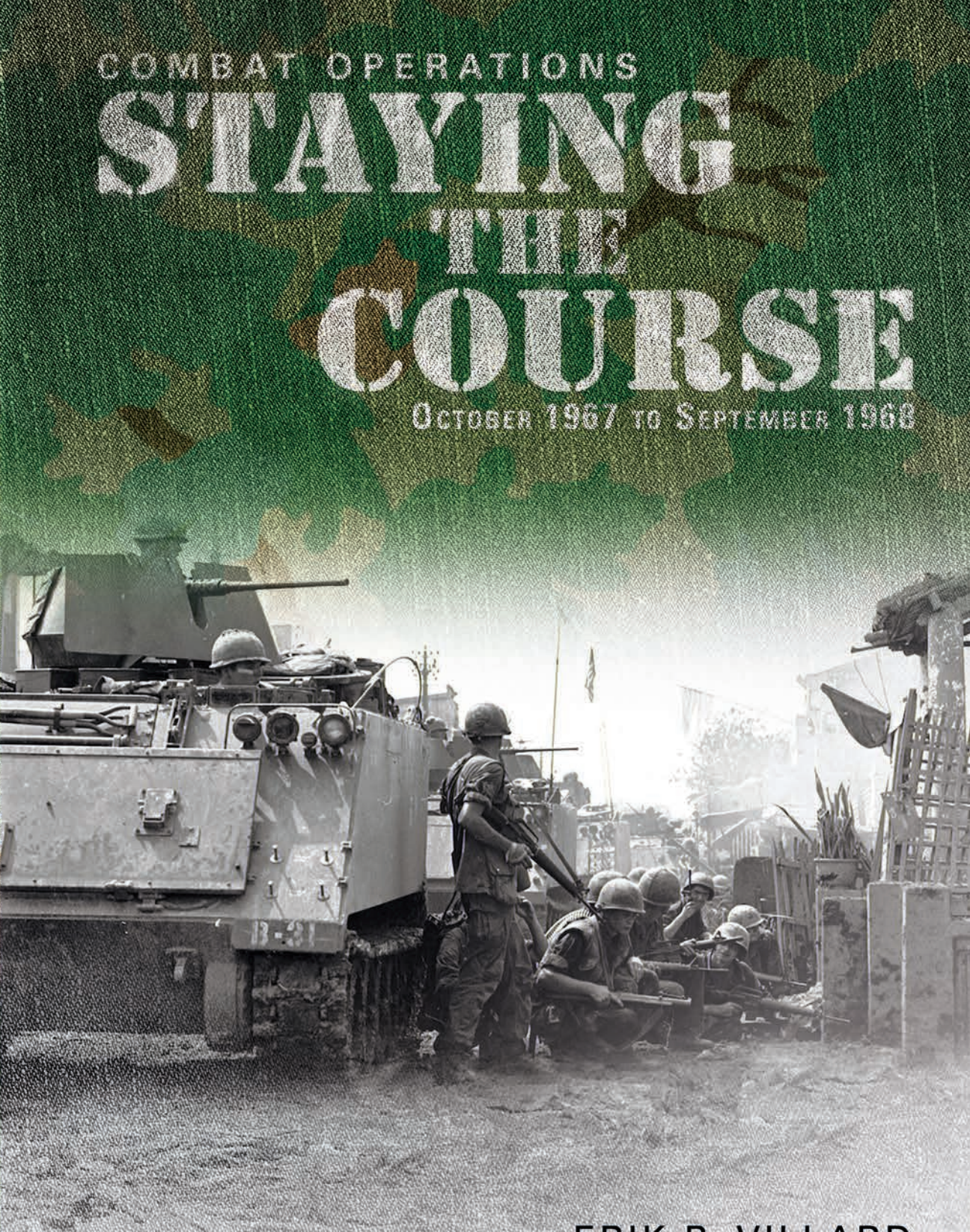
COMBAT OPERATIONS

STAYING THE COURSE

October 1967 to September 1968



ERIK B. VILLARD

THE UNITED STATES ARMY IN VIETNAM

Combat Operations

STAYING THE COURSE

October 1967 to September 1968

NORTH VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE
SOUTH CHINA SEA
QUANG TRI
Hue
I CTZ
THUA THIEN
LAOS
Da Nang
QUANG NAM
THAILAND
QUANG TIN
QUANG NGAI
KONTUM
BINH DINH
SOUTH VIETNAM
PLEIKU
CAMBODIA
PHU BON
PHU YEN
Tonle Sap
DARLAC
II CTZ
KHANH HOA
QUANG DUC
TUYEN DUC
Da Lat
Cam Ranh
PHUOC LONG
BINH LONG
NINH THUAN
TAY NINH
III CTZ
LAM DONG
BINH DUONG
LONG KHANH
BINH THUAN
BINH TUY
HAU NGHIA
BIEN HOA
SAIGON
CHAU DOC
KIEN PHONG
KIEN TUONG
LONG AN
GIA DINH
PHUOC TUY
AN GIANG
DINH TUONG
GO CONG
Vung Tau
KIEN GIANG
VINH LONG
KIEN HOA
PHONG DINH
IV CTZ
VINH BINH
GULF OF THAILAND
CHUONG THIEN
BA XUYEN
BAC LIEU
AN XUYEN
SOUTH VIETNAM
1967–1968
Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
Administrative Boundary
Hue
Autonomous Municipality
0
150
Miles
0
150
Kilometers

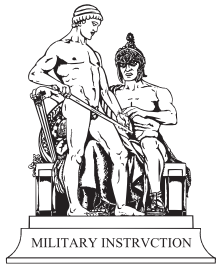
United States Army in Vietnam

Combat Operations

STAYING THE COURSE
October 1967 to September 1968

by

Erik B. Villard



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United States Army in Vietnam

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. . . to Those Who Served

Foreword

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive issue. But nearly fifty years after the end of major U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, well over half the U.S. population is too young to have any direct memory of the conflict. The massive American commitment—political, economic, diplomatic, and military—to the mission of maintaining an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam deserves widespread attention, both to recognize the sacrifice of those who served and to remember how those events have impacted our nation.

U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia began after World War II when elements of the Vietnamese population fought back against the re-imposition of French colonial rule. Although the United States generally favored the idea of an independent Vietnam, it supported France because the Viet Minh rebels were led by Communists and U.S. policy at that point in the Cold War sought to contain any expansion of communism. France's defeat in 1954 led to the division of Vietnam into a Communist North (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and a non-Communist South (Republic of Vietnam). The United States actively supported the latter as it dealt with a growing Communist-led insurgent force (the Viet Cong) aided by the North Vietnamese. The initial mission of training South Vietnam's armed forces led to deepening American involvement as the situation grew increasingly dire for the Republic of Vietnam.

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States already had invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the effort to build a secure and stable Republic of Vietnam. That commitment expanded rapidly through 1969, when the United States had over 365,000 Army soldiers (out of a total of a half million troops of all services) in every military region of South Vietnam, with thousands of other Army personnel throughout the Pacific area providing direct support to operations. The war saw many innovations, including the massive use of helicopters to conduct airmobile tactics, new concepts of counterinsurgency, the introduction of airborne radio direction finding, wide-scale use of computers, and major advances in battlefield medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden was still borne by soldiers on the ground who slogged on foot over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military effort by the United States was, however, matched by the resolve of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country

under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive as American commitment wavered in the face of high casualties and economic and social challenges at home. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the American military role in the conflict. Actual peace was elusive, and two years later the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam, bringing the war to an end in April 1975.

The vast majority of American men and women who went to Vietnam did so in the uniform of the U.S. Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. This book, the twelfth volume of the U.S. Army's official history of the Vietnam War, is dedicated to them.

Washington, D.C.
29 September 2017

JON T. HOFFMAN
Chief Historian

The Author

Erik B. Villard graduated from Occidental College in Los Angeles with degrees in history and English literature and earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington in Seattle. He started working at the U.S. Army Center of Military History as a historian in 2000. He has devoted much of his personal time to helping Vietnam War veterans and their families through history-oriented social media groups that he established in 2014. Over the last few years, he has also become involved in digital humanities, applying graphic design software, 3D modeling programs, geospatial information systems, and audio-video production to the field of military history.

Preface

Staying the Course describes the twelve-month period when the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies embarked on a new and more aggressive strategy that shook the foundations of the South Vietnamese state and forced the United States to reevaluate its military calculations in Southeast Asia. Hanoi's general offensive–general uprising brought the war to South Vietnam's cities for the first time and disrupted the allied pacification program that was just beginning to take hold in some rural areas formerly controlled by the Communists. For the enemy, however, those achievements came at a staggering cost in manpower and material; more importantly, the Tet offensive failed to cripple the South Vietnamese government or convince the United States to abandon its ally. As the dust settled from the Viet Cong attacks, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered his military commanders to press ahead with their current strategy unchanged apart from some short-term tactical adjustments and a modest increase in the U.S. troop deployment. His decision to stay the course seemed to bear fruit as the allies repaired their losses and then forged new gains throughout the summer and autumn of 1968 despite two more Communist offensives, each one proving to be weaker than the last. Even so, the allied situation at the end of this period appeared to be only marginally better than it had been in late 1967; the peace talks in Paris had stalled, and American public opinion had turned decisively against the war.

In the course of writing this book I have received assistance from a great many people. At the Center of Military History, those who provided valuable advice and comments on the manuscript include Dr. Andrew J. Birtle, Dr. John M. Carland, Dr. William M. Hammond, Dale W. Andrade, and Dr. Joel D. Meyerson. Excellent production assistance came from S. L. Dowdy who did the maps, Hildegard J. Bachman who did the primary editing,Dale A. Perrigo who did the footnotes, Michael R. Gill who did the photos and layout, and Diane S. Arms who supervised the production process.

Those in the Center's chain of command should also be recognized. I wish to acknowledge a succession of helpful branch chiefs—Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, Dr. William Hammond, Dr. Joel Meyerson, Dr. Andrew Birtle, and Virginia K. Shaw. My thanks also go to a series of division chiefs—Dr. Richard W. Stewart, Dr. Joel Meyerson, and Dr. James C. McNaughton, who supervised the project. A number of chiefs of Military History—Brig. Gen. John S. Brown, Dr. Jeffrey J. Clarke, Robert J. Dalessandro, Dr. Richard Stewart,

and Charles M. Bowery Jr.—helped orchestrate and bring to fruition this complex project.

Useful recommendations came from the review panel convened by Dr. Richard Stewart, the Center's Chief Historian and panel chair. I wish to thank the members—Lt. Gen. John E. Cushman, Dr. Andrew Wiest, Dr. Gregory A. Daddis, Dr. Joel Meyerson, and Dr. James H. Willbanks.

A number of people outside the Center provided information, support, and friendship, which made the writing of this book so enjoyable. Richard L. Boylan and Cliff Snyder helped me navigate the collection at the National Archives and Records Administration. Robert J. Destatte and Merle L. Pribbenow translated dozens of Vietnamese Communist histories and memoirs on my behalf; Joseph Galloway and Don North gave me valuable insight on the role of journalists during the war; and a superlative group of Vietnam veterans, including Robert Walkowiak and David A. Sciacchitano, worked with me on special projects that expanded my understanding of key events described in the book. I also wish to thank my outstanding social media research team who have worked tirelessly to further the cause of Vietnam War history: Ted Acheson, Kent Annas, Howard Berkowitz, Larry Berman, Adam Bertil, Frank Blazich, Charles Brown, James Buckland, Chris Circelli, Jim Cloninger, Skip Cox, Ralph Crowe, Greg Daddis, Shaun Darragh, David Durian, Bryan Entwistle, Joseph Galloway, Larry Gates, Keith Goudy, Gerry Gudinas, Ken Hamburger, Tom Hanton, Roger Hawkins, Belinda Herkins, Bob Hesselbein, Donald Hirst, Patrick Hughes, Joss Huot, Chuck Kannas, Phil Kastner, Wooyoung Alex Kim, Bob Laymon, Larry Margolies, Byron McCalman, John McGuire, Ralph McLain, Ron Milam, Edwin Moise, Stephane Moutin-Luyat, Mark Moyar, Greg Murry, Lanh Nguyen, Nathan Nguyen, John Nolan, Nguyen Ky Phong, Xe Quang, Wayne Smith, Bob Sorely, Bao Anh Thai, Rob Thompson, Jonas Thorsell, Nguyen Tuan Trung, Jim Van Doren, Pete Van Til, Jay Veith, Scott Villard, Vic Vizcarra, Ron Ward, Andrew Wiest, Rob Wilkins, Jim Willbanks, Lis Pov Xyooj, Linh Yoshimura, and Ryan Young.

Finally, I must extend my deepest gratitude to my family: my father Mark Villard, my mother Brenda Villard, my brother Scott Villard and his wife Miki Villard, my aunt Jan Villard, and most especially my wonderful wife Eve for giving me support through this long process. I truly could not have done it without them.

The author alone is responsible for the interpretations and conclusions in this volume, as well as for any errors that may appear. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Departments of the Army and Defense or the U.S. government.

Washington, D.C.
29 September 2017

ERIK B. VILLARD

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Part One
Opening Battles

1

A Question of Momentum

In the autumn of 1967 nearly half a million U.S. troops began a third year of combat operations in the Republic of (South) Vietnam. They fought alongside South Vietnamese forces and contingents from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines against the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam and its clandestine arm in the South, the largely southern-born insurgents dubbed the "Viet Cong," who were trying to topple the government in Saigon and reunify the Vietnamese people under communism. The conflict had been difficult and costly for all sides, and there was no end in sight. The Communists had suffered the worst of the casualties, and some of them were beginning to worry that victory was slipping from their grasp, but for the time being they remained committed to their cause. The senior leadership of South Vietnam was equally determined to persevere, but theirs was a weak and internally divided state whose population increasingly tired of the struggle. Most crucial for South Vietnam's survival, but the least committed, were South Vietnam's allies. America was the most dedicated and important of these, but it too was having doubts as to whether the price of South Vietnam's freedom was worth the cost. For all sides, therefore, the conflict appeared to be entering a decisive phase, the outcome of which might well determine the war's ultimate conclusion.

For President Lyndon B. Johnson, the war had already reached a crisis point. Johnson had always been deeply ambivalent about the conflict in Vietnam. He had led the United States to war in 1965 in part because he had feared a North Vietnamese victory might lead to further Communist gains in the rest of Southeast Asia. Perhaps more importantly, he had feared what a loss would do to America's prestige as the leader of the free world in the wider Cold War, not to mention the political damage such a loss would inflict on himself and his party. But he had entered the conflict with little enthusiasm, fearing the vagaries of war and the threat the conflict posed to his ambitious domestic agenda. His tepid approach to the war had led to a policy of cautious incrementalism that so far had yielded neither victory nor profitable negotiations. Rather, three years of escalating casualties, expenditures, and troop deployments had simply magnified the doubts Johnson and his Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, harbored about the conflict—doubts that made it even more difficult for them to champion the war at home. For here too weariness was spreading.[1]

[1] Richard Betts, "Misadventure Revisited," in *Vietnam as History,* ed. Peter Braestrup (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984), pp. 5–8; Herbert Schandler, "America and Vietnam: The Failure of Strategy, 1964–1967," in Braestrup, ed., *Vietnam as*

According to a Gallup poll, only half of Americans in 1967 believed that progress was being made in Vietnam. Antiwar demonstrations were getting larger, resistance to the draft was growing, and racial and social upheaval was becoming more evident in the country, creating an atmosphere of crisis. More than 15,000 U.S. military personnel had already lost their lives in Vietnam. At the current rate of fighting another 700 to 900 Americans would die from hostile action, accidents, and other causes each month. The president knew that time was running out. Speaking to his National Security Council in October, he admitted that "our people will not hold out for four more years." Even his staunchest Democratic allies were getting worried. Behind closed doors, senior party leaders warned the president "we will lose the [1968] election if we do not do something about Vietnam quick."[2]

Though Johnson desperately needed some kind of breakthrough, he was determined to keep the war a local conflict fought with limited means. The goal of U.S. policy, most clearly laid out in National Security Action Memorandum 288 from March 1964, was to preserve "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam." It was not to destroy North Vietnam's government or to reunify Vietnam under a democratic regime. With Cold War tensions running high around the world, Johnson did not want Vietnam to metastasize into a hot war between the United States and its superpower rivals, China and the Soviet Union.[3]

The most important restriction that the president imposed on the commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland, was geographic. Johnson allowed Westmoreland to conduct secret ground reconnaissance missions into Laos and Cambodia to gain intelligence about the North Vietnamese logistical network that wound its way through those countries, but he refused to let U.S. troops attack those targets. He likewise refused to blockade North Vietnamese harbors or to stop ships bearing weapons for Communist troops in South Vietnam from docking at Cambodian ports. The Laotian and Cambodian governments

History, pp. 23–26. For perspectives on Johnson and the war, see George C. Herring, "The Reluctant Warrior: Lyndon Johnson as Commander in Chief," in *Shadow on the White House, Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945–1975,* ed. David L. Anderson (Manhattan: University Press of Kansas, 1993), pp. 87–112; H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, and Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); George M. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987); Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), pp. 18–20.

[2] First quote from U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964–1968*, vol. 5, *Vietnam 1967* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2002), p. 840 (hereafter cited as *FRUS, 1964–1968*). Second quote from Robert Dallek, *Lyndon B. Johnson: Portrait of a President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 313.

[3] National Security Action Memo, McGeorge Bundy, National Security Adviser, for Sec of State et al., no. 288, 17 Mar 64, sub: Implementation of South Vietnam Programs, National Security Council History, Presidential Decisions, Gulf of Tonkin Attacks, box 38, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL), University of Texas, Austin, Tex.

were both weak and technically neutral and faced North Vietnamese–backed insurgencies of their own. They feared these might spin out of control if the United States expanded the war into their countries. Moreover, in the case of Laos, Americans and Laotians alike worried that a U.S. incursion might trigger a Chinese countermove.[4]

Johnson also refused to let Westmoreland or his South Vietnamese allies send ground troops into North Vietnam. The MACV commander had proposed making an amphibious landing just north of the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam, but Johnson worried that any thrust north of the 17th Parallel would encourage China and the Soviet Union to take a more direct role in the war. Already, 170,000 Chinese soldiers maintained logistical routes in North Vietnam and manned antiaircraft defenses around the capital Hanoi and the port of Haiphong. Hundreds of Soviet pilots and thousands of technical advisers stiffened the North Vietnamese Air Force. During the first nine months of 1967 alone, the two Communist powers had given North Vietnam approximately a billion dollars in aid (equivalent to over seven billion dollars at 2017 rates), including most of the weapons, ammunition, fuel, and technical expertise that it needed to fight the war. That foreign assistance could easily skyrocket if Moscow or Beijing thought their ally was in danger.[5]

General Westmoreland

Another way that the president kept the war in check was by controlling the strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam, Operation Rolling Thunder. The White House directed the program through the U.S. 13th Air Force in Thailand and from carrier groups of the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the South China Sea, not through Westmoreland's command. Johnson vetted the target list himself and imposed buffer zones around sensitive areas—downtown Hanoi, the port of Haiphong, and the Vietnamese-Chinese border. He rejected any proposal to target North Vietnam's dam and dike system, since the flooding

[4] Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*, p. 379.

[5] HQ, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), Cmd History, vol. 1, 1967 (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, MACV, 1967), p. 19, Historians files, U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH), Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as MACV History, date); John C. Donnell and Melvin Gurtov, *North Vietnam: Left of Moscow, Right of Peking* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corp., 1968), p. 37.

and subsequent wave of disease and starvation would probably kill several hundred thousand civilians.[6]

Although the principal goal of ROLLING THUNDER was to make it harder for North Vietnam to move troops and supplies into the South, Johnson also used the bombing program as an extension of his diplomatic efforts. He varied its scope and intensity to reflect the perceived status of discussions between the governments in Washington and Hanoi. The president had paused the bombing several times in the past, hoping to draw the Communists into negotiations, but nothing had materialized. As things stood now, he doubted another bombing pause would convince the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table in good faith. "I think they are playing us for suckers. They have no more intention of talking than we have of surrendering." That suited Westmoreland, who never had liked the idea of a bombing pause. As long as ROLLING THUNDER continued to wear down North Vietnam's industrial base and to hinder the flow of enemy supplies into the South, the MACV commander was satisfied to let others manage the program.[7]

Finally, the president limited the war by imposing a ceiling on the number of troops deployed to South Vietnam. At Johnson's direction, in October 1967 Secretary McNamara established a 525,000-man troop ceiling for MACV. Both men were determined to hold the line against further increases if at all possible. Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had asked that an additional 100,000 troops be sent to Vietnam by the end of 1969, but the strategic reserve of the U.S. military was nearly tapped out. The only way to rebuild it quickly was to mobilize several hundred thousand reservists and guardsmen for a period of several years. Putting that number of civilians back into uniform would result in a political firestorm and impose a drag on the economy, neither of which the president could afford twelve months away from a national election. Whatever Westmoreland could accomplish in the next year, he had to do it with the forces already committed.[8]

Westmoreland disagreed with many of Johnson's restrictions, but he was not a confrontational man. He preferred to seek consensus and to work within the confines of what was politically possible. Equally important, by the fall of 1967 he believed that the war was moving in a favorable direction.

When Johnson first committed ground combat troops in the spring of 1965, South Vietnam had seemed on the brink of collapse. Westmoreland had used the hurriedly arriving troops as a fire brigade to stop the Communist advance. Between early 1965 and the summer of 1966, MACV had grown from 27,000 troops to more than 200,000. The expansion had

[6] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 121; Notes, White House Mtg, 5 Aug 67, sub: Notes of the President's Meeting with Clark Clifford and General Maxwell Taylor, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 5:670–75.

[7] Notes, White House Mtg, 26 Sep 67, sub: Notes of the President's Meeting with Secretary McNamara et al., in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 5:825.

[8] Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*, p. 462.

thrown the enemy off balance and provided Westmoreland the resources he needed to build a logistical system capable of supporting future operations. In MACV's second campaign season between mid-1966 and the fall of 1967, the arrival of another 250,000 U.S. personnel had allowed Westmoreland to go on the offensive. Striking deep into the jungles and mountains of South Vietnam, U.S. units had inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy.[9]

With MACV set to receive another 60,000 troops by the end of 1968, General Westmoreland expected to have even more success. "We are making steady progress," he told his former deputy, Lt. Gen. John A. Heintges, in a private cable on 11 October 1967, "There is wide-spread optimism here." He elaborated his thoughts later in the month in a message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Noting that "the enemy has not won a single tactical victory of significance during the past year," he ticked off some facts. On the military side of the ledger, sickness, hunger, and heavy casualties had weakened many enemy units. On the political side, South Vietnam had recently formed a new democratically elected government, and economic conditions were improving now that more than 90 percent of essential roads remained open to commerce by day. The general was under no illusions—he expected the war to continue at a high tempo for at least several more years—but he believed that South Vietnam would ultimately prevail as long as it continued to receive U.S. assistance.[10]

That assistance was key. Few believed South Vietnam could win the war on its own against its larger, more industrialized, and more unified neighbor. Still, South Vietnam was responsible for its own security, and for it to bear this burden effectively, U.S. advice and material assistance were vital. Achieving the goal of an effective South Vietnamese armed force would also eventually allow the United States to reduce, although perhaps never eliminate, its military presence in Vietnam, an imperative for America given the cost of the conflict and its growing unpopularity at home. The U.S. training and equipment program, begun over two decades before, was well under way by late 1967, but the South Vietnamese armed forces continued to be plagued by serious shortcomings in terms of numbers, proficiency,

[9] See John M. Carland, *Combat Operations*: *Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2000). See George L. MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1998).

[10] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 9514 to Lt Gen John A. Heintges, Deputy Cdr, 7th Army, 11 Oct 67, Historians files, CMH; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 10295 to General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), 30 Oct 67, sub: Information for General Wheeler 1 November Briefing, pp. 1–4, William C. Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Rpt, Ofc of the Asst Secretary of Defense (Sec Def), Systems Analysis, Southeast Asia Programs, Southeast Asia Statistical Tables through Oct 1968, Table 1c; Fact Book, MACV, vol. 2, n.d., sub: Chieu Hoi Fact Sheet; Cable, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to Walt W. Rostow, National Security Adviser, 7 Nov 1967, sub: Measurements of Progress, p. 14. All in Historians files, CMH. HQ, MACV, Cmd History, vol. 1, 1968 (Saigon, Vietnam: Military History Branch, Office of the Secretary, MACV, 1968), p. 350.

equipment, morale, and, most importantly, leadership. Westmoreland planned to accelerate efforts to improve the South Vietnamese forces, particularly those most responsible for pacification security. Toward that end, in 1967 he assigned his deputy, General Creighton W. Abrams, the job of overseeing efforts to improve the South Vietnamese military.[11]

The question was, would U.S. assistance continue to the degree necessary and over the time needed to win? Realizing that the American public was losing patience with the war, Westmoreland acceded to the president's request that he assist in the administration's public relations campaign to maintain support. At a Washington, D.C., press conference in November the general stated "I am absolutely certain that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing." In other forums, Westmoreland predicted that the U.S. public would soon see "some light at the end of the tunnel." In a contest in which the enemy had a say, and particularly in a quasi-clandestine war without fronts in which intelligence on the enemy's capabilities and intentions were limited and progress was hard to measure, such pronouncements were risky and would soon come back to haunt him. True, Westmoreland was not alone in expressing reasons for hope in the fall of 1967. And he and others often tempered their positive statements with caveats about the many obstacles to success. But these reservations sometimes got lost in the heat of public discourse, leaving some people to have higher expectations than were justified by the facts on the ground. As for the increasingly pessimistic president and his defense secretary, a dramatic, unexpected victory would be needed to buoy their spirits. If war is a struggle of wills, by the fall of 1967 America's war effort rested on a shaky foundation.[12]

General Abrams

[11] Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*, p. 278; Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War, Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 75; Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), p. 281; Transcript, William C. Westmoreland Speech at National Press Club, 21 Nov 67, William C. Westmoreland History files, CMH.

[12] Quote from Transcript, General William C. Westmoreland Speech at National Press Club, 21 Nov 67, pp. 3–4; Quote from Msg, Westmoreland HWA 3445 to General Creighton W. Abrams, Deputy MACV Cdr, 26 Nov 67, sub: Concept of Situation Portrayed during

Westmoreland's Strategy for 1968

While people at home wrestled over the political and moral merits of the war in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, a man for whom duty and loyalty were paramount, soldiered on. Born in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 1914, William Childs Westmoreland had enjoyed an exemplary career marked by rapid advancement. After graduating from the U.S. Military Academy in 1936, he had gone on to see combat in Tunisia, Sicily, France, and Germany as an artillery and airborne officer in World War II. He had fought again in Korea, this time as commander of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team. His upward path thereafter continued. After Westmoreland completed a three-month management program at Harvard Business School, the Army promoted him to major general in 1956 at the young age of forty-two and placed him in charge of the elite 101st Airborne Division in 1958. Following Westmoreland's assignments as the commandant of the U.S. Military Academy, as head of the U.S. Army Strategic Reserve, and as commander of XVIII Airborne Corps, Johnson picked him to take charge of MACV in June 1964, just as the U.S. commitment to Vietnam neared a critical juncture.[13]

As Westmoreland contemplated allied strategy in the autumn of 1967, he did so from a vantage point of long-standing policies. The most important was the president's determination to use U.S. military force, not to defeat North Vietnam per se, but to inflict pain sufficient to drive it to the negotiating table on terms favorable to the allies. This limited and defensive policy, while not unlike that adopted by the United States during the later stages of the Korean War, essentially left the initiative to the enemy. As long as he was willing to endure, the war would continue. Of course, killing the enemy eroded his capabilities and might even create conditions sufficient to win the war inside South Vietnam, *if* the allies were able to isolate South Vietnam from outside infiltration. To date, the United States had been unable to affect this, and it was unlikely to do so unless the president lifted his ban on cross-border operations. Consequently, combat-induced attrition remained the central tool for degrading the enemy's capabilities, if not to win the war on the ground, then to break the enemy's will to continue.[14]

Recent Visit to Washington, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Affidavit, Barry Zorthian, 15 Dec 83, in U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, *William C. Westmoreland, Plaintiff, v. CBS, Inc., et al., Defendants. 82 Civ 7913 (PNL). Plaintiff General William C. Westmoreland's Memorandum of Law in Opposition to Defendant CBS's Motion to Dismiss and for Summary Judgment. app. A - Affidavits Cited in Support of Plaintiff's Opposition to Defendant's Motion*, p. 406 (hereafter cited as *Westmoreland Memorandum of Law, app. A*); Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory, Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 126–30; Daddis, *Westmoreland's War, Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, pp. 88–89.

[13] For more information on his career, see William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976); Samuel Zaffiri, *Westmoreland: A Biography of General William C. Westmoreland* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

[14] For an example of administration thinking about how to wage the war, see Memo, Robert S. McNamara, Sec Def, for President Lyndon B. Johnson, 20 Jul 65, sub: Recommendations of

If Westmoreland hoped to one day be given permission to curtail the flow of men and materiel into South Vietnam, he did not challenge the military utility of attrition, an ancient and effective method of warfare that the North Vietnamese themselves embraced. But he never believed that force alone could win the conflict. Rather, he fully supported national policy and Army doctrine in viewing the war inside South Vietnam as an insurgency fueled by popular discontent. Success thus hinged not just on winning big battles, but on creating a government that was both effective and responsible to the will of the people, that protected people from Communist agitators and bullies, and that redressed the socioeconomic maladies that the Communists exploited—a process generally referred to as "pacification."[15]

The method the allies had chosen to spread government control through the countryside since the early 1960s was one of progressive area clearance. Under this concept, the allies selected an area to reclaim from the enemy and conducted military operations in and around it to drive off the enemy's major combat units. Once the allies had cleared the region of major combatants, they would continue to conduct operations on the periphery to prevent the enemy from reentering it in force. Meanwhile, they would use a combination of military, paramilitary, intelligence, and police forces to secure the targeted area by establishing local security, by rooting out the enemy's clandestine political infrastructure through which he ruled or influenced many communities, and by eliminating the last vestiges of the Communist's military and guerrilla forces. As the area became more secure, the allies introduced a governmental apparatus to mobilize public support, replacing Communist control with their own. The allies made particular efforts to organize *Ap Doi Moi*, or fully pacified hamlets (sometimes referred to as Real New Life Hamlets, the equivalent of Strategic Hamlets of previous years) that met certain political, social, and security criteria. Finally, the allies would introduce programs—educational, medical, agricultural, political, developmental, and humanitarian—that stole the insurgents' thunder by redressing social ills, that won public support, and that helped build a new nation. After a region was sufficiently secure, the allies would repeat the process in a neighboring area, so that government control would gradually spread across the entire county as a drop of oil spreads across water (an analogy drawn from the

Additional Deployments to Vietnam, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, vol. 3, *Vietnam, June–December 1965* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), pp. 171–79.

[15] Carter Malkasian, "Toward a Better Understanding of Attrition: The Korean and Vietnam Wars," *Journal of Military History* 68 (July 2004): 911–42; Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72 (October 2008): 1219–23; Daddis, *Westmoreland's War, Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, pp. 74–91; Memo, MACV Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) for Deputy of CORDS, I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ), et al., 12 Sep 67, sub: 1968 Pacification Planning: Definition of Terms, Historians files, CMH. MACV Dir 525-4, 17 Sep 65, sub: Tactics and Techniques for Employment of U.S. Forces in the Republic of Vietnam, pp. 1–2, Westmoreland History files, no. 1, CMH; John M. Carland, "Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents," *Journal of Military History* 68 (April 2004): 553–54, 558. For a discussion of pacification and the U.S. military's role therein, see MACV, Handbook for Military Support of Pacification, Feb 1968, Historians files, CMH.

French counterinsurgency term *tache d'huile*, or "oil stain"). The process was logical, but was difficult to implement in practice.[16]

If pacification was the bedrock of Westmoreland's strategy for the war inside South Vietnam, it could not be achieved without offensive operations. Focusing on pacification and local defense alone would not be effective, Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson explained, because it would allow the enemy to mass his military forces and to overrun secured areas at will, thereby undoing pacification progress. Rather, just as the allies attempted to counter the political and guerrilla aspects of the insurgency, they also had to address the threat posed by his regular military formations and the bases that supported them. This was best achieved by taking the war to the enemy through offensive operations that either destroyed Communist resources or kept the foe off balance, thereby providing a shield behind which pacification could proceed unmolested. The size and scope of such offensives varied widely, but since the enemy operated powerful combat forces organized up to the division level, using terrain, fortifications, and evasion to his maximum advantage, large operations were sometimes needed to find, fix, and destroy him. Politics and war were thus the horses that pulled the counterinsurgency wagon, with the war horse typically in the lead. They were often difficult to keep in sync, but each was necessary if the vehicle was to move forward.[17]

Generally speaking, the allies conducted four major types of military operations. "Search-and-destroy" operations attacked the enemy's military units and bases. "Border control" operations endeavored to cut off the enemy from external reinforcement and sanctuary. "Clear-and-hold" operations secured the countryside, separated the people from the guerrillas, and paved the way for the restoration of government control. "Security" operations employed small patrols, guards, and fortifications to protect key installations, lines of communications, and economic and population centers. The allies used a variety of tactics and techniques to execute these operations, with civil, police, and intelligence actions accompanying many of them to one degree or another.

Executing this complex program required a division of labor. By mutual consent, the allies assigned to the U.S. military primary responsibility for attacking the enemy's conventional military forces and bases, as the United States had the means and skills best suited for this task. Since large enemy formations often resided in remote, underpopulated areas, this approach also helped reduce conflicts between U.S. soldiers and inhabitants as well as civilian casualties caused by the application of American firepower. Conversely,

[16] Pamphlet, MACV, Guide for Province and District Advisers, 1968, p. 13-2; Pamphlet, MACV, Guide for Subsector Advisers, 1966, pp. 2–3. Both in Historians files, CMH. For background on U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and its application in Vietnam, see Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2007), pp. 223–90, 304–27, and 361–444.

[17] Harold K. Johnson, "The Army Chief of Staff on Military Strategy in Vietnam," *Army Digest* 23 (April 1968): 7–9.

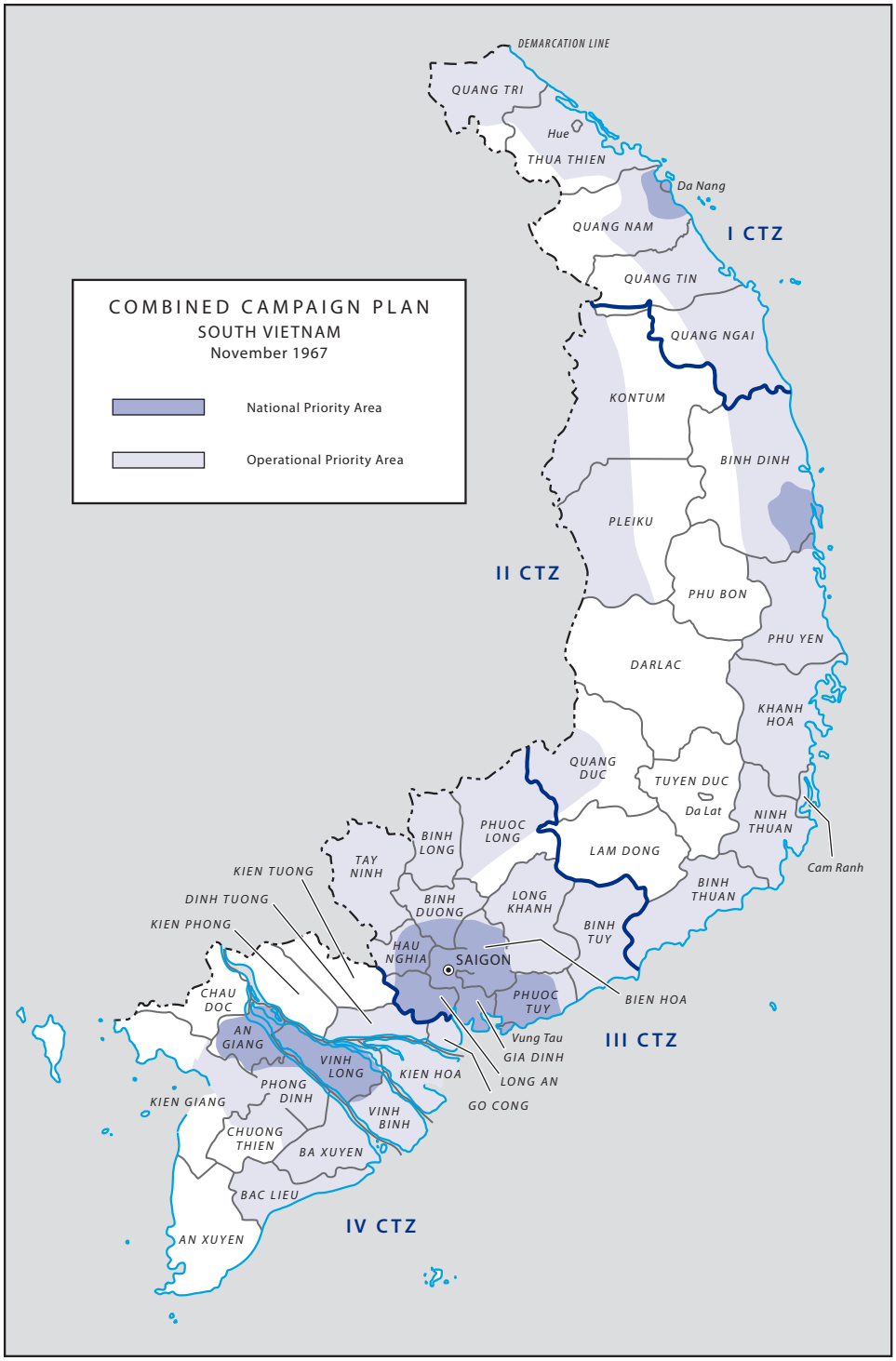
the South Vietnamese held primary responsibility for the clear, hold, pacification, and longer-term nation-building aspects of allied strategy. This maximized Vietnamese capabilities and reinforced the South Vietnamese government's position as a sovereign nation responsible for managing its own internal affairs. Naturally, U.S. forces assisted the Vietnamese to varying degrees in the full array of community security, pacification, and nation-building missions, just as South Vietnamese troops participated in major military operations, but by and large each country focused its attention on its allotted roles. Thus in August 1967, U.S. military forces were responsible for roughly 70 percent of search-and-destroy operations against the enemy's major units and bases in the hinterland. They conducted 20 percent of all offensive actions against regular enemy units operating near government-controlled areas, 38 percent of operations against guerrillas in areas undergoing pacification, and 16 percent of security operations. Conversely, South Vietnamese forces conducted just 18 percent of the attacks on major enemy units but performed 56 percent of offensive operations in and around controlled areas, 57 percent of the offensive actions in areas undergoing pacification, and 81 percent of the security mission.[18]

U.S. and South Vietnamese planners embraced all of these principles when they met in October 1967 to finalize plans for the upcoming year. Although pacification activities occurred in every province in South Vietnam, the Combined Campaign Plan for 1968 (AB 143) continued the previous year's program of concentrating resources on twenty-six of South Vietnam's forty-four provinces (*Map 1*). Omitted were areas where the enemy's military forces were strongest—such as the northernmost and southernmost reaches of the country—or that were remote and sparsely populated, such as the mountainous Central Highlands and provinces bordering Laos and Cambodia.[19]

The 1968 plan called for the greatest effort to be made in areas close to the capital city of Saigon, with the rest of the country receiving progressively fewer resources the farther north or south one traveled from that location. The MACV and Vietnamese staffs further decided that for 1968 they would focus the pacification effort on two types of areas. First, they wished to solidify control over areas in which the South Vietnamese government already held some sway. Second, they wanted to target areas where a significant number of people could be added to the rolls of those living under government authority without expanding allied resources over a large physical area. This approach reflected criticisms that earlier pacification campaigns had tried to secure too many areas at once, often beyond the allies' ability to protect and to organize them properly. Consequently, new pacification initiatives for 1968 were very limited

[18] Other nations, such as Australia and South Korea, accounted for the remaining effort in each category. Rpt, Ofc of the Asst Sec Def, Systems Analysis, Southeast Asia Programs, 27 Sep 68, pp. 10–12, Historians files, CMH.

[19] MACV and South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) Combined Campaign Plan (CCP), 1967, AB 142, 7 Nov 66, pp. 2–5; CCP, 1968, AB 143, 11 Nov 67, pp. 1–8. Both in Historians files, CMH.


COMBINED CAMPAIGN PLAN
SOUTH VIETNAM
November 1967
National Priority Area
Operational Priority Area
DEMARCATION LINE
QUANG TRI
Hue
THUA THIEN
Da Nang
QUANG NAM
I CTZ
QUANG TIN
QUANG NGAI
KONTUM
BINH DINH
PLEIKU
II CTZ
PHU BON
PHU YEN
DARLAC
KHANH HOA
QUANG DUC
TUYEN DUC
Da Lat
NINH THUAN
Cam Ranh
BINH LONG
PHUOC LONG
LAM DONG
TAY NINH
KIEN TUONG
DINH TUONG
KIEN PHONG
BINH DUONG
LONG KHANH
BINH THUAN
BINH TUY
HAU NGHIA
SAIGON
BIEN HOA
CHAU DOC
PHUOC TUY
AN GIANG
Vung Tau
III CTZ
VINH LONG
GIA DINH
KIEN HOA
LONG AN
PHONG DINH
KIEN GIANG
GO CONG
VINH BINH
CHUONG THIEN
BA XUYEN
BAC LIEU
IV CTZ
AN XUYEN

MAP 1

geographically, even within the twenty-six priority provinces. Planners anticipated that during 1968 South Vietnamese pacification forces would target 2,000 hamlets for accession to government control, of which 800 would achieve status as *Ap Doi Moi*.[20]

Military plans reflected the pacification design. The 1968 Campaign Plan designated most of the pacification priority provinces as priority areas for offensive military operations. Other areas targeted for offensive action were the four northernmost provinces, where the enemy posed a significant threat due to the proximity of North Vietnam, the western sectors of Kontum and Pleiku Provinces, a favorite enemy haunt from which he could threaten the heavily populated coast, and the border areas northwest of Saigon—Tay Ninh, Binh Long, Phuoc Long, and Quang Duc Provinces—which also acted as important bases and conduits for enemy forces. Disrupting the enemy in these areas would both shield pacification efforts in the more populated areas and pave the way for geographical expansion in the future. The allies planned only minimal operations in sparsely populated areas like the center of the country and in the Communist-dominated Mekong Delta in the nation's south.[21]

Since the areas the allies planned to target in 1968 were similar to those of 1967, little movement of forces was needed to execute the AB 143 plan. Two U.S. brigades would continue to screen the national frontier in the highland provinces of Kontum and Pleiku, while a similarly sized force helped protect the heavily populated, rice-producing coastal lowlands that formed South Vietnam's long, littoral arc along the South China Sea. The bulk of U.S. forces remained in two key areas. In the first, the nation's far north, two U.S. Marine divisions and one U.S. Army division would continue to battle heavy enemy forces that drew support from neighboring North Vietnam. In the second, the Saigon region, four U.S. Army divisions formed a defensive ring around that politically vital area. MACV had few U.S. ground forces in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon. The South Vietnamese government limited America's footprint in the delta both because the North Vietnamese had no major combat units there for the Americans to fight, and because it preferred to minimize the potential adverse consequences of having U.S. ground units operating in the densely inhabited region. The only exception, a relatively recent one at that, was in the upper delta, where a U.S. Army brigade operated along with a U.S. Navy river flotilla to patrol the southern approaches to Saigon.

For the winter dry season, which would bring better weather to the southern half of the country over the next six months, Westmoreland planned only two major geographical thrusts. First, he intended to weaken

[20] Memos, Republic of Vietnam Ministry of Revolutionary Development, 21 Sep 1967, sub: Remarks of the Minister of Revolutionary Development at the Meeting held on 20–21 September concerning RD Policy for 1968; MACV Policy Statement on U.S. Supported Civil Programs, n.d., sub: Development of the FY 68/69 AID Country Assistance Program, p. 4; MACV CORDS for Deputy of CORDS, I CTZ, et al., Sep 67, sub: 1968 Pacification Planning—Advance Guidance. All in Historians files, CMH.

[21] CCP, 1967, pp. 2–3; CCP, 1968, pp. 2–3.

the enemy's offensive capability in the capital region by pushing two of the U.S. divisions guarding Saigon out to the Cambodian frontier north of Saigon where they would disrupt the enemy's ability to bring in reinforcements and supplies. Second, he planned to consolidate the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) so it could be employed as a strike force throughout the northern part of the country, spending the next six months attacking enemy bases in the rugged mountains that lined the Laotian border. Finally, although not involving a significant relocation of forces, he intended to complete the obstacle system that McNamara had dictated be constructed along the Demilitarized Zone. Once completed, it would discourage North Vietnamese infiltration and stop any large-scale conventional invasion. By mid-1968, Westmoreland expected these and other operations would have further restricted the ability of large enemy units to reach the populated areas of South Vietnam, buying the government more time and space to work on pacification.[22]

As for the South Vietnamese, they organized their forces into four corps areas—the far north (I Corps), the center (II Corps), the heartland (III Corps), and the Mekong Delta in the south (IV Corps). Nearly half of the South's regular army units and the majority of their territorial soldiers served were deployed around the nation's cities, towns, lines of communications, economic facilities, and heavily populated rural areas. In all, about 500,000 South Vietnamese military and civilian personnel provided direct support to pacification and related civil operations. Most of the remaining regulars conducted offensive operations outside of but close to areas that were either government controlled or undergoing pacification.[23]

Allied plans for 1968 called for an increase in spending on pacification and for a dramatic rise (from 572 to 856) in the number of specially trained, Revolutionary Development (RD) teams that spearheaded the creation of *Ap Doi Moi*. Territorial, police, and paramilitary security forces were also slated for growth. Following long-established plans, Westmoreland hoped that the continued development of these forces would gradually free more regular South Vietnamese Army units for mobile operations. In the meantime, the only truly indigenous mobile reserves came from two sources. First, each of South Vietnam's four corps commanders had several ranger battalions—totaling about twenty nationwide—that constituted their corps reserves. Second, the Joint General Staff directly controlled another fourteen battalions—eight airborne and six marine—as a strategic reserve deployable anywhere in the country. The fairly static nature of most South Vietnamese formations, the importance that they remain in place in order to preserve government influence over the population, and the paucity of Vietnamese reserves meant that

[22] Msg, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), to Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), 28 Sep 67, sub: Reorientation of In-Country Forces, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH; CCP, 1968, pp. 13–14, A-2; MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, p. 1; MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, p. 1.

[23] Text of Ambassador Robert Komer's News Conf, 24 Jan 68, box 70, Neil Sheehan Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

U.S. forces had to act as the allies' primary mobile reserve—a fact that further undermined their utility as agents of long-term area security and pacification. Indeed, the continued growth of allied forces notwithstanding, they could not be everywhere at once, often leading to difficult choices that reinforced the allies' decision not to try and acquire large new chunks of territory in 1968.

As for his opponent's strategy, Westmoreland expected the enemy to concentrate on attacks in I Corps in the north, and in the border provinces of II and III Corps, where proximity to sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam provided an advantage. Westmoreland anticipated that the North Vietnamese might try to gain "a spectacular victory" somewhere in the remote hinterlands in order to affect U.S. public opinion and to improve their position for either negotiations or further combat. At the same time, he expected the enemy "to take measures over the next several months to reduce the heavy casualties we have inflicted on him thus far in 1967." Those measures might include more reliance on sapper units and attacks by fire, breaking up units into smaller groups to avoid contact, and moving some main force regiments closer to the border so they could escape into Cambodia and Laos when pressured. Whatever Hanoi had in mind, General Westmoreland felt confident that in 1968 the allies would continue to build on the momentum they had already generated in 1967.[24]

If the 1968 campaign went according to plan, MACV expected the South Vietnamese government would be well on its way toward a more stable and secure future. He hoped to start the process of turning over the war to the South Vietnamese by as early as 1969. Any U.S. troop withdrawals "will probably be token at first," he acknowledged, but he thought that within five years or so the South Vietnamese would be doing most of the actual fighting, allowing MACV to shrink back down to a modestly sized training and support command.[25]

The Chain of Command

Important as Westmoreland was in shaping the course of the Vietnam War, he was not the lone actor on the war's crowded stage. As the head of MACV, General Westmoreland was responsible for directing all U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps operations inside South Vietnam. He also served as the principal adviser to South Vietnam's armed forces—which he did not control—and he oversaw the activities of the South Korean, Australian, New Zealand, Thai, and Filipino military contingents, collectively known as the Free World Military Assistance Forces. Westmoreland and his staff had initially worked from an office building in downtown Saigon before moving in September 1967 to a new spacious complex on the edge of Tan Son Nhut,

[24] First quote from Notes, General William C. Westmoreland Speech, 6 Mar 67, sub: Address by General Westmoreland, p. 2, Historians files, CMH. Second quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 9514 to Heintges, 11 Oct 67, p. 1.

[25] Msg, Westmoreland HWA 3445 to Abrams, 26 Nov 67, sub: Concept of Situation Portrayed during Recent Visit to Washington.

the country's main commercial and military airfield, which covered six square kilometers on the northwestern edge of Saigon.[26]

MACV was the largest component of the U.S. Mission to South Vietnam, the joint body that supervised all U.S. government activities in that country. Another four agencies rounded out the U.S. Mission. The U.S. Embassy supervised political and diplomatic affairs under the direction of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. As the head of the U.S. Mission, Bunker was the highest-ranking U.S. official in South Vietnam. In daily practice, he and Westmoreland treated one another as equals; Bunker usually deferred to the general on military matters, while Westmoreland extended the same courtesy to the ambassador in political affairs. [27]

A second agency, the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO), managed public affairs under the direction of Barry Zorthian, a former journalist and diplomat who had become the embassy's chief press officer back in 1964. He held daily briefings in Saigon to inform the media about MACV operations and to speak on behalf of Westmoreland and Bunker regarding U.S. policies. Zorthian also supervised MACV's psychological warfare program, helping to design leaflets and radio broadcasts aimed at inducing enemy soldiers to defect. Defectors would then be funneled into the *Chieu Hoi* ("Open Arms") program, the South Vietnamese government's effort to rehabilitate its former adversaries.[28]

Ambassador Bunker

The third component of the U.S. Mission, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), supervised a variety of social, economic development, and humanitarian assistance programs. It also bore primary responsibility for assisting South Vietnam's police, sometimes in cooperation with the fourth element of the U.S. Mission, the Saigon station of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA's field agents assisted South Vietnam's intelligence apparatus and gathered a wide range of information that went into briefings for the president and his national

[26] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 121.

[27] Howard B. Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker, Global Troubleshooter, Vietnam Hawk* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina, 2003), p. 175; Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962–1967*, p. 354.

[28] William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962–1968,* United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006), p. 147.

security staff, giving them another perspective on the war to complement the information they received from MACV.

Although the civilian components of the U.S. Mission were independent of Westmoreland, he exercised significant influence over those programs most directly related to pacification through a subordinate element within MACV, the directorate for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS. President Johnson had created CORDS in April 1967 to bring all U.S. civil and military pacification programs under a single manager after separate efforts by MACV and the U.S. Mission had proven inefficient. Johnson had chosen a member of his National Security Council, Robert W. Komer, to head the new directorate. Nicknamed "Blowtorch" for his forceful personality, Komer asked for and received the title of ambassador so his rank and privileges would be equivalent to Westmoreland's deputy, General Abrams, thus giving the CORDS chief the leverage he felt he needed for the job. The insertion of a civilian into a military organization with rating power over those military personnel engaged in pacification work was novel. Komer had no authority, however, over U.S. military units.

Working for Komer were several thousand (mostly military) U.S. personnel who assisted, but did not control, South Vietnamese officials at the province and district levels. In addition to funneling resources to local governments and to providing advice on a host of socioeconomic matters, they helped train territorial defense forces and developed a network of regional

Robert Komer (left) *meeting with President Johnson at the White House*

intelligence centers to identify the clandestine Viet Cong infrastructure. This last task was particularly important, as the infrastructure served as kind of secret government that competed with the Saigon regime in the organization and control of the population. It was the infrastructure that provided the Viet Cong with much of their recruits, food, taxes, and information. To date, allied attacks against the infrastructure had yielded marginal results, but in July 1967 the allies had begun to reenergize the effort through a program termed Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX). Although it was not yet fully accepted by the South Vietnamese government, Komer expected that South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu would soon provide comprehensive implementing instructions. Komer and his deputy, Maj. Gen. George L. Forsythe, thus had their hands in a wide range of political, socioeconomic, administrative, security, and intelligence activities. By the fall of 1967, CORDS had already become a central player in the war effort.[29]

Ambassador Komer channeled many of his resources through the South Vietnamese agency that was principally responsible for the pacification program, the Ministry of Revolutionary Development. Led by Lt. Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang, the ministry supervised the territorial security forces, administered the *Chieu Hoi* program that repatriated defectors, and oversaw a variety of social programs that provided rural healthcare, refugee aid, and educational resources. Most importantly, the ministry trained and controlled

President Johnson (center) *meets with Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky* (left) *and President Nguyen Van Thieu*

[29] Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 86–98.

the Revolutionary Development teams that worked in the countryside to convert endangered hamlets into *Ap Doi Moi* communities.[30]

In addition to representing the U.S. military within the U.S. Mission and to overseeing those civil programs directly related to pacification via CORDS, Westmoreland belonged to a military chain of command that coursed its way back to Washington. As one of five subunified commands operating within the region of United States Pacific Command, MACV came under the control of the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC). The present CINCPAC, Adm. Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., had assumed his duties in June 1964, the same month that General Westmoreland had taken charge of MACV. Sharp gave Westmoreland wide latitude in running the war inside South Vietnam. The admiral's chief concern was managing the joint U.S. Air Force and Navy strategic bombing campaign that had been hammering North Vietnam's logistical infrastructure since March 1965. As a matter of convenience, Sharp allowed Westmoreland to communicate directly with officials in Washington as long as the admiral received a copy of each message.

Admiral Sharp reported to Secretary of Defense McNamara, a former automobile executive known for his analytical brilliance and data-driven, cost-cutting approach to business whom President John F. Kennedy had appointed in 1961. Initially supportive of intervention in Vietnam, McNamara changed his outlook after the massive infusion of U.S. aid had failed to produce quick results. The secretary was especially disenchanted with the ROLLING THUNDER bombing campaign, seeing it as a costly and futile effort that stiffened North Vietnamese resolve while damaging American prestige abroad. In fact, his long tenure as secretary of defense was about to end. Feeling that he was no longer in step with administration policy on the war, in November 1967 McNamara announced that he would be leaving office in a few months.[31]

Admiral Sharp

[30] Rpt, United States Administration for International Development (USAID) Program in Vietnam, presented by John P. Robinson, Acting Director, USAID Mission to Vietnam, to Senior Ofcrs' Conf, 6 Jun 68, Historians files, CMH; Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: U.S. Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), p. 119.

[31] Bruce M. Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), pp. 31–33; Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 313.

Although not technically in the chain of command, another leader was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle "Bus" G. Wheeler, who had received his appointment from President Johnson in July 1964 after serving for two years as the Army Chief of Staff. Wheeler advocated using all measures short of nuclear weapons to force North Vietnam to abandon its support for the Viet Cong insurgency. He consistently asked the president for the maximum number of troops whenever the Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared their recommendations for each deployment package. Before submitting the most recent of those, Program 5, which had set MACV's troop level at 525,000 spaces, Wheeler had also urged Johnson to mobilize several hundred thousand national guardsmen and reservists so the United States could replenish its strategic reserves, troops that could be used to deal with other contingencies (Berlin and Korea remained hot-button areas) or be sent to Vietnam. The president had refused to mobilize the reserves, but otherwise had given Wheeler most of what he had asked for.

The chain of command that extended downward from General Westmoreland encompassed nearly 480,000 U.S. troops in October 1967. Divided by service branch, the Army fielded the largest share with some 314,000 soldiers. Another 78,000 personnel came from the Marine Corps, 56,000 from the Air Force, 31,000 from the Navy, and around 500 from the Coast Guard. Westmoreland also exercised operational control over the Free World Military Assistance Forces, which included around 45,000 South Koreans, approximately 6,300 Australian and 500 New Zealand troops who operated as a combined task force, about 2,200 soldiers from Thailand, and around 2,000 noncombat troops from the Philippines.[32]

Organized as a joint headquarters, MACV contained, in addition to CORDS, three service branch components. The largest of the three, the U.S. Army, Vietnam (USARV), provided administrative, logistical, and support services to all U.S. Army units stationed in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland retained the title of commanding general, USARV, but placed daily control of the organization in the hands of its deputy commander, Lt. Gen. Bruce M. Palmer Jr. Headquartered at the Long Binh military complex approximately twenty kilometers northeast of Saigon, the USARV base camp sprawled across several square kilometers of land that engineers had reclaimed from an adjacent rubber plantation. A few kilometers to the west lay the Bien Hoa Air Base, which was capable of handling the largest transport aircraft in the U.S. Air Force.[33]

General Palmer supervised a variety of combat support subcommands. The largest of these was the 1st Logistical Command, which employed some 50,000 personnel to keep supplies moving from entry ports and airfields to forward depots around the country. The U.S. Army Engineer Command (Provisional), composed of the 18th and 20th Engineer Brigades, worked with several U.S. civilian construction firms to build the infrastructure required for a modern war. Another USARV component, the 18th Military Police Brigade,

[32] MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 156–57.
[33] For details about MACV, see Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962–1967.*

supported the logisticians and engineers by escorting convoys, guarding facilities, managing traffic, and deterring theft.[34]

General Palmer's responsibilities did not end there. He also supervised the 1st Aviation Brigade that supported allied operations with over 2,000 rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft, and the 44th Medical Brigade that provided health care services from nearly 200 locations across South Vietnam. The 1st Signal Brigade maintained the communications network in South Vietnam and Thailand; a subsidiary component, the Regional Communications Group, Vietnam, provided a secure message link to Honolulu, Hawaii, and Washington.[35]

After its Army component, MACV's next-largest service command was the Seventh U.S. Air Force. General William W. Momyer directed its operations from Tan Son Nhut, controlling a total of six tactical fighter wings that flew close air support missions for the ground forces, two air commando wings with specialized ground attack aircraft, one tactical reconnaissance wing, and one transport air wing. The command also included a variety of search and rescue helicopters, electronic and psychological warfare aircraft, and a fleet of small fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft. The one aircraft type not under General Momyer's control was the B–52 Stratofortress. Primarily designed to deliver nuclear weapons, the eight-engine strategic bomber could also carry up to thirty tons of conventional ordnance. Westmoreland obtained their use through the Strategic Air Command, which flew up to 1,000 bombing sorties in South Vietnam each month from bases in Guam and Thailand.[36]

The third and final component command within MACV was the Naval Forces, Vietnam. Led by R. Adm. Kenneth L. Veth, it controlled three naval combat groups. A flotilla of Navy and Coast Guard cutters known as Task Force 115 patrolled the coastal waters to prevent seaborne infiltration. The nimble, shallow-hulled PBRs (Patrol Boats, River) of Task Force 116 prowled the waterways of the Mekong Delta in search of enemy sampans. Lastly, a fleet of landing craft, armored monitors, and barrack ships known as Task Force 117 supported allied units in the northeastern Mekong Delta as part of an amphibious assault group known as the Mobile Riverine Force.

Westmoreland organized his ground maneuver units into three corps-level commands that mirrored the South Vietnamese system of corps tactical zones (CTZs). By arrangement with the South Vietnamese government, he assigned particular areas within each corps to the Australia–New Zealand, Thai, and South Korean combat forces.

The I Corps region that bordered North Vietnam contained the highest density of U.S. troops. Westmoreland directed the U.S. effort in the five northernmost provinces through III Marine Amphibious Force and its commander, Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr. Both Cushman and the South Vietnamese corps com-

[34] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 124–26.

[35] Pamphlet, MACV, Tour 365: For Soldiers Going Home, Summer, 1970, pp. 7–12, copy in Historians files, CMH.

[36] John Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive, 1965–1968*, United States Air Force in Southeast Asia (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1988), app. 1.

General Cushman

mander, Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, maintained their headquarters in the port city of Da Nang in Quang Nam Province. Farther south in the twelve provinces of the South Vietnamese II Corps zone, Army Lt. Gen. William B. Rosson directed a corps-size command known as I Field Force, Vietnam (I FFV), from the coastal city of Nha Trang in Khanh Hoa Province. His counterpart was Lt. Gen. Vinh Loc, who commanded Vietnamese forces assigned to II Corps from Pleiku City in the Central Highlands province of Pleiku. MACV's third major combat command, II Field Force, Vietnam (II FFV), operated in the eleven provinces of the South Vietnamese III Corps zone under the direction of Army Lt. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand. His headquarters was at Long Binh. The III Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, directed his forces from Bien Hoa, just up the road from Long Binh. Together, they oversaw the approaches to Saigon. Vietnam's last corps organization, IV Corps, controlled the sixteen densely populated and food-rich provinces that formed the Mekong Delta. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Manh commanded the corps from Can Tho, Phong Dinh Province, in the central delta. Because Westmoreland stationed relatively few U.S. troops in the delta, he did not post a field force headquarters there as in the other three corps tactical zones.

Two Special Forces commands rounded out the forces at Westmoreland's disposal. The U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), headquartered in Nha Trang, organized long-range reconnaissance missions and manned surveillance camps on the South Vietnamese border. These men also advised South Vietnamese Special Forces, which in turn commanded a small army of irregulars recruited largely from non-Vietnamese ethnic groups, particularly the Montagnards of the Central Highlands. Another weapon in Westmoreland's arsenal was MACV's clandestine Studies and Observations Group, which sent small teams of U.S. Special Forces soldiers and indigenous mercenaries into Laos and Cambodia to spy on the enemy.

The U.S. Army in Vietnam

Of the approximately 314,000 U.S. Army personnel attached to MACV, just over one in every four soldiers belonged to the combat maneuver forces, represented by the infantry, airborne, mechanized, armor, and armored

cavalry. In October 1967, Westmoreland commanded a total of seventy-seven U.S. Army combat maneuver battalions. Of those, sixty-three were infantry-type units, eleven were armored cavalry units, and two were armor units. Their primary job was to close on the enemy by ground movement or airmobile assaults, to cut off his escape routes whenever possible, and then to defeat him in close-range combat.[37]

The standard U.S. infantry battalion had an authorized strength of 920 officers and enlisted men. Detachments, illness, casualties, and soldiers departing at the end of their one-year tour of duty meant that battalions almost never took to the field at full strength. Traditionally the Army organized infantry battalions into three rifle companies, but in 1967 it added a fourth to units in Vietnam to better handle the demands of area warfare. Rounding out the battalions were a heavy weapons platoon and a command group. The standard infantry weapon was the M16A1 assault rifle, a recently developed lightweight but powerful weapon that fired a 5.56-mm. cartridge from a twenty-round magazine. It was accurate to a range of more than 600 meters. The A1 model incorporated several improvements, such as a chromed receiving chamber, to fix the jamming problems that had plagued the initial version of the weapon. Approximately one in every eight U.S. infantrymen carried an M79 grenade launcher, a shotgun-like weapon that fired several varieties of 40-mm. ammunition—buckshot, high-explosive, illumination, and white phosphorous incendiary shells—out to 180 meters. Most soldiers also carried several hand-thrown fragmentation grenades or smoke canisters for marking targets.

In the category of support weapons, a U.S. battalion was authorized thirty-two M60 7.62-mm. general-purpose machine guns (belt-fed weapons weighing 23 pounds, and with an effective range of 1,100 meters) and ten M2 .50-caliber heavy machine guns (a tripod-mounted weapon weighing approximately 100 pounds, and with an effective range of 1,800 meters). Each battalion also possessed twelve M29 81-mm. medium mortars, a muzzle-loaded, smooth-bore weapon crewed by five men, which could lob a high-explosive round with a lethal burst radius of 11 meters, out to a distance of nearly 5,000 meters. The nearly 100-pound weapon could be broken down into three components—base plate, firing tube, and bipod—when it was carried into the field.[38]

The Army used two main types of armored vehicles. Mechanized infantry units were equipped with M113 armored personnel carriers, a boxy, twelve-ton tracked vehicle with aluminum armor thick enough to stop small arms and machine gun fire. Crewed by a driver and a commander, the M113 could carry up to eleven soldiers. Most vehicles were armed with a single .50-cali-

[37] Transcript, Westmoreland Speech at National Press Club, 21 Nov 67, an. A, p. 3. Westmoreland estimated that in 1968 around 61 percent of his troops were in combat-related roles, which compared quite favorably to the 57 percent figure recorded during World War II and the Korean War.

[38] Thomas C. Thayer, ed., *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965–1972*, 12 vols. (Arlington, Va.: Defense Documentation Center, Defense Logistics Agency, 1975), 2:23.

A soldier waits for the enemy with an M16A1 rifle.

A soldier loads a smoke round into an M79 grenade launcher.

ber machine gun, but the cavalry version also had two side-mounted M60 machine guns. For armored units, the main vehicle was the M48A3 Patton, a 53-ton diesel-powered tank armed with a 90-mm. cannon and two machine guns. The armor on its turret could shrug off a rocket-propelled grenade, but the vehicle's tracks and rear engine compartment were vulnerable to enemy fire.

Combat troops who provided direct support to the maneuver units represented the second category of soldier, comprising roughly a quarter of Westmoreland's force. They included artillery, air defense artillery, assault helicopter, military intelligence, chemical corps, signal corps, and combat engineer forces. These soldiers helped locate the enemy and facilitated his destruction by transporting combat troops into battle and by providing heavy supporting fire. Some of them, particularly the artillerymen and aviators, routinely found themselves in combat situations, while a greater percentage operated from the relative safety of brigade camps and division headquarters.

Each infantry battalion received direct support fire from a battery of six 105-mm. howitzers, either the M101A1 or the newer and lighter M102 version, both of which could fire a variety of ammunition types with an effective range of 11,500 meters. The high-explosive round had a lethal burst radius of about fifteen meters, but limited penetration capability. To knock out fortified positions, it was usually necessary to employ heavier weapons controlled at the brigade or division level such as the M114 towed 155-mm. howitzer or the M109 self-propelled 155-mm. howitzer, which fired a high-explosive round with a lethal burst radius of 25 meters out to nearly 15,000 meters. More powerful still was the 175-mm. M107 self-propelled gun, a flat trajectory, high-velocity cannon that could strike targets up to 34,000 meters away, and the even heavier 8-inch (203-mm.) M110 self-propelled howitzer, capable of hurling a 20-pound projectile with a lethal burst radius of 80 meters to a maximum range of 25,000 meters.

The third and final category of U.S. Army personnel were the administrative and logistical troops. Representing nearly half of Westmoreland's total force, their job was to supply, maintain, and move the combat forces as well as handle most of the administrative chores. Frontline soldiers derided the comparatively soft life that these rear-echelon troops enjoyed, but no modern army could function without them to keep the machines running, the supplies flowing, and the paperwork in order.

In addition to MACV's primary mission of destroying the enemy's combat forces and logistical network, the command supervised about 14,000 personnel who performed two additional core missions. The first was advising and equipping the South Vietnamese armed forces, a job performed by about 7,000 U.S. troops. MACV placed advisers at every level of Vietnamese military command, from the Joint General Staff down to battalions. Advisers attached to regular combat units helped with their training, provided tactical advice, and ensured that the government troops received timely air and artillery support. Still other advisers served at Vietnamese military schools, training centers, and logistical installations. Another 7,000 or so worked under CORDS to execute MACV's other key

Members of Battery A, 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery, fire a 175-mm. self-propelled gun.

mission—pacification. CORDS maintained representatives at the corps level and posted senior advisers to work with every province and district chief in Vietnam. Below them, U.S. soldiers advised Vietnamese territorial forces in the areas of intelligence, weaponry, tactics, and logistics.[39]

The South Vietnamese Armed Forces

The South Vietnamese military had around 615,000 personnel in October 1967. Nearly half, some 292,000 men, served in the regular army. Another 16,000 belonged to the navy, 15,000 to the air force, and 8,300 to the marines. Another 282,000 personnel served in territorial security units known as the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces. All of these personnel fell under the authority of the Joint General Staff headquarters, which directed the war from a multiblock complex just south of Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The head of the Joint General Staff and Westmoreland's direct counterpart was General Cao Van Vien, a diligent and hardworking officer. General Vien reported directly to President Thieu, himself a former general.[40]

[39] Fact Book, MACV, vol. 2, n.d., sub: Description of the Organization, Mission, and Scope of the Advisory Effort, Historians files, CMH.

[40] Rpt, MACV, 19 Nov 67, sub: Selected RVNAF Personnel Data, Encl 1, Historians files, CMH.

South Vietnam organized its army around ten light infantry divisions. Most consisted of three infantry regiments plus a cavalry squadron and two field artillery battalions. Due to variations in their composition, division strength varied between 9,000 and 11,000 troops. Each corps commander also controlled a mobile reserve force consisting of between three and six ranger battalions and one or two armored cavalry squadrons, the latter equipped with M41 Walker Bulldog light tanks, 23-ton vehicles armed with a 76-mm. cannon and two machine guns. The elite of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, eight airborne battalions and six marine battalions, formed a strategic reserve that reported directly to the head of the South Vietnamese Army in Saigon.

South Vietnamese units tended to be smaller and not nearly as well armed as their U.S. counterparts. The standard South Vietnamese infantry battalion had an authorized strength of just over 600 soldiers, or around two-thirds that of a full strength U.S. unit. In late 1967, only the elite South Vietnamese battalions and the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division were armed with M16s, which remained in short supply. The majority of government troops carried the World War II–era M2 .30-caliber carbine, a semiautomatic weapon with a fifteen-round clip and an effective range of just 200 meters. Support weapons were also lacking. South Vietnamese battalions were equipped with only six .30-caliber machine guns (roughly equivalent to the more modern M60 machine gun, but heavier), four 81-mm. mortars, and six light 60-mm. mortars.

General Vien

The Regional and Popular Forces accounted for nearly half of the South Vietnamese ground force, and were responsible for security at the provincial level and below. The more capable of the two organizations was the Regional Forces, organized into approximately 1,000 light infantry companies plus several dozen armored car companies, a handful of river patrols units, and several reconnaissance battalions used for airfield defense. Armed with a mixture of M2 carbines, .30-caliber light machine guns, and a few 60-mm. mortars, the average Regional Forces soldier had received basic training at the individual and company level. The best units could participate in offensive missions with the regular army, while the worst were only capable of defending fixed locations.

Most of the static security missions such as guarding hamlets, manning watchtowers, and protecting bridges fell to the Popular Forces, organized into some 4,500 platoons that operated under the direction of a district chief. Most Popular Forces soldiers were middle-aged men who had received some basic individual training. Armed with a mixture of carbines and World War II–era submachine guns, the Popular Forces were not up to the task of fighting main force regulars, but posed a threat to the local Viet Cong when properly employed. More often than not, they suffered from poor leadership and inadequate support. In extreme cases, they could become a bullying gang in the community that they were supposed to defend.

A U.S. Army adviser wades through a rice paddy with South Vietnamese troops.

The South Vietnamese Army also fielded two groups of specialized soldiers, the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and the Mobile Strike Force (MSF). Their main task was to harass and interdict enemy infiltration from over forty Special Forces camps scattered throughout the country, mostly in remote areas near the border with Laos and Cambodia. Numbering almost 40,000 soldiers at the end of 1967, the CIDG fighters were recruited mostly from the Montagnard and Khmer people. The minimally trained and lightly armed CIDG troops mainly patrolled the countryside near Special Forces camps. By contrast, the nearly 6,000 MSF soldiers were recruited mostly from the ethnic Nungs (a tribal people originally from the hills of North Vietnam) who lived in the Cholon District of Saigon. The MSF soldiers, better-armed and disciplined than their CIDG counterparts, provided

a ready reaction force in each of the four tactical zones. Operating under the command of the U.S. 5th Special Forces Group and not tied down to static security duties, the MSF companies could be employed anywhere on short notice within their respective zone.[41]

The Enemy

In late 1967 most Americans saw the Vietnam War as a three-year-old conflict. From the point of view of the Vietnamese, however, the "American War" was merely the latest phase in the much longer struggle. The titular head of the North Vietnamese state, Ho Chi Minh, had spent several decades trying to defeat French colonialism and the new South Vietnamese state in order to reunify all of Vietnam under the control of the Communist Lao Dong Party. As things stood in late 1967, Ho Chi Minh was not sure if he would live long enough to see his dream realized. He was now in his seventy-seventh year, weakened by malaria and other chronic diseases that he had contracted long ago while living in jungle camps. Ho spent much of his time in seclusion while a small group of his most trusted comrades handled the daily affairs of state.[42]

This inner circle of men included Le Duan, general secretary of the Lao Dong Party; General Vo Nguyen Giap, minister of defense; Pham Van Dong, prime minister of North Vietnam; and Truong Chinh, chairman of the National Assembly, the legislative body of the Lao Dong Party. Those men, plus Ho and five others, constituted the voting members of the Politburo, the senior executive committee of the Lao Dong Party that held the ultimate reins of power in Hanoi. That high council effectively determined North Vietnam's war strategy.

The members reached their decisions through a process of debate, held in private and attended only by their small inner circle. No single person, not even Ho, had the power to impose his will if the majority stood against him. While all sought the reunification of Vietnam under the direction of the Lao Dong Party, they sometimes disagreed about which methods to use to achieve that end. When deadlock threatened, the Central Committee usually turned to Ho to mediate the dispute. In the end, a dominant faction would emerge and the group would reach a consensus. The Politburo then transmitted its decision to the National Assembly of the Lao Dong Party, whose essential function was to rubber-stamp the directives of the high council. The members of the Politburo never aired their disagreements in public, for all pronouncements were supposed to reflect the scientific and ineluctable nature of Marxism-Leninism.[43]

[41] Col Francis J. Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961–1971,* Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1989), p. 82.

[42] For background, see Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support, The Early Years, 1941–1960,* United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983).

[43] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 13–14.

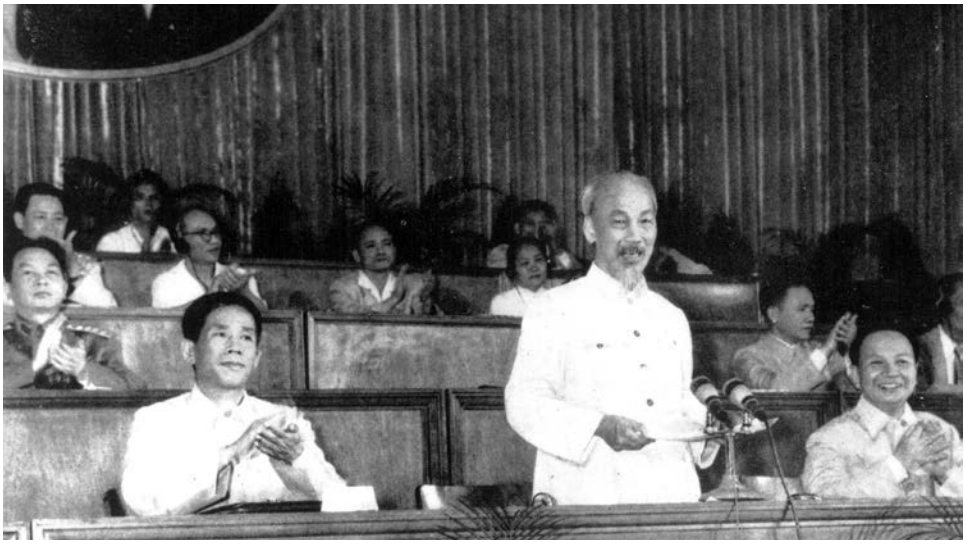
The most active and influential voice in the Politburo was Le Duan, the second-highest-ranking member of the party. He had led the Viet Minh armies in the south in the early years of the First Indochina War and then became the chief organizer of the southern Communists after the partition of 1954. In 1959, when the Politburo decided to throw the weight of North Vietnam behind the southern insurgency, Le Duan became head of the Reunification Department, the agency that controlled the infiltration of men and supplies into the South. His position also gave him control over the southern branch of the Lao Dong Party. By November 1967, the Reunification Department had sent tens of thousands of trained cadre to help lead the insurgency as well as an even larger number of North Vietnamese troops to fight in the South. From his office in Hanoi, Le Duan controlled a vast party apparatus that extended down to the smallest and most remote Viet Cong hamlet in the South.

Although the Reunification Department determined how many men and supplies would go south each month, most of the work to fulfill those goals came from the Ministry of Defense. The number-three man in the Politburo, General Giap, ran the department alongside his protégée, Senior General Van Tien Dung, the chief of staff of the North Vietnamese Army. Giap and Dung controlled approximately 450,000 North Vietnamese troops. Of those, slightly more than 10 percent were fighting within the borders of South Vietnam, and Hanoi was capable of committing another 10 percent without significantly weakening the defenses of North Vietnam.

Enemy units in South Vietnam received their military supplies through two main channels. The first and most important was the Ho Chi Minh Trail, an elaborate supply network that began in the lower part of North Vietnam, crossed over into Laos, and then wound its way south along multiple routes to a final endpoint in Cambodia, opposite the border with Pleiku Province (*see Map 2*). A special North Vietnamese logistical command known as the *559th Group* maintained the trail network and ferried supplies between the major depot stations known as *binh trams*. The logistical command also supervised the infiltration of between 6,000 and 7,000 North Vietnamese troops each month to replace losses in the South.[44]

The second Communist logistical channel was by sea. Allied maritime operations prevented enemy vessels from unloading supplies on South Vietnamese shores, but the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia remained wide open. By late 1967, most of the military supplies used by the enemy in III and IV Corps came through Sihanoukville. Cambodian officials were paid to look the other way while Viet Cong logisticians loaded the material onto trucks, which then drove to the enemy camps using the country's highway

[44] Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 14.3–67, p. 2, in U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, *William C. Westmoreland, Plaintiff, v. CBS, Inc., et al., Defendants. 82 Civ 7913 (PNL). Plaintiff General William C. Westmoreland's Memorandum of Law in Opposition to Defendant CBS's Motion to Dismiss and for Summary Judgment, app. B,* p. 257 (hereafter cited as *Westmoreland Memorandum of Law, app. B*); MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 29.



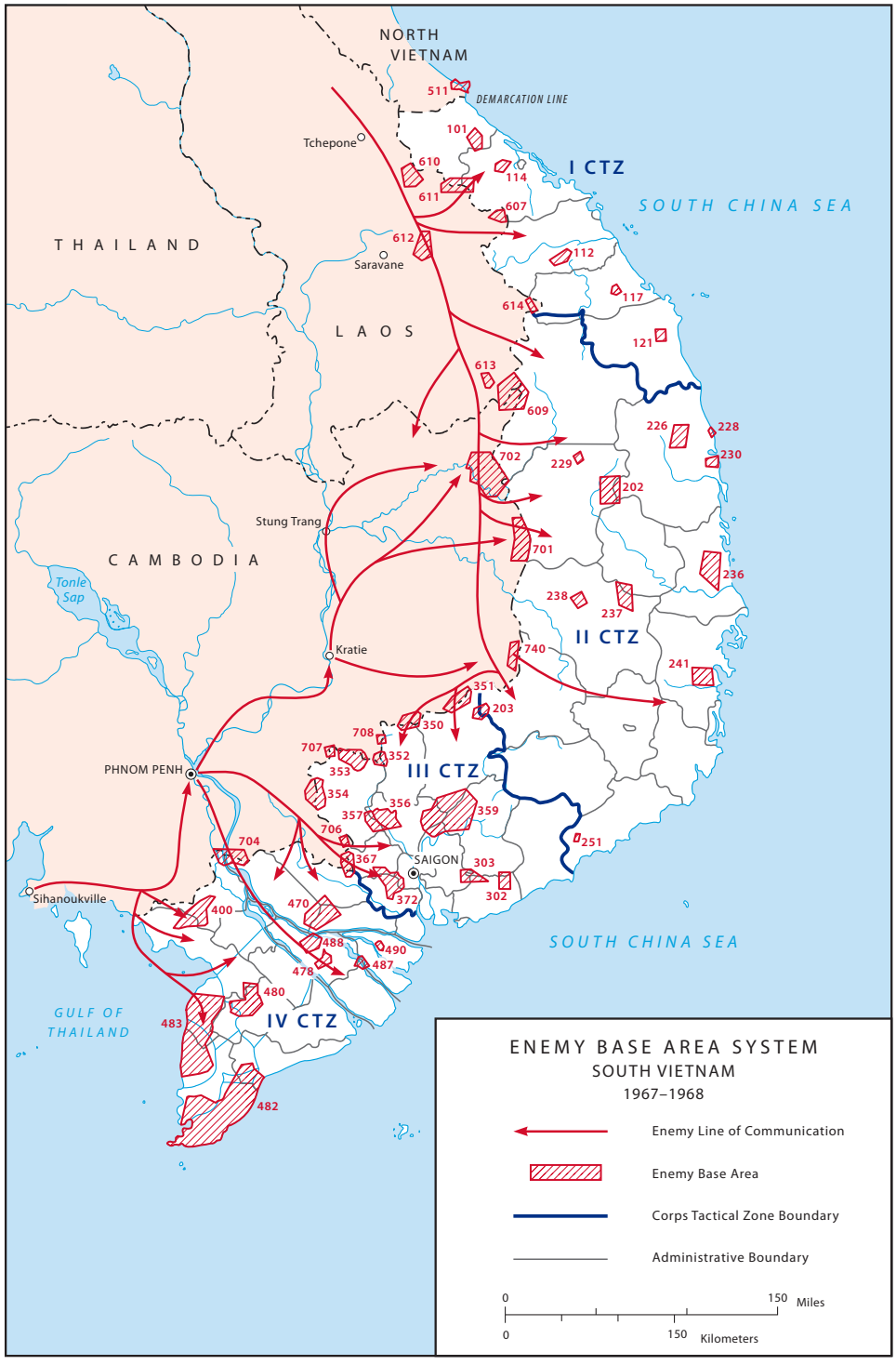
North Vietnamese leaders attend the Third National Congress of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi, 1960. From left to right, first row: Le Duan, Ho Chi Minh, and Truong Chinh; second row, Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong.

system. The enemy also used the international airport at Phnom Penh, the capital city, to fly high-ranking North Vietnamese officials back and forth whenever they needed to meet with commanders in III and IV Corps.

In October 1967, MACV believed that about 118,000 full-time enemy soldiers were fighting in the South, some 64,000 Viet Cong regulars along with the approximately 54,000 North Vietnamese troops from the *People's Army of Vietnam* (*PAVN*). The Viet Cong soldiers, more formally members of the *People's Liberation Armed Forces* (*PLAF*), fell into two main categories, main and local force units. The main force units closely resembled their North Vietnamese counterparts in terms of organization and equipment, and generally were just as well trained and well armed. The distinction between the two also blurred because many Viet Cong main force units contained a large percentage of North Vietnamese soldiers. Over the last several years, the number of northerners had grown steadily because local recruitment had failed to keep pace with losses, and southerners were now a minority in some Viet Cong units.

MACV defined a main force unit as one that was directly subordinate to a Communist front command, military region, or military subregion. Such units frequently operated across provincial borders and sometimes relocated to entirely new areas of South Vietnam depending on the tactical requirements. Local force units were subordinate to a provincial or district party committee and remained within that specified territory. Operating in battalion, independent company, and independent platoon strength, they often reinforced main force units fighting in their areas.[45]

[45] Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1986), p. 89.


NORTH VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE
511
Tchepone
101
610
611
114
607
I CTZ
SOUTH CHINA SEA
THAILAND
612
Saravane
112
117
614
LAOS
121
613
609
226
228
230
702
229
202
Stung Trang
701
CAMBODIA
236
Tonle Sap
238
237
II CTZ
Kratie
740
241
351
203
350
708
707
352
PHNOM PENH
353
III CTZ
354
356
357
359
706
704
251
367
SAIGON
303
Sihanoukville
372
302
400
470
488
490
487
478
480
SOUTH CHINA SEA
GULF OF THAILAND
483
IV CTZ
482
ENEMY BASE AREA SYSTEM
SOUTH VIETNAM
1967–1968
Enemy Line of Communication
Enemy Base Area
Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
Administrative Boundary
0
150
Miles
0
150
Kilometers

MAP 2

The majority of local and main force infantrymen were equipped with either a Chinese copy of the Simonov Semi-Automatic (SKS) carbine or, more commonly, the Chinese Type 56 assault rifle. The latter was modeled on the famous Soviet-designed AK47 assault rifle; because the two weapons were virtually identical, allied troops commonly referred to both variants as the AK47. Both the carbine and the assault rifle fired a 7.62-mm. cartridge, the SKS from a ten-round clip and the AK47 from a thirty-round magazine, out to an effective range of about 400 meters. Sacrificing some of its range and accuracy for mechanical simplicity, the AK47 was easier to maintain and far less prone to jamming than the M16. The reliability of the weapon plus its large magazine gave the enemy a distinct advantage when fighting South Vietnamese troops armed with M1 and M2 carbines.[46]

Specially trained soldiers known as sappers performed a variety of reconnaissance and combat engineer missions. Sappers were trained to use explosives and taught how to infiltrate allied perimeters; they typically spearheaded infantry assaults and sometimes operated independently when stealth was required. Some sapper teams were trained to operate in the water, and a few were even trained to operate U.S. armored vehicles that the enemy might capture.

The support weapons used at the battalion level were Soviet designs made in China. Some soldiers were armed with a B40 or B41 rocket-propelled grenade launcher, a smoothbore, breech-loaded, tube-shaped weapon that fired a small rocket capable of damaging a tank and destroying less-well-protected vehicles. Each battalion also possessed several dozen Soviet-designed RPD 7.62-mm. light machine guns, one-man weapons equipped with 100-round magazine drums and effective to a range of 1,000 meters. Most enemy battalions contained a heavy weapons company, usually armed with a mix of 60-mm. and 82-mm. mortars, and a number of 57-mm. or 75-mm. recoilless rifles, smoothbore, breech-loaded, and tripod-mounted weapons that were capable of knocking out most armored vehicles at a range of up to several thousand meters.

The heavier weapons used at the regimental and division level most often came from the Soviet Union or one of its Eastern Bloc allies. Enemy regiments typically contained at least one antiaircraft unit armed with 12.7-mm. belt-fed heavy machine guns, crewed by two men and usually mounted on tripods that could also be used in a ground support role. Enemy artillery units operating in South Vietnam were typically equipped with a mixture of 120-mm. mortars and 122-mm. rockets. The rockets were designed to be fired from a smoothbore, muzzle-loaded, tripod-mounted tube, but also capable of being fired from a sloped mound of dirt or a simple wooden cross-brace. The 122-mm. rocket had an effective range of 11,500 meters, but its accuracy was poor.[47]

[46] Pamphlet, Department of the Army, Lessons Learned Vietnam Primer, no. 525-2, 21 Apr 67, p. 51, copy in Historians files, CMH.

[47] Ibid.

Viet Cong guerrillas emerge from a swamp to conduct an attack.

Backing the 118,000 main and local force regulars were, by MACV estimates, some 90,000 guerrilla soldiers. They sniped at allied troops, planted booby traps, collected taxes, and served as guides for enemy main force units. Most guerrillas were armed with World War II– and Korean War–vintage weapons, while a few continued to use bolt-action rifles dating back to World War I.[48]

Operating behind the shield provided by the military forces was the Viet Cong Infrastructure, roughly 80,000 political functionaries who formed a shadow government in many parts of the countryside. They distributed propaganda, obtained supplies, levied taxes, and recruited new members. Many of them had legal status (i.e., they lived in the open as regular civilians with government-issued identification cards) so they did not usually carry weapons unless there was a special need.[49]

MACV and the CIA agreed that the enemy fielded around 320,000 main force, local force, guerrilla, and political infrastructure personnel within South Vietnam. They disagreed, however, as to whether or not to include in the official enemy order of battle another estimated 120,000 Viet Cong supporters who belonged to the so-called Self-Defense (part-time guerrillas living in enemy-controlled areas) and Secret Self-Defense units (part-time clandestine organizations operating in government-controlled areas). These irregular forces posed as typical civilians, keeping their weapons hidden until the time came to carry out a mission. The CIA had pushed hard in mid-1967 to include these Viet Cong supporters in the calculation of enemy combat

[48] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 53; Peter Copeland, "Enemy Small Arms in Vietnam," *Army Digest* vol. 24 no. 6 (June 1969): 52–55.

[49] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 56.

strength, but MACV had resisted the demand. Westmoreland's analysts argued that the Self-Defense and Secret Self-Defense personnel had little impact on combat operations, and adding them to the official order of battle tally would create an erroneous view of enemy strength. In October 1967, MACV and the CIA reached a compromise that gave Westmoreland most of what he wanted. MACV did not add the Self-Defense and Secret Self-Defense forces to its order of battle estimates, though the CIA gained the opportunity to draw attention to the role of these part-time personnel, who the agency believed were more influential in the war than MACV analysts were prepared to concede.[50]

The Communists depended on a complex logistical system of bases built by hand over many years to sustain the roughly 220,000 full-time fighters that belonged to the main, local, and guerrilla forces. Well shielded by mountains, swamps, or heavily canopied jungle, these installations contained everything the troops needed to wage war: headquarters, training facilities, ammunition and supply depots, repair shops, hospitals, barracks, and even rest areas. Employing them as strategic hubs, Communist commanders drew upon them well ahead of attacks to stockpile food, ammunition, and whatever other supplies they would need in small caches near their targets. They called the process "preparing the battlefield." In late 1967, MACV estimated that the enemy possessed at least fifty-three major base areas in South Vietnam and another nineteen in Laos and Cambodia.[51]

The Communists maintained three interrelated organizations in South Vietnam to coordinate and control their political and military activities: the National Liberation Front (NLF), the People's Revolutionary Party, and the *Central Office for South Vietnam* (*COSVN*). All three organizations were subsidiaries of North Vietnam's Lao Dong Party, which exercised total control over the war in the South. The National Liberation Front was supposedly an independent umbrella organization that coordinated the efforts of all Communist and non-Communist groups fighting against the Saigon government. Although it had included many non-Communist nationalists during the 1950s and early 1960s, it had fallen so blatantly under Hanoi's control by the mid-1960s that *COSVN* Resolution 4 in March 1966 referred to it openly as the southern branch of the Hanoi regime. The People's Revolutionary Party pretended to be an entirely separate organization from North Vietnam's Lao Dong Party, but in truth it reported directly to the Party's Reunification Department, the directorate that was responsible for infiltrating troops, supplies, and Communist cadre into the South. *COSVN* was the ruling executive council of the People's Revolutionary Party. The leadership of the two organizations was virtually the same, and its highest-ranking officers were members of the North Vietnamese Politburo.

The North Vietnamese government controlled the war in the South through an overlapping combination of military headquarters and administrative regions that changed over time to reflect the war's growing complex-

[50] Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1962–1968*, pp. 325–27.
[51] Ibid., p. 68.

ity (*Map 3*). The enemy controlled his main force regiments and divisions through five corps-level headquarters known as front commands, which were subordinate to military regions that supervised all military and political activities in a particular geographic region. The *DMZ Front* controlled the main force units along the Demilitarized Zone; it reported to the *Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region*, which encompassed northern I Corps and the southeastern panhandle of Laos. Southern I Corps and the coastal provinces in northwestern II Corps belonged to *Military Region 5*, which controlled its main force units through the *B1 Front*. North Vietnamese units in western II Corps reported to the *B3 Front*, which was subordinate to the *Western Highlands Military Region* stretching into an adjoining slice of Laos and Cambodia. Finally, *COSVN* managed the provinces in the southern half of South Vietnam as well as logistical areas in Cambodia, and controlled its main force units through the *B2 Front*.[52]

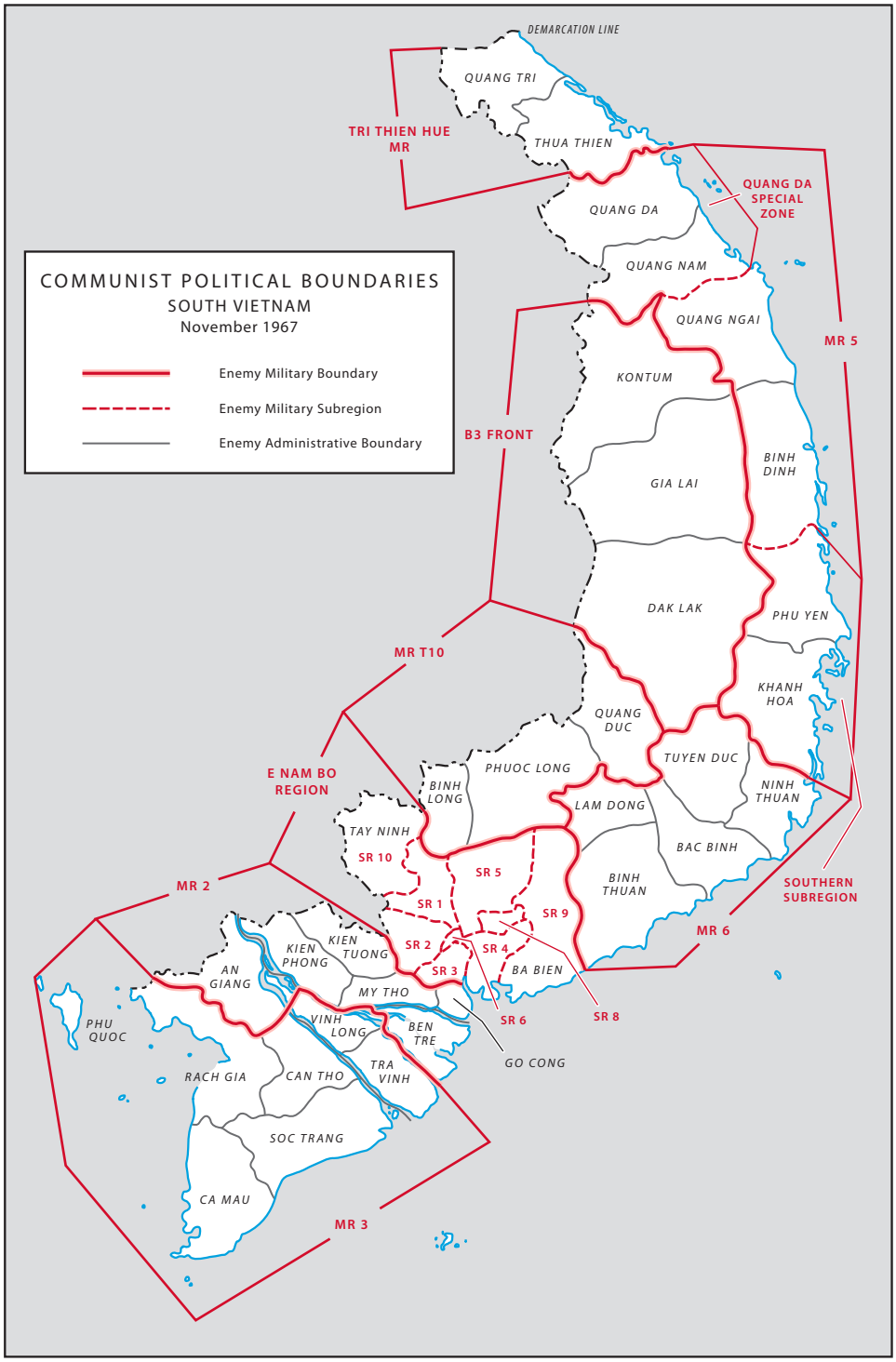
Hanoi's Decision to Launch a General Offensive–General Uprising

When North Vietnamese leaders met in April 1967 to discuss the goals they hoped to achieve during the coming winter-spring campaign, the primus inter pare of the Politburo, Le Duan, argued that the time had come "to create a new turning point that [would] enable us to make a great leap forward." The political and military situation in South Vietnam was at last right, he insisted, for the long-awaited *tong cong kich/tong khoi nghia* (general offensive–general uprising). Le Duan recommended an all-out attack against South Vietnam's administrative infrastructure, which meant attacking the big cities for the first time in the conflict. The goal was to paralyze the government long enough for Viet Cong–controlled revolutionary councils to seize power in many provincial and district capitals. Claiming to represent those so-called liberated zones, the revolutionary councils would jointly demand the formation of a coalition government in Saigon that would include representatives from the National Liberation Front. Following the formation of that coalition government, the National Liberation Front members would press for an immediate cease-fire and the speedy departure of U.S. and Free World forces. After they had gone, the Communists could step out of the shadows and reunify the country under the banner of the Lao Dong Party.[53]

American public opinion played only a minor role in Le Duan's conception of the general offensive–general uprising. Although he welcomed the growing antiwar sentiment in the United States, Le Duan saw the general

[52] Tran Van Tra, *Ket Thuc Cuoc Chien Tranh 30 Nam* [*Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre*] (Ho Chi Minh City: Van Nghe Publishing House, 1982), p. 2 (hereafter cited as *History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre).*

[53] Quote from Le Lien, "Creating A Turning Point in the Resistance War Against the Americans," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, 3 Dec 04; U.S. Mission Saigon, "The New Situation and Mission," Vietman Documents and Research Notes (VDRN), no. 20, Mar 68, Historians files, CMH.


COMMUNIST POLITICAL BOUNDARIES
SOUTH VIETNAM
November 1967
Enemy Military Boundary
Enemy Military Subregion
Enemy Administrative Boundary
DEMARCATION LINE
QUANG TRI
THUA THIEN
TRI THIEN HUE MR
QUANG DA
QUANG DA SPECIAL ZONE
QUANG NAM
QUANG NGAI
MR 5
KONTUM
B3 FRONT
BINH DINH
GIA LAI
DAK LAK
PHU YEN
MR T10
KHANH HOA
QUANG DUC
TUYEN DUC
E NAM BO REGION
PHUOC LONG
BINH LONG
NINH THUAN
LAM DONG
TAY NINH
BAC BINH
SR 10
SR 5
SR 1
SR 9
BINH THUAN
SOUTHERN SUBREGION
MR 2
SR 2
SR 4
MR 6
KIEN PHONG
KIEN TUONG
AN GIANG
SR 3
BA BIEN
MY THO
SR 6
SR 8
VINH LONG
BEN TRE
PHU QUOC
GO CONG
TRA VINH
RACH GIA
CAN THO
SOC TRANG
CA MAU
MR 3

MAP 3

offensive–general uprising as a way to achieve concrete gains on the battlefield, rather than as a ploy to undermine U.S. public support for the war.

North Vietnamese leaders had started preparations for a general offensive–general uprising after South Vietnamese generals overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, but shelved their plans in early 1965 after the United States intervened in the war. North Vietnamese leaders quietly returned to a strategy of protracted warfare, ratified with the passage of Resolution 12 of the Lao Dong Party in December 1965. As a senior *COSVN* commander recalled in a postwar history, the supplies that had been stockpiled for the general offensive were instead used to satisfy the "urgent battlefield requirements" of fighting the Americans.[54]

North Vietnamese leaders had revised their strategy in late 1966 after concluding that the United States was not likely to expand the ground war into Laos, Cambodia, or North Vietnam, thus ensuring that the Communists would continue to enjoy a relatively safe rear area. In the words of the *COSVN* commander, Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the United States' political and military effort had become "deadlocked." The U.S. public was already tiring of the conflict; further troop deployments to South Vietnam would probably be minimal. The Politburo adopted a more aggressive strategy in January 1967 with the passage of Resolution 13, which directed its forces to "Intensify the political struggle in coordination with the military struggle in order to carry out a general offensive and insurrection in the cities and the enemy-controlled portions of the rural countryside and establish a broad-based national democratic coalition that has as its core the National Liberation Front."[55]

Several Politburo members supported Le Duan's call for a general offensive–general uprising, most notably chief of the General Staff, General Dung, and the commander of *COSVN*, General Thanh. They argued that only a small slice of the southern population—the 10 percent who were Catholics, the small-land-owning upper class, and a few middle-class urbanites who worked for the Americans—truly supported the government. In their view, a far larger number of people, including the urban poor, many low-ranking military and security personnel, and disaffected intellectuals, would turn against the regime if given the opportunity. As proof, Le Duan pointed to the violent protests that had exploded in the northern cities of South Vietnam that summer, principally led by disaffected Buddhists but also involving military officers, which the government had quashed with brutal force.[56]

[54] Tran Van Tra, "Tet Mau Than: Chien Cong Hien Hach" [*Tet: Glorious Military Exploit*], *Journal of Vietnamese Military History* 28, no. 4 (April 1988): 15–16.

[55] Patrick J. McGarvey, ed., *Visions of Victory: Selected Vietnamese Communist Military Writings, 1964–1968* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Publications, 1969), p. 117; Van Kien Dang, *Toan Tap, 28, 1967* [*Collected Party Documents, vol. 28, 1967*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, n.d.), p. 147.

[56] Senior Col Nguyen Van Minh et al., *Lich Su Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc, 1954–1975, Tap V: Tong Tien Cong Va Noi Day Nam 1968* [*History of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation, vol. 5: The 1968 General Offensive and Uprising*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2001), pp. 31–32 (hereafter cited as *History of the*

Worrying military trends also played a role in Le Duan's thinking. The intervention of nearly 400,000 U.S. troops had halted or reversed much of the progress won by Communist forces in the years before 1965. Large-scale search-and-destroy operations were beginning to erode key base areas in South Vietnam. This development forced the enemy to rely more heavily on his rear areas in Cambodia and Laos, reducing his ability to support his main force units in the populated areas of South Vietnam. The Viet Cong were also finding it harder to recruit new soldiers, especially since some areas previously dominated by the Communists were now returning to government control. *COSVN* Resolution 5 published in May 1967 admitted that "we are still encountering problems in obtaining replacements and reinforcements" for main and local force units and that the allies have "been able to seize a number of areas and gain control of a larger portion of the population."[57]

Another sobering fact for the North's leaders was the intensity of the U.S. strategic bombing campaign. The aerial war was taking a steady toll that could not be borne indefinitely. Communist China and the Soviet Union had increased their aid shipments to compensate for those losses, but North Vietnamese leaders were uncomfortable with their growing dependency. If Hanoi waited too long, changing geopolitical conditions might convince one or both Communist superpowers that it was no longer in their interest to support a proxy war in Vietnam.[58]

Not everyone in the Politburo believed the time had come to launch a general offensive–general uprising. The most vocal opponent was General Giap, who argued that the country should continue to pursue a strategy of protracted warfare. He believed that the allied forces were still strong, not weakened and demoralized like the French had been in 1954 when Giap had struck at Dien Bien Phu. He stressed the enormous risk that North Vietnam would take in a single go-for-broke campaign. If the attack failed, he feared it would take five to ten years to rebuild the lost army.

Despite Giap's position as head of the North Vietnamese armed forces, his power to determine policy was not as strong as his title might suggest. For the last several years, he had clashed repeatedly with General Thanh over the formulation of strategy, with Thanh and his ally Le Duan usually getting the upper hand. Giap's status within the Politburo had suffered accordingly. By contrast, Le Duan, who ranked second in the Politburo behind Ho Chi Minh, was clearly on his way to the top. When the Politburo met in May and June of 1967 to consider the proposed offensive, the Le Duan faction carried the day. The unexpected death of General Thanh the following month—he apparently suffered a heart attack—altered nothing.

Resistance War Against the Americans); Van Thai, "May Van De Ve Chien Luoc Trong Cuoc Tien Cong Va Noi Day Xuan 1968" [*Some Strategic Questions on the Offensive and Uprising of the Spring of 1968*], *Tap Chi Lich Su Quan Su* [*Military History Magazine*] 26, no. 2 (February 1988), p. 21, copy in Historians files, CMH (hereafter cited as *Questions on the Offensive and Uprising of the Spring of 1968)*; Dang, *Collected Party Documents, vol. 28, 1967*, p. 143.

[57] Dang, *Collected Party Documents, vol. 28, 1967*, p. 490.

[58] Ibid., p. 383; James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 52–55.

A Le Duan loyalist, Pham Hung, went south in August to replace General Thanh as the leader of *COSVN*.[59]

The Politburo began to flesh out its plan in October after meeting with regional commanders from the South. On the twenty-fifth, the Central Committee prepared a new directive, Resolution 14, which committed North Vietnam to a strategy of general offensive–general uprising. The document was deliberately vague about timing and objectives, describing the coming campaign as "a phase and a process of very fierce and complex strategic attacks via both military and political offensives" that will last "for a fixed or shortened period of time, depending on our subjective efforts and the reaction of the enemy." It acknowledged that the campaign would be difficult because the attacks would not come at a time "when the enemy is totally exhausted but rather during a time when the enemy still has more than one million troops and a large war capacity." It identified three possible outcomes: the first being total victory, the second being a limited victory where an intact South Vietnamese government still controlled most of the cities, and a third where the offensive failed and the allies retaliated by expanding the war into Laos, Cambodia, and even North Vietnam.[60]

Whatever the outcome, Le Duan and his supporters believed it was necessary to make an all-out effort now if they expected to see victory in their lifetimes.[61] The conclusion of Resolution 14 summarized their rationale:

> We are standing now before great strategic prospects and opportunities. . . . We have defeated the enemy both strategically and tactically. . . . Our military and political forces in the South are stronger than ever before. . . . We hold the initiative on the battlefield. . . . Millions of people are seething with revolution and are ready to rise up. . . . This situation allows us to move our revolutionary war into a new era in which we can secure a decisive victory.[62]

During the coming year, this Communist vision of total victory would collide with American expectations of progress as the two sides exerted their maximum efforts of the war to date.

[59] Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 68; Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, eds., *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), pp. 73–81; Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, pp. 29, 36, 48–49; Rpt, Communist Strategy and Doctrine in South Vietnam: 1970, Mar 1970, p. 9, box 16, Douglas Pike Collection, Unit 01 - Assessment and Strategy, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Tex.

[60] U.S. Mission Saigon, "The New Situation and Mission."

[61] Van Kien Dang, *Toan Tap, 29, 1968* [*Collected Party Documents, vol. 29, 1968*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, n.d), pp. 41–67.

[62] Thai, "*Questions on the Offensive and Uprising of the Spring of 1968*," pp. 2–3.

2

Opening Moves: Battles North and West of Saigon

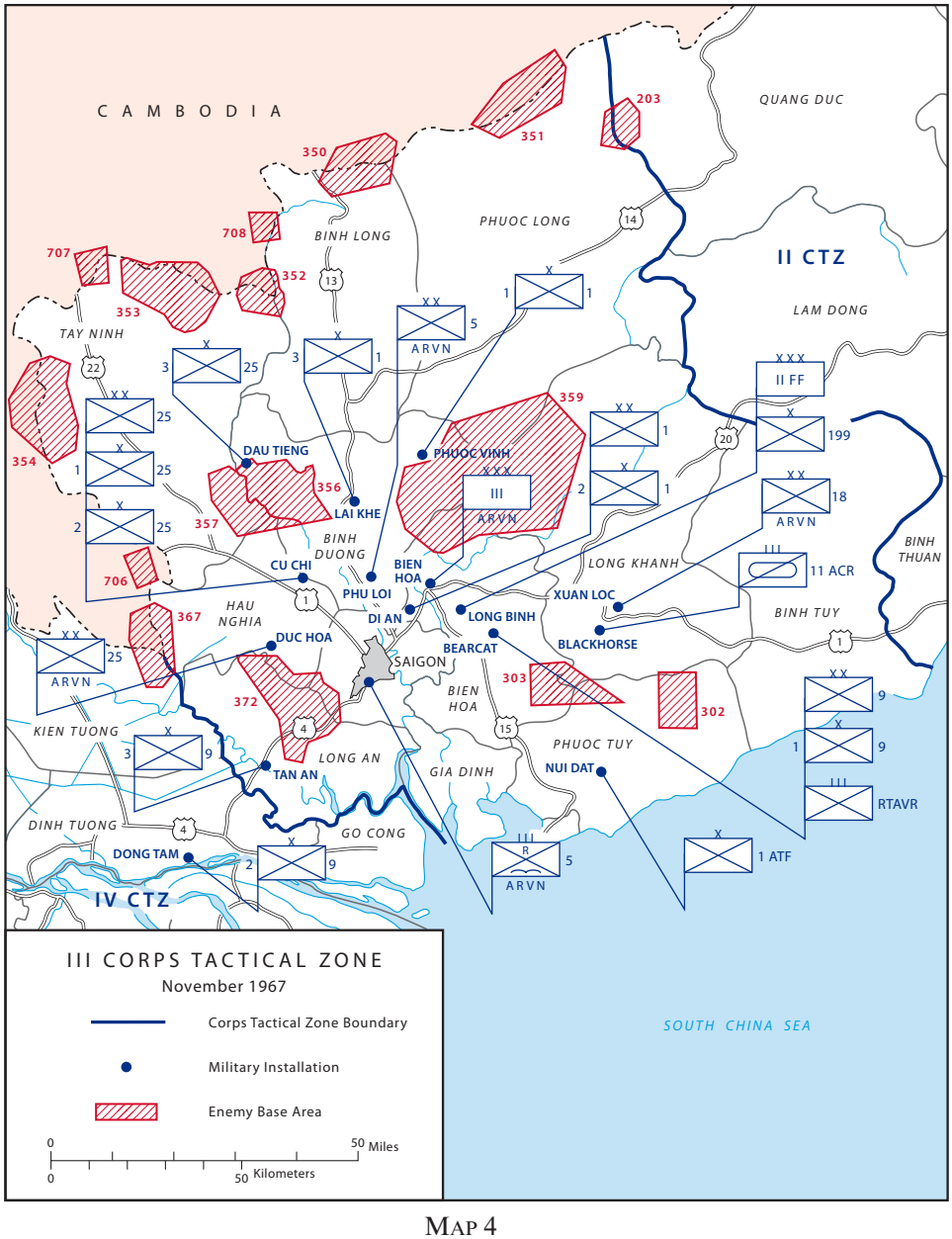
Home to South Vietnam's capital, the III Corps Tactical Zone was in many ways the heart of the Republic of Vietnam. Consisting of eleven provinces spread across 200 square kilometers of forested hills, trackless jungle, marshland, small farms, and vast rubber plantations, the zone linked the nation's rice bowl—the Mekong Delta—with the rest of the country. Although the outlying provinces were sparsely populated, Saigon and the provinces adjacent to it—Gia Dinh, Long An, Hau Nghia, Binh Duong, and Bien Hoa—contained about a third of the nation's population as well as the core of its political administration and logistical infrastructure. Neither side believed that the Republic of Vietnam could survive without Saigon, and hence both had striven to control it since the insurrection's earliest days.

By the time U.S. ground troops arrived in 1965, the zone was clearly in trouble. The government maintained a firm grip inside the capital, but otherwise Saigon was a city besieged. Communist agents wielded significant influence over much of the region's population and territory. Supporting them were several major enemy units that staged out of a series of heavily fortified bases that virtually ringed the city. With Communist forces farther south interfering with the flow of food from the Mekong Delta into the city, the inhabitants lived in a state of perpetual crisis.

General Westmoreland responded by deploying many of the troops that arrived from the United States in 1965 to guard the approaches to the city. Initial priority had gone to securing the four key installations without which U.S. intervention in South Vietnam would not be possible—the air bases at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa (six and thirty kilometers from Saigon, respectively), the port of Vung Tau about sixty kilometers to the southeast, and the port of Saigon itself, the nation's largest. As his numbers grew, he had launched a series of raids into the enemy bases that threatened the city from the north and northwest, particularly War Zone C in Tay Ninh Province and War Zone D centered in Phuoc Thanh Province. He likewise had sought to interfere with the flow of supplies from Cambodia into III Corps (*Map 4*).[1]

By 1966 a web of U.S. installations ringed Saigon, with Westmoreland pushing farther into the interior. By 1967, the general had sufficient numbers to launch a series of major offensives into War Zone C, the most notable of which was Operation Junction City. These actions had bloodied the enemy and kept him off balance as Westmoreland pushed the ring of U.S. camps and forward logistical areas farther out from Saigon, thereby laying the groundwork for additional thrusts toward the Cambodian border on a more sustained basis.

[1] Carland, *Stemming the Tide, May 1965 to October 1966*, pp. 73–94, 165–83, 305–53.



MAP 4

Guiding all these operations was Westmoreland's notion that the best way to defend Saigon was to push into the outer provinces of III Corps north and west of Saigon to destroy the Viet Cong logistical system as close to the Cambodian border as possible. This approach would compel enemy main force units to give battle in remote areas, thereby relieving pressure on the South Vietnamese pacification effort and sparing the population from the worst of the fighting.

As U.S. soldiers had expanded the shield out from Saigon, South Vietnamese forces had filled in behind to execute the second element of allied strategy—that of territorial control. The allies had declared the provinces immediately adjacent to Saigon to be National Priority provinces for the receipt of pacification resources. Although the Vietnamese carried the brunt of this effort, U.S. combat forces had contributed by executing a myriad of military and security operations in and around areas targeted for pacification, and by performing humanitarian and civil improvement activities collectively known as civic action. By late 1967, the Americans had made their presence felt, but the allies were still locked in an as-yet indecisive politico-military conflict with the enemy, fighting the same Communist formations over the same pieces of ground. Control over, and the support of, the rural inhabitants continued to hang in the balance.

Planning the Dry Season Offensive

As the MACV commander solidified his plans in the fall of 1967, weather continued to dominate the ebb and flow of events. The dry season, which brought firm ground and clear skies from October to May, was just beginning. This was the traditional time for the allies to launch their major offensives into the interior. These attacks would have to be largely completed by the time seasonal rains complicated the movement of men and materiel between May and October.

The man responsible for U.S. forces in the III Corps Tactical Zone was the commander of II Field Force, Lt. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand. A lanky Californian widely respected in U.S. military circles, Weyand controlled thirty-three U.S. Army and six Free World forces combat maneuver battalions organized into three infantry divisions and several independent brigade-size elements. He arrayed these forces in ten major bases that formed a rough circle around Saigon. Situated thirty and sixty kilometers out from the city, the bases were close enough to defend the approaches to Saigon while still remaining in striking distance of the enemy bases and units clustered in III Corps' outer provinces. Two brigades of the 9th Infantry Division screened the flat and fertile provinces to the south of Saigon and Highway 4, which was the main line of communications to the Mekong Delta. The 3d Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment, the 11th Armored Cavalry, and the 1st Australian Task Force screened the provinces to the east and southeast of Saigon. Immediately outside the capital itself, the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light) was preparing to relocate from Gia Dinh Province to Bien Hoa Province, where it would help the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division guard the important Bien Hoa–Long Binh military complex from Communist units based in the wilderness known as War Zone D north of the Dong Nai River. Farther north and west, the 1st Infantry Division operated along Highway 13, an all-weather, two-lane road that traveled through almost 130 kilometers of farmlands, rubber plantations, and dense forest near the Cambodian border. Finally, to the west of Saigon, the 25th Infantry Division

performed a mix of pacification and offensive operations. Backing those maneuver units were twenty-one additional U.S. Army combat battalions representing two artillery groups, an air cavalry squadron, a helicopter-rich aviation group, and an engineer group. Already numbering about 90,000 men, II Field Force expected the arrival of the rest of the 101st Airborne Division around the turn of the year.[2]

General Weyand

In addition to his duties as combat commander of II Field Force, General Weyand also served as the senior military adviser to Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, head of the South Vietnam's III Corps. Considered one of the best generals in the South Vietnamese Army, Khang controlled some 45,000 regulars organized around three light infantry divisions (the 5th, 18th, and 25th), a ranger group, an armored cavalry squadron, and a handful of independent artillery groups. He allocated roughly a third of his infantry battalions to province chiefs who used them to defend Revolutionary Development areas. The rest of the regulars performed reserve, garrison, and limited offensive operations. Also present in III Corps, but under the command of the province chiefs and not the corps commander, were 45,000 Regional and Popular Forces soldiers who performed security and pacification support duties.[3]

For the 1967–1968 dry season, Westmoreland and Weyand intended to mount a large-scale offensive to cut the three main infiltration routes that entered III Corps from Cambodia. The 1st and 3d Brigades of the 1st Infantry Division and the bulk of the 11th Armored Cavalry would push into Binh Long Province to cut the Adams Trail. This route began at Base Area 351 on the Cambodian side of the Phuoc Long provincial border, tunneled its way south through a triple-canopy rainforest, skirted the eastern edge of Song Be, and then passed through the western half of War Zone D. Operated by the *70th Rear Service Group*, the trail terminated in northern Bien Hoa Province at a base area known to the Americans as the Catcher's Mitt.

Once the 2d and 3d Brigades of the 101st Airborne Division had arrived from the United States around the end of the year, Weyand planned to attack

[2] Rpt, Army Progress Build-Up, 25 Oct 1967, p. 66, Archives, CMH; Cmd Fact Bk, 1st Log, 30 Nov 1967, Encl 1 to Operational Report-Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 Aug–31 Oct 1967, II Field Force Vietnam (II FFV), n.d., Historians files, CMH.

[3] Msg, Walt W. Rostow to Lyndon B. Johnson, 4 Mar 68, sub: Present Status of RVNAF, p. 2, document 23, Vietnam 2G 7/67-12/68, Manpower Mobilization in SVN (1 of 2), box 72, National Security File (NSF)-Vietnam Country files, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL), Austin, Tex.

the enemy's second major trail network, the Serges Jungle Highway. Operated by the *86th Rear Service Group*, this route began some forty kilometers west of the Adams Trail on the boundary line between Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces. It ran south along the full length of the provincial border and then veered east into War Zone D.

Meanwhile, two brigades from the 25th Infantry Division would strike northwest to interdict the third corridor, the Saigon River Trail. This route wound its way from Cambodia through Tay Ninh and Binh Dinh Provinces to the outskirts of Saigon. Success against the Saigon River corridor was critical, as it was the largest and most important of the three routes. If all went according to schedule, by January 1968 General Westmoreland would have seven U.S. combat brigades arrayed across the northern rim of III Corps to interdict the three routes that threatened Saigon from the north and west. Given the enemy's developing plans—as yet undetected by the allies—to attack Saigon in the coming year, the outcome of these operations would have particular significance.[4]

The Other Side of the Hill

Just as Westmoreland had plans for the upcoming dry season, so too did the enemy, and as it turned out, these ran directly counter to MACV's design. When Lt. Gen. Hoang Van Thai had assumed command of *COSVN* in September 1967, he found that the *B2 Front*'s staff had already developed a scheme for the coming months. The plan called for an offensive in an area the Communists termed *Military Region 10*, essentially Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces—two of the three provinces that Westmoreland intended to attack. Just as the allies wanted to cut the Adams and Serges Trails, *B2 Front* wanted to further secure and expand those networks by eliminating one or more of the border surveillance camps that kept tabs on those infiltration routes. Since the Politburo had yet to decide on the timing and objectives of the general offensive–general uprising, Thai decided to go ahead with the regional offensive. Besides, any success in securing the trails would strengthen his position if and when the government in Hanoi ordered a general offensive.

Thai had at his disposal some 50,000 combat soldiers and 10,000 rear service troops that operated within the territorial limits of III Corps and the northeastern corner of IV Corps. His primary strike force consisted of three light infantry divisions each with a strength of between 6,000 to 8,000 soldiers. The *7th PAVN Division* and the *9th PLAF Division* ranged across the provinces to the north of Saigon, while the *5th PLAF Division* operated to the east of the capital. *COSVN* also controlled the *101st PAVN Regiment*, a unit recently detached from the *7th Division* to defend the Iron Triangle area of southwestern Binh Duong Province. The heavily forested base area, located between Phu Cuong to the south and Lai Khe to the north, with the Saigon River to its west and Highway 13 to its east, contained a maze of underground tunnels

[4] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 338; MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 388–91.

and bunkers that the enemy intended to use as a forward staging area for an eventual assault on Saigon. The *Dong Nai Regiment*, another unit directly controlled by *COSVN*, guarded the western approaches to War Zone D. A dozen local force battalions and many small guerrilla units operated under provincial or subregion control, most within twenty kilometers of Saigon. Adding to Thai's strength were the *69th Artillery Group*, which controlled the *84A PLAF Artillery Regiment,* armed with 122-mm. rockets and 120-mm. mortars, and the *52d* and *58th PLAF Artillery Battalions,* armed with 120-mm. mortars.[5]

General Thai chose the *9th PLAF Division*, his most experienced fighting force, to spearhead the offensive in Binh Long Province. Commanded by Senior Col. Hoang Cam, an experienced officer who had fought U.S. forces many times over the past two years, the three-regiment *9th Division* would receive support from the *84A PLAF Artillery Regiment* and the *208th Anti-Aircraft Battalion,* the later armed with dozens of 12.7-mm. heavy machine guns. Two regiments from the *5th PLAF Division*, the *88th PAVN* and the *275th PLAF*, would take the lead role in neighboring Phuoc Long Province. Finally, General Thai would use part of his *7th Division*, the *165th PAVN Regiment*, to interdict Highway 13 in the region around An Loc. *COSVN*'s remaining main force regiments—the *101st PAVN*, the *141st PAVN*, the *274th PLAF*, and the *Dong Nai*—were to spend the final months of 1967 defending base areas and lines of communications in central III Corps.[6]

Thai's initial target was Loc Ninh, a district capital in Binh Long Province that the *9th Division* had attempted to overrun in late 1966. The town of 6,000 inhabitants was located in the middle of a large rubber plantation roughly twelve kilometers south of the border. A border surveillance camp and a small airfield lay on the southeastern edge of town. The camp contained eleven U.S. Special Forces soldiers and around 400 Montagnard CIDG troops, their heaviest weapons being several 81-mm. and 4.2-inch mortars. Located at the northwest end of the airfield was a South Vietnamese district headquarters, a figure-eight compound of sandbags and wooden bunkers that was manned by around 200 Regional Forces soldiers, the South Vietnamese district chief, and one U.S. adviser. A few mortars and machine guns were their main firepower.[7]

General Thai had several reasons for choosing Loc Ninh as the initial target of *COSVN*'s winter-spring offensive. First, he wanted to embarrass the newly elected President Thieu by capturing a district capital just days before

[5] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 59; Operational Reports–Lessons Learned (ORLL), 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, 15 Feb 68, p. 8, boxes 40–41, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, U.S. Army, Vietnam (USARV), Records of U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950–1975, Record Group (RG) 472, National Archives, College Park, Md. (NACP).

[6] After Action Report (AAR), Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, 12 Apr 68, an. B, Historians files, CMH; Monthly Order of Battle (OB) Sum, Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam (CICV), Oct 67, Historians files, CMH; Special Rpt, Combined Military Interrogation Center (CMIC), no. 1211-68, 17 May 68, sub: OB of the 7th VC Div aka WS 7, p. 2, box 72, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP. The rank of senior colonel that Cam held was equivalent to the rank of brigadier general in the U.S. Army.

[7] *Su Dong 9* [*9th Division*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1990), p. 96 (hereafter cited as *9th Division*).

he was scheduled to take office. Second, Thai wanted to neutralize the Special Forces camp at Loc Ninh because it served as a staging point for intelligence-gathering missions along the border. Finally, the operation would give Colonel Cam and his staff their first chance to command the entire *9th Division* in battle. As enervating as guerrilla warfare was for the allies, Communist leaders believed that only large conventional forces would be able to destroy allied military forces and conquer South Vietnam. The operation would thus be a major step for *COSVN* on its quest to develop a conventional army that could execute complex, corps-size campaigns.[8]

An overview of a CIDG compound and airstrip at Loc Ninh

The terrain around the district capital was well suited for the fight that Cam envisioned. Neat rows of mature rubber trees obscured the low rolling hills and gently flowing streams yet allowed easy movement for his foot soldiers. Some of the plantations were still in operation, while others had been abandoned during the war. The high weeds and tangled underbrush that choked these neglected sections offered extra opportunities for concealment. Beyond the plantations, a sea of jungle stretched outward in every direction. The tall trees and thick vegetation hid an elaborate network of trails that Colonel Cam could use to move troops rapidly from one part of the battlefield to another

[8] Ibid.; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975,* vol. 2, trans. by Merle Pribbenow (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), pp. 329–30; Thomas Cheatham and Richard V. Oliver, "Loc Ninh a Bloody Disaster for Reds," *Pacific Stars & Stripes*, 5 Nov 1967.

and with small risk of being detected. Moreover, there were few clearings in the jungle large enough to accommodate helicopters, so his troops would have an easier time predicting where the Americans were likely to land their forces. With both the Americans and the Communists planning operations in Binh Long Province, the stage was set for a major confrontation.[9]

The Battle for Loc Ninh

General Weyand officially launched his dry season campaign on 29 September 1967 with Operation SHENANDOAH II—a two-brigade effort to secure and repair the entire length of Highway 13. The II Field Force commander needed to have the highway reliably open at least during the day before he could start placing his brigades along the Cambodian border. Simply put, the airfields in Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces were too small and too few in number to handle the quantity of supplies he would need for sustained combat operations.

During the first weeks of October, the 1st and 3d Brigades from Maj. Gen. John H. Hay Jr.'s 1st Division secured the length of highway between Lai Khe and Chon Thanh along the border of Binh Duong and Binh Long Provinces. His forces also swept through the Long Nguyen Secret Zone, an enemy base area some fifty kilometers north of Saigon just west of the road. This action inadvertently interfered with the enemy's plans. As it happened, Colonel Cam's most reliable unit, the *271st Regiment*, was in the Long Nguyen Secret Zone, waiting for a rice shipment as it returned from a mission in central Binh Duong Province. The commander of the *271st Regiment*, feeling that there was no way to evade the Americans, struck first. On 17 October, the *271st Regiment* lured the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, into a devastating ambush near Ong Thanh, a small stream near the

Generals Westmoreland and Hay

[9] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, n.d., p. 5, box 9, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP. See also Information Brief, MACV Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (MACCORDS), Binh Long Province, n.d., Revolutionary Development (RD) files, CMH.

Binh Duong–Binh Long boundary. The enemy killed fifty-six U.S. soldiers, but the *271st Regiment* lost many of its men to air and artillery strikes as it fled north to Cambodia after the battle. As a result, the battered and exhausted unit was in no condition to fight in the upcoming campaign.[10]

The next stage of SHENANDOAH II called for General Hay's 1st and 3d Brigades to secure Highway 13 through An Loc, Binh Long's capital, and up to Loc Ninh twenty-five kilometers farther north. Hay could then build a stockpile of supplies at Quan Loi, a forward base just east of An Loc, giving him the resources to support several brigades in the formerly inaccessible territory of northern Binh Long Province. Weyand put these plans on hold, however, as evidence grew that *COSVN* was preparing to launch a major offensive in northern III Corps.[11]

In late September and early October, small teams of Montagnard irregulars led by U.S. Special Forces soldiers based at the Loc Ninh border surveillance camp had discovered an engineer company from the *9th Division* building what appeared to be a large hospital on the Song Be River several kilometers west of town. The patrols had also found elements of the *84A Artillery Regiment* camped within a few kilometers of Loc Ninh. This unit never operated without significant backup and usually only appeared during major battles. Most ominous of all, the allies obtained a document that claimed the *9th Division* would begin a major operation in Binh Long Province on or about 25 October. These findings, supplemented by radio intercepts, aerial infrared scans, and the recent clash with the *271st Regiment*, led General Weyand to warn II Field Force units on 22 October that there was a "definite threat" to Loc Ninh and possibly to Song Be, a district capital in Phuoc Long Province some forty kilometers to the east. Weyand instructed General Hay to prepare a contingency plan should he need to defend either district capital.[12]

Colonel Cam opened the Communist dry season campaign in *Military Region 10* shortly after midnight on 27 October when the *88th Regiment* attacked Song Be. Mortar crews shelled the town, while two North Vietnamese battalions attacked the base camp of the South Vietnamese 5th Division that was located several kilometers southeast of the capital. Although the camp contained no more than 200 soldiers, their new battalion commander proved to be an aggressive leader. The government troops stood their ground with help from U.S. fighter-bombers and eventually threw the enemy back into the forest. When the defenders searched the battlefield at first light, they found 134 North Vietnamese dead as well as 2 wounded soldiers. Government troops

[10] MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, *October 1966 to October 1967*, p. 361.

[11] MFR, MACV, Ch of Staff, J–2, 4 Nov 67, sub: Current Intelligence and Indications Briefing (CIIB) Meeting, 4 Nov 67, Westmoreland History files, 24-10, CMH; CCP, 1968, an. B, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH; MACV Strategic Study, Sep 67–Sep 68, pp. 29, B17–B18, Historians files, CMH.

[12] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 42, II FFV, 15–21 Oct 67, 22 Oct 67, an. F, p. 2 (quoted words), Historians files, CMH. See also MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, *October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 309–19; AAR, Assault on Loc Ninh, 29 Oct–4 Nov 67, Det B-33, 5th Special Forces (SF) Gp (Abn), 1st SF, 12 Nov 67, p. 2; AAR, Opn CIDG KILLS, Co A, 5th SF Gp (Abn), 1st SF, 14 Nov 67, p. 1. Both AARs are in Historians files, CMH.

also collected seventy-three abandoned weapons, including three flamethrowers and ten machine guns. South Vietnamese losses amounted to twelve killed, of whom seven were civilian laborers.[13]

Later that day, a South Vietnamese ranger battalion flew into Song Be, as did the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, a unit from the 1st Infantry Division that was based at Lai Khe in southern Binh Duong Province. When its commander, Lt. Col. Richard E. Cavazos, led his men through the surrounding countryside, they found recently used trails but no enemy soldiers. With the scent gone cold, the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, returned to Lai Khe on the afternoon of 28 October.[14]

After darkness had fallen, Colonel Cam unleashed the *9th Division* against Loc Ninh. At approximately one hour past midnight, a salvo of 122-mm. rockets and 82-mm. and 120-mm. mortar rounds slammed into the Special Forces camp and the South Vietnamese district headquarters. Some hit the town and set it ablaze. The defenders responded with their own mortar fire as news of the attack flashed from Loc Ninh to MACV headquarters (*Map 5*).

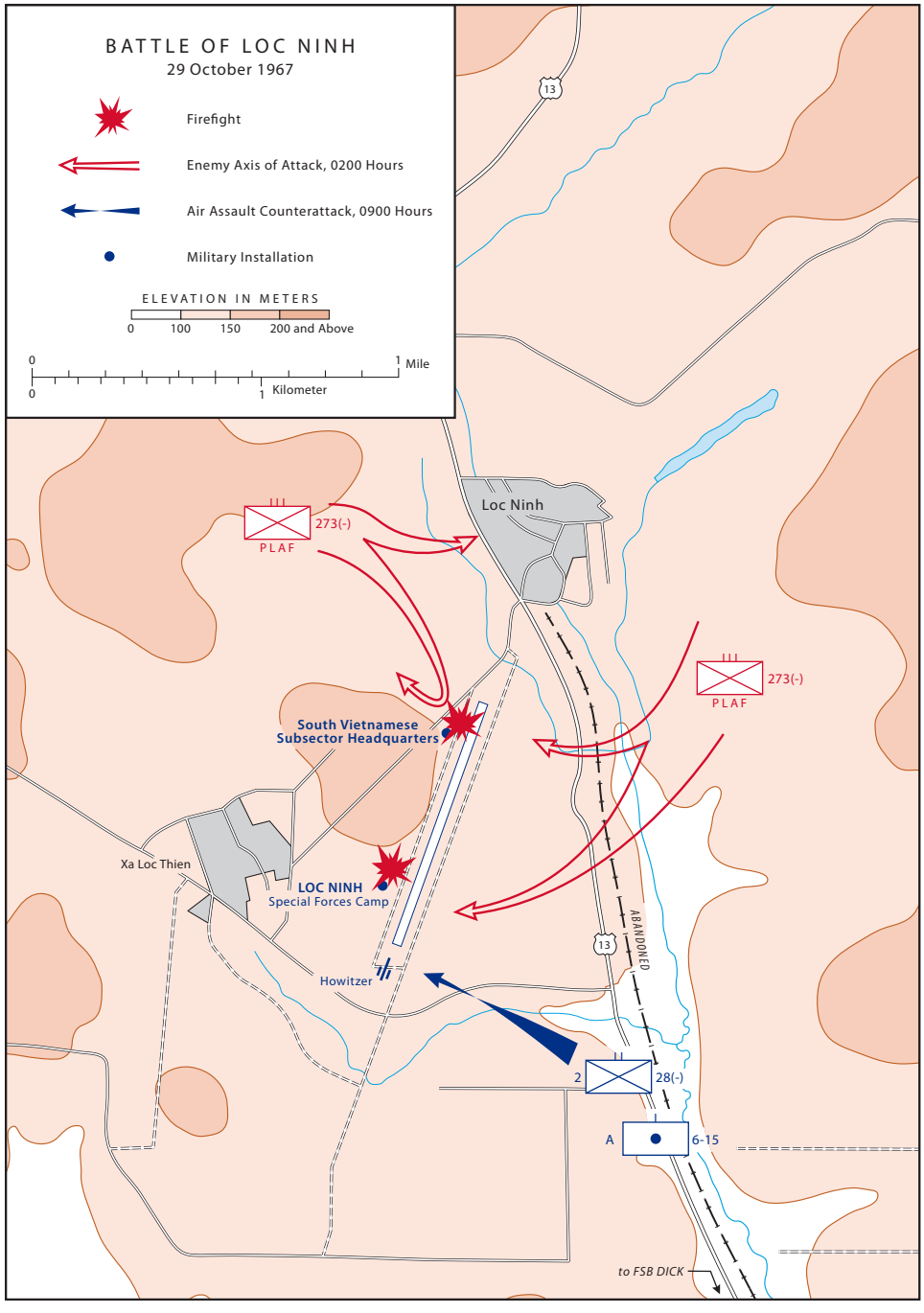
An hour later, a group of sappers emerged from the rubber trees west of the district headquarters. They sprinted across the open ground and detonated their satchel charges in the wire on the northern side of the compound before the defenders could drive them off. Two battalions from the *273d Regiment* then charged out of the trees and scrambled through the openings. Buckling under the weight of the onslaught, the defenders pulled back into the southern square of the compound through a narrow connecting passage where they continued the fight.

First on the scene to help the defenders was a pair of U.S. Army UH–1B Huey helicopter gunships, each equipped with side-mounted, forward-oriented 7.62-mm. machine guns. The gunships strafed the Viet Cong troops attacking the compound, using the patchwork of burning fires on the ground to orient their runs. The helicopters were soon joined by an AC–47 Spooky, a two-engine transport aircraft of World War II vintage that had been modified to carry a trio of six-barreled 7.62-mm. miniguns. The motorized Gatling-style guns that pointed out the left side of the aircraft were each capable of firing 6,000 rounds a minute. As the lumbering aircraft banked into a shallow counterclockwise turn, the weapons roared to life, sending ribbons of fire into the trees that concealed the enemy reserve force.

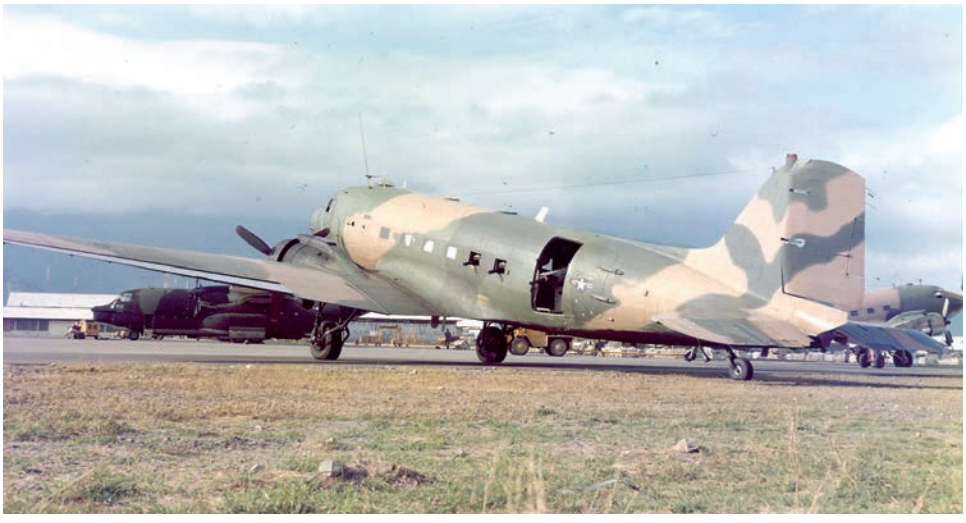
The aerial punishment was savage to behold but had no effect on the enemy soldiers who were already inside the compound. In desperation, the South Vietnamese district chief called an artillery barrage down on his own position. The shells he requested were not ordinary ones, however. The high-explosive rounds were armed with proximity fuses. Detonated by a radio signal a fraction of a second before hitting the ground, the shells filled the air with

[13] Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans*, p. 17; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 44, II FFV, 29 Oct–4 Nov 67, 5 Nov 67, an. B, Historians files, CMH.

[14] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 3d Bde, 1st Inf Div, 7 Dec 67, p. 6, attached to AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, 12 Apr 68, box 30, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.


BATTLE OF LOC NINH
29 October 1967
Firefight
Enemy Axis of Attack, 0200 Hours
Air Assault Counterattack, 0900 Hours
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1 Mile
0
1 Kilometer
13
Loc Ninh
273(-)
PLAF
273(-)
PLAF
South Vietnamese
Subsector Headquarters
Xa Loc Thien
LOC NINH
Special Forces Camp
Howitzer
13
ABANDONED
2
28(-)
A
6-15
to FSB DICK

MAP 5



An AC–47 Spooky gunship at Nha Trang Air Base

white-hot fragments that did no harm to the defenders in their bunkers but sowed havoc on the Viet Cong fighting in the open. When the barrage ended, U.S. F–100 Super Sabre fighter-bombers dropped cluster bombs into the trees west of the compound to prevent enemy reinforcements from coming up. The combination of artillery and air strikes finally broke the enemy's endurance. The main body of the *273d Regiment* withdrew around 0400.[15]

When the sun rose, the South Vietnamese defenders discovered that some of the bunkers in their compound still contained Viet Cong troops. The worn-out Regional Forces soldiers waited until a Montagnard company from the Special Forces camp and two companies of regulars flown in from the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division showed up to finish the job. The U.S. advisers brought armloads of M72 light antitank weapons from their camp to help clear out the bunkers. The job took several hours to complete; not a single Viet Cong soldier surrendered. Of the 135 enemy bodies that the allies recovered in Loc Ninh after the battle, 92 came from the northern half of the district compound. The South Vietnamese lost eight killed and thirty-three wounded.[16]

Later that morning, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division sent a battery of 105-mm. howitzers and two companies from the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, to set up a firebase near the southwest corner of Loc Ninh's airstrip. The battery went into action around 0950. Its first job was to soften up a landing zone some 3,500 meters to the northwest near the hamlet of Srok Silamite for Colonel Cavazos' 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry. Cavazos landed his battalion unopposed a short time later. His infantrymen quickly staked out a defensive perimeter and began digging bunkers as helicopters flew in a battery of 105-mm. howitzers, the weap-

[15] AAR, Attacks on Loc Ninh SF Camp, 21st Mil Hist Det, 5th SF Gp (Abn), 23 Dec 67, pp. 4, 6, Encl 3, box 21, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[16] Ibid., p. 9; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 44, II FFV, p. 8.

A soldier carrying an M72 antitank weapon

ons and all of their ammunition slung like yo-yos on a rope beneath the aircraft.[17]

At 1200, one of the Montagnard companies from Loc Ninh radioed that it had made contact with a North Vietnamese platoon some 1,000 meters to the north of the landing zone. Cavazos immediately sent Company C to trap the enemy. Moving quickly through the evenly spaced rubber trees, his company slammed into the enemy platoon from behind, killing nine soldiers and dispersing the rest. When two more North Vietnamese platoons counterattacked, Cavazos sent Company D to turn the enemy's flank. The outnumbered Communists soon fled, leaving behind five more bodies. Captured documents indicated that the men were from the *165th PAVN Regiment,* two battalions of which General Thai had assigned to Colonel Cam, along with several hundred fillers from the *141st Regiment,* to make up for the loss of the *271st Regiment*.[18]

When Colonel Cam learned that U.S. units were searching the rubber trees four kilometers from Loc Ninh, he dispatched more troops to engage them. The following morning, a battalion from the *165th Regiment* pounced on Company A from the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, as it was reconnoitering the area around the landing zone. Cavazos immediately sent Company D and a company of Montagnards to the rescue. The relief force helped Company A push the enemy back to a low hill where the North Vietnamese soldiers took

[17] This section is based on AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, an. B, p. 17, and D. After Action Interv, 17th Mil Hist Det with Lt Col Richard E. Cavazos, Cdr, 1st Bn, 18th Inf, Capt Carl W. Robinson, Cdr, Co A, 1st Bn, 18th Inf, Capt William M. Annan, Cdr, Co C, 1st Bn, 18th Inf, and Capt Charles H. Carden, Cdr, Co D, 1st Bn, 18th Inf, n.d., sub: Battle of Srok Silamite, Vietnam Interv 144, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 11; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 44, II FFV, pp. 8–9.

[18] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, pp. 17–18; John H. Hay Jr., *Tactical and Materiel Innovations*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1974), pp. 42–56.

refuge in some shallow irrigation trenches. The allied soldiers gave air strikes and helicopter gunships a chance to soften up the hill before they resumed their advance (*Map 6*).

The lightly armed Montagnards rarely got the chance to overpower an entire North Vietnamese battalion, so they attacked with particular zeal. Many used up their ammunition so quickly that they began picking up AK47 and RPD light machine guns from dead enemy soldiers to continue the fight. One soldier even snatched a .45-caliber pistol from a surprised U.S. officer and then charged a North Vietnamese machine gunner who was pinned down under heavy fire. When the pistol failed to chamber a round, the Montagnard soldier pistol-whipped the man senseless.[19]

The ferocity of the charge proved too much for the North Vietnamese. They fled into a gully where many died from a rain of artillery shells, cluster bombs, and napalm canisters. The allies found eighty-three enemy dead and captured thirty-two weapons.[20]

General Hay pored over the intelligence that trickled into the 1st Division headquarters looking for signs of the enemy's next move. From captured documents and prisoner interrogation reports, Hay knew that he faced the *165th* and *273d Regiments* along with elements from the *141st Regiment*. The *88th Regiment* remained a threat to Song Be, and Hay was now learning that the headquarters of the *5th PLAF Division* and its *275th Regiment* were marching toward that area as well. There were also signs that the *5th Division* had taken operational control of the *88th Regiment*, raising the possibility that the enemy might open a new front in Phuoc Long Province while the *9th Division* continued its campaign in Binh Long. For the moment, however, Hay's greatest concern was another attack on Loc Ninh.[21]

Hay ordered the commander of the 1st Brigade, Col. George E. Newman, to move his headquarters to Quan Loi, a staging area and airstrip in central Binh Long Province, where he would take charge of the coming fight. At that point, the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, was west of the district capital, while a company from the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, guarded the artillery firebase at the airfield. Colonel Newman's 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, and the remainder of the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, waited at Quan Loi.[22]

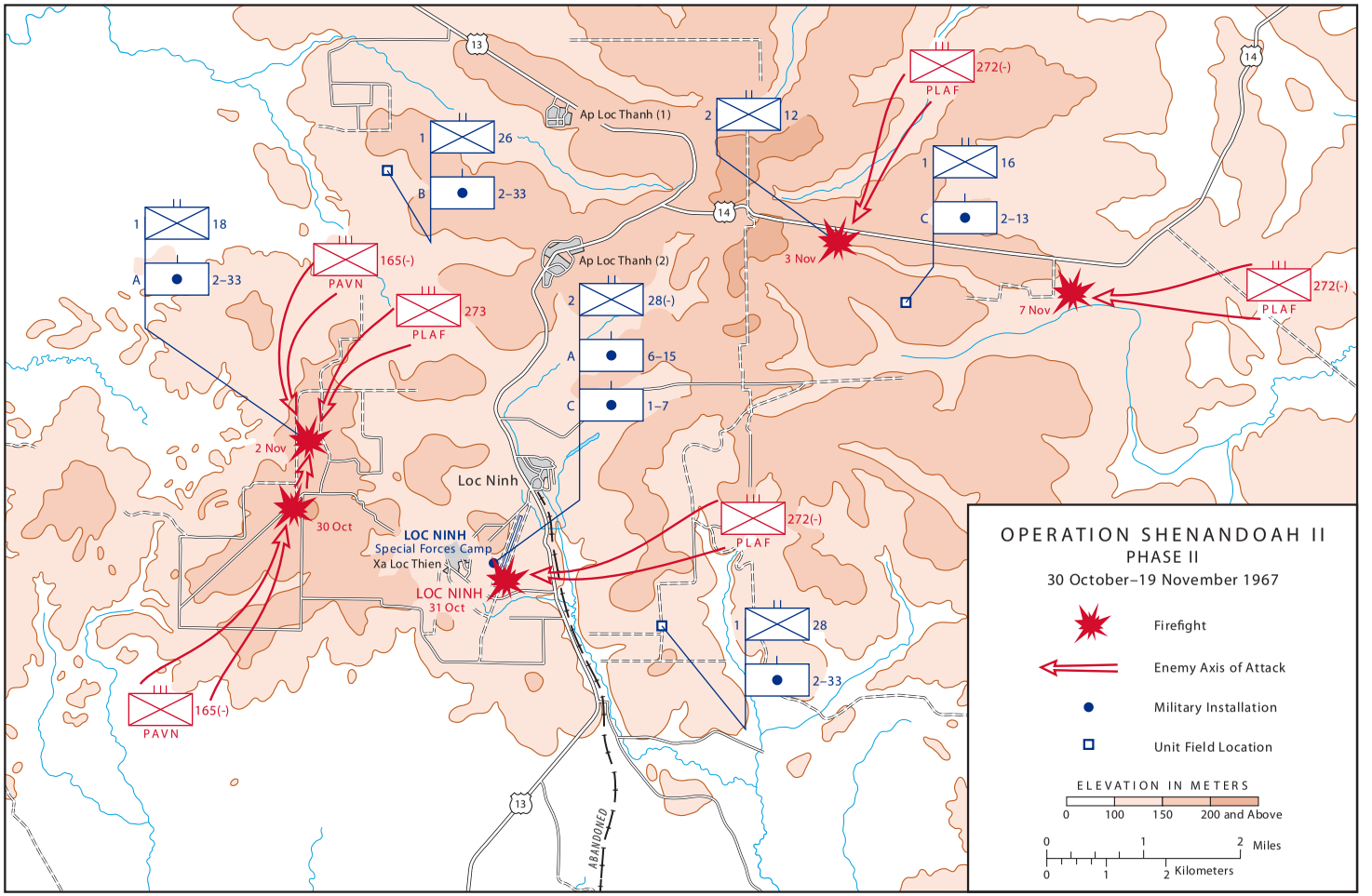
Colonel Newman did not have long to wait for Cam's next move. Shortly after midnight on 31 October, a hail of rockets and mortar shells crashed into the district compound, the Special Forces camp, and the 1st Division artillery firebase at the south end of the Loc Ninh airfield. The bombardment was more accurate than it had been two nights before. At the

[19] Interv, 21st Mil Hist Det with M Sgt Thurman D. Ramy et al., n.d., sub: The Battle of Loc Ninh, pp. 171, 176, Vietnam Interv 166 Transcribed, Historians files, CMH.

[20] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, pp. 18–19.

[21] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Bde, 1st Inf Div, 8 Dec 67, p. 11, Historians files, CMH; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 43, II FFV, 22–28 Oct 68, 28 Oct 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 44, II FFV, pp. 1–3; Interv, George L. MacGarrigle with Lt Gen John D. Hay, former Commanding General (CG), 1st Inf Div, 29 Apr 80, Historians files, CMH.

[22] Hay, *Tactical and Materiel Innovations*, p. 47.


OPERATION SHENANDOAH II
PHASE II
30 October–19 November 1967
Firefight
Enemy Axis of Attack
Military Installation
Unit Field Location
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1
2
Miles
0
1
2
Kilometers
Ap Loc Thanh (1)
Ap Loc Thanh (2)
Loc Ninh
LOC NINH
Special Forces Camp
Xa Loc Thien
LOC NINH
31 Oct
30 Oct
2 Nov
3 Nov
7 Nov
ABANDONED
1
26
B
2–33
2
12
1
16
C
2–13
1
18
A
2–33
165(-)
PAVN
273
PLAF
2
28(-)
A
6–15
C
1–7
272(-)
PLAF
7 Nov
272(-)
PLAF
3 Nov
272(-)
PLAF
1
28
2–33
165(-)
PAVN
13
14

Map 6

Soldiers prepare to load a 106-mm. recoilless rifle.

Special Forces camp, no fewer than six 122-mm. rockets exploded inside or near the compound in the opening moments of the battle. As the barrage tapered off, a swarm of helicopter gunships and a Spooky arrived over Loc Ninh to strafe the surrounding forests. They were met by blistering fire from the heavy machine guns of the *208th Anti-Aircraft Battalion*; one forward air controller later said it was the heaviest antiaircraft fire he had ever seen in Vietnam.[23]

Two hours later, several hundred troops from the *272d Regiment* emerged from the tree line on the eastern side of the airfield. They came under interlocking fire from the two allied camps on the west side of the runway and the 1st Division outpost at the south end. The American artillerymen exploded proximity-fuse shells over the heads of the advancing soldiers, while the infantrymen at the firebase fired directly at them with three 106-mm. recoilless rifles and a pair of .50-caliber machine guns.[24]

Although the enemy took terrible losses, several dozen soldiers made it across the airfield and attacked the district headquarters compound. Using straw mats to slither over the concertina wire that surrounded the headquarters, the platoon-size force fought its way into the compound. With no more Viet Cong troops coming up behind to help them, however, the group retreated

[23] AAR, Attacks on Loc Ninh SF Camp, 21st Mil Hist Det, 5th SF Gp (Abn), p. 13; *Su Doan 7: Ky Su* [*7th Division: A Record*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1986), p. 43 (hereafter cited as *7th Division*), copy in Historians files, CMH.

[24] AAR, Attacks on Loc Ninh SF Camp, 21st Mil Hist Det, 5th SF Gp (Abn), p. 14.

less than twenty minutes later. The fighting continued until dawn when the *272d Regiment* withdrew east, leaving behind 110 dead. Friendly losses came to nine killed and fifty-nine wounded.[25]

The defenders did not realize it at the time, but they were the recipients of some good luck that night. The *165th Regiment* had been scheduled to join the attack, but its guides had become lost in the seemingly endless rows of rubber trees. The regiment never made it to the fight.[26]

At first light, Colonel Newman organized a pursuit of the *272d Regiment* by sending the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. James F. Cochran III, into a clearing two kilometers southeast of Loc Ninh. The unit built a sturdy firebase using sandbags and wood-reinforced bunkers before going in search of the enemy. Over the next two days, patrols from the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, killed a total of eleven enemy soldiers, but the main body of the *272d* remained out of sight.[27]

On the evening of 1 November, elements from the *84A Artillery Regiment* hit Loc Ninh with mortar and rocket fire. When the barrage ended, a battalion from *272d Regiment* peppered the district compound with machine gun fire. The attacks were a ruse. Cam revealed his true hand around thirty minutes after midnight when 82-mm. mortar shells began to pummel the firebase of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry. From the ambush teams that Colonel Cavazos had placed on nearby trails he learned that hundreds of Viet Cong were converging on the firebase. After making their hushed radio calls, the ambush teams detonated the claymore mines that they had hidden along the trails, shredding dozens of unwary Viet Cong troops. The scouts then slunk away as the enemy columns pressed on toward their target.[28]

When the Viet Cong reached the firebase, they raked it with small arms fire, first from one direction and then from another, to provoke the Americans into firing back and thus reveal their positions. The trick failed because Cavazos had already warned his men to hold their fire. They could see by the light of the parachute flares now drifting down that the ground attack had not yet begun. When enemy mortar crews went into action, Cavazos brought in helicopter gunships to silence them. When U.S. fighter-bombers swooped in to drop their ordnance, at least twelve Viet Cong heavy machine guns blasted back in defiance, sending streams of deadly green tracers into the sky. The fighters immediately focused on the new threat and took out the antiaircraft weapons with several well-aimed bombing runs.

At 0415, the *273d Regiment* finally launched its main assault. Several hundred screaming soldiers charged the perimeter. Cavazos now turned his men loose. Claymore mines and machine guns scythed into the advancing force, killing many attackers, including three Viet Cong soldiers who were

[25] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, p. 19; Interv, 21st Mil Hist Det with Ramy et al., p. 54.

[26] *7th Division*, p. 43.

[27] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, p. 20.

[28] Ibid., pp 19–20; Interv, 17th Mil Hist Det with Cavazos et al., p. 5.

armed with Soviet-made flamethrowers. The defensive fire was simply too much and the *273d Regiment* called off the attack thirty minutes later. Taking advantage of what darkness remained, the depleted regiment slipped away toward Cambodia.

The next morning, the Americans recovered 263 enemy dead from the battlefield. Numerous drag marks and blood trails hinted at even greater losses for the *273d Regiment*, now on the verge of being combat ineffective. U.S. losses were remarkably light: one killed and eight wounded. Colonel Cavazos had executed a nearly textbook example of how to defeat a numerically superior enemy force at night through a combination of timely intelligence, excellent troop discipline, a well-organized defense, and accurate supporting fire.[29]

Seeing that Cam was eager for a fight, General Hay gave Colonel Newman operational control over the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, from the 3d Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division. Commanded by Lt. Col. Arthur D. Stigall, the battalion made an unopposed helicopter landing four kilometers northwest of Loc Ninh on 2 November. Through General Weyand, Hay also gave Newman control over the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, from the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. Led by Lt. Col. Ralph D. Tice, the unit made an uncontested landing six kilometers northeast of Loc Ninh on the same day. With their arrival, four U.S. infantry battalions now formed a box around Loc Ninh. Confident that the town now had enough men to repel another attack, and with a South Vietnamese ranger battalion set to arrive there the following day, Hay's next step was to locate the three enemy regiments still lurking somewhere near the district capital.[30]

Cam lost no time going on the attack. That evening he sent the *1st Battalion* of the *272d Regiment* to assault the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, northeast of town, hoping that the firebase would be only half built. Colonel Tice and his men worked quickly, however, finishing their foxholes and bunkers by 0230 when the enemy attacked. Unable to close in on the position and punished by air and artillery strikes, the enemy withdrew from the field around 0400. He left fifty-seven dead on the field, and seven wounded Viet Cong soldiers became prisoners of war. American losses came to four killed.[31]

When the next several days passed without contact, Newman used the lull to rearrange his forces. On 6 November, he ordered the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, to dismantle its firebase northwest of Loc Ninh where there had been no enemy sightings and to establish a new base northeast of town. Newman instructed the unit's commander, Colonel Stigall, to probe eastward where he thought the *272d Regiment* was regrouping. Just south of Stigall's location, the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, continued to shield the eastern approaches to Loc Ninh. With two of

[29] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Bde, 1st Inf Div, p. 12; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 44, II FFV, p. 9. The *273d Regiment* lost an estimated 600 men between 29 October and 2 November 1967.

[30] Interv, MacGarrigle with Lt Gen (Ret.) Fillmore K. Mearns, CG, 25th Inf Div, 27 May 76, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, an. F and H.

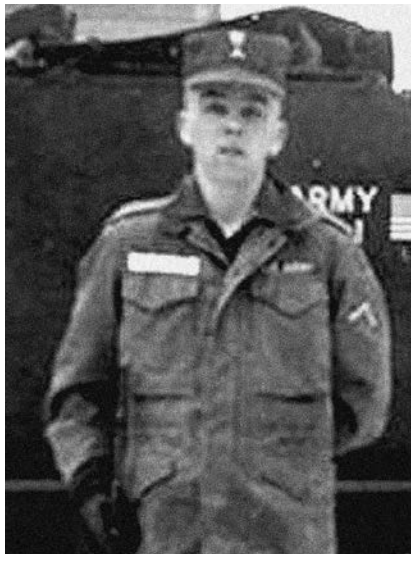
[31] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Bde, 1st Inf Div, an. F, pp. 12–15, Encl to AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div; AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, pp. 21–22; Capt Richard W. Flanagan, "Shenandoah II," *Danger Forward*, 1st Inf Div, vol. 2, no. 2, Jun 68, p. 17, Historians files, CMH; Interv, MacGarrigle with Maj Gen R. Dean Tice, Cdr, 2d Bn, 12th Inf, 25th Inf Div, 3 Feb and 9 Mar 81, Historians files, CMH.

Newman's battalions interposed between the Viet Cong and the district capital, he felt at liberty to move the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, from Loc Ninh back to Quan Loi and to fly the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, east to Song Be just in case Cam was tempted to move in that direction. A portion of the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, remained in Loc Ninh to man the artillery base at the airfield.[32]

Stigall began his search for the *272d Regiment* on the morning of 7 November. Leaving Company A to guard his new base, he marched the rest of his battalion west down a dirt road flanked on the left by a plantation and on the right by jungle. Other than an occasional sniper round whipping through the air, there was no sign of the enemy.

At 1305, three hours into the march, the colonel decided to turn his column northeast into the rubber trees. The lead company had barely entered the forest when dozens of Viet Cong soldiers from the *3d Battalion, 272d Regiment,* sprang their ambush. Enemy small arms and machine guns raked the exposed Americans crowded on the road. A salvo of rocket-propelled grenades killed Stigall and his battalion command group. Enemy fire also wounded two of his company commanders and put most of the U.S. radios out of action.

One of the few officers remaining was the commander of Company D, Capt. Raymond H. Dobbins, who happened to be at the rear of the column and thus outside the main killing zone. When enemy soldiers attempted to curl around Company D's position to roll up the left flank of the American line, Dobbins repositioned some of his men to block the maneuver. One of those men was Sgt. Robert F. Stryker of Company C, who helped foil the assault with well-aimed shots from his M79 grenade launcher. Later he threw himself on a grenade just before it exploded, sacrificing his own life to save several wounded comrades. For his actions he received the Medal of Honor.[33]



Robert Stryker
(shown here as a private)

After checking the Viet Cong flanking attack, Captain Dobbins assumed temporary command of the battalion, calling in air and artillery strikes as he reorganized his men and moved them back some one hundred meters to a more defensible position on higher ground. The enemy fought for another hour before breaking contact, leaving behind sixty-six of his dead. The 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, had sustained eighteen killed and twenty-two wounded. After flying out those casualties, bringing in new supplies, and reorganizing the battalion, Colonel Newman decided that the

[32] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, an. B.

[33] U.S. Senate, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, *Medal of Honor Recipients, 1863–1973* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 931.

unit was still capable of performing its mission, and so kept it in the field. When no further contact with the enemy took place around Loc Ninh over the next few days, General Hay concluded that the battle-worn units of the *9th Division* were heading back to Cambodia. The week-long battle for Loc Ninh was over.[34]

Second Wave at Song Be and Bo Duc

Even as the *9th PLAF Division* began withdrawing from Loc Ninh, elements of the *5th PLAF Division* were massing near Song Be town, some forty kilometers to the east. The *275th Regiment* arrived from War Zone D in southern Phuoc Long Province to join the *88th Regiment,* now attached to the *5th Division*. The second phase of *Military Region 10*'s campaign to improve the security of Communist lines of communications into III Corps was about to unfold.

On the morning of 6 November, elements from the *275th Regiment* ambushed a company from the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division that was stationed south of Song Be. The enemy continued the fight even when South Vietnamese reinforcements arrived. The two sides became intermingled, preventing the allies from using air and artillery strikes, but the government soldiers eventually prevailed. They claimed to have killed 265 enemy soldiers. That figure is in doubt because airpower and artillery, which together usually inflict the most casualties in a battle, played little or no role here. Whatever the truth, South Vietnamese losses were significant: fifty-four dead, fifty-five wounded, and fifteen missing in action.[35]

General Weyand thought something big might be brewing because the *275th Regiment* did not usually operate this far to the north. With General Hay's 1st and 3d Brigades of the 1st Infantry Division fully committed to Binh Long Province, Weyand ordered two battalions from the 25th Infantry Division to sweep the area around Song Be. After two fruitless weeks of searching, he called off the effort and returned the two battalions to their parent brigades.[36]

Just as the two battalions left Song Be, trail watchers observed a new enemy regiment (later identified as the *271st Regiment*) moving into the area. They also detected a large number of Communist troops building fortifications near Bu Gia Map, an abandoned hamlet twenty-eight kilometers northeast of Song Be that had a small airfield formerly used by the Special Forces. The enemy, it appeared, was gearing up for a new campaign in Phuoc Long Province.[37]

More evidence supporting that view came on 25 November when part of the *275th Regiment* attacked the South Vietnamese Army camp south of Song

[34] AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Bde, 1st Div, pp. 8, 14–15; AAR, Opn SHENANDOAH II, 1st Inf Div, an. A, pp. 22–23, and G; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 45, II FFV, 5–11 Nov 67, 11 Nov 67, an. F, p. 2, Historians files, CMH. See Flanagan, "Shenandoah II," pp. 18–20.

[35] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 45, II FFV, pp.1, 3, 9.

[36] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, n.d., p. 3, box 71, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn KOLEKOLE, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, 29 Dec 67, pp. 28–30, box 18, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[37] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 46, II FFV, 12–18 Nov 67, 12 Nov 67, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

Be. The fight lasted more than four hours, resulting in approximately one hundred enemy dead. That attack, it later turned out, was a diversion. Cam's real targets were Bo Duc, a district capital some twenty kilometers northwest of Song Be, and the neighboring Special Forces camp at Bu Dop, located two kilometers to the north of Bo Duc.[38]

Cam's plan was similar to the one he had used at Loc Ninh. The *272d Regiment* was to overrun Bo Duc and destroy the district headquarters. Following that, the *271st* and the *273d Regiments* would assault the nearby Special Forces camp at Bu Dop and fight any reinforcements that might land at its small airfield. The major shortcoming in Cam's plan was the weakened state of his division. His regiments were short on manpower, despite receiving several hundred North Vietnamese fillers in the intervening weeks. It remained to be seen whether his battered division could rise to the occasion.[39]

Cam's preparations did not go unnoticed. On 26 and 28 November, Montagnard troops from Bo Duc observed unidentified enemy forces moving through the area. General Hay believed that the *88th* and *275th Regiments* were hovering near Song Be, but the *9th Division* had dropped out of sight after the Loc Ninh battle. Hay could not discount the possibility that Cam had snuck into Phuoc Long Province in the intervening weeks. He decided to wait for the situation to develop before committing troops to either Song Be or Bo Duc.[40]

The answer came shortly after midnight on 29 November. The second phase of Cam's dry season campaign began when the *2d* and *3d Battalion*s of the *272d Regiment* attacked the Bo Duc District headquarters, a fortified compound defended by a reconnaissance company from the South Vietnamese 5th Division, a company of Regional Forces soldiers, and two Popular Forces platoons. Viet Cong mortar fire prevented the Montagnard soldiers stationed at the nearby Bu Dop Special Forces camp from reinforcing the embattled district headquarters.

The enemy attacked the compound from multiple directions to take advantage of his superior numbers. The tactic worked. A group of Viet Cong troops fought its way through the southern perimeter and forced the defenders to regroup in the northern half of the compound. The U.S. adviser attached to the reconnaissance company, Capt. Harold E. Bolin, repeatedly exposed himself to hostile fire to direct air strikes against Viet Cong machine gun positions. When the situation became critical, he called down napalm and 750-pound bombs a mere seventy-five meters from his location to prevent the enemy from overrunning the compound. The air strike landed on target, violently jarring

[38] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 47, II FFV, 19–25 Nov 67, 25 Nov 67, p. 2; Periodic Intel Rpt, MACV, J–2, 1–30 Nov 67, Nov 67, p. 4. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[39] Rpt, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, USARV, 5 Feb 70, sub: History of the *273 VC Regiment*, p. 15, Historians files, CMH.

[40] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 48, II FFV, 26 Nov–2 Dec 67, 2 Dec 67, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

the government soldiers in their bunkers but also killing many Viet Cong troops caught in the open.

When the defenders saw the enemy waver, they counterattacked and drove him back into the jungle. Both Communist battalions broke contact around 0630, leaving behind ninety-six dead. Friendly losses came to fifteen killed and fifty-seven wounded.[41]

Allied reinforcements arrived the next afternoon, 29 November, in several flights of helicopters. Two infantry battalions from the South Vietnamese 5th Division took up defensive positions in the town, while General Hay sent Colonel Cochran's 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, as well as Battery A from the 2d Battalion, 33d Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, from Quan Loi to Bu Dop. The U.S. units established a firebase at the northwestern end of the runway.

The enemy tested the American position later that night. Shortly after 2200, a salvo of mortar rounds and 122-mm. rockets plunged into the firebase. One rocket landed squarely on a bunker, killing all four of its occupants. When the bombardment ended, hundreds of Viet Cong soldiers from the *3d Battalion, 271st Regiment*, and elements of the *80A Replacement and Training Regiment* emerged from rubber trees on the eastern side of the runway. As they crossed the open ground that separated the woods from the firebase, a distance of some 200 meters, the American artillery crews depressed their howitzer barrels and fired directly into the onrushing infantry. Small arms and machine gun fire from the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, brought down more Communist troops, but still the enemy pressed his assault.[42]

Minutes later, the besieged Americans heard the thump of rotor blades as a pair of helicopter gunships arrived overhead. A dozen or more enemy antiaircraft machine guns greeted the aircraft, but their pilots evaded the ribbons of fire that streamed skyward. Keen-eyed helicopter crews spotted a cluster of enemy mortars firing from a soccer field in a nearby hamlet. Several strafing runs disabled the weapons and decimated their operators. A flight of F–100 fighter-bombers thundered in low to tear at the enemy-held woods with bombs and cannon fire. The enemy assault faltered and soon Viet Cong soldiers were scurrying back into the forest. By 0030 almost all of the shooting had stopped. U.S. casualties were seven killed and eleven wounded. The Communists left behind thirty-one bodies. Enemy prisoners later reported that the rest of the *271st* and the entire *272d Regiment* had been lurking nearby during the engagement to exploit any breakthrough that occurred.[43]

Despite the drubbing he had administered to the *9th Division* so far, General Hay doubted Colonel Cam was ready to give up just yet. During the

[41] Ibid.; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, 12 Apr 68, p. 36, box 18, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Recommendation for Award, G–2 Adviser, Advisory Team 70, South Viet 5th Inf Div Advisory Det, n.d., sub: Capt. Harold E. Bolin, Distinguished Service Cross, Awards Br, Mil Personnel Div, Adjutant Gen sec., USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[42] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, pp. 8–9; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 49, II FFV, 3–9 Dec 67, 9 Dec 67, p. 10, Historians files, CMH.

[43] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, pp. 8–9.

An F–100D Super Sabre releases a napalm bomb over a rain forest canopy in South Vietnam.

next week, allied patrols continued to clash with enemy forces around Bo Duc, and each night mortar shells landed in the town. Believing that a second and larger attack against the district capital might still be in the offing, Hay sent the 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, and a 4.2-inch mortar platoon to fortify a second firebase at the Bu Dop airstrip on 4 December. Two days later, he sent the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, under the command of Lt. Col. Mortimer L. O'Connor, and Battery B, 1st Battalion, 5th Artillery, to establish a firebase southeast of Bo Duc where enemy activity had been spotted.

Viet Cong soldiers were indeed in that area. An hour after midnight on 8 December, the *3d Battalion, 273d Regiment*, attacked the firebase of the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, with the main assault party advancing behind a steady barrage of rocket-propelled grenades. U.S. artillery, using the minimum amount of propellant possible because the engagement range was so short, tore through the enemy with high-explosive shells and prevented him from reaching the outer wire. After taking further losses from air strikes, helicopter gunships, and 4.2-inch mortars, the enemy withdrew around 0300. The Americans counted forty-nine enemy dead the next day against their own loss of four killed. When B–52 bombers began to pound the area around Bo Duc and Bu Dop, Colonel Cam finally decided it was time to withdraw back into Cambodia for rest and refitting.[44]

The second phase of the *Military Region 10* campaign had not gone well for the enemy. Between 25 November and 8 December, the Communists had lost at least 400 men and possibly up to twice that number at Song Be, Bo Duc, and Bu Dop in unsuccessful attacks on fixed allied positions. Their only success had occurred on 5 December when a battalion from the

[44] Ibid., p. 9; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 49, II FFV, pp. 10–11.

88th Regiment had attacked a Montagnard refugee camp called Dak Son, located just north of Song Be. In the days preceding the attack, Viet Cong propagandists had warned the villagers to return to their original village in Cambodia so they could provide manpower and food for the Communists. The Stieng tribesmen, who had repulsed three Viet Cong attacks earlier in the year, refused to leave, but this time the enemy came in overwhelming strength. The North Vietnamese soldiers burned down the hamlet with flamethrowers, killing more than 200 women and children and abducting at least 400 villagers.[45]

Thunder Road

As the *5th* and *9th PLAF Divisions* fought their battles at Song Be and Bo Duc in late November and early December, the *7th PAVN Division*, commanded by Senior Col. Nguyen Hoa, tried to cut Highway 13, the allies' main supply route in Binh Long and Phouc Long Provinces. If Hoa succeeded, he would undercut Weyand's dry season offensive by making it impossible for II Field Force to sustain operations along the border.

The *7th Division*'s main adversary was the 3d Brigade, 1st Division, which had spent the last several months reopening the road between An Loc, a district capital in southern Binh Long Province, and the brigade's headquarters at Lai Khe, a distance of some seventy kilometers. The 3d Brigade operated from a series of firebases named CAISSON I through VII built at ten-kilometer intervals along that stretch of highway. Early every morning, detachments would emerge from these bases to check for mines or other damage the Communists might have done to the road the previous night. Within two hours the road would be ready for civilian and military traffic. Troops would occasionally search communities along the road for enemy agents, while other soldiers distributed propaganda and performed civic actions. As dusk approached, traffic would be stopped and curfews imposed. Hamlet gates would be locked and positions secured against the possibility of nighttime harassment by enemy mortars. Through the subsequent hours of darkness, the brigade would use tower-mounted radar to detect, and mortars to disrupt, enemy activity along the road. It would also deploy troops to temporary positions between the firebases to further discourage enemy meddling during the night. Still other artillery would launch harassment and interdiction fire against suspected enemy areas of activity. Then, when the dawn again crept over the horizon, the brigade would repeat the process all over again in what had proven to be a highly successful system.[46]

Colonel Hoa made his opening move against Highway 13 on 24 November. Shortly after midnight, the *165th Regiment* sent its *2d Battalion* to overrun a

[45] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 12–15, 20, 36–37; Pamphlet, United States Information Service (USIS), Massacre at Dak Son, n.d., Historians files, CMH.

[46] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde and Lai Khe Base, 1st Inf Div, 8 Feb 68, pp. 1, 10; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, 31 Jan 68, p. 15. Both in Historians files, CMH.

night defense position on the shoulder of Highway 13, some twelve kilometers south of An Loc. Company B of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, manned the position, assisted by a platoon from the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, consisting of three M48A3 tanks and four M113 armored personnel carriers, and two platoons from the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry (Mechanized), equipped with eleven M113s.[47]

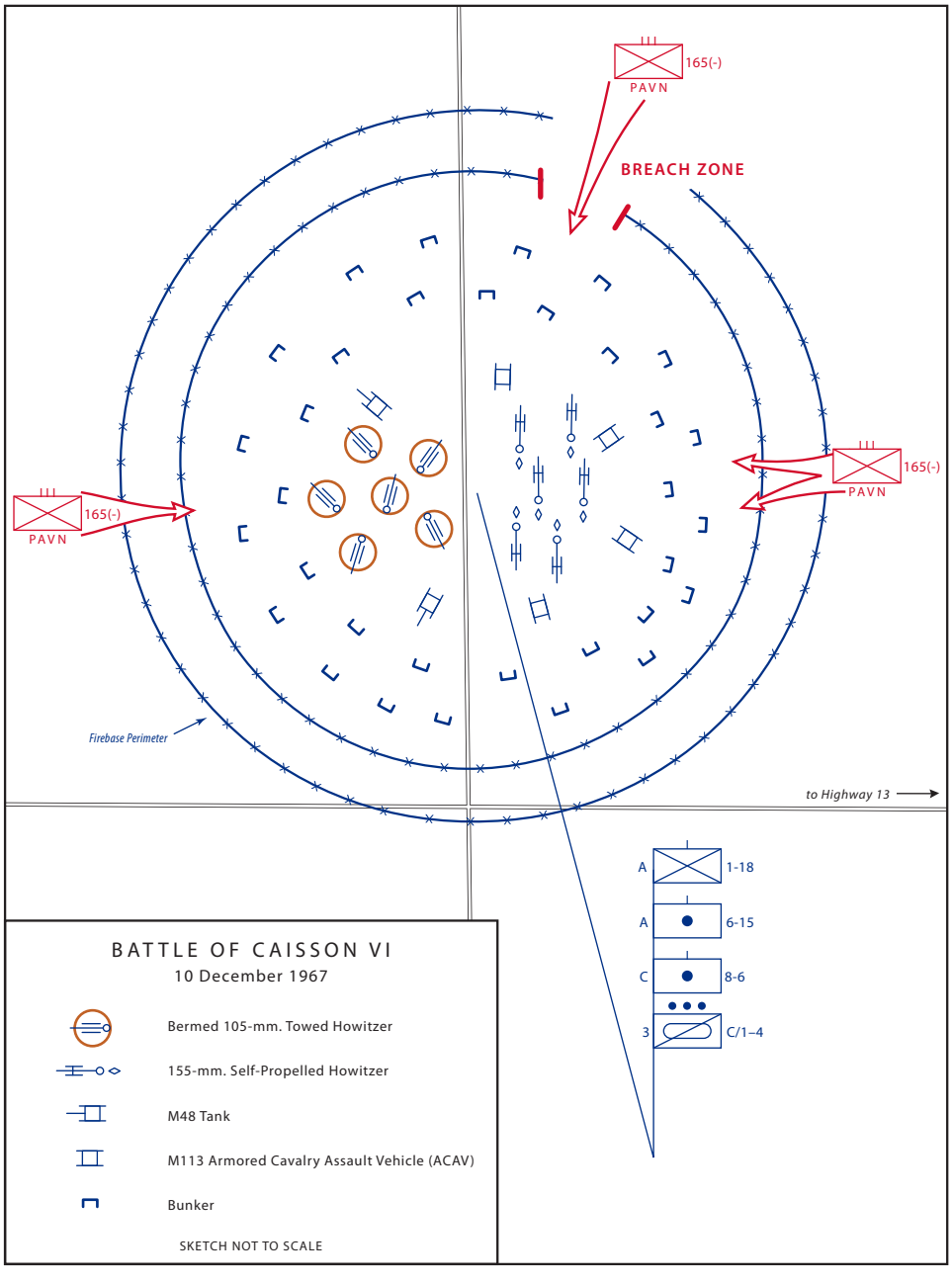
When the North Vietnamese attacked, the armored vehicles that ringed the perimeter exacted a fearful toll on them. Rocket-propelled grenades hit several of the vehicles but did not put any of them out of action. Enemy sappers were unable to reach the wire in order to blow gaps for the infantry behind them. Pinned down by the tremendous volume of fire emanating from the base, the North Vietnamese became easy targets for artillery and tactical air strikes. When helicopter gunships and Spooky aircraft joined the action, the North Vietnamese commander called off the attack and withdrew his men around 0145. The enemy left behind fifty-seven dead and a large amount of equipment. American losses came to four killed. Hoa's first effort had failed.[48]

Nine days later, Hoa sent his *141st Regiment* into action against a second night defense position that was three kilometers south of his first target. This second outpost might have appeared to be an easier target because it contained a smaller force, Company D, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, and one mechanized platoon from Company C of the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry. Shortly after midnight on 3 December, the *1st Battalion, 141st Regiment,* stormed the perimeter and got inside the wire before being driven back by defensive fire and an onslaught of artillery, air strikes, and helicopter gunships. The Americans lost seven killed while claiming at least twenty-seven North Vietnamese lives. Perhaps helping to explain the relatively modest enemy body count, the Americans discovered several hundred fighting holes approximately 200 meters from the camp that would have been fairly effective in sheltering the enemy from allied bombs and shells.[49]

A week later, Colonel Hoa gave his *165th Regiment* another chance. The target this time was CAISSON VI, situated in the Xa Cat Rubber Plantation six kilometers south of An Loc. The base contained two artillery units, Battery A of the 6th Battalion, 15th Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, and Battery C of the 8th Battalion, 6th Artillery, armed with 155-mm. howitzers. Company A from the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, protected the camp along with three M48A3 tanks and four M113 armored personnel carriers from Troop A of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, which were dug into fighting positions along the outer perimeter (*Map 7*).[50]

Two hours after midnight on 10 December, a barrage of 75-mm. recoilless rifles and 82-mm. and 120-mm. mortars slammed into the firebase. When the bombardment lifted, a mass of North Vietnamese soldiers assaulted

[47] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 47, II FFV, p. 10; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 6.
[48] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, pp. 6–7.
[49] Ibid., p. 7.
[50] Ibid.


165(-)
PAVN
BREACH ZONE
165(-)
PAVN
165(-)
PAVN
Firebase Perimeter
to Highway 13
A 1-18
A 6-15
C 8-6
3 C/1–4
BATTLE OF CAISSON VI
10 December 1967
Bermed 105-mm. Towed Howitzer
155-mm. Self-Propelled Howitzer
M48 Tank
M113 Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle (ACAV)
Bunker
SKETCH NOT TO SCALE

MAP 7

the perimeter. Sapper teams rushed forward with their heads bowed low to avoid being hit by the rocket-propelled grenades that whooshed through the air from their comrades behind them. When the sappers had blown several holes in the wire, Viet Cong infantry sprinted through the gap. Defensive fire cut down scores of them but some made it through. The U.S. tanks fired canister rounds, shells filled with shotgun-like steel balls, to seal the gaps. The defenders soon hunted down the enemy soldiers who had gotten into the compound, although not before one sapper team managed to disable an M48 tank.

A cascade of artillery shells eventually forced the North Vietnamese to withdraw. By 0330 the fighting was over. When the sun rose, U.S. soldiers collected 143 enemy dead along with large quantities of discarded weapons and military gear. The cost to the defenders had been one killed. After the battle of CAISSON VI, the battered *165th Regiment* ceased further attempts to cut Highway 13.[51]

Screaming Eagles

General Weyand received the additional reinforcements he needed to cut the enemy supply lines in Phuoc Long Province when the 101st Airborne Division's 2d and 3d Brigades arrived from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in November and December of 1967. Known as Operation EAGLE THRUST, the deployment was the largest and longest military airlift into a combat zone that the United States had ever attempted, requiring no fewer than 369 sorties by U.S. Air Force C–141 Starlifter transport aircraft. All told, the aircraft carried 9,794 passengers and 5,083 tons of equipment. An additional 4,110 tons of equipment made the journey by sea.[52]

The commander of the 101st Airborne Division, Maj. Gen. Olinto M. Barsanti, and his advance party arrived at Bien Hoa Air Base on 18 November where they established the division headquarters. The division's 3d Brigade arrived in the first week of December and immediately moved to Phuoc Vinh in Binh Duong Province, fifty kilometers northeast of Saigon. When the division's 2d Brigade arrived in the third week of December, it moved in temporarily with the 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi, twenty-five kilometers northwest of Saigon. The support units of the 101st Airborne Division, the last elements of the division to leave Fort Campbell, arrived at their new stations during the last week of December. By placing the 2d and 3d Brigades of the division at long-established bases, Weyand had given the newcomers a chance to acclimate in relatively safe areas while freeing up his more experienced forces to go after the enemy regiments in Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces.[53]

[51] Ibid., pp. 7–8.
[52] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 37–38.
[53] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 51, II FFV, 17–23 Dec 67, 23 Dec 67, p. 3, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 37–38.

The unit that escorted the 3d Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division to its new home at Phouc Vinh, the 11th Armored Cavalry, normally operated east of Saigon in Bien Hoa Province, but Weyand shifted two of its three squadrons to northern III Corps in early December to secure Highway 13 during the dry season campaign. Those two squadrons brought with them several dozen M48A3 tanks and over a hundred M113 ACAVs (armored cavalry assault vehicles), a modified version of the M113 troop carrier equipped with a swivel-mounted M60 machine gun on either side of the rear deck behind the commander's .50-caliber machine gun. Backed by a helicopter troop with forty-eight aircraft, the famed "Blackhorse" Regiment was capable of protecting long stretches of roadway while its engineer company made improvements and cleared mines.[54]

General Barsanti

On 4 December, the commander of the 11th Armored Cavalry, Col. Jack MacFarlane, began Operation QUICKSILVER with his 1st and 2d Squadrons. Their task was to open and secure parts of Highway 13 in Binh Duong Province for the movement of the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and the 1st Brigade, 1st Division. Mines and roadblocks had rendered some sections of the highway impassable, so it was up to MacFarlane and his men to make the way safe for the hundreds of unarmored trucks that would convey the two brigades to their new base camps.

Operating out of the 1st Division base camp at Lai Khe, the Blackhorse troopers got off to a fast start. Although there were several local force companies in the area, and two battalions of the newly formed *Dong Nai Regiment* were less than a day's march to the southeast, the enemy stayed out of sight. Engineers attached to the 1st and 2d Squadrons disarmed a number of buried mines, including a 750-pound bomb and a 155-mm. artillery round that guerrillas had rigged with a pressure detonator. The engineers also repaired road surfaces that guerrillas or the weather had damaged. Colonel MacFarlane stationed tanks and armored cavalry assault vehicles at regular intervals along the highway to provide around-the-clock security. The regimental helicopter troop and U.S. Air Force observation planes equipped with Starlight night-vision scopes assisted the forces on the ground. Just developed by the Army, these Starlight scopes (optical instruments that magnified the ambient light that reflected down from the stars and the moon) turned night for the viewer into a green-hued day. Under that protective shield, the 3d Brigade,

[54] Simon Dunstan, *Vietnam Tracks: Armor in Battle, 1945–1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 104.

101st Airborne Division, made its way to Phouc Vinh without loss. With the mission complete, QUICKSILVER came to an end on 21 December.[55]

The next day, the regiment turned its attention to northern Binh Long Province, initiating Operation FARGO to secure Highway 13 between An Loc and Loc Ninh. After building a base near Loc Ninh, MacFarlane had orders to open Highway 14A between Loc Ninh and Bo Duc. Weyand instructed him to patrol the Cambodian border during the holiday season. In past years, the Communists had used the cease-fire periods at Christmas, New Years, and Tet to step up infiltration.[56]

On 22 December, the 11th Armored Cavalry's 1st and 2d Squadrons began moving north from An Loc. Encountering almost no resistance, the Blackhorse troopers spent the next four days securing Highway 13, constructing three firebases to defend the road, and establishing a regimental command post and logistical center at Loc Ninh. Following the Christmas truce, engineers equipped with Rome plows, armored bulldozers named for the town in Georgia where they were built, cleared a 100-meter strip on either side of Highway 13 to make it harder for the enemy to set up ambushes.

On 28 December, the 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, turned over Camp Blackhorse to the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, from the 9th Infantry Division, so it could travel north to join its sister squadrons in northern III Corps. Lt. Col. Howard R. Fuller Jr. and his 9th Division cavalrymen took over Operation KITTYHAWK to protect Highway 1 and other lines of communications in Long Khanh Province. Having only one squadron instead of three to secure his area of operations, Fuller was fortunate that the Viet Cong chose to keep a low profile during the inaugural month of his unit's deployment.

When the 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, joined the 1st and 2d Squadrons at Loc Ninh on 31 December, it marked the first time that the regiment would operate with all of its subordinate elements together since it had arrived the previous December. It was also the regiment's first exposure to combat in a triple-canopy rainforest. Despite the restricted sight lines and obstacles to movement, Colonel MacFarlane was confident that his troopers could go almost anywhere in the jungle and keep the enemy on the run.[57]

Assessing the Campaign North of Saigon

During the opening phase of his dry season campaign, General Weyand had accomplished his initial objectives in Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces while also turning back a major enemy offensive. General Hay's 1st Infantry Division had succeeded in opening Highway 13 as far north as Loc Ninh, a necessary precursor to future operations along the border. Hay had then posi-

[55] AAR, Opn QUICKSILVER, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), n.d., pp. 5–6, 10, box 25, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[56] AAR, Opn FARGO, 11th ACR, n.d., p. 2, box 25, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[57] Ibid., pp. 1, 6.

tioned his 1st and 3d Brigades, reinforced by elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry, into the sector between An Loc and Loc Ninh where they could strike at the Communist bases and supply routes that ran parallel to and across the upper portion of Highway 13. At the same time, Hay's division, with only minor support from the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division and the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, had thwarted *COSVN*'s seven-regiment offensive in the battles at Loc Ninh, Song Be, Bo Duc, and Bu Dop, not to mention several clashes along Highway 13. Furthermore, Weyand had successfully moved the 2d and 3d Brigades of the 101st Airborne Division into position for the next stage of his campaign—an airmobile assault into northern Phuoc Long Province to block the Adams Trail supply channel that fed War Zone D.[58]

Weyand nevertheless recognized that the enemy had scored a few points of his own. The Communist offensive had damaged government influence in the border region. In Phuoc Long Province, the North Vietnamese assault on Dak Son had generated nearly 1,800 refugees who by year's end had still not been resettled. The fighting at neighboring Song Be had caused still more suffering. Meanwhile, in Long Binh Province, one Revolutionary Development team and three Truong Son teams (Revolutionary Development teams assigned to Montagnard communities) had abandoned their work through most of November. More serious had been the effect on Loc Ninh District town. At the outset of the battle, most of the town's residents had fled by bus and U.S. Army helicopters to temporary shelters established for them in the provincial capital. When they returned home a few weeks later, they found the town destroyed by the U.S. counterattack and looted by members of the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division. The allies provided humanitarian assistance throughout the ordeal, and 1st Division engineers rebuilt Loc Ninh's market, but the populace's faith in the ability of the government to protect them was shaken. As a II Field Force report conceded, the enemy's seizure of Loc Ninh, no matter how temporary, had represented "a significant political victory" for the enemy.[59]

Tropic Lightning Strikes War Zone C

There was, however, one more piece of Weyand's offensive—the thrust into the Communist base area known as War Zone C. Encompassing the northern half of Tay Ninh Province, War Zone C was one of the largest enemy-controlled areas in South Vietnam. The sparsely inhabited, triple-

[58] Intel Information Cable, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 27 Dec 67, sub: Summary of Viet Cong activities in III Corps during November 1967, pp. 3–4, box 90, NSF-Vietnam Country files, LBJL.

[59] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, 12 Apr 68, p. 13 (quoted words). Periodic Intel Rpt no. 45, II FFV, pp. 4–5; Memo, MACV Office of Information (MACOI) for Press, no. 332-67, 28 Nov 67, sub: Radio Hanoi and Liberation Radio Statements on the Battle of Loc Ninh Release; Rpt, RD Advisory Team 81, Binh Long Province, 30 Nov 67, pp. 2, 5; Memo, Lt Gen Frederick C. Weyand for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, sub: The CORDS Field Overview for December, 1967, pp. 20–21. All in Historians files, CMH.

canopy rainforest offered ideal concealment for the supply dumps maintained by the *50th* and *82d Rear Service Groups*. The trees and vegetation grew so thick in many places that the forest floor remained in near darkness even on the sunniest days. Only a handful of provincial roads penetrated War Zone C and they turned to mud during the wet season. For nearly half of the year, this vast territory was an opaque and nearly impenetrable stronghold.

Hidden from the prying eyes of allied reconnaissance aircraft, Viet Cong logisticians had constructed an elaborate logistical network that ran from Cambodia through War Zone C and down the course of the Saigon River through Tay Ninh, Hau Nghia, and western Binh Duong Provinces to the outskirts of the capital. To counter this threat, Westmoreland had conducted extensive bombing and defoliation campaigns, backed during the past two dry seasons by large search-and-destroy operations. The most recent operation, JUNCTION CITY in February and March of 1967, had netted around 850 tons of supplies and eliminated 2,700 Communist soldiers. Nevertheless, the supply channel remained open, supporting the *9th PLAF Division*, the *84A PLAF Artillery Regiment*, and at least a dozen Viet Cong infantry battalions. As the third and final component of the dry season offensive, MACV intended to interdict the corridor as close to the Cambodian border as possible until the rainy season once again made operations in the remote areas problematic.

The organization Weyand chose for the task was the 25th Infantry Division. Nicknamed "Tropic Lightning" for the lightning-bolt patch worn by the soldiers of this Hawaii-based unit, the division headquartered at Cu Chi, a Communist-infested section of Hau Nghia Province thirty-five kilometers northwest of Saigon. The division's 3d Brigade (formerly the 3d Brigade of the 4th Division, which the 25th Division had acquired in a troop swap) resided at Dau Tieng, Tay Ninh Province, a former French villa situated on the edge of the massive Michelin Rubber Plantation some thirty-five kilometers northwest of Cu Chi. By the fall of 1967, Maj. Gen. Fillmore K. Mearns led the division. The son of an Army general, Mearns had graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1938 and had fought in Sicily and Italy during World War II, receiving a Silver Star Medal in the process.[60]

General Mearns

Mearns' orders for Operation YELLOWSTONE were to cut the Saigon

[60] MACV History, 1966, vol. 1, p. 69.

River corridor, to destroy supply caches, and to build two new Special Forces camps deep in War Zone C to monitor the border. To accomplish this mission, Mearns would have available his 1st and 3d Brigades, an armed helicopter unit—the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry (less one troop)—based at Tay Ninh West, and two battalions from the South Vietnamese 49th Regiment, 25th Division. General Weyand expected *COSVN* to resist the incursion with some of the main force units that used Tay Ninh Province as their rear area. The most likely opponents would be two North Vietnamese regiments, the *141st* and *165th*, believed to be in War Zone C or just to the east in Binh Long Province. The operational area likely contained several rocket or mortar battalions from the *84A Artillery Regiment*, and *COSVN* might even use the *9th Division* despite the recent beating it had taken at Loc Ninh and Song Be.[61]

General Mearns set YELLOWSTONE in motion on 8 December, directing the operation from a forward command post at Dau Tieng. Two battalions from the 3d Brigade—the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, led by Lt. Col. John M. Henchman, and the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. James V. Ladd—moved by helicopter to the small hamlet of Katum, located at the northern terminus of provincial Route 4 in the north-central part of War Zone C. They met no resistance. When the two battalions finished securing the area a few days later, General Mearns ordered several units at Tay Ninh West—the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, the 7th Battalion, 11th

Battery B, 7th Battalion, 11th Artillery, at a firebase at Katum await a fire mission during Operation YELLOWSTONE.

[61] MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, *October 1966 to October 1967*, p. 141.

Artillery, equipped with towed 105-mm. howitzers, and the 588th Engineer Battalion—to proceed north along Route 4 to Katum. Arriving without incident, the engineers began building Firebase CUSTER, which would serve as the 1st Brigade's forward base for the duration of YELLOWSTONE. They also helped the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, build a second base known as BEAUREGARD some five kilometers to the southeast near the village of Bo Tuc. The engineers positioned the base on the shoulder of Route 246, a seasonal road that led from Katum into the eastern half of War Zone C.

As the 25th Division's 1st Brigade punched deep into enemy territory, Col. Leonard R. Daems sent his 3d Brigade into the southeastern edge of War Zone C, led by Lt. Col. Thomas U. Harrold's 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry. Two battalions from the South Vietnamese 49th Regiment joined the search for enemy supply caches. Armed helicopters from the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, supported the 1st and 3d Brigades from the air, looking for signs of the enemy around Katum and Dau Tieng.[62]

The crews of those low-flying scout aircraft helped the infantry locate dozens of well-concealed supply dumps and bunker complexes. Some were lightly defended by Viet Cong rear service troops while others were unguarded. One of the biggest finds went to the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, which discovered 350 tons of rice stashed six kilometers northwest of Katum. Four days later in the southeastern corner of War Zone C, the 3d Brigade's 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, found 15,000 grenades buried in 55-gallon oil drums. The haul represented enough ordnance to equip ten Communist main force battalions with their normal combat load. The B–52 bombers destroyed any bases spotted by helicopter crews that infantry patrols could not reach.[63]

Enemy resistance stiffened during the second week of YELLOWSTONE. Around two hours after midnight on 15 December, mortar crews from the *2d* and *3d Battalions* of the *141st PAVN Regiment* began shelling Firebase BEAUREGARD, which was home to Colonel Henchman's 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry. When the barrage ended, several hundred pith-helmeted North Vietnamese soldiers scrambled across the open ground between the firebase and the forest. Most did not make it through the defensive fire, but a team of sappers found a way into the base and placed satchel charges in the ammunition dump, setting off 600 105-mm. shells before Americans forced the infiltrators to retreat. Colonel Henchman directed air and artillery strikes, which relieved some of the pressure on the base, and the battle settled into a long-distance gunfire duel that raged until 0735. The retreating North Vietnamese left behind forty bodies. The 4th Battalion lost six killed and twelve wounded. That same night, a Special Forces camp at Tien Ngon on the western edge

[62] Material in this section is based on AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 1st Bde, 25th Inf Div, and AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div. Both in ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, box 71. AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 3d Sqdn, 17th Cav, 20 Mar 68, box 2, 7th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP; and ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, 42–44.

[63] AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, p. 3; AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 3d Squad, 17th Cav, p. 3.

Soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, move through heavy growth in their armored personnel carriers during Operation YELLOWSTONE.

of War Zone C withstood a similar attack that included a 300-round mortar barrage followed by infantry and sapper probes.[64]

The next day, men from the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, found a notebook on the body of a senior sergeant from the *141st Regiment* who had died during the attack on BEAUREGARD. The notebook indicated that the unit, now operating directly under *COSVN*, had orders to overrun Firebase CUSTER as well as BEAUREGARD. If left intact, those bases could severely disrupt Communist supply lines that led from the Fishhook region of Cambodia, a wedge of land that jutted into South Vietnam on the border of Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces, down through the eastern half of War Zone C.[65]

In anticipation of a showdown, both sides moved extra forces into the region during the second half of December. The *9th Division*'s *271st* and *272d Regiment*s joined *COSVN* in the Fishhook after wrapping up the *Military Region 10* offensive at Song Be. On the U.S. side, the 3d Brigade, 25th Division, conducted a brief blocking operation south of Dau Tieng to support Operation CAMDEN, the search for the *101st PAVN Regiment*, before heading back into War Zone C to join the 1st Brigade with Operation YELLOWSTONE. Colonel Daems decided to build his forward base camp for the 3d Brigade on Route

[64] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 50, II FFV, 10–16 Dec 67, 16 Dec 67, pp. 1, 3, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, p. 7; *7th Division*, p. 46.

[65] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 51, II FFV, pp. 1–12.

244, a south-running branch of Route 246, some twelve kilometers southeast of Firebase BEAUREGARD.

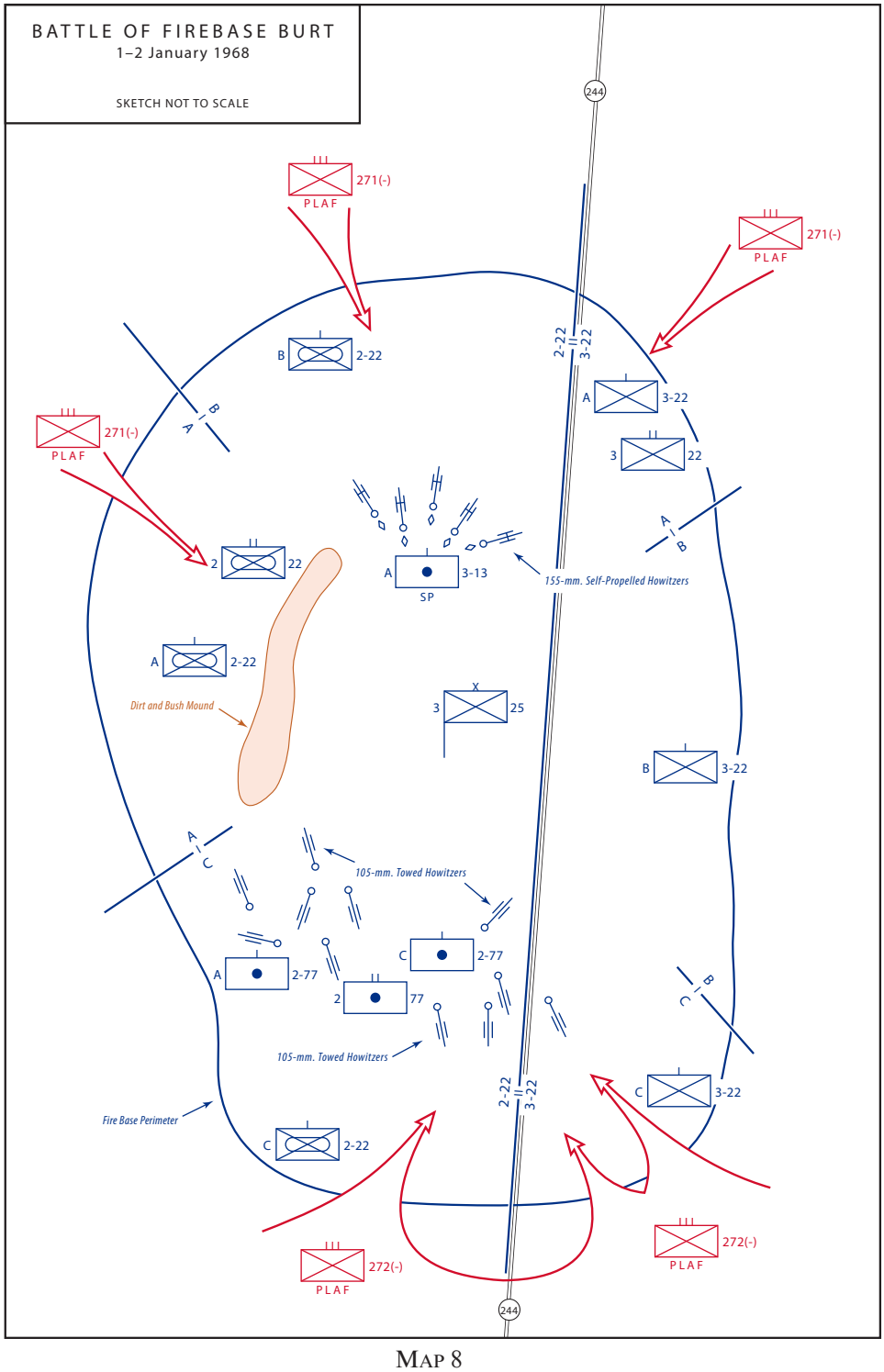
Colonel Daems needed only two days to get his men in place. On 28 December, he sent Lt. Col. Awbrey G. Norris and the 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry (Mechanized), up Route 4 to BEAUREGARD accompanied by two 105-mm. batteries from the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery, and a battery of M109 self-propelled 155-mm. howitzers from the 3d Battalion, 13th Artillery. The following morning, Colonel Harrold's 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, boarded helicopters at Dau Tieng and flew to the spot on Route 244 that Colonel Daems had chosen for his new forward outpost, Firebase BURT. Harrold's soldiers encountered no resistance. Later that day, the 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, and the three artillery batteries that were waiting at BEAUREGARD traveled east on Route 246 and then south on Route 244, also without incident. Meanwhile, the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, commanded by Colonel Tice, and several additional artillery batteries traveled from Dau Tieng to BEAUREGARD where they assumed the defense of the base. By the evening of 29 December, the lion's share of the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, was now arrayed to the east of the 1st Brigade on the general line of Route 246.[66]

The soldiers at Firebase BURT quickly built fighting positions and strung razor wire around the perimeter, knowing that the enemy might attack at any time. Bisected by Route 244, the outpost measured a kilometer from east to west and half that distance from north to south. Unable to fit all 900 men and their equipment on open ground, Colonel Daems' task force had extended the eastern tip of BURT a few dozen meters into the trees. The brigade commander located his command post and supply area at the center of the base. The 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, built and occupied around forty bunkers on the eastern half of the perimeter. The 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, placed their M113 armored personnel carriers in a series of hull-down positions along the western half of BURT. Batteries A and C from the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery, placed their eleven 105-mm. howitzers in the southern portion of the firebase. The five 155-mm. self-propelled howitzers belonging to Battery A of the 3d Battalion, 13th Artillery, were arrayed in the northern half of the perimeter. A pair of M42 tracked antiaircraft vehicles, colloquially known as "Dusters," from Battery B of the 5th Battalion, 2d Artillery, and a pair of M55 truck-mounted quad .50-caliber machine guns from Battery D, 71st Artillery, gave the defenders additional protection (*see Map 8*).[67]

COSVN reacted quickly to the presence of Firebase BURT. Daems' 3d Brigade was now only a few kilometers west of the trail network that connected Base Area 353 in the Fishhook with the *Sub-Region 1* base camps on the Saigon River. *COSVN*'s military head, General Thai, ordered the *9th Division*, which had returned to the Fishhook following the Loc Ninh–Song Be campaign, to attack the base as soon as possible. Colonel Cam moved his

[66] AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, pp. 2, 9.

[67] AAR, Battle of Soui Cut, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, 9 Jan 68, p. 1, Encl 2 to ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, box 71.


BATTLE OF FIREBASE BURT
1–2 January 1968
SKETCH NOT TO SCALE
244
271(-)
PLAF
271(-)
PLAF
B 2-22
2-22 II 3-22
A 3-22
3 22
271(-)
PLAF
A
B
2 22
A 3-13
SP
155-mm. Self-Propelled Howitzers
A 2-22
Dirt and Bush Mound
3 X 25
B 3-22
A
C
105-mm. Towed Howitzers
C 2-77
A 2-77
2 77
105-mm. Towed Howitzers
C
B
2-22 II 3-22
C 3-22
Fire Base Perimeter
C 2-22
272(-)
PLAF
272(-)
PLAF
244

Map 8

An M42 40-mm. self-propelled antiaircraft gun, or "Duster," provides perimeter defense.

271st and *272d Regiments* into position on the evening of 31 December, while a 24-hour truce for the New Year went into effect.[68]

At 1800 on the first of January 1968, some of those Viet Cong troops attacked a squad of U.S. soldiers at an outpost some 200 meters east of Firebase BURT. After losing two men killed, the Americans retreated to BURT. Colonel Daems put the firebase on alert and ordered the other ambush teams positioned to the north, south, and west of BURT to remain where they were.

Two hours later, the enemy fired a few mortar rounds into BURT, apparently to check the range, and then the shelling stopped. A few minutes later, U.S. ambush patrols that were hiding in the jungle several hundred meters to the north and to the south of BURT reported large numbers of enemy soldiers moving through the trees. There were so many, in fact, that the ambush teams chose not to open fire for fear of being annihilated. BURT's defenders made a final check of their weapons and ammunition as Colonel Daems' staff got on the radio to coordinate artillery support from BEAUREGARD.

[68] The following section is based on AAR, Battle of Soui Cut, 3d Bn, 22d Inf, n.d., box 32, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP. AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE II, 3d Bn, 22d Inf, n.d., in ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, box 71; AAR, Battle of Suoi Cut, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div; AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 2d Bn (Mech), 22d Inf, 20 Mar 68, in ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, box 71; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 42–44; *9th Division*, p. 98.

At 2330, Viet Cong mortar crews opened a fifteen-minute barrage. When the final shell hit, a wave of Viet Cong soldiers from the *1st* and *3d Battalions* of the *271st Regiment* streamed out of the trees to attack the northern end of the base, while the *2d* and *3d Battalions* of the *272d Regiment* hit the perimeter from the south.

The Americans let loose with M16 rifles and M60 machine guns, detonated dozens of claymore mines, and fired canister rounds from their 90-mm. recoilless rifles. The lethal metal tore into the advancing Viet Cong, but those who survived did not falter. Firing a steady stream of rocket-propelled grenades at the firebase, which knocked out an M113 carrier and an M42 Duster, the *2d* and *3d Battalions* of the *273d Regiment* advanced toward the razor wire that protected BURT. Artillery rounds from BEAUREGARD smashed into the surrounding jungle, but still the Viet Cong infantry came on.

At 0230, a squad of sappers breached the wire along the southern face of BURT. Enemy soldiers wriggled through the holes and then ran toward the bunker line. Colonel Daems ordered every 105-mm. howitzer that could be brought to bear to lower its barrel and fire directly into the advancing Communists with beehive rounds. The metal darts posed little danger to the American soldiers inside their bunkers, but the onrushing Viet Cong had no such protection. The steel needles cut down dozens of enemy soldiers, including one man who was vaporized by an expanding cone of darts as he attempted to stuff a grenade into a company command bunker.[69]

Confronted by such murderous fire, the Communists fell back beyond the wire to regroup. Taking advantage of the lull, a flight of UH–1 helicopters from the 145th and the 188th Assault Helicopter Companies swooped in to resupply BURT with ammunition and artillery shells. When they departed, U.S. fighter-bombers streaked in to drop napalm and cluster bombs on suspected enemy staging areas.[70]

The Viet Cong resumed the battle at 0330 with a battalion-size attack aimed at the southern end of BURT. Colonel Daems shifted several infantry platoons and two M113s from less-threatened sectors to the area under attack. The enemy assault faltered and then died away at 0500, bringing to an end a twenty-hour battle that General Mearns later described as a "cliffhanger."[71]

As soon as the sun came up, helicopter gunships from the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, went in search of the enemy. They observed small groups of Viet Cong heading toward Cambodia and killed around twenty of the fleeing troops. Meanwhile, Colonel Daems' men collected numerous bodies, some 115 enemy weapons, and large quantities of ammunition and equipment scattered around BURT. General Weyand flew in by helicopter to see the results himself, while General Mearns stayed aloft in his command helicopter to direct the pursuit of the retreating *9th Division*. In all, the *271st* and *272d Regiments* had lost 379 men killed in the attack on BURT and another 8 wounded who became

[69] AAR, Battle of Soui Cut, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, pp. 2–4.

[70] Ibid., p. 4; AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE II, 3d Bn, 22d Inf, p. 2; AAR, Opn YELLOWSTONE, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, p. 3.

[71] Interv, MacGarrigle with Mearns, p. 20.

prisoners. Radio Hanoi claimed that the Communists had killed or wounded 600 Americans, but the actual tally was 23 dead and 146 wounded. Even so, the battle for Firebase BURT was the heaviest action the 25th Division had seen since Operation JUNCTION CITY back in February, March, and April of 1967. Colonel Daems gave much of the credit for his victory to the precision artillery and close air support that his forces had received.[72]

The Situation at the Beginning of the New Year

At the start of 1968, the 25th Infantry Division appeared to be on track with its dry season campaign. General Mearns' 1st and 3d Brigades were firmly entrenched in northeastern War Zone C and astride the infiltration trail that fed the enemy bases that lined the Saigon River in Hau Nghia and Binh Duong Provinces. In less than a week, the two brigades had already located and destroyed a number of supply caches, and stood to uncover many more before the end of the dry season. As a bonus, their incursion into War Zone C had forced the better part of the *9th PLAF Division* and elements of the *7th PAVN Division* to engage in another costly fight only weeks after sustaining huge casualties in the Loc Ninh–Song Be campaign. Meanwhile, the 2d Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division appeared to have the enemy main force threat under control in the populated districts between Tay Ninh City and Cu Chi. General Mearns later recalled feeling a sense of "supreme confidence" as 1968 began, anticipating the effect his division would have on the Saigon River infiltration network over the next four months, and by his own admission, not yet aware of the massive enemy buildup that would soon result in the general offensive–general uprising.[73]

[72] AAR, Battle of Soui Cut, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, p. 5; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 43–44.

[73] Interv, MacGarrigle with Mearns, p. 28.

3

Protecting the Heartland

When the U.S. 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions kicked off the dry season offensive by invading the enemy-held wilderness of northern III Corps, other elements of II Field Force protected the rest of the corps zone. Of particular interest was the National Priority Area around Saigon—a heavily populated region averaging fifty kilometers in depth that included Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa Provinces and portions of the provinces of Binh Duong, Hau Nghia, Long An, Phuoc Tuy, and Long Khanh. No fewer than fifteen Viet Cong infantry battalions and four North Vietnamese infantry regiments operated in or adjacent to this area, threatening the nation's capital, the logistical and administrative facilities that sustained much of the allies' armed forces, and the lines of communications that connected this vital region to the rest of the country.[1]

To protect the heartland of the South Vietnamese state, General Weyand retained half of his combat force—the equivalent of eight combat brigades—in a loose ring around the capital. Supporting them were the 79th Engineer Group, the 89th Military Police Group, the 12th Aviation Group, and the 23d and 54th Artillery Groups. Weyand could also call on the services of Air Force attack squadrons based in III Corps and, through Westmoreland, B–52 bombers based outside the country. Not under his control, but carrying the majority of the burden, were General Khang's three infantry divisions, one ranger group, and additional combat support elements. At any one time, Khang usually assigned 16 of his infantry battalions to the province chiefs to directly support pacification, supplementing the roughly 200 Regional Forces companies and over 700 Popular Forces platoons already under their control. Taken together, General Weyand believed the allies had sufficient forces to defend the Saigon region for the next six months, while the remaining elements of II Field Force attacked the borderlands.[2]

In accordance with allied concepts, U.S. forces performed several missions. They secured bases and roads, conducted patrols to keep the enemy away from areas that were either pacified or undergoing pacification, launched search-and-destroy operations against large enemy units and bases whenever they were found, and reinforced friendly units attacked by the enemy. U.S. soldiers also helped train South Vietnamese forces and performed civic actions to

[1] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, 12 Apr 68, pp. 26–29, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; MACV Planning Dir 9-67, 29 Oct 67, sub: Planning Guidance for Senior Commander for the period 1 Nov 67–30 Apr 68, pp. 7–8, Historians files, CMH.

[2] MACV Planning Dir 9-67, 29 Oct 67, pp. 7–8.

relieve war-related suffering and to improve the population's opinion of the allied cause. The South Vietnamese focused their attention on defending communities and installations; on eliminating enemy local forces, guerrillas, and clandestine elements in and around populated areas; and on spreading the government's control within the area shielded by U.S. forces.

As things stood at the end of October, only about half of the 188 hamlets targeted for Revolutionary Development in III Corps in 1967 appeared to be on track. Tay Ninh Province, populated by the intensely anti-Communist Cao Dai religionists, and Phuoc Tuy Province, assisted by the 1st Australian Task Force, had already met their year-end goals. As for the remaining provinces, their officials predicted that most of the 1967 hamlets could be finished by the end of January 1968 if the security situation held and programmatic obstacles were overcome. As CORDS helped the South Vietnamese address pacification issues, Westmoreland expected that Weyand would do his part by keeping a lid on enemy large-unit activity, thereby "enabling an increase in economic activity and resultant rural prosperity" so as to strengthen popular support for the government and bring more food and manpower resources under its control.[3]

Binh Duong and Hau Nghia Provinces

As the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions pushed toward the Cambodian border during the final months of 1967, each left one brigade behind to perform long-standing security missions. In the 1st Division, General Hay ordered the commander of his 2d Brigade, Col. Charles C. Thebaud, to shield pacification activities in Binh Duong Province. Likewise, General Mearns instructed the commander of the 2d Brigade, 25th Division, Col. Edwin W. Emerson, to protect Hau Nghia and to support allied operations in adjacent portions of Binh Duong Province.

Just north of Saigon, Binh Duong shared a border with six other provinces and was the strategic linchpin of northern III Corps. Bisected from north to south by Highway 13, with the Saigon River to its west and the enemy-held wilderness known as War Zone D to its east, it was a logistical crossroads for both sides. The Communists controlled 45,000 of Binh Duong's 226,000 inhabitants and exerted significant influence over another 41,000, most of them in the province's three northern districts.

Colonel Thebaud's 2d Brigade operated from two main bases. The largest was at Di An in neighboring Bien Hoa Province, twenty kilometers northeast of Saigon. The other was at Phu Loi, located near Binh Duong's capital of Phu Cuong, twenty-five kilometers north of Saigon. Also located at Phu Cuong was the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division.

[3] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 10295 to General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman, JCS, 30 Oct 67, p. 10; CCP, 1967, p. 85, Historians files, CMH. Memorandum for the Record (MFR), MACV, CORDS Directorate, 15 Oct 67, sub: Report of On and Behind Schedule of Provinces with Respect to the 1967 RD Program as of 30 September 1967, p. 1; Rpt, MACV, CORDS Directorate, 20 Nov 67, sub: HES Newsletter, Encl 1. All in Historians files, CMH.

Its commander, Brig. Gen. Pham Quoc Thuan, had two infantry regiments and one armored cavalry squadron in Binh Duong. He typically loaned as many as four of his infantry battalions to the province chief to support Revolutionary Development.[4]

Since February 1967, Colonel Thebaud's 2d Brigade had been engaged in a local security mission known as Operation LAM SON 67 that shielded the heavily populated districts of Lai Thieu, Chau Thanh, and Phu Hoa in the southern third of Binh Duong, part of III Corps' National Priority Area. Prior to November, the brigade operated largely within the National Priority Area itself—primarily Lai Thieu and Chau Thanh Districts. Thereafter, it shifted much of its operations farther north into areas dominated by the Communists, in part to provide additional security for Highway 13, the 1st Division's lifeline during Operation YELLOWSTONE. The northern districts included Tri Tam in the northwestern part of the province, a jungled area that contained the Viet Cong base area known as the Trapezoid; Ben Cat, in which government-controlled areas around the district seat and Highway 13 were juxtaposed against such major enemy bases as the Iron Triangle and the Long Nguyen Secret Zone; and sparsely populated Phu Giao in northeastern Binh Duong Province, which bordered War Zone D. The province chief and his U.S. adviser were uncomfortable about the northern shift of the 2d Brigade's activities, fearing it would weaken the security of the southern districts.[5]

Regardless of where it operated, the brigade performed frequent battalion- and company-sized reconnaissance-in-force and harassment operations to keep the local force Viet Cong off balance. It set up nightly ambushes in

Soldiers of the 1st Infantry Division during an operation near Phu Loi

[4] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, n.d., p. 4, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[5] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 4.

squad and platoon strength and extensively employed stay-behind ambushes. In the latter, a force that was moving through the countryside would leave behind a small detachment that would secret itself, waiting to strike any Viet Cong who might return to the area thinking the Americans had departed. Colonel Thebaud considered the technique "quite successful."[6]

Thebaud coordinated his activities with the South Vietnamese and conducted combined operations with them. An aspect of this effort was a combined task force of two infantry companies and an armored cavalry platoon that routinely operated with Vietnamese paramilitary forces. The brigade also performed combined operations to weaken the infrastructure and to prevent contraband from reaching the enemy. One commonly used method were cordon-and-search operations. In these actions, U.S. units surrounded a hamlet to prevent escape, while Vietnamese police looked for Viet Cong political and intelligence agents, guerrillas, draft dodgers, and contraband. To lessen the inhabitants' ordeal, the allies conducted psychological and civic actions, distributed humanitarian supplies, and performed free medical exams. Thebaud considered cordon-and-search operations to be an effective technique, assuming sufficient time was available to coordinate the operation with Vietnamese authorities beforehand. Another method used in Binh Duong and throughout Vietnam were Mobile Resource Control Teams. These teams—mixed groups of U.S. Military Police and South Vietnamese Military and National Police—established impromptu checkpoints along thoroughfares. Here they checked identity papers and blocked the transportation of food, medicines, and other supplies into Viet Cong areas. To be effective, the allies found that they had to move the checkpoints frequently as the enemy quickly learned to evade static posts.[7]

Conducting operations absorbed the majority of the brigade's time, but it also helped the Vietnamese improve their skills. In addition to the small combined task forces mentioned above, 2d Brigade personnel participated in the 1st Division's refresher training program for the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division and 1st Armored Cavalry. A mixture of U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers taught the six-week course that emphasized junior leader skills, with two battalions graduating from the 2d Brigade's course at the end of the year. The 2d Brigade also supplied personnel for the 1st Division's Mobile Advisory Teams and Improvement Action Teams. These teams strove to enhance security in Revolutionary Development areas. Each of the division's six Mobile Advisory Teams consisted of one officer, two noncommissioned officers, a medic, and a radio operator. The men lived with and trained Vietnamese territorial forces. They also joined the units they advised in conducting patrols and ambushes. Improvement Action Teams of one officer, one noncommissioned officer, an interpreter, and a varying number of specialists performed

[6] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 2d Bde, 1st Inf Div, 8 Feb 68, pp. 1 (quoted words), 2, Historians files, CMH.

[7] Ibid., pp. 1–2; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Mil Police Co, 1st Inf Div, 4 Feb 68, p. 1; Pamphlet, MACV, Guide for Province and District Advisers, 1968, pp. 13-5–13-12. Both in Historians files, CMH.

short-duration projects in support of territorial outposts. By late 1967, three Mobile Advisory Teams and two Improvement Action Teams were operating in the province. The actual conduct of community security operations at the hamlet and village level remained a Vietnamese responsibility, although in one unusual case the 1st Division provided eight U.S. soldiers as bodyguards to a village chief in Chau Thanh District. CORDS personnel believed the act was unwise, since the chief had a "shaky reputation" and was not someone they thought Americans should be identifying with.[8]

Thanks to the 2d Brigade's efforts, security had gradually improved in southern Binh Duong Province during 1967. Thebaud's continuous probes had kept the regional Viet Cong units, including the *3d Di An* and *4th Thu Duc Battalions*, largely out of the LAM SON zone. By year's end, companies and platoons could move safely in areas where in February an entire battalion would have been required. Contact with the enemy had been light. Between 1 November 1967 and 31 January 1968, the brigade killed eighty-one Viet Cong, captured thirty prisoners, and believed it may have killed another seventy enemy soldiers whose bodies it did not recover.[9]

CORDS and 1st Division personnel reported that relations between the populace and U.S. combat troops were generally positive. Perhaps the greatest cause of criticism was American driving habits, and both CORDS and the 1st Division harped on military drivers to behave courteously. To minimize civilian casualties and property damage, U.S. forces did not use napalm in Binh Duong and kept a tight control over artillery fire near hamlets. Realizing this, and perhaps hoping to provoke a retaliatory strike that might alienate civilians, the Viet Cong set up their own artillery near hamlets. U.S. officials responded by encouraging communities to report the presence of Viet Cong troops, promising that the allies would respond by direct action without resorting to artillery. Conversely, they warned that failure to report enemy activity would force the Americans to respond to enemy bombardments in kind, even if they originated from populated areas. In one case, U.S. artillery reacted to enemy fire coming from a hamlet that had not taken up the American offer, killing one civilian and injuring several others. The next time the Viet Cong came to that hamlet, the people promptly reported them, and the Popular Forces drove them out without resorting to heavy fire support.[10]

Brigade personnel burnished their image, and by association hopefully that of the South Vietnamese government, by hosting parties and conducting over 120 medical and dental visits, treating 14,000 Vietnamese civilians from 1 November 1967 to 31 January 1968. Projects completed by the 2d Brigade in the Revolutionary Development area of Binh Duong during the last months of 1967 included the construction of houses, culverts, and

[8] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, pp. 10–11; Rpt, Michael B. Cook and David T. Kenny, Field Evaluators, CORDS, 4 Feb 68, sub: Completed Ap Doi Moi Khanh Loc, Binh Duong Province, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.

[9] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 2d Bde, 1st Inf Div, p. 1; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, pp. 1, 13–14.

[10] CORDS Representative Debrief, Binh Duong Province, Vietnam, 1966–1967, Honolulu, Hawaii, Asia Training Center, no. 6677B, n.d., pp. 19–22, Historians files, CMH.

A medical assistant treats a child under the Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP).

village dispensaries. So active were U.S. units in performing civic actions here and elsewhere in Vietnam that in September Westmoreland assigned CORDS the mission of coordinating military-civic action with comparable efforts on the civilian side, both to reduce duplication and to assure that aid was applied where it would best serve the allied cause. The need for such coordination was demonstrated in southern Binh Duong when the 23d Artillery Group teamed up with the citizens of Gadsen, Alabama, to build a refugee camp so sumptuous by local standards that it created jealously and discontent in the neighboring communities.[11]

Ultimately, however, CORDS officials in Binh Duong believed that security, and not good deeds, was the bedrock on which pacification would succeed or fail, and on this point they felt uneasy. For all the 2d Brigade's good work, U.S. advisers believed that the allies simply did not have enough forces to protect the populated areas. Indeed, no sooner had the 2d Brigade begun to shift its attention to northern Binh Duong than the enemy exploited its absence with increased activity in the south. Small groups of Viet Cong guerrillas, aided by an infrastructure that the Americans believed had been weakened but was still intact, committed acts that undermined the confidence of the inhabitants in the government. On 8 November, for example, a Viet Cong party attacked Tan Phuoc Khanh village in Chau Thanh District. The defenders, including a Revolutionary Development team and a Popular Forces platoon, repulsed the attack. On 22 November, the Viet Cong in neighboring Lai Thieu District

[11] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 2d Bde, 1st Inf Div, p. 1; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 14; CORDS Representative Debrief, Binh Duong Province, Vietnam, 1966–1967, p. 31; MACV History, 1967, vol. 2, pp. 692–93.

peppered a South Vietnamese Army post with mortar, small arms, and automatic weapons fire. The following day, the Viet Cong returned in company strength to assault Tan Phuoc Khanh despite the fact that the government had reinforced the village with forty Regional Forces soldiers. The guerrillas used small arms, automatic weapons, and light antitank weapons to inflict nine casualties on government forces before the latter drove them off. Then, in early December, a Viet Cong platoon attacked a Revolutionary Development team that was giving a literacy class in the hamlet of Hoa My, killing eight team members and wounding four others. By January 1968, reports indicated that enemy main force units were beginning to filter into the southern districts of the province, their mission as yet unknown. Unless the teams and the villagers they were attempting to organize enjoyed greater security, pacification would remain a delicate proposition in Binh Duong Province.[12]

While the 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, attempted to protect the populated areas of Binh Duong, Colonel Emerson and his 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, performed a similar task in neighboring Hau Nghia Province. Like Binh Duong, the Viet Cong had always been strong in Hau Nghia, and since its arrival in 1966 the 25th Division had labored mightily, but not always successfully, to tame the province. CORDS personnel attributed a noticeable improvement in security over the course of the year to the activities of U.S. combat forces, yet by the fall of 1967 the enemy was still ubiquitous.[13]

In September, as part of the preparations for the 25th Infantry Division's dry season offensive against War Zone C, the allies reapportioned responsibility for security in Hau Nghia. Although U.S. units could operate anywhere when circumstances dictated, the 2d Brigade was only responsible for the territory between the Saigon River and Highway 1 in the northern districts of Cu Chi and Trang Bang. Here the brigade would secure both the division's base camp at Cu Chi town and Highway 1 while attacking the Communist bases that lined the southern end of the Saigon River corridor in northeastern Hua Nghia, southern Tay Ninh, and western Binh Duong Provinces. The South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division and provincial troops assumed responsibility for securing the rest of the province. This included the western parts of Trang Bang and Cu Chi Districts; Duc Hoa District in southeastern Hau Nghia, home of the provincial capital at Bao Trai; and the swamp-filled Duc Hue District of western Hau Nghia, which was divided from the more populated districts to the east by the winding Vam Co Dong River and the enemy-held plantations that lined its course.

October was largely uneventful. As the 25th Infantry Division prepared for the thrust against War Zone C, only the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry, operated below Highway 1, where it protected a jungle-clearing

[12] Rpt, RD Advisory Team 23, Binh Duong Province, 31 Dec 67, p. 3; Memo, RD Advisory Team 23, Binh Duong Province, for Deputy, CORDS, III CTZ, 6 Nov 67, sub: Special Joint Narrative Report on Revolutionary Development, p. 1; Rpt, CORDS, III CTZ, Binh Duong Province, period ending 30 Nov 67, n.d., pp. 1–3. All in Historians files, CMH. Rpt, Cook and Kenny, 4 Feb 68, pp. 2–5, 9.

[13] For the story of the 25th Division in Hau Nghia, see Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991).

operation executed by special bulldozers called Rome plows in Thai My village about ten kilometers northwest of Cu Chi town. Within their zones of responsibility U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers, sometimes working as combined teams, provided security for both the national elections and the winter rice harvest. The latter task, which continued through the remainder of the year, was particularly important, both to help the economy and to deny the enemy food. The 2d Brigade responded to a number of small harassment actions, while South Vietnamese forces, backed by timely assistance from U.S. Army artillery and helicopter gunships, handily repulsed several small probes by the *269th Battalion* west of Highway 1. The only significant U.S. losses occurred in the early morning hours of 15 October when the Viet Cong used mortars and recoilless rifles to bombard Duc Hoa, a town about a dozen kilometers southeast of Bao Trai. The shelling killed two Americans and wounded eleven, all members of the advisory team to the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division. The fire likewise killed or injured twenty-seven South Vietnamese soldiers and twenty-one civilians. A similar bombardment of Bao Trai that same night wounded fourteen civilians.[14]

Notwithstanding the fact that the brigade confined most of its operations to the northeastern edge of the province, Colonel Emerson placed his forward tactical operations center in Bao Trai to maximize coordination with the province chief and the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division. Indeed, combined activities remained a staple of 2d Brigade operations. One such example was the Combined Lighting Initial Project. Begun in May, the experiment entailed having U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers live and

Rome plows during a land-clearing operation

[14] Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Hau Nghia Province, period ending 31 Oct 67, n.d., pp. 1–3, Historians files, CMH.

fight together for the purpose of upgrading the effectiveness of the province's Popular Forces. Two such platoons had been formed, with individual U.S. squads farmed out to various Popular Forces outposts. On 31 October, General Mearns ended the project, replacing it with two Mobile Advisory Teams drawn from 25th Division personnel. These continued to work closely with the province's territorials. Meanwhile, the 2d Brigade provided refresher training for a South Vietnamese Army battalion.

The brigade's participation in pacification entailed psychological warfare and civic action activities conducted in close coordination with CORDS and the Vietnamese. The unit sponsored youth and sports programs and helped build a high school. It also supported a major propaganda campaign in September and October to generate defectors to the *Chieu Hoi* program. By the time the effort ended, 102 Viet Cong had rallied to the government, a number CORDS officials found disappointing.[15]

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the 25th Division's support for pacification in Hau Nghia involved the counterinfrastructure campaign. By November, the Vietnamese government and CORDS advisers had established District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers (DIOCCs) in all of Hau Nghia's districts. These centers brought together all of the entities generating intelligence at the district level—be they civil, military, paramilitary, police, or intelligence—for the purpose of sharing information on the enemy. Overseeing the effort in Bao Trai was a U.S.-Vietnamese Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) committee whose primary goal was to ferret out the Viet Cong politico-military apparatus. Among its activities was the publication of a "most wanted" list. This was as much a psychological as a counterintelligence action because the names on the list were not necessarily the Viet Cong the allies most wanted to neutralize, but the ones upon which they had the most information and who were therefore the easiest to target. The idea was to announce a target and then to eliminate him as soon as possible, thereby making a disproportionate impression on both the citizenry and the Viet Cong. After the publication of the first such list in November, the allies flooded the province with over a million leaflets naming known Viet Cong. The 25th Division assigned a permanent liaison officer to the ICEX committee, while the Vietnamese National Police posted policemen to 2d Brigade units whenever they conducted cordon-and-search operations.[16]

One novel element of the 25th Division's counterinfrastructure contribution was the creation of a Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon (CRIP). Formed in the spring of 1967, the unit merged the reconnaissance platoon of the 2d Brigade's 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, with a Regional Forces intelligence platoon. Acting on information from the provincial intelligence apparatus, the CRIP specialized in rapid foot and airmobile strikes to nab enemy agents and guerrillas as soon as the news was received. In October the CRIP conducted eight airmobile raids. In one strike, the platoon acted on

[15] Ibid., pp. 1–5.

[16] Memo, Lt Gen Frederick C. Weyand for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, sub: The CORDS Field Overview for December, 1967, app. B, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

information provided by a defector to kill two Viet Cong and to capture two more along with weapons and documents.[17]

To secure the division's rear before it moved north against War Zone C, in November General Mearns ordered elements of the entire division to assist the 2d Brigade in an assault against enemy sanctuaries near the Saigon River. In addition to destroying hidden supply dumps and clearing jungle, the general hoped the sweep would draw out the *101st PAVN Regiment*, a former element of the *7th PAVN Division* that *COSVN* had detached for independent operations in the Saigon River corridor. Other targets included the Viet Cong main force units stationed in Hau Nghia—the *267th Battalion*, the *269th Battalion*, and the *1st Quyet Thang Battalion*—that might be attempting to gather in the winter rice harvest.[18]

Colonel Emerson's base-clearing mission, Operation ATLANTA, got under way on 18 November when he landed his 1st Battalion of the 27th Infantry by helicopter into the western part of the Iron Triangle, a heavily forested enemy base 310 square kilometers in area wedged between the Saigon River and Highway 13 in Binh Duong Province. The 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, from the 3d Brigade set up a blocking position along its northern rim, and units from the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division screened the Highway 13 corridor east of the Iron Triangle. Emerson's infantry battalions encountered only light resistance from Viet Cong rear service and security personnel. After those troops had secured transit points on the Saigon River, Emerson sent the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry (Mechanized), on loan from the 1st Brigade, 25th Division, and engineers equipped with Rome plows across the river by barge to begin the jungle-clearing phase of Operation ATLANTA.

Over the next three weeks, Emerson's task force cleared nearly 11,000 acres of jungle and destroyed approximately 7,000 meters of tunnels, reducing the size and effectiveness of the Viet Cong sanctuary, though not eliminating it. The Americans also seized nearly 200 tons of rice and killed 143 enemy soldiers; U.S. losses came to 18 dead and 74 wounded, mainly from mines and booby traps that the enemy used to protect his supply caches. There was no sign of the *101st PAVN Regiment*.[19]

In the first week of December, Colonel Emerson recalled the 1st and 2d Battalions, 27th Infantry, from the Iron Triangle so they could prepare for the next phase of his dry season campaign, Operation SARATOGA, a much broader operation that covered northeastern Hau Nghia, southern Tay Ninh, and western Binh Duong Provinces. Designed to interfere with the enemy's food collection effort during the winter harvest, Operation SARATOGA also aimed to neutralize enemy bases in the Filhol Plantation and the Ho Bo Woods north of Cu Chi. General Mearns also placed the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, under Emerson's control for the duration of SARATOGA, with orders to maintain

[17] Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Hau Nghia Province, pp. 1–5.

[18] MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 372–76; AAR, Opn Atlanta, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, 16 Jan 68, p. 3, box 18, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[19] AAR, Opn Atlanta, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, pp. 4, 7, 26–27.

A lieutenant kneels next to a tunnel entrance in the Iron Triangle.

security on Highway 1 between Gia Dinh Province and Tay Ninh Province, the 25th Infantry Division's supply line for Operation YELLOWSTONE.[20]

When SARATOGA got under way on 8 December, Colonel Emerson landed the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, led by Lt. Col. Ernest F. Condina, into the Ho Bo Woods and the Filhol Plantation to secure the area for a Rome plow sweep. The battalion encountered no serious resistance. That same day, the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, escorted the division engineers and their plows out of the Iron Triangle and back across the Saigon River via barges, reaching Cu Chi without incident. Four days later, the *1st Battalion, 101st PAVN Regiment*, attacked Condina's battalion as it was setting up a night defense position in the Filhol Plantation. The Americans repulsed the assault with help from artillery crews based at Cu Chi, twelve kilometers to the south. Condina's battalion sustained ten wounded while killing thirty-nine Communist soldiers. The most dangerous enemy in southern Binh Duong Province had at last come out to fight.[21]

After several days passed without further sign of the *101st*, General Mearns decided to put SARATOGA on hold so he could launch a new operation known as CAMDEN to trap the North Vietnamese unit. On 17 December,

[20] AAR, Opn Saratoga, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, n.d., p. 4, box 18, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[21] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 50, II FFV, 10–16 Dec 67, 16 Dec 67, pp. 1, 9, Historians files, CMH.

the 1st and 2d Battalions, 27th Infantry, and several companies from the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, began a sweep through the Ho Bo and Boi Loi Woods. The 3d Brigade, commanded by Col. Leonard R. Daems Jr., established a blocking force along the eastern side of the Saigon River to prevent the North Vietnamese regiment from escaping into the Trapezoid base area located just north of the Iron Triangle. Two battalions from the South Vietnamese 49th Regiment, 25th Division, also joined the hunt.[22]

CAMDEN'S first major contact occurred on the twenty-first when a battalion-size enemy force ambushed Company A, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, and several M48 tanks that were searching the Ho Bo Woods. The Americans sustained four killed and sixteen wounded in the sharp fight, while also losing two tanks destroyed. Enemy losses came to forty-two dead. The uniforms worn by the enemy suggested that they belonged to a Viet Cong local force unit, most likely the *1st Quyet Thang Battalion*, rather than the North Vietnamese *101st Regiment*.[23]

The next day on the eastern side of the river, the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, a 3d Brigade unit commanded by Lt. Col. Thomas U. Harrold, found the elusive *101st Regiment* while combing through the Trapezoid. His men stumbled onto a pair of bunker complexes manned by North Vietnamese soldiers, resulting in an all-day fight that left fourteen Americans dead and thirty-nine wounded. The enemy withdrew during the night, carrying away all but three of his dead. General Mearns spent another week searching for the *101st*, finally terminating CAMDEN on 31 December. During the operation, the allies had killed over 100 enemy soldiers, captured 29 detainees and 19 tons of rice, and destroyed another 35 tons of rice that could not be easily relocated.[24]

All of the attention devoted to degrading the enemy's main forces and bases along the Saigon River corridor in November and December necessarily pulled troops away from maintaining Hau Nghia's day-to-day security. Usually the 2d Brigade could muster only one battalion for security duties, and sometimes none. The allies had also removed two South Vietnamese Army battalions from Hau Nghia and sent them to Tay Ninh Province to participate in Operation YELLOWSTONE. When U.S. troops were available, they performed ground patrols, small airmobile raids, search-and-destroy operations, and hamlet cordon-and-search actions. One of the hamlet searches, conducted by the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, and Vietnamese police on 16 December apprehended one hundred Viet Cong suspects. Forty Kit Carson Scouts, Viet Cong defectors assigned to U.S. units as intelligence and reconnaissance personnel, assisted in most of these operations. Meanwhile, the 25th Division's military police continued to perform resource control operations with their

[22] The following section is based on ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 25th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 5–6, and ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, 12 Apr 68, p. 30. See also AAR, Opn Camden, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, n.d.; AAR, Opn Camden, 3d Bde, 25th Inf Div, 23 Jan 68; AAR, Opn Camden, 3d Squad, 4th Cav, n.d.. All in box 40, Cmd Reporting files, 18th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[23] AAR, Opn Camden, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, pp. 5–6.

[24] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, 12 Apr 68, p. 30, Historians files, CMH.

South Vietnamese counterparts, netting 100,000 piasters worth of contraband, almost a kilogram of marijuana, and fifty-three deserters and draft dodgers in December. The brigade's training and civic action activities likewise continued unabated, while the Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon vigorously harried the enemy. By year's end, the platoon had killed ninety-two Viet Cong, captured thirty-six, and destroyed twenty tunnels since its formation in the spring. Inspired by its success, other U.S. divisions created their own CRIP organizations.[25]

Security did not decline during the last quarter of 1967 as a result of the allies' decision to reduce forces in Hau Nghia, but the rate of progress slowed. If the province's advisory personnel wished more troops had been available, they took pride in the fact that Vietnamese regular and territorial forces had been able to maintain existing levels of security despite the drawdown. True, the enemy could be counted on to commit five to ten acts of terrorism per month, assassinating officials and Revolutionary Development cadre and throwing grenades into public places, but such actions were impossible to stop entirely. Clashes between allied and Communist units were rare and generally small affairs, with the South Vietnamese holding their own.

As for pacification, the winter rice harvest was bountiful thanks to the use of U.S.-financed fertilizer, a good growing season, and an expansion of the acreage farmed due to improved security. Harvest losses to the Viet Cong were moderate. All roads were considered safe to travel during the day, with the volume of commercial traffic steadily increasing. The primary agents in the battle against the Viet Cong infrastructure—the police and Hau Nghia's CIA-advised provincial reconnaissance unit—were still not functioning as well as could be hoped. During the last quarter of the year counterinfrastructure activities resulted in the death of eleven Viet Cong agents and the capture of seventeen more, with sixteen people turning themselves in to the *Chieu Hoi* program. Revolutionary Development continued, albeit behind schedule, thanks in part to the close collaboration between the advisory detachment and a fine province chief. All in all, Hau Nghia's U.S. advisers were satisfied with the amount of pacification progress at year's end.[26]

Yet just as in neighboring Binh Duong, disturbing reports of enemy troop movements began to filter into allied intelligence centers during the final days of the year. The focal point of these movements was the enemy-dominated Duc Hue District and the Vam Co Dong River. Several small clashes occurred during the last weeks of December that indicated that the enemy intend to attack the provincial capital. On the night of 12 December, the Viet Cong lobbed thirty-five mortar shells into the city, while a platoon unsuccessfully attacked a Popular Forces post north of town. Two weeks later, a CRIP patrol

[25] AAR, Opn Saratoga, 8 Dec 67–10 Mar 68, 2d Bde, 25th Inf Div, n.d., p. 11; Rpt, CORDS, Hau Nghia Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, n.d., p. 8. Both in Historians files, CMH. Memo, Weyand for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, p. 10.

[26] Monthly Progress Rpts, RD Advisory Team 81, Hau Nghia, Province, 31 Dec 67, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

located fifty Viet Cong outside Bao Trai and dispersed them by calling in artillery. Far more serious than these skirmishes were indications that the Viet Cong in Hau Nghia were refitting both their local forces and the guerrillas with AK47 assault rifles, weapons that would give them a significant advantage in any firefight with government forces. Anticipating that the enemy would soon launch his winter offensive, province officials looked forward to early January, when the two South Vietnamese battalions participating in Operation YELLOWSTONE were scheduled to return.[27]

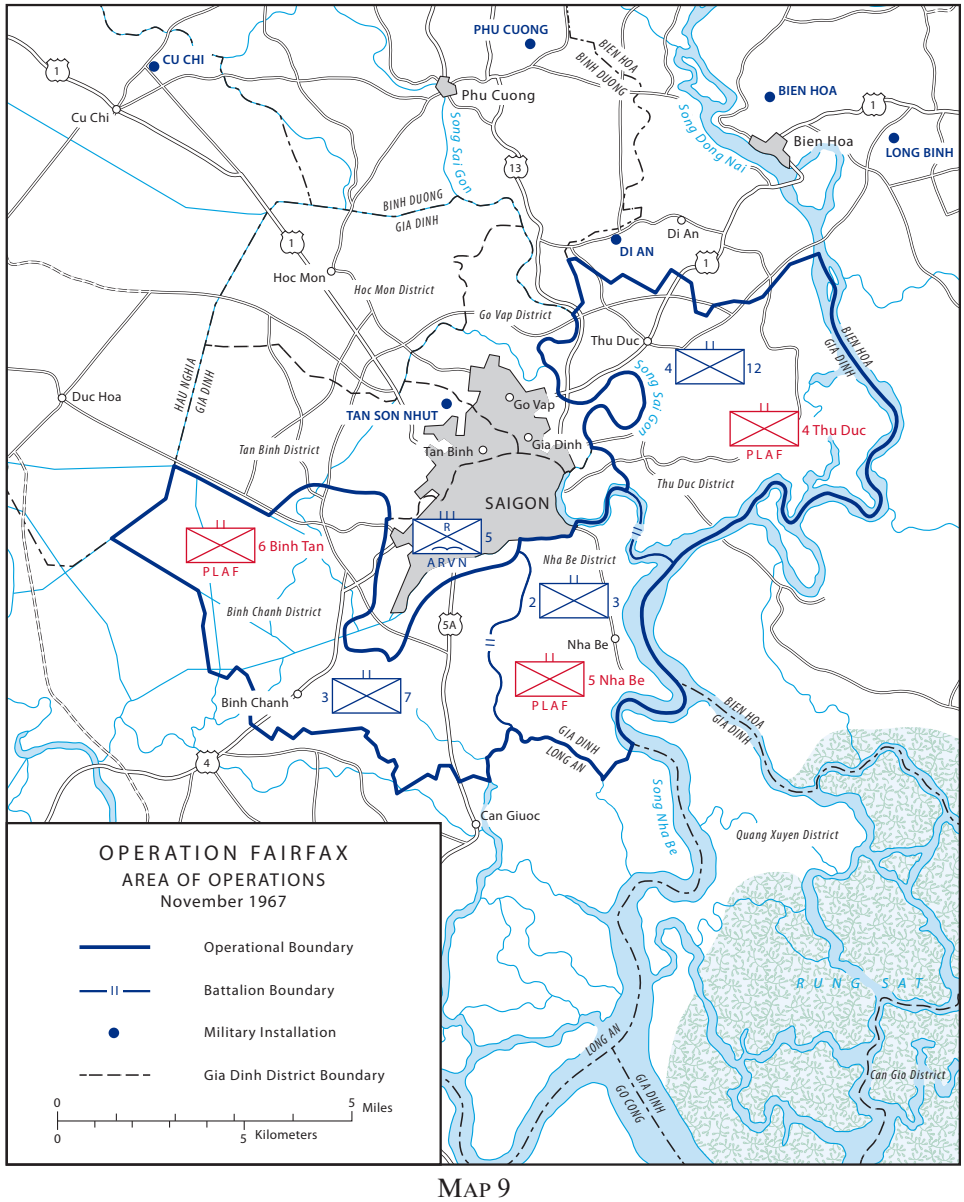
Gia Dinh: A Province in Transition

In December 1966, General Westmoreland had initiated an experiment in U.S. military support to pacification in Gia Dinh Province. The province, which surrounded Saigon, was a logical place to conduct such an experiment, for any effort to spread pacification out from the capital into the countryside in "oil-spot" fashion would necessarily have to work through Gia Dinh. In Operation FAIRFAX, Westmoreland committed three battalions drawn from the 1st and 25th Divisions to work with the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group to secure three of Gia Dinh's most troubled districts—Binh Chanh, Nha Be, and Thu Duc. The following month, MACV replaced the ad hoc force with the recently arrived 199th Infantry Brigade (Light), which remained in Gia Dinh until the closing weeks of 1967 (*Map 9*).

Between January and December 1967, the 199th Infantry Brigade assigned each of its three infantry battalions to a district where they paired off with a South Vietnamese ranger battalion. The area security mission entailed a mixture of search-and-destroy missions, daylight saturation patrols, night ambushes, roving highway checkpoints, and cordon-and-search operations. Sometimes the U.S. and South Vietnamese battalions worked together in combined operations with their respective companies integrated down to the squad level. At other times, they mixed U.S. and South Vietnamese platoons to form provisional companies. When operating with Vietnamese river

A scout dog and handler from the 44th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog)

[27] Ibid., pp. 5–7.



MAP 9

assault groups in the marshy areas south of Saigon, the brigade often brought along a team from the 49th Infantry Platoon (Scout Dog) to sniff out Viet Cong hidden in the dense vegetation. The brigade also worked extensively with the territorial forces, conducting combined operations and training.[28]

[28] AAR, Opn Fairfax/Rang Dong, 11th Inf Bde, 3 Jan 68, p. 9, box 18, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

The integration of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces extended upward through the command and control structure of the 199th Infantry Brigade. Under the command of Brig. Gen. Robert C. Forbes, the 199th Infantry Brigade headquarters contained a staff liaison team from the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group, as did the headquarters of each of the brigade's three battalions. Each district also contained an Area Security Coordination Committee consisting of the district chief and his U.S. adviser, the commander of territorial forces, the senior police officer, the commanders of the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, and officials from civilian aid agencies. The committees collated information about the Viet Cong infrastructure and performed combined planning.[29]

Briefing General Westmoreland on the status of Operation FAIRFAX in the fall of 1967, General Forbes reported that the integrated operations "have proven beneficial to U.S. and South Vietnamese forces alike," and had produced an improved security environment. When the operation had begun, the targeted districts had contained three Viet Cong battalions totaling around 1,400 soldiers who regularly conducted company-size attacks. Eight months later, that number had been halved, and allied activities had forced one of the three Viet Cong battalions to leave its assigned district for the relative safety of eastern Long An Province. The brigade's Red Catcher Training Teams had provided refresher training to all of the South Vietnamese ranger and Regional Forces units in the FAIRFAX sector, putting the Vietnamese through a two-week course followed by two weeks of combined operations with U.S. units. The number of enemy attacks had fallen from a high of twenty-four in August to just two in October, and the number of terrorism incidents had declined from thirty to two during the same period. All of the Revolutionary Development teams in the affected districts were working in their assigned hamlets, and the major roads that passed through the sector were rated as secure both day and night. Much indeed had been accomplished.[30]

Yet there were shortcomings too. Revolutionary Development had proceeded slowly due to programmatic delays, while the South Vietnamese police and intelligence services had not taken effective action to uproot the enemy infrastructure, rendering all government progress among the population tentative. Although Vietnamese soldier skills had improved under U.S. tutelage, leadership throughout the regular and territorial forces remained marginal, with Vietnamese commanders taking only a passing interest in pacification-related issues. Just as disturbing to Westmoreland, the Vietnamese had begun to exhibit "a tendency to let the Americans do the job alone." Believing that U.S. soldiers had taught the Vietnamese all they could, and concerned that the experiment in integration might be fostering dependency rather than self-reliance, the MACV commander decided it was time to move on. The lesson he drew from FAIRFAX was that it was "better

[29] MFR, MACV, 12 Oct 67, sub: MACV Commander's Conference 24 September 1967, p. 4, Encl 6, Historians files, CMH.

[30] Ibid., p. 4 (quote), Encl 6; and an. F, app. 2 and 3; Rpt, CORDS, III Corps, p. 13, attached to Memo, Weyand for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68.

*General Weyand (*left*) with General Forbes*

for South Vietnamese and American units to operate side by side in cooperation than to integrate." "The South Vietnamese in the long run simply had to learn to stand on their own," he remarked, and integration, despite its benefits, did not necessarily offer a clear path to achieving that ultimate objective. After a year of integrated operations, it was time for the Vietnamese to take full responsibility. General Weyand was confident that they were prepared to do so.[31]

Leaving the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group and the territorials to continue operations in the FAIRFAX zone, General Forbes moved his brigade from Gia Dinh to Bien Hoa Province in three stages. The 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, left Thu Duc District on 15 November, moving to Camp Frenzell-Jones. Two weeks later, the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, ended its mission in Binh Chanh District, and on 14 December the 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry, departed Nha Be District, closing out Operation FAIRFAX.[32]

The brigade's departure did not, however, end its support for pacification in Gia Dinh. The unit continued to run two-week refresher courses for Regional Forces units and to provide three of the province's eight Mobile Advisory Teams, the others being supplied by the 1st, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions. In addition to training the province's territorials and to accompanying them on missions, the teams helped all South Vietnamese forces conduct their own in-place training and provided civic action assistance to villages, making them in the words of province adviser, "a valuable asset."

[31] Quotes from Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 207. MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 31–59, 95–162, 327–90. Rpts, CORDS, Gia Dinh Province, period ending 30 Nov 67, pp. 5–7; CORDS, Gia Dinh Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, pp. 1, 11. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[32] AAR, Opn Fairfax/Rang Dong, pp. 1–3.

The Viet Cong recognized their worth as well, attacking two of the teams in December without success.[33]

As in Hau Nghia, CORDS advisers attributed much of the progress that had occurred in Gia Dinh during the year to the presence of U.S. combat units. They likewise expressed satisfaction that security remained relatively stable after the 199th Infantry Brigade had departed. By year's end, the government continued to control all the people and places it had dominated during FAIRFAX, and it looked as though the province would complete the 1967 Revolutionary Development campaign in January 1968, although CORDs officials worried that in their rush to meet the goal their counterparts were sacrificing quantity for quality, a recurring problem in Vietnamese pacification schemes. True, the number of Viet Cong incidents and acts of terror increased noticeably in November and December, and agents reported seeing a growing number of enemy soldiers, most notably sappers, moving through the province. These activities, together with the withdrawal of the 199th Infantry Brigade, had led to a decline in the population's sense of security. Concern, rather than alarm, characterized the reaction of the senior province adviser, who regarded the developments as entirely predictable. Enemy activity always increased with the onset of the dry season, and it was natural for the Viet Cong to test government security forces once U.S. combat units had left. What the enemy's plans held in store remained to be seen.[34]

East of Saigon

One of the factors that contributed to the termination of Operation FAIRFAX was Weyand's need to adjust his dispositions in eastern III Corps. By the fall of 1967, Weyand had four maneuver units—the 1st Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, the 11th Armored Cavalry, the 1st Australian Task Force, and the Royal "Queen's Cobra" Thai Regiment—assisting the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division in securing the four provinces east of Saigon (Bien Hoa, Phuoc Tuy, Long Khanh, and Binh Tuy). However, since the II Field Force commander planned to send the 11th Armored Cavalry to the northwest in December to support the borderland offensive, he needed to shuffle his forces to fill the impending void. Moving the 199th Infantry Brigade eastward would help compensate for the loss of the cavalry.

Eastern III Corps was a large theater. Stretching from the upper limits of the Mekong Delta to the lower spur of the Central Highlands, the region measured some 130 kilometers at its widest point and a similar distance from north to south. More than half of the 725,000 people who resided there lived within 50 kilometers of Saigon, principally in central and southern Bien Hoa Province, western Long Khanh Province, and western Phuoc Tuy Province, where the flat terrain and moderately wet climate could support rice farming. A

[33] Rpt, CORDS, Gia Dinh Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, p. 12.
[34] Ibid., pp. 9–10.

smaller percentage of the population lived in fishing hamlets along the southeastern coast, or in the dry interior districts of eastern III Corps. Relatively few people lived in northern Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, and Binh Tuy Provinces, which were blanketed with triple-canopy forests and low rolling hills.

Of the four eastern provinces, Bien Hoa demanded the lion's share of General Weyand's attention. An estimated 287,000 of its 386,000 inhabitants lived in contested areas, while another 55,000 people resided in Viet Cong territory. Not even the capital city was safe at all hours. The province chief was notoriously ineffective, as was the principal South Vietnamese Army unit, the 48th Regiment. The corps commander, General Khang, relied on his mobile reserves, a pair of South Vietnamese ranger battalions, to protect Bien Hoa City and his III Corps headquarters.

Owing to the marginal security situation, Weyand retained a sizable force in Bien Hoa to defend three installations. Bien Hoa Air Base, located on the eastern bank of the Dong Nai River some thirty kilometers northeast of downtown Saigon, contained numerous aviation units. Two kilometers farther east of Highway 1, the massive complex known as Long Binh contained the main logistical facilities of U.S. Army, Vietnam, as well as the II Field Force headquarters, Camp Frenzell-Jones, and the headquarters of the 12th Aviation Group. Finally, the 9th Infantry Division maintained its headquarters and rear support area at Camp Martin Cox, also known as Bearcat, located ten kilometers southeast of Long Binh via Highway 15.

Several Viet Cong bases located on the fringes of Bien Hoa Province posed a constant threat to Weyand's facilities. The northern districts of Tan Uyen and Cong Thanh lay within the southern edge of War Zone D, while a battalion-size sapper force known as *Group 10* sometimes operated in the marshy, southernmost district of Nhon Trach, where it harassed cargo vessels that made their way up the Dong Nai River to off-loading points near Long Binh. Just as disconcerting, southeastern Long Thanh District contained a portion of the Hat Dich Secret Zone, a favorite sanctuary of the *274th Regiment* of the *5th PLAF Division*.

During the preceding wet season campaign, General Weyand had relied mainly on Maj. Gen. George C. O'Connor and his 9th Infantry Division to keep the enemy at bay in northern and central Bien Hoa Province. General O'Connor in turn had relied on his 1st Brigade, which was stationed at Camp Martin Cox. By relocating the 199th Infantry Brigade to northern Bien Hoa, Weyand was able to shift the 1st Brigade, 9th Division, into neighboring Long Khanh Province. This move in turn would eventually free the Long Khanh–based 11th Armored Cavalry for service in northern III Corps (*see Map 10*).

As a few dozen soldiers from the 199th Infantry Brigade continued to work with Gia Dinh's security forces, the rest of the brigade turned its attention to its new assignment. The mission had two components. The first, Operation UNIONTOWN, was designed to prevent enemy units based in War Zone D—especially those armed with 122-mm. rockets that had a maximum range of almost 9,000 meters—from attacking the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex. General Forbes assigned to UNIONTOWN the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, in eastern Tan Uyen District on the north side of the Dong Nai River, and the 2d

An aerial view of the logistical facility at Long Binh

Battalion, 3d Infantry, in Cong Thanh District on the south side of the river. General Forbes deployed his remaining unit, the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, to the second component, Operation MANCHESTER. Its role was to interdict the Communist supply channel that led from War Zone D to southern Binh Duong Province, following a network of foot and ox trails that ran parallel to the Dong Nai River through western Tan Uyen District. The battalion would also help screen the southern edge of War Zone D, thereby permitting one battalion from the South Vietnamese 48th Regiment, headquartered in Tan Uyen District town, to guard the hamlets that lined the river.[35]

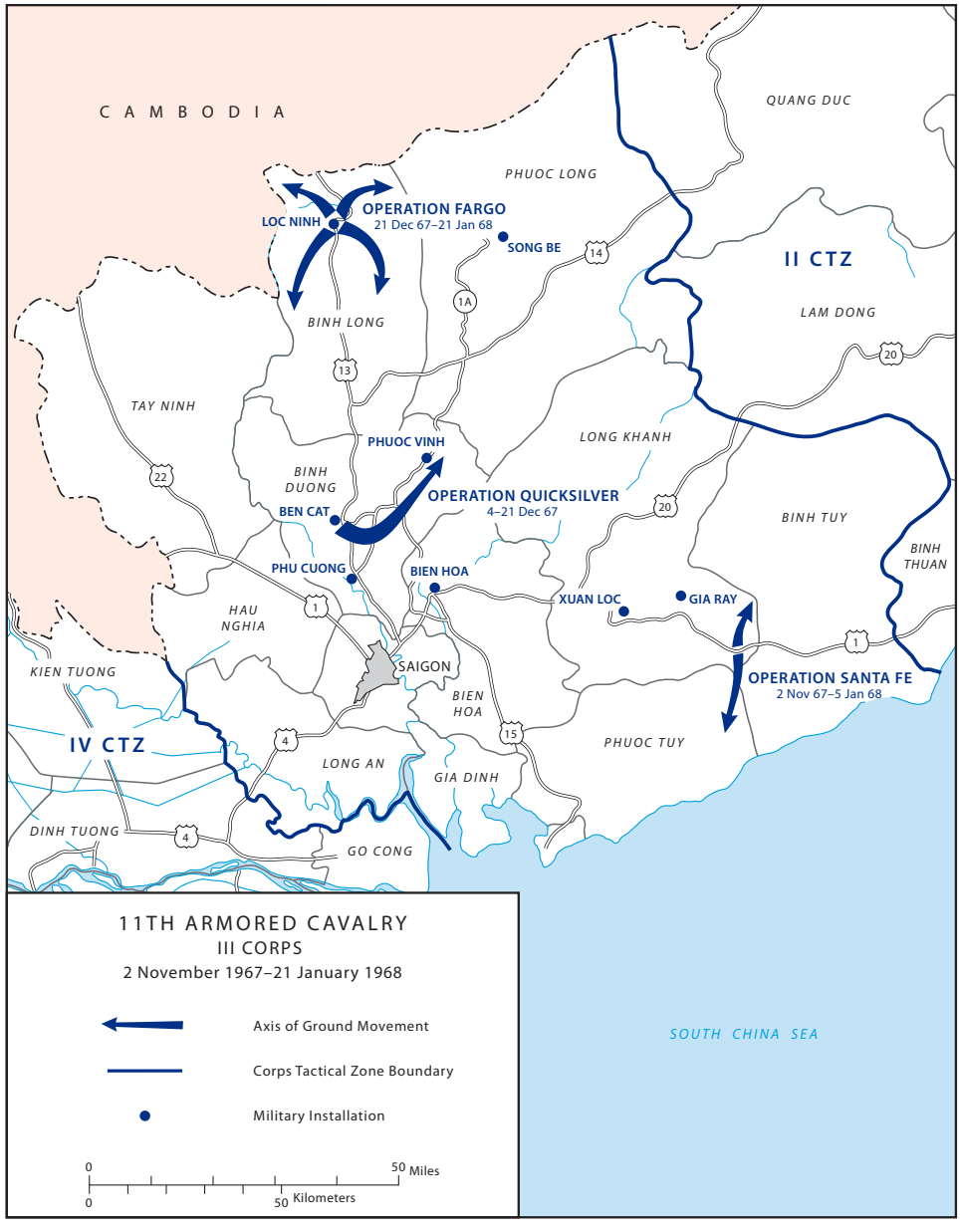
The principal enemy threat in the MANCHESTER zone was the *Dong Nai Regiment*, a unit that *COSVN* formed in the summer of 1967 by merging local Viet Cong battalions with a large number of North Vietnamese infiltrators. The regiment's mission was to defend the supply line that ran between War Zone D and the capital region. General Forbes was eager to come to grips with the unit, which had recently attacked Tan Uyen town and the base camp of the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 48th Regiment, killing several dozen South Vietnamese soldiers between 22 and 25 November.[36]

Forbes assumed control of the UNIONTOWN/MANCHESTER sector from the 9th Infantry Division on 1 December. Three days later, the commander of the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, Lt. Col. William S. Schroeder, landed his unit from Long Binh to a large field several kilometers north of Tan Uyen town. A flight of CH–47 helicopters also delivered Battery C of the 2d Battalion, 40th Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers. Other aircraft brought in bulldozers and a large amount of building material, including prefabricated bunkers, to construct a new outpost called Firebase NASHUA.[37]

[35] AAR, Opn Uniontown/Manchester, 199th Light Inf Bde, 8 Feb 68, p. 8, box 40, Historians Background files, 18th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[36] Rpt, RD Advisory Team 5, Bien Hoa Province, 30 Nov 67, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.

[37] Ibid., an. F, p. 3.



MAP 10

The soldiers encountered a vastly different environment from the one they had known in Gia Dinh. Their previous sector had been flat, inundated, and densely populated, a checkerboard of farms and hamlets crisscrossed with waterways and roads. The area north, east, and west of Firebase NASHUA was essentially a wilderness. Thick vegetation covered most of the terrain. Large anthills that the sun had baked to concrete-like hardness dotted the landscape.

General O'Connor (foreground on the right) *and his staff listen as the commander of the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment, Col. Sanan Yudhasaraprasit, gives a speech following his arrival at Bearcat.*

There were few streams capable of inhibiting movement, but also few roads. Most of the 15,000 people in Tan Uyen clustered near the district town or along the river. What little intelligence the 199th Infantry Brigade possessed about its new sector came mainly from aerial reconnaissance and long-range patrols; no longer would there be a South Vietnamese police or military security service information network to draw upon.

As it happened, the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, did not have long to wait before the enemy made himself known. On the early morning of 6 December, a Viet Cong mortar barrage pummeled Firebase NASHUA, killing or wounding several Americans. At daybreak, two platoons from Company A and a scout dog team searched for the enemy gunners, believed to be southeast of the firebase, while Company C swept the area to the north in case the Viet Cong force had retired toward War Zone D.

That afternoon, the two-platoon force was moving through an area of thick undergrowth several kilometers from NASHUA when it fell victim to a devastating ambush. Unknown to the patrol, it had walked into the middle of a concealed bunker complex defended by the *Dong Nai Regiment's D800 Battalion*. The intense fire killed or wounded more than a dozen U.S. soldiers in the opening moments. The survivors sought cover and radioed for help. Colonel Schroeder ordered Company C to race to the site. He also dispatched some armored personnel carriers from Troop D of the 17th Cavalry that were operating nearby, and flew in a company from the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, which was on thirty-minute standby at Long Binh. Assisted by helicopter gunships from the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, the reinforcements extracted the survivors from Company A before night fell. The cost had been high. A total of twenty-five U.S. soldiers had been killed and another eighty-two wounded.

Soldiers of the 199th Infantry Brigade crossing a stream during a mission

Two M113s had fallen victim to enemy mines. The enemy left behind sixty-seven dead. *COSVN* was clearly unwilling to let the 199th Infantry Brigade operate so close to War Zone D without a fight.[38]

In the week that followed, General Forbes reinforced his position in Tan Uyen. He deployed the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, into the eastern part of the district, where it established Firebase KEANE. He also placed a battery of 155-mm. self-propelled howitzers from the 2d Battalion, 35th Artillery, at Firebase NASHUA. Most of the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, moved from Di An to Tay Ninh City that month to participate in Operation YELLOWSTONE, but one troop of helicopter gunships remained at Di An to support UNIONTOWN/MANCHESTER. Forbes also gained operational control over Company F, 51st Infantry, a long-range reconnaissance patrol unit that had recently deployed to South Vietnam to operate with II Field Force.

On 19 December, a team from Company F, 51st Infantry, spotted troops from the *Dong Nai Regiment* while patrolling the southern edge of War Zone D. Colonel Schroeder sent a company from his 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, by helicopter to investigate. When his men received fire at the landing zone, Schroeder sent additional troops from the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, assisted by helicopter gunships from the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry. The

[38] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 199th Inf Bde, n.d., p. 26; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 49, II FFV, 3–9 Dec 67, 9 Dec 67, p. 9. Both in Historians files, CMH.

enemy eventually withdrew back into War Zone D, leaving behind forty-nine dead. U.S. losses came to seven killed and thirteen wounded. Eight days later, the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, engaged a company-size unit southeast of NASHUA, claiming thirty more enemy dead for a loss of three Americans killed and twenty-eight wounded. The *Dong Nai Regiment* was quickly proving itself to be the most dangerous opponent the 199th Infantry Brigade had yet encountered.

By that point, the 199th Infantry Brigade had sustained a total of 35 killed and 126 wounded in its first month of operations in the UNIONTOWN/MANCHESTER zone, a far higher casualty rate than the brigade had experienced in Gia Dinh Province. Forbes' brigade acquired some hard-won lessons about operating in a sector where the enemy had the time and resources to build extensive underground bunkers, something the 199th Infantry Brigade had not seen in Gia Dinh, and fighting a highly disciplined main force regiment instead of local Viet Cong units. Nevertheless, the 199th Brigade had accomplished its primary mission. Not a single rocket or mortar landed within the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex during December, and the *Dong Nai Regiment* kept its distance from Tan Uyen town after the U.S. soldiers moved into the sector.[39]

Opening Highway 1

As the 199th Infantry Brigade moved into northern Bien Hoa Province to defend Bien Hoa–Long Binh, the 9th Infantry Division turned its full attention to the security and Revolutionary Development support mission known as Operation RILEY in central Bien Hoa and western Long Khanh Provinces. Begun on 22 July 1967, General O'Connor relied on Col. Harry O. Williams and his 1st Brigade to spearhead the assignment. In addition to the three infantry battalions in the 1st Brigade—the 2d and 4th Battalions, 39th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry (Mechanized)—the division's reconnaissance element, the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, also played a prominent role in Operation RILEY. O'Connor typically retained a battalion-size mix of standard infantry companies and mechanized troops organized as Task Force FORSYTH near Camp Martin Cox to defend the 9th Infantry Division's base camp and to provide a reaction force in case Long Binh came under attack. His remaining forces divided their time between road security patrols, armed reconnaissance sweeps through the rubber plantations and forested areas in the RILEY zone, and a variety of civic action and engineer support missions.[40]

One of the ways in which the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, supported the Revolutionary Development program was by establishing Improvement Action Teams to assist the Regional and Popular Forces in Bien Hoa Province. The Improvement Action Teams surveyed all of the territorial outposts in the province to determine what upgrades they required, how best to assist them when they came under attack, and the most efficient way of delivering supplies

[39] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 199th Inf Bde, p. 26.
[40] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, p. 28.

to each station. The 9th Division provided most of the engineer support and materials needed to bring each outpost to acceptable standards of defensibility and livability. Some problems were redressed through creative methods. Many Regional Forces outposts were surrounded by thick grass or vegetation that the troops inside refused to clear, fearing they would step on one of the unmarked landmines that had been buried around the outposts at some previous time. The 9th Infantry Division engineers solved the problem by using flamethrower-equipped M113s to burn away the vegetation at a safe distance. Likewise, the 9th Infantry Division conducted a civic aid operation known as KANSAS that provided food and building materials to communities in Bien Hoa Province at the request of local authorities.[41]

General O'Connor's principal partner in the RILEY sector was the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division, headquartered at Xuan Loc, the capital of Long Khanh Province, located on Highway 1 due east of Long Binh some sixty kilometers from Saigon. U.S. advisers regarded the division commander, Brig. Gen. Do Ke Giai, as a "conscientious commander [who] demands high performance standards," but a year in charge had done little to improve the performance of his unit, widely considered to be the worst in the South Vietnamese Army. O'Connor provided several Military Advisory Teams to help train the South Vietnamese, and the 54th Artillery Group maintained its headquarters and several medium artillery batteries in Xuan Loc to give Giai's division extra firepower. A pair of II Field Force units further stiffened defenses south of Xuan Loc. The 11th Armored Cavalry maintained its main base, Camp Blackhorse, a dozen kilometers south of Xuan Loc on provincial Highway 2, where it conducted a regional security mission known as Operation KITTYHAWK under the control of the 9th Infantry Division. Another twenty-five kilometers to the south via Highway 2, the 1st Australian Task Force operated out of its camp at Ba Ria to protect Phuoc Tuy Province.[42]

The traditional enemy threats in the RILEY and KITTYHAWK sectors came from the *274th* and *275th Regiments* of the *5th PLAF Division* and the *D440* and *D445 Local Force Battalions*. The *5th Division* maintained two main base camps in the region. The Hat Dich Secret Zone was located some fifty kilometers east of Saigon at the intersection of Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, and Phouc Tuy Provinces. It was flat and covered by wild forests. The smaller May Tao Secret Zone was located another forty kilometers to its east at the intersection of Long Khanh, Phouc Tuy, and Binh Tuy Provinces. It too was heavily forested but contained at its center a hill that rose approximately 500 meters above the surrounding countryside. The two base areas received most of their military supplies from War Zone D, which in turn received its supplies along the Adams Trail from Cambodia. Being at the end of that long chain meant that

[41] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, 30 Jan 1968, p. 14; and pp. 1, 4, Encl 9 to ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, 30 Jan 68, boxes 40–41, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[42] Quote from Msg, Lt Gen Frederick C. Weyand HOA 1539 to Westmoreland, 21 Oct 67, p. 3, Historians files, CMH. ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, pp. 15–17.

the Hat Dich and May Tao base areas had trouble building up their reserves, which somewhat restricted enemy operations in southeastern III Corps.

Before he shifted the 11th Armored Cavalry to Binh Long to support the offensive near the Cambodian border, General Weyand wanted to take a swing at the *5th PLAF Division* and its logistical system in eastern III Corps. At his instructions, General O'Connor laid plans for an operation known as SANTA FE to neutralize the *5th Division*'s base in the May Tao Secret Zone and to secure Highway 1 from Xuan Loc to the II Corps boundary, a distance of sixty kilometers. Once secure, U.S. engineers would repair the road and replace eleven bridges that the Viet Cong had destroyed in 1962. The road-opening mission was part of a larger campaign initiated by the South Vietnamese to restore an unbroken highway connection from Saigon to the Demilitarized Zone. The restoration of Highway 1 would also give the government better access to the civilian population in eastern III Corps, and give the civilian population better access to the commercial markets in Saigon.

The 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, would spearhead Operation SANTA FE, reinforced by elements of the 1st Australian Task Force, the 11th Armored Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division. During the two-month operation, the 9th Division would depend on its 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, to continue security missions in central Bien Hoa Province, and the

The advance element of the 1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, arrives at Tan Son Nhut.

An M48 tank from the 11th Armored Cavalry on a search-and-destroy mission

newly arrived Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment, stationed at Camp Martin Cox, to support the Revolutionary Development program in southern Bien Hoa.

Operation SANTA FE got under way on 3 November when the 1st Brigade, 9th Division, loaded the entire 4th Battalion, 39th Infantry, aboard six helicopter companies at Long Binh. The air assault required careful preparation; never before had II Field Force attempted to airlift a complete battalion at one time and deliver it to a single landing zone. The mission went flawlessly. The soldiers wore colored scarves to denote which of the four companies they belonged to. The colors helped the air crews load their correct passengers, and when the helicopters delivered the troops to a landing zone just north of the May Tao Secret Zone, each helicopter company touching down one after another, all of the nearly 800 soldiers put their boots on the ground within the space of just three minutes. Gunships from Troop D, 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, prowled overhead to provide suppressive fire if needed, but the entire landing occurred without opposition.[43]

Pushing out from the landing zone, the soldiers secured the four-kilometer gap between Highway 1 and the Mao Tao Secret Zone, finding no sign of the *5th Division*. Around 1500 that afternoon, the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the forward headquarters of the 1st Brigade arrived at the location via Highway 1, making the journey without incident. Several U.S. engineer and truck companies followed soon after to establish Firebase WILDCAT, the forward supply area and operating base that would serve the brigade for the remainder of SANTA FE.

[43] AAR, Opn Santa Fe, 1st Bde, 9th Inf Div, 25 Apr 68, p. 9, in ORLLS, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

In the weeks that followed, the allies saw few signs of the enemy. The 11th Armored Cavalry and the 1st Australian Task Force placed blocking elements around the May Tao Secret Zone as the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, swept the northern rim of the zone, but only a handful of rear service troops contested the invaders. By the time the 11th Armored Cavalry withdrew from SANTA FE in early December, it was clear to General O'Connor that the headquarters of the *5th Division* and the *275th Regiment* had already gone north to participate in the fighting around Song Be. The latest intelligence suggested that part of the *274th Regiment* had taken refuge in the Hat Dich area of southern Bien Hoa Province, and the remainder had withdrawn to War Zone D in northern Long Khanh. Between 3 November and 1 December, the 9th Division located and destroyed approximately 1,000 fortifications and cleared nearly 8,900 acres of forestland along the northern rim of the May Tao Secret Zone. In the process, the allies killed a total of 126 Viet Cong while losing 6 killed and 35 wounded.[44]

During the final month of SANTA FE, the allies secured the stretch of Highway 1 between Firebase WILDCAT and the II Corps boundary, building several temporary bases along the way and establishing a string of permanent Regional Forces outposts. At the same time, troops from the 15th and 86th Engineer Battalions set about repairing or replacing bridges, resurfacing damaged pavement, and removing the vegetation on either side of the highway to an average depth of one hundred meters. The engineers also repaired several branch roads that led to towns on the coast of southern Binh Tuy Province. A few days before SANTA FE ended on 5 January 1968, a military convoy carrying South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and a group of reporters took a highly publicized journey along Highway 1 from Saigon to the Demilitarized Zone, the first time in nearly a decade that such a trip was possible.[45]

Enemy activity remained low during December in the 1st Brigade area of operations. The only large-scale attack took place in southern Bien Hoa Province on the night of 20–21 December when a reinforced battalion from the *274th Regiment* attacked a company night position held by the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment. The outnumbered Thai soldiers fought off a determined but disorganized assault that lasted several hours, killing sixty-eight Viet Cong while sustaining a loss of six killed and eighteen wounded. A Viet Cong soldier taken prisoner during the battle told his interrogators that morale in the *274th Regiment* was at rock bottom, with many troops suffering from hunger, fear of allied air raids, and untreated medical ailments. There was even less enemy activity in Long Khanh Province during December. When the 11th Armored Cavalry departed for northern III Corps at the end of the month to support the border offensive, the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, moved from Camp Martin Cox to Camp Blackhorse to continue Operation KITTYHAWK. At the conclusion of SANTA FE on 5 January 1968, the 1st Brigade of the 9th

[44] Ibid., p. 5.

[45] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, p. 32; Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968–1973, p. 337.*

Infantry Division returned to central Bien Hoa to resume Operation RILEY, leaving the 1st Australian Task Force to continue its security mission in Phuoc Tuy Province and the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division to keep an eye on the newly opened section of Highway 1.[46]

The 1st Brigade's return to Bien Hoa Province was most welcome. Bien Hoa had made little progress on the pacification front during 1967. Viet Cong strength had combined with inefficiencies in the South Vietnamese civil bureaucracy to weaken allied efforts to spread government control. Some U.S. soldiers in Bien Hoa city had not helped the situation, creating disturbances at bars, reaching out from moving vehicles to snatch hats off pedestrians, and throwing smoke grenades into peaceful crowds.[47] Nonetheless, the senior CORDS representative in Bien Hoa, a civilian, stated that what progress had occurred had "all been the result of unilateral U.S. actions."[48] Indeed,

> CORDS has had to increasingly rely on the resources, skills, and capabilities of resident U.S. military units. These units have, without exception, effectively filled the gaps and their efforts have succeeded in reducing the critical road situation that has been worsening throughout the years. Their action in many other areas has been highly commendable and CORDS Bien Hoa (as well as the government of Vietnam itself) owes a great deal to these units and their commanders who have unselfishly devoted themselves to furthering pacification.[49]

Even the misbehavior of some Americans had largely been offset "in the minds of the people by the frequent military civic action projects." Although the situation was far from perfect, by the end of December 1967 the CORDS adviser reported that, thanks to U.S. efforts, "the average man enjoys a greater feeling of security today than he did last year or even last month." But it remained up to South Vietnamese authorities to build on this achievement to create true, lasting progress in pacification, security, and governance, and this, regrettably, they had not yet done.[50]

Long An Province

Much like the other U.S. brigades that ringed Saigon to the west, north, and east, the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, guarded the southern approaches to Saigon in Long An Province. The brigade's mission in Operation ENTERPRISE was "to achieve military pacification by destroying the enemy; eliminating his infrastructure; denying him use of lines of communications; and extending

[46] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Bde, 9th Inf Div, 15 Feb 68, p. 18, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[47] Rpts, CORDS, Bien Hoa Province, period ending 30 Nov 67, pp. 1, 5, 11; CORDS, Bien Hoa Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, pp. 1–6. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[48] Rpt, CORDS, Bien Hoa Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, p. 1.

[49] Ibid., p. 4.

[50] Ibid., pp. 6, 1, 3, 7 (quote).

government of Vietnam control through the support of Revolutionary Development." It was not an easy assignment, for Long An's seven districts were some of the least secure in all of III Corps. That was of particular concern to the allies because the province was the gateway to the Mekong Delta. The population of Saigon relied on food purchased in the delta and shipped north on roads and canals that passed through Long An. Of particular importance was Highway 4, which ran through the province on its 350-kilometer journey from Saigon to An Xuyen Province at the delta's southernmost tip. Long An produced around 280,000 tons of rice each year, representing over one-third of the total harvest in III Corps. The allies could ill afford to leave the province in enemy hands.[51]

Several factors made Long An, whose name meant "peaceful dragon," a challenging environment. Two winding rivers, the Vam Co Tay and the Vam Co Dong, flowed in a southeasterly direction through the province from the Parrot's Beak region of Cambodia to the Saigon River estuary, giving the enemy easy access to supply bases in Cambodia that were only fifty kilometers from the capital. Disused sugar cane and pineapple plantations lined the Vam Co Dong, offering year-round concealment to the *267th, 269th*, and *6th Binh Tan Battalions* from *Sub-Region 2*. In the eastern part of Long An Province, the *506th*, *508th*, *5th Nha Be*, and *Phu Loi II Battalions* from *Sub-Region 3* used the numerous streams that crisscrossed the swampy area for mobility and concealment, moving stealthily during the night in shallow-hulled sampans and hiding by day in the thick palms that grew along every creek. Last but not least, the enemy enjoyed active or passive support from more than half of the 480,000 people who lived in Long An. Over the past seven years, Viet Cong organizers had built a strong base of support by redistributing land from wealthy absentee owners to poor local farmers, by exploiting popular resentment against corrupt officials, and by resisting the government's attempt to resettle communities who lived in remote and poorly guarded areas. As a result, the authority of the South Vietnamese government did not extend far beyond the district towns and a few strategic hamlets on Highway 4.[52]

At the start of November 1967, the commander of the 3d Brigade, 9th Division, Col. George W. Everett, controlled two infantry battalions and one mechanized battalion in the ENTERPRISE sector. He maintained his primary base camp near Tan An, the provincial capital, some thirty-five kilometers southwest of Saigon at the intersection of Highway 4 and the Vam Co Tay River. The Tan An camp also contained the main U.S. airfield in Long An Province, where Everett kept several U.S. Huey helicopter companies for air-mobile operations.

[51] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 30 Jan 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH; "Route 4, Mekong Delta to Saigon," in Rpt, OSAD (Systems Analysis), Southeast Asia Analysis, Dec 67, p. 43, Historians files, CMH.

[52] AAR, Opn Enterprise, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 3, 8, box 11, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 174–75.

Members of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, position their M113s.

The 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, operated from Tan Tru, a district town some seven kilometers east of Tan An. From a nearby base at An Nhut Tan, one company from the battalion patrolled the Vam Co Dong River in shallow-draft patrol boats known as Boston Whalers, equipped with 85-horsepower outboard motors and capable of carrying a dozen soldiers with their equipment.

Everett's second maneuver unit, the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, was based eleven kilometers northeast of An Nhut Tan in the district town of Rach Kien. The battalion stationed one of its companies in the town of Can Giuoc, eight kilometers to the east, and a second company at a former French post, fifteen kilometers southeast of Rach Kien, where the Vam Co Dong merged with the Saigon River. The battalion helped Vietnamese forces maintain control of provincial Highway 5A, which passed through Can Giuoc District, connecting Saigon with Go Cong Province in IV Corps.

The third major element of the 3d Brigade, the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry (Mechanized), was headquartered in the district town of Binh Phuoc some ten kilometers southeast of Tan An. The unit was responsible for patrolling Highway 4 between Saigon and Dong Tam. It also provided a mechanized platoon for each of the supply convoys that traveled daily between Long Binh and Tan An. A 105-mm. howitzer battery from the brigade's 2d Battalion, 4th Artillery, supported each of the battalions.

The commander of the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division, Brig. Gen. Phan Trong Chinh, maintained two regiments in Long An Province, leaving them under the control of a deputy commander so that he could focus

on operations in Hau Nghia and Tay Ninh Provinces. The South Vietnamese 46th Regiment was headquartered in Can Giuoc, a district town in the eastern part of the province, and the South Vietnamese 50th Infantry Regiment was headquartered in Ben Luc, a district town twelve kilometers northeast of Tan An. Backing those regular forces were the usual assortment of Regional and Popular Forces troops assigned to district and village posts, while Revolutionary Development teams worked in those hamlets targeted for pacification.[53]

Since commencing Operation ENTERPRISE on 13 February 1967, the 3d Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division had helped the South Vietnamese establish a viable pacification program. In early 1967, the government had controlled less than a quarter of the population and only 4 percent of the province was considered physically secure. The enemy had held the initiative, conducting battalion-size attacks on a regular basis, and controlling all routes of communications by night. By the end of summer, however, the 3d Brigade's hard-hitting search-and-destroy missions had reduced the enemy's strength and freedom of movement. Four Viet Cong battalions that had routinely operated in the heart of Long An now spent most of their time along the eastern and western fringes of the province, dispersed into squad- and platoon-sized elements to more easily avoid detection. The South Vietnamese government had established a Revolutionary Development zone along the northeastern edge of Long An that had linked the government-controlled hamlets that lined Highways 4 and 5A so as to create a barrier to enemy forces attempting to approach Gia Dinh and Saigon from the south.[54]

The 3d Brigade used several techniques tailored for Long An's environment. Its two standard infantry battalions conducted regular "jitterbug" missions throughout the province. These entailed putting several companies onto helicopters, which then flew from place to place, touching down long enough for a foot patrol to search a nearby tree line or vegetated canal, before heading off to another destination if no sign of the enemy was found. The flat, open farmland that covered much of the province offered ready-made landing zones when the rice fields were not inundated, as did the web of secondary roads. The 3d Brigade also made frequent use of night ambushes, inserting platoons on foot or by boat at likely enemy crossing points or staging areas.

To help improve the performance of South Vietnamese forces and to benefit from their local knowledge, 30 percent of the brigade's operations were combined actions. The Americans found that operations were most profitable from the pedagogical standpoint when troops were integrated at a low level. Thus, combined operations at the squad level were more productive than at the battalion level.[55]

The increased security on the roads and waterways created as a result of allied operations produced a greater willingness by residents to provide intelli-

[53] AAR, Opn Enterprise, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 3–4, 8.

[54] Ibid., pp. 73–74.

[55] ORLL, 1 Aug 67–31 Oct 67, II FFV, n.d., p. 27, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Memo, 9th Inf Div for CG, USARV, 22 Feb 68, sub: Senior Officer's Debriefing Report, p. 9, Historians files, CMH.

A soldier looks through an AN/PVS-2 Starlight scope mounted on top of an M16 rifle.

gence. Commercial traffic increased as well. The task of protecting that traffic fell largely on the mechanized 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, particularly with regard to the two main thoroughfares, Highways 4 and 5A. Convoys escorted by U.S. soldiers and military policemen traveled at night because there was no civilian traffic to impede their progress. The mechanized unit also ran frequent "roadrunner" missions by day and night, sending out an infantry platoon and five M113 armored personnel carriers to travel up and down Highway 4 looking for enemy sappers. The vehicles sometimes raced along at top speed to catch Viet Cong mine layers before they could hide. At other times, an infantry squad would hop off the moving vehicles and set an ambush for sappers who might appear when the sound of the carriers had died away.

In late 1967, both sides decided to escalate the battle for Highway 4. CORDS Director Robert Komer declared control of the road vital, both for Vietnam's prosperity and as a way to deny the Viet Cong access to the ongoing rice harvest, and allied planners made safe travel along the highway an objective in the 1967–1968 campaign plan. Conversely, Communist officials in the upper delta ordered a renewed effort against Highway 4 so as to "smash [America's] plan of pacifying the Mekong Delta." In addition to ordering combat operations, they set quotas for communities located near the route to lay mines and erect barriers.[56]

On the nights of 24–27 October, enemy troops used explosives and shovels to crater the highway in almost fifty places between My Tho in

[56] Quote from "Route 4, Mekong Delta to Saigon," p. 44; J. Mintz, "Game Warden, Mobile Riverine Force, and Revolutionary Development Operations in the Delta," INS Research Contribution No. 26 (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Naval Studies, Center for Naval Analysis, June 1968), p. 12.

Dinh Tuong Province and Saigon, though only one site on the road was closed for more than four hours. Viet Cong sappers also destroyed several bridges, cutting traffic in those areas for a day or two until U.S. engineers could erect Bailey bridges as temporary replacements. Guerrilla units attacked Regional and Popular Forces outposts, and Viet Cong gunners shelled or mortared several towns, including the capital of Kien Hoa Province, Ben Tre.[57]

To better protect the nightly convoys between Long Binh and My Tho, the commander of the 5th Battalion, Lt. Col. William B. Steele, obtained a pair of M42 Dusters, each mounting a pair of rapid-fire 40-mm. cannon, and additional jeeps equipped with powerful searchlights. He also received extra AN/PVS-2 night-vision scopes for his riflemen. In addition, Steele began sending a full mechanized company instead of a single platoon with each convoy. As a further measure, he received a pair of helicopter gunships to escort any convoy that made an emergency daytime run.[58]

The enhanced measures soon took effect. Colonel Steele's battalion eliminated several mine-laying teams in the last week of October and neutralized favorite ambush spots with stay-behind patrols and intermittent artillery strikes. The local guerrillas who carried out most of the sniping missions soon faded away, as did the civilian labor gangs who dug up the roads. The frequency of enemy incidents diminished, and by the middle of November the flow of traffic in Long An had returned to normal.[59]

Although hostile actions along Highway 4 receded, elsewhere in the province the enemy stepped up his activities during the final two months of the year. Most of these episodes involved acts of harassment by fire, ambushes, raids, and terror conducted on a small scale. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces responded by increasing the number of night ambushes and patrols. By December, on any given night Colonel Everett had between one-third and one-half of his platoons out performing patrols and ambushes, sometimes as far as ten kilometers from their battalion base camps. Often their goal was to interdict known Viet Cong lines of communications, making it difficult for the enemy to move men and materiel. Perhaps due to this threat, the Viet Cong increased the number of mortar attacks on U.S. bases and district towns in Long An. To discourage these bombardments, the allies pulled some of their patrols back toward key installations, thereby lessening their coverage of Viet Cong routes.[60]

[57] DoD Intel Rpt, no. 6027862967, 13 Nov 67, sub: Draft Plan, pp. 1, 8–9, document 28b, Vietnam 1967–1968 Winter-Spring Campaign (1 of 2), box 154; Cable, General William C. Westmoreland to CINCPAC, 16 Dec 67, sec. 4, p. 3, sec. 5, p. 2, document 14, Vietnam 2C (2) General Mil Activity (2 of 2), box 69; Cable, CIA, 17 Jan 68, sub: Summary of Viet Cong Activities in IV Corps During December 1967, p. 5, document 48, Vietnam-4B, VC Offensive Activity 3/67-9/68 (1 of 2), box 90. All in NSF-Vietnam Country files, LBJL.

[58] AAR, Opn Enterprise, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, p. 71.

[59] Ibid.; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, pp. 36–37; and pp. 8–9, Encl 14 to ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, box 41; AAR, Opn Enterprise, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, p. 76.

[60] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 2, 6, 8.

The one exception to the low-level harassment occurred during the early morning darkness of 10 December, when the *508th Battalion* and elements of the *5th Nha Be Battalion* attacked a U.S. company outpost at An Nhut Tan, located on the bank of the Vam Co Dong River. The Viet Cong overran three perimeter bunkers as well as the mortar pit. The defenders from Company A of the 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, eventually repulsed the attackers, but only after losing seven killed and fifty-three wounded. The U.S. soldiers located thirty-five enemy dead when they searched the area after daylight. A subsequent investigation determined that some of the soldiers manning the perimeter had been asleep prior to the assault. It also appeared that the concertina wire was too loose and rusty to be effective, and most of the trip flares and claymore mines had been allowed to deteriorate, rendering them inoperative.[61]

Apart from the attack at An Nhut Tan, however, the Viet Cong local and main force battalions in Long An Province stayed out of sight, giving the Revolutionary Development areas some respite from serious attack. Although responsibility for Revolutionary Development resided primarily with the South Vietnamese and their U.S. advisers, Everett, like other U.S. commanders charged with area security missions, actively assisted pacification. To facilitate both military and counterinfrastructure operations, the brigade worked closely with Vietnamese military and civilian officials and their U.S. advisers. This was particularly true with regard to the province's Tactical Operation Center and its Combined Operation Intelligence Center, as well as the six newly established District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Centers. In addition to conducting combined military police patrols and cordon-and-search actions to find enemy agents and contraband, in November Colonel Everett formed a Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon. Over the next three months, the platoon killed fifteen Viet Cong, eight of whom were political cadre.[62]

Colonel Everett supplemented the security operations he conducted in conjunction with Vietnamese regular and territorial forces with training and civic action programs. A seven-man detail taught a six-week refresher course to a regular Vietnamese battalion, while three Mobile Advisory Teams honed territorial fighting skills and several Improvement Action Teams made weekly visits to upgrade territorial outposts. Between 1 November 1967 and 30 January 1968, brigade medics treated 44,394 civilians and taught first aid to Vietnamese assigned to village dispensaries. Brigade soldiers helped build two schools, three dispensaries, and three public latrines. They provided technical and commodity support to a joint effort to build a new marketplace, and they taught highly popular English language classes. Members of the brigade's engineering element, the 15th Engineer Battalion, took time out from clearing mines and constructing bases and roads to build desks for schoolchildren, while

[61] AAR, Attack on An Nhut Tan, 19th Mil Hist Det, 20 Jun 68, pp. 1–3, Historians files, CMH.

[62] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 1–2, 6, 14.

the 159th Engineer Construction Group focused its energies entirely on Revolutionary Development projects.[63]

Thanks to the security offered by the 3d Brigade, Revolutionary Development was moving forward slowly in Long An Province. Hounded by allied forces, more Viet Cong turned themselves in to the *Chieu Hoi* program in Long An during 1967 than in any other province in III Corps. By January 1968, U.S. Army engineers had nearly completed road and bridge construction that linked all of the district seats to the provincial capital for the first time in years, and a U.S. civilian company was poised to begin repaving Highway 4 from Saigon to My Tho. Under the protection of U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers, several areas of Long An provided rice to the government's coffers for the first time in years. Through a myriad of mostly small actions, Colonel Everett had steadily chipped away at the enemy. Between 1 November 1967 and 30 January 1968, the 3d Brigade killed 241 Viet Cong. It captured twenty-one soldiers and took possession of eighty ralliers. It also captured 14 crew-served weapons, 65 small arms, and 8 tons of rice among other supplies, and destroyed 79 enemy structures and 1,450 bunkers. During the same period, provincial officials reported eliminating 115 Viet Cong infrastructure personnel, of whom 43 were killed, 37 captured, and 35 rallied. The price borne by the 3d Brigade between 1 November 1967 and 30 January 1968 was 31 killed and 363 wounded, while the South Vietnamese suffered about 200 casualties during 1967's final two months.[64]

Allied officials had reasons to hope that Long An would continue to progress, but there were challenges, too. Like elsewhere in III Corps, increased enemy activity coinciding with the onset of the traditional winter-spring campaign season created a heightened sense of insecurity among Long An's population. The recent departure of the 199th Infantry Brigade from neighboring Gia Dinh Province exposed the province's northern flank to infiltration. Reports indicated that by drafting manpower from local forces and by avoiding engagements, the Viet Cong battalions in Long An Province had no trouble making up their combat losses. Enemy morale was also allegedly on the rise thanks to the ongoing distribution of modern Communist Bloc weapons such as assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, the latter easily capable of punching through an M113 carrier. It was only a matter of time before *COSVN* used its growing strength to test allied defenses in the upper delta.[65]

Taking Stock

At the beginning of 1968, General Weyand had accomplished most of the military goals he had hoped to achieve in III Corps' National Priority Area

[63] Rpt, RD Advisory Team 86, Long An Province, 31 Dec 67, p. 3, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 12–15.

[64] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 2, 6, 9, 11–12; Rpt, RD Advisory Team 86, Long An Province, pp. 1, 4, 6.

[65] AAR, Opn Enterprise, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 30–31; Rpt, RD Advisory Team 86, Long An Province, p. 2; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 50, II FFV, p. 3.

during the first phase of the dry season campaign. His forces had whittled down the Iron Triangle and several other base areas on the Saigon River and had strengthened the antirocket barrier around Bien Hoa–Long Binh. They had also been fairly successful in discouraging the enemy from conducting major attacks in populated areas. Finally, road security efforts had enabled him to sustain the troops he had sent toward the Cambodian border.

Meanwhile, South Vietnamese authorities and their U.S. advisers had continued to push forward on the pacification front. The Revolutionary Development program appeared to be gaining momentum. The number of Revolutionary Development teams in III Corps stood at around one hundred and was set to grow by another thirty in the next few months. General Khang had assigned roughly half of his regular South Vietnamese Army units to support Revolutionary Development, and security was improving in many pacification areas. In addition, fifty-one of the fifty-three districts in III Corps now had a functioning combined intelligence center, an important step toward energizing the new counterinfrastructure effort that the allies had inaugurated under the name *Phuong Hoang*, or Phoenix. Though the program was still in its infancy, by year's end the district intelligence centers had already identified nearly 5,000 Viet Cong cadre, with allied forces eliminating 200 of them in October and November alone. True, small-scale attacks and harassment activities continued and could occur almost anywhere, but overall allied officials believed that conditions in III Corps were slowly improving.

The U.S. Army forces that ringed Saigon during the first months of the dry season had contributed significantly to pacification progress. They had bolstered area security both directly, by conducting a myriad of saturation patrols, ambushes, road security, and strike missions, sometimes in concert with the Vietnamese, and indirectly, by training the regular and territorial forces above and beyond the assistance provided through the advisory system. Aid to the Regional and Popular Forces had been particularly important, with U.S. brigades supplying one logistical support, twenty-four Mobile Advisory Teams, and eleven Improvement Action Teams in the III Corps zone. The senior CORDS representative to III Corps deemed the work of these teams to be "most impressive."[66]

Although responsibility for the counterinfrastructure campaign rested largely with the Vietnamese, U.S. forces had contributed here as well. They had collaborated in the collection and dissemination of information, had worked with police on population and resources control measures, and had executed combined cordon-and-search operations to capture Viet Cong among the villagers. Last but not least, they had formed special strike groups such as the Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoons.

Weyand's forces had also made their influence felt on the softer side of pacification. U.S. units had helped secure the winter rice harvest, with III Corps reporting a 10 percent increase in the amount of land farmed thanks to

[66] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 52–54; Rpt, CORDS, III Corps, app. B, p. 9, attached to Memo, Weyand for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68.

the improving security situation. Security and maintenance work performed by U.S. combat and engineer units on such roads as Highways 1, 4, and 13 had directly benefited pacification by enhancing the movement of people and goods, facilitating government outreach, and building public confidence. Between 1 November 1967 and 31 January 1968, U.S. Army engineers had built or repaired 799 kilometers of roadway in III Corps, more than triple the amount of work performed over the previous three months.

U.S. forces had lent a hand to allied outreach efforts, too. From November 1967 through January 1968, U.S. Army and Air Force aviation in III Corps had delivered 468 million propaganda leaflets and 2,396 hours of broadcasts from the air. Meanwhile, on the ground, eighteen U.S. Army civil affairs platoons had worked with U.S. units and the Thai Volunteer Regiment to perform a myriad of civil assistance actions. Weyand had detailed another seven civil affairs teams to work directly for the senior province advisers in the high-priority provinces around Saigon. Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) teams had treated nearly 344,000 Vietnamese civilians, while unit commanders had provided their personnel and resources to a variety of formal and informal civic actions, from delivering construction supplies to sponsoring orphanages and hosting Christmas parties. Weyand embraced all of these efforts and augmented them by creating a special Friendship Platoon. The platoon worked to win the confidence of village officials and residents alike by distributing commodities, encouraging local self-help projects, and developing institutions of public education.[67]

Weyand was proud of what U.S. forces had achieved, but he recognized that a great deal remained to be done. Despite allied security and counterinfrastructure efforts, Viet Cong guerrillas could still harass civilians and outposts over most of III Corps. During 1967, the Viet Cong had committed over 4,000 acts of terrorism in III Corps, specifically targeting for execution 631 individuals and kidnapping another 614. Less discrete acts, such as throwing grenades into crowds, placing bombs in public areas, and conducting indiscriminate shootings, had killed or injured over 2,300 Vietnamese, and by year's end the rate of Viet Cong terrorist actions in III Corps was on the rise. Meanwhile, the enemy's base camps along the Saigon River, diminished as they were, continued to harbor main force units capable of doing great harm. Nor was there any guarantee that the pacification program would continue to make the slow gains it had made in 1967. Indeed, II Field Force analysts had indications that the enemy had yet to deliver the main blow in the winter-spring campaign season. On 12 December, the U.S. 25th Infantry Division captured a secret Communist Party document that declared that the enemy hoped the revolutionary movement would achieve a "new leap forward" during the 1967–1968 dry season, creating conditions that would bring down the Thieu regime and pave the way for a coalition government dominated by the National

[67] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 54–55; Rpt, CORDS, III Corps, pp. 2, 4, 11, 14, 24–25; and app. 3, pp. 4–5, attached to Memo, Weyand for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68.

Liberation Front. According to the document, the last months of 1967 and the year 1968 would prove to be the most important period in the war to date. The truth of that statement would soon be tested.[68]

[68] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 4, 11; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 52, II FFV, 24–30 Dec 1967, 30 Dec 67, p. 10, Historians files, CMH.

4

Operations in the Mekong Delta

Roughly six million people, representing between 30 and 40 percent of South Vietnam's population, lived on the 40,000 square kilometers of low-lying land to the south and west of Saigon known as the Mekong Delta. Fed by the Mekong and Bassac Rivers that flowed from Cambodia to the South China Sea, the delta's rich alluvial soil and teaming waterways generated over 75 percent of South Vietnam's food supply. Without the delta, the nation would starve.[1]

Since the emergence of the insurgency in 1959, the South Vietnamese government had lost access to a significant portion of the delta's bounty. This was due partly to the fact that the Viet Cong's message of land for the landless resonated with the region's large number of tenant farmers. By November 1967, MACV analysts determined that roughly a third of the people who lived in the sixteen delta provinces that made up the IV Corps Tactical Zone lived under some degree of Viet Cong control. Government influence was strongest near the district and provincial capitals and along the limited highway system that connected those cities. Outside the towns, control was difficult. Distances were large, communities scattered, and travel problematic because of the seasonal rains that inundated the countryside, and the presence of Viet Cong, who busily interdicted roads and waterways by laying ambushes, erecting barriers, placing mines, and demolishing bridges. Moreover, virtually no roads of any kind penetrated the marshy Plain of Reeds that covered most of Kien Tuong and Kien Phong Provinces in the northern delta, or the thick mangrove forests that blanketed many coastal districts in the western and southern delta. Here the enemy established his largest bases, but sanctuaries existed almost everywhere thanks to the wooded groves and trackless marshlands that dotted the landscape.[2]

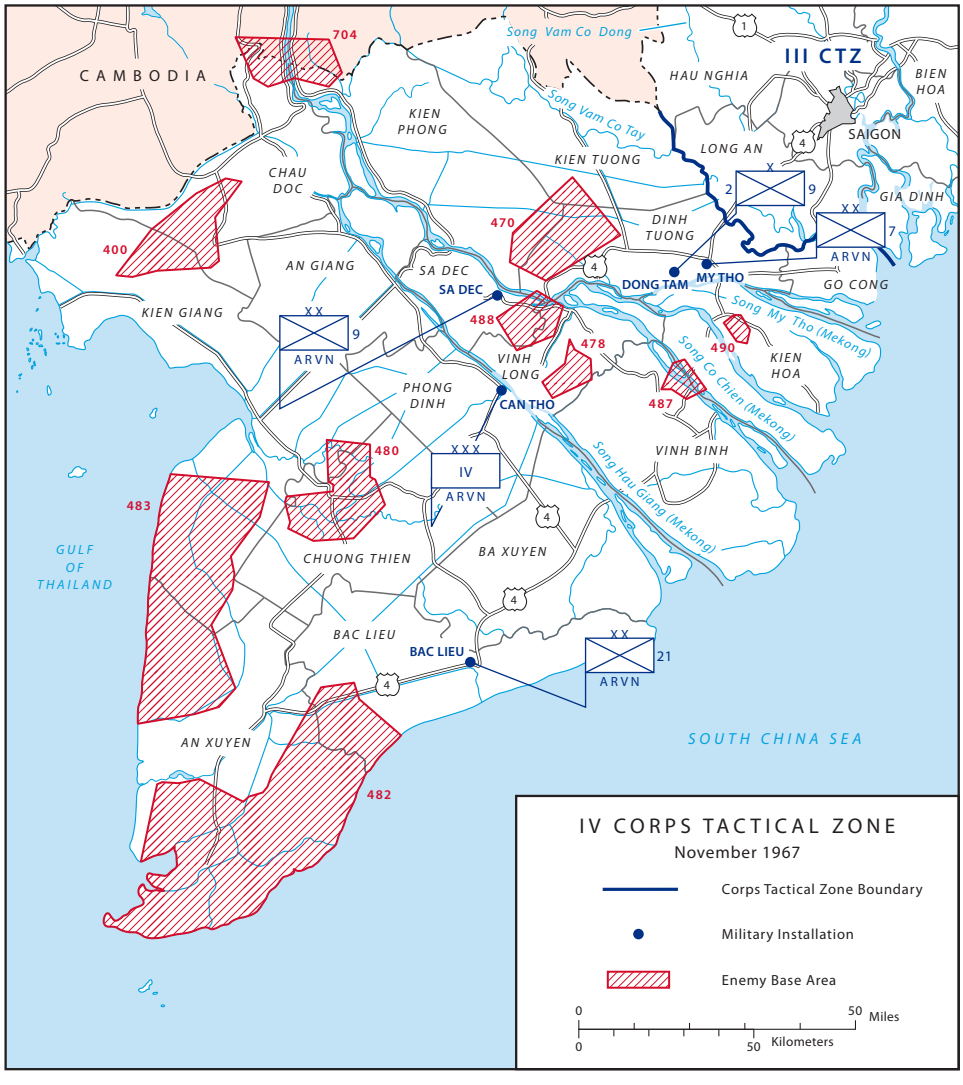
By the fall of 1967, Viet Cong main and local forces in IV Corps numbered twenty-two battalions and seventy-four companies. Backing them were an additional 32,000 guerrilla and infrastructure personnel. *COSVN* controlled those forces through two regional headquarters. *Military Region 2* encompassed the provinces in the upper part of IV Corps, an area more or less bounded by the Bassac River to the south and the Vam Co Tay River to the

[1] Fact Book, Delta IV Corps, Deputy for CORDS, IV Corps, Can Tho, Dec 67, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

[2] Rpt, CORDS, Ofc of Asst Ch of Staff, 20 Nov 67, sub: HES Newsletter, an. 4, p. 5, Historians files, CMH; MACV Planning Dir 9-67, 29 Oct 67, sub: Planning Guidance for Senior Commander for the period 1 Nov 67–30 Apr 68, pp. 8–9, Historians files, CMH; Mintz, "Game Warden, Mobile Riverine Force, and Revolutionary Development Operations in the Delta," p. 6.

north. Its headquarters was in Base Area 704 on the border of Kien Tuong Province and Cambodia. The second command, *Military Region 3*, directed operations in IV Corps' southern and western provinces. It resided in the U Minh Forest on the southwestern coast of Kien Giang Province (*Map 11*).[3]

The man tasked with restoring government control in the delta was IV Corps commander Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Manh. Manh controlled forty-three



MAP 11

[3] Rpt, HQ, U.S. Army Advance Gp, IV CTZ, 24 Feb 68, sub: CORDS Field Overview for CY 1968, Historians files, CMH; Cable, Saigon to CIA, 17 Jan 68, sub: Summary of Viet Cong Activities in IV Corps During December 1967, p. 7, document 48, Vietnam-4B, VC Offensive Activity Mar 67–Sep 68 (1 of 2), box 90, NSF-Vietnam Country files, LBJL; MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 55–59; Rpt, MACV, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, 31 Jan 68, sub: Order of Battle Summary, 1–31 Jan 68, p. IV-34, box 142, MACV, J–03, RG 472, NACP.

maneuver battalions, most of which were part of three South Vietnamese divisions—the 7th Infantry Division in the upper delta, the 9th Infantry Division in the central delta, and the 21st Infantry Division in the south. He assigned sixteen of these battalions to provide dedicated support for Revolutionary Development. The rest performed offensive or security duties. Backing them were the territorial forces that belonged to the governors of the various provinces—roughly 300 Regional Forces companies and 1,700 Popular Forces platoons. Five ranger battalions and three armored cavalry squadrons rounded out the government's land forces. Cooperating with Manh but not under his control were a dozen South Vietnamese Navy River Assault Groups of twenty landing craft each and a U.S. Navy group known as Task Force 116, equipped with nearly 200 armed patrol boats and a squadron of U.S. Navy "Seawolf" UH–1 gunships. These forces performed anti-infiltration and anti-smuggling missions on the delta's many waterways.[4]

Since the Saigon government was loathe to allow the U.S. Army to operate in the densely populated delta, Westmoreland had only a modest presence in IV Corps. In November 1967, the senior adviser in IV Corps, Brig. Gen. William R. Desobry, oversaw the activities of ten helicopter companies and two observation aircraft companies belonging to the 164th Aviation Group and nearly two dozen Special Forces teams at border surveillance camps. He also supervised roughly 3,000 U.S. advisers assigned to provincial governments and regular and territorial units. Not under his control was the most potent offensive force in IV Corps, a special U.S. Army-Navy amphibious group known as the Mobile Riverine Force.[5]

The Mobile Riverine Force was a unique organization. Based at Dong Tam in Dinh Tuong Province, some six kilometers west of the provincial capital of My Tho, it consisted of the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, and the U.S. Navy's Task Force 117. Officially, the chain of command remained divided, with the 2d Brigade reporting to II Field Force through the 9th Infantry Division, and Task Force 117 reporting to the headquarters of the U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, in Saigon. In practice, Westmoreland brokered an agreement between the services that placed the force under the control of the Task Force 117 commander when it was moving or at anchor on a river, and under the command of the senior Army officer whenever troops went ashore. Usually this was Brig. Gen. William B. Fulton, one of the 9th Infantry Division's two assistant commanders. Essentially a gentleman's agreement, the system proved effective.[6]

The Army component of the Mobile Riverine Force consisted of three infantry battalions—the 3d and 4th Battalions, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry—supported by the 3d Battalion, 34th Artillery (105-

[4] Victory Daniels and Judith C. Erdheim, *Game Warden* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Naval Research, 1976), pp. 15–16; Mintz, "Game Warden, Mobile Riverine Force, and Revolutionary Development Operations in the Delta," p. 6.

[5] Daniels and Erdheim, *Game Warden*, pp. 15–16.

[6] Mintz, "Game Warden, Mobile Riverine Force, and Revolutionary Development Operations in the Delta," pp. 9–11. For details about the origins of the Mobile Riverine Force and its early operations, see MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967,* ch. 24.

A heavily armed and armored monitor patrols the waterways.

Tango boats and monitors tied alongside the USS Benewah

mm. howitzers), and Company D, 15th Engineer Battalion. General O'Connor also maintained the 1st Battalion, 84th Artillery, and Battery B of the 2d Battalion, 84th Artillery, both equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, at Dong Tam to defend the base.

The Mobile Riverine Force's naval component, Task Force 117, contained three squadrons. The first was a support squadron that performed headquarters, logistical, and housekeeping chores. The other two were assault squadrons designed to make amphibious landings. Each assault squadron contained about one hundred Landing Craft, Mechanized (LCMs) that had been modified to create a variety of transport, command, medical, and fire support vessels. Additional fire support could be obtained by placing artillery on barges. The Navy had converted more than one hundred LCM–6 vessels into armored troop carriers known as Tango boats that were armed with four 50-caliber machine guns, two 20-mm. cannon, and an MK19 40-mm. automatic grenade launcher. Another variant of the LCM–6, the "monitor," served as a floating tank, exchanging its troop-carrying capability for extra armor, a 40-mm. cannon, and either a 105-mm. howitzer or a flamethrower.[7]

Taking the Offensive

After moving to Dong Tam in June 1967, the 2d Brigade commenced a series of operations code-named CORONADO with Task Force 117 and South Vietnamese marines. Per agreement with the Vietnamese, the Mobile Riverine Force operated just in the northern delta, particularly the provinces of Kien Tuong, Kien Phong, Dinh Tuong, Kien Hoa, and Go Cong. These provinces fell within the tactical zone of the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division, whose commander, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Viet Thanh, resided in My Tho. General Thanh's battalions typically operated separately from one another to defend specific district or Revolutionary Development areas. The Vietnamese troops stayed close to the major towns and roads, rarely venturing into remote areas. With his manpower dispersed, Thanh had neither the means, nor frankly the inclination, to take the fight to the enemy.[8]

The Mobile Riverine Force gave the allies the ability to go on the offensive in the upper delta. Through aggressive search-and-destroy missions against major enemy units and bases, the allies hoped the force would keep the enemy off balance, interfere with his line of communications, and erode his strength. Achieving these ends would help the allies

[7] MFR, MACV, 12 Oct 67, sub: MACV Commanders' Conference 24 September 1967, pp. 2–4, Encl 7, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, Seventh Air Force, Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) study, 31 Aug 69, sub: Riverine Operations in the Delta, May 1968–Jun 1969, Historians files, CMH.

[8] Rpt, MACCORDS, 2 Dec 67, sub: Monthly Pacification Report, an. 3, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.

protect the southern approaches to Saigon, maintain government access to the delta's rich bounty, and provide a more suitable environment for pacification to move forward.

The force's targets were the over 15,000 full-time enemy soldiers and cadre who regularly operated in the upper delta. The enemy organized these groups into five battalions of infantry and fifteen companies of support troops—three sapper, four engineer, two heavy machine gun, and six artillery (two 82-mm. mortar, one 120-mm. mortar, and three 75-mm. recoilless rifle). Between March and December, 639 tons of military equipment and supplies flowed into the region from North Vietnam via Cambodia, as the foe steadily increased his capabilities.[9]

Between June and September, the Mobile Riverine Force conducted Operations CORONADO I through V that ranged across the lower tributaries of the Mekong River. It battered the *261st*, *263d*, and *514th Battalions* in Dinh Tuong Province and the *516th* and *520th Battalions* in Kien Hoa Province. The amphibious group also swept through the Rung Sat swamp in southern Gia Dinh Province and Long An's Can Giuoc District, discouraging the mortar and rocket-propelled grenade attacks that occasionally threatened the shipping that passed through the Saigon River estuary. Benefits appeared to accrue for pacification, too. Attitude surveys conducted by South Vietnamese officials showed that farmers living in government-controlled areas of Long An and Dinh Tuong felt more secure as a result of U.S. combat operations, encouraging them to till more land and to feel less pressure from Viet Cong taxation.[10]

During these initial operations, General Fulton and the 2d Brigade learned how to fight as part of an amphibious task force, something they had not been trained to do before deploying to Vietnam. The inundated conditions presented a set of challenges rarely seen elsewhere in the country. Nearly all of the soldiers attached to the Mobile Riverine Force developed some degree of dermatophytosis, more commonly known as immersion foot, from living in the water-logged environment. Fungal infections were also commonplace, affecting the hands, arms, and waist as well as the lower extremities. The division surgeon determined that the uniforms and boots worn by the U.S. soldiers greatly contributed to the outbreak of these fungal lesions, noting that none of the Viet Cong prisoners captured in the delta who wore shorts and sandals had any kind of skin disease. To reduce the severity of these afflictions, the 9th Infantry Division adopted a policy of keeping soldiers in the field for no more than forty-eight hours at a stretch before pulling them out for twenty-four hours so they could dry out their lower extremities. The rest period also helped soldiers recover from the persistent high temperature and humidity, and the exhaustion of slogging through deep mud. As an

[9] Cao Minh et al., *Quan Khu 8: Ba Muoi Nam Khang Chien (1945–1975)* [*Military Region 8: Thirty Years of Resistance War (1945–1975)*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1998), p. 612 (hereafter cited as *Military Region 8*).

[10] Senior Ofcr Debriefing Rpt, Maj Gen George C. O'Connor, 22 Feb 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

Soldiers of Company B, 3d Battalion, 9th Infantry Division, rest after slogging through deep mud.

An armored troop carrier, known as a Tango boat, discharges soldiers from the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, during an operation in the Mekong Delta.

additional measure, Fulton rotated his three infantry battalions between the riverine fleet and Dong Tam on a regular basis to give each of them a few uninterrupted weeks on dry land.[11]

When *Military Region 2* launched its dry season offensive against Highway 4 in late October 1967, General O'Connor directed the Mobile Riverine Force to return from a sweep of the Rung Sat swamp to destroy the enemy units that had become active in Dinh Tuong Province. According to South Vietnamese intelligence, the *261st*, *263d*, and *514th Battalions* had reportedly gathered in the Cam Son Secret Zone, sandwiched between Highway 4 and the My Tho River in south-central Dinh Tuong. The commander of the 2d Brigade, Col. Burt A. David, ordered the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, to remain at Dong Tam, while the 3d and 4th Battalions, 47th Infantry, boarded the vessels of Task Force 117, commanded by U.S. Navy Capt. Wade C. Wells.

Operation CORONADO IX began on 2 November when the Mobile Riverine Force steamed upriver some twenty kilometers and landed troops in the Cam Son Secret Zone. Colonel David's infantrymen saw few signs of the enemy as they waded through the Cam Son Secret Zone, leading the colonel to believe that the *261st* and *263d Battalions* were probably operating from another base nearby, most likely the Ban Long Secret Zone just to the east.[12]

To increase David's chances of catching the enemy, the Joint General Staff placed the South Vietnamese 5th Marine Battalion under his control. The unit had four rifle companies and a heavy weapons company, making it larger than its American counterparts, and its soldiers were among the best trained and equipped in the South Vietnamese armed forces. Joining the Mobile Riverine Force on 9 November, the marines and U.S. infantrymen began a three-day sweep of the Ban Long Secret Zone. They located more than a hundred enemy bunkers but only a handful of Viet Cong, killing eleven and capturing eight.

The lack of contact in the two secret zones to the south of Highway 4 plus new intelligence strongly suggested that the two Viet Cong battalions were located in Base Area 470 in the western part of Dinh Tuong Province. The South Vietnamese corps commander, General Manh, asked General Weyand to assist the South Vietnamese 7th and 9th Infantry Divisions in a sweep of Base Area 470. The II Field Force commander agreed to lend the Mobile Riverine Force and elements of the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, for Operation KIEN GIANG 9-1.

The area of northeastern Cai Be District targeted in KIEN GIANG 9-1 resembled the state of Nevada in a somewhat elongated form. Roughly ten kilometers long and four kilometers wide, the region was bounded on the north by the twelve-meter-wide Ton Duc Loc Canal, on the west by the ten-meter-wide So Bay Canal, on the east by the four-meter-wide Ca Nhip Canal, and on the south by the three-meter-wide Ong Tai Creek. Houses lined the palm-fringed canals, while rice paddies covered the vast majority of the land. By day, thousands of sampans plied the canals carrying goods and people. By

[11] Ibid.

[12] Cable, General William C. Westmoreland to CINCPAC, 16 Dec 67, sec. 5, p. 2, document 14, Vietnam 2C (2) General Mil Activity (2 of 2), box 69, NSF-Vietnam Country files, LBJL.

night, the waterways were empty except for Viet Cong vessels that slunk along the shadowed riverbanks.

A unit from the 2d Brigade, Lt. Col. Guy I. Tutwiler's 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, was first to depart Dong Tam on the morning of 15 November. A flight of helicopters landed Companies A, B, and C into the southern part of the KIEN GIANG zone to secure a firebase for howitzers from Colonel Everett's 3d Brigade. After patrols failed to locate the enemy, the trio of companies established Firebase CUDGEL at the intersection of the So Bay Canal and the smaller Ong Tai Creek. At around 0900, CH–47 helicopters delivered Battery C from the 2d Battalion, 4th Artillery, bringing along experimental firing platforms for each of the six 105-mm. howitzers. Battery D arrived with additional platforms later that afternoon.

That same morning, Company A from Lt. Col. Richard E. Zastrow's 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, moved by helicopter into the northern part of the KIEN GIANG zone. The company located and captured just one enemy soldier in its sector. The day went less smoothly for Company B of the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, and the battalion's reconnaissance platoon, which landed at a different location. They came under heavy fire from a Viet Cong company shortly before noon. The sharp engagement cost the Americans two killed and four wounded; four M16s and one AN/PRC–25 radio also went missing. The enemy soon withdrew, allowing Company B and the reconnaissance platoon to secure a location at the intersection of the Ton Duc Loc Canal and the So Bay Canal. Company C from the 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, soon arrived by helicopter, as did Battery B from the 2d Battalion, 4th Artillery. The site known as Firebase MACE became operational early that afternoon.

As the various units from the U.S. 9th Infantry Division moved into position on the morning of 16 November, U.S. helicopters landed three South Vietnamese infantry battalions from General Thanh's 7th Infantry Division along the Ton Duc Loc Canal, the northern boundary of the KIEN GIANG zone. The government troops swept south as U.S. forces finished establishing the two firebases that were to provide them with artillery support. The South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry, recorded the most valuable find, apprehending a Viet Cong security chief who directed his captors to a camp containing a supply of booby traps and a stack of documents detailing supply operations. Meanwhile, six CIDG companies took up screening positions along the canals to the north of the KIEN GIANG zone, while elements of Brig. Gen. Lam Quang Thi's 9th Infantry Division did the same on the western side of Base Area 470.

The enemy tested the defenses of Firebase MACE later that evening when several companies brought the outpost under fire from the east and west. The firefight that began around two hours before midnight lasted for several hours, killing six Americans. The withdrawing enemy left no casualties behind. The ferocity of their fire and skill in policing the battlefield suggested that they were well-armed and highly disciplined main force regulars, not district-level guerrillas. The assault confirmed that at least one Viet Cong battalion was indeed located in Base Area 470, though its identity was not yet known.

The following day, 17 November, the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, swept north from Firebase CUDGEL, while Lt. Col. William B. Steele's 5th Battalion,

60th Infantry (Mechanized), maneuvered south from MACE, each battalion leaving behind one company to protect the firebases. Colonel Tutwiler's battalion marched back to CUDGEL that afternoon where a flight of helicopters lifted the unit back to Dong Tam, ending its role in KIEN GIANG 9-1. The departing infantrymen were replaced by Colonel Steele's three companies; Colonel Zastrow's 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, regrouped at MACE for the night.

Firebase CUDGEL

The 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, gathered that evening at Firebase CUDGEL, which was not much more than a soggy piece of farmland measuring some 300 meters by 250 meters. The So Bay Canal, which delineated the western side of the base, was too wide for enemy troops to cross, but the Ong Tai Creek at the southern end of CUDGEL was only three meters wide and two meters deep—an obstacle capable of slowing down but not stopping a determined foe. The wet rice fields that lay to the north and west were crisscrossed with shallow irrigation ditches, offering attackers some measure of cover and concealment (*Map 12*).[13]

The new occupants of CUDGEL did their best to improve its defenses with the limited time and resources at their disposal. The troops had plenty of sandbags and wood beams but only a handful of entrenching tools. With the water table only a meter below ground, Steele's men scraped out shallow fighting positions and ringed them with earth-filled sandbags. CUDGEL contained a detachment of engineers from the 3d Brigade but none of their heavy equipment, because vehicles would have gotten hopelessly mired in the mud. As a result, the artillerymen of Batteries C and D remained exposed on their stilted platforms, which were only large enough to accommodate the howitzers, their crews, and some ammunition. The engineers also lacked machetes or chainsaws to clear away the scrub bushes that encroached on the eastern edge of the firebase, making that sector especially vulnerable to infiltration.[14]

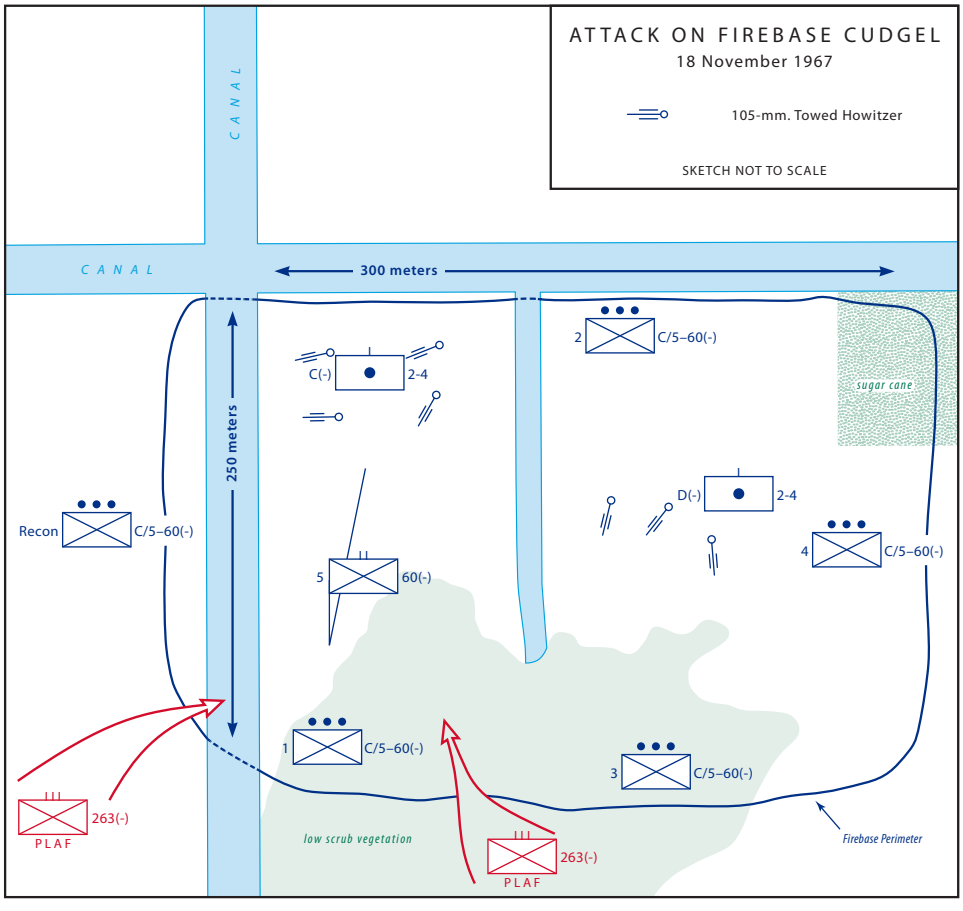
When darkness set in, Colonel Steele placed two of his companies in the farmlands to the north and east of CUDGEL to intercept enemy forces coming from those directions. He kept Company C at the firebase to protect Batteries C and D, and placed his reconnaissance platoon on the southern side of Ong Tai Creek. The only way to get across the creek was a narrow and rickety footbridge; coming back that way in the middle of a firefight would not be easy, but Steele saw no other way to protect his southern flank.[15]

Explosions from enemy mortar rounds broke the night silence at 0150, 18 November. On the southern side of the Ong Tai Creek, a company from the *263d Battalion* advanced toward the reconnaissance platoon holding that sector. The

[13] Rpt, 9th Div, n.d., sub: Battle of Fire Support Base Cudgel, 18 Nov 67, pp. 1–2, box 7, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[14] Ibid., p. 3.

[15] Ibid., p. 2.



MAP 12

American soldiers detonated claymore mines and threw grenades before opening up with their M16 rifles and M60 machine guns. Some Viet Cong troops went down but the majority pressed forward, firing their weapons, and forcing the reconnaissance platoon to retreat to the edge of the canal. Some of the soldiers reached CUDGEL via the footbridge, while others plunged into the canal and waded across with their weapons held above their heads. Several badly wounded men, left behind in the confusion, hid themselves in the tall grass near the creek.

The advancing enemy stopped a few dozen meters from the canal to set up several recoilless rifles and machine guns. As the reconnaissance platoon opened fire on them from the opposite bank, the artillerymen from Battery C leveled their howitzers and started blasting the enemy with beehive and high-explosive rounds. Viet Cong gunners returned fire, hitting the No. 2 howitzer from Battery C with a recoilless rifle shell that ignited the powder charges stored near the weapon. Metal fragments and burning sparks wounded the entire crew, knocking them all to the ground and rendering most of them unconscious.

The ear-splitting roar of the firefight brought one of the wounded gunners, Pfc. Sammy L. Davis, back to his senses. Struggling to his feet, he inspected his

howitzer and saw that it was damaged but still operational. Despite a serious back wound, he managed to load the weapon and fire it at the enemy. The howitzer skidded back, knocking Davis to the ground, and then an exploding mortar shell peppered him with fragments. Undeterred, Private Davis got up again and pushed the howitzer back into position. Firing his weapon a second time, he managed to knock out the recoilless rifle that had wounded him and his crew.[16]

After firing the last three howitzer rounds he could find, including one designed to hold propaganda leaflets, Davis picked up an M16 rifle and continued the fight. Hearing a wounded American calling from the opposite bank, he and another artilleryman, Pfc. William H. Murray, crossed the three-meter-wide creek with several air mattresses that soldiers used for sleeping. Davis and Murray floated the wounded man and two other injured Americans back across the canal, and then carried them to the aid station. Refusing treatment for his own wounds, Davis joined another howitzer crew for the remainder of the battle. For his actions that night, Private Davis received the Medal of Honor.[17]

As the reconnaissance platoon was fighting for its life south of CUDGEL, several companies from the *263d Battalion* hit the 1st and 3d Platoons of Company C on the eastern edge of the firebase. The Viet Cong had avoided the American company, screening the eastern approaches to CUDGEL by coming up from the south, crossing the creek behind that unit, and then moving west toward the firebase. The thick foliage that grew in that area prevented the 1st and 3d Platoons from seeing the attackers until the last moment. As the thin line of Company C soldiers fought the enemy at close range, Colonel Steele ordered his companies in the field to stay where they were so he could hit the attacking Viet Cong with air and artillery strikes.

A team of helicopter gunships appeared at 0215. The commander of Company C, Capt. Thomas A. Russell, used a portable strobe light to show the helicopter pilots the farthest extent of the American positions. Using that light as a guide, the gunships raked the trees and bushes farther east where the enemy was massing his forces. An AC–47 fixed-wing gunship and several F–100 Super Sabre fighter-bombers that arrived some thirty minutes later hit the Viet Cong troops who were attacking from the south.[18]

Company C held the line for another desperate hour before the enemy ended his assault. The Viet Cong withdrew in good order, taking with them nearly all of their casualties. Steele's men found only five enemy corpses the next morning, though the colonel believed that upwards of 150 Viet Cong soldiers had been killed or seriously wounded. Seven U.S. soldiers had died in the attack and another ninety-eight had been wounded. Half of the forty-four artillerymen were casualties; two of their howitzers needed major repairs.[19]

[16] Ibid., pp. 19–20.
[17] Ibid., p. 20.
[18] Ibid., pp. 12–15.
[19] Ibid., p. 18; AAR, Opn ENTERPRISE, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, n.d., p. 24, box 11, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Airmobile artillery platforms were designed to overcome the swampy conditions in the Mekong Delta.

As Colonel Everett's battalions had moved into the western part of Base Area 470, establishing Firebases MACE and CUDGEL, the Mobile Riverine Force had swept the eastern and southern part of the enemy zone. That put Colonel David in a good position to catch the *263d Battalion* when it withdrew from Firebase CUDGEL on the morning of 18 November. His force, consisting of the South Vietnamese 5th Marine Battalion and elements of the 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, intercepted the enemy. In the furious engagement that followed, the enemy lost 178 killed and 33 captured, while the allies lost 26 killed and 155 wounded. With the *263d Battalion* no longer combat effective and the *514th Battalion* nowhere to be found, General O'Connor instructed Colonel Everett to return the 3d Brigade task force back to Long An.[20]

CORONADO IX

During the next phase of CORONADO IX, the Mobile Riverine Force turned its attention to the districts east of My Tho where the *514th Battalion* and the *502d Battalion*, a local force unit from neighboring Kien Hoa Province, often operated. On 4 December, a flotilla of Tango boats carrying the South Vietnamese 5th Marine Battalion came under fire approximately a dozen kilometers east of My Tho. At the direction of the new Task Force 117 com-

[20] William B. Fulton, *Riverine Operations*, *1966–1969*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), p. 137.

mander, Capt. Robert S. Salzer, the landing craft turned into the hail of fire and headed for the riverbank. Several LCM gunboats, or monitors, including one equipped with a flamethrower, helped suppress the Viet Cong from the *502d Battalion* as the marines stormed ashore.[21]

The marines took the camp in a headlong assault, killing around a hundred Viet Cong soldiers and putting the rest to flight. Colonel David landed his 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, onto a nearby beach and flew in the 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, to trap the retreating foe. Breaking into small groups as it retreated, the *502d Battalion* lost a total of 243 soldiers killed and 24 captured that day. The Viet Cong unit had put up a stiff fight, however, killing 40 South Vietnamese marines, 12 Americans, and wounding 225 allied personnel.[22]

When the allies failed to locate any more Viet Cong units in the days that followed, Colonel David decided to head back to Dong Tam for resupply and to rotate his units so at least half of his soldiers would be fresh. After spending weeks in the field, many of his men invariably developed ailments that required treatment. Returning to base on 17 December, he dropped off the 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, replacing the unit with the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry. After a short stop, the Mobile Riverine Force headed out onto the Mekong River once again for the next phase of Operation CORONADO IX.

Supporting the South Vietnamese Government

In late 1967, General Westmoreland reminded his subordinates that U.S. forces had two coequal missions in Vietnam. The first was the destruction of the enemy "across the entire spectrum of his organization; including the shadow government, the local force units; the Viet Cong main force units and the North Vietnamese Army." The second was "to strengthen the government of Vietnam and specifically the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces," from the largest regular army formation down to the smallest Popular Forces element, through training, collaboration, equipment modernization, and logistical support. Although the advisory structure bore primary responsibility for supporting Vietnamese civil and security endeavors, both Westmoreland and his two deputies, General Abrams and Ambassador Komer, were united in emphasizing that all U.S. military organizations needed to take an interest in building up the Vietnamese apparatus, for only when this had been done could the United States truly accomplish its objective in Vietnam.[23]

The commander of II Field Force, General Weyand, and of the 9th Infantry Division, General O'Connor, fully embraced MACV's emphasis on

[21] Ibid., p. 139.

[22] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, n.d., p. 30; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, 15 Feb 68, p. 3, Encl 13, box 40. Both in ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[23] MFR, MACV, n.d., sub: MACV Commanders Conference, 3 December 1967, pp. 7 (quotes), 8–11, Historians files, CMH.

supporting the Vietnamese. O'Connor believed that this was his most important mission, and he gave his unit commanders points to remember when working with the Vietnamese military:

1. The Vietnamese are as courageous as anyone else, given the same odds for success or survival.
2. Their leadership is adequate except where proven otherwise on an individual basis.
3. If they are expected to fight as well as U.S. units, they should be supported as well as U.S. units.
4. They possess invaluable know-how concerning the enemy and the environment. They need moral support as well as physical support.
5. They must be treated as equals and at times with the deference due any man who is at the mercy of circumstances beyond his control.
6. The objectives assigned Vietnamese units must be commensurate with the unit's actual capabilities.
7. Example is the best teacher.
8. Patience is required.[24]

In the delta, General Fulton and Colonel David followed O'Connor's admonitions. They conducted many combined operations with Vietnamese regular and territorial forces. They would have liked to have done more, but met resistance from the South Vietnamese 7th Division's commander. The 9th Infantry Division also provided refresher training to Vietnamese Army battalions. O'Connor experimented with two approaches. The first was a sister battalion system, in which a U.S. and South Vietnamese Army battalion trained together, usually on the basis of paired companies. O'Connor soon discovered that the quality of the training performed in this fashion varied widely depending on the commanders involved. A shortage of interpreters also seriously hampered this method, so the division soon abandoned it in favor of a committee system. Each brigade, including Colonel David's, organized a group of U.S. and South Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers who together trained a Vietnamese battalion. Usually the Americans provided short initial lectures and demonstrations, with the Vietnamese instructors performing all the practical work. After several weeks of training, soldiers would be tested. This was a real-life, three-day combat operation, graded by a senior Vietnamese officer assisted by his U.S. adviser. O'Connor reported that the method worked well, with particularly good results occurring with Vietnamese armor, engineer, and artillery battalions.

Soldiers from the 9th Infantry Division also helped man some of the nineteen mobile assistance teams that worked with the Regional and Popular Forces in the IV Corps zone. These men were all volunteers, with a large percentage choosing to extend their tour. General O'Connor stated

[24] Memo, 9th Inf Div for CG, USARV, 22 Feb 68, sub: Senior Officer's Debriefing Report, pp. 6, 9 (quote), 10, Historians files, CMH.

that the Vietnamese enthusiastically embraced the assistance provided by the Mobile Advisory Team and Improvement Action Team.[25]

Supporting the South Vietnamese government involved more than just working with indigenous soldiers. Equally important were measures to win the favor of the population. Acclimatization to the special requirements posed by operating among a civilian population in an insurgency environment began in officer education and soldier basic training in the United States and continued when troops arrived in Vietnam.[26] General Westmoreland frequently emphasized the importance of good conduct, pacification, and winning popular support. In addition to issuing many rules of engagement designed to minimize injury to civilian lives and property, in 1966 he had begun issuing pocket-size cards titled "Guidance for Commanders in Viet Nam" and the "Nine Rules of Conduct" to every officer and soldier in Vietnam so that they would have a ready reference pertaining to these issues. The nine rules, based on Maoist principles, were:

1. Remember we are guests here. We make no demands and seek no special treatment.
2. Join with the people! Understand their life, use phrases from their language and honor their customs and laws.
3. Treat women with politeness and respect.
4. Make personal friends among the soldiers and common people.
5. Always give the Vietnamese the right of way.
6. Be alert to security and ready to react with your military skill.
7. Don't attract attention by loud, rude or unusual behavior.
8. Avoid separating yourself from the people by a display of wealth or privilege.
9. Above all else you are members of the U.S. Military Forces on a difficult mission, responsible for all your official and personal actions. Reflect honor upon yourself and the United States of America.[27]

The guidance for commanders consisted of fifteen principles covering a range of military topics, including the following items:

1. Use your firepower with care and discrimination, particularly in populated areas.
2. Capitalize on psychological warfare opportunities.
3. Assist in 'revolutionary development' with emphasis on priority areas and on civic action wherever feasible.

[25] Ibid., pp. 11–12.

[26] For background on rules of conduct, see Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976*, pp. 401–05. See also Study, Ofc of Deputy Ch of Staff, Opns, Dec 70, sub: An Analysis of the Evolution of MACV Rules of Engagement Pertaining to Ground Operations, 1965–1969, Geo V Vietnam, 350 Travel Pack, Archives, CMH.

[27] Nine Rules, May 66, Geo V Vietnam, 350 Travel Pack, Historians files, CMH.

4. Encourage and help Vietnamese military and paramilitary units; involve them in your operations at every opportunity.
5. Keep your officers and men well informed, aware of the nine rules for personnel of MACV and mindful of the techniques of communist insurgency and the role of free world forces in Vietnam.[28]

Westmoreland supplemented these guidelines in September 1967 with a third pocket card, "The Enemy in Your Hands." It reminded soldiers that the torture and abuse of prisoners were both counterproductive and illegal. Disturbed by reports that some soldiers were engaging in inappropriate behavior, in December 1967 he again reminded his senior officers of the importance of proper conduct, because "if we antagonize the local inhabitants our cause will be seriously set back." He further instructed them that when violations occurred, they should "move in aggressively and punish both the offender and his commander, who should have taught him better."[29]

The 9th Infantry Division was particularly sensitive to the political ramifications of working in the heavily populated Mekong Delta. Here the 2d Brigade had an advantage over other U.S. units, for the fact that it was a waterborne force minimized its impact on the population. Operating in an area in which every bit of dry land was at a premium, the brigade had few land facilities, thereby keeping to a minimum the number of civilians who had to be displaced to accommodate American bases. Similarly, using boats for operations and logistical movements reduced the wear and tear on roads and cropland from heavy vehicles.

General O'Connor supplemented MACV's rules of engagement with ones of his own, and in some cases he and his brigade commanders negotiated special supplementary rules with province chiefs. However, the general recognized that "what looked good on paper is sometimes hard to apply in the heat of battle." Judgment and flexibility were required, with the commander on the scene being the only person who could properly interpret the rules based on the circumstances. He also admitted that when soldiers took casualties from a building, "the instant reaction of troops is to burn the whole hamlet down" rather than just the structure from which the fire emanated. Overcoming inappropriate behavior, whether borne of stress, instinct, anger, disillusionment, high jinks, or maliciousness, was, O'Connor noted, "a never-ending task."[30]

The 9th Infantry Division required all incoming personnel to attend what was called the "Reliable Academy." Here soldiers received an orientation to the war in Vietnam and how it was being fought. Included in the course were "classes on the Vietnamese people, their feelings, loyalties, convictions and

[28] Guidance for Commanders in Vietnam, May 66, Geo V Vietnam, 350 Travel Pack, Historians files, CMH.

[29] MFR, MACV, n.d., sub: MACV Commanders Conference, 3 December 1967, pp. 12–13 (quotes); The Enemy in Your Hands, USARV, GTA 21-1, Sep 67, Geo V Vietnam, 350 Travel Pack, Historians files, CMH.

[30] Memo, 9th Inf Div for CG, 22 Feb 68, pp. 3–5, 6 (first two quotes), 8 (last quote).

Soldiers from the 9th Infantry Division walk along a dry path during a foot patrol in the Mekong Delta.

aspirations" that were designed to promote "respect through understanding" and to "reduce actions or incidents caused by ignorance which have an adverse effect on free world military assistance forces/Vietnamese relations." General O'Connor further insisted that troops review the code of conduct before every operation. The fact that the division placed villages off-limits to soldiers helped reduce opportunities for mischief, and generally speaking O'Connor was pleased with the conduct of his men. Cases of violating shrines were rare and incidents involving local women were "surprisingly few." Nevertheless, he admitted that "we are only partially successful in this indoctrination task," with soldiers "teasing or whistling at school girls" and operating vehicles without regard to civilian safety.[31]

Last but not least, the 9th Infantry Division executed propaganda and civic action missions to smooth the rough edges of America's presence. Many of the 2d Brigade's civic actions occurred near the Dong Tam base, where U.S. troops provided direct pacification support as part of Operation Hop Tac. Soldiers executed area saturation patrols, trained paramilitary soldiers, and performed extensive civic actions. Whether in the Dong Tam area or farther afield, medical visits were the Mobile Riverine Force's most popular outreach program, with a Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) team typically appearing on a landing craft at the end of a combat operation to dispense care. Still, the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, reported: "Fear is one of the major drawbacks to any form of civic action that could be undertaken. The fear is that Viet Cong forces may initiate reprisals against those who cooperate with government of Vietnam and/or MACV advisers in civic action projects." Until the allies drove off the main

[31] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 9th Inf Div, 13 Feb 68, p. 27.

force units and provided better security from enemy agents and guerrillas, there were limits to what benevolent actions could achieve.[32]

The Delta at Year's End

During the final two months of 1967, the 9th Infantry Division soldiers and its attached battalion of Vietnamese marines had inflicted sharp losses on some of the principal Viet Cong units in northern IV Corps, rendering the *261st* and *502d Battalions* combat ineffective for the time being. Allied forces conducting Operations CORONADO IX and KIEN GIANG 9-1 had killed and found the bodies of over 500 Viet Cong, with hundreds more probably killed or wounded. They had taken about a dozen Viet Cong prisoners and detained over 600 suspects. They had also destroyed about 600 bunkers, removed a half-dozen barriers blocking canals, and captured 170 weapons and nearly 22 tons of food and supplies. Thanks in part to these efforts, Highway 4 remained open in northern IV Corps as did the commercial waterways that led to and from Saigon. Meanwhile Communist officials reported that U.S. activity had greatly complicated their efforts to move supplies forward to support their planned offensive for 1968. The Mobile Riverine Force had achieved important results.[33]

There were also some positive developments not directly associated with the Mobile Riverine Force. Evidence was beginning to accumulate that the appeal that the enemy had enjoyed earlier in the conflict was fading. Wartime demand had led the Viet Cong to increase the taxes they levied on the delta population by 30 percent or more. Forced drafts of civilians into Viet Cong labor and military units were exceedingly unpopular. The disparity in wealth between government- and Communist-controlled areas was also becoming more apparent. Changes in government policy had recently allowed the price of rice to rise dramatically, doubling farm revenue in the delta. Flush with disposable income, residents eagerly expanded their businesses, improved their homes, motorized their sampans, and bought luxury goods. And, if the benefits of living under government control were not enough to win greater support for the government, the costs of living with the Viet Cong were becoming increasingly high, for as the senior CORDS representative in the delta, Sterling J. Cottrell, reported, "the belief that [government] firepower is brought to bear on Viet Cong localities has alienated the people from Viet Cong influence and encouraged them to seek [government] control." Whether it be out of patriotism, self-interest, or fear, people continued to vote with their stomachs and feet to the detriment of the Viet Cong movement.[34]

[32] Ibid., p. 6; tab D, pp. 2 (quote), 16, 27.

[33] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, II FFV, pp. 29–31; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 29 Jan 68, pp. 1–7, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 30 Jan 68, p. 10, Historians files, CMH; Minh et al., *Military Region 8,* p. 615.

[34] Memo, Sterling J. Cottrell, Deputy, CORDS, IV Corps, for COMUSMACV, 3 Jan 68, sub: CORDS Field Overview for 1967, pp. 3 (quote), 5; Rpt, CORDS, Kien Hoa Province, Dec 67, 30 Dec 67, p. 3. Both in Historians files, CMH.

Progress, however, remained painfully slow. According to the statistical measurements of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) by which U.S. officials judged progress, the number of people living in relative security (hamlets rated categories A, B, and C) in IV Corps had increased over the course of 1967 by just 4.7 percent. This brought the percentage of people living under government "control" in the delta up to 55.6 percent compared with the national average of 67 percent. With much of IV Corps still under Viet Cong influence and with the government assigning most of the region a low priority for the receipt of Revolutionary Development resources, this was perhaps the best that could be hoped for. Indeed, despite setbacks, such as the Viet Cong offensive that had disrupted communications routes, undermined public confidence, and produced setbacks for the Revolutionary Development program, Cottrell, O'Connor, and their subordinates believed that the allies would eventually prevail in the long, grinding struggle for supremacy. Westmoreland's appraisal of the situation across South Vietnam at the end of 1967 was certainly applicable to the Mekong Delta: "much has been accomplished, though less than we would have hoped."[35]

The question was, why were the allies still falling short of their goals in the upper delta? Several factors were at play, none of which were unique. The first was a lack of security borne from the enemy's martial strength. In a comment that could apply equally to many other provinces, MACV inspectors in Dinh Tuong noted in late 1967 that "one of the main preconditions for pacification—destruction or neutralization of enemy main forces—does not exist in Dinh Tuong." Until this was achieved, pacification would be held hostage.[36]

Closely allied with the first issue was slow progress in eliminating the guerrillas and political cadre that lived among the population. Here the allies had hope that MACV's renewed emphasis on rural security through Regional and Popular Forces improvement and the Phoenix counter-infrastructure campaign would eventually bear fruit, but as yet the progress had been limited.

Tied to both shortcomings was the age-old question of leadership. Several U.S. officials believed that the commander of the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division was too passive and could have used his men much more aggressively to help maintain security. As for the province chiefs of the upper delta, they ranged from outstanding to abysmal. Even when a governor was excellent, as in Kien Tuong Province, he was often hamstrung by an indolent governmental apparatus. All too often, Vietnamese offi-

[35] Rpt, CORDS, Research and Analysis Div, 19 Feb 68, sub: Year-End Synopsis of 1967 HE Data Changes, p. 6; Msgs, COMUSMACV 03518 to Admiral Ulysses J. Sharp et al., 3 Feb 68, sub: Pacification in South Vietnam during 1967, pp. 3, 10–11, 21–24; COMUSMACV 03518 to Sharp et al., 3 Feb 68, p. 2 (quote); Memo, 9th Inf Div for CG, 22 Feb 68, pp. 4–5, 13; Memo, Cottrell for COMUSMACV, 3 Jan 68, p. 5; Rpt, MACV, Ofc of Asst Ch of Staff, CORDS, 27 Dec 67, sub: Project TAKEOFF Status Report, November 1967, tab E, p. 1. All in Historians files, CMH.

[36] MFR, MACJ01R, 15 Nov 67, sub: Trip to Dinh Tuong Province, 8–9 November 1967, Maj Gen George I. Forsythe, Lt Col Paul E. Suplizio and Phillip Worchel, Historians files, CMH.

cialdom—whether in Saigon or the provinces—moved at a languid pace, missing opportunities, exacerbating conditions, wasting resources, and tolerating corruption.[37]

Finally, the government's methodology with regard to Revolutionary Development was often flawed. The praise U.S. commentators heaped on the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, for his outstanding work in supporting Revolutionary Development in Dinh Tuong Province was exceptional. Although CORDS reported gradual improvement, many Vietnamese soldiers showed little interest in Revolutionary Development, and too many South Vietnamese civil officials were equally disinterested. Labeling pacification "Revolutionary Development," as the Americans had done to inspire the Vietnamese to greater action, did not make it so. As the U.S. adviser to Go Cong Province observed, many Vietnamese officials exhibited "a desire to place blue dots on the map, rather than genuinely pacify the hamlets. After a hamlet has been pacified, the tendency on the part of the government of South Vietnam has been to ignore it, with little follow up activity in continuing to root out Viet Cong infrastructure and in continuing economic development projects. The lack of attention given these areas has resulted in a situation where it is now necessary to 're-pacify,' a rather expensive means of retaining control over an area."[38]

One possible conclusion for the United States was that it should intrude even deeper into the Vietnamese governmental process to make it work. This was not the task of U.S. combat units, but some officers looked for ways to help. Noting that the "destruction of the insurgent military strength is vital but is only the first phase in the required overall program," Task Force 117 commander, Captain Wells, suggested that his force could do a better job coordinating its operations with provincial pacification plans. General O'Connor, who had already promoted a system of coordinating bodies at the provincial and district levels wherever the 9th Infantry Division operated, agreed, and he endorsed a more holistic approach to military planning in the delta. Yet beyond this they, like most U.S. civil and military officials, were unwilling to go. Tying U.S. military operations more closely to pacification was important, wrote Wells, but "of greater significance," was the need for the South Vietnamese themselves to implement Revolutionary Development more vigorously, for until this was done, nothing the Mobile Riverine Force or the 9th Infantry Division could do would be able to "return the area and people to the control and support of the government of Vietnam."[39]

[37] Rpts, CORDS, Go Cong Province, period ending 30 Nov 67, n.d., p. 3; CORDS, Dinh Tuong Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, n.d., p. 11; CORDS, Kien Hoa Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, n.d., pp. 1–2; CORDS, Kien Tuong Province, period ending 31 Dec 67, n.d., p. 1. All in Historians files, CMH.

[38] Rpt, CORDS, Go Cong Province, period ending 30 Nov 67, n.d., p. 9, Historians files, CMH.

[39] Wells quote from Mintz, "Game Warden, Mobile Riverine Force, and Revolutionary Development Operations in the Delta," p. 14, and see also pp. 17, 19, 21. Memo, 9th Inf Div for CG, USARV, 22 Feb 68, sub: Senior Officer's Debriefing Report, pp. 8, 10.

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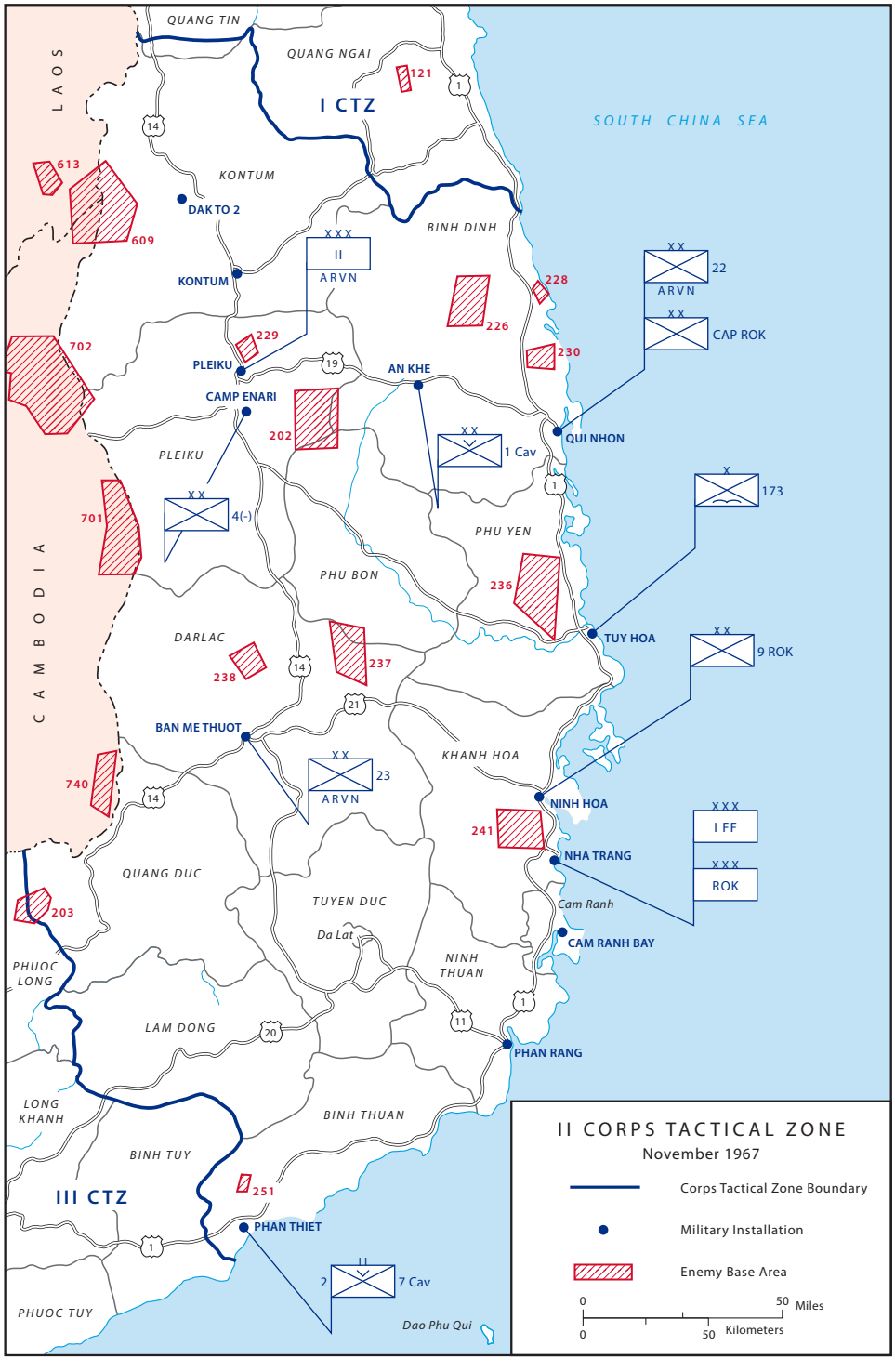
Across the Central Highlands

The Central Highlands presented the U.S. Army in Vietnam with operational challenges far different than those found in the Mekong Delta. The border provinces of II Corps—Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac—spanned an undeveloped backcountry of forests and mountains over 300 kilometers long and more than 100 kilometers wide, but with a population of only 500,000 people. Steep, tree-covered ridgelines dominated Kontum Province and the upper half of Pleiku Province, giving way to a broad plateau covered by evergreen forests and fringed by low, rolling hills in Darlac Province. The streams that coursed through the region were too shallow and winding to allow boat travel (*Map 13*).

In late October, the officer responsible for managing the American war effort in II Corps was Lt. Gen. William B. Rosson, a Westmoreland protégé who had taken charge of I Field Force in July. Rosson directed the operations of around 55,000 U.S. troops and 38,000 South Korean soldiers from his headquarters in the coastal city of Nha Trang. Rosson deployed twenty-eight of his maneuver battalions, ten American and eighteen South Korean, in the resource-rich coastal lowlands to assist sixteen South Vietnamese Army infantry battalions in protecting the heavily populated lowlands. That left nine U.S. maneuver battalions, working in cooperation with twelve South Vietnamese Army battalions, to hold the line in the sparsely settled Central Highlands.

General Rosson

Maj. Gen. William R. Peers led Rosson's primary maneuver force in western II Corps, the 4th Infantry Division. Peers was experienced in irregular warfare. He had commanded an OSS (Office of Strategic Services) unit in Burma during World War II and managed covert operations in southern China for the Central Intelligence Agency during the Korean War. He made his base at Camp Enari, situated on a flat, open plain ten kilometers south of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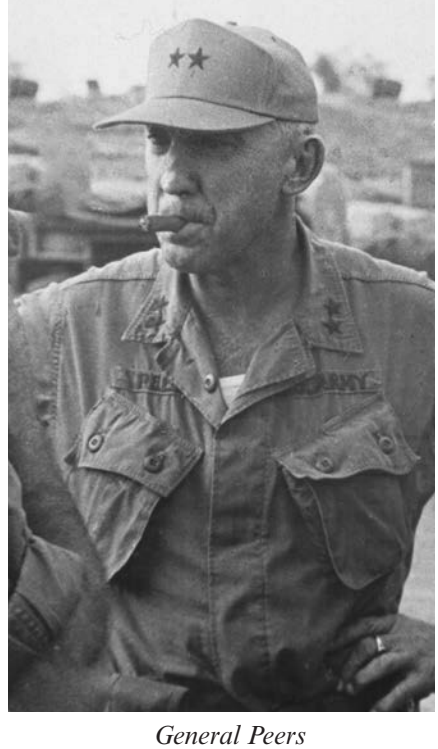
9 ROK
21
BAN ME THUOT
KHANH HOA
740
XX
23
ARVN
NINH HOA
241
XXX
I FF
NHA TRANG
XXX
ROK
QUANG DUC
TUYEN DUC
Cam Ranh
203
Da Lat
CAM RANH BAY
PHUOC LONG
NINH THUAN
LAM DONG
20
11
PHAN RANG
LONG KHANH
BINH THUAN
BINH TUY
III CTZ
251
PHAN THIET
II
2
7 Cav
PHUOC TUY
Dao Phu Qui
II CORPS TACTICAL ZONE
November 1967
Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
Military Installation
Enemy Base Area
0
50
Miles
0
50
Kilometers

MAP 13

Pleiku City in the shadow of a hill known as Dragon Mountain. Camp Enari also served as the headquarters of the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. The division's 2d Brigade operated from Camp Oasis, located twenty kilometers southwest of Pleiku City via Highway 19. To make up for the absence of the 3d Brigade, currently on loan to a provisional Army division in southern I Corps, Westmoreland had reinforced General Peers with three highly mobile units. The 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, and the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, worked alongside the division's 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry, to defend the 4th Infantry Division's lines of communications in the Central Highlands. A third unit, the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry, with two helicopter gunship troops and one mechanized troop, gave Peers another force that could range across the vast distances of western II Corps. The 4th Infantry Division also received support from the 52d Artillery Group, equipped with one light and three heavy artillery battalions, and the 52d Aviation Group composed of six UH–1 helicopter companies.[1]



General Peers

Describing the operational conditions and imperatives he faced in western II Corps, General Peers remarked that "the war in the Highlands could be considered a somewhat conventional jungle war" where the "tactics used by the North Vietnamese Army forces were closely akin to those used by Japanese forces in WWII." His main responsibility was to shield provincial and district capitals that lay along Highway 14, a paved road that ran from north to south through the middle of the Central Highlands. Fortunately, most of those towns lay between 30 to 50 kilometers from the border, giving Peers a sizable buffer zone. The 4th Infantry Division commander counted on the fact that enemy offensives never happened quickly. Trails had to be hacked out of the jungle and forward staging areas built. With few civilians in the area, enemy soldiers had to carry nearly all of their own supplies on foot. Food was scarce, and U.S. aircraft sprayed chemical defoliants over abandoned or suspected farming sites to prevent enemy soldiers from growing their own. As a result, the North Vietnamese soldiers in western II Corps could not live off the land as their Viet Cong counterparts did in IV Corps. Enemy

[1] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, I FFV, 15 Feb 1968, pp. 19–22, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

troops would often labor for weeks or even months to pre-position enough supplies for a major battle, giving U.S. reconnaissance elements time to detect those preparations. As the assistant chief of staff for intelligence in the 4th Infantry Division, Lt. Col. John A. Smith, explained, "It takes [the enemy], maybe half a month to move from one province to another. We can move a brigade in a day and a half. We can wait and watch them move, and then at the last moment, move in."[2]

General Peers was mainly concerned about the 15,000 North Vietnamese combat troops who operated under General Hoang Minh Thao's *B3 Front*, a headquarters that controlled all the main force units in the South Vietnamese provinces of Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac, as well as the western portions of Binh Dinh and Phu Bon Provinces. Thao's main combat force, the *1st PAVN Division*, contained three strong regiments, the *32d*, the *66th*, and the *174th*, and was commanded by a veteran officer, Col. Nguyen Huu An. The *B3 Front* commander also controlled three independent regiments, the *24th PAVN Regiment* based in Kontum Province, the *95B PAVN Regiment* in Pleiku Province, and the *33d PAVN Regiment* in Darlac Province. Thao's long-range striking power came from the *40th PAVN Artillery Regiment*, armed with 122-mm. rockets, 120-mm. mortars, and 75-mm. recoilless rifles. The enemy received his supplies and replacements from several large bases on the Cambodian border, which lay at the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[3]

New Threats in the Highlands

As October 1967 drew to a close, General Rosson's most pressing concern in the Central Highlands was the ominous sign of an offensive buildup by elements of the *B3 Front*. The news was not unexpected. Every year since 1965, the *B3 Front* had launched a major attack at the beginning of the dry season somewhere in western II Corps. The questions in Rosson's mind were not if, but where and when.[4]

The I Field Force commander believed that the most likely targets were the CIDG camps and other installations in western Kontum and Pleiku Provinces that were within easy reach of the enemy's Cambodian base. Dak To stood at the top of the list. Long-range patrols from the 4th Infantry Division and I Field Force had detected enemy troops camped near the border. Helicopter-

[2] First quote from Senior Ofcr Debriefing Rpt, Lt Gen William R. Peers, 23 Jun 69, p. 3. Second quote from Interv, 4th Inf Div Historian with Lt Col John A. Smith, 16 Sep 68, p. 7. MFR, MACV, 3 Dec 67, sub: MACV Commanders' Conference, p. 4, Encl 4. All in Historians files, CMH.

[3] Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam,* vol. 2, pp. 376–77, 380–81; *Luc Loung Vu Nang Nhan Dan Tay Nguyen Nong Kong Chien Chong My Cuu Nouc* [*The People's Armed Forces of the Western Highlands During the War of National Salvation Against the Americans*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1980), pp. 67–109 (hereafter cited as *People's Armed Forces of the Western Highlands*); Periodic Intel Rpt no. 32, I FFV, 6–12 Aug 67, 12 Aug 67, Historians files, CMH.

[4] MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 67–76.

An OV–1B Mohawk surveillance aircraft equipped with a side-looking airborne radar pod

mounted sniffer devices had detected signs of smoke released by campfires, and OV–1 Mohawk aircraft from the 225th Surveillance Airplane Company had also picked up those unseen fires using their infrared sensors.

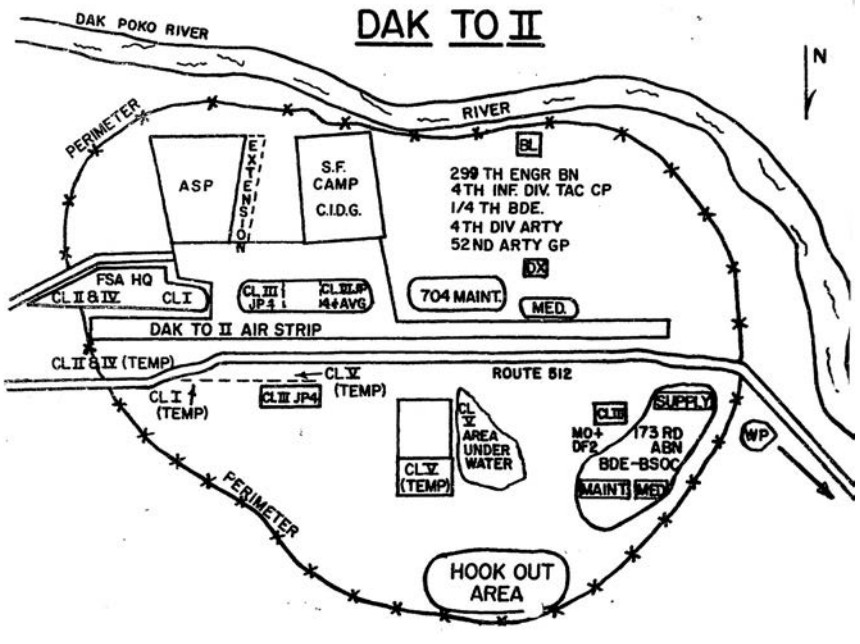
More evidence came from I Field Force radio research units, which intercepted a series of transmissions coming from the *1st Division* headquarters. Using sophisticated decoding and triangulation techniques, and employing aircraft crammed with detection gear, U.S. intelligence determined that the messages had gone to the *24th Regiment*, somewhere north of Dak To, and to the *32d* and *66th Regiments*, somewhere to its west. There were also reports that the *174th Regiment* had taken up station in Laos no more than a day's march away.[5]

Rosson examined other possibilities, too. Recent information indicated that the *33d Regiment* was "planning an adventure in northwestern and central Darlac," news that had led General Peers to shift his 2d Brigade down to Ban Me Thuot for the time being. He also had to consider a new thrust toward Pleiku City. On 28 October, North Vietnamese gunners had bombarded the city with forty-six 122-mm. rockets, the first time such weapons had been used against the provincial capital. For Rosson, however, the weight of evidence pointed toward Dak To. Back in June, elements of the *1st PAVN Division* had fought a series of bloody battles with the 173d Airborne Brigade in the hills south of Dak To, nearly overrunning a U.S. paratrooper company at one point. Now with dry weather settling in,

[5] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, 3 Jan 68, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH; Cdr's Analysis, Battle of Dak To, Maj Gen William R. Peers, 10 Nov 67, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 42, I FFV, 15–21 Oct 67, 21 Oct 67, p. 14, box 1, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

General Thao might be planning a similar operation but on a larger scale. "More than ever," Rosson wrote, the enemy "needs a dramatic tactical victory to buoy the morale of his troops and to convince the man in the village of Communist invincibility."[6]

The enemy had long regarded the northwestern part of Kontum Province as a key strategic area in his plans for winning the war. The Dak To Valley, which ran west-east from Laos into Kontum Province, offered a natural invasion route for enemy forces. Featuring an old colonial road named Route 512 that ran the length of the valley, the Dak To corridor was one of the few places in western I Corps or II Corps that offered easy cross-border movement. If the enemy won control of the Dak To Valley, he would have a high-speed invasion route that could feed troops, supplies, and vehicles into the Central Highlands from depots on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On a more defensive note, North Vietnamese leaders wanted to prevent the allies from stockpiling enough supplies in the Dak To area to support a cross-border incursion, should General Westmoreland get the approval for such an operation. Finally, General Thao had specific orders from the North Vietnamese Ministry of Defense to wage a major battle in the Dak To area in the autumn of 1967 in order to wipe out one or more U.S. battalions, giving Hanoi a powerful propaganda victory that



A map from a 4th Infantry Division after action report showing the layout of the Dak To II base in early November 1967

[6] Both quotes from Msg, Rosson NHT 1391 to Westmoreland, 9 Nov 1967, sub: Evaluation and Assessment of Situation in II CTZ October 1967, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

could challenge Westmoreland's claims of progress and strike a blow at American morale (*see Map 14*).[7]

Allied defenses in the Dak To area consisted of three military camps and half a dozen firebases that lined Route 512 on the northern side of the valley. The first of those military camps, Dak To I, was a battalion-size facility located just west of Tan Canh, itself garrisoned by a South Vietnamese battalion from the 42d Regiment. Dating back to the early 1960s, Dak To I had a small airstrip that could accommodate helicopters and observation aircraft. Three kilometers farther to the west was a newer and larger facility called Dak To II whose airfield could handle C–130 aircraft. Fourteen kilometers to the west was the Ben Het Special Forces camp, where U.S. engineers were building a new firebase that would soon house 175-mm. batteries from the 52d Artillery Group capable of hitting targets across the border. South of Route 512, a narrow horizontal plain led to a series of high mountain ridges and narrow valleys that generally ran from north to south. Some of those valleys wound their way to the Cambodian border, giving the enemy several routes to the Dak To battlefield.[8]

General Peers began strengthening the Dak To bases on 28 October 1967. He replaced the 2d Battalion, 8th Infantry (Mechanized), currently defending the valley, while troops from the 299th Engineer Battalion improved Route 512 between Tan Canh and Ben Het, with straight-leg infantry units from the 1st Brigade that were more capable of fighting in the hills. Lt. Col. John P. Vollmer's 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, arrived at Dak To airfield on a flight of C–130s. Another flight delivered the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Glen D. Belnap, the next day. The brigade commander, Col. Richard H. Johnson, likewise established a forward headquarters at Dak To. General Rosson further reinforced him with the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, from the 173d Airborne Brigade, airlifted from the Tuy Hoa airfield in Phu Yen Province. Johnson settled the paratroopers into Ben Het. A trio of batteries from the 6th Battalion, 29th Artillery, rounded out Johnson's force.[9]

The Battle Begins, 2–6 November

The allies gained an unexpected windfall on 2 November when Sgt. Vu Huong from the *66th Regiment* turned himself in to a small government out-

[7] Senior Gen Chu Huy Man, *Thoi Soi Dong* [*Time of Upheaval*] *(*Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House*,* 2004), p. 464 (hereafter cited as *Time of Upheaval*).

[8] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 4, 56, 65–67, Encl 2. The information on Ben Het is in Interv, George L. MacGarrigle with Lt Gen William B. Rosson, 13 Sep 77, Historians files, CMH.

[9] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, p. 1, Encl 2; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 51, I FFV, 17–23 Dec 67, 23 Dec 67, an. C-3, box 1, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff , G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Interv, MacGarrigle with Rosson, 13 Sep 1977; Msg, Rosson NHT 1334 to Westmoreland, 28 Oct 67, Historians files, CMH; Hay, *Tactical and Material Innovations*, pp. 78–96; John A. Cash et al., *Seven Firefights in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1989), pp. 85–108.

post north of Dak To. Huong, a member of a reconnaissance team that had been scouting the terrain around Dak To, had overheard one of his officers saying that the *66th* and *32d Regiments* were spread out south and west of Dak To along with a battalion from the *40th Artillery Regiment*. The remainder of the artillery unit and the *24th Regiment* were apparently north of Dak To, as was the *174th Regiment.* According to Huong, the attack was to have taken place on 28 October, timed to coincide with the rocket attack on Pleiku City, but the commander of the *1st Division*, General An, had pushed back the date because his artillerymen at Dak To were not ready.[10]

Allied interrogators questioned his story. How, they wondered, could a mere sergeant know so much about the plans of the *1st Division*? Was he part of a ploy to mislead the allies? However, the details he provided fit well with what the Americans already knew or suspected. Peers and Rosson decided that Huong was telling the truth: the *B3 Front* was preparing a division-size attack on Dak To, hoping to engage U.S. forces on rugged, forest-covered terrain that negated some of the Americans' advantages in firepower and helicopter mobility.[11]

Hoping to preempt the artillery barrage that Huong had predicted, Peers ordered Colonel Johnson to send his infantry into action. The 1st Brigade commander directed Colonel Belnap and his 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, to investigate the long series of peaks known as "Rocket Ridge," a favorite North Vietnamese launching site, that lay to the south of Dak To I. Johnson instructed Colonel Vollmer and his 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, to search a smaller cluster of peaks to the west of Rocket Ridge known as Ngok Dorlang.

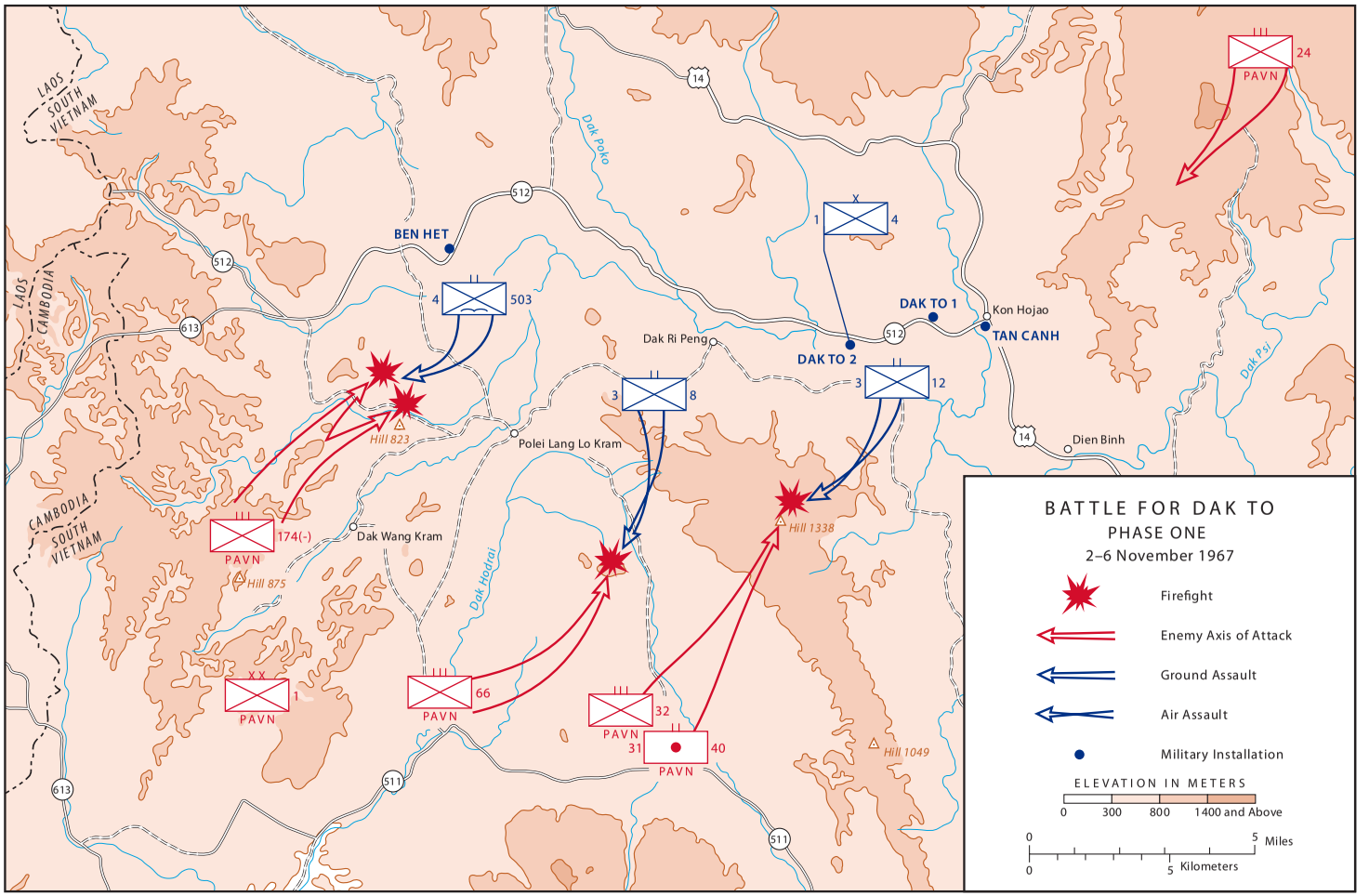
At I Field Force headquarters, General Rosson alerted the 173d Airborne Brigade headquarters in Phu Yen Province to be ready to join its 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, at Ben Het. When those reinforcements arrived, the 173d Airborne Brigade would move into the Dak Klong Valley, south of Ben Het, where Sergeant Huong said that his own unit, the *66th Regiment,* was located. General Vinh Loc agreed to place South Vietnamese troops to the north of Dak To in case the *24th Regiment* made its appearance. U.S. Special Forces units and long-range reconnaissance patrols from I Field Force would screen the area west of Ben Het. Four squadrons of F–100 Super Sabre fighter-bombers, flying from Phu Cat airfield in the lowlands west of Qui Nhon, remained on call for tactical air support.[12]

Colonel Johnson's infantry soon confirmed that enemy soldiers were on both principal ridgelines to the south of Dak To. On the morning of 3 November, helicopters flew two companies from the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, seven kilometers south to Rocket Ridge, landing them about 1,500 meters to the south of Hill 1338, an observation point that offered sweeping views of the Dak To Valley. As Colonel Vollmer's men set out for the peak,

[10] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 44, I FFV, 29 Oct–4 Nov 67, 4 Nov 67, an. C-1, pp. 1–2, box 1, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[11] Ibid.; Interv, MacGarrigle with Rosson, 20 Sep 77, Historians files, CMH.

[12] This section is based on AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, 9 Dec 67, pp. 5, 7–8, 10, Encl 6 to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div.


LAOS
SOUTH VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
LAOS
CAMBODIA
SOUTH VIETNAM
BEN HET
DAK TO 1
DAK TO 2
TAN CANH
Kon Hojao
Dak Ri Peng
Polei Lang Lo Kram
Dak Wang Kram
Dien Binh
Dak Poko
Dak Hodtai
Dak Psi
Hill 823
Hill 875
Hill 1338
Hill 1049
PAVN
174(-)
503
66
32
31
40
24
1
4
3
8
12
14
512
613
511
BATTLE FOR DAK TO
PHASE ONE
2–6 November 1967
Firefight
Enemy Axis of Attack
Ground Assault
Air Assault
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
300
800
1400 and Above
0
5
Miles
0
5
Kilometers

MAP 14

scanning the area for rocket or mortar positions as they climbed, heavy fire erupted from camouflaged bunkers farther up the slope. The soldiers from the 3d Battalion had no way of maneuvering around the bunkers that blocked the trail ahead, and found them impossible to knock out with grenades. After losing four killed, Colonel Vollmer pulled his companies back so air and artillery strikes could go to work. The North Vietnamese defenders endured several hours of punishment, including a bombing sortie that hit them with twenty-four 1,000-pound bombs equipped with delayed-action fuses, before they finally withdrew from their bunkers.

An examination of the partially destroyed bunkers showed Vollmer and his men why they had been so hard to knock out. Each fighting position was crowned on the top and sides by thick mahogany logs harvested from the surrounding forest, making them impervious to anything less than a direct hit from a bomb or artillery shell. It would have taken the North Vietnamese several days to build such bunkers, using only handsaws to carve through the iron-hard wood. The enemy had clearly come for a long fight.

At the same time that Colonel Vollmer's troops landed on Rocket Ridge, Colonel Belnap touched down on the eastern end of Ngok Dorlang with two companies from his 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry. Belnap's plan was to sweep west across Hills 882, 843, and 785, before reaching his final objective, Hill 724, some three kilometers away. Meanwhile, a third company from his battalion traveled by helicopter from Dak To to a spur of Rocket Ridge, Hill 1001, four kilometers to the north of where Belnap was positioned. The site

Men of the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, establish an outpost on Rocket Ridge.

known as Firebase 6 became operational later that day when the howitzer battery attached to the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, flew to the site and readied its weapons to support the two infantry companies across the valley.

As evening approached, Belnap's men received intermittent sniper fire from the surrounding woods. Pushing west, the two companies flushed out and killed eight North Vietnamese soldiers. Four soldiers from the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, also lost their lives that day. The two companies made their night encampment on Hill 882, the tallest point on Ngok Dorlang, and some two kilometers west of Hill 724.[13]

The fighting on Rocket Ridge and Ngok Dorlang appeared to confirm Sergeant Huong's story. On 4 November, Peers informed Rosson that the threat was credible enough to justify the deployment of additional troops from the 173d Airborne Brigade. The I Field Force commander agreed. The next day, Rosson made arrangements to fly the 1st and 2d Battalions from the 173d Airborne Brigade, most of its artillery and its brigade staff, from Phu Yen to Dak To. The brigade's 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry, which had just arrived in South Vietnam, stayed behind to protect Phu Yen's rice harvest. Rosson provided additional support through a steady apportionment of B–52 strikes. Soon the high-altitude bombers were hitting areas to the south and west of Dak To that Sergeant Huong said might contain staging areas for the *1st PAVN Division*.

Two days later, Brig. Gen. Leo H. Schweiter established his 173d Airborne Brigade command post at Ben Het, reporting to General Peers. Schweiter, who had seen action at Normandy and Bastogne during World War II and who had later fought in Korea, had gone on to command the 5th Special Forces Group before coming to Vietnam in August 1967 to lead the 173d Airborne Brigade. At the direction of General Peers, Schweiter ordered the commander of his 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, Lt. Col. David J. Schumacher, to secure Ben Het, and the commander of the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, Maj. James R. Steverson, to take over the defenses at Dak To I and II. That allowed Colonel Johnson's 1st Brigade to focus on Rocket Ridge and Ngok Dorlang, and permitted General Schweiter to use his remaining unit, the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, for a sweep of the Dak Klong Valley, which lay due south of Ben Het.

Schweiter directed the commander of the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, Lt. Col. James H. Johnson, to march three of his companies south about seven kilometers to secure Hill 823 at the mouth of the Dak Klong Valley. There, near the outer range of the artillery batteries firing from Ben Het, helicopters would deliver Company B with tools and materials to build a new firebase, followed by a battery of 105-mm. howitzers, to support further advances into the valley.

Colonel Johnson's three companies set out that morning, marching along parallel routes to sweep the area between Ben Het and Hill 823. The colonel monitored his troops from a helicopter. Company D, consisting of three platoons plus a platoon of Montagnards from Ben Het, reached an intermediary hill called Ngok Kom Leat just before noon. When one of the soldiers spotted

[13] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, p. 9.

General Schweiter
(shown as a major general)

communications wire snaking up the slope, Johnson instructed Company D to investigate. Cautiously, the soldiers and the accompanying platoon of Montagnards headed up Hill 823.

Finding fresh footprints and human waste halfway up the hill, Company D formed a defensive circle in a small clearing. The squad of Americans who crept out to search the neighboring area ran into North Vietnamese soldiers almost immediately. Both sides opened fire; the patrol returned to the perimeter with the enemy hot on their heels. The skirmish turned into a full-blown firefight with North Vietnamese soldiers closing on the U.S. position from several directions. Colonel Johnson ordered Companies A and C to join the fight as soon as possible, while he called in air and artillery strikes to defend the beleaguered unit.

With those supporting fires, Company D held the enemy at bay until Company A arrived several hours later. As it arrived, the North Vietnamese attackers melted away. The casualty roll in Company D totaled four killed and more than a dozen wounded. Company C, which had been delayed by enemy snipers, reached the hill the next morning. After searching the hill, finding twenty-eight enemy dead, the three companies from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, resumed their march toward Hill 823 where Company B was fighting its own battle.[14]

The previous afternoon, Colonel Johnson had decided to land Company B on Hill 823 to establish a firebase that could help his other men on Ngok Kom Leat. Company B touched down on Hill 823 at around 1430, following a day-long bombardment that cleared away the dense foliage on its summit and killed any North Vietnamese hiding there. The soldiers from Company B found discarded rucksacks and newly smashed rifle stocks on the summit, but no bodies. After posting several two-man listening teams farther down the hill, the remaining soldiers began digging foxholes and hacking at undergrowth to improve their fields of fire.[15]

[14] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, n.d., pp. 1–4, Historians files, CMH. For more on the 6 November battles, see Cash et al., *Seven Firefights in Vietnam,* pp. 85–108.

[15] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 15–16; and AAR, Battle of Dak To, Inf action on 6–8 Nov 67, Co B, 4th Bn, 503d Inf, Encl 2; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, pp. 8–10.

Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, check their bearings during a search for enemy positions.

The enemy appeared thirty minutes later, moving up the slope along a broad front while spraying the U.S. positions with AK47 assault rifles and RPD light machine guns. The initial burst of fire killed two Americans manning a listening post; five more of their comrades also died when they rushed down the hill to help their buddies. The remainder of Company B dove into foxholes and bomb craters around the summit and returned fire. Within minutes, howitzers from Ben Het began to pound the lower slopes, while a flight of fighter-bombers circled above, waiting for a chance to drop their ordnance.

Colonel Johnson had no good way of reinforcing his soldiers before nightfall. The other companies from his 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, were already committed to the fight at Ngok Kom Leat several kilometers to the north. Even if he had other troops, hostile fire would surely damage or destroy any helicopters that tried to land on the summit of Hill 823. Likewise, it was too risky to land troops onto the valley floor at the base of the hill without knowing the strength and disposition of the enemy. Company B had to hold the hill until morning.

The fight raged throughout the afternoon and continued into the night. Enemy soldiers crawled close enough to the American foxholes to hurl grenades; the men from Company B threw some back before they exploded, as well as some of their own grenades. The single U.S. mortar crew on Hill 823 lobbed shells at the enemy from the bottom of a large crater, their 81-mm. tube pointing nearly straight up as they brought fire to within one hundred meters of the U.S. perimeter. An AC–47 fixed-wing gunship circled the hill

throughout the night, dropping illumination flares and firing its six-barreled machine guns at the enemy-held woods on the lower slope. North Vietnamese fire slackened and then ceased shortly before dawn on the seventh. The morning roll call for Company B revealed that sixteen of its soldiers had been killed and more than twice that number wounded.

The enemy's retreat from Hill 823 permitted Colonel Johnson to finally bring in more troops. Helicopters delivered a company from the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, which joined Company B from Johnson's own 4th Battalion as it searched the bomb-scarred slopes. Patrols located eighty-nine enemy corpses and a large abandoned camp at the base of the hill. Documents recovered from the scene revealed that the dead belonged to the *66th Regiment*, confirming the presence of *1st Division* units in the Dak Klong Valley. With sizable North Vietnamese units also on Ngok Dorlang and Rocket Ridge to the east, the unfolding battle was shaping up to be the biggest clash in the highlands since the enemy had tried to overrun the Duc Co Special Forces camp in western Pleiku Province six months earlier.[16]

The Allied Counteroffensive, 7–15 November

The quiet that returned in the Dak Klong Valley on the seventh gave General Peers an opportunity to move the headquarters and support elements of the 173d Airborne Brigade from Ben Het to the older Dak To airfield just west of Tan Canh. Despite being farther from the Dak Klong Valley, Dak To I was more spacious, had a larger stock of supplies, and was less vulnerable to attack or temporary road closures on Route 512 (*Map 15*).[17]

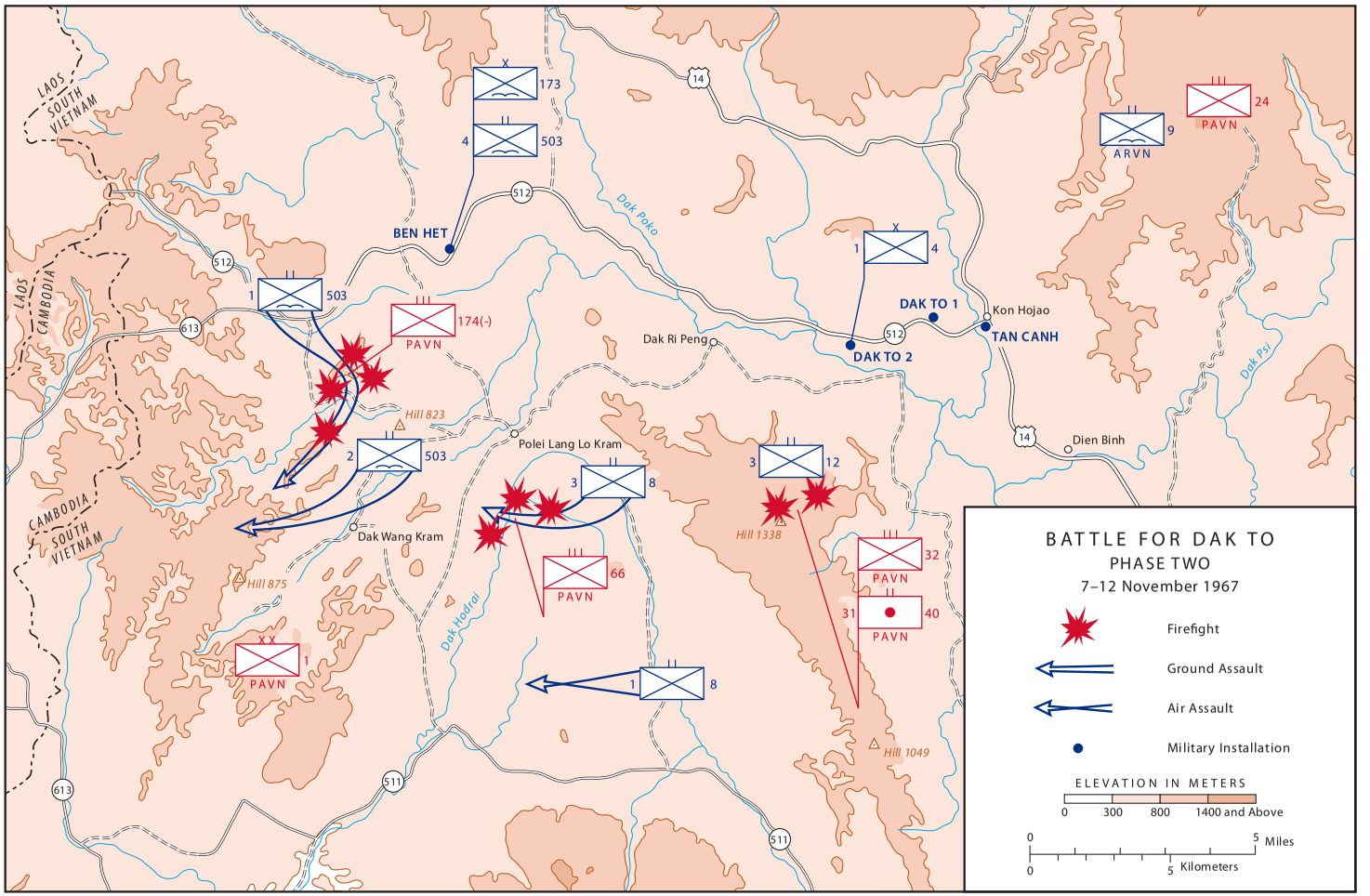
Using the intelligence his men had gathered during the last few days, Peers formally divided the battlefield south of Route 512 into two operational zones. The eastern zone belonging to Colonel Johnson's 1st Brigade stretched from Highway 14 and the Dak Hodrai River, encompassing both Rocket Ridge and Ngok Dorlang, where the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, were currently looking for the *32d Regiment* and the *31st Battalion* of the *40th Artillery Regiment*. The western zone between the Dak Hodrai River and the Cambodian border went to General Schweiter's 173d Airborne Brigade, which continued its search for the *66th Regiment* in the Dak Klong Valley. The *174th Regiment* from General An's *1st Division* had yet to make an appearance.[18]

General Peers also had to consider the independent *24th Regiment*, last reported somewhere to the north of Dak To. To prevent the North Vietnamese unit from disrupting the allied supply channel on Highway 1,

[16] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, 9 Dec 67, pp. 2, 7; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, p. 16; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, 10 Dec 67, p. 12.

[17] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 9–10.

[18] Cover Ltr, Maj Gen William R. Peers to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, and pp. 9–10; and Cdr's Analysis, Battle of Dak To, Peers, 10 Nov 67, pp. 66–68.


LAOS
SOUTH VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
LAOS
CAMBODIA
SOUTH VIETNAM
BEN HET
DAK TO 1
DAK TO 2
TAN CANH
Kon Hojao
Dien Binh
Dak Ri Peng
Polei Lang Lo Kram
Dak Wang Kram
Dak Poko
Dak Psi
Dak Hodrai
Hill 823
Hill 875
Hill 1338
Hill 1049
173
503
4
1
503
174(-)
PAVN
2
503
3
8
66
PAVN
XX
1
PAVN
1
8
3
12
32
PAVN
31
40
PAVN
ARVN
9
24
PAVN
1
4
14
512
613
511
BATTLE FOR DAK TO
PHASE TWO
7–12 November 1967
Firefight
Ground Assault
Air Assault
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
300
800
1400 and Above
0
5 Miles
0
5 Kilometers

MAP 15

General Loc borrowed the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion from the Joint General Reserve. U.S. aircraft flew the paratroopers from Saigon to Dak To, where they passed to the command of the South Vietnamese 24th Tactical Zone headquarters based at Kontum City. Arriving on the seventh, the paratroopers joined the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 42d Regiment, at Tan Canh for Operation Le Loi 45 in the hills northeast of Dak To.[19]

While the 173d Airborne Brigade and South Vietnamese forces completed their movements on 7 November, Col. Richard Johnson's 1st Brigade continued to search the hills south of Dak To. On the ninth, Colonel Vollmer's 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, discovered an enemy bunker complex on the lower slopes of Hill 1338. Mindful of the costly battle his men had fought three days earlier, Vollmer waited several hours, while air and artillery softened the target. His men took the position as well as a second bunker line farther up the hill the next day. The engagements cost the North Vietnamese at least twenty-five dead and the Americans seven killed. Behind the second line of bunkers, Vollmer's men found an abandoned mortar pit that was large enough to accommodate a 120-mm. mortar, a weapon with sufficient range to hit the Dak To bases.[20]

As three companies from the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, fought their way toward Hill 1338, Companies A and D from the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, continued their westward progress across Ngok Dorlang. As they headed toward Hill 724, Company B remained at Firebase 6 on Hill 1001, five kilometers to the northeast, to defend the battalion's howitzer battery.

Colonel Belnap's two companies received intermittent sniper fire from the front and either side as they descended the western spur of Hill 843, a low ridge that pointed toward Hill 724 about 1,500 meters away. The column of platoons moved cautiously as squads to the front and the flanks searched the adjoining woods. Companies A and D stopped that afternoon at the base of the spur, 700 meters away from their objective.

The Americans had just started to scratch out foxholes and fill sandbags when the enemy attacked. Mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades exploded in the trees and on the ground as several hundred North Vietnamese attacked down the slope that led to Hill 843. Belnap's men held their line, killing two flamethrower-equipped North Vietnamese soldiers before they could employ their weapons. Colonel Belnap called in artillery and air strikes, which relieved some of the pressure. After several hours of combat, the enemy withdrew at 2030. Eleven American soldiers had been killed and another thirty-eight wounded in the vicious assault. The enemy had also sustained heavy casualties, leaving behind 230 dead, 37 rifles, and 38 crew-served weapons. A wounded North Vietnamese soldier captured the next morning said that the attackers belonged to the *7th Battalion, 66th Regiment*, which had been marching to a new location when it had spotted the Americans and decided to give battle.[21]

[19] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 9–10.

[20] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, p. 10.

[21] Ibid., p. 9; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 45, I FFV, 5–11 Nov 67, 11 Nov 67, p. 3, box 1, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Troops from the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, pause during a sweep of the hills southwest of Dak To.

Colonel Belnap kept his battered units in place the next day as helicopters flew out their casualties and delivered supplies. The following morning, 9 November, he moved Company A back to Firebase 6, and flew in Companies B and C from the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry. The pair of companies stayed there on the western spur of Hill 843 with Company D, while air and artillery strikes pounded Hill 724, a bombardment that continued for the next two days. Meanwhile, General Peers airlifted the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, from Darlac Province to the Dak To II base where it could reinforce Belnap's battalion, if necessary.

On the morning of 11 November, Colonel Belnap sent his soldiers up the hill. The Americans encountered no resistance, finding only bomb craters and smashed trees at the top. Just as the final group of soldiers reached the summit, however, a mass of North Vietnamese troops emerged from the trees on the northern and western slopes of Hill 724. The enemy unleashed a torrent of bullets, killing several Americans who manned the outer listening screen. The surviving scouts ran up the hill, while their comrades at the summit laid down covering fire. North Vietnamese troops climbed to within twenty meters of the perimeter, a ragged arc of bomb craters, fallen logs, and broken stumps, before Belnap's men stopped their advance.

The fighting raged for the next eight hours as the North Vietnamese attempted to breach the U.S. line on the northwest slope. As the day wore on, however, the torrent of bombs, napalm canisters, and artillery shells that hit the enemy's staging areas began to tell. The assaults became less frequent and intense, and finally stopped as darkness gathered. The men from the 3d

Battalion, 8th Infantry, remained vigilant through the night, but the enemy did not return. When morning came, Belnap's companies located ninety-two North Vietnamese dead on the hill. Considering the weight of U.S. firepower the enemy had endured, his true losses may have been two or three times that number. The Americans had also sustained heavy losses; some twenty-five soldiers were killed, more than twice that number with serious or life-threatening wounds, and a host of other men with lesser injuries. For the moment, the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, was close to being combat ineffective.[22]

"As far as brutal fighting goes," General Peers told a group of reporters after the fight on Hill 724, "I would say this is the worst we've had." Even so, the division commander agreed to keep the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, in the field after Colonel Belnap reorganized his unit, replacing some of his losses with headquarters and rear-echelon personnel. Morale remained high, Belnap reported, and his men were eager to deliver some payback. The battalion spent the next few days searching the valley to the west of Hill 724, a known infiltration corridor. They found empty supply dumps and bunker complexes, including one large enough to support an entire battalion, but no sign of the enemy. Peers also moved the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. John H. Madison, into the Dak Hodrai Valley south of Hill 724, in case the *66th Regiment* attempted to retreat in that direction.[23]

Into the Dak Klong Valley

As General Schweiter spent the seventh of November moving his headquarters and support elements from Ben Het to Dak To I, his 1st and 4th Battalions of the 503d Infantry manning Hill 823 at the mouth of the Dak Klong Valley constructed a new artillery outpost known as Firebase 15. The base became fully operational on 9 November when helicopters delivered a battery of 105-mm. howitzers from the brigade's 3d Battalion, 319th Artillery. General Schweiter kept his two remaining batteries at Ben Het for the time being.[24]

When he spoke to General Peers on the ninth, Schweiter raised several concerns about pursuing the enemy down the Dak Klong Valley. Ten kilometers long and averaging a kilometer wide, the scrub-covered valley ran in a southwestern direction toward Cambodia, ending a mere six kilometers from the border where enemy reserves might be waiting. Staying to the high ground, his paratroopers would be marching up and down a succession of rugged hills across a densely forested and unexplored ridgeline. Schweiter had yet to locate the *174th Regiment*, which might hit his flank or rear as he

[22] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, p. 9.

[23] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 11, 25; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, pp. 8–10, 13; Peers quote from Edward Hymoff, *Fourth Infantry Division, Vietnam* (New York: M. W. Ladds Publishing, 1968), p. 133.

[24] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 1967, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 3–4; Edward F. Murphy, *Dak To: The 173d Airborne Brigade in South Vietnam's Central Highlands, June–November 1967* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1993), p. 115.

A CH–47A Chinook helicopter delivers supplies to soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, in the hills south of Dak To.

moved down the valley. His three paratrooper companies had to rely on air strikes for most of their supporting fire, as the shells fired by the 105-mm. howitzers at Firebase 15 had trouble penetrating the forest canopy, causing deadly tree bursts that endangered the Americans on the ground. Considering the quality of the North Vietnamese bunker systems found on Rocket Ridge, the enemy had enjoyed ample time to build similar strong points in the Dak Klong Valley.[25]

General Peers acknowledged those risks but decided they were worth taking. The present situation offered I Field Force with its best chance of trapping and destroying a major part of the *1st Division* since the Ia Drang campaign two years earlier, a fight that had knocked the enemy division out of action for a good six months. If the 173d Airborne Brigade moved swiftly enough, it could block the westward escape routes of the *32d* and *66th Regiments* still on Ngok Dorlang and Rocket Ridge. With that in mind, the 4th Division commander instructed General Schweiter to proceed down the western ridge of the Dak Klong Valley. Peers also promised to bring in more troops as soon as possible. He notified his 2d Brigade at Ban Me Thuot to prepare for an airlift to Dak To, and asked General Rosson for permission to use part of the 1st Cavalry Division, now operating in the lowlands of Binh Dinh Province, if the necessity arose.

[25] Interv, MacGarrigle with Rosson, 20 Sep 77.

After getting his orders from General Peers on the morning of the ninth, General Schweiter prepared the 173d Airborne Brigade for its southward march into the Dak Klong Valley. He flew Colonel Johnson's worn-out 4th Battalion back to Dak To for a rest, replacing it with Colonel Schumacher's 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry. Schweiter's 1st, 2d, and 3d Battalions spent the next two days at Firebase 15 as helicopters delivered supplies, creating a forward logistical base that could support the paratrooper companies for up to a week.

Needing to secure his right flank before proceeding south, Schweiter instructed Schumacher to explore a saddle-shaped ridge called Ngok Kring, two kilometers west of Firebase 15. Before heading out with Companies A, C, and D, he divided his force into two groups so he could search the ridge more quickly. Company B remained behind to defend the post.

Schumacher ordered Task Force BLUE, made up of Company A and a platoon of Company D, to reconnoiter Ngok Kring's southern peak, called Hill 889, and Task Force BLACK, made up of Company C and the remainder of Company D, to search the northern peak. The two groups would remain within 1,000 meters of one another, though the dense vegetation that covered Ngok Kring would make it difficult for them to see each other.

The two groups split apart when they reached the bowl of the valley. Task Force BLUE had just started to climb Hill 889 when an enemy platoon opened fire on it from concealed bunkers higher on the slope. The Americans pulled back so artillery and aircraft could soften the position. After waiting several hours, Task Force BLUE captured the line, a network of squad-size bunkers connected by an elaborate system of trenches. Later that afternoon and higher up the slope, Task Force BLUE encountered another bunker complex that it demolished with air strikes and artillery.[26]

On the northern side of the ridge, Task Force BLACK ran into even stronger resistance as it ascended the opposite peak of Ngok Kring. North Vietnamese bullets killed or wounded several paratroopers as the Company C commander, Capt. Thomas McElwain, led his men up the thickly wooded slope. U.S. casualties continued to mount, and after a time the paratroopers heard AK47 fire coming from their flanks and rear. Captain McElwain organized his men into a perimeter halfway up the slope and then radioed his battalion commander to describe his situation. Task Force BLACK's predicament was serious but not dire. Since Task Force BLUE had not completed its mission across the valley, Colonel Johnson decided to fly in reinforcements to relieve Captain McElwain. Shortly thereafter, Company C of the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, boarded helicopters at Dak To and headed for Ngok Kring.[27]

Landing on the open saddle between the two hills, the company from the 4th Battalion fought its way up the northern peak. Meanwhile, the situ-

[26] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 18–19.

[27] Ibid., pp. 15–16; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div; Intervs, MacGarrigle with Col Gerald T. Cecil, 7 Nov 89, Historians files, CMH; Capt Frank C. Foster Jr., 24th Mil Hist Det, with Co A, 4th Bn, 503d Inf, Encl 4 to Dak To Combat After Action Intervs, Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, Historians files, CMH.

Paratroopers from the 173d Airborne Brigade advance through woods in the Dak Klong Valley.

ation for Task Force BLACK continued to worsen. With enemy soldiers hugging his perimeter from all directions, Captain McElwain could not bring down effective air and artillery support without endangering his own men. Desperately, they hung on for several more hours until the relief column from the 4th Battalion finally broke through their perimeter. A ragged cheer rang out from the survivors of Task Force BLACK, many of whom were too wounded or exhausted to even stand up. The North Vietnamese soon melted away, allowing the Americans to tally their losses and police the battlefield. Only a handful of men in Task Force BLACK had escaped injury; Captain McElwain's command had lost a total of 26 soldiers killed and 154 wounded. The Americans counted 184 dead North Vietnamese on the hill and captured 2 enemy soldiers.[28]

Having secured his right flank at Ngok Kring, Schweiter pressed ahead with the southward advance into the Dak Klong Valley. On the afternoon of 11 November, helicopters delivered three companies from Major Steverson's 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, onto a hill three kilometers south of Firebase 15 that had previously housed a firebase. Their landing on Hill 845 was unop-

[28] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 19–21; Interv, Foster with Co C. 4th Bn, 503d Inf, n.d., Encl 4 to Dak To Combat After Action Intervs, Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, Historians files, CMH.

posed. The next morning, two of Steverson's companies began rebuilding Firebase 16 as Company A went looking for the enemy.

Descending the hill's southwestern slope, Company A had gone only 500 meters when it came under fire from the peak ahead. Major Steverson fed another company into the battle but his troops were unable to take the enemy-held summit. The 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, lost six killed and forty-four wounded in the unsuccessful assault. A captured North Vietnamese soldier claimed that two companies of the *3d Battalion, 174th Regiment*, were on that ridge, the first indication that all three regiments from the *1st PAVN Division* were committed to the fight.[29]

Learning that news, General Rosson decided to strengthen Peers' hand. On 12 November, the I Field Force commander ordered the commander of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, Col. Donald V. Rattan, to move two of his airmobile battalions and supporting artillery batteries from Binh Dinh Province to Dak To. Given recent reports that the *95B PAVN Regiment* planned to attack Special Forces camps in southern Kontum and northern Pleiku Provinces, Rattan moved his 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, to Kontum City to serve as a ready reaction force. He put his other unit, the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, into the lower Dak Hodrai Valley southeast of the 173d Airborne Brigade's area of operations to block a major withdrawal route to Cambodia.

General Rosson also gave his 4th Division commander permission to redeploy elements from his 2d Brigade currently operating near Ban Me Thuot. General Peers flew in the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, which Colonel Johnson landed on a ridge three kilometers southeast of Hill 724 to prevent the enemy from withdrawing through the Dak Sir Valley. North of Tan Canh, General Loc reinforced the 9th Airborne Battalion with the 3d Battalion, 42d Infantry, which continued the hunt for the *24th Regiment* under the new operational name Le Loi 46.[30]

Back in the Dak Klong Valley, Major Steverson made another effort on 13 November to seize the enemy-held ridge south of Firebase 16. Companies A and B from the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, brought along several 90-mm. recoilless rifles, weapons they normally kept in the rear because of their weight, in order to knock out North Vietnamese bunkers. Leading the way, the 2d Platoon from Company B used the weapons to destroy the first bunker they spotted. The blast produced a torrent of hostile fire from the woods ahead, forcing the recoilless rifle crews to seek cover. Enemy pressure intensified, isolating the 2d Platoon from the main body. When the remainder of Company B finally reached the embattled platoon, most of its members had already been killed or wounded.

The two companies held the attackers at bay until they withdrew that evening. Losses for the 2d Battalion came to twenty-one killed and twenty wounded. When Steverson's men moved up the slope the next morning, they discovered forty-eight enemy bodies plus several wounded soldiers from the *3d Battalion, 174th Regiment*. The prisoners said they had been marching

[29] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, p. 15.
[30] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, p. 11.

north to attack some unspecified target when they encountered Americans coming the opposite way. They knew nothing about the whereabouts of the regiment's other two battalions.[31]

The Pursuit Continues: 15–18 November

As General Peers maneuvered his combined force of three infantry battalions, three airborne battalions, and one airmobile battalion across the battlefield south of Dak To in an effort to trap the *1st Division*, the enemy delivered a punishing blow to his logistical system. On the morning of 15 November, a North Vietnamese mortar crew concealed in the Dak Sir Valley between Rocket Ridge and Ngok Dorlang opened fire on the main Dak To base, choosing a moment when four C–130 transport aircraft were either parked on the airfield or taxiing on the runway. The opening salvo hit two of the big airplanes, setting them afire. Shell fragments damaged the third aircraft, but the crew got its engines going and flew the transport to safety. So did a fourth C–130 that had just landed; its pilot spun the aircraft around at the end of the runway and took off in the opposite direction, unscathed by the shells that chased his aircraft. General Peers, who happened to be flying overhead in his helicopter when the attack began, marveled at the pilot's skill and good fortune. "It was an outstanding act of gallantry," Peers later remarked. "I sent a note to [the Seventh Air Force's Commander] General [William W.] Momyer about his pilot and crew chief" (*see Map 16*).[32]

Artillery fire and helicopter gunships silenced the mortar crew a short time later, but not before one of the shells hit a large ammunition dump that logisticians had established in a field to handle the overflow from the main storage area. The initial explosion set off more explosions that soon ignited the entire ammunition dump. The garrison found it could not battle the flames because the blast had destroyed Dak To's main water line. It was not until the next day that soldiers got the fire under control.

A damage assessment reported the loss of 1,100 tons of ammunition. The blast had destroyed 30,000 artillery shells and several huge bladders, each filled with 10,000 gallons of aviation fuel. Unexploded ordnance was strewn across half the base. The runway was pockmarked with craters and littered with jagged, tire-shredding pieces of metal. It would take several days of frantic work to get the airfield back in action.[33]

Fortunately for Peers, the enemy launched no further artillery attacks on Dak To and his land supply route, Highway 19, remained open. Sufficient stores remained on hand to support the units in the field, and by 20 November

[31] Rpt, Prisoner Interrogation (PI), 172d Mil Intel Det, 173d Abn Bde, 172-382-67, 14 Nov 67; and Rpt, Captured Documents, 172d Mil Intel Det, 173d Abn Bde, no. 10, 15 Nov 67. Both in Encl 5 to Dak To Combat After Action Interviews, Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde.

[32] Quote from Presentation, MACV Cdrs Conf, Maj Gen William R. Peers, 3 Dec 67, Historians files, CMH. AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 41–42; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, p. 17.

[33] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 41–44.

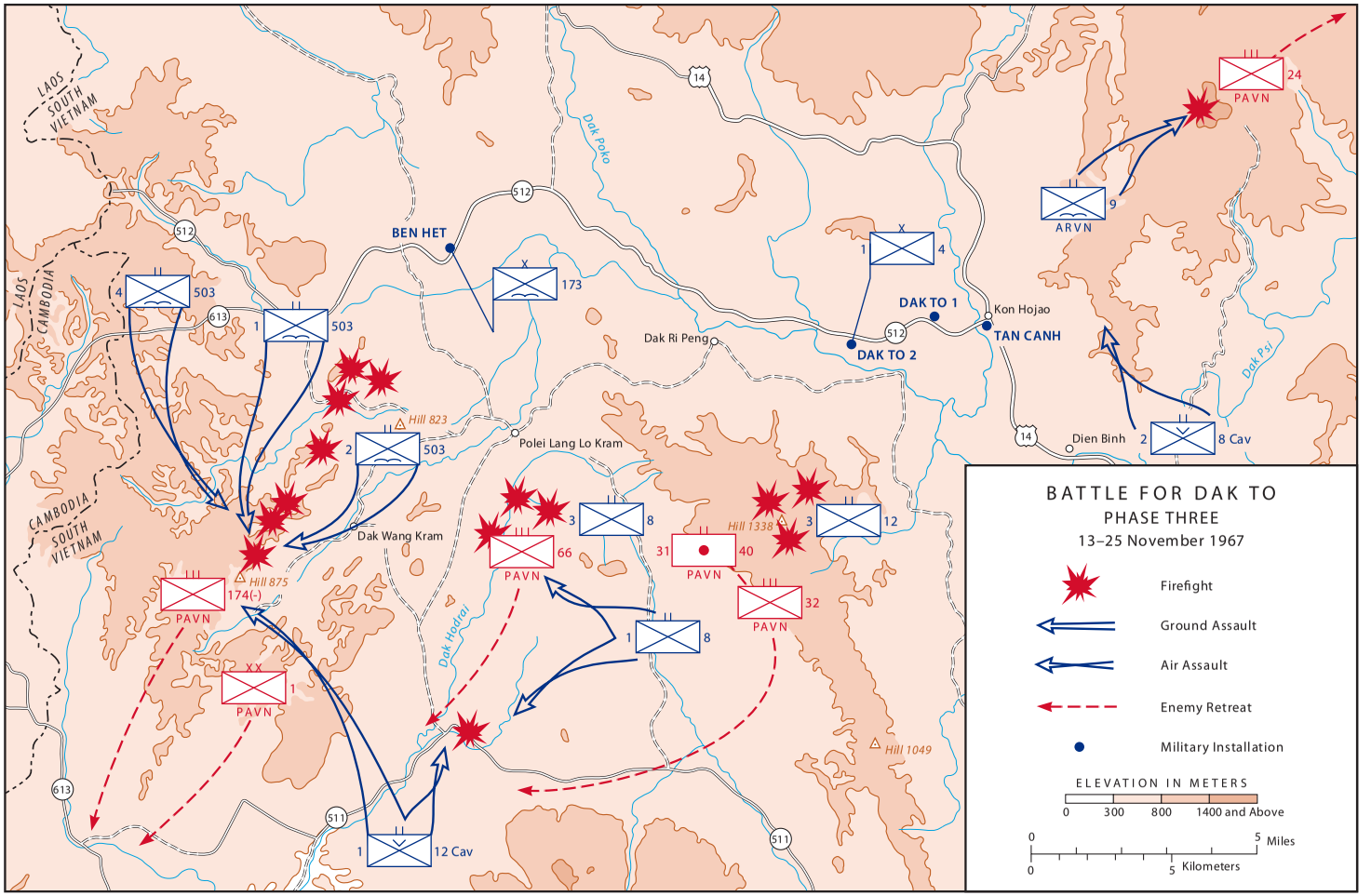
An aerial view of the Dak To II airfield on 15 November 1967, showing smoke plumes rising from several destroyed C–130s.

the daily truck convoys from Qui Nhon had delivered enough ammunition and supplies to replace all of the lost materiel. The airfield also returned to action, though Peers insisted that only one C–130 be allowed on the ground at any one time.[34]

As service troops repaired the damage at Dak To, Colonel Vollmer's 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, continued its search of Rocket Ridge. Pushing north toward Hill 1338 and fighting their way through several positions, the three U.S. companies finally reached the summit on 17 November. The fifty-nine North Vietnamese dead they found during those several days all belonged to the *32d Regiment*.

Northeast of Dak To, the South Vietnamese task force finally located its quarry, the *24th Regiment*, the final *B3 Front* unit believed to be in the area. The initial contact happened on 14 November when the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 42d Infantry, ran into a line of fortifications as it ascended Hill 1416, ten kilometers northeast of Tan Canh. Coming forward to lead the assault, the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion sustained heavy losses as it tried to advance up the steep slope against a well-entrenched opponent. The next afternoon, II Corps commander General Vinh Loc flew in the 2d

[34] Ibid., pp. 17–18; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 8th Transportation Gp (Motor Transport), n.d., pp. 3–4, box 39, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.


LAOS
SOUTH VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
LAOS
CAMBODIA
SOUTH VIETNAM
BEN HET
Dak Poko
Dak Ri Peng
Polei Lang Lo Kram
Dak Wang Kram
Dak Hodrai
Hill 823
Hill 875
Hill 1338
Hill 1049
DAK TO 1
DAK TO 2
Kon Hojao
TAN CANH
Dak Psi
Dien Binh
503
173
174(-)
66
8
12
40
32
24
9
8 Cav
12 Cav
PAVN
ARVN
BATTLE FOR DAK TO
PHASE THREE
13–25 November 1967
Firefight
Ground Assault
Air Assault
Enemy Retreat
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
300
800
1400 and Above
0
5
Miles
0
5
Kilometers

MAP 16

and 3d Airborne Battalions from the Joint General Reserve, sending the battered 9th Battalion back to Saigon. It took four days of heavy, uphill fighting before the South Vietnamese paratroopers broke through the enemy's defenses. U.S. advisers counted 247 enemy dead and 70 captured weapons, while the South Vietnamese task force had sustained total losses of 47 killed and 182 wounded. Underscoring the nearly point-blank range of the battle, an estimated thirty-one of the South Vietnamese casualties had come from allied supporting fires.[35]

As the *24th Regiment* broke contact and disappeared from Hill 1416, the enemy on Rocket Ridge and Ngok Dorlang also began withdrawing. Between the fifteenth and twentieth, soldiers from the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, discovered a network of abandoned fortifications and base camps as they searched their sectors. With the Dak To campaign now entering its third week, General Peers wondered if the *32d* and *66th Regiments* had finally reached the limits of their endurance.[36]

Hill 875: 18–24 November

Seeing signs that the *32d* and *66th Regiments* were beginning to withdraw toward the border, Peers knew that he would have to move quickly if he wanted to intercept them. Relying on units drawn from his 2d Brigade and the 1st Cavalry Division to block their southern escape routes, the 4th Division commander counted on the 173d Airborne Brigade to block the western routes. The resulting cordon would be imperfect—there was simply too much ground to cover—but the blocking units still stood a chance of inflicting further losses on the enemy.

On the eighteenth, General Schweiter resumed his push down the final stretch of the Dak Klong Valley. He ordered his 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, to search Hill 882, two kilometers to the west of Firebase 16, and for the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, to sweep Hill 875 two kilometers to its south.

That afternoon, Colonel Schumacher ascended Hill 882 with Companies A, C, and D from the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry. His men were still catching their breath when a lookout spotted an enemy squad approaching from the west. Taking cover behind fallen logs, the Americans opened fire. The enemy replied in kind, his volume of fire steadily increasing as more North Vietnamese troops arrived from the west, and as enemy mortar crews joined the action.[37]

Colonel Schumacher called in air and artillery strikes, which suppressed the Communist mortars and eased the pressure on his perimeter. The attacks grew less intense and then stopped a few hours later. All told, the 1st Battalion,

[35] AAR, Advisory Det, 24th Special Tactical Zone, 12 Dec 67, p. 5, Encl 9 to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div.

[36] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, pp. 11–12.

[37] Interv, Foster with Co. A, 1st Bn, 503d Inf, n.d., Encl 6 to Dak To Combat After Action Intervs, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, Historians files, CMH; Murphy, *Dak To*, p. 217.

Men from the 173d Airborne Brigade watch for enemy soldiers on Hill 875.

503d Infantry, had sustained a loss of six soldiers killed and another twenty-nine wounded. The following morning, the Americans discovered fifty-one dead enemy soldiers from the *3d Battalion*, *174th Regiment*.[38]

Meanwhile, back on the eighteenth when Colonel Schumacher's battalion had set out west toward Hill 882, a second task force, composed of Companies A, C, and D from the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, and a company of Montagnard soldiers, had headed south under Major Steverson's command toward Hill 875.

As the task force approached the hill, the South Vietnamese irregulars split away from the main force in order to circle around and investigate the south side of Hill 875. The Montagnards came under heavy fire as they ascended the slope. The fire appeared to be coming from a line of well-concealed bunkers up ahead. Pulling back for a few hours to let air strikes and artillery go to work, the Montagnard troops had no better luck when they advanced a second time. Seeing no way to outflank the bunker line—the eastern and western slopes of Hill 875 fell away sharply, and appeared nearly impossible to climb—the Montagnard unit had formed a perimeter at the base of the hill

[38] AAR, A-1-503d Inf, 17–19 Nov 67, 10 Dec 67, Encl 4 to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde.

and awaited further instructions. It would be up to the 330 paratroopers from Major Steverson's 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, to take the hill.[39]

On the morning of 19 November, the battalion started up the northern side of the hill with Company C on the right or western flank, Company D on the left or eastern side, and Company A following in reserve. Progress was slow because the slope was overgrown with bamboo and scrub brush. The bombardment the day before had also knocked over many trees that the soldiers now had to clamber over.[40]

At 1030, three shots rang out. The point man from Company D fell dead. Moments later, a medic met the same fate when he tried to reach the downed soldier. Those first shots soon became a steady roar as dozens of hidden enemy soldiers opened fire from positions on the hill above. The hidden fortifications remained almost invisible to the paratroopers, betrayed only by the flash of a muzzle burst or a fleeting glimpse of an enemy soldier as he rose to hurl a grenade down the slope.

With the battle now joined in earnest, the soldiers from Companies C and D dropped their packs so they could maneuver more easily. Recoilless rifle rounds and rocket-propelled grenades rained down the slope, some of them skipping off the ground before bursting among the Americans. Unwary paratroopers triggered booby-trapped 82-mm. mortar rounds and Chinese directional mines that the enemy had hidden in the undergrowth. Faced with mounting casualties and growing disorganization, the commander of Company C, Captain Harold J. Kaufman, ordered his men to pull back. Companies C and D threw smoke grenades to mark their positions and then hunkered down, while artillery and air strikes began hitting the Communist positions.[41]

A half hour later, the two companies resumed their advance up the tree-splintered slope. Although several more troopers went down to enemy fire, the Americans pressed on and overran the first line of bunkers and trenches, tossing grenades before moving farther up the hill. To their surprise, a North Vietnamese soldier emerged from one of the bunkers and opened fire. Although the paratroopers killed the man and then threw more grenades into his bunker, a second enemy soldier emerged from the same bunker a short time later. It became clear to the paratroopers that the enemy's fortifications included tunnels that connected these bunkers to other positions farther up the hill. Later investigations also revealed that many bunkers contained a

[39] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 23–28; Murray, *Dak To,* pp. 233–301; Interv, Foster with Co. A, 2d Bn, 503d Inf, n.d., Dak To Combat After Action Intervs, Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, Historians files, CMH.

[40] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde, 10 Dec 67, p. 2, Encl 5 to Dak To Combat After Action Intervs, 6 Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, Historians files, CMH; Senior Col Nguyen Quang Dat and Tan Hanh, eds., *Mot So Tran Danh Trong Khang Chien Chong Phap, Khang Chien Chong My, 1945–1975 (Tap 1)* [*A Number of Battles During the Resistance Wars Against the French and the Americans, 1945–1975, vol. I*] (Hanoi: Military History Institute of Vietnam, n.d.), p. 112 (hereafter cited as *A Number of Battles During the Resistance Wars*).

[41] Dat and Hanh, eds., *A Number of Battles During the Resistance Wars*, pp. 110–12; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde, p. 4, Encl 5.

U-shaped trench to the rear into which its defenders could crawl to protect themselves from exploding grenades.

By noon, the rising number of casualties in Companies C and D and the exertion of climbing the steep, log-strewn slope brought the attack to a standstill. Major Steverson pulled his troops back a few hundred meters so fighter-bombers and artillery could pound the enemy bunker line. When the colonel resumed his attack two hours later, the North Vietnamese seemed unaffected by the bombardment.

While the latest attack got under way, Major Steverson ordered Company A, his reserve force, to clear a landing zone that would allow him to evacuate his casualties. A hovering helicopter dropped off axes and chainsaws to speed the process, but the work came to a stop when a ripple of gunfire rang out from the picket line farther down the hill. It was later revealed that the four-man security detail had opened fire on a mass of North Vietnamese soldiers advancing up the slope. Return fire killed one American and wounded two more; the survivors headed up the slope, tossing grenades to slow the enemy and yelling an alarm to those above.

The commander of Company A, Capt. Michael J. Kiley, formed a defensive line with his 1st Platoon and sent messengers to retrieve his 2d and 3d Platoons that were collecting wounded men higher on the hill. Moments later, mortar rounds began to detonate across the half-finished landing zone, wounding Captain Kiley and most of his command group.[42]

Despite his injuries, the captain remained in command as his 3d Platoon reached his position and joined the defense. His 2d Platoon, meanwhile, was still descending the slope when disaster struck. Without warning, a company from the *1st Battalion*, *174th Regiment*, emerged from the trees on the western side of the hill and slammed into the platoon. It was later revealed that the North Vietnamese soldiers had climbed the precipitous western slope via a hidden trail they had made using wooden steps. The attackers drove a wedge between the 2d Platoon and the remainder of Company A. They overran the command group, killing everyone there, including Captain Kiley. The remnants of Company A withdrew up the hill, bringing all the wounded they could carry and yelling "Friendly, friendly!" so the soldiers from Companies C and D would not fire on them by mistake.[43]

Linking up at around 1530, the three companies of the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, established a tight perimeter about one hundred meters in diameter. They took cover behind tree stumps and fallen logs, or used helmets and combat knives to scrape out shallow foxholes. The soldiers placed all of the dead or seriously wounded men near the center of the perimeter where the senior U.S. officer, Captain Kaufman from Company C, stationed his command post. They then hunkered down as air and artillery pounded the surrounding forest.

[42] AAR, 2d Bn, 503d Inf Contact of 19–23 Nov 67, 6 Dec 67, pp. 5–6, Historians files, CMH.

[43] Dat and Hanh, eds., *A Number of Battles During the Resistance Wars*, p. 108; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 5–7, Encl 5.

During pauses in the bombardment, helicopters dropped supplies to the trapped soldiers, many of whom were down to their last few magazines. Some of the ammunition, medicine, and water landed outside the perimeter, and hostile fire damaged six helicopters so badly that they had to be grounded. Nevertheless, enough supplies got through to keep the paratroopers alive.

Back at Dak To, General Schweiter received permission from General Peers to fly three companies from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, out to Firebase 16 where they could join the fight. A flight of CH–47 helicopters delivered Company B that evening; Colonel Johnson's Companies A and D were scheduled to arrive the next morning.

The situation on Hill 875 took a dramatic turn for the worse at 1900 when a U.S. Air Force F–4C Phantom dropped a 750-pound bomb that landed short, hitting the middle of the U.S. position. The explosion killed forty-two paratroopers, including Captain Kaufman, and wounded another forty-five, some of them for the second or third time that day.[44]

Among the dead was the 173d Airborne Brigade's chaplain, Maj. Charles J. Watters. Throughout the day he had moved among the troops, providing words of encouragement to the living, attending to the wounded, and administering the last rites to the dying. Early on, when he had spotted a wounded paratrooper standing on the front line in a state of shock, the chaplain had run into the thick of battle, hoisted the man onto his back, and carried him to safety. He then had dashed through enemy fire a second time to retrieve a soldier who had collapsed only a few meters from a North Vietnamese trench. Later that afternoon when Companies C and D pulled back to form a perimeter with Company A, he had noticed that several injured paratroopers had been inadvertently left behind. Shrugging off attempts to restrain him, he made three more trips into no-man's-land to carry wounded men to safety. Finally satisfied that every American still alive was inside the perimeter, Watters was busy helping the medics and ministering to the dying when the errant bomb hit. He would posthumously receive the Medal of Honor for his actions that day.[45]

With Kaufman's death, the acting commander of Company D, 1st Lt. Bartholomew O'Leary, took charge of the battalion. After reorganizing his companies, he reported back to headquarters that only three other officers were still fit for duty. He himself was seriously wounded. Nonetheless, O'Leary predicted that the battalion would hold out until morning unless the enemy launched an all-out attack. To everyone's relief, the *1st* and *2d Battalions* of the *174th Regiment* caused little trouble that night.[46]

The next morning, 20 November, O'Leary's men began cutting trees and clearing brush, eventually hacking out a landing zone just large

[44] Rpt, CHECO, Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), 21 Jun 68, sub: Battle of Dak To, p. 13, copy in Historians files, CMH.

[45] Interv, Foster with Co A, 2d Bn, 503d Inf, n.d.; Daily Staff Journal, 2d Bn, 503d Inf, 19 Nov 1967, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde, p. 27.

[46] Daily Staff Journal, 2d Bn, 503d Inf, 19 Nov 67; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde, p. 24.

Troops from the 173d Airborne Brigade take cover on the northern face of Hill 875.

Members of the 4th Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade, load wounded aboard a UH–1D helicopter following the battle for Hill 875.

enough to accommodate a helicopter. Enemy soldiers remained close by, and as one paratrooper would later remark, "We secured half the LZ [landing zone] and the North Vietnamese Army the other half." Enemy fire drove off the first several helicopters that tried to land. At 1600, one finally got through, delivering medical supplies and several officers from Company B of the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry. Bullets struck the aircraft as it departed, but the Huey made it back to base carrying five critically wounded soldiers.[47]

Shouts of relief rang out from O'Leary's paratroopers an hour later when they spotted Company B from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, making its way up the hill. The survivors welcomed their rescuers with open arms and some with tears in their eyes. Their spirits rose even higher around midnight when Colonel Johnson arrived with Companies A and C.[48]

Colonel Johnson, now in command of the Americans on Hill 875, brought with him several flamethrowers, two 81-mm. mortars, and a batch of M72 66-mm. light antitank weapons that General Schweiter had flown out from Dak To. Some of Johnson's men knew how to use the M72s, but the flamethrowers were a different story. One or two men per platoon were shown how to operate the cumbersome devices and told to employ them as best they could.[49]

The 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, began its attack on the afternoon of 21 November. The battalion advanced on a three-company front—Company A on the left, Company B in the center, and Company C on the right. The North Vietnamese defenders, seemingly unaffected by the preparatory air and artillery strikes that had lasted for around eight hours, met the advancing soldiers with a storm of fire. The M72 rocket launchers that the paratroopers carried proved to be nearly useless against bunkers, most of which had firing slits only fifteen centimeters wide and were impervious to all but a direct hit on the aperture. The flamethrowers fared no better because most of the men operating them were reluctant to stand up in full view of the enemy for the several seconds required to fire the jet of burning fuel. A few who did use them were not able to saturate the bunkers with enough napalm to knock them out.

As darkness set in several hours later, Johnson pulled his men back to their starting line. As the paratroopers headed down the slope, many of them yelled curses at the North Vietnamese to vent their anger. Johnson's 4th Battalion had suffered greatly—15 killed and 108 wounded. Some of the injured men could be patched up and returned to duty right away, but even so Johnson's battalion had effectively lost around 20 percent of its strength in just one day.

Seeing firsthand the difficulty his men had faced, Johnson recommended that Schweiter pull the U.S. forces back so a B–52 strike could annihilate the summit. Schweiter declined. The minimum safe distance for a B–52 strike

[47] Interv, Foster with Co A, 2d Bn, 503d Inf, n.d., Encl 7.
[48] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, p. 2, Encl 6.
[49] Ibid., pp. 3–4.

was 3,000 meters, and he feared that the North Vietnamese on Hill 875 would slip away if he pulled his paratroopers back to Firebase 16. The general did, however, get authorization for B–52s to pummel suspected staging areas to the west and northwest of Hill 875 where reserve elements of the *174th Regiment* might be hiding.[50]

Despite his determination to take the hill, Schweiter could not ignore the worsening situation of his brigade. By the morning of 22 November, the 2d and 4th Battalions of the 503d Infantry had lost a total of 86 killed and 130 wounded who required medical evacuation.

General Peers tried to relieve some of the pressure on the paratroopers by turning the southern side of the mountain that the Montagnard scout company had been monitoring over to the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, a unit he had just flown in from Darlac Province. Companies A and D from the battalion made an unopposed landing at the base of the hill that afternoon. On instructions from General Schweiter, they moved halfway up the southern slope and established a blocking position for the evening. The Americans received occasional mortar rounds but encountered no North Vietnamese that day.[51]

At first light on the morning of 23 November—Thanksgiving Day in the United States—Schweiter sent the 2d and 4th Battalions, 503d Infantry, up the north side of the hill, while the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, did the same on the reverse slope. This time the paratroopers only faced sporadic mortar and rifle fire as they trudged up the ruined landscape. After eliminating a few North Vietnamese diehards from the trenches that ringed the summit, Schweiter's soldiers reached the top of Hill 875 at around 1130. Both exultant and relieved, many men cried out "Airborne" and "Geronimo" as they reached the top. Companies A and D from the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, came up the opposite slope a short time later, having encountered almost no resistance. That afternoon, helicopters delivered a hot Thanksgiving dinner.

When the Americans finished policing up the battlefield, they found a total of 298 North Vietnamese dead from the *1st* and *2d Battalions*, *174th Regiment*. As for the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, had lost a total of ninety-five men killed between 19 and 23 November, while the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, had lost eighteen killed during the same period. The following morning, General Schweiter withdrew his worn-out paratroopers from the hill, relinquishing it and Firebase 16 to the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry.[52]

In the week that followed, the 173d Airborne Brigade regrouped at Ben Het, while the 4th Division's 1st Brigade continued to search the ridges and valleys south of Route 512. The effort turned up a handful of North Vietnamese stragglers and numerous abandoned camps. Many of the enemy's

[50] Ibid.

[51] Interv, Capt Peter L. Sawin, 29th Mil Hist Det, with Lt Col Harold B. Birch, 1 Jul 68, Vietnam Interview Tape (VNIT) 170, CMH.

[52] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 28–31; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, p. 35.

Soldiers from the 173d Airborne Brigade occupy North Vietnamese trenches on Hill 875.

supply depots, sleeping areas, and command posts were built into the sides of steep hills and lined from floor to ceiling with thick logs. Some still contained food, equipment, and ammunition that the enemy had abandoned.[53]

The South Vietnamese landed one final blow against the retreating enemy. On 29 November, the South Vietnamese 2d and 3d Airborne Battalions engaged two battalions of the *24th Regiment* northeast of Tan Canh, killing 109 Communists while losing 10 of their own men. The North Vietnamese replied by rocketing and mortaring Firebase 12 near Ben Het on the evening of 1 December. With that parting shot, the month-long battle came to a close. Over the next two months, the U.S. airborne units returned to their regular duties on the coast, while the *B3 Front* rested and refitted its regulars for the next phase of the winter-spring campaign.[54]

Results and Interpretations

Allied commanders regarded the Dak To campaign as a victory, albeit one with a bitter aftertaste. General Peers had sent the better part of three infantry and cavalry brigades to trap and destroy the *1st PAVN*

[53] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, pp. 13–14; Hymoff, *Fourth Infantry Division, Vietnam,* pp. 132–33.

[54] AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div, pp. 21–22; and Encl 4 to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 1st Bde, 4th Inf Div; AAR, Opn MacArthur, 1st Bde, 1st Air Cav Div, n.d., pp. 6–7, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, I FFV, p. 12; Interv, Sawin with Birch, 1 Jul 1968, p. 41.

Division in the hills south of Dak To, resulting in the most savage and prolonged encounter of the war to date. Although the 173d Airborne Brigade had taken a beating, the allies had captured all of their objectives and inflicted sore losses on the enemy. The trio of South Vietnamese airborne battalions that had taken Hill 1416 also showed great aplomb under difficult circumstances. "The combined U.S. and [South Vietnamese Army] enemy body count of 1,644 is by itself proof that the enemy suffered an enormous defeat," Peers reported following the battle. "However, his real defeat lies in the fact that he was caught while preparing for an attack that he calculated would demonstrate his ability to take and hold an area and give him the victory he so desperately needs. . . . Instead, he was suddenly on the defensive and after more than three weeks of savage fighting was sent limping back to his sanctuaries."[55]

The North Vietnamese, for their part, were equally upbeat about the battle. Radio Hanoi asserted that the allies had committed a total of seven divisions to the fight and had lost 2,800 dead. According to a Communist propaganda pamphlet meant for South Vietnamese soldiers in the highlands, "American and Puppet Troops in Saigon and Kontum usually brag and flatter you by telling you: 'calm down because you have the 173d US Airborne Brigade to fight along with you.' This so-called Allied Force . . . was beaten to death in Dak To."[56]

A more objective look at the numbers tells a different story. Rather than employing seven divisions as the enemy claimed, the allies had committed only ten battalions, several of which had done little or no fighting. U.S. casualties totaled 283 killed and 1,188 wounded, while the South Vietnamese had sustained 61 killed, 253 wounded, and 14 missing. By contrast, even if the enemy had incurred only half of the 1,663 killed and captured and more than 2,400 wounded the allies claimed, he had still suffered far more grievous losses than his opponents.[57]

Testifying to the efficacy of U.S. air power in this battle, North Vietnamese prisoners later revealed that many of their casualties had come from the 257 B–52 strikes flown during the battle. A soldier from the *66th Regiment* estimated that B–52s had killed 200 men in his regiment alone and wreaked similar havoc on other units. The bombing strikes had also proved unusually effective against the enemy's command and control

[55] Memo, Maj Gen William R. Peers for HQ, 4th Inf Div, Ofc of the Commanding General, n.d., sub: Combat Operations After Action Report, Battle of Dak To, attachment to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div.

[56] Spook Sheet, HQ, 173d Abn Bde, Ofc of Intel Ofcr, no. 3, 27 Nov 67, attachment to AAR, Battle of Dak To, 173d Abn Bde; MACOI, Release no. 348-67, 14 Dec 67; Ltr, Birch to Berry, 31 Aug 67; MACOI, Release no. 16-68, 16 Jan 68. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[57] A returnee from the *66th Regiment*, Vu Nhu Y, estimated that the *1st Division* had lost approximately 650 men during the battle, most to B–52 and artillery strikes, while a returnee who worked as a doctor in the 1st Division put the number of their wounded at 1,100. Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 60368, 18 Mar 68, sub: Battle of Dak To and Effects of B-52 Strikes, p. 2, box 150, doc. 113a, NSF-Vietnam Country file, LBJL; AAR, Battle of Dak To, 4th Inf Div, pp. 34–35; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 310268, 9 Apr 68, sub: Medical Organization and Activities of Agr Site 1, B.3, pp. 12–13, box 65, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

General Peers confers with Lt. Col. Jamie R. Hendrix, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division.

structure. On 15 November, a B–52 strike had hit the headquarters of the *32d Regiment* near Hill 1262, causing several dozen casualties. Among the dead was the regiment's deputy chief of staff. A prisoner also reported that a B–52 strike had decimated the staff of the *9th Battalion*, *66th Regiment*, as it held a meeting on Ngok Dorlang in early November, killing the battalion commander, four company commanders, two company executive officers, and two platoon leaders.[58]

The battle demonstrated the limitations of the enemy's logistical system. A captured North Vietnamese battalion commander revealed that his division had spent more than a month moving supplies across the border to staging areas that were still well to the south of Dak To. After consuming some of the supplies during the month, the North Vietnamese soldiers had brought most of the remainder to forward positions at the beginning of November. Limited to what they could carry on foot, their ammunition supply had only been large enough for a few days of hard fighting. When it was gone, the enemy had no choice but to withdraw.

The slow nature of the enemy's logistical system also hindered his tactical movement. Most of the *1st Division* was still moving into place when two battalions from Colonel Johnson's 1st Brigade came to Dak To and began searching the nearby hills. As a result, the 120-mm. mortar crews and 122-mm. rocket crews from the *40th Artillery Regiment* failed to

[58] Rpt, CHECO, PACAF, 21 Jun 68, p. 6; Special Rpts, CMIC, no. 50868, 7 Mar 68, sub: B-52 Airstrikes in Kontum Prov, RVN, p. 2; CMIC, no. 305368, 18 Apr 68, sub: Organization of the 1st Division or Agr Site 1, B.3, p. 24. Both in box 65, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

get into their firing positions on Rocket Ridge. The *174th Regiment* had completed its fortifications on Hill 875 only a few days before the 173d Airborne Brigade had arrived, and the regiment's *3d Battalion* that had clashed with the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, on the eighteenth, was three weeks behind schedule for a planned attack on Ben Het.

As for American casualties, the air and artillery strikes that had so devastated the enemy also bloodied the U.S. infantry units they were trying to support. The tangled, triple-canopy forests around Dak To concealed the troops on the ground from pilots and fire control observers, making targeting mistakes all too frequent. On top of that, the massive, iron-hard trees sometimes deflected even the most carefully aimed bombs and shells, many of which carried time-delay fuses in order to penetrate the undergrowth before exploding. The net effect was an inordinate number of casualties from friendly fire.

The 173d Airborne Brigade's historian summed up the cost:

> Of the 192 [dead in] . . . the 173d a good 70 of these were killed by our own people. A misplaced bomb officially killed forty-two but actually caused at least fifty deaths. On another occasion misplaced artillery landed on a company CP group killing the company commander (2d tour Infantry Captain), Forward Observer, 1st Sgt, [the Radio Operators] . . . and many CIDG troops. There were other instances of misplaced indirect fire and shooting of men wandering in front of friendly positions. Almost 40% of our fatal casualties were caused by ourself [*sic*].[59]

Questions were also raised about the tactics that General Peers had permitted his subordinates to employ. Maj. Gen. Charles P. Stone, who succeeded Peers as commander of the 4th Infantry Division on 4 January 1968, later described the methods that U.S. commanders had previously used in the highlands as "stupid." Stone was particularly critical of General Schweiter and his performance at Dak To. "I had the damnest time (after my arrival in Vietnam) getting anybody to show me where Hill 875 was," he told interviewers following the war. "It had absolutely no importance in the war thereafter. None. It had no strategic value. . . . It made no difference . . . that the enemy held all those mountains along the border because they controlled no people, no resources, no real growing areas and suffered a horrible malaria rate. Why . . . go out there and fight them where all the advantages were on . . . [their] side."[60]

General Westmoreland, by contrast, expressed no dissatisfaction with the tactical decisions his commanders had made prior to or during the battle. On balance, the MACV commander believed it was worth pursu-

[59] Interv, 24th Mil Hist Det with Foster, Nov 67, sub: Analysis and Observation of Historian during Battle of Dak To, Dak To Combat After Action Intervs, Nov 67, 173d Abn Bde, Historians files, CMH.

[60] Interv, MacGarrigle and Robert Pringle with Maj Gen Charles P. Stone, fmr Cdr, 4th Inf Div, 31 Oct 68, Historians files, CMH.

ing the enemy at every opportunity if that kept him bottled up along the border. "We cannot permit [the enemy] . . . to strike the confidence of the South Vietnamese people in ultimate victory or to bolster his own morale with successes," he wrote to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Wheeler, shortly after the battle, for

> to do otherwise would be to deliver to him, without contest, the very objectives which he seeks. . . . If we intentionally let the enemy deep into Kontum Province, we would be taking a major step backwards. . . . [The] people (in that province) could feel, justifiably, that they had been let down. . . . The first step in total erosion of our posture in this country would have begun.

No matter the tactical challenges of fighting the enemy deep in the interior mountains, Westmoreland argued, it was still preferable to fighting him in the populated lowlands. If the allies shied away from engaging North Vietnamese in the highlands,

> we would have a much more serious proposition. We cannot apply our fire power [in the lowlands] with as much freedom, we permit him to get at potential sources of food to sustain his forces, and we give him more maneuver room. . . . It would have cost at least twice as much in military casualties (not to mention civilian casualties) and would have taken at least twice as long to do the job.[61]

Good Neighbors in the Highlands

If U.S. officers disagreed over the necessity of the Dak To campaign and the way it was fought, they were united in their support for pacification. Like other U.S. formations in Vietnam, the 4th Infantry Division supplemented its major combat activities with a host of smaller but still consequential actions designed to boost the ability of the government of Vietnam to enhance its control of the rural population in the thinly populated highlands. In addition to performing security missions, particularly along the major roads to the benefit of civilian and military traffic, the division supported pacification by training local security forces and by conducting civic actions.

In the 4th Division, Combined Mobile Training Teams performed the territorial training function done by Mobile Advisory Teams in III Corps, while Combined Mobile Inspection Teams were the equivalent of Improvement Action Teams, improving outpost security. By year's end, these teams had trained thirty-four Regional Forces companies and sixty-five Popular Forces platoons. The division also assisted in the training of Revolutionary Development teams. Throughout the process, division trainers took special cognizance of the abilities exhibited by South Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers, quietly passing this information along to the provin-

[61] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 11956 to Wheeler, 10 Dec 67, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

cial advisory team. CORDS advisers reported that units that had received training from the 4th Infantry Division emerged with higher morale and greater proficiency. Peers further reinforced local security by maintaining five reaction platoons and one exploitation platoon at Camp Enari, ready to respond to reported threats.[62]

While Peers' men helped improve the population's first line of defense, they performed equally fine service through the "Good Neighbor" program. Wherever 4th Division troops went in Pleiku, Darlac, and Kontum Provinces, they conducted psychological, medical, and civic actions to ameliorate living conditions and to curry favor with the local inhabitants. Between 1 November 1967 and 31 January 1968, U.S. forces in the 4th Division's tactical area of responsibility delivered 61 million leaflets, 302 hours of airborne and 318 hours of ground loudspeaker broadcasts, and 32 hours of audiovisual presentations. In November, the attached 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, used its vehicles to round up sixteen cattle for a village, while a team from 41st Civil Affairs Company performed much work in support of the Edap Enang Refugee Center in Darlac Province. The division made it possible for twelve civilians to receive training as health workers and for fifty people to attend the Montagnard Agricultural School, while it posted one soldier full time to the Highlands Junior Military Academy as a sports and English instructor. During the three months ending 31 January 1968, division accomplishments included the construction of twenty-six medical civic action shelters, seven playgrounds, nine wells, sixteen kilometers of road, three pig pens, and one dispensary, with four more under way. U.S. Army engineers cleared 10 acres for civilian use at Edap Enang, while the division distributed nearly 12,000 pounds of food, 7,000 pounds of clothing, 3,000 pounds of soap, 9,700 feet of lumber, and 61 tons of sand for construction. Last but not least, the division veterinarian treated 67 cattle, and medical personnel treated 38,000 people and provided daily rations of milk and vitamins for 34,000 youth. Recognizing their popularity, the Viet Cong damaged or destroyed eight of the twenty-six shelters that the medical civic action teams used when making their rounds, but by the end of January the division had rebuilt all but two.[63]

Most of these actions were well received. A notable exception was the effort to introduce American methods of pig husbandry. The South Vietnamese government brought in piglets and U.S. personnel built pens and provided instruction, but the locals proved disinterested. An inordinate number of piglets died and the farmers abandoned the pens, allowing their animals to once again roam free.[64]

General Peers focused much of his effort on creating a zone of security and prosperity around Camp Enari. U.S. troops brought security through frequent patrols and progress through socioeconomic assistance. His actions had a dual purpose, for the zone essentially corresponded to the range of

[62] Rpt, CORDS, Kontum Province, 31 Dec 67, p. 10; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 4th Inf Div, 7 Mar 68, pp. 8–9, 21. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[63] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 4th Inf Div, pp. 12, 17–21.

[64] Ibid., p. 19.

North Vietnamese rockets, thus enhancing the safety of the U.S. base as well as the civilian population.

In December, Peers expanded the pacification and security zone around Camp Enari from a radius of ten kilometers to twelve. The move raised the number of hamlets in the zone from sixty-nine to eighty-five. This increased the total population in the Good Neighbor area to nearly 100,000 people, representing over 60 percent of the population of Pleiku Province. To service the area, the division created twenty-three civic action teams, each consisting of five to ten men. Because the division's manpower authorization did not include these positions, Peers took men out of troop units to man the teams. At first he rotated personnel through the assignment, but eventually he realized that it was best to make the assignments permanent, as the knowledge and experience team members gained over time enhanced their effectiveness. The teams visited their assigned hamlets five days a week, consulting with district and village headmen and performing civic actions. A Good Neighbor Council permitted the exchange of ideas between the provincial government, community leaders, and the 4th Division.[65]

General Peers reported that the civic action teams had "created a favorable psychological climate for local civilians to join the U.S./Government of Vietnam side. The advances in health and living conditions the Montagnards have achieved in cooperation with civic action teams, and the promise of education are strong incentives to join the free world." Even in areas less frequented by U.S. forces, civilians responded to American kindness with information about enemy activities, allowing soldiers to avoid ambushes and mines. One village of resettled Montagnards that frequently received civic action assistance, Plei Thi The in Pleiku Province, reciprocated by throwing its lot in with the allies. When the Viet Cong threatened to destroy the community if the residents did not move back to their original homes, the villagers sought U.S. help instead. After consulting with government authorities, the 4th Division provided material to fortify the hamlet. It also armed and trained a platoon of defenders and maintained a small detail in the village to further guide the residents in their very personal struggle against the Viet Cong.[66]

Stories like that of Plei Thi The warmed Peers' heart, but he had to admit "the lack of security in most hamlets forces the civilians to cooperate with both sides." Outside of the Dak To campaign, the enemy was not terribly active in the 4th Division's area in late 1967, but allied forces were spread so thin over such a large area that they could not make much progress in improving local security conditions outside of the Good Neighbor area. Security in Kontum Province in particular was in a critical condition. For while the enemy's main force units were nowhere to be seen, having withdrawn back to their sanctuaries after Dak To, local guerrillas had stepped up operations, engaging in numerous acts of kidnapping, road mining, terror, and other

[65] Ibid., pp. 17–18; MFR, MACV, 24 Jun 67, sub: MACV Commanders' Conference, 11 June 1967, pp. 17–18, folder 18, Westmoreland History files, CMH.

[66] MFR, MACV, 24 Jun 67, pp. 11, 20–22, 23 (quote).

forms of harassment. The Viet Cong were especially interested in pressuring farmers to give them their winter harvest, and in December U.S. patrols in Pleiku frequently came upon large food caches that the villagers had secreted away for the enemy. The nature of combat may have been somewhat different in the forested mountains of II Corps than in III Corps' rolling plains or the rice paddies of IV Corps, but the challenges of fighting both a dangerous conventional foe and a clandestine insurgent movement remained the same.[67]

[67] Ibid., pp. 23 (quote), 35; Rpt, CORDS, Kontum Province, 31 Dec 67, pp. 1–2, 7–8, 12; CORDS, Pleiku Province, 31 Dec 67, p. 3; CORDS, Darlac Province, 31 Dec 68, pp. 5–6. All in Historians files, CMH.

6

Defending the Central Coast

If the war in the Central Highlands was a battle over outposts, the war on the central coast was a struggle over resources. II Corps' five eastern provinces—Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan—offered a concentrated source of manpower and food to whichever side could control them. Nearly two million people lived in the coastal lowlands within forty kilometers of the South China Sea. That population produced 85 percent of the rice grown in II Corps, harvested an annual bounty of fish, manufactured the pungent *nuoc muam* (fish sauce) that added protein and flavor to the Vietnamese diet, and extracted salt from the ocean at a rate of 115 tons per year to preserve fish and other meat products. In recognition of those facts, the Combined Campaign Plan for 1968 allocated the majority of allied resources within II Corps to the five coastal provinces. The plan also gave National Priority Area status to the lowlands of Binh Dinh Province, the most densely populated and agriculturally productive area on the coast, making it eligible for additional "funds, military forces, GVN [Government of Vietnam] civil cadre, materials, and managerial attention" from Saigon.[1]

In late October 1967, allied forces in eastern II Corps consisted of approximately 100,000 troops built around fifty maneuver battalions. The I Field Force commander, General Rosson, controlled ten U.S. maneuver battalions. Also present were eighteen maneuver battalions from the Republic of Korea Expeditionary Force, an organization separate from MACV, but which operated in close coordination with the Americans. The 41st Artillery Group supported those twenty-eight maneuver battalions with seven artillery battalions. The 10th and 268th Aviation Battalions provided helicopter support through four assault UH–1 companies and two medium-lift CH–47 companies. General Rosson's counterpart, II Corps commander General Vinh Loc, kept twenty-two of his thirty-six maneuver battalions in the coastal provinces, as well as a significant majority of his 25,000 Regional Forces and 33,000 Popular Forces soldiers.[2]

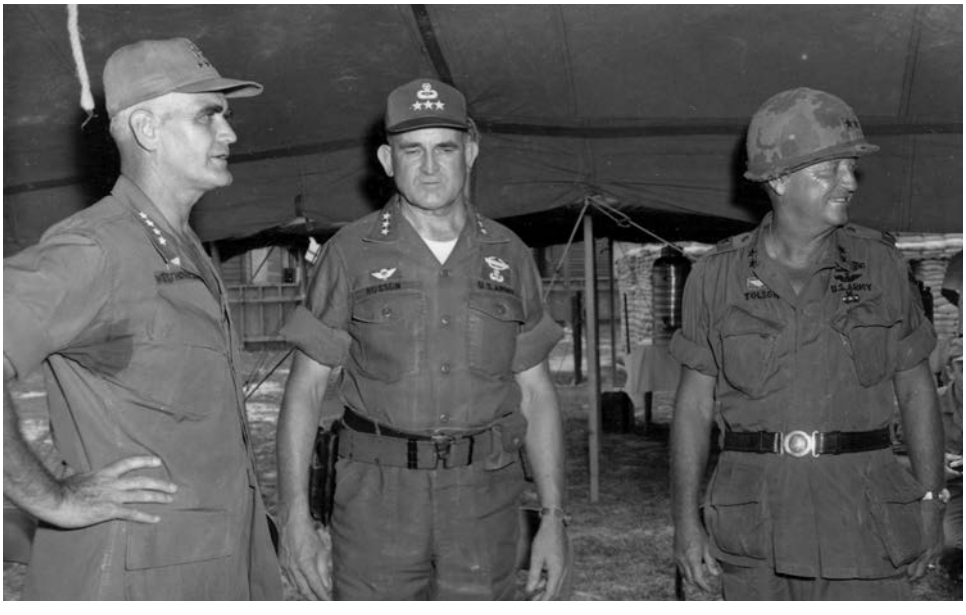
Of the fifty allied battalions stationed in eastern II Corps, over half operated in the strategic province of Binh Dinh. The commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. John J. Tolson, kept two brigades on the north and central coast to help two regiments from Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Hieu's South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division. Two infantry regiments and one

[1] CCP, 1967, AB142, 7 Nov 66, pp. B-6, E-1-5, E-2-3, Historians files, CMH.

[2] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 371–73; Stanley R. Larsen and James L. Collins Jr., *Allied Participation in Vietnam*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), pp. 120–59.

cavalry regiment from the South Korean 1st "Capital" Division defended the southern end of Binh Dinh Province, an area that contained the Phu Cat airfield and the port of Qui Nhon, South Vietnam's fifth largest city and the primary I Field Force logistical center in northern II Corps. South Korean forces also protected Highway 19, a two-lane paved road that extended west from the outskirts of Qui Nhon and up the winding An Khe Pass, some sixty kilometers away, to Camp Radcliff at An Khe where the 1st Cavalry Division located its rear service elements. A composite force of armed helicopters, artillery, and military policemen stationed at Camp Radcliff protected the airfield complex and the next portion of Highway 19, which continued westward across a broad plateau toward Pleiku City.

Farther down the coast in Phu Yen Province, the 173d Airborne Brigade worked alongside a regiment from the South Korean 9th "White Horse" Infantry Division and a regiment from the South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division in the lowlands surrounding Tuy Hoa, the provincial capital. Khanh Hoa, the third coastal province, contained fewer regular units but a number of facilities that were vital to the war effort. The headquarters of the South Korean 9th Infantry Division and one of its regiments operated from the small but densely populated plain around Ninh Hoa, a district capital on the central coast of Khanh Hoa Province. Thirty kilometers farther south, General Rosson's I Field Force headquarters and the forward command post of the South Korean Expeditionary Force managed their respective organizations from the Roberts Compound in downtown Nha Trang. The provincial capital also contained the headquarters of the 5th Special Forces Group, the headquarters of the 17th Aviation Group, and an airfield with four squad-



Generals Westmoreland, Rosson, and Tolson

rons of AC–47 gunships and several dozen CH–47 heavy-lift helicopters that operated throughout II Corps. Finally, south of Nha Trang the coast curved back to create Cam Ranh Bay, an immense natural harbor shielded from the ocean by a long sandy peninsula. Featuring six deep-draft mooring stations, a massive POL (Petroleum, Oil, and Lubrication) station, and two 3,000-meter runways capable of handling any aircraft in the U.S. Air Force's inventory, the bay area represented the most important cluster of logistical and aviation facilities between Qui Nhon and Saigon. Still growing in size at the end of 1967, Cam Ranh Bay ranked a close second to Saigon in the volume of U.S. supplies that it received. To protect the complex, the allies maintained a base on the mainland side of the harbor near Dong Ba Thin, which housed an infantry regiment from the South Korean 9th Infantry Division and several U.S. helicopter companies.

On the southern coast of Ninh Thuan, a regiment from the South Vietnamese 23d Infantry Division and several Korean battalions defended the lowlands around the provincial capital, Phan Rang. A nearby air base housed three F–100 squadrons as well as three squadrons of C–123 Providers, a midsize transport plane that could land on shorter airfields than the C–130 but not carry as much cargo. Finally, at the southern extreme of II Corps, a one-battalion task force from the 1st Cavalry Division operated with two Vietnamese battalions in Binh Thuan, the southernmost coastal province in II Corps.[3]

South Korean soldiers from the "Tiger" Division in Qui Nhon

[3] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, I FFV, 15 Feb 68, p. 21, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Allied commanders faced approximately 20,000 North Vietnamese and 10,000 Viet Cong regulars in the five coastal provinces of II Corps, backed by perhaps 20,000 part-time guerrillas and 5,000 rear services personnel. The North Vietnamese contingent consisted of five infantry regiments and several support battalions under the direction of Maj. Gen. Chu Huy Man, commander of *Military Region 5*. Man controlled his main force units in Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Khanh Hoa Provinces through a tactical headquarters known as the *B1 Front*. Local province and district committees supported those North Vietnamese units with half a dozen Viet Cong battalions and more than twice that number of local force companies. On the lower coast of II Corps, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Minh Chau directed four Viet Cong battalions through a subcommand of *COSVN* known as *Military Region 6*.[4]

General Westmoreland's planning directive for the 1967–1968 winter-spring season called on his I Field Force commander, General Rosson, to "expand security in the pacification priority areas of the coastal provinces" and to support "increased offensive operations by ROK [South Korean] forces against enemy main force and local units . . . with emphasis on Phu Yen and southern Binh Dinh." U.S. combat units would assume the main burden of searching the coastal hills for the North Vietnamese regiments that operated from them. By driving main force enemy units into the mountains, the Americans would make it difficult for them to enter the lowlands to interfere with the pacification programs being run by CORDS and the South Vietnamese government. South Korean units would focus their efforts on defending the major logistical hubs and lines of communications on the central coast, while nearly all of the South Vietnamese units in eastern II Corps would remain tied to specific districts to provide area security against local Viet Cong forces and to support Revolutionary Development. So far this year, the enemy had not been especially active, but with the autumn harvest just beginning, allied commanders expected to see a rise in enemy activity as North Vietnamese units returned from the remote base camps where they had spent the summer to collect food and to disrupt pacification along the coast.[5]

Pacification Support in Binh Dinh

The province of Binh Dinh was one of the most contested regions in the country. Endowed with the most productive farmland north of the Mekong

[4] Intel Memo, Saigon for CIA, 25 Nov 67, sub: The Status of the North Vietnamese Divisions in Coastal II Corps, pp. 12, 14–15, Historians files, CMH; Pike, *PAVN*, p. 346. The enemy's administrative boundaries differed somewhat from those used by the South Vietnamese government. The western third of Binh Dinh Province, for example, was divided among the enemy's Kontum and Gia Lai (Pleiku) Provinces, while the province of Phu Bon was completely subsumed in his Dac Lac (Darlac) Province.

[5] Quote from Dir, MACV, 29 Oct 67, sub: Planning Guidance for Senior Commanders for the Period 1 Nov 67–30 Apr 68, p. 7. Msg, Rosson NHT 1391 to Westmoreland, 9 Nov 67, sub: Evaluation and Assessment of Situation in II CTZ October 1967, p. 1. Both in Historians files, CMH.

Delta, it produced enough rice (250,000 tons in 1967) to feed its population of nearly 900,000 people with surplus to boot. Nearly all of those inhabitants lived in the coastal lowlands, a series of fertile plains that extended inland from ten to fifty kilometers, and divided from one another by lateral mountain spurs and hill formations. A broad mountainous plateau covered the western half of the province, a mostly undeveloped region covered by scrub vegetation and grasslands that was home to scattered communities of Montagnards. The highland tribes lived in relative isolation, but many of the Vietnamese civilians in the coastal lowlands had been under Communist control since 1954 when Viet Minh cadres from other parts of the country had settled in this agriculturally rich area after the First Indochina War and married into local families. As a result, government authority was sharply curtailed in much of the province.

Working to ensure that this remained so were several regular enemy units, the most notable of which was the *3d PAVN Division*. The enemy had formed the *3d,* or "*Yellow Star,*" *Division* in September 1965 by linking the *2d PLAF Regiment*, which had been operating in Binh Dinh since 1962, with the *18th* and *22d PAVN Regiments*, both recently infiltrated from North Vietnam. Led by the former chief of staff of the *B3 Front*, Colonel Vo Thu, the division's 6,700 troops worked from a chain of camps in the coastal hills of Binh Dinh and southeastern Quang Ngai Province. They enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the local forces and village cadre on the coast. When the North Vietnamese came down to the lowlands, they relied heavily on local party committees and on the *50th* and *E2B PLAF Battalions* for guides, porters,

A troop leader from Troop B, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, issues orders by radio while on a mission during Operation PERSHING.

security, food, and medical assistance. The Viet Cong, in turn, depended on the prompt intervention of the main force units whenever allied operations placed the infrastructure in jeopardy.

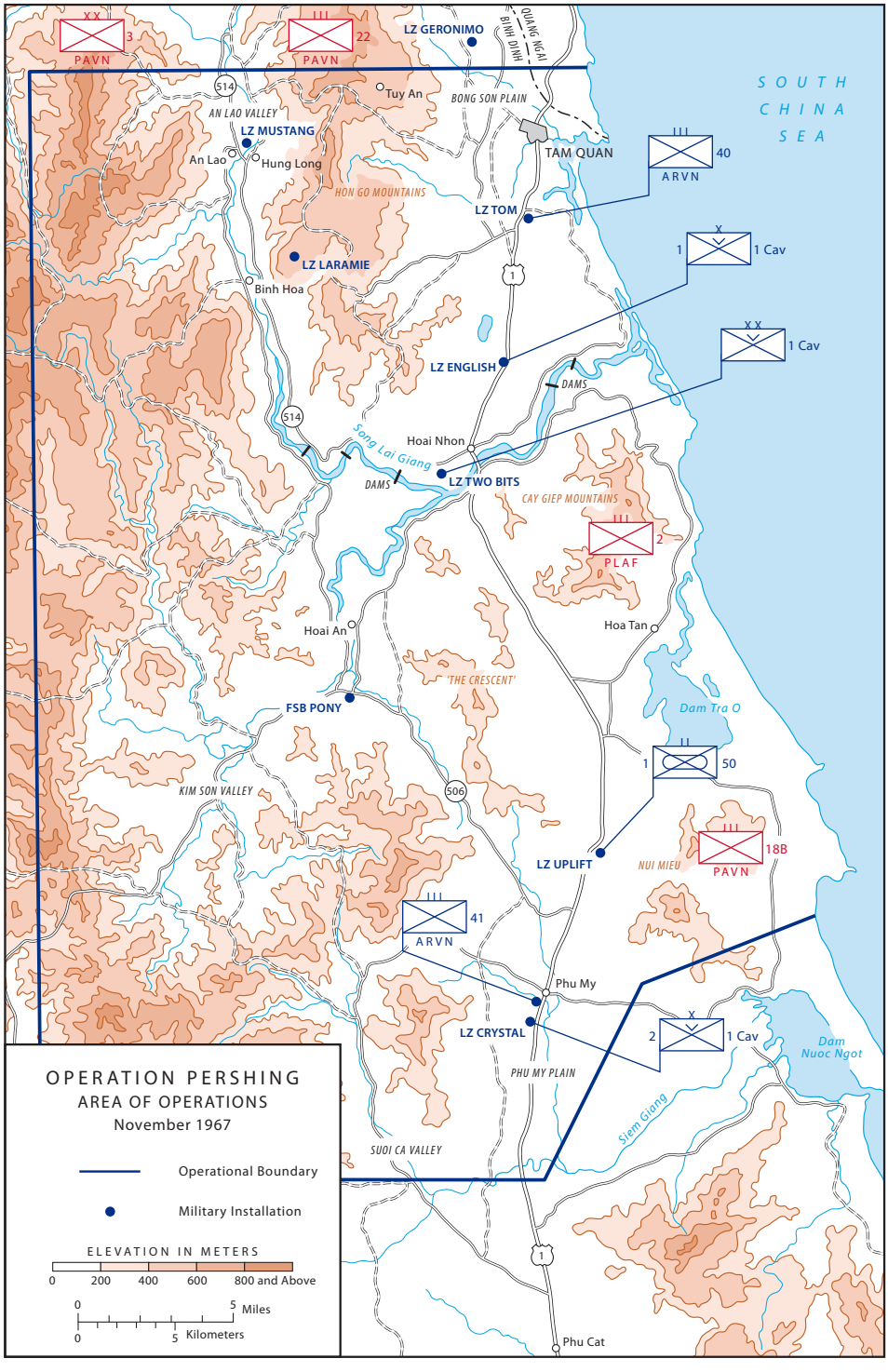
In 1966, the allies had launched new efforts to increase their presence in Binh Dinh. Starting with Operation MASHER/WHITE WING in January, the 1st Cavalry Division had frequently operated in northern Binh Dinh. During Operations CRAZY HORSE (May 1966), THAYER I (September 1966), and IRVING (October 1966), the airmobile division had repeatedly struck the enemy. Each time the Americans had hammered the main force units, driving them from the lowlands and into the sparsely populated hills. And each time the enemy had used the relative safety of the highlands to regroup, replenish, and then to return to challenge the allies on the coastal plain, a pattern made all the easier by the proximity of the mountains to the sea and the enemy's long association with the population.

Recognizing the depth of the problem, in February 1967 Westmoreland had committed the 1st Cavalry Division to a long-term pacification support mission in northern Binh Dinh. Operation PERSHING sought to improve population security in the Phu My and Bong Son Plains and adjacent valleys of northern Binh Dinh in three ways. First, the division conducted patrols and search-and-destroy operations in the highland areas bordering the lowlands so as to shield the populated areas from incursions by major enemy units. Second, with the concurrence of South Vietnamese officials, it evacuated the residents of some of the harder-to-protect valleys to the coast, thereby enhancing their security and denying the enemy access to their labors. Finally, the division used numerous company-level patrols, airmobile raids, and cordon-and-search operations to assist the South Vietnamese 22d Division and provincial forces in pacifying the coastal plain itself (*Map 17*).[6]

Between September and December 1967, U.S. soldiers were heavily involved in protecting the rice harvest in Operation RICE GRAIN. The 1st Cavalry Division commander, General Tolson, conducted daytime patrols, nighttime ambushes (dubbed "Bushmaster" operations), and aerial surveillance over farming areas from the time the rice was gathered to the point where the grains were bagged for transportation to government-monitored milling stations. The hardest part of the effort, and the one over which the division had the least control, was in making sure that government officials adequately protected the rice once it was in their possession.

Complementing the harvest program was the division's long-established campaign to root out the Viet Cong infrastructure, an effort designated Operation DRAGNET. In May 1967, the allies had assigned a South Vietnamese National Police field battalion to the division for just this purpose. The battalion lived on 1st Cavalry Division bases and was fully integrated into its operations. Tolson was impressed by these paramilitary policemen and allowed

[6] Carland, *Stemming the Tide,* pp. 202–30, 256–74, 358–59, 366; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, *October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 83–92, 179–201, 315–16; Interv, Capt Joseph W. A. Whitehorne, 14th Mil Hist Det, with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, 28 Jun 68, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.


XX
3
PAVN
III
22
PAVN
LZ GERONIMO
QUANG NGAI
BINH DINH
SOUTH
CHINA
SEA
514
Tuy An
BONG SON PLAIN
AN LAO VALLEY
LZ MUSTANG
An Lao
Hung Long
TAM QUAN
III
40
ARVN
HON GO MOUNTAINS
LZ TOM
X
1
1 Cav
LZ LARAMIE
Binh Hoa
1
XX
1 Cav
LZ ENGLISH
DAMS
514
Song Lai Giang
Hoai Nhon
DAMS
LZ TWO BITS
CAY GIEP MOUNTAINS
III
2
PLAF
Hoa Tan
Hoai An
'THE CRESCENT'
FSB PONY
Dam Tra O
II
1
50
KIM SON VALLEY
506
LZ UPLIFT
NUI MIEU
III
18B
PAVN
III
41
ARVN
Phu My
LZ CRYSTAL
X
2
1 Cav
Dam
Nuoc Ngot
PHU MY PLAIN
Song Giang
SUOI CA VALLEY
1
Phu Cat
OPERATION PERSHING
AREA OF OPERATIONS
November 1967
Operational Boundary
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
200
400
600
800 and Above
0
5
Miles
0
5
Kilometers

MAP 17

them to wear the 1st Cavalry Division patch on their uniforms. Together, the soldiers and policemen conducted hamlet cordon-and-search operations at all times of the day and night, varying their activities so as not to set a predictable pattern. Some of these raids, dubbed "Swooper" operations, were conducted entirely by heliborne assault to minimize the warning time enemy cadre would have to hide or escape. During 1967, the division raided some hamlets up to thirty times, picking off one or two Viet Cong personnel each visit and gathering information for use in future operations. Vietnamese armed propaganda teams and culture/drama troops accompanied the 1st Cavalry Division on these operations, wooing the populace through speeches and entertainment.[7]

In late 1967, province chief Lt. Col. Phan Minh Tho enhanced Operation DRAGNET by establishing a provincial intelligence office and district-based intelligence centers as part of the Phoenix program. Meanwhile the 1st Cavalry Division supplemented cordon-and-search operations with a variety of other techniques to disrupt Viet Cong activities. One of these was the "Selective Snatch," in which a small team of two helicopters bearing three soldiers each and two helicopter gunships scoured the countryside looking for "suspicious" individuals. When the helicopters spotted such individuals, they would dive down and disgorge their soldiers who would bundle the suspects aboard the helicopters for extraction and interrogation. Another method was the use of platoon-size airmobile forces dubbed "minicavs," also escorted by a pair of gunships, which descended on suspicious locales based on intelligence reports. When significant resistance was expected or when more manpower was needed to effectively seal an area, the division performed larger heliborne raids. In October alone, the 1st Cavalry Division conducted 277 battalion or smaller air assaults. In November and December, U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese police searched nearly 8,500 homes and interrogated 108,000 people as part of Operation DRAGNET and associated activities. These actions resulted in the killing of 29 Viet Cong and the capturing of another 43, along with 170 people accused of civil crimes, 18 weapons, 3 feet of documents, various military supplies, and over 49 tons of contraband rice. Together with other actions conducted from November 1967 through January 1968, the division captured nearly 96 tons of rice, nearly all of which it distributed to needy refugees.[8]

A final element of the 1st Cavalry Division's efforts against the enemy's activities was the interdiction of the routes the Viet Cong used to move men, food, and supplies to and from populated areas. Most of these movements were done at night, further complicating the task of identifying the enemy in Vietnam's heavily foliated terrain. In addition to placing squad and platoon ambushes along suspected Viet Cong routes during hours of darkness, U.S. artillery routinely conducted nighttime harassment and interdiction fire

[7] AAR, Opn PERSHING, 11 Feb 67–21 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, n.d., tab 4, Techniques; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, 17 Mar 68, pp. 10–11. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[8] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, Encl 10; Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 28 Jun 68, p. 8; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 67, 1st Cav Div, 20 Feb 68, p. 34; MFR, MACV, 24 Jun 67, sub: MACV Commanders' Conference, 11 Jun 67, p. 18. All in Historians files, CMH.

A 1st Cavalry Division soldier checks a civilian identification card.

missions against trails and supply areas in the coastal hills to discourage the enemy from extracting rice from the lowlands. In some cases, the division used "artillery ambushes" triggered by trip flares or experimental seismic detectors that alerted artillerymen to movement in the targeted areas. A second method, "Trail Runner," involved individually targeting artillery pieces to cover specific lengths of trails or ridgelines that intelligence indicated the enemy intended to use on a particular night. At the designated moment, the artillery would inundate the route with time-on-target fires. Supplementing these ground-based methods were two night aerial techniques. In the "Hunter Killer" technique, a UH–1 helicopter equipped with a Starlight scope guided two helicopter gunships toward targets in relatively open areas. "Lightning Bug" operations were similar but targeted possible areas of seaborne infiltration. The method of identifying the enemy during Lightning Bug actions varied. Sometimes a helicopter dropped flares to illuminate the coastline; at others a Starlight scope was used. Once a target was discovered, the patrol would illuminate it either with flares or a searchlight, while two helicopter gunships moved in to engage. Often a helicopter equipped with side-looking aerial radar would fly ahead of the Lightning Bug team to report suspicious activities to be investigated.[9]

Tolson supplemented the food protection, counterinfrastructure, and counterinfiltration campaigns with a variety of activities to strengthen the government's presence among the population. In addition to creating a "pro-

[9] AAR, Opn PERSHING, 11 Feb 67–21 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, tab 4.

tective outer shell" for the twelve Vietnamese pacification teams operating in Phu My District, Tolson provided special security around polling places for national elections on 3 September and 22 October. The effort enabled voters to reach the polls without interference from the Viet Cong. Testifying to the success of the operations, more than 95 percent of the eligible voters in the 1st Cavalry Division area of operations cast their vote.[10]

General Tolson also carried out psychological and civic actions. Between November 1967 and January 1968, U.S. forces distributed over 45 million leaflets and delivered over 202 hours of aerial broadcasts. This effort helped generate eleven defectors. Like most enemy defectors, including the twenty-eight Viet Cong that had defected to the 1st Cavalry Division the previous quarter, the deserters rallied not for political reasons, but because of a lack of food, an abundance of sickness, and the constant fear of being hit by artillery and air strikes. They claimed that many of their comrades were equally demoralized, but were too afraid of their officers to desert. In addition to weakening the enemy and providing propaganda for the South Vietnamese government to exploit, the *Chieu Hoi* program helped the 1st Cavalry Division in a tangible way by providing recruits for its Kit Carson Scouts. By late 1967, the 1st Cavalry Division had forty-two Kit Carson Scouts, who repeatedly proved their worth by spotting signs of enemy activity, booby traps, and ambushes.[11]

Between November 1967 and January 1968, the 1st Cavalry Division conducted 550 sick calls to hamlets in northern Binh Dinh, treating over 38,000 people. It hosted over twenty parties for civilians and refugees and engaged in some small community construction projects. The division "strictly emphasized at all levels of command" rules of engagement to minimize harm to civilian lives and property, and it initiated new procedures that expedited the resolution of civilian claims against the division for up to $1,000 for noncombat damage to their property.[12]

Last but not least, the 1st Cavalry Division worked to improve government forces responsible for area security. It conducted frequent combined operations at the company and battalion level with the South Vietnamese 22d Division and provincial forces, and lent its air transportation and gunship assets to the Vietnamese. Tolson also opened the division's training center to the South Vietnamese, who sent about one hundred men each month to courses offered by the center, including a combat leadership class given to select South Vietnamese noncommissioned officers. In September 1967, the 1st Cavalry Division also organized six Combined Mobile Training Teams to train and inspect Regional Forces units during two-week onsite visits, and five Combined Mobile Improvement Teams to do the same for the Popular Forces. [13]

[10] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 67, 1st Cav Div, pp. 21, 35; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, Encl 10.

[11] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, Encl 11, p. 37; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Binh Dinh Province, 29 Dec 67, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

[12] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, Encl 10; AAR, Opn PERSHING, 11 Feb 67–21 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 10 (quote).

[13] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 67, 1st Cav Div, p. 26; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 15; AAR, Opn PERSHING, 11 Feb 67–21 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, tab 9.

Battling the Yellow Star Division

As important as the support the 1st Cavalry Division gave to the South Vietnamese pacification was, ultimately success or failure was intimately tied to the main force war. When the enemy's conventional forces were absent, pacification could advance in relative security. Conversely, incursions by enemy regulars threatened isolated units and communities and derailed civil programs. In Binh Dinh as well as the rest of Vietnam, the process of trying to shield populated areas from the trauma of a main force incursion was never ending. And like many of his peers, General Tolson believed he could not sit back and wait for the enemy to attack at his leisure. Rather, the 1st Cavalry Division's ethos was to keep the enemy on his heels as much as possible through offensive operations.[14]

Conducting both offensive and area security operations simultaneously was difficult under the best of circumstances, but it was particularly hard in the case of the 1st Cavalry Division because it doubled as Westmoreland's strategic reserve. As such, it was sometimes needed elsewhere, thereby disrupting the continuity of effort in Binh Dinh. This certainly was the case during the second half of 1967. Departing in late June for a month-long operation in the western highlands, the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, was the first to go. It returned in late July to operate along Binh Dinh's border with Quang Ngai Province, but left for good two months later to join U.S. forces in central I Corps. The 1st Brigade was next, departing for Kontum Province during November to participate in the battle for Dak To. Until the 1st Brigade returned, General Tolson had just three infantry battalions left to conduct Operation PERSHING.

General Rosson compensated for the departure of the 1st Brigade by giving Tolson control over the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry (Mechanized), a unit that arrived from the United States in late September. The 1st Cavalry Division commander headquartered the unit in central Binh Dinh at a firebase named Landing Zone UPLIFT, fifty-five kilometers north of Qui Nhon. Tolson's plan called for the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, to operate along Highway 1 on the Phu My and Bong Son Plains, while his 2d Brigade looked for the *2d PLAF Regiment*, last spotted in the Cay Giep Mountains on the southern edge of the Bong Son Plain, and the *18th PAVN Regiment*, believed to be in the Mieu Mountains, which lay due west of UPLIFT on the northern rim of the Phu My Plain.[15]

That task became more difficult in mid-November when Tolson learned that the *3d Division*'s remaining element, the *22d PAVN Regiment,* was also preparing to move from Quang Ngai Province onto the Bong Son Plain. He responded to the threat by asking General Rosson to return the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade from the western highlands. Even though the Dak To battle had not yet ended, Rosson agreed that more troops were needed

[14] AAR, Opn PERSHING, 11 Feb 67–21 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, pp. 6–8, 11.

[15] AAR, Opn PERSHING, 1st Cav Div, 29 Jun 68, p. 4, box 23, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 28 Jun 68; Interv, George L. MacGarrigle with Tolson, 24 Jun 1976, Historians files, CMH.

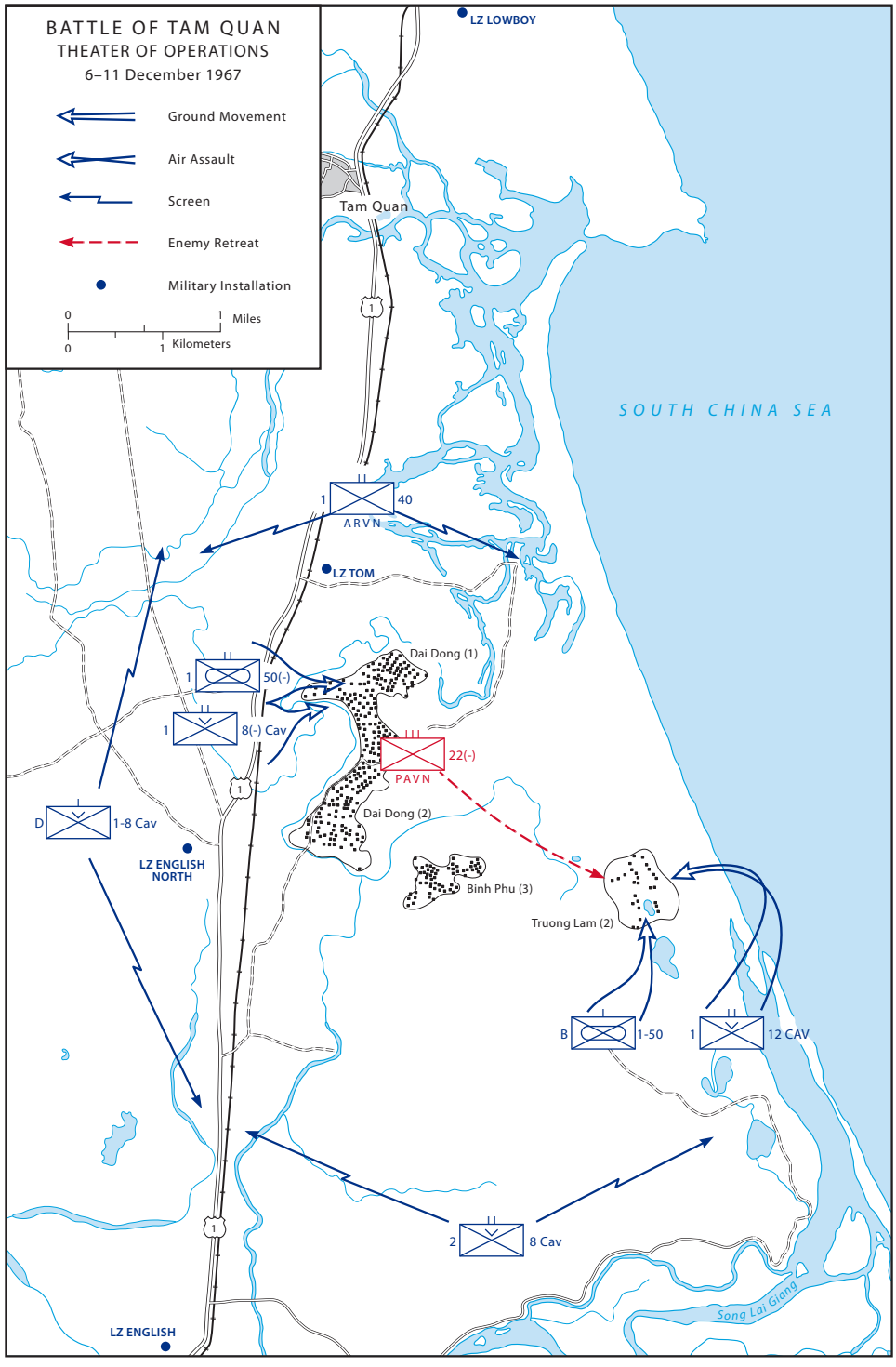
to protect Binh Dinh Province. When the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, flew back to the coast later that month, Tolson stationed it at Landing Zone ENGLISH, located on Highway 1 in the central portion of the Bong Son Plain. He gave the brigade's commander, Colonel Rattan, control over all 1st Cavalry Division units north of the Lai Giang, a river that effectively separated the Bong Son Plain from the Phu My Plain.

Rattan got his first solid fix on the enemy on 6 December. Just after midnight, the *22d Regiment* sent a battalion to attack Landing Zone TOM, a South Vietnamese outpost some nine kilometers north of Landing Zone ENGLISH. When the assault went badly, the enemy battalion commander radioed his regimental colonel and asked for instructions. A U.S. radio research unit intercepted the transmission and determined that the *22d Regiment*'s command post was broadcasting from Dai Dong, a village just to the southeast of TOM. The news surprised Tolson. After all the work over the previous year, the enemy had once again infiltrated main force units down onto the heavily populated lowlands, albeit to an area with deep Communist connections (*Map 18*).[16]

One of the chief architects of Army airmobile doctrine, Tolson believed that speed and surprise often trumped careful preparation when it came to hunting the enemy. As he later wrote in a postwar study of airmobile warfare, conducting "air assaults without prior artillery preparation and with limited prior reconnaissance involved considerable risk, but frequently yielded rewarding results." Tolson trusted in his ability to concentrate forces quickly and to deliver the necessary fire support with helicopter gunships and aerial rocket artillery (Hueys armed with 2.75-inch rocket launcher pods) whenever

Soldiers from Company A, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, form their armored personnel carriers into a defensive ring.

[16] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, p. 7.


BATTLE OF TAM QUAN
THEATER OF OPERATIONS
6–11 December 1967
Ground Movement
Air Assault
Screen
Enemy Retreat
Military Installation
0
1
Miles
0
1
Kilometers
LZ LOWBOY
Tam Quan
SOUTH CHINA SEA
1
40
ARVN
LZ TOM
Dai Dong (1)
1
50(-)
1
8(-) Cav
22(-)
PAVN
Dai Dong (2)
D
1-8 Cav
LZ ENGLISH NORTH
Binh Phu (3)
Truong Lam (2)
B
1-50
1
12 CAV
2
8 Cav
Song Lai Giang
LZ ENGLISH

MAP 18

his scouts found a promising target. Consequently, when a helicopter crew sent to investigate the intelligence report spotted an antenna protruding from a bunker near Dai Dong, he did not hesitate to land an aerorifle reconnaissance squad, known as a Blue Team, to check it out.[17]

Dai Dong village contained four hamlets. The two largest hamlets, Dai Dong (1) and Dai Dong (2), formed a long north-south island on a sea of flooded rice fields. Below Dai Dong (2) lay the third and fourth hamlets in the village, smaller in size, which stretched eastward to the sea. The radio antenna that the heliborne scouts had spotted was situated in Dai Dong (2).

No sooner had the Blue Team landed in a field west of Dai Dong (2) when the hamlet erupted with machine gun and small arms fire. The American soldiers found it impossible to move forward. When a second Blue Team landed nearby to relieve some of the pressure, it too attracted a hail of gunfire from Dai Dong (2). Certain that he had found some portion of the *22d Regiment*, General Tolson turned the action over to Rattan. The colonel dispatched Company B from the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, and a mechanized platoon from Company A of the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, to investigate further.[18]

A Blue Team from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, watches a UH–1 gunship fly overhead.

[17] Quote from Lt Gen John J. Tolson, *Airmobility, 1961–1971*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1973), p. 139. AAR, Opn PERSHING, 1st Cav Div, tab 8, pp. 1–12.

[18] Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, n.d., sub: Combat After Action Interview No. 2-68, box 9, Mil Hist Units, Historians Background files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

The two units arrived on the scene shortly after 1800, the mechanized troopers from Company A approaching in their M113 armored personnel carriers from the southwest and Company B from the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, landing by helicopter in a field west of Dai Dong (2). The soldiers endured a brutal volume of fire as they tried to close in on North Vietnamese troops from the *7th Battalion, 22d Regiment*, who manned a network of bunkers and trenches on the edge of Dai Dong (2). The four M113s from Company A provided supporting fire with their machine guns from the southwest, but thick mud and ferocious rocket-propelled grenade fire prevented the vehicles from advancing. The attack stalled a few dozen meters short of the tree line.[19]

At that juncture, several Communist soldiers emerged from their trenches and ran to where injured American soldiers lay. Whether the foray was meant to capture the wounded men or to collect their equipment, the remainder of Company B took it as a brazen affront. Ignoring the storm of fire that confronted them, the men of Company B closed the remaining distance and engaged the enemy at point-blank range. The Americans soon cleared the trenches, but fading daylight ruled out a deeper thrust into the hamlet. Unwilling to risk a North Vietnamese counterattack in the tight confines of Dai Dong, Colonel Rattan withdrew his forces to the fields west of the hamlet.

The 1st Brigade commander spent the evening gathering reinforcements for an assault on Dai Dong. He put the commander of the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, Lt. Col. Christian F. Dubia, in charge of the battle and made available to him Companies A, B, and D from his own battalion plus an additional mechanized platoon of M113 carriers, a section of four M42 Dusters, and two flamethrower-equipped M113s. Rattan arranged for elements of the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 40th Infantry, and Regional Forces troops to seal off the area north of the village, while soldiers from the 3d and 4th Battalions, 40th Infantry, were to do the same south of Dai Dong. A pair of companies from the 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, would land on the beach to the east to complete the encirclement.[20]

Knowing what was coming, the commander of the *22d Regiment* and his headquarters slipped out of the village that evening and headed down the coast to the Cay Giep Mountains. He ordered the *7th Battalion, 22d Regiment,* to continue the fight for Dai Dong (2), and for his *8th Battalion* to remain hidden in a hamlet several kilometers to the south known as My An (2).[21]

On the morning of the seventh, Companies A and B, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, and the two mechanized platoons attacked the village from the west after a ninety-minute artillery bombardment that included tear gas shells. The choking fumes forced some of the North Vietnamese to abandon their bunkers, but the volume of hostile fire hardly slackened. Enemy marksmen took a particularly heavy toll of the crews of the armored personnel carriers, killing several drivers and commanders with head shots. Seeing that his

[19] Interv, Whitehorne with Col Donald V. Rattan, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.
[20] Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 2–3.
[21] Rpt, 1st Cav Div, n.d., sub: Battle of Tam Quan District, p. 31, Historians files, CMH.

attack had lost momentum, Colonel Dubia ordered his forces to pull back so artillery, tactical air, and gunships could hammer the enemy's trench line.

The assault resumed at 1315 hours after the arrival of more armored carriers from Company D, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry. As before, the lumbering vehicles drew some of the heaviest fire. A recoilless rifle knocked out one of the M113s but was in turn destroyed by one of the flamethrowing vehicles. At around 1415, when the leading U.S. infantrymen were within fifty meters of the trenches, several armored personnel carriers accelerated to top speed and smashed through a hedgerow shielding the enemy's front line. The vehicle crews swept the adjoining trenches with grenades and machine gun fire as the infantry rose from the rice paddy and surged toward the opening. A pair of engineer bulldozers then came forward and began crushing the bunkers. The fighting continued well into the evening; this time, the Americans retained their foothold in the Dai Dong.[22]

The next morning, 8 December, U.S. mechanized forces advanced against token resistance. During the previous night, the *7th Battalion, 22d Regiment*, had slipped away southeast toward My An (2), where the *8th Battalion, 22d Regiment,* occupied a fallback position. All told, the defense of Dai Dong (2) had cost the enemy at least 200 killed. American losses totaled nine dead.[23]

Rattan immediately went in pursuit. For the first few days, he could not locate the enemy, although South Vietnamese troops discovered and surrounded the *8th Battalion, 22d Regiment.* However, on 11 December, Colonel Rattan's men regained contact with the *7th Battalion* in the hamlet of Truong Lam (2), some two kilometers east of My An (2), where the 1st Cavalry Division had fought a pitched battle with the *22d Regiment* back in January 1967. Sharp fighting around Truong Lam (2) produced at least a hundred more enemy dead. South Vietnamese troops inflicted even greater losses on the *8th Battalion, 22d Regiment*, with help from U.S. artillery and air strikes. On 12 December, however, both battalions slipped the allied noose once again and retreated south to their camps in the Cay Giep Mountains.[24]

Although the *22d Regiment* had lived to fight another day, the fighting in Dai Dong, My An, and Truong Lam hamlets, which the 1st Cavalry Division dubbed the battle of Tam Quan after the largest nearby town, was a significant blow to the *3d Division*. In all, the *22d Regiment* had lost nearly 700 soldiers killed or captured; only its *9th Battalion*, which was hiding in the hills of the northern An Lao Valley, escaped serious harm.[25]

[22] Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 4–5.

[23] Rpt, 1st Cav Div, Dec 67, sub: 1st Air Cavalry Division Presentation, p. 60, Historians files, CMH.

[24] Ibid., p. 33; Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 7–8; Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, Battle of Tam Quan District, 30 Dec 67, p. 32, Historians files, CMH.

[25] Rpt, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, Battle of Tam Quan District, 30 Dec 67, p. 12; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, 13 May 68, p. 8, box 2, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn PERSHING, 11 Feb 67–21 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 8.

On 14 December, General Tolson turned his attention to the *3d Division*'s *2d Regiment*, which had moved from the Cay Giep Mountains on the lower edge of the Bong Son Plain to the Nui Mieu Mountains, ten kilometers to the south, to attack government outposts on the northern Phu My Plain. That day, the *93d Battalion* from the *2d Regiment* tried to overrun Truong Xuan hamlet and a Regional Forces compound. Soldiers from the South Vietnamese 41st Regiment and a company from the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, manhandled the enemy, killing 115 soldiers and capturing 5 more.[26]

During the month-long campaign that followed, the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, continued to work closely with the South Vietnamese 41st Regiment in pursuing the *2d Regiment*. The allies scored some notable victories, including a strike against the regiment's headquarters that killed either the regimental commander or his deputy. Between 2 and 4 January 1968, elements of the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, and two companies from the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, trapped part of the *95th* and *97th Battalions* and a rear service company from the *2d Regiment* in a seaside hamlet just south of the Cay Giep Mountains. The action cost the enemy ninety-seven dead. By mid-January, the allied operations against the *2d Regiment* had reduced its strength by more than 500 men, or one-third of its original total.[27]

Elsewhere in the region, South Vietnamese forces joined the South Korean Capital Division's 1st Regiment to drive the enemy's *18th Regiment* from the lowlands of southern Binh Dinh. Between 17 December 1967 and 6 January 1968 alone, Operation MAENG HO ("Fierce Tiger") 9 accounted for 299 enemy soldiers killed and 84 captured, mostly from the *E2B PLAF Battalion* and the *18th Regiment*. Just as important, the operation curtailed the enemy's access to food. In late December, the *5th Battalion* from the *18th Regiment* went from having one can of rice per man to one can for every ten. With their men facing starvation, the enemy in southern Binh Dinh Province was forced to spend far more time and effort procuring food than on conducting operations.

According to the official history of the *3d PAVN Division*, between September 1967 and January 1968, the Communist units on the northeastern coast of II Corps "suffered [so] many reverses and casualties . . . that heavy infiltration of North Vietnamese Army troops was still not enough to fill the gaps." Success in the lowlands convinced General Westmoreland that he could safely transfer the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division from Binh Dinh Province to northern I Corps nearly a month ahead of schedule. The division officially terminated Operation PERSHING on 17 January 1968 when Colonel Rattan's brigade began moving north by air and by sea. The division's 2d Brigade remained in Binh Dinh for the time being to continue the search for the *3d PAVN Division*, a mission now called Operation PERSHING II, under the direction of I Field Force headquarters. Westmoreland was taking a gamble by leaving the province so thinly defended, but he judged

[26] Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 11.

[27] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 1, I FFV, 31 Dec 67–6 Jan 68, 6 Jan 68, p. 3, box 2, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, RG 472, NACP.

that northern I Corps rather than the central coast would be the theater of decision in the coming weeks.[28]

Fighting for Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa Provinces

Like Binh Dinh to its north, Phu Yen Province had been a strongly pro-Communist area since the First Indochina War. In the fall of 1967, up to two-thirds of its 350,000 or so inhabitants lived under some degree of Communist influence. The region was home to the *18B* and the *95th PAVN Regiments*, nominally attached to the *5th PAVN Division*, which was in fact a small forward headquarters from the *B1 Front* that lacked support units normally associated with a division. Also present were a pair of well-trained sapper companies and two Viet Cong infantry units, the *30th Main Force Battalion* and the *85th Local Force Battalion*. From base camps in the mountains, the enemy periodically descended to the coastal plain to collect rice and taxes, recruit new soldiers, and attack government outposts.[29]

Much like Binh Dinh, Phu Yen consisted of a shallow coastal plain where most of its people lived and a mountainous interior that covered almost three-quarters of the province. The largest concentration of people resided on the Tuy Hoa basin, a triangular plain that stretched inland from the southern coast to a maximum depth of around twenty kilometers, or in the capital city, Tuy Hoa, located on the coast just north of where the Ba River emptied into the South China Sea. The 173d Airborne Brigade and the 28th Infantry Regiment from the South Korean 9th Infantry Division maintained a pair of base camps next to one another about a dozen kilometers down the coast at Phu Hiep. The South Vietnamese 47th Infantry Regiment, 22d Infantry Division, operated from a main base in Tuy Hoa City, supported by an armored cavalry troop from the South Vietnamese 8th Cavalry. On a typical basis, two South Vietnamese infantry battalions operated on the Tuy Hoa Plain to assist the Regional and Popular Forces in shielding the Revolutionary Development areas that ringed the capital. A reinforced Korean battalion and some supporting U.S. artillery units helped defend the lowlands of Tuy An and Song Cau Districts farther up the coast. A combination of territorial units and a South Korean battalion defended the pipeline that ran parallel to the coast in Hieu Xuong District. The pipeline carried fuel from Vung Ro Bay where oil tankers

[28] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, I FFV, pp. 10–11; Su Doan Sao Vang (Su Dong 3) Binh Doan Chi Lang Quang Khu 1; Ky Su [*Yellow Star Division (3d Division), Chi Lang Military Group, Military Region 1; Memoir*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1984), p. 76 (hereafter cited as *3d Division*), copy in Historians files, CMH. Quote from Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History, 1946–1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 435.

[29] Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Phu Yen Province, Nov 67, p. 4, RD files, CMH; AAR, Opn Bolling-Dan Hoa, 173d Abn Bde, 2 Mar 69, p. 28, box 4, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

discharged their cargo to an air base south of the provincial capital called Tuy Hoa South.[30]

Over the last two years, the 173d Airborne Brigade had acted as one of General Westmoreland's principal "fire brigades," going from province to province, first within III Corps and then across II Corps, as emergencies arose. Most recently, the brigade had spent several months in Kontum Province conducting Operation GREELEY to protect the Dak To area. In September, however, General Rosson instructed the brigade's commander, General Schweiter, to return to Phu Yen Province, minus one airborne battalion, to locate and destroy the *95th Regiment*, which had taken refuge in the "The Hub," a base area nestled in the foothills northwest of Tuy Hoa City. The main responsibility for this operation, BOLLING, fell to the 1st and 4th Battalions of the 503d Infantry. General Schweiter could call on the South Vietnamese and South Koreans for assistance if needed.

When heavy fighting around Dak To in early November drew the 173d Airborne Brigade back to the Central Highlands, the 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry, which had just arrived from the United States, took charge of the BOLLING area of operations. Fortunately for the unseasoned unit, enemy contact remained light for the next month. The American posture strengthened in mid-December when the headquarters of the 173d Airborne Brigade and the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, returned from the highlands.

UH–1D helicopters arrive at a landing zone in Phu Yen Province held by soldiers from the 173d Airborne Brigade.

[30] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 173d Abn Bde, 15 Feb 68, p. 5, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

General Schweiter then resumed his search for the *95th PAVN Regiment*, sending helicopter-borne scout platoons into the interior mountains and valleys of Phu Yen Province. The 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry, gained contact on 27 December when a scout platoon came under heavy fire after landing in the Ky Lo Valley, some forty-five kilometers northwest of Tuy Hoa. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. John R. D. Cleland, had chosen to search the valley because the enemy had ambushed South Vietnamese and South Korean forces there several times in recent days. Observation aircraft had also come under fire whenever they had flown low over the valley. Believing that some element of the *95th Regiment* was likely there, Colonel Cleland landed the remainder of his battalion into the area to develop the situation.

Company A ran into trouble when it touched down near the hamlet of Xom Dap, some two kilometers south of the initial contact area. The landing zone, a clearing some 200 meters long and 50 meters wide that was surrounded by hedges and trees, had already been staked out by the enemy. North Vietnamese troops opened fire on the Americans from concealed bunkers as soon as the helicopters touched down. The cross fire killed or wounded a score of paratroopers in the opening minutes of the battle and set a helicopter ablaze.

Company A regained its bearings after an initial period of confusion and began eliminating the bunkers with grenades. The fight raged for several hours, with the enemy breaking contact around 1530 when a company from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, arrived on the scene by helicopter. The battle resulted in sixty-two enemy dead at a cost of twelve Americans killed and thirty-four wounded. Over the next several weeks, the 173d Airborne Brigade discovered other evidence of a North Vietnamese presence in the area but saw little more of the *95th Regiment*.

In Operation BOLLING the 173d Airborne Brigade killed nearly 400 Communists and captured 59 more along with 146 weapons and 126 civil defendants. The brigade also destroyed 103 enemy structures and 177 bunkers and captured over 12,000 pounds of food. Shielded by the brigade's activities, South Vietnamese officials scrambled to complete the 1967 Revolutionary Development program, which was about two months behind schedule. Their efforts were complicated by the fact that BOLLING had resulted in the damage or destruction of about 4,000 civilian structures, displacing about 20,000 people. The 173d Airborne Brigade helped CORDS and civil officials attempt to ameliorate the damage by delivering relief supplies and medical care.[31]

Farther south along the coast, in Khanh Hoa Province, enemy activity remained minimal in the last months of 1967. The enemy controlled only a small percentage of the 340,000 people who lived in the territory, making it hard for him to replace his losses and to obtain food. Because of their precarious supply situation, the *18B Regiment*, *5th PAVN Division*, and the *307th Local Force*

[31] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, I FFV, pp. 10–11; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 9–12, 19–20; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Phu Yen Province, period ending 31 Oct 67, n.d., p. 4, RD files, CMH; AAR, Co A, 3d Bn, 503d Inf, 173d Abn Bde, n.d., pp. 2–5, 15, 17, VNIT 28, CMH.

A gun crew of Battery B, 3d Battalion, 319th Artillery, 173d Airborne Brigade, fires a 105-mm. howitzer during Operation BOLLING.

Battalion avoided contact with the nearby South Korean 9th Division, which enjoyed excellent support from Khanh Hoa's Regional and Popular Forces.[32]

One example that demonstrated the partnership came on 6 November, when the South Vietnamese 376th Regional Forces Company located two enemy companies during a sweep north of Nha Trang. Despite being outnumbered, the South Vietnamese irregulars kept the enemy pinned in place, allowing two companies from the South Korean 9th Division to arrive by helicopter and outflank the enemy. When a third enemy company joined the fray, the allies countered with well-placed artillery and air strikes. By the time the fight ended the next day, several dozen soldiers from the *8th Battalion, 18B Regiment*, lay dead on the battlefield. Three weeks later, the regiment's *7th Battalion* lost sixty-seven killed when it tangled with South Korean troops and South Vietnamese irregulars ten kilometers west of Nha Trang. Despite the *18B Regiment*'s poor track record, however, the allies could not afford to

[32] Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Khanh Hoa Province, Nov 67, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

become complacent as long as it remained less than a day's march from the vital allied command hub at Nha Trang.[33]

Defending Southern II Corps

The south-central coast was something of a strategic backwater. The provinces of Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, Tuyen Duc, and Lam Dong in II Corps and Binh Tuy in III Corps contained a total population of 680,000, barely two-thirds of the population of Binh Dinh Province alone. The provinces of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan were relatively dry because the monsoon slid past the low coastal hills without depositing much rain; forests covered most of the interior highlands. As a result, the region produced only about 88,100 tons of rice, barely more than one-quarter of Binh Dinh's annual yield. Nevertheless, the region linked the larger and more important theaters to the north and south. Whichever side controlled southern II Corps could thus project power more easily into those critical battlefields.[34]

In the enemy scheme of organization, the southern provinces of II Corps plus Binh Tuy Province belonged to *Military Region 6* under General Chau. Described by one American officer as a "crafty commander and an expert in guerrilla, harassing-type operations," Chau controlled four Viet Cong battalions and half a dozen district companies. Despite the modest size of his command, he had managed to keep Highway 1 virtually closed for the last several years and also to stay one step ahead of his pursuers by regularly moving his units across provincial or district boundaries.[35]

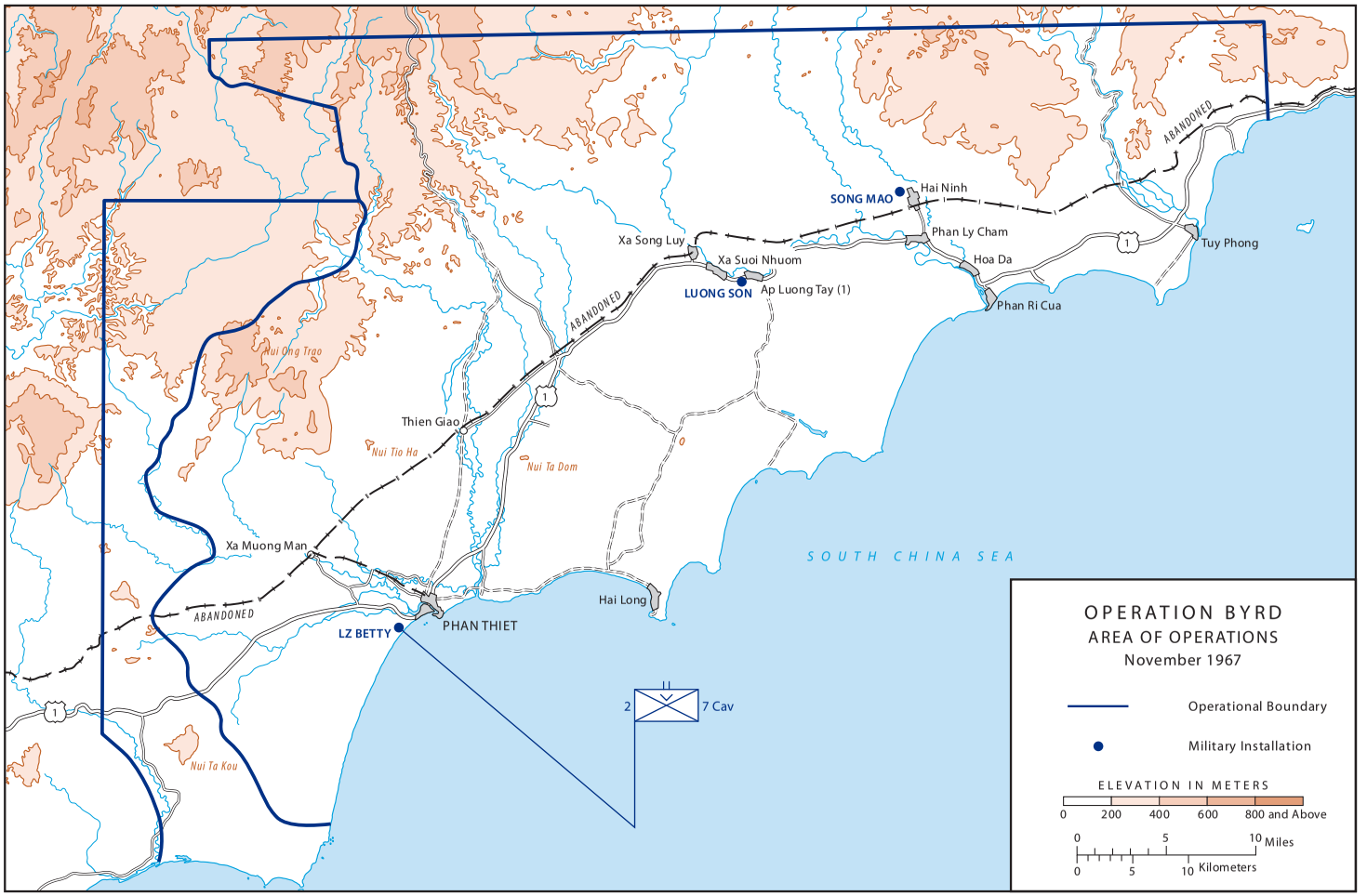
General Rosson maintained a small airmobile task force built around the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, near Binh Thuan's capital, Phan Thiet, to assist the South Vietnamese on II Corps' southern coast. The battalion had come to Binh Thuan Province in August 1966 for a search-and-destroy mission, Operation BYRD, which was expected to last two months. The airmobile task force had proven to be so useful that General Westmoreland had decided to keep it in place. Equipped with thirty-eight helicopters plus a battery each of 105-mm. and 155-mm. howitzers, Task Force BYRD furnished a mobile, hard-hitting offensive punch that the South Vietnamese lacked (*Map 19*).

Task Force BYRD functioned in close cooperation with Vietnamese authorities. Its commander acted as the senior military adviser to Binh Thuan Province, a role that gave him extra credibility when dealing with the province chief, Lt.

[33] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 45, I FFV, 5–11 Nov 67, 11 Nov 67, p. 5; and Periodic Intel Rpt no. 48, I FFV, 26 Nov–2 Dec 67, 2 Dec 67, pp. 4–5, 7. Both in Historians files, CMH. Periodic Intel Rpt no. 1, I FFV, p. 18.

[34] MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, p. 197.

[35] Quote from Senior Ofcr Debriefing Program, Lt Gen William R. Peers, 23 Jun 69, p. 3, Historians files, CMH. AAR, Opn BYRD, 2d Bn, 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div, 10 May 68, p. 4 and app. 8, box 4, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Monograph, Lt Col Joseph T. Griffin Jr., Operation BYRD, A Model for U.S. Forces During Vietnamization (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, 5 Mar 70), p. 3, Historians files, CMH.


SONG MAO
Hai Ninh
Phan Ly Cham
Tuy Phong
Xa Song Luy
Xa Suoi Nhuom
Hoa Da
LUONG SON
Ap Luong Tay (1)
Phan Ri Cua
ABANDONED
ABANDONED
ABANDONED
Nui Ong Trao
Thien Giao
Nui Tio Ha
Nui Ta Dom
Xa Muong Man
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Hai Long
LZ BETTY
PHAN THIET
2
7 Cav
Nui Ta Kou
1
OPERATION BYRD
AREA OF OPERATIONS
November 1967
Operational Boundary
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
200
400
600
800 and Above
0
5
10 Miles
0
5
10 Kilometers

MAP 19

Col. Nguyen Khac Tuan, who was also the commander of the South Vietnamese 44th Regiment. The partnership had worked out well, and by the autumn of 1967, BYRD had become the longest sustained combat operation conducted by U.S. forces in Vietnam.[36]

Not surprisingly, Task Force BYRD conducted many combined operations. A typical formula was to form an operational group that paired one company from each nation. Sometimes the paired companies maintained their national integrity, while at others they intermixed, so that the U.S. company contained a Vietnamese platoon and the Vietnamese company contained an American platoon. The Americans benefited from the Vietnamese soldiers' knowledge of the terrain and people, while the Vietnamese seemed eager to demonstrate their abilities in a spirit of healthy competition. The Vietnamese also benefited by having access to U.S. logistical and medical evacuation resources, whose availability promoted effectiveness and confidence.[37]

Soldiers from both nations also conducted outreach activities. Most of this effort centered on Phan Thiet and the irrigated plain immediately to its north, where three-quarters of Binh Thuan Province's 250,000 people lived and where most of the rice was grown. U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers protected farmers harvesting their crops, distributed supplies, undertook small construc-

A U.S. soldier sets up a movie projector and sound system to show pro-government films to civilians in Phan Thiet.

[36] Monograph, Griffin, Operation BYRD, A Model for U.S. Forces During Vietnamization, pp. 5–6, 9.

[37] Rpt, CORDS, 6 Dec 67, sub: Evaluation Report, Task Force BYRD, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

tion projects, and provided free medical care to civilians. Task Force BYRD's engineer detachment kept the roads over which civilian commerce passed in serviceable condition. Although weaknesses in execution meant that the counterinfrastructure program had yet to score significant gains, a CORDS representative who visited the region in December after a six-month absence noted startling changes. In June, economic activity had been minimal; the people had appeared timid and would disappear into their homes when approached by government officials. In December, the representative reported that "women were taking produce to market, the roads were busy with carts, bicycles and a few motorcycles. People were harvesting rice, preparing fields and planting new crops. While the construction of Revolutionary Development projects is behind schedule, considerable progress appears to have been made in the less tangible, but more important, psychological area." Clearly, he concluded, Task Force BYRD had "successfully contributed toward improving security within Binh Thuan Province, and pacification progress would deteriorate significantly if it were withdrawn."[38]

Although the allies had made strides in pacifying this area during 1967, several Viet Cong units, most notably the *840th Main Force Battalion* and the *482d Local Force Battalion*, still lurked near the capital. These units and six local force companies posed a continuous threat not only to Phan Thiet, but also to the many small South Vietnamese outposts scattered throughout the countryside.[39]

Heading into the final two months of 1967, one of General Westmoreland's main goals on the southeastern coast was to open and improve Highway 1 from Xuan Loc to Phan Rang, thereby restoring the ground line of communications between III Corps and II Corps. Task Force BYRD was a centerpiece in that mission. Protected by the soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, U.S. engineers rebuilt or improved damaged sections of Highway 1 throughout the length of Binh Thuan Province. Those engineers had also helped Vietnamese engineers construct platoon-size outposts at intervals along the highway that were now being manned by territorial soldiers. Work was also under way on several company-size firebases to give the South Vietnamese 44th Infantry Regiment the ability to station troops in forward areas near Highway 1 instead of holding them back near Phan Thiet. This new line of outposts allowed the province chief to create a forward defensive screen around the Revolutionary Development areas of the Phan Thiet basin, making it harder for Communist units based in the western mountains to cross the highway undetected.

The enemy moved against this new defensive barrier on 8 November 1967 when the *840th Battalion* and the *450th Local Force Company* attacked Fort MARA, a small post on Highway 1 some fifteen kilometers northeast of Phan Thiet. The post contained the headquarters and an infantry company from the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 44th Regiment, and some Vietnamese engineers who were still working on the unfinished fort. The U.S. adviser

[38] Ibid., pp. 6, 7 (first quote), 8 (second quote).

[39] AAR, Opn BYRD, 2nd Bn, 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div, pp. 2, 27, 36–37; Monograph, Griffin, Operation BYRD, A Model for U.S. Forces During Vietnamization, p. 12.

at Fort MARA called for air support. The commander of Task Force BYRD, Lt. Col. Joseph T. Griffin Jr., quickly dispatched three UH–1 helicopters, which formed a Night Hunter team. The first helicopter carried infantrymen equipped with night-vision scopes and tracer rounds for their M16s. It flew low to the ground, while a second helicopter dropped flares from a higher altitude. Bringing up the rear was a third helicopter armed with aerial rockets. An AC–47 fixed-wing gunship joined the team over MARA. The aircraft enabled the South Vietnamese to hold on until dawn when a company from the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, chased off the attackers. The cost that the defenders paid, twenty-eight killed and thirty-five wounded, reflected the ferocity of the battle. Viet Cong losses came to forty-two dead. Despite the attack, Vietnamese engineers completed MARA two days later, giving the allies a strong base to defend that stretch of Highway 1.[40]

Two weeks later, General Chau showed his willingness to fight the Americans, provided it was on his terms. The battle began with a mortar attack on Thien Giao, a Vietnamese Army post located some twenty kilometers southwest of Fort MARA. Colonel Griffin dispatched a platoon of infantry to search for the enemy gunners. When helicopters deposited the soldiers in a clearing near the post, the surrounding area exploded with small arms and machine gun fire. Having guessed correctly where the Americans would land, General Chau had set a trap with the *482d Battalion*. The hail of fire drove off the helicopters, several with damage, as the U.S. platoon fought for its life.

Colonel Griffin quickly dispatched the remainder of his battalion to relieve the stranded platoon. The North Vietnamese greeted the incoming helicopters with a hail of machine gun bullets and rocket-propelled grenades. The helicopters pressed through the storm and deposited their passengers, though many aircraft suffered damage and two were forced to crash-land. After several hours of combat, the soldiers from the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, managed to rescue the trapped platoon and to drive off the *482d Battalion*. The cost to the Americans had been high, eleven dead and thirty-six wounded, while the enemy lost an estimated twenty-one killed.[41]

The 2d Battalion suspended Operation BYRD on 1 December in order to join the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in a new operation codenamed KLAMATH FALLS along the border between Binh Thuan and Lam Dong Provinces. Three battalions of the South Vietnamese 44th Regiment and the South Vietnamese 11th Ranger Battalion joined in the effort to locate and destroy the headquarters of *Military Region 6* and any main force units that were operating in the area. Of particular concern was the *186th Local Force Battalion*, which had mauled several Regional Forces companies and elements of the South Vietnamese 44th Regiment on 12 November, killing at least sixty-five government soldiers and damaging or destroying two 105-mm. artillery pieces. A secondary goal of the operation was to improve

[40] AAR, Opn BYRD, 2d Bn, 7th Cav, 1st Cav, pp. 22, 36–37; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 45, I FFV, p. 5.

[41] AAR, Opn BYRD, 2nd Bn, 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div, pp. 32–33.

security on Highway 1 so traffic could move freely between Phan Thiet and Nha Trang.[42]

Over the six weeks that followed, the allies located and destroyed many supply caches and bunker complexes along the border between Lam Dong and Binh Thuan Provinces, some large enough to serve a battalion, but the Viet Cong made only fleeting appearances. Intelligence gathered during KLAMATH FALLS suggested that the main enemy units in the area had withdrawn to safer locations just prior to the start of the operation, suggesting that the Viet Cong had advance warning of some kind. The ninety-five man headquarters of *Military Region 6*, for example, had split into several groups and fled in different directions. In the end, the Americans could claim no more than 156 Communists killed over the six-week period. Of those, nearly half fell to just one of the five participating U.S. infantry battalions, the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, probably due to its greater familiarity with the area.[43]

As for the operation's second objective, the reopening of Highway 1, a South Vietnamese convoy successfully drove from Nha Trang to Phan Thiet and back between 18 and 21 December. Though some parts of Highway 1

A door gunner mans his M60 machine gun as the UH–1D helicopter lands to pick up wounded near Phan Thiet.

[42] AAR, Opn KLAMATH FALLS, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, 27 Jan 68, p. 3, box 19, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 46, I FFV, 12–18 Nov 67, 18 Nov 67, p. 16, Historians files, CMH.

[43] AAR, Opn KLAMATH FALLS, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, p. 5, Encl 1-2 and Encl 1-A-3.

remained dangerous at night, commercial traffic began to flow in increasing volume between Phan Thiet and Phan Rang during the day, opening new markets for the people who lived on the southeastern coast and providing opportunity for greater prosperity.[44]

The Balance Sheet

During the December 1967 battle of Tam Quan, the 1st Cavalry Division had captured a North Vietnamese soldier who informed his captors that the *3d PAVN Division* had entered the densely populated lowlands to prepare for a general offensive and uprising. "We just could not comprehend what he was telling us," recalled Tolson. Indeed, from his perspective the notion sounded far-fetched. During its nearly year-long area security mission in northeastern Binh Dinh Province, the 1st Cavalry Division had killed about 5,400 Communist soldiers and captured another 2,300 along with 2,000 civil defendants, 1,500 weapons, and 482 tons of rice and salt. Nearly 200 of the civil defendants turned out to be infrastructure personnel. These confirmed losses, together with the likelihood of other casualties, could reasonably be expected to have created serious challenges for the enemy. And in fact, they had, for when the general offensive finally occurred in early 1968, northeastern Binh Dinh would emerge relatively unscathed. And yet the offensive still occurred, illustrating both the difficulty not just of interpreting intelligence about future enemy actions, but of understanding the state of play at any given moment in this complex conflict.[45]

By the end of 1967, many indices confirmed Tolson's impression that the allies were making headway, not only in Binh Dinh, but in II Corps more generally. Compared with 1966, Viet Cong incidents in II Corps had dropped 18 percent. Information on Communist strength was unclear, with the enemy removing his dead and feeding in replacements from North Vietnam, but the allies believed that they had killed about 20,000 enemy soldiers in II Corps during 1967 while losing 4,900 men themselves. The Americans, with their superior firepower and aggressive inclination, had inflicted over 50 percent of the enemy's casualties, with the South Vietnamese and South Koreans responsible for the rest. True, the allies had failed to achieve the unrealistic goal they had set for themselves of permanently eliminating all the Communist base areas in II Corps. They had, in fact, eliminated none, as the enemy always returned after allied soldiers left. Nevertheless, they had penetrated all of the enemy's major bases but one, sometimes repeatedly, damaging his facilities and forcing him to rebuild and restock. Considering the damage the allies had done to the enemy's units and bases, I Field Force commander General Rosson believed

[44] Monograph, Griffin, Operation Byrd, A Model for U.S. Forces During Vietnamization, p. 22.

[45] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 28 Jun 68, pp. 2, 7 (quote); ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 9.

Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division search a well for enemy supplies.

that the allies had made "emphatic progress in defeating major [enemy] forces" in 1967.[46]

Rosson was less sanguine when it came to local security. Indeed, by year's end the allies considered security in seven of II Corps' twelve provinces to be unsatisfactory. Rosson acknowledged that the allies had made only modest gains in undermining the enemy infrastructure. Likewise, the number of ralliers in 1967—3,154—was less than in 1966. The I Field Force commander attributed the situation to the enemy's skill, flaws in the counterinfrastructure and *Chieu Hoi* efforts, and to the fact that there were fewer major battles in 1967 than in 1966, as "experience indicates that the number of ralliers tends to increase in periods of heavy fighting, especially in the populated lowland areas." Still, during the last three months of 1967, the allies had captured or killed over 1,500 infrastructure personnel as the result of 770 small unit operations. Rosson was proud of the efforts that his 961 CORDS personnel (711 of whom were military) had made to improve local conditions. He was also proud of the contribution made by U.S. combat units, which during the last quarter of 1967 had used their own personnel to train forty-three Regional Forces companies and eighty-six Popular Forces platoons. Indeed, the I Field Force commander boasted to Westmoreland that "some of the best United States–Army of the Republic of Vietnam talent is being devoted to improvement of Regional Forces/Popular Forces capabilities." He looked forward to perform-

[46] Memo, Lt Gen William B. Rosson for General William C. Westmoreland, 10 Jan 68, sub: I FFV Annual Assessment CY 1967, pp. 7 (quote), 8–9, 19, 22; Rpt, Ofc of the Asst Sec Def, Systems Analysis, Southeast Asia Programs, Southeast Asia Statistical Tables through October 1968, Tables 2e, 4b. Both in Historians files, CMH.

ing more training assistance and combined operations in the coming year, and expected better results as U.S. guidance took root, the Phoenix program took full flight, and the growing National Police force completed its reorientation toward the counterinfrastructure mission.[47]

Some positive developments appeared on the civil side of the ledger too. More hamlets were rated secure, more food was being produced, and the roads were significantly safer. General Rosson estimated that the government had retained control of 89 percent of the rice grown in II Corps, which, when coupled with the fact that the allies destroyed about half of the Communist-controlled cropland in II Corps, the shortage of rice had imposed hardships on enemy soldiers. The Hamlet Evaluation System reported that the proportion of II Corps' population living under government control had risen slightly, from 72.6 percent in January 1967 to 75.8 percent in December. The situation was particularly good in Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan Provinces, where CORDS reported 90, 90, and 87 percent of the population, respectively, living in relative security. Good news also emerged from the challenging province of Binh Dinh, where the combined efforts of the United States, South Korea, and South Vietnam had lifted the percentage of the population living under government control from 50 percent to 64 percent during the year.[48]

Of course, as with the military situation, not all the news was good. Despite allied efforts, the Viet Cong remained deeply intertwined with the population, particularly in Phu Yen and Binh Dinh. Contrary to the downward trend in total incidents, the number of assassinations and kidnappings in II Corps had risen in 1967. Although the South Vietnamese government reported completing work in 92 percent of the II Corps hamlets targeted for Revolutionary Development in 1967, Rosson believed 80 percent was a more accurate figure, with the quality of the work as yet undetermined. In general, problems large and small plagued most socioeconomic and political measures. "Taken as a whole," Rosson concluded, "the pacification effort in II Corps was successful in 1967," with "solid though not spectacular gains" standing side by side with some "disappointing" performances in pacification by the South Vietnamese.[49]

One of the most pernicious problems continued to be apathy and corruption among South Vietnamese officials. Rosson saw a glimmer of hope when, in October, the Thieu government removed, tried, and convicted for malfeasance the province chief and two district chiefs from Binh Dinh. The new province chief of whom the Americans thought highly, Colonel Hoang Dinh Tho, was continuing to purge disreputable officials, some of

[47] Memo, Rosson for Westmoreland, 10 Jan 68, pp. 11–13, 21 (first quote); Msgs, COMUSMACV 03518 to CINCPAC, 3 Feb 68, sub: Pacification in South Vietnam during 1967, pp. 17–18, Historians files, CMH; Rosson NHT 1391 to Westmoreland, 9 Nov 67, p. 2 (second quote), 1–30 Nov 67, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[48] MFR, MACV, 2 Jan 68, sub: MACV Commanders' Conference, 3 Dec 67, p. 1, Encl 4, Historians files CMH; Memo, Rosson for Westmoreland, 10 Jan 68, pp. 12, 14.

[49] MFR, MACV, 2 Jan 1968, p. 1, Encl 4; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Binh Dinh Province, 29 Dec 67, p. 2; Memo, Rosson for Westmoreland, 10 Jan 68, pp. 14–16, 19 (quotes), 20.

whom had been lining their pockets by turning a blind eye on illicit trade with the enemy. "Probably no other government sponsored program has a more immediate and favorable effect on the Binh Dinh populace than the drive against corruption," wrote Rosson, yet it was an uphill battle all the same.[50]

Looking back at the year just ending, Rosson, like Westmoreland, conceded that the allies had achieved less than they had hoped. The citizenry of II Corps shared this sentiment. According to the I Field Force commander, public morale dipped at year's end, as unrealistic expectations that the newly elected national government would quickly improve economic conditions faded, and the Viet Cong stepped up their terror and harassment activities. Nevertheless, like the MACV commander, General Rosson was confident that the allies were moving in the right direction, reporting to his superior in January that "the outlook for substantially greater gains in 1968 is favorable."[51]

[50] Memo, Rosson for Westmoreland, 10 Jan 68, p. 17 (quote); Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Binh Dinh Province, 29 Dec 67, p. 2.

[51] Memo, Rosson for Westmoreland, 10 Jan 68, pp. 1 (quote), 17, 23.

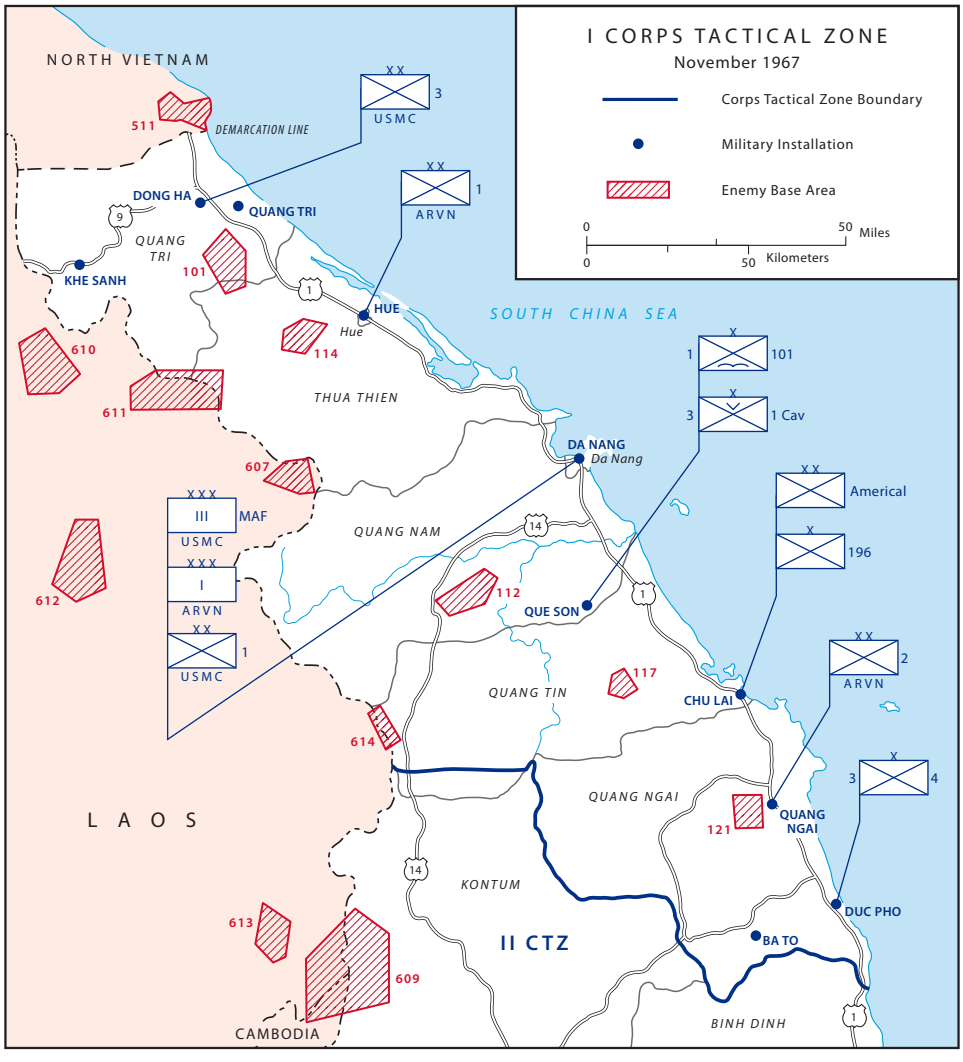
7

Reinforcing I Corps

As General Westmoreland looked ahead to 1968, he was particularly keen to strengthen his position in the I Corps Tactical Zone. North Vietnam remained capable of launching a conventional invasion across the Demilitarized Zone with three to five infantry divisions supported by artillery and armored units, a concentration of force that might overwhelm the allied defenses at any given point. The enemy also exerted pressure on I Corps from the west, taking advantage of the relatively short distance (sixty kilometers on average) that separated his camps in Laos from the populated coast. Those infiltration routes were also fairly secure, since the allies had no permanent presence in the mountainous interior of I Corps apart from a scattering of Special Forces camps. Furthermore, many hamlets in the coastal districts of Quang Tri, Thua Thien, and Quang Ngai Provinces had been under de facto Communist rule since 1954, giving the enemy bases in the lowlands from which to operate. While the allied position in I Corps had improved modestly during 1967, Westmoreland wanted better results in the coming year.[1]

His main goal was to seize the strategic initiative in I Corps, something he had been unable to accomplish because of a lack of resources. By the fall of 1967, the commander of III Marine Amphibious Force, General Cushman, had at his disposal two divisions of U.S. marines, a brigade of South Korean marines, and three U.S. Army brigades. All of these troops were tied down protecting strategic areas. The 3d Marine Division was fighting a high-intensity conventional war along the Demilitarized Zone, while the 1st Marine Division was protecting the port of Da Nang and the adjacent National Priority Area in Quang Nam Province. A pair of Marine regiments patrolled the sector between the Demilitarized Zone and Da Nang to ensure that Highway 1 remained open the length of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. South Korean marines helped secure the coast of central I Corps, while to the south the three Army brigades had their hands full battling a combination of main force and guerrilla units in an area almost 150 kilometers long in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. With barely enough

[1] Memo, Walt W. Rostow for President Lyndon B. Johnson, 14 Nov 67, sub: General Westmoreland's Assessment for the Month of October, p. 3, Historians files, CMH. For information about I Corps during the summer of 1967, see MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, *October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 228–85. Also see Gary L. Telfer et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Fighting the North Vietnamese, 1967* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1984).



MAP 20

troops to fulfill those missions, General Cushman was not in a position to wrest initiative from the enemy (*Map 20*).

The South Vietnamese corps commander, General Hoang Xuan Lam, could offer little offensive help with his thirty-three maneuver battalions. Except for one regiment stationed in the war-torn and nearly depopulated lowlands just south of the Demilitarized Zone, the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division was committed to Revolutionary Development activities around Quang Tri City and Hue. The South Vietnamese 51st Infantry Regiment supported pacification on the An Hoa Plain, the National Priority Area south of Da Nang. The South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division secured the environs of Quang Ngai City and other regional capitals in southern I Corps. General Lam's two armored cavalry groups were needed to secure

Highway 1, leaving him with a true mobile force of only three ranger battalions. South Vietnamese forces also relied on III Marine Amphibious Force for much of their aviation, artillery, and logistical support, none of which Cushman could spare without potentially shortchanging U.S. units.

To meet the severe challenges posed by having to fight roughly 45,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regulars operating close to North Vietnam, the allies had set in motion several projects during 1967. One of the biggest was the Strong Point Obstacle System, a network of minefields, barbed wire, ground sensors, observation posts, and combat bases that III Marine Amphibious Force was building in the northeastern corner of Quang Tri Province. Secretary McNamara first proposed the barrier system in March 1966, and Admiral Sharp and General Westmoreland accepted the concept after a year-long process of review and refinement. The III Marine Amphibious Force was less enthusiastic; as one marine officer put it, "With these bastards [the North Vietnamese], you'd have to build the zone all the way to India and it would take the whole Marine Corps and half the Army to guard it; even then they'd probably burrow under it." Nevertheless, the 3d Marine Division and Navy Seabees had begun work on the barrier system in the spring of 1967. Code-named DYE MARKER, the strong point and obstacle trace extended some thirty kilometers from the South China Sea to Dong Ha Mountain. Another system called MUSCLE SHOALS monitored enemy movement between Dong Ha Mountain and the Laotian panhandle with thousands of air-dropped sensors. Westmoreland saw DYE MARKER as a way to "channel the enemy into well-defined corridors where we might bring air and artillery to bear and then hit them with mobile ground reserves." South Vietnamese troops would man the barrier after it was completed, freeing the U.S. marines for offensive operations.[2]

Completing that process, however, was not easy, and by late 1967 it appeared that U.S. engineers would need another year to finish the system. The 600-meter-wide trace was still only half cleared, and most of the sensors and barbed wire associated with the trace had not been emplaced. Nine of the ten strong points were finished, but none of those had been properly hardened to withstand artillery fire. Engineering equipment and construction material were in short supply, while in October, the northeast monsoon brought heavy rains, halting operations of all kinds. Westmoreland therefore instructed General Cushman to scale back the DYE MARKER effort, concentrating only on the strong points, until dry weather permitted construction to resume in the spring.[3]

[2] Jack Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), pp. 13 (quote), 21–25.

[3] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 11; Lt Gen Willard Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 23–24; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 10489 to Wheeler, 14 Nov 67, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. For details of the barrier and other proposed defensive systems along the Demilitarized Zone, see MACV History, 1967, vol. II, pp. 911–12, and Telfer et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam,* ch. 7.

The logistics support area at Con Thien

Another way in which Westmoreland intended to bring pressure on the enemy was through the combined airpower of the U.S. Seventh Air Force and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. The war had depopulated the northern part of Quang Tri Province, permitting the United States to use tactical air strikes in that region virtually without restriction. In September, the MACV commander had broken up a North Vietnamese siege at Con Thien, a strong point north of Dong Ha, with round-the-clock bombing sorties that had driven enemy artillery batteries into hiding and had decimated the battalions that were attempting to encircle the outpost. At the time, Westmoreland had avoided putting both services under a single joint air manager, conscious of Marine reluctance to cede authority over their aviation wing. For the sake of efficiency, however, the MACV commander hoped to work out an arrangement in the coming year that was acceptable both to the marines and the Air Force.

Since no barrier could prevent the main force units in the mountains from reaching the populated lowlands, Westmoreland emphasized the importance of a third weapon—hunger. As in II Corps, North Vietnamese units depended on the food grown on the coastal plain. Working closely with South Vietnamese authorities and the U.S. advisory teams, General Cushman put additional troops in whichever district happened to be harvesting rice in a particular month. In October, Westmoreland declared

that the effort had achieved "considerable success," predicting that the enemy would soon resort to desperate measures to acquire food.[4]

Barriers, bombs, and starvation were only part of the solution, for what General Cushman needed most of all were men. In the spring and summer of 1967, Westmoreland had reinforced the marines by sending three Army formations—the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light), the 3d Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division, and the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division—to form a provisional entity, Task Force OREGON. The task force operated in southern I Corps, thereby permitting Cushman to shift some of his marines farther north. Yet the measure had proven insufficient, so in the fall Westmoreland decided on two additional steps—he would move the 1st Cavalry Division from II Corps to I Corps, and he would disband Task Force OREGON and replace it with a new, fully staffed division, designated the 23d Infantry Division. Based at Chu Lai in southern Quang Tin Province under the command of Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster, the 23d, or "Americal," Division would permit Cushman to send even more marines northward, while the 1st Cavalry would give the Marine general some badly needed offensive punch.[5]

General Koster

What followed over the next four months was a complicated dance. In September, Westmoreland temporarily assigned the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, to General Koster. Then, two newly raised organizations—the 198th and 11th Infantry Brigades (Light)—arrived from the United States in October and December, respectively. They joined the 196th Infantry Brigade as the official components of the 23d Infantry Division. As these formations settled in, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, both formerly part of Task Force OREGON, remained under Koster's operational direction until late 1967 or early 1968, when they departed from I Corps. The 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, also eventually returned to General Tolson's control.

[4] Memo, Rostow for President Johnson, 14 Nov 67, p. 3; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 9425 to Cushman, 8 Oct 67, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[5] In World War II, the United States had formed the 23d Infantry Division by drawing together units that were already serving in the South Pacific. Initially based on the island of New Caledonia in 1942, the division's commander asked for permission to designate the new formation the "American, New Caledonian Division." When the Army reactivated the 23d Division in Vietnam under similar circumstances, the title "Americal" was reborn.

It was a turbulent process. General Koster at times commanded up to five brigades at once, juggling battalions from place to place as he lost or gained units. When the dust finally settled in early 1968, Cushman would have two full U.S. Army divisions under his control—the 23d Infantry and the 1st Cavalry—plus the support of another provisional Army unit, the 108th Artillery Group. With soldiers freeing up marines from security duties in central and southern I Corps, with the South Vietnamese preparing to take over some of the bases along the Demilitarized Zone, and with the 1st Cavalry Division readying itself for action in its new theater, Cushman would finally have the resources he needed to hold the border, to shield the population, and to take the war to the enemy.[6]

General Cushman welcomed the development, yet the process underlined the hard fact that even after the deployment of nearly half a million U.S. military personnel to South Vietnam, the allies simply did not have enough men for the tasks at hand. To meet new threats or to undertake new initiatives, Westmoreland always had to rob Peter to pay Paul—in this case to weaken security in northern II Corps by transferring the 1st Cavalry Division to I Corps. The statistic relating the total number of U.S. military personnel in Vietnam hid the fact that most of those personnel were not direct combatants, but rather combat support and combat service support personnel. These people were vitally necessary to project the kind of combat power that America was wielding nearly 14,000 kilometers from home, but they were not capable of holding ground themselves. Of the 485,000 military personnel in Vietnam in December 1967, only about 74,000 were in combat maneuver battalions. Cushman's gain was thus someone else's loss.[7]

But what to do with his newfound strength? With his position bolstered along the Demilitarized Zone, General Cushman planned to unleash the 1st Cavalry Division on a six-month campaign to cripple the North Vietnamese logistical system in the borderlands of I Corps. He anticipated launching the first phase of this offensive, dubbed Operation York, in late December, by sending the 3d Brigade from the 1st Cavalry Division, a South Vietnamese airborne task force, and elements of the 4th Infantry Division into southwestern Quang Ngai to sweep the Do Xa War Zone, a logistical hub that supplied most of the main force units in *Military Region 5*. The second phase of York, set to begin in February 1968, called for the entire 1st Cavalry Division and a South Vietnamese airborne task force to invade a pair of enemy strongholds, Base Area 114 in the mountains southwest of Hue and Base Area 101 in the Hai Lang Forest southwest of Quang Tri City. In the last phase of York, slated to begin in late March or early April, the 1st Cavalry Division and the Vietnamese paratroopers would invade the A Shau, a remote valley in

[6] Telfer et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 231–32; Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam,* p. 313; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 747; Interv, Lt Col William Baxley Jr. with Brig Gen George H. Young Jr., CG, Americal Div, 22 Jun 68, p. 3, VNIT 71, CMH; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 206–07.

[7] Michael Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965–1972* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), p. 127.

western Thua Thien Province that served as the enemy's main distribution center in northern I Corps.[8]

If all went according to plan, the marines would block any potential invasion from the north, while the 1st Cavalry Division's offensive and Americal's security operations would prevent the North Vietnamese in central and southern I Corps from launching a major offensive from the west. Meanwhile, the completion of the barrier system would restrict enemy attacks in the eastern half of the Demilitarized Zone and allow the 3d Marine Division to build up a mobile reserve that it could use for offensive operations in its zone. By the beginning of summer, if the situation in I Corps remained stable, Westmoreland would be at liberty to send the 1st Cavalry Division on other missions elsewhere in the country or, if President Johnson gave him the authority he had long sought, to thrust into Laos to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[9]

The Struggle for the Que Son Basin

All of these plans were in the future. Until the 1st Cavalry Division had fully deployed to I Corps, Cushman could only maintain his predominantly defensive duties. For the newly formed 23d Infantry Division and its attachments, this meant providing a protective buffer around core pacification areas situated along Highway 1 in the coastal sections of Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai Provinces. One of the division's principal areas of operations during the closing months of 1967 was the Que Son Basin.

The Que Son Valley straddled the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. It measured twenty kilometers at its widest point and extended inland for nearly forty kilometers, blanketed by rice fields and dotted with small hillocks that rose to a maximum height of sixty meters. Thick hedgerows enclosed and subdivided the hamlets in the valley, which were usually built around the hillocks. Most of the small streams that irrigated the fields drained into a central channel, the Ly Ly River, a shallow, slow-moving waterway that flowed in a northeastern direction to the South China Sea. Two roads traveled the length of the valley, Route 535 to the north and Route 534 to the south, both branching west from Highway 1 on the coast and coming together near the district town of Hiep Duc at the far end of the valley.[10]

Control over the Que Son Valley was important both for the rice it produced and the access it gave to the National Priority Area in Quang Nam Province. This area stretched from the autonomous coastal city of Da Nang southward

[8] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 11636 to Sharp, 3 Dec 67, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 16.

[9] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01382 to Sharp, 30 Jan 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[10] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 2-68, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF), 7 Jan 68, pp. A8–A10, folder 003, U.S. Marine Corps, Hist and Museum Div, Vietnam War Documents Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University (TTU), Lubbock, Tex.; AAR, Opn Wheeler/Wallowa, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 17 Feb 68, an. A, p. 1, box 12, Historians Background files, 14th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

about thirty kilometers to the capital of Quang Nam Province, Hoi An, and extended inland roughly fifteen kilometers. The region included the eastern half of the An Son Valley, which ran parallel to the Que Son Valley and was separated from it by a steep ridgeline known as Mat Rang Mountain. The 5th Marines patrolled the western half of the An Son Valley, while the South Vietnamese 51st Infantry Regiment and the South Vietnamese 1st Ranger Group defended the lowlands between Da Nang and Hoi An, shielding the thirty Revolutionary Development teams dispersed throughout the National Priority Area. Several dozen U.S. Marine Combined Action Platoons, each consisting of an infantry squad and one Navy corpsman, were also scattered throughout the zone. Each was paired with a Popular Forces platoon in an assigned hamlet where they lived full time, training the Vietnamese irregulars, performing security duties, and supervising civic aid programs.

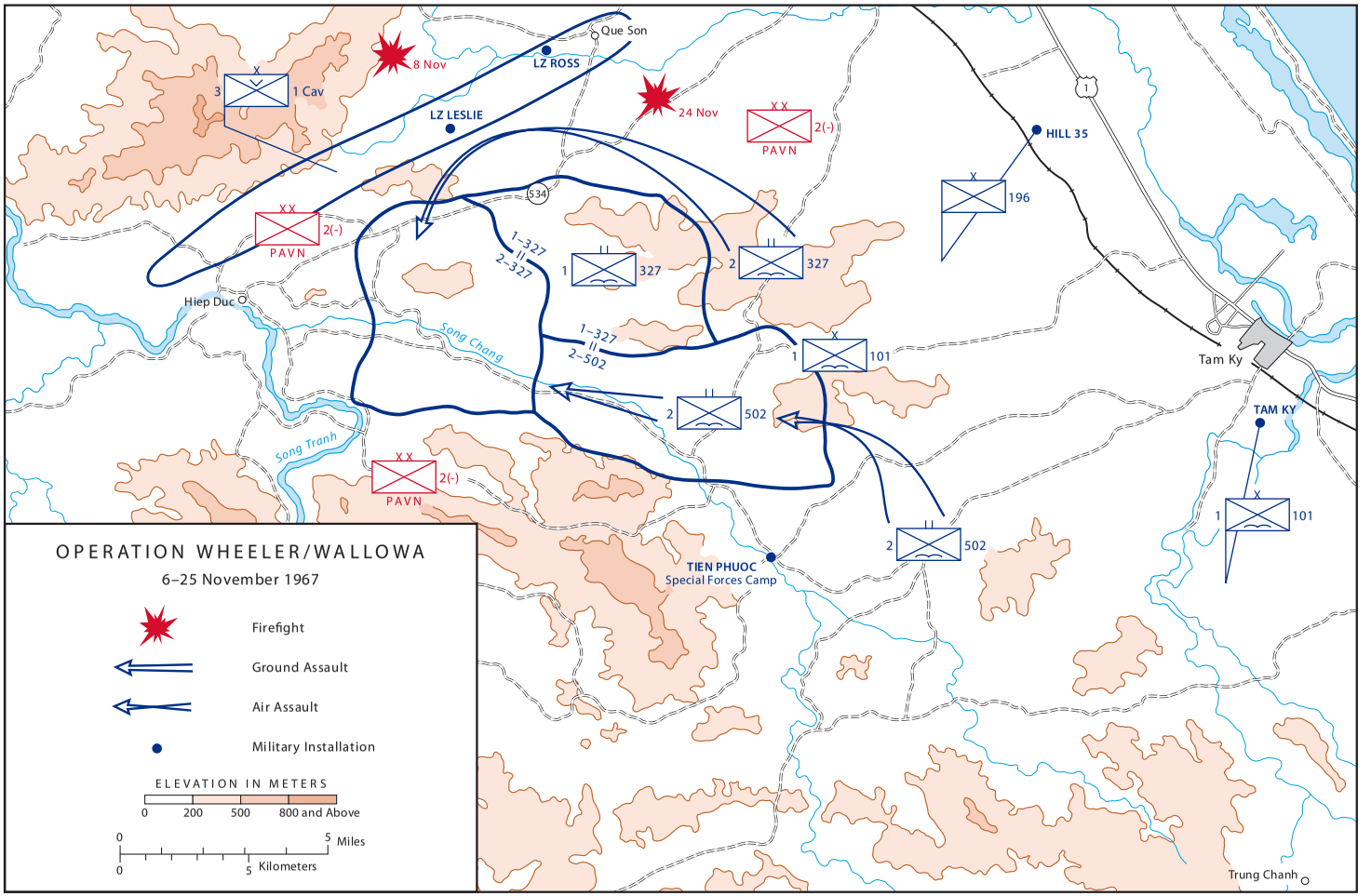
Neither the Revolutionary Development teams nor the Combined Action Platoons could survive for long without the protection of the larger ground units and U.S. air and artillery assets, for lurking on the fringes of the Que Son Basin was the *2d PAVN Division*. Commanded by Senior Col. Le Huu Tru, the 6,000-man North Vietnamese division contained three infantry regiments—the *3d*, *21st*, and *31st*—backed by antiaircraft, recoilless rifle, and sapper units. It was Koster's primary foe.[11]

In the fall of 1967, two brigades under General Koster's control led the campaign against the *2d PAVN Division*. On 11 September, Brig. Gen. Salve H. Matheson's 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, began Operation WHEELER in the southern part of the Que Son Valley. General Matheson maintained his headquarters on Highway 1 near Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province, about fifteen kilometers southeast from the entrance to the Que Son Valley. After the 3d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division had displaced the 5th Marines from the northern half of the valley on 3 October, it joined the hunt with Operation WALLOWA. Led by Col. Hubert S. Campbell, the brigade established its main base at Landing Zone BALDY, positioned on Highway 1 at the mouth of the valley near the district town of Thang Binh, some eleven kilometers south of Hoi An. Also in early October, General Matheson gained control over the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, which left the 3d Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division based at Duc Pho in southern Quang Ngai Province for the WHEELER area of operations (*Map 21*).[12]

The two Army brigades got off to a fast start. Aided by mild weather that rarely curtailed flying, their Huey gunships found plentiful targets since the enemy troops in the Que Son Valley, accustomed to fighting marines who had few helicopters, were used to moving around during the day. By the end of October, Koster could boast that his two brigades had drawn at least five

[11] Telfer et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 188; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Senior Province Adviser, Quang Nam Province, 30 Nov 67, p. 6, Historians files, CMH.

[12] AAR, Opn Wheeler, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, 11 Dec 67, p. 1, AARs, box 17, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn Wheeler/Wallowa, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, an. A, p. 1.


OPERATION WHEELER/WALLOWA
6–25 November 1967
Firefight
Ground Assault
Air Assault
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
200
500
800 and Above
0
5
Miles
0
5
Kilometers
Que Son
LZ ROSS
8 Nov
24 Nov
LZ LESLIE
3
1 Cav
XX
2(-)
PAVN
534
1–327
2–327
1
327
2
327
HILL 35
196
Hiep Duc
Song Chang
1–327
2–502
1
101
2
502
Tam Ky
TAM KY
Song Tranh
TIEN PHUOC
Special Forces Camp
Trung Chanh

MAP 21

UH–1B gunships from the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, skim low across the terrain looking for enemy targets.

of the *2d Division*'s nine battalions into combat and that they had killed or captured more than 1,600 soldiers.[13]

Despite its losses, the *2d Division* refused to leave the Que Son Basin. On 8 November, troops from the *3d PAVN Regiment* used a dozen or more carefully concealed 75-mm. recoilless rifles to ambush a column of armored personnel carriers from the Americal Division's reconnaissance unit, the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, near Landing Zone Ross, a battalion camp for the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, located fifteen kilometers northwest of Hiep Duc. The attack cost the Americans ten killed and forty-six wounded, as well as four armored personnel carriers destroyed. The 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, found three of the 75-mm. recoilless rifles and forty-five North Vietnamese dead when it searched the battlefield the next day.[14]

The clash produced disquieting intelligence. A captured North Vietnamese soldier reported that two battalions from the *68th PAVN*

[13] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 67, Americal Div, 8 Feb 68, p. 11, box 66, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn Wheeler, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, pp. 2–3, Encl 1; Periodic Intel Rpt, MACV, Oct 67, n.d., pp. 2, 8; Intervs, MacGarrigle with Brig Gen Samuel W. Koster, CG, Americal Div, 26 Aug 82; MacGarrigle with Col James O. McKenna, Commanding Officer (CO), 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 16 and 22 Jun 82. All in Historians files, CMH.

[14] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, n.d., p. 11, box 45, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn Wheeler, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, pp. 8–9.

Men of Company A, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, climb a hill in the Que Son Valley during Operation WALLOWA.

Artillery Regiment, a unit armed with 122-mm. rockets, had recently moved into the hills overlooking the Que Son Valley. Although the weapons were inaccurate, they had a twelve-kilometer range and their warheads packed a substantial punch. If the prisoner's report was true, that would give the *2d Division* a long-distance striking power it had formerly lacked and would put American bases at greater risk.[15]

General Koster could not allow the rocket threat to go unchecked. To find the enemy before he struck, Koster turned to his aerial reconnaissance teams, a combination of OH–23 scout helicopters and UH–1 Hueys that carried six-man reconnaissance squads. Now familiar with U.S. airmobile tactics, the enemy initiated countermeasures. On 13 November, machine gun fire brought down a Huey carrying a Blue Team in a rice paddy southeast of Landing Zone ROSS. When a trio of helicopters flew in to rescue the downed aircrew, as many as six North Vietnamese 12.7-mm. machine guns concealed on a nearby knoll opened fire. The effect was devastating. One helicopter exploded in midair and two more were forced to make emergency landings. The *2d Division* had executed its first preplanned helicopter ambush.

The commander of the 101st Airborne's 1st Brigade, General Matheson, ordered the commander of the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, Lt. Col. Robert

[15] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, pp. 11–12.

G. Kimmel, to mount a relief operation to save the downed aircrews. After suppressing the nest of enemy machine guns with air and artillery strikes, the colonel landed three rifle companies into the area to establish a perimeter around the downed Hueys before night fell.

The following morning, Colonel Kimmel flew out in his command helicopter to direct the sweep for the North Vietnamese ambushers. While his men were beating the bushes and inspecting hamlets, a concealed enemy machine gun opened fire on Kimmel's aircraft, severing its main rotor blade. The subsequent crash killed everyone on board, including Kimmel. His battalion continued its mission, later passing to the control of Lt. Col. Marion C. Ross when he arrived with his 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, later that afternoon.

Neither battalion regained contact with the enemy, prompting Colonel Ross to terminate the mission two days later. U.S. casualties came to twenty-two killed and twenty-eight wounded. Hostile fire had hit over twenty helicopters, eight of which were destroyed or severely damaged. Enemy losses were unknown. The Americal Division changed its operational doctrine in the wake of that incident, mandating that ground units spearhead future rescue efforts rather than helicopter rescue teams.[16]

On 11 November, Koster combined Operation WHEELER with Operation WALLOWA to simplify command and control arrangements as the mix of American units began to change in the valley. A week later, the 198th Infantry Brigade (Light) moved from Duc Pho to Chu Lai, relieving Col. Louis Gelling's 196th Infantry Brigade, which moved into the southern part of the WHEELER-WALLOWA zone. With the arrival of Gelling's brigade, General Matheson flew his 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, down to Phan Rang for a month-long mission in southern II Corps.

The first test of the 196th Infantry Brigade came on 22 November when a U.S. radio research unit picked up a transmission apparently sent by the headquarters of the *3d PAVN Regiment*. Triangulation of the signal placed its origin at Hill 63, a small granite outcrop seven kilometers east of Landing Zone ROSS. If the *3d Regiment* was indeed in the valley near Landing Zone ROSS, Colonel Gelling had a rare opportunity to bag a major part of the *2d Division*.

Gelling passed along the information to the executive officer of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, Maj. Gilbert N. Dorland, who was on patrol near ROSS with Companies B and D from his battalion, two platoons of armored personnel carriers from Troop F, 17th Cavalry, and a platoon of tanks from Troop A, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry. It was too late in the day for Major Dorland to act on the tip, but he resolved to investigate the following morning.[17]

Task Force DORLAND approached Hill 63 on a cool and cloudy Thanksgiving morning, 23 November. Despite its modest height, the hillock offered a commanding view of the surrounding farmlands. Knowing that the

[16] AAR, Opn Wheeler/Wallowa, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, an. A, p. 4.
[17] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, p. 12.

North Vietnamese sometimes used it as an observation point when they were gathering food, Major Dorland moved to investigate.

Task Force DORLAND split into two groups and approached the hill from opposite sides. When the American infantrymen began climbing its slopes at around 0700, a torrent of small arms and machine-gun fire greeted them from concealed positions higher on the hill. Four U.S. soldiers were killed and another eleven wounded during the opening phase of the battle. The volume of fire led Major Dorland to conclude that at least one battalion from the *3d PAVN Regiment* held the hill.

As Companies B and D fought their way up the northern and southern slopes, Major Dorland led a group of M48 tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers around the hill to establish a blocking position on its western side. When the mechanized group reached its destination, a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers emerged from the tall grass near the base of the hill, fired at the Americans, and then sprinted west to a hedgerow-enclosed hamlet some 200 meters away. Troop F pursued. Moments later, recoilless rifles concealed in the hamlet opened fire on the troopers. Enemy rounds slammed into two armored personnel carriers, including the one carrying Dorland. He was thrown from his vehicle and then badly injured when the carrier ran over his body. Despite his pain, Dorland refused painkillers or medical evacuation so he could return to the fight.

A hedgerow-enclosed hamlet provided concealment for the enemy.

While Dorland's armored vehicles fought back with machine guns and cannon, his two infantry companies fought their way up Hill 63. It was slow and costly work, with the companies sustaining some fifty casualties in the first two hours of combat. Seeing he had a major fight on his hands, Dorland asked for help. Colonel Gelling sent Company B, 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry, commanded by Capt. David Spohn, which landed near the eastern side of Hill 63 around 0915.

Believing that the enemy on Hill 63 was more or less trapped, Major Dorland ordered Captain Spohn to seize the enemy-held hamlet. Supported by several M48 tanks, Company B closed the intervening distance and entered the maze of hedgerows that enclosed the settlement. The infantrymen silenced several recoilless rifles, which allowed the tanks to begin destroying enemy bunkers at close range, either with cannon fire or by crushing them underneath the weight of the vehicles.

Back on Hill 63, Companies B and D from the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, finally reached the summit, killing the last defender around noon. That accomplished, Major Dorland ordered both companies to march west and join the hamlet-clearing operation. Ninety minutes later, helicopters flew in Company C from Dorland's 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, which also joined the battle. Confident that the four infantry companies and reinforced mechanized troop were taking care of matters, Dorland relinquished his command at around 1500 and flew out by helicopter to receive some much-needed medical attention. The Army recognized his gallantry by awarding him the Distinguished Service Cross.

The next day, Colonel Gelling flew in Company D from the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, and Company B from the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, to search the area around Hill 63 for other *2d Division* elements, while the units already on the ground finished clearing the hamlet to its west. The enemy abandoned the hamlet later that day and scattered to the east and south in small, fasting-moving teams to complicate allied pursuit. Documents found on dead North Vietnamese soldiers identified their unit as the *2d Battalion, 3d PAVN Regiment*. Colonel Gelling's men reported that they had killed a total of 128 Communists in the three-day battle for Hill 63 and its environs. Seven U.S. soldiers had been killed (all in the first two hours of the first day) and eighty-four wounded. Some of the wounded had been wearing armored vests, which had saved lives by absorbing grenade fragments.

What mission the *3d PAVN Regiment* had been performing near Ross remained a mystery, but the Americal Division obtained more evidence a week later that something was afoot. On the afternoon of 5 December, an air cavalry troop commander assigned to support the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, was training a new gunship team from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, when he spotted some people on a ridge north of Landing Zone Ross. After the helicopters made a low pass that identified them as North Vietnamese, the two gunships opened fire and cut down several of the figures. A Blue Team landed on the ridge just a few minutes later and eliminated even more soldiers, bringing the total number of dead to seventeen.

A search of their possessions revealed that they had been the command group of the *2d Division*, apparently caught while performing a reconnaissance mission against Landing Zone Ross. Among the dead were the division commander, Colonel Tru, the division's political officer, its deputy chief of staff, its chief of rear services, its chief of military operations and intelligence, its chief of combat operations and training, and the commanders of the *3d* and *21st Regiments* along with several of their battalion commanders.[18]

A notebook marked "Absolute Secret" and other documents recovered from the scene described a plan for a multiregiment attack on Ross. The plan emphasized the need to destroy a large number of U.S. helicopters and discussed tactics that could be used to shoot them down. Although the document did not specify a date for the attack, it described a preparatory phase that was to end on 23 December. Therefore, U.S. intelligence deduced that the attack would probably come just before or right after the customary Christmas truce.[19]

Taking the document at its word, General Koster strengthened the 3d Brigade's defenses at Ross. He also reinforced Leslie, a smaller, company-size base that was four kilometers to the southwest. Most significantly, he stationed a troop of M113s from the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, at Ross, giving the base a hard-hitting reaction force.

Koster learned more about the *2d Division*'s plans on 9 December, when his main air reconnaissance element, Troop B of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, spotted a battalion-size group of North Vietnamese five kilometers northwest of Landing Zone Baldy. After air and artillery strikes had pounded the location, several companies from the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, moved in to engage the enemy. The day-long battle resulted in the deaths of 121 Communist soldiers. Ten more soldiers who were taken prisoner said they had been part of a food-gathering party from the *1st* and *3d Regiments*. According to their reports, the headquarters of the *2d Division* was trying to accumulate a month's worth of rice so it could conduct a major operation in the Que Son Valley.

Over the next several weeks, Troop B of the 1st Squadron saw no more sign of the *2d Division*. Its only major contact during that period came on 14 December, when gunships spotted troops from the *70th Main Force Battalion* and the *V15 Local Force Company* on the coastal plain east of Baldy. The helicopters killed fifty-eight Viet Cong soldiers with help from the 5th

[18] Interv, Capt Joseph W. A. Whitehorne, 14th Mil Hist Det, with Col Hubert S. Campbell, CO, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 12 May 68, pp. 2–3, VNIT 96, CMH; *Su Doan 2, Tap 1* [*2d Division, Volume I*] (Da Nang: Da Nang Publishing House, 1989), p. 85 (hereafter cited as *2d Division*), copy in Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, n.d., sub: Sequence of Events, Winter-Spring Offensive 1967-68, 2d NVA Division, MR5, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

[19] Interv, MacGarrigle with Col Alfred E. Spry, S–2, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 19 Apr 83, Historians files, CMH. Spry was the first to analyze the captured notebooks and maps. Interv, MacGarrigle with Koster, 26 Aug 82; Interv, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 3; Rpt, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, pp. 2–3.

A line of M113s from the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, Americal Division, during a sweep operation near Tam Ky

Battalion, 7th Cavalry, but a search of the dead local force fighters produced no additional clues about the intentions of the *2d Division*.[20]

The 2d Division *Attacks*

The next warning sign came on 23 December, when signals analysts reported that the *2d Division* had assumed an "alert posture," a strong indication that a major attack was in the offing. Helicopters and reconnaissance teams scoured the valley, but they found no sign of the enemy. U.S. intelligence concluded that the *2d Division* had probably canceled the attack after the Americal Division had captured a copy of the enemy's plans on 5 December.

Koster was not so sure. Even though the *B1 Front* must have known that its plan had been compromised—MACV had released portions of it to the media on 6 December—the general knew that the enemy was desperate to regain control of the Que Son Valley to feed his troops. North Vietnamese soldiers had already raided villages along the periphery of the valley, but the

[20] AAR, Opn Wheeler/Wallowa, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, an. A, p. 7; Rpt, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 5.

amount of rice they had collected was not enough to feed the *2d Division*. Trusting his instincts, Koster directed the two brigades in the Que Son Basin to assume that the enemy was still planning a major attack in the near future.[21]

Koster's hunch proved correct. Even though the *B1 Front* commander, Maj. Gen. Chu Huy Man, wished to call off the attack and give the *2d Division* a rest prior to the upcoming general offensive and uprising, he went ahead with the plan because he had orders from the North Vietnamese Ministry of Defense to cripple the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and to tie it down prior to the great offensive set to begin in less than a month. Although his staff was already swamped with preparations for Tet, Man sent cadres from his headquarters to replace the decimated *2d Division* command group. Senior Col. Giap Van Cuong, General Man's chief of staff and a former commander of the *3d PAVN Division*, became the *2d Division*'s new commander. Cuong and his staff had no time to change the plan so they went ahead with the existing scheme to attack Landing Zone Ross. Colonel Cuong could only hope that the Americans would drop their guard once the original attack date of 23 December passed without incident.[22]

On 26 December, three North Vietnamese soldiers from the *2d Division* surrendered and informed their captors that a multiregiment attack would take place against Landing Zones Ross and Baldy in the near future. More evidence that an attack was imminent came five days later when the radios of the *2d Division* fell silent. In the past, a sudden break in enemy radio traffic often signaled that a big attack was near.

To preempt the long-anticipated blow, General Koster on 2 January directed the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, to scour the area around Ross with helicopter-borne infantry. Early that day, a company from the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, drew heavy fire when it landed into a rice paddy west of Landing Zone Ross. A second company reinforced the first, and the two units remained in heavy contact with the enemy until dark. The Americans killed twenty-four North Vietnamese soldiers and took two prisoners. The captured men claimed that they had just come out of the mountains to the northwest with at least a thousand other troops, had seen numerous antiaircraft weapons, and had passed an artillery position containing six 122-mm. rocket launchers. Also during that day, U.S. engineers found and destroyed a large number of mines on the road between Ross and Leslie, a route that had formerly seen little mining activity. On the basis of those reports and the continued radio silence, the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, went on full alert.[23]

On the night of 2 January 1968, enemy forces north and south of the Que Son Valley carried out a series of diversionary attacks to support the plan of the *2d Division*. Two Viet Cong battalions assaulted a district headquarters in Quang Ngai Province, while a battalion of sappers raided a district headquarters in Quang Tin Province. Both attacks failed. General Man's troops

[21] Intervs, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 3; MacGarrigle with Koster, 26 Aug 82.
[22] *2d Division*, p. 85; Man, *Time of Upheaval,* p. 478.
[23] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 23d Inf Div, p. 12, box 66, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Interv, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 3; Rpt, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 8.

fared better in Quang Nam Province, where they conducted twenty-five attacks in seven of the province's nine districts and subjected Da Nang Air Base to a rocket barrage. A few of the smaller assaults fared well, as the Viet Cong overran the Hieu Duc District headquarters and destroyed a Marine Combined Action Platoon in Hieu Nhon District, but the more ambitious efforts fizzled. An attempt to seize a South Vietnamese artillery base miscarried, while the attack on Da Nang, for all its violence, inflicted only slight damage on the base (*Map 22*).[24]

General Man launched his main attack in the Que Son Valley at 0145 on 3 January. Although the 196th Infantry Brigade's Landing Zone WEST, ten kilometers south of ROSS, and several other bases in the valley came under mortar attack, ROSS and the smaller LESLIE bore the brunt of the assault, sustaining at least 250 rounds from 82-mm. and 120-mm. mortars as well as fifty 122-mm. rockets and heavy fire from 75-mm. recoilless rifles. As the barrage lifted, two battalions from the *3d Regiment* attacked ROSS from the west, while one battalion from the *21st Regiment* attacked from the south.

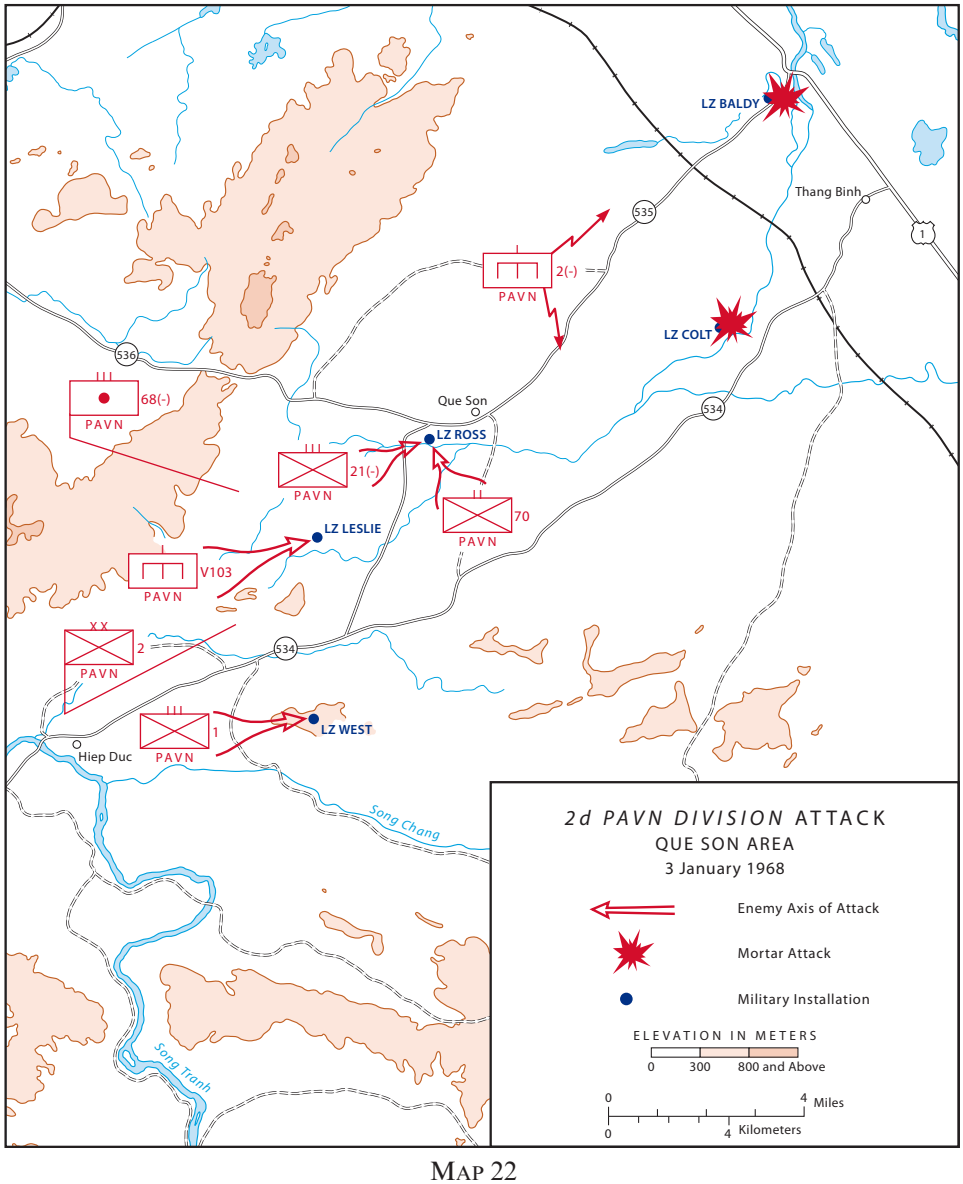
Fighting from reinforced bunkers that had kept them safe from the bombardment, the 400 soldiers who defended the outer perimeter of Landing Zone ROSS met the attackers with blistering fire. The armored personnel carriers raked the enemy with their cupola-mounted .50-caliber machine guns; artillerymen fired their 105-mm. howitzers at the attackers by aiming along the top of their barrels. No amount of bravery could overcome that curtain of steel; the assault slowed, lost its cohesion as casualties mounted, and finally came to an end around 0530.

Meanwhile, at LESLIE, a reinforced company of sappers from the *2d Division* armed with satchel charges and flamethrowers broke through the perimeter around the same time that the attack against ROSS was getting under way. The sappers caused havoc along the bunker line for several minutes, killing over a dozen U.S. soldiers in the swirl of close-range fighting before the infantry company from the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, which was defending the base, drove them off. After making several more unsuccessful efforts to regain their foothold, the sappers withdrew at around 0600. All told, the North Vietnamese lost 242 killed at ROSS and 67 at LESLIE. U.S. casualties came to 18 killed (15 of those at LESLIE) and 137 wounded.[25]

The next morning, the fourth of January, the 196th Infantry Brigade faced a late-developing attack by the *1st Regiment* at Landing Zone WEST, ten kilometers south of ROSS. At 0430, Company D of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, was reconnoitering the area to the northwest of the landing zone when it spotted a company of North Vietnamese soldiers. Once the shooting began, more enemy troops joined the fight. Soon the Americans were facing

[24] Rpt, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 8; Rpt, Senior Adviser, CORDS, Quang Nam Province, 13 Feb 68, sub: Province Report, Quang Nam Province, for the period ending 31 January 1968, p. 4; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Hieu Nhon District, Jan 68, p. 1. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[25] Rpt, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 8; Interv, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 3; Charles A. Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet: Breakout of the 2/12th Cavalry at Hue* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008), p. 30.



MAP 22

an entire North Vietnamese battalion. Companies A and C, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, converged on the area to prevent the enemy force from reaching the base.

The fighting near Landing Zone WEST continued all that day and into the fifth. On the afternoon of 5 January, Colonel Gelling sent Company A of the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, and Company C of the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, to reinforce the three companies from the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, pres-

Men of Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, on patrol in the Que Son Valley during Operation WALLOWA

ently in contact. As darkness fell, the five companies began preparing night defense positions, separated from one another by around 500 to 1,000 meters, in order to screen a wider area with the night ambush teams each would later send out.

Company C of the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, was still preparing its positions when a North Vietnamese battalion struck. Enemy fire took out the company commander and one of his platoon leaders almost immediately. More Americans fell dead and wounded as the volume of fire intensified. Company C fought a desperate four-hour holding action until rescued by Company A of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry. The battle cost Company C sixteen killed and fifty-six wounded. Gelling pulled the unit out of the field and replaced it with Company B, 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, and Company D from the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry.[26]

While North Vietnamese infantrymen clashed with soldiers from the 196th Infantry Brigade around Landing Zone WEST, the 12.7-mm. antiaircraft battalion attached to the *2d Division* continued to hunt Colonel Campbell's helicopters from entrenched positions around ROSS and LESLIE. Despite heavy air and artillery strikes on their locations, North Vietnamese gun crews still managed to hit at least twenty-six helicopters and destroy six.

[26] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 196th Inf Bde, 2 Feb 68, p. 3, box 142, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Their most notable success came on 7 January, when enemy gunners shot down a helicopter carrying the commander of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Lt. Col. Robert L. Gregory, killing him and six others on board.[27]

After a week of hard fighting, however, the *2d Division* was reaching the limit of its endurance. The final clash of the campaign came on 10 January when the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, tangled with a reinforced North Vietnamese battalion near Ross. The firefight resulted in 122 enemy dead for a cost of 16 American wounded and 4 armored vehicles destroyed. Afterward, the *2d Division* withdrew from the valley. In the end, the enemy's plan to create a helicopter killing zone around Leslie and Ross had yielded some success, damaging or destroying several dozen aircraft. On the other hand, the 3d Brigade had never experienced a critical shortage of working helicopters and the U.S. defenders never ran out of food and ammunition. Moreover, U.S. officers estimated that during its week-long offensive in the Que Son Valley, the *2d Division* had lost 1,100 soldiers killed in action and a similar number wounded badly enough to require extended medical care. Total enemy losses attributed to Operations Wheeler and Wallowa through the end of January 1968 exceeded 3,300 killed and 600 weapons captured at a cost of 220 American lives. Until reinforcements arrived from North Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the *2d Division* would be only marginally combat effective.[28]

The Battle for Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces

As fighting heated up in the Que Son Valley at the turn of the year, it was more sporadic in the other areas occupied by the Americal Division, southern Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. In Quang Tin, the Americal Division operated in the southeast portion of the province from its main base camp at Chu Lai. In Quang Ngai, the most populous province in I Corps, General Koster was responsible for the northern (Binh Son) and southern (Mo Duc and Duc Pho) districts, while the South Vietnamese 2d Division was responsible for the National Priority Area around Quang Ngai City and the province's central coast. Most of the province's forty-four Revolutionary Development groups labored within twenty kilometers of Quang Ngai City. In both Quang Tin and Quang Ngai, the allies left the sparsely populated western mountain districts mostly to the enemy.

Quang Ngai's relative tranquility belied its violent past. The Communists had ruled over most of the province since the 1940s, indoctrinating the population and fortifying almost every hamlet in the sectors they controlled with bunkers, trenches, tunnels, and traps. The situation had worsened after the enemy had created the *3d PAVN Division* in Binh Dinh and southern Quang

[27] AAR, Opn Wheeler/Wallowa, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, an. B, p. 2.

[28] Interv, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 3; F. Clifton Berry, *Chargers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 71–95; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 196th Inf Bde, pp. 1–4; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, 8 Feb 68, p. 25, Historians files, CMH.

Ngai Provinces in 1965. With the South Vietnamese unable to expand very far from Quang Ngai City on their own, Westmoreland had provided help, first by sending in U.S. marines, and then, in 1967, by creating Task Force OREGON. The Americans conducted extensive operations north and south of Quang Ngai City. By late 1967, they had succeeded in creating a shield around the central pacification area and in driving off the main force units from the lowlands. The cost, however, had been high—the destruction of many hamlets and the creation of tens of thousands of refugees who had either fled the fighting on their own or who had been removed, willingly or not, by allied forces to the relative safety of government-controlled areas. The conflict had been especially devastating in Duc Pho District, where the presence of the *3d Division*, extensive fortifications, and strong local forces had led to a situation in which "virtually every meter of ground had to be fought over." But the battle had also taken a toll on the enemy, and it was a welcome reprieve when in November the *3d Division* departed for Binh Dinh Province and the half-dozen Viet Cong battalions that remained in Quang Ngai dispersed to nurse their wounds and to gather rice during the fall harvest.[29]

General Koster used the lull to reshuffle his forces in southern I Corps. On 16 November, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, commanded by Col. George E. Wear, moved from Duc Pho to Landing Zone GATOR, just south of the Chu Lai complex. Colonel Wear's unit joined the 196th Infantry Brigade in Operation MUSCATINE, a security mission to protect Chu Lai and the neighboring lowlands from several Viet Cong battalions, and to search for their camps in the hills that ran along the Quang Tin–Quang Ngai border. Ten days later, the 196th Infantry Brigade moved north into the Que Son Valley to join Operation WHEELER. It was replaced by the 198th Infantry Brigade, which in turn handed over Duc Pho to the newly arrived 11th Infantry Brigade under the command of Brig. Gen. Andrew A. Lipscomb.

Koster made further adjustments in early January 1968 when the *2d Division* launched its offensive in the Que Son Valley. He moved two battalions from the 198th Infantry Brigade at Duc Pho north to Tam Ky area of Quang Tin Province to relieve elements from the 196th Infantry Brigade, which Colonel Gelling could then deploy against the *2d Division* if needed. The 198th Infantry Brigade units deployed to Tam Ky also assumed tactical control over the Batangan Peninsula in northeastern Quang Ngai Province, assuming that sector from the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade, which deployed to the Hoi An area in Quang Nam Province to reinforce the National Priority Area there. In the meantime, Koster ordered the 198th Infantry Brigade to continue Operation MUSCATINE in Duc Pho District

[29] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, sub: Evaluation Report, Task Force Oregon Operations, p. 4 (quote), Historians files, CMH; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 2-68, III MAF, 7 Jan 68, pp. A8–A10; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Quang Tin Province, 1 Nov 67, p. 2; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Quang Ngai Province, 31 Oct 67, p. 2; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Quang Nam Province, 1 Nov 67, p. 1. All in RD files, CMH.

Soldiers from Company B, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, move across a swampy area during Operation MUSCATINE.

with the 1st Battalion, 52d Infantry, and elements of the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division.[30]

The enemy exploited the shifting roster of units in early December, when he embarrassed allied officials by destroying the Binh Son District headquarters. Operation MUSCATINE was equally frustrating for ordinary U.S. soldiers, who suffered a steady stream of casualties from booby traps and mines, but rarely encountered the enemy. To the dismay of the troops, most of the Viet Cong's mines came from bases abandoned by the South Koreans who had departed the area without clearing their minefields.[31]

Although there were few major battles, the security situation deteriorated toward the end of the year, as Viet Cong guerrilla forces picked up the slack from the *3d Division*. Harassing fire and acts of terrorism accounted for most of this activity, but in January 1968 several clashes occurred with larger enemy forces. On New Year's Day, elements of the Americal Division deployed to blocking positions in Quang Ngai Province as troops from the South Vietnamese 2d Division and U.S. helicopter gun-

[30] Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Province Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai Province, 28 Dec 67, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

[31] AAR, Opn Muscatine, 4th Bn, 3d Inf, 11th Inf Bde, 20 Jun 68, p. 28, box 2, Historical Background files, 3d Mil Hist Det, RG 472, NACP.

ships engaged a large enemy force, killing 111 and capturing 37 weapons. On the following day, the enemy struck back, as the Viet Cong *406th* and *38th Battalions* and a pair of local force platoons penetrated the central pacification zone and attacked the headquarters of Quang Ngai's Nghia Hanh District. Fortunately, a Viet Cong deserter had alerted the defenders to the impending assault. Fully prepared, the South Vietnamese rebuffed the attack, killing seventy-four Viet Cong and capturing five prisoners and twenty weapons. Two weeks later, the Americal Division initiated the largest U.S. action of the period when on 17 January, Company A, 1st Battalion, 52d Infantry, caught up with four local force companies near the coastal village of Phu Nhieu in Quang Tin Province, several kilometers south of Chu Lai. Reinforced by the battalion's Company B, the troops swept toward the village, while the 3d Brigade's reconnaissance platoon and Company B, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, landed into blocking positions south and west of the town. As the attack progressed, Viet Cong who had sought refuge in the village fled into the blocking positions, where small arms fire and gunships cut them down. At a loss of 1 soldier killed and 6 wounded, the Americans claimed 100 enemy dead, 7 prisoners of war, and 38 captured weapons. The following day, the wheel of fortune turned again, when a Viet Cong company ambushed an understrength government battalion backed by five Popular Forces platoons in Nghia Hanh District. The district chief who was accompanying the operation and the South Vietnamese soldiers fled, leaving their U.S. advisers to fend for themselves.[32]

With most of the enemy's main forces having retreated from the seat of action, U.S. units shifted to patrol mode. The 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, for example, operated by establishing firebases in strategic locations while keeping its rifle companies out and about in the countryside. Each day the companies would move to a new location. Punctuating the constant day and night patrols were occasional company- and battalion-size search-and-destroy operations and extensive harassment and interdiction fire by the brigade's artillery, which every night launched shells into suspected enemy locations. The combined effect of U.S. and enemy actions produced a low-grade attrition. By the end of January 1968, Operation MUSCATINE had yielded 454 enemy dead and 103 weapons captured at a cost of 25 American lives.[33]

According to a CORDS report, the frequent battles over fortified hamlets, the large flows of refugees, and the heavy use of air and artillery fire had, over the years, created a "conventional type of war" in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin, in which "many houses were destroyed." Similar conditions

[32] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, pp. 15, 26; AAR, 3d Mil Hist Det, n.d., sub: Free World Military Forces Operations: Operation Muscatine, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 3d Bde, 4th Inf Div, 2 Feb 68, p. 5, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Memo, District Adviser, Nghia Hanh, for Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai Province, 1 Feb 68, sub: District Report, Historians files, CMH.

[33] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, p. 25.

U.S. soldiers interact with civilians during a search-and-clear mission in Quang Ngai Province.

existed in Quang Nam and portions of Quang Tri. In March 1968, writer Jonathan Schell brought this aspect of the war to the attention of the U.S. public in a pair of articles published in the *New Yorker* magazine. Based on a visit he had made to Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces in August 1967, Schell recounted in detail the extensive damage U.S. forces had done to sections of the countryside, the suffering of civilians caught in the fighting, and the callousness that can taint the outlook of men in combat.[34]

U.S. officials knew of Schell's findings before they were published, for on his return to the United States he briefed Secretary McNamara, who then gave Schell a room in the Pentagon to write the articles. According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, McNamara was "horrified" by the stories of "meaningless and random bombings" and "the cynical attitude toward human life which, it purported, permeated our forces." The news reinforced the anguish the secretary felt over a war he helped initiate, but that he no longer believed in. [35]

[34] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 5; Jonathan Schell, "Quang Ngai and Quang Tin I," *New Yorker*, 9 Mar 68, pp. 37–129; and pt. II, 16 Mar 68, pp. 40–130.

[35] Nitze quote from Louis A. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors, Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Viet-Nam, 1954–1975* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 116, and see also pp. 114–18.

After reading Schell's draft, McNamara circulated it within the government, triggering several investigations. The investigators concluded that Schell had exaggerated the amount of destruction and that he had gotten some of his facts wrong. They also believed that he had not explained the unusual and unfortunate combination of factors that had made fighting in I Corps so desperate, thereby leading readers to the erroneous conclusion that the conditions he had witnessed were typical of the country as a whole. Nevertheless, they conceded that much of what Schell had recounted was true—that those sections of the countryside that had seen the most fighting had been turned into a moonscape; that some of these areas were now devoid of people, while others still contained large numbers of civilians who were subjected to air and artillery strikes; that thousands of refugees crowded into towns and camps; and that rules of engagement designed to limit harm to civilians were not always understood or obeyed. In short, many of the fears U.S. officials had expressed early on about the potential adverse consequences of committing U.S. troops to fighting in heavily populated areas had come true in I Corps.[36]

The Schell stories also amplified concerns that had already been growing about the number of refugees in Vietnam—concerns that were sparking inquiries in the U.S. Congress and were spurring MACV to reexamine the issue. People left their homes for many reasons. Some fled when the Viet Cong attacked their villages. Some left on their own accord to escape Viet Cong oppression or to seek better job opportunities in urban areas, while others became homeless as a consequence of battle. Many chose to flee areas of recurrent fighting in search of safety, and in some cases allied forces had evacuated whole communities, either for their protection, to deny the enemy labor and supplies, or to facilitate military operations. It was therefore impossible to apportion responsibility precisely for the creation of refugees. One U.S. official estimated that only about 1 percent of all refugees came about as a result of deliberate evacuations by allied forces. This number was undoubtedly far too low, but allied officials were probably correct in maintaining that the vast majority of refugees had not come about as a result of mandatory evacuations. One critic of U.S. actions who undertook a detailed analysis estimated that evacuations accounted for only about 10 percent of the total refugee population during the course of the war.[37]

[36] Memo, James D. Hataway Jr. for Ambassador, U.S. Embassy, Saigon, 12 Dec 67, sub: House Destruction in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin; Comments on the Schell Manuscript, 16 Dec 67, attached to Memo, Hataway for Ambassador, 26 Jan 68, sub: Destruction in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[37] Memo, Robert W. Komer for General William C. Westmoreland, 28 Nov 67, sub: Refugees, p. 1; Rpt, Jerry L. Dodson, Field Evaluator, CORDS, 4 Sep 67, sub: Evaluation of Refugee Handling Operations in Quang Ngai Province, with attachments; Rpt, Col Hugh G. Fly, Ofc of the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA), JCS, 13 Dec 67, sub: After Action Report—Field Trip, Vietnam, p. 4; Memo, Col R. B. McRae, RD Div, SACSA, JCS, for Maj Gen William E. DePuy, 3 Nov 67, sub: Causes of Refugee Flow, pp. 1–5, and attachments. All in Historians files, CMH. Thomas Thayer, "How to Analyze a War Without Fronts, Vietnam, 1965–1972," *Journal of Defense Research*, ser. B: Tactical Warfare, vol. 7B, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 924–25; Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, pp. 353, 357–59.

Realizing that it was politically important for both governments to mitigate the refugee situation, the United States reinforced long-standing efforts to push South Vietnam toward improving its handling of refugees. Meanwhile, in October MACV reemphasized the desirability of minimizing population displacement and directed that commanders report all movements of 500 or more people. CORDS Director Robert Komer also canvassed the corps-level commanders, asking if they could take steps to reduce the number of refugees created by U.S. operations. All of them replied in the affirmative except one—III Marine Amphibious Force commander General Cushman, who stated that refugees were inevitable given the location and intensity of combat in I Corps. In his opinion, it was better to relocate people than to expose them to the hazards of battle. He also rejected, as did most U.S. commanders, a suggestion by Komer that U.S. military units take over responsibility for the refugees they generated from the South Vietnamese government. He conceded that U.S. forces needed to do a better job of coordinating their operations with civil officials, both to limit the number of refugees and to better care for those who left their homes. MACV reinforced the importance of the issue by publishing a new annex devoted exclusively to the subject of refugees in the 1968 Campaign Plan.[38]

If U.S. officials were united in believing that the allies needed to do more to care for refugees, and if they were mostly in agreement on the need to reduce the number of displaced persons created by allied operations, they were of two minds as to the role refugees played in the conflict. Some saw the refugee crisis as an unmitigated disaster. Others believed that the flow of refugees into government-controlled territory hurt the Viet Cong by denying them labor and recruits. In essence, population movement drained the human sea in which the guerrillas swam, a turn of a phrase from Maoist guerrilla doctrine that Westmoreland himself employed. Certainly the phenomenon gave the government access to people it otherwise would not have had. The Viet Cong seemed to share the view that dislocated people represented a gain for the government and a loss for them, for they constantly pressured refugees who came from Viet Cong–dominated areas to return to their homes. A stark example of this occurred in Quang Nam in November, when the Viet Cong targeted refugee camps throughout the province, "resulting in heavy

[38] Comments on the Schell Manuscript, 16 Dec 67, pp. 8–10, attached to Memo, Hataway for Ambassador, 26 Jan 68; Msg, COMUSMACV 2564 to CG, III MAF, et al., 23 Jan 68, sub: Refugees; Msg, Saigon 8577 to State, 14 Oct 67; Memo, Peter R. Rosenblatt for Komer, 16 Feb 68, sub: The Refugee Situation in I Corps; Robert W. Komer, Press Background Statement, 28 Dec 67, sub: Refugee Situation; Rpt, Col F. P. Serong (Australian Army), CORDS, Dec 67, sub: The Refugee Situation, National Overview; Memo, R. M. Montague for Komer, 28 Dec 67, sub: Notes on Refugee Policy; Memo, Charles T. Cross, Acting Deputy, CORDS, I CTZ, for Komer, 7 Dec 67, Msg, CG, III MAF, to COMUSMACV, 2 Oct 67. All in Historians file, CMH. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, pp. 84–98, 118–22.

civilian casualties, destruction of over 600 dwellings, widespread terror and an obvious psychological impact."[39]

The impact of relocation on the population varied. Most found living conditions to be worse than that of their peacetime villages, and U.S. officials openly worried that the government's often shoddy treatment of refugees at best squandered an opportunity and at worst turned the affected people into opponents of the regime. On the other hand, a CORDS survey in Quang Ngai found that many refugees enjoyed being free from Viet Cong impositions and appreciated the improved safety that resulted from their relocation. Some even welcomed the mandatory evacuations imposed by allied forces. The reason for the latter sentiment was that one way the Viet Cong discouraged people from leaving Communist-dominated areas was by preventing them from taking their property with them. Becoming a refugee thus meant becoming destitute. However, when U.S. forces conducted a planned evacuation, they often helped people take out their livestock and belongings, thereby allowing the people to escape both Communist domination and the fighting while keeping their worldly goods.[40]

If the effects of population movement on the political struggle were debatable, in Quang Ngai and other "liberated" zones in which the enemy was deeply entrenched, evacuation made sense from a narrow, tactical point of view. Every person who relocated out of the combat area was one less potential casualty, and every depopulated acre was one more in which allied firepower could be applied against the enemy with less restraint—firepower that was critical owing to the enemy's heavy fortifications.[41]

A CORDS investigation revealed how communities in Quang Ngai sometimes became casualties of war. When U.S. troops operated in Viet Cong–controlled areas, they frequently came under fire or mine attack from hamlets, including ones that had previously been "cleared" of the enemy. Galled by the recurring threat but feeling constrained in the application of return fire due to the presence of civilians, U.S. units would issue stern warnings to the inhabitants. One such warning, a leaflet produced by the U.S. marines and published by Schell, depicted rubble and read, "If you support the Viet Cong . . . your village will look like this." It continued:

> The Viet Cong hide among innocent women and children in your villages to fire upon troops and aircraft. If the Viet Cong in this area use you or your village for this purpose, you can expect death from the sky. Do not let your lives and your homes be destroyed. Do not let the Viet Cong be the reason for the death of your loved ones. Report all Viet Cong locations immediately.[42]

[39] Memos, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, sub: CORDS Field Overview for December 1967, p. 12; Senior Adviser, Quang Nam Province, for CORDS, 1 Dec 67, sub: Quang Nam Province, period ending 30 November 1967, 30 Nov 67, p. 3 (quote). Both in Historians files, CMH.

[40] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 8.

[41] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 152–53.

[42] Quote from Schell, "Quang Ngai and Quang Tin I," p. 43, and see also pp. 42, 44.

The Americal Division distributed similar leaflets. The CORDS report explained what often happened next.

> After repeated warnings to the hamlet, usually to no avail, a search and destroy operation is launched. The hamlet is surrounded and searched and the inhabitants screened for Viet Cong suspects. They are allowed time to pack their belongings and collect their livestock and then are moved to one of the sixty-five refugee camps in the province. Shortly thereafter, the hamlet is destroyed. Notwithstanding this type of operation, friendly forces still continue to receive fire from such hamlets and encounter mines, but they no longer are inhibited from returning fire and calling in artillery or air strikes.[43]

As for anyone left behind, and people often refused to evacuate, allied officials tended to believe that such individuals had chosen to side with the enemy and would have to live with the consequences of their decision. An investigation revealed, however, that when civilians became casualties, U.S. forces treated them responsibly, regardless of who had caused their injury or on which side of the conflict the civilians were thought to belong.[44]

The Balance Sheet in I Corps

With the advent of the New Year, allied officials struggled to assess how matters were fairing in I Corps. They had at their disposal a mass of statistics and some subjective reports, but what did they mean? And how did the war look from the enemy's perspective, or, for that matter, from the viewpoint of the Vietnamese people? Here as elsewhere in Vietnam, facts, assumptions, and unanswered questions blended together to create a picture that was at once hopeful and discouraging.

Militarily, the allies had done well. During 1967, U.S., South Vietnamese, and South Korean forces reported that they had killed 40,000 enemy soldiers in I Corps and suspected that they had put out of action 33,000 more. They had captured 3,697 Communist personnel, 9,287 weapons, and 2,720 tons of rice. Of the casualties, U.S. military forces had killed about 16,000 Communists in large-unit operations and 9,000 in small-unit operations, with the number of small-unit operations conducted in the theater three times higher than in 1966. Focusing even more narrowly, between 1 November 1967 and 31 January 1968, the Americal Division alone had killed nearly 4,600 enemy soldiers and captured 1,425 weapons, indicating that at least on this front, positive news was likely to continue into the new year.[45]

[43] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 8.

[44] Comments on the Schell Manuscript, 16 Dec 67, p. 15, attached to Memo, Hataway for Ambassador, 26 Jan 68.

[45] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, p. 26.

Military pressure led by the United States was also a major factor in boosting the *Chieu Hoi* program. During 1967, a total of 2,258 individuals took advantage of the program, a 53 percent increase over the previous year. Heavy fighting in Quang Ngai generated the largest number of defectors in I Corps. In neighboring Quang Tin, an entire Viet Cong platoon of 38 men surrendered, while during the last two months of the year defectors on three occasions guided Americal soldiers to caches totaling over 170 weapons, including recoilless rifles, machine guns, and many arms of Chinese manufacture.[46]

There was also positive news on the political front. According to the CORDS senior representative in I Corps, 1967 had been a year of "slow but steady progress in pacification." The number of "A" hamlets (hamlets that earned the highest score on the Hamlet Evaluation System [HES] scale) had trebled, the number of "B" hamlets had doubled, and the number of Viet Cong hamlets had declined by 14 percent. Seventy-eight percent of the hamlets scheduled for Revolutionary Development at the start of the year had completed the process. By year's end, the HES reported that 56.6 percent of I Corps population was relatively secure—well below the national average of 66.9 percent, but an 8.1 percent increase over the course of the year. Indeed, the 317,000 people added to the rolls of those living in government-controlled areas represented the largest gain of any corps area in 1967.[47]

During 1967, the allies had built 300 classrooms and trained 500 teachers in I Corps. CORDS had spent over 20 million piasters on expansion of hospitals in the region that over the course of the year had admitted 67,188 patients, 18,000 of whom had war-related injuries. CORDS had also built 23 village dispensaries and delivered 66,993 tons of commodities while constructing enough housing to shelter 60,000 refugee families.[48]

Task Force OREGON and the Americal Division had contributed significantly to pacification progress. For example, between November 1967 and January 1968 General Koster's division treated 65,407 patients through MEDCAP (Medical Civic Action Program) and helped build 3 dispensaries, 17 schools, 22 wells, 21 public latrines, 3 marketplaces, 561 houses, 2 playgrounds, and a church. Americal units and individuals donated 1,390 pounds of clothes, 287,274 pounds of food, 58,000 board feet of lumber, 16,850 bars of soap, and 142,470 piasters during the same time period. Koster also significantly eased CORDS' logistical difficulties by loaning it trucks to move its supplies and relocate refugees.[49]

[46] Ibid., p. 39; Memos, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 7–10; Quang Tin Advisory Team for CORDS, 1 Nov 67, sub: Special Joint Narrative Report on Revolutionary Development, p. 6, Historians files, CMH.

[47] Msg, COMUSMACV 03518 to CINCPAC, 3 Feb 68, sub: Pacification in South Vietnam during 1967, pp. 10–11, 17; Memo, CORDS for Distribution, 14 Jan 68, sub: Monthly Pacification Status Report, p. 3-1. Both in Historians files, CMH. Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 1, 2, 5.

[48] Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 13–15.

[49] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, pp. 37–38.

A U.S. medic checks the eyes of a young girl during a MEDCAP mission.

In mid-November, General Koster initiated Operation HAYSTACK, which paired companies and platoons from the Americal Division with National Police in a program that established random checkpoints on Highway 1. The effort led to the arrest of a number of Viet Cong agents who were attempting to move supplies from one place to another disguised as legitimate traders. In a related program, Americal Division police and National Police targeted the black market in and around Chu Lai, Tam Ky, and Duc Pho, restricting the flow of marijuana to U.S. troops and apprehending Vietnamese draft dodgers who made their living through the black market. Meanwhile, U.S. engineers were constantly busy with minesweeping, repair, and maintenance missions on Highway 1, and restoring fourteen bridges and thirty-four culverts destroyed by enemy demolitions in the final months of 1967. Engineers also opened twenty-two kilometers of Route 535 from Highway 1 to Landing Zone ROSS, creating an all-weather road that extended into the heart of the Que Son Valley. By keeping the roads of central and southern I Corps open, Koster helped government programs and civilian commerce alike.[50]

Operation HAYSTACK reflected an increasing interest on the part of U.S. military officials in making the counterinfrastructure program more effective. In September, a CORDS investigation stated that Task Force OREGON's counterinfrastructure efforts had failed to do much damage to the enemy.

[50] Ibid., pp. 24, 30.

According to the report, Viet Cong cadre had often been able to "hoodwink" U.S. soldiers due to their unfamiliarity with Vietnamese language, people, and customs. Vietnamese interpreters were not much help, both because they were few in number and because they were generally urban in origin and unfamiliar with the local situation. Consequently, the report recommended that U.S. units integrate a few locally recruited Popular Forces soldiers into each platoon. By year's end, there were some glimmers of hope. Every jurisdiction now had district operations and intelligence coordination centers that were slowly gaining in experience. In troubled Duc Pho District, for example, the center supplied information to combined teams formed by members of the local provincial reconnaissance unit and a U.S. rifle platoon drawn from the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, which killed or captured sixty-two members of the infrastructure in the last two months of the year.[51]

In September 1967, a CORDS review stated that there was insufficient coordination between U.S. Army units, province advisers, and civil officials in I Corps. By year's end, however, senior CORDS officials were heaping praise on the Army. Three U.S. Army civil affairs platoons were acting as liaisons between military and civilian agencies in coordinating civic actions in the Americal area of operations. The 29th Civil Affairs Company had also assigned displaced person teams to Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai Provinces to assist in refugee relief efforts, while at the division level General Koster's G–5 attended weekly meetings with the province advisory teams in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai. In Quang Tin, the senior province adviser reported in November that "the most favorable factor during this period has been the massive offensive operations by the U.S. Army units in the province. If these operations continue at this level it will allow the 1968 [Revolutionary Development] program to be greatly expanded." The following month, the senior CORDS representative in Quang Ngai wrote that relations between the province and U.S. units stationed there had been excellent, and that planning for Revolutionary Development "enjoyed the close coordination and received magnificent support from the leadership of the Americal Division." Similarly, when elements of the 1st Cavalry Division moved into Quang Tri Province in January 1968, the province senior adviser reported that they "were outstanding in their eagerness to coordinate and cooperate with CORDS and [South Vietnamese] authorities."[52]

Last but not least, the population seemed to be bearing up under the strain. Those who had suffered most as a result of the war, the refugees, seemed largely apathetic but not openly hostile to the government. Indeed,

[51] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 7 (quoted word), and p. 2, Encl 2; Memo, District Adviser, Duc Pho, for Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai Province, 27 Dec 67, sub: District Report, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

[52] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 11; Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, p. 9; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, Americal Div, pp. 34, 36; Memos, Quang Tin Advisory Team for CORDS, 1 Nov 67, p. 2 (quote); Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai, for Deputy, CORDS, III MAF, 4 Dec 67, sub: Quang Ngai Province, period ending 30 November 1967, pp. 1, 4; Rpt, CORDS, Quang Tri Province, period ending 31 January 1968, 31 Jan 68, p. 9. All in Historians files, CMH.

more seemed to blame the Viet Cong than the government for their plight. As for the population as a whole, the senior CORDS representative in I Corps reported that the "morale of the populace has vacillated during the year, depending on security conditions and political events. The net balance, however, has been a significant rise in confidence in the [South Vietnamese government] and a rising belief that the Viet Cong cannot win." Contributing to this confidence was the favorable view most civilians reportedly had of U.S. soldiers. Two factors underlay this phenomenon. First, the populace credited the Americans with improving their security through military action. People surveyed in September contrasted U.S. military performance favorably with that of French soldiers more than a decade earlier, noting not only superior U.S. firepower, but also that the Americans patrolled more vigorously than had the French. Second, the CORDS survey reported that "almost all of the people in the operation region of Task Force OREGON have acknowledged that soldiers in American units have treated people with kindness." All and all, General Koster had reason to believe that his combat and noncombat actions were having a generally positive effect.[53]

Yet there were countervailing signs too. The same report that credited the majority of U.S. soldiers with kindness also reported that ill-considered acts by some—unnecessary shootings, unwarranted destruction, and the molestation of women—tarnished America's reputation. U.S. actions had likewise not been able to improve the region's critical rice deficit. Rice production in I Corps had held steady at 154,320 tons in 1967, considerably below the 1965–1966 average of 435,400 tons. This was due to the heavy military activity that had damaged farms and spurred farmers to abandon land in contested areas. In addition to disrupting the economy, the movement of people was creating a staggering burden. By year's end, I Corps had over half a million refugees—far more than any other corps zone in Vietnam due to the theater's peculiar military and geographical conditions. Refugee care drained social resources away from other government programs, including Revolutionary Development. Moreover, U.S. officials fretted that the Vietnamese government was missing a significant opportunity to win converts by its handling of the crisis. Noting that "apathy on the part of government officials remained the single most important obstacle to the refugee program," the entire U.S. civil and military apparatus pressed the Vietnamese government to improve refugee care. Although some improvement was reported by year's end, a brigade commander in I Corps vocalized a common sentiment among U.S. officials when he remarked about a local district chief, "Hell, I care more about his people than he does!"[54]

[53] Rpt, Dodson, 4 Sep 67, p. 5; Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, p. 7; Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, pp. 1, 4 (quote), Encl 2.

[54] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 10; and p. 1, Encl 2; Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 11, 12 (III MAF quote). Brigade commander quote from Comments on the Schell Manuscript, 16 Dec 67, p. 16, attached to Memo, Hataway for Ambassador, 26 Jan 68. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors,* pp. 86, 88, 111.

When one considers that the government registered 200,000 new refugees in I Corps in 1967, it is clear that much of the HES gains that year were the result of people moving into government areas rather than the government expanding its control outward. This was certainly the case in Duc Pho District, where the number of people living in government-controlled areas doubled, nearly all as the result of population movement. In all of I Corps, the allies had been able to provide the necessary security for only 5,600 refugee families to return to their native hamlets.[55]

To make matters worse, the enemy had made up much of his losses, mostly by infiltrating more soldiers in from North Vietnam. Reports indicated a massive increase in truck traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The vehicles bore not just fresh manpower but tons of weaponry such as assault rifles, antitank rockets, and artillery that materially improved the enemy's arsenal. The appearance of the *304th* and the *320th PAVN Divisions* near Khe Sanh forced Westmoreland to alter his plans. In mid-December, he canceled the first phase of Operation York (the incursion into the Xo Da base area of southwestern Quang Ngai Province) so that the 1st Cavalry Division could move farther north into Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces by late January 1968, a month ahead of schedule, in case the enemy launched a new offensive against Khe Sanh and the Demilitarized Zone. Should the enemy not act, the 1st Cavalry Division would be poised to attack base areas in western Quang Tri and Thua Thien in the spring as originally envisioned in phases two and three of York.[56]

U.S. ground combat units could do little about North Vietnamese infiltration given the administration's proscription against cross-border operations, but even within their sphere of action, signs existed that all was not well. Although CORDS evaluators praised the U.S. Army's extensive civic action effort, they conceded that "its value is difficult to assess." As one Vietnamese member of a CORDS inspection team reported, social welfare programs could not by themselves erase years of Communist propaganda and domination.[57] Equally important was the fact that even though "the military situation is considerably improved" thanks to U.S. combat operations, security, "the *sine qua non* of Revolutionary Development program accomplishment" according to the region's senior CORDS official, remained "the primary problem within I Corps." Until the security situation could be improved, little could be expected of pacification. As the U.S. adviser in Quang Ngai explained, people "like the material things the Revolutionary Development cadre can produce or procure for the good of their hamlets. But they are still reluctant to give their full support to a government they don't yet

[55] Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 11–12; Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 3.

[56] Memorandum for the Record (MFR), 9 Dec 67, sub: Meeting, Westmoreland History file, no. 26, CMH; Cmd Chronology, 3d Marine Amphibious Force, Dec 67, Historians files, CMH; Study, Estimate of the Enemy Situation: DMZ Area, Vietnam, 1 Jan 67, U.S. Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, Historians files, CMH; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 14–15; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 12397 to Wheeler, 20 Dec 67, p. 4, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[57] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, pp. 10 (quote), 11.

fully understand or trust and which is often unable to supply total security from Viet Cong terrorism and personal reprisals."[58]

The Viet Cong did their best to add to the insecurity. Although the number of large engagements fell in I Corps thanks to U.S. actions, the total number of Viet Cong–initiated incidents actually doubled in 1967 over 1966, making it the only corps zone in South Vietnam to experience a rise in incidents. Most of these incidents were small, but they undermined government authority and kept the public in a state of unease. Particularly noticeable was a rise in terrorism, part of a nationwide trend but especially stark in I Corps, where the number of assassinations and abductions tripled over the course of the year, leaving 1,127 civilians dead and 1,794 missing.[59]

Even more surprising to CORDS investigators was that in Quang Ngai the enemy attacked hamlets in U.S. Army areas of operations more frequently than in areas protected by the South Vietnamese Army. This was the opposite of what they had expected due to the U.S. Army's greater level of activity, but the situation probably reflected the fact that U.S. units operated in the more difficult outer areas, shielding the National Priority Area occupied by government forces. Still, the data indicated the limits of U.S. achievement. Although the U.S. forces had driven the enemy's main forces away from the lowlands, their cordon was never so ironclad as to prevent incursions, nor had they been able to root out the many snipers, guerrillas, and political cadre who had remained behind, with one survey estimating that 75 percent of the refugees in Duc Pho District were still in contact with the Viet Cong.[60]

U.S. officials placed most of the blame for the situation on the South Vietnamese. They bore primary responsibility for the local security, counterinfrastructure, and state-building effort, but they often failed to follow-up U.S. military achievements with effective action. U.S. officials expressed satisfaction with the fact that South Vietnam had committed 16 regular battalions, 1 battalion and 34 companies of Regional Forces, and 190 Popular Forces platoons to support Revolutionary Development in I Corps, with most of the government's remaining units performing security and offensive missions that complemented the pacification effort. They particularly praised the pacification work of the 1st South Vietnamese Division in the north, but in the south, CORDS officials believed the South Vietnamese 2d Division was "excessively passive" and the Regional and Popular Forces understaffed. If inadequacies in recruitment, training, and equipment were not enough, the task of keeping the territorials up to strength was complicated by high desertion rates. Many units had "ghost" soldiers on the rosters—nonexistent men for whom commanders collected salaries—while in Quang Ngai three entire Popular Forces platoons were manned solely by invalids.[61]

[58] Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, p. 8 (quotes); Memo, Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai, for Deputy, CORDS, III MAF, 4 Dec 67, p. 5.

[59] Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 8–9; Msg, COMUSMACV 03518 to CINCPAC, 3 Feb 68, pp. 15, 17.

[60] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, pp. 5–6; and p. 4, Encl 2.

[61] Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, p. 10; Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, pp. 4 (quote), 6.

Inadequacies on the civil side matched shortcomings exhibited by the South Vietnamese security services. Most of the government ministries supporting the Revolutionary Development program continued to display little genuine interest, and the performance of officials was often mediocre. In the words of the senior CORDS adviser for I Corps, "Certain obstacles exist which could negate the impressive progress of this past year. The most serious problem will be transforming the government of Vietnam into an effective political organism which will genuinely serve the needs of the people and with which they can identify." Nation building in war-torn I Corps was clearly going to be a task of many more years.[62]

The combination of the government's weaknesses and the enemy's strengths left two of the three provinces in which Americal operated at the bottom of the HES scale in I Corps, with just 41.7 percent and 46.2 percent of the population relatively secure in Quang Nam and Quang Tin, respectively. Quang Ngai, by contrast, had the highest level of government control in I Corps, at 58.6 percent. As in many provinces, however, much of the territory was contested, if not in enemy hands outright.[63]

The sometimes conflicting imperatives of defeating the enemy's main forces, improving security, and minimizing civilian casualties and social dislocation raised questions as to whether a change in method was necessary. Noting that "Task Force OREGON's experience has demonstrated that clearing hamlets is of little use unless forces remain behind to hold them," a CORDS study team wondered if U.S. units should assume from the South Vietnamese greater responsibility for the local security mission. Advisers in Quang Ngai championed this idea. They had seen the disruption to pacification caused both by the rotation of U.S. units in and out of the province and by the heavy toll that U.S. tactics took on the socioeconomic fabric of the countryside. In August, Binh Son District senior adviser Lt. Col. Robert C. Jarvis suggested a scheme to reclaim the depopulated sections of his district. Conceding that "the inclination of conventional force commanders to support a system of removing civilian non-combatants out of harm's way has moral, political, and tactical merit," Jarvis believed that U.S. forces needed to integrate their efforts with a systematic oil-spot campaign that would reclaim lost land, resettle refugees, and mobilize the population for their own defense. Under his proposal, people would be resettled in abandoned territory, not in their original homes, but in specially selected and fortified communities not unlike the *agrovilles* and strategic hamlets of old. U.S. units would then conduct search-and-destroy operations in the area, working closely with the Vietnamese to restore order, security, and governance. Jarvis' successor, Maj. Neill J. Willoughby, went further. Casting much of the blame for Binh Son's lack of progress on local officials, he suggested two major changes. First, that U.S. advisers be given greater authority over their Vietnamese counterparts, for until this was done, "we will continue to 'throw sand against the wind.'" Second, he wanted the United States to do more to upgrade the Popular Forces, for "unless drastic changes are made

[62] Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 4 Jan 68, pp. 3, 7 (quote).
[63] Memo, CORDS for distribution, 14 Jan 68, p. 3-4.

to upgrade these forces, across the board, we can forget about winning." Binh Son District was home to eight of the seventy-nine Marine Combined Action Platoons in I Corps, and the adviser believed that they did an excellent job in boosting the security of the communities they served. He proposed having U.S. Army units join the marines by deploying squads to live and work with the Popular Forces in the hamlets.[64]

These suggestions had some merit and reflected the growing movement, spearheaded by CORDS, for greater coordination of U.S. operations with politico-military programs. On the other hand, few of the proposals were new, and elements of them had already been implemented in various ways. As for breaking down Army units on a large scale and stationing them in hamlets, this was a nonstarter. Neither Secretary McNamara, Ambassador Komer, nor General Westmoreland supported the idea.[65] The Marine program had had some success, but it was significantly behind schedule, and after two years had yet to produce a single hamlet defense organization capable of standing on its own. Recognizing that the elephant in the room was the North Vietnamese Army, General Cushman allocated only 1,250 men to the Combined Action Program while devoting over 98 percent of his marines to operations indistinguishable from those conducted by the Army. Given the limitations of the program, MACV preferred to enhance local security through the use of mobile training teams that augmented the existing territorial advisory system. Such an approach was more in keeping with the mutually agreed upon division of labor between the allies, an arrangement that made sense not just on political grounds, but for military reasons as well. As a CORDS investigation team explained,

> It seems doubtful whether Task Force OREGON should be assigned the mission of occupying ground, or villages or hamlets that have been cleared of large units. The mobile battalions which compose Task Force OREGON would be frittered away in company and platoon size local garrisons. Task Force OREGON's effectiveness as a highly mobile striking unit to be used against main force Viet Cong regiments and battalions which continue to threaten the coastal plain, would diminish.[66]

In short, deconstructing the allies' principal offensive weapon in the name of local security would reduce capability and risk disaster given the enemy's military strength. Until and unless the enemy's large, conventional units could be defeated, the U.S. military would have no choice but to focus the majority of its efforts on the main force war.

[64] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, p. 8; Memo, Lt Col Robert C. Jarvis, Sub Sector Adviser, Binh Son, for Sector Adviser, Quang Ngai, 16 Aug 67, attached to Memo, Dodson for Komer, 16 Aug 67, sub: Evaluation of Refugee Handling Operations in Quang Ngai Province; Memo, Senior Adviser, Binh Son District, for Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai, 29 Jan 68, sub: District Report, p. 1 (quotes). Both in Historians files, CMH.

[65] Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976*, pp. 399–400, 415–16, endnote 85.

[66] Rpt, CORDS, 13 Sep 67, pp. 4, 6.

8

The Gathering Storm

As the northeast monsoon campaign season reached its midpoint in early January 1968, General Westmoreland felt relatively satisfied with the progress his command had achieved during the last three months. Allied forces had decimated two of North Vietnam's most experienced divisions at Loc Ninh, Song Be, and Dak To. They had preempted or contained North Vietnamese offensives in the coastal lowlands, on the Bong Son Plain, in the Tuy Hoa Basin, and in the Que Son Valley. The allies had reopened important lines of communications, the upper part of Highway 13 in III Corps, and the stretch of Highway 1 between II and III Corps, while also preserving existing routes—Highway 4 in the upper delta and Highway 19 in the Central Highlands—that the enemy tried to close. Rice denial efforts were taking a toll on the health and morale of the enemy units that operated in the coastal provinces of I Corps and II Corps. Allied combat operations had eliminated 25,000 enemy soldiers and captured nearly 8,000 weapons during the last quarter. Another 4,500 enemy soldiers had voluntarily surrendered. The pacification program continued to lag in some areas but the general trend was positive, with 66.9 percent of the people relatively secure (urban areas plus hamlets rated A, B, or C by the Hamlet Evaluation System).[1]

Westmoreland expected to see even faster progress during the coming year as MACV added more troops and some major initiatives. He anticipated completing the Strong Point Obstacle System and converting the 101st Airborne Division into an airmobile division. He also intended to consolidate the entire 9th Infantry Division at Dong Tam for offensive operations in IV Corps and to remove the 1st Cavalry Division from daily operations so that it could serve as a true, theaterwide reserve. The present strength of MACV now stood at around 480,000 troops, a figure that would rise to 525,000 personnel when the remaining part of the Program 5 deployment package—a mix of helicopter, support, and fighter-bomber units—arrived by mid-1968.[2]

Ambassador Bunker was equally optimistic about the political situation in South Vietnam. Writing to the White House on 13 January, the U.S. ambassador said that President Thieu now appeared to be willing to undertake many of the reforms suggested to him by the U.S. Mission. The South Vietnamese leader promised to crack down on corrupt and incompetent officials, and announced his intention to replace more than a third of his province and district chiefs

[1] Periodic Intel Rpts, MACV, Oct 67, 30 Oct 67, p. 15; MACV, Nov 67, 30 Nov 67, p. 15; MACV, Dec 67, 31 Dec 67, p. 15; Memo, CORDS for distribution, 14 Jan 68, sub: Monthly Pacification Status Report, p. 3-1. All in Historians files, CMH.

[2] MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 156–57.

in the next few months. Thieu had called for a national mobilization effort, which would expand the size of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces by nearly 100,000 troops during the coming year, around half of that increase going to the Regional and Popular Forces. The national economy was growing, and the rate of inflation was under control. President Thieu had settled his differences with Vice President Ky, his former rival, and the likelihood of another military coup or mass civilian demonstrations in Saigon seemed remote.[3]

Though the pacification effort had yielded mixed results in 1967, CORDS Director Robert Komer expected to see stronger gains in the coming year. The U.S. government had budgeted over $500 million in aid to the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, up from $350 million in 1967. Komer expected the number of 59-man Revolutionary Development teams to grow from the present total of 555 teams to around 700 by the end of 1968. Additional manpower was flowing into the security services. The Regional and Popular Forces stood to gain another 40,000 personnel, a strength increase of more than 10 percent. Now that the South Vietnamese government had agreed to participate in MACV's Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) effort, soon to be renamed the *Phuong Hoang*/Phoenix program, thousands of men would be added to the South Vietnamese National Police Field Force and other security agencies that were in charge of identifying and apprehending Viet Cong cadre. With those extra resources, Ambassador Komer hoped to establish another 1,480 Revolutionary Development hamlets by the end of 1968, exceeding the 1967 tally of around 900 hamlets by more than 50 percent.[4]

Admiral Sharp agreed that the allied war effort appeared to be gaining momentum. Writing to General Wheeler on 1 January, the CINCPAC commander reported that the 1967 combined campaign had produced a "definite shift in the military situation favorable to us . . . the enemy is no longer capable of a [decisive] military victory."[5]

Even so, Sharp and Westmoreland both predicted that the war would intensify in 1968. In a message to Wheeler on 20 December, the MACV commander said that the enemy had now "decided that prolongation of his past policies for conducting the war would lead to his defeat," and that Hanoi "would have to make a major effort to reverse the downward trend." Given the current disposition of forces, North Vietnam was most likely to launch a major offensive in northern I Corps, a sector where the ratio of allied to enemy troops was nearly equal, or to conduct further attacks in the borderlands of II Corps and III Corps in hopes of getting better results than it had at Loc Ninh, Song Be, and Dak To. Whatever the enemy had in mind, Westmoreland believed that MACV possessed sufficient resources to handle any threat.[6]

[3] Telg, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker AMB 16225 to President Lyndon B. Johnson, 17 Jan 68, pp. 1–3, document 77a, NSF-Vietnam Country files, LBJL.

[4] Text of News Conf, Ambassador Robert Komer, 24 Jan 68, Historians files, CMH.

[5] Msg, Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp to JCS, 1 Jan 68, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH.

[6] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 12397 to General Earle G. Wheeler, 20 Dec 67, pp. 1–3, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

Writing to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 26 December, Admiral Sharp endorsed Westmoreland's opinion that "the enemy may be approaching a period where basic decisions concerning the future conduct of the war probably will have to be made." Sharp did not anticipate the enemy making an all-out, go-for-broke effort since Hanoi had sufficient intelligence capabilities to be accurately informed about the balance of power in the South. Even so, he agreed with Westmoreland that "the enemy hopes that if he strikes some effective blows in the next few months the U.S. may respond to pressures from home and abroad and accept a (Viet Cong–dominated) coalition government." If those offensives failed to generate the desired results, he expected Hanoi to return to a strategy of protracted war but at a reduced level. "In summary," the admiral wrote, "most of the evidence we hold points toward the approach of an important although not final period in the enemy situation . . . the likelihood of a final effort in the winter-spring offensive sometime after Tet cannot be discounted but remains remote."[7]

Enemy Preparations for Tet

As the new allied campaign plan was going into effect at the beginning of January, the Fourteenth Plenum of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee officially endorsed the general offensive–general uprising strategy first proposed by the Politburo in October 1967. The only element yet to be decided was the exact time and date that it would begin.

At this stage, preparations for the offensive had been proceeding in earnest for more than two months. Almost 35,000 soldiers had traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during that time, roughly three times the normal average. Communist logisticians had delivered more than 61,000 tons of supplies to the southern battlefield, twice what the North had committed to the previous winter-spring campaign. Nearly all of the local force units had traded in their World War II–era weapons for new AK47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Rank-and-file soldiers had received dozens of hours of indoctrination meant to convince them that the war was entering its decisive phase and could be won within the next year.[8]

In early January, only a few high-ranking generals in each Military Region and Front headquarters knew the full extent of the plan. The colonels who commanded regiments and senior colonels who commanded divisions were aware of Hanoi's intention to launch a general offensive and general uprising—they had all been briefed on Resolution 14 via special study guides issued by the Ministry of Defense back in October—but they did not know when it would start, or what was going to happen outside of their tactical area. Lower-ranking officers would receive their orders approximately a week

[7] Msg, Sharp to Wheeler, 26 Dec 67, pp. 1–2, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[8] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 2088, 30 Jul 68, sub: Preparations for the Tet Offensive, p. 2, box 8, CMIC Interrogation Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, MACV, J–2, RG 472, NACP.

The Soviet-designed RPG7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher was a more powerful successor to the RPG2 launcher and began to arrive on the battlefield in late 1967.

beforehand; the average soldier would not learn about the offensive until less than twenty-four hours before he went into battle.

According to the blueprint developed by *PAVN* Chief of Staff General Dung, the first phase of the offensive would begin at Khe Sanh ten days before the main attack got under way. General Hai's instructions were to besiege the Marine base with the *304th* and *325C Divisions* in order to "draw enemy forces away from other theaters of operation." North Vietnamese leaders especially hoped to pull in South Vietnamese airborne and Marine battalions from the Joint General Reserve so they would be sidelined when the cities came under attack.[9]

The initial wave of the offensive called for approximately 45,000 Viet Cong and 40,000 North Vietnamese main and local force soldiers to invade almost

[9] Quote from *Chien Troung Tri-Thien-Hue Trong Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc Toan Thang (Du Thao)* [*The Tri-Thien-Hue Battlefield/Military Region During the Victorious War of National Salvation Against the Americans (draft)*] (Hue: Thuan Hoa Publishing House, 1985), pp. 135–36. *Chien Dich Tien Cong Duong 9 - Khe Sanh Xuan He 1968* [*The Spring-Summer 1968 Khe Sanh -- Route 9 Offensive Campaign*] (Hanoi: Military History Institute of Vietnam, 1987), p. 16 (hereafter cited as *Khe Sanh-Route 9 Offensive Campaign*), copy in Historians files, CMH. *Su Doan 304, Tap II* [*304th Division, Volume II*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1990), pp. 59, 62–63 (hereafter cited as *304th Division*), copy in Historians files, CMH.

300 cities, including most of the 44 provincial capitals, around one-third of the 245 district capitals, and all 6 autonomous cities, including Saigon. Their main targets were South Vietnamese command, control, and administrative facilities; radio stations; airfields; and logistical depots. In the countryside, artillery and sapper units would strike dozens of allied firebases, airfields, and bridges. Hamlet-based guerrillas would try to overrun Regional and Popular Forces outposts, impede traffic on secondary roads, and assassinate local officials.

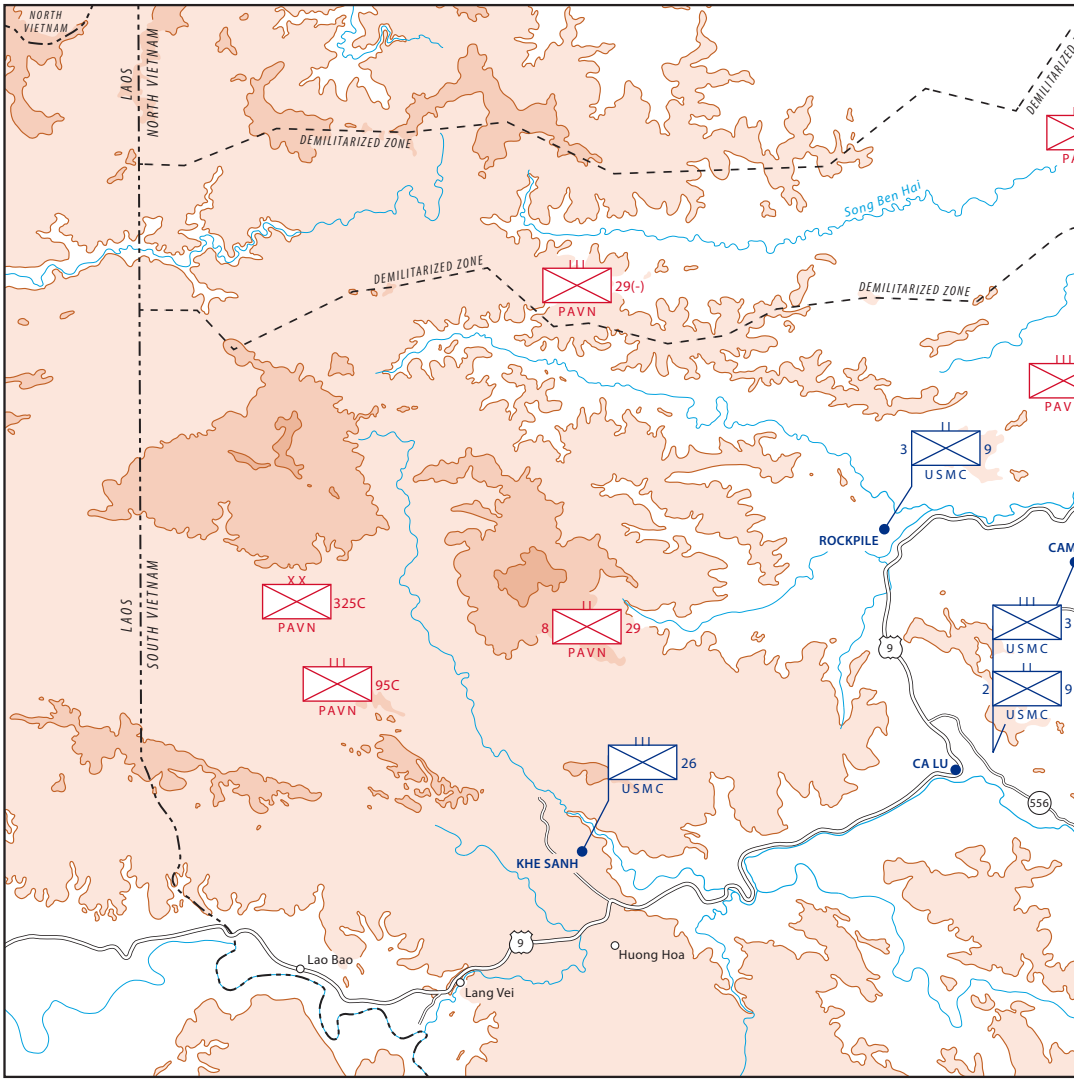
As Communist troops poured into the cities, undercover political cadre and urban agents would take to the streets with banners and bullhorns, exhorting the civilian population to rise up against the government. Viet Cong hit squads would attempt to kill high-ranking South Vietnamese officials, for "without the annihilation of tyrants and spies, there would be no uprising." Once the government apparatus in each city had been paralyzed, local party committees would emerge from the shadows and set up revolutionary councils to complete the seizure of power.[10]

General Dung directed the heaviest attacks against Saigon and its outlaying districts. Ten local force battalions and urban sappers from the *F100 Special Action Group* would destroy command and control centers in the capital, while the *5th PLAF*, *7th PAVN*, and *9th PLAF Divisions* attacked allied installations and blocked roads on the outskirts of Saigon. Hue, the former imperial capital and a symbol of Vietnamese nationalism, was to be the second main theater in the general offensive. Three North Vietnamese regiments under the command of the *Hue City Front* would overrun the walled city, while a fourth *PAVN* regiment, detached from the *325C Division* at Khe Sanh, occupied several hamlets to the west of Hue to open a supply channel between the city and Base Area 114 in the nearby mountains. At least two more regiments would march down from Khe Sanh in the days that followed.

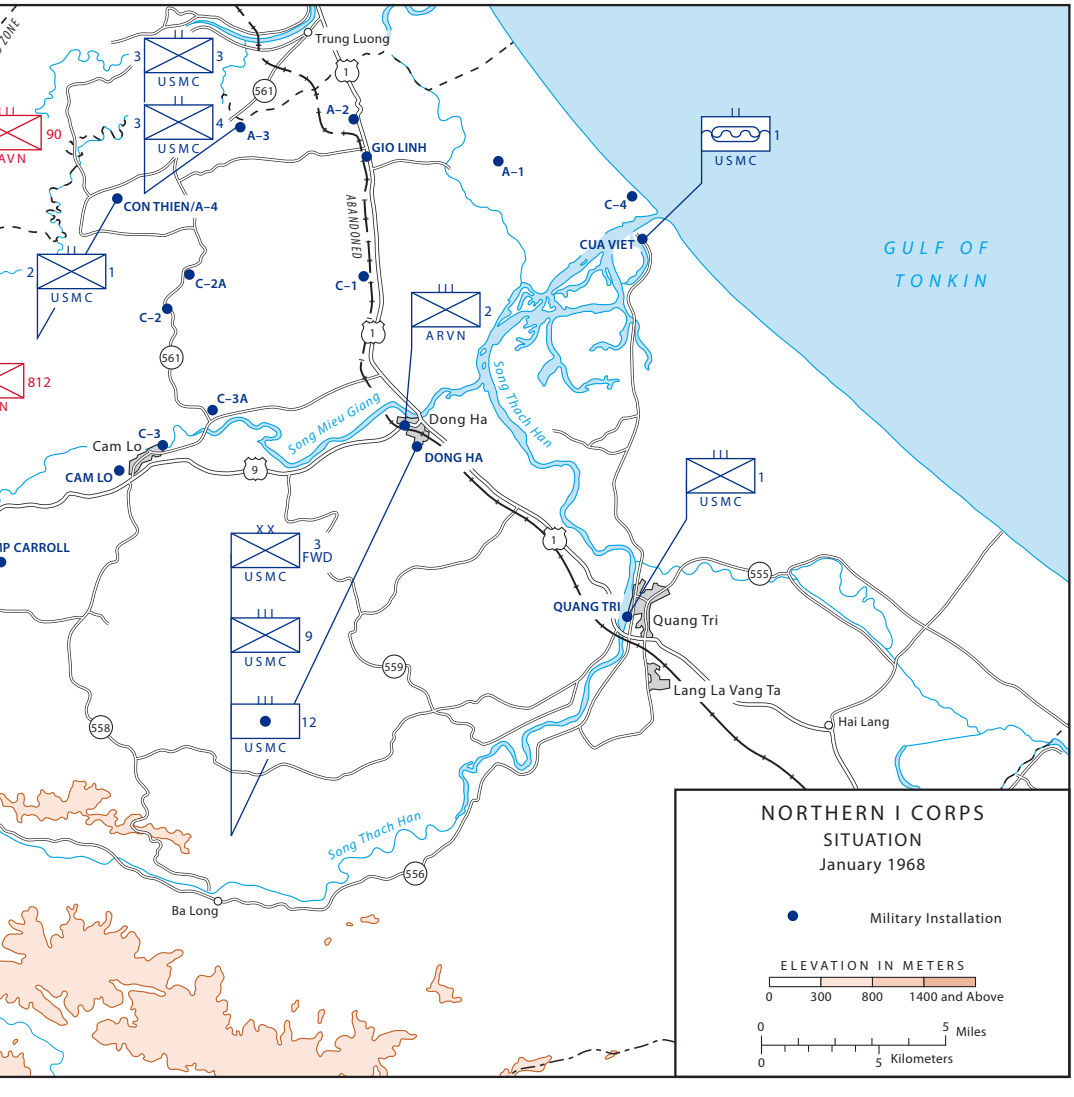
In other parts of the country, North Vietnamese main force soldiers would accompany local Viet Cong troops when they invaded their target cities. The *2d PAVN Division*, for example, would send a battalion into Da Nang to assist three local force battalions. In II Corps, a battalion from the *3d PAVN Division* would enter Qui Nhon alongside two Viet Cong units; two battalions from the *24th PAVN Regiment* and two local force battalions would invade Kontum City; and the entire *33d PAVN Regiment* would enter Ban Me Thuot alongside three local force battalions.

Viet Cong local and main force units would spearhead most of the attacks in III Corps and all of the assaults in IV Corps. Outside of the capital zone,

[10] Quote from Intel Rpt, Department of Defense (DoD), Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), no. 6027069968, 23 Jan 68, sub: Propaganda Leaflets, p. 8, box 13, DoD Intel Information Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, MACV, J–2, RG 472, NACP. Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 2074, 30 Jul 68, sub: Preparations for Offensive, p. 3, box 8, CMIC Interrogation Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, MACV, J–2, RG 472, NACP; U.S. Mission Saigon, "The New Situation and Mission," VDRN, no. 20, Mar 68, p.1, Historians files, CMH; Combined Document Exploitation Center, Intel Bull 9388, 9 Feb 68, p. 2, box 29, CDEC Bulls, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, MACV, J–2, RG 472, NACP.


NORTH VIETNAM
LAOS
NORTH VIETNAM
DEMILITARIZED ZONE
Song Ben Hai
DEMILITARIZED ZONE
DEMILITARIZED ZONE
29(-)
PAVN
3
9
USMC
ROCKPILE
XX
325C
PAVN
8
29
PAVN
LAOS
SOUTH VIETNAM
95C
PAVN
26
USMC
CA LU
KHE SANH
9
Lao Bao
Lang Vei
Huong Hoa
556

Map 23


Trung Luong
3
USMC
3
3
USMC
4
90
AVN
A–3
A–2
GIO LINH
A–1
CON THIEN/A–4
ABANDONED
C–4
CUA VIET
GULF OF TONKIN
1
USMC
2
1
USMC
C–2A
C–1
C–2
2
ARVN
812
C–3A
Song Mieu Giang
Song Thach Han
Dong Ha
C–3
Cam Lo
CAM LO
DONG HA
1
USMC
XX
3
FWD
USMC
IP CARROLL
QUANG TRI
Quang Tri
9
USMC
Lang La Vang Ta
Hai Lang
12
USMC
Song Thach Han
Ba Long
NORTHERN I CORPS
SITUATION
January 1968
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
300
800
1400 and Above
0
5
Miles
0
5
Kilometers

the strongest attacks in the delta would be directed at the cities of My Tho, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, and Can Tho. Multiple Viet Cong battalions would also attack Da Lat and Phan Thiet in southern II Corps.

North Vietnamese leaders expected to launch a second phase of the general offensive about three weeks after the first, using the approximately 15,000 soldiers that would come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the intervening period to replenish the losses sustained during the initial phase. Following that up with a third phase in early March, the enemy high command would then evaluate the political and military situation to determine if and when another round of general offensives would begin later that year.[11]

The Politburo waited until 14 January to choose the exact day and hour that the offensive was to begin. It decided to strike at midnight between the first and second days of Tet Mau Than, the holiday that marked the start of the lunar new year. Doing so would violate the cease-fire pledge they had made, and potentially alienate some of the urban residents the enemy was counting on to participate in antigovernment demonstrations, but the military advantage of attacking when more than 50 percent of South Vietnamese soldiers were expected to be on leave was too great to pass up. To preserve security, General Dung would transmit that information to his commanders a mere seventy-two hours ahead of time, giving them just enough time to get their troops into their forward attack positions.[12]

Warning Signs

On the evening of 2 January, a Marine listening post outside Khe Sanh ambushed six North Vietnamese soldiers who appeared to be on a reconnaissance mission. The marines killed five of the men; the sixth, though wounded, escaped in the darkness. The five dead soldiers proved to be high-ranking North Vietnamese officers, including a regimental commander. That incident, combined with word that the *304th* and *325C Divisions* were closing in around the combat base, convinced Westmoreland's chief of intelligence, Brig. Gen. Phillip Davidson, that a major showdown was developing at Khe Sanh (*see Map 23*).[13]

Westmoreland took all possible measures to ensure that the outcome of the battle would never be in doubt. The key to his plan was overwhelming firepower. He ordered the III Marine Amphibious Force and the U.S. Seventh Air Force to design a plan to subject the North Vietnamese around

[11] *Tong Ket Cuoc Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc: Thang Loi va Bai Hoc* [*Review of the Resistance War Against the Americans to Save the Nation: Victory and Lessons*] (Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 1995), pp. 67–73 (hereafter cited as *Review of the Resistance War Against the Americans*), copy in Historians files, CMH.

[12] Tran Bach Dang, *35 Nam Mau Than: Bo Chi Huy Tien Phuong ABon Tap; Hai Muoi Chin Tet* (*28-1-1968-Chu Nhat*) [*The 35th Anniversary of the Tet Offensive: The Forward Headquarters Charges Forward*; *29 Day of the Lunar Month (Sunday, 28 January 1968)*] *Bao Cong An T.P. Ho Chi Minh* [*Ho Chi Minh City Public Security Newspaper*] 23 Jan 03.

[13] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 00276 to Sharp, 7 Jan 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

Khe Sanh to the most sustained bombardment of the war. The resulting operation, named NIAGARA to invoke an image of cascading bombs and shells, used a concept known as SLAM (Search, Locate, Annihilate, and Monitor) that Westmoreland's deputy for air operations, General Momyer, had developed four months earlier to break the siege at Con Thien. SLAM placed all available air, ground, and naval assets under a single manager, cutting through bureaucratic tangles and parochial service barriers to bring the maximum amount of firepower to bear on a target with the greatest possible speed and efficiency.[14]

The first phase of NIAGARA, an intensive reconnaissance and intelligence collection effort to "search" and "locate," began immediately. General Momyer increased the number of aerial reconnaissance flights over Khe Sanh and seeded the surrounding terrain with air-dropped seismic sensors. Radio research units in the air and on the ground eavesdropped on North Vietnamese electronic communications, and an elite U.S. Army Special Forces reconnaissance unit that Westmoreland sent to Khe Sanh tracked enemy movements on the ground.[15]

When MACV had developed a fix on the enemy's positions, it would unleash the "annihilate" phase of NIAGARA II, a round-the-clock bombing effort involving B–52 strikes, close air support sorties from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and the U.S. Seventh Air Force units at Da Nang, and artillery fire from the sixteen 175-mm. guns at Camp Carroll, some twenty kilometers to the west. Marine gunners at Khe Sanh would add to that fire with three 105-mm. howitzer batteries, one 155-mm. howitzer battery, and one 4.2-inch mortar battery. Meanwhile, ground patrols from Khe Sanh and reconnaissance aircraft equipped with high-resolution cameras would conduct poststrike assessments (the "monitor" phase) in order to refine the targeting process.[16]

Sensitive to the political implications of fighting a high-profile battle near the North Vietnamese border, Westmoreland wanted the South Vietnamese Army to play a visible role in the defense of Khe Sanh. President Thieu was in complete agreement. At his instructions, General Vien ordered his corps commander, General Lam, to send the South Vietnamese 37th Ranger Battalion to join the garrison at Khe Sanh. Vien also flew two South Vietnamese airborne battalions to Quang Tri Province, giving Lam a total of three airborne battalions.

While Westmoreland was preparing to engage the enemy in northern I Corps, he also saw signs in early to mid-January that other parts of South Vietnam might be in danger too. Some of the earliest warnings came in the western highlands. On 2 January, radio researchers from I Field Force intercepted a message from *B3 Front* headquarters instructing regional command-

[14] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 203–04.

[15] Ibid., p. 315; Rpt, Senate Hearings, Confirmation of General William C. Westmoreland as Ch of Staff, 14 May 68, sub: Operation Niagara, U.S. Army, Fact Bk II, copy in Historians files, CMH.

[16] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 337; Rpt, CHECO, 13 Sep 68, sub: Khe Sanh (Operation Niagara), pp. 4–12, Historians files, CMH; Bernard C. *Nalty, Air Power and the Fight for Khe Sanh* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1973), pp. 82–86.

An aerial view of the base at Khe Sanh

ers to prepare for a forthcoming general offensive and general uprising. Three days later, soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division captured a directive entitled "Urgent Combat Order Number One," containing plans for an enemy offensive in Pleiku Province that would begin "before the Tet holiday."[17]

Westmoreland also heard dangerous rumblings coming from III Corps. General Weyand arranged a special meeting with the MACV commander on 10 January to discuss the ominous intelligence trends he was seeing. Contact with the enemy had fallen off in recent weeks, the II Field Force commander said, but his radio research units were hearing increased chatter between *COSVN* and its main force units. Weyand's most trusted field agents confirmed that something big was brewing. He feared that as many as five regiments had slipped through the line of American units on the border. He asked Westmoreland for permission to move some U.S. battalions closer to the capital. After speaking with General Davidson, who reported the same "tenuous but disturbing" information, Westmoreland agreed to move thirteen battalions from the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions back to Binh Duong and Hau Nghia Provinces, raising to twenty-seven the number of U.S. battalions guarding the approaches to Saigon.[18]

[17] Quote from Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 317.

[18] Ibid., p. 318; Rpt, II FFV, 20 Mar 68, sub: G–3 Briefing, pp. 4, 7, Historians files, CMH; Wirtz, *Tet Offensive*, pp. 183, 200.

Also on 10 January, Westmoreland canceled the first phase of Operation YORK in southwestern Quang Ngai Province so the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division could move straight into northern I Corps to assist General Cushman's 3d Marine Division. The MACV commander instructed General Weyand to prepare the 2d Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division for an air movement from Phuoc Long Province to Thua Thien Province by the end of the month, leaving only the division's 3d Brigade in Phuoc Long Province to conduct the anti-infiltration mission known as SAN ANGELO for the remainder of the dry season.[19]

As Westmoreland shored up his position in northern I Corps, President Johnson sought reassurance that the United States would be able to hold Khe Sanh. General Wheeler conveyed the questions that had been expressed "in high non-military quarters" to the MACV commander on 11 January. Westmoreland replied the following day, noting that he had just returned from a visit with General Cushman where the two commanders had discussed contingency plans for reinforcing Khe Sanh if the need arose. The 3d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division was now on alert to fly from the Que Son Valley to northern I Corps on short notice. The South Korean 2d Marine Brigade was finishing its move from Quang Ngai Province to the area south of Da Nang, permitting III Marine Amphibious Force to relieve five Marine infantry battalions from the 1st Marine Division for employment north of the Hai Van Pass by 31 January. As for Khe Sanh, Westmoreland expressed his firm conviction that it could be held, and said that to relinquish the post would deliver "a major propaganda victory for the enemy." He also shot down the notion that interservice tensions had emerged between himself and General Cushman, calling the notion "absurd."[20]

In the days that followed, Admiral Sharp seconded Westmoreland's confidence about Khe Sanh. With both CINCPAC and MACV squarely in favor of staying put, General Cushman moved forward with preparations to withstand a possible siege. On 16 January, he sent the 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, to Khe Sanh to join the 1st and 3d Battalions, 26th Marines, and a U.S. Army Special Forces detachment. The regimental commander, Col. David E. Lownds, put the newly arrived battalion in the surrounding hills to reinforce several companies from the 3d Battalion that were already stationed there. This gave him the better part of two full battalions on the commanding terrain north and northwest of Khe Sanh, which he believed would be the enemy's main avenue of approach.[21]

On the nineteenth of January, Colonel Rattan flew his 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, from An Khe airfield in Binh Dinh Province to Phu Bai, just south of Hue, with orders to continue on to Quang Tri City as soon as

[19] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 107; MFR, Ch of Staff, MACV, 14 Jan 68, sub: CIIB Meeting, 13 January 1968, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH.

[20] First quote from Msg, Wheeler JCS 00343 to Westmoreland, 11 Jan 68, p. 1. Second quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 00547 to Wheeler, 12 Jan 68, p. 4. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[21] Capt Moyers S. Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, Historical Branch, 1969), pp. 30–33; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 69.

possible to relieve the 3d Marines of the 3d Marine Division for duty farther north. Since the airfield at Phu Bai could not accommodate the swarm of over one hundred helicopters, Colonel Rattan landed his aircraft in a nearby field, situated on the edge of a vast cemetery that became known as Landing Zone El Paso. Seeing how unprepared the marines were to accommodate an airmobile unit, Westmoreland instructed General Tolson to keep his 3d Brigade in the Que Son Valley a few days longer so that the 1st Cavalry Division commander could find a suitable location near Hue to house his unit.[22]

Westmoreland's concern about the situation in northern I Corps increased on 20 January when General Davidson returned from an inspection trip to Khe Sanh. The pessimistic report he submitted on the conditions at the base—"unprotected installations," a "general lack of preparation to withstand heavy concentrations of artillery and mortar fire"—and the skepticism that the base commander, Colonel Lownds, allegedly expressed when Davidson told him that his garrison faced two reinforced enemy divisions, raised doubts in Westmoreland's mind about the ability of III Marine Amphibious Force to control the coming battle on the Demilitarized Zone while still handling all of its other responsibilities in I Corps. The MACV commander resolved to establish an Army forward headquarters as soon as possible to give him maximum control over the 1st Cavalry Division and other Army units that were operating in northern I Corps.[23]

Meanwhile, more evidence arrived at MACV headquarters indicating enemy offensives in II and III Corps. On the twentieth, South Vietnamese soldiers in Darlac Province captured a notebook that described an upcoming attack on Ban Me Thuot. That same day in Binh Dinh Province, the South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division obtained a Viet Cong document that mentioned an operation soon to take place in Qui Nhon. General Weyand continued to see evidence of an imminent offensive in III Corps. Reflecting his concerns, II Field Force issued a report on 20 January that warned that "[the enemy] will attempt to achieve a victory during the Tet period . . . and will aim at targets of political as well as military significance."[24]

Later that day, General Westmoreland sent an update to General Wheeler that cautioned that "the enemy is presently developing a threatening posture in several areas" and that "he may exercise his initiatives prior to, during, or after Tet." He also informed the chairman of the Joint Chiefs that he had asked President Thieu to cancel the 48-hour holiday truce in northern I Corps and to shorten it elsewhere in the country, but the South Vietnamese leader had demurred, fearing a popular backlash.[25]

[22] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 107.

[23] Quote from Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 556.

[24] Quote from Periodic Intel Rpt no. 3, II FFV, 14–20 Jan 68, 20 Jan 68, pp. 4–5. Periodic Intel Rpt no. 4, II FFV, 21–27 Jan 68, 27 Jan 68, p. 5. Both in Historians files, CMH. Hoang Ngoc Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 35.

[25] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 12397 to Wheeler, 20 Dec 67, p. 1. Pearson, *War in the Northern Provinces*, 1966–1968, p. 35.

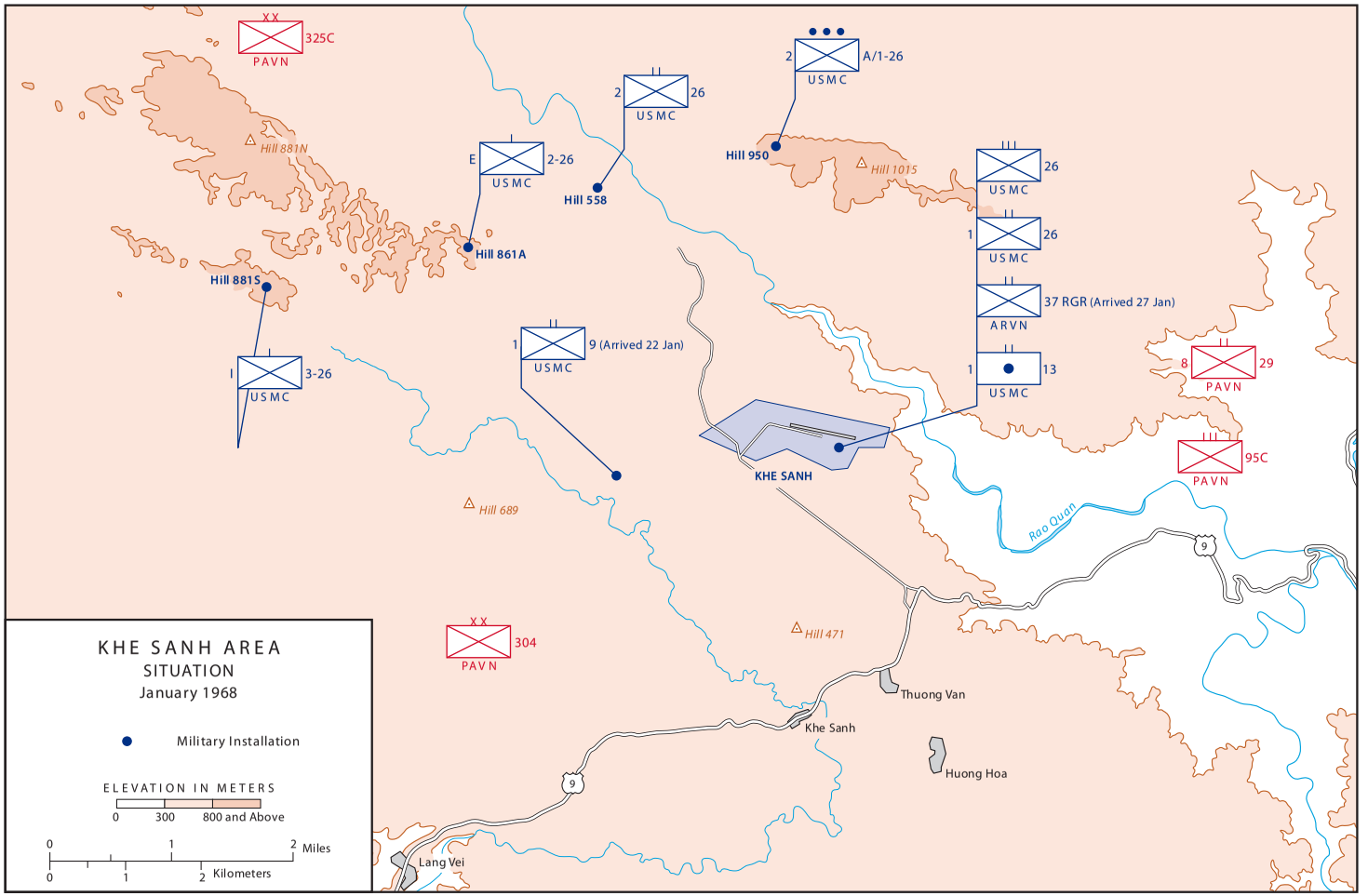
Supplies are dropped from a C–130 at the Khe Sanh base.

Khe Sanh Besieged

On the morning of 21 January, North Vietnamese gunners began pounding the Khe Sanh combat base with a sustained barrage of rocket, mortar, and artillery fire. As Davidson had warned, Colonel Lownds' supply and ammunition dumps soon went up with a roar. Drums containing tear gas also caught fire. Pushed by the wind, the resulting fumes soon pervaded the bunkers and trench lines of the complex. Although the defenders of the base donned gas masks and remained in their bunkers where they were safe from everything but a direct hit, most everything else at Khe Sanh was open season to the enemy's gunners. Exploding rounds soon destroyed seven helicopters, flattened a mess hall, riddled trucks and tents, and set the base's fuel depot ablaze. Fourteen marines died in the attack and forty-three more were wounded. The only confirmed enemy casualties were fourteen North Vietnamese sappers killed while trying to infiltrate the western end of the airfield (*Map 24*).[26]

As the attack unfolded against the Marine combat base, a battalion from the *304th Division* and a squad of sappers attacked the district headquarters in the village of Khe Sanh, four kilometers to the south of the base. The

[26] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 258–61; Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh*, pp. 42–45.


XX
325C
PAVN
Hill 881N
Hill 881S
Hill 861A
E
2-26
USMC
2
26
USMC
Hill 558
2
A/1-26
USMC
Hill 950
Hill 1015
26
USMC
1
26
USMC
37 RGR (Arrived 27 Jan)
ARVN
1
13
USMC
8
29
PAVN
95C
PAVN
1
9 (Arrived 22 Jan)
USMC
I
3-26
USMC
KHE SANH
Hill 689
Rao Quan
9
XX
304
PAVN
Hill 471
Thuong Van
Khe Sanh
Huong Hoa
9
Lang Vei
KHE SANH AREA
SITUATION
January 1968
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
300
800 and Above
0
1
2 Miles
0
1
2 Kilometers

MAP 24

defenders, two platoons of South Vietnamese irregulars, two platoons of U.S. marines, and a handful of U.S. Army advisers, beat back the initial assault. When Lownds sent a Marine company to relieve the headquarters, however, strong enemy resistance forced the group to turn back. A second relief effort ended in disaster. Helicopters deposited a Regional Forces company from Quang Tri City at the wrong location, right next to a North Vietnamese bunker complex. At least twenty-five Americans and seventy or more South Vietnamese irregulars perished in the wayward rescue attempt.[27]

The attacks at Khe Sanh on 21 January strengthened Westmoreland's conviction that Quang Tri Province was the central focus of the enemy's winter-spring offensive. He initiated NIAGARA II, the bombing campaign to defend Khe Sanh, and diverted more C–130 flights to support the base. General Lam sent a South Vietnamese ranger battalion to join Colonel Lownds' 26th Marines at Khe Sanh, and General Vien placed two South Vietnamese airborne battalions on standby in Saigon for possible deployment to Quang Tri Province to reinforce the three airborne battalions already there. Although Westmoreland issued a nationwide bulletin warning about the possibility of "simultaneous, widespread offensive activity" in the near future, he remained convinced that such attacks would only be "an attempt to divert and disperse our strength." Feeling that he had seen through the enemy's ruse, he remained focused on the battle for Quang Tri Province, which, in his view, "may well be the decisive phase of the war."[28]

Westmoreland renewed his appeal to Thieu to cancel the Tet truce entirely or at least to reduce it to thirty-six hours. This time President Thieu agreed to cancel the truce in northern I Corps and to reduce it to thirty-six hours elsewhere in the country, though he insisted on waiting until the morning of 29 January to announce the change. He also pledged that half of the South Vietnamese Army would remain on duty during the week-long holiday instead of the usual retention rate of about 20 percent.[29]

Back in Washington, President Johnson kept close tabs on the fighting at Khe Sanh and demanded assurances from General Wheeler and the other service chiefs that the Marine base could be held. Mindful of the crushing defeat suffered by French troops in another Vietnamese valley in 1954, he warned Wheeler: "I don't want any damn Dinbinphoo." General Wheeler soothed the president's concerns, pointing out that Westmoreland had taken every step possible to ensure victory. With the chairman's approval, MACV staffers were even developing contingency plans for the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Khe Sanh area. In the end, Johnson accepted the judgment of

[27] *304th Division*, p. 64; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 261–63.

[28] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01060 to Sharp, 23 Jan 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[29] MFR, 16 Jan 68, sub: Meetings with President Thieu, 0900, and Gen. Vien, 1500, 15 January, Historians files, CMH. Based on studies of previous cease-fires of differing lengths, U.S. intelligence had determined that during a 36-hour cease-fire, the enemy could move 3,300 tons; in a 48-hour truce, he could move 14,400 tons (much of it by coastal shipping). Msg, Wheeler to Westmoreland, 19 Jan 68, sub: Tet Stand-Down, Historians files, CMH.

Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs that Khe Sanh must be held, and more to the point, could be held no matter what the enemy chose to do.[30]

The MACV commander moved quickly to shore up his position in northern I Corps. On 21 January, Westmoreland ordered General Tolson to move the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division from Landing Zone El Paso some fifty kilometers northwest to Quang Tri City in order to relieve the 3d Marines. He also gave Tolson the green light to move his 3d Brigade from the Que Son Valley to Camp Evans, a firebase on Highway 1 some fifteen kilometers north of Hue, to relieve the 1st Marines. Since the 2d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division was presently tied down to Operation Pershing in Binh Dinh Province, Westmoreland gave Tolson operational control of the 2d Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, which flew north to Phu Bai from III Corps via C–130 transports over the next few days. When all three brigades had arrived in their new tactical sector between Quang Tri City and Hue, the MACV commander instructed Tolson to commence Operation Jeb Stuart with the goal of locating and destroying the North Vietnamese main force units that operated from the hills to the west of both provincial capitals.[31]

A UH–1D helicopter prepares to land at Camp Evans during airlift operations to move elements of the 1st Cavalry Division.

[30] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01164 to Sharp, 24 Jan 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2007), p. 41; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 541; Memo, JCS for President Lyndon B. Johnson, 29 Jan 68, sub: The Situation at Khe Sanh, Historians files, CMH.

[31] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 118.

With Westmoreland's instructions in hand, General Tolson immediately dispatched a forward liaison group to Quang Tri City to prepare its C–130 airfield and nearby landing zones for the arrival of the 1st Brigade. The commander of the 1st Brigade, Colonel Rattan, flew his troops and equipment in by helicopter over the next three days. After establishing his headquarters at Landing Zone BETTY on the southern outskirts of the city, Colonel Rattan immediately commenced search-and-destroy missions against Base Area 101 to the southwest from Landing Zone BETTY and an adjacent camp known as Landing Zone SHARON. Now with Rattan's brigade in place, the 3d Marines relinquished its control over the area and moved north to join the fighting near the Demilitarized Zone.

Beginning on 23 January, the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, commanded by Col. John H. Cushman, began traveling by C–130 from Cu Chi to Landing Zone EL PASO, where Cushman established his temporary headquarters. All three battalions arrived within two days. At the instruction of General Tolson, Colonel Cushman sent his 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, to Landing Zone BETTY on 27 January to defend the facility, while Colonel Rattan's 1st Brigade was out on search-and-destroy missions. Three days later, Cushman sent the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, to Landing Zone JANE, located ten kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City near Highway 1 and Hai Lang District town, to assist Rattan with his sweep into Base Area 101. The 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, remained behind to defend EL PASO. Meanwhile, General Tolson's 3d Brigade, commanded by Col. James O. McKenna, flew from the Que Son Valley to Landing Zone EL PASO between 25 and 27 January, stopping only briefly before moving on by truck and helicopter to Camp Evans, a base fifteen kilometers north of Hue and next to Highway 1 that had just been vacated by the 1st Marines.[32]

As the 1st Cavalry Division was getting settled into northern I Corps, Westmoreland authorized on 26 January the formation of a new provisional corps headquarters, MACV Forward, under the command of his deputy, General Abrams. The new organization would be staffed mostly by Army personnel drawn from MACV headquarters and a smaller number of marines drawn from III Marine Amphibious Force. When MACV Forward became operational at Phu Bai sometime in early February, Abrams would take control over all the combat units in I Corps so General Cushman's headquarters, soon to be elevated to the status of a field army, could focus on the advisory, logistical, and support needs of the theater. Westmoreland expected MACV Forward to evolve by March into a more permanent and robust headquarters to be known as the Provisional Corps, Vietnam. He knew that the creation of an Army-led headquarters in the middle of Leatherneck country would not go down easily with the Marine chain of command; nevertheless, he felt that the tactical situation trumped service pride, and whatever friction developed between III Marine Amphibious Force and MACV Forward could be resolved when the crisis abated.[33]

[32] Interv, Capt Joseph W. A. Whitehorne with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, p. 2, VNIT 207, CMH.

[33] Cosmas, *The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 47; Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 1233 to CINCPAC, 26 Jan 68; COMUSMACV 1011 to Combined JCS

Allied Expectations

Whatever the enemy had in mind, Westmoreland doubted that the Communists were going to strike during the upcoming Tet Mau Than holiday, a celebration of the new lunar year that was the most important cultural event in Vietnamese society. Based on the cycle of the moon rather than on the sun, the date of the Tet holiday varied on the solar calendar each year between 20 January and 20 February. In 1968, Tet began on the night of 30–31 January. Saigon and Hanoi had agreed to observe a 48-hour cease-fire, and South Vietnamese officials expected that the enemy would continue to honor the traditional truce. Moreover, allied leaders found it hard to imagine that the Communists would bring the war into the homes of millions of civilians at a time traditionally set aside for family gatherings and the veneration of ancestors. Only the South Vietnamese commanders in northern I Corps and western II Corps, areas where an enemy threat seemed imminent, severely curtailed holiday leaves for their soldiers. In southern I Corps, eastern II Corps, and in III Corps, regional commanders allowed an average of 50 percent of their troops to go on leave, while officers in IV Corps permitted three-quarters of their soldiers to go home for the holiday. President Thieu planned to spend the holiday with his wife's family in the Mekong Delta city of My Tho. As head of the intelligence office of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung, would later recall, "Nobody was convinced that the communists would launch a concerted offensive against cities and towns across the country during the Tet holidays."[34]

Allied officials had seen clues over the last few months that indicated that the enemy might attack urban areas in early 1968, but no hard evidence regarding the objectives or timing of such attacks. On 23 October 1967, for example, a South Vietnamese unit in the Mekong Delta captured the notebook of an enemy officer, which described the war as entering a new and decisive phase: "Our present strategy consists of an all out attack on the enemy. . . . [W]e should attack everywhere on the battlefield while the general uprising takes place in the cities." Two days later, the allies captured a second document in Tay Ninh Province that referred to the coming winter-spring offensive as the *tong cong kich/tong khoi nghia* (general offensive–general uprising) in which Communist forces would target "enemy rear bases and installations" and "motivate the people to rise up and destroy the enemy's oppressive machinery."[35]

Allied units captured similar documents in southern I Corps and II Corps in the weeks that followed. On 19 November, soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division captured a note in Quang Tin Province that read, "The Central Headquarters of the Party and Uncle Ho have ordered the Party Committee in South Vietnam and the entire army and people of South

(CJCS), 22 Jan 68, sub: Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cabazos, Lt Col, Inf, U.S. Army. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[34] Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, p. 37.

[35] Intel Rpt, DoD, DIA, no. 6027908967, 21 Nov 67, sub: Memorandum, p. 10, Historians files, CMH; U.S. Mission Saigon, "The New Situation and Mission," VDRN, no. 20, Mar 68, pp. 5, 10.

Vietnam to implement a General Offensive and General Uprising in order to achieve a decisive victory for the revolution within the Winter and 1968 Spring and Summer." The document mentioned plans for strong military attacks in coordination with "uprisings of the local population to take over towns and cities . . . [and to liberate] the capital city." The document did not specify when the offensive would start but predicted that "Region 5 will be completely liberated during the 1967–1968 Winter-Spring Campaign." Likewise, on 11 December, soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division captured a North Vietnamese Army bulletin in Binh Dinh Province that exhorted "the entire army and the entire people of South Viet Nam to carry out the General Offensive and the General Uprising . . . during the 1968 Winter-Spring-Summer phase."[36]

By the middle of January 1968, Westmoreland was convinced that the enemy had indeed embarked on a campaign of unusual size and ambition. Nevertheless, he expected the main blow to land in northern I Corps, most likely at Khe Sanh where the Communists enjoyed short supply lines and a favorable ratio of forces, and doubted that the enemy would risk his forces in an all-out offensive that stretched the length and breadth of South Vietnam. Many Communist units seemed to be suffering from poor morale, manpower shortages, and inadequate food supplies. The outcome of the recent Loc Ninh battle made him even more skeptical. *COSVN* had employed the better part of a division to attack a single, remote district capital. The enemy had managed to hold the town for only a few hours, and his losses had been enormous. Westmoreland and his subordinates found it inconceivable that the enemy would fight a hundred or more of such battles across the country at once. As Westmoreland's chief of intelligence, General Davidson, explained, "Even had I known exactly what was to take place, it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody."[37] He would later write:

> Although United States intelligence had dredged up several reports dealing in exhortative terms with the "Great Uprising," no responsible American or South Vietnamese official believed that the enemy would throw himself at the heart of Allied strength: the cities. The result of such rashness, a devastating enemy defeat, was predictable, and thus, intellectually unacceptable to General Westmoreland and to the other military professionals on his staff.[38]

[36] First three quotes from Rpt, MACV, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, J–2, 15 Dec 67, sub: Translation Report, p. 10, box 153; Intel Rpt, DoD, DIA, no. 6027038468, 12 Jan 68, sub: Notes on a Political Meeting; A Resolution and an Order by Ho Chi Minh, p. 22, doc. 4, box 154. Both in NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 316.

[37] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 12397 to Wheeler, 20 Dec 67; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 321 (quote); Pearson, *The War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968*, p. 30; Shore, *The Battle for Khe Sanh*, pp. 29–30; Eric Hammel, *Khe Sanh: Siege in the Clouds* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1989), pp. 11–21, 22; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 105.

[38] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 479.

In his own postwar memoir, Westmoreland admitted that he could not imagine the enemy pursuing a strategy that would "invite catastrophic losses and certain defeat."[39]

In fairness to Westmoreland and his staff, the bits of information that foreshadowed the Tet offensive were all but swallowed up in an ocean of data, much of it irrelevant but still time-consuming to process. The clues also had to compete with other data that supported alternative theories of what the enemy was likely to do, most of which seemed more credible than a putative general offensive and general uprising. Even under the best of circumstances, analysts found it hard to separate the enemy's rhetorical flourishes from his actual intentions. Most Communist publications were filled with boilerplate slogans predicting victory in the South and wildly inaccurate reports that claimed one battlefield success after another. The talk of a popular uprising, in particular, seemed more like boastful propaganda than a real strategy considering the strongly anti-Communist sentiments of the urban population. MACV described one such document that talked about a general uprising as "not the actual policy of the Communist Party command but rather an internal propaganda version designed to inspire the fighting troops." What is more, the enemy had been talking about a general offensive and general uprising in theoretical terms since 1964. Although allied leaders had no reason to doubt that the enemy looked forward to the day when such an attack would be possible, he seemed to be in no position at the moment to consider that option seriously.[40]

General Davidson
(shown as a major general)

In the wake of the Tet offensive, an intelligence study that included representatives from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Department of State, the National Security Agency, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that MACV had not been taken completely by surprise by the Tet offensive, though it had failed to appreciate the true scope of the

[39] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 316.

[40] Quoted words from Press Release, United States Mission in Vietnam, 5 Jan 68, box 152, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

attacks. General Westmoreland had issued a string of warnings starting in mid-December that had alerted his superiors in Hawaii and Washington that the enemy was planning a winter-spring offensive of unusual size and ambition. Though he had continued to believe that the main blow would land in northern I Corps, he had told his superiors on 23 January that "it is prudent to expect that enemy activities may be initiated simultaneously elsewhere in RVN [South Vietnam] in an attempt to divert and disperse our strength to levels incapable of country wide success." He had tried to get President Thieu to curtail or cancel holiday leaves, and had kept U.S. and Free World forces troops on full alert going into the Tet holiday. Armed with the most specific warnings, the South Vietnamese units in northern I Corps and western II Corps were relatively well prepared for the fighting that ensued. At the other end of the spectrum, a lack of danger signs in IV Corps had left the South Vietnamese units there woefully unprepared. The study group credited the enemy with maintaining a high degree of operational security, a feat accomplished at the expense of coordination, since North Vietnamese leaders had waited until the last moment to reveal the details of the offensive to local commanders.[41]

The failure of allied intelligence before Tet, to the extent that there had been a failure, was one of imagination. U.S. and South Vietnamese officials had assumed that the enemy would respect the holiday because of its deep cultural importance. The allies were aware that the enemy had the capability to mount a complex, coordinated attack, but found it difficult to imagine that he would willingly expose himself to concentrated allied firepower for objectives that seemed infeasible: the destruction of the South Vietnamese government and the instigation of an uprising. After years of following a strategy of protracted warfare designed to wear down and outlast their opponents, the enemy had suddenly changed course, seeking a decisive victory in a short period of time, and for this the allies were unprepared. They were in for a rude awakening.[42]

[41] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01060 to Sharp, 23 Jan 68, p. 2. Interim Rpt, CIA, 8 Apr 68, sub: Intelligence Warning of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, Historians files, CMH.

[42] Interim Rpt, CIA, 8 Apr 68.

Part Two

The General Offensive Begins

9

Tet Unleashed

On the morning of 28 January, the North Vietnamese Ministry of Defense notified its southern front commands via an encrypted radio transmission that the general offensive was to begin at midnight "between the first and second days of Tet." *COSVN* and the other headquarters relayed the message to their subordinate units, and when evening came, tens of thousands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers began moving by foot and by truck, by bicycle and by sampan, toward their designated targets.[1]

At some point during the next few hours, General Dung's staff became aware of a problem that threatened to throw the plan into chaos. Most of the southern commanders, it appeared, were using the solar or Western calendar issued by the South Vietnamese government, a legacy of French colonial rule, rather than the lunar-based calendar used in North Vietnam and many other Asian countries. Hanoi intended the offensive to begin at midnight of 30–31 January, but "between the first and second days of Tet" translated into the night of 29–30 January for those who used a solar calendar. General Dung sent an urgent message to clarify his intent.[2]

For some the message came too late. General Man from *Military Region 5* reported that he could not get the message out to most of his units since they had already turned off their radios to prevent allied signal experts from triangulating their positions. Grimly, he informed General Dung that his attacks were going to take place one day early in southern I Corps, the Central Highlands, and the central coast of II Corps.[3]

First Strikes on the Central Coast

On the north-central coast of *Military Region 5*, the sector in II Corps that included Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Khanh Hoa Provinces, General Man sent all five of his North Vietnamese infantry regiments into action as well as two Viet Cong local force battalions and seven sapper companies. The attack force that marched on Nha Trang on the night of 29–30 January

[1] Tran Van Tra, "Victory and Thoughts about Victory," p. 13.

[2] *Lich Su Cuc Tac Chien 1945–2000* [*History of the Combat Operations Department, 1945–2000*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1980), p. 14, copy in Historians files, CMH.

[3] Man, *Time of Upheaval*, p. 478. According to captured enemy officers, main force units normally shut down their radios seventy-two hours prior to launching a major attack to ensure that they would not be detected by electronic interception. If they observed "radio silence" (receiving but not transmitting), a message to delay might have reached some units, but those involved in the "general uprising" behind allied lines probably were unreachable.

consisted of two understrength battalions from the *18B Regiment* and four district-based sapper companies. At Tuy Hoa, one battalion from the *95th Regiment* and one Viet Cong infantry battalion comprised the assault force, while at Qui Nhon, the attackers consisted of just one Viet Cong infantry battalion and three district-based sapper companies. All told, the strike force came to just over a thousand men, more than half of them Viet Cong. As for his main combat force, the *3d Division*, Man ordered elements from the *2d* and *22d Regiments* to attack Phu My and elements of the *18th Regiment* to attack An Nhon, two district capitals in central-south Binh Dinh (*Map 25*).[4]

General Man's principal target in Khanh Hoa Province, the city of Nha Trang, was situated at the northern end of an island six kilometers long and three kilometers wide, bounded on the east by the South China Sea, by estuaries to the north and south, and by a river to the west. Highway 1 entered the city from the west, passing through a corridor of farmland sandwiched between coastal hills to the north and to the south of Nha Trang. Almost all of the usable land south of the metropolitan area had been taken over by U.S. military installations, principally a C–130-capable airfield and Camp McDermott, which contained the headquarters of the U.S. 5th Special Forces Group and the South Vietnamese Special Forces Command.[5]

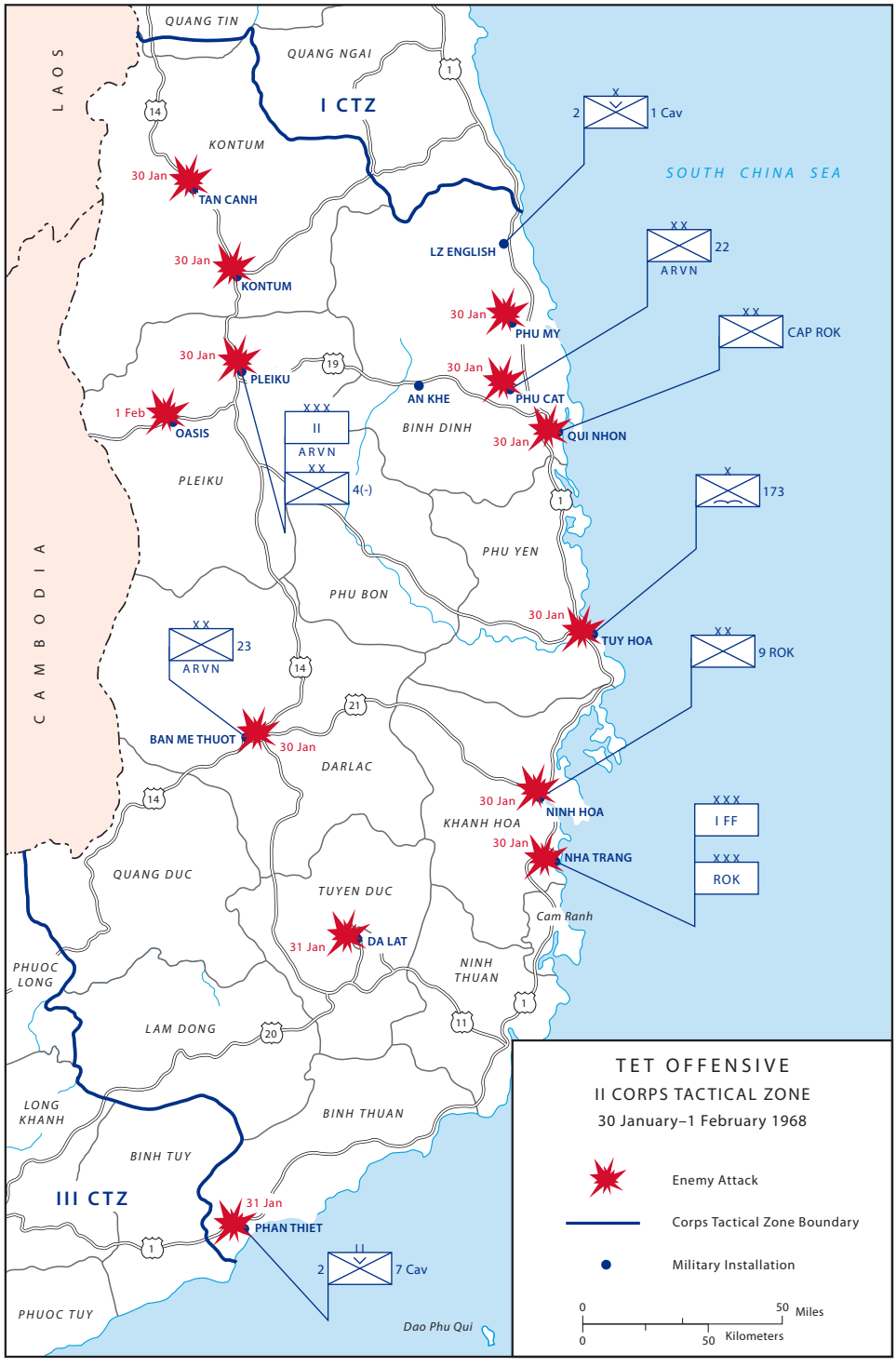
The allied forces in Nha Trang, like those in most South Vietnamese cities, had a joint defense plan that defined security responsibilities, command and control arrangements, and intelligence-sharing procedures. The head of the South Vietnamese Special Forces, Brig. Gen. Doan Van Quang, held the dual positions of Nha Trang garrison commander and Nha Trang Special Zone commander. The commander of the U.S. 5th Special Forces Group, Col. Jonathan F. Ladd, served as the U.S. Installation Defense commander. Finally, the province chief, Lt. Col. Le Khanh, controlled the territorial units in neighboring districts. He coordinated their operations with the South Korean 9th "White Horse" Division, headquartered at Ninh Hoa twenty kilometers to the north.

The allies had rehearsed the joint defense plan on 26 January, but no system was perfect. On the twenty-eighth or twenty-ninth of January, Vietnamese policemen learned from a captured Viet Cong agent that the enemy intended to attack the city at some point in the near future. Urgently, they prepared a report and delivered it to their American liaison. He passed it on, but someone further up the chain who did not understand the significance of the report left it on his desk, only to be delivered to Colonel Ladd's headquarters after the battle was over. As a result of that oversight, the U.S. installations in Nha Trang remained on normal alert when the Tet truce began at midnight, 29–30 January.

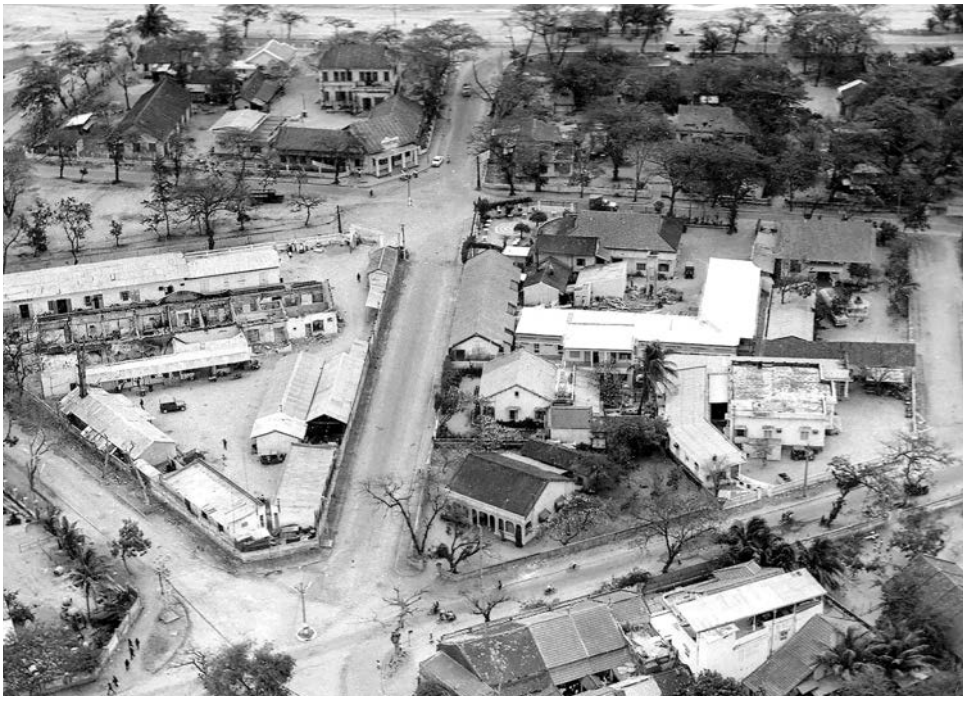
Forty minutes later, six 82-mm. mortar rounds exploded near the western side of the airfield. Colonel Ladd issued a yellow alert. Flare ships lumbered

[4] Intel Rpt, MACV, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, 31 Jan 68, sub: Monthly Order of Battle Summary, pt. IV, sec. 1b, Historians files, CMH.

[5] Rpt, MACV, 15 Jan 68, sub: Construction Program South Vietnam, sec. 9, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.


QUANG TIN
QUANG NGAI
I CTZ
LAOS
CAMBODIA
KONTUM
30 Jan
TAN CANH
30 Jan
KONTUM
30 Jan
PLEIKU
1 Feb
OASIS
PLEIKU
II
ARVN
4(-)
AN KHE
BINH DINH
LZ ENGLISH
30 Jan
PHU MY
30 Jan
PHU CAT
30 Jan
QUI NHON
PHU YEN
PHU BON
30 Jan
TUY HOA
23
ARVN
BAN ME THUOT
30 Jan
DARLAC
30 Jan
NINH HOA
KHANH HOA
30 Jan
NHA TRANG
QUANG DUC
TUYEN DUC
Cam Ranh
31 Jan
DA LAT
PHUOC LONG
NINH THUAN
LAM DONG
LONG KHANH
BINH THUAN
BINH TUY
III CTZ
31 Jan
PHAN THIET
7 Cav
PHUOC TUY
Dao Phu Qui
SOUTH CHINA SEA
1 Cav
22
ARVN
CAP ROK
173
9 ROK
I FF
ROK
TET OFFENSIVE
II CORPS TACTICAL ZONE
30 January–1 February 1968
Enemy Attack
Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
Military Installation
0
50 Miles
0
50 Kilometers

MAP 25



South Vietnamese sector headquarters (left) *and the MACV compound* (right) *in Nha Trang*

into the sky to look for the gunners, but the hissing lights they dropped onto the suspected enemy position revealed nothing. After the passage of thirty uneventful minutes, Ladd rescinded the yellow alert.

Unknown to him, South Vietnamese installations on the western side of the city were already under attack. After quietly occupying Buddha Statue Hill, famous for the large white Buddha that sat on its peak, the *1st Company* of the *7th Battalion*, *18B Regiment*, and the *88th Sapper Company* assaulted the Nha Trang radio station. The twenty-one Regional Forces soldiers inside the walled compound found they could not call for help because the enemy had cut their telephone line. A second battle raged several hundred meters to the south as the *T89 Sapper Company* tried to fight its way into a South Vietnamese signal facility and the city jail.[6]

Another hour passed before Ladd's headquarters learned that the city was under attack. At 0140, a group of taxis and minibuses pulled up to Khanh Hoa Sector Command, a joint tactical center that was located across the street from MACV Advisory Team 35 and a block south of the provincial administration office. Approximately sixty Viet Cong from the *K90*, *K91*, and *K92 Sapper Companies* piled out of the vehicles and charged into the

[6] Pham Van Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)* (Saigon, 1968), p. 362; CDEC, Intel Bull 12,982, 3 Jun 68, p. 2, box 36, CDEC Bulls, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, G–2, RG 472, NACP; Rpt, Interv no. TET-VC-76, Rand Corporation, 28 May 68, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

provincial administration and Sector Command compounds. MACV Advisory Team 35 radioed a warning to Camp McDermott. General Quang immediately dispatched his ready reserve, a mobile strike force company under the control of U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment A–503, which headed out of the Special Forces compound on foot a few minutes later.

By that time, the fight at the Sector Command and the provincial administration office was already over. Fifteen South Vietnamese soldiers had lost their lives trying to protect the two compounds; another three dozen had been injured. Among those taken prisoner by the sappers were three U.S. advisers who had been working at the Sector Command. Colonel Khanh and his family escaped detection only because the attackers did not search his home for they considered it too small to belong to anyone important.[7]

Fifteen minutes later, Colonel Ladd received another warning, this time from I Field Force headquarters. Enemy soldiers had been spotted near the Roberts Compound, a billeting and mess facility for U.S. and South Korean officers. The enemy force, approximately fifty North Vietnamese soldiers from the *1st Company* of the *7th Battalion*, *18B Regiment*, had been headed for the provincial administration office when it had unknowingly passed by the compound. The U.S. and South Korean guards immediately engaged the enemy troops. Finding their way forward blocked, the North Vietnamese sought cover in a building that happened to be next to the villa where the chief of staff of the South Korean Expeditionary Force lived. Allied troops surrounded the building, and the battle continued.

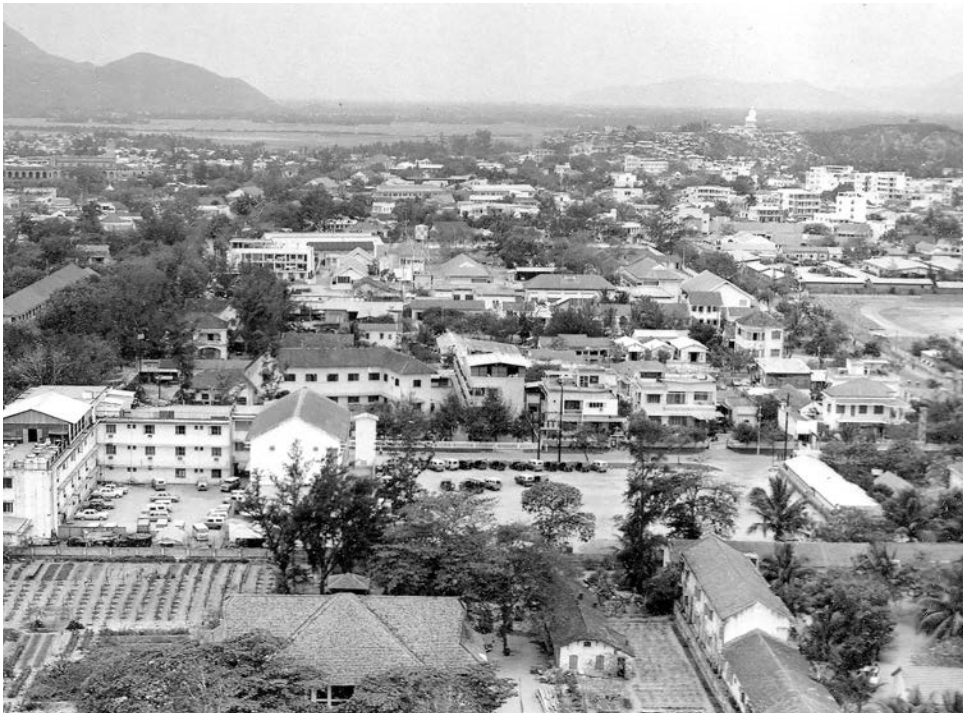
News reached Camp McDermott that Ninh Hoa, twenty kilometers to the north, was also under attack, but that the district chief seemed to have the situation under control. The assault force, later determined to be the *11th Company* of the *18B PAVN Regiment* and the *H71 Local Force Company*, withdrew from town later that morning when helicopters brought several companies from the South Korean 29th Infantry Regiment back to their base in the city.[8]

General Quang's ready reaction force led by U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment A–503 arrived at the Sector Command compound around 0230. After rescuing the three soldiers from Advisory Team 35, whose nearby compound the enemy had not attacked, the Montagnard soldiers and their advisers retook the South Vietnamese sector headquarters after an intense firefight. The remaining sappers fell back to the province headquarters one block to the north. This position proved to be too strong for the Montagnard troops to overcome. Determined to let none of the sappers escape, General Quang, sent two companies from the South Vietnamese 91st Ranger Battalion, a unit that had been resting and refitting at the Special Forces compound, to finish the job.[9]

[7] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 367; AAR, 1968 Tet Offensive, I FFV, 9 Apr 68, p. 3, Encl 5. All in Historians files, CMH.

[8] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, pp. 2–3, Encl 1.

[9] AAR, Tet Offensive Actions in the II Corps, I FFV, p. 3, Encl 5; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 368.



A view of the Roberts Compound (foreground) *in Nha Trang*

To deal with the Viet Cong on the western side of the city, General Quang recalled a pair of Montagnard light infantry companies that were on patrol in the countryside northwest of Nha Trang. As they neared the outskirts of town, the Montagnards ran into a blocking force from the *8th Battalion*, *18B Regiment*. A few well-placed air strikes and some aggressive maneuvering soon convinced the enemy to abandon his position. Instead of falling back into the city to join their comrades, the North Vietnamese troops opted for self-preservation by heading west toward the hills.

The two light infantry companies entered Nha Trang as the sun began to rise. After linking up with a mobile strike force company led by U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment A–502 that had just flown in from Dong Ba Thin, twenty kilometers to the south, the column surrounded the neighborhood at the base of Buddha Statue Hill and then began hunting down the more than 200 enemy soldiers who remained on the loose there.[10]

While the fighting continued on the western edge of the city, the allies mopped up the last intruders in downtown Nha Trang. A combination of South Korean and American troops cleared the enemy-held building next to the Roberts Compound, nearly wiping out the *1st Company* of the *7th Battalion*, *18B Regiment*. Eight blocks to the north at the provincial administration compound, South Vietnamese rangers closed in on the remaining

[10] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 370.

sappers from the *K90* and *K91 Sapper Companies*. At around 0900, Colonel Khanh took advantage of the enemy's shrinking perimeter to sneak out of his house, whereupon he commandeered an armored personnel carrier—principally so he could use the vehicle's .50-caliber machine gun—and from there directed the battle until the last sapper went down around noon. For the rangers, the victory had not come cheaply; eighteen of their men had been killed, including the battalion commander, his deputy, and a company commander.[11]

After taking a short break to reorganize, the two ranger companies joined the fight for Buddha Statue Hill. The enemy abandoned the hill later that evening, returned to it the following night, and then was chased off for good by South Vietnamese infantry and U.S. helicopter gunships on the morning of 1 February. Afterward, Colonel Khanh sent the Montagnard units and a South Korean infantry company on a careful sweep through Nha Trang. The search turned up only a few stragglers. On 4 February, the province chief declared the city secure.

The battle for Nha Trang claimed the lives of seventy-four allied soldiers, nearly all of them South Vietnamese. The enemy lost 274 men killed and another 76 taken prisoner. The *7th Battalion*, *18B Regiment*, had been gutted; the *K90* and *K91 Sapper Companies* ceased to exist. Using tips from civilians and information obtained from prisoners, government authorities managed to identify and then arrest nearly everyone in the Nha Trang Party Committee.[12]

General Man's next target up the coast was Tuy Hoa, a small fishing village at the intersection of Highway 1 and the Da Rang River that served as the capital of Phu Yen Province. A small airfield known as Tuy Hoa North lay just north of town on the west side of Highway 1. Five kilometers down the road on the far side of the Da Rang River was a second and larger airfield, Tuy Hoa South, which served as the base of operations for the 268th Aviation Battalion and four helicopter assault companies.

The province chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Van Ba, looked after the defense of the city from his headquarters in the center of town. His main source of combat power came from the South Vietnamese 47th Infantry Regiment, which was headquartered there along with one battalion. The only U.S. combat installation in town was a I Field Force artillery firebase positioned just west of Tuy Hoa North. The men of Battery C of the 6th Battalion, 32d Artillery, used their two 8-inch howitzers and two 175-mm. guns to support Operation BOLLING, presently being conducted west of Tuy Hoa by the headquarters of the 173d Airborne Brigade and its 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry. The gunners were also equipped with a pair of M42 Duster self-propelled vehicles, each mounted with a 40-mm. cannon for base defense.[13]

[11] Ibid., pp. 2–4; Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-11, Rand Corporation, 16 Apr 68, p. 11, Encl 5, Historians files, CMH.

[12] Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-11, Rand Corporation, 16 Apr 68, p. 4, Encl 5; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 375.

[13] AAR, D Co, 4th Bn, 503d Inf, 173d Abn Bde, n.d., VNIT 31, CMH; AAR, 1968 Tet Offensive, I FFV, 9 Apr 68, Encl 2, Historians files, CMH.

When the camp of the South Vietnamese 47th Infantry came under mortar attack at 0130, the province adviser, Lt. Col. Vernon J. Walters, alerted the 173d Airborne Brigade that the city was under assault. The shelling lasted for twenty minutes. When it ended, the defenders braced themselves for a ground attack, but instead there was only a strange, pregnant silence.

Just west of the city, around 300 soldiers from the *5th Battalion*, *95th PAVN Regiment*, waited in a rice field for the arrival of the *85th Local Force Battalion*. The plan was for the Viet Cong unit to attack the provincial headquarters, radio station, and other government buildings in Tuy Hoa, while the North Vietnamese unit hit the airfield complex and a prisoner of war compound just north of town. Unknown to the North Vietnamese battalion commander, the Viet Cong troops had turned back for home after getting ambushed on their way to the staging area. The anxious commander waited for two hours, and then proceeded with the attack.

Three of his companies headed for the U.S. artillery base while the remaining company veered south to attack the prisoner of war compound. The main assault group penetrated the western side of the artillery base and overran one of the 175-mm. guns. The men of Battery C created a new defensive line to contain the enemy within a thirty-meter pocket. Two hundred meters to the south, the remaining company from the *5th Battalion* attempted to liberate the Communist fighters that were being held as prisoners of war, but failed to overcome the South Vietnamese guards. Hoping that the *85th Battalion* would still make its appearance, the commander of the *5th Battalion*, *95th Regiment*, decided to keep fighting where he was rather than abandon his small foothold north of the city.[14]

That decision proved costly. Shortly after first light, a flight of Huey helicopters brought Companies C and D from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, and a command group led by the battalion commander, Colonel Johnson, to the Tuy Hoa North airfield. More helicopters ferried in a pair of companies from the South Korean 28th Infantry Regiment. As Colonel Johnson readied his men for an attack, a battalion from the South Vietnamese 47th Infantry Regiment formed a blocking position to the west of the airfield, and the two South Korean companies formed another blocking position to the north. When they were in place, Colonel Johnson sent his paratroopers into the artillery base to eliminate the North Vietnamese salient, which they did after a fierce thirty-minute firefight. Surrounded on three sides, the enemy hurried south to a circular, palm-shaded settlement on the edge of Tuy Hoa named Binh Tin.

The allies established a cordon around the hamlet, while Colonel Johnson discussed the situation with Colonel Ba and with General Schweiter, who had just arrived by helicopter. From what the province chief could determine, the North Vietnamese were preventing many residents of the hamlet from leaving because their presence discouraged air and artillery strikes. Colonel Ba needed to find a way to get those civilians out.

[14] Intel Rpt, Intel Team 28, Phu Yen Province, 26 Jan 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

An aerial view from the subsector headquarters looking south toward Binh Tin hamlet with the U.S. artillery base and the prison in the middle ground

An aerial view of Binh Tin hamlet after the defeat of Viet Cong forces

When South Vietnamese psychological warfare troops failed to convince the enemy to surrender or to release their hostages, U.S. aircraft doused the hamlet with tear gas and smoke. Johnson sent a company of gas-mask-wearing paratroopers into Binh Tin, but the attack bogged down when their eye pieces fogged up. Nevertheless, the smoke and gas distracted the enemy long enough for dozens of civilians to flee the hamlet. When the paratroopers withdrew to reorganize, Colonel Ba agreed that the time had come for stronger measures.

As the ring of allied soldiers around Binh Tin looked on, a flight of five U.S. Air Force F–100 Super Sabres pulverized the hamlet with 500-pound bombs and burned it to ash with napalm. The aerial strike devastated the North Vietnamese battalion, killing or wounding everyone in the command group along with dozens of other soldiers. Artillery took over when the jets departed. The remains of Binh Tin burned throughout the rest of the day and well into the night.

When three companies from the 4th Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade, entered the hamlet the next morning, they found a profusion of mangled bodies and a few dazed survivors. All told, at least 189 members of the *5th Battalion*, *95th Regiment*, had been killed in the fight for Tuy Hoa and another 31 had been captured. The U.S. unit that had seen the most action, Company D of the 4th Battalion, 173d Airborne Brigade, had lost fourteen soldiers killed and forty wounded. Civilian casualties were not recorded.

After letting several days go by so that the defenders might relax their vigilance, the enemy returned to Tuy Hoa on the morning of 5 February. The tactic worked. The *85th Local Force Battalion* and a composite company from the *95th Regiment* sneaked into the western part of the city without being detected. Despite having the element of surprise, the enemy failed to overrun any of his intended targets, chiefly the police station and several government buildings, and the defenders, once alert to the danger, responded quickly and effectively. The security troops held on until daylight when two battalions from the South Vietnamese 47th Regiment launched a counterattack that drove the enemy from the city after a few hours of fighting.[15]

Clashes in Binh Dinh

General Man's third major target on the night of 29–30 January was Qui Nhon, the capital of Binh Dinh Province and the most important allied port between Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang. Located on a peninsula that resembled a duck's head, the city and its dock facilities filled the narrow beak that pointed east toward the South China Sea. The eye of the duck, Ba Hoa Mountain, rose more than 300 meters above the peninsula's otherwise flat landscape. Route 441 ran like a stripe along the top of the duck's head, going northwest into the rich farmlands of An Nhon District, and eventually terminating at the town of Ba Gai where Highway 1 intersected Highway 19. An

[15] AAR, 1968 Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, pp. 2–4, Encl 2.

airfield and U.S. logistical facilities adorned the region of the throat and a series of rolling hills the base of the neck.

The joint defense plan for the city, last rehearsed on 1 January, placed the province chief, Lt. Col. Phan Minh Tho, in charge of the defense of Qui Nhon. He used a combination of Regional and Popular Forces units and police to guard the city. The commander of the U.S. Army Support Command, Qui Nhon, Brig. Gen. George H. McBride, relied primarily on the 93d Military Police Battalion to protect the U.S. installations in town.[16]

On the morning of 29 January, agents from the Military Security Service, the counterespionage branch of the South Vietnamese Army, captured a high-ranking member of the Qui Nhon City Committee and ten of his associates in a safe house on the outskirts of town. In their possession were two propaganda audiotapes that announced the liberation of Qui Nhon, Da Nang, and other cities on the central coast. When asked about the recordings, the prisoners said that the cities mentioned on the tapes were going to be attacked later that night.[17]

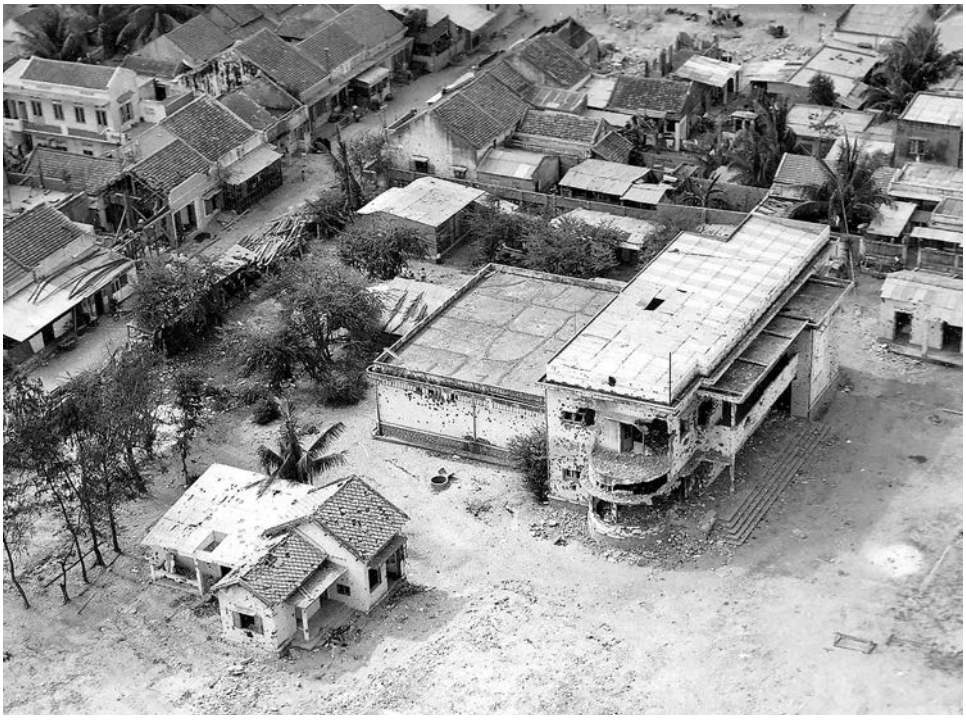
Colonel Tho and General McBride issued a citywide alert. The province chief imposed a curfew and banned the use of firecrackers. Qui Nhon was placed off-limits to U.S. personnel. Tho made sure that all of the security checkpoints and outposts that screened the approaches to the city were fully manned.[18]

Despite all of the precautions, the enemy still managed to seize one of his major objectives. At 0400, 30 January, approximately twenty commandos from the *D10* and *D20 Sapper Companies* stormed the headquarters of the Military Security Service where the eleven members of the Qui Nhon City Committee were being held for interrogation. They killed or captured the twelve South Vietnamese soldiers who were on duty in a matter of minutes. One block away, a group of around fifty sappers charged into the city's radio station where they killed nine of its guards and wounded thirty more. When the enemy failed to locate the confiscated propaganda tapes that they had intended to play on the radio—Colonel Tho had them at his headquarters, several blocks to the south—the sappers hunkered down and waited for the rest of the Qui Nhon attack force to complete its job.

The province chief was in the midst of organizing a counterattack to retake the radio station when he learned that U.S. Navy patrol boats in the harbor had intercepted and sunk several sampans loaded with enemy soldiers. Those men later turned out to belong to the *D30 Sapper Company*. Their mission had been to land on the beach just south of the provincial administration office and then overrun Colonel Tho's headquarters.

Around that same time, the commander of the South Vietnamese 2d Railway Security Battalion reported that more than a hundred Viet Cong soldiers—the *E2B Local Force Battalion*—had captured the train station and

[16] Ibid., pp. 2–3, Encl 4.
[17] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 383.
[18] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, p. 2, Encl 4; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 383.



The radio station complex at Qui Nhon

railway yard on the western side of Qui Nhon, just a few blocks north of the radio station. Some of the Viet Cong soldiers were roaming the surrounding neighborhood, yelling for residents to join a popular uprising, though no one appeared to be responding to their calls.

Colonel Tho asked General Hieu of the South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division and General Quang of the South Vietnamese Special Forces Command to send reinforcements as soon as possible. General Hieu dispatched his reconnaissance company. When it ran into a blocking force from the *18th Regiment* on the way to Qui Nhon, the general sent one of his infantry battalions to the city by another route. It reached the train yard around 0800. As for General Quang, he presently had his hands full defending Nha Trang but promised to send a pair of CIDG companies later that afternoon.[19]

With the situation at the train yard under control, Colonel Tho turned his attention to the sappers in the radio station. He surrounded the concrete, two-story building with Regional Forces soldiers, National Police, and staff from his headquarters and then had them batter the structure with machine guns and recoilless rifles until it was nothing more than a hollowed-out

[19] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, pp. 2–5, Encl 4; Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-80, Rand Corporation, 6 Jun 68, pp. 3, 10, folder 14, box 10, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02–Mil Opns, The Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, 28 Jan–3 Feb 68, 3 Feb 68, p. 11, box 2, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

The railroad station at Qui Nhon

wreck. Every man in the *D10* and *D20 Sapper Companies* was either killed or captured.

The infantry battalion from the South Vietnamese 22d Division, meanwhile, hunted the troops from the *E2B Local Force Battalion* in the grease pits and machine shops of the train yard. The enemy withdrew from the city late in the afternoon when a pair of CIDG companies sent by General Quang joined the clearing operation. Two infantry companies and a mechanized company from the South Korean Capital Division moved into the city that evening to bolster Colonel Tho's security troops, but the enemy did not return to Qui Nhon.[20]

Although the attackers had destroyed most of the files in the Military Security Services building, thereby wiping out a great deal of intelligence that government officials had gathered about Viet Cong activities in recent months, the battle had been a disaster for the enemy. The allies reported killing 161 Viet Cong soldiers and capturing another 45. South Vietnamese losses came to thirty-five killed and seventy-six wounded, almost half of them at the radio station or the Military Security Services building in the first ten minutes of the battle.[21]

[20] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, pp. 2–5, Encl 4; Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-80, Rand Corporation, 6 Jun 68, p. 11.

[21] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, p. 7.

Thanks to U.S. operations over the preceding months, the *3d PAVN Division* entered Tet badly battered. Determined to preserve the division no matter how the general offensive turned out, General Man ordered its infantry regiments to strike the district capitals of An Nhon and Phu My, which were closer to their mountain hideaways than Qui Nhon, and to use only part of their strength in each attack. The *B1 Front* commander hoped that the *3d Division* would tie down the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and a portion of General Hieu's 22d Infantry Division during the critical opening hours of battle, thereby giving his attack forces in Qui Nhon a better chance at success.

The *18th PAVN Regiment*, the division's weakest unit, used a battalion to block the road between An Nhon and Qui Nhon on the morning of 30 January. This prevented General Hieu's ready reaction force, the reconnaissance company from the South Vietnamese 22d Division, from reaching the besieged port city that day. That minor success proved to be its most significant contribution of the offensive. The regiment's lowest point came on 6 February when its *8th Battalion* attacked An Nhon itself, only to be repulsed by four Popular Forces platoons after losing forty-one killed.

The *3d PAVN Division*'s *2d PLAF* and the *22d PAVN Regiments* joined forces in the central part of the province to attack the district capital of Phu My, some fifty kilometers north of Qui Nhon. Both units were in poor shape. The *22d Regiment* had been decimated at the battle of Tam Quan in December, while the *2d Regiment* had lost at least a quarter of its strength fighting in the Cay Giep–Nui Mieu Mountain region in late December and early January. To make matters worse, the allies had spotted the *2d Regiment* on 23 January as it moved into a staging area several kilometers east of town. Two mechanized companies from the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, and South Vietnamese irregulars had killed 142 soldiers from the regiment's *95th* and *97th Battalions* that day.[22]

After that engagement, the two mechanized companies and a mechanized troop from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, had set up camp in Phu My, waiting for the *2d Regiment* to make another appearance. They were rewarded on the night of 30–31 January when the allies spotted the *2d Regiment* approaching the town from the east. The U.S. troops pounced on the attack party and drove it off. Over the next few nights, the *2d Regiment* and the *22d Regiment* took turns attacking Phu My, but the 1st Cavalry Division's mechanized units rebuffed them. The North Vietnamese withdrew on 6 February, leaving behind 200 dead.[23]

Hard Fighting in the Highlands

Unlike General Man who was required to attack over a dozen cities on the central coast, General Thao had just four major targets in the *B3 Front*,

[22] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 6-68, I FFV, 4–10 Feb 68, 10 Feb 68, p. 8, box 2, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[23] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 4-68, I FFV, 21–27 Jan 68, 27 Feb 68, p. 5, box 2, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, p. 4; 3d Division, pp. 74–76.

allowing him to achieve a higher concentration of forces than the *B1 Front* commander. Commencing his attack on the night of 29–30 January, Thao sent a total of four infantry regiments, four sapper battalions, three local force infantry battalions, two artillery battalions, and at least nine local force companies to seize the provincial capitals of the western highlands—Kontum City, Pleiku City, and Ban Me Thuot. He ordered two more regiments, the *66th* and the *174th* of the *1st Division*, to continue their siege of Ben Het and Firebase 25, and to attack the nearby town of Tan Canh in order to cut Highway 14 between Dak To and Kontum City.[24]

The capital of Darlac Province, Ban Me Thuot, was the linchpin of the allied defenses in the southern highlands. The mixed Montagnard and Vietnamese community of some 67,000 people lay near the southern end of Highway 14, approximately forty kilometers from the Cambodian border. Tea plantations and scrub forests covered the surrounding, mostly flat landscape. Highway 14 ran past the lower edge of the city, traveling from northeast to southwest. Just north of town, Highway 21 branched away from Highway 14, heading east toward the coast and eventually terminating at the district town of Ninh Hoa.

General An, the commander of the South Vietnamese 23d Infantry Division, was responsible for defending the provincial capital. His headquarters was situated on the southern edge of town. The city also contained the base camps of the South Vietnamese 45th Infantry Regiment and the South Vietnamese 8th Armored Cavalry Squadron as well as a MACV compound. An airfield known as Camp Carroll lay on the eastern side of town, on the northern shoulder of Highway 14. It contained the only U.S. combat force in the city, the 155th Assault Helicopter Company.

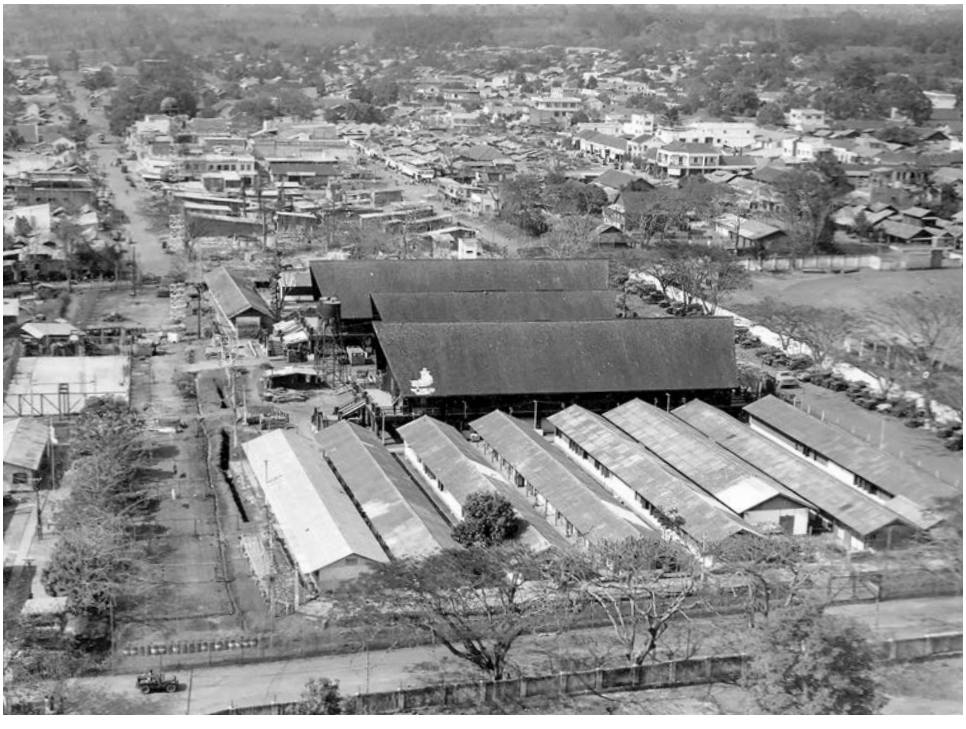
Officials in Ban Me Thuot had not received any specific intelligence suggesting the enemy might attack the city during the Tet holiday. As a consequence, General An did not recall any of the three battalions from the South Vietnamese 45th Infantry Regiment that were in the field, and he permitted the units in the city to grant leave to two-thirds of their men.[25]

The attack began at 0130 on 30 January when four battalions from the *33d PAVN Regiment*, the *301st* and the *401st Local Force Battalions*, and four local force companies—approximately 3,000 soldiers in all—swarmed into Ban Me Thuot from the south. Their main targets were General An's headquarters, a South Vietnamese artillery base on the western side of town, the provincial administration office, and the National Police Station. The enemy penetrated the last two of those targets, and also overran the treasury office and imperial palace, which became the enemy's bases of operations for the remainder of the battle.[26]

[24] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 2714, 9 Apr 68, sub: Medical Organization and Activities of Agricultural Site 1, B.3, p. 16, box 65, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel, MACV, J–2, RG 472, NACP.

[25] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 330.

[26] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, pp. 3–4, Encl 7.



A MACV compound in the foreground and Camp Coryell in the background at Ban Me Thuot

As those attacks were getting under way, a battalion from the *33d PAVN Regiment* peeled away to assault the city's radio station in the southwestern part of town. The Regional Forces troops who were guarding the facility held out for several hours before they were finally overwhelmed. Heavy fire prevented a group of irregulars from a nearby Montagnard training center from coming to their rescue. Once in possession of the station, the enemy broadcast a message ordering the residents of Ban Me Thuot to evacuate the city. Their mission accomplished, the North Vietnamese troops destroyed the radio tower and then laid siege to the Montagnard training center.[27]

Throughout the morning, light tanks and armored personnel carriers from the South Vietnamese 8th Armored Cavalry Squadron raced back and forth to break up enemy attacks around town. Rocket-propelled grenades disabled or destroyed four of their vehicles, but the South Vietnamese cavalrymen kept the enemy off balance until the 2d and 3d Battalions from the South Vietnamese 45th Infantry Regiment returned to the city around noon. General An's counterattack gained strength later in the day when four of his reconnaissance companies and a Regional Forces company came in from the

[27] Ibid.

A South Vietnamese Army M24 Chaffee light tank at Tan Son Nhut

field. By nightfall, the enemy's foothold had shrunk to several square blocks around the treasury building and imperial palace.[28]

Heavy fighting continued throughout the next day, 31 January. Possession of the treasury building and the imperial palace went back and forth several times, with the enemy regaining control of them in the evening. Worried by the slow pace of the clearing operation, General An asked the corps commander, General Vinh Loc, for additional troops.

At his behest, the South Vietnamese 23d Ranger Battalion flew into Camp Carroll shortly after midnight and then joined the clearing operation when it resumed at daybreak. Even with those extra soldiers, progress remained slow. Snipers seemed to be everywhere, sometimes popping up in areas that had once seemed secure. The Communists still appeared to have plenty of machine gun ammunition and rocket-propelled grenades. The South Vietnamese used their heavy weapons sparingly, so as to not cause more damage to the city than was necessary.

The enemy made a last bid to regain the initiative on the morning of 2 February when he plastered the South Vietnamese artillery camp with tear gas and then sent a wave of infantry to capture the howitzers. At 0300 a group

[28] Ibid., pp. 3–5; Intel Cable, CIA, 1 Feb 68, sub: II Corps Situation Report as of 1800 Hours 1 February 1968, p. 4, document 17, Vietnam-Memo dated 6 Feb 68, box 187, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

of attackers broke through the perimeter. U.S. helicopter gunships swooped in to machine-gun the invaders by the light of parachute flares and burning ground fires. The North Vietnamese troops gave up their toehold and ended their assault twenty minutes later.

Resistance in the city began to crumble on 3 February. General An's soldiers recaptured the radio station, imperial palace, and treasury building. Resistance waned as the enemy began filtering out of the city. The allied situation further improved that afternoon when the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, landed at the airfield. The following morning, the American paratroopers went in search of the enemy as he retreated south, but found only an abandoned camp littered with equipment.[29]

The four-day battle had devastated much of Ban Me Thuot, damaging or destroying 3,300 homes and leaving some 20,000 people, over one-third of the population, temporarily without shelter. Approximately 560 civilians had been killed in the fighting and another 800 had been wounded. The South Vietnamese had lost seventy-four soldiers killed in action. The enemy lost as many as 900 soldiers dead or severely wounded.[30]

General Thao's second target in the western highlands was Pleiku City, the capital of Pleiku Province. The mixed Vietnamese and Montagnard community of some 33,000 people, situated at the intersection of Highway 14 and Highway 19, was the most important military center in the western highlands. The South Vietnamese II Corps commander, General Vinh Loc, maintained his headquarters just north of town near a host of other military facilities, including the New Pleiku airfield, the main base of the 52d Artillery Group, the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 2d Ranger Group, a Montagnard training center, and a U.S. Special Forces cantonment. The South Vietnamese 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment was stationed just east of town, and beyond it was Camp Holloway, an airfield complex that contained the headquarters of the 52d Aviation Battalion and four assault helicopter companies, the 119th, the 170th, the 179th, and the 189th. The closest U.S. ground combat units were located nine kilometers to the south at Camp Enari, home of the 4th Infantry Division.[31]

The allies had received multiple indications throughout the month that the enemy intended to attack the city right before Tet. Nevertheless, the II Corps commander, General Loc, had gone to Saigon. The man he left in charge of defending Pleiku City, Maj. Le Than, the deputy province chief for security, took the warning signs seriously. He ensured that Regional Forces soldiers and troops from the South Vietnamese 11th Ranger Battalion were on full alert, and placed armored vehicles from the South Vietnamese 3d Armored Cavalry around the II Corps headquarters. The senior adviser at the II Corps headquarters, Col. John W. Barnes, arranged for a platoon of

[29] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 4th Div, 21 May 68, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.
[30] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, pp. 4–8, Encl 7, tab E.
[31] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, pp. 1–3, Encl 8.

tanks from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, to be stationed at Camp Holloway as a ready reserve force.[32]

Ninety minutes past midnight in the early hours of 30 January, the *K31 Battalion*, *40th Artillery Regiment*, opened fire on the two airfields, the artillery firebase, and the ranger compound. The ground attack got under way ninety minutes later when Viet Cong sappers probed the Montagnard training center on the north side of Pleiku City. Soon the entire city and both airfields were under attack by the *408th Sapper Battalion*, half of the *H15 Local Force Battalion*, elements of the *407th Sapper Battalion*, a company from the *28th Sapper Battalion*, and over a hundred local guerrillas. Alert and well-prepared, the defenders proved equal to the challenge; none of the facilities fell into enemy hands. A group of sappers tried to enter General Vinh Loc's house, only to be repulsed by his security detail. The South Vietnamese 3d Armored Cavalry, acting as a mobile fire brigade, proved especially effective in blunting the Communist attack. Always in the thick of fighting, the squadron lost three M41 tanks and two other armored vehicles in the first several hours of combat.[33]

The allies went on the offensive at first light. At 0715, two companies of Montagnard irregulars began fighting their way from the training center into the heart of the city. At the same time, the platoon of U.S. tanks drove from Camp Holloway to the artillery camp southwest of town to make sure the howitzers did not fall into enemy hands. Thirty minutes later, the South Vietnamese 11th Ranger Battalion entered the city from the east and moved to the center of town before initiating a house-to-house sweep. Later in the morning, the South Vietnamese 22d Ranger Battalion and the command element of the South Vietnamese 2d Ranger Group entered the city from the west and joined the clearing operation in downtown Pleiku. As evening approached, two companies from the U.S. 4th Engineer Battalion landed by helicopter on the southern outskirts of town to prevent the enemy from escaping in that direction.

After nightfall, most of Viet Cong retreated to the southwestern corner of town where allied forces were thinnest. Some hid themselves in ruined buildings and in piles of debris hoping to escape notice, while others discarded their weapons and put on civilian clothes in hopes of passing as refugees. The evasion techniques were not particularly successful, but they did force the South Vietnamese soldiers to backtrack and reexamine areas that had previously been cleared.[34]

[32] Debriefing, Maj Gen Charles P. Stone, 15 Nov 68, pp. 8–9, Historians files, CMH; Intel Sum 4, I FFV, 17–23 Jan 68, 23 Jan 68, box 1, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, G–3 Adviser, Second Regional Assistance Command (SRAC), USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[33] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, pp. 2–3, Encl 8; Interv, Lt Col Jim Breen and Lt Col Charlie Moore with Lt Gen William R. Peers, former CG, 4th Div, and CG, I FFV, 13 Apr 77, p. 71, Senior Ofcr Oral Hist Program, U.S. Army Military History Institute (MHI), Carlisle Barracks, Pa.; Bfg, Maj Angelo Theofanous, G–2 Adviser, II Corps, and Maj Richard W. Prengergast, Deputy G–3 Adviser, II Corps, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

[34] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, pp. 2–4, Encl 8; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Pleiku Province, Feb 68, n.d., p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

Members of Company E, 4th Engineer Battalion, 4th Infantry Division, sweep toward the Chinese school in Pleiku.

Allied troops continued their slow squeeze of the North Vietnamese sappers and Viet Cong fighters the next morning, 31 January. The makeshift force from the 4th Engineer Battalion cleared Pleiku's main school around noon, killing twenty-one enemy soldiers in the process. When darkness fell, most of the surviving Communists withdrew from the city. Clearing operations continued the next day but netted only a handful of enemy soldiers, so the engineer task force and the tank platoon from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, returned to Camp Enari.

On the morning of 2 February, just when the battle seemed to be over, the allies spotted several companies from the *H15 Local Force Battalion* digging entrenchments on the western outskirts of town. As it turned out, only part of the unit had gotten to the city to participate in the initial attack. The remainder of the unit, including its commander, had just shown up. Seeing that the city was now in allied hands, the commander had decided to make a stand in his present location.[35]

It was a poor decision. The Viet Cong had yet to finish their work when a flight of six helicopter gunships pounced on them. As they scattered, a line of tanks and armored personnel carriers from the South Vietnamese 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment converged on the scene. Within an hour or so

[35] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, p. 4, Encl 8.

U.S. tanks and armored personnel carriers from the 4th Infantry Division prepare to move out.

the Viet Cong unit was all but wiped out. Those losses brought the enemy casualty figure to 606 soldiers killed and another 156 captured in the battle for Pleiku City. The allies lost twenty-eight dead.[36]

While the battle for Pleiku City had been under way, General Thao had ordered two North Vietnamese units, the *95B Regiment* and the *32d Regiment*, *1st Division*, to cut the roads leading into the provincial capital. The *95B Regiment*, for reasons not entirely clear, had made only a half-hearted attempt to comply with the order. On the morning of 31 January, North Vietnamese mortar crews had fired a barrage of shells at a convoy that was passing through the Mang Yang Pass, a narrow defile on Highway 19 east of Pleiku City. A few minutes later, a flight of allied aircraft had bombed the gunners into silence. The result of the attack was one damaged truck and three wounded Americans. The pass remained open.

The *32d Regiment*, *1st Division*, showed more determination to cut Highway 19 at Thanh An, a district capital some twenty-three kilometers southeast of Pleiku City. The headquarters and support area for the 2d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Camp Oasis, lay just south of town. The mission of the *32d Regiment* was to tie up the U.S. brigade for as long as possible.

[36] Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-41, Rand Corporation, 3 May 68, pp. 4–5, Historians files, CMH; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, p. 6.

The North Vietnamese unit may have had problems during its march to Thanh An, for it did not attack the district town until the morning of 1 February, by which point the battle for Pleiku City was virtually over. The South Vietnamese defenders held their ground until helicopter gunships from the 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry, and armored personnel carriers from the 2d Battalion, 8th Infantry (Mechanized), arrived on the scene from Camp Oasis. The battle turned into a disaster for the *32d Regiment*. The next morning, allied soldiers counted 275 enemy bodies on the battlefield. Allied troops went after the retreating *32d Regiment* and discovered its base camp on 5 February. The enemy lost another thirty-five soldiers before he could break contact and disappear into the forest.[37]

The third city in the western highlands to be attacked on the night of 29–30 January was Kontum City, the capital of Kontum Province. Like the other two provincial capitals in the highlands, its population of approximately 27,000 was a mixture of Vietnamese and Montagnards. Located approximately fifty kilometers north of Pleiku City, the town was nestled in a bend of the Dak Bla, a slow-moving river that shielded the southern and eastern approaches to the city. Highway 14 passed through the western edge of town, connecting the provincial capital with Pleiku City and Dak To.

A string of installations lined the northern edge of town. At the eastern end was an airfield complex that housed the 57th Assault Helicopter Company; Troop A of the 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry; Company B of the 299th Engineer Battalion; and a company of Montagnard irregulars. A MACV advisory compound and a U.S. communications facility stood at the western end of the line. Between the airfield and the advisory compound was the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 24th Special Tactical Zone, manned by elements of the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 42d Regiment; the South Vietnamese 406th Reconnaissance Company; and a South Vietnamese battery of 105-mm. howitzers. A company of Montagnard soldiers guarded the province chief's headquarters in the center of town.[38]

The official responsible for managing the security of Kontum City was Col. Nguyen Trong Luat, the commander of the 24th Special Tactical Zone, which incorporated Kontum Province. The senior adviser attached to his headquarters, Col. James P. Cahill, coordinated the American portion of the joint defense plan. Reliable intelligence from multiple sources had indicated to them that the city was likely to be attacked at some point during the week-long Tet holiday. The two commanders had reviewed and exercised the joint defense plan, increased their reconnaissance efforts, and strengthened the defenses of several key installations, adding new layers of razor wire and

[37] Man, *Time of Upheaval*, p. 473; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, p. 3; AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, pp. 5–6, Encl 7.

[38] AAR, Attack on Kontum Provincial Capital, 45th Mil Hist Det, 28 Feb 68, pp. 1–2, box 29, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 316.

minefields outside the perimeter of the airfield. Colonel Luat also kept half of his troops on duty through the holiday.[39]

The attack on Kontum City began at 0212 on 30 January, when a company from the *406th PAVN Sapper Battalion* and a company from the *304th Local Force Battalion* approached the city from the northeast and then assaulted the airfield. As the Communists struggled through the new fields of razor wire and took casualties from antipersonnel mines, American security guards opened fire, and gunships from the 57th Assault Helicopter Company scrambled aloft. Using the illumination provided by searchlights at the airfield to pick out their targets, the helicopters blasted the enemy with rockets and machine guns, stopping his advance fifty meters short of the main landing strip.

The enemy made a second and even stronger push toward the airfield a short time later when the *K6 Battalion* of the *24th PAVN Regiment* joined the assault. Emerging from their compound with a roar of engines and the bark of machine gun fire, two M48 tanks and four M113 armored personnel carriers from Troop A, 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, plowed into the right flank of the advancing North Vietnamese. The sudden attack threw the enemy into disarray, but when the Communists recovered from their initial surprise, the cavalrymen went from being the hunters to being the hunted. Rocket-propelled grenades flared out at them, hitting at least one of the vehicles, and the U.S. vehicles began a fighting retreat back to their compound.[40]

As the attack against the airfield was getting under way, several companies from the *K4* and *K5 Battalions*, *24th Regiment*, and two companies from the *304th Battalion* assaulted the compound of the 24th Special Tactical Zone several hundred meters to the west. When enemy troops penetrated the facility, Colonel Luat retreated to his private residence with one of his infantry companies, effectively abdicating his command duties. Fortunately for the defenders, the attackers seemed disorganized. The enemy overran a pair of 105-mm. howitzers, for example, but made no attempt to use or to disable them. They also ignored the headquarters of the 24th Special Tactical Zone and the home of the deputy province chief, two buildings that ought to have been on their target list.[41]

At the same time the enemy attacked the tactical zone headquarters, several companies from the *K4* and *K5 Battalions* struck the advisory compound several hundred meters to the southwest. A combination of advisers, signal personnel, and Montagnard scouts repulsed the assault, but the enemy overran an interrogation center and a language school just north of the compound.

In the center of town, approximately eighty men from the *406th Sapper Battalion* who had infiltrated the city in ones and twos in the days leading up to Tet, donned South Vietnamese uniforms before emerging from their safe

[39] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, p. 2, Encl 9.

[40] "Battle for Vietnam: Defense of a provincial capital during the Tet Offensive, 29 January–2 February 1968," p. 6, VNIT 202, CMH; ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 52d Combat Avn Bn, 6 Feb 68, p. 1, Encl 4, box 98, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[41] "Battle for Vietnam," p. 6, VNIT 202, CMH.

A view of the province chief's headquarters in Kontum City

houses to attack the province chief's headquarters. The Montagnard defenders repulsed the sappers.

As the fight raged, the province chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Hop Doan, spotted a group of men crouched in a nearby trench, dressed as Regional Forces soldiers but wearing the kind of packs that only Viet Cong soldiers used. Doan pointed the group out to one of his soldiers who was armed with a M79 grenade launcher. The soldier fired, and the resulting explosion killed everyone in the group; it later turned out that those killed were the Viet Cong province chief and several members of his shadow government. However, their deaths had no immediate effect on the battle, and for the next several hours the enemy continued a furious siege of the province headquarters.[42]

The fighting in the city tapered off to occasional rifle shots when the sun rose. Most enemy fighters went into hiding to avoid the helicopter gunships that prowled overhead. The first American reinforcements arrived in the midst of this eerie calm. Task Force DELTA, composed of two helicopter-borne rifle platoons and Company D of the 7th Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, 4th Infantry Division, landed at the airfield around 0930. After getting orga-

[42] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, p. 4, Encl 9; Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-1, Rand Corporation, 9 Apr 68, p. 2; Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-13, Rand Corporation, 18 Apr 68, pp. 2, 4. Both in Historians files, CMH.

nized and studying the latest reports, the force moved into the northern part of the city shortly after noon. Resistance was light at first but grew exponentially the closer Task Force DELTA got to the MACV advisory compound in the northwestern part of town. More troops would be needed to lift the siege.

Help arrived that afternoon when the commander of the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, Lt. Col. William P. Junk, flew into the city with his staff and two infantry companies. He sent Company A to join Task Force DELTA in the northern part of town and Company B to the southern edge of the city to secure the main bridge over the Dak Bla. Once the colonel had established his command center near the bridge, he assumed tactical command over all U.S. ground troops in the city. As far as he could tell, there were probably several hundred enemy soldiers in the heart of the city and perhaps two or three times that number on its northern outskirts. The situation was still precarious at the advisory compound in the northwestern part of town and at the province chief's house. As evening fell, U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers braced themselves for another long night of battle.[43]

Under cover of darkness, the Communists tried and failed once again to seize the airfield. Then, just after midnight on 30–31 January, the *24th Regiment* resumed its attack against the advisory compound. After several hours of intense gunfire, the U.S. advisers and their Montagnard troops began to run low on ammunition. When several enemy soldiers wormed their way through the outer wire at 0415 on 31 January, the Americans started burning their sensitive papers. It was a prudent but unnecessary act. The defenders quickly eliminated the handful of attackers who had gotten through the wire and then effectively plugged the gap with small arms fire. As for the ammunition shortage, a low-flying U.S. Air Force plane dropped new stores into the compound a short time later. Now with plenty to go around, the defenders held on until sunrise when the enemy called off the attack.

Allied troops poured into Kontum City on the second day of battle. A company of Montagnard soldiers landed by helicopter at the advisory compound and Company D, 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, from the 4th Infantry Division manned positions around the airfield. A battery of 105-mm. howitzers went into action near Colonel Junk's command post on the southern outskirts of town. Later that afternoon, nine M48 tanks from Company C, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, drove up Highway 14 and into the provincial capital. The tanks split into groups of twos and threes so they could protect key installations around the city. After Task Force DELTA finished a long sweep through the city, it retired to the advisory compound for the night.

As the allies had expected, the *24th Regiment* resumed its attack against the advisory compound on the morning of 1 February. North Vietnamese troops knocked out a generator at the compound that provided power for the perimeter lights, but the enemy could not turn the resulting darkness to his advantage. Once again, the defenders ran low on ammunition after several hours of intense fighting, but a few daring helicopter pilots eventually got

[43] Rpt, Interv no. Tet-VC-13, Rand Corporation, 18 Apr 68, pp. 5–6, Historians files, CMH.

U.S. soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, battle the enemy in Kontum City.

through to deliver much-needed supplies. Meanwhile, North Vietnamese gunners bombarded the airfield with 122-mm. rockets. One of the exploding warheads ignited a large fuel truck that burned furiously but otherwise did no appreciable damage to the facility.

When daylight came, Colonel Junk began a coordinated, citywide clearing operation. Company C from the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, and Task Force DELTA swept through the main part of Kontum City, flushing out Communist soldiers in ones and twos from many of the houses. Meanwhile, the colonel sent Company D to recapture the prisoner interrogation center and the language school in the northwestern corner of the city near the U.S. advisory compound. A hail of gunfire raked the lead platoon from Company D as it approached the buildings, wounding at least a dozen men. Junk immediately committed his Company C as well as a pair of tanks and an M113 from Troop A, 2d Squadron, 1st Cavalry, which had just arrived in the city. The combined force overpowered a company of North Vietnamese soldiers from the *24th Regiment* that had fortified the area, killing an estimated forty-seven of them. Around one hundred Communist soldiers fled north across an open field. Most were cut down by American weapons before they reached the concealing brush on the other side.

Colonel Junk got more good news later that evening when two companies from the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, flew in from Dak

To. They set up night defense positions just north of the airfield. The colonel now had a sizable force interposed between the city and the *24th Regiment* on its northern outskirts.

That night, for the first time since 29 January, the provincial capital was almost completely quiet. The troops from the *24th PAVN Regiment*, the *304th Local Force Battalion*, and the *406th PAVN Sapper Battalion* began withdrawing from the city. By allied estimates the enemy had lost 753 killed in action, a large number of his original attack force.[44]

U.S. forces spent the third and fourth of February sweeping up enemy stragglers in Kontum City, and then initiated a pursuit of the *24th Regiment* on the fifth. Colonel Junk had sufficient troops at his disposal—two artillery batteries, one armored company, one armored cavalry squadron, and five infantry battalions—to overwhelm the North Vietnamese unit if it chose to stand and fight, so he released the two companies from the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, which returned to Dak To.[45]

Meanwhile the *24th Regiment* was reorganizing itself on Hill 684, a wood-covered slope some five kilometers northeast of town. The hill had served as a forward base for the unit in the days before Tet, so it was already fortified with bunkers, trenches, and supply caches. Now the hill would become a defensive stronghold for one final battle.

The first contact occurred some 1,500 meters south of Hill 684 when enemy scouts clashed with the lead elements of the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry. The skirmishing lasted until nightfall. The next morning, 6 February, Company A from the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, pushed through the enemy screen and assaulted Hill 684. On the right flank, Company B assaulted a neighboring peak, Hill 721. When Company A encountered strong resistance, Company B changed its azimuth and came up the eastern side of Hill 684. The North Vietnamese used their advantages in elevation and cover to good effect. After being pinned down for most of the day, the Americans eventually retired with four killed and seventeen wounded. General Peers dispatched Company A from the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, to reinforce Colonel Junk.

On the morning of 7 February, air and artillery strikes blanketed the hill. After the dust settled, Companies A and B from the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, and Company A from the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, went straight up the hill, while Company D, 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry, and some tanks went around the western base of the hill, and Company C from the 1st Battalion, 22d infantry, hooked around it from the east. The trap closed on air; the enemy had gone. With that, the battle for Kontum had effectively come to an end.

The only other major battle of the Tet offensive to take place in the western highlands took place at Tan Canh District town, just east of Dak To. One battalion from the *174th Regiment* occupied part of the city on the morning of 30 January, but before the day was over a battalion from the

[44] AAR, Tet Offensive in the II Corps Zone, I FFV, p. 8, Encl 9.
[45] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, p. 6.

South Vietnamese 42d Regiment chased the enemy back into the hills. On 8 February, the *174th Regiment* returned to attack Tan Canh with even greater numbers, but the South Vietnamese defenders, having had a full week to improve their positions, stopped the enemy from entering the city. The North Vietnamese unit lost about 150 soldiers in the second attack. Afterward, the *174th* and *66th Regiments* withdrew to refit in Cambodia.[46]

Initial Fighting in Southern I Corps

General Man's *B1 Front* extended into the three provinces of southern I Corps—Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Quang Tin. Man planned to strike the capital cities of each of these provinces. On 29 January, he was able to contact his forces in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin to clarify the time the offensive was to begin, thereby delaying the attacks in those areas until the morning of 31 January as the North Vietnamese high command had intended. He was less successful in communicating with the troops in Quang Nam, with the result that the attack on Quang Nam's capital of Hoi An began twenty-four hours ahead of time, during the early morning of 30 January (*Map 26*).

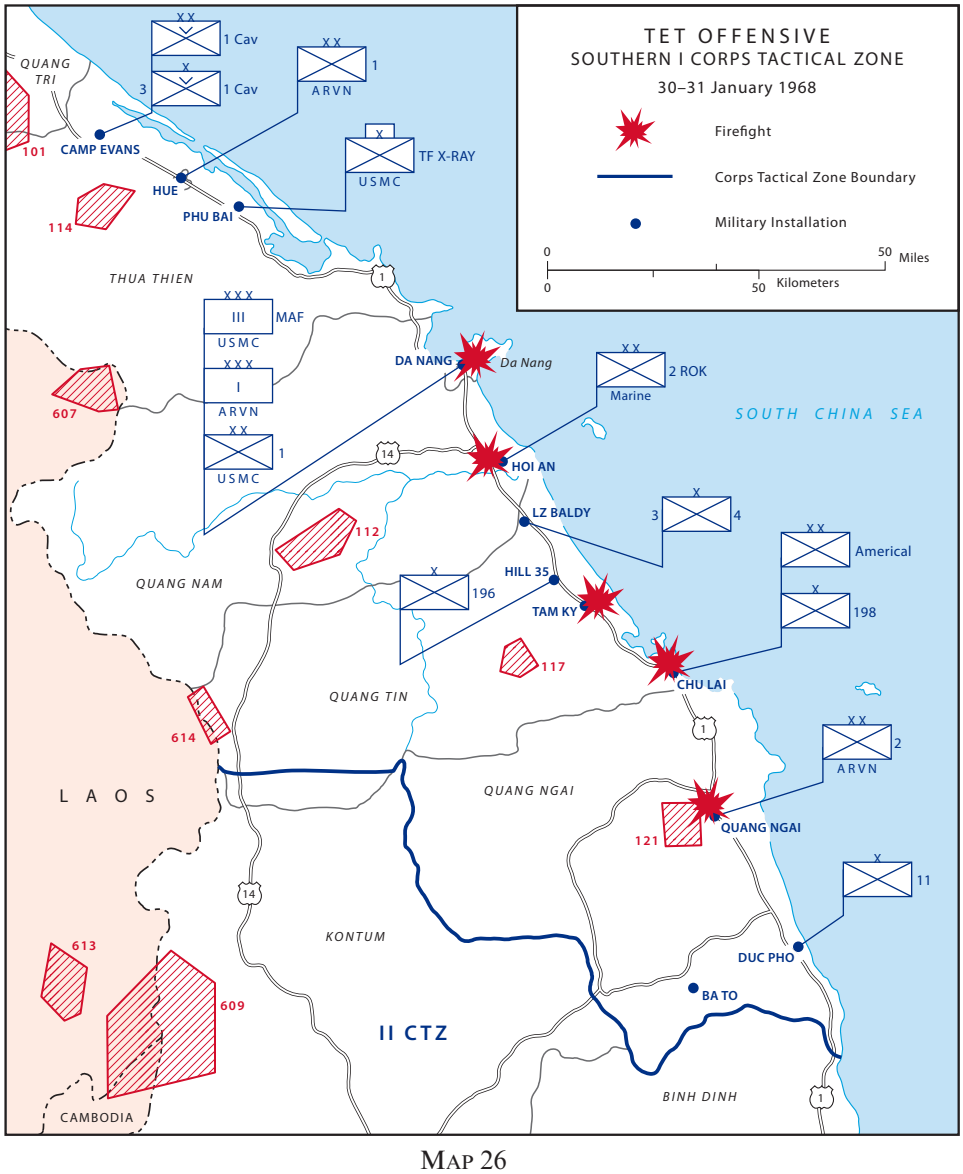
Hoi An contained about 44,000 people and was relatively well defended for its size. The province chief, Lt. Col. Le Tri Tin, relied on Regional Forces units to defend the city. Troops from the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade manned several firebases on the outskirts of town, while the city itself contained the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment and a government engineer battalion. Although allied intelligence had not received a specific warning about an attack, the senior U.S. adviser to Quang Nam Province had ordered a higher state of readiness due to the many unusual signs of enemy activity in southern I Corps.[47]

Shortly before 0330 on 30 January, troops from the *V25 Local Force Battalion* and the *Q12 Local Force Company* assaulted the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment as well as the engineer compound. The Communists seized about half of the engineer compound until heavy defensive fire, including point-blank blasts from South Vietnamese 105-mm. howitzers, stopped their advance.

When daylight came, the Viet Cong pulled back to a civilian housing area, now abandoned, that belonged to the families of South Vietnamese soldiers. When helicopter gunships failed to drive the enemy out, South Vietnamese artillerymen blasted apart the homes, including many of their own. A South Korean infantry company and several U.S. Marine tanks then moved in to

[46] Ibid., pp. 8–9; AAR, Opn MacArthur, 3d Bn, 12th Inf, 4th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 5, 26, box 4, Hist Background files, 13th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, p. 6; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 6-68, I FFV, p. 6.

[47] AAR, Enemy Tet Offensive and Allied Reaction, Ofc of the Senior Adviser, Quang Nam Sector, Advisory Team 1, n.d., p. 3, and an. A, p. 1, contained in Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, sub: Enemy's Tet Offensive, Encl 2, box 30, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn Dinosaur, South Korean 2d Marine Bde, n.d., p. 1. Both in box 30, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.



MAP 26

finish the job. Afterward, government officials estimated that the enemy had lost as many as 300 soldiers, some of whom appeared to be no more than ten years old.[48]

[48] Rpt, III MAF, 9 Aug 68, sub: Enemy's Tet Offensive, p. 3, Encl 1, box 30, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Enemy Tet Offensive and Allied Reaction, Ofc of the Senior Adviser, Quang Nam Sector, Advisory Team 1, pp. 3–4, and an. A, pp. 1–2; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 305.

Thanks to the confusion in the enemy's ranks over the timing of the Tet offensive, allied forces in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin had twenty-four hours to prepare for attacks in their sectors. They made the most of it.

The acting commander of the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division, Col. Nguyen Van Toan, led the defense of the capital of Quang Ngai Province, Quang Ngai City. The town, which held 41,000 people, sat between the Tra Khuc River to the north and the smaller Ve River to the south, eight kilometers from the coast. Fields of sugar cane covered the land west and east of town. Two hills, Mont Ong north of town and Mong to the south, offered excellent points of observation over the city and surrounding farmland. Highway 1 ran through the heart of town.

Colonel Toan situated his headquarters in a stone citadel on the northeastern side of town. The bastion measured some 500 meters on each side and was defended by an infantry battalion and an armored cavalry troop. Several Regional Forces companies and Popular Forces platoons guarded government facilities deeper in town. Two kilometers west of the city was an airfield that contained the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 4th Infantry Regiment. One battalion defended the headquarters while a second battalion was camped near the Tra Khuc Bridge two kilometers north of Quang Ngai City. Four kilometers north of town, two platoons of irregulars guarded a Popular Forces training center.[49]

The attack against Quang Ngai City commenced at 0405 on 31 January. A barrage of mortar, recoilless rifle, and automatic weapons fire swept the city as elements of the *406th Sapper Battalion*, the *506A Sapper Company*, and the *C19 Local Force Company* attacked the southern wall of the citadel. Viet Cong troops destroyed an armored personnel carrier and damaged a second with rocket-propelled grenades but could not overcome the heavy fire that rained down on them from the government soldiers manning the parapet. In the end, only a single five-man sapper team was able to scale the walls. They destroyed an empty building with their satchel charges before South Vietnamese troops killed them.

Having blunted the attack against the citadel, the government counterattacked at 0530. Armored personnel carriers from the Vietnamese 1st Squadron, 4th Armored Cavalry, and soldiers from the Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 4th Infantry, sallied out to confront the besiegers. The Viet Cong withdrew to a more defensible location, a cluster of villages east of the citadel. Backed by U.S. helicopter gunships, the South Vietnamese regained contact with the enemy around 1500. The battle for the villages lasted for three hours until the defenders slipped away. All told, 128 Viet Cong and 31 government troops had died in the fighting around the citadel.[50]

While the struggle for the citadel was under way, a second battle was taking place in the heart of Quang Ngai City. The *409th Sapper Battalion*, the *81st Local Force Battalion*, and the *C95 Sapper Company* fought a Regional

[49] Rpt, I Corps Advisory Gp, Advisory Team 1, 9 Apr 68, sub: After Action Report of the Enemy's Tet Offensive, pp. 7–8, Encl 5, Historians files, CMH.

[50] Ibid., p. 8.

Forces company for control of the province and the sector headquarters, a large hospital, and the city's jail. The attackers overran the hospital and the jail, releasing about 900 prisoners. According to standing Communist orders, anyone who had once been a Viet Cong soldier was supposed to pick up arms and join the attack. How many did so is uncertain.

Perhaps bolstered by dozens or even hundreds of new fighters, the Viet Cong maintained their foothold in Quang Ngai City throughout the day and night of 31 January. It was not until 0800 on the following morning that South Vietnamese troops finally recaptured the town center. The enemy had paid a high price for his fleeting success. Viet Cong losses came to 161 killed while 5 South Vietnamese soldiers had died.[51]

Meanwhile, a third Viet Cong force hit the western side of Quang Ngai City on the night of 30–31 January. The *407th Sapper Battalion*, the *20th Montagnard Battalion*, the *107th Anti-Aircraft Battalion*, and eight local force companies converged on the airfield and the adjacent headquarters of the South Vietnamese 4th Infantry Regiment. The defenders from the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 4th Regiment, may have been outnumbered by two or three to one, but they refused to surrender an inch of territory. When dawn came, the government troops went on the attack. Despite the reported presence of the *107th Anti-Aircraft Battalion*, low-flying helicopter gunships rained destruction on the Viet Cong. The South Vietnamese infantry mopped up behind them, and by 0900 on 31 January most of the Viet Cong had fled the field. Enemy losses came to 209 killed while the South Vietnamese lost 6 dead.[52]

At roughly the same time that the enemy launched his three-pronged assault against Quang Ngai City, the *48th Local Force Battalion* embarked on a mission to cut Highway 1 some four kilometers north of town. Its objective was to destroy the main bridge over the Tra Khuc River. Rather than fight a confusing night battle with the Regional Forces company that guarded the bridge, the enemy unit decided to overrun a Popular Forces training center situated on a hill overlooking the bridge. They then planned to destroy the span with mortars once there was enough daylight to see. When the Viet Cong attacked the training center, the defenders sent a warning to the South Vietnamese 4th Battalion, 4th Regiment, which was bivouacked nearby. Accompanied by two platoons of armored personnel carriers and supported by artillery and helicopter gunships, the government troops drove the *48th Local Force Battalion* from the hill before the Viet Cong gunners could destroy the bridge. When the fighting ended around 1035 on 31 January, the allied troops counted 144 enemy bodies in the area. South Vietnamese losses came to nine killed. [53]

All told, the Communists had lost at least 639 dead as well as 190 individual weapons and 52 crew-served weapons in the four separate but related battles in and around Quang Ngai City. The enemy remained in the area for

[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., p. 9.

the next week, harassing installations with mortar and long-range weapons fire and occasionally clashing with allied patrols, but the city itself did not again come under ground attack. Having lost another 120 or so men in the week's fighting, the Viet Cong withdrew in the second week of February to rest and refit.[54]

The final provincial capital to be hit in southern I Corps was Tam Ky, the seat of Quang Tin Province. The city of approximately 38,000 people was home to the South Vietnamese 6th Infantry Regiment and the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 22d Artillery Battalion. The two compounds contained a total of three infantry companies, two 105-mm. artillery batteries, and one 155-mm. battery. Four companies of irregulars guarded the sector and provincial headquarters in the northern part of the city. The province chief, Lt. Col. Hoang Dinh Tho, commanded the garrison. The only U.S. troops in Tam Ky were a handful of advisers.[55]

Tam Ky's defenders were on high alert because a Viet Cong soldier captured near the city on 27 January had revealed that the town would be assaulted within the next few days. Sure enough, at 0400 on 31 January, mortar and recoilless rifle fire began to slam into Tam Ky. A short time later, the *72d* and *105th Local Force Battalions* and three local force companies emerged from the east and attacked the South Vietnamese compounds. Heavy defensive fire and point-blank salvos from the South Vietnamese 105-mm. howitzers shattered the attacks.

A second assault developed from the north. The *70th* and the *74th Main Force Battalions* and three local force companies entered the city after punching through a company from the South Vietnamese 6th Regiment. Enemy troops occupied the province headquarters and a nearby hospital. The victory was short-lived; at first light, South Vietnamese troops retook those buildings with help from American helicopter gunships.

A search of the battlefield on the morning of 1 February revealed no less than 486 enemy bodies, which was approximately one-third of the attacking force. From captured prisoners, the allies discovered that many of the Viet Cong soldiers were youths between the ages of fourteen and nineteen who had been recruited only a few weeks before the offensive.[56]

The Viet Cong hovered near Tam Ky for the next several days, looking for another opportunity to attack. With five South Vietnamese infantry battalions sweeping the countryside, the best the enemy could manage was to burn down part of a refugee camp that lay just north of the airfield. After that raid, the enemy withdrew into the western hills.[57]

The only other significant action to occur in Quang Tin took place at the Chu Lai complex, thirty-five kilometers south of Tam Ky. The air base was too well defended for the enemy to assault with ground forces, so he resorted

[54] Ibid., p. 13.

[55] Ibid., p. 3, Encl 4.

[56] ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 23d Inf Div, 8 Feb 68, pp. 13–14, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, I Corps Advisory Gp, Advisory Team 1, 9 Apr 68, pp. 6, 9, Encl 5.

[57] Rpt, I Corps Advisory Gp, Advisory Team 1, 9 Apr 68, pp. 11–12, Encl 5.

to shelling it with 122-mm. rockets on the night of 30–31 January. The impacting rounds destroyed three fixed-wing aircraft and damaged another twenty-three. The losses did not significantly affect the performance of the 14th Aviation Battalion or the two U.S. Marine combat wings stationed at Chu Lai.[58]

The Thrust at Da Nang

Far more important than any of the other targets in southern I Corps was the autonomous city of Da Nang. A port whose landward approaches resided in Quang Nam Province, Da Nang was South Vietnam's second largest city. The *B1 Front* planned to commit the entire *2d Division*, a pair of North Vietnamese rocket artillery regiments, and several local force battalions to conquering it. To reach the city, those forces had to penetrate a security zone that was nearly twenty kilometers deep and manned by five Marine infantry battalions and one Marine tank battalion from the 1st Marine Division, two battalions from the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade, and two battalions from the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment. Backing those maneuver units were two artillery battalions from the 11th Marines and a three-battalion reserve force from the Vietnamese 1st Ranger Group.

Any attacking force that broke through that screen then had to contend with an additional layer of security. The 1st Marine Military Police Battalion guarded the enormous air base on the southwestern edge of the city, home to the U.S. Army 16th Aviation Group and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Additional troops protected the headquarters of III Marine Amphibious Force, situated on the eastern side of the city across the Han River. General Lam's I Corps headquarters, protected by an infantry company, lay on the western side of the Han River adjacent to the air base.

The first sign of trouble came early on 30 January when South Vietnamese sentries noticed a pair of Viet Cong frogmen in the water near the main bridge over the Han River. The alert guards shot dead one of the sappers and captured the other. When no further incidents materialized elsewhere in the city, the abortive bridge attack looked to be an isolated event. That theory was put to rest two hours later when a salvo of 122-mm. rockets hit the III Marine Amphibious Force logistical complex and the Da Nang Air Base.[59]

Shortly after the bombardment began, the *R20* and *V25 Local Force Battalions* and two local force companies entered the southern outskirts of the city. Regional and Popular Forces soldiers stopped most of the enemy troops in a village named Hoa Vang that was about two kilometers south of the air base. However, around a hundred Viet Cong fighters slipped through and made their way to the nearby I Corps headquarters. The attackers were

[58] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 155, 747; Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, sub: Enemy's Tet Offensive, pp. 45–46, Encl 1, box 30, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[59] AAR, Tet Offensive, 1st Marine Div, 25 May 68, pp. 24–25, Historians files, CMH.

An aerial view of the Da Nang Air Base

too few in number to overcome the South Vietnamese infantry company that was stationed there. General Lam, who was still at home, responded in disbelief and then fury when his chief of staff telephoned him with the news. Lam ordered an immediate counterattack, and four armored personnel carriers and a reconnaissance squad soon drove the Viet Cong off.[60]

The defeated group withdrew to Hoa Vang to rejoin their comrades, now heavily engaged with South Vietnamese rangers and mechanized troops from the South Vietnamese 4th Cavalry Regiment. When dawn came and the enemy still held part of the village, General Lam gave III Marine Amphibious Force permission to employ fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships against the village. Under that pressure, the enemy abandoned the village and headed south, leaving around 125 of his dead in the ruins of Hoa Vang. U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese troops killed or captured most of the 200 or so survivors the following day.[61]

In truth, the enemy had not intended to attack Da Nang with only two reinforced infantry battalions. The mission of the Viet Cong troops had been

[60] AAR, Enemy's Tet Offensive, I Corps Advisory Gp, 9 Apr 68, pp. 1–3, Encl 3, box 30, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 144–46; Man, *Time of Upheaval*, p. 477.

[61] AAR, Enemy's Tet Offensive, I Corps Advisory Gp, 9 Apr 68, pp. 1–3, Encl 3.

to act as a spearhead for the *2d Division*, but on the morning of 30 January the North Vietnamese division was still twenty-five kilometers to the south. The division commander, Colonel Cuong, had decided that the original plan to reach the city by a forced march at night was too risky. He had opted instead for a methodical approach that would take longer to accomplish, so that he would not be in position by the night of 29–30 January. Cuong may have been able to radio his decision to *B1 Front* headquarters, but at that late stage the information likely never reached the *R20* and *V25 Local Force Battalions*, which also had not received Man's revised instructions to delay all attacks until the night of 30–31 January. As a result, the Viet Cong troops who fought so tenaciously for Hoa Vang went to their deaths in vain.[62]

When the residents of Da Nang emerged from their homes on the morning of 31 January, life quickly assumed its normal rhythms. There were few visible signs of destruction because most of the fighting had been confined to the I Corps headquarters area, to Hoa Vang Village, and to the area south of the Cau Do River. South Vietnamese authorities immediately began clearing away the detritus. Several rockets slammed into the air base that morning, but citizens returned to the streets as soon as the warning sirens stopped wailing.[63]

As the inhabitants of Da Nang went about their daily routines, they were unaware that Colonel Cuong was bringing his *2d Division* north to attack the city. One element, the *31st Regiment*, was already less than ten kilometers southwest of Da Nang in a region where three rivers—the Tuy Loan, the Cau Do, and the Yen–formed a T-intersection. The III Marine Amphibious Force knew of its general location because Marine patrols had recently clashed with North Vietnamese scouts, resulting in seventeen American deaths and thirty-seven confirmed enemy killed.

General Cushman was not overly worried about the safety of Da Nang. The *2d Division* had many obstacles to overcome before it could strike the city. Troops from the 1st and 3d Battalions, 7th Marines, patrolled the lowlands southwest of Da Nang out to a depth of some twenty kilometers. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, guarded the southern and southeastern approaches. Tanks from the 1st Marine Tank Battalion and armored tractors from the 3d Marine Amphibious Battalion stood by as a ready reaction force. Assisting the Americans were two battalions from the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment, whose main headquarters was near the village of Bo Mung twelve kilometers south of Da Nang. The enemy would also need to cross one or more large rivers before he could enter the city. It was a tall order even for a highly experienced unit such as the *2d Division*.[64]

Colonel Cuong also had to worry about preserving a line of communications back to his base on Go Noi Island. Perhaps for that reason, or perhaps to divert allied attention, he decided to attack a pair of district capitals that lay along his axis of advance. Shortly after midnight on 31 January, ele-

[62] *2d Division*, pp. 91–92.
[63] AAR, Enemy's Tet Offensive, I Corps Advisory Gp, 9 Apr 68, p. 3, Encl 3.
[64] Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, pp. 31–33, Encl 1.

ments of the *10th Sapper Battalion* attacked the district headquarters town of Duy Xuyen, Quang Nam Province, some seven kilometers southwest of Hoi An. The South Vietnamese district chief rallied the Regional Forces troops defending the headquarters and requested variable time fuse artillery fire, which used shells that exploded at a predetermined height above ground to increase their fragmentation effect. The fire lasted until dawn, killing over one hundred enemy troops. The sappers sought concealment when daylight came but stayed within weapons range of the headquarters.

When an infantry company from the *2d Division* and a local force company joined the siege, the district chief decided to abandon his headquarters. At 1600 on 31 January, he marched his soldiers four kilometers east to the safety of a South Korean firebase. Meanwhile that day, the *8th Battalion*, *31st Regiment*, attacked the district capital of Dien Ban, which lay six kilometers north of Duy Xuyen. That attack was less successful; troops from the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment held on to the city with help from South Korean marines stationed east of town.[65]

Two more days passed before the *2d Division* made its next move. On the night of 2–3 February, North Vietnamese gunners sent twenty-eight 122-mm. rockets slamming into the Da Nang Air Base. The explosions destroyed one aircraft and damaged six others. Enemy mortar crews also lobbed shells at the I Corps headquarters. The same night, fifteen kilometers south of the city, sapper teams destroyed two culverts and damaged a bridge on Highway 1 near the village of Thanh Quit, effectively cutting the road between Da Nang and Hoi An.

When troops from the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment swept through Thanh Quit around noon that day, they stumbled onto a battalion from the *31st Regiment* that had chosen to hide there. The enemy stood his ground even when a company from the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, joined the firefight later that afternoon. The North Vietnamese finally broke contact when night fell. The marines found only three bodies when they swept the village the next morning but believed the enemy had carried off as many as fifty dead.[66]

During the next three days, the allies lost track of the enemy. Marine intelligence believed that the *31st* and *1st Regiments* were still south of the Tuy Loan and the Cau Do Rivers. Reports indicated that the division's headquarters had moved six kilometers north from Go Noi Island to a spot above Route 4, a lateral branch of Highway 1 that terminated in the western hills. The *21st Regiment*, they believed, still had not left the Go Noi area.[67]

As it turned out, the *2d Division* was closer to Da Nang than the allies knew. The *21st Regiment* and two battalions from the *31st Regiment* were north of Hoi An near Thanh Quit, while the bulk of the *1st Regiment* was approaching the Cau Do River. Before the *2d Division* crossed that river, however, Colonel Cuong planned to take out several allied outposts that would threaten his rear if left untouched. Once those targets had been neutralized,

[65] Ibid., an. A, p. 3; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 158.
[66] Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, pp. 33–34, Encl 1.
[67] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 159.

he would send his division forward to seize the Cam Le Bridge and enter the city.[68]

The enemy opened the second phase of his offensive against Da Nang in the early morning hours of 6 February. Between 0100 and 0500, the North Vietnamese mortared Marine positions southwest of Da Nang. Enemy gunners also hit the 1st Cavalry Division helicopter landing area near the Marine logistics complex northwest of Da Nang, destroying two helicopters and damaging eight others.[69]

Simultaneously, North Vietnamese troops attacked several hamlets in the lowlands south of Da Nang that contained Combined Action Platoons. Despite having superior numbers, the North Vietnamese were unable to destroy any of the platoons because allied reinforcements arrived in the nick of time. In one particularly fierce fight that took place in the hamlet of Duong Lam just south of the Tuy Loan River, two companies from the *3d Battalion*, *31st Regiment*, were on the verge of overrunning a Combined Action Platoon when a force of Marine infantry and tanks showed up to save the day.[70]

The largest battle initiated by the *2d Division* on 6 February took place some twelve kilometers south of Da Nang at the base camp of the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment. North Vietnamese mortars and recoilless rifles started pounding the compound at around 0300. As the bombardment got under way, a battalion from the *21st Regiment* attacked the base from the east, while the regiment's remaining two battalions charged from the west. Unbeknownst to the enemy, two battalions from the South Vietnamese 51st Regiment had set up night defense positions outside of the base, one to the east and one to the west. The advancing enemy soldiers were surprised to find their way blocked by layers of dug-in South Vietnamese troops. The enemy attacked time and again but to no avail. Artillery and an AC–47 Spooky fixed-wing gunship tore up his rear staging areas while his frontline troops fell into confusion.

The *21st Regiment* kept fighting even when daylight came, a clear sign that Colonel Cuong wanted the compound captured at nearly any cost. He could ill afford leaving a major allied base at his rear while he advanced on Da Nang. The odds of success became miniscule as the day progressed and more allied troops began to arrive on the scene. At 0900, a company of Marine infantry accompanied by several amphibious tractors and tanks counterattacked the *21st Regiment* from the south. By the end of the day, elements from four companies—two each from the 2d and 3d Marines—had joined the battle. Heavy fighting continued through the night and all day on 7 February. When the enemy finally broke contact around dusk, the marines estimated they had killed at least 320 North Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese claimed to have killed an additional 266 enemy soldiers.[71]

[68] *2d Division*, pp. 95–97.
[69] Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, p. 34, Encl 1.
[70] Ibid., pp. 34–35.
[71] AAR, Enemy Tet Offensive and Allied Reaction, Ofc of the Senior Adviser, Quang Nam Sector, Advisory Team 1, an. G, app. 5, pp. 1–2, contained in Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, Encl 2; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 159–60.

Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division, move down a road near Da Nang accompanied by amphibious tractors.

On 6 February, the same night that the *2d Division* began its big push toward Da Nang, Colonel Cuong dispatched the *60th Battalion*, *1st Regiment*, to assault the engineer compound in Hoi An. Likely a diversion to keep the allies guessing about Cuong's ultimate goals, the effort fared badly. The attackers failed to penetrate the compound and were later chased off by a combination of South Vietnamese infantry and tanks. Two prisoners later revealed that they had been given orders to attack Hoi An as many as five times if necessary, but no further assaults came after 6 February.[72]

The surge in activity near Da Nang prompted Westmoreland to send more troops to the area. On 7 February, he instructed the commander of the 23d Infantry Division, General Koster, to redeploy two of his battalions to support the thinly stretched 1st Marine Division. After conferring with Maj. Gen. Donn J. Robertson and the III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters, General Koster decided to send reinforcements into the northern part of the sector held by the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, which was south of the Cau Do River near Highway 1. Task Force MIRACLE led by Colonel Gelling from the 196th Infantry Brigade consisted of the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry,

[72] AAR, Enemy Tet Offensive and Allied Reaction, Ofc of the Senior Adviser, Quang Nam Sector, Advisory Team 1, an. A, p. 3, contained in Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, Encl 2; *2d Division*, p. 95.

Men from the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade, move out in search of units from the 2d PAVN Division.

and the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry. It would operate under the command of the 1st Marine Division.

General Westmoreland also took steps to intercept the *2d PAVN Division* should it fall back from Da Nang. The 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, from the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, established Landing Zone HARDCORE on a hill just south of Go Noi Island. On 9 February, General Koster sent a second unit from the brigade, the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, to reinforce the blocking effort.[73]

Meanwhile, allied units began to search the area south of Da Nang for the elements of the *2d Division* that had escaped detection so far. On the afternoon of 7 February, the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, disembarked from Marine helicopters at Duong Son (1), a hamlet some 1,500 meters west of Highway 1 and an equal distance south of the Cau Do River. The night passed in relative quiet until 0345 when a Combined Action Platoon in Lo Giang (1), a hamlet two kilometers to the northeast, reported coming under heavy mortar, automatic weapons, and small arms fire. The commander

[73] AAR, Opn Engagements Around HARDCORE, 1st Bn, 14th Inf, 13 Apr 68, p. 2, box 13, AARs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 162.

of the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, Lt. Col. William J. Baxley, immediately marched his unit to the rescue.

When Colonel Baxley's battalion reached Lo Giang around 0700, it found the village under siege by the *90th Battalion*, *1st Regiment*. The North Vietnamese troops kept the attack going even as they turned to face the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry. Unknown to Baxley at the time, the North Vietnamese had orders to overrun the hamlet and secure the nearby Cam Le Bridge so the entire division could cross into Da Nang. When the fighting dragged on without a decision, General Robertson reinforced the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, with two Marine companies. Even that was not enough to break the enemy circle around Lo Giang. Finally, later that afternoon, Marine helicopters braved heavy fire to evacuate the Combined Action Platoon from Lo Giang. When the fighting finally died down that evening, the Americans estimated that they had killed at least 150 North Vietnamese soldiers.[74]

Colonel Gelling, who had just arrived at Duong Son with his task force headquarters and the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, immediately went after the *21st Regiment*. If the unit was willing to stand and fight, Gelling would pile on with everything he had. The next morning, 8 February, he used the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, to attack the enemy position from the north, while the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, enveloped it from the south. The latter unit immediately collided with the *3d Battalion*, *21st Regiment*, resulting in a day-long battle. The enemy broke contact shortly before dark, leaving behind forty-six bodies. Meanwhile troops from the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, clashed with several companies from the *1st Regiment* on the eastern side of the Vinh Dien River. The fighting resulted in ninety enemy dead. Those battles confirmed that all three of the *2d Division*'s regiments had reached the southern bank of the Cau Do River.[75]

Colonel Cuong, however, decided not to risk any further advance. On the night of 7–8 February, he began to withdraw the *2d Division* to its mountain camps in the northern Que Son Valley. The 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, and the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, intercepted some of those troops while operating out of Landing Zone HARDCORE, positioned on a mountain spur just north of the Que Son Valley. The Americans killed a reported 236 enemy soldiers near Goi Noi Island on 9 February and several dozen more over the next several days. By 12 February, the same day General Robertson returned Task Force MIRACLE to the control of the 23d Division, the fighting around Goi Noi Island had come to an end as the last elements of the *2d Division* disappeared into the neighboring hills.[76]

All told, the North Vietnamese division had lost between 1,200 and 1,400 soldiers in the period from 29 January to 14 February. The Army units of Task Force MIRACLE inflicted a quarter of those losses. As for the allies, the

[74] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 23d Inf Div, 7 May 68, p. 12, box 66, ORLLS, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 162.

[75] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 163.

[76] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 23d Inf Div, p. 12; AAR, Opn Engagements around HARDCORE, 1st Bn, 14th Inf, 13 Apr 68, pp. 9–15.

marines sustained 124 killed and the Army 18 killed, while approximately two dozen South Vietnamese soldiers died during the fighting. The performance of the *2d Division* must have been a disappointment for the enemy. According to General Man's plan, Da Nang had been the third most important target in the country behind Saigon and Hue. However, the *2d Division* had not been in position to support the initial Viet Cong attack and never got within striking distance of the city. As a consequence, Da Nang was spared much of the damage that other cities endured during Tet.[77]

Conclusion

The general offensive in II Corps and southern I Corps had exacted a heavy toll on both sides. Between 29 January and 17 February, the units of the *B1* and *B3 Fronts* had lost 5,405 soldiers killed in action, as well as 1,327 small arms and 127 crew-served weapons. Another 704 soldiers had become prisoners of war. Allied losses had not been as steep, though they were still significant: 471 killed, 1,746 wounded, 71 vehicles damaged or destroyed, and 49 aircraft damaged or destroyed. The cost to the civilian population had been especially severe. A total of 814 civilians had been killed and another 2,919 wounded; over 97,000 inhabitants had been left homeless and over 10,000 homes destroyed.[78]

Disaffection ran high in the enemy's ranks after the failed offensive. Not even senior officers were immune to criticism. Two high-ranking officials in the *B1 Front* accused General Man of gross incompetence. The general they said with bitterness had not accomplished a single objective during the offensive. Losses had been heavy. Morale had plummeted. The whole enterprise had been a fiasco. A little over a month later, however, both men recanted after the Politburo praised Man. Still, as the *B1 Front* commander would acknowledge in his postwar memoir, he felt partly responsible for the debacle, for he had not spoken out against a plan that in his mind "had no foundation in reality."[79]

[77] Rpt, III MAF, 3 Aug 68, sub: Enemy's Tet Offensive, Encl 4 to Press Bfg, Tet Offensive, date?, p. 5, Historians files, CMH; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 163.

[78] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, I FFV, 15 May 68, pp. 13–14, Historians files, CMH.

[79] Man, *Time of Upheaval*, p. 479.

10

Saigon Embattled

In the early morning of 30 January, President Thieu was asleep at his family home in the Mekong Delta city of My Tho when Communist troops stormed more than a dozen regional capitals in II Corps and southern I Corps. Like many other government officials, he had taken a few days of holiday leave to be with his family, safe in the assumption that North Vietnamese leaders would abide by the traditional cease-fire. Roused from bed, the South Vietnamese president reviewed the situation by phone with General Vien and General Westmoreland back in Saigon. Thieu agreed to cancel the cease-fire and return to the capital as soon as possible.

The South Vietnamese government and the U.S. Mission Council jointly announced the cancellation of the truce at 0945 on 30 January. General Vien and his staff worked the phones to notify regional commanders and through them the nearly 400,000 South Vietnamese soldiers who were on leave. Some returned to their units quickly, but others did not get the message right away or else had problems getting back to their units.

The Capital Military Region on Alert

Westmoreland, meanwhile, issued a nationwide alert to all U.S. personnel warning them to prepare for enemy attacks that night. He was confident in their readiness, since all U.S. and Free World forces units had remained at full operational status going into the Tet holiday. In recent weeks, MACV had issued numerous bulletins alerting U.S. personnel that enemy attacks were likely to occur at various locations around the country. Now, given the wave of attacks that had hit allied targets across the upper midsection of South Vietnam, anticipation of more attacks elsewhere ran high.[1]

At II Field Force headquarters in the Long Binh military complex, General Weyand spent the balance of 30 January conferring with his senior commanders and his III Corps counterpart, General Khang, to ensure the optimum placement of allied forces to protect Saigon. Weyand had at his disposal the 1st

[1] Rpt, 1st Avn Bde, n.d., sub: Participation in the Initial Phase of the Tet Offensive - 29 Jan–8 Feb 68, p. 225, box 3, Rcds of U.S. Forces, Mil Personnel Div, Presidential Unit Citation/ Distinguished Unit Citation (PUC/DUC), USARV, RG 472, NACP; Rpt, III MAF, 8 Aug 68, sub: Enemy's Tet Offensive, p. 3, Encl 4, box 30, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5-68, I FFV, 28 Jan–3 Feb 68, 3 Feb 68, pp. 4, 11, box 2, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, I FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 131–32; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 471.

and 2d Brigades of the 25th Infantry Division in eastern Hau Nghia Province; the 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, in southern Binh Duong Province; the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light) and the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, in western Bien Hoa Province; and the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, in northern Long An Province. Deployed alongside the Americans were the South Vietnamese 5th, 18th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, north, east, and west of the capital, respectively. Weyand ordered his reconnaissance elements—scout helicopters, observation aircraft, and long-range infantry patrols—to focus their attention on the approaches to Saigon. The USARV commander, Lt. Gen. Bruce M. Palmer Jr., stationed more troops from the 720th Military Police Battalion at the massive prisoner-of-war facility at Bien Hoa and at the nearby II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh. Extra helicopter gunship teams at Bien Hoa and Tan Son Nhut were placed on standby.

South Vietnamese authorities took additional precautions within the Capital Military District, the special security zone that included Saigon and the five adjacent districts of Gia Dinh Province. The district commander, Col. Nguyen Van Giam, ordered the four ranger battalions, one marine battalion, and one Regional Forces reconnaissance battalion under his command to establish night ambush positions on likely infiltration routes around the capital. The chief of Gia Dinh Province, Maj. Bui The Cau, ordered all 30 of his Regional Forces companies and all 144 Popular Forces platoons to remain on duty at their highway checkpoints and hamlet guard posts. Commanders at other military installations also went on alert. The head of the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area, Lt. Col. Luu Kim Cuong, directed the Vietnamese 2d Service Battalion to place extra guards on duty that night and to have reaction teams waiting in reserve. Likewise, the senior officers at the various training facilities in the Capital Military District, including the Marine Corps School, the Reserve Officer School, the Armored Training Command, the Artillery Training Command, the Engineer Training School, and the Quang Trung Infantry Center, instructed all of the military personnel who were on those posts to participate in their defense.

Metropolitan Saigon was already on maximum alert because the director of the National Police, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Loan, had received reports on 29 January indicating that Viet Cong special action units had infiltrated the city. The police director had wasted no time distributing more ammunition and machine guns to the South Vietnamese 1st Service Battalion and the South Vietnamese 5th and 6th Military Police Battalions, which guarded installations and checkpoints throughout the city. He put more patrols out on the streets and ordered the 6,000 municipal policemen in the city to remain on duty at their precinct stations overnight.

From his headquarters on the southeastern edge of Tan Son Nhut, the chief of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, General Vien, directed the Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion to remain at Tan Son Nhut instead of flying to northern Quang Tri Province as previously directed. He made arrangements to fly back the two Marine battalions currently in Binh Dinh Province and the two Marine battalions operating in the northern delta. He also obtained authority to use President Thieu's palace guard, the South

Vietnamese 1st Airborne Battalion, which was headquartered at Camp Le Van Duyet in the heart of Saigon.[2]

The only U.S. ground unit in Saigon that had any combat capability was the 716th Military Police Battalion, commanded of Lt. Col. Gordon D. Rowe. The battalion's primary role was law enforcement—few of its 1,300 military policemen had seen combat and none had received urban warfare training. Armed with M16s and a few light machine guns, the battalion's only heavy weapons were a handful of 90-mm. recoilless rifles, for which it had no ammunition. Colonel Rowe had never developed a tactical plan for his battalion because the South Vietnamese were responsible for defending the city. The crisis now forced him to improvise.[3]

After consulting with his superior, the chief of the U.S. Army Headquarters Area Command, Brig. Gen. Albin F. Irzyk, Colonel Rowe doubled his mobile patrols on the streets of Saigon and placed extra guards at likely targets such as MACV headquarters, General Irzyk's headquarters, and the provost marshal's office. General Irzyk also mobilized volunteers from his headquarters to guard other installations around the city. Mechanics and drivers secured the Phu Tho Motor Pool in the western part of the city, while clerks and food storage specialists picked up weapons to defend the nearby commissary and post-exchange compound.[4]

On the evening of 30 January, Westmoreland sent a cable to his superiors in Honolulu and Washington describing the attacks that had hit II Corps and southern I Corps. The heaviest fighting during the past eighteen hours, he said, had occurred in the western highlands, where a major *B3 Front* offensive had long been expected. Westmoreland believed the enemy had accomplished little, characterizing the attacks as "desperation tactics" designed to "terrorize populated areas." He described the allied military response as "generally good;" fighting continued in many cities, but the enemy had already lost some 700 soldiers killed in action and another 300 captured. Based on that sample of prisoners, some of the attackers appeared to be civilians whom the Viet Cong had pressed into service, rather than dedicated fighters. While he expected more attacks to occur in the coming days, Westmoreland reported that his senior commanders all felt they had "the situation well in hand."[5]

Attacks Downtown

The battle for Saigon began at 0245 on 30 January when three automobiles pulled up to the south vehicle gate of the six-acre park that enclosed the Independence Palace and President Thieu's private residence. Fourteen

[2] Biographical Sketch, DIA, Maj Gen Nguyen Ngoc Loan, n.d., document 1g, box 176, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

[3] Albin F. Irzyk, *Unsung Heroes, Saving Saigon* (Raleigh, N.C.: Ivy House Publishing, 2008), p. 35.

[4] Ibid., pp. 60–61; Transcript, VNIT 199, p. 2, Encl 19, CMH.

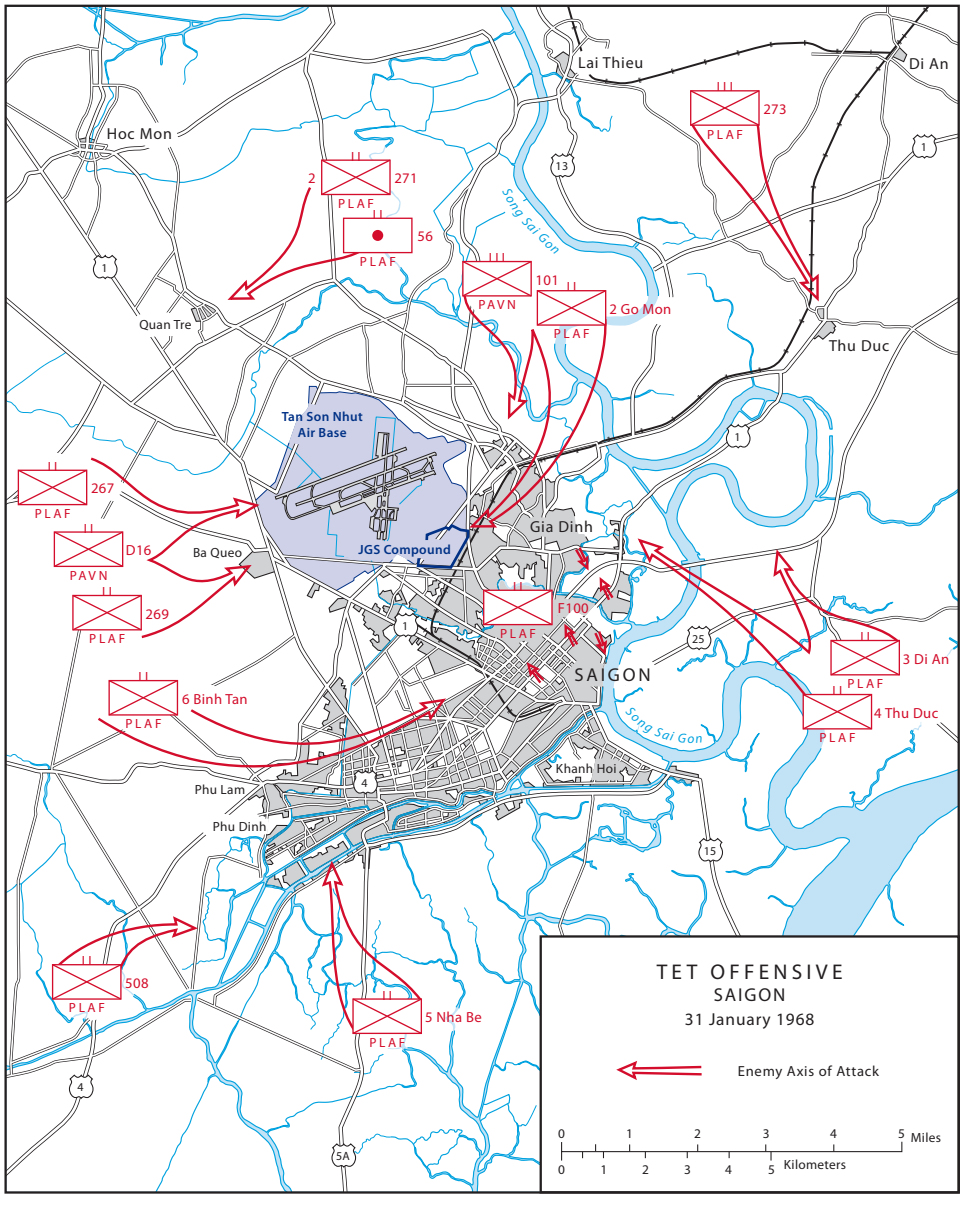
[5] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01438 to Wheeler, 30 Jan 68, Westmoreland History files, CMH.

U.S. Embassy in Saigon (shown here in 1974 with the addition of corner guard towers)

Viet Cong agents from the *F100 Special Action Group*, one of them a woman, spilled out of the vehicles dressed in normal civilian attire but wielding AK47 assault rifles and B40 grenade launchers. Their small arms fire drove away the security guards who were standing by the closed metal-lattice gate. Sprinting forward, they could see the illuminated palace building through the iron bars as one of the sappers began to affix an explosive charge to the lock. Before the agent could finish his work, small arms and machine gun fire tore through the sapper squad as a platoon of South Vietnamese soldiers and a pair of M41 tanks counterattacked from inside the palace grounds. Four Viet Cong soldiers fell dead or dying, and the remainder retreated across the street where they took refuge in an unfinished high-rise apartment building (*Map 27*).

Climbing to its upper stories, the sappers continued the fight, even firing several rocket-propelled grenades at the Independence Palace, but the grenades all fell short. They held out against South Vietnamese soldiers and policemen for some thirty hours, finally surrendering when the seven still alive (including the female sapper) ran out of ammunition.[6]

[6] Intel Cable, CIA, 6 Feb 68, sub: Experiences of a Viet Cong Soldier Who Participated in the Attack on Saigon, p. 4, box 240 (2 of 2), document 148, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Transcript, VNIT 199, pp. 3, 14, Encl 11; Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, pp. 57–58;


Lai Thieu
Di An
Hoc Mon
273
PLAF
2
271
PLAF
56
PLAF
Song Sai Gon
101
PAVN
2 Go Mon
PLAF
Quan Tre
Thu Duc
Tan Son Nhut
Air Base
267
PLAF
D16
PAVN
Ba Queo
JGS Compound
Gia Dinh
269
PLAF
F100
PLAF
SAIGON
3 Di An
PLAF
6 Binh Tan
PLAF
4 Thu Duc
PLAF
Song Sai Gon
Khanh Hoi
Phu Lam
Phu Dinh
508
PLAF
5 Nha Be
PLAF
TET OFFENSIVE
SAIGON
31 January 1968
Enemy Axis of Attack
0 1 2 3 4 5 Miles
0 1 2 3 4 5 Kilometers

MAP 27

Thirty minutes into the battle for the Independence Palace, more fighting broke out at the U.S. Embassy three blocks to the east. The state-of-the-art compound, completed in September 1967, was built to withstand the kind of terrorist bombing that had partly destroyed the previous embassy site, a downtown office building, in 1965. The facility was ringed by a two-meter concrete wall, pierced on the southern side by a pedestrian entrance and on the western side by a vehicle gate. The chancery building stood at the center of the compound, a six-story, rectangular building crowned with a helicopter pad. The building was encased with a white honeycomb shell designed to absorb mortar and rocket blasts. The main door on the ground floor was a thick slab of teakwood, fronted by a sturdy iron gate that could deflect grenades thrown at the door. A row of concrete planters dotted the front lawn, while a two-story villa stood just east of the chancery building. The north side of the compound was a parking lot, presently empty save for several limousines and their Vietnamese drivers who were spending the night on call.[7]

The chancery was nearly deserted this evening, manned by three U.S. Marine guards, one of them positioned on the roof with a shotgun, and a handful of embassy staffers. A pair of soldiers from the 716th Military Police Battalion stood watch by the vehicle gate. Several South Vietnamese policemen from the nearby precinct station usually stood guard outside the embassy, but tonight they were absent, likely on account of Tet. Ambassador Bunker was asleep at his private residence, eight blocks to the north; in his absence, the senior embassy official in the compound that night was the CIA station chief, Col. George D. Jacobson, who lived in the villa next to the chancery building.

Shortly after 0300, a taxi and a truck rolled up to the southeastern corner of the compound. Fifteen sappers armed with AK47 rifles, B40 grenade launchers, and Chinese-made pistols jumped out. Their orders were to seize the embassy grounds, break into the chancery building, and take hostage the people inside. It was a dangerous mission but not suicidal by design. The sappers had been told by the *Sub-Region 6* headquarters that hundreds of antiwar and antigovernment university students would converge on the embassy that morning to stage a sit-down strike. The sappers also expected one or more local force battalions to relieve them at some point during the next twenty-four hours.[8]

As the taxi and truck drove away from the corner, the pair of U.S. military policemen who were standing watch at the vehicle gate opened fire on the sap-

Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 06-027-68, 6 Jul 68, sub: The Attack on the President's Private Home on Truong Minh Giang Street and on the House of Mr Kieu (Kieeur) (the President's Elder Brother), box 73, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2 MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[7] Thomas L. Johnson and Mary R. Himes, *Historical Account of the Military Police Corps Regiment: Assault on the American Embassy: TET-68* (Fort McClellan, Ala.: Department of the Army, 1983), pp. 1–2.

[8] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 538-68, 12 Mar 68, sub: Attack on the US Embassy, box 63, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

pers and then ducked into the compound. After locking the metal gate behind them, they radioed their headquarters that the embassy was under attack.

Moments later, the sappers blew a hole in the southeastern corner of the wall. The Americans shot the first two who crawled through, killing the Viet Cong commander and badly wounding his executive officer. The Marine guard on the roof tried to fire his shotgun, but it jammed. As he tried to clear the weapon, a man armed with an AK47 rifle emerged from the rear parking lot, shooting the two military policemen in the back and killing them both. A second man carrying a rifle came around the building, and the two figures—later determined to be a pair of embassy drivers, secretly recruited by the Viet Cong—joined the other enemy soldiers on the front lawn.[9]

The sappers launched a rocket-propelled grenade at the front entrance to the chancery building. The warhead blew a small hole in the heavy teak door and shattered the glass that adorned the interior reception area, injuring several embassy personnel hunkered down near the front desk. The sappers fired several more rocket grenades at the upper floors of the chancery, but they barely chipped its honeycomb carapace. Deciding to conserve their remaining rocket grenades or to deal with allied armor should that be necessary, the sappers crouched behind the concrete planters in the front yard and waited for help to arrive.

When Colonel Rowe received the distress call from the embassy, he dispatched several jeep patrols to find out what was going on. The first two patrols both took routes that passed by the south vehicle gate of the Independence Palace. As they came up to the unfinished high-rise building, the enemy sappers inside destroyed both vehicles in turn, killing two Americans and wounding three. A third jeep patrol reached the U.S. Embassy without incident, but unaware of the danger, the soldiers pulled up to the lattice-gate pedestrian entrance and were gunned down by the sappers crouched on the embassy's front lawn.[10]

Subsequent patrols, warned of the fate that befell the first three teams, took greater care in approaching the embassy compound and parked their vehicles a block away before proceeding on foot. Joined by a squad of marines from the embassy guard unit, the ad hoc task force cordoned off the area. A UH–1 helicopter loaded with soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division tried to land on the chancery roof. Peppered with bullets, the aircraft veered away and made an emergency landing in a rice paddy. Knowing that the sappers had failed to enter the chancery building and possessed only a limited amount of ammunition, Colonel Rowe decided to wait until full daylight before mounting an assault. In the meantime, American troops continued to snipe at the enemy soldiers on the front lawn, killing or wounding several during the next few hours and preventing the survivors from obtaining food, water, or rest.[11]

[9] Johnson and Himes, *Historical Account of the Military Police Corps Regiment*, pp. 5–7.

[10] Irzyk, *Unsung Heroes, Saving Saigon*, p. 86.

[11] Johnson and Himes, *Historical Account of the Military Police Corps Regiment*, pp. 7–8; Joseph L. Dees, "The Viet Cong Attack that Failed," U.S. Department of State Newsletter, May

U.S. Ambassador Bunker (partially obscured by a rifle) and a security team assess the damage to the embassy compound after it had been attacked during the lunar new year offensive.

Commencing the attack at around 0800 against an opposing force now reduced to six or eight able-bodied fighters, a group of military policemen and marines forced their way through the main gate, while a second team stormed the rear parking lot. The two groups secured the embassy grounds after a sharp firefight that resulted in several Americans being wounded or killed. All but three of the sappers perished, including the two turncoat embassy drivers. Two more embassy drivers, innocent bystanders it would seem, were also killed in the rear parking lot during the morning counter-attack. The wounded sappers, two of them unconscious, were taken to a U.S. military hospital. At 0900, the embassy staff declared the facility secure.

Fifteen minutes later, General Westmoreland and his security detail arrived by car just as two UH–1 helicopters landed on the roof, discharging a platoon from the 101st Airborne Division that checked and secured all six levels of the chancery building. Ambassador Bunker and his entourage drove up a few minutes later. Taken on a short tour of the grounds, the two leaders could see that the chancery had suffered little more than cosmetic damage. Ambassador Bunker ordered the building reopened for business later that afternoon.

68; Interv, Capt Oliver Rose with Rick L. McAlister, 4 Dec 02. Both in Historians files, CMH.

Following the assaults on the presidential palace and the U.S. Embassy, the third target of the *F100 Special Action Group* that night was the Vietnamese Navy headquarters, located on the Saigon River waterfront a few hundred meters southeast of the U.S. Embassy. At 0250, a pair of automobiles deposited twelve sappers a block away from the headquarters. The sappers charged the front gate, firing their weapons at the two guards who were standing there. The shots missed, and as the guards returned fire, more armed South Vietnamese Navy personnel spilled out of the building and joined the fight. Several sappers fell dead or wounded, but the remainder pressed forward. Two reached the outer wall of the Navy complex and breached it with explosives. Both were killed by security guards when they tried to crawl through the hole. When the shooting ended a few minutes later, only two sappers were still alive, both wounded. Among the dead was the commander of the *F100 Special Action Group*.[12]

At roughly the same time that the Navy headquarters came under attack, another battle began two blocks to the northeast at the National Broadcasting Station. A pair of South Vietnamese Army trucks stopped on the street in front of the main entrance and around thirty men wearing South Vietnamese military police uniforms jumped out. The leader of the group strode up to the guard at the front entrance as if to speak with him, and then drew his pistol and killed the man. Their pretense no longer necessary, the Viet Cong commander and his men from the *E2 Water Engineer Company* rushed into the building and either killed or subdued the staff inside. The *E2 Water Engineer Company* now had complete control of the station and its broadcasting equipment.[13]

Jubilation turned into frustration as one of the sappers tried to play a prerecorded propaganda tape. The broadcast studio, it appeared, had lost the connection to its transmission tower on the outskirts of town. Unknown to them, a quick-witted South Vietnamese political warfare officer who was on duty at the transmitter station had cut the line once he realized that the broadcast studio in Saigon was under attack.[14]

The sappers expected to be reinforced, but that help would never come. As the *3d Di An Battalion* approached a bridge over the Nhi The River northeast of Saigon, it got bogged down in a fight with South Vietnamese policemen. That gave General Vien a chance to recall the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion, which was operating in the countryside to the east. The rangers reached the bridge ahead of the Viet Cong soldiers. After intense fighting

[12] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 129–31; Oberdorfer, *Tet!,* p. 143; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 04-030-68, 17 May 68, sub: C.10 Special Action Units Attack on RVN Navy HQ, pp. 2–3, box 61, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Le Quang Tuan, Huang Tien Cong Saigon-Gia Dinh (Nam 1968) [*The Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*] (Hanoi: Vietnamese Institute of Military History, 1988), p. 23.

[13] Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, p. 144; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 03-118-68, 3 May 68, sub: Sub-Region 1 and the Water Engr (Engineer) Sect, MR-4, pp. 3–5, box 21, CMIC Special Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 30.

[14] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 133.

that left the surrounding neighborhood in flames, the *3d Di An Battalion* broke contact and headed back into the countryside.[15]

The withdrawal of the *3d Di An Battalion* sealed the fate of the *E2 Water Engineer Company* and the other sappers in downtown Saigon. At 0630, a company of South Vietnamese paratroopers and several M41 tanks closed in around the radio station. The sappers held out for another three hours before all were either killed or captured.[16]

The Battle for Tan Son Nhut Air Base

Encompassing sixteen square kilometers of land on the northwestern outskirts of Saigon, the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area contained some of the most important military facilities in the country. The U.S. Seventh Air Force and the South Vietnamese Air Force both maintained their headquarters at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, which also served as the country's main international airport. The Davis Station on the southern edge of Tan Son Nhut was home to the Army Security Agency's 509th Radio Research Group, an administrative headquarters that supervised and supported the various Army signal intelligence units that operated throughout South Vietnam. General Vien's Joint General Staff compound was located on the southeastern side of the air base; immediately to its north was the MACV headquarters complex, built on land that was once a golf course. The Go Vap Logistical Area lay at the northeastern corner of the air base, a shipping and storage center that contained the U.S. Red Ball Express compound, designed to handle high-priority items, as well as the South Vietnamese Armor and Artillery training centers, which also doubled as repair and maintenance facilities.[17]

This evening, the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area was defended by its regular security group, three allied battalions and a helicopter gunship platoon. The South Vietnamese 53d Regional Forces Battalion, an elite reconnaissance unit composed of six companies, screened the countryside to the north and west of the air base. The South Vietnamese 2d Service Battalion, a security unit that specialized in air base defense, and the U.S. Air Force 377th Security Police Squadron shared responsibility for manning the watchtowers and bunkers that dotted the perimeter of the base. Four pairs of UH–1 gunships from the

[15] AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, n.d., p. 19, Historians files, CMH; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 87.

[16] Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, p. 59; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 84–87; Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 34; Transcript, VNIT 199, p. 4, Encl 11.

[17] The following section is based on AAR, Mortar, rocket, automatic/small arms, and ground attacks against Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area, 377th Combat Support Gp, n.d., box 25, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP. Rpt, 3d Sqdn, 4th Cav, 25th Inf Div, n.d., sub: Recommendation for the Presidential Unit Citation, box 6, Presidential and Distinguished Unit Citations, Adjutant General sec., RG 472, NACP; AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, pp. 12–13; AAR, Task Force Ware, II FFV, n.d., box 34, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

An aerial view of Tan Son Nhut

4th Platoon, 120th Assault Helicopter Company, waited on the tarmac, fully loaded with ammunition and fuel, their crews ready to lift off within minutes of being alerted. In addition, the South Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion waited in reserve at the South Vietnamese Airborne Division headquarters, General Vien having canceled its deployment to northern I Corps earlier that day.

At 0320, the American-manned bunkers near Gate 51 at the western entrance to Tan Son Nhut began receiving .50-caliber machine gun, 82-mm. mortar, and 75-mm. recoilless rifle fire from the Vinatexco textile factory, 500 meters to the north on the opposite side of Highway 1. The Air Force guards responded with M16 and M60 machine gun fire, but their weapons had little effect at that range. Enemy fire also raked the South Vietnamese watchtowers on the western side of Tan Son Nhut, forcing their occupants to take cover (*see Map 28*).

The torrent of bullets and shells prevented the defenders from engaging a minitruck that raced down Highway 1 and stopped at a point roughly halfway between the western gate and the clothing factory. A Viet Cong sapper team climbed out and sprinted over to the outer perimeter fence, placing an explosive charge that blew a gap once the sappers had retreated. As the dust settled, a phalanx of soldiers from the *267th PLAF Battalion* who had been hiding in a nearby field rose to their feet and charged across Highway 1, some heading for the breach and others moving south to attack Bunker 51, which protected

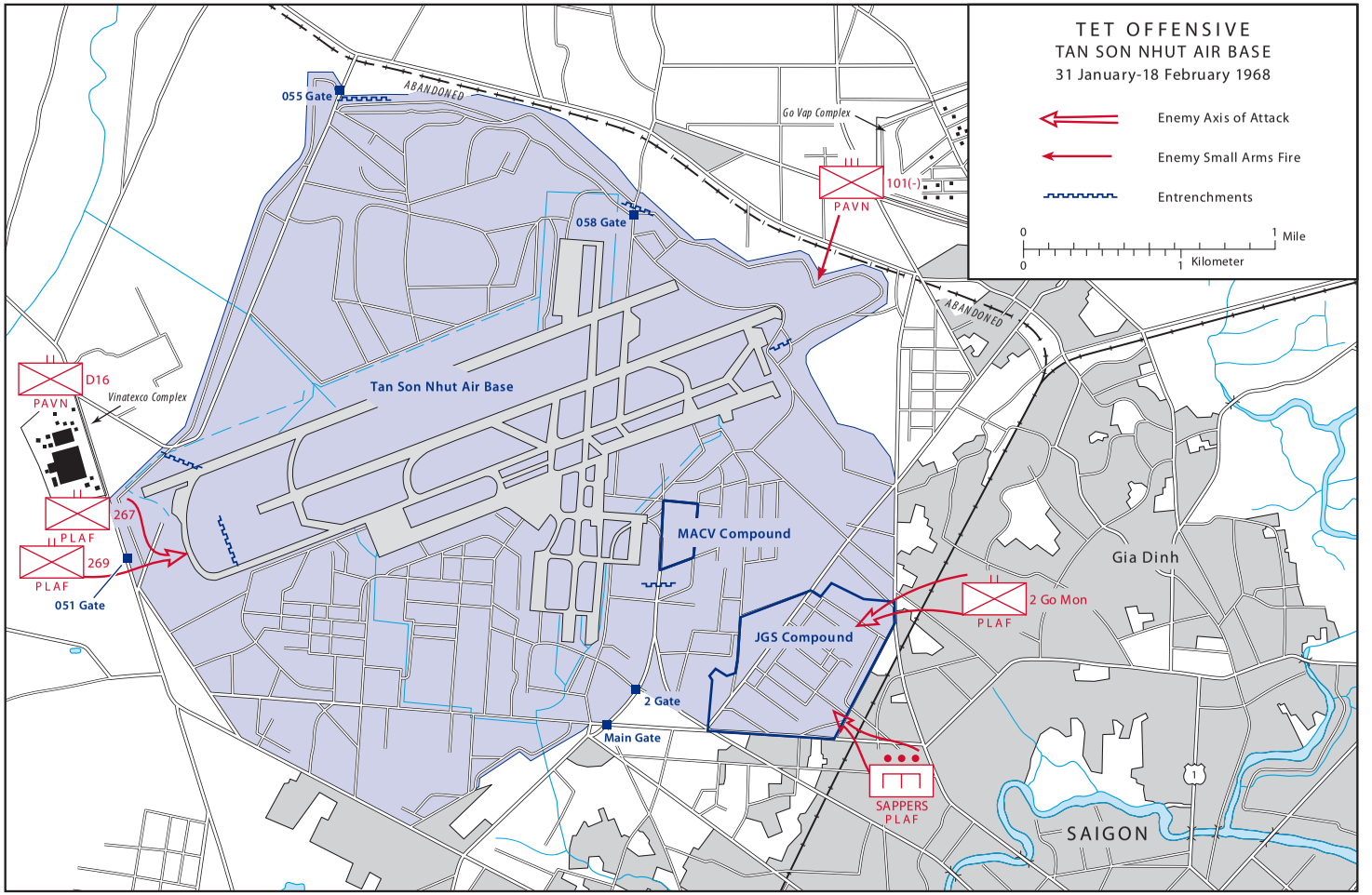
A crewman from the 4th Platoon, 120th Aviation Company, checks the twin side-mounted M60 machine guns on his Huey gunship at Tan Son Nhut.

the western gate. Pinned down in their bunker, the U.S. security personnel could do little to slow the onrushing tide. Before being overwhelmed, they radioed a warning: hundreds of enemy soldiers were inside the perimeter and advancing toward the western end of the Tan Son Nhut runway.[18]

More bad news reached the South Vietnamese air base commander, Colonel Cuong, from a patrol from the 53d Regional Forces Battalion, which was attempting to reconnoiter the enemy force at the Vinatexco factory. The patrol had spotted a battalion of Viet Cong soldiers, perhaps two, waiting in a field near the factory, apparently preparing to follow the battalion that was already streaming through the gap in the outer fence. The opposing force was too large for the patrol to engage unaided. The U.S. adviser attached to the patrol requested assistance from the helicopter gunship platoon at Tan Son Nhut.

Cuong also learned that the enemy had entered the Go Vap Logistical Area, outside the northeastern corner of the air base perimeter. Three battalions from the *101st PAVN Regiment* and a battalion from the *165th PAVN Regiment* had already overrun the Phu Dong Armored Training Center and the Co Loa Artillery Training Center. Fortunately, the first of those facilities did not presently contain any tanks or armored personnel carriers that the

[18] Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 32.


TET OFFENSIVE
TAN SON NHUT AIR BASE
31 January-18 February 1968
Enemy Axis of Attack
Enemy Small Arms Fire
Entrenchments
0 1 Mile
0 1 Kilometer
055 Gate
ABANDONED
Go Vap Complex
101(-)
PAVN
058 Gate
ABANDONED
D16
PAVN
Vinatexco Complex
Tan Son Nhut Air Base
267
PLAF
269
PLAF
051 Gate
MACV Compound
JGS Compound
2 Gate
Main Gate
Gia Dinh
2 Go Mon
PLAF
SAPPERS
PLAF
SAIGON
1

MAP 28

enemy might appropriate for his own use, while the South Vietnamese artillerymen at the second facility had removed the breechblocks from their howitzers before retreating from the compound, rendering all twelve 105-mm. weapons useless. Part of the *101st Regiment* had tried to enter Gate 10 on the eastern side of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, but troops from the South Vietnamese 2d Service Battalion and a group of armed volunteers raised from the nearby MACV headquarters appeared to have the situation under control.[19]

Recognizing the western thrust as the greatest threat, Colonel Cuong brought his reserve force, around one hundred security personnel and four M41 light tanks, out to meet the enemy. As he led his troops forward, a bullet struck the colonel in the leg. Though the wound was serious, Cuong refused to leave the battle at such a critical juncture.

Outnumbered, outgunned, and with two of their tanks destroyed by rocket grenades, the thin line of security troops held the *267th Battalion* in check long enough for two pairs of Huey gunships to get airborne. The helicopters made an immediate impact. As they commenced their strafing runs, Viet Cong soldiers scrambled to find concealment in the knee-high grass that grew between the fence and the runway. Making their passes from east to west, the gunships also tore into a second Viet Cong unit, the *D16 PAVN Battalion*, which had just begun to cross Highway 1 with the intention of entering the air base, as well as a third enemy unit, the *269th PLAF Battalion*, which was waiting for its turn in a field farther west. With all three Viet Cong battalions pinned in place by the gunships, Colonel Cuong reorganized his troops, a mixture of American and South Vietnamese personnel, some who were trained security guards and others from rear support units who had picked up weapons. When daylight came, the ad hoc security group, reinforced by two companies from the South Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion, began reducing the enemy salient like hunters flushing quail from a grassy field.[20]

Meanwhile, General Westmoreland ordered General Weyand to organize a task force that would help the South Vietnamese restore security in the Capital Military District. At 0530, the II Field Force commander directed his deputy, Maj. Gen. Keith L. Ware, to establish a tactical command post at Camp Le Van Duyet next to the Capital Military District headquarters. Once operational, HURRICANE FORWARD would assume tactical control over all of the U.S. units that entered the Saigon–Gia Dinh zone.

While General Ware made his preparations, General Weyand ordered the commander of the 25th Division, General Mearns, to send any mechanized

[19] AAR, Opn Tet Offensive, II FFV, n.d., p. 13; Interv, Maj Lewis P. O'Rourke with Lt Col Kenneth E. George, 16 May 68, VNIT 199, CMH; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 96, 132; AAR, Opn Attack on Tan Son Nhut, 31 Jan 68, 2d Service Bn Advisory Det, Advisory Team 100, 9 Mar 68, p. 1, VNIT 199, CMH.

[20] AAR, Mortar, rocket, automatic/small arms, and ground attacks against Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area, 377th Combat Support Gp, pp. 3–7; Rpt, 8th Mil Hist Det, 1st Avn Bde, 10 Jul 68, sub: Combat After Action Interviews, Operations of the 4th Platoon, 120th Aviation Company (Airmobile Light), p. 20, VNIT 199, CMH; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 83.

troops he could spare to join the battle on the western side of Tan Son Nhut. The closest available unit was Troop C, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, presently guarding a bridge near the town of Hoc Mon twenty kilometers northwest of the air base. Mearns instructed the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Glenn K. Otis, to leave one platoon at the bridge and to bring the rest of Troop C, six M48 tanks, and twelve M113 armored personnel carriers to Tan Son Nhut without delay. Colonel Otis led Troop C from his command helicopter, dropping flares to guide his troops around ambush sites and roadblocks, and bringing his force to within sight of the Vinatexco factory by 0630.

Apparently unaware that the building and its grounds were occupied by three Viet Cong heavy weapons companies, Colonel Otis instructed Troop C to proceed straight down Highway 1. When the head of the column was only about a hundred meters away, a blizzard of rocket grenades erupted from the factory grounds, damaging or destroying the four vehicles in front, and killing or wounding every officer in the column. The ranking noncommissioned officer, S. Sgt. Gary D. Brewer, quickly restored order. After maneuvering the remaining vehicles into positions where all of their weapons could be brought to bear on the factory, Sergeant Brewer led an effort to rescue the crews from the disabled vehicles who were pinned down by the side of the road.

General Mearns gave Colonel Otis permission to bring up the platoon he had left behind in Hoc Mon. By the time it arrived at 0730, Troop C's situation was becoming desperate. Many soldiers were running low on ammunition. Viet Cong troops were coming out of the factory to flank the American position, some closing within hand-grenade range. The helicopter gunships from Tan Son Nhut were unable to help, kept at a respectful distance by the .51-caliber antiaircraft machine guns that the enemy was operating from the roof of the factory.

General Ware

Seeing his position deteriorate, Otis asked for and received permission to employ Troop B, located at the town of Trang Bang some forty kilometers to the north. Driving down Highway 1 at top speed and smashing through five Viet Cong ambushes along the way, Troop B arrived on the scene at 0800. Coming up to the rear of Troop C, the relief force pivoted to the right, drove off the road into an open field, and then reformed its line to face the factory. From the road, Troop C burned off its remaining ammunition to

Tanks and armored personnel carriers from Troop B, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 25th Infantry Division, advance in attack formation across an open field.

cover Troop B as it smashed into the enemy's left flank. Unable to stop the armored attack, Viet Cong soldiers began to abandon their fighting pits, and one by one the enemy mortars and machine guns fell silent. Colonel Otis, who had to change helicopters three times during the course of the engagement due to battle damage, would receive the Distinguished Service Cross for his leadership that day. [21]

The fight was still going on at 1100 when General Ware formally established HURRICANE FORWARD and took operational control over Troops B and C of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry. Another unit that Weyand added to Task Force WARE, the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, from the 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, joined the battle a short time later. Enemy resistance eventually came to an end when a flight of South Vietnamese A–1E Skyraiders and U.S. F–100 fighter-bombers reduced the building to a smoking ruin. The allies later found over 300 Viet Cong dead in and around the destroyed factory.[22]

[21] Recommendation for Award, CG, 3d Sqdn, 4th Cav, 25th Inf Div, to Department of the Army, 13 Apr 68, sub: Brewer, Gary D; Citation, Distinguished Service Cross for Lt Col Glenn K. Otis. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[22] Bfg, Lt Col David Hughes, 20 Mar 68, sub: II Field Force Press Briefing on VC TET Offensive, p. 9, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p. 19.

While American units handled the threat to the western side of Tan Son Nhut, General Vien flew in additional South Vietnamese troops from IV Corps and II Corps to deal with the enemy who was fighting on the opposite side of the air base. Arriving from Binh Dinh Province, the South Vietnamese 4th Marine Battalion exited the air base through a small northern gate and then counterattacked the enemy soldiers who were occupying the Phu Dong and the Co Loa bases. Later that afternoon, the South Vietnamese 1st and 2d Marine Battalions arrived from Dinh Tuong Province, and the South Vietnamese 6th Airborne Battalion flew in from Dak To. General Vien sent the 1st Marine Battalion to join the fighting in Go Vap. Helicopters transported the two remaining units to the Joint General Staff compound, on the southeastern side of the air base, to evict a Viet Cong battalion that had seized some of its buildings. Vien also redeployed the South Vietnamese 3d Marine Battalion from its present position near Hoc Mon area to the northern edge of Go Vap to block the escape of the *101st Regiment*.[23]

That afternoon when the fighting ended on the western side of Tan Son Nhut, General Ware created a new task force led by the commander of the 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, Col. Charles C. Thebaud, that would protect the air base until it was out of danger. Task Force THEBAUD initially consisted of the 1st Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry; the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry; plus two more units Weyand had transferred to HURRICANE FORWARD, the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, from the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division; and the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. By 1700, all four units and their attached 105-mm. artillery batteries had moved into the perimeter.[24]

Over the next twenty-four hours, Colonel Thebaud shifted his focus to the Go Vap area after concluding that the enemy was unlikely to make new attacks against the western side of Tan Son Nhut. On 1 February, Task Force THEBAUD, reinforced with Troop A from the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, from the 1st Infantry Division, joined the clearing operation that South Vietnamese marines were conducting in Go Vap. Under that pressure, the four enemy battalions broke into small elements on 2 February, each trying to make its way back to the countryside, leaving behind approximately 600 of their dead.[25]

The Joint General Staff Compound

The enemy attack that came closest to succeeding on the morning of 30 January took place at the Joint General Staff headquarters, located in a walled-off enclosure roughly a square kilometer in size that occupied the

[23] Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 35; AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, an. I-6; Transcript, VNIT 199, p. 8, Encl 11.

[24] AAR, Mortar, rocket, automatic/small arms, and ground attacks against Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area, 377th Combat Support Gp, pp. 11–12, attachment A; Transcript, VNIT 199, pp. 13, 38, Encl 15.

[25] Transcript, VNIT 199, pp. 19–20, Encl 11; Daily Journal, Advisory Team 100, 2 Feb 68, pp. 10–11, Historians files, CMH.

A ready reaction force from Company C, 716th Military Police Battalion, heads out in a 2½-ton truck.

southeastern corner of the Tan Son Nhut Sensitive Area. The facility contained General Vien's headquarters, situated at the western end of the compound, a variety of living quarters occupied by South Vietnamese officers and their families, and a collection of administrative buildings and military education facilities. Security guards stood watch at the five vehicle gates that led into the compound.

At 0300, a government limousine carrying a South Vietnamese general turned off of Vo Tanh Street, a major thoroughfare that ran past the southern edge of the compound, and drove through Gate 5. At that moment, twenty-two Viet Cong commandos carrying AK47s and three B40 grenade launchers appeared in an alleyway that terminated at Vo Tanh Street on the opposite side of Gate 5. The South Vietnamese guards managed to close the gate before the Viet Cong sappers reached the end of the alleyway; jumping behind cover, the guards opened fire on the exposed commandos, killing several and forcing the remainder to seek cover in residential buildings farther down the alleyway. An American soldier from the 716th Military Police Battalion who was standing guard at Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ) No. 3, a residence for senior U.S. officers that stood on the opposite side of the alleyway facing

Gate 5, witnessed the brief firefight. He stepped inside the villa, locked its door behind him, and radioed a warning to Colonel Rowe's headquarters.[26]

The commander of the 716th Military Police Battalion redirected a pair of jeep patrols that were in the area. Arriving a few minutes later, the military policemen learned that more than a dozen heavily armed sappers were holed up in some of the buildings along the alleyway, though no one could say which ones for sure. The U.S. policemen asked battalion headquarters to send more troops, but to avoid using the alleyway during their approach.

As requested, Colonel Rowe dispatched a reaction force, twenty-six men from Company C, three soldiers riding in a jeep and twenty-three soldiers traveling in a 2½-ton truck. Perhaps unfamiliar with this part of town, a fact compounded by the darkness that made street signs hard to see, the reaction force turned into the southern end of the alley as it neared the villa and proceeded up its length, the jeep in front and the truck behind. The jeep made it through unscathed, but not the truck. As it traveled up the alleyway, a rocket grenade slammed into the front end of the truck, destroying its engine and shredding the front tires. As dazed military policemen began to climb down from the truck, sappers sprayed them with automatic weapons fire. The explosion and subsequent bullets killed sixteen of the Americans and wounded the remaining seven. Two of the injured men crawled to safety, and U.S. military policemen retrieved a third, but enemy fire prevented the rescuers from reaching any of the dead or wounded farther down the alley.[27]

The standoff continued until an American V100 armored car, driven by a crew from the 720th Military Police Battalion at Long Binh, arrived at 1300. Using its protective bulk and twin .30-caliber machine guns to cover their movement, military policemen dashed into the alley and rescued the four soldiers who were lying injured near the demolished truck and retrieved most of the dead. The sappers were finally subdued the next morning when South Vietnamese troops stormed their position. Ten of the enemy soldiers were killed and the remainder became prisoners of war.[28]

While the battle for the BOQ No. 3 alleyway was unfolding on the morning of 30 January, a second fight was beginning near Gate 2 on the eastern side of the Joint General Staff compound. At 0700, close to 200 soldiers from the *2d Go Mon Battalion* appeared outside Gate 2, having reached their destination by following the railroad track that entered Saigon from the north and passed by the Joint General Staff compound. The Viet Cong destroyed

[26] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 135.

[27] Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 31.

[28] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 341-68, 21 Feb 68, sub: General OB of the J–6 Element, C-10 Bn, aka T-700, p. 3, box 60, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 343-68, 22 Feb 68, sub: VC Tet Offensive in Saigon: 1968, p. 4, box 2, CMIC Interrogation Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 344-68, 22 Feb 68, sub: Recruitment, Explosive Training and the Attack on Saigon by the J–6 Squad, pp. 2–3, box 2, CMIC Interrogation Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Transcript, VNIT 264, 31 Jan 68, sub: The Tet Offensive: 716th MP Battalion & 18th Military Police Brigade, Encl to Interv, Sp4c. Newsom, C Co, 52d Infantry, et al., Historians files, CMH; Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, pp. 55–57.

Soldiers battle Viet Cong sappers near BOQ No. 3.

Gate 2 with rocket grenades, killing the security guards who had been posted there, and then stormed into the southeastern corner of the compound. The Viet Cong soldiers occupied a half-dozen empty administrative buildings, fortifying them against an expected South Vietnamese counterattack, instead of venturing deeper into the compound to attack the Joint General Staff headquarters, some 500 meters to the northwest.

When General Vien learned that enemy soldiers had penetrated the compound, he ordered the South Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion, presently assisting Colonel Cuong's security troops on the western side of Tan Son Nhut, to send two companies to the JCS compound by helicopter as soon as possible.[29]

At 0900, a flight of U.S. helicopters deposited the South Vietnamese paratroopers at General Vien's headquarters. He ordered the pair of companies to pin the Viet Cong battalion in place until more reinforcements arrived. The resulting skirmish continued for several hours, with neither side trying to gain territory, until two more battalions from the South Vietnamese general reserve joined the battle. Reinforced by the South Vietnamese 2d Marine Battalion, recently arrived from the Mekong Delta, and the South Vietnamese 6th Airborne Battalion, just flown back from Dak To, General Vien began his counterattack in earnest. Facing a superior force on the ground and heli-

[29] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 81, 137.

copter gunships overhead, the Viet Cong gave up their foothold later that evening and retreated north through the city with South Vietnamese marines hot on their heels.[30]

Cholon and the Phu Tho Racetrack

At 0300 on 30 January, approximately 200 soldiers from the *6th Binh Tan Battalion* and 100 civilians conscripted to serve as ammunition and stretcher bearers, entered the Phu Lam suburb on the western outskirts of Saigon. There they met several Viet Cong agents who led the battalion into the city as far as the Phu Tho racetrack, a large field containing an oval dirt track and a concrete, three-story viewing stadium, in the Chinese district of Cholon three kilometers south of Tan Son Nhut and two kilometers west of Camp Le Van Duyet. The first set of guides departed, their mission finished, but the second set of guides, the ones responsible for leading the *6th Battalion* to the Chi Hoa prison, some 1,500 meters to the northeast, were nowhere to be seen. After some time, the battalion commander sent two of his companies deeper into the city, hoping that they would find the way to the prison, while he kept the other half of his force at the racetrack.[31]

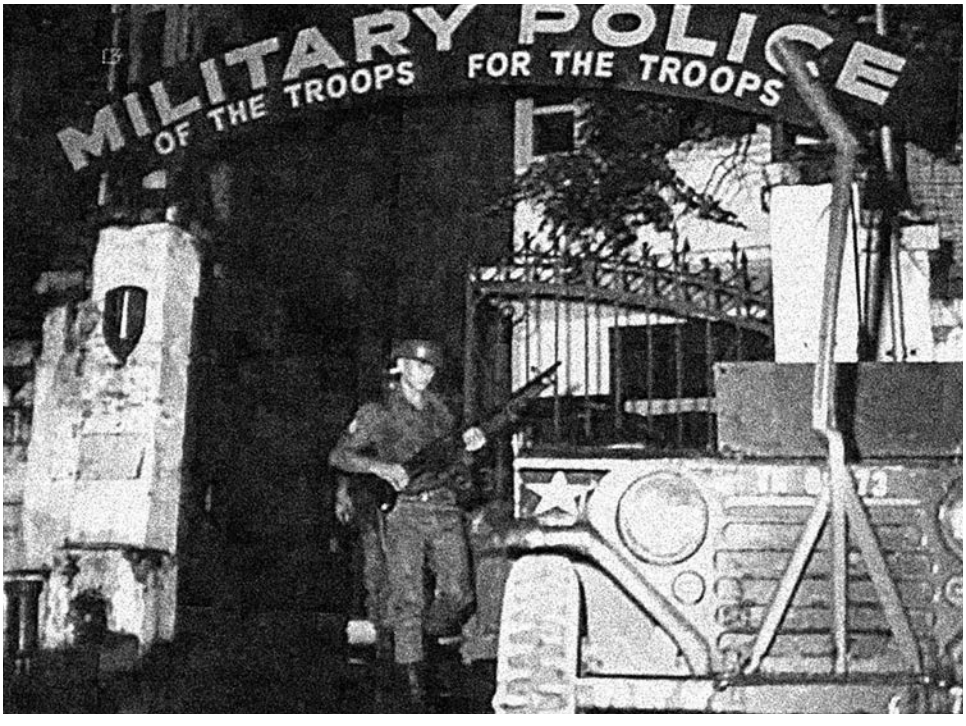
The *6th Binh Tan Battalion* avoided discovery until 0445 when a two-man jeep patrol from the 716th Military Police Battalion sped through the six-way intersection at the southern end of the racetrack where the enemy commander was waiting with two of his companies. Viet Cong troops opened fire, killing one of the military policemen; the other soldier had just time enough to transmit a distress call on his jeep-mounted radio before he, too, was gunned down.

The warning was too brief and cryptic for anyone at Colonel Rowe's headquarters to understand its meaning. As a result, the 716th Military Police Battalion did not warn any of its roving jeep patrols to avoid the six-way intersection south of the racetrack. During the next hour, two more patrols drove through the same intersection, and each in turn came under enemy fire, killing or wounding their occupants.[32]

[30] Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, pp. 56–57; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 485-68, 5 Mar 68, sub: OB of 3d Co, 2d Independent Bn, GO MON District Element, pp. 2–5, box 64, CMIC Interrogation Dossiers, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 02-007-68, 10 Feb 68, sub: Attack on the JGS Compound during TET, pp. 2–4, box 21, CMIC Special Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968),* pp. 135–37.

[31] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 919-68, 17 Apr 68, sub: OB of the 6th LF Bn and the Binh Tan Sub-Region, pp. 4–7, box 4, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 1141-68, 4 May 68, sub: 6th VC LF Bn, p. 2, box 4, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, p. 61; Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, p. 145; Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 23; Intel Cable, CIA, 14 Feb 68, sub: Experiences of (redacted), an ammunition bearer for Company 2, Battalion 6, during the attack on Saigon, p. 2, box 240 (2 of 2), document 96, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

[32] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 919-68, 17 Apr 68, p. 12; Tai Nguyen, *Ve Voi Voi Nguon: Hoi Ky* [*Back to My Roots: A Memoir*] (Hanoi: People's Public Security Publishing House, 1997), p. 203.



Soldiers from the 716th Military Police Battalion leave their compound to conduct a jeep patrol in Saigon.

After losing contact with those patrols, Colonel Rowe dispatched a truck carrying thirteen soldiers to investigate. Heading out at 0600, the reaction team found three disabled jeeps, four dead Americans, and two wounded military policemen littering the six-way intersection. Dashing through heavy enemy fire, the squad rescued both injured policemen and then withdrew to a building on the southeastern side of the intersection. Colonel Rowe sent a second team to reinforce the first group and a vehicle to pick up the two wounded men. Try as they might, the weight of enemy fire prevented them from recovering any of the four dead military policemen, who still lay in the intersection. This was going to be a job for regular infantry.

Alerted to the presence of the *6th Binh Tan Battalion*, General Weyand called upon his nearest available unit, the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, 199th Infantry Brigade, which was stationed in Gia Dinh Province approximately ten kilometers to the southwest. Receiving his orders through brigade headquarters, the battalion commander, Lt. Col. John K. Gibler, dispatched Company A to the southern edge of Cholon where it met up with eight M113s from Troop D, 17th Cavalry, which served as the 199th Infantry Brigade's reconnaissance unit. Now constituted as Task Force Gibler, the U.S. soldiers joined up with two companies from the South Vietnamese 33d Ranger Battalion sent by General Vien. The Vietnamese chief also instructed the South Vietnamese 38th Ranger Battalion, currently operating in the Phu Lam

A South Vietnamese ranger sprints across a street during the fighting in Cholon.

neighborhood, to advance on the racetrack from the west, thereby presenting the enemy with a two-front attack.

As Task Force GIBLER headed north through the Cholon District, a densely populated blue-collar neighborhood where most of the residents lived and worked in two- and three-story row houses, it began to receive fire from enemy soldiers belonging to the *6th Binh Tan Battalion* who had positioned themselves in upper windows and on rooftops. The allied infantry fanned out through side alleys in hopes of outflanking the enemy, but the armored personnel carriers had no choice but to continue down the main avenue. Spraying Viet Cong strong points with their .50-caliber machine guns, the vehicles kept going even when a rocket grenade destroyed Troop D's command vehicle. With help from the South Vietnamese rangers, who eliminated several Viet Cong support weapons, including a .51-caliber machine gun that the enemy had dragged to the roof of a three-story building, the seven armored personnel carriers and the infantrymen from Company A inched their way toward the racetrack, six blocks away.[33]

As that battle raged in Cholon, a second fight was developing to the east. Two enemy units, the *508th Battalion* and the *5th Nha Be Battalion*, had entered the southern edge of Saigon intent on reaching General Loan's

[33] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 91–93.

National Police headquarters. Local police had blocked their advance long enough for General Vien to deploy the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion. The enemy now appeared to be contained within a several-block radius and was in no position to aid the *6th Binh Tan Battalion*.

By 1100 when Task Force GIBLER passed to the control of General Ware and HURRICANE FORWARD, the allied force coming from the south and the South Vietnamese 38th Ranger Battalion coming from the west had both reached the six-way intersection adjacent to the racetrack, where they linked up with the platoon from the 716th Military Police Battalion Colonel Rowe had dispatched earlier that morning. Deploying several 106-mm. recoilless rifles, the soldiers and a pair of helicopter gunships blasted the concrete stadium pavilion where the *6th Binh Tan Battalion* was making a stand. The enemy abandoned the site later that afternoon and withdrew by twos and threes into the residential neighborhood to the west. A combination of South Vietnamese rangers and policemen followed in pursuit. The Americans established a temporary firebase on the stadium lawn. Just before dark, helicopters flew in the remainder of Colonel Gibler's 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, as well as its attached howitzer battery.[34]

On the morning of 1 February, General Ware reinforced Task Force GIBLER with Companies A and B from the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, a mechanized unit from the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, stationed in Long An Province. The task force spent the day clearing the neighborhood around the racetrack, which was still infested with Viet Cong soldiers. Enemy rocket grenades disabled two of the armored personnel carriers, but when night came Task Force GIBLER was able to declare the neighborhood secure. Scattered elements of the *6th Binh Tan Battalion* remained in the western suburbs of Saigon for another week; in the end, only thirty Viet Cong soldiers from the original force made it back to their base camp on the Vam Co Dong River.[35]

Battles on the Periphery of Saigon

After the Capital Military District, the second most important target in *COSVN*'s Tet attack plan was the Bien Hoa–Long Binh military complex, located some twenty kilometers northeast of the capital across the Dong Nai River that formed the boundary between Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa Provinces. Slightly to the northwest of its neighbor, the Bien Hoa Air Base housed fighter-bomber squadrons and armed helicopter companies, and was home to the newly arrived command group from the 101st Airborne Division. The U.S. Air Force 3d Security Police Squadron manned the bunkers and watchtowers that encircled the air base, while the

[34] Rpt, Tet Offensive Bfg-15 Minute Version, 7th Mil Hist Det, n.d., p. 7, box 2, 7th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Long Binh/Saigon Tet Campaign, 199th Inf Bde, 15 Apr 68, pp. 12–13, box 22, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[35] AAR, Task Force Ware, II FFV, pp. 3–4.

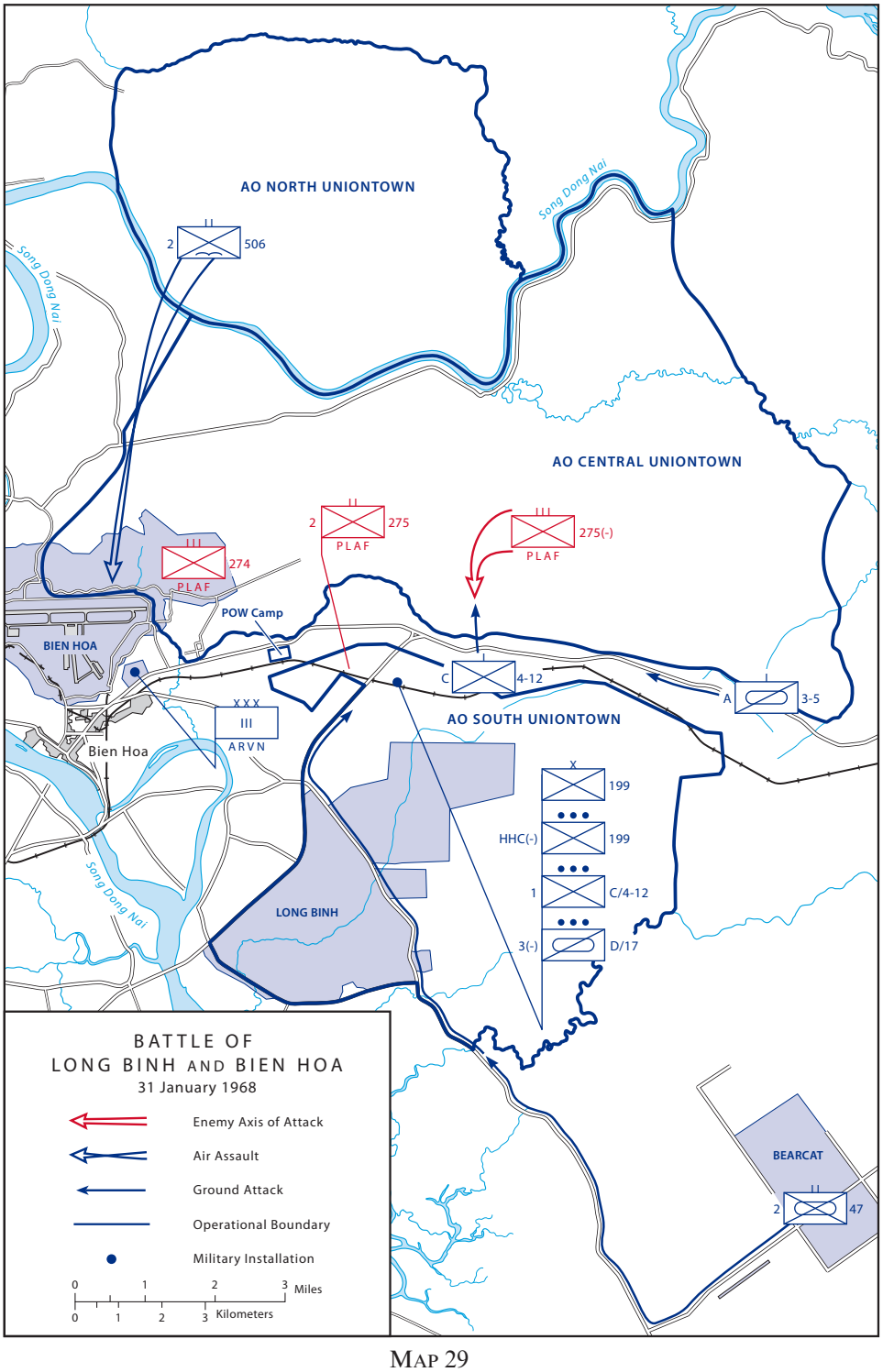
South Vietnamese 57th Regional Forces Battalion screened the adjacent countryside. Just south of the air base, General Khang maintained his III Corps headquarters in the city of Bien Hoa, also home to his ready reaction force, the South Vietnamese 3d Ranger Task Force, consisting of the 35th and 36th Ranger Battalions. General Khang's corps artillery, two 155-mm. howitzer battalions, operated from a base near the Dong Nai River on the southeastern side of Bien Hoa City.[36]

Four kilometers east of Bien Hoa Air Base was the Long Binh military complex, a thirty-square-kilometer facility that served as the main U.S. logistical complex in III Corps and as home to USARV headquarters. An important secondary function was its role as a command and control center. A compound called the Plantation, which lay on the northern edge of the base, contained the headquarters of II Field Force, the headquarters of the 199th Infantry Brigade, and the headquarters of the 12th Aviation Group. The latter provided helicopter support for all of III Corps and controlled nine assault helicopter companies stationed at either Bien Hoa or Long Binh. The 720th Military Police Battalion provided security for Long Binh, while elements of the 199th Infantry Brigade patrolled the surrounding districts to discourage rocket and mortar attacks against the two U.S. facilities. As an additional precaution, General Weyand instructed the commander of the 9th Infantry Division, General O'Connor, to ready a mechanized force from his 1st Brigade at Bearcat, sixteen kilometers to the south, should Long Binh be attacked (*see Map 29*).

At 0030 on 31 January, a patrol from the 199th Infantry Brigade—Company E of the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry—detected a company-size enemy force approximately ten kilometers north of Bien Hoa, moving in the direction of the air base. The Americans engaged the enemy with the help of artillery, killing forty-seven Communists. Thirty minutes later, a long-range reconnaissance patrol from the 199th Infantry Brigade spotted enemy soldiers moving through the rubber trees several hundred meters to the north of Long Binh. Several helicopter gunships took off from Bien Hoa Air Base to investigate, but it was too dark to see much.

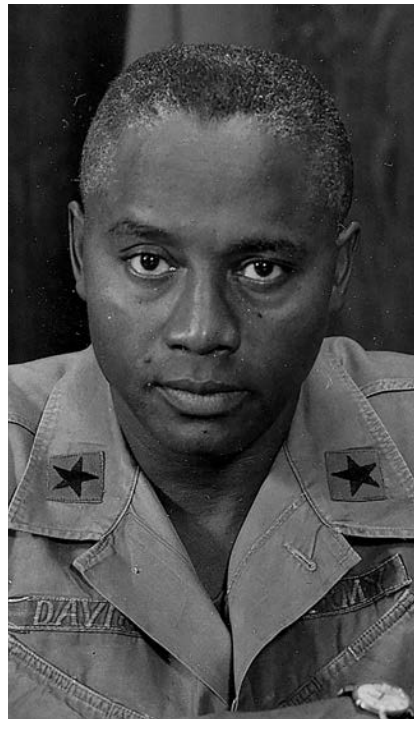
Two uneventful hours passed with no more sign from the enemy. Then at 0300, the helicopter gunships that had been circling the jungle north of Long Binh saw dozens of bright flames as a salvo of 122-mm. rockets streaked toward Bien Hoa and Long Binh. Enemy gunners from the *84A PAVN Artillery Regiment* fired approximately one hundred 82-mm. mortar rounds and ninety 122-mm. rockets at Long Binh. Several dozen detonated near the headquarters of II Field Force and of the 199th Infantry Brigade in the Plantation compound, but none were direct hits. The acting commander of the 199th Infantry Brigade, Col. Frederic E. Davison, directed three of the four infantry companies that were in the field to converge on the launch area. Convinced that a ground attack was imminent, General Weyand ordered General O'Connor to dispatch the mechanized task force the 9th Division commander had assembled at Bearcat.

[36] AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, pp. 10–11.


AO NORTH UNIONTOWN
Song Dong Nai
2
506
AO CENTRAL UNIONTOWN
2
275
PLAF
275(-)
PLAF
274
PLAF
POW Camp
BIEN HOA
C
4-12
A
3-5
XXX
III
ARVN
Bien Hoa
AO SOUTH UNIONTOWN
X
199
HHC(-)
199
1
C/4-12
3(-)
D/17
LONG BINH
BEARCAT
2
47
BATTLE OF
LONG BINH AND BIEN HOA
31 January 1968
Enemy Axis of Attack
Air Assault
Ground Attack
Operational Boundary
Military Installation
0 1 2 3 Miles
0 1 2 3 Kilometers

MAP 29

The sound of the rockets was the signal for the *5th PLAF Division* to attack. Two battalions of the *274th PLAF Regiment* emerged from a rubber plantation some 500 meters east of the Bien Hoa Air Base. The Viet Cong commanders possessed detailed maps of the facility given to them by spies who had worked there as manual laborers. Armed with that information, the enemy had a clear idea of how best to destroy the dozens of aircraft parked at the air base as well as the fuel and ordnance stations needed to service them.[37]



Colonel Davison (shown as a brigadier general)

Before it reached the airstrip, the *274th PLAF Regiment* had to overcome a line of bunkers manned by a platoon of South Vietnamese Regional Forces soldiers and security personnel from the U.S. Air Force 3d Security Police Squadron. The Viet Cong focused their assault on the linchpin of the bunker line, an old French concrete structure named Bunker Hill 10. At least five rocket-propelled grenades and dozens of mortar shells slammed into the pillbox in the opening minutes of the battle. Despite the incoming rounds, the senior officer in the bunker, Capt. Reginald V. Maisey Jr., stepped outside between breaks in the fire so he could get a better view of the enemy, information he relayed by radio to the air control center. His luck ran out at 0430 when he was killed by a rocket grenade. The men in Bunker Hill 10 and neighboring positions fought on, and the steady chatter of their M16s and M60s was enough to prevent the two Viet Cong battalions from closing the distance and knocking out the bunkers.[38]

Several flights of AH–1 Cobra gunships from the 334th Assault Helicopter Company roared aloft as soon as there was enough light to distinguish friend from foe on the ground. The sleek Cobras darted back and forth raking the Viet Cong soldiers in the grassy field below with their rockets and machine guns. The enemy became disorganized in the hazy smoke that rose from the field as the dry grass caught fire.[39]

[37] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 813-68, 5 Apr 68, sub: Attack on Bien Hoa Air Base, p. 2, box 3, CMIC Interrogation Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[38] Captain Maisey received the Air Force Cross posthumously. Recommendation for Decoration, 1 Jun 68, sub: The Medal of Honor (Posthumous), Maisey, Reginald V., Jr., box 14, Mil Personnel Div, Adjutant General sec., USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[39] Rpt, Interv no. GE 9, Rand Corporation, n.d., p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

An AH–1C Cobra gunship

Shortly before noon, the South Vietnamese 57th Regional Forces Battalion counterattacked through the bunker line and forced the Viet Cong to yield some ground. Meanwhile, a scratch force of cooks, mechanics, and clerical personnel from the 145th Aviation Battalion took up positions along the bunker line to stiffen the defenses. Bowing to the inevitable, the battered *274th PLAF Regiment* withdrew back into the rubber plantation. When allied infantry searched the hundred or more enemy bodies scattered across the battlefield, they found that nearly half carried timer-detonated explosives meant to destroy U.S. aircraft. The airfield back in operation, a flight of C–130 transports later that day flew in the 2d Battalion of the 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, from Phuoc Long Province, to help South Vietnamese forces that were fighting a Viet Cong battalion in the city of Bien Hoa.[40]

As the *274th Regiment* was beginning its attack against the air base on the morning of 31 January, its sister unit, the *275th PLAF Regiment*, was moving into position to attack Long Binh from the northwest. At 0430, two

[40] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. US 813-68, 5 Apr 68, p. 2; AAR, Participation in the Initial Phase of the Tet Offensive, 29 Jan–8 Feb 68, 1st Avn Bde, n.d., pp. 14–15, box 3, PUC/DUC Mil Personnel Div, Rcds of U.S. Forces, RG 472, NACP; Msg, HQ, USARV, to CG, 1st Avn Bde, 18 Feb 70, sub: Recommendation for Award of the Valorous Unit Award, p. 5, box 11, Valorous Unit Awards, Adjutant General sec., RG 472, NACP.

Soldiers from the 199th Infantry Brigade defend the Plantation.

of its battalions emerged from a small hamlet known as the Widows' Village, so named because most of its residents were the wives and family members of deceased soldiers, just to the west of the Plantation headquarters complex. As Viet Cong soldiers poured out of the hamlet, the defenders at the Plantation raked them with small arms and machine-gun fire from the protection of bunkers and armored personnel carriers. Unwilling to charge into that storm of bullets, and clearly illuminated by roving searchlights and descending flares, the enemy headed for the concealment of a nearby bamboo grove. American bullets inexorably tore the bamboo grove to shreds.[41]

A short time later, at approximately 0530, the 9th Division reaction force arrived from Bearcat. A long column of armored personnel carriers from the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, raced along Highway 1 from the east and then formed a line to face the enemy battalions in the bamboo grove. As the mechanized troopers poured fire into the shattered woods, helicopter gunships from the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, swooped in to rocket and machine-gun the Viet Cong. The punishment went on until around 0800 when the two enemy battalions fled back across Highway 1 to the Widows' Village.

Joining forces with another 9th Division unit that had just arrived by helicopter from Bearcat, Company B of the 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, the soldiers from the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, entered the Widows' Village and cleared

[41] AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p. 10.

Soldiers and M113 armored personnel carriers from the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, advance on the enemy-held Widows' Village.

it of enemy troops in a battle that lasted most of the day. Retreating north into the rubber trees, the *275th Regiment* left behind over 200 of its dead.[42]

The one successful mission that the enemy carried out against Long Binh that morning took place at 0400 on the northeastern side of the base when a sixty-man sapper team infiltrated the perimeter and then entered the massive ammunition dump, the largest in South Vietnam. Pursued by soldiers from the 720th Military Police Battalion, the Viet Cong soldiers managed to place eighteen satchel charges before retreating. Bomb squads found and disarmed seven of the devices, but the remaining charges detonated at around 0730. Eight that were faulty or improperly placed did little damage, but the other three ignited pallets that were filled with artillery shells and their propellant bags. The resulting mushroom cloud was visible for kilometers, but the storage bunkers did their job, absorbing most of the blast and flames and preventing the nearby ammunition pits from igniting as well. The lost ammunition represented only a fraction of the total stock, and logisticians made good the deficit within a few days.[43]

The defenders at Bien Hoa and Long Binh recovered a total of 527 enemy dead from the battlefield on the morning of 1 February. Many of those killed were sixteen- and seventeen-year-old North Vietnamese conscripts who had just joined the *5th PLAF Division* to bring it up to strength for the Tet offensive. Apart from the half-day suspension of jet aircraft operations at Bien Hoa and the destruction of a few ammunition pads at Long Binh, neither

[42] Rpt, Lt Col David Hughes, Ch of G–3, II FFV, 20 Mar 68, sub: II Field Force G–3 Briefing, p. 21, Historians files, CMH.

[43] Rpt, 15th Mil Hist Det, 23 Apr 68, sub: VC/NVA Attack on Long Binh Ammunition Supply Depot, 31 January 1968, p. 1; and Encl 6. Both in VNIT 70, CMH.

installation suffered much harm. The *5th Division*'s attempt to overrun Bien Hoa and Long Binh had been a conspicuous failure.[44]

Battles Outside of Saigon

While *COSVN* relied on Viet Cong local force battalions from *Sub-Regions 1* through *5* to spearhead the attacks into Saigon, it employed its main force regiments, three from the Viet Cong *9th Division*, three from the North Vietnamese *7th Division*, and the *Dong Nai Regiment*, to interdict the main roads leading into the capital. If the attacks in the capital went well, General Thai could send some of those units into the city to assist the Viet Cong spearhead battalions. Conversely, if the fighting in Saigon looked hopeless, the *COSVN* commander could withdraw his main force regiments even if that meant sacrificing some of his local force units.[45]

On the morning of 31 January, two regiments from the *9th Division* attempted to cut Highway 1 west of Saigon to prevent mechanized units from the U.S. 25th Infantry Division based at Cu Chi, Dau Tieng, or Tay Ninh West from reaching the city. Neither regiment succeeded. The *271st Regiment* briefly overran the district town of Hoc Mon but failed to destroy a key bridge that was being guarded by Troop C of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry. Later that morning, the cavalry troop turned the bridge over to South Vietnamese troops and then drove cross-country to Tan Son Nhut to counterattack the Viet Cong holding the Vinatexco factory. Meanwhile, the *272d Regiment* established a blocking position to the south of Cu Chi, but failed to stop Troop B of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, when the mechanized unit raced down Highway 1 at 0800 to join the battle at the textile factory.[46]

The *9th Division*'s third regiment, the *273d*, had a different and more difficult assignment. Its mission was to attack the town of Thu Duc, a district capital in eastern Gia Dinh Province located on Highway 1 between Saigon and Bien Hoa. In order to do so, the unit had to march in a single night without being detected from Hau Nhgia Province west of Saigon to the eastern side of the city, a route that skirted several bases from the South Vietnamese 5th Division and the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. On the evening of 30 January, an infantry patrol from the 1st Division camp at Phu Loi spotted the regiment near Phu Cuong, some eighteen kilometers north of Go Vap. The patrol called in an artillery strike that decimated the unit. The disorganized Viet Cong troops took refuge in a hamlet named An My.[47]

[44] AAR, Opn Tet Offensive, II FFV, an. A-1.
[45] Ibid., an. A-4.
[46] Ibid., p. 15; *9th Division*, p. 100.
[47] AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p. 13, and an. A; Regimental Hist of 273d VC Regiment, p. 16, Historians files, CMH; Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, pp. 61–67.

The base commander dispatched three companies from the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, one troop from the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and several M42 Dusters from Battery A of the 5th Battalion, 2d Artillery, to help South Vietnamese forces cordon An My. One Viet Cong battalion slipped away, resuming its journey to Thu Duc around daybreak on 31 January, but the two remaining battalions were almost completely annihilated. Allied soldiers recovered at least 343 Viet Cong bodies from the ruins of An My.[48]

When the *273d Regiment* did not show up at Thu Duc on the morning of 31 January, a pair of local force companies went ahead with the assault. They were repulsed with heavy losses. Learning that a battalion from the *273d Regiment* had escaped An My, General Ware sent a 1st Division combat team to the district capital. Task Force MEYER consisted of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, a company from the 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry, and Troop A from the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry. At Thu Duc the force joined the South Vietnamese 2d Marine Battalion, which had just finished clearing the *2d Go Mon Battalion* from the Joint General Staff compound. As a result, the solitary battalion from the *273d Regiment* that had escaped from An My the previous day sustained heavy casualties when it attacked Thu Duc on the morning of 1 February. The battalion made a second attack two days later alongside the *4th Thu Duc Battalion* but fared no better. The fighting around Thu Duc cost the enemy upwards of 400 killed. Highway 1 between Saigon and Bien Hoa remained open.[49]

COSVN's other main combat formation in northern III Corps, the *7th PAVN Division*, fared no better than the *9th Division* in isolating Saigon from the neighboring provinces. The *88th* and the *141st Regiments* failed to block Highway 13 in Binh Long and northern Binh Duong Provinces, evidenced by the fact that 200 vehicles from the 11th Armored Cavalry traveled down the road from Loc Ninh to Bien Hoa in only a few hours on the evening of 31 January. Likewise, two battalions from the *165th Regiment* and a local force company failed to capture Ben Cat, a district capital some thirty-eight kilometers north of Saigon, because the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 8th Infantry, the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and Company C from the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, were able to brush aside several ambushes on Highway 13 and come to the rescue of the besieged town.[50]

COSVN sent another main force unit, the *Dong Nai Regiment*, to attack regional capitals in southern Binh Duong and northeastern Bien Hoa Provinces. On the morning of 1 February, two battalions from the *Dong Nai Regiment* and part of the *Phu Loi I Battalion* attacked Phu Cuong, the capital of Binh Duong Province, which lay some twenty kilometers north of Saigon via Highway 13. Their attack on the headquarters of the South Vietnamese

[48] Rpt, Hughes, 20 Mar 68, p. 32; Rpt, 1st Inf Div Arty, 11 Feb 68, sub: Attack on Phu Loi Base Camp, 31 January to 7 February 1968, pp. 1–5, VNIT 159, CMH.

[49] Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector, 1968*, p. 34; AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p.16; AAR, Task Force Ware, II FFV, p. 3; AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p. 20, and an. A-5.

[50] AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p. 15; *7th Division*, pp. 54–55.

5th Infantry Division failed outright, but enemy troops managed to fight their way into a nearby training facility for South Vietnamese engineers. At that critical moment, a group of U.S. soldiers from the 41st Engineer Company who formed an advisory detachment at Phu Cuong rushed forward to meet the attackers, checking their advance long enough for the South Vietnamese defenders to reorganize themselves. The allied engineers held on for another five hours until an infantry battalion from the South Vietnamese 5th Division came to their aid. The enemy battalions withdrew from the city at dusk, leaving behind 123 bodies.[51]

Two days later, on 4 February, the two uncommitted battalions from the *Dong Nai Regiment* attacked Tan Uyen, a district capital on the upper bank of the Dong Nai River some eight kilometers north of the Bien Hoa Air Base. The enemy destroyed the town's power plant before being chased off by units from the South Vietnamese 48th Infantry Regiment, 18th Division, headquartered in Tan Uyen.[52]

The Viet Cong offensive in Phuoc Tuy Province got under way on the morning of 1 February when the *D445 Local Force Battalion* and the *C610 Local Force Company* attacked the capital city of Ba Ria. Two companies from the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 52d Infantry, and some Regional Forces soldiers fought a desperate holding action until the South Vietnamese 11th Airborne Battalion arrived from the nearby Van Kiep National Training Center later that morning. The allied counterattack gained momentum with the arrival of two mechanized platoons from the 1st Australian Task Force, based at Nui Dat ten kilometers to the northeast, plus two units from the South Vietnamese 18th Division, the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 42d Infantry, and the South Vietnamese 52d Ranger Battalion, based to the north at Xuan Loc. The *D445 Battalion* and the *C610 Company* withdrew that evening, leaving an estimated 300 dead behind.[53]

The next day, 2 February, the *D440 Local Force Battalion* and elements of the *84th Rear Service Group* attacked Xuan Loc itself, targeting the provincial headquarters compound and the base camp of the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division. Facing two battalions from the South Vietnamese 43d Regiment, the South Vietnamese 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry Regiment, U.S. artillery batteries from the 52d Artillery Group, and several Regional Forces companies, the Viet Cong made no headway. Retreating before dawn, the enemy returned for a second strike early the next morning, this time penetrating as far as the central market before being driven out of Xuan Loc with considerable losses.[54]

[51] Rpt, 159th Engineer Group, n.d., sub: Recommendation for Valorous Unit Award, 159th Engineer Group, Valorous Unit Awards, Adjutant General sec., RG 472, NACP.

[52] Ibid., p. 22.

[53] John Rowe, *Vietnam: The Australian Experience* (North Sydney, Australia: Time-Life Books, 1987), p. 95; AAR, Tet Offensive, II FFV, p. 18; Maj R. F. Stuart, *3 RAR in South Vietnam 1967–1968* (Sydney, Australia: Printcraft Press, 1968), p. 16.

[54] AAR, Def of Xuan Loc, 45th Mil Hist Det, 15 Feb 68, pp. 2–4, VNIT 8, CMH; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 54th Arty Gp, 1 May 68, pp. 9–10, box 101, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

A display of captured Communist weapons

Assessing the Cost

As the Communist offensive in III Corps lost steam at the end of its first week, General Westmoreland began to assess its consequences. There was little doubt that the enemy had taken a beating. Allied intelligence believed that around 7,900 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had been killed in action in III Corps between 29 January and 5 February. During that same period,

another 500 or so Communists had surrendered or defected to the allies. The *5th* and the *9th Divisions* were temporarily combat ineffective, as were eight local force battalions in the Saigon region. Another eight to ten local force battalions in eastern and northern III Corps were less badly hurt, but still not likely to engage in offensive action for some time. The South Vietnamese armed forces had fought well, as had many police units. Allied losses—around 400 U.S. troops and almost 600 South Vietnamese personnel—were a fraction of those sustained by the enemy. From a military point of view, the allies had won a great victory.[55]

Even so, Westmoreland knew that the political costs had been high. In a cable to General Wheeler, the MACV commander acknowledged that "the enemy has dealt the GVN [Government of South Vietnam] a severe blow." The fighting had destroyed around 11,000 structures and displaced around 100,000 people in metropolitan Saigon. Though the enemy had failed to cripple the South Vietnamese government, his thrust into the capital had spread fear and uncertainty among Saigon's residents. Previously insulated from the war, many civilians in the capital openly doubted the ability of the government to protect them. Rumors of new attacks multiplied each day. Territorial security forces had withdrawn from key Revolutionary Development areas too, throwing pacification programs into chaos. Thus even in failure, *COSVN* had delivered a stunning psychological blow that threatened to sabotage allied plans for 1968.[56]

[55] Rpt, Hughes, 20 Mar 68, p. 36.

[56] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01614 to Wheeler, 4 Feb 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Rpt, Hughes, 20 Mar 68, p. 39; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 34–35; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, II FFV, 20 May 68, p. 10, box 18, ORLLS, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 8-68, I FFV, 18–24 Feb 68, 24 Feb 68, pp. 1–6; and Periodic Intel Rpt no. 9-68, I FFV, 25 Feb–2 Mar 68, 2 Mar 68, p. 7. Both in Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

11

Mekong Firestorm

The allied forces in the Mekong Delta were among the least prepared for the Viet Cong offensive that engulfed the country during Tet. None of the intelligence that the IV Corps commander, General Manh, and his senior adviser, Maj. Gen. George S. Eckhardt, had seen in recent weeks indicated that their sector was in danger. North Vietnamese soldiers, far from their families, might violate the Tet truce, but it was hard to imagine the locally recruited Viet Cong soldiers abandoning their families during the holiday. As a result, U.S. units remained at normal readiness, but the South Vietnamese corps commander, General Manh, approved leave for more than two-thirds of the South Vietnamese military personnel in IV Corps.

The 1,700 advisers who reported to General Eckhardt expected to get a short respite from their duties during the holiday, as did the several thousand aviation, engineer, and logistical support troops that operated from airfields near Soc Trang, Vinh Long, and Can Tho. Not so the 2d Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, which had just started a new phase of Operation CORONADO X to interdict enemy logistical activity in Base Area 470 during the holiday period. On Saturday the twenty-eighth, the brigade commander, Colonel David, and most of his troops—Lt. Col. Ivan C. Bland's 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry; Lt. Col. John G. Hill's 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry; a company from the 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, and several 105-mm. howitzer batteries—traveled up the Ton Duc Loc Canal to establish a line of firebases, spread ten kilometers apart, north-south through the center of Base Area 470. The screen thus formed would discourage the enemy from moving supplies during the 36-hour cease-fire across and along the Ton Duc Loc Canal, a major north-south artery in Base Area 470.[1]

When the Saigon government and the U.S. Mission canceled the cease-fire on Monday morning, 30 January, Vietnamese commanders attempted to recall their soldiers on leave. The news spread quickly, but many soldiers had traveled to other districts and provinces for the holiday. Most were still awaiting transportation when the offensive began later that night.

When Colonel David learned about the enemy attacks that hit the northern part of the country, he ordered his battalions on the Mang Thit Canal to search the eastern part of Base Area 470 to look for Viet Cong units that might be heading for My Tho or one of the nearby district towns. His

[1] Rpt, Cdr, U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, 9 Feb 68, sub: U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam Monthly Historical Summary, January 1968, p. 23, Historians files, CMH; MACV History, 1967, vol. 1, p. 236; AAR, Opn CORONADO X, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 27 Apr 68, pp. 3–4, box 2, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

South Vietnamese soldiers battle Viet Cong insurgents in the Mekong Delta.

patrols on 30 January located a few supply caches but no enemy soldiers. Colonel David was not reassured. He ordered his battalion commanders to be ready to join the Mobile Riverine Force on short notice if the 2d Brigade was needed elsewhere.[2]

The Delta in Flames

At 0300 on 31 January, the Viet Cong offensive hit eleven of the sixteen provinces in IV Corps. General Eckhardt was at his headquarters, an airfield complex two kilometers north of Can Tho, when the strikes began. The senior adviser thought about taking a jeep into town so he could work with General Manh at his IV Corps headquarters, but abandoned his idea when he learned that Can Tho airfield was under attack. Confined to his headquarters, General Eckhardt and his staff stayed glued to their radios for the next several hours as they assessed developments in the Mekong Delta.

The picture that emerged was bleak. From what Eckhardt could determine, upwards of thirty Viet Cong infantry battalions had invaded ten of the sixteen provincial capitals in IV Corps. In the countryside, many Regional and Popular Forces units had abandoned their outposts, sometimes under pressure

[2] AAR, Opn CORONADO X, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, p. 7.

and sometimes not, to seek the safety of the nearest district town. Guerrillas had closed numerous roads and canals. Sappers had destroyed several bridges in Dinh Tuong Province, temporarily severing Highway 4 between Saigon and the delta.

The performance of the South Vietnamese regular forces was somewhat more reassuring. Most of the units appeared to be fighting well despite missing up to two-thirds of their manpower. There were no reports of mass desertions or defections, and only a couple of government facilities had fallen into enemy hands. The report on senior leadership was mixed. Several province chiefs had folded under the pressure, and General Manh seemed too preoccupied with the security of his own headquarters to perform his duties, but the commanders of the South Vietnamese 7th, 9th, and 21st Divisions were handling the crisis well. Moreover, hundreds of South Vietnamese soldiers were returning to duty with each passing hour, and units based in the provinces least affected by the fighting were now making their way to the areas of IV Corps that were most in need (*Map 30*).[3]

The most threatened part of IV Corps appeared to be its northeastern corner. In Dinh Tuong Province, 1,500 Viet Cong soldiers controlled the western half of the provincial capital, My Tho, and a second force was pressing in from the east. President Thieu was still at his family home in the middle of town, and presently unable to leave the city. A sapper team had broken into the home of General Thanh, the commander of the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division, who had wisely spent the night at his headquarters. The general was now trying to recall several infantry battalions from nearby Revolutionary Development areas to mount a counterattack.[4]

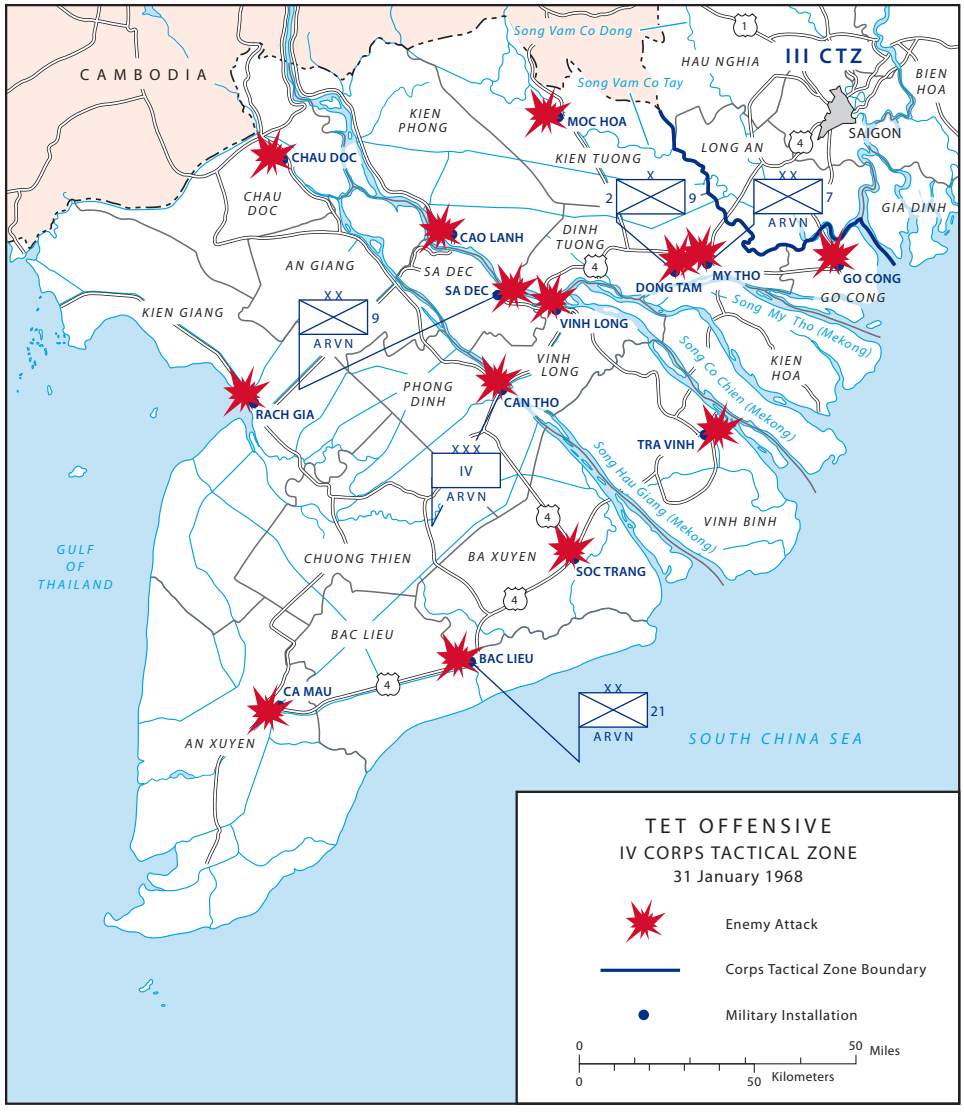
Twelve kilometers to the south, an enemy force of nearly 2,000 soldiers had overrun Ben Tre, the capital of Kien Hoa Province, and controlled a string of fishing villages on the opposite bank of the Ben Tre River. Only the provincial headquarters, the MACV advisory compound, the main police station, and a South Vietnamese Army logistics compound remained in allied hands. Two battalions from the South Vietnamese 10th Regiment were trying to fight their way into town, but the regimental commander, Lt. Col. Nguyen Tuong Dien, had been killed leading an attack. The only good news was the fortuitous appearance of four U.S. Navy patrol boats. Joining up with five South Vietnamese armed junks, the flotilla had prevented enemy troops on the south side of the river from crossing over to the city via a narrow steel bridge.[5]

The situation in the central delta was not much better. In Phong Dinh Province, the *Tay Do Battalion* and the *307th Local Force Battalion* had occupied the southern and western suburbs of Can Tho, temporarily seizing

[3] Rpt, CIA to White House Situation Room, 1 Feb 68, sub: Situation Report IV Corps as of 1300 Hrs, 1 February 1968, Historians files, CMH.

[4] Rpt, Advisory Team 96, n.d., sub: Historical summary of Viet Cong Tet Offensive, pp. 13–15, box 34, AARs, 1965□1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[5] Ibid., pp. 1, 5, 8; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 433; Rpt, MACV, n.d., sub: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces RVNAF, p. 4, document 77, 31 Mar Speech, vol. 2, tabs A–Z, box 47, NSF-National Security Council History, LBJL; Cdr Wynn A. Goldsmith, U.S. Naval Reserve, "River Rats to the Rescue at Ben Tre," *Vietnam* (February 1998): 26–32.



MAP 30

the university. Downtown, a platoon of sappers had tried to fight their way into the South Vietnamese IV Corps headquarters. General Manh's security detail had repulsed the commandos, trapping them in a hotel across the street. Even though the danger to his headquarters had passed, Manh continued to worry about the safety of his compound, and was neglecting his duties as corps commander.[6]

[6] Rpt, Advisory Team 96, n.d., pp. 13–15; *Quan Khu 9: Nam Khang Chien (1945–1975)* [*Military Region 9: Thirty Years of Resistance (1945–1975)*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1996), p. 416; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 428.

South Vietnamese IV Corps headquarters in Can Tho

Two kilometers to the north, the *303d Local Force Battalion* continued to besiege the U.S. airfield that contained Eckhardt's headquarters, along with several fixed-wing and helicopter companies from the 307th Combat Aviation Battalion, Company D from the 5th Special Forces Group, and the headquarters of the 69th Engineer Battalion. Earlier that morning, forty sappers had penetrated the northwestern perimeter of the airfield during a mortar barrage meant to cover their approach. Before the sappers had time to spread out, an eleven-man reaction force from the 69th Engineer Battalion caught sight of them. Engaging them with M16s most had not used since basic training, the engineers held the enemy in place long enough for additional security teams to arrive. Five of the engineers lost their lives. Security personnel from the 244th Surveillance Airplane Company thwarted a second sapper attack, killing a Viet Cong team that tried to breach the southern perimeter of the airfield. When the *307th Local Force Battalion* melted back into the countryside just before dawn, it left behind sixty-seven dead and thirty wounded.[7]

[7] Rpt, 45th Mil Hist Det, n.d., sub: The Tet Offensive in IV ARVN Corps, pp. 1–2, Encl 1 to Rpt, Location of Maneuver Battalions, IV ARVN Corps, 30 Jan 68, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 69th Engr Bn (Construction), 4 Mar 68, sub: Valorous Unit Award Recommendation, pp. 1–2, box 3, Rcds of U.S. Forces, Mil Personnel Div, RG 472, NACP; Rpt, 1st Avn Bde, n.d., sub: Participation in the Initial Phase of the Tet Offensive, 29 January–8 February 1968, p. 350, box 3, Rcds of U.S. Forces, Mil Personnel Div, RG 472, NACP; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 164th

By the time the situation in Can Tho appeared to be under control, the same could not be said for Vinh Long, the capital of Vinh Long Province. Located twenty kilometers east of Can Tho on the south bank of the Mekong River, the city was under attack from two Viet Cong battalions and a host of local force companies. Although a mechanized troop from the South Vietnamese 2d Cavalry Squadron and the South Vietnamese 43d Ranger Battalion had wiped out a Viet Cong sapper team that had tried to seize the city jail, they failed to prevent the *306th Local Force Battalion* and several district companies from occupying the southern part of the city. A second enemy battalion, the *308th Local Force Battalion*, had tried to cross the river from its north bank, but South Vietnamese patrol boats had sunk or turned away most of the enemy-filled sampans.[8]

An enemy mortar and ground assault also hit the U.S. airfield two kilometers to the west, which housed three helicopters companies, an observation aircraft company, and a variety of transportation and logistical units. A sapper team penetrated the southwestern perimeter of the airfield and scattered among the revetments that housed twelve O–1 Bird Dog observation aircraft. The airfield commander, Lt. Col. Bernard Davis Thompson Jr., was killed by enemy fire as he led an ad hoc security team composed of technicians, air crewmen, and clerks in a counterattack to expel the commandos. All of the Viet Cong soldiers were killed or driven off before they could detonate their satchel charges.[9]

The situation was more encouraging in Sa Dec City, the capital of Sa Dec Province, located on the west bank of the Mekong River some twenty-five kilometers north of Can Tho. The only enemy unit to enter the city, a small sapper team, had tried to break into the private residence of General Thi, the commander of the South Vietnamese 9th Division, but his security guards had repelled the assault. When General Thi arrived at his house, a light machine gun in hand, all of the Viet Cong were either dead or captured, most of them barely trained soldiers around sixteen years old. General Eckhardt later learned that a flight of AH–1G Cobra gunships from Vinh Long had destroyed the main attacking force before it reached the city, sinking the sampans that were carrying them while they were still south of the capital.[10]

The defenders fared less well in Tra Vinh, the capital of Vinh Binh Province and home of the South Vietnamese 14th Infantry Regiment. Two Viet Cong

Combat Avn Gp, 14 May 68, pp. 2–3, Encl 4 to ORLL, 307th Combat Avn (Phantom) Bn, 17 Apr 68, Historians files, CMH.

[8] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 435; Rpt, CORDS, IV CTZ, Vinh Long Province, period ending 29 Feb 68, 29 Feb 68, pp. 3, 5, Historians files, CMH; *Quan Khu 8: Ba Muoi Nam Khang Chien (1945–1975)* [*Military Region 8: Thirty Years of Resistance War (1945–1975)*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1998), p. 428.

[9] Adrian G. Traas, *Engineers at War*, United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2010), p. 343; Rpt, 1st Avn Bde, n.d., pp. 353–55; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 164th Combat Avn Gp, p. 2, Encl 4.

[10] Lam Quang Thi, *The Twenty-Five Year Century* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2003), p. 204; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 164th Combat Avn Gp, p. 14, Encl to ORLL, 13th Combat Avn (Guardian) Bn, 19 Apr 68, Historians files, CMH.

An aerial view of the Vinh Long airfield

battalions, the *501st* and the *509th*, and several local force companies overran nearly half of the town and seized the province headquarters building. A South Vietnamese cavalry troop came to Tra Vinh's rescue around dawn, forcing the enemy to retreat to a pagoda at the northern end of town. More South Vietnamese reinforcements were headed for the city; the province chief expected it to be free of enemy soldiers within a day or two.[11]

In the northwestern part of the delta, the hardest hit town appeared to be Chau Doc City, the capital of Chau Doc Province, which was located on the Bassac River just south of the Cambodian border. Three local force battalions, the *510th*, *511th*, and *512th*, and four local force companies overran the city so quickly that many U.S. civilians who worked there had been trapped in their private residences, unable to reach the comparative safety of the province headquarters, the MACV advisory compound, or the South Vietnamese Navy patrol boat base.

Thirty minutes later, four U.S. Navy river patrol boats pulled up to the boat dock and landed a team of U.S. Special Forces soldiers and South Vietnamese irregulars. The team that had just fought its way out of an ambush near the border headed into town, while the U.S. boats peppered enemy positions along

[11] Bfg folder, Vinh Binh Province, Jan 1968, p. 9, Historians files, CMH; *Military Region 9*, p. 433; Rpt, Advisory Team 52, 17 May 68, sub: Distinguished Unit Citation, pp. 2–3, box 7, Unclassified Unit Awards Case files, Personal Services Support Directorate, RG 472, NACP.

Sergeant Dix

the river with their machine guns. Led by S. Sgt. Drew D. Dix, a U.S. Army Special Forces soldier, the small team fought its way through the town and rescued twelve U.S. civilians, killing or capturing nearly fifty enemy soldiers in the process. Sergeant Dix later received the Medal of Honor for his feat. The enemy was now contained, and the South Vietnamese 15th Regiment was due to arrive in a few hours.[12]

In Kien Giang Province, the *U Minh 10 Battalion* and a local sapper company had entered the province capital, Rach Gia City, overrunning nearly half of the town until checked by a South Vietnamese mechanized unit sent from Vi Thanh, the capital city of Chuong Thien Province, some forty kilometers to the east, which had not been attacked that morning. Joining up with the town's Regional Forces defenders, the mechanized unit had pushed the Viet Cong troops out of the city, and U.S. helicopter gunships had gone in pursuit of the enemy as he withdrew on foot and by sampan through the surrounding mangrove forests.[13]

In the lower delta, Viet Cong units had attacked three provincial capitals. A pair of enemy battalions had invaded the capital of Bac Lieu Province, Bac Lieu City, which contained the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division. None of the government buildings in town had fallen to the enemy, and the division commander, General Minh, was now leading a vigorous counterattack that was likely to clear the city by nightfall.[14]

Things were more uncertain in neighboring Ba Xuyen Province, where a pair of Viet Cong battalions had invaded its capital, Soc Trang. The province chief, Lt. Col. Huynh Thao Luc, had become unnerved, abdicating his duties to junior staffers who were trying to rally the town's defenders. Fortunately, several U.S. Army helicopter gunships were assisting the South Vietnamese

[12] Rpt, Advisory Team 52, 17 May 68, p. 2; Intel Cable, CIA, 4 Feb 68, sub: Security Situation in Chau Doc City, Chau Doc Province, as of 2400 Hours on 3 February 1968, p. 1, document 41, Vietnam-CIA Cables February (1 of 4), box 240 (1 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; MFR, Advisory Team 64, 27 Jan 70, sub: Tet 1968 Chau Doc, pp. 1–4, Historians files, CMH; Department of the Army, GO 10, 6 Feb 69, sub: Award of the Medal of Honor, Historians files, CMH; MFR, MACCORDS, 17 Feb 68, sub: Narrative Assessment, Post-TET Pacification Status, IV CTZ, Historians files, CMH.

[13] Intel Cable, CIA, 4 Feb 68, sub: Security Situation in Rach Gia City, Kien Province, as of 2400 Hours on 3 February 1968, p. 2, document 50, box 240, Vietnam Country Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU.

[14] Bfg folder, Bac Lieu Province, Jan 68, p. 6, Historians files, CMH; *Military Region 9*, pp. 436–37.

from the airfield on the south side of town, and a South Vietnamese ranger battalion was on its way from Bac Lieu.[15]

The most encouraging news to reach General Eckhardt came from Ca Mau, the capital of An Xuyen Province, located near the terminus of Highway 4, some forty kilometers west of Bac Lieu. Due to the foresight of the province chief, Lt. Col. Ngo Xuan Nghi, who had not allowed his men to go on holiday leave, his Regional Forces units and the South Vietnamese infantry battalion stationed in the city were at full strength when the *U Minh 2* and the *U Minh 3 Local Force Battalions* attacked on the morning of 31 January. Colonel Nghi's troops ambushed the attackers on the outskirts of town, spreading panic among the Viet Cong soldiers, many of whom were young boys pressed into service just days earlier. The two enemy battalions left behind several hundred of their dead and a mountain of equipment as they retreated. South Vietnamese casualties had been negligible and the provincial capital had suffered almost no damage. The inspired defense of Ca Mau proved to be one of the few bright spots in an otherwise dismal picture that first day.[16]

The Mobile Riverine Force to the Rescue

When General Eckhardt conferred with General Weyand later that afternoon, they agreed that My Tho, Ben Tre, and Vinh Long City needed urgent assistance. The other regional capitals were doing better. Aided by South Vietnamese units from less-threatened parts of the delta, the defenders in Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Tra Vinh, and Chau Doc City were driving the Viet Cong from their cities. The enemy had already retreated from Rach Gia City, Ca Mau, and Cao Lanh, and no fighting had been reported in five delta capitals: Go Cong City (Go Cong Province), Cao Lanh (Kien Phong Province), Vi Thanh (Chuong Thien Province), Moc Hoa (Kien Tuong Province), and Long Xuyen (An Giang Province).[17]

General Westmoreland directed his II Field Force commander to send whatever elements of the 9th Infantry Division in III Corps that he could spare to join Colonel David's 2d Brigade and the Mobile Riverine Force without delay. Until the crisis passed, the MACV commander placed the augmented Mobile Riverine Force under General Eckhardt's tactical command. The senior adviser was well qualified for the role. He had come to Vietnam in December 1966 as the commander of the 9th Infantry Division, and later served as the deputy commander of II Field Force. Furthermore, his authority

[15] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 164th Combat Avn Gp, p. 3, Encl 4; Rpt, Soc Trang Army Airfield, 16 Apr 68, sub: Documentation of Army Aviation Operations (29 Jan–29 Feb 68), p. 1, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 45th Mil Hist Det, n.d., Encl 1.

[16] Rpt, David T. Kenney et al., MACCORDS, 1 Mar 68, sub: Trip Report IV Corps Tactical Zone, pp. 1–5, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 45th Mil Hist Det, n.d., pp. 1–3, Encl 6; Special Rpt, CMIC, US 04-004-68, 16 Apr 68, sub: U Minh 2 Bn, Subordinate to An Xuyen Province, p. 8, box 21, CMIC Interrogation Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[17] Rpt, Advisory Team 96, n.d., pp. 13–15; *Military Region 9*, p. 416.

as the senior adviser to IV Corps would ensure that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces worked together as efficiently as possible.

When Eckhardt gained control of the Mobile Riverine Force on the afternoon of 31 January, it was still deployed along the Ton Duc Loc Canal in western Dinh Tuong Province. He instructed the 2d Brigade commander, Colonel David, to reembark Colonel Hill's 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, so the Mobile Riverine Force could set sail the following morning. In the meantime, Eckhardt used helicopters to airlift Company B from Colonel Bland's 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, back to Dong Tam, so it could establish a blocking position east of the base before night fell. Another flight of helicopters moved Companies A and C of the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, to the Vinh Long airfield to protect the installation overnight.[18]

After spending a relatively uneventful night at the airfield, the two companies from Colonel Bland's battalion flew back to the Mobile Riverine Force, which then steamed south down the Mang Thit Canal and out onto the Mekong River before anchoring at a spot just west of My Tho. At around 1500, U.S. helicopters picked up Company B of the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and flew it to downtown My Tho, where it secured a piece of waterfront just south of the provincial headquarters. That accomplished, Colonel David began landing the three companies from the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, and two from the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, carried aboard the Mobile Riverine Force.[19]

Once ashore, the colonel and his battalion commanders received an update from the province chief. The central part of the city, bordered by the Cung Canal on the west and the Bao Dinh River to the east and north, was mostly under government control, but the western suburbs, a residential area sandwiched between the Cung Canal and the base camp of the South Vietnamese 7th Division, remained in the hands of the *216A* and *514th Local Force Battalions*. The South Vietnamese 32d Ranger Battalion was still fighting at least two Viet Cong companies just north of the city, and at least one enemy battalion was dug into the eastern suburbs of My Tho. Two battalions from the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division were marching back to the city but would not arrive for another day. It would be up to the Americans to spearhead the counterattack.[20]

With several hours of daylight still remaining, Colonel David ordered his two battalion commanders to begin clearing the western suburbs. The Americans encountered strong resistance when they rounded the northern end of the canal and began driving south through the kilometer-long residential area held by the enemy. The six U.S. companies relied on traditional fire and maneuver tactics, employing their organic weapons instead of air and artillery strikes whenever possible to limit property damage and to reduce the chance of civilian casualties. When darkness brought a halt to the fighting, the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, were still a few

[18] AAR, Opn CORONADO X, Mobile Riverine Force, 27 Apr 68, p. 7, box 7, Security-Classified Unit Award Case files, Personnel Services Support Directorate, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[19] Ibid., p. 8.

[20] Fulton, *Riverine Operations, 1966–1969,* p. 150.

MACV advisory compound west of My Tho

blocks shy of the river, having killed an estimated eighty-five enemy soldiers while sustaining two killed and thirty-eight wounded.[21]

That night, the Viet Cong troops who remained in My Tho abandoned the city. Colonel David's battalions completed their sweep of the western suburb on the morning of 2 February and then reboarded the Mobile Riverine Force around noon. General Eckhardt decided to send the amphibious group back to western Dinh Tuong Province in hopes of trapping any Viet Cong forces who attempted to withdraw through Base Area 470. The Mobile Riverine Force deployed along the Mang Thit Canal later that afternoon, but operations over the next several days yielded few results. The enemy, it appeared, had not strayed very far from My Tho, an ominous sign that suggested the battle for the provincial capital was not yet over.

When the Mobile Riverine Force had sailed for My Tho on the morning of 1 February, the commander of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division, General O'Connor, had sent a task force drawn from his 1st and 3d Brigades to relieve Ben Tre in neighboring Kien Hoa Province. The latest intelligence indicated that somewhere between 700 and 800 Viet Cong soldiers from the *516th Local Force Battalion* and several local force companies controlled most of the city. Allied troops still clung to a few enclaves on the waterfront, principally the province headquarters and the MACV advisory compound. The

[21] AAR, Opn CORONADO X, Mobile Riverine Force, p. 9.

Soldiers from the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, move ashore to engage the enemy.

South Vietnamese ranger battalion stationed on the northern edge of town was trying to fight its way into Ben Tre but had made little progress. Several hundred Viet Cong troops also controlled the south bank of the Ben Tre River, though U.S. and South Vietnamese Navy patrol boats had prevented any from crossing the narrow steel bridge that spanned the river.[22]

Although O'Connor's 1st Brigade was heavily committed to the fighting around Long Binh and Bien Hoa and was still responsible for the defense of Bearcat and a long stretch of Highway 1 in eastern III Corps, the brigade commander, Colonel Williams, managed to cut loose his 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Harold P. Mueller, for immediate deployment to Dong Tam. The brigade's 4th Battalion, 49th Infantry, would continue to mop up the remnants of the *5th Division* at Long Binh, while the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and a portion of his 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, continued Operation RILEY in Long Khanh Province and defended Camp Martin Cox in western Bien Hoa Province.[23]

At 3d Brigade headquarters in Tan An, Colonel Everett freed up part of his 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Anthony P. DeLuca,

[22] *Military Region 8*, p. 629.

[23] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 9th Inf Div, 30 Apr 68, Encl 12, p. 1, box 2, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

and most of his 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. John B. Keeley, for immediate deployment to Ben Tre. Late on the afternoon of 1 February, helicopters landed Company B, 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, and Company B, 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, into the small MACV compound on the west side of Ben Tre. With those reinforcements, the defenders at the compound and the adjacent province headquarters threw back the enemy assaults that materialized later that night.

Early the next morning, helicopters delivered Colonel DeLuca and the remainder of his 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, to the MACV compound. Other helicopters transported Colonel Mueller and his 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, from Camp Martin Cox to landing zones just east of the city. Upon landing, Mueller's battalion passed to the tactical control of Colonel DeLuca, through whom Colonel Everett and his 3d Brigade would supervise the clearing operation in Ben Tre.[24]

At 0900, the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, attacked east from the advisory compound toward the central marketplace, while the 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, pushed west toward the city. Both units faced stiff resistance, ending the day more than a kilometer apart and with most of the marketplace still in enemy hands. The trap was closing, however, and when darkness set in the Viet Cong decided to withdraw into the countryside north of Ben Tre. More than 150 enemy dead littered the ruined city, in which only one out of every five buildings remained intact. Soldiers from the South Vietnamese 10th Regiment spent the next several days on a looting spree as they searched the city for Viet Cong stragglers. The pair of U.S. battalions swept the area outside Ben Tre with few results, and then returned to Dong Tam on 5 February to rest and reorganize.[25]

As for the third crisis spot in the upper delta, Vinh Long City, elements of three Viet Cong battalions continued to occupy large parts of the provincial capital. The situation improved somewhat on 2 February when the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 15th Infantry, arrived in the city, but the rate of allied progress remained slow. With public anger growing, the province chief requested help from the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division. Colonel David ordered his two battalion commanders currently with the Mobile Riverine Force to redeploy their men to the area just south of Vinh Long City. Colonel David's plan was to intercept the Viet Cong as they retreated from the city and then crush them in a pincer movement using his two battalions and the South Vietnamese units in Vinh Long.[26]

Late on the afternoon of 2 February, a flight of helicopters ferried Colonel Hill's 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, from its current position in western Dinh Tuong Province to landing zones approximately five kilometers south of Vinh Long City. Around that same time, Colonel Bland's 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry,

[24] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 9th Inf Div, Encl 12, p. 10.

[25] Rpt, 3d Bde, 9th Div, n.d., sub: Recommendation for Award of Presidential Unit Citation, pp. 1–4, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn ENTERPRISE, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 53–54, Historians files, CMH.

[26] Harvey Meyerson, *Vinh Long* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 144–45.

minus one company that flew by helicopter to Can Tho airfield, motored past Vinh Long City in a fleet of landing craft, turned south down a canal, and then disembarked on the right flank of the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry.[27]

As soon as the enemy caught sight of the helicopters and boats dropping troops in his rear, he decided that it was time to leave Vinh Long. The *306th*, the *308th*, and the *587th Local Force Battalions* withdrew from the city that night, losing eighty soldiers to Colonel David's battalions as they passed through the U.S. cordon but preserving the bulk of their men to fight another day. The enemy withdrew a safe distance from the city, outside of the search radius of the U.S. battalions that remained in the area for two more days before returning to Dong Tam.[28]

When South Vietnamese units regained contact with the enemy southwest of Vinh Long on 6 February, Colonel David sent the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, out once again with the Mobile Riverine Force. While searching the tree-lined canals that snaked through the countryside, Colonel Hill's battalion found scattered groups of enemy soldiers, killing sixty-three against their own loss of four killed and sixty-seven wounded. The 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, joined the search operation on 7 February, but when no further contacts took place, the U.S. units returned to Dinh Tuong Province in search of richer hunting grounds.[29]

Firebase Jaeger

With all of the provincial capitals firmly back in allied hands by the seventh of February, General Weyand returned the Mobile Riverine Force to the control of the 9th Infantry Division and its 2d Brigade commander, Colonel David, thereby freeing General Eckhardt to concentrate on his duties as the senior adviser to IV Corps. The II Field Force commander instructed General O'Connor to move the remaining elements from the 1st Brigade at Camp Martin Cox to Dong Tam as soon as possible, giving the division commander a two-brigade force with which to mount a counteroffensive in the upper delta. Colonel Everett, meanwhile, resumed his security mission in Long An Province with the 3d Brigade.

The 9th Division's most pressing assignments were to restore security along Highway 4 in Dinh Tuong Province and to prevent further attacks on My Tho. Receiving intelligence that several enemy battalions remained near the city, General O'Connor directed the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, currently based at Dong Tam, to sweep the hamlets orbiting My Tho. As the search began on 8 February, two companies from the 5th Battalion discovered the *265th Battalion* in the hamlet of Long My, just three kilometers northwest of the provincial capital. Bringing up an additional company, the mechanized troopers drove the enemy out of Long My, killing at least ninety-one

[27] *Military Region 8*, p. 430.
[28] AAR, Opn Coronado X, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 9–10.
[29] Ibid., pp. 11–12.

Viet Cong soldiers. The Americans sustained four killed and twenty-eight wounded. Even with the *265th Battalion* removed from the picture, at least five others—the *261A* and *261B Battalions*, the *514th Battalion*, plus the *263A* and *263B Battalions*—remained unaccounted for.[30]

On 10 February, General O'Connor airlifted the headquarters of the 1st Brigade, 9th Division, and the entire 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, from Camp Martin Cox to Dong Tam. In addition to that infantry battalion, the commander of the 1st Brigade, Colonel Williams, gained operational control over the 3d Brigade's 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry; the 1st Battalion, 84th Artillery; and Company A, 15th Engineer Battalion, for a new mission called Operation Hop Tac I. Its goal was to secure and repair Highway 4 across the length of Dinh Tuong Province, a distance of some fifty-nine kilometers.[31]

In the week that followed, the 1st Brigade task force encountered only light resistance as it repaired and reopened damaged sections of Highway 4. On 13 February, the Mobile Riverine Force headed south for an extended operation in the central delta, leaving Colonel Williams with the responsibility of handling any crisis that might emerge in his sector. Accordingly, the 1st Brigade commander made arrangements to send troops to Vinh Long City when three Viet Cong battalions invaded the provincial capital the next evening, but the South Vietnamese defenders turned out not to need American help. The enemy withdrew to the countryside two days later, leaving behind around 300 of their dead as well as more devastation in the provincial capital.[32]

The first serious challenge to Operation Hop Tac I came on the night of 24–25 February at Firebase Jaeger, a 9th Division outpost that was approximately seven kilometers northeast of Dong Tam (*see Map 31*). The base was built on an acre of dry rice paddy just south of Highway 4. It had good all-around visibility, the nearest tree lines being approximately one kilometer to the north and to the west. Less to be desired, a series of shallow dikes criss-crossed the area, partly negating the effectiveness of the defensive wire that surrounded the base.

The firebase was built to protect the four 155-mm. howitzers of Battery B of the 1st Battalion, 84th Artillery. Defending the battery were Companies B and C of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, equipped with twenty-five armored personnel carriers. Also present was a thirty-man road-building team from Company B, 15th Engineer Battalion, and a platoon from Company A, 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, which stood by in reserve. Half of the armored personnel carriers were arrayed around the edge of the perimeter at 25-meter intervals, while the other half were concentrated near the center of the firebase. None had protective earthworks around them because the soil was exceptionally hard at this time of year and only a bulldozer could have torn up enough earth to do the job. The

[30] AAR, Opn Coronado X, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, p. 14.

[31] AAR, Opn Hop Tac I, 1st Bde, 9th Div, 30 Apr 68, pp. 1–2, box 42, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[32] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 437.

soldiers were barely able to fill enough sandbags to build several command bunkers and to construct a low barrier for the howitzers.[33]

It was well after midnight on 25 February when 300 to 400 Viet Cong soldiers from the *263d Main Force Battalion* and the *313th Sapper Engineer Company* quietly approached the firebase from the south, east, and west. Many wore straw attached to their backs to resemble cut rice stalks. Some crept along the bottom of the partly filled canals to avoid detection. As the enemy closed the last 200 meters, a listening post on the southeast side of JAEGER spotted a group of enemy soldiers through a Starlight scope and raised the alarm. The time was 0145.

Capt. Daniel R. Schueren from Company B of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, dispatched four armored personnel carriers to investigate the contact. The vehicles had only just exited the northern gate and made a right-hand turn when a volley of rocket-propelled grenades came shrieking out of the darkness. The lead vehicle burst into flames after being hit. Seconds later, another salvo of rocket grenades whooshed toward the carriers that ringed the west side of the base. Before long six M113 armored personnel carriers were burning furiously. Captain Schueren was dead, killed by enemy fire when he left his command bunker to rally his men.[34]

Meanwhile, Viet Cong sappers were busy tearing holes in the defensive wire with satchel charges. Enemy radio technicians also jammed the frequency used by the headquarters of 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry. The battalion staff changed to the Company B frequency in order to coordinate air and artillery strikes, call in a flare ship, and arrange for helicopter support. Colonel Williams also called on the defenders at Firebase HESSIAN, three kilometers to the east, and Firebase FELS, three kilometers to the west, to send reinforcements.[35]

The situation at JAEGER became critical at 0245 when a squad of Viet Cong soldiers penetrated the sector held by the artillery battery. Two of the four howitzers fell into enemy hands. Worried that the sappers might try to use the captured weapons, the acting commander of Company C, 1st Lt. Lee Alley, decided to call for artillery support from HESSIAN and FELS. He requested that the shells be set to detonate in the air above the firebase. Word went around to the defenders to seek cover as Lieutenant Wade radioed in the fire mission. A minute or two later, dozens of artillery shells began to explode over the base. The deadly thunderstorm cut down some of the advancing enemy soldiers and sent the rest scurrying for cover, momentarily checking the Viet Cong assault.[36]

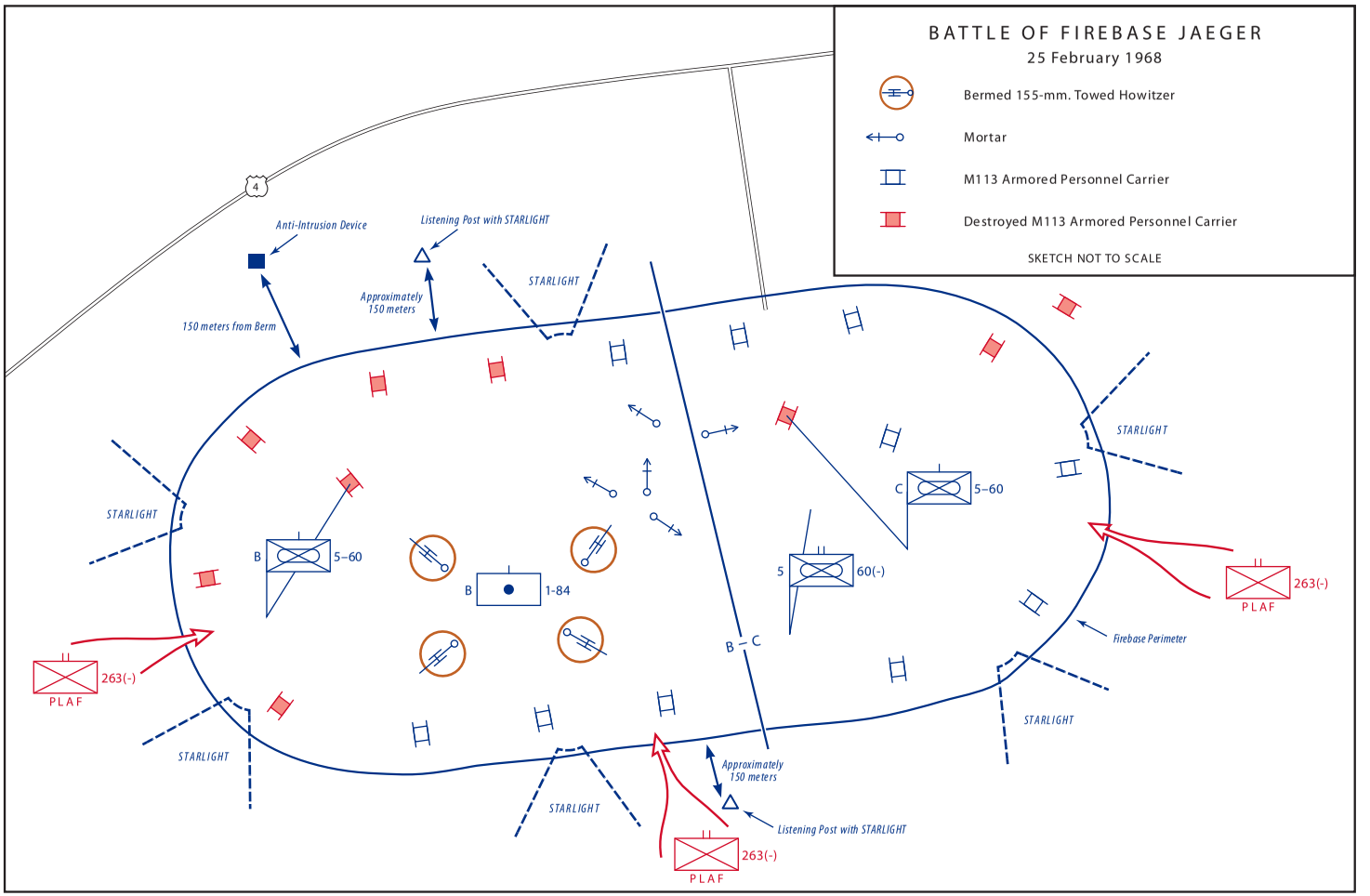
At that critical juncture, around 0300, five armored personnel carriers from the reconnaissance platoon of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, rumbled into sight on the eastern branch of Highway 4. A total of seven vehicles had left Firebase HESSIAN, but an enemy ambush claimed two of them en

[33] AAR, FS/PB JAEGER, 25 Feb 68, 5th Bn, 60th Inf, 3 Mar 68, p. 3, box 15, AARs, 1965□1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[34] Ibid.; Keith W. Nolan, *House to House: Playing the Enemy's Game in Saigon, May 1968* (St. Paul, Minn.: Zenith [MBI Publishing], 2006), p. 25.

[35] AAR, FS/PB JAEGER, 25 Feb 68, 5th Bn, 60th Inf, p. 3.

[36] Nolan, *House to House*, p. 26.


BATTLE OF FIREBASE JAEGER
25 February 1968
Bermed 155-mm. Towed Howitzer
Mortar
M113 Armored Personnel Carrier
Destroyed M113 Armored Personnel Carrier
SKETCH NOT TO SCALE
4
Anti-Intrusion Device
Listening Post with STARLIGHT
Approximately 150 meters
150 meters from Berm
STARLIGHT
B 5–60
B 1-84
C 5–60
5 60(-)
B – C
263(-)
PLAF
Firebase Perimeter
Approximately 150 meters
Listening Post with STARLIGHT

MAP 31

An M113 from the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, travels Highway 4 in the Mekong Delta.

route. The remaining five vehicles tore through attacking Viet Cong and then entered JAEGER. Lieutenant Wade stopped the artillery barrage so the entire garrison could emerge from cover and resume their positions. The infantry lashed the enemy with small arms and machine-gun fire as the reconnaissance platoon and several other armored personnel carriers began a slow clockwise sweep of the perimeter. By 0315, the Americans had killed or chased off the last of the intruders.[37]

Fifteen minutes later, a group of armored personnel carriers carrying Company A, 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, arrived from Firebase FELS and immediately headed south after the retreating enemy. Company C from the 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, arrived on foot from Firebase FELS some forty-five minutes later and secured the outer perimeter. By 0515 all of the shooting had stopped.[38]

The battle had been one of most costly engagements in the recent history of the 9th Division. Twenty-two Americans had been killed and seventy-one wounded. Nine armored personnel carriers had been destroyed and two howitzers had been damaged. The enemy had lost some one hundred killed. If there was a silver lining for the 9th Division, enemy resistance in central

[37] AAR, Opn HOP TAC I, 1st Bde, 9th Div, p. 6.
[38] Ibid., p. 21.

Dinh Tuong Province dropped off noticeably after the battle for JAEGER. Viet Cong interdiction of Highway 4 became increasingly rare as U.S. units honed their ability to operate at night, usually in squad- and platoon-size patrols that would wait in ambush for enemy mine layers to carry out their business. When Operation HOP TAC I ended on 10 March, the number of enemy craters that appeared on Highway 4 each night had dropped from a high of eighty-nine to almost none.[39]

CORONADO XI

While Colonel Williams' 1st Brigade restored security along Highway 4 in Dinh Tuong Province, Colonel David's 2d Brigade headed deeper into the delta than it had ever operated before. The mission came about when the South Vietnamese corps commander, General Manh, asked the Mobile Riverine Force for assistance in driving off four enemy units, the *303d*, *307th*, *309th*, and the *Tay Do Battalions*, which still clung to the outskirts of Can Tho City. Commencing Operation CORONADO XI on 13 February, Colonel David and the Mobile Riverine Force headed out of Dong Tam and set a course for Phong Dinh Province.

Landing at several beaches south of Can Tho City the next day, the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, began a clockwise sweep around the provincial capital. Resistance was minimal. Over the next nine days, the Americans killed a total of eighty-two Viet Cong soldiers and found a number of supply dumps. U.S. losses came to fourteen killed and seventy-three wounded in the clearing operation.

On 20 February, *Military Region 3* sent the *312th Local Force Battalion*, two provisional battalions, and an element of the *306th Battalion* to attack Sa Dec City. Troops from the South Vietnamese 15th Regiment held the enemy at bay, while General Thi arranged for the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, and the South Vietnamese 3d Troop, 2d Armored Cavalry Squadron, to mount a relief operation from Vinh Long City. When those troops reached Sa Dec City that afternoon, the enemy retreated into the countryside.[40]

Whatever the motive, the enemy attack had no effect on the 2d Brigade, which continued its sweep around Can Tho City. Two days later, Colonel David received intelligence that placed the *Military Region 3* headquarters in Phung Hiep District at the southern end of Phong Dinh Province. Hoping to catch the enemy unawares, the 2d Brigade commander decided to head south with the Mobile Riverine Force by way of the canal system, using engineer jacks to elevate bridges so the boats could reach otherwise inaccessible areas.

Arriving at Phung Hiep on the twenty-third, Companies B and C of the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, made contact with security elements from the *Military Region 3* headquarters. Assisted by gunships, air strikes, and naval vessels, the 2d Brigade killed sixty-six of the enemy that day while suffering

[39] Ibid., p. 34.
[40] Ibid., p. 207; *Military Region 9*, pp. 431–33.

Tango boats landing on a riverbank in the Mekong Delta

only three wounded. Most of the *Military Region 3* command group escaped, but from that time on the enemy headquarters spent more of its time concealed in rear base areas than in the field directing operations.[41]

The Mobile Riverine Force returned to Can Tho on 25 February after a mortar barrage struck the U.S. airfield north of town that morning. The shelling damaged two aircraft and destroyed between 50 and 75 percent of the ordnance in the main ammunition depot. Two Americans were killed and another twenty-seven were wounded. Colonel David sent the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, back into the countryside around Can Tho to look for the four Viet Cong battalions still thought to be in the area.[42]

On the morning of 26 February, a patrol located a battalion-size enemy force manning fortified positions seven kilometers northwest of the capital. Companies from the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, converged on the location, some on foot, and others by helicopter. The enemy put up a stiff defense, damaging a dozen helicopters as they landed troops behind the Viet Cong position. When the fighting ended that evening,

[41] AAR, Opn CORONADO XI, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 17 Apr 68, pp. 12–13, box 2, Asst Ch of Staff, G–3, 9th Inf Div, RG 472, NACP.

[42] Intel Cable, CIA, 26 Feb 68, sub: Situation in the Provinces of IV Corps as of 1300 Hours on 25 February 1968, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

the Americans found a total of sixty-two enemy dead and a large ammunition dump. Their own losses had been fourteen killed and fifty-one wounded. When the two U.S. battalions found no other enemy units in the countryside west and north of Can Tho in the days that followed, David felt assured that the provincial capital was momentarily safe from that quarter.

Turning its attention to new hunting grounds, the 2d Brigade moved the Mobile Riverine Force into the canals south of Can Tho to join three South Vietnamese ranger battalions in a sweep of the area. On the afternoon of 1 March, a fight began five kilometers southwest of the city, which lasted until the next day, producing sixty-three enemy dead and a U.S. loss of six killed and thirty-seven wounded. That clash proved to be the last major contact of CORONADO XI. When the operation ended on 6 March, the Mobile Riverine Force recorded a total body count of 297 Viet Cong soldiers. Colonel David's troops had not delivered the knockout blow he had hoped for. Nevertheless, the aggressive American thrust into the central delta had protected Can Tho City from further harm, and the appearance of the Mobile Riverine Force this deep into the delta had given the headquarters of *Military Region 3* new problems to worry about.[43]

The Post-Tet Situation in IV Corps

Judged by the goals *Military Regions 2* and *3* had set prior to the general offensive, Tet had been a disappointment. Viet Cong troops had seized only a handful of the government and military command centers that the enemy had identified as essential targets. No uprising had materialized. The South Vietnamese government had not cracked and most of its military forces had performed credibly. Many Viet Cong units had taken heavy casualties that could not be quickly or easily replaced. Enemy depots were now depleted, while morale, sky-high prior to Tet, was now conspicuously low among some units.

On the whole, South Vietnamese regular units had proven surprisingly resilient, especially given their low strength at the start of the offensive. Those units from the Vietnamese 7th Division that had seen action at My Tho, Soc Trang, Ca Mau, and Can Tho had done particularly well. South Vietnamese ranger and marine units had also proved their elite status. Although Regional and Popular Forces soldiers had abandoned their rural outposts, they had not deserted in large numbers, instead withdrawing to the nearest town to take part in its defenses. Still, there had been a downside to their actions, for large parts of the countryside were now devoid of government troops. At the end of February, most Regional and Popular Forces units still had not returned to their rural stations, leaving the Revolutionary Development program at a standstill in nine out of the delta's sixteen provinces.[44]

[43] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 9th Inf Div, Encl 12, p. 9.

[44] Rpt, MACV, 21 Mar 68, sub: Assessment of RVNAF Status, pp. 1–3, document 87, 31 Mar Speech, vol. 7, Advisory Gp Papers, box 49 (1 of 2), NSF-National Security Council

Easier to determine was the impact of the offensive on the urban population in IV Corps. On a comparative basis, the cities in the Mekong Delta sustained the greatest amount of damage in Vietnam, with more than 21,000 buildings destroyed and more than 93,000 people left homeless. Large swathes of My Tho, Ben Tre, Chau Doc, and Vinh Loc had been leveled in the fighting or burned to ashes. Repairing the damage would likely take more than a year.

If the enemy could hold on to his rural gains and keep the provincial capitals under psychological, if not physical, siege, he could justify the high price he had paid during Tet. Conversely, if the South Vietnamese regained their confidence quickly and resumed the pacification program with renewed vigor, the depleted Viet Cong would be hard-pressed to resist. Much would depend on the quality of allied leadership over the next few months to see what the lasting impact would be.[45]

History, LBJL.

[45] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 9th Inf Div, Encl 12, p. 26; Rpt, Lt Col Philip S. Hurd, CORDS, 18 Mar 68, sub: Trip Report IV Corps Tactical Zone, p. 2; and Encl 1.

12

Fighting in the Northern Provinces

More than a dozen Viet Cong battalions attacked cities throughout the Mekong Delta on the night of 30–31 January, a mixed force of approximately twenty Viet Cong and North Vietnamese battalions struck the capitals of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces at the other end of the country. The *7th Front* sent five battalions and nearly 2,000 soldiers to attack Quang Tri City, while the *Hue City Front* mustered fifteen battalions and more than 5,000 soldiers to attack Hue. Oddly, the three North Vietnamese infantry divisions and supporting artillery units attached to the *DMZ Front*, the strongest of the three enemy commands in northern I Corps, remained virtually inactive as the general offensive got under way. Only a few sapper and artillery raids troubled the units defending the Strong Point Barrier, and no serious fighting took place at Khe Sanh between 28 January and 6 February. General Westmoreland would learn the reason several months later from a North Vietnamese prisoner of war: a B–52 bomb strike on 28 January had nearly destroyed Maj. Gen. Tran Qui Hai's *DMZ Front* headquarters, forcing his staff to move to a new location and thereby leaving the North Vietnamese units it controlled without orders. Westmoreland welcomed the lull along the Demilitarized Zone, for he needed all of the newly arrived Army units in northern I Corps to deal with the attacks at Quang Tri City and Hue.

The Assault on Quang Tri City

Allied officials in Quang Tri City were better prepared than most for the attacks that hit South Vietnam's cities on the first and second nights of Tet. The senior province adviser, Robert B. Brewer, had learned from one of his spies in September that the enemy intended to seize the city sometime in early 1968. In the last week of January, when intelligence suggested that the attack was imminent, the province chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Am, put the city on an emergency footing. He canceled all military leave, imposed a curfew, and placed sandbagged checkpoints manned by the Regional Forces on every street corner. Colonel Am also received operational control over the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion, which he transferred to the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment, Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu Hanh, the officer responsible for coordinating the defenses around Quang Tri City.[1]

[1] Ltr, Robert B. Brewer to Eric M. Hammel, 14 Nov 86, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 297–98; Intel Cable, CIA, 2 Feb 68, sub: This is a

The provincial capital was a collection of one- and two-story buildings on the bank of the Thach Han, a wide river that ran past the western edge of the city on its way to Dong Ha, a journey by water of some twenty kilometers, and then another ten kilometers beyond that to the Cua Viet estuary. A square stone fortress measuring several city blocks on each side dominated the northern half of Quang Tri City. Built by the Vietnamese emperors in the early nineteenth century, the Citadel featured thick stone walls and a water-filled moat that offered good protection for Colonel Am's provincial headquarters. A two-lane dirt road known as Route 555 entered the city from the northeast, passed by the eastern edge of the Citadel and the lower half of town, and then continued south another four kilometers before ending near the Catholic hamlet of La Vang. At the northwestern corner of Quang Tri City, a second road known as Route 560 headed north along Thach Han for about a kilometer, crossed a small tributary known as the Vinh Dinh River, and then continued north to the district town of Trieu Phong and more than a dozen Revolutionary Development hamlets. A third road, Highway 1, approached Quang Tri City from the southeast, turned east along the lower edge of town, and then crossed the Thach Han via a steel bridge. Turning to the northwest, Highway 1 passed by the Ai Tu airfield, a newly completed C–130-capable facility manned by U.S. Air Force personnel, before continuing on to Dong Ha.

Going into the Tet holiday, Colonel Hanh chose to keep three battalions from his South Vietnamese 1st Regiment in Trieu Phong District to the north and northeast of Quang Tri City to defend the Revolutionary Development hamlets there and to watch for the *808th* and *814th Battalions*, which operated from the Communist-controlled villages that lined the coast. He stationed two companies from the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion inside the Citadel along with a battery of Vietnamese 105-mm. howitzers. Hanh placed a second paratrooper company in the wooded hamlet of Tri Buu just northeast of the Citadel to watch Route 555. MACV Advisory Team 4 stationed in a compound near the eastern corner of the Citadel helped cover the open farmland to the east of Quang Tri City with bunker-protected machine guns and a pair of M42 Dusters. Two National Police Field Force companies and several Popular Forces platoons manned sandbagged checkpoints at street corners throughout town. Colonel Hanh kept his fourth infantry battalion and a cavalry troop of M113 armored personnel carriers at the La Vang regimental headquarters, situated near Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON approximately three kilometers south of town. Finally, he placed the fourth company from the South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion near the southeastern edge of town to watch Highway 1.

Colonel Hanh's ace in the hole, Colonel Rattan's 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, was conducting Operation JEB STUART from several landing zones in Base Area 101 at the start of the Tet holiday, looking for signs of the *812th Regiment* that made its home there and paying special attention to the routes that led to the provincial capital. If the city came under attack, Rattan had

Situation Report on 1 February prepared by CAS, based on the personal observation of a CAS official in the province, p. 2, box 240 (1 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

An aerial view of Quang Tri City

a plan in place to relieve the capital with the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry. His contingency plan would soon be put to the test.

The assault on Quang Tri City got under way at 0200 on 31 January, a cold and drizzly moonless night. The battle began when twenty North Vietnamese commandos from the *10th Sapper Battalion* who had infiltrated the city over the last few days emerged from safe houses to attack the Citadel. The saboteurs intended to destroy Colonel Am's headquarters and then to hold one of the fortress gates long enough for the main strike force—the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* of the *812th Regiment* and the *814th Local Force Battalion*—to enter the city (*Map 32*).[2]

The sappers counted on speed and surprise to make up for their small numbers. They had neither. The main attack force was at least two hours behind schedule and still several kilometers to the east of the city. Rain-swollen streams had slowed the units, and their officers were confused in the unfamiliar terrain. Furthermore, the town was filled with alert Regional Forces soldiers and policemen who were expecting just such an attack. The defenders mowed down most of the sappers with truck-mounted machine guns and the rest soon

[2] AAR, Opn JEB STUART I, 1st Cav Div, 2 Jul 68, p. 2, Encl 5, Historians files, CMH.

surrendered. The premature raid gave the city notice that a second and larger attack was imminent.[3]

The three enemy battalions that made up the main attack force reached the city around 0400. The *814th Battalion* headed for the hamlet of Tri Buu, approaching the city from the northeast along Highway 1. Concealed by a layer of early morning fog, the Viet Cong made it to the edge of the hamlet before being spotted by the South Vietnamese paratroopers who were stationed there. After a short and confused firefight in nearly pitch-dark conditions, the outnumbered paratroopers fell back to the Citadel. The *814th Battalion* raked the Citadel with heavy machine guns mounted in the cupola of a Catholic church, while a second local force battalion, the *808th*, mortared the city from a blocking position it had established on Highway 1 just northeast of town.

While that fight raged, the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* attacked Quang Tri City from the southeast, their mortar teams shelling Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON and the La Vang complex, while the main body of North Vietnamese soldiers hustled up Highway 1. U.S. sharpshooters and a .50-caliber machine gun crew positioned on top of a water tower at Landing Zone BETTY engaged the enemy from the flank, killing or wounding several dozen North Vietnamese soldiers, but the remainder kept going without bothering to return fire. The *K4 Battalion* plunged into the provincial capital, while the *K6 Battalion* stopped at the intersection of Highway 1 and Route 555, taking cover in a field of tombstones just north of Landing Zone BETTY. Counting the Viet Cong battalions at the other end of town, as many as 1,500 enemy soldiers now clung to the outskirts of the provincial capital.[4]

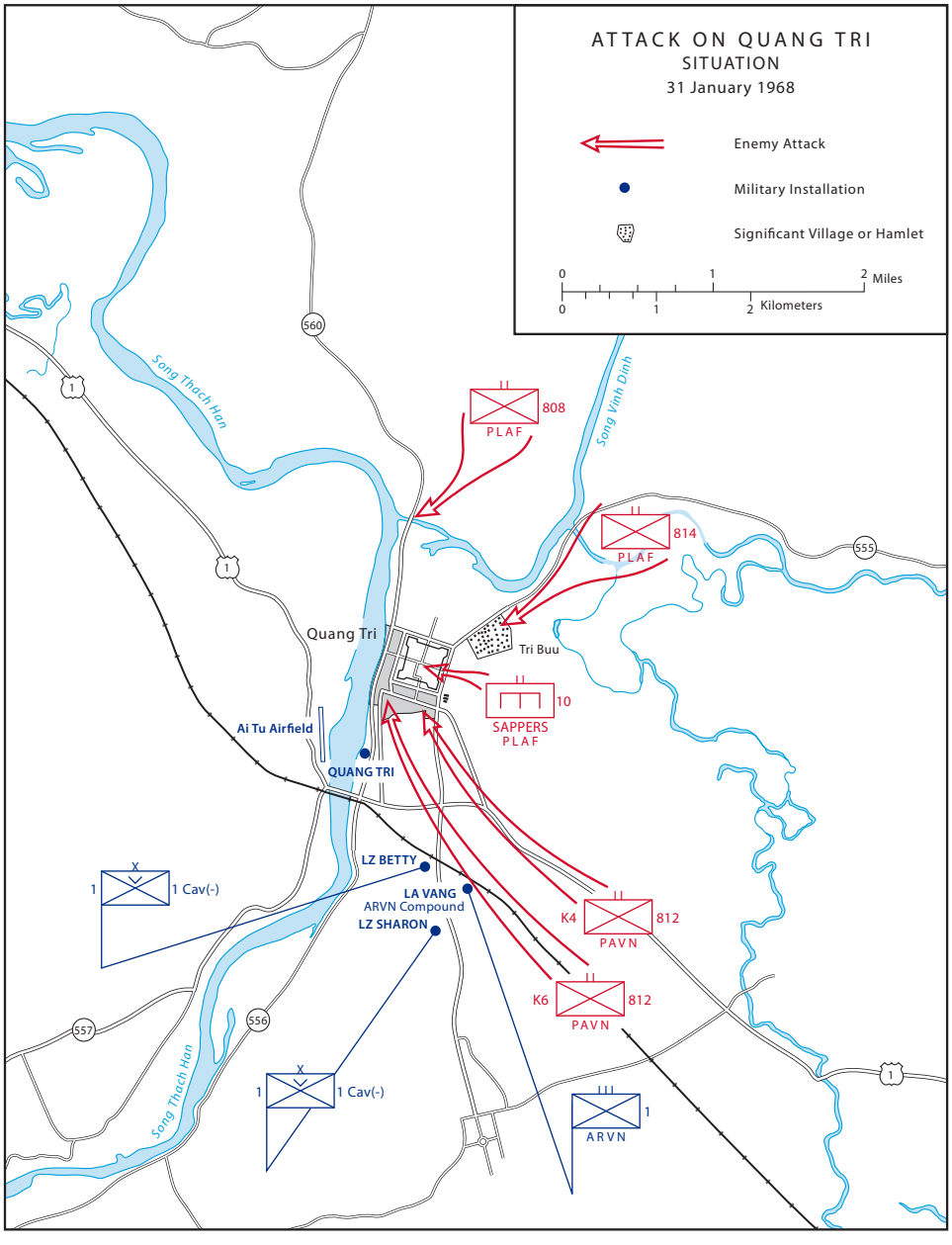
Isolating the city was not the same as conquering it, however. The soldiers from the *814th Battalion* had no way of entering the Citadel because the *10th Sapper Battalion* had failed to seize any of its gates. The *K4 Battalion* could not fight its way through the South Vietnamese policemen and territorial soldiers that had formed an ad hoc defensive line in the center of Quang Tri City. Unable to advance, the *814th Battalion* stayed put in the hamlet of Tri Buu and the *K4 Battalion* began digging into the southern edge of town.[5]

Colonel Hanh launched a two-pronged counterattack shortly after daybreak. Two of his battalions near Trieu Phong headed south on Route 560, hoping to cross Vinh Dinh Bridge and then attack east toward Tri Buu, but encountered the *808th Battalion* in a blocking position a few hundred meters north of the bridge. The South Vietnamese advance came to an abrupt halt, and the two battalion commanders reported only marginal progress over the next few hours. Colonel Hanh's counterattack from the south fared no better. The infantry battalion and the cavalry troop he dispatched from La Vang got only as far as the cemetery on the southern edge of town before being stopped

[3] Intel Cable, CIA, 2 Feb 68, sub: Situation Report on Quang Tri Province as of 0700 on 1 February, pp. 3–4, box 240 (1 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 299.

[4] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 299; AAR, Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, 1 Apr 68, p. 3, Encl to ORLL, 1 Nov 67–31 Jan 68, 1st Cav Div, 17 Mar 68, Historians files, CMH.

[5] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 300.


ATTACK ON QUANG TRI
SITUATION
31 January 1968
Enemy Attack
Military Installation
Significant Village or Hamlet
0 1 2 Miles
0 1 2 Kilometers
560
1
Song Thach Han
808
PLAF
Song Vinh Dinh
814
PLAF
555
Quang Tri
Tri Buu
10
SAPPERS
PLAF
Ai Tu Airfield
QUANG TRI
LZ BETTY
LA VANG
ARVN Compound
LZ SHARON
1 Cav(-)
K4
812
PAVN
K6
812
PAVN
557
556
Song Thach Han
1 Cav(-)
1
ARVN

MAP 32

by the soldiers from the *K6 Battalion.* When Colonel Hanh's battalions failed to punch through after several hours of hard fighting, Colonel Am turned to the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division for help.[6]

Colonel Rattan relayed the message to General Tolson, and asked for permission to shift several companies currently operating in Base Area 101 to landing zones southeast of town where the heavy weapons companies from the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* were located. The colonel wanted to knock out the mortars and recoilless rifles that had effectively closed the runways at BETTY and SHARON. He also intended to cut off the enemy's line of retreat back to Base Area 101. Tolson urged Rattan to execute the plan without delay.[7]

At 1600, an armada of helicopters appeared in the overcast skies above Quang Tri City. A flight of aircraft deposited Companies B and C from the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, near Highway 1 some two kilometers southeast of town. Within minutes, the Americans located the heavy weapons company from the *K4 Battalion* and began a swirling, close-range battle with the North Vietnamese gun crews. Meanwhile, a second flight of helicopters landed Companies A and C from the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, about two kilometers farther south where the *K6 Battalion* had emplaced its mortars and recoilless rifles. The North Vietnamese troops initially fought with great determination, but resistance waned over the next few hours as helicopter gunships, artillery, and roving cavalry platoons wiped out a growing number of gun crews.[8]

As Colonel Rattan's troops disrupted the enemy's rear, the South Vietnamese task force fighting at the cemetery near Landing Zone BETTY renewed its attack. Bereft of its heavy weapons support and hammered incessantly by air and artillery strikes, the *K6 Battalion* gradually gave way and then broke as evening approached. Attacking from the north, the South Vietnamese battalions finally swept aside the *808th Battalion* blocking their way and crossed the Vinh Dinh River into town. Attacking out of the Citadel, the reorganized South Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion also drove the *814th Battalion* from Tri Buu after several hours of hard fighting.[9]

As darkness brought an end to the fighting, the soldiers from the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* who still occupied a few blocks along the southern edge of Quang Tri City abandoned their positions and headed south. Most retained their weapons and uniforms, but some donned civilian clothing to blend into the crowds of refugees who were fleeing the city. When daybreak came on 1 February, the capital was back in allied hands.[10]

Colonels Hanh and Rattan organized a combined pursuit of the *K4* and *K6 Battalions* that netted an additional three North Vietnamese soldiers killed or captured over the next four days. The largest single engagement took place

[6] Ibid.

[7] AAR, Battle of Quang Tri, 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 4.

[8] Rpts, 14th Mil Hist Det, 1 Apr 68, sub: Battle of Quang Tri, pp. 5–6; 1st Bde, 1st Cav Div, n.d., sub: An analysis of current capabilities of the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, p. 4. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[9] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, p. 300.

[10] Interv, author with Steven Velcrum, former member of Co C, 1st Bn, 5th Cav, 26 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

on 4 February when the 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry, a unit from the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, then operating under the control of the 1st Cavalry Division, discovered the *K5 Battalion* from the *812th Regiment* near the district town of Hai Lang, eight kilometers southeast of Quang Tri City. Designated as the reserve force for the attack on the capital, the *K5 Battalion* had remained near Hai Lang throughout the battle to protect the enemy's line of communications to Base Area 101. In the ensuing firefight, the paratroopers killed 108 enemy soldiers with the help of artillery and helicopters at a cost of 5 dead and 42 wounded. South Vietnamese troops scored another blow against the *812th Regiment* when they located its command post in the woods just east of La Vang and killed the North Vietnamese regimental commander. The government troops also captured the regiment's chief of staff along with a trove of cryptographic equipment and codes, plus the regimental logbook that contained a desperate final entry: "Help. Being attacked by American Airborne. Give idea."[11]

All told, the enemy lost an estimated 914 soldiers killed and another 86 captured between 31 January and 6 February in the battle for Quang Tri City. The badly mauled *812th Regiment* disappeared into the western mountains for the next several months. The *808th* and the *814th Battalions* dropped from sight for an even longer period, only returning to offensive action in the latter part of 1968. [12]

Allied operations quickly resumed after the battle. Rattan's brigade shifted its focus back to Base Area 101, while the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment returned to the Revolutionary Development areas around Quang Tri City. In the city, however, fear of another attack remained palpable for weeks afterward.

The battle for Quang Tri City proved to be one of the most one-sided allied victories of the Tet offensive. Nonetheless, its outcome had been very much in doubt on the morning of 31 January. The enemy had not relinquished his grip on the city until Colonel Rattan's soldiers had begun landing in his rear. Quang Tri City had been fortunate; no other city in the country had a fully functional airmobile brigade operating on its doorstep. The 1st Cavalry Division could not be everywhere in northern I Corps at once, and where its reach was weak, the enemy stood a substantially greater chance of achieving his aims.

Target: Hue

The former imperial capital of Vietnam had so far escaped the worst ravages of war. From time to time the enemy mortared the city, and saboteurs from the *Hue City Sapper Unit* occasionally committed acts of terrorism,

[11] Intel Cable, CIA, 3 Feb 68, sub: This is a Situation Report in Quang Tri Province as of 0400 Hours on 3 February, p. 4, box 240 (1 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Ltr, Brewer to Hammel, 14 Nov 86, p. 3.

[12] Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, 1 Apr 68, pp. 5, 7.

but a large enemy force had never appeared at the city's gates. Nonetheless, considering the city's cultural and intellectual importance to the Vietnamese people—as well as its political status as the capital of Thua Thien Province—it was only a matter of time before the Communists tried to make it their prize.

According to Buddhist legend, Hue had sprung to life as a lotus flower blossoming from a puddle of mud. In more prosaic terms, the city sat on a bend of the Perfume (Hoang) River seven kilometers southwest of the South China Sea and was divided by the river into two sections. On the north bank stood the Citadel, a six-square-kilometer fortress constructed in the first two decades of the nineteenth century at the behest of the royal family. Modeled after the Forbidden City in Beijing, the Vauban-style fortress was built in the shape of a diamond, with its four corners pointing to the cardinal directions of the compass. Stone walls up to eight meters high and several meters thick encircled the city, as did a wide moat filled with water. The Perfume River ran a parallel course a short distance from the southeastern wall, offering extra protection from that quarter. Ten gates pierced the massive walls, four on the southeastern side, and two each on the remaining walls. A shallow canal cut through the heart of the Citadel, winding a crooked course from the middle of the southwestern wall to the middle of the northeastern wall. A pair of culverts connected the interior city canal with the canals outside. In more peaceful times, boats traveled from the Perfume River into the city, but now barbed wire blocked both culverts. The southeastern section of the city contained the

An aerial view of Hue on the Perfume River

Imperial Palace, a walled and moat-ringed compound covering nearly a square kilometer that had housed the royal family between 1802 and 1945.[13]

South of the Perfume River lay the newer section of the city, a bustling residential and business community that contained numerous public buildings, including the prestigious Hue University, the province headquarters and its associated jail, the main hospital, and the treasury. Southern Hue, half the size of the Citadel, was also known as the Triangle because it resembled an irregular triangle bounded on the south by the Phu Cam Canal, on the east by a stream known as the Phat Lac, and on the northwest by the Perfume River. A pair of bridges linked the modern city to the Citadel. The Nguyen Hoang Bridge, built to transport vehicles and pedestrians using Highway 1, spanned the Perfume River near the eastern corner of the Citadel. Fifteen hundred meters to its southwest was the Bach Ho Railroad Bridge. The other bridge of military importance in southern Hue was the An Cuu Bridge, a modest arch on Highway 1 that conveyed traffic across the Phu Cam Canal.

Despite Hue's size and importance, the city had relatively few defenders within its limits. On the eve of Tet, the greater metropolitan area contained fewer than a thousand South Vietnamese troops on active duty. Some of the garrison was on leave to celebrate Tet, either at their homes in the city or elsewhere in neighboring districts. The headquarters of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, made its home in the Mang Ca compound, a minifortress that occupied the northern corner of the Citadel. Apart from the headquarters staff and a handful of support units, the only combat units in the Citadel were the division's 36-man reconnaissance platoon and the division's reaction force, the elite Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company. General Truong's other reserve, a troop of M41 light tanks, was laagered on Highway 1, two kilometers south of the Triangle. In an emergency, he could also call on two South Vietnamese airborne battalions and a troop of armored personnel carriers that operated ten kilometers to the north of the city at a Highway 1 outpost called PK–17.[14]

The American presence in the city was minimal, with only 200 or so troops on assignment there at any given time. Approximately one hundred U.S. Army advisers and administrative personnel as well as a few Marine guards were headquartered in a lightly defended compound a block and a half south of the Perfume River, on the east side of Highway 1 just across from the university. A rotating group of staff personnel from the compound were stationed at General Truong's headquarters day and night. Other U.S. and Australian advisers were out in the countryside accompanying South Vietnamese units.

The closest regular U.S. combat units were stationed to the southeast of Hue. The 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, a unit from the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, currently attached to General Tolson's division, defended the rear logistical base of the 1st Cavalry Division, Landing

[13] "The Rebirth of Hue," Vietnam Feature Service TCB-037, n.d., p. 7. In the language of the Cham people who lived in that region of central Vietnam, Hue meant "lily."

[14] AAR, NVA/VC Tet Offensive: Hue, 1st Inf Div Advisory Det, Advisory Team 3, 30 Mar 68, p. 9, Historians files, CMH.

Headquarters of the South Vietnamese 1st Division at Hue

Zone El Paso, seven kilometers southeast of the Citadel via Highway 1. Elements of the 1st and the 5th Marine Infantry Regiments operated from Phu Bai, fifteen kilometers southeast of the Citadel, under the control of Task Force X-Ray, a brigade-size component of the 1st Marine Division. Task Force X-Ray had the dual mission of protecting the C–130 airfield and adjoining logistical base at Phu Bai, as well as preserving the line of communications on the fifty-kilometer stretch of Highway 1 between Phu Bai and the Hai Van Pass. Each day, truck convoys departed from offloading and storage facilities in Da Nang, traveled twenty kilometers up and through the winding Hai Van Pass, and then on to Phu Bai and Landing Zone El Paso, where they deposited the supplies needed by Task Force X-Ray and the 1st Cavalry Division. A different set of truck companies based at Landing Zone El Paso made daily trips up Highway 1 as far as Quang Tri City to deliver supplies to the 1st Cavalry Division's forward bases. One of the units that depended on those supplies was the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, headquartered at Camp Evans twenty-five kilometers to the northwest of the Citadel.

The 3d Brigade was in a state of flux on the eve of the Tet holiday. When its commander, Colonel Campbell, flew his command group and two battalions from the Que Son Valley to Camp Evans on 26 January, he discovered that the site, a muddy patch of ground on the southern shoulder of Highway 1 that had formerly been occupied by elements of

the 3d Marine Division, contained no pre-positioned stocks of ammunition or fuel. Supplies were still tight five days later. Because General Westmoreland had deployed the 1st Cavalry Division to northern I Corps almost two months ahead of schedule, III Marine Amphibious Force had not created a supply depot at Camp Evans and did not have enough trucks on hand to keep up with demand. The runway was also too short to land C–130 transport aircraft. Now with all three of his maneuver battalions, his artillery battalion, and the remainder of his brigade consolidated at Evans, Campbell did not have enough fuel to operate his 150 helicopters on a regular basis, nor enough artillery shells to perform regular fire support missions. Until the division's rear logistical area at Landing Zone El Paso could push enough supplies to him, which might take a week or more due to a shortage of trucks, the 3d Brigade was essentially a light infantry unit.[15]

General Truong was eager to see Campbell's brigade get on its feet. Signs appeared that the *6th PAVN Regiment* and the *12th Sapper Battalion*, units that operated from the mountains northwest of Hue, intended to

General Truong (left) *confers with General Tolson* (center).

[15] Pearson, *War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968,* pp. 57–65; Ray L. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift, United States Air Force in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1983), p. 325; Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet,* p. 52; AAR, Opn Jeb Stuart I, 1st Cav Div, 2 Jul 68, p. 8, box 15, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

attack the capital. What Truong did not know was that the enemy had recently shifted several more regiments and support units into the area and formed a new tactical headquarters, the *Hue City Front*, to control them. Among the new arrivals was the *7th Battalion* of the *29th Regiment*, *325C PAVN Division*, which had recently been operating near Khe Sanh. The *5th PAVN Regiment* came down from Base Area 101 and the *4th PAVN Regiment* came up from the southern part of Thua Thien Province. Other reinforcements included an artillery battalion armed with 122-mm. rockets, two sapper battalions, two 82-mm. mortar companies, two 75-mm. recoilless rifle companies, and two 12.7-mm. heavy machine gun companies. Counting the Viet Cong units that operated near the capital, the enemy had gathered an attack force equivalent to at least fourteen battalions.[16]

The *Hue City Front* divided itself into two wings. The southern group consisted of the *804th*, *815th*, and *818th Battalions* of the *4th Regiment*; the *1st* and *2d Sapper Battalions*; and several heavy weapons companies. The northern wing consisted of the *800th*, *802d*, and *806th Battalions* of the *6th Regiment*; the *12th Sapper Battalion*; the *416th Battalion* of the *5th Regiment*; the *7th Battalion* of the *29th Regiment*; and a pair of heavy weapons companies. The enemy left his mountain camps for the city on the evening of 29 January.

General Truong was unaware of their approach, but the wave of attacks in II Corps and southern I Corps later that night convinced him that his own city was in danger. He canceled holiday leave and instructed the Regional and Popular Forces units near Hue to remain on duty each night. He ordered his staff to stay at the Mang Ca compound for the next few days and sent half of his Hac Bao Company across the river to defend the provincial headquarters. He also dispatched his reconnaissance platoon four kilometers up the Perfume River, knowing that enemy units were likely to march along its course to find their way to the city at night.[17]

The general's precautions paid off at 2200 when Regional Forces troops reported seeing enemy soldiers sneaking past a hamlet near the western tip of the Citadel. Pursued by gunfire, the shadowy figures disappeared back into the night. Two hours later, the reconnaissance platoon reported that several enemy battalions were marching past their hidden position toward Hue. Truong ordered his scouts to return to the Citadel at once; he would need every soldier he could get to ward off the coming assault.[18]

[16] Tong Ho Trinh, *Huong Tien Cong va Noi Day Tet Mau Than o Tri-Thien-Hue 1968* [*The 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*] (Hanoi: Vietnamese Institute for Military History, 1968), pp. 21–22.

[17] George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999), p. 20; Ltr, Robert B. Annenberg to Maj (Ret.) Tom Cubbage , 23 Feb 89, sub: Vietnam Reminiscences: The Battle of Tet, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, 19 Mar 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

[18] Smith, *Siege at Hue*, pp. 18–20.

A City Besieged: 31 January–1 February

At 0333 on 31 January, a Viet Cong signal flare burst over Hue. Agents from the *Hue City Sapper Unit,* dressed like civilians but carrying automatic rifles and pistols, emerged from safe houses in the Citadel. Some cut the telephone lines that led into General Truong's headquarters. Others killed the soldiers standing watch at one of the southwestern gates and then opened it for the *800th Battalion*, the *802d Battalion*, and the *12th Sapper Battalion* that were concealed in farmlands nearby. After rushing through the gate, the *800th Battalion* veered north to attack the Tay Loc airfield, while the remaining units plunged east into the heart of the city (*Map 33*).[19]

Meanwhile, a company from the *806th Battalion* seized the An Hoa Bridge that spanned the moat near the western tip of the Citadel. Forty sappers—the shadowy force briefly glimpsed earlier that night—scaled the northwestern wall of the Citadel and then captured a gate so a second company could enter the city. The combined force then headed east to attack General Truong's headquarters. The remaining two companies from the *806th Battalion* occupied a cemetery about a kilometer to the north to block Highway 1.[20]

Not everything went the enemy's way. The *800th Battalion* failed to overcome fifty Hac Bao soldiers and some ordnance troops at the Tay Loc airfield. The *802d Battalion* briefly penetrated the Mang Ca compound only to be driven back by an ad hoc force of clerks and headquarters staff. The enemy could afford to bypass the airfield, but he needed to overrun the 1st Division headquarters before he could consider the city truly his.

General Truong was determined not to let that happen. He ordered his four infantry battalions to return to the city as soon as possible. In the meantime, he recalled his Hac Bao soldiers from the airfield and ordered the M41 tank troop in southern Hue to relieve his position. The Hac Bao detachment and more than a hundred South Vietnamese soldiers who had been on leave reached the 1st Division headquarters, giving Truong enough men to hold his position for the time being. Meanwhile, at the rear base of the South Vietnamese armored cavalry troop, southeast of Hue, the troop commander headed north on Highway 1 with two M41 tanks and two M113 armored personnel carriers—the only vehicles that were currently fit for duty. An enemy ambush destroyed one tank and one carrier as the column crossed the An Cuu Bridge and entered southern Hue. A few hundred meters up the road, still well short of the MACV advisory compound, a storm of rocket-propelled grenades destroyed the two remaining vehicles. Truong would receive no help from that quarter.[21]

As the defenders at the Mang Ca compound fought to retain their foothold in the Citadel, the southern wing of the *Hue City Front* swarmed into the Triangle. A reinforced company from the *2d Sapper Battalion* assaulted the MACV advisory compound. The defenders repulsed each wave of attackers, and after two hours the enemy battalion moved on to easier targets in the

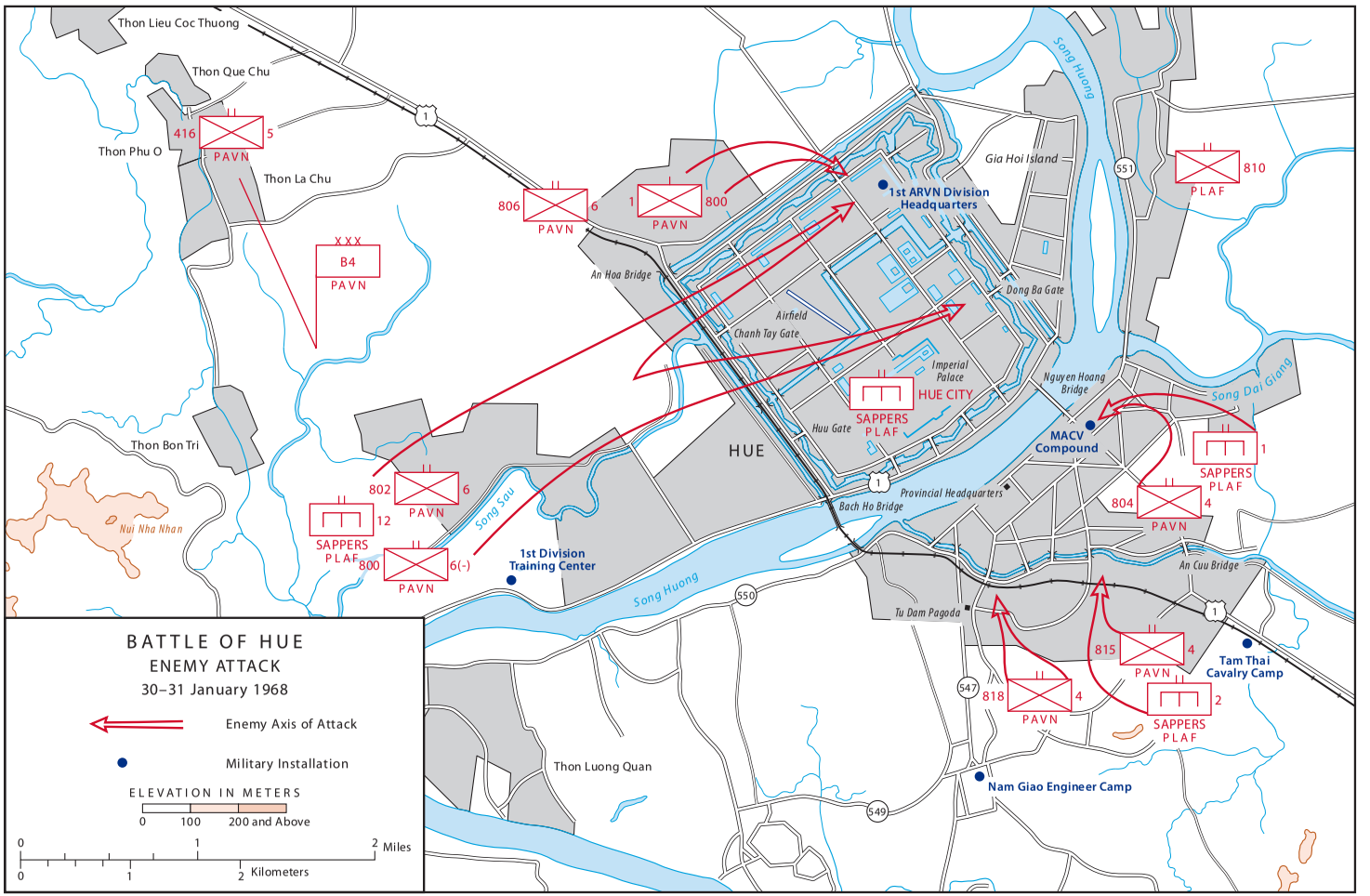
[19] Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 29.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p. 34.

An aerial view of southern Hue

city. Meanwhile, the *4th* and the *5th Regiments* seized government buildings throughout the Triangle. The only target that gave them real trouble was the provincial headquarters, where a platoon of Hac Bao soldiers held out until later that day.[22]

Shortly after the attack began, the MACV advisory team in Hue notified the Marine headquarters at Phu Bai and asked for help. The commander of Task Force X-RAY, Brig. Gen. Foster C. LaHue, agreed to send a reduced company to reinforce the advisers. He had little else to spare. All of his outposts from the Hai Van Pass to Phu Bai were under attack, and enemy sapper teams had mined or cratered a number of locations on that fifty-kilometer stretch of Highway 1. The road to Da Nang was closed, and General LaHue saw his first priority as restoring it so truck convoys could once again start delivering supplies to Task Force X-RAY and the 1st Cavalry Division. At that stage, neither the Marine commander nor anyone else at III Marine Amphibious Force appreciated the extent of the crisis in Hue. Several days would pass before U.S. commanders outside

[22] Interv, Maj Lamar F. Peyton, 45th Mil Hist Det, with Col George O. Adkisson, 11 Mar 68, VNIT 201, CMH; Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.


Thon Lieu Coc Thuong
Thon Que Chu
Thon Phu O
Thon La Chu
Thon Bon Tri
416
5
PAVN
XXX
B4
PAVN
806
6
PAVN
1
800
PAVN
An Hoa Bridge
Airfield
Chanh Tay Gate
Huu Gate
HUE
HUE CITY
SAPPERS
PLAF
Imperial Palace
Dong Ba Gate
Nguyen Hoang Bridge
Song Huong
Gia Hoi Island
551
810
PLAF
1st ARVN Division Headquarters
Song Dai Giang
MACV Compound
SAPPERS
PLAF
1
804
4
PAVN
Provincial Headquarters
Bach Ho Bridge
An Cuu Bridge
Tu Dam Pagoda
815
4
PAVN
818
4
PAVN
SAPPERS
PLAF
2
Tam Thai Cavalry Camp
Nam Giao Engineer Camp
Thon Luong Quan
549
547
550
802
6
PAVN
SAPPERS
PLAF
12
800
6(-)
PAVN
Song Sau
1st Division Training Center
Nui Nha Nhan
BATTLE OF HUE
ENEMY ATTACK
30–31 January 1968
Enemy Axis of Attack
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
200 and Above
0
1
2 Miles
0
1
2 Kilometers

MAP 33

of the city fully understood the situation there. As a result, the marines LaHue sent to reinforce Hue would be venturing into the unknown.[23]

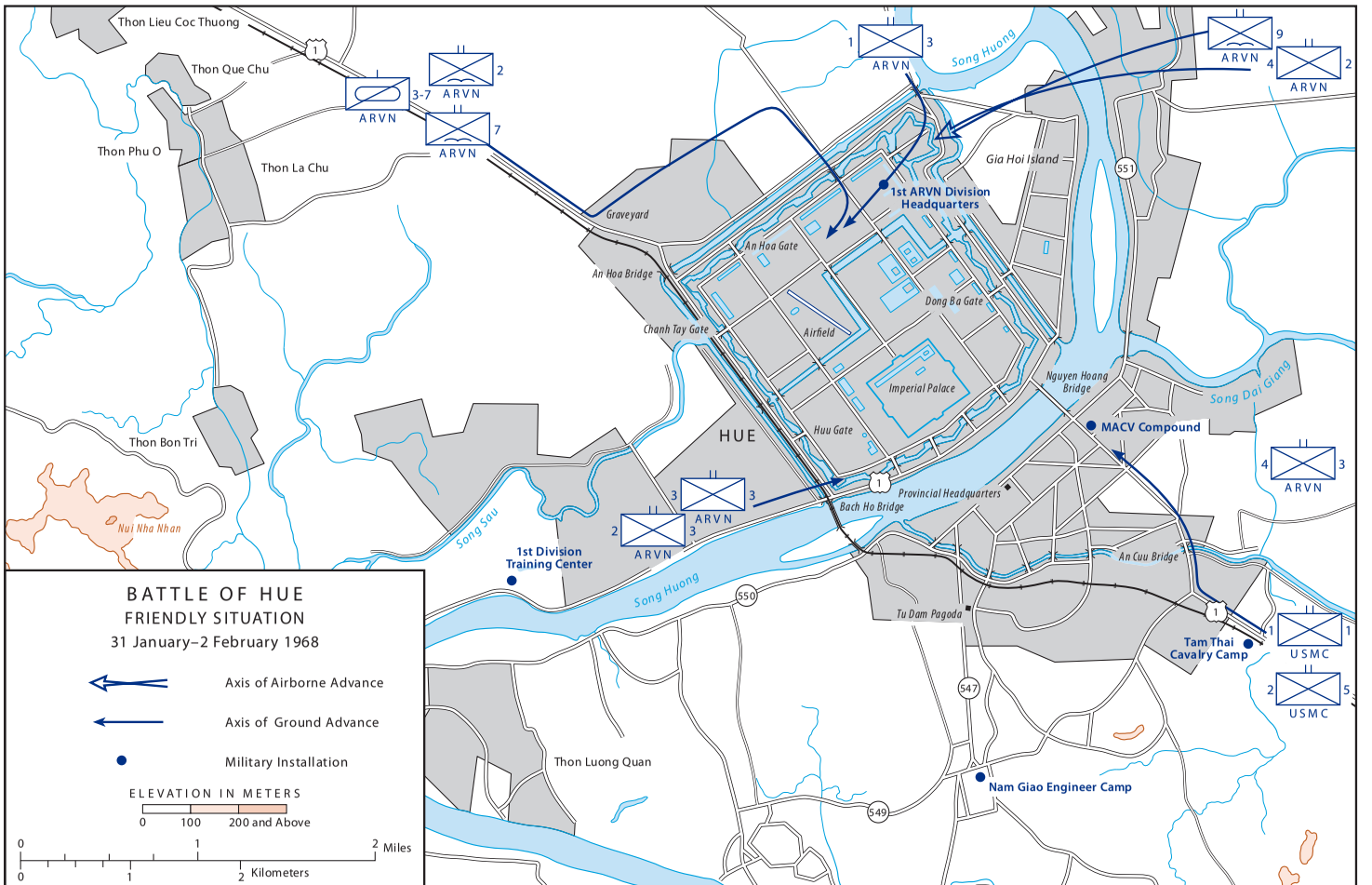
At 0830, a reduced company from the 3d Marine Division boarded trucks at Phu Bai and, along with two U.S. Army trucks armed with quad .50-caliber machine guns, headed north toward Hue. En route, the task force encountered four Marine M48 tanks pulled up on the shoulder of Highway 1. Their crews explained that they had been headed for the Navy loading ramp just north of the MACV advisory compound when they had been informed that Hue was under attack. The tankers agreed to join the task force as it continued up Highway 1.

The column crossed the An Cuu Bridge without incident, noting the two destroyed South Vietnamese vehicles by the side of the road. A few minutes later, the U.S. troops reached the spot where the two remaining South Vietnamese cavalry vehicles had been knocked out, finding the troop commander lying badly wounded by his tank. Picking up the injured man, the column continued on through southern Hue until it came to a spot where the buildings gave way to rice fields on either side for 500 meters. Anything crossing that exposed section of highway would be a conspicuous target and there was only room enough for two vehicles to travel side by side. A vehicle disabled or destroyed by enemy fire might block the entire road. Fearing his men would be butchered in the back of the trucks before they reached the advisory compound, the Marine officer in charge of the column radioed Phu Bai for reinforcements.

A second Marine rifle company joined the convoy a short time later, and with the U.S. tanks in the lead, the column headed north onto the exposed causeway. As expected, the task force came under heavy fire, but the volume of suppressive fire poured back by the South Vietnamese and Marine tanks, plus two Marine rifle companies, allowed the column to inch forward without taking serious casualties. Four hours later, the tail end of the column managed to reach the MACV compound. It was clear to them, at least, that the enemy in Hue was much stronger and more determined than anyone at Task Force X-Ray headquarters had suspected (*Map 34*).

Knowing that General Truong's headquarters was in peril, General LaHue ordered the Marine task force to cross the river and fight its way to the Mang Ca compound. The American M48 tanks were too heavy for the bridge, however, and the South Vietnamese tank crews refused to cross. Two Marine infantry platoons went forward instead. As soon as the Americans appeared on the bridge, the walls of the Citadel erupted with enemy machine-gun and small arms fire. Several marines fell dead or wounded, and when the others reached the far side they discovered that the fishing shacks and shanty homes that lined the riverbank were filled with North Vietnamese snipers. With a third of their number now dead or wounded, the two platoons doubled back across the bridge and returned to the advisory compound carrying their fallen.

[23] Unless otherwise noted, the following section is based on Historical Study, Opn Hue City, 31st Mil Hist Det, 2-68, Aug 1968, Historians files, CMH. AAR, Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det; AAR, NVA/VC Tet Offensive: Hue, 1st Inf Div Advisory Det, Advisory Team 3.


Thon Lieu Coc Thuong
Thon Que Chu
Thon Phu O
Thon La Chu
Thon Bon Tri
Nui Nha Nhan
Song Sau
Song Huong
Song Dai Giang
Graveyard
An Hoa Bridge
An Hoa Gate
Chanh Tay Gate
Airfield
Dong Ba Gate
Imperial Palace
Huu Gate
HUE
Nguyen Hoang Bridge
Gia Hoi Island
1st ARVN Division Headquarters
MACV Compound
Provincial Headquarters
Bach Ho Bridge
An Cuu Bridge
Tu Dam Pagoda
1st Division Training Center
Tam Thai Cavalry Camp
Nam Giao Engineer Camp
Thon Luong Quan
ARVN
USMC
3-7 ARVN
BATTLE OF HUE
FRIENDLY SITUATION
31 January–2 February 1968
Axis of Airborne Advance
Axis of Ground Advance
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
200 and Above
Miles
Kilometers

MAP 34

A U.S. marine scans the streets in Hue for enemy snipers, with an M48 tank ready to provide firepower.

That evening, the marines and U.S. Army advisers spent a mostly sleepless night in the compound, while General LaHue and III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters tried to piece together what was happening in Hue.[24]

The marines from Task Force X-Ray were just one of many allied units trying to reach General Truong and his staff on 31 January. Shortly after 0900, the South Vietnamese 3d Troop, 7th Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 7th Airborne Battalion joined up at PK–17 and then proceeded southeast on Highway 1. Around noon, as the mechanized column neared a graveyard about 400 meters from the Citadel, soldiers from the *806th Battalion* who had concealed themselves in foxholes next to headstones opened fire with rocket-propelled grenades and automatic weapons. The initial fusillade destroyed two of the twelve M113 armored personnel carriers and brought the column to a halt.[25]

The commander of the South Vietnamese task force reviewed his options. His troops were beyond friendly artillery range and the worsening weather ruled out air strikes, but he was under orders to reach General Truong's headquarters as quickly as possible. Finding no alternative, the airborne officer

[24] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968)*, pp. 1–2.

[25] Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, sub: After Action Report, p. 40, Historians files, CMH.

opted for a frontal assault. The armored personnel carriers tried to suppress the enemy with their .50-caliber machine guns as the South Vietnamese paratroopers charged into a withering storm of fire. Almost half were killed or wounded in that desperate advance. The survivors fought their way to the middle of the cemetery and then hunkered down, unable to advance or retreat. The South Vietnamese battalion commander radioed I Corps headquarters for reinforcements, and General Lam released the 2d Airborne Battalion, which was waiting in reserve at PK–17. Coming down Highway 1, the 2d Battalion swung east and then executed a flanking attack against the *806th Battalion*. The maneuver relieved some of the pressure on the 7th Airborne Battalion but failed to dislodge the North Vietnamese battalion from the southern part of the cemetery.

The exchange of gunfire tapered off as darkness approached. The South Vietnamese soldiers spent a cold and miserable night shivering among the headstones, but when they awoke the next morning, 1 February, they discovered that the *806th Battalion* had pulled back into the Citadel. Around noon, several Hac Bao soldiers met up with the task force and led it across country back to the Hue Citadel, entering General Truong's besieged headquarters through a gate near the Mang Ca compound.[26]

The commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division was also doing all that he could to get the four battalions from his 3d Regiment back into the Citadel. Marching back from their Revolutionary Development sector west of the city, the 2d and the 3d Battalions made it to the southern corner of the Citadel where the railroad bridge crossed the Perfume River on the evening of the thirty-first, but they were unable to force the enemy-controlled gates and walls. The 4th Battalion, which had been operating in the countryside southeast of Hue, ran into Viet Cong blocking forces that delayed its return until 5 February. The 1st Battalion, stationed to the east of Hue, also found its way blocked by local force units. Turning back to the coast, the 1st Battalion met up with South Vietnamese Navy boats and then traveled down the Perfume River to the Mang Ca compound on the afternoon of 1 February. Counting the just-arrived airborne task force, Truong now had sufficient number of men to initiate a limited counteroffensive.[27]

On the afternoon of 1 February, the 2d and the 7th Airborne Battalions pushed out from the 1st Division compound accompanied by elements from the Hac Bao Company and the handful of cavalry vehicles that were still in working condition. The combined force headed west and then south through light enemy resistance to the Tay Loc airfield, rescuing the small group of ordnance troops who still defended the southern end of the runway. General Truong held his 1st Battalion from the 3d Regiment that had just come from the coast in reserve. Just before dusk, U.S. Marine CH–46 helicopters arrived from Dong Ha with two companies of the South Vietnamese 4th Battalion,

[26] Ibid., p. 42.

[27] Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. 33, 35; Interv, Peyton with Capt Gary A. Webb, Adviser to South Vietnamese 1st Bn, 3d Inf, 11 Mar 68, VNIT 201, CMH.

A Marine machine gun team during street fighting in Hue

2d Regiment. Deteriorating conditions and the coming of night grounded the helicopters before they could transport the rest of the battalion.[28]

As the weather in Thua Thien Province took a turn for the worse on 1 February, General LaHue and his staff back at Phu Bai began working on a plan to recapture southern Hue. Despite having no intelligence on the enemy's strength or composition, the commander of Task Force X-RAY took the most aggressive option, ordering the senior Marine commander at the advisory compound, Lt. Col. Marcus J. Gravel of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, to push west along the bank of the Perfume River with two companies and a few tanks. The marines made little progress against the North Vietnamese who seemed to have every street and alley covered by automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. By noon, the two companies had been reduced to around half of their original fighting strength. Pulling his men back to the compound, Colonel Gravel loaded the most badly wounded men onto trucks and sent them speeding back to Phu Bai. When the convoy reached the base, an unwashed lieutenant fresh from the battle briefed General LaHue on the situation. The general, only now beginning to appreciate the magnitude of the Communist attack, sent a company from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, by helicopter and promised to send more reinforcements soon.

[28] Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, pp. 38, 41.

Enter the Cavalry: 2–10 February

When General Lam and General Cushman met at Da Nang on the night of 1 February to discuss the situation in Hue, they agreed that the South Vietnamese would be responsible for clearing the Citadel while the marines did the same for the Triangle. They also agreed that they would limit the damage done to the historic city as much as possible. To pressure the enemy from the west, the presumed direction of Communist supply lines, Cushman received permission from Westmoreland to use the 1st Cavalry Division. The commander of the division, General Tolson, in turn relayed the mission to the 3d Brigade's commander, Colonel Campbell (*see Map 35*).

Circumstances forced Campbell to proceed with caution. An air assault against the western wall of the Citadel was out of the question because the ground fire around Hue was too intense and the brigade's artillery batteries at Camp Evans were too far away to support such a maneuver. Campbell knew that North Vietnamese troops lay thick about the city, but he had no specific intelligence on their strength and disposition. A visual inspection by air suggested that the enemy was everywhere. One helicopter pilot and assault platoon leader with the 229th Aviation Battalion, Capt. Ken E. Hamburger, later recalled seeing Viet Cong flags flying from villages all along Highway 1 between PK–17 and Hue when he passed over the area. Campbell would not risk dropping an infantry battalion or two in the midst of a superior enemy force. No matter where he put his soldiers, it would be difficult to keep them supplied by helicopter due to the bad weather and the abundance of North Vietnamese antiaircraft guns.[29]

Among his other problems, Campbell worried that he might not get enough food, fuel, and ammunition to support his operations. The enemy occupation of Hue had severed the ground link between the 1st Cavalry Division and Phu Bai. The truck companies that had serviced the 1st Cavalry Division were all headquartered at Phu Bai, now cut off from both Camp Evans and Da Nang. Enemy troops had also severed the pipeline that transferred fuel to Phu Bai from a pumping station on the coast. As things looked right now, it might take several weeks to reopen Highway 1 between Camp Evans and Da Nang.

Communist sappers had also mined Highway 1 to the north of Camp Evans, interdicting the road to Dong Ha. In any event, the truck companies based at Dong Ha were assigned to the 3d Marine Division, and already had their hands full with that mission. To make matters worse, enemy activity on the Thach Han River had prevented some allied supply vessels from making the journey from the Cua Viet estuary to Dong Ha, reducing the amount of fuel and ammunition that was stored at the Marine base camp. As a result, Colonel Campbell was forced to rely on air-dropped supplies delivered by C–130 aircraft and CH–47 supply runs to Dong Ha to sustain his brigade at Camp Evans. Even then, bad weather and a shortage of C–130 aircraft

[29] Interv, Capt Joseph W. A. Whitehorne with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet,* p. 73; Interv, author with Capt Ken E. Hamburger, 13 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

(there were only around eighty planes to service all of South Vietnam) would limit the tonnage he received. With those problems in mind, Colonel Campbell began planning for the relief of the city.[30]

Because of the shortage of aviation fuel and helicopters at Camp Evans, Campbell had to deploy his brigade in stages. That afternoon, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, boarded helicopters under overcast skies and flew to PK–17. The soldiers left their packs behind—the gear was to be transported later—in order to fit more men into each aircraft. The packs contained, among other things, their rubber-coated nylon ponchos and sweaters. Both were sorely missed as a cold rain began to fall. After eating a meal of cold rations, the troops spent a miserable night in a mud-covered field near PK–17.[31]

On the morning of 3 February, the 400 infantrymen of the 2d Battalion assembled to hear their commander, Lt. Col. Richard S. Sweet, issue their marching orders. Sweet decided to take a circuitous route to Hue by going south and then east rather than marching straight down Highway 1, which the enemy had probably blocked with mines and ambushes. He was concerned that the battery of 105-mm. guns normally attached to his battalion had not yet arrived at PK–17—bad weather and a shortage of CH–47 helicopters were to blame—but if luck prevailed, his men would reach the city walls before dark.[32]

Setting out at 0700, the battalion marched south for about 1,500 meters and then turned southeast toward Hue, keeping Highway 1 on its left flank. For the next several hours, it saw no signs of the enemy apart from a solitary sniper who fired a few rounds before disappearing. At 0945, when Colonel Sweet's men were about four kilometers northwest of the Citadel, they reached a tiny hamlet called Thon Lieu Coc Thuong. As the Americans entered the hamlet, its inhabitants fled to a large island of trees 200 meters to the southeast. Inside the hamlet, the battalion found freshly dug trenches and foxholes as well as hundreds of little paper North Vietnamese flags. The enemy, it appeared, was close at hand.[33]

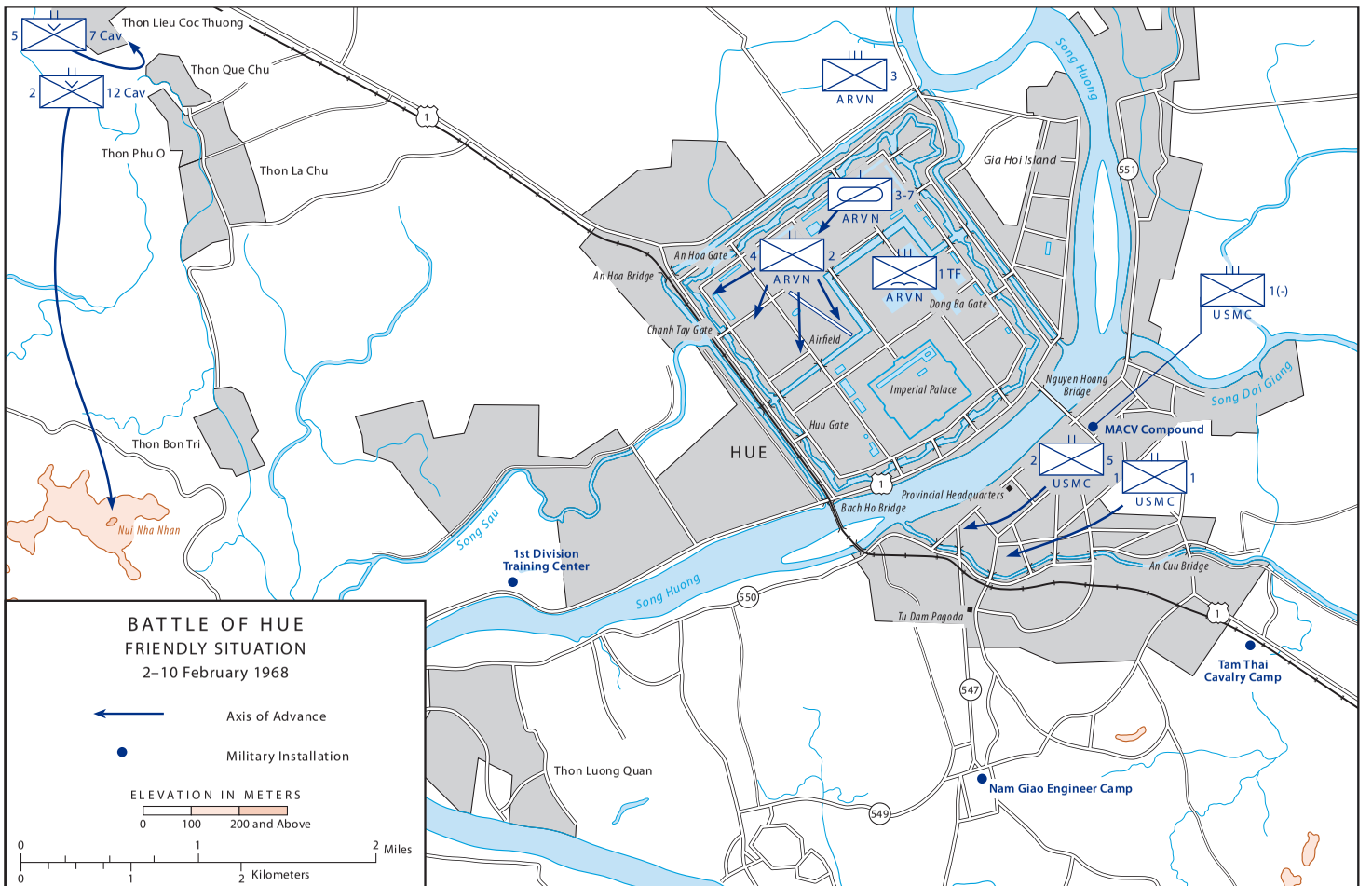
As the battalion searched the hamlet, snipers began firing at the Americans from the wooded island to the south where the villagers had fled. Consulting his map, Colonel Sweet saw that the island sheltered the villages of Thon Que Chu and, to its south, Thon La Chu. He called for an artillery strike from two South Vietnamese 105-mm. howitzers at PK–17. Without interpreters on hand to adjust the fire, the shelling proved ineffectual. Although the low cloud ceiling ruled out close air support missions from the U.S. Air Force, brigade headquarters sent gunship and aerial rocket artillery helicopters to soften up the enemy position. The aircraft worked over Thon Que Chu for about an

[30] Intervs, Whitehorne with Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 4; Whitehorne with Col Hubert S. Campbell, CO, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 12 May 68, p. 4, VNIT 96, CMH; AAR, Opn JEB STUART I, 1st Cav Div, tab V, p. 2; Pearson, *War in the Northern Provinces, 1966–1968,* pp. 57–65; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift,* pp. 325, 329; Traas, *Engineers at War*, p. 348.

[31] After Action Interview (AAI), Hue, 2–5 Feb 68, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1 May 68, p. 3, box 30, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[32] Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet,* p. 61.

[33] Ibid., p. 71.


BATTLE OF HUE
FRIENDLY SITUATION
2–10 February 1968
Axis of Advance
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
200 and Above
0
1
2 Miles
0
1
2 Kilometers
5
7 Cav
2
12 Cav
Thon Lieu Coc Thuong
Thon Que Chu
Thon Phu O
Thon La Chu
Thon Bon Tri
Nui Nha Nhan
1
HUE
Song Sau
Song Huong
1st Division
Training Center
550
Thon Luong Quan
549
547
3
ARVN
3-7
ARVN
4
2
ARVN
1 TF
ARVN
An Hoa Gate
An Hoa Bridge
Chanh Tay Gate
Airfield
Dong Ba Gate
Imperial Palace
Huu Gate
Gia Hoi Island
551
Song Huong
1(-)
USMC
Nguyen Hoang
Bridge
Song Dai Giang
MACV Compound
2
5
USMC
1
1
USMC
Provincial Headquarters
Bach Ho Bridge
An Cuu Bridge
Tu Dam Pagoda
Tam Thai
Cavalry Camp
Nam Giao Engineer Camp

MAP 35

Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division head for Hue.

hour until one pilot mistakenly fired on the 2d Battalion, killing one soldier and wounding four. Colonel Sweet called off the helicopters. The preparatory bombardment had done little harm to the enemy, but General Tolson demanded that Sweet take Thon Que Chu without further delay. The colonel strongly recommended waiting until the artillery battery providing direct support to the battalion became operational at PK–17, but Tolson overruled him. Out of options, Sweet decided to take Thon Que Chu with a frontal assault.[34]

In a scene reminiscent of a World War I infantry assault, around 150 men from the unit charged across the open field that stood between them and Thon Que Chu. Bright flashes rippled across the far tree line as North Vietnamese troops hidden at the edge of the hamlet opened fire. Bullets and mortar fragments toppled some of the advancing Americans, who had no cover other than a small cemetery in the middle of the field. Colonel Sweet fed more platoons into the attack, and helicopter scout ships reappeared to strafe the enemy positions. The attacking troops reached the tree line shortly after noon and drove the enemy deeper into Thon Que Chu. Nine soldiers had been killed, most from sniper rounds to the head, and another forty-eight had been wounded in the assault.[35]

[34] AAI, Hue, 2–5 Feb 68, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, p. 3.
[35] Ibid., p. 4.

Once inside the woods, the Americans discovered an elaborate network of trenches and camouflaged bunkers. It was clear that the enemy had expended considerable time and energy fortifying the village. The thick hedgerows of bamboo and palm trees that divided the family holdings also offered formidable natural defenses. Bespeaking the prosperity of the village, some of its houses were sturdy stone and tile structures that were strong enough to deflect bullets or shell fragments. In midafternoon, the rest of the battalion crossed the open field and entered Thon Que Chu. With only a few hours of daylight left, Colonel Sweet decided to establish a night defense position and then resume his advance the next morning.[36]

The wisdom of Colonel Sweet's decision to stay put was proved when the North Vietnamese counterattacked his battalion only a short time after it had finished scooping out foxholes in the sandy soil. Small arms and machine-gun fire poured in from all directions, and Sweet soon realized that his men were surrounded by a much larger enemy force. The cavalrymen spent the rest of the day locked in a prolonged firefight with a better-armed North Vietnamese force equipped with 82-mm. mortars, 75-mm. recoilless rifles, and .51-caliber heavy machine guns, weapons typically associated with a regimental-size formation. The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, repelled several strong probes and cleared out a number of snipers that crept their way into the village. The volume of enemy fire became so intense at times that it was nearly impossible for the cavalrymen to raise their heads above the rim of their foxholes for more than a second or two. None of the enemy thrusts broke through the perimeter, however, and the firefight gradually trailed off and then ceased. Emerging from their foxholes, the soldiers found that nearly everything they had left above ground had been shredded. When Sp4c. Steven M. Johnson collected his C-ration packages, for example, he found them so riddled with bullets and mortar fragments as to be inedible.[37]

Later that day, 3 February, several helicopters were able to touch down in a small clearing inside the village long enough to evacuate the dead and the most seriously wounded Americans. When the battalion began to run low on ammunition, the unit's logistics officer, Maj. William I. Scudder, scrounged up all the bullets and grenades he could find at Camp Evans and then convinced a few brave helicopter pilots to deliver the goods to Thon Que Chu. Without those shipments, the 2d Battalion would have run out of ammunition during the night.

At this point, Colonel Sweet still did not know the size or the identity of the enemy force besieging him. Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu harbored the headquarters of the *Hue City Front*, as well as the *416th Battalion* of the *5th PAVN Regiment* and all three battalions of the *29th Regiment*, *325C Division*, the latter having just arrived after a forced march from Khe Sanh. Sweet surmised that he had stumbled on a major staging area for reinforcements and

[36] Ibid., p. 5.
[37] Interv, author with Sp4c. Steven M. Johnson, 27 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

Troops of the 1st Cavalry Division fight in Thon La Chu.

supplies going into Hue, and he knew the enemy would make great sacrifices to preserve it.[38]

Earlier that afternoon, around the time that the 2d Battalion was fighting its way into Thon Que Chu, Colonel Campbell and his 3d Brigade headquarters moved from Camp Evans to PK–17. General Tolson also flew down from his headquarters at Camp Evans to the post to monitor the progress of Colonel Sweet's troops. Clearly the 2d Battalion was in grave danger. Unless it received sustained fire support, it might not survive the next determined assault. To Campbell's relief, a convoy from Camp Evans arrived at PK–17 shortly before 1800, carrying ammunition for a pair of U.S. 105-mm. howitzers that had arrived earlier in the day. The artillery liaison officer with the 2d Battalion made sure that every shell counted, and Colonel Sweet's men, their spirits and their defensive power greatly improved, held their own throughout the night.

The 2d Battalion faced renewed enemy pressure on the morning of 4 February. Shortly after 0700, a volley of 82-mm. mortar fire and 122-mm. rocket fire hit the U.S. position in Thon Que Chu. When the bombardment ended, North Vietnamese troops assaulted the cavalry perimeter from multiple

[38] Shelby L. Stanton, *Anatomy of a Division: 1st Cav in Vietnam* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1987), p. 120; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab G, p. 1; Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 32.; Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet,* p. 141.

directions. Much of the killing took place at ranges of less than twenty meters. The 3d Brigade headquarters sent a rocket-armed helicopter to assist the 2d Battalion, but ground fire brought the aircraft down before it reached Thon Que Chu. Finding no weak spots in the U.S. line, the North Vietnamese ended their attack fifteen minutes later. Though brief, the morning firefight cost the 2d Battalion another eleven killed and fifty-one wounded.[39]

As medics treated the injured, Colonel Sweet reviewed the state of his battalion. He knew that his unit would be overrun if it remained in Thon Que Chu. Only about 200 men were still able to fight. Most had gotten less than six hours of sleep over the last two days, and they were almost out of water. His closest source of help, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, was just then arriving at PK–17 and would take at least another twenty-four hours to reach Thon Que Chu. Even though Major Scudder had loaded a medevac helicopter going to the village with ammunition and then used a drawn pistol to warn away a senior officer who tried to unload the aircraft, supplies remained low because firefights flared up throughout the day.[40]

Late in the afternoon on 4 February, Colonel Sweet discussed the situation with his company commanders. After considering his options, he decided that the 2d Battalion would break free of the encirclement that evening. Despite the unit's predicament, Sweet was unwilling to take it back to PK–17 without first having accomplished his mission. He considered moving his men to another settlement 1,500 meters to the east but abandoned the idea after the observation aircraft he sent to investigate the hamlet barely avoided getting shot down by North Vietnamese antiaircraft guns. Resolving to do what the enemy probably least expected, the colonel decided to move deeper into enemy-held territory, to a small hill named Nha Nhan that rose from the plain several kilometers southwest of Thon Que Chu. While his depleted unit only had a limited offensive ability at this point, Sweet knew that the top of the hill would be an ideal spot to observe Communist troops as they moved into Hue. After Colonel Campbell approved the plan, Colonel Sweet decided that the battalion would move out at 2000. He reasoned that it would be completely dark and the enemy, with any luck, would be preoccupied with cooking food and repairing equipment.

The 2d Battalion prepared for its escape as evening fell. The men placed their excess equipment into a pile that engineers then rigged with explosives, timed to detonate later that night. A pair of UH–1 Huey helicopters flew into Thon Que Chu to evacuate several dozen wounded soldiers, but there was not enough room to take the bodies of the eleven dead. Colonel Sweet had them buried in the sand so they could be retrieved at a later date.

As darkness fell, the troopers quietly formed two columns, using tape and pieces of clothing to secure items that might make noise as they marched. Shortly after 2000, the battalion sneaked northwest toward a gap in the enemy line that appeared to be around seventy-five meters wide. The North Vietnamese sentries to either side did not see the Americans as they slipped

[39] AAI, Hue, 2–5 Feb 68, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, p. 5; Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet,* p. 100.
[40] Krohn, *Lost Battalion of Tet,* p. 100.

away. After reaching the graveyard that stood between Thon Que Chu and Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, the battalion formed a single file, sent scouts out ahead, and began marching south. A few minutes later, the scouts froze when they heard the unmistakable sound of a machine gun bolt being drawn. The unseen North Vietnamese troops manning the weapon were only cleaning it, however, and failed to notice the crouching Americans just a few meters away. The scouts quietly backtracked and led the battalion in a wide arc around the machine gun nest without incident.

Approximately thirty minutes later, as the troopers crossed a stream that lay southwest of Thon La Chu, they heard a massive explosion in the distance as several pounds of plastic explosives turned their excess equipment into a ball of flame. At that prearranged signal, the 105-mm. howitzers at PK–17 began lobbing high-explosive and white phosphorous shells into Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu to cover the escape of the 2d Battalion. The heavy cruiser, USS *Canberra,* also joined the bombardment, pounding the enemy-held hamlet with its 8-inch naval guns. Meanwhile, Colonel Sweet and his men kept trudging through the night, every soldier concentrating on following the person in front of him. Most of the men were staggering from exhaustion, and many were also suffering from minor wounds. As the battalion passed near several enemy-held settlements, Communist lookouts stationed there—apparently believing that the column was a line of North Vietnamese soldiers headed for the Citadel—shined flashlights for them to use as navigation beacons. At one point, a large group of enemy soldiers who were headed for the city actually crossed right in front of the American column, which remained quiet and motionless until the danger had passed.[41]

When the battalion finally reached Nha Nhan shortly after dawn on 5 February, its men wearily climbed to the top of the ridge, which turned out to contain an outpost manned by a South Vietnamese platoon. With the panorama of Hue spread out below them—looking deceptively peaceful apart from some rising columns of smoke and the occasional white-orange flash of a distant explosion—the Americans set up camp and grabbed some much-needed rest.

As soon as Colonel Sweet's men began to direct artillery and naval gunfire on targets they observed on the plain below, the enemy stopped trying to move men and supplies into Hue during daylight hours. To discourage the enemy from approaching the hill at night, the division sent the 2d Battalion a .50-caliber machine gun and a searchlight. Although the North Vietnamese made no effort to assault Nha Nhan, they did try to cut off Colonel Sweet's supply channel by shooting at the helicopters that delivered food, water, and ammunition. A sniper from Company B of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Sp4c. Carl T. Johnson, recalled that the heavy enemy fire either seriously damaged or shot down at least four helicopters. To reduce their vulnerability to antiaircraft fire, the UH–1 helicopters avoided landing on the hill whenever possible, instead

[41] Interv, author with John Toler, 12 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH; Edward J. Marolda and G. Wesley Pryce III, *A Short History of the United States Navy and the Southeast Asian Conflict, 1950–1975* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1984), p. 44.

swooping low over the summit and having their crews kick out supply crates as the aircraft roared past.[42]

On 5 February, Campbell flew two companies from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, a unit from the 101st Airborne Brigade presently operating with the 1st Cavalry Division, from Camp Evans to PK–17 where they established a new base, Landing Zone SALLY, a short distance to the west. With the paratroopers now interposed between Camp Evans and the enemy-infested mountains to the west, Colonel Campbell released the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, from defensive duties at Camp Evans and ordered its commander, Lt. Col. James B. Vaught, to march his battalion four kilometers to the south to investigate the hamlet of Thon Trung where enemy mortar crews had previously fired on Camp Evans.[43]

As the two lead companies from the battalion approached the village around 1030, they received small-arms and mortar fire. At the same time, enemy machine gunners 1,500 meters to the southeast riddled a command and control helicopter that was flying a mission on behalf of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry. The stricken aircraft crash-landed in enemy territory. A short time later, a second helicopter swooped in to rescue the downed crew and passengers, but the Americans still needed to recover the damaged aircraft. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, turned away from its original mission and spent the rest of the day trying to reach the wreckage, but enemy resistance prevented the men from reaching the helicopter.

The battalion resumed its advance the next day, 6 February. After a brief skirmish, it secured the downed helicopter and then returned to Thon Trung. The battalion overran the village and found a cache of supplies so huge that it took the rest of the day to dispose of it. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, spent the night in the village and resumed its march to Thon Que Chu on the morning of 7 February.[44]

Around 1100, as the lead company entered a hamlet midway between Thon Trung and Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, a helicopter landed and unloaded supplies. Upon taking off, the aircraft made a slow turn over Thon Que Chu, apparently oblivious to the danger below. The woods erupted with machine-gun and small arms fire and the heavily damaged helicopter made a crash landing on the other side of Thon Lieu Coc Thuong. Colonel Vaught, who had planned to attack Thon Que Chu from his present position later that day, instead turned his battalion east to the crash site. After waiting for a quick artillery and naval gunfire barrage to soften up Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, his troops stormed the village. They discovered dozens of uncompleted fighting positions and extensive communications wire but no Communists. Emerging from the other side of the village, the soldiers secured the downed helicopter and rescued its crew, while gunships suppressed a smattering of enemy machine-gun and mortar fire that came from Thon Que Chu. With evening

[42] Interv, author with Sp4c. Carl T. Johnson, 19 Apr 05, Historians files, CMH.

[43] AAR, Battalion attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, 4 May 68, pp. 2–3, box 30, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[44] Ibid.

fast approaching, Vaught decided to stay put. He began building a forward base where he could stockpile supplies, and he established a medical aid station in anticipation of the coming battle.[45]

The colonel sent two companies forward to probe Thon Que Chu on the morning of 8 February. One company crossed the open field quickly, but the unit on its right flank, some 300 meters away, encountered heavy fire and stopped 50 meters short of the woods. Vaught sent two platoons from another company to help and called in 1,500 rounds of artillery from PK–17, but several hours of intense fighting took place before the pinned company managed to extract itself. U.S. losses totaled two killed and seven wounded. Seeing that Thon Que Chu was extremely well defended and probably could not be taken by a single battalion, Colonel Vaught ordered the men from the first company to pull back to Thon Lieu Coc Thuong for the night.[46]

Hearing from Vaught that a frontal assault was all but impossible, Colonel Campbell began looking for another way in. On 9 February, the 3d Brigade commander instructed Colonel Sweet's battalion on Nha Nhan to probe Thon La Chu from the south. As the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, moved out that morning, accompanied by the South Vietnamese platoon from the hill outpost, the men encountered a squad of well-camouflaged snipers at the base of the hill. North Vietnamese bullets and mortar fragments killed two Americans and wounded twelve others before a team of cavalrymen outflanked the enemy, killing at least three of the sharpshooters. More trouble lay ahead. As the unit was crossing a rice field that led to the village of Thon Bon Tri, a small wooded settlement 1,500 meters south of Thon La Chu, a battalion or more of North Vietnamese opened fire from the tree line. The Americans quickly lost another two men killed and ten wounded. Unable to advance and with darkness fast approaching, Colonel Sweet decided to pull his unit back to Nha Nhan for the night.[47]

Colonel Campbell needed to get more of his brigade into the battle, but he still did not have enough aviation fuel, spare parts, and artillery shells, notwithstanding valiant efforts by the U.S. Air Force to ease the shortfall. Transport aircraft kept food, fuel, and ammunition flowing into Camp Evans using pathfinders on the ground and radar control teams for guidance because the cloud ceiling rarely exceeded 91 meters and was often much worse. Sometimes the visibility was so bad that observers at the camp never saw the transport planes, but only the parachuted supplies when they emerged through the low-hanging clouds. Between 4 and 8 February alone, U.S. Air Force C–130s flew thirty-four missions and delivered around one million pounds of supplies. Even so, Campbell needed Highway 1 to be reopened between Camp Evans

[45] Rpt, 31st Mil Hist Det, Aug 1968, sub: Opn HUE CITY, p. 32, Historians files, CMH.

[46] AAR, Battalion attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, pp. 3–4.

[47] AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab C, p. 3; Daily Jnl, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, S–2/3, 9 Feb 68, pp. 1–3, box 5, Daily Jnl, Asst Ch of Staff, S-3, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, Cav Units, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

A Huey helicopter delivers supplies to 1st Cavalry Division troops in Thon La Chu.

and the Marine base at Dong Ha before he could bring the full weight of the 3d Brigade to bear.[48]

The logistics problems in northern I Corps were affecting more than just Campbell's 3d Brigade. As USARV commander General Palmer had informed Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson on 5 January, the "most urgent problem in I CTZ [I Corps Tactical Zone] from [a] logistic point of view is to open Highway 1 north of Da Nang and keep it open. Current inability of III MAF to maintain this road open is perhaps the primary logistic factor limiting number of troops which can be supported in northern I CTZ." On 8 February, General Tolson had explained to Palmer how supply problems were limiting his operations in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces. The commander of the 1st Cavalry Division "seriously doubted that capability exists to support logistically, additional brigade of the 101st [Airborne Division] in this area right now although it is urgently needed." He had recommended sending only one infantry battalion and supporting artillery to the C–130 airfield at Quang Tri City until the supply situation improved. General Westmoreland had conveyed similar concerns to Admiral Sharp and General Wheeler that day, noting that his effort to deploy elements of the 101st Airborne Division into northern I Corps will "post a tremendous logistical challenge in view of

[48] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 5; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab AE, p. 1.

the poor weather at this time and the enemy situation." Reinforcing the point in a message to General Johnson on 8 February, General Palmer wrote that the "logistics situation is critical. Other than airlift, the primary logistic support for northern I CTZ must come by water through the Cua Viet estuary, which is harassed by enemy fire. Bad weather hampers all operations."[49]

After meeting with General Cushman on the eighth to discuss the problems facing III Marine Amphibious Force, General Westmoreland explained to Sharp and Wheeler on 9 February the steps he intended to take to ease the crisis. He decided to airlift a battalion from the 101st Airborne Division to Phu Bai to secure that supply point so the Marine units from Task Force X-Ray could focus on the fight for Hue. He proposed sending a second airborne battalion to Da Nang so it could be deployed to the Hai Van Pass to reopen that stretch of Highway 1, and an Army combat engineer battalion from northern II Corps to repair damaged sections of the highway. Once a ground line of communications had been restored between Da Nang and Phu Bai, and from Dong Ha to Camp Evans, the MACV commander intended to bring in additional elements of the 1st Cavalry Division and 101st Airborne Division to help retake Hue and restore security in the lowlands of northern I Corps. To control the growing number of U.S. Army units in northern I Corps and to achieve better coordination between the Army, Marine, and South Vietnamese forces, Westmoreland expected to have the joint headquarters known as MACV Forward up and running within the week, headed by General Abrams, who would take control of the fight for Hue from a command post now being created at Phu Bai.[50]

Going on the Attack in the Triangle and the Citadel: 2–10 February

As Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division was attempting to dislodge the North Vietnamese troops holding Thon La Chu in order to cut the enemy supply line that ran from the western mountains through the hamlet and then east into the Citadel, a handful of battered U.S. Marine infantry companies continued the slow and costly process of liberating southern Hue. When the commander of the 1st Marines, Col. Stanley S. Hughes, arrived at the MACV advisory compound on 3 February to take charge of the battle, he saw why progress had been so slow. North Vietnamese soldiers seemed to occupy every floor in every building. From those vantage points, they were able to engulf the marines in interlocking fields of fire every time the Americans tried to advance. The North Vietnamese soldiers possessed an abundance of rocket-propelled grenade launchers and ammunition. The stone

[49] First quote from Msg, Palmer ARV 266 to General Johnson, 5 Feb 68, p. 5. Second quote from Msg, Tolson FCV 095 to Palmer, 8 Feb 68, p. 1. Third quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01810 to Sharp, 8 Feb 68, p. 1. Fourth quote from Msg, Palmer ARV 289 to General Johnson, 8 Feb 68, p. 4. All in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[50] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01858 to Wheeler, 9 Feb 68, p. 3, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

Troops of Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, engages in a firefight in Hue.

and concrete buildings that they occupied gave them strong cover as well as concealment. Some enemy soldiers had also dug spider holes next to buildings and courtyard walls that were nearly impossible to see from ground level. Sniper fire seemed to come from everywhere.[51]

Colonel Hughes reorganized the four Marine companies and resumed the attack on 4 February. Using a combination of M72 antitank weapons, 3.5-inch rocket launchers, 106-mm. recoilless rifles, and tear gas, the marines captured several blocks by day's end. They also gained needed reinforcements when a second company from the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moved by truck from Phu Bai to the advisory compound. In the next two days that followed, the Americans captured several important government buildings, including one that had recently served as the headquarters of the *5th PAVN Regiment*. The tired but elated marines hauled down a Viet Cong banner that had been flying from a flagpole in the courtyard and raised the stars and stripes while a CBS film crew captured the event.[52]

The marines made comparatively rapid progress when they resumed their westward attack on 7 February. The Communists left behind an ever-larger number of weapons and bodies, a sign of their increasing disorganization. In a

[51] Rpt, 101st Abn Div, 29 Dec 68, sub: Special Intelligence Study Nr 33-68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, p. 6.

[52] Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, pp. 189–90.

tacit admission that they had lost the battle for the Triangle, sappers destroyed the Nguyen Hoang Bridge to prevent the Americans from crossing the river and attacking the southeastern wall of the Citadel.

Worn down by more than a week of incessant combat and effectively cut off from their comrades on the other side of the river, the *815th Sapper Battalion* and the *2d Sapper Battalion* moved to the southern side of the Phu Cam Canal where the *818th Battalion* was already located. Meanwhile, the *804th Battalion* and the *1st Sapper Battalion* remained south of the canal near the An Cuu Bridge, while the *810th Battalion* began preparing to sneak west across the Perfume River by raft and by boat to Gia Hoi Island.[53]

The marines spent the next several days rounding up enemy stragglers from the Triangle. On 10 February, a battalion from the 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, flew from III Corps to Phu Bai. The unit relieved several Marine companies in the area, which General LaHue then sent to Hue. The first of these reinforcements had to dismount from their trucks at the damaged An Cuu Bridge and move across it by foot, but when engineers finished building a pontoon bridge next to the damaged span four days later, trucks were once again able to move freely between Phu Bai and Hue.[54]

While General LaHue's marines were busy retaking the Triangle, the South Vietnamese forces under General Truong were slowly expanding their foothold in the Citadel. On 2 February, helicopters brought the remainder of the Vietnamese 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, as well as a company from the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, to the 1st Division compound. Marine helicopters also flew in the Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion from Quang Tri City. By nightfall, government forces had regained control over most of the Citadel's northwestern quarter.[55]

The South Vietnamese forces made slow progress over the next few days. Although the enemy had lost nearly 700 men according to allied estimates, he showed no signs of cracking. General Truong knew that North Vietnamese reinforcements and supplies were entering the Citadel from Thon La Chu each night. Proof of that came on the evening of 6 February when a battalion from the *29th Regiment* previously reported to be in Thon La Chu launched a fierce counterattack in the Citadel that forced the South Vietnamese to fall back to the Tay Loc airfield.[56]

General Truong received additional troops of his own the next day. On 7 February, U.S. Navy landing craft transported the 2d, 3d, and 4th Battalions of the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment to the 1st Division headquarters. Later in the evening, a company from the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment and fifteen M113 armored personnel carriers arrived from Quang Tri City. All told, Truong now had in the Citadel his entire 3d Regiment, a battalion from

[53] Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, sub: Attack on Hue City, p. 8, Historians files, CMH; Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027656768, 22 Jul 68, p. 8; Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 41.

[54] Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 35.

[55] AAR, Battle of Hue, 45th Mil Hist Det, p. 6.

[56] Rpt, 31st Mil Hist Det, Aug 1968, p. 27.

his 2d Regiment, two companies from his 1st Regiment, three paratrooper battalions from the 1st Airborne Task Force, two armored cavalry squadrons, and the Hac Bao Company.[57]

His force was less formidable than it seemed. Combat had reduced some of the battalions to less than 200 effective soldiers. Food and ammunition were running low. Exhaustion and a steady stream of casualties were sapping morale. The South Vietnamese units had few heavy weapons such as mortars and recoilless rifles with which to dislodge the enemy from the stone buildings and the thick hedgerows common to the old city. The consistently bad weather prevented all but the bravest or most foolhardy pilots from flying air support missions. Although Truong estimated that the Communists in the Citadel had lost nearly 1,200 men killed since the start of the offensive, a steady stream of replacements and supplies continued to flow into the southwestern part of the Citadel. Until he received more troops or substantially more artillery and air support, Truong knew that progress would be slow.[58]

West of Hue: 11–20 February

West of the Citadel, on top of Nha Nhan Hill, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, continued to face a nearly intractable problem. Colonel Sweet wanted to get moving against the North Vietnamese in the valley below, but he had only the vaguest idea of their strength and dispositions. Shortly before midnight on 11 February, he sent a squad of volunteers down the hill and into the woods surrounding Thon Bon Tri to assess the enemy's position. Using a Starlight night-vision scope, the group discovered that the North Vietnamese had built an elaborate trench just inside the tree line. The scouts also observed a second trench studded with bunkers a short distance behind the first. When the squad returned to the summit of Nha Nhan and described what it had seen, Colonel Sweet realized that a daylight frontal attack against such a position would be suicidal. After he explained the situation to his superior, Colonel Campbell decided to keep the 2d Battalion on top of Nha Nhan rather than send it in a futile attack against Thon Bon Tri (*see Map 36*).[59]

Even though the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, was temporarily out of the picture, Campbell decided to make another effort against Thon Que Chu with the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry. On the morning of 12 February, the artillery batteries stationed at Camp Evans fired hundreds of rounds into Thon La Chu, using up much of the ammunition reserves they had managed to stockpile over the last few days. Even so, the bombardment seemed to have little effect. A chatter of machine-gun and small-arms fire greeted Vaught's battalion when it advanced from the trees of Thon Lieu Coc Thuong around noon. Two of the cavalry companies managed to cross the clearing and to enter Thon La Chu,

[57] Ibid., pp. 30, 32.
[58] Ibid., p. 32.
[59] Ibid., p. 6.

but they withdrew a short time later as their casualties began to mount. The Americans lost five killed and thirty-four wounded in the assault.[60]

Colonel Campbell decided to forego new attacks against Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu until the weather had cleared and he had more infantry at his disposal. Given more troops, the 3d Brigade commander could effectively isolate Thon La Chu, cutting the supply channel that ran west to the mountains and east to Hue, even if he did not take the hamlet itself. To that end, General Tolson gave Campbell command of the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, which began moving south from Camp Evans to PK–17 on 12 February. Although the enemy still had the ability to move men and supplies between Thon La Chu and the Citadel—the *815th Battalion*, *5th Regiment*, crossed the Perfume River and occupied Thon Bon Tri on the thirteenth, and the same night the *9th Battalion*, *29th Regiment*, moved from Thon La Chu into the old city—Campbell could now pressure the enemy's supply line between Thon La Chu and the western hills. On 15 February, a company from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, discovered a North Vietnamese force of equal size, possibly a rear service element, when it swept through the village of Thon Trung. After artillery and aerial rocket helicopters hit the North Vietnamese position, two companies from the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, flew in by helicopter to join the assault. The three U.S. companies killed at least fifty-eight Communists and drove the rest from the village. Slowly, the cordon was closing around Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu.[61]

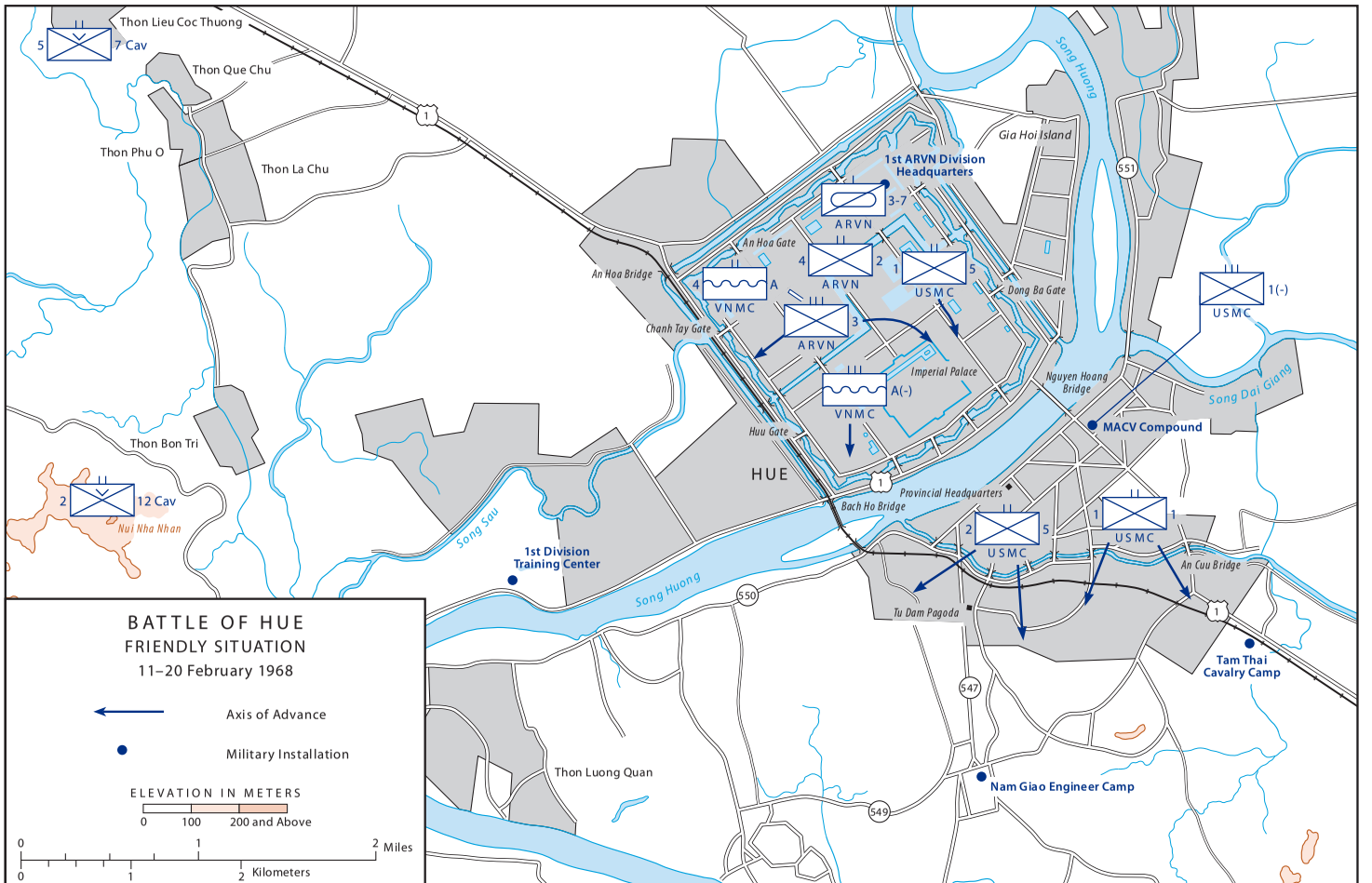
On 15 February, Westmoreland's deputy, General Abrams, assumed command of MACV Forward, which had come into being at Phu Bai three days earlier. In his new position, Abrams exercised tactical authority over all U.S. combat units north of the Hai Van Pass, giving Westmoreland a high degree of control over the fighting in northern I Corps and putting the separate battles being waged at Hue, one by Task Force X-Ray south of the Perfume River and another by the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, west of the Citadel, under a single U.S. commander for the first time. Abrams' status as Westmoreland's deputy also gave him the authority he needed to coordinate efficiently U.S. and South Vietnamese operations.[62]

Abrams quickly recognized the importance of shutting down the enemy supply line. Although the enemy controlled only about one-third of the city at that stage, he was getting new supplies and reinforcements every night. Several days earlier, the *6th Battalion*, *24th Regiment*, *304th Division*, originally located near Khe Sanh, had reached the Citadel after following a route that took it through Base Area 101, Base Area 114, and Thon La Chu. Elements of the *324B PAVN Division* had also been spotted moving south from Quang Tri Province toward Hue, a fact confirmed on 16 February when the 1st Brigade,

[60] AAR, Battalion attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 4.

[61] AAR, Opn Jeb Stuart, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 11 Mar 68, p. 3, Encl 1, Historians files, CMH; Daily Jnl, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, S–2/3, 14 Feb 68, p. 1; Rpt, 31st Mil Hist Det, Aug 1968, pp. 39–40; Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, pp. 39–40.

[62] Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 1233 to CINCPAC, 26 Jan 68; Westmoreland MAC 1011 to CJCS, 22 Jan 68, sub: Visit to Washington by Richard E. Cavazos, LTC Inf, USA. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 345.


Thon Lieu Coc Thuong
5
7 Cav
Thon Que Chu
Thon Phu O
Thon La Chu
Thon Bon Tri
2
12 Cav
Nui Nha Nhan
Song Sau
1st Division Training Center
Song Huong
Thon Luong Quan
HUE
An Hoa Bridge
An Hoa Gate
Chanh Tay Gate
Huu Gate
1st ARVN Division Headquarters
3-7
ARVN
4
A
VNMC
2
1
5
USMC
3
A(-)
Imperial Palace
Provincial Headquarters
Bach Ho Bridge
Gia Hoi Island
Song Huong
Dong Ba Gate
Nguyen Hoang Bridge
Song Dai Giang
MACV Compound
1(-)
An Cuu Bridge
Tu Dam Pagoda
Tam Thai Cavalry Camp
Nam Giao Engineer Camp
1
547
549
550
551
BATTLE OF HUE
FRIENDLY SITUATION
11–20 February 1968
Axis of Advance
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
200 and Above
0
1
2 Miles
0
1
2 Kilometers

MAP 36

1st Cavalry Division, tangled with part of the *803d PAVN Regiment*, *324B Division*, about twenty kilometers northeast of Hue.[63]

After talking to General Tolson about the situation north and west of Hue, General Abrams flew over the battlefield on the morning of 16 February to see for himself how the fighting was developing. Returning to Phu Bai, he sent a message to General Cushman expressing his conviction that "the threat to Hue is building up rapidly." He noted that three enemy battalions were still operating in the Citadel, resupplied nightly from a camp in the mountains west of Hue. The unexpected appearance of the *803d Regiment* and the resilient enemy supply channel led Abrams to conclude that "we must seek every means to reinforce the 3d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division" even if that meant "straining our logistic base to the maximum."[64]

Abrams met with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, General Lam, and General Cushman that afternoon to discuss the situation at Hue. Abrams declared that their first priority should be to close down the enemy supply route west of the Citadel. The longer the enemy held Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu, he argued, the longer the battle in the Citadel would go on. The others concurred. Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade would therefore get the lion's share of whatever extra resources Abrams could squeeze out of his command.[65]

On 17 February, Abrams met with Westmoreland and Cushman at MACV Forward headquarters to discuss the situation. Allied intelligence indicated that a second wave of attacks was likely to hit the country within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, with Hue being one of the primary targets. All three generals were concerned because several enemy regiments in I Corps had yet to join the offensive, and the North Vietnamese had already brought troops in from as far away as Khe Sanh to fight for the imperial capital. Upon the advice of Abrams and Cushman, General Westmoreland decided to establish a full Army brigade at Phu Bai. From III Corps he brought in the headquarters of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and its 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry. Once on the ground, the brigade commander, Col. John W. Collins III, took control of his 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, which had come to Phu Bai a week earlier, as well as the 2d Battalion, 505th Infantry, a unit from the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, that had just arrived from the United States. Westmoreland also ordered the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, minus one troop, to be detached from the 9th Infantry Division in eastern III Corps so it could move to Thua Thien Province as soon as possible. With Army units moving into place to defend the Phu Bai sector, General LaHue and Task Force X-Ray could concentrate their full attention on the battle for the Citadel.[66]

[63] AAR, Opn Jeb Stuart, 1st Cav Div, p. 4, p. 1, tab G, and p. 5, Encl 5; Rpt, 101st Abn Div, 29 Dec 68, p. 2.

[64] Msg, Abrams PHB 087 to Cushman, 16 Feb 68, p. 2, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[65] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, XXIV Corps, Vietnam, 4 Jun 68, p. 2, box 67, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn Jeb Stuart, 1st Cav Div, tab V, p. 2.

[66] AAR, Opn Hue City, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, 23 Mar 68, pp. 1–2, box 4, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Msgs, Abrams PHB 099 to Westmoreland, 17 Feb 68; Westmoreland MAC 02241 to Sharp, 17 Feb 68. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

Back at Camp Evans, the situation was finally beginning to improve for Campbell's 3d Brigade. On 15 February, the number of daily supply convoys shuttling between Dong Ha and Camp Evans increased from one to three. Four days later, the colonel received some much-needed manpower. General Tolson released the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, from base defense duties at Camp Evans, while Campbell also gained control over the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry. He now had a total of four battalions he could use against the enemy west of Hue.[67]

On 20 February, General Abrams directed General Tolson to clear the western approaches to Hue, using all the resources at his disposal except those essential for the defense of Quang Tri City. The 1st Cavalry Division commander informed Colonel Campbell to proceed with his assault on Thon La Chu. Though the weather remained bad, Campbell believed that he finally had enough men and supplies to seize Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu. He also hoped that the 10,000 artillery shells and 27 tons of aerial ordnance that had pummeled the hamlets during the last week, combined with naval shelling from the 6-inch guns of the USS *Providence* and the 8-inch guns of the USS *Canberra*, had begun to tell on the North Vietnamese defenders.[68]

On 20 February, Campbell moved his battalions into their attack positions. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, flew from Camp Evans to Landing Zone SALLY, the small landing zone next to PK–17, and then marched to a jump-off point just west of Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu. On its right flank was the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, which had spent the morning clearing the village of Thon Trung for a second time after an enemy company had moved back in. Meanwhile, in the hamlet of Thon Lieu Coc Thuong, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, prepared for its fourth assault against the far woods. During the preceding week, the battalion had held a series of training exercises to teach the soldiers how to use demolitions to dislodge the enemy from his bunkers and hedgerows. Campbell also loaned the battalion a pair of M42s, whose twin 40-mm. cannon could provide rapid and accurate supporting fire against fortified positions. Finally, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, sent two companies into the valley to circle around the northwest side of Thon Bon Tri and attack it from the rear. The colonel resolved to take Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu early the next morning.[69]

Stalemate in the Citadel: 11–20 February

As the 3d Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division became more deeply embroiled in the fighting to the west of Hue, the Marine units from Task Force X-RAY plunged into the battle for the Citadel (*see Map 37*). After Colonel

[67] AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, Encl 1, p. 3.

[68] Msg, Abrams PHB 128 to Tolson, 20 Feb 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH; Monthly Sum, MACV, Feb 1968, pp. 49–51, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Battalion attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 5.

[69] AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div, tab E, p. 2.

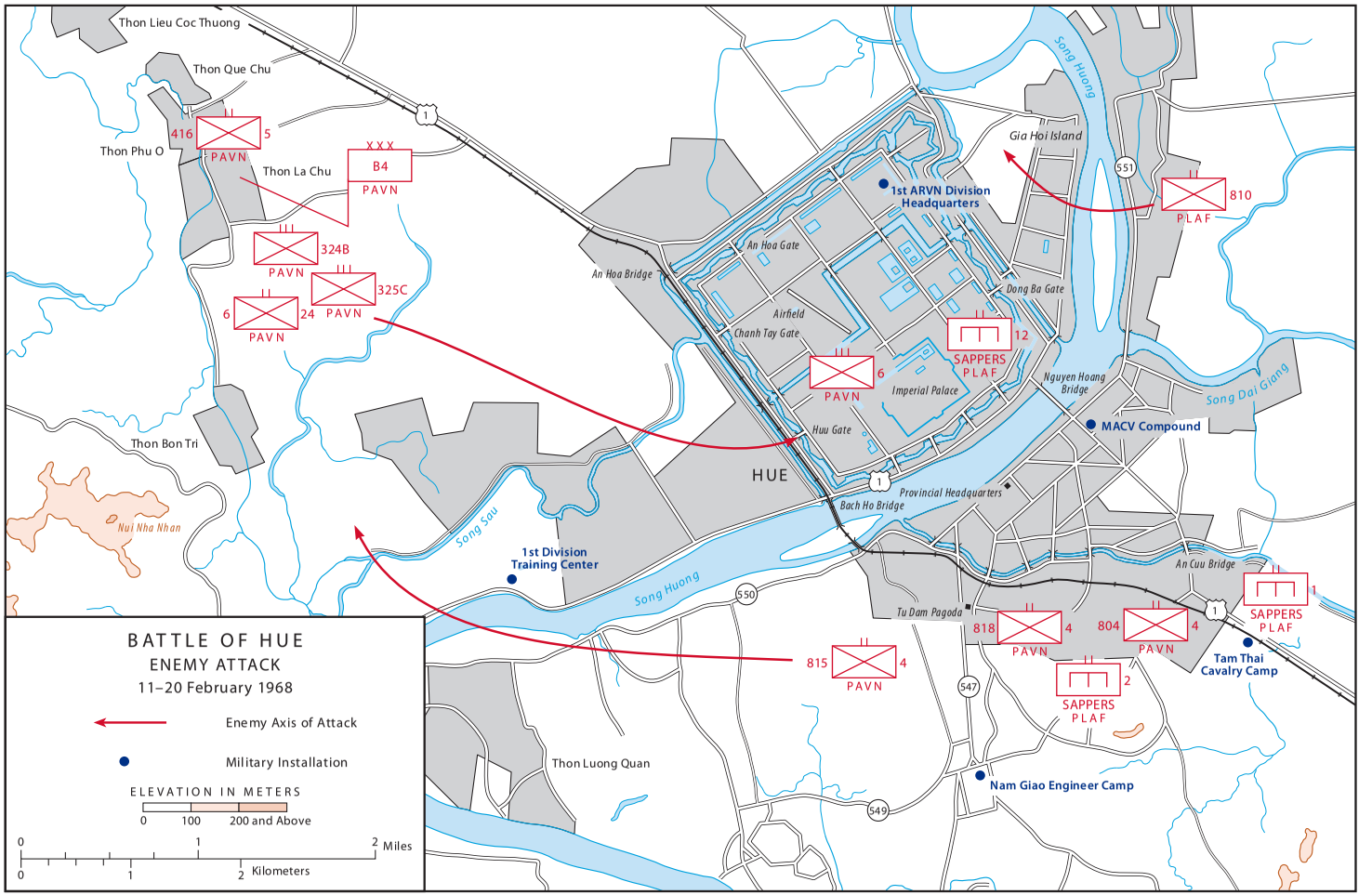
Hughes from the 1st Marines declared that major enemy resistance had ended in southern Hue on 10 February, General LaHue ordered the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, to travel from Phu Bai to the Mang Ca compound to join the South Vietnamese clearing operation in the Citadel. Westmoreland covered the departure of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, with the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, a unit from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, that he released from III Corps. The marines could call on four 155-mm. howitzers that were based at Landing Zone El Paso, a battery of 105-mm. howitzers in southern Hue, and a pair of 4.2-inch mortars in the Hue stadium a short distance east of the advisory compound. The latter weapons were capable of firing tear gas canisters as well as high-explosive rounds. The utility of the heavy ordnance was nevertheless limited by the South Vietnamese high command's decision to limit artillery fire inside the Citadel due to the damage large-caliber shells would inflict on civilians and the city's historic architecture. The success of the Marine effort would therefore depend on the bravery and skill of a few hundred riflemen.[70]

On 11 February, a day after South Vietnamese troops swept the last surviving Communists from the neighborhoods around the Tay Loc airfield, U.S. helicopters landed there with a company from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. Another company from the 5th Marines and five Marine tanks also arrived at the Mang Ca compound by boat. Later in the day, helicopters began bringing in South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Alpha, which had spent the last twelve days fighting in Saigon, to replace the battered 1st Airborne Task Force. The weather turned nasty in the afternoon, however, and only the headquarters and one company of the Vietnamese marines made it into the city before clouds and rain grounded the helicopters. Two days would pass until the weather permitted the airlift to resume.

On 13 February, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Maj. Robert H. Thompson, his staff, and a reinforced company boarded a landing craft on the south bank of the Perfume River and traveled to the Mang Ca compound. Snipers and mortar crews did their best to hit the vessels, each dangerously laden with fuel and ammunition, but the boats made it safely to their destination. Once at the 1st Division compound, Thompson reviewed the tactical situation with General Truong. The major proposed that his marines relieve the South Vietnamese paratroopers in the eastern half of the Citadel and then attack toward the southeastern wall the following morning.

General Truong, relieved to see U.S. troops in the Citadel at last, agreed to the plan. But what he either did not know or failed to tell Major Thompson was that the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne Task Force had already pulled out of its sector and left for Saigon. Consequently, when three companies of Thompson's battalion moved toward their jump-off line in the eastern quarter of the city on the morning of 13 February, the two units that were leading the way collided with an equally large force of North Vietnamese who had quietly reclaimed several residential blocks that had been under the control of the South Vietnamese paratroopers. Thirty-five men from Company A,

[70] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 194.


Thon Lieu Coc Thuong
Thon Que Chu
Thon Phu O
Thon La Chu
Thon Bon Tri
Nui Nha Nhan
416
5
PAVN
XXX
B4
PAVN
324B
PAVN
325C
6
24
PAVN
PAVN
An Hoa Bridge
An Hoa Gate
Airfield
Chanh Tay Gate
Dong Ba Gate
Imperial Palace
Huu Gate
6
PAVN
12
SAPPERS
PLAF
1st ARVN Division
Headquarters
Gia Hoi Island
810
PLAF
Song Huong
Nguyen Hoang
Bridge
Song Dai Giang
MACV Compound
HUE
Provincial Headquarters
Bach Ho Bridge
Song Sau
1st Division
Training Center
Song Huong
An Cuu Bridge
Tu Dam Pagoda
818
4
PAVN
804
4
PAVN
1
SAPPERS
PLAF
Tam Thai
Cavalry Camp
815
4
PAVN
2
SAPPERS
PLAF
Thon Luong Quan
Nam Giao Engineer Camp
1
550
547
549
551
BATTLE OF HUE
ENEMY ATTACK
11–20 February 1968
Enemy Axis of Attack
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
200 and Above
0
1
2 Miles
0
1
2 Kilometers

MAP 37

Men of Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, use walls and buildings as cover to advance in Hue.

more than a third of its total strength, were killed or wounded in the first few minutes of contact.[71]

Thompson immediately sent in his reserve company and two M48 tanks, which allowed the shaken troops from Company A to regroup and then continue the fight. The marines managed to advance only a block or two that day, a story repeated during the next few days as North Vietnamese opposition showed no signs of weakening.

On the other side of the city, the South Vietnamese marines were having an equally hard time retaking the area southwest of the Imperial Palace. They advanced only 400 meters during the next two days, partly because the enemy had turned every house into a stronghold and dotted every yard with fighting pits, and partly because the marines lacked heavy weapons, particularly the 106-mm. recoilless rifles that were proving so useful to the Americans.

Meanwhile, Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, continued to grind ahead in the eastern sector of the city. On the fifteenth, after a round of artillery, naval gunfire, and air strikes wore down a key strong point on the eastern wall that anchored the enemy's right flank, Thompson's marines finally resumed their progress. By this point in the battle, the Americans had become skillful street fighters and could distinguish which structures on a block were

[71] Ibid., p. 199.

keys to breaking the enemy's front line. Supported by mortars, tanks, and recoilless rifles, and sometimes employing riot control agents that required them to wear gas masks, the marines darted forward in small groups to clear each room and building one at a time. Hour by hour Thompson's marines kept moving forward, but only slowly and at great cost. After two more days of bitter fighting with little territory gained, Major Thompson called a temporary halt on 17 February. For the next few days, his weary marines concentrated on building up their nearly exhausted supplies and on organizing themselves for the next attack.[72]

The Final Push: 20–25 February

On the afternoon of 20 February, Major Thompson hatched a plan to break the enemy's last line of defense on the eastern side of the city. Three hours after midnight, select groups of marines crept into no-man's-land. Each headed for a building that had proven vital to the enemy's defense. To the marines' surprise, they found all three buildings virtually undefended. The Communists, it appeared, quietly pulled back from their frontline positions after dark each night to rest. When the enemy came walking back from the direction of the southeastern wall just before first light, the marines shot over a dozen North Vietnamese soldiers before they realized that their position was threatened. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, moved forward to consolidate the gain, and by the end of the twenty-first the U.S. troops had pressed to within one hundred meters of the southeastern wall.[73]

As U.S. and South Vietnamese marines entered the final phase of the battle in the Citadel, General Lam released the South Vietnamese 21st and the 39th Ranger Battalions from I Corps reserve to clear out the Viet Cong that still occupied a string of hamlets along the Perfume River immediately to the east. Once the South Vietnamese rangers arrived, the U.S. Navy landing craft that ferried troops and supplies from the boat ramp near the advisory compound and the Mang Ca compound upriver faced substantially less hostile fire than before.[74]

To the west of Hue, Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade engineered a breakthrough of its own around the time that Thompson's 1st Battalion began its final push to the wall. Shortly before dawn on 21 February, Campbell launched a three-battalion attack against Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu after a brief but intense bombardment. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, hit the same spot in the wood line that it had briefly penetrated three times before. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, assaulted Thon La Chu from the west as did the 2d Battalion,

[72] Ibid., p. 201; AAR, Battle of Hue, Advisory Teams 3 and 4, n.d., p. 8, box 1, Organizational Hist, 101st Abn Div, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[73] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 207.

[74] Interv, Peyton with Maj Jack D. Woodall, Senior Adviser to South Vietnamese 1st Ranger Gp, Capt Donald S. Roe, Senior Adviser to South Vietnamese 21st Ranger Bn, and Capt Kenneth R. Johnston, Senior Adviser to the South Vietnamese 39th Ranger Bn, 11 Mar 68, VNIT 201, CMH.

501st Infantry, on its right flank. Applying the lessons they had learned from earlier attempts to storm the woods, the Americans employed smoke canisters to obscure the enemy's vision and 40-mm. cannon fire to destroy individual strong points. Low-flying scout helicopters also proved useful by spraying bunkers from the rear and trenches from above where they were more vulnerable. Putting their newly learned demolitions expertise to use, the soldiers of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, used ten-pound shaped charges mounted on poles to destroy several bunkers at the edge of the tree line that had caused them great trouble in the past. When the three battalions breached the outer line and plunged into Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu, they came to grips with a regiment or more of North Vietnamese soldiers in a swirling, close-range battle that lasted most of the day.

The Communists began a fighting withdrawal from the hamlets at around 1700, moving east toward the wooded settlements that clustered near the southwestern wall of the Citadel, three kilometers away, where allied troops had yet to venture. Three of the U.S. battalions pursued the fleeing enemy while the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, remained in Thon La Chu to search for stragglers and documents. In the fighting that day, the enemy had lost eighty-nine killed and two captured. Friendly casualties were four killed and seventy-seven wounded. One prisoner later told his interrogators that the village had contained almost 1,000 North Vietnamese regulars at the time of the attack. While some of the enemy units, such as the *416th Battalion*, *5th Regiment*, had been there since the start of the battle, others, such as the *7th Battalion* and the regimental headquarters of the *90th Regiment*, *324B Division*, had arrived in Thon La Chu only a few days earlier after a forced march from Khe Sanh.[75]

Around the same time that Campbell's battalions struck Thon Que Chu and Thon La Chu on the morning of 21 February, two companies of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, maneuvered around Thon Bon Tri and attacked it from the northwest. Colonel Sweet's men encountered only light resistance because most of the North Vietnamese soldiers were in the southern part of the hamlet, manning the trenches that faced Nha Nhan. Capitalizing on the surprise they had achieved, the two cavalry companies hit the enemy from behind. The North Vietnamese fought back stubbornly for most of the day, but once darkness set in they withdrew east toward the hamlets that lay along the Perfume River near the southwestern corner of the Citadel. Colonel Sweet resolved to pursue them at first light.

On the morning of 22 February, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, remained in Thon Que Chu–Thon La Chu to mop up pockets of resistance, while the remaining units under 3d Brigade control began marching toward the Citadel. They advanced along parallel tracks, with the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, following the course of Highway 1; the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, searching the central route; and the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, sweeping the area

[75] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 2-68, 1st Cav Div, 1–29 Feb 68, 29 Feb 68, p. 12, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, n.d., sub: Battle of Hue, p. 8, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Battalion attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 6; Trinh, *1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, p. 40.

to the south. At first, the three battalions encountered only a smattering of North Vietnamese soldiers, most of whom appeared to have gotten cut off from their units. In midmorning, however, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, came under heavy fire from an estimated company of North Vietnamese who had occupied the hamlet of Thon An near the northwestern tip of the Citadel. Colonel Vaught called in helicopter gunships and artillery, while the pair of Dusters attached to his unit systematically leveled any structure that appeared to be serving as a strong point. The supporting fire went on all day, but the Communist troops did not abandon their positions. With darkness approaching, Vaught paused the attack until the following morning.

Meanwhile, several kilometers to the south, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, made contact with another force of well-organized North Vietnamese soldiers just before noon. Several companies of enemy troops armed with mortars, machine guns, recoilless rifles, and rocket-propelled grenades were strongly entrenched along the south side of the Sau Canal, a deep waterway that ran toward the Citadel perpendicular to the Perfume River, forming a triangle of land roughly three kilometers wide and less than one kilometer long that was heavily wooded and contained several hamlets. As the firefight grew, the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, about a kilometer to the north, began moving toward the canal. As the paratroopers passed through a hamlet along the way, they discovered the bodies of at least thirty civilians whom the Communists had murdered. Many of those slain had been bound and shot while others had been dismembered. Continuing their march, the soldiers from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, moved onto the left flank of the cavalrymen and attacked the North Vietnamese troops defending the canal. The enemy held firm until darkness forced the U.S. battalions to call off the attack.[76]

By 22 February, the area of the Citadel still controlled by the enemy had shrunk to the grounds of the Imperial Palace and the southwestern corner of the old city. With the allies closing in on all sides, the *Hue City Front* ordered its troops to retreat through the western wall while they still could.[77]

U.S. soldiers cleaned up the remnants of enemy forces that were still at large north of the Citadel on 23 February. That morning, one company from the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, boarded helicopters and flew to the Hue docks near the Mang Ca compound where it joined a platoon of armored personnel carriers from Troop A of the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, on loan from the 9th Infantry Division. The greater part of the 5th Cavalry had just arrived in the Phu Bai–Hue region after redeploying from eastern III Corps to northern I Corps via the port of Vung Tau. The mechanized task force swept along the northwestern wall toward the An Hoa Bridge, flushing out Communist soldiers who had taken refuge in the grasses and weeds. Meanwhile, two kilometers to the northwest, the remainder of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, resumed its advance toward Thon An. The cavalrymen fought their way into

[76] AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 4, Encl 1; Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, 10 Mar 68, sub: Battle of Hue, p. 6, tab C, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn JEB STUART, 1st Cav Div.

[77] Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027541968, 16 Sep 68, p. 47; Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, 10 Mar 68, p. 10; Interv, Peyton with Woodall, Roe, and Johnston, 11 Mar 68.

Troops of the 1st Cavalry Division approach the Hue Citadel.

the enemy-occupied hamlet and found beneath its shattered remains a honeycomb with bunkers capable of withstanding all but the heaviest bombardment. The troopers spent the rest of the day searching the ruins for survivors and combing through the adjacent cemetery where the *806th Battalion* had ambushed the South Vietnamese 7th Airborne Battalion on 31 January.[78]

Meanwhile, on the twenty-third, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, resumed their battle with the enemy force that was dug into the south side of the Sau Canal. The presence of civilians sometimes led the allies to restrict their use of artillery. Whenever possible, forward observers brought howitzer fire down on the North Vietnamese bunkers and trenches that lined the canal, but sometimes those positions were too close to U.S. lines for safety. Based on the intensity of enemy fire, the Communists appeared to have large reserves of ammunition for their machine guns, recoilless rifles, and mortars. The Sau Canal also presented a formidable physical barrier to any attack the Americans might contemplate. For the moment, Campbell's two battalions were stymied.

The battle in the Citadel came to a symbolic end just before dawn on 24 February when South Vietnamese soldiers recaptured the southern gate and hauled down the massive Viet Cong flag that had flown over it since the start of the battle. In midmorning, the Hac Bao Company and an infantry bat-

[78] AAR, Battalion Attack, 5th Bn, 7th Cav, 14th Mil Hist Det, p. 7.

talion from the 3d Regiment made a final sweep of the Imperial Palace and overcame the few North Vietnamese soldiers who were still capable of resisting. Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese Marine task force retook most of the southwestern wall. By nightfall, only the extreme southwestern corner of the Citadel remained in enemy hands.

West of the Citadel that same morning, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, tried to fight its way across the Sau Canal and through several layers of North Vietnamese fortifications. The cavalrymen had little room to maneuver on the congested battlefield and frequently faced fire from several directions at once. Colonel Sweet decided to pull his men back across the canal so artillery and mortars could further soften up the Communist positions. He resumed the attack later that day with support from the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, but got no better results. The nearly fanatical resistance that the Americans faced probably had something to do with the fact that the North Vietnamese were in the midst of withdrawing the last of their troops from the Citadel. Like water rushing out of a hole in the bottom of a bucket, the North Vietnamese forces drained out of the Citadel directly into the Sau enclave. That gave the enemy an incentive to hold the line at the edge of the canal and significantly increased the number of soldiers he had to defend it.

Also on the twenty-fourth, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, finished its work in Thon La Chu and headed east toward Highway 1. After clearing out several pockets of resistance along the way with the help of helicopter gunships and artillery, it camped in a graveyard about a kilometer from the Citadel. That night, the battalion observed enemy soldiers marching away from Hue to the north and to the west. Forward observers called in artillery strikes, killing an unknown number of the retreating Communists. A machine gunner in Company A of the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, Sp4c. George J. Patterson Jr., recalled finding thousands of enemy footprints the next day that reminded him of the markings left by a cattle stampede.[79]

The allies crushed the last organized resistance in the Citadel on 25 February. Just east of the old city, the South Vietnamese 21st and 39th Ranger Battalions finished a three-day sweep of Gia Hoi Island that netted hundreds of Communist cadre, many of whom turned out to be university students. According to local residents, those students had played a key role in rounding up government officials and others the enemy regarded as threats to their regime. West of the Citadel, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, organized another assault on the Sau enclave only to discover that the enemy had slipped away during the night. Colonel Sweet's men found an abandoned regimental field hospital and many fresh graves near the canal with piles of discarded equipment heaped nearby.[80]

[79] AAR, Opn Jeb Stuart, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, p. 5, Encl 1; Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, 10 Mar 68, p. 7; Annual Hist Sum, 1968, 2d Bn , 12th Cav, n.d., p. 13, box 1, Organizational Hist, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, 1st Cav Div, Cav Units, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Rpt, 14th Mil Hist Det, 10 Mar 68, p. 11; Interv, author with George Patterson Jr., 22 Mar 05, Historians files, CMH.

[80] Annual Hist Sum, 1968, 2d Bn, 12th Cav, n.d., p. 13; Rpt, 45th Mil Hist Det, 19 Mar 68, sub: Battle of Hue, p. 2, Encl 9, Historians files, CMH.

Aftermath

On 26 February, President Thieu flew from Saigon to Hue to congratulate General Truong and his men. The month-long battle for Hue had been the most sustained and ferocious engagement of the war to date. A total of 142 U.S. marines had died in the fighting for Hue and another 1,100 or so had been wounded. The South Vietnamese Army lost 333 men killed and 1,773 wounded and the Vietnamese marines another 88 killed and 350 wounded. The 1st Cavalry Division reported losses of 68 killed and 453 wounded, while the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, listed its casualties as 6 dead and 56 wounded.[81]

The residents of Hue had also paid a steep price. More than 4,000 civilians had lost their lives during the 25-day battle, most at the hands of the enemy. Viet Cong cadre had executed hundreds of government officials, while North Vietnamese soldiers during their retreat from the city had killed an even greater number of civilians that they had forced to work for them as porters. Months after the battle ended, South Vietnamese officials discovered a number of mass graves to the south and west of Hue where the enemy had buried nearly 3,000 civilians they had killed in the final stages of the battle. Some of the dead had their hands and feet tied, and many showed signs of having been shot at close range. At least 600 had been buried alive. The North Vietnamese never publicly admitted to killing more than a small number of civilians, blaming most of the deaths instead on the allies or on collateral damage from the battle. However, a captured document from April 1968 admitted to the "elimination" of nearly 3,000 "tyrants and puppet administrative personnel." Not all Communist officials were pleased that the executions had taken place. According to one captured document, some cadres in Thua Thien Province felt that the mass killings had been inconsistent with Viet Cong policy.[82]

The South Vietnamese armed forces had performed well during the battle. The Hac Bao Company, the 3d Regiment of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, and the paratroopers of the South Vietnamese 1st Airborne Task Force had fought with exceptional skill and valor. Often fighting without direct U.S. assistance, they had bested their North Vietnamese opponents in a prolonged, close-range battle. The 1st Division's command and control system had also proved to be excellent, due in no small part to General Truong's leadership.[83]

For the enemy, Hue had been his most successful operation of the Tet offensive. He had nearly overran one of South Vietnam's largest and most

[81] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 213.

[82] Intel Rpt, DOD, no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, pp. 6, 9; Quoted words from Intel Bull, CDEC, no. 11791, 26 Apr 68, p. 2, box 154, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; "The Rebirth of Hue," p. 2.

[83] Memo, Col Jack T. Pink, Sec, Joint Staff, MACV, for George D. Jacobson, Mission Coordinator, U.S. Embassy, 31 Mar 68, sub: Updates of TET Offensive Evaluations, p. 1, Encl 1, Historians files, CMH; Memo, Brig Gen Harris W. Hollis, Director of Opns, MACV, for Army Ch of Staff, 25 Mar 68, sub: Performance of ARVN during Battle of Hue, p. 8, Historians files, CMH.

An aerial of the city of Hue in ruins

culturally important cities in a matter of hours and had established a revolutionary government there that had lasted for almost a month. By hanging onto the city for twenty-five days, the enemy had been able to keep the Tet offensive alive in the U.S. media weeks after the fighting had ended elsewhere in the country.[84]

The offensive had also sorely tested the U.S. logistic and command arrangements in northern I Corps, hitting III Marine Amphibious Force when it was still shuffling units and working on infrastructure upgrades to support the 1st Cavalry Division. General Cushman's headquarters had not had time to sort out the various problems that came from integrating Marine operations and supply requirements with an Army airmobile division. Task Force X-Ray, the provisional command that Cushman had created as a stop-gap measure to defend the supply line between Hue and Da Nang, had not had the resources or authority to control the fighting at Hue once that battle started. For the first ten days of the battle, the marines in southern Hue and the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, west of Hue had operated with little coordination, and the U.S. forces likewise had achieved little coordination with the South Vietnamese. General Westmoreland had resolved those problems by sending his deputy to take charge of the battle, but it had taken more than a week to get a new command post with all the necessary signal equipment up

[84] AAR, Battle of Hue, Advisory Teams 3 and 4, p. 11; AAR, Battle of Hue, 1st Inf Div Advisory Det, Advisory Team 3, p. 3; Intel Rpt, DOD, no. 6027448568, 29 May 68, pp. 4–6.

and running at Phu Bai, using personnel borrowed from MACV headquarters in Saigon and from the 1st Signal Brigade.[85]

No one at MACV or III Marine Amphibious Force had anticipated the scope of the enemy offensive, and therefore had not anticipated the possibility that Highway 1 would be closed for an extended period between Da Nang and the U.S. bases in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces. Isolated from his main source of supply, Colonel Campbell could not bring the full weight of his 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, to bear on the fight until the situation had improved in the middle of February. Likewise, Westmoreland had been able to bring additional units into the fight only on a piecemeal basis, as dictated by the supply situation.

Fortunately for the allies, the fleet of U.S. Air Force transport aircraft, reinforced by Army and Marine helicopters and supplemented by cargo vessels coming up the Perfume River, had been able to bring in enough supplies to keep Campbell's brigade and Task Force X-RAY fighting. In February, C–130 aircraft had made over 1,000 landings at Phu Bai, and another 350 sorties to Quang Tri City and Dong Ha. The C–130s had also moved several South Vietnamese airborne battalions from Saigon to Phu Bai, plus the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in late February. All told, the U.S. Seventh Air Force reported that it had transported 36,000 tons of cargo to I Corps that month, a 50 percent increase over the average monthly tonnage and amounting to one-third of the countrywide workload in February.[86]

Despite the enemy's accomplishments, he had paid a dear price for his nearly month-long occupation of Hue. Allied estimates of the number of enemy killed ranged from between 2,500 and 5,000. The *4th*, *5th*, and *6th Regiments* had taken heavy losses, with some battalions reduced to approximately 100 men out of an original force of nearly 400. Other units that had arrived later in the battle were only marginally better off. The enemy would need several months to rest and reconstitute his units before they were once again combat ready. The battering the Communists took in Hue also exacted a psychological toll. According to captured documents, many soldiers in the *6th Regiment* became reluctant to operate in the lowlands in the months following Tet.[87]

Ironically, the siege of Khe Sanh, which the enemy hoped would draw allied forces away from South Vietnam's cities, ended up backfiring on him. The growing danger to the Marine base had so alarmed Westmoreland that he had rushed the 1st Cavalry Division to northern I Corps a full month ahead of schedule. But instead of sending it out to Khe Sanh, he had put the division in the lowlands where it could best respond to enemy initiatives. The cavalry had arrived just in time to save Quang Tri City and to help drive the enemy from Hue. The North Vietnamese miscalculation had cost them dearly, robbing them of their best chance for an outright military victory in the Tet campaign.

[85] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 02452 to Sharp, 21 Feb 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.
[86] Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, pp. 326–28.
[87] Intel Bull, CDEC, no. 15873, 27 Aug 68, sub: 6th NVA Regt, Tri-Thien-Hue MR, p. 2, box 41, CDEC Bulls, Asst Ch of Staff, J–2, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

Nonetheless, the allies knew how close they had come to disaster in both cases, and as the mopping-up operations got under way around Quang Tri City and Hue, Abrams and his staff at MACV Forward began planning a new set of operations that would make it difficult if not impossible for the enemy to ever set foot in those cities again.

Part Three

Thrust and Parry

13

Reverberations

The explosion that ripped through South Vietnam during the 1968 Tet holidays was the single most important event of the Vietnam War. Planned by the Communists and foreseen but underestimated by the allies, everyone recognized the offensive as a transformational moment. But what would the effects be? During the weeks that followed the initial attacks, the three primary combatants pored over reports to understand what had happened and to decide what to do next.

The Communist Perspective

From the moment the first gun sounded, the government in Hanoi adopted an unrelentingly positive tone in public. The Lao Dong Party's official newspaper declared that "the once-in-a-thousand year opportunity has come. The bugle has sounded victory," and every other government organ followed suit. Privately, however, Communist officials were less sanguine, for they realized that Le Duan's bid to bring the war to a quick and successful conclusion had failed. After making the obligatory triumphal posturing, *COSVN* headquarters acknowledged that "we have been guilty of many errors and shortcomings." Militarily, the Communists had failed to capture many key objectives, had not held on to the areas that they had succeeded in capturing, and had not eliminated any major allied units. South Vietnamese formations had not dissolved in a mass of defections as anticipated, Communist command and control had been poor, and the morale of Communist soldiers was flagging as a result of the reversals. Most importantly, the attack had not brought the Thieu government to its knees.[1]

[1] Quote from James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive, A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 152. Circular from *Central Office of South Vietnam* (*COSVN*) Current Affairs Committee and Mil Affairs Committee of South Vietnam Liberation Army HQ Concerning a Preliminary Assessment of the Situation, 31 Jan 68, in *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, 2 vols., Gareth Porter, ed. (Standfordville, N.Y.: E. M. Coleman Enterprises, 1979), 2:486 (second quote); Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), pp. 11–12; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, vol. 2, pp. ix, 224; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973,* pp. 59, 65. See also synopses of captured *COSVN* and *MR5* documents in Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 02701 to Sharp, 26 Feb 68; and Westmoreland MAC 02063 to Wheeler, et al., 13 Feb 68. Both in Creighton W. Abrams Papers, CMH, and Bfg, MACV, J–2 Strategy Assessment, p. 2, Encl 3 to MFR, MACV, 5 Apr 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, 31 Mar 68, Historians files, CMH.

Compounding the inability of the Communists to achieve their objectives was the human cost of the failure. Both publically and privately, Communist officials found the question of losses too delicate to address. Even decades after the war, the official military history published by the Communist government of Vietnam made no mention of the causalities the Communists suffered during Tet. This reticence did not apply to the allies, as the history gleefully claimed that the Communists had "killed or dispersed 150,000 enemy soldiers, including 43,000 Americans," destroying 2,370 aircraft and 1,700 armored vehicles in the process.[2]

The allied accounting—while undoubtedly inexact—was far more realistic and sobering for Hanoi's leadership. MACV estimated that the Communists had committed 124,000 troops to the Tet offensive—84,000 in the initial battles of 30–31 January, plus another 40,000 over the next several weeks. These had suffered mightily. During February 1968, the allies had killed about 50,000 enemy personnel. Of this number, 40,000 had been soldiers and 10,000 had been individuals not carried on MACV's roster of enemy military units. MACV arbitrarily evenly divided the latter category into two groups—members of the infrastructure and civilians who, either willingly or not, had served the enemy as guides, auxiliaries, or laborers. To the dead were added thousands more who either had surrendered, been captured, or who had been detained as suspects. The number of enemy wounded was unknown, but MACV postulated that 14,000 enemy personnel had been hurt seriously enough to have either died or been permanently incapacitated. In contrast, the command reported 7,277 allied military dead—5,025 Vietnamese, 2,105 Americans, and 147 from the other Free World forces.[3]

Equally hard to swallow for Hanoi's leaders was the fact that their plan for a national uprising had fizzled. "We failed to motivate the people to stage uprisings and break the enemy's oppressive control," admitted *COSVN*, a fact that

[2] Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, vol. 2, pp. 223, 467 (nn. 22 and 23); Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968),* pp. 475–81.

[3] Definitive numbers are always hard to come by, and those related to Tet are no exception. In addition to the usual issues of incomplete information, varying parameters, and diverse accounting methods are added difficulties caused by the sheer size of Tet. The numbers presented here are derived from Rpt, Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense (OASD), Comptroller (Systems Policy and Information), Directorate of Information Opns, Southeast Asia Statistical Sum, 5 Dec 73, tables 2, 6; and Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through Oct 1968, n.d., tables 1C, 2B, 2C, 2E. Both in Historians files, CMH. See also, Rpt, MACV, 6 Mar 68, sub: Enemy Losses for the period 291800 hrs Jan 68 to 052400 hrs March 68, pp. 1–2, document 12, Westmoreland History files, CMH; Rpt, General Earle G. Wheeler, 27 Feb 68, sub: Report of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Situation in Vietnam and MACV Force Requirements, p. 3, document 4a, Vietnam 2H (1) 1/68-2/68 Strategic Reconsiderations after Tet, box 75 (2 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968),* pp. 41, 55–56; Phillip B. Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1990), pp. 83–84. An additional 1,100 South Vietnamese military personnel were listed as missing. American wounded for February totaled 9,464, of whom about 5,000 required hospital care. South Vietnamese and third nation soldiers requiring hospitalization in February came to 11,451 and 147, respectively. Rpt, OASD, Comptroller, Southeast Asia Statistical Sum, 5 Dec 73, tables 2, 6. As with enemy casualties, sources differ on friendly casualties.

An M48A3 tank and its crew from the 4th Infantry Division stand guard in front of a destroyed house during the fighting in Pleiku City.

Military Region 5 headquarters termed "a big problem." Once the bullets had begun to fly, the populace had found the bomb shelter more appealing than the barricades. In a land in which many were tired of war and apathetic about the outcome, fear and indifference easily trumped ideology. The Communists had certainly gained in the short run by demonstrating that no place was beyond their reach. They had also gained when some civilians blamed the government for the destruction that had been visited on their homes during the fighting. But just as many people if not more blamed the Communists for violating the cherished Tet holidays, for creating the situation that had caused the devastation, and for the massacre of thousands of civilians at Hue. Even the most talented propagandist could not gloss over that fact that the Communists had not achieved their much-publicized objectives. They had called for a mass uprising, and no one had bothered to show up.[4]

Faced with so much bad news, Hanoi's leaders took solace in three factors. First, although they could not sustain losses indefinitely on the scale they had suffered in February, they still had significant reserves in the South that they had not committed. To these they were busily adding more men—regulars sent down from the North's still substantial army, and southerners recruited or impressed from areas where the government's presence had

[4] Circular from COSVN, 31 Jan 68, in Porter, *Vietnam*, p. 486 (quote); Msg, Westmoreland MAC 02063 to Wheeler, et al., 13 Feb 68.

been weakened. The expanded ability to recruit southerners pointed to the second reason for optimism—the assault on South Vietnam's towns and cities had forced the Saigon government to withdraw most of its troops from the countryside, creating a vacuum the Communists hoped to exploit. And third, exploitation was possible because the Communist infrastructure had emerged from Tet fairly intact. Located mostly in the countryside away from the sites of Tet's major battles, only a portion of the infrastructure had participated in the fighting. If allied estimates that about 5,000 Communist cadres had died during Tet was correct, then nearly 80,000 infrastructure members remained, ready to fill the vacuum created by the government's withdrawal from the countryside.[5]

All things considered, Le Duan judged that the best course was to forge ahead. The Hanoi government instructed its troops to remain as close to the cities as possible, creating a physical and mental state of siege that it hoped would sap the population's spirits and relegate allied forces to a defensive posture. Militarily, Communist soldiers were to avoid direct confrontations with the Americans and to refrain from attacking the major cities, relying instead on bombardments and small raids to keep the allies pinned down. Smaller provincial and district towns were fair game, however, with *COSVN* establishing a goal to render them 80 percent destroyed. Communist units were also to target allied air bases, fuel depots, and lines of communications. Meanwhile, the party would exploit the vacuum in the countryside to the maximum extent possible, spreading its influence, gathering food and recruits, and mobilizing the populace for the still-hoped-for general uprising. Last but not least, the North would continue to pump men and resources into the South until the Communists had rebuilt their forces sufficiently to launch another thrust at the cities. A sense of urgency pervaded all of this, for as *COSVN* headquarters explained, "If in the coming days we fail to quickly motivate a large and powerful force of the masses to stand up against the enemy in time, and if we fail to concentrate our armed forces to attack him continuously, he will certainly recover his strength and counterattack us more strongly. Not only will this limit the impact of our victories, it will create new difficulties for us."[6]

The View from Saigon

If the forecast for Hanoi's leaders was overcast, President Thieu gazed upon an equally leaden sky. Tet traumatized South Vietnam like no other

[5] Edwin E. Moise et al., eds., "The Myths of Tet," in Michael Arthur, *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 242, 244.

[6] Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, vol. 2, p. 227; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 02701 to Sharp, 26 Feb 68; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 02063 to Wheeler, et al., 13 Feb 68; Circular from COSVN, 31 Jan 68, in Porter, *Vietnam*, p. 486 (quote); Bfg, MACV, J–2 Strategy Assessment, pp. 3–4, Encl 3; Memo, COSVN for Sub Region 4, 21 Feb 68, Encl to News Release, U.S. Mission Press Center, no. 120-68, 26 Jun 68, sub: COSVN Report Outlines Viet Cong "Second Offensive" Tactics, Historians files, CMH.

event. The enemy had penetrated the regime's innermost sanctuaries, making a mockery of claims of security, undermining Thieu's standing with the public, and damaging socioeconomic activity. Routine governance had ground to a halt, and the populace was filled with dread, not only by what had taken place, but also by Communist promises that more was to come.

In addition to losing several thousand military dead, nearly 14,000 South Vietnamese soldiers had been hospitalized for wounds by 5 March. More than 10,000 had deserted, although about half of that number had returned to the colors. The elite airborne division had suffered particularly heavy losses, and at one point fifty-eight battalions were combat ineffective due to lack of manpower.[7]

The urban nature of the fighting had hit the populace unusually hard. South Vietnamese authorities put the civilian toll at 14,300 killed, 24,000 wounded, and 627,000 homeless. Over 72,000 homes had been destroyed. CORDS came up with similar casualty statistics but put the damage higher—over 884,000 refugees, 108,000 houses that either had been destroyed or had received at least 50 percent damage, and another 102,000 buildings with less than 50 percent damage. The United States estimated that property losses exceeded $173 million.[8]

The countryside, on the other hand, had emerged largely unscathed. The Communists had attacked only about fifty hamlets during the opening phase of the offensive. Still, some damage had occurred in rural areas. The Viet Cong had set fire to some settlements, while the allies had bombed and shelled others as they fought to dislodge enemy soldiers.[9]

More devastating to the allied cause in the countryside than the physical destruction was the loss of control, as rural security forces had fallen back to urban areas. According to MACV's hamlet evaluation system, the percentage of the population living in relative security dropped precipitously as a result of Tet—from about 67 percent to 60 percent—representing a reduction from the government's rolls of over 1.3 million people. CORDS Director Komer later speculated that the situation was much worse, estimating that the government had lost control of 2.7 million people.[10]

[7] Memo, JCS for the President, 27 Feb 68, sub: Military Situation and Requirements in Vietnam, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

[8] Son, ed., *Viet Cong "Tet" Offensive (1968),* p. 56; Rpt, CORDS, 1969, sub: Daily Civilian Casualties During Post Tet Offensive, p. 1; Tables, CORDS, Status of Refugees and Cement and Roofing, 9 May 68; Rpt, Chairman, JCS, 28 Feb 68, sub: Situation in Vietnam and MACV Force Requirements (JCS 2472/237), p. 5, Encl 1 (Intelligence). All in Historians files, CMH. Louis A. Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors: Displaced Persons and Other War Victims in Viet-nam, 1954–1975*, vol. 14, Contributions to the Study of World History (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1988), p. 161.

[9] Msg, Sec of State 120926 to All European Diplomatic Posts, et al., 27 Feb 68, sub: Vietnam Situation Report as of 1800 EST, 26 February 1968, pp. 3–4, Historians files, CMH.

[10] Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through October 1968, n.d., table 5a; Communique, General William C. Westmoreland to Admiral Ulysses G. Sharp, 29 Mar 68, sub: Post-Tet Pacification, p. 6; MFR, MACV, 1 Jun 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, 19 May 1968, p. 2. All in Historians files, CMH.

Damaged houses in Saigon

Tet did not affect the countryside equally. The damage to the pacification program varied significantly from one region, province, district, and village to another. Nationwide, Tet had made a serious impact on thirteen of the nations' forty-four provinces. It had a moderate impact on sixteen provinces and little to no effect on fifteen provinces. In general, I and IV Corps had suffered the worst. In I Corps, the attacks had brought widespread destruction to Revolutionary Development areas in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces, while Quang Tin Province had escaped virtually untouched. In IV Corps, the fighting had created a large number of refugees for the first time in the war. The northeastern tier of delta provinces—Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, Kien Hoa, and Vinh Binh—saw particularly high numbers of refugees. Most of the outposts lost nationwide to abandonment or hostile action lay in the northeastern delta. Rural security had also vanished in the upper delta provinces that bordered Cambodia. In the central delta, the enemy had inflicted serious setbacks to the Revolutionary Development programs in Phong Dinh and Vinh Long Provinces. The least affected provinces in IV Corps were An Giang, dominated by the militantly anti-Communist Hoa Hao sect, and Chung Thien, which the enemy had ignored, preferring to use it as a staging area for attacks elsewhere in the region.[11]

[11] Msg, Sec of State 120926 to All European Diplomatic Posts, 27 Feb 68, pp. 3–4. For somewhat different tabulations of the impact on pacification in the provinces, see Memo,

Compared with the far northern and southern corps zones, central Vietnam, as represented by II and III Corps, had suffered far less. The Tet offensive most affected II Corps' pacification programs along the northeastern coast and in the western highlands. Binh Dinh Province, formerly a showplace for progress through most of 1967, became more insecure than it had been at any point since the arrival of U.S. forces in early 1966. Its neighbor to the south, Phu Yen, was almost as bad. Rural security was likewise almost nonexistent in the highland provinces of Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac. The situation on the central and southern coast, on the other hand, was better. In the southwest interior, Tuyen Duc Province sustained a major setback, while the offensive had largely bypassed the neighboring provinces of Quang Duc and Lam Dong. As for III Corps, the Tet offensive had severely damaged pacification in Saigon and in the neighboring provinces of Hau Nghia, Binh Duong, and Gia Dinh. Progress had also come to a standstill in Phuoc Long and Binh Long Provinces due to the withdrawal of allied forces to more populous areas. Pacification sustained moderate to minor setbacks in the provinces east of Saigon, while to the west, Tay Ninh, a stronghold of the anti-Communist Cao Dai sect, emerged unscathed. Long An Province suffered little for a different reason—most of the local Viet Cong had marched on Saigon.[12]

With the cities aflame and the government's presence in the countryside weakened, President Thieu faced a difficult road ahead. Yet just as Hanoi's leaders found silver linings among the clouds that darkened their horizon, Thieu also saw rays of hope. The government, after all, had survived, and the populace had spurned the enemy's call for revolution. True, much of the countryside was in jeopardy, but this did not mean that the Communists had actually captured the areas vacated by the government, since the enemy, too, had focused his efforts on the cities. In fact, the allies maintained that the Communists had gained outright control over only 280,000 people as a result of Tet. The rest of the people who had fallen off the rolls of the "secured" population had become "contested," with neither side holding an undisputed upper hand. If the allies acted with speed and purpose, they could reclaim many of the lost areas relatively quickly. Enhancing the prospects of a rapid restoration was the fact that the Revolutionary Development teams and the other entities most closely associated with pacification had suffered few losses thanks to the enemy's focus on the cities and the withdrawal of most pacification personnel to protected areas.[13]

Mission Coordinator for Members of the Mission Council, 15 Mar 68, sub: U.S. Mission Assessment of Current Situation, pp. 2–3. Communique, Westmoreland to Sharp, 29 Mar 68, p. 3; Memo, CIA, Saigon, for CIA HQ, Langley, 19 Mar 68, sub: Pacification in the Wake of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, pp. A-1, A-27; Rpt, Lt Col Clarence W. Hannon, I Corps Field Evaluator, CORDS, 28 Feb 68, sub: Visit to I Corps Tactical Zone 20–24 February 1968, p. 1. All in Historians files, CMH. .

[12] Memo, CIA, 19 Mar 68, pp. A-8, A-19.

[13] Communique, Westmoreland to Sharp, 29 Mar 68, pp. 2–5; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 70.

Bright spots appeared on the military front as well. Notwithstanding the fact that most units had been seriously understrength due to the Tet holiday, South Vietnam's armed forces had performed remarkably well. This, combined with the beating the allies administered to the Communists, resulted in a noticeable improvement in morale. U.S. advisers reported that 42 of the South's 149 regular army combat battalions deserved high praise, while only 8 had performed poorly. Standout units included the South Vietnamese Airborne Division, the Marine Brigade, certain ranger battalions and armored cavalry units, and elements of the 1st, 2d, 5th, 7th, and 21st Infantry Divisions. Most Regional and Popular Forces units had fought well too, playing key roles in the defense of provincial and district capitals. The territorials in I and II Corps had fared the best. Performance in III and IV Corps had been more varied—most had served competently, but there had been instances of treachery and desertion.[14]

Tet had also tested the mettle of Vietnamese officials at every level. Predictably the results were mixed, but overall MACV was pleased. President Thieu and Vice President Ky had provided strong and effective leadership, as had General Vien at the Joint General Staff and General Khang at III Corps headquarters. Of the division commanders, Colonel Truong of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, Colonel Toan of the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division, and General Dong of the South Vietnamese Airborne Division had performed admirably. U.S. advisers gave strong ratings to nine province chiefs, including Lt. Col. Le Tri Tin of Quang Nam, Lt. Col. Nguyen Hop Doan of Kontum, Lt. Col. Bui Kim Nha of Long Khanh, and Lt. Col. Ly Trong My of Kien Tuong.[15]

Other South Vietnamese commanders had faltered during the crisis. The most conspicuous disappointments were General Vinh Loc, the II Corps commander who had spent the early days of Tet leading troops in Pleiku City like an infantry captain, and General Manh, the IV Corps commander who had become paralyzed with worry as the offensive broke across the Mekong Delta. Encouraged by the Americans to clean house, in mid-March, President Thieu replaced General Loc at II Corps with Lt. Gen. Lu Mong Lan. Lan had been the commandant of the Defense College and had at one point or another commanded the 18th, 23d, and 25th Infantry Divisions. The senior adviser in II Corps, Col. John W. Barnes, welcomed the news, calling Lan "extremely competent." Likewise, General Manh made way for Lt. Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang at IV Corps. The former minister of Revolutionary Development, Thang was a dynamic and expe-

[14] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 17–32; Enemy losses for the period 291800 hrs Jan 1968 to 052400 hrs March 1968, 6 Mar 68, pp. 1–2, document 12, Westmoreland History files, CMH; Memo, Walt W. Rostow, National Security Adviser, for the President, 4 Mar 68, document 23, Vietnam 2G 7/67–12/67, Manpower Mobilization in SVN (1 of 2), box 75 (2 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Rpt, General Wheeler, 27 Feb 68, sub: Report of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Situation in Vietnam and MACV Force Requirements, p. 7, and Encl. 7, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

[15] Memo, JCS for Rostow, 13 Feb 68, sub: Status of RVNAF, pp. 1, 10, Historians files, CMH.

rienced commander. He brought his own handpicked staff from Saigon to Can Tho. Westmoreland stated that Thang was "like a breath of fresh air in IV Corps." Thieu also replaced nine province chiefs who had performed poorly, and several others for miscellaneous reasons. "This housecleaning in the wake of [the] Tet offensive," the MACV commander reported to Admiral Sharp, "is a distinct plus."[16]

Indeed, U.S. officials hoped that the shock the Communists had administered to the South Vietnamese state would galvanize it into action, and there were some hopeful signs. Thieu initiated a nationwide mobilization and said he would consider other measures to rally public support. As the nation recovered from the trauma, groups of citizens began forming spontaneously either to provide relief for refugees, to help rebuild devastated areas, or to supplement existing defense forces with local militias. The movement eventually gave rise to the formation of the People's Self-Defense Force, a vehicle for citizen mobilization that would eventually number in the millions.[17]

The sight of Communist agents running amok during Tet also galvanized the regime to take the threat posed by the infrastructure more seriously. Although the counterinfrastructure apparatus had ceased to function in many areas during the offensive, it had still managed to kill or capture between 500 and 600 infrastructure members in February in addition to the estimated 5,000 killed in battle. The number of killed or captured through the counterinfrastructure program rose dramatically in March to 1,323, and the monthly tally of neutralized cadre would continue to exceed 1,000 every month thereafter as the government redoubled its efforts to uproot the enemy's clandestine organization. Aiding the government in this endeavor was the fact that many cadre had blown their cover during Tet and were now more vulnerable. In July, Thieu gave the effort a considerable boost when he finally issued full implementing instructions for the Phoenix program. Thanks to Tet, the South Vietnamese were finally moving forward on a number of fronts long advocated by MACV.[18]

If Tet opened the door for some long-term improvements in the way South Vietnam prosecuted the conflict, it also left the government with some immediate challenges. Providing shelter to those who had lost their homes during the fighting was perhaps the most pressing of these. President Thieu recognized the problem but was reluctant to tackle it until the overall situation had stabilized. Believing there was no time to waste, General Westmoreland stepped forward on 2 February to propose a combined U.S.–South Vietnamese rebuilding program. Thieu agreed to the initia-

[16] First quote from Senior Ofcr Debriefing Rpt, Brig Gen John W. Barnes, 15 Dec 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH. Second quote from General William C. Westmoreland Hist notes, vol. 30, 1–31 Mar 68, p. 3, document 1, Westmoreland History files, CMH. Communique, Westmoreland to Sharp, 29 Mar 68, p. 8.

[17] Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 152–54.

[18] Ibid.; Communique, Westmoreland to Sharp, 29 Mar 68, p. 5; Rpt, Pacification Sub-Program, p. 3, Encl 1 to MFR, MACV, 10 Aug 68, sub: Status of Phoenix/Phung for period January–June 1968, Historians files, CMH.

tive, dubbed Project Recovery, the following day. Under the rubric of a Central Recovery Committee led by South Vietnamese Vice President Ky and CORDS Director Komer, MACV made available 600 million piasters (roughly $5 million) of emergency aid, which it disbursed through U.S. field advisers. While the U.S. Agency for International Development provided raw materials and other necessary commodities, the U.S. Army applied its own unique skills to the effort. U.S. military engineers cleared away rubble and built new housing, Army logisticians provided supplies and labor, Army medical personnel treated the sick and injured and gave immunizations, and Army communications specialists repaired damaged telephone lines. Most of the money was spent by the end of February. Some funds were improperly distributed or went to projects that failed to achieve their goals. Nevertheless, the infusion of money played an important role in redressing urban destruction and kick-starting the South Vietnamese economy. After a burst of activity in February and March, the pace of progress slackened noticeably, but the program continued aided by the infusion of additional capital and material. By mid-May, all but 286,000 Tet refugees had been rehoused, and the United States and South Vietnam had distributed over 36,000 tons of food, 66,000 tons of construction materials, 5,000 tons of miscellaneous relief supplies, 584,000 bags of cement, and nearly 634,000 sheets of aluminum roofing. By this point, the South Vietnamese government had also disbursed over 483 million piasters in relief and resettlement allowances to 60,000 families. Other foreign nations and nongovernmental organizations had contributed 739 million piasters and relief supplies, while private Vietnamese individuals and organizations had raised another 510 million piasters in a burst of patriotism and compassion.[19]

A second challenge facing Thieu was to bring his military back up to strength. All training had stopped on 31 January as the soldiers stationed at training centers and schools had joined the fighting, thereby disrupting the flow of replacements into units. Fortunately, the training establishment escaped with only minor damage. The Joint General Staff ordered all activity to resume on 11 February, and by the end of the month seven of the South Vietnamese Army's nine individual training centers were back in action, as were seventeen of the twenty-four military schools, three of the ten division training centers, and eight of the thirty-seven Popular Forces training centers. The Joint General Staff expected the remaining facilities to be open by the end of March. With Thieu pledging to push recruitment, MACV estimated that the South Vietnamese infantry divisions in II and III Corps would regain their full strength by May, and the divisions in I and IV Corps by August. It likewise expected the Regional and Popular Forces to be back to full strength within three to six months. As for the thirty-five battalions in the Joint Strategic Reserve, the South Vietnamese Airborne Division would be out of action for several months,

[19] Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 144–47; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 69; MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, p. 540; Wiesner, *Victims and Survivors*, pp. 163–67.

but the Marine Brigade and the twenty-battalion ranger force recovered quickly.[20]

Whether veterans or new recruits, all of South Vietnam's security forces were to be armed better than ever before. The fact that many Viet Cong local and guerrilla soldiers had sported newly delivered Communist Bloc weaponry during Tet spurred the United States to accelerate preexisting efforts to rearm the South Vietnamese with more modern weapons, including M16 assault rifles. General Westmoreland identified the effort as one of his top priorities, and on 9 March MACV completed an ambitious plan to support a greatly enlarged South Vietnamese force structure with a plethora of new equipment, with the territorials to be armed and organized nearly on par with the regulars. By pushing South Vietnam to the brink of the precipice without completing the job, the Communists had triggered a reaction that would significantly improve its adversary's strength.[21]

America Reacts

If the South Vietnamese were traumatized by Tet, Americans were no less shocked. An atmosphere of foreboding engulfed the nation, as the media depicted the situation in dire tones. General Westmoreland and Ambassador Komer tried to counter what they regarded as overly negative reporting, but their effort, Westmoreland later wrote, "was more than offset by the alarming headlines and the gloom-and-doom type editorials that proceeded to propagandize the limited successes of the Viet Cong." To make matters worse, some in the administration, particularly those who already harbored doubts about the war and the way it was being fought, joined the Greek chorus. The Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, for example, declared that the Tet offensive had "killed the Revolutionary Development Program," and that "to a large extent the Viet Cong now control the countryside." Efforts by Westmoreland and Komer to boost the administration's morale met with no more success than with the media. So convinced were some that the war was lost that they refused to believe evidence to the contrary presented by Westmoreland and Ambassadors Bunker and Komer. Embittered by the lack of receptivity, Komer later complained that it was as if official Washington "had turned off its hearing aid."[22]

The sense of despair in the United States was symptomatic of deeper currents of weariness and doubt over what was becoming an increas-

[20] Rpt, MACV, 21 Mar 68, sub: Assessment of RVNAF Status, pp. 1–3, 8, document 87, 31 Mar Speech, vol. 7, Advisory Gp Papers, box 49 (1 of 2), NSF-National Security Council Hist, LBJL.

[21] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 84–85, 121–22; Clarke, *The Final Years, 1965–1973*, pp. 292–94.

[22] Westmoreland quote from Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1962–1968*, p. 346. See also pp. 344–48, 355, 356 (quotes), 357, 369–72; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 88; Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 141, 143 (final quote).

ingly controversial war. It also reflected the profound distrust that had developed over the years between the administration and the media, the result of a war that was both difficult to fight and to understand, of overly optimistic projections to which Westmoreland had contributed, and of deliberate disingenuousness by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Just two months before Tet, General Westmoreland had told the National Press Club that the enemy "is certainly losing." To be fair, he had also warned of a long, hard war ahead, and had anticipated some form of enemy offensive, but the enormity of Tet easily swept such qualifications from public memory. Nor could promises of future success as a result of the enemy's recent defeat compete with the images of chaos, death, and destruction that television programs beamed into American living rooms on a nightly basis. Thus, when President Johnson claimed that the enemy offensive was "a complete failure," and when MACV released astronomical estimates of enemy casualties, their credibility was so compromised as to render them ineffective in the public debate. What carried more weight with a growing number of Americans were pronouncements made by the widely respected newscaster Walter Cronkite, who in late February declared that the allies could not win the war and that the best America could hope for was a stalemate. "To say that we are closer to victory today," he told his audience, "is to believe, in the face of evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past."[23]

It is important to note that while many journalists, officials, and politicians adopted a pessimistic outlook after Tet, the American public moved more slowly. Prior to Tet, polls indicated that Americans identified themselves as prowar or antiwar by a margin of five to three. In early February, Americans reacted to the Communist offensive by rallying to the cause, with those identifying themselves as prowar "hawks" outnumbering antiwar "doves" by a margin of six to two. One poll indicated that 74 percent of Americans had confidence in U.S. military policies in Vietnam. Another poll showed that 53 percent of Americans actually wanted to intensify the war and another 10 percent wanted to maintain the current effort, while only 24 percent wanted to withdraw gradually. But by March, opinion had begun to shift under the weight of negative reporting. The number of people identifying themselves as doves rose to a level about equal to hawks, while the number of people expressing confidence in U.S. military policy dropped to 54 percent. About 63 percent of the public disapproved of President Johnson's handling of the war—a view shared by hawks and doves alike, albeit for different reasons. The situation among the public was still fluid, but a plurality now viewed the war

[23] Quote from Transcript, General William C. Westmoreland's speech at National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 21 Nov 67, p. 1, copy in Historians files, CMH. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive, A Concise History,* pp. 152 (Johnson quote), 155; John Prados, *Vietnam, The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), pp. 241 (Cronkite quote), 242–43; Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1962–1968*, p. 349; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 104.

as a mistake. The result, General Abrams observed, was that "while the enemy failed in [the] Republic of Vietnam, he won in the United States."[24]

Whither from Here? The Reinforcement Debate

While the nation struggled to understand the situation in Vietnam in an atmosphere of mounting doubt, President Johnson and his advisers grappled with questions about how best to respond to the challenge laid down by the Communists. Throughout Tet, General Westmoreland had presented a calm demeanor. He had conceded that the enemy landed a heavy blow, but he maintained that the situation was in hand and offered an unprecedented opportunity for the allies to launch a devastating, and perhaps war-changing, riposte. Indeed, the U.S. Army had weathered the storm fairly well. Losses in February were double the normal rate, but no U.S. unit had become combat ineffective, and the replacement system quickly filled the gaps. Other than in I Corps, where the enemy had disrupted the distribution of supplies, the U.S. logistical system had performed admirably, ensuring the flow of food, fuel, and ammunition to those who needed it. The Defense Department quickly replaced the aircraft losses suffered during Tet—22 for the U.S. Air Force and 89 (mostly helicopters) for the Army—with the Army alone sending 292 aircraft to Vietnam by late February. Heightened consumption had eroded stocks, and shortages of certain parts existed, particularly for aircraft and armored vehicles, but all of these difficulties were fixable. There seemed to be no reason why the Army could not capitalize on the enemy's dislocation to recoup the losses and score some gains. Thus when on 4 February General Wheeler asked Westmoreland if he needed emergency reinforcements, Westmoreland confidently responded that he did not.[25]

Temporarily assuaged, President Johnson's anxiety about the situation in Vietnam returned in full force on 7 February when North Vietnamese troops overran the Lang Vei Special Forces camp near Khe Sanh. Just after midnight, two sapper companies and a flamethrower platoon led two battalions from the *304th Division* and a battalion from the *325th Division* through the wire. Supporting the North Vietnamese infantrymen were sixteen PT76 light tanks from the *198th Tank Battalion* and a platoon of armored cars.

[24] Leo Bogart, *Silent Politics, Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Wiley, 1972), pp. 91–92, n. 53. In addition, 4 percent wanted to withdraw U.S. forces to enclaves around important cities, and 9 percent expressed no opinion. Bennadette Rigal-Cellard, ed., *La Guerre du Vietnam et la Societe Americaine* (Bordeaux, France: University Press of Bordeaux, 1991), p. 198; Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory, Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), pp. 26–27, 440; Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1962–1968*, pp. 371–73; Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive, A Concise History*, pp. 157, 159; MFR, MACV, 5 Apr 68, p. 5 (Abrams quote).

[25] Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 01464 to Wheeler, 1 Feb 68, pp. 1–2; Westmoreland MAC 01614 to Wheeler, 4 Feb 68, pp. 1–2. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 64, 67; Rpt, JCS, 28 Feb 68, sub: Report of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Situation in Vietnam and MACV Force Requirements, pp. 7–9, Historians files, CMH.

The dozen or so U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers and the several hundred Montagnard irregulars who manned the base responded with machine gun and recoilless rifle fire. The allies destroyed several of the Soviet-designed tanks but could not repel the tidal wave of North Vietnamese soldiers. Before long the allied position had been reduced to a handful of bunkers.

The Special Forces personnel who manned those bunkers called artillery and air strikes on top of the camp to drive off the Communist troops. The enemy suffered losses but held fast. The senior commander at the Khe Sanh combat base, Colonel Lownds, contemplated sending a relief force even though it was still pitch dark and the road to Lang Vei was almost certainly blocked by the enemy. In the end, he decided that the risks outweighed the likelihood of success. Informed that a relief effort could not be organized until daybreak, the soldiers still manning Lang Vei decided to punch through the encirclement and regroup at a nearby village. Somewhere around a hundred men, including fourteen Americans, made it out before the North Vietnamese jaws finally snapped shut.[26]

The defeat at Lang Vei created a new sense of urgency in the president. He asked Wheeler what Westmoreland needed at this critical juncture, stating, "Everything he wants, let's get it to him." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who shared Johnson's unease about the situation, relayed the offer to Westmoreland in a personal message on 8 February. Wheeler proposed sending a brigade from the 82d Airborne Division and a reinforced Marine regimental landing team right away. He underscored the urgency of the president's message by saying, "The United States Government is not prepared to accept defeat in South Vietnam. In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them."[27]

Westmoreland saw no reason for such anxiety. Replying to Wheeler that same day, he wrote that the allies "can probably hold our own and continue to make progress against the enemy in all areas except the DMZ–Quang Tri–Thua Thien area." Nonetheless, the MACV commander agreed that it was "only prudent to plan for the worst contingency," and indicated that he would welcome the deployment of several more brigades to northern I Corps by early spring if the administration wished to send them.[28]

Wheeler was not satisfied. The Joint Chiefs chairman wanted the MACV commander to submit an urgent request for reinforcements, believing that the president would dither if Westmoreland failed to express a strong need. "Please understand," Wheeler wrote in a private message early on the morning of 9 February, "I am not trying to sell you on the deployment of additional forces." Nevertheless, he made it clear that Westmoreland ought to ask for more troops while the offer was on the table. Later that morning, the MACV

[26] Thao, ed., *The Spring-Summer 1968 Route 9-Khe Sanh Offensive Campaign*, p. 28, Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 275–76; Cash et al., *Seven Firefights in Vietnam*, pp. 109–38.

[27] First quote from Davidson, *Vietnam at War,* p. 494. Second quote from Msg, Wheeler JCS 01590 to Westmoreland, 8 Feb 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[28] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01810 to Wheeler, 8 Feb 68, Westmoreland History files, 29-41, CMH.

An aerial view of destroyed bunkers and a burned-out PT76 tank after the fall of Lang Vei

commander submitted a report to Sharp and Wheeler in which he said, "I would welcome reinforcements at any time they can be made available," explaining how he might use some of the last remaining units of the nation's active duty strategic reserve—the 82d Airborne Division and elements of the 5th Marine Division—to strengthen his position in northern I Corps. "It is conceivable," he concluded, "that a six-month loan of these units would turn the tide" and restore allied momentum in I Corps while bridging the gap until the South Vietnamese Army could make up its Tet losses and begin to enjoy the fruits of the accelerated weapons modernization program.[29]

With Westmoreland's request in hand, General Wheeler met with the president and the other Joint Chiefs of Staff the next day. Surprised by the MACV commander's request for troops, Johnson wanted to know what had happened in the last five days to change his mind. Wheeler explained that allied intelligence had detected another 15,000 North Vietnamese troops crossing into the South, principally massing around Khe Sanh and other Marine strong points near the Demilitarized Zone. The siege of Khe Sanh might go on for months. The fight to retake Hue was proving harder than expected. Given the precarious situation in northern I Corps, the chairman

[29] First quote from Msg, Wheeler JCS 01590 to Westmoreland, 9 Feb 68. Second quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 01858 to Wheeler, 9 Feb 68. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 90.

argued, it was necessary to give the MACV commander enough additional troops to deal with any contingency.[30]

There was, however, a caveat. "In all prudence," Wheeler warned, "I do not think we should deploy these troops without reconstituting our strategic reserves in the United States." Sending some of the last active duty combat units based in the United States to Vietnam would compromise America's ability to respond rapidly to crises elsewhere in the world. Tensions were high on the Korean peninsula. For over a year, North Korea had initiated a series of border clashes and fostered an insurgency in South Korea, and on 25 January 1968 it had seized the American spy ship USS *Pueblo*. It was conceivable that South Korea might withdraw its expeditionary force from Vietnam if the conflict back home escalated. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union could always provoke a new crisis in Europe or Africa that would demand a U.S. response. Mobilizing the reserve components would protect the United States against such eventualities and help rebuild units in the United States and Europe that were being hollowed out to support the war in Vietnam. But Wheeler knew that his suggestion would not be well received. The president had long resisted the idea of mobilizing the reserves. Pulling several hundred thousand men out of the civilian workforce would disrupt the economy and anger many middle-class families whose fathers or sons had joined the reserves or National Guard not expecting to see service in Vietnam. The political heat would be intense. By depicting the long-sought-for mobilization as an urgent necessity to meet an allegedly dire situation in Vietnam, Wheeler wanted to leverage the Tet offensive to his advantage. Johnson, however, would not be stampeded into taking such a controversial action. He deferred making a decision until he and his advisers had time to study a formal proposal from the Joint Chiefs of Staff.[31]

Over the next few days, Wheeler prodded and cajoled Westmoreland into transforming his statement that he would "welcome" more men into a "firm request." The resulting plan, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted to Secretary McNamara on 12 February, called for the immediate dispatch of about 10,000 men, while the Pentagon readied the remainder of the 82d Airborne and 5th Marine Divisions for possible deployment later in the year. Echoing what Wheeler had said three days earlier, the Joint Chiefs made the program contingent on a major mobilization to redress deficiencies in the existing force structure. McNamara quickly endorsed the call for an immediate reinforcement, recommending to the president that he deploy the 10,300 men Wheeler had offered to Westmoreland on 8 February—the 27th Marine Regimental Landing Team drawn from the 5th Marine Division, the 3d Brigade from the 82d Airborne Division, and some support troops. He

[30] Mtg Notes, 9 Feb 68, sub: Notes of the President's Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pp. 6–8, JCS, box 2, Tom Johnson's Mtg notes, LBJL.

[31] Quote from Mtg Notes, 9 Feb 68, pp. 6–8. Msg, Wheeler JCS 2590 to Westmoreland, 5 Mar 68, p. 2, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, pp. 496–97.

Secretary of Defense Clifford

stated, however, that this deployment should not be contingent on the larger question of calling up the reserves.[32]

Later that day, President Johnson held a meeting attended by National Security Adviser Walt W. Rostow, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, outgoing Secretary of Defense McNamara, incoming Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Richard M. Helms, General Wheeler, and several others. Everyone agreed with McNamara that the most prudent course of action was to send immediately the small number of men Wheeler had promised Westmoreland and to handle the question of the reserves later. President Johnson approved the group's recommendation, putting aside the mobilization issue until Wheeler had a chance to visit Saigon and confer with Westmoreland. The airborne soldiers arrived in Vietnam on 18 February and the marines began landing on the twenty-third.[33]

When Westmoreland learned of the president's decision, he was naturally pleased to have over 10,000 more men to shore up his position in northern I Corps. Writing to Wheeler on the thirteenth, the MACV commander stated that "despite the high priority accorded to the cities, I still see the enemy position in the Khe Sanh/DMZ area as the greatest single threat. It must be stopped or all of northern I CTZ [corps tactical zone] will be in jeopardy." But he did not want the troop request misconstrued as a desperate plea. "I am expressing a firm request for additional troops, not because I fear defeat if I am not reinforced, but because I do not feel that I can fully grasp the initiative from the recently reinforced enemy without them." Sending the remainder of the 5th Marine and 82d Airborne Divisions to Vietnam, he explained, would "permit me not only to contain his [the enemy's] I Corps offensive but also to capitalize on his losses by seizing the initiative in other areas. Exploiting this

[32] Mike Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, 5 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 4:542–46; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 92 (quotes).

[33] *FRUS, 1964–1968,* vol. 6, *Vietnam, January–August 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2002), pp. 188–96.

opportunity could materially shorten the war." He urged the administration to adopt a more aggressive approach in Vietnam, saying, "If the enemy has changed his strategy we must change ours."[34]

On 23 February, General Wheeler flew to Saigon with several White House advisers on a fact-finding mission for the president. Westmoreland was surprised by Wheeler's haggard appearance and gloomy disposition. The MACV commander was solidly upbeat, noting that the enemy had sustained massive casualties, but the chairman and his group seemed fixated on the question of whether the enemy was capable of launching another round of urban attacks. Westmoreland was not unduly worried. He expected the enemy to try again, but believed that the allies were taking all of the necessary steps to prevent another Tet-style offensive.[35]

The following day, Wheeler and Westmoreland met to discuss the future direction of U.S. strategy. After considering several contingencies, they drew up a request for 206,000 personnel. Known as Program 6, the request consisted of three increments. The first increment of 108,000 troops consisted of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), the 6th Armored Cavalry, the remainder of the 5th Marine Division, five Air Force tactical fighter squadrons (plus three more already promised in the Program 5 reinforcement package), and various support units. It was to arrive in Vietnam no later than 1 May 1968. The second package of 42,000 men was to be ready by 1 September, and the third increment of 56,000 was to be available by 1 December. The second and third groups would go to Vietnam only if the president decided to pursue a more aggressive strategy, such as allowing MACV to invade Laos or Cambodia, or if the Communists launched another major offensive. Otherwise, those 98,000 troops would be used to reconstitute the strategic reserves in the continental United States.[36]

Wheeler left Saigon on 25 February, stopping in Hawaii to brief Admiral Sharp and to cable a summary report to the president, which he sent on the twenty-seventh. The proposal called for the mobilization of 400,000 reservists and guardsmen for at least two years. Half of those personnel would replenish the strategic reserve in the United States, and the other half represented the 206,000 troops needed for the Program 6 deployment to Vietnam. Wheeler knew Johnson would be reluctant to approve the request. He also understood that most of Johnson's civilian advisers except for National Security Adviser Walt Rostow opposed Westmoreland's desire to make incursions into Laos, Cambodia, and the southern part of North Vietnam. He believed, therefore, that the only way to sell the troop augmentation to the president was to por-

[34] Quotes from Cable, General William C. Westmoreland to General Earle G. Wheeler, 13 Feb 68, document 32a, Walt Rostow, 10–13 Feb 68, vol. 61 (1 of 2), box 29 (1 of 2), NSF-Memos to the President from Walt Rostow, LBJL. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 352.

[35] Msg, Wheeler JCS 02113 to Westmoreland, 21 Feb 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[36] Westmoreland decided to request the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) rather than the rest of the 82d Airborne Division as the 5th's heavy punch and ground mobility would be useful in I Corps, while the 82d Airborne would require significant helicopter augmentation to be adequately mobile, placing additional strain on the Army's aviation resources. *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 3:15; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, p. 503.

tray the situation in the bleakest possible terms and to imply that the United States risked defeat if it did not fully mobilize.[37]

Wheeler's 27 February cable reflected this approach. While not inaccurate, it dwelled on the negative. He reported that "the initial attack nearly succeeded in a dozen places and the margin of victory—in some places survival—was very very small indeed." He indicated that the "pacification program has been brought to a halt" and the government faced "enormous problems with refugees, civilian casualties, morale and recovery." If the enemy renewed the general offensive, General Westmoreland's margin "will be paper thin" and "he might suffer some reverses" unless he obtained three extra divisions and fifteen more tactical fighter squadrons by the end of 1968. The general laid out his request for a 206,000-man force package and recommended that the first increment of 108,000 troops be sent without delay.[38]

When Wheeler returned to Washington on 28 February, he briefed the president and his key advisers on the full, nearly fifty-page report. Once again, the chairman stressed the negative consequences of Tet. He warned that the enemy was capable of launching a second round of attacks and raised the possibility that the allies would suffer a major setback, possibly even the loss of the two northernmost provinces, unless Westmoreland received major reinforcements.[39]

The request alarmed administration officials. President Johnson directed his incoming Secretary of Defense, Clifford, to convene a study group to examine the proposal. After being sworn in on 1 March, Secretary Clifford spent the next three days examining the pros and cons of the request. A successful lawyer who had advised the last four presidents on national security matters, Clifford brought a wealth of experience and a ruthless pragmatism to his new job. Like his predecessor, he had once been a strong proponent of the war who now had serious misgivings. Most of the civilian analysts that he spoke to at the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency reinforced his doubts, as they now believed that the war had become hopelessly deadlocked. Clifford's military advisers disagreed, but when the new secretary asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff whether the 206,000 additional troops would be sufficient to guarantee success in the war, he received no satisfying answers. The secretary of defense came away from the meeting resolved to "level off our involvement, and . . . work toward a gradual disengagement" without abandoning the South Vietnamese state.[40]

Clifford forwarded the report prepared by his study group to the president on 4 March. The report recommended that Johnson grant Westmoreland a temporary augmentation representing a brigade from the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), the 6th Armored Cavalry, and a variety of support

[37] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 93–95.

[38] *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 6:263 (first quote), 265 (second quote).

[39] Ibid., 6:267–75; Zaffiri, *Westmoreland,* pp. 303–11.

[40] Quote from Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Unmaking of a President: Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam* (Princeton, N.J.: University Press, 1977), p. 216. Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 98–99; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, pp. 514–15.

and logistical units. In addition, the report endorsed sending three tactical fighter squadrons that had been deferred from last year's program, producing a total deployment of 23,000 men. The study urged the president to call up approximately 262,000 reservists to reconstitute the strategic reserve and to provide Westmoreland with additional manpower if the need arose. Such a step was only prudent given the uncertain world in which the United States found itself. Clifford, however, advised against sending any additional men to Vietnam beyond the 23,000 until the U.S. government had conducted a top to bottom review of its war policy and the South Vietnamese government had taken concrete steps to improve its effectiveness and viability. Finally, the report recommended that the United States accelerate the delivery of war materiel to South Vietnam to enhance its ability to defend itself.[41]

Notably absent in the report were recommendations about strategy. Several civilians in the Departments of Defense and State believed that the war could not be won militarily no matter how many men the United States deployed. That being the case, they wanted the United States to adopt an enclave strategy in which U.S. forces would remain close to the major population centers, effectively ending the large search-and-destroy operations that took place in the countryside. Such a strategy, they argued, would be more effective in protecting the population than offensive operations, thereby creating the conditions South Vietnam needed to build a viable nation. Equally important, they believed that an enclave approach would reduce U.S. casualties, a key consideration if the U.S. government was to retain enough domestic political support to remain in this increasingly contentious conflict long enough to achieve an acceptable outcome. In contrast, General Wheeler and senior Army leaders, including Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson, vigorously opposed the idea. Wheeler argued that the enclave strategy was untenable because it ceded large parts of the country to the enemy and gave him every opportunity to mass his forces near the population centers, free to attack whenever he chose. Unable to reach an agreement, the study group decided not to make any recommendations pertaining to strategy. Nevertheless, when Clifford briefed the president on the report, he offered the enclave concept as a possible alternative to the way the war was currently being prosecuted.[42]

After reading the study, President Johnson tentatively agreed to send the 23,000-man augmentation force Clifford recommended. He accepted the report's recommendation that additional forces beyond the 23,000 not be sent unless the situation warranted it, and he made it more difficult for the military to prepare for such a contingency by balking at mobilizing a large number of reservists, opting instead for a limited call-up to replace those troops who were going to Vietnam. Johnson felt that the political and economic consequences of mobilizing several hundred thousand reservists was simply too high, even if most of those troops never ended up going overseas.

[41] *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 6:314–16.

[42] Ibid.; Memo, Army Ch for the President, 1 Feb 68, sub: Validity of Present Strategy of Operations in South Vietnam, pp. 1–5, Historians files, CMH; *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 6:311–55; Gravel, *The Pentagon Papers,* 4:549–604.

He embraced the idea of beefing up the South Vietnamese armed forces as a way to boost allied capability, and he accepted in principle the idea of making future assistance conditional on the Vietnamese becoming more effective and accountable. President Johnson regarded these decisions as a change in strategy, yet the changes were marginal and reflected his predilection for piecemeal actions and incremental measures in response to immediate needs. He did not show any interest in Clifford's call for a major strategy review and took no steps to initiate one. He refused to get involved in the debate over the enclave concept, preferring as he always had to leave the details of the ground war up to the MACV commander. He remained committed to the fight for an independent Vietnam, complaining in subsequent days over certain civilian officials in the Defense Department, such as Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, who he accused of advocating "surrender." And while he continued to oppose expanding the conflict into neighboring countries, he did not rule out the possibility of future troop increases. In short, a wholesale reevaluation of the war's goals and methods was not in the cards.[43]

On 10 March, the *New York Times* disclosed Wheeler's massive mobilization proposal. Leaked by the plan's opponents, the news triggered a political firestorm that lowered morale, raised skepticism, and reinforced opposition to the war. If the plan was not already dead by the time the *New York Times* broke the story, it was certainly so afterward.[44]

Feeling that he needed outside advice, the president convened a group of eminent public figures upon whom he had previously turned for policy recommendations. Among the group were former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, former commander of the United Nations troops in Korea General Matthew B. Ridgway, and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell D. Taylor. Collectively known as the "Wise Men," the group delivered its recommendations to Johnson the next day. Deeply divided, the majority concluded that the war had devolved into a stalemate. Even if more forces were deployed to Vietnam, there was still little chance of winning in a reasonable length of time and at a cost that would be acceptable to the American people. Reaching essentially the same conclusion as Secretary Clifford, the group recommended that the president seek a negotiated end to the fighting.[45]

The president was dismayed by the finding, but took the group's recommendation under advisement. He realized that the Tet offensive had so weakened support both for the war and his own candidacy in the upcoming presidential election that some change in policy was necessary. He accepted the advice of the panel and others that the United States should seek to deescalate the conflict by entering into negotiations with North Vietnam. A partial cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam would accompany the offer as a sign of good faith. He had, however, no intention of abandoning the

[43] *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 6:327, 450 (quote).

[44] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 358; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, pp. 506–07; *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 3:65–70; Zaffiri, *Westmoreland*, pp. 311–12.

[45] *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 6:412–18, 471–74.

South. Rather, he hoped the gesture would win him enough political support to continue the conflict in such a way as to secure South Vietnam's survival as an independent, non-Communist nation.[46]

On 22 March, Johnson reduced the 23,000-man reinforcement package he had tentatively approved earlier in the month to just 13,500 men. The final Program 6 package consisted of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), a squadron of the 6th Armored Cavalry (rather than the entire regiment), and some support personnel. The Defense Department planned to deliver these forces in September or October.[47]

The following day, President Johnson announced that he would be removing General Westmoreland as the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Many assumed the decision was part of the fallout from Tet, but there was more to the matter than that. In 1967, President Johnson had made Abrams Westmoreland's deputy with an eye toward having him succeed as MACV commander. By 1968, Westmoreland had been in Vietnam for four years, twice as long as the average tour for a senior officer. The administration was moving toward a decision when the Tet offensive and the furor it caused at home led President Johnson to delay announcing the change until the situation had settled down. Finally, on 23 March, President Johnson informed Westmoreland that he would become the next Army chief of staff when General Johnson retired in June. The timing of the announcement led pundits to claim that the president was removing Westmoreland for poor performance, kicking him "upstairs" to remove him from the scene, but President Johnson, General Wheeler, and Secretaries McNamara and Clifford all denied this was the case. Still, it is doubtful that a keen political tactician such as President Johnson was unaware of the fact that Tet had discredited Westmoreland in the eyes of many Americans, and that Johnson's efforts to rally support for the conflict might benefit by removing the man who, rightly or wrongly, had become associated with the war's perceived shortcomings. But changing the commander was not the same as changing strategy. When Johnson announced Westmoreland's eventual departure from MACV on the twenty-third, he made a point of stating that the change in command had "nothing to do" with matters of strategy or tactics. That this was so became clear a few days later when Westmoreland's heir apparent, General Abrams, met with the president and General Wheeler to discuss Vietnam. After Wheeler assured the president that "our basic strategy is sound," Abrams declared "I don't feel we need to change strategy." With minor tactical adjustments, the ground war would proceed on the course Westmoreland had set for it. The president seemed satisfied.[48]

[46] Ibid., 6:449–50, 454–55, 463, 479–80, 483–90.

[47] Ibid., 6:459–65.

[48] Zaffiri, *Westmoreland,* pp. 298–300, 311, 313–14 (quoted words), 316; General Westmoreland's Hist notes, vol. 30, 1–31 Mar 68, pp. 12–13, document 1, Westmoreland History files, CMH; George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 161; *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:447–48, 451–52, 463 (Wheeler and Abrams quotes), 465.

On 24 March, Wheeler met with Westmoreland at Clark Air Base in the Philippines to brief him about the decisions. He said that President Johnson understood Westmoreland's rationale for requesting an additional 206,000 men, but that he felt he lacked the political support to call up the requisite number of reservists. For the same reason there would be no expansion of the war into Laos, Cambodia, or North Vietnam. The arrival of the Program 6 package would raise the troop ceiling to 549,500 personnel. Westmoreland was distressed by how the troop request was being perceived by the American public. He also believed that by not sending significant reinforcements, the United States was missing an opportunity to take the war to the enemy after he had just suffered a reversal. Yet he continued to believe that progress was possible, reporting several days later that "the current forces, augmented with the proposed reinforcement package, will provide us the means necessary to contain further enemy initiated actions while continuing forward progress in most areas."[49]

On 28 March, President Johnson approved a call-up of 62,000 reservists. The bulk of them, almost 54,000 men, came from the Army Reserve and National Guard, while the remainder came from the Air Force and from the Navy. He saved the public announcement of the Program 6 troop increase for 31 March when he addressed the nation on television in what would become one of the landmark speeches of his presidency.[50]

Speaking directly to the American people, Johnson summarized his efforts to achieve a lasting peace in Southeast Asia that would guarantee the security and independence of the Republic of Vietnam. To demonstrate his sincerity in achieving peace, he declared a unilateral bombing halt above the 20th Parallel, putting most of North Vietnam off limits. He announced the increased troop ceiling supported by a limited call-up of reservists, and indicated that the United States would accelerate its program of equipping the South Vietnamese military with modern weapons. Johnson ended his speech with the unexpected announcement that he would not seek the nomination of his party to be president. By freeing himself from election year politics, Johnson hoped to heal the partisan divide at home and devote all of his energies to seeking peace in Vietnam. It would also free him from the anguish he had been feeling about the war for the past four years.[51]

Johnson's stunning announcement that he would not seek reelection—a decision he had been debating for some time but which had received added impetus from the acrimony caused by Tet—represented a final confirmation that the offensive had changed the trajectory of the war. In a few months' time, new men would lead the United States and its army in the field. For the first time in the war, U.S. and North Vietnamese negotiators would sit opposite each other at the conference table, with the United States hoping that negotiations would permit a de-escalation of the conflict and eventually

[49] Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, pp. 358–59; Msg, Westmoreland MAC 4192 to Wheeler, 27 Mar 68, pp. 3–4 (quote), Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[50] *FRUS, 1964–1968*, 3:76–77.

[51] Ibid., 3:80–90; "Behind LBJ's Decision Not to Run in 1968," *New York Times*, 16 Apr 88.

lead to an acceptable peace. What no one knew at the time was that years of fighting remained.

Johnson wanted peace, but not at any price, and the North Vietnamese were uninterested in anything short of total victory. As appreciative as the Hanoi government was of the growing political crisis in the United States, it had not reached the point where it could compel Johnson or his successor to quit, and there was no guarantee that it would. Suspicious of Johnson's motives, Communist leaders were disinterested in agreeing to anything that would prevent them from achieving their ultimate aim of destroying South Vietnam and absorbing it into the Communist state. They realized that Johnson's suspension of bombing north of the 20th Parallel meant that U.S. bombers were concentrating even more firepower against Communist infiltration routes into South Vietnam south of that line. Likewise, if Johnson had approved a much smaller deployment to Vietnam than his generals had asked for, he had not foresworn sending more, and the entire history of America's involvement to date—with one troop ceiling after another being replaced by an even higher one—did not give the Communists cause for confidence. Thus while Le Duan agreed to peace talks, he adopted a policy of "talking while fighting," in which discussions at the conference table would be almost as confrontational as the battles in the field—a fact evidenced right from the start by weeks of debate over what shape that table would take. Moreover, Le Duan still considered military power to be his primary tool, refusing to give up his dream for achieving military victory in 1968. With the president determined not to be bullied and his generals committed to fighting the war along much the same lines as before, life for the American soldier in the field would not change much after Tet.[52]

[52] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 114–15; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 103.

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The Allies Strike Back

During the two months of deliberations that culminated in President Johnson's speech on 31 March, the war in Vietnam continued apace. No sooner had the allies repulsed the initial attacks than General Westmoreland and Ambassador Komer began calling for a vigorous counteroffensive. They argued that it was imperative for the allies to act quickly, both to exploit the enemy's military dislocation and to recover the people and territory that the government of Vietnam had abandoned. As rumors circulated of a second Communist offensive and word filtered back about the controversy over his troop request, Westmoreland added a third reason to act—to prove to "the people in South Vietnam and Washington" that "we are not waiting for either the Viet Cong to resume the initiative, or for someone to help us." To drive home the point, Westmoreland and the chief of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, General Vien, traveled the country to urge corps commanders and their U.S. counterparts to take to the offensive. President Thieu realized that Westmoreland was right, but felt torn by an equally pressing need to ensure that South Vietnam's cities were truly secure. Still in shock over the offensive and receiving mixed signals from the government in Saigon, many local Vietnamese civil and military officials did little to restore order outside the urban centers. Only gradually as the weeks passed did they begin to act with varying amounts of vigor. Consequently, responsibility for much of the counteroffensive fell to the U.S. Army.[1]

Restoring Security in Central III Corps

Due to its strategic importance, the region around Saigon naturally received significant attention, not only from Westmoreland, but also from the South Vietnamese, who perhaps here more than any other area of the country committed themselves early on to the restorative effort. The challenges were formidable. At the beginning of March, more than twenty enemy battalions remained on the outskirts of Gia Dinh Province, raising the possibility that *COSVN* intended to resume its offensive against Saigon in the near future. The *271st* and *272d Regiments* of the *9th PLAF Division* as well as the *D16, 267th,* and *269th Main Force Battalions* were reported to be somewhere in eastern

[1] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 149; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 66–67, 70; *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:309–10, 311 (quote), 476; Telg, Embassy Saigon 20584 to Department of State, 27 Feb 68; Notes, President's Meeting to Discuss General Wheeler's Trip to Vietnam, 28 Feb 68, p. 5. Both in Historians files, CMH.

Hau Nghia Province. The *101st Regiment* and the *Dong Nai Regiment* plus elements of the *165th Regimen*t had been spotted in southern Binh Duong Province. Five or six Viet Cong battalions remained on the loose in Long An Province. Several more, including one from the *5th PLAF Division,* appeared to be in the Thu Duc area east of the capital. Most of the enemy units that had taken part in the initial wave of the Tet offensive were only marginally combat effective at this point, but *COSVN* could still maintain psychological and economic pressure on the capital by clinging to its suburbs while laying the groundwork for the next major assault.[2]

Westmoreland scrapped his original plan to invade War Zone D, a multi-division operation known as DODGE CITY, so Generals Weyand and Khang could sweep the districts that surrounded the capital. "As the circle expands," Westmoreland wrote to Wheeler on 2 March, "ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] forces will continue operations on an inner belt around the city while U.S. forces fan out into peripheral areas." The 1st, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions would provide most of the maneuver battalions, supported by the 11th Armored Cavalry.[3]

At Westmoreland's direction, Weyand and Khang merged their respective sweep-and-clear missions on the outskirts of Saigon into a combined effort known as QUYET THANG ("Resolved to Win"). The largest allied operation yet conducted in III Corps, QUYET THANG aimed to coordinate the efforts of six American and ten South Vietnamese brigade equivalents through centralized planning, better intelligence sharing, and a greater emphasis on combined operations at the company and battalion level. QUYET THANG also called for close cooperation between regular allied forces and the territorials that operated under South Vietnamese province and district chiefs. A Regional Forces company, for example, would be paired with a U.S. mechanized platoon for a rural patrol mission, or a National Police Field Force platoon would accompany a U.S. infantry company to identify Viet Cong cadre during a search of a contested hamlet.[4]

As Weyand and Khang developed a common planning system for II Field Force and III Corps, division and brigade commanders followed suit. The 199th Infantry Brigade (Light), which already had a relationship with the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group as a result of Operation FAIRFAX, created new liaison channels with the South Vietnamese Marine Brigade and the South Vietnamese Airborne Division in Gia Dinh Province. South of the capital, the 3d Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division partnered with the South Vietnamese 50th Regiment in Long An Province, while the 3d Squadron of the 11th Armored Cavalry, coming south from Binh Long Province after an operation with the 101st Airborne Division, moved into southeastern Hau Nghia Province to support the 49th Regiment from the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division. In northern and western Hau Nghia, the 2d and 3d

[2] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 10-68, II FFV, 3–9 Mar 68, 9 Mar 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.
[3] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 2960 to Wheeler, 2 Mar 68, p. 2, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.
[4] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, II FFV, 20 May 68, p. 45, box 18, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

M113 armored personnel carriers of Troop L, 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, are in position at the start of Operation QUYET THANG.

Brigades of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division worked with a cavalry squadron from the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division and territorial units. North of Saigon, the 2d and 3d Brigades of the 1st Infantry Division partnered with the 7th and 8th Regiments of the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division in Binh Duong Province. Weyand and Khang set 11 March as the start date for QUYET THANG.[5]

General Weyand suspended several operations on the tenth to make way for the new territorial security mission. Operation SARATOGA ended for the 25th Infantry Division in Hau Nghia Province; its 1st Brigade continued a separate mission to defend Tay Ninh Province. Weyand suspended LAM SON 68 for the 1st Infantry Division in Binh Duong. The division's 1st Brigade remained in Binh Long to protect Highway 13. Finally, he terminated Operation ENTERPRISE for the 9th Infantry Division in Long An, leaving its 1st and 2d Brigades to continue other missions in northern IV Corps. East of the capital, the 199th Infantry Brigade pressed ahead with a separate operation begun on 8 March called VALLEY FORGE to destroy the rear services units linked to the *5th Division*. Weyand ordered the 1st and 2d Squadrons of the 11th Armored Cavalry to assist the 199th Infantry Brigade while keeping an eye on eastern Long Khanh Province with Operation KITTYHAWK and Camp Blackhorse with Operation ADAIRSVILLE.[6]

[5] Ibid., p. 23; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967*, pp. 156–57; General Westmoreland's Hist notes, 1–31 Mar 68, p. 4, document 1, vol. 30, Westmoreland History files, CMH.

[6] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 10-68, II FFV, p. 4; Monthly Sum, Mar 68, HQ, MACV, 25 May 68, p. 21, folder 4, box 1, John M. Shaw Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU.

Eastern Hau Nghia Province proved to be the most active sector of QUYET THANG during the first two weeks of the operation. The action started on 12 March when Troop M of the 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, and a Regional Forces company discovered more than a hundred enemy soldiers from the *267th* and *269th Battalions* hiding in a wooded area about six kilometers north of Duc Hoa, a district capital that also served as the headquarters of the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division. The allied troops flushed the Viet Cong from their position, killing thirty-six and capturing ten more. U.S. losses were light, but among the wounded was the 11th Armored Cavalry commander, Colonel MacFarlane, who had been on hand to observe the fight. Col. Leonard D. Holder took over the regiment three days later, but when he died in a helicopter crash on 21 March, Col. Charles R. Gorder stepped in to take charge.[7]

During that period of change at regimental headquarters, the 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, and South Vietnamese troops from Duc Hoa discovered the *272d Regiment* from the *9th Division* hiding in the countryside between Duc Hoa and Cu Chi. Between 15 and 17 March, Troop M and South Vietnamese forces killed some 273 enemy soldiers with help from air and artillery strikes. After losing sight of the *272d Regiment*, Troops L and M regained contact with the enemy on 20 March. Assisted by a South Vietnamese battalion, the cavalrymen killed 142 Communist soldiers that day and 57 more in the same area six days later. Reeling from the loss of more than 400 soldiers, the Viet Cong regiment withdrew to the relative safety of War Zone C.[8]

During the last week of March, the main area of contact in Operation QUYET THANG shifted north to the sector patrolled by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division. Allied intelligence had already seen signs of large infiltration groups moving south from War Zone C to camps along the Saigon River. Early on the morning of 25 March, one of those North Vietnamese filler battalions attacked a pair of Regional Forces outposts near Trang Bang in northern Hau Nghia Province. The Communists may have seen the outposts as easy pickings, but that impression vanished when the South Vietnamese 43d Ranger Battalion arrived on the scene with a U.S. mechanized force from the 4th Battalion, 23th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor. The allies killed at least 287 Viet Cong soldiers in the ten-hour battle. Twenty-three allied soldiers lost their lives.[9]

Allied troops in the 25th Infantry Division sector clashed with more infiltration groups in the days that followed. On 26 March, South Vietnamese paratroopers found the bodies of 128 enemy soldiers east of Hoc Mon, a district town just northwest of Tan Son Nhut. They had apparently died in air and artillery strikes while moving toward the capital. The next day, the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, and two companies from the 2d Battalion, 14th Infantry, killed some ninety-seven Communists when they clashed with an

[7] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, II FFV, pp. 45–46; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 11th ACR, 10 May 68, p. 2, box 48, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[8] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 11th ACR, p. 6.

[9] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, II FFV, p. 46.

infiltration group five kilometers northeast of Trang Bang, a district town just up the road from Cu Chi. Combined with a clash near Trang Bang on 24 March between the *7th Cu Chi Battalion* and the 1st Brigade, 25th Division, the allies had killed over 600 enemy fighters in the space of four days. As satisfying as that result was, it also highlighted the enemy's ability to move large numbers of troops from Cambodia to central III Corps despite the increased tempo of allied operations.[10]

To interdict that infiltration channel closer to its source, Weyand moved the 199th Infantry Brigade from Bien Hoa Province to Tay Ninh Province on 28 March to help the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, patrol the area between Tay Ninh City and Dau Tieng in a new operation called WILDERNESS. The 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, covered the temporary absence of the 199th Infantry Brigade by moving the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 506th Infantry from Phuoc Vinh to Long Binh, leaving the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, to screen the western side of War Zone D.

The previous three weeks had been somewhat frustrating for the 199th Infantry Brigade. When Operation VALLEY FORGE had yielded small results in eastern Bien Hoa Province, the brigade had started a new mission called BOX SPRINGS with the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, from the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, to interdict the Communist supply routes that ran from War Zone D to the outskirts of the capital. The 199th Infantry Brigade found some large underground bases as well as a number of Soviet-made trucks, but few enemy soldiers.[11]

Operation WILDERNESS proved to be no more satisfying. The 199th Infantry Brigade had fleeting contact with rear service units and local guerrillas who contented themselves with mining the roads and harassing the Dau Tieng and Tay Ninh base camps with mortar fire. The 199th Infantry Brigade found two Communist camps and captured a large quantity of rice, but the only enemy forces it encountered were several platoons from the *C14 Local Force Battalion* that fled once they realized the odds they were facing. When WILDERNESS came to an end on 7 April, the 25th Division had killed between 200 and 300 enemy soldiers while losing 7 of its own.[12]

In the first week of April, the number of enemy contacts in the QUYET THANG zone took a sudden dip. In March, allied forces had killed an average of fifty-three enemy soldiers a day, a figure that fell by almost half in the first week of April. Allied intelligence saw numerous signs that the enemy battalions that had once been in the QUYET THANG zone had withdrawn to more remote locations. So far, the allies had killed some 1,420 enemy soldiers, captured over 500 weapons, and recovered approximately 107 tons of rice. Allied losses had been slight. Rocket attacks were less frequent thanks to Westmoreland's

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p. 47; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 199th Inf Bde, 15 May 68, p. 19, box 142, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[12] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 25th Inf Div, n.d., box 71, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 199th Inf Bde, p. 20; AAR, Opn WILDERNESS, 1st Bde, 25th Inf Div, 21 May 68, p. 19, box 40, 18th Mil Hist Det, RG 472, NACP.

Two soldiers of Company B, 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, during a firefight

efforts to push the enemy out of range of Saigon, and South Vietnamese security forces had returned to the districts near Saigon that they had abandoned during Tet. Convinced that the Vietnamese could handle the security situation in the newly cleared zone, and determined to pursue the enemy as he withdrew, the allies launched a new operation called TOAN THANG ("Complete Victory") on 8 April.[13]

Operation TOAN THANG expanded allied military operations from the districts that surrounded Saigon to most of III Corps. With the South Vietnamese Army now back on its feet, Weyand's forces enjoyed greater freedom to pursue *COSVN*'s main force units into the northern provinces of III Corps.

Nearly every combat unit in III Corps joined the counteroffensive, although some units continued with missions such as base security that limited their participation. The South Vietnamese 18th Division joined the effort, which expanded the reach of TOAN THANG into Long Khanh and Binh Tuy Provinces. The 199th Infantry Brigade returned to Bien Hoa Province to resume its interdiction efforts against War Zone D. The Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment, operating under the control of the 9th Division, continued to secure lines of communications and to protect Camp Martin Cox in eastern Bien Hoa Province.

[13] Bfg, II FFV, n.d., sub: Battles in III CTZ since Tet (11 Mar–31 May), p. 2, box 2, Historians background files, 7th Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 15-68, II FFV, 7–13 Apr 68, 13 Apr 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

M113s of the 25th Infantry Division engage the enemy during Operation TOAN THANG.

The 1st Australian Task Force also remained where it was for the moment, but by joining TOAN THANG it made itself available for missions outside of Phuoc Long Province for the first time in the war. The 1st and 2d Squadrons of the 11th Armored Cavalry terminated their separate missions in Bien Hoa and Long Khanh Provinces, and the 3d Squadron returned to Camp Blackhorse to refit after its month-long detail to the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division. A week later, the 1st and 3d Squadrons would be on their way to Binh Long Province to disrupt *Military Region 10*'s logistical network, while the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, advanced in neighboring Phuoc Long Province. All told, some seventy-nine allied maneuver battalions would comb the length and breadth of III Corps for *COSVN*'s main force units.[14]

Operation TOAN THANG produced steady though not spectacular results in its first month. Allied troops killed a total of 709 enemy soldiers during week one, which was comparable to the 693 enemy dead they had killed at the beginning of April. That figure grew to 892 killed during the second week of TOAN THANG and then dipped slightly to 792 during the last full week of the month. The enemy body count grew in small increments, usually the result of squad- and company-size firefights that ended as soon as the enemy could break contact. Roving helicopter gunships, tactical air strikes, and artillery

[14] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, II FFV, p. 49.

fire missions accounted for the majority of the kills. The enemy struck back where he could, mostly with mortar and rocket attacks aimed at allied bases or at night defense positions. By keeping their forces dispersed and on the move, the Communists were able to avoid excessive losses, though those tactics complicated efforts to position themselves for another strike at Saigon.

The largest engagement of TOAN THANG's opening phase took place on 12 April near the southeastern edge of War Zone C. The 3d Brigade, 25th Division, had just begun sweeping Base Area 355, a belt of woods five kilometers northwest of the Michelin Rubber Plantation, in search of the *9th Division*. Several hours after midnight, sappers from the *271st Regiment* crept forward to probe the night defense position of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, targeting Company B on the southwestern portion of the perimeter. The Americans returned fire and then hunkered down in their foxholes as the first of several hundred mortar rounds began to hit. Around 0400, a battalion of soldiers from the *271st Regiment* surged out of the trees and headed for the sector held by Company B. The Americans fought back desperately, but the enemy's superior numbers soon began to tell. Within thirty minutes, the enemy had breached the line and was threatening to push into the heart of the battalion's position.

An unrelenting wave of air and artillery strikes plus the arrival of helicopter gunships around 0500 helped stabilize the situation and gave the defending infantrymen time to organize a counterattack. The reconnaissance platoon from the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, soon arrived to help Company B, and at 0615 a group of armored personnel carriers from the 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, roared onto the scene and put the Viet Cong to flight. The beaten enemy broke contact and withdrew around 0700, leaving behind 153 corpses. Sixteen U.S. soldiers died in the battle and forty-seven were wounded. The 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, regained contact with the *271st Regiment* later that day and killed another fifty-one enemy soldiers for its own loss of seven killed and forty-five wounded.[15]

Such pitched battles were rare in April. Only on five other occasions did allied forces clash with a company-size enemy force. The best result for the allies came on 18 April when Troop A, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, cornered an enemy force in a bunker complex nineteen kilometers east of Ben Cat. The enemy used riot control gas against the attacking Americans and eventually fought his way out, but not before losing at least fifty-seven of his soldiers killed.[16]

By April, security was still below pre-Tet levels in much of III Corps, but the situation was significantly better than it had been in February. Thanks to the shield provided by Operations QUYET THANG and TOAN THANG, commercial traffic resumed and Revolutionary Development teams began returning to their hamlets. Generally speaking, the teams found the rural population dismayed by the allies' failure to protect them, apprehensive over the much-rumored second enemy offensive, and eager for the government to provide effective security from the Viet Cong, who since the government's withdrawal in February had been taxing, recruiting, and proselytizing at a prodigious rate.

[15] Ibid., pp. 50–51.
[16] Ibid., p. 51.

But the Viet Cong's concentration on preparing for the next offensive also meant that they had not devoted the time and resources to truly implant themselves in formerly government-controlled areas.

Binh Long Province demonstrated the fluidity of the situation. The Communists had not conducted any major attacks in this remote province during Tet, but they fully exploited the withdrawal of U.S. and South Vietnamese military formations toward Saigon by increasing their harassment actions and by establishing governments in a number of hamlets. Communist rule proved both brief and unpopular. When the 1st Brigade, 1st Division, returned to Loc Ninh District in March, 2,000 Montagnards from two hamlets took advantage of the opportunity to leave for government territory. The 1st Brigade helped 900 of these individuals evacuate with their possessions from one of those communities, Loc An, before setting the hamlet ablaze at the request of the hamlet chief. After a Viet Cong mortar barrage killed five civilians in the hamlet of Ninh Phu, the community declared that the Viet Cong were no longer welcome. As U.S. troops advanced, the newly established Communist governments of six hamlets fled for the jungle without a shot being fired. The province senior adviser, Thomas J. Barnes, reported that provincial officials were finally "beginning to stir from the paralysis" caused by Tet.

By April, all of the province's Revolutionary Development teams were back in the countryside, spreading out in oil-spot fashion from the provincial and district capitals. The 1st Brigade was helping to improve the territorials by conducting combined operations, by providing training, and by distributing for the first time M79 grenade launchers and light antitank weapons to Regional and Popular Forces soldiers to help them keep pace with guerrillas who were now armed with Soviet B40 rocket-propelled grenade launchers smuggled in via Cambodia. Like most other province advisers in areas where U.S. troops were operating, Barnes attributed the improved conditions largely to U.S. offensive operations. Still, serious problems remained on both the security and pacification fronts, with Barnes repeating the well-accepted adage that improved security was the sine qua non of pacification. At present, Binh Long was enjoying the benefits of U.S. military activity and the enemy's decision to move his combat units elsewhere. "As long as main force units are absent," he concluded, "the government of Vietnam appears able to make dramatic inroads in Viet Cong controlled areas. Should main force units return, government inroads into Viet Cong preserves could prove ephemeral."[17]

Wherever they were located, U.S. units conducted offensive operations to keep the enemy's major units in check while assisting with area security by performing patrols and undertaking combined operations with the Regional and Popular Forces. They also continued operating the many mobile training teams they had created in 1967 to improve the performance of the Regional

[17] Rpt, CORDS, Advisory Team 81, n.d., sub: Binh Long Province Report for March 1968, pp. 1 (first quote), 2–3, 6 (second quote), 7; Rpt, CORDS, Advisory Team 81, n.d., sub: Binh Long Province Report for April 1968, pp. 1–2, 5–8. Both in Historians files, CMH.

and Popular Forces. Most divisions spoke highly of the effort, but the system was beginning to change. After several months of deliberation, MACV decided to assume control over the territorial training teams. The transition would occur gradually over the next few months. In many cases, MACV reassigned current team members from their parent divisions to CORDS. As their tours of duty expired, MACV would eventually replace these initial personnel with men drawn from the United States specifically for these assignments. The province senior advisers welcomed the move, as it gave them direct control over the entire territorial training effort in their provinces.

One pacification-related function that U.S. formations continued to be involved fully was civic action. In March, the senior CORDS adviser in Hau Nghia Province praised "the outstanding support rendered by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division," which had provided "food, cooking utensils, sleeping equipment, and clothing and engineering support to clean up Cu Chi town." CORDS advisers in neighboring Binh Duong Province singled out the 3d Brigade, 25th Division, for its many civic actions in that province, while a district adviser in Bien Hoa Province reported that "the enthusiasm and cooperation of U.S. units in assisting in the rebuilding of Tet Offensive damaged public and private structures, and their desire to complete interrupted civic action programs and start new ones, have been major factors in re-establishing a successful pacification effort. Their assistance in securing population areas from Viet Cong incursions has been invaluable." These and other actions undertaken by U.S. units throughout South Vietnam were of special significance because they came at a time when the South Vietnamese government, still reeling from the shock of Tet, was not doing enough to assist the population.[18]

Regaining the Initiative in the Northern Mekong

As allied forces tried to regain control over the countryside in III Corps, a similar process began in IV Corps. Westmoreland planned on consolidating the 9th Infantry Division in the northern Mekong Delta "to break the near stalemate which has existed for some time in that area." The 1st Brigade would be reconfigured for operations with the Mobile Riverine Force, which meant giving up its tracked and wheeled vehicles so all three battalions could function as light infantry. Westmoreland also planned on moving several armed helicopter troops from the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry, from III Corps to IV Corps where they could strike the Viet Cong logistical routes that passed through the Plain of Reeds.[19]

[18] Rpt, CORDS, 31 Mar 68, sub: Hau Nghia Province, p. 1; Rpt, Maj Hugh G. Waite, Senior Adviser, n.d., sub: Duc Tu District, Bien Hoa Province, period ending 26 March 1968, p. 1 (quote); Rpt, CORDS, 31 Mar 68, sub: Binh Duong Province, pp. 5–6; Rpt, Capt Wayne A. Rush, District Senior Adviser, 31 Mar 68, sub: Tri Tam District, Dinh Duong Province, p. 1; Memo, G–5, 25th Inf Div, for CG, 25th Inf Div, 5 May 68, sub: Operational Report for Quarterly Period ending 30 April 1968, pp. 1–10; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 199th Inf Bde (Light), 15 May 68, pp. 3, 39–42. All in Historians files, CMH.

[19] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 2956 to Wheeler, 2 Mar 68, p. 2, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

In early March, most of the Viet Cong battalions in IV Corps had split into small groups to evade detection. That gave the new South Vietnamese corps commander, General Thanh, a bit of breathing space to repair the damage of Tet and to instill a more offensive spirit in his troops than had been present under General Manh. Showing the energy and initiative that had impressed U.S. advisers when Thanh had been minister of Revolutionary Development, the new IV Corps commander set to work putting the delta back in order.[20]

Containing the enemy in Dinh Tuong Province and keeping Highway 4 open remained, as before, a key priority. On 7 March, the 1st and 2d Brigades of the 9th Division and elements of the South Vietnamese 7th Division commenced Operation TRUONG CONG DINH to locate and destroy the enemy forces that had attacked My Tho. Their main target was the *261A Main Force Battalion*, considered the most effective Viet Cong unit in the delta. It had recently been incorporated into the new *Dong Thap I Regiment* along with the *261B* and *263d Main Force Battalions*. Starting on 17 March, the 1st Brigade, 9th Division, initiated a related operation called PEOPLE'S ROAD to provide security for the 20th Engineer Battalion as it repaired a 24-kilometer stretch of Highway 4 between Cai Lay and My Tho in Dinh Tuong Province.[21]

The 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, backed by the gunboats and landing craft of the Mobile Riverine Force, kicked off Operation TRUONG CONG DINH with a series of airmobile and beach assaults that took place northwest of My Tho. Toward the evening of the second day, 8 March, Company B, 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, made contact with an unidentified enemy force some seven kilometers from the capital. Companies C and E from the battalion closed in on the area, and in a firefight that lasted all night the Americans killed thirty-seven Viet Cong soldiers while losing five of their own. The 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, continued to clash with platoon- and company-size groups in the same area over the next two weeks, most notably on 11 March when they killed a total of sixty-four enemy soldiers, although the Americans were unable to trap the main body of the *261st Battalion*. The elusive enemy struck back with nighttime mortar attacks, one of which on 9 March sank a pair of artillery barges and destroyed four howitzers. Thirteen days later, Viet Cong gunners on the south side of the My Tho River hit the floating headquarters of the Mobile Riverine Force, the USS *Benewah*, with a pair of 75-mm. recoilless rifle rounds. One shell opened a hole below the water line, but the crew quickly contained the flooding.[22]

[20] Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 2984 to Abrams, 3 Mar 68, p. 4; Westmoreland MAC 2960 to Abrams, 2 Mar 68, p. 2. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. General Westmoreland's Hist notes, 1–31 Mar 68, p. 3; MFR, MACCORDS, 17 Feb 68, sub: Narrative Assessment, Post-TET Pacification Status, IV CTZ, p. 11, Historians files, CMH; Clarke, *The Final Years, 1965–1973,* pp. 309–10.

[21] Monthly Sum, Mar 68, MACV, 25 May 68, p. 23; Traas, *Engineers at War*, p. 344.

[22] AAR, Opn TRUONG CONG DINH, 2d Bde, 9th Div, 23 Apr 68, pp. 5–6, box 2, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Fulton, *Riverine Operations, 1966–1969,* pp. 161–62.

A barracks ship (APL–26)

In mid-March, all the South Vietnamese forces in the delta joined Operation TRUONG CONG DINH, giving General Thanh greater flexibility in crafting his strategy. Armed with the authority to shift battalions from the South Vietnamese 7th, 9th, and 21st Divisions to wherever they were needed most, Thanh drew up a list of the most threatened areas of IV Corps and then began flooding them with troops. By the end of March, the South Vietnamese units under his command had regained most of the territory lost during Tet and had begun to make inroads into areas normally dominated by the Viet Cong.[23]

Meanwhile, back in Dinh Tuong Province, the 4th Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, shifted their area of operations several times over the next two weeks, ranging as far east as the Co Gong provincial border and as far west as the city of Vinh Long. They found and destroyed hundreds of bunkers but rarely killed more than a handful of Viet Cong on any particular day. The enemy appeared to have withdrawn deeper into his 20/7 Heartland Zone and Base Area 470 in western Dinh Tuong Province rather than contest the engineering project on Highway 4. As of 2 April, when the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, exchanged places with the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, which had been defending the Dong Tam Base, the cumulative enemy losses for TRUONG CONG DINH stood at 150 killed and 14 soldiers taken as prisoners of war.

[23] MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 399–400.

Troops from the 9th Infantry Division reboard Tango boats during an operation in the Mekong Delta.

In mid-April, the 3d and 4th Battalions of the 47th Infantry moved into northern Kien Hoa Province to sweep the area around Ben Tre. Their most productive day came on the seventeenth when the two battalions combined to kill ninety Viet Cong soldiers while losing five killed and fifty wounded themselves. For the most part, however, the enemy units in the area refused to give battle unless cornered, and even then they usually managed to slip away by dividing into small teams that concealed themselves in the foliage that grew along the canals. At the end of April, the official results for Operation TRUONG CONG DINH came to 343 Viet Cong killed against U.S. losses of 51 killed. Unlike the precarious situation that had prevailed throughout February, enemy units no longer hovered on the outskirts of the provincial or district capitals in northeastern IV Corps, and the frequency of mortar or recoilless rifle attacks on those cities had diminished to almost none.[24]

The combination of offensive actions by the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, operating with the Mobile Riverine Force and the security efforts by the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, in Dinh Tuong Province, had kept the enemy off balance in the northeastern delta, giving the South Vietnamese a chance to get back on their feet. Nearly all of the Regional and Popular Forces units that had withdrawn from the countryside at the start of Tet

[24] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, II FFV, p. 49.

were now back in their rural stations. The South Vietnamese Army battalions that had been recalled to defend the cities were once again operating in their Revolutionary Development areas. The flow of traffic on Highway 4 had almost returned to pre-Tet levels; the number of mining incidents on the road had dwindled from 159 in February to 21 in April. People ignored Viet Cong threats not to use roads and canals to ship their goods to market. Reconstruction of the urban areas destroyed during Tet was moving forward rapidly. Most of the Revolutionary Development teams in the northeastern delta had moved into the hamlets assigned to them in the 1968 Combined Campaign Plan, including fifteen of seventeen in Go Cong Province, twelve of fifteen in Kien Hoa Province, and all eleven in Dinh Tuong Province. The teams reestablished government presence in previously pacified hamlets that the Communists had taken over, as province chiefs adapted to the changed conditions on the ground. Often they found that the Communist tide that had swept over the delta had been relatively shallow. True, the Viet Cong had been able to tax and recruit in areas that had previously been off limits to them, but they had not had the time to root themselves deeply into the community due to their focus on rebuilding their shattered military units. In Go Cong, for example, advancing government troops found thirty-two hamlets that had been engulfed in the red tide but which had refused to let the Communists in. As difficult as the situation was, it appeared that fears that the countryside had been lost irrevocably had been overblown.

In many places, the returning Revolutionary Development teams had to devote much of their initial effort not to pushing pacification forward, but to helping residents repair their shattered communities. The Viet Cong had done some of the damage, but allied air and artillery employed during the counteroffensive had done much harm as well. This fact, combined with the looting done by government soldiers in some of the delta's chief towns during Tet, did not endear the population to the allied cause. However, here as elsewhere in Vietnam, destruction created complex psychological reactions that ranged from resentment to resignation. And, as was true in the cities, many rural residents came to blame the Viet Cong for their suffering, even if it had come at the hand of allied ordnance, because it had been the Communists who triggered the combat by occupying their communities. What one person and community after another told government officials was that they wanted safety and security more than anything else. If the government could protect them from future enemy incursions and the dangers they entailed, it would have their support.[25]

The 9th Division conducted psychological and civic action operations on a considerable scale to help the population recover from Tet. In addition to assisting local hospitals, the division's medical civic action teams treated nearly

[25] Special Joint Narrative Rpts, RD, Go Cong Province, 30 Apr 68, pp. 1–2, 9–11; RD, Kien Hoa Province, 30 Apr 68, pp. 5, 10; RD, Dinh Tuong Province, 31 Mar 68, pp. 1–7; RD, Dinh Tuong Province, 30 Apr 68, pp. 1, 4–5; RD, Vinh Binh Province, 31 Mar 68, p. 4; RD, Vinh Long Province, 31 Mar 68, pp. 1–4; RD, Chau Doc Province, 31 Mar 68, p. 2. All in Historians files, CMH.

50,000 civilians during February, March, and April. The division provided water, 203,000 pounds of food, and a significant amount of building supplies to distraught communities. It also helped build or repair many structures, including a facility for 300 children orphaned as a result of the fighting. When General Westmoreland put out a call for soldiers to make voluntary contributions to a special Tet Aggression Relief Project, the men of the division responded by donating $2,700 of their own money.[26]

Operations on the Central Coast

Just as the allies endeavored to restart pacification by clearing the approaches to Saigon, I Field Force commander General Peers planned to maintain at least one brigade of troops in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen Provinces during the coming quarter to keep the *3d PAVN Division* and the independent *95B Regiment* in check so the South Vietnamese could reenergize the stalled pacification campaign. His new counterpart was General Lu Mong Lan. Westmoreland praised Lan for his "aggressive spirit," but in truth he had a mixed reputation. Peers certainly hoped that General Lan could get the best out of the South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division in Binh Dinh Province, for large swathes of the lowlands were still heavily influenced by the Viet Cong.[27]

In early March, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and its new commander, Col. Eugene P. Forrester, had just started Operation PATRICK to help South Vietnamese and South Korean forces defend the lowlands of Binh Dinh Province. Working alongside Forrester's brigade was the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, a mechanized unit that had been patrolling Binh Dinh Province since September 1967 and which was currently operating under the command of Lt. Col. Cheney L. Bertholf Jr. Farther south, the 2d and the 4th Battalions of the 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, helped contain the enemy in Phu Yen Province with Operation BOLLING.[28]

The 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, saw the most action in the weeks that followed. On 9 March, the *22d Regiment* of the *3d PAVN Division* attacked the unit's camp, Landing Zone LITTS, two kilometers north of Phu My on the shoulder of Highway 1. A handpicked team of rocket grenadiers and the *8th Battalion, 22d Regiment*, led the assault that failed to reach the well-dug-in infantry and sandbagged armored personnel carriers from Company D, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry. Thirty-six North Vietnamese soldiers died in the failed attack. Six days later, the mechanized company killed another thirty-four soldiers from the *22d Regiment* while patrolling north of Phu My. After that second setback, the North Vietnamese regiment dropped out of sight for the remainder of March. Even so, its presence in the Mieu Mountains northeast of Phu My continued to impede pacification efforts, discouraging

[26] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 9th Inf Div, 12 May 68, pp. 39–48, Historians files, CMH.

[27] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 2984 to Abrams, 3 Mar 68, p. 4 (quoted words).

[28] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 9-68, I FFV, 25 Feb–2 Mar 68, 2 Mar 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; *3d Division*, p. 81.

government officials from working in the hamlets that lay in the shadow of the coastal hills.[29]

Otherwise uneventful, Operation PATRICK terminated on 30 March when the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, moved to the Central Highlands to rejoin its parent division. At the same time, Peers redeployed the 1st, 2d, and 3d Battalions of the 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, as well as its headquarters from Kontum Province to the coastal plain. The 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, went to Camp Radcliff to conduct Operation WALKER, while the 2d and 3d Battalions, 503d Infantry, moved to the new brigade headquarters at Landing Zone ENGLISH. The 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, remained in Phu Yen Province. Now commanded by Brig. Gen. Richard J. Allen, who replaced General Schweiter on 20 March, the brigade kicked off Operation COCHISE in Binh Dinh to carry on the mission of PATRICK.[30]

General Allen began COCHISE by targeting a busy Communist supply route in the Vinh Thanh Mountains known as the Oregon Trail. Intelligence suggested that the *3d Division*'s command post and elements of the *2d* and *22d Regiments* were in the area. Allen committed all of the troops that he could spare—parts of the 2d and 3d Battalions, 503d Infantry, plus a South Vietnamese battalion and some CIDG soldiers—but the *3d Division* avoided contact for the entire twelve days of the operation and throughout the rest of April. Though the 173d Airborne Brigade failed to locate its quarry, the sweep kept North Vietnamese soldiers out of the heavily populated Bong Son and Phu My lowlands for six weeks. Farther south toward Qui Nhon, the South Korean Capital Division did its part to defend the Revolutionary Development area in Tuy Phuoc District by organizing a thirty-company operation called MAENG HO 11 that killed 202 enemy soldiers and captured another 84 in the second half of April.[31]

As security improved in Binh Dinh's lowlands as a result of allied military activities, South Vietnamese officials returned to the countryside to restart Revolutionary Development programs. By March, all fifty Revolutionary Development teams were back in the field, nearly all of them in hamlets slated for pacification in the 1968 Combined Campaign Plan. As was true elsewhere, however, much of their initial work was devoted to rebuilding damaged homes rather than performing routine pacification tasks. According to CORDS, their efforts to reestablish the government's presence was facilitated by the fact that

[29] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 3d Bde, 4th Div, 4 May 68, p. 5, box 26, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 10-68, I FFV, 3–9 Mar 68, 9 Mar 68, pp. 5–6, Historians files, CMH.

[30] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 3d Bde, 4th Div, p. 5; *3d Division*, p. 77; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 13-68, I FFV, 24–30 Mar 68, 30 Mar 68, p. 6, Historians files, CMH.

[31] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 14-68, I FFV, 31 Mar–6 Apr 68, 6 Apr 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 173d Abn Bde, 15 May 68, pp. 9, 32, box 138, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; *3d Division*, p. 85.

in Binh Dinh "a great number of infrastructure cadres have been uncovered, and their ranks have been severely decimated."[32]

Economic conditions were also getting better, spurred by improved rural security and the reopening of Highway 1. The April rice harvest was better than expected, yielding 2 tons per acre compared to the 1.9 tons usually gathered that month. Food prices returned to pre-Tet levels and supplies were adequate everywhere. The province chief was taking vigorous action to combat corruption, black marketeering, and price gouging. He insisted, for example, that all shopkeepers display their prices prominently in their storefronts as a way of discouraging illegal profiteering. Reconstruction efforts were visible in Qui Nhon and many of the hamlets damaged during Tet. By the end of April, the provincial government had distributed 34,400 bags of cement and sheets of roofing to families that had lost their homes. A broad recovery appeared to be under way in the lowland districts of Binh Dinh Province, but full recovery was many months away and would require, in the opinion of the senior province adviser, continued "large unit, sustained operations" and frequent local patrolling to keep the enemy's conventional forces at bay. [33]

U.S. units contributed to the restoration in a variety of ways beyond providing the necessary military shield. They sought to improve the performance of South Vietnamese regulars by conducting combined operations with them at the company level. In coordination with CORDS and South Vietnamese government officials, they sponsored the usual set of medical, humanitarian, and construction projects associated with the Army's civic action program. Finally, in April the 173d Airborne Brigade organized and trained three adviser teams to assist the territorials. Each team consisted of a lieutenant, an infantry noncommissioned officer, and three enlisted men with the specialties of infantry, medicine, and engineering. The teams, which the brigade placed under the control of CORDS advisers in three of Binh Dinh's districts, then began providing eleven-day training cycles for Regional Forces companies and five-day training for Popular Forces platoons. The trainers emphasized learning by doing rather than classroom instruction, and accompanied the territorial soldiers on patrols and ambushes. Eventually, the teams would work with all sixteen Regional Forces companies and seventy-one platoons that were stationed in the three serviced districts.[34]

Separate from the effort to secure the lowlands, the 1st Battalion of the 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, conducted Operation WALKER in the interior highlands of the province to defend Camp Radcliff and to protect Highway 19 around An Khe. Screening the road was a vital, if unglamorous, task. The allied bases in the highlands depended on the large, slow-moving truck convoys that traveled back and forth from Qui Nhon. Although the

[32] Rpt, CORDS, 31 Mar 68, sub: Binh Dinh Province, pp. 1, 9 (quote), Historians files, CMH.

[33] Ibid., p. 15; Memo, CORDS, 25 Mar 68, sub: Status of Pacification—Binh Dinh Province (Tet Offensive), pp. 1–3; Special Joint Narrative Rpt, RD, Binh Dinh Province, Apr 68, pp. 1–2, 11–17. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[34] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 31, 37.

A military police officer from the 173d Airborne Brigade and a policeman from the South Vietnamese National Police at a checkpoint near Bong Son during Operation COCHISE

allies had used Rome plows and defoliants to strip a wide belt of vegetation from either side of Highway 19, there were still numerous places where the Communists could lay in wait. In a typical ambush, enemy soldiers would attempt to disable the lead and the rear vehicles using a combination of rocket-propelled grenade launchers, mines, or claymores to trap the rest of the convoy and thus make it an easier target for the ambushing force. The subsequent firefights rarely lasted for more than few minutes because the Communist soldiers did not want to expose themselves to air and artillery strikes by lingering in the area.[35]

The enemy concentrated his attacks in the Mang Yang Pass, a narrow and twisting section of Highway 19 approximately halfway between An Khe and Pleiku City where the 2d Squadron of the 1st Cavalry, 4th Infantry Division, passed off eastbound convoys to the 1st Battalion, 503d Infantry, or acquired those coming west. The *5th Battalion, 95B Regiment,* and the *124th Mortar Company* periodically tried to shut down the strategic pass. On 5 March 1968, for example, a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers attacked a convoy nearing the Mang Yang Pass from the south side of Highway 19, employing a

[35] AAR, Opn WALKER, 173d Abn Bde, 2 Mar 69, p. 1, box 38, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 10-68, I FFV, p. 4.

combination of RPG2 rocket-propelled grenades, claymore mines, and automatic weapons fire. The brief but well-coordinated ambush destroyed one truck, damaged three others, and killed two U.S. soldiers. Just west of the Mang Yang Pass on 15 March, North Vietnamese troops destroyed a passing fuel truck with a rocket-propelled grenade and then triggered two command-detonated mines as the column came to a halt. The attackers fled the scene before the defenders could engage them.[36]

One of the largest but least successful attacks came on 10 April when a company from the *95B Regiment* ambushed a column of trucks in the Mang Yang Pass. The North Vietnamese opened fire several minutes too early, probably because they mistook the sound of a dud 105-mm. howitzer shell being blown up by an ordnance disposal team a short distance away for the initial round of an incoming barrage. The error proved disastrous. A section of tanks that was spearheading the convoy and two platoons of paratroopers immediately converged on the concealed North Vietnamese troops, killing forty-five of them and capturing seven crew-served weapons. The convoy reached its destination without loss.[37]

Meanwhile, the remaining element of the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. David L. Buckner, continued Operation BOLLING in northern Phu Yen Province to defend the capital of Tuy Hoa and the heavily populated districts that surrounded it. Batteries C and D of the 3d Battalion, 319th Artillery, supported the battalion, as did Task Force MITCHELL, made up of Company D, 16th Armor, and Troop E, 17th Cavalry. The primary threat to the city came from elements of the *95B Regiment* and the *85th Local Force Battalion*, but they remained largely out of sight during March and April while they waited for reinforcements to bring them back up to strength. Thanks in part to this passivity, the province made significant progress in pacification in April. According to the province senior adviser, security, while still inadequate, was "qualitatively better now than before the Tet offensive," and rural residents seemed more willing to report on Viet Cong activities.[38]

A similar lack of hostile activity prevailed in the southern provinces of II Corps. In Khanh Hoa Province, where the withdrawal of government troops during the Tet offensive had produced a two-month delay in meeting pacification goals, CORDS reported "a spectacular breakthrough in the government of Vietnam's attack on the infrastructure" in which 110 Viet Cong cadre were incarcerated thanks to their surfacing during Tet. Progress was less notable in Ninh Thuan Province, which like Khanh Hoa contained no U.S. combat formations, but where authorities made little headway against the infrastructure. Finally, in the southernmost coastal province of II Corps, a U.S. air-

[36] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 10-68, I FFV, p. 4; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 11-68, I FFV, 10–16 Mar 68, 16 Mar 68, pp. 4–5, Historians files, CMH.

[37] AAR, Opn WALKER, 173d Abn Bde, p. 6; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 15-68, I FFV, 7–13 Apr 68, 13 Apr 68, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

[38] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 173d Abn Bde, p. 33; Rpt, CORDS, 30 Apr 68, sub: Phu Bon Province, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

Artillerymen from the 173d Airborne Brigade prepare for a fire mission.

borne task force built around the 3d Battalion, 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, continued Operation McLain from its base at Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan Province. Rural security had declined significantly after Tet, as much from the government's withdrawal to the towns and subsequent passivity as from enemy action. Modest gains began to accrue in April when, goaded by MACV and I Field Force headquarters, the Vietnamese finally began to go onto the offensive. The men of the 3d Battalion assisted in the rejuvenation by conducting low-level combined operations with government forces and by training a Regional Forces intelligence squad as a long-range reconnaissance patrol. Still, the paratroopers rarely caught sight of the enemy, as the commander of *Military Region 6*, General Chau, reverted to his traditional strategy of attacking lines of communications and isolated outposts, and withdrew his main units, the *840th Main Force Battalion* and *482d Local Force Battalion*, into the interior hills to rest until orders came for a second general offensive.[39]

[39] Memo, CORDS, 25 Mar 68, sub: Status of Pacification—Khanh Hoa Province (Tet Offensive), pp. 1–2, 3 (quote); Rpt, CORDS, 31 Mar 68, sub: Khanh Hoa Province, pp. 1–3; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 11-68, I FFV, p. 7; Memo, CORDS, 25 Mar 68, sub: Status of Pacification—Binh Thuan Province (Tet Offensive), pp. 1–5; Rpt, CORDS, 30 Apr 68, sub: Binh Thuan Province, pp. 1–11. All in Historians files, CMH.

Patrolling the Highlands

In the western part of II Corps, the commander of the 4th Infantry Division, General Stone, continued his screening mission in the borderlands, Operation MacArthur, for signs of the *1st PAVN Division* and three North Vietnamese regiments—the *24th*, *33d*, and *95B*—controlled by the *B3 Front*. Stone relied on intelligence to make the most of his limited resources. Reconnaissance patrols from the 4th Infantry Division and Montagnard teams led by Army Special Forces soldiers silently watched the dozens of trails that led into Laos and Cambodia. Supporting the scouts high overhead were airplanes equipped with infrared tracking systems and chemical sniffers that detected the smoke from campfires and vehicle engines. Racing low and fast over the treetops were scout helicopters looking to catch unwary North Vietnamese soldiers out in the open or to spot clues betraying their presence, such as newly dug trenches or a still-smoldering campfire. An enemy force discovered by any of those means would face a gauntlet of air and artillery strikes and then a swarm of helicopter-backed infantry if he dared come within striking distance of one of the few towns that dotted the highlands. General Stone felt he could afford to let the enemy come to him because, as he put it, "I have everything the enemy wants and he has nothing I want."[40]

In early March, U.S. forces were distributed evenly across Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac Provinces. The 1st and 2d Battalions of the 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, were looking for the *33d Regiment* near Ban Me Thuot, although it now appeared that the enemy had retreated far to the southwest to lick his wounds. The 2d Brigade of the 4th Division guarded Pleiku Province, aware that the *32d Regiment* had recently moved somewhere southwest of the provincial capital. The 1st Brigade, 4th Division, had an even greater responsibility in Kontum Province, for it had to monitor the *24th Regiment* that was somewhere north of Kontum City as well as the *66th* and *174th Regiments* that were in the Dak To area. Bruised though the enemy might be, he could still launch regimental-size attacks. While General Stone and I Field Force commander General Peers doubted the *B3 Front* would initiate another major offensive in the next few months—partly because of its Tet losses and partly because of the seasonal onset of the rains of the southwest monsoon—they expected the enemy to seek small gains whenever he could, and they were prepared to thwart those local offensives at every turn.[41]

After Tet, the commander of the *B3 Front*, General Thao, decided to shift his main focus away from Dak To. While he would continue to threaten the allied bases there, he believed the thickening defenses between Ben Het and Tanh Canh had substantially reduced his chances for success. By contrast, areas to the south were less well protected and thus offered a greater opportunity to pick off an isolated base or to ambush an unwary unit. The CIDG

[40] Senior Debriefing Rpt, Maj Gen Charles P. Stone, 15 Nov 68, pp. 3, 5, box 5, Senior Ofcr Debriefing Rpts, Cmd Historian, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[41] Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, Jan–Mar 68, MACV, 9 May 68, p. 32, box 189, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

camps at Plei Kleng, twenty-two kilometers west of Kontum City, and Plei Mrong, some thirty kilometers southwest of the capital, were especially enticing targets because they were lightly defended with little or no road access to the main allied bases. All the while, Thao would continue to restock his forward supply areas and to integrate replacements coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in anticipation of the next major phase of the 1968 general offensive–general uprising.[42]

The allies learned more about Thao's intentions on 1 March when the commander of the *9th Battalion, 66th Regiment*, Vu Nhu Y, turned himself in and spoke at length to allied interrogators. He explained that the post-Tet mission of the *1st Division* was to draw allied units into the region in order to create opportunities for Communist units elsewhere in the country. The division and elements of the *40th Artillery Regiment* would continue to harass Ben Het and Dak To with indirect fire, while the *66th Regiment* looked for opportunities to assault outposts. The same was true for the *174th Regiment*. The North Vietnamese officer admitted that the *1st Division* still had not fully recovered from the Dak To campaign, even though it had recently obtained a fresh regiment, the *320th*, to replace the battered *32d*, which had moved south to Darlac Province to operate under front control with the *33d Regiment.* The *320th Regiment*—formerly the *209th Regiment, 312th Division*—had just arrived from North Vietnam and was near full strength. General Thao could also reinforce an attack along Route 512 with the independent *24th Regiment* if the need arose.[43]

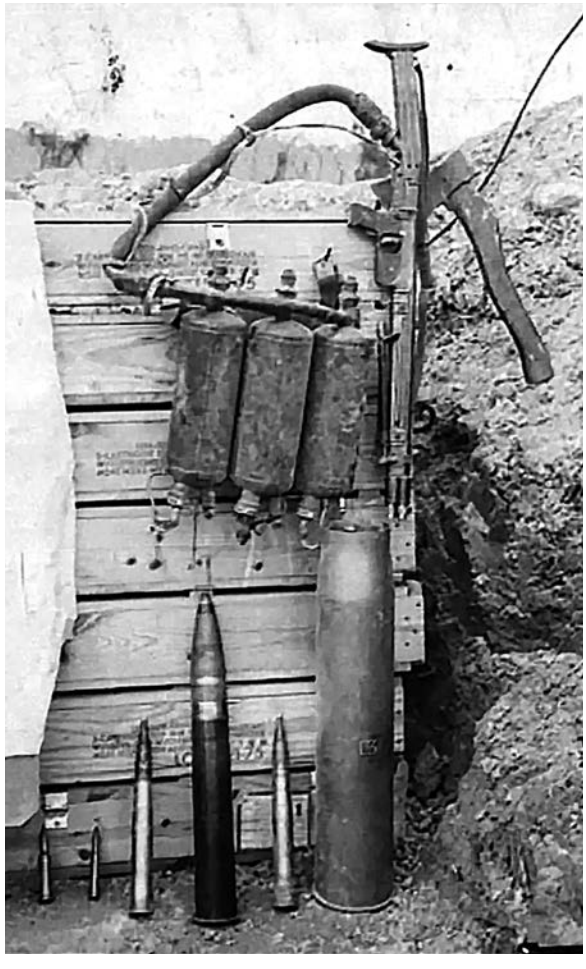
For the next several weeks, the allies caught only fleeting glimpses of those regiments. Enemy activity increased toward the end of March as the *B3 Front* began funneling more men and supplies through the network of trails that crisscrossed the highlands. U.S. patrols spotted groups of North Vietnamese soldiers on almost a daily basis, although the Communists usually broke contact and disappeared as quickly as possible. Allied intelligence warned that the *320th Regiment* of the *1st PAVN Division* was likely to make its presence known before long because General Thao would want to season his new unit. There were also clear signs that the *1st Division* headquarters had moved from Cambodia back into western Kontum Province, strengthening the theory that the division headquarters intended to test its newly acquired regiment.[44]

Proof of that came on 26 March when two battalions of the *320th Regiment* attacked Firebase 14. Companies A and B of the 3d Battalion, 4th Infantry, 8th Infantry Division, had established the outpost a few days earlier to protect the Polei Kleng CIDG camp twelve kilometers to the east. Employing flamethrowers in addition to automatic weapons and RPG2 rocket launchers, the North Vietnamese penetrated the northwest perimeter and briefly occu-

[42] Col Gen Nguyen Huu An*, Chien Truong Moi* [*New Battlefield*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1986), pp. 91–92.

[43] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 03-053-68, 18 Apr 68, sub: Organization of the 1st Division, B.3, pp. 29–30, Vietnam Enemy Order of Battle vol. 1, box 151, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 9-68, I FFV, pp. 3, 8, H-1.

[44] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 173d Abn Bde, p. 26.



A North Vietnamese flamethrower and captured cannon shells

pied a few bunkers until driven off by a U.S. counterattack. The brutal fight claimed the lives of 19 Americans and 135 North Vietnamese soldiers.[45]

Whatever the future plans of the *B3 Front*, the 173d Airborne Brigade would no longer be in its immediate line of fire. On 30 March, the brigade ended its grueling five-month stint in the Central Highlands when it flew to Binh Dinh Province to swap places with the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, bringing all three brigades of the 4th Infantry Division together for the first time in the war. The *1st Division* immediately challenged the incoming unit. Beginning on 1 April and continuing for eight days, gunners lobbed some 400 mortar and recoilless rifle rounds into Firebase 14, which the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, had relinquished to Lt. Col. William W. Taylor Jr. and his 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry. On 5 April, Companies A, B, and C from Colonel Taylor's battalion encountered a battalion from the *320th PAVN Regiment* west of the base and killed forty-eight enemy soldiers before the Communists broke contact. Ten days later, Company C from the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, clashed with another large force in the same area. Air and artillery strikes killed dozens of North Vietnamese soldiers, but an accurate body count was impossible because the enemy had sufficient time to clear the battlefield before he withdrew.

The sudden spike in activity around Firebase 14 came into clearer focus on 20 April. A pair of North Vietnamese deserters told their interrogators that the *B3 Front* was trying to strengthen its infiltration and supply routes that led from the tri-border area to the central plateau where the major cities

[45] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 13-68, I FFV, p. 2.

were located. General Stone responded to this report by establishing a second outpost a short distance to the west of Firebase 14 manned by elements of the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, and the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry. Like Firebase 14, it was situated on a key piece of terrain that overlooked the surrounding area. The North Vietnamese sent a battalion to attack the new base on 29 April, but the defenders, Company B of the 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, turned back the assault and killed forty-six Communist soldiers. As long as Stone controlled the high ground west of Kontum City, the enemy would find it difficult to mass his forces to attack the provincial capital.[46]

Another reason for the surge in enemy activity in Kontum Province was the arrival of the *325C Division*, minus its *29th Regiment*, which it had left behind in northern Quang Tri Province. Scout helicopters from the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry, noticed a rise in enemy activity around Dak To in early April as the *95C* and the *101D Regiments* moved into the area. The towering forest that greeted the North Vietnamese soldiers was vastly different from the barren moonscape that characterized the Khe Sanh area, and it would take the division's troops and their commander, Senior Col. Chu Phuong Doi, several weeks of learning the terrain and sorting out supply arrangements before the division was fully ready for offensive action. In the meantime, the *1st Division* shifted south toward the Kontum-Pleiku border where it was better positioned to threaten the respective provincial capitals.[47]

Meanwhile, starting in mid-March and continuing through April, all three border provinces reported significant improvements in rural security and pacification. According to Kontum's CORDS adviser, "Progress was attributable to the success of U.S. military units in isolating major North Vietnamese Army units from the populated areas and also to a new offensive spirit on the part of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam." The senior province adviser in Darlac agreed. CORDS personnel also took note of the 4th Division's well-established civic action program, which often represented the only military civic action during the period as South Vietnamese units proved disinterested in such work. One U.S. officer died from a mishap at one of the twenty-eight well-digging projects the division undertook for Montagnard communities between February and April. In addition to dispensing 39,000 medical treatments, distributing several tons of food and relief supplies, and helping on several community construction projects, the division also provided logistical support to the consolidation of nineteen Montagnard hamlets into three villages. The hamlet chiefs of these communities had requested the consolidation to enhance their security, and the moves went well. The division reported that its activities continued to win the populace's favor and to generate intelligence. But here, as throughout Vietnam, all of these achievements depended on secu-

[46] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 3d Bde, 4th Div, p. 6.

[47] Man, *Time of Upheaval*, pp. 481–82; Pham Gia Duc, *325th Division, 1954–1975*, vol. 2 (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 2002) p. 65; An, *New Battlefield*, p. 90; Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans*, p. 194.

rity, and the ominous movements of major North Vietnamese combat formations in April raised concerns over whether the recent gains would last.[48]

The Americal Division in Southern I Corps

Westmoreland's principal goal in southern I Corps after Tet was to restore security to the densely populated, rice-growing areas that were clustered near the major cities. He directed General Cushman to clear the lowlands south of Da Nang with the 1st Marine Division and the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade, while the Americal Division and the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division worked to restore security around Tam Ky, Quang Ngai City, and the populated zones in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. Cushman's force would shrink in late March when the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, moved from the Que Son Valley to Binh Dinh Province, leaving just the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light) to carry on with Operation WHEELER/WALLOWA. Fortunately, the Americal Division would soon get more troops. Individual replacements arriving in April and May were to form a fourth rifle company in the battalions of the 196th and 198th Infantry Brigades (Light), and two new independent battalions activated for Vietnam service, the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, and the 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry, were set to join the 11th and 198th Infantry Brigades (Light) in the Quang Tin–Quang Ngai sector.[49]

The allied situation in southern I Corps remained in turmoil at the beginning of March. Quang Tin Province had weathered the Tet offensive well, but Quang Nam Province to its north and Quang Ngai Province to its south were still reeling from the effects of Tet. The National Priority Area that stretched south of Da Nang to the An Hoa Valley had experienced several weeks of fighting during Tet. Many of the Revolutionary Development teams and associated pacification officials assigned there were still taking refuge in Da Nang or Hoi An. Security had plummeted in Quang Ngai, reducing the government's control to the major towns. Even under the best of circumstances, U.S. analysts believed it would probably take three months to erase the setback.

The Americal Division retained the lead role in fighting the *2d PAVN Division* and more than a dozen Viet Cong battalions that were based in the coastal hills from the Que Son Valley to Duc Pho. Its commander, General Koster, also had to be ready to come to the aid of the Special Forces camps that dotted the mountainous interior. On top of that, Koster anticipated two more months of organizational turmoil as his unit evolved from a provisional outfit into a standardized infantry division of three organic brigades. His 11th and 198th Infantry Brigades were still getting acclimated to Vietnam, both

[48] Rpt, CORDS, 31 Mar 68, sub: Kontum Province, pp. 1–4, 8; Rpt, CORDS, 30 Apr 68, sub: Kontum Province, pp. 1 (quote), 2–3; Rpt, CORDS, 31 Mar 68, sub: Darlac Province, pp. 1–10; Rpt, CORDS, 30 Apr 68, sub: Darlac Province, pp. 1–12; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 4th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 25–30. All in Historians files, CMH.

[49] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, Americal Div, 7 May 68, p. 26, box 66, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

having arrived only a few months earlier. Koster's most experienced unit, the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, which had been in southern I Corps since April 1967, had left the Que Son Valley at the end of February. As a result, the general had to commit the division's armored reconnaissance unit, the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, led by Lt. Col. Walter C. Cousland, to help the 196th Infantry Brigade pick up the slack. That left the 198th Infantry Brigade to watch the area around the division base at Chu Lai in southeastern Quang Tin Province and his newest unit, the 11th Infantry Brigade, to patrol southeastern Quang Ngai Province.[50]

One of Koster's main priorities was to prevent the enemy from attacking the district and provincial capitals that had suffered so badly during Tet. When allied intelligence noticed a spike in Viet Cong activity near Quang Tin's capital, Tam Ky, in the last week of February, elements of the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 2d Division went looking for the enemy. On 26 February, they searched a wooded area some three kilometers southwest of Tam Ky known as the Pineapple Forest, a well-known enemy base area. Koster's cavalrymen flushed from cover around 500 Viet Cong soldiers belonging to the *72d Local Force Battalion,* the *70th Main Force Battalion,* and the *V13* and *V15 Local Force Companies*, which had been hiding in a forward staging area, apparently intent on attacking Tam Ky at some point in the near future. The allies killed an estimated 201 Viet Cong soldiers over the next three days and thus removed an incipient threat to the capital.[51]

In the WHEELER/WALLOWA zone that covered Quang Nam's Que Son Valley, the 196th Infantry Brigade and the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, continued their hunt for the *2d Division*. At the beginning of March, Koster learned that part of the *2d Division* had come down from the western hills into the Que Son Valley, most likely to find food. On the fourth day of the month, elements from the 196th Infantry Brigade and the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, converged on the south-central part of the valley, which turned out to be teeming with soldiers from the *3d PAVN Regiment*. Over the next eight days, the Americal troops killed an estimated 436 North Vietnamese soldiers in dozens of squad- and company-size firefights. If that tally was correct, it meant that the *3d Regiment* would need at least a month or two to recover its offensive capability, giving local authorities more time to pacify the valley without fear of a main force attack.[52]

Koster's headquarters continued to look closely for any signs pointing to a new round of attacks against the cities. Some of the information it gathered amounted to little more than unsubstantiated rumor, but in late March an enemy soldier surrendered and told his captors that a large Viet Cong force was massing near Quang Nam's capital of Hoi An. Acting on the information he provided, elements of the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, and the 198th Infantry Brigade searched the coastal flats south of the city and discovered the *70th Main Force Battalion* and several local Viet Cong units less than ten kilometers

[50] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, Americal Div, p. 13.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.

A scout from the 196th Infantry Brigade scans for the enemy with a sniper scope mounted on an M14.

from the provincial capital. Using the mobility and shock of the armored personnel carriers to great advantage, the Americal troops killed an estimated 263 enemy soldiers before the Communists were able to break contact. Hoi An, for the moment at least, appeared to be out of danger.[53]

In early April, the 198th Infantry Brigade shifted south to the Que Son Valley to fill the gap left by the departure of the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. One of its first missions was to help the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, and the 39th Engineer Battalion open a road connection between Tam Ky and a Special Forces camp near the district capital of Tien Phuoc, some twenty kilometers to the southwest of Tam Ky along Route 533. Elements from the South Vietnamese 2d Division would also help the U.S. forces search Base Area 117 in the mountains south of Route 533 for Viet Cong units such as the *72d Main Force Battalion* and the *74th Local Force Battalion*.

The 198th Infantry Brigade kicked off the new mission, named Operation Burlington Trail, on 8 April when Companies C and D of the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, landed on a pair of hilltops approximately ten kilometers southwest of Tam Ky that provided excellent observation of the surrounding terrain. The following day, the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, landed on Hill 218, another key piece of high ground several kilometers west of where Companies C and

[53] Ibid.

D had landed the previous day. The battalion immediately began constructing Firebase BOWMAN to serve as the primary artillery fire support base for the operation.[54]

That same day, Troop A and a platoon from Troop C of the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, advanced toward Tien Phuoc along Route 533. Soldiers from the *72d Main Force Battalion* tried to block its progress, but the armored force fought its way through the ambush, killing thirty-three enemy soldiers. Four Viet Cong soldiers who were taken prisoner claimed that their units had recently been equipped with Soviet-made antitank hand grenades, but it remained to be seen whether such weapons would prove effective against the U.S. tanks and armored personnel carriers. The antitank grenades could only be employed at short range and would therefore demand considerable bravery and a good measure of luck from their users. As it turned out, the enemy never got close enough to the cavalrymen over the next week to use such weapons if they had them. The mechanized column reached Tien Phuoc on 14 April and three days later declared Route 533 open to regular traffic.[55]

Viet Cong activity remained light around BOWMAN for the first few days of the operation apart from a flurry of enemy mortar rounds that struck the base on 10 April, killing two Americans and wounding eight others. The pace quickened on the afternoon of 13 April, when Company A of the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, encountered a Viet Cong platoon five kilometers southwest of the firebase. The U.S. infantrymen killed seven of the enemy while air strikes claimed at least nineteen others. Later that evening, the Viet Cong exacted revenge by hitting Company B from the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, with a concentrated storm of mortars and automatic weapons fire that wounded twenty-two Americans.[56]

Contact with the enemy around Firebase BOWMAN again dropped to low levels for the remainder of April. During that time the balance of the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, joined the operation, as did Company A of the 1st Battalion, 52d Infantry, which assumed the security duties at BOWMAN. On the last day of the month, a Viet Cong force attacked the firebase with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades, but the defenders repulsed the assault and killed four enemy soldiers for a cost of eight wounded.

The spike in action continued the next day, 1 May, when Company A from the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, was inserted by helicopter into a hot landing zone some eleven kilometers southwest of BOWMAN. The Americans killed thirty-one Viet Cong before the enemy withdrew. As before, contact in the BURLINGTON TRAIL area once again dropped off, suggesting that the Viet Cong wished only to hide.[57]

Meanwhile, northwest of the BURLINGTON TRAIL area in the heart of the Que Son Valley, the 196th Infantry Brigade turned over its role in WHEELER/WALLOWA to the 198th Infantry Brigade on 19 April so that the 196th Infantry

[54] AAR, Opn BURLINGTON TRAIL, 198th Bde, n.d., p. 4, Historians files, CMH.
[55] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, Americal Div, p. 14.
[56] AAR, Opn BURLINGTON TRAIL, 198th Bde, p. 5.
[57] Ibid.

Soldiers of Company D, 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade, move out from a landing zone in Quang Ngai Province.

Brigade could assume the defense of Camp Evans, while the 1st Cavalry Division conducted Operation DELAWARE. Over the previous two months, the 196th Infantry Brigade claimed to have killed 262 North Vietnamese and 417 Viet Cong soldiers, captured or destroyed 180,000 pounds of rice, and destroyed a large number of camps. The Americans had compelled the enemy units that normally operated in the Que Son Valley to spend much of their time in the mountains of western Quang Nam Province where they were safer from allied patrols but also farther removed from their source of food. Because of their isolation, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops also exerted less influence over the people who lived on the coastal plain. As spring brought a change from the wet northeast monsoon to the drier southwest monsoon, it now became the responsibility of the 198th Infantry Brigade to preserve and expand the hard-won allied gains in the Que Son.[58]

The third major component of the Americal Division, the 11th Infantry Brigade, worked alongside the South Vietnamese 2d Division to restore security in Quang Ngai Province following Tet. The 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, conducted Operation MUSCATINE in the heavily populated lowlands that lay northwest of the provincial capital. Also participating in MUSCATINE was Task Force BARKER, a group composed of three infantry companies and a partial artillery battery drawn from various parts of the

[58] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, Americal Div, p. 13.

A grenadier from Company B, 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, 11th Infantry Brigade, looks through an underground storage area during a hamlet search near Duc Pho.

11th Infantry Brigade that was commanded by the brigade's operations officer, Lt. Col. Frank A. Barker. It patrolled a sector formerly held by the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade that lay northeast of Quang Ngai City and which included the Batangan Peninsula. Elements from the South Vietnamese 2d Division guarded the districts immediately surrounding Quang Ngai City. The 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, and the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, operated in the southeastern part of the province from the brigade headquarters at Duc Pho. The 11th Infantry Brigade, therefore, had a huge amount of territory to cover, a problem exacerbated by the fact that it was physically split in two by the South Vietnamese zone.[59]

The My Lai Massacre

In the wake of Tet, allied units based near Quang Ngai City searched the countryside for the enemy forces that had attacked the provincial capital. The Viet Cong had suffered tremendous casualties but would bounce back unless the experienced cadre that formed the nucleus of their units could be destroyed. South Vietnamese troops and U.S. gunships scored a success on 6 February when they killed fifty men from the *406th Sapper Battalion* southwest of Quang Ngai City and another ninety-two soldiers from the *83d Local Force Battalion* near the same location the next day.

The *48th Local Force Battalion* proved more elusive. The unit typically operated out of the sprawling village of Son My, made up of over a dozen

[59] William R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 27, 39.

hamlets that dotted the lower coast of the Batangan Peninsula. The community of rice farmers and fisherman had been a Communist stronghold since its founding by Viet Minh supporters in 1945. Technically the area was in the South Vietnamese zone of operations, but the government's repeated reluctance or inability to clear the area led the allies to authorize Task Force BARKER to enter Son My in search of the *48th Local Force Battalion*. On U.S. military maps, the area surrounding the largest of the settlements, My Lai (1), was colored pink to reflect its Viet Cong–controlled status. Before long, the men of Task Force BARKER came to refer to the whole area as "Pinkville."[60]

Although there was some question as to whether the *48th Battalion* was recovering from Tet in the village or in the hills to the northwest, Colonel Barker conducted regular sweeps through Son My looking for the unit. Whenever the soldiers from Task Force BARKER did so, they faced a landscape that was filled with mines and booby traps. Snipers shot at them from concealment and then vanished without a trace. The Americans rarely caught a glimpse of their foes, in part because the area was riddled with tunnels that the local inhabitants had built to protect themselves and which the Viet Cong had turned to their own uses. The villagers, most of whom either actively supported the Communists or else were too frightened to resist their demands, almost never warned the Americans when they were in danger.[61]

The soldiers became increasingly angry and frustrated as a steady stream of their comrades suffered grievous injuries, while the local inhabitants pretended not to know where the minefields were and who was doing the sniping. It mattered little that South Korean troops rather than Viet Cong soldiers had probably laid the minefields for their own defense. Morale plummeted after a catastrophic incident on 25 February when a company walked into an unmarked minefield near the village of Lac Son. The resulting explosions killed three Americans and wounded twelve others, one more example of how everything and everyone seemed to be against them in Pinkville.

Revenge was therefore on the minds of many soldiers in Company C of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, when they disembarked from helicopters on the morning of 16 March at the edge of a hamlet known to the Vietnamese as Thuan Yen and to the Americans as My Lai (4). The latest intelligence from Task Force BARKER suggested that the headquarters and two companies from the *48th Battalion*, some 200 men, had congregated in the hamlet. It was also home to some 400 civilians thought to be Viet Cong sympathizers. The commander of Company C, Capt. Ernest L. Medina, had told his men that all of the inhabitants would be away at market at the time of the assault, and that they had permission to burn down the huts, kill the livestock, cave in the wells, and cut down the crops so the enemy could no longer use them. The company was to advance east through the village, killing any Viet Cong they saw, and

[60] Ibid., p. 41.

[61] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, Americal Div, pp. 16, 20; Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking Press, 1992), pp. 57, 90.

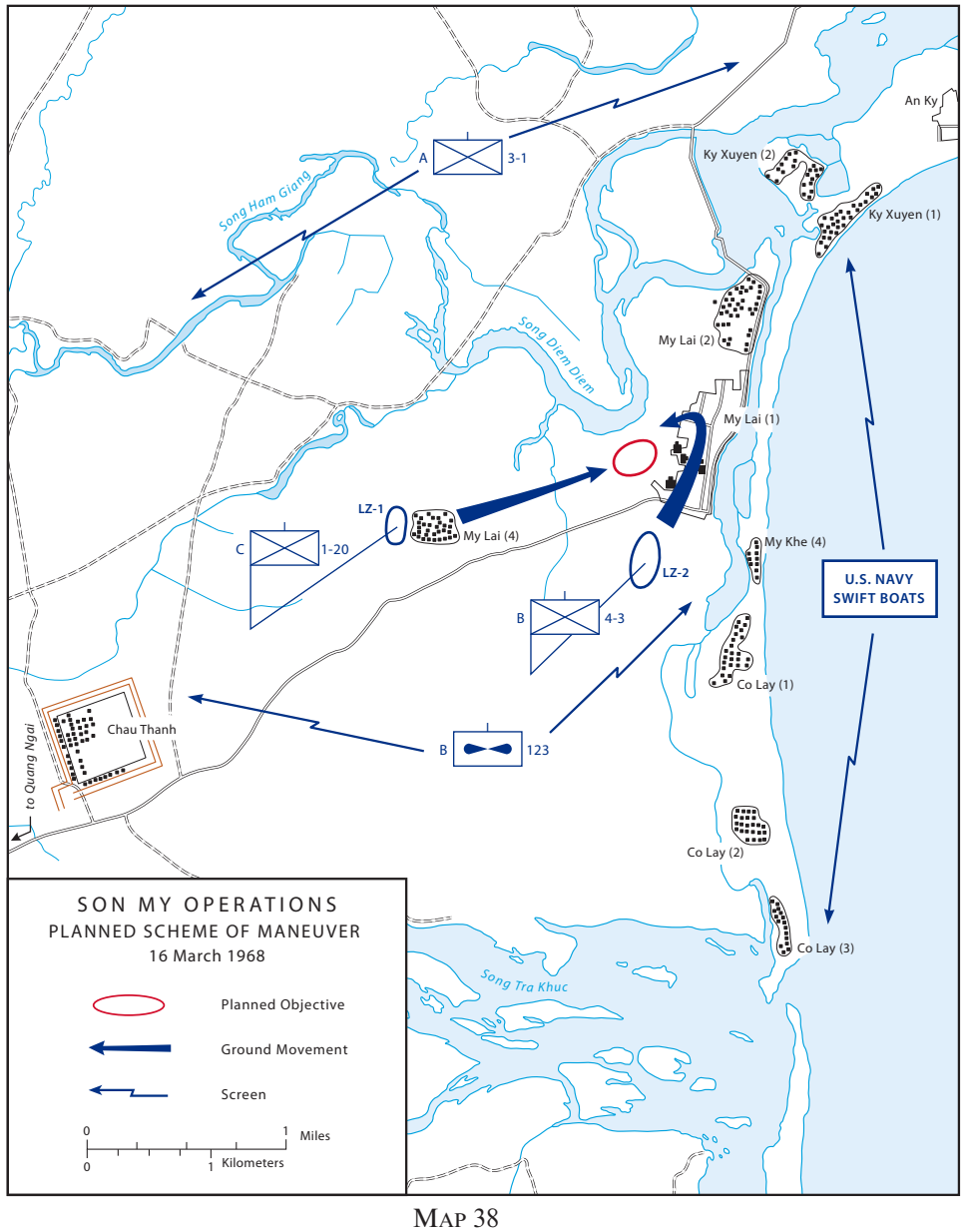
A Viet Cong guerrilla with his SKS rifle

then link up with Company B from the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, after it finished a separate sweep through My Lai (*Map 38*).[62]

What happened next reflected a near-complete breakdown of leadership in both companies. Soldiers in both units, most notoriously the 1st Platoon of Company C, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, led by Lt. William H. Calley Jr., rounded up and executed dozens of children, women, and old men in retaliation for their presumed support of the Viet Cong. Some soldiers raped women or participated in acts of torture. Others refused to partake in the orgy of killing, while a brave few tried to stop the shootings. Captain Medina, who was monitoring the sweep from outside of the village, later said that he had been unaware of these events. Nevertheless, he should have become suspicious when he heard the steady discharge of American weapons without noting a single enemy weapon fired in return. The captain let several hours elapse before he entered the hamlet and restored order.

The most conspicuous attempt to halt the massacre took place when an OH–23 Raven helicopter pilot from Company B, 123d Aviation Battalion, Warrant Officer (WO1) Hugh Thompson Jr., his crew chief Sp4c. Glenn Andreotta, and his gunner Sp4c. Lawrence Colburn, spotted numerous dead civilians and decided something was amiss. After seeing some soldiers execute

[62] Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry*, pp. 167, 170; Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, pp. 83–85, 95–98.



MAP 38

a wounded woman lying prone on the ground, Thompson's worst fears were confirmed. Flying on, he spotted a ditch that contained a mass of wounded civilians and landed his helicopter, intent on rescuing the people. When he got out and asked some nearby soldiers what was going on, an officer—Lieutenant Calley, as it happened—told him to mind his own business. As Thompson returned to his aircraft and flew away, his crew chief, Specialist Andreotta, witnessed Calley and some of his men execute the wounded civilians with their

M16 rifles. Stunned, Thompson flew on until he saw a group of civilians huddled around a bunker and a second group of soldiers approaching them with weapons drawn. Landing his helicopter between the two, Thompson got out and informed the soldiers that he intended to evacuate the civilians by helicopter. They backed off, and soon a UH–1 gunship landed at Thompson's request to rescue the civilians. Afterward, Thompson and his crew flew back to the ditch where Calley and some of his men had executed more than one hundred civilians. Checking the mangled remains of what had been old men, women, and children, they discovered one survivor, a girl of about five or six years old, who was in shock but otherwise unhurt. They flew her to a hospital in Quang Ngai City and then returned to base. Thompson reported what he had seen to his superior, the commander of Company B, 123d Aviation Battalion, Maj. Frederic Watke, who in turn informed the battalion commander, Lt. Col. John Holladay. Colonel Holladay forwarded the report to Colonel Barker, Medina's immediate superior, and to the commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade, Col. Oran K. Henderson. It was Henderson's second day as brigade commander.[63]

After receiving the report, Colonel Barker radioed Captain Medina to clarify the situation. Medina told Barker that his company had engaged the Viet Cong and that about twenty civilians had been caught in the cross-fire. He stated that he had no knowledge of U.S. soldiers deliberately killing civilians. Barker accepted Medina's explanation, apparently believing that Thompson had not seen things clearly. Later in the day, Colonel Henderson flew out to speak with Medina in person. Getting the same explanation from Medina, he flew back to his headquarters considering the matter closed.

On 16 March, soldiers from Company C of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, and Company B of the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, had killed between 350 and 500 civilians in various parts of Son My Village, most notably in My Lai (4) and My Khe (4). That evening, when General Koster received the daily briefing at division headquarters, Task Force BARKER claimed to have killed 128 Viet Cong soldiers in the Son My area, though it had captured only three weapons. Barker stated that air and artillery strikes had inadvertently killed around a dozen civilians. Some of those in attendance scoffed at the report, noting the disparity between the body count and the number of weapons recovered. The inconsistency irritated General Koster, who instructed his deputy, Brig. Gen. George H. Young Jr., to look into the matter.[64]

On the morning of 17 March, General Young met the officers from the 123d Aviation Battalion—Major Watke and Colonel Holladay—to discuss Warrant Officer Thompson's report. Watke and Holladay later testified that they told Young that Thompson had seen soldiers executing civilians, but Young later said that he had gotten the impression that only a few civilians had been killed, and by accident, not on purpose. After speaking with Watke and Holladay, General Young briefed General Koster, apparently giving him the less inflammatory version of his recent meeting. Young then flew out to speak

[63] William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), pp. 43–44.

[64] Allison, *My Lai,* p. 52; Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, p. 169.

with the executive officer of Task Force BARKER, Maj. Charles Calhoun. The major stood by the official story of 128 Viet Cong dead, though he allowed that some of them might have been civilians killed by artillery fire.[65]

The following morning, 18 March, General Young met with Colonel Henderson, Colonel Barker, Colonel Holladay, and Major Watke to reconcile the discrepancies in their stories. Young supposedly warned the four officers, "We are the only five that know about this. . . . Something happened yesterday." Unable to reach a consensus, General Young ordered Henderson to investigate the matter further and to report to him within seventy-two hours. According to the official Army investigation of the My Lai massacre conducted in 1969, Colonel Henderson's three-day inquiry was "little more than a pretense" designed to sweep the incident under the rug. The report that Henderson gave to General Young on 19 March, an oral explanation without a written copy, was cursory and misleading. Henderson briefed Koster the next day, explaining that up to twenty civilians might have been killed by accident during the operation, but claiming that he could find no evidence that any U.S. soldiers had deliberately executed innocent people. Apparently satisfied, General Koster indicated that the matter was closed. Neither Henderson, Young, nor Koster filed a written report. Neither General Peers at I Field Force nor General Westmoreland at MACV had any inkling of what had transpired. The 11th Infantry Brigade continued its operations in Quang Ngai Province as if nothing had happened.[66]

Revelation of the My Lai massacre would not occur until the following year. In March 1969, a recently discharged soldier, Ronald Ridenhour, sent a letter describing the atrocity to over thirty officials in Washington. Ridenhour, who had served in the 11th Infantry Brigade, had not witnessed the massacre himself, but had learned of it from talking to men who had been present. His letter reached General Westmoreland, now Army chief of staff, who ordered an investigation. The Office of the Inspector General launched a wide-ranging criminal probe, and on 5 September 1969 the Army filed murder charges against Lieutenant Calley.[67]

In late October 1969, an Associated Press reporter named Seymour Hersh got a tip that the Army was investigating an alleged massacre in Vietnam. After interviewing Calley, Hersh broke the story in thirty newspapers around the country on 13 November. That piece and a follow-on article published a week later unleashed a wave of anger and revulsion through American society. Like Tet and the controversy over Wheeler's large troop request, news of the incident further undermined public support for the war.[68]

The disclosure prompted Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor to establish a separate board of inquiry to investigate the cover-up that had occurred when General Koster had commanded the Americal Division. Led by General

[65] Allison, *My Lai,* pp. 61–62.

[66] Ibid., p. 65.

[67] Ibid., pp. 76–85. For Westmoreland's reaction to My Lai and the issues it raised, see Zaffiri, *Westmoreland*, pp. 333–52.

[68] Allison, *My Lai,* pp. 84–85; Bogart, *Silent Politics,* pp. 93–94.

Peers, the inquiry began on 26 November 1969, eventually producing a report in March 1970 consisting of over 20,000 pages of testimony from more than 400 witnesses, plus hundreds of other pieces of evidence. The Peers Report accused thirty individuals of having knowledge of the killings, of making false reports, of suppressing information, and of committing similar derelictions of duty. Of the thirty, four were deceased, including the task force commander, Colonel Barker. Seven had left the Army and were not prosecuted because the service maintained it lacked jurisdiction, leaving nineteen active duty officers who could be charged in the cover-up. Of those, only the brigade commander, Colonel Henderson, went to trial. The court-martial returned a verdict of not guilty. The Army dropped charges against the rest for lack of evidence, but meted out administrative punishments to several individuals. Among those were General Koster, then the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The Army censured Koster, demoted him to the rank of brigadier general, and stripped him of his Distinguished Service Medal for failing to conduct an adequate investigation.[69]

Meanwhile, the separate inspector general's investigation of the My Lai massacre ultimately resulted in thirteen members of Task Force BARKER, including the commander of Company C, Captain Medina, and the leader of the 1st Platoon, Lieutenant Calley, being charged with various counts of murder or assault with the intent to commit murder. The first two trials went badly for the Army. Prosecutors had difficulty getting sufficient evidence from witnesses to prove their case, and both soldiers were found not guilty. Given the outcome of those initial trials, the Army decided to drop the charges against all but Medina and Calley, who stood the strongest chance of being convicted.[70]

Lieutenant Calley, charged with six counts of premeditated murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians, went on trial on 17 November 1970. When the military court delivered its verdict on 29 March 1971, it found Calley guilty of murdering no fewer than twenty-two Vietnamese civilians, for which he received a sentence of life in prison with hard labor and dismissal from the Army. His lawyers appealed, and bowing to strong public sentiment that the Army was making Calley a scapegoat, President Richard M. Nixon intervened, ordering that Calley be placed under house arrest in lieu of prison until the appeal process was resolved. After several years of additional court decisions and complex legal maneuvering, Calley won release on parole in November 1974 after having served just four months in a stockade. As for Captain Medina, who went on trial on 16 August 1971 for the murder of 175 civilians, Army prosecutors had trouble getting conclusive testimony from witnesses, and Medina was found not guilty on 29 April 1972.[71]

[69] Allison, *My Lai,* pp. 82–84; Fred L. Borch, "Samuel W. Koster v. The United States: A Forgotten Legal Episode from the Massacre at My Lai," *Army Lawyer* (November 2015): 1–4.

[70] Bogart, *Silent Politics*, pp. 91–94.

[71] Ibid., pp. 95–121. According to a Gallup poll, 79 percent of Americans disapproved of the initial guilty verdict and life sentence in the Calley case. Bogart, *Silent Politics,* p. 94.

All of these developments were far in the future. For the Americal Division in the spring of 1968, the war proceeded much as it had before My Lai. In early April, the 11th Infantry Brigade obtained intelligence that the *401st PLAF Main Force Regiment* and the *81st PLAF Local Force Battalion* were gathering in Base Area 121 near a horseshoe bend in the Tra Khuc River some fourteen kilometers west of Quang Ngai City. Believing that another attack against the provincial capital might be imminent, the brigade organized a sweep of the area named Operation NORFOLK VICTORY. On 8 April, elements of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, as well as Company C from the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, helicoptered into several landing zones that were between seven and fifteen kilometers southwest of the provincial capital. Ground fire brought down an OH–23 Raven helicopter, but enemy contact was otherwise light that day.

Over the next eleven days, the companies uncovered a moderate haul of food and supplies while fending off a number of small hit-and-run attacks. They destroyed several company-size camps and located a supply station that held over 3,600 hand grenades and 2,250 pounds of explosives. When the operation came to an end on 19 April, the 11th Infantry Brigade soldiers had killed forty-three Viet Cong while losing five of their own. For the time being, at least, there was little sign that the enemy was massing for another assault against Quang Ngai City.[72]

The remainder of April passed quietly in Quang Ngai Province apart from one notable clash that took place near the northeastern boundary of the MUSCATINE zone. On 23 April, a Viet Cong force led by the *95th Local Force Sapper Company* and supported by elements of the *48th Local Force Battalion* attacked a hamlet that was occupied by Marine Combined Action Program Team 135. Americal soldiers came to the aid of the defenders and with their help killed some forty-nine Viet Cong soldiers. The enemy carried away most of the bodies as he withdrew. According to local villagers, one of the dead had been a battalion commander, but the Americans could not confirm whether the *48th Battalion* had indeed lost its senior officer during the firefight.[73]

In addition to conducting its primary combat mission, the Americal Division continued to work closely with CORDS and Vietnamese officials in Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces. Between February and April the division's medical teams treated 62,000 civilians. Koster used his vehicles to move over 2,000 tons of CORDS supplies, while the division disbursed $3,500 in cash and distributed over 104 tons of food, clothing, and construction materials to the population. The division supported an orphanage and helped build or repair 130 houses, a church, 17 wells, 18 schools, 3 dispensaries, and 2 marketplaces. Last but not least, the officers and men of the Americal Division responded to Westmoreland's call for acts of charity in the wake of Tet by donating $1,800 of their own money to the relief effort. None of these actions could wash away the stain of My Lai, but they indicated the genuine desire of

[72] AAR, Opn NORFOLK VICTORY, 1st Bn, 20th Inf, 4 May 68, pp. 1–5, box 1, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[73] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, Americal Div, p. 18.

the United States, the U.S. Army, and the vast majority of servicemen to help the Vietnamese people during difficult times.[74]

A Sense of Urgency

By the end of March, the allies were beginning to restore the government's presence in the countryside. Most of the Revolutionary Development teams were back in hamlets, with the remainder working out of district and provincial capitals doing refugee and reconstruction work. On the other hand, only thirty-one of the fifty-one Vietnamese Army battalions assigned to support Revolutionary Development had returned to their assigned sectors, as commanders and province chiefs continued to express concern over the safety of urban areas. As far as General Westmoreland and Ambassador Komer were concerned, the recovery process was moving far too slowly. On 31 March, the same day President Johnson delivered his speech to the American people but before officials in Saigon had heard it, Westmoreland held a meeting of the senior U.S. and South Vietnamese military leaders to reemphasize the need for aggressive action.[75]

The keynote was one of urgency. Westmoreland spoke of exploiting the enemy's weakness before he could recover to launch another offensive. Abrams, who had just returned from Washington, warned that although President Johnson was fully behind the war effort, Tet had caused public opinion to swing against America's participation in the conflict. Komer emphasized the importance of making gains in pacification to restore the confidence of the American and Vietnamese peoples. All three emphasized that the time had come for the Vietnamese to assume greater responsibility for their own destiny. Timidity, ineffectiveness, and half measures could not be tolerated. Last but not least, Westmoreland and his deputies asserted that the U.S. political situation meant that the allies only had two or three months in which to demonstrate to the American people that genuine progress was being made. If they failed, they feared that America's patience might run out.[76]

The solution that Westmoreland, Komer, and Abrams agreed upon was a nationwide general offensive to regain the countryside, hurt the enemy, and dispel the adverse psychological climate of fear (in Vietnam) and despair (in the United States). This of course was not new—all three men had been saying this since early February, but Abrams' dire warnings about how the war was being perceived back home gave renewed urgency to the call. "There must be a spectacular reversal in attitude and military performance," declared Westmoreland. "No lethargy can be permitted in our

[74] Ibid., pp. 49–51.

[75] Msg, COMUSMACV 08814 to CINCPAC, 29 Mar 68, sub: Post-Tet Pacification Assessment, pp. 2–3, 4–5, Historians files, CMH.

[76] MFR, MACV, 5 Apr 68, sub: MACV Commanders' Conference, 31 March 1968, pp. 2, 5, 7–12, Historians files, CMH.

commanders . . . we must sharpen our intelligence, go on the offensive, and stay on the offensive. We must achieve results." He characterized what was needed as "a military explosion," with the Vietnamese armed forces in the vanguard, to "win faster" than the allies had been able to do so far. Poor commanders must be relieved and strong ones promoted. During the day the allies would target the enemy's stockpiles, while at night they would use patrols and ambushes to disrupt the supply lines that fed those depots. The result, he hoped, would be a strangulation of the enemy's ability to make large-scale attacks of the kind recently witnessed. Military victories would dispel the gloom that had seized the American public and demonstrate "to the world at large that we are winning." Recognizing the role the media played in shaping perceptions at home, he stated, perhaps plaintively, "The press must report victories; for these are facts and the press must report facts. I am confident the press will report fairly."[77]

Equally important as the military and psychological benefits to be accrued through aggressive military operations were the gains to be made via political and institutional action. Westmoreland called for attacking the full spectrum of the enemy's presence in Vietnam, including his political infrastructure and the local guerrillas that supported it. Vietnam must fully mobilize, with the United States redoubling its efforts to modernize the expanded force. Finally, the MACV commander pressed on his audience the importance of pacification and nation building, "emphasizing the necessity for imposing a mantle of security to succeed in pacification." MACV's deputy for Revolutionary Development amplified this theme, with improvements in the Regional and Popular Forces being the main vehicle for achieving pacification security. Allied military forces could help the economy revive through their reconstruction and road and waterway security efforts, but much of the burden would fall on the Vietnamese, who needed to accelerate the Revolutionary Development effort, end political bickering, and restore public confidence. The only thing new about these prescriptions was the urgency in which they were conveyed.[78]

Komer had in fact already begun talking with the Vietnamese about finding a "quick fix" for restoring order to the countryside. Believing that the allies could not afford the time it took for Revolutionary Development teams to fully pacify a hamlet, a process that required the completion of ninety-eight standardized tasks, the CORDS chief advocated jettisoning current procedures. Instead of a 59-man Revolutionary Development team spending six months in one hamlet, he suggested that the team be split in half and rotated through six to twelve hamlets at a time, thereby producing pacified communities at an accelerated rate. He likewise suggested that teams focus just on security and counterinfrastructure matters, leaving socioeconomic development for a later date. The allies would not make a decision on his proposals at the 31 March conference, but General

[77] Ibid., pp. 7, 13.
[78] Ibid., p. 8.

Vien concurred in Westmoreland's assessment and pledged that his nation would amplify its efforts in the coming months.[79]

There was indeed an acceleration of progress during April, but not enough to merit categorizing it as an explosive event. South Vietnamese leaders became more active and their military and political forces moved deeper into the countryside, yet Thieu and many of his subordinates remained fundamentally cautious. Enemy activity dropped 30 percent from March, as did his casualties, and he avoided conflict as much as possible. Still, the allies reported killing over 29,000 enemy soldiers during March and April while capturing over 10,200 weapons. Allied losses during the same period included 5,982 dead (2,949 American) and 1,200 weapons. Desertions were up in the South Vietnamese armed forces, but so was recruitment, with nearly 77,000 joining the colors, 70 percent as volunteers. By the end of April, 32 percent of South Vietnam's provinces reported that conditions had been restored to pre-Tet levels. Fourteen percent reported making significant progress toward that goal, 47 percent reported slight to moderate gains, and 7 percent little to none. Twelve provinces registered significant success against the Viet Cong infrastructure, but progress remained slow in the rest of the country for a variety of reasons. Last but not least, hamlet evaluation scores indicated that the counteroffensive had yet to translate into tangible pacification gains. Since February, the allies had restored a state of relative security to 2 percent of South Vietnam's population. This meant that by the end of April only 62 percent of the nation's people were considered relatively secure, compared to 67.2 percent at the end of January. Unless the allies accelerated the pace at which they restored their control over the countryside, Komer fretted that they would not be able to reach January's pre-Tet level of pacification until the end of the year. With only modest gains in pacification and no perceptible improvement in the popular mood in the United States, Westmoreland's counteroffensive had not yet achieved either the military, or more importantly, the political and psychological objectives he had set out for it. With increasing reports that the enemy had regained sufficient strength to renew his offensive, the balance remained in doubt.[80]

[79] Ibid., pp. 7–10; Msg, COMUSMACV 08814 to CINCPAC, 29 Mar 68, p. 8; Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 149–50.

[80] Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through October 1968, n.d., tables 1c, 2d, 2e, 4a, 4e, 5a, Historians files, CMH. Conditions in the provinces based on provincial Revolutionary Development reports for the month of April.

15

To Khe Sanh and the A Shau

At the beginning of March, as the battle for Hue concluded and the allies began pushing back into the countryside, General Westmoreland directed General Abrams at MACV Forward to move ahead with the long-delayed offensive in northern I Corps that the two men had developed during the YORK planning back in November 1967. As flying conditions improved in late March because of the waning strength of the northeast monsoon, they intended a multifaceted campaign. First, they would lift the siege of Khe Sanh in western Quang Tri Province. Then, they would launch a raid into the A Shau Valley in western Thua Thien Province to destroy the supply depots that fed Base Area 114 near Hue and Base Area 101 near Quang Tri City, thereby complicating the enemy's ability to supply the large conventional forces he maintained in Northern I Corps. As the offensive moved forward, the 3d Marine Division would continue its vigil along the Demilitarized Zone, while the 101st Airborne Division, consisting of its 1st and 2d Brigades and reinforced by the newly arrived 3d Brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, helped the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division secure the populated lowlands around Hue. To better control the effort, Westmoreland directed Abrams to transform his temporary command post at Phu Bai into a robust joint headquarters known as Provisional Corps, Vietnam.[1]

At first glance, the allied situation in northern I Corps appeared to be no more promising in early March than it had been in late January. Two North Vietnamese divisions, the *304th* and *325C*, continued to besiege the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh. The *320th Division*, fresh and fit after sitting out the Tet offensive, lurked somewhere near Con Thien, Gio Linh, and the other allied strong points in Leatherneck Square. South Vietnam's third-largest city, Hue, now lay in ruins. At least sixteen of the enemy battalions that had attacked the city during Tet were now on the loose in the densely populated lowlands of Thua Thien Province. The *4th*, *5th*, and *6th Regiments* were in poor shape after five straight weeks of fighting, but other units that had joined the battle later, such as the *90th* and the *803d Regiments* of the former *324B Division*, were still combat effective. The other regional capital, Quang Tri City, had escaped Tet with little damage due to the quick intervention of the 1st Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade, but an informant working for the allies reported that the *812th Regiment*, the main enemy attack force during Tet, was planning a second strike against Quang Tri City. Most of the South Vietnamese units that had been

[1] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 2951 to Wheeler, 2 Mar 68, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

working on rural pacification were now holed up in the nearest town, leaving dozens of Revolutionary Development hamlets undefended.[2]

Upon closer inspection, however, General Westmoreland's position in northern I Corps was substantially stronger than it had been six weeks earlier. Operation NIAGARA II, the tactical bombing campaign he had initiated on 22 January to defend Khe Sanh, had been hitting the *304th* and *325C Divisions* with an average of 1,500 tons of ordnance each day. The U.S. Seventh Air Force and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing had sorted out most of the command and control problems that had arisen, and improving weather had made targeting and damage assessment easier. Prisoners reported that both divisions had sustained heavy casualties, with one battalion losing half of its strength in a single B–52 raid, and that at least 300 soldiers had deserted.[3]

Down in the coastal lowlands, the MACV commander now had two full Army divisions instead of a single Marine regiment to assist the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division. The 1st Cavalry Division had regained its 2d Brigade on 1 March, giving General Tolson a chance to display the full potential of his airmobile division. The headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division, meanwhile, was preparing to move from Bien Hoa Air Base to Camp Eagle in order to take control of its 1st and 2d Brigades and the attached 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division. The mechanized 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, on loan from the 9th Infantry Division, provided an armored punch to complement the six airmobile brigades.

The supply situation in northern I Corps had also improved considerably. Navy Seabees and Army engineers had just completed an over-the-shore logistical facility twenty kilometers east of Quang Tri City called Utah Beach (more commonly known as Wunder Beach). By 10 March, it was expected to increase the supply flow from 2,000 tons a day to almost 3,300 tons, well above the 2,600 tons needed for daily operations. Farther down the coast at Tan My, ten kilometers northeast of Hue, the U.S. Navy petroleum, oil, and lubrication offloading dock and pumping station continued to fill storage tanks at Camp Eagle and Phu Bai as quickly as engineers could build them, a vital task since the 1st Cavalry Division consumed an average of 120,000 gallons of aviation fuel every day. Without those and other improvements such as the new C–130 airfield built near Quang Tri City to support the YORK operations, General Abrams noted, "I don't believe that what has been done could have been done." Westmoreland was pleased with the progress. "With over 20 percent of all U.S./ARVN maneuver battalions in [northern I Corps], and with the

[2] Periodic Intel Rpt, Provisional Corps, 10–23 Mar 68, 25 Mar 68, pp. 1–2, box 1, XXIV Corps, Asst Ch of Staff, Intel G–2, Periodic Intel Rpts, MACV, RG 472, NACP; Intel Rpt, CIA, 19 Mar 68, sub: Pacification in the Wake of the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, an. A, pp. 1–4, Historians files, CMH.

[3] Rpt, CHECO, 13 Sep 68, sub: Khe Sanh (Operation NIAGARA), 22 January–31 March 1968, PACAF, pp. 86, 90, 92–93, Historians files, CMH.

An M110 8-inch self-propelled howitzer

logistical situation improving daily," Westmoreland wrote Wheeler on 3 March, "we are in an excellent posture to commence a broad offensive."[4]

On 10 March, Westmoreland flew to Phu Bai to talk with Abrams and his second in command at MACV Forward, General Rosson, about the coming campaign. They agreed that it would begin with a brigade of the 101st Airborne Division moving into the hills west of Hue to clear Route 547, a rutted road bisecting Base Area 114 that had become the enemy's main transportation corridor from the A Shau Valley. Along the way, the paratroopers were to build a series of artillery bases from which 8-inch and 155-mm. howitzers could hit targets throughout Base Area 114. When the weather improved in early April, the 1st Cavalry Division and elements of the 9th Marines and the South Vietnamese Airborne Division would clear Highway 9 to Khe Sanh and lift the siege of the Marine base. After both of those missions had been accomplished, the 1st Cavalry Division was to send a brigade into the A Shau Valley to search for the North Vietnamese supply dumps hidden there, while its remaining two brigades turned their attention to Base Areas 101 and 114. Later in the summer, the 1st Cavalry Division and elements of the 101st Airborne Division

[4] First quote from Msg, Abrams PHB 218 to Westmoreland, 4 Mar 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Second quote from Msg, Westmoreland MACV 02984 to Wheeler, 3 Mar 68, p. 3, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Pearson, *War in the Northern Provinces*, pp. 59–62.

would strike into the eastern portion of the Demilitarized Zone to clear North Vietnamese forces around Dong Ha and Con Thien.[5]

Also that day, Westmoreland officially activated the Provisional Corps, Vietnam, and named General Rosson as its new commander. Abrams returned to Saigon to resume his duties as Westmoreland's deputy. For the time being, Rosson also remained the nominal head of I Field Force in order to hold his three-star rank; his deputy in II Corps, General Peers, became the acting commander of I Field Force. Rosson's new position gave him tactical control over all U.S. combat units north of the Hai Van Pass, including the 3d Marine Division and Task Force CLEARWATER, a Marine-Navy amphibious group that operated on the Perfume River and the Cua Viet channel. Westmoreland remained mindful of Marine pride, however, raising III Marine Amphibious Force to Field Army status to ensure that the senior Army officer in I Corps remained subordinate to the senior Marine officer. The MACV commander assured General Cushman that the creation of Provisional Corps was based on "tactical and management considerations and have nothing to do with the performance of the Marines, which is, and always has been, excellent." Fortunately, Rosson had developed a good rapport with Cushman and other Marine officers during his tenure as commander of Task Force OREGON and its successor, the Americal Division, in the later part of 1967. That relationship was sure to be tested in the coming weeks as the U.S. Army eclipsed the U.S. Marine Corps as the principal fighting force in northern I Corps.[6]

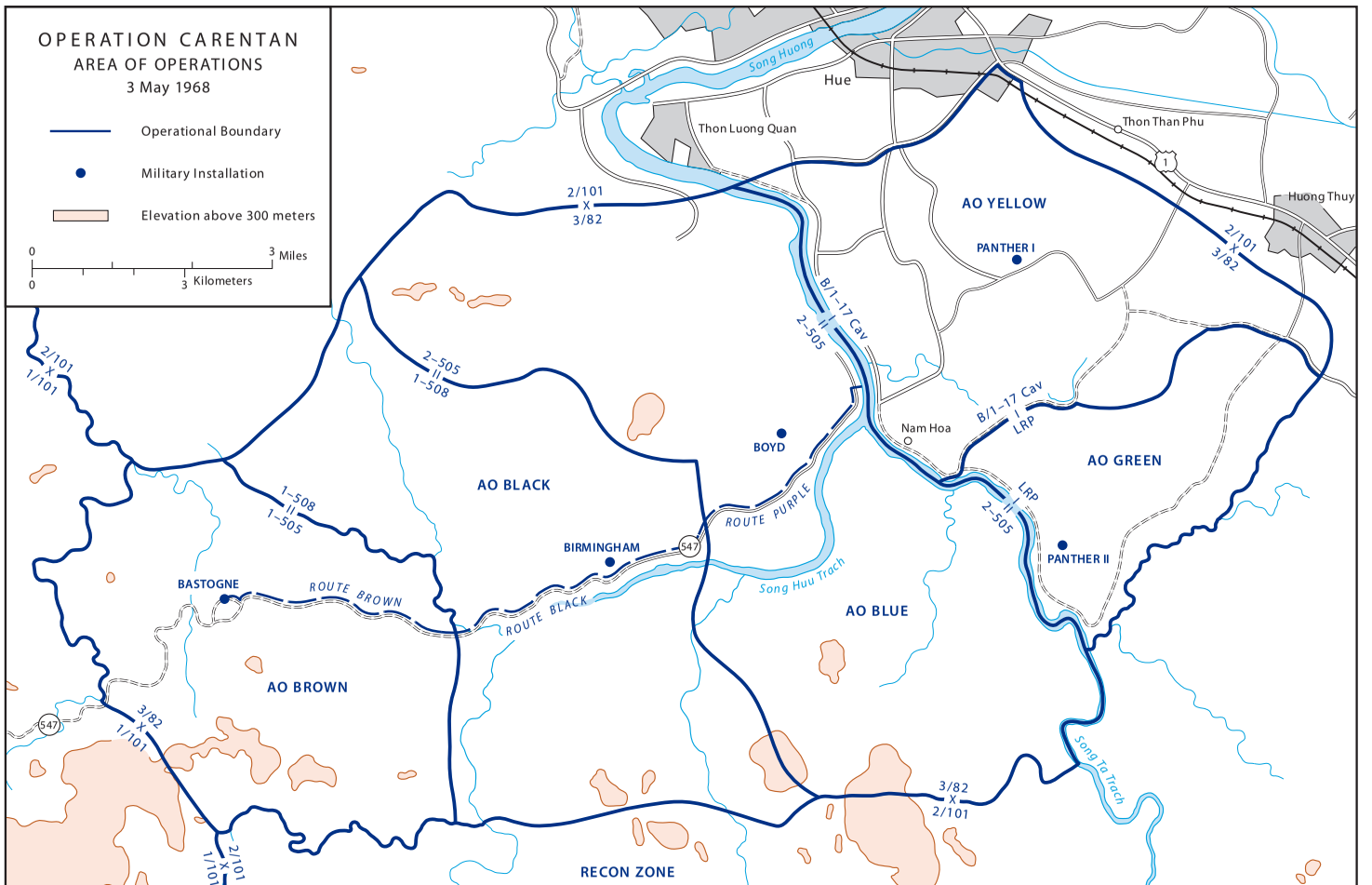
Operation CARENTAN

After meeting with Westmoreland and Abrams, General Rosson discussed the new mission of the 101st Airborne Division with its commander, General Barsanti. Operation CARENTAN I called for the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, to patrol Highway 1 between Camp Eagle and PK–17, the South Vietnamese military camp north of Hue, gradually taking over the JEB STUART area from the 1st Cavalry Division so it could prepare for the relief of Khe Sanh. Barsanti gave the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, the mission of clearing Route 547 (*Map 39*).[7]

[5] Cable, Lt Gen Robert E. Cushman to General William C. Westmoreland, 10 Mar 68, pp. 3–4, Westmoreland History files, CMH; Interv, Capt Joseph W. A. Whitehorne with Maj Gen John J. Tolson, 24 Jun 68, p. 6, Historians files, CMH; MFR, 11 Mar 68, sub: COMUSMACV visit to I CTZ, MACV, Historians files, CMH.

[6] Statement, General William C. Westmoreland, 6 Mar 68, p. 1 (quote), document 11, vol. 30, Westmoreland History files, CMH. See also Rpt, XXIV Corps, n.d., sub: The Critical Year, 1968: The XXIV Corps Team, p. 23, Historians files, CMH; Msgs, Johnson WDC 3234 to Westmoreland, 3 Mar 68, p. 1; and Westmoreland MAC 4367 to Wheeler, 27 Mar 68, p. 2. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 238–40.

[7] AAR, Opn CARENTAN, 3d Bde, 82d Abn Div, 31 May 68, p. 4, box 1, Organization Hist, 101st Abn Div, RG 472, NACP.


OPERATION CARENTAN
AREA OF OPERATIONS
3 May 1968
Operational Boundary
Military Installation
Elevation above 300 meters
0
3 Miles
0
3 Kilometers
Song Huong
Hue
Thon Luong Quan
Thon Than Phu
Huong Thuy
AO YELLOW
PANTHER I
2/101
X
3/82
B/1–17 Cav
II
2–505
2–505
II
1–508
2/101
X
1/101
BOYD
Nam Hoa
B/1–17 Cav
LRP
AO GREEN
AO BLACK
1–508
II
1–505
ROUTE PURPLE
LRP
II
2–505
PANTHER II
BIRMINGHAM
547
BASTOGNE
ROUTE BROWN
ROUTE BLACK
Song Huu Trach
AO BLUE
AO BROWN
547
3/82
X
1/101
3/82
X
2/101
Song Ta Trach
2/101
X
1/101
RECON ZONE

MAP 39

That push toward the A Shau Valley began on 18 March when the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, completed a sweep south of Hue with the 1st Cavalry Division and returned to General Barsanti's control. The brigade commander, Colonel Collins, established his command post at Firebase BIRMINGHAM, ten kilometers southwest of the city on a high point overlooking Route 547. The next day, Collins sent the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Robert C. Yerkes, to seize an old French fort a few kilometers farther west on Route 547, while the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Gerald E. Morse, advanced along the north side of Route 547, and the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Howard H. Danford, screened the area to the south. Recent intelligence indicated that the *29th Regiment, 325C Division*, was in the area, but the paratroopers encountered only sporadic rifle fire that day. The French fort proved to be empty. The three battalions stopped there for the night, while Army engineers began building a new base named HENRY.

The paratroopers' next objective was a proposed firebase site eight kilometers farther up the road. When the Americans neared the site on 21 March, Company C of the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, ran into a small enemy outpost on the north side of the road. Overcoming that position, Company C then ran into a larger cluster of bunkers. Company A joined the fight and together they took that position as well, losing six killed and twenty wounded in the process. Evidence suggested that the dead North Vietnamese belonged to the *29th Regiment, 325C Division.* A few hundred meters farther on, the paratroopers ran into an even more elaborate fortification. This time their assault failed, costing the two companies another six killed and fifty-two wounded. Colonel Collins withdrew his battered companies so air and artillery strikes could pound the position. When the Americans returned the next morning, the enemy was gone. The paratroopers found more bunkers along Route 547 in the days that followed, but their defenders—typically a squad or two of North Vietnamese soldiers—withdrew from those positions as soon as they had been spotted.[8]

As the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, continued its steady westward movement on Route 547, General Barsanti ordered Colonel Cushman and his 2d Brigade to search the foothills west of Hue, thereby squeezing the enemy forces in Base Area 114 from two sides. On 22 March, Cushman sent the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Richard J. Tallman, and the 1st Battalion, 502d Infantry, led by Lt. Col. Bertram J. Bishop, into those densely vegetated hills to look for the *90th Regiment.* Cushman's brigade saw heavy action in the weeks that followed. Several company-size firefights claimed the lives of thirty-five paratroopers, and a misplaced artillery barrage killed another eleven U.S. soldiers. Enemy losses came to 175 soldiers killed. The paratroopers captured some Communist supplies, including nearly 7,000

[8] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 101st Abn Div, 24 May 68, pp. 3–4, box 127, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn CARENTAN, 3d Bde, 82d Abn Div, p. 3, Encl 1; AAR, Opn CARENTAN II, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, 29 Apr 68, p. 4, and p. 5, Encl 2, box 1, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Soldiers from the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, patrol the hills near Hue.

pounds of rice. Better still, enemy prisoners revealed that the incursion had forced the *90th Regiment* to abandon a rice-gathering mission it had planned for that month.[9]

Meanwhile, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, kept pushing west on Route 547 and on the twenty-seventh reached its next objective point. Army engineers transformed that clearing into Firebase BASTOGNE, a battalion-size strong point that became the brigade's forward operating base. Within a few days of its opening on 31 March, it contained more than twenty artillery pieces, including several 8-inch and 175-mm. guns that could reach the eastern part of the A Shau Valley. Colonel Collins stationed the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, at BASTOGNE for its security and ordered the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, based farther east at BIRMINGHAM, to patrol the stretch of Route 547 between the two posts. On 2 April, General Barsanti moved Collins' remaining unit, the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, to Landing Zone JANE south of Quang Tri City to help the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, now headquartered at Camp Evans, cover the territory recently vacated by the 1st Cavalry Division. To reflect its expanded mission, the 101st Airborne Division changed the name of the ongoing operation to CARENTAN II.[10]

[9] AAR, Opn CARENTAN I and II, 2d Bde, 101st Abn Div, 29 May 68, p. 7; AAR, Opn CARENTAN, 101st Abn Div, 29 May 68, p. 4. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[10] AAR, Opn CARENTAN II, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, pp. 7, 10.

The 101st Airborne Division at Firebase BASTOGNE

Despite a warning from the South Vietnamese I Corps headquarters that an attack against Hue was imminent, over the next two and a half weeks the situation remained fairly quiet in the coastal lowlands and along the stretch of Route 547 that connected Firebases BASTOGNE and BIRMINGHAM. The 1st Brigade reported only a handful of skirmishes, and most of those were initiated by U.S. troops. When CARENTAN II came to an end on 18 April, the total number of North Vietnamese dead stood at 224. More importantly, the 101st Airborne Division had severed the enemy's main line of communications between the A Shau Valley and the Hue lowlands. As worrisome as BASTOGNE and BIRMINGHAM must have been to the North Vietnamese, however, they had an even larger problem to deal with in early April—the long-awaited allied effort to lift the siege of Khe Sanh.[11]

Operation PEGASUS

The relief of Khe Sanh, Operation PEGASUS, was the largest and most complex allied operation yet undertaken in I Corps, involving eight cavalry

[11] Ibid., p. 8; AAR, Opn CARENTAN, 3d Bde, 82d Abn Div, p. 4, Encl 1; Msg, CIA to White House, 31 Mar 68, sub: I Corps Situation Report as of 1300 Hours Local Time on 31 March 1968, document 72, box 67 (1 of 2), NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

battalions, seven infantry battalions, three airborne battalions, a ranger battalion, and over one hundred artillery pieces, the most powerful being the seventeen 175-mm. guns at Camp Carroll capable of hitting targets thirty-four kilometers away. The senior officer in charge of the operation, General Tolson, controlled the 1st Cavalry Division, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force as well as the 26th Marines and the South Vietnamese 37th Ranger Battalion at Khe Sanh. Backing those forces were the 1st Cavalry Division's 450 aircraft, ranging from two-seat OH–13 scout helicopters to massive CH–54 heavy-lift helicopters, as well as several dozen U.S. Air Force C–7, C–123, and C–130 transport aircraft. Numerous strike aircraft from the U.S. Seventh Air Force and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing provided tactical air support (*Map 40*).[12]

Operation PEGASUS got under way on 20 March when the 8th Engineer Battalion (Combat), 1st Cavalry Division, and the 11th Marine Engineer Regiment began building a forward operating base near Ca Lu, a Marine outpost on Highway 9 some twenty kilometers east of Khe Sanh. Within a few days, it featured an airstrip capable of handling C–7 and C–130 aircraft as well as an 8-inch battery and two 155-mm. howitzer batteries. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, assumed the security duties at the firebase.[13]

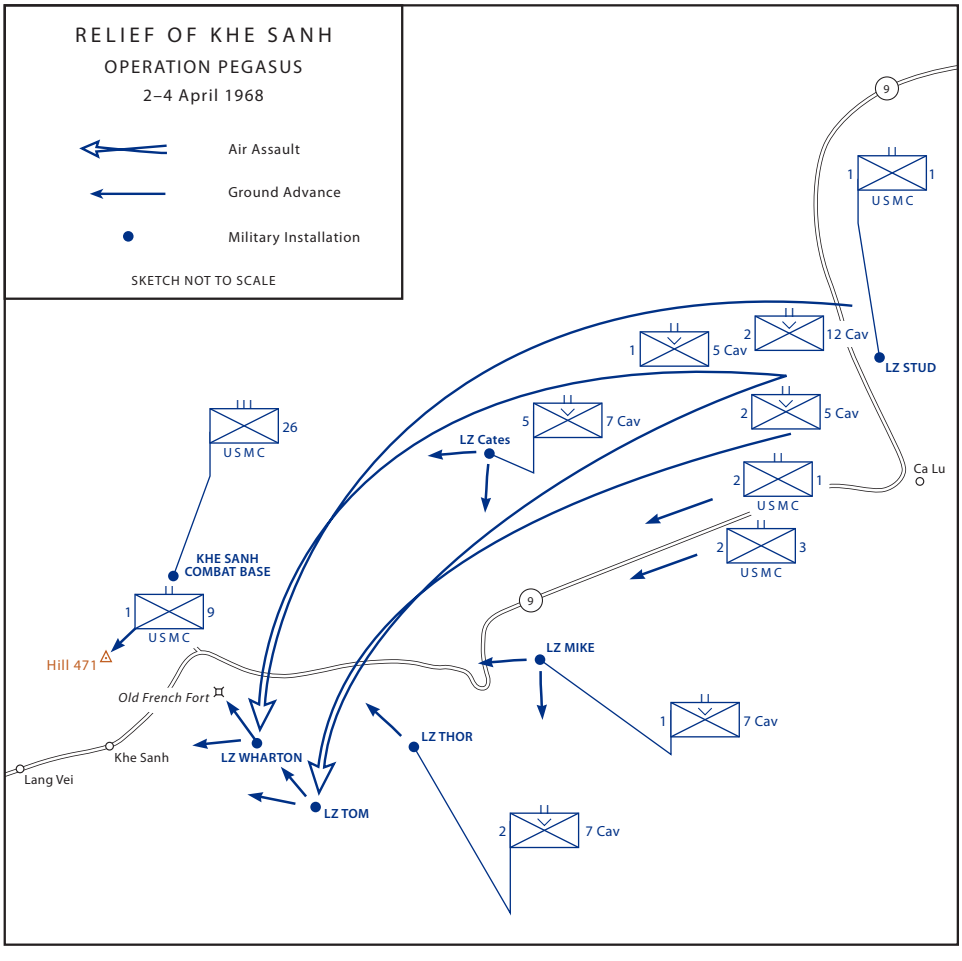
The marines had only a vague idea of the strength and disposition of the enemy forces between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, so General Tolson relied heavily on Lt. Col. Richard W. Diller's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, to gather the tactical intelligence he needed. The unit began flying reconnaissance missions out of Landing Zone STUD on 26 March. Tolson used the information gathered by the aircrews to identify the most suitable landing zones for his infantry battalions. When the scout helicopters encountered ground fire, they provided targeting data for air and artillery strikes as well as B–52 ARC LIGHT missions. Fighter-bombers from the Seventh Air Force also dropped several dozen huge bombs called "daisy cutters" that were rigged to explode a short distance above the ground so as to blast a ready-made landing zone out of the forest. The vegetation proved to be so dense in some areas, however, that the combined effect of several bombs provided just enough space for a single helicopter to land. In the meantime, the 26th Marines at Khe Sanh began sending larger and more aggressive patrols to gain further information about the enemy's position and capabilities.[14]

Although it was not immediately obvious to the allies, the number of enemy troops in the area had fallen from around 20,000 in mid-January to about 7,000 North Vietnamese soldiers. The *95C* and *101C Regiments* of

[12] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 17 Jun 68, p. 6, Historians files, CMH; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 284; Rpt, XXIV Corps, n.d., pp. 28, 35.

[13] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 17 Jun 68, p. 3; AAR, Opn CARENTAN I and II, 2d Bde, 101st Abn Div, p. 3; Rpt, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, sub: Historical Study 3-68, Operation PEGASUS, pp. 4, 8–9, 18, box 24, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, RG 472, NACP.

[14] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 17 Jun 68, p. 2; AAR, Opn PEGASUS/LAM SON 207A, 1st Cav Div, 11 Jul 68, p. 5, box 24, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, RG 472, NACP; Interv, Whitehorne with Col Hubert S. Campbell, CO, 3d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 12 May 68, p. 6, VNIT 96, CMH; Rpt, XXIV Corps, n.d., p. 33.



MAP 40

the *325C Division* had already departed for the western highlands, while the *7th* and *9th Battalions, 29th Regiment*, had stayed near Hue after Tet. Only the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment,* remained behind to block Highway 9 between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. A pair of light tank battalions that had once been stationed near Lang Vei had withdrawn to the Laotian border. That left only the *304th Division,* composed of the *9th*, part of the *24th,* and the *66th Regiments*, as well as the *12th Battalion, 68th Artillery Regiment*, and the *241st Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment* to carry on the siege. Months of bombardment, combat, and disease had reduced the infantry battalions to a half or a third of their original size. They were supported by the *2d Battalion, 675th Artillery Regiment*, equipped with 122-mm. guns, and the *45th Artillery Regiment*, equipped with 122-mm. rockets. The North Vietnamese high command continued to see Khe Sanh as a way to lure allied combat units into the hinterlands to relieve pressure on Communist forces elsewhere in the country, but as an enemy history of the battle would

A CH–54 Tarhe, or Flying Crane, picks up a sling load.

later admit, the *DMZ Front* worried that its forces "were too small and were spread too thin" to handle a determined allied attack.[15]

General Rosson had to make sure that the *320th Division*, which operated near Gio Linh and Con Thien, did not make a sudden lunge west toward Landing Zone STUD to disrupt Operation PEGASUS. On 30 March, he sent a mechanized group known as Task Force KILO, composed of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, and the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, to sweep the coastal plain northeast of Dong Ha where the North Vietnamese division had last been spotted. Two battalions from the South Vietnamese 2d Regiment joined the diversionary attack known as LAM SON 203. Rosson expected Task Force KILO to encounter heavy resistance, but the group made faster progress than expected, reaching its objectives on the afternoon of the first day. The attackers killed an estimated 150 North Vietnamese while losing nineteen of their own as well as two M113s. Rosson had planned the mission to last only forty-

[15] Quote from *Khe Sanh-Route 9 Offensive Campaign*, pp. 23–24. See also AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, 11 Jul 68, p. 9, Historians files, CMH; *Phao Binh Nhan Dan Viet Nam: Nhung Chang Duong Chien Dau, Tap II* [*People's Artillery of Vietnam: Combat History, Volume II*] (Hanoi: People's Army Artillery Command, 1986), pp. 161–62 (hereafter cited as *People's Army Artillery of Vietnam*); *304th Division*, p. 103.

An OH–13 Sioux helicopter

eight hours, but was so encouraged by its success that he decided to keep it going for several more days.[16]

Taking advantage of the distraction created by Task Force KILO, Tolson moved his 3d Brigade from Camp Evans to Landing Zone PEDRO, northwest of Quang Tri City, on 30 March. The South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force was already in position at the Quang Tri City airfield, having flown in from Saigon on C–130s a few days earlier. A trio of Marine battalions waited at Landing Zone STUD. Operation PEGASUS began at 0801 on 31 March, ending Operation JEB STUART for the 1st Cavalry Division and Operation SCOTLAND for the Marine forces at Khe Sanh.[17]

On 1 April, the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, pushed west up Highway 9 under foggy and overcast skies. The weather made little difference to the Marine infantry but delayed the movement of Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade until 1330. The headquarters of the brigade along with the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and Battery B, 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, went into Landing Zone MIKE, a hilltop just north of Highway 9 some seven kilometers southwest of

[16] AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, pp. 12, 23, 26; Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, sub: Operation PEGASUS, p. 37, Historians files, CMH.

[17] ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 1st Cav Div, 13 Jun 68, p. 2, box 2, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 68, p. 28.

Artillerymen of Battery A, 6th Battalion, 33d Artillery, build protective sandbag walls around their 105-mm. howitzers.

Landing Zone STUD. The 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, flew into MIKE later in the day. Meanwhile, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and Battery C from the 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, deployed to Landing Zone CATES two kilometers south of MIKE. Despite the late start, Colonel Campbell got all three of his battalions and two artillery batteries into the field before dark.[18]

On 2 April, the cavalry and Marine forces advanced four kilometers along Highway 9, clashing with squad- and platoon-size elements of the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment*, manning outposts on the high ground that overlooked the road. The outnumbered enemy gave way after offering a disorganized resistance. Marking the limit of the day's progress, the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, established Landing Zone THOR on the northern shoulder of Highway 9, which became the base of operations for Battery A from the 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, and its 105-mm. howitzers.[19]

By now the enemy knew that an operation to lift the siege of Khe Sanh was under way. Back in February the *DMZ Front* commander, General Hai, would have welcomed this battle. He knew that his chances of overrunning Khe Sanh had always been small; his real intent had been to maul an allied relief force as it inched its way up the gutted and washed-out Highway 9 toward the embattled Marine base. However, that plan had died with the departure of the *325C*

[18] Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 29; Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 17 Jun 68, p. 4.

[19] Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 32.

Division. The best that Hai could do now was fight for time and hope to land a lucky blow at the right moment.

Knowing that the 1st Cavalry Division could land troops almost anywhere, the headquarters of the *304th Division* ordered the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment*, to mass its troops at an old French fort just west of Landing Zone THOR, where it could establish a blocking position overlooking Highway 9. The *66th Regiment*, *304th Division,* established a second blocking position on Highway 9 just east of Khe Sanh and the *9th Regiment* remained in its siege positions around Khe Sanh. The *24th Regiment* stayed in reserve to the southwest near the old Special Forces camp at Lang Vei.[20]

Tolson was encouraged by the 3d Brigade's swift progress and by the enemy's apparent disorder. The allied bombing had cut many of the field telephone lines used by the headquarters of the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment*, to communicate with its subordinate companies and with the division headquarters. The battalion resorted to using runners, but that method was slow and unreliable. As a result, the North Vietnamese fought as isolated platoons and companies and often had trouble getting support from their own artillery, rocket, and mortar units. In addition to leaving many of their supply caches virtually unguarded, the enemy also left behind an inordinately large number of bodies and weapons when he retreated. In the words of the 3d Brigade commander, Colonel Campbell: "The enemy simply bugged out." Tolson decided to speed up the deployment of his remaining forces.[21]

The 1st Cavalry Division commander sent the 2d Brigade under Col. Joseph C. McDonough into action on 3 April. The 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, went into Landing Zone WHARTON, four kilometers south of Landing Zone THOR, with the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, arriving a short time later. Meanwhile, the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, went into Landing Zone TOM two kilometers to its southeast. Batteries A, B, and C from the 1st Battalion, 77th Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, joined the brigade at its forward bases that same day. North Vietnamese gunners peppered the landing zones with recoilless rifle and mortar fire, killing four soldiers and wounding five more, but otherwise the enemy did little to hinder allied progress.[22]

Westmoreland flew to Khe Sanh that same day to confer with the commander of the 26th Marines, Colonel Lownds, and to assess the situation firsthand. On his way in to the airfield by helicopter, the MACV commander got a bird's-eye view of the enemy trenches extending from the village of Khe Sanh to the edge of the wire surrounding the combat base, a distance of some three kilometers. Lownds informed Westmoreland that the fortifications, built to shelter a division or more, now held perhaps a third of that number. Westmoreland left the meeting confident that the counterattack that Lownds had scheduled for the next day would succeed in breaking through that ring. The MACV commander saw a bit of action himself later that day when hostile

[20] *Khe Sanh-Route 9 Offensive Campaign*, p. 25; *304th Division*, p. 98.

[21] Quote from Interv, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 6. See also AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, p. 9.

[22] Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, pp. 35–36.

UH–1D Huey helicopters deliver 1st Cavalry Division soldiers to forward landing zones.

ground fire hit his helicopter as it was leaving Khe Sanh, but no one on board was injured.[23]

On the morning of 4 April, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, set out along a coffee plantation road that led from Khe Sanh to Highway 9. The unit's objective was Hill 471, three kilometers to the south of the combat base that had a commanding view of Highway 9. Air and artillery strikes softened up the hill for several hours before the Marine infantry began its assault at 1500. It encountered a reinforced North Vietnamese platoon, partially decimated by the rain of shells and bombs, that put up a brave fight before finally giving way. The marines lost ten dead and recovered thirty enemy bodies. The Americans had hardly caught their breath when enemy gunners from the *2d Battalion, 675th Regiment*, and the *45th Artillery Regiment* began shelling the hill with 82-mm. mortar rounds and 122-mm. rockets. The barrage lasted well into the night, killing seven marines and wounding thirty-four others.[24]

Around 0430, elements of the *7th* and *9th Battalions*, *66th Regiment*, *304th Division*, came out of the predawn darkness to retake Hill 471. The three

[23] General William C. Westmoreland's Hist notes, 1–30 Apr 68, pp. 2–3, document 1, Westmoreland History files, CMH; AAR, Opn PEGASUS/LAM SON 207A, 1st Cav Div, p. 3.

[24] Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 37; *People's Army Artillery of Vietnam*, p. 162.

Marine companies stood their ground with help from air and artillery strikes and drove the enemy back, killing a reported 140 North Vietnamese troops while losing one killed and twenty-eight wounded. The fight was over by 0630. With that victory, the marines secured control of the intersection where the coffee plantation road that led to the combat base met Highway 9.[25]

Meanwhile on 4 April, the 1st Cavalry Division met its first real challenge of the campaign two kilometers south of Landing Zone THOR. As the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, closed in on the old French fort that overlooked a narrow switchback on Highway 9, the soldiers discovered that it was already held by North Vietnamese troops from the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment*. The cavalrymen tried to maneuver within grenade-throwing range of the fort but found it impossible to do so without bringing down a torrent of machine-gun and mortar fire. The 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, spent the next three days trying to seize the position, but to no avail.

Colonel McDonough broke the deadlock on the morning of 7 April by air-lifting a pair of companies from the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, deep behind the enemy position and then attacking the fort from the opposite direction. The attacking companies faced almost no resistance. Apart from six enemy soldiers who died resisting the morning assault, the bulk of the North Vietnamese defenders had slipped away during the night. The capture of the fort removed the last major strong point between the 1st Cavalry Division and Khe Sanh.[26]

As the fight for the fort was still under way, Tolson sent his 1st Brigade into action. On the afternoon of 5 April, the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and Battery A, 2d Battalion, 19th Artillery, equipped with 105-mm. howitzers, flew into Landing Zone SNAPPER approximately seven kilometers south of the Khe Sanh combat base. Battery B from the 2d Battalion, 19th Artillery, arrived the next day, as did Battery B of the 1st Battalion, 30th Artillery, armed with 155-mm. howitzers.[27]

The most notable action of the day occurred near SNAPPER when a rocket-armed helicopter from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, spotted a PT76 light tank under some camouflage. A flurry of 2.75-inch rockets killed approximately two dozen North Vietnamese soldiers who were hiding nearby but missed the vehicle, which scurried away toward Laos.[28]

The following day, 6 April, Companies C and D of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, landed by helicopter immediately northeast of the combat base and began scouring the crater-pocked hills for enemy soldiers. Meanwhile, troops from the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, approached the base on foot from the southeast. The 2d Battalion ran into a well-concealed network of trenches, bunkers, and fighting pits manned by a small group of North Vietnamese soldiers from the *9th Regiment*. The Communists made up for their lack of numbers with

[25] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 285.

[26] AAR, Opn PEGASUS/LAM SON 207A, 1st Cav Div, p. 3; Interv, Whitehorne with Campbell, 12 May 68, p. 7.

[27] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 17 Jun 68, p. 5; Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 45.

[28] AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, p. 10; Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, pp. 41, 43.

a superior knowledge of the terrain and their skills in camouflage. They were also highly disciplined, often holding their fire until the Americans were only a few steps away and then disappearing down a tunnel or through a side trench before they could be cornered. The commander of Company A, Capt. Al W. Degyansky, later said that they were the best enemy soldiers he had ever faced. The 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, settled into a game of cat and mouse with the North Vietnamese soldiers that would last for more than two days.[29]

On the afternoon of 6 April, a company from the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force flew into Khe Sanh, marking a symbolic end to the siege. It joined forces with the South Vietnamese 37th Ranger Battalion and marched out of Khe Sanh to reconnoiter a site recently hit by allied air strikes. The government troops found seventy North Vietnamese bodies and a large amount of equipment, including four mortars and a heavy machine gun. The enemy's failure to collect his weapons and his dead suggested that he was beginning to lose cohesion.[30]

Also on 6 April, Colonel Lownds sent the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, to attack a bunker complex south of the base. The marines found no enemy soldiers but recovered the bodies of twenty-one Americans who had been killed back in February and March. The other force in Lownds' command that was operating outside of the wire, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, turned over Hill 471 to the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, when the Army unit came in that afternoon by helicopter. The landing was unopposed. The Marine battalion headed for Hill 689, a high point some four kilometers to the west that the enemy had occupied for the last three months. The North Vietnamese cordon around the base was disintegrating.[31]

Unwilling to let the *304th Division* slip away into Laos, General Tolson tried to block its withdrawal by sending the South Vietnamese paratroopers under his control deep into the enemy's rear. On 7 April, a flight of helicopters began landing the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force at Landing Zone SNAKE, a site some five kilometers southwest of Khe Sanh and two kilometers northeast of the Lang Vei Special Forces camp. The next day, a South Vietnamese patrol made contact with the *5th Battalion, 24th Regiment,* which appeared to have been headed for the landing zone. The resulting firefight grew to involve the entire South Vietnamese battalion and left at least seventy-four enemy soldiers and eleven paratroopers dead. The North Vietnamese withdrew without having reached the landing zone. The remaining two battalions of the airborne task force and its headquarters arrived at SNAKE later that day. With that maneuver, Tolson now had all four of his brigades in the fight.[32]

On 8 April, the headquarters of the 3d Brigade flew into Khe Sanh to set up a tactical operations center. Meanwhile, two companies from the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, reached the base by foot from the southeast after

[29] *Cavalair*, vol. 2, no. 74, 1 May 68, p. 8; *304th Division*, pp. 109–10.
[30] Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 44.
[31] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 285.
[32] AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, p. 10; *Khe Sanh-Route 9 Offensive Campaign*, p. 27.

South Vietnamese paratroopers arrive at Khe Sanh by CH–47 Chinook helicopters during Operation PEGASUS.

having finally overcome the enemy blocking force that had delayed their progress for two days. Early that morning the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Roscoe Robinson Jr., had airlifted Companies C and D behind the enemy's position and launched a sudden attack that caught the North Vietnamese by surprise. Fourteen air strikes and over 1,000 rounds of artillery compounded the enemy's disorder, forcing him to abandon his positions as well as fifteen bodies and dozens of weapons.[33]

The remainder of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, as well as the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, marched onto the base the next day. Hundreds of marines stood on top of bunkers waving, taking pictures, and handing out C-rations as the cavalrymen passed through the front gate. A soldier from the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, Pfc. Claude S. Brown, said that what he noticed most about the marines was the extreme paleness of their skin, a result of spending months on end living in underground bunkers. The 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, took over responsibility for defending the perimeter, allowing the entire 26th Marines to go at last on the offensive after months of hunkering down. As elements from the regiment counterattacked northward out of Khe Sanh, the 1st Battalion,

[33] *Cavalair*, vol. 2, no. 74, 1 May 68, p. 8; *304th Division*, pp. 109–10. Robinson would later become the first African American to become a full four-star general in the U.S. Army.

9th Marines, seized Hill 689 after pressing through a mortar barrage that claimed nine American lives.[34]

Tolson's men spent the next several days patrolling their respective sectors, finding a number of large supply caches but relatively few enemy soldiers. Even the far-ranging 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, saw little sign of the enemy, the most noteworthy discovery being a PT76 tank found nestled in a camouflaged position near Highway 9 a short distance from the Laotian border. A tactical air strike destroyed the vehicle before it could get away.

On 10 April, General Westmoreland instructed Rosson to start winding down Operation PEGASUS so the 1st Cavalry Division could prepare for Operation DELAWARE, a brigade-size raid into the A Shau Valley planned for the end of the month. The Provisional Corps commander relayed the message to General Tolson, who immediately began reorienting his division for its new mission. On 11 April, he airlifted most of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, from the Khe Sanh area to Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON south of Quang Tri City. He kept the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, behind to search through the destroyed Lang Vei camp. The South Vietnamese 37th Ranger Battalion redeployed to Da Nang the same day. Meanwhile, the Marine and Navy engineers wrapped up their work on Highway 9 after refurbishing fourteen kilometers of road, repairing or replacing nine bridges, and constructing seventeen bypasses.[35]

The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, entered the ruins of the Lang Vei Special Forces camp on the morning of 12 April after pushing through a small blocking force and killing forty North Vietnamese soldiers. The Americans found little of interest in the bombed-out compound but discovered a trove of weapons and ammunition at a former Special Forces camp a kilometer to the east. The haul included twenty-one .30-caliber machine guns, four 81-mm. mortar tubes, three 57-mm. recoilless rifles, 5,300 mortar rounds, 1,050 recoilless rifle shells, and over 100,000 rounds of ammunition for U.S. rifles and machine guns.[36]

Between 12 and 14 April, the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and the division command post airlifted from the Khe Sanh area to Camp Evans. The last major contact of the operation occurred on the morning of 14 April when the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, assaulted the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment*, on Hill 881 North, the last enemy position that posed a direct threat to Khe Sanh. The marines took the objective with supporting fire from dozens of artillery pieces and eight 106-mm. recoilless rifles, killing 106 enemy soldiers while losing six of their own.[37]

PEGASUS ended the next day, 15 April, giving way to Operation SCOTLAND II under the control of the 3d Marine Division. Tolson kept elements of the 2d

[34] Historical Study, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, pp. 48–52; *Cavalair*, vol. 2, No. 74, 1 May 68, p. 1; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 287.

[35] Interv, Whitehorn with Tolson, 17 Jun 68, p. 6; Rpt, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 62; AAR, Opn PEGASUS/LAM SON 207A, 1st Cav Div, pp. 9–10.

[36] Rpt, 31st Mil Hist Det, May 1968, p. 63.

[37] AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, p. 10.

Troops from the 1st Cavalry Division arrive at Khe Sanh during Operation PEGASUS.

Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, in the vicinity of Khe Sanh to give the marines an extra measure of airmobile striking power. The South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force airlifted from Khe Sanh to Hue on 15 April so it could reorganize itself for the coming A Shau operation.[38]

PEGASUS was an unquestioned success. The enemy lost an estimated 1,325 personnel and over 700 weapons during the fifteen-day operation. Friendly losses came to 41 Army personnel, 51 marines, and 33 South Vietnamese troops killed in action. The North Vietnamese had been oriented to stop a ground advance along Highway 9 but seemed completely unprepared to handle the series of vertical envelopments that bypassed his strong points. Some units from the *66th Regiment* that were guarding the intersection of

[38] Ibid., p. 62.

Highway 9 and the Khe Sanh coffee plantation road, for example, abandoned their positions and some of their heavy weapons once they realized that they had been outflanked by helicopter assaults. Not a single aircraft from the 1st Cavalry Division went down to antiaircraft fire during the entire operation. Despite the enemy's long-standing goal of drawing allied forces into the Khe Sanh area, the *304th Division* had only offered haphazard resistance before retreating. Highway 9 between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu was once again open.[39]

Into the A Shau Valley

The 1st Cavalry Division's next destination was the A Shau Valley, a glacial cut in the mountains of western Thua Thien Province approximately thirty kilometers long and oriented from the northwest to the southeast. The valley averaged around one and a half kilometers wide but suddenly broadened into a small plateau near its midpoint. Its jungle-covered slopes ranged in height from 380 and 600 meters with an average inclination of twenty degrees. The undulating valley floor was covered by a mixture of brushwood and clear forest interspersed with areas of elephant grass that grew to a height of over three meters.[40]

A two-lane packed earth road, Route 548, ran the length of the valley. After exiting the northern tip it doubled back and then turned west into Laos. The enemy kept the road in serviceable condition because it was the easiest way to transport supplies across the border. North Vietnamese engineers added logs and steel plates to heavily trafficked or damaged sections and built bypasses around bomb craters that were too difficult to be repaired. Near the midpoint of the valley, the road intersected Route 547, which remained hardly more than a footpath until one reached the Hue lowlands some twenty kilometers to the east. Some five kilometers northwest of the intersection was an abandoned airfield near the destroyed village of A Luoi that had once been used to resupply a U.S. Army Special Forces outpost.[41]

Allied intelligence estimated that the valley held approximately 3,000 North Vietnamese soldiers, the equivalent of seven battalions, when the operation began. Most were thought to be engineer or rear support troops, but one was the *280th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment* equipped with dozens of four-barreled 23-mm. cannons as well as 37-mm. cannons, the latter capable of hitting targets at an altitude of 7,620 meters. The *3d Battalion, 203d Armored Regiment*, had a forward support base in the valley, but most of its PT76 light tanks were stationed across the border in Laos. A few hundred security per-

[39] AAR, Opn PEGASUS/LAM SON 207A, 1st Cav Div, pp. 9–10; AAR, Opn PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, p. 16; ORLL, 1 Feb–30 Apr 68, 1st Cav Div, p. 2.

[40] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, 11 Jul 68, pp. 1–2, box 11, Hist Background files, 31st Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[41] Ibid.

sonnel guarded the logistical sites in the A Shau, but there were no dedicated infantry units in the valley at that time.[42]

The Provisional Corps, Vietnam, was to be the headquarters in charge of Operation DELAWARE, with General Tolson and his 1st Cavalry Division to play the leading role. Fresh from his success at Khe Sanh, Tolson arrived at Phu Bai on 14 April to present his operations plan to Rosson, Cushman, and Westmoreland. He proposed sending the 1st and 3d Brigades from his division plus the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, into the valley for a month-long reconnaissance-in-force mission. The MACV commander endorsed the plan, and instructed Tolson to be ready to support a limited incursion by the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment into Base Area 607 across the Laotian border if President Johnson gave the authorization. A great deal of war materiel transported down the Ho Chi Minh Trail was deposited in Base Area 607, and then carried by rear service units across the border through winding mountain passes into the A Shau Valley. Westmoreland stressed the need to keep the A Shau operation a secret from the press until it was over, since the raid was "possibly more dangerous than any offensive operation we have ever undertaken in Vietnam . . . because of the marginal weather, the difficult terrain, and enemy reinforcement possibilities from Laos." Allied intelligence also expected the air defenses in the A Shau Valley to be among the most formidable yet faced by the 1st Cavalry Division. Moreover, the operation would mark the first time that the division would make a major air assault beyond the range of supporting fire from its 105-mm. and 155-mm. howitzers.[43]

Tolson was not overly concerned by the risks. His division had braved heavy antiaircraft fire during Tet and around Khe Sanh. As for the weather, he felt confident that his pilots could make it through the intermittent fog and clouds with enough supplies until his troops reopened the A Luoi airfield. He also expected to win control of the high ground early in the operation and felt he had plenty of artillery and infantry to do the job. In fact, Tolson told Westmoreland that he "would like to see the enemy come after us for a change, particularly the forces from Laos."[44]

Rosson accepted Tolson's plan with one minor change. Tolson had wanted to send the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force into Base Area 114, but Rosson decided instead that it should help the 101st Airborne Division clear Route 547A that led from Hue to the A Shau Valley. To cover the temporary absence of the 1st and 3d Brigades of the 1st Cavalry Division from the piedmont and coastal lowlands, Westmoreland approved Tolson's recommenda-

[42] *Nhung Tran Danh Cua Phao Binh Vietnam Trong Cac Cuoc Chien Tranh Giai Phong Va Bao Ve To Quoc, Tap II* [*Battles of Vietnamese Artillery during the Wars of Liberation and to Defend the Fatherland*, *Volume II*] (Hanoi: Artillery Command Publishing House, 1990), pp. 216–17 (hereafter cited as *Battles of Vietnamese Artillery*).

[43] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 5536 to Honorable P. G. Goulding, 21 Apr 68, p. 1 (quote), Westmoreland Msg files, CMH; AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 3; Transcript, VNIT 96, p. 7.

[44] Msg, Tolson FCV 346 to Westmoreland, 29 Apr 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

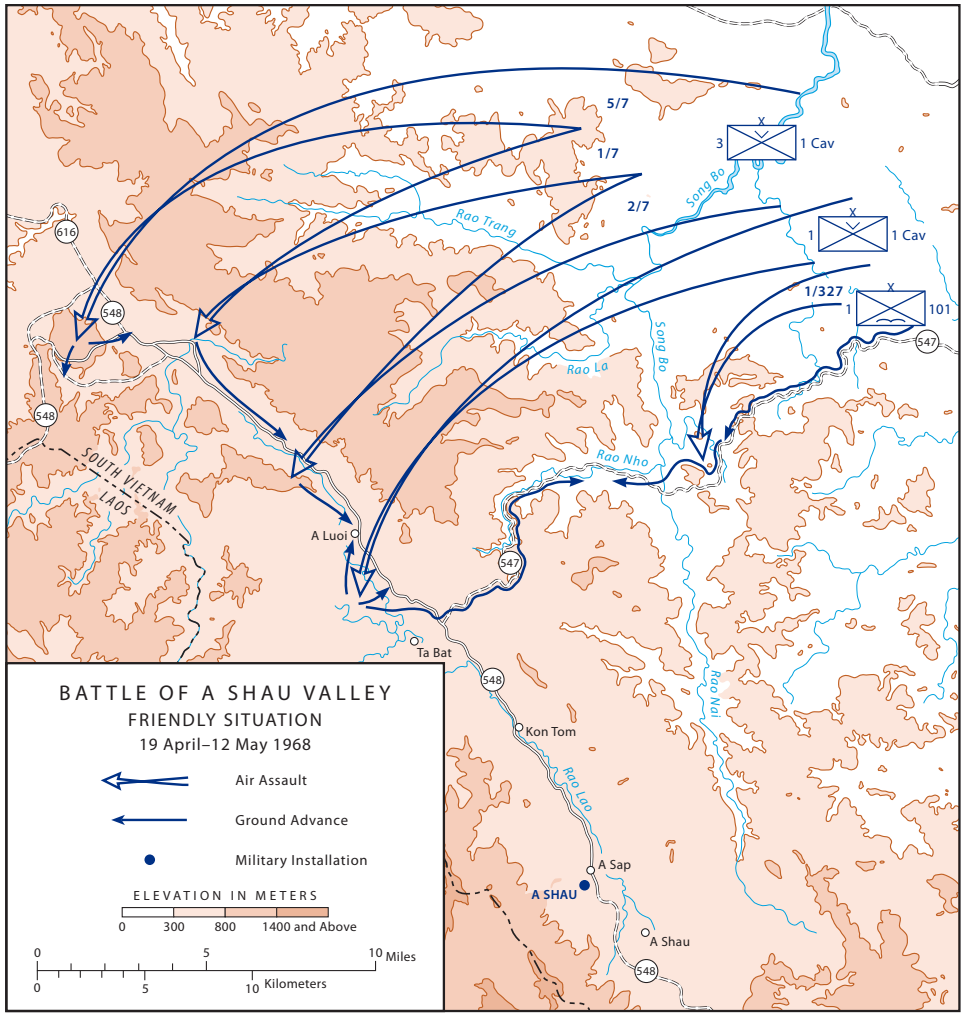
Soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, rest after disassembling their equipment in the A Shau Valley.

tion to shift the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light) from the Que Son Valley area to Camp Evans.[45]

The 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, began reconnaissance missions into the A Shau on 13 April, three days before the scheduled start of DELAWARE. The weather remained poor for the next several days, so Tolson recommended—and Rosson agreed—to postpone the start of the operation until 19 April. Tolson had planned to send his 1st Brigade into the central portion of the valley during the opening phase of DELAWARE but changed his mind when scout helicopters encountered heavy concentrations of antiaircraft weapons around the village of A Luoi and the abandoned airstrip. He decided instead to land Colonel Campbell's 3d Brigade into the northern part of the valley where antiaircraft fire had been lighter and where it could cut Route 548 at the mouth of the A Shau. Strike aircraft made extensive use of daisy cutter bombs to blast open landing sites on ridge lines and on the valley floor. Fighter-bombers from the Seventh Air Force and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew over 200 tactical sorties to suppress antiaircraft positions, while B–52 bombers flew 21 missions against targets in the valley (*Map 41*).[46]

[45] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 21 May 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 12.

[46] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 21 May 68, p. 3; AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 8.



MAP 41

The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and an artillery battery flew into the northern end of the valley on 19 April, carried by helicopters from the division and the 11th Aviation Group. The North Vietnamese antiaircraft defenses were ferocious, hitting twenty-three aircraft on the first day of the operation. Ten of the helicopters crash-landed or else were too badly damaged to continue flying. Despite the constant stream of machine-gun rounds and exploding cannon shells, the 3d Brigade still landed with most of its men and equipment intact. Casualties came to four killed and twenty wounded. General Tolson told reporters that "by far it's the hottest place we've ever gone into, and the most [helicopter] losses we've taken in a single day."[47]

[47] Rpt, XXIV Corps, n.d., p. 46.

The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, got to work building the main base for the 3d Brigade known as Landing Zone TIGER. The 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, established a small firebase nearby known as Landing Zone VICKI. Patrols sent out by the two battalions encountered only a handful of North Vietnamese soldiers in addition to several 37-mm. antiaircraft guns that the enemy had abandoned when the U.S. troops had touched down. Before long, a battery of 105-mm. howitzers was in place at Landing Zone TIGER and was firing at the A Luoi airfield. Six 175-mm. guns at Landing Zone BASTOGNE added to the bombardment.[48]

Meanwhile, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, left Operation CARENTAN II to join DELAWARE. On 19 April, it sent the bulk of the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, and a company from the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, to push west from Firebase BASTOGNE along Route 547. The Americans encountered only light resistance. That afternoon, the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, landed on a hill some eight kilometers southwest of BASTOGNE where it began constructing Firebase VEGHEL. The new outpost, only fifteen air kilometers from the A Shau, brought the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, within artillery range of the valley and placed it in a position to intercept enemy forces trying to escape along Route 547.[49]

The following day, the South Vietnamese 6th Airborne Battalion provoked a storm of small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire when it landed at VEGHEL. Heavy fog prevented the remainder of the battalion from flying in until early evening. Bad weather also briefly delayed the arrival of the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry, to the firebase on 21 April, although the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Battalion landed at VEGHEL on the twenty-second with little problem.[50]

Back in the A Shau, deteriorating weather also slowed the deployment of the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. Elements of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, had to wait until 20 April before they could arrive on Landing Zone PEPPER some seven kilometers southeast of TIGER and about five kilometers northwest of the A Luoi airfield. Gathering thunderstorms grounded the aircraft fleet before the battalion could finish its insertion, and it was not until the twenty-second that the rest of the battalion and Campbell's forward command post were able to land at PEPPER.

Meanwhile on the twentieth, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, marched four kilometers southeast from Landing Zone VICKI and established a forward operating base known as Landing Zone GOODMAN. A battery of 105-mm. howitzers and a battery of 155-mm. howitzers were inserted over the next several days. In the northernmost part of the A Shau, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, sent out patrols to interdict Highway 548 where it entered the valley

[48] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 3; Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 21 May 68, p. 4; Transcript, VNIT 96, p. 7.

[49] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, 28 May 68, p. 2, Encl 1, box 11, AARs, 31st Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[50] Rpt, XXIV Corps, n.d., pp. 47, 50.

and to explore the network of trails that connected the valley floor to the higher elevations. Resistance continued to be light.[51]

On 21 April, the chief of staff of *Group 559* ordered Lt. Col. Tran Ngoc Anh, the highest-ranking artilleryman in the A Shau, to form a provisional headquarters known as the *B8 Front* to organize a counterattack with the forces on hand. The only combat units in the valley other than a few tanks and some security personnel were two artillery units in transit to the lowlands—one equipped with 122-mm. rockets and the other with 85-mm. guns—and many of their officers, staff personnel, and technical experts had already gone ahead to Base Area 114 to prepare for a May offensive. There was no time to bring in reinforcements, so the enemy would have to make do with what he had.[52]

The headquarters also had very little information about allied strengths and dispositions. It sent out reconnaissance parties to gather information, including one on 23 April that probed Landing Zone TIGER with a platoon-size attack and a barrage of 60-mm. mortar fire. The defenders repulsed the assault, killing six enemy soldiers. The *B8 Front* also dispatched artillery-spotting teams to several points along the western mountain spine where they could observe the central and northern parts of the valley.[53]

The 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, began its assault into the A Shau on the twenty-fourth. The new brigade commander, Col. John E. Stannard, began by inserting the 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, at Landing Zone CECILE one kilometer south of the abandoned A Luoi airfield. The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, established Landing Zone STALLION next to the airstrip the following day. The long-abandoned runway was cratered by bomb shells and covered with dense green foliage, but Army engineers had sufficiently restored it by 1 May to receive C–7 and C–123 aircraft, and two days later to accept the larger C–130 transports.[54]

Resistance in the A Shau remained light until 28 April when Company C from the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry, encountered a reinforced company of North Vietnamese soldiers two kilometers west of the airfield in an area known as the "Punchbowl" because the mountain slope to the north rose steeply from the brushwood-covered valley floor, forming a concave wall. Other elements from the 1st and 2d Battalions, 8th Cavalry, joined the battle and spent the next several days rooting out the enemy troops with help from air and artillery strikes. At one point the Americans found themselves under fire from a PT76 tank that was dug into a camouflaged position. A sergeant crawled forward and knocked it out with a pair of M72 antitank rounds. That proved to be the only confirmed sighting of an armored vehicle in the valley during the operation. Nonetheless, rumors of tank sightings circulated among the U.S. soldiers, and more than a few reported hearing the distant clank of Soviet machinery at night.[55]

[51] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 8.
[52] *Battles of Vietnamese Artillery*, p. 216.
[53] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 3.
[54] Ibid., p. 10.
[55] *The Air Cavalry Division*, vol. 1, no. 3, Sep 68, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.

A 105-mm. howitzer provides fire support to the 1st Cavalry Division.

When the North Vietnamese finally abandoned the Punchbowl on 3 May, leaving behind thirty dead, the Americans found a vast storage depot, a hospital, and a truck park. Power and telephone lines led away in several directions to smaller satellite bases. Based on documents found at the site, the Punchbowl complex had apparently been the forward headquarters of *Binh Tram 7*, a regimental-size logistical command that was subordinate to *Group 559*.[56]

The South Vietnamese 3d Regiment joined the operation on 29 April when the command group went into Landing Zone LUCY six kilometers southeast of the A Luoi airfield, a site that the 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, had prepared the previous day. The remainder of the regiment, as well as the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 1st Regiment, arrived at LUCY over the next two days and then began reconnaissance-in-force operations in the southern third of the valley.[57]

Meanwhile, east of the A Shau, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and the South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Task Force continued clearing the territory between Firebases BASTOGNE and VEGHEL. For the most part the allies encountered small supply parties that quickly broke contact. On the twenty-ninth, however, Companies B and D of the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, got into a prolonged firefight with a North Vietnamese company only a kilometer or so from Firebase VEGHEL. The enemy had the upper

[56] Ibid., pp. 4–5, 9–10.
[57] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 10.

hand because he fought from well-made bunkers and camouflaged positions in the trees, and was so confident in his defenses that at one point he sent out a force to envelop Company B. The U.S. unit pulled itself out of the trap, although not before losing thirteen killed and sixteen wounded.

When the two U.S. companies renewed their attack the following morning, they found the bunkers empty except for the bodies of fifteen dead Communist soldiers. Enemy resistance along Route 547 diminished with each passing day while the tonnage of captured equipment, including hundreds of 75-mm. cannon shells, thousands of rounds of antiaircraft ammunition, and 600 pounds of explosive materials, continued to grow.[58]

Likewise, the *B8 Front* could do little to prevent allied patrols from finding many of the bases and supply dumps that were hidden across the A Shau Valley. A North Vietnamese platoon clashed with Company D of the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, to the west of Landing Zone TIGER on 26 April, resulting in twelve dead Communist troops and four dead Americans, but for the most part the enemy stayed out of sight. Allied troops located dozens of caches ranging in size from a single concealed bunker to a depot large enough to support a battalion. Collectively they yielded a huge quantity of food, nearly 2,300 individual weapons, and tens of thousands of rounds of small-caliber ammunition. The allies also discovered a large number of shells for 76-mm., 85-mm., and 122-mm. artillery pieces, the first hard evidence that such weapons had been introduced into South Vietnam. Among the captured equipment were seventy-three trucks and two bulldozers. Other noteworthy prizes included a dozen 37-mm. antiaircraft cannons, some of them damaged by air strikes.[59]

As the 1st Cavalry Division continued to search the A Shau Valley for hidden supplies at the beginning of May, General Westmoreland instructed Rosson and Tolson to begin making plans to withdraw from the valley by the middle of the month. By then, his troops would likely have located most of the enemy war materiel that could be found in the valley. Also, his hopes to launch a limited incursion into Base Area 607 in neighboring Laos had come to naught. Westmoreland's efforts to impose a news embargo on the A Shau operation had failed on 26 April when the influential foreign policy columnist Joseph Alsop, apparently unaware of the ban, broke the story. With the public aware that the 1st Cavalry Division had moved into the A Shau Valley, Westmoreland, who never abandoned his hope that the president might authorize an incursion into Laos, noted to Wheeler on 3 May that "it is now obvious that we would not be in a position to deny categorically the involvement of sizable forces in Laos if queried by the press." Furthermore, the MACV commander wanted to get Tolson's 1st and 3d Brigades back down into the Highway 1 corridor before the North Vietnamese regiments based in the coastal hills—the *812th Regiment* in Base Area 101, and the *29th* and *90th Regiments* in Base Area 114—took advantage of the 1st Cavalry Division's

[58] AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, p. 7.

[59] Interv, Whitehorne with Tolson, 21 May 68, p. 3, Encl 1; AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, pp. 5–6.

A Soviet-designed 37-mm. antiaircraft cannon

absence to move into the lowlands around Quang Tri City and Hue. Finally, the recent information provided by Lt. Col. Tran Van Dac, a former Viet Cong political officer in the Saigon area, indicated that Hanoi would soon renew its general offensive throughout South Vietnam. It remained to be seen whether the combined effects of Operations DELAWARE and CARENTAN had significantly impaired the enemy's ability to launch new attacks in the lowlands of northern I Corps.[60]

[60] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 5817 to Wheeler, 3 May 68, p. 1 (quote), Westmoreland Msg files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Cav Div, 20 Aug 68, p. 2, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

16

The General Offensive Renewed

When *COSVN* leaders held a secret conference with *B2 Front* officials in late March to review the results of the Tet offensive, General Thai and Secretary Hung asked whether a new round of attacks could be organized before the rainy season began in mid-May. Le Duan, still the preeminent voice in North Vietnam's Politburo, was pushing hard for a resumption of the general offensive. Some regional commanders expressed their doubts. The Viet Cong units that had spearheaded the first wave were still in bad shape, they said, and the North Vietnamese troops coming into theater were inexperienced youths, often weak from malaria and other tropical diseases that they had contracted on the journey south. As for the soldiers who had lived through the Tet offensive, many were demoralized after seeing their hopes for victory dashed. Supplies were an issue as well. Most of the forward depots were either empty or destroyed. Replacing them would not be easy with U.S. and South Vietnamese units constantly sweeping the provinces around Saigon. Those problems, combined with the heightened allied vigilance, led some *B2 Front* officials to conclude that "there was no longer any opportunity to liberate the cities and province capitals" with a Tet-style offensive.[1]

COSVN leaders acknowledged those challenges but downplayed their severity. "We still possess the element of surprise," Thai and his fellow generals insisted, and "even though the enemy has pulled in his forces to defend the inner city and the suburbs, there are still many gaps and holes in his defenses." *COSVN* leaders eventually won over the skeptics and drafted a communiqué to Hanoi recommending a resumption of the general offensive. After consulting with its other front commands, the Politburo ordered preparations for a second wave to begin.[2]

The plan that solidified in early April differed from its predecessor in several notable respects. The first was a difference in operational methods. During Tet, the enemy had attempted to seize nearly every major city in South Vietnam. During the second wave, the Communists intended to invade only one urban target—Saigon—while relying on rocket and mortar fire to harass the other major cities around the country. A second

[1] Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans,* p. 193.

[2] Quote from Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans,* p. 160; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 0409768, 4 May 68, sub: VC Commentaries on the Recent General Offensive, pp. 2–3, box 21, CMIC Special Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, RG 472, NACP; Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6027707668, 2 Jul 68, sub: CDEC Bulletin No. 13861, p. 1, document 9, Vietnam-Troop Morale, box 154, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

difference between the plans was the diminished role of a general uprising. Although North Vietnamese leaders continued to call for a popular revolt, *COSVN* would make only a halfhearted attempt to mobilize civilian help in Saigon during round two. The third and most important distinction had to do with expectations. The first wave had been an all-out effort to destroy the South Vietnamese government root and branch; the second wave was meant to bolster North Vietnam's negotiating position in the peace talks soon to begin in Paris, as well as to improve its logistical posture at the strategic level. Although North Vietnamese leaders continued to talk about "finishing the enemy off" in 1968, the new plan contained a provision for "taking pro-active measures in the event the war expands and becomes protracted."[3]

Communist commanders gathered around 60,000 soldiers for the second wave, one-third fewer than had been used during Tet but with a higher proportion of main force regulars. All told, thirty North Vietnamese infantry regiments representing nine divisions and all five major front commands would see action, joined by four artillery regiments, three composite Viet Cong/*PAVN* infantry regiments, and ten provincial infantry battalions. The heaviest attacks would be directed against Saigon in III Corps and Dong Ha in northern I Corps. Regimental-strength operations were planned for Quang Tin, Kontum, and Binh Dinh Provinces. Enemy units elsewhere in the country would support the second wave with stand-off attacks against district and provincial capitals.

Communist plans were compromised on 19 April when the chief political officer of *Sub-Region 1*, North Vietnamese Lt. Col. Tran Van Dac, turned himself in to government authorities in Binh Duong Province. He claimed that *COSVN* was going to attack the capital at the end of April with a stronger force than had been employed during Tet. He said other attacks were going to take place elsewhere in the country, though he did not know the details. After questioning Dac for two days and cross-checking his story with radio intercepts, prisoner interrogations, and agent reports, the allies concluded that he was telling the truth. Westmoreland alerted his senior commanders that a second general offensive was brewing. Together with General Vien, Westmoreland redeployed many of the U.S. and Vietnamese battalions operating in III Corps back to Saigon's environs. "With foreknowledge of enemy plans," Westmoreland wrote on 21 April, "we now have a chance to inflict a crushing defeat on him."[4]

The allies tried to keep Colonel Dac's defection a secret, but someone leaked the story to a newspaper in Saigon, which ran a feature on him a

[3] *Lich Su Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh Khang Chien (1954–1975)* [*History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh*] (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1994), p. 506.

[4] Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 5289 to Cushman, 21 Apr 68, pp. 1–2 (quote); Maj Gen Fillmore K. Mearns HOA 0537 to Westmoreland, 23 Apr 68. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Msg, Westmoreland MACV 3972 to Director, National Security Agency, 23 Apr 68, sub: Tran Van Dac, pp. 2–4; Periodic Intel no. 70, MACV, 1–30 Apr 68, n.d., p. 3. Both in Historians files, CMH.

few days later. The news confronted *COSVN* with a difficult choice. After weighing the risks, the Politburo decided to go ahead with the offensive. Canceling the second wave would make the Communists appear weak, an unacceptable position for North Vietnam as it entered the peace talks. Moreover, Colonel Dac's knowledge of Communist plans had been limited to the Saigon area, so that Communist intentions for the rest of the country were still opaque to the allies. To restore some semblance of surprise, the Politburo postponed the offensive for one week, hoping that the allies would relax their guard during the interval. It made an exception for the *DMZ Front*. It told General Hai to go forward with his Dong Ha–Cau Viet campaign because North Vietnamese leaders hoped it would draw off some of the U.S. units that were presently conducting Operation DELAWARE in the A Shau Valley and Operation CARENTAN II in the foothills west of Hue. Without siphoning off some of those forces, the Communists would have trouble getting supplies to the five North Vietnamese regiments that operated in the lowlands between Quang Tri City and Phu Bai. As ordered, units from the *320th PAVN Division* left their forward staging areas on the evening of 27 April and two days later moved undetected into their battle areas just north of Dong Ha. The second general offensive had begun.[5]

Fighting on the Demilitarized Zone

The commander of the *DMZ Front*, General Hai, had two missions to perform. He intended to invade the eastern lowlands of Quang Tri Province with the *320th Division* and the independent *27th PAVN Regiment*. Forward elements from both units were to occupy a string of hamlets just north of Dong Ha where Highway 1 crossed the Bo Dieu River. From there, the enemy could interdict cargo ships coming from the Cau Viet estuary and block the only road between Dong Ha and Gio Linh, thereby threatening several key supply lines used by the 3d Marine Division at Dong Ha.[6]

At the western end of the Demilitarized Zone, the *9th* and *66th Regiments* of the *304th PAVN Division* had orders to keep the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 9th Marines tied down in the SCOTLAND II sector until the *308th PAVN* "*Iron*" *Division* arrived in mid-May with two regiments to renew the siege of Khe Sanh. General Hai ordered its remaining regiment to reinforce the *Group 44 Front* in the Da Nang sector, a subcommand of the *B1 Front* that already controlled one North Vietnamese infantry regiment and two rocket artillery battalions. Elsewhere in *Military Region Tri-Thua-Thien,* the *812th Regiment* would test allied defenses around Quang Tri City under

[5] *History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh*, p. 507; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 352.

[6] *Su Doan 325, Tap II* [*325th Division, Volume II*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1986), p. 63 (hereafter cited as *325th Division*).

the command of the *7th Front,* while the *Hue City Front* tried to get the *90th* and *803d Regiments* within striking distance of Hue.[7]

When the Provisional Corps headquarters warned Maj. Gen. Rathvon M. Tompkins about "VC intentions to launch a new phase of attacks [that] will begin in late April [or] the first ten days of May," the commander of the 3d Marine Division could do little more than wait and see. Most of the forces under his operational control were already committed to missions along the southern edge of the Demilitarized Zone. His 1st Marines secured the SCOTLAND II sector at the western end of the line with help from the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division; his 4th Marines patrolled the LANCASTER II zone along the central Demilitarized Zone; and his 9th Marines patrolled the KENTUCKY sector that stretched from Cam Lo to Dong Ha. At the eastern end of the line, his 3d Marines guarded the Cau Viet estuary through Operation NAPOLEON/SALINE. The sector between the 3d and 9th Marines, the heart of "Leatherneck Square," which included Highway 1 from Dong Ha to Gio Linh, belonged to the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Regiment and its commander, Lt. Col. Vu Van Giai. General Tompkin's sole reserve was Task Force ROBBIE, a company of Marine infantry and a company of Marine tanks stationed at Cam Lo, ten kilometers to the west of Dong Ha via Highway 9.[8]

On the morning of 29 April, local officials reported that sappers had destroyed a small bridge on Highway 1 some four kilometers north of Dong Ha, cutting the road between 3d Marine Division headquarters and Gio Linh, ten kilometers to the north, where one of Colonel Giai's battalions manned Strong Point A–2. A second battalion guarded Strong Point A–1 at the eastern end of the obstacle trace. Two more battalions were stationed at Firebase C–4, two kilometers north of the destroyed bridge, where Colonel Giai maintained his headquarters. The South Vietnamese promptly dispatched elements from those two battalions to investigate.

When they arrived at the bridge, the government troops came under heavy fire from enemy soldiers on the southern bank of the stream. Additional fire came from snipers hidden in nearby hamlets. The South Vietnamese found themselves pinned down on the road, unable to advance or to outflank the enemy. Colonel Giai asked General Tompkins for assistance. The 3d Marine Division commander ordered his reserves, Task Force ROBBIE, to cross the Bo Dieu River and hit the enemy from the rear, but the combat team encountered strong resistance on Highway 9 and did not reach Dong Ha until late in the afternoon. When Colonel Giai learned that Task Force ROBBIE was delayed, and with his own losses having reached seventeen killed, the colonel pulled his men back to let U.S. air and artillery strikes go to work.[9]

[7] Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review, 14 May 68, p. 3, document 8, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, USARV, Vietnam-Weekly Combat and Intel Security Review 9/67-10/68, boxes 187–88, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 307.

[8] Msg, Westmoreland MAC 5289 to Cushman, 21 Apr 68, pp. 1–2.

[9] Rpt, Opns of U.S. Marine Forces Vietnam, Apr 1968, p. 14, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, G–3, Historians files, CMH; Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 292.

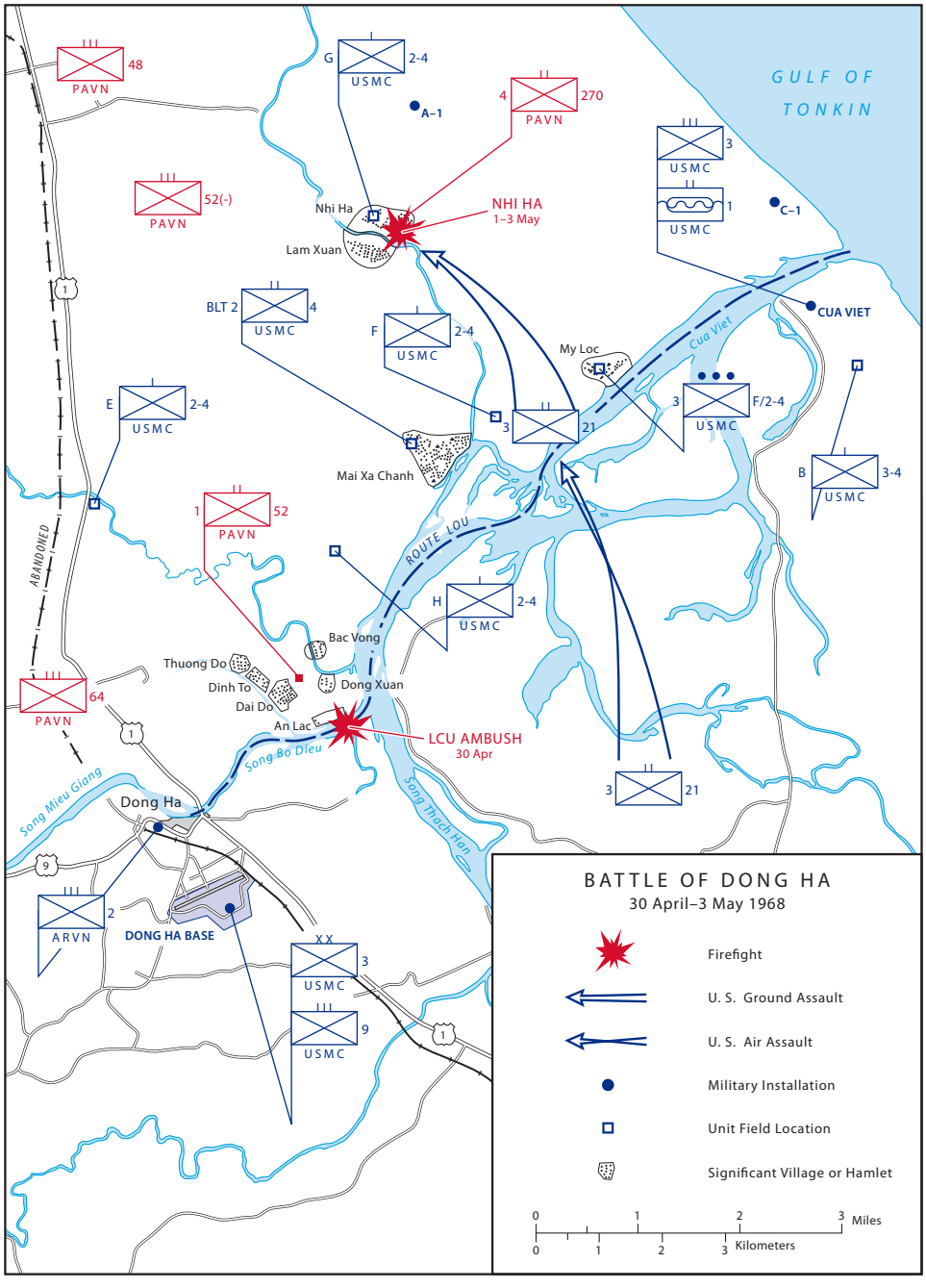
At daybreak on 30 April, the allies discovered North Vietnamese troops dug into the north bank of the Bo Dieu River from Dong Ha to the edge of the Cua Viet estuary. General Tompkins learned that at least one battalion from the *52d Regiment* and a heavy weapons company had fortified a cluster of hamlets around Dai Do (1), just two kilometers northeast of Dong Ha. North Vietnamese troops had also been spotted along the river farther east toward the Cau Viet estuary. The *64th Regiment* had established positions along the west side of Highway 1 to block the 9th Marine units based in the KENTUCKY sector. The *48th Regiment* from the *320th Division* had established a defensive line along Highway 1 to block the South Vietnamese battalions at Gio Linh and at Firebase C–4. Adding to his problems, Tompkins also got wind that elements of the independent *270th PAVN Regiment* had occupied a hamlet named Nhi Ha, about ten kilometers northeast of Dong Ha, which the North Vietnamese regiment used as a waypoint whenever it came south into the NAPOLEON/SALINE sector to attack shipping in the Cau Viet estuary (*Map 42*).[10]

General Tompkin's first priority was to retake the hamlets around Dai Do so enemy gunners could not sink or block the Navy LSTs (Landing Ship, Tanks) that brought 95 percent of the 3d Marine Division's supplies up the Cua Viet estuary. He ordered the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, to attack the Dai Do pocket from the west, while the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, pushed east against the *64th Regiment*. He ordered the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, to screen the area around Dong Ha south of the Bo Dieu River. Colonel Giai had his troops seal off the Highway 1 corridor. To cover the Nhi Ha sector vacated by the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, General Rosson gave Tompkins operational control over the Provisional Corps' reserve force, the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, from the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light). The next morning, helicopters flew Lt. Col. William P. Snyder and his 3d Battalion from Camp Evans to a landing zone near the Bo Dieu River eight kilometers south of Nhi Ha to join Operation NAPOLEON/SALINE with the 1st Marine Amphibious Tractor Battalion.

On 1 May, three companies from the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, fought their way into Dai Do from the west and began clearing the string of enemy-controlled hamlets that lay between the river and Highway 1. Many civilians had not been able to flee their homes, so the marines relied on direct-fire weapons, including 90-mm. tank cannons and 106-mm. recoilless rifles instead of air and artillery strikes. After a savage, close-range battle that swirled back and forth through the hamlets all day, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, gained a solid foothold in Dai Do and parts of neighboring hamlets when night fell.

The fighting in Dai Do reached its peak on 2 May when several North Vietnamese battalions tried to regain the positions they had lost the previous day. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, repulsed each attack, though the situation for the outnumbered Americans remained precarious. When the Communists withdrew that evening, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, had sustained fifty killed

[10] *325th Division*, pp. 70–71.


GULF OF TONKIN
48 PAVN
G 2-4 USMC
A–1
4 270 PAVN
3 USMC
1 USMC
C–1
52(-) PAVN
Nhi Ha
NHI HA
1–3 May
Lam Xuan
CUA VIET
BLT 2 4 USMC
F 2-4 USMC
My Loc
Cua Viet
E 2-4 USMC
3 21 USMC
3 F/2-4 USMC
B 3-4 USMC
Mai Xa Chanh
1 52 PAVN
ROUTE LOU
ABANDONED
H 2-4 USMC
Bac Vong
Thuong Do
Dinh To
Dai Do
Dong Xuan
64 PAVN
An Lac
LCU AMBUSH
30 Apr
Song Bo Dieu
Song Mieu Giang
Dong Ha
Song Thach Han
3 21 USMC
2 ARVN
DONG HA BASE
XX 3 USMC
9 USMC
BATTLE OF DONG HA
30 April–3 May 1968
Firefight
U. S. Ground Assault
U. S. Air Assault
Military Installation
Unit Field Location
Significant Village or Hamlet
0 1 2 3 Miles
0 1 2 3 Kilometers

MAP 42

Troops from the 196th Infantry Brigade watch as a UH–1D helicopter lifts off.

and ninety-eight wounded that day alone. With the unit nearing exhaustion, General Tompkins sent several companies from the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, across the river that evening to shore up the U.S. position.[11]

Unable to regain a foothold in Dai Do, the *27th Battalion* and *52d Regiment* headed north on the evening of 2 May, moving through the countryside in company formations, to rejoin the *48th Regiment,* some ten kilometers to the north. The remaining element of the *320th Division*, the *64th Regiment,* also broke contact that evening, marching away from the riverfront area west of Highway 1 where it had fought a holding action against the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, during the last two days.

Meanwhile, a second fight was developing farther to the east. On the morning of 1 May, Colonel Snyder and his 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, left their staging area on the north bank of the Bo Dieu River, marching north along the Jones Creek toward the ruined hamlet of Nhi Ha. Nearing the site later that day, the Americans found it occupied by the *4th Battalion, 270th Regiment.* Employing Marine and Air Force fighter-bombers to soften the enemy position, the U.S. battalion took Nhi Ha after a sharp two-day fight that reportedly killed 137 enemy troops as well as 14 U.S. soldiers. The enemy withdrew north into the scrub-covered countryside.[12]

[11] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 302–03.
[12] Ibid., p. 304.

Colonel Synder sent one of his companies ahead on 3 May to search several destroyed hamlets that lay just to the north. Sending only one company proved to be unwise. North Vietnamese troops ambushed the company while it was moving in column through the tall bushes, killing a dozen soldiers. Snyder brought the rest of his troops forward just in time to prevent the enemy from overrunning his isolated unit. The 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, returned to Nhi Ha to await further orders. General Tompkins decided there was no point in pursuing the *270th Regiment* now that it had been pushed a safe distance from the river. On 2 May, North Vietnamese recoilless rifle crews had damaged several U.S. cargo ships on the Bo Dieu River, forcing them to return to the Cua Viet estuary, but no further attacks from the riverbank had materialized since then. With the battle for Dai Do winding down, the Marine general returned the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, to Camp Evans, and handed the Nhi Ha sector back to his 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. General Rosson subsequently flew Colonel Snyder's battalion back to the Que Son Valley where it rejoined Operation Wheeler/Wallowa with the 196th Infantry Brigade.[13]

When General Tompkins learned of the enemy's retreat from Dai Do, and when the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, found only a handful of stragglers as it pushed north toward the destroyed bridge on Highway 1, the Marine general concluded that the *320th Division* had slipped around Colonel Giai's blocking force and was now headed back to the Demilitarized Zone. On 7 May, Tompkins organized a new mission, Operation Concordia Square, to destroy some of those retreating units. Since he lacked the helicopters needed to leapfrog over the North Vietnamese, General Rosson gave him operational control over the 1st and 2d Battalions, 5th Cavalry, from the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, currently operating with the 1st Marines near Khe Sanh. The commander of the 2d Brigade, Col. Robert H. McKinnon, landed his 1st and 2d Battalions from the 5th Cavalry near Firebase C–4, established a forward headquarters there, and then sent company-size patrols out to search the Highway 1 corridor south of Gio Linh.[14]

On the morning of 9 May, disaster struck Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry. Its lead platoon was walking through an area of dense scrub when it came under heavy fire from a camouflaged North Vietnamese bunker complex. The torrent of bullets badly wounded the company commander and killed or injured more than a dozen men around him in the opening seconds of the ambush. The remainder of the cavalry battalion launched a desperate assault against the bunkers and managed to rescue what was left of the lead company before it was annihilated. Elements of the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, joined the fight in the next few hours and gradually the Americans gained the upper hand. The enemy abandoned the complex that night, leaving behind 148 bodies. The 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, had paid a high price

[13] Ibid., p. 306.
[14] AAR, Opn Concordia Square, 2d Bde, 1st Cav Div, 3 Jun 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, on patrol with U.S. Marine M48 tanks north of Dong Ha

for the victory, seventeen killed and forty-two wounded, mostly from the opening minutes of the battle.[15]

The two cavalry battalions carried out several night ambushes over the next few days, using air and artillery strikes to great effect on the enemy columns that they spotted moving north. U.S. Marine tanks joined the sweep as well. When the operation came to an end on 17 May, the 1st and 2d Battalions, 5th Cavalry, reported having killed 347 enemy soldiers and captured another 15. Total U.S. casualties came to 25 killed and 117 wounded.[16]

The two-week battle near Dong Ha had produced mixed results. General Hai had briefly closed traffic on the Bo Dieu River and mauled several U.S. units—the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, sustaining the worst with 91 killed and almost 300 wounded—but at a steep price. The 1st Cavalry Division estimated that the allies had killed between 1,200 and 1,500 North Vietnamese soldiers. The enemy had achieved no tangible gains.[17]

Safeguarding Hue

When Westmoreland informed Rosson on 21 April that the enemy was planning on launching a second Tet-style offensive within a week or two, the head of the Provisional Corps instructed General Barsanti, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, to adjust his operations in Thua Thien Province to forestall a possible attack on Hue. Barsanti ordered his 2d Brigade commander, Colonel Cushman, to shift the focus of Operation CARENTAN II from the hills west of Hue to the lowlands that surrounded the capital. The

[15] Ibid., pp. 2–4.
[16] Ibid., p. 5.
[17] Ibid., p. 20.

first major find came on 28 April when the elite Hac Bao Company of the South Vietnamese 1st Division discovered the *8th Battalion, 90th Regiment*, hiding in the fishing hamlet of Phuoc Yen just six kilometers northwest of Hue. Elements from the 1st and 2d Battalions, 501st Infantry, surrounded the hamlet and then annihilated the enemy unit over the next four days. Enemy losses came to 309 killed and 104 captured. Among the dead were the battalion commander, the executive officer, and three company commanders.[18]

The allies discovered another enemy force lurking near Hue on 2 May when a Regional Forces company reported North Vietnamese soldiers in Bon Tri, a hamlet six kilometers to the west of Hue that the enemy had used as a supply station during the Tet offensive. Several companies from the 1st Battalion, 505th Infantry, helped the Hac Bao Company maul the *3d Battalion, 812th Regiment.* The enemy withdrew after two days of fighting, leaving behind 121 of his dead. Allied losses totaled four killed and eighteen wounded.

On 5 May when the main phase of the second general offensive got under way, enemy artillery units bombarded Hue, Da Nang, and a variety of other military targets, including Camp Evans, hit with twenty 122-mm. rockets from the *K32 PAVN Artillery Battalion*. Damage in all cases was minor. Also on the fifth, elements of the 101st Airborne Division guarding Route 547 clashed with the *7th Battalion, 29th Regiment,* near Firebase BASTOGNE, killing seventy-one Communists, while a second element from the 101st Airborne Division west of Hue drove the *7th Battalion, 90th Regiment*, from the hamlet of Thon La Chu, killing fifty-five enemy troops.[19]

Over the next few days, North Vietnamese artillery hit other targets but neither Quang Tri City nor Hue came under ground attack. Satisfied with the results of his spoiling efforts in the A Shau, General Rosson ordered the 1st Cavalry Division to begin winding down Operation DELAWARE. The 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, flew back to Camp Evans on the tenth and the eleventh. During the same period, the South Vietnamese 3d Regiment redeployed to its base camp at PK–17, located halfway between Camp Evans and Hue, while the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, began to tear down the allied bases scattered throughout the valley. North Vietnamese artillery shelled the allies as they left, but most of the fire proved to be ineffectual because the enemy forward observers lacked radios and could not provide timely data to the gunners. The 1st Brigade completed its extraction on 16 May, flying by helicopter from Landing Zone STALLION for Camp Evans and

[18] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 32-68, III MAF, 4–10 Aug 68, 13 Aug 68, p. 5, . Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, p. 355.

[19] Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review, 28 May 68, p. 4, document 36, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, USARV, Vietnam-Weekly Combat and Intel Security Review 9/67-10/68, boxes 187–88, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 5, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, 8–14 May 68, 14 May 68, p. 2, box 1, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, XXIV Corps, RG 472, NACP; "Vietcong Press Saigon Attacks," *New York Times*, 6 May 68.

then back home to Landing Zones BETTY and SHARON near Quang Tri City. Operation DELAWARE/LAM SON 216 officially ended the next day.[20]

Though the enemy had failed to prevent the 1st Cavalry Division from raiding his supply bases in the A Shau Valley, he managed to strike back at the U.S. logistical system just as DELAWARE was coming to an end. On 19 May, the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, was in the midst of refueling its helicopters and taking on supplies when twelve 122-mm. rockets slammed into Camp Evans. The incoming rounds hit an open-air ammunition dump, igniting 3,400 tons of ordnance and causing a fire that spread to the nearby airfield, eventually damaging or destroying 124 aircraft. The catastrophic loss of helicopters and ammunition rendered the cavalry brigade ineffective for at least a week until replacement aircraft could be obtained. Fortunately for Rosson, the enemy failed to take advantage of the situation by attacking Quang Tri City or some other target in the 1st Brigade area of operations while the unit was crippled. Still, the incident proved that the allied logistical system in northern I Corps remained vulnerable as long as North Vietnamese rocket crews prowled the hills overlooking Highway 1.[21]

On a more positive note for General Rosson, Operation DELAWARE had proved that the A Shau Valley was no longer beyond allied reach. The 1st Cavalry Division had overcome treacherous weather and ferocious antiaircraft fire to kill some 850 enemy soldiers and to capture or destroy hundreds of tons of food, weapons, and equipment. Thousands of documents describing the North Vietnamese logistical system fell into allied hands. Allied operations in the A Shau and along Route 547 had been so effective that they had forced the *Military Region Tri-Thua-Thien* headquarters to scrap most of its plans for the May offensive, including an attack on Hue. The cost to the allies for this important achievement had been 142 American and 26 South Vietnamese soldiers killed, with 11 helicopters destroyed and 35 damaged. The enemy was not going to abandon the A Shau Valley, however, and Rosson knew that Provisional Corps would need to return there at periodic intervals to maintain the safety of the population living in the lowlands.[22]

The Fall of Kham Duc

The main target of the enemy's offensive in southern I Corps was the Kham Duc Special Forces camp, a remote outpost nestled in the mountains of western Quang Tin Province. General Dung wanted to seize the border surveillance camp so North Vietnamese engineers could build a high-speed infiltration corridor from Laos to the Que Son Valley. The *Military Region*

[20] *Battles of Vietnamese Artillery*, p. 218; Transcript, VNIT 96, p. 8, CMH; AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, 28 May 68, p. 11, Historians files, CMH.

[21] Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review, 28 May 68, p. 2.

[22] Rpt, XXIV Corps, n.d., sub: The Critical Year, 1968: The XXIV Corps Team, p. 66, Historians files, CMH. See also ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, XXIV Corps, 20 Aug 68, p. 4, box 67, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; AAR, Opn DELAWARE, 1st Cav Div, p. 6; Transcript, VNIT 96, p. 8; Transcript, VNIT 203, p. 6, CMH.

5 commander, General Man, instructed two regiments from the *2d PAVN Division* to overrun the camp, while its third regiment tied down the 196th Infantry Brigade in the Que Son Valley. The *31st Regiment* attached to the *Group 44* headquarters would similarly divert the 1st Marine Division units in the An Hoa Valley west of Da Nang (*Map 43*).[23]

Established in 1961, the Kham Duc border surveillance camp was as remote as could be found in South Vietnam. The road that had once connected Kham Duc village to the Que Son Valley, Highway 14, had fallen into disrepair and could no longer support vehicle traffic. The garrison had to rely on helicopters or fixed-wing aircraft using a single dirt airstrip for all of its supply needs. To make matters worse, the Kham Duc runway—located in a valley six kilometers long and two kilometers wide—was often closed due to poor weather because the bowl-shaped depression trapped the fog and clouds that were common to this area. Even in good weather, pilots of C–130 transports found it nerve-racking to land and take off on the short runway with their big four-engine aircraft.[24]

In early May, the Kham Duc camp contained approximately 500 allied troops. Company A of the 70th Engineer Battalion had arrived in April to repair the runway and to build a hard surface base for a radio navigation facility that would enable aircraft to land in all but the worst conditions. On the east side of the runway was a fortified camp manned by fifteen soldiers from Detachment A–105, Company C, 5th Special Forces Group, and approximately 300 CIDG soldiers. The families of the CIDG troops lived in the village of Kham Duc, some 800 meters north of the airfield. Five small outposts sat atop the hills to the south, west, and north to give warning of an attack.[25]

Seven kilometers to the southwest on a hill overlooking Highway 14 was a second, smaller camp known as Ngok Tavak. The fort, which consisted of sandbagged trenches and bunkers, dated back to the First Indochina War. Presently it was manned by a handful of U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers, three Australian advisers, and the 11th Mobile Strike Force, a company of mostly ethnic Chinese mercenaries. One of the Australians, Capt. John White, commanded the mobile strike force company and was in overall charge of Ngok Tavak.[26]

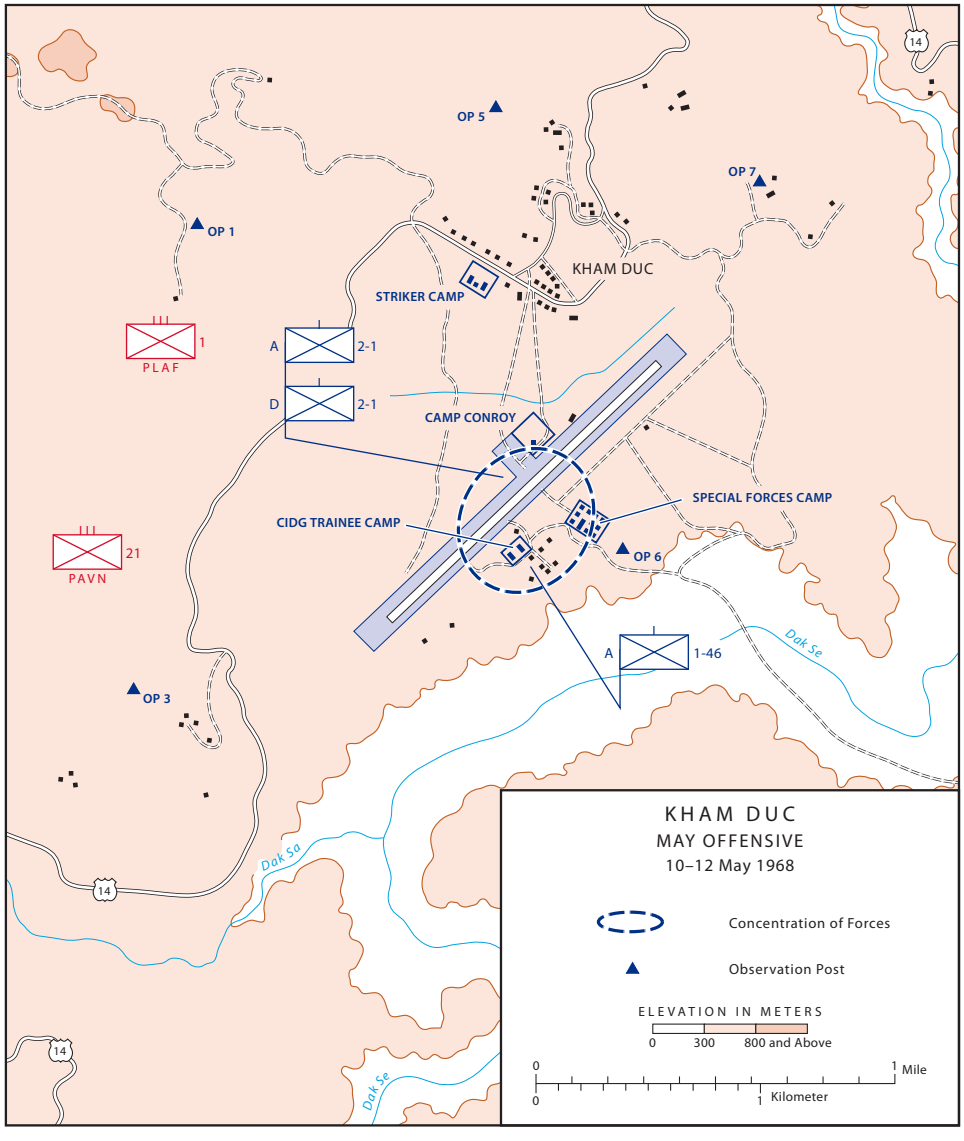
For many years, Kham Duc had fulfilled its border surveillance mission without attracting much attention from the enemy, but things suddenly changed in the spring of 1968. Intelligence reports indicated that North Vietnamese rear service troops were repairing the Laotian section of Highway 14, apparently with an eye toward building a new logistical route to carry men

[23] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, pp. 189, 192; Man, *Time of Upheaval*, pp. 482–83.

[24] Rpt, Americal Div, 16 May 68, sub: Summary of Operation GOLDEN VALLEY, p. 1, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[25] Alan L. Gropman, *Airpower and the Airlift Evacuation of Kham Duc*, USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, vol. V, Monograph 7 (Alabama: Air War College, 1979), p. 2; Traas, *Engineers at War*, pp. 369–72.

[26] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 542.



MAP 43

and supplies into the lowlands of Quang Tin Province. It stood to reason that the enemy would eventually try to neutralize Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak because both lay along the path that the enemy intended to use.

Allied concerns grew in late April when intelligence sources reported large enemy concentrations in the region. Most ominous of all, a CIDG patrol seized a bunker several kilometers east of Kham Duc that contained a sand-table model of the camp. The North Vietnamese soldiers who had been

driven from the command post left behind no documents, however, so the enemy's specific intentions remained unclear.[27]

On 3 May, General Cushman sent a pair of 105-mm. howitzers from Battery D of the 2d Battalion, 13th Marines, to bolster the garrison at Ngok Tavak. The commander of III Marine Amphibious Force also directed General Koster and his Americal Division staff to prepare a relief plan for Kham Duc, Operation GOLDEN VALLEY, if the need arose.[28]

Undetected, two regiments from the *2d PAVN Division* as well as a battalion of 85-mm. howitzers and a battalion of 23-mm. antiaircraft cannons were already poised to strike Kham Duc. The division's remaining element, the *31st Regiment*, stayed back in the Que Son Valley to launch a diversionary attack against Landing Zone CENTER. Allied intelligence failed to note the westward movement of the *1st PLAF* and *21st PAVN Regiments* partly because there were no Special Forces camps, and thus no regular ground patrols, in the region between the Que Son Valley and Kham Duc. The distance between the *2d Division*'s mountain base camps and Kham Duc was also less than thirty kilometers, a distance that could be crossed in only two days. Moreover, the U.S. presence in the Que Son Valley had been reduced from two brigades in late 1967, one fully airmobile, to a single brigade now, the 196th Infantry Brigade, and its helicopter and patrol teams were focused on the valley, not on the mountains to the west.[29]

When the second general offensive began across the country on 5 May, the *31st Regiment* attacked Landing Zone CENTER with mortars and recoilless rifles to draw in reserve forces from the Americal Division that might otherwise be used in the coming battle for Kham Duc. When allied aircraft tried to silence those gun crews, a heavy machine gun company from the *K31 PAVN Anti-Aircraft Battalion* opened fire from carefully hidden positions around the firebase, shooting down two helicopters and an A–1E Skyraider. As the enemy pressure continued, General Koster sent his 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, into the hills around Landing Zone CENTER on 8 May, and the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, soon joined the hunt. The fighting lasted for three weeks, and though it resulted in the deaths of 365 North Vietnamese soldiers, it tied down a major portion of the 196th Infantry Brigade just as the battle for Kham Duc got under way.[30]

The North Vietnamese at Kham Duc began their part of the operation on 10 May with an assault on Ngok Tavak. After a fierce mortar barrage that pounded the fort at 0300, a group of unidentified Vietnamese approached the Marine section of the perimeter, yelling "Don't shoot, don't shoot, friendly, friendly!" The artillerymen held their fire, thinking them to be CIDG sol-

[27] Interv, Maj Paul B. Weber with Capt Daniel Waldo Jr., Co A, 70th Engr Bn, 18 Jun 68, p. 17, VNIT 214, CMH.

[28] Man, *Time of Upheaval*, pp. 482–83; *2d Division*, pp. 102–03; Paper, Gregory W. Sanders, "A New Interpretation of the Battle of Kham Duc, 10–12 May 68," 14 Mar 08, p. 2, delivered at Sixth Triennial Vietnam Symposium, TTU.

[29] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, Americal Div, 7 Aug 68, p. 8, box 66, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[30] Ibid.; *2d Division*, p. 110.

diers. Once they reached the entry point in the wire, the unfamiliar soldiers—North Vietnamese troops wearing CIDG uniforms—opened fire as they rushed through the gap in the wire. The attackers quickly gained a foothold in the fort, and more enemy troops poured out of the jungle and up the hill.[31]

The defenders retreated to the crest of Ngok Tavak where they managed to establish a new line. When AC–47 gunships and tactical air strikes failed to dislodge the enemy, the commander of U.S. Special Forces Detachment A–105, Capt. Christopher J. Silva, who had come to the hill the previous day to inspect its defenses, requested that reinforcements be sent immediately while the defenders still controlled the landing pad on the reverse side of the hill. A flight of four Marine CH–46 helicopters brought more CIDG troops from Kham Duc, but enemy fire disabled the last two aircraft after they touched down. The burning aircraft blocked all but a small part of the landing pad.

The garrison suffered another setback that morning when enemy fire severely wounded Captain Silva. A UH–1 helicopter flew in to evacuate him and a number of other badly wounded men, but panicked CIDG troops swarmed aboard the aircraft when it touched down and it could not take on the injured. The aircraft flew away with several CIDG troops clinging to its skids; all fell to their deaths when their grip gave out.

The remaining defenders decided to abandon Ngok Tavak. The Marine artillerymen fired the last of their shells and then disabled their howitzers. Covered by a protective screen of air strikes, the U.S. and Australian soldiers led the survivors to the southeast, guessing correctly that there were no enemy forces in that direction. Helicopters came to pick them up, the last group arriving at Kham Duc around 1900. The casualty report for Ngok Tavak came to one U.S. soldier and fourteen marines killed, fifty-two U.S. and South Vietnamese personnel wounded, and sixty-four allied troops missing in action (two of them were U.S. marines). The number of enemy killed was unknown.[32]

At 0830 on 10 May, while the fighting at Ngok Tavak was still under way, III Marine Amphibious Force headquarters instructed the Americal Division to initiate Operation GOLDEN VALLEY. No enemy troops had yet appeared in the hills around Kham Duc but the battle at Ngok Tavak suggested a large force was on its way. With most of the 196th Infantry Brigade tied down in the fight near Landing Zone CENTER, General Koster got permission to use the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, a unit from the 196th Infantry Brigade that was currently operating with the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in Thua Thien Province. It would take the better part of the day to airlift that battalion, so Koster sent Company A and the headquarters element of the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, to reinforce Kham Duc in the meantime. The rein-

[31] *2d Division*, p. 104.

[32] Shulimson et al., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 543; Gropman, *Airpower and the Airlift Evacuation of Kham Duc*, p. 8.

forced company arrived at around 1050 and began improving the defenses at the camp.[33]

The 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Robert B. Nelson, arrived by C–130 transport that afternoon along with three 105-mm. howitzers from Battery A of the 3d Battalion, 82d Artillery. The artillerymen set up their battery on the northwestern quarter of the runway next to the engineer compound. Only three of the weapons had made it to the airfield before darkness grounded the transports, but the other two howitzers were expected to arrive early the next morning. General Koster directed Colonel Nelson to take charge of Kham Duc.[34]

The colonel placed Company A, the mortar section, and the command group of the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, on the western side of the airfield. Company D from the battalion guarded the southwestern corner of the base, while Company A of the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, held the southern edge of the runway. Companies B and C from the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, defended the southeastern and northeastern perimeter of the airfield, respectively. In between them lay the Special Forces camp and its garrison of several hundred CIDG troops. Throughout the day, the men of Company A, 70th Engineer Battalion, scurried back and forth across the airfield, using a pair of bulldozers and a front loader to dig trenches and excavate bunkers for the new arrivals. When evening came on the tenth, approximately 1,200 allied soldiers were arrayed in defensive positions along the perimeter of Kham Duc. Small squads also manned each of the five hilltop outposts that surrounded the valley.[35]

Just as daylight began to appear on 11 May, North Vietnamese mortars hidden in the surrounding hills opened fire on Kham Duc. The three 105-mm. howitzers at the north end of the runway banged back defiantly. After C–130s braved the mortar barrage and delivered two additional howitzers to Battery A, these joined the fight around 0930. Three of the battery's five tubes fell silent shortly after noon when a mortar round hit Battery A, killing one man and wounding nineteen, but the surviving artillerymen eventually got two of the damaged howitzers back into action.[36]

While the artillery duel was under way that morning, General Koster and the deputy commander of III Marine Amphibious Force, U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, flew in to review the situation firsthand. Over a dozen North Vietnamese mortars continued to bombard the camp despite repeated air strikes meant to suppress them. The B–52s had dropped several hundred tons of bombs on Highway 14 between Kham Duc and Ngok Tavak, but their effect on the enemy was unclear. Intelligence reports suggested that the entire *1st PLAF Regiment* and probably the *21st PAVN Regiment* were

[33] Rpt, Americal Div, 16 May 68, p. 2.

[34] Rpt, Americal Div, n.d., sub: Statement, Lt Col Robert B. Nelson, CO, 2d Bn, 1st Inf, 196th Bde, p. 3, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[35] Rpt, Americal Div, 16 May 68, p. 1, Encl 1.

[36] Rpt, Capt Kenneth W. Bernard, Battery A, 3d Bn, 82d Arty, 196th Bde, 14 May 68, pp. 1–2, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Kham Duc under mortar attack from the North Vietnamese

near Kham Duc but their exact position could not be known because of the triple-canopy jungle that covered the region. Being so close to their base camps in Laos, the enemy troops had enough food and ammunition at their disposal to carry on the siege for months.[37]

Stilwell and Koster informed General Cushman that the allied position was untenable. Sharing their pessimism, the head of III Marine Amphibious Force reported the bad news to General Westmoreland who agreed that the camp did not have the "defensive potential of Khe Sanh." The III Marine Amphibious Force ordered the Americal Division to prepare for the evacuation for Kham Duc, and General Koster passed the word to Colonel Nelson.[38]

As the commander of the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, and his staff were developing a plan to reduce the perimeter in stages, the *2d Division* launched its main attack. At 0230 on 12 May, the North Vietnamese infantry swarmed over three of the five hilltop observation posts. Colonel Nelson tried to drive

[37] Rpts, Americal Div, 12 May 68, sub: Debriefing of Capt John Connolly, Asst S–3, 2d Bn, 1st Inf, and Capt Ronald Lopes, 3d Bde, 82d Abn Div, Arty Liaison Ofcr, p. 3; Americal Div, n.d., sub: Interv with 1st Lt Peter L. Everts, Co A, 1st Bn, 46th Inf, p. 5. Both in box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP. Rpt, Americal Div, 16 May 68, p. 3.

[38] Rpt, HQ, Americal Div, 16 May 68, sub: Summary of Operation GOLDEN VALLEY, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

off the attackers with helicopter gunships and artillery but to no avail. One of the six-man observation teams was wiped out. Another team made it back with four men wounded, and a third team escaped with North Vietnamese troops snapping at their heels. The loss of the observation posts meant that the enemy now had an unobstructed view of the valley floor and an ideal perch for his mortars and antiaircraft guns.[39]

The evacuation of Kham Duc got under way at around 0800 when a pair of CH–47 helicopters from the 178th Assault Support Helicopter Company flew in from the north. The lead aircraft had just begun its final descent when a burst of machine gun fire raked its tail section. Flames erupted from the Chinook as it landed, and its crew jumped clear of the aircraft while it was still taxiing. The burning helicopter rolled onto one side and came to a shuddering stop, its wreckage blocking part of the runway. Seeing the fate of its partner, the second CH–47 veered away and returned to Landing Zone Ross. Around that same time, enemy gunners shot down a U.S. Air Force A1–E Skyraider that was trying to suppress the ground fire. "We've got a small Khe Sanh going on here," radioed one of the U.S. advisers, Capt. Willard C. Johnson.[40]

At around 0830, enemy infantry began advancing toward the runway from the south as well as from the northwest. Air strikes kept them at a respectful distance, while engineers worked feverishly to remove the destroyed CH–47. The engineers got the hulk off the runway at around 1100 and the evacuation resumed.[41]

The first aircraft, a C–130 transport, landed successfully but was so badly shot up that it took off again after only taking on a few passengers. A C–123 came on its heels, getting out sixty-five people, but it was not until three hours later that the next transport arrived. That aircraft, a C–130, took on a full load of CIDG troops and their dependents. Just as it cleared the northern ridgeline, hostile fire sent it crashing to earth. There were no survivors. The third C–130 aircraft made a safe landing, took on passengers, and got away despite being riddled with bullet holes. Enemy fire disabled the fourth C–130 while taxiing and the crew abandoned the aircraft. The next three C–130 transports to come in had better luck, each taking on a full load of passengers and getting airborne without damage. One of the pilots, Lt. Col. William Boyd Jr., later described the experience as "trying to land in the middle of an exploding munitions dump."[42]

[39] Rpt, Americal Div, n.d., sub: Statement, 2d Lt Gene Alfred Tavineny, 1st Plt Leader, Co A, 1st Bn, 46th Inf, p. 2, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[40] Quote from Transcript, Capt Willard C. Johnson, Advisory Team 2, 12 May 68, p. 3, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP. Interv, Weber with Waldo, 18 Jun 68, p. 37; Gropman, *Airpower and the Airlift Evacuation of Kham Duc*, p. 12.

[41] Interv, Weber with Pfc Thomas Paranoski, Co A, 70th Engr Bn, 18 Jun 68, p. 59, VNIT 214, CMH; Rpt, Americal Div, 14 May 68, sub: Air Support of Golden Valley (Kham Duc), p. 1, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[42] Rpt, Americal Div, 12 May 68, sub: Debriefing of Lt Col William Boyd, Jr., p. 1, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

Meanwhile, Army CH–47 and Marine CH–46 helicopters were picking up the slack, evacuating as many troops and civilians as they could carry, which sometimes amounted to twice their typical passenger loads. There was no room to evacuate the heavier equipment so most of that was destroyed in place. At 1430, an enemy mortar round exploded the ammunition dump, leaving the entire battery position in flames but causing no casualties among the artillerymen who were already marching toward an embarkation point farther down the runway.[43]

The last group to leave Kham Duc was the CIDG company and its Special Forces officers, who hustled on board a C–130 and got airborne before the enemy realized that they were gone. Only minutes after they departed, another C–130 landed and deposited three U.S. Air Force Combat Control Team members who had not gotten word that the evacuation was complete. Receiving a distress call from the men on the ground, a C–123 piloted by Lt. Col. Joe M. Jackson dove through a hail of bullets and landed near the Air Force team. The three stranded Americans dashed onto the taxiing plane, which Colonel Jackson managed to coax into the sky just as North Vietnamese soldiers appeared on the runway. He and everyone on board made it back safely, and for his bravery Colonel Jackson later received the Medal of Honor.[44]

Although the allies had managed to evacuate the garrison of Kham Duc under the very nose of the *2d PAVN Division*, Operation GOLDEN VALLEY had been a close thing. The Americans had lost six helicopters, two C–130 transports, one O–2 spotter plane, and one A1–E fighter-bomber. Seven 105-mm. howitzers that could not be moved were destroyed in place. The allies suffered 25 killed, 120 wounded, and 13 missing. The III Marine Amphibious Force estimated that North Vietnamese losses to be 545 soldiers killed, though no body count could be made. Whatever the cost had been to the *2d Division*, its victory at Kham Duc had cleared the way for North Vietnamese engineers to build a major logistics route in southern I Corps, something which the enemy had formerly lacked.[45]

Ambush in Binh Dinh Province

The enemy high command chose Binh Dinh Province as its main combat theater in the eastern part of II Corps during the second general offensive. The *Military Region 5* commander, General Man, ordered the *3d PAVN Division* to cripple the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry (Mechanized), which provided an armored fist for the two battalions from the 173d Airborne Brigade that operated in Binh Dinh Province. The *3d Division* did not have enough

[43] Rpt, Maj Donald M. Buchwald, S–3, 2d Bn, 1st Inf, 196th Bde, n.d., p. 2, Historians files, CMH.

[44] Rpt, Americal Div, 14 May 68, p. 1.

[45] Rpt, Americal Div, 16 May 68, p. 5.

Armored personnel carriers of Company B, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, move into position in the Bong Son Plain.

supplies to fight an extended campaign, so General Man instructed its senior leaders to execute a few well-prepared ambushes.[46]

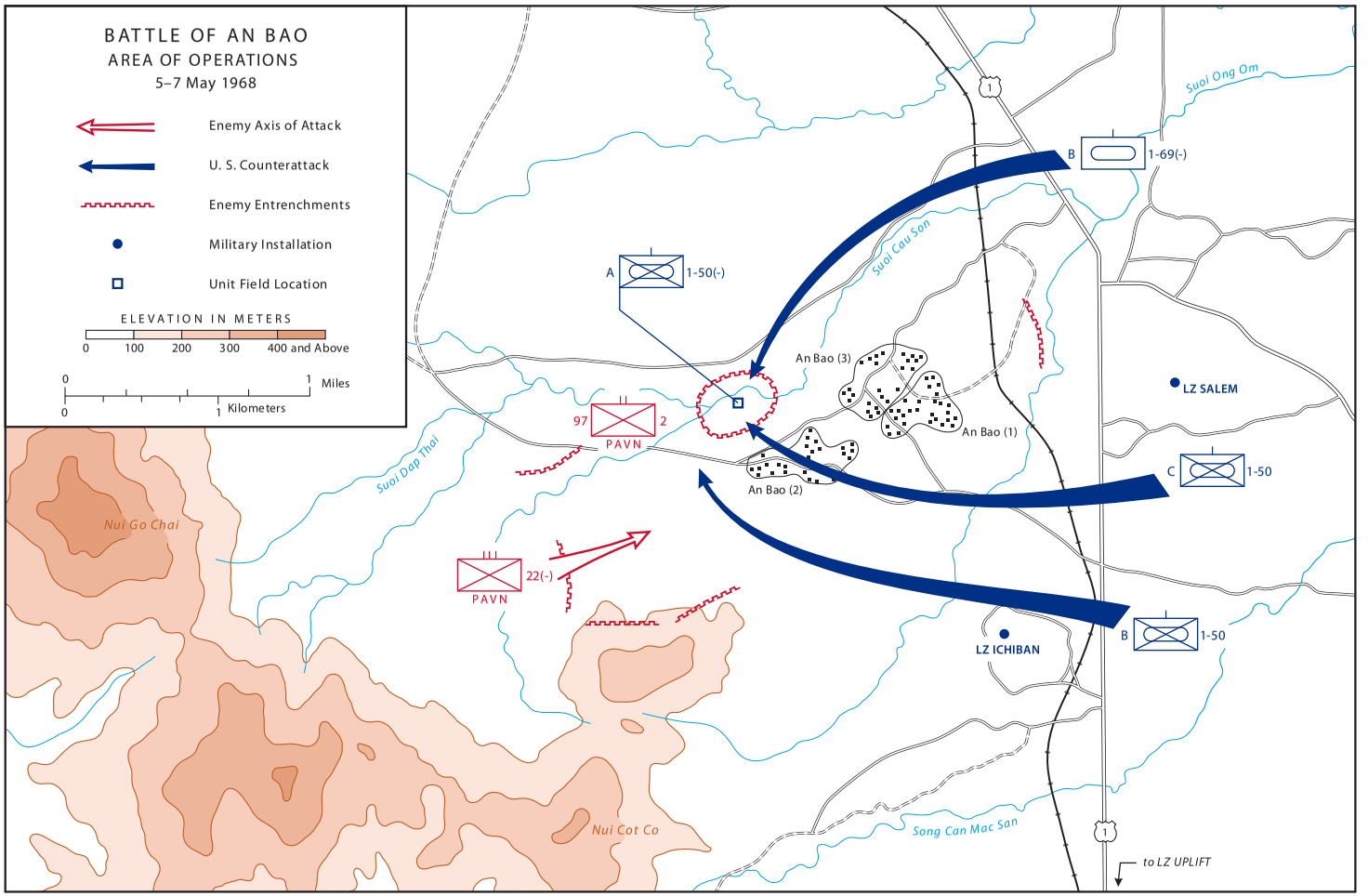
The headquarters and support base of the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, was located at Landing Zone UPLIFT, several kilometers to the south of Phu My District town. Under the command of Lt. Col. John B. Carter, the mechanized unit ranged up and down Highway 1 as far north as the Bong Son Plain and as far south as Phu Yen Province. The commander of the 173d Airborne Brigade, General Allen, also controlled a platoon of tanks from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, which he used to support his 2d and 3d Battalions of the 503d Infantry as they conducted Operation COCHISE along Binh Dinh's central coast.

The *3d Division* started its campaign on 5 May by attacking Landing Zone SALEM, a firebase some thirteen kilometers north of Phu My, and Landing Zone OLLIE three kilometers to the north. Those attacks combined with signal intercepts that indicated the presence of a North Vietnamese regimental headquarters north of Phu My, convinced Colonel Carter to go looking for the enemy without delay.[47]

Carter ordered all available forces at Landing Zone UPLIFT to search the area around An Bao, a village some two kilometers to the west of Landing Zone SALEM, where the enemy command post was thought to be located (*Map 44*). The only troops on hand were two platoons from Company A, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, which had just come back from a grueling mission

[46] Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans,* p. 191; Msg, Abrams MAC 04568 to Westmoreland, 5 Apr 68, p. 4, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[47] *3d Division*, pp. 85–87; AAR, Battle of An Bao, 1st Bn, 50th Inf, 29 May 68, pp. 1–2, folder 1, Bud Harton Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU.


BATTLE OF AN BAO
AREA OF OPERATIONS
5–7 May 1968
Enemy Axis of Attack
U. S. Counterattack
Enemy Entrenchments
Military Installation
Unit Field Location
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
200
300
400 and Above
0
1
Miles
0
1
Kilometers
Suoi Ong Om
Suoi Cau San
Suoi Dap Thai
Nui Go Chai
Nui Cot Co
Song Can Mac San
A 1-50(-)
B 1-69(-)
C 1-50
B 1-50
97 2 PAVN
22(-) PAVN
An Bao (1)
An Bao (2)
An Bao (3)
LZ SALEM
LZ ICHIBAN
to LZ UPLIFT

MAP 44

and had not slept for the last twenty-four hours. Nevertheless, they fired up their nine armored personnel carriers, rounded up a few clerks and mechanics to serve as extra infantrymen, and then headed up Highway 1 at around 0800 on 5 May. The ad hoc force commanded by Lt. Dennis E. Hinton contained a total of fifty-five men.[48]

The column of vehicles traveled up Highway 1 and then turned west near Landing Zone SALEM onto a small dirt road. At around 1000, the force entered a field of dry rice paddies about one kilometer square that was bordered by trees, save for a small gap on the other side. Cautiously, the two platoons and their nine armored personnel carriers rolled into the clearing.

Suddenly, off to the southwest, the Americans saw fifteen figures dressed in black pajamas stand up and run into the trees. The armored personnel carriers switched from column to line formation and advanced in that direction, spraying the trees with machine gun fire. There was no return fire, and the Americans found only a few spider holes and a couple of abandoned infantry packs. With the temperature climbing toward one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and no enemy in sight, Lieutenant Hinton called for a lunch break. He formed his vehicles into a circle near the southern edge of the field, and put a few soldiers into the nearby tree line to act as lookouts.

Just as the troops were finishing their meals, a salvo of rocket-propelled grenades and recoilless rifle rounds slammed into their perimeter, knocking out Hinton's command vehicle and the medical vehicle. Mortar rounds began to land on the U.S. position and enemy machine guns chattered. Realizing that he was surrounded, Lieutenant Hinton radioed for help.

The enemy forces that had sprung the ambush—the *97th Battalion, 2d Regiment*, and the *7th* and *9th Battalions, 22d Regiment*—began closing in on the trapped Americans. Two armored personnel carriers surged forward with their .50-caliber and M60 machine guns blazing, trying to buy more time, but a volley of rocket-propelled grenades disabled both vehicles. Another armored personnel carrier, this one equipped with a flamethrower, took a hit and began to burn furiously. The remaining four vehicles and some dismounted soldiers retreated through the gap where they had entered the clearing. They made their escape and headed back to Highway 1. In the confusion, they left behind fifteen men who formed a small perimeter several hundred meters to the northwest of where the five disabled vehicles lay.[49]

When word of the disaster reached Landing Zone UPLIFT, Company C, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, boarded its M113s and headed toward An Bao. The company commander, Capt. Jay C. Copley, had almost no information to go on; he only knew that Company A was in serious trouble. Around that same time, perhaps ten or twelve minutes past noon, the commander of Company B from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, Capt. Timothy J. Grogan, received orders from Colonel Carter to round up as many tanks as he could

[48] AAR, Battle of An Bao, 1st Bn, 50th Inf, pp. 1–2; Memoir (or Ltr), James E. Fitzgerald, 5 May 68, Historians files, CMH.

[49] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 173d Abn Bde, 15 Aug 68, pp. 30–31, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; *3d Division*, p. 82.

find and proceed to the ambush site. Seven M48 tanks left the base a short time later and sped north on Highway 1.

Captain Grogan, who was as much in the dark about the situation as Captain Copley, overshot the road to An Bao by some 1,500 meters. When he finally did turn west off of Highway 1, one of his tanks got stuck in the mud. He left another vehicle there to pull it out while he continued west with his five remaining tanks. While his vehicles were still more than a kilometer away from the battle site, enemy bullets began to ping off the hulls. Fearing an ambush by rocket-propelled grenades or recoilless rifles, Grogan and his men slowed down and raked the surrounding brush with machine gun fire as they finished the last leg of their journey.

Captain Copley, who knew that stretch of Highway 1 better than Captain Grogan, made the correct turnoff and thus reached the ambush site first. He entered the clearing just as the North Vietnamese infantry was closing in on the fifteen soldiers from Company A who had been left behind. Company C's armored personnel carriers quickly formed a protective circle around the survivors, many of whom were too wounded to fight. The North Vietnamese vastly outgunned the Americans and they soon killed several men in Company C and wounded another thirty, including Captain Copley. Lying on the floors of the armored personnel carriers, the injured cried out in pain as a torrent of hot, empty brass cascaded down on them from the chattering machine guns and rifles of their comrades.

Just when things were looking desperate, Captain Grogan's tanks burst onto the scene. The roar of their 90-mm. cannon gave the enemy pause, and the combined force made a fighting withdrawal out of the clearing. The Americans retired to a safer location so they could reorganize, evacuate their wounded, and obtain more ammunition. Air and artillery strikes pummeled the tree lines to pin down the North Vietnamese.

At around 1700, a platoon of tanks dispatched from Landing Zone ENGLISH and Company B from the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, led by Capt. Ronald G. Dennis, arrived at the place where Captains Copley and Grogan were reorganizing their troops. Now nearly a battalion strong, the combined force moved back into the clearing to reengage the enemy.

Heavy fire erupted once more from the opposite tree line. The air and artillery strikes that had hammered the woods for nearly five hours seemed to have had little effect on the enemy's willingness or ability to fight. As the vehicles rolled forward, their crews were surprised to discover that the once-dry rice field was filling up with water. Enemy soldiers—or perhaps an errant bomb—had destroyed a dike, and the clearing was now too swampy to be crossed. The armored vehicles withdrew to establish a night defense position several hundred meters away, while air and artillery strikes continued.

The North Vietnamese probed the U.S. perimeter at 0330 on 6 May. Several hundred soldiers hit the night defense position from the northwest, advancing behind a curtain of mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades. The barrage detonated a large pile of ammunition, injuring several Americans, but the defenders beat back the assault. The enemy withdrew from the field ninety minutes later, dragging away dozens of dead and wounded soldiers.

Three Americans died in the fight and another eighteen suffered wounds. It proved to be the enemy's parting blow; a search of the woods the next morning revealed only empty trenches and bunkers along with some destroyed North Vietnamese equipment.

The official figures for the Battle of An Bao came to 117 confirmed enemy dead and around 70 weapons captured. Eighteen Americans had been killed, most of them from Company A of the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, and another ninety-one wounded. One of the dead was the leader of the original task force from Company A, Lieutenant Hinton. The Army posthumously awarded Hinton, who had previously received two Bronze Star Medals for Valor, a Meritorious Bronze Star for his actions at An Bao. The commander of Company C, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, Captain Copely, and Captain Grogan of Company B, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, both received the Distinguished Service Cross for the leadership they demonstrated during that difficult engagement.

Colonel Carter got the chance for some payback a few days later when he learned that the *2d Regiment* had been spotted near the hamlet of Trung Hoi (2), at the mouth of the 506 Valley to the west of Landing Zone Uplift. Taking no chances this time, he ordered Companies B and C, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, and a pair of M42 Dusters to investigate the area.[50]

On the morning of 11 May, the mechanized force traveled to a stretch of Route 506 that was some four kilometers west of Landing Zone Uplift. The task force proceeded cautiously because vegetation up to three meters high restricted visibility on either side. The Americans left the road and soon found an unoccupied but well-maintained battalion-size trench complex. The two companies, now separated by a distance of some 650 meters, formed defensive perimeters and sent out scouts to reconnoiter the area.

Shortly after 1100, scouts reported seeing North Vietnamese soldiers moving along Route 506. No sooner had both companies opened fire when they themselves came under attack from several directions at once. The volume of fire suggested that the entire *2d Regiment* had joined the fight. When waves of enemy infantry began to crash against Company B's perimeter, it initiated a fighting withdrawal toward Company C.

The danger was not over when the two companies joined up. A rocket-propelled grenade hit the command vehicle of Company B, wounding its company commander, Captain Dennis. Enemy bullets had disabled half of the .50-caliber machine guns in Company C and many of its M60 machine guns had overheated because their operators had been firing them nonstop. Before long, however, air and artillery strikes began to suppress some of the enemy's fire. The support allowed the two companies to withdraw several hundred meters down Route 506 to Trung Hoi (2) where helicopters brought in supplies and evacuated the wounded.

[50] The following section is based on AAR, Battle of Trung Hoi (2), 1st Bn, 50th Inf, 11–13 May 68, 5 Jun 68, folder 1, Bud Harton Collection, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU; *3d Division*, pp. 85–86.

An M48 tank from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, in Binh Dinh

After the injured men had been flown out, the combined strength of the two companies stood at only ninety-six men. A platoon of tanks from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, arrived a short time later, but that was all the help that was forthcoming at the moment. Despite being only a company strong, the force went back on the attack and regained contact with the enemy at 1640. After two hours of fighting, the composite company pulled back to get additional ammunition, but by that point the enemy had begun to disperse into the nearby hills. The shooting gradually died away and the night passed without incident.

The enemy, having withdrawn to the village of Trinh Van two kilometers to the southwest, was nowhere to be found when the Americans moved up Route 506 the following morning of 12 May. There were only sixty-one enemy bodies to be found because the North Vietnamese had policed up the battlefield during the night. The Americans estimated that they had actually killed at least 200 North Vietnamese soldiers in the previous day's action, which became known as the Battle of Trung Hoi (2). U.S. losses came to three killed and forty wounded, a relatively small toll considering the weight of fire the Americans had faced and the determined nature of the enemy's attack. Most surprising of all, not a single armored vehicle had been disabled or destroyed during the battle.

Two weeks later, the same battalions that had faced off at An Bao and Trung Hoi met for a third time in what proved to be the *3d Division*'s last

major engagement of the May offensive. Colonel Carter, having heard from informants that the *2d Regiment* was in the village of Trinh Van near the mouth of the 506 Valley, sent Company B and several platoons from Company C, 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, to check out the settlement on the morning of 25 May.[51]

The Americans turned off Route 506 when they were two kilometers southeast of Trinh Van. Their vehicles rolled over newly planted rice fields, low hedges, and the occasional small stream as they approached the village. When the force got within a few hundred meters of the largest hamlet, Trinh Van (1), at around 1100, the enemy opened fire from a line of well-camouflaged bunkers that stood between the Americans and the hamlet. The bunkers were not only difficult to spot but they were also remarkably sturdy, having been constructed from wood, earth, and bricks. The North Vietnamese had enjoyed ample time to sight their weapons on the ground Companies B and C now occupied. It quickly became clear that the incoming mortar, recoilless rifle, and machine gun fire was too heavy for a frontal assault to succeed.

The commander of Company B, 1st Lt. James H. Lee, attempted to maneuver his unit around the enemy's right flank, but his command vehicle took a direct hit from a 60-mm. mortar shell that mortally wounded the artillery forward observer and wounded several other crewmen. Lieutenant Lee was not incapacitated, but his vehicle threw a tread a short time later as it tried to cross a small stream. Realizing that the enemy's right flank could not be turned, he tried the same maneuver on the other flank after switching vehicles. That too failed in the face of heavy fire. Lieutenant Lee pulled the task force back several hundred meters to reorganize.

Meanwhile, a relief force composed of the reconnaissance platoon from the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, and a platoon of tanks from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, was on its way from Landing Zone Uplift. The five tanks joined Companies C and D, while the reconnaissance platoon took up a position some 500 meters to its rear at a stream crossing that offered the most direct way back to Landing Zone Uplift.

As Lieutenant Lee and the rest of the force under his command passed around ammunition and refueled their vehicles from supplies delivered by helicopter, air strikes and helicopter gunships worked over the North Vietnamese positions on the outskirts of Trinh Van. The enemy sent forward a swarm of two-man antitank teams armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers, but falling bombs obliterated at least six of the teams as they crawled toward the circle of vehicles. None of the bombs got close enough to hit the tanks or armored personnel carriers, whose machine guns targeted any sign of movement.

Lieutenant Lee resumed the assault on Trinh Van (1) at 1612, but hostile fire stopped the advance well short of the village. With too few troops to outflank the enemy and not enough firepower to blast his way into the village, Lee decided to pull back for the night.

[51] The following section is based on AAR, Battle of Trinh Van (1), 1st Bn, 50th Inf, 11 Jun 68, box 6, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

When the Americans reconnoitered Trinh Van on the morning of 26 May, the enemy had vanished. The *2d Regiment* had slipped away into the western hills during the night, leaving behind thirty-eight bodies in and around the elaborate fortifications that ringed the village. One American had been killed in action and twenty others wounded. Mines had damaged one tank and one armored personnel carrier, but none had been disabled or destroyed as a result of enemy fire.

In all, the *3d Division*'s campaign in Binh Dinh Province had fallen short of General Man's goal to cripple the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry. The division had scored a notable success at An Bao by destroying five armored personnel carriers and by knocking one of the battalion's companies out of action. In the two battles that followed, however, the *2d* and *22d Regiments* had failed to destroy any more armored vehicles, which left the *3d Division* in much the same position in early June as it had been at the start of the May offensive. With the division's ammunition and medical supplies running low after six months of fighting, General Man ordered the *2d* and *22d Regiments* to move north into Quang Ngai Province where they would remain for the duration of the wet season, leaving the *18th Regiment* behind to defend the division's base camps.

The short-lived and mostly ineffective enemy offensive had also failed to arrest Binh Dinh's pacification program, which continued to make steady progress throughout May and into June. There were now fifty-one Revolutionary Development teams in the field, and most of the hamlets they served were showing good results. The drive to recruit new territorial soldiers was so successful that the Popular Forces training center at Phu Cat could hardly keep up with the influx. In May, over a 1,000 new recruits were undergoing basic training, many more than the facility had been designed to accommodate. Likewise, the Phoenix (*Phuong Hoang*) program had apprehended so many Viet Cong suspects that Binh Dinh's detainee facilities were filled to bursting. New facilities were under construction, but until then the province chief, Colonel Tho, had to issue orders to reduce the number of detainees brought in. With security on Highways 1 and 19 remaining good, trade flourished with little regard to the Communist offensive.[52]

Renewed Pressure at Ben Het and Dak Pek

The third and final area that General Man targeted during the May offensive was western Kontum Province. Continuing a strategy that the *B3 Front* had been pursuing for several years, he resolved to chip away at the system of firebases and border surveillance camps that the allies had erected across the highlands. It was presently beyond his power to overrun a major camp like Dak To or Ben Het, but the battalion- and company-size outposts that shielded them were much more vulnerable. It also suited his purpose

[52] Special Joint Narrative Rpts, RD, Binh Dinh Province, 31 May 68, pp. 1–4; RD, Binh Dinh Province, 30 Jun 68, pp. 16–18. Both in Historians files, CMH.

to wage a series of limited battles rather than one big battle at the moment because his main strike force, the *325C Division*, had recently come south after an extended deployment at Khe Sanh and needed to learn how to fight in this unfamiliar environment of steep mountains and thick forests.

When the second general offensive got under way on 5 May, enemy gunners shelled the three principal cities in the *B3 Front*—Kontum City, Pleiku City, and Ban Me Thuot—though only briefly and without causing much damage. Only two major ground attacks took place that day. In the first, a battalion from the *32d Regiment* attacked a convoy on Highway 14 to the south of Kontum City, but the ambush turned into a rout when troops from the South Vietnamese 3d Armored Cavalry arrived on the scene. The Americans reported nine killed and sixteen missing, while the North Vietnamese lost 122 soldiers and a good deal of equipment.[53]

The second action of the day was more significant. At 0445, a battalion of North Vietnamese troops from the *325C Division* assaulted Hill 990, a small outpost two kilometers south of Ben Het that was manned by a company of Montagnard irregulars and a pair of U.S. advisers. The enemy struck with such speed and ferocity that he broke through the perimeter before supporting artillery could be brought to bear. Ten minutes later, the enemy suddenly withdrew. After a two-hour lull, a mass of North Vietnamese soldiers rushed up the hill, fought their way into the outpost for a second time, and then vanished back into the woods. When the dazed defenders counted their losses, they found that one of the advisers had been killed and the other could not be located. Sixty-six of the irregulars had been killed, wounded, or gone missing. The defenders found sixteen dead North Vietnamese.

After that trial run, the *325C Division* turned its attention to Firebase 25, a 4th Infantry Division outpost some three kilometers northeast of Ben Het that contained Companies C and D of the 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry. Just before midnight on 9 May, a reinforced battalion from the *101D Regiment* and a sapper company stormed up the slope to attack the firebase, which proved to be a much tougher target than Hill 990. The garrison repulsed the Communists after a three-hour firefight, losing three dead and killing at least forty-seven North Vietnamese.[54]

The hills around Dak To remained relatively quiet for the next two weeks, but the I Field Force commander, General Rosson, was not convinced that the danger had passed. On 24 May, Rosson created Task Force MATTHEWS to sweep the hills around Dak To. Commanded by the assistant division commander of the 4th Infantry Division, Brig. Gen. Don R. Hickman, the force consisted of five infantry battalions from the 4th Infantry Division and three from the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Before the task force moved out, Rosson arranged for eighty-eight B–52 sorties to level the jungle

[53] Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review, 14 May 68, pp. 2, 4, document 8; Intel Cable, CIA, 5 May 68, sub: II Corps Situation Report as of 1400 Hours, pp. 1–2, document 60, Vietnam-CIA Cables, May 1968 (1), box 243, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

[54] Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans,* p. 194; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 19, I FFV, 5–11 May 68, 11 May 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

in which the task force would be operating so subsequent air and artillery strikes would be more effective.[55]

Before the last of the ARC LIGHT bombing raids had been completed, and possibly prompted into premature action by them, the *325C Division* moved to the attack. On the evening of 25 May, the *95C* and *101D Regiments* assaulted Firebase 29, a 4th Infantry Division outpost four kilometers southwest of Ben Het that stood atop Hill 824. At 1730, rockets and mortar rounds slammed into the base, sending the defenders, Companies A and C of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, along with elements of the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, and Battery B of the 6th Battalion, 29th Artillery, scurrying for cover. The defenders responded with 81-mm. mortars, 106-mm. recoilless rifles, and 4.2-inch mortars. Nearby firebases began pummeling the lower slopes of Hill 824 with their own artillery. An AC–47 fixed-wing gunship soon came on station and sent a cascade of 7.62-mm. machine gun fire into the woods surrounding the camp.[56]

The North Vietnamese concentrated their assault on the southwestern edge of the perimeter where the Americans had carved a helicopter landing zone out of the hillside. At around 2000, North Vietnamese troops from the *120th Sapper Battalion* began to demolish the razor wire with satchel charges. The defenders thinned the ranks of the sappers, but within fifteen minutes or so the enemy had blown several gaps in the wire. Hundreds of North Vietnamese infantrymen converged on the location, firing their weapons as they came.

The defenders cut down the charging enemy by the score but they kept coming. North Vietnamese recoilless rifle teams and rocket grenadiers eventually knocked out the bunkers that protected the landing zone, and at 2200 a surge of enemy soldiers finally overwhelmed that weakened sector. Once inside the perimeter the enemy split up. Some troops went left or right along a communications trench, seizing half a dozen bunkers along the way, while others continued climbing for the summit where the command post lay.

At this critical juncture, the task force commander ordered Company A on the other side of the hill to send a reaction force. The unit, which was dealing with an attack of its own, could muster only fifteen men for the job. As the detachment hurried over to contain the penetration, the group split into three five-man sections so they could engage the enemy on the left, right, and center. The counterattack threw the North Vietnamese off balance, making them fall back to take refuge in several bunkers.

The reorganized U.S. troops pummeled the enemy-held bunkers with recoilless rifles and M72 light antitank rockets. When the supply of M72s ran out, the defenders filled several 155-mm. shell canisters with gasoline and then placed the makeshift bombs on the bunkers along with incendiary grenades to set them alight.

[55] Interv, George L. MacGarrigle with Maj Gen Charles P. Stone, 13 Mar 74, p. 47, Historians files, CMH.

[56] The following section is based on Rpt, 1st Bn, 8th Inf, 13 Sep 68, sub: Recommendation for Presidential Unit Citation, Historians files, CMH.

The enemy's situation inside the firebase became increasingly desperate. Nonstop air and artillery strikes prevented additional North Vietnamese from passing through the wire. Without reinforcements, the Communist soldiers who held the bunkers near the landing zone slowly began to lose their foothold. After one last desperate effort to reach them failed at 0130, the North Vietnamese began a slow withdrawal from the battlefield. When dawn came, there were still a few enemy troops left alive in three of the bunkers, but by 0730 the Americans had killed or captured all of the holdouts.

The battle's final tally came to 198 enemy soldiers killed. North Vietnamese prisoners estimated that an additional 150 of their comrades had died and around 300 were wounded. U.S. losses numbered eighteen killed and sixty-two wounded, but the small garrison could take pride in the fact that it had bested two North Vietnamese regiments in what ended up being the largest battle to take place in the Central Highlands during the May offensive.

The battle for Firebase 29 had only just concluded when I Field Force received intelligence that the *21st Regiment* of the *2d PAVN Division*, a unit that normally operated in the Que Son Valley area of central I Corps, had dropped down into II Corps and was advancing on the Dak Pek border surveillance camp in the extreme northwestern corner of Kontum Province. The information set off alarm bells at General Stone's 4th Infantry Division headquarters. As the general later recalled, "Dak Pek, other than Duc Lap, was the only place I felt I might lose." The camp was a few kilometers from the Laotian border and difficult to reach during the monsoon season because bad weather frequently grounded flights in that part of II Corps.[57]

At Stone's instructions, General Hickman sent two battalions from the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, to secure the high ground overlooking the Special Forces camp. Stone arranged for B–52s to blast the surrounding terrain. The quickness of the allied reaction seemed to take the *21st Regiment* by surprise. Whether it had intended to attack Dak Pek or simply wanted to create a diversion to disrupt allied operations around Dak To, the North Vietnamese regiment was no longer in a position to do either without risking annihilation. Choosing the fastest route to safety, the enemy force retreated into Laos.[58]

Just as the crisis was abating at Dak Pek, violence flared again in the Ben Het region. On 30 May, the *101D Regiment* emerged from hiding to attack Hill 990 for a second time. North Vietnamese gunners began to pound the outpost at 0230 with 120-mm. mortars and 105-mm. howitzers. Sappers crawled forward to reconnoiter its defenses. Then, at 0500, a battalion of Communist soldiers surged up the hill. This time they found it occupied not by Montagnard irregulars but by Company D, 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry. Well-coordinated defensive fire stopped the assault, and the North Vietnamese withdrew after just thirty minutes. When the defenders checked the hillside at daybreak, they found forty-three enemy bodies and estimated

[57] Interv, MacGarrigle with Stone, 13 Mar 74, p. 53.

[58] AAR, Opn MATTHEWS, 4th Div, 13 Jun 68, p. 9, box 22, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

that the North Vietnamese had carried away many more. The Americans lost seven killed and fifty-six wounded.[59]

The second fight at Hill 990 proved to be the last battle for the *325C Division* during the May offensive. Task Force MATTHEWS continued to search the hills near Ben Het, but it gradually became clear to General Hickman that the *101D* and *95C Regiments* had withdrawn into Laos. With the threat receding, the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, began to turn over the firebases it occupied near Dak Pek and Ben Het to the 4th Infantry Division and to make its way back to III Corps. General Rosson disbanded Task Force MATTHEWS on 12 June so the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, could turn its full attention back to Operation MACARTHUR and respond quickly to whatever new threats emerged in Kontum Province.[60]

In the larger scheme of the war, the fighting that took place in Kontum and Binh Dinh Provinces produced no discernable changes in the balance of power. The fighting around Dong Ha had cost both sides dearly; the allies had pushed the enemy away from that vital Marine logistical and command center, but the North Vietnamese retained the ability to penetrate the Strong Point Obstacle System and launch new attacks in the future if they were willing to pay the price. In Binh Dinh's lowlands, the *3d PAVN Division* had nearly wiped out a company from the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, but had done little to slow the revitalization of the South Vietnamese pacification program. The seizure of Kham Duc, on the other hand, was a clear victory for the enemy for it opened a new infiltration route that might one day link the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Que Son Valley. In political terms, however, the seizure of a remote outpost did little to improve the enemy's prestige or diplomatic clout. For that, North Vietnamese leaders pinned their hopes on their main effort, a multidivision attack on Saigon that aimed to demoralize, rather than liberate, the city's residents.

[59] Ibid., p. 2.
[60] Ibid., p. 10.

17

Mini-Tet in Saigon

When Colonel Dac turned himself in to government authorities on 19 April, he revealed many details about the imminent enemy offensive in the Capital Military District. As many as ten regiments would take part, he said, as well as several rocket artillery units. Around half of the attack force would remain on the outskirts of Gia Dinh Province to protect the enemy's lines of communications, particularly the Saigon River corridor northwest of the city and the Dong Nai River corridor northeast of the capital. The remaining infantry intended to penetrate Saigon from all four points of the compass to strike government buildings such as the Independence Palace, the Joint General Staff headquarters, and the Chi Hoa prison. The main thrust, an attack spearheaded by the *9th PLAF Division*, would come from the west.[1]

As a result of Dac's testimony, Generals Weyand and Khang thickened allied defenses around Saigon. The II Field Force commander instructed General Mearns from the 25th Infantry Division to move part of his 3d Brigade from Tay Ninh Province to the zone of his 2d Brigade, near Cu Chi in Hau Nghia Province. Weyand ordered General Ware from the 1st Infantry Division to move part of his 1st Brigade in Binh Long Province down to southern Binh Duong Province to help the 2d Brigade, 1st Division. In addition, he ordered the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, to block the trail system that issued from the southwestern edge of War Zone D. Weyand concentrated his aerial reconnaissance missions over the central portion of III Corps and directed II Field Force's long-range patrol teams, augmented by elements of the 5th Special Forces, to monitor the infiltration routes that led to the capital.

Closer in, a dozen U.S. battalions ringed the periphery of Gia Dinh Province, ready to assist the South Vietnamese forces in the Capital Military District if needed. Two units from the 9th Infantry Division—the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, and the 4th Battalion, 39th Infantry—guarded the southern approaches to Saigon along with the 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry, from the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light). Four units from the 25th Infantry Division screened the western side of the capital—the 1st and 2d Battalions, 27th Infantry, the mechanized 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, and the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry. The 1st Infantry Division placed the 1st and 2d Battalions, 18th Infantry, northeast of the capital, while the three remaining units from the 199th Infantry Brigade guarded the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex. Though Weyand hoped to intercept a significant number of enemy units before they reached that inner ring,

[1] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 2053, 19 Apr 68, sub: VC Commentaries on the Recent General Offensive, pp. 7–10, Historians files, CMH.

he directed his three division commanders to be ready to commit more units into the Capital Military District if needed.[2]

A dozen elite South Vietnamese battalions joined the Americans at the inner ring around Saigon. The III Corps commander, General Khang, placed three Marine battalions east of the capital, a trio of airborne battalions north of Tan Son Nhut, and three ranger battalions west and south of the city. Khang kept another ranger battalion in Gia Dinh Province as a reserve, and two airborne battalions at the Airborne Division headquarters on Tan Son Nhut Air Base. In his other role as commander of the Capital Military District, Khang also controlled two military police battalions and a security battalion in the city, a second security battalion and two reconnaissance battalions at Tan Son Nhut, as well as more than 6,000 city policemen subordinate to General Nguyen Loan, the head of the National Police.[3]

As April drew to a close, allied intelligence picked up signs of enemy activity consistent with preparations for an offensive. In northern Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces, enemy mortar crews shelled more than a dozen border surveillance camps and firebases between 28 April and 3 May. Analysts at II Field Force interpreted the shelling as an attempt "to draw attention away from his primary intentions in the central corps zone" and to pin down allied border patrols, while Communist troops and supplies crossed the frontier. Aerial infrared and chemical detection missions flown over War Zone C also indicated a surge in activity from the Fishhook region down to the Saigon River corridor.[4]

MACV analysts noticed similar warning signs west of Saigon. In Hau Nghia Province, several South Vietnamese outposts that were located in the infiltration corridor between the Saigon River and Highway 1 reported being attacked by unusually large and well-armed enemy units, not the typical district guerrillas they were used to seeing. On the second of May, Troop D of the 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry, confirmed the presence of main force units in the lower Saigon River corridor when it discovered a battalion from the *271st Regiment* in the farmlands south of Cu Chi. At the 25th Infantry Division base camp, General Mearns dispatched an ad hoc group known as Task Force DUNLOP, composed of elements from the 2d Battalion, 34th Infantry, the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, and the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, to intercept the battalion and any others that might be in the area. The mechanized force pinned the unit to the edge of a deep swamp and battered it for two days, killing 213 soldiers, until the survivors fled into the swamp. Overall, the pattern of activity north and west of Saigon in the first days of May led analysts at II Field Force to conclude that "a resumption of the offensive is imminent" and

[2] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, 14 Aug 68, pp. 6–8, box 18, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[3] Ibid., p. 23; Quarterly Evaluation, 1 Apr–30 Jun 68, MACV, 30 Jun 68, p. 35, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Task Force HAY, II FFV, n.d., p. 3, Historians files, CMH; AAR, The Saigon Offensive, Phase III, 20th Mil Hist Det, 21 Jun 68, p. 1, Encl 9, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, p. 22.

[4] Quote from Periodic Intel Rpt no. 18, II FFV, 28 Apr–4 May 68, 4 May 68, pp. 2, 7–8, Historians files, CMH.

that "the enemy will undoubtedly attempt a spectacular event . . . in order to improve his position" at the Paris peace talks set to begin on the tenth of May.[5]

Opening Clashes to the East and North of Saigon

The second wave of the general offensive began at 0400 on 5 May with a Viet Cong mortar attack on the Newport Bridge, a two-lane concrete and steel span that conveyed traffic across the Saigon River from the capital to Bien Hoa. When the barrage ended a few minutes later, several hundred soldiers from the *4th Thu Duc Battalion* and the *2d Battalion, 274th Regiment*, emerged from a nearby rubber plantation and assaulted the men from the South Vietnamese 5th Marine Battalion that were guarding the eastern end of the bridge (*see Map 45*). The assault failed.[6]

The enemy made a second attempt to cut Saigon off from Bien Hoa at 0500. Elements from the *1st* and *3d Battalions* of the *Dong Nai Regiment* attacked the Binh Loi Bridge, where Highway 1 crossed the Saigon River approximately two kilometers northwest of the Newport Bridge. Troops from the South Vietnamese 6th Marine Battalion prevented sapper teams from getting close enough to destroy the bridge with satchel charges. The North Vietnamese eventually withdrew after losing fifty-four killed and five captured. Within a few hours, both of the major bridges between Saigon and Bien Hoa were open for military traffic.[7]

As those two attacks were taking place, a company of North Vietnamese soldiers from the *K3 Battalion*, all wearing South Vietnamese uniforms, crossed the Saigon River in sampans. Making it to the other side without being spotted, the disguised enemy continued on foot to the Phan Than Gian Bridge, one of the crossing points that spanned the canal that traced the northern edge of downtown Saigon. Regional Forces soldiers and South Vietnamese marines guarding the bridge challenged the new arrivals. Unable to give the correct password, the enemy opened fire and stormed the bridge, but the South Vietnamese repulsed the assault. When more government troops arrived on the scene, the North Vietnamese fell back to the suburb of Thi Nghe where they continued the fight. A few hours later, General Loan arrived with more policemen and took charge of the clearing operation. As he was leading his men, M16 in hand, a bullet struck him in the thigh. The wound nearly proved to be fatal. General Loan spent the next several months in recovery, and the debilitating effects of his injury forced him to resign as National Police director.[8]

As the fighting got under way on the eastern side of Saigon, Generals Weyand and Khang learned that the enemy had entered the western outskirts

[5] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, 1 Aug 68, p. 7, box 72, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[6] AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, p. 2.

[7] Intel Rpt, DoD, no. 6028187168, 11 May 68, sub: OB of the Dong Nai Regt, p. 7, document 16, Vietnam-Enemy Order of Battle, vol. 1a, box 151, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, p. 2.

[8] Quarterly Evaluation, 1 Apr–30 Jun 68, MACV, p. 34.

Members of the South Vietnamese Popular Forces defend a bridge against the Viet Cong.

of the city. Ambush patrols from the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion screening the farmlands west of Phu Tho reported numerous Viet Cong squad- and platoon-size groups moving through their sector. When fired upon, most of the enemy soldiers tried to evade contact and continued moving toward the city. When the South Vietnamese Airborne Task Force north of Tan Son Nhut and allied forces south of the city reported little or no enemy activity, General Khang concluded that the main Communist effort was indeed originating from the west. He moved the South Vietnamese 33d Ranger Battalion into Phu Lam, three kilometers south of the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion, to block Route 10 into Cholon, and ordered the South Vietnamese 38th Ranger Battalion to move from southern Saigon to fill the gap between Phu Lam and Phu Tho.[9]

At II Field Force headquarters in Long Binh, General Weyand ordered his deputy, Maj. Gen. John H. Hay Jr., to establish a forward command post at Camp Le Van Duyet, just as General Ware had done during Tet, to control the U.S. units that would soon be fighting on the periphery of Saigon. Hay and

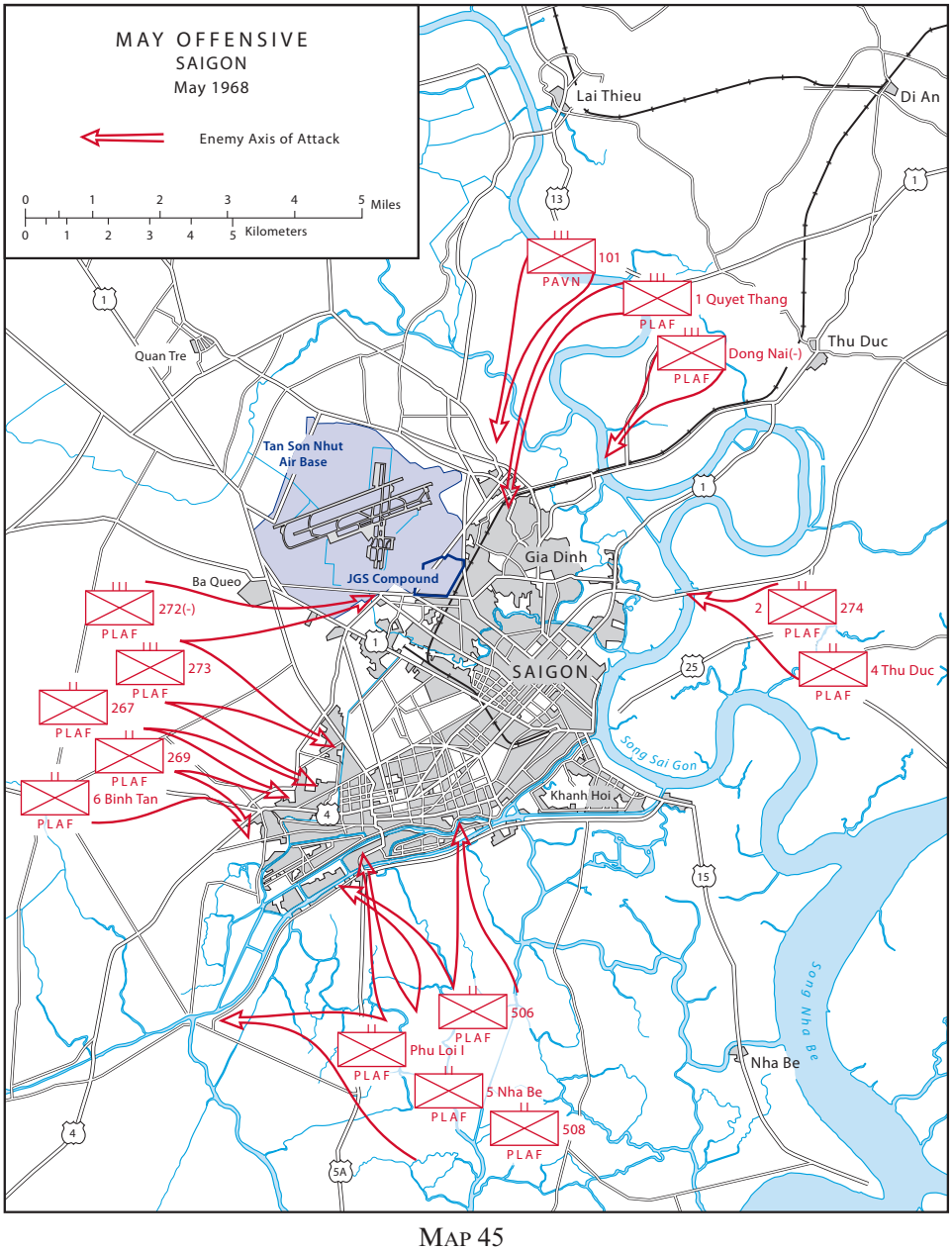
[9] Intel Cable, CIA, 15 May 68, sub: Activities of Elements of the 31st Viet Cong Regiment during the May Attack on Saigon, pp. 1–5, document 9, Vietnam-CIA Cables, May 1968 (2), box 243, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Rpt, 20th Mil Hist Det, 3 Jun 68, sub: The Saigon Offensive, 5–12 May 1968, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

South Vietnamese rangers during the May offensive

some staff from II Field Force flew into Saigon at around 0700 to organize HURRICANE FORWARD, which Weyand planned to activate by the morning of the sixth.

While those preparations were under way, General Weyand received word that Colonel Thebaud's 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, had engaged several enemy units between the Phu Loi and Di An base camps. The first battle had begun when a pair of companies from the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, had gone to the hamlet of Tan Hiep, three kilometers northeast of Di An, to investigate a tip from local authorities about a Viet Cong ammunition dump. The troops came under heavy fire from machine guns and recoilless rifles as they tried to enter the hamlet. Colonel Thebaud dispatched two more companies of the 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry, along with several troops from the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and Troop D of the 7th Squadron, 1st Cavalry. The task force first surrounded Tan Hiep and fought its way through the hamlet, which turned out to contain several battalions from the *Dong Nai Regiment* as well as support elements from the *5th PLAF Division*. When the fighting ended that evening, the Americans had killed 260 enemy troops. The remaining Viet Cong retreated from the hamlet in disorder.[10]

[10] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, n.d., pp. 5–6, box 9, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.



MAP 45

The second engagement in Thebaud's sector took place south of Phu Loi when Troops A and B from the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, discovered several battalions from the *165th PAVN Regiment* hiding in the hamlet of Xom Moi. After giving the residents a chance to flee, the province chief authorized air and artillery strikes. The bombardment lasted all day, and when the U.S. cavalrymen and South Vietnamese soldiers swept through the hamlet the next

morning they found 500 North Vietnamese dead in the ruins of Xom Moi. U.S. casualties came to four killed. The commander of the *165th Regiment*, Col. Phan Viet Dung, was so disheartened that he turned himself over to the Americans, telling them what he knew about *COSVN*'s plans.[11]

By the afternoon of the fifth, the fighting had died away on the eastern side of Saigon and there were no indications of an assault along the southern edge of the capital. North of Tan Son Nhut, the South Vietnamese airborne task force had skirmished with reconnaissance elements of the *101st PAVN Regiment*, but those fights had been brief and the main enemy force had yet to appear. Moreover, the 2d Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division had intercepted six enemy battalions that had been headed toward the northern side of Saigon, meaning that any future thrust from that direction was likely to be relatively weak. For the moment it appeared that the main battle of the May offensive was going to take place in the five kilometers between Tan Son Nhut and Phu Lam, where the latest intelligence indicated that the *9th Division* and the *Cuu Long II Regiment* were trying to push into the heart of Saigon.[12]

The Fight on the Western Outskirts, 5–12 May

After conferring with General Khang, Weyand decided to move two battalions from the 199th Infantry Brigade currently stationed near Long Binh to the western side of Saigon to shore up the left flank of the South Vietnamese Ranger task force. The II Field Force commander instructed the head of the brigade, Brig. Gen. Robert C. Forbes, to block Route 10 and Highway 4, which both entered the city through the suburb of Phu Lam. On the morning of 6 May, trucks from the 48th Transportation Group carried the infantrymen over the Newport Bridge and through the heart of Saigon before depositing them at their destinations. The brigade's forward command post and the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Kenneth W. Hall, occupied Firebase Horseshoe Bend on the shoulder of Highway 4, two kilometers southwest of Phu Lam, while the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. William Mastoris Jr., manned Firebase Stephanie on Route 10 two kilometers west of Phu Lam. Six 105-mm. howitzers from Battery C, 2d Battalion, 40th Artillery, four self-propelled 155-mm. howitzers from Battery C, 2d Battalion, 35th Artillery, and mechanized Troop D, 17th Cavalry, strengthened the position at Stephanie. General Forbes also regained from the 9th Infantry Division operational control of his 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. William C. Carper III, which operated from Firebase Smoke ten kilometers south of Horseshoe Bend.[13]

As soon as the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, had settled into Firebase Stephanie, located next to a Regional Forces post, Colonel Mastoris dispatched

[11] Ibid., pp. 7, 16.
[12] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, pp. 5–6.
[13] AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, p. 3; Quarterly Evaluation, 1 Apr–30 Jun 68, MACV, p. 35; AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, p. 2.

A psychological operations officer uses a loudspeaker to encourage the Viet Cong to surrender.

Company D to search the woods that lined Route 10 farther to the west. After moving around 200 meters, the company spotted a Viet Cong force moving east toward the city and opened fire. The firing drew in more enemy, and soon Company D found itself outnumbered. Artillery fire from Firebase STEPHANIE and helicopter gunships from Troops C and D of the 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, based at Tay Ninh West, more than evened the odds, and Colonel Mastoris soon sent another company to assist the one in contact. The fighting ebbed and surged throughout the day, with the enemy repeatedly attempting to push up Route 10

An old French cemetery outside the southwest perimeter of the Tan Son Nhut Air Base

toward the city. When darkness fell, at least 139 Viet Cong soldiers lay dead on the field. U.S. losses amounted to four killed.[14]

When HURRICANE FORWARD became operational at Camp Le Van Duyet on the morning of 6 May, General Weyand turned his attention to the other major battle that was developing in the western suburbs, a clash between the *Cuu Long II Regiment* and the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion just southeast of Tan Son Nhut. The II Field Force commander gave General Hay control over the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry (minus Troop C), from the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, with instructions that he use the tanks and armored personnel carriers to support the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion as it tried to retake a pair of hamlets, Ap Binh Long and Ap Hoa Thanh, that the *Cuu Long II Regiment* had turned into makeshift fortresses.

Led by Lt. Col. Glenn K. Otis, the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, traveled south from Cu Chi along Highway 1, reaching the air base at around 0830 without incident. While Colonel Otis developed an attack plan with the commander of the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion, government officials armed with loudspeakers spent several hours calling on the Viet Cong in Ap Binh Long and Ap Hoa Thanh to surrender. None did, but many civilians fled the hamlets. The allies then doused the settlements with tear gas, hoping to win them back without a destructive battle, but gusting winds dispersed the chemicals before they had any real effect. The only option left was force.[15]

The cavalrymen and rangers began their assault late in the afternoon, moving south across a field toward Ap Binh Long. The rangers and armored vehicles faced steadily increasing fire the closer they got to the hamlet, first

[14] AAR, Opn Task Force HAY, II FFV, p. 4.
[15] Ibid.

from mortars and recoilless rifles, and then from machine guns, small arms, and rocket-propelled grenades. The enemy, protected by a network of makeshift bunkers and trenches he had constructed since the previous day, shrugged off the suppressive fire that the U.S. vehicle crews attempted to lay down to cover the advance of the rangers. Realizing the gap could not be closed without taking excessive casualties, Colonel Otis and the South Vietnamese commander pulled their men back. Unwilling to let the enemy hold a position so near to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, General Khang authorized the use of air strikes and artillery to evict the *Cuu Long II Regiment* from Ap Binh Long and Ap Hoa Thanh.[16]

As the fighting intensified at Ap Binh Long and Ap Hoa Thanh on the morning of 6 May, South Vietnamese officials received word that Viet Cong troops had been spotted in the old French cemetery just south of the main gate of Tan Son Nhut. General Vien ordered a company from the South Vietnamese 7th Airborne Battalion, barracked on the southern side of the air base, to investigate. Upon reaching the cemetery, a rectangular park lined with white tombstones and surrounded by a wall of two-story shanty houses, the paratroopers discovered several dozen Viet Cong soldiers armed with light machine guns, small arms, and a few mortars. The paratroopers spent the entire day battling those troops, killing sixty with help from helicopter gunships and South Vietnamese A1–E Skyraiders, and capturing another eleven. South Vietnamese losses were light, though among the fatalities was Col. Luu Kim Cuong, commander of both the 33d Air Wing and the Tan Son Nhut Special Zone. The Viet Cong prisoners, all from the *9th Division*, said that the cemetery had been designated as a waypoint for planned attacks on Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff compound, and Camp Le Van Duyet.[17]

Concerned that more enemy troops might be on their way to the cemetery, Khang and Hay agreed that Ap Binh Long and Ap Hoa Thanh must be retaken the next day so the allies could restore the security zone around the air base. To help in that effort, Weyand gave Hay operational control over the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, a mechanized unit from the 25th Infantry Division stationed at Cu Chi. The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Thomas C. Lodge, brought his unit to Tan Son Nhut early in the morning where it joined up with the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion, arrayed in attack formation just north of Ap Binh Long.[18]

On the morning of the seventh, the two battalions of U.S. tanks and armored personnel carriers rolled forward in a line-abreast formation with South Vietnamese rangers screening their advance. The volume of enemy fire was less intense than it had been previously, indicating that the air and artillery strikes had taken their toll on the defenders. Hostile fire knocked out one

[16] Ibid., p. 2.

[17] Quarterly Evaluation, 1 Apr–30 Jun 68, MACV, p. 35; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 193568, 19 Jul 68, sub: OB of the Cuu Long Regt, p. 6, document 30, Vietnam-Enemy Order of Battle, vol. 2, box 151, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, p. 2.

[18] AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, p. 2.

vehicle and damaged seven others, but the allies got inside the hamlet with few casualties. Employing the firepower of the armored vehicles and the tenacity of the South Vietnamese rangers, the allies outflanked the enemy bunkers one by one and silenced each Viet Cong machine gun or recoilless rifle team within. As evening fell, the surviving Viet Cong withdrew to the adjacent hamlet of Ap Hoa Thanh, leaving behind more than one hundred of their dead.[19]

On the left flank of the South Vietnamese ranger and U.S. mechanized units, the 199th Infantry Brigade's 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, and 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, maintained their blocking positions in the Phu Lam area along Route 10 and Highway 4, respectively, despite continued efforts by the *9th Division* to break into the city. From what General Forbes could determine, at least four Viet Cong battalions had congregated in the hamlet of Binh Tri Dong just west of the line held by the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, and Troop D, 17th Cavalry. Despite its size, the *9th Division* never managed to organize a large-scale and sustained attack. Artillery strikes from Firebase STEPHANIE and air strikes from Bien Hoa inflicted additional though uncounted casualties on the Viet Cong trapped in Binh Tri Dong.

The enemy's growing disorganization became apparent later in the day when General Forbes sent Company B of the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, and Companies A and D, 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, in a wide flanking maneuver around the southern side of Binh Tri Dong to establish a block on the opposite side of the hamlet. Right before noon just after the three companies had finished preparing their new positions, a battalion from the *271st Regiment* came marching down Route 10 oblivious to the danger. The U.S. soldiers opened fire at close range. Startled, the Viet Cong broke formation and headed north into a wooded area after having lost forty-four of their number killed. Two Americans died in the brief firefight. When night fell, the 199th Infantry Brigade's blocking forces remained firmly ensconced on either side of Binh Tri Dong.[20]

General Weyand got more good news on the seventh when he learned that units from the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions had intercepted several enemy battalions outside the capital. Approximately five kilometers south of the Di An base camp, elements from the 1st and the 2d Battalions, 28th Infantry, killed some ninety-five soldiers from the *K3 Battalion, Dong Nai Regiment,* the unit that had been responsible for the attack on the Binh Loi and Phan Tan Gian Bridges on 5 May. On the opposite side of Saigon, Companies A and B of the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, and Troop C of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, engaged the *3d Battalion, 88th PAVN Regiment,* a few kilometers southwest of Hoc Mon, killing a reported 199 enemy soldiers, including the battalion commander and his entire staff. Several kilometers to the south in the countryside just west of Tan Son Nhut, Company C from the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, and elements of the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, took turns pun-

[19] Ibid.

[20] AAR, Task Force HAY, II FFV, p. 5; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 199th Inf Bde, 22 Aug 68, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

ishing a battalion from the *271st Regiment*, killing one hundred enemy soldiers over the course of two days.[21]

By the morning of 8 May, all of the intelligence available to Weyand and Khang indicated that the enemy's western thrust against Saigon had failed. Although soldiers from the *Cuu Long II Regiment* and the *9th Division* were still fighting in the sector west of Phu Tho and Phu Lam, they were no longer trying to reach the city; most were hunkered down in defensive positions and some were beginning to retreat. The most visible sign of progress came late that afternoon when the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion and the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, regained the hamlet of Ap Thanh Hoa, killing a rear-guard force of some fifty Viet Cong soldiers that had stayed behind to cover the withdrawal of the *Cuu Long II Regiment*'s headquarters. As for the *9th Division* battalions farther to the south in the hamlet of Binh Tri Dong, those units remained pinned in place by the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry. Subjected to incessant bombing and shelling for the last several days, some of the *9th Division* battalions were no longer combat effective. The *4th Battalion, 272d Regiment*, for example, now had 43 men fit for duty out of an original complement of some 500 soldiers.[22]

When his subordinates reported their predicament, *9th Division* commander General Thai gave them permission to withdraw from the Binh Tri Dong pocket. To assist the breakout, *COSVN* organized several diversionary attacks. In the first, the *Sub-Region 1* command north of Saigon directed the *101st Regiment* to assault Tan Son Nhut in the early morning hours of 9 May. After finding its way blocked by the South Vietnamese 5th Airborne Battalion four kilometers north of Tan Son Nhut and just west of the Quang Trung Infantry Center, the *101st Regiment* attacked.

The North Vietnamese began their assault with a concentrated barrage of rocket-propelled grenades that knocked the defenders back on their heels. Enemy soldiers got within fifty meters of the South Vietnamese command post before the paratroopers steadied their line. The tide of battle soon turned in favor of the government when reinforcements from the South Vietnamese 1st and 7th Airborne Battalions arrived led by the commander of the South Vietnamese Airborne Division, Maj. Gen. Du Quoc Dong. He organized a defensive line that stymied all efforts by the *101st Regiment* to penetrate or outflank the position. The fighting continued all day and into the night. When it ended on the morning of 10 May, a few dozen survivors from the *101st Regiment* retreated north, leaving behind nearly 300 of their dead or badly wounded. The South Vietnamese had lost 17 dead and 52 wounded.[23]

COSVN initiated a second diversion on the morning of 9 May, this one to open an escape route through Hau Nghia Province. The command ordered

[21] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 8; Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review, 14 May 68, p. 8, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, USARV, NACP; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, pp. 7–8.

[22] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, p. 27.

[23] AAR, The Saigon Offensive, 5–12 May 68, 20th Mil Hist Det, 3 Jun 68, p. 23, Encl 2, Historians files, CMH.

An M109 155-mm. self-propelled howitzer

Sub-Region 2 to attack Firebase MAURY, an outpost that the commander of the 25th Infantry Division, General Mearns, had just established in Duc Hoa District approximately nine kilometers south of Cu Chi, and which stood squarely in the path of retreat that the *9th Division* intended to use. Manning the post were Companies A and B of the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry; Troop I of the 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry; and artillery made up of the towed 105-mm. howitzers from Batteries B and C of the 7th Battalion, 11th Artillery, and the self-propelled 155-mm. howitzers of Battery A, 3d Battalion, 13th Artillery. To assist the assault, *Sub-Region 2* headquarters instructed elements from the *208th Artillery Regiment* to rocket the 25th Infantry Division's base camp at Cu Chi, which housed several UH–1 helicopter gunship companies.[24]

At 0100 on 9 May, North Vietnamese artillery crews sent a salvo of thirty rockets crashing into Cu Chi, killing seven Americans and wounding forty-eight others. An hour later, Communist infantry assaulted Firebase MAURY from the north and from the south in battalion strength. While the defenders were preoccupied with these attacks, a team of sappers used some encroaching woodlands to reach the western portion of the perimeter undetected. After cutting their way through the wire, the sappers destroyed five M109 155-mm. self-propelled howitzers and two ammunition trucks with satchel charges before slipping back out of the perimeter. When the shooting stopped a few hours later, ten Americans were dead and another sixty-six wounded. The

[24] *9th Division*, pp. 106–07.

enemy left behind eighteen of his dead. The troops at Firebase MAURY spent the better part of the day clearing away destroyed equipment.[25]

The beleaguered *9th Division* units at Binh Tri Dong exploited the diversions on the morning of 9 May to make their escape. Viet Cong soldiers crept out of the filthy bunkers and spider holes that had kept them alive during the last five days and began marching west in small groups, leaving behind a great deal of equipment and most of their dead in order to travel quickly. The enemy showed his usual efficiency in slipping past the U.S. troops positioned along Route 10 west of the village. When the sun came up, South Vietnamese engineers moved in to disable any booby traps the Viet Cong might have left behind and to bury the 277 dead enemy soldiers they found in the rubble.

Over the next few days, allied units to the west of Saigon continued to engage small groups of withdrawing enemy soldiers. The trio of South Vietnamese ranger battalions west of Phu Tho and Tan Son Nhut killed a reported 87 Communist fighters on 10 May and another 101 the next day. Farther west in the swamplands that lay on the border of Gia Dinh and Hau Nghia Provinces, the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, killed several dozen soldiers from the retreating *9th Division*, while the 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry, mauled an element of the *208th Artillery Regiment*, eliminating sixty-six North Vietnamese gunners and capturing three 122-mm. rocket launchers. In the 199th Infantry Brigade sector to the south, the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, completed its sweep of the Route 10 corridor west of Phu Lam, while the 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry, cleared out the last Viet Cong diehards along the edge of the city south of Highway 4 and to the east of Firebase HORSESHOE BEND, killing sixteen enemy soldiers on 11 May.[26]

To expedite clearing operations in western Gia Dinh Province, General Mearns ordered the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, to establish a firebase approximately four kilometers west of Tan Son Nhut next to Route 234, a north-south road that crossed the enemy's line of retreat. As Firebase PIKE VI took shape on the morning of 11 May, Mearns moved two batteries of 105-mm. howitzers and a battery of M109 self-propelled 155-mm. howitzers into the perimeter. Mindful of the recent disaster at MAURY, Means also sent engineers to construct earthen walls for all three batteries before evening fell. The preparations paid off later that night when the enemy bombarded the firebase with several hundred rounds of 82-mm. mortar fire. None of the howitzers were knocked out of action and the defenders sustained only light casualties. When the barrage ended, a battalion from the *272d Regiment* assaulted the base. Facing a storm of fire that included beehive shells from the 105-mm. howitzers that filled the air with steel darts, the enemy withdrew after losing 110 men. The failed assault on Firebase PIKE VI proved to be the last major contact in the

[25] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, Arty, 15 Aug 68, pp. 15–16, Historians files, CMH; Maj Gen David E. Ott, *Field Artillery, 1954–1973*, Vietnam Studies (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1975), pp. 161–62.

[26] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, pp. 7–9.

western suburbs as the fighting thereafter gravitated into Hau Nghia and Tay Ninh Provinces.[27]

In that same period between 9 and 12 May, the Communist units that had entered areas to the north and to the east of Saigon made their own escape from the Capital Military District. Before retreating, soldiers belonging to *Sub-Regions 4* and *5* tried again on four separate occasions to destroy the Binh Loi and Newport Bridges. The final attack that took place on the morning of 12 May was the most successful. Gunners from the *4th Thu Duc Battalion* scored a direct hit on the Newport Bridge with a recoilless rifle, sending a chunk of steel-reinforced concrete almost sixty meters long and half the width of the bridge crashing into the river. The enemy then promptly packed up his weapons and hustled away before helicopter gunships could retaliate. For the allies, the damage inflicted on the bridge proved to be little more than an inconvenience. The temporary loss of one lane did not seriously impede traffic, and over the next four weeks engineers repaired the otherwise intact bridge.[28]

The Battle for South Saigon, 7–12 May

When the South Vietnamese 33d and 38th Ranger Battalions left south Saigon on the morning of 6 May to block the enemy thrust toward Cholon, General Hay arranged for U.S. troops to fill the gap until South Vietnamese units could be found to do the job. What was intended as a temporary expedient turned into one of the most vicious and sustained battles the Americans would experience in the Saigon area at any point in the war.[29]

Under orders from General Hay, the 9th Infantry Division sent Company C from the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, rumbling up Highway 4 and then east along Route 232, a two-lane road that ran along the southern edge of the city. The road passed through the Eighth District, a Catholic working-class slum that in recent years had sprouted along the southern edge of the Doi Canal. The mechanized unit, commanded by Capt. Edmund B. Scarborough, parked its armored personnel carriers at two of the three bridges that spanned the Doi Canal. The captain set up his headquarters near the Tung Tien Vuong Bridge, situated approximately three kilometers due south of the Phu Tho racetrack. It was also known as the 5A Bridge because Route 5A entered the city at that point. Four kilometers to the east was the Y Bridge, so named because it resembled that letter when viewed from above. Scarborough sent his 1st Platoon to guard that span. Another four kilometers beyond that lay the Tan Thuan Bridge, but for the moment that remained under the protection of South Vietnamese marines.

Captain Scarborough would soon have his hands full because four Viet Cong battalions under the control of *Sub-Region 3* were headed his way. The

[27] AAR, Task Force Hay, II FFV, pp. 7, 9.
[28] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 21.
[29] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 9th Inf Div, 20 Aug 68, p. 20, boxes 41–42, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

goal of the *506th* and *508th Battalions*, the *Phu Loi I Battalion*, and the *5th Nha Be Battalion* was to seize the three bridges in the Eighth District and enter the city to attack the National Police headquarters and other targets. The *Phu Loi I Battalion* aimed to take the 5A Bridge, while the *506th Battalion* headed for the Y Bridge. The *5th Nha Be Battalion,* only 110 men strong, advanced on their right flank toward the Tan Thuan Bridge. Coming up behind the *506th Battalion* was the *508th Battalion,* a below-strength outfit with just 173 men, which had orders to preserve a line of communications into the countryside.[30]

Using the many streams and canals that crisscrossed southern Gia Dinh Province, the four battalions traveled by foot and sampan right up to the edge of the city without being detected. The enemy began his assault at 0345 on 7 May. Soldiers from the *506th Battalion* opened fire on the armored personnel carriers that were standing guard on the Y Bridge. A company from the *Phu Loi I Battalion*, having already crossed the canal on sampans without being detected, also opened fire from the north bank. The 1st Platoon blazed back with their own weapons as AK47 bullets chipped away the bridgework and pinged off their vehicles. The troops hoped that the intimidating firepower of their .50-caliber and M60 machine guns would keep the enemy at a respectful distance. Several rocket-propelled grenades whooshed out of the darkness, but the rounds slammed into the bridge instead of the vehicles.[31]

At 0530, the *506th Battalion* shifted its focus from the 1st Platoon to a police station located just south of the Y Bridge. The outgunned policemen were on the verge of abandoning the building when several gunships appeared overhead. Their guns forced the Viet Cong to seek cover. Captain Scarborough immediately sent his 2d Platoon under 1st Lt. Ronald P. Garver racing from the 5A Bridge to the police station. An estimated company of Viet Cong was getting ready to attack the station from a nearby rice paddy when the four armored personnel carriers rolled into the compound. Their machine guns forced the enemy to stay put behind a series of dikes. The fight remained hotly contested until a Cobra gunship strafed the length of the dike, putting the enemy to flight.[32]

While soldiers from the *506th Battalion* continued to snipe at the 1st and 2d Platoons, the main enemy threat shifted to the hamlet of Cau Mat, which sat on the canal road a few hundred meters to the west. Now occupied by the *Phu Loi I Battalion*, the hamlet became Captain Scarborough's most pressing problem. As long as the enemy controlled Cau Mat, the captain's company would be effectively cut in two. He radioed the commander of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, Lt. Col. Eric F. Antila, for instructions. Antila told him to keep his men where they were until more help arrived. Two platoons from Company A were already on their way from Ben Luc in northeastern

[30] *History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh*, p. 54; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 0702468, 8 Jun 68, sub: The Organization of Sub-Region 3 and its Penetration of Saigon, p. 5, document 42a, Vietnam-Enemy Order of Battle, vol. 3, box 151, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

[31] *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector*, p. 54.

[32] Nolan, *House to House,* pp. 192–93.

Long An Province. Colonel Antila also told Scarborough that helicopter gunships from Troop B, 7th Squadron, 1st Cavalry, would arrive shortly.

Nine armored personnel carriers and fifty-eight soldiers from Company A, 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, arrived in the Eighth District a few hours later. After South Vietnamese troops established a blocking position on the east side of the hamlet, the U.S. soldiers began working their way among the ramshackle buildings and narrow streets on the western side of Cau Mat. Many already knew something about urban combat; Company A had fought in the Phu Tho area of Saigon during Tet. The advance was slow and methodical. In the confusing warren of houses and alleyways, there was always a risk that the enemy could sneak through the cordon and double back for a surprise rear attack. The Americans also had to be discriminating in their use of fire because the hamlet was still full of civilians. Air and artillery strikes were ruled out for the same reason. As a result, most of the fighting took place at close range with small arms, grenades, and machine guns. By evening, Company A had killed several dozen Viet Cong while losing two killed and forty-seven wounded. Much of Cau Mat still remained in enemy hands.

As the battle for Cau Mat heated up, General Hay directed General O'Connor to commit more men from his 9th Infantry Division. On the afternoon of 7 May, a composite company of the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, and part of the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, landed onto a dry rice paddy some 1,500 meters south of Cau Mat. Colonel Antila assumed operational control over those units. The commander of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, now had the equivalent of six companies at his disposal, but many more would be needed to clear the Eighth District.

On the morning of 8 May, the infantry company from the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, began to sweep Cau Mat from south to north. The scout platoon from the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, joined the action a short time later, adding some extra punch with its armored personnel carriers and .50-caliber machine guns. The sweep was a harrowing affair. Viet Cong spider holes and makeshift bunkers seemed to be everywhere. Many houses contained snipers. From those darkened interiors they were often invisible to the U.S. soldiers moving around on the streets outside. Progress was frustratingly slow.

The enemy's tenacity convinced South Vietnamese authorities to permit limited air and artillery strikes. The commander of the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, Lt. Col. Anthony P. DeLuca, directed those strikes from his circling command helicopter. South Vietnamese officials did their best to move the residents of Cau Mat out of harm's way. In some cases, frightened civilians ran straight through ongoing firefights in a desperate attempt to reach safety.[33]

Early on 9 May, the *506th Battalion* resumed its attack on the Y Bridge. At around 0230, the enemy began mortaring a pagoda where Colonel DeLuca had set up his command post. Things quieted down after thirty minutes, but a rocket-propelled grenade broke the calm at 0400 when it slammed into the pagoda. That signaled the start of another mortar barrage against DeLuca's command post. As shells exploded outside, the colonel began to get reports

[33] Ibid., p. 174.

Civilians flee as fighting begins.

of enemy activity up and down the length of the Eighth District. No major assault developed, but the shooting continued at a steady pace even after the sun rose. In hindsight, the sudden burst of activity was probably designed to draw attention away from the western suburbs where the *Cuu Long II Regiment* and the *9th Division* were trying to withdraw.[34]

At daybreak, Colonel Antila sent his 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, on another sweep through Cau Mat to clear out the *Phu Loi I Battalion*. He also dispatched Company B, 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, under Capt. Philip L. Eckman to assist Colonel DeLuca who was strongly engaged with the *506th Battalion* around the Y Bridge.

As the fighting spread north of the canal, thousands of residents streamed south across the Y Bridge. South Vietnamese troops tried to maintain order but some people were pushed into the coils of barbed wire that lined the bridge. Others were trampled by panicked neighbors. At least one hundred civilians either died or became injured while crossing the bridge. Other residents died in the fighting as they ran through the city streets. In the end, most of the terrified

[34] Ibid., p. 176.

civilians made it across the bridge. As their numbers dwindled, the allies began to scour the neighborhood with a more liberal application of firepower.[35]

The fighting on 9 May spread well beyond Cau Mat and the Y Bridge area. When Company B from the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, arrived at DeLuca's command post early in the afternoon, the colonel ordered Captain Eckman to assist a police facility that had come under attack. The station was located some 800 meters to the southeast, situated next to the Ong Lon Canal that fed north into the Doi Canal. The enemy who had attacked the station was likely from the *508th Battalion*, which was trying to keep the tributary open for use as a supply and escape route. When Eckman's armored personnel carriers rolled up to the embattled station, the Viet Cong initially stood their ground, but melted back into the surrounding countryside an hour later when Company A, 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, joined the fight.[36]

Around that same time, another fight was developing in the nearby hamlet of Xom Ong Doi. The hamlet lay two kilometers east of the Y Bridge and the same distance west of the Tan Thuan Bridge. A company from the South Vietnamese 1st Marine Battalion was locked in battle with the *5th Nha Be Battalion*, which had been trying to reach the bridge for the past several days. The marines had enough men to protect the bridge but not enough to clear Xom Ong Doi, so the 9th Infantry Division extended its zone of responsibility to cover the eastern part of the Eighth District. It gave the mission of securing Xom Ong Doi to the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Joseph H. Schmalhorst, which was currently patrolling the region south of the 5A Bridge. It would be joined by the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. John B. Tower, a mechanized unit stationed at the 3d Brigade base camp at Bearcat.[37]

Company A and the greater part of Company C, 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, landed just east of Xom Ong Doi shortly after noon. The pilots flew fast and low to evade the heavy ground fire that greeted the incoming helicopters. Once the infantrymen got their feet on the ground, they fanned out toward the southern side of the hamlet. Vietnamese marines set up a blocking position to the west. The advancing Americans came under small arms fire but it was not particularly heavy; the hundred or so living members of the *5th Nha Be Battalion* were likely stretched thin across the hamlet. The men from the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, killed several snipers on the southern edge of Xom Ong Doi and then entered the hamlet at 1500.

About that same time, the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, minus Company A, completed its journey from Bearcat to the Eighth District. The mechanized unit sped through downtown Saigon and then crossed over the Tan Thuan Bridge before pulling up along the north side of Xom Ong Doi. The arrival

[35] Intel Cable, CIA, 13 May 68, sub: Popular Attitudes of Saigon/Cholon Residents during Present Viet Cong Attacks, p. 2, document 37, Vietnam-CIA Cables, May 1968 (2), box 243, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

[36] AAR, Battle of South Saigon, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 11 Aug 68, p. 5, box 42, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[37] Ibid.

of Colonel Tower's men meant that the *5th Nha Be Battalion* was now boxed in on three sides. For all intents and purposes, it was a complete encirclement because helicopter gunships from the 7th Squadron, 1st Cavalry, watched the open fields to the east.[38]

Desperately outnumbered but full of resolve, the *5th Nha Be Battalion* would not go down without a fight. A storm of fire raked Company B, 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, the lead unit in Colonel Tower's force, as it came rumbling down the canal road. Several soldiers fell dead or wounded during the opening salvo. Company B responded with a fusillade of machine gun and small arms fire that tore into the flimsy buildings that lined the road. From his helicopter buzzing overhead Colonel Tower ordered Company C, which was at the rear of the column and had not yet entered Xom Ong Doi, to turn south for a short distance before turning west again to bring flanking fire onto the enemy. As the company performed the maneuver, several of the vehicles bogged down in the marshland that bordered the hamlet. The rest backed out to the firm ground on the road. The immobilized vehicles provided supporting fire, while the remainder of the unit began a house-to-house sweep through the hamlet.

This clearing operation was a brutal affair. Nearly all of the residents had fled Xom Ong Doi, so it turned into a virtual free-fire zone. The allies blasted their way through the hamlet, while helicopter gunships sent waves of rockets crashing into the tightly packed buildings. U.S. fighter-bombers swooped in to demolish whole blocks with 500-pound bombs, napalm, and 20-mm. cannon. The 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, expended so much ammunition that Colonel Tower had to arrange emergency resupply from Bearcat. By evening, hostile fire had almost ceased. When the two U.S. battalions pulled back because of darkness, gunships continued to pound Xom Ong Doi by the flickering light of a hundred or more fires.

The 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, encountered no resistance when they entered the hamlet the next morning. The retreating *5th Nha Be Battalion* left behind twelve of its dead in the ruins of Xom Ong Doi. The 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, had lost eight men killed during the battle.[39]

Although the Americans had driven the *5th Nha Be Battalion* out of Xom Ong Doi, the *506th* and *Phu Loi I Battalions* still clung to footholds around the Y Bridge and Cau Mat, respectively. Colonel DeLuca decided to tackle Cau Mat first. On the morning of 10 May, he sent Companies A and B from the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, down the canal road to attack the hamlet from the east. Well-hidden snipers brought the column to a halt on the outskirts of Cau Mat. DeLuca sent in his reconnaissance platoon as well as Captain Eckman's Company B of the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, to execute a flanking attack from the southeast. They, too, came under heavy fire and stopped short of Cau Mat. Despite having abundant gunship and artillery support, DeLuca's infantry made little progress that day, losing six killed and forty wounded. Air

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., pp. 6–7.

strikes, artillery, and gunships pounded the enemy positions through the night as DeLuca's men readied themselves for another day of grueling, close-quarter combat.

To their relief, the Viet Cong began to withdraw on the morning of 10 May. The first sign came when an estimated two companies of enemy soldiers attacked a South Vietnamese Regional/Popular Forces outpost in Xom Tan Liem, a small hamlet on Route 5A five kilometers south of the Doi Canal. The attack indicated that the enemy was moving from the Eighth District back into the countryside. Colonel Antila ordered Companies A and C of the 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, to rescue the besieged government soldiers and trap the Viet Cong force.[40]

The pair of mechanized companies came under heavy fire as they neared Xom Tan Liem. The enemy—the *508th Battalion*—possessed .51-caliber anti-aircraft machine guns, 82-mm. mortars, and 75-mm. recoilless rifles. Having stayed well south of Cau Mat and the Y Bridge, the unit was still relatively fresh. After thirty minutes of fighting that left six Americans dead and over two dozen more wounded, the Americans pulled back to reorganize.

A short time later, Colonel Schmalhorst landed Companies A and C of the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, on Route 5A just north of where Companies A and C, 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, were taking care of their casualties and restocking ammunition. The four companies waited there on the road for several hours while bombs and shells hammered the hamlet. When Schmalhorst's troops resumed their advance late that afternoon, they faced only sporadic sniper fire as they moved down the highway. When they entered the hamlet, all they found were a few dazed and wounded Viet Cong soldiers. According to those prisoners, the *508th Battalion* was headed for the deserted village of Da Phuoc two kilometers to the south. Darkness ruled out an immediate pursuit, but Schmalhorst resolved to regain contact at first light.[41]

On the morning of 11 May, the survivors from the *Phu Loi I Battalion* abandoned Cau Mat and began moving south. Most slipped away while it was still dark, clinging to the dense foliage that lined rivers and streams as they marched south. One group of fifty soldiers made the mistake of lingering in Cau Mat until daylight. The thin light of early dawn was enough to reveal their location, and within minutes an artillery strike destroyed the group.[42]

Meanwhile, Colonel Schmalhorst resumed his pursuit of the *508th Battalion*. He sent Company C, 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, commanded by Captain William J. Owen, to check the nearby hamlet of Da Phouc where the Viet Cong had reportedly gone during the night. Sure enough, when Owen's men approached the abandoned community, they came under heavy fire from Viet Cong troops who were dug in along the bank of a stream. The Americans quickly realized this was no mere rear guard; the enemy was throwing everything he had into the fight. Rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine-gun fire, and mortar shells flew at Company C. The volume

[40] AAR, Battle of South Saigon, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 6–7.
[41] Ibid., pp. 7–8.
[42] Nolan, *House to House*, pp. 258–59.

Soldiers of Company B, 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Division, move through a village in ruins during the May offensive.

of fire hardly diminished even when precise air and artillery strikes began to explode among the enemy positions.

Colonel Schmalhorst inserted by helicopter Company D, 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, fresh from the battalion base camp, onto the far side of Da Phouc. When it advanced toward the stream to hit the enemy from behind, a contingent from the *508th Battalion* turned their weapons around and prevented the trap from closing. The firefight continued well into the evening as air strikes and artillery shells lit up the sky. In the early hours of 12 May, the *508th Battalion* broke contact and continued its retreat south. Companies C and D lost a total of two dead and twenty wounded in the battle for Da Phuoc.[43]

The Viet Cong completed their evacuation of the Eighth District on 12 May. A few stragglers fell to the 3d Battalion, 39th Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, as they swept through the ramshackle buildings and rice fields from Cau Mat to the Y Bridge. Others died from air and artillery strikes that chased the enemy as he marched south. When evening came, there was quiet in south Saigon for the first time in a week.

The cost of the battle, especially to the Eighth District, had been high. Much of Cau Mat and Xom Ong Doi lay in ruins. At least 8,000 homes had

[43] Ibid., p. 291.

been destroyed in the fighting and over a dozen square blocks of the city were a flattened wasteland. The cost of the battle for the enemy was difficult to calculate. The 9th Infantry Division recorded a body count of 852 enemy killed, but that figure is far too high considering that less than 1,000 Viet Cong soldiers were involved in the battle. A more likely body count is probably 200 to 250 killed in addition to a somewhat higher number of enemy soldiers who were wounded. It is therefore reasonable to posit a total casualty rate for the four Viet Cong battalions somewhere between 50 and 75 percent.

Saigon: Interlude and the Second Phase, 13 May–7 June

By the morning of 13 May, most of the fighting in Gia Dinh Province had ended as the enemy completed his withdrawal from the Capital Military District. Northeast of the capital, elements from the 1st Australian Task Force clashed with the *141st Regiment* near Tan Uyen District town, north of the Dong Nai River and west of War Zone D. The day before, the 1st Australian Task Force had inserted by helicopter a reinforced battalion and two artillery batteries into an abandoned rubber plantation five kilometers northwest of Tan Uyen to watch the trails leading back to War Zone D. A few hours after establishing Firebase CORAL, the defenders had faced a determined attack by at least one battalion from the *141st Regiment*. The resulting six-hour fight had claimed the lives of at least one hundred North Vietnamese soldiers, while the defenders had lost nine killed and twenty-eight wounded. One 105-mm. howitzer and two 81-mm. mortars had also been damaged. A prisoner revealed that the attacking unit had been the *275th Infiltration Group*, which had recently joined the *141st Regiment*. The *275th Infiltration Group* had been marching toward Saigon when it noticed helicopters depositing 105-mm. howitzers into the nearby rubber plantation. According to the prisoner, the chance to overrun so many guns at an unfinished firebase had proven an irresistible temptation.[44]

The defenders at Firebase CORAL clashed with the *141st Regiment* a second time on the night of 15–16 May. The base turned out to be an even tougher nut to crack this time. The soldiers had improved its fortifications by erecting earth walls around the artillery pieces and by building more sandbagged positions. The defenders were also more numerous than before. The new arrivals included Squadron A, 3d Cavalry Regiment, an Australian unit equipped with M113 armored personnel carriers; and Company A of the 2d Battalion, 35th Artillery, a U.S. Army unit equipped with M109 155-mm. self-propelled howitzers. The artillerymen also had a pair of M42 Dusters for additional protection.[45]

The North Vietnamese attack began at 0215 with a battalion-size assault against the eastern side of CORAL. The defenders responded with a withering

[44] Lex McAulay, *The Battle of Coral* (Hawthorn, Australia: Hutchinson, 1988), p. 37; AAR, Opn TOAN THANG, Phase I, 1st Australian Task Force, n.d., p. 19, box 6, AARs, Free World Mil Assistance Ofc, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[45] *7th Division*, p. 67; AAR, Opn TOAN THANG, Phase I, 1st Australian Task Force, p. 20.

display of firepower, their tanks, machine guns, and artillery backed by a flight of helicopter gunships and fighter-bombers. A battery of 175-mm. guns at Long Binh added to the destruction by shelling areas that the enemy was using as staging and fire support positions. A few North Vietnamese fought their way into the perimeter but were soon hunted down. The action tapered off as dawn approached, with the Communists ending their attack just after 0600.

The allies estimated that they had killed or badly injured almost half of the 1,300 strong attacking force, which they learned had been the *K2* and *K3 Battalions*, *141st Regiment*, the *269th* and *275th Infiltration Groups*, the *C17 Recoilless Rifle Company*, and the *C18 Anti-Aircraft Company*. The cost to the allies had been five killed and twenty-one wounded. Interestingly, a North Vietnamese doctor who surrendered in July told his interrogators that *COSVN* circulars described the battle as a great victory, claiming that all of the defenders, erroneously identified as troops from the U.S. 1st Infantry Division, had perished in the fight.[46]

Northwest of the capital, the U.S. 25th Infantry Division continued its pursuit of the *9th Division* following its expulsion from Gia Dinh Province on 12 May. With the danger to Saigon receding, General Weyand placed the three battalions of the 199th Infantry Brigade that were operating in western Gia Dinh Province under the operational control of General Mearns. The II Field Force commander also returned to their parent organizations the units that had operated under Task Force HAY. After relinquishing the last unit on 16 May, Hay closed his temporary command post and returned to Long Binh.

Between 16 and 25 May, the allies combed Gia Dinh Province and the surrounding districts, paying particular attention to the routes that led to base areas such as War Zone D, the Iron Triangle, and the Khien Quong Pineapple Plantation. The hunt produced a steady flow of enemy dead despite the absence of major battles. On 17 May, for example, the 25th Division killed one hundred enemy soldiers. The 9th Infantry Division claimed another seventy-six the following day. The situation was stable enough for Weyand to redeploy some of his forces while the sweep was under way. He returned the 199th Infantry Brigade, minus one battalion, to the area between Phuoc Vinh and the Dong Nai River where it resumed a forward defense of the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex. He sent U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment B–56 into the Iron Triangle on 24 May to look for enemy concentrations, the same day that the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, began a temporary deployment to II Corps to counter an enemy buildup in the Central Highlands.[47]

Weyand could not become complacent, because prisoner reports suggested that the enemy was going to launch a second phase of his offensive. The likelihood of that appeared to increase on 22 May when the *320th PAVN Division* attacked U.S. Marine and South Vietnamese Army units in I Corps around Con Thien and Dong Ha. In the ensuing three-day battle, the allies

[46] Interrogation Rpt, CMIC, no. US 2437-68, 3 Sep 68, sub: Enemy Engagement with US Forces, Historians files, CMH.

[47] AAR, Task Force HAY, II FFV, p. 30.

killed about 762 North Vietnamese soldiers. Since the last time the *320th Division* had threatened Dong Ha just prior to the start of the May offensive, the new round of fighting suggested a possible resumption of hostilities around Saigon.

There were also growing signs in III Corps that an attack was coming. Many of the Communist units that had attacked Saigon on 5 May still clung to forward positions on the outskirts of Gia Dinh Province, hiding in Viet Cong–controlled hamlets or within the concealment of jungle bases like the Iron Triangle. Some units also appeared to be drifting back toward the capital. On the night of 22 May, for example, an enemy force attacked the 25th Division's 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, while it was camped near a trail five kilometers northeast of Duc Hoa. The action that resulted in sixty-four enemy dead suggested that the Communists were moving back toward Saigon, their ranks partly replenished with hundreds of North Vietnamese who had crossed from Cambodia into III Corps over the last week or so.[48]

That prediction was correct. The *B2 Front* was only days away from unleashing a second strike against the capital. The scale of the assault was much smaller than before, however. *COSVN* could muster only nine battalions for the attack, four of which were operating at company strength, making the assault force only one-quarter as large as that in the first wave. The main attack would once again come from the west supported by a diversionary strike from the north. The enemy knew he stood little chance of harming the Thieu government, but he could still erode its credibility by terrorizing the city's residents.[49]

The second phase began on the night of 24–25 May when the *K3* and *K4 Battalions* of the *Dong Nai Regiment* and the *K1* and *K2 Battalions* from the *1st Quyet Thang Regiment* entered Gia Dinh City, a northern suburb sandwiched between Go Vap and downtown Saigon. Even though the four battalions had only eighty to one hundred men apiece, they had orders to attack the town's large police headquarters, seize a pair of bridges that led into downtown Saigon, and then take over the city's radio and television stations. It was an impossible assignment.

The Viet Cong had hardly set foot in Gia Dinh City when they were assailed by the South Vietnamese 1st and 6th Marine Battalions. The 436th Regional Forces Company and National Police joined the hunt, while the 1st, 5th, and 11th South Vietnamese Airborne Battalions sealed off the edges of the suburb. The enemy lost at least forty killed on the first day, including the regimental commander and the senior political officer of *1st Quyet Thang Regiment*. The list of enemy troops killed or captured grew in the coming days. Among those taken prisoner were the executive officer of the *K3 Battalion* and the political officer of the *K4 Battalion*, who provided

[48] Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review, 28 May 68, p. 3, document 7, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, USARV, Vietnam-Weekly Combat Intel and Security Review 9/67-10/68, boxes 187–88, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 21-68, II FFV, 19–25 May 68, 25 May 68, p. 3, box 1, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[49] *9th Division*, p. 106.

A South Vietnamese ranger tosses a hand grenade into an enemy-occupied building in Cholon.

valuable intelligence about the enemy's plans. By 1 June, the four battalions had been reduced to just seventy healthy soldiers and thirty wounded men who could still fight.[50]

The only other significant battle to take place north of Saigon during the second phase occurred on the night of 27–28 May when the greater part of the *165th Regiment* and the *1st Battalion, 141st Regiment*, attacked Firebase CORAL for the third time that month. It was a weak effort and the enemy withdrew after losing forty-seven killed. By all appearances, the enemy forces of *Sub-Regions 1* and *5* appeared to be spent.[51]

The western thrust against Saigon began on the night of 26–27 May. The *273d Regiment* headed toward Phu Lam alongside the *6th Binh Tan* and *308th Battalions,* the latter unit having just arrived from the delta. The Vietnamese 2d Marine Battalion bore the brunt of the initial assault. U.S. forces got in on the action when the *2d Battalion, 273d Regiment*, attacked the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, which was camped some six kilometers west of Saigon. The enemy broke contact after ninety minutes, but the battalion caught up with him at daybreak. Reinforced by Troops A

[50] *History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh*, p. 518; Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector*, p. 57.

[51] *7th Division*, pp. 67–68; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 17.

and C of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, the Americans nearly annihilated the *2d Battalion,* killing 243 enemy soldiers while losing 6 killed and 28 wounded.[52]

As the fighting increased around Phu Lam, the South Vietnamese 38th Ranger Battalion, minus one company, and the reconnaissance company from the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group rushed in to help the South Vietnamese marines. Aided by gunships, the two battalions took twenty-three prisoners and killed around 370 enemy soldiers over the next four days. Nevertheless, the enemy showed great determination, and approximately 200 troops, mostly from the *6th Binh Tan Battalion*, managed to slip past the allied screen into Cholon.[53]

At first the National Police took responsibility for tracking down the intruders. When dozens of Viet Cong remained at large several days later, the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion sent a reinforced company and its headquarters element to deal with the threat. On 1 June, the South Vietnamese rangers and National Police sealed off an area approximately twelve square blocks where the Viet Cong troops were most active. Pinning them down was another matter. The enemy rarely operated in teams greater than six men and moved around frequently. The Viet Cong also took to demolishing the thin walls that divided most row houses so that they could move from one building to another without being seen from the street. Some even traveled through the sewer system.[54]

Two more companies from the South Vietnamese 30th Ranger Battalion joined the hunt on 2 June, squeezing the contested area to just a few square blocks. Many high-ranking government officials showed up to witness the enemy's final destruction. At the request of the South Vietnamese battalion commander, the senior U.S. adviser called in helicopter gunships to eliminate the few remaining enemy strong points so the rangers could avoid further casualties. At around 1740, one of those helicopters fired a 2.75-inch rocket that struck a building that contained the forward command post of the 30th Ranger Battalion. The blast killed several high-ranking South Vietnamese officials. Since most of the dead were political allies of Vice President Ky, a rumor spread that President Thieu had orchestrated the attack to weaken his long-time rival. A U.S. Army investigation concluded that a faulty rocket engine had been to blame.[55]

The South Vietnamese 35th Ranger Battalion took over from the weary 30th Ranger Battalion on 4 June and kept whittling away at the enemy's enclave until the last strong point fell on 7 June. A handful of Viet Cong troops managed to slip through the cordon and flee back to

[52] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 22-68, II FFV, 26 May–1 Jun 68, 1 Jun 68, p. 12, Periodic Intel Rpts, Asst Ch of Staff, G–2, II FFV, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[53] Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 0511868, 4 Jun 68, sub: Plan of Action of the 6th Bn, Penetrating Saigon for the 3d Time, pp. 3–4, document 24, Vietnam-Enemy Order of Battle, vol. 2, box 151, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL.

[54] AAR, The Saigon Offensive, Phase III, 20th Mil Hist Det, p. 5, Encl 18, p. 1.

[55] Msg, Abrams MAC 7613 to Wheeler and Sharp, 10 Jun 68, General Creighton W. Abrams Msg files, CMH.

Captured weapons on display (two on the left are RPG7s and two on the right are Soviet-designed light machine guns)

the countryside, but most of the 200 soldiers who had entered Cholon were now either dead or captured. Among the dead was the deputy commander of *Sub-Region 2*, Col. Vo Van Hoang, who had led the *6th Binh Tan Battalion* and the *308th Battalion* into Saigon.[56]

[56] AAR, The Saigon Offensive, Phase III, 20th Mil Hist Det, pp. 5–7.

All told, the second phase of fighting in the Capital Military District between 28 May and 10 June cost the enemy an estimated 600 killed and another 107 captured. The South Vietnamese lost 42 killed and 142 wounded in Saigon during the same time frame.[57]

Assessing the May Offensive

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong paid dearly for Le Duan's decision to launch the May offensive. The official Communist military history of the war offers no statistics, but MACV reported that the allies killed over 24,000 Communist troops in May. The allies also captured 1,400 soldiers and welcomed another 600 enemy personnel who turned themselves in through the *Chieu Hoi* program. As was to be expected, most of the enemy's losses occurred in III Corps. A reliable South Vietnamese agent reported that the enemy suffered 37,000 casualties in and around Saigon, an estimate that included not just killed but also wounded, nonbattle casualties, and deserters. Some of those casualties were probably civilians, for as one Communist history acknowledged, "Very large numbers of civilian coolie laborers were killed while supporting our combat operations." The informant reported that a majority of the losses had occurred while the enemy was moving toward Saigon, a point on which the official Communist history agrees. Allied interdiction efforts outside the capital had been so successful that of the thirty-five battalions committed to the attack, only portions of thirteen managed to reach the metropolitan area. Allied offensive operations had likewise prevented an attack on Hue and had so damaged *Military Region 5* that the enemy had no choice but to withdraw from the populated lowlands for the comparative safety of remote mountain sanctuaries.[58]

The second offensive of 1968 gutted many enemy units that were still recovering from Tet, and enemy morale plummeted. According to prisoners at the time and postwar Communist histories, virtually all of *Sub-Region 1*'s company-, battalion-, and regimental-level officers either died during the offensive or were wounded. One survivor of the *308th Battalion* estimated that by June there were only 40 men left in his unit out of an original complement of 300. Among the casualties was the battalion's entire command group. In early June, the *508th Battalion* had only 71 men left out of its original complement of nearly 300 soldiers. The *5th Nha Be Battalion* had approximately sixty men still able to fight. According to the commander of *Sub-Region 5*, Col. Le

[57] Do Dang Son, "The Final Battle in the Western Sector of Saigon," *Quan Doi Nhan Dan,* 3 Dec 04; Rpt, 20th Mil Hist Det, 21 Jun 68, sub: The Saigon Offensive, Phase III, p. 8, Historians files, CMH.

[58] Quote from *History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh*, p. 520. Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through Oct 1968, n.d., table 1c, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, p. 19; Msg, Ambassador Saigon 27764 to Sec of State, 20 May 68, sub: Assessment of the Enemy's May Offensive, sec. 2, pp. 2–3, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, p. 22; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 228–29.

Van Ngot, the *K3* and *K4 Battalions* of the *Dong Nai Regiment,* which should have had around 400 men in each unit, had been reduced to only 30 combat-effective soldiers apiece. The loss of so many experienced officers, noncommissioned officers, and veteran soldiers was devastating, as the enemy could only restore his ranks with inexperienced and often hastily trained men. This contrasted starkly with allied forces, which emerged with their unit leadership intact and their men confident despite unusually heavy losses of their own—4,223 deceased soldiers, of whom 2,169 were Americans. Fortunately, civilian casualties from the May offensive—421 killed and 1,444 injured—were far lower than for Tet.[59]

Other metrics besides casualties indicated how the offensive fell short. Once again the Thieu government had withstood the test, and its armed forces had performed ably. A general uprising had not materialized, with the population displaying even less enthusiasm for the Communist cause than it had at Tet. Not only had the Communists failed to reach their most important targets, but they also could not hold those they attacked. Apart from the prolonged battle in the Saigon suburbs, the offensive had essentially run its course in a matter of days with little damage to the government's position in the countryside. True, the attack had prevented the allies from expanding pacification during May, but it had not done serious harm. Hamlet evaluation scores indicated no change in the number of people (62 percent of the population) living in relative security during May. The Communists had managed to overrun just 16 of the nation's over 4,000 rural outposts, with the government reoccupying 10 of those by mid-month. Unlike the first offensive in which the government had abandoned large swaths of territory, only 6 of the more than 700 Revolutionary Development teams and just a handful of the units assigned to rural security functions had withdrawn from their assigned posts. The enemy had thus gained neither ground, resources, nor people. From a military standpoint, the campaign had been a disaster. Writing years later, one of the architects of the campaign—National Liberation Front committee member and leader of Communist forces in Saigon, Tran Bach Dang—conceded that "passion led us to go too far" in mounting the May offensive.[60]

Nevertheless, as with Tet, the loss of so many Communist soldiers had not been in vain, for once again the enemy had won a psychological victory. The offensive struck another blow at the confidence of the South Vietnamese

[59] Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through October 1968, table 1c; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 0702468, 8 Jun 68, p. 5, document 42a; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 202368, 23 Jul 68, sub: OB of the 308th Independent Bn, aka Cuu Long 2 Bn, MR-3, document 23, Vietnam-Enemy Order of Battle, vol. 1a, box 151, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; *History of the Resistance War in Saigon-Cho Lon-Gia Dinh*, p. 516; Tuan, *Saigon-Gia Dinh Offensive Sector*, p. 58; Special Rpt, CMIC, no. 0610868, 8 Jul 68, sub: General Information of the K.2, K.3, and K.4 Battalions, Dong Nai Regt, p. 1, document 19, Vietnamese Col Le Van Ngot, box 189, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, LBJL; Rpt, CORDS, 1969, sub: Daily Civilian Casualties During Post Tet Offensive, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

[60] Quote from Tran Bach Dang, "Mau Than: Cuoc Tong Dien Tap Chien Luoc" [Tet: A Strategic Rehearsal], *Vietnam Journal of Military Affairs* 26, no. 2 (February 1988). Msg, Bunker AMB 27497 to Johnson, 16 May 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through October 1968, table 5a.

people. Even more significantly, it deepened the unease that the American public felt about the war. When pollsters asked a question in June identical to one used in February, the percentage of respondents who wished to "discontinue the struggle and begin to pull out of Vietnam gradually in the near future" had nearly doubled, from 24 percent to 42 percent, while those willing to escalate the conflict had dropped from 53 percent to 35 percent. Other events, such as the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on 4 April, and the rioting that followed in several cities, contributed to the atmosphere of crisis that was leading an increasing number of Americans to feel that the nation should focus on its domestic troubles rather than fight a war overseas.[61]

Another repercussion of the spring offensive was increased discontent, both in South Vietnam and in the United States, over the human suffering created by the fighting. About 20,000 homes were destroyed and 130,000 people displaced in Saigon and its environs as a result of the offensive, with up to another 40,000 people rendered homeless nationwide. MACV reported that 479 civilians had died and 1,835 had been wounded during May. The number of casualties and refugees was far lower than that generated by the Tet offensive, and the Communists were certainly responsible for their share of each category, but there was no doubt that most of the physical destruction had occurred as the result of allied air and artillery fire. The fact that much of the destruction had occurred in the nation's capital, the home base of the American media presence in South Vietnam, heightened the adverse reaction.[62]

General Westmoreland and Ambassadors Bunker and Komer realized that something had to be done about civilian suffering, not only on humanitarian grounds, but to ease President Thieu's political difficulties and to allay criticism of the war back home. As he had after Tet, Westmoreland proposed, and Thieu approved, a special program of relief and rebuilding. Spearheaded by the U.S. Army's 46th Engineer Battalion, a U.S. Navy construction battalion, and South Vietnamese military units, Operation DONG TAM ("United Hearts and Minds") distributed relief supplies, provided medical services, and cleared away rubble. U.S. military engineers also laid the foundations for 1,500 prefabricated dwellings that were built in a U.S. Army factory. By the end of July, the number of refugees in Saigon and Gia Dinh Province had fallen to 37,000. By the time Project Recovery and Operation DONG TAM ended in early October 1968, over two dozen nations and charitable organizations had spent more than $20 million in cash and supplies on relief and restoration projects.[63]

U.S. officials also realized that something needed to be done to reduce the amount of destruction caused by allied firepower in friendly cities. On 13 May, Westmoreland convened a U.S.–South Vietnamese study group

[61] Rigal-Cellard, *La Guerre du Vietnam et la Societe Americaine*, p. 198.

[62] Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1968–1973*, pp. 26–28; Rpt, MACCORDS, 1969, sub: Daily Civilian Casualties during Post Tet Offensive, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 114.

[63] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 114; Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 147–48; Weisner, *Victims and Survivors*, pp. 167–70; Fact Sheet, MACV, 28 May 68, sub: Operation DONG TAM, Historians files, CMH.

to examine ways to minimize collateral damage during urban combat. The group was in the midst of its deliberations when an errant helicopter strike on 2 June exacerbated the issue. The event spurred General Abrams, who was acting MACV commander while Westmoreland was traveling, to direct that henceforth only field force commanders could authorize the use of helicopter gunships, fixed-wing aircraft, and indirect artillery fire in urban areas. Three days later, Secretary of Defense Clifford reacted to adverse publicity about the damage done in Saigon by having Wheeler ask Abrams to initiate a study on minimizing destruction and casualties in urban areas. As Westmoreland had already initiated such a study, Abrams let it proceed while penning a defensive note rejecting criticism of allied tactics. The general's response "sent Clifford into orbit" and almost cost Abrams his job before he had officially assumed it. Warned by Wheeler of the current situation, Abrams quickly apologized, reporting that he had already made changes to U.S. tactics.[64]

Westmoreland's study group did not report its findings until 14 June, five days after the general had stepped down as MACV commander. The group recommended increased use of riot control gas and more training for South Vietnamese forces in urban combat. It endorsed Abrams' decision that U.S. aviation and indirect artillery fire not be used in cities without field force approval. But it also recognized that heavy firepower was necessary if allied soldiers were to avoid excessive casualties, and for that reason it advocated that the United States give the Vietnamese more recoilless rifles, a form of light artillery that due to their flat trajectory and direct-fire application were less likely to cause collateral damage or to injure people sheltering underground. Abrams approved the recommendations. Remarking that "our military forces must find a way to save Saigon without destroying it," Abrams adhered to his position eight days later by denying Weyand's request to allow division commanders to authorize indirect fire in cities. Still, Abrams realized that collateral damage was inescapable, and that the best way to prevent it was to stop the enemy before he entered urban areas—something that the May offensive had demonstrated was achievable, but not with 100 percent success.[65]

Keeping population centers safe from enemy bombardment was also easier said than done. The Communists had long used mortars to terrorize small communities, but until recently they had lacked the wherewithal to target the heart of large urban areas with any consistency. The enemy's decision after Tet to rely more on artillery than infantry to attack urban areas reflected not only his recognition of the futility of ground assaults, but also a greater ability to conduct long-range bombardment. In preparation for the Tet offensive, the *People's Army of Vietnam* had doubled the number of artillery battalions in the South from thirteen to twenty-six. Included in the mix was a growing number

[64] Edward J. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965–1969* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), p. 195 (quote); Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1968–1973*, pp. 29–31; Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 543.

[65] Msg, Abrams MAC 7871 to Wheeler, 14 Jun 68, pp. 1–2, Abrams Msg files, CMH; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 115–16; Hammond, *Military and the Media, 1968–1973*, p. 31 (quote).

of 122-mm. rockets. After the failure of the May offensive, the enemy decided to maintain psychological pressure on the allies by using rockets to bombard Saigon indiscriminately. On 10 May, sixteen 122-mm. rockets slammed into various points of the city. The enemy boasted that he would bombard Saigon with a hundred rockets per day for a hundred days, but the actual number proved to be far less. Between 5 May and 16 June, the Communists fired a total of 145 rockets of the 122-mm. variety and 17 rockets of the 107-mm. type at Saigon. The attacks accomplished little of a military nature but succeeded in injuring civilians and destroying property. They also frightened the population, embarrassed allied officials, and kept the American public aware that the enemy was still potent.[66]

Westmoreland had already begun a series of measures to deter long-range bombardments and to capture ammunition stockpiles, and together he and Abrams reinforced the effort. The allies redeployed troops to better cover the 777-square-kilometer area from which the enemy's long-range artillery could hit Saigon. After considerable U.S. lobbying, President Thieu unified all Vietnamese security forces protecting Saigon's environs by naming General Minh, formerly the commander of the Vietnamese 21st Infantry Division, as commander of the Capital Military District and military governor of Saigon. To complement this action, as one of his last acts as MACV commander, Westmoreland established a Capital Military Assistance Command under II Field Force deputy commander General Hay. In this post, General Hay exercised operational control over all U.S. units and advisers in Saigon–Gia Dinh, with himself serving as adviser to General Minh. The Vietnamese built and manned sixty towers to spot rocket launches, and Abrams assigned U.S. aviation assets to respond rapidly to launch sightings. Allied artillery crews honed their skills, and with the help of the tower-mounted spotters, were soon able to deliver accurate counterbattery fire in less than sixty seconds after a reported launch. The number of rocket attacks dropped perceptibly as the allies successfully countered the terror blitz. Still, success carried a price. By stationing twenty-seven allied maneuver battalions in Gia Dinh and by dedicating additional troops to cut the routes through which the North Vietnamese moved rockets toward the capital, Abrams complained that he had been compelled to adopt a posture that "degrades our flexibility and our potential to accomplish other missions."[67]

If Abrams was frustrated, Westmoreland, in his final days in command, was more so. Once again the allies had hammered the enemy, yet the victories

[66] Msgs, Westmoreland MAC 6613 to Wheeler, 20 May 68, p. 8; Westmoreland MAC 06891 to Sharp, 26 May 68, p. 1. Both in Westmoreland Msg files, CMH. Quarterly Evaluation, 1 Apr–30 Jun 68, MACV, p. 9; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, p. 20; Intel Bfg, p. 3, Encl to MFR, MACV, 1 Jun 68, sub: MACV Commanders Conference, 19 May 1968, Historians files, CMH; Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, pp. 209–10.

[67] Memo, General Earle "Bus" G. Wheeler for the President, 19 Jul 68, sub: Military Situation in South Vietnam, p. 6, document 12b, Vietnam 2C (12) 7/68, General Mil Activity, box 72, LBJL; Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968–1969*, p. 109; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 27-68, II FFV, 20 Jun–6 Jul 68, 6 Jul 68, p. 18, Historians files, CMH; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 112–13, 114 (quote); *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:979–80.

that he had hoped would rally the American people did not have the desired effect, as doubt and anxiety continued to trouble the national psyche. A contributing factor to the malaise was that the May offensive had demonstrated that the enemy continued to retain the initiative, determining the time, place, and tempo of battles notwithstanding the horrendous casualties he suffered. If MACV leaders earlier in the year had been correct in forecasting that they had only two or three months to reverse the unfavorable trends in American public opinion by achieving battlefield dominance, they had not achieved their goal.

As depressing as that realization was, General Westmoreland continued to urge his subordinates to act aggressively. The second major Communist offensive of 1968 was barely twenty-four hours old when on 6 May Westmoreland had sent out a message to his subordinates renewing his call for a general counteroffensive. After reminding them of both the 31 March agreement between himself and General Vien and the fact that peace talks were set to begin in just four days, he declared that "we must redouble our vigilance and our initiative, to insure that the enemy achieves no success on the battlefields of South Vietnam. . . . Commencing immediately our objective will be to make a major breakthrough toward military victory in South Vietnam. We have the assets to do the job. . . . Nothing less than the fulfillment of our potential will be an acceptable conclusion to the fighting that lies immediately ahead."[68]

Specifically, he called for "an aggressive, unremitting, twenty-four hour application of pressure on all enemy elements," emphasizing the need for more operations during hours of darkness. Allied forces would prevent the enemy from attacking the cities, drive the Communists from populated areas, and pursue and destroy the foe wherever he went. He further called on his commanders not to waste artillery ammunition on "the dubious device of indiscriminate harassing fire." U.S. commanders were to integrate the Vietnamese into the effort fully, pushing them to the "van of the attack" wherever possible, as "this must become increasingly their war." Last but not least, he reminded his subordinates that population "security is what is strived for. It is not a tactic, it is a goal. It will be the result of a dynamically aggressive military campaign and thorough coordination with Phoenix committees." "Pacification operations are inseparable from the main offensive," he wrote, with the tactical commander having to exercise "just as much sense of proprietorship" in pacification support activities "as he would display in the other facets of his responsibility." Ultimately, he stated, the offensive "must result in driving the enemy from the population and political centers of the country, opening the lines of communications, and giving breathing room to the process of pacification" so as to "rid this land of [the enemy's] influence" once and for all.[69]

Two weeks after the 6 May message, Westmoreland and his civilian deputy for pacification, Robert Komer, reiterated these themes in what would be the general's last conference with his principal commanders.

[68] Msg, COMUSMACV 12854 to I FFV, et al., 6 May 68, in Msg, COMUSMACV 15262 to American Embassy, Paris, 27 May 68, Historians files, CMH.

[69] Ibid.

Westmoreland devoted most of the meeting to the subjects of pacification, U.S.-Vietnamese collaboration, the protection of Saigon and Hue from ground and artillery attack, and advisory assistance to the Regional and Popular Forces. With Westmoreland's backing, Komer stressed the important roles U.S. combat formations could play in assisting the Vietnamese and their U.S. advisers in furthering pacification. Noting that the enemy had started creating "liberation committees" in hamlets for the purpose of claiming territory, population, and seats in any possible coalition government that might emerge from the peace negotiations, Komer pressed U.S. commanders to move aggressively to reclaim people and territory. He requested the assistance of combat commanders in driving the enemy away from populated areas, in securing civilian commerce, in avoiding unnecessary destruction, and in helping in a variety of counterinfrastructure, security, and civic action tasks.[70]

If some of the details were new, the concepts had been aired many times before. This fact highlighted the consistency with which MACV had conceptualized and prosecuted the war. It also reflected the fact that although he had achieved much during his tenure as MACV commander, Westmoreland was still fighting over the same ground and wrestling with the same issues as he had over the past four years. Victory, however conceived, had eluded him, and it now fell to a new commander to find answers to the Vietnam enigma.

[70] MFR, MACV, 1 Jun 68, pp. 2 (quote), 11, Encl to MFR, MACV, 1 Jun 68.

18

A Summer of Attrition

Creighton W. Abrams Jr. officially replaced General Westmoreland as MACV commander on 3 July 1968. Like Westmoreland, Abrams had graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1936 and had served with distinction during World War II, but here the similarity ended. Westmoreland was statuesque, polished, and somewhat aloof. Abrams was gruff, blunt, and down to earth. The differences in personality and style impressed observers, and over time Abrams would make his own mark on MACV. Yet, underlying the differences between the two men was a strong current of continuity, for both viewed the war in much the same way.[1]

General Abrams shared Westmoreland's penchant for applying heavy firepower, including B–52 bombers, to hammer the enemy in both North and South Vietnam. Although Westmoreland had recently dropped the term *search and destroy*, which had assumed negative connotations in the mind of the public, and replaced it with euphemisms like *reconnaissance in force* and *spoiling attacks*, both men believed that it was vital for the allies to bleed the enemy through continuous and unrelenting offensive action. Abrams rejected suggestions from the Johnson administration that he cut back on offensive operations to reduce U.S. casualties and endorsed the recommendations of Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to expand the ground war into Laos and Cambodia. He also doubted the viability of Secretary Clifford's proposal that U.S. forces should withdraw to coastal enclaves.[2]

Abrams made the continuity between himself and his predecessor explicit during his first few days in command. After listening to his commanders explain how they had been conducting operations, he told them in a meeting in July that "he saw no reason to issue new instructions. We appear to be doing what we ought to be doing." Speaking of the enemy during another July meeting, he emphasized to his subordinates that "the critical problem for us is to determine a practical way to inflict significant attrition on him; to grab hold of him and to destroy him. This is the payoff—to kill the enemy." Abrams would reiterate this call for maximum attrition many times.[3]

[1] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 181–83; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 362.

[2] Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965–1969,* Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, vol. 6 (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2011), pp. 192–201.

[3] MFRs, MACV, 9 Oct 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, 20 July 1968, p. 14; and MACV, 26 Jul 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, 4 July 1968, p. 9 (quote). Both in Historians files, CMH. Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 132, and n. 53.

If killing was central to Abrams' thinking, it was not the only point of continuity between himself and Westmoreland. The new MACV commander shared his predecessor's recognition that pacification and population security were key elements of the conflict. Like Westmoreland, Abrams believed conventional operations furthered pacification by making it difficult for the enemy's regular forces to operate in populated areas. He likewise followed his predecessor's lead in using those units that could be spared from offensive tasks to screen populated areas and to improve Vietnamese security forces. Rejecting the dichotomy that some pundits had asserted existed between America's military and nonmilitary activities, in March 1968 Abrams had begun using the phrase "one war" to emphasize the interrelationship between political and military actions in Vietnam. It was an apt phrase that encapsulated the holistic, full-spectrum approach that had always characterized America's approach to the conflict, for as Westmoreland had noted in 1966, "the war in Vietnam is a single war in which military support for Revolutionary Development be integrated closely with other military tasks." And like Westmoreland and most other U.S. officials over the years, Abrams believed that the primary way U.S. Army combat units could contribute to pacification was by hunting down and killing the enemy, particularly his conventional units, whenever and wherever they could be found. He also rejected the notion that the United States should usurp responsibility for pacification from the South Vietnamese. Rather, he would continue America's long-standing policy of holding the South Vietnamese responsible for pacification in all its aspects, including the provision of security at the hamlet and village level. Semantics aside, the change in command would have little impact on the tasks the average American soldier would perform or the way in which he performed them.[4]

As Abrams appraised the situation in the summer of 1968, he believed that, for the moment at least, military requirements trumped pacification. Already on notice from his superiors that he must protect South Vietnam's cities at all costs from rocket and ground attack, and aware that the enemy was planning a third major offensive for late summer, Abrams placed expanding the government's hold over the population on a back burner compared to guarding the cities and degrading the enemy's ability to support major attacks. Thus, while the new MACV commander would continue the general offensive begun by his predecessor, he focused on the military aspects of the task and did not initially endorse Komer's bid for rapidly expanding the government's control over the rural population. The push Komer and Westmoreland had been making to accelerate the pace of pacification would have to wait.[5]

Abrams' determination to continue aggressive military action notwithstanding, the tempo of battle abated across South Vietnam during his first

[4] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 110, 129–35. Quote from Msg, Westmoreland MAC 10608 to Sharp, 4 Dec 66, Historians files, CMH. For a discussion of the continuity in American thought and action in Vietnam, see Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72 (October 2008): 1249–56; and Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976*.

[5] Hunt, *Pacification*, p. 151.

months in command. Enemy exhaustion was the prime factor. Two major offensives had pushed the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to the limits of their endurance. An official history produced by the Communist government of Vietnam later acknowledged that "our soldiers and civilians had suffered heavy losses of personnel, weapons, and ammunition" in the first six months of 1968. The defection of several high-ranking Communist officers likewise indicated a growing sense of despair among enemy field commanders. As the summer began, the Communists withdrew many of their combat units to rear areas for an extended period of rest, while Le Duan and the Politburo debated the merits of launching a third general offensive.[6]

A second reason for the summer lull was the onset of the southwest monsoon. From mid-May to mid-October, drenching rains soaked the lower two-thirds of South Vietnam. Flood waters draining south from Cambodia submerged most of the Mekong Delta. During the height of the season in June and July, many provinces received more than twelve inches of precipitation a month. The cumulative effect of those rains—unpaved roads turned to mud, sodden bunkers and foxholes, rotted food, deteriorating equipment, and outbreaks of waterborne diseases—dampened offensive operations on both sides.

In past wet seasons, U.S. units had taken advantage of the reduced main force threat to intensify the search for local force units, infrastructure personnel, and hidden supply caches in the populated lowlands. They would do so again this year, but with emphasis on protecting the cities and attacking the infiltration routes through which the enemy was endeavoring to rebuild his forces for the next wave of attacks. Given the heightened stakes associated with a third offensive now that peace talks had begun, Abrams predicted the summer "will be the most critical period of 1968."[7]

Continuity and Change in I Corps

During the summer of 1968, Abrams completed several of Westmoreland's initiatives in I Corps and maintained most of the other activities he had inherited from his predecessor. Generally speaking, the changes that came to fruition were mainly organizational. The first involved command arrangements. On 1 July, General Stilwell became acting commander of Provisional Corps, Vietnam, taking over from General Rosson who had gone to Da Nang to command III Marine Amphibious Force temporarily while General Cushman took a month's leave. Two weeks later, Abrams redesignated the Provisional Corps as the XXIV Corps, giving the headquarters the status of an official field force headquarters, even though it remained subordinate to III Marine Amphibious

[6] Quote from Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans,* p. 207. Msg, Westmoreland MAC 06299 to Wheeler et al., 14 May 68, p. 2, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[7] Msg, Abrams MACV 8128 to Sharp, 19 Jun 68, p. 12, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

General Stilwell (left) *with General Lam*

Force. Finally, on 1 August, Stilwell received his third star, officially replacing General Rosson who returned to the United States for his next assignment.[8]

A second organizational initiative that Abrams' brought to fruition was the conversion of the 101st Airborne Division into a fully airmobile unit. Redesignated the 101st Air Cavalry Division by orders issued on 28 June, its new table of organization added the 2d Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, a helicopter unit to replace the armored cavalry squadron that had once provided its reconnaissance arm, plus the 160th Aviation Group composed of eight assault helicopter companies, four support helicopter companies, and one aviation company. The air cavalry squadron was already in South Vietnam, but most of the units that would make up the 160th Aviation Group would not deploy until the end of the year, with the rest, along with two aerial rocket artillery companies, expected in early 1969.[9]

The third development that transpired during the summer came at the end of July, when the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), arrived in northern I Corps from Fort Carson, Colorado. Commanded by Col. Richard J. Glikes, the brigade consisted of the 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, the 1st

[8] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, XXIV Corps, 15 Nov 68, p. 1, box 67, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[9] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 101st Abn Div, 15 Aug 68, p. 1; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 101st Abn Div, 22 Nov 68, p. 1. Both in Historians files, CMH

Soldiers of Company C, 1st Battalion, 61st Infantry, on patrol near the Demilitarized Zone

Battalion, 61st Infantry (Mechanized), and the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor. The towed 105-mm. howitzers of the 5th Battalion, 4th Artillery, supported the maneuver units, while Troop A, 4th Squadron, 12th Cavalry, served as Colonel Glikes' reconnaissance element. Based at Dong Ha, the heavy brigade with its 148 armored personnel carriers and 67 tanks was to operate under the control of the 3d Marine Division.[10]

Colonel Glikes' brigade needed several months of seasoning before it was ready for independent operations, so elements from the unit participated in patrols alongside Marine and Vietnamese forces near the Demilitarized Zone. The brigade first tasted combat on 12 August when Company A from the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor, helped Marine infantrymen assault a North Vietnamese bunker complex near Gio Linh. The tankers acquitted themselves well, killing eighty enemy while suffering seven wounded. Over the coming weeks, more brigade elements participated in these one-day raids, providing valuable training for their officers and men, even when they produced few contacts.[11]

[10] ORLL, 1 Aug –31 Oct 68, 1st Bde, 5th Div (Mech), 13 Dec 68, p. 2, box 29, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[11] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 10-68, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, 7–20 Jul 68, 25 Jul 68, an. E, p. 1, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Bde, 5th Div (Mech), pp. 2–3.

The one change that received the most press attention, and the one for which General Abrams was most directly responsible, was the abandonment of Khe Sanh. In March, Abrams had made a point of reminding President Johnson—who had feared the base would become another Dien Bien Phu—of how successful Westmoreland's decision to hold the base had been. Nevertheless, the new MACV commander decided that Khe Sanh's utility had come to an end. Hostile activity in the region had dropped off significantly since the bulk of the *304th* and *308th Divisions* had withdrawn into Laos. With fewer targets, and with the president still firmly against the idea of mounting a cross-border raid into Laos, Abrams thought it was no longer desirable to maintain a large base in such a remote area. Most importantly, he believed allied interests in northern I Corps could best be served by minimizing large, static bases and by using the resources freed by closing such posts for mobile operations. Westmoreland had opposed closing Khe Sanh, as much for symbolic as for military reasons, but the decision was no longer his to make. Hoping that "some of the wind could be taken out of the sails of armchair strategists who double as news commentators and columnists," the new Army chief of staff collaborated with the MACV commander in drawing up a list of reasons to explain the closure. The 3d Marine Division abandoned the base on 5 July, but the Army's talking points dispelled little of the confusion back home over why this iconic base was now no longer necessary.[12]

The closing of the Marine base at Khe Sanh represented a significant deviation from Westmoreland's approach to defending the northern border, but throughout the rest of I Corps, U.S. units continued operating much as they had before the change of command. The northernmost Army division in Stilwell's XXIV Corps, General Tolson's 1st Cavalry Division, spent the summer continuing Operation JEB STUART. Begun in January 1968, JEB STUART was a search-and-clear operation conducted in the coastal lowlands and piedmont areas of southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces. Tolson's 1st Brigade, commanded by Col. John Stannard, worked the lowlands around Quang Tri City with the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment to protect the town and the Revolutionary Development areas clustered to the north. Part of the 1st Brigade also operated from company-size landing zones in Base Area 101 to disrupt the enemy's logistical pipeline that led back to the A Shau Valley. Meanwhile, Col. Robert M. MacKinnon's 2d Brigade patrolled the region south and east of Quang Tri City, while the 3d Brigade, led by Col. Charles H. Curtis, covered the lowlands to the north of Hue from its base at Camp Evans. General Truong, commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, partnered with the 3d Brigade by having his elite reconnaissance unit, the Hac Bao Company, identify targets that Colonel Curtis' airmobile units could engage. Lastly, Tolson employed the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, an armored cavalry unit from the 9th Infantry Division on loan to

[12] Quote from Msg, Westmoreland HDA 2365 to Abrams, 28 Jun 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg Files, CMH. *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:463–64; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 72, 116–18.

A UH–1D helicopter from the 1st Cavalry Division comes in for a landing with a CH–47 Chinook in the background.

him since February, to guard the logistical facility at Wunder Beach and the lines of communications that radiated from it.[13]

Under the protection of the 1st Cavalry Division and assisted by increasingly aggressive government security forces, the Revolutionary Development program flourished in Quang Tri during the summer of 1968. As they had done previously, all three U.S. brigades assisted pacification by working with provincial troops in conducting cordon-and-search, counterinfrastructure, rice denial, and night ambush operations. These activities weakened the enemy's grip on the population and hurt his logistics, scooping up military supplies and huge quantities of rice. Tolson supplemented the destructive work with an active civic action campaign in which the division built a school, helped civilian communities with a variety of self-help projects, and provided medical and relief services.[14]

[13] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Air Cav Div, 20 Aug 68, p. 2, box 5, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[14] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Air Cav Div, pp. 2, 6, AC-1; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Cav Div, 6 Dec 68, pp. 1–4, AD-1, AE-1, Historians files, CMH. For the state of affairs in Quang Tri, see the monthly reports filed by the CORDS advisory detachment kept in the Historians files at CMH.

The three North Vietnamese units that typically operated in the JEB STUART zone—the *6th*, the *9th*, and the *812th Regiments*—assisted the recovery effort by staying in their mountain camps for most of the summer. The Viet Cong battalions that operated in the lowlands also kept a low profile. Those who failed to stay out of sight paid the price for their carelessness. On 26 June, scouts spotted the *K4 Battalion* from the *812th Regiment* in woods eight kilometers east of Quang Tri City. The South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Regiment converged on the North Vietnamese battalion and killed a reported 148 enemy soldiers. The next day, scout helicopters of the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, discovered the *814th Local Force Battalion* sheltering in the village of Binh An, some twelve kilometers northeast of Quang Tri City. After surrounding the village and allowing the civilians to evacuate, the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, annihilated the enemy force, killing 225 enemy soldiers and capturing 44 over the course of two days. Such engagements reflected the growing ability of the 1st Cavalry Division and its Vietnamese partners to destroy enemy units that ventured into the lowlands.[15]

Farther south in Thua Thien Province, General Barsanti and the 101st Airborne Division continued a similar search-and-clear mission begun during Westmoreland's tenure, Operation NEVADA EAGLE. Barsanti's mission in NEVADA EAGLE was to protect Hue and the surrounding districts. The general stationed the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in the lowlands to help government forces defend Revolutionary Development areas and to prevent the enemy from acquiring rice during the summer harvest. The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, operating in the foothills southwest of Hue, conducted spoiling attacks into Base Area 114 from the bases they had built along Route 547 in March and April. The division also exchanged mobile training teams with the South Vietnamese 1st Division. The Vietnamese benefited from American instruction on the care and use of equipment, while the Americans gained insights into Viet Cong methods from the Vietnamese.[16]

The 2d Brigade's commander, Colonel Cushman, set his sights on the *5th PAVN Regiment*, the only main force unit that still roamed the districts south of Hue. After locating the North Vietnamese formation on 30 May, Cushman's paratroopers hounded it for two weeks, killing more than 500 of its soldiers. Reduced to the size of a battalion, the battered regiment withdrew into the mountains southwest of Hue and did not return for the rest of the year.[17]

The absence of main force units in the coastal lowlands after mid-June put the district-based Viet Cong at greater risk to allied sweeps. Throughout the summer Barsanti and, after 17 July, his successor, Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais, pressed the enemy in support of pacification. In addition to conducting robust civic action and propaganda campaigns, the paratroopers employed frequent offensive operations, saturation patrols, cordon-and-search actions, and

[15] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 9-68, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, 23 Jun–6 Jul 68, 11 Jul 68, p. 1, Historians files, CMH.

[16] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 101st Abn Div, pp. 11, 29.

[17] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

night ambushes to erode the enemy's ability to operate in populated areas. They captured large rice stockpiles but fought few battles. As usual, most of the cordons were combined operations. In one such action, three companies of U.S. paratroopers and some U.S. Navy boats teamed up with a Vietnamese National Police Field Force unit, a Popular Forces squad, a psychological operations broadcast team, a Provincial Reconnaissance Unit, and members of the Police Special Branch to search the hamlets of An Truyen and Ap Trieu Son on 8–9 August. The allies killed forty-three Viet Cong, captured twenty-three more, and apprehended forty criminals.[18]

General Zais
(shown as lieutenant general)

Even more productive operations followed in late summer and early fall. With the enemy avoiding contact, Colonel Cushman introduced a technique called "the soft cordon." Designed for use in populated areas where organized resistance was not expected, the technique minimized injury to civilians and destruction to property by limiting the use of artillery and firepower. Surprise and speed also helped keep casualties down. Once an area was sealed, detailed searches, universal detention and interrogation, night ambushes, and civic and propaganda actions rounded out the effort. The entire operation was carefully coordinated between U.S. and Vietnamese forces in accordance with government pacification plans. U.S. combat units worked closely with the territorial forces and the National Police. Perhaps the most important aspect of soft cordon, unlike other cordon operations, is that units thoroughly combed target areas for a week or more.[19]

Between 10 September and 31 October, soft cordon operations resulted in the death of 313 Viet Cong and the capture of 651 more, 252 of whom were members of the clandestine infrastructure. The division also captured over 400 weapons and charged 77 people with civil crimes, while 120 Viet Cong turned themselves in. Allied losses totaled nine dead and fifty-eight wounded. Two of the dead and twenty-two of the wounded were Americans. More important than the favorable statistics was the boost these operations gave to pacification. For example, one of Cushman's combined area clearance actions, Operation

[18] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 101st Air Cav Div, 15 Aug 68, pp. 6–7, 18; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 101st Abn Div, 22 Nov 68, pp. 2, 5, 14, 17–19. Both in Historians files, CMH.
[19] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 101st Abn Div, pp. 6–10, 24 (quote)–26.

LAM SON 260, enabled over 9,000 of the 13,000 residents who had fled Thua Thien's Vinh Loc District after Tet to return to their homes.[20]

Cushman's tactics led some Viet Cong to despair. One demoralized guerrilla captured in July said that he had not seen a North Vietnamese soldier for two months. At the beginning of August, the senior adviser in Thua Thien Province, Col. Thomas W. Bowen, reported that the 2d Brigade's "domination of the battlefield has accelerated the return of [the government's] presence in the countryside," and that "the people are beginning to believe that the government does have the upper hand." More confirmation came in October when a U.S. patrol killed a Viet Cong major in Quang Dien District and found on his person a report dated in early September. "We used to say," the major had written, "that [the Americans] go *sweeping*; it is not sweeping now, but we must say they go looking for underground bunkers." The new "sweep and occupy" tactics, in which the Americans "do not leave any area unsearched, and they continue the search day after day," had decimated both the guerrilla forces and the infrastructure in the district, leading many to defect and the population to "lose confidence in the final victory of the people's revolution." All this was good news for the Americans, yet the division still reported that civilians refused to volunteer information, as they knew that eventually the Americans would leave, and they feared what the Viet Cong would do to collaborators thereafter. Interesting also were aspects of the soft cordon technique described by the Viet Cong major that did not get much attention in U.S. reports, namely that the allies "fire a lot of artillery," that they compelled people to leave Viet Cong–controlled areas, and that they "burned and destroyed everything left behind by the people in the liberation areas, including houses, temples, and even trees and bushes, and they forced the people to go back to the area to cut or defoliate by hand what they could not burn." Even "soft" methods had a hard edge.[21]

While Cushman helped pacify the lowlands around Hue, in the highlands southwest of the city Colonel Collins' 1st Brigade, 101st Air Cavalry Division, and the 3d Brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, commanded by Col. Lawrence L. Mowery, conducted frequent raids into Base Area 114 to prevent the North Vietnamese regiments who were hiding there—the *29th*, the *90th*, and the *803d*—from returning to the lowlands. Those units, still bruised from the two offensives, rarely challenged the incursions, even though that meant sacrificing many of their supplies. In mid-July, for example, a South Vietnamese patrol discovered a bunker containing 1,000 rocket-propelled gre-

[20] Ibid.; Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 14 Oct 68, sub: CORDS field Overview, pp. 2, 4, 9, Historians files, CMH.

[21] Bowen quote from Rpt, Thua Thien Province, Advisory Team 3, 4 Aug 68, p. 1, Revolutionary Development files, CMH. Periodic Intel Rpt no. 26-68, III MAF, 23–29 Jun 68, 30 Jun 68, p. 2; and Periodic Intel Rpt no. 29-68, III MAF, 14–20 Jul 68, 21 Jul 68, p. 6. Both in Historians files, CMH. ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 101st Abn Div, 15 Aug 68, p. 5, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 101st Abn Div, pp. 3-1 to 3-3 (quotes).

Troops from the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, at Firebase Eagle's Nest in the A Shau Valley during Operation Somerset Plain.

nades, 100 boxes of small arms ammunition, and 53 boxes of machine gun ammunition.[22]

With the allied position looking strong along the Demilitarized Zone, and seeing no immediate threats to Quang Tri City or Hue, in August General Stilwell seized the opportunity to make another incursion into the A Shau Valley. Dubbed Operation Somerset Plain, the two-week raid would be the 101st Air Cavalry Division's first large-scale airmobile assault. With the possibility of stiff resistance, the division initiated the operation by firing 8,000 artillery rounds from ten batteries, several of which were located at two recently completed firebases, Eagle's Nest and Georgia, on the eastern rim of the valley. Bombs dropped during fourteen B–52 strikes and four flights of fighter-bombers added to the devastation, while other aircraft dropped tear gas at the three western passes that connected the valley to Laos to impede enemy movements.[23]

The first flight of helicopters, loaded with troops from the 1st Brigade, 101st Air Cavalry Division, now commanded by Col. Harold I. Hayward, landed near the abandoned A Luoi airfield in the central part of the valley

[22] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 101st Abn Div, p. 2; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 29-68, III MAF, p. 3.
[23] AAR, Opn Somerset Plain, 1st Bde, 101st Abn Div, n.d., pp. 9, 13, box 32, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

on 4 August 1968. Resistance was light and only one aircraft, a gunship, was forced to make an emergency landing after being hit by ground fire. The next day, several battalions from the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division landed into the southern part of the valley. All told, fifty helicopter flights were needed to bring the allied force into the A Shau. Most of the troops flew in from Firebase BIRMINGHAM just east of the valley, which XXIV Corps headquarters had designated as the operation's forward supply point. Trucks brought supplies from Hue and Camp Eagle to BIRMINGHAM to reduce flight time and the physical wear on the helicopters. Once the materiel reached the firebase, CH–47 helicopters carried it to the main landing zones in the valley where it was reloaded onto UH–1 helicopters and then distributed to units in the field.[24]

The assault phase of SOMERSET PLAIN ended on 6 August with the arrival of the South Vietnamese Hac Bao Company. The reconnaissance unit joined the hunt for supply dumps. The enemy impeded the search with small ambushes and the occasional night mortar barrage. For the most part, the North Vietnamese avoided a stand-up fight because the odds were so clearly against them. The wisdom of that approach became clear on 10 and 11 August when the *816th* and *818th Main Force Battalions* came out of hiding to attack the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, in the southern part of the valley. The allies brought air and artillery support to bear almost immediately, and the enemy retreated into the jungle after losing several dozen killed.[25]

On 16 August, the allies ended the search phase and began preparing to leave the valley. Excess equipment was either lifted out or destroyed. Troops demolished their temporary bases, going so far as to fill in every foxhole they had dug and to recover all the sandbags. Meanwhile, a pair of long-range reconnaissance patrol teams and elements of Company C, 326th Engineer Battalion, laid minefields at the western passes into Laos to discourage the enemy from returning. Each mine was fitted with a delay fuse to explode after a set number of days. Soldiers also placed sensors around the minefield to detect movement. A monitoring station at Firebase EAGLE'S NEST used direct telephone lines to nearby artillery bases so that fire could be brought down quickly on the western passes if enemy activity was detected.[26]

The allies began the extraction phase of SOMERSET PLAIN on 17 August, airlifting out of the valley during the next three days without incident. The total number of North Vietnamese soldiers killed during the operation came to 181, with an additional 4 taken prisoner. The South Vietnamese lost eleven killed, eight of those from an allied 155-mm. shell that fell short. U.S. deaths came to seven, all from Company D of the 2d Battalion, 327th Infantry, after an errant air strike on 10 August that also wounded fifty-four men in the unit. The allies located and destroyed only a modest amount of supplies, which suggested that the North Vietnamese logistical system had still not recovered from Operation

[24] Ibid., p. 13.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 17.

Soldiers from Company A, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, 196th Infantry Brigade, conduct a patrol near Chu Lai.

DELAWARE six months earlier. If the results were unremarkable, SOMERSET PLAIN was notable as one of the few operations conducted by the newly coined 101st Air Cavalry Division. On 15 September, the division changed its name once again, this time to 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile).[27]

The third Army division that operated in I Corps, the Americal Division, continued to assist the 1st Marine Division and the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division in the zone's southern provinces. On 3 June, General Koster returned to the United States to become superintendent of the United States Military Academy. His deputy, Brig. Gen. George H. Young, ran the division until its new commander, Maj. Gen. Charles M. Gettys, took over on 23 June. Young was then reassigned to III Marine Amphibious Force where he became the commanding general of Support Command. His replacement as Americal's assistant division commander was Brig. Gen. Howard H. Cooksey.[28]

When General Gettys took charge of the Americal Division, the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light) under Colonel Gelling was engaged with Operation WHEELER/WALLOWA in the Que Son Valley, Quang Nam Province, to keep the *2d PAVN Division* out of that vital breadbasket. His second formation, the

[27] Ibid., pp. 18–19.

[28] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, Americal Div, 7 Aug 68, p. 1, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

198th Infantry Brigade (Light) led by Col. J. R. Waldie, continued Operation BURLINGTON TRAIL in Quang Tin Province. It shielded the provincial capital of Tam Ky and the Chu Lai Air Base by maintaining an active hunt for the five Viet Cong battalions that operated in the hills to the west. Quang Ngai Province remained the bailiwick of Gettys' third brigade, the 11th Infantry Brigade (Light), which employed four battalions under the command of Colonel Henderson to defend the provincial capital and the brigade's base camp at Duc Pho. The division's mechanized force, the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, operated in all three provinces to protect lines of communications and to reinforce the infantry brigades as needed.[29]

As warning signs grew of a late summer offensive, Gettys tried to calculate the enemy's most likely course of action. The *2d Division* remained a threat to Tam Ky and Hoi An, while one or more regiments of the *3d Division*, having moved into Quang Ngai Province in June, menaced its provincial capital. The *31st*, *36th*, and *38th PAVN Regiments*, new units that were composed of local force battalions as well as North Vietnamese fillers that had come down in the spring, endangered Da Nang.[30]

The *2d Division*, which operated in and around the Que Son Valley, remained the preeminent threat in the Americal zone. Little had been seen of the division since May when the North Vietnamese unit had overrun the Kham Duc Special Forces camp and briefly threatened the Dak Pek Special Forces camp. At the beginning of July, allied intelligence picked up signs that the *1st Regiment* and support elements from the *2d Division* were converging on Hiep Duc at the western end of the valley. General Rosson ordered General Gettys to investigate. On 6 July, the Americal Division and the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division launched a combined operation named Operation POCAHONTAS FOREST to search for the regiment and to preempt a possible attack on Hiep Duc.[31]

General Gettys formed a brigade-size task force commanded by his deputy to execute the mission. Task Force COOKSEY contained two units from the 11th Infantry Brigade—the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, and the 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry—as well as one from the 196th Infantry Brigade, the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry. A mechanized platoon from Troop F, 17th Cavalry, a company from the 26th Engineer Battalion, and four mobile strike force companies composed of Montagnards rounded out the force. The South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division organized a separate combat group based around the 2d and the 4th Battalions, 5th Infantry Regiment, and supported by one artillery battery.[32]

During the first week of POCAHONTAS FOREST, allied troops found a few supply caches in the hills around Hiep Duc, but no sign of the *1st Regiment*.

[29] Ibid., pp. 7, 11.

[30] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 27-68, III MAF, 30 Jun–6 Jul 68, 7 Jul 68, pp. 3, A-9. Periodic Intel Rpt no. 28-68, III MAF, 7–13 Jul 68, 14 Jul 68, p. 5. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[31] Historical Rpt, Opn POCAHONTAS FOREST, 3d Mil Hist Det, n.d., p. 1, box 2, 3d Mil Hist Det, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[32] Ibid., p. 2.

General Gettys expanded the search on 11 July when he attached the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, to Task Force COOKSEY, and then added a fifth unit, the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, ten days later. The wider net caught only a few minnows. The month-long operation netted just 127 enemy soldiers. Task Force COOKSEY reported its own losses as eighteen killed. Nevertheless, the main goal of POCAHONTAS FOREST had been achieved. The sweep had kept the *1st Regiment* away from Hiep Duc and allowed the Americal Division to build a series of firebases at the western end of the Que Son Valley, actions that supported pacification.[33]

The 198th Infantry Brigade, which patrolled the rolling hills south of the Que Son Valley, also saw few signs of the enemy that summer. The only major contact in the BURLINGTON TRAIL sector came on 23 July when elements of the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, operating under the command of Colonel Waldie, engaged the *105th Local Force Company* and elements of the *2d Division*'s engineer battalion near the southern mouth of the valley, ten kilometers northeast of Tam Ky. Sixty-eight enemy soldiers died in the brief fight. The discovery that North Vietnamese engineers were operating alongside local force soldiers suggested that the *2d Division* was preparing for new attacks in the lowlands. That theory gained credence three days later when the Americal Division captured a North Vietnamese soldier south of Hiep Duc. The prisoner claimed that his unit, the *21st Regiment*, *2d Division*, was conducting a resupply mission near Kham Duc but intended to enter the Que Son Valley in August for a new offensive.[34]

Colonel Henderson's 11th Infantry Brigade in Quang Ngai Province to the south also saw relatively little action in June and July. On 10 June, Henderson terminated Operation MUSCATINE, a five-week search for Viet Cong units west of Quang Ngai City. That campaign had killed only seventy-two enemy soldiers but had produced more than one hundred U.S. casualties, mainly from mines and traps. Henderson then waited for solid intelligence on the location of the enemy before starting a new operation. He got that lead on 15 June when the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, captured two North Vietnamese soldiers from the *22d Regiment*, *3d Division*, in the foothills west of Quang Ngai City. Their capture was the first indication that elements of the *3d Division* had moved north from Binh Dinh Province into southern I Corps.

General Gettys and the commander of the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division, Colonel Tuan, organized a three-pronged search for the *22d Regiment*. On 19 June, the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, commenced Operation CHATTAHOOCHEE SWAMP in the foothills southwest of Quang Ngai City near the Ha Thanh Special Forces camp. Another unit from the 11th Infantry Brigade, the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, assumed the defense of the Duc Pho base. The next day, the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, from the 198th Infantry Brigade launched a separate operation northwest of Quang Ngai City called VANCE CANYON to scour the area around the Tra Bong Special Forces camp. Colonel Henderson's 1st Battalion, 52d Infantry, assumed the defense of the

[33] Ibid., p. 7.
[34] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, Americal Div, p. 11.

Chu Lai Special Zone. Colonel Tuan launched his own operation with six battalions to search the river valley that lay between the American sectors.[35]

The sweeps netted little. In their first week, the two Americal operations killed less than two dozen enemy. Convinced that the *22d Regiment* had moved out of the area, Gettys ended CHATTAHOOCHEE SWAMP on 29 June and VANCE CANYON three days later. For the moment at least, North Vietnamese units throughout *Military Region 5*, the area that encompassed southern I Corps and northern II Corps, were staying out of sight.[36]

Besides conducting these major operations, the Americal Division exchanged training missions with the South Vietnamese 2d Division and conducted many combat missions, both large and small, with Vietnamese forces. It also assisted pacification through a variety of activities. During Operation GOLDEN FLEECE, it helped protect the rice harvest, securing by the end of October over 6,105 tons of rice and capturing from the enemy another 110 tons. From May through October, Americal Division trucks hauled 4,799 tons of construction supplies and food for CORDS, while the division's units and personnel donated an additional 30,000 tons of relief supplies and $7,000 in cash. Working closely with Vietnamese and CORDS officials, division medical teams treated 180,000 people, and division units helped civilians build schools, wells, dispensaries, markets, a hospital, and a variety of other small community projects. The enemy took note, and on 26 September, a sniper attempted to assassinate the commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade, a district chief, and several other senior officials in Duc Pho town, Quang Ngai Province, as they dedicated a marketplace the brigade had helped build. The assassin wounded one Vietnamese official before being apprehended.[37]

One of the division's premier projects during the summer was the construction of Ky My, a community in Quang Tin Province's Hau Duc District designed to resettle refugees close to their original homes. The division spearheaded the U.S.–South Vietnamese venture, which produced nicer homes than the ones people had left behind, but authorities had difficulty coaxing people to move in. The prospective inhabitants wondered if they would have sufficient security, mainly because they felt the new community would be a prime target for the Viet Cong. Their concerns were justified. On 28 June, guerrillas attacked the refugee hamlet of Son Tra in Quang Ngai Province, killing 78 refugees and Revolutionary Development cadre, wounding 74 civilians, and destroying 570 homes. Like Ky My, Son Tra was one of the "safe haven" communities championed by CORDS advisers to return refugees to areas near their original homes, in this case the devastated and largely depopulated Binh Son District.

Determined to stop government encroachment and to drive people back into "liberated" areas, the guerrillas conducted many similar outrages throughout the summer. In August, for example, they torched 257 homes and inflicted

[35] Ibid., p. 24.
[36] Ibid., p. 28.
[37] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, Americal Div, pp. 30–31; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, Americal Div, 7 Nov 68, pp. 14, 40, Historians files, CMH.

A military policeman from the Americal Division issues health and comfort items to a detainee at the prisioner-of-war collection center in Chu Lai.

17 civilian casualties in Dong Thoi refugee camp in Quang Tin's Thang Binh District. The incendiary raid was just one of 25 similar incidents in I Corps that month that left 4,000 people homeless. Whenever one of these incidents occurred, U.S. military units, CORDS advisers, and Vietnamese officials banded together to repair the physical damage as quickly as possible, but the psychological scars were more difficult to mend.[38]

Like other divisions, Americal worked closely with province and district Phoenix committees, neutralizing fifty-six members of the Viet Cong infrastructure between July and September. The division operated its own network of spies that helped thwart several attacks. It was also a leader in the Volunteer Informant Program (VIP), in which units paid civilians for information. General Gettys' division accounted for 90 percent of VIP disbursements in I Corps and 45 percent nationwide. Sixty percent of the informants were children. Typically, informants turned in war materiel. In August, Americal's

[38] Memos, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 14 Jul 68, p. 17; CG, and III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 13 Sep 68, sub: CORDS field Overview, p. 3; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, Americal Div, pp. 41–43; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, Americal Div, pp. 41–43; Rpts, CORDS, Senior Adviser, Quang Tin Province, 3 Jul 68, p. 2; and CORDS, Senior Adviser, Quang Tin Province, 2 Aug 68, p. 2; Memos, CORDS, Senior Adviser, Quang Ngai Province, for CORDS, III MAF, 30 Jun 68, sub: Monthly Report, p. 1; and CORDS, Senior Adviser, Quang Tin Province, for CORDS, III MAF, 3 Sep 68, sub: Monthly Report, p. 2. All in Historians files, CMH.

VIP resulted in the acquisition of 197 artillery, 1,004 mortar, and 22,560 small arms munitions, 41 mines, and 37 pounds of explosives. The program generated almost no intelligence about the Viet Cong themselves, however, a subject most people felt was too risky to discuss.[39]

During the summer of 1968, U.S. forces had maintained stability in I Corps. They had kept the enemy's conventional forces largely out of populated areas and in some cases had eroded the Viet Cong's presence among the population. In addition to their many combat activities, XXIV Corps' soldiers and marines had devoted 34,000 hours to civic action work between August and October, accomplishing many worthy endeavors. CORDS officials reported solid progress in pacification in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces, with Quang Tin Province showing gains as well. The situations in Quang Ngai, and particularly Quang Nam, were less satisfactory. These provinces had been lagging behind the rest of I Corps in 1967, and the Tet offensive had only worsened their plight. During the summer, assassinations, kidnappings, and other incidents of terror and harassment had increased in southern I Corps, keeping it off balance. Local officials and security forces had achieved modest progress in spreading government control in Quang Ngai, but had made little headway in Quang Nam. Taken as a whole, Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) scores in I Corps rose from 51 percent rated relatively secure in June to 52.7 percent in August. If the summer of 1968 was to be a critical period of the war, allied success in I Corps had been modest.[40]

Operations in II Corps

At the start of the southwest monsoon season, most of I Field Force commander General Peers' nineteen maneuver battalions were committed to operations in northern II Corps. The 4th Infantry Division continued Operation MacArthur, its long-standing defense of the western highlands, while to the east the 173d Airborne Brigade continued to assist in protecting populated areas in the coastal provinces. During the first half of June, the allies spotted a number of North Vietnamese units withdrawing from II Corps. General Peers learned that the *2d Regiment* and the *22d Regiment* of the *3d PAVN Division* had moved into southern Quang Ngai Province, most likely headed for Base Areas 118 and 120 in the mountains west of the provincial capital. The *325C Division* and the *1st Division* appeared to have withdrawn from Kontum Province to Base Area 701 in Laos. Two units formerly attached to the *B3 Front*—the *32d* and *33d Regiments*—were reportedly heading south toward III Corps. "If this is the case," General Abrams wrote to Peers on 22 June,

[39] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, Americal Div, pp. 18–19, 77; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, Americal Div, p. 50.

[40] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, HQ, XXIV Corps, 20 Aug 68, pp. 17–20, Historians files, CMH; Memo, CG, III MAF, for COMUSMACV, 14 Oct 68, p. 4; Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through October 1968, n.d., table 5a, Historians files, CMH.

"I should think you would have at hand a period of two or three weeks at least in which U.S., Republic of Korea, and Army of South Vietnam forces could rise up and really mop up" the enemy units that still remained in II Corps. Abrams' hope would not be realized. As had been the case since the start of the war, allied formations had great difficulty locating the enemy once he went to ground. By withdrawing across the border or into remote sanctuaries inside South Vietnam, by making the most of concealing and difficult terrain, and by breaking down into small detachments and avoiding contact, the enemy effectively denied the allies decisive engagements.[41]

General Stone

In the Central Highlands, the commander of the 4th Infantry Division, General Stone, continued his trifold mission of screening the border, protecting provincial capitals and the roads that served them, and assisting pacification. His 1st Brigade guarded the area between Dak To and Dak Pek in northwestern Kontum Province, his 3d Brigade monitored the Polei Kleng region to the west of Kontum City, and his 2d Brigade stood in reserve to the south in Pleiku Province. Operations varied based on the mission assigned. Being deepest into enemy territory, the 1st Brigade conducted mostly search-and-destroy and patrol missions, while the 3d Brigade, stationed closer to Kontum's population centers, performed more security and village cordon-and-search activities. Regardless of where combat operations took place, Stone encouraged his subordinates to integrate provincial civil affairs advisers into their activities to smooth relations with the inhabitants and avoid unnecessary property destruction.[42]

Throughout the summer, the division continued its Good Neighbor program in the protected zone outside of Kontum City, with twenty-four civic action teams working daily. Stone also continued consolidating small, vulnerable hamlets in the Good Neighbor zone into larger, more defensible villages, with eight communities undergoing such a transition. Further afield, each of the division's brigades continued to perform the normal slate of medical, sanitation, construction, and humanitarian activities associated with the civic

[41] Quote from Msg, Abrams MAC 6252 to Peers, 22 Jun 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH. Periodic Intel Rpt no. 26-68, I FFV, 23–29 Jun 68, 29 Jun 68, p. 3; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, HQ, I FFV, 15 Aug 68, p. 1. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[42] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 4th Inf Div, n.d., p. 44, Historians files, CMH.

action program, with the 1st Brigade forming a combined South Vietnamese Army–U.S. Army civic action team.[43]

On 1 July, the 4th Infantry Division, like all other units in I Field Force, formally relinquished the last of its Regional and Popular Forces training teams to CORDS. The transfer did not mean that U.S. combat units stopped working with the territorials. Stone directed his brigade commanders to provide any assistance the new MACV mobile advisory teams might request. Last but not least, he continued to do his part in helping to strengthen the indigenous military.[44]

In June, General Peers had given expression to MACV policy by ordering that all I Field Force operations be given a Vietnamese name as well as an English name to emphasize the importance of combined activities. Thus, Operation MacArthur became Operation Binh Tay–MacArthur. The change was often symbolic, as U.S. units had already been cooperating with the Vietnamese. In practice, the extent of Vietnamese participation in U.S. operations under what Peers called the "pair off" system varied widely depending on the circumstances. Still, cooperation frequently occurred. Thus between August and October, the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, participated in twenty-two combined operations with the South Vietnamese Army, forty-six with the Regional and Popular Forces and the CIDG, and twenty-three with the National Police. Meanwhile, the division provided training in long-range reconnaissance patrolling to Vietnamese regulars and initiated an exchange program in which the U.S. 4th Division, the South Vietnamese 22d Division, and the South Korean Capital Division traded officers for two-week stints. The division also began training former Communist soldiers to work as Kit Carson Scouts.[45]

Contact with the enemy was light during the summer, with the 4th Infantry Division killing 1,500 Communist troops and capturing 437 weapons and 21 tons of food between May and October. The division provided 102,000 civilians with medical exams, and distributed 233,000 youth health packets, 27 tons of food, and 3.6 tons of clothing. It also assisted with hundreds of civil construction projects, from latrines to churches. The officers and men of the 1st Brigade supplemented the official civic action program by donating $860 of their own money to a school in Kontum. Behind the shield provided by the division, CORDS advisers in Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac reported satisfactory progress in most pacification programs, although the amount of territory controlled by the government remained unchanged. The price the division paid during the summer for these achievements was 303 men killed and 1,500 wounded.[46]

[43] Ibid., pp. 23–24; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 4th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 24–26, Historians files, CMH.

[44] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 4th Inf Div, p. 12; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 4th Inf Div, pp. 13–14.

[45] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 4th Inf Div, p. 12; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 3d Bde, 4th Inf Div, 4 Nov 68, p. 42, Historians files, CMH.

[46] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 4th Inf Div, pp. 10, 23–29; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 4th Inf Div, pp. 7, 24–30; Rpts, CORDS, province adviser, Jun–Sep 1968, Historians files, CMH.

While the 4th Infantry Division screened II Corps' western frontier, General Allen's 173d Airborne Brigade scattered its resources along Vietnam's central coast. The brigade's largest concentration of forces, and its most important mission, lay in northeastern Binh Dinh Province. Here two airborne battalions assisted by the mechanized 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry, and a company of M48 tanks from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, continued Operation COCHISE on the Bong Son Plain.[47]

General Peers was eager to exploit the enemy's relative passivity in eastern II Corps as the Communists tried to recover from their two failed offensives, but problems in the South Vietnamese command structure posed difficulties. The I Field Force commander thought highly of his counterpart, General Lan, who had displayed great energy since taking control of II Corps in March. However, Lan lacked the political influence of his predecessor, General Vinh Loc, which put Lan at a disadvantage when dealing with willful subordinates. That weakness was particularly evident in Binh Dinh Province. Whenever the commander of the South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division, General Hieu, wished to organize mobile operations with his 40th Infantry Regiment, based at Landing Zone ENGLISH, or his 41st Infantry Regiment, based at Landing Zone CRYSTAL, he had to negotiate with the powerful province chief, Lt. Col. Phan Minh Tho, who used those same units to support the pacification program. The relationship between the two officers—Peers called it a "vendetta"—had been simmering for years, and to make matters worse, both of Hieu's regimental commanders enjoyed a close relationship with the province chief. The result was a pair of regiments that rarely sought the enemy. Peers hoped that the temporary absence of the *3d Division* would give Hieu the opportunity to shake things up in Binh Dinh.[48]

Those hopes were not fulfilled. Despite attempts by General Allen to get the South Vietnamese 22d Division more involved in mobile operations with the 173d Airborne Brigade, General Hieu seemed unable or unwilling to free up the 40th and 41st Infantry Regiments from their security missions across the Bong Son and Phu My lowlands. One of the four battalions from each regiment was technically "free" at any given time, but usually received training during that period and was not available for operations. Such was the dilemma for South Vietnamese officers who had to juggle pacification and modernization programs while trying to develop a mobile offensive capability.

An incident near Tam Quan at the northern edge of the Bong Son Plain further highlighted U.S. concerns. On the afternoon of 22 July, enemy mortar crews attacked Landing Zone TOM, a firebase on the northeast side of the village that contained a battery of U.S. 155-mm. howitzers and a South Vietnamese infantry company. When the shelling began, a detachment from the U.S. 19th Engineer Battalion that was making repairs to Highway 1 near Landing Zone TOM got in its vehicles and drove south to escape the danger. Hot on its heels came several armored personnel carriers from the South

[47] Msg, Abrams MAC 7315 to Wheeler, 3 Jun 68, pp. 3–4, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

[48] Quoted words from Msg, Peers NHT 1011 to Abrams, 14 Jul 68, p. 3, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 40th Infantry, which rolled out of Landing Zone TOM to investigate the mortar fire. As the engineers were passing through the southern part of Tam Quan, they came under heavy fire. The South Vietnamese mechanized troopers who were behind them backed out of the ambush zone, leaving behind one damaged vehicle and abandoning the Americans at the head of the column.[49]

General Allen offered to send in his paratroopers, but Lt. Col. Nguyen Ba Thinh, the commander of the South Vietnamese 40th Infantry, insisted on leading the counterattack. At Colonel Thinh's request, U.S. helicopters landed one of his battalions on the outskirts of Tam Quan. With darkness setting in and hostile fire coming from the village, the battalion commander elected to stay put at the landing zone. Exasperated, Allen dispatched several of his own companies to surround the ambush site before sending in his reconnaissance platoon to look for survivors. Arriving at 2230, the platoon found a grim scene: seventeen allied bodies, including twelve U.S. engineers, two U.S. technical advisers, and three South Vietnamese soldiers. One armored personnel carrier had been destroyed, and three armored personnel carriers and six engineer vehicles had been heavily damaged. Only two Americans, one wounded and one unhurt, were still alive. Enemy losses were unknown.[50]

General Peers hid none of his dismay when he spoke to General Lan about the incident. The I Field Force commander warned his counterpart that security in northern Binh Dinh Province was "regressing" because Hieu refused to challenge his long-serving regimental commanders, "who are acting like small time warlords." Both South Vietnamese colonels observed entirely "self-imposed" limits that gave them an excuse to avoid operations with the 173d Airborne Brigade in the mountains overlooking the Bong Son Plain. General Lan promised to light a fire under Hieu, but Peers knew that improvements were likely to come slowly if at all.[51]

If the Americans were frustrated by their inability to get the Vietnamese regulars out on the offensive, they realized there was much to do on the pacification front. The allies considered two-thirds of the 350,000 people living in the COCHISE area of operations to be heavily influenced by the Viet Cong. With the *3d PAVN Division* making itself scarce, General Allen was able to focus much of the brigade's energy on attacking the local Viet Cong apparatus. Making the most use of long-range reconnaissance patrols to screen the approaches to the Bong Son Plain, Allen combined his battalions with South Vietnamese forces to conduct frequent security sweeps in the northern lowlands.[52]

Like other U.S. commanders, Allen found it challenging to operate in populated areas where the enemy exercised a deep presence. One of the most serious problems was the steady stream of casualties inflicted on U.S. soldiers

[49] Msg, Peers NHT1064 to Abrams, 24 Jul 68, pp. 1–2, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., p. 3; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 30-68, I FFV, 21–27 Jul 68, 27 Jul 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

[52] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 173d Abn Bde, 15 Nov 68, p. 37, Historians files, CMH.

A Viet Cong wire-rigged grenade booby trap

by booby traps. During the summer, Allen's paratroopers discovered and disarmed 125 traps but inadvertently triggered an additional 300 that killed several men and left another 150 wounded. Whenever possible, troops followed armored vehicles whose weight detonated antipersonnel devices before the infantry reached them. Antitank mines not discovered by observation or electronic detectors were rarely powerful enough to damage tanks and did minimal harm to armored personnel carriers, but the force of the blast could injure those inside a carrier, and for this reason many soldiers rode atop, rather than inside, M113s. When vehicles were unable to enter a suspicious area or were otherwise unavailable, the lead man in a patrol carried a grappling hook attached to a nine-meter nylon cord. Lying prone, the soldier would toss the hook over a suspicious patch, then drag it back to snare possible booby trap wires. Former Viet Cong recruited as Kit Carson Scouts were particularly adept in identifying traps, and during the summer the brigade rapidly increased the number of scouts.[53]

As was the case throughout Vietnam, Allen recorded that "booby traps were very bad psychologically for our young paratroopers and commanders, in that the men develop a sometimes bitter hatred for the local villagers. The men have every reason to believe, and are sometimes correct in this belief, that the booby traps are made by the very people they see living in the villages."

[53] Ibid., p. 85.

Other Viet Cong tactics, such as opening fire from a house before retreating behind a shield of women and children, were equally galling to U.S. soldiers. Recognizing that his men might take their frustrations out on the populace, Allen made a strong effort to enforce long-standing MACV guidance on correct behavior toward civilians and prisoners. He ordered his battalion commanders to monitor their men closely and occasionally went out on operations to observe firsthand how his men behaved. The brigade investigated incidents involving the injury or mistreatment of civilians and provided compensation and assistance when U.S. actions, whether deliberate or accidental, harmed civilians. His leadership helped avoid an incident like My Lai, despite the similar operational conditions.[54]

Complementing Allen's insistence on proper conduct were his policies on the use of fire support in heavily populated areas. Like Colonel Cushman, he ordered commanders not to use artillery or airpower in villages unless they were engaging a significant enemy unit, in which case they could employ the full panoply of firepower available to minimize U.S. casualties. Allen reported that his emphasis on proper conduct and firepower restraint helped keep the loss of civilian life and property to a minimum. Other factors that contributed to the small number of civilian casualties during operations were the fact that every home usually had an underground bunker, and that when an enemy main force unit entered a village, many civilians would immediately depart before a battle began.[55]

As it conducted its operations, the 173d Airborne Brigade fully participated in the program to ameliorate civilian suffering and to win public support. Working closely with CORDS advisers and local officials, it treated 12,000 civilian patients between June and August and assisted in a number of humanitarian and community improvement projects. After guerrillas destroyed the refugee hamlet of Ngoc An, located south of Bong Son town, when its residents refused to return to Communist-controlled territory, the brigade gave building materials to the ninety-six families the Viet Cong had made homeless. These supplies represented just part of the over thirteen tons of construction materials and sixteen tons of food that the brigade delivered to communities during the summer.[56]

On 22 August, Generals Hieu and Allen launched Operation DAN SINH 22-6, a three-phased pacification-support operation by six battalions (three U.S. and three South Vietnamese) to clear the Bong Son Plain. The operation differed from the brigade's previous activities in that, like Colonel Cushman to the north, Allen kept allied units in a particular village for a week or two before relocating them to another area, thus allowing sufficient time for an in-depth search. Otherwise, the techniques he used were indistinguishable from those used by all U.S. units in Vietnam for years. Phase I lasted until 6 September and consisted of search-and-clear operations across the entire plain. Aided by

[54] Ibid., pp. 84–85.

[55] Ibid., pp. 84–86.

[56] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 56–58, 82–83; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 173d Abn Bde, 15 Aug 68, pp. 29, 40–41, 55-2, Historians files, CMH.

the extensive use of Rome plows, the allies uncovered and destroyed numerous tunnels, caves, fortifications, and traps. Phase II lasted from 7 September to 27 October, during which time the allies used cordon-and-search actions to screen the population. For small communities, the brigade would send a rifle company to establish a cordon either at dusk or at dawn. The screening of inhabitants became more productive once Vietnamese authorities assigned a company of National Police to assist in the interrogations. Popular Forces soldiers also helped with the search, while civic action personnel addressed local needs and Communist defectors organized into armed propaganda teams proselytized the residents. By the end of Phase II, the allies had interrogated nearly 13,000 people, killed 237 Viet Cong, and detained 122 confirmed and 115 suspected enemy personnel. They had also captured seventy-one weapons. During Phase III, which was to start 28 October with no definite end date, Allen intended to saturate the Bong Son Plain with patrols to prevent the enemy from returning, creating a fertile environment for pacification activities. Allied operations on the Bong Son Plain helped the province as a whole inch up in the hamlet evaluation standings to a point where by 31 September allied officials considered over 71 percent of the province's population to be relatively secure.[57]

Allen considered the operation a success. He particularly felt that keeping units in a given locale for an extended period was much more productive than a short stay. But he also recognized that such operations were only possible when the enemy's conventional forces were absent, and that gains could easily be lost if an enemy incursion or demands for troops elsewhere led to a diminishment of attention, a dilemma that had confronted the allies from the start. Consequently, he strongly supported MACV's long-standing policy of using U.S. units to improve the efficiency of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Both in the COCHISE area of operations and elsewhere in II Corps, he "paired off" one U.S. battalion with a South Vietnamese regiment to conduct combined operations and training. He emphasized helping the territorial forces, which was the key to establishing permanent control over the hamlets. Despite formal relinquishment of the territorial training mission to CORDS, he formed an ad hoc team to help a Popular Forces unit build village defenses and another to help territorials improve their bridge security techniques. In July, he established a Regional and Popular Forces leadership school at An Khe that graduated one hundred students per month. The initiative inspired General Peers to order the 4th Infantry Division to create a similar academy. Allen also created a Regional and Popular Forces Affairs Office within the brigade headquarters that served as a liaison with the territorials. One officer in every battalion was charged with knowing everything there was to know about the territorial forces operating in his unit's sector. The officer helped integrate territorial troops into battalion operations and provided assistance to those forces, thereby supplementing CORDS' training and development effort. The brigade also began giving out awards to individual territorial soldiers to boost

[57] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 37–38, 85; AAR, Opn COCHISE-DAN SINH, 31 Mar 68–31 Jan 69, 173d Abn Bde, 2 Mar 69; Rpt, CORDS, Monthly Pacification Status Rpt, Hamlet Evaluation System, 30 Sep 68, pp. 2–5. All in Historians files, CMH.

South Vietnamese soldiers during training

their esprit, with 1st Sgt. Pham Dai receiving the Bronze Star Medal with "V" device for valor.[58]

While Allen focused most of his attention on the COCHISE area of operations, small task forces performed other missions in eastern II Corps. In Operation WALKER, one battalion defended the brigade's main base at An Khe in western Binh Dinh Province and the road that ran through it linking Pleiku City with the coastal logistics hub at Qui Nhon. While important, the mission generated little combat in the summer of 1968. Another battalion task force continued Operation BOLLING in the populated basin surrounding Phu Yen's capital of Tuy Hoa. The force conducted search-and-destroy operations and protected roads and farmers harvesting rice. It, too, had little contact with the enemy, both because he had withdrawn to lick his wounds and because the area was largely under government control. Finally, a third airborne task force based in Phan Thiet, Binh Thuan Province, continued Operation MCLAIN (the successor to Operation BYRD) in southern II Corps alongside South Vietnamese Army units.[59]

[58] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 26, 55-1, 55-3; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 173d Abn Bde, pp. 32–33, 40–53, 86–87.

[59] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, HQ, I FFV, p. 14; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, HQ, I FFV, 9 Mar 69, p. 66, Historians files, CMH.

Southern II Corps had generally been a quiet area, but Peers and Allen found cause for concern during the summer. The region fell under the supervision of the South Vietnamese 23d Infantry Division. One senior U.S. officer considered the division commander, General An, to be "an absolutely superb commander." Unfortunately, the same could not be said for his subordinates. General An lacked confidence in the commander of the 44th Infantry, Lt. Col. Vo Kham, whose mission was to defend Binh Thuan and Lam Dong Provinces. As for Kham's battalion commanders, Peers reported to Abrams that none could be classified as an effective officer, "even in ARVN terms." General An was also disenchanted with Lt. Col. Ho Huu Dong, the commander of the South Vietnamese 2d Ranger Group. His three ranger battalions served as II Corps' main exploitation force, but Colonel Dong had become exceedingly cautious after his units had sustained heavy casualties during Tet.[60]

Problems surfaced in May, when the Viet Cong defeated the Vietnamese 22d Ranger Battalion in Tuyen Duc Province. Then on the twenty-eighth, the *186th Local Force Battalion* briefly occupied a portion of the provincial capital at Da Lat. General Lan redeployed the South Vietnamese 2d Ranger Group to protect the city, but on the first of June the enemy mauled one of Colonel Dong's battalions west of town. Two days later, the Viet Cong ambushed a Regional Forces company near Bao Loc in neighboring Lam Dong Province. On the fifth and seventh of June, South Vietnamese troops in southern Ninh Thuan Province lost two engagements with the Viet Cong near Phan Rang. The string of setbacks prompted General Lan to ask for U.S. assistance.[61]

On 8 June, Peers ordered the commander of Task Force SOUTH, Colonel Cleland, to suspend Operation MCLAIN in Ninh Thuan Province so that his combat group—the 3d Battalion, 506th Infantry, the 192d Assault Helicopter Company, and a pair of 105-mm. howitzer batteries—could move to Da Lat. Peers designated Cleland's search for the *186th Battalion* as Operation BANJO ROYCE. The I Field Force commander also directed General Allen to detach a company from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, currently engaged with Operation BOLLING, for temporary duty in Lam Dong Province.

Task Force SOUTH came up empty in Tuyen Duc Province, but on 17 June Company C from the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, came upon the *145th Main Force Battalion* near Bao Loc, resulting in a sharp battle that cost the Americans seven killed and thirty-three wounded. Eager to regain contact, Allen airlifted the 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, from the COCHISE sector in Binh Dinh Province to Bao Loc, whereupon it commenced Operation HARMON GREEN with its sister company from the 4th Battalion. General Lan reinforced the mission with two battalions from the South Vietnamese 2d Ranger Group (now under the command of Maj. Bui Van Sam, who replaced the lackluster Colonel Dong) and three mobile strike force companies. Lan and Peers also established a new combined

[60] First quote from Interv, George L. MacGarrigle with Maj Gen Charles P. Stone, 3 Mar 74, Historians files, CMH. Second quote from Msg, Peers NHT 742 to Abrams, 5 Jun 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

[61] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, HQ, I FFV, pp. 20–21.

headquarters in Da Lat to share intelligence and to coordinate operations in southern II Corps.[62]

As soon as Operation HARMON GREEN got under way, the action switched back to Binh Thuan Province. On 18 June, several Regional Forces companies and elements of the South Vietnamese 3d Battalion, 44th Infantry, engaged a company from the *482d Local Force Battalion* just north of Phan Thiet. The government troops killed sixty-two Viet Cong, suffering eighteen dead themselves. One U.S. adviser also died. Two days later, two companies from the *482d Battalion* ambushed a patrol from the South Vietnamese 4th Battalion, 44th Infantry, in the same area as the first encounter. On this occasion, the government troops lost thirty-six killed and another thirty-two wounded.[63]

The reversals led to additional alterations. On 1 July, Peers terminated HARMON GREEN and placed the 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, under the command of Task Force SOUTH. Colonel Cleland redeployed his 3d Battalion, 506th Infantry, 101st Air Cavalry Division, to Ninh Thuan Province where it resumed Operation MCLAIN from Landing Zone BETTY near Phan Thiet. General Lan also took steps to improve the situation, replacing the inept commander of the 44th Infantry with a proven leader, Lt. Col. Nguyen Ba Thinh. Lan gave Colonel Thinh three new battalion commanders.[64]

Colonel Thinh met his first test on 17 July when his 2d Battalion discovered the *840th Main Force Battalion* and the *450th Local Force Company* in fortifications ten kilometers northeast of Phan Thiet. Thinh committed his remaining maneuver unit, the 3d Battalion, 44th Infantry, while Cleland sent in several companies from the 3d Battalion, 506th Infantry, and helicopter gunships from Troop B, 1st Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry. Backed by the strong U.S. force and led by an able commander, Thinh's men drove the Viet Cong from their bunkers in a two-day battle. According to a prisoner, sixty-eight enemy soldiers died. Allied losses totaled fifteen South Vietnamese and two U.S. soldiers.[65]

General Peers welcomed the positive turn in southern II Corps, but felt that he would have to keep U.S. troops in the region for the foreseeable future. That meant he could not return the 3d Battalion, 503d Infantry, to Binh Dinh Province, which left General Allen with the 2d Battalion, 503d Infantry, the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry (Mechanized), and elements from the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, to defend the Bong Son Plain. The I Field Force commander could only hope that the South Vietnamese would be able to take up the slack if and when the *3d Division* finally returned to its old haunts.[66]

[62] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 25-68, I FFV, 16–22 Jun 68, 22 Jun 68, p. 6, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, HQ, I FFV, p. 22.

[63] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 25-68, I FFV, pp. 1, 21.

[64] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 27-68, I FFV, 30 Jun–6 Jul 68, 6 Jul 68, p. 7, Historians files, CMH.

[65] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 29-68, I FFV, 14–20 Jul 68, 20 Jul 68, pp. 6, 20, Historians files, CMH.

[66] MFR, MACV, 20 Jul 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, pp. 6–7, Historians files, CMH.

Peers was compelled to stretch his forces even more thinly when a new threat emerged in the southern highlands. In mid-July, allied intelligence learned that the two primary *B1 Front* units stationed in the mid-coastal region—the *95th Regiment* in Phu Yen Province and the *18B Regiment* in Khanh Hoa Province—had started marching west, each leaving behind only a skeleton force to protect their base camps. Recent reports also indicated that the *1st Division* had begun to drift south after spending the last six weeks resting in Base Area 701 near the tri-border intersection. Finally, captured enemy documents indicated that the *B3 Front* was combining local Viet Cong battalions in each of the three highland provinces to form new regiments. "It is too early to predict exactly what the enemy is up to," Peers wrote Abrams on 16 July, but his best guess was a late summer offensive aimed at Ban Me Thuot with supporting attacks elsewhere.[67]

As a precaution, the I Field Force commander airlifted two infantry battalions from the 2d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, as well as two artillery batteries and one air cavalry troop into Ban Me Thuot on 18 June to operate alongside the South Vietnamese 45th Infantry Regiment. General Stone's 1st Brigade, now commanded by Col. Joseph E. Fix, remained in northwestern Kontum Province with four infantry battalions to guard the Dak To, Ben Het, Dak Pek, and Dak Seang border camps, all of which had endured intermittent mortar and rocket attacks in June and early July. The commander of the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, Colonel Forrester, continued to defend the western approaches to Pleiku City with three infantry battalions and one armored cavalry squadron.[68]

"I have been trying to rationalize what will happen in the highlands," the I Field Force commander wrote to General Abrams. "It appears that the enemy's primary target will be Ban Me Thuot . . . [but] I don't think he is ready as yet." If the *1st Division* attacked with two of its regiments, Peers believed that the task force from the 4th Infantry Division currently stationed there and General An's forces could handle the situation. If all three regiments from the North Vietnamese division attacked and other *B3 Front* units launched diversionary strikes in Pleiku and Kontum Provinces, he admitted that allied forces could be tied down "to the point wherein they may not be able to deploy additional forces" to Ban Me Thuot. If so, it might be necessary to airlift a brigade from III Corps, as had been done back in late May to defend Dak Pek, but that was assuming things remained quiet in III Corps. Peers also asked the South Koreans if they could send a brigade into the highlands. The Koreans expressed interest, but turning that idea into reality would take time. For the moment then, the I Field Force commander had to deal with emerging threats with the forces he had on hand.[69]

[67] Quote from Msg, Peers NHT1811 to Abrams, 16 Jul 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH.
[68] Msg, Abrams MAC 9883 to Wheeler, 22 Jul 68, p. 2, Abrams Msg files, CMH.
[69] Msg, Peers NHT 1075 to Abrams, 27 Jul 68, p. 1, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH.

II Field Force and the Approaches to Saigon

For the new MACV commander, nothing in the summer of 1968 was more important than protecting Saigon from another Communist incursion, as much for the political and diplomatic consequences as for the military ones, and allied deployments reflected this fact. Of the ninety-four battalions available to II Field Force commander General Weyand and III Corps commander General Minh in July, the allies assigned twenty-five to the Capital Military District in and around Saigon and posted an additional fifty in the five provinces surrounding that district, leaving just nineteen battalions to protect the rest of III Corps. Wherever they were located, virtually all of these units were committed to Operation TOAN THANG, the combined offensive the allies had initiated in April to reestablish government presence in populated areas. Satisfied with the arrangements he had inherited from Westmoreland, Abrams made few substantive changes either to the dispositions or the missions assigned to U.S. units in the III Corps zone.[70]

America's most immediate contribution to Saigon's security came in the form of two infantry brigades and supporting air and artillery assets that Weyand assigned to General Hay's Capital Military Assistance Command. The brigades—the 199th Infantry Brigade and the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division—were so effective in countering the rocket and mortar threat that the city experienced few bombardments after 17 June. Aggressive allied action in Gia Dinh Province during that month resulted in 1,900 enemy dead, 424 prisoners, and 987 weapons captured at the cost of 242 allied military deaths. By July, security had returned to pre-Tet levels and nearly all of the enemy's main force units had withdrawn from Gia Dinh. The number of contacts fell precipitously, with the allies losing 17 dead (4 American) and 132 wounded (78 American) in July versus the enemy's 183 dead, 94 prisoners, and 290 weapons captured. U.S. forces were responsible for 80 percent of the enemy's dead. The declining statistics reflected the enemy's withdrawal, rather than a reduction in allied effort. During July, the 199th Infantry Brigade set 1,170 ambushes, conducted 474 patrols, and launched 578 company-size search-and-destroy operations. Although the brigade inflicted few casualties, it destroyed 1,000 bunkers and captured 466 pounds of TNT and 4 tons of rice.[71]

Still, allied preoccupation with protecting Saigon from a third offensive rather than solidifying pacification meant that the Viet Cong were able to penetrate many hamlets at will. In July, U.S. units tried to alter the situation, taking advantage of the absence of enemy conventional units to increase their activities with the Vietnamese police and territorial forces. The 199th Infantry Brigade, for example, performed 52 company-size combined operations, 42

[70] Weekly Forecast, MACV, J–3, Opns to COMUSMACV, 20 Jul 68, p. 4, Encl to MFR, MACV, 20 Jul 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, 20 July 1968, p. 5, Historians files, CMH.

[71] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, II FFV, 14 Aug 68, pp. 31–32; Rpt, Gia Dinh Advisory Det, 30 Jun 68, sub: Gia Dinh Province, p. 7; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 199th Inf Bde, 22 Aug 68, p. 14. All in Historians files, CMH.

1st Infantry Division soldiers wade through a stream during a patrol.

combined cordon-and-search actions, and joined with the Vietnamese to man 583 resources-control checkpoints. Guided by information provided by district intelligence centers, these operations were responsible for many of the 128 members of the Viet Cong infrastructure captured or killed in Gia Dinh during the month.[72]

By the time Maj. Gen. Fillmore K. Mearns assumed command of the Capital Military Assistance Command on 3 August, the situation in and around Saigon was stable. The city was secure and enemy strength in Gia Dinh had declined to two battalions and 350 guerrillas. In the daily grind of patrol and ambush, casualties in Gia Dinh during August totaled 23 allied dead (13 American) and 104 wounded (54 American) versus 103 Viet Cong killed and 49 combatants and 174 weapons captured. The senior U.S. adviser in the province noted a marked improvement in territorial morale and performance, which he attributed to two factors: the distribution of M16 semiautomatic rifles, part of the post-Tet effort to boost the Regional and Popular Forces, and the many opportunities that paramilitary forces had to work with and learn from allied regular forces. Most of this effort fell to the Americans, who conducted 652 actions with the Regional and Popular Forces in August, in contrast to South Vietnamese regulars who performed just 48 such operations. Still, challenges

[72] Rpt, Gia Dinh Advisory Det, 30 Jun 68, pp. 1, 4–5, 7; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 199th Inf Bde, p. 14.

remained, as most of the improvement seemed to occur in the Regional, not the Popular, Forces. Moreover, statisticians noted a significant disparity in performance based on the presence or absence of American guidance. When a U.S. adviser was present on a night ambush, Gia Dinh's Regional and Popular Forces contacted the enemy 4.85 percent of the time. Without an American, the contact rate dropped to 0.5 percent.[73]

CORDS advisers noted similar disparities on the civil side. They reported that the Revolutionary Development program in Gia Dinh was effective in achieving tangible tasks, such as taking a census and identifying Viet Cong sympathizers, but was far less successful in getting people to identify with the government. Civil progress was therefore painfully slow. U.S. forces did what they could, supplementing their security work with civic actions. In July, the 199th Infantry Brigade delivered 10 tons of cement, 16 tons of food, 29,000 bricks, and 69,000 board feet of lumber. It helped build or rebuild thirty-six permanent houses, forty-four temporary refugee homes, three schools, and a dispensary. It distributed 226 pounds of candy, 800 pounds of soap, and 196 bottles of vitamins, while its medical personnel treated 10,500 civilians. Last but not least, the brigade paid 21,000 piasters to seven families for nine injuries and two deaths caused by U.S. artillery fire. It would continue to perform similar actions for the rest of the summer, spending an additional 98,500 piasters in solatium payments to thirty-seven civilians harmed in six firearm and eight traffic accidents, two artillery incidents, and six cases in which U.S. forces inadvertently hit civilians while responding to hostile fire.[74]

By September, pacification and security measures had succeeded in bringing nearly 49 percent of Gia Dinh's rural population under government control. This represented an increase of three percentage points since July. Considering the quantity of allied troops in and around Gia Dinh and the province's proximity to Saigon, the number was a testament to the difficulty of the task and the challenges that remained.[75]

While U.S. forces assigned to the Capital Military Assistance Command secured Saigon's environs, the 1st Infantry Division spent the summer attacking the enemy's bases and lines of communications to the north. Most of General Ware's 1st Infantry Division and the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division patrolled Binh Duong Province and the northeastern part of Bien Hoa Province. The 1st and 2d Squadrons from the 11th Armored Cavalry operated with elements of Ware's division along the Highway 13 corridor in Binh Long Province. Here as throughout III Corps, the enemy avoided contact. Viet Cong guerrillas maintained an atmosphere of uncertainty through sporadic acts of propaganda, intimidation, harassing fire, and terror, but ground attacks were rare. In addition to conducting search-and-destroy operations into enemy

[73] Rpt, Gia Dinh Advisory Det, 31 Aug 68, sub: Gia Dinh Province, pp. 1–3; Rpt, Gia Dinh Advisory Det, 31 Jul 68, sub: Gia Dinh Province, p. 6. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[74] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 199th Inf Bde, n.d., p. 20, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 199th Inf Bde, pp. 25–26.

[75] Rpt, Gia Dinh Advisory Det, 31 Jul 68, p. 8; Rpt, CORDS, Monthly Pacification Status Rpt, Hamlet Evaluation System, 30 Sep 68, pp. 3–12.

sanctuaries and using Rome plows to protect friendly controlled roads and to unmask enemy infiltration routes, General Ware used small unit operations to harass the foe. As the enemy's combat units broke down into small groupings to avoid detection, the 1st Division followed suit, progressing from battalion- to company- to platoon-size operations backed by an increasing number of night ambush patrols.[76]

Generally, the allies made slow but perceptible progress in the 1st Division area of operations during the summer of 1968. During June and July, General Ware's 1st and 3d Brigades killed 619 Communists, destroyed 1,900 bunkers, and captured 44 soldiers, 200 weapons, and 318 tons of food. The steady pressure from search-and-destroy operations and B–52 strikes compelled the enemy to alter his logistical system, abandoning large depots and dispersing his supplies among many small caches. By so doing, the Communists made their system more resilient and preserved their capability, albeit with less efficiency. Food, however, was at a premium, as allied raids and protective measures around farmland forced the enemy to import rice from Cambodia to feed his troops. Defectors reported low morale and reduced proficiency as inadequately trained recruits filled the ranks. Frequent cordon-and-search operations likewise hindered the enemy's ability to acquire support from the villages, whose inhabitants showed an increasing reluctance to supply the enemy with men and materiel. But the enemy's infrastructure ran deep, as did the legacy of terror, and the 1st Division reported no progress in persuading people to give information on enemy activities. Security remained problematic in many areas, especially in the far border provinces of Binh Long and Phuoc Long. Nor were the 1st Division's accomplishments pain free. In June and July, the division lost 94 dead and 595 wounded.[77]

In a portion of Binh Duong and to the west, the 25th Infantry Division performed its part in operation TOAN THANG. General Mearns' 1st and 3d Brigades patrolled Tay Ninh Province. The 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, operating under Mearns' control, defended northern Hau Nghia Province, while the 2d Brigade, 25th Division, guarded central and southern Hau Nghia under the control of the Capital Military Assistance Command. Later in the summer, the 25th Division's 2d and 3d Brigades would swap assignments.

During June and July, the 25th Infantry Division conducted many battalion-size operations against Communist bases. It used airmobile operations to strike targets of opportunity, and deployed night ambush patrols along avenues of approach to Saigon so extensively that about half of the division's soldiers worked during the day and the other half at night. It did not venture

[76] Memo, G–2, 1st Inf Div, for CG, 1st Inf Div, 30 Jul 68, sub: An Assessment of the NVA/VC Posture from 1 August 1967–1 August 1968, p. 2; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, n.d., pp. 1–3, 9. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[77] Rpt, Binh Long Advisory Det, n.d., sub: Binh Long Province Report for August 1968, pp. 1–3; Rpt, Phuoc Long Advisory Det, 30 Jun 68, sub: Phuoc Long Province, pp. 1, 4–5; Rpt, Phuoc Long Advisory Det, 31 Aug 68, sub: Phuoc Long Province, p. 1. All in Historians files, CMH. ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 13; Memo, G–2, 1st Inf Div, for CG, 1st Inf Div, 30 Jul 68, pp. 2–3.

into War Zone C, leaving that region to long-range patrols from I Field Force backed by frequent B–52 strikes. The 25th Division's activities generated few contacts with the enemy but destroyed many of his facilities and supplies.[78]

Because main force units were often unfamiliar with the Saigon region and had to depend on locals for guides, II Field Force ordered its subordinates to "dig out [the Communists'] infrastructure and his local force units." Like other U.S. formations, the 25th Infantry Division contributed to this effort by conducting raids and cordon-and-search operations in collaboration with province and district intelligence centers and the local police and paramilitary forces.[79]

By the end of June, the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES) reported that roughly 56 percent of the 867,000 people living in the 25th Division's zone of operations were relatively secure. In Tay Ninh, Revolutionary Development was proceeding and combined operations occurred daily. The province adviser reported that the "Conditions of cooperation between U.S. . . . and Vietnamese official and military forces is of the highest caliber and little can be done to improve the rapport. U.S. forces contributed maximum effort to pacification and civic action and have been a tremendous asset to Tay Ninh. Troop misconduct is rare and acts which are committed are quickly rectified." The most serious incident involved a soldier who fired an M79 grenade launcher while riding in a convoy, wounding four civilians. By the end of the month, U.S. officials had been unable to identify the perpetrator.[80]

The situation in Hau Nghia, a long-standing Viet Cong bastion, improved at a slower pace, with CORDS officials attributing the progress more to the absence of enemy activity than to allied operations. By the end of July, the security situation was still precarious, with most Revolutionary Development teams spending their nights in military camps rather than the villages in which they worked. A small combined task force, composed of one U.S. company, a South Vietnamese ranger company, and Regional and Popular Forces, was providing an excellent experience for the territorials, and as elsewhere, the 25th Division participated in raids against Communist infrastructure personnel whenever the opportunity arose. One airmobile raid by a U.S. rifle company, the division's Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon, and a detachment from a Vietnamese Provincial Reconnaissance Unit eliminated nine members of the Viet Cong infrastructure and their guards near My Hanh village.[81]

As elsewhere in Vietnam, the war was a seemingly endless cycle of destruction and construction. During June and July, the 25th Infantry Division and its attached brigade from the 101st Airborne Division killed 1,273 enemy personnel and destroyed 260 sampans. Captures since 1 May included 37 sol-

[78] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, 1 Aug 68, p. 3, Historians files, CMH.

[79] MFR, MACV, 20 Jul 68, p. 9.

[80] Rpt, Tay Ninh Advisory Det, n.d., sub: Tay Ninh Province Semi-annual Report for the period ending 30 June 1968, p. 11 (quote); Rpt, Tay Ninh Advisory Det, 31 Jul 68, sub: Tay Ninh Province, p. 5. Both in Historians files, CMH. ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, p. 28.

[81] Rpt, Hau Nghia Advisory Det, 31 Jul 68, sub: Hau Nghia Province, pp. 2, 6, 9–10, Historians files, CMH.

A U.S. soldier and a South Vietnamese soldier collaborate on a psychological information pamphlet.

diers, 428 weapons, 78 tons of rice, 72,000 rounds of small arms ammunition, 1,667 rocket and artillery rounds, and 857 pounds of explosives. U.S. Air Force fighter-bombers supplemented the destruction by dropping 4,570 tons of ordnance in 3,600 sorties, with B–52s flying another 166 missions. The onslaught from the air reportedly destroyed an additional 876 enemy personnel, 4,355 bunkers, 619 structures, 78 sampans, 20 bridges, and 4,790 meters of trenches, causing 331 secondary explosions or fires in the process. On the flip side of the counterinsurgency coin, between 1 May and 31 July, the 25th Division helped build or repair 3,217 dwellings, 68 kilometers of roads, 10 dispensaries, 11 schools, and 7 bridges. It distributed considerable quantities of food and building supplies and treated 90,000 patients through its MEDCAP teams. The price for these accomplishments during June and July were 145 American dead, 879 wounded, and the loss of 11 M113s, 6 trucks, 3 helicopters, 1 tank, 1 M42 antiaircraft vehicle, and a 155-mm. howitzer. The enemy damaged another 35 helicopters, 34 trucks, and 36 armored vehicles.[82]

With the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions screening the northern and western approaches to Saigon, the directions that posed the greatest threat, an assortment of nations continued to guard the eastern and southern flanks of the capital. In the east, the 3d Squadron of the 11th Armored Cavalry, the

[82] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 25th Inf Div, pp. 4, 19, 30.

General Ewell

1st Australian Task Force, and the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment assisted the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division. Also present were the rear elements of the 9th Infantry Division that guarded Camp Martin Cox and its environs in Bien Hoa Province. The rest of the 9th Division adjusted its position to better screen the capital's southern approaches. In June, the 1st Brigade moved to Long An Province, while the 3d Brigade left Long An for Dong Tam where it joined the 2d Brigade in the Mobile Riverine Force. Joining the 9th Division was the 7th Squadron, 1st Air Cavalry, minus one squadron, which moved to Vinh Long Province with fifty-nine armed helicopters and a ground reconnaissance troop. In addition to supporting U.S. and South Vietnamese ground forces, General Abrams instructed the squadron to patrol the 44th Special Tactical Zone in the northern delta to interdict enemy water traffic carrying supplies across the border. Finally, in July, Maj. Gen. Julian J. Ewell, a distinguished World War II combat veteran who had assumed command of the 9th Division in late February, moved the division's headquarters from Camp Martin Cox to Dong Tam, completing the division's reorientation.[83]

During the summer, the 9th Infantry Division operated in over a dozen provinces in III and IV Corps, concentrating its efforts in those closest to Saigon—Long An, Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, and Kien Hoa. In Long An, the 1st Brigade worked alongside two regiments from the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division in seeking the enemy, blocking Communist lines of communications and keeping those of the allies open, and preventing hostile artillery from moving into range of Saigon. Typically, the brigade's one mechanized battalion patrolled the roads and an infantry battalion monitored the areas from which enemy rockets could hit Saigon, leaving the other two battalions free for mobile operations. The brigade launched search-and-destroy, armed aerial reconnaissance, and airmobile raids on a daily basis. Tactically, it resorted to all of the techniques that the U.S. Army had developed over the years to fit the conditions of Vietnam—eagle flights, in which a small airmobile force roamed the skies looking for targets of opportunity; jitterbugging, in which helicopters landed many patrols over a target area; and checkerboarding, in which a

[83] ORLL, 1 May–31 Aug 68, 9th Inf Div, n.d., p. 2, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 7th Armd Sqdn, 1st Cav Div, 31 Jul 68, p. 3, box 4, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

company deployed as secretly as possible, often as a stay-behind element of a larger force, before dispersing to numerous ambush locations for up to three days. These and other patrol techniques were based on the long-established principle of locating the enemy with a small force and then, if warranted, to "pile on" with additional ground troops and fire support when a significant contact occurred.[84]

Several examples of the pile-on technique occurred in August. When on the seventh, a company of the 6th Battalion, 31st Infantry, made contact with a Viet Cong battalion, the brigade quickly deployed seven additional companies by helicopter to encircle the foe. Artillery then pummeled the area and its egress routes through the night. By dawn the next day, the enemy was gone, leaving behind forty-six bodies, eleven prisoners, fourteen individual weapons, and one mortar. Four days later, a similar engagement produced 104 Viet Cong dead, 8 prisoners, 21 individual weapons, and 5 machine guns. Then, on 19 August, a company of the 2d Battalion, 39th Infantry, called in eight additional companies, air cavalry, fixed-wing aircraft, and artillery to pile onto two Viet Cong companies, resulting in the death of ninety-three enemy soldiers and the capture of fifteen prisoners, six defectors, and forty-five weapons. These were just a portion of the 1,293 enemy the 1st Brigade would kill between August and October at a cost to the brigade of 97 dead and 324 wounded.[85]

One of the ways the enemy attempted to defeat U.S. tactics was to disperse its encampments, with a battalion spread out over four to six kilometers. A second was to break down into small groups to exfiltrate encirclements at night. The Viet Cong frequently attempted to evade the Americans by wading or swimming along the many canals that crisscrossed the region. The brigade tried to counter the enemy's use of streams and canals by dropping concussion grenades into the water and by pouring gasoline onto the surface and setting it alight.[86]

As with other U.S. units with area security missions, the brigade supported pacification in a variety of ways. It worked with Vietnamese police and territorial forces to combat the enemy's politico-military apparatus. It strengthened local security by providing advice and materiel to the Regional and Popular Forces. It also engaged in what it called "Intelligence Civic Action" by placing intelligence personnel on MEDCAP teams. As the doctors and medics ministered to the sick, the accompanying intelligence agents unobtrusively gathered information that they then passed on to district intelligence centers. Last but not least, the brigade engaged in more traditional civic action activities. It distributed supplies, health kits, sports equipment, and food. Along with attached engineers, it continued the province's road-building program and helped communities with self-help projects. Included among the latter were the electrification of a dispensary and the construction of a maternity clinic, a foot

[84] Msg, Abrams MAC 7315 to Wheeler, 3 Jun 68, p.10, Westmoreland Msg files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 9th Inf Div, pp. 1–2; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Bde, 9th Inf Div, n.d., pp. 19–20, Historians files, CMH.

[85] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 5–7, 9–10, 11, 22.

[86] Ibid., pp. 20–22.

bridge, and a boxing arena. Thanks in part to these activities, Revolutionary Development made modest gains in Long An, yet by September, lax security still enabled the Viet Cong to access many of the province's pacified hamlets after dark.[87]

The 2d and 3d Brigades of the Mobile Riverine Force had a more varied mission than the 1st Brigade, combining limited area security functions with wide-ranging waterborne operations. During the summer, the newest member of the force, the 3d Brigade, 9th Division, operated mostly in Dinh Tuong and Go Cong Provinces as part of Operation TRUONG CONG DINH (begun in March) and its successor, Operation QUYET CHIEN ("Determined to Fight" begun in August). After transferring the task of protecting Highway 4 to the South Vietnamese 7th Division and the territorials in July, the brigade nimbly combined airmobile and waterborne operations to strike enemy bases and lines of communications. Security in Dinh Tuong returned to pre-Tet levels as the allies attacked Viet Cong sanctuaries and helped extend government influence into the countryside. CORDS reported slow but steady progress in pacification, while ralliers told of low morale and adverse public sentiment against the Communists caused by their forced requisition of manpower and supplies. Dinh Tuong's senior U.S. adviser noted that cooperation with the 9th Division continued "to be extremely helpful in providing assistance in the building of outposts, Revolutionary Development, self-help, and other civic action projects." Combined cordon-and-search actions yielded mixed results. A large operation in Dinh Tuong's Long Dinh District on 2 July involving three U.S. rifle companies, Popular Forces, and National Police came up empty handed, while a similar action nineteen days later on Toi Son Island, Chau Thanh District, killed two and captured fifty-five Viet Cong, three of whom were members of the infrastructure. To improve the effort against the apparatus, the division proposed, and Dinh Tuong officials accepted, the formation of a 42-man unit to target the infrastructure, comprised equally of American and Vietnamese territorial volunteers. Slowly the populace evinced more confidence, marred only by occasional incidents of bad conduct by U.S. military personnel. Of more serious consequence was the damage combat operations did to Dinh Tuong's irrigation canals, aggravating a severe drought that hit the province that year.[88]

The other member of the Mobile Riverine Force, the 9th Infantry Division's 2d Brigade, moved about the northern delta throughout the summer, striking enemy bases and logistical routes at will. In addition to its many offensive operations, the brigade supported pacification by delivering food, building

[87] Rpt, Long An Advisory Det, 31 Jul 68, sub: Long An Province, pp. 1–2; Rpt, Long An Advisory Det, n.d., sub: Long An Province, as of 30 September 1968, p. 1. Both in Historians files, CMH. ORLL, 1 May–31 Aug 68, 9th Inf Div, p. 29; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 1, 8, 16–17.

[88] Rpt, Dinh Tuong Advisory Det, n.d., sub: Dinh Tuong Province, June 1968, pp. 1, 11–13, 14 (quote); Rpt, Dinh Tuong Advisory Det, 1 Aug 68, sub: Dinh Tuong Province, pp. 1, 3, 6, 17; Rpt, Dinh Tuong Advisory Det, 2 Oct 68, sub: Dinh Tuong Province, p. 4; Rpt, IV Corps Advisory Gp, n.d., sub: CORDS Monthly Field Overview, July 1968, p. 9; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 3d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 31 Oct 68, p. 1. All in Historians files, CMH.

Members of the 9th Infantry Division walk along an embankment during a mission in the Mekong Delta.

materials, and medical supplies; treating 4,500 civilian patients between May and July; and helping the territorials through training missions and the distribution of considerable amounts of weapons and supplies.[89]

One of the provinces to which the 2d Brigade administered was Kien Hoa. By June, the security situation in Kien Hoa was eroding. Of the four South Vietnamese Army battalions based in the province, two rarely ventured out of the capital city of Ben Tre, and the other two, assigned to support Revolutionary Development, did little more than perform perfunctory patrols. Although the province adviser reported that the 2d Brigade was helpful in supporting the territorials, the Americans conducted just two operations in the province that month, killing a single Viet Cong soldier. On 15 July, General Ewell increased support to the province by assigning the 2d Brigade to a tactical area of interest in Kien Hoa with the object of destroying those enemy units that adversely affected Revolutionary Development. The operation, however, lasted just eleven days before he moved the brigade on, first to Vinh Long, and then to Phong Dinh and Chuong Thien Provinces.[90]

[89] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 11 Aug 68, pp. 9, 18–19, Historians files, CMH.

[90] Rpt, Kien Hoa Advisory Det, n.d., sub: Kien Hoa Province, June 1968, pp. 1, 8, Historians files, CMH.

The thrust into Chuong Thien, Operation VI THANH, took place between 30 July and 8 August. The movement represented the deepest penetration of the Mekong Delta to date by conventional U.S. ground forces. Attached to the brigade for this operation was the South Vietnamese 5th Marine Battalion. On the operation's first day both the Vietnamese marines and the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, ran into stiff opposition. Thereafter, actions devolved into a series of battalion search-and-destroy operations and heliborne and waterborne raids that generated small contacts. By the time the operation ended, the allies had killed 249 Viet Cong and captured 18 prisoners, 278 small arms, 24 machine guns, and 3 artillery pieces of various types. Allied losses totaled three dead and six wounded.[91]

One incident marred the operation. On 8 August, as the 2d Brigade withdrew from Chuong Thien and sailed north, it reported receiving intense fire at three locations along the Can Tho River and Xa No Canal in the waterside village of Cai Rang, south of the city of Can Tho, Phong Dinh Province. The senior province adviser to Phong Dinh painted a different picture—a weak ambush made by no more than a Viet Cong platoon. Whatever the truth, the Mobile Riverine Force responded with all the firepower at its disposal. Viet Cong casualties are unknown, but by the time the Americans stopped shooting they had killed 72 civilians, wounded 204, and damaged or destroyed nearly 500 houses. The surviving inhabitants were seething. General Ewell, province officials, and their U.S. advisers responded rapidly. The 9th Infantry Division sent a team to offer condolences, delivered twelve tons of food, and provided medical and rebuilding supplies. It also made solatium payments of 924,000 piasters to the victims and their families. The rapid response headed off civil unrest, although it is not known how effective the allies were in convincing the inhabitants that the Viet Cong were at fault for the incident.[92]

After the conclusion of Operation VI THANH, the 2d Brigade briefly operated in southern III Corps before returning to the IV Corps zone in September. In the interim, security continued to deteriorate in Kien Hoa. The U.S. province adviser praised the 9th Division for helping the Regional and Popular Forces with artillery and mobility support, but more needed to be done. In response General Ewell created a semipermanent land base near Kien Hoa's capital of Ben Tre. Under what was dubbed Operation HOMESTEAD, he kept one of the 2d Brigade's battalions at the base at all times, with the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, being the first to pull such duty. As the rest of the brigade moved by boat and helicopter to strike targets throughout Kien Hoa, the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, conducted company-size operations during the day and patrols and ambushes at night to secure the area around Ben Tre. Meanwhile, Ewell sent a special detachment to train territorial antiguerrilla squads meant to target the Viet Cong infrastructure, and provided over sixty men to help the province's Regional and Popular Forces improve their outposts. As a result of

[91] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 9th Inf Div, n.d., p. 20; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, 1 Nov 68, pp. 8–9. Both in Historians files, CMH.

[92] Rpt, Phong Dinh Advisory Det, 31 Aug 68, sub: Phong Dinh, pp. 5–6, 9–10, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 May–31 Aug 68, 9th Inf Div, p. 30.

the greater attention to Kien Hoa, the number of enemy defections increased, including North Vietnamese soldiers assigned to train the local Viet Cong. Enemy casualties more than doubled, from 118 in August to 330 in September. The province senior adviser attributed much of the improvement to Ewell's actions, with the brigade's primary targets, the *550th* and *516th Battalions*, being particularly hard hit. He conceded, however, that allied military actions had not yet translated into improved security or more effective government control at the hamlet level. In fact, Hamlet Evaluation System scores remained flat throughout the summer. This contrasted noticeably with provinces in which the 9th Infantry Division had maintained a more consistent presence, such as Long An, where Hamlet Evaluation System scores had inched up over the summer, and Dinh Tuong, where the number of people living in relative security increased by over seven percentage points, growing the figure from the mid-30s to the low 40s between July and September.[93]

The 9th Infantry Division was not responsible for everything that occurred militarily or politically in the area in which it operated during the summer. Consequently, as with other U.S. units, it is difficult to draw a direct line of causation, particularly with regard to developments in pacification. Nevertheless, it was clear that Ewell's actions had weakened the enemy in the northern Mekong Delta. Despite the fact that there had been few large battles between June and October, the division had killed 1,683 Viet Cong and captured 386 more, plus hundreds of weapons and considerable stocks of food and supplies. The cost to the division for this achievement had been 379 killed and 1,964 wounded.

Like most U.S. divisions throughout the war, the 9th Infantry Division had operated mostly at the small unit level, although battalion-size operations contacted the enemy at a significantly higher rate than the more numerous company and platoon actions. And, like other U.S. formations, firepower and destruction had a significant role in the division's operations. Between May and October, U.S. artillery had fired 626,179 rounds in support of the 9th Infantry Division, while the U.S. Air Force had flown 5,109 sorties dropping 4,488 tons of bombs and 1,687 tons of napalm. The Air Force reported that its efforts resulted in the death of 433 Viet Cong and the destruction of 3,364 buildings, 9,544 bunkers, and 316 sampans over and above the results achieved by the Army.[94]

The actions of the 9th Division in southern III Corps and northern IV Corps contributed to the overall success of II Field Force in keeping the enemy's main forces at bay during the summer of 1968. When taken together, the 9th Division's accomplishments in Operations Truong Cong Dinh and Quyet Chien and those of the rest of II Field Force in Operation Toan

[93] Rpt, Kien Hoa Advisory Det, 2 Sep 68, sub: Kien Hoa Province, pp. 1–2; Rpt, Kien Hoa Advisory Det, 3 Oct 68, sub: Kien Hoa Province, pp. 1–3. Both in Historians files, CMH. ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 2d Bde, 9th Inf Div, pp. 2–3, 7, 9, 15; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 9th Inf Div, pp. 8, 20.

[94] ORLL, 1 May–31 Jul 68, 9th Inf Div, pp. 23, and Encl 6, 7, 8, Historians files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 9th Inf Div, Encl 6, 7, 8.

THANG resulted in the death of over 10,000 enemy combatants between June and October and the capture of prodigious quantities of supplies. Behind the shield provided by II Field Force operations, the allies had been able to repair most of the damage caused by Tet, and most provinces reported slow but perceptible gains in pacification. In III Corps, for example, the number of "relatively secure" people as measured by HES had crept upward by 1.6 percent between July and September, meaning that around 80 percent of the people now lived under government control.[95]

The gains in II Field Force's area of operations were part of a larger, nationwide trend. For although there had been no spectacular developments, the general counteroffensive initiated by Westmoreland in March and continued by Abrams through the summer had, by the end of September, produced a gain of nearly seven percentage points in the number of Vietnamese considered to be relatively secure. The gain virtually erased all of the ground lost in pacification as a result of the Tet offensive. The allies had made similar progress on the military front. Despite the absence of large battles during most of the summer, the allies, and particularly the Americans, had continued to inflict disproportionate casualties on the enemy while keeping his bases and logistical system under constant attack. True, the allies could not prevent the enemy from making up, in quantity if not quality, many of these losses, but they had certainly complicated this effort and degraded his morale and capability. On both the political and military fronts, therefore, matters appeared to be moving in the right direction.[96]

There were, however, countervailing factors. To begin with, the enemy had inflicted casualties as well, with the Americans losing nearly 3,000 dead during the third quarter of 1968. The war of attrition was thus very much alive. Although the allies continued to inflict far more damage than they suffered, each American casualty in this remote and increasingly unpopular war roiled America's democratic system. Such was not the case for North Vietnam, for whom the conflict was of immense importance and whose totalitarian leaders, insulated from public pressure, were determined to push forward almost regardless of cost.

The fact that it had taken seven months to recover most of the people lost from government control as a result of Tet was also discouraging, for it indicated both how difficult the task had been and how challenging the future remained. The explosive military and political riposte that Westmoreland and Komer had called for had not occurred, partly because of the enemy's depth and agility, and partly because rapid moves were largely beyond the capability of the South Vietnamese government which, even under the best of circumstances, rarely acted with decisiveness. Not only had the allies not dealt the enemy's conventional forces a fatal blow, but the government had yet to assert strong control in those areas it had previously abandoned. Thus, U.S. ana-

[95] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, II FFV, p. 19.

[96] Southeast Asia Mil Casualties, Table 52, Encl to Memo, Director of Information Opns, Ofc of Asst Sec Def, for distribution, 3 Dec 73, sub: Last Update of Southeast Asia Statistical Summary Tables, Historians files, CMH.

lysts reported that 81 percent of South Vietnam's total population still lived in areas where the enemy maintained a political apparatus. Even in communities that the allies rated as "relatively secure," 39 percent of the people were still subject to Viet Cong taxes, 45 percent were subject to actions by village-level guerrillas, and over 60 percent were exposed to the Communist infrastructure. Until South Vietnamese political and security forces made greater progress in solidifying the government's control over rural communities, the insurgent aspect of the war would continue to be a problem.

Clearly, much needed to be done, but for General Abrams, whose immediate concern in the summer had been to ensure the failure of a rumored third major enemy offensive, this was of secondary importance. Whether the summer's accomplishments would be enough to defeat a third offensive and to clear the way for future progress in pacification would soon be put to the test.[97]

[97] Thayer, ed., *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War, 1965–1972*, 9:104–06, 120, 124; and 10:57–58; Msg, Abrams MAC 10131 to Wheeler, 28 Jul 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH; Sitrep, 314/10871-68, MACV, 8 Jul 68, Historians files, CMH.

19

Thwarting the Third Wave

North Vietnamese leaders commenced planning for a third general offensive in late June when *COSVN* and *Military Region 5* held conferences to review the results of the second wave. Le Duan personally attended the *COSVN* meeting—flying into Phnom Penh, Cambodia, under an assumed name and then trekking east by car and then by foot—to deal with any confusion that might arise about Hanoi's policy. Well that he did; according to one attendee, the debate proved to be "lengthy and at times heated." Some delegates complained that *COSVN*'s strategy "had not been in keeping with the reality of the situation." Many believed it had been a mistake to send "numerically weaker forces with their lack of firepower" into strongly defended urban areas such as Saigon. A clear majority, including the dozen Communist Chinese advisers who had been assisting the *B2 Front* headquarters, believed that the second general offensive had been too costly for the meager gains it had produced.[1]

After allowing the delegates to express their concerns, General Thai, Le Duan, and other senior *COSVN* leaders reasserted control over the proceedings. Persuaded by their authority as party leaders, the assemblage voted to reaffirm the policy of general offensive–general uprising, and to launch a third wave by mid-August. The Chinese delegates objected to the decision; in protest, they returned home. In the days that followed, General Thai sacked several *B2 Front* officials who had openly criticized the policy. Meanwhile, General Man, who had to deal with "rightist and negativist thinking" among his own delegates in *Military Region 5*, used a similar combination of persuasion and strong-arm tactics to win support for a third offensive.[2]

Back in Hanoi, Le Duan met on 24 July with other top leaders, among them the chief of staff of the *People's Army of Vietnam*, General Dung, and seven other Politburo members who specialized in military affairs, to develop an operational blueprint for the third general offensive. After considering the recommendations submitted by *COSVN* and *Military Region 5*, the Lao Dong Party Central Committee agreed that the *Eastern Nam Bo Theater* of the *B2 Front* (roughly corresponding to the III Corps zone) would once again serve as the primary battlefield. Saigon would not be the focal point, however, since the five subregions that surrounded the capital were desperately

[1] Intel Rpt, CIA, 13 Aug 70, sub: Policy of the General Offensive Reaffirmed at August 1968 COSVN Conference, pp. 6–7, Historians files, CMH.

[2] Quote from Man, *Time of Upheaval*, p. 483; *Mien Dong Nam Bo Khang Chien (1945–1975) Tap II* [*The Resistance War in Eastern Cochin China (1945–1975), Volume II*] (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1993), p. 364.

short of troops and supplies. The Saigon Party Committee was also in disarray, its secret agent network decimated and its military arm reduced to just two sapper squads.

With the capital temporarily out of reach, Le Duan and the other committee members chose Tay Ninh Province to be the primary theater in the *B2 Front*. Its proximity to Communist base areas in Cambodia, its heavily forested terrain, and the relatively low density of allied military forces there gave the enemy advantages he did not enjoy in central III Corps. Furthermore, Politburo leaders recognized the need to protect and expand the logistical routes that ran through the province if they hoped to attack Saigon in the future. The plan called for the *5th PLAF Division* (which by this point was composed almost entirely of North Vietnamese) and the *9th PLAF Division* to draw out the 25th Infantry Division from the line of outposts it held between Tay Ninh City and Dau Tieng before local force units attacked the provincial capital. In neighboring Binh Long Province, the *7th PAVN Division* was to attack Loc Ninh to tie down elements from the 1st Infantry Division and the South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division that might otherwise join the fight in Tay Ninh. Enemy units elsewhere in the *B2 Front* would contribute to the offensive with attacks by fire and limited ground assaults.[3]

The Politburo committee identified two secondary theaters for the coming campaign. The first was the southwestern highlands of the *B3 Front*. The plan called for the three-regiment *1st PAVN Division* to overrun the Duc Lap Special Forces camp, located in Quang Duc Province astride a disused section of Highway 14 about nine kilometers from the Cambodian border. Seizure of the camp would open the way for North Vietnamese engineers to build a high-speed infiltration route through the region. After seizing the camp, the *1st Division* would head northeast toward Ban Me Thuot, looking for opportunities to destroy allied units that might venture out to meet them. To support the Duc Lap operation, the *24th PAVN Regiment* would cut Highway 14 between Pleiku City and Ban Me Thuot, while the *95C* and *101D PAVN Regiments*, now independent following the return of the *325C PAVN Division* headquarters to North Vietnam, probed allied posts in northwestern Kontum Province. Given the weakness of Communist units in the coastal provinces, the Politburo permitted them to make do with attacks by fire and a few sapper raids.[4]

The other secondary theater was central I Corps, the main target being Da Nang. Sapper units and local force battalions under the command of *Group 44* would try to destroy command-and-control facilities within the city, while the *368B PAVN Artillery Regiment* pummeled the main air base. The *31st* and *38th PAVN Regiments* would pin down the 1st Marine Division units shielding Da Nang so that six Viet Cong local force battalions could slip past them into the city.

[3] Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans*, p. 209; *9th Division*, p. 109; Lung, *General Offensives of 1968–1969*, p. 110.

[4] Minh et al., *History of the Resistance War Against the Americans*, p. 210.

In southern I Corps where the Americal Division operated, North Vietnamese leaders ordered the *2d PAVN Division* to attack Tam Ky with a reinforced regiment, and for the *3d PAVN Division* to attack Quang Ngai City with a similar size force. Because of critical food and supply shortages in northern I Corps, the Politburo allowed the main force units there to remain on the sidelines. The enemy also decided to hold back his forces in the eastern Demilitarized Zone—the *320th PAVN Division* plus the *138th* and *270th PAVN Regiments*—since he had no way of tying down the 1st Cavalry Division without attacking Hue and Quang Tri City.[5]

As Hanoi's instructions filtered downward to the five front commands and their subordinate elements in early August, allied intelligence intercepted enough clues to anticipate the basic timing and objectives of the campaign. On the tenth, Abrams sent an analysis of the current situation to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He expected as many as seven North Vietnamese regiments to attack allied positions in the central Demilitarized Zone within the next five days. He saw no immediate danger to Hue, but believed that cities in central I Corps, including Da Nang, Tam Ky, and Quang Ngai City, were likely to be attacked in regimental strength. In II Corps, a North Vietnamese division was massing to the southeast of Ban Me Thuot. Most threatening of all, *COSVN* had moved two reinforced divisions into Tay Ninh Province, apparently intent on attacking its capital city. No major threat had been detected in the Capital Military District or in IV Corps, though limited sapper activity and rocket attacks were expected. Abrams reassured his superiors that the "current deployment of [allied] ground forces is satisfactory," and that he was "confident in our ability" to defeat the coming offensive.[6]

Allied Preparations

While the enemy finalized his plans, the U.S. soldiers assigned to II Field Force continued executing Operation Toan Thang. On the first of August, command of II Field Force passed from General Weyand to Maj. Gen. Walter T. Kerwin Jr., the latter being well acquainted with the situation through his former role as MACV chief of staff. Otherwise, the general configuration of U.S. combat units remained much as it had been throughout the spring and summer. General Ware's 1st Infantry Division and elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry guarded Binh Duong and Binh Long Provinces. The 25th Infantry Division, now under the command of Maj. Gen. Ellis W. Williamson, a former commander of the 173d Airborne Brigade who had brought the unit to South Vietnam in 1965, retained his 1st Brigade in Tay Ninh Province as a forward screen. He stationed his 2d Brigade plus the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, in Hau Nghia Province to watch the Saigon River and

[5] Ibid.

[6] Memo, General John P. McConnell, Acting Chairman, JCS, for President Johnson, 12 Aug 68, sub: Enemy Preparations for Country Wide Offensive in South Vietnam, document 49c, box 72B, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU.

General Kerwin
(shown as a lieutenant general)

General Williamson

Vam Co Dong River corridors. The 3d Brigade, 25th Division, was on loan to the Capital Military Assistance Command, as was the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light). General Ewell's 9th Infantry Division defended Long An and Dinh Tuong Provinces south of the capital, while the 1st Australian Task Force and the Royal Thai Army Volunteer Regiment operated east of Saigon.[7]

General Abrams was not overly concerned about an attack on Saigon, believing that the enemy was too weak to seriously threaten the city. Intelligence agents reported that allied operations had made it extremely difficult for the Communists to infiltrate men and supplies into the Capital Military District. The enemy "must attempt to fight his way in with the big units," Abrams concluded, and most of those were currently located in northern III Corps. The latest intelligence indicated that the *5th* and *9th PLAF Divisions* were going to attack near Tay Ninh City, while two local force battalions infiltrated the provincial capital itself. The *7th PAVN Division* was expected to move against Loc Ninh in neighboring Binh Long Province. Abrams predicted that the three main force divisions would try to slip south if and when the opportunity arose to attack Saigon. Determined not to be lured out into the hinterlands and thus expose the city to attack, Abrams instructed General Kerwin to fight the coming battles in Tay Ninh and Binh

[7] Msg, Abrams MAC10868 to Wheeler, 12 Aug 68, pp. 2–3, Westmoreland Msg Files, CMH.

Long Provinces with the minimum forces necessary, while also maintaining the essential lines of communications in northern III Corps.[8]

The new commander of III Corps, Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, was taking steps of his own to prepare for the expected *COSVN* offensive. Recalled from his post as ambassador to South Korea to replace General Khang, General Tri was in the process of forming a two-brigade corps reserve consisting of an airborne task force and a marine task force that he could commit to northern III Corps on short notice. To replace the paratroopers and marines who had previously been assigned to the Capital Military District, Tri pulled back a half-dozen ranger battalions that had been on loan to his three division commanders and consolidated them in the Saigon area. General Tri also ordered his division commanders to free their remaining ranger battalions and a few infantry battalions from territorial security duties so that they could be employed as mobile reserves in each division tactical area. Regional and Popular Forces units assumed the territorial security duties formerly conducted by regular army units. Although borne of necessity, this step reflected the growing effectiveness of the Regional and Popular Forces, partly as a result of the training they had been receiving from U.S. advisers and combat units, and partly from the post-Tet influx of more and better weaponry. Last but not least, local security had benefited from the fact that *COSVN* had used guerrillas and local force soldiers as replacements for its conventional units, thereby reducing Communist capabilities at the local level.[9]

If MACV's intelligence was accurate, *COSVN*'s anticipated offensive would begin in central Tay Ninh Province. That put the 1st Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division and its new commander, Lt. Col. Duquesne A. Wolf, squarely in the firing line. Colonel Wolf's tactical zone, centered on the provincial capital, measured some sixty kilometers wide and about eighty-five kilometers deep. He was responsible for defending two major bases—his brigade headquarters on the northwestern edge of the capital, known as Tay Ninh West, and Camp Rainier, located in Dau Tieng some thirty kilometers to the east. Wolf also had to secure five major roads that radiated from the provincial capital. Route 13 bisected the city from east to west, and Highway 22 crossed it from north to south. Most of the brigade's supplies arrived by trucks via Highway 22. Two additional roads branched diagonally from Tay Ninh City. Route 4 traveled northeast to the foot of Nui Ba Den, an extinct volcano some five kilometers from Tay Ninh City that rose to a height of nearly 1,000 meters. The fourth major artery, Route 26, ran southeast from the city, passing through the Cau Khoi Rubber Plantation, ten kilometers down the road, before continuing another dozen kilometers to the district town of Khiem Hanh. Another provincial road, Route 239, crossed Route 26 just south of the Cau Khoi Plantation, leading east to Dau Tieng and west to Highway 22.

To defend his sector, Colonel Wolf controlled two standard infantry battalions, two mechanized infantry battalions, and three tank platoons sup-

[8] Msg, Abrams MAC 10181 to Wheeler, 28 Jul 68, pp. 1–2, Westmoreland Msg Files, CMH.
[9] Msg, Kerwin HOA 1039 to Abrams, 12 Aug 68, pp. 1–2, Westmoreland Msg Files, CMH.

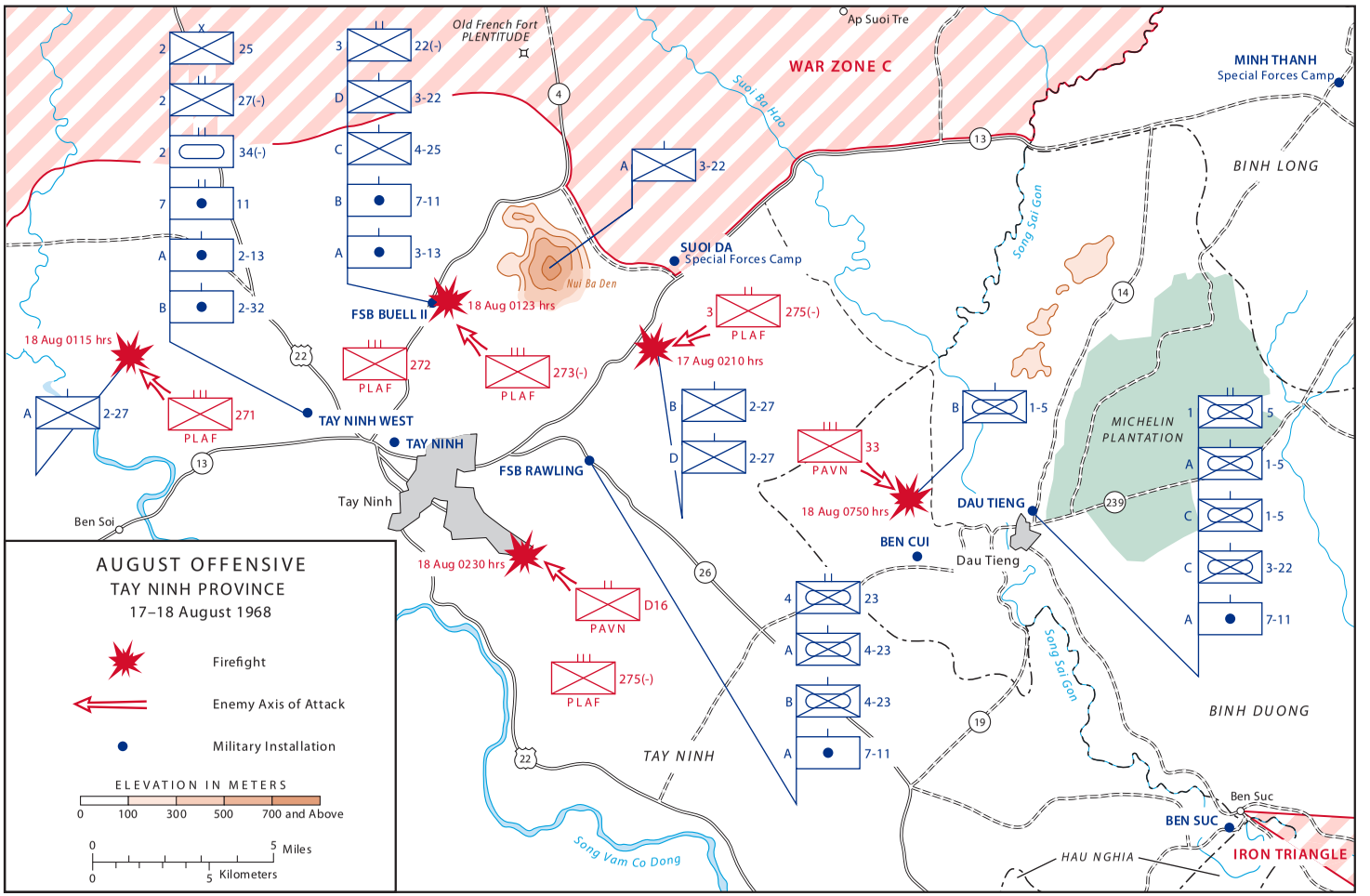
An OH–6 Cayuse scout helicopter with Nui Ba Den in the background

ported by eight artillery batteries. He positioned most of his troops along the northern and eastern approaches to Tay Ninh City, operating from the following three main bases: Tay Ninh West, the 1st Brigade headquarters located a few kilometers northwest of the city; Firebase Buell II, located four kilometers north of Tay Ninh City; and Firebase Rawlins III, located two kilometers east of the city. Wolf kept one of his mechanized infantry battalions at Dau Tieng, thirty kilometers to the west. On the South Vietnamese side, the province chief protected Tay Ninh City with four Regional Forces companies and a smattering of Popular Forces platoons, backed by a mobile reserve consisting of ten armored personnel carriers modified to carry extra machine guns.[10]

The Battle for Tay Ninh Begins

The first sign of danger came late on the evening of 17 August when an ambush patrol from Company D, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, one of several teams screening the three-kilometer gap between Nui Ba Den and Route 13 just east of Tay Ninh City, spotted a column of enemy regulars marching toward the capital. The team called in artillery fire and engaged the foe with small arms once the shells began to detonate among the Viet Cong. The Communists veered away, retreating north and east, leaving behind dozens of killed and wounded. The contact alerted Colonel Wolf that the long-expected attack on Tay Ninh City was under way (*Map 46*).[11]

[10] AAR, Battle for Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, 7 Feb 69, p. 9, box 33, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.
[11] Ibid.


AUGUST OFFENSIVE
TAY NINH PROVINCE
17–18 August 1968
Firefight
Enemy Axis of Attack
Military Installation
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
300
500
700 and Above
0
5
Miles
0
5
Kilometers
WAR ZONE C
Old French Fort
PLENTITUDE
Ap Suoi Tre
MINH THANH
Special Forces Camp
BINH LONG
Suoi Ba Hao
Song Sai Gon
SUOI DA
Special Forces Camp
Nui Ba Den
FSB BUELL II
18 Aug 0123 hrs
18 Aug 0115 hrs
17 Aug 0210 hrs
18 Aug 0750 hrs
18 Aug 0230 hrs
TAY NINH WEST
TAY NINH
Tay Ninh
FSB RAWLING
Ben Soi
DAU TIENG
Dau Tieng
BEN CUI
MICHELIN
PLANTATION
BINH DUONG
TAY NINH
Song Vam Co Dong
HAU NGHIA
Ben Suc
BEN SUC
IRON TRIANGLE
PLAF
PAVN

MAP 46

The fighting began in earnest shortly after midnight when a battalion from the *273d Regiment*, *9th PLAF Division*, attacked Firebase BUELL II. Two platoons from Company D, 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, two platoons from Company C, 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, and five tanks from Company A, 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, defended the perimeter with the soldiers manning wooden bunkers and the vehicles partly shielded by raised earthwork barriers. The North Vietnamese crawled close enough to hit several of the dug-in M48 tanks with B40 rocket-propelled grenades, but the glancing blows did not disable the vehicles. Before long, the weight of the defensive fire drove the attackers back. The enemy battalion broke contact at first light, leaving behind 104 dead and 8 wounded.[12]

Around the time that the *273d Regiment* commenced its attack on Firebase BUELL II, a company of *9th Division* sappers climbed the rocky face of Nui Ba Den, two kilometers to the west, to assault the U.S. signal station on its summit. Since the last attack back in May had devastated part of the facility, the 25th Infantry Division had beefed up security measures by building more bunkers, laying more barbed wire, and stationing a company from the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, on Nui Ba Den every night. Despite those improvements, the North Vietnamese sapper force that struck early on the morning of 18 August still penetrated the perimeter to destroy several buildings in the lower half of the compound. Satchel charges demolished the nest of electrical generators that provided power to the base; the relay station went off-line, and the 25th Infantry Division had to switch to a slower network of short-range transmitters to maintain communications between Cu Chi, Dau Tieng, and Tay Ninh West.

The fighting lasted until dawn when the sappers retreated, minus fifteen of their dead. In addition to those bodies, the defenders collected about one hundred unused satchel charges, more than enough explosives to demolish every building on the hill. U.S. losses came to eight killed and twenty-three wounded. The transmitter station became operational again later that day following the installation of new generators.[13]

While enemy units were busy attacking Firebase BUELL II and Nui Ba Den, the *D14 Local Force Battalion* and a company from the *275th PLAF Regiment* (which despite its designation consisted mostly of North Vietnamese) entered the southeastern side of Tay Ninh City. The district chief used the territorial forces and policemen at his disposal to keep the enemy from moving toward the city center, while the province chief and his senior adviser, Lt. Col. Vernon L. Bond, developed a relief plan with Colonel Wolf.[14]

When daylight came on 18 August, the 1st Brigade commander moved Companies A and B, 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, from Firebase RAWLINS III to the southeastern edge of the city, and deployed Task Force 2-34 along its

[12] Ibid.; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 14, 25th Inf Div, 1–31 Aug 68, 1 Sep 68, p. 11, Historians files, CMH.

[13] John D. Bergen, *Military Communications: A Test for Technology,* United States Army in Vietnam (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Center of Military History, 1986), p. 268.

[14] Transcript, VNIT 395, p. 1, Encl 24, CMH.

southwestern face. When those units had moved into place, the province chief organized a counterattack from within the city, sweeping south with a line of Regional and Popular Forces soldiers. Progress was slow because the territorial soldiers relied only on small arms, and then sparingly, to save civilian lives and property. With darkness approaching, Wolf reinforced the South Vietnamese line with Troop B of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and the 1st Brigade's combined reconnaissance platoon. Later that evening, Communist troops probed the line. Finding the way blocked, and knowing that other U.S. forces were positioned to the south, the *D14 Battalion* returned to the jungles southeast of Tay Ninh City.

At the same time that the *9th Division* was testing allied defenses northwest of Tay Ninh City, the *5th Division* began its mission to cut Route 239 between Dau Tieng and the provincial capital. Lt. Col. Andrew H. Anderson, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, headquartered at Dau Tieng, learned of that threat shortly before noon on 18 August when his Company B, commanded by Capt. Gregory J. Hayward, located a North Vietnamese force dug into the Ben Cui Rubber Plantation several kilometers west of Camp Rainier. The volume of fire convinced Captain Hayward that he faced at least two well-equipped enemy battalions. Colonel Anderson dispatched Company C and the battalion's reconnaissance platoon to reinforce Hayward's company. Assisted by artillery, helicopter gunships, and fighter-bombers, the U.S. force finally drove the enemy from the field at 1600. Hayward's soldiers collected ninety-two Communist dead and a large haul of equipment, including a field radio and three .50-caliber machine guns, weapons that were usually found at the regimental level. An analysis of captured documents revealed that the North Vietnamese force had included a battalion from the *33d PAVN Regiment* as well as the *D24 Anti-Aircraft Battalion*.[15]

While the *33d Regiment* was moving into the Ben Cui Plantation to cut Route 239, another element of the *5th Division*, the *275th PLAF Regiment*, was setting up ambush positions along Route 26 in the Cau Khoi Plantation, eight kilometers southeast of Tay Ninh City. At 0930 on 18 August, Troop A, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, a unit temporarily based at Checkpoint Tango where Route 239 crossed Route 26, was heading north through the plantation when it came under fire from Viet Cong hidden on either side of the road. Troop A slewed its vehicles to face the attackers. A few minutes later, Colonel Wolf dispatched Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, which motored south down Route 26 and hit the enemy in the flank. Together, the mechanized units drove the Viet Cong from their ambush positions, killing thirty-four. U.S. casualties totaled four killed and seventeen wounded.[16]

On the morning of 19 August, Colonel Anderson's battalion regained contact with the *33d Regiment* in the Ben Cui Plantation. Companies B and C and the reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, clashed with enemy troops who had reoccupied the fighting pits they abandoned the previous day. When several M113s became mired in the water-soaked

[15] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, Encl 111, p. 15.
[16] Ibid., p. 16.

Troops from the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, move through the Ben Cui Plantation.

ground, Captain Hayward decided not to press the attack. Neither did the enemy. The long-range skirmish continued until dusk when the enemy withdrew deeper into the plantation. U.S. losses totaled two killed and another twenty-four wounded.[17]

The presence of the *33d* and *275th Regiments* in the plantations just east of Dau Tieng convinced General Williamson to reposition the cavalry troop at Checkpoint Tango to the relative safety of Dau Tieng. On the afternoon of 19 August, Troop A, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, headed northwest on Route 239 toward Dau Tieng. Colonel Anderson sent Company B of the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, west along Route 239 to rendezvous with the tankers at the edge of the Ben Cui Plantation and to escort them back to Dau Tieng.

At 1845, the mechanized company was driving west through the plantation when the *33d Regiment* ambushed the lead platoon. A torrent of rocket-propelled grenades and recoilless rifle shells knocked out the two leading vehicles. Company B established a position on the north side of the road, while aircraft and artillery pounded the enemy. After two hours of ferocious combat, the cavalry troop from the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, roared in from the west and hit the enemy in the flank. The maneuver bought the Americans a short respite. After loading up its casualties, the mechanized

[17] Ibid.

A soldier aims his M79 grenade launcher.

group motored east, fighting its way through North Vietnamese ambushes all the way back to Camp Rainier. On the way, rocket grenades disabled two tanks and two armored personnel carriers that had to be abandoned. Company B was nearly out of ammunition when it finally arrived at the base, carrying a total of eight killed and forty-four wounded. The unit estimated that it had killed up to 200 enemy soldiers.[18]

While the *5th Division* was battling to control the roads and the plantations west of Dau Tieng, the *9th Division* tried to find a gap in the defenses that protected Tay Ninh West. In the early morning hours of 20 August, a platoon from Company A, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, spotted a party of enemy soldiers while manning a night ambush position two kilometers north of Tay Ninh West. After engaging the enemy with their personal weapons, the Americans realized from the blistering return fire that they were facing an entire battalion. The platoon leader called in air and artillery support while fighting desperately to keep the Viet Cong from overrunning his position. The enemy withdrew shortly before dawn, leaving behind 155 bodies. U.S. losses came to five killed and six wounded. In all likelihood, the platoon's determined stand thwarted what might have been a major ground attack against Tay Ninh West.[19]

[18] Ibid., Encl 35, pp. 1–2, Encl 111, p. 17.
[19] Ibid., Encl 37, pp. 10, 17.

When Colonel Wolf briefed General Williamson on the morning of 20 August, the brigade commander asked to borrow an infantry battalion from the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, which had seen almost no action since the start of the offensive. Wolf said that he had enough troops to defend his firebases and to keep the main roads open, but not enough to maneuver aggressively against the enemy. Williamson turned down the request since he was still unsure if the Tay Ninh attacks were mere feints before the *5th* and *9th Divisions* plunged south toward Saigon. Wolf would have to make do with what he had.

As a result, the 1st Brigade commander maintained an essentially defensive posture, swapping individual companies from here to there as the situation required, and waiting for the enemy to initiate battle. If Wolf had any consolation, it was that both the *33d Regiment* and the *275th Regiment* appeared to be staying put for the time being. On the morning of 20 August, for example, Company B, 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, was driving north on Route 26 through the Cau Khoi Plantation when it came under heavy fire at a bridge where Company A from the battalion had been ambushed the day before. While it engaged the ambushers, Company A came south down the road from Firebase RAWLINS III to join the fight. The mechanized units eventually drove off the ambushing force from the *275th Regiment* and recovered twenty-eight Communist dead. U.S. losses totaled four killed and seven wounded.[20]

The *33d Regiment* renewed its fight with the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, on the morning of 21 August when Company C and the reconnaissance platoon discovered North Vietnamese troops in the same northwestern section of the Ben Cui Plantation they had occupied on the eighteenth. This engagement proved to be far different from the earlier encounters. This time the enemy chose to attack, sending two battalions forward to close with the advancing line of U.S. infantry and vehicles. North Vietnamese troops armed with B40 rocket-propelled grenades targeted the six leading armored personnel carriers, knocking them out one by one. In the first hour of fighting, almost every officer in the two lead platoons, including the company commander, died.

In Company C's 1st Platoon, S. Sgt. Marvin R. Young vigorously took command after the death of the platoon commander. When the company's sole surviving officer, a second lieutenant, ordered the survivors to pull back to a new defensive line, Young stayed where he was to provide covering fire. The withdrawal was well under way when he discovered that an element of his platoon had been unable to disengage and was at risk of being overwhelmed. As he moved forward to help, he received a severe head wound, but nonetheless continued to the trapped men and orchestrated their extraction. During the subsequent retreat, enemy fire wounded him in the arm and shattered his leg. Rather than impede the pace of the withdrawal, Sergeant Young ordered the men to proceed without him while he remained behind to provide cover. He continued to fight until killed by

[20] Ibid., p. 17.

the advancing enemy. His selfless action allowed his platoon to survive the battle, eventually to return to Camp Rainier without further incident. The Americans reported counting 182 enemy dead littering the battlefield, but their own casualties had been steep: 18 killed and 23 wounded. The Army posthumously awarded Sergeant Young the Medal of Honor for his deeds that day.[21]

Hoping to knock the *33d Regiment* out of action, Colonel Wolf decided to pursue the North Vietnamese with all the force he could spare. The counterattack would leave him thinly stretched, but he judged the reward was worth the risk. He instructed Colonel Anderson to set up a blocking position on the east side of the Ben Cui Plantation with the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry. Wolf arranged for helicopters to fly two companies from the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, from Tay Ninh West to the west side of the plantation. The brigade commander had to wait until the next morning to do so, however, because only one helicopter company was available. He hoped that the *33d Regiment* stayed put until then.

As Colonel Anderson was dealing with the *33d Regiment* west of Dau Tieng on 21 August, mechanized and cavalry units assigned to protect Route 26 continued their battle with the *275th Regiment* in the Cau Khoi Rubber Plantation. Late that afternoon, Troop A from the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and Company A from the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, clashed with Viet Cong troops just south of the bridge where heavy fighting had occurred the previous day. This time, the enemy remained well hidden in the trees, withdrawing before the Americans could close in for the kill. U.S. losses came to three killed and five wounded.

Later that afternoon at Tay Ninh West, Colonel Wolf briefed General Williamson, II Field Force commander General Kerwin, and Kerwin's Vietnamese counterpart, General Tri. Wolf argued that the heavy fighting that had taken place over the last four days proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Tay Ninh Province, not Saigon, was *COSVN*'s primary target. Having confirmed that his sector contained no less than six main force regiments, Wolf asked that he be given at least two more artillery batteries and one infantry battalion. General Kerwin agreed with the colonel's assessment and directed General Williamson, who had been slow to provide extra troops thus far, to make the reinforcements available. General Tri also promised to send an airborne battalion to Tay Ninh City as a reserve.[22]

The enemy added urgency to Wolf's request later that night by launching simultaneous attacks against Firebases Buell II and Rawlins III. At Firebase Buell II, Companies C and D of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, repulsed a headlong assault by the *174th Regiment*. The enemy left behind sixty bodies and eleven wounded soldiers. U.S. losses came to three killed and eighteen wounded. On the northeastern side of the city, Companies A and B from the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, defended Firebase Rawlins III in a four-hour battle with the *3d Battalion, 275th Regiment*. The retreating

[21] Ibid., Encl 111, pp. 20–21.
[22] Ibid., p. 22.

enemy left behind twenty-five dead and four wounded, while U.S. losses totaled one killed and ten wounded.[23]

Later on the morning of 22 August, a new round of fighting flared to life in the Ben Cui Plantation when Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, reengaged elements of the *33d Regiment* during a sweep of Route 239. The resulting firefight, which Company C joined a short time later, produced another twenty-four enemy dead, while costing the Americans four disabled vehicles, five killed, and sixteen wounded.[24]

Convinced that both the *5th* and *9th Divisions* were fully committed to the battle, General Williamson instructed his 2d Brigade, commanded by Col. Raymond O. Miller, to move north into Dau Tieng. On the twenty-third, Colonel Miller transferred his headquarters from Cu Chi to Camp Rainier, where he gained operational control over the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry. Williamson moved several other units into Dau Tieng to operate under Miller's command, including Troop A of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, and the 1st and 2d Battalions, 27th Infantry, each minus one company. The move allowed Wolf's 1st Brigade—its maneuver elements now consisting of the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry; three troops from the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry; the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry; and three companies from the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor—to focus on the immediate vicinity of Tay Ninh City.

As soon as Colonel Miller established his new headquarters at Dau Tieng, he dispatched a task force to construct a base on Route 239 midway between the Ben Cui and Cau Khoi Plantations. Firebase SCHOFIELD became operational that evening, manned by two 105-mm. howitzer units, Battery A of the 1st Battalion, 8th Artillery, and Battery C of the 7th Battalion, 11th Artillery, as well as Companies A, B, and D of the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, supported by elements of Troop A, 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry.

Shortly after midnight, the enemy reacted to this new threat by hurling two battalions from the *33d Regiment* at Firebase SCHOFIELD. The ferocious four-hour battle cost both sides dearly. The Americans found 103 North Vietnamese dead and an unusually high number of abandoned weapons, including four machine guns, four 60-mm. mortar tubes, two recoilless rifles, and eleven rocket-propelled grenade launchers. The Americans lost nine killed and forty-one wounded. Four armored personnel carriers and two tanks had been destroyed and five M113s damaged. However, the enemy's failure to overrun Firebase SCHOFIELD meant that Colonel Miller now had a strong forward base in between the *33d* and *275th Regiments*, which enabled him to respond more quickly to any threats on Routes 239 and 26.[25]

[23] Ibid., pp. 18–19.
[24] Ibid., p. 19.
[25] Ibid., p. 20.

The Offensive Widens

On the morning of 19 August, one day after the *5th* and *9th Divisions* began their campaign in Tay Ninh, North Vietnamese mortar crews from the *7th Division* shelled the Loc Ninh Special Forces camp in neighboring Binh Long Province. When daylight arrived, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division, General Ware, ordered the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, which was currently laagered in the district capital, to search for the enemy. That afternoon, elements of the armored cavalry regiment clashed with troops from the *5th* and *6th Battalions, 165th Regiment*, in the rubber plantations southwest of town. The two-day battle cost the enemy thirty-two killed and twenty captured. U.S. losses came to four killed and thirty-one wounded, with two armored personnel carriers destroyed.[26]

Concerned that other elements of the *7th Division* were lurking in the area, General Ware airlifted an additional unit to Loc Ninh on 20 August, the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Thomas E. Fitzpatrick. Joining forces with the cavalry squadron, Fitzpatrick's battalion saw sustained action over the next four days, first with the *165th Regiment* southwest of town, and then with a battalion from the *320th PAVN Regiment* northeast of Loc Ninh. Nearly 200 enemy soldiers died in those clashes, while U.S. casualties amounted to a dozen killed. The North Vietnamese withdrew into Cambodia on 25 August, leaving behind a few companies to keep tabs on allied movements around Loc Ninh.[27]

The third general offensive reached IV Corps on the night of 21–22 August when Viet Cong units in thirteen provinces attacked three provincial capitals, seven district towns, eight outposts, two airfields, and two training centers. Of the seventy-five separate attacks recorded that night, thirty-nine were conducted by long-range fire, and only seven of the ground attacks involved more than a single company. The *516th* and *550th Battalions* conducted the most determined assault, hitting Ben Tre, but government forces repulsed the attack with virtually no U.S. help. The Communists called off a multibattalion assault on Can Tho when the attack forces failed to reach their jump-off point in time. On 24 August, the *263d* and *514A Battalions* assaulted a district headquarters in My Tho Province, but the thrust fell apart when enemy mortar crews, their aim spoiled by wet ground giving way beneath their tubes, shelled their own advancing infantry.[28]

COSVN's offensive also reached Saigon on the night of 21–22 August when twenty-two 122-mm. rockets slammed into the city, marking the first time that the capital had been shelled in almost two months. One of the warheads plunged into the National Assembly building, severely damaging the

[26] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Inf Div, 16 Nov 68, p. 6, box 5, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; *7th Division*, p. 73.

[27] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, II FFV, n.d., p. 20, Historians files, CMH.

[28] Msgs, Abrams MAC 11355 to Wheeler, 22 Aug 68; and General Eckhardt CTO 397, Senior Adviser, IV Corps, to Abrams, 5 Sep 68. Both in Abrams Msg files, CMH. ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 9th Inf Div, 31 Oct 68, p. 8, box 42, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Minh et al., *Military Region 8*, p. 659.

A 1st Infantry Division officer uses a radio while a CH–47 Chinook delivers supplies to an American position in Binh Long Province.

unoccupied structure, and the other rocket strikes killed seventeen people and wounded sixty-nine others.[29]

One of the five Viet Cong headquarters in the capital zone, the *Sub-Region 3* command, had planned on attacking Saigon with ground forces, but that plan had unraveled in early August when its combat forces—the *1st* and *2d Long An Battalions*, the *Dong Phu Battalion* (formerly the *Phu Loi II Battalion*), and the *265th Battalion*—had run afoul of the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, while moving north through Long An Province. Over a two-week period, the 9th Infantry Division had killed nearly 400 enemy soldiers and captured 50 prisoners, forcing the *Sub-Region 3* headquarters to abandon its plan to attack the Eighth District and the Nha Be petroleum storage facility.[30]

The fighting spread to I Corps on the night of 22–23 August when Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units attacked at least thirty-six cities, towns, and allied bases, chiefly with rocket and mortar fire. Enemy sappers also struck two of those targets with deadly effect. In the first incident, a team

[29] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, Capital Military Assistance Command, n.d., p. 2, box 63, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[30] Maj Gen Huynh Cong Than, *On the Long An Battlefield: A Memoir* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1994), p. 149.

of commandos fought its way into Landing Zone BOWMAN, an Americal Division outpost in the Que Son Valley. The defenders lost five killed and twenty-six wounded before repelling the sappers, who lost one man killed and another captured. An even more damaging raid took place in Da Nang when a company from the *R20 Battalion* and a platoon of sappers infiltrated Forward Operating Base 4, a compound just south of Marble Mountain at Da Nang that contained a MACV Studies and Observations Group headquarters, several U.S. Special Forces teams, and a mobile strike force company. Satchel charges and rocket-propelled grenades killed 17 U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers, the heaviest one-day loss of Green Berets in the war, and wounded another 125 allied personnel.[31]

In addition to the rocket artillery and sapper attacks, enemy infantry attempted to penetrate two major cities. The first was Da Nang, designated by the Politburo as a key target of the August offensive. The heaviest fighting took place around the Cam Le Bridge, two kilometers south of the main air base. The *V25* and *T89 PLAF Battalions* tried to seize the span so main force units coming from the south could enter the city. A platoon of U.S. Marine military policemen held them at bay, waging a desperate but successful defense from a line of bunkers until relieved by troops from the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, and South Vietnamese rangers. Just north of the bridge, a company from the *402d PLAF Sapper Battalion* tried to seize the Hoa Vang District headquarters. A combination of U.S. advisers and Regional Forces troops defended the position until they, too, were rescued by U.S. marines and South Vietnamese rangers. The sappers fell back to the bridge, where the fighting continued fiercely for the next nine hours. Hammered by air strikes, hemmed in by allied infantry, and pummeled by a platoon of M48 tanks, the surviving Viet Cong troops broke and ran late that afternoon. A search of the ground between Hoa Vang and the bridge found 184 enemy dead.[32]

While that fight was still under way, other battles flared in the lowlands south of Da Nang. Several Marine outposts came under fire, but two battalions from the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division and a pair of ranger battalions saw the most action. Assisted by U.S. Marine fighter-bombers, the government soldiers turned back probing attacks from the *31st* and *38th PAVN Regiments*, killing almost 300 enemy soldiers before the North Vietnamese withdrew to the Go Noi Island base zone.[33]

The other regional capital on the main force target list was Quang Ngai City. The *3d Division* sent its *1st Regiment* down from the coastal mountains on the morning of 24 August, but roving patrols from Troop A of the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, located the assault group while it was still six kilometers west of the city. Troops B and C from the squadron immediately rushed

[31] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 23d Inf Div, 7 Nov 68, p. 10, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Opn BURLINGTON TRAIL, 11th Inf Bde, n.d., p. 12, box 4, AARs, 1965–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP; Periodic Intel Rpt no. 34-68, III MAF, 18–24 Aug 68, 27 Aug 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH; Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 377.

[32] Shulimson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, p. 378.

[33] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 34-68, III MAF, p. 4.

to the scene, and the 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry, and the 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry, each provided a company of infantry to support the vehicles. After four days of heavy fighting, the North Vietnamese broke contact and retreated back into the mountains. The battle claimed the lives of 567 enemy soldiers, nearly destroying one battalion from the *1st Regiment* and rendering the other two combat ineffective.[34]

In II Corps, the third general offensive began on the morning of 18 August when a battalion from the *101D Regiment* attacked the Dak Seang Special Forces camp in northwestern Kontum Province. The Montagnard defenders repulsed the assault, killing thirty-five enemy soldiers and capturing eleven more. The following day, North Vietnamese gunners plastered the camp with at least 125 rounds of mortar and recoilless rifle fire. Farther south, enemy artillery crews pounded a U.S. outpost near Dak To with twenty-one rockets. The fighting spread to Pleiku Province on 20 August when a battalion from the *24th Regiment* assaulted a South Vietnamese firebase, located on Highway 14 some twenty-two kilometers north of the provincial capital. The defenders turned aside the somewhat disorganized attack, killing eighty-seven enemy troops while losing nine of their own killed.

The fighting spread across II Corps on the night of 23–24 August when enemy mortar and rocket crews shelled more than thirty locations, among them An Khe, Bong Son, Phan Thiet, and Phan Rang. That same evening, the *66th Regiment* from the *1st Division* plus the *20th Sapper Battalion* and several heavy weapons units converged on Duc Lap, a small village in western Quang Duc Province approximately seven kilometers from Cambodia. The division's *320th Regiment* established a blocking position on Highway 14 northeast of Duc Lap to intercept allied ground units coming from Ban Me Thuot. The *95C Regiment* stayed back near the Cambodian border with the division's headquarters and support units.

The Dak Sak Special Forces camp, a collection of log and sandbag bunkers manned by two mobile strike force companies, a South Vietnamese Special Forces team, U.S. Special Forces Detachment A–239, and a few Australian advisers, lay approximately five kilometers southeast of the largest hamlet in Duc Lap village. Highway 14 bisected the community, extending southwest toward Cambodia and northeast toward Ban Me Thuot. Inside the main hamlet was a subdistrict headquarters, a wood and earth fortification not much larger than a football field defended by a half-dozen or so Special Forces advisers and a Regional Forces company. Another Regional Forces company manned the Bon Sar Pa outpost, located three kilometers to the southwest on a knoll overlooking Highway 14.[35]

The attack began in the early morning hours of 24 August when two squads from the *20th Sapper Battalion* crept up to the Duc Lap subsector headquarters and cut through several layers of protective wire without alerting the

[34] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 23d Inf Div, p. 10; AAR, Opn BURLINGTON TRAIL, 1st Sqdn, 1st Cav, n.d., pp. 3–4, box 31, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

[35] AAR, Battle for Duc Lap, I FFV, 24 Sep 68, pp. 4–5, box 29, AARs, Asst Ch of Staff, J–3, MACV, RG 472, NACP.

guards. They stormed into the compound and began throwing satchel charges, while a North Vietnamese infantry company stationed outside the wire raked the compound with covering fire. One of the satchel charges partly collapsed the advisory team headquarters, wounding five of the Americans who were sleeping inside. When they emerged to rally the Montagnard defenders, heavy enemy fire killed one of the advisers and drove the rest back (*Map 47*).[36]

Trapped in their headquarters, the advisers in the subsector compound radioed the Dak Sak camp for help, only to learn that it, too, was under heavy attack. North Vietnamese troops had penetrated the wire and occupied part of the northern hill inside the camp. Nevertheless, the command group at Dak Sak promised to send a company of mobile strike force soldiers when daylight came. In the meantime, an AC–47 Spooky gunship arrived to suppress enemy mortar and machine-gun positions beyond the reach of the defenders' weapons.[37]

At General An's headquarters in Ban Me Thuot, the South Vietnamese commander met with Generals Peers and Stone to discuss the relief of Duc Lap and the security of the provincial capital. To shore up the latter, Peers ordered General Allen to airlift the 4th Battalion of the 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, from Tuy Hoa to Ban Me Thuot where it would join the newly created Task Force SPOILER. Commanded by Col. Herbert J. McChrystal, the task force included his 2d Brigade, 4th Division, as well as the 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry, two troops from the 7th Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, and seven artillery batteries. General An ordered a battalion from the 47th Infantry Regiment to redeploy from Phu Yen Province to Ban Me Thuot. The South Korean Expeditionary Force offered to provide additional troops should the need arise.[38]

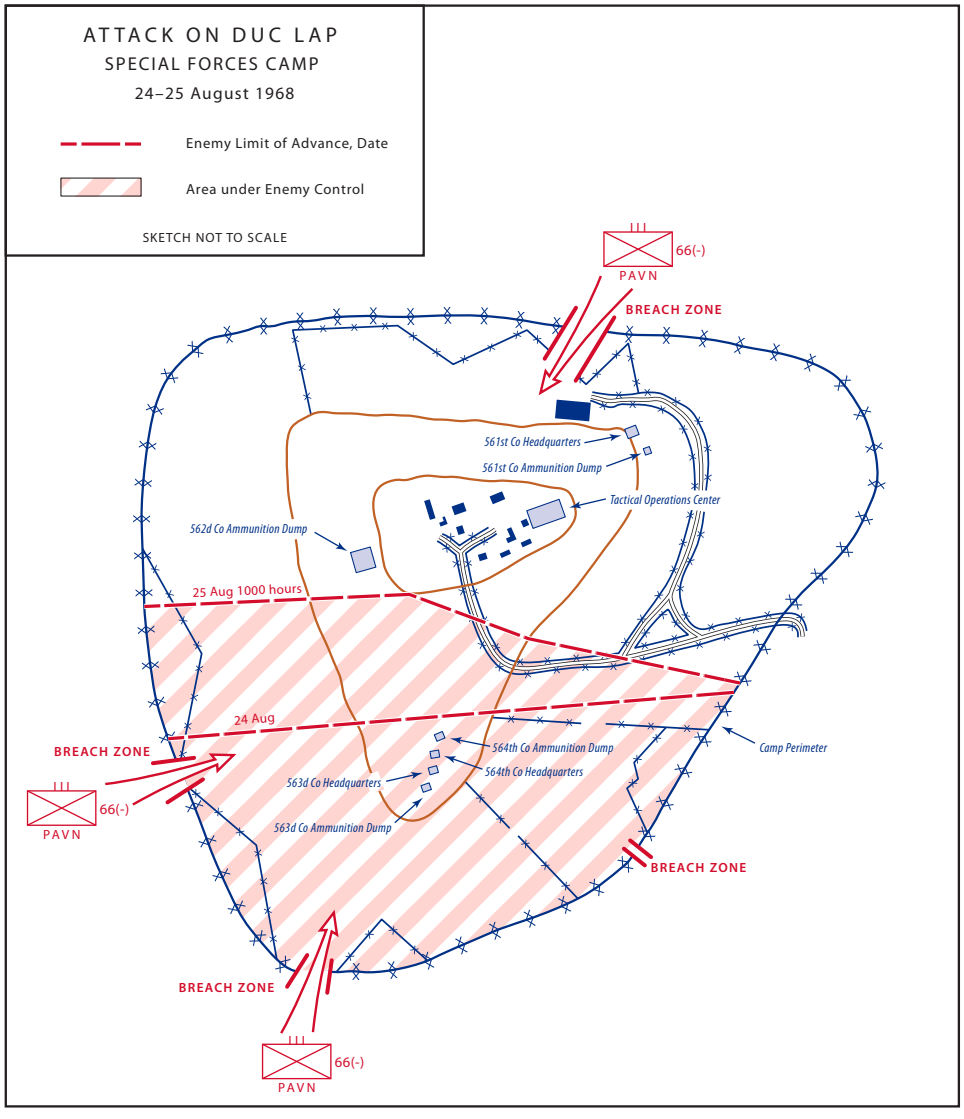
Turning to the relief of Duc Lap, General An dispatched two battalions from the 45th Regiment that were currently patrolling Highways 14 and 21 near Ban Me Thuot. General Stone arranged for the 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry, to defend the highways during their absence. General An also received permission from his corps commander to fly in several mobile strike force companies from the coastal lowlands. They and the two South Vietnamese battalions would receive direct 105-mm. artillery support from Colonel McChrystal's 2d Brigade, 4th Division. After establishing a new firebase three kilometers southwest of the Dak Sak camp, McChrystal agreed to fly in Battery A from the 4th Battalion, 42d Artillery, and two platoons from the 2d Battalion, 35th Infantry, organized as Task Force LANCE. Peers provided additional help to the Duc Lap defenders with five B–52 ARC LIGHT strikes that bombed the surrounding hills later that day.[39]

[36] Ibid., p. 16.

[37] Ibid., pp. 13, 19–22.

[38] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 7th Armd Sqdn, 17th Air Cav, 11 Aug 68, p. 8, box 60; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 4th Inf Div, pp. 2–3, Encl 1, box 25. Both in ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP. Msg, Peers NHT 1125 to Abrams, 6 Aug 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

[39] AAR, Battle for Duc Lap, I FFV, pp. 25–26.



MAP 47

On the morning of 24 August, U.S. helicopters airlifted a mobile strike force company into Duc Lap, landing them outside the wire of the main camp. Fighting its way into Dak Sak, the Montagnard unit attacked the enemy-held hill on the northern side of the compound. The assault failed with heavy losses. U.S. helicopters tried to land on the airfield to retrieve the dozens of Montagnard casualties, but North Vietnamese machine guns on the hill shot down four of the aircraft, discouraging further attempts for the moment.

The allied situation at Duc Lap began to improve late that afternoon when helicopters positioned the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 45th

Regiment, into a landing zone near the subsector headquarters in Duc Lap village. Enemy fire brought down two helicopters, but the other aircraft got the battalion on the ground before nightfall. Around dusk, another flight of helicopters deposited two mobile strike force companies into a clearing three kilometers south of the Special Forces camp, securing the site for Task Force LANCE set to arrive the next day.[40]

The twenty-fifth of August proved to be the turning point in the battle for Duc Lap. The North Vietnamese renewed their attack against the subsector headquarters, now down to 61 troops out an original complement of 118, but the defenders held out until relieved by the South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 45th Regiment. After rescuing the compound, General An's battalion swept the high ground to the north where the attack had originated and forced the North Vietnamese to retreat from the village of Duc Lap entirely.

The situation that day at the Dak Sak Special Forces camp was more precarious. The attacking North Vietnamese infantry took complete control over the small hill that dominated the northern end of the compound, forcing the defenders—three depleted mobile strike force companies plus their U.S., South Vietnamese, and Australian advisers—to withdraw to a second, larger hill at the southern end of the camp where the main command post and most of the advisory buildings were located.

Help arrived just in time. Once the artillery battery from Task Force LANCE deployed at its designated landing zone three kilometers to the south of Dak Sak, the two mobile strike force companies that had secured the position the night before headed north and fought their way into the Special Forces camp at around 1300 on 25 August. The Montagnards broke up a North Vietnamese attack, hitting the enemy from the flank as Communist soldiers advanced across the runway toward the southern hill. After pushing the foe back to the northern hill, the two Montagnard units, joined by a fresh mobile strike force company that had just arrived from Pleiku, waited for air and artillery strikes to soften up the position before they assaulted the summit. North Vietnamese fire cut down dozens of the attackers, killing three U.S. advisers who led the charge, but the remaining irregulars swept to the top of the hill. By 1900, the entire Dak Sak Special Forces camp was back in allied hands.[41]

The intensity of the fighting diminished on the twenty-sixth. The South Vietnamese 2d Battalion, 45th Regiment, continued to battle enemy troops in the hills just north of the subdistrict headquarters, but the *66th Regiment* made no effort to renew its siege of the Dak Sak Special Forces camp. By 27 August, the crisis in the Duc Lap area appeared to be over. General An flew in the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 45th Infantry Regiment, just as a precaution, but the government troops found little trace of the *1st Division* in the days that followed.[42]

[40] Ibid., pp. 28–29.
[41] Ibid., pp. 31–35.
[42] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 35-68, I FFV, 25–31 Aug 68, 31 Aug 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH.

Allied casualties for the battle of Duc Lap came to 114 killed and 238 wounded. Seven of the dead were U.S. advisers. The I Field Force estimated that over 700 North Vietnamese soldiers had perished, most from air and artillery strikes. Allied commanders later learned that the *1st Division* had ended the campaign prematurely due to a lack of trained replacements, food shortages, sickness magnified by the rainy conditions, and a scarcity of arms and ammunition.[43]

U.S. commanders praised the performance of the South Vietnamese at Duc Lap. General Peers singled out the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 45th Infantry Regiment, which in his words had "demonstrated professionalism and a fighting spirit equal to that of any unit in the history of the war." Abrams called the performance of the South Vietnamese "magnificent" and said that General An had handled the Duc Lap battle "with consummate skill." Tragically, an air accident claimed the life of An and his wife on 8 September. He was posthumously promoted to major general and awarded the highest decoration in the Vietnamese Army.[44]

Fighting Continues in Tay Ninh Province

One week into the Tay Ninh campaign, a combination of casualties, disease, and sodden living conditions had significantly eroded the fighting power of the *5th* and *9th Divisions*. General Thai decided to make one final push before suspending *COSVN*'s offensive until early September. He ordered the *88th PAVN Regiment* to move from Hau Nghia Province into the rubber plantations that bordered Highway 22 south of Tay Ninh City. He also instructed the *275th PLAF Regiment* to continue its interdiction efforts on Route 26.[45]

On the morning of 25 August, a convoy of eighty-nine supply vehicles manned by troops from the 6th and 7th Transportation Battalions departed Long Binh on a routine supply mission to Tay Ninh West. A detachment of military policemen, riding in jeeps equipped with machine guns, accompanied them. After passing through Saigon, the convoy headed northwest on Highway 1 to Trang Bang before angling onto Highway 22 for the final leg of the journey.[46]

The column of vehicles reached the Thanh Duc, or Little Rubber, Plantation around noon. The plantation, located approximately ten kilometers southeast of Tay Ninh City, fronted the east side of Highway 22 for about two kilometers and extended about five kilometers nearly to the edge of the Cau Khoi Plantation. A string of hamlets lined the west side of the road. As

[43] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 2d Bde, 4th Div, 2 Nov 68, pp. 5–6, box 3, ORLLs, 1966–1971, Cmd Historian, HQ, USARV, RG 472, NACP.

[44] First quote from Telg, Bunker Saigon 37046 to President Johnson, 4 Sep 68, p. 17. Second quote from Telg, Bunker Saigon 36596 to President Johnson, 29 Aug 68, p. 25. Both in NSF-Vietnam Country Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU.

[45] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, Encl 34, p. 2.

[46] Stephen C. Tunnell, "Convoy Ambush At Ap Nhi," *Vietnam* 12 (April 1999): 20.

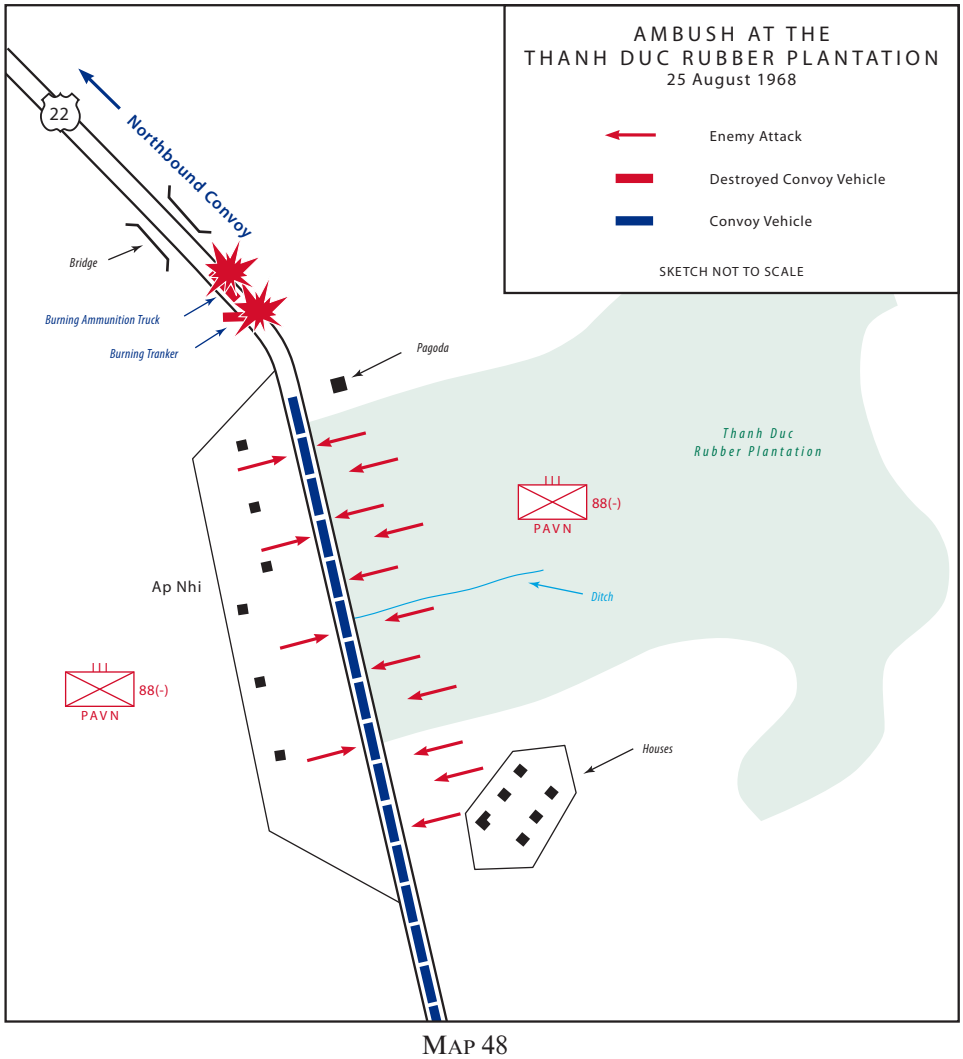
the Americans drove past, they spotted troops wearing South Vietnamese Army uniforms standing among the trees. All seemed well until those troops—actually North Vietnamese soldiers from the *88th Regiment* wearing stolen uniforms—opened fire on the column, as did hidden enemy crews firing machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars.[47]

The initial burst of fire destroyed a tanker toward the front of the convoy within seconds; its destruction created a roadblock for the fifty-eight vehicles lined up behind it. The vehicles in front of the burning tanker sped away, getting clear of the ambush zone within minutes and eventually making their way safely to Tay Ninh City. Meanwhile, the drivers of the stalled vehicles and the small military police escort dismounted and returned fire from positions behind their vehicles or along the west side of the road (*Map 48*).[48]

One of the men caught in the ambush was a nineteen-year-old driver from the 62d Transportation Company, Sgt. William W. Seay. As the enemy approached within ten meters of the road, Sergeant Seay opened fire from behind his truck, killing two. He then spotted a sniper in a tree seventy-five meters to his front and killed him. When a North Vietnamese soldier threw a grenade under an ammunition trailer, he raced into the open, picked up the grenade, and threw it back at the enemy, killing four and saving the lives of the men around him. When another grenade landed three meters from his position, he again exposed himself to enemy fire to toss it back. After receiving a painful wound in the right wrist, Sergeant Seay spotted three enemy soldiers who had penetrated the American position and who were about to open fire on his unsuspecting comrades. Despite being weak from loss of blood and with his right hand immobilized, he stood up and fired his rifle with his left hand, killing all three assailants. It was his last act, as a North Vietnamese sniper inflicted a mortal wound. The Army recognized Sergeant Seay's bravery by posthumously awarding him the Medal of Honor.[49]

About fifteen minutes into the desperate fight, Colonel Wolf received a distress call and dispatched his nearest force, Lt. Col. Clifford C. Neilson's 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry. An element from Company C, 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, came up Highway 22 from the south, while the balance of Colonel Neilson's troops fought their way into the northern end of the ambush zone. Arriving overhead in his command helicopter, Colonel Wolf saw that the North Vietnamese were still pressing the attack. Some enemy soldiers were in among the supply vehicles, and a few were even collecting artillery shells from a flatbed trailer. He asked General Williamson to send a troop from the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, based at Cu Chi. He also asked that a company from the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, land onto the northern edge of the plantation so it could move into the trees and hit the enemy from the rear. Williamson approved both requests.[50]

[47] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, Encl 45, pp. 1–2.
[48] Ibid., Encl 111, p. 24.
[49] Medal of Honor Citation for Sgt William W. Seay, n.d., Historians files, CMH.
[50] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, Encl 45, p. 2.



MAP 48

The tanks and armored personnel carriers of Troop B from the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, arrived at the southern end of the plantation at around 1400. Colonel Wolf ordered the troop commander to send half of his force into the rubber plantation to roll up the enemy's left flank while his remaining soldiers secured the trapped and disabled vehicles on the road. Fifteen minutes later, helicopters landed Company C of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, at the northern end of the ambush zone. They hit the enemy's right flank, while Colonel Neilson's 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry, battled the North Vietnamese from the road.[51]

The counterattacks pushed the enemy deeper into the plantation, allowing some drivers to reboard their vehicles and navigate them clear of the

[51] Ibid., Encl 42, p. 11.

ambush zone. However, almost two dozen trucks, including several carrying artillery shells, were too damaged to move. Williamson ordered Wolf to tow the vehicles back to Tay Ninh West before sundown.

The colonel faced a dilemma. He did not have enough recovery vehicles to tow the damaged trucks, and his work crews on Highway 22 were still receiving intermittent enemy fire. The units that he had sent into the Little Rubber Plantation were running low on ammunition and fuel. Darkness was fast approaching. To make matters worse, a heavy rainstorm had blown in, threatening to ground all of his supply helicopters. With the *88th Regiment* still lurking nearby, Wolf decided to consolidate his forces along Highway 22 for the night. Recovery of the vehicles would have to wait until the next day.

Colonel Wolf sent several companies back into the plantation the next morning, 26 August, but found that the *88th Regiment* had pulled out during the night, leaving behind an extensive network of fortifications and 103 North Vietnamese dead. U.S. casualties totaled twenty-one killed, plus twenty-two vehicles destroyed and another forty-nine damaged.[52]

General Williamson was critical of Wolf's performance. The 25th Division commander believed that the colonel had failed to protect the stranded convoy vehicles and their cargo to a sufficient degree, choosing to chase the enemy through the plantation rather than concentrate on recovering the damaged and destroyed vehicles. Wolf, for his part, felt that his options had been limited by the circumstances and that Williamson, monitoring the battle by radio back in Cu Chi, had not properly appreciated the conditions on the ground. The 1st Brigade commander and his superior officer already had a tense relationship. Wolf had been agitating for additional forces since the start of the offensive because he, unlike Williamson, was convinced that the main battle was unfolding around Tay Ninh City and that Saigon was not in immediate danger. The ambush at the Little Rubber Plantation strained that already frayed relationship. Having lost faith in his brigade commander, General Williamson transferred Wolf to a staff position on 27 August, placing the 1st Brigade in the hands of Col. Robert L. Fair.[53]

Shortly after midnight on 27 August, the *275th Regiment* emerged from the Cau Khoi Plantation for one final attack. Two battalions converged on Firebase Rawlins III, but the halfhearted assault against the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, accomplished little. The enemy left behind fifty-eight bodies, two wounded prisoners, three machine guns, five rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and seven satchel charges. The defenders sustained eight wounded in the attack. With that, the initial phase of *COSVN*'s third general offensive came to an end.[54]

Enemy losses in Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces during that ten-day period totaled around 1,500 killed, with perhaps another 2,000 soldiers incapacitated by wounds, as compared to U.S. casualties of 85 killed and about 300 wounded. Taking all of South Vietnam into account, the enemy had sus-

[52] Ibid., Encl 54, p. 3.
[53] Ibid., Encl 111, p. 32.
[54] Ibid., p. 21.

tained approximately 8,700 killed during the first eleven days of the August offensive. By comparison, that was roughly three-quarters the number of men the Communists had lost during the initial phase of the May offensive. General Abrams was gratified with the results. At his weekly intelligence meeting on 24 August, the MACV commander told his subordinates that the enemy was becoming desperate "because he can't do a goddamn thing militarily. . . . He's a prisoner of his own damn strategy, and he can't find a good way out. He can't admit it–that's impossible for him." At long last, the enemy might have reached his breaking point. "I think he's got a deteriorating military machine," Abrams said. "He's got maybe about three more times, or two more times, that he can somehow lash it forward. And, if we can keep at this, it'll just bust open. I think he's trapped."[55]

The September Phase

As the fighting tapered off in the waning days of August, Abrams instructed his subordinates to keep pressure on the enemy with reconnaissance-in-force operations and actions to interdict infiltration routes. Recent intelligence suggested that North Vietnam intended to resume the third general offensive at some point in the next few weeks. The allies gathered more evidence to support that theory, while the lull persisted through the first week of September. A reliable informant in III Corps, for example, told authorities that *COSVN* had ordered a new round of attacks to commence between 10 and 15 September. Abrams doubted that the enemy could mount stronger attacks than before, but still expected him to renew the fighting. Writing to his subordinates on 3 September, the MACV commander predicated that North Vietnam would adopt a "stretched-out and phased offensive" strategy, staggering his attacks over time, and switching from region to region to keep the offensive going for as long as possible.[56]

Abrams' analysis proved correct. At the beginning of the month, North Vietnamese leaders instructed all five major front commands to resume the offensive as soon as local conditions permitted. Only *COSVN* reported that it would be ready to launch a new round of attacks in September. The plan that General Thai submitted for the second phase of the Tay Ninh campaign was similar to the first. The *7th PAVN Division* would renew the fighting around Loc Ninh, while the *5th* and *9th PLAF Divisions* attacked allied positions north and east of Tay Ninh City. This time, however, *COSVN* instructed those units to commit fewer soldiers, using just one battalion per regiment or

[55] Quotes from Lewis Sorely, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes, 1968–1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), p. 33. Msg, Abrams MAC 11822 to Wheeler, 3 Sep 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

[56] Quote from Msg, Abrams MAC 12145 to Kerwin et al., 3 Sep 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH. Intel Rpt, DIA, 7 Sep 68, sub: Viet Cong Military and Political Plans in Tay Ninh Province for Period 6 to 15 September, Historians files, CMH.

one company per battalion at a time, to prolong the offensive without incurring crippling losses.[57]

At that point in early September, the disposition of allied forces in Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces remained essentially unchanged. Colonel Fair's 1st Brigade continued to shield Tay Ninh City, while a battalion-size task force from General Ware's 1st Infantry Division screened Loc Ninh. On 9 September, however, General Kerwin and General Tri agreed to move a South Vietnamese Airborne task force and a South Vietnamese Marine task force into Tay Ninh Province. Those units began arriving two days later, just as *COSVN* launched the second phase of its third general offensive.

The *320th PAVN Regiment* opened the fighting at Loc Ninh on the morning of 11 September by mortaring the Special Forces compound and a nearby 1st Infantry Division base manned by the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry. General Ware had retained Colonel Fitzpatrick's battalion at the district capital along with Troop E from the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, to keep an eye on the rubber plantations surrounding Loc Ninh. When daylight came, Fitzpatrick sent two companies to look for the mortars. Two kilometers east of town, the Americans discovered North Vietnamese fortifications, sparking a fight that cost them five killed and ten wounded. Colonel Fitzpatrick pulled back for the night and briefed Ware on the situation.

General Ware decided to send the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Leland C. Rew, to Loc Ninh the next morning, 12 September. When the unit arrived, Rew took three of his companies into the plantations north of town, each heading for Hill 222 about six kilometers away, and using separate routes of march to widen the search pattern.

Shortly after noon, Colonel Rew's companies clashed with battalion-size elements from the *141st*, *165th*, and *320th PAVN Regiments*, which were arrayed to the south and southwest of Hill 222. Isolated from one another, the U.S. companies faced intense pressure during the opening stage of the battle, and at least one company came close to being overrun. Air and artillery strikes plus the arrival of Troop E from the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, tipped the balance back in favor of Rew's infantry, which ended the day camped close to one another just south of Hill 222.[58]

That same morning on the twelfth, Companies C and D from the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, resumed their eastward push from Loc Ninh. After overrunning the bunkers they had encountered the previous day, the Americans discovered an even larger complex hidden within an abandoned rubber plantation about five kilometers from the district capital. Despite assistance from air and artillery strikes, U.S. soldiers failed to take the heavily defended position, later determined to be the command post of the *5th Battalion, 320th Regiment*.[59]

Early the next morning, 13 September, a company of North Vietnamese assaulted Fitzpatrick's men to cover the withdrawal of the main enemy

[57] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 15.
[58] Ibid., Encl 3 p. 2.
[59] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, II FFV, p. 20; *7th Division*, p. 76.

force. When the attack ended, Companies C and D from the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, examined the now-abandoned bunker complex and then headed east in pursuit. They regained contact at 1300, this time with the fresh *4th Battalion, 320th Regiment*. Under heavy pressure from the North Vietnamese, Colonel Fitzpatrick requested assistance from Troop E of the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, currently located several kilometers to the north. The cavalry unit arrived at the battlefield a few hours later and helped drive off the attackers.[60]

The second major engagement on 13 September took place at Hill 222 to the north of Loc Ninh. The 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, got into position to assault the enemy-controlled hill, while helicopters landed three companies from the 2d Battalion, 16th Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Charles P. McLean, into a blocking position just east of the objective. At around 1300, shortly before the assault got under way, General Ware flew north in his command helicopter to observe the battle from above. The aircraft was flying low over the jungle about five kilometers south of Loc Ninh when machine-gun fire ripped through the cabin. The helicopter crashed to the ground, killing General Ware in addition to three members of his staff and four crew members. The assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Orwin C. Talbott, immediately stepped in to take charge of the 1st Division.[61]

Despite that tragedy, Colonel Rew went forward with the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry's assault on Hill 222. Heavy enemy fire drove back his first attempt. He tried again after plastering the hill with air and artillery strikes, but with no more success. Fighting continued all day, with the enemy launching several counterattacks of his own before darkness brought an end to the shooting.

On 14 September, Companies B and C from the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, marched north to join Colonel Rew's force at Hill 222 after losing contact with the North Vietnamese forces east of Loc Ninh. When the Americans went up the hill later that afternoon, they found an abandoned bunker complex with at least eighty fighting positions, all connected with communications wire that led to a central command position on the reverse slope of the hill. The fall of Hill 222 marked the end of the third general offensive in Binh Long Province.

The second phase of the Tay Ninh campaign began early on 11 September when the *271st Regiment* lobbed 200 mortar rounds into Firebase Buell II, home to the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, 25th Infantry Division. The subsequent assault was halfhearted, with the enemy withdrawing after losing nine killed. U.S. casualties totaled seventeen wounded.[62]

That attack had been a diversion for the main strike. A short time later, the *D14 Battalion* attacked three different Regional/Popular Forces posts on the northern edge of Tay Ninh City, opening a way into the city for elements

[60] *7th Division*, p. 76.

[61] ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, 1st Inf Div, p. 8.

[62] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 37-68, II FFV, 8–14 Sep 68, 14 Sep 68, p. 10, Historians files, CMH; AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, p. 3.

of the *271st Regiment,* which had not participated in the attack on BUELL II. The province chief requested help to deal with the crisis.

Within a few hours, the South Vietnamese Airborne Division had established a forward command post at Ven Ven, a hamlet on Highway 22 approximately three kilometers southeast of the Little Rubber Plantation. The South Vietnamese 6th Airborne Battalion and an artillery battery accompanied the forward headquarters. Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese 2d and 3d Marine Battalions and another artillery battery set up a second firebase some eight kilometers to the east. From those two locations the South Vietnamese could interdict enemy units that might attempt to slip south from Tay Ninh to attack Saigon.[63]

The remainder of the South Vietnamese Airborne Division task force arrived on the afternoon and evening of 11 September. The South Vietnamese 3d Airborne Brigade, which included the 2d and 9th Airborne Battalions plus the 4th Marine Battalion, deployed to Tay Ninh City by helicopter to clear the northeastern suburbs. The senior adviser to the South Vietnamese troops, Maj. Roy D. Martin, was impressed by their street fighting skills, recalling that he did not see a single civilian killed or a single house destroyed in their tactical area. When the enemy withdrew from the city the next morning, the government troops recovered twenty-one Communist dead.[64]

Also on 11 September, the *5th Division* resumed its effort to cut Route 239 when a battalion from the *275th Regiment* attacked a fortified camp manned by Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, of the 25th Infantry Division on the western side of the Ben Cui Plantation. The initial barrage of mortar, recoilless rifle, and rocket-propelled grenade fire killed the company commander, leaving the senior platoon leader in charge. The new commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, Lt. Col. William E. Klein, fed Companies C and B into the fight over the next few hours, assisted by Company B from the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry. The enemy withdrew that morning, leaving behind almost one hundred dead. The Americans had lost three killed and eighteen wounded.[65]

Another element of the *5th Division*, the *88th PAVN Regiment*, executed a second road-cutting operation on 12 September by ambushing a convoy on Highway 22. The attack that occurred some three kilometers north of the Little Rubber Plantation proved to be far less successful than the ambush on 25 August. This time, the convoy was a nimble fleet of nineteen vehicles from the 48th Transportation Group that included a tank and an armored personnel carrier. The opening volley disabled a vehicle in the middle of the convoy, bringing the next four vehicles to a halt, but their drivers and passengers quickly dismounted and returned fire. Meanwhile, the front section of the convoy sped away and the tail section pulled back to a safe distance. Several armored personnel carriers from the 25th Infantry Division that were on security duty nearby showed up within minutes, as did several heli-

[63] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, Encl 63A, p. 4.
[64] Ibid., Encl 60, pp. 1–2.
[65] Ibid., Encl 32, p. 3; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, II FFV, p. 28.

copter gunships. The enemy withdrew some forty-five minutes later, having destroyed only one tractor-trailer and slightly damaging three other vehicles. Enemy losses came to at least eighteen killed.[66]

On 13 September, the *9th Division* renewed its attack on Firebase BUELL II north of town. It hammered the base with at least 600 mortar rounds before the *3d Battalion*, *272d Regiment*, launched an assault. Having weathered the bombardment with minimal casualties, the defenders had no trouble repulsing the attack. The Viet Cong battalion retreated westward, leaving behind seventy-six dead. Later that day, the South Vietnamese 2d Airborne Battalion caught up with the *3d Battalion*, *272d Regiment*, which had taken refuge with other troops from the regiment in a hamlet southwest of Tay Ninh City. The paratroopers stormed the hamlet, killing a reported 150 enemy soldiers while sustaining 9 dead and 17 wounded themselves.[67]

In subsequent days, the main theater of action switched to the region between Tay Ninh City and Dau Tieng. On 14 September, Company B of the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, engaged the *1st Battalion*, *272d Regiment*, some twelve kilometers east of Tay Ninh City, killing thirty-three enemy soldiers. Approximately six kilometers west of Dau Tieng, mechanized troopers from the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, located an element of the *275th Regiment* while patrolling Route 239, resulting in the deaths of another twenty-five enemy soldiers. The *275th Regimen*t struck back on 16 September, attacking the forward outpost that the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, had established in the Ben Cui Plantation. That assault, plus another one on 17 September and a third on the twentieth, all failed, costing the enemy several dozen more killed. During that same week, the *174th Regiment* attacked units from the 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, and the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, which were operating along Route 26 near the Cau Khoi Plantation. For *COSVN*, those assaults proved to be just as fruitless.[68]

The final chapter of the Tay Ninh campaign began shortly after midnight on 20 September when the *1st Battalion*, *272d Regiment*, attacked a Regional Forces outpost in Phuoc Tan hamlet, twenty kilometers west of Tay Ninh City. The enemy lost thirty-five killed in the brief assault. Expecting the outpost to be attacked again, General Tri sent the South Vietnamese 1st Marine Battalion to defend Phuoc Tan. The next evening, several battalions from the *271st Regimen*t attacked the post. Backed by air and artillery support, the defenders eliminated another 128 Viet Cong soldiers and captured six prisoners of war. The *272d Regiment* attacked the outpost for a third time on 27 September, now defended by the South Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion, and reportedly lost another 150 soldiers killed.[69]

According to information later obtained by the allies, General Thai had targeted the remote outpost to achieve a face-saving victory, but most of his troops who had fought in the battle were soldiers only recently released from

[66] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, Encl 55, pp. 1–2.
[67] Ibid., Encl 19, p. 6.
[68] Ibid., Encl 32, p. 4.
[69] Periodic Intel Rpt no. 39-68, II FFV, 22–28 Sep 68, 28 Sep 68, p. 6, Historians files, CMH.

Armored personnel carriers of the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 25th Infantry Division, sweep through a rubber plantation along Highway 1 during a search-and-destroy operation.

the hospital, many still sick or not fully recovered from their wounds. Having lost an estimated 4,415 soldiers killed in August and another 4,617 killed in September, and with most of his regiments no longer capable of offensive action, General Thai brought *COSVN*'s Tay Ninh campaign to a close.[70]

Conclusion

The third general offensive proved to be significantly less powerful than the Tet or May attacks. The vast majority of the countryside was hardly affected, with pacification emerging unscathed in all but a handful of provinces. The attack generated relatively few refugees, although civilian casualties—1,036 dead and 2,536 wounded—were higher than those created by the May offensive. General Abrams noted the widening gap between Hanoi's strategic ambitions and its battlefield strength. "The enemy's [most recent] offensive," he wrote on 8 September, "has not unfolded as he intended." *COSVN* had shelved plans for a third strike on Saigon, settling instead for a fleeting raid on Tay Ninh City. Allied units had thwarted North Vietnamese attacks aimed at Da Nang and Ban Me Thuot. Enemy commanders in the

[70] AAR, Battle of Tay Ninh, 25th Inf Div, Encl 70, pp. 1–2.

Mekong Delta and along the central coast had canceled operations before they had begun. Most telling of all, the region that had endured the heaviest fighting in February and May—northern I Corps—had stayed quiet in August. According to MACV, the allies had killed 16,578 enemy combatants in August and 13,163 more in September. Instead of being what Abrams had predicted would be "the longest and most intensive [offensive] of 1968," the Communist attack had "foundered from the outset," demonstrating that the enemy was approaching a point of temporary exhaustion. Nevertheless, North Vietnam still retained the ability and willingness to fight, and with drier weather just around the corner, the MACV commander anticipated seeing new attacks before the year was done.[71]

[71] Msg, Abrams MAC 12145 to Lt Gen Mildren et al., 8 Sep 68, p. 4, Abrams Msg files, CMH; ORLL, 1 Aug–31 Oct 68, II FFV, p. 15; Periodic Intel Rpts, MACV, 1–31 May 68, n.d.; MACV, 1–30 Apr 68, n.d.; MACV, 1–31 Aug 68, n.d.; MACV, 1–30 Sep 68, n.d.; Rpt, CORDS, 1969, sub: Daily civilian casualties during Post Tet Offensive, p. 1. All in Historians files, CMH.

20

An Evolving War

In 1965, the United States deployed ground combat forces to South Vietnam to stem the Communist tide that was threatening to submerge that beleaguered nation. Over the next two years, additional deployments by U.S. and Free World forces solidified the allied position and began taking the war to the enemy. By 1967, Le Duan, the general secretary of the Lao Dong Party, had become convinced that the Communists needed to do something dramatic to win the war. His solution was to launch a massive general offensive–general uprising in 1968, the purpose of which was, according to the resolution of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Fourteenth Plenum, to put "a sharp dagger through the throat of the enemy." This decision dominated the course of the war during the twelve months between October 1967 and September 1968, making them the most momentous of the conflict to date. Le Duan's decision, however, proved a gross miscalculation. The people refused to rise up, the Communists suffered staggering losses, and the South Vietnamese government not only weathered the storm but, galvanized by the attack, began to take steps to make its military and political apparatus more effective than ever.[1]

Statistics indicated the magnitude of the North's failure. From October 1967 through September 1968, the U.S. military reported that the allies had killed 175,000 Communist soldiers. About 154,000 of these had died during the first nine months of 1968. The allies were also well on their way to meeting their goal of eliminating 12,000 members of the enemy's clandestine infrastructure in 1968, with the Phoenix program reporting 9,600 eliminations by the end of September, mostly through capture rather than death. Even the Vietnamese Communist Party, not known for candor, acknowledged in 1995 that the 1968 offensives had led to the death or injury of over 111,000 Communist soldiers and political cadre along with "tens of thousands of members of the revolutionary masses." Allied losses, while serious, paled by comparison: 43,400 dead from October 1967 through September 1968, of which about 12,500 were Americans who had died as a result of fighting in 1968.[2]

[1] Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 90–94, 100–102. Quote from the resolution of the Fourteenth Plenum of December 1967 that gave final approval to the offensive, as quoted in John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), p. 230. For Communist admissions of Tet's failure, see Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), pp. 544–45.

[2] Sum, Southeast Asia Mil Casualties, Friendly and Enemy, Table 53, Encl to Memo, Director of Information Opns, Ofc of the Asst Sec Def, for distribution, 3 Dec 73, sub: Last Update of Southeast Asia Statistical Summary Tables; MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, p. 89; Rpt, Thomas C. Thayer, ed., *A System Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965–1972*, vol. 2, *Forces*

If there was a ray of hope for the North, it came in the form of war weariness in the United States. Although it had not been Le Duan's goal, Tet had so shocked the U.S. public as to change the political calculus. Many Americans became discouraged, the antiwar movement expanded, and a growing number of leaders who had once supported the war now called for some form of disengagement. In August, a Gallup poll indicated that for the first time a majority of Americans (53 percent) believed that America's participation in the war had been a mistake. The change in mood was palpable.[3]

Many factors—ideological, political, social, and strategic—had been chipping away at support for the war for years, and it was the existence of these factors that made possible the conundrum of the Communists winning a strategic victory out of a battlefield defeat. Factors directly associated with the conflict that undermined American will included opposition to the draft, the war's mounting economic costs, and the growing number of U.S. casualties. Although Tet significantly increased American casualties, its most consequential effects were to erode Americans' faith in the nation's political and military leadership and to challenge the belief that victory was possible. Whether or not the war was winnable became less important than the perception that it could not be won, at least not in a manner acceptable to a growing number of people. The political reverberations caused by Tet started the countdown toward America's eventual exit from the Vietnam War.[4]

But when would the clock run out? A stunning defeat at Dien Bien Phu had led the French to conduct a precipitous withdrawal of northern Vietnam in 1954, but in 1968 it had been the Communists who had lost all the major engagements. The Americans were shaken, but not broken. True, most Americans now believed the war had been a mistake, but a poll taken in September reported that nearly as many respondents wanted to bomb North Vietnam with nuclear weapons as those who advocated an immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces. Other surveys indicated that the majority of Americans still supported the fighting, either to seek victory or as part of a gradual withdrawal tied to successful outcomes on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. The Politburo may have been correct in interpreting President Johnson's suspension of bombing over much of North Vietnam and the offer for peace talks as signs of weakness, but the United States showed no indication of exiting the war any time soon. Indeed, deeply suspicious of American motives, Le Duan worried that the United States would drag out negotiations in order to buy time for South Vietnam. It seemed that the only thing Hanoi's leaders

and Manpower, n.d., p. 26; Fact Sheet, MACV, 10 Aug 68, sub: Status of Phoenix/Phung for Period January–June 1968, p. 1, and Encl 2; Msg, COMUSMACV 33400 to CINCPAC, 5 Nov 68, sub: Pacification in South Vietnam during September 1968, p. 9. All in Historians files, CMH. Communist Party statement as quoted in Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, n. 7, p. 338.

[3] Joseph Carroll, Gallup Poll Asst Ed., The Iraq–Vietnam Comparison, 15 Jun 04, p. 6, Historians files, CMH; *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:909.

[4] Andrew H. Sidman and Helmut Norpoth, "Fighting to Win: Wartime Morale and the American Public," *Electoral Studies* 31 (Winter 2012): 334–40; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 103–04; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, pp. 124–26; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, pp. 545–48; Prados, *Vietnam*, pp. 241–49.

could count on for the foreseeable future was the continuation of a costly war with no end in sight.[5]

The enemy prepared accordingly. Whether victory was ultimately achieved on the battlefield or at the negotiating table, Le Duan was acutely aware that military strength was the key to success. Consequently, he spent the year feverishly replacing his losses. Thanks to infiltration from the North, enemy troop strength in South Vietnam actually grew despite the enormous casualties, from 228,000 personnel in December 1967 to around 240,000 troops in September 1968. And, while Le Duan had still not abandoned his desire to attack South Vietnamese cities, the cold facts compelled him to shift his tactics to ones more sustainable for the long haul. The Communists began pulling back their conventional forces, avoiding costly offensives to return to a more guerrilla-centric strategy of small-scale operations, sapper attacks, and long-range bombardments. Such an approach would keep the pressure on the allies while buying time for the North to rebuild.[6]

Still, all was not well. The proportion of southerners in the enemy's combat formations, already declining before Tet, continued to dwindle, the result not just of heavy casualties, but of a growing reluctance by the population to support the enemy cause. Just as important, the rush to refill the ranks meant that most of the replacements lacked the level of military and ideological preparation of their predecessors. By the summer, U.S. commanders reported a noticeable decline in the efficiency and morale of the enemy's combat forces.[7]

Compounding the mismatch was the fact that allied forces were expanding far more rapidly than those of the enemy. Between December 1967 and September 1968, U.S. forces had grown by 42,000 men to 538,000 personnel, and as a result of Johnson's March decision to raise the troop ceiling, MACV was slated to reach 549,500 in 1969. By September 1968, U.S. and Free World forces fielded 141 maneuver battalions, the highest number to date. Goaded by Tet, South Vietnam's forces had grown even more quickly—from 643,000 service members in January 1968 to around 824,500 by September. Half of that increase had gone to the regular army, which now fielded 162 maneuver battalions. The remainder of the increase went into the Regional and Popular Forces, bringing their combined strength to around 400,000 men. Last but not least, the newly created People's Self-Defense Force, a neighborhood watch initiative formed in reaction to Tet, had mushroomed to 750,000 civilians, of whom 62,000 were armed. Although the South Vietnamese still exhibited significant weaknesses in leadership and performance, the allies were finally beginning to

[5] Nguyen, Hanoi's War, pp. 113–26; Ritgal-Cellard, *La Guerre du Vietnam*, p. 203; Leo Bogart, *Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion*, p. 92; Hagopian, *Vietnam War in American Memory*, pp. 26–27, 440.

[6] *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:920, 978–79; Rpt, OASD, Systems Analysis (Southeast Asia Programs), Statistical Tables through October 1968, n.d., Tables 1a, and 2c, Historians files, CMH.

[7] Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, 1 Jul–30 Sep 68, MACV, 13 Nov 68, p. 14, Historians files, CMH.

field the numbers they needed both to combat the enemy's conventional forces and to provide the security necessary for pacification to succeed.[8]

Equally threatening to the Communists as the growing imbalance in numbers were changes in weaponry. The advantage in small arms firepower that the enemy had enjoyed over government forces for nearly four years was finally coming to an end. By late 1968, most of the South Vietnamese Army and a growing proportion of its Regional and Popular Forces were now armed with modern M16 rifles instead of World War II surplus rifles. Other weapons, such as M60 machine guns, M79 grenade launchers, and M72 light antiarmor weapons typically used in antipersonnel roles, were coming to the Vietnamese in greater numbers as well, boosting not only the performance but also the morale of government forces. Communist dreams that Tet would deal a crippling blow to the armed forces of South Vietnam had come a cropper.[9]

The enemy had emerged from Tet weaker logistically, too. Not only had the offensives drawn mightily on Communist resources, but allied operations had disrupted many enemy logistical stores. The 1st Cavalry Division's month-long incursion into the A Shau Valley, Operation DELAWARE, and frequent raids into Base Areas 101 and 114, had effectively severed the Communist supply channel between Laos and the coastal lowlands of northern I Corps. In III Corps, allied units had swept through the base areas that lined the Saigon River, disrupting *COSVN*'s biggest infiltration channel between Cambodia and the capital region. These substantial accomplishments were tempered by the fact that forty-one of the enemy's fifty base areas in South Vietnam still remained active, as did his sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, but clearly it would take much time and effort for the enemy to recover.[10]

Conversely, the allied logistical system had bounced back after Tet. Not only was the U.S. military providing a flood of new equipment for South Vietnam, but also MACV's logistical network was now more capable of supporting offensive missions along South Vietnam's border. The opening of Highway 13 between Saigon and Loc Ninh in late 1967 had finally made it possible for U.S. forces to operate on the northern fringe of III Corps in large numbers during the dry season. In II Corps, engineers had expanded the size and strength of the Dak To bases, giving Abrams a strong forward position in the western highlands from which to harass Communist infiltration and, should the administration ever permit it, to launch major raids against enemy bases

[8] Ibid.; Monthly Statistics on Vietnam, Table 2, Encl to Memo, Director of Information Opns, Ofc of the Asst Sec Def, for distribution, 3 Dec 73; Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, 1 Jul–30 Sep 68, MACV, pp. 63–64, 115; Rpt, Thomas C. Thayer, ed., *A System Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965–1972*, vol. 1, *The Situation in Southeast Asia*, n.d., p. 33, Historians files, CMH; Msg, Bunker Saigon 35472 to the President, 15 Aug 68, p. 5, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU; Weekly Sum, 15–21 Sep 68, MACV, Ofc of Information, 26 Sep 68, p. 2, Historians files, CMH; Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, 1 Jul–30 Sep 68, MACV, pp. 63–64.

[9] Telg, Bunker Saigon 35472 to the President, 15 Aug 68, p. 5, NSF-Vietnam Country Files, Vietnam Center and Archive, TTU; Weekly Sum, 15–21 Sep 68, MACV, Ofc of Information, 26 Sep 68, p. 2; Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, 1 Jul–30 Sep 68, MACV, pp. 63–64.

[10] Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, 1 Jul–30 Sep 68, MACV, 13 Nov 68, sec. 9, p. 3; MACV History, 1968, vol. 1, pp. 56, 59.

in southern Laos and northern Cambodia. Most critically, Abrams now had a supply and transportation system in northern I Corps that could support three full divisions, compared to just one reinforced division back in January. The logistical improvements that Westmoreland had initiated—airfield upgrades, docking facilities, and storage sites—had made possible the incursion into the A Shau Valley and the relief of Khe Sanh. What was more, MACV was now in a position to execute a major cross-border raid into Laos from I Corps, if and when the next president chose to do so. All of these developments put additional pressure on the enemy to protect his logistical network in the hinterlands, thereby diverting his strength away from the populated lowlands and giving more breathing room to the pacification effort.[11]

Anything that diverted the Communists from operations among the population represented progress, for here significant challenges remained. Although President Thieu had removed many incompetent or corrupt officials in 1968, grassroots politics and governmental administration remained critical weaknesses of the South Vietnamese state. The new counterinfrastructure effort, the Phoenix program, was still a work in progress, and losses notwithstanding, much of the Communist apparatus remained intact. Indeed, by September, MACV estimated that at least 46 percent of the population remained under some degree of Viet Cong influence. Yet here, too, the Communists had cause for concern. The failure of the general uprising and resistance to Communist-imposed taxes and recruitment indicated that the enemy faced an increasingly hostile environment. Having focused most of their efforts during Tet on military rather than political work, the Communists had also failed to capitalize on the withdrawal of government forces from the countryside. The result was that the government's population losses were ephemeral. By the end of September, the allies had recouped all the population losses associated with the 1968 offensives. Thus, if serious problems remained for the government, the allies could at least take comfort that the enemy had failed to accrue significant gains in either territory or population, despite his tremendous sacrifices.[12]

Indeed, apart from the U.S. political scene, the enemy's efforts in 1968 had surprisingly little impact on the allied conduct of the war, at least so far. America's overarching goal—to secure the sovereignty of a non-Communist South Vietnam—remained unchanged. So, too, did the methods. As Westmoreland had explained at the National Press Club on 21 November 1967, the United States was fighting "a limited war, with limited objectives, and with limited means," so that there would not be a "total military victory, in the classic sense." Instead, the Johnson administration's policy had always been to use military force to convince the enemy that "he can't win," thereby forcing him to accept a negotiated settlement acceptable to the allies.

[11] Msg, Abrams MAC 12535 to Wheeler, 17 Sep 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH.

[12] MFR, MACV, 25 Sep 68, sub: MACV Commander's Conference, 20 September 1968, p. 3, Historians files, CMH; Telg, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to the President, 19 Sep 68, p. 4, Historians files, CMH; Rpt, Thayer, ed., *A System Analysis View of the Vietnam War: 1965–1972*, vol. 1, *The Situation in Southeast Asia*, p. 22; Quarterly Evaluation Rpt, 1 Jul–30 Sep 68, MACV, pp. 58–59.

Now, nearly a year later, this remained the goal, as did Johnson's negotiating formula, first put forward in a September 1967 speech in San Antonio, Texas. True, Tet accelerated efforts to create an indigenous military that was largely capable of holding its own. It also ramped up domestic pressure for a U.S. withdrawal. But both of these goals were long-standing aspects of U.S. policy. Westmoreland had predicted in November 1967 that 1968 would be the year in which "it will be possible for us to phase down our level of commitment and turn more of the burden of the war over to the Vietnamese Armed Forces." The following month, he had initiated withdrawal planning, the so-called T-Day plan, which Abrams would continue. But few people in authority countenanced a precipitous withdrawal. Even withdrawal advocate Secretary of Defense Clifford conceded that a drawdown could not begin "until there is some development," either on the battlefield or in Paris, "that causes us to decide that we can bring some home."[13]

Militarily, the conflict also remained much the same as before. Although Washington officials debated possible changes in concept, President Johnson showed no interest in shifting to an enclave strategy and explicitly rejected Clifford's contention that the war was unwinnable. On the other hand, Abrams was no more successful than Westmoreland or the Joint Chiefs in persuading the president to use ground troops to cut the flow of men and materiel from external sanctuaries, which were the lifeblood of the enemy war effort. With no new guidance from Washington, Westmoreland and Abrams continued to operate much as they had over the past several years. The change in command had no measurable impact, as General Abrams' tactical and operational methods differed little from those used by his predecessor. Similarly, all of the elements of the pacification program—CORDS, Revolutionary Development, civic action and nation building, the Phoenix program, and territorial force improvement—had been established prior to Abrams' ascension. As CORDS director, Komer recalled of the transition between Westmoreland and Abrams, "There was no change in strategy whatsoever."[14]

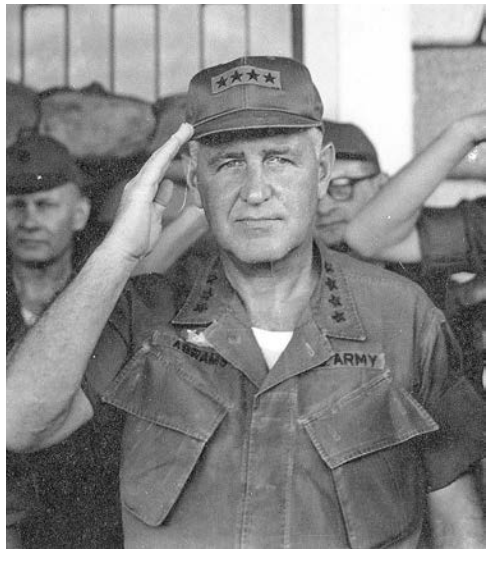
But the circumstances under which the war was being fought were changing, and Abrams intended to adjust accordingly. In doing so, he chose an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach, building on a vision he shared with Westmoreland. Thus, while operations would continue largely in the mold of the past, the Combined Campaign Plan for 1969, which MACV drafted in September 1968, called for exploiting the enemy's post-Tet weaknesses to place

[13] Q&A transcript, Address by General William C. Westmoreland, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 21 Nov 67, pp. 1–2, Historians files, CMH. Quote from Msg, Bunker Saigon 38774 to President Johnson, 26 Sep 68, pp. 7–8, Historians files, CMH. Drea, *McNamara, Clifford, and the Burdens of Vietnam, 1965–1969,* pp. 196–98.

[14] *FRUS, 1964–1968,* 6:695, 900. Director Robert Komer quoted in W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russack, 1977), p. 79; George C. Herring, "The Reluctant Warrior: Lyndon Johnson as Commander in Chief," pp. 104–08, in *Shadow on the White House, Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945–1975,* David L. Anderson, ed. (Manhattan: University Press of Kansas, 1993). Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72 (October 2008): 1225–26, 1230–38; Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 129–39.

greater emphasis on pacification support and counterinfrastructure activities. The plan also lessened the traditional dichotomy in missions between U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, stressing the importance of preparing for the day in which the Army of the Republic of Vietnam could survive without the presence of U.S. ground combat units. But Abrams could not envision a day in which South Vietnam could literally stand alone. Indeed, MACV's current proposal would keep 20,000 advisory and support personnel in South Vietnam until mid-1973, and 16,600 thereafter, with no end in sight.[15]

If Abrams' desire to shift more resources to pacification support reflected the opportunities created by the enemy's defeat in 1968, it also reflected realities—the expanding opposition to the war at home and the newly initiated peace talks in Paris. Although unlikely given the depth of disagreement between the two sides, no one could rule out the possibility that the talks might suddenly produce a cease-fire that would freeze the antagonists in place or produce a speedy U.S. withdrawal. By spring, the allies had already detected a movement by the Viet Cong to organize public governments in areas they controlled in an effort to bolster their territorial claims should that day arise. The realization had added urgency to Komer and Westmoreland's efforts to thrust the allies back into the countryside in the wake of Tet. Although the allies had reclaimed most of the people lost earlier in the year, by September they had not yet expanded their holdings over pre-Tet levels. Only after the defeat of the third offensive did Abrams feel comfortable enough to lend weight behind Komer's quest to lock in as much land and people as possible, as quickly as possible, to act as a buffer against political and diplomatic uncertainties. If MACV could persuade President Thieu to go along, this would set the allies on a new course over the next few months. In the meantime, Abrams had every intention to use all the combat power at his disposal to hammer the Communists, perhaps to a level that the South Vietnamese could contain once the inevitable U.S. withdrawal began.[16]



General Abrams

[15] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, pp. 122, 129–39; Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976*, pp. 366–68.

[16] Cosmas, *Years of Withdrawal, 1968–1973*, p. 189; Msg, Westmoreland, Chief of Staff, Army, Washington, D.C., to Abrams, COMUSMACV, Saigon, 20 Sep 68, Abrams Msg files, CMH; Hunt, *Pacification*, pp. 154–56.

As September 1968 came to a close, General Abrams sent an upbeat assessment of the situation to General Wheeler. Noting that the allies had completed their post-Tet recovery, he announced his intention "to launch an all-out counter offensive to preempt the enemy's initiative in the political arena while maintaining the current tempo of military operations." He was confident the allies would score big gains both militarily and in pacification, particularly given "the manner in which all commanders have captured and demonstrated the spirit of the offensive." "By Tet 1969," Abrams assured Wheeler, "the enemy will have nothing to celebrate."[17]

[17] Msg, Abrams MAC 13117 to Wheeler, 28 Sep 68, pp. 1 (first and second quotes), 5 (third quote), Historians files, CMH; MACV History, 1968, vol. 2, p. 780.

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This book is built on a broad range of materials generated by units involved in combat operations and supplemented by records from combat service and combat service support units. Foremost among them are command reports, quarterly summaries (Operational Reports–Lessons Learned, or ORLLs), unit journals, and unit after action reports (AARs). Command reports cover a wide range of unit activities over a period from one month to one year, while the ORLLs cover unit activities over a three-month period. The quarterly reports also describe various challenges encountered during that period as well as recommendations on how to overcome them. Unit journals offer daily accounts of what a particular unit was doing and where it was located along with initial casualty estimates and some raw intelligence. AARs cover specific firefights, battles, or operations, often providing the best source of information on significant combat events. The records of the various intelligence and operations staffs (G–2 and G–3) are also important to the historian. These were based on contributions from subordinate headquarters and included situation reports, which informed higher headquarters of significant incidents or new developments. The G–2 sections (J–2 at MACV) produced daily intelligence summaries and, at the field force and MACV level, generated periodic intelligence reports, weekly and monthly, respectively.

National Archives and Records Administration

Most source documentation for this volume is located in the Washington, D.C., area. The largest holding is at the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. The U.S. Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950–1975, file (Record Group [RG] 472) occupies some 30,000 linear feet of shelf space. Other important record groups deal with the Army Staff (RG 319); U.S. Army Commands (RG 338); interservice agencies such as MACV (RG 334); and documents collected during the Westmoreland-CBS libel trial (RG 407).

U.S. Army Center of Military History

The second most important record collection dealing with the U.S. Army's role in Vietnam is maintained by the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington, D.C. Upon completion of the U.S. Army in Vietnam series, the materials involved, including interviews conducted by historians, will be transferred to the National Archives.

The Center's largest and most important holding is a photocopied set of the papers of General William C. Westmoreland collected during his tour of duty as commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. The originals are in the possession of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library in Austin, Texas. A second set of photocopies is on file at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

Occupying about eighteen linear feet of space, the Westmoreland Papers are in two parts. The first contains a history that the general dictated at intervals, often daily, to members of his staff. It constitutes a detailed account of his activities, his decisions, and often the thinking behind those decisions. Attached are copies of relevant incoming and outgoing messages, memorandums, reports, staff studies, and other documents that the general considered important. The second is a nearly complete set of backchannel messages between Westmoreland and his superiors in Hawaii and Washington. It often sheds light on the political policies that affected Westmoreland's approach to the war and the problems that field commanders sometimes confronted.

The Center of Military History maintains another collection, which also has an important bearing on the Vietnam period. It contains more than one thousand interviews conducted by members of military history detachments dispatched to South Vietnam during the war. In all, twenty-seven military history detachments served, most composed of one officer and one enlisted man, assigned to various U.S. Army units and commands in Vietnam. They produced eyewitness accounts of combat actions, studies of lessons learned, and end-of-tour interviews with important officers. Although the quality of the workmanship varied with the producer, the collection as a whole is valuable for the understanding of platoon- and company-level operations that it imparts.

U.S. Army Military History Institute

The archives of the U.S. Army Military History Institute have 128 linear feet of special collections and documents regarding Vietnam, many of which are duplicated at the Center of Military History and the National Archives. In addition, during the past twenty years, under the sponsorship of the Military History Institute Oral History Office (as part of the larger Department of the Army Senior Officer Debriefing Program), students attending the Army War College have conducted extensive interviews with senior retired general officers, many of whom served in Vietnam. Most of those interviews are available to the public.

The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University

The Vietnam Archive has collected millions of pages of material and tens of thousands of photographs, slides, maps, periodicals, audio, moving images, and books related to the Vietnam War, Indochina, and the impact of the war

on the United States and Southeast Asia. Most have been digitized and made available online through their Web site.

Defense Technical Information Center

The Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC), a federal agency that reports to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, is an online digital archive. DTIC contains tens of thousands of reports and special studies on the Vietnam War produced by various departments of the Department of Defense as well as by special contractors and think tanks.

Published Sources

Socialist Republic of Vietnam Histories

The government of Vietnam has its own official history-writing program, and the effort has produced dozens of books and monographs over the past three decades. There are histories of each division (as well as of several regiments), campaign narratives, oral histories, and many specialized studies. Although often unreliable about casualty figures, they provide crucial information on North Vietnamese and Viet Cong battle plans and troop movements. By and large, these valuable sources are still unfamiliar to American scholars. The works cited in the text and noted below can be found at the Center.

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Map Symbols and Terms

Military Units

Function

Armor . . . . .

Amphibious Tractor (USMC). . . . .

Aviation . . . . .

Cavalry (Armored) . . . . .

Engineer or Sapper . . . . .

Field Artillery . . . . .

Infantry . . . . .

Infantry (Airborne) . . . . .

Infantry (Air Assault) . . . . .

Infantry (Mechanized) . . . . .

Size Symbols

Platoon or Detachment . . . . . •••

Battery, Company, or Cavalry Troop I

Battalion or Cavalry Squadron II

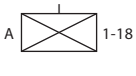
Reginent or Group. III

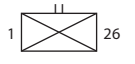
Brigade. X

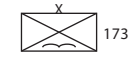
Division XX

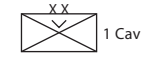
Corps XXX

Examples

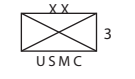
Company A, 1st Battalion, 18th Infantry. . . . . 

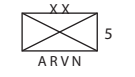
1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment . . . . . 

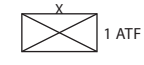
173d Airborne Brigade . . . . . 

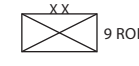
1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) . . . . . 

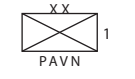
Reconnaissance Platoon, Company C, 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry. . . . .

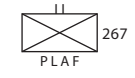
3d Marine Division . . . . . 

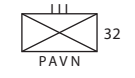
South Vietnamese 5th Infantry Division . . . . . 

1st Australian Task Force . . . . . 

South Korean 9th Infantry Division. . . . . 

1st *PAVN* Division . . . . . 

267th *PLAF* Battalion. . . . . 

32d *PAVN* Regiment . . . . . 

Geographic Terms

Ap	Hamlet
Chu	Mountain
Cua	Channel, river mouth
Dak	Stream

Dam	Lake, marsh
Ia	River
Kinh	Canal
Nui	Mountain, ridge
Prek	Stream
Rach	Stream
Se	River
Song	River
Suoi	Stream
Xa	Village
Ya	Stream

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
COSVN	*Central Office for South Vietnam*
CRIP	Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
DIOCC	District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Center
FFV	Field Force, Vietnam
GVN	Government of Vietnam
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
I FFV	I Field Force, Vietnam
ICEX	Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation
II FFV	II Field Force, Vietnam
IMPACT	Improvement Action
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (U.S.)
JGS	Joint General Staff (South Vietnam)
JUSPAO	Joint United States Public Affairs Office
LST	Landing Ship, Tank
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAT	Mobile Advisory Team
MEDCAP	Medical Civic Action Program
MR	Military Region
MSF	Mobile Strike Force
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
NLF	National Liberation Front
PAVN	*People's Army of Vietnam* (North Vietnam)

PBR	Patrol Boat, River
PLAF	*People's Liberation Armed Forces* (Viet Cong)
RD	Revolutionary Development
SKS	Simonov Semi-Automatic
SLAM	Search, Locate, Annihilate, Monitor
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USARV	U.S. Army, Vietnam
VC	Viet Cong
VIP	Volunteer Informant Program

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