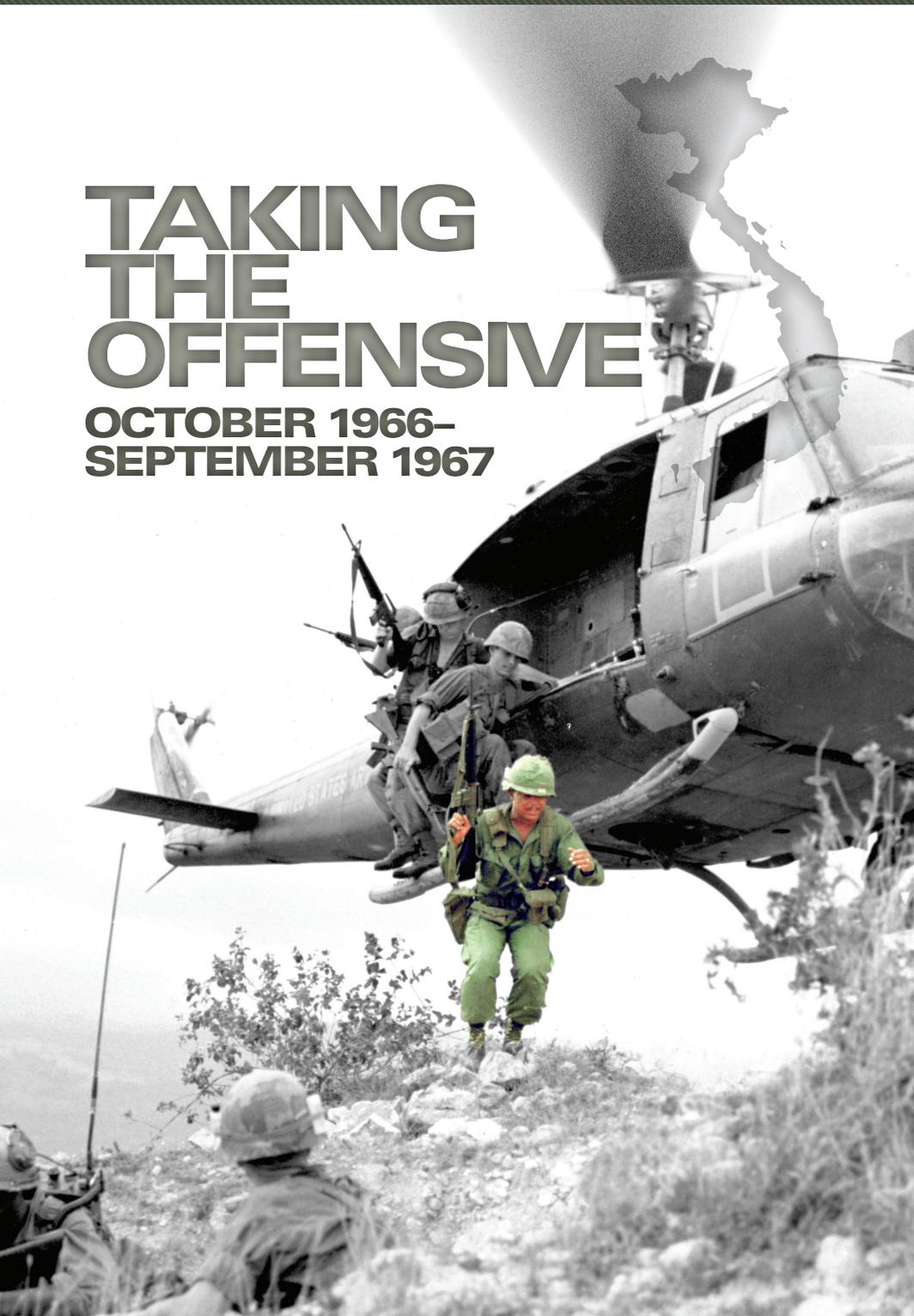


THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

# TAKING THE OFFENSIVE

OCTOBER 1966–  
SEPTEMBER 1967



Cover: Members of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) landing on a hilltop during Operation LEJUNE in 1967. (*National Archives*)

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# **TAKING THE OFFENSIVE**

**OCTOBER 1966–  
SEPTEMBER 1967**

by  
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Washington, D.C., 2016



# Introduction

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive issue. But fifty years after the beginning 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 reimposition 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 United States Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. These commemorative pamphlets are dedicated to them.

JON T. HOFFMAN  
Chief Historian

## **Taking the Offensive, October 1966–September 1967**

In early 1966, the head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General William C. Westmoreland, controlled some 185,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam. Over the last eighteen months he and his South Vietnamese allies had checked the growth of the Communist insurgency and were now poised to begin making progress across a wide front—political, economic, psychological, and military. With a robust logistical network in place and another 200,000 U.S. troops expected to arrive by the end of 1967, Westmoreland told his superiors that the allied strategy for the coming year “will be one of a general offensive.” Although the primary mission of the U.S. and Free World Military Assistance Forces from South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand would be “destroying VC/NVA [Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army] main forces and base areas,” they would also support the South Vietnamese pacification program designed to eradicate Viet Cong influence at the village and hamlet level. “The 1967 combined campaign plan,” Westmoreland reported, “is based on the concept that the war in Vietnam is a single war” requiring the U.S. and South Vietnamese to apply a wide range of military, economic, and political measures suited to the particular conditions of each region and locality.

Westmoreland expected several years of hard fighting before the Communist threat was contained. The enemy fielded around 131,000 full-time soldiers belonging to the indigenous *People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF)*, also known as the Viet Cong, and to the North Vietnamese *People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN)*. The North Vietnamese and some of the Viet Cong soldiers belonged to conventional “main force” units. These formations were well-equipped with modern Chinese and Soviet weapons and operated under the control of North Vietnamese regional headquarters known as *Front* commands. The remainder of the full-time Viet Cong soldiers formed what were known as “local force” units.

These were smaller and generally less well-armed than main force units, and operated under the control of province- or district-based committees. Backing the conventional units were an additional 113,000 hamlet-based guerrillas and 39,000 Viet Cong political cadre who provided the regulars with food, recruits, and intelligence. North Vietnam poured thousands of fresh soldiers and hundreds of tons of supplies onto the southern battlefield each month via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Viet Cong cadre drew manpower, taxes, and food from nearly 40 percent of South Vietnam's population. All of the enemy forces in South Vietnam came under the control of North Vietnam's Communist Party and its principal decision-making body, the politburo, composed of a dozen senior officials who ran the country at the behest of Ho Chi Minh, now elderly, infirm, and living in semiretirement (*Map 1*).

The United States waged a strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam designed to pressure Hanoi into withdrawing its support for the Viet Cong, but Operation ROLLING THUNDER had yet to weaken the enemy's resolve. Even so, the air campaign and several others that targeted the Ho Chi Minh Trail in neighboring Laos had made it harder and more expensive for North Vietnam to move troops and supplies into the South. Westmoreland's superior, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp Jr., controlled the strike aircraft which were based in Thailand and on carrier groups in the South China Sea, though President Lyndon B. Johnson imposed buffer zones around sensitive areas—downtown Hanoi, the port of Haiphong (the off-loading point for Soviet cargo ships), the Vietnamese-Chinese border—and vetted the target list himself. The president therefore tended to use the bombing program as an extension of his diplomatic efforts, varying its scope and intensity to reflect the perceived status of back-channel discussions between the governments in Washington and Hanoi, not the military situation on the ground.

Westmoreland enjoyed substantial but not unlimited authority when it came to fighting the war in South Vietnam. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the head of the U.S. mission, was technically the highest-ranking American official in South Vietnam. Lodge usually deferred to the general on military matters, while Westmoreland extended the same courtesy to the ambassador in political affairs. The head of MACV served as the principal military adviser to the South Vietnamese government,



Map 1



The 173d Airborne Brigade advance on a wood line in War Zone D.

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but lacked the authority to command South Vietnamese forces or remove corrupt and incompetent leaders. Westmoreland likewise had little authority over South Vietnam's pacification program which aimed to bring economic development and security to rural hamlets at risk of falling under Viet Cong control. Another component of the U.S. mission, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), delivered the lion's share of economic development and humanitarian assistance funds (\$275 million in 1965 and over twice that amount in the first nine months of 1966). Hoping to bring the various aid programs under more effective supervision, Lodge established the Office of Civil Operations in November 1966 to coordinate the actions of all U.S. civilian agencies in Vietnam supporting revolutionary development.

Political considerations at home prevented Westmoreland from intensifying the war beyond a certain point. The growing cost of the war—some 5,700 U.S. troops had already died, and another 26,800 had been wounded—steadily eroded public support. The president's refusal to mobilize the nation's reserve components meant that MACV's maximum strength would likely top out at around 500,000 men. Johnson would not allow Westmoreland to strike the enemy's sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia with conventional ground forces, fearing such attacks would destabilize the pro-Western governments in both countries. The MACV commander did monitor the Communist supply network in Laos and Cambodia using small reconnais-

sance teams from the MACV Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG), but the existence of that program was kept a tightly held secret. Likewise, the president ruled out any conventional ground attack into North Vietnam out of concern that the Soviet Union and China would formally enter the war on Hanoi's behalf. Despite the restrictions he faced and the obstacles he had to overcome, Westmoreland hoped his 1966–1967 campaign would begin to swing the momentum of the war in the favor of the allies.

## **STRATEGIC SETTING**

Keeping to the campaign strategy that General Westmoreland had developed with his South Vietnamese counterparts the previous year, the allies divided responsibility for fighting the war based on their respective capabilities. South Vietnamese forces took the lead in the heavily populated rural areas and in the cities, devoting most of their attention to battling local Viet Cong units and rooting out Communist political cadre and guerrillas. U.S. combat forces used their superior mobility, engineer support, and firepower to seek out and destroy enemy regulars in the remote forests and mountains while also neutralizing the base areas and infiltration routes that supported them. For the upcoming northeast monsoon season—the period from November to May when the prevailing winds brought dry weather and clear skies to the lower half of South Vietnam—Westmoreland intended to mount large search and destroy operations in the provinces north and west of the capital at Saigon. His goal was to reduce the threat that several large Communist jungle bases posed to the capital region, the political, economic, and military heart of the South Vietnamese government. Meanwhile, he would use the soon-to-arrive U.S. 9th Infantry Division and the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light) to strengthen the shield immediately around the city. Farther north, other Army units would continue to defend the vast interior of the Central Highlands and shield the food-rich, densely populated coastal plains, while U.S. Marine forces defended the Demilitarized Zone that bordered North Vietnam and protected the major cities in the northernmost provinces. By the spring of 1967, the MACV commander hoped to be wearing down the enemy's combat strength faster than he could replace it, while South Vietnam's government steadily reclaimed people and territory from Viet Cong control.

General Westmoreland had a good understanding of Communist military thinking based on the thousands of enemy documents that MACV had captured in recent years. The Communists divided the battlefield into three general categories: the agrarian lowlands where most of the rural population lived and where most of the food was produced; the hinterlands, the remote and sparsely populated mountains, forests, and swamps that covered three-quarters of South Vietnam; and the cities, the administrative, military, and commercial centers. In late 1963, the First Secretary of the Lao Dong Party and the dominant figure in Hanoi, Le Duan, had instructed his principal commander in the South, General Nguyen Chi Thanh, to crush the South Vietnamese Army with an aggressive main force war and to attack Saigon itself when the conditions were right. This policy, which relegated the local force and guerrilla units to a supporting role, remained in place even after the United States began sending combat units to Vietnam in the spring of 1965. Unlike the South Vietnamese forces, U.S. combat units were able to fight in the remote jungles and mountains which had formerly been enemy safe zones. General Thanh lost his chance to take Saigon, but insisted on continuing the main force war despite the heavy casualties it incurred in order to preserve his logistical network in the hinterlands and to shield the local Viet Cong units in the countryside. Now with the dry season beginning in the lower half of the country, Westmoreland expected to see an upsurge in the fighting as U.S. units pushed into the wilderness areas where the Communist regulars were based.

By October 1966, Westmoreland commanded approximately 325,000 personnel in South Vietnam, including around 200,000 members of the U.S. Army. Close to half of those soldiers belonged to combat or combat support units, organized around four divisions (three infantry and one airmobile), three separate infantry or airborne brigades, and one armored cavalry regiment, forming a total maneuver force of fifty battalions backed by thirty artillery battalions and sixty-two aviation companies. The remaining half of the U.S. Army in Vietnam consisted of combat service support units, handling a range of logistical, administrative, and technical missions, plus a force of nearly 10,000 advisers who worked with South Vietnamese units and provincial governments in hundreds of locations around the country. The MACV commander also controlled twenty U.S. Marine Corps maneuver battalions, and

indirectly controlled twenty-one South Korean and two Australian maneuver battalions, giving him a total maneuver force of ninety-three combat battalions.

The standard U.S. infantry battalion had an authorized strength of 920 officers and enlisted men, organized into four infantry companies, one heavy weapons platoon, and a command group. The average Army brigade in Vietnam consisted of three battalions—infantry, mechanized, or armor—plus a field artillery battalion and a host of smaller support units to accomplish signal, engineering, medical, supply, and other tasks. In late 1966, most U.S. infantrymen carried the M16 assault rifle, a lightweight but powerful weapon that fired a 5.56-mm. bullet from a twenty-round magazine, while others were armed with the older and heavier M14 rifle that fired a 7.62-mm. bullet from a twenty-round magazine. The Army intended to replace all of the M14s with M16s as soon as U.S. factories produced sufficient numbers, but the initial production model of the M16 had proven unreliable—the rifle tended to jam from unburned powder or debris accumulating in the firing chamber. A new variant with a chromed chamber and other improvements, the M16A1, would begin reaching U.S. soldiers in early 1967, equipping all U.S. infantry units and a few select South Vietnamese units by the end of the year.

Westmoreland organized U.S. ground forces into intermediate field commands which generally paralleled South Vietnamese corps headquarters. The U.S. officer in charge of each field command served as the principal adviser to his South Vietnamese counterpart. In the I Corps Tactical Zone, the III Marine Amphibious Force directed operations in South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces from the port of Da Nang, employing a combat force built around the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions and working in coordination with a South Korean marine brigade. Based at the coastal town of Nha Trang, the I Field Force headquarters controlled U.S. operations across the twelve provinces of II Corps, using the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), the 4th Infantry Division, and the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division as its principal weapons, assisted by two South Korean infantry divisions. The II Field Force headquarters based at Long Binh, northeast of Saigon, ran U.S. operations in III Corps with a combat maneuver force built around the 1st Infantry Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light), and the 11th Armored Cavalry. The II

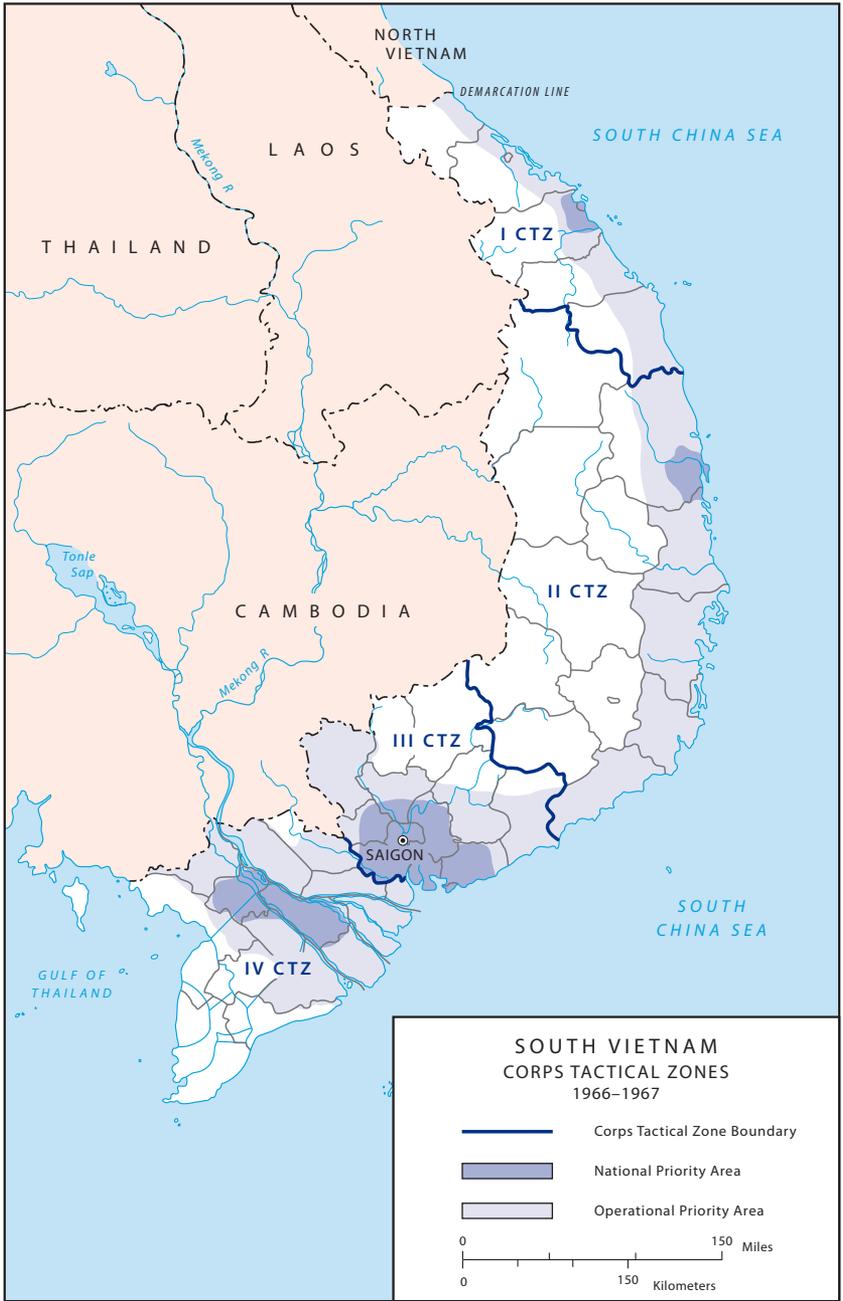
Field Force also coordinated the operations of a brigade-sized Australian–New Zealand task force (*Map 2*).

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam consisted of some 275,000 soldiers in the autumn of 1966, organized around ten light infantry divisions, twenty ranger battalions, four armored cavalry groups, and eight separate battalions of artillery. Smaller and less well-equipped than their U.S. counterparts, these units generally operated in limited areas near major centers of population. To deal with emergency situations, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff in Saigon controlled a strategic reserve of six airborne and five marine battalions that could be deployed to any part of the country on short notice. Part of this strategic reserve force was typically stationed in one of four National Priority Areas, one in each corps zone, that the government had identified as being critical to the country and therefore in need of extra resources to strengthen rural security and economic development. The head of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, coordinated South Vietnamese operations through General Westmoreland, who served as his principal adviser.

In addition to the regular ground forces, another 320,000 lightly armed soldiers belonging to the Regional and Popular Forces performed local security duties under the control of 44 province and 242 district chiefs. Around 16,000 personnel served with the South Vietnamese Air Force, while a similar number of troops belonged to the coastal-oriented South Vietnamese Navy. Finally, some 30,000 Mon-Khmer tribesmen from the highlands of Vietnam fought as local militia under the control of the 1,200-man U.S. Army 5th Special Forces Group and its South Vietnamese counterpart. Commonly referred to as Montagnards, these irregulars manned border surveillance and security posts. Remote and vulnerable, those outposts had often been the target of Communist attacks, and would prove to be so again in the year to come.

## OPERATIONS

In October 1966, II Field Force Commander Lt. Gen. Jonathan O. Seaman set in motion the dry season campaign for III Corps, the South Vietnamese tactical zone that encompassed eleven provinces between the southern foothills of the Central Highlands and the northern edge of the Mekong Delta. He ordered the 25th Infantry Division with four attached brigades



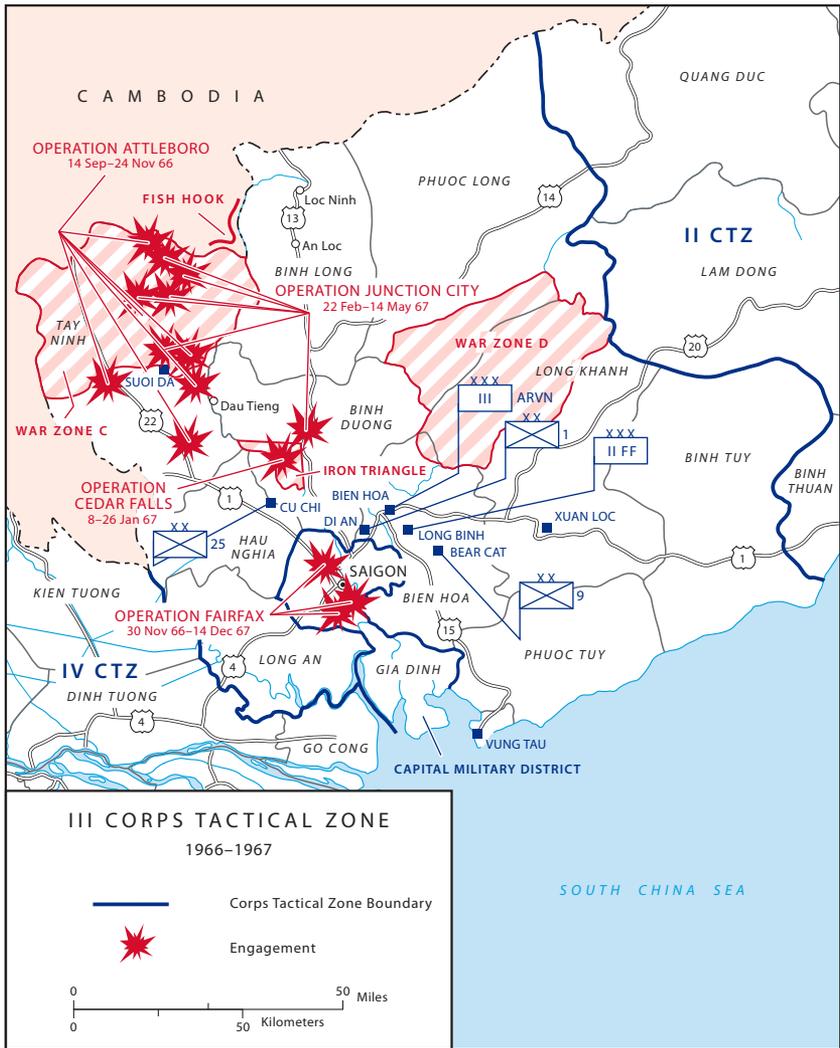
Map 2

to sweep the rubber plantations and triple-canopy rainforests of Tay Ninh Province, northwest of the capital, and to comb through the enemy-held jungles in Hau Nghia Province west of Saigon. Meanwhile, he instructed the 1st Infantry Division, reinforced by the 173d Airborne Brigade and elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry, to wear down enemy base areas in Binh Duong Province north of Saigon. II Field Force would support those maneuver units with the 23d and 54th Artillery Groups, the 12th Aviation Group, and the 921st Engineer Group. General Seaman relied on his counterpart, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Bao Tri, to safeguard the populated areas of III Corps using three South Vietnamese infantry divisions, five ranger battalions, and three armored cavalry squadrons backed by hundreds of smaller Regional and Popular Forces units. The independent, brigade-sized 1st Australian Task Force reinforced the allied position east of Saigon (*Map 3*).

#### ATTLEBORO BEGINS

In mid-September, Brig. Gen. Edward H. de Saussure's 196th Brigade began a series of battalion-sized probes in southern Tay Ninh Province named Operation ATTLEBORO. When 25th Division units uncovered a large cache of rice in the Saigon River Valley about thirty kilometers southeast of Tay Ninh City, the commander of the 25th Division, Maj. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, who was also the acting II Field Force commander in General Seaman's absence, ordered de Saussure to move his battalions farther up the Saigon River in search of more stockpiles. One battalion redeployed to the district town of Dau Tieng on 19 October, and four days later uncovered a shed complex housing a large stockpile of rice. After discovering other large caches, de Saussure received permission from Brig. Gen. George G. O'Connor, acting commander of the 25th Division in Weyand's absence, to reinforce ATTLEBORO with a second battalion from the 196th Brigade on 1 November, putting an infantry battalion from the 25th Infantry Division under his control.

Over the next three days, the two battalions from de Saussure's brigade and a shuttle of helicopters managed to fly out only a portion of the huge rice haul. When a captured document revealed the locations of other supply bases hidden in the forests about ten kilometers north of Dau Tieng, General O'Connor



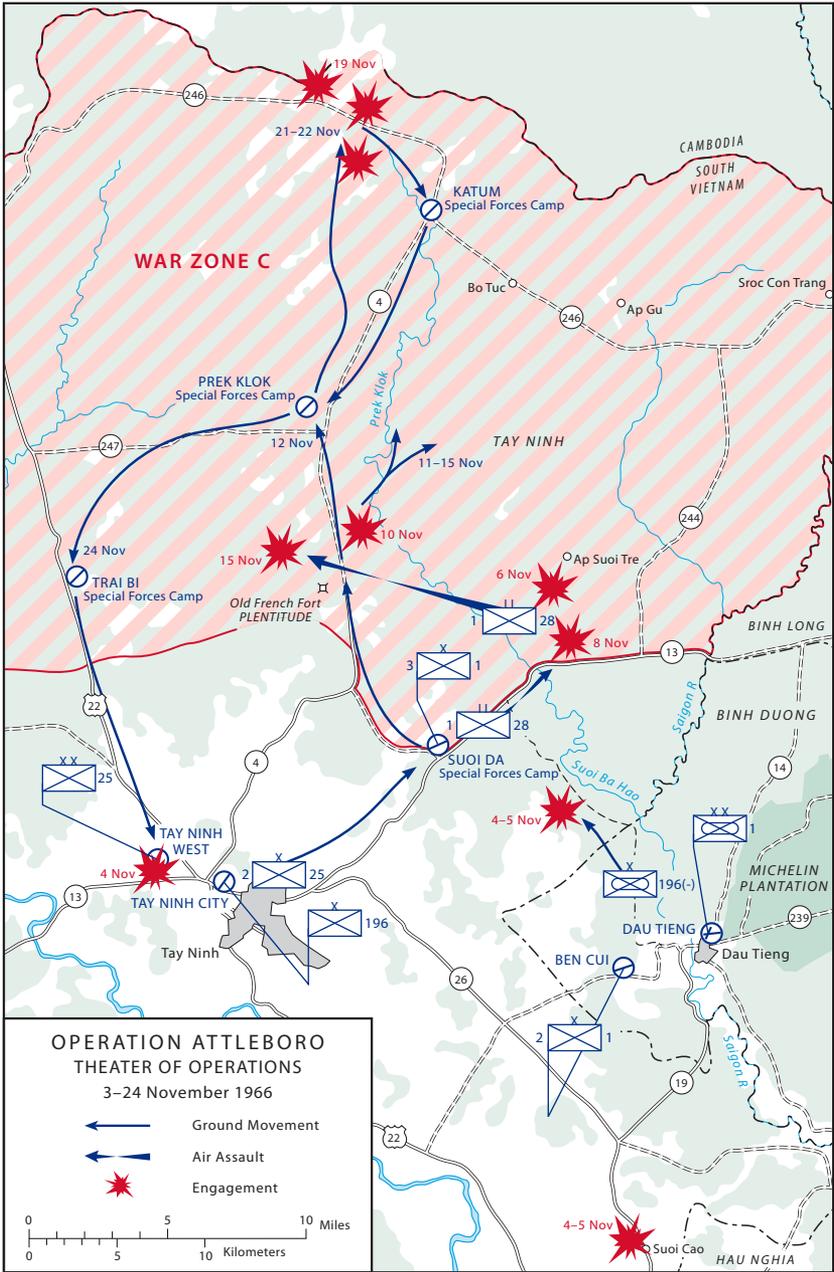
Map 3

directed de Saussure to spend one more day recovering rice and then to destroy what he could not evacuate. On the morning of 3 November, de Saussure marched his two battalions north from Dau Tieng, advancing in four groups across a wide front to drive enemy forces before them. Simultaneously, de Saussure air assaulted the infantry battalion that he controlled from the 25th

Infantry Division to the east and west of de Saussure's advancing battalions to catch any Communist forces that might try to outflank the 196th Brigade. General de Saussure's third battalion remained in reserve at Tay Ninh (*Map 4*).

Nothing went as the 196th Brigade commander planned. The brigade's four advancing columns and the two flanking units became disoriented in the dense jungle and thick elephant grass, losing track of where the other units were located. About 1200, a unit from the *101st PAVN Regiment* ambushed a patrol from the 25th Division on the American western flank, inflicting heavy casualties. General O'Connor reinforced the embattled troops with two more companies from his 25th Infantry Division delivered by helicopter. Meanwhile, de Saussure airlifted his third battalion from Tay Ninh City to Dau Tieng and then marched half of it north to join his other soldiers who were heavily engaged with a regiment from the *9th PLAF Division*. As night approached, the American troops consolidated into two perimeters about a kilometer from one another, the first commanded by Maj. Guy S. Meloy and the other by Lt. Col. Hugh H. Lynch. In the morning the units in both locations untangled and reorganized themselves from the previous night's confusion and continued their missions.

Unbeknownst to General de Saussure, U.S. operations had disrupted General Thanh's plans. Thanh headed the *Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)*, an extension of North Vietnam's politburo that ran all Communist affairs in the lower half of South Vietnam and adjacent areas of Cambodia. He had hoped to blunt a dry-season push into the Communist base areas of northern III Corps by tying U.S. forces down with an offensive of his own. Accordingly, he had ordered the commander of the *9th PLAF Division*, Senior Colonel Hoang Cam, to "destroy a 'vital' element of the enemy" in the provinces north of Saigon, and to support the local insurgent forces and political infrastructure by widening "friendly" and "liberated areas." The *COSVN* chief had also directed Cam to protect the important logistical base area in northern Tay Ninh Province known as War Zone C. Given those requirements, Cam had decided to attack the inexperienced 196th Infantry Brigade, as well as the South Vietnamese Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) and territorial units located nearby.



Map 4

Colonel Cam had planned to initiate his offensive on 3 November using two Viet Cong regiments from the *9th PLAF Division* and one from the *7th PAVN Division*, reinforced by a Viet Cong local force battalion. While one Viet Cong regiment struck the 196th Brigade's newly established base to the west of Tay Ninh City in an attempt to lure out and annihilate its reaction force, two battalions from the second Viet Cong regiment, joined by the Viet Cong local force battalion, would attack South Vietnamese outposts at Suoi Cao, thirty kilometers to the southeast. The remaining Viet Cong battalion and the North Vietnamese regiment from the *7th PAVN Division* would conduct the main attack on the Suoi Da Special Forces camp, fifteen kilometers northeast of Tay Ninh City.

As the Americans advanced on 3 November, Colonel Cam quickly adjusted his plans. Seeing an opportunity to strike the 196th Infantry Brigade while it was exposed, he canceled the attack on the Suoi Da Special Forces camp. He likewise downgraded the attacks on Tay Ninh and Suoi Cao to diversions. If all went well, these thrusts would confuse the Americans and facilitate Cam's new objective—the destruction of de Saussure's brigade.

Cam's diversionary efforts caused confusion in the allied camp but achieved little else. The South Vietnamese at Suoi Cao easily rebuffed the assault on their position with the help of U.S. air and artillery, while the attack on Tay Ninh never materialized. With most of his combat units in the heavy woods near the Ba Hao northwest of Dau Tieng, Cam sent an additional battalion to reinforce one that occupied a prepared fortified stronghold, complete with concrete bunkers and interconnecting tunnels, less than 500 meters northwest of the western American laager.

On the morning of 4 November, General de Saussure instructed Meloy to bring half of his force northeast to link up with Colonel Lynch as the remainder of his troops continued their northward sweep. Meloy's group had only traveled a few hundred meters when its lead company walked into an ambush that enemy soldiers from the *9th Division* had prepared the night before. U.S. artillery had little effect, and attacks on the left and right flanks not only failed to dislodge the enemy, but resulted in all the U.S. companies becoming pinned down and taking heavy casualties. Meloy requested reinforcements as the

enemy continued to attack. Colonel Lynch sent a company to link up with Meloy, but after those troops got into a fight with Viet Cong soldiers well short of their destination, de Saussure ordered the company to return to Lynch's position.

Four hours later, and after three human wave assaults nearly overran Meloy's position, a fresh infantry company from the 25th Division air assaulted into a landing zone just to the west of the ambush site. It failed to break the enemy cordon, sustaining heavy casualties including the battalion and company commanders. Meloy's men were unable to fight their way through from the other side. With the situation deteriorating, General Weyand ordered the commander of the 1st Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. William E. DePuy, to assume control of the battle. DePuy moved elements from his 3d Brigade to Soui Da on the evening of 4 November and established his own forward command post at Dau Tieng. General DePuy ordered the four committed infantry battalions to break contact and to consolidate themselves into a single perimeter under the command of Major Meloy, who had proven to be the best officer on the ground, and then wait for the arrival of two infantry battalions from the 1st Infantry Division the next morning.

The fighting resumed early on 5 November as the *9th Division* made a final attempt to isolate and overwhelm part of the U.S. force. Major Meloy kept his troops organized, throwing back the assault and then pursuing the retreating enemy. Hard fighting continued for several hours as the American soldiers, reinforced by two battalions from the 1st Infantry Division, pushed their way through Viet Cong bunker complexes that the enemy used as staging areas. A pair of soldiers from Company A, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, Capt. Robert F. Foley and Pfc. John F. Baker Jr., were later awarded the Medal of Honor for rescuing many of their wounded comrades while advancing through enemy fire and knocking out multiple bunkers, ignoring the grenade wounds that both had received in the process.

On 6 November, General DePuy sent the 196th Brigade back to Tay Ninh City to recover while he continued his pursuit of the *9th Division* and *101st Regiment*. General Weyand elevated ATTLEBORO to a Field Force operation and instructed General O'Connor to deploy his 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, with four battalions to assist General DePuy's 2d and 3d Brigades.

On 10 November, O'Connor's 2d Brigade, commanded by Col. Thomas M. Tarpley, headed north. Meanwhile, DePuy air assaulted five of his battalions to locations north and northeast of Suoi Da. When none of DePuy's battalions made significant contact, he ordered the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, to prepare for extraction so it could be committed elsewhere. As the unit waited to be picked up by helicopter, an enemy company attacked the northern part of its position. The Americans drove the foe back with heavy losses. A short while later, the North Vietnamese renewed the attack from the northwest, but the Americans again repulsed their assault. Despite losses, the enemy regimental commander sent a second battalion against the Americans' western and southwestern flanks. The Communist units, committed piecemeal, never penetrated the perimeter and subsequently disengaged. Col. Edwin H. Marks' 3d Brigade attempted to cut off their retreat, but the enemy escaped. The next day, U.S. soldiers found many dead enemy strewn around their perimeter, and discovered more hidden in a tunnel complex where they also found a huge supply base, which may have explained the intensity of the enemy attack.

Colonel Cam's forces were in full retreat by 8 November, heading back to the safety of Cambodia. General O'Connor's 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, pursued the enemy nearly to the border but located only abandoned base camps and a few Communist units who fought delaying actions before vanishing. When ATTLEBORO ended on 24 November, a total of eighteen U.S. and three South Vietnamese infantry battalions had participated, making it the largest allied operation of the war to date. The sweep had forced the *9th Division* to abandon its planned attack on the Suoi Da Special Forces camp in order to defend its own bases and depots. Enemy losses were counted as 1,016 soldiers killed in action, but U.S. commanders believed they had inflicted heavier casualties than the official total given the enemy's practice of removing the dead after a battle. Although DePuy recommended that the II Field Force continue its sweep of War Zone C, Weyand believed that it was unwise to keep several U.S. brigades out in the remote wilderness if the enemy refused to give battle. The acting II Field Force commander returned the units to their normal operational areas, a move that General Seaman endorsed when he resumed the Field Force command at the end of November.

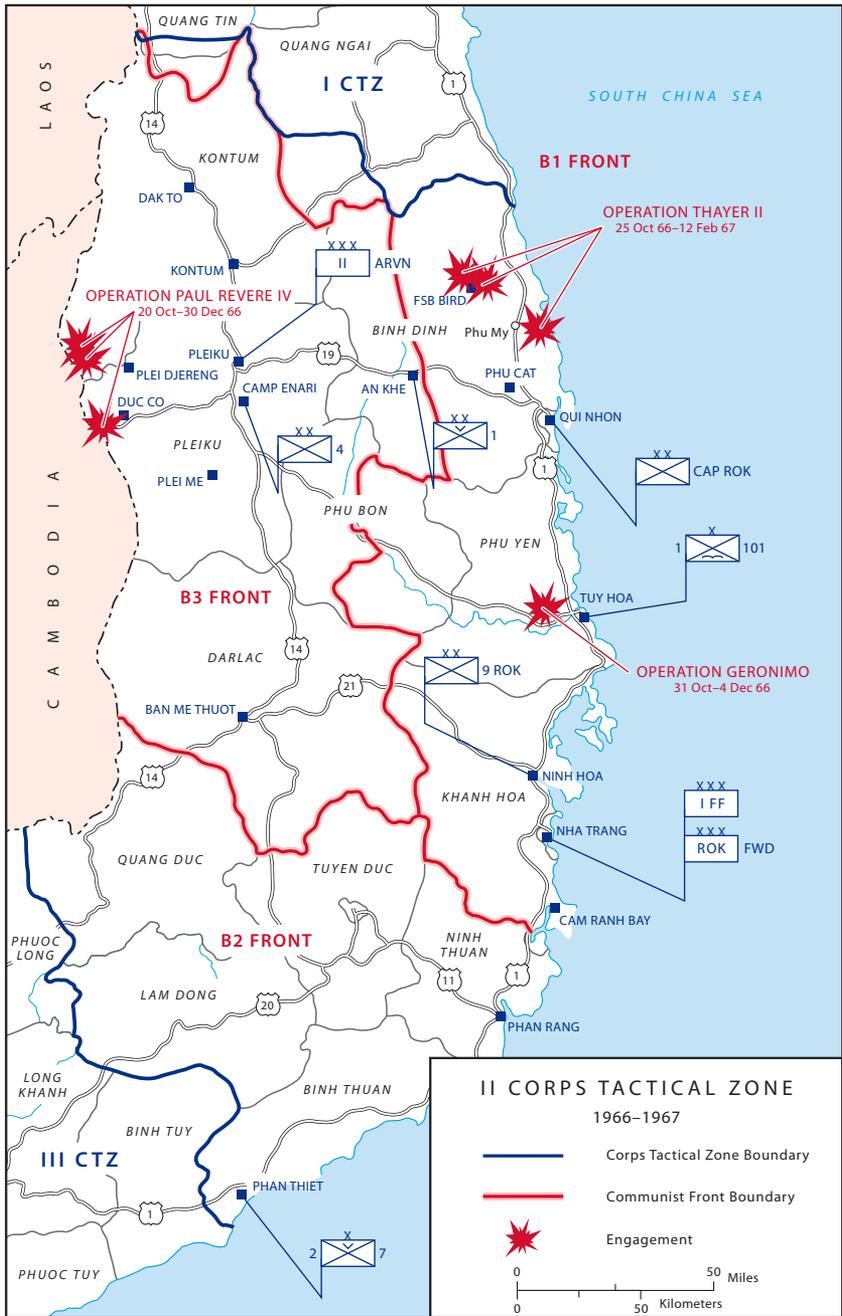
### THE B3 FRONT IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

In the autumn of 1966, the I Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. Stanley Larsen, defended the western highlands of II Corps—Kontum, Pleiku, and Darlac Provinces—with two reinforced brigades under the control of the 4th Infantry Division. The division's commander, Maj. Gen. Arthur S. Collins, maintained his headquarters at Camp Enari, just south of Pleiku City, which served as the rear base for his 2d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, the attached 3d Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Squadron, 10th Cavalry, and most of the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor. General Collins used those eight maneuver battalions, reinforced by the 52d Artillery Group, the 52d Aviation Battalion (Combat), and the 937th Engineer Group (Combat), to deal with the half-dozen North Vietnamese regiments that operated in the western highlands.

Collins' main supply route, Highway 19, extended east across the highland plateau from Pleiku City to An Khe, the rear base of the 1st Cavalry Division, and then down to the coastal port of Qui Nhon, a total distance of around 130 kilometers. In addition to the materiel provided by the 8th Transportation Group (Motor Transport) from the U.S. Army Support Command, Qui Nhon, to the 45th General Support Group in Pleiku City, the U.S. Seventh Air Force and I Field Force aviation units brought additional troops and supplies to the U.S. airfields near Pleiku City, Kontum City, and Ban Me Thuot in Darlac Province.

A North Vietnamese headquarters known as the *B3 Front* controlled enemy regulars in the western highlands. The six regiments protected a logistical network that moved supplies from Laos and Cambodia across the mountainous plateau to enemy base camps along the central coast. A second tactical headquarters known as the *B1 Front* controlled the Communist main force units on the central coast of II Corps and southern I Corps. Both front commands reported to the *Military Region 5* headquarters, which controlled and coordinated all of the enemy's political and military affairs in those two sectors (*Map 5*).

Given the enormous size of the western highlands (some 300 kilometers long and 100 kilometers wide) and its rugged, forest-covered terrain, General Collins relied on timely intelligence to anticipate and then to respond to enemy threats. His main task was to shield provincial and district capitals that lay along Highway 14, a paved road that ran from north to south through



Map 5

the middle of the Central Highlands. Larsen's counterpart, Lt. Gen. Vinh Loc, controlled two infantry regiments, an armored cavalry group, and a three-battalion ranger group in western II Corps, but those units lacked the equipment and training to operate in the remote mountains. Fortunately, most of the towns on Highway 14 lay between thirty and fifty kilometers from the border, giving Collins 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 also scarce, and U.S. aircraft sprayed chemical defoliants over suspected farming sites to prevent the enemy from growing his own food. As a result, the Communist troops in western II Corps could not live off the land as their counterparts did on the fertile coast. Enemy soldiers would often labor for weeks or even months to pre-position enough supplies for a major battle, giving U.S. reconnaissance elements—Montagnard patrols operating from a dozen U.S. 5th Special Forces Group border surveillance camps, long-range reconnaissance teams attached to I Field Force, fixed-wing surveillance aircraft equipped with infrared and chemical detectors, helicopter-infantry scout teams, and radio intercept detachments—ample time to detect those preparations.

Hoping to eliminate some of I Field Force's best sources of intelligence, the *B3 Front* ordered the *1st PAVN Division* and the *95B PAVN Regiment* to attack a pair of Special Forces camps—Plei Djereng, about forty kilometers west of Pleiku City, and Duc Co, twenty kilometers farther south and east of the Plei Trap Valley—which blocked the most convenient infiltration routes into southwestern Pleiku Province. In late September 1966, the Communists began moving supplies from Cambodia into the Plei Trap Valley, and then to staging areas near the Special Forces camps.

The commander of the 4th Infantry Division, General Collins, caught wind of the threat on 14 October when a Montagnard scout company ran into a large North Vietnamese force near Plei Djereng. When the enemy stood and fought, and then resumed the battle the next day, Collins suspected that the *B3 Front* was attempting to pin down the Montagnard units at Plei Djereng prior to an attack on the camp itself. On 16 October,

he ordered one of his two main maneuver units, the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, commanded by Col. James G. Shanahan, to move into the hills around Plei Djereng. Over the next five days, Shanahan's men encountered small groups of soldiers from the *95B Regiment* and found evidence that two regiments from the *1st PAVN Division* had also moved into the area. With hard intelligence in hand, Collins dispatched Col. Judson F. Miller and the 2d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, to Plei Djereng, committing all six of his infantry battalions to a search and destroy operation he dubbed PAUL REVERE IV.

For the first week of the operation, U.S. troops found abandoned camps and used trails in the hills around Plei Djereng but no enemy units. That changed on the night of 27–28 October when the North Vietnamese attacked four of the U.S. companies in their night defense positions. The fighting lasted on and off for three days, resulting in 138 enemy killed and 22 U.S. troops dead. Eager to trap the three North Vietnamese regiments before they could withdraw into Cambodia, General Larsen moved the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, commanded by Col. George Casey, from the central coast to Duc Co so General Collins could concentrate his forces in the Plei Trap Valley.

The six battalions of Collins' two brigades advanced relentlessly and forced the enemy to give ground and abandon supplies. To guard against the possibility of a North Vietnamese unit slipping past the U.S. advance to attack Plei Djereng, Lt. Col. Eleazer Parmly deployed two battalion-sized groups of Special Forces-led CIDG troops into the area. Parmly personally led Task Force PRONG to screen the western approaches to the Special Forces camp, while Task Force NORTH conducted surveillance along the northern limit of Collins' advance. On 10 November, an element of Task Force PRONG was patrolling a kilometer from Cambodia when a North Vietnamese unit that Maj. Gen. Chu Huy Man held in reserve, the *88th PAVN Regiment*, lunged across the border to pick it off. The CIDG soldiers held their ground with assistance from U.S. air and artillery strikes, but their casualties were heavy. General Collins air assaulted a battalion from Miller's 2d Brigade into the contact area, helping the CIDG troops withdraw to a more defensible location three kilometers from the border. The 4th Infantry Division commander also did not want any U.S. troops to cross the border inadvertently, which could create a political crisis. General Collins ordered

Shanahan's 3d Brigade to continue its northern advance through the Plei Trap Valley while the remainder of Miller's 2d Brigade headed west on foot to support Task Force PRONG.

The next day, 11 November, Colonel Miller established Firebase RED WARRIOR at the spot where his infantry battalion had regrouped with Task Force PRONG, also flying in an artillery battery to provide those troops with additional firepower. The enemy reacted swiftly. On the evening of 12 November, North Vietnamese mortars bombarded the firebase, and then waves of Communist infantry assaulted RED WARRIOR from the north and west. The defenders repulsed the savage, all-night attack at a cost of five killed and forty-one wounded. When morning came, the defenders found seventy-six enemy dead on the outskirts of the firebase. Not wishing to risk more fighting so near the border, Collins abandoned the base and had another one established farther east.

On 18 November, elements from the 2d Brigade and Task Force PRONG found two huge, abandoned enemy bases in the southern Plei Trap, and Collins directed Colonel Miller to destroy them. As allied soldiers were exploring the camps, the *33d PAVN Regiment* emerged from the surrounding jungle, attacking from three directions at once. The U.S. infantrymen held the enemy at bay throughout the afternoon, continuing to fight until the North Vietnamese withdrew in the early morning hours of 19 November. Allied losses came to nineteen killed, including a squad leader from Company C, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, Sgt. Ted Belcher, who received the Medal of Honor for jumping on an enemy grenade to save the lives of his squad members. General Collins decided the time had come to withdraw Miller's 2d Brigade from the southwestern Plei Trap Valley. Miller was not finding large supply caches to destroy, and the enemy could attack him at will from his Cambodian sanctuaries without fear of being pursued.

While Colonel Miller was shifting his forces farther east, Colonel Casey of the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, screened his movement by inserting company-sized elements to check reported enemy sightings. On 21 November, one of the companies encountered a North Vietnamese battalion, which immediately attacked and overran one of the U.S. platoons. The Communists executed their American prisoners before withdrawing under bombardment from U.S. aircraft and artillery.

Troopers later swept the area and found it strewn with enemy bodies. Unwilling to risk another such debacle, General Larsen instructed Casey to return both of his battalions to Binh Dinh Province.

Once all of the U.S. units had departed the lower Plei Trap Valley, Larsen saturated the area with B-52 strikes for the next ten days. Meanwhile the two brigades controlled by the 4th Infantry Division continued to search the northern part of the valley, hoping to regain contact with the North Vietnamese regiments still believed to be in the area. On 9 December, General Larsen reinforced PAUL REVERE IV with the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and General Loc committed several South Vietnamese battalions to aid in the search. When the allies failed to locate any major targets after nearly two weeks, Larsen ended the operation on 27 December and redeployed all of his units to their traditional sectors.

#### GUARDING THE CENTRAL COAST

As the 4th Infantry Division hunted *B3 Front* regiments in the western highlands during the final months of 1966, General Larsen conducted other operations in the coastal lowlands of II Corps where 80 percent of the region's people lived and where most of the food was produced. The I Field Force commander used the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) to combat the *3d PAVN Division* in Binh Dinh Province, II Corps' National Priority Area, and two brigades—the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division—to defend smaller Phu Yen Province to its south. General Larsen also used the 1st Cavalry Division as his theater reserve, because its fleet of nearly 500 helicopters gave it the ability to reinforce any sector in II Corps on short notice. The South Korean Capital Division helped secure the southern part of Binh Dinh Province where Qui Nhon, the main I Field Force port and supply depot, and the 7th Air Force fighter-bomber airfield at Phu Cat were located. The South Korean 9th Infantry Division (“White Horse”) worked with South Vietnamese forces on the southern coast of II Corps to protect Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan Provinces, the last of those also home to a reinforced battalion from the 1st Cavalry Division known as Task Force BYRD. General Larsen's 41st Artillery Group and the 17th Aviation Group supported

both U.S. and South Korean forces in all five coastal provinces of II Corps.

On the northern coast of Binh Dinh Province, Maj. Gen. John Norton, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, continued his long-running hunt for the *3d PAVN Division* in the autumn of 1966. His main effort, Operation THAYER II, produced few contacts in November and early December as the North Vietnamese continued to hide somewhere in the mountains that overlooked the Bong Son and Phu My Plains. On 17 December, however, elements of the 1st Brigade under Col. James S. Smith encountered two North Vietnamese battalions while searching the Kim Son Valley, a former Viet Cong stronghold just west of Phu My that the South Vietnamese government had begun to depopulate by moving the people to safer areas on the coast. The Communists had apparently come down into the valley to look for food that might have been left behind. Six U.S. rifle companies fought a hotly contested battle with the enemy that lasted until nightfall.

The commander of the *3d Division*, Col. Le Truc, was not willing to surrender his access to the valley and those farmers who still remained. He ordered his *22d Regiment* to overrun one of the 1st Cavalry Division's landing zones in the Kim Son Valley, a company-sized firebase known as BIRD. Manned by two artillery batteries and one company of infantry, the fortifications at BIRD were in poor shape due to the recent monsoon flooding. The outpost also lacked protective razor wire and listening posts beyond the bunker line, making it an especially vulnerable target.

On the evening of 26 December, two North Vietnamese battalions moved into assault positions, one of them within twelve meters of the U.S. bunker line, without being detected. At 0100, the North Vietnamese began pummeling the landing zone with mortars and recoilless rifles, disorienting the defenders and allowing the lead enemy battalion to penetrate the northeastern part of BIRD. The Communists recoiled, however, when the crew of a 105-mm. howitzer fired two "beehive" rounds into the advancing North Vietnamese soldiers, shredding them with hundreds of steel darts. S. Sgt. Delbert O. Jennings, an infantryman from Company C, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry, gunned down an enemy sapper team that was attempting to destroy another howitzer, raced back and forth through the cross fire to reorganize the American lines,

and then killed a North Vietnamese soldier with the butt of his weapon before going in search of wounded Americans, actions for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. The arrival of helicopter gunships finally convinced the enemy commander to withdraw his forces, having destroyed one artillery piece and inflicted severe casualties on the defenders. The next morning, elements of the 1st Cavalry Division pursued the retreating *22d Regiment*, eventually killing a total of 267 of its men either at BIRD or in the days that followed. The 1st Cavalry Division lost twenty-seven soldiers killed and sixty-seven wounded in the fight, but the enemy had been driven from the Kim Son Valley, allowing the South Vietnamese government to complete the evacuation of the inhabitants so that they could no longer aid the enemy.

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An UH-1B firing on enemy positions



In Phu Yen Province to the south, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, worked with South Vietnamese forces to shield the coastal basin around Tuy Hoa, the provincial capital, and the jet-capable airfield just south of the city. The major threat came from the *18B* and *95th PAVN Regiments* that operated from the coastal hills, supported by several Viet Cong battalions in the lowlands. Brig. Gen. Willard Pearson, the commander of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, initiated a search for those regiments on 31 October 1966 using intelligence that indicated their probable locations. In the opening phase of Operation GERONIMO, Pearson sent two of his battalions to search a known enemy base area about twenty kilometers southwest of Tuy Hoa. The paratroopers hit a dry hole, finding evidence that the *18B Regiment* had moved out of the area a month earlier.

Shifting to his other target, the *95th Regiment*, Pearson air assaulted most of his brigade into a second base area northeast of Tuy Hoa on 6 November. Brig. Gen. David O. Byars' 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, shielded the Tuy Hoa lowlands as the paratroopers swept east and south across the forested hills. One of General Pearson's battalions overran a fortified North Vietnamese camp on 10 November, but GERONIMO netted few other trophies during the next two weeks. When intelligence confirmed that the *95th Regiment* had moved far to the west, General Larsen sent Pearson's brigade to the Central Highlands to reinforce Operation PAUL REVERE IV. Operation GERONIMO ended on 4 December, its meager results partly offset by the knowledge that the hills around Tuy Hoa were presently clear of North Vietnamese units.

#### INTO THE IRON TRIANGLE

After bringing Operation ATTLEBORO to a close in Tay Ninh Province at the end of November 1966, General Seaman waited an additional two months before making another sweep of War Zone C. The delay would enable him to return to the war zone during the height of the dry season when the weather would be favorable and the enemy at his most active. In the meantime, the II Field Force commander decided to target the Iron Triangle, a Viet Cong base area that served as the enemy's principal supply center in central III Corps. Communist rear service troops transported war material from the Fish Hook region of Cambodia to intermediate

stations in War Zone C, and then through other camps on the east side of the Saigon River before arriving at the Iron Triangle, centered thirty kilometers north of Saigon. The Iron Triangle was known to contain the *Military Region 4* headquarters, *COSVN*'s principal command organ in central III Corps, and served as a forward supply base for the *9th PLAF Division* as well as several Viet Cong local force battalions. Disrupting the Iron Triangle would reduce the enemy's ability to conduct offensive operations near Saigon, a key objective for General Westmoreland.

Named for the geometric shape it resembled, the base area occupied some 300 square kilometers of jungle in southern Binh Duong Province, its lower vertex pointing dagger-like toward the capital. Bounded to the southwest by the Saigon River and to the east by Highway 13, the triangle's northern face extended horizontally through the Dien Thanh forest from the village of Ben Suc on the west toward the district capital of Ben Cat to the east. General Seaman's plan, a massive search and destroy operation named CEDAR FALLS, called for six allied maneuver brigades to surround the triangle. They would move in rapidly from multiple directions to prevent the enemy from escaping and then conduct a month-long sweep. U.S. engineer units equipped with powerful bulldozers, called Rome plows, and demolition gear would help clear vehicle paths and landing zones in the dense jungle. South Vietnamese forces would relocate the residents of Ben Suc to more secure areas elsewhere in III Corps. Once depopulated, most of the Iron Triangle would be turned into a free-fire zone, permitting U.S. forces to fire on suspected targets without first obtaining permission from South Vietnamese authorities.

In the first week of January 1967, the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, and the 196th Infantry Brigade established a blocking position on the west side of the Saigon River while elements of the 1st Infantry Division and the 173d Airborne Brigade moved into areas on the periphery of the Iron Triangle, giving those movements separate operational names (in the event the enemy overheard U.S. radio chatter) to disguise their true purpose. Operation CEDAR FALLS began in earnest on 8 January 1967 when the 1st Infantry Division's 1st and 2d Brigades secured the village complex of Ben Suc in the northwestern corner of the triangle, while the 1st Division's 3d Brigade and most of the 173d Airborne Brigade extended the cordon around the northeastern corner of the triangle. The 11th Armored Cavalry completed the encircle-

ment by forming a screen between Ben Cat and the Saigon River, cutting the Iron Triangle in two. By the evening of 8 January, all six brigades were in place.

Allied units encountered only scattered resistance from guerrillas and rear service troops as they moved into the Iron Triangle. A 1st Infantry Division task force secured Ben Suc on the first day, opening the way for South Vietnamese authorities to enter the village and begin to evacuate its residents. Elsewhere in the Iron Triangle U.S. soldiers found hidden supply caches and discovered dozens of camouflaged trapdoors that led to a maze of underground tunnels and rooms. Soldiers who volunteered to explore their depths armed only with a flashlight and a pistol became known as “tunnel rats.” Those subterranean scouts recovered a trove of supplies and documents, including some from the recently abandoned bunker complex of the *Military Region 4* headquarters. Afterward, U.S. engineers collapsed the tunnels with explosives or reported their locations so they could be destroyed by B-52 bombers.

When CEDAR FALLS ended on 26 January, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces had found and destroyed the *Military Region 4* headquarters complex, over 1,000 bunkers, and hundreds of tunnels and surface structures. They had captured large quantities of weapons, equipment, supplies, ammunition, booby-traps, and several thousand tons of rice. The operation netted nearly one-half million pages of documents, signal and cryptologic codes, and information concerning the enemy’s forces and political infrastructure. Allied forces killed or captured more than 1,000 enemy fighters and resettled most of the civilian population to secured villages. Nevertheless, the allies knew that they had discovered only a portion of the tunnel system, and most of the Iron Triangle was still covered in dense jungle, offering the enemy the concealment and the material he needed to build new fortifications. What was more, the forced resettlement program had brought hardship on thousands of civilians, providing fodder for Viet Cong propagandists. Even with the area depopulated, more operations and B-52 strikes would be needed to keep the threat under control.

#### RETURNING TO WAR ZONE C

At the conclusion of Operation CEDAR FALLS in late January 1967, General Seaman gave his forces several weeks to rest and refit before he launched the next and biggest phase

of his dry season campaign. Named after a town near Fort Riley, Kansas, home of the 1st Infantry Division, Operation JUNCTION CITY called for seven U.S. brigades to push into northern Tay Ninh Province almost to the Cambodian border for a two-month search and destroy mission into War Zone C. The II Field Force commander ordered the new commander of the 1st Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. John H. Hay Jr., to spearhead the operation with his 1st and 3d Brigades, joining three brigades attached to General Weyand's 25th Division as well as the 173d Airborne Brigade and elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry. Similar to CEDAR FALLS, JUNCTION CITY called for U.S. units to encircle the target area—the heart of War Zone C as defined to the east by Route 4, to the west by Highway 22, and to the north by Route 246—before sweeping specific areas within it. Seaman hoped to draw the *9th PLAF Division* and other *COSVN* main force units into battle as II Field Force used the good weather to search War Zone C more carefully than it had done in November during ATTLEBORO.

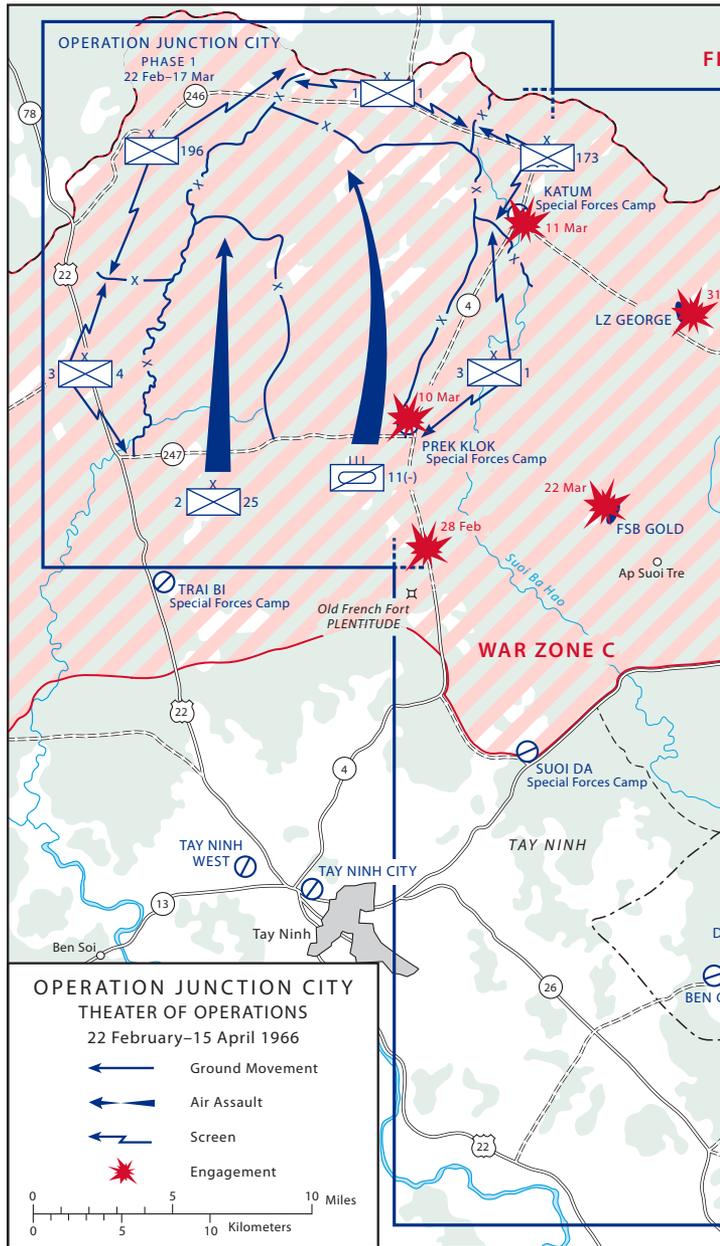
The II Field Force commander was eager to disrupt the Communist infiltration route that dropped south from the Fish Hook through the eastern part of War Zone C before continuing along the winding course of the Saigon River to the Iron Triangle and other Viet Cong base areas on the outskirts of the capital. During the recent Tet holiday truce period from 8 to 12 February that marked the start of the new lunar year, General Westmoreland noted the “dramatic logistical buildup undertaken by the North Vietnamese” across the country, including a massive push of supplies down the Saigon River infiltration route. General Seaman expected Operation JUNCTION CITY to uncover and destroy some of that enemy materiel before it could be used while also interdicting the Saigon River trail during the remaining part of the dry season.

At first light on 22 February, U.S. helicopters air assaulted eight battalions from the 196th Infantry Brigade, the 173d Airborne Brigade, and the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, along Route 246, with some units landing within two kilometers of the Cambodian border. A ninth battalion, from the 173d Airborne Brigade, conducted a parachute drop from U.S. Air Force C-130 transports near the Katum Special Forces camp, the first and only large-scale airborne operation of the war. Moving up Highway 22, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, screened

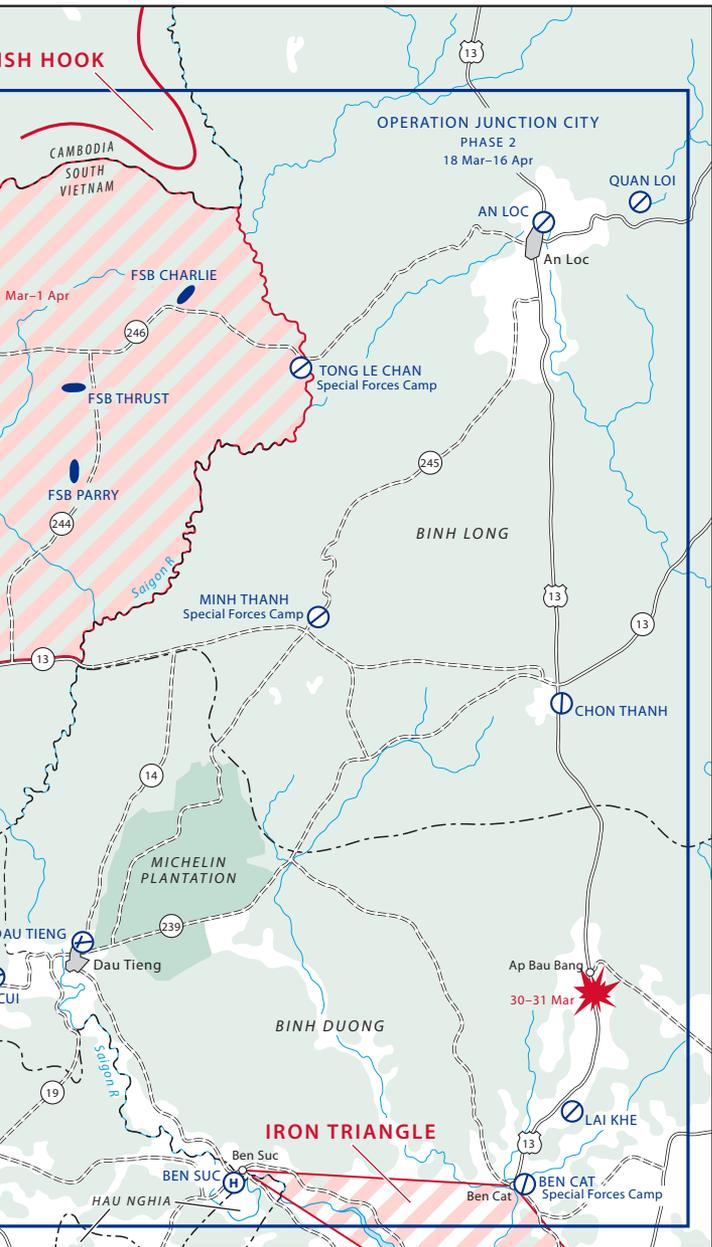
the western side of War Zone C, while the 3d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, sealed Route 4 along its eastern side, thus creating a U-shaped enclosure measuring about twenty kilometers on each face. As those blocking elements moved into position, elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry and the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, attacked from south to north into the heavily forested heart of War Zone C (*Map 6*).

Over the next five days, the advancing soldiers discovered a network of small camps and some rear service troops, but no main force units or COSVN itself. General Thanh had withdrawn his headquarters and three North Vietnamese regiments into the Fish Hook region of Cambodia; rather than confront the allied sweep head-on, the COSVN commander decided to attack the supply lines that supported the 1st and 25th Divisions in northwestern III Corps. Thanh ordered his regiments in the Fish Hook to swing south to cut Route 4 on the eastern side of Operation JUNCTION CITY. He also ordered a 9th Division regiment in War Zone D, some sixty kilometers to the east of War Zone C, to cut Highway 13 that supported the 1st Division north of Saigon.

COSVN's counterattack began on 28 February when a battalion from the 101st Regiment ambushed a company from the 3d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, some fifteen kilometers north of the Suoi Da Special Forces camp. The engagement on Route 4 cost the Americans 25 killed and 28 wounded, while the enemy left behind 167 dead. The attack combined with the paltry results he was getting inside the Operation JUNCTION CITY horseshoe convinced Seaman to reorient his units. On 1 March, he moved the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, and the 173d Airborne Brigade from their blocking positions on Route 246 to the eastern side of JUNCTION CITY. General Hay's 3d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, remained in place along Route 4, operating from three main firebases—the Special Forces camps at Suoi Da, Prek Klok, and Katum—to guard the main U.S. supply route in eastern War Zone C. On the opposite side of the dissolving horseshoe, Seaman ordered Weyand to search the area west of Highway 22 with elements of his 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and to return the 196th Brigade and the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, to their bases at Tay Ninh City and Cu Chi, respectively. Finally, he instructed the 11th Armored Cavalry to make a counterclockwise sweep along the



Map 6





An Air Force C-130 drops supplies to ground forces during Operation JUNCTION CITY.

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boundary of Operation JUNCTION CITY to secure the roads that ringed War Zone C.

The shift brought an increase in fighting on the eastern side of War Zone C. On 3 March a battalion from the *70th Guard Regiment* attacked a company from the 173d Airborne Brigade near Katum, and on 10 March the *272d Regiment* launched a savage assault on a 1st Infantry Division firebase near the Prek Klok Special Forces camp. The two engagements cost the enemy around 250 killed for a loss of 23 American lives. On 11 March, an element of the *101st Regiment* attacked the 173d Airborne Brigade east of Prek Klok, resulting in a three-day skirmish that reduced the enemy's force by fifty men. Those attacks were probably designed to buy time for Viet Cong rear service troops to move out of the area with everything they could carry. U.S. soldiers found a number of recently abandoned camps as they searched the forests east of Route 4, including one that had been the *National Liberation Front's* radio broadcast site.

On 18 March, General Seaman initiated phase two of Operation JUNCTION CITY by establishing a new horseshoe to the

east of the original zone. Route 4 became the western side of the new horseshoe, stretching thirty kilometers from Suoi Da to Katum. The northern face extended forty kilometers east from Katum to An Loc via Route 246. Highway 13 south of An Loc formed the eastern side of Operation JUNCTION CITY II. The new commander of the 25th Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. John C. F. Tillson, placed the 196th Brigade in a blocking position on Route 4 and ordered the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, to search the western side of JUNCTION CITY II. General Hay put his 1st and 2d Brigades on Route 246, and sent engineers to build a new Special Forces camp, Tong Le Chon, at the halfway point to monitor the upper reaches of the Saigon River infiltration corridor in eastern War Zone C. General Hay stationed the newly arrived 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, along Highway 13, and sent the 173d Airborne Brigade into the heart of the new horseshoe. Hay retained one squadron from the 11th Armored Cavalry, the other two having gone back to eastern III Corps, giving him and General Tillson a total of twenty-four maneuver battalions for this second phase of the operation.

General Thanh reacted fiercely to the presence of so many U.S. combat units athwart his main supply channel into III Corps. On the night of 20–21 March, the *273d Regiment, 9th Division*, and guerrillas attacked a U.S. night position on Highway 13, eight kilometers north of Lai Khe, manned by Troop A of the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry, and a battery of 105-mm. howitzers. The assault failed, costing the enemy at least 227 soldiers killed and putting the *273d Regiment* out of action. U.S. losses were three killed and sixty-three wounded, with two armored personnel carriers destroyed and five tanks and eleven armored personnel carriers damaged. The next evening on the other side of the JUNCTION CITY II zone, two battalions from the *272d Regiment* assaulted Firebase GOLD, located near Soui Tre hamlet about fifteen kilometers northeast of the Suoi Da Special Forces camp, and manned by 450 troops from the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. Advancing waves of Viet Cong soldiers penetrated the southwest perimeter about 0800, but artillerymen stopped their advance with a blast of beehive rounds. The situation became critical fifteen minutes later when the enemy penetrated the northeast sector, but a flight of U.S. fighter-bombers and a relief force of tanks and infantry arrived just in time to disrupt the attack. The shattered *272d Regiment* beat a hasty retreat, leaving behind 647 dead, as well as many weapons and large quantities of

ammunition. Westmoreland later described the battle at Firebase GOLD as “one of the most successful single actions of the year.”

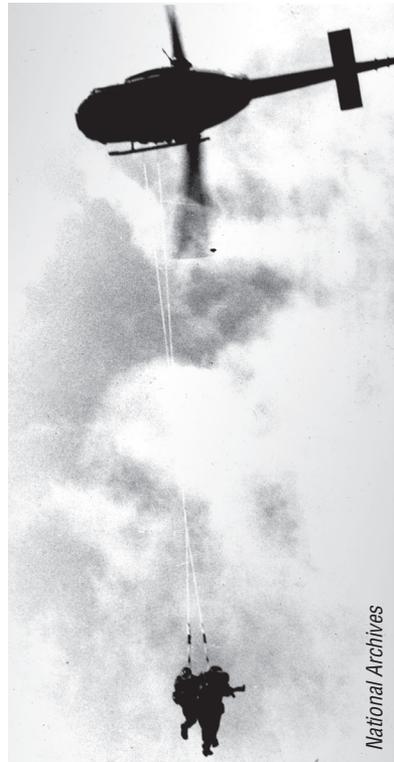
With two regiments knocked out of action for no appreciable gain, General Thanh decided to bide his time before committing his remaining forces. The COSVN commander allowed General Hay’s 1st and 2d Brigades of the 1st Infantry Division to move into position on Route 246 virtually unopposed and to begin building a string of firebases while U.S. engineers began work on the Tong Le Chon Special Forces camp, located approximately halfway between Katum and An Loc.

On 24 March 1967 General Seaman passed the II Field Force baton to Lt. Gen. Bruce Palmer, who in turn notified Generals Hay and Tillson to begin winding down Operation JUNCTION CITY II. The six-brigade sweep through War Zone C had yet to produce satisfying results. U.S. troops had located numerous camps, but most were empty. Booby traps, mines, and sniper fire had produced a steady trickle of casualties, and the logistical burden of supporting so many brigades in the remote wilderness of War Zone C was putting a strain on II Field Force’s aviation, vehicle, and maintenance capacities. General Palmer was about to start pulling units out of the sector when his intelligence learned that one or more COSVN regiments were moving toward the U.S. positions on Route 246. Suddenly the fight was back on.

The enemy made his first move on the afternoon of 31 March when elements

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A reconnaissance team extracted by helicopter.



National Archives



Col. James A. "Alex" Grimsley (left), 2d Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, and Lt. Col. Alexander Haig (right), 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, confer during Operation JUNCTION CITY II.

of COSVN's security unit, the *70th Guard Regiment*, attacked a patrol from Lt. Col. Alexander Haig's 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, which was operating from Landing Zone GEORGE approximately ten kilometers southeast of Katum. Believing that a larger enemy attack was imminent, Colonel Haig pulled his men back to GEORGE, which they manned with another infantry battalion from the 1st Infantry Division.

His hunch proved to be correct. Early on 1 April, the fresh *271st Regiment* and the *70th Guard Regiment* attacked Landing Zone GEORGE while mortars bombarded the other 1st Division firebases along Route 246. The men at GEORGE were well dug-in, having constructed bunkers along the perimeter that featured full overhead cover and firing slits to the front and oblique angles, but the Viet Cong pressed onward through the murderous cross fire. The enemy penetrated the northwestern perimeter to a depth of seventy-five meters before the weight of U.S. air strikes, automatic weapons fire, and helicopter gunships finally proved too much. The attackers retreated, leaving behind some 600 dead. U.S. casualties numbered 17 killed and 102 wounded. The fight for

GEORGE wrecked Thanh's last remaining main force unit in the area. Thereafter, the enemy kept his distance, surrendering for the moment control of War Zone C.

General Palmer kept his forces in the region for another two weeks before ending JUNCTION CITY II on 15 April. All told, the two-month operation had destroyed 5,000 enemy structures, captured more than 800 tons of food and supplies and a half-million pages of documents, and killed over 2,700 enemy soldiers. It had dealt the *9th Division* a serious beating and disrupted COSVN's main supply channel into III Corps, but the arrival of the wet season meant that U.S. forces would not be able to operate in War Zone C for another six months, giving the enemy time to recover from his wounds. II Field Force would need to return in even greater strength and for a longer period of time next year in order to make a decisive impact in III Corps.

Despite the failure to achieve all the intended goals, the operations in War Zones C and D helped secure III Corps' more populated areas by keeping the enemy's major combat units otherwise occupied. Of particular concern for the allies was III Corps' National Priority Area—the city of Saigon, Gia Dinh Province, which enveloped the capital, and neighboring portions of Binh Duong, Hau Nghia, Long An, Phuoc Tuy, and Bien Hoa Provinces. This region contained nearly 3 million people and was the heart of South Vietnam's political, military, and economic apparatus. The allies could not win the war without maintaining a firm hold over this area. Thus, while the 1st and 25th Divisions pressed against the enemy's fortified bases to the north and west, other allied elements worked in the rear to improve the security of the National Priority Area.

Most of the burden for protecting the National Priority Area fell on the South Vietnamese 5th, 18th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, assisted by Regional and Popular Forces and various police formations. When the 11th Armored Cavalry joined II Field Force in October 1966, Seaman stationed the unit in Bien Hoa Province to the east of Saigon because the relatively dry and flat land offered suitable conditions for its armored vehicles. The area west and south of the capital was much wetter, inundated for part of the year and crisscrossed with rivers and canals. The II Field Force commander relied on his 25th Infantry Division based at Cu Chi, Hau Nghia Province, to assist South Vietnamese forces in that area as circumstances permitted, but there were not enough U.S. troops to spare for a sustained effort.

To correct this deficiency, Westmoreland obtained the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light) in late December 1966, stationing the unit at Long Binh and ordering it to work with South Vietnamese forces in Gia Dinh Province. Operation FAIRFAX, which began in late December, paired U.S. and South Vietnamese troops at the battalion and company level throughout Gia Dinh. As the MACV commander described the concept to his superiors, FAIRFAX was designed to “root out the VC infrastructure and pave the way for Revolutionary Development” in the critical districts surrounding Saigon so the enemy could no longer get within striking range of the capital and other critical facilities like Tan Son Nhut Air Base and Long Binh Post by relying on the local population for food, shelter, and information. Westmoreland looked forward to getting more help in January 1967 when the 9th Infantry Division began to arrive from the United States. He planned to place that division’s three brigades along Saigon’s eastern and southern flanks, thereby completing the perimeter of U.S. divisions around the capital and its environs.

Eager to get more results from South Vietnam’s pacification program, managed by the Ministry of Revolutionary Development with only minimal assistance from MACV, and better performance out of the South Vietnamese Army, President Johnson traveled to the island of Guam on 20–21 March 1967 to speak with South Vietnam’s Chief of State General Nguyen Van Thieu and Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky. The president brought with him the experienced diplomat Ellsworth Bunker, who was slated to replace Ambassador Lodge in May, and his national security adviser, Robert Komer, who would soon take charge of a new MACV directorate called the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) that would supervise all U.S. efforts related to the pacification program. The formation of CORDS would end years of fragmented control and unify U.S. support of pacification under MACV’s umbrella, with Komer serving as Westmoreland’s deputy for revolutionary development.

To assist Westmoreland, President Johnson announced in April 1967 that General Creighton W. Abrams, the Army vice chief of staff, would become Westmoreland’s deputy at MACV. General Abrams would also play an active role in training and modernizing the South Vietnamese Army as well as the Regional and Popular Forces units that provided the first line of defense in many rural areas. With Komer working on paci-

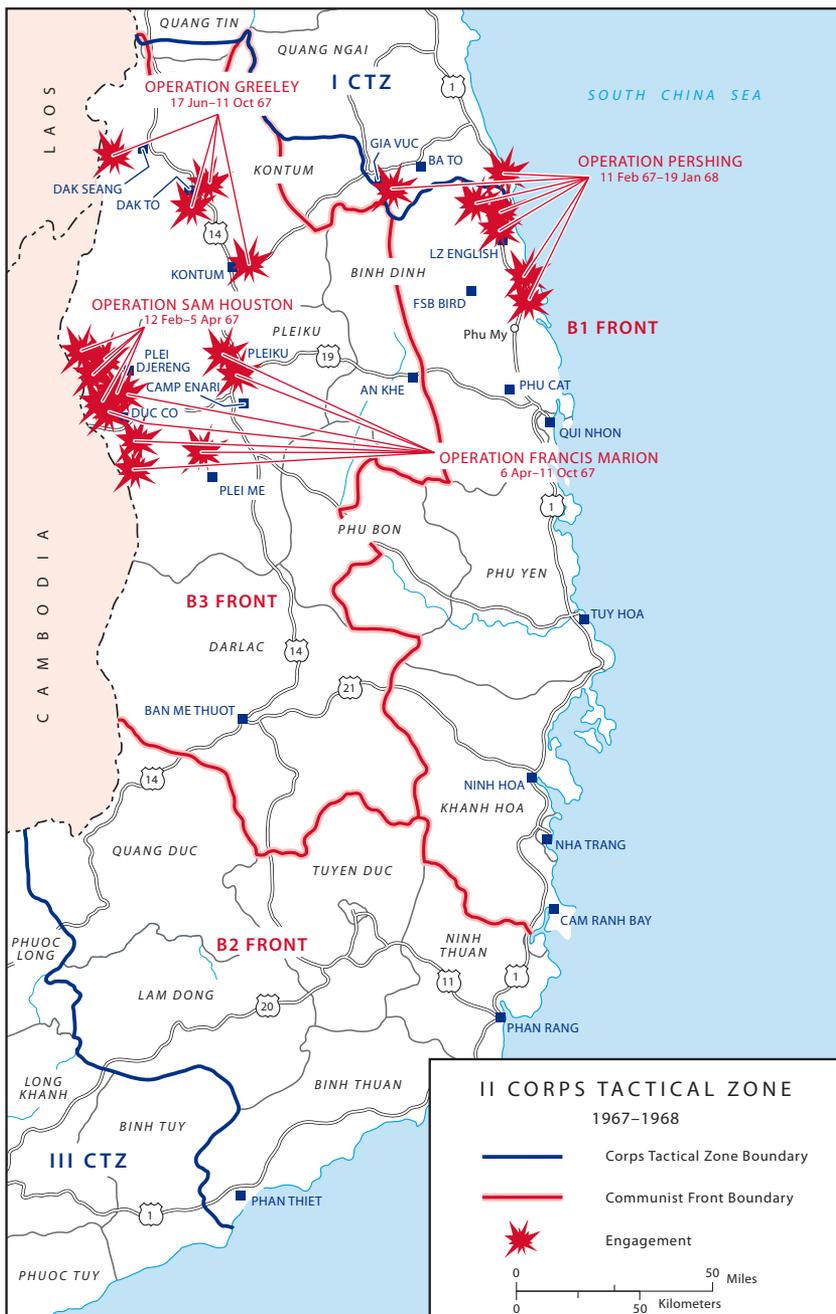
fication and Bunker handling political affairs, particularly South Vietnam's transition from a state ruled by a military committee to a democratic nation governed by elected officials and a written constitution, General Westmoreland would now be able to focus more of his attention on the military challenges of defeating the Communists.

#### RENEWED FIGHTING IN II CORPS

On 3 January 1967, Maj. Gen. William R. Peers took command of the 4th Infantry Division, replacing General Collins as the principal U.S. commander in the western highlands. Like his predecessor, Peers believed it was necessary to engage the enemy as soon as he crossed the border so the *B3 Front* would burn through supplies and manpower that otherwise might reach Communist units on the populated central coast. When allied intelligence learned that the enemy had returned to the Plei Trap Valley early that February, two months after the conclusion of Operation PAUL REVERE IV, Peers obtained permission from General Larsen to mount another sweep through the southwestern corner of Pleiku Province.

The 4th Division commander gave the leading role of the new mission, Operation SAM HOUSTON, to Col. James B. Adamson and his 2d Brigade. On 12 February, Colonel Adamson sent two infantry battalions into the Plei Trap Valley. The *32d* and *66th PAVN Regiments* contested the incursion with short but savage company- and battalion-sized attacks, withdrawing each time before U.S. forces had an opportunity to fix the enemy in place. By 15 February, U.S. losses had grown to 55 killed and 74 wounded, while Adamson's 2d Brigade counted about 300 enemy dead (*Map 7*).

Seeing that the North Vietnamese had adjusted their tactics, Peers modified his own. The 4th Infantry Division commander began using B-52 strikes as his primary offensive weapon, hitting areas in the valley that aerial observation, radio intercepts, and long-range reconnaissance patrols indicated might contain enemy forces. To assess the results of the bombing and to cover a wider search area, Peers got permission from General Larsen to reinforce SAM HOUSTON with two battalions from the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, commanded by Col. Charles A. Jackson. Even with those reinforcements, the operation produced meager results. General Peers' decision to operate



Map 7

near the border almost backfired on 27 February when a helicopter mistakenly landed a scout team in Cambodia. The team got into a skirmish but the helicopter extracted it without any loss once the error had been recognized. Fortunately for Peers, the matter blew over without sparking a political crisis. Contact in the Plei Trap Valley remained sporadic until 12 March when U.S. troops discovered several battalions from the *88th PAVN Regiment* in a bunker complex, sparking a fierce battle that cost the Americans fourteen killed and forty-six wounded. After losing an estimated 200 dead, the enemy escaped across the Cambodian border.

General Peers expanded the Operation SAM HOUSTON sector on 16 March when Montagnard trail watchers and U.S. long-range reconnaissance patrols reported North Vietnamese troops in the Plei Doc Valley, fifteen kilometers south of the Plei Trap Valley. Colonel Jackson sent two battalions from his 2d Brigade to investigate. Disaster struck late on 21 March when a battalion from the *95B Regiment* overran a long-range reconnaissance patrol in the Plei Doc Valley. Two U.S. infantry companies rushed to the area but arrived too late. The North Vietnamese attacked the relief force and then withdrew into Cambodia, leaving behind 136 of its dead. U.S. losses came to twenty-seven killed and forty-eight wounded. In addition, Communist forces in the Plei Trap Valley ambushed a company from Colonel Adamson's 1st Brigade, killing twenty-two Americans and wounding fifty-three, for minimal losses of their own.

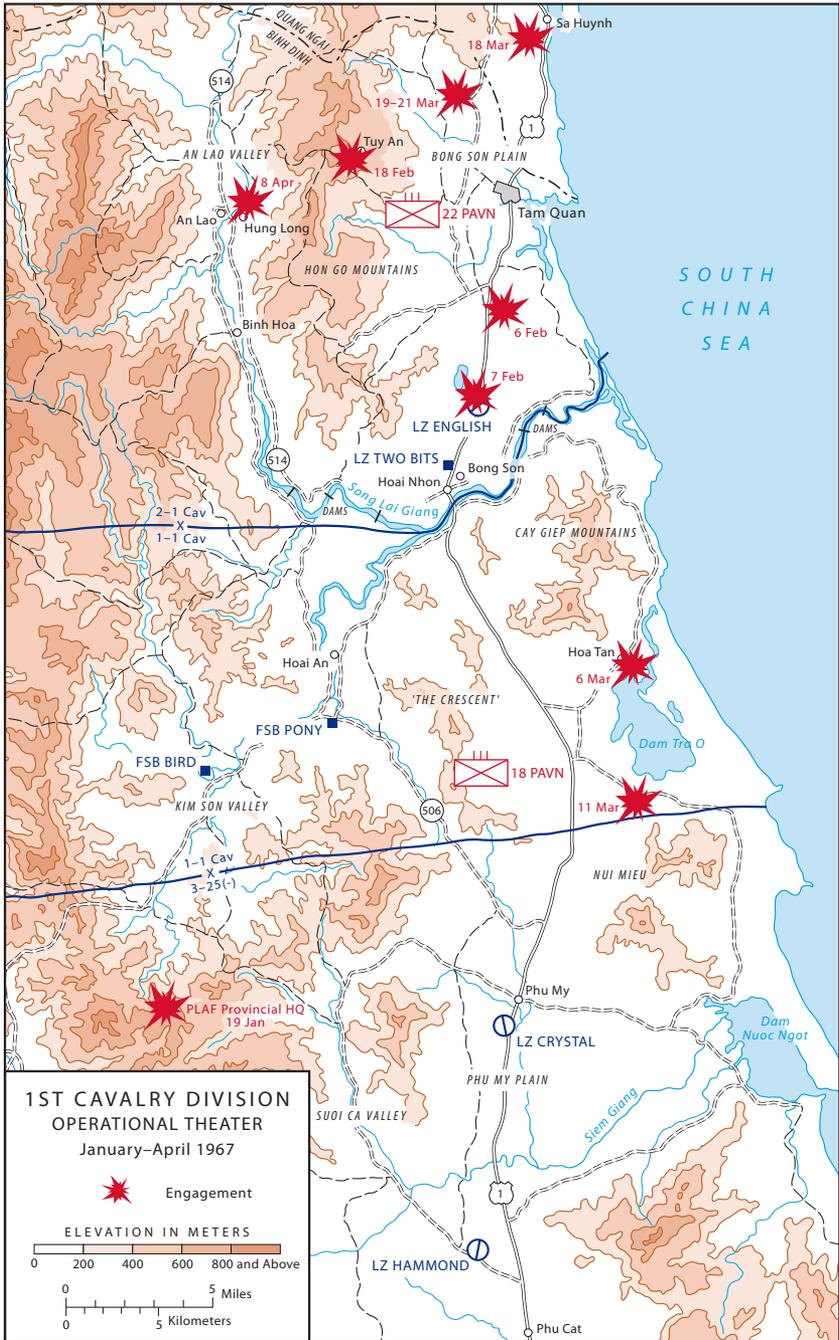
With the monsoon season approaching, General Peers began winding down Operation SAM HOUSTON. By 5 April all of his forces had left the Plei Trap and Plei Doc Valleys. Like its predecessor PAUL REVERE IV, SAM HOUSTON had prevented the *B3 Front* from building a base in southwestern Pleiku Province that could be used to attack Pleiku City or the Special Forces camps that screened the border. The operation also tied down at least three enemy regiments during the height of the dry season, stopping them from hitting more vulnerable targets elsewhere. On the other hand, SAM HOUSTON had cost the 4th Infantry Division over 200 more killed and wounded in ten fewer days than PAUL REVERE IV, with enemy losses of killed and captured nearly 200 fewer. The enemy was adapting his tactics to mitigate the effects of U.S. firepower, and taking full advantage of the Cambodian safe zone to avoid battle when he

wished. On the balance, however, General Peers believed that maintaining a strong forward defense was worth the effort, and resolved to fight along the border whenever necessary.

#### BINH DINH PROVINCE

The lull that descended over the western highlands at the beginning of 1967 permitted General Larsen to shift Colonel Shanahan's 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, down to the coastal lowlands of Binh Dinh Province to assist General Norton's 1st Cavalry Division with a new operation called PERSHING. Norton's airmobile troopers had spent the last four months of 1966 securing the coastal lowlands and interior valleys of Phu My district with Operations THAYER I and II. Now the I Field Force commander wanted to push north onto the Bong Son Plain, a rich agrarian flatland that extended north twenty-five kilometers from the Lai Giang River to the hills at the southern edge of Quang Ngai Province, and west roughly ten kilometers from the South China Sea to the Hon Go Mountains. The Viet Cong controlled most of the 100,000 farmers and fishermen who lived on the Bong Son Plain, as well as the 6,000 inhabitants of the An Lao Valley, which ran parallel to the Bong Son Plain on the western side of the Hon Go Mountains. General Norton's mission was to destroy or drive away elements of the *3d PAVN Division* that camped in the coastal hills overlooking the plain so South Vietnamese forces could begin pacifying the hamlets on the Bong Son Plain and relocating the civilians of the An Lao Valley to more secure locations. Once the rainy season ended in April or May, the 1st Cavalry Division commander hoped to extend Operation PERSHING's reach into the hills of southern Quang Ngai Province so he could disrupt the Viet Cong bases that supported the *3d PAVN Division* on the north-central coast (*Map 8*).

In early January, Shanahan's brigade settled into southern Phu My District so General Norton could consolidate his 1st and 2d Brigades farther north to prepare for PERSHING. To support operations on the Bong Son Plain, Norton began accumulating supplies at Landing Zone ENGLISH, five kilometers north of the Lai Giang River, located on Highway 1 next to the camp of the South Vietnamese 40th Regiment, 22d Infantry Division. Washed-out roads and poor flying weather slowed



Map 8



Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) await the second wave of combat helicopters during Operation PERSHING.

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the buildup at ENGLISH, delaying the start of the operation until the second week of February.

Norton's soldiers caught only sporadic glimpses of the enemy during the initial stage of Operation PERSHING. The sudden appearance of four cavalry battalions and hundreds of helicopters on the southern Bong Son Plain convinced the *22d PAVN* and *2d PLAF Regiments* to head north to the comparative safety of Quang Ngai Province. The 1st Cavalry Division had driven the *3d PAVN Division* out of the resource-rich district for the first time in the war, allowing the South Vietnamese to begin extending government control to a greater portion of the Bong Son Plain.

While the *3d Division's* remaining unit, the *18th PAVN Regiment*, continued to cling to its traditional sector in Phu My and Phu Cat Districts in central Binh Dinh Province on 6 March, helicopter scouts from the 1st Cavalry Division discovered a battalion from the regiment concealed in a hamlet near the Tra O Marsh, sixteen kilometers southeast of Landing Zone ENGLISH. Colonel Shanahan swept the area with elements from his 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, killing eighty-two North Vietnamese soldiers before the enemy vanished into the



“Skytroopers” of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) dismount on a beach on the South China Sea during Operation PERSHING.

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costal hills. Colonel Casey’s 2d Brigade joined the hunt around Tra O Marsh, but on 11 March Communist troops ambushed a company from the 1st Cavalry Division during a helicopter insertion, killing nineteen Americans and wounding twenty-five for an apparent loss of only ten men. As the twin fights demonstrated, the airmobile prowess of the 1st Cavalry Division made it easier to find enemy units, but did not guarantee that the fight would always be on American terms.

The focus of Operation PERSHING shifted north again on 18 March when the sapper battalion from the *3d PAVN Division* attacked a South Vietnamese outpost at the small port of Sa Huynh on the Quang Ngai-Binh Dinh border. General Norton ordered Smith to scour the northern Bong Son Plain with his 1st Brigade. On the evening of 19 March, a U.S. infantry company found the *22d Regiment* in the hamlet of Truong Son, eighteen kilometers north of Landing Zone ENGLISH. Colonel Smith brought in additional units to surround the area while General Norton deployed most of Colonel Casey’s 2d Brigade to join the chase. Over the next three days U.S. units killed 120 North Vietnamese



An artilleryman during Operation PERSHING

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soldiers while losing 34 themselves. The bulk of the *22d Regiment* managed to escape into southern Quang Ngai Province. Norton resolved to pursue the battered *3d PAVN Division* in April when drier weather would bring better flying conditions.

Though the results were less than he had hoped, General Larsen still looked favorably on the I Field Force wet season campaign for the central coast. In Binh Dinh Province, Operations THAYER and PERSHING had inflicted heavy losses on the *3d PAVN Division* and driven it from the populated lowlands to the barren coastal hills where food and clean water were scarce. The withdrawal left the hamlet-based guerrillas and political cadre more vulnerable to allied sweeps. Indeed, the Hamlet Evaluation System reports submitted by the U.S. advisory detachment in Binh Dinh indicated that the percentage of the population living under government control had increased from 22 percent to 68 percent between October 1966 and April 1967. Unfortunately, a large part of that increase had come through the forced or voluntary displacement of civilians. By the spring of 1967, nearly 20 percent of Binh Dinh's population, some 140,000 people, had moved from enemy-controlled villages to squalid refugee camps

that the government had erected on the outskirts of regional towns, straining the ability of provincial administrators to care for their needs.

Farther down the coast in II Corps, the allies had also made important gains. In Phu Yen Province, the two South Korean infantry divisions had relieved the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, in the Tuy Hoa Basin, permitting Larsen to move it into the western highlands on a permanent basis. South Korean forces had also expanded their sector in Ninh Thuan Province, allowing Westmoreland to move the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, from the Phan Rang Basin to southern I Corps in late April. To the south in Binh Thuan Province, Task Force BYRD had helped South Vietnamese forces establish a viable pacification program in the rice-growing basin around the provincial capital of Phan Thiet.

Shielded by the half-dozen U.S. and South Korean brigades on the central coast, MACV's logistical support system continued to grow. The U.S. Army Support Command at Cam Ranh Bay served as the principal supply center for all of the allied forces in southern II Corps, while the 54th General Support Group provided a smaller hub at Nha Trang in Khanh Hoa Province. Based at Cam Ranh Bay, the 35th Engineer Group (Construction) built all of the roads, structures, airfields, storage areas, and port facilities required by I Field Force in southern II Corps. The 45th Engineer Group (Construction) performed a similar role in northern II Corps from Tuy Hoa and Qui Nhon. The 16th Military Police Group worked with the logistical units in II Corps, performing a range of tasks including convoy protection, installation security, traffic control, and theft prevention. Operating from mountain peaks across II Corps, units from the 21st Signal Group helped coordinate the increasingly complex activities of I Field Force.

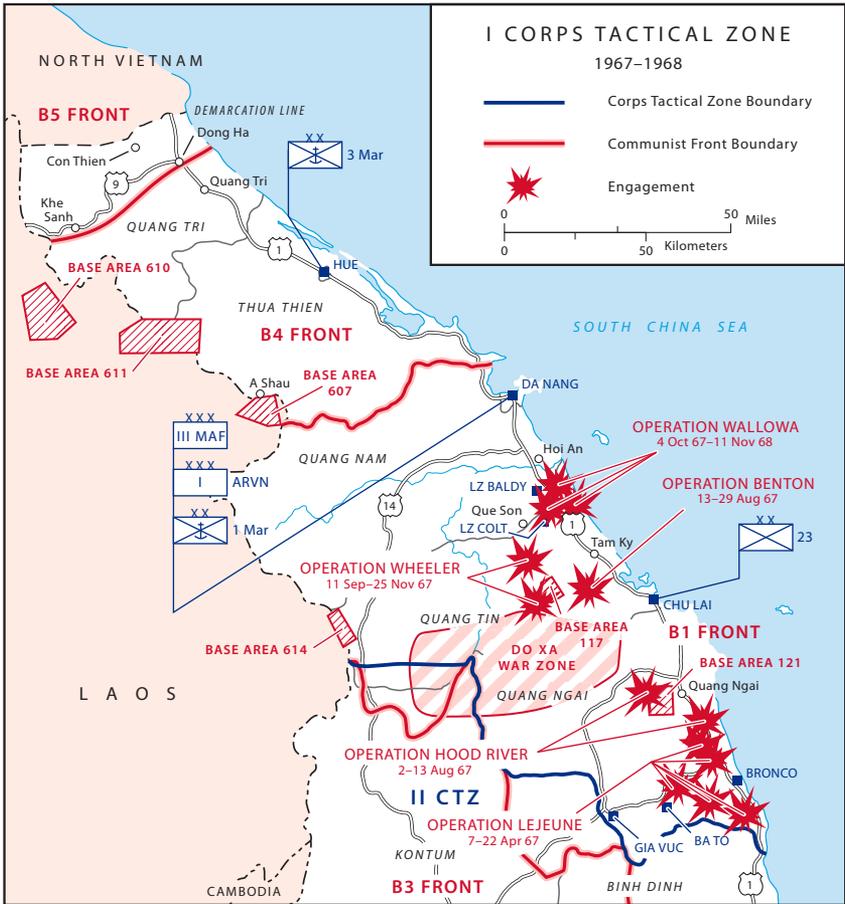
#### TASK FORCE OREGON

By early 1967 it was clear to General Westmoreland that III Marine Amphibious Force needed additional combat power to hold the line in I Corps. MACV intelligence noted a steady buildup of North Vietnamese units, with eight regiments now hovering just above the Demilitarized Zone and two more to the west in Laos. The enemy had begun bombarding U.S. Marine outposts in northern Quang Tri Province with 122-mm. rockets and 130-mm. guns, a significant escalation of

firepower compared to the 82-mm. mortars the Communists had used in the past. North Vietnamese logisticians had also turned the A Shau Valley in western Thua Thien Province into a major depot, shortening the time and effort it took to get supplies to troops in the coastal lowlands of I Corps. Consequently, Westmoreland decided to compose a provisional Army formation using brigades borrowed from I and II Field Force to defend southern I Corps, allowing the commander of III Marine Amphibious Force, Lt. Gen. Lewis W. Walt, to concentrate his 1st and 3d Marine Divisions exclusively in the northern part of I Corps (*Map 9*).

Southern I Corps—the lower portion of Quang Nam Province as well as Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces—had been a bastion of Communist support going back to the Indochina War. A majority of the rural population had lived under de facto Communist control for almost two decades. Government forces stayed close to the regional towns and Highway 1, the main north-south road through the narrow coastal lowlands. The interior mountains that covered some 80 percent of southern I Corps contained a sprinkling of Montagnard communities and six Special Forces camps. A Communist trail network moved troops and supplies through the mountains from Base Area 614 in Laos through the Do Xa War Zone in south-central Quang Ngai Province, a waypoint that contained the *Military Region 5* headquarters, and then to forward bases in the coastal hills of southern I Corps. Both the *2d* and *3d PAVN Divisions* as well as a dozen Viet Cong infantry battalions relied on this network for the supplies and equipment they needed to fight, except food which they procured locally.

In the autumn of 1966, MACV developed a plan to disrupt the enemy camp system in I Corps with a series of airmobile raids spearheaded by the 1st Cavalry Division. Dubbed Operation YORK, the plan depended on the allies achieving enough stability in II Corps that Westmoreland could detach the 1st Cavalry Division from I Field Force without jeopardizing the region. Beginning with the Do Xa War Zone in Quang Ngai Province, the 1st Cavalry Division would leapfrog up the chain of enemy bases that dotted the interior mountains of I Corps, using its fleet of helicopters to reach those remote areas which III Marine Amphibious Force, overextended as it was, had not been able to strike.



Map 9

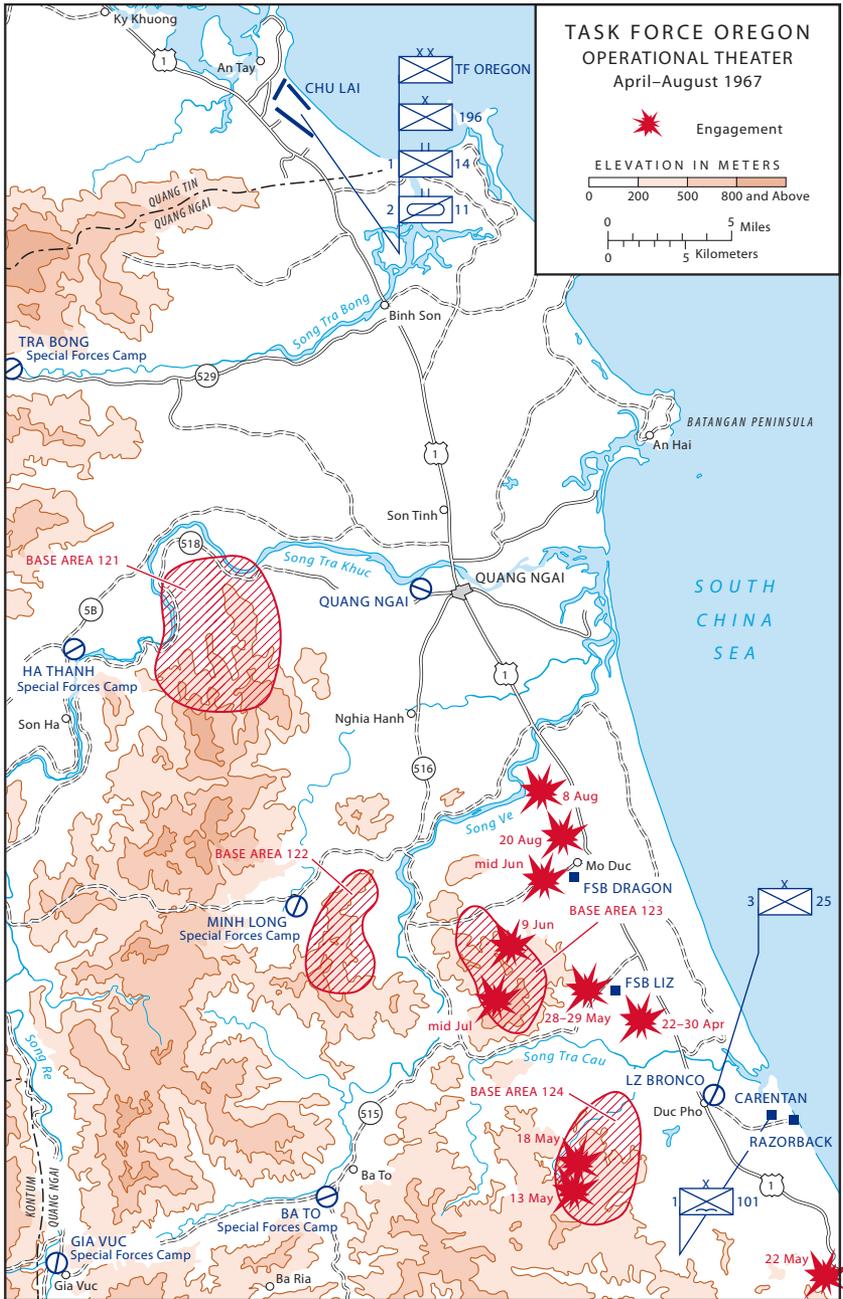
In the spring of 1967, however, the 1st Cavalry Division was still needed in Binh Dinh Province, so Westmoreland authorized the formation of a provisional force to hold the line until Operation YORK could be organized and logistical upgrades put in place to support an airmobile division in I Corps. On 6 April, the MACV commander formed Task Force OREGON, putting it under the command of his chief of staff, Maj. Gen. William B. Rosson, and naming it after Rosson's home state. Westmoreland assigned three brigades to the force: the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, then on the southern coast of II Corps; the 3d Brigade,

25th Infantry Division, presently serving with the 1st Cavalry Division in Binh Dinh Province; and the 196th Infantry Brigade, currently operating with the 25th Infantry Division in Tay Ninh Province. He directed those brigades to deploy to southern I Corps by 1 May, with Shanahan's 3d Brigade going to Duc Pho on the southeastern coast of Quang Ngai Province, and the other two brigades to Chu Lai, an air base complex on the southern coast of Quang Tin Province where Rosson would establish his headquarters. Task Force OREGON would receive its logistical support from III Marine Amphibious Force, most of it delivered via Highway 1 from the port of Da Nang. Rosson reported to General Walt, but the Marine commander gave his Army subordinate a wide degree of flexibility in operational matters (*Map 10*).

The air base at Chu Lai offered all of the facilities needed by Brig. Gen. Richard T. Knowles and the 196th Infantry Brigade when they arrived from III Corps in mid-April. In addition to his three infantry battalions, Knowles also took control over a battalion from Shanahan's 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, and a squadron from the 11th Armored Cavalry.

Unlike Chu Lai, the small outpost at Duc Pho needed significant upgrades to accommodate a full brigade. Westmoreland ordered the new commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, Maj. Gen. John J. Tolson, to send a task force to Duc Pho in early April to pave the way for Colonel Shanahan's 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. On 7 April Tolson commenced Operation LEJEUNE, sending two cavalry battalions and his 2d Brigade headquarters to relieve the Marine units at Duc Pho, which then headed north to Quang Nam Province. Meanwhile, the 8th Engineer Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division, and the 39th Engineer Battalion (Combat) from I Field Force turned the airfield into an all-weather runway capable of handling C-130 transport aircraft, and established an over-the-beach logistical facility named RAZORBACK on the coast to the east. The 1st Cavalry Division completed its work in the second half of April, returning to Binh Dinh Province and making way for Colonel Shanahan's 3d Brigade to move into its new base camp at Duc Pho, Landing Zone BRONCO.

As the first two brigades of Task Force OREGON settled into their new homes, General Rosson received intelligence that the *22d PAVN Regiment* and the headquarters of the *3d PAVN Division* had moved from Binh Dinh Province into the hills of southern Quang Ngai Province to link up with the division's *2d*



Map 10



Members of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) landing on a hilltop during Operation LEJEUNE in 1967.

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*PLAF Regiment.* Rosson also learned that the *1st PLAF Regiment* of the *2d PAVN Division* had shifted south from Quang Tin Province into Quang Ngai Province. This unusual concentration raised the possibility that the enemy intended to overrun either the Ba To Special Forces camp, located in the Song Ve Valley twenty-five kilometers west of Duc Pho, or the Minh Long Special Forces camp twenty-two kilometers to its north. The hills that surrounded those camps contained a network of enemy installations that collectively served as the main depot and distribution point for North Vietnamese supplies coming from Base Area 614 in Laos. If the Communists overran one or both Special Forces camps, the allies would find it much harder to monitor those hills and therefore anticipate enemy offensives in southern Quang Ngai Province.

At General Rosson's request, General Westmoreland agreed to move the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, from southern II Corps to Duc Pho immediately, giving Task Force OREGON its third brigade in early May rather than at the end of the month. As a temporary expedient, Westmoreland also shifted the I

Field Force boundary north to include Quang Ngai Province in the event that Task Force OREGON needed reinforcements from Tolson's 1st Cavalry Division.

Over the next few weeks, the pair of infantry battalions from the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, operating under Colonel Shanahan's control saw the most action, skirmishing in the lowlands around Duc Pho and LIZ, a firebase that Shanahan established ten kilometers northwest of BRONCO to extend the range of his artillery coverage. His troops mostly encountered Viet Cong local force units, but on 22 May the 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, trapped a battalion from the *22d PAVN Regiment* in a hamlet southeast of BRONCO. The Americans killed at least seventy North Vietnamese troops, putting that enemy battalion out of action for the next six months. On 29 May, Shanahan's brigade cornered another enemy battalion, this one from the *1st PLAF Regiment*, just west of Firebase LIZ, killing eighty-one Viet Cong soldiers and preempting an attack on the post.

As the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, swept the lowlands, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, went hunting for the North Vietnamese units that threatened the Ba To and Minh Long Special Forces camps. After the airborne brigade had landed at RAZORBACK beach in early May, its commander, Brig. Gen. Salve H. Matheson, had established a camp near Duc Pho known as CARENTAN. He had then sent two of his battalions into the forested hills overlooking the Ve and Tra Cau River Valleys, holding his third in reserve. His paratroopers had clashed with company-sized enemy units throughout May and into June, killing over 400 Communists and razing several Viet Cong camps. When Colonel Matheson received intelligence that the enemy planned to overrun the Mo Duc district headquarters, ten kilometers north of LIZ, he established a new firebase just west of town called DRAGON. Thwarted, the enemy shifted his focus to the south, hitting BRONCO on 23 June with a mortar barrage that killed three Americans and wounded fifty-one more.

Despite the attack on its main camp, the 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, now under the command of Col. George E. Wear, continued to get the best of the enemy in Duc Pho District. Colonel Wear's men became increasingly proficient at finding the concealed fighting pits and tunnels where Viet Cong soldiers hid themselves, and more savvy about avoiding the booby traps

that seemed to be everywhere. As June passed into July, contact dwindled in the hills and lowlands of southern Quang Ngai Province. South Vietnamese forces took advantage of the better security situation to relocate 7,000 civilians from the Ve and Tra Cau River Valleys to refugee camps on the coast, denying the enemy the food and labor formerly provided by those farmers.

The 196th Infantry Brigade and the squadron from the 11th Armored Cavalry saw relatively little action around Chu Lai in May and June. On 1 June, the command of Task Force OREGON passed from General Rosson to Maj. Gen. Richard Knowles, the former commander of the 196th Brigade who now received his second star. Toward the end of July, Knowles received intelligence that the *2d PAVN Division* was preparing to attack Quang Ngai City with its *1st PLAF* and *21st PAVN Regiments* before the government held elections to choose delegates for the National Assembly, an important step on South Vietnam's path toward becoming a constitutional democracy. On 2 August, U.S., South Korean, and South Vietnamese units launched a combined sweep through the foothills west of Quang Ngai City and south of the Tra Khuc River where they thought the enemy was located. Operation HOOD RIVER used the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, and elements of the 196th Brigade as blocking forces while units from the South Korean 2d Marine Brigade, the South Vietnamese 2d Infantry Division, and two South Vietnamese ranger battalions spearheaded the search. The results were disappointing. Possibly tipped off by spies, the enemy proved hard to find; between 2 and 13 August, the allies killed only 166 Communist soldiers, while losing 21 killed and 133 wounded themselves, many of those casualties coming from mines and booby traps. Even so, Operation HOOD RIVER ensured that the *2d PAVN Division* posed no immediate threat to Quang Ngai City.

As HOOD RIVER began winding down, General Knowles shifted units to meet a new threat in Base Area 117 in Quang Tin Province west of Chu Lai. Intelligence reported that the *21st PAVN Regiment* from the *2d Division* and a Viet Cong local force battalion had moved into Base Area 117 in the foothills southwest of Tam Ky to protect a North Vietnamese rocket artillery unit that intended to bombard Tam Ky and other towns on the coast to discourage voter turnout for the September elections. On 12 August a large enemy force attacked a South Vietnamese ranger battalion just north of those foothills, confirming the presence of Communist units. The next day, General



"Duster" 40-mm. at the perimeter of Landing Zone UPLIFT, overlooking Highway 1 in August 1967.

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Knowles began Operation BENTON by air assaulting two battalions from Matheson's 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, into the area and placing two battalions from the 196th Brigade as a blocking force between Base Area 117 and Tam Ky. The airborne battalions skirmished with elements of the *21st PAVN Regiment* but found it impossible to locate the main enemy body in the dense, jungle-covered hills. Knowles committed the third paratrooper battalion on 15 August but the results continued to be meager. When Task Force OREGON ended Operation BENTON on 29 August, its soldiers had killed 303 enemy soldiers and captured a modest amount of weapons, ammunition, and other supplies. U.S. losses totaled 45 killed and 326 wounded, plus 5 helicopters shot down.

As the elections neared in early September, the *2d PAVN Division* moved north into the Que Son Valley, a fertile and densely populated basin that straddled the border between Quang Tin and Quang Nam Provinces. Not only did the valley offer the enemy a chance to replenish his food stores, it was also less well-defended than the areas to the south patrolled by Task Force OREGON. The III Marine Amphibious Force commander, General Walt, was in



Company C, 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, with Task Force OREGON near Duc Pho in June 1967.

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the process of shifting his 1st Marine Division farther north to deal with the growing threat in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Only two battalions from the 5th Marines remained in the Que Son Valley, and unlike similar Army formations, the marines possessed relatively few helicopters.

The enemy took advantage of the thinning U.S. presence in southern Quang Nam. At the end of August the Communists attacked and partly overran the provincial capital of Hoi An and two district towns. Then, on 4 September, they attacked a Marine company in the Que Son Valley, drawing in and pinning down four additional Marine companies while three local force battalions converged on Tam Ky near the coast. South Vietnamese units and U.S. air strikes repulsed the Viet Cong assault force before it reached the city, killing over 200 enemy soldiers, but the marines in the Que Son Valley paid a fearful price. Almost 100 Americans died in the three-day battle that also claimed the lives of nearly 400 enemy soldiers from the *1st PLAF Regiment*.

Generals Westmoreland and Walt agreed that III Marine Amphibious Force needed more troops to hold the Que Son

Valley. Enemy pressure was also starting to build on the 3d Marine Division positions south of the Demilitarized Zone, particularly the battalion-sized firebases that Marine and Navy engineers had built in the eastern lowlands to anchor the Strong Point Obstacle System, the anti-infiltration barrier more commonly known as the McNamara Line. Several of those strong points lay within range of artillery firing from North Vietnam. The outpost at Con Thien was particularly hard hit, receiving more than 1,000 rounds of artillery, rocket, and mortar fire on 25 September alone. General Walt also needed to ensure that Highway 1, the main supply route between his logistical hub at Da Nang and his northernmost bases, remained secure at all times. With nothing to spare, he agreed that it would be up to the Army to take care of the Que Son Valley and the rest of southern I Corps.

In recognition of that fact, General Westmoreland received approval from the Army to transform Task Force OREGON into a full division-sized formation with its own organic units and a more robust logistical support system. On 25 September, the task force became the 23d Infantry Division (Americal), commanded by Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster. For the moment, the division would consist of the 196th Infantry Brigade, the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. In November and December, the latter two brigades would return to their parent divisions and a pair of newly activated units, the 11th and 198th Infantry Brigades, would join the Americal. The division's reconnaissance element, the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, had already arrived at Chu Lai in August. The cavalry element of Task Force OREGON, the 2d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, would continue to operate from Chu Lai until October when it would return to III Corps.

When General Koster took command of the Americal Division, General Matheson's 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, was hunting for the *2d PAVN Division* in the lower Que Son Valley west of Tam Ky. Matheson believed that the enemy had pulled back into the mountains to regroup near the abandoned district capital of Hiep Duc. He therefore planned Operation WHEELER as a multi-battalion encirclement to trap and then destroy a major element of the North Vietnamese division. After two of his battalions established blocking positions to the west and south of the town, and U.S. Marine and South Vietnamese units occupied high ground to the north overlooking Route 534 to cordon off the area, Matheson inserted one infantry battalion to drive from the east to Hiep Duc

on 26 September. Despite resistance for more than a week, all three battalions advanced and tightened the encirclement.

As the weather deteriorated and gave way to heavy downpours, the enemy continued to evade, but occasionally infiltrated behind U.S. units. Koster reinforced the airborne brigade with an additional battalion on 4 October. The Americans encountered stiffer opposition when at midnight the enemy attacked an airborne company. After the enemy overran one platoon, the company repelled the assault. Another enemy force attacked a nearby firebase defended by South Vietnamese militia. Although the artillerymen managed to repel the attack, the weather favored the enemy as rainstorms hampered movement, caused logistical problems, and limited air support.

While the paratroopers conducted Operation WHEELER, Westmoreland decided to reinforce Koster with Col. James O. McKenna's 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, so the Americal Division could cover the upper part of the Que Son Valley. On 3 October, McKenna launched Operation WALLOWA, with his command post and one battalion at Landing Zone BALDY, thirty kilometers northwest of Tam Ky, a second battalion on Hill 23 at a firebase named Landing Zone COLT, and the third at a post formerly occupied by marines on a hill near Que Son. McKenna initially punished scattered enemy units moving in the area, but before the Americans had completed their defenses, the enemy infiltrated COLT's perimeter early on 10 October, causing considerable damage.

Guided by captured documents that indicated the presence of a North Vietnamese regiment just west of BALDY, McKenna retaliated on the morning of 20 October. Reinforced by the 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, and artillery and air support, the brigade inflicted lopsided casualties in a number of small fights. Seven days later, the Americans beat back a fierce North Vietnamese counterattack launched to cover the withdrawal of the rest of their forces. Although the Americans failed to destroy the enemy regiment, they succeeded in keeping it from the populated areas and sources of forage. Most of the enemy's casualties proved to be North Vietnamese regulars, not local guerrillas, and captured documents confirmed that the Americans had badly hurt the *2d PAVN Division*. When October ended, Task Force OREGON (the Americal Division) had enjoyed some tactical successes, but had not achieved the ambitious results Westmoreland had

hoped. American soldiers inflicted about 1,400 casualties, divided equally between North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main forces, local forces, and guerrillas.

#### THE HIGHLANDS AGAIN

During the rainy season, the *B3 Front* had replaced its losses, and by mid-summer 1967 it had seven regiments in the Central Highlands of II Corps. Three were part of the *1st PAVN Division* located in Cambodia, while the others operated independently with one each in Darlac and Pleiku and two in Kontum Provinces. The Communists intended to operate as before, drawing U.S. units away from the populated coast into the rugged border regions to inflict heavy losses on them. Learning of the *B3 Front* buildup from intelligence reports, General Peers decided to send his 4th Infantry Division into a new border campaign called Operation FRANCIS MARION on 6 April, orienting his 1st Brigade around Duc Co to shield the western approach to Pleiku City and his 2d Brigade farther south in the area around Plei Me.

A mechanized battalion from Peer's 2d Brigade gained the first major contact of FRANCIS MARION on 30 April when it ambushed a North Vietnamese force north of Plei Me. The enemy attempted to break contact, but the Americans pursued them to

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A Special Forces-trained Montagnard strike force.





M48 tank

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a fortified camp. As U.S. tanks and armored personnel carriers overran part of the base, the North Vietnamese launched a desperate counterattack that failed to stop the armored vehicles. A day later on 1 May, a company from the 1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, repulsed a battalion-sized attack near Duc Co. Prisoners and other intelligence gathered as a result of the battles indicated that the *B3 Front* was moving a division-sized force into southwestern Pleiku Province for a major offensive sometime in June.

Peers initiated preemptive attacks in mid-May, having infantry check the border following B-52 strikes. He found little evidence of the enemy until 18 May when the sighting of a single enemy soldier precipitated a nine-day battle. Unknown to the Americans, the enemy had sent tracking parties to locate isolated platoon- and company-sized positions to attack with battalion-sized units. During the course of the first encounter, the North Vietnamese overran a platoon of the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, executing their captives before relief arrived. The enemy then made three unsuccessful assaults over a two-hour period against the Americans who had occupied one of his base camps for a night defensive position. The North Vietnamese withdrew and remained quiet for the next three days until 21 May, when a battalion advanced behind a mortar barrage in an unsuccessful attack against two U.S. companies of the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry.

Three days later, two companies of the 3d Battalion, 12th Infantry, went to a clearing to await helicopter evacuation while a third company began digging in on nearby high ground. The North Vietnamese attacked the troops waiting for airlift, but broke off the assault when the soldiers of the remaining company left their fighting positions and went to their comrades' aid. Two companies from 3d Battalion, 8th Infantry, tried to link up with the beleaguered force when a ground attack hit them in the lower Ia Tchar Valley. The men from the 8th Infantry rebuffed repeated assaults until reinforcements arrived. In the five battles fought over the nine-day period in May, U.S. forces had performed well, inflicting disproportionate casualties under difficult circumstances.

After the North Vietnamese attacked government installations at Kontum City and Tan Canh and the Special Forces camp at Dak To with mortars and rockets on 17 June, General Peers ordered the commander of the 173d Airborne Brigade, Brig. Gen. John R. Deane, to send two battalions along with supporting armor and artillery into the area on Operation GREELEY. Five days later, on 22 June, while conducting a search and destroy mission in the steep, jungle-covered mountains five kilometers south of Dak To, a company of paratroopers engaged an enemy battalion heading back to Laos. In the violent fight that followed, the company became separated into two groups and suffered heavy casualties before reinforcements forced the enemy to withdraw and helicopters extracted the battered paratroopers.

Having identified at least one regiment of the *1st PAVN Division* in the area, I Field Force Commander General Larsen sent the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, to Dak To and the two-battalion 1st Airborne Task Force of the South Vietnamese Army to Kontum as reinforcements for the 4th Division. As one battalion each from the 1st Cavalry Division and 173d Airborne Brigade moved to block routes into Laos, the paratroopers who had fought the previous day returned to the battle site, finding that the enemy had executed those Americans who had been wounded and captured.

When Larsen's sweep came up empty, he returned the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, to Binh Dinh Province until a new threat emerged. In early August, North Vietnamese units converged on the Dak Seang Special Forces camp in the far northwestern corner of Kontum Province, but the II Corps

Commander General Vinh Loc took the lead this time sending an infantry regiment and an airborne task force to defend the outpost. Backed by U.S. air support, the South Vietnamese troops inflicted heavy casualties on the North Vietnamese and drove them back into Laos.

Operation FRANCIS MARION came to a close in mid-October having yielded mixed results. The allied forces claimed to have killed 1,000 enemy troops at the cost of 300 U.S. and 100 South Vietnamese dead, resulting in a relatively high ratio of enemy-to-friendly killed. The border defense operation had prevented the *B3 Front* from overrunning any of the allied border positions, but it had also diverted I Field Force units from missions on the central coast. As the dry season approached in the western highlands, General Peers expected the enemy to renew his attacks, once again testing the ability of the 4th Infantry Division to protect 300 kilometers of rugged territory.

#### SUMMER IN THE II CORPS LOWLANDS

Down in the coastal lowlands of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen Provinces, the 1st Cavalry Division and the 173d Airborne Brigade saw few signs of the *3d PAVN Division* and the *95th PAVN Regiment* between May and July 1967 as the enemy spent the first half of the dry season hiding in the mountains and building up supplies for future offensives. General Tolson's 1st and 2d Brigades continued to patrol the Bong Son and Phu My Plains while his 3d Brigade extended Operation PERSHING into the Sang Mountains and Nuoc Dinh Valley on the border between Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai Provinces. Although the soldiers uncovered a number of bases and engaged caretaker units, the enemy again avoided substantial contact.

General Tolson sent Colonel McKenna's 3d Brigade, back under 1st Cavalry Division control, to the Song Be Valley in Quang Ngai Province on 7 August. Leapfrogging infantry battalions and artillery firebases south, the brigade encountered little resistance until the morning of 9 August. After one company air assaulted into a landing zone fifteen kilometers north of Gia Vuc, North Vietnamese troops opened fire and swarmed its perimeter. Unable to destroy the Americans after four hours of fighting, the enemy broke contact and withdrew. The brigade continued searching northward but found little evidence of enemy's presence until it ended the operation on 21 August and returned to the An

Lo Valley, at which time Tolson detached two of the battalions to reinforce the other brigades on the coastal plain.

After an enemy battalion unsuccessfully attacked one of its companies just east of Landing Zone ENGLISH on 22 August, 1st Cavalry Division leaders anticipated an attack on the base itself. Instead, the enemy attacked the division's forward command post at midnight on 25 August. Concentrated defensive fire disrupted the attack and upset North Vietnamese plans to interfere with the South Vietnamese elections in Binh Dinh Province. As the 1st Cavalry Division ended Operation PERSHING, which lasted from February to October 1967, it had killed 3,900 and captured more than 2,100 enemy troops. U.S. casualties numbered 498 dead and 2,361 wounded.

#### THE WET SEASON IN III CORPS

During the first half of 1967, the 1st Infantry Division had successfully kept Communist regulars away from the most populated areas of northern III Corps, but II Field Force Commander General Palmer expected the enemy to try something with the onset of the rainy season. He directed the 1st Division to have its 2d Brigade continue to support pacification efforts in the vicinity of Di An, Binh Duong Province, as the 1st and 3d Brigades provided a shield against the *9th PLAF Division*, which at the time was residing in a major base area called War Zone D, northeast of Saigon (*Map 11*).

Code named Operation BILLINGS, General Hay had the 1st Division begin a spoiling attack north of Phuoc Vinh, a district capital in Binh Duong Province, on 12 June. The lack of contact seemed to indicate that the Viet Cong had retreated farther north to a large clearing designated as Landing Zone X-RAY. Anticipating that the enemy would be waiting to oppose an airmobile insertion, Hay directed Colonel Marks to march his 3d Brigade overland to secure X-RAY. The walking artillery barrage that preceded his leading units on 17 June unfortunately telegraphed the plan.

Soon after the two battalions formed a perimeter at Landing Zone X-RAY, a patrol reported movement from the northwest. At 1300 a Viet Cong force estimated at two battalions penetrated the perimeter from the north and northwest. With artillery and helicopter gunship support, the defenders managed to turn back repeated assaults when a second wave struck the southeast



Map 11

perimeter. Despite heavy losses, the enemy overran one platoon before air strikes stabilized the situation at 1345. The enemy then withdrew under the cover of a twenty-minute mortar barrage. The division's reaction force arrived to reinforce the perimeter just as the fight ended.

Patrols sent out the next morning and for several days thereafter found many enemy bodies. To continue to punish the retreating regiment, Hay placed heavy supporting fire, including B-52 strikes, on likely withdrawal routes and established blocking positions to the east and northeast of X-RAY. The enemy, however, remained elusive. In an effort to cover the battered regiment's withdraw, General Thanh ordered elements of the *7th PAVN Division* to conduct diversionary attacks on An Loc, capital of Binh Long Province, and the 1st Division's forward base at Quan Loi, while his main attack seized the hamlet of Xa Tan Hung, five kilometers southeast of Quan Loi.

Without conducting their usually thorough reconnaissance, North Vietnamese troops began leaving their assembly areas after dark on 10 July. The *7th Division* lost the element of surprise when U.S. soldiers on the Quan Loi perimeter spotted movement just after midnight and opened fire. Although enemy sappers had already penetrated the base's defensive wire and struck an artillery position when the fighting erupted, they failed to cut paths through the barriers that would have better enabled the assault forces to reinforce them. U.S. reaction forces killed or ejected all the sappers after two hours of fighting. Meanwhile, the attack on An Loc fizzled.

The diversion at Quan Loi had begun before the regiment making the main effort against Xa Tam Hung had reached its assault positions. Artillery illumination rounds from the nearby battle revealed the presence of the lead battalion as it moved through a grove of rubber trees, alerting the company of South Vietnamese soldiers defending the objective. Having lost communication with his headquarters, and fearing he would become a target for American artillery fire if he delayed, the enemy battalion commander immediately launched the attack without waiting for the follow-on forces. The North Vietnamese mortar preparation missed the defenders and fell instead on the village, causing many civilian casualties. The South Vietnamese company stubbornly defended its position, and as the battle at Quan Loi ended, U.S. artillery and gunships came to their support. The rest of the enemy force arrived and attacked piecemeal with disastrous results. As they retreated at dawn, North Vietnamese stragglers committed numerous atrocities against local inhabitants.

Throughout the summer, Communist forces conducted sporadic attacks, including artillery bombardments, on popu-

lated areas that killed many more civilians. This activity culminated in an attack by a Viet Cong regiment on the Tong Le Chon Special Forces camp shortly after midnight on 7 August. Before the defenders stopped the assault with the assistance of artillery and gunships, the Communists penetrated the southern perimeter and captured and executed a number of CIDG soldiers.

During the first half of 1967, Philippine and South Vietnamese troops had used the relative quiet following Operations ATTLEBORO, CEDAR FALLS, and JUNCTION CITY to redouble their pacification efforts in dozens of contested hamlets throughout Tay Ninh and Binh Duong Provinces. These activities came under renewed stress, however, once the *7th PAVN Division* had recovered enough from its earlier losses to return to the field. In late spring and early summer, Col. Kenneth E. Buell's 3d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, noticed increased hostile activity. When captured documents and prisoner interrogations indicated a North Vietnamese interest in the brigade's base at Dau Tieng, Buell planned Operation DIAMOND HEAD.

On 11 July, the brigade's units along with South Vietnamese Regional Forces made several sweeps toward the Cambodian border, but found no enemy concentrations or supply caches. That night, however, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops of the *7th Division* attacked government outposts between Tay Ninh West and Dau Tieng, overrunning one of them. The brigade's battalions remained busy responding to sporadic infantry, rocket, and mortar attacks, but the foe avoided contact and dispersed before being brought to battle.

The 25th Infantry Division's 1st Brigade had similar experiences around Cu Chi in Hau Nghia Province. Col. Doniphan Carter had his 1st Brigade conduct numerous cordon, search, and civilian removal operations in conjunction with the South Vietnamese Army, turning the area around Phu Hoa village, fifteen kilometers northeast of Cu Chi, into a free-fire zone. In spite of several defeats, enemy forces usually escaped annihilation, and continued their rocket and mortar attacks on civilian areas. For the rest of the summer, the 25th Division and the 199th Brigade continued to search suspected enemy locations. With few exceptions, these maneuvers produced only fleeting contact with the enemy.

East of Saigon, the 9th Infantry Division's new commander, Maj. Gen. George C. O'Connor, initiated a search and destroy mission that June against the *5th Division's* traditional staging area, a forested region in southeastern Bien Hoa Province known as the Hat Dich. From this sanctuary, enemy forces were within easy striking distance of Highway 1 to the north and Highway 15 to the west, the two principal allied lines of communications in eastern III Corps. Operation AKRON began on 9 June when the division's 1st Brigade entered the western side of the Hat Dich, its plow-equipped engineers ready to destroy Viet Cong fortifications, while a squadron from the 11th Armored Cavalry and a South Vietnamese ranger battalion entered the eastern side of the Hat Dich.

U.S. units involved in the operation rested in nighttime laagers, and at 0100 on 19 June the enemy struck one of these positions. The defenders—an armored cavalry troop, a battery of self-propelled 155-mm. howitzers, and a squadron headquarters—responded with their own firepower supported by helicopter gunships and artillery. The next morning the attackers evaded the pursuing Americans.

About a week later, the commander of the South Vietnamese 18th Division, Brig. Gen. Do Ke Giai, sent a ranger battalion to investigate information given by defectors that a Communist battalion was located ten kilometers northwest of Tuc Trung, Long Khanh Province. Late on the afternoon of 27 June the rangers discovered a recently abandoned camp, which was actually a well-prepared ambush. After suffering many casualties, the rangers scattered to the east. A task force with two cavalry troops and two artillery batteries from the 11th Armored Cavalry went to help, but arrived too late and found only corpses and the detritus of battle. At the same time, a South Vietnamese battalion linked up with surviving rangers and renewed the fight the next day. General O'Connor sent one 9th Division battalion to join the cavalry units in establishing blocking positions. The battle seemed to end that night, but on 29 June, the South Vietnamese encountered and overran an entrenched enemy unit.

Operation AKRON continued for a week and involved nine American, South Vietnamese, and Australian battalion-equivalent formations. It yielded only moderate results as the foe avoided combat. A break then ensued during which O'Connor received control of the Royal Thai Army's "Queen's Cobras" Volunteer

Regiment, which he positioned in southwestern Bien Hoa Province to complete the encirclement of the Hat Dich. When Operation AKRON II began at the end of September, the 1st Brigade and Rome plows reentered the Hat Dich looking for the enemy once more.

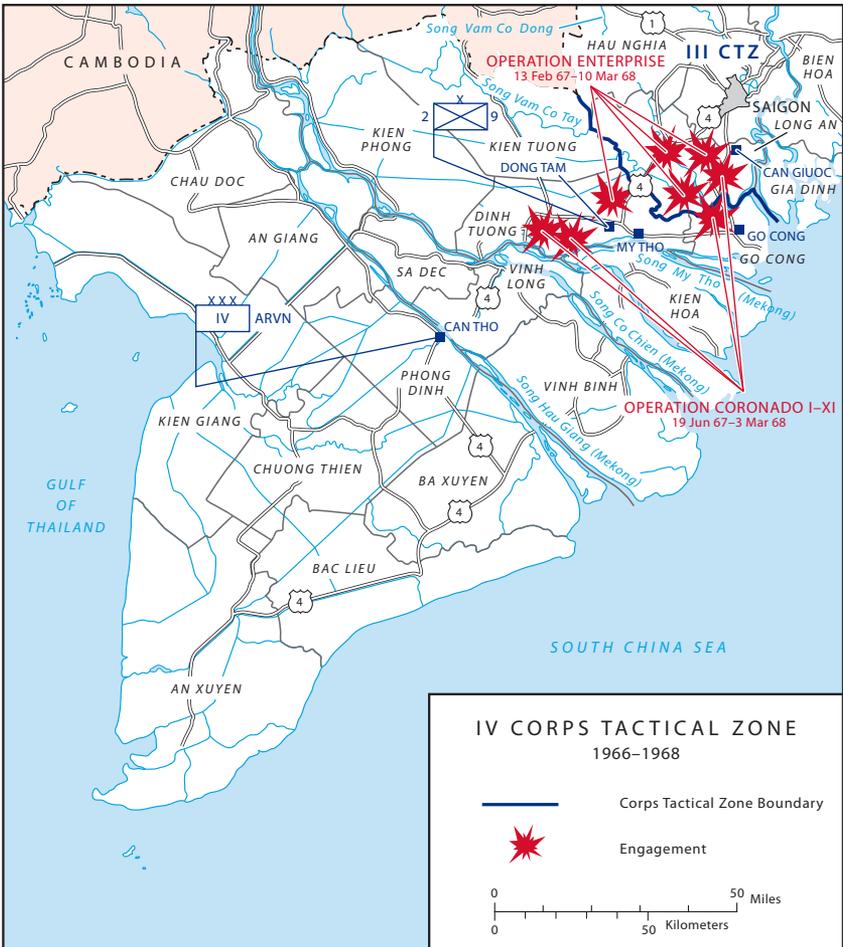
#### INTO THE MEKONG DELTA

The Mekong Delta, which comprised all of IV Corps and the southernmost sections of III Corps, was the richest agricultural area in South Vietnam. Fed by the Mekong River that flows from Cambodia to the South China Sea, the Delta's rich alluvial soil and teaming waterways generated over 75 percent of the nation's food supply. The seventeen provinces southwest of Saigon also contained a wealth of manpower, its 6 million inhabitants representing about one-third of South Vietnam's total population. During the first year of U.S. combat operations from mid-1965 to mid-1966, Westmoreland had relied on three South Vietnamese infantry divisions backed by around 3,000 U.S. advisers and a dozen aviation companies to fight the war in the seventeen provinces southwest of Saigon. By the latter half of 1966, however, he and his South Vietnamese counterparts agreed that it would be necessary to station several U.S. brigades in the upper Mekong Delta to contain the Viet Cong main force battalions that were preventing the government from expanding its control into enemy-held areas of the countryside. With the U.S. 9th Infantry Division scheduled to arrive in South Vietnam at the end of 1966, General Westmoreland chose to use it to strengthen the allied position in the contested provinces south of Saigon.

The plan that Westmoreland brokered with the South Vietnamese government called for the 9th Division to station its 1st Brigade and division support area at Bearcat, just east of Saigon in Bien Hoa Province, its 3d Brigade in Long An Province, south of Saigon, and its 2d Brigade in Dinh Tuong Province immediately southwest of Long An Province. All three brigades would report to II Field Force even though the 2d Brigade would be operating in the IV Corps zone, thus allowing the senior adviser in IV Corps, Brig. Gen. William R. Desobry, to retain his focus on the advisory effort (*Map 12*).

Another special feature of the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, was its amphibious role in the upper Mekong Delta. General Westmoreland paired the U.S. Army brigade with a U.S.

Navy component known as Task Force 117 to create the Mobile Riverine Force, a versatile weapon that could reach enemy-controlled areas of the delta normally beyond the range of the road-bound South Vietnamese forces. The naval component was built around 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



Map 12

one hundred landing craft 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 towed barges or helicopter-delivered platforms that would remain stable in waterlogged terrain.

The first elements of the 9th Infantry Division arrived by ship at the port of Vung Tau, southeast of Saigon, in December 1966. Under the leadership of Maj. Gen. George S. Eckhardt, the division spent the next few months completing its movement to theater. During that time, it conducted limited operations in the Rung Sat Swamp south of Saigon to hone amphibious warfare techniques, and supervised the construction of Dong Tam, an amphibious base that U.S. engineers were building just west of My Tho, the capital of Dinh Tuong Province, for the Mobile Riverine Force.

In February, the division's 3d Brigade, built around one mechanized and two light infantry battalions, deployed to Long An Province and began Operation ENTERPRISE to secure Highway 4, the vital route that linked Saigon with the Delta's teeming agricultural bounty. With no North Vietnamese units in the area, the brigade operated with South Vietnamese Army and Regional and Popular Forces units to erode Viet Cong influence and to pacify the rural hamlets where insurgent sympathies remained strong. In April, the 3d Brigade dispersed one Viet Cong battalion and bloodied another, but the enemy returned with a vengeance. On 2 May, a Communist battalion savaged a U.S. company during a night attack, killing seventeen Americans and wounding forty-eight. Following that assault, Viet Cong units avoided contact with the U.S. 9th Infantry Division in Long An Province for the next three months, preferring instead to target the South Vietnamese territorial forces that represented a direct threat to Viet Cong control over the rural population.

As the 3d Brigade continued Operation ENTERPRISE in Long An, the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, moved into its newly completed base at Dong Tam and spent the early part of May operating in central Dinh Tuong Province to ensure that no Viet Cong units were preparing to strike the amphibious base. A major fight developed on 3 May when two U.S. infantry battalions discovered a Viet Cong local force company dug into the hamlet of Ap Bac (2), a traditional enemy stronghold where a Communist unit had famously repulsed a South Vietnamese attack supported

by U.S. helicopters in January 1963. This time, the results were different. Supported by armored personnel carriers, U.S. Air Force AC-47 Spooky gunships, and waves of armed helicopters, the infantrymen from the 9th Division encircled and then overran the Viet Cong unit, killing more than 200 enemy soldiers. The Communist troops did not die easily; it took fierce, close-range fighting to overcome their positions. Two men from Company A, 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, later received the Medal of Honor for destroying no less than seven enemy bunkers, one soldier covering the other as they rushed forward to wipe out each position. American losses came to fifteen killed and twenty-seven wounded, most of them in the initial stage of the assault.

On 19 June, the 2d Brigade and Task Force 117 initiated the first phase of a long-running operation known as CORONADO designed to bring the Mobile Riverine Force into areas of the upper delta previously untouched by South Vietnamese units. The initial mission targeted a large enemy redoubt that stretched for eight kilometers from Can Giuoc, Long An Province, to Rach Cat. A South Vietnamese battalion protected the west flank along Route 230 as minesweepers led the way down the Rach Cat River followed by river assault boats, monitors, and command and control craft. Meeting no opposition, one infantry battalion landed with two companies north and east of the objective while the other landed two companies north and west of the target. After Col. Willam B. Fulton committed the brigade's reaction force company by helicopter and the afloat reserve company came ashore to check on a suspected enemy location that proved empty, the brigade continued moving southward with the two battalions abreast.

The two companies advancing on the extreme left suffered heavy casualties when they walked into an ambush set by a local force Viet Cong battalion. Repeated company-sized attacks failed to penetrate the enemy's position, but established a cordon on three sides by the time night fell. When they renewed their advance in the morning, the attacking battalions found the enemy had withdrawn. Although they found few bodies, prisoners and captured documents revealed the brigade had inflicted severe casualties on the Viet Cong.

The Mobile Riverine Force next moved into the Binh Xuan Secret Zone in northwest Go Cong Province. With South Vietnamese forces blocking to the southwest, U.S. troops landed

on the morning of 4 July and established a series of patrol bases along two rivers that bordered the stronghold. Inserting infantry units by helicopter and landing craft to establish several ambush sites over a three-day period, the Americans suffered no casualties but killed or captured more than one hundred of the enemy.

When intelligence detected a major enemy buildup in Dinh Tuong Province, Westmoreland ordered a thrust to eliminate the threat. In addition to the Mobile Riverine Force, he assigned the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, and 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, reinforced by South Vietnamese battalions, to assist. The plan called for the riverine force to sweep into the Cam Son base area from the south while a U.S. mechanized battalion and a South Vietnamese ranger battalion established blocking positions to the north. After clearing that area, the riverine force would enter the eastern part of the Ban Long redoubt while a brigade of South Vietnamese marines and the 25th Division's 1st Brigade stood ready to reinforce.

The two riverine battalions landed at five beaches in the southern Cam Son on 28 July and swept north. They met only fleeting resistance. Believing that the foe had withdrawn to new positions, South Vietnamese marines air assaulted into the Ban Long area of Dinh Tuong Province several days later and immediately took heavy fire. Although the marines could not take the position in five hours of heavy fighting, they launched another attack that night with U.S. artillery support. That attack failed as well, but the enemy found his escape routes blocked by a South Vietnamese ranger battalion and by two battalions of the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. Desperate, the Viet Cong tried to break the encirclement by attacking the marines the next morning. When that failed, some hid their weapons, split into small groups, and attempted to blend in with civilians. Others fled south toward the My Tho River or west and came up against the rangers.

After O'Connor reinforced the rangers with a U.S. mechanized infantry battalion, he sent the two riverine battalions to the confluence of the Tra Tan and My Tho Rivers with instructions to sweep east, and airlifted a battalion from the 3d Brigade to the opposite end of the battle area to sweep west. The three battalions thus formed a horseshoe-shaped cordon with the My Tho River and Ap Binh Thoi village in the center, as U.S. troops helped South Vietnamese police screen civilians for suspects.

Many of those questioned eventually admitted their membership in the local force battalion. The riverine forces redeployed elsewhere, but mopping-up operations continued until 4 August as the South Vietnamese 7th Division completed a series of sweeps that resulted in numerous, albeit minor, engagements that further punished the enemy.

The 2d Brigade continued Operation CORONADO with a raid into Long An Province on 19 August when the riverine battalions landed at an overgrown pineapple plantation on the Vam Co Dong River and swept inland. The operation flushed part of a Viet Cong battalion out of its base and into adjacent rice paddies where helicopter gunships took a heavy toll of the fleeing unit. After three weeks of operations in conjunction with the 199th Brigade and South Vietnamese units in eastern Long An Province, and with other 9th Division elements in the marshy Rung Sat Special Zone east of Saigon, the 2d Brigade turned its attention to a familiar area in September.

Since the last time the 2d Brigade had conducted operations there, the Viet Cong had massed three or four main force battalions in Dinh Tuong Province. General O'Conner ordered Fulton, newly promoted to brigadier general as assistant division

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#### Operation CORONADO



commander exercising control over both the 2d and 3d Brigades, to Dong Tam. Col. Burt A. David, Fulton's replacement in command of 2d Brigade, then led a push into the Com Son base area. After a South Vietnamese battalion on the north, a Regional Forces battalion on the east, and the mechanized battalion attached from 3d Brigade on the northeast cordoned off the enemy redoubt, a riverine battalion swept north from landing sites on the My Tho on 12 September, but found no enemy. As the riverine soldiers continued their search the next morning, the mechanized battalion advanced into Ban Long from its blocking position on Route 20. A second riverine battalion went ashore, boarded helicopters, and landed immediately south and advanced in conjunction with the mounted unit. By 1200 the two battalions encountered resistance that became stiffer as they advanced, prompting Fulton to airlift another company from the unengaged riverine battalion to reinforce them. With the cordon not yet complete when night fell, the enemy broke contact and escaped.

The next day, 14 September, the South Vietnamese 7th Division reported that a large enemy force remained in a fortified area on the east bank of the Rach Ba Rai River, about ten kilometers upstream from its confluence with the My Tho. The

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A Navy assault craft of Task Force 117 during Operation CORONADO.



2d Brigade planned to encircle the enemy with one battalion each from the north and south, and a mechanized battalion from the east, pinning the foe against the Ba Rai.

The operation began early on 15 September when the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, and its naval escorts followed mine-sweepers up the Rach Ba Rai. In the most dangerous phase of the operation, the convoy had to navigate a waterway that narrowed to only thirty meters wide, and which the enemy could easily control. As the convoy steamed upstream, the enemy opened fire from both banks with recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, and small arms. The vessels' armor plate prevented serious structural damage, and no boats were destroyed. The intense fire inflicted a number of casualties, however, especially among the sailors, and forced the vessels to retreat. After replacing the dead and wounded crewmen, the task force made a second attempt. Supported by artillery firing a rolling barrage that fell ahead and to both flanks, the vessels broke through and landed the troops.

With the northern beach finally secure, the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry, went ashore south of the enemy position. As a precaution, Fulton had ordered the mechanized 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry, to change its planned westward attack northward. Taken as insurance if the enemy had opposed the landing of the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, the shift created a gap between it and the 3d Battalion, 47th Infantry. To close the gap, 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry, of the 3d Brigade air assaulted into the space between the advancing units as artillery and air strikes pounded the enemy. With its ranks already thinned from casualties sustained in the ambush on the river, the 3d Battalion, 60th Infantry, advanced slowly. When darkness settled over the battlefield, the enemy broke contact and escaped through gaps in the cordon or swam across the Ba Rai. The next day, the Americans found a number of dead bodies amid the abandoned bunkers, but the five days of fighting had resulted in disappointment.

## **ANALYSIS**

In early October 1967 when Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara asked the Joint Chiefs for their strategy recommendations for the coming year. General Westmoreland approved the U.S.–South Vietnamese combined campaign plan that outlined

their joint goals for 1968. The allies appeared to be making slow but steady progress in most areas of the war. During the first nine months of 1967 the allies had killed over 66,000 Communist soldiers while losing 17,000 of their own, 7,000 of whom were Americans. Naturally, both sides had deployed new soldiers to replace the fallen, yet even so Communist troop strength had declined by 20,000 men while allied strength had risen by 66,000. In addition to enjoying success in the war of attrition, the allies had made perceptible progress on the pacification front, increasing the percentage of the rural population living under government control from 44 percent to 48 percent as measured by MACV's Hamlet Evaluation System. If North Vietnam could not reverse these trends, its prospects for victory were bleak.

Westmoreland believed that the allies had thwarted every major Communist offensive over the last year and were now in a position to start grinding down the enemy's main force units and supply network faster than they could be replaced. MACV's growing logistical strength, a spate of new airfield construction, and improvements in road security would soon allow the allies to conduct simultaneous division-sized operations in remote border areas of South Vietnam for months at a time, forcing the enemy to divert an ever greater part of his strength to defensive actions far from the populated lowlands. During the next six months, the MACV commander planned to push eight or more brigades into the enemy sanctuaries of northern III Corps and send the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) rampaging through the interior of I Corps, hitting base areas formerly beyond reach of allied forces. As those operations diverted and then chewed up enemy main force units, South Vietnamese forces would gain extra breathing room to intensify the pacification program with assistance from the CORDS directorate of MACV.

Another threat to Hanoi's ambitions was the growing political stability of the South Vietnamese state. The transition of the Saigon government from a military junta to a democratically elected, constitutional republic came to fruition when Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky, after resigning their military commissions, won a national election as president and vice president, respectively. The 3 September 1967 election saw a national voter turnout of 83 percent. More rounds of voting scheduled for October and November would elect national legislators as well as province, district, and village officials. This time, the militant

Buddhists who had organized mass protests against the government in 1963 and in 1966 did not take to the streets. If the new South Vietnamese government succeeded in appealing to the political as well as economic aspirations of rural communities formerly alienated by Saigon, the Communists would lose some of their popular support and be forced to use harsher measures to enforce obedience.

Allied progress, however, was not easy, quick, or irreversible. The enemy remained a powerful and pervasive force, nurtured by external sanctuaries, the infiltration of soldiers and equipment from North Vietnam, and a deeply rooted clandestine political apparatus that exercised varying degrees of influence over much of South Vietnam's population. If the U.S. Army had hurt the enemy and thwarted many of his plans, it had not yet tilted the scale decisively in the allies' favor. Most importantly, allied actions had not yet persuaded Communist leaders in North Vietnam to end their effort to conquer the South. Unless the allies could cripple the North or prevent it from sending in reinforcements and supplies, the war seemed likely to continue for many more years until one side or the other lost the physical or moral ability to continue to fight. This was what had happened during the Indochina War of 1945–1954, when the Communists had won control of northern Vietnam, not through conquest, but by bleeding the French until their will had broken. Believing the Communists would never be able to defeat the United States militarily, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earl G. Wheeler predicted that the enemy's only recourse was "to win this war in Washington, just as they won the war with the French in Paris." Only time would tell if Wheeler was correct.

## The Author

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