

# report

OAD-CR-155

## **Indochina Refugee Authored Monograph Program**

### ***The General Offensives of 1968-69***

**By**

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*Prepared for:*

*Department of the Army  
Office of Chief of Military History  
Forrestal Building  
12th E Independence Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20134*

*27 June 1978*

*Contract No. MDA 903-76-C-0172*

**GENERAL  
RESEARCH**



**CORPORATION**

**WESTGATE RESEARCH PARK, McLEAN, VIRGINIA 22101**

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## Preface

Much has been written about the enemy's 1968 Tet Offensive, a major event in the Vietnam War. However, most publications on this subject, to include books and press accounts of the Western world and South Vietnam's own official military history records, focused primarily on the spectacular aspect of battles fought during early 1968.

This monograph endeavors instead to analyze and compare all four periods of enemy offensive activities which lasted well into 1969. Seeking to present the Vietnamese point of view, it assesses enemy and friendly strategies, the reactions and combat performance of the RVNAF and Free World Military Assistance Forces and the impact of the offensive on the conduct of the war with regard to the enemy, South Vietnam, and the United States.

In the preparation of this monograph, I have drawn heavily on my personal experience and recollections. Interviews with involved principals and a review of documentation have also helped establish credibility of facts and depth of insight. The most valuable data, unobtainable anywhere else, are those provided by Lieutenant General William E. Potts, U.S.A. (Retired) from his personal files. For this courtesy, I certainly owe him a special debt of gratitude.

I am particularly indebted to General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Chief of Staff, JGS and Commanding General of the Central Logistics Command, RVNAF, and Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, J-3, JGS, for their valuable guidance, comments, and suggestions, especially those concerning the Tran Hung Dao plan and conduct of combat operations. I am also grateful to

Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commanding General of I Corps, who commanded the 1st ARVN Infantry Division at the time of the offensive, and Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, last Commander of the 3d ARVN Infantry Division who served as I Corps Chief of Staff when the offensive began, for thoughtful critical remarks and valuable insight into the battles of Hue and elsewhere in the I Corps area.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia  
27 June 1978

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## CHAPTER I

### War During the 1965-1967 Period

#### *The Impact of U.S. Search-and-Destroy Operations*

The demise of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his regime—the First Republic—which came as a result of the military-led November 1 coup of 1963, began to usher South Vietnam into a period of turmoil which saw political stability and military security steadily on the decline. Successive plots and counterplots crippled central authority and weakened the war effort. Used as an instrument of state to counter coups, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) were divided among cliques and lost their combat effectiveness.

This came as a windfall for the Communists who immediately seized the opportunity to step up their activities. The Strategic (now re-designated New Life) Hamlet system, which was the mainstay of rural defense and control, came under increasing enemy attacks and faced the danger of ultimate destruction. In many provinces, village and hamlet officials fled enemy pressure and sought refuge in safer district towns. Lines of communication across the country became insecure because of land mines and interdiction. Even in big cities terrorism and sabotage occurred with periodic regularity.

The situation deteriorated to an even greater extent by late 1964, especially in Binh Dinh Province, the long established stronghold of Communist insurgency. This threat came not only from enemy military pressure but also from the potential danger of insurrection by a local population which was, by inclination, extensively pro-Communist.

The initial alarm sounded during the first week of 1965. From all indications, it seemed to presage still more agitation and setbacks in the days ahead.

It all began when an ARVN Ranger battalion was caught and nearly destroyed in an enemy ambush near the village of Binh Gia, in Phuoc Tuy Province. Contrary to their past activity pattern, the Communist forces did not withdraw from the scene of the fighting. They remained in the area, mounted another ambush and inflicted severe losses to a Vietnamese marine battalion being deployed there as relief. Obviously, the enemy had initiated a new phase of warfare, the "mobile warfare phase" of his strategy for conquest.

In the meantime, our intelligence confirmed the presence of a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiment in the Central Highlands. Information collected during December 1964 indicated that this was the first NVA regimental size unit introduced into South Vietnam. By February 1965, the total NVA units infiltrated into the same area had increased to four regiments, all belonging to the 325th Division. In view of this force buildup, the Central Highlands apparently became the target of primary interest to North Vietnam.

The month of February 1965 also saw two major Communist actions directed against U.S. personnel in South Vietnam. The first was a ground attack on Camp Holloway, a U.S. base near Pleiku, and the second involved the sabotage of a hotel in downtown Qui Nhon which served as billet for U.S. personnel. As a result, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the evacuation of U.S. military dependents and eventually decided to bring U.S. combat troops into South Vietnam.

It was in the Central Highlands that the first contest between regular NVA and U.S. forces took place. Neither had ever been in contact with the other until the battle of Pleime which was to become a landmark of the war's new phase. In launching the Pleime campaign, the NVA forces had planned to take Pleiku, force the evacuation of Kontum and gain control of Route QL-19, which would practically divide South Vietnam into two halves.

The battle of Pleime lasted from mid-October to late November 1965; it was the first division-size engagement on a South Vietnamese battlefield since 1954. Selecting the Central Highlands as battleground, the enemy undoubtedly placed a high stake on his legendary advantage in this type of terrain, which he hoped could neutralize American superiority

Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commanding General of I Corps, who commanded the 1st ARVN Infantry Division at the time of the offensive, and Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, last Commander of the 3d ARVN Infantry Division who served as I Corps Chief of Staff when the offensive began, for thoughtful critical remarks and valuable insight into the battles of Hue and elsewhere in the I Corps area.

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in firepower and mobility. The enemy had every reason to believe he could deal U.S. forces a smashing blow in his own habitat of jungle and mountains where during the 1945-1954 war, he had successfully overrun Kontum City and wiped out the famous French Mobile Group No. 100. He therefore entrusted the conduct of the campaign to veterans of the First Indochina War such as General Chu Huy Man and Colonel Ha Vi Tung who had been crowned with laurels of victories past.<sup>1</sup>

The Pleime campaign was also an opportunity for NVA forces to learn more about U.S. tactics and U.S. combat capabilities, especially in terms of firepower and mobility. The lessons to be drawn from this first round of engagements were particularly critical since they would contribute toward the formulation of an appropriate war doctrine to effectively confront U.S. forces in South Vietnam.

For the U.S. and RVN forces, the battle of Pleime certainly helped put to test the validity of combined operations which were to become the staple of warfare efforts in the years ahead. Through it, the U.S. was also able to evaluate its own methods and to determine whether the conventional approach would be the proper response to a war that many had termed as unconventional.

The resounding defeat inflicted on the enemy at Pleime compelled him to abstain from rushing into other major engagements during the 1965-1966 dry season. He endeavored instead to build up his force while constantly searching for an effective way to cope with the expanding U.S. troop commitment. As more U.S. and Free World units poured into South Vietnam, North Vietnam also increased its infiltration of replacement and entire regular units. This infiltration rate reached a monthly average of 6,000 to 7,000 men during 1966.

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<sup>1</sup>Colonel Ha Vi Tung was the commander of the 803d Viet Minh Regiment, the unit which in 1954 had destroyed the French GM-100 at An Khe Pass on Route 19.

The U.S., in the meantime, continued its process of force buildup, deploying units, building ports, airfields, combat and logistic bases, organizing logistic support, communications and intelligence systems to meet growing requirements. At the same time, it also began to find ways of coping with the other kind of war that the enemy was staging at the grassroots level in coordination with the war he was fighting with main force units from the North.

In late 1966, the U.S. initiated the concept of search-and-destroy operations designed to clear enemy main force units from populated centers and drive them into areas where they could be destroyed. These operations were to create the favorable conditions required for pacification, which would start from populous centers. At the same time, U.S. air power was extensively used against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in an effort to interdict and inflict maximum losses to enemy infiltration of personnel and logistics from the north.

Not until September of that year did U.S. forces launch Operation ATTLEBORO which was designed to destroy enemy main force units in an area west of the Michelin plantation and the very heart of enemy War Zone C, located in northwestern Tay Ninh Province on the Cambodian border. This operation ended in November and was considered a test of the search-and-destroy concept. Initially, it involved only the U.S. 196th Infantry Brigade. However, as the operation progressed, more U.S. forces were committed, to include eventually <sup>the 1st Division</sup> elements of ~~the 25th Infantry~~ Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 3d Brigade of the 4th ~~Infantry~~ Division, and the 11th Armored Regiment. The remarkable results achieved through Operation ATTLEBORO led the U.S. command to the conclusion that multi-division operations of the search-and-destroy type were the key to success in South Vietnam.

After ATTLEBORO, the U.S. command initiated Operation CEDAR FALLS in early January 1967 which lasted 18 days. This operation was designed to destroy the headquarters of enemy MR-4 located in the "Iron Triangle" area which straddled the converging boundaries of Binh Duong, Tay Ninh,

and Binh Long Provinces.<sup>2</sup>

CEDAR FALLS was the first corps-size U.S. combat operation in South Vietnam and the first major combined U.S.-RVN operation involving formal planning. ARVN participation in this operation consisted of the 1st Airborne Brigade, elements of the 7th and 8th Regiments of the 5th Infantry Divisions, and one ranger battalion. The combined results were spectacular. Not only had our forces completely destroyed the enemy headquarters, they also killed 720 enemy troops, took 217 prisoners and received 666 ralliers. In addition, our forces seized 3,700 tons of rice, 23 crew-served and 555 individual weapons, and destroyed 509 buildings, 424 underground shelters and tunnels and 334 boats.

During this operation Rome plows were used extensively to clear heavy vegetation and build pioneer roads, which effectively turned the heretofore impenetrable "Iron Triangle" into an uncluttered area of operation easily accessible to mechanized troops and fully open to aerial observation.

Despite extensive havoc wrought by CEDAR FALLS, the enemy base area seemed to be alive again with renewed enemy activity only two days after our troops had moved out. These indications provided by aerial observation revealed that the enemy was resilient and resourceful enough to survive even the most destructive blow ever unleashed on him. This also indicated that a short duration foray was not enough to strangle an enemy base area and in order to fully exploit the results of such an operation and prevent the resurrection of enemy activities, our troops would have to remain in the area of operation for a much longer period.

This lesson was not forgotten by the U.S. command. Operation JUNCTION CITY, which followed CEDAR FALLS in the widening framework of search-and-destroy operations, lasted nearly three months and involved an even larger force commitment. The target this time was another

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<sup>2</sup>The enemy MR-4 headquarters was responsible for the conduct of activities directed against Saigon, Gia Dinh and Cho Lon.

enemy stronghold, War Zone C, which represented perhaps the biggest prize of all.

JUNCTION CITY was designed to destroy the supreme headquarters that controlled all enemy forces operating in the southern half of South Vietnam, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), or one of Hanoi's forward command posts. COSVN was located in War Zone C, a large enemy base area of about 250 square miles adjoining the Cambodian border, long considered and boasted by the enemy as an impenetrable sanctuary. The terrain here was ideal for insurgent activities. Mostly covered by heavy underbush and multi-canopied jungle, it sheltered the enemy's top level military and political headquarters and was teeming with logistic installations: supply bases, training centers, communications and broadcasting stations, dispensaries and even rest and recuperation camps. JUNCTION CITY's secondary objective was to convert this enemy base area into a series of friendly outposts, fire bases and an airfield.

Designed as an immediate follow-up of ATTLEBORO, Operation JUNCTION CITY was not initiated until 22 February 1967. For this operation, the U.S. command committed two infantry divisions comprising a total of 22 battalions, and 14 artillery battalions. ARVN participation, which had initially been planned to involve two infantry regiments, was much smaller, with only four infantry battalions.

The biggest result achieved by JUNCTION CITY was to inflict crippling losses to COSVN's main force unit, the CT-9 Division. Enemy casualties totalled 2,728 dead, 34 detained, and 139 rallied. His material losses included 100 crew-served and 491 individual weapons and in excess of 5,000 underground shelters and tunnels destroyed. Total friendly casualties amounted to only 1/10th of enemy dead and 1,500 wounded. Also, three airfields for C-130's and two Special Forces camps were established in the area of operation.

COSVN, the main target, was not destroyed. However, as a result of the operation, the enemy was forced to gradually move his installations and supplies west into a sanctuary on Cambodian territory. Since that time, the enemy never again boasted of impenetrable sanctuaries inside South Vietnam.

As for the Republic of Vietnam, the worst appeared to have passed, and as security was restored in the wake of search-and-destroy operations, the nation seemed to revive and improve. Gradually, the nation extricated itself from its political impasse and confidently tread its way toward stability and democracy. The first foundation stone was laid on September 1966 when a constitutional assembly was created through free elections. Its work culminated in a new constitution from which the Second Republic of Vietnam was born on 1 November 1967, exactly four years after the demise of the First.

As for the conduct of the war, the U.S. and RVN agreed to pursue a common strategy beginning in 1967. By mutual consent, the RVNAF took responsibility for the pacification effort, which was being stepped up in populous areas, while U.S. forces assumed the defense of the DMZ and border areas, interdicted North Vietnam's infiltration, and conducted search-and-destroy operations against enemy base areas.

Another significant effort jointly initiated by the U.S. and RVN took the form of a silent war against the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). A political arm of Communist insurgency, the VCI had always been active in support of the enemy's main force warfare. Its activities, however, seemed to have eluded the GVN's attention, chiefly because of the low VCI profile. As the pacification program was set in motion, it was realized that success could not be achieved as long as the VCI was free to collect taxes, assassinate our officials, move supplies, provide communications for main force units, make propaganda, and conduct terrorist actions. All of these activities were highly effective; they sustained the enemy's war effort and impeded ours. They took place not only in rural areas but also in urban centers. Elimination of the VCI therefore became mandatory if pacification was to succeed.

#### *Situation as of the Second Half of 1967*

In general, the situation of South Vietnam ameliorated remarkably during the second half of 1967. As a result of pacification efforts, by year's end, 67% of the South Vietnamese population was living in security under government control. This was significant progress when

compared to the level of population control under the First Republic (62%). Of the 242 districts, 222 were considered secure. Up to 8,650 hamlets had been completely pacified, and 3,500 were being contested. This was a remarkable achievement considering that there were a total of 12,600 hamlets across South Vietnam.

The national economy also recovered and seemed to prosper through increased U.S.-financed imports and the income generated by the presence of U.S. and Free World troops. As new jobs became available, unemployment sharply declined and consumer purchasing power rose. Business proliferated and expanded to the great profit of shrewd entrepreneurs, especially those who provided goods and services for U.S. troops.

Although the standard of living in urban areas seemed to rise, many thought that it was fictitious prosperity. Most disquieting, however, was the social ripple caused by the presence of 485,000 U.S. troops at the year's last count, notwithstanding about 60,000 "third-country" troops.

Total friendly troop level by year's end stood at 1.2 million, to include the RVNAF. Infantry forces benefited from the support of 3,100 U.S. helicopters in addition to tactical and strategic air. Beginning in April 1967, some B-52 missions were flown from Utapao Base in Thailand, a much shorter route compared to the 5,000 miles round trip from Guam. As a result, B-52 bombings increasingly terrorized enemy units.

An atmosphere of optimism seemed to prevail throughout. It was shared by almost everybody, to include the military and political leaders in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland, for one, was optimistic about progress and prospects for the immediate future. In a testimony before the U.S. Congress in November 1967, he expressed hopes that the U.S. would be able to initiate limited troop redeployments from South Vietnam by late 1968. Despite undeniable overall improvements in the military situation, there still existed troublesome spots, especially in the border areas.

In the DMZ area, the U.S. Marine Base at Con Thien had been under repeated enemy attacks since 27 September, and despite very effective air support, the enemy did not break contact until 49 days later. Con

Thien, Carroll, and Khe Sanh were major fire support bases manned by U.S. Marines along the southern edge of the DMZ. As strongpoints of a defense system, these bases were considered an effective shield to protect the two northern provinces of I Corps area, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, from major enemy penetrations and attacks. Among these bases, Khe Sanh was the most important because of its geographical position. Located in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province, Khe Sanh effectively controlled a valley area which was the crossroads of enemy infiltration routes from North Vietnam and from lower Laos. During the last quarter of 1967, there were many indications of a massive enemy force concentration around the Khe Sanh area involving several NVA divisions. Intelligence estimates all pointed toward an inevitable siege of the base. If the siege ever materialized, it would amount to a major showdown of forces which, in view of the base's position and reports on enemy force concentration, was very much reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu 13 years earlier.

In the III Corps area, on 27 October an ARVN battalion successfully held back an attack by a NVA regiment at Song Be in Phuoc Long Province near the Cambodian border. Two days later, a regiment of the enemy 9th Division struck against the district town of Loc Ninh in Binh Long Province. The enemy penetrated the district headquarters area and gained control of about half of it, but was finally expelled by the defenders, who were reinforced by elements of the 18th ARVN Division and strongly supported by U.S. tactical air. Despite this, fighting spread into the adjacent plantation areas and did not abate until several days later after intervention by a brigade of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. During this battle, the enemy lost in excess of 800 men.

In mid-November, another major battle took place in Dakto, northwest of Kontum City in the II Corps area, pitting four enemy regiments against four ARVN battalions and two U.S. infantry <sup>brigades</sup> battalions. The engagement lasted 22 days and eventually compelled the U.S. command to bring in the U.S. 173d Airborne Brigade from the coastal zone as reinforcement, which increased the total friendly commitment to division size. When the enemy finally broke contact, he had left behind over 1,400 dead, inflicted to a large extent by B-52 strikes.

By the end of 1967, according to ARVN intelligence estimates, total enemy strength in South Vietnam had reached approximately 323,000, not including those units in the infiltration pipeline. Of this total, approximately 130,000 were combat troops; the VCI and guerrilla forces accounted for 160,000 and the remaining was made up of administrative and rear service elements. The enemy order of battle consisted of nine infantry divisions distributed equally among the RVN I, II and III Corps areas, and accounting for among themselves and other separate units, a total of 35 infantry regiments and 20 artillery and air-defense regiments or 230 combat and 6 sapper battalions. These represented only confirmed units and if other reported but still unconfirmed units were taken into account, then total enemy force structure could be significantly larger.

In terms of armament, most remarkable was the Soviet assault rifle AK-47 which had become standard issue for almost all enemy combat units. Enemy firepower was also enhanced by a substantial number of self-propelled rockets, mostly 122-mm and 140-mm. From all indications, enemy forces were apparently undergoing intensified modernization in weaponry and equipment. In fact, the Soviet Union had committed herself by an agreement concluded with North Vietnam in September 1967, to provide more airplanes, artillery, antiaircraft weapons, rockets, and ammunition for her embattled ally. In October, North Vietnam itself confirmed that Red China and other countries of the Communist Bloc had also substantially increased their level of military and economic aid.

As statistics revealed at the end of 1967, enemy human losses for the entire year amounted to 87,534 dead and 27,178 rallied, 17,671 among them were combat troops. His material losses included 31,000 assorted weapons and 14,000 tons of rice. Both of these losses represented an increase of 50% compared to our 1966 estimates.

On the friendly side, casualties were much lighter. Total U.S. losses for the seven years beginning in 1961 and ending on 31 December 1967 amounted to 16,106. The RVNAF also incurred losses proportionately much smaller than the enemy's, but in the other war, it suffered much more significant losses that caused some concern to both U.S. and national authorities. Those were the heavy toll in administrative cadres at the

village and hamlet level where VCI terrorist activities increased significantly during the second half of 1967. During that short period alone, 4,000 village and hamlet officials were killed, 8,000 wounded and another 5,400 abducted.

The year 1968 began with a stream of intelligence reports on the enemy's imminent Winter-Spring campaign which bore all the signs of a major offensive. Despite the telltale signs, both the U.S. and RVN commands were still speculating on the probability of the enemy campaign, and neither was certain when it would take place or if it would even be conducted. No evidence obtained so far had ever pointed clearly toward the inevitability.

As early as 19 October 1967, the enemy had announced he would observe a 7-day truce on the Tet occasion. This was the longest truce ever proposed by the Communists. Many, especially U.S. and RVN intelligence analysts, had speculated that the enemy would take advantage of the truce period to move his units and supplies and complete the last stage of his preparations for the Winter-Spring campaign. Our intelligence also estimated that this campaign would be primarily directed against the Khe Sanh Base area where reports had indicated an enemy force concentration of at least three main force divisions.

To face this mounting pressure around Khe Sanh, the U.S. command deployed the 1st Air Cavalry Division and one brigade of the 101st Airborne Division from II Corps area to I Corps area to strengthen the defense of the two northernmost provinces. Then, on 21 January 1968, two NVA divisions initiated an attack on Khe Sanh Base with the support of artillery. Concurrently, enemy armor made its first appearance during the war when five PT-76's were sighted at Lang Vei, five miles west of Khe Sanh.

As the battle raged on fiercely, Khe Sanh drew most of the U.S. command's attention and concern. The RVN was much less concerned since no ARVN force had been involved prior to the siege. Not until the fighting had been in full progress did the RVN decide to deploy one ARVN Ranger battalion to the base, more for political than tactical reasons, evidently. For the RVN presence was deemed symbolically significant in a battle that eventually would make history.

Despite Khe Sanh and other developments in the military situation, the RVN population and even its leadership still felt reassured. The presence of one half million U.S. and Free World troops and U.S. air and firepower had convinced everybody that the Communists could hardly conduct anything big, and if they attempted to do so, they would surely incur heavy losses and a tragic defeat.

In any event, Tet was approaching and to most Vietnamese, everything else hardly mattered, including politics and the war. Even those who were deeply concerned about current events seemed carefree enough to join in the feverish pre-Tet shopping spree and preparations.

This year, the festive mood among Vietnamese was particularly accentuated. By contrast to previous years, the level of individual income seemed to have risen substantially as a result of increasing business and job opportunities brought about by the presence of U.S. and Free World troops. To add to the expectation of festivities ahead, the GVN removed the long ban on traditional firecrackers during Tet, which set in motion a booming business in manufacturing and imports. The wealthy Vietnamese were particularly fond of firecrackers imported from Hong Kong, whose machinegun-like noise was rhythmically accentuated by big booms that sounded like grenade explosions. The GVN Ministry of Information went all out in its public-relations campaign, distributing Tet presents for the troops and the underprivileged. Each gift parcel contained, in addition to the usual toilet articles, a horoscope predicting among other things a bright future for South Vietnam in the Year of the Monkey and, naturally, disaster for the Communists.

On New Year's Day, some piecemeal information was circulated among the Saigon population to the effect that the enemy was attacking a few cities across the country. But this information created only a small ripple of concern not strong enough to distract people from celebrating.

Then during the night, amid the deafening noise and echo of unending firecrackers, there were also heard more distinct, sharper reports of AK-47 and RPM automatic rifle rounds interspersed by B-40 rocket thuds. But no one seemed to recognize these ominous sounds until dawn when early commuters bumped into strange faces, strange uniforms and the

distinctive "Binh Tri Thien" rubber sandals in some city quarters. Then it was too late; the surprise had been almost total.

But very few of our citizens could believe their eyes. How could this have happened during a Tet truce and when the enemy was reported to be defecting everywhere? Only a few believed that the enemy was actually attacking Saigon, much less conducting coordinated attacks in 28 other cities throughout South Vietnam. Why was the enemy attacking the cities? How had he accomplished this maneuver? Had he changed his strategy and his rules of war?

## CHAPTER II

### North Vietnam's Change of Strategy and Preparations for the General Offensive-General Uprising

#### *Communist Strategy in South Vietnam During the 1965-1966 and 1966-1967 Dry Seasons*

The Communist's foremost concern after the rapid buildup of U.S. and Free World troops in South Vietnam was to search for an appropriate strategy to confront the new war situation.

This task was not an easy one. In the first place, Communist military leaders seemed to know very little about U.S. forces. In an article written in 1967 under the pen name of Truong Son, one of the highest ranking Communist military leaders in South Vietnam admitted that during the summer 1966, one year after the U.S. had begun its force buildup, COSVN and its key military commanders were still probing desperately to resolve puzzling questions concerning U.S. strategy and total strength, specific capabilities of each major U.S. unit and American rules of activity.

Nguyen Chi Thanh, commander of all Communist forces in the COSVN area of South Vietnam, analyzed the balance of forces and recognized that U.S. forces enjoyed three advantages: great numerical strength, a powerful air force, and sizeable artillery and armor. In his quest for an appropriate strategy to offset the imbalance of forces which was increasingly tilting in favor of the U.S.-RVN side, Thanh strongly advocated the large-scale offensive approach. He believed that his side should take advantage of the offensive momentum gained during the dry season prior to the introduction of U.S. forces and carry it on with major scale attacks by main force units. This strategic approach naturally called for a bigger commitment of NVA forces.

Studying U.S. military strategy in South Vietnam, Nguyen Chi Thanh concluded that this strategy was characterized by five main efforts:

1. To disperse Communist main force units and force them to revert to guerrilla warfare. It was for this reason that U.S. forces were conducting search-and-destroy operations on a large scale.

2. To spread Communist forces thin over the territory of South Vietnam and destroy them piecemeal with superior firepower. This effectively amounted to forcing the Communists to fight the war on U.S. terms and making them more vulnerable.

3. To expand the RVN rear areas through pacification, consolidate territorial control, and use these pacified areas as platforms from which to launch attacks against Communist-controlled areas.

4. To mop up and protect strategic lines of communication, especially vital links between bases in order to facilitate troop movement and ensure the effectiveness of offensive operations.

5. To isolate North Vietnam from the South and seek ways to cut off North Vietnamese military assistance for the South.

As a result, Thanh concluded that the most effective strategy was to conduct the offensive on all battlefronts continuously and with determination. He believed that this was the only way to gain the initiative in the conduct of the war.

Truong Son also shared this concept. Echoing Thanh's lines, he propounded that to make it impossible for the U.S. to take advantage of its superiority in air and firepower, the most effective approach would be to launch close-range attacks on headquarters, bases and troop cantonments on a massive scale. He was convinced that the Communist side would be much better off with this approach than hesitatingly searching for any other strategy which involved no immediate and decisive action. To waver, he argued, would bring forth disastrous consequences.

Successive surges of Communist activities during the 1965-1966 dry season seemed to reflect Nguyen Chi Thanh's strategy of determined confrontation. As these activities eventually ended in failure, especially after the tragic defeat at Plei Me, North Vietnam's military leaders began to voice doubts and criticize Thanh's conduct of the war.

Without directly incriminating Thanh, Vo Nguyen Giap made a cool assessment of the war situation in South Vietnam and advocated a temporary retrogression to defensive warfare. He believed that Communist

forces were not yet ready to confront American superiority in combat strength and firepower. A more appropriate strategy, he argued, would be to focus on small-scale, harassment attacks, guerrilla-style, consolidate the defense posture, and buy time for the activation, training and infiltration of additional NVA units. Only then would Communist forces in South Vietnam be prepared for the offensive phase of warfare.

Giap's moderate stance was rejected by Nguyen Chi Thanh. To drive home his displeasure with North Vietnam's minister of defense, Thanh acrimoniously attacked those he considered "conservative and captive of old methods and past experience." "Because these people could not see beyond their past," he charged, "they thought only of mechanically repeating the past and were incapable of analyzing the concrete local situation which required an entirely new kind of response."

The conflict that broke out between Giap and Thanh remained unresolved. After the 1966-1967 dry season during which U.S. forces successfully stepped up search-and-destroy operations, the old polemic resumed with rekindled impassion. Each kept reiterating his own arguments, and neither seemed amenable to a reconciled viewpoint. The enemy's quest for a most appropriate strategy to meet the U.S. challenge in South Vietnam thus remained an issue open to debates.

North Vietnam's military leaders aligned behind Vo Nguyen Giap continued to extol guerrilla activities which they believed had been successful in South Vietnam. They proudly pointed to the disruption of South Vietnam's pacification efforts, the obstruction of U.S. logistic buildup activities, the interdiction of vehicle traffic by ambushes on major lines of communications such as QL-14, QL-19, QL-21, and terrorist activities in major cities as irrefutable evidence of guerrilla warfare's effectiveness. This effectiveness, they emphasized, was producing a favorable, psychological impact and greatly enhanced Communist prestige throughout the world.

As Hanoi viewed it, the most resounding exploit among these activities was the shelling of the Independence Palace by 60-mm mortar and 57-mm recoilless rifle on the evening of 31 October 1967 when a formal reception was taking place. This was considered particularly important because the occasion marked not only the inauguration of South

Vietnam's Second Republic but also the presence of Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey.

In spite of Hanoi's official stance, Nguyen Chi Thanh did not renounce his conviction. In a last analysis written in May 1967 in which he made an assessment of the 1966-1967 dry season campaigns, Thanh still maintained his view although he was more cognizant of the role and value of guerrilla and local forces in South Vietnam.

This polemical impasse among Communist generals on which kind of strategy was best for the prosecution of the war was not resolved until the death of Nguyen Chi Thanh, which was announced on July 6, 1967.<sup>1</sup> What followed in the wake of his death seemed to vindicate Vo Nguyen Giap's viewpoint and took the war on a new course. Giap's viewpoint was thoroughly discussed in a lengthy article published in the "People's Army" daily on September 14 and 16, 1967 and subsequently broadcast by Hanoi Radio. The article was pompously entitled: "Big Victory, Gigantic Task."

*Vo Nguyen Giap's Strategic Viewpoint  
After the 1966-1967 Dry Season*

"Big Victory, Gigantic Task" was actually the fourth article Giap wrote during 1967. In terms of content, it was considered the most significant because it accurately expounded North Vietnam's military strategy for the years ahead. More importantly, it seemed to highlight Giap's viewpoints, which were going to provide guidance for Communist forces in South Vietnam. Unlike Nguyen Chi Thanh, Tran Van Tra, his successor, adhered completely with the policies and viewpoints of Vo Nguyen Giap.<sup>2</sup>

Viewed from another angle, Giap's proposition could be primarily construed as a military application of major policy lines laid down by

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<sup>1</sup>General Nguyen Chi Thanh reportedly died of B-52 bomb-inflicted injuries in his headquarters, COSVN, somewhere in Tay Ninh Province.

<sup>2</sup>Tran Van Tra was a Lieutenant General who served as Commander of COSVN until the fall of Saigon in 1975. Additionally during 1973 he headed the NLF Delegation to the Joint Military Commission.

Democratic Republic Resolution No. 13 which had been adopted by North Vietnam's Politbureau five months earlier. Its enforcing character was evident. Enemy prisoners and ralliers later confirmed that Communist forces in South Vietnam were all required to study Giap's article.

Appraising his main opponent, the U.S., Vo Nguyen Giap opened that the numerical strength and strong firepower of U.S. forces hardly helped them enjoy initiative in South Vietnam.

To substantiate this point, Giap demonstrated how people's war activities had kept them dispersed over vast areas, pointing as examples to the DMZ where U.S. Marines were spread thinly over a defense perimeter 500 to 600 kilometers long and the Central Highlands where U.S. Army units had to defend an area of more than 200 square kilometers. Giap recognized that U.S. firepower was strong and considerable, especially B-52's, but this firepower was not effective because in people's war, the objectives were scattered almost everywhere.

Strategically, Giap was convinced that in its role as the world's fire brigade, the U.S. could not maintain a large military force in South Vietnam for any long period. He believed that the U.S. would be worn down by the war and sooner or later would have to negotiate for its end on terms foreseen as advantageous to the Communist side.

As a result, U.S. and Free World troops were the primary targets for attack on the Communist list of priorities followed by U.S. bases and the U.S. logistic system. The Communist objective was to inflict as many casualties on U.S. troops as possible. Attacks on the RVNAF and the GVN were considered only as third and fourth priorities.

As regards the employment of forces for attack, Vo Nguyen Giap felt that the development of main forces had to be consistent with the local situation in each area. Therefore, he promoted the idea that main forces should be concentrated on a certain "strategic zone" instead of being dispersed over the entire battleground of South Vietnam.

According to Giap, the effectiveness of attacks depended on the judicious use of three kinds of forces: main, local, and guerrilla. These forces should be used in two different but very effective tactics: combined and independent. As Giap viewed it, the combined tactic relied on infantry as a primary force and the support of artillery, engineer

and sappers. The independent tactic, on the contrary, involved the use of small but highly combat-effective units in raids and shellings against U.S. bases and other strongpoints.

To prove his point, Giap discussed the combined tactic successfully used by Communist forces in Tri-Thien and the Central Highlands. This tactic, he argued, had forced the U.S. Command to remove its units from populated areas, especially the Mekong Delta, and redeploy them to these battlegrounds. This redeployment in turn curtailed the RVN pacification efforts in the populated areas. As a result, Giap claimed, the combined tactic had effectively wrecked the RVN scheme to eliminate the Communist infrastructure in the South.

Looking ahead and considering the future conduct of the war, Giap stressed that Communist forces in the South should place more emphasis on the coordinated use of their three forces and endeavor especially to expand and improve guerrilla forces as a major strategic requirement. He saw the potential of these guerrilla units becoming the strike forces of the future once they had grown strong and effective in every area.

Predicting the future course of events, Vo Nguyen Giap estimated that the United States would expand the war into Cambodia, Laos, and possibly North Vietnam also where a major landing of U.S. forces could take place. Giap's concern about a U.S. landing was genuine and oppressive enough to prompt him to warn that in such an event, Red China would probably intervene. In any event, he insinuated that North Vietnam would be well prepared to counter it.

Up to this time, Giap had always emphasized, that the war in South Vietnam was a protracted one and that it might last five, 10 or 20 years or even longer. This line of thought happened to be a mimic of Ho Chi Minh's declaration of policy made at the outbreak of the war. It was also reiterated by Nguyen Chi Thanh in his last article published in May 1967.

Giap's article, therefore, sounded like a confirmation of North Vietnam's unflinching belief in the doctrine of protracted warfare. His words were unfortunately taken at their face value and completely misled our analysts.

Not knowing that Giap's writing was intended to stimulate South

Vietnamese insurgents on the one hand, and to confuse our side as to North Vietnam's true course of action on the other, our analysts hastily concluded, in the light of Giap's article, that North Vietnam was yet to show that it was prepared for a general offensive in the near future. In all likelihood, they estimated, North Vietnam was still pursuing a protracted course of warfare and far from willing to bypass its intermediary phase.

In fact, the North Vietnamese leadership had already decided differently. There were several reasons for North Vietnam to make the strategic decision to launch a general offensive in South Vietnam during the 1967-1968 dry season.

*Reasons for the 1968 General Offensive  
and Communist Preparations*

Vo Nguyen Giap revealed that he was primarily concerned about two things. First, the United States would probably expand the war beyond South Vietnam's territory, and second, the GVN pacification and development program would be successful.<sup>3</sup>

Expansion of the war, especially into North Vietnam, was what the North Vietnamese leadership had sought to prevent all along because this would cause serious difficulties. For one thing, North Vietnam would have to extend its forces over a larger geographical area, which could include North Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. Since all of these areas of operation were strategically interdependent like links in a chain, a breakdown in any one link would disrupt the entire war effort.

A U.S. landing in the North could also bring about unfathomable consequences that might spell disaster for the regime. It could create an opportunity for suppressed popular antipathy to surface and possibly crystallize into insurrection, even among some high-ranking officials

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<sup>3</sup> North Vietnam had prepared to face a probable U.S. landing by organizing a para-military force and an extensive self-defense system. Its concern was such that the number one priority, economic production, had become secondary to national defense.

in the government. This fear was foremost in the minds of North Vietnam's leaders. As a testimony to it, a high-ranking enemy rallier later disclosed that in September 1967, Hanoi authorities arrested and detained in excess of 200 party members accused of being dissenters.

Most significant among those detained were Hoang Minh Chinh, superintendent of the School for Political Studies; Colonel Le Trung Nghia, director of North Vietnam's Central Intelligence Agency; and several other prominent officials, all arrested for the crime of heretical thoughts and opposition to the conduct of the war. At about the same time, North Vietnam also enacted a special law which imposed harsh punishments on "reactionary" crimes such as sabotage, spying, opposition to or obstruction of national defense enterprises.

Despite its advocacy of protracted warfare conceived as antidote to the U.S. strategy of quick victory, North Vietnam began to feel its increasingly debilitating impact. Even while it argued that the ratio of human losses, which stood at one American for every ten North Vietnamese, was more of a concern to the U.S., the Hanoi leadership was having second thoughts. In fact, the effect of accumulated damage and casualties that the North Vietnamese population was suffering had generated an undercurrent of bitterness and frustration that might jeopardize the long-term war effort. North Vietnam's economy, which had gained some headway toward recovery, was plunging downhill again as a result of stepped up U.S. bombings against targets of strategic significance. North Vietnam was therefore becoming increasingly dependent on Russia and Red China for military and economic aid. More difficult still for the Hanoi leadership was its position vis-à-vis these big brothers: how to steer a middle course between them without alienating either while both appeared to be heading toward aggravating animosity.

One week before the general offensive actually took place, the RVN suddenly obtained an unprecedented intelligence windfall in the person of a high-ranking enemy prisoner. He was Nam Dong, political commissar of the enemy MR-6 headquarters, captured in an ambush while he was on his way back from a conference at COSVN. After intensive interrogation lasting several weeks, Nam Dong disclosed that North Vietnam was switching its strategy from protracted warfare to general offensive-general

uprising, a radical departure from the conduct of the 1946-1954 First Indochina War. This sudden change in strategy was attributed by Nam Dong to four main reasons:

1. U.S. forces were much stronger than French forces. In the First Indochina War, the Dien Bien Phu victory by the Viet Minh had sufficed to bring about the Geneva Accords. In the present war, the Communists entertained no hopes of achieving a similar victory given the military might and firepower of the United States.

2. North Vietnam's strategy of "enveloping the cities with the rural areas," which had been successful during the First Indochina War, proved no longer effective in the face of combined U.S.-RVN efforts. This obsolescent strategy not only failed to bring about a decisive victory, it also retrogressed the war to Mao Tse Tung's first strategic phase of guerrilla warfare.

3. If protracted warfare was to continue in its present course, North Vietnam would surely incur increasing losses. In the long run, Hanoi feared that aggravating attrition in manpower and material resources might eventually cause the Communist regime in the North to collapse.

4. It was, therefore, about time for big and decisive actions in the South. In Hanoi's view, a general military offensive coupled with popular uprising had all the chances to succeed because the Communists would enjoy "two strategic opportunities and one tactical advantage."

One strategic opportunity was the U.S. presidential election in November 1968. Hanoi believed that in the event of a Communist victory, the Johnson administration, which had already run into difficulties because of strong domestic opposition to the war, would no longer be able to bring more troops to South Vietnam. Eventually, it might even be compelled to reduce U.S. troop strength and seek negotiations on terms advantageous to the Communist side.

The other strategic opportunity, according to Nam Dong, came from increasing opposition, both domestic and international, to U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Therefore, a big Communist victory would make this opposition stronger and more widespread, which in all likelihood, would force the U.S. to terminate its involvement in Vietnam against its own will.

As to the tactical advantage, the Communists felt certain they would be able to achieve surprise. Therefore, Nam Dong revealed, Hanoi had decided to launch the general offensive during the Tet holidays.

When asked about Hanoi's plans in the event of a defeat, Nam Dong reiterated Vo Nguyen Giap's belief that this offensive would be a success. But even if it turned out to be a defeat, Giap did not think it would adversely affect the war effort because Communist activities had always been rooted in the rural and mountainous areas. A failure in the cities, therefore, would simply amount to a return to the old redoubts.

The Communists were well aware that they would suffer great losses when attacking the cities. But losses were not North Vietnam's main concern, Nam Dong argued, because its capacities for replacement had been estimated at about three times those of South Vietnam.

There were other advantages which North Vietnam thought would favor the Communist side. It believed that the RVNAF was no longer combat-effective, both in defensive and offensive maneuvers. The South Vietnamese people, Hanoi believed, hated Americans and the Thieu government. They had manifested their antipathy through frequent demonstrations and violence and by joining such popular organizations as the National Salvation and Buddhist movements. Hanoi was thus convinced that they were ripe for insurrection and ready to join the Communist side in the event of a general offensive.

In all respects, Nam Dong's deposition proved to be reliable. His revelations corroborated several unconfirmed reports, for example, Vo Nguyen Giap's interest in the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Even though Giap wrote in his article that such an election was merely a device for the U.S. party in power to reshuffle its ranks and that the U.S. policy of aggression would remain unchanged regardless of the election outcome, Hanoi in reality was well aware of the fact that in an election year, a U.S. president was seldom inclined to make bold policy decisions.

As Giap saw it, United States policy toward Vietnam had always been predicated on an effort to prevent the political, economic and social life of the American people from being affected by the war. And he

predicted this policy was going to change as a result of the growing political dissent both in the United States and South Vietnam.

To his interpretation, the popular manifestations that had several times rocked South Vietnam's big cities were but indications of anti-government and anti-war feelings. They were also signs of popular sympathy toward Communist insurgency.

Hanoi's belief in the support of the South Vietnamese population was further enhanced by the RVN presidential election in the fall of 1967 in which the winning slate of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky obtained only 34% of the popular votes. Evidence of popular sympathy was obvious when the runner-up candidate, Truong Dinh Dzu, collected 17% of the ballots on the basis of his "restoring peace and ending the war" platform which happened to concur with the NLF political line.<sup>4</sup>

The Communists estimated therefore that a general offensive against South Vietnam's cities would have the inevitable effect of a catalyst which initiated a popular insurrection. They called that insurrection a "General Uprising" whose successful antecedent they had found in the August Revolution of 1945, believing that a repeat of that historical event could now be achieved through the same device of popular incitement. Besides, the basic objective of people's war as formulated by Mao Tse Tung's tenet always dictated that victory should have political significance and toward that end, be made to look like a popular rather than a military success. For these reasons, the military offensive planned for 1968 had been conceived under the conceptual formula of a "General Offensive-General Uprising."

To prepare for that big event, North Vietnam evidently required special assistance from Russia and Red China, not only in military hardware but also, though not as urgent, in economic aid. The insistent quest for this assistance eventually resulted in a military aid package agreement between Moscow and Hanoi in early September 1967. Russia agreed

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<sup>4</sup>There were a total of ten candidates for the 1967 presidential election.

to provide North Vietnam with additional warplanes, rockets, anti-aircraft artillery, armored vehicles, infantry weapons and ammunition. Then in October 1967, Hanoi announced that Communist bloc countries, especially Russia and Red China, had agreed to increase military and economic aid to North Vietnam.

This increased military aid eventually found its way into South Vietnam where Communist infantry forces, with the AK-47 assault rifle and B-40 rocket launcher now becoming standard issues, began to enjoy a marked advantage over the RVNAF in terms of firepower.<sup>5</sup>

But when did North Vietnam actually begin its preparations for the 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising? The earliest evidence of preparatory activity dated back to March or April 1967 when North Vietnam confirmed its switch of strategy through the promulgation of Resolution No. 13.

A short time later, the first instance of political preparation was detected in May the same year when COSVN summoned the deputy chairman of Saigon-Gia Dinh's Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals and assigned him the mission to contact and keep close touch with those personalities earmarked by the Communists to take part in future coalition government.

This intelligence report thus made it clear that one of the strategic objectives to be achieved was a coalition government. Destined to replace the current RVN government, it was to be established after the General Offensive-General Uprising had succeeded in Saigon. According to COSVN plans, this coalition government would order the RVNAF to cease combat in those areas where fighting was still indecisive. It was also this coalition government which would eventually initiate negotiations with the United States to solve pending political and military matters in the event of victory.

Apparently, however, the Communists foresaw that even if their

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<sup>5</sup>AK-47's were captured in South Vietnam for the first time in 1964. Then in late 1966, Communist forces began to use B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers. Despite their early appearance, these weapons were only issued piecemeal and did not become standard for all Communist units until the 1968 offensive.

offensive was to succeed, militarily, they could never actually defeat both the RVNAF and U.S. forces in South Vietnam. Therefore, as enemy ralliers and prisoners later disclosed, the offensive was primarily targeted against RVNAF and GVN installations. U.S. forces did not interest Communist strategists because the main objective was to destroy the RVNAF and overthrow the RVN government through country-wide popular revolt. In such an event, U.S. bases and installations would become virtually isolated and U.S. forces would never dare to use firepower indiscriminately against Communist forces hidden behind the popular shield. In the end, as the Communists calculated, the U.S. would have its hands so tied that it would be compelled to negotiate for troop withdrawal with the new (coalition) government of South Vietnam.

To hasten the collapse of the RVNAF and win popular support, it was mandatory for the Communist side to influence public opinion. In fact, the main Communist propaganda ploy used toward this objective was to try and convince the South Vietnamese that the U.S. had agreed to a coalition government as a solution for the political future of South Vietnam. Therefore, since their general offensive only sought to formalize that solution, by pre-arrangement Communist forces would not attack U.S. targets.

In September 1967, Saigon reeked with rumors that a high-ranking Communist cadre was apprehended by the Vietnamese police after making contact with the U.S. Embassy but was released shortly thereafter under U.S. pressure. These rumors led to another story that General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Director General of the National Police, had tendered his resignation in protest of U.S. intercession and pressure.

Although these stories were never substantiated, they persisted as doubts in the inquisitive minds of the Saigon people. So when the Communist offensive materialized, save for the unique sapper action against the U.S. Embassy, the suspicious Saigon people were very much interested in the fact that no other U.S. installations and particularly, no U.S. personnel ever came under enemy attack even though they moved freely in the city. And intriguingly enough, the suspicious minds drew their own conclusions.

In a further attempt to convince the South Vietnamese population, during September, the NLF repeatedly broadcast its political program, guaranteeing them among other things appealing freedom of religion, thought, association, movement, work, etc. Such was the extent of Communist preparations on the domestic political front.

Diplomatically, the Communist effort was equally significant. On 31 December 1967, North Vietnam's minister for foreign affairs declared that if the U.S. unconditionally ceased its bombings, North Vietnam would be prepared to talk. This sounding balloon sought to achieve a double purpose. First, it put a smoke screen on Hanoi's preparations for the general offensive and enhanced the belief espoused by U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders that peace talks would shortly take place. Second, a cessation of bombings would enable North Vietnam to speed up infiltration movements into the South during the dry season without great losses and in time for the offensive.

Other Communist announcements of extended truce during Christmas, New Year and Tet were intended to achieve the same purposes: diversion and a free hand in infiltration. In fact, the Communists did take advantage of the Christmas-New Year truce both to move supplies in place and to reconnoiter future battle sites. According to the revelations of Tam Ha, a high-ranking enemy cadre who rallied after the offensive had faltered, the commander of the 9th Division, the unit responsible for attacking Saigon, and his regimental commanders made several reconnoitering trips during this period of truce.

On the military front, as diversionary actions, Communist forces launched several large-scale attacks against Khe Sanh Base in the DMZ area, Dakto in the Central Highlands and Phuoc Long and Loc Ninh further south near the Cambodian border. All of these attacks were aimed at drawing the concern of U.S. and RVN military leaders, forcing them to bring forth reinforcements which would have been otherwise committed to the defense of populous and urban areas, hence and at the same time, creating favorable conditions for sapper penetrations into cities.

The attack on Loc Ninh, it was later known, was also intended to provide Communist forces with an opportunity to experiment with street fighting tactics on the one hand, and to test the RVNAF reactions and

use of firepower to relieve embattled cities and populous centers on the other.

To create further diversions and mislead our intelligence, Communist main forces remained in their usual areas of operation while local units continued to harass and try to pin down our forces by ground attacks and shellings across the country. According to the enemy's concept of operation, infiltrated sapper units were the primary forces employed to attack important targets and headquarters in cities with the support of local force battalions. Once these objectives had been occupied, the attacking elements were to hold them at all costs for a period from 2 to 5 days to afford main force units the necessary time to move in as reinforcements.

To muster additional forces in a short time, enemy plans also called for the capture of prisoner camps and the employment of liberated prisoners as local combatants. It was equally expected that attacking forces should look for rebellious elements among the local population and enlist their participation in combat. For that purpose, weapons and ammunition were to be moved into cities beforehand and used not only to resupply attacking forces but also to equip liberated prisoners and volunteers.

The infiltration of weapons and ammunition into cities was subjected to meticulous planning in order to avoid detection. Toward that end, it was coordinated with and took advantage of normal traffic movements of goods and merchandise regularly delivered to urban markets. These movements were accelerated during the busy trade periods such as Christmas, New Year, and particularly during the pre-Tet week when traffic was heaviest and control usually more relaxed.

Although various techniques of infiltration were used, the most common and reliable turned out to be the one practice so familiar to smugglers: double-decked trucks and boats and concealment beneath cargoes. Once the weapons, explosives and ammunition had been successfully smuggled in, they were to be distributed among the VCI members who would keep them in custody in their own houses or hide them in such unsuspected areas as cemeteries, drainage ditches and garbage dumps. An enemy prisoner who belonged to the 83d Rear Service Group, the unit in

charge of moving weapons, explosives, and ammunition into Saigon, later disclosed that by using this smuggling technique, he had been able to deliver his war cargoes in four trips; the first time in late November, the second time at Christmas and the last two times three days before Tet.

Another method of obtaining additional war materials that the enemy had planned to use was to steal them from ARVN units. Priority was also given to capturing armored vehicles and artillery pieces which the enemy estimated to be doubly useful. Not only could they be immediately used to support attacks and confuse ARVN troops, their employment by VC troops would also look as if ARVN combat arms had joined in the attacks on the insurgent side.

To speed up the collapse of the RVNAF, which the enemy had expected, and enlist the cooperation of some of their units, a scheme was devised to capture alive key RVNAF unit commanders. The enemy hoped that by forcing these commanders to give orders, RVNAF units under their command would either cease combat and capitulate or cooperate with his side.

Among the objectives that Communist forces were ordered to attack and hold at all costs, radio and TV broadcast stations were considered most vital to the effort of instigating a country-wide popular insurrection. Several propaganda programs had therefore been pre-recorded on tapes, slated to be transmitted over our airwaves during the first hours of the offensive. The most effective among these programs, according to enemy propagandists, was perhaps Ho Chi Minh's Tet greetings addressed to the South Vietnamese population.

On the eve of Tet, Hanoi Radio suddenly broadcast a short poem by Ho Chi Minh which it said was Ho's greetings. The poem reads:

"This Spring (Tet) is entirely different from previous ones  
Because every household is enjoying news of victory  
North and South are now forever reunited  
Forward! Total victory will be ours."

Intended to stimulate Communist troops in the south and exhort the South Vietnamese population into joining them in the General Offensive-General Uprising, the poem, especially the last line had also been conceived as code words for the attack, as enemy prisoners and ralliers later testified.

All preparations for attack were thus thoroughly made including the most minute details. The enemy was so sure of success that even Ho's poem was composed to sound as if victory had been achieved. Its implied present tense made it perfectly appropriate whether broadcast by Hanoi or Saigon Radio, before or during Tet.

To achieve tactical surprise, which Vo Nguyen Giap considered essential for success, the offensive operational plan was kept strictly confidential and disseminated to each subordinate level of execution only as requirements dictated. Executive members of COSVN knew of the plan some time in May 1967. Not until three months later was this plan disseminated to high-ranking enemy officials of the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh Special Zone. Actual preparations for combat, however, began only in November. From that time on, a flurry of activities took place and did not abate until the attack orders were issued.

During that time, enemy units received replacements while supplies were moved into areas of future operation. Communication-liaison, reconnaissance, and sapper teams extensively searched for access routes into cities and reconnoitered targets of attack. These routes were to become avenues of approach for main force units which would move in as soon as the main objectives had been secured. Maps were distributed to participating units and even though they were not militarily accurate, they did show GVN check points in detail. Also to minimize leaks, even participating units were informed that reconnaissance activities were being conducted with the sole purpose of selecting targets for sabotage or shellings.

In addition, several sapper units were given training in street combat tactics. However, the extent of this training was limited so as to maintain secrecy.

For those units that were slated to attack first, combat orders were issued only 48 to 72 hours prior to action. And contrary to usual operational practice, unit missions and terrain studies were simply discussed to an extent considered reasonably compatible with local combat requirements. As a result, no unit commander from the middle level down ever knew that the attack he was going to conduct was part of a country-wide general offensive.

Despite these precautions, such extensive preparations could not go entirely airtight and without leaving telltale traces. Most of these indications could be found in enemy documents that RVNAF and U.S. units happened to capture during operations.

The question that should naturally arise is to what extent did the RVN know in advance about the 1968 General Offensive-Uprising, and especially, why did everybody seem to agree that our enemy had achieved the element of surprise?

## CHAPTER III

### The RVN and Enemy Preparations

#### *How Much Did We Know*

In March 1967, ARVN units captured an enemy document during an operation in the III corps area. The document, which belonged to the enemy CT-5 Division, discussed summarily a plan of attack against Saigon. This plan was rudimentary and so amateurishly prepared that both ARVN and U.S. intelligence analysts disproved it as pure fantasy.

Two months later, the National Police apprehended a high-ranking enemy cadre by the name of Ba Tra. He declared being Deputy Chairman of the Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals for the Saigon-Cho Lon area. Among documents seized from his possession, there was a list naming a few members of the Saigon intelligentsia. Ba Tra disclosed that they were the personalities whom the NLF earmarked as cabinet members of a future coalition government of South Vietnam. His mission was to contact, persuade, and prepare them for selected cabinet rank positions in that government. This was the first time that information on a Communist-sponsored coalition government in South Vietnam was ever obtained. The motives behind this project and the objectives contemplated remained unclear, however.

Then in September the same year another enemy cadre with the name of Sau Ha was arrested and detained, again by the National Police. Submitted to intensive interrogation, Sau Ha disclosed he had the mission to contact the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to discuss certain important issues of mutual interest, including an exchange of prisoners. Nothing more was learned of what ensued except that, as rumors had it, he was claimed by the U.S. Embassy, which reportedly maintained that he was serving as a double agent. Along with Sau Ha, a few other enemy cadres

who had been detained for some time, were also released, all presumably upon U.S. requests.

Rumors thereafter circulated to the effect that some kind of private agreement had been reached between the U.S. and the VC but nobody seemed to know any specifics. Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Director General of the National Police, tendered his resignation to protest U.S. intrusion. However, his resignation was not accepted.

When North Vietnam made public the text of Vo Nguyen Giap's article "Big Victory, Giant Task", which Hanoi Radio carried from 14 to 16 September 1967 in its daily programs, South Vietnam immediately sensed that something new had been brought into enemy war policies. As usual, Communist rhetoric only made sense if read between the lines. A change in strategy seemed transparent enough, but nobody could decipher exactly what direction it would take.

Not until early October was ARVN intelligence able to obtain, through its agent network, the first lead of that new strategic direction: Resolution No. 13 of North Vietnam's Politbureau. In no nonsense terms, Resolution No. 13 called for victory in a short time and prescribed the strategy of large-scale offensive to achieve it.

A few days later, another document was seized from enemy Unit 16 during an operation in the III Corps Area. Unit 16 was COSVN's principal armor force. The document discussed training efforts concerning sapper tactics and how to operate ARVN armored vehicles.

On 25 October 1967, still another important enemy document fell into our hands in Tay Ninh Province. Dated 1 September 1967, it contained these introductory remarks "This is instructional material to help better understand the new situation and our new task." Apparently, it was intended for middle-level cadres. The document consisted of two parts, the first part outlining the main objective to be achieved by Communist forces: ending the American presence in South Vietnam. This was to be accomplished by the establishment of a coalition government, and the NLF would be playing a major role in arranging for the American exit. The second part of the document discussed the strategy of "three-

pronged offensive" designed to: (1) defeat the RVNAF; (2) destroy U.S. political and military institutions, and; (3) instigate a country-wide insurrection of the popular masses. This projected offensive bore the abbreviated designation TCK-TKN which stood for Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia (General Offensive-General Uprising).

On 3 November 1967, three days after the major battle of Dakto broke out fiercely northwest of Kontum, ARVN forces captured a document whose originator was the B-3 Front, the enemy headquarters that was directing the attack. The contents of this document discussed four objectives to be achieved by Communist forces in the Central Highlands:

(1) To destroy the bulk of U.S. forces in the Central Highlands, thereby forcing them to bring in reinforcements, and to destroy and disrupt a major part of ARVN forces here.

(2) To improve combat tactics and techniques and concentrate efforts on destroying enemy major units.

(3) To weaken enemy vitality, liberate as large an area as possible and consolidate the base system. Achieving this would amount to actually taking part in the political struggle for national liberation.

(4) To harmoniously coordinate efforts with other fronts across South Vietnam in order to implement correctly and unify our policies.

Another enemy document seized in Quang Tin Province, I Corps Area, in November provided substantial detail on the General Offensive-General Uprising that was about to unfold. A passage in the document read in fact: "This is the time we should proceed with our General Offensive-General Uprising. Through the coordinated use of military forces combined with a country-wide popular uprising, we shall attack every provincial city, and every district town, including the capital, Saigon, which we shall liberate."

At about the same time, information concerning a reorganization of enemy territorial control in South Vietnam began to stream in from our human intelligence network. Most significant among the features of this realignment were the changes brought into enemy territorial organizations in the RVN I and III Corps areas. In the I Corps area, the enemy Tri Thien-Hue Military Region was transformed into four

military subdivisions instead of two (Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces).

In the III Corps area, the enemy Military Region 4, which was in charge of Saigon-Cho Lon, was reorganized into 5 military subdivisions whose interboundaries converged on Saigon-Cho Lon. An enemy document classified "top secret", captured in January 1968 from COSVN's communication and transportation section, confirmed this new organizational realignment. (*Map 1*)

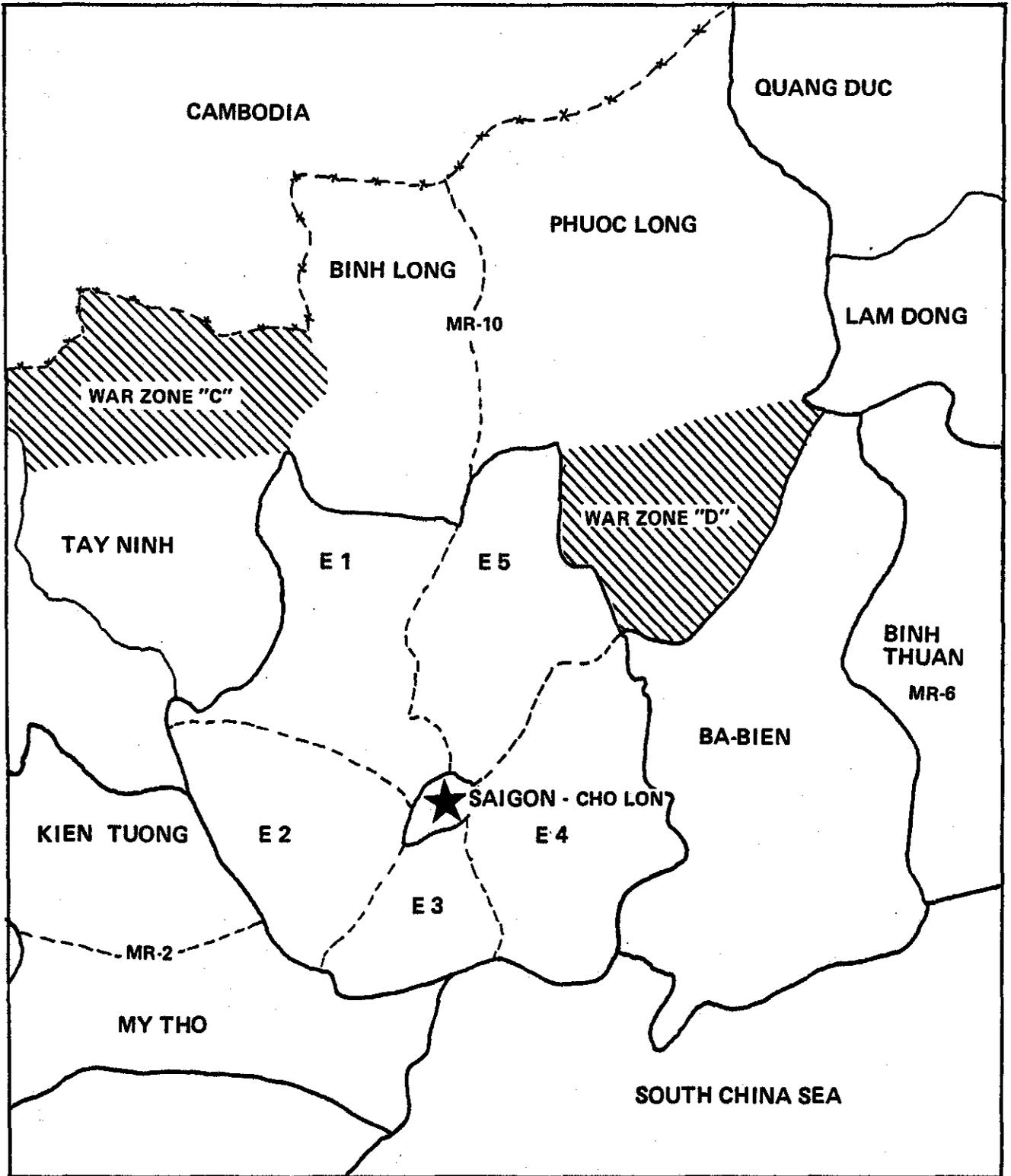
On 4 January 1968, during an operation in the Dakto area, the U.S. 4th Infantry Division captured another significant document. This was Operation Order No. 1 concerning an attack planned against Pleiku City before Tet.

In mid-January, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division also seized an enemy document from the Dong Nai Regiment in III Corps area concerning a plan of concerted attacks against Phu Cuong, the provincial capital of Binh Duong, the 5th ARVN Division Headquarters and the Headquarters, 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron, also in Binh Duong Province. This information was subsequently confirmed by an enemy rallier belonging to the 273d Regiment, 9th Division.

On 20 January 1968, the 23d ARVN Infantry Division captured from the enemy a plan of attack against Ban Me Thuot City. However, this plan did not specify when the attack would take place. The same day, the 22d ARVN Infantry Division also seized a document mentioning Qui Nhon as a target for attack.

At Qui Nhon, on 28 January, the local Military Security Service received from agent sources several reports concerning secret meetings held in the city by enemy cadres. During a cordon and search operation at two of the meeting places, MSS personnel apprehended 11 enemy cadres, both male and female, and seized from their possession two pre-recorded tapes. The tapes contained an appeal to the local population to take up arms and overthrow the government. They also recorded an announcement that "the Forces Struggling for Peace and Unification" already occupied Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang. Upon interrogation, the enemy cadres disclosed that Communist forces were going to attack Qui Nhon and many other cities during the Tet period.

Map 1 - Realignment of Enemy Military Regions



On the same day, 28 January, at III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa, the G-2 learned through intelligence sources that the enemy had moved one artillery and two infantry regiments to an area north of the city. The next morning, 29 January, the local population of Ho Nai, a suburban district town near Bien Hoa, reported the presence of a Communist unit, size unknown, in an area adjacent to this town.

On the night of 30 January, ARVN soldiers on guard duty at the main gate of III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa detected an enemy reconnaissance team nearby, opened fire, and killed one enemy armed with an AK-47. At Can Tho City, seat of IV Corps Headquarters, on the same night, enemy sappers disguised as tourists went into a hotel and rented rooms for the night. They were immediately discovered and arrested.

At 2100 hours on 30 January, a RF element tending an ambush on the Saigon defense perimeter captured an enemy soldier with an AK-47. The prisoner disclosed that Communist troops were going to attack Saigon, Tan Son Nhut Airbase, the Joint General Staff compound, and Saigon Radio station at 0300 hours on 31 January 1968. This happened to be just a few hours away.

And the attack on Saigon, as it turned out, began exactly at 0300 hours on 31 January 1968, in the small hours of the second day of Tet.

### *The Surprise: Why?*

One thing was certain. The enemy had really achieved the element of surprise.

The surprise was so total that even though he was informed of all developments in the enemy situation which I have summarized, President Thieu at the last minute did not take any significant action to counter the enemy's move. Apparently, he did not believe that things could develop as indicated by a few intelligence reports. At the time the fighting erupted across the country, he was at My Tho for a Tet reunion with his wife's family.

Even after fighting had erupted at several places in Saigon and despite an announcement made by Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky over Saigon

Radio in which he appealed to our population to stay calm, many people still thought that it was simply a coup. Many others said they could not believe their eyes when in the early morning of 31 January they saw troops in palm-leafed hats and black rubber sandals, Binh-Tri-Thien style. That these Communist troops could actually establish themselves in some of the city blocks of Saigon was simply an incredible accomplishment.

It was thus obvious that on our part, nobody was convinced that the Communists would launch a concerted offensive against cities and towns across the country during the Tet holidays. Even those considered the most knowledgeable about the enemy—our intelligence analysts—required better information on which to base their estimates.

But why this surprise? Why was it possible that no one in our intelligence establishment was adequately alarmed in the face of indications? From hindsight, it appears that our failure began with a wrong estimate of the enemy, and intelligence methodology may have been to some extent responsible for it. Our intelligence theory taught us that in estimating the enemy's probable course of action we should be primarily concerned with his capabilities and not his intentions. Capabilities, it was maintained, differed from intentions in that they were real, tangible facts, the conditions that made the execution of a certain course of action possible whereas intentions were often something vague, uncertain, hence unreliable. True to these teachings, our intelligence analysts dismissed those pieces of information they considered as just expressing an intention such as the enemy's plan of attack against cities, for example. Understandably, they were primarily interested to know whether the enemy had the capabilities for it.

With the information available to South Vietnam, it was true that the enemy hardly had the capabilities for such an ambitious action. Most intelligence data collected on the enemy during the period prior to the offensive either indicated that his units were facing difficulties or that the morale of his troops had declined markedly. Furthermore, given the prevailing balance of forces and the deployment and disposition of enemy main force units at that time, which showed that they were still confined to outlying bases far removed from urban centers, there was

little possibility that the enemy could initiate a general offensive regardless of his intention. Our analysts further argued that even though the enemy was bold enough to attack and successfully occupy part of a city or a district town, how was he ever capable of holding it for any long period? Besides, it was hardly possible that the enemy would want to incur inevitable heavy losses for something predictably ephemeral. And on top of all that, we believed that the enemy did not even have the capability to establish, much less operate, an administration where he might gain temporary control.

Some of our analysts even went as far as believing that the enemy was actually reverting to the first or defensive phase of his war strategy. They pointed convincingly to such indications as COSVN Headquarters being moved to Cambodia and the enemy being forced to carve out new bases in that sanctuary as a result of destructive U.S. search-and-destroy operations being conducted into long-established bases such as War Zones C and D and the Iron Triangle. To pass from Stage One to the General Offensive or Stage Three, they argued, the enemy had to go through Stage Two, which was a period of contention or holding out. They also emphasized that this was a certainty which conformed to Communist warfare rules.

This argument seemed plausible enough if Vietnamese Communists strictly adhered to Red China's precepts of people's war strategy, which our intelligence analysts usually believed they would. Indeed, until shortly before the Tet Offensive, all of our intelligence estimates had been based on the conviction that the enemy was pursuing Lin Piao's strategy, which prescribed "using the rural areas to encircle and strangle the cities," implying insurgency or guerrilla warfare. Our analysts at that time had never visualized the proposition of "attacking the cities to liberate rural areas."

Vo Nguyen Giap's article "Big Victory, Giant Task" also contributed its part to the serious error committed by our intelligence analysts. The idea which influenced them most was Giap's contention that the war was going to last many more years. With this clue, they finally concluded that the General Offensive-General Uprising to which enemy documents referred would not materialize in the immediate future.

Such an assessment eventually became a conviction, a certainty that overshadowed information suggesting indications of a general offensive. This certainty persisted in spite of reports on enemy training for street combat and behavior toward the South Vietnamese urban population which were the type of information we had never had before since the beginning of the war.

Another significant omission which partly accounted for our lack of perception was that the intelligence data collected were never assembled into a cohesive mosaic or synthesized into a general estimate that could provide us with a basis on which to construct a collection plan seeking to obtain all we needed to know about the enemy's intended general offensive. No RVN intelligence agency, military or civilian, to my knowledge, had ever attempted or even received any instruction to do this.

But the biggest shortcoming of our intelligence structure was perhaps the almost total lack of coordination between agencies, or the lack of a coordinating agency. This shortcoming came to our attention as early as in 1960-1961, was never remedied, and remained a significant weakness until 1968 despite the creation of the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), which was directly under presidential control.

Every intelligence agency, therefore, functioned independently and rarely shared its information with others. The National Police, for example, kept for itself those data concerning the coalition government plan and valuable depositions made by such important sources as Ba Tra and Sau Ha. Then, the vital information on the imminent offensive, which resulted from the arrest of Nam Dong a few days before Tet, also locked itself in the MSS files like some sort of private property and was never reported or communicated to the J-2, Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces.

The same shortcoming existed even in the military intelligence reporting system. ARVN units which happened to capture enemy documents seldom reported and dispatched them in time. Some G-2's at the division level and especially at corps level and many sector S-2's did not consider it a duty obligation to report what they collected to the JGS J-2 Division. This deplorable omission was sometimes condoned or even

encouraged by certain field commanders who found it beneficial for their good standing to communicate the more important pieces of information directly to the Independence Palace. Influenced by his commander's reckless attitude, naturally the G-2 or S-2 was reluctant to contact the JGS and often felt he could dispense altogether with reporting. In two substantiated cases, a corps G-2 was expressly told by his commander not to bother with reporting to higher headquarters.

Then, despite the abundance of communications facilities made available for ARVN use by U.S. forces, the military intelligence system was never authorized any sole-purpose channels for intelligence reporting by our JGS. This lack of dedicated communications continued to hinder our intelligence reporting even after the complete transfer of U.S. communications assets.

Intelligence coordination between the JGS and MACV during this period was also not firmly established as far as estimates were concerned. Although normal exchange of current information occurred as a matter of standing operating procedure at all combined intelligence agencies, there was definitely a lack of sharing when it came to important information of immediate consequence or those pertaining to the personal estimate of each intelligence chief. The fact that U.S. intelligence advisers at ARVN field units usually received and dispatched information to MACV J-2 much more rapidly than their counterparts did to J-2, JGS also accounted in part for the usual lack of coordination at this level.

As for U.S. military intelligence, there was no doubt that it was highly successful on collecting information through technical facilities. At the time of the 1968 Tet offensive, however, the United States did not appear to be as capable in the production of intelligence as during the subsequent stages of the war. Additionally it appeared that U.S. intelligence suffered from the same subjectivity that plagued its ARVN counterpart. Obviously, U.S. military intelligence also failed to come to any solid conclusion as far as the scope, size, and timing of the enemy offensive were concerned.

As a result of all this, information became piecemeal, incomplete, untimely, and consequently did not always interest our intelligence

experts. Interpretations of this kind of information, therefore, were vague and often erroneous. The attack against Loc Ninh, for example, was viewed as an enemy political ploy to overshadow the inauguration of South Vietnam's Second Republic. In the same vein, the realignment of enemy territorial organization in the RVN I and III Corps areas was interpreted as an effort by our enemy to control his infrastructure activities more effectively. Then the 7-day truce which had been declared for Christmas and New Year by the Communists was construed by our analysts as a possible time frame for enemy attack. But the attack did not materialize until after the enemy had taken advantage of that period of truce to move supplies, redeploy troops, reconnoiter targets and finalize his preparations.

In the light of available information, our RVN intelligence estimated, therefore, that the Communists would launch a major offensive campaign whose principal objectives were Khe Sanh Base, the strongpoints south of the DMZ and other friendly bases along the western borders of II and III Corps areas.

This estimate coincided with the personal views of our field commanders and national leaders. In this regard, there seemed to be a certain mutual effect which regulated their thinking to such an extent that they could hardly deviate from each other. Our national leaders, who were impressed and influenced by rousing public and press speculations on the possibility of a second Dien Bien Phu battle, evidently accepted this possibility, especially when no intelligence agency produced anything to disprove it. Influenced in their turn by the near conviction of the national leaders, our South Vietnamese intelligence agencies came up with estimates that went along similar lines, avoiding those they thought would contradict their superiors. In the screening process, they even abstained from selecting those intelligence data which related to the possibility that the enemy would strike in the heart of our cities during the Tet holidays.

The end of it all led to the decision to deploy two airborne battalions, our last reserves, to the I Corps area; the JGS had approved this displacement based on a MACV recommendation that the DMZ situation

required additional ARVN troops. That these battalions happened to be in Saigon the day the offensive took place was simply due to the unavailability of air transportation.

Just a few days before Tet, President Thieu decided to reduce the RVN truce to 36 hours. He had been spurred into making that decision by the U.S. Embassy and particularly General Westmoreland, who informed him that the situation bore several indications of an imminent enemy offensive. But even then nobody seemed to believe that Saigon and other cities would be the major objectives of this offensive and that the Tet truce would be violated. President Thieu left for My Tho in the afternoon of 29 January to celebrate Tet. His last decision before departing Saigon was to concur with MACV on cancelling the truce for the two northernmost provinces of the I Corps area.

Orders were thus given to all RVNAF units to confine 50% of their troop strength to barracks. But special Tet leaves, which had been allowed to 5% of each unit's strength, were not cancelled. In some areas, defensive measures were taken based on division commanders' and province chiefs' own estimates of the local situation.

At Ban Me Thuot, the 23d ARVN Division commander cancelled all Tet leaves and consolidated the defense of the city in the light of captured enemy documents. At Binh Duong, the 5th Division commander and the province chief took similar measures after they had come upon indications of an imminent attack. The division called back one of its battalions at Song Be, Phuoc Long Province, to reinforce the defense of Binh Duong. The 18th ARVN Division at Xuan Loc also called back to headquarters two of its battalions from outlying areas to be used as reserves and a reaction force.

On the afternoon of 29 January, contents of the two pre-recorded tapes seized from the enemy at Qui Nhon by the MSS were transmitted back to II Corps Headquarters and the Joint Operations Center, JGS, via hot lines. General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the JGS, immediately ordered his J-3 to call all corps commanders, warn them of the imminent enemy attack and instruct them to take appropriate defensive measures. Whether all corps commanders took this warning seriously or how they implemented the J-3 instructions were not clear at the time. In any event, many ARVN

commanders later claimed that this warning failed to communicate any true sense of emergency.

These orders were subsequently relayed throughout the hierarchy, but apparently they did not reach down to every level because of communications difficulties. Unit commanders hastily tried to call back the men on leave, but by that time those who had long journeys to make had already left.

At that tardy moment, even those who did not have to take up immediate guard or alert duties, had managed to slip away to their families in town. Tet was but a few hours away. Despite the warning, the prevailing feeling among ARVN troops was one of suspended belief. Very few in fact took it seriously

At midnight on 30 January, as tradition would have it, every household began celebrating Tet. Two hours later, the first attack of the enemy general offensive broke out at Nha Trang. During the night, all five provincial capitals of II Corps area came under enemy fire.

News of these attacks did not impart any sense of alert among the people of Saigon, who like those of other cities not yet under attack, were carried away by the festive mood. Saigon Radio, however, interrupted its regular program at 0945 hours to announce the cancellation of the Tet truce in view of the enemy's blatant violations. At the Capital Military District, orders were issued to confine all troops to barracks. In the afternoon, all major accesses to Saigon were subjected to tight control. To reinforce its defenses the CMD headquarters requested and obtained the use of one airborne battalion as reserves. It immediately deployed one company to the Chi Hoa Prison, and another to the Saigon National Radio Station. To avoid arousing curiosity among the Saigon people, this airborne company took up alert duties at the MSS compound, which was adjacent to the radio station. Two other companies of this battalion were held as reserve at CMD headquarters.

At Tan Son Nhut airbase, no change occurred in its defenses. The base continued to be defended by the 2d Service Battalion and air force security forces, as usual; but the airborne companies that were waiting for air transport to take them to Da Nang the next morning, 31 January, were present on the base that TET New Year Day in full battle dress.

In downtown Saigon, field police forces took up defense positions at vital street intersections. Their presence was hardly noticed by the few people who ventured outside on that day. The uninterrupted noise of firecrackers continued to echo throughout the city at all hours, even during the night. And when the first enemy rounds were fired at 0200 on 1 February, they blended into this noisy background. A few hours earlier, at around midnight, many Saigon people saw groups of armed men moving silently in the dark in some street blocks. Most thought that perhaps a coup was unfolding.

And so the attack of Saigon, which rolled up the curtain for the country-wide 1968 enemy offensive, took place at a time and against objectives our people least expected.

## CHAPTER IV

### The General Offensive, Phase I

#### *A Bird's-Eye View*

The country-wide attacks that made up the 1968 TET Offensive did not all occur at the same time. Twenty-four hours before the actual offensive began, five provincial capitals of II Corps area, Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot, Kontum, Pleiku, and Qui Nhon, and Da Nang City in I Corps area were already under attack.

It was difficult to determine why this apparent lack of coordination existed. Some attributed it to an error in orders received by the B-3 Front and Headquarters, MR-5. However, this theory could not hold because the enemy MR-5 area included not only Da Nang and Qui Nhon but also Quang Ngai, Quang Tin and Phu Yen, which were not attacked until a day later.

Others maintained that this was a deliberate enemy scheme designed to deceive our side as to the real objectives of the offensive. However, since tactical surprise had been the enemy's foremost consideration, it was difficult to accept this theory as valid. Had the enemy launched all attacks at the same time, the surprise to our side would have been greater; then Saigon and Hue would have been even more vulnerable because precautionary measures would have been virtually non-existent. In fact, it was precisely these early attacks that enabled the RVN to take some appropriate though tardy defensive measures.

No one seemed therefore able to provide a logical explanation for these early attacks. By general consensus, it was agreed that the date of the offensive was 31 January 1968, the day the enemy attacked Saigon, Cholon and Gia Dinh.

Other cities and provincial capitals that came under attack on the same day as Saigon were: Quang Tri, Hue, Quang Tin, Quang Ngai in

I Corps area, Phan Thiet in II Corps area, and Can Tho and Vinh Long in IV Corps area.

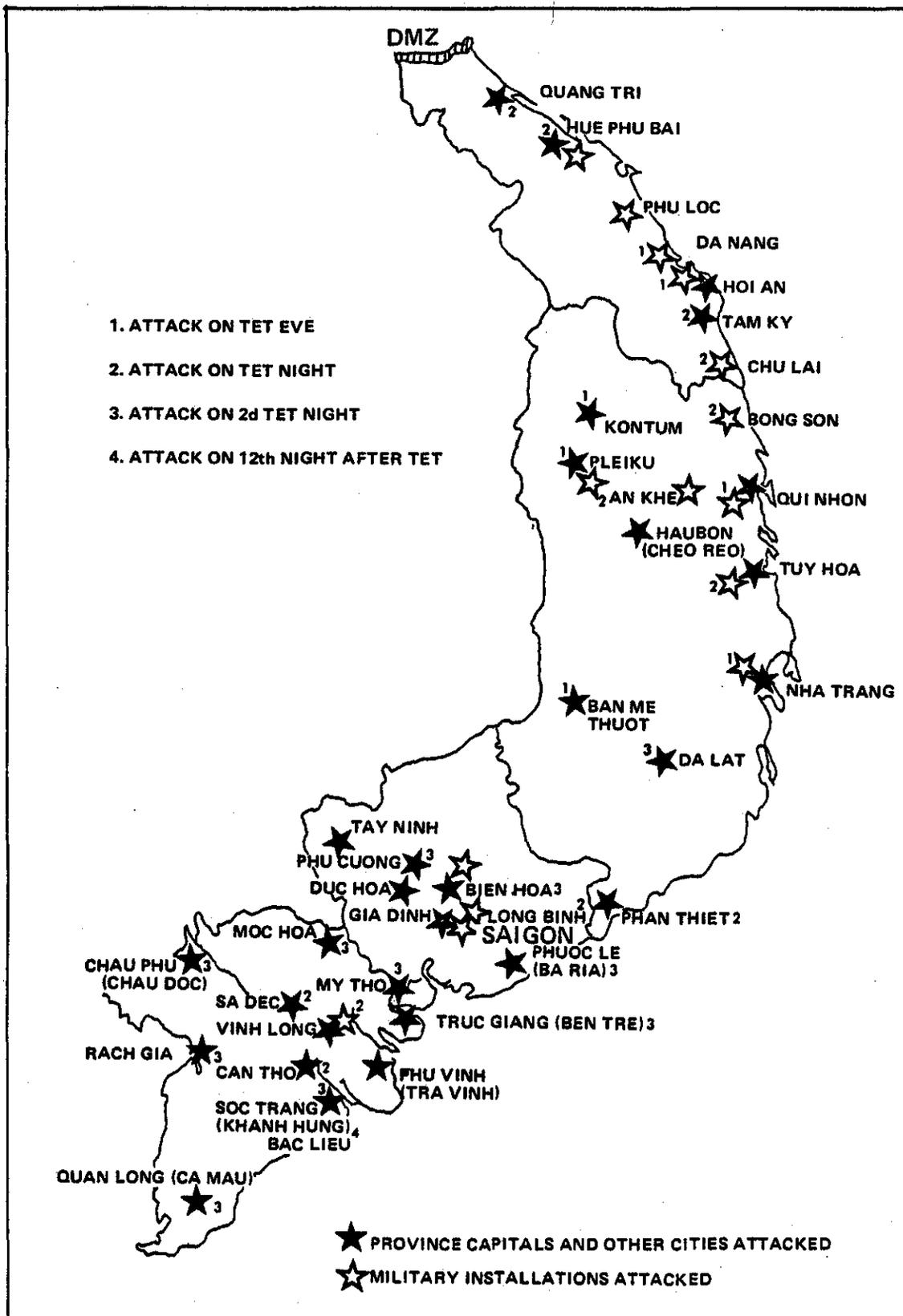
The next day, 1 February, the enemy initiated attacks on Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, Binh Duong in III Corps area, and Kien Hoa, Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, Kien Giang, Vinh Binh, and Kien Tuong in IV Corps area. The latest attack in date which took place on 10 February, was on Bac Lieu in IV Corps area. In total, 28 out of South Vietnam's 48 cities and provincial capitals had become objectives of the general offensive. The ones that had been spared were regarded by the enemy as insignificant and subjected only to minor harassments. (Map 2)

Regardless of the size and importance of the objective, the enemy followed exactly the same pattern of attack. His primary targets remained without exception the highest local RVNAF headquarters and the radio broadcasting station. The forces that conducted the initial attack were all local units, sappers and VCI elements. Their mission was to capture and hold designated targets until reinforcements could move in from outside the city. Accompanying the attacking elements were political cadres who had the responsibility to coax the local population into rebellion.

At Da Nang, the seat of I Corps Headquarters and one of the first two objectives to come under attack in this corps area, Colonel Nguyen Duy Hinh, acting Chief of Staff, I Corps, received a phone call from the JGS in Saigon at about 2000 on 29 January. The JGS informed him that the enemy would probably initiate an increased surge of activities and admonished caution and defensive measures. After reporting to Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, I Corps Commander, and acting on his instructions, Colonel Hinh informed all subordinate units and asked them to carry out the JGS orders.

At about 0300 on 30 January, the enemy began to attack Hoi An, the provincial capital of Quang Nam, some 30 km south of Da Nang. Half an hour later, Colonel Hinh heard many shots being fired at the I Corps Headquarters. From his house only 500 meters away, he saw brilliant tracers ricocheting upward from the stream of cross fire. "Enemy attack," he thought to himself as he picked up the telephone to inform the I Corps commander. As Colonel Hinh vividly recalled, General Lam's first

Map 2 – The 1968 Tet Offensive, Phase I



reaction was an expression of incredulity; "baloney, baloney," he said, interrupting Colonel Hinh's verbal report. Checking with I Corps Headquarters, Colonel Hinh learned that an enemy sapper squad had penetrated the headquarters compound, and ARVN soldiers on guard and alert duties were reacting forcefully, killing at least one. Despite its successful penetration, the enemy squad did not seem very active. Trying to hold ground, it fought a delaying action, apparently waiting for a reinforcement that never came. At that time, this reinforcement was being tied up in an attack on the Hoa Vang district town just south of Da Nang. Faced with a fierce resistance by defending forces, that enemy unit was being pinned down, unable to make headway or fall back. When morning came, an ARVN Ranger battalion, which had just returned from an operational mission and was resting at its base near Da Nang, was deployed to Hoa Vang as a relief force together with an ARVN armor element. From the Hoa Cam Training Center nearby, another relief element moved in. At the same time tactical air bombed and strafed enemy positions at Hoa Vang despite their proximity to friendly troops. The enemy attack on Da Nang ended rapidly.

In II Corps area, Nha Trang was the first city to be attacked during the 1968 general offensive. The enemy attack took place at 0030 on 31 January, just after the Tet midnight rite had been performed. The enemy at first attacked the Naval Training Center, and as the fighting went on, he began to inject troops into the city for other attacks. His combat force consisted of elements of five sapper companies totalling approximately 160 men, supported by a mortar and recoilless rifle company and about 100 VCI members implanted in the city. As was the case in other areas, the attacking elements had been promised reinforcement by main force units. But in Nha Trang, the enemy never suspected that the reaction by defending forces would be so fierce. Even with just 20 men the Nha Trang radio station fought on, and not one enemy sapper was able to penetrate inside. With the immediate relief provided by an ARVN Ranger battalion and three Special Forces detachments, Nha Trang was free of enemy just 12 hours after the attack was initiated. An added reason for the rapid failure of the attack was that several VCI elements in the city were apprehended

before they had time to participate. This was made possible through the revelations of enemy prisoners under interrogation.

At Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot, the three Central Highlands provincial cities which all came under attack on the day before the offensive began, the enemy pattern of attack was almost identical. At each place, sapper elements would penetrate the city first, to be immediately followed by a main force regiment. Two battalions of the 24th NVA Regiment made some headway into Kontum City but were subsequently driven out. The third battalion of this regiment was held in check outside the city.

At Pleiku, the enemy H-15 Local Force Battalion had received orders to coordinate the attack with the NVA 95B Regiment, but this regiment failed to show up at the rendezvous. Orders were subsequently changed for the H-15 Battalion to proceed with the attack alone. It was then 0930 in the morning. Having to move across a large open field to get into Pleiku, the H-15 Battalion became an easy target for an ARVN armor unit implanted on the outskirts of the city. During the battle, the enemy battalion commander was taken prisoner.

At Ban Me Thuot, Colonel Truong Quang An, 23d ARVN Division commander, had expected the enemy attack on the city in the light of available intelligence reports. He had therefore cancelled all Tet leaves and prepared subordinate units for the defense. On the night the enemy launched his attack, the 23d Division even had patrols on the move at a distance of up to 10 km from the city. When an enemy unit succeeded nevertheless in penetrating the city, the friendly reaction with armor and reconnaissance elements was immediate and forceful. Despite this, the battle for Ban Me Thuot lasted nine days. During that time, the NVA 33d Regiment penetrated into the city four times but was driven back each time.

At Qui Nhon, the defending forces were unable to prevent enemy penetration into the city, despite the fact that they had discovered the enemy scheme of attack through the capture of 11 VCI members and a pre-recorded tape destined to be broadcast on Qui Nhon Radio. Enemy sappers attacked the city exactly as planned. In addition, they occupied the local MSS building, released the 11 detainees and even

captured the MSS chief, an ARVN captain who had directed the successful raid and arrested these VCI members. After being released, these enemy cadres joined in the attack, but several were killed in the process. The Qui Nhon radio station, being one of the enemy's primary targets, had been overrun during the first hours of the attack. The enemy controlled this station but was never able to broadcast the pre-recorded announcement for the simple reason that he could not recover the tape.

Enemy forces conducting the attack on Qui Nhon were made up of one local force battalion and one sapper battalion. The defending forces meanwhile consisted of a single RF company immediately available when the attack began but later reinforced by a reconnaissance company, an engineer company and a special forces company. They were eventually supported by two companies of the ROK Tiger Division.

When attacking Qui Nhon, the enemy had hoped to receive a helping hand from the local population who, from years of living under Viet Minh control prior to 1954, had been presumed to be largely pro-Communist. However, this helping hand was never extended despite enemy coaxing. The enemy attack on Qui Nhon, therefore, ended in dismal failure.

In the III Corps area, the enemy concentrated his primary effort on Saigon, Cho Long and Gia Dinh, which made up the Saigon metropolitan area. His effort here was closely coordinated with other attacks throughout the corps area, which, according to plans, proceeded at a frenetic pace in Bien Hoa, Binh Duong, Long Khanh, Long An, and Hau Nghia.

In the IV Corps area, enemy attacks were conducted against 13 out of 16 provincial cities. The offensive was therefore most extensive despite the absence of NVA units. The enemy plan of attack in this corps area included a scheme to capture alive the commanders of the 7th and 9th ARVN Divisions. As it was later revealed, enemy sappers had planned to attack the residence of the 9th Division commander and expected to capture him and his family there. They planned next to have him summon his deputy and chief of staff and force all three to order the divisional units into submission. The enemy scheme eventually

failed because the 9th Division commander remained at his headquarters on the night of the attack and personally directed ARVN efforts to clear the town of enemy sappers.

Enemy forces in the Mekong Delta included approximately 20 local force battalions. All of them participated in the offensive. The fighting was especially heavy at Vinh Long, Vinh Binh, My Tho and Can Tho.

Can Tho was the seat of IV Corps Headquarters. Despite the capture of several enemy sappers disguised as tourists in a downtown hotel on the eve of the attack, no alert orders were issued. Elements of two enemy local force battalions succeeded therefore to penetrate the outskirts of the city two days in advance without being detected. At Can Tho, the targets of attack remained the same as elsewhere: Corps headquarters, the radio station and a few other places of particular significance to enemy propaganda efforts such as the local university and shopping center. However, friendly forces reacted with determination and drove the enemy out of the city within just one day.

At Vinh Binh, friendly forces also took just one day to clear the attackers. At Vinh Long, fighting was heavier and lasted for several days because three enemy battalions had penetrated the city. But the enemy seemed to concentrate his efforts on My Tho, where he committed three battalions and a sapper company and held one battalion in reserve. The 7th Division succeeded nevertheless in clearing this substantial enemy force from My Tho with the support provided by a U.S. mobile riverine unit and inflicted heavy losses to the enemy.

Despite heavy fighting at some places, in general the enemy's offensive seemed to run out of steam by the end of the first week. In most provincial cities, friendly control was thoroughly regained in less than one week. Two exceptions to this were Saigon and Hue, the current and ancient capitals of the nation, respectively. The political significance of these cities was evident enough. It was where the enemy concentrated most of his determined efforts.

## *The Attack on Saigon*

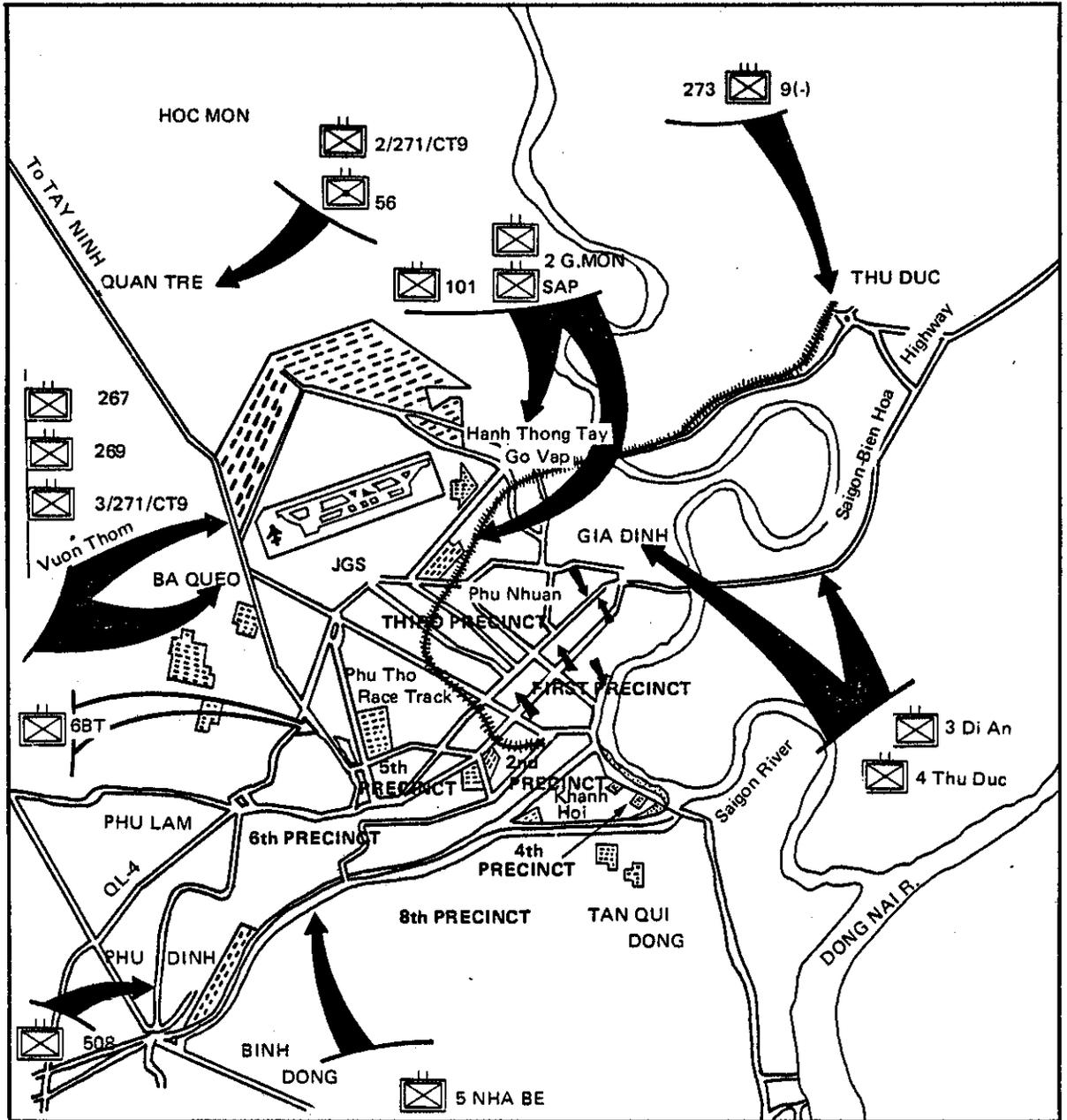
As the enemy offensive unfolded in Saigon during the night of Tet's first day (31 January 1968) six major objectives became apparent: the RVNAF Joint General Staff, the Independence Palace, the U.S. Embassy, Tan Son Nhut airbase, the National Broadcasting Station and the Vietnamese Navy Headquarters. Attacks in other areas near Saigon could be considered supporting efforts. (*Map 3*)

Except for Tan Son Nhut, the primary enemy force that conducted attacks against these objectives was the C-10 City Sapper Battalion. With a strength of 250, the C-10 Battalion consisted entirely of men who were living under a perfect cover within Saigon; they were, therefore, thoroughly familiar with city life and the streets of Saigon. Some of them were cyclopousse or taxicab drivers.

The C-10 Battalion's mission was to attack and gain control of these six objectives and hold them for 48 hours. During that period, other local force battalions would be maneuvering into Saigon to relieve the sappers. All the men in C-10 had been promised instant promotion after the objectives were occupied. This stimulation had been deemed necessary, given the suicidal nature of their mission. The platoon leader who directed the attack on gate No. 5 of the JGS compound, for example, later revealed that in case of success, he would be promoted to battalion commander. His specific mission was to penetrate gate No. 5, occupy the general officers' quarters, and capture alive those generals found at home or detain their family members as hostages.

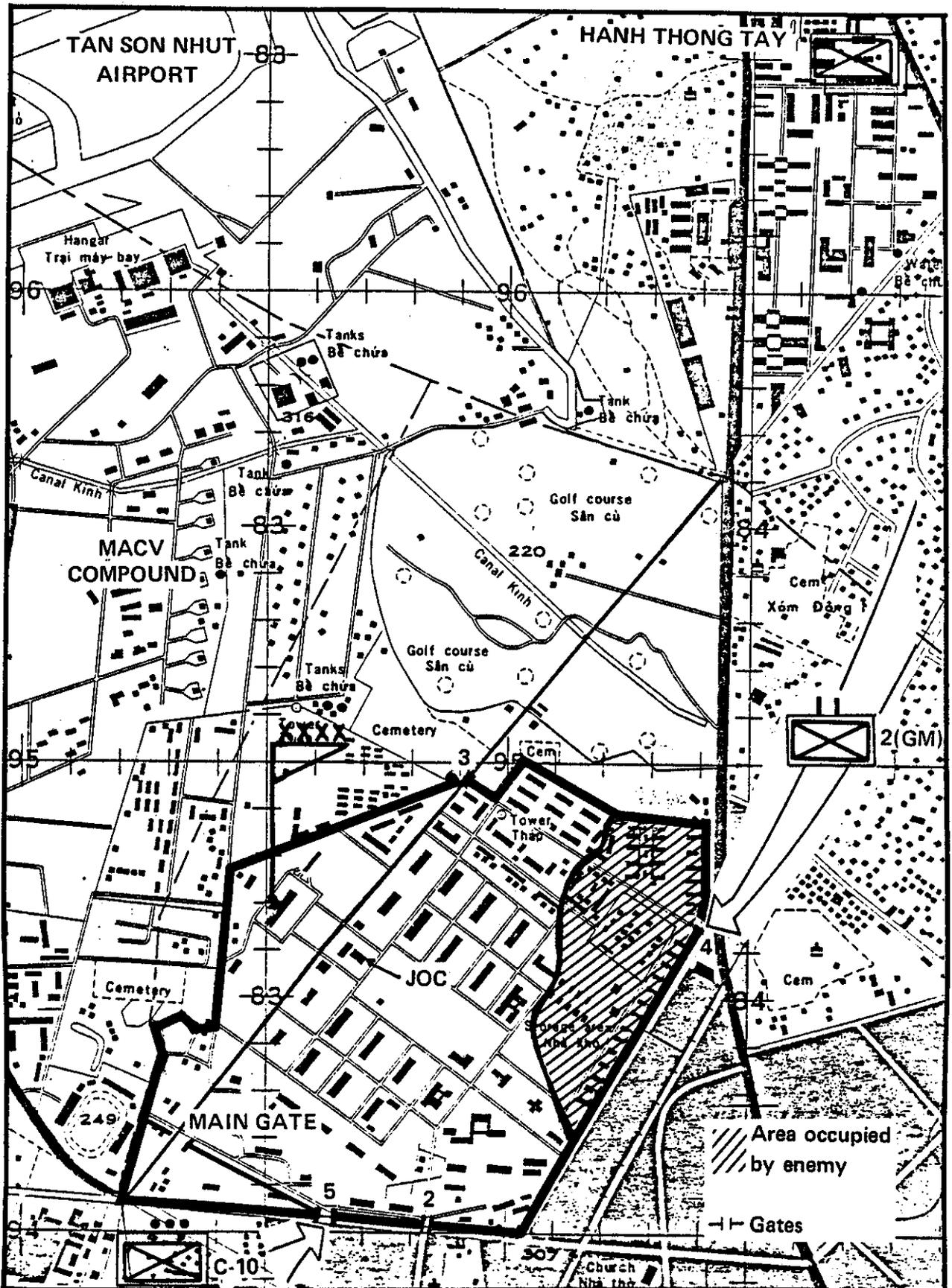
The attack on gate No. 5 of the JGS compound took place at 0200. (*Map 4*) Part of the C-10 sapper platoon which was to conduct the attack arrived on a bus, but several of its members had already taken position in the Long Hoa Pagoda just across the street. When the bus stopped in front of the gate, the sapper contingent jumped out, attempting to run through the gate, usually kept closed, which was just opened to let a general officer in. Precisely at that moment, a U.S. MP patrol jeep happened to pass by. As enemy sappers momentarily turned their attention to the jeep and opened fire on it, the

Map 3 – Enemy Attacks on Saigon, Tet 1968



Scale 1: 25,000

Map 4 - Enemy Attacks on the JGS Compound



Scale 1: 12,500

ARVN guard closed the gate and fired back from a side bunker. The U.S. jeep under attack was immediately reinforced by U.S. MP personnel from BOQ NO. 3 and other U.S. installations nearby. The enemy attack on gate No. 5 ended in complete failure.

According to plans, the attacks on gates Nos. 5 and 4 of the JGS compound were to be initiated simultaneously. Fortunately, the enemy unit assigned to attack gate No. 4, the 2d Battalion (Go Mon) did not arrive in time. At the time of the attack on gate No. 5, this battalion was still on the move along the railroad track that led toward this objective from north of Saigon. The 2d Battalion (Go Mon) was part of a three battalion force which was to penetrate Saigon from Gia Dinh Province in two elements. The first element, composed of two battalions had penetrated the Hanh Thong Tay military complex at Go Vap where it was mounting attacks on such ARVN compounds as No Than and Co Loa, which housed the Artillery Command and one artillery battalion, and Phu Dong, the rear base of an armor unit. The second element of the Go Mon Battalion was to move deeper south along the railroad track toward gate No. 4 of the JGS where it did not arrive until 0700. The gate was quickly knocked down by B-40 rockets and enemy troops swarmed through it. Once inside, they immediately fanned out and overran two building areas nearby: the Armed Forces Language School and the JGS Headquarters Company. ARVN defenses for the entire JGS complex consisted merely of the Honor Guard Battalion and one armor troop. Initial reaction was therefore weak and lacked coordination.

After occupying the Armed Forces Language School and the JGS Headquarters Company areas, the Go Mon Battalion dug in for defense instead of expanding its control to adjacent areas. Had it done just that, it would have probably succeeded in occupying the most vital areas of all in the JGS complex: the J-2 Division, the Central Logistics Command, the JOC, and more significantly, the main building which housed the office of the chief of the JGS and his chief of staff.

Not until after the JGS compound was cleared did we learn why the enemy had failed to seize his biggest prize when it seemingly lay within reach. As prisoners of the Go Mon Battalion revealed, the mission of this battalion was to attack and hold at all costs the RVNAF General

Headquarters. Carrying out its orders to the letter, the battalion did break through gate No. 4 and occupied the building area with large display signs all marked: General Headquarters or General Headquarters Company. Believing that the RVNAF General Headquarters was in his hands, the enemy organized defense positions to hold it and did not venture into adjacent areas until reinforcements arrived.

Two hours after the attack on gate No. 4 began, two ARVN airborne companies were deployed to the JGS compound on emergency orders. With the support of the JGS armor troop, the paratroopers attacked ferociously to drive the enemy out, but it was no easy task because the enemy had been solidly entrenched in the occupied area. However, with the commitment of ARVN paratroopers, the enemy knew he had no chance to occupy the JGS main area even with reinforcements.

At noon, a U.S. helicopter landed in the JGS compound and out stepped President Thieu. He immediately convened a meeting with several members of his cabinet who since the enemy attack began had found their way individually into the JGS compound. The JGS thus temporarily turned into an alternate Independence Palace where measures were being taken to counter the enemy offensive despite the uneasy fact that fighting was no more than 1 km away.

In the afternoon, a marine battalion arrived at the JGS compound to reinforce its defenses but did not counterattack until the following morning, 1 February. Joining forces with the paratroopers, the marines finally drove the enemy out at 1030 after a few hours of fighting. Defeated and dispersed, elements of the Go Mon Battalion took refuge in the city blocks nearby.

The attack on the Independence Palace was also conducted by a 34-man platoon of the C-10 Sapper Battalion. (Map 5) At 0130 on 31 January, this platoon placed B-40 fire on the staff entrance gate of the Palace on Nguyen Du Street and attempted to crash through. The Palace security forces, which were made up of the Presidential guard, police, MP's and two tanks, reacted forcefully and immediately stopped the sappers' assault. Driven back, the enemy took refuge in an unfinished high-rise building across the street. During the next two days, except for two of its men captured alive, the entire sapper



platoon was killed. As it turned out, the suicidal attack on the Independence Palace was more of an attempt to create a psychological shock than a military victory because it was doomed to failure from the start.

Three blocks away, a similar suicidal attack was attempted against the U.S. Embassy on Thong Nhat Boulevard. This enemy force consisted of 19 sappers, all from the C-10 Battalion, equipped with B-40 rocket launchers and explosives. A few succeeded in penetrating the front yard but could not get into the locked building. By the next morning, all 19 sappers had been killed.

In the attack against the National Broadcasting Station, enemy sappers disguised themselves as field police troopers. This C-10 sapper element rapidly overwhelmed the field police squad defending the station for broadcasting because it was just an audio and recording studio. The chief of the transmitter station, which was located at Ouan Tre several miles away, was resourceful enough to switch off the remote audio lines from the main studio as soon as it was occupied. He then used a standby studio equipped with tape recorders. Saigon Radio, therefore, continued to broadcast without interruption, using primarily pre-recorded programs. Nobody ever detected anything abnormal on the airwaves.

At 0500, the airborne company, which was assuming alert duties at the MS compound nearby, deployed its troops to the radio station. After less than two hours of fighting, the paratroopers destroyed the entire sapper element and captured the station. By 0700, the main studio was functioning again and started its regular program of the day with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky's announcement and appeal to the population.

At the Vietnamese Navy Headquarters compound on Bach Dang Quay, the enemy attack was short-lived; it ended just as soon as it began at 0300. The ill-fated enemy squad of 12 sappers rode in two civilian passenger cars. As the cars approached the checkpoint on

Lam Son Square, which was usually blocked, they were stopped by naval guards. The fighting that ensued was brief because the naval alert detachment at headquarters had been in combat positions behind bunkers. Ten sappers were immediately killed, the remaining two were captured before they could even set foot inside the checkpoint line. The prisoners disclosed that according to plans, they were to occupy the Navy Headquarters, and, with reinforcements, take possession of all ships docked along Bach Dang Quay. These ships were to be subsequently used to transport people from other areas to Saigon as participants in the uprising.

Another significant action by the C-10 Battalion was an attempt against the Embassy of the Philippines where the ambassador also resided, but the ambassador managed to escape with a light injury. An attempt to kidnap Prime Minister Nguyen Van Loc at his residence also failed.

At Tan Son Nhut, a major attack was driven against the airport by three enemy battalions, two of them local force and one from the 9th Division. This enemy force simultaneously attacked gates No. 10, No. 51 and No. 2 at 0300.

Approaching the airport from the Vinatexco textile plant located to the west, where the enemy had established a field command post and positioned antiaircraft weapons on the roof of the building, the enemy force broke through gate No. 51 and advanced about 200 meters inside the fence, moving toward the main runway. But here the enemy met with fierce resistance from airport security forces, which consisted of Vice-President Ky's security guard, the National Police, and paratroopers who defended their rear base nearby. Friendly forces were also joined by two USARV platoons.

Almost immediately, two companies of the 8th Airborne Battalion, which were waiting for air transportation in the military terminal, arrived as reinforcement. As a result, the enemy suffered substantial losses and was unable to make any progress. At the same time, the 3d Armored Squadron of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi began its movement toward Tan Son Nhut after an emergency request for relief by U.S. forces at the airport. On its way to Tan Son Nhut, the U.S.

armor column was guided by air-dropped flares and took cross-country short cuts, bypassing the embattled area of Hoc Mon and probably ambush sites. At daybreak, the column entered Tan Son Nhut and inflicted serious losses to the enemy force, which was compelled to fall back to the Vinatexco area.

At 0900, VNAF and USAF tactical air attacked the Vinatexco compound, inflicting further losses to the enemy. Around gate No. 51, site of the most furious fighting, over 300 enemy troops lay dead. At gate No. 2, meanwhile, the fierce resistance put up by the ARVN 2d Service Battalion effectively kept the enemy at bay.

Despite the rapid restoration of friendly control at these major objectives, by daybreak enemy local forces had penetrated several areas in western and southern Saigon.

At Cho Lon, one enemy local force battalion had penetrated and occupied the Phu Tho race track. As the enemy saw it, the Phu Tho race track was a critical strongpoint for his efforts because its occupation would deny our forces a large field which they could use to bring in reinforcements by helicopters. This race track also lay adjacent to a critical junction of major roads between Saigon and Cho Lon, and provided an excellent staging area for assembling and dispatching troops. From this area, enemy 82-mm mortars could also effectively support any combat action or shell any target in Saigon or Cho Lon, to include the Tan Son Nhut Airbase.

The next mission to be accomplished by the enemy local force battalion occupying the Phu Tho race track was to attack the Chi Hoa prison complex and free Communist detainees. However, this battalion lost contact with its two local guides and did not know the way to reach Chi Hoa, barely 2 km away. Since most of the local population in the area had fled and those who remained tactfully refused to serve as guides, the enemy battalion found itself confined to the race track. The Chi Hoa prison complex remained untouched even during the subsequent phases of the offensive.

In Gia Dinh Province, the enemy penetrated the Hang Xanh area, a major road junction just outside Saigon where the Highway to Bien Hoa began. Thu Duc, a district town located some 18 km away on this

highway also came under attack. It was apparent that the enemy was trying to sever land communications between Saigon and Bien Hoa, seat of III Corps Headquarters, and interdict the access road to Vung Tau. The enemy effort in this northern suburb of Saigon was strong and persistent. Heavily populated and easy to infiltrate and ex-filtrate, this area provided the enemy with a perfect position from which it could initiate attacks against key military installations nearby.

At 0900 on 31 January, two enemy local force battalions attacked the Co Loa artillery base in Go Vap. The enemy eventually overran the base and captured 12 105-mm howitzers located there. However, he was unable to use them because before withdrawing from the base, ARVN artillerymen had dismantled all the firing blocs. During the day, a marine battalion deployed to the area retook the base and recovered all twelve artillery pieces.

A short distance away, the enemy also attacked Camp Phu Dong which was the headquarters of the ARVN Armor Command. Since the purpose of the attack was to capture ARVN armored vehicles, the enemy force included an element of COSVN's 16th Section, which specialized in armor employment and tactics. Even though the enemy had made careful preparations, his reconnaissance had failed to reveal that all ARVN armored vehicles on the base had been moved elsewhere two months earlier. Camp Phu Dong was retaken at the same time as the artillery base.

Both Camps Phu Dong and Co Loa turned out to be two of the most important targets which the enemy had planned to occupy at all costs. Our enemy had expected to use the captured artillery pieces and armored vehicles to support his attacks in Saigon. He was so certain of success that all participating units in the Saigon area had been informed that they would receive artillery and armor support.

By the end of the first 48 hours, it was obvious that the enemy's chance of success had greatly diminished. Not a single major objective in Saigon was in his hands, and the promised reinforcements were nowhere in sight. Hopes of a popular uprising also began to falter. There were no demonstrations and no significant cooperation from the

population save for some isolated supply activities performed under coercion by the VCI.

During this time, the Saigon VCI proved to be extremely active. Many of its members served as guides for the attacking units. A few of them were actually holding jobs in U.S. and GVN agencies. Among those killed during the offensive, one even had a CMD-issued pass authorizing him to circulate during curfew hours. Several others had passes allowing them access to some U.S. civilian installations. When the attack on Saigon began, believing that the offensive and uprising were going to be a success, most of the city's VCI members surfaced and participated in subversive activities. They performed many useful tasks in support of the attacking forces, serving as guides and informants in the areas under Communist control, where they helped search and arrest GVN officials, policemen, and military officers. They acted as propagandists, encouraging the people and inciting them to revolt and demonstrate in support of the "liberation" forces. As a result of these supporting activities, the enemy local forces that attacked Saigon and Cho Lon were able to move around in a metropolitan area that was obviously too large, too populous, too strange, and whose modern facilities and civilization remained beyond their realm of knowledge.

By this time, as many as 15 enemy battalions had been introduced into the general area that comprised Saigon, Cho Lon and part of Gia Dinh Province. They had occupied a northern suburb of Saigon, the 7th and 8th precincts in Cho Lon, the Phy Tho race track and part of a few city blocks in Saigon itself. They broke down into small elements, taking shelter in people's homes, organizing defense positions in high-rise buildings, and awaiting the reinforcement of main force units which were to move in from the outside as planned.

#### *Supporting Attacks in III Corps Area*

At the time of the enemy offensive, ARVN forces in the III Corps area consisted of three infantry divisions, one ranger group and three armor squadrons. The 25th ARVN Division was located at Hau Nghia,

the 18th ARVN Division at Long Khanh and the 5th ARVN Division at Binh Duong. The 5th Ranger Group was stationed in Saigon. (Map 6) There were also the two airborne battalions of the JGS general reserve preparing for deployment to the I corps area. In total, there were 46 ARVN maneuver battalions in the III Corps area. For the Tet period, each battalion had about 50% of its strength ready for combat.

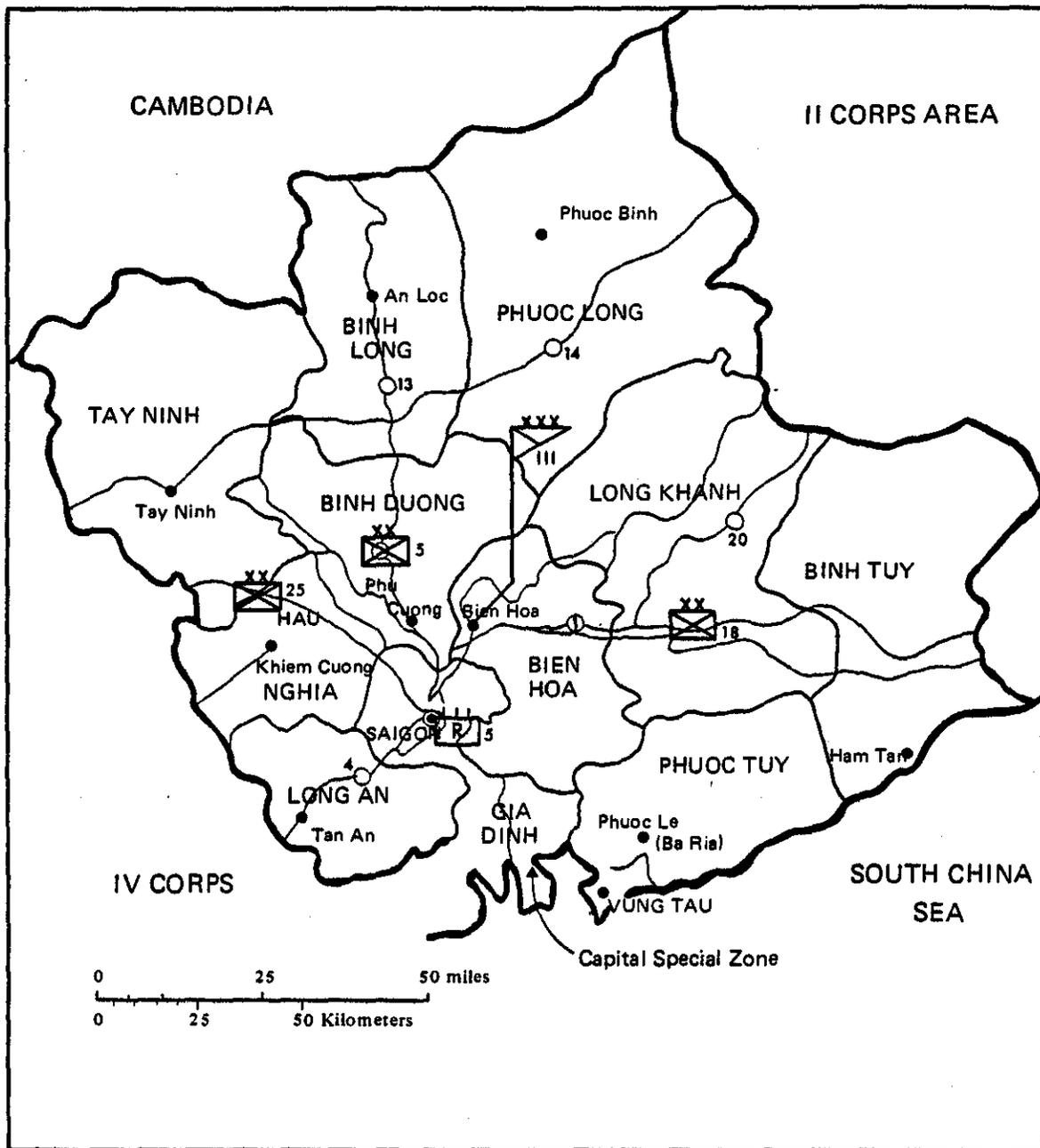
U.S. forces in III Corps area consisted of the Headquarters of II Field Force and the U.S. 199th Infantry Brigade at Long Binh (Bien Hoa), the 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi (Hau Nghia), the 9th Infantry Division at Long Thanh (Phuoc Tuy), and the 1st Infantry Division at Lai Khe (Binh Duong). In addition, there were three Australian battalions at Ba Ria and one Royal Thai battalion at Long Thanh. The total of U.S. and Free World forces in the III Corps area therefore consisted of 53 infantry battalions and 13 armor battalions. (Map 7)

When the offensive began, enemy forces located in the III Corps area consisted of three infantry divisions (the 5th, 7th, and 9th), three separate infantry regiments (101st, 88th and Dong Nai), one artillery regiment, and 29 local force battalions.

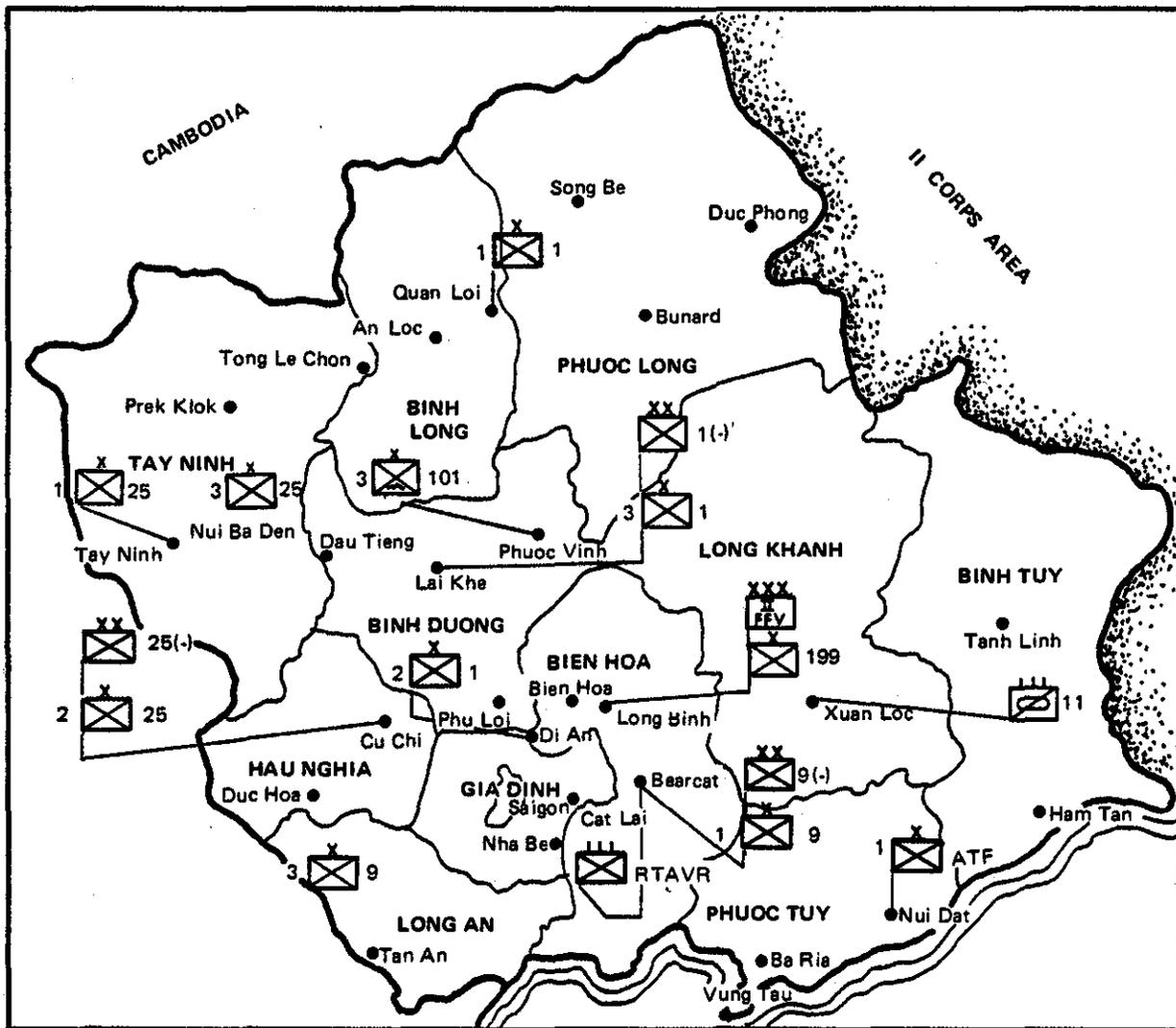
The enemy offensive plan assigned the 9th Division the mission of attacking the Quang Trung Training Center and the Headquarters, U.S. 25th Infantry Division, with the objective of blocking the movement of reinforcements from these units toward Saigon on Route QL-1. One regiment of the 9th Division was to attack Thu Duc and block the Bien Hoa highway, interdicting the movement of reinforcements from III Corps in Bien Hoa, the U.S. II Field Force in Long Binh and the RVNAF marines in Di An.

The 7th Division had two regiments. One regiment was assigned the mission to attack the Headquarters, U.S. 1st Infantry Division, at Lai Khe and, in coordination with the Dong Nai Regiment, the provincial capital of Binh Duong and the Headquarters, 5th ARVN Infantry Division. These attacks would effectively interdict all reinforcement movements from the north and northwest toward Saigon along Routes QL-13 and QL-1. The 101st Regiment (Separate) was placed under operational control of

Map 6 – III Corps Area and Disposition of ARVN Forces



Map 7 – Disposition of U.S. and FWMA Forces, III Corps Area





the 7th Division with the mission to attack and occupy the Go Vap District north of Saigon. The 88th Regiment (Separate) was to interdict Route QL-13 south of An Loc and Binh Duong.

The 5th Division with two regiments had the mission to attack the Headquarters, US II Field Force, at Long Binh with one regiment; (Map 8) the other regiment was to attack the Bien Hoa AFB, the Headquarters, III Corps, and Bien Hoa City.

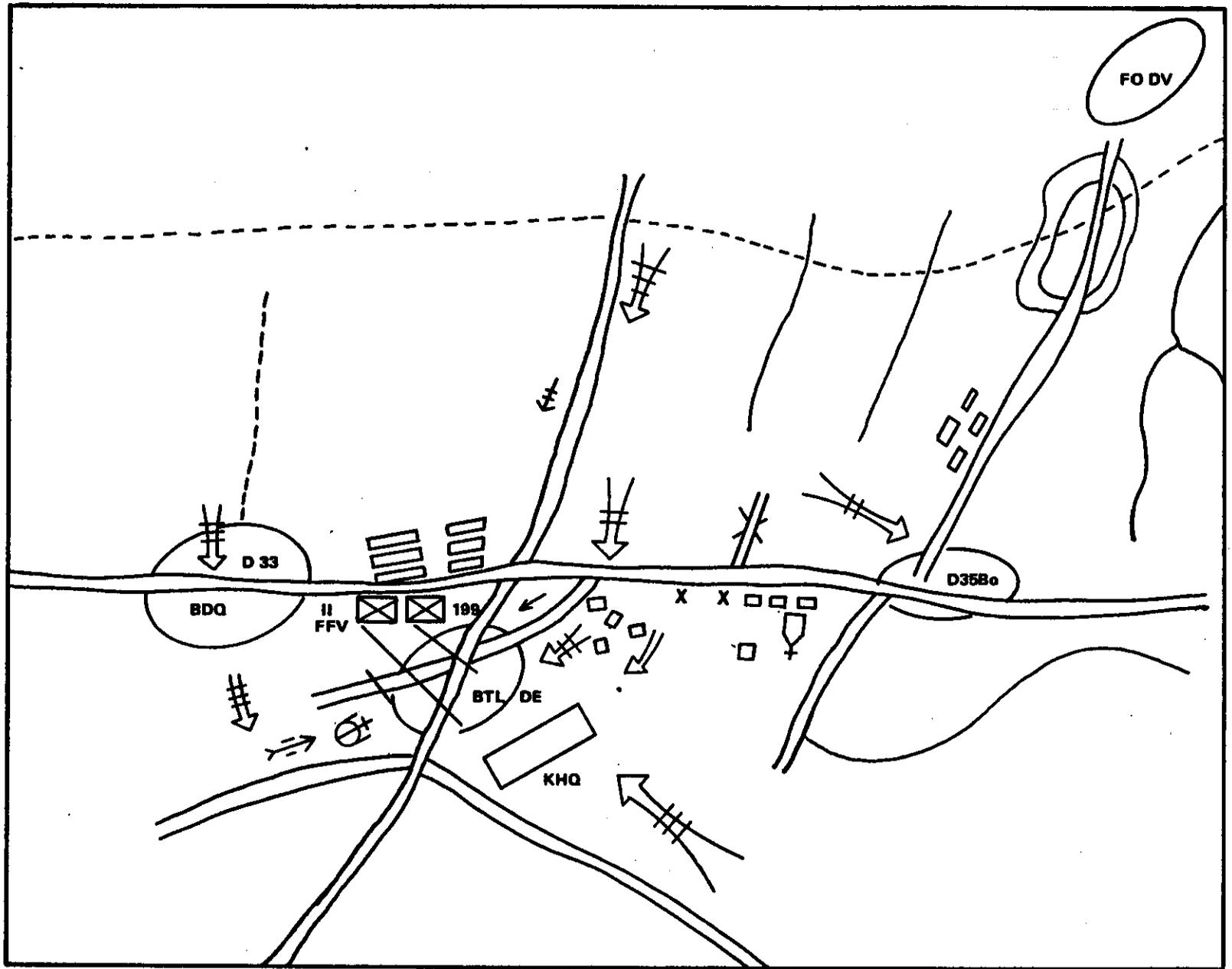
The five new subdivisions of former enemy MR-4 which surrounded and converged on Saigon also received specific combat missions in support of the attack on the capital city. One local force battalion of the 1st Subdivision was to attack the district town of Cu Chi. The 2d Subdivision's local force battalion was to attack the Headquarters, ARVN 25th Infantry Division, at Duc Hoa. The local force battalion of the 3d Subdivision received the primary mission to protect the enemy forward CP of General Tran Do, responsible for the attack on Saigon, and to harass ARVN units in its area of responsibility. The 4th Subdivision was to conduct harassment activities against ARVN forces while the 5th Subdivision's local forces would attack Phu Loi, Phu Cuong and Tan Uyen in coordination with the Dong Nai Regiment.

In the enemy Ba-Bien Province (Ba Ria-Bien Hoa), one local force battalion was to attack the Headquarters, ARVN 18th Division, at Xuan Loc, and another was to attack the provincial city of Ba Ria and Australian forces located in the vicinity.

Most of these pre-planned attacks took place throughout the III Corps area either simultaneously with the attack on Saigon or one or two days later. However, Tay Ninh City was not attacked until 6 February and Long An City on 8 February. Most of these attacks were either immediately defeated or ephemeral<sup>y</sup> successful. None of the objectives was held by the enemy more than one day.

The attack on the Quang Trung Training Center on 31 January was highlighted by the fact that enemy troops disguised themselves as ARVN infantrymen and marines. But the attack failed and ended in late afternoon after the defenders were reinforced by a marine battalion. However, the enemy succeeded in controlling a large part of the Hoc Mon district town nearby, causing temporary difficulties for supply

Map 8 -- Enemy Plan of Attack Against Long Binh  
(original captured sketch)



movements from Tay Ninh and Cu Chi to Saigon.

At Bien Hoa, the enemy 5th Division attacked simultaneously the U.S. Army base at Long Binh, the Bien Hoa airfield and III Corps Headquarters but missed the Communist prisoner camp near the city because of confusion. The two companies of the 275th Regiment that received the mission to attack this camp in coordination with another element had been instructed to move to a rendezvous point which was formerly a rubber plantation nearby. Unfortunately for the enemy, this rubber plantation had been cleared a month earlier by Rome plows. So when they arrived at the rendezvous point and found that no rubber plantation was in sight, the two companies moved to another area, missing the attack.

At the Bien Hoa air force base, the attack driven by the enemy 274th Regiment was completely stalled by fierce resistance put up by the defending RF battalion after the eastern end of the runway had been penetrated. At III Corps Headquarters, meanwhile, even though the attacking enemy local force battalion had been reinforced by one battalion of the 5th Division, it was unable to breakthrough the defense perimeter. Shortly thereafter, the intervention by the U.S. 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment finally shattered all enemy efforts at both places.

At Long Binh, despite detailed planning, the enemy was able only to blow up a few ammunition dumps on the base. At Ba Ria near Vung Tau, however, the enemy successfully overran a small airfield adjacent to the Van Kiep Training Center, main objective of his attack. Sector headquarters immediately employed the 11th Airborne Battalion, which was undergoing training at the center. In coordination with another RF battalion, the ARVN paratroopers eventually broke the enemy attack and retook the airfield during the day.

In Binh Duong Province, the enemy attacked Phu Cuong, the provincial capital where he occupied the ARVN Engineer School but not the sector headquarters. Nearby, he also took the district town of Ben Cat, seizing a 155-mm artillery position installed by the ARVN 5th Division. However, enemy troops did not know how to use the artillery pieces.

Along with Phu Cuong, Ben Cat was retaken late in the afternoon the day of the attack.

In general, enemy attacks in the provinces surrounding Saigon were all short-lived, lasting no longer than one day on the average. The enemy not only lacked the capability to hold, he also met with swift and forceful reactions by the local defending forces. As it turned out, most RF battalions performed unexpectedly well, fighting courageously in defense and counterattacking with enthusiastic vigor, aided in their efforts by U.S. infantry units, armor, artillery, and gunships. As a result, targets temporarily overrun by the enemy at the beginning of the attack were all retaken within a short time.

The most sustained enemy effort in III Corps area, remained locked in Saigon, his primary objective, where fighting was still raging. After the initial shock of surprise, however, ARVN and U.S. forces began to counterattack and seize the initiative.

### *Clearing Operations in Saigon*

At the time the enemy attacked Saigon, ARVN forces available for the defense of the city consisted of eight infantry battalions. These did not include the three RF battalions, two MP battalions and two service battalions which were detached piecemeal for guard and security duties at military and governmental installations, check points and bridges.

The first action taken by the Joint General Staff after the attack on Saigon was to call general reserve units back for the immediate relief of the city. Within 48 hours, therefore, an additional seven infantry battalions had been brought back, because of fast transportation facilities available. By the end of the third day of the attack, RVNAF forces in the Saigon area had increased to a total of five airborne battalions, five marine battalions, five ranger battalions, one artillery battalion, which had all been withdrawn from their previous commitment in II, III and IV Corps areas. The recall of these forces had not been easy. With heavy combat burdens on their own shoulders, the II and IV Corps commanders were particularly reluctant to release them.

With additional forces available, the JGS decided to launch a major relief operation to clear enemy troops from the nation's capital. Lt. General Nguyen Duc Thang, then Minister of Rural Development and former J3 of the JGS, came up with a plan which was quickly approved and code-named after the JGS compound's designation, Tran Hung Dao. Because of the significance of the relief operation, General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the JGS, took personal command.

The concept of operation was based on the idea of organizing Saigon and its suburbs into several areas of operation and assigning each area or zone to a specific service or combat arm. Initially, there were five areas of operation or zones, designated A, B, C, D, and E. (*Map 9*) Zone A was assigned to the Airborne Division because it was where its headquarters was based. Zone B was assigned to the Marine Division for the same reason. Zone C, which was essentially downtown Saigon and relatively more secure, was made the responsibility of the National Police. At that time total NP strength in Saigon, to include field police forces, numbered in excess of 20,000. Zone D, which included the Chinatown in Cho Lon, was assigned to the RVNAF Ranger Command. Zone E, which included Tran Hung Dao camp and the MACV compound, was made the responsibility of the JGS Headquarters Commandant. For the defense of this zone, the JGS honor guard battalion was reinforced by four makeshift battalions which had been assembled with personnel of the JGS staff divisions and other service agencies located within the JGS compound and totalled 1,928 men, mostly officers and NCO's. The JGS staff divisions retained only about one-third of their personnel, those who were deemed utterly necessary for critical staff work. Zone F was added to the original plan only on 9 February. Since this area comprised mostly outlying suburbs, and the ARVN did not have enough forces to commit there, it was assigned to U. S. forces.

By this time, an agreement of principle had been reached between III Corps, whose responsibility encompassed the CMD, and the U.S. II Field Force, whereby ARVN forces would be in charge of clearing operations within the city and U.S. forces would conduct screening operations in the suburbs, destroy enemy forces retreating from the



city, and block those attempting to penetrate it.

Operation Tran Hung Dao terminated its first phase on 17 February by which time the situation in Saigon had greatly improved in spite of continued fighting in some areas in Cho Lon. It was then decided to turn over command of the operation to III Corps. Most enemy units, especially the local force battalions, had been driven out into the suburbs. There remained only a few pockets of resistance in Cho Lon manned by piecemeal enemy elements.

Clearing activities were most vigorous during the week from 5 to 12 February, especially in Zone D where it was difficult to uproot enemy elements nested in people's houses in a particularly dense area. In several cases, our forces had to ask the people to leave the combat area before moving in. In addition to hit-and-run tactics, the enemy also positioned antiaircraft weapons on high-rise buildings, which seriously impeded support missions flown by gunships. Destroying these antiaircraft weapons was therefore a priority task for our forces.

In some areas in Cho Lon, the enemy occupied several Buddhist temples and hospitals, using them as shelters or operational bases. The An Quang Pagoda, a celebrated Buddhist temple associated with the Buddhist militants of 1966, was used as a high-level headquarters. In their determination to destroy this enemy command post, our forces retook the pagoda with air support even at the price of causing extensive damage to it. A short distance away, the Children's Hospital was also used as troop cantonment and defense strongpoint.

At Binh Dong, also in Cho Lon, the enemy occupied a governmental rice depot then set fire to it. He also set fire to a paper mill at Phu Lam. At both places, the fires sent billowing black smoke high into the sky, obstructing aerial observation and support. Causing these fires was a deliberate enemy scheme intended not only to impede our air intervention but also to create an aura of blight and fear which added to the confusion among the population.

The last major battle fought in Saigon took place in the Phu Dinh-Phu Lam area on 11 February. With the support of a U.S. unit, ARVN Ranger forces completely wiped out a high-level enemy command post

located in the Phu Lam communal temple. Among the 30 enemy bodies found inside, there were 6 armed with pistols, an evident indication of high ranks. From the documents seized on them we learned that the place had sheltered a protection element of COSVN's forward command post. Speculations therefore arose and spread about to the effect that Tran Do, the Communist general who directed the attack on Saigon, had been killed. However, a subsequent fingerprint check on the bodies found that Tran Do was not among them. Since the results of this fingerprint check were not made public, rumors of Tran Do's death persisted and accounted for a jubilant mood among the Saigon population and troops.

The fighting in Saigon abated immediately following this battle. On 17 February, however, it resumed with fresh intensity with the onset of a new series of attacks. These attacks began with fierce rocket fire striking at Tan Son Nhut and the MACV headquarters nearby, causing considerable damage to the air passenger terminal. Then enemy infantry troops moved in and pushed hard primarily against Tan Son Nhut AFB, the area from Hoc Mon to Xom Moi in Go Vap, and the Phu Lam area, south of Cho Lon.

The renewed attacks lasted until early March, highlighted by several firefights inside Saigon and Cholon. Its intensity, however, was much less than that of phase 1. The enemy had brought in some fresh local force battalions to relieve the one's being engaged and fresh troops to replace losses. But these fresh troops proved to be dismally combat-ineffective. Many among them were just retrieved from rest and recuperation, and others had received only a two-week crash training course. Apparently to compensate for this weakness, the enemy committed the entire 9th Division to attacks in the north and northwest of Saigon and in Hoc Mon-Go Vap. In the meantime he kept up rocket shellings against Saigon and sapper sabotage activities in and around the city. In addition to the Binh Loi Bridge on the Saigon River, which had one span seriously damaged, the enemy also blew up two other lesser bridges and a power transformer station in Cho Lon.

By this time, however, the RVNAF and U.S. forces had expanded their

mopping-up activities well beyond the suburbs. These activities converged on outlying areas suspected of harboring enemy troops such as Thu Duc, Lai Thieu, Di An and Vinh Loc. The objective now was to push the fighting as far away from Saigon as possible.

A period of relative calm began to reign in Saigon immediately following a heavy engagement on 7 March between ARVN paratroopers and enemy main force units in the Ba Diem and Tan Thoi Trung areas in Zone D. This lull lasted until 5 May when it was broken again by the second phase of the general offensive.

Countrywide, meanwhile, the military situation improved remarkably. Mopping-up activities effectively cleared most cities and provincial capitals from the encroachment of enemy troops with the exception of Hue where fighting was still raging ferociously since the beginning of the offensive. Here the loss in human lives incurred by the civilian population had reached the proportions of a natural disaster, which was made even more horrible by the mass massacre of approximately 4,000 people, all victims of Communist atrocities committed during the 25 days the city remained under their control.

### *The Battle of Hue*

Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam, had a population of approximately 140,000 at the time the enemy offensive began. It was the cradle of militant Buddhism, whose confrontation with President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 led to his death and the demise of his regime. During the years that followed, the militant Buddhist movement in Hue picked up momentum and flared up again in 1966 when, with the support of some disaffected ARVN commanders, it openly defied central authority in Saigon. Twenty thousand Buddhists at some time joined in anti-government demonstrations in Hue, backed up by most ARVN units located in the city, including the 1st Infantry Division.

These demonstrations eventually culminated in a showdown in which Buddhist households in the city displayed their altars on the streets, paralyzing business activities and blocking vehicular traffic, even the convoys of the U.S. Marines. The showdown erupted in violence when

a Buddhist nun burned herself and mobs on a wild rampage set fire to the U.S. Consulate building after thoroughly ransacking it. Most fanatic among the demonstrators were some professors of the Hue University and its extremist students.

All of these confrontations with the government tinted Hue with a certain hue of political radicalism which the Communists identified with their own interests. As a result, they considered Hue the second most important objective to be conquered after Saigon during their 1968 Tet Offensive. For Hue, with its political and historical significance, would be the perfect place for the inauguration of a coalition government of their making.

At the time the attack on Hue began, ARVN forces available in the city consisted solely of the headquarters of the 1st Infantry Division, which was located in Mang Ca, a small and isolated camp in the northern corner of the Old Citadel. (*Map 10*)

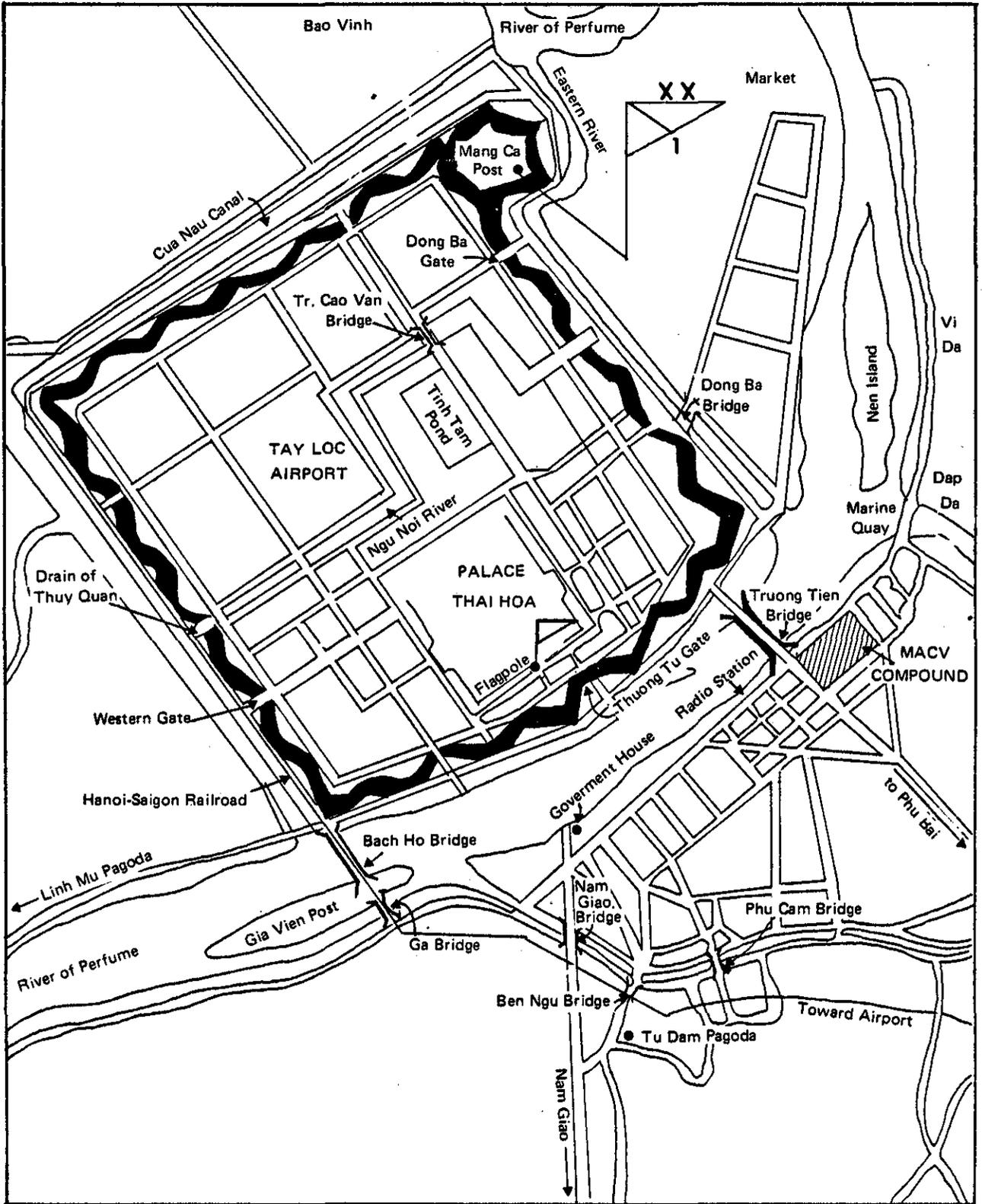
The square-shaped Old Citadel occupied an area whose outer perimeter consisted of a solid earth-and-stone rampart, 20 feet thick and from 25 to 30 feet high, surrounded by a zig zag moat. Inside this rampart, and at a distance varying from 20 to 80 yards from it, there was a brick wall. Both the rampart and wall were built in 1802 under the reign of Emperor Gia Long, the forefather of the Nguyen dynasty.

Within the Old Citadel, there were two areas of particular interest: the Imperial Palace with its stately Midday gate topped by a majestic flagpole, all constructed in ancient architectural style, and the Tay Loc airfield, a product of modern times. South of the Old Citadel ran the River of Perfume over which two bridges provided access to the more contemporary southern part of the city, Trang Tien and Bach Ho. On this southern bank of the river were located governmental and military installations such as the Thua Thien Sector headquarters and the MACV compound.

No U.S. combat unit was based in Hue City. The nearest U.S. base was at Phu Bai, eight km to the southeast where the U.S. 3d Marine Division had established its headquarters.

As for ARVN forces, besides the 1st Infantry Division headquarters located inside the Old Citadel, the nearest combat units were the 7th

Map 10 – The Old Citadel, Hue City



Scale 1: 4,000

Armored Cavalry Squadron at An Cuu, 2 km to the southeast, and the 2d Airborne Battalion which established a temporary base near Route QL-1 17 km northwest of Hue in the vicinity of the "Street Without Joy."

During the days that preceded Tet, the situation in I Corps area became tense with intelligence reports indicating large enemy troop concentrations near Khe Sanh Base and in the DMZ area north of Quang Tri. Other reports revealed a major enemy troop movement from the DMZ into Thua Thien Province and a logistic buildup and other troop movements in the piedmont area west of Hue. In the face of this mounting tension, the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division was relocated from Military Region 2 to Camp Evans, 16 km northwest of Hue, ready for any eventuality. No intelligence estimate, however, predicted an enemy attack on Hue during the Tet holidays.

On the morning of Tet's first day, reports on enemy attacks against some provincial capitals in II Corps area streamed in the 1st Division headquarters. The night before, during a patrol mission four km southwest of Hue, an element of the Reconnaissance Company, 1st Division, had clashed with an enemy force estimated at about two battalions, reportedly moving toward the city. The division commander, Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, immediately convened a staff meeting during which he took certain measures to prepare for defense. Alert orders were issued to confine all troops to their barracks and prepare for combat. At Mang Ca Camp, the seat of the division headquarters, however, there were only the Headquarters Company, the Reconnaissance Company and a few divisional support elements.

Lunar New Year's Day in Hue passed without event amid traditional celebrations. Then past midnight, at 0340, the enemy struck with a fierce preparatory fire of 122-mm rockets and 82-mm mortars. The enemy forces which conducted the initial attack on Hue consisted of two infantry regiments, two sapper battalions, and one artillery (rocket) battalion, assisted by sappers already in place inside the city. According to plans, the 6th Regiment was to attack the old citadel and push its primary effort against the 1st Infantry Division headquarters, while the 4th Regiment was to attack the MACV compound and the Thua Thien Sector headquarters, both located on the southern bank of the river.

The 4th Regiment's attack began with the 802d Battalion pushing against the Mang Ca compound and the 800th Battalion against the Tay Loc airfield. Both encountered heavy resistance by the Reconnaissance (Black Panther) Company, 1st Division, almost the sole defender of these areas. Failing in their initial attempts, both enemy battalions broke contact and moved toward other targets nearby after having incurred some losses. The Black Panther Company, meanwhile, was called back to division headquarters where it was to reinforce other divisional elements in resisting the attack by the 812th Battalion. During this time, the 6th Regiment's CP and one infantry battalion under its control penetrated and held the outer north-western area of the old citadel, which commanded access to Route QL-1. Their mission was to safeguard a line of communication and supply route from outside of the city toward the old citadel.

South of the river in the meantime and despite forceful attacks, the enemy 4th Regiment failed to take any of the three targets it had been assigned: the MACV compound, the sector headquarters and the city's police headquarters.

By the morning of the next day, however, Hue city had practically fallen under enemy control with the exception of key military and governmental headquarters. In the old citadel, the NLF flag was hoisted on the Midday gate flagpole at 0800.

Judging the situation critical, the 1st Division commander ordered the 2d Airborne Battalion, the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, and his own 3d Regiment back to Hue to reinforce the defense of division headquarters and clear the city. All three units were intercepted and attacked on their way, the 2d ABN Battalion at An Hoa, northwest of Hue, the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron in the southern suburbs and two battalions of the 3d Regiment southwest of the city.

Shortly thereafter, the 2d ABN Battalion was instructed to bypass enemy blocks and move east to approach the Mang Ca compound, which it entered and was immediately tasked to retake the Tay Loc airfield. The 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, meanwhile, paid some price in trying to reach the sector headquarters, which it did but only after the squadron commander, Lt. Colonel Phan Huu Chi, had been sacrificed and twelve of its

armored vehicles knocked out by enemy B-40 rockets. Finally, the two battalions of the 3d Regiment made it to the Bao Vinh pier off the River of Perfume after a long journey by small landing craft. Both reached the 1st Division Headquarters in the afternoon of 1 February.

On the U.S. side, two marine companies supported by four tanks were deployed from their base at Phu Bai on the morning of 31 January in an effort to relieve the embattled MACV compound. The U.S. relief task force was intercepted at the An Cuu Bridge just south of the city but finally made it to the MACV compound in the afternoon. With this reinforcement, the MACV compound held its ground firmly against a heavy attack by the enemy 4th Regiment during the night.

By now, it was obvious that to clear the enemy's foothold in the city, the 1st Division would require more forces. The division commander therefore ordered the 9th Airborne Battalion back from Quang Tri. With U.S. helilift support, the battalion landed in Mang Ca during 2 February. It was followed shortly thereafter by the 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, 1st Division, also helilifted in from Dong Ha. With these additional forces, the 1st Division finally retook the Tay Loc airfield inside the old citadel after two days of heavy fighting during which the enemy lost in excess of 200 killed.

In the meantime, U.S. Marine reinforcements deployed for the defense of the MACV compound during 2 and 3 February had brought total U.S. forces there to one battalion, the 15th USMC Battalion, which was subsequently augmented with armor elements and ONTOS vehicles equipped with 106-mm recoilless rifles.

During that time, enemy forces attacked and overran the municipal prison of Hue where approximately 2,000 prisoners were detained. After being freed, a large majority of these prisoners was used as local labor while others were given weapons and joined enemy combat units as replacements. The enemy also began to consolidate his control over the city with the effective help of local VCI members. The local VCI had compiled a black list containing the names and addresses of all those who served in the military, in the government, or in U.S. agencies. This list served a double purpose. It enabled enemy forces to search for and arrest those they considered "enemies of the revolution" for

immediate elimination. It also helped the enemy in screening and classifying the civilian population of Hue.

According to accounts of survivors, the first thing Communists did after occupying Hue was to divide the city into areas and put each area under the control of a "Revolutionary Committee." All inhabitants were required to report to and register with the Revolutionary Committee of their area. They were also to turn in all weapons, ammunition, and radio receivers in their possession. After registration, everybody was let free to go home. During the days that followed registration, many people were asked to report again and never returned. They were those whose names had been placed on the VCI black list. When inquiring about their condition or location, their families were informed that they had to attend a reeducation course.

Information which leaked back gradually revealed the true nature of this reeducation process. According to a few who managed to escape and survive, all those detained for the purpose of "reeducation" were given picks and shovels and ordered to dig shelters. They did not suspect that these shelters were to become their own graves.

Later, after Hue had been liberated, most of these mass graves were found after a diligent and systematic search. We thus discovered many such graves on the campuses of the Gia Long and Gia Hoi High Schools and in the vicinity of the Tang Quang Tu Pagoda, all within city limits. But there were several others which would have never been discovered had they not been pinpointed by enemy returnees; they were all located outside the city in such outlying areas as those forests surrounding the Tu Duc and Minh Mang tombs.

This mass murder eventually went down in history as the most abominable and inhuman atrocity ever committed by the Communists during the war. Although they condemned it, many South Vietnam were at a loss when trying to determine why this was necessary. After all, they reasoned, Hue had always been considered more anti-government than anywhere else in South Vietnam. The militant Buddhists notwithstanding, Hue was the breeding ground for a Communist-sponsored political movement, the so-called "National Alliance for Democracy and Peace." This movement

had attracted some professors and students at the University of Hue.

Another opinion ventured that this mass murder was a pre-planned Communist action aimed at eliminating GVN organizations and personnel against whom the VCI of Hue had always harbored a certain blood feud. To General Truong, our 1st Division Commander, however, the mass murder was part of a security plan designed to protect VCI members whose covers had been blown when they surfaced to join in the attack, especially after the RVNAF announced they were determined to take Hue back at any cost.

In any event, the mass murder had a backlash which proved to be extremely adverse to the Communists as far as their standing with the South Vietnamese people was concerned.

When they attacked Hue, the Communists had already made preparations for the installation of a local government of their own. The man they selected as mayor of Hue, who was later tracked down and arrested by our forces, turned out to be the former chief of the city's national police. Involved in the Buddhist showdown of 1966, the man fled and joined enemy ranks after its failure.

Militarily, in the meantime, several new developments had taken place. For the first time after a long period of bad weather, VNAF tactical aircraft had taken advantage of clear skies to attack two enemy battalions entrenched inside the old citadel. Twenty-four 500-lb bombs were dropped over enemy positions especially in the southwestern corner of the citadel.

During the same day of the VNAF attack, using floating mines, the enemy was able to destroy two of the twelve spans of the Truong Tien Bridge which connected the Old Citadel and business section of the city with the modern southern city blocks. An additional two enemy battalions had also been brought into the citadel. These forces subsequently launched a forceful attack on 10 February against one battalion of the 1st Division, causing severe losses to this ARVN unit.

On 12 February, three Vietnamese marine battalions were deployed to Hue. Two among them had participated in battles at My Tho in the Mekong Delta and at Go Vap in Gia Dinh Province. All three battalions were transported by naval craft to the Bao Vinh landing from where they moved to the 1st Division Headquarters compound. And just as soon as

they arrived, the marines launched counterattacks to retake the citadel, but progress was slow in the absence of direct air and artillery support.

The next day, U.S. Marine forces began to join in the effort to clear the citadel. Even solidly entrenched behind indestructible walls of the old rampart enemy forces suffered heavy losses caused by the accurate fire of 106-mm recoilless rifles mounted on ONTOS vehicles. The weather also began to improved markedly, which made the support provided U.S. Marines by U.S. tactical aircraft more effective and quickened the pace of clearing operations. The enemy was apparently digging in for a long stay. He had strewn substantial obstacles on roadways inside the citadel, barricading himself behind trucks and other vehicles and heaps of household furniture taken from the population. He also positioned sharpshooters at key points to deter the advance of our troops.

On 16 February, the technical detachment of the 1st Division intercepted a radio message from the enemy headquarters inside the citadel. Its content revealed that the enemy commander there had been killed during an attack-by-fire, that enemy losses were heavy, and that the new commander recommended a withdrawal from the citadel. From a reply message by the enemy higher headquarters, also intercepted, we learned that this recommendation was disapproved and Communist forces in the citadel were ordered to continue the fighting.

On 19 February, the enemy suddenly counterattacked in force in the citadel, driving his effort toward the Tay Loc airfield. Not until much later did we learn that this surge of effort was designed to cover the escape of some high-ranking enemy commanders stranded in the citadel. All that remained there now were just combat troops and lower level commanders.

The enemy's stubborn resistance inside the citadel became desperate on 21 February when three U.S. Air Cavalry battalions drove a concerted attack against the La Chu area, five km northwest of Hue and location of the headquarters of the 29th Regiment, 325C Division. U.S. forces occupied this area and thus severed all enemy communications and re-supply activities between the citadel and the outside.

On 22 February, two ARVN Ranger battalions arrived in Hue to reinforce the efforts of clearing the Gia Hoi area of Hue City.

Then at 0500 on 24 February, the 2d Battalion of the 3d Regiment, 1st ARVN Division, finally retook the Imperial Court inside the citadel where its troops immediately brought down the NLF flag, ripped it into tatters and hoisted the RVN national colors. For the first time in twenty-five days, our yellow and triple red-striped flag fluttered triumphantly in the early morning air. This also marked the total reoccupation of Hue City for by that time, only one isolated enemy element still remained in Gia Hoi. The next day, this element was wiped out.

The battle for Hue lasted only twenty-five days but it was by far the fiercest, the bloodiest, and the most destructive. During the battle, the enemy had committed a total of 16 battalions or nearly the equivalent of two infantry divisions; according to our statistics, he had lost in excess of 2,000 killed. An enemy document captured later revealed that in the battle of Hue, he had suffered 1,042 killed and several times that amount wounded. It also provided an inventory of troop commanders killed which amounted to 1 regimental, 8 battalion and 24 company commanders, and 72 platoon leaders.

Another captured document gave a post-mortem analysis of the causes our enemy attributed to his defeat in Hue. These were:

1. Lack of accurate intelligence reports. (Enemy forces, for example, attacked An Hoa expecting the 2d ABN Battalion to be there, but this unit had redeployed to the Mang Ca compound).
2. Lack of coordination among units that attacked the headquarters of the 1st Division.
3. Lack of proper coordination among all units.

On the ARVN side, our success in driving the enemy out of Hue City, had to be first and foremost attributed to the fact that the 1st ARVN Division was able to hold on to its headquarters in the Mang Ca compound, and from there, continue to direct coordinated operations by the employment of its organic and attached units. The Mang Ca compound, therefore, had become not only a vital base to receive reinforcements from the outside but also an excellent staging area for the conduct of counter-attacks.

Another element which contributed to our success was the laudably high morale of our troops. After being forced into a defensive posture, ARVN units had fought gallantly and continued to fight well despite persuasive enemy appeals to surrender. A case in point was the gallant fight put up by the 81st Ordnance Company which, with only 80 men, sustained combat for 15 days to safeguard its stock of 1,400 M-16 rifles. This company was also resourceful enough to move all of its stocks away before its compound was overrun by enemy troops. In several other areas and military installations, our RF and PF troops also resisted valiantly until they ran out of ammunition and only then withdrew.

On the U.S. side, marine units had effectively contributed to the clearing of the citadel, inflicting severe losses to the enemy and speeding up the pace of relief operations. In the process, they had suffered casualties amounting to 53 killed and 380 wounded.

RVNAF casualties meanwhile amounted to 213 killed and 879 wounded. On the part of the civilian population, however, losses both material and human, were extremely heavy. Approximately 80% of all houses within the citadel area had been completely destroyed. During the short period of enemy occupation, the people of Hue also lived in agony among horrors and hardships that they had never encountered before. In addition to war hazards, they had suffered from shortages of food, water and lighting. They also had to move among decaying corpses that could not be buried and whose stink could drive everyone to hysteria.

This brief co-existence with the Communists during the period of their occupation eventually caused the people of Hue to change their minds completely. From an attitude of confrontation, they had learned to accommodate with the national government and above all, to reject with determination every political inclination smacking of sympathy toward Communism.



Dead VC Sapper at U.S. Embassy Entrance, 31 January 1968



The Phu Tho Race Track as Temporary Operational Base  
for ARVN and U.S. Forces During Tet, February 1968

## CHAPTER V

### The Offensive, Phases II, III, and IV

#### *Phase II, May 1968*

Prior to taking part in the General Offensive-General Uprising of Tet 1968, all Communist political and military cadres had received guidance instructions to the effect that this was going to be the biggest, and also the last offensive. The effort, therefore, demanded a highest level of determination on the part of every participant.

However, just a few days after the offensive had been set in motion, an "absolutely secret" memorandum bearing the signature of Bay Hong, code name for Pham Hung, the COSVN leader, began to circulate among the Communist hierarchy. This memorandum, captured in Military Region 3, made an overall assessment of the situation and contained several self-critical remarks. Despite substantial gains, the memorandum admitted, Communist forces still fell short of their objectives. They had not yet occupied as many targets as had been planned, they had not yet wiped out South Vietnam's mobile and defense forces, and they had not yet succeeded in inciting a popular uprising against the government. All of these shortfalls were attributed to the failure to expand proselyting activities, untimeliness and lack of continuity in propaganda actions, and the delay and interruption of communications.

The memorandum then emphasized:

"The primordial thing we have to understand is that our General Offensive-General Uprising has been conceived to defeat a stubborn and reactionary enemy who has more than 1.2 million troops, all modernly equipped. Ours is a strategic offensive of long duration, which consists of several military campaigns and popular uprisings intended to

shatter every enemy counterattacking effort. As such, it has to be an extremely arduous fight."

"We must continuously attack the enemy and deny him the chance to rest and to reorganize. We must attack the enemy repeatedly, 3 or 4 times if need be, in those areas under contest, and we must not withdraw just because we fail in our first effort."

Thus it became clear from the enemy's viewpoint that the offensive was not a one-time effort but a multi-phased campaign, and from what this memorandum implied, each phase was apt to include several surges of activity.

The first phase of the offensive clearly began to abate some time during the first week of March 1968. By this time, it was apparent that in view of severe losses, the enemy needed some respite to reorganize and refit his battered units. To prepare for the next phase of the offensive, he also required some time to conduct a post-mortem analysis of his failures during the first phase, move in supplies, and reconnoiter the sites of future battles.

In the eyes of the enemy, Phase II of the offensive was particularly significant because of certain political developments that would probably affect the American war effort. First of all, there was the decision, made by President Johnson on 31 March, to cease all bombings north of the 20th parallel, which in effect would spare up to 80% of North Vietnamese territory. The decision he also made and announced at the same time not to run for re-election in November was surely an indication of severe difficulties in American internal politics. Negotiations, meanwhile, had reached the stage where an appropriate location for peace talks would soon be agreed by all parties concerned. All of these significant events were looked upon as favorable to the Communist side. Therefore, to further enhance his political posture, the enemy considered it mandatory to follow up his first offensive with a second one.

During this time, the RVN and U.S. were preoccupied with the effort to destroy enemy forces that were still in the provinces adjacent to Saigon. Toward that end, a major combined operation was launched in mid-March with the participation of elements of the ARVN 7th and 25th Divisions,

one airborne brigade, the 5th Ranger group, and national police forces, and on the U.S. side, elements of the 1st, 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Code-named TOAN THANG (Total Victory), this operation eventually destroyed an additional 2,600 enemy troops.

In I Corps area, another major combined operation, PEGASUS/LAM SON, which was initiated in early April with the commitment of U.S. infantry, marine units and the 1st Air Cavalry Division and elements of the ARVN 1st Division, and one airborne brigade, successfully reopened Route No. 9, which connected the lowlands of Quang Tri Province with Khe Sanh Base. This operation also broke the siege laid on this base by two NVA divisions during the past 77 days.

Information on the enemy's second phase of his offensive was obtained during the first week of April. It was disclosed by a high-ranking enemy rallier, Colonel Tran Van Dac, alias Tam Ha, who was deputy political commissar of the enemy MR-4. Colonel Tam Ha did not believe in the success of the general offensive and was not convinced that the urban population would rise up and join in the offensive even before the launching of Phase I. After he received orders to prepare for Phase II, he decided to rally to the GVN and disclosed valuable information concerning enemy plans. According to Colonel Tam Ha, phase II had been planned to take place on 22 April, but owing to delays in preparations, it would be most likely postponed for about 2 weeks. He also disclosed that the main objective of attack for Phase II was Saigon and that the enemy was going to commit a force equivalent to two infantry divisions in this attack. According to plans, the enemy 9th Division would conduct the primary effort against Tan Son Nhut while two supporting efforts would be directed against the southern and western parts of Saigon.

Colonel Tam Ha's disclosure corroborated with other intelligence data being obtained on enemy preparations for Phase II. On 26 April, an enemy surgeon belonging to a field medical unit was apprehended in Bien Hoa while he was reconnoitering a site for his surgical station. A notebook found in his possession recorded the date and time of Phase II attacks as beginning at 0120 on 28 April.

To preempt this second enemy offensive attempt, in early May a coordinated operational plan was implemented. The 3d Brigade, U.S. 9th Infantry Division, conducted a screening operation in Long An where its mission was to interdict enemy penetrations from the south into Saigon. Elements of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division with the support of U.S. air cavalry units operated in the Vam Co East River area west of Saigon while an element of the U.S. 5th Special Forces Group conducted patrols in the Vuon Thom area, 17 km west of Saigon, which was a permanent staging area for enemy forces. North of Saigon, an element of the U.S. 199th Infantry Brigade conducted activities south of the Dong Nai River and north of Bien Hoa in an effort to prevent an enemy attack from the direction of War Zone D. The U.S. 1st Infantry Division received the mission to interdict enemy penetrations from the north of Saigon while the 1st Australian Task Force at Long Thanh would devote its efforts to block enemy penetrations from the east toward Long Binh, Bien Hoa and Saigon. Within the Capital Military District, meanwhile, ARVN units were to coordinate screening operations with national police forces and block the enemy's piecemeal infiltrations into Saigon.

On 3 May, just when American and North Vietnamese negotiators announced that they were progressing toward actual peace talks, which were soon to begin in Paris, III Corps received reliable information from one of its penetration agents that the enemy would launch his second phase of attacks during the night of 4 May.

One day before Phase II actually began, a big explosion occurred in the Saigon Television and Radio compound. Enemy sappers had loaded a taxi cab parked in close proximity of this compound with 100 lbs of TNT and detonated it. The explosion caused some physical damage and interrupted TV transmission for a short time.

A captured enemy sapper later disclosed that this sabotage was intended to impress the Saigon population as to enemy capabilities and as a signal for phase II attacks. Enemy units had been instructed that the day following the announcement of this explosion on Saigon Radio was the day Phase II of the general offensive would begin.

As scheduled and indicated by our intelligence reports, Phase II

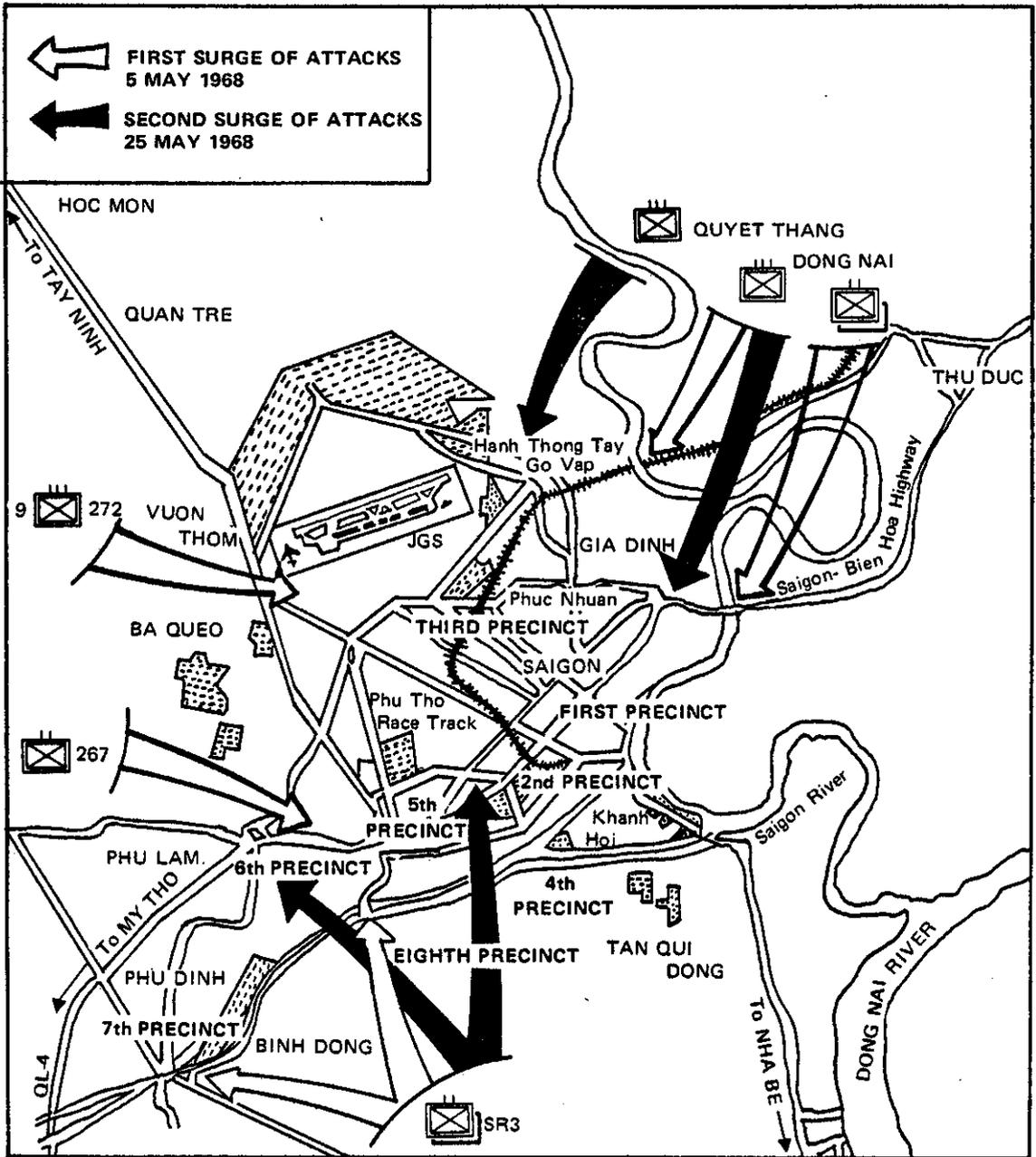
of this offensive was launched during the night of 4 May and began with extensive shellings against 119 targets across the country, to include provincial cities, district towns, villages and military installations. Apart from Saigon, the main objective, ground attacks were driven only against Bu Dop, an outlying district town in III Corps area, three miles east of the Cambodian border. However, this attack was driven off during the same night. Enemy ground attacks against Saigon took place at 0400 on 5 May through two primary efforts, west and north, and a secondary effort, east of the city. (Map 11) By breaking down into small elements, enemy units had succeeded in penetrating the outlying suburbs of Saigon before the attack. Some of these elements utilized boats and even trucks to infiltrate into the city. At a checkpoint outside Saigon, our forces apprehended some enemy troops hidden in a double-decked truck loaded with bricks; having difficulty breathing, the troops crawled out from the lower deck. In some other areas, enemy troops disguised themselves as ARVN troops. ✓g

Immediately after an intensive shelling, two enemy local force battalions attacked the Saigon-Bien Hoa Highway Bridge just east of the city. The Binh Loi Bridge, three km to the northwest, also came under heavy attack by two battalions of the enemy Dong Nai Regiment. Both bridges were major accesses connecting Bien Hoa with Saigon across the Saigon River. But both attacks were driven back by Vietnamese marine units during the day of 5 May.

The next day, 6 May, the enemy launched another effort from the west of Saigon. In this effort, enemy attacks which took place in two villages west and southwest of Tan Son Nhut airbase were defeated by elements of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division and air cavalry units. The enemy suffered severe losses.

Intelligence agent reports, in the meantime, indicated that enemy troops that had penetrated Saigon from the west were trying to assemble at the French cemetery adjacent to Tan Son Nhut airbase and attack the headquarters of CMD. An ARVN airborne battalion was immediately deployed to this area to search for the enemy but made only scattered contacts with a small enemy element. As it later turned out, the enemy battalion

Map 11 – Enemy Attacks on Saigon, Phase II



Scale 1: 25,000

that was supposed to assemble there could not contact its local guide and therefore arrived in the area the next day. With the support of VNAF skyraiders, our paratroopers attacked this enemy battalion and almost destroyed it completely. The battalion belonged to the 272d Regiment, 9th Division. On our side, we suffered the loss of VNAF Colonel Luu Kim Cuong, commander of the Tan Son Nhut AFB, who was killed by an enemy B-40 rocket while directing his troops during a counter-attack.

Enemy prisoners captured in this battle disclosed that their plan was to assemble a multi-battalion force and launch a surprise attack against both Tan Son Nhut AFB and the headquarters of the ARVN Airborne Division nearby at Bay Hien. But except for the first battalion that had already arrived and was annihilated by ARVN paratroopers, the other two battalions of the 272d Regiment failed to arrive at the scheduled time. Both battalions were therefore redirected toward the south of Saigon where in coordination with forces of the enemy 3d Subdivision, they would launch attacks on 7 May against the Phu Tho Hoa area in the 6th Precinct and the 7th and 8th Precincts in Cho Lon.

The battles that subsequently took place in Cho Lon were so intense that a 24-hour curfew was declared over this entire area.

At Phu Lam, the enemy 267th Local Force Battalion moved in after an attack and occupied the Minh Phung area, a vital area which controlled two main roads providing access from Saigon-Cho Lon to Route QL-4. Here, enemy troops were equipped with 75-mm recoilless rifles and antiaircraft weapons; they were apparently determined to take on our armor and deter close air support. They also dug in and prepared for extended fighting. People fleeing the area reported that enemy troops knocked holes in walls between adjacent townhouses in the area to facilitate movement and combat actions within each city block. This street combat technique was a duplication of the 1946 experience in Hanoi where the city's self-defense youths organized themselves for a showdown with French forces during the tense days that preceded the outbreak of the resistance war.

Enemy troops were so well entrenched in this area that it took the

38th Ranger Battalion two long days and the support of armor, artillery, and tactical air to eliminate them completely and reoccupy the area.

Meanwhile, another enemy attack erupted in the Binh Tien and Binh Tay areas nearby; here enemy troops attacked the Binh Tien Bridge and the Binh Tay Distillation Plant and penetrated into the vicinity of Hau Giang Avenue, which was adjacent to the Minh Phung area. The enemy even hoisted the NLF flag over a schoolhouse in this area. But he was finally driven off by the 35th Ranger Battalion, which fought for two days with the support of tactical air.

In the 8th Precinct, a buffer zone between downtown Saigon and the Nha Be area, the Y Bridge also came under attack by two enemy local force battalions. But the enemy's attempt was thwarted by the 35th Ranger Battalion which, with the support of a U.S. rifle company from the 9th Infantry Division and U.S. armor elements, fought off the enemy advance toward the bridge from a solid defense line. A counterattack by U.S. forces ensued, led by an infantry battalion of the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, with the support of armor and tactical air, which finally wiped out all enemy troops taking refuge in city blocks adjacent to the Y Bridge.

By 12 May, Phase II of the General Offensive against Saigon-Cholon had been defeated with an enemy death toll of about 3,000. During this phase, the enemy had committed elements of eight regiments and three separate battalions. Actually, however, only 13 enemy battalions had successfully penetrated Saigon and conducted attacks within the city.

The situation remained calm afterwards, and not until 25 May did the enemy come back again with another surge of attacks which, by contrast with the first one, caught us rather unaware. Enemy forces this time had filtered through the Saigon security belt without being detected. The Dong Nai Regiment, for example, had already been in place at An Phu Dong, a guerrilla base just three km north of Saigon, two days before the attack, but its presence was not known. Obviously, the vigilance of CMD troops had diminished and their patrol activities had slackened because of the long days of combat during the last few weeks. Not until enemy forces had begun to move into the suburbs did

they sound the alert.

The first contacts occurred north of Saigon. They were followed shortly thereafter by other attacks to the south and southwest.

In northern Saigon, enemy forces consisted of two regiments, the Dong Nai and the Quyet Thang Regiments. The area where they penetrated was a densely populated suburb limited to the west by the Hanh Thong Tay military complex with its depots, installations and the Cong Hoa General Hospital, to the east by the Saigon-Bien Hoa Highway and to the south by the Gia Dinh Province Office Building and Sector Headquarters. With the areas of operation divided along Route QL-1 and limited by the Bang Ky Bridge, the Dong Nai Regiment attacked toward the northeast while the Quyet Thang Regiment pushed in the northwest direction.

During the battles that ensued in this area, the enemy deliberately positioned his combat elements in pagodas where he hoped his troops would be immune from air attacks. Many such pagodas were occupied by enemy troops: Tam Thanh, Quan Tam, Duoc Su, Truc Lam, Linh Son, Giac Hoa, etc. Apparently, the enemy had staked their chance on the Vietnamese traditional respect of pagodas and the pro-Buddhist sentiment prevailing among ARVN troops. He thought that if we attacked or employed tactical air against pagodas, we would surely incur the wrath of Buddhists and give him a good opportunity to drive home his anti-GVN propaganda.

Despite the political risks involved, our forces were determined to dislodge the enemy from these pagodas. Without hesitation, our marines, paratroopers, and airborne rangers moved in and attacked in force.

The enemy attack against the Bang Ky Bridge took place during the night of 30 May. It was a fierce battle pitting our marines against two battalions of the Dong Nai Regiment. During the attack, an enemy sapper element succeeded in blowing up a fuel pipeline in this area which caused several smoke-laden incendiaries. The smoke screened enemy troop movements and imparted confusion among the population. It took our marines until 3 June to clear enemy troops completely from this area. During this battle, the commander of the Dong Nai Regiment was killed.

In other areas of Gia Dinh Province, fighting continued fiercely in the heavily populated areas. To uproot the enemy quickly, our forces had to employ airborne Ranger Delta teams which were thoroughly experienced in independent fighting and street combat. The relief process was slow and painful but effective.

By this time, however, the use of tactical air and artillery to support relief operations in Saigon had begun to incur some adverse opinion among the urban population about their destructive effect. To soothe popular sentiment, the newly designated prime minister, Mr. Tran Van Huong, issued instructions to the effect that our forces had to curtail the use of firepower in the densely populated suburbs.

In the area occupied by the Quyét Thang Regiment, our airborne units, abiding by the new orders, requested the use of riot control agents to dislodge enemy troops from their shelters. But the use of riot control agents in this area proved ineffective because as soon as it was released by our aircraft, prevailing winds immediately blew it away and sometimes back toward our lines. Our paratroopers, therefore, had to resort to night raids against enemy positions, a tactic which proved effective. Decimated by heavy losses after a few days of fighting the Quyét Thang Regiment asked for reinforcements from the Dong Nai Regiment. The reinforcements arrived but were intercepted and destroyed by an ARVN airborne battalion. Faced with the risk of complete annihilation, the Quyét Thang regimental commander left behind a battalion to fight a delaying action while he and the rest of the regiment tried to slip away. When this regiment reached the Bang Ky Bridge, it was intercepted by our marines and was forced to fall back <sup>in</sup> ~~disorderly~~ into the Cay Thi Area and lost all chances of breaking through the tightening ARVN ring of troops. On 17 June, the deputy commander of the Quyét Thang Regiment, Senior Captain Pham Van Xuong, surrendered. He informed us that his regiment's strength was down to 230 but 110 among them were wounded.

Xuong's surrender was immediately exploited by our Psywar units. His appeal for surrender addressed to enemy troops was recorded on tape

and broadcast from circling aircraft. One by one, elements of what remained of the shattered Quyét Thang Regiment surfaced and surrendered. By 18 June, a total of 152 enemy troops had laid down their weapons and capitulated. This was by far the largest surrender the enemy had made to date. The remnants of this regiment were subsequently either tracked down and killed or captured. The Quyét Thang Regiment no longer existed in the enemy's order of battle. And with it, the enemy's offensive effort in northern Saigon also came to an end.

South of Saigon, in the Cho Lon area, the enemy's second surge of attacks broke out on 27 May, two days later than in Gia Dinh Province. Here the attacks were short-lived and ended on 7 June. They were conducted by two local force battalions of the enemy 3d Subdivision. The enemy's main effort in this area, like the first time, was against Phu Lam, a vital road junction connecting the Saigon-Cho Lon metropolitan area with the Mekong Delta via Route QL-4. As a result, traffic to and from the delta was temporarily suspended.

In this area, the enemy's tactic was to break down into small elements and occupy high-rise buildings and other civilian habitations. His main weapon was the B-40 rocket launcher. Each enemy soldier, therefore, had to carry one or two B-40 rounds in addition to his individual weapon and ammunition issue. The enemy committed only two battalions, but each battalion had been replenished to a full strength of 350. Before moving in for the attack, all enemy troops had been ordered to fight until the last man and not to withdraw regardless of the circumstances.

On the GVN side, defending forces at Phu Lam consisted of one Ranger battalion, two marine companies and national police forces. Spread as they were over this large area, they could not prevent the penetration of enemy forces, which succeeded with relative ease in occupying a new housing complex, Phu Lam A. A Ranger company counterattacked and successfully drove enemy troops off but was compelled to withdraw into adjacent city blocks because its strength was not sufficient to ensure effective defense of the complex. The enemy, therefore, came back and reoccupied the complex. By the time the entire Ranger batta-

lion had been assembled and deployed to retake Phu Lam A, the complex had been evacuated. Taking advantage of the dark, the enemy had penetrated deeper into Cho Lon.

A major tactical blunder committed by our forces here was their failure to cordon off the area occupied by enemy troops with a continuous security belt. Instead, they just posted a few security guard details around it. This allowed the enemy to move with ease, especially at night. As a result, an entire city block in downtown Cho Lon, to include its main thoroughfare, Boulevard Tong Doc Phuong, came under enemy control. Enemy troops immediately occupied high-rise buildings in the area and dug in for defense.

The battle for the relief of Cho Lon became painful and drawn-out. Our forces had to rely on tactical air and gunships to destroy enemy resistance nests lodged on the top floors of several buildings. In addition, they also used M-79 grenade launchers and 57-mm recoilless rifles to take on enemy weapon positions one by one and eventually inflicted quite serious losses on the enemy.

On 2 June, amidst the raging battle, a fatal accident occurred on our side which caused death to some key Vietnamese commanders making up the command of the relief operation in Cho Lon. Their headquarters was at the Thuong Phuoc High School. A salvo of rockets fired by a U.S. gunship struck this group of officers while they were observing the progress of the battle. Five among them died immediately to include Colonel Nguyen Van Luan, Saigon Police Chief, Colonel Dao Ba Phuoc, commander of the 5th Ranger Group, and the 5th Precinct Police Chief. The mayor of Saigon, Colonel Van Van Cua, and the military governor of Saigon, Colonel Nguyen Van Giam, also present among the group, were injured.

An investigation conducted by U.S. authorities later revealed that the firing accident was caused by technical mishaps. The rockets obviously misfired, and the fire angle was apparently too narrow to afford a good security margin. (The distance between the real target and where the group of officers stood was merely 200 m). The crooked minds of some Saigon politicians, however, refused to believe that it was just an

accident. They speculated that it was a deliberate American error designed to provide President Thieu with an opportunity to appoint those loyal to him to the key positions held by the deceased and injured officers, all appointees and confidants of Vice-President Ky.

In any event, the accident caused a two-day delay in the progress of relief operations. By the time a new commander was appointed and resumed control of operations, the enemy had been solidly entrenched in a Chinese restaurant, the famous Soai Kinh Lam, and our forces were unable to dislodge him. To quicken the relief, the new commander decided to call for armor support and the use of riot control agents. Equipped with gas masks, ARVN troops assaulted the enemy-occupied building after tear gas canisters had been thrown in. They rapidly overwhelmed enemy troops, who had nothing to protect themselves but wet towels. The Soai Kinh Lam Restaurant was retaken easily.

On 6 June, our communications intelligence units intercepted a message in which the enemy 3d Subdivision headquarters disapproved a request from local force units in Cho Lon to withdraw and promised them immediate reinforcements. Two ARVN Ranger companies were deployed to intercept enemy reinforcements at a point on their approach route.

During the night of 7 June, enemy troops disguised as marines and field police troopers and estimated at about a company's strength penetrated into the Kim Bien market area in Cho Lon. Almost immediately, they were surrounded by our forces. The enemy's effort to relieve his battered troops in Cho Lon ended in failure. Caught inside the ARVN noose, a few enemy elements chose to surrender. They were immediately employed to appeal to their comrades to cease fighting. First a group of 17 enemy troops surrendered followed by another group of 32, then by still other groups. Finally, both enemy battalions which penetrated Cho Lon and launched attacks for the last ten days were either captured, killed or surrendered.

A tally of enemy-related activities made after the end of Phase II clearly showed a sharp decline as compared to Phase I. During the first four days of Phase II, for example, there were only 52 enemy initiated infantry attacks, or just one half of the total recorded during the same period in Phase I (104). Of these attacks, only

6 were conducted at battalion level or above, as compared to 29 in Phase I.

In contrast, perhaps to compensate for this waning strength of infantry attacks, the enemy had substantially increased his attacks-by-fire during Phase II. There were 433 shellings reported across the country compared to just 268 for Phase I. The quantity of mortar shells and rockets expended during Phase II in these attacks-by-fire also increased more than twofold (10,369 as compared to 4,185).<sup>1</sup>

Of all infantry attacks the enemy initiated during Phase II, only those driven against Gia Dinh (north of Saigon) and Cho Lon were significant. In both places enemy actions differed with those conducted in Phase I in several aspects.

First, apparently to avoid great losses, enemy forces broke down into small elements and penetrated densely populated areas from which they initiated attacks. This was a marked departure from Phase I during which the enemy launched direct attacks against definite objectives and incurred heavy losses in the process. The lessons of Phase I were apparently well learned. By adhering to populated areas and moving from one place to another in case they could not hold on to any particular place, enemy forces had hoped to reduce the effectiveness of our tanks, artillery and tactical air. The effect of this tactic brought about extensive physical damage and casualties to the population, which induced their grievances and helped enemy propaganda.

Second, during Phase II, the enemy had considerably stepped up his propaganda activities in those areas he penetrated. Armed propaganda teams used loudspeakers to broadcast appeals to the population to rise up and participate in what they called a movement sponsored by the "National

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<sup>1</sup>All statistical figures have been obtained from the files of Lt. General William E. Potts, former Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, J-2, MACV (1969-1973) and Assistant Chief of Chief of Staff for Intelligence, G-2, U.S. Army Pacific (1967-1968).

Alliance for Peace and Democracy." Ten different kinds of leaflets were distributed by these teams, making the same kind of appeal. In the Cho Lon and Phu Dinh areas, VCI members searched houses and looked for GVN officials and military and police officers, whom they arrested and took away.

Third, no U.S. installations came under enemy attack during Phase II. This was perhaps a calculated move intended to achieve two things. By sparing U.S. installations, the enemy conveyed the idea that he was showing an attitude of goodwill toward peace negotiations and through this, hoped to gain some American sympathy. This move was also aimed at sowing more suspicion among the South Vietnamese population about a pre-arranged solution to the war, which the U.S. might conclude with the enemy behind their backs. Speculations on this subject had already poisoned public opinion since the beginning of the offensive and affected even some GVN officials and military officers.

The first surge of attacks in Phase II ended with about 4,000 homes destroyed by fire. Our forces suffered 210 killed, to include 67 Americans, and 979 wounded, to include 333 Americans.

All enemy infantry attacks ended by 12 May, but they were followed by the fiercest rocket attacks the enemy had ever unleashed against Saigon. The rocket attacks began on 19 May, apparently to commemorate Ho Chi Minh's birthday. The heaviest attacks took place in June when Saigon received incoming rockets for 12 consecutive days. During this period, to impart still more terror on the Saigon population, enemy propaganda announced that the shelling campaign would last 100 days with an intensity of at least 100 rockets per day. But this turned out to be just propaganda. Enemy rocket attacks on Saigon were not selective; because populated areas became frequent targets for such attacks. During the 12 consecutive days of rocket attacks in June, over 100 civilians were killed and in excess of 400 wounded.

The trauma of the Saigon population and the grievances occasioned by these rocket attacks were such that the GVN had to take certain

emergency measures aimed at protecting Saigon more effectively. The CMD command, which was responsible for this protection, was separated from III Corps control and placed under a newly-appointed military governor, Major General Nguyen Van Minh, who was regarded as thoroughly experienced in antishelling measures during the period he commanded the 21st Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta. General Minh immediately appointed a special committee in charge of protecting Saigon against enemy shellings. To increase patrol and surveillance activities along the Saigon rocket belt, CMD was authorized an additional six RF companies and the employment of the 81st Airborne Ranger Group. Particularly effective in night combat, the airborne Rangers were used in night patrol activities and to launch night attacks against enemy mini-bases near the rocket belt. Security measures within the CMD were also strengthened, and the new CMD commander was authorized to use all ARVN units located in the CMD for security purposes up to 50% of their strengths. All of these new measures greatly contributed to the improvement of security in Saigon and eventually curtailed enemy rocket attacks to a large extent.

### *The Offensive, Phase III*

After the two phases of the offensive which took place during the first half of 1968, the Communists had incurred total losses amounting to 170,000 casualties and 39,800 weapons of all types.

This heavy toll seriously affected the morale of Communist troops and cadres in almost all units. A substantial number of enemy unit commanders had been killed or wounded; many others chose to rally to the GVN. High-ranking enemy cadres captured during the battles of Phase II, included Colonel Le Van Ngot, alias Ba Sinh, commander of the 5th Subdivision and also deputy commander, All-Subdivision Front, and Major Huynh Thanh Dong, Chief of Staff of the forward headquarters, 1st Subdivision. Those who rallied to the GVN included Colonel Phan Viet Dung, commander of the 165th Regiment, 7th Division, in addition to Colonel Tran Van Dac, who had defected during Phase I.

The enemy's propoganda apparatus, which had heretofore been considered effective, fell victim to an unexpected backlash. The outcome of the offensive thus far and the realities witnessed by enemy troops in South Vietnamese cities contrasted so much with Communist propoganda lines that the latter became outright lies. Southern enemy troops, for example, had been informed that they would receive an enthusiastic support from the urban population, which never materialized. NVA troops who were sent to the South to participate in the offensive had been led to believe that South Vietnam had been "liberated" and what remained for them to do was just go in and take over. The situation of South Vietnam had been represented to them as one of near-collapse in which the exploited population was chafing under repressions and deprivations, longing for the day of liberation. But what Communist troops really saw for themselves during the short period they came into contact with South Vietnamese urban civilization had struck them as beyond imagination. NVA troops in particular could not believe their eyes when confronted with the sophisticated amenities of westernized modern life. Their impression was one of awe and bewilderment.

Gradually, they came to suspect and disbelieve their own propoganda apparatus. Just as they were suffering from one defeat after another, for example, this apparatus continued to sing news of victory along with statistical results on "enemy" losses that had been so excessively falsified that even the most gullible Communist troops had to question their veracity. If it was true that all cities of South Vietnam had been liberated and if RVN and U.S. forces had been inflicted so many losses, enemy troops wondered why were they still required to participate in unending combat operations. The truth finally dawned on them that what they had been told was simply hollow propoganda. And for the devout Communist, this affected his morale most seriously.

The deterioration in troop morale and confusion among Communist ranks had reached such alarming proportions that COSVN had to issue a series of resolutions intended to educate and restore the shattered faith of the Communist rank-and-file. Resolution No. 6 was adopted and disseminated in March 1968; however, even three months later, it was

followed by Resolution No. 7. This came as a most unusual practice because resolutions were all important policy formulations usually effective for one to two years or more.

In view of their pressing nature, Resolutions Nos. 6 and 7 contained instructions which were usually issued for less important matters.

Resolution No. 7 was issued for the purpose of reiterating the enemy's view of the General Offensive-General Uprising campaign. This campaign, it was argued, was not a one-time offensive but consisted of several offensive phases, each phase overlapping with the next one and all conducted with growing intensity. Resolution No. 7 then emphasized the need for a third phase which was to be initiated in August. The date selected for the initiation of this phase was 19 August, the day the Viet Minh August Revolution took place 23 years earlier.

Despite COSVN's determination to proceed with Phase III, obviously our enemy had lost the capabilities to carry it out. By this time, all major enemy units had been driven out of the CMD. The enemy's 9th Division, the single major unit participating in Phase II attacks in Saigon, Hoc Mon and Ben Luc, had moved to the west of Tay Ninh Province toward border sanctuaries where it would have to lick its wounds and protect infiltration routes at the same time.

The enemy 7th Division, after several engagements with the 1st Australian Task Force in Binh My and after withdrawing one of its elements from battles north of Saigon during Phase II, had retreated into Hat Dich base, which straddled the common boundaries of Bien Hoa, Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy Provinces. Its sister unit, the 5th Division, had also withdrawn into the Boi Loi area and War Zone D.

To muster more main force strength for his next effort, the enemy deployed the NVA 1st Division from the Central Highlands to III Corps area, where its first regiment was reported in late July. At the same time, local enemy forces belonging to the five subdivisions around Saigon were completely reorganized and upgraded into regiments through a combination of local and main force elements. Each subdivision was required to have one such regiment.

As to RVN and U.S. forces, their primary efforts during this period

against enemy rocket attacks had resulted in a combined effort taken up by the CMD and III Corps in cooperation and coordination with the U.S. II Field Force. The RVNAF also took advantage of this opportunity to implement a program of force structure expansion and modernization, which saw the activation of new units and the delivery of new weapons.

Tactically, the protection of Saigon became more and more effective as enemy shelling was sharply reduced. To ensure this protection, our forces conducted round-the-clock ground and air patrols, installed counter-battery radars in conjunction with a system of observation towers which covered the entire perimeter of Saigon and its immediate vicinity, and extensively used military dogs for the detection of enemy infiltrations. As a result of these activities, large numbers of 122-mm rockets were seized and the enemy was no longer able to preposition rockets around Saigon. Rocket attacks, therefore, sharply declined beginning in late June.

During this same period, ARVN and U.S. forces also expanded search-and-destroy operations around the cities and major bases, especially in III Corps area. The U.S. 1st Infantry Division operated along Route QL-13 north of Saigon and in the areas of Song Be, Quan Loi and Phuoc Vinh. The U.S. 9th Infantry Division conducted activities along Route QL-4 toward the south and southwest of Saigon while the U.S. 25th Infantry Division mopped up the areas west and northwest of the city. The U.S. 199th Infantry Brigade, meanwhile, conducted security operations in the areas surrounding Bien Hoa City and Long Binh Base, and the 1st Australian Task Force operated north of Bien Hoa, interdicting enemy infiltrations from War Zone D toward Saigon. All of these activities were greatly successful. During the month of June alone, our forces killed 1,600 enemy troops and captured over 700 weapons of all types and 78 122-mm rockets. Most engagements with the enemy took place in outlying areas such as Duc Hoa in Hau Nghia Province, Rach Kien in Long An Province, and Loc Ninh in Binh Long Province.

During the month of July, combined RVN-U.S. operations focused on enemy bases located in northern and western III Corps area. The

threat of enemy infantry attacks against Saigon, therefore, greatly diminished, although it still remained a concern.

Phase III of the enemy general offensive began on 17 August 1968, two days earlier than planned. It was a concerted effort that took place simultaneously in I, II, and III Corps areas, primarily through attacks-by-fire. Saigon, however, came under a rocket attack only on 22 August. A total of 19 122-mm rockets were fired on that day, 10 in Saigon, six in Cho Lon and three in the harbor area. This delayed attack on Saigon was part of the enemy's plan for Phase III. According to this plan, elements of the enemy 1st and 7th Divisions conducted attacks against Tay Ninh, An Loc and Loc Ninh on 17 and 19 August with the purpose of drawing our forces away from the CMD, which would leave the ground open for local forces of the five enemy subdivisions to penetrate and launch attacks. But this plan did not work because ARVN and U.S. forces steadfastly remained around Saigon for its defense.

In addition to Saigon, the enemy also attacked another significant target: the Bu Prang Special Forces Camp in Quang Duc Province, five km from the Cambodian border. The battles here lasted several days, ending with enemy losses of 776 killed and friendly losses of 116, including 2 Americans. This attack, however, marked the last enemy offensive effort during 1968.

Of the three offensive phases conducted so far, Phase III was definitely the weakest in all respects. The enemy was able to launch 15 infantry attacks across the country, compared to 52 attacks in Phase II. Among these 15 attacks only 2 were of battalion size or above. Attacks-by-fire were also sharply reduced: a total of 95 were reported, contrasted with 433 in Phase II.

In some other aspects, Phase III attacks also differed from those of the previous two phases. For one thing, these attacks were no longer accompanied by propaganda activities. The enemy's plan for Phase III did not even call for these activities. Obviously, he had realized that inciting the South Vietnamese into rebellion and joining Communist ranks was just an utopian proposition.

Secondly, no main force units joined in the attack against Saigon; only local forces participated even though they had suffered severe losses

during Phase I. In order to bring his local force battalions up to combat strength for the attack, the enemy had to deactivate some others. Most significantly, enemy units attacking Saigon in August were no longer required to fight to the last man. In fact, an enemy document captured during Phase III contained an express order for all attacking units to withdraw after accomplishing their mission and not to become involved in sustained combat. The order also emphasized the need to draw "enemy" forces away from Saigon and destroy them in strategic areas (outside of Saigon). Apparently, the enemy realized he had paid too high a price for trying to hold out in Saigon during Phase II. It was also possible that this new order had been dictated by the need to improve troop morale for those units still capable of attack, because this morale was evidently at a low ebb. A diary captured from an enemy cadre in Phase III recorded these confessions:

"Everybody is tired and confused. Many don't want the unit to break down into small elements because it would be easily destroyed by enemy attacks. Many others are afraid they will get lost in the city, still others will surely run into difficulties because they can't swim. On the other hand, the enemy is more active, more numerous, and enjoys the initiative."

Another captured enemy document revealed the fact that about 1/3 of enemy troops were in bad health.

To Communist leaders, especially COSVN, however, the general offensive continued to bring them victories. They pointed to the fact that the U.S. and RVN had been edged into a deteriorating defensive posture in which they had to redeploy combat units for the defense of cities. The evacuation of Kham Duc and Khe Sanh base by U.S. troops was an evidence of this deteriorating posture. Other events that took place in the U.S., such as the resignation of Secretary McNamara and the replacement of General Westmoreland, also proved that the U.S. was meeting with increasing difficulties.

As a result, the enemy felt a pressing need to keep the offensive spirit alive, if only for the purpose of taking advantage of political events which he was convinced were working to his advantage. But the problem for our enemy was how to proceed, knowing the true status of

his units. In a letter addressed to his troops on 10 August, the political commissar of the 9th Division was heard making this appeal:

"Before we launch this offensive phase in the fall, I want to remind all of you, comrades, that you should try to live up to your own fame. Let us endeavor to accomplish the mission with which you have been entrusted."

The pathetic tone of this appeal failed, however, to fill in the big void created by severe losses that called for immediate replacements, but the only source of replacement manpower was North Vietnam, and this process certainly took time.

The enemy situation after Phase III, therefore, was one of longing for replacements and reduced activities which primarily consisted of shellings, sabotage and terrorists actions.

Taking advantage of the enemy's plight, the RVN vigorously pushed its pacification program ahead with the purpose of restoring control over rural areas that had been lost as a result of the enemy offensive. At the same time, with a renewed source of fresh manpower, it endeavored to make up for the losses incurred since Tet. Both the enemy and our side were well aware that the 1968 general offensive was yet to run its final course.

#### *The Offensive, Phase IV, February 1969*

Phase III of the general offensive exposed all the weaknesses which caused the enemy to fall far short of his objectives despite his continued and determined efforts. The dictates of politics and a strong bargaining position for peace negotiations, however, continued to keep him under pressure.

COSVN was therefore so hard pressed that as soon as Phase III had ended in failure, it immediately issued Resolution No. 8 in September to provide guidance for the next effort. By this decision, the enemy committed himself to preparing for what he called the "Winter-Spring" offensive campaign.

In terms of objectives to be achieved, Resolution No. 8 did not differ much from the previous two resolutions. Our enemy was still

striving for a complete military victory. The approach to achieving this objective was different, however. Resolution No. 8 in effect prescribed a step-by-step effort toward that end instead of pressing for an immediate victory. Realizing perhaps that victory could not be achieved as long as U.S. forces were still in South Vietnam, COSVN observed that efforts should be devoted to attacking and destroying major U.S. force components to such an extent that the U.S. would have to concede defeat in South Vietnam and cease all bombings against the north. By the time he issued Resolution No. 8, our enemy had all the reasons to expect a cessation of bombings. He rightly claimed that this would be a big victory for his side.

President Johnson's decision to cease all U.S. bombings beginning on 1 November 1968 came as the enemy had predicted. The cessation of bombings took effect at a time when the onset of the dry season made it possible for our enemy to set his infiltration machine in motion. As if he had fully prepared for it, the enemy did not seem to lose any time in taking advantage of this momentous decision. Only one day after this decision had gone into effect, a large North Vietnamese labor force was assembled under emergency orders to repair and rehabilitate major roads and bridges destroyed by U.S. bombings. At the same time, a fuel pipeline was hastily installed from Dong Hoi to a point just north of the DMZ, a sure indication of stepped up truck traffic in this area. As aerial photos gradually made it all too evident, stockpiles of supplies and war materiel were being assembled in the north and available to be picked up and delivered to southern battlefields.

South of the DMZ, enemy logistic movements also increased considerably. Evidence of an enemy buildup became visible enough through the several operations conducted by U.S. units in this area. During operation Dewey Canyon in late February 1969, for example, U.S. forces captured an enemy 122-mm field gun, which was the first ever seen deployed in South Vietnam.

U.S. operational efforts in the DMZ area during this time were all designed to disrupt and interdict enemy infiltration and logistic movements from North Vietnam. During the first 40 days of 1969 alone, our forces seized in excess of 17,000 assorted mortar rounds and over 500

rockets ranging in calibers from 107-mm to 144-mm. The significance of this amount of ammunition thus captured was less a credit to our success than an indication of the magnitude of enemy supplies and our enemy's capability to move them into the south.

By early 1969, indications of an enemy offensive during Spring had become evident through several intelligence sources. Most indicative among them was perhaps Directive No. 71 issued by COSVN on 31 January.

This directive reasserted the enemy's intent to renew his general offensive-general uprising campaign of 1968 by an offensive effort in the spring of 1969. Drawing lessons from the three offensive phases in 1968, the enemy now placed first priority on destroying U.S. military forces and war-making capabilities in South Vietnam, to be followed in second priority by the destruction of RVN forces and the dismantling of GVN control. To achieve these basic objectives, Directive No. 71 prescribed a program of activities aimed at interdicting major lines of communication, isolating U.S. and RVNAF military bases, wrecking the GVN pacification program, and keeping both the military offensive momentum and the urban insurrection movement going.

In the face of these enemy plans, both the RVN and U.S. forces stepped up their preparations for counteraction. Also drawing lessons from past enemy activity patterns, our forces expanded patrol and operational activities into outlying areas with the purpose of detecting enemy troop movements and preempting enemy attacks.

As a result, when Phase IV of the offensive came about as predicted during the night of 22 February, the enemy could not obtain surprise. However, with the benefit of additional supplies and fresh manpower infiltrated during the dry season, the enemy was able to conduct infantry attacks and attacks-by-fire against over 100 targets across the country, to include provincial capitals, military installations and outposts.

These attacks were kept at a significant level only for the first five days. During that time, enemy activities were primarily shellings; the most significant ones were rocket attacks on Saigon, Hue and Da Nang.

In the Central Highlands, enemy activities focused on major lines of communication such as QL-1, QL-14 and QL-19, to include sabotage of the railway between Qui Nhon and Nha Trang. In the Mekong Delta, infantry

attacks were mounted against several areas in Dinh Tuong, Kien Hoa, Chau Doc, and Vinh Binh Provinces.

In Saigon, extreme precaution had been taken by the CMD command concerning the protection and defense of the city following intelligence reports. ARVN forces particularly stepped up patrol and ambush activities in areas surrounding the suburbs. During the night the enemy initiated his Phase IV offensive, over 500 patrols and ambushes were taking place in these areas. Thus, despite the seven 122-mm rockets fired against Saigon during that night, our security forces succeeded in destroying two enemy rocket teams while they were preparing to fire on the city.

Of all enemy activities in III Corps area, there were two most significant infantry attacks, one conducted by a regiment of the 9th Division against the Long Binh base area, and the other by a regiment of the 5th Division against suburbs of Bien Hoa City. The attack against Long Binh lasted four days during which the enemy suffered 200 killed while U.S. forces incurred only light casualties.

The target of enemy attack in Bien Hoa was the village of Thai Hiep just northwest of the city. The village was penetrated by the 275th Regiment of the enemy 5th Division at about 0300 hours on 23 February. On the same morning, III Corps deployed a task force composed of a marine battalion, an infantry battalion, and an armored cavalry squadron to the area, and the village was sealed off. But the attack by our forces against the village was not launched until 1100 hours after a Ranger battalion and additional RF troops had arrived. From the village, the enemy put up a fierce resistance, solidly entrenched behind parapets made of sand bags, which the villagers had used to build anti-shelling shelters. By 1500, after the use of air power against the target had been decided, ARVN psywar teams made broadcasts to the villagers asking those who were still stranded inside to seek their way out. Taking advantage of this authorized evacuation, some wounded enemy troops managed to slip out. After the target had been softened by VNAF and U.S. tactical aircraft, the search for enemy troops inside the village became an easy task. When the search ended, 87 enemy troops had either been captured or capitulated, 264 enemy bodies lay strewn about, and in excess of 100 assorted weapons were seized. Enemy prisoners declared the mission of their

regiment was to attack Bien Hoa City and the airbase.

A significant feature of Phase IV of the enemy offensive was the conspicuous absence of local forces and the exclusive use of main force units in all attacks. Obviously, after the severe losses incurred during 1968, no local force unit was capable enough to participate in the 1969 Spring offensive.

To stimulate the deteriorating morale of their troops, Communist forces of the B3 Front employed armored vehicles in their attack against the Ben Het Special Forces Camp, located in the Tri-border area, northwest of Kontum City.<sup>2</sup> During this attack, which began on 6 March, 1969, the enemy committed ten PT-76's and six cargo trucks to carry infantry troops. Despite the enemy's initial numerical advantage, the defending forces, which consisted only of one CIDG company, a U.S. Special Forces team and an artillery element, resisted forcefully with the support of U.S. tactical air and destroyed two PT-76's and all six enemy trucks. The fighting lasted for 56 days, and not until 1 July did the enemy break contact and withdraw after failing to take the camp even with the strong support of artillery, mortar and rockets. During the period of the attack, in excess of 6,000 assorted rounds were fired against the camp. ✓

During this last phase of attacks, however, enemy activities were conspicuously non-existent in I Corps area. This was perhaps due to the success of U.S. conducted operations in this area, particularly the combined operation Nevada Eagle, which spanned a period of several months and did not terminate until the end of February. During this operation, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division and its ARVN counterpart, the 1st Infantry Division, inflicted well over 3,000 casualties on the enemy. Other operations during the same period such as Fayette Canyon, conducted by the U.S. Americal Division northwest of Tam Ky, and Hardin Falls also brought about excellent results. ✓

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<sup>2</sup>The enemy employed armored vehicles for the first time in the war against the Lang Vei, near Khe Sanh, on 7 February 1968.

By the end of May 1969, the combined operation conducted by the U.S. 101st Division and the ARVN 1st Division had been successfully terminated when our forces occupied the Dong Ap Bia peak after 10 days of heavy fighting. Dong Ap Bia was a strategic hill from which our forces could control the A Shau Valley, where enemy supplies were usually stock-piled and which was the staging area for most enemy attacks in northern I Corps area. The control of this hill by our forces was a definite setback for the enemy in this area.

Compared to Phase III, Phase IV of the enemy offensive was markedly stronger in terms of both level and intensity. Its significance might even equal that of Phase II as far as the enemy was concerned, and a parallel could be appropriately drawn between the two. The number of attacks-by-fire during Phase IV even surpassed those of Phase II (433) whereas only 95 such attacks were accounted for during Phase III. There were 125 infantry attacks during Phase IV as compared to 52 during Phase II and 15 during Phase III. Attacks of battalion size or larger numbered 16, compared to six in Phase II and two in Phase III.<sup>3</sup>

However, the most conspicuous decline in enemy capabilities during the last phase was perhaps our enemy's inability to launch any infantry attack against Saigon as he did during Phase II. Politically and psychologically therefore, it seemed that the effect of the general offensive had reached its climax during the first half of 1968. Whatever efforts our enemy attempted after that, to include Phases III and IV, were just inconsequential ripples that did not even affect our military posture.

This inconsequential effect was even felt by those enemy troops who no longer believed in party leadership or a military victory and

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<sup>3</sup> All statistical figures have been obtained from the files of Lt. General William E. Potts, former Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, J-2 MACV (1969-1973) and Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, G2, U.S. Army Pacific (1967-1968).

chose to defect as an expression of their disaffection. Usually, before any military campaign was initiated, all participating troops had to attend indoctrination sessions during which they learned to appreciate the political and military requirements for such an effort. This indoctrination was usually effective and normally, very few enemy troops ever defected before a military campaign began. But it seemed that all this had changed because by the time Phase IV was launched, unprecedented numbers of enemy combat troops had chosen not to fight and to defect. During the first week alone, ralliers of all types had reached over the thousand mark and this rate had remained constant during the following weeks, a record high since March 1967. For the first half of 1969, a total of 20,000 enemy personnel had become ralliers, a threefold increase over the entire year of 1968.

This high rate of enemy desertion reflected the declining morale in most all units during that period. The pressure kept on enemy troops had been overwhelming at a time when irreplaceable losses were increasing and the constant demand for more sacrifices for the sake of bargaining power in future peace talks was being emphasized.

Fully aware of this deteriorating military posture, enemy leaders opted for a new strategic approach to fight the war. Their new strategy no longer called for all-out effort or big scale offensive. Instead, it became an economy-of-force warfare emphasizing small scale attacks by small level units, evidently to keep losses at a minimum. The goal to be achieved, however, remained the same: however small the attacks, they had to draw public attention, domestically and internationally.

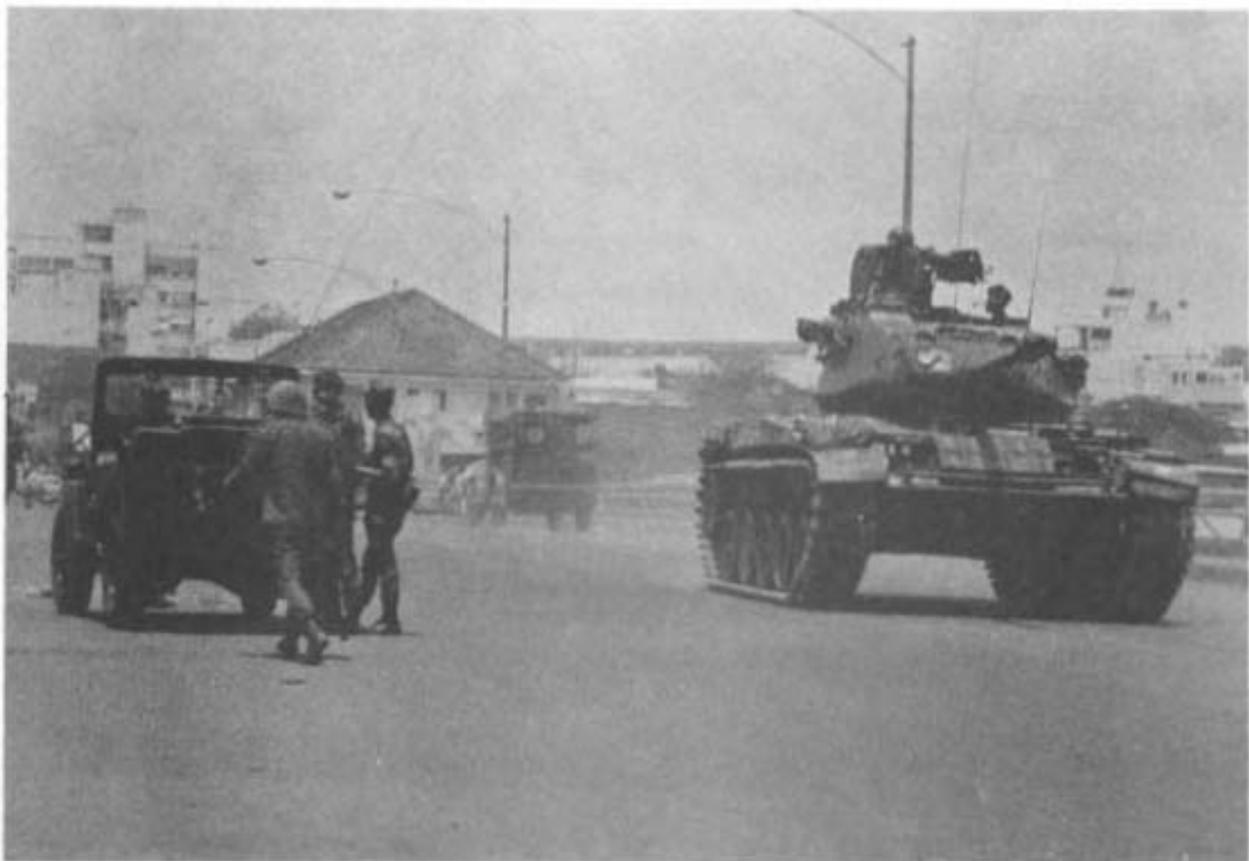
For the first time since Giap's article, COSVN admitted the need to preserve forces when it issued Directive No. 55 in April 1969. The directive stressed in effect: "Never again, and under no circumstances are we going to risk our entire military force for just an offensive. On the contrary, we should endeavor to preserve our military potential for future campaigns."

However sound and realistic this new approach might be, it represented a radical departure from established policies and until directed to do so, COSVN would have to keep it in the conceptual stage. Not until after the North Vietnamese Politbureau had voted its approval did COSVN

make it an official subject for study and indoctrination when it issued Resolution No. 9 in July 1969.

Essentially an embodiment of Hanoi's decision to switch strategy, COSVN's Resolution No. 9 went into effect immediately. Enemy initiated activities during the rest of 1969 faithfully followed the policies laid out in the resolution. During August, sapper activities made a strong comeback as if taking over from big-unit actions. Most of these activities were aimed at sabotage, harassment, and terror; they were reminiscent of guerrilla actions during the early stage of the war. On 7 August, for example, enemy sappers penetrated the U.S. rest and recuperation area of Cam Ranh Base, killing two Americans and wounding 198 others. The next day, saboteurs detonated 60 pounds of plastic at the VNAF English School in the 5th Precinct of Cho Lon, causing serious damage to the school building, 12 Vietnamese personnel killed and 67 others wounded, to include 28 Americans. Late in August, a grenade was thrown into a crowd of civilians during a meeting held by RD cadres at Phu Cat in Binh Dinh Province; 24 were killed and over 100 wounded by this enemy action. The same day, a foreign freighter sailing on the Saigon River detonated a floating mine at Nha Be and incurred some damage.

All of these activities were conducted to implement Resolution No. 9 whose policies clearly indicated the impact that the 1968-69 general offensive-general uprising was having on our enemy.



ARVN Rangers and Tank Blocking the Phan Thanh Gian  
Bridge, 6 May 1968



Fighting at the French Cemetery Adjoining Tan Son Nhut  
Airbase, 7 May 1968



Combat Action Near Tan Son Nhut AFB, May 1968



ARVN Rangers Moving Through Western Cholon  
After Clearing Enemy, 10 May 1968



NVA Troops Captured Near Saigon, May 1968



VC Rocket Attack on Saigon, August 1968

## CHAPTER VI

### Impact of the 1968-1969 General Offensive

#### *"Talk and Fight"*

Like a catalyst, the enemy's unsuccessful attacks during Tet 1968 had brought about peace talks in Paris barely three months after Hue City was wrested back from among smoldering ruins. It was quite indicative of the enemy's warring policy that peace talks should begin in the midst of his second phase of attacks. For "Talk and Fight" had become the strategy that dictated our enemy's actions in the years ahead.

As a rule of Communist people's warfare since the days of the Long March, "Talk and Fight" was not something new. In the context of the Vietnam war, however, opinions during 1968 differed as to how far our enemy would want to go by it and what kind of balance he wished to strike between war and peace. Not even six months into peace talks, our enemy already strongly hinted at how he viewed peace-making efforts when a document captured from him squarely affirmed in early 1969, "The Paris peace talks cannot bring about any results until we achieve a big military victory."

Peace talks, therefore, did not delude our enemy into forsaking or even diminishing his war efforts. On the contrary, military victory still remained the sine qua non for peace and the ultimate goal to be achieved regardless of talks. A pattern of coordinated enemy activity soon developed which saw military actions support political moves and political moves give rise to military actions, especially when new "peace initiatives" were at stake.

In spite of his weakening military posture in the aftermath of Tet 1968, our enemy still drew heavily on his exhausted capabilities to achieve some spectacular each time he felt the need to give weight to some political move. On 8 May 1969, for example, the NLF came up with

a new 10-point peace proposal, the essentials of which dwelled on a total solution to the war. Among other things, our enemy demanded the unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. troops, the creation of a coalition government for South Vietnam, and no interference from foreign powers. Translated into military terms, this solution to the war sounded like a total victory on the battlefield which was precisely lying beyond the reach of our enemy at that time.

Phase IV of the offensive had ended in failure. Still, to prove that he was utterly serious in his demands and evidently to incite further pressure from the U.S. antiwar movement, which he hoped could cause the U.S. to give in to those demands, the enemy followed up his peace proposal with a military initiative on 11 and 12 May. Essentially a "high point" of cyclical summer activities, this initiative consisted of 212 shellings conducted on a country-wide basis, of which 105 were relatively significant and still included Saigon as a primary target. In several areas, shellings were followed up by infantry attacks, but none of these attacks exceeded battalion size. Conducted primarily at company level, most ended by the end of the second day.

Then on 10 June 1969, the enemy announced the inauguration of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam, which virtually upgraded the rebellious NLF into a political entity of international stature. This was also a calculated move preparing and paving the way for the NLF's participation in the peace talks, which practically placed it on a political par with the Republic of Vietnam should the latter decide to play the "talk-fight" game.

By now, the political dictates of the "talk-fight" game were pressing on Communist military leaders for a military strategy which had not only to be tailored to battleground realities and their own capabilities but also to satisfy the military requirements in support of peace negotiations.

In general terms, this new enemy strategy was embodied in COSVN's Resolution No. 9 and details of its implementation explained in a subsequent directive, appropriately called "Resolution No. 14 on guerrilla warfare (DKCT)".

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pp 128 thru 133

COSVN Resolutions No. 9 and 14/DKCT

Disseminated among the high levels of the party hierarchy five months after Phase IV of the general offensive, COSVN Resolution No. 9 was a watershed policy directive that set the Communist conduct of the war in South Vietnam on an entirely new course. Most significantly, it provided a cool analysis of the impact of the 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising on our enemy's war posture and thoroughly justified his actions for the past year and a half.

Besides what he termed as successes, which in view of all the evidence gathered by our side, could be attributed to his usual bias, our enemy proved to be more candid and unusually objective when he assessed his own shortcomings. And although called a COSVN resolution, its scope evidently transcended the authority and decision-making power normally assigned to this southern office of the North Vietnamese Politbureau. The preamble of the document, therefore, made it clear that the contents resulted from a "total agreement" with North Vietnam's resolution.

Assessing the general situation, our enemy believed that his general offensive had resulted in a significant human and materiel losses to U.S. forces. The incremental withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Vietnam and the de-Americanization of the war were appropriately considered a major turning point in the war which effectively changed the balance of forces to our enemy's favor. This new balance of forces provided a new opportunity which, if effectively seized at the proper time, could lead to still bigger victories.

However, our enemy felt he was still incapable of making that big leap forward to seize this opportunity because of several shortcomings.

First, he candidly admitted his own failure to promote an indispensable "political tidal wave" among the South Vietnamese population, not only during the general offensive but also and even under the currently favorable political circumstances.

Second, he admitted to the ineffectiveness of his proselyting activities, which failed to disintegrate our armed forces and our

government as he had expected they would.

Third, he recognized that his guerrilla warfare had developed too slowly and sporadically, attributing its weaknesses mainly to errors of approach and tactics.

Finally, the failure of the offensive, as he saw it, was also one of logistics, and he attributed it to the immaturity of people's organizations at the infrastructure level which could not ensure the flow of supplies to frontline units.

Analyzing the causes for these shortcomings, the COSVN leadership believed that its cadres had not fully understood the basic requirements of the General Offensive-General Uprising Campaign as far as party leadership's guidance was concerned. Worse still, it felt that in many instances the implementation of party leadership's guidance had been incorrect and devoid of supervision and control.

The COSVN leadership then castigated its cadres for being "near-sighted" in appraising the balance of forces between the two sides, exalting the enemy while debasing their own capabilities, distrusting the Politbureau's strategy, and consequently, fighting without enthusiasm or conviction. The single most important principle that ensured victory for the General Offensive-General Uprising, therefore, had not been adhered to and was lost.

COSVN criticism was especially harsh against those cadres whom it accused of having mistaken the General Offensive for just a one-time action of transient nature. This was the most serious mistake that caused them to lose their sense of audacity and duty required in times of emergency, and as a result, they had become rightist-minded and fearful of action.

For all that candor, our enemy's self-criticism still fell far short of his true condition by the latter half of 1969. In fact, each of the shortcomings that he had confessed implied much more than he dared admit for obvious reasons. There were also certain other difficulties that he felt not politically appropriate to discuss. Most serious among them was the severe dent made into his infrastructure ranks as a result of the 1968 General Offensive. The truth was that about half of this infrastructure had been completely and irretrievably destroyed in the process.

The depletion among Communist infrastructure ranks had reached such proportions that beginning in May 1969, our enemy had to use North Vietnamese replacements to fill the void, especially in the Mekong Delta. Naturally, this was an expedient that never met the requirements in terms of local politics and regional affinity. It never helped our enemy resurrect that deceased part of his infrastructure body for the simple reason that a northern transplant could not become a local insurgent overnight.

The increasing substitution of local infrastructure members and combat troops with replacements from the north in the aftermath of the offensive gradually fostered a feeling of animosity between southern and northern Communists which smacked of regionalism and discrimination in spite of party ideology and discipline. Although repressed, this conflict seemed to deepen with time as the southern-born Communists realized that the insurgent war was no longer theirs but increasingly a North Vietnamese enterprise.

The severe losses incurred by southern-born insurgents, whether infrastructure or local force elements, during the offensive was a fact that could not be hidden from these families of the deceased. This was also true of northern-born cadres and troops whose families in the north suddenly ceased to hear from them after the offensive. Even though the COSVN leadership never admitted to it, the fact was amply demonstrated by the many diaries and letters captured and the testimony of prisoners and ralliers.

As Communist main force units withdrew from populous centers and urban areas after the offensive failure, the dwindling guerrilla and infrastructure ranks suddenly found themselves cut off from the kind of military support on which they had come to depend. The interdependence and mutual support between these components, which for years had contributed so much to effective insurgent activities, were now lost. This explained why the GVN pacification effort succeeded so easily and so rapidly as of late 1968.

As a result, along with diminishing military effectiveness, other enemy activities also suffered a marked decline. Our enemy found it increasingly difficult to sell his propaganda, recruit new manpower,

collect taxes, or run his financial operations, all the activities that had helped sustain his insurgency warfare for so many years.

To overcome these difficulties and remedy his own shortcomings, the enemy sought ways to keep his military activities alive while trying to keep the commitment of forces and his losses down. He found it effective and economical to fight a kind of "souped up" guerrilla warfare: sapper actions. Essentially a sabotage and hit-and-run tactic, sapper actions were not a military novelty. Their chief advantage, however, was to create headlines, which suited well our enemy's purpose at this juncture, and to inflict as much damage to our military potential as possible at minimum cost. More significantly, from this time on, sapper actions were to become the mainstay of enemy activities.

In a military sense, the impact of the 1968-69 general offensive-general uprising saw a turnabout in enemy strategy which curtailed main force warfare and emphasized small-scale actions by small local force units. It was in this strategic direction that COSVN Resolution No. 9 explicitly promoted guerrilla warfare and implicitly maintained that small-scale warfare was but a transition phase in the continuous process of general offensive and general uprising.

To further explain this new warfare direction to his rank and file, the enemy passed and issued Resolution No. 14 on guerrilla warfare, which was immediately used as indoctrination material in all units.

Resolution No. 14 went at great length to explain the reasons why it was necessary to break up main and local force units into companies while keeping parent unit designations intact. It also encouraged efforts to turn all main force elements thus broken up into sapper units.

This new organizational trend, the COSVN leadership maintained, had several advantages. First, by scattering combat forces, the threat of destruction by firepower, especially B-52 bombings that big force concentrations usually faced, and losses would be greatly reduced. Second, the dispersion of units went along with a dispersion of supplies, which would make it easier to supply and support small units than big concentrated units. Third, the breaking down of major units also allowed the selection of combat-experienced troops to form new sapper units.

The success of guerrilla warfare, the resolution emphasized, depended on these sapper units, whose effectiveness in combat had been fully demonstrated in the past.

In spite of their doctrinal logic, these arguments failed to convince a great number of enemy military cadres who only found weaknesses in the new strategic approach.

These cadres believed that the dissection of units would surely dilute or even dissolve unit integrity and morale entirely. Command and control would become difficult and unit commanders would be overburdened by additional responsibilities with regard to planning, coordination and supervision. It was hard under those circumstances to maintain the offensive spirit required of all units.

They also anticipated logistic problems caused by direct support for company-level operations. Communist cadres were all familiar with the existing supply system in which major units were responsible for their subordinate components. They felt that direct support for small units would complicate logistic tasks and lengthen and multiply supply lines because the system had to reach down to every place across the country.

As to the activation of new sapper units with experienced personnel taken from the present force structure, almost all believed that it would seriously affect unit combat capabilities since by this time no unit had its full complement of combat-experienced troops.

In general, Resolution No. 14 wrought upon itself criticism and scorn from all quarters, to include veteran political commissars. Some were pessimistic about future war prospects, believing that militarily, their side had been soundly defeated. Why else, they reasoned, would they have to retrogress to guerrilla warfare if not because of the offensive's failure? Many cadres and troops, therefore, yearned for the day the Paris peace talks would be concluded, losing their heart in continued fighting. As the testimony of ralliers revealed, many middle-level cadres, those who enjoyed the privilege of owning private radio receivers secretly tuned in to broadcasts of western stations such as the BBC and VOA to monitor with anticipation and hopes the progress of peace talks and what they all longed for most: a cease-fire. And

amidst commonly shared secrets, the forlorn and the homesick already daydreamed about the time all could be reunited with their families.

Undoubtedly aware of these human feelings, the Communist leadership stepped up indoctrination efforts to drive home its new concept of integrated people's warfare. The war in South Vietnam, it maintained, was no longer a three-phase progression like the 1946-1954 Resistance War, but a single-phase effort with a flexible strategy. This strategy was essentially a continuous offensive by military forces whose level and extent had to be consistent with the local situation and local capabilities.

As if to prove this point, and again to support his bargaining position at the conference table, the enemy successively launched his fall campaign on 11 and 12 August 1969 with 137 limited infantry attacks and shellings and his winter campaign in early November with a primary effort driven against Quang Duc Province near the Cambodian border.

But these activities failed to help our enemy redress his weakening military posture and compensate for what had been irretrievably lost. The fact was that all COSVN-controlled main force units had been driven into Cambodian territory and other major units dissected into scattered elements. His infrastructure had been severely and perhaps fatally damaged, and no replacements could ever bring it to full life again. The morale of his troops was at its lowest ebb, and his ranks were continually and increasingly depleted by defection.

In addition to this lamentable condition, COSVN was also deeply concerned about the possibility that the U.S. and RVN might strike into Cambodia and Laos where his lifeline and sanctuaries now lay at their mercy. Politically, the trend was never so bad for the Communist cause. The South Vietnamese people seemed more staunchly anti-Communist than ever, and this spirit was particularly strong among the urban population.

Despite these domestic setbacks, which came as an adverse consequence of the 1968 general offensive, our enemy still felt he had the upper hand in long-term prospects. He saw an indisputable advantage in the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the complete cessation of bombings against North Vietnam which in time might give him the ultimate chance of a final conquest.

## *A Windfall for South Vietnam*

Like a cold breeze, the Communist 1968 Tet Offensive seemed to awaken the South Vietnamese people from a lethargic slumber. Everybody became sober and alert, fully aware of what was at stake.

But the damage was done and the moment of truth had arrived. The initial bewilderment and terror gradually disappeared and gave way to consciousness and self-assurance. Even though war had stepped into their heretofore secure habitat and after meeting face to face with an enemy whom they had so far only heard about through all sorts of myths, the urban people still kept their faith intact and never even thought of the RVN being defeated in this showdown of force.

It was difficult to trace back the roots of this overconfidence. People rushed about to stay away from crossfire, but never did they panic. Perhaps in their brief contacts with Communist troops, they had not been impressed. They had seen in those young and plain peasant faces nothing but innocence and immaturity, and they suddenly felt a strong surge of compassion and pity. They had seen that these troops were fighting without the support of artillery or tanks. And, unconsciously, they made a comparison and came to the conclusion that it was most unlikely that the paratroopers, the marines, the Rangers could ever be subdued by those peasants. No, they were convinced that the RVN could not lose this war, especially when the mighty U.S. forces were still there at their side.

As their homes turned into battle positions behind which the intruders entrenched themselves, the urban population suddenly became conscious of their duties to defend not only themselves but their nation. But how could one do this without taking up a weapon and joining in the fighting? Thus, the idea of self-defense gradually took shape and became stronger as the enemy procrastinated. It was a neglected feeling that had not surfaced in the people's consciousness for a long time.

In this very moment of distress, every dissent of opinion seemed to disappear as if by magic. Politicians, congressman, and all those who professed to be political opponents of the regime suddenly found all polemics hollow, almost ridiculous. Unconsciously, they also felt the

need to join in the struggle by contributing constructive ideas to steer the nation away from possible demise.

However, the immediate efforts to save the nation always rested with the military. The first action taken by the Joint General Staff was to conduct an emergency operation to clear the enemy from Saigon, the symbol of the GVN authority. As an expedient to assemble enough forces for the effort and to set the example for the entire RVNAF, it was decided to turn all staff and service personnel of the JGS into combat troops with the exception of a few key staff elements, and the Chief of JGS himself took personal command of the relief forces. Several battalions were thus activated overnight, and it was truly an unprecedented event which saw colonels and majors acting as platoon leaders and company grade officers carrying rifles as simple privates. But they created quite a sensation and greatly impressed the local population around the JGS compound when they were deployed to take up combat positions just like any other ARVN troopers.

In Saigon as well as in other cities throughout South Vietnam, big crowds of servicemen on Tet leave reported to city garrison headquarters, anxious to get back to their units. Because of the lack of transportation facilities, the JGS authorized all sector headquarters to employ these servicemen for immediate combat duties in their hometowns until security was restored; then they could join their units when transportation was available.

In addition to expedient measures, the JGS, pending the general mobilization bill which was being drafted by the National Assembly, recalled to immediate active duty 65,000 retired servicemen who had less than 12 years of service. This bill was passed on 15 June and signed into law on 17 June. By this law, the draft age range was extended from 18 to 38 instead of the current 19 to 39 eligibility. Those who belonged to the 17 and 39 to 43 age classes were required to join the People's Self-Defense system. A stumbling block in manpower procurement, which had been obstinately maintained by the legislative branch, was thus removed.

With this new mobilization law, the JGS estimated that the RVNAF would receive an additional 268,000 men by December. What it did not

expect was that three months ahead of schedule nearly 90% of that quota would have been met. The popular response to mobilization was unprecedented, and it overwhelmed the RVNAF processing and training capabilities. By September, 240,000 draftees had beaten the deadline by volunteering or reporting to draft centers ahead of time; among them, 161,000 were volunteers who enlisted in combat arms or service branches of their choice. Most remarkable was the fact that about half of that manpower consisted of urban youths, again an unprecedented record. The surge of volunteers and draftees was such that basic training had to be reduced from 12 to 8 weeks.

If this enthusiastic response to mobilization was an indication of anything, it could only be a measure of how the people felt toward Communist insurgency. It had to be made clear, however, that this enthusiasm did not result from propaganda or psywar actions, although the Ministry of Information and the RVNAF Political Warfare Department did step up public relations activities. It simply stemmed from a sincere desire to serve, to contribute something at a time when the nation's survival was at stake. And in their decision to join the military services, these youths had unquestionably expressed an unflinching faith in the future of South Vietnam, which they felt they had a duty to defend and believed that it was defensible. As a result of the mobilization law, 6% of the South Vietnamese population had virtually become combatants in one way or another. Transposed to another scale, it was as if 12 million Americans had joined the services at the call of duty.

In all cities across South Vietnam, especially in Siagon, the urban people beyond the draft age also displayed a similar enthusiasm in organizing themselves for defense. Given their endemic indifference to the war effort, this sudden demonstration of patriotic fervor struck everyone as strange and incredible. Without being told or asked, they set up self-defense committees, organized fund drives to purchase barrier materiel, fenced off their own blocks with barbed wire, and took up guard duties at the only entrance gate to each block. At night, they became particularly vigilant and security-minded, screening people coming in and out, letting in only those people who lived in the block,

and reporting to police all strangers or suspects who loitered around.

In Saigon, especially in some suburban Catholic communities, people were not satisfied when taking up guard duties with bare hands. They began to petition the government for weapons and ammunition. At first, the distribution of weapons for self-defense purposes was restricted to Catholic communities. Soon, by popular demand, the GVN overcame its cautiousness and made weapons available for all self-defense organizations. This was how the People's Self-Defense movement came into being, a concept which had been espoused since the days of the First Republic but never was implemented on such a scale owing to the lukewarm response by the people. Taking the cue from the growing popular demand, the GVN stepped in and launched a country-wide campaign to institute self-defense forces not only in cities but also in rural areas. By April, just three months after Tet, the People's Self-Defense Forces had become a reality throughout South Vietnam. Their organization was eventually formalized by the Mobilization Law in June 1968.

Riding on the crest of the self-defense movement, the college students of Saigon, made idle by the closing down of universities to make them available as refugee centers, gathered themselves into a para-military organization pompously designated "Capital Defense Student Division". Armed with individual weapons, the students were employed to assist the police and ARVN units in maintaining security for the city. When communist forces attacked Saigon during Phase II of the offensive, 2,000 college students of the division participated in the defense of the city. They were mostly deployed to man checkpoints and guard accesses to Saigon, particularly in the river-bound southern suburbs. The Student Division did not exist for long, however, for as Saigon came back to normal, the students also returned to their books.

During the attacks on Saigon, Communist forces were all equipped with AK-47's and rocket launchers, B-40 or B-41. The superiority of these weapons, especially the AK-47, was immediately recognized by the urban people, even by the teen-agers. For one thing, after days of listening to battle sounds, the Saigon people were able to differentiate between the sharper, rounder and more uniform AK-47 bursts and the dull crackles of our Garand and carbine reports. Therefore, they could

orient themselves and know exactly where the enemy was. To pass idle time while the fighting was still raging, some even amused themselves with this guessing game by listening to the sounds of gunfire and telling whether they were the enemy's or ours. All agreed that the AK-47 sounds were more impressive.

The inferiority of ARVN troops in individual armament eventually became a major concern, which pressed the JGS into asking for improvement. A modernization plan was initiated and placed under a combined JGS-MACV committee for implementation. By May 1968, the first stage of the plan was completed, and the RVNAF began to receive modern infantry equipment such as the M-16 rifle, the M-60 machinegun, the M-79 grenade launcher, and the AN/PRC-25 field radio set.

By the same programming effort, the U.S. also made available more heavy equipment for the RVNAF to keep up with their modernization and force structure expansion trends. By the end of 1969, ARVN armor assets had been brought up to 1,500 vehicles compared to 600 at the time the offensive began. Artillery pieces also increased substantially, to include the M-102 for the Airborne Division, adding two more artillery battalions to each infantry division. The Airborne Division thus found itself with three artillery battalions, one for each brigade for better direct support instead of just one for the entire division as in early 1968. The VNAF also saw its helicopter armada increased fourfold to 400 ships, in addition to 60 more jet fighter-bombers.

An indirect consequence of the offensive was that the rural areas became virtually open to enemy penetration and control. The threat exerted on cities compelled GVN and military authorities to place a high priority on their relief at the expense of other activities, including pacification and development. As the fighting continued, ARVN infantry battalions were gradually extracted from pacification support and redeployed to cities to ensure their defense. Meanwhile, RD cadre teams which remained behind in villages found themselves unable to operate without military support. Many such teams were called back to cities to participate in more pressing tasks such as organizing and supervising the operation of refugee centers.

The deterioration of security in rural areas was such that as soon as the urban situation improved, pacification became the number one priority again. Rapidly, security and control were restored as fighting in cities subsided, just as they had quickly deteriorated when the enemy offensive was in full swing. By 30 September, therefore, the GVN had regained its normal pre-Tet control over rural areas, based on HES statistics.

Encouraged by this quick recovery, the GVN immediately embarked on a three-month accelerated pacification program beginning on 1 November. The purpose was to take back everything that had been lost to the enemy in the rural areas during the offensive.

The subsequent pacification effort for 1969 continued and expanded the scope of the successful accelerated program. More oriented toward development, the 1969 program focused on the village rather than the hamlet, a concept which effectively turned the village, the traditional basic administrative unit of rural South Vietnam, into a bulwark of local development and progress. The village chief, an elected official, was given full authority in local government affairs; he was especially empowered to resolve property and land ownership matters, a move which paved the way for a monumental land reform program the next year. Militarily, the village chief also assumed unified command over the PF, the RD cadres, and especially the police, which for the first time in South Vietnam's history were made available at the village level. Within this new rural administrative structure, the village was destined to play the key role in national defense and development, a role that enabled South Vietnam to contest effectively with the enemy at the very grassroots level.

The immediate goal of the 1969 pacification program, however, was to drive the enemy away and prevent him from returning to the rural areas. Priority was given to those areas that met the criteria of high population density, proximity to major lines of communication and political and economic viability. In June 1969, half way through the program, the GVN pushed it even farther by launching a special four-month pacification effort which concentrated on improving security, order, and law enforcement in villages. When the program was completed,

up to 92% of the South Vietnamese population by HES statistics were living in relative security in class A, B, and C hamlets.

In spite of inherent errors in any data collection and reporting system, the fact should be admitted that by the end of 1969, South Vietnam truly fared much better in terms of rural security and control. Credit of course should be given not only to the GVN efforts but also to the material and technical support provided by MACCORDS. This pacification progress was real and especially unsettling for our enemy. He was so completely flabbergasted by our achievements that a good part of COSVN Resolution No. 9 was devoted to assessing the impact of the GVN pacification program and devising a comprehensive plan to counter it. As if to testify to the success of pacification in 1969, the political commissar of the enemy MR-4 (Saigon-Cho Lon) admitted, in a document captured from him, that the expansion of GVN control was such that he had to spend nearly four months on long detours to reach the Ba Thu area in Cambodia for a high-level COSVN meeting. It had normally taken him only two weeks to travel to the same area.

Improved security made it possible for the RVNAF to take over the responsibility of defending the CMD from the U.S. II Field Force on 1 October 1969. But since the beginning of the year, the RVNAF had already taken on additional combat responsibilities to destroy enemy main and local force units, relegating pacification support responsibilities to the RF and PF.

Socially, the enemy 1968 offensive had brought about additional problems for the GVN which suddenly found in excess of 3 million refugees on its hands. This created unusual burdens for a national budget already deeply in deficit. The process of finding shelters, providing food and health services, and resettling this mass of dispossessed people was not only financially and socially burdensome but time and energy consuming as well. In addition, there were also problems of screening and surveillance to weed out enemy agents who found the refugee masses particularly tempting for propaganda and subversive activities.

Then there was the problem of rehabilitating civilian housing and industrial plants destroyed or damaged as a result of street fighting,

especially in Saigon, Cho Lon, and Hue. All of these relief and financial support expenses struck a big dent in the national budget. On top of these problems, the GVN also had to ensure the regular supply of cities, especially Saigon, in basic commodities to avert shortages in rice and fuel and particularly to combat black market and price manipulation by greedy businessmen.

To make a final tally, the enemy 1968 offensive affected South Vietnam in several aspects and placed many burdens on the GVN. Eventually, all obstructions were removed, and South Vietnam found everything much better than before the offensive. But progress and achievements would have been much more substantial had the South Vietnamese leadership known how to exploit its advantages of the moment. It was agreed that never before had South Vietnam been in such a privileged position, a position which combined all three basic ingredients of success, namely, "opportunity, advantage, and popular consent," as the famous strategist Sun Tzu saw it centuries ago.

#### *The Limitations of South Vietnam's Efforts*

Unquestionably, the enemy 1968 offensive came as a windfall for South Vietnam in terms of prospects for long-range success. Among the basic ingredients of success, popular consent was the most important because up to that time it had been missing. For years, the battle of the hearts and minds had been waged but never won. But this time, and most unexpectedly, this battle was won without much effort. This stimulating fact was that during and after the offensive, every South Vietnamese seemed to have made up his mind as to what side he wanted to live with. This almost universal rejection of Communism came about not as a result of propaganda or coercion but as a profound conviction, a faith suddenly rediscovered in the face of disaster. As a result, the popular consent to align with nationalism was sincere, almost instinctive. Without a formal referendum, the great majority of the South Vietnamese population had overwhelmingly voted for the nationalist regime, by their attitude, by their actions. If this popular mandate was maintained

and strengthened, then force of will and solidarity could never be subdued by its Communist archenemy.

It was most unfortunate that as soon as the perils were gone, this national unity and sense of dedication to the national cause also ebbed away, and everything seemed to downgrade to its former condition, edging the nation back to its old problems of divisiveness, factional rivalry, social malaise, and lethargy.

A cunning politician, President Thieu took advantage of the nation's survival effort to consolidate his power, wresting it back from his political rival, Vice President Ky. He fired Ky's appointees, to include the prime minister, reshuffled the cabinet, reappointed key military commanders and replaced them with his own men. All of these changes did not help improve leadership or advance the national cause. They were made in the same old pattern of power intrigue, based not on talent, experience or merits but on personal loyalty and clannish relations. The administrative machinery, therefore, continued to function with the same lethargic pace, plagued by inefficiency, waste, and corruption. Deluded by perpetuating political intrigues, a divisive national leadership, and the aggravation of social ills, the South Vietnamese people who were expecting progress and innovation, gradually found their newly rediscovered patriotic ardor and dedication sapped and gone.

Militarily, the conduct of war efforts was affected by the replacement of three out of four corps commanders. This change was publicized as an effort to remove incompetence but the real motive behind it was entirely different. In fact, since Thieu was elected president, he had always felt his constitutional power greatly constrained by the Council of Generals, a kind of military politburo which had propped him and Ky up into power, of which he was simply a member. By removing the three key members of this council, President Thieu effectively used his elective authority to deal it a fatal blow and asserted himself as the unrivaled strongman of the regime.

The second element of success South Vietnam enjoyed in the aftermath of the 1968 enemy offensive was opportunity. This opportunity came and went because South Vietnamese leadership failed to take full

advantage of it. It was the most opportune moment for the Republic of Vietnam to regain national initiative, enhance its cause, initiate social reforms, create a foundation for national development and self-sufficiency, and reorganize its defense structure and armed forces in such a way that the conduct of the war conformed to both conventional and unconventional requirements and to the economic realities of the nation.

Vietnamization provided just that: a precious opportunity to develop indigenous resources for long-term survival. The gradual American disengagement implied that South Vietnam had to rely upon itself to survive, and with continued American aid, it had all the chances of making it provided that the American protective shield would not be removed as long as North Vietnam still maintained its divisions in the south.

For all its implications, Vietnamization did not concern the South Vietnamese leadership who saw in it just a chance to get more war materiel and economic aid from the U.S.. It failed to see for itself that to survive without the presence of American troops, a comprehensive national plan mobilizing all resources available and obtainable would be required to enable South Vietnam to take over war responsibilities effectively. Aside from criticizing Vietnamization as an inappropriate term to save pride and face, the Independence Palace did not provide any guidance on how it should be implemented, what other requirements it occasioned in addition to force structure expansion and equipment modernization, and how the war should be fought without the American presence. The South Vietnamese leadership even failed to alert its people on the immediate consequences of the U.S. troop withdrawal and condition popular psychology to self-sufficiency and self-defense. As a result, Vietnamization amounted to just that: a normal process of force expansion and modernization, nothing else.

The complacency and nearsightedness with which the South Vietnamese leadership viewed the process of American disengagement derived perhaps from ignorance and blind trust. It was possible that President Thieu did not sense any cause for alarm because he had been promised continued

American support. But as a national leader, he surely took a chance when he did not even question the future of that support.

Last but not least was South Vietnam's enhanced posture as a strong and viable nation, which was brought about not only by the enemy's failure but also by the U.S. disengagement. Both events concurred to make South Vietnam the indisputable master of its own destiny and the invincible adversary of North Vietnam, not the southern insurgents whom it had crushed during the offensive. This was a military and political advantage that in the long run should have contributed to South Vietnam's success in war or in peace.

## CHAPTER VII

### Observations and Conclusions

The Communist General Offensive of 1968-69 marked an important turning point in the Vietnam war. Despite its short-lived intensity, which lasted for some time during Phase I, then diminished during Phase II, and finally became insignificant during Phases III and IV, the repercussions and effect caused by it bore heavily on the final outcome of the war.

Both sides, the Communists as well as the RVN and U.S., claimed victory. Victory, however, depends on the sense that each side imparted to it. In the commonly accepted sense, victory usually means military success, and the extent of victory can be measured by the objectives achieved, the losses incurred. Within this frame of reference, the Communists could hardly say they were the victors of this offensive.

Of all the military objectives that the Communists had set about to attain--the major cities, provincial capitals, and district towns of South Vietnam--none was under their control when the offensive ended. For this failure, they had to pay a prohibitively high price in human losses even if we were to scale down our own reporting statistics.

Our enemy also publicized what he claimed to be "severe losses" inflicted on our side. Knowing communist propaganda for what it was, there could hardly be any grain of truth in those figures, which had in fact been so exaggerated that even Communist troops and pro-Communist public opinion refused to believe them as a matter of simple logic. If the alleged losses had been as true as reported, they reasoned, the RVNAF would have been entirely wiped out. But the truth dawned on them that not only were the RVNAF very much alive and well, they also became stronger and stronger. What else could explain the fact that eventually Communist forces had to withdraw to their bases, and even main force units were constrained to break down into small

elements in order to survive?

Victory, however, did not simply mean military success in Communist eyes. Our enemy recognized the importance of military success, but he believed that the essential ingredient of victory was political success. In the drawn-out process of conquering South Vietnam, the Communists always nurtured the dream of a political victory. Their strategy of offensive, therefore, combined all three efforts: political, military and proselyting, in which the military effort was but a lever to drive political success forward.

Such a political success was what the Communists had very much expected during their 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising. They hoped to achieve this through the catalyzing effect of the military offensive: a country-wide revolt among the population living under the RVN control.

Popular uprising and tactical surprise were the two key factors that led to genuine victory, as the Communists viewed it. Both had been the objectives set forth in the offensive plan whose success was predicated on their being achieved.

As the offensive unfolded, everyone could see that the Communists were able to achieve only one of these objectives: the much-expected "general uprising" never materialized. If our side was the victim of military surprise, then the total indifference shown by the South Vietnamese people toward Communist instigations came about perhaps as an even bigger surprise for our enemy because it was political.

Just as we kept asking ourselves why we were surprised, our enemy must have asked himself the same thing. This surprise of his, like ours, had its own causes. For one thing, he had misread the feelings of the South Vietnam population. It was true that urban unrest had crippled South Vietnam to some extent ever since the Buddhist show-down in 1963. This and the subsequent political turmoil coupled with anti-government, anti-U.S. protests and demonstrations, which climaxed in disruptive acts of violence, were obviously the manifestations of a frustrated urban populace undergoing a phase of political growth crisis. They never meant, as our enemy had erroneously construed it, an expression of sympathy toward insurgency or Communism.

True to their self-serving interpretation, Communist leaders identified this urban unrest with the process of political struggle for the Communist cause. They believed that Communism was the only alternative and that those who openly defied the government naturally opted for Communist insurgency.

In this black-and-white world of Communism where party discipline and doctrinal orthodoxy were the absolute rules, understandably no political cadre of the lower echelons would ever dare contradict the party's leadership by reporting the contrary. No party member would want to run the risk of being criticized as rightist-minded and lacking faith in the party's policies and leadership. For this aberrance, he might even be castigated for failure or neglect in proselyting the masses or the crime of heresy. As a result, the Communists committed the same error that sometimes marred our effort, namely, failure to report the truth.

One of the ploys that our enemy had planned to use in instigating the South Vietnamese population into insurrection was to make them suspicious of the U.S. His purpose was to impart on them and on the RVN government and armed forces the impression that his offensive action had been subject to pre-agreement by the U.S.

The suspicion was further enhanced by the fact that the RVN was caught off-guard by the offensive. Apparently very few Vietnamese, especially those who had some knowledge about U.S. capabilities, could bring themselves to believe that the U.S. was unable to detect Communist preparations for the general offensive. They suspected that the U.S. did know but withheld the information because it had struck an agreement with the Communists to end the war and disengage from South Vietnam. This was how the surprise came about, they concluded. To some senior Vietnamese Commanders, it also appeared that the U.S. intelligence system, in spite of its technological prowess, had simply failed to fully predict the objectives, scope, and timing of the enemy offensive.

To obtain the element of surprise, the Communists had to strike on New Year's day that, by tradition, every Vietnamese held in sacred

eneration. The price they had to pay for that surprise, therefore was unexpectedly high because it was the popular backlash that doomed their plans to utter failure. There was no doubt that in those areas under attack the urban people were irritated by what they considered a most treacherous act by the Communists. And this wrath partly accounted for the enthusiasm with which people subsequently responded to the GVN appeals for solidarity in self-defense against aggression.

Granted the Communists did achieve the element of surprise, I do not believe it would have been possible under normal conditions. Our enemy had spent at least six months to prepare for his offensive. Given the scale and the extent of preparations, there was simply no way he could keep it secret, regardless of how precautionous he might have been. Indeed, to some extent, our enemy did give away his secret and our intelligence was also able to detect several indications. In the light of these indications alone, the enemy scheme would have appeared more transparent to us had we not been preoccupied with overconfidence and subjectivity. The lesson here was quite classic, but this was how we learned not to underestimate the enemy's capabilities.

Since our enemy had predicated his success on the element of surprise, a question that could have been asked in the aftermath of the offensive was this. Had we been able to detect the enemy's scheme, or, in other words, if our enemy had known that his plan was no longer a secret, would he still have proceeded with the offensive?

It is difficult to prove something that would have resulted from what did not really happen, but from hindsight and based on events which subsequently unfolded, one may say that the offensive would have taken place even if it had been discovered.

As evidence to this, we may point, for example, to the fact that the enemy still launched the second phase of his offensive even though he no longer enjoyed the element of surprise. The fact was enemy infantry forces kept returning and even succeeded in penetrating Saigon and Cholon for a second time even though we knew in advance the

entire enemy plan, including such essential details as his objectives, his forces, his direction of attack and even the timing of his attack.

It was self-evident, therefore, that any planner had to take into consideration the possibility that however minute his planning, the element of surprise might or might not work. That it might not work would not necessarily doom the entire plan, and in view of the political objectives he had decided upon, it would be senseless for our enemy to hold back his offensive simply for the reason that we had known about it.

Undoubtedly, our enemy had weighed the pros and cons and estimated the chances of victory or defeat in his planning. This was precisely the reason why Vo Nguyen Giap later concluded that even in the event of defeat, his side had nothing to lose in the offensive. This made sense militarily because the worst that could happen to our enemy amounted simply to a retreat toward his former bases where he could always wait and prepare for another chance.

Not only did our enemy have nothing to lose, he had everything to gain because the general offensive was perhaps the only strategic alternative to help him recover some measure of initiative that had been lost after the dismal dry seasons of 1965-1966 and 1966-1967. The general offensive was intended precisely to wrest back the initiative, not only a military sense but also in terms of politics and international prestige.

The chain of events that successively took place in the aftermath of the offensive, such as President Johnson's non-candidacy, the reshuffle of U.S. military leaders seen through the resignation of Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and the reassignment of General William C. Westmoreland, the complete cessation of bombings against North Vietnam, the mounting anti-war movement in the U.S., and the eventual U.S. troop redeployment from South Vietnam: all were considered as political victories by the Communists. Certainly, as they viewed it, these were far more important than just military gains.

To put it differently, our enemy believed that he had broken the will and determination of the U.S. through his general offensive. To

his reasoning, the U.S. intervention in Vietnam had reached its peak; from this time on, it had no other way to go but downhill.

As far as the RVN and U.S. side was concerned, the military gains were more obvious. Such military accomplishments as measured through statistics on enemy troops killed, detained or rallied, on enemy weapons captured, represented solid facts that nobody could dispute because they were witnessed by the South Vietnamese people themselves. No single city or district town had been completely seized by the Communist during the offensive. More importantly, the enemy was completely driven away from urban areas. These facts also constituted undeniable evidence of our military victory.

In addition to military victory, the RVN also achieved other gains which, though less visible, were perhaps far more important for its long-term survival.

First and foremost, the RVNAF had gained self-assurance; they were confident they could defeat the North Vietnamese Army. Then, the extensive firefights that pitched our RF and PF against NVA units completely shattered the myth that the RVN territorial forces were no match for the enemy's main forces. The RVNAF felt confident because they had fully demonstrated, to their own people and in the inquisitive eyes of the foreign press, the value of their combat capabilities, a value that had been misconstrued because they had had no previous chance to prove it.

In terms of internal politics, the RVN also gained a resounding victory. The South Vietnamese people, at the most critical moment of the situation when the enemy was at their very doorsteps, had made a clear-cut decision as to their political inclination. They had unwaveringly opted for the regime of South Vietnam and declined the invitation to join the Communists, although this invitation was wrapped under such appealing concepts as Neutrality, Democracy and Peace. This unflinching attitude of the South Vietnamese people toward Communism was termed appropriately "voting by feet." Indeed, by their feet, they always chose to flee the Communist-controlled areas toward where the nationalist government was established.

But the South Vietnamese people did not only vote by their feet; they also voted by their hands which picked up weapons and by their will which told them to use these weapons for defense. They did not simply flee the Communists; they actually joined the ranks of nationalists and fought against those from whom they fled, directly or indirectly, even with weapons, something which was least expected and seldom occurred before. Without being told, they voluntarily cooperated with the government in organizing themselves for defense, protecting their households, their communities against the VCI whose members they tracked down and eliminated. The surprising fact about it all was that never before had the rapport between the people and the armed forces and between the people and the government been so close. Without much effort, the GVN had thus definitely won the battle of the hearts and the minds.

Such was the situation of South Vietnam in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive. Its positive aspects were self-evident. Unfortunately they were little known by the world at large, especially the American public, which was exposed only to the negative aspects that carried all the undertones of pessimism, despair, and defeatism.

Reports on the enemy's offensive came to the American public only from one side, the South Vietnamese side. Among the words and pictures depicting war, destruction, and death, there was none that suggested and effectively conveyed the fact that those involved on our side, to include the people, never lost their confidence in the survival of South Vietnam. The end result of it all seemed rather weird. While those directly involved in the fight were still confident and hopeful, the spectators detached from it had already felt disheartened and gave up.

In this atmosphere charged with prejudices, everything seemed to take on a meaning quite different from normal. General Westmoreland, for example, requested an additional 200,000 U.S. troops, which made sense militarily since this reinforcement was needed not only to deter future offensive attempts by the Communists but also to exploit the gains achieved after they had been defeated.

But this request unfortunately brought about a totally different effect, an effect which was both undesirable and unexpected. It fed more fuel to the anti-war movement whose most vocal elements vehemently demanded the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam and an immediate end to the war. Although it never had any significant effect on our conduct of the war other than mollifying the will of some ARVN junior officers, this clamor struck at the hearts of some segments of the American public and U.S. Congressmen as well who had already felt bitterly disappointed with the military solution in Vietnam, in which they no longer took heart. For at a moment of utmost confidence and optimism, the enemy suddenly pulled out a surprise attack which seemed to turn everything upside down.

From hindsight, one may be tempted to question the wisdom of that request for more U.S. troops. At a time when Americans felt increasingly adverse to the war, perhaps a political move such as recommending a gradual reduction in the level of U.S. troops by that same amount would have helped level off the mounting tension. Not only would this have been more logical, it could even bring our hard earned military victory and other gains into proper focus. After all, we should have required less, and not more troops in South Vietnam since the enemy had been so soundly defeated.

To free nations, however, balancing the requirements of the war against those dictated by politics in order to achieve the desired overall result was perhaps not a habitual domain of war leadership. Yet, in the context of the Vietnam war, political dictates could hardly be ignored because it was they that eventually prevailed.

Strangely enough, the events which unfolded in the U.S. during 1968 followed a pattern similar to those that took place in France fourteen years earlier. It was in that remote backstage of the war scene, whether in Washington, D.C. or Paris, that people felt the most insecure and disenchanted. But there could hardly be any parallel between 1954 and 1968 because the military situation then was entirely different. The aftermath of Dien Bien Phu was one of deterioration and despair, whereas what followed in the wake of Tet

1968 was but improvement and high expectations. Despite this, much to our consternation, we could do nothing to help cleanse the polluted air of our political backstage.

All this led us to the conclusion that the outcome of the enemy's 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising had self-compensating but opposing effects for both sides of the war. To our side, South Vietnam and the U.S., it was obviously a military success but a political failure in the long-term. As to our enemy, he was unquestionably defeated militarily; but politically, it was hardly deniable that he had won.

The enemy offensive, in the final analysis, was not unlike a chess game in which our opponent sacrificed his queen to move into checkmate position. We won his queen but in the process we also exposed our king to his checkmate. However, the final outcome of Tet 1968 would not have necessarily turned out this way had we known how to enhance our chance. For Tet 1968 had brought about new opportunities that would have helped us attain success in the near future. But we just let these opportunities slip by unknowingly.

Our enemy, on the contrary, jumped on this occasion to formalize the National Liberation Front as an entity capable of struggling politically with our regime on equal terms. He also seized the opportunity to obtain the complete cessation of bombings against his homeland, to gain an advantageous position in the peace talks that followed, and finally to wrest back the initiative in the war.

The United States, too, had seized its own chance, the chance of disengaging from the war with honor and in the hopes that its new strategy would work as long as South Vietnam survived.

On its part, South Vietnam was given the opportunity to strengthen its defense posture by expanding and modernizing its armed forces. For some time, it was able to regain initiative on the battlefield, driving the enemy away from urban centers and into his jungle habitat. Two years after Tet 1968, it was even able to launch offensive operations into Cambodia. But the best opportunities that South Vietnam enjoyed in the aftermath of Tet 1968 were perhaps the support of

its people, the solidarity of its own ranks, and the ascendancy of its cause. All these were the ingredients that should unfailingly lead to ultimate success had our leadership known how to nurture and find ways to develop.

The sad fact was that once the threat to survival had been removed, all the gains that we were able to achieve gradually disappeared and finally everything seemed to regress to its former condition amidst contentment and complacency.

It was inadmissible, however, for the South Vietnamese leadership to fail to see what our enemy could and would do both in the short and long term and take appropriate actions to counter it. Communist strategy in South Vietnam was as clear as daylight, especially since the event of COSVN Resolution No. 9. Never in the war had we been able to lay our hands on such a comprehensive enemy policy document. All of our enemy's strategic approach, present and future, his vulnerabilities and shortcomings, his short and long-range objectives were there, laid out with unmistakable clarity. Despite this, we failed to plan for counteraction or even modify our plans to meet the implications of our enemy's strategy. Perhaps our leaders did not appreciate the importance of that document or did not believe in it. Or perhaps they were confident that their way of conducting the war was appropriate enough to face any contingency. In any event, it looked as though they saw in COSVN Resolution No. 9 nothing but the evidence of a military feat.

South Vietnam's passivity and inertia in the face of enemy designs were evidenced by its own indecisiveness as to whether to make the enemy document public. Our leadership did not know what to do with it and was unable to agree to disagree with a U.S. recommendation to release it to the press. It was finally the U.S. Embassy which made the decision and informed our own press of COSVN Resolution No. 9.

Finally, the Republic of Vietnam failed to exploit its own political and military advantages brought about by the enemy offensive. By its own doing, it let its principal role slip away and relegate its position to that of dependent nation. Its subsequent efforts to regain that

primary role in the Paris peace talks, therefore, were not too successful because it was too late.

The elements of success that South Vietnam enjoyed after the 1968 Tet offensive were all there for it to exploit. But it did not know how to do it and let them slip away.

Politics, for one, reverted to intrigues and power struggles as if oblivious to the ever-present threat of Communist conquest and seemingly ignorant of the fact that U.S. policies had irreversibly changed from commitment to disengagement.

Had our national leaders been more pragmatic and more properly concerned about future prospects, they could have seen for themselves that South Vietnam was in grave danger. Had they been cognizant of that danger and taken appropriate measures to maintain and exploit the gains achieved after the 1968 offensive, then perhaps this offensive would have yielded golden fruits, not for our enemy but for us who rightly deserved it.

South Vietnam would certainly have survived the conquest of its archenemy. For the prospects of a militarily strong and politically stable South Vietnam would have caused our allies, especially the U.S., to adopt political and military policies other than those that prevailed in the end.

Unfortunately, political clairvoyance and wisdom were not the forte of our leadership. As a result, what we gained from the 1968 Tet offensive turned out to be just an ephemeral victory. But from it our enemy was able to shape up the favorable conditions that enabled him to win the final victory in 1975.

## Glossary

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ABN	Airborne
AK-47	Russian-designed assault rifle, 7.62-mm
B-40, B-41	Chinese-made rocket launcher
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Binh-Tri-Thien	The provinces of Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien
CIO	Central Intelligence Organization
CMD	Capital Military District
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CT	Enemy code abbreviation for divisions (Cong Truong), particularly those under COSVN control such as the 5th, 7th, and 9th
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
FWMA	Free World Military Assistance
GVN	Government of the Republic of Vietnam
G-2	Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Corps and Division level
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System
J-2	Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, JGS
J-3	Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, JGS
JGS	Joint General Staff
JOC	Joint Operations Center
MACCORDS	Military Assistance Command Civil Operations and Rural Development Support
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MP	Military Police
M-79	Grenade launcher

MSS	Military Security Service
MR	Military Region
NLF	National Liberation Front (Viet Cong)
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (Viet Cong)
PF	Popular Forces
PT-76	Russian light tank
QL	Vietnamese National Route
RD	Rural Development
RF	Regional Forces
ROK	Republic of Korea
RPM	Chinese-made light machine gun
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
S-2	Officer in charge of Military Intelligence, regiment, battalion, sector and subsector levels
Tri-Thien	The provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien
Tri-Thien-Hue	The provinces of Quang Tri, and Thua Thien and Hue City
USARV	United States Army, Vietnam
VCI	Viet Cong Infrastructure
VNAF	Vietnam Air Force
VNN	Vietnam Navy
VOA	Voice of America