

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

# TURNING POINT

1967-1968



Cover: An M113 armored personnel carrier (APC) and its crew lead the way down a street in Saigon, providing security for ground troops of Company B, 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, and the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division. (*National Archives*)

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# Introduction

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

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

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States already had invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the effort to build a secure and stable Republic of Vietnam. That commitment expanded rapidly through 1969, when the United States had over 365,000 Army soldiers (out of a total of a half million troops of all services) in every military region of South Vietnam with thousands of other

Army personnel throughout the Pacific area providing direct support to operations. The war saw many innovations, including the massive use of helicopters to conduct airmobile tactics, new concepts of counterinsurgency, the introduction of airborne radio direction finding, wide-scale use of computers, and major advances in battlefield medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden was still borne by soldiers on the ground who slogged on foot over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military effort by the United States was, however, matched by the resolve of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive as American commitment wavered in the face of high casualties and economic and social challenges at home. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the American military role in the conflict. Actual peace was elusive, and two years later the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam, bringing the war to an end in April 1975.

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

JON T. HOFFMAN  
Chief Historian

## Turning Point, 1967–1968

During October 1967, the United States appeared to be making slow but steady gains against the Viet Cong insurgents and their North Vietnamese allies who were attempting to destroy the South Vietnamese government. Army General William C. Westmoreland, the chief of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), expected to get even better results in the coming year as more U.S. combat units joined his command, raising its maximum authorized strength to 525,000 personnel. MACV advisers continued to modernize the South Vietnamese armed forces and the effort to expand government authority in the countryside appeared to be gaining traction. The enemy was suffering enormous casualties and many of his troops were afflicted by malnutrition and disease. Hammered from the air by B-52 bombers and disrupted by allied ground sweeps, the Viet Cong base areas in South Vietnam were no longer the safe havens they once had been. Despite these gains, however, MACV's mission was far from complete. The enemy was disciplined and resourceful, sustained by a constant flow of arms and men from North Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and guided by a party that was ruthlessly committed to national reunification on its own terms (*see Map 1*). Knowing that the American people were unwilling to support a costly and protracted war, which already had cost the lives of more than 15,000 Americans, Westmoreland keenly felt the need to accelerate his progress in 1968 “on all fronts—political, military, economic, and psychological.”

North Vietnamese leaders also were eager to intensify the war, believing that the time had come “to create a new turning point that [would] enable us to make a great leap forward.” In the



Map 1

autumn of 1967, Ho Chi Minh and his senior officials agreed that the political and military situation in South Vietnam favored the commencement of the long-awaited *tong cong kich/tong khoi nghia* (general offensive-general uprising). North Vietnamese leaders resolved to attack South Vietnam's administrative infrastructure, which meant expanding the war into the big cities for the first time in the conflict. The goal of the general offensive was to paralyze the government long enough for Viet Cong-controlled revolutionary councils to seize power in many provincial and district capitals. Claiming to represent those "liberated zones," the revolutionary councils would jointly demand the formation of a coalition government in Saigon that would include representatives from the National Liberation Front. Following the formation of that coalition government, the National Liberation Front members would press for an immediate cease-fire and the speedy departure of American and Free World forces. After they had gone, the Communists could step out of the shadows and reunify the country under the banner of the Lao Dong (People's Worker) Party. Between Westmoreland's ambitious goals and the enemy's planned general offensive, 1968 looked to become the most violent year of the war to date, and possibly a decisive turning point by the time it had ended (*see Map 2*).

## STRATEGIC SETTING

President Lyndon B. Johnson faced a political and strategic dilemma in late 1967, needing to see faster progress in Vietnam but unwilling to expand the war beyond certain limits. He remained committed to the goal of preserving "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam" as stated in his National Security Action Memorandum 288 from March 1964, but agonized about the growing human and monetary costs. Public support for the war was steadily eroding, and some leading Democrats were privately predicting a Republican victory in the next presidential election unless the United States achieved a breakthrough. North Vietnam showed no interest in anything short of victory, and seemed unfazed by the U.S. bombing campaign known as ROLLING THUNDER that had already destroyed much of its industrial base. The president could not send another large package of troops to Vietnam without first calling up the reserve components, a politically dangerous step he was unwilling to take. Johnson was also determined to prevent the ground war from spilling across



Map 2

the border into Cambodia, Laos, or North Vietnam, and placed geographical limits on the strategic bombing campaign to avoid hitting ground targets in Communist China or Soviet ships in Haiphong harbor. Nevertheless, the president held out hope that Westmoreland's strategy would eventually prevail in Vietnam as long as the United States stayed the course.

The strategy that MACV had pursued since the start of U.S. combat operations in mid-1965 had three main components. The first goal was to wear down the Viet Cong (or *PLAF* [*People's Liberation Armed Forces*]) and North Vietnamese (or *PAVN* [*People's Army of Vietnam*]) conventional main force units through combat operations, anti-infiltration programs, and the destruction of the enemy's logistical network. The second and related goal was to help the South Vietnamese government regain control over the territory and people dominated by the enemy's shadow government, a process known as pacification. MACV's third essential mission was to train and modernize the South Vietnamese armed forces so they could eventually handle the threat of internal insurgency and external invasion without the need for significant U.S. combat forces.

In October 1967, General Westmoreland commanded some 480,000 uniformed personnel, including 314,000 soldiers. His ground forces were organized around 77 U.S. Army maneuver battalions and 21 U.S. Marine Corps maneuver battalions, backed by 49 field artillery battalions, a sizable engineer component, and a powerful aviation fleet that included 3,400 helicopters. Westmoreland also exercised operational control over some 52,000 military personnel from the Free World Military Assistance Forces, which included 45,000 South Korean troops organized around twenty-two maneuver battalions, approximately 6,300 Australian and 500 New Zealand troops who operated as a combined two-battalion task force, about 2,200 soldiers from Thailand, and 2,000 noncombat troops from the Philippines. The MACV commander coordinated his actions with but did not control the South Vietnamese armed forces, which consisted of around 615,000 troops, most of them belonging to the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam. A MACV component command, the U.S. Seventh Air Force, supported ground operations in South Vietnam with fifty-two tactical squadrons as well as a host of reconnaissance and transport aircraft. Another component command, the U.S. Naval Forces, Vietnam, conducted an anti-seaborne infiltration program called *MARKET TIME* and a river security operation in the Mekong Delta called *GAME WARDEN*

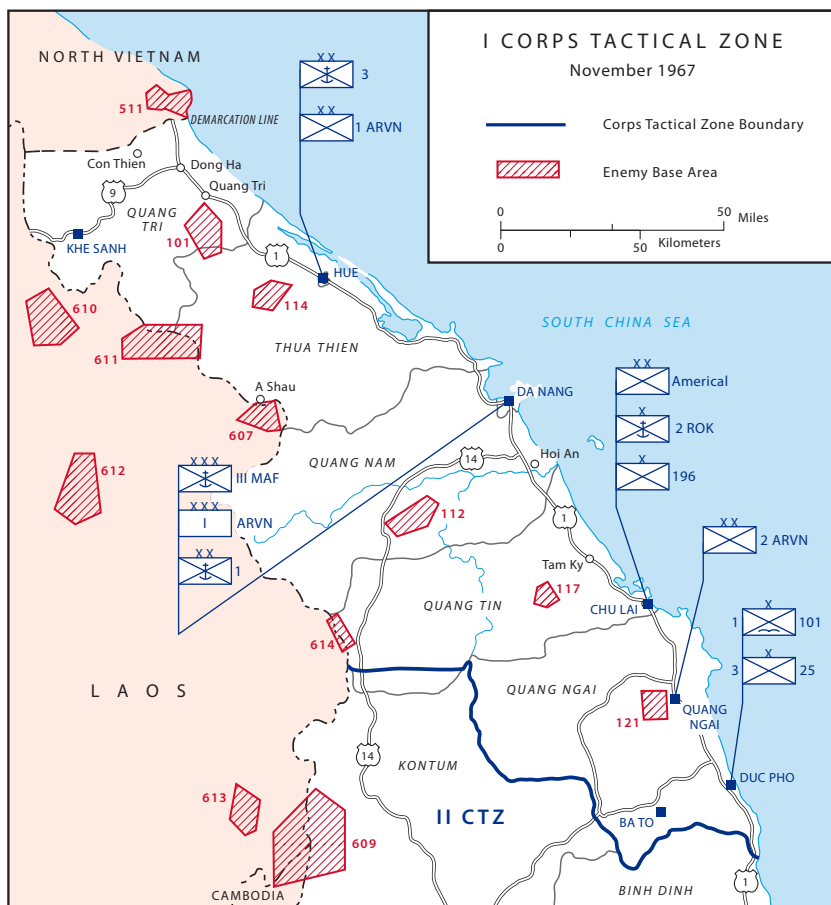
with several hundred U.S. Navy and Coast Guard patrol vessels and a small fleet of reconnaissance aircraft.

Westmoreland relied on three major subcommands to direct the ground war in South Vietnam. The first of those, the III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), controlled U.S. operations in I Corps, the tactical zone that incorporated the five northernmost provinces and the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam. The U.S. 1st and 3d Marine Divisions guarded the northern and central provinces alongside a South Vietnamese infantry division and a South Korean marine brigade, while the U.S. Army's 23d Infantry Division, better known as the Americal Division, operated in the central and southern zones in partnership with a second South Vietnamese division. In addition to its organic air and artillery, the III Marine Amphibious Force was aided by two helicopter battalions from the 16th Aviation Group and five artillery battalions from the 108th Artillery Group. The commander of III Marine Amphibious Force located his headquarters in the coastal city of Da Nang, which also served as the main port and airfield in I Corps (*Map 3*).

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Soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) search a well for enemy supplies.





Map 3

A second corps-level headquarters, I Field Force, controlled American forces across the broad expanse of II Corps in the middle part of South Vietnam. Two brigades from the 4th Infantry Division screened the remote and sparsely populated western highlands, while two brigades from the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and the independent 173d Airborne Brigade protected the northeastern lowlands. Two South Vietnamese infantry divisions divided their forces between the highlands and the lowlands, while two South Korean infantry divisions defended the central and southern coast. I Field Force supported those allied units with

four helicopter battalions from the 17th Aviation Group, seven combat engineer battalions (one battalion was under the operational control of the Americal Division in southern I Corps) from the 18th Engineer Brigade, and twelve artillery battalions mainly from the 41st and 52d Artillery Groups. The commander of I Field Force maintained his headquarters in the coastal city of Nha Trang; two other coastal cities, Qui Nhon and Cam Ranh Bay, acted as the main supply hubs for the U.S. forces in II Corps (*Map 4*).

Another Army-led headquarters, II Field Force, controlled American units in the III Corps region that surrounded Saigon, as well as the U.S. forces in the IV Corps zone of the Mekong Delta (*see Maps 5 and 6*). The command's major maneuver units formed a defensive ring around the capital, with the 25th Infantry Division guarding the west and northwest approaches, the 1st Infantry Division to the north and northeast, one brigade from the 9th Infantry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry to the east, two brigades from the 9th Infantry Division to the south (with one operating in upper IV Corps alongside a U.S. Navy river fleet), and the 199th Infantry Brigade (Light) patrolling the immediate

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UH-1D helicopter gunships arrive at a landing zone in Phu Yen Province held by soldiers from the 173d Airborne Brigade.

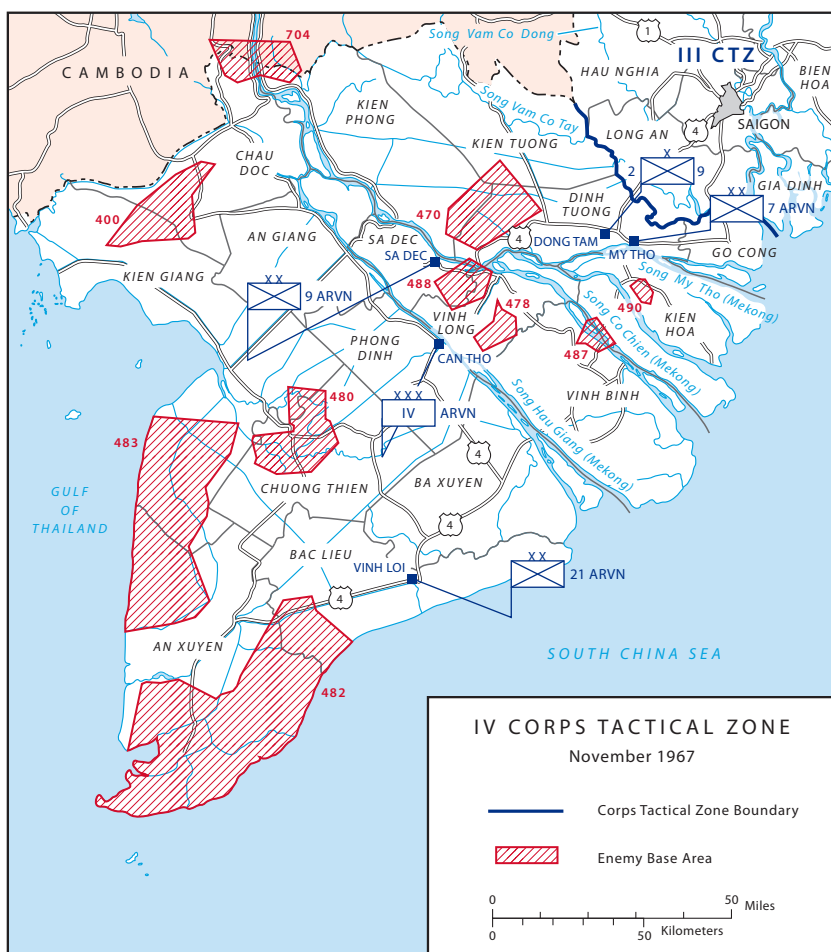






Map 5

outskirts of Saigon. Three South Vietnamese infantry divisions and two brigade-size units—the 1st Australian Task Force and the Royal Thai Volunteer Regiment (the “Queen’s Cobras”)—rounded out the major maneuver units in III Corps. II Field Force supported those allied combat units with nine helicopter battal-



Map 6

ions from the 12th Aviation Group, four combat engineer battalions from the 20th Engineer Brigade, and nine artillery battalions belonging to the 23d and 54th Artillery Groups. South Vietnamese infantry divisions bore the main burden of defending IV Corps in the Mekong Delta. The commander of II Field Force located his headquarters in a camp called Plantation at Long Binh, a massive logistical complex some twenty kilometers northeast of Saigon that served as the main distribution and storage facility for the

supplies that came into the port of Saigon and through the nearby airfields at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa.

Westmoreland supported South Vietnam's pacification program, MACV's second key mission, through the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) directorate. Established in May 1967, CORDS gathered all of the previously existing pacification programs run by various U.S. civilian and military agencies into a single MACV agency headed by a civilian manager, Robert W. Komer, who held a State Department rank equivalent to that of a four-star general. The CORDS chief managed the flow of money and resources for the roughly 7,000 U.S. military advisers who assisted South Vietnamese officials at the province and district level.

Pacification was a multistage process that employed a mixture of conventional forces, security and police units, and government social welfare agencies. The allies first identified a populated area to reclaim from the enemy and then conducted military operations in and around that sector to drive off enemy main force combat units. Once that had been accomplished, military forces would conduct further operations on the territory's periphery to prevent Communist combat units from reentering it while South Vietnamese paramilitary, intelligence, and police forces established local security, rooted out the enemy's clandestine political infrastructure, and hunted down Viet Cong guerrillas. As the area became more secure, the allies introduced a civil government and other organizations to mobilize support for the government, replacing Communist control with their own. Finally, the allies would introduce programs—educational, medical, agricultural, political, developmental, and humanitarian—that stole the insurgents' thunder by redressing social ills, won public support, and helped build a new nation. After a region was sufficiently secure, the allies would repeat the process in a neighboring area, so that government control would gradually spread across the entire country as a drop of oil spreads across water.

The allied campaign plan for 1968 concentrated national pacification resources on twenty-six of South Vietnam's forty-four provinces. The plan omitted areas where the enemy's military forces were strongest, such as the northernmost and southernmost reaches of the country, or areas that were remote and sparsely populated, such as the mountainous central highlands and provinces bordering Laos and Cambodia. The MACV and Vietnamese

staffs decided that for 1968 they would focus the pacification effort on solidifying control over areas in which the South Vietnamese government already held some sway, and on those areas where a significant number of people could be added to the rolls of those living under government authority without expanding control over a large physical area. This approach reflected criticism that earlier pacification campaigns had tried to secure too many areas at once, often beyond the allies' ability to protect and organize them properly. Consequently, new pacification initiatives for 1968 were very limited geographically, even within the twenty-six priority provinces. Most of the effort would take place in four National Priority Areas, one in each corps zone (*see Map 7*). The South Vietnamese Ministry of Revolutionary Development, the agency that spearheaded the pacification program, intended to support up to 2,000 hamlets (out of the national total of around 16,000) with its growing force of 59-man rural development teams, hoping to turn at least 800 of those hamlets into prosperous and secure settlements by the end of the year.

Another 7,000 or so U.S. troops, mostly soldiers, trained and equipped the South Vietnamese armed forces, MACV's third key mission. Advisers worked at every level of Vietnamese military command, from the Joint General Staff down to battalions. Those attached to South Vietnamese combat units helped with their training, provided tactical advice, and ensured that government troops received timely air and artillery support. Still other advisers served at Vietnamese military schools, training centers, and logistical installations.

## OPERATIONS

### PUSHING OUT TO THE CAMBODIAN BORDER

Between late October 1967 and early May 1968, the relatively good weather conditions that prevailed over most of South Vietnam made it easier for U.S. forces to operate in the triple-canopy rainforests that lined the Cambodian border. Taking advantage of the logistical network he had built up over the previous two years, General Westmoreland directed his II Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, to mount division-size operations in the northern wilderness of III Corps, which would continue until the monsoon rains returned that spring. It would be the largest U.S. offensive of the war to



Map 7

date, involving eight maneuver brigades at its peak. Weyand intended to cut the three main infiltration routes that entered the northern part of III Corps: the Saigon River Trail, which descended through the western provinces of Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia; the Serges Trail, which passed through the central provinces of Binh Long and Binh Duong; and the Adams Trail, which passed through the eastern provinces of Phuoc Long and Bien Hoa Provinces. The II Field Force commander expected that the U.S. dry season offensive would draw in most of the enemy's main force regiments, keeping them well away from the National Priority Area in the southwestern part of III Corps, where South Vietnamese forces were trying to pacify the heavily populated and food-rich districts surrounding Saigon. If all went according to plan, General Weyand's brigades would sharply reduce the amount of supplies reaching Viet Cong base areas in III Corps while also grinding down the most dangerous units belonging to the *Central Office for South Vietnam* (COSVN), the main enemy headquarters in this zone.

Westmoreland and Weyand had to remain flexible in their plans, however, because this was the time of year when North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regiments emerged from hiding to launch dry season campaigns of their own. The enemy's usual approach was to attack an isolated town or garrison somewhere along the border to draw allied forces into a prepared battleground of his choosing. With most of the South Vietnamese forces tied down to garrison, area security, and pacification work, the task of defeating them usually fell to the Americans.

General Weyand kicked off the II Field Force dry season campaign on 29 September 1967 with Operation SHENANDOAH II. Weyand directed the 1st Infantry Division to destroy the 7th PAVN and 9th PLAF Divisions, which operated in Binh Duong and Binh Long Provinces to the north of Saigon. While the 1st Infantry Division kept those units busy, U.S. engineers would repair and upgrade Highway 13, which ran due north of Saigon through Binh Duong and Binh Long Provinces almost to the Cambodian border. General Weyand needed to open the road by December so he could execute the second phase of his dry season campaign, placing and then sustaining six U.S. brigades along the Cambodian border, where they could reach enemy base areas that had previously been inaccessible.

The enemy offered little resistance when the first U.S. units moved out from Lai Khe, a 1st Infantry Division base camp situated on Highway 13 approximately 45 kilometers north of Saigon. A mechanized infantry battalion from the division's 1st Brigade pushed north along the road, followed by the division's engineer battalion. Equipped with Rome plows, powerful bulldozers that rip through vegetation with special tree-cutting blades, the engineers cleared away a hundred meters of vegetation on either side of Highway 13 to deny the enemy concealment, and then began upgrading the rutted dirt road to become an all-weather two-lane highway.

Seeing Weyand's intention to open Highway 13 through the heart of Binh Duong and Binh Long Provinces, the enemy began to challenge SHENANDOAH in early October. On the fourth day of the month, a Communist regiment attacked the mechanized infantry battalion that was pushing north along the road from Lai Khe. Two days later, the enemy clashed with another battalion from the 1st Infantry Division in about the same area. On the seventeenth, a Viet Cong regiment from the *9th PLAF Division* ambushed another U.S. infantry battalion in a densely wooded area southwest of Chon Thanh. Friendly artillery and air strikes helped to beat back the attackers, but not before dozens of U.S. troops, including the battalion commander, had perished in the three-sided ambush.

On 27 October, the primary theater of combat shifted north when COSVN launched its own offensive in the northern Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces. COSVN leaders hoped to wipe out several of the Special Forces camps that kept tabs on enemy supply lines in northern III Corps. The enemy also intended to overrun one or more district capitals in the area to embarrass President Nguyen Van Thieu, recently elected head of state in South Vietnam's first national election. COSVN's winter-spring offensive of 1967–1968 was also the first time it tried to fight a battle with three divisions in a region spanning several provinces, a step toward its goal of conducting even larger operations in the future.

The initial enemy strike took place near Song Be, the capital of Phuoc Long Province, where North Vietnamese forces assaulted the encampment of a South Vietnamese infantry battalion. Assisted by U.S. air strikes, the defenders repulsed the attackers with heavy losses. Two days later on the twenty-ninth, a Viet Cong regiment

attacked the district seat of Loc Ninh in neighboring Binh Long Province, briefly seizing control of the town but failing to overrun the nearby Special Forces camp. Modifying SHENANDOAH to deal with the new threat, General Weyand ordered the 1st Infantry Division to deploy several infantry battalions and supporting artillery to Loc Ninh in order to search for the *9th PLAF Division* in the rubber plantations that surrounded the town.

Those 1st Infantry Division battalions clashed repeatedly with Viet Cong units in the days that followed. The *9th PLAF Division* withdrew from the area on 8 November, having sustained around 1,000 soldiers killed in action. The threat safely past, Weyand withdrew the 1st Division units from Loc Ninh on 19 November so they could resume road-clearing operations on Highway 13.

COSVN resumed its offensive toward the end of the month, this time attacking two South Vietnamese outposts in Phuoc Long Province not far from the Cambodian border. Just after midnight on 29 November 1967, a reinforced battalion from the *7th PAVN Division* attacked the district headquarters compound at Bo Duc. Mortar rounds also struck the Bu Dop Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) Special Forces camp a little more than a kilometer to the north. Friendly air and artillery strikes helped to oust the enemy from the district compound, and South Vietnamese and U.S. reinforcements moved by helicopters to the area. The enemy savagely attacked a battalion from the 1st Division that night, prompting Weyand to send several more infantry battalions to the Bo Duc–Bu Dop area. Several light encounters followed, and on the night of 8 December, a U.S. battalion beat back another attack by the *7th PAVN Division*. For the rest of the month, one U.S. infantry battalion remained around Bu Dop while another moved to Song Be, where it carried out reconnaissance-in-force operations.

While the 1st Division screened the district capitals in northern III Corps, it continued to repair and upgrade Highway 13, which the division called Thunder Road. Military convoys began to travel its length by late November, and civilian traffic and economic activity also increased. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, who once moved men and supplies along the road and crossed it at will, launched a series of night assaults in December aimed at the U.S. firebases that protected the road. During one attack on 10 December, elements of a North Vietnamese regiment struck a battalion-size task force eight kilometers southwest of An Loc. U.S. ground fire and tactical air support drove the attackers

back with heavy losses. Other enemy attacks proved to be no more successful, and Highway 13 remained open as a key allied line of communications in northern III Corps.

General Weyand received the additional reinforcements he needed to cut the Adams Trail in Phuoc Long Province, one of the goals of the current II Field Force dry season campaign, when the 2d and 3d Brigades of the 101st Airborne Division flew into III Corps from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, during November and December 1967. Known as Operation EAGLE THRUST, the deployment was the largest and longest military airlift into a combat zone that the United States had ever attempted, requiring no fewer than 369 sorties by U.S. Air Force C-141 Starlifter transport aircraft. All told, the aircraft carried 9,794 passengers and 4,611 metric tons of equipment. An additional 3,729 metric tons of equipment made the journey by sea.

The commander of the 101st Airborne Division, Maj. Gen. Olinto M. Barsanti, and his advance party arrived at Bien Hoa Air Base on 18 November where they established the division headquarters. The division's 3d Brigade arrived in the first week of December and immediately moved to Phuoc Vinh in Binh Duong Province, fifty kilometers northeast of Saigon. When the division's 2d Brigade arrived in the third week of December, it moved in temporarily with the 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi, twenty-five kilometers northwest of Saigon. The support units of the 101st Airborne Division, the last elements of the division to leave Fort Campbell, arrived at their new stations during the last week of December.

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

On 4 December, the commander of the 11th Armored Cavalry, Col. Jack MacFarlane, began Operation QUICKSILVER with his 1st and 2d Squadrons to open parts of Highway 13 in Binh Duong Province for the movement of the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, from Cu Chi to Phuoc Vinh. Engineers attached to the 11th Armored Cavalry disarmed a number of buried mines, including a 750-pound bomb and a 155-mm. artillery round that Viet Cong guerrillas had rigged with a pressure detonator. The engineers also repaired road surfaces that guerrillas or the weather had damaged. Colonel MacFarlane stationed tanks and armored cavalry assault vehicles at regular intervals along the highway to provide around-the-clock security. The regimental helicopter troop and U.S. Air Force observation planes assisted forces on the ground. Between sunset and sunrise their Starlight night-vision scopes (optical instruments that magnified the ambient light from stars and the moon to provide a green-hued view of the world) proved especially valuable. Under that protective shield, the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, made its way to Phuoc Vinh without loss. With the mission complete, QUICKSILVER ended on 21 December.

The next day, the regiment turned its attention to northern Binh Long Province, initiating Operation FARGO to secure Highway 13 between An Loc and Loc Ninh. After building a base near Loc Ninh, Colonel MacFarlane then had orders to open Highway 14A between Loc Ninh and Bo Duc to permit military and commercial vehicles to travel once again between the northernmost district capitals in Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces. Opening Highway 14A would also allow Colonel MacFarlane to interdict the Serpes Trail during the middle and late dry season (January to April) when Communist infiltration efforts typically reached their peak. As for the Adams Trail in northeastern Phuoc Long Province, General Weyand intended to block that route with a massive air assault operation known as SAN ANGELO conducted by the newly arrived 2d and 3d Brigades of the 101st Airborne Division.

That left the 25th Infantry Division to cut the Saigon River corridor, the largest of the three Communist infiltration routes in northern III Corps. The trail began in the Fishhook region of Cambodia, passed south through the triple-canopy rainforest of War Zone C in northern Tay Ninh Province, and then followed the course of the Saigon River through a series of forested base

areas that lined the border between Hau Nghia and Binh Duong Provinces before terminating on the outskirts of Saigon. Despite being subjected to heavy B-52 bombing raids, an extensive defoliation program, and some of the largest search-and-destroy operations of the war, the Saigon River infiltration network continued to support the *9th PLAF Division* and around a dozen Viet Cong infantry battalions. For the dry season campaign that began in November 1967, General Weyand ordered the commander of the 25th Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. Fillmore K. Mearns, to interdict that supply channel by putting two brigades across its path in northern Tay Ninh Province while keeping a third brigade in Hau Nghia Province to handle the enemy forces that operated along the Saigon River.

Before General Mearns initiated his dry season offensive in the wilderness of northern Tay Ninh Province, he used elements from all three of his brigades to sweep the jungles and disused rubber plantations near the division's base at Cu Chi, located on Highway 1 in western Hau Nghia Province some twenty kilometers northwest of Saigon, to ensure that his rear area would be as safe as possible. Operation ATLANTA got under way on 18 November when General Mearns air-assaulted several regular infantry battalions in and around the western part of the Iron Triangle, a heavily forested enemy base wedged between the Saigon River and Highway 13 in neighboring Binh Duong Province. Once those troops had secured the sector between Cu Chi and the Iron Triangle, Mearns sent a mechanized infantry battalion and 25th Division engineers equipped with Rome plows through the corridor and across the river by barge to begin the jungle-clearing phase of Operation ATLANTA. Over the next three weeks, the 2d Brigade task force cleared nearly 4,452 hectares of jungle and destroyed approximately 7,000 meters of tunnels, further reducing the size of the Viet Cong sanctuary though not eliminating it completely. The Americans also seized nearly 181 metric tons of rice and killed 143 enemy soldiers. U.S. losses came to 18 dead and 74 wounded, many of those casualties coming from mines and booby traps that the enemy used to protect his supply caches.

In the first week of December, General Mearns recalled his forces from the Iron Triangle so the 25th Infantry Division could prepare for the next phase of the dry season campaign. His 2d Brigade under Col. Edwin W. Emerson commenced Operation SARATOGA on 8 December, a security-oriented operation that

covered northeastern Hau Nghia, southern Tay Ninh, and western Binh Duong Provinces. Designed to interfere with the enemy's food-collection effort during the winter harvest, Operation SARATOGA also aimed to destroy the Viet Cong battalions that maintained base camps in the Filhol Plantation and the Ho Bo Woods to the north of Cu Chi. General Mearns also placed the 3d Squadron, 4th Cavalry, under Emerson's control for the duration of SARATOGA, with orders to maintain security on Highway 1 between Gia Dinh Province and Tay Ninh Province, the main line of supply for the 25th Infantry Division.

The same day that his 2d Brigade began Operation SARATOGA, General Mearns' 1st and 3d Brigades, reinforced by a tank battalion and an air cavalry squadron, commenced a search-and-destroy mission in northern Tay Ninh Province called Operation YELLOWSTONE. The sparsely inhabited, triple-canopy rainforest of War Zone C, the largest Communist base area in III Corps, offered ideal concealment for the elaborate network of camps and trails that linked bases on the Cambodian border to the Saigon River corridor. For nearly half of the year, the vast territory was an opaque and nearly impenetrable stronghold. Only a handful of provincial roads penetrated War Zone C and they turned to mud during the wet season. While dry weather prevailed, the two brigades from the 25th Infantry Division would take advantage of the firm soil and good flying conditions to operate close to the Cambodian border. The division would also help build two new Special Forces camps deep in War Zone C so the allies could more easily monitor the border after Operation YELLOWSTONE ended sometime in April or May.

General Mearns set YELLOWSTONE in motion on 8 December, air-assaulting two infantry battalions to the small hamlet of Katum, located at the northern terminus of Highway 4 in the north-central part of the War Zone C. They met no resistance. When the two battalions finished securing the area a few days later, General Mearns ordered a task force consisting of tanks, artillery, and engineers to head north from Tay Ninh West, the 1st Brigade's base camp located on the outskirts of Tay Ninh City. Arriving via Route 4 without incident, the task force began building Firebase CUSTER, which would serve as the 1st Brigade's forward base for the duration of YELLOWSTONE. The engineers in the task force also helped one of the infantry battalions construct a second firebase



A modified D7E bulldozer equipped with a Rome plow and an armored cab

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known as BEAUREGARD some five kilometers to the southeast near the village of Bo Tuc. The firebase was positioned on the shoulder of Route 246, a seasonal road that led from Katum into the eastern half of War Zone C.

As the 25th Division's 1st Brigade punched deep into enemy territory, General Mearns sent his 3d Brigade under Col. Leonard R. Daem based at Dau Tieng, thirty kilometers east of Tay Ninh City, into the southeastern edge of War Zone C. Joined by two South Vietnamese infantry battalions, the 3d Brigade units located numerous supply caches but few enemy soldiers.

Communist resistance stiffened during the second week of YELLOWSTONE. Around two hours after midnight on 15 December, North Vietnamese mortar crews from the 7th PAVN Division opened fire on Firebase BEAUREGARD, manned by the 25th Division's 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry. When the barrage ended, several hundred pith-helmeted North Vietnamese soldiers scrambled across the open ground between the firebase and the forest. Most did not make it through the defensive fire, but a team of sappers found a way into the base and placed satchel charges in the ammunition dump, setting off six hundred 105-mm. shells before U.S. soldiers forced them to retreat. The North Vietnamese left behind forty bodies, while the defenders lost six killed and twelve wounded.

In anticipation of a showdown, both sides moved extra forces into the region during the second half of December. COSVN placed two regiments from the *9th PLAF Division* along the border between the Fishhook region and War Zone C, where they could block a possible allied incursion into Cambodia as well as defend the upper portion of the Saigon River supply trail. On the American side, General Mearns moved the 3d Brigade, 25th Division, from Dau Tieng into the northeastern part of War Zone C, extending eastward the position already established by his 1st Brigade at Firebases CUSTER and BEAUREGARD along Route 244. By the evening of 29 December, the 3d Brigade had moved into its new forward base camp, Firebase BURT, on a south-running branch of Route 246 some twelve kilometers southeast of Firebase BEAUREGARD.

Firebase BURT measured a kilometer from east to west and half that distance from north to south, with the road running vertically through the middle of the outpost. Unable to fit all 900 men and their equipment on open ground, Colonel Daem's task force had extended the eastern tip of BURT a few dozen meters into trees. The brigade commander located his command post and supply area at the center of the base. The 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, occupied around forty bunkers on the eastern half of the perimeter. The 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, placed their M113 armored personnel carriers in a series of hull-down positions along the western half of BURT. Batteries A and C from the 2d Battalion, 77th Artillery, placed their eleven 105-mm. howitzers in the southern portion of the firebase. The five 155-mm. self-propelled howitzers belonging to Battery A of the 3d Battalion, 13th Artillery, were arrayed in the northern half of the perimeter. A pair of M42 Dusters from Battery B of the 5th Battalion, 2d Artillery, and a pair of M55 truck-mounted quad .50-caliber machine guns from Battery D, 71st Artillery, gave the defenders additional protection.

COSVN reacted quickly to the presence of Firebase BURT, located only a few kilometers west of the Saigon River infiltration route. On the evening of 31 December, the *271st* and the *272d Regiments* from the *9th PLAF Division* moved into attack position, while a 24-hour truce for the New Year went into effect.

The enemy attack got under way shortly before midnight on 1 January, just as the truce was expiring. Supported by a fierce mortar barrage, several hundred enemy soldiers streamed out of the trees to attack the northern and southern ends of the firebase

simultaneously. The Americans let loose with M16 rifles and M60 machine guns, detonated dozens of claymore mines, and fired canister rounds from their 90-mm. recoilless rifles. The lethal metal tore into the advancing Viet Cong, but those who survived did not falter. Firing a steady stream of rocket-propelled grenades at the firebase that knocked out an M113 armored personnel carrier and an M42 Duster, the enemy troops clawed their way toward the razor wire that surrounded BURT. At 0230, a squad of sappers breached the wire along the southern face of BURT. U.S. artillerymen lowered their 105-mm. howitzers and fired directly into the advancing Communists with beehive rounds, special warheads packed with metal darts. Unable to withstand the murderous fire, the Viet Cong withdrew, finally ending their assault just before daybreak.

The failed attack on Firebase BURT had cost the enemy at least 379 men killed and another 8 wounded men who became prisoners. Radio Hanoi claimed that the Communist forces had killed or wounded 600 Americans, but the actual tally was 23 dead and 146 wounded. Even so, the battle for Firebase BURT was the heaviest action the 25th Division had seen since Operation JUNCTION CITY in early 1967. COSVN clearly viewed Operation YELLOWSTONE as a significant threat, forcing the enemy to commit large portions of his *7th PAVN* and *9th PLAF Divisions* to defend War Zone C and thus drawing those units away from the National Priority Area of central III Corps. As the 1st and 3d Brigades of the 25th Infantry Division settled into their forward positions along Route 246 at the beginning of 1968, it remained to be seen whether COSVN would fight for its still-concealed supply dumps in War Zone C or forfeit them in order to pursue other, more pressing missions.

#### EAST OF SAIGON

As the U.S. 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions pushed into the enemy-held wilderness in northern III Corps, General Weyand's third major combat force, the U.S. 9th Infantry Division, continued its long-standing mission to protect the provinces east and south of Saigon. Eager though he was to interdict the Viet Cong supply channels near the Cambodian border, Weyand also needed to maintain sufficient combat power near the capital to assist the three South Vietnamese infantry divisions and one Ranger group that defended the National Priority Area around Saigon—a zone

averaging fifty kilometers deep that included all of Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa Provinces and certain segments of Binh Duong, Hau Nghia, Long An, Phuoc Tuy, and Long Khanh Provinces. The II Field Force commander was also responsible for protecting the massive Bien Hoa–Long Binh military complex in northwestern Bien Hoa Province that acted as the central logistical hub for II Field Force and as a primary command and control center for both U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. Over the next six months, Weyand planned to carry out a series of limited, security-oriented missions in eastern and southern III Corps to keep the enemy main force threat under control, while the rest of II Field Force conducted offensive missions far to the north of Saigon.

General Weyand retained seven combat brigades near the pacification priority area of central III Corps during the 1967–1968 dry season. The 1st and the 25th Infantry Divisions each kept one brigade in the districts north of Saigon to support the South Vietnamese forces in Binh Duong and Hau Nghia Provinces. East of the capital, the U.S. 9th Infantry Division maintained a brigade in Bien Hoa Province to work alongside the 199th Infantry Brigade (Separate) and the Thai “Queen’s Cobra” Regiment. The 1st Australian Task Force was to continue security operations in its traditional sector of Phuoc Tuy Province, southeast of Saigon. The 11th Armored Cavalry, normally stationed in southern Long Khanh Province, would spend November conducting road-clearing missions until departing for northern III Corps for the rest of the dry season. South of Saigon, a second brigade from the 9th Infantry Division would continue to shield pacification areas in Long An Province and to protect lines of communications, lending assistance when needed to the division’s third brigade, which was operating with an amphibious task force in upper IV Corps. General Weyand believed that these formations—supported by a major portion of the 12th Aviation Group, the 23d and 54th Artillery Groups, and almost a dozen fixed-wing attack squadrons, not to mention significant South Vietnamese forces—would be able to shield pacification activities around Saigon for the next six months, while his remaining forces conducted the offensive portion of his dry season campaign in northern III Corps.

One of Weyand’s first priorities in eastern III Corps at the start of the dry season was to move the 199th Infantry Brigade from Gia Dinh Province, where it had spent the last year partnering with the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group on a local

security mission known as Operation FAIRFAX/RANG DONG, to northern Bien Hoa Province so it could screen the Dong Nai River corridor that lay between the Communist sanctuary known as War Zone D and the allies' Bien Hoa–Long Binh logistical complex. That move would free up elements of the 9th Infantry Division so that they could operate in Long Khanh Province to cover the temporary absence of the 11th Armored Cavalry. Eventually, the II Field Force commander planned to transfer the entire 9th Infantry Division down into the Mekong Delta, a move that compelled him to scale back the division's responsibilities in eastern III Corps.

The 199th Brigade's new mission, Operation UNIONTOWN/MANCHESTER, had two objectives. The first, UNIONTOWN, was to prevent enemy forces in War Zone D from attacking the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex, especially those equipped with 122-mm. rockets that had a maximum range of almost 9,000 meters. The goal of MANCHESTER was to interdict the Communist supply channel that led from War Zone D toward Saigon following a network of foot and ox trails that ran parallel to the Dong Nai River in Binh Duong Province.

The enemy reacted strongly when the 199th Infantry Brigade began operating north of the Dong Nai River astride the War Zone D supply line. On the night of 4 December, enemy mortars pounded the forward base of the 4th Battalion, 12th Infantry, known as Firebase NASHUA, killing or wounding several Americans. The battalion commander sent out patrols to locate the enemy gunners. On the morning of the sixth, Company A discovered a nest of enemy-held bunkers several kilometers southeast of NASHUA. When the U.S. soldiers assaulted the complex, they discovered that it was far larger than first presumed and defended by an entire battalion from the *Dong Nai Regiment*. The 199th Brigade committed reinforcements from the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, and a group of armored personnel carriers from Troop D of the 17th Cavalry, eventually seizing the bunkers. When the fighting ended that evening, a total of twenty-five U.S. soldiers had been killed and another eighty-two wounded. The enemy left behind sixty-seven of his dead. COSVN was clearly unwilling to let the 199th Brigade operate so close to War Zone D without a fight.

In the remaining weeks of December, the 199th Brigade clashed with the *Dong Nai Regiment* several more times, resulting in total U.S. casualty figures of 35 killed and 126 wounded in its

first month of UNIONTOWN/MANCHESTER. Nevertheless, the 199th Brigade had accomplished its primary mission. Not a single rocket or mortar landed within the Bien Hoa–Long Binh complex during December, and the *Dong Nai Regiment* had steered clear of the pacification areas in northern Bien Hoa Province.

East of Saigon, the 1st Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division continued its long-standing security mission in southern Bien Hoa, western Long Khanh, and northwestern Phuoc Tuy Provinces known as Operation RILEY. Chief among its goals was protecting the major roads in eastern III Corps, particularly Highway 1, which ran in a northeastern direction from Saigon to Bien Hoa City, and then headed due east some 120 kilometers to the II Corps boundary. Halfway along that stretch of road was Xuan Loc, the rubber plantation town that served as the main base of the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division and the capital of Long Khanh Province. The 54th Artillery Group also maintained its headquarters next to the South Vietnamese division compound on the eastern side of town. A second important road was Highway 15, which originated in Bien Hoa City, heading south and east past Long Binh to Camp Martin Cox, the main base camp for the 9th Infantry Division, and then another forty-five kilometers to the capital of Phuoc Tuy Province, a town known as Phuoc Le or Ba Ria. Nui Dat, the main base camp of the 1st Australian Task Force, lay seven kilometers northeast of Ba Ria. From Ba Ria, Highway 15 traveled southwest another twenty kilometers to Vung Tau, a small port and fishing town built at the end of a peninsula that jutted out into the South China Sea. The third and final major road in eastern III Corps was provincial Highway 2, which ran due south from Xuan Loc past Camp Blackhorse, the home of the 11th Armored Cavalry, before terminating at Ba Ria, a total distance of around fifty kilometers.

At the start of the dry season in late 1967, General Weyand instructed the commander of the 9th Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. George G. O'Connor, to secure and then upgrade Highway 1 from Xuan Loc to the II Corps boundary, a stretch of road that had been closed for several years. Elements of the 1st Australian Task Force, the 11th Armored Cavalry, and the South Vietnamese 18th Infantry Division also joined the two-month operation known as SANTA FE. The road-opening mission was part of a larger campaign to restore an unbroken highway connection from the Cambodian

border near Saigon to the Demilitarized Zone. Operation SANTA FE would also give Weyand a chance to attack several camps used by the *5th PLAF Division*, the main threat in eastern III Corps.

The allies encountered only minimal resistance during SANTA FE. As it turned out, the headquarters of the *5th PLAF Division* and its *275th Regiment* had already gone north to participate in the fighting around Song Be, while the *274th Regiment* chose to remain hidden in a base area north of Xuan Loc. Only some rear service troops and security elements were on hand to defend the ground. Protected by the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, U.S. engineers swept Highway 1 for mines and repaired its surface, while the South Vietnamese Army posted troops at regular intervals along its length as far as the II Corps boundary. With those forces in place at the beginning of January 1968, a military convoy accompanied by South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and a group of reporters took a highly publicized journey along Highway 1 from Saigon to the Demilitarized Zone, the first time in nearly a decade that such a trip was possible.

#### FIGHTING IN THE MEKONG DELTA

Much like the territorial security and road protection mission that General O'Connor's 1st Brigade performed in eastern III Corps, the 3d Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division had spent the last year conducting a similar operation in Long An Province, south of Saigon, known as ENTERPRISE. Despite the presence of two regiments from the South Vietnamese 25th Infantry Division, Long An Province remained one of the least secure in all of III Corps. That was of particular concern to the South Vietnamese government because Long An served as Saigon's gateway to the Mekong Delta. The capital relied on food purchased in the delta and then shipped north on roads and canals that passed through Long An. The province also produced around 254,000 metric tons of rice each year, representing over one-third of the total harvest in III Corps. The South Vietnamese government needed to maintain a strong foothold in Long An Province to guarantee an adequate food supply for Saigon.

In late October 1967, the commander of the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, Col. George W. Everett, controlled two infantry battalions and one mechanized battalion in the ENTERPRISE sector. He maintained his primary base near Tan An, the provin-

cial capital, some thirty-five kilometers southwest of Saigon at the intersection of Highway 4 and the Vam Co Tay River. The Tan An camp also contained the main U.S. airfield in Long An Province, where Colonel Everett kept several U.S. Huey helicopter companies for airmobile operations.

As the dry season started, the Viet Cong forces in Long An Province initiated an offensive to cut Highway 4, timed to coincide with the *9th PLAF Division's* offensive in northern III Corps. In the week that followed, sapper companies destroyed several bridges on Highway 4 and cratered the road with explosives. Viet Cong cadre mobilized the population to dig up secondary roads. Guerrilla units attacked Regional and Popular Forces outposts, and Viet Cong mortar crews shelled the district towns.

The offensive against Highway 4 and its subsidiary routes not only threatened the pacification program in Long An Province by reducing government access to rural areas, but it also posed a risk to the 9th Infantry Division's main supply corridor south of Saigon. To protect the U.S. supply convoys that traveled each night between Long Binh and Dong Tam, General O'Connor gave the 3d Brigade extra equipment, which Colonel Everett passed on to the mechanized 5th Battalion, 60th Infantry. Included in the reinforcement were a pair of M42 Duster self-propelled vehicles, each mounting a pair of rapid-fire 40-mm. cannon, additional jeeps equipped with powerful searchlights, and extra Starlight scopes.

By day, helicopters loaded with infantry teams prowled the skies, landing frequently here and there in a tactic known as "jitterbugging," so the scouts on board could investigate potential Viet Cong hiding spots such as tree lines and densely vegetated riverbanks. At night, "roadrunner" teams consisting of an infantry platoon and five M113 armored personnel carriers traveled up and down Highway 4 looking for enemy sappers. The vehicles sometimes raced along at top speed in order to catch Viet Cong mine layers before they could hide. At other times, an infantry squad would hop off the moving vehicles and then set an ambush for sappers who might appear when the sound of the armored personnel carriers had died away.

The enhanced security measures soon took effect. The 3d Brigade eliminated several elite Viet Cong mine-laying teams and neutralized favorite ambush spots with stay-behind patrols and intermittent artillery strikes. The guerrillas who carried out most

of the sniping missions soon faded away, as did the civilian labor gangs who dug up roads. By the middle of December, the flow of traffic in Long An Province had returned to normal.

To the south in Dinh Tuong Province, part of the IV Corps Tactical Zone that covered sixteen provinces in the Mekong Delta, a joint U.S. Army-Navy task force called the Mobile Riverine Force operated from an amphibious base at Dong Tam, situated on the northern bank of the Mekong River some six kilometers west of the provincial capital My Tho. The army component of the Mobile Riverine Force was built around the 2d Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, consisting of three standard infantry battalions. Helicopter companies from the 164th Aviation Group stationed near the cities of Can Tho and Vinh Long, southwest of Dong Tam, provided airmobile support to the 2d Brigade whenever it was needed. The naval component of the Mobile Riverine Force, Task Force 117, consisted of a river support squadron, built around three converted World War II-era LCTs (Landing Craft, Tank) that could house a full infantry battalion and an artillery battery, and two river assault squadrons, each composed of around one hundred small vessels designed to provide troop lift and gunfire support to the river support squadron.

When the Viet Cong launched their dry season offensive against Highway 4, General O'Connor directed the Mobile Riverine Force (with two battalions afloat) to locate and destroy the enemy in Dinh Tuong Province. On 2 November, the Mobile Riverine Force commenced Operation CORONADO IX, steaming up the Mekong River and then turning north into the maze of canals and streams that crisscrossed western Dinh Tuong Province. The amphibious task force established several firebases in the heart of Base Area 470, the main Viet Cong supply and staging area in the province, and then began searching for hidden caches and enemy units.

In the early hours of 18 November, two Viet Cong battalions attacked one of those 9th Division outposts, Firebase CUDGEL, a soggy piece of farmland measuring some 300 meters by 250 meters defended by a reinforced infantry company and two artillery batteries. The battle was fought at close range, with Viet Cong soldiers intermingled with U.S. troops in the darkness. The artillerymen fired their howitzers straight into the attacking Communists, and armed helicopters raked the enemy-infested trees and bushes around CUDGEL using a flashing strobe light

inside the perimeter to orient their attack runs. When the fighting ended the next morning, the U.S. troops located only five enemy corpses, though it was likely that up to 150 Viet Cong soldiers had been killed or seriously wounded. Seven U.S. soldiers had died in the attack and another ninety-eight had been wounded. Half of the forty-four artillerymen were casualties; two of their howitzers needed major repairs.

In the remaining six weeks of 1967, the Mobile Riverine Force inflicted more sharp losses on the enemy in northeastern IV Corps, putting several Viet Cong main force battalions out of action for the time being. Highway 4 remained open to traffic as did the commercial waterways that lead to and from Saigon. Nevertheless, the Viet Cong dry season offensive, which hit the upper delta in late October 1967, combined with smaller attacks elsewhere in IV Corps, produced setbacks for the pacification program in nine out of the sixteen provinces, including Dinh Tuong, Kien Tuong, and Go Cong Provinces in the upper delta where the Mobile Riverine Force operated. Unless the allies improved the security situation in the Mekong Delta, the enemy would continue to draw on the vast reservoir of food and manpower it contained.

#### INTO THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS

A few days after the battles at Loc Ninh and Song Be got started in III Corps, another border battle erupted in the western highlands of II Corps. Just a few kilometers from the international border in northwest II Corps, Dak To lay astride a natural infiltration route into Kontum and Pleiku Provinces. Dak To consisted of the town and district headquarters on Highway 14, the short Dak To 1 airstrip a few kilometers to the southwest along Route 512, the larger Dak To 2 airfield and brigade base camp farther west, and beyond that the Ben Het Special Forces camp, where construction had begun on an airstrip and a future artillery site for 175-mm. guns that could reach the enemy's base camps inside Cambodia and southern Laos. The trio of allied bases lined the north end of a valley that was surrounded on all sides by peaks and ridges varying between 792 to 1,311 meters high. Tall trees that formed double and triple canopies covered the steep slopes.

When the 4th Infantry Division began Operation MACARTHUR in mid-October 1967, the sweeps throughout the western highlands region produced only sporadic contact with the enemy. This soon

changed. Near the end of the month, allied intelligence detected signs that the *1st PAVN Division* had crossed the Cambodian border into Kontum Province, with Dak To being its most likely target. At the beginning of November, an enemy soldier from the *1st Division* confirmed that information when he defected to the allies. The commander of I Field Force, Lt. Gen. William B. Rosson, ordered the 4th Infantry Division to deploy its 1st Brigade headquarters and two infantry battalions to Dak To. He also instructed the 173d Airborne Brigade currently operating on the central coast to send one of its four battalions and to put two more on standby.

The coming fight around Dak To was destined to become one of the largest and bloodiest battles of the entire war. The enemy's plan was simple: lure allied units into the hills around Dak To, where the rugged, forest-covered terrain would negate some of the U.S. advantages in firepower and helicopter mobility. In June, the Communists had nearly overrun a company from the 173d Airborne Brigade in the hills south of Dak To. This time they hoped to isolate and annihilate several U.S. companies at once, something they had never yet managed to do. From the allied perspective, U.S. commanders were more than willing to fight the enemy in the hills around Dak To if that gave them a chance to hammer the main force units with sustained artillery and air strikes, including the devastating B-52 ARC LIGHT raids so feared by Communist soldiers.

Initially, the 4th Division's 1st Brigade sent one infantry battalion to occupy the ridgeline immediately south of Dak To 1 known as Rocket Ridge, the best vantage point for enemy artillery crews. A second battalion deployed to a smaller ridgeline immediately south of Dak To 2, and the airborne battalion moved into Ben Het to the west of Dak To 2. During the first week of November, the 4th Division encountered enemy units moving to preselected and sometimes previously prepared positions. These fierce encounters prompted General Creighton B. Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy (Westmoreland was in Washington at the time) to let General Rosson deploy the 173d Airborne Brigade with two more battalions to the Ben Het area. In a series of helicopter assault landings, the paratroopers and infantrymen moved from ridge to ridge, where they faced strong resistance from the entrenched enemy. Meanwhile, South Vietnamese troops took up blocking positions east of Dak To. They were joined by additional infantry and airborne troops to the north and northeast

initially to block and then to attack a North Vietnamese regiment moving down a valley from the northeast. To complete the ring around Dak To, the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, deployed south and southeast to block possible attacks and intercept any withdrawing enemy.

With enemy casualties mounting, the North Vietnamese *1st Division* pulled out two of its regiments from the hills south of Dak To, leaving a third regiment to cover their withdrawal. This resulted in a violent five-day struggle beginning on 17 November for Hill 875, which involved three battalions of the 173d Airborne Brigade and a battalion from the 4th Infantry Division. After a battalion of the 173d Brigade suffered heavy casualties trying to seize the hill from a North Vietnamese force entrenched near the summit, the brigade commander sent in a second battalion. The enemy then launched a surprise attack, coming up a hidden trail on the side of Hill 875 and surrounding the Americans on the slope. A third battalion from the 173d Airborne Brigade helped break the encirclement, and the paratroopers finally took the hill with assistance from the heaviest concentration of tactical air and artillery on any single terrain feature in the II Corps area up to this point in the war. The victory had come at a punishing cost: the 173d Airborne Brigade had lost 115 killed and over 250 wounded during the five-day battle for Hill 875.

Among the American dead was the 173d Airborne Brigade's chaplain, Maj. Charles J. Watters. He had accompanied the advancing troops, providing encouragement, attending the wounded, and administering last rites to the dying. Ignoring advice to the contrary, he had repeatedly left U.S. lines and braved enemy fire to rescue wounded paratroopers. Back inside the perimeter he was assisting the medics and ministering to the dying when a bomb dropped by a U.S. A-4 Skyhawk fighter-bomber struck his location. The errant weapon killed him and forty-one other paratroopers and wounded forty-five. Chaplain Watters later received a posthumous Medal of Honor for his actions that day.

The last elements of the North Vietnamese *1st Division* withdrew across the border into Laos in early December, having sustained around 1,600 troops killed in action and perhaps twice that number seriously wounded. General Westmoreland described the Dak To fight as "an engagement exceeding in numbers, enemy losses, and ferocity even the Ia Drang Valley Campaign of 1965." The large fleet of helicopters and fixed-wing transport aircraft in



Members of the 4th Battalion, 503d Infantry, 173d Airborne Brigade, load wounded aboard a UH-1D helicopter following the battle for Hill 875 at Dak To.

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the U.S. arsenal had allowed the MACV commander to rapidly reinforce the remote Dak To bases with extra troops from other parts of the country, proving once again the superior operational mobility of the allied forces. B-52 bombing strikes had shown their value as tactical weapons, accounting for at least a third of the enemy's casualties and decimating a pair of North Vietnamese field headquarters. On the other hand, the Communists had demonstrated their ability to draw American units onto carefully prepared battlefields of the enemy's choosing. All told, nearly 300 U.S. troops had been killed and over 1,000 wounded in the month of fighting at Dak To.

During the fight for Dak To, enemy units in other parts of Kontum and Pleiku Provinces had begun a coordinated campaign to impede the convoys that traveled between the coastal port of Qui Nhon and the regional capitals in the western highlands. One of the first major incidents took place on Highway 14 just north of Kontum City on 11 November. A U.S. engineer platoon was on its way to repair a bridge that the Viet Cong had damaged when it came under fire from several platoons of enemy soldiers hidden on either side of the road. Sfc. John K. McDermott was in the lead vehicle when a recoilless rifle round exploded against his truck, but he managed to keep control of the vehicle and drove it

off the road to allow the rest of the convoy to get by. McDermott then jumped from the truck and directed his men to safety. He killed two Viet Cong attackers before two more leaped at him, bringing him to the ground. After struggling free, he wounded the attackers and then proceeded to drive several trucks out of the ambush site while under heavy fire. Despite intensive enemy rifle fire and exploding grenades, he rallied his men in a counterattack. Meanwhile, S. Sgt. Frank J. Walker, a squad leader who was riding behind McDermott when the ambush occurred, leaped from his truck and charged into enemy machine-gun fire, knocking out several Viet Cong positions. These heroic actions allowed the convoy to move out of danger. Within a half hour, reinforcements arrived and drove off the enemy. Six Americans died and four were wounded in the encounter. Nine Viet Cong were confirmed dead. General Westmoreland later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for valor to both sergeants in a ceremony at Pleiku.

As the enemy began targeting supply convoys in II Corps, U.S. units developed countermeasures. Military police units were equipped with V-100 armored cars but they were too few in number to accompany all convoys. The same was true for armed helicopters. Forced to improvise, the soldiers of the 8th Transportation Group resorted to fitting side and armor plating and sandbagging floors to their five-ton cargo trucks. Trucks were usually equipped with M60 and .50-caliber machine guns. Specially fitted gun trucks were jerry-rigged with heavier armor and weapons such as quadruple .50-caliber machine-gun mounts originally designed for air defense. Combined with the two or so armored cars per convoy, protection was still insufficient to cover convoys that were normally broken down into three or four segments, or serials, to avoid congestion. Gun truck conversions also meant the loss of a truck company per transportation group. Transportation personnel assigned as ad hoc infantry also reduced manpower. Drivers were told to keep moving through sniper fire and to contact security forces at the first sign of trouble. Meanwhile, the Army continued working on better convoy defensive weapons.

#### FIGHTING IN COASTAL AREAS AND ALONG THE DEMILITARIZED ZONE

General Rosson's strike force on the central coast, two airmobile brigades from the 1st Cavalry Division, continued to put pressure on the enemy through Operation PERSHING, which began in February 1967 and would continue into early 1968.



U.S. units developed countermeasures to deal with enemy targeting of supply convoys.

The I Field Force commander's objective was to eliminate Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces from that rice-rich coastal province. The 1st Cavalry Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. John J. Tolson, combined the surprise of cavalry with the shock of armor to overwhelm North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong defenses. Enemy fortifications were well organized and typically prepared in a series of hedgerows quickly thrown up in an elaborate perimeter that gave excellent cover and concealment around an entire village. General Tolson used an armored company on loan from the 4th Division equipped with M48A3 medium tanks to deal with the enemy fortifications. The tank's 45-metric-ton weight and 90-mm. cannon were capable of destroying even the stoutest bunker. In September, the division received another armor capability with the attachment of the 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 50th Infantry, a recent arrival in Vietnam. The mechanized unit took the lead in securing Highway 1, usually accompanied by minesweeping teams and bulldozers. Repairing damage caused by enemy attacks on the forward bases and countering his increased use of mines and booby traps drew heavily on the 1st Cavalry Division's engineers. The onset of the monsoon limited the movement of armor cross-country, and engineering



An M48A3 Patton tank of the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, attached to the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), moves through the dense jungle in Binh Dinh Province during Operation PERSHING.

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equipment, especially bulldozers and portable bridging, helped overcome obstacles and gaps along the way.

In late 1967, the 1st Cavalry Division fought a major battle against the *3d PAVN Division* in northern Binh Dinh Province. On 6 December, a scout helicopter crew spotted an enemy radio antenna poking up from a hamlet near the town of Tam Quan just east of Highway 1. The division used “piling-on” tactics that had proved successful in earlier operations. An air cavalry battalion and elements of the attached mechanized infantry battalion deployed first. The 1st Brigade added forces and teamed up with South Vietnamese troops in a battle characterized by massive use of artillery, tactical air support, and air assaults. The mechanized force, which included flame-throwing armored personnel carriers, closed in to destroy and crush enemy trenches. Bulldozers supported the attackers by building a causeway over the spongy ground, burying trench lines, and clearing areas for helicopter medical evacuation. Enemy forces, consisting primarily of the *22d PAVN Regiment*, lost 650 men during this fierce engagement and in several more contacts during the next two weeks.

When enemy main force units could not be found in the hills and wooded hamlets of coastal II Corps, which was most of the



Artillerymen of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), load a round into a 105-mm. howitzer.

time, U.S. units helped South Vietnamese units and local authorities carry out a variety of security and economic development programs designed to win the loyalty of the rural population and extend the reach of government control. Turning dirt roads into paved, all-weather routes, building new bridges or strengthening old ones to carry the weight of heavy vehicles, and establishing manned checkpoints at regular intervals on Highway 1 prompted a resurgence of commercial traffic and a growing confidence on the part of the South Vietnamese government trying to reclaim control over the region. A determined enemy, however, struck back. With renewed vigor, the Viet Cong waged a relentless campaign of mining the roads, ambushing vehicles, and damaging or destroying recently built bridges. Even though enemy activity along the Americal Division's section of Highway 1 was extremely high, the road was never closed for an entire day. Destroyed or damaged bridges were usually discovered during early morning aerial reconnaissance flights or by minesweeper teams. Normally, the road was open to traffic by noon or at least before nightfall.



Soldiers from Company A, 1st Battalion, 52d Infantry, 23d Infantry Division, provide cigarettes to some villagers during a search-and-clear operation in the Binh Son and Son Tinh Districts in Quang Ngai Province.

In southern I Corps, the Americal Division faced the dual challenge of patrolling a long stretch of enemy-infested lowlands while undergoing a major organizational change. In October, one of the division's permanently assigned units, the 198th Infantry Brigade (Light), deployed from the United States to Hoi An in Quang Nam Province, replacing the on-loan 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, which returned to Phan Rang in II Corps. In December, a second organic unit, the 11th Infantry Brigade (Light), arrived at Duc Pho to replace the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, though the latter unit would not return to its parent division until March, giving the 11th Brigade time to acclimate to its new environment. While those swaps were taking place, the Americal Division continued to operate in the Que Son Valley on the border of Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces with the 1st Cavalry's 3d Brigade and the 196th Infantry Brigade. This mission known as Operation WALLOWA relieved the 1st Marine Division of its former responsibilities in the Que Son, allowing the Marine division to shift more forces to the north to strengthen the U.S. position in northern I Corps.

While the introduction of an Army division threw the enemy off balance in southern I Corps, the North Vietnamese kept relent-

less pressure on the marines all along the Demilitarized Zone. The increased shelling endangered the construction of border posts and bases, including the combat outpost at Khe Sanh in the mountains of northwestern Quang Tri Province. The construction of strongpoints, begun in April 1967, was part of the long-debated electronic anti-infiltration barrier, the "McNamara Line," ordered by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara to be built from the coast to the Laotian border. Mounting casualties prompted Westmoreland and the Marine commander, who both had doubts whether the system would work, to halt construction temporarily and concentrate on improving existing strongpoints and combat bases. Meanwhile, electronic sensors would be dropped along the Demilitarized Zone as listening devices to detect enemy movement. As 1967 came to an end, Marine units were constantly pounded by North Vietnamese artillery that continued to pin them down inside their fortified bases.

Although battles raged along the border and intelligence showed massive enemy troop movements still taking place, General Westmoreland believed the military situation in South Vietnam was turning in the allies' favor. The South Vietnamese government had succeeded in holding national elections. A new coordinated pacification program was under way. The protective arc around major cities expanded, and more U.S. troops arrived, allowing operations to shift to the remote border regions. When summoned to Washington by President Johnson in November, Westmoreland effused his most optimistic assessment of the war. "It is significant," he told the National Press Club, "that the enemy has not won a major battle in more than a year. In general, he can fight his large forces only at the edges of his sanctuaries. . . . His guerrilla force is declining at a steady rate. Morale problems are developing within his ranks."

#### PLANNING FOR 1968

As 1967 drew to a close, General Westmoreland saw no reason to change the campaign plan for 1968 that he had issued in October. Over the past few months, the Communists had achieved nothing tangible. U.S. forces had repulsed the Communist offensives in northern III Corps and western II Corps at great cost to the enemy. During 1967, allied units had killed an estimated 88,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops. Infiltration from the North had dropped slightly compared to the previous year. Overall, enemy troop strength had dipped slightly during the last year, and now

stood at 261,000 combat troops and support personnel. The pacification effort was especially heartening with some two-thirds of the hamlets in South Vietnam judged as secure and under the control of the central government compared to two and a half years earlier when the government was being chased from the countryside and on the verge of collapse. Westmoreland regarded Hanoi's choices as few, and he intended to keep them that way.

Indeed, as additional U.S. ground forces arrived, he saw an opportunity to deploy the mobile 1st Cavalry Division as a theater exploitation force in areas where good weather prevailed. In a series of operations code-named YORK, the division would deploy to the III Corps border during the December to April dry season in the south. During the May to September dry season farther north, the cavalry division would then move to I Corps to sweep the four provinces along the Laotian border. Reestablishing control in the A Shau Valley in southwest I Corps could set the stage for an invasion of Laos, which, along with a possible amphibious assault around the Demilitarized Zone, could, Westmoreland believed, help end the war.

The MACV commander had also refined his earlier concept of a three-phase war to one of four phases. He saw 1968 as the year of the third phase, in which the Americans would continue to help strengthen the South Vietnamese military. The United States would also turn over more of the war effort to the South Vietnamese. In what he termed the fourth—and decisive—phase, Westmoreland could see the “U.S. presence becoming superfluous as infiltration slowed, the Communist infrastructure was cut up, and a stable government and capable Vietnamese Armed Forces carried their own war to a successful conclusion.” He also expected that the enemy would try to do something to change this trend. Still, he reported that if all went well, a phased withdrawal of U.S. forces could begin in late 1969.

#### THE 1968 *TET MAU THAN* OFFENSIVE

As the new allied campaign plan was going into effect at the beginning of January, the enemy was making last-minute preparations for his general offensive-general uprising that would commence during the *Tet Mau Than* holiday at the end of January, a celebration that marked the beginning of the lunar new year. Despite Westmoreland's belief that infiltration had declined precipitously, during the last two months almost 35,000 North

Vietnamese soldiers had traveled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, roughly three times the normal average. Communist logisticians had delivered more than 55,338 metric tons of supplies to the southern battlefield, twice what it had committed to the previous winter-spring campaign. Nearly all of the local force units had traded in their World War II-era weapons for brand-new AK47s and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Rank-and-file enemy soldiers had received dozens of hours of political indoctrination meant to convince them that the war was entering its decisive phase and could be won within the next year.

The Communists planned to commit some 84,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops for the initial wave of the general offensive. Nearly every Communist main force and local force unit in South Vietnam had a role to play, some attacking into the cities while others blocked lines of communications or tied down allied units in the countryside. As always, military action was subordinate to a political goal. The Communists hoped the offensive would paralyze the South Vietnamese government and lead to a popular uprising that would undermine support for the regime in Saigon. If all went according to plan, war-weary South Vietnamese citizens would demand the formation of a new government that included representatives from the Viet Cong in order to negotiate an end to the conflict. Even if a popular uprising failed to materialize, North Vietnamese leaders still believed that the general offensive would do serious and lasting damage to the South Vietnamese state, and erode the confidence of its civilians and military personnel alike.

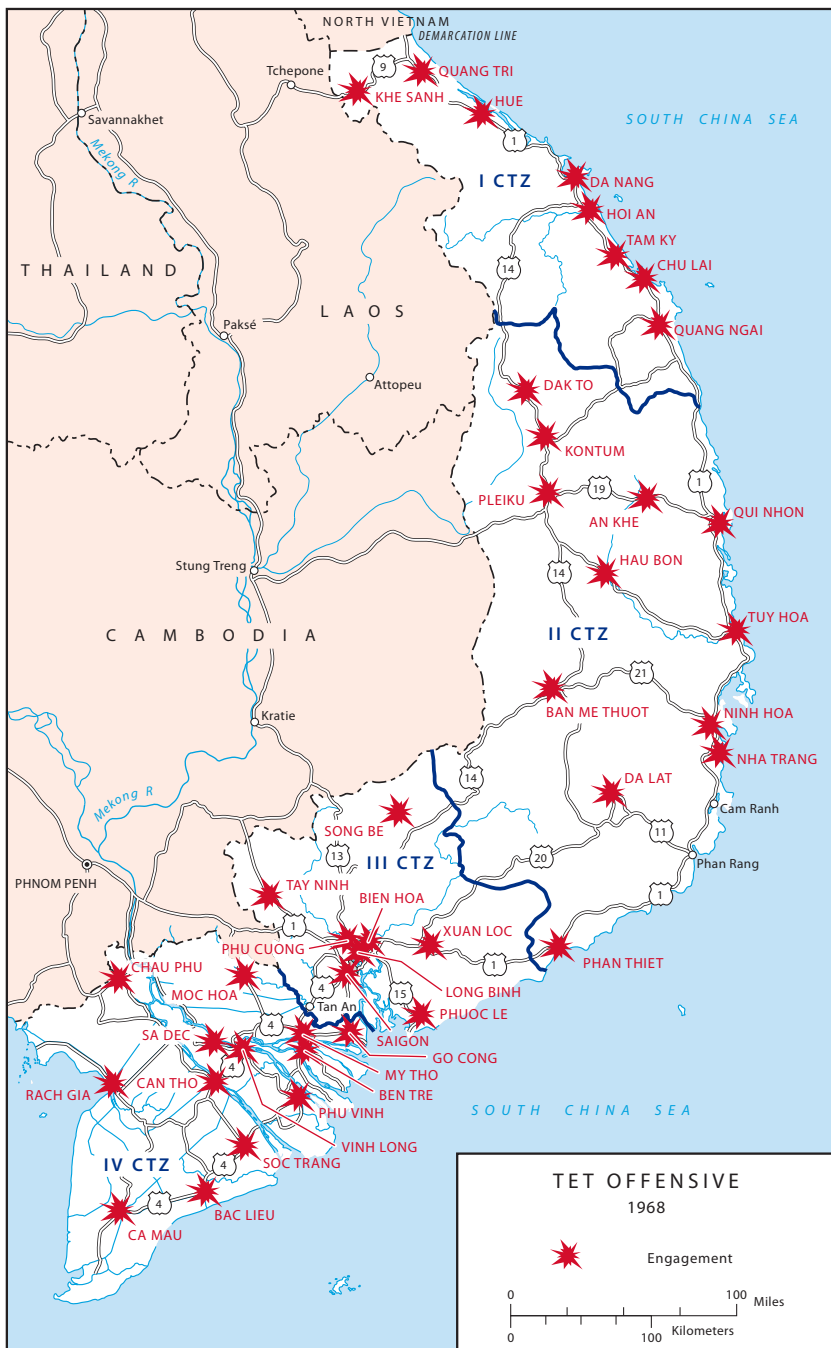
The allies received enough intelligence warnings in January to know that some kind of enemy offensive was in the works. Westmoreland alerted both his subordinates and his superiors to the coming danger and authorized some changes in U.S. dispositions. In III Corps, General Weyand pulled some of his units that were operating near the Cambodian border back to the National Priority Area around Saigon, just in case COSVN launched an attack near the capital. Allied commanders in the western highlands also put their forces on high alert after U.S. units recovered a Communist document that indicated that the enemy intended to launch an offensive in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces. However, General Westmoreland and his subordinates believed that Hanoi's main target would be northern I Corps, where the North Vietnamese could easily mass their forces, as they had done around the Khe Sanh combat base. Allied leaders only began to appreciate

the true scope of the enemy's offensive on the early morning of 30 January 1968 when Communist troops invaded eight major cities in southern I Corps and II Corps (a premature strike caused by a mix-up in communications between Hanoi and some regional commanders) (*see Map 8*).

Twenty-four hours later, fighting erupted almost everywhere across South Vietnam as the Communists attacked 36 of 44 provincial capitals and 64 of 242 district towns, as well as 5 of 6 of South Vietnam's autonomous cities, among them Hue and Saigon. Local force units and sappers spearheaded the assaults and attempted to hold their designated objectives until reinforcements could arrive in strength from outside the cities. Political cadres accompanied the assault groups with the intent, in vain as it turned out, to coax the local population into rebellion. The fighting in Hue and Saigon was especially vicious, and throughout the country heavy rocket and mortar fire and demolition charges damaged airfields, logistical facilities, and supply routes. While the South Vietnamese government and its forces constituted the prime enemy target, U.S. units were swept into the turmoil.

The earliest and premature attacks took place in the coastal cities of II Corps. At 0035 on 30 January 1968, only a half hour into the Vietnamese lunar New Year, mortar rounds landed near the South Vietnamese Navy Training Center in Nha Trang. At 0410, two Viet Cong battalions attacked Qui Nhon, a major allied supply base. The important port of Cam Ranh Bay experienced its first major threat when sappers swam into the bay and set off a demolition charge on a tanker, leaving it with a diamond-shaped hole above the water line. Within two days, the enemy attacked major population centers in nine of the corps' twelve provinces. Communist troops cut Highway 19 just west of Qui Nhon, as well as the road from Cam Ranh Bay to Ban Me Thuot in the southern highlands province of Darlac. Heavy fighting at Da Lat, Ban Me Thuot, and Kontum shut down the airfields in all three towns.

The fighting in the Qui Nhon area lasted from 30 January well into February and was typical of the allied experience in coastal II Corps. Before the attack on Qui Nhon, South Vietnamese forces had uncovered local Viet Cong hideouts and captured several cadre and prerecorded tapes to be used following the seizure of the radio station. Expecting an attack, the province chief announced a ban on fireworks, which some people ignored, and a curfew. Despite these precautions, a Viet



Map 8

Cong sapper battalion and a local force battalion slipped into the city, some of the insurgents disguised as South Vietnamese soldiers. They seized and briefly controlled the radio station, freed Viet Cong captives, and occupied the railway station. The South Vietnamese regrouped and with the help of troops from the South Korean Capital Division based outside the city ousted the attackers. The counterattack, however, destroyed the radio station and damaged the train station's workshop, including a new General Electric locomotive, and other buildings in town.

Because the Viet Cong's primary objectives in Qui Nhon were South Vietnamese facilities, the attackers initially bypassed the Americans unless they happened to be in the way. At daybreak on 30 January, three U.S. civilian contractors traveling to work in a company jeep passed near the radio station. The Viet Cong opened fire killing all three. In addition, seven U.S. troops died and several were wounded in Qui Nhon, including three soldiers who also drove by the radio station during the fighting.

The thousands of U.S. rear service troops that were based at dozens of logistical and administrative facilities in the Qui Nhon area immediately took up arms to help defend their installations. While the enemy focused most of his attacks on South Vietnamese targets, the American bases were often located nearby, putting them in the line of fire. On 3 February, for example, Communist rockets landed near the fuel storage tanks at the 84th Engineer Battalion west of town, leaving holes but no other damage. That same day, a squad of sappers infiltrated the camp itself, and the engineers lost two killed and two wounded. A second attack occurred on the twenty-sixth, along with an assault on a nearby South Vietnamese ammunition depot. This time the engineers killed two sappers without suffering any casualties. Meanwhile, the 84th Battalion's quarry at Phu Tai off Highway 1, a few kilometers south of Qui Nhon, was hit by a mortar attack on 11 February that resulted in the battalion's third combat death.

The first attacks in the highlands took place around 0130 on 30 January at Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac Province, about an hour following the opening strike at Nha Trang. As celebrants set off a string of fireworks in the streets, a barrage of mortar and rocket rounds struck the town, followed by a ground assault by two Viet Cong battalions. Simultaneously, a battalion-size attack took place against the small district capital of Tan Canh near Dak To. Thirty minutes later, a North Vietnamese regiment and two

separate battalions, almost 3,000 men, moved against Kontum City, the capital of Kontum Province; and a half hour later, a second enemy force invaded Pleiku City, the capital of Pleiku Province and the location of South Vietnam's II Corps headquarters.

With one of its infantry brigades still operating with the Americal Division in southern I Corps, the 4th Infantry Division was hard-pressed to defend the western highlands. When a Viet Cong local force battalion stormed into Pleiku City on the morning of 30 January, the division assembled an ad hoc mixture of engineers, tankers, cavalymen, and artillerymen to help retake the city. At 1500, the engineers landed by helicopter outside town and set up a defensive perimeter. The armor company's tanks joined the task force that afternoon, followed that evening by the 4th Engineer Battalion's own armor force. The next morning, the task force and South Vietnamese troops advanced into town, took enemy fire, and continued the sweep until dusk. The U.S. troops took three prisoners, two of whom were members of sapper teams on suicide missions. The next morning on 1 February, the engineers formed two skirmish lines and resumed the sweep, this time with the tank company. This drive resulted in the killing of twenty-one Viet Cong and the capture of several weapons. As the advance proceeded northward resistance ceased. By nightfall, the task force's command post moved to a South Vietnamese artillery compound. One platoon reinforced the Artillery Hill Camp west of town, and another platoon with a platoon of tanks guarded the power plant. The engineers also manned a nearby observation post equipped with two Starlight scopes. By 1930, the observation post reported enemy troops moving toward town. Heavy concentrations of firepower delivered by artillery, helicopter gunships, and Air Force AC-47 Spooky gunships halted the advance. South Vietnamese troops moving through the area the next day found some blood-soaked clothing, bandages, and equipment but no bodies. Several sweeps of the area followed without any traces of the enemy. Its mission as infantry completed, the task force returned to Camp Enari at 1800, 1 February, and its troops resumed normal chores as engineers.

At Kontum City, heavy fighting developed around government facilities and the airfield. By noon on 30 January, it became apparent that the South Vietnamese regular and territorial defenders needed help. The South Vietnamese rushed in a reinforced battalion, and the 4th Division deployed a task

force centered on the 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry. In a campaign that lasted through 12 February, the 4th Division's task force (divided into teams and supported by two batteries of artillery, a company of armor, a troop of air cavalry, and two Dusters) helped retake the city in house-to-house fighting and pursued the enemy through nearby hamlets and heavily defended hills to the north.

Convoys in the highlands carrying men and materials continued to move at great risk, and ambushes took an ever-increasing toll in casualties and damage to equipment. The enemy, believing that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces would be dispersed while reacting to the attacks on the cities, made it a point to attack isolated vehicles and large convoys alike. Because Highway 14 served as the main supply road between the two province capitals, the engineers cleared one hundred meters of vegetation from each side to reduce ambushes, but this did not discourage the attackers. On 6 March and again on 13 March, convoys took heavy losses. In the second attack, the vehicles at the rear of a 150-vehicle convoy were struck from both sides of the road. The enemy, estimated to range from two reinforced companies to two battalions, had taken positions behind berms of foliage and earth formed by the land clearing. After the initial fusillade of automatic weapons and rocket fire, sappers rushed toward the vehicles, throwing satchel charges at the trucks. The South Vietnamese armored cavalry squadron providing security entered the battle, and air strikes broke the attack. A few vehicles managed to run the ambush and clear the killing zone, but one destroyed truck blocked the road. A relief convoy moved to the ambush site to remove the disabled vehicles. Casualties totaled twelve dead and nineteen wounded.

Although the allies in III Corps had expected trouble at Tet, the number of Viet Cong who slipped through the defenses around Saigon in the morning of 31 January and the fury of the offensive came as a shock. South Vietnamese and U.S. troops recovered quickly, however, and ejected most of the attackers within a week, save for some holdouts in Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon. The attack in Saigon began with the raid on the U.S. Embassy, a rectangular six-story fortress completed the previous September. The embassy was a dubious military objective but of significant psychological value. After breaching the wall and entering the grounds and chancery building, but not the embassy building,

all nineteen of the sappers were killed by elements of the 716th Military Police Battalion, U.S. Marine Corps guards, and a platoon from the 101st Airborne Division. By the end of the day, five U.S. battalions were in and about the city and troops occupied positions along roads leading into the city. Army helicopter gunships were in the air almost continuously, assisting allied forces. Simultaneous assaults at Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the nearby South Vietnamese Joint General Staff compound, the presidential palace, and other installations in Saigon also failed, although some enemy soldiers did briefly penetrate the back side of the air base and the South Vietnamese headquarters complex. Racing through the night, armored cavalry from the 25th Infantry Division helped to defeat an enemy regiment threatening to overrun the air base. Communist assaults in the provinces north and west of Saigon and in IV Corps were also short-lived, although a second series of attacks in and around Saigon took place on 17 February, beginning with rockets striking Tan Son Nhut Air Base and MACV headquarters. Their intensity, however, was much less than the initial assaults. These attacks lasted intermittently until early March, highlighted by several fire fights in Saigon and Cholon.

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U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker (partially obscured by a rifle) and a security team assess the damage to the embassy compound after it had been attacked during the lunar new year offensive.



The heaviest attack to take place on the outskirts of Saigon commenced on the morning of 31 January when a Viet Cong regiment from the *5th PLAF Division* assaulted the II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh and a second Viet Cong regiment from the *5th Division* assaulted Bien Hoa Air Base, three kilometers to the west. The attack aimed at the II Field Force headquarters at Plantation originated from Ho Nai Village on the other side of Highway 1A, nicknamed “Widows’ Village” because it housed the widows and orphans of South Vietnamese soldiers. Advancing across the road, Viet Cong soldiers opened up with a torrent of rifle and machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades against the camp. The defenders—in many cases cooks, radiomen, engineers, and clerks manning defensive positions—responded with automatic weapons fire and grenades, which stopped the assault and pinned down the attackers. Military police and Army helicopter gunships joined the fighting. Soon elements of the 199th Infantry Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry swept the area, leaving sixty enemy dead in Ho Nai. Down the road at Bien Hoa Air Base, a combination of U.S. Air Force security troops and South Vietnamese soldiers repulsed the Viet Cong attack with help from helicopter gunships based on Bien Hoa, including several sleek new AH-1G Cobra attack helicopters.

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Mechanized soldiers from the 9th Infantry Division advance into an enemy-held hamlet outside of II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh.



The enemy interdicted all major roads from Saigon. Convoys caught in outlying areas often waited for days for the engineers to clear the way. Ground transportation in the delta was also at a standstill since the Vietnamese drivers, fearing reprisals, stayed away from work. Most highway improvement work in III and IV Corps ceased. River barges, which normally plied the waterways in the region, were held up at Vung Tau. Rail movements stopped entirely. For several days, only priority airlifts could reach some of the inland bases.

Elsewhere in III and IV Corps the enemy suffered defeats. South of Saigon, the riverine troops of the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, fought successively at My Tho, Cai Lay, and Vinh Long, and by the second week of February had crippled the offensive in the upper Mekong Delta. North of the capital, “tunnel rats”—specially trained teams of soldiers, usually made up of men of small stature, to search tunnel complexes—found a large North Vietnamese Army staging base. Rome plows moved in and razed the facility, deterring an expected attack on the U.S. 1st Infantry Division’s Phu Loi base camp in southeastern Binh Duong Province. Viet Cong gunners repeatedly rocketed and mortared the 1st and 25th Infantry Division base camps north and west of Saigon during the first few weeks of February,

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Troops of the 1st Infantry Division during an operation near Phu Loi in March 1968





Two Navy armored troop carriers from the Mobile Riverine Force approach the shore to disembark soldiers from the 2d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, during an operation in the Mekong Delta.

but their sporadic and inaccurate fire caused relatively little damage and did not hinder U.S. operations.

In northern I Corps, North Vietnamese troops attacked Hue and Quang Tri City and cut off Tan My, one of the three ports above Da Nang. The other two, Dong Ha and Cua Viet, fell within artillery range from the Demilitarized Zone, making their use tenuous. The enemy also cut the Hai Van Pass along Highway 1 linking Da Nang to Hue. Supplies could be delivered by air, but the monsoon weather made flying and landing over-the-beach uncertain at best. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese had increased their pressure on the marines at Khe Sanh. General Westmoreland had decided to hold the base, which he believed could tie down large North Vietnamese forces that otherwise could have moved unhindered around allied positions into the populated areas. On 5 February, heavy ground attacks followed by intense artillery fire the next day struck Khe Sanh and nearby Lang Vei Special Forces Camp. Although the enemy took Lang Vei, the defenders at Khe Sanh and the surrounding hilltop outposts held out against heavy bombardments and ground assaults.

Some of the most tenacious combat of the Tet offensive occurred in Hue, the capital of Thua Thien Province. Hanoi's strategists thought that here if anywhere the general offensive-general uprising might gain a political foothold. North Vietnamese

regulars with the help of accomplices inside the city were thrown into the battle, indicating that the stakes at Hue were higher than elsewhere in the South. They quickly captured most of the city on the south bank of the Perfume River and later seized the bulk of the northern half, including the Imperial Citadel. House-to-house and street-to-street fighting caused enormous destruction, forcing nearly 100,000 residents of Hue to flee their homes.

To the north and northeast of Hue, the 1st Cavalry Division began to strike back at the enemy. The 1st Brigade quickly moved from Binh Dinh Province and helped South Vietnamese troops clear Quang Tri City. The 3d Brigade, which had been conducting operations between Chu Lai and Da Nang, moved into the hamlets west of Hue in an attempt to cut the enemy's main supply channel. To help coordinate U.S. operations in northern I Corps, Westmoreland established a joint headquarters at Phu Bai (south of Hue) named MACV Forward where his deputy, General Abrams, took charge in mid-February. While South Vietnamese and U.S. Marine units advanced through Hue in bitter house-to-house combat, four U.S. Army battalions managed to take the enemy-held hamlets west of the city. The last North Vietnamese troops were driven out of the city in late February.

Allied counterattacks were slow to develop in northern I Corps because the enemy had done a thorough job in cutting Highway 1 between Da Nang and Hue. Sappers closed the narrow winding Hai Van Pass with three major breaks and many obstacles. Along a straight stretch farther north, dubbed the "Bowling Alley," they destroyed every bridge and culvert and excavated large trenches along the way. During the first two weeks of February, attempts by Marine engineers and Seabees (Navy engineers) to clear the road resulted in heavy casualties and loss of equipment. When the Army's 35th Engineer Battalion arrived from II Corps to take over reopening the road, it too could not proceed due to the strong presence of enemy forces. Repeated efforts over the next few days resulted in enemy fire and several casualties. Only in late February when the 101st Airborne Division arrived to sweep the area west of the pass, and with similar efforts by the marines to the north, was it possible for the Americans to reopen the road.

The reopening of Highway 1 eased the logistical crisis around Hue, but officials still faced the task of supporting the action farther north and reconstituting the forward stockpiles, especially the fuel and ammunition, that would be needed for

the relief of Khe Sanh. By one estimate, another 907 metric tons a day would be needed, nearly four times the rated capacity of Highway 1, if the counteroffensive was to kick off as planned on 1 April. With no other practical alternative but supply by sea, the surest way to move materiel in bulk, the U.S. command now gambled that the battle for the northern coast was about to be won. It immediately laid plans for landing supplies on a beach east of Quang Tri City.

The over-the-shore facility was a major accomplishment. A joint effort by Army engineers, Navy Seabees, Army transportation units, Navy landing ships, and a Marine Corps fuel detachment transformed the beach into a key logistical facility. Landing craft discharged cargo over the pontoon causeway, while amphibious resupply cargo barges and lighters brought supplies of all types ashore from deep-draft ships. Over time, the site contained extensive ammunition and fuel storage areas, a helicopter refueling point, a road net with a two-lane connection to Highway 1, and fuel pipelines laid offshore and from the beach to Highway 1 and then north to Dong Ha. Each day truck convoys moved cargo inland from the beach storage area to the forward support bases of the combat divisions. (Because of the remarkable achievements of its personnel, the facility took on the name of Wunder Beach, a slight play on words of the transportation commander's name, Lt. Col. Charles H. Sunder.) As an additional benefit, the new inland road also crossed and effectively cut a main North Vietnamese supply route leading into Hue.

By the end of March 1968, the storm of the Tet offensive had abated. U.S. officials estimated that during the first three months of 1968, the allies had killed 72,455 Communist soldiers. Many of these casualties had fallen on Viet Cong troops and political cadre, thereby weakening the Communist's hold over the population at the local level. During the same period, allied forces suffered 15,715 dead, of which 4,869 were Americans.

With so much of the fighting occurring in populated areas, civilians became casualties as well. Most civilian suffering was the result of being caught in the crossfire between Communist and allied forces, but not all. When the Communists captured communities, they often executed officials and anyone else whom they believed posed an obstacle to their control. In Hue, Communist officials massacred several thousand men, women, and children. Allied soldiers occasionally committed atrocities

as well, albeit on an unsystematic and smaller scale. The most widely known of these occurred in the hamlet of My Lai in March 1968.

My Lai, one of several hamlets in the village of Son My, was situated in the coastal plain of Quang Ngai Province, about eight kilometers northeast of the provincial capital of Quang Ngai City. The Communists had long dominated the area, and the allies considered its population, which rarely offered information or assistance, to be hostile. Operations in the area proved to be slow, frustrating exercises, with most U.S. casualties coming from mines and booby traps. Operating in such conditions day after day induced a climate of fear and hate among the soldiers of the Americal Division who were ordered to eliminate Communist forces in the area. The already thin line between civilian and guerrilla combatant was easily blurred and violated. On 6 March, elements of Company C, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, a relatively inexperienced unit with weak leadership, went on a rampage and massacred several hundred civilians in My Lai and surrounding areas.

Looking across South Vietnam, and unaware of the events at My Lai due to a cover-up at the local level, General Westmoreland had reasons for optimism. True, allied casualties had been significant, but the Communists had suffered grievously. The populace had not rallied to the Communists as officials in Hanoi had predicted. Indeed, far from collapsing, the South Vietnamese government had rallied, and although the situation had been precarious in many places, no South Vietnamese units had been destroyed and many fought extremely well. More than simply rallying, the South Vietnamese government finally mobilized the nation in the wake of Tet, approving a MACV plan to increase its armed forces to over 800,000 men in the next two years. The ground seemed to be laid for the allies to make a devastating riposte, one that would not only recapture lost ground, but also make inroads into areas long dominated by the enemy.

Americans at home saw a different picture. Tet shocked a public that was growing tired of mounting U.S. casualties. Dramatic images showing the sapper attack on the U.S. Embassy in the heart of Saigon, the besieged marines at Khe Sanh, and the bitter fight for Hue dimmed General Westmoreland's contention of an allied victory. President Johnson's claims of progress in the war, already doubted by many, lost even more

credibility, and he showed signs of frustration with the war. Defense Secretary McNamara, also disenchanted, left office on 29 February, replaced by Clark M. Clifford, an adviser and close friend of the president. Public skepticism over the war swelled when the *New York Times* revealed that Westmoreland had requested, at the urging of Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) Chairman General Earle G. Wheeler, an additional 206,000 troops be sent to Vietnam. This appeal for more troops would require mobilizing some reserve and national guard units. Half of the guardsmen and reservists called up would be sent to Vietnam; the remainder would replenish the U.S. strategic reserve force. General Westmoreland had made it clear to the president that the allies were in no danger of being defeated, and that those additional troops would only be necessary if the United States decided to prosecute the war more aggressively in order to hasten victory, to include sending troops into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But to a jaded public, the request sounded like desperation.

With public support plummeting to new depths, President Johnson decided to authorize a more modest troop increase than Westmoreland and Wheeler had requested. He rejected the proposal for 206,000 more troops, but agreed to send some 3,650 men from the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and some 3,300 men from the 27th Marine Regiment from Okinawa, to northern I Corps where the situation remained precarious. The brigade soon joined the 101st Airborne Division in Thua Thien Province as its third brigade. This measure allowed the 101st Airborne Division's 3d Brigade to remain in the Saigon area. Johnson also agreed to send the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), to Vietnam that autumn—the last Army combat unit to deploy to South Vietnam.

Now that the president had drawn a firm limit on the U.S. commitment, Westmoreland knew that he must make the best possible use of the troops he had, and the South Vietnamese would have to take on a larger share of the war effort. As a signal to foster negotiations, Johnson also curtailed air strikes against North Vietnam. When the president outlined his decision in a nationwide address on 31 March, he surprised everyone by announcing that he would not seek reelection and would devote his full attention to resolving the conflict. Though Hanoi had

suffered a military defeat, Johnson's actions implied that the Communists had achieved a political and diplomatic victory.

#### ALLIED COUNTERATTACKS

On 1 April, Westmoreland believed the allied forces were ready to counterattack. He told his senior commanders that forces in I Corps were "now in position to seek decisive battles in Quang Tri and Thua Thien." Along the coastal regions and in the western highlands "our troops are orienting their operations on the enemy to keep him away from population centers and resources." Moving south, he noted, "Allied campaigns throughout III and IV Corps are diligently securing and restoring lines of communications and installations (economic lifelines) that are vital to these rich and populated areas." Westmoreland concluded, "We must go after the enemy throughout the country; we must hound him and hurt him. We can achieve a decisive victory and we must do so at once, to restore the perspective with which the world sees this war. We must demonstrate by our actions that we are, in fact, winning the war."

Westmoreland's admonition to increase the tempo of pressure against the enemy came soon after the announcement that he would be leaving Vietnam after four years as MACV commander. On 23 March, he was informed of his appointment as Army chief of staff. His deputy, General Abrams, would replace him that summer. In his few remaining months as MACV commander, Westmoreland directed counteroffensive operations that regained all the ground and population lost during Tet, broke the siege of Khe Sanh, and severely disrupted the enemy's supply network in I Corps. Sharing Westmoreland's basic approach to the war, General Abrams intended to continue the allied counterattack once he took charge of MACV in June.

In mid-March, the North Vietnamese decided to abandon the siege of Khe Sanh and began to pull back into Laos just as Westmoreland chose to reestablish a land link with the Marine base. The MACV commander did not consider the base in great peril but became anxious to reestablish contact "if for no other reason than to silence dolorous critics and allay President Johnson's concern." Soon after taking charge of MACV Forward, General Abrams had developed a plan, code-named Operation PEGASUS, to break the siege of Khe Sanh, but weather conditions and logistic preparations held up launching the campaign.

Planning continued while allied forces retook Hue, more Army reinforcements reached the area, engineers reopened the lines of communications, and logisticians reconstituted stockpiles. When the logistics-over-the-shore supply facility began to discharge over 907 metric tons a day, MACV set 1 April as the D-day for the relief of Khe Sanh.

Meanwhile, five widely scattered U.S. divisions, three Army and two Marine, had taken up positions in I Corps, and Westmoreland considered the force too large to be controlled from a single headquarters. The recent arrivals included the 101st Airborne Division, which deployed from III Corps to Phu Bai on 19 February. When the 101st took over responsibility for the 1st Cavalry Division's old operating area, the cavalrymen moved to a new base and airstrip called Landing Zone STUD at Ca Lu in central Quang Tri Province to prepare for PEGASUS. At that point, Westmoreland decided to upgrade the III Marine Amphibious Force to the level of a field army headquarters with a subordinate Army corps. On 10 March, accordingly, MACV Forward at Phu Bai officially became Provisional Corps, Vietnam, and General Abrams returned to Saigon. General Rosson, who had earlier commanded Task Force OREGON and then I Field Force, and was currently serving as Abrams' deputy at MACV Forward, assumed command of the new Army corps and opera-

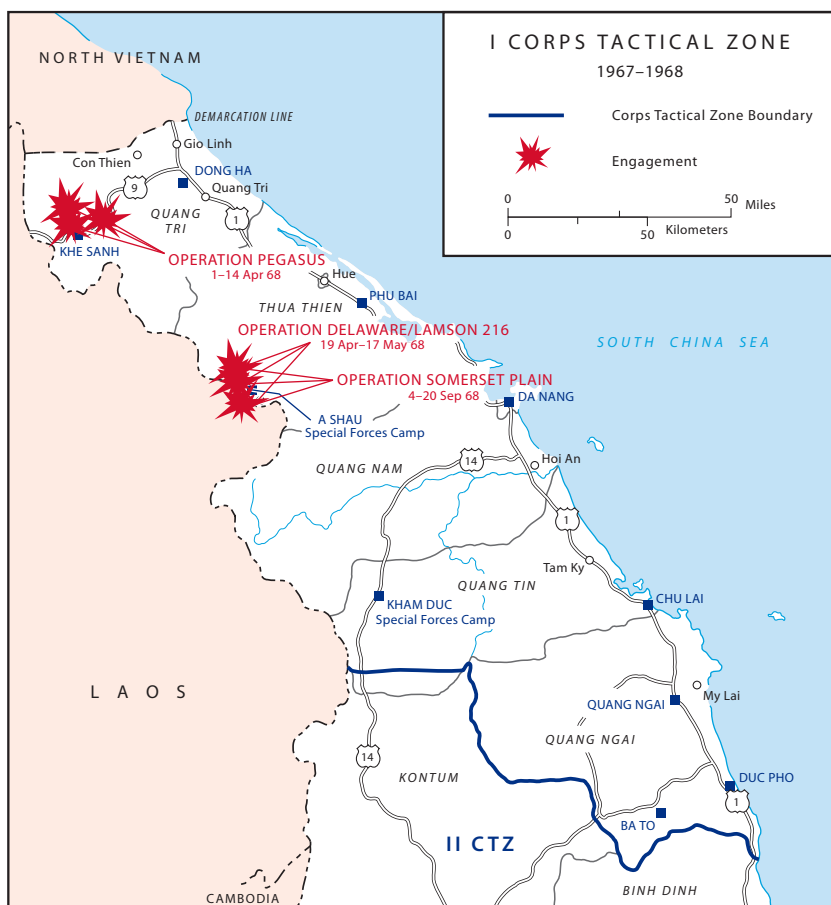
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Members of Battery A, 6th Battalion, 33d Artillery, build protective sandbag walls around 105-mm. howitzers at Landing Zone STUD, the forward base camp of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), in preparation for Operation PEGASUS.



tional control of the two Army divisions, the 3d Marine Division, and other supporting forces in northern I Corps.

Operation PEGASUS began at 0700 on 1 April with American and Vietnamese forces moving out from Landing Zone STUB along Highway 9 toward the Khe Sanh base (*Map 9*). This followed an allied deception operation initiated a few days earlier northeast of Dong Ha. The PEGASUS force, under the control of the 1st Cavalry Division, included the division's three brigades, a Marine Corps regiment, a South Vietnamese



airborne task force, and the garrison at Khe Sanh, over 30,000 troops. The 1st Marine Regiment led the ground attack, securing and repairing the road as it advanced westward. Poor weather delayed the airmobile part of the operation to 1300, when the 1st Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade began seizing high ground in a series of airmobile assaults. On 3 April, the 2d Brigade landed three battalions southeast of Khe Sanh and attacked to the northwest. During the fourth day, the marines continued their push while the cavalrymen applied pressure throughout the battle area. The following day, elements of the 26th Marine Regiment sallied forth from Khe Sanh and seized Hill 471 southeast of the base. On 5 April, North Vietnamese troops tried to retake the hill, but the marines, sustained by artillery and close air support, cut down the attackers in one of the major fights of the campaign. That same day, units of the 1st Cavalry Division's 1st Brigade made air assaults into positions overlooking Highway 9 south of the base. More air cavalry troops landed on Hill 471 to relieve the marines in the first relief of Khe Sanh's defenders. The official linkup came the following afternoon when the 1st Cavalry Division airlifted South Vietnamese airborne troops to the base. On the morning of the eighth, the 3d Brigade cleared the remaining section of road and linked up with the 26th Marine Regiment. Two days later, the 1st Brigade seized the old Lang Vei Special Forces camp. Provisional Corps, Vietnam, officially ended PEGASUS on 15 April.

Next in line in I Corps was an airmobile assault against the North Vietnamese redoubt in the A Shau Valley. Located less than ten kilometers from the Laotian border and running northwest to southeast, the valley extends between two high and steeply sloped mountain ranges. Among the few manmade features were three abandoned airfields spread along the valley floor. North Vietnamese troops had controlled the A Shau since March 1966 when they overran the Special Forces camp in the southern end and established a major staging area to infiltrate troops and supplies through Laos into Thua Thien Province. After reviewing detailed intelligence of the North Vietnamese bastion, General Tolson exclaimed, "This was his [the enemy's] Cam Ranh Bay, so to speak." The valley's peculiar location and topography expose it to both the northeast and southwest monsoons, and the brief interval between monsoons

(mid-April to mid-May) prompted Westmoreland's planners to propose a quick strike. During the last days of Operation PEGASUS, Provisional Corps, Vietnam, completed final preparations for the assault, called Operation DELAWARE/LAM SON 216, committing elements of Tolson's 1st Cavalry Division and the 101st Airborne Division along with South Vietnamese forces. A corps reserve was established by moving the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light) to Camp Evans, a base camp just north of Hue.

The operation began on the morning of 19 April with preplanned air and artillery strikes. But almost at once, heavy anti-aircraft fire met the 1st Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade, and poor weather played havoc with helicopter assaults and Air Force resupply missions. Just getting the desired firebases in place to support an assault on the old French airstrip at A Luoi took until the twenty-fourth. Meanwhile, to the east, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, drove westward along Route 547, a narrow, winding, overgrown, unimproved road. On the second day, the cavalry division's 3d Brigade expanded operations with one battalion pushing southeast and another blocking Route 548 that entered the valley from Laos. The following day, 21 April, the fighting increased as the Americans moved deeper into the sanctuary. As the weather temporarily improved, the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, inserted a battalion into the central part of the A Shau, about a kilometer south of the A Luoi airstrip. Two more battalions followed, sweeping the surrounding area. During the rest of April, the buildup of forces and supplies continued around the airstrip, and by early May, North Vietnamese resistance lessened. On 12 May, the 1st Cavalry Division and South Vietnamese airborne troops pushing westward along Routes 547 and 547A met some ten kilometers east of A Luoi. As the operation proceeded, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces uncovered vast enemy caches. One find included a large maintenance area and two Soviet-manufactured bulldozers used in building the logistical base and supply routes. By mid-May, the rains of the southwest monsoon intensified, and the allies began to pull out. Operation DELAWARE/LAM SON 216 officially ended on 17 May.

Allied officers declared PEGASUS and DELAWARE/LAM SON 216 tactical and strategic successes, but it did not take long for the North Vietnamese to return to Khe Sanh and the A Shau.

North Vietnamese artillery pieces located across the border in Laos resumed a steady bombardment of the Marine combat base, and in May, a North Vietnamese infantry division had once again taken up position in the nearby hills. After PEGASUS, senior U.S. Army and Marine Corps commanders in I Corps repeatedly declared the Khe Sanh base a liability. The marines had long advocated quitting Khe Sanh and employing a mobile defense along the Demilitarized Zone. Westmoreland agreed in principle, but he disagreed with the recommended timing and deferred the decision to his successor, General Abrams. Preparations already under way to close the base were canceled, and the marines dug in again. On 15 April, fresh Marine battalions and two battalions from the 1st Cavalry Division launched a new operation. In the ten weeks that followed PEGASUS, U.S. troops in or near Khe Sanh suffered more than twice the casualties reported during the siege. In June, Abrams became theater commander, and he quickly decided to close the combat base. With shells continuing to rain down on the base, the marines completed the evacuation on the evening of 5 July. The decision to leave Khe Sanh caused some bewilderment in the United States. Abrams justified this move by pointing out that not tying down troops to specific terrain would better the chances to counter future threats. Its abandonment signaled the demise of the McNamara Line and further postponement of MACV's hopes for large-scale American cross-border operations, a measure that President Johnson still refused to sanction.

#### THE MAY AND AUGUST OFFENSIVES

Communist actions suggested a renewed offensive, and it began on 5 May. Its timing coincided with the opening of the long-heralded Paris peace talks after President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th Parallel. This offensive, which Americans dubbed the "mini-Tet," turned out to be less powerful than its predecessor nearly everywhere except in Saigon. At the same time, it showed the negotiators in Paris that Hanoi would continue to fight. Except at Saigon and a few other places, the May attacks featured rocket and mortar attacks against towns, cities, and U.S. installations. Attacks on bridges and airfields were usually repulsed. In northern I Corps, the allied forces anticipated the attacks and blocked enemy advances toward Dong Ha. After a series of bloody engagements in the

eastern Demilitarized Zone, the planned attack on Hue never got under way. Strong North Vietnamese forces did succeed in taking the Special Forces camp at Kham Duc, located about seventy-five kilometers southwest of Da Nang near the Laotian border. In the area around Pleiku and Kontum, preemptive attacks—by the 4th Infantry Division, elements of the 173d Airborne Brigade, and the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, plus heavy B-52 strikes—forced the enemy to cancel attacks and withdraw into Cambodia. The main attack took place in Saigon. U.S. and South Vietnamese troops on the approaches to the capital intercepted and destroyed many small guerrilla bands. Those that got into the city holed up in the Cholon district and fought stubbornly, often setting fires in the highly flammable shanty neighborhoods. This gave the impression of a city under siege and was designed to embarrass the government and influence the talks in Paris. Allied efforts to rout the enemy created more destruction. By mid-May, the allied forces had rooted the Communists out of most of their strongholds, ending the worst of the street fighting. Rocket and mortar attacks continued, however, and renewed attacks in Cholon and near the Phu Tho racetrack took place later that month.

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Enemy weapons and ammunition captured by South Vietnamese paratroopers during the fighting near Tan Son Nhut Air Base during the May 1968 “mini-Tet” offensive.



The only real North Vietnamese battlefield success took place at Kham Duc in southwest I Corps. Kham Duc and its satellite camp at Ngok Tavak, seven kilometers to the southwest, served as the last remaining Special Forces camps along the Laotian border in I Corps. Kham Duc camp sat astride Highway 14, which also served as an avenue for the North Vietnamese coming down the roads and tracks of the Ho Chi Minh Trail just across the border. Although the two outposts could not block Communist infiltration into South Vietnam, they kept the enemy's activities under observation and frequently hindered his movements. Placed in one of the most rugged border regions in Vietnam only fifteen kilometers from the Laotian border, the Kham Duc camp, village, and airfield sat in a kilometer-wide bowl surrounded by hills rising abruptly to 610 meters high. Earlier in January when General Westmoreland canceled the first of his projected YORK operations, he had still wanted the airfield upgraded to handle sustained C-130 traffic and pads built for a radio navigation system. These tasks were passed down to an engineer company based at Pleiku. After some delays on 9 April, the first platoon flew to Kham Duc and moved to a nearby abandoned camp located on higher ground adjacent to the airfield. Work was well under way by the time the last element arrived on 15 April.

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Members of the South Vietnamese 7th Battalion, Airborne Division, fire M60 machine guns and lob hand grenades at a Viet Cong position near Tan Son Nhut Air Base.



A major ground attack now appeared imminent, and an infantry battalion task force from the Americal Division began arriving by air and assumed command, while the engineers cleared fields of fire and improving defensive positions. On the morning of 10 May, a Viet Cong battalion attacked the compound at Ngok Tavak, forcing the defenders to abandon the camp and withdraw to Kham Duc before darkness. Scattered mortar fire rained down on Kham Duc on 11 May as the last of the reinforcements arrived. By then, U.S. commanders had second thoughts about another protracted battle, and they recommended vacating the camp. After reviewing the situation that evening, General Westmoreland concluded that Kham Duc "had none of the importance of or defensive potential of a Khe Sanh, and I ordered evacuation." Army and Marine helicopters managed a few pickups, but a downed CH-47 blocked the runway. Because two bulldozers had been disassembled for evacuation, the engineers used a bucket loader to move the damaged Chinook. Fuel leaking from the burning helicopter, however, set the bucket loader ablaze, and the engineers had to abandon it. Frantically, they reassembled a bulldozer and finally moved the helicopter, permitting the landing of C-123s and C-130s. When one C-130 took off down the cratered and shrapnel-littered runway, mortars burst on all sides flattening a tire. The crew aborted the takeoff, off-loaded the passengers, and with the help of engineer maintenance troops cut away the ruined tire. With fuel streaming from holes in the wings, the damaged and nearly empty aircraft managed to take off. At 1100, a C-123 took off with forty-six engineers, and CH-47s carried out the remaining sixty-four between 1100 and 1500. That afternoon, the enemy shot down two C-130s, but helicopters and transports protected by close-in air strikes completed the evacuation by 1600. Following the evacuation, air strikes demolished the remains of the camp.

The May attacks in the Saigon area proved more destructive than those of Tet. Some 15,000 homes were destroyed creating nearly 104,000 new refugees. With the monsoon on the horizon, the South Vietnamese government began a crash reconstruction program. Fortunately, the government's Central Recovery Committee established during the Tet offensive was still carrying out Project RECOVERY, and was able to move quickly to erect temporary housing. Media claims that allied firepower had caused much of the damage prompted General Westmoreland to lend assistance. On 13 May, a joint task force of U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force engineers

began building some 1,500 temporary family units. Plans called for building 6-meter-by-18-meter standard wooden barracks shells divided into five-family units. Unfortunately, renewed attacks in late May and coordination problems caused by the hasty assembly of the diverse workforce initially hampered the operation. After two weeks of construction, the project's original completion date was moved back two weeks to the end of July. Despite these setbacks and the arrival of the rainy season, the project neared completion by early September.

In mid-August, Hanoi attempted to renew its general offensive a third time, but with limited results. Many Communist units were still depleted from the fighting earlier that year, and instead of attacking major cities, they settled for raiding remote outposts and bombarding populated areas. In I Corps, the Americal Division's armored cavalry squadron blocked North Vietnamese forces heading toward Tam Ky. In II Corps, the enemy avoided contact with two exceptions. One unsuccessful assault took place against Duc Lap district headquarters near the Cambodian border. Another struck the Dak Saeng CIDG camp farther north along the Laotian border. In III Corps, the U.S. 25th Infantry Division fought off enemy attacks at Firebase BUELL, four kilometers northeast of Tay Ninh City, and a night defensive position west of Dau Tieng. Another isolated attack was a damaging ambush on a supply convoy traveling between Long Binh and Tay Ninh. During the attack on the convoy, soldiers returning from a minesweeping operation fought off the attackers until relieved by an armored cavalry troop. The battered convoy reached Tay Ninh, but some two dozen ruined vehicles littered the road.

August also marked the arrival of the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), from Fort Carson, Colorado, which consisted of one tank battalion, a mechanized infantry battalion, a standard infantry battalion, a self-propelled artillery battalion, an armored cavalry troop, and an engineer company. In a short time the brigade, which deployed along the Demilitarized Zone under 3d Marine Division control, surprised the North Vietnamese who had never battled true armor formations in this area.

Finally, two U.S. Army reorganizations in midsummer created a new corps headquarters in I Corps and a second airmobile division. On 15 August, the Provisional Corps, Vietnam, became the XXIV Corps, a headquarters that had previously seen combat service in

the Pacific during World War II. Lt. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, who had replaced General Rosson in July, assumed command of the corps and operational control over the 1st Cavalry, 101st Airborne, and 3d Marine Divisions and the 1st Brigade, 5th Division. Like its predecessor, XXIV Corps remained under the operational control of the III Marine Amphibious Force. Conversion of the 101st Airborne Division to an airmobile configuration had been considered by the Department of the Army prior to the division's deployment. Conversion began on 1 July. A year would pass before the full complement of helicopters was available and support facilities at Camp Eagle located between Hue and Phu Bai were completed.

Hanoi's offensives did not deter the allies from trying to regain the initiative through a series of operations aimed at supply trails, caches, and way stations. U.S. Marines, no longer tied down to fixed bases, launched more airmobile operations along the Demilitarized Zone. They followed the Army's lead in setting up mutually supporting firebases atop jungle peaks as the Marine riflemen fanned out below searching for trails and supplies. In early August, allied forces returned to the A Shau Valley. A brigade-size task force from the 101st Airborne Division and elements of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division were airlifted into the valley in Operation SOMERSET PLAIN. Again, the engineers kept the main supply route, Route 547, to Firebase BIRMINGHAM open and built four new firebases covering the five infantry battalions in their sweeps. Along with finding and destroying caches and base camps, the invading troops this time left the area littered with minefields. These obstacles hardly daunted the North Vietnamese, who quickly moved back from neighboring Laos. After withdrawing from the A Shau, the 101st carried out an integrated airmobile, naval, and ground cordon operation on the enemy sanctuary at Vinh Loc Island east of Hue. The II Corps zone saw a continuation of reconnaissance and reconnaissance-in-force operations. Around Saigon, a large-scale campaign, Operation TOAN THANG (Complete Victory), which had started in April, aimed at enemy units in the area. In the delta, the U.S. 9th Infantry Division fought several battles, destroying a main force battalion near the III/IV Corps border. To support the effort in the delta, a study done by Army and Navy headquarters in Vietnam concluded that additional units of the 9th Division could be stationed at Dong Tam without further dredging. With a modest addition of naval craft to the river-assault squadrons, an expanded force could support two brigades afloat and one at Dong Tam. By midyear, planning was under way to reorganize

the 9th Division to a mobile river configuration and move it to IV Corps. On 25 July, the division headquarters moved from Bearcat to a new base camp at Dong Tam.

## **ANALYSIS**

Taking stock of the war in late September 1968, General Abrams had reason to believe that allied fortunes were on the rise. The most striking statistic concerned enemy losses. Over the last nine months, the allies had eliminated approximately 242,000 enemy soldiers from the battlefield, more than double the casualty rate from the previous year. Dozens of battalions, particularly those which had attacked Saigon, Hue, and other large cities, had sustained casualty rates of over 50 percent; some units had been decimated twice, once during Tet and a second time during May. The overall weakening of the general offensive between January and August offered compelling evidence that the enemy was pursuing a losing strategy that would continue to degrade his forces at an unsustainable rate.

Another statistical measurement, the ratio of manpower, had also changed in favor of the United States during the last nine months. While enemy manpower had grown slightly, allied strength had expanded at a far greater rate. MACV now consisted of 538,563 personnel, an increase of nearly 40,000 troops, with the U.S. Army, Vietnam, and its 354,729 soldiers representing the largest service component. General Abrams had gained 10 Army maneuver battalions, bringing the total number in September to 89. All told, the allies now fielded a combined total of 303 combat maneuver battalions, an increase of 21 since January.

The South Vietnamese government had shaken off the effects of Tet and was now on the rebound. Encouraged by the fact that the population had refused to rise up in support of the Tet offensive, President Thieu enacted measures to mobilize the nation more efficiently. Most of the South Vietnamese regular infantry battalions were now equipped with M16 rifles and other modern weapons, and some of the Regional Forces units were beginning to receive them as well. Thanks to Westmoreland's counteroffensive and increased South Vietnamese efforts, pacification was back on track in most parts of the country. Hamlet Evaluation Survey data showed that almost 66.8 percent of the total population now lived in relatively secure areas, just short of the 67.2 percent figure recorded in January prior to the general offensive. The Phung

Hoang/Phoenix program to identify and eliminate the enemy's shadow government was also gaining some traction. Finally, since Tet, President Thieu had sacked no fewer than 25 province chiefs and 162 district chiefs for incompetence or corruption, with MACV advisers reporting that the new officials were "significantly more honest and competent than their predecessors."

Despite those positive trends in the war, many challenges remained for General Abrams and his South Vietnamese allies. Thanks to infiltration from North Vietnam, the total number of enemy troops in South Vietnam—combat soldiers, administrative personnel, and guerrillas—had actually grown from 224,000 personnel in January to around 253,000 troops in September. Viet Cong influence remained strong in many parts of South Vietnam, most notably the lower half of IV Corps, in Long An Province just south of Saigon, in the coastal border area between II Corps and I Corps, and in the lowlands of Quang Tri Province. North Vietnamese leaders showed no signs of yielding, while U.S. politicians had been shaken by Tet and public support in the United States continued to fall. On average, over 1,000 U.S. troops were being killed and another 8,000 wounded each month in South Vietnam. War is a test of wills, and although Tet was a military disaster for the Communists, the failed offensive had seriously shaken America's willingness to continue the fight. Whoever gained the White House in the November presidential election would face nearly irresistible pressure to begin drawing down U.S. forces. It remained an open question whether General Abrams could accomplish the mission of preserving an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam as U.S. leaders began thinking about ways to exit the imbroglio in Southeast Asia.

## The Author

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• VIETNAM COUNTEROFFENSIVE, PHASE III 1967-1968

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