

JUNCTION CITY SHOOTOUT

A multidivisional attack by II Field Force into War Zone C caught the enemy by surprise and cost him more than 2,700 of his best soldiers.

By Lawrence M. Greenberg

February 22, 1967. It was D-day for the biggest U.S. military operation launched since the beginning of the war. The paratroopers had been airborne for 30 minutes when the jumpmaster's voice sliced through engine noise and nervous conversation. "Stand in the door!" Thirty "sky soldiers" of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the first element of a 780-man airborne task force, snapped static lines to the overhead cable and queued up at the C-130 Hercules' two jump doors. At the front of the respective lines stood Brigadier General John R. Deane, Jr., 173rd commander, and Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Sigholtz, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne), and airborne task force commander.

While the task force prepared to make the first and only American parachute assault in Vietnam, eight other infantry battalions made helicopter assaults into 10 landing zones (LZ). On the ground, another six battalions moved into blocking and screening positions that, together with the parachute drop and airmobile assaults, would form a horseshoe-shaped cordon around the western half of War Zone C, the home and staging area for 9,000 guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars of the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN) and its 9th Division.

In Saigon, 45 miles to the south, one ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) infantry and five Vietnamese Marine battalions that comprised Task Force Alpha waited for insertion into the 50-by-80-kilometer operations area on D+1. Task Force Wallace, composed of the ARVN 35th Ranger Battalion and 1st Troop 3/1 Cavalry, also waited to join the "Big Red One," the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. Operation Junction City was about to begin.



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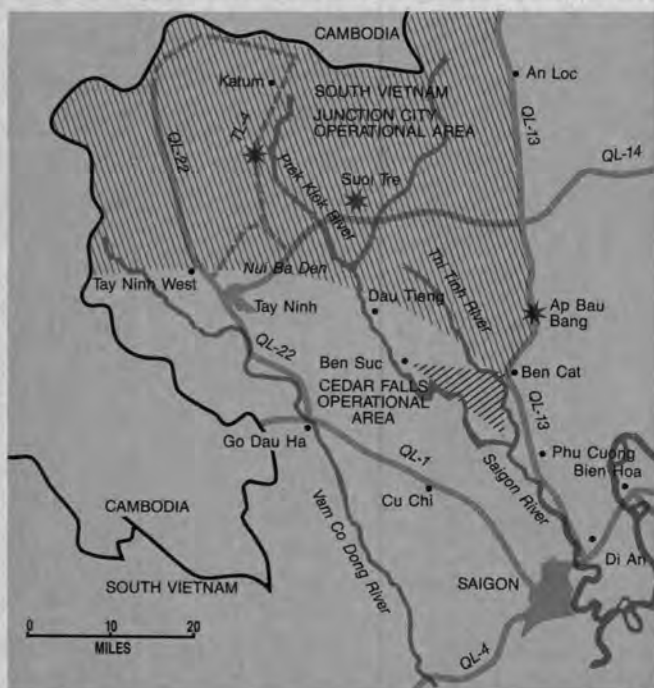
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TOP: After parachuting into their drop zone, "sky soldiers" of the 173rd Airborne Brigade encounter early resistance in a rice paddy on February 22, 1967. ABOVE: The objective of Operation Junction City was to cordon off and destroy the Communist Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN) and the Viet Cong's 9th Division in War Zone C.

One thousand feet over Drop Zone (DZ) Charlie, a series of dried rice paddies midway between Katum and the Cambodian border four miles to the north, the first of 13 C-130s, spaced to arrive every 26 seconds, came in from the southwest. Each plane would drop half its paratroopers on its first pass, and then circle for a second, final run nine minutes later. At 0900, the ready light in the lead aircraft turned green and the paratroopers jumped, marking the culmination of eight months of intensive planning by Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), II Field Force Vietnam (IIFORCEV) and Seventh Air Force.


The operation, envisioned by General William S. Westmoreland, MACV commander, and planned by Lt. Gen. Jonathan O. Seaman, IIFORCEV commander, was designed as a two-phase action to seal the northern portion of Tay Ninh province along the Cambodian border, locate and destroy logistic bases and smash the enemy force therein.

Junction City's two phases would first use two brigade-size formations to drive the surrounded Viet Cong against U.S. forces holding the cordon, and second, conduct battalion-size search-and-destroy missions in the rest of the zone to the east. With increased manpower and political backing from Washington, General Westmoreland wanted to combine U.S. firepower and mobility to seize the initiative from the Communist forces and move from a reactive to an offensive posture.

The parachute drop took less than 20 minutes and resulted in only 11 minor jump-related injuries. Among those jumping was 53-year-old Chief Warrant Officer Howard P. Melvin, making his fifth career combat assault. During World War II, Melvin participated in airborne assaults at Gela, Sicily, Salerno and St. Mere Eglise. Other jumpers included brigade surgeon Lt. Col. Eimar Himma; chaplain Lt. Col. Xavier Gigiello, Jr., and his assistant, Major Conrad Walker, Jr.; the senior air liaison officer from Bien Hoa Air Base, Lt. Col. Henry Burrow; and three civilian press correspondents, including Miss Kathy Leroy, a French Associated Press reporter. Five other correspondents remained aboard the aircraft and arrived at the DZ later by helicopter.

Once on the ground, units re-formed and secured the perimeter for the first of two equipment drops by an additional 13 C-130s that began at 0927. Despite a two-hour preparatory air strike on the DZ by Guam-based B-52s and tacair fighter-bombers, the operation caught the Viet Cong by surprise. The paratroopers ran into only sporadic sniper fire that was quickly silenced. Thanks to intense planning, unit regrouping went smoothly. Each aircraft was cross-loaded with 10 men from each of the battalion's three rifle companies, with the remaining seats divided among the battalion's headquarters company, A Battery 3/319 Artillery (105mm), various 173rd Airborne support elements, and "Tailpipe," the Air Force Combat Control Team. The men were loaded so they would exit the aircraft from the side closest to their unit's designated assembly area. In addition, the first men to reach the ground ignited smoke grenades and inflated colored balloons to help the other men find their units. By 1000, DZ Charlie was secure, artillery was surveyed and ready to fire, and perimeter patrols established. After the second equipment drop at 1300, the perimeter was expanded to secure the area for use as a brigade command post and fire support base (FSB).

Helicopter assaults at the 10 LZs forming the northern section of the cordon began at 0811 when the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry (1/28) "Black Lions" occupied LZ 5 northwest of the DZ against light opposition. At 1630, the 1st Battalion 2nd Infantry (1/2), made the last assault into LZ 3 unopposed, on the boundary between the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions at the northwest corner of the horseshoe. The other eight assaults met limited or no resistance. The eight-battalion lift



Death from above. A helicopter crewman scans the jungle below for signs of enemy activity in support of the largest offensive operation conducted by U.S. forces in Vietnam to date—including the only mass parachute drop of the war—Operation Junction City.



Troops of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment move into position south of Highway 247 before joining the 25th Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade in blocking the horseshoe-shaped cordon formed by nine other American and South Vietnamese battalions.

used every available helicopter in Vietnam since each battalion required 60 UH-1 sorties. This partially explains why the 173rd—the first separate brigade in the U.S. Army and the first Army ground combat unit to arrive in Vietnam—was parachuted into action; that is, to free 60 UH-1s and six Chinooks for other missions.

The first day of Operation Junction City went exceptionally well, albeit against very limited opposition. Twenty-six C-130s and 249 helicopter sorties, a new single-day record, inserted nine battalions into blocking positions along the horseshoe-shaped cordon. Meanwhile, at the lower open base of the horseshoe, the 11th Armored Cavalry "Blackhorse" Regiment and the 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, maneuvered into positions south of Highway 247 from which to attack north the next morning. By day's end, 22 combat battalions were emplaced around the 60-kilometer-long barrier.

After dawn on February 23, the two brigade-size units started northward to engage the enemy or force them against blocking positions manned the previous day. As they moved up the horseshoe, they uncovered significant caches and fortifications but, as would remain the case with the cordon, the cav and infantry encountered few enemy. Later in the day, Task Force Alpha joined the "Tropic Lightning," as the 25th Infantry Division was known.

Results from search-and-destroy operations over the next four days were mixed. On the morning of March 24, VC gunners fired 120 82mm mortars at Lt. Col. Rufus C. Lazzell's 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry (1/16), causing seven casualties, including the loss of a company commander. No significant contact followed the sudden attack. On March 25 and 26, 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, units had occasional con-

tact with an estimated VC company but, overall, the enemy chose to flee rather than fight.

By February 28, activity began to increase along the cordon's eastern perimeter. It was here that the first major engagement of Operation Junction City took place at 0800 on the 28th. Captain Donald S. Ulm led B Company, 1/16 Infantry, out of its night defensive position six kilometers south of the town of Prek Klok (near the southeastern boundary of the cordon) toward the Prek River, some 2,500 meters east of Route 4. Three hours after B Company's departure, Captain Ulm's point platoon emerged from dense jungle about 1,000 meters from the road and was taken under heavy grenade, rocket and mortar fire from an estimated Viet Cong company.

Third platoon formed a hasty perimeter and was in danger of being overrun when the remainder of the company arrived. The enemy fire continued to intensify as B Company assumed a horseshoe-shaped defense. By counting three VC heavy machine guns, Captain Ulm realized he was probably facing an enemy battalion.

Ulm called for artillery support from the 2nd Battalion, 33rd Artillery (2/33), at Fire Support Base II in Prek Klok, and requested reinforcement from battalion headquarters. At the same time, the captain made contact with an Air Force forward air controller (FAC).

While Ulm maneuvered his fire teams to counter an encirclement, F-100 Super Sabres and B-57 Canberras from Phan Rang arrived overhead. The FAC choreographed the air strikes so that jets attacked every 15 minutes with 750-pound bombs, napalm and highly effective anti-personnel cluster bombs (CBUs). At one point, VC came so close to his lines that Ulm called for CBU strikes within 30 meters of his posi-



Airborne operations for the 173rd did not end with the initial parachute drop. Here, one of its soldiers prepares to scramble aboard a helicopter as the continuing operation compels his unit to shift its location to a new tactical area.

tions. The company commander, now severely wounded, continued to call for air strikes until the first of three relief companies arrived at an LZ 600 meters to the northwest. Two additional companies flew in and helped the beleaguered B Company evacuate its position.

Fighting ended at 1500. Several hours later, the company reached the LZ with its 25 dead and 28 wounded. Despite heavy losses, the combination of ground fire, artillery and 54 close air support strikes killed at least 167 enemy of the 2nd Battalion, 101st NVA Regiment. Ulm's company was flown to Suoi Da to rest and receive replacements while the wounded were evacuated to the 45th Surgical Hospital at Tay Ninh. The company returned to the line five days later.

During the next 10 days, combat escalated with a number of engagements and several large mortar attacks on U.S. positions near the Cambodian border. On March 3, Charlie Company 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (2/503), clashed with a large element of the VC 70th Guard Regiment east of Katum. During the 30-minute fire fight 48 Americans were killed or wounded and the guerrillas suffered 39 killed by ground fire, mortars and four tactical air strikes. On the 6th, an early morning mortar attack on a mechanized infantry company near Cambodia produced 41 casualties.

Four days later, two battalions of the 272nd VC Regiment initiated the second major battle of Operation Junction City at Fire Support Patrol Base II, located near Prek Klok on Route 4. The FSPB was manned by Lt. Col. Charles D. Daniel, Jr.'s 2/33 Artillery and protected by two battalions of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry (Mech), under the command of Lt. Col. Edward J. Collins.

At 2213, March 10, the engagement began with an intense 20-minute mortar barrage followed by a ground assault from

both east and west. Defenders fought from armored personnel carriers positioned every 50 meters around the perimeter and from fighting positions interspersed between the tracks. Meanwhile, the 2/2 Infantry's heavy mortar platoon, under Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth D. Davis, fired 435 rounds of counter-battery and defensive fire.

An AC-47 "Spooky" gunship from Nha Trang arrived shortly after the assault began and supplemented the infantry and artillery with flares and Minigun fire. At 2230, four F-100s dropped napalm and CBUs on the enemy as they advanced over open ground toward the base. With tacair concentrating on the eastern half of the base, artillery from nearby bases pounded attackers on the west. As the battle raged, helicopters made 64 sorties to the besieged FSB, delivering ammunition and evacuating wounded. At 0430, the assault broke under the combined pressure from 5,000 artillery rounds, air strikes and ground fire. At dawn, U.S. forces discovered 197 enemy dead compared to American losses of 3 killed and 38 wounded.

The final week of Phase I of Operation Junction City was marked by occasional contact and the discovery of a large, well-prepared logistical complex in the "Little Elephant's Ear" near Cambodia. On March 15, most of the 173rd Airborne flew back to Bien Hoa to prepare for deployment on March 23 for Phase II operations. When the initial phase ended at midnight March 17, allied forces had swept the entire cordoned area and killed 835 VC, captured 15 prisoners, and recovered nearly 300 weapons.

Phase II concentrated on the eastern portion of War Zone C, with operations similar to those conducted in the western half during Phase I. The primary target remained COSVN and the 9th VC Division.

The third battle of Operation Junction City took place just two days into Phase II at FSB 20, located just north of Ap Bau Bang along Route 13. B Battery, 7th Battalion, 9th Artillery, occupied the base and was reinforced by A Troop, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry "Black Knights." FSB 20 was located in a large clearing bounded by dense forest to the north and west, and by a rubber plantation to the south.

The attack began at 2250 on March 20 with a probe into the northeast perimeter, spearheaded by a herd of 15 cattle. Ten minutes later, a VC heavy machine gun opened fire, but was soon silenced by three armored personnel carriers and a tank that illuminated the position and engaged the enemy with cannon and machine-gun fire. After a 90-minute lull, the battle resumed when the firebase received heavy mortar and rocket fire. Radar at an artillery base in Lai Khe and an airborne artillery spotter located the mortar position 1,500 meters west of Ap Gau Bang and it was successfully silenced by counterbattery fire.

A well-organized ground assault began just before 0100 from the rubber plantation to the south with a secondary attack coming from the northwest. Viet Cong advanced under heavy covering fire and at times reached several armored personnel carriers where they were blown off the tracks by 90mm canister rounds fired from nearby tanks. At that point, troop commander Captain Raoul H. Alcala learned that reinforcements and an AC-47 gunship were on the way.

"Spooky" arrived and illuminated the area with flares while spraying open ground around the camp with withering Mini-gun fire. On the ground, tanks fired round after round of anti-personnel canister into the attackers. Meanwhile, two tank platoons reached the base as a flight of F-100s arrived overhead. At 0220, Alcala counterattacked and pushed the VC back to the rubber plantation. For the next three hours AC-47s tormented groups of skirmishers as they tried to recover their dead from around the FSB.

At 0450, the Viet Cong began to mass for yet another attack from the south. When the assault came at 0510, tanks turned on their searchlights and caught the enemy in the open. With the enemy illuminated, FACs directed F-100s into the fray with CBUs, napalm and 500-pound bombs. Four more flights of F-100s and one flight of F-4 Phantoms arrived during the next hour and struck both the visible attackers and the plantation.

By 0700 the battle was over. Tanks were out of canister and low on high-explosive rounds, but they held their ground. The FSB lost only three men killed and 63 wounded thanks to 3,000 artillery rounds and nearly 30 tons of air-delivered ordnance. In comparison, the 273rd VC Regiment lost 227 men. After the battle, Maj. Gen. John H. Hay, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, dropped leaflets to the VC advising them that, although Q763's (273rd Regiment) regimental and battalion commanders had disgraced themselves at Ap Bau Bang, U.S. forces had buried their dead and cared for the wounded left behind.

The following day, March 21, the largest confrontation of Junction City took place at FSB Gold near Suoi Tre, a 2nd



Striking a compromise between heat and bullets, the gunner of an M-113 armored personnel carrier forsakes his helmet and shirt, but retains his bulletproof "flak jacket."

Battalion, 77th Artillery, base located 19 miles north of Tay Ninh. At 0630 hours, 2,500 men of the 272nd Regiment and U-80 Artillery attacked the base from all sides following a 650-round mortar attack. Waves of attackers advanced under recoilless rifle and rocket fire and penetrated the south-east perimeter. While B Company, 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry; elements of the 12th Engineers; and tankers of the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor, fought overwhelming odds, a FAC from Dau Tieng arrived at 0700 and directed a flight of F-5s against a nearby tree line. After the air strike, the FAC's O-1 Bird Dog lost its left wing to ground fire and crashed, killing the pilot.

Two batteries of 105mm artillery at nearby firebases joined the fight to provide perimeter defense while Lt. Col. John W. Vessey, Jr.'s 2/77 Artillery fired canister rounds into the on-rushing enemy. (Vessey would rise to become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Reagan administration.) Overhead, a second FAC and two F-100s arrived. As the jets dropped their ordnance, sometimes as close as 50 meters to friendly lines, one soldier recalled seeing a large formation of enemy simply disappear when it was hit with napalm.

Despite supporting artillery and air strikes, at 0845 defenders were forced to withdraw to secondary positions around the howitzers. Fifteen minutes later, a relief column from the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry (Mech), broke through VC lines and joined B Company in a counterattack to restore the original perimeter.

At 0915, the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry (Mech), and 2/34 Armor crashed through the woods from the southwest, machine guns and cannons blazing, while overhead, F-4s and an AC-47 gunship integrated their support to rout the VC. Resupply and medevac helicopters began to arrive at



TOP: Mortar crewmen of 1st Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade, recoil and cover from the sandstorm raised by the helicopter bringing them ammunition. ABOVE: M-48 tanks used their searchlights and 90mm cannister rounds to foil Viet Cong night assault. The COSVN and most of the 9th VC Division somehow managed to escape the cordon laid during Operation Junction City.

1000, and by 1045 the battle was over. Tanks and aircraft pursued the enemy as they withdrew. Six hundred fifty-four Viet Cong dead remained in and around the FSB, with many others probably carried away. U.S. losses were 31 killed and 109 wounded. Suoi Tre was another major defeat for the 272nd Regiment.

After the Suoi Tre fighting, enemy activity lessened while the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division; 173rd Airborne Brigade; 196th Light Infantry Brigade; and the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, conducted company-size search-and-destroy missions throughout eastern War Zone C. The 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, conducted road security along Route 13 until released from Operation Junction City on March 29, five days after Lt. Gen. Bruce Palmer, Jr., assumed command of IIFORCEV.

Routine operations ended abruptly on March 31 when the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry "Blue Spaders" assaulted a suspected staging area for the VC's 271st Regiment near Ap Gu, just three miles from the Cambodian border. The battalion's LZ turned out to be in the middle of the enemy regimental area. Shortly after beginning a patrol, the recon platoon was engaged by heavy fire from a series of well-constructed bunkers. Bravo Company swung north to help the platoon and soon found itself also heavily engaged. At that point, battalion commander Lt. Col. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., (later secretary of state in the Reagan administration) ordered Alpha Company to reinforce the units already in contact.

When VC tried to flank the battalion, F-100s struck with bombs and napalm, allowing the units to withdraw toward the LZ. As the enemy left their bunkers to pursue the infantrymen, they were hit by artillery and air strikes. At 1555, the first of two additional infantry companies from the 1/16 Infantry reinforced the LZ and evacuated wounded. The situation stabilized overnight while both sides regrouped.

At 0500 the next morning, the 271st attacked again with mortars, followed at 0600 by a large, coordinated ground assault. As they crossed open ground toward the American defensive positions in the LZ, F-100s came out of the darkness and walked napalm and CBU's across the enemy to within 25 meters of the defenders. One company of VC managed to slip through the woods and attacked Charlie Company, 1/26 Infantry, penetrating its line. Finally, at 0800, the attack stalled as helicopter gunships joined the ground fire, supporting artillery and air strikes. As the 271st Regiment withdrew, two platoons from Bravo and Charlie Companies counter-attacked to restore the perimeter.

Throughout the day, VC hit the perimeter with a series of feints and frontal assaults. Artillery, ground fire and air strikes beat back each attack. By that afternoon the VC regiment was in full retreat, pursued by tacair and three B-52s that struck suspected routes of withdrawal toward Cambodia. At one location outside the LZ, 29 enemy dead were found in a single line, victims of a CBU attack. The enemy—two battalions of the 271st Regiment and elements of the 70th Guard Regiment—lost 609 dead in the engagement, 350 attributed to the 103 air strikes and the remainder to ground fire and 15,000 rounds of artillery. American losses during the two-day battle were 17 killed and 102 wounded.

In other parts of War Zone C, contact with snipers and small groups of VC was frequent. East of Ap Gu, the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, suffered a series of intense mortar barrages that caused 64 casualties at FSB Charlie on April 7. Elsewhere, the 196th Infantry Brigade and 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, conducted wide-ranging sweeps that uncovered tunnel complexes, fortifications and significant caches of equipment and food, but could not entice the enemy into major actions.

Phase II of Junction City ended at midnight, April 14. Although the entire operation was originally scheduled to end after Phase II, its success caused General Westmoreland to ex-



A Chinook helicopter brings supplies to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment on February 28, as Junction City continues. Helicopters made timely logistic support possible to an unprecedented degree, as well as the rapid evacuation of casualties.

tend it, albeit on a smaller scale, for another month. While most of the units were released for other duties, the 196th was designated a "floating" or mobile brigade to conduct sweeps in the lower portion of War Zone C and 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, secured villages and towns. On April 8, the brigade assumed mobile-brigade duties from the 196th until it was relieved by the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, augmented with a tank company and the ARVN 36th Rangers on April 21.

The mobile force operated at battalion or smaller size throughout Phase III and received daily resupply by airdrop and helicopter. However, by this time the Viet Cong had gone to ground and contact remained sporadic. Near Minh Thanh, 173rd Airborne units continued to dispatch long-range reconnaissance patrols (LRRP) on a variety of landing zone surveillance and combat patrols that had begun in March. Operation Junction City finally ended completely at midnight May 14, although several units remained at strategic base camps and at three C-130-capable airfields constructed by Army engineers during the operation.

The end of Operation Junction City brought to a close the largest, most aggressive and best-coordinated allied campaign of the war to that time. The operation was planned and executed brilliantly, with the original horseshoe cordon falling on War Zone C by complete surprise. However, very little combat occurred within the trap, with most significant confrontations taking place along its eastern periphery.

Ultimately, Operation Junction City failed to achieve its primary objective of destroying COSVN and the VC 9th Division. After a period of rebuilding in Cambodia, both formations returned to South Vietnam. American forces had, however, soundly defeated each of the 9th Division's subordinate regiments in hard-fought, skillfully executed battles. Enemy documents captured later in 1967 showed that the VC lost 2,728 guerrillas and NVA regulars during Junction City.

The cost in American lives had been 218 men killed and 1,576 wounded, despite North Vietnamese claims of 13,500 U.S. casualties during the three-month operation. ARVN forces that participated periodically and in much smaller numbers suffered seven deaths and several dozen wounded.

In addition to the human toll, Junction City deprived Communist forces of substantial munitions and food caches, disrupted COSVN political activities, and established a series of fortified camps and airfields throughout War Zone C for future operations. By accomplishing these objectives, the American operation removed, at least temporarily, the oldest Viet Cong sanctuary in the south and demonstrated that allied strategy intended to take the fight to the enemy. Unfortunately for the allies, such an offensive strategy lacked a sound political base and could not be sustained.

Thus, Operation Junction City was typical of many large-scale search-and-destroy operations undertaken between 1967 and 1970. While the actions disrupted enemy logistic and combat operations, deprived the VC of freedom of movement and killed large numbers of their combatants, over time new guerrillas were recruited, units re-formed and the once-occupied land reclaimed due to the lack of effective, long-lasting political control. Operation Junction City therefore may not have been the "turning point" that General Bernard W. Rogers called it in 1974, but perhaps was more accurately described by General Dave R. Palmer four years later as a significant step in "an escalating military stalemate." □

Contributing editor Lawrence M. Greenberg recommends the following books for additional reading on Operation Junction City: John Schlight's *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive, 1965-1968* (Office of Air Force History, 1988); Bernard W. Rogers' *Cedar Falls-Junction City: A Turning Point* (Department of the Army, 1974); and Dave R. Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet* (Presidio Press, 1978).



A South Vietnamese airborne trooper shows off a Chinese-made Type 56 light machine gun captured from the Viet Cong during a sweep along French Plantation Road near Tan Son Nhut in May 1968. At that time, it was inconceivable that his Communist adversaries could ever boast being better equipped than he, but such would be the case only six years later.