no part in the fighting (the Blues and Royals got two as souvenirs).

Because of the absence of enemy armor, British tanks were free to support infantry, and they saw much fighting in the hill battles around Port Stanley. They were also used to ferry troops and supplies, evacuate casualties, and even for air defense — one Scimitar claimed an A-4 Skyhawk! Only one was damaged when a Scimitar hit a U.S.-made anti-tank mine. There were no casualties and the tank was repaired. Though its light weight means light armor protection, these little tanks were able to take care of themselves in the Falklands.

The Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) has been integral to modern combat in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The Falklands introduced a whole spectrum of SAMs to combat. At sea, the British had the long-range Sea Dart (eight kills), the high-technology Sea Wolf (five kills) and the short-range Sea Cat (six kills). On land they had the heliportable Rapier (14 kills), the manportable Blowpipe (seven kills) and the U.S.-made manportable Stinger (one kill).

Men of 5 Infantry come ashore at San Carlos under the antiaircraft cover of .50 Browning. Photo: Paul Haley, *Soldier* Magazine

The Argentines had British-made Blowpipes and Tigercats (a land version of the Sea Cat), one Franco-German-made Roland launcher and Soviet-made SA-7 *Strella* manportable SAMs, a contribution from either the Soviets, Libya, Cuba or Peru. All together, they accounted for one or two Harriers and two observation helicopters (all probably to Blowpipes).

The true effectiveness of any SAM, however, is not in the number of aircraft it kills, but in "virtual attrition" in the attacks it breaks up, and the number of bombs it causes to miss. The British SAM defense protected San Carlos Bay well enough from the attacking Argentine aircraft to allow British ships to unload their supplies. The Rapier shined at San Carlos. Light and accurate, it lacks a proximity fuse and must hit to kill — a great advantage, since otherwise the British would have showered their own ships and men with fragments.

Blowpipe AA man-portable, shoulder-controlled surface-to-air missile proved highly effective in Falklands War. Photo: Paul Haley, *Soldier* Magazine

The Sea Wolf is designed to defend ships against fast-moving threats. It can shoot down not only missiles, but cannon shells as well (although it was not called upon to do either during the war).

The Stinger saw limited use, only by the SBS and SAS, who used it to shoot down a Pucara ground-attack aircraft on 2 June.

Aside from the Blowpipe missile, the Argentines actually lacked enough SAMs for an effective defense. However, just the threat of their presence and deployment hindered British air operations — giving virtual attrition.

The helicopter is as integral to modern warfare as the truck, and both the British and Argentines used helicopters throughout the campaign. Even in the abysmal weather of a sub-antarctic winter, the helicopter proved crucial to land and sea operations.

British Scout helicopters used SS-11 anti-tank guided missiles against bunkers at Darwin, while the Argentine submarine *Santa Fe* was put out of action by missile-firing naval helicopters. The Royal Navy's Lynx helicopters used the Sea Skua — the first air-to-surface missile designed especially for anti-shipping helicopters — to sink or cripple four small Argentine warships. Seven Sea Skua missiles were fired, and seven hits were scored.

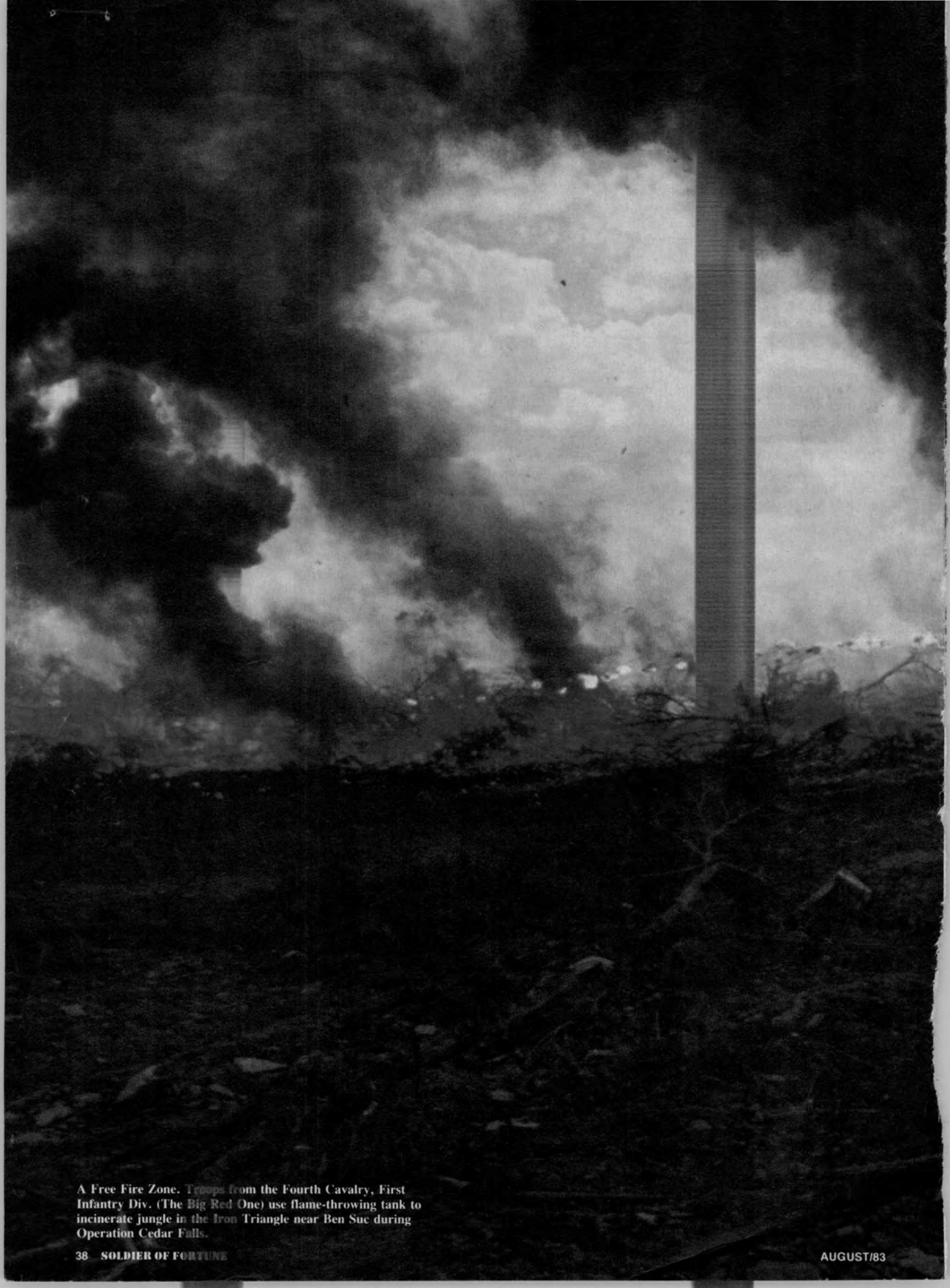
As well as attacking the *Santa Fe*, British helicopters kept up constant anti-submarine cover for the task force, which kept the other three Argentine submarines at bay. British helicopters were used for rescue and casualty evacuation duties throughout the war. The relatively low loss of life — when compared to similar incidents in World War II — on the British ships that were lost is due in large part to the helicopter crews who pulled survivors from fire or water.

Both sides used helicopters primarily in a transport role. The Argentines used them in the initial invasion of the Falklands and South Georgia (where the tiny Royal Marine garrison shot up two troop-carrying Puma helicopters, destroying one). They also lifted a battalion into Goose Green from Port Stanley immediately before the Second Battalion of the Parachute Regiment began its assault. But aside from this, the Argentines did not make use of the flexibility of their helicopters.

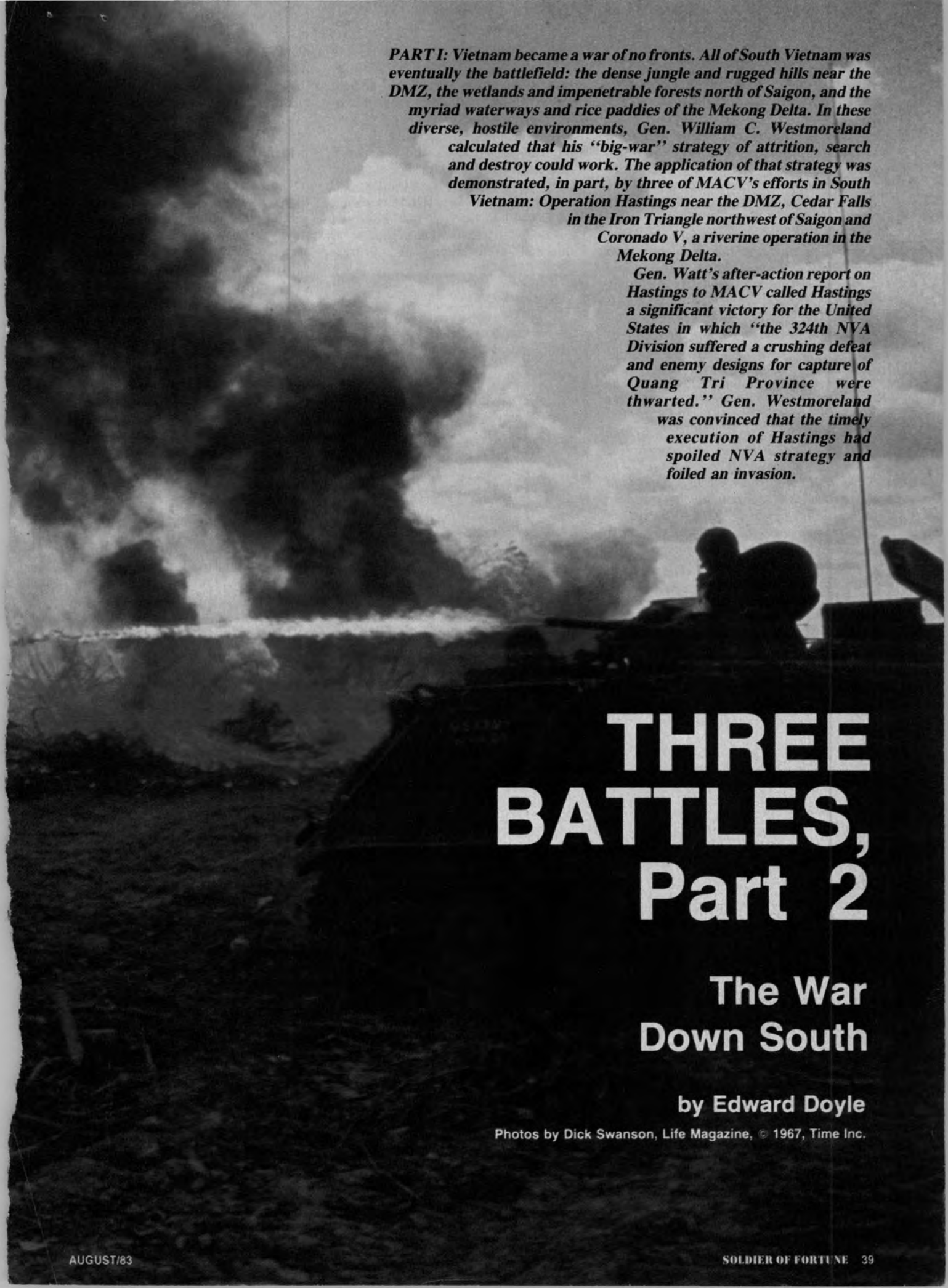
The British suffered a severe setback when all six of the Royal Air Force Wessex and all but one of the Chinook medium-lift helicopters sent to the Falklands sank with the merchant ship *Atlantic Conveyor*. The surviving Chinook, the now-legendary *Bravo November*, flew around the clock, establishing new load records. To exploit the Argentine withdrawal from Fitzroy settlement, the British packed 81 infantrymen into *Bravo November* and flew them in, with standing room only.

Most of the transport flying fell to the Royal Navy. They brought in the troops to South Georgia and San Carlos Bay, then lifted in priority items from the waiting ships, which is why the Rapier SAM batteries were in action from shore so quickly. Armed Sea King transport helicopters, following rocket-armed Gazelle scout helicopters, inserted troops of the 1st Battalion, 7th Duke of Edinburgh's Own Gurkha Rifles, in Vietnam-style airmobile assaults against cut-off Argentine units in the British rear.

Continued on page 66



A Free Fire Zone. Troops from the Fourth Cavalry, First Infantry Div. (The Big Red One) use flame-throwing tank to incinerate jungle in the Iron Triangle near Ben Suc during Operation Cedar Falls.



PART I: Vietnam became a war of no fronts. All of South Vietnam was eventually the battlefield: the dense jungle and rugged hills near the DMZ, the wetlands and impenetrable forests north of Saigon, and the myriad waterways and rice paddies of the Mekong Delta. In these diverse, hostile environments, Gen. William C. Westmoreland calculated that his "big-war" strategy of attrition, search and destroy could work. The application of that strategy was demonstrated, in part, by three of MACV's efforts in South Vietnam: Operation Hastings near the DMZ, Cedar Falls in the Iron Triangle northwest of Saigon and Coronado V, a riverine operation in the Mekong Delta.

Gen. Watt's after-action report on Hastings to MACV called Hastings a significant victory for the United States in which "the 324th NVA Division suffered a crushing defeat and enemy designs for capture of Quang Tri Province were thwarted." Gen. Westmoreland was convinced that the timely execution of Hastings had spoiled NVA strategy and foiled an invasion.

THREE BATTLES, Part 2

The War Down South

by Edward Doyle

Photos by Dick Swanson, Life Magazine, © 1967, Time Inc.

3 BATTLES

The Marines exacted a stiff price from 324B for its incursion: 882 killed, 17 captured, and 200 weapons, 300 pounds of documents and more than 300,000 rounds of ammunition seized. In all, 126 Marines were killed and 448 wounded.

From a long-term perspective Hastings demonstrated the problems faced by MACV forces fighting in the rugged hills of northern I Corps. By exploiting their continuing ability to move across the DMZ into South Vietnam, NVA divisions were able to control the tempo of combat in I Corps. Their options included full-scale invasion, hit-and-run attacks and increasing infiltration of the south. These types of NVA offensive threats caused a steady build-up of U.S. Marines from 1966 to 1968 near the DMZ. One Army report concluded, "Gen. Walt, with his forces stretched to the limit and short of helicopter and logistical assets, was unable to do more than hold his own." Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap described the situation this way: "The Marines are being stretched as taut as a bowstring."

AIR Force Lt. Col. Grove Johnson described security at Saigon's sprawling Tan Son Nhut Air Base as being "like defending a stockade in the days of the Indians." Charged with securing the multi-million-dollar airfield complex, only a few miles from downtown Saigon, from Viet Cong (VC) attacks, Johnson installed barbed wire, round-the-clock patrols and a network of booby traps. But no level of vigilance seemed able to deter daring raids by VC guerrillas and saboteurs. On the evening of 4 December 1966, 25 VC breached Tan Son Nhut's defensive perimeter to within hand-grenade range of U.S. warplanes, parked unattended in an open field. Base security discovered and killed the VC before they accomplished their mission of destroying the planes. The incident compounded evidence piling up at nearby MACV headquarters: VC activity in the Saigon area was reaching alarming proportions.

An old woman and a child were among the Vietnamese removed from Ben Suc during Operation Cedar Falls and taken to a relocation camp.

Tan Son Nhut was not the only target. Eight VC battalions, operating brazenly within a 20-mile radius of Saigon, were slowly strangling the city's commercial, agricultural and communications links with the rural population in thousands of villages. The VC controlled many of the roads and waterways surrounding Saigon and extorted "tolls" for their use, imposing a financial drain as well as political embarrassment on the Government of Vietnam (GVN). Particularly galling was the ability of VC units to strike almost at will into the heart of South Vietnam's capital. When the VC sent a rocket and mortar barrage into a Saigon crowd celebrating South Vietnam's National Day, the top officers at MACV and the South Vietnamese government decided they had had enough.

Gen. Westmoreland, impatient with GVN foot-dragging in pacification and suppression of rampant VC terrorism in and around Saigon (incidents doubled in 1966), opted for an American solution: a hardhitting search-and-destroy operation to eliminate the source of VC pressure on Saigon and its environs.

NATIONAL DAY BLAST
by Bob Poos

I happened to be in Saigon on Vietnamese National Day, 1 November 1966, when the VC troubled to mortar and rocket the capital.

It was something of an oddity for me to be in Saigon. I liked neither it nor the marshy jungled area around it. If I had to be in Vietnam walking through the woods with infantry looking for bad guys, I preferred to do it up in I Corps where the Marines lurked or below in II Corps, home-away-from-home for the First Air Cav and the 25th Division.

Two Corps also had Nha Trang. Ah, Nha Trang. Had congress passed a law requiring every infantryman to spend one week's R&R in Nha Trang, told him that was what he was fighting for and then aimed him north, Hanoi would have fallen in a matter of days to savage hordes of American soldiers and Marines. Those of you who have been there will know what I mean.

One of the advantages to being a combat correspondent in 'Nam, as opposed to being a combat soldier, was that you could pretty well pick out the area you wished to work in and, for the most part, remain there.

But, sometimes, circumstances dictated a trip to Saigon. Perhaps mere curiosity to see what the place looked like. Possibly while hitchhiking from one point to another via military transport aircraft, you might get dumped off there and since the stop was unavoidable, you might do well to visit the Constellation Hotel veranda, or the Aterbea Restaurant or any one of many such fleshpots where one could regale others with tales of his courage during the most recent battle (in modest self-deprecation, of course), quench one's thirst with ice-cold sweat-beaded bottles of Ba Mui Ba and satiate the other personal needs of a reasonably young man just back from the war.

But usually it was because the wire-service Bureau Chief wanted to lay eyes from time to time upon these intrepid combat correspondents. He also wanted to bitch about their expense accounts. (I once turned in one for 5,000 piastres as a bribe to an Air Vietnam DC3 crewchief for cramming me in with a planeload of toilet bowls en route from Qui Nhon to Da Nang, then under siege by Buddhist rebels. The Bureau Chief wished to know what the hell a cargo of toilet bowls had to do with a siege. For that matter, so did I.) He also wanted you to do unpleasant things like work 16 to 20 hours in the Bureau, pounding out on ancient upright typewriters dozens of bulletins, scores of urgents and millions of words while at the same time striving manfully to force yourself to use the hopelessly confused telephone system, half of whose phones had been left behind by the French, the other half of which were in the process of being installed by the Americans — and neither of which worked. And he also wanted you to cover the "Five O'Clock Follies," the daily MACV briefing on what was supposed to be going on around the country militarywise. No need to speculate here. You didn't *wonder* if they were lying to you, you *knew* they were.

A good friend in the MACV Public Information Office once remarked bitterly to me over drinks: "When this thing got going, they had two options: to flood you with facts, or blind you with bullshit. They chose the latter."

Out in the boondocks, it was different. There, a soldier (or Marine) be he private or colonel, was so happy to see you, he didn't bother lying. And MACV, God bless its prevaricating heart, permitted one full access to them — if he wanted to share the same perils.

The truth (you might get killed getting it; 50 of us were) was available.

ARVN soldiers in background keep a close eye on Ben Suc villagers during evacuation and subsequent destruction of Ben Suc village in the Iron Triangle during Operation Cedar Falls. All are suspects because the area had been VC dominated for years.

That was why a small number, about 10 percent at any given time of the 400 to 600 correspondents in-country, elected to remain with the combat troops and avoid Saigon as though it abounded in syphilis, gonorrhea, black water fever and leprosy — all of which it did.

I digress. It has taken me altogether too long to explain why I was in Saigon that 1 November, instead of out in the boonies smiting the Hated 'Cong hip and thigh with pencil, notebook and camera. But when one starts to reflect on such things, the memories are always much nicer than the realities.

Anyhow, it was National Day. I was in town and Bureau Chief Ed White thought it would be nice if I earned my bread and beans by helping cover the festivities. My assignment: crawl ignominously beneath bleachers atop which were perched Prime Minister Nguen Cao Ky and a large assortment of other high-ranking dignitaries, few of whom I'd ever seen before. In this strategic location, I could overhear what Ky had to say (there was no prepared text, but he was to deliver the message in both Vietnamese and English), use my badly battered old Nikon F to snap pictures should the opportunity present itself and then rush both to AP headquarters, only a couple of blocks away.

There the film (if any) would be given to Chief Photographer Horst Faas and I would dictate my notes to Peter Arnett, John Wheeler or, as White succinctly put it: "Someone who knows what's going on and who can write."

I did as ordered and located myself under the grandstands some time prior to commencement of the ceremony. Then began the usual endless wait for something to happen, a common experience for newspaper reporters the world over. Eventually the speeches began, delivered by a line of lesser dignitaries, and Ky waited patiently, clad in his usual colorful jumpsuit, purple I think it was, for his turn as the *piece de resistance*.

But his delivery was suddenly interrupted by the unmistakable (if you've ever heard them) whooshing, hissing, sibilant sounds of incoming mortars and rockets.

I didn't move, figuring the people-packed bleachers overhead would afford the best protection available on such short notice. Then, of course, came the explosions. Close, my ears told me, but not too close. It was probably area rather than targeted fire, designed more to intimidate than to kill.

No one was injured by flying shrapnel or anything else, although they certainly would have been, had pandemonium erupted with everyone trying to scramble free from his seat and seek cover elsewhere.

But above all the noise, Ky's voice roared first in Vietnamese and then in English: "NO ONE MOVES. EVEN IF WE'RE ALL KILLED. NO ONE MOVES. STAY WHERE YOU ARE." Ky wasn't a very big man but he sure could bellow when he wanted to. Would have done credit to some hogcallers I knew back home in southern Illinois when I was a kid. And besides possessing a very large and loud voice, he also proved beyond question that he owned a very large pair of brass balls.

And so that was when American and Vietnamese brass decided, figuratively, "Now you've gone too far! Shooting at GIs is one thing but delivering fin-stabilized ordnance in the general direction of General Officers is another." And Operation Cedar Falls came to pass.

When it did, I was happily enveloped in the great, green, protective arms of the First Cav, somewhere east of Bong Son. And I sure am glad I was.

He called it Cedar Falls after the Idaho hometown of a young Army lieutenant recently killed in action and posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Its target was the 63-square-mile wedge of jungle and paddy fields northwest of Saigon, known as the Iron Triangle. MACV referred to the Triangle, a longtime VC sanctuary, as a "dagger pointed at Saigon." It functioned as the nerve center for VC terrorism in the Saigon region, with a vast network of concrete bunkers, base camps, supply depots and field hospitals connected by tunnels. Some American officers thought the Triangle served as headquarters for the VC Fourth Military Region, which controlled all villages in the vicinity.

For 18 months prior to Cedar Falls, U.S. B-52s had been blasting VC installations in the Triangle, hoping to drive the guerrillas from their hideout. According to Brig. Gen. Glenn Walker, "You don't fight this fellow [VC guerrilla] rifle to rifle. You locate him and back away. Blow the hell out of him and then police up." The rain of more than a million pounds of bombs, however, yielded no tangible results: the VC's hold on the Triangle remained unshaken. Now, in early 1967, his Army bolstered by thousands of new troops to a total of 385,000, Westmoreland felt he had the muscle to go into the Triangle in force and "police up."

Cedar Falls was to employ a force of 15,000 men drawn from several American and South Vietnamese divisions, making it the largest operation yet in the war. Its principal objective was "destruction of the enemy's Military Region IV Headquarters" and the razing of his fortifications once and for all. If Cedar Falls was successful, as MACV envisioned it, the VC would be finished in the Triangle.

The units involved were the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and the 173rd Airborne Brigade, as well as elements of the 25th Infantry Division, 196th Light Infantry, the 1st Infantry Division (Big Red One) and the ARVN 5th Infantry Division. Their mission: to seal off the Triangle's perimeter, using the standard hammer-and-anvil maneuver. One force, the hammer, would conduct a coordinated sweep across the Triangle, while a second, the anvil, would position itself to block the enemy's avenue of escape. To prevent intelligence leaks to the VC, MACV kept preparations for Cedar Falls an exclusively American affair. Even the highest South Vietnamese military and civilian officials were kept in the dark until late in the planning stage. Cedar Falls' commander, Gen. Jonathan Seaman, commander of Second Field Force, delayed briefing the ARVN III Corps commander and arranging for ARVN support troops until two days before the operation. Despite the unusual emphasis on surprise, Seaman did not alter the practice of prepping the operation zone with air and artillery. No target in the Triangle was spared, except for one small village — set in a loop of the Saigon River in the Triangle's far northwestern corner.

Cedar Falls, with its air and artillery bombardment, troop maneuvers and search-and-destroy tactics bore many of the trappings of conventional warfare. Not so conventional, however, was what MACV had in store for the village of Ben Suc, reputed hub of VC control of the Triangle. MACV had classified Ben Suc as "under firm enemy control" since 1964 when the VC drove out an ARVN battalion stationed there. A U.S. Army history described it as a "fortified supply and political center" in which "the central organization for the Viet Cong's secret base was located."

Ben Suc posed a serious dilemma for MACV. For almost a decade the village had been cooperating with and supporting the VC. An Army spokesman complained, "We haven't even been able to take a census to find out who's there." If, according to Mao's aphorism, the people are the sea in which the guerrilla must swi[m] MACV concluded there was no optio[n] in Suc's case, but to drain the [sea] moving the people and destroyin[g] village. As one American colon[el] ked, "This is probably the only [way] r political solution for this place."

After a[n] helicopter assault into Ben Suc b[y] Division units, the village was to be [sealed] off and swept for VC. On the e[ve] Cedar Falls, Maj. Allen Dixon ou[tlined] the scenario to a group of six nev[s] The attack is going to go tomor[row] ning and it's going to be a co[m]plete surprise. Five hundred men of t[he] Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade a[re] to be lifted right into the villag[e] in 60 choppers. . . . We have lear[ned] that the perimeter of the village is [well] mined, and that's why we'll be g[oing] to the village proper." Its people [don't] know it, but Ben Suc no longer [has a] future.

On 8 Ja[nuary] 1967, Cedar Falls got underway. [Troops] from Ben Suc, 60 "slicks," [troop]-carrying helicopters, hovered a[bove] Tieng airstrip, forming two gi[ant] against the clear morning

A suspect Viet Cong (center) surrenders during Operation Cedar Falls which had a final body count of 720.

ARVN soldiers remove rice cache under village of Ben Suc. The Viet Cong, which had controlled the area for years, had dug complex systems of tunnels throughout the area in which they stored food, supplies, weapons, medical stores — and in which they hid during American bombing and infantry operations.

sky. Maj. Nick Primis, the mission's aviation officer from the 1st Aviation Battalion, had everything timed to the second. At precisely 0745, the helicopters, traveling less than 50 feet apart, skimmed above treetops at 85 mph. The lead pilot, within minutes, spotted smoke from colored smoke grenades tossed by the Pathfinders, specially trained soldiers put in ahead of the main body of troops to mark the landing zone.

Suddenly, a call came in over the radio of Maj. George Fish, piloting one of 10 gunships covering the landing: "Rebel 36, go in for the mark." Fish dove toward Ben Suc, taking fire from a bunker. His guns quickly silenced it. Fish then took a moment to admire the view: "You look out to see a whole bunch of choppers ... beautifully coordinated and planned." The landing was textbook perfect.

"Our skids were almost in the water," recalled Maj. Donald Ice. "Then we jumped a tree line, flared up and popped into the landing zone." In less than 90 seconds, all the helicopters had touched down, deposited 420 soldiers and headed back to Dau Tieng.

The people of Ben Suc were caught totally by surprise. The menacing roar of the helicopters and swiftness of the assault stunned the villagers. Maj. Ice remembers having "to push Vietnamese out of the landing zone. They didn't know what was happening." The villagers remained strangely calm, almost in a state of shock, even as pandemonium erupted around them.

Helicopters with public-address systems circled above the village, and ARVN officers blared the same message: "Attention, people of Ben Suc. You are surrounded.... Do not run away or you will be shot as VC. Stay in your homes and wait for further instructions." Most obeyed the warning. Those seeking to escape met a wall of fire in every direction. In addition to an artillery barrage, gunships fired rockets into the surrounding jungle, and jets screeched low over the village with loads of napalm. Messages broadcast by the loudspeakers could hardly be heard through the din.

A distraught young woman later cried: "The loudspeakers came overhead, but how could I hear them? The bombs were exploding everywhere. My father is deaf, so how could he hear the voices from the helicopter.... My father is very old."

VC guerrillas, squeezed between the hammer and anvil, offered what resistance they could muster. Company A, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, one of the first units on the ground, encountered booby traps and sniper fire while edging toward the village outskirts to prevent anyone from leaving. Two claymore mines detonated by nearby VC exploded, downing two men. In the next instant, a large booby trap in a tree exploded and two more

3 BATTLES

men went down. The rest of the company froze in their tracks. They had wandered into a minefield.

The lightning reaction of Sgt. Ernest Williams salvaged the situation. He rushed forward to cover the wounded and summon medical aid. As medics tended to the wounded, Williams coped with VC sniper fire. He brought his men forward to provide cover, enabling the unit to withdraw from the minefield without further casualties.

Ben Suc had its own surprise for the Americans. Besides occasional sniper fire, resistance was much lighter than expected from a VC stronghold. Yet for the soldiers this offered not relief but frustration. For days they had anticipated combat with well-entrenched guerrillas, and the tons of captured food, medical supplies and equipment seemed small return for the risk they had taken. It was eerie for the Americans to see the visible signs of an army whose soldiers, in spite of all efforts to envelop them, had disappeared, like phantoms, into the jungle.

The people of Ben Suc presented a quandary for Americans responsible for interrogating and evacuating them. The men, women and children, though they wore no uniforms and carried no guns, were no less members of the local VC infrastructure. Divided into four rear service companies, the villagers did everything from transport rice and supplies to construct village defenses. Even the children played a role by assisting their parents whenever possible. A sign posted on a tree in the village exhorted them to "battle vigorously against the American aggressors." All this hindered efforts to isolate truly "hard-core" VC among the villagers.

For the tense, battle-primed GIs ordered to seal off the village, the often subtle nuances and indicators used by interrogators to identify VC from civilian, combatant from non-combatant, were a luxury they felt they could not afford. The decision, VC or not VC, often had to be reached in a split second and was compounded by the language barrier. The consequences of any ambiguity sometimes proved fatal to Vietnamese villagers. In Ben Suc, one unit of American soldiers, crouching near a road

Photo: U.S. Army

TRIANGLE TUNNEL RAT

by Michael Kathman

I was assigned as an intelligence scout, commonly called a "Tunnel Rat," with the 3rd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, during 1966 and 1967 in South Vietnam. During Operation Junction City, I had an experience that gives the "grunt's"-eye view — from both sides.

In 1967, our squadron was assigned the task of clearing the enemy from an area known as the Iron Triangle. For years a stronghold controlled by the Viet Cong, the Triangle contained miles of tunnels. On that particular day, I entered one tunnel after carefully searching for booby-traps (such as poisonous snakes suspended from the tunnel roof) and recent signs of the enemy — and ran into an apparent dead end approximately 100 meters inside. I could think of no reason why the enemy would dig a tunnel so deep without an escape route.

After slowly backtracking, I found what I was searching for. Protruding about one inch from the roof of the tunnel was the bottom of the kind of aluminum pan that the Vietnamese used for washing.

I don't believe I've ever perspired as much as I did in the 10 minutes it took to probe with my bayonet for a trip wire. When I found none, I switched off my flashlight, and inched the pan up onto the floor of a second tunnel that ran across the top of the one I was in. Then I cautiously raised the upper half of my body into the tunnel until I was lying flat on my stomach. When I felt comfortable, I placed my Smith Wesson .38-caliber snub-nose (sent to me by my father for tunnel work) beside the flashlight and switched on the light, illuminating the tunnel.

There, not more than 15 feet away, sat a Viet Cong eating a handful of rice from a pouch on his lap. We looked at each other for what seemed to be an eternity, but in fact was probably only a few seconds.

Maybe it was the surprise of actually finding someone else there, or maybe it was just the absolute innocence of the situation, but neither one of us reacted.

After a moment, he put his pouch of rice on the floor of the tunnel beside him, turned his back to me and slowly started crawling away. I, in turn, switched off my flashlight, before slipping back into the lower tunnel and making my way back to the entrance. About 20 minutes later, we received word that another squad had killed a VC emerging from a tunnel 500 meters away.

I never doubted who that VC was. To this day, I firmly believe that grunt and I could have ended the war sooner over a beer in Saigon than Henry Kissinger ever could by attending the peace talks.

Photo: U.S. Navy

SINGING THE MEKONG DELTA BLUES

by Richard Schorske

American soldiers called it "wading in oatmeal." Even during scorching days of the Delta dry season, mud was everywhere. It fouled weapons, mired tanks and crippled even amphibious tracked vehicles; it ruined leather and caused a near epidemic of "immersion foot," a sort of athlete's foot run wild.

So serious was the health hazard from wading in the Delta's swamps and rice paddies that the men of the Mobile Riverine Force could patrol "on land" no more than four to five days. When they returned for a drying-out period aboard one of their floating barracks ships, the American riverine fighters enjoyed — by infantrymen's standards — special treatment in recognition of the special hazards which they faced.

The headquarters of River Assault Flotilla One, the USS *Benewah*, was air-conditioned, a luxury in South Vietnam's searing heat. Although the *Benewah* was a strange-looking vessel, the more than 1,000 Army and Navy personnel billeted there welcomed its amenities. In addition to air-conditioning, there was fresh food, sometimes helilifted in, and a complete surgical suite able to handle many medical emergencies without need for evacuation. Above all, there was security: Peace and quiet could almost be taken for granted aboard the barracks ships.

Moored near the center of a river, countermortar radar aboard ship provided coverage of the surrounding area, while Army security forces reinforced by artillery patrolled the shore. Unlike life aboard the attacking craft, the Monitors and ATCs, there was little danger of a sudden barrage of fire for those recuperating back at "the base."

After several days of drying out and repairing equipment, troops assigned to riverine operations would be on the move again in the Delta. Some brigades would conduct as many as four operations a month, patrolling rivers as well as engaging enemy troops hidden among the paddies and inland waterways.

In fulfilling their primary mission of providing security for commercial traffic and reducing VC access to population centers and the rice market, the riverine force encountered hazards in riverine duty that no infantryman near the DMZ was likely to encounter. As Cmdr. S. Swarztrauber recounts, while performing the routine, often unpleasant task of searching junks and sampans, a PBR crewman could suddenly discover "the latest in VC booby traps: Opening a bilge compartment, he is met by a deadly — and very angry — tropical snake whose tail had been tacked to the keel board."

Enemy mines were an ever-present danger. Elaborate measures were taken to protect friendly commercial vessels and elements of the "brown water navy" against underwater explosions. Once more, the enemy's deceptiveness occasionally caused problems; as Swarztrauber recalls, "A river mine-sweeper crewman, throwing a hand grenade at a suspicious C-ration box, is startled by a 150-foot geyser of cocoa-colored water — the box disguised a floating VC mine."

When seeking out the enemy away from the protection of their assault craft, members of the Riverine Forces encountered problems similar to those which afflicted American fighters on search-and-destroy missions elsewhere in the country. In addition to their patrolling and interdiction tasks, the Mobile Force employed a repertoire of offensive measures designed to encircle the VC or to drive them against a blocking force, with the Americans' flanks covered by helicopter gunships.

But, as happened so often, when the enemy was not surprised, and chose not to stand and fight, he took advantage of the concealment offered by dense foliage on the river banks, breaking into small groups and leaving the scene under cover of sniper teams.

The experience of the men of the Fourth Battalion, 47th Infantry, 9th Infantry Div., on patrol in late June 1967, was a particularly dramatic example of the VC's ability to ambush an assault force that was disembarking to engage the enemy on his own ground. At midday, Capt. Robert Reeves was leading his men from River Assault Force One across a stretch of water 10 inches deep and bordered by mangroves. When they were about 100 yards from the trees, in an open field, the VC cut loose.

"During the initial contact," Reeves said, "I had approximately 50 men wounded. Some of them died almost instantly." "We had nowhere to go," added a private, "We just dove into the water."

Forced to keep their heads above water to breathe, and immobilized by heavy fire, the men were easy targets for VC snipers. River-based artillery and air support worked over the VC positions, but could not stop the fire.

Meanwhile the tide rolled in, placing the men neck-deep in water and causing malfunctions in the troops' M16s. Four helicopters sent in to evacuate the wounded were shot down. Finally the Monitors were able to train their cannon and mortars on the forest and drive off the VC.

"Their firepower saved us," Reeves recounted. "It was pretty bad." Although a force had been sent to try to locate the ambushers, none were found.

It was a harrowing case of enemy and environment combining to make life miserable for the riverine fighters. In the last analysis, it was not immersion foot, the dangers of mines or even water-borne snakes that most affected the Americans, but the VC's all-too-familiar ability to set ambushes while evading the standard hammer-and-anvil movement. The Delta was hotter, and wetter, than South Vietnam's other battlefields — highlands, northern provinces and the central coast. But in this crucial respect — the elusiveness of the enemy — the Delta war was still the Vietnam War.

leading out of the village, were on the lookout for VC. A Vietnamese man approached their position on a bicycle. He wore black pajamas, the peasant outfit adopted by the VC. As he rode 20 yards past the point where he first came into view, a machine gun crackled some 30 yards in front of him. The man tumbled dead into a muddy ditch.

One soldier grimly commented: "That's a VC for you. He's a VC, all right. That's what they wear. He was leaving town. He had to have some reason."

Maj. Charles Malloy added: "What're you going to do when you spot a guy with black pajamas? Wait for him to get out his automatic weapon and start shooting? I'll tell you I'm not."

The soldiers never found out whether the Vietnamese was VC or not. Such was the perplexity of a war in which the enemy was not a foreign force but lived and fought among the people.

At 1000, two hours after the Americans had landed, it was already hot in Ben Suc. While interrogations went on in a schoolhouse, about 1,000 people gathered in the center of the village clutching their bundles and possessions. Thousands more followed. By now shock had given way to resentment and hostility, expressed by villagers' sullen stares. The evacuation and transporting of nearly 6,000 people to a refugee camp at Phu Loi near Phu Cuong commenced immediately. This sign, at the camp entrance, greeted them: "Welcome to the reception center for refugees fleeing communism."

Conditions in Phu Loi were atrocious, frustrating the smooth relocation process sought by MACV. Gen. Westmoreland observed, "For the first several days the families suffered unnecessary hardships." For a week the camp lacked latrines, wood and water for cooking, and tents for shelter. But even the construction of such facilities could not alleviate the pain of refugees separated from the family rice fields they had tilled for generations and the tombs of their ancestors. Despite the promise of new homes, the people of Ben Suc faced bleak days ahead as psychologically as well as physically "displaced persons."

One refugee, an old man, lamented: "I was born in Ben Suc, and I have lived there for 60 years. My father was born there also, and so was his father." He shook his head. "Now I will have to live here for the rest of my life."

While the refugees at Phu Loi pondered their future, the U.S. 1st Engineer Battalion of the 1st Division, commanded by Lt. Col. Joseph Kiernan, entered Ben Suc with bulldozers, tankdozers and demolition teams. Its mission was to destroy the "two" villages of Ben Suc, the structures above ground and the tunnel complex below. The engineers' powerful tankdozers, M48 medium tanks armored against mines, rolled over the villagers' homes and buildings.

What is left of Ben Suc village after troops from the U.S. First Infantry Division flattened it during Operation Cedar Falls in 1966.

Outside Ben Suc, massive Rome plows, called "jungle-eaters," gobbled up wide stretches of jungle. The Rome plow, a large tractor with a bulldozer blade, was specially developed for land-clearing operations.

As Lt. Col. Kiernan remembers, "I guess it was about 20 acres of scrub jungle....The place was so infested with

A bulldozer from First Engineer Bn., U.S. First Infantry Division, levels a hut in village of Ben Suc, which was flattened during Operation Cedar Falls.

Pfc. George Nagel, his M79 "Bloop Tube" resting on one knee, examines sewing machine found in a tunnel complex by the "Tunnel Rats" of the 173rd Airborne Brigade during an operation just north of Saigon. Photo: U.S. Army

tunnels that as my dozers would knock over the stumps of trees, the VC would pop out from behind the dozers. We captured about . . . six or eight VC one morning. We went through and methodically knocked down the houses." When it was all over, according to the Army's account, "One of the major objectives of Operation Cedar Falls had been achieved: The village of Ben Suc no longer existed."

While Ben Suc was being flattened, the hammer forces of the 1st Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade and Task Force Deane swung into action with simultaneous attacks across the Iron Triangle and into the Thanh Dien forest. Theirs was a tall order, entailing airmobile assaults into Thanh Dien, search-and-destroy operations, demolition of enemy installations and evacuation of all civilians. The Americans had come to fight, but throughout the Triangle there was only light, sporadic resistance.

In Cedar Falls, it quickly became apparent that VC main-force units were evading the blow of the hammer. Elaborately planned heliborne assaults into the jungle assumed the aura of a Hollywood battle scene, as though no one was really fighting and no one would actually die. When 60 helicopters carrying troops of the "Big Red One" landed in an LZ that had been pounded by a preparatory air strike, one observer noted, "It's like a Cecil B. De Mille production." Not one VC was found at the LZ, dead or alive.

U.S. forces, however, chalked up impressive statistics in terms of enemy installations destroyed, food and supplies seized, and documents uncovered. During the 19-day span of Cedar Falls, U.S. and ARVN troops destroyed 1,100 bunkers, and 500 tunnels. They captured enough rice to supply 13,000 VC for a year and a wide array of equipment and weapons. The credit for much of it belonged to members of the 242nd Chemical Detachment, nicknamed the "tunnel rats," volunteers accepted on the basis of their small stature, physical agility and aggressiveness.

While Joe Kiernan's dozers and plows cleared more than eight percent of the 63 square miles of the Triangle, tunnel rats explored nearly 12 miles of tunnels exposed at various locations. Descending into the VC's dark, winding labyrinths was a hot, dirty, difficult job at best. The pointman of a six- to 10-man team had to squeeze his body through narrow openings and shallow corridors on all fours. Armed with a silencer-equipped pistol (to fire without one in a tunnel meant ruptured ear drums), a hand telephone, flashlight and compass, he never knew whether the tunnel might collapse or what might be waiting round the next turn: mines, booby traps, bats and scorpions — or even a VC.

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COSTA RICA
A Domino In Line

by Jay Mallin Photos by Jim Coyne

As SOF went to press, the Costa Rican government appealed to the Organization of American States to send a military peace-keeping force to maintain order along its border with Nicaragua.

It specified that troops from Columbia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela compose the force.

COSTA Rica, one of Central America's southernmost republics, is famous for three reasons:

It has the most stable democracy in all Latin America (only three military men have ever been president, and the last violent change of government was back in 1948).

It has more schoolteachers than soldiers (not particularly difficult since Costa Rica has no army).

It claims to have the most beautiful women in Latin America (or, as one