Sex, lies and supplies in the early days of the war

VIETNAM

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TET

The counterattack that saved Saigon

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Weyand's Winning Ways

Army Chief of Staff Frederick Weyand, seven years after Tet, back in Saigon on a fact-finding mission for President Ford.

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IT IS COMMONLY HELD THAT the massive offensive launched by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army forces on January 31, 1968, was a military disaster for the Communists, leaving the VC severely weakened and the NVA badly battered. In spite of this, the Tet Offensive was a public relations and political disaster for the United States and a turning point in the war, of which volumes have been written. Often lost in discussions of Tet, however, is just how the nighttime "surprise" attack on the heart of South Vietnam—Saigon and its environs—was so masterfully met and turned back by a massive, coordinated counterattack largely before dawn the next day. In our cover story, Rod Paschall offers an inside account of how his boss, Lt. Gen. Frederick Weyand, conceived and executed the crushing counterattack that saved Saigon.

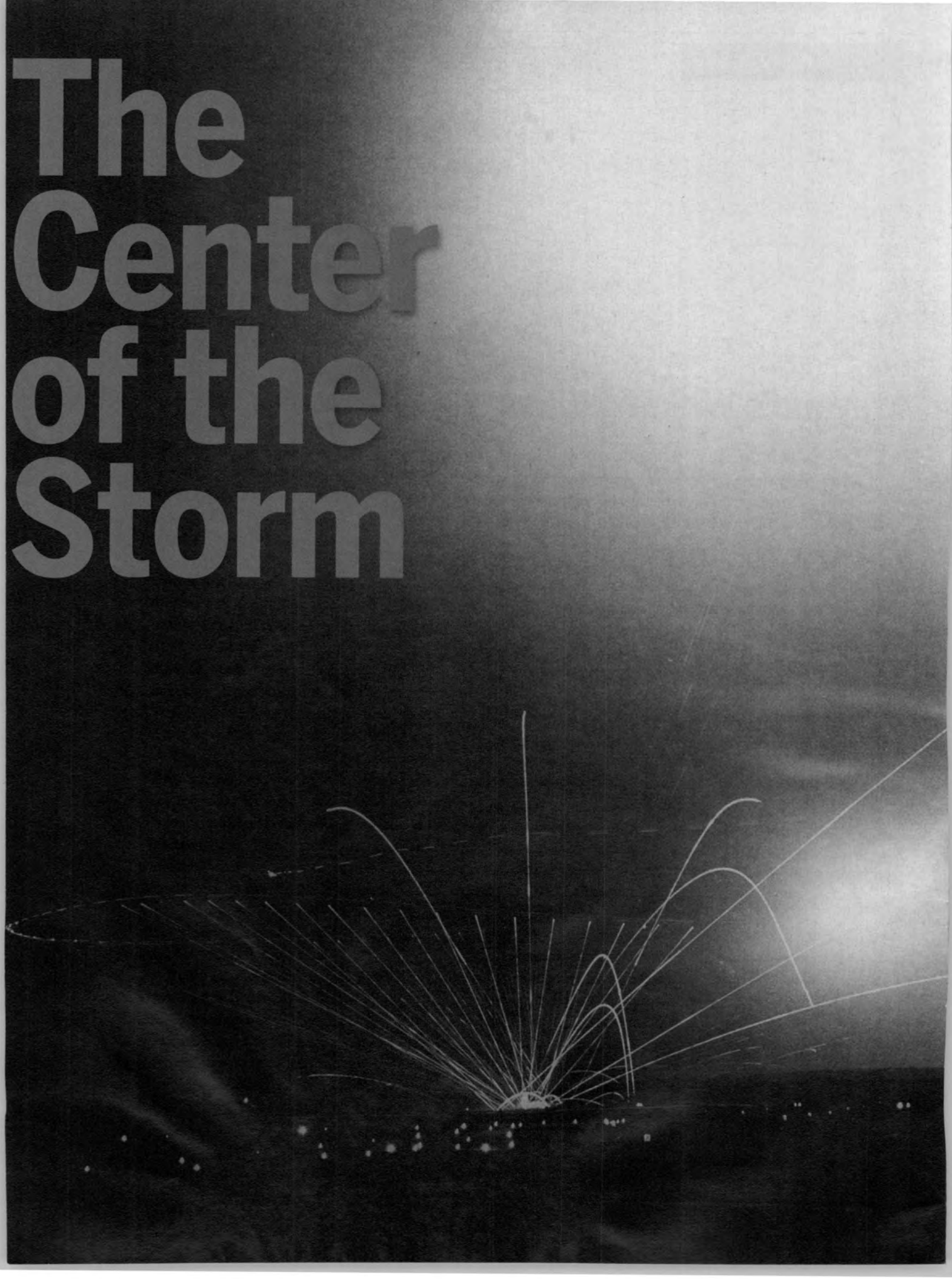
The spectacular Viet Cong sapper attack on the U.S. Embassy in the first hours of Tet and its underlying symbolism was a major reason why Weyand's success was widely discounted. Army photographer Don Hirst was in front of the embassy while it was under attack in the darkness that morning and later as the action was concluding. Hirst tells his story of taking one of the day's most iconic images (pg. 32), and the lasting impact that it had on him.

With the U.S. buildup to wage war in Vietnam came the need for vast infrastructure and a system of distribution for every imaginable good and service. Navy Captain Archie Kuntze found himself atop this massive organization in 1964. A powerful man dubbed the American Mayor of Saigon, Kuntze became engulfed in a corruption scandal that revolved around his torrid love affair with a Chinese beauty. As contributor Larry Englemann reveals in his story (pg. 36), much about Kuntze's saga, and the woman intertwined in it, remains shrouded in mystery.

When American participation in the Vietnam War began to wane and U.S. troops were being withdrawn, those still in-country grew increasingly wary of being among the last to die in the unpopular war. Vietnam veteran and Ohio State University professor William Shkurti's new book, *Soldiering On in a Dying War,* examines the perception and reality about the soldiers still fighting during this period. An excerpt from Shkurti's book, about the 1971 "mutiny" at Fire Support Base Pace, begins on pg. 44.

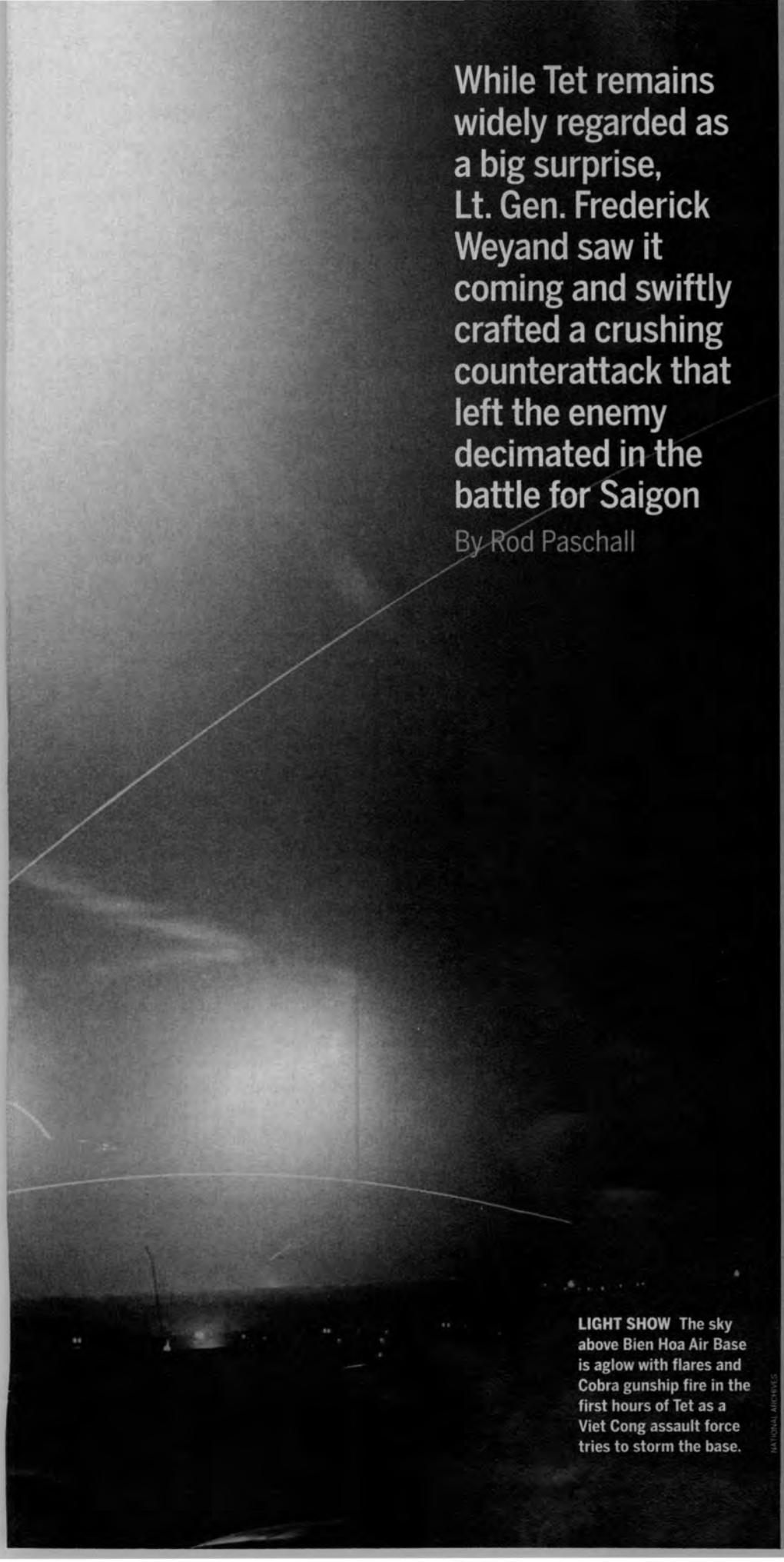
By virtue of her Armed Forces Radio show broadcast daily across Vietnam for nearly seven years, Chris Noel earned a special place in the hearts and minds of hundreds of thousands of young GIs. It is an affection that has diminished little over four decades. Beginning on pg. 52, Chris Noel recounts how she started her radio show and was transformed by her own Vietnam experience. ★

The Center of the Storm



While Tet remains widely regarded as a big surprise, Lt. Gen. Frederick Weyand saw it coming and swiftly crafted a crushing counterattack that left the enemy decimated in the battle for Saigon

By Rod Paschall



LIGHT SHOW The sky above Bien Hoa Air Base is aglow with flares and Cobra gunship fire in the first hours of Tet as a Viet Cong assault force tries to storm the base.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

The Tet Offensive of 1968 was a watershed event in the Vietnam War, its impact transcending the battlefield to reach deep into the American psyche; its reverberations still felt 44 years later. However, a yawning chasm between the facts on the ground and the popular perceptions of Tet exists still. That disconnect is no greater than in the story of the battle for Saigon. That the attack on the capital was not a surprise and was quickly overwhelmed by a well-planned and masterfully orchestrated counterattack is obscured by the dramatic and chaotic early-hours fight at the U.S. Embassy. The crushing U.S. victory in the battle for Saigon was largely the result of one man's ability to overcome skepticism from his superiors, grasp the enemy's intent based on limited intelligence, quickly devise a plan, mobilize forces and centralize command authority to ensure his ability to retain maximum flexibility.

In late November 1967, Central Intelligence Agency analyst Joseph Hovey reported that captured documents indicated that Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units were planning a big operation early in the coming year. All their resources were to be used to seize South Vietnam's major cities.

Hovey's report was generally

BOLD ACTION Anticipating the Tet attacks, Lieutenant Gen. Frederick Weyand prepositioned U.S. and Allied forces across the Saigon area, ready to pounce once the enemy made its key targets, such as Saigon's Newport Bridge (below) clear.

greeted with skepticism by U.S. military leaders. The prevailing view was that the VC had been so depleted that NVA fillers were supplementing them. Pure NVA units rarely strayed far from the remote forested regions, where they could strike and quickly withdraw to their safe, cross-border sanctuaries. And the cities were places of the Saigon government's strength.

But, Hovey's analysis was an accurate warning of the far-flung attack that produced the war's most significant events: North Vietnam's most misconceived and costly scheme, a foolishly maligned U.S. triumph, and the emergence of an American battle leader who was arguably the war's most astute and perceptive military officer, 51-year-old Lt. Gen. Frederick Carlton Weyand.

While the offensive would be countrywide, its focus was on Saigon and its environs. The capital city and the area around it contained two-thirds of the country's population and the majority of its agricultural and industrial resources. As such, it had the most powerful Allied military organization, the U.S. II Field Force Vietnam (IIFFV) commanded by Weyand.

Four U.S. infantry divisions, two independent infantry brigades, an armored cavalry regiment, a Special Forces battalion, and supporting artillery, engineer, signal and aviation units comprised IIFFV. Weyand also had operational oversight of the 1st Australian Task Force, Thailand's Volunteer Regiment and the Philippine Civic Action Group. He was also responsible for the U.S. military advisers assigned to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) III Corps commanded by Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang. Khang's command included the Capital Military District in Saigon, three ARVN divisions, local and territorial forces and artillery, Ranger and airborne units in a 13,000-square-mile area.

By January 1968, I had known General Weyand for two years, initially serving as an assistant operations officer in the 25th Infantry Division then under his command. In December 1966, after my six-month stint as an infantry company commander, Weyand asked me to extend my tour and become his aide-de-camp. In early 1967, I accompanied him to his new assignment at IIFFV headquarters, where we shared a small house. There, Weyand's daily routine began with morning intelligence and operations briefings and meetings. I handled his phone calls, his schedule and ran down information he wanted. In the afternoon, when we boarded his helicopter and visited IIFFV units conducting operations, I was his note taker, radio operator and bodyguard.

Fred Weyand was professionally well suited for his duties. He had been an intelligence officer in the China-Burma-India Theater in World War II. Most of his contemporaries knew him as a superb, tactically savvy infantry battalion commander in Korea during 1951. There, he won acclaim for exceptional leadership and skill in a particularly difficult battle where, under great Chinese pressure, his battalion became the covering force—protecting a regimental withdrawal. His performance resulted in an estimated 3,000 Chinese battle deaths and a Presidential Unit Citation for his battalion. The action was widely cited as a shining example of battle leadership. Subsequent tours of duty in-

TOP: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

cluded command of a battle group and assignments representing the Army to the U.S. Congress and high-ranking officials.

His demeanor could be deceptive. Casual acquaintances saw a lanky, affable, laid-back Californian, "cool and cerebral," a reporter once wrote. In fact, Weyand was sometimes concealing anger, particularly when he spotted incompetence. His only health problem was an occasional bout of acid reflux, which especially flared when he was masking his agitation.

Innovative in his support of South Vietnamese forces, he instilled mutual battlefield confidence by occasionally assigning American combat units to fight alongside ARVN units. He solved thorny questions of control and reluctance to have a single U.S. or Vietnamese officer in command. Weyand developed a command relationship that was far more akin to artillery leaders than infantrymen. He placed the U.S. unit "in direct support" of the Vietnamese unit, avoiding subordination of one unit commander to the other while achieving unity of purpose. He differed somewhat from other U.S. general officers in Vietnam in that, despite his infantry background, he was a strong proponent of armor. And, unlike others, he focused on village-level counterinsurgency operations rather than stand-up battles with main forces.

In the first week of 1968, Weyand became convinced an enemy offensive was coming and was concerned about General William Westmoreland's desire to employ some 20 battalions—about 40 percent of II Field Force's combat power—in an operation 75 miles northeast of Saigon. Increasingly, IIFF units were finding evidence of VC/NVA interest in the capital and its immediate surroundings, the 1,750-square-mile Saigon-Long Binh-Bien Hoa complex. Viet Cong plans to strike district and provincial governments in the area had been discovered. A captured map showed a revision of VC unit boundaries, each with direct access to Saigon.

Weyand briefed Westmoreland on January 10, detailing the clues to a looming enemy offensive. As he later recalled, "Westy wasn't happy about it, but he agreed." The movement of IIFF units was delayed and Weyand began relocating units closer to Saigon and plowing down foliage near installations to give defenders good fields of fire. He sent the 1st Australian Task Force to search for enemy movement from the northeast and a large contingent of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment to the northwest to intercept enemy units believed to be heading southward.

Meanwhile, Weyand's adversary, 49-year-old General Tran Van Tra, commander of VC/NVA forces in the southern half of South Vietnam, was supervising the pre-positioning of supplies and infiltration of combat units to concealed jump-off points. A southerner, Tra had led Viet Minh actions in Saigon against the French. Trained in Moscow and Peking, he then commanded an NVA division. His plan featured initial main-force assaults to be delivered by six VC and four NVA regiments accompanied by local units. Missions included seizure of the Ton Son Nhut/Bien Hoa/Long Binh complexes, destruction of the Newport Bridge, seizure of the ARVN base near Hoc Mon and the Go Vap ARVN artillery and armor center, and blocking the U.S. 25th and 1st Infantry Divisions. Nineteen local force battalions and sapper groups had targets in Saigon and Cholon and were to hold their gains for 48 hours until reinforcements arrived. In the countryside, local forces were to provide carrying parties and guides to main force units and seize province and district capitals.

To gain surprise, Hanoi chose to violate the only civil custom between the warring parties. Since 1963, when the Communists proposed annual ceasefires during Christmas, New Year's Day and the Lunar New Year (Tet), these pauses were generally observed. Most South Vietnamese and Americans expected their enemies to again honor the custom for three days during Tet 1968.

'Weyand sent a flash message to all units an hour before the ceasefire, to prepare for an attack'

However, about an hour before the ceasefire was to begin on Monday afternoon, January 29, Weyand had seen enough evidence of a probable massive truce violation that he dispatched a "flash" (top priority) message to his forces. It stated the enemy could be expected to violate the Tet truce, and all units must be prepared for that contingency. This warning was made eight hours before the enemy truce violation actually began in the northern part of the country and 17 hours prior to the Allies canceling the "stand-down" throughout the country after the offensive began.

With only sketchy information, Weyand quickly developed his plan to defeat the expected offensive. The enemy was experienced in evading U.S. forces, so it was not surprising that units he'd sent north were not intercepting sizeable bodies of NVA or VC forces. Mostly, he had to guess their destinations. Experience told him the attack would come late enough to permit enemy forces to move to their attack positions in darkness, but early enough to achieve maximum damage while still in darkness. The balance of intelligence pointed to the night of January 30-31.

Without precise knowledge of enemy locations, Weyand knew he would have to initially cede the initiative to General Tra. However, he would remain on defense only briefly and had no intention to await daylight to begin his counterattack. To strike quickly, he chose to organize a rapid-reaction, mostly armored counterattack force, hurl it at the enemy immediately—in darkness—and destroy Tra's attackers before they could gain their objectives.

During Monday evening, January 29, and continuing the next day, Weyand was calling or meeting selected commanders who had mechanized infantry or armored cavalry units. He reached into his bag of unusual command and control tricks, telling them he was "putting a string" on their armor. That meant some of

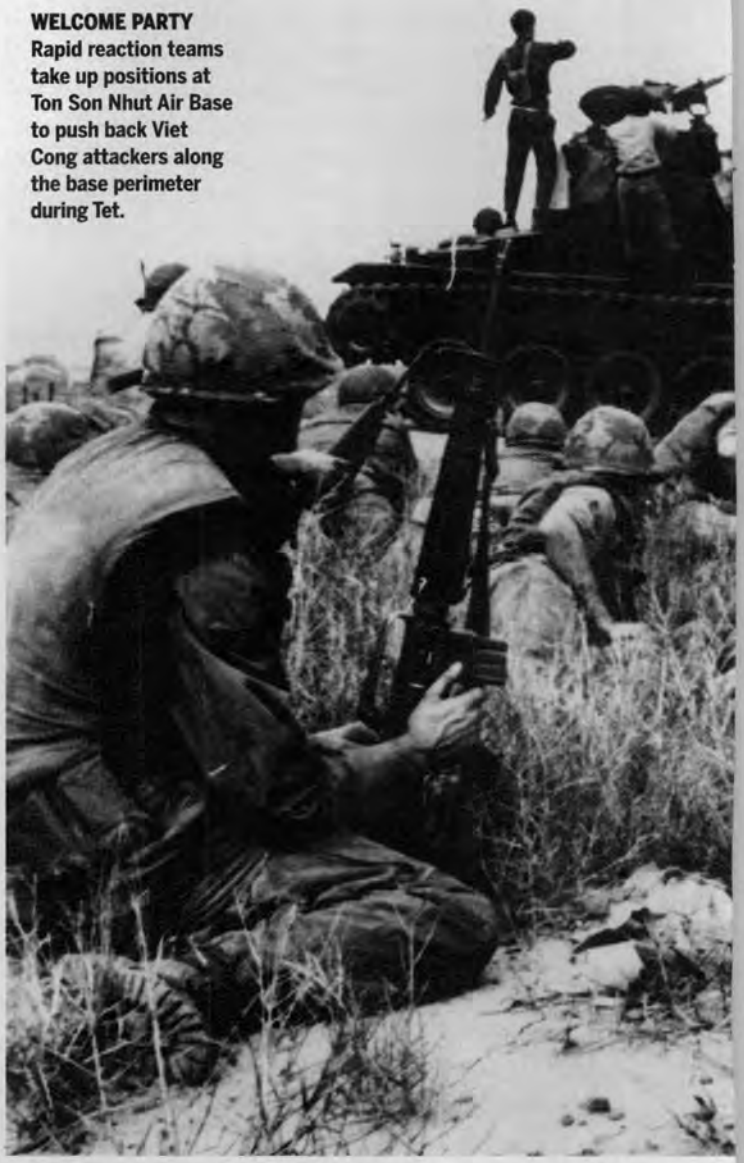
Weyand's subordinate commanders would have to get his permission to employ their own armor elements, giving Weyand the first option in choosing these units' missions. With these instructions, he had organized a powerful, highly mobile and centrally controlled force of some 500 armored fighting vehicles. In addition to mechanized infantry battalions, this force had vehicles from five armored cavalry squadrons, each having three ground cavalry troops. Each troop was authorized nine medium tanks and 23 M-113 armored personnel carriers, the latter mounting .50-caliber machine guns. Each cavalry squadron also had an air cavalry troop, with nine light scout helicopters, 11 troop-carrying UH-1 helicopters and six UH-1 gunships.

The only hitch in Weyand's extraordinary plan came when Westmoreland demanded a IIFFV armored cavalry squadron be dedicated for the Ton Son Nhut (TSN) complex. Weyand argued that he needed flexibility to determine that unit's mission. Westmoreland replied: "Damn it Fred, I know your views and have considered them. Now, get with it!"

On Tuesday, January 30, I accompanied Weyand on two late afternoon visits. The first was to the Saigon headquarters of General Khang, who was intending to supervise forces in the Capital Military District. He told us several Viet Cong had been picked up in Saigon and that his headquarters and the national radio station were likely to be hit, and that the Phu Tho Racetrack near Cholon appeared to be designated as some sort of assembly point. Weyand told Khang he would keep an eye on the ARVN III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa, and although we had no responsibility for the Saigon-Cholon-Tan Son Nhut complex, he offered assistance. At dusk, we arrived at the Australian Task Force. Weyand met with the commander, who brought in one of his New Zealand Maori trackers who reported that he had found the tracks of the 275th VC Regiment and followed them for a week to determine their probable destination. The Maori looked at Weyand and told him he believed the regiment was "headed for Long Binh—your headquarters." With that alarming information, we dashed back to Long Binh and got a report on our perimeter security. Weyand then put helicopter gunships on strip alert and retired for the night.

HOLDING GROUND At Bien Hoa Air Base, a key enemy objective, the heavily sandbagged Bunker Hill 10—pockmarked by a dozen direct Viet Cong B-40 rocket hits—managed to hold fast during an intense seven-hour onslaught in the early hours of January 31.

WELCOME PARTY Rapid reaction teams take up positions at Ton Son Nhut Air Base to push back Viet Cong attackers along the base perimeter during Tet.



At 3 a.m., all hell broke loose. Mortar rounds and 122mm rocket began exploding within the Long Binh cantonment. Bullets from small-arms and machine gun fire snapped overhead. The general and I sprinted to the Quonset hut housing our Tactical Operations Center (TOC). The operations and intelligence staff were at work, some sitting on the floor because of blasts of machine gun fire peppering the roof.

Weyand immediately began implementing his counterattack plan. Helicopter gunships on strip alert had already risen to find

BOTH IMAGES: NATIONAL ARCHIVES

'At 3 a.m., all hell broke loose as mortars and rockets began to rain down on Long Binh'

and attack the launch sites. Air Force fixed wing gunships were called in. Within 30 minutes, Weyand had enough knowledge of VC locations to begin directing armor units to specific threats. He ordered the 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry (2-47 Mechanized) to move north, drop off a unit to clear the ammunition depot, assist in defending the Long Binh perimeter, and send another unit to relieve the besieged defenders of the ARVN III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa. Gunships of the 3rd Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry (3-17 Cav) were ordered to hit VC assault forces along the Long Binh perimeter. One troop of the 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry (3-5 Cav) was ordered to counter the VC attack on Bien Hoa Air Base. At 0355, when the Ben Cat District Headquarters came under attack, an element of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry (1-4 Cav) was dispatched to assist ARVN defenders there. Within the first hour of the enemy offensive—still two hours before sunrise—these and other orders were dispatched to troop units, were being coordinated or were already being implemented.

Beginning at 0400, the scope of II Field Force responsibilities expanded to include assistance to the Capital Military District and Ton Son Nhut Air Base defenders. The 3rd Squadron of the 4th Cavalry (3-4 Cav) was directed to engage enemy forces that had penetrated the Ton Son Nhut perimeter. The commander of the 101st Airborne Division was ordered to conduct a helicopter assault on the roof of the U.S. Embassy, which was then under attack. At 0430, when a VC attack was launched near Ho Nai in an attempt to free 2,000 VC prisoners held there, a mechanized infantry unit was ordered to respond. At 0500, IIFFV and Air Force gunships were lighting up the sky with machine gun tracer fire hitting exposed VC and NVA. Allied defenders were blasting away at the attackers with rifles and machine guns from sandbag bunkers behind barbed wire barriers. Piercing the darkness were the headlights of hundreds of fast moving tanks and armored personnel carriers thundering toward their assigned objectives.

Although bullets zipping through the roof had stopped, the tensest moments within the IIFFV TOC began around 0500 when we got word that the attempt to land troops at the U.S. Embassy

had been driven away by enemy fire. At the same time, several of our armor counterattack forces were nearing areas where we expected ambushes. One such incident was reported at 0530 when a platoon of the 4th Battalion, 23rd Infantry (Mech) was hit 16 miles northwest of Saigon while en route to relieve besieged local forces. However, about the same time, we received a report that the troop of the 1-4 Cav counterattacking at Ben Cat was already achieving success against Viet Cong forces. And, 15 minutes later, a 2-47 (Mech) company struck the rear of the VC force attempting to seize the ARVN III Corps Headquarters at Bien Hoa.

At 0600, tension inside the TOC waned as most of our armor forces were simply overrunning or bypassing hastily established VC ambush and blocking positions. And, our tanks and APCs were starting to arrive in the rear or on the flanks of VC assault units, many of which were still attempting to penetrate Allied perimeters. Minutes later, as the skies began to brighten, the enemy was not only trying to survive U.S. Army and Air Force gunships above and incessant fire from American and ARVN defenders to their front—they suddenly had rampaging mechanized infantry carriers and tanks to their rear and on their flanks.

'Suddenly the VC assault units had rampaging infantry carriers on their flanks and to their rear'

The Communist assault forces were rapidly losing the initiative, becoming surrounded and overwhelmed. At sunrise, lead elements of the 3-4 Cav arrived at Ton Son Nhut. They surprised three VC battalions there and began scything through the attackers. By 1300, the Viet Cong were fleeing, leaving behind more than 500 bodies of their comrades. At Ben Cat, the VC broke off their attack and withdrew in the face of the 1-4 Cav, abandoning 47 of their dead. Much the same was happening at Long Binh and Bien Hoa all through the day.

While the counterattack was largely a quick success in Saigon, some serious fighting continued in the city for the next 20 days and in one case, it would last into March. Under great pressure, Viet Cong assault units had broken up and groups of survivors were able to avoid capture and find cover. When they became cornered, they fought to a bloody end. The toughest of these situations unfolded in the dense urban maze of Cholon. At 0900 on January 31, an infantry company with a platoon of six APCs from the 17th Cavalry arrived near the Phu Tho Racetrack and joined MPs and ARVN Rangers in the fight. The racetrack was cleared, but the retreating VC began entering buildings, fortifying them and creating concealed bastions. Thus began the painstaking and costly urban struggle that lasted into mid-March.

Elsewhere on the morning of January 31, the U.S. Embassy was secured at 0900, Bien Hoa Air Base resumed flight operations at 1300, and General Weyand sent more forces into Saigon, establishing a command in the Capital Military District under his deputy, Maj. Gen. Keith Ware. The next day, despite occasional outbreaks of firing, the Government of Vietnam was functional in Saigon. There was no sign of either a "general uprising" or the promised VC reinforcements entering the city.

On February 1, however, Weyand was snared in a growing rift between President Lyndon Johnson's administration and an increasingly skeptical U.S. news media. Under pressure from his superiors to refute some press characterizations of a Communist victory, General Westmoreland summoned Weyand to downtown Saigon to brief about 100 reporters.

In our jeep en route to the briefing, we were nearly killed. The general was up front by the driver and I was wedged between two hefty public affairs officers. As we sped along streets that were sometimes under fire from isolated bands of Viet Cong, I suddenly spotted a black-clad figure with an AK-47 assault rifle atop a two-story building. I was still struggling to get my carbine up as he leveled the weapon and fired a burst—just missing as we sped by.

After Weyand's briefing, most questions were about the impact of the offensive on the course of the war. The general cautioned that no one could make such a judgment for at least several months, when we would know just how badly we had hurt the enemy and have an assessment of the South Vietnamese peoples' attitudes toward the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese government. In spite of his thoughtful observation, the thrust of almost all U.S. news media stories the next day was centered on the Tet attack's effect on the war's outcome—conclusions that simply could not possibly be known at that point.

Weyand could not escape fallout from the "news war" in the days ahead. After a press story emerged about one of our units directing a bomb run on Viet Cong barricaded in a stone building in Cholon, Westmoreland's deputy, General Creighton Abrams, came for a situation report. As the briefer began his summary of the day's operations, an angry Abrams suddenly burst out, "Who the hell ordered an airstrike in Cholon?" Weyand jumped up, grabbed the pointer from the briefer and said, "I did!" Both men were agitated and hostile as Weyand recounted the soldiers lost in house-to-house fighting. He told Abrams his instructions to subordinates were to find the enemy using minimum manpower and destroy them using substantial firepower. On Abrams' departure, Weyand's instructions remained unchanged.

Then, there was Weyand's session with Walter Cronkite, the popular anchor of the *CBS Evening News* who had just visited the northern part of the country. Westmoreland encouraged Cronkite to interview Weyand. The session, dealing with the Tet Offensive in III Corps, lasted 90 minutes. Later, Weyand described the result: "Walter said, 'Well, that's a great story, but I'm probably not going to use any of it.' The reason, he said, was he'd been up to Hue. And he said, 'I've seen those thousands of bodies, as a result of the massacre [the NVA's wanton killing of civilians].

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHOLON WASTELAND Saigon's dense Chinese sector bore the brunt of desperate fighting that dragged on for days after the initial Tet attack.

And I've decided…I'm going to do everything possible in this war to bring it to an end.'" As with his press briefing, Weyand had once again wasted his time. As one press analyst described it, the bulk of the American reporting on the Tet Offensive portrayed a "disaster scenario" for the Allied side. The American news media had its story and they were sticking to it.

The effect of the Tet Offensive on the outcome of the war was indeed profound. Drastically overestimating southern sympathy for communism and grossly underestimating Allied military strength, Hanoi's leaders had concocted an ill-conceived plan that spread their forces everywhere, without enough at any one place to make a tangible gain. In III Corps alone, 12,614 enemy were killed between January 29 and February 19. During the same period, there were 944 Allied combat deaths there, including 453 Americans. The southern Vietnamese Communists, who led many of the Tet assaults, had all but committed suicide. Their ranks had been seriously thinned and, what is more, a dramatic countrywide rise in their defection to the Government of Vietnam began, peaking during the next year when 47,087 changed sides—about one-third of the total defections from 1963 to 1973. This does not count perhaps an even larger figure—Viet Cong that simply quit fighting and went home. The southern Communist movement had been severely diminished by Tet, and the task of bringing communism to South Vietnam defaulted to the North Vietnamese Army.

General Frederick Weyand's successful counterattack was a result of his foresight in centralizing control of IIFFV armor units to ensure the quick destruction of enemy assault forces before they could gain a foothold in Saigon. His deployments were well aimed and well timed. His actions saved countless Allied lives and, except for the special case of Cholon, greatly shortened the duration of the fight around the capital. Regrettably, Weyand and his soldiers' achievement went unheralded in the United States—submerged in a flood of news media stories describing an Allied catastrophe. ★

Rod Paschall was a Special Forces detachment commander in Vietnam in 1962-63; served in Laos in 1964; returned to Vietnam as a company commander and staff officer in 1966-68, and finished service in Southeast Asia in Cambodia in 1974-75. He is editor-at-large for MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History.

FAMOUS FRAME
Army photographer Don Hirst arrived just in time on the morning of January 31, 1968, to capture the scene of MPs taking one of the surviving Viet Cong sappers away from the U.S. Embassy.

Capturing the Embassy Sapper

An Army photographer's story of triumph and tragedy behind one of the most iconic images from the Tet fight for the U.S. Embassy **By Don Hirst**