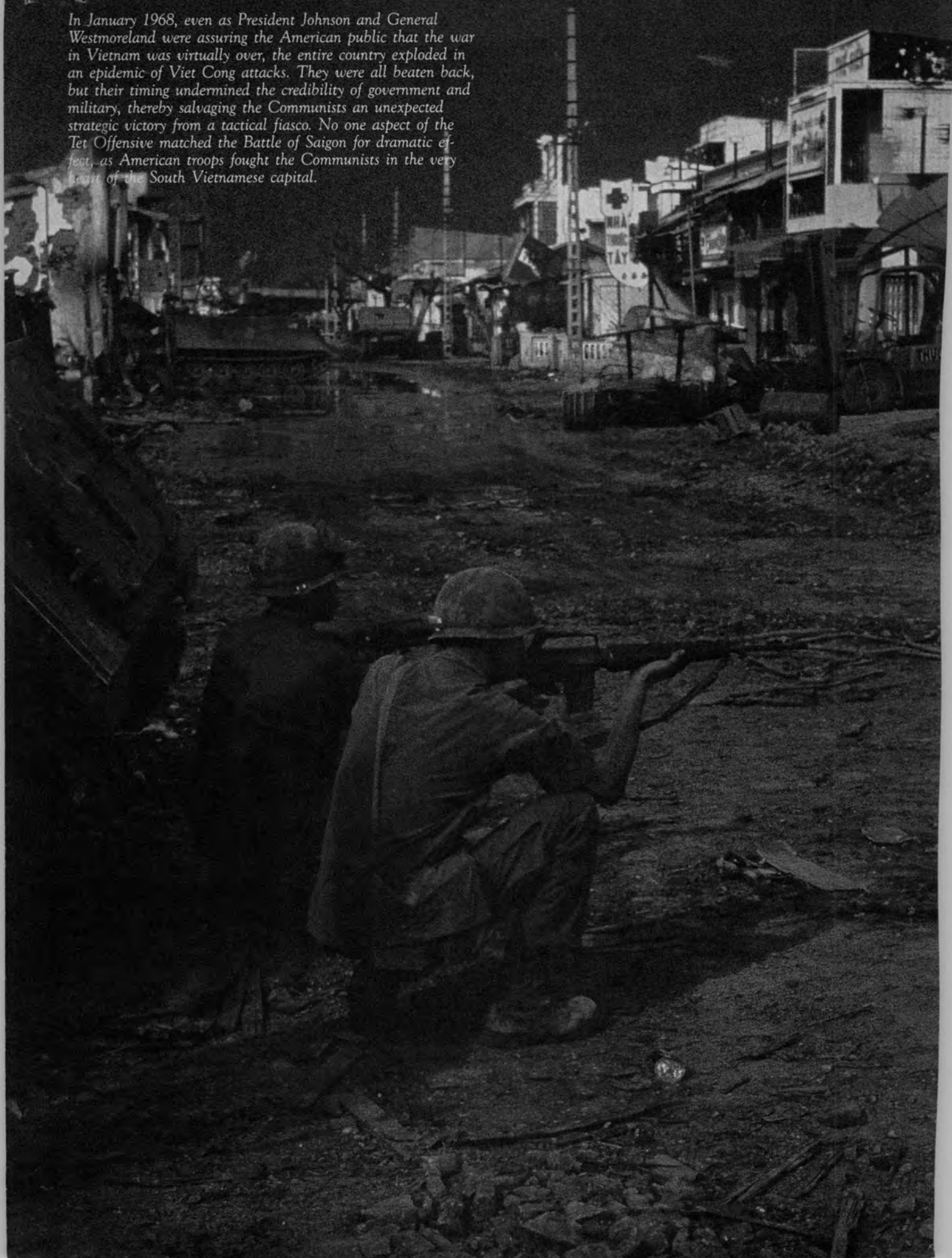


In January 1968, even as President Johnson and General Westmoreland were assuring the American public that the war in Vietnam was virtually over, the entire country exploded in an epidemic of Viet Cong attacks. They were all beaten back, but their timing undermined the credibility of government and military, thereby salvaging the Communists an unexpected strategic victory from a tactical fiasco. No one aspect of the Tet Offensive matched the Battle of Saigon for dramatic effect, as American troops fought the Communists in the very heart of the South Vietnamese capital.



chute. A tree-penetrator fuse on the nose of the bomb would be activated by a tiny propeller. Contact with trees triggered an immense airburst that felled all trees in the immediate area, "like daisies." The result would be a circular clearing large enough to accommodate from one to three helicopters at a time.

If the nose fuse failed to detonate the 20-year-old bombs, a timed fuse at the tail would set it off.

To enhance the ground radar controller's image of the airplane, a small transponder was taped to a window in the cargo compartment.

One unique aspect of the C-130 bombing mission was that the weapons were released by enlisted loadmasters, the only Air Force enlisted men to release an aerial weapon in Vietnam.

Although the primary purpose of the "daisy cutters" was to cut down trees to make helicopter landing zones, the weapons quite often were used against enemy troops as well. It was not uncommon for the Army to designate an enemy base camp as an "LZ." Bombs also were dropped on top of mountain peaks, leveling the terrain somewhat so that troops could be landed right on top.

The resulting LZ could be enlarged with chain saws and explosives into a fire base. If desired, two bombs could be dropped adjacent to one another, so the cleared areas would overlap.

When Allied troops invaded Cambodia in 1970, they assaulted onto LZs created by BLU-82 15,000-pound follow-on bombs that were developed as the supply of 10,000-pound M-121s dwindled. The BLU-82 looked like a large propane tank—perhaps because that is what it was! Each BLU-82 contained a slurry mixture of propane and TNT. Drop techniques for the M-121 and BLU-82 systems were identical.

During the Lam Son 719 mission into Cambodia, several BLU-82 missions were flown, both to create LZs and to destroy enemy troop concentrations. When the 463rd was inactivated in 1971, the mission of dropping the bombs passed to the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing, the last C-130 wing to operate in Southeast Asia.

In the very last days of the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was given a supply of BLU-82s for use against Communist forces. One bomb, detonated near the town of Xuan Loc, reportedly killed more than 500 Communist troops and created temporary confusion among the rest in the advancing army. More BLU-82s were airlifted into Tan Son Nhut from Clark AFB right up until the final day of the Vietnam War. The last U.S. military airplane to be destroyed in South Vietnam was a C-130 that had flown into Tan Son Nhut with two BLU-82s for the VNAF. □

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BATTLE FOR SAIGON

In the Tet Offensive of 1968, the Viet Cong prepared carefully for its objectives inside the Saigon Circle. The result would be a plethora of battles—and battles within battles.

By David T. Zabecki

In early July 1967, a top-ranking North Vietnamese Army (NVA) general died in a military hospital in Hanoi. For many years after, it was reported that he had been killed by an American B-52 strike. More recently, it has been suggested that he actually died from a heart attack. Regardless of the cause, however, the timing of his death had profound impact on the North Vietnamese decision-making process that led to the Tet Offensive.

Senior General Nguyen Chi Thanh had been the top-ranking North Vietnamese military commander in the South. Aside from Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, he was the only other man to hold four-star rank in the NVA. He was also a major political power—for 17 years he had been a member of North Vietnam's ruling Politburo. He also had been a longtime opponent of Giap's policy of meeting America's military might head-on. But now his voice was stilled. Immediately following Thanh's state funeral on July 6, the Politburo met to consider Giap's plan to bring the war to a speedy and successful conclusion.

The war had not been going well for the Communists. Thanh's Viet Cong (VC) and NVA troops in the South had been losing in every encounter with the Americans since taking a bloody pounding in the Ia Drang Valley in 1965. Thanh thought it was madness to try to compete with superior U.S. firepower and mobility. He wanted to scale back operations and conduct a protracted guerrilla struggle, slowly grinding down the American will to continue. Giap, the victor of Dien Bien Phu, wanted to stage another master stroke, bringing America quickly to its knees. With Thanh now dead, there was no other voice of dissent in the Politburo.

The key to Giap's plan was the concept of the "General Offensive," borrowed from Chinese Communist doctrine. Following the General Offensive, in a one-two punch combination, would come the "General Uprising," wherein the people of the South would rally to the Communist cause and bring down the Saigon government. The General Uprising was a distinctly Vietnamese element of revolutionary dogma.

The success of Giap's plan depended on three key assump-

tions: that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would not fight and would collapse under the initial impact; that the people of the South would follow through with the General Uprising; that faced with an overwhelming shock action, the American will to continue would crack.

The timing of the General Offensive was set for Tet 1968, the beginning of the Lunar New Year: The Year of the Monkey. Tet is by far and away the most important holiday of the Vietnamese year. It is almost impossible for a Westerner to understand its significance. It's like Christmas, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July and your birthday, all rolled into one.

Giap's buildup and staging of the Tet Offensive was a masterpiece of deception. General instructions were sent to units in the field, but the exact timing and specific unit objectives of the attacks were withheld until the last moment.

Starting in the fall of 1967, Giap staged a series of bloody, but seemingly pointless, battles in the border regions and in the north of the country near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). On October 29, the 273rd VC Regiment attacked the district capital of Loc Ninh, in the "Fishhook" region northwest of Saigon. On November 23, the 4th NVA Regiment launched a major attack on Dak To. In early January 1968, several NVA divisions began to converge on the isolated U.S. Marine outpost at Khe Sanh, in the northern ARVN I Corps Area, near the DMZ.

All of these actions were part of Giap's "peripheral campaign," designed to draw U.S. units out of the urban areas and toward the borders. For the most part, they were carried out by NVA troops, while VC units moved into their Tet jump-off positions, built up their supplies and rehearsed. In the case of the 273rd VC Regiment's attack at Loc Ninh, captured enemy documents later revealed that the purpose of that battle had been to give the Viet Cong experience in conventional attack formations.

The Communist military leadership used the 1967 Christmas cease-fire to good advantage. Senior commanders used the truce to reconnoiter their assigned objectives. On Christmas Day, Colonel Nam Truyen, commander of the 9th VC



TOP: The Tet Offensive's strategy was simple: Hit the enemy everywhere, and inspire a general popular uprising. The risks involved were dilution of Communist forces and their exposure to America's awesome conventional arsenal. MIDDLE: Viet Cong make satchel charges and other explosives from recovered defective enemy artillery shells in preparation for their coming offensive. ABOVE: As a machine gun moves up into covering position, Viet Cong soldiers charge into the suburbs of Saigon—and unexpectedly stiff resistance.

Division, slipped into Saigon with forged papers identifying him as a student returning home for the holiday. Once inside the city, he made a thorough tour around the perimeter of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, one of his primary targets.

By December 15, 1967, the U.S. Command had turned over sole responsibility for the defense of Saigon to the South Vietnamese military, a gesture of confidence in the growing reliability of the ARVN. The main task of securing Saigon was assigned to the 5th ARVN Ranger Group, supported in turn by the 2nd Battalion, 13th Artillery, the only U.S. combat unit remaining inside the city itself. Meanwhile, 39 maneuver battalions from the U.S. II Field Forces (an organization essentially the same as a corps) were earmarked for a campaign against the VC and NVA base camps near the Cambodian border. By the time of Tet, only 14 U.S. and Free World maneuver battalions were scheduled to be inside the so-called "Saigon Circle," a 29-mile zone around the capital.

Lieutenant General Fredrick C. Weyand, Commander of II Field Forces, didn't like the pattern he was seeing. His troops in the border regions were experiencing too few contacts, and enemy radio traffic around Saigon was getting heavier. On January 10, 1968, Weyand (a former intelligence officer and future Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army) went to see his boss, General William C. Westmoreland, with his concerns. He convinced Westmoreland to allow a shift of some of II Field Forces' combat power back inside the Saigon Circle. (When the attacks did come, 27 maneuver battalions were back inside the Circle. Weyand's call on Westmoreland may well have been the single most decisive decision of the entire battle.)

By late January, intelligence estimates placed 20,000 to 40,000 NVA troops around Khe Sanh. General Westmoreland was now convinced that the enemy would violate any Tet truce. Still believing that the main enemy effort would be in the north, he requested the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments to cancel the cease-fire in the ARVN I Corps tactical zone.

The initial blow fell at Khe Sahn on January 21. From that point until the city attacks erupted at Tet, the attention of the entire U.S. military and the National Command Structure was riveted on the far-flung Marine outpost. The press started making comparisons between Khe Sanh and Dien Bien Phu; Khe Sanh became an obsession for President Johnson, who had a scale model of the battlefield installed in the White House Situation Room.

When the main attacks on the cities finally came, Giap's plan didn't exactly go off without a hitch. The secrecy of his buildup cost him something in coordination. At 12:15 on the morning of January 30, Da Nang, Pleiku, Nha Trang and nine other cities in the center of Vietnam came under attack. The assaults were premature—units in the Viet Cong's Military Region 5 had jumped off one day too early. General Westmoreland's intelligence chief, Brig. Gen. Phillip B. Davidson, told him to expect the same thing country-wide by the next day. At 9:45 that morning, the Allies canceled the Tet cease-fire for the remainder of the country. At 11:25 all U.S. units were ordered to full alert. The maneuver units inside the Saigon Circle were ordered to take up blocking positions around Saigon and around the nearby Long Binh-Bien Hoa military complex. An element of surprise had been lost.

At 1:30 in the morning on January 31, the presidential palace in Saigon was attacked by a 14-man platoon from the Viet Cong's C-10 Sapper Battalion. By 3:40 a.m., Hue, far in the north, was under attack. The Tet Offensive was in full swing.

Before the day was over, five of six autonomous cities, 36 of 44 provincial capitals, and 64 of 245 district capitals had been attacked. Except for Khe Sahn, Hue and the Saigon Circle, however, the fighting was over in just a few days. But even after the first full day of nationwide fighting, the Allied Com-

mand still didn't have a clear picture of what was happening. In a press conference late on January 31, General Westmoreland was still maintaining that the attacks on the cities and Saigon were diversions for the main effort at Khe Sanh and the DMZ, instead of the other way around.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of the importance the enemy placed on the Saigon Circle objective was reflected in the Communist command structure for the attacks. The entire operation was under the command of Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, the second highest ranking officer in the NVA since the death of General Thanh the previous July. Just prior to Christmas, Tra had shifted his headquarters from the "Fishhook" area of Cambodia and taken up residence on the outskirts of Saigon, at the headquarters of Colonel Tran Van Duc, the chief VC political officer for the area. They were joined there by Maj. Gen. Tran Do, the VC commander for the operation.

The Communist command had eight major objectives for the Saigon Circle. With these objectives achieved, they believed, would come the crippling of the Saigon government, and with that, the General Uprising. A combined force of 35 battalions, organized into one NVA and two VC divisions, was committed.

Singularly or in combination, the VC and NVA units were to seize and neutralize the key command, control and communications centers inside Saigon; seize the artillery and armor depots at Go Vap; and neutralize Tan Son Nhut Air Base and the MACV command center. Further, they would seize the Cholon section of Saigon; destroy the Newport Bridge linking Saigon to Long Binh-Bien Hoa on Highway 1; seize the massive U.S. logistics center at Long Binh; neutralize the U.S. Air Base at Bien Hoa; and neutralize the II Field Forces and III ARVN Corps command centers.

Finally, they were to block any attempts by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division to reinforce Saigon from Chu Chi along Highway 1 and block any attempts by the U.S. 1st Infantry Division to reinforce Saigon from Lai Khe along Highway 13.

During the early hours of January 31, General Weyand sat in his Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at Long Binh, watching the battle sites on his operations map light up "like a pinball machine." Between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m., he ordered the nearly 5,000 American combat troops under his immediate control into action. Later that morning, he ordered his deputy commander, Maj. Gen. Keith Ware, into Saigon to take command of all the U.S. forces Weyand was sending into the city. As a battalion commander in World War II, General Ware had won the Medal of Honor. A few months after Tet, he would assume command of the 1st Infantry Division, the "Big Red One," only to die shortly thereafter in a helicopter crash.

As the morning of the thirty-first dragged on and Weyand's forces were stretched thinner and thinner, his most pressing problem turned out to be the one that was probably the most militarily insignificant: the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

At about 2:15 on the morning of the thirty-first, a taxicab pulled onto Thong Nhut Boulevard and drove past the American Embassy. When machine-gun fire from the cab raked the front gate, the two MPs on duty, SP4 Charles L. Daniel and PFC William E. Sebast, slammed it shut and immediately radioed for help. The compound was under assault by a 19-man platoon of the C-10 Sapper Battalion.

Rather than assault the gate directly, the sappers went farther down along the street and blew a hole in the wall with C-4 plastic explosive. Once inside the compound, they killed Sebast and Daniel, but not before the two MPs managed to kill the VC platoon leader and his assistant. The sappers blew open the doors of the chancery with a B-40 rocket, but for some reason they never entered the building. It wouldn't have been hard, for there were only three U.S. Marines inside.

Deprived of their leader, the sappers just sat inside the compound and exchanged shots with the MPs on the outside who



TOP: The author's unit, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry, moves into alert positions northeast of Bien Hoa in late afternoon, January 30, 1968. Typically, the troops prefer the risk of sniper fire to being caught inside if their M-113 armored personnel carrier (APC) encounters a mine or rocket. MIDDLE: Another APC moves down a suburban street in Saigon as the Tet Offensive erupts. ABOVE: Taking cover beside two dead comrades, military police fight their way back into the U.S. Consulate next to the U.S. Embassy.

had responded to PFC William Sebast's earlier call for help.

Weyand, meanwhile, was under heavy pressure from his headquarters to regain control of the embassy. At 5 a.m. he sent a helicopter carrying troops from the 101st Airborne Division. They tried to land on the chancery roof but were driven off by heavy fire from the sappers on the ground. Another air insertion was attempted at 8 a.m.; this one succeeded and soon all the VC sappers were dead.

Elsewhere in the city, another platoon of the C-10 Battalion hit gate Number 5 of the ARVN Joint General Staff (JGS) compound at 2 a.m. The first attack was driven back, and the 1st and 2nd VC Local Force Battalions were brought up to continue the assault. At 4 a.m. a truckload of American MPs from the 716th MP Battalion was racing to answer a trouble call from an American officers' billet near JGS headquarters. The MPs were ambushed in an alley by a VC company on its way to the same JGS compound. The resultant fight in the alley lasted 12 hours. Sixteen American MPs were killed and 21 were wounded. Meanwhile, other VC forces managed to get inside the JGS compound about 9:30 a.m., but they were quickly ejected and routed by a reaction force of ARVN paratroopers.

A few blocks north of the U.S. Embassy, yet another platoon of the ubiquitous C-10 Battalion hit the National Radio Station. The station had been reinforced during the night by a platoon of ARVN paratroopers, almost all of whom were soundly asleep on the station roof when the attack started. The sappers took up positions in an adjacent apartment building where they could fire down on the ARVN soldiers. After killing all the paratroopers, the sappers had little difficulty taking over the station. They were accompanied by an NVA radio specialist who carried prerecorded broadcast tapes announcing the fall of the Saigon government and the so-called General Uprising. Their plans fell apart at the last moment, however, when the night crew at the transmission site 14 miles away shut down the link on a prearranged signal.

The ARVN depot complex at Go Vap, on the northern edge of the city, was the primary objective of the 101st VC Regiment. The plan called for the capture of ARVN tanks from the Phu Dong Armored Headquarters and howitzers from the Co Lao Artillery Headquarters. These heavy weapons were then to be used to assault the east end of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, about one mile away. Troops specially trained to operate the weapons accompanied the attack forces. Both assaults were successful, but once inside Phu Dong, the VC discovered that the tanks had been moved elsewhere two months prior. At Co Lao, the VC managed to capture 12 105mm howitzers, but the weapons were disabled at the last minute when the withdrawing ARVN troops had the presence of mind to remove the firing locks. A few hours later, the Go Vap complex was retaken by the 4th Vietnamese Marine Corps Battalion.

The following day, just north of the city, the U.S. 1st Infantry Division turned the tables on the force that was supposed to block the "Big Red One" from reinforcing Saigon. Moving southeast along Highway 13, the Americans ran into the 273rd VC Regiment, the same unit that had hit the district capital of Loc Ninh the previous October. The VC took up defensive posi-

tions near Phu Loi but were caught there by the Division's artillery and sealed in the box by the infantry. Two days and 3,493 artillery rounds later, the 273rd had been virtually destroyed as an effective fighting unit.

During the evening of January 30, a large VC force infiltrated the Vinatexco textile factory across Highway 1 from Tan Son Nhut. At about 3:20 the next morning, three VC battalions (the D16, the 267th and a battalion from the 271st VC Regiment) stormed the western side of the air base, which also housed the command for MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam). Secondary attacks were also launched against the north and east gates. Even though the armor and artillery that were supposed to come from Go Vap never arrived, the western perimeter was breached and the Communist forces made it onto the runway.

The base was defended by an oddly assorted reaction force consisting of the 377th Security Police Squadron, two platoons of MACV Headquarters' guard force, the ARVN 52nd Regional Force Battalion, and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky's bodyguard. The base's only reserve consisted of two companies from the ARVN 8th Airborne Battalion, men who had been sitting in the Tan Son Nhut terminal awaiting air transport north, where they had been ordered to reinforce the DMZ. By 4:15 a.m. this reserve had been committed—attackers and defenders were fighting hand-to-hand on the western end of the runway. Calls for help went out to the U.S. 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi, about 15 miles northwest of Saigon.

The 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, had already been alerted for a possible relief mission to Tan Son Nhut. When the call came through, the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Glenn K. Otis, was ordered to immediately commit his Troop C. As the armored cavalry troop, under the command of Captain Leo B. Virant, raced down Highway 1 in the dark, Otis flew overhead in his command-and-control helicopter, harassing Viet Cong ambush sites from the air and guiding the troops

TET MISPERCEPTIONS

The Tet Offensive of 1968 has come to be regarded as a massive U.S. intelligence failure on the order of the Battle of the Bulge. It wasn't that a large-scale enemy action wasn't expected; it was the size of the action, the level of coordination, and the nature of the targets that ultimately came as a surprise. The indicators were there, but hindsight is always 20/20—especially in intelligence.

On November 19, 1967, troops of the 101st Airborne Division captured a Communist party document calling for the General Offensive/General Uprising and the takeover of Saigon. It was dismissed as merely a piece of morale-boosting propaganda. Other captured documents said the same sort of thing, however, and as 1967 came to a close, the rate of enemy defections had dropped off sharply, a clear indicator something big was coming.

But the enemy had been solidly beaten at every turn for the past two years. He just couldn't have the capabilities to mount such an effort. As one intelligence officer put it: "If we'd gotten the whole battle plan, it wouldn't have

been believed. It wouldn't have been credible to us."

Another factor that caught Allied intelligence flat-footed was the exact timing of the attacks. By the end of December, most intelligence analysts were predicting large-scale enemy actions just prior to, or just after, Tet. Almost no one thought it even remotely possible that the Communists would violate Tet itself. But historical precedents were there. The first major battle of the Second Indochina War took place in 1960, when the Viet Cong attacked an ARVN headquarters in Tay Ninh at Tet. And in 1789, Vietnam's national hero, Emperor Quang Trung, ousted the Chinese from Hanoi with a surprise Tet attack. In Vietnamese history, the event is roughly the equivalent of Washington's celebrated Christmas night attack on the Hessians at Trenton, N.J.

Ironically, General Westmoreland even had a statue of Quang Trung displayed in his Saigon living quarters.

March 1968, meanwhile, was a high-rotation month for the U.S. 9th Infantry Division. The unit had arrived in Vietnam a little more than a year be-

around the danger zones by means of flares dropped nearby.

One platoon of Troop C was left to secure the Hoc Mon Bridge, just north of the base. Colonel Otis then returned to Cu Chi to rearm and refuel, and the rest of Troop C crashed into the rear of the three VC battalions at about 6 a.m. The VC responded with rocket-propelled grenades (RPG). About one-third of the armored column was destroyed and Captain Virant was seriously wounded, but the cohesion of the VC attack was badly disrupted.

American troopers from the destroyed vehicles were fighting from the ditch alongside the highway and rapidly running out of ammunition. Unable to establish contact with Allied forces inside the base, Troop C radioed back to Cu Chi for help. Colonel Otis got the call and immediately headed back for Tan Son Nhut. The platoon guarding the Hoc Mon Bridge was committed first and arrived at 7:15 a.m. Otis then called in his air cavalry troop. Ammo was brought in by air, and the wounded were evacuated. Otis directed the air troop's gunships against the attackers.

Troop B was then called in from its alert position about 30 miles away. It raced down Highway 1 and reached Tan Son Nhut in about 45 minutes. Otis positioned the new arrivals across the enemy's north flank, effectively putting the VC in a right angle between two armored columns. More gunships and artillery pounded the enemy, now firmly fixed in the "L." By 10 a.m., the VC attack folded. Many Viet Cong fled back into the textile mill, which was later leveled by air strikes. Around the base perimeter, mop-up operations continued well into the night.

The 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry, was later awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for the fight. Four members of the squadron, including Otis, received the Distinguished Service Cross. Twenty years after the fight at Tan Son Nhut, Glenn K. Otis retired from the Army as the four-star general in command of the U.S. Army in Europe.

Thirteen miles to the east, the Long Binh-Bien Hoa com-

plex was simultaneously attacked by the 5th VC Division. There, too, the battle was decided by armored and mechanized forces. The previous night, the 9th Division's 2nd Battalion, 47th Infantry (Mechanized), under the command of Lt. Col. John B. Tower, had moved into alert positions outside the cities. At 4:45 on the morning of the thirty-first, General Weyand ordered the battalion forward.

Company A was sent to relieve the attack on a large Allied POW compound maintained between the two cities on Highway 1. Company B was sent to reinforce the already-breached perimeter of the Long Binh ammo dump. Company C, commanded by Captain John Gross, was sent to relieve the attack on the ARVN III Corps headquarters in Bien Hoa City.

Company B arrived at the ammo dump at 6:30 a.m. Some of the soldiers joined in the fight to eject the intruders, while others helped ordnance personnel remove and disarm satchel charges already placed in many bunkers by VC sappers. Company A, meanwhile, attacked from the Long Binh base across Highway 1 into elements of the 275th VC Regiment in Ho Nai Village and "Black Widow Village"—so called by U.S. troops because many widows of VC officers were thought to live there.

To reach the ARVN III Corps headquarters, Company C had to fight its way through the middle of the 275th VC Regiment astride Highway 1 and through the flank of the 274th VC Regiment attacking Bien Hoa Air Base. At 5:45 a.m., it plowed into the rear of the 238th VC Battalion attacking the III Corps compound. Company C attacked from the march column and overran the besieged ARVN position.

Company C continued to fan out from the III Corps compound, fighting house to house through the city. After months of jungle fighting, the men of Company C suddenly found themselves engaged in World War II-style city fighting. As disorienting as the abrupt change was for the Americans, they adapted to it much faster than their enemy. M79 grenade launchers were used with deadly effect against VC riflemen firing from the upper stories of buildings.

When Bien Hoa City was finally cleared by 5:30 that evening, Company C had taken only eight walking wounded. One of the company's several pet dogs was also wounded when an RPG hit an M113 armored personnel carrier (APC). The troops later obtained a "Purple Heart" for the dog. (Company C had more than its share of dog lovers.)

While Company C fought to secure Bien Hoa City, Troop A of the 9th Division's 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry, was sent to relieve the attack on Bien Hoa Air Base. The troop, commanded by Captain Ralph B. Garretson, had to move 18 miles down Highway 1 and run the same gauntlet as Company C. At the town of Trang Bom, Troop A was hit by a company-sized ambush, but just rolled right through it, the men firing as they went. Ten miles from Bien Hoa, they were momentarily stopped cold when the VC blew a highway bridge after Troop A's first tank rolled across. The troop's M113s could ford the stream, but the tanks could not. After a hasty fording operation, Troop A was once again on the move, but with only one of its tanks.

The cavalry column had to fight through Bien Hoa city to reach the air base. It lost two APCs, a loss reducing the relief force to only one tank and eight

TV viewers form their opinions from those samples, fed to them in 15- and 30-second capsules on the evening news. Such images cater to short attention spans, but can distort perspective.

Perhaps the best example was the fight for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. As a military target, the embassy was utterly insignificant. The fight there had absolutely no influence on the overall military situation. One U.S. officer later described it as "a piddling platoon action." But to the American viewers of the six o'clock news who saw the final stages of the fight in living color, it seemed a military disaster second only to Pearl Harbor.

Another problem was the way the Tet Offensive was perceived by the journalists themselves. Instead of their periodically going out to the war from a safe and comfortable base in Saigon, the war, for the first time, came to them.

General Bruce Clarke later summed it all up when he said that the enemy "took the battle down around the Caravelle Hotel and so, from the standpoint of the average reporter over there, it was the acorn that fell on the chicken's head, and it said, 'the sky is falling.'"

General Bruce Clarke later summed it all up when he said that the enemy "took the battle down around the Caravelle Hotel and so, from the standpoint of the average reporter over there, it was the acorn that fell on the chicken's head, and it said, 'the sky is falling.'"

The result is a highly selective sample of what any war is really like. Yet,



An ARVN soldier advances through the rubble of Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Saigon and scene of some of the most intense street fighting. The ARVN bent but did not break during the offensive.

APCs. As the relief column rolled out of the city toward the air base, the squadron commander, Lt. Col. Hugh J. Bartley, spotted another large ambush from his command-and-control helicopter. At Bartley's direction, the column detoured around the ambush site, firing into the ambushers' rear as it went.

Troop A reached the air base and linked up with the 101st Airborne Division's 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry, which had been brought in by helicopter at dawn. Together they ejected the attackers from the eastern end of the field. The fight took most of the day. Troop A lost two more APCs. Its lone tank took 19 hits and lost two crews, but was still operational when the battle was over.

The fight for Long Binh-Bien Hoa ended on the evening of February 1 with the arrival of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, after an eight-hour forced march from War Zone C. The 2nd of the 47th Infantry and Troop A of the 3rd of the 5th Cavalry were later awarded Valorous Unit Citations.

The teeming Chinese section of Cholon, in the southwest corner of Saigon, was the Communists' key population objective inside the Saigon Circle. Initially, the area was attacked by the 5th and 6th VC Local Force Battalions. As the fighting dragged on into days—and then into weeks—elements of every Communist unit known to be operating in Saigon were eventually identified there.

The key to Cholon was the Phu Tho Racetrack. It was at the hub of most of the key streets in the area and, by holding it, the VC could deny its use as a landing zone. Early on the thirty-first, General Weyand ordered Brig. Gen. Robert C. Forbes, commanding general of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade, to send some of his troops to reinforce ARVN rangers in Cholon. The elements from the 199th had to be shifted from their defensive positions at Long Binh, making the huge logistics complex just that much more vulnerable.

The 6th VC LF Battalion had little trouble taking the

racetrack. From there, a large number of Communist political cadres fanned out to work through the huge urban sprawl. Some tried to whip up support for the General Uprising. Others went to serve arrest and execution warrants on government figures and ARVN officers in the area. A month-long reign of terror in Cholon had begun.

Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry, and the 199th's reconnaissance troop reached Cholon about 8 a.m. that morning (January 31). Six blocks from the racetrack, an RPG hit the lead APC in the column, killing the platoon leader. Communist troops began to fire down onto the column from the surrounding buildings. The infantry dismounted and continued fighting house to house, exactly as their colleagues in the 2nd Squadron of the 47th were doing in Bien Hoa at that very moment.

By 1 p.m. Company A had pushed to within two blocks of the racetrack. The VC then withdrew to prepared positions behind the concrete benches at the track. Company A assaulted the position, but was repulsed. At 4:30 it tried again, this time supported by helicopter gunships. The Americans succeeded in taking the track, but the VC troops melted away into the streets of Cholon. Shortly after dark, Companies B and C of the 3rd of the 7th were brought onto the racetrack by helicopter.

The next morning, the troops at the racetrack were reinforced by two mechanized companies (B and C) of the 9th Division's 2nd Battalion, 60th Infantry, and the 33rd ARVN Ranger Battalion. Using the racetrack as a base of operations, they started working outward to clear Cholon. The VC tried to retake the racetrack later that day, but were beaten back.

The tedious city fighting ground on. By February 3, the South Vietnamese had five ranger, five marine and five airborne battalions inside Saigon. The Americans had committed seven infantry, one MP and six artillery battalions. On February 5, the ARVN 5th Ranger Group started an opera-



South Vietnamese M41 Walker Bulldog light tanks stand guard as life in Cholon returns—relatively—to normal. The Communists' hoped-for General Uprising has failed, but their having carried the fight into the capital has left an indelible mark.

tion to finally clear Cholon. For political and prestige reasons, the South Vietnamese JGS requested that the Americans pull out of Cholon and allow the ARVN to finish the job. By the 10th of February, they were requesting that the 3rd of the 7th be sent back in. Later, the 3rd of the 7th Infantry was also awarded the Valorous Unit Citation for its fight in Cholon.

Hue was retaken on February 25. Cholon was finally cleared on March 7. Hoping to save some face, the Communists stepped up their pressure on Khe Sanh, but in a traditional set-piece battle like that, they had no reasonable expectation of overcoming American firepower and air superiority.

About March 20, the NVA units around Khe Sanh began to melt away. On April 1, Operation PEGASUS, the ground relief of Khe Sanh, was launched. Enemy opposition was light. A few weeks later, Colonel Tran Van Dac, the chief VC political officer for Saigon, defected. The Tet Offensive was over.

Militarily, the Tet Offensive had been a tactical disaster for the Communist forces. By the end of March, they had not achieved a single one of their objectives. More than 58,000 VC and NVA troops died in the process, as opposed to just under 4,000 U.S. and 5,000 ARVN deaths.

By attacking everywhere at once, Giap had superior strength nowhere. He achieved great surprise, but he was unable to exploit it. Analyzing the battle for the Saigon Circle, General Weyand later concluded that it had actually been a large collection of relatively small independent actions. The assault had been launched piecemeal, and it was repulsed piecemeal.

Giap had been dead wrong in two key assumptions. The people of the South did not rally to the Communist cause. The General Uprising never took place—even in Hue, where Communist forces held an entire city for the longest time. Nor did the ARVN fold. It may have buckled in a few areas, but by and large, it fought, and fought amazingly well.

If there was a single big loser in the Tet Offensive, it was

the Viet Cong. The guerrillas of the South led the main attacks, and they suffered the heaviest casualties. The guerrilla infrastructure, so carefully developed over many years, had been destroyed with a single throw of the dice. From that point on, the Second Indochina War was entirely run by the North. The VC were never again a significant force on the battlefield. When Saigon fell in 1975, it was at the hands of four NVA corps.

And yet, Giap was quite correct in his third assumption—about the will of his enemy. With one hand, the United States gave Giap his greatest tactical defeat, and with the other hand gave him his greatest strategic victory, making the Tet Offensive one of the most paradoxical of the world's decisive battles.

The American military had been caught by surprise but still won. The generals instinctively knew the enemy was on the ropes, and now was the time to finish him off. Westmoreland and JCS Chairman Wheeler put together a plan requiring an additional 206,000 American troops to exploit the enemy's debacle, but the Johnson White House leaked the plan to the press. The story broke on March 10, 1968. The American public concluded the extra troops were needed to recover from a massive defeat, with accusations that it had been lied to by the government. It was a psychological turning point. Less than three weeks later, President Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election. As the American military historian Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall summed up later, the 1968 Tet Offensive was "a potential major victory turned into a disastrous retreat through mistaken estimates, loss of nerve, bad advice, failure in leadership, and a tidal wave of defeatism." □

Vietnam veteran David T. Zabecki was there, in uniform and battle gear, for the Tet Offensive. As further reading, please try Tet by Don Oberdorfer; The Big Story by Peter Braestrup; On Strategy by Colonel Harry G. Summers Jr.