

A REVIEW OF THE VC TET OFFENSIVE

31 January - 7 February 1968

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The VC TET Offensive as it is referred to in this summary covers the period of 31 January 1968 to 7 February 1968. No summary of the TET Offensive would be complete however, without mention of these few days just prior to the attack.

Little if any advance warning was received through intelligence channels until the last moment. Sightings of large troop concentrations were almost totally lacking. Although the VC has to move from widely dispersed areas from within and without Vinh Long Province, no civilians came forward with information regarding these massive troop movements. It would be fair to say the vigilance of ARVN and of U.S. Forces was somewhat dulled by the TET holidays and the three day truce which was in effect. When the truce was terminated on 30 January at 0945 hours normal reconnaissance was in progress. In the mid afternoon of 30 January unusual sampan traffic was noted by a Swamp Fox aircraft in the Duc Ton Free Fire Zone. Upwards of 300 sampans were sighted along an 8 kilometer canal line. Permission was granted to take the sampans under fire and armed helicopters began putting in strikes. The aircraft were met by intense automatic weapons fire. Over 100 of the sampans were sunk with several secondary explosions being observed. The strikes were called off by Province officials when it was reported that some of the sampans were friendly and several civilians had been wounded. Despite repeated requests to continue the strikes, permission was denied. As events would later show, these "friendlies" were part of the D-857 Provincial Mobile Battalion. (See Map A)

The VC order of battle as pieced together during the attacks and subsequent to that time reveals the following units were involved in the attack on Vinh Long City and Vinh Long Airfield: D-857th VC Provincial Mobile Battalion, strength 400 men; 306th VC Main Force Battalion, strength 500 men; 308th VC Main Force Battalion, strength 300 men; and the 307th VC Battalion, strength 250 men. All VC units mentioned above were listed in CB manuals except the 307th Battalion. This unit was organized especially for the attack and consisted of the Chau Thanh, Minh Duc, and Tam Binh DSU's with filler cadre from the 306th VC Main Force Battalion.

The attack showed considerable planning at all levels since the country-wide offensive began at 0300 31 January and it might be added; almost to the minute. The units involved in the attack were for the most part well trained and especially well equipped.

Most VC units were armed with considerable quantities of the latest Chinese and Russian weapons and equipment. Main stay of the VC was the Chinese copy of the Russian AK-47 and SKS carbine. Considerable quantities of RPG-2 and RPG-7 rocket launchers were present, in some cases down to squad level. In addition to these weapons, US made M-1 and M-2 carbines, M-1 rifles and BAR's were used in great numbers. Supporting units had considerable numbers of 60mm, 82mm, 62mm mortars and 57mm and

75mm recoilless rifles. Anti-aircraft weapons of the heavy weapons companies consisted of German MG 42's, RPD light machineguns, U.S. .50 caliber and Chinese 12.7mm heavy machineguns, and in several instances U.S. made 7.62mm Mini Guns. Although the VC were extremely well armed and had more than sufficient ammunition, no evidence of 102mm, 122mm, and 140mm rockets were discovered.

Captured documents and POW interrogations showed the VC attacked on three fronts (See Map A). The 3-857 Battalion attacked the Vinh Long Airfield from west of Route 4, the 308th Battalion attacked Vinh Long City from the east through Long Chau Village and the 306th Battalion with the 307th in reserve attacked Vinh Long City from the south, east of Route 4. Many VC troops were present in Vinh Long City prior to the beginning of the attack. It is believed that these troops were infiltrated into the city as much as a week prior. Despite the presence of these troops no acts of sabotage were reported.

At this point it may be well to describe the ARVN forces available for the defense of Vinh Long and their state of readiness. Within Vinh Long City and adjacent to it, less the U.S. forces at the airfield, the forces consisted of the following: 43d Ranger Bn., 2d Armored Cav Hqs, 3/2 Troop 2d Cav, 271st and 272d RF Companies, elements of Chau Thanh PF, 'D' Battery 91st Arty, RAG 23 and 31, one U.S. Navy PBR River Section (8 boats), 1 NPFF Company, local National Police and the PRU. Although this may seem to be a formidable array of military force, such was not the case. Many of the troops assigned to the above mentioned units, except the PBR's, were low in strength due to the TET Holiday leaves and passes. Added to the shortage of assigned troops, the element of almost complete surprise and the ensuing mental shock, the battle for Vinh Long erupted at 0300 hours 31 January 1968.

To better depict the sequences of events, a day by day description of the fighting will be given. This description is based on personal observations, memory, and for the most part the TOC Journal covering this period of time. In all honesty it must be stated here that the TOC Journal is far from being complete due to circumstances beyond the control of this officer. As much detail will be included as is practical and germane to the situation.

30 Jan 68:

At 2200 hours a message was received from Saigon alerting all units to increase their readiness and to be on the alert for increased VC activities. What actions ARVN took in regard to that message is still unknown at this time.

31 Jan 68:

At 0300 hours the attack began on Vinh Long City and the Airfield.

Mortar and recoilless rifle fire could be heard from all quarters of the city and exploding shells and tracer fire could be seen from the airfield. The Personnel of Team 52 were ordered to remain in their compounds by the PSA. As events showed later, this decision saved many lives. Shortly after the attack began both MACV I and II compounds came under attack with small arms, automatic weapons and B-40's. Fighting continued throughout the night with the Ranger compound, Cav Headquarters and National Police Headquarters under attack as well as Vinh Long Airfield. Vinh Long Airfield had to repulse a strong ground attack during the night for the VC had penetrated the perimeter at several points.

The main target of the attack in Vinh Long City was the TOC. Captured VC documents (See Map B) show the routes of advance of the 306th and 308th Bns. Map B also shows the National Police Headquarters as an intermediate objective. The VC, despite their careful planning did not know that NPFF Company had returned to Vinh Long. The VC had counted on overrunning the Police Headquarters but such was not to be the case due to the presence of the rFF Company.

In conjunction with the attack on Vinh Long City, all but one District town was subjected to varying degrees of attack or harassment. This action successfully tied down all major friendly elements for some time.

1 Feb 68:

Heavy fighting continued in the city with the VC attacking from three sides of the TOC and the surrounding area. Ranger elements moved into the area just east of the TOC along the Long Chau canal to block VC elements in that area. They were supported by MAG elements from the river. Cav elements moved into the Province Headquarters by mid-day and occupied the area surrounding it and the NPFF and National Police fought from their compound.

Reports continued to be received requesting support for District towns. The only support that could be given was by air. Were it not for the quantity and quality of the air support received throughout the period, the outcome of the battle may have been completely different.

Late in the afternoon orders were given to evacuate MACV I and II compounds and to evacuate all U.S. civilians from Vinh Long. All U.S. personnel moved to Vinh Long Airfield and late in the evening all U.S. civilians were evacuated to Dong Tam by U.S. Navy elements.

By 2200 hours the first ARVN troop reinforcements began to arrive in Vinh Long with the 3d Bn of the 15th Regiment being the first. The 3/15th linked up with the Cav elements in the vicinity of Province Headquarters.

2 Feb 68:

The 9th ARVN Division TOC arrived in the morning and co-located with the Province and Advisory TOC's. Heavy fighting continued in the early morning hours with the airfield receiving heavy fire from AW's, recoilless rifles and mortars, but no ground attack. By daylight the Province Hospital was secured by the 43d Rangers.

The IV Corps SA arrived at the TOC around noon and was briefed by the PSA. About the same time more reinforcements arrived with the second unit being the 1/16th with 15th Regiment Hqs arriving shortly afterwards. A task force was organized at 1500 hours with 15th Regt. Hqs as central Hqs.

Fighting during mid-day slackened somewhat and resupply operations were begun. District towns continue to be harassed with Ba Cang being most seriously threatened. Air support continued to be very effective.

By 1700 hours MACV I and II were reoccupied with only minor damage having been done to the buildings despite rumors that MACV I was in ruins.

Toward midnight Province Headquarters came under recoilless rifle attack followed by a ground assault. The VC entered the building but were repulsed by a strong counterattack by the Cav and 1/15th. More fighting erupted toward midnight with the PR/RAG base receiving rifle grenades and mortar rounds.

3 Feb 68:

Several OP's in Da Cang were reported under attack and armed choppers and Specky supported during the early hours. At first light much of the fighting in Vinh Long had died down except for the crack of a sniper's rifle.

Around noon a sighting of 200 VC was reported east of town and a VC major general was reported to be with the unit. Reports indicated the VC were regrouping for another attack. Several air strikes were placed on the VC unit. Later intelligence reports indicated as many as 150 of the 200 VC were KIA, including the VC major general, the Vinh Long Province Chief and the 306th VC BN commander.

More reinforcements arrived at 1300 hours with the units being the 1/16th and 16th Recon Company. The Recon company was sent to Vinh Long Airfield to bolster security and defenses.

Contact was again made with the VC by the 1/16th but was broken off by the VC after air strikes were placed on their positions. Fighting slowed down during mid afternoon.

Towards evening several VC locations were spotted and RAG boats took

them under fire. More reports of OP's being attacked were received at TOC. Resupply of OP's became critical with amme and food running low in many of the OP's. ARVN troops began to clean up small pockets of VC still holding out in the city. Heavy damage was reported from air strikes and refugees began moving into the Cathedral.

4 Feb 68:

Vinh Long Airfield received very heavy AW fire around 0100. An air strike was put in on the VC location and the firing ceased.

The Ranger compound came under attack again the early morning hours; however, no ground assault was made. The Cav compound began receiving mortar fire and they returned fire with their own mortars and silenced the VC mortars.

Cho Lach reported several OP's under attack. Ba Cang reported receiving recoilless rifle, small arms and mortar fire; Specky was sent to support.

By 1530 hours elements of the 9th U.S. Division began landing TOC the Airfield. This support was requested by PSA on 2 February. These units were part of the Riverine Brigade and were supported by their own artillery.

All evening reports of numerous VC sightings and attacks on OP's were received from Cho Lach, Ba Cang and Tam Binh.

5 Feb 68:

The 9th U.S. Division's Riverine Brigade operated south of the Airfield and had heavy contact most of the day; results were 27 VC KIA and 4 VC POW's.

Reports were received throughout the day on the location and intent of the VC; however, many of these sightings were false and were probably sent by VC agents to confuse the intelligence picture.

Resupply of OP's remained critical throughout the Province. Gunships were required for most resupply operations.

Most of the fighting in Vinh Long was with small groups of VC rear guard elements. It appeared that the Main Force units had withdrawn south and east except in the vicinity of the Airfield where the US 9th Division elements still had heavy contact.

False reports and rumors continued to be received and the intelligence picture remained cloudy at best.

6 Feb 68:

Fighting in Vinh Long had ceased by early morning; The VC began concentrating on keeping District towns pinned down with harassing fires while they attacked OP's one by one. This tactic was very successful and many OP's were abandoned because they ran out of food and amme. This was especially true in Che Lach and Tam Binh.

The Airfield continued to be harassed by several rounds of mortar fire and occasional sniper fire throughout the day.

Resupply of District towns had to be accomplished by choppers since all roads were closed. Many OP's were not resupplied because Districts believed that they were completely surrounded. The VC scare tactics were very effective in keeping District forces penned-up in the District towns.

Towards midnight the VC began their nightly harrassment of District towns and the airfield. The My Thuan ferry was attacked and one landing deck was sunk and one ferry boat was set afire.

7 Feb 68:

U.S. 9th Division elements were withdrawn during the morning. Their total results were 137 VC KIA and 10 VC PW's. Their employment helped considerably in the security of the airfield and bolstered the morale of the ARVN forces.

The VC continued their harrassment of District towns and OP's. Once again the airfield was harassed by mortar fire. Although the airfield was mortared by the VC since the start of the offensive, damage and casualties were very light.

The TET Offensive ended for all practical purposes on 7 February although VC harassments continued for another week. The casualties inflicted during the attack were most severe in Vinh Long City. Approximately 25% of the city was totally destroyed and light to heavy damage of another 25% was recorded. Civilian casualties amounted to 200 dead and an unknown number wounded. ARVN and U.S. forces suffered 140 KIA and about the same number WIA in and around Vinh Long City and the Airfield. The District Towns fared much better except Che Lach. This one district lost 50 of the 70 OP's lost throughout the Province and over 450 PF WIA.

VC casualties were listed between 400 - 500 KIA and an unknown WIA. Large quantities of weapons and material were also lost.

Between 7 February and 16 February the VC continued their harrassment of the Province capital, airfield, and district towns. On the night of 17 February the second wave attack began but was deemed to failure before it started. Although small elements of VC did enter the city the regiment

plus of ARVN troops in Vinh Long City reacted quickly and drove the VC out within one day of sporadic fighting. The second wave attack did not endanger the airfield as did the first attack and only minor damage was inflicted.

ADDED COMMENTS

As stated previously the VC TET Offensive was launched with almost complete surprise. As the gods of war would have it many small events altered the course of the battle. A PRU soldier was to lead the VC into the city and help them take the PRU compound from the inside. The fact that he over-slept and was not in the compound when the attack started prevented the almost certain capture of the PRU compound. (See Map B)

The National Police compound was targeted to fall prior to the assault on the TCC. A few days prior to the attack the NPFF company returned to Vinh Long. With their additional troops and fire power, the police compound held out. (See Map B)

The VC themselves seemed confused after the initial attack. POW interrogations revealed that the VC broke up into small groups and after the first day never had a coordinated plan of attack.

Psychological warfare was used very effectively by the VC throughout the entire period. False troop sightings and intentions were passed on to the civilian population to confuse the GVN. This tactic worked more effectively than even the VC had hoped for. For the most part GVN officials were in a state of shock. With the Province Chief in Saigon, little if any effective leadership was demonstrated by Province officials. Advisers had to step in and take charge in some cases.

Despite what has been written in some publications the U.S. 9th Division did not "save" Vinh Long but assisted in one area - south of the airfield. Most of the fighting was done by GVN troops with the aid of U.S. airpower.