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AFTER TET

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RONALD H. SPECTOR

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AUTHOR OF *EAGLE AGAINST THE SUN*

AFTER TET BLOODIEST YEAR	
R	1300 SPECTOR R
828676	QP 121494 RANP 8196
702	85
BC12	44 890 38 2

U.S. \$13.00

Can. \$17.00

U.K. £10.00

AUSTRALIA \$18.00

FRANCE 13.00

GERMANY 13.00

Cover design by Eric London

Cover photograph AP/Wide World

ISBN 0-393-02867-6

9780393028676

9 780393 028676



VIETNAM 1968

AFTER TET

THE BLOODIEST YEAR IN VIETNAM

Ronald H. Spector



Vintage Books
A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York

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AFTER TET

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FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, FEBRUARY 1994

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Spector, Ronald H., 1943—

After Tet: the bloodiest year in Vietnam / Ronald H. Spector.—

1st Vintage Books ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-679-75046-0

1. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975.

2. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975—United States. I. Title.

DS558.S69 1994

959.704'34—dc 20 93-27495

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

To my younger son Jonathan and to my older son Daniel, who was born in the year that the war ended; and to my friends and companions of 1968-69 who did not live to see that year.

Company point platoon.²⁸ Supported by heavy mortar fire and 106 recoilless rifles, the Marines cleared the enemy bunkers one by one. Corporal Eldridge Patterson of L Company was knocked momentarily unconscious by a grazing blow to his head. "I came to, I saw blood all over me but I knew I wasn't dead. I picked up my rifle and went after [the NVA who had shot at me]. Got to the top of the hill and he took his second shot at me and I heard a whine past my ear. I was shooting from the hip with my M-16 rifle and put a round right through him."²⁹

More than a hundred North Vietnamese soldiers died on Hill 881 North that day.³⁰ Others fled, attempting to find cover in the tall elephant grass from the waiting Marine fighters circling near the hill. In the late afternoon, Lance Corporal Dennis Mannion of K Company performed a brief victory ceremony. He "took down his brownish-green jungle pants and shit on the hallowed NVA high ground of 881 North—it wasn't too difficult a job. I had to take a shit anyway—and it was very satisfying."³¹

Had the Vietnam War been a World War II movie, the story would have ended here, with the exhausted but triumphant Marines atop Hill 881 North where it all began, with the siege of Khe Sanh lifted by fast-moving sky cavalry and the North Vietnamese routed. In fact, however, the PEGASUS fighting marked the midpoint, not the end, of the ordeal of Khe Sanh. More than four hundred American troops would be killed in or near Khe Sanh in the ten weeks following the commencement of Operation PEGASUS, and 2,300 others would be seriously wounded.³² That was more than twice the casualties officially reported for the period of "the siege" from late January to the end of March.

The truth was that Khe Sanh, though no longer cut off or threatened with imminent attack, remained under siege. Communist artillery, dug deep into the crags and peaks of the Co Roc mountains in nearby Laos, continued to bombard the base at will, while the Americans could never successfully locate or destroy those guns. NVA regiments, badly mauled during PEGASUS or in the winter fighting, could withdraw at will to refit and regroup across the Laotian border, then return to fight another day.

That Khe Sanh was more a liability than an asset had long been obvious to both General Rosson and his nominal superior, the III

MAF commander, Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman. As PEGASUS went forward, Cushman and Rosson made preparations to abandon Khe Sanh and to shift to a more mobile posture of operations. Naval gunfire experts and Air Force liaison officers arrived at the base to plan for the destruction of all fixed installations at Khe Sanh. Marines and support personnel began packing equipment and filling in fighting holes. "The general attitude of people in the base is that it is wrong to abandon the base after fighting so long for it," Chaplain Stubbe wrote in his diary. "Was it all worth it? Sic transit gloria mundi."³³

Chaplain Stubbe's misgivings were mild indeed compared with the reaction of General William Westmoreland when he learned of plans for "Retrograde." "Sunday we went up to Phu Bai for a meeting on Khe Sanh," General Chaisson wrote to his wife. "I never saw Westy so mad. They were working plans under Rosson to pull out. Westy lowered the boom. He was so mad he wouldn't stay around and talk with them. Instead he told me what he wanted and left me to push it with Rosson and Cushman."³⁴

The following morning a Marine engineer officer at Khe Sanh "received a very great shock" at the morning staff meeting. "Late last night word came down from 'high levels' that Khe Sanh Combat Base would not be abandoned. So we had to unpack all our personal gear and then this p.m. we started digging in again. The trenches from which we had pulled our CONEXs [large metal storage boxes] had all been filled in already and our organic [metal] mats had been staged for helo-lift. . . . It will take at least a week to get our area built up again."³⁵

Instead of closing the base, a new operation, "SCOTLAND II," would begin on April 15. Marines would continue to occupy Khe Sanh and some of the surrounding hills and to conduct reconnaissance and search-and-destroy operations.³⁶ The four battalions of Marines that had held Khe Sanh before PEGASUS would be relieved by three fresh Marine battalions and two battalions of The Cav's 1st Brigade.

SCOTLAND II opened with a battle that rivaled in sheer misery, pain, and bloodshed any of the events of the winter just ended. It began as a routine patrol by A Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, near the battalion's base on Hill 689, a few miles from Khe Sanh.

The patrol was checking an area where a few North Vietnamese soldiers, possibly forward observer teams for the ubiquitous Communist mortar batteries, had been recently spotted. Like many Marine companies in early 1968, Captain Henry D. Banks's Company A had only two platoons with a total strength of about eighty-five men. However, that was more than enough to handle the few scattered Communist soldiers who were all the Marines expected to find in the area.

The platoon left Hill 689 at 7:00 A.M., passed through a valley, and reached the base of a neighboring hill at about 10:00 A.M. Two-thirds of the way up the hill, Banks halted the company and sent his 1st Platoon under Second Lieutenant Francis B. Lovely on ahead. Just before reaching the crest, Lovely stopped and sent one fire team ahead to check out the reverse slope. Dropping to a low crawl, the fire team approached the ridge line and soon came under fire from their direct front.

Believing he had run into a sniper, Lieutenant Lovely deployed his platoon to outflank the enemy position, only to be met with heavy small arms and grenade fire. An attempt by the 2d Platoon to sweep around the right of the enemy position also met heavy fire. Within a few minutes Banks had lost a dozen men, including the 2d Platoon commander and platoon sergeant, and about twenty others were wounded. The wounded and dead were so close to the enemy positions that they could not be reached. Nor could Banks call in artillery support without endangering his own wounded.

Captain Banks, realizing that he had run into an enemy bunker complex, called for assistance in evacuating his wounded and extracting his platoon from the trap. Lieutenant Colonel John Cahill, the battalion commander, brought his two remaining companies in to help. D Company was ordered to move to back up A Company and assist in the evacuation. Meanwhile C Company would attack the rear of the enemy bunker complex to relieve pressure on A Company.

But the battalion was not dealing with a single bunker complex, as Cahill believed.³⁷ It was in fact engaged with at least a company of North Vietnamese troops in mutually supporting bunker complexes. The bunker complex facing A Company was U-shaped and therefore could not be outflanked. Its rear was protected by other

U-shaped bunker complexes, all concealed by the heavy vegetation and elephant grass.

The North Vietnamese had already won the first part of the battle by luring A Company's successive elements into a deadly crossfire and pinning them down so close that they could not call in supporting arms. Now they were to repeat the performance with C Company.

Without knowing the exact position or strength of the enemy, C Company was committed to the attack up the wooded rear of the hill on which A Company had been pinned down. Captain Lawrence Himmer, the company commander, placed his two platoons on line, with 1st Platoon leading. As the line cleared the crest of the hill, the Marines came under heavy fire from a second enemy bunker complex to its left flank. Within a few minutes Captain Himmer, the two platoon commanders, a platoon sergeant, and most of the squad leaders were killed or wounded. The Marines traded grenades with the enemy and blasted them out of bomb craters and spider holes. First Lieutenant David Carter, who led the 1st Platoon, estimated that only eight of his thirty-two men came away alive and unhurt.³⁸ Finally, under fire from both front and flank, C Company halted, its ranks heavily depleted, its center squads barely in contact with A Company.

A Company had meanwhile made good progress in evacuating its wounded, and Colonel Cahill, who had been wounded himself but refused to be evacuated, ordered D Company to attack around the other side of the hill in order to relieve the pressure on C Company, now in as precarious a position as A.

Making their way through the 4-foot elephant grass, Captain Cargill's D Company was soon immobilized by heavy and accurate sniper fire and mortars. With five men killed and unable to see the enemy, D Company was also halted.

With darkness approaching, Colonel Cahill now had no choice but to attempt to extract his scattered and badly hurt companies. As Corporal Dewey E. Troup, a squad leader with C Company bitterly observed, "By evening there was bodies everywhere . . . and we really hadn't did what we came up there to do: we still hadn't got the gooks off the hill . . . 'cause we didn't have anything left to take the hill."³⁹ Company A had largely completed its withdrawal, and

Company B had retrieved its wounded but not its dead. Company C was in worse shape, its dead and wounded in scattered pockets, its company commander missing.

The evacuation of the wounded had become a minor nightmare. The single landing zone was under intermittent mortar fire and was so small that CH-46s could not land safely. Only UH-1s, smaller and handier but with less carrying capacity, could be used. With Khe Sanh fogged in, the choppers had to make the long flight all the way back to Dong Ha before returning. As darkness settled in, evacuation became even more difficult; eventually some casualties had to be brought back or carried to Hill 689.

Departing from Marine Corps tradition, 1/9 had been obliged to leave some of its dead behind. What was not realized at the time was that some of the living had been left as well. The following morning Marines of C Company on Hill 689 were startled to hear a man yelling across the valley from the area of the previous day's battle. Corporal Henry Casteneda recognized the voice of his squad-mate, Corporal John Hunnicutt, thought to have been killed in the previous day's fighting. Sergeant Thomas Dubrey quickly organized his platoon for a rescue. As the lead squad approached Hunnicut's position, they suddenly heard a single rifle shot. At the same time Corporal Hunnicut's yells ceased. The Marines called to Hunnicut but heard no reply, and they were now beginning to receive scattered sniper fire. Convinced that Hunnicut was dead, Sergeant Dubrey withdrew to Hill 689.

Less than two hours later a spotter plane, checking the area of the previous day's fighting, noticed a Marine who appeared to be alive about 50 meters down the slope from the U-shaped bunker complex that had been the objective of A and D companies' unsuccessful assaults. A number of American bodies could also be seen scattered near the bunker.

While fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships strafed and rocketed the area, volunteers from 1/9 boarded two CH-46s to attempt to rescue the Marine and recover as many bodies as possible. The first CH-46 landed in a swirl of dust and sand directly atop the bunker complex. One North Vietnamese soldier was crushed to death as the 46 lowered its heavy rear tailgate, and the Marines emerged, rifles and machine guns blazing. Four more Vietnamese

were shot by the Marines as they raced around the left side of the helicopter toward a half-dozen Marine bodies. The single live Marine remained on the right of the helicopter, too far away to be reached, and the CH-46 had now become the target of enemy mortar and machine gun fire. With seventeen bullet and shrapnel holes in its fuselage and part of the hydraulic system shot away, the CH-46 could not reposition itself for a second try. The rescue party scrambled back aboard and the 46 limped back to Hill 689.

The live Marine was still on the ground, and the second CH-46 requested permission to make a try, but the battalion air officer had now concluded that the large, slow CH-46s would have little chance of making a successful rescue in such a confined space.

But other helicopters could. Early in the afternoon Air Cavalry gunship pilots in the area who had been listening to the radio traffic volunteered to attempt a pickup. A flight of eight Huey gunships, collectively called Blue Max, slowly circled the area blasting away with rockets and machine guns while a ninth swooped down to rescue the Marine. Medevaced to Khe Sanh, the rescued Marine proved to be not Corporal Hunnicut but PFC Panyaninec, another C Company survivor.

CPT FRANK MAYER GOT DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS FOR THIS
The following morning, Corporal Casteneda again heard Hunnicut's voice calling for help. C Company dispatched another patrol to rescue Hunnicut. By this time, however, the planned transfer and replacement of Marine battalions at Khe Sanh was well under way. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill was about to get a new regimental commander. So the patrol was halted a few hundred yards from Hunnicut while two colonels and a general discussed its next move. While the discussion continued, Blue Max repeated its performance of the previous day and rescued Hunnicut. In all, 1/9 had lost forty-one killed and thirty-two wounded on Hill 622. Corporal Hunnicut's C Company had twenty-six of its eighty-five-odd Marines killed, including the company commander, Captain Himmer. More than two dozen dead had been left on the battlefield.

The failure to recover the dead and the long delays in evacuating the wounded were unusual and prompted an investigation, but in most other ways 1/9's nameless battle on a nameless hill near Khe Sanh was fairly typical of Marine battles in Vietnam in the spring of

1968. A platoon or company would stumble onto a well-prepared enemy unit in a strong, mutually-supporting bunker complex. The Americans would take heavy casualties in the first few minutes and would be hindered in using artillery by fear of hitting wounded near the bunkers. The wounded, in turn, would be unreachable because of heavy enemy fire. Other American units would be committed to the battle without benefit of reconnaissance or intelligence and would themselves be ambushed or pinned down.

That 1/9 failed to occupy the hill and force the Communists to retreat was no doubt galling to the pride of Marines like Corporal Troup and many others, but in practical terms this failure made little difference. The Marines would have left the hill within a few days in any case. As a squad leader with 2d Battalion, 26th Marines commented a few days after his battalion's successful assault on Hill 881 North, "First of all I'd like to say that I feel this operation was successful. But it was needless, due to the fact that after we had taken our objective we just left it. . . . We ran them off the hill and they came right back and occupied the position."⁴⁰ In victory or defeat, the pattern of ground warfare near the DMZ remained the same.

Further south, however, in the coastal lowlands of Thua Thien province near Hue, Brigadier General John H. Cushman's second brigade of the 101st Airborne was experimenting with new methods. Since arriving in the area in mid-March, Cushman had attempted to work closely with the South Vietnamese, establishing close ties between his units and local government officials. Unlike many American commanders, Cushman encouraged close cooperation with the South Vietnamese military, even undertaking joint operations and arranging for South Vietnamese Regional Forces and militia or "Popular Forces" to accompany American platoons and companies.⁴¹

The result was that Cushman began to receive good intelligence on the whereabouts of the enemy. On more than one occasion his men were able to locate North Vietnamese Army forces precisely in a village or hamlet and surround the area. Yet the majority of the enemy was almost always able to slip through the American encirclement or "cordon" during the night.

Unsuccessful or at best partly successful, cordon operations had become a commonplace since the U.S. forces first began large-scale operations in Vietnam three years before. Cushman was determined to change that. He and his battalion commanders attempted further cordon operations and carefully analyzed their experiences. It soon became apparent that night-long continuous illumination of a village by air-dropped flares would be necessary for success. Even eight to ten minutes of darkness would be sufficient for the enemy to shift position and escape. It was also necessary to ring the village completely with foxholes only 10 meters apart. Finally, every man in those foxholes would have to remain awake and alert, even though many of them might have been fighting all the previous day.

At the end of April, Cushman's men finally got the chance to apply their hard-learned lessons. In Huong Tra district near Hue, at a bend in the Perfume River, two companies of the American 1/501st, the elite Black Panther company of the South Vietnamese First Division, and three platoons of Popular Forces trapped an entire North Vietnamese battalion in two villages, Phuoc Yen and Le Van Thuong.

For five nights the North Vietnamese struggled desperately to escape the noose, losing about four hundred men before final resistance collapsed on May 3. The Americans and South Vietnamese captured 107 prisoners, the largest haul of the war to that point. The brigade repeated its success one month later, when it encircled and destroyed the command group of a North Vietnamese regiment and a battalion in the village of Le Xa Dong in Phu Vang district, capturing forty-one prisoners.

The Second Brigade's achievement was hailed as a great success by Saigon and was played up for the media, but Cushman's innovations were not passed on. Indeed, MACV lacked any effective mechanism for passing them on, and his achievements were never repeated. Within a few months, failure, sometimes disastrous failure, had become the rule for attempts at cordon operations in Vietnam.

While the Marines were settling in to more of the same in the hills and valleys near Khe Sanh, and the Second Brigade of the 101st was conducting its successful experiments with cordons, the 1st Cavalry Division had been assigned a new mission. The biggest Communist success of Tet had come at Hue, the old imperial capital, where

North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces had seized a large proportion of the city. They had held out for three weeks in the older fortified part of the city known as the Citadel, which contained the imperial palace. General Westmoreland and his commanders were convinced that the staging area and supply base for the Communist forces that had attacked Hue and for others which continued to menace Thua Tien province was the A Shau Valley. The A Shau was a remote, mile-wide finger of bottom land running northwest to southeast between the jagged mountains near the Laotian border. An old French road, Route 527, snaked its way from the valley across mist-covered mountains to Hue.

From 1963 until 1966, the Americans had maintained a Special Forces camp at the southern end of the A Shau Valley, but in March 1966 the Communists had overrun the camp. Using materials from the former American airstrip to improve their main road, Route 548, the Communists turned the valley into a major base and terminus of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴² Now for the first time since 1966 Westmoreland was ready to again attack the A Shau Valley with his Air Cavalry.

To General Tolson the sudden order to terminate his 1st Cavalry Division's operations around Khe Sanh and move to the A Shau came as an unwelcome surprise. "I had scheduled more than thirty-eight additional operations to extend our control of the Khe Sanh area," he wrote four years later. "There was great potential for the continued air assault operations that were abruptly brought to a close."⁴³

The great haste in dispatching The Cav to the A Shau was due to calculations about the weather. Even in a region of Southeast Asia renowned for its bad weather, the A Shau Valley had a special reputation. Its peculiar location and topography made it subject to both the northeast and southeast monsoon with their heavy rain and hail. The brief interval between monsoons, mid-April to mid-May, was believed by Westmoreland's planners to be the only suitable time for operations in the valley.⁴⁴

The 1st Cav's descent into the A Shau, code-named Operation Delaware, began with a near disaster as two battalions of The Cav air-assaulted into the northern end of the valley on April 19. Despite more than two hundred tactical air strikes and twenty-one B-52 raids

during the preceding five days, North Vietnamese anti-batteries were alive and kicking as the assault helicopters made their way down through the fog and low-lying clouds. Mobile 37mm antiaircraft guns, which could fire three rounds a minute, and dozens of heavy machine guns destroyed ten helicopters and damaged more than a dozen others.⁴⁵

Once on the ground the two battalions, 1-7 Cavalry and 5-7 Cavalry, found themselves unopposed but virtually walled in by the steadily deteriorating weather. During the next four days high winds, thunderstorms, and torrential rains made aerial resupply a nightmare. For the helo pilots "what should have been a simple twenty-minute flight" from The Cav's staging area to the valley "was usually an hour and twenty minutes of sheer terror." The Hueys picked their way through fog and rain squalls, always hoping to avoid the jagged peaks and ridge lines obscured by the clouds and murk.⁴⁶

Despite the weather, 5-7 Cavalry, whose direct support artillery had been airlifted in an hour after its assault, was able to receive some supplies. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Wasiak's 1-7 Cavalry was not so lucky; their position at LZ Vicky was so weathered in that the battalion could neither be resupplied nor evacuated. Colonel Wasiak had no choice but to move his battalion overland to a more favorable spot 4 miles south, LZ Goodman. The trek through the thick jungle in the pouring rain took four days. (In The Cav's after-action report this movement was described as "1-7 Cav commenced an attack over land to secure LZ Goodman.")⁴⁷ Along the way, 1-7 troopers discovered two Soviet-built bulldozers carefully concealed in the hillside.

As 1-7 arrived at LZ Goodman the weather moderated, and on April 24 two battalions of The Cav's 1st Brigade air-assaulted into the central part of the valley near the abandoned airstrip at the village of A Loui. Meanwhile the 3rd Brigade in the northern end of the valley took advantage of the better weather to bring in their remaining supporting units and artillery. In both the northern and the central portions of the valley Cav soldiers were finding massive amounts of supplies as well as trucks, construction equipment, and the AA guns that had earlier given them so much trouble.

The North Vietnamese forces in the valley, mostly engineer and transportation troops, put up little resistance on the ground except

at a large depression in the valley called the Punch Bowl, which housed a major logistics complex. The North Vietnamese company defending the Punch Bowl was well entrenched in mutually supporting bunkers and had at least one tank in support.

Using massive air and artillery support The Cav blasted the North Vietnamese from the bunkers in three days of hard fighting. Sergeant Hillery Craig of D Company 1/8 Cav knocked out a tank with two rounds from his M-72 rocket launcher. The Punch Bowl proved to be the major supply and support center for the entire A Shau Valley with a truck park, hospital, administrative, and logistical sites.⁴⁸

By May 10, as the rains of the southwest monsoon forced The Cav to begin extracting its units from the valley, the horse soldiers had captured more than 71,000 pounds of food, over two hundred thousand rounds of ammunition, seventy-six vehicles including a tank, and more than a dozen large antiaircraft guns.⁴⁹

The 1st Cavalry Division commanders believed that Operation Delaware had been a severe blow to the Communists, not only in the material but also in the psychological sense. "The 1st ACD has effectively demonstrated to the enemy that he has no sanctuaries. His operations are under constant threat of assault by air-mobile infantry," read The Cav's after-action report.⁵⁰ In fact, the North Vietnamese were back in a few weeks. American and South Vietnamese forces would not return to the A Shau for almost a year. When they did return, the operation there would lead to one of the most fateful encounters of the war on a mountain called Dong Ap Bia, which the GIs would soon rename Hamburger Hill.

By the time The Cav had departed the A Shau in mid-May the North Vietnamese had begun to return to the area around Khe Sanh in considerable numbers. By early May four North Vietnamese regiments totaling more than 4,500 men, together with supporting artillery, were in the immediate vicinity of the base. The 3d Marine Division commander, General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, compared the situation "to that experienced during late CY 1967."⁵¹ The overland supply route along Highway 9 from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh remained open but was the scene of "almost nightly ambushes and fire fights."⁵² More than two hundred Marines and soldiers had been killed and almost one thousand wounded since the siege had been officially lifted in mid-April. Khe Sanh was once again experiencing

heavy shelling by artillery, mortars, and rockets. "No one here is unaware," remarked Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman, commander of the Marine forces in and around Khe Sanh, "that 'Long-range Charley' would like to put one of his 130mm rounds right on your head."⁵³

Less than one month after the conclusion of PEGASUS, after all the dramatics of "air-mobile assaults," Marines taking back the high ground, and "lifting the siege," the war in the mist-covered mountains on the Laotian border was back to business as usual.

been spectacular yet unsuccessful. In the Central Highlands, however, the story would be different.

Far from the urban centers and coastal farmlands, just 10 miles from the Laotian border, the Special Forces base of Kham Duc sat in the center of a mile-wide green bowl in the rugged border country of northwestern Quang Tin province, about 90 miles southwest of Da Nang. After the much-publicized fall of Lang Vei in February 1968, Kham Duc, with its satellite camp Ngoc Tavak, 3 miles closer to Laos, was the last remaining Special Forces camp on the Laotian border of I Corps. The two outposts sat astride Route 14, the principal north-south road through the border region. Just across the border, the roads and tracks of the Ho Chi Minh Trail extended their fingers south and east, some already reaching to Route 14 itself. From there the North Vietnamese forces could continue east to the coastal plains south of Da Nang, or southeast to the Central Highland towns of Kontum and Dak To.

Like Khe Sanh and Lang Vei, Kham Duc and Ngoc Tavak did not truly "block" the enemy's infiltration into South Vietnam. The border country was too rugged, the Communist lateral roads too numerous, and the camps' garrisons too small to do that, yet the camps kept the Communists under observation and frequently interdicted their movements. Their presence meant that there would always be some sand and gravel thrown into the smoothly meshed gears of the Laotian infiltration system.

Since early April, U.S. Army engineer units had been at work upgrading Kham Duc's runway and constructing a hard-surface base for a radio navigation facility. As the improvements to the base progressed, so did Communist preparations for attack. By late April U.S. intelligence was reporting large enemy units in the area, including elements of the 2d PAVN Division. A prisoner taken on May 3 reported that his unit was planning to attack Kham Duc.²⁷ Four months before, when Khe Sanh had been similarly threatened, the Americans had poured in reinforcements and air support. After the besieged base held, General Westmoreland would declare the battle for Khe Sanh "a Dien Bien Phu in reverse." Kham Duc, however, was to prove a Khe Sanh in reverse.

As at Khe Sanh, the Americans began by reinforcing. A battalion task force of the Americal Division, consisting of the 2d Battalion,

1st Infantry, an additional infantry company, and some supporting artillery, began arriving by air at Kham Duc late in the morning of May 10. Lieutenant Colonel Robert B. Nelson, commander of the 2d Battalion, assumed command of the camp.²⁸

Nelson's men joined about sixty Army engineers and about four hundred Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) soldiers with their South Vietnamese and U.S. Special Forces leaders and advisers. The CIDG were mercenaries recruited and organized by the Special Forces from among the various highland non-Vietnamese tribal, ethnic, and religious minorities. Neither as well-armed nor as well-trained as the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, the CIDG group's primary mission was surveillance, scouting, patrol, and local security. Although their leaders were sometimes bound to the Special Forces and the government by personal ties or political deals, they were primarily freelance soldiers and were hired as a group on a contractual basis. Their behavior in a crisis varied from cowardice and treachery to stalwart heroism depending, on the specific situation and the tribal group involved.²⁹

Even as reinforcements were arriving at Kham Duc, Ngoc Tavak was already under attack. Located on the site of an old French fort, Ngoc Tavak was defended by a 113-man CIDG "Mobile Strike Force Company" with eight U.S. Army Special Forces and three Australian Training Team advisers. Thirty-three U.S. Marines of Battery D, 2d Battalion, 13th Marines, manned two 105mm howitzers, which had recently been moved to Ngoc Tavak to interdict nearby North Vietnamese routes and trails. The howitzers, however, were short of ammunition and could be resupplied only by air from Kham Duc.³⁰

At 3:00 in the morning of May 10, the Communists opened a heavy artillery and mortar barrage against the base, followed by a ground attack some thirty minutes later. During the height of the action some of the CIDG troops abandoned their positions and fled toward the compound yelling, "Don't shoot, don't shoot, friendly, friendly." Once inside the compound, however, the "friendly" troops unleashed a hail of grenades and tossed satchel charges at the Marine positions, causing heavy casualties. Some of the surviving Americans believed that they could also hear the distinctive sound of carbines being fired at them by the CIDGs. (Only the CIDGs had

carbines. All NVA troops carried AK-47s, whose high-velocity rounds sounded quite different from those of a carbine.)³¹

The Special Forces commander, Captain Christopher J. Silva, and the commander of the Marine battery, Lieutenant Adams, were both badly wounded during the night. As the North Vietnamese attackers penetrated the perimeter and advanced into the eastern end of the camp, the remaining defenders pulled back and called for support from Air Force gunships and fighter-bombers on station above the camp. The defenders believed that some of the wounded were still on the western side of the camp, but as the North Vietnamese closed in the Americans had no choice but to call for the gunships to blast the western side with their deadly flechettes and cannon.³²

At dawn, two Australian warrant officers managed to organize a counterattack by the loyal CIDG troops, which cleared the perimeter and recaptured the howitzer positions abandoned during the night attack. Yet the Marines were almost out of shells for their 105s.

Four CH-46 helicopters carrying reinforcements from Kham Duc arrived later that morning to be greeted by a hail of fire from the North Vietnamese forces surrounding Ngoc Tavak. The first chopper managed to land safely and unload about twenty-five CIDG troops, but as the second CH-46 approached the landing zone its fuel line was severed by automatic weapons fire. The damaged chopper, its fuel streaming from the fuselage, settled safely to the ground and unloaded its troops. The third helicopter landed along side and discharged its reinforcements as the crew of the crippled CH-46 jumped aboard. As the third chopper was about to lift off, however, it was hit by an RPG round and burst into flames.³³ The helicopter landing zone was now unusable, and only small UH-1 medevac helicopters could land at the camp to take off the severely wounded. As one medevac chopper came in to hover off a nearby hill, a large number of panicky CIDG soldiers rushed aboard; others held on to the skids as the helicopter lifted off, then fell to their death several hundred feet below.³⁴

Captain White of the Australian training team, the senior surviving officer, was now in command. Requesting permission to evacuate the camp, White was told to "hang on." With the helo pad unserviceable, water and ammunition nearly exhausted, most of the

Americans killed or wounded, and the steadiness of the CIDG a doubtful proposition, White believed he had no choice but to abandon the camp before darkness brought renewed attacks.³⁵

Avoiding the obvious routes to Kham Duc, where the enemy was almost certain to be waiting in ambush, White led his men southeast through heavy jungle to a hill about a mile from Ngoc Tavak, where they hacked out a landing zone. CH-46s quickly swooped in to bring the survivors back to Kham Duc.³⁶

The loss of Ngoc Tavak had been costly. Of the forty-four Americans and Australians at Ngoc Tavak, fifteen had died, twenty-three had been wounded, and two were missing. Of the hundred-odd CIDG troops, sixty-four were missing or had deserted and thirty were killed or wounded.³⁷ By the time the dazed and exhausted survivors reached Kham Duc, that camp, too, was under attack.

Scattered mortar fire rained down on the camp on May 11 as the last of the Americal reinforcements and additional supplies were flown into the besieged base. By the end of that day there were a total of some 1,500 U.S. and CIDG soldiers at Kham Duc plus almost three hundred dependents of the CIDG troops, who had been evacuated from their village near the base. Many of the Americal troops had been sent to reinforce the outposts in the hills surrounding the camp's bowl-shaped valley.

Late at night on May 11, troops of the 1st NVA Regiment began their final preparations for an assault on Kham Duc. Around 4:00 A.M. the Communists overran the first of the outposts, Number 7, on a hill northeast of the base. By that time General Westmoreland had already decided to abandon the camp.

Since the arrival of U.S. forces in Vietnam, some of the largest and most stubborn battles had begun as contests for the control of such Special Forces camps as Plei Me, Bu Dop, Bac Po, and Khe Sanh. Kham Duc appeared likely to be the next such battleground, with powerful enemy forces converging on the base, U.S. reinforcements arriving, and support and strike aircraft being summoned to aid the defenders.

Yet as U.S. commanders studied the impending battle, they began to have second thoughts. When Colonel Jonathan Ladd, commander of Special Forces in Vietnam, met with the III MAF commander, General Robert Cushman, he found Cushman unwilling to commit

os to Kham Duc. Colonel Ladd pointed out that strong
ents would be needed to hold the camp against an attack
rced PAVN regiment. General Cushman, however, had
few uncommitted troops to spare and was concerned about a new
threat posed by the buildup of Communist forces in the An Hoa
basin area southeast of Da Nang. A reserve CIDG Mobile Strike
Force company had already been dispatched to another threatened
Special Forces camp, Thuong Duc, located on the main western
approaches to Da Nang. General Cushman also pointed out that
Kham Duc would be difficult to resupply and was beyond artillery
range of friendly supporting bases.³⁸

The following afternoon, Ladd accompanied Deputy MACV
Commander Creighton Abrams to a meeting with Cushman and
Amical Division commander Major General Samuel Koster.
Koster had now assumed operational control of the Kham Duc
battle. At the meeting the III MAF staff briefed the generals on the
situation at Kham Duc. They recommended that the camp be
abandoned or, as they phrased it, "relocated." Colonel Ladd strongly
disagreed, pointing out that Kham Duc was the last South Vietnamese
outpost in the western mountains of southern I Corps. He also
emphasized that it was an important launching site for MACV's
super-secret SOG teams, which conducted reconnaissance missions
and raids into Laos and other parts of southeast Asia to observe and
interdict lines of communication, capture prisoners, assess bomb
damage, and collect intelligence. By 1968 the number of such
missions had risen to more than three hundred a year.³⁹

Colonel Ladd suggested that a Communist victory at Kham Duc
might be put to propaganda use, especially in view of the opening of
peace talks in Paris. Unmentioned but ever present during the
deliberations were the recent vivid memories of the siege of Khe
Sanh. Although American generals had always spoken of the battle
with confidence and enthusiasm when addressing Washington or the
media, they had found it an anxious and wearing experience,
superimposed as it was on the widespread and bloody fights of Tet.
Now, with the new "mini-Tet" looming, neither Abrams nor
Cushman was inclined to begin another protracted battle. "The
decision to evacuate was brought on considerably by the Khe Sanh
experience," General Westmoreland's operations officer wrote.⁴⁰ At

the conclusion of the discussions, Abrams instructed Cushman to
prepare plans for a withdrawal. Westmoreland approved the decision
a few hours later.⁴¹

By the time word of the decision to evacuate reached Colonel
Nelson at Kham Duc, all of the hill outposts were under heavy
attack. Squads and platoons of Americal soldiers reinforcing the
CIDG troops on the hills fought desperately, supported by C-47
gunships, which dropped flares to illuminate the area and peppered
the attackers with their mini-cannon. As the outposts were over-
whelmed, the defenders directed gunship and artillery fire onto their
own positions. A few managed to escape into the Kham Duc
perimeter, but many died on the hill outposts.

The fate of the outposts added to the sense of terror and
foreboding within Kham Duc. The morning began with a fresh
disaster as the first evacuation helicopter, an Army CH-47, was hit by
heavy ground fire as it landed on the runway. The chopper exploded
in flames, and its burning hulk blocked the runway for more than an
hour.

As the sun rose over Kham Duc, burning away some of the
morning fog, aerial observers beheld a grim sight. The camp was
under almost continuous mortar fire, and heavy ground attacks were
under way against the northwest perimeter. The burning CH-47 sent
clouds of black smoke into the sky. On the nearby hills radio
antennas sprouted above the newly established NVA command
posts.⁴²

Inside the perimeter the men of E Company, 2/1 Infantry, tensely
awaited the ground attack they knew would come. The enemy
mortar barrage increased in intensity, and a near miss showered one
squad with shrapnel. An 82mm mortar round scored a direct hit on
a nearby mortar manned by CIDG personnel, killing or wounding all
three of the crew. Specialist 4 Todd Regon, leader of the E Company
mortar team, quickly rounded up some Americal infantry men, led
them to the pit, and gave them a crash course in mortar firing.
Scrambling back to his own mortar position, Regon was astounded
to see illumination rounds bursting over the daytime battlefield. An
instant later the mortar man recalled that he had failed to show his
infantry trainees the difference between high explosive and illumina-
tion rounds for the CIDG mortar. Despite his grim situation, Regon

managed to chuckle, "This ought to confuse the hell out of the enemy."⁴³

As enemy pressure on the base increased, MACV directed all available air support to Kham Duc. Fighters and attack planes from Pleiku, Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay, and Phu Cat and from bases in Thailand converged on the beleaguered base in answer to Seventh Air Force commander General W. W. Momyer's call for a "Grand Slam" maximum air effort. An airborne command post in a converted C-130 coordinated the air attacks as dozens of aircraft responded to Momyer's call. At times there were as many as twenty fighters over Kham Duc. Two forward air controllers in light planes flew parallel to each other at opposite sides of the Kham Duc runway, each controlling fighter strikes on its side of the field. "There was such an abundance of fighters by late morning that the FACs could choose the fighter they wanted, based on whether it carried napalm, cluster bomb units, five-hundred- or seven-hundred-fifty-pound bombs, or high drag bombs."⁴⁴

"We've got a small Khe Sanh going here," an Air Force officer at Kham Duc wrote in his diary. "I hope we finish it before night comes."⁴⁵ The evacuation, when it came, was marked by confusion, panic, and tragedy. Many of the defenders at Kham Duc were not informed of the decision to abandon the camp until many hours after it had been made. The CIDG forces, panicky and on the verge of mutiny or surrender, feared that the Americans would abandon them.

The Air Force's 834th Air Division, whose giant C-123s and C-130s would have to make the actual evacuation, was also dogged by confusion and last-minute changes. At 8:20 A.M. on the twelfth, the 834th was alerted for an all-out effort to evacuate the beleaguered base. Two hours later, fighting at Kham Duc had grown so intense that the Seventh Air Force canceled the evacuation and directed the transports to fly in additional ammunition to Kham Duc. By the time the MACV operations center directed the 834th to resume evacuation operations, around 1:30 P.M., transports were already on their way to Kham Duc loaded with ammunition. Other planes on the ground had to unload their cargoes before proceeding empty to Kham Duc to bring out the defenders. To complicate matters further, Colonel Henderson's command post could not



In the wake of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam and widespread domestic dissent and disillusionment with the war, President Johnson meets with his advisers to hear a briefing by General Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy. At the end of March 1968, Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection, that bombing of North Vietnam would cease, and that peace talks should begin. (l. to r.: Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the President, and General Abrams)(Defense Dept.)



Following the defeat of the Communist attacks in August and September 1968, General Creighton Abrams advised President Johnson that a further bombing halt in return for substantive peace talks would be militarily safe and "the right thing to do." (U.S. Army)

communicate with many of the supporting aircraft because the Americal's radios were incompatible with those used by most of the planes. Messages had to be relayed from the Special Forces command post, whose radios could talk to the planes. At times, the heavy volume of incoming message traffic "almost jammed" the two nets.⁴⁶ The communications mess made it almost impossible for ground commanders to coordinate transport and helicopter landings with supporting air strikes.

That complete disaster was averted could be credited largely to the deadly skills of the fighter pilots and their controllers and to the iron nerve and brilliant improvisation of the tactical airlift crews. The first C-130 into Kham Duc landed about 10:00 A.M. in a hail of mortar and automatic weapons fire and blew a tire on the debris-strewn runway. Lieutenant Colonel Daryll D. Cole's plane, dispatched before the evacuation order had been reinstated, had a full load of cargo for Kham Duc, but panic-stricken civilians and CIDG troops rushed the plane as soon as it taxied to a stop, preventing either orderly unloading or evacuation. With mortar shells landing ever closer to the aircraft, Cole decided to attempt a takeoff with his overloaded plane crowded with CIDG personnel and much of the remaining cargo. His first attempt was unsuccessful, and the increased attention the plane was attracting from NVA gunners persuaded the passengers to make a hasty exit. In the meantime, the crew had succeeded in cutting away part of the ruined tire. Dodging the runway debris, with fuel streaming from the wing tanks, and under heavy fire, Cole managed to get his stricken C-130 airborne and safely back to Cam Ranh Bay.

Cole was followed by a C-123 piloted by Major Ray Shelton, which managed to load about sixty Army engineers and Vietnamese civilians in less than three minutes and to take off under heavy enemy fire.

Throughout the day Army and Marine helicopters continued to dodge the heavy fire to bring in ammunition and evacuate the wounded from Kham Duc. Yet the helicopters could not carry the large numbers of people now desperate to escape from the doomed camp. Only the large transports of the 834th could do that, and since 11:00 A.M. there had been no planes. Then, around 3:00 P.M., a C-130 piloted by Major Bernard L. Butcher landed at Kham Duc.

CIDG troops, women, and children swarmed aboard the plane. The CIDG soldiers and their families were convinced that the Americans intended to leave them behind and were in a state of utter panic. Two hours earlier, Special Forces Sergeant Richard Campbell had watched in horror and disbelief as a woman and her small child who had fallen while climbing the rear ramp of a CH-46 helicopter were trampled by fear-maddened CIDG soldiers in a rush to board the chopper.⁴⁷ Now, nearly two hundred women and children crowded aboard Butcher's bullet-riddled C-130.

Because he had received heavy fire from the southwest corner of the field on landing, Butcher elected to take off to the northeast. A few minutes before Butcher's takeoff, fighters had raked the NVA machine guns on the low ridges north of the runway with loads of cluster bomb units. The deadly CBUs killed the gun crews but failed to silence the guns, which were soon manned by replacements from nearby enemy positions.⁴⁸ Butcher's plane, struck by heavy machine gun fire, crashed and exploded in an orange ball of flame less than a mile from the runway. There were no survivors.⁴⁹

Watching Butcher's crash, Lieutenant Colonel William Boyd, Jr., pilot of the next C-130 into the camp, decided on a steep, side-slipping descent onto the field. Just as Boyd's plane was about to touch down a shell exploded 100 feet ahead on the runway. Pushing his throttle forward, Boyd climbed steeply into the air for a second attempt. Landing successfully on his next try, Boyd loaded about one hundred CIDG and American soldiers and took off under heavy fire for Cam Ranh Bay.

The fourth C-130, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Delmore, had been forced to make a second pass to avoid Boyd's takeoff, and this time the Communist gunners were ready. Their .50 caliber bullets ripped 6-inch holes in the sides of the fuselage as the giant C-130, its hydraulic system shot away, bounced along the runway, glanced off the wreckage of the CH-46 destroyed that morning, and plowed into a dirt mound on the side of the runway. Miraculously the entire crew escaped. A few minutes later Delmore's crippled plane burst into flames.

The remaining C-130 pilots orbiting above Kham Duc awaiting their turn to land had seen Butcher's plane crash and burn, Delmore's wrecked on landing, and two helicopters hit by ground

fire and destroyed. The runway was littered with debris and burning wreckage.

Undeterred, Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Montgomery brought his C-130 into Kham Duc, followed by two more C-130s, which, together, brought out more than four hundred people, just as the Seventh Air Force was issuing orders to cancel further C-130 landings because of the high losses. A final daring flight by Lieutenant Colonel Joe M. Jackson in a C-123 brought out the last Air Force ground control personnel. The Special Forces command group, which had insisted on remaining to the last so as to exercise some control over the terrified and near-mutinous CIDG forces, escaped by helicopter shortly afterward.

Before 5:00 P.M. it was over. Communist troops advanced cautiously into Kham Duc and along the runway perimeter as explosions from the burning aircraft and ammunition dumps lit up the twilight sky. The following morning sixty B-52 bombers, the entire force available in Vietnam, rained 12,000 tons of bombs on the camp, and MACV proclaimed that the enemy had suffered severely. Yet nothing could disguise the fact that Kham Duc had been an American defeat—a Khe Sanh in reverse. American commanders had vacillated between reinforcing the camp and evacuating it, finally opting for evacuation under the worst possible circumstances. Command, control, and communications had been confused and often ineffective. General Abrams termed the operation "a minor disaster."⁵⁰ "This was an ugly one and I expect some repercussions," the chief of Westmoreland's operations center wrote.⁵¹

Yet the repercussions were few. Abrams angrily ordered I Corps commanders to review their command, control, communications, and planning in order "that when your command is confronted with a similar imminent problem, appropriate action would be taken so that we would not lose another camp."⁵² The general's expression of unhappiness, however, was confined to Top Secret messages. No heads rolled, no investigations were launched. Saigon and Washington remained unruffled, barely concerned. The news media, preoccupied with the Communist attacks in Saigon and the peace negotiations in Paris, paid little attention. In a war in which the distinction between success and failure, victory and defeat, had long

been blurred and confused, even an unequivocal debacle like Kham Duc could be obfuscated, obscured, and ignored.

One reason General Cushman could ill spare troops to reinforce Kham Duc was that he was expecting an attack on Da Nang similar to those the Communists had already launched against Saigon. By 1968 the entire 1st Marine Division existed almost solely for the defense of Da Nang. That city, with its giant airfield, port facilities, and complex array of military headquarters and logistical support facilities, had become the nerve center of the war in the north.

The 1st Marine Division's regiments were deployed in a fanlike fashion to the southwest, south, and southeast of the city, facing at least five North Vietnamese and Viet Cong regiments, some thirty-thousand men, concealed among the heavily populated lowland rice country or in the scrub and elephant grass of the river valleys of the Thu Bon and An Hoa or the jungle-covered Que Son mountains.

Over the past three years the Marines and the Army Americal Division to the south had launched numerous forays against these base areas. Always difficult, often harrowing and bloody, the operations were invariably declared "successful." Yet the Communist threat remained.

Now Cushman prepared to launch another spoiling attack, code-named ALLEN BROOK. For this operation the Marines deployed elements of the 5th, 7th, and 27th Marines in the broad valley of the Thu Bon River, which flowed into the sea near Hoi An, about 20 miles south of Da Nang. The objective was a suspected Communist base complex located on Go Noi Island, an island formed by the Thu Bon River in Dien Ban district near Route 1, the main north-south highway of South Vietnam.

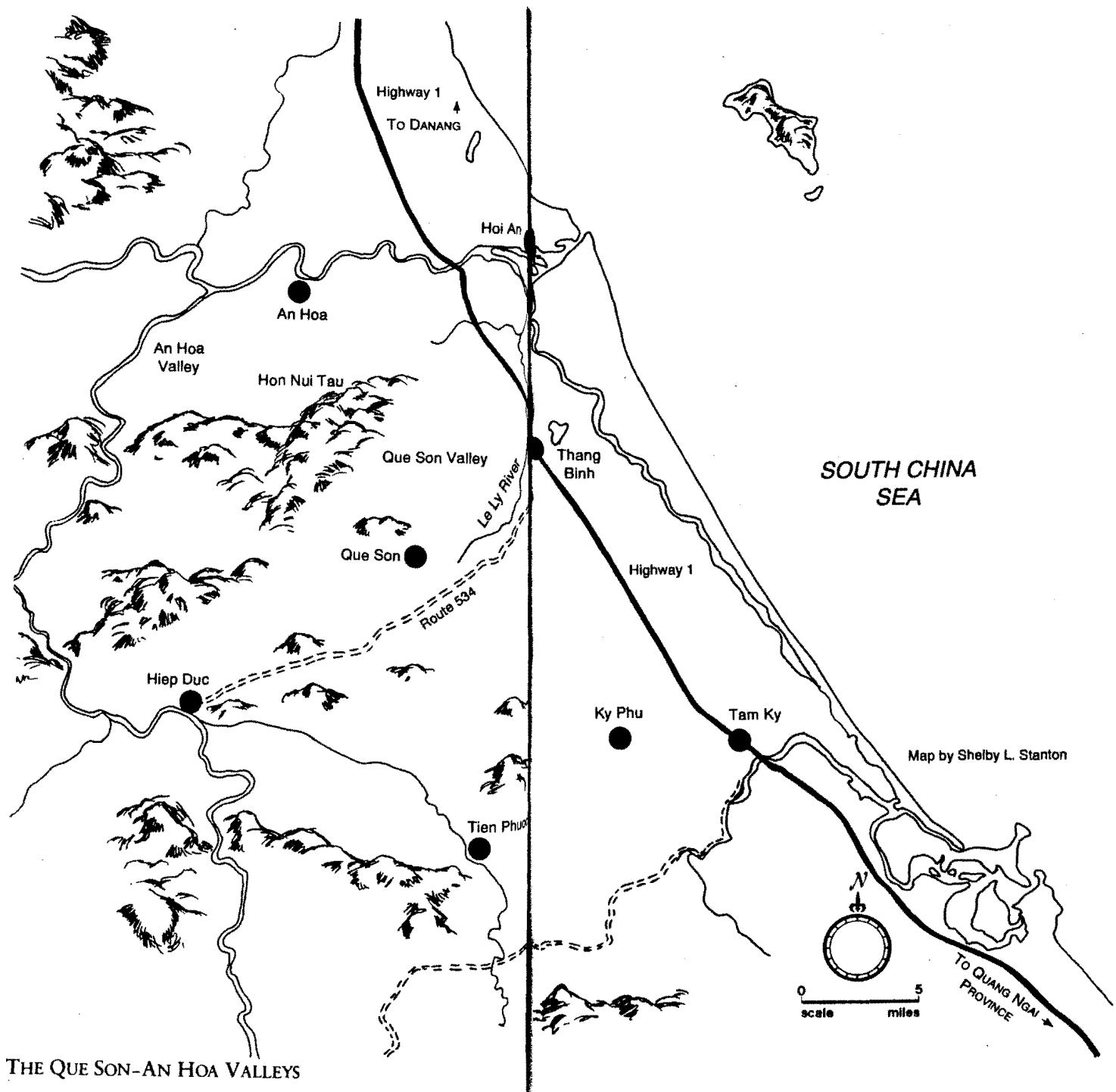
In Dien Ban district the coastal rice paddies gave way to flat, open fields covered by grass and scrub, broken by the occasional thick stand of trees. The flat, sandy soil was used for growing crops of corn, peanuts, and tobacco, and the civilian population was relatively sparse and scattered. In mid-May, when two battalions of the 7th and 27th Marines began Operation ALLEN BROOK, the average daily temperature in Dien Ban district hovered above 110 degrees each day.

I Company, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, was the first to find the enemy. Landed by helicopter onto a grassy knoll, the company fanned out by platoons into the valley. Moving toward a small hamlet with his squad, Lance Corporal Lewis Carpenter, the point fire team leader, noticed a woman gesturing and shouting vigorously to some unseen persons in the hamlet. Yelling for the squad to follow, Carpenter's fire team raced to the hamlet, surprising a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers at their meal. As Carpenter's men opened fire, the Communists fled in all directions while the women screamed and vainly attempted to retrieve the NVA rifles from their hiding places in the village and throw them to the fleeing soldiers. In a few moments the one-sided fight was over. More than a dozen North Vietnamese bodies lay scattered through the hamlet, and the women, later identified as members of a medical unit, had been taken prisoner.⁵³

I Company pushed on through a dry river bed and on toward a tree line on the far bank. About midway across the river bed the company was hit by a hail of rifle and machine gun fire from the tree line. Only the point squad of the lead platoon managed to reach the far side of the dry river before the entire company became pinned down by heavy fire. Enemy snipers in the tree line began picking off the Marines as they vainly sought cover in the river bed. A steady rain of grenades issued from the tree line as well.

Unable to advance or withdraw, I Company called for air strikes. For almost an hour fighters bombed and strafed enemy positions in the wood. Then the company attempted a second assault but was again met by heavy fire.⁵⁴ Almost half the company was killed or wounded in this second attack. The Marines could make little headway against the North Vietnamese defenders fighting from bunkers whose ordinarily strong log-and-concrete construction had been reinforced by railroad ties and iron rails from a nearby abandoned rail line.⁵⁵ I Company's survivors remained pinned down in the river bed for more than eight hours tormented by the heat and running low on water.

Two more companies of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, were lifted in by helicopter to link up with and relieve the pressure on I Company. As the CH-46 transports, their motors still roaring, lowered their rear ramps to debark the men of K Company, 3/27,



mortar rounds began hitting the landing zone. K's Marines raced down the ramps through the hot blast of the helicopter engine exhaust and into 7-foot elephant grass. Four Marines were wounded before the company had even completed its debarkation around 5:30 in the afternoon.

Even while the last elements of the company were clearing the landing zone, the lead squads were already in heavy contact with the North Vietnamese units in the riverside tree line. The Marines grimly continued to advance into the tree line, calling in artillery support and occasional air strikes. At 7:30 P.M., as the sun was beginning to set, two platoons of K Company succeeded in linking up with the beleaguered Marines of I Company. L Company of 3/27, which had also been heli-lifted in and had encountered little resistance, took up positions just to the east of I and K Companies.

That night the Marines consolidated their positions and evacuated their casualties. I Company had lost more than sixty killed and wounded, while K had lost twenty. The following morning K relieved I Company and, together with L, attempted to continue the sweep of Go Noi Island. As they approached a tree line near the hamlet of Li Bac, however, the lead platoon of Company K came under sporadic sniper fire. As the lead elements of the two companies drew closer to the tree line, the North Vietnamese unleashed a heavy volume of rifle and machine gun fire from well-concealed bunkers and fighting holes. Entire squads were pinned down and could neither withdraw nor be reinforced in the face of the withering fire.⁵⁶ "People were dying and we couldn't get to them," Corporal Charles D. Hukaby, an interpreter with K Company, reported. "At one point the platoon commander could see people only twenty-five meters in front of him, but we couldn't get to them."⁵⁷ Once again, the heat began to take its toll. The Marines discarded their flak jackets and doled out their dwindling water supplies. In some squads heat casualties exceeded those due to enemy fire. Rumors circulated that the temperature was 130 degrees. That was almost certainly an exaggeration, but the sweltering Marines were in no mood to dispute it.

Midway through the day a fresh company, M, arrived and attempted to link up with Company K. One platoon of M Company, moving around the right flank of K on the outskirts of Li Bac, ran

into a box-shaped ambush and suffered heavy casualties. The platoon commander and all three squad leaders were killed or wounded. A handful of survivors, of whom only three were uninjured, managed to fight their way to the shelter of a large hut, which proved to be a North Vietnamese command post. Before the startled North Vietnamese could react, the Marines hurled grenades into the hut and barricaded themselves inside. Seeing the brief struggle, Hospitalman Third Class James Walters, the platoon medic, sprinted into the hut carrying a wounded Marine, then left again to drag two more wounded into the hut, where the Marines were now surrounded on all sides by the Communists. Observing this action, Captain B. K. Thomas, the company commander, directed helicopter gunships onto the area surrounding the trapped Marines. With the fire of the gunships falling within 10 feet of the hut, the Marines were able to make a hasty withdrawal, the walking wounded helping to carry the more seriously injured.⁵⁸ It was only after dark that the embattled Marines were able to disengage fully and recover all their wounded.⁵⁹ In two days of fighting, the four companies of 3/27 had lost 179 men killed or wounded.

The battles of May 17 and 18 set the pattern for the rest of ALLEN BROOK, which continued intermittently over the next two weeks as additional companies and battalions were fed into the hot, airless plain of the Thu Bon. "In all cases," a battalion reported, "contact with the enemy followed the same general pattern. Friendly forces would approach a tree line from across an open field. The lead elements of the friendly forces would enter the tree line and would be taken under fire and pinned down. The follow up elements would be taken under fire as they attempted to move forward across the open ground to assist those units already in contact. The ranges would always be under one hundred fifty meters and, in many cases, less than fifty meters."⁶⁰ It was the perfect demonstration of the North Vietnamese fighting doctrine, which aimed to surprise and pin down the Americans at ranges so close that there could be no help from the deadly U.S. artillery and aircraft.

The NVA tactics were never wholly successful. Eventually the Marines would be able to disengage, and the deadly rain of fire from the sky would begin. After one air strike against a group of NVA bunkers one Marine recalled that he had "never in my life seen an

area more flattened out and devastated. The bunkers were burning on the inside and collapsing.⁶¹ After the first days of the operation the Marines were joined by tanks, whose armor and 90mm guns proved more of a match for the bunkers. Yet the fighting in the river basins south and west of Da Nang remained among the most harrowing and sanguinary combat in Vietnam. Here, even more than in the mountains on the Laotian border or at Dai Do, the Americans were fighting the war on the enemy's terms. The United States held the initiative and could invade any Communist outpost or base area. Yet the tactical advantages in these forays usually rested with the Communists, who would allow the Americans to spend lives against their elaborately prepared defenses in terrain that the Communists knew intimately and the Americans very imperfectly.

American generals argued that these forays kept the enemy off balance and disrupted his supply system and bases. ALLEN BROOK was also credited with having preempted an enemy offensive against Da Nang. Yet, given the lack of coordination, staying power, and imagination the Communists had repeatedly demonstrated in their attacks on towns and cities, compared with their formidable fighting qualities on the defensive, one may wonder whether such preemptive operations were worth the cost. Worth it or no, ALLEN BROOK set the pattern of warfare in the river basins and coastal lowlands of Quang Nam, which was to continue almost unabated for two more years.

On the face of it, the general trend of the May fighting appeared to go in the Americans' favor. The North Vietnamese had failed, at heavy cost, to gain a foothold in Saigon or in the border provinces of the north. Allied spoiling attacks such as ALLEN BROOK had eliminated any direct threat to Da Nang. Only at the remote Special Forces camp of Kham Duc had the Communists scored a success. Yet the battles of "Little Tet" gave Americans small cause for celebration. Saigon had been devastated, and allied casualties were near an all-time high.

If the generally unsuccessful attacks of "mini-Tet" demonstrated that the Communists had learned little from their defeats at Tet, the near-record U.S. casualties suggested that the Americans had not learned much either. Infantry units were still sent against superbly

concealed and protected Communist bunker complexes without benefit of adequate reconnaissance and sometimes without appropriate supporting arms. Units were often fed into battles piecemeal without any clear idea of enemy strength and dispositions. Despite overwhelming allied numerical superiority on paper, Westmoreland and his commanders frequently found their available combat forces stretched thin, as at Kham Duc and Dai Do, where adequate numbers were simply not available to meet the threat in a timely manner. Nor, despite U.S. technological superiority, were American GIs particularly well-equipped for the battles in which they were engaged. U.S. infantry lacked a weapon like the Communist B-40 rocket launcher, which was able to penetrate bunkers, while the superior reliability of the AK-47 rifle to the M-16 was already the subject of a considerable body of GI folklore. U.S. artillery was often unable to locate and silence Communist guns across the DMZ or concealed in Laos. A Marine general later observed, "It appeared unbelievable that the mighty United States, with all its technical expertise and awesome military power, was unable to at least neutralize the artillery fire from a third-rate little nation. Nevertheless the incoming artillery shells continued to arrive. U.S. target-locating equipment had not been improved since World War II. In fact, a strong case can be made that the capability had deteriorated."⁶²

Air attacks could be devastating against bunker complexes, but they had to be delivered with great skill and precision and with the right mix of weapons. In costly battles in the hills around Khe Sanh during the spring of 1967, the Marines had discovered that only 750-pound to 2,000-pound bombs with delayed fuses could smash the strongest bunkers.⁶³ Yet weather often made attacks with such weapons hazardous or impossible, even when ground or air commanders had the insight to ask for them.

Both sides had repeated many of their mistakes of February and March in the bloody battles of May, and neither side appeared much closer to victory. Yet now the Communists were beginning to run short of men and the Americans to run short of time. A slow and painful period of learning and adjustment for both sides was about to begin.

in the hamlets of La Phat and La Nam. It took G Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, assisted by air strikes, five hours to force a Communist platoon from La Phat at the cost of seven Marines killed and nineteen wounded.

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong had been well prepared. In Chau Phong the Marines found sufficient rice and ammunition to supply five hundred men. The troops opposing the Marines at La Thap had new weapons, helmets, and body armor.⁶⁷ Yet the Communist threat to Da Nang had died in the blasted, smoldering houses of Chau Dhong.

Elsewhere, the Third Offensive also sputtered to a halt. Many of the planned attacks had never materialized. U.S. forces had not been lured from the major cities, and many Communist units found themselves short of supplies and unable to mass for the attack in the face of heavy U.S. firepower. Only in Tay Ninh province, northwest of Saigon, did sustained fighting erupt. Communist forces, hoping to push past Tay Ninh toward Saigon, clashed with elements of the U.S. 25th Division in a series of bloody fights in the bamboo woods, hills, and rubber plantations near Tay Ninh.

The battles began with an attack on Fire Base Buell, which sat astride the main approach routes to Tay Ninh from the north about 4 miles from the town. The Americans had been alerted by intelligence to the danger of attack and were well prepared. The fire base's six 105mm and five 155mm guns and a battery of 4.2-inch mortars were protected by revetments and by a high chain-link fence for defense against rocket-propelled grenades. The entire base was protected by triple concertina wire with numerous trip flares concealed in its strands. The fire base's infantry company had been reinforced the previous day by a mechanized infantry company and a platoon of tanks, whose armored vehicles added to the already considerable firepower of the soldiers entrenched in Fire Base Buell's bunker line.⁶⁸

The Communist attack began at 1:00 A.M. with a barrage of 82mm mortar fire. As the firing slackened illumination rounds from the 4.2-inch mortars revealed enemy forces advancing on the northern and southern ends of the base. The North Vietnamese mortar rounds hit an oil storage area near the 155mm battery, starting a large fire, and two of the tanks were damaged by rocket

powered grenades (RPGs) fired by a group of North Vietnamese soldiers who had managed to crawl forward through the wire on the northwest sector of the perimeter—but the base was never in danger. Deadly high explosive rounds called "Killer Junior" burst in the air above the attackers. As the North Vietnamese closed to under 100 yards, the gunners switched to rounds of "Beehive" canisters fired at point-blank range. On the southern edge of the base, two Cobra helicopter gunships made repeated machine gun attacks on the North Vietnamese, then were replaced by Air Force fighter-bombers and "Spooky" gunships, which remained on station throughout the battle. By 5:30 A.M. enemy fire had all but ceased. Most of the attackers had not even come within 10 meters of the wire. The Americans lost one dead and twenty-six wounded, while the Communists left 104 bodies and eight wounded on the battlefield.⁶⁹

Yet not all the clashes near Tay Ninh were as one-sided as the attack on Fire Base Buell. One week after that fight a large convoy from Long Binh to Tay Ninh was ambushed near the village of Ap Nhi on the road to Tay Ninh. It was nearly noon, and the convoy of almost a hundred vehicles had just passed the village when the ambush was sprung. More than one hundred Viet Cong and NVA were concealed among the young rubber trees to the left of the road. The ambushers allowed about half the convoy to pass through the killing zone, then opened heavy fire with automatic rifles, machine guns, and mortars.

A tanker toward the head of the column was hit and burst into flames, effectively blocking the road. The truckers leaped from their vehicles and took cover on the opposite side of the road, laying down a heavy volume of fire with their M-16s and machine guns as they desperately sought to prevent the enemy from crossing the road and flanking the convoy.⁷⁰

Specialist 4 William Seay was driving a 5-ton tractor pulling a trailer load of artillery charges when the convoy came under fire. Snipers concealed in the trees added to the hazards of fire from the more numerous attackers concealed in the rubber fields. Jumping from his vehicle, Seay took cover behind the large rear wheels of his tractor, where he was joined by another driver, Specialist 4 David Sellman. Sellman and Seay were soon in the midst of a fire fight with

a group of North Vietnamese who had left the cover of the rubber trees and were attempting to assault the vehicles. Sellman killed one NVA who had approached to within 15 meters of his position before his M-16 jammed. Seay killed or wounded two more, halting the enemy attack. Seay also accounted for a sniper in a tree to his right. Minutes later a grenade landed under Seay's trailer, which was loaded with 175mm shells. Shifting his rifle to his left hand, Seay scooped up the grenade and tossed it back at the Vietnamese concealed in the rubber.⁷¹

To the rear of the convoy, a squad of engineers of the 65th Engineer Battalion was returning from a mine-sweeping operation when it encountered the Communist ambushers. The engineers were accompanied by about a dozen infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, 5th Mechanized Infantry, riding in two armored personnel carriers. One of the .50 caliber machine guns on the APCs had been burned out in a previous fight and was inoperable, while the other continually jammed.

The NVA opened heavy fire with rifles and machine guns, supplemented by grenades from a captured M79 grenade launcher. The engineers and infantry fought back with rifles, grenades, and M-60 machine guns. As ammunition began to run low, Sergeant Gregory Haley, an engineer squad leader, worked his way to the rear of one of the APCs, climbed in, and brought out additional ammunition and two more machine guns. Jumping down from the APC, he emitted a string of curses as he noticed that one of the machine guns lacked a trigger. Haley fed a bandolier of ammo into the second machine gun, slammed the plate shut, and opened fire, only to have the gun jam. As he attempted to unjam the gun, the charging handle broke in his hand.⁷²

After two hours of heavy fighting, an armored cavalry troop arrived on the scene, forcing the ambushers to break off their attack. At 9:00 P.M. the remnants of the shattered convoy limped into Tay Ninh. More than two dozen ruined vehicles had been left on the road, along with the bodies of several dozen of the attackers. Specialist Seay, killed by a sniper's bullet, was nominated by his commanding officer for a Medal of Honor. Sergeant Haley, after rescuing two of the wounded, drove them to safety in an APC.

As action around Tay Ninh gradually died down and further

planned attacks in I Corps and in the Delta failed to materialize, the Communists launched a final desperate attack on the Special Forces camp at Duc Lap near the Cambodian border in Quang Duc Province, perhaps hoping to repeat their earlier successes at Lang Vei and Kham Duc. Four thousand North Vietnamese soldiers from at least three regiments attacked the Duc Lap subsector headquarters astride the main routes to the large highland city of Ban Me Thuot and the nearby Special Forces camp, A-239. For more than a week the grim battle raged in the jungle-covered hills around the small, flat Duc Lap plateau. The outnumbered Vietnamese, Special Forces, and Montagnard tribesmen and their American advisers at A-239 fought off repeated NVA attacks and were reinforced by other Special Forces Mobile Strike Force companies fed in from Nha Trang and Ban Me Thuot.

The subsector headquarters was defended only by a company of Popular Forces and by a handful of American advisers, but the South Vietnamese, mostly former Catholic refugees who had fled North Vietnam in 1954, turned the defense of the small district headquarters into an epic worthy of the Alamo. The district chief, Lieutenant Nguyen Nhu Phu, refused to leave his post even after being wounded, and his officers and NCOs moved about among the outnumbered defenders continually encouraging them and positioning them to meet new enemy assaults. Wives of the Popular Force soldiers reloaded magazines and braved enemy fire to bring ammunition to the defenders.⁷³

After two days of heavy fighting, two battalions of the South Vietnamese 23d Division were lifted by helicopter to attack the North Vietnamese positions ringing the Duc Lap subsector and A-239. An American Army officer watched as one of the South Vietnamese battalions assaulted a hill near the Duc Lap subsector five times during one day. "In the evening the hill was still in enemy hands. The commander pulled back to medevac his wounded and prepare to attack once more. . . . The battalion had been on combat operations continuously for the past thirty-one days. Casualties had claimed one-third of the unit. The troops were obviously tired. Still the plan and conversation were only of the impending attack."⁷⁴

The North Vietnamese also fought well. A Special Forces sergeant watching the North Vietnamese withdraw under heavy fire

observed that "one position would cover and pin us down while another was evading us. They fought hard and they left their positions only when they thought it was safe to do so. It was almost like a well-planned and rehearsed operation because each man seemed to know exactly what the other was going to do."⁷⁵

Despite their excellent discipline and stubborn determination, the North Vietnamese were unable to breach the defenses of Duc Lap and A-239 completely. Under increasing pressure from South Vietnamese Army attacks and heavy air assaults by American gunships, fighter-bombers, and even B-52s, the North Vietnamese withdrew toward Cambodia, carrying with them the wreckage of the Third Offensive.

"The events that took place constituted a dismal failure" for the Communists, a MACV report on the fighting declared. The enemy lost 20,000 KIA in five weeks of fighting and attained not a single objective for his long touted "final and decisive phase."⁷⁶ The message omitted mention of the obvious: that the Communist failures were not final or decisive either. Yet after September, Abrams could breathe a little easier. On the battlefield, for the Americans, things would never be quite so bad again.

Eager to exploit the Communist August defeats, Abrams requested permission for American units in contact with enemy forces to pursue them across the Cambodian border to a distance of up to 20 kilometers. President Johnson remained unwilling, as he had been with Westmoreland, to extend the war across international boundaries. After studying Abrams's request for almost six weeks, the White House instructed the MACV commander to maintain "constant, relentless, persistent pressure" on the enemy but to "avoid any sudden or dramatic increase in out-of-country operation."⁷⁷

Abrams repeated his request in October. From MACV's point of view, extending the war into Cambodia made perfectly good sense. The Communists, after their August failures, were vulnerable in a way they had never been before. From the perspective of Washington the proposal to widen the ground war even in "hot pursuit" was politically and psychologically suicidal. Any apparent move to escalate the war would undermine the President's remaining public support, reignite antiwar protests, further splinter the Democratic

Party, and probably deliver the November elections to the Republicans.

The President's March speech, designed primarily as a device to buy time and regain public support, had set in motion a train of events that was now irreversible. Many Americans, dissatisfied with the lack of progress in Paris, were calling for a total bombing halt. Secretary Clifford had also found himself obliged to fend off repeated questions and rumors about the imminent beginning of U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam.

The Americans had gained a decided edge on the battlefield as a result of the Communists' costly attacks of February, May, and August, but in the United States time was running out and options were narrowing. If the Americans were to achieve a favorable solution to their Vietnam predicament, they would have to find it in Vietnam, not in Paris or Washington, and they would have to find it soon.