

*Indochina Monographs*

**The General Offensives  
of 1968-69**

*Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung*



**U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY  
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

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## Indochina Monographs

This is one of a series published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History. They were written by officers who held responsible positions in the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese armed forces during the war in Indochina. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and other necessary support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The monographs were not edited or altered and reflect the views of their authors—not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense. The authors were not attempting to write definitive accounts but to set down how they saw the war in Southeast Asia.

Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.  
Brigadier General, USA  
Chief of Military History



## Preface

Much has been written about the enemy's 1968 Tet Offensive, a major event in the Vietnam War. However, most publications on this subject, to include books and press accounts of the Western world and South Vietnam's own official military history records, focused primarily on the spectacular aspect of battles fought during early 1968.

This monograph endeavors instead to analyze and compare all four periods of enemy offensive activities which lasted well into 1969. Seeking to present the Vietnamese point of view, it assesses enemy and friendly strategies, the reactions and combat performance of the RVNAF and Free World Military Assistance Forces and the impact of the offensive on the conduct of the war with regard to the enemy, South Vietnam, and the United States.

In the preparation of this monograph, I have drawn heavily on my personal experience and recollections. Interviews with involved principals and a review of documentation have also helped establish credibility of facts and depth of insight. The most valuable data, unobtainable anywhere else, are those provided by Lieutenant General William E. Potts, U.S.A. (Retired) from his personal files. For this courtesy, I certainly owe him a special debt of gratitude.

I am particularly indebted to General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Chief of Staff, JGS and Commanding General of the Central Logistics Command, RVNAF, and Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, J-3, JGS, for their valuable guidance, comments, and suggestions, especially those concerning the Tran Hung Dao plan and conduct of combat operations. I am also grateful to

Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commanding General of I Corps, who commanded the 1st ARVN Infantry Division at the time of the offensive, and Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, last Commander of the 3d ARVN Infantry Division who served as I Corps Chief of Staff when the offensive began, for thoughtful critical remarks and valuable insight into the battles of Hue and elsewhere in the I Corps area.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia  
27 June 1978

Hoang Ngoc Lung  
Colonel, ARVN

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## CHAPTER I

### War During the 1965-1967 Period

#### *The Impact of U.S. Search-and-Destroy Operations*

The demise of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his regime—the First Republic—which came as a result of the military-led November 1 coup of 1963, began to usher South Vietnam into a period of turmoil which saw political stability and military security steadily on the decline. Successive plots and counterplots crippled central authority and weakened the war effort. Used as an instrument of state to counter coups, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) were divided among cliques and lost their combat effectiveness.

This came as a windfall for the Communists who immediately seized the opportunity to step up their activities. The Strategic (now redesignated New Life) Hamlet system, which was the mainstay of rural defense and control, came under increasing enemy attacks and faced the danger of ultimate destruction. In many provinces, village and hamlet officials fled enemy pressure and sought refuge in safer district towns. Lines of communication across the country became insecure because of land mines and interdiction. Even in big cities terrorism and sabotage occurred with periodic regularity.

The situation deteriorated to an even greater extent by late 1964, especially in Binh Dinh Province, the long established stronghold of Communist insurgency. This threat came not only from enemy military pressure but also from the potential danger of insurrection by a local population which was, by inclination, extensively pro-Communist.

The initial alarm sounded during the first week of 1965. From all indications, it seemed to presage still more agitation and setbacks in the days ahead.

It all began when an ARVN Ranger battalion was caught and nearly destroyed in an enemy ambush near the village of Binh Gia, in Phuoc Tuy Province. Contrary to their past activity pattern, the Communist forces did not withdraw from the scene of the fighting. They remained in the area, mounted another ambush and inflicted severe losses to a Vietnamese marine battalion being deployed there as relief. Obviously, the enemy had initiated a new phase of warfare, the "mobile warfare phase" of his strategy for conquest.

In the meantime, our intelligence confirmed the presence of a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regiment in the Central Highlands. Information collected during December 1964 indicated that this was the first NVA regimental size unit introduced into South Vietnam. By February 1965, the total NVA units infiltrated into the same area had increased to four regiments, all belonging to the 325th Division. In view of this force buildup, the Central Highlands apparently became the target of primary interest to North Vietnam.

The month of February 1965 also saw two major Communist actions directed against U.S. personnel in South Vietnam. The first was a ground attack on Camp Holloway, a U.S. base near Pleiku, and the second involved the sabotage of a hotel in downtown Qui Nhon which served as billet for U.S. personnel. As a result, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the evacuation of U.S. military dependents and eventually decided to bring U.S. combat troops into South Vietnam.

It was in the Central Highlands that the first contest between regular NVA and U.S. forces took place. Neither had ever been in contact with the other until the battle of Pleime which was to become a landmark of the war's new phase. In launching the Pleime campaign, the NVA forces had planned to take Pleiku, force the evacuation of Kontum and gain control of Route QL-19, which would practically divide South Vietnam into two halves.

The battle of Pleime lasted from mid-October to late November 1965; it was the first division-size engagement on a South Vietnamese battlefield since 1954. Selecting the Central Highlands as battleground, the enemy undoubtedly placed a high stake on his legendary advantage in this type of terrain, which he hoped could neutralize American superiority

in firepower and mobility. The enemy had every reason to believe he could deal U.S. forces a smashing blow in his own habitat of jungle and mountains where during the 1945-1954 war, he had successfully overrun Kontum City and wiped out the famous French Mobile Group No. 100. He therefore entrusted the conduct of the campaign to veterans of the First Indochina War such as General Chu Huy Man and Colonel Ha Vi Tung who had been crowned with laurels of victories past.<sup>1</sup>

The Pleime campaign was also an opportunity for NVA forces to learn more about U.S. tactics and U.S. combat capabilities, especially in terms of firepower and mobility. The lessons to be drawn from this first round of engagements were particularly critical since they would contribute toward the formulation of an appropriate war doctrine to effectively confront U.S. forces in South Vietnam.

For the U.S. and RVN forces, the battle of Pleime certainly helped put to test the validity of combined operations which were to become the staple of warfare efforts in the years ahead. Through it, the U.S. was also able to evaluate its own methods and to determine whether the conventional approach would be the proper response to a war that many had termed as unconventional.

The resounding defeat inflicted on the enemy at Pleime compelled him to abstain from rushing into other major engagements during the 1965-1966 dry season. He endeavored instead to build up his force while constantly searching for an effective way to cope with the expanding U.S. troop commitment. As more U.S. and Free World units poured into South Vietnam, North Vietnam also increased its infiltration of replacement and entire regular units. This infiltration rate reached a monthly average of 6,000 to 7,000 men during 1966.

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<sup>1</sup>Colonel Ha Vi Tung was the commander of the 803d Viet Minh Regiment, the unit which in 1954 had destroyed the French GM-100 at An Khe Pass on Route 19.

The U.S., in the meantime, continued its process of force buildup, deploying units, building ports, airfields, combat and logistic bases, organizing logistic support, communications and intelligence systems to meet growing requirements. At the same time, it also began to find ways of coping with the other kind of war that the enemy was staging at the grassroots level in coordination with the war he was fighting with main force units from the North.

In late 1966, the U.S. initiated the concept of search-and-destroy operations designed to clear enemy main force units from populated centers and drive them into areas where they could be destroyed. These operations were to create the favorable conditions required for pacification, which would start from populous centers. At the same time, U.S. air power was extensively used against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in an effort to interdict and inflict maximum losses to enemy infiltration of personnel and logistics from the north.

Not until September of that year did U.S. forces launch Operation ATTLEBORO which was designed to destroy enemy main force units in an area west of the Michelin plantation and the very heart of enemy War Zone C, located in northwestern Tay Ninh Province on the Cambodian border. This operation ended in November and was considered a test of the search-and-destroy concept. Initially, it involved only the U.S. 196th Infantry Brigade. However, as the operation progressed, more U.S. forces were committed, to include eventually the 1st Division, elements of the 25th Division, the 173d Airborne Brigade, the 3d Brigade of the 4th Division, and the 11th Armored Regiment. The remarkable results achieved through Operation ATTLEBORO led the U.S. command to the conclusion that multi-division operations of the search-and-destroy type were the key to success in South Vietnam.

After ATTLEBORO, the U.S. command initiated Operation CEDAR FALLS in early January 1967 which lasted 18 days. This operation was designed to destroy the headquarters of enemy MR-4 located in the "Iron Triangle" area which straddled the converging boundaries of Binh Duong, Tay Ninh,

and Binh Long Provinces.<sup>2</sup>

CEDAR FALLS was the first corps-size U.S. combat operation in South Vietnam and the first major combined U.S.-RVN operation involving formal planning. ARVN participation in this operation consisted of the 1st Airborne Brigade, elements of the 7th and 8th Regiments of the 5th Infantry Divisions, and one ranger battalion. The combined results were spectacular. Not only had our forces completely destroyed the enemy headquarters, they also killed 720 enemy troops, took 217 prisoners and received 666 ralliers. In addition, our forces seized 3,700 tons of rice, 23 crew-served and 555 individual weapons, and destroyed 509 buildings, 424 underground shelters and tunnels and 334 boats.

During this operation Rome plows were used extensively to clear heavy vegetation and build pioneer roads, which effectively turned the heretofore impenetrable "Iron Triangle" into an uncluttered area of operation easily accessible to mechanized troops and fully open to aerial observation.

Despite extensive havoc wrought by CEDAR FALLS, the enemy base area seemed to be alive again with renewed enemy activity only two days after our troops had moved out. These indications provided by aerial observation revealed that the enemy was resilient and resourceful enough to survive even the most destructive blow ever unleashed on him. This also indicated that a short duration foray was not enough to strangle an enemy base area and in order to fully exploit the results of such an operation and prevent the resurrection of enemy activities, our troops would have to remain in the area of operation for a much longer period.

This lesson was not forgotten by the U.S. command. Operation JUNCTION CITY, which followed CEDAR FALLS in the widening framework of search-and-destroy operations, lasted nearly three months and involved an even larger force commitment. The target this time was another

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<sup>2</sup>The enemy MR-4 headquarters was responsible for the conduct of activities directed against Saigon, Gia Dinh and Cho Lon.

enemy stronghold, War Zone C, which represented perhaps the biggest prize of all.

JUNCTION CITY was designed to destroy the supreme headquarters that controlled all enemy forces operating in the southern half of South Vietnam, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), or one of Hanoi's forward command posts. COSVN was located in War Zone C, a large enemy base area of about 250 square miles adjoining the Cambodian border, long considered and boasted by the enemy as an impenetrable sanctuary. The terrain here was ideal for insurgent activities. Mostly covered by heavy underbush and multi-canopied jungle, it sheltered the enemy's top level military and political headquarters and was teeming with logistic installations: supply bases, training centers, communications and broadcasting stations, dispensaries and even rest and recuperation camps. JUNCTION CITY's secondary objective was to convert this enemy base area into a series of friendly outposts, fire bases and an airfield.

Designed as an immediate follow-up of ATTLEBORO, Operation JUNCTION CITY was not initiated until 22 February 1967. For this operation, the U.S. command committed two infantry divisions comprising a total of 22 battalions, and 14 artillery battalions. ARVN participation, which had initially been planned to involve two infantry regiments, was much smaller, with only four infantry battalions.

The biggest result achieved by JUNCTION CITY was to inflict crippling losses to COSVN's main force unit, the CT-9 Division. Enemy casualties totalled 2,728 dead, 34 detained, and 139 rallied. His material losses included 100 crew-served and 491 individual weapons and in excess of 5,000 underground shelters and tunnels destroyed. Total friendly casualties amounted to only 1/10th of enemy dead and 1,500 wounded. Also, three airfields for C-130's and two Special Forces camps were established in the area of operation.

COSVN, the main target, was not destroyed. However, as a result of the operation, the enemy was forced to gradually move his installations and supplies west into a sanctuary on Cambodian territory. Since that time, the enemy never again boasted of impenetrable sanctuaries inside South Vietnam.

As for the Republic of Vietnam, the worst appeared to have passed, and as security was restored in the wake of search-and-destroy operations, the nation seemed to revive and improve. Gradually, the nation extricated itself from its political impasse and confidently tread its way toward stability and democracy. The first foundation stone was laid on September 1966 when a constitutional assembly was created through free elections. Its work culminated in a new constitution from which the Second Republic of Vietnam was born on 1 November 1967, exactly four years after the demise of the First.

As for the conduct of the war, the U.S. and RVN agreed to pursue a common strategy beginning in 1967. By mutual consent, the RVNAF took responsibility for the pacification effort, which was being stepped up in populous areas, while U.S. forces assumed the defense of the DMZ and border areas, interdicted North Vietnam's infiltration, and conducted search-and-destroy operations against enemy base areas.

Another significant effort jointly initiated by the U.S. and RVN took the form of a silent war against the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI). A political arm of Communist insurgency, the VCI had always been active in support of the enemy's main force warfare. Its activities, however, seemed to have eluded the GVN's attention, chiefly because of the low VCI profile. As the pacification program was set in motion, it was realized that success could not be achieved as long as the VCI was free to collect taxes, assassinate our officials, move supplies, provide communications for main force units, make propaganda, and conduct terrorist actions. All of these activities were highly effective; they sustained the enemy's war effort and impeded ours. They took place not only in rural areas but also in urban centers. Elimination of the VCI therefore became mandatory if pacification was to succeed.

#### *Situation as of the Second Half of 1967*

In general, the situation of South Vietnam ameliorated remarkably during the second half of 1967. As a result of pacification efforts, by year's end, 67% of the South Vietnamese population was living in security under government control. This was significant progress when



compared to the level of population control under the First Republic (62%). Of the 242 districts, 222 were considered secure. Up to 8,650 hamlets had been completely pacified, and 3,500 were being contested. This was a remarkable achievement considering that there were a total of 12,600 hamlets across South Vietnam.

The national economy also recovered and seemed to prosper through increased U.S.-financed imports and the income generated by the presence of U.S. and Free World troops. As new jobs became available, unemployment sharply declined and consumer purchasing power rose. Business proliferated and expanded to the great profit of shrewd entrepreneurs, especially those who provided goods and services for U.S. troops.

Although the standard of living in urban areas seemed to rise, many thought that it was fictitious prosperity. Most disquieting, however, was the social ripple caused by the presence of 485,000 U.S. troops at the year's last count, notwithstanding about 60,000 "third-country" troops.

. Total friendly troop level by year's end stood at 1.2 million, to include the RVNAF. Infantry forces benefited from the support of 3,100 U.S. helicopters in addition to tactical and strategic air. Beginning in April 1967, some B-52 missions were flown from Utapao Base in Thailand, a much shorter route compared to the 5,000 miles round trip from Guam. As a result, B-52 bombings increasingly terrorized enemy units.

An atmosphere of optimism seemed to prevail throughout. It was shared by almost everybody, to include the military and political leaders in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland, for one, was optimistic about progress and prospects for the immediate future. In a testimony before the U.S. Congress in November 1967, he expressed hopes that the U.S. would be able to initiate limited troop redeployments from South Vietnam by late 1968. Despite undeniable overall improvements in the military situation, there still existed troublesome spots, especially in the border areas.

In the DMZ area, the U.S. Marine Base at Con Thien had been under repeated enemy attacks since 27 September, and despite very effective air support, the enemy did not break contact until 49 days later. Con

Thien, Carroll, and Khe Sanh were major fire support bases manned by U.S. Marines along the southern edge of the DMZ. As strongpoints of a defense system, these bases were considered an effective shield to protect the two northern provinces of I Corps area, Quang Tri and Thua Thien, from major enemy penetrations and attacks. Among these bases, Khe Sanh was the most important because of its geographical position. Located in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province, Khe Sanh effectively controlled a valley area which was the crossroads of enemy infiltration routes from North Vietnam and from lower Laos. During the last quarter of 1967, there were many indications of a massive enemy force concentration around the Khe Sanh area involving several NVA divisions. Intelligence estimates all pointed toward an inevitable siege of the base. If the siege ever materialized, it would amount to a major showdown of forces which, in view of the base's position and reports on enemy force concentration, was very much reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu 13 years earlier.

In the III Corps area, on 27 October an ARVN battalion successfully held back an attack by a NVA regiment at Song Be in Phuoc Long Province near the Cambodian border. Two days later, a regiment of the enemy 9th Division struck against the district town of Loc Ninh in Binh Long Province. The enemy penetrated the district headquarters area and gained control of about half of it, but was finally expelled by the defenders, who were reinforced by elements of the 18th ARVN Division and strongly supported by U.S. tactical air. Despite this, fighting spread into the adjacent plantation areas and did not abate until several days later after intervention by a brigade of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division. During this battle, the enemy lost in excess of 800 men.

In mid-November, another major battle took place in Dakto, northwest of Kontum City in the II Corps area, pitting four enemy regiments against four ARVN battalions and two U.S. infantry brigades. The engagement lasted 22 days and eventually compelled the U.S. command to bring in the U.S. 173d Airborne Brigade from the coastal zone as reinforcement, which increased the total friendly commitment to division size. When the enemy finally broke contact, he had left behind over 1,400 dead, inflicted to a large extent by B-52 strikes.

By the end of 1967, according to ARVN intelligence estimates, total enemy strength in South Vietnam had reached approximately 323,000, not including those units in the infiltration pipeline. Of this total, approximately 130,000 were combat troops; the VCI and guerrilla forces accounted for 160,000 and the remaining was made up of administrative and rear service elements. The enemy order of battle consisted of nine infantry divisions distributed equally among the RVN I, II and III Corps areas, and accounting for among themselves and other separate units, a total of 35 infantry regiments and 20 artillery and air-defense regiments or 230 combat and 6 sapper battalions. These represented only confirmed units and if other reported but still unconfirmed units were taken into account, then total enemy force structure could be significantly larger.

In terms of armament, most remarkable was the Soviet assault rifle AK-47 which had become standard issue for almost all enemy combat units. Enemy firepower was also enhanced by a substantial number of self-propelled rockets, mostly 122-mm and 140-mm. From all indications, enemy forces were apparently undergoing intensified modernization in weaponry and equipment. In fact, the Soviet Union had committed herself by an agreement concluded with North Vietnam in September 1967, to provide more airplanes, artillery, antiaircraft weapons, rockets, and ammunition for her embattled ally. In October, North Vietnam itself confirmed that Red China and other countries of the Communist Bloc had also substantially increased their level of military and economic aid.

As statistics revealed at the end of 1967, enemy human losses for the entire year amounted to 87,534 dead and 27,178 rallied, 17,671 among them were combat troops. His material losses included 31,000 assorted weapons and 14,000 tons of rice. Both of these losses represented an increase of 50% compared to our 1966 estimates.

On the friendly side, casualties were much lighter. Total U.S. losses for the seven years beginning in 1961 and ending on 31 December 1967 amounted to 16,106. The RVNAF also incurred losses proportionately much smaller than the enemy's, but in the other war, it suffered much more significant losses that caused some concern to both U.S. and national authorities. Those were the heavy toll in administrative cadres at the

village and hamlet level where VCI terrorist activities increased significantly during the second half of 1967. During that short period alone, 4,000 village and hamlet officials were killed, 8,000 wounded and another 5,400 abducted.

The year 1968 began with a stream of intelligence reports on the enemy's imminent Winter-Spring campaign which bore all the signs of a major offensive. Despite the telltale signs, both the U.S. and RVN commands were still speculating on the probability of the enemy campaign, and neither was certain when it would take place or if it would even be conducted. No evidence obtained so far had ever pointed clearly toward the inevitability.

As early as 19 October 1967, the enemy had announced he would observe a 7-day truce on the Tet occasion. This was the longest truce ever proposed by the Communists. Many, especially U.S. and RVN intelligence analysts, had speculated that the enemy would take advantage of the truce period to move his units and supplies and complete the last stage of his preparations for the Winter-Spring campaign. Our intelligence also estimated that this campaign would be primarily directed against the Khe Sanh Base area where reports had indicated an enemy force concentration of at least three main force divisions.

To face this mounting pressure around Khe Sanh, the U.S. command deployed the 1st Air Cavalry Division and one brigade of the 101st Airborne Division from II Corps area to I Corps area to strengthen the defense of the two northernmost provinces. Then, on 21 January 1968, two NVA divisions initiated an attack on Khe Sanh Base with the support of artillery. Concurrently, enemy armor made its first appearance during the war when five PT-76's were sighted at Lang Vei, five miles west of Khe Sanh.

As the battle raged on fiercely, Khe Sanh drew most of the U.S. command's attention and concern. The RVN was much less concerned since no ARVN force had been involved prior to the siege. Not until the fighting had been in full progress did the RVN decide to deploy one ARVN Ranger battalion to the base, more for political than tactical reasons, evidently. For the RVN presence was deemed symbolically significant in a battle that eventually would make history.

Despite Khe Sanh and other developments in the military situation, the RVN population and even its leadership still felt reassured. The presence of one half million U.S. and Free World troops and U.S. air and firepower had convinced everybody that the Communists could hardly conduct anything big, and if they attempted to do so, they would surely incur heavy losses and a tragic defeat.

In any event, Tet was approaching and to most Vietnamese, everything else hardly mattered, including politics and the war. Even those who were deeply concerned about current events seemed carefree enough to join in the feverish pre-Tet shopping spree and preparations.

This year, the festive mood among Vietnamese was particularly accentuated. By contrast to previous years, the level of individual income seemed to have risen substantially as a result of increasing business and job opportunities brought about by the presence of U.S. and Free World troops. To add to the expectation of festivities ahead, the GVN removed the long ban on traditional firecrackers during Tet, which set in motion a booming business in manufacturing and imports. The wealthy Vietnamese were particularly fond of firecrackers imported from Hong Kong, whose machinegun-like noise was rhythmically accentuated by big booms that sounded like grenade explosions. The GVN Ministry of Information went all out in its public-relations campaign, distributing Tet presents for the troops and the underprivileged. Each gift parcel contained, in addition to the usual toilet articles, a horoscope predicting among other things a bright future for South Vietnam in the Year of the Monkey and, naturally, disaster for the Communists.

On New Year's Day, some piecemeal information was circulated among the Saigon population to the effect that the enemy was attacking a few cities across the country. But this information created only a small ripple of concern not strong enough to distract people from celebrating.

Then during the night, amid the deafening noise and echo of unending firecrackers, there were also heard more distinct, sharper reports of AK-47 and RPM automatic rifle rounds interspersed by B-40 rocket thuds. But no one seemed to recognize these ominous sounds until dawn when early commuters bumped into strange faces, strange uniforms and the

distinctive "Binh Tri Thien" rubber sandals in some city quarters. Then it was too late; the surprise had been almost total.

But very few of our citizens could believe their eyes. How could this have happened during a Tet truce and when the enemy was reported to be defecting everywhere? Only a few believed that the enemy was actually attacking Saigon, much less conducting coordinated attacks in 28 other cities throughout South Vietnam. Why was the enemy attacking the cities? How had he accomplished this maneuver? Had he changed his strategy and his rules of war?

## CHAPTER II

### North Vietnam's Change of Strategy and Preparations for the General Offensive-General Uprising

#### *Communist Strategy in South Vietnam During the 1965-1966 and 1966-1967 Dry Seasons*

The Communist's foremost concern after the rapid buildup of U.S. and Free World troops in South Vietnam was to search for an appropriate strategy to confront the new war situation.

This task was not an easy one. In the first place, Communist military leaders seemed to know very little about U.S. forces. In an article written in 1967 under the pen name of Truong Son, one of the highest ranking Communist military leaders in South Vietnam admitted that during the summer 1966, one year after the U.S. had begun its force buildup, COSVN and its key military commanders were still probing desperately to resolve puzzling questions concerning U.S. strategy and total strength, specific capabilities of each major U.S. unit and American rules of activity.

Nguyen Chi Thanh, commander of all Communist forces in the COSVN area of South Vietnam, analyzed the balance of forces and recognized that U.S. forces enjoyed three advantages: great numerical strength, a powerful air force, and sizeable artillery and armor. In his quest for an appropriate strategy to offset the imbalance of forces which was increasingly tilting in favor of the U.S.-RVN side, Thanh strongly advocated the large-scale offensive approach. He believed that his side should take advantage of the offensive momentum gained during the dry season prior to the introduction of U.S. forces and carry it on with major scale attacks by main force units. This strategic approach naturally called for a bigger commitment of NVA forces.

Studying U.S. military strategy in South Vietnam, Nguyen Chi Thanh concluded that this strategy was characterized by five main efforts:

1. To disperse Communist main force units and force them to revert to guerrilla warfare. It was for this reason that U.S. forces were conducting search-and-destroy operations on a large scale.

2. To spread Communist forces thin over the territory of South Vietnam and destroy them piecemeal with superior firepower. This effectively amounted to forcing the Communists to fight the war on U.S. terms and making them more vulnerable.

3. To expand the RVN rear areas through pacification, consolidate territorial control, and use these pacified areas as platforms from which to launch attacks against Communist-controlled areas.

4. To mop up and protect strategic lines of communication, especially vital links between bases in order to facilitate troop movement and ensure the effectiveness of offensive operations.

5. To isolate North Vietnam from the South and seek ways to cut off North Vietnamese military assistance for the South.

As a result, Thanh concluded that the most effective strategy was to conduct the offensive on all battlefronts continuously and with determination. He believed that this was the only way to gain the initiative in the conduct of the war.

Truong Son also shared this concept. Echoing Thanh's lines, he propounded that to make it impossible for the U.S. to take advantage of its superiority in air and firepower, the most effective approach would be to launch close-range attacks on headquarters, bases and troop cantonments on a massive scale. He was convinced that the Communist side would be much better off with this approach than hesitatingly searching for any other strategy which involved no immediate and decisive action. To waver, he argued, would bring forth disastrous consequences.

Successive surges of Communist activities during the 1965-1966 dry season seemed to reflect Nguyen Chi Thanh's strategy of determined confrontation. As these activities eventually ended in failure, especially after the tragic defeat at Plei Me, North Vietnam's military leaders began to voice doubts and criticize Thanh's conduct of the war.

Without directly incriminating Thanh, Vo Nguyen Giap made a cool assessment of the war situation in South Vietnam and advocated a temporary retrogression to defensive warfare. He believed that Communist



forces were not yet ready to confront American superiority in combat strength and firepower. A more appropriate strategy, he argued, would be to focus on small-scale, harassment attacks, guerrilla-style, consolidate the defense posture, and buy time for the activation, training and infiltration of additional NVA units. Only then would Communist forces in South Vietnam be prepared for the offensive phase of warfare.

Giap's moderate stance was rejected by Nguyen Chi Thanh. To drive home his displeasure with North Vietnam's minister of defense, Thanh acrimoniously attacked those he considered "conservative and captive of old methods and past experience." "Because these people could not see beyond their past," he charged, "they thought only of mechanically repeating the past and were incapable of analyzing the concrete local situation which required an entirely new kind of response."

The conflict that broke out between Giap and Thanh remained unresolved. After the 1966-1967 dry season during which U.S. forces successfully stepped up search-and-destroy operations, the old polemic resumed with rekindled impassion. Each kept reiterating his own arguments, and neither seemed amenable to a reconciled viewpoint. The enemy's quest for a most appropriate strategy to meet the U.S. challenge in South Vietnam thus remained an issue open to debates.

North Vietnam's military leaders aligned behind Vo Nguyen Giap continued to extol guerrilla activities which they believed had been successful in South Vietnam. They proudly pointed to the disruption of South Vietnam's pacification efforts, the obstruction of U.S. logistic buildup activities, the interdiction of vehicle traffic by ambushes on major lines of communications such as QL-14, QL-19, QL-21, and terrorist activities in major cities as irrefutable evidence of guerrilla warfare's effectiveness. This effectiveness, they emphasized, was producing a favorable, psychological impact and greatly enhanced Communist prestige throughout the world.

As Hanoi viewed it, the most resounding exploit among these activities was the shelling of the Independence Palace by 60-mm mortar and 57-mm recoilless rifle on the evening of 31 October 1967 when a formal reception was taking place. This was considered particularly important because the occasion marked not only the inauguration of South

Vietnam's Second Republic but also the presence of Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey.

In spite of Hanoi's official stance, Nguyen Chi Thanh did not renounce his conviction. In a last analysis written in May 1967 in which he made an assessment of the 1966-1967 dry season campaigns, Thanh still maintained his view although he was more cognizant of the role and value of guerrilla and local forces in South Vietnam.

This polemical impasse among Communist generals on which kind of strategy was best for the prosecution of the war was not resolved until the death of Nguyen Chi Thanh, which was announced on July 6, 1967.<sup>1</sup> What followed in the wake of his death seemed to vindicate Vo Nguyen Giap's viewpoint and took the war on a new course. Giap's viewpoint was thoroughly discussed in a lengthy article published in the "People's Army" daily on September 14 and 16, 1967 and subsequently broadcast by Hanoi Radio. The article was pompously entitled: "Big Victory, Gigantic Task."

*Vo Nguyen Giap's Strategic Viewpoint  
After the 1966-1967 Dry Season*

"Big Victory, Gigantic Task" was actually the fourth article Giap wrote during 1967. In terms of content, it was considered the most significant because it accurately expounded North Vietnam's military strategy for the years ahead. More importantly, it seemed to highlight Giap's viewpoints, which were going to provide guidance for Communist forces in South Vietnam. Unlike Nguyen Chi Thanh, Tran Van Tra, his successor, adhered completely with the policies and viewpoints of Vo Nguyen Giap.<sup>2</sup>

Viewed from another angle, Giap's proposition could be primarily construed as a military application of major policy lines laid down by

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<sup>1</sup>General Nguyen Chi Thanh reportedly died of B-52 bomb-inflicted injuries in his headquarters, COSVN, somewhere in Tay Ninh Province.

<sup>2</sup>Tran Van Tra was a Lieutenant General who served as Commander of COSVN until the fall of Saigon in 1975. Additionally during 1973 he headed the NLF Delegation to the Joint Military Commission.

Democratic Republic Resolution No. 13 which had been adopted by North Vietnam's Politbureau five months earlier. Its enforcing character was evident. Enemy prisoners and ralliers later confirmed that Communist forces in South Vietnam were all required to study Giap's article.

Appraising his main opponent, the U.S., Vo Nguyen Giap opened that the numerical strength and strong firepower of U.S. forces hardly helped them enjoy initiative in South Vietnam.

To substantiate this point, Giap demonstrated how people's war activities had kept them dispersed over vast areas, pointing as examples to the DMZ where U.S. Marines were spread thinly over a defense perimeter 500 to 600 kilometers long and the Central Highlands where U.S. Army units had to defend an area of more than 200 square kilometers. Giap recognized that U.S. firepower was strong and considerable, especially B-52's, but this firepower was not effective because in people's war, the objectives were scattered almost everywhere.

Strategically, Giap was convinced that in its role as the world's fire brigade, the U.S. could not maintain a large military force in South Vietnam for any long period. He believed that the U.S. would be worn down by the war and sooner or later would have to negotiate for its end on terms foreseen as advantageous to the Communist side.

As a result, U.S. and Free World troops were the primary targets for attack on the Communist list of priorities followed by U.S. bases and the U.S. logistic system. The Communist objective was to inflict as many casualties on U.S. troops as possible. Attacks on the RVNAF and the GVN were considered only as third and fourth priorities.

As regards the employment of forces for attack, Vo Nguyen Giap felt that the development of main forces had to be consistent with the local situation in each area. Therefore, he promoted the idea that main forces should be concentrated on a certain "strategic zone" instead of being dispersed over the entire battleground of South Vietnam.

According to Giap, the effectiveness of attacks depended on the judicious use of three kinds of forces: main, local, and guerrilla. These forces should be used in two different but very effective tactics: combined and independent. As Giap viewed it, the combined tactic relied on infantry as a primary force and the support of artillery, engineer

and sappers. The independent tactic, on the contrary, involved the use of small but highly combat-effective units in raids and shellings against U.S. bases and other strongpoints.

To prove his point, Giap discussed the combined tactic successfully used by Communist forces in Tri-Thien and the Central Highlands. This tactic, he argued, had forced the U.S. Command to remove its units from populated areas, especially the Mekong Delta, and redeploy them to these battlegrounds. This redeployment in turn curtailed the RVN pacification efforts in the populated areas. As a result, Giap claimed, the combined tactic had effectively wrecked the RVN scheme to eliminate the Communist infrastructure in the South.

Looking ahead and considering the future conduct of the war, Giap stressed that Communist forces in the South should place more emphasis on the coordinated use of their three forces and endeavor especially to expand and improve guerrilla forces as a major strategic requirement. He saw the potential of these guerrilla units becoming the strike forces of the future once they had grown strong and effective in every area.

Predicting the future course of events, Vo Nguyen Giap estimated that the United States would expand the war into Cambodia, Laos, and possibly North Vietnam also where a major landing of U.S. forces could take place. Giap's concern about a U.S. landing was genuine and oppressive enough to prompt him to warn that in such an event, Red China would probably intervene. In any event, he insinuated that North Vietnam would be well prepared to counter it.

Up to this time, Giap had always emphasized, that the war in South Vietnam was a protracted one and that it might last five, 10 or 20 years or even longer. This line of thought happened to be a mimic of Ho Chi Minh's declaration of policy made at the outbreak of the war. It was also reiterated by Nguyen Chi Thanh in his last article published in May 1967.

Giap's article, therefore, sounded like a confirmation of North Vietnam's unflinching belief in the doctrine of protracted warfare. His words were unfortunately taken at their face value and completely misled our analysts.

Not knowing that Giap's writing was intended to stimulate South

Vietnamese insurgents on the one hand, and to confuse our side as to North Vietnam's true course of action on the other, our analysts hastily concluded, in the light of Giap's article, that North Vietnam was yet to show that it was prepared for a general offensive in the near future. In all likelihood, they estimated, North Vietnam was still pursuing a protracted course of warfare and far from willing to bypass its intermediary phase.

In fact, the North Vietnamese leadership had already decided differently. There were several reasons for North Vietnam to make the strategic decision to launch a general offensive in South Vietnam during the 1967-1968 dry season.

*Reasons for the 1968 General Offensive  
and Communist Preparations*

Vo Nguyen Giap revealed that he was primarily concerned about two things. First, the United States would probably expand the war beyond South Vietnam's territory, and second, the GVN pacification and development program would be successful.<sup>3</sup>

Expansion of the war, especially into North Vietnam, was what the North Vietnamese leadership had sought to prevent all along because this would cause serious difficulties. For one thing, North Vietnam would have to extend its forces over a larger geographical area, which could include North Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam. Since all of these areas of operation were strategically interdependent like links in a chain, a breakdown in any one link would disrupt the entire war effort.

A U.S. landing in the North could also bring about unfathomable consequences that might spell disaster for the regime. It could create an opportunity for suppressed popular antipathy to surface and possibly crystallize into insurrection, even among some high-ranking officials

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<sup>3</sup> North Vietnam had prepared to face a probable U.S. landing by organizing a para-military force and an extensive self-defense system. Its concern was such that the number one priority, economic production, had become secondary to national defense.

in the government. This fear was foremost in the minds of North Vietnam's leaders. As a testimony to it, a high-ranking enemy rallier later disclosed that in September 1967, Hanoi authorities arrested and detained in excess of 200 party members accused of being dissenters.

Most significant among those detained were Hoang Minh Chinh, superintendent of the School for Political Studies; Colonel Le Trung Nghia, director of North Vietnam's Central Intelligence Agency; and several other prominent officials, all arrested for the crime of heretical thoughts and opposition to the conduct of the war. At about the same time, North Vietnam also enacted a special law which imposed harsh punishments on "reactionary" crimes such as sabotage, spying, opposition to or obstruction of national defense enterprises.

Despite its advocacy of protracted warfare conceived as antidote to the U.S. strategy of quick victory, North Vietnam began to feel its increasingly debilitating impact. Even while it argued that the ratio of human losses, which stood at one American for every ten North Vietnamese, was more of a concern to the U.S., the Hanoi leadership was having second thoughts. In fact, the effect of accumulated damage and casualties that the North Vietnamese population was suffering had generated an undercurrent of bitterness and frustration that might jeopardize the long-term war effort. North Vietnam's economy, which had gained some headway toward recovery, was plunging downhill again as a result of stepped up U.S. bombings against targets of strategic significance. North Vietnam was therefore becoming increasingly dependent on Russia and Red China for military and economic aid. More difficult still for the Hanoi leadership was its position vis-à-vis these big brothers: how to steer a middle course between them without alienating either while both appeared to be heading toward aggravating animosity.

One week before the general offensive actually took place, the RVN suddenly obtained an unprecedented intelligence windfall in the person of a high-ranking enemy prisoner. He was Nam Dong, political commissar of the enemy MR-6 headquarters, captured in an ambush while he was on his way back from a conference at COSVN. After intensive interrogation lasting several weeks, Nam Dong disclosed that North Vietnam was switching its strategy from protracted warfare to general offensive-general

uprising, a radical departure from the conduct of the 1946-1954 First Indochina War. This sudden change in strategy was attributed by Nam Dong to four main reasons:

1. U.S. forces were much stronger than French forces. In the First Indochina War, the Dien Bien Phu victory by the Viet Minh had sufficed to bring about the Geneva Accords. In the present war, the Communists entertained no hopes of achieving a similar victory given the military might and firepower of the United States.

2. North Vietnam's strategy of "enveloping the cities with the rural areas," which had been successful during the First Indochina War, proved no longer effective in the face of combined U.S.-RVN efforts. This obsolescent strategy not only failed to bring about a decisive victory, it also retrogressed the war to Mao Tse Tung's first strategic phase of guerrilla warfare.

3. If protracted warfare was to continue in its present course, North Vietnam would surely incur increasing losses. In the long run, Hanoi feared that aggravating attrition in manpower and material resources might eventually cause the Communist regime in the North to collapse.

4. It was, therefore, about time for big and decisive actions in the South. In Hanoi's view, a general military offensive coupled with popular uprising had all the chances to succeed because the Communists would enjoy "two strategic opportunities and one tactical advantage."

One strategic opportunity was the U.S. presidential election in November 1968. Hanoi believed that in the event of a Communist victory, the Johnson administration, which had already run into difficulties because of strong domestic opposition to the war, would no longer be able to bring more troops to South Vietnam. Eventually, it might even be compelled to reduce U.S. troop strength and seek negotiations on terms advantageous to the Communist side.

The other strategic opportunity, according to Nam Dong, came from increasing opposition, both domestic and international, to U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Therefore, a big Communist victory would make this opposition stronger and more widespread, which in all likelihood, would force the U.S. to terminate its involvement in Vietnam against its own will.

As to the tactical advantage, the Communists felt certain they would be able to achieve surprise. Therefore, Nam Dong revealed, Hanoi had decided to launch the general offensive during the Tet holidays.

When asked about Hanoi's plans in the event of a defeat, Nam Dong reiterated Vo Nguyen Giap's belief that this offensive would be a success. But even if it turned out to be a defeat, Giap did not think it would adversely affect the war effort because Communist activities had always been rooted in the rural and mountainous areas. A failure in the cities, therefore, would simply amount to a return to the old redoubts.

The Communists were well aware that they would suffer great losses when attacking the cities. But losses were not North Vietnam's main concern, Nam Dong argued, because its capacities for replacement had been estimated at about three times those of South Vietnam.

There were other advantages which North Vietnam thought would favor the Communist side. It believed that the RVNAF was no longer combat-effective, both in defensive and offensive maneuvers. The South Vietnamese people, Hanoi believed, hated Americans and the Thieu government. They had manifested their antipathy through frequent demonstrations and violence and by joining such popular organizations as the National Salvation and Buddhist movements. Hanoi was thus convinced that they were ripe for insurrection and ready to join the Communist side in the event of a general offensive.

In all respects, Nam Dong's deposition proved to be reliable. His revelations corroborated several unconfirmed reports, for example, Vo Nguyen Giap's interest in the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Even though Giap wrote in his article that such an election was merely a device for the U.S. party in power to reshuffle its ranks and that the U.S. policy of aggression would remain unchanged regardless of the election outcome, Hanoi in reality was well aware of the fact that in an election year, a U.S. president was seldom inclined to make bold policy decisions.

As Giap saw it, United States policy toward Vietnam had always been predicated on an effort to prevent the political, economic and social life of the American people from being affected by the war. And he



predicted this policy was going to change as a result of the growing political dissent both in the United States and South Vietnam.

To his interpretation, the popular manifestations that had several times rocked South Vietnam's big cities were but indications of anti-government and anti-war feelings. They were also signs of popular sympathy toward Communist insurgency.

Hanoi's belief in the support of the South Vietnamese population was further enhanced by the RVN presidential election in the fall of 1967 in which the winning slate of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice-President Nguyen Cao Ky obtained only 34% of the popular votes. Evidence of popular sympathy was obvious when the runner-up candidate, Truong Dinh Dzu, collected 17% of the ballots on the basis of his "restoring peace and ending the war" platform which happened to concur with the NLF political line.<sup>4</sup>

The Communists estimated therefore that a general offensive against South Vietnam's cities would have the inevitable effect of a catalyst which initiated a popular insurrection. They called that insurrection a "General Uprising" whose successful antecedent they had found in the August Revolution of 1945, believing that a repeat of that historical event could now be achieved through the same device of popular incitement. Besides, the basic objective of people's war as formulated by Mao Tse Tung's tenet always dictated that victory should have political significance and toward that end, be made to look like a popular rather than a military success. For these reasons, the military offensive planned for 1968 had been conceived under the conceptual formula of a "General Offensive-General Uprising."

To prepare for that big event, North Vietnam evidently required special assistance from Russia and Red China, not only in military hardware but also, though not as urgent, in economic aid. The insistent quest for this assistance eventually resulted in a military aid package agreement between Moscow and Hanoi in early September 1967. Russia agreed

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<sup>4</sup> There were a total of ten candidates for the 1967 presidential election.

to provide North Vietnam with additional warplanes, rockets, antiaircraft artillery, armored vehicles, infantry weapons and ammunition. Then in October 1967, Hanoi announced that Communist bloc countries, especially Russia and Red China, had agreed to increase military and economic aid to North Vietnam.

This increased military aid eventually found its way into South Vietnam where Communist infantry forces, with the AK-47 assault rifle and B-40 rocket launcher now becoming standard issues, began to enjoy a marked advantage over the RVNAF in terms of firepower.<sup>5</sup>

But when did North Vietnam actually begin its preparations for the 1968 General Offensive-General Uprising? The earliest evidence of preparatory activity dated back to March or April 1967 when North Vietnam confirmed its switch of strategy through the promulgation of Resolution No. 13.

A short time later, the first instance of political preparation was detected in May the same year when COSVN summoned the deputy chairman of Saigon-Gia Dinh's Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals and assigned him the mission to contact and keep close touch with those personalities earmarked by the Communists to take part in future coalition government.

This intelligence report thus made it clear that one of the strategic objectives to be achieved was a coalition government. Destined to replace the current RVN government, it was to be established after the General Offensive-General Uprising had succeeded in Saigon. According to COSVN plans, this coalition government would order the RVNAF to cease combat in those areas where fighting was still indecisive. It was also this coalition government which would eventually initiate negotiations with the United States to solve pending political and military matters in the event of victory.

Apparently, however, the Communists foresaw that even if their

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<sup>5</sup>AK-47's were captured in South Vietnam for the first time in 1964. Then in late 1966, Communist forces began to use B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers. Despite their early appearance, these weapons were only issued piecemeal and did not become standard for all Communist units until the 1968 offensive.

offensive was to succeed, militarily, they could never actually defeat both the RVNAF and U.S. forces in South Vietnam. Therefore, as enemy ralliers and prisoners later disclosed, the offensive was primarily targeted against RVNAF and GVN installations. U.S. forces did not interest Communist strategists because the main objective was to destroy the RVNAF and overthrow the RVN government through country-wide popular revolt. In such an event, U.S. bases and installations would become virtually isolated and U.S. forces would never dare to use firepower indiscriminately against Communist forces hidden behind the popular shield. In the end, as the Communists calculated, the U.S. would have its hands so tied that it would be compelled to negotiate for troop withdrawal with the new (coalition) government of South Vietnam.

To hasten the collapse of the RVNAF and win popular support, it was mandatory for the Communist side to influence public opinion. In fact, the main Communist propaganda ploy used toward this objective was to try and convince the South Vietnamese that the U.S. had agreed to a coalition government as a solution for the political future of South Vietnam. Therefore, since their general offensive only sought to formalize that solution, by pre-arrangement Communist forces would not attack U.S. targets.

In September 1967, Saigon reeked with rumors that a high-ranking Communist cadre was apprehended by the Vietnamese police after making contact with the U.S. Embassy but was released shortly thereafter under U.S. pressure. These rumors led to another story that General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Director General of the National Police, had tendered his resignation in protest of U.S. intercession and pressure.

Although these stories were never substantiated, they persisted as doubts in the inquisitive minds of the Saigon people. So when the Communist offensive materialized, save for the unique sapper action against the U.S. Embassy, the suspicious Saigon people were very much interested in the fact that no other U.S. installations and particularly, no U.S. personnel ever came under enemy attack even though they moved freely in the city. And intriguingly enough, the suspicious minds drew their own conclusions.

In a further attempt to convince the South Vietnamese population, during September, the NLF repeatedly broadcast its political program, guaranteeing them among other things appealing freedom of religion, thought, association, movement, work, etc. Such was the extent of Communist preparations on the domestic political front.

Diplomatically, the Communist effort was equally significant. On 31 December 1967, North Vietnam's minister for foreign affairs declared that if the U.S. unconditionally ceased its bombings, North Vietnam would be prepared to talk. This sounding balloon sought to achieve a double purpose. First, it put a smoke screen on Hanoi's preparations for the general offensive and enhanced the belief espoused by U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders that peace talks would shortly take place. Second, a cessation of bombings would enable North Vietnam to speed up infiltration movements into the South during the dry season without great losses and in time for the offensive.

Other Communist announcements of extended truce during Christmas, New Year and Tet were intended to achieve the same purposes: diversion and a free hand in infiltration. In fact, the Communists did take advantage of the Christmas-New Year truce both to move supplies in place and to reconnoiter future battle sites. According to the revelations of Tam Ha, a high-ranking enemy cadre who rallied after the offensive had faltered, the commander of the 9th Division, the unit responsible for attacking Saigon, and his regimental commanders made several reconnoitering trips during this period of truce.

On the military front, as diversionary actions, Communist forces launched several large-scale attacks against Khe Sanh Base in the DMZ area, Dakto in the Central Highlands and Phuoc Long and Loc Ninh further south near the Cambodian border. All of these attacks were aimed at drawing the concern of U.S. and RVN military leaders, forcing them to bring forth reinforcements which would have been otherwise committed to the defense of populous and urban areas, hence and at the same time, creating favorable conditions for sapper penetrations into cities.

The attack on Loc Ninh, it was later known, was also intended to provide Communist forces with an opportunity to experiment with street fighting tactics on the one hand, and to test the RVNAF reactions and

use of firepower to relieve embattled cities and populous centers on the other.

To create further diversions and mislead our intelligence, Communist main forces remained in their usual areas of operation while local units continued to harass and try to pin down our forces by ground attacks and shellings across the country. According to the enemy's concept of operation, infiltrated sapper units were the primary forces employed to attack important targets and headquarters in cities with the support of local force battalions. Once these objectives had been occupied, the attacking elements were to hold them at all costs for a period from 2 to 5 days to afford main force units the necessary time to move in as reinforcements.

To muster additional forces in a short time, enemy plans also called for the capture of prisoner camps and the employment of liberated prisoners as local combatants. It was equally expected that attacking forces should look for rebellious elements among the local population and enlist their participation in combat. For that purpose, weapons and ammunition were to be moved into cities beforehand and used not only to resupply attacking forces but also to equip liberated prisoners and volunteers.

The infiltration of weapons and ammunition into cities was subjected to meticulous planning in order to avoid detection. Toward that end, it was coordinated with and took advantage of normal traffic movements of goods and merchandise regularly delivered to urban markets. These movements were accelerated during the busy trade periods such as Christmas, New Year, and particularly during the pre-Tet week when traffic was heaviest and control usually more relaxed.

Although various techniques of infiltration were used, the most common and reliable turned out to be the one practice so familiar to smugglers: double-decked trucks and boats and concealment beneath cargoes. Once the weapons, explosives and ammunition had been successfully smuggled in, they were to be distributed among the VCI members who would keep them in custody in their own houses or hide them in such unsuspected areas as cemeteries, drainage ditches and garbage dumps. An enemy prisoner who belonged to the 83d Rear Service Group, the unit in

charge of moving weapons, explosives, and ammunition into Saigon, later disclosed that by using this smuggling technique, he had been able to deliver his war cargoes in four trips; the first time in late November, the second time at Christmas and the last two times three days before Tet.

Another method of obtaining additional war materials that the enemy had planned to use was to steal them from ARVN units. Priority was also given to capturing armored vehicles and artillery pieces which the enemy estimated to be doubly useful. Not only could they be immediately used to support attacks and confuse ARVN troops, their employment by VC troops would also look as if ARVN combat arms had joined in the attacks on the insurgent side.

To speed up the collapse of the RVNAF, which the enemy had expected, and enlist the cooperation of some of their units, a scheme was devised to capture alive key RVNAF unit commanders. The enemy hoped that by forcing these commanders to give orders, RVNAF units under their command would either cease combat and capitulate or cooperate with his side.

Among the objectives that Communist forces were ordered to attack and hold at all costs, radio and TV broadcast stations were considered most vital to the effort of instigating a country-wide popular insurrection. Several propaganda programs had therefore been pre-recorded on tapes, slated to be transmitted over our airwaves during the first hours of the offensive. The most effective among these programs, according to enemy propagandists, was perhaps Ho Chi Minh's Tet greetings addressed to the South Vietnamese population.

On the eve of Tet, Hanoi Radio suddenly broadcast a short poem by Ho Chi Minh which it said was Ho's greetings. The poem reads:

"This Spring (Tet) is entirely different from previous ones  
Because every household is enjoying news of victory  
North and South are now forever reunited  
Forward! Total victory will be ours."

Intended to stimulate Communist troops in the south and exhort the South Vietnamese population into joining them in the General Offensive-General Uprising, the poem, especially the last line had also been conceived as code words for the attack, as enemy prisoners and ralliers later testified.

All preparations for attack were thus thoroughly made including the most minute details. The enemy was so sure of success that even Ho's poem was composed to sound as if victory had been achieved. Its implied present tense made it perfectly appropriate whether broadcast by Hanoi or Saigon Radio, before or during Tet.

To achieve tactical surprise, which Vo Nguyen Giap considered essential for success, the offensive operational plan was kept strictly confidential and disseminated to each subordinate level of execution only as requirements dictated. Executive members of COSVN knew of the plan some time in May 1967. Not until three months later was this plan disseminated to high-ranking enemy officials of the Saigon-Cholon-Gia Dinh Special Zone. Actual preparations for combat, however, began only in November. From that time on, a flurry of activities took place and did not abate until the attack orders were issued.

During that time, enemy units received replacements while supplies were moved into areas of future operation. Communication-liaison, reconnaissance, and sapper teams extensively searched for access routes into cities and reconnoitered targets of attack. These routes were to become avenues of approach for main force units which would move in as soon as the main objectives had been secured. Maps were distributed to participating units and even though they were not militarily accurate, they did show GVN check points in detail. Also to minimize leaks, even participating units were informed that reconnaissance activities were being conducted with the sole purpose of selecting targets for sabotage or shellings.

In addition, several sapper units were given training in street combat tactics. However, the extent of this training was limited so as to maintain secrecy.

For those units that were slated to attack first, combat orders were issued only 48 to 72 hours prior to action. And contrary to usual operational practice, unit missions and terrain studies were simply discussed to an extent considered reasonably compatible with local combat requirements. As a result, no unit commander from the middle level down ever knew that the attack he was going to conduct was part of a country-wide general offensive.

Despite these precautions, such extensive preparations could not go entirely airtight and without leaving telltale traces. Most of these indications could be found in enemy documents that RVNAF and U.S. units happened to capture during operations.

The question that should naturally arise is to what extent did the RVN know in advance about the 1968 General Offensive-Uprising, and especially, why did everybody seem to agree that our enemy had achieved the element of surprise?



## CHAPTER III

### The RVN and Enemy Preparations

#### *How Much Did We Know*

In March 1967, ARVN units captured an enemy document during an operation in the III corps area. The document, which belonged to the enemy CT-5 Division, discussed summarily a plan of attack against Saigon. This plan was rudimentary and so amateurishly prepared that both ARVN and U.S. intelligence analysts disproved it as pure fantasy.

Two months later, the National Police apprehended a high-ranking enemy cadre by the name of Ba Tra. He declared being Deputy Chairman of the Committee for the Proselyting of Intellectuals for the Saigon-Cho Lon area. Among documents seized from his possession, there was a list naming a few members of the Saigon intelligentsia. Ba Tra disclosed that they were the personalities whom the NLF earmarked as cabinet members of a future coalition government of South Vietnam. His mission was to contact, persuade, and prepare them for selected cabinet rank positions in that government. This was the first time that information on a Communist-sponsored coalition government in South Vietnam was ever obtained. The motives behind this project and the objectives contemplated remained unclear, however.

Then in September the same year another enemy cadre with the name of X----- was arrested and detained, again by the National Police. Submitted to intensive interrogation, X----- disclosed he had the mission to contact the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to discuss certain important issues of mutual interest, including an exchange of prisoners. Nothing more was learned of what ensued except that, as rumors had it, he was claimed by the U.S. Embassy, which reportedly maintained that he was serving as a double agent. Along with X-----, a few other enemy cadres

who had been detained for some time, were also released, all presumably upon U.S. requests.

Rumors thereafter circulated to the effect that some kind of private agreement had been reached between the U.S. and the VC but nobody seemed to know any specifics. Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, Director General of the National Police, tendered his resignation to protest U.S. intrusion. However, his resignation was not accepted.

When North Vietnam made public the text of Vo Nguyen Giap's article "Big Victory, Giant Task", which Hanoi Radio carried from 14 to 16 September 1967 in its daily programs, South Vietnam immediately sensed that something new had been brought into enemy war policies. As usual, Communist rhetoric only made sense if read between the lines. A change in strategy seemed transparent enough, but nobody could decipher exactly what direction it would take.

Not until early October was ARVN intelligence able to obtain, through its agent network, the first lead of that new strategic direction: Resolution No. 13 of North Vietnam's Politbureau. In no nonsense terms, Resolution No. 13 called for victory in a short time and prescribed the strategy of large-scale offensive to achieve it.

A few days later, another document was seized from enemy Unit 16 during an operation in the III Corps Area. Unit 16 was COSVN's principal armor force. The document discussed training efforts concerning sapper tactics and how to operate ARVN armored vehicles.

On 25 October 1967, still another important enemy document fell into our hands in Tay Ninh Province. Dated 1 September 1967, it contained these introductory remarks "This is instructional material to help better understand the new situation and our new task." Apparently, it was intended for middle-level cadres. The document consisted of two parts, the first part outlining the main objective to be achieved by Communist forces: ending the American presence in South Vietnam. This was to be accomplished by the establishment of a coalition government, and the NLF would be playing a major role in arranging for the American exit. The second part of the document discussed the strategy of "three-

pronged offensive" designed to: (1) defeat the RVNAF; (2) destroy U.S. political and military institutions, and; (3) instigate a country-wide insurrection of the popular masses. This projected offensive bore the abbreviated designation TCK-TKN which stood for Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia (General Offensive-General Uprising).

On 3 November 1967, three days after the major battle of Dakto broke out fiercely northwest of Kontum, ARVN forces captured a document whose originator was the B-3 Front, the enemy headquarters that was directing the attack. The contents of this document discussed four objectives to be achieved by Communist forces in the Central Highlands:

(1) To destroy the bulk of U.S. forces in the Central Highlands, thereby forcing them to bring in reinforcements, and to destroy and disrupt a major part of ARVN forces here.

(2) To improve combat tactics and techniques and concentrate efforts on destroying enemy major units.

(3) To weaken enemy vitality, liberate as large an area as possible and consolidate the base system. Achieving this would amount to actually taking part in the political struggle for national liberation.

(4) To harmoniously coordinate efforts with other fronts across South Vietnam in order to implement correctly and unify our policies.

Another enemy document seized in Quang Tin Province, I Corps Area, in November provided substantial detail on the General Offensive-General Uprising that was about to unfold. A passage in the document read in fact: "This is the time we should proceed with our General Offensive-General Uprising. Through the coordinated use of military forces combined with a country-wide popular uprising, we shall attack every provincial city, and every district town, including the capital, Saigon, which we shall liberate."

At about the same time, information concerning a reorganization of enemy territorial control in South Vietnam began to stream in from our human intelligence network. Most significant among the features of this realignment were the changes brought into enemy territorial organizations in the RVN I and III Corps areas. In the I Corps area, the enemy Tri Thien-Hue Military Region was transformed into four

military subdivisions instead of two (Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces).

In the III Corps area, the enemy Military Region 4, which was in charge of Saigon-Cho Lon, was reorganized into 5 military subdivisions whose interboundaries converged on Saigon-Cho Lon. An enemy document classified "top secret", captured in January 1968 from COSVN's communication and transportation section, confirmed this new organizational realignment. (Map 1)

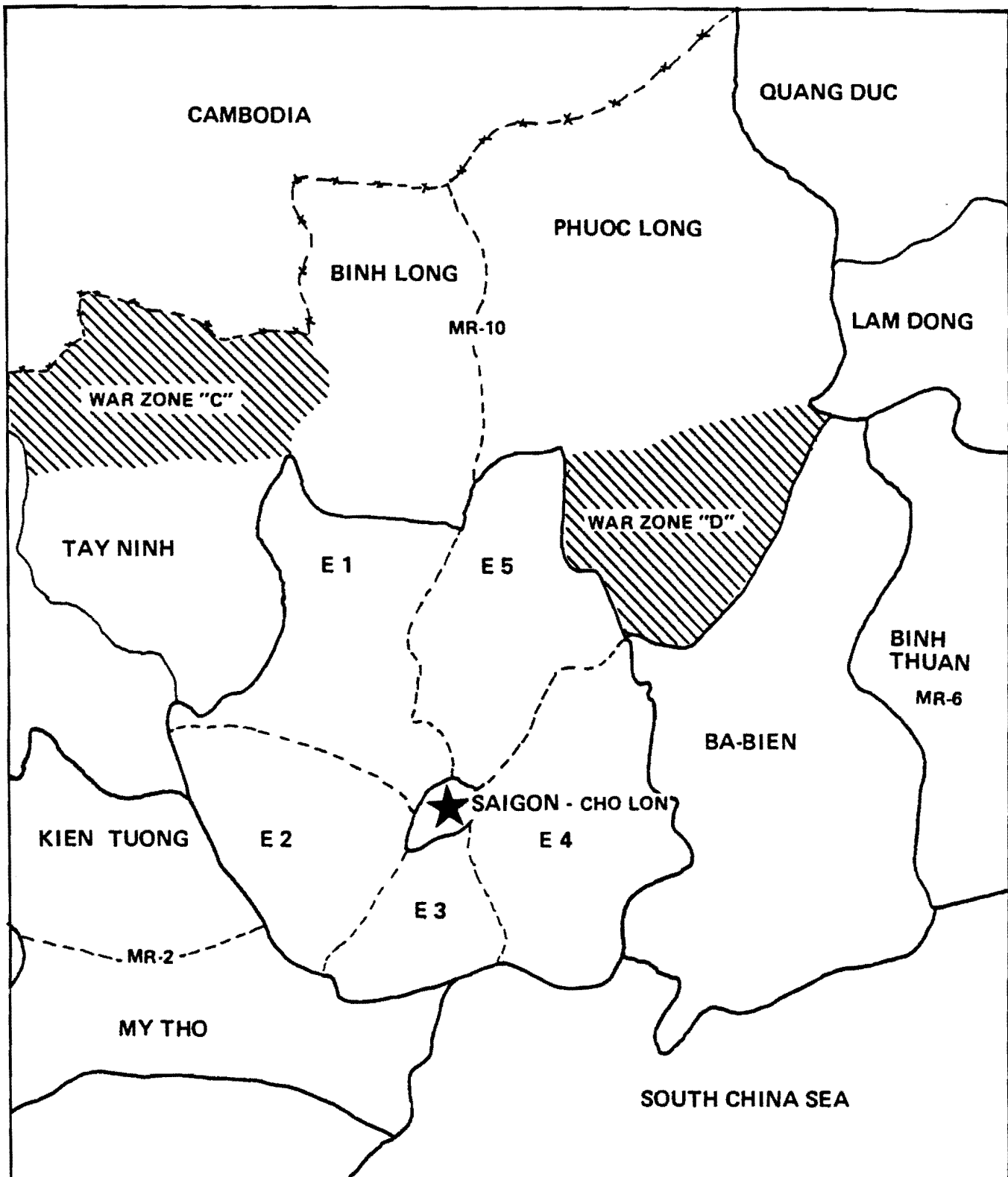
On 4 January 1968, during an operation in the Dakto area, the U.S. 4th Infantry Division captured another significant document. This was Operation Order No. 1 concerning an attack planned against Pleiku City before Tet.

In mid-January, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division also seized an enemy document from the Dong Nai Regiment in III Corps area concerning a plan of concerted attacks against Phu Cuong, the provincial capital of Binh Duong, the 5th ARVN Division Headquarters and the Headquarters, 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron, also in Binh Duong Province. This information was subsequently confirmed by an enemy rallier belonging to the 273d Regiment, 9th Division.

On 20 January 1968, the 23d ARVN Infantry Division captured from the enemy a plan of attack against Ban Me Thuot City. However, this plan did not specify when the attack would take place. The same day, the 22d ARVN Infantry Division also seized a document mentioning Qui Nhon as a target for attack.

At Qui Nhon, on 28 January, the local Military Security Service received from agent sources several reports concerning secret meetings held in the city by enemy cadres. During a cordon and search operation at two of the meeting places, MSS personnel apprehended 11 enemy cadres, both male and female, and seized from their possession two pre-recorded tapes. The tapes contained an appeal to the local population to take up arms and overthrow the government. They also recorded an announcement that "the Forces Struggling for Peace and Unification" already occupied Saigon, Hue, and Da Nang. Upon interrogation, the enemy cadres disclosed that Communist forces were going to attack Qui Nhon and many other cities during the Tet period.

Map 1 — Realignment of Enemy Military Regions



On the same day, 28 January, at III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa, the G-2 learned through intelligence sources that the enemy had moved one artillery and two infantry regiments to an area north of the city. The next morning, 29 January, the local population of Ho Nai, a suburban district town near Bien Hoa, reported the presence of a Communist unit, size unknown, in an area adjacent to this town.

On the night of 30 January, ARVN soldiers on guard duty at the main gate of III Corps Headquarters in Bien Hoa detected an enemy reconnaissance team nearby, opened fire, and killed one enemy armed with an AK-47. At Can Tho City, seat of IV Corps Headquarters, on the same night, enemy sappers disguised as tourists went into a hotel and rented rooms for the night. They were immediately discovered and arrested.

At 2100 hours on 30 January, a RF element tending an ambush on the Saigon defense perimeter captured an enemy soldier with an AK-47. The prisoner disclosed that Communist troops were going to attack Saigon, Tan Son Nhut Airbase, the Joint General Staff compound, and Saigon Radio station at 0300 hours on 31 January 1968. This happened to be just a few hours away.

And the attack on Saigon, as it turned out, began exactly at 0300 hours on 31 January 1968, in the small hours of the second day of Tet.

### *The Surprise: Why?*

One thing was certain. The enemy had really achieved the element of surprise.

The surprise was so total that even though he was informed of all developments in the enemy situation which I have summarized, President Thieu at the last minute did not take any significant action to counter the enemy's move. Apparently, he did not believe that things could develop as indicated by a few intelligence reports. At the time the fighting erupted across the country, he was at My Tho for a Tet reunion with his wife's family.

Even after fighting had erupted at several places in Saigon and despite an announcement made by Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky over Saigon

Radio in which he appealed to our population to stay calm, many people still thought that it was simply a coup. Many others said they could not believe their eyes when in the early morning of 31 January they saw troops in palm-leafed hats and black rubber sandals, Binh-Tri-Thien style. That these Communist troops could actually establish themselves in some of the city blocks of Saigon was simply an incredible accomplishment.

It was thus obvious that on our part, nobody was convinced that the Communists would launch a concerted offensive against cities and towns across the country during the Tet holidays. Even those considered the most knowledgeable about the enemy—our intelligence analysts—required better information on which to base their estimates.

But why this surprise? Why was it possible that no one in our intelligence establishment was adequately alarmed in the face of indications? From hindsight, it appears that our failure began with a wrong estimate of the enemy, and intelligence methodology may have been to some extent responsible for it. Our intelligence theory taught us that in estimating the enemy's probable course of action we should be primarily concerned with his capabilities and not his intentions. Capabilities, it was maintained, differed from intentions in that they were real, tangible facts, the conditions that made the execution of a certain course of action possible whereas intentions were often something vague, uncertain, hence unreliable. True to these teachings, our intelligence analysts dismissed those pieces of information they considered as just expressing an intention such as the enemy's plan of attack against cities, for example. Understandably, they were primarily interested to know whether the enemy had the capabilities for it.

With the information available to South Vietnam, it was true that the enemy hardly had the capabilities for such an ambitious action. Most intelligence data collected on the enemy during the period prior to the offensive either indicated that his units were facing difficulties or that the morale of his troops had declined markedly. Furthermore, given the prevailing balance of forces and the deployment and disposition of enemy main force units at that time, which showed that they were still confined to outlying bases far removed from urban centers, there was

little possibility that the enemy could initiate a general offensive regardless of his intention. Our analysts further argued that even though the enemy was bold enough to attack and successfully occupy part of a city or a district town, how was he ever capable of holding it for any long period? Besides, it was hardly possible that the enemy would want to incur inevitable heavy losses for something predictably ephemeral. And on top of all that, we believed that the enemy did not even have the capability to establish, much less operate, an administration where he might gain temporary control.

Some of our analysts even went as far as believing that the enemy was actually reverting to the first or defensive phase of his war strategy. They pointed convincingly to such indications as COSVN Headquarters being moved to Cambodia and the enemy being forced to carve out new bases in that sanctuary as a result of destructive U.S. search-and-destroy operations being conducted into long-established bases such as War Zones C and D and the Iron Triangle. To pass from Stage One to the General Offensive or Stage Three, they argued, the enemy had to go through Stage Two, which was a period of contention or holding out. They also emphasized that this was a certainty which conformed to Communist warfare rules.

This argument seemed plausible enough if Vietnamese Communists strictly adhered to Red China's precepts of people's war strategy, which our intelligence analysts usually believed they would. Indeed, until shortly before the Tet Offensive, all of our intelligence estimates had been based on the conviction that the enemy was pursuing Lin Piao's strategy, which prescribed "using the rural areas to encircle and strangle the cities," implying insurgency or guerrilla warfare. Our analysts at that time had never visualized the proposition of "attacking the cities to liberate rural areas."

Vo Nguyen Giap's article "Big Victory, Giant Task" also contributed its part to the serious error committed by our intelligence analysts. The idea which influenced them most was Giap's contention that the war was going to last many more years. With this clue, they finally concluded that the General Offensive-General Uprising to which enemy documents referred would not materialize in the immediate future.



Such an assessment eventually became a conviction, a certainty that overshadowed information suggesting indications of a general offensive. This certainty persisted in spite of reports on enemy training for street combat and behavior toward the South Vietnamese urban population which were the type of information we had never had before since the beginning of the war.

Another significant omission which partly accounted for our lack of perception was that the intelligence data collected were never assembled into a cohesive mosaic or synthesized into a general estimate that could provide us with a basis on which to construct a collection plan seeking to obtain all we needed to know about the enemy's intended general offensive. No RVN intelligence agency, military or civilian, to my knowledge, had ever attempted or even received any instruction to do this.

But the biggest shortcoming of our intelligence structure was perhaps the almost total lack of coordination between agencies, or the lack of a coordinating agency. This shortcoming came to our attention as early as in 1960-1961, was never remedied, and remained a significant weakness until 1968 despite the creation of the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), which was directly under presidential control.

Every intelligence agency, therefore, functioned independently and rarely shared its information with others. The National Police, for example, kept for itself those data concerning the coalition government plan and valuable depositions made by such important sources as Ba Tra and X-----. Then, the vital information on the imminent offensive, which resulted from the arrest of Y----- a few days before Tet, also locked itself in the MSS files like some sort of private property and was never reported or communicated to the J-2, Joint General Staff, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces.

The same shortcoming existed even in the military intelligence reporting system. ARVN units which happened to capture enemy documents seldom reported and dispatched them in time. Some G-2's at the division level and especially at corps level and many sector S-2's did not consider it a duty obligation to report what they collected to the JGS J-2 Division. This deplorable omission was sometimes condoned or even

encouraged by certain field commanders who found it beneficial for their good standing to communicate the more important pieces of information directly to the Independence Palace. Influenced by his commander's reckless attitude, naturally the G-2 or S-2 was reluctant to contact the JGS and often felt he could dispense altogether with reporting. In two substantiated cases, a corps G-2 was expressly told by his commander not to bother with reporting to higher headquarters.

Then, despite the abundance of communications facilities made available for ARVN use by U.S. forces, the military intelligence system was never authorized any sole-purpose channels for intelligence reporting by our JGS. This lack of dedicated communications continued to hinder our intelligence reporting even after the complete transfer of U.S. communications assets.

Intelligence coordination between the JGS and MACV during this period was also not firmly established as far as estimates were concerned. Although normal exchange of current information occurred as a matter of standing operating procedure at all combined intelligence agencies, there was definitely a lack of sharing when it came to important information of immediate consequence or those pertaining to the personal estimate of each intelligence chief. The fact that U.S. intelligence advisers at ARVN field units usually received and dispatched information to MACV J-2 much more rapidly than their counterparts did to J-2, JGS also accounted in part for the usual lack of coordination at this level.

As for U.S. military intelligence, there was no doubt that it was highly successful on collecting information through technical facilities. At the time of the 1968 Tet offensive, however, the United States did not appear to be as capable in the production of intelligence as during the subsequent stages of the war. Additionally it appeared that U.S. intelligence suffered from the same subjectivity that plagued its ARVN counterpart. Obviously, U.S. military intelligence also failed to come to any solid conclusion as far as the scope, size, and timing of the enemy offensive were concerned.

As a result of all this, information became piecemeal, incomplete, untimely, and consequently did not always interest our intelligence

experts. Interpretations of this kind of information, therefore, were vague and often erroneous. The attack against Loc Ninh, for example, was viewed as an enemy political ploy to overshadow the inauguration of South Vietnam's Second Republic. In the same vein, the realignment of enemy territorial organization in the RVN I and III Corps areas was interpreted as an effort by our enemy to control his infrastructure activities more effectively. Then the 7-day truce which had been declared for Christmas and New Year by the Communists was construed by our analysts as a possible time frame for enemy attack. But the attack did not materialize until after the enemy had taken advantage of that period of truce to move supplies, redeploy troops, reconnoiter targets and finalize his preparations.

In the light of available information, our RVN intelligence estimated, therefore, that the Communists would launch a major offensive campaign whose principal objectives were Khe Sanh Base, the strongpoints south of the DMZ and other friendly bases along the western borders of II and III Corps areas.

This estimate coincided with the personal views of our field commanders and national leaders. In this regard, there seemed to be a certain mutual effect which regulated their thinking to such an extent that they could hardly deviate from each other. Our national leaders, who were impressed and influenced by rousing public and press speculations on the possibility of a second Dien Bien Phu battle, evidently accepted this possibility, especially when no intelligence agency produced anything to disprove it. Influenced in their turn by the near conviction of the national leaders, our South Vietnamese intelligence agencies came up with estimates that went along similar lines, avoiding those they thought would contradict their superiors. In the screening process, they even abstained from selecting those intelligence data which related to the possibility that the enemy would strike in the heart of our cities during the Tet holidays.

The end of it all led to the decision to deploy two airborne battalions, our last reserves, to the I Corps area; the JGS had approved this displacement based on a MACV recommendation that the DMZ situation

required additional ARVN troops. That these battalions happened to be in Saigon the day the offensive took place was simply due to the unavailability of air transportation.

Just a few days before Tet, President Thieu decided to reduce the RVN truce to 36 hours. He had been spurred into making that decision by the U.S. Embassy and particularly General Westmoreland, who informed him that the situation bore several indications of an imminent enemy offensive. But even then nobody seemed to believe that Saigon and other cities would be the major objectives of this offensive and that the Tet truce would be violated. President Thieu left for My Tho in the afternoon of 29 January to celebrate Tet. His last decision before departing Saigon was to concur with MACV on cancelling the truce for the two northernmost provinces of the I Corps area.

Orders were thus given to all RVNAF units to confine 50% of their troop strength to barracks. But special Tet leaves, which had been allowed to 5% of each unit's strength, were not cancelled. In some areas, defensive measures were taken based on division commanders' and province chiefs' own estimates of the local situation.

At Ban Me Thuot, the 23d ARVN Division commander cancelled all Tet leaves and consolidated the defense of the city in the light of captured enemy documents. At Binh Duong, the 5th Division commander and the province chief took similar measures after they had come upon indications of an imminent attack. The division called back one of its battalions at Song Be, Phuoc Long Province, to reinforce the defense of Binh Duong. The 18th ARVN Division at Xuan Loc also called back to headquarters two of its battalions from outlying areas to be used as reserves and a reaction force.

On the afternoon of 29 January, contents of the two pre-recorded tapes seized from the enemy at Qui Nhon by the MSS were transmitted back to II Corps Headquarters and the Joint Operations Center, JGS, via hot lines. General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the JGS, immediately ordered his J-3 to call all corps commanders, warn them of the imminent enemy attack and instruct them to take appropriate defensive measures. Whether all corps commanders took this warning seriously or how they implemented the J-3 instructions were not clear at the time. In any event, many ARVN

commanders later claimed that this warning failed to communicate any true sense of emergency.

These orders were subsequently relayed throughout the hierarchy, but apparently they did not reach down to every level because of communications difficulties. Unit commanders hastily tried to call back the men on leave, but by that time those who had long journeys to make had already left.

At that tardy moment, even those who did not have to take up immediate guard or alert duties, had managed to slip away to their families in town. Tet was but a few hours away. Despite the warning, the prevailing feeling among ARVN troops was one of suspended belief. Very few in fact took it seriously.

At midnight on 30 January, as tradition would have it, every household began celebrating Tet. Two hours later, the first attack of the enemy general offensive broke out at Nha Trang. During the night, all five provincial capitals of II Corps area came under enemy fire.

News of these attacks did not impart any sense of alert among the people of Saigon, who like those of other cities not yet under attack, were carried away by the festive mood. Saigon Radio, however, interrupted its regular program at 0945 hours to announce the cancellation of the Tet truce in view of the enemy's blatant violations. At the Capital Military District, orders were issued to confine all troops to barracks. In the afternoon, all major accesses to Saigon were subjected to tight control. To reinforce its defenses the CMD headquarters requested and obtained the use of one airborne battalion as reserves. It immediately deployed one company to the Chi Hoa Prison, and another to the Saigon National Radio Station. To avoid arousing curiosity among the Saigon people, this airborne company took up alert duties at the MSS compound, which was adjacent to the radio station. Two other companies of this battalion were held as reserve at CMD headquarters.

At Tan Son Nhut airbase, no change occurred in its defenses. The base continued to be defended by the 2d Service Battalion and air force security forces, as usual; but the airborne companies that were waiting for air transport to take them to Da Nang the next morning, 31 January, were present on the base that TET New Year Day in full battle dress.

In downtown Saigon, field police forces took up defense positions at vital street intersections. Their presence was hardly noticed by the few people who ventured outside on that day. The uninterrupted noise of firecrackers continued to echo throughout the city at all hours, even during the night. And when the first enemy rounds were fired at 0200 on 1 February, they blended into this noisy background. A few hours earlier, at around midnight, many Saigon people saw groups of armed men moving silently in the dark in some street blocks. Most thought that perhaps a coup was unfolding.

And so the attack of Saigon, which rolled up the curtain for the country-wide 1968 enemy offensive, took place at a time and against objectives our people least expected.