

CHAPTER IV

The General Offensive, Phase I

A Bird's-Eye View

The country-wide attacks that made up the 1968 TET Offensive did not all occur at the same time. Twenty-four hours before the actual offensive began, five provincial capitals of II Corps area, Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot, Kontum, Pleiku, and Qui Nhon, and Da Nang City in I Corps area were already under attack.

It was difficult to determine why this apparent lack of coordination existed. Some attributed it to an error in orders received by the B-3 Front and Headquarters, MR-5. However, this theory could not hold because the enemy MR-5 area included not only Da Nang and Qui Nhon but also Quang Ngai, Quang Tin and Phu Yen, which were not attacked until a day later.

Others maintained that this was a deliberate enemy scheme designed to deceive our side as to the real objectives of the offensive. However, since tactical surprise had been the enemy's foremost consideration, it was difficult to accept this theory as valid. Had the enemy launched all attacks at the same time, the surprise to our side would have been greater; then Saigon and Hue would have been even more vulnerable because precautionary measures would have been virtually non-existent. In fact, it was precisely these early attacks that enabled the RVN to take some appropriate though tardy defensive measures.

No one seemed therefore able to provide a logical explanation for these early attacks. By general consensus, it was agreed that the date of the offensive was 31 January 1968, the day the enemy attacked Saigon, Cholon and Gia Dinh.

Other cities and provincial capitals that came under attack on the same day as Saigon were: Quang Tri, Hue, Quang Tin, Quang Ngai in

I Corps area, Phan Thiet in II Corps area, and Can Tho and Vinh Long in IV Corps area.

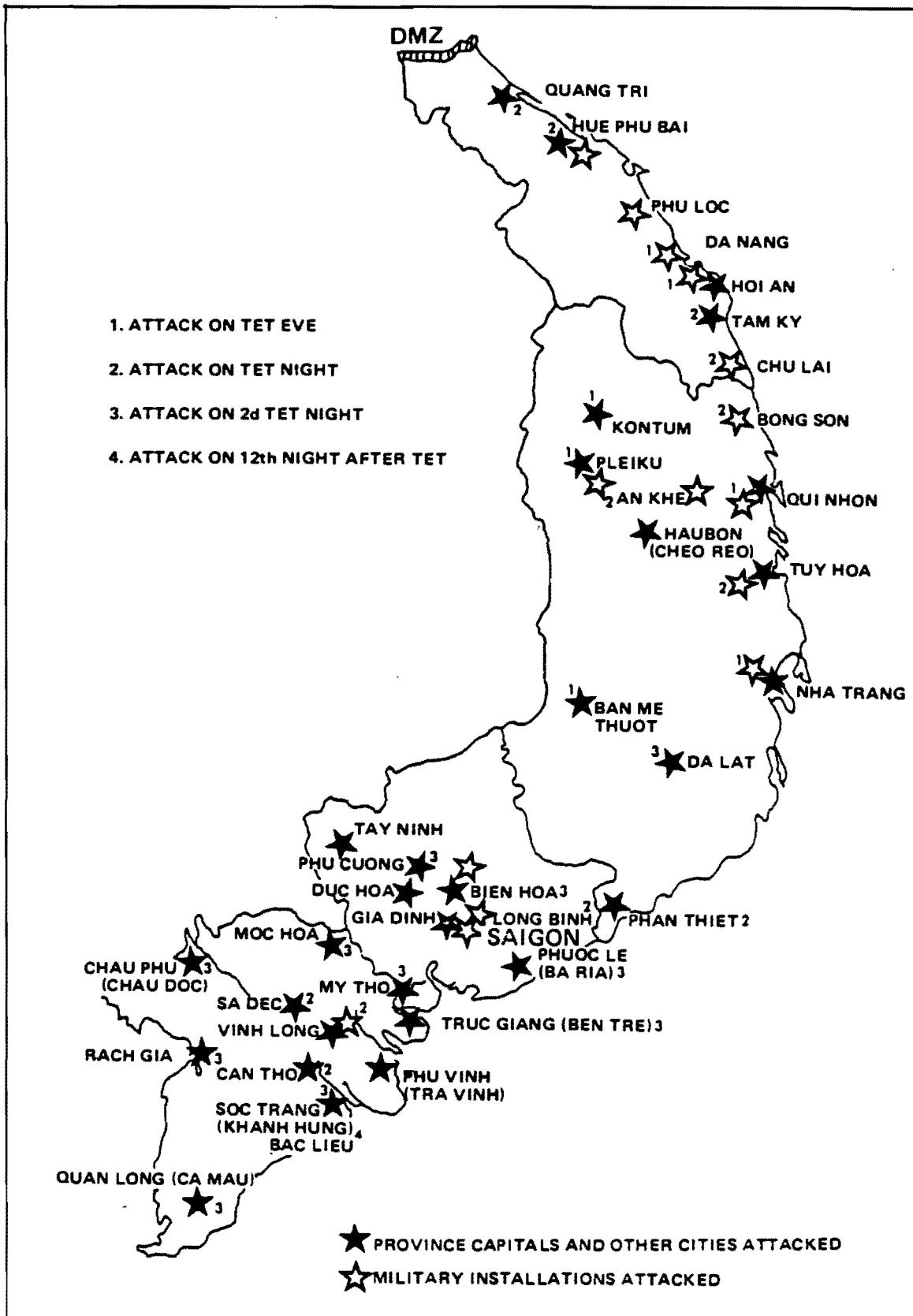
The next day, 1 February, the enemy initiated attacks on Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, Binh Duong in III Corps area, and Kien Hoa, Dinh Tuong, Go Cong, Kien Giang, Vinh Binh, and Kien Tuong in IV Corps area. The latest attack in date which took place on 10 February, was on Bac Lieu in IV Corps area. In total, 28 out of South Vietnam's 48 cities and provincial capitals had become objectives of the general offensive. The ones that had been spared were regarded by the enemy as insignificant and subjected only to minor harassments. (Map 2)

Regardless of the size and importance of the objective, the enemy followed exactly the same pattern of attack. His primary targets remained without exception the highest local RVNAF headquarters and the radio broadcasting station. The forces that conducted the initial attack were all local units, sappers and VCI elements. Their mission was to capture and hold designated targets until reinforcements could move in from outside the city. Accompanying the attacking elements were political cadres who had the responsibility to coax the local population into rebellion.

At Da Nang, the seat of I Corps Headquarters and one of the first two objectives to come under attack in this corps area, Colonel Nguyen Duy Hinh, acting Chief of Staff, I Corps, received a phone call from the JGS in Saigon at about 2000 on 29 January. The JGS informed him that the enemy would probably initiate an increased surge of activities and admonished caution and defensive measures. After reporting to Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, I Corps Commander, and acting on his instructions, Colonel Hinh informed all subordinate units and asked them to carry out the JGS orders.

At about 0300 on 30 January, the enemy began to attack Hoi An, the provincial capital of Quang Nam, some 30 km south of Da Nang. Half an hour later, Colonel Hinh heard many shots being fired at the I Corps Headquarters. From his house only 500 meters away, he saw brilliant tracers ricochetting upward from the stream of cross fire. "Enemy attack," he thought to himself as he picked up the telephone to inform the I Corps commander. As Colonel Hinh vividly recalled, General Lam's first

Map 2 – The 1968 Tet Offensive, Phase I



reaction was an expression of incredulity; "baloney, baloney," he said, interrupting Colonel Hin's verbal report. Checking with I Corps Headquarters, Colonel Hin learned that an enemy sapper squad had penetrated the headquarters compound, and ARVN soldiers on guard and alert duties were reacting forcefully, killing at least one. Despite its successful penetration, the enemy squad did not seem very active. Trying to hold ground, it fought a delaying action, apparently waiting for a reinforcement that never came. At that time, this reinforcement was being tied up in an attack on the Hoa Vang district town just south of Da Nang. Faced with a fierce resistance by defending forces, that enemy unit was being pinned down, unable to make headway or fall back. When morning came, an ARVN Ranger battalion, which had just returned from an operational mission and was resting at its base near Da Nang, was deployed to Hoa Vang as a relief force together with an ARVN armor element. From the Hoa Cam Training Center nearby, another relief element moved in. At the same time tactical air bombed and strafed enemy positions at Hoa Vang despite their proximity to friendly troops. The enemy attack on Da Nang ended rapidly.

In II Corps area, Nha Trang was the first city to be attacked during the 1968 general offensive. The enemy attack took place at 0030 on 31 January, just after the Tet midnight rite had been performed. The enemy at first attacked the Naval Training Center, and as the fighting went on, he began to inject troops into the city for other attacks. His combat force consisted of elements of five sapper companies totalling approximately 160 men, supported by a mortar and recoilless rifle company and about 100 VCI members implanted in the city. As was the case in other areas, the attacking elements had been promised reinforcement by main force units. But in Nha Trang, the enemy never suspected that the reaction by defending forces would be so fierce. Even with just 20 men the Nha Trang radio station fought on, and not one enemy sapper was able to penetrate inside. With the immediate relief provided by an ARVN Ranger battalion and three Special Forces detachments, Nha Trang was free of enemy just 12 hours after the attack was initiated. An added reason for the rapid failure of the attack was that several VCI elements in the city were apprehended.

before they had time to participate. This was made possible through the revelations of enemy prisoners under interrogation.

At Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot, the three Central Highlands provincial cities which all came under attack on the day before the offensive began, the enemy pattern of attack was almost identical. At each place, sapper elements would penetrate the city first, to be immediately followed by a main force regiment. Two battalions of the 24th NVA Regiment made some headway into Kontum City but were subsequently driven out. The third battalion of this regiment was held in check outside the city.

At Pleiku, the enemy H-15 Local Force Battalion had received orders to coordinate the attack with the NVA 95B Regiment, but this regiment failed to show up at the rendezvous. Orders were subsequently changed for the H-15 Battalion to proceed with the attack alone. It was then 0930 in the morning. Having to move across a large open field to get into Pleiku, the H-15 Battalion became an easy target for an ARVN armor unit implanted on the outskirts of the city. During the battle, the enemy battalion commander was taken prisoner.

At Ban Me Thuot, Colonel Truong Quang An, 23d ARVN Division commander, had expected the enemy attack on the city in the light of available intelligence reports. He had therefore cancelled all Tet leaves and prepared subordinate units for the defense. On the night the enemy launched his attack, the 23d Division even had patrols on the move at a distance of up to 10 km from the city. When an enemy unit succeeded nevertheless in penetrating the city, the friendly reaction with armor and reconnaissance elements was immediate and forceful. Despite this, the battle for Ban Me Thuot lasted nine days. During that time, the NVA 33d Regiment penetrated into the city four times but was driven back each time.

At Qui Nhon, the defending forces were unable to prevent enemy penetration into the city, despite the fact that they had discovered the enemy scheme of attack through the capture of 11 VCI members and a pre-recorded tape destined to be broadcast on Qui Nhon Radio. Enemy sappers attacked the city exactly as planned. In addition, they occupied the local MSS building, released the 11 detainees and even

captured the MSS chief, an ARVN captain who had directed the successful raid and arrested these VCI members. After being released, these enemy cadres joined in the attack, but several were killed in the process. The Qui Nhon radio station, being one of the enemy's primary targets, had been overrun during the first hours of the attack. The enemy controlled this station but was never able to broadcast the pre-recorded announcement for the simple reason that he could not recover the tape.

Enemy forces conducting the attack on Qui Nhon were made up of one local force battalion and one sapper battalion. The defending forces meanwhile consisted of a single RF company immediately available when the attack began but later reinforced by a reconnaissance company, an engineer company and a special forces company. They were eventually supported by two companies of the ROK Tiger Division.

When attacking Qui Nhon, the enemy had hoped to receive a helping hand from the local population who, from years of living under Viet Minh control prior to 1954, had been presumed to be largely pro-Communist. However, this helping hand was never extended despite enemy coaxing. The enemy attack on Qui Nhon, therefore, ended in dismal failure.

In the III Corps area, the enemy concentrated his primary effort on Saigon, Cho Long and Gia Dinh, which made up the Saigon metropolitan area. His effort here was closely coordinated with other attacks throughout the corps area, which, according to plans, proceeded at a frenetic pace in Bien Hoa, Binh Duong, Long Khanh, Long An, and Hau Nghia.

In the IV Corps area, enemy attacks were conducted against 13 out of 16 provincial cities. The offensive was therefore most extensive despite the absence of NVA units. The enemy plan of attack in this corps area included a scheme to capture alive the commanders of the 7th and 9th ARVN Divisions. As it was later revealed, enemy sappers had planned to attack the residence of the 9th Division commander and expected to capture him and his family there. They planned next to have him summon his deputy and chief of staff and force all three to order the divisional units into submission. The enemy scheme eventually

failed because the 9th Division commander remained at his headquarters on the night of the attack and personally directed ARVN efforts to clear the town of enemy sappers.

Enemy forces in the Mekong Delta included approximately 20 local force battalions. All of them participated in the offensive. The fighting was especially heavy at Vinh Long, Vinh Binh, My Tho and Can Tho.

Can Tho was the seat of IV Corps Headquarters. Despite the capture of several enemy sappers disguised as tourists in a downtown hotel on the eve of the attack, no alert orders were issued. Elements of two enemy local force battalions succeeded therefore to penetrate the outskirts of the city two days in advance without being detected. At Can Tho, the targets of attack remained the same as elsewhere: Corps headquarters, the radio station and a few other places of particular significance to enemy propaganda efforts such as the local university and shopping center. However, friendly forces reacted with determination and drove the enemy out of the city within just one day.

At Vinh Binh, friendly forces also took just one day to clear the attackers. At Vinh Long, fighting was heavier and lasted for several days because three enemy battalions had penetrated the city. But the enemy seemed to concentrate his efforts on My Tho, where he committed three battalions and a sapper company and held one battalion in reserve. The 7th Division succeeded nevertheless in clearing this substantial enemy force from My Tho with the support provided by a U.S. mobile riverine unit and inflicted heavy losses to the enemy.

Despite heavy fighting at some places, in general the enemy's offensive seemed to run out of steam by the end of the first week. In most provincial cities, friendly control was thoroughly regained in less than one week. Two exceptions to this were Saigon and Hue, the current and ancient capitals of the nation, respectively. The political significance of these cities was evident enough. It was where the enemy concentrated most of his determined efforts.

The Attack on Saigon

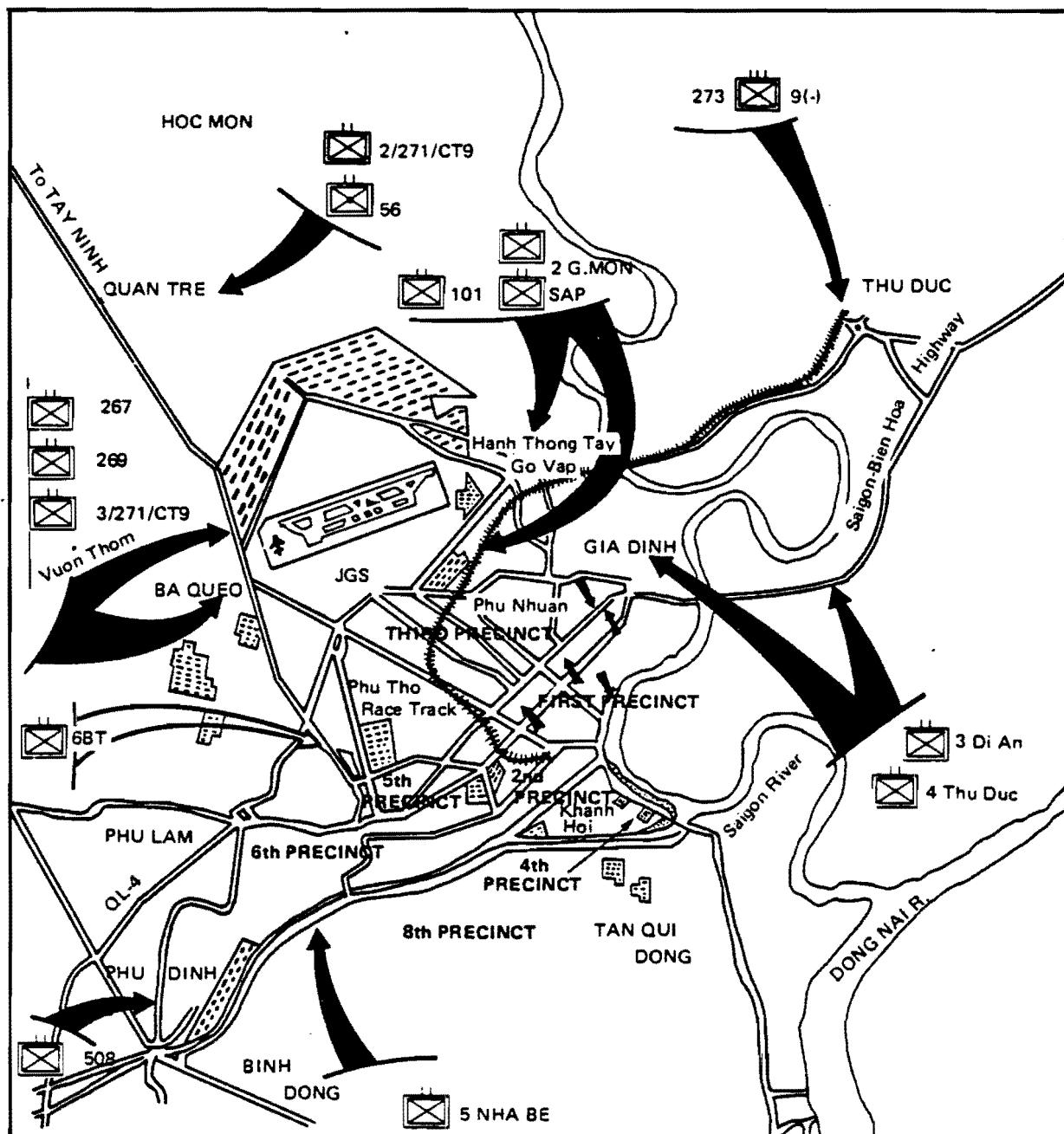
As the enemy offensive unfolded in Saigon during the night of Tet's first day (31 January 1968) six major objectives became apparent: the RVNAF Joint General Staff, the Independence Palace, the U.S. Embassy, Tan Son Nhut airbase, the National Broadcasting Station and the Vietnamese Navy Headquarters. Attacks in other areas near Saigon could be considered supporting efforts. (*Map 3*)

Except for Tan Son Nhut, the primary enemy force that conducted attacks against these objectives was the C-10 City Sapper Battalion. With a strength of 250, the C-10 Battalion consisted entirely of men who were living under a perfect cover within Saigon; they were, therefore, thoroughly familiar with city life and the streets of Saigon. Some of them were cyclopousse or taxicab drivers.

The C-10 Battalion's mission was to attack and gain control of these six objectives and hold them for 48 hours. During that period, other local force battalions would be maneuvering into Saigon to relieve the sappers. All the men in C-10 had been promised instant promotion after the objectives were occupied. This stimulation had been deemed necessary, given the suicidal nature of their mission. The platoon leader who directed the attack on gate No. 5 of the JGS compound, for example, later revealed that in case of success, he would be promoted to battalion commander. His specific mission was to penetrate gate No. 5, occupy the general officers' quarters, and capture alive those generals found at home or detain their family members as hostages.

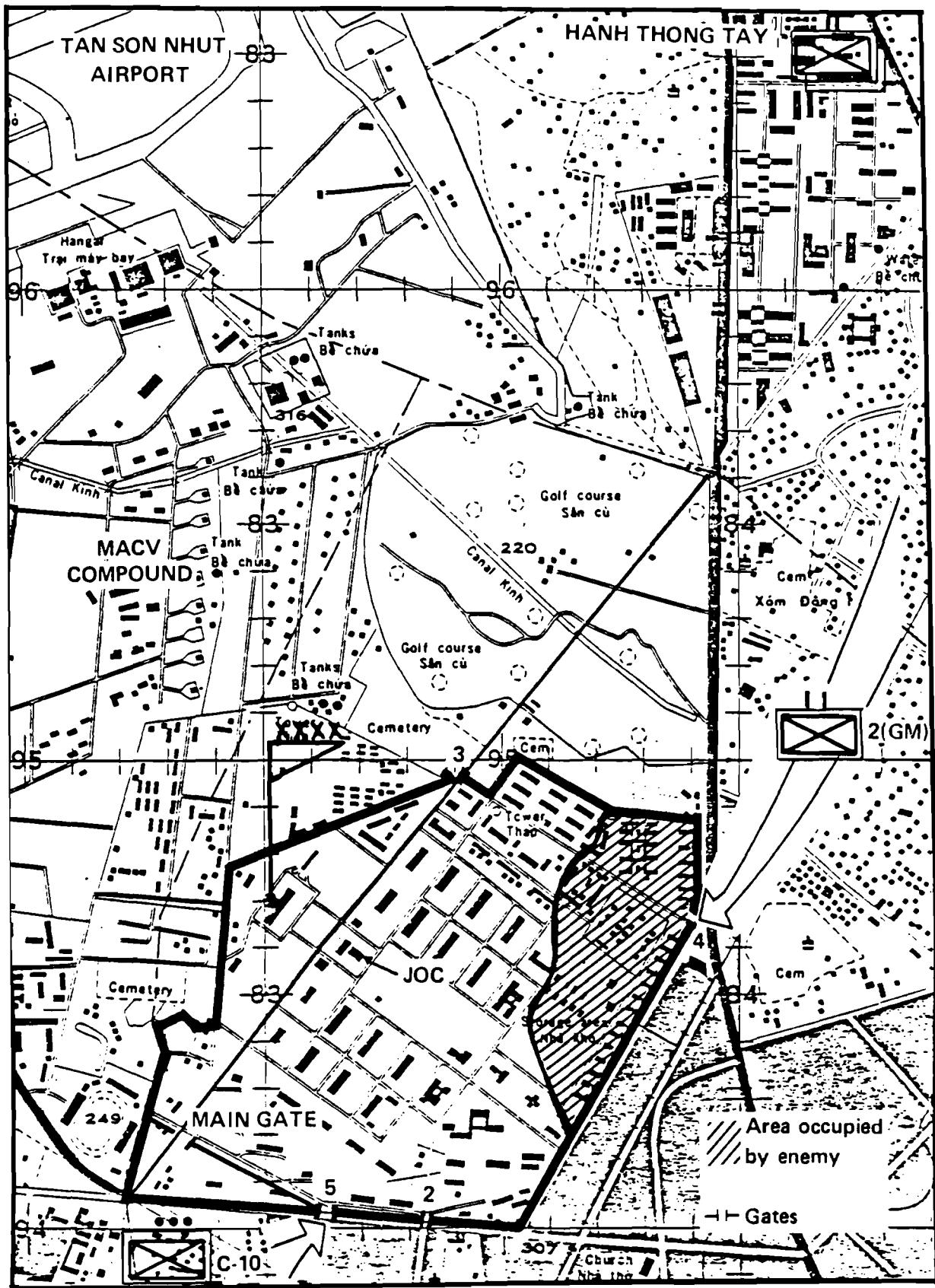
The attack on gate No. 5 of the JGS compound took place at 0200. (*Map 4*) Part of the C-10 sapper platoon which was to conduct the attack arrived on a bus, but several of its members had already taken position in the Long Hoa Pagoda just across the street. When the bus stopped in front of the gate, the sapper contingent jumped out, attempting to run through the gate, usually kept closed, which was just opened to let a general officer in. Precisely at that moment, a U.S. MP patrol jeep happened to pass by. As enemy sappers momentarily turned their attention to the jeep and opened fire on it, the

Map 3 – Enemy Attacks on Saigon, Tet 1968



Scale 1: 25,000

Map 4 – Enemy Attacks on the JGS Compound



ARVN guard closed the gate and fired back from a side bunker. The U.S. jeep under attack was immediately reinforced by U.S. MP personnel from BOQ NO. 3 and other U.S. installations nearby. The enemy attack on gate No. 5 ended in complete failure.

According to plans, the attacks on gates Nos. 5 and 4 of the JGS compound were to be initiated simultaneously. Fortunately, the enemy unit assigned to attack gate No. 4, the 2d Battalion (Go Mon) did not arrive in time. At the time of the attack on gate No. 5, this battalion was still on the move along the railroad track that led toward this objective from north of Saigon. The 2d Battalion (Go Mon) was part of a three battalion force which was to penetrate Saigon from Gia Dinh Province in two elements. The first element, composed of two battalions had penetrated the Hanh Thong Tay military complex at Go Vap where it was mounting attacks on such ARVN compounds as No Than and Co Loa, which housed the Artillery Command and one artillery battalion, and Phu Dong, the rear base of an armor unit. The second element of the Go Mon Battalion was to move deeper south along the railroad track toward gate No. 4 of the JGS where it did not arrive until 0700. The gate was quickly knocked down by B-40 rockets and enemy troops swarmed through it. Once inside, they immediately fanned out and overran two building areas nearby: the Armed Forces Language School and the JGS Headquarters Company. ARVN defenses for the entire JGS complex consisted merely of the Honor Guard Battalion and one armor troop. Initial reaction was therefore weak and lacked coordination.

After occupying the Armed Forces Language School and the JGS Headquarters Company areas, the Go Mon Battalion dug in for defense instead of expanding its control to adjacent areas. Had it done just that, it would have probably succeeded in occupying the most vital areas of all in the JGS complex: the J-2 Division, the Central Logistics Command, the JOC, and more significantly, the main building which housed the office of the chief of the JGS and his chief of staff.

Not until after the JGS compound was cleared did we learn why the enemy had failed to seize his biggest prize when it seemingly lay within reach. As prisoners of the Go Mon Battalion revealed, the mission of this battalion was to attack and hold at all costs the RVNAF General

Headquarters. Carrying out its orders to the letter, the battalion did break through gate No. 4 and occupied the building area with large display signs all marked: General Headquarters or General Headquarters Company. Believing that the RVNAF General Headquarters was in his hands, the enemy organized defense positions to hold it and did not venture into adjacent areas until reinforcements arrived.

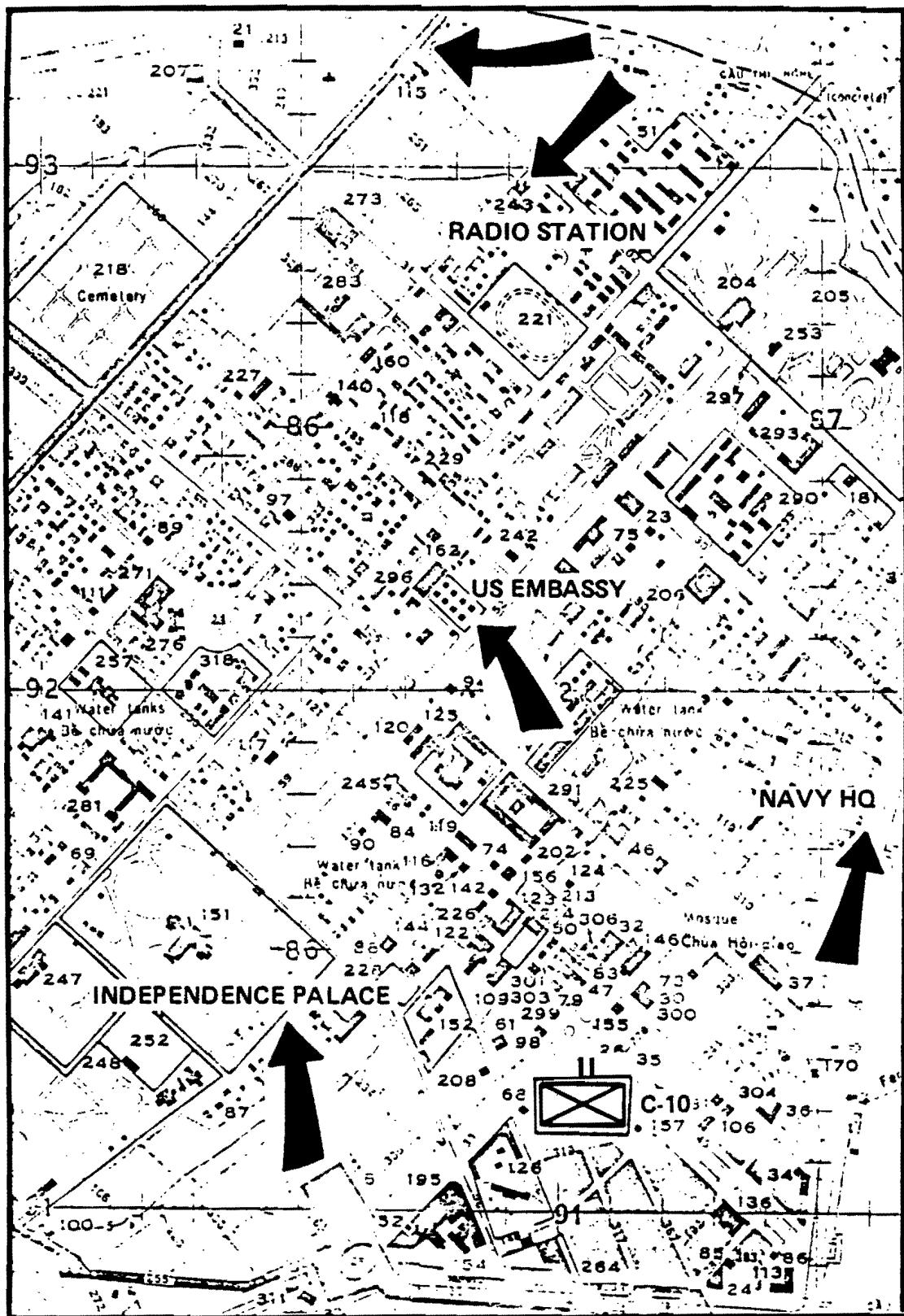
Two hours after the attack on gate No. 4 began, two ARVN airborne companies were deployed to the JGS compound on emergency orders. With the support of the JGS armor troop, the paratroopers attacked ferociously to drive the enemy out, but it was no easy task because the enemy had been solidly entrenched in the occupied area. However, with the commitment of ARVN paratroopers, the enemy knew he had no chance to occupy the JGS main area even with reinforcements.

At noon, a U.S. helicopter landed in the JGS compound and out stepped President Thieu. He immediately convened a meeting with several members of his cabinet who since the enemy attack began had found their way individually into the JGS compound. The JGS thus temporarily turned into an alternate Independence Palace where measures were being taken to counter the enemy offensive despite the uneasy fact that fighting was no more than 1 km away.

In the afternoon, a marine battalion arrived at the JGS compound to reinforce its defenses but did not counterattack until the following morning, 1 February. Joining forces with the paratroopers, the marines finally drove the enemy out at 1030 after a few hours of fighting. Defeated and dispersed, elements of the Go Mon Battalion took refuge in the city blocks nearby.

The attack on the Independence Palace was also conducted by a 34-man platoon of the C-10 Sapper Battalion. (Map 5) At 0130 on 31 January, this platoon placed B-40 fire on the staff entrance gate of the Palace on Nguyen Du Street and attempted to crash through. The Palace security forces, which were made up of the Presidential guard, police, MP's and two tanks, reacted forcefully and immediately stopped the sappers' assault. Driven back, the enemy took refuge in an unfinished high-rise building across the street. During the next two days, except for two of its men captured alive, the entire sapper

Map 5 – Targets of Enemy Attack, Downtown Saigon



Scale 1: 12,500

platoon was killed. As it turned out, the suicidal attack on the Independence Palace was more of an attempt to create a psychological shock than a military victory because it was doomed to failure from the start.

Three blocks away, a similar suicidal attack was attempted against the U.S. Embassy on Thong Nhat Boulevard. This enemy force consisted of 19 sappers, all from the C-10 Battalion, equipped with B-40 rocket launchers and explosives. A few succeeded in penetrating the front yard but could not get into the locked building. By the next morning, all 19 sappers had been killed.

In the attack against the National Broadcasting Station, enemy sappers disguised themselves as field police troopers. This C-10 sapper element rapidly overwhelmed the field police squad defending the station for broadcasting because it was just an audio and recording studio. The chief of the transmitter station, which was located at Ouan Tre several miles away, was resourceful enough to switch off the remote audio lines from the main studio as soon as it was occupied. He then used a standby studio equipped with tape recorders. Saigon Radio, therefore, continued to broadcast without interruption, using primarily pre-recorded programs. Nobody ever detected anything abnormal on the airwaves.

At 0500, the airborne company, which was assuming alert duties at the MS compound nearby, deployed its troops to the radio station. After less than two hours of fighting, the paratroopers destroyed the entire sapper element and captured the station. By 0700, the main studio was functioning again and started its regular program of the day with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky's announcement and appeal to the population.

At the Vietnamese Navy Headquarters compound on Bach Dang Quay, the enemy attack was short-lived; it ended just as soon as it began at 0300. The ill-fated enemy squad of 12 sappers rode in two civilian passenger cars. As the cars approached the checkpoint on

Lam Son Square, which was usually blocked, they were stopped by naval guards. The fighting that ensued was brief because the naval alert detachment at headquarters had been in combat positions behind bunkers. Ten sappers were immediately killed, the remaining two were captured before they could even set foot inside the checkpoint line. The prisoners disclosed that according to plans, they were to occupy the Navy Headquarters, and, with reinforcements, take possession of all ships docked along Bach Dang Quay. These ships were to be subsequently used to transport people from other areas to Saigon as participants in the uprising.

Another significant action by the C-10 Battalion was an attempt against the Embassy of the Philippines where the ambassador also resided, but the ambassador managed to escape with a light injury. An attempt to kidnap Prime Minister Nguyen Van Loc at his residence also failed.

At Tan Son Nhut, a major attack was driven against the airport by three enemy battalions, two of them local force and one from the 9th Division. This enemy force simultaneously attacked gates No. 10, No. 51 and No. 2 at 0300.

Approaching the airport from the Vinatecxo textile plant located to the west, where the enemy had established a field command post and positioned antiaircraft weapons on the roof of the building, the enemy force broke through gate No. 51 and advanced about 200 meters inside the fence, moving toward the main runway. But here the enemy met with fierce resistance from airport security forces, which consisted of Vice-President Ky's security guard, the National Police, and paratroopers who defended their rear base nearby. Friendly forces were also joined by two USARV platoons.

Almost immediately, two companies of the 8th Airborne Battalion, which were waiting for air transportation in the military terminal, arrived as reinforcement. As a result, the enemy suffered substantial losses and was unable to make any progress. At the same time, the 3d Armored Squadron of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi began its movement toward Tan Son Nhut after an emergency request for relief by U.S. forces at the airport. On its way to Tan Son Nhut, the U.S.

armor column was guided by air-dropped flares and took cross-country short cuts, bypassing the embattled area of Hoc Mon and probably ambush sites. At daybreak, the column entered Tan Son Nhut and inflicted serious losses to the enemy force, which was compelled to fall back to the Vinatexco area.

At 0900, VNAF and USAF tactical air attacked the Vinatexco compound, inflicting further losses to the enemy. Around gate No. 51, site of the most furious fighting, over 300 enemy troops lay dead. At gate No. 2, meanwhile, the fierce resistance put up by the ARVN 2d Service Battalion effectively kept the enemy at bay.

Despite the rapid restoration of friendly control at these major objectives, by daybreak enemy local forces had penetrated several areas in western and southern Saigon.

At Cho Lon, one enemy local force battalion had penetrated and occupied the Phu Tho race track. As the enemy saw it, the Phu Tho race track was a critical strongpoint for his efforts because its occupation would deny our forces a large field which they could use to bring in reinforcements by helicopters. This race track also lay adjacent to a critical junction of major roads between Saigon and Cho Lon, and provided an excellent staging area for assembling and dispatching troops. From this area, enemy 82-mm mortars could also effectively support any combat action or shell any target in Saigon or Cho Lon, to include the Tan Son Nhut Airbase.

The next mission to be accomplished by the enemy local force battalion occupying the Phu Tho race track was to attack the Chi Hoa prison complex and free Communist detainees. However, this battalion lost contact with its two local guides and did not know the way to reach Chi Hoa, barely 2 km away. Since most of the local population in the area had fled and those who remained tactfully refused to serve as guides, the enemy battalion found itself confined to the race track. The Chi Hoa prison complex remained untouched even during the subsequent phases of the offensive.

In Gia Dinh Province, the enemy penetrated the Hang Xanh area, a major road junction just outside Saigon where the Highway to Bien Hoa began. Thu Duc, a district town located some 18 km away on this

highway also came under attack. It was apparent that the enemy was trying to sever land communications between Saigon and Bien Hoa, seat of III Corps Headquarters, and interdict the access road to Vung Tau. The enemy effort in this northern suburb of Saigon was strong and persistent. Heavily populated and easy to infiltrate and exfiltrate, this area provided the enemy with a perfect position from which it could initiate attacks against key military installations nearby.

At 0900 on 31 January, two enemy local force battalions attacked the Co Loa artillery base in Go Vap. The enemy eventually overran the base and captured 12 105-mm howitzers located there. However, he was unable to use them because before withdrawing from the base, ARVN artillerymen had dismantled all the firing blocs. During the day, a marine battalion deployed to the area retook the base and recovered all twelve artillery pieces.

A short distance away, the enemy also attacked Camp Phu Dong which was the headquarters of the ARVN Armor Command. Since the purpose of the attack was to capture ARVN armored vehicles, the enemy force included an element of COSVN's 16th Section, which specialized in armor employment and tactics. Even though the enemy had made careful preparations, his reconnaissance had failed to reveal that all ARVN armored vehicles on the base had been moved elsewhere two months earlier. Camp Phu Dong was retaken at the same time as the artillery base.

Both Camps Phu Dong and Co Loa turned out to be two of the most important targets which the enemy had planned to occupy at all costs. Our enemy had expected to use the captured artillery pieces and armored vehicles to support his attacks in Saigon. He was so certain of success that all participating units in the Saigon area had been informed that they would receive artillery and armor support.

By the end of the first 48 hours, it was obvious that the enemy's chance of success had greatly diminished. Not a single major objective in Saigon was in his hands, and the promised reinforcements were nowhere in sight. Hopes of a popular uprising also began to falter. There were no demonstrations and no significant cooperation from the

population save for some isolated supply activities performed under coercion by the VCI.

During this time, the Saigon VCI proved to be extremely active. Many of its members served as guides for the attacking units. A few of them were actually holding jobs in U.S. and GVN agencies. Among those killed during the offensive, one even had a CMD-issued pass authorizing him to circulate during curfew hours. Several others had passes allowing them access to some U.S. civilian installations. When the attack on Saigon began, believing that the offensive and uprising were going to be a success, most of the city's VCI members surfaced and participated in subversive activities. They performed many useful tasks in support of the attacking forces, serving as guides and informants in the areas under Communist control, where they helped search and arrest GVN officials, policemen, and military officers. They acted as propagandists, encouraging the people and inciting them to revolt and demonstrate in support of the "liberation" forces. As a result of these supporting activities, the enemy local forces that attacked Saigon and Cho Lon were able to move around in a metropolitan area that was obviously too large, too populous, too strange, and whose modern facilities and civilization remained beyond their realm of knowledge.

By this time, as many as 15 enemy battalions had been introduced into the general area that comprised Saigon, Cho Lon and part of Gia Dinh Province. They had occupied a northern suburb of Saigon, the 7th and 8th precincts in Cho Lon, the Phy Tho race track and part of a few city blocks in Saigon itself. They broke down into small elements, taking shelter in people's homes, organizing defense positions in high-rise buildings, and awaiting the reinforcement of main force units which were to move in from the outside as planned.

Supporting Attacks in III Corps Area

At the time of the enemy offensive, ARVN forces in the III Corps area consisted of three infantry divisions, one ranger group and three armor squadrons. The 25th ARVN Division was located at Hau Nghia,

the 18th ARVN Division at Long Khanh and the 5th ARVN Division at Binh Duong. The 5th Ranger Group was stationed in Saigon. (*Map 6*) There were also the two airborne battalions of the JGS general reserve preparing for deployment to the I corps area. In total, there were 46 ARVN maneuver battalions in the III Corps area. For the Tet period, each battalion had about 50% of its strength ready for combat.

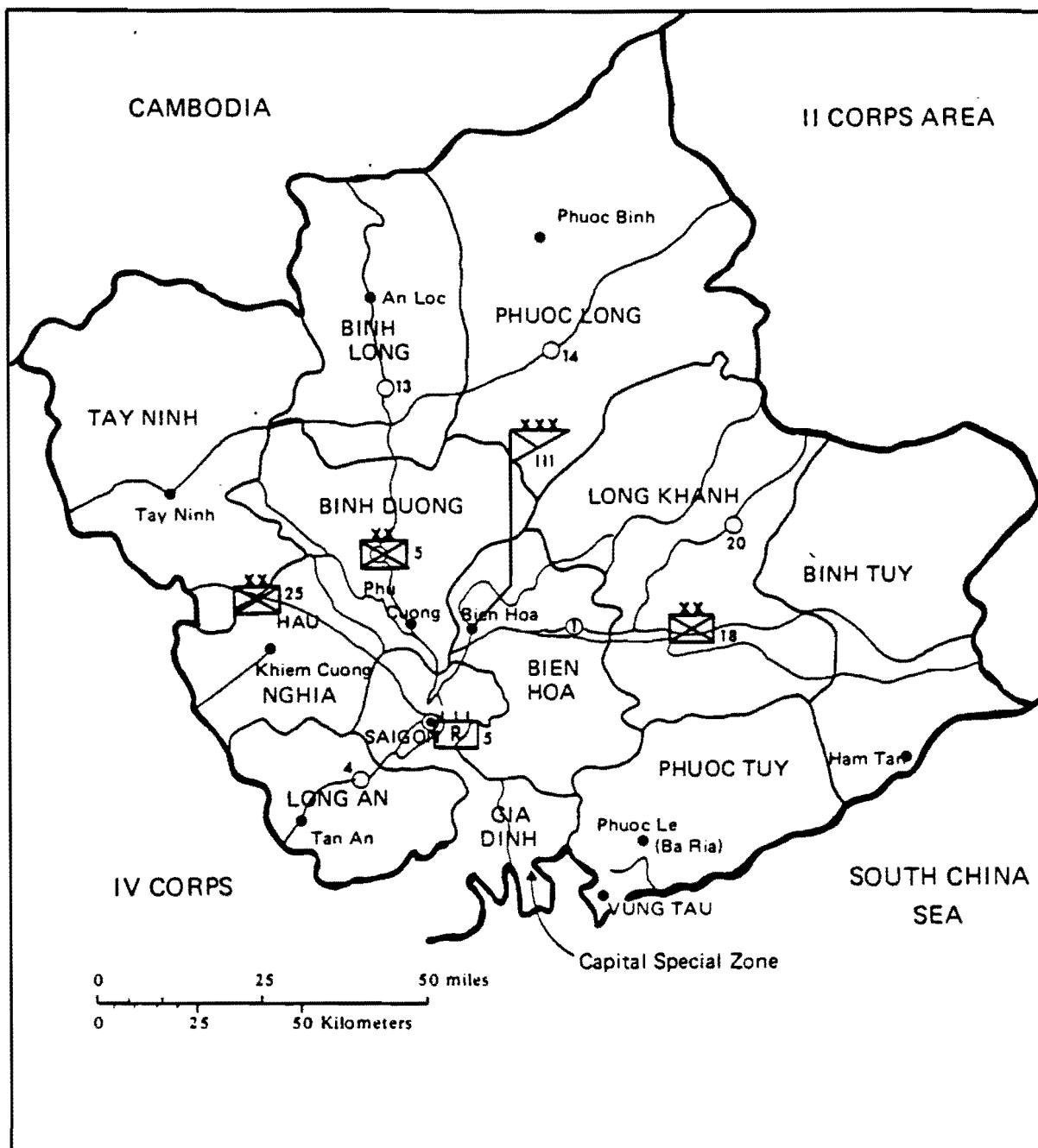
U.S. forces in III Corps area consisted of the Headquarters of II Field Force and the U.S. 199th Infantry Brigade at Long Binh (Bien Hoa), the 25th Infantry Division at Cu Chi (Hau Nghia), the 9th Infantry Division at Long Thanh (Phuoc Tuy), and the 1st Infantry Division at Lai Khe (Binh Duong). In addition, there were three Australian battalions at Ba Ria and one Royal Thai battalion at Long Thanh. The total of U.S. and Free World forces in the III Corps area therefore consisted of 53 infantry battalions and 13 armor battalions. (*Map 7*)

When the offensive began, enemy forces located in the III Corps area consisted of three infantry divisions (the 5th, 7th, and 9th), three separate infantry regiments (101st, 88th and Dong Nai), one artillery regiment, and 29 local force battalions.

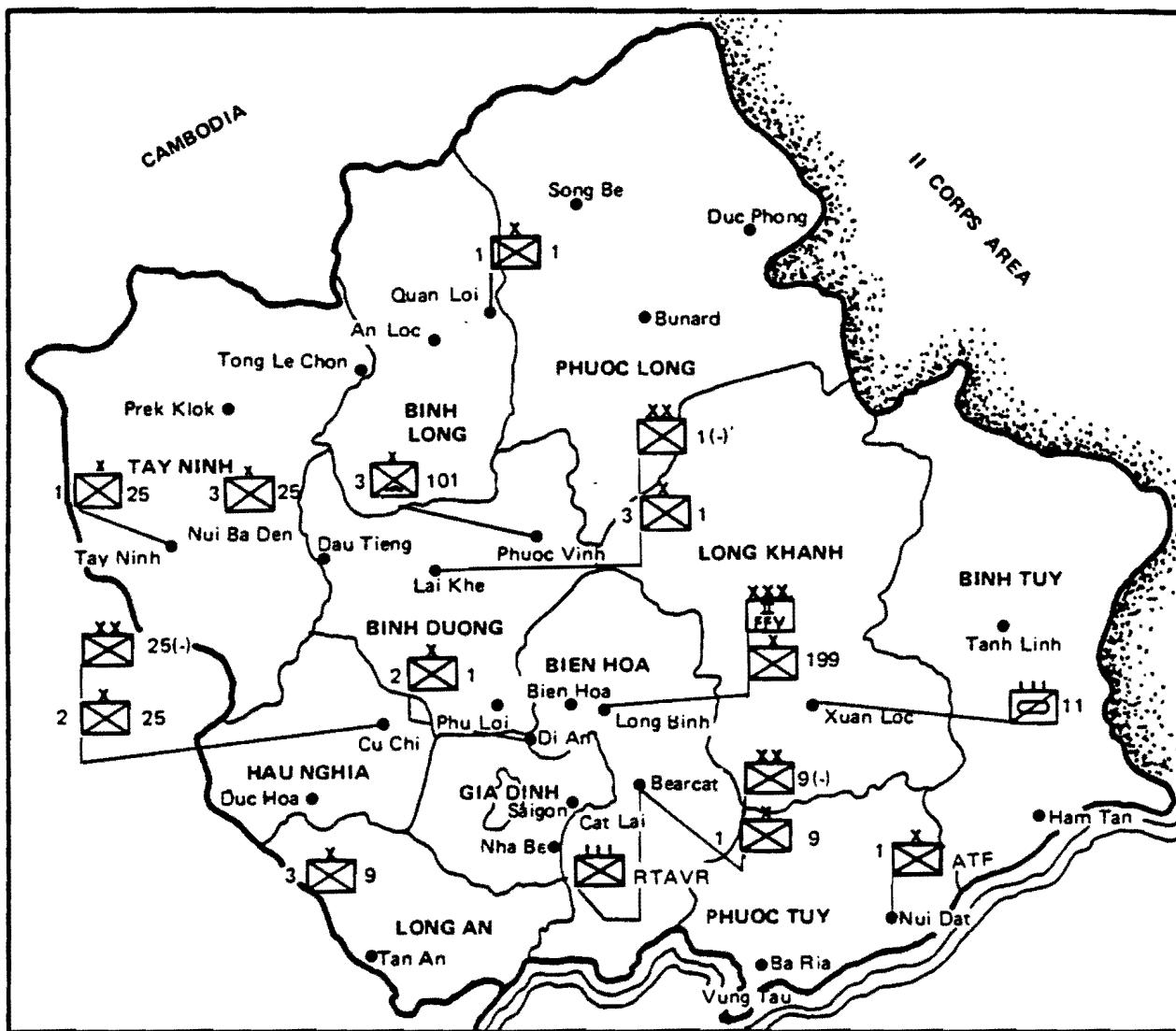
The enemy offensive plan assigned the 9th Division the mission of attacking the Quang Trung Training Center and the Headquarters, U.S. 25th Infantry Division, with the objective of blocking the movement of reinforcements from these units toward Saigon on Route QL-1. One regiment of the 9th Division was to attack Thu Duc and block the Bien Hoa highway, interdicting the movement of reinforcements from III Corps in Bien Hoa, the U.S. II Field Force in Long Binh and the RVNAF marines in Di An.

The 7th Division had two regiments. One regiment was assigned the mission to attack the Headquarters, U.S. 1st Infantry Division, at Lai Khe and, in coordination with the Dong Nai Regiment, the provincial capital of Binh Duong and the Headquarters, 5th ARVN Infantry Division. These attacks would effectively interdict all reinforcement movements from the north and northwest toward Saigon along Routes QL-13 and QL-1. The 101st Regiment (Separate) was placed under operational control of

Map 6 – III Corps Area and Disposition of ARVN Forces



Map 7 – Disposition of U.S. and FWMA Forces, III Corps Area



the 7th Division with the mission to attack and occupy the Go Vap District north of Saigon. The 88th Regiment (Separate) was to interdict Route QL-13 south of An Loc and Binh Duong.

The 5th Division with two regiments had the mission to attack the Headquarters, US II Field Force, at Long Binh with one regiment; (*Map 8*) the other regiment was to attack the Bien Hoa AFB, the Headquarters, III Corps, and Bien Hoa City.

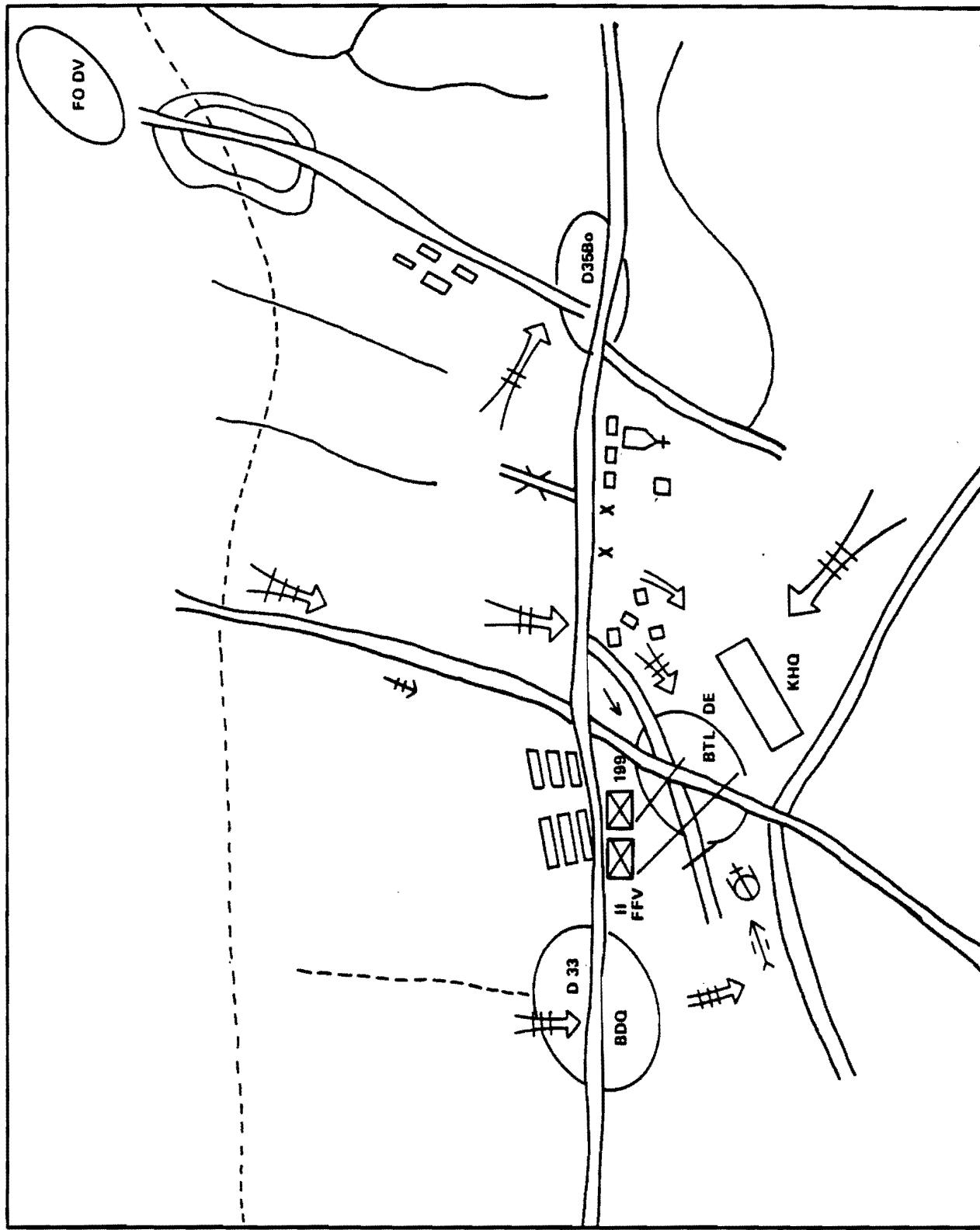
The five new subdivisions of former enemy MR-4 which surrounded and converged on Saigon also received specific combat missions in support of the attack on the capital city. One local force battalion of the 1st Subdivision was to attack the district town of Cu Chi. The 2d Subdivision's local force battalion was to attack the Headquarters, ARVN 25th Infantry Division, at Duc Hoa. The local force battalion of the 3d Subdivision received the primary mission to protect the enemy forward CP of General Tran Do, responsible for the attack on Saigon, and to harass ARVN units in its area of responsibility. The 4th Subdivision was to conduct harassment activities against ARVN forces while the 5th Subdivision's local forces would attack Phu Loi, Phu Cuong and Tan Uyen in coordination with the Dong Nai Regiment.

In the enemy Ba-Bien Province (Ba Ria-Bien Hoa), one local force battalion was to attack the Headquarters, ARVN 18th Division, at Xuan Loc, and another was to attack the provincial city of Ba Ria and Australian forces located in the vicinity.

Most of these pre-planned attacks took place throughout the III Corps area either simultaneously with the attack on Saigon or one or two days later. However, Tay Ninh City was not attacked until 6 February and Long An City on 8 February. Most of these attacks were either immediately defeated or ephemerally successful. None of the objectives was held by the enemy more than one day.

The attack on the Quang Trung Training Center on 31 January was highlighted by the fact that enemy troops disguised themselves as ARVN infantrymen and marines. But the attack failed and ended in late afternoon after the defenders were reinforced by a marine battalion. However, the enemy succeeded in controlling a large part of the Hoc Mon district town nearby, causing temporary difficulties for supply

Map 8 – Enemy Plan of Attack Against Long Binh
(original captured sketch)



movements from Tay Ninh and Cu Chi to Saigon.

At Bien Hoa, the enemy 5th Division attacked simultaneously the U.S. Army base at Long Binh, the Bien Hoa airfield and III Corps Headquarters but missed the Communist prisoner camp near the city because of confusion. The two companies of the 275th Regiment that received the mission to attack this camp in coordination with another element had been instructed to move to a rendezvous point which was formerly a rubber plantation nearby. Unfortunately for the enemy, this rubber plantation had been cleared a month earlier by Rome plows. So when they arrived at the rendezvous point and found that no rubber plantation was in sight, the two companies moved to another area, missing the attack.

At the Bien Hoa air force base, the attack driven by the enemy 274th Regiment was completely stalled by fierce resistance put up by the defending RF battalion after the eastern end of the runway had been penetrated. At III Corps Headquarters, meanwhile, even though the attacking enemy local force battalion had been reinforced by one battalion of the 5th Division, it was unable to breakthrough the defense perimeter. Shortly thereafter, the intervention by the U.S. 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment finally shattered all enemy efforts at both places.

At Long Binh, despite detailed planning, the enemy was able only to blow up a few ammunition dumps on the base. At Ba Ria near Vung Tau, however, the enemy successfully overran a small airfield adjacent to the Van Kiep Training Center, main objective of his attack. Sector headquarters immediately employed the 11th Airborne Battalion, which was undergoing training at the center. In coordination with another RF battalion, the ARVN paratroopers eventually broke the enemy attack and retook the airfield during the day.

In Binh Duong Province, the enemy attacked Phu Cuong, the provincial capital where he occupied the ARVN Engineer School but not the sector headquarters. Nearby, he also took the district town of Ben Cat, seizing a 155-mm artillery position installed by the ARVN 5th Division. However, enemy troops did not know how to use the artillery pieces.

Along with Phu Cuong, Ben Cat was retaken late in the afternoon the day of the attack.

In general, enemy attacks in the provinces surrounding Saigon were all short-lived, lasting no longer than one day on the average. The enemy not only lacked the capability to hold, he also met with swift and forceful reactions by the local defending forces. As it turned out, most RF battalions performed unexpectedly well, fighting courageously in defense and counterattacking with enthusiastic vigor, aided in their efforts by U.S. infantry units, armor, artillery, and gunships. As a result, targets temporarily overrun by the enemy at the beginning of the attack were all retaken within a short time.

The most sustained enemy effort in III Corps area remained locked in Saigon, his primary objective, where fighting was still raging. After the initial shock of surprise, however, ARVN and U.S. forces began to counterattack and seize the initiative.

Clearing Operations in Saigon

At the time the enemy attacked Saigon, ARVN forces available for the defense of the city consisted of eight infantry battalions. These did not include the three RF battalions, two MP battalions and two service battalions which were detached piecemeal for guard and security duties at military and governmental installations, check points and bridges.

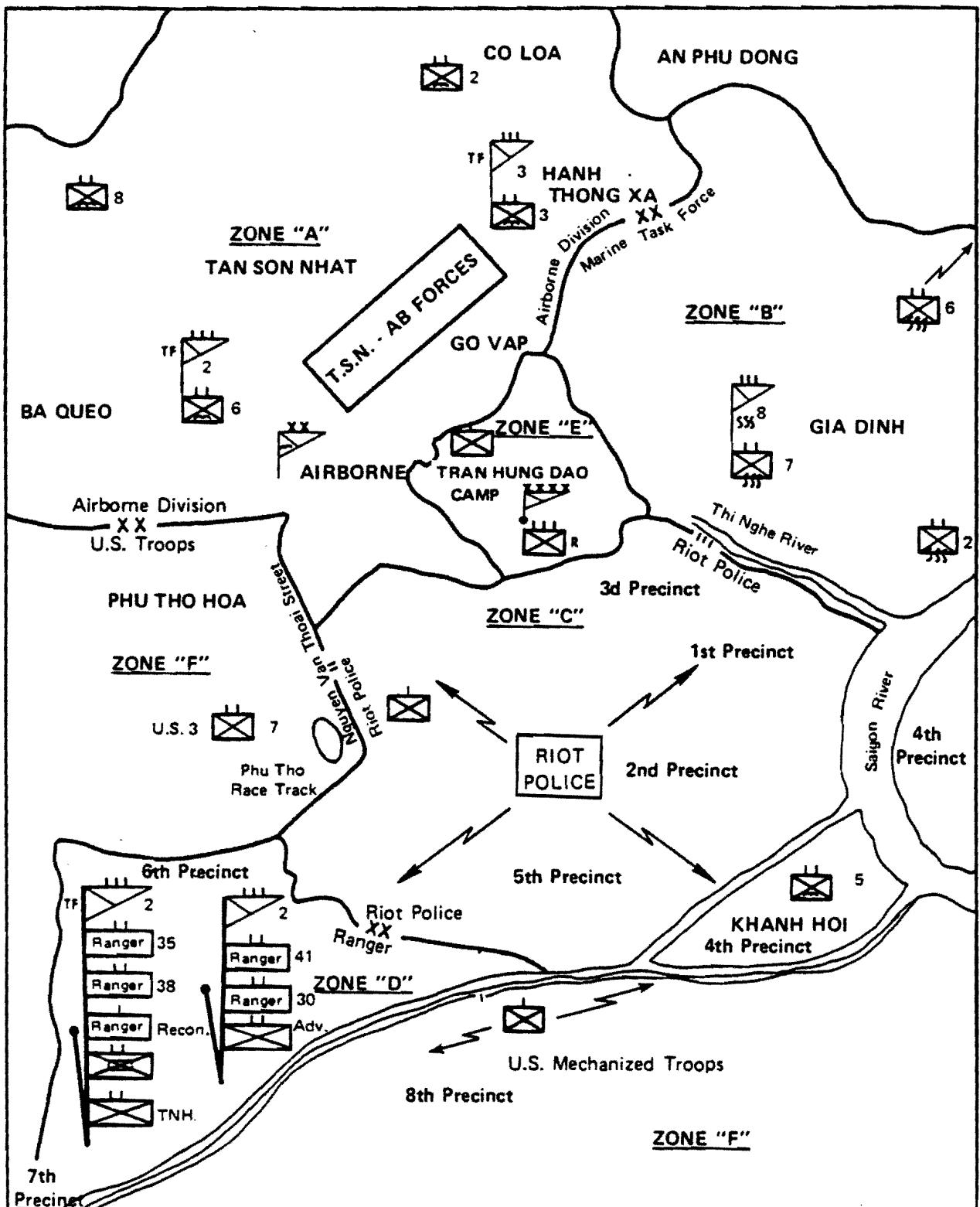
The first action taken by the Joint General Staff after the attack on Saigon was to call general reserve units back for the immediate relief of the city. Within 48 hours, therefore, an additional seven infantry battalions had been brought back, because of fast transportation facilities available. By the end of the third day of the attack, RVNAF forces in the Saigon area had increased to a total of five airborne battalions, five marine battalions, five ranger battalions, one artillery battalion, which had all been withdrawn from their previous commitment in II, III and IV Corps areas. The recall of these forces had not been easy. With heavy combat burdens on their own shoulders, the II and IV Corps commanders were particularly reluctant to release them.

With additional forces available, the JGS decided to launch a major relief operation to clear enemy troops from the nation's capital. Lt. General Nguyen Duc Thang, then Minister of Rural Development and former J3 of the JGS, came up with a plan which was quickly approved and code-named after the JGS compound's designation, Tran Hung Dao. Because of the significance of the relief operation, General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the JGS, took personal command.

The concept of operation was based on the idea of organizing Saigon and its suburbs into several areas of operation and assigning each area or zone to a specific service or combat arm. Initially, there were five areas of operation or zones, designated A, B, C, D, and E. (*Map 9*) Zone A was assigned to the Airborne Division because it was where its headquarters was based. Zone B was assigned to the Marine Division for the same reason. Zone C, which was essentially downtown Saigon and relatively more secure, was made the responsibility of the National Police. At that time total NP strength in Saigon, to include field police forces, numbered in excess of 20,000. Zone D, which included the Chinatown in Cho Lon, was assigned to the RVNAF Ranger Command. Zone E, which included Tran Hung Dao camp and the MACV compound, was made the responsibility of the JGS Headquarters Commandant. For the defense of this zone, the JGS honor guard battalion was reinforced by four makeshift battalions which had been assembled with personnel of the JGS staff divisions and other service agencies located within the JGS compound and totalled 1,928 men, mostly officers and NCO's. The JGS staff divisions retained only about one-third of their personnel, those who were deemed utterly necessary for critical staff work. Zone F was added to the original plan only on 9 February. Since this area comprised mostly outlying suburbs, and the ARVN did not have enough forces to commit there, it was assigned to U. S. forces.

By this time, an agreement of principle had been reached between III Corps, whose responsibility encompassed the CMD, and the U.S. II Field Force, whereby ARVN forces would be in charge of clearing operations within the city and U.S. forces would conduct screening operations in the suburbs, destroy enemy forces retreating from the

Map 9 – The Tran Hung Dao Plan



Scale 1: 25,000

city, and block those attempting to penetrate it.

Operation Tran Hung Dao terminated its first phase on 17 February by which time the situation in Saigon had greatly improved in spite of continued fighting in some areas in Cho Lon. It was then decided to turn over command of the operation to III Corps. Most enemy units, especially the local force battalions, had been driven out into the suburbs. There remained only a few pockets of resistance in Cho Lon manned by piecemeal enemy elements.

Clearing activities were most vigorous during the week from 5 to 12 February, especially in Zone D where it was difficult to uproot enemy elements nested in people's houses in a particularly dense area. In several cases, our forces had to ask the people to leave the combat area before moving in. In addition to hit-and-run tactics, the enemy also positioned antiaircraft weapons on high-rise buildings, which seriously impeded support missions flown by gunships. Destroying these antiaircraft weapons was therefore a priority task for our forces.

In some areas in Cho Lon, the enemy occupied several Buddhist temples and hospitals, using them as shelters or operational bases. The An Quang Pagoda, a celebrated Buddhist temple associated with the Buddhist militants of 1966, was used as a high-level headquarters. In their determination to destroy this enemy command post, our forces re-took the pagoda with air support even at the price of causing extensive damage to it. A short distance away, the Children's Hospital was also used as troop cantonment and defense strongpoint.

At Binh Dong, also in Cho Lon, the enemy occupied a governmental rice depot then set fire to it. He also set fire to a paper mill at Phu Lam. At both places, the fires sent billowing black smoke high into the sky, obstructing aerial observation and support. Causing these fires was a deliberate enemy scheme intended not only to impede our air intervention but also to create an aura of blight and fear which added to the confusion among the population.

The last major battle fought in Saigon took place in the Phu Dinh-Phu Lam area on 11 February. With the support of a U.S. unit, ARVN Ranger forces completely wiped out a high-level enemy command post

located in the Phu Lam communal temple. Among the 30 enemy bodies found inside, there were 6 armed with pistols, an evident indication of high ranks. From the documents seized on them we learned that the place had sheltered a protection element of COSVN's forward command post. Speculations therefore arose and spread about to the effect that Tran Do, the Communist general who directed the attack on Saigon, had been killed. However, a subsequent fingerprint check on the bodies found that Tran Do was not among them. Since the results of this fingerprint check were not made public, rumors of Tran Do's death persisted and accounted for a jubilant mood among the Saigon population and troops.

The fighting in Saigon abated immediately following this battle. On 17 February, however, it resumed with fresh intensity with the onset of a new series of attacks. These attacks began with fierce rocket fire striking at Tan Son Nhut and the MACV headquarters nearby, causing considerable damage to the air passenger terminal. Then enemy infantry troops moved in and pushed hard primarily against Tan Son Nhut AFB, the area from Hoc Mon to Xom Moi in Go Vap, and the Phu Lam area, south of Cho Lon.

The renewed attacks lasted until early March, highlighted by several firefights inside Saigon and Cholon. Its intensity, however, was much less than that of phase 1. The enemy had brought in some fresh local force battalions to relieve the one's being engaged and fresh troops to replace losses. But these fresh troops proved to be dismally combat-ineffective. Many among them were just retrieved from rest and recuperation, and others had received only a two-week crash training course. Apparently to compensate for this weakness, the enemy committed the entire 9th Division to attacks in the north and northwest of Saigon and in Hoc Mon-Go Vap. In the meantime he kept up rocket shellings against Saigon and sapper sabotage activities in and around the city. In addition to the Binh Loi Bridge on the Saigon River, which had one span seriously damaged, the enemy also blew up two other lesser bridges and a power transformer station in Cho Lon.

By this time, however, the RVNAF and U.S. forces had expanded their

mopping-up activities well beyond the suburbs. These activities converged on outlying areas suspected of harboring enemy troops such as Thu Duc, Lai Thieu, Di An and Vinh Loc. The objective now was to push the fighting as far away from Saigon as possible.

A period of relative calm began to reign in Saigon immediately following a heavy engagement on 7 March between ARVN paratroopers and enemy main force units in the Ba Diem and Tan Thoi Trung areas in Zone D. This lull lasted until 5 May when it was broken again by the second phase of the general offensive.

Countrywide, meanwhile, the military situation improved remarkably. Mopping-up activities effectively cleared most cities and provincial capitals from the encroachment of enemy troops with the exception of Hue where fighting was still raging ferociously since the beginning of the offensive. Here the loss in human lives incurred by the civilian population had reached the proportions of a natural disaster, which was made even more horrible by the mass massacre of approximately 4,000 people, all victims of Communist atrocities committed during the 25 days the city remained under their control.

The Battle of Hue

Hue, the ancient capital of Vietnam, had a population of approximately 140,000 at the time the enemy offensive began. It was the cradle of militant Buddhism, whose confrontation with President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 led to his death and the demise of his regime. During the years that followed, the militant Buddhist movement in Hue picked up momentum and flared up again in 1966 when, with the support of some disaffected ARVN commanders, it openly defied central authority in Saigon. Twenty thousand Buddhists at some time joined in anti-government demonstrations in Hue, backed up by most ARVN units located in the city, including the 1st Infantry Division.

These demonstrations eventually culminated in a showdown in which Buddhist households in the city displayed their altars on the streets, paralyzing business activities and blocking vehicular traffic, even the convoys of the U.S. Marines. The showdown erupted in violence when

a Buddhist nun burned herself and mobs on a wild rampage set fire to the U.S. Consulate building after thoroughly ransacking it. Most fanatic among the demonstrators were some professors of the Hue University and its extremist students.

All of these confrontations with the government tinted Hue with a certain hue of political radicalism which the Communists identified with their own interests. As a result, they considered Hue the second most important objective to be conquered after Saigon during their 1968 Tet Offensive. For Hue, with its political and historical significance, would be the perfect place for the inauguration of a coalition government of their making.

At the time the attack on Hue began, ARVN forces available in the city consisted solely of the headquarters of the 1st Infantry Division, which was located in Mang Ca, a small and isolated camp in the northern corner of the Old Citadel. (*Map 10*)

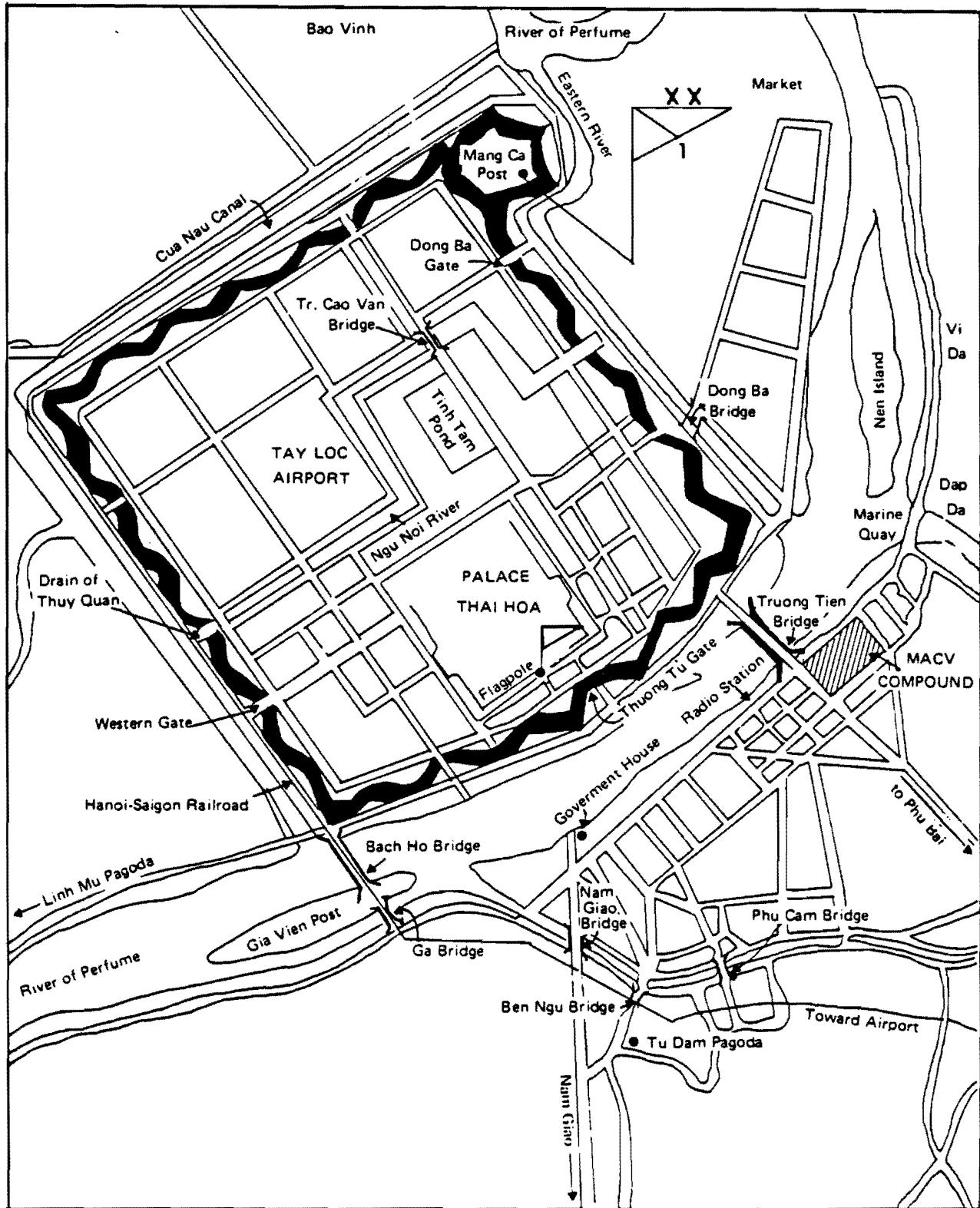
The square-shaped Old Citadel occupied an area whose outer perimeter consisted of a solid earth-and-stone rampart, 20 feet thick and from 25 to 30 feet high, surrounded by a zig zag moat. Inside this rampart, and at a distance varying from 20 to 80 yards from it, there was a brick wall. Both the rampart and wall were built in 1802 under the reign of Emperor Gia Long, the forefather of the Nguyen dynasty.

Within the Old Citadel, there were two areas of particular interest: the Imperial Palace with its stately Midday gate topped by a majestic flagpole, all constructed in ancient architectural style, and the Tay Loc airfield, a product of modern times. South of the Old Citadel ran the River of Perfume over which two bridges provided access to the more contemporary southern part of the city, Trang Tien and Bach Ho. On this southern bank of the river were located governmental and military installations such as the Thua Thien Sector headquarters and the MACV compound.

No U.S. combat unit was based in Hue City. The nearest U.S. base was at Phu Bai, eight km to the southeast where the U.S. 3d Marine Division had established its headquarters.

As for ARVN forces, besides the 1st Infantry Division headquarters located inside the Old Citadel, the nearest combat units were the 7th

Map 10 – The Old Citadel, Hue City



Scale 1: 4,000

Armored Cavalry Squadron at An Cuu, 2 km to the southeast, and the 2d Airborne Battalion which established a temporary base near Route QL-1 17 km northwest of Hue in the vicinity of the "Street Without Joy."

During the days that preceded Tet, the situation in I Corps area became tense with intelligence reports indicating large enemy troop concentrations near Khe Sanh Base and in the DMZ area north of Quang Tri. Other reports revealed a major enemy troop movement from the DMZ into Thua Thien Province and a logistic buildup and other troop movements in the piedmont area west of Hue. In the face of this mounting tension, the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division was relocated from Military Region 2 to Camp Evans, 16 km northwest of Hue, ready for any eventuality. No intelligence estimate, however, predicted an enemy attack on Hue during the Tet holidays.

On the morning of Tet's first day, reports on enemy attacks against some provincial capitals in II Corps area streamed in the 1st Division headquarters. The night before, during a patrol mission four km southwest of Hue, an element of the Reconnaissance Company, 1st Division, had clashed with an enemy force estimated at about two battalions, reportedly moving toward the city. The division commander, Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, immediately convened a staff meeting during which he took certain measures to prepare for defense. Alert orders were issued to confine all troops to their barracks and prepare for combat. At Mang Ca Camp, the seat of the division headquarters, however, there were only the Headquarters Company, the Reconnaissance Company and a few divisional support elements.

Lunar New Year's Day in Hue passed without event amid traditional celebrations. Then past midnight, at 0340, the enemy struck with a fierce preparatory fire of 122-mm rockets and 82-mm mortars. The enemy forces which conducted the initial attack on Hue consisted of two infantry regiments, two sapper battalions, and one artillery (rocket) battalion, assisted by sappers already in place inside the city. According to plans, the 6th Regiment was to attack the old citadel and push its primary effort against the 1st Infantry Division headquarters, while the 4th Regiment was to attack the MACV compound and the Thua Thien Sector headquarters, both located on the southern bank of the river.

The 4th Regiment's attack began with the 802d Battalion pushing against the Mang Ca compound and the 800th Battalion against the Tay Loc airfield. Both encountered heavy resistance by the Reconnaissance (Black Panther) Company, 1st Division, almost the sole defender of these areas. Failing in their initial attempts, both enemy battalions broke contact and moved toward other targets nearby after having incurred some losses. The Black Panther Company, meanwhile, was called back to division headquarters where it was to reinforce other divisional elements in resisting the attack by the 812th Battalion. During this time, the 6th Regiment's CP and one infantry battalion under its control penetrated and held the outer north-western area of the old citadel, which commanded access to Route QL-1. Their mission was to safeguard a line of communication and supply route from outside of the city toward the old citadel.

South of the river in the meantime and despite forceful attacks, the enemy 4th Regiment failed to take any of the three targets it had been assigned: the MACV compound, the sector headquarters and the city's police headquarters.

By the morning of the next day, however, Hue city had practically fallen under enemy control with the exception of key military and governmental headquarters. In the old citadel, the NLF flag was hoisted on the Midday gate flagpole at 0800.

Judging the situation critical, the 1st Division commander ordered the 2d Airborne Battalion, the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, and his own 3d Regiment back to Hue to reinforce the defense of division headquarters and clear the city. All three units were intercepted and attacked on their way, the 2d ABN Battalion at An Hoa, northwest of Hue, the 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron in the southern suburbs and two battalions of the 3d Regiment southwest of the city.

Shortly thereafter, the 2d ABN Battalion was instructed to bypass enemy blocks and move east to approach the Mang Ca compound, which it entered and was immediately tasked to retake the Tay Loc airfield. The 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, meanwhile, paid some price in trying to reach the sector headquarters, which it did but only after the squadron commander, Lt. Colonel Phan Huu Chi, had been sacrificed and twelve of its

armored vehicles knocked out by enemy B-40 rockets. Finally, the two battalions of the 3d Regiment made it to the Bao Vinh pier off the River of Perfume after a long journey by small landing craft. Both reached the 1st Division Headquarters in the afternoon of 1 February.

On the U.S. side, two marine companies supported by four tanks were deployed from their base at Phu Bai on the morning of 31 January in an effort to relieve the embattled MACV compound. The U.S. relief task force was intercepted at the An Cuu Bridge just south of the city but finally made it to the MACV compound in the afternoon. With this reinforcement, the MACV compound held its ground firmly against a heavy attack by the enemy 4th Regiment during the night.

By now, it was obvious that to clear the enemy's foothold in the city, the 1st Division would require more forces. The division commander therefore ordered the 9th Airborne Battalion back from Quang Tri. With U.S. helilift support, the battalion landed in Mang Ca during 2 February. It was followed shortly thereafter by the 4th Battalion, 2d Regiment, 1st Division, also helilifted in from Dong Ha. With these additional forces, the 1st Division finally retook the Tay Loc airfield inside the old citadel after two days of heavy fighting during which the enemy lost in excess of 200 killed.

In the meantime, U.S. Marine reinforcements deployed for the defense of the MACV compound during 2 and 3 February had brought total U.S. forces there to one battalion, the 15th USMC Battalion, which was subsequently augmented with armor elements and ONTOS vehicles equipped with 106-mm recoilless rifles.

During that time, enemy forces attacked and overran the municipal prison of Hue where approximately 2,000 prisoners were detained. After being freed, a large majority of these prisoners was used as local labor while others were given weapons and joined enemy combat units as replacements. The enemy also began to consolidate his control over the city with the effective help of local VCI members. The local VCI had compiled a black list containing the names and addresses of all those who served in the military, in the government, or in U.S. agencies. This list served a double purpose. It enabled enemy forces to search for and arrest those they considered "enemies of the revolution" for

immediate elimination. It also helped the enemy in screening and classifying the civilian population of Hue.

According to accounts of survivors, the first thing Communists did after occupying Hue was to divide the city into areas and put each area under the control of a "Revolutionary Committee." All inhabitants were required to report to and register with the Revolutionary Committee of their area. They were also to turn in all weapons, ammunition, and radio receivers in their possession. After registration, everybody was let free to go home. During the days that followed registration, many people were asked to report again and never returned. They were those whose names had been placed on the VCI black list. When inquiring about their condition or location, their families were informed that they had to attend a reeducation course.

Information which leaked back gradually revealed the true nature of this reeducation process. According to a few who managed to escape and survive, all those detained for the purpose of "reeducation" were given picks and shovels and ordered to dig shelters. They did not suspect that these shelters were to become their own graves.

Later, after Hue had been liberated, most of these mass graves were found after a diligent and systematic search. We thus discovered many such graves on the campuses of the Gia Long and Gia Hoi High Schools and in the vicinity of the Tang Quang Tu Pagoda, all within city limits. But there were several others which would have never been discovered had they not been pinpointed by enemy returnees; they were all located outside the city in such outlying areas as those forests surrounding the Tu Duc and Minh Mang tombs.

This mass murder eventually went down in history as the most abominable and inhuman atrocity ever committed by the Communists during the war. Although they condemned it, many South Vietnam were at a loss when trying to determine why this was necessary. After all, they reasoned, Hue had always been considered more anti-government than anywhere else in South Vietnam. The militant Buddhists notwithstanding, Hue was the breeding ground for a Communist-sponsored political movement, the so-called "National Alliance for Democracy and Peace." This movement

had attracted some professors and students at the University of Hue.

Another opinion ventured that this mass murder was a pre-planned Communist action aimed at eliminating GVN organizations and personnel against whom the VCI of Hue had always harbored a certain blood feud. To General Truong, our 1st Division Commander, however, the mass murder was part of a security plan designed to protect VCI members whose covers had been blown when they surfaced to join in the attack, especially after the RVNAF announced they were determined to take Hue back at any cost.

In any event, the mass murder had a backlash which proved to be extremely adverse to the Communists as far as their standing with the South Vietnamese people was concerned.

When they attacked Hue, the Communists had already made preparations for the installation of a local government of their own. The man they selected as mayor of Hue, who was later tracked down and arrested by our forces, turned out to be the former chief of the city's national police. Involved in the Buddhist showdown of 1966, the man fled and joined enemy ranks after its failure.

Militarily, in the meantime, several new developments had taken place. For the first time after a long period of bad weather, VNAF tactical aircraft had taken advantage of clear skies to attack two enemy battalions entrenched inside the old citadel. Twenty-four 500-lb bombs were dropped over enemy positions especially in the southwestern corner of the citadel.

During the same day of the VNAF attack, using floating mines, the enemy was able to destroy two of the twelve spans of the Truong Tien Bridge which connected the Old Citadel and business section of the city with the modern southern city blocks. An additional two enemy battalions had also been brought into the citadel. These forces subsequently launched a forceful attack on 10 February against one battalion of the 1st Division, causing severe losses to this ARVN unit.

On 12 February, three Vietnamese marine battalions were deployed to Hue. Two among them had participated in battles at My Tho in the Mekong Delta and at Go Vap in Gia Dinh Province. All three battalions were transported by naval craft to the Bao Vinh landing from where they moved to the 1st Division Headquarters compound. And just as soon as

they arrived, the marines launched counterattacks to retake the citadel, but progress was slow in the absence of direct air and artillery support.

The next day, U.S. Marine forces began to join in the effort to clear the citadel. Even solidly entrenched behind indestructible walls of the old rampart enemy forces suffered heavy losses caused by the accurate fire of 106-mm recoilless rifles mounted on ONTOS vehicles. The weather also began to improved markedly, which made the support provided U.S. Marines by U.S. tactical aircraft more effective and quickened the pace of clearing operations. The enemy was apparently digging in for a long stay. He had strewn substantial obstacles on roadways inside the citadel, barricading himself behind trucks and other vehicles and heaps of household furniture taken from the population. He also positioned sharpshooters at key points to deter the advance of our troops.

On 16 February, the technical detachment of the 1st Division intercepted a radio message from the enemy headquarters inside the citadel. Its content revealed that the enemy commander there had been killed during an attack-by-fire, that enemy losses were heavy, and that the new commander recommended a withdrawal from the citadel. From a reply message by the enemy higher headquarters, also intercepted, we learned that this recommendation was disapproved and Communist forces in the citadel were ordered to continue the fighting.

On 19 February, the enemy suddenly counterattacked in force in the citadel, driving his effort toward the Tay Loc airfield. Not until much later did we learn that this surge of effort was designed to cover the escape of some high-ranking enemy commanders stranded in the citadel. All that remained there now were just combat troops and lower level commanders.

The enemy's stubborn resistance inside the citadel became desperate on 21 February when three U.S. Air Cavalry battalions drove a concerted attack against the La Chu area, five km northwest of Hue and location of the headquarters of the 29th Regiment, 325C Division. U.S. forces occupied this area and thus severed all enemy communications and re-supply activities between the citadel and the outside.

On 22 February, two ARVN Ranger battalions arrived in Hue to reinforce the efforts of clearing the Gia Hoi area of Hue City.

Then at 0500 on 24 February, the 2d Battalion of the 3d Regiment, 1st ARVN Division, finally retook the Imperial Court inside the citadel where its troops immediately brought down the NLF flag, ripped it into tatters and hoisted the RVN national colors. For the first time in twenty-five days, our yellow and triple red-striped flag fluttered triumphantly in the early morning air. This also marked the total reoccupation of Hue City for by that time, only one isolated enemy element still remained in Gia Hoi. The next day, this element was wiped out.

The battle for Hue lasted only twenty-five days but it was by far the fiercest, the bloodiest, and the most destructive. During the battle, the enemy had committed a total of 16 battalions or nearly the equivalent of two infantry divisions; according to our statistics, he had lost in excess of 2,000 killed. An enemy document captured later revealed that in the battle of Hue, he had suffered 1,042 killed and several times that amount wounded. It also provided an inventory of troop commanders killed which amounted to 1 regimental, 8 battalion and 24 company commanders, and 72 platoon leaders.

Another captured document gave a post-mortem analysis of the causes our enemy attributed to his defeat in Hue. These were:

1. Lack of accurate intelligence reports. (Enemy forces, for example, attacked An Hoa expecting the 2d ABN Battalion to be there, but this unit had redeployed to the Mang Ca compound).

2. Lack of coordination among units that attacked the headquarters of the 1st Division.

3. Lack of proper coordination among all units.

On the ARVN side, our success in driving the enemy out of Hue City, had to be first and foremost attributed to the fact that the 1st ARVN Division was able to hold on to its headquarters in the Mang Ca compound, and from there, continue to direct coordinated operations by the employment of its organic and attached units. The Mang Ca compound, therefore, had become not only a vital base to receive reinforcements from the outside but also an excellent staging area for the conduct of counter-attacks.

Another element which contributed to our success was the laudably high morale of our troops. After being forced into a defensive posture, ARVN units had fought gallantly and continued to fight well despite persuasive enemy appeals to surrender. A case in point was the gallant fight put up by the 81st Ordnance Company which, with only 80 men, sustained combat for 15 days to safeguard its stock of 1,400 M-16 rifles. This company was also resourceful enough to move all of its stocks away before its compound was overrun by enemy troops. In several other areas and military installations, our RF and PF troops also resisted valiantly until they ran out of ammunition and only then withdrew.

On the U.S. side, marine units had effectively contributed to the clearing of the citadel, inflicting severe losses to the enemy and speeding up the pace of relief operations. In the process, they had suffered casualties amounting to 53 killed and 380 wounded.

RVNAF casualties meanwhile amounted to 213 killed and 879 wounded. On the part of the civilian population, however, losses both material and human, were extremely heavy. Approximately 80% of all houses within the citadel area had been completely destroyed. During the short period of enemy occupation, the people of Hue also lived in agony among horrors and hardships that they had never encountered before. In addition to war hazards, they had suffered from shortages of food, water and lighting. They also had to move among decaying corpses that could not be buried and whose stink could drive everyone to hysteria.

This brief co-existence with the Communists during the period of their occupation eventually caused the people of Hue to change their minds completely. From an attitude of confrontation, they had learned to accommodate with the national government and above all, to reject with determination every political inclination smacking of sympathy toward Communism.



Dead VC Sapper at U.S. Embassy Entrance, 31 January 1968



VC Killed During an Attempted Breakthrough
of Tan Son Nhut AFB, 1 February 1968



The Phu Tho Race Track as Temporary Operational Base
for ARVN and U.S. Forces During Tet, February 1968



The Dong Ba Cemetery Where Victims of the Hue
Massacre Were Buried, February 1968



The Sorrow of Hue People

CHAPTER V

The Offensive, Phases II, III, and IV

Phase II, May 1968

Prior to taking part in the General Offensive-General Uprising of Tet 1968, all Communist political and military cadres had received guidance instructions to the effect that this was going to be the biggest, and also the last offensive. The effort, therefore, demanded a highest level of determination on the part of every participant.

However, just a few days after the offensive had been set in motion, an "absolutely secret" memorandum bearing the signature of Bay Hong, code name for Pham Hung, the COSVN leader, began to circulate among the Communist hierarchy. This memorandum, captured in Military Region 3, made an overall assessment of the situation and contained several self-critical remarks. Despite substantial gains, the memorandum admitted, Communist forces still fell short of their objectives. They had not yet occupied as many targets as had been planned, they had not yet wiped out South Vietnam's mobile and defense forces, and they had not yet succeeded in inciting a popular uprising against the government. All of these shortfalls were attributed to the failure to expand proselyting activities, untimeliness and lack of continuity in propaganda actions, and the delay and interruption of communications.

The memorandum then emphasized:

"The primordial thing we have to understand is that our General Offensive-General Uprising has been conceived to defeat a stubborn and reactionary enemy who has more than 1.2 million troops, all modernly equipped. Ours is a strategic offensive of long duration, which consists of several military campaigns and popular uprisings intended to

shatter every enemy counterattacking effort. As such, it has to be an extremely arduous fight."

"We must continuously attack the enemy and deny him the chance to rest and to reorganize. We must attack the enemy repeatedly, 3 or 4 times if need be, in those areas under contest, and we must not withdraw just because we fail in our first effort."

Thus it became clear from the enemy's viewpoint that the offensive was not a one-time effort but a multi-phased campaign, and from what this memorandum implied, each phase was apt to include several surges of activity.

The first phase of the offensive clearly began to abate some time during the first week of March 1968. By this time, it was apparent that in view of severe losses, the enemy needed some respite to reorganize and refit his battered units. To prepare for the next phase of the offensive, he also required some time to conduct a post-mortem analysis of his failures during the first phase, move in supplies, and reconnoiter the sites of future battles.

In the eyes of the enemy, Phase II of the offensive was particularly significant because of certain political developments that would probably affect the American war effort. First of all, there was the decision, made by President Johnson on 31 March, to cease all bombings north of the 20th parallel, which in effect would spare up to 80% of North Vietnamese territory. The decision he also made and announced at the same time not to run for re-election in November was surely an indication of severe difficulties in American internal politics. Negotiations, meanwhile, had reached the stage where an appropriate location for peace talks would soon be agreed by all parties concerned. All of these significant events were looked upon as favorable to the Communist side. Therefore, to further enhance his political posture, the enemy considered it mandatory to follow up his first offensive with a second one.

During this time, the RVN and U.S. were preoccupied with the effort to destroy enemy forces that were still in the provinces adjacent to Saigon. Toward that end, a major combined operation was launched in mid-March with the participation of elements of the ARVN 7th and 25th Divisions,

one airborne brigade, the 5th Ranger group, and national police forces, and on the U.S. side, elements of the 1st, 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Code-named TOAN THANG (Total Victory), this operation eventually destroyed an additional 2,600 enemy troops.

In I Corps area, another major combined operation, PEGASUS/LAM SON, which was initiated in early April with the commitment of U.S. infantry, marine units and the 1st Air Cavalry Division and elements of the ARVN 1st Division, and one airborne brigade, successfully reopened Route No. 9, which connected the lowlands of Quang Tri Province with Khe Sanh Base. This operation also broke the siege laid on this base by two NVA divisions during the past 77 days.

Information on the enemy's second phase of his offensive was obtained during the first week of April. It was disclosed by a high-ranking enemy rallier, Colonel Tran Van Dac, alias Tam Ha, who was deputy political commissar of the enemy MR-4. Colonel Tam Ha did not believe in the success of the general offensive and was not convinced that the urban population would rise up and join in the offensive even before the launching of Phase I. After he received orders to prepare for Phase II, he decided to rally to the GVN and disclosed valuable information concerning enemy plans. According to Colonel Tam Ha, phase II had been planned to take place on 22 April, but owing to delays in preparations, it would be most likely postponed for about 2 weeks. He also disclosed that the main objective of attack for Phase II was Saigon and that the enemy was going to commit a force equivalent to two infantry divisions in this attack. According to plans, the enemy 9th Division would conduct the primary effort against Tan Son Nhut while two supporting efforts would be directed against the southern and western parts of Saigon.

Colonel Tam Ha's disclosure corroborated with other intelligence data being obtained on enemy preparations for Phase II. On 26 April, an enemy surgeon belonging to a field medical unit was apprehended in Bien Hoa while he was reconnoitering a site for his surgical station. A notebook found in his possession recorded the date and time of Phase II attacks as beginning at 0120 on 28 April.

To preempt this second enemy offensive attempt, in early May a coordinated operational plan was implemented. The 3d Brigade, U.S. 9th Infantry Division, conducted a screening operation in Long An where its mission was to interdict enemy penetrations from the south into Saigon. Elements of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division with the support of U.S. air cavalry units operated in the Vam Co East River area west of Saigon while an element of the U.S. 5th Special Forces Group conducted patrols in the Vuon Thom area, 17 km west of Saigon, which was a permanent staging area for enemy forces. North of Saigon, an element of the U.S. 199th Infantry Brigade conducted activities south of the Dong Nai River and north of Bien Hoa in an effort to prevent an enemy attack from the direction of War Zone D. The U.S. 1st Infantry Division received the mission to interdict enemy penetrations from the north of Saigon while the 1st Australian Task Force at Long Thanh would devote its efforts to block enemy penetrations from the east toward Long Binh, Bien Hoa and Saigon. Within the Capital Military District, meanwhile, ARVN units were to coordinate screening operations with national police forces and block the enemy's piecemeal infiltrations into Saigon.

On 3 May, just when American and North Vietnamese negotiators announced that they were progressing toward actual peace talks, which were soon to begin in Paris, III Corps received reliable information from one of its penetration agents that the enemy would launch his second phase of attacks during the night of 4 May.

One day before Phase II actually began, a big explosion occurred in the Saigon Television and Radio compound. Enemy sappers had loaded a taxi cab parked in close proximity of this compound with 100 lbs of TNT and detonated it. The explosion caused some physical damage and interrupted TV transmission for a short time.

A captured enemy sapper later disclosed that this sabotage was intended to impress the Saigon population as to enemy capabilities and as a signal for phase II attacks. Enemy units had been instructed that the day following the announcement of this explosion on Saigon Radio was the day Phase II of the general offensive would begin.

As scheduled and indicated by our intelligence reports, Phase II

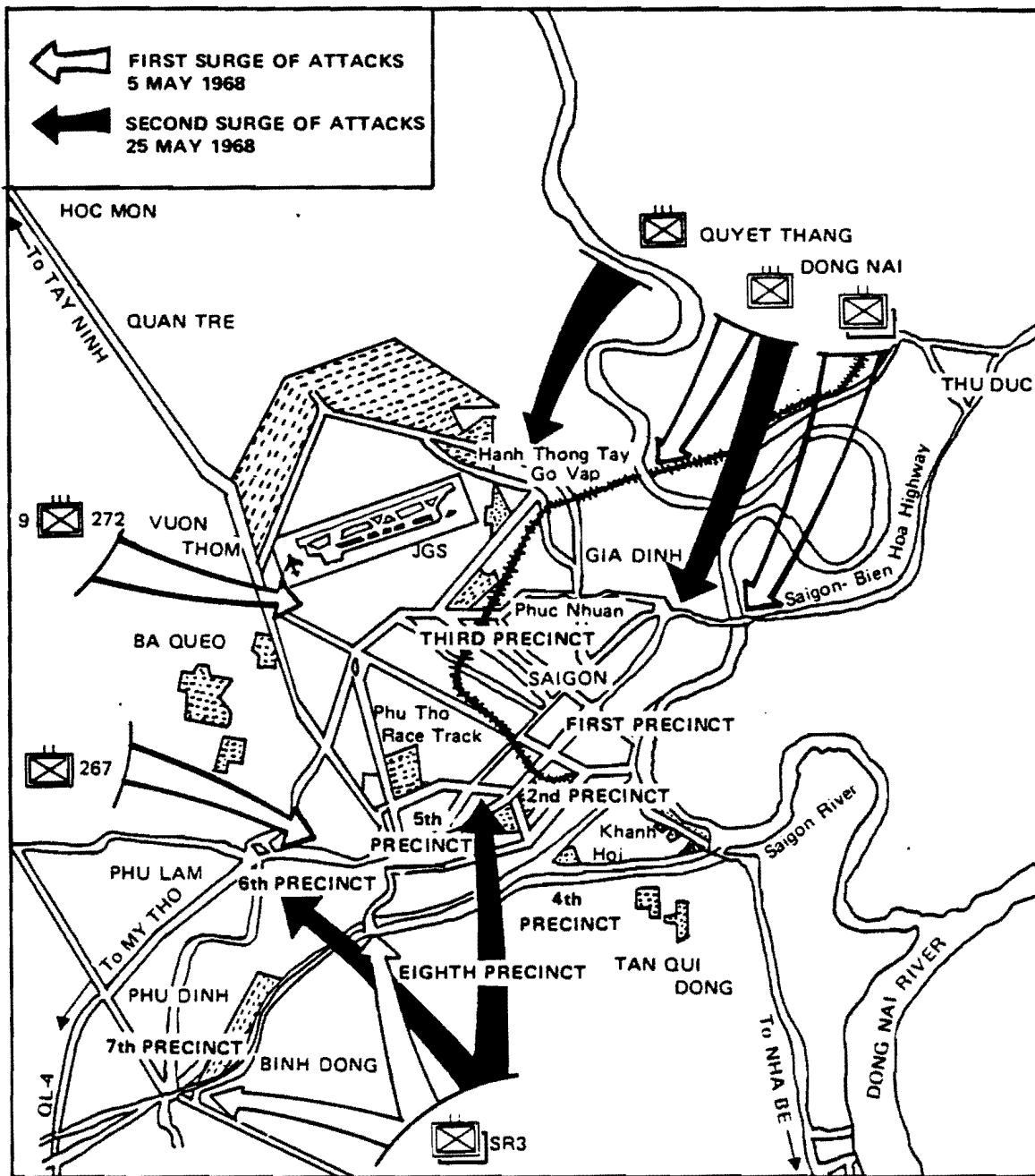
of this offensive was launched during the night of 4 May and began with extensive shellings against 119 targets across the country, to include provincial cities, district towns, villages and military installations. Apart from Saigon, the main objective, ground attacks were driven only against Bu Dop, an outlying district town in III Corps area, three miles east of the Cambodian border. However, this attack was driven off during the same night. Enemy ground attacks against Saigon took place at 0400 on 5 May through two primary efforts, west and north, and a secondary effort, east of the city. (Map 11) By breaking down into small elements, enemy units had succeeded in penetrating the outlying suburbs of Saigon before the attack. Some of these elements utilized boats and even trucks to infiltrate into the city. At a checkpoint outside Saigon, our forces apprehended some enemy troops hidden in a double-decked truck loaded with bricks; having difficulty breathing, the troops crawled out from the lower deck. In some other areas, enemy troops disguised themselves as ARVN troops.

Immediately after an intensive shelling, two enemy local force battalions attacked the Saigon-Bien Hoa Highway Bridge just east of the city. The Binh Loi Bridge, three km to the northwest, also came under heavy attack by two battalions of the enemy Dong Nai Regiment. Both bridges were major accesses connecting Bien Hoa with Saigon across the Saigon River. But both attacks were driven back by Vietnamese marine units during the day of 5 May.

The next day, 6 May, the enemy launched another effort from the west of Saigon. In this effort, enemy attacks which took place in two villages west and southwest of Tan Son Nhut airbase were defeated by elements of the U.S. 25th Infantry Division and air cavalry units. The enemy suffered severe losses.

Intelligence agent reports, in the meantime, indicated that enemy troops that had penetrated Saigon from the west were trying to assemble at the French cemetery adjacent to Tan Son Nhut airbase and attack the headquarters of CMD. An ARVN airborne battalion was immediately deployed to this area to search for the enemy but made only scattered contacts with a small enemy element. As it later turned out, the enemy battalion

Map 11 – Enemy Attacks on Saigon, Phase II



Scale 1: 25,000

that was supposed to assemble there could not contact its local guide and therefore arrived in the area the next day. With the support of VNAF skyraiders, our paratroopers attacked this enemy battalion and almost destroyed it completely. The battalion belonged to the 272d Regiment, 9th Division. On our side, we suffered the loss of VNAF Colonel Luu Kim Cuong, commander of the Tan Son Nhut AFB, who was killed by an enemy B-40 rocket while directing his troops during a counter-attack.

Enemy prisoners captured in this battle disclosed that their plan was to assemble a multi-battalion force and launch a surprise attack against both Tan Son Nhut AFB and the headquarters of the ARVN Airborne Division nearby at Bay Hien. But except for the first battalion that had already arrived and was annihilated by ARVN paratroopers, the other two battalions of the 272d Regiment failed to arrive at the scheduled time. Both battalions were therefore redirected toward the south of Saigon where in coordination with forces of the enemy 3d Subdivision, they would launch attacks on 7 May against the Phu Tho Hoa area in the 6th Precinct and the 7th and 8th Precincts in Cho Lon.

The battles that subsequently took place in Cho Lon were so intense that a 24-hour curfew was declared over this entire area.

At Phu Lam, the enemy 267th Local Force Battalion moved in after an attack and occupied the Minh Phung area, a vital area which controlled two main roads providing access from Saigon-Cho Lon to Route QL-4. Here, enemy troops were equipped with 75-mm recoilless rifles and antiaircraft weapons; they were apparently determined to take on our armor and deter close air support. They also dug in and prepared for extended fighting. People fleeing the area reported that enemy troops knocked holes in walls between adjacent townhouses in the area to facilitate movement and combat actions within each city block. This street combat technique was a duplication of the 1946 experience in Hanoi where the city's self-defense youths organized themselves for a showdown with French forces during the tense days that preceded the outbreak of the resistance war.

Enemy troops were so well entrenched in this area that it took the

38th Ranger Battalion two long days and the support of armor, artillery and tactical air to eliminate them completely and reoccupy the area.

Meanwhile, another enemy attack erupted in the Binh Tien and Binh Tay areas nearby; here enemy troops attacked the Binh Tien Bridge and the Binh Tay Distillation Plant and penetrated into the vicinity of Hau Giang Avenue, which was adjacent to the Minh Phung area. The enemy even hoisted the NLF flag over a schoolhouse in this area. But he was finally driven off by the 35th Ranger Battalion, which fought for two days with the support of tactical air.

In the 8th Precinct, a buffer zone between downtown Saigon and the Nha Be area, the Y Bridge also came under attack by two enemy local force battalions. But the enemy's attempt was thwarted by the 35th Ranger Battalion which, with the support of a U.S. rifle company from the 9th Infantry Division and U.S. armor elements, fought off the enemy advance toward the bridge from a solid defense line. A counterattack by U.S. forces ensued, led by an infantry battalion of the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, with the support of armor and tactical air, which finally wiped out all enemy troops taking refuge in city blocks adjacent to the Y Bridge.

By 12 May, Phase II of the General Offensive against Saigon-Cho Lon had been defeated with an enemy death toll of about 3,000. During this phase, the enemy had committed elements of eight regiments and three separate battalions. Actually, however, only 13 enemy battalions had successfully penetrated Saigon and conducted attacks within the city.

The situation remained calm afterwards, and not until 25 May did the enemy come back again with another surge of attacks which, by contrast with the first one, caught us rather unaware. Enemy forces this time had filtered through the Saigon security belt without being detected. The Dong Nai Regiment, for example, had already been in place at An Phu Dong, a guerrilla base just three km north of Saigon, two days before the attack, but its presence was not known. Obviously, the vigilance of CMD troops had diminished and their patrol activities had slackened because of the long days of combat during the last few weeks. Not until enemy forces had begun to move into the suburbs did

they sound the alert.

The first contacts occurred north of Saigon. They were followed shortly thereafter by other attacks to the south and southwest.

In northern Saigon, enemy forces consisted of two regiments, the Dong Nai and the Quyet Thang Regiments. The area where they penetrated was a densely populated suburb limited to the west by the Hanh Thong Tay military complex with its depots, installations and the Cong Hoa General Hospital, to the east by the Saigon-Bien Hoa Highway and to the south by the Gia Dinh Province Office Building and Sector Headquarters. With the areas of operation divided along Route QL-1 and limited by the Bang Ky Bridge, the Dong Nai Regiment attacked toward the northeast while the Quyet Thang Regiment pushed in the northwest direction.

During the battles that ensued in this area, the enemy deliberately positioned his combat elements in pagodas where he hoped his troops would be immune from air attacks. Many such pagodas were occupied by enemy troops: Tam Thanh, Quan Tam, Duoc Su, Truc Lam, Linh Son, Giac Hoa, etc. Apparently, the enemy had staked their chance on the Vietnamese traditional respect of pagodas and the pro-Buddhist sentiment prevailing among ARVN troops. He thought that if we attacked or employed tactical air against pagodas, we would surely incur the wrath of Buddhists and give him a good opportunity to drive home his anti-GVN propaganda.

Despite the political risks involved, our forces were determined to dislodge the enemy from these pagodas. Without hesitation, our marines, paratroopers, and airborne rangers moved in and attacked in force.

The enemy attack against the Bang Ky Bridge took place during the night of 30 May. It was a fierce battle pitting our marines against two battalions of the Dong Nai Regiment. During the attack, an enemy sapper element succeeded in blowing up a fuel pipeline in this area which caused several smoke-laden incendiaries. The smoke screened enemy troop movements and imparted confusion among the population. It took our marines until 3 June to clear enemy troops completely from this area. During this battle, the commander of the Dong Nai Regiment was killed.