



*Photo by SSgt. Charles
Washington*



Prelude to Attack

The year 1968 opened with an unwarlike quietness because of the New Year Truce. Only isolated squad-size VC units were involved in any fire fights. Army units found several rice caches. A company from the 173rd Airborne Brigade's 503rd Infantry found one rice cache of slightly over 1000 pounds hidden in bushes near its perimeter.

No sooner had the truce ended when the Viet Cong mortared, and tried to overrun the base camp of the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division in Tay Ninh Province. Shortly before midnight on New Year's Day, human wave attacks struck the base's perimeter from three sides. The attack broke off before the morning of January 2. The defenders found 347 enemy bodies strewn about the defensive area. It was later established that the attackers were from the 271st and 272nd VC Regiments.

Action elsewhere picked up. In the North both the Americal and 1st Cavalry Divisions reported increased contact with the enemy. In the highlands the 4th Division made contact with guerrillas near Pleiku and Dak To, and the 101st Airborne Division discovered several VC tunnel complexes west of Cu Chi in III CTZ.

During the next few days heavy contacts were made in the Americal's Operation Wheeler/Wallowa area of action in southern ICTZ, and along the Saigon River, 15 miles northwest of Saigon, in the 25th Division's Operation Yellowstone.

On January 7 a new \$500,000 Dial Central Office was opened in Phu Bai to provide a 1,000-line exchange for Marine and Army elements in the area.



PROVINCE CAPITAL HIT

Guerrilla forces made a pre-dawn terror attack on Hau Nghia's province capital of Khien Cuong. Following a mortar and rocket barrage, the VC penetrated to the center of town. Vietnamese National Police, Regional Forces and American advisors broke the attack at the market place. One policeman, alone at his post, was credited with killing five insurgents with hand grenades.

Two battalions of the ARVN 49th Regiment rushed to the aid of the city. By dawn 20 enemy bodies were counted in the center of town and four enemy suspects were detained. American casualties were three killed and 15 wounded. The Vietnamese police and Regional Forces casualties were described as light; however, the cost to the civilian populace was severe. Eighty civilians were wounded and 150 families were homeless from the surprise assault.

Heavy action continued through the next week centered in the Americal's battle area of southern I CTZ and the 25th's area of operation northwest of Saigon. Many units reported enemy resupply activity. Recently vacated tunnels and bunkers were also discovered, but there were only sporadic contacts. The 9th Division launched sweep operations 25 miles southwest of Saigon against a reported buildup of enemy forces; however, only light enemy contact was made.

During the month large and small enemy rice caches were discovered from one end of the country to the other. In the north, NVA forces were building up in the vicinity of the Marine base at Khe Sanh. This base sits astride the main infiltration route that skirts the DMZ through which enemy reinforcements are funneled toward Quang Ngai City and Hue. Units of the 108th Artillery Group at Camp Carroll were firing constant support for the bastion, 18 miles away.

Rice and weapons caches turned up regularly. The most unusual capture was made by the 11th Armored Cavalry near the Cambodian border, 70 miles north of Saigon. A North Vietnamese Regular was spotted carrying 60-pound bags of rice on a bicycle. He tried to out-pedal an Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle (ACAV), but he was no match for the ACAV's speed. The Blackhorse troops ended the NVA soldier's rice smuggling days.

Sporadic action continued through the third week of January with small engagements reported and many more caches being discovered. On several occasions base camps

The Vung Chua Mountain site, located near Qui Nhon, is a major communications relay link between the northern and southern commands of USARV.



INNOCENT. OR . . . ? Sampans make a tranquil setting on the waterways of the country. They are one of the main modes of transportation and commerce in Vietnam, and are used by the Communists to deliver large quantities of arms and ammunition. Photo by SSgt. Robert Peterson.

received harassing mortar fire.

The 1st Cavalry Division encountered an enemy force estimated at two battalions near Bong Son in Binh Dinh Province. The 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry was moving into the area when a lone enemy soldier was sighted. When the armored vehicles moved into an attacking position, heavy resistance was met. Gunships and airstrikes were called in and a blocking force moved in behind the enemy. After a day of fighting 128 enemy lay dead on the battlefield. The cavalry lost four men.

In the closing week of January, gunship crews from the 13th Combat Aviation Battalion spotted large sampan flotillas 31 miles southwest of Saigon in Dinh Tuong Province. Thirty-one of the sampans were sunk. Enemy sampan activity seemed to have suddenly increased as gunships reported sinking 98 more of the boats.

The Viet Cong attacked the town of Trang Bang, 28 miles northwest of Saigon, attempting to overrun the district headquarters. In typical VC fashion the insurgents struck from three sides with recoilless rifle and rocket fire at the buildings. The Viet Cong soldiers were caught in a crossfire from Popular Forces bunkers when they assaulted. Six enemy soldiers were killed in the fighting, as were a policeman and a civilian woman. Thirty-five civilians, including 16

women and eight children, were victims of wounds in the attack. The enemy was forced to withdraw from the town, never achieving his objective.

Although weapons and food caches continued to be turned up by searching troops, enemy contact was rare. The planned 36-hour Tet truce was approaching. In I CTZ the Communist threat was so severe the entire truce period was cancelled there. Heavy daily enemy artillery and rockets pounded away at Khe Sanh while North Vietnamese troops moved in on three sides.

A DEADLY HOLIDAY

Across the rest of the nation civilians and military were planning family reunions and celebrations for the three-day holiday starting the last day of the month. Already fire crackers were being shot off in happy anticipation of the Buddhist New Year. Tet being a time of family gatherings, made movement of large groups of people possible without suspicion. This was exactly what the Communist guerrillas needed and during the days preceding Tet, large numbers of the VC and NVA moved into the nation's major cities.

Arms and ammunition were smuggled into the cities inside loads of farm produce and materials carried in trucks and sampans. They were then moved to cemeteries inside coffins



USARV and 1st Logistical Command headquarters buildings at Long Binh Post form a geometric pattern in what was once jungle. Photo by Sp4 James Lynch.

War Reaches The Cities



Military policemen lead away a Viet Cong who was captured in the vicinity of the American Embassy during the Communist attack January 31. Corporal George Moyer, left, and Sp4 James M. Singer, 527th Military Police Company, were rushed to the Embassy to assist guards in repelling an assault on the compound. Photo by Sp5 Donald A. Hirst.



in mock funerals. Even the flower pots were used to hide magazines of ammunition and hand grenades. By evening of January 30 most cemeteries in the major cities had become VC arsenals.

TET ATTACKS BEGIN

The first of the Tet attacks occurred at Nha Trang at 1:15 a.m. on January 30. The assault was apparently aimed at the U.S. Military Assistance Compound in downtown Nha Trang. By nightfall the next day, attacks took place in 27 of the 44 province capitals. The U.S. Embassy was one of the first targets in Saigon. Strikes were also made at Da Nang, Hue, Quang Tri, Qui Nhon, My Tho, Tan Phu Trung, An Khe, Pleiku, Kontum, Dalat, Ban Me Thout, Hoi An, Tuy Hoa, Hoc Mon, Tay Ninh, Ben Tre and Soc Trang. Also hit were military airfields at Da Nang, Chu Lai, Tan Son Nhut, Bien Hoa, Pleiku and Tuy Hoa. Major military installations were also subjected to ground and mortar attacks, including the huge ammunition dump and the II Field Force Headquarters at Long Binh.

Many of the cities overrun were cleared of guerrillas within 24 hours; however, several cities were held by the enemy for longer periods. These included Saigon, Hue and Dalat.

ANGRY PEOPLE

The Communists had hoped to rouse the people to a popular uprising with the attacks. The NVA and VC troops had been told the people would greet them with open arms. Instead, by violating the sacred family celebration of Tet by bombing, burning and disrupting city life, and by executing civilians, the Communists angered the people.

EMBASSY ASSAULTED

In Saigon 19 Viet Cong blasted a hole in the compound wall of the U.S. Embassy at about 3 a.m. on the last day in January. Several unsuccessful attempts were made by the terrorists to penetrate the embassy. The thick cherry wood door at the main entrance took a rocket hit and stood fast. Insurgents who entered the compound through the shattered wall and by scaling the rear wall were stopped in a 6-hour battle with Marine guards reinforced by military police from the 716th MP Battalion. To insure no VC had entered the embassy building a helicopter loaded with 101st Airborne paratroopers landed on the roof to search the building from top to bottom. The last insurgent died in a civilian aide's quarters in the rear of the compound, killed by the civilian himself with a pistol thrown to him by the MP's.

The attackers attempted to enter the Independence Palace grounds, but were driven into an incompleted hotel where they held out for two days. Other guerrillas struck military and government installations all over the Saigon-Cholon-Tan Son Nhut area. The MACV compound was struck by sniper fire and the sprawling Tan Son Nhut Airbase was invaded by about 700 guerrillas. Tropic Lightning troops of the 25th

Infantry Division were called to help drive the enemy out of the base. American and ARVN soldiers supported by helicopter gunships rushed to the city.

Communist political cadre paraded through the streets in an attempt to rally the people to assist them; they found few takers.

Throughout the country superior firepower and logistical support turned the tide against the Communists dramatically.

The 1st Cavalry in the north secured Quang Tri; 4th Division troops had secured Pleiku and Kontum, and so it went to the south where 9th Division troops freed My Tho from the VC. Through all the fighting, ARVN troops displayed conspicuous bravery. They proved that this is their country and they are willing to fight for it.

COSTLY ATTACKS

The fierceness of the fighting was attested to by the casualty figures. In three days the Communist death toll was esti-



A helicopter lands on the U. S. Embassy roof, recalling the manner in which troops of the 101st Airborne Division were landed to aid in clearing the compound.

mated at over 10,000. Some 3,000 suspects were being detained. South Vietnamese losses reached 632 killed and 1,588 wounded. American deaths were 281 with another 1,195 wounded. Other Free World Forces lost 34 men. At least 3,000 civilians died and another 350,000 were left homeless.

Destruction of property was high. In Pleiku, 50 per cent of the homes were destroyed by the fighting. But the worst catastrophe struck Hue, which was completely overrun by the Communists. When the fighting to retake the city was over, near the end of February, 80 percent of the city had been destroyed, including many irreplaceable art treasures of the Citadel, the historic home of Vietnamese emperors for centuries.

Free World Forces quickly moved to block off escaping Communist soldiers on the outskirts of the cities and to destroy guerrilla mortar and rocket crews harassing military installations.

Ten days after the first attack, the brunt of the Communist effort was broken everywhere except in Hue, where the 1st Cavalry Division blocked additional North Vietnamese units from reinforcing the insurgents in the city, who were slowly being dug out block by block by U.S. Marine and ARVN forces.

The most reliable intelligence estimates indicated a second wave of attacks would take place by mid-month. Vietnamese and American forces conducted sweeps in the vicinity of the

large cities to break up the possibility. One Delta city, Bac Lieu, was attacked by the VC, but the invaders were turned back by ARVN soldiers in a day-long battle.

In the Saigon-Bien Hoa area, the 25th and 9th Infantry Divisions, joined by the 199th Light Infantry Brigade and 11th Armored Cavalry, clashed with Viet Cong guerrillas frequently. Artillery and helicopter gunship supporting fires caused the Communist death toll to mount at an incredible rate. During early portions of the Tet attacks, the only available aerial gun support was provided by the 1st Aviation Brigade and 1st Cavalry Division gunships.

FRESH TROOPS ARRIVE

By mid-month President Johnson decided to send 10,500 more U.S. troops to Vietnam. The first major unit to answer the call was the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division. The brigade was rapidly deployed to the I CTZ to alleviate pressure on Marine forces who were fighting in Hue and who were facing an estimated four to five North Vietnamese divisions.

On February 18 the second wave of attacks was launched by the Communists. This time they were not as severe as the initial attacks, with no major ground assaults being initiated. The attacks were basically mortar and rocket barrages. Nearly every military installation hit during Tet was struck again, including the ammunition dump at Long Binh and the airfields at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa. Sixteen provincial



Their homes destroyed by the Viet Cong attack on Saigon, Vietnamese citizens search through the rubble for material with which to rebuild.