

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

TRANSITION

NOVEMBER 1968-

DECEMBER 1969



Cover: Adviser watches over South Vietnamese soldier firing M16 rifle, November 1969. (CMH Files)

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**NOVEMBER 1968–
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Introduction

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive issue. But fifty years after the beginning of major U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, well over half the U.S. population is too young to have any direct memory of the conflict. The massive American commitment—political, economic, diplomatic, and military—to the mission of maintaining an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam deserves widespread attention, both to recognize the sacrifice of those who served and to remember how those events have impacted our nation.

U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia began after World War II when elements of the Vietnamese population fought back against the reimposition of French colonial rule. Although the United States generally favored the idea of an independent Vietnam, it supported France because the Viet Minh rebels were led by Communists and U.S. policy at that point in the Cold War sought to contain any expansion of communism. France's defeat in 1954 led to the division of Vietnam into a Communist North (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and a non-Communist South (Republic of Vietnam). The United States actively supported the latter as it dealt with a growing Communist-led insurgent force (the Viet Cong) aided by the North Vietnamese. The initial mission of training South Vietnam's armed forces led to deepening American involvement as the situation grew increasingly dire for the Republic of Vietnam.

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States already had invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the effort to build a secure and stable Republic of Vietnam. That commitment expanded

rapidly through 1969, when the United States had over 365,000 Army soldiers (out of a total of a half million troops of all services) in every military region of South Vietnam with thousands of other Army personnel throughout the Pacific area providing direct support to operations. The war saw many innovations, including the massive use of helicopters to conduct airmobile tactics, new concepts of counterinsurgency, the introduction of airborne radio direction finding, wide-scale use of computers, and major advances in battlefield medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden was still borne by soldiers on the ground who slogged on foot over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military effort by the United States was, however, matched by the resolve of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive as American commitment wavered in the face of high casualties and economic and social challenges at home. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the American military role in the conflict. Actual peace was elusive, and two years later the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam, bringing the war to an end in April 1975.

The vast majority of American men and women who went to Vietnam did so in the uniform of the United States Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. These commemorative pamphlets are dedicated to them.

JON T. HOFFMAN
Chief Historian

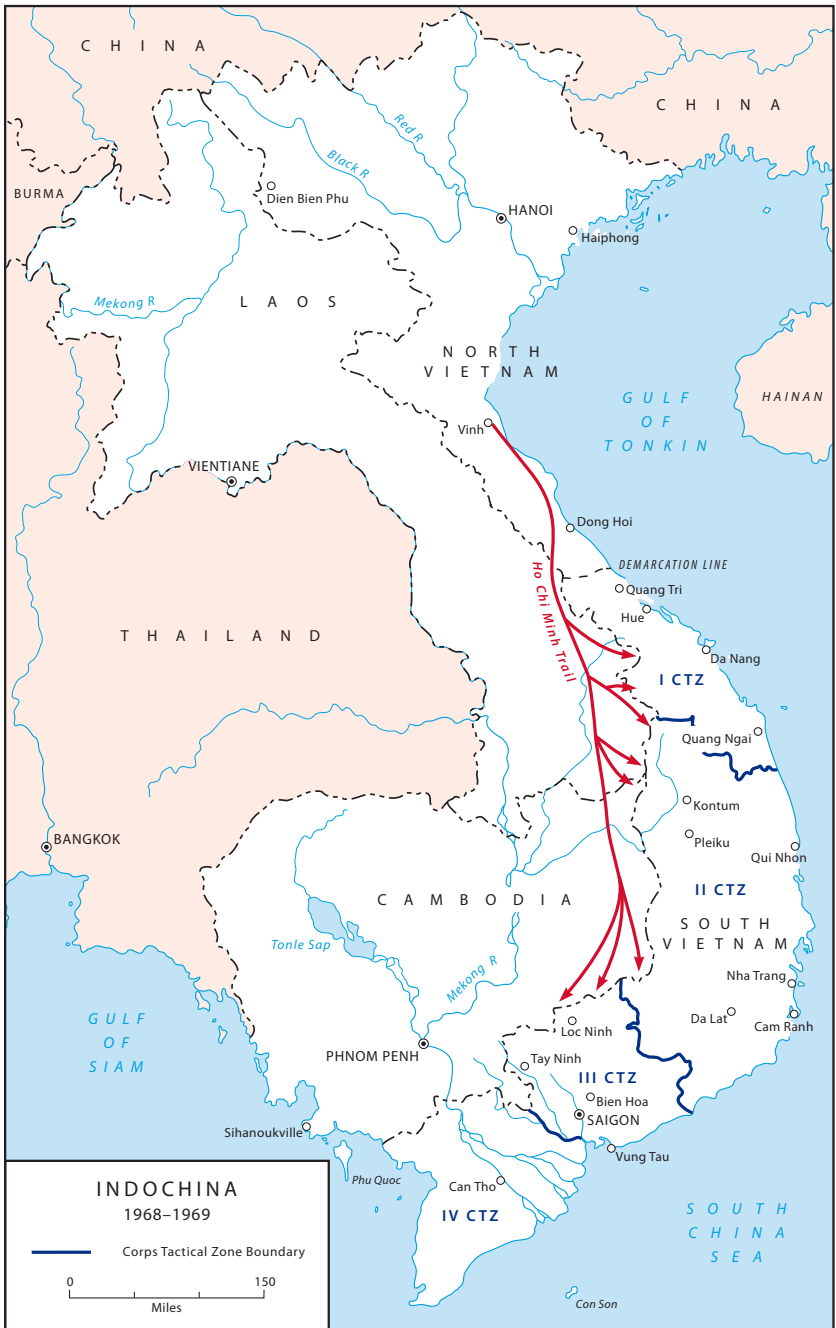
Transition, November 1968– December 1969

By 1968, the government of South Vietnam, backed by U.S. advisers, had been fighting Communist Viet Cong insurgents and their patrons in neighboring North Vietnam for fourteen years. It was a desperate struggle that pitted neighbor against neighbor and exacted a mounting toll in the form of casualties, refugees, and socioeconomic dislocation. In 1965, the United States had added its own ground combat troops to the struggle, thwarting the very real prospect of a Communist victory. Since that low point the allies had been gradually gaining ground in an escalating conflict. In late January 1968, the Communist leadership in North Vietnam had launched a major offensive in a bid to change the situation in its favor. The widespread attacks, which began during the Tet new year holidays and continued on and off through September, failed miserably. The population of South Vietnam refused to rise up in support, and the Communists suffered enormous casualties. As the enemy aggression abated, the commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General Creighton W. Abrams, believed the allies were poised to make significant gains. But time was not on his side. Although the allies had defeated the enemy militarily, the shock that the Communists had been able to launch such a massive strike after years of American involvement had undermined support for the war back in the United States. With peace talks under way in Paris, Abrams raced against the clock to give South Vietnam the best chance for survival before the inevitable withdrawal of U.S. troops.

STRATEGIC SETTING

In the aftermath of the 1968 offensives, both sides consolidated their positions and increased their forces. The enemy withdrew his regular main forces—a combination of Viet Cong *People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF)* and North Vietnamese *People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)* units—to remote bases in South Vietnam and to sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. He reinforced these units by moving additional men, weapons, and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia and into the South. By September, the allies estimated that the enemy fielded more than 250,000 frontline combatants, backed by many more part-time guerrillas, political operatives, and active sympathizers. Meanwhile, U.S. forces increased to 538,000, with the Army approaching 355,000 soldiers in country. Other nations, particularly South Korea and Australia, provided 66,000 men, while the South Vietnamese military stood at 996,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, territorials (Regional and Popular Forces), and other paramilitary personnel. Assisting them was a growing number of policemen and a partially armed, hamlet-based militia called the People's Self-Defense Force (*Map 1*).

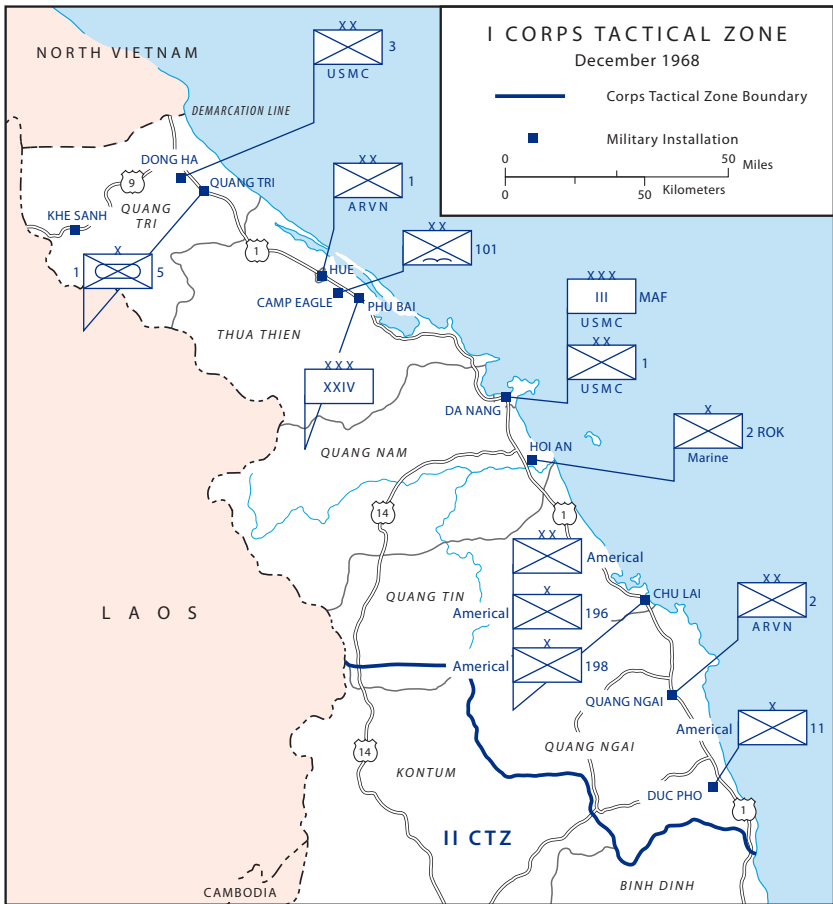
By the fall of 1968, the U.S. Army had troops in each of South Vietnam's four corps tactical zones. Due to the threat of an invasion from North Vietnam, Abrams maintained a heavy U.S. presence in the northernmost zone, known as the I Corps Tactical Zone. The commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr., supervised the U.S. contingent in I Corps. He assigned control of U.S. forces from the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam south to the Hai Van Pass in Quang Nam Province to the U.S. Army's XXIV Corps. The commander of XXIV Corps, Lt. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, had operational control of the 101st Airborne Division (to include the unit's 3d Brigade, recently transferred from III Corps), the 3d Marine Division, and the recently arrived 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). The 101st Airborne Division was in the midst of being transformed into an airmobile division to give it more mobility and striking power. South of the pass, III Marine Amphibious Force directed operations of the 1st Marine Division and the Army's 23d Infantry Division, also called the Americal Division. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was also present, but it would soon be shifted elsewhere. Other forces in I Corps



Map 1

included two South Vietnamese infantry divisions, an infantry regiment, territorial forces, and a South Korean marine brigade. These troops, as was the case throughout the country, operated under their own national command authorities in collaboration with those of the United States (*Map 2*).

In the II Corps Tactical Zone, which spanned the center of the country from the sparsely populated Central Highlands in the west to the crowded lowlands that lined the South China Sea, Abrams assigned U.S. forces to I Field Force under Lt. Gen. William R. Peers. Peers commanded just two major tactical units—the

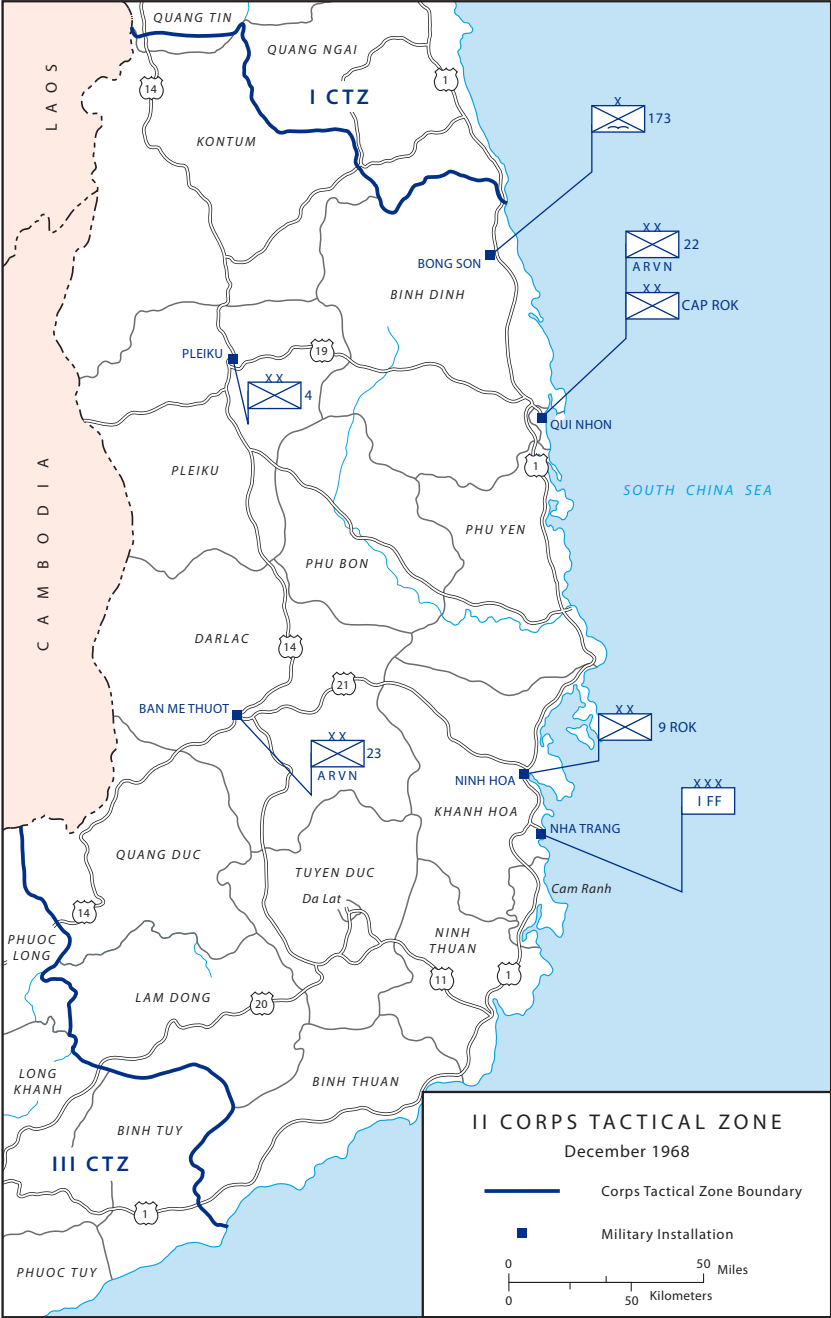




U.S. soldiers with the 4th Infantry Division search for mines south of Pleiku in the Central Highlands in May 1968.

4th Infantry Division, which patrolled South Vietnam's western border, and the 173d Airborne Brigade, which operated along the coast. U.S. Army Special Forces patrolled the border using tribal irregulars known as Montagnards. Two South Vietnamese and two South Korean infantry divisions backed by territorials covered the rest of II Corps, but there was no doubt that the allies were hard pressed to cover the area, which represented nearly half of South Vietnam. (*See Map 3.*)

Farther south still lay the military region known as the III Corps Tactical Zone. Home to the country's capital at Saigon and nearly 40 percent of the country's population, III Corps was the political and administrative heartland of South Vietnam. Saigon's significance as well as its vulnerability—the city was situated just sixty kilometers from Cambodia, whose government permitted the enemy to use its territory as a staging ground—led Abrams to garrison the zone strongly. He assigned U.S. troops in III Corps to II Field Force headquarters, led by Lt. Gen. Walter Kerwin. Kerwin had at his disposal the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions; the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division; the 199th Infantry Brigade; the 11th Armored Cavalry; and, after being transferred from the I Corps Tactical Zone in September, the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne



Map 3

Division. Allied forces included contingents from Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. Three South Vietnamese infantry divisions, territorial forces, and the nation's airborne and marine reserves also made III Corps their home, although the Vietnamese Joint General Staff often called on the paratroopers and marines to serve elsewhere in the country on a contingency basis. (See Map 4.)

Last but not least, South Vietnam's IV Corps Tactical Zone encompassed the southernmost portion of the country. The Mekong River Delta dominated the region, a heavily populated, often inundated, agriculturally rich area. Three South Vietnamese infantry divisions backed by territorial forces provided the bulk of IV Corps' defenses. The U.S. ground presence was limited to Special Forces camps along the Cambodian border and the remainder of the 9th Infantry Division, some elements of which were just in the process of relocating from III Corps to IV Corps. The division patrolled the southern approaches to Saigon, sometimes aboard the vessels of the Mobile Riverine Force. Army aviation support came from the 1st Aviation Brigade's troop- and cargo-carrying helicopters, fixed-wing utility and surveillance aircraft,

Grenadiers of the 199th Infantry Brigade fire M79 grenade launchers near Saigon in an area thought to be booby-trapped.





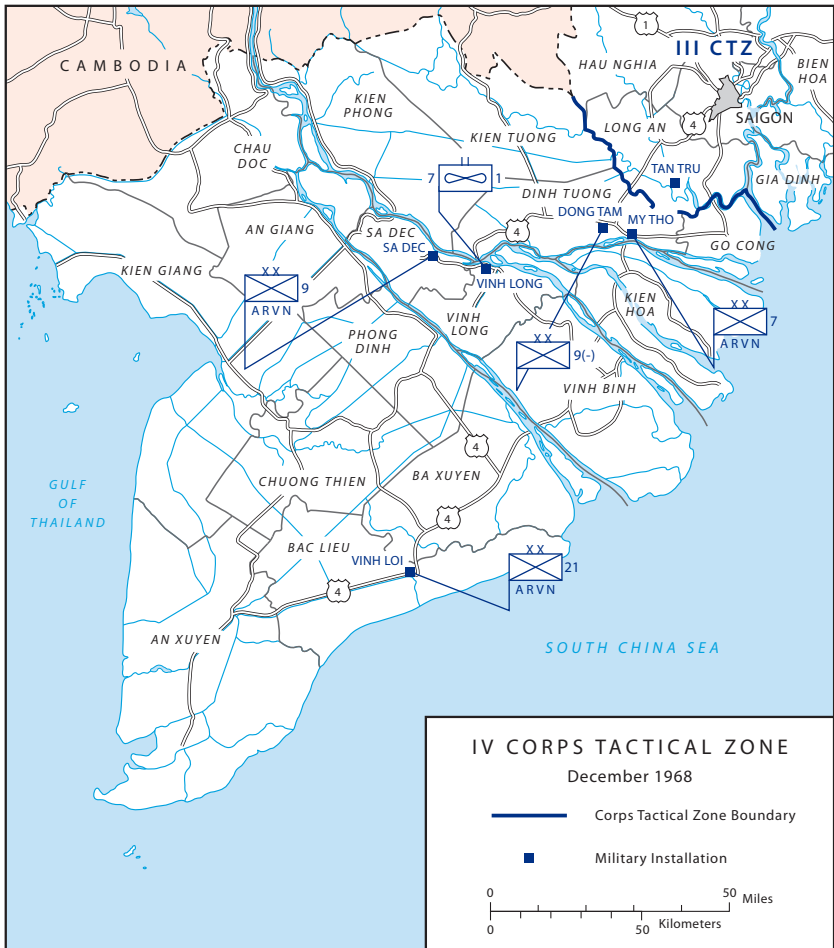
and assault helicopters, including the deadly AH-1G Cobra. U.S. forces in South Vietnam's IV Corps Tactical Zone were too few in number to have a U.S. corps-equivalent command such as the III Marine Amphibious Force in I Corps or the two U.S. field forces in II and III Corps. Consequently, Abrams placed them under the



U.S. Army AH-1G Cobra assault helicopters, like the one shown here supporting the 101st Airborne Division, were used with deadly effectiveness.

operational control of Maj. Gen. George S. Eckhardt, the senior U.S. adviser to the South Vietnamese commander of IV Corps. (See Map 5.)

Because President Lyndon B. Johnson was reluctant to declare a national mobilization, relatively few national guardsmen or reservists served in Vietnam. However, in May 1968 the president had authorized a modest call-up that included seventy-six Army units. Forty-three of these (eight National Guard and thirty-five Reserve) deployed to Vietnam between August and December. The contingent consisted of artillery, infantry, engineer, transportation, medical, ordnance, supply, and maintenance specialists organized into units that ranged in size from battalions to small detachments. One infantry unit, a long-range patrol company,



Map 5

was the only National Guard ground maneuver unit to serve in Vietnam. While deployed on tours that typically lasted ten months, these units played an important role in supporting the American war effort.

Regardless of where they were located, U.S. troops faced an inhospitable environment of rugged mountains, swamps, and forests. Land clearing by armored bulldozers called Rome Plows was effective in cutting back the enemy's cover, but it was impossible to clear more than the verges of roads and a few areas of

critical importance. Air Force C-123 Provider aircraft sprayed herbicides under a controversial program called Operation RANCH HAND, but by 1968 the United States was curtailing this activity. Vietnam was such a verdant land that even in defoliated areas some tree canopy survived to conceal the enemy. He persistently used this cover to avoid detection, to launch surprise attacks, to demolish bridges, and to interdict roads and waterways with ambushes, mines, and booby traps. To make matters worse,

A crane assigned to the 131st Engineer Company (Vermont Army National Guard) is shown parked in South Vietnam. The unit performed road construction and other engineer support missions in the highlands.





A modified D7E bulldozer equipped with a Rome Plow blade and an armored cab clears trees and brush. The vehicles became an effective tool for clearing roadside areas, hindering enemy ambushes, and limiting cover and concealment.

the tropical climate and frequent rains caused physical discomfort, created health risks, and restricted major combat operations to the drier seasons. Damage caused by floods and typhoons added to the misery and complicated efforts to build bases and to keep supply roads open.

The challenges posed by geography and weather were constants, but the rising tide of antiwar sentiment in the United States was adding concerns of a different kind. In November 1968, Americans elected a new president, Richard M. Nixon, who, like an increasing number of Americans, no longer believed military victory in the traditional sense was possible. He was not willing to abandon Vietnam, but neither was he prepared to maintain an indefinite commitment. He hoped U.S. military pressure would compel the Communists to accept peace on terms favorable to the allies, but he also wanted to end America's participation in the war as quickly as possible. Throughout his first year in office, the president would vacillate between these two, often incompatible, desires.

In truth, the writing had been on the wall for some time. Abrams' predecessor, General William C. Westmoreland, had begun withdrawal planning in late 1967, and after the Tet offen-

sive of January–February 1968 the United States had accelerated its efforts to prepare South Vietnamese forces for the day when U.S. ground combat troops would no longer be present. The initiation of peace talks in Paris between the United States and North Vietnam later in the year added urgency to these activities because, while it was unlikely that the antagonists would reach a quick accord, that possibility could not be discounted, making it imperative that the South Vietnamese become as strong as possible, as quickly as possible. Similar considerations shaped General Abrams' strategy for the coming year. Concerned lest a sudden agreement in Paris freeze the warring parties in place, Abrams and his deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), Robert W. Komer, persuaded South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to embark on an offensive to reclaim as much territory and as many people as possible. The allies called the effort the Accelerated Pacification Campaign, *pacification* being the term used to describe politico-military programs to secure the nation's population, replace the clandestine Communist governing apparatus with an effective government administration, and build a prosperous and united nation through socioeconomic development and reform. The campaign, which coincided with the advent of drier, and thus more militarily favorable, weather throughout much of the country, began on 1 November 1968.

OPERATIONS

WINTER 1968–SPRING 1969

The Accelerated Pacification Campaign set an ambitious goal—to convert about 1,100 hamlets that were either ruled by the Viet Cong or in a contested status to at least minimum government control by 31 January 1969. For the South Vietnamese, it meant an all-out politico-military effort, supported by U.S. CORDS advisers, to push into the countryside, to secure the targeted population, and to establish the rudiments of government administration. Specially formed Revolutionary Development teams acted as the vanguard of pacification, working in hamlets for several months to establish a government presence before moving on to repeat the process in another community. Although the teams had their own security element, most of the burden for providing population security lay with the Regional and Popular

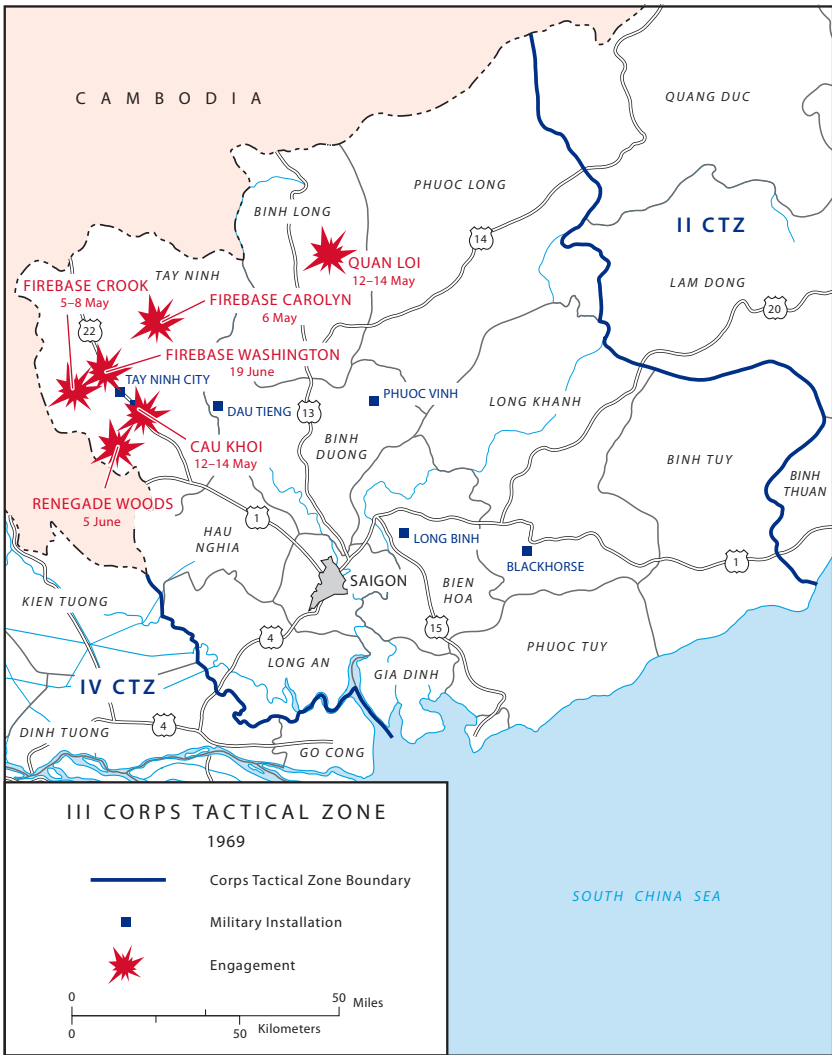
Forces, the National Police, and the militia, all backed by the South Vietnamese Army, which often detached battalions for that purpose. The contribution of U.S. Army units, while vital, was more indirect. U.S. units conducted large-unit sweeps and small-unit patrols near areas undergoing pacification to prevent enemy military units from interfering with the process. They also worked with South Vietnamese officials to eliminate Communist agents living among the people and helped train South Vietnamese forces, either by conducting combined operations with them or by providing training. Farther afield, U.S. units conducted vigorous “spoiling attacks” against the enemy’s bases and supply lines to degrade his ability to conduct war near populated areas. Statistically the campaign was a great success. The allies occupied all 1,100 targeted hamlets. The results encouraged them to push ahead with equally ambitious pacification plans for the rest of the year. Nevertheless, it was difficult to judge the true state of affairs. Circumstances varied from hamlet to hamlet, and the Communist clandestine apparatus often remained intact to some degree even after occupation. Frequently, the strongest emotions exhibited by those living in newly pacified communities was apathy and a deep desire to be left alone by both sides in the conflict.

A Regional Forces patrol enters a Montagnard village in 1969. Note the soldier at left is still equipped with the M1 rifle while the soldier at center carries an M1 carbine.



The number of violent contacts between U.S. and Communist forces was relatively low during the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. The United States took advantage of the lull to redeploy Maj. Gen. George L. Forsythe's 1st Cavalry Division from I Corps to III Corps. The move, code-named LIBERTY CANYON, reflected Abrams' sensitivity to the threat 50,000 enemy combatants posed to Saigon and its environs. In sixteen days in late October and early November 1968, a fleet of planes, helicopters, trucks, and ships moved the division 917 kilometers. Forsythe established his new headquarters at Phuoc Vinh, Binh Duong Province, about fifty kilometers northeast of Saigon. No sooner had he arrived than he began operating over an immense area (12,432 square kilometers) of forest and plantations that encompassed the provinces of Phuoc Long, Binh Long, Tay Ninh, and northern Binh Duong. His mission was to interdict Communist infiltration routes from Cambodia to make it impossible for the four major enemy formations based in the area (the *5th PLAF*, *9th PLAF*, *1st PAVN*, and *7th PAVN Divisions*) to mass enough men and supplies to threaten Saigon. To support the division's frequent airmobile raids and patrols, U.S. Army engineers built a line of artillery firebases and helicopter landing zones near the Cambodian border. Some of these proved too vulnerable to the enemy's concentrated power in Cambodia, and by year's end Forsythe had fallen back to a new line deeper inside South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the active screen provided by the 1st Cavalry Division enabled allied units operating in the more populated areas closer to Saigon, most notably the U.S. 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions and the South Vietnamese 5th and 18th Divisions, to vigorously prosecute the Accelerated Pacification Campaign. (See *Map 6*.)

Allied actions suppressed, but did not eliminate, enemy activity in III Corps during early 1969. Most incidents amounted to small-scale attacks on hamlets, outposts, and supply routes. One of these actions took place on 11 January 1969 along Highway 13 in northern III Corps. A platoon from Troop A, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry, had just escorted a supply column to Quan Loi, ninety-six kilometers north of Saigon. The operation had been incident-free, but on the return trip a reinforced enemy company ambushed the column of seven M113 armored personnel carriers. A recoilless rifle round hit one of the carriers and set it ablaze, seriously wounding the leader of the column, 1st Lt. Harold A. Fritz. Realizing the enemy had his platoon surrounded, Fritz



Map 6

climbed to the top of his burning vehicle from where he directed his troops into defensive positions. He then dismounted and ran from vehicle to vehicle, encouraging his men, assisting the wounded, and directing fire. One vehicle in particular was crucial to the platoon's survival—an M113 equipped with a six-barreled

Vulcan 20-mm. antiaircraft gun that flashed continuously. When the enemy launched an assault, Fritz manned a machine gun to help repulse the attack. No sooner had the first wave receded than a second wave of enemy soldiers nearly overran the platoon. Armed with a pistol and a bayonet, Fritz led a small group of men in a daring charge that routed the attackers. His actions bought the platoon enough time to survive until a relief force arrived from the 1st Cavalry Division. The U.S. government recognized Lieutenant Fritz's valor by awarding him the Medal of Honor.

South of Fritz's position, in northern IV Corps, the 9th Infantry Division supported the Accelerated Pacification Campaign by conducting engagements in Kien Hoa Province before initiating a wider action, dubbed Operation Speedy Express, on 1 December. Under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Julian J. Ewell, the division conducted a myriad of small waterborne and airmobile efforts backed by copious air and artillery strikes to make Viet Cong haunts in the northern Mekong Delta as inhospitable as possible. On 13 December, the Viet Cong struck back, attacking the 2d Battalion, 60th Infantry's base camp at Tan Tru in central Long An Province. For three hours, they lashed the base with mortar rounds and machine-gun fire, then tried to break through the

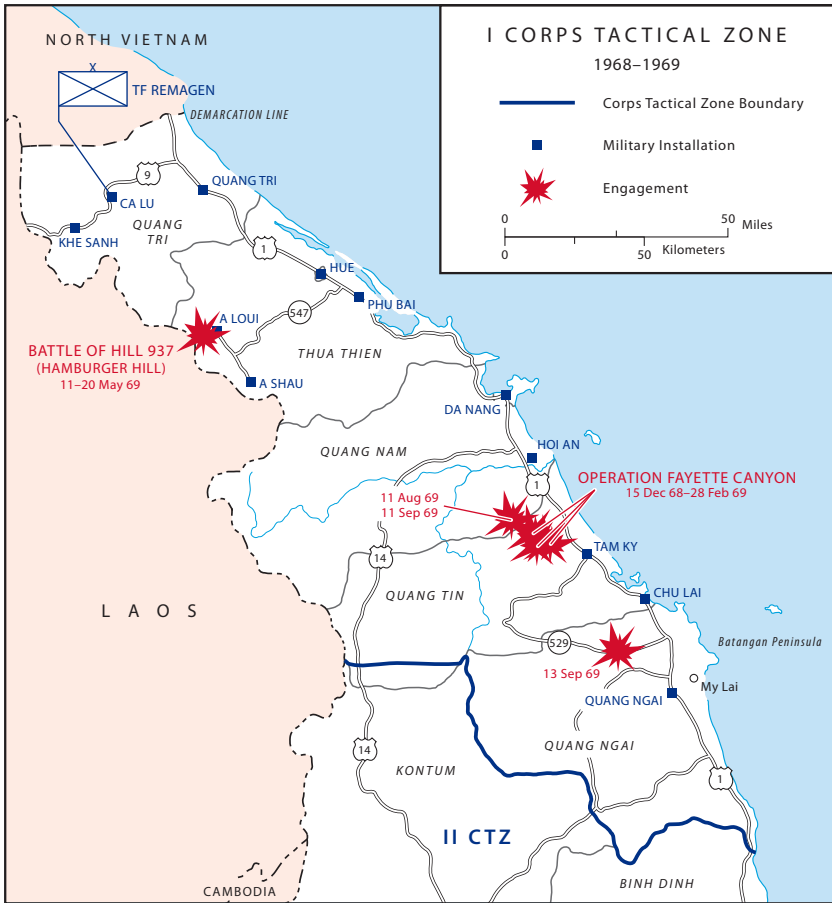
U.S. soldiers operate an armored personnel carrier equipped with a Vulcan antiaircraft gun. American troops used a Vulcan during an enemy ambush on Highway 13 in northern III Corps on 11 January 1969.



barbed wire that ringed the fortification. When it was over, thirty-three Viet Cong and two Americans were dead. The defeat seemed to dampen the enemy's spirit because he launched only a handful of serious attacks over the next few months.

American morale, on the other hand, received a boost when Maj. James N. "Nick" Rowe escaped from the Viet Cong on 31 December 1968 after five years of captivity. The Viet Cong had captured Rowe, a Special Forces intelligence officer, during an ambush in 1963. After multiple harsh interrogations, he had deceived his captors into thinking he was merely an engineer charged with civic action duties who lacked any valuable knowledge. The Viet Cong had nevertheless confined him to a small, bamboo cage in the southern Mekong Delta where he experienced torture and deprivation, in part to punish him for three unsuccessful escape attempts. When the guerrillas inadvertently learned that Rowe was an intelligence officer from American peace activists who expressed a desire to meet him, his captors became enraged at having been deceived and decided to execute him. He was being led to his execution when two U.S. helicopter gunships flying in support of a South Vietnamese ground operation appeared in the area. Rowe overpowered his guards, who had become distracted by the aircraft, and waved down the helicopters, which flew him to safety. The Army recognized his bravery during his captivity and escape by awarding him the Silver Star. He would later apply his experiences when designing the Army's Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape course. A lifelong counterinsurgent, Rowe would die in the line of duty as a colonel when Communist guerrillas assassinated him in the Philippines in 1989.

During the early months of 1969, Ewell kept up a frenetic pace of round-the-clock raids, ambushes, and patrols that, by the time Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS ended on 3 June 1969, had achieved impressive results. During the operation's six-month duration, the 9th Division reported killing 10,899 Viet Cong and capturing another 2,579. In the same period, 242 Americans had died, yielding an enemy to friendly kill ratio of 45:1. However, the claim strained credulity, given the fact that the normal ratio throughout South Vietnam was 3.5:1. Some speculated that many of the dead were civilians. Probably some civilians were killed, but the most likely explanation for the dubiously high casualty number was that units turned in inflated claims due to Ewell's well-known practice of measuring performance through "body counts." Whatever the



Map 7

truth, pacification statistics also soared behind the division's operational screen. The number of Viet Cong-controlled villages in four key provinces in which the division was most active fell from 117 in December 1968 to 66 by the end of March 1969. But here, too, the results were questionable, as CORDS officials reported that division operations antagonized the population through property destruction and intrusive behavior. It was an unfortunate fact of life both here and elsewhere in Vietnam that pacification could not succeed without security but that security could not be achieved without inflicting some adverse consequences on pacification.

Notwithstanding the controversy, in April Abrams promoted Ewell to become II Field Force's commanding general.

As the 9th Division combed the northern Mekong Delta, U.S. forces in I Corps divided their efforts among guarding the Demilitarized Zone that separated North from South Vietnam, securing populated areas through active patrolling, and harassing the enemy by interdicting his lines of supply and raiding his bases. Throughout the first few months of 1969, the 101st Airborne Division ran numerous operations, from brigade search-and-destroy missions to platoon patrols, all aimed at keeping enemy main force units away from the coast of Thua Thien Province and Hue, the country's second-largest city after Saigon. (*See Map 7.*)

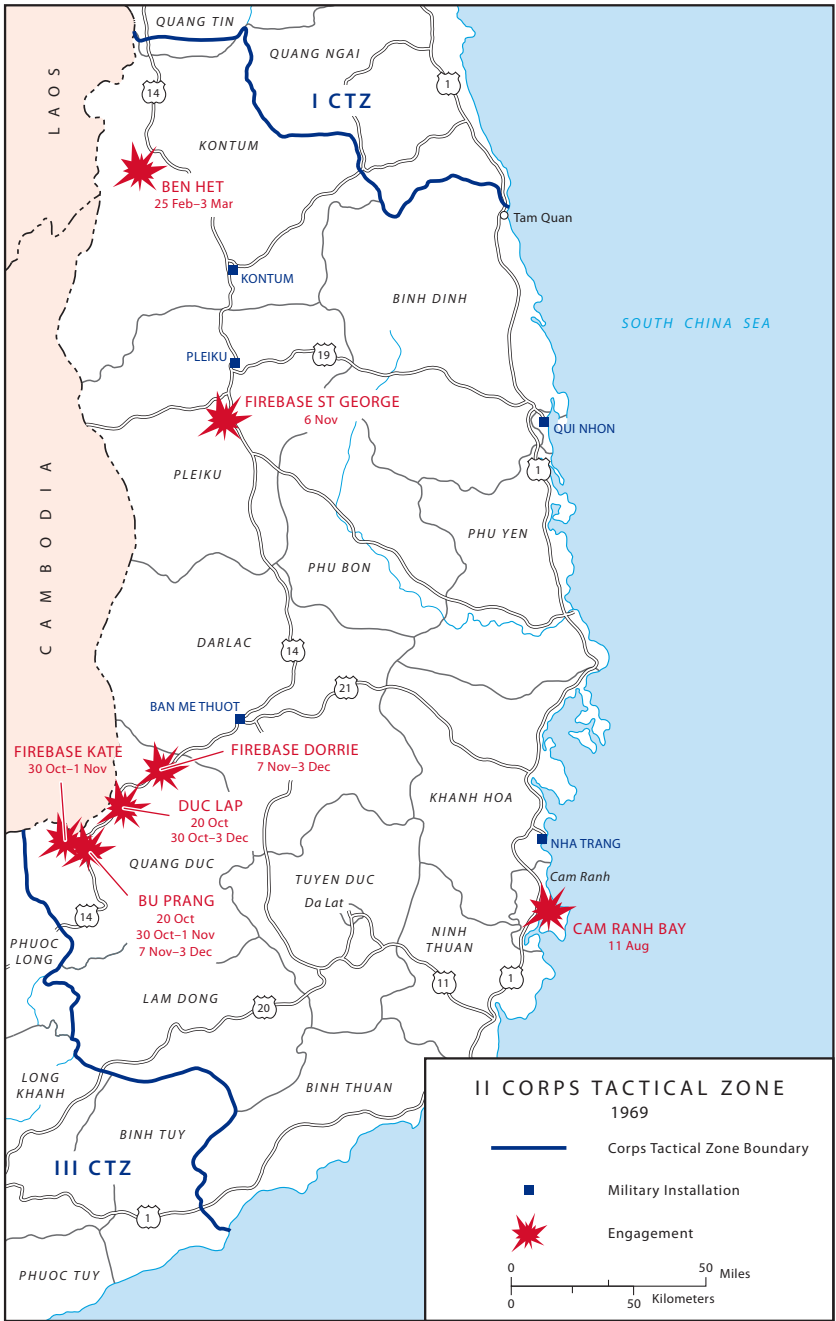
The Americal Division performed similar missions in the southern I Corps, penetrating enemy base areas in the western mountains and hunting guerrilla bands along the populated eastern coast. Its largest endeavor of the period was Operation FAYETTE CANYON, which aimed to disrupt enemy bases in southern Quang Tin Province while the 1st Marine Division undertook a parallel effort in the northern part of the province. The primary area of

General Abrams (left) addresses senior commanders in April 1969 during a change of command ceremony at II Field Force, Vietnam. At right foreground is Lt. Gen. Julian J. Ewell, the II Field Force incoming commander, while South Vietnamese Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, the commander of III Corps, is at center.



operations was a defile created by the Thu Bon River that wound its way eastward from the mountains to the South China Sea. Regular main force units thought to be living in what soldiers called the Antenna Valley included the *21st PAVN Regiment*, the Viet Cong *1st Main Force Regiment*, and an artillery battalion. Preliminary actions began in November 1968 as the Americal's 196th Infantry Brigade established several artillery firebases from which patrols and expeditions could emanate. FAYETTE CANYON got under way in earnest on 15 December, as elements of three battalions and a helicopter troop moved out behind five strikes made by Air Force B-52 Stratofortress strategic bombers. Contact was sparse. Either the enemy used the valley's rugged slopes and lush vegetation to evade contact, or he had departed before the operation had begun. Over the next two and a half months, the 196th Brigade scoured the region with little success. Because the brigade lacked airmobility to range far and wide over the rugged hills, its commander, Col. Frederick J. Kroesen, ordered "maximum use of artillery," but there was no way to know what effect the 8,067 rounds fired by the three batteries supporting the operation had on the enemy. By the time FAYETTE CANYON ended on 28 February 1969, the 196th Brigade reported having killed 238 North Vietnamese soldiers and 89 Viet Cong at a cost of 2 Americans dead and 17 wounded. Having failed to harm the enemy seriously, the brigade withdrew from the interior "to secure population centers and counter enemy attacks on the coastal plain," exactly what the operation was supposed to have prevented had it succeeded in pinning down the enemy in his base areas.

Farther south, in the center of the country, U.S. Special Forces and the 4th Infantry Division tried to screen II Corps' long, remote border with Laos and Cambodia. It was a daunting task given the vast distances, rugged terrain, and the lack of roads, with some posts accessible only by air. Fortunately, most of the region's population was clustered near the major cities—Kontum in Kontum Province, Pleiku in Pleiku Province, and Ban Me Thuot in Darlac Province—and the few roads that serviced them, making population security easier. Although sparsely populated, the Central Highlands was of great strategic significance since it offered a covered route by which enemy units based in Laos and Cambodia could advance toward the heavily populated central coast. Despite the onset of drier weather that the enemy traditionally used to launch attacks, he was unusually quiet during



Map 8

late 1968 and early 1969. The 4th Division nevertheless remained vigilant, working together with the South Vietnamese to make the enemy's task as difficult as possible. His failure during the winter to breach the screen of American posts in the west made life easier for the only other major U.S. formation in II Corps—the 173d Airborne Brigade. It spent the winter and spring dispersed along South Vietnam's central coast, helping South Vietnamese military and political forces secure the population during the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (*Map 8*).

Driving the intensity of U.S. activity across South Vietnam in early 1969 was Abrams' belief that the enemy would launch a major offensive around the time of the Tet holidays, just as he had done in 1968. Outgoing President Johnson had made the enemy's job easier in November 1968 when he had unilaterally suspended the bombing of North Vietnam in the hope of coaxing the Communists into serious negotiations. The Communists had taken advantage of the suspension by improving infiltration routes and by building a petroleum pipeline in the Demilitarized Zone. Troops and materiel had poured into South Vietnam during the following months, reinforcing Abrams' suspicions about a new Tet offensive and prompting him to launch spoiling actions throughout the winter. During the first forty days of 1969, aggressive allied actions captured large quantities of Communist weaponry.

Allied preemptive measures could not stop the enemy, but they greatly limited the impact of his offensive when it finally began in the early morning hours of 23 February. During the action that followed, the enemy struck over 125 major targets and 400 lesser ones. In many cases he eschewed ground assaults for bombardments delivered by mortars, artillery, and rockets. Two enemy divisions did attack logistical installations outside of Saigon, but the allies rebuffed these. Operations against Hue and other coastal cities in the northern part of the country proved stillborn, while in the Central Highlands, the Communists made only one significant thrust. In late February, the North Vietnamese began bombarding the Ben Het Special Forces camp, thirty-five kilometers northwest of Kontum City. They followed up in early March with several assaults involving the *66th PAVN Regiment* and a contingent of Russian-made PT-76 light tanks. Backed by elements of the 4th Infantry Division and U.S. aircraft, the camp weathered the challenge, although a desultory siege would continue for several more months.

Taken as a whole, the 1969 Tet offensive was a bust. Communist losses soared—from 27,400 dead in the last quarter of 1968 to nearly 45,000 in the first quarter of 1969—with very little to show for the sacrifice. General Abrams believed his strategy of launching spoiling attacks against enemy bases and supply routes had taken the wind out of the Communists' sails, thereby limiting the impact of the offensive. In the case of III Corps, the enemy's major target, Abrams particularly credited the 1st Cavalry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry for blunting the blow. Thanks to them, he said, the enemy "had to wrestle with us from the Cambodian border all the way down [toward Saigon]. They've [the 1st Cavalry Division] ridden him, taken his stuff away from him, and he's just had a hell of a time."

In fact, spoiling actions had been so successful that Abrams made them a centerpiece of post-Tet operations. Many of the largest of these missions during the first months of 1969 took place in I Corps, which was particularly vulnerable to infiltration due to its proximity to North Vietnam and Laos. The greatest threat came from Laos, which meant that U.S. forces had to move westward into the heavily forested Anamite Mountains if they were to effectively interfere with the enemy's ability to amass the supplies he needed to mount large-scale attacks. In late January, elements of the 3d Marine Division had begun operating along the Laotian border in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. In mid-March, the 1st Brigade, 5th Division, reinforced the effort by forming a heavily armored group called Task Force Remagen that advanced along Highway 9 from Ca Lu to the Khe Sanh plateau in western Quang Tri Province. It then turned south to interdict the border and screen the northern flank of the marines searching for enemy units and bases in the valleys to the southeast. Task Force REMAGEN roamed the area until the end of April, encountering light resistance.

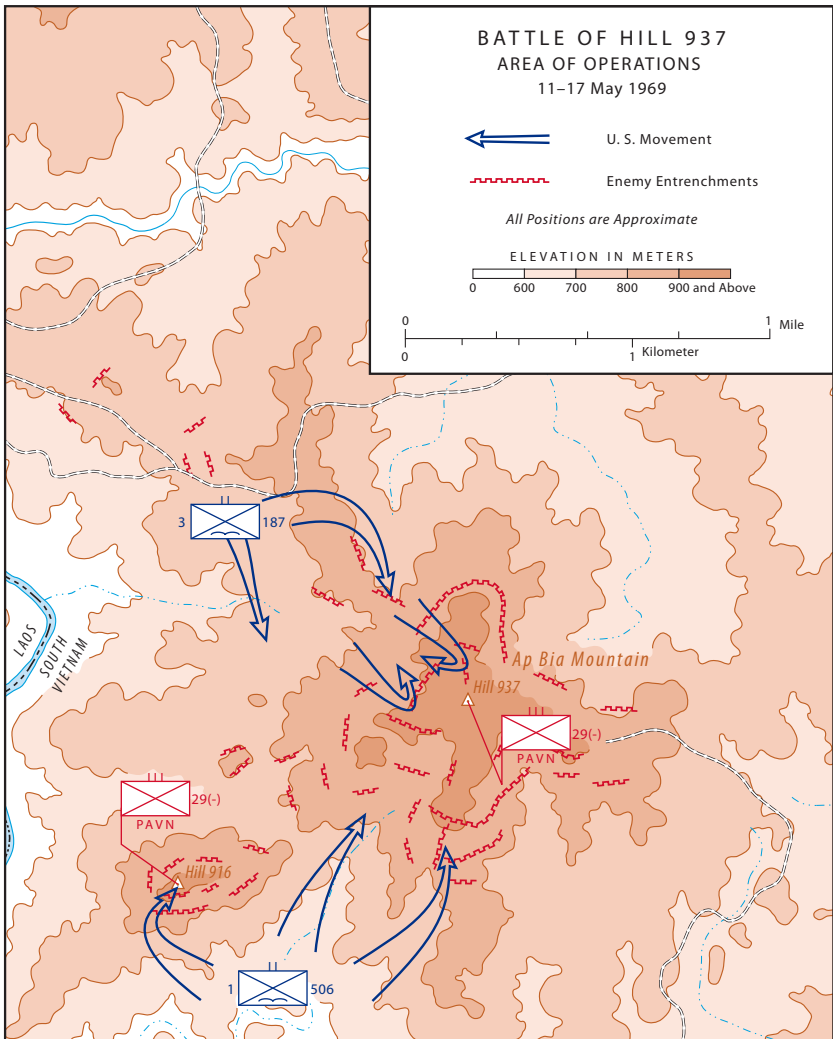
Meanwhile, reports of an enemy buildup in the A Shau Valley, one of the main avenues into South Vietnam in western Thua Thien Province, caused Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais' 101st Airborne Division to join the hunt. The allies had swept the rugged defile several times in previous years, but it was too remote to permanently control, and the enemy always returned from across the Laotian border after the Americans had left. Nor was it easy for the Americans to return. Each foray required an extensive engineering effort to build or restore the artillery firebases, landing zones, and



South Vietnamese soldiers carry one of their wounded during fighting near Bien Hoa in February 1969.

roads needed to keep the combat troops supplied and supported in the heavily forested interior.

Zais' paratroopers uncovered a number of logistical facilities in a series of operations conducted in February, March, and April, but rarely did the enemy choose to stand and fight. This changed on 11 May when the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, advanced on Ap Bia Mountain (Hill 937), a prominence near the Laotian border west of the A Shau Valley, where intelligence indicated a significant enemy presence (*Map 9*). The going was tough, as the soldiers pressed through bamboo thickets, triple-canopy jungle, and the occasional clearing choked with tall elephant grass. When Company B neared the abandoned village of A Luoi, gunfire erupted from camouflaged bunkers. The unit suffered three soldiers killed and nineteen wounded. The survivors withdrew, leaving the wounded where they fell. After a quick regrouping, the paratroopers dashed back to retrieve their comrades, but again Communist fire drove them off. The commander of the 3d Battalion, Lt. Col. Weldon F. Honeycutt, ordered Company B to make another assault. Under a curtain of supporting small-arms fire, the soldiers charged the bunkers, passing the bodies of their comrades as they went. By 1645, they had cleared the enemy from the hillside. Later that evening helicopters evacuated the wounded,



Map 9

but tragedy struck when a helicopter gunship accidentally fired on the battalion command post, killing one and wounding thirty-five.

The next morning, 12 May, the battalion pushed through more tall vegetation as it ascended the ridges that led toward Hill 937. Once again, fire from hidden bunkers limited the advance, and, as the battalion dug in for the night, artillery pounded the



M113 armored personnel carriers assigned to the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), cross the sixty-foot span of an armored vehicle launched bridge in the Khe Sanh area in June 1969.

enemy's positions farther up the mountainside. Perhaps to lessen pressure on the mountain, just before dawn on the thirteenth two North Vietnamese battalions stormed Firebase AIRBORNE, seven kilometers northeast of Ap Bia. Sappers penetrated the perimeter and ran through the compound, tossing explosives into bunkers. They destroyed one 105-mm. howitzer and badly damaged a 155-mm. piece, then moved toward an ammunition storage bunker. Grenades flew, and the bunker went up in a flash of fire. Ultimately, the defenders drove the North Vietnamese from the base, killing forty. But U.S. losses were also heavy—twenty-one dead and fifty-two wounded. Meanwhile, back on Ap Bia Mountain, Honeycutt's troopers spent the thirteenth working their way farther up the slopes while artillery and air strikes enveloped the higher elevations in smoke and flame. But the onslaught was not enough to silence the North Vietnamese, who kept up their fire, picking off the Americans as they moved.

At 0800, 14 May, Honeycutt ordered Companies B and C to attack the mountain from the west and Company D to attack from the north, supported by aircraft and artillery. Fifteen minutes later, Company C reported that it had moved into a bunker complex and that the North Vietnamese were fighting hard. The company's 3d Platoon almost reached the ridgetop but was forced to retreat.



Bridge under construction along Route 547

Company B was now exposed on both flanks, so Honeycutt ordered it to withdraw as well. When Company B returned to the rear, its commander reported that the ridgetop “was covered with blood, pieces of body, and enemy dead.” The fight for Hill 937 was becoming a meat grinder for both sides, leading the paratroopers to name it: Hamburger Hill.

It was more of the same the next day, 15 May. Following a massive barrage, Honeycutt’s Company C moved into a blocking position while Company A joined Companies B and D on the offensive. By early afternoon, the three companies were heavily engaged, the fighting made worse by mines the North Vietnamese had laid during the night. Company B suffered the most, with a half-dozen men wounded and killed during the day. Even the battalion headquarters came under attack. Several rocket-propelled grenades hit the command post, wounding several, including Honeycutt, but he refused evacuation and continued directing the fight.

Slowly but surely, the Americans pushed forward, using a 90-mm. recoilless rifle to neutralize bunkers near the hilltop. At 1400 on 15 May, the men of the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry,

were 150 meters from the summit when another friendly fire incident occurred. Cobra helicopter gunships accidentally loosed their rockets into Company B's command group, killing two and wounding fourteen, including the company commander.

Honeycutt was furious. He replaced the wounded commander and got the units moving again, and within an hour his paratroopers had moved another seventy-five meters up the mountain. "[T]he enemy was quite willing to let us get to the top of the hill," recalled 2d Lt. Franco J. Boccia, "because once we got up there we were in the open and they could fire at us from well-entrenched and concealed positions all around us." It certainly appeared as if Company A would make it to the top by nightfall, but Honeycutt was reluctant to risk leaving a single understrength company on the hilltop overnight. There was no choice but to order it back down the hill to the previous night's defensive positions.

Colonel Honeycutt had other reasons to be cautious. It seemed that he might be facing more than one battalion on Ap Bia Mountain. Many of the dead North Vietnamese had fresh haircuts, clean uniforms, and new weapons, which, according to one report, confirmed that "reinforcements were being slipped into the area, undoubtedly from across the Laotian border." Consequently, he decided not to launch another ground assault until Lt. Col. Robert J. Bower's 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, was in position to the south.

The 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry's march to Hill 937 on 16 May was not easy. Companies A and C, moving along separate routes, ran into machine guns firing from bunkers on Hill 916, about 1,000 meters southwest of Ap Bia Mountain. Despite artillery and air strikes, the enemy kept shooting. It was soon clear that Bower would not be able to join forces with Honeycutt by the morning of the seventeenth as planned. For the rest of the day, the two companies slugged it out with the enemy, traveling slowly along the ridge, taking casualties as they went.

In the meantime, Honeycutt made plans for the attack, now rescheduled for 18 May. The 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, would support his assault from the southwest behind a curtain of air strikes and tear gas. He issued flak jackets and extra ammunition to his men, although the extreme heat made wearing the body armor almost unbearable. For the rest of the day, the paratroopers sat and waited, and for the first time in a week they had no contact with the enemy.



Wounded soldiers receive treatment before medical evacuation during the Battle of Hamburger Hill in May 1969.

Not so for Colonel Bower's battalion, which faced even stiffer opposition as it advanced. Concentric rows of mutually supporting bunkers forced the battalion to move through killing fields with little cover. "The bunkers," said one officer, "had cover which would enable them to withstand some pretty strong air attacks and artillery fire. In addition the slopes were covered by a variety of claymore [mines], some of them quite large." With the help of gunships, artillery, and tear gas, Bower's paratroopers moved from bunker to bunker, clearing the enemy away. By nightfall of the seventeenth, they were in position to begin the attack on Hamburger Hill.

On the morning of 18 May, fighter planes streaked overhead, hammering the enemy. And once again they failed to crack the hardened bunkers. The thick jungle was now gone, leaving the mountaintop "completely bald," yet still the North Vietnamese poured heavy fire on anyone advancing up the hill.

The Americans started back up the mountain a little after 0800—the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, from the north and the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, from the south. Honeycutt's men met "intensive and withering" fire but were able to push on. The Company D commander yelled over the radio that the North

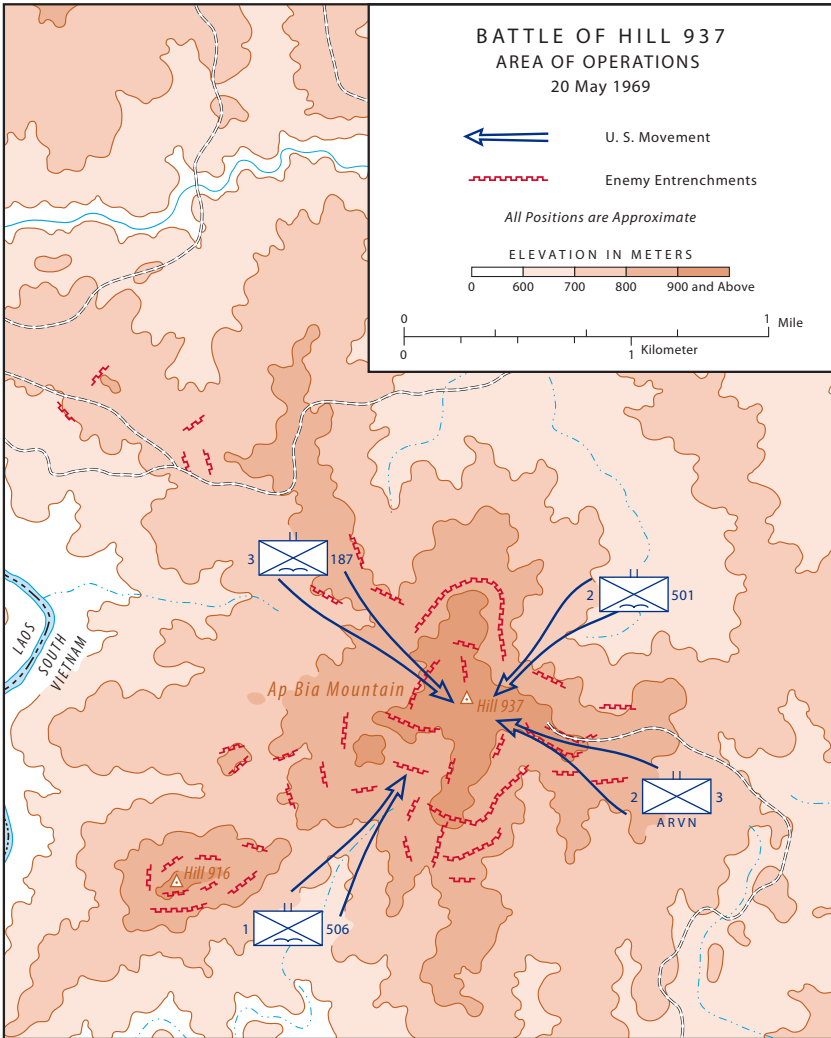
Vietnamese were “all around him,” but that his men were “shooting them up.” By noon, he and the other company officers were wounded. All three companies were forced to halt while gunships and artillery took over once more. To make matters worse, a torrential rain storm burst over the A Shau, turning Ap Bia’s now bare slopes into a mudslide. Casualties mounted—fourteen killed and sixty-four wounded—prompting the brigade commander to order the companies to pull back.

Colonel Bower’s men had it no easier. As mortar rounds rained on them, they fought their way, bunker by bunker. Company B reported taking fire from all sides and was able to move only 100 meters in five hours. By the time the unit set up a night defensive perimeter, it was still 600 meters from the crest of the hill.

Following the action closely from a helicopter above was General Zais, who now appeared to have two choices: call off the operation or press on. After some reflection he felt certain that his men could take the hill, if they were reinforced. That evening, he met with General Stilwell and the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Division, Maj. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong. All agreed that two additional battalions would turn the tide. General Truong volunteered his 2d Battalion, 3d Regiment, and Zais decided to use his 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry.

On 19 May, helicopters flew the South Vietnamese battalion to a landing zone 1,200 meters southeast of the mountain, from where it advanced to attack positions for the following day. The 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. Robert L. German, helicoptered in about 1,200 meters northeast of the hill. Meanwhile, on the mountain itself, the 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry, pushed upward, one company leapfrogging over another. By nightfall, it was within 200 meters of the summit. The 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, now reinforced with Company A, 2d Battalion, 506th Infantry, encountered much less resistance.

The next morning, 20 May, aircraft and artillery pounded the mountaintop as the Americans prepared to climb the slopes. At 1100, the 3d Battalion, 187th Infantry, moved out. At first there was no reaction from the enemy, but after several minutes mortar rounds, bullets, and rocket-propelled grenades filled the air. But fifty-five minutes later the paratroopers reached the top. Company A stepped onto the summit first, but there was no time to rest. The enemy fought fiercely, and it was not until every bunker was blown that the Americans finally forced him off the shattered hill.



Map 10

Honeycutt watched from his helicopter as the surviving North Vietnamese fled from the mountain, scurrying down draws and gullies while harried by jets overhead (Map 10).

After ten days of fighting, Ap Bia Mountain was in American hands. More importantly from the division's perspective, it had decimated the enemy. The official body count was 633 North

Vietnamese dead, while the Americans lost 70 dead and 372 wounded. General Zais was pleased with the results, although he regretted the cost in American lives. In the end, it was the enemy he was after, not the terrain. "The 29th North Vietnamese Army Regiment had been eliminated as a force to contend with at a later date," read one report.

But if MACV and the 101st Airborne Division were satisfied, others were dismayed. While the battle was not much different than countless other fights, circumstances made the engagement a volatile one. The Nixon administration had come into office promising peace, and to many people that meant avoiding bloody fights with the enemy. The spark that touched off the tinder was an Associated Press story by journalist Jay Sharbutt, who wrote of reluctant soldiers pushed onward by unrelenting officers. Senator Edward M. Kennedy used the story to denounce President Nixon's Vietnam policy as being "counter to our stated goals and intentions in Paris." He also condemned the Army's tactics, saying it was "senseless and irresponsible to continue to send our young men to their deaths to capture hills and positions that have no relation to ending the conflict."

General Zais was stunned. "These people are acting like this was a catastrophe for the U.S. troops," he told his officers. "This was a tremendous, gallant victory." But he was fighting a losing battle. Operations aimed at destroying the effectiveness of enemy units by killing as many soldiers as possible—a war of attrition—were no longer credible in the eyes of many Americans. The public was tired of seeing body bags. Abrams, who had rejected calls the previous year to reduce U.S. casualties, could no longer defy the mounting pressure. From now on, he and his subordinates would have to exercise greater restraint in undertaking actions that put Americans in harm's way. He nevertheless recognized Zais' achievements by promoting him to become the commander of XXIV Corps.

VIETNAMIZATION AND WITHDRAWAL

The new approach was not long in coming. On 14 May, three days into the battle for Hill 937, President Nixon told the American people, "We have ruled out attempting to impose a purely military solution on the battlefield. We have also ruled out either a one-sided withdrawal from Vietnam, or the acceptance in Paris of terms that would amount to a disguised defeat." Part of his



(Seated from left) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle G. Wheeler; Lt. Gen. Walter T. Kerwin, the commanding general of II Field Force, Vietnam; Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird; and General Creighton W. Abrams, the commanding general of MACV, receive a briefing from Roger McGuire, of CORDS Advisory Team 91, in Bien Hoa Village in March 1969.

plan was for a phased withdrawal of all U.S. and North Vietnamese combatants. To get the ball rolling, Nixon would take the first step, withdrawing some U.S. forces before North Vietnam agreed to remove any of its troops.

Deputy MACV commander General Andrew J. Goodpaster called the effort “de-Americanization,” but Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird preferred the more positive sounding “Vietnamization.” Shortly after the Battle of Hamburger Hill ended, President Nixon and South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu formally promulgated Vietnamization on 8 June in a meeting on the Pacific island of Midway. Vietnamization was designed to create South Vietnamese forces strong enough to defend the country with only a modicum of U.S. support. In theory, U.S. units would only be withdrawn to the degree that the South Vietnamese armed forces proved themselves capable of picking up the slack. Closely tied to the military initiative were political, social, and economic reforms that leaders hoped would turn South Vietnam into a more viable and democratic state. Such reforms, however, could not progress until security measures had significantly degraded the enemy’s clandestine presence among the population.

These realities, combined with the demand for fewer casualties, resulted in a greater emphasis on security, pacification support, and training missions. Major offensive operations would continue but would become more difficult as U.S. soldiers withdrew from the conflict. Those withdrawals were to start immediately.

At Midway, President Nixon announced that he would withdraw 25,000 U.S. troops from South Vietnam starting within thirty days. Further withdrawals would be made as the situation warranted. Believing that the United States needed to demonstrate that it was serious about seeking peace and requiring the South Vietnamese to assume more of the war's burdens, Laird insisted that this initial increment, labeled Phase I, be drawn mostly from frontline combat units. He left the selection of exactly which units to MACV.

General Abrams approached Vietnamization warily. When the Nixon administration had sent him in January to alert Thieu to the possibility that the United States might start withdrawing troops in 1969, he had told the South Vietnamese president that, in his opinion, "the time is [not] yet right for [a] withdrawal of major [American] combat units." Little had transpired in the first half of the year to make him change his mind, and he had argued throughout the spring against an early or substantial withdrawal. The administration rejected his counsel, opting for a 50,000-man reduction by year's end. Although he had lost the battle over the initiation of the withdrawal, his arguments had succeeded in limiting the size of Phase I and in postponing the decision on the timing of future increments.

It is important to note that the Vietnamization program announced at Midway was not designed to make South Vietnam entirely self-sufficient. In fact, General Abrams and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, believed that Vietnamization would fail if used for that purpose. President Thieu agreed. Essential to Vietnamization's success, therefore, were the presumptions that either U.S. negotiators at Paris would succeed in getting North Vietnam to remove the bulk of its military forces from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, or that the United States would remain in the fight, albeit to a lesser degree. Should these assumptions prove false, senior U.S. military leaders believed South Vietnam would be in grave jeopardy.

Hoping to secure as much aid as he could from the arrangement, Thieu requested that the United States allow a more rapid

buildup of Vietnamese forces and of U.S.-provided equipment than currently envisioned. Abrams successfully resisted the call for the rapid infusion of more U.S. heavy equipment on the grounds that the Vietnamese would have trouble absorbing it. Besides, since he believed some U.S. forces would still be necessary to secure the South even after Vietnamization was completed, it made sense for the United States to continue to provide and maintain the most sophisticated weapons. A more measured pace would serve the Vietnamese better.

In July, Abrams submitted a proposal that called for the United States to retain 275,000 troops in South Vietnam *after* the completion of the withdrawal in about two years' time. This "residual force," not unlike the contingent the United States continued to retain in Korea years after the 1953 armistice, would include eight combat brigades and twenty-eight artillery battalions backed by ample contingents of aircraft, helicopters, engineers, and logisticians. Whether Nixon, Laird, and, for that matter, the American people would permit such a hefty commitment was questionable. The request was another indication of the U.S. military's belief that South Vietnam would require substantial American support for the indefinite future.

President Nixon makes a surprise visit to troops in Di An near Saigon in July 1969 after a trip to Guam and a meeting with South Vietnamese President Thieu.



Because Secretary Laird had rejected Abrams' warning that "any significant reduction in current [U.S.] force levels will result in a significant decrease in combat capability," as well as a loss of bargaining position at Paris, the MACV commander had no choice but to orchestrate the drawdown as best he could. He tried to tailor the cuts so as to maintain "a balanced combat capability and as much capability for as long as possible." For Phase I, he decided to withdraw elements of the 3d Marine Division, the headquarters of the 9th Infantry Division, and two of the division's three brigades. The II Field Force commander, General Ewell, warned that the Vietnamese in IV Corps were not yet able to stand on their own without the 9th Division's support, but Abrams thought that the northern Delta was where he could best take the risk.

The president's special assistant for national security, Henry A. Kissinger, thought Abrams faced a thankless task, remarking that "he could not possibly achieve the victory that had eluded us at full strength while our forces were constantly dwindling." Abrams' only recourse was to press ahead with efforts to improve the South Vietnamese armed forces, both materially and in terms of skill, in the hope that the improvements would be sufficient to counterbalance the reduction of American combat power. Initially, MACV planners envisioned simply transferring equipment from departing U.S. units to equivalent South Vietnamese organizations, but the focus quickly changed to delivering new equipment from depot stocks. Still, unit-to-unit handovers occurred, particularly for artillery and engineer units, with the 18th and 20th Engineer Brigades handing over equipment on a massive scale beginning in June.

Along with the transfer of equipment and the delivery of new materiel, U.S. advisers and combat units actively assisted in the training of the South Vietnamese military. In January 1969, the 1st Logistical Command had initiated a new program titled Project BUDDY, an effort designed to prepare the South Vietnamese to assume greater logistical responsibilities through a formal program of on-the-job training. Later, MACV headquarters extended this program to all its subordinate commands. For example, South Vietnamese Army engineers gained valuable experience under Project BUDDY by working with associated U.S. Army engineer units. Between August and December 1969, two U.S. Army construction battalions worked closely with the South Vietnamese and encouraged them to assume more responsibilities, such as



As part of Project Buddy, a U.S. soldier supervises a South Vietnamese engineer as he operates a grader typical of the equipment transferred to the South Vietnamese military.

expanded minesweeping and road repair work. In time, South Vietnamese engineers became very proficient at repairing and building bridges. Similar improvements in capability were soon noticeable in other types of units, both combat and noncombat alike, but everyone acknowledged that the South Vietnamese were a long way from being self-sufficient.

MILITARY OPERATIONS, SUMMER–FALL 1969

Directives from the Nixon administration to reduce U.S. casualties mirrored those from officials in Hanoi, who also changed tactics in 1969 to lessen their losses. Their motivations, however, were different. The Communist armed forces were still recovering from the terrible defeats they had suffered in 1968, losses they could not sustain indefinitely if they hoped to prevail. Moreover, with the United States beginning to withdraw from the conflict, the Communists could afford to wait for the day when they could go head-to-head against the South Vietnamese alone. Although U.S. negotiators in Paris were insisting that the North Vietnamese withdraw as part of any peace deal, the Communists refused to countenance it. Kissinger openly worried that by making unilateral withdrawals the United States had undercut its own negotiating

position, but he could not dissuade President Nixon and Secretary Laird from moving ahead. With the United States creating the very situation for which the Communists hoped, the North Vietnamese decided they could afford to hold back most of their conventional forces, using the withdrawal period to rebuild, while keeping up pressure through guerrilla warfare, terrorism, bombardments made from a distance, and raids by specially trained teams of sappers. Such tactics reduced North Vietnamese losses while inflicting a continuous flow of casualties on the Americans that was both difficult for the allies to stop and politically damaging given the U.S. public's growing disenchantment with the conflict.

The combined impact of the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces, the enemy's penchant for attacking soft targets rather than tangling with U.S. combat formations, and the frontless, guerrilla nature of the conflict put soldiers who normally did not play a direct role in combat, such as clerks, logisticians, and construction troops, in the line of fire. Not only were these men and women critical for the smooth operation of the American war machine, but their deaths and injuries had just as much political impact on Americans at home as casualties suffered among the combat arms.

Engineers assigned to repairing roads and clearing them of mines and booby traps were always in jeopardy. The 19th Engineer Combat Battalion, for example, endured incessant harassment while working on Highway 1 in northern II Corps and southern I Corps. During the quarter ending 31 January 1969, for example, the battalion recorded 202 incidents, including small-arms and grenade attacks and mine explosions that killed 5, wounded 31, and damaged vehicles and equipment. Explosives also destroyed bridges and culverts, and enemy sappers and civilian laborers frequently cut trenches and built barricades along the roads. In reaction, the 19th and other engineer units formed their own infantry detachments to carry out security, reconnaissance, and even offensive missions around worksites and camps.

Noncombat commands, such as the 1st Logistical Command, likewise initiated crash training programs to prepare for combat contingencies. Too often, however, guards at supply depots were unqualified to operate the weapons they were issued. Meanwhile, transportation truck units frequently endured ambushes, as they offered lucrative targets at minimal risk. In II Corps, the most frequently ambushed route was Highway 19 between the coastal port city of Qui Nhon, Binh Dinh Province, and the Central

Highlands city of Pleiku. In III Corps, the enemy especially targeted the road network between the massive logistical facilities at Long Binh, Bien Hoa Province, to the east of Saigon; 25th Infantry Division camps at Dau Tieng, Binh Duong Province, to the north; and Tay Ninh City, Tay Ninh Province, to the west. Combat troops or military policemen offered some protection to convoys, but the policemen had too few V-100 armored cars to be everywhere. Helicopter gunships helped, but again it was impossible to overfly every convoy. Consequently, transportation units resorted to fitting armor plating to the sides of their vehicles and sandbagging the floors. They also created “gun trucks” equipped with heavier armor and weapons that included quadruple .50-caliber machine guns. The added security, while necessary, reduced hauling capacity, as every Army transportation group converted the equivalent of an entire truck company to gun trucks.

All of these adaptations enabled the Army to continue to perform many critical functions in an increasingly resource-constrained environment, but no place in Vietnam was ever entirely safe. This was demonstrated in August 1969, when enemy sappers attacked the rest and recuperation area at Cam Ranh Bay, Khanh Hoa Province, killing 2 Americans and wounding 198 others. The next day saboteurs detonated explosives at an English-language school operated by the U.S. Army near Saigon, killing twelve and wounding sixty-seven, including twenty-eight Americans.

But the Communists could not afford to simply ignore U.S. combat units, for this ceded too much initiative to the Americans. When they felt the situation favored them, when confronted by the threat of a significant setback, or when pressed against a wall, they would fight, as evidenced by the recent Battle for Hamburger Hill. Indeed, while that battle was unfolding in May 1969, the Communists were taking the offensive far to the south in III Corps.

The reason for the offensive lay in the effectiveness of allied operations. As one Communist history explained, by the late spring of 1969,

the enemy continued to successfully implement his plans of gaining control of the population and “pacifying” the area. He mounted counterattacks that recaptured most

of the liberated zones and areas we had seized during the previous offensives. His forces attacked and blocked our source of supplies from the great rear area [North Vietnam]. Our armed units suffered tremendous shortages of all types, and the lives of the troops became very difficult.

To rectify the situation, the Communists felt it was imperative to break the screen that U.S. units were maintaining north and west of Saigon. The target they chose was the city of Tay Ninh, the capital of Tay Ninh Province, located about ninety kilometers northwest of Saigon and within easy striking distance of Communist bases in Cambodia.

The enemy's initial target was Firebase CAROLYN, which sat astride one of his supply routes leading into South Vietnam. During the first few minutes of 6 May, a sentry from one of the two companies from the 1st Cavalry Division that manned the base detected movement near the perimeter wire and opened fire. For the next two hours rockets streaked toward the base. Then, at 0200, the bombardment increased dramatically. Two enemy battalions moved forward under the barrage, striking from three directions, penetrating the wire, and establishing a foothold inside the base.

The defenders called for support, which was provided by artillery at neighboring firebases and from helicopter gunships. The combined air and artillery fire halted a North Vietnamese attempt to reinforce their salient inside CAROLYN, and a counterattack by the defenders drove out the enemy, though not before he managed to blow up the ammunition storage bunker. By dawn the attack had waned, and at 0600 the *95C PAVN Regiment* broke contact and withdrew northward. The failed assault cost the Communists 198 killed and 31 captured, and they left behind dozens of assault rifles and 23 crew-served weapons.

The North Vietnamese defeat at Firebase CAROLYN did not end the offensive. Instead, the enemy intensified bombardments of other bases. The high point came between 12 and 14 May, just as the battle for Hamburger Hill was getting under way to the north, with coordinated ground assaults by elements of the *9th PLAF Division* on three firebases and a sapper attack against the 1st Cavalry Division's camp at Quan Loi, Binh Long Province, ninety-six kilometers north of Saigon. All were unsuccessful. At the same time, part of the *18B PAVN Regiment* ambushed truck convoys on

Route 26 near Cau Khoi, southeast of Tay Ninh City. By the last week in May, enemy action dwindled to almost nothing, and the gambit had cost the Communists over 500 men. The screen of U.S. bases had effectively cut the flow of men and supplies needed for the offensive and doomed it to failure.

During the rest of the summer, the 1st Cavalry Division continued to harry Communist units and bases. The enemy, however, had not abandoned his designs on Tay Ninh. This time, he chose to reach the city by tackling Firebase CROOK, a 25th Infantry Division post fourteen kilometers northwest of Tay Ninh City that, like CAROLYN, blocked a Communist supply route. Enclosed by three rings of barbed wire, Firebase CROOK was also equipped with remote sensors and radar and lay well within range of large caliber guns situated at several nearby installations. Inside the perimeter, Battery A, 7th Battalion, 11th Artillery, manned six 105-mm. howitzers, protected by Company B, 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, and the battalion's Headquarters Company.

On the evening of 5 June, CROOK's seismic sensors alerted the garrison to movement in the woods east and northwest of the camp, while radar detected the presence of small bodies of troops on all sides. Battery A opened fire, and the base's commander, Maj. Joseph E. Hacia, executive officer of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, requested artillery support. Enemy movement subsided until 0255 on 6 June, when a barrage of rockets, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortar shells—estimated at eighty rounds per minute for the first five minutes and fifty per minute for the next hour and a half—accompanied a battalion-strength infantry assault on the installation by the *272d PLAF Regiment*. Most of the rockets sailed over the base, but one mortar round killed a U.S. soldier. Small arms and artillery from inside the compound, aided by fire from neighboring firebases, stopped the infantry attack.

After sunrise, Company B sent a platoon through a gap in the wire to reconnoiter. It found about a dozen enemy soldiers in hiding who wounded four Americans with grenades. The platoon withdrew and called in artillery from a nearby firebase, as well as air strikes. Reconnaissance eventually revealed the bodies of seventy-six enemy. Meanwhile, Companies A and C of the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, arrived by helicopter about five kilometers north of Firebase CROOK and began a sweep toward the base. In the afternoon, they engaged a hostile force for about three hours.

Enemy activity at Firebase CROOK slackened during the day but resumed in the evening on the previous night's schedule. The base's radar detected small groups of men moving in the forest beginning at 2000 on 6 June and continuing into the early hours of the next morning. U.S. artillery, directed by heliborne observers as well as those at the camp, fired beehive rounds, each containing 8,000 flechettes. At 0255, 7 June, the Communists initiated a fierce bombardment on Firebase CROOK as two battalions advanced on the post. The force approaching from the northwest got inside the first line of barbed wire before the defenders shot it up, but the northeastern attackers never reached the perimeter. Sunrise revealed the bodies of 323 dead enemy soldiers.

That evening, at 2000, the time when the base's radar had begun to detect enemy movement on the previous two days, Major Hacia ordered a precautionary test firing of all weapons. The enemy responded with several 75-mm. recoilless rifle rounds and small-arms fire from all sides of the perimeter. Mortar rounds and rockets followed, and the Americans replied with artillery and automatic weapons for an hour and a half. The exchange marked the end of the battle.

The defense of Firebase CROOK had succeeded beyond expectations. In three days, the small garrison, aided by sensors and heliborne observers and overwhelming support from tactical air strikes, helicopter gunships, and artillery, had killed over 400 of perhaps 1,100 attackers. The defenders had lost one dead and seven wounded. Careful construction of the base, excellent training, and the advanced technology that characterized the American approach to the war had achieved their purpose.

While part of the *9th PLAF Division* attacked Firebase CROOK, the rest of the division had moved against Tay Ninh City, where, allied intelligence sources said, the National Liberation Front hoped to establish a capital for its newly organized Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Vietnam. Attempts to counter the offensive began soon after dawn on 5 June, when Companies C and D of the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, found the *271st PLAF Regiment* in Renegade Woods, fifteen kilometers south of the city, and called in air strikes. The Americans killed forty-five of the enemy while suffering four killed and fourteen wounded.

The next day, 6 June, the enemy struck at six sites in and around Tay Ninh City. South Vietnamese and U.S. troops rebuffed the enemy in a series of battles that lasted through 9 June. A



Firebase WASHINGTON, one of the firebases of the 25th Infantry Division near Cu Chi, northwest of Saigon, is shown in an aerial photo in August 1969.

ten-day lull ensued until the wee hours of 19 June, when the enemy made yet another attempt on Tay Ninh. A heavy mortar barrage and machine-gun fire covered the advance of North Vietnamese sappers on Firebase WASHINGTON, northwest of the city. The sappers broke through two rows of barbed wire before fire from the defenders, helicopter gunships, and nearby artillery batteries stopped them. Shortly before dawn, South Vietnamese paratroopers engaged a battalion of the *88th PAVN Regiment* east of Tay Ninh. U.S. soldiers from Company C, 4th Battalion, 23d Infantry, lent a hand, and together the allies drove the foe from the city. Meanwhile, South Vietnamese marines and elements of the U.S. 25th Division engaged in several battles south and west of town. By dusk several hundred enemy soldiers were dead, bringing the offensive in Tay Ninh Province to closure.

As the summer rains descended, three U.S. Army units—the 25th Infantry Division, 1st Cavalry Division, and 1st Infantry Division—continued to guard the western and northern approaches to Saigon with fair success. Along with allied units posted to the east of the city, including the 199th Infantry Brigade, and the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, to the south, they spent their time skirmishing with guerrillas, probing enemy base areas,

interdicting known supply routes, and patrolling the countryside. To help improve the South Vietnamese military, all U.S. units conducted combined operations and assisted in the training of South Vietnamese regular and territorial forces. U.S. troops also continued to run operations to secure the region's agricultural bounty and to destroy Communist caches. In this they had great success, for as a captured document conceded: "The situation in this area is extremely tense, since practically every unit down here has been stricken by hunger. [T]o purchase rice is a matter of life or death."

The absence of major battles did not mean that service in III Corps was any less dangerous. During the summer of 1969, one man received two Silver Star awards for bravery, but they were not his first. In January 1968, Clyde L. Bonnelycke had received a Silver Star while serving as a marine during the Tet offensive. After reenlisting in the Army, S. Sgt. Bonnelycke found himself back in Vietnam in July 1969 with Company D, 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry. On the thirteenth, the enemy ambushed his platoon during an operation in Tay Ninh Province, wounding several soldiers. Bonnelycke picked up a wounded man's machine gun and laid a base of fire that allowed his men to counterattack. He kept firing until running out of ammunition, then silenced an enemy bunker using hand grenades. These actions resulted in Bonnelycke receiving his second Silver Star. One month later, on 12 August, the post at which he was staying came under an intense bombardment. He left the safety of his bunker to rescue wounded soldiers, then ran to the perimeter to lay down suppressive fire on the enemy with a machine gun. When that weapon ran out of ammunition, he obtained a second one and continued to fight while wounded, exhibiting gallantry that resulted in yet a third Silver Star.

Actions by men like Sergeant Bonnelycke contributed to the allies' success in keeping Saigon and its environs relatively secure during the summer and fall of 1969. Yet the cordon that ringed the capital lost some of its elasticity due to the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Division from northern IV Corps. The division's departure began in July, and by the end of August, all but the division's 3d Brigade, which remained as an independent unit, had left Vietnam.

The first withdrawal of a major U.S. combat formation created challenges that would soon become familiar over the next two

years. One of these was to keep some semblance of pressure on the enemy. The 9th Division continued to run patrols even as it stood down, but these became increasingly tied to camp security. The units then moved to the Mobile Riverine Force's main base at Dong Tam, Dinh Tuong Province, where they billeted aboard barracks ships. Tactical coordination with the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division, which operated in the same region and with whom the Americans had a long relationship, took place without difficulty. But it was impossible to expect the South Vietnamese to maintain the same amount of pressure with one division as the allies had been able to do with two. As the 9th Division's operations drew to a close, engineering activities also phased out, although projects relating to pacification or civic action continued to completion.

Leaving Dong Tam marked the first major disposal of real property in the war and foreshadowed problems with future base transfers. An inventory of the base reported 1,001 buildings and facilities valued at \$9.2 million. Service troops shipped home some items, such as air conditioners, lighting fixtures, and ceiling fans. Some damage occurred as departing Americans and arriving Vietnamese looted the facilities. Bureaucratic snafus

The Dong Tam base in the Mekong Delta is shown in an aerial photo. Completed in late 1968, the base was the first major real property to be transferred to the South Vietnamese military and foreshadowed problems with future base transfers.



and Vietnamese lethargy delayed the final transfer of the base to South Vietnam by nearly two months, to late October. In an effort to ensure that the Vietnamese could maintain the facilities, the 9th Division and U.S. contractors set up a number of training programs.

A similar process occurred elsewhere. In October, the Army transferred BLACKHORSE, the former base camp of the 11th Armored Cavalry located sixty-four kilometers east of Saigon, to the South Vietnamese 18th Division. No significant damage took place at the 700-acre installation valued at \$1.9 million. Then, in December, the departing 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, either dismantled or turned over to the Vietnamese its camps in III Corps. But the reshuffling caused by the withdrawals also resulted in some gains for the Army. Thus, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), inherited the departing 3d Marine Division's base at Quang Tri City, Quang Tri Province, while elements of the 1st Cavalry Division moved into quarters formerly belonging to the Philippine Civic Action Group at Tay Ninh.

The 11th Armored Cavalry continued operations around Saigon such as this minesweeping team clearing the way for M551 Sheridan tanks. The Sheridan was a light amphibious tracked vehicle designed as an antitank vehicle for airborne forces and had more firepower than the armored cavalry assault vehicle. The Sheridan began arriving in Vietnam in early 1969.





A U.S. soldier with the 101st Airborne Division views a bunker while on patrol east of Tam Ky in northern I Corps in June 1969.

Because U.S. forces were already stretched thin, General Abrams did not require any major drawdown from units in II Corps during 1969. In the Central Highlands, Lt. Gen. Charles A. Corcoran, who had taken over command of I Field Force from General Peers in March, continued his predecessor's program of screening the border, harassing Communist lines of supply, and working to improve South Vietnamese forces through combined operations, training teams, and buddy programs. Generally the enemy was quiet, but in the fall U.S. intelligence detected troop movements from Cambodia into the southern Highlands—two North Vietnamese infantry regiments, the *28th* and *66th*, each with a strength of about 1,800 men, along with the *40th PAVN Artillery Regiment* and the *K-37 Sapper Battalion*. The move was a major one considering how little action had occurred in the region through most of the year. Their targets appeared to be Bu Prang and Duc Lap, two Special Forces camps guarding valleys that the Communists used to infiltrate the area with men and materiel from Cambodia.

On 20 October, the *66th Regiment* and the *33d Battalion, 40th Artillery Regiment*, moved toward Bu Prang in the south-

western corner of Quang Duc Province, while the *28th Regiment* and other elements of the *40th Artillery Regiment*, spearheaded by the *K-37 Sapper Battalion*, moved on Duc Lap forty-five kilometers to the northeast.

At Bu Prang, Capt. William L. Palmer's twelve-man Special Forces Detachment A-236 and 336 Montagnard irregulars defended the camp, which included several satellite fire support bases whose guns were manned by U.S. artillerymen. On 30 October, an enemy battalion attacked Firebase KATE, nine kilometers east of Bu Prang, but the timely arrival of U.S. helicopter gunships drove it off. The attackers then initiated a siege, digging trenches ever closer to the base.

South Vietnamese troops from the 23d Division tried to pry the enemy away from Firebase KATE, but to no avail. On 1 November, a heavy North Vietnamese barrage knocked out all of the base's artillery. Ground assaults from the south, east, and west followed. All were beaten back, but that afternoon the allies decided to evacuate KATE as well as two other firebases.

Under the watchful eye of U.S. aircraft, KATE's defenders left at 1630, quickly linking up with two companies from the South Vietnamese 5th Mobile Strike Force Battalion, which had moved in to act as an escort. The force then marched north and met the 1st Battalion, 2d Mobile Strike Force, which had air assaulted in to add further protection. By noon the following day, KATE's weary contingent of more than a hundred men reached Bu Prang, where it joined the garrison. Troops from the other two firebases began their evacuations on 2 November, with helicopters airlifting their artillery to Bu Prang and Ban Me Thuot. After the evacuation of the firebases, the South Vietnamese fell into a defensive shell. U.S. advisers concluded that this "defensive attitude" made it impossible for the base to do more than await its fate at the hands of the North Vietnamese.

The situation was much the same at Duc Lap, located on two hilltops overlooking a broad plateau that extended to the Cambodian border. U.S. Army Special Forces Detachment A-239 and more than 200 Montagnard irregulars manned the post. Four artillery firebases—DORRIE, HELEN, MIKE SMITH, and VOLCANO—provided support, but as was the case at Bu Prang, the arrangement was not enough to prevent the enemy from making a concerted attack. In three separate engagements between 30 October and 2 November, Montagnard irregulars and soldiers

from the South Vietnamese 53d Regiment, the 22d Ranger Battalion, and the 3d Squadron, 8th Armored Cavalry, drove the enemy away from Duc Lap with heavy casualties. For the next few days, at least, the enemy limited his activity to a desultory bombardment.

On 3 November, two South Vietnamese ranger companies flew to Firebase HELEN, where they joined in a search for two American helicopter pilots who had been shot down the previous day. Enemy troops pinned down the rangers, forcing the South Vietnamese 23d Division to send reinforcements to bail them out. The North Vietnamese struck the relief force as well, and through the night and all of the following day the South Vietnamese were heavily engaged. On 5 November, the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 45th Regiment, added its weight to the battle, and the enemy attack ground to a standstill.

To support the South Vietnamese, I Field Force ordered more artillery to the area. On the morning of the fifth, two 155-mm. howitzers from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 92d Artillery, were helicoptered in from Ban Me Thuot to Firebase DORRIE, located on Highway 14 east of the Special Forces camp. Two days later, on 7 November, the enemy converged on the base as well as on VOLCANO. Both bases held their own. For the next ten days, combat was equally distributed between the vicinities of Bu Prang and Duc Lap. The North Vietnamese bombardment of Bu Prang rose in tempo, and between 16 and 18 November the defenders endured the heaviest shelling of the siege. On the seventeenth, the South Vietnamese 1st Battalion, 47th Infantry, sweeping the jungle two miles east of the camp, bumped into an enemy battalion in a fight that lasted for several hours. Artillery from Bu Prang and air strikes killed 243 North Vietnamese soldiers, while the South Vietnamese suffered 11 wounded.

As far as I Field Force was concerned, the only way to break the siege at Bu Prang was to apply additional airpower, but restrictive rules of engagement imposed by officials in Washington made this difficult. These rules banned the use of heavy firepower, not only inside Cambodia, but within Vietnam in areas near the border. As General Corcoran complained, "Tactical air and artillery cannot be placed on possible or even known enemy positions unless the actual gun positions have been identified and a tactical emergency declared." The I Field Force commander told Abrams that the procedure "causes unnecessary delays in

engaging targets and has resulted in additional casualties and a lowered morale at Bu Prang.”

Abrams agreed with his subordinate’s concerns. In a message on 1 December to the commander in chief of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, he urged “that I be given operational authority to conduct ARC LIGHT [B-52 Stratofortress strategic bomber] strikes within the disputed area.” Enemy attacks in the vicinity of Bu Prang had “mounted steadily” in the past few weeks, and the Communists were clearly taking advantage of the limitations placed on U.S. airpower. For example, noted Abrams, one 120-mm. mortar position was “located almost precisely in the center of one of the ARC LIGHT target boxes disapproved” by Washington. In order to gain the upper hand, argued the MACV commander, “I consider it necessary to deny the enemy the use of his privileged sanctuary from which he is mounting his attacks on the Bu Prang Special Forces camp.”

Changes in the rules were slow in coming, and the North Vietnamese barrage gradually ground down the defenders. On 2 December, Corcoran reported that “the situation within the Bu Prang camp is gradually deteriorating due to continuous indirect fire attacks.” Over the past five days, almost 700 artillery and mortar rounds had fallen within the perimeter, and I Field Force worried that “the morale of the [irregulars] is going down.” Twelve Montagnards and two American Special Forces soldiers had been killed during this time, and fifty-seven, ten of them Americans, had suffered wounds. Corcoran feared the worst, telling Abrams, “If the enemy has the capability and is permitted to maintain his resupply unimpeded in the disputed area and to continue to shell the camp, in the long term [he] may be able to destroy Bu Prang without resorting to a ground attack.”

After much beseeching, the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved two successive nights of B-52 strikes against the enemy. Beginning on the early morning of 3 December, the strategic bombers pounded five separate targets in the previously off-limits area west of Bu Prang. A second raid followed the next night. Although it was impossible to tell how effective the strikes had been, the North Vietnamese soon broke off the sieges of both Bu Prang and Duc Lap. Ultimately, airpower had played a critical role in their defense. Over a period of sixty days, U.S. tactical aircraft had made 1,309 sorties in support of the two Special Forces camps, while B-52 bombers had undertaken 87 missions. Altogether, U.S.

aircraft had dropped 30 million pounds of bombs. Artillery had also played a large role, lobbing 20,000 rounds of 105-mm. and 155-mm. ammunition and 1,100 175-mm. and 8-inch shells at the enemy between 28 October and 10 December. Here, as well as at many other battlefields during the course of the war, the heavy application of firepower provided by planes, helicopter gunships, artillery, and offshore warships often made the difference between victory and defeat.

Yet it was only a matter of time before the North Vietnamese tried again, so in late December, the allies razed Bu Prang and began rebuilding it in a more defensible location eighteen kilometers to the southeast. Constructed by the 19th Engineer Battalion, the new facility, dubbed “the ultimate Special Forces fighting camp,” was sited on a prominent hilltop and built almost completely underground. Monsoon rains delayed construction, however, and the new base was not completed until November 1970, at which time the United States turned it over to South Vietnam. Duc Lap remained in place until December 1970 when it, too, came under control of the South Vietnamese.

Apart from the battles at Duc Lap and Bu Prang, and a 6 November sapper attack on Firebase ST. GEORGE, thirty-five kilometers south of Pleiku City, that left nine Americans dead and twenty-four wounded, the Highlands were relatively quiet in late 1969. The situation allowed the 4th Infantry Division to transfer some of its units away from the border to the piedmont and coastal lowland sections of II Corps. The division’s 2d Brigade moved to Binh Dinh Province in September, followed by the 1st Brigade in December. This left just the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, together with U.S. Army Special Forces, artillery, and aviation troops to assist the South Vietnamese in holding the vast Highlands. Meanwhile, the rest of the 4th Division helped other U.S., South Korean, and South Vietnamese forces in shielding II Corps’ most populated areas from local guerrillas and the occasional main force threat. Central to this effort was the U.S. Army’s 173d Airborne Brigade, which, since April 1969, had been devoted to an intense pacification support mission called Operation WASHINGTON GREEN.

Binh Dinh was one of the most populous and poorest provinces in South Vietnam, and since the days of the anticolonial war against the French, it had been one of the Communists’ strongest bastions. After repeated attempts to wrest it from the enemy had yielded modest results, Abrams ordered the 173d Brigade to try its

hand at pacifying the province's northern districts. The plan called for the brigade to break down into platoon-sized packets that would guard roads and installations, saturate inhabited areas with day and night patrols, attack the enemy's clandestine infrastructure, and work closely with the territorials and militia through combined operations and training programs. The troops would live and work in close proximity to hamlets to lend maximum support to the South Vietnamese government's pacification activities. "If this thing works," declared General Abrams, "we are going to do it throughout the Army."

Operation WASHINGTON GREEN scored many successes during the remainder of 1969. Security from hostile military action improved, the combined result of U.S. activity and the fact that Viet Cong military forces rarely operated in groups larger than a squad and almost always tried to avoid contact. Scores registered by the Hamlet Evaluation System, the primary means by which MACV measured pacification progress, rose noticeably. In fact, the number of people living in Communist-controlled communities plummeted to just 1,300, while the system reported that 90 percent of the province's rural population was now "relatively secure" and living under some degree of government control. The size, armament, and ability of the Regional, Popular, and People's Self-Defense Forces increased, while Communist morale declined. The allies were also moderately successful in sweeping up cadre of the enemy's clandestine governing apparatus. U.S. officials touted the operation's success and vowed to continue it in the new year. Even the enemy acknowledged the change in fortunes. In November, a Communist official reported that "the enemy pacification elements scored many successes." In another document, the Communists acknowledged that the

presence of U.S. and Regional Forces troops in the hamlet areas are making it difficult to procure rice and supporters will not rally. Sympathizers are dwindling and popular support is at an all-time low. The mountains are no longer a sanctuary. The U.S. and Regional Forces 62 troops are penetrating and locating base camps in the Tiger Mountains by use of squad and platoon reconnaissance in force. U.S. troops choose to fight under all circumstances, and will insanely pursue us into the mountains.

Operation WASHINGTON GREEN was working. But there were plenty of obstacles ahead. To date, South Vietnamese authorities had enjoyed only modest success at establishing sound local administration, let alone popular government. Competent, dynamic leadership was rare. If local security forces had improved, performance still varied widely, and generally speaking, they remained dependent on the United States. This was not a good sign for Vietnamization, a program whose achievements depended on fostering autonomy. Last but not least, WASHINGTON GREEN's accomplishments had gotten the attention of Communist leaders, and they were determined to do something about that.

Allied gains notwithstanding, the enemy's clandestine network still existed and continued to wield influence over much of the province's population. The enemy used its clandestine presence, along with guerrillas and sappers, to launch a major terror campaign that the allies found impossible to stop. During 1969, the Communists initiated more terrorist incidents in Binh Dinh than in all but one of the country's forty-four provinces. They assassinated 570 people, injured 535, and kidnapped another 373. The murders, kidnappings, and acts of random violence had a disproportional impact. They eroded civilian confidence in the government and intimidated local officials, making it exceedingly hard either to establish effective government or to persuade the population to actively support the allies. To make matters worse, during the fall of 1969, the *3d PAVN Division* moved into Binh Dinh Province for the specific purpose of undermining the pacification program. The shift had an immediate and adverse effect. The I Field Force responded to the threat by relocating two of the 4th Division's brigades from the Highlands to Binh Dinh. The deployment meant that the 173d Airborne Brigade could continue its highly dispersed and hence vulnerable pacification-oriented mission under the protection of the newly arrived troops, but it correspondingly weakened the allies' position in the Central Highlands. Moreover, the reinforcement was not enough. Although the Americans easily rebuffed a few small-scale attacks in October and November, by December, the commander of the 173d Airborne Brigade, Brig. Gen. Hubert S. Cunningham, felt compelled to withdraw one of his battalions from pacification work to boost the conventional defense of the province. Even without winning battles, the mere presence of the *3d PAVN Division* encouraged local Communists and cowed South Vietnamese officials. The implications for the

future were stark, especially because the 4th Infantry Division was slated to return to the United States in the following year.

For the present, however, allied officials were encouraged by what had transpired in Binh Dinh, and they felt fairly good about what was happening to the north, in I Corps, as well. Under the supervision of the new commander of III Marine Amphibious Force, Lt. Gen. Herman Nickerson Jr., U.S. combat units kept up the pressure on the enemy throughout the summer and fall by raiding his bases and by helping to secure the rice harvest. In June, the 101st Airborne Division completed its conversion to an airmobile configuration, making it even more lethal than before. Like most other U.S. formations, the division ran a myriad of small patrols, ambushes, and heliborne raids of company and battalion-size, but just because the majority of these operations were small in size did not mean that they were any less dangerous.

On 13 July, one element of the 101st Airborne Division—Company B, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry—was moving along a ridgeline in Thua Thien Province to attack a fortified position that had pinned down an adjoining company. Suddenly, from a nearby hill, the North Vietnamese unleashed heavy fire that stopped the

General Abrams (right) greets South Vietnamese Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, the commander of I Corps, as U.S. Marine Corps General Nickerson, the commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force, looks on in June 1969.



unit in its tracks. Sp4c. Gordon R. Roberts, a rifleman who had received a Silver Star at Hamburger Hill, crawled through the grass toward the nearest emplacement. He then jumped to his feet and, with rifle blazing, headed straight into the enemy's fire. He killed two gunners and, after pausing to load a fresh magazine in his M16 rifle, advanced on a second bunker. When enemy fire knocked the weapon from his hands, he picked up an M16 dropped by a comrade and continued his assault, killing the crew at the bunker with rifle fire before eliminating a third position with an accurate grenade toss. By then, he was cut off from his platoon, but he continued forward, knocking out a fourth enemy position. He then helped move wounded men while under fire to an evacuation area. The following year, President Nixon draped the Medal of Honor around Roberts' neck for his actions that day.

A week after Roberts' display of bravery, another 101st Airborne Division trooper, S. Sgt. John A. Gertsch, assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, distinguished himself when the division once again raided the A Chau Valley. When hostile fire seriously wounded his platoon leader, Gertsch dragged the fallen lieutenant to safety. He then took command of the platoon and forced the enemy to withdraw. In another action, when the North Vietnamese attacked part of the platoon, Gertsch charged, scattering the enemy and rescuing two wounded men. Eventually during the operation Gertsch was wounded, but he continued to lead his men and, when he saw a wounded man and a medic in jeopardy, he moved forward once again, gaining time for the two to escape before enemy fire cut him down. The U.S. government recognized Sergeant Gertsch's valor by posthumously awarding him the Medal of Honor.

As the 101st Airborne Division scoured Thua Thien Province, farther south the Americal Division worked to improve security along I Corps' southern coast. Throughout the summer and fall, Maj. Gen. Lloyd B. Ramsey, who had taken command of the division in June, continued long-standing search-and-destroy operations in the coastal hills to prevent Communist conventional units from descending into the lowlands to disrupt pacification. Because the enemy usually avoided contact, few major engagements resulted from these operations. Then, in late July, the division's 198th Infantry Brigade (Light) joined with U.S. marines and South Vietnamese forces to comb Quang Ngai Province's Batangan Peninsula, a longtime Communist stronghold. The

operation weakened, but did not eliminate, the enemy's deeply rooted presence in the area.

The following month, the enemy launched a rare offensive in the Americal sector. The target was Firebase WEST, a post located on Liet Kiem Mountain, thirty-two kilometers west of Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province. The base dominated the high ground at a key point where the Hiep Duc, Que Son, and Nui Loc Son Valleys converged, and little could pass by unnoticed by the hilltop garrison. Companies A and E, 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry, 196th Infantry Brigade, and three 155-mm. howitzers from Battery C, 16th Artillery, made West their home. Two other nearby bases—CENTER and SIBERIA—provided additional artillery support.

Late at night on 11 August, ground radar picked up movement to the north of Firebase WEST, and soon sentries saw movement on the slopes below. An inaccurate mortar barrage broke the silence. Only one round landed inside the base, killing one American and wounding three others. As soon as the barrage lifted, about 200 soldiers from the *31st PAVN Regiment* rushed toward the wire but without firing their weapons. The Americans shattered the eerie silence by firing everything they had at the attackers, including howitzers at Firebases CENTER and SIBERIA. These two posts fired more than 1,700 rounds throughout the night and into the early daylight hours. The result was devastating. Not a single enemy soldier made it into the perimeter, and in the morning, troops found fifty-eight dead—fully one-quarter of the attacking force—and dozens of weapons, including bangalore torpedoes and twenty-pound shaped charges.

The enemy was not finished, however. The Hiep Duc Valley was a crucial infiltration route, and the Communists could not allow the Americans to remain unmolested. A month later, during the early hours of 11 September, they zeroed in on Siberia, the westernmost base in the 196th Brigade's area of operations. Located about eight kilometers west of Landing Zone WEST near the banks of the Tranh River, SIBERIA found itself the target of a battalion from the *60th Battalion, 1st PLAF Regiment*—part of the *2d PAVN Division*. As one company attacked from the west, another stormed up the north slope using flamethrowers and rocket-propelled grenades. Within minutes of the assault, artillery from Landing Zone WEST rained down on the attackers, and within the hour, an AC-119G Shadow gunship arrived above the

base and sprayed minigun fire on the attackers. Enemy machine guns forced the plane to depart, but air strikes soon destroyed the machine-gun emplacements and the gunship returned.

Despite the suppressing fire, the enemy made it to the perimeter. Sappers cut through the wire, throwing satchel charges and firing rocket-propelled grenades. At least one Communist soldier managed to use his flamethrower against one of the bunkers, killing one American and wounding another two. But determined fire from the defenders, plus artillery support, drove back the attackers, and by 0315, only recoilless rifle fire and a few mortar rounds were hitting the base.

At about the same time, the enemy struck Hiep Duc town, only recently repopulated by the South Vietnamese government as part of the pacification effort. The Communists targeted a couple of Regional Forces outposts west of the community, as well as Landing Zone KAREN, which protected the town to the south. The following day, the South Vietnamese, with some U.S. support, drove the foe away.

The only other significant enemy attack in September occurred along Route 529 near the village of An Phong, twenty kilometers southwest of Chu Lai, Quang Tin Province. On 13 September, two companies of North Vietnamese soldiers launched a predawn assault on the village, a key outpost at the mouth of the Suoi Tra River Valley, a fertile and well-populated narrow strip of flat land that extended well into the mountains west of the coastal plain. The local militia held its own against the enemy troops, and, in about an hour, two Regional Force companies were brought in by helicopter, arriving just in time to help repel a second assault. That afternoon, reinforcements from the 1st Battalion, 52d Infantry, and Troop H, 17th Cavalry, swept in and chased the enemy out. By the end of the day, the Americans and South Vietnamese had killed 116 North Vietnamese, ending what had been a serious threat to this crucial salient of government control into the mountains.

Throughout the rest of the year, the Communists remained quiet in southern I Corps. Intelligence reported that all major North Vietnamese units had moved west into the mountains and “were primarily occupied with the gathering and storing of rice and with establishing themselves in secure base areas far removed from the normal [areas of operation] of Americal units.” Viet Cong combat units had broken down into squad size or smaller to escape detection. What few attacks there were during the last

three months of 1969 were usually executed by local guerrillas and were aimed at South Vietnamese pacification activities, especially in Quang Tin Province. Americal patrols did, however, occasionally encounter the enemy as he tried to infiltrate into the populated lowlands. On 13 December, for example, the 198th Brigade's Troop D, 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry, bumped into a large group of enemy soldiers on the Batangan Peninsula. A fierce battle erupted, and Troop C rushed to reinforce. Later in the day, the enemy broke contact, leaving behind more than fifty dead.

MORALE AND LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS

Despite the decline in the number of major battles, the Americal Division, like many others, operated under stressful circumstances in the latter half of 1969, suffering a steady stream of casualties from snipers, mines, and booby traps. It was frustrating work not being able to come to grips with one's tormentors and unable to tell friend from foe among the population, but by and large, the unit performed well. In November, however, the division's honor was tarnished when news broke about a massacre committed in March 1968 by members of the division in the hamlet of My Lai in Son My village, eight kilometers northeast of the provincial capital of Quang Ngai. In that incident, U.S. soldiers operating in the Batangan Peninsula had vented their frustration by murdering several hundred civilians in a senseless rampage. Americal Division officers had then covered up the massacre, and it had gone undetected until a former Americal soldier—who had learned of the incident by talking with fellow soldiers but who had not himself witnessed it—tipped off senior officials in Washington. The Army eventually brought charges against over two dozen personnel, but only one platoon leader, Lt. William L. Calley Jr., was successfully prosecuted for murder. The lurid affair undermined support for the war at home, weakening the spiritual bonds between a people and its army so vital in a democracy.

Those bonds had, in fact, been fraying ever since the war had begun, as a growing segment of the American public became openly critical of the commitment. The war's unpopularity, coupled with turmoil at home over the draft and a variety of other social, racial, and economic issues, cultivated an atmosphere that promoted the questioning of authority. Increasingly, many soldiers in Vietnam saw themselves not as the defenders of freedom, but as the unfortunate victims of a misguided government. These

pressures escalated as the new withdrawal policy undermined the rationale for men to risk their lives for an uncertain and thankless outcome. No soldier wanted to be the last to die in an unpopular war. Consequently, the Army increasingly found itself grappling with problems of disobedience, drug abuse, and racial tensions.

Compounding the fallout from domestic turmoil and the decision to withdraw was the long-standing policy of limiting a soldier's tour of duty in Vietnam to one year. Although multiple tours were possible with a break in between, the Army was desperately short of frontline leaders by 1969. To make up for the shortage of noncommissioned officers (NCOs), the Army's Noncommissioned Officers Candidate Course, derisively called the "Shake 'n' Bake" course, rushed promising privates directly through twenty-one weeks of advance training to become sergeants. These young and inexperienced NCOs faced considerable difficulty leading combat troops. Even then, many specialist fourth class soldiers ended up as squad leaders. Lowered standards, shortened training, and faster promotions to meet the high demand for noncommissioned and junior officers often resulted in the assignment of squad, platoon, and company leaders with less combat experience than the troops they led. Added to this was the frequent shifting of officers to new assignments, a practice that undercut unit cohesion and smacked of ticket punching to enhance one's career. Several scandals, including one involving the former sergeant major of the Army, as well as incidents of false reporting and inflated body counts, further tarnished the reputation of the officer and NCO corps. All of these problems raised disquieting questions about the professional competence and ethics of Army leaders.

In some cases, disenchanted soldiers threatened or harmed noncommissioned and junior officers they disliked. This phenomenon was referred to as "fragging," due to the use of fragmentation grenades by soldiers to intimidate or injure their leaders. The full extent of the problem will never be known, but it increased sharply in 1969.

One incident that came to exemplify the deterioration was the "Alpha Company Affair." On 12 August 1969, Communist soldiers attacked a remote firebase overlooking the Song Chang Valley, forty-eight kilometers south of Da Nang in Quang Nam Province. In the battle that followed, a helicopter went down with the loss of all on board. A major effort then ensued to reach the crash site

and recover the bodies. Over the next five days, one of the units involved, Company A, 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, 196th Infantry Brigade, lost ten killed and twenty wounded. When it received orders on the sixth day to move back into the valley, the company commander, 1st Lt. Eugene Shurtz, who had been in Vietnam for only two weeks and was occupying a job normally reserved for a captain, reported that his men refused to advance. When the battalion commander, Lt. Col. Robert C. Bacon, asked why, Shurtz stated that they “simply had enough—they are broken. There are boys here who have only ninety days left in Vietnam. They want to go home in one piece.” The lieutenant further reported that he had little support in the unit because many of his noncommissioned officers were either dead or wounded. Colonel Bacon directed his executive officer and an experienced NCO, Sgt. Okie Blankenship, to visit the unit to “give them a pep talk and a kick in the butt.”

When Colonel Bacon’s emissaries arrived, the soldiers told them that they were sick of the heat and the sudden firefights by day and the mortaring by night and that they would go no further. Sergeant Blankenship tried to motivate the men by telling them—falsely—that another company was down to only fifteen men and was still advancing. When a soldier called his bluff by asking him to identify the unit, Blankenship responded by challenging the men’s courage, saying, “Maybe they have got something a little more than what you have got.” Enraged, one soldier moved toward Blankenship with fists raised, yelling, “Don’t call us cowards, we are not cowards,” but Blankenship simply turned his back on him and walked away. Shamed into action, the rest of the company returned to the fight. No one was punished for the rebellion.

The incident was highly disturbing, as it marked the first time that a unit the size of a company had disobeyed an order in Vietnam. Nine days later, a smaller mutiny occurred when a platoon from the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, refused to go on a patrol. This time, the ringleaders were experienced noncommissioned officers. The captain commanding the company noted that the platoon’s twenty-one soldiers, all with extensive combat experience, had refused to move because they considered it unfair for them to have to go on another patrol. The Army prosecuted them, but meted out light punishments. Some officers complained that the Army had chosen to pamper enlisted men rather than inflict the sort of hard punishments they felt were needed to deter future insubordination. The Army, however,



As the year drew to an end, a U.S. soldier with the 199th Infantry Brigade boosts his morale with a Christmas card from home and his own tree.

believed there were extenuating circumstances. The battalion had lost three of its commanders to wounds in four months and a new company commander had just arrived to replace an officer relieved for cause. Moreover, some of the soldiers who were close to the end of their tours erroneously believed that official policy exempted them from combat missions within thirty days of their redeployment. The fact that everyone in the platoon had served honorably in combat before the incident, and that they continued to do so afterward, spoke toward leniency as well.

Large-scale acts of disobedience like these two episodes were rare, but they illustrated the strains that were increasingly tugging on the fabric of military discipline and unit cohesion in Vietnam. Fortunately, the vast majority of men did their duty, and there was plenty of bravery left in the ranks. Between late 1968 and late 1969, about fifty military personnel received the Medal of Honor for actions taken in Vietnam, with many more receiving lesser awards.

ANALYSIS

The period from October 1968 to December 1969 was a successful one for the allies. Thanks to the boost given by the Accelerated Pacification Campaign and subsequent efforts, the

percentage of the South Vietnamese population living in “relative security” under some form of government control (rated in categories A, B, and C in the Hamlet Evaluation System) leaped from 76 percent in December 1968 to 93 percent in December 1969. Even if the numbers exaggerated the amount of progress, which they undoubtedly did, the trend was both encouraging and unmistakable. Taking advantage of the shield provided by U.S. forces and the enemy’s own decision to pull back some of his conventional units, the South Vietnamese government was getting out into rural communities as never before, organizing the population, creating militias and other territorial defense forces, and providing some rudimentary services. Roads were being repaired and reopened, commerce was flourishing, and agricultural and industrial production was growing. Plenty of socioeconomic and political problems remained, some of them severe, but there seemed to be reasons for hope.

The U.S. Army contributed to the progress in several ways. Thousands of soldier-advisers helped their South Vietnamese counterparts at every level from battalion to corps; while in the provinces, U.S. Army advisers assigned to CORDS assisted South Vietnamese officials in a wide variety of sociopolitical and security tasks. U.S. military units amplified the 14,000-man advisory effort by conducting training programs of their own and by coordinating their operations with South Vietnamese units so that the Vietnamese could learn by doing in combined activities. Pair-offs and buddy systems abounded, while logisticians busied themselves with delivering new equipment and instructing the Vietnamese on its use and maintenance. South Vietnam’s armed forces grew in strength and capability, with the United States paying particular attention to improving the territorial forces that were crucial to securing the gains made in pacification at the local level. CORDS personnel and U.S. units supplemented these activities with a robust campaign of civic action, delivering relief supplies, providing technical advice, dispensing free medical care, and supporting charitable undertakings.

The U.S. Army also contributed to progress in 1969 by killing thousands of enemy soldiers. Indeed, the war of attrition so often denigrated by critics of the conflict was very much alive in 1969. Both sides may have sought to minimize their own casualties, but neither had given up the belief that victory, or at least an acceptable result, could be achieved by using violence to destroy the

other side's ability or will to continue the fight. Although there were fewer major battles than in prior years, the allies nevertheless reported that they had killed nearly 157,000 enemy personnel in 1969, more than in any year except 1968. The human and material losses imposed by the United States demoralized the enemy, eroded his political as well as military influence over the countryside, and prevented his major conventional forces from invading the heavily populated areas and upending the pacification effort. Attrition by combat, therefore, remained an integral part of what General Abrams called a one-war strategy that attempted to blend military, security, pacification, and nation-building efforts into a single, seamless, unified effort. But military progress remained the first among equals, for as a special study group formed within the president's National Security Council concluded, the principal driver for almost all allied success in pacification during the year was the "much more favorable allied posture in the main force war than had existed before 1969." Because "the allies were able clearly to gain the upper hand in the main force war, destroying, dispersing, or pushing back the enemy main force units" in 1968 and 1969, pacification had prospered. If attrition through combat did not guarantee success, it provided the first step toward that goal.

But the Communists, too, had exacted a price—9,367 dead American servicemen (also the single greatest loss in any year other than 1968)—and nearly 22,000 dead South Vietnamese security personnel. The problem for the United States was that the huge casualties it had inflicted on the enemy had not caused the totalitarian leaders in North Vietnam to flinch. Instead, America's comparatively small losses were having a disproportionate impact on its own democratic system, as a growing number of people came to the conclusion that a non-Communist South Vietnam was either unobtainable or not worth the price. The United States was thus losing the war of attrition, not materially, but spiritually, with ominous implications for the ultimate outcome. For if military success was the true driver of progress, and if that success was disproportionately due to American power, then the withdrawal of that power before the enemy abandoned his quest of conquest was dangerous indeed.

Thus the question at the end of the year, as at the start, was whether the United States could achieve enough positive change to ensure South Vietnam's survival before the inevitable American withdrawal. Despite the many positive accomplishments over the

past year, General Abrams was unsure he had attained this goal. In addition to lingering social, administrative, and political problems, South Vietnam's security forces were overstretched, and as the U.S. withdrawal continued, they would undoubtedly struggle to make up for the quantitative and qualitative advantages they had enjoyed from America's presence. True, some Vietnamese units were performing to a high standard, but many others remained mediocre. As is so often the case in human endeavors, leadership was what often made the difference, but that was a commodity far more difficult for America to export than bullets and guns. Abrams believed that a younger generation of officers showed promise, but many advisers in the field found their situation profoundly frustrating as they had to prod and cajole their counterparts, often with limited success, into effecting the changes they thought would put South Vietnam on a sounder footing.

To make matters worse, initial declarations that the composition and timing of the withdrawal would be based on the military situation on the ground quickly fell by the wayside. Under significant pressure to bring some closure to the unpopular conflict, President Nixon and Secretary Laird allowed domestic political considerations to dominate the process. This reality placed the whole process of Vietnamization, and of the ultimate outcome of the war itself, in grave jeopardy.

In August, Abrams tried to address administration concerns by reducing the size of the proposed postwithdrawal "residual force" to 50,000 men. Although still considerable, the new force would consist almost exclusively of advisers and support units without any of the direct ground combat capability MACV had originally envisioned. Laird rejected the proposal, wanting a clean break from the Southeast Asian quagmire. Instead, he asked for a plan that would create an indigenous military that could "maintain at least current levels of security" with minimal U.S. assistance. This meant giving South Vietnam technical capabilities that it had long relied on the United States to provide, particularly in the areas of air, artillery, transportation, and logistical support. He also wanted the plan to solve the "critical problems of corruption, leadership, motivation, and morale" that had plagued South Vietnam's armed forces since their creation. If South Vietnam was to have armed forces capable of fighting both the Viet Cong and North Vietnam independently by the time the United States completed its withdrawal, it would have to expand its manpower, absorb

large quantities of equipment, and become proficient at operating a sophisticated command, control, and logistical infrastructure at breakneck speed.

The U.S. military's response to the secretary's demand was tepid. Abrams proposed ideas for redressing some of the systemic weaknesses in the Vietnamese military system, but these were neither novel nor promising given the fact that many of these problems had defied nearly two decades of U.S. military advice and assistance. Moreover, both he and Wheeler believed the administration was unrealistically changing the original goals of Vietnamization. They nevertheless went back to the drawing board to develop something more akin to the administration's desires.

Meanwhile, President Nixon and Secretary Laird pressed ahead. Setting aside the military's misgivings, in September they increased the Phase II withdrawal increment that was to be implemented by the end of 1969 from 25,000 to 40,000 men. Abrams grudgingly met the requirement by earmarking the rest of the 3d Marine Division and the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, for redeployment. He warned, however, that "the situation is such that it would not—repeat not—be militarily sound to recommend further U.S. troop redeployments at this time." The administration disagreed, announcing in mid-December a Phase III withdrawal of another 50,000 men. The only concession Laird gave to Abrams was to extend the Phase III completion date to 15 April 1970. MACV selected the 1st Infantry Division, a brigade of the 4th Infantry Division, and a Marine Corps regimental combat team to meet the requirement.

In December, Abrams and the Joint Chiefs dutifully submitted a new plan to meet Laird's requirements. It called for a larger and more rapid buildup of Vietnamese forces than hitherto contemplated. To the secretary's annoyance, it also continued to call for a larger U.S. residual force than he desired, but he nonetheless accepted a revised version of the plan. Notable, however, were the assumptions on which the plan was based—that pacification and territorial security would keep making rapid progress, that U.S. materiel and financial support would continue uninterrupted, and that the U.S. Air Force would be able to conduct combat missions on behalf of South Vietnam from bases outside the country. Finally, the plan assumed that the North's military presence would diminish inside South Vietnam. Any significant deviation from these assumptions would seriously compromise the plan. Abrams

had already learned, however, that once the withdrawal train had left the station, it was awfully hard to stop. Whether the Nixon administration would be willing to slow or reverse the troop withdrawals should any of these assumptions prove inaccurate remained to be seen.

As he wrestled with his misgivings, the MACV commander felt that something more was needed to increase the odds of a favorable outcome. The answer, he believed, was for the allies to cross over into Cambodia, Laos, and perhaps even North Vietnam to destroy the sanctuaries that sustained the enemy's war effort in the South. U.S. military leaders had been proposing such a move since 1961, but no American president had been willing to take the risk. Surprisingly, President Nixon proved receptive to the notion, for despite all the pressure to get out of Vietnam, he, too, realized that something more needed to be done to reduce the chances of defeat. A successful action against the external threat would undoubtedly cause a political backlash at home and abroad, but it might be worth the risk if it enabled U.S. troop withdrawals to continue unhindered and if it bought more time for the military modernization and nation-building effort in South Vietnam to proceed. A severe curtailment of North Vietnam's ability to meddle in the South might even lead the Communists to agree to terms more favorable to the allies because, as yet, the talks in Paris had produced nothing tangible. Indeed, America's unilateral removal of over 75,000 troops by year's end had not enticed the Communists to make meaningful concessions, let alone to remove a single soldier in return. Nevertheless, by the end of 1969, President Nixon had not approved any of the cross-border schemes proposed by the nation's military leaders.

But that was about to change. In the spring of 1970, a coup in Cambodia would open the door to an intervention by the United States. President Nixon would seize the opportunity by authorizing a major ground operation to destroy the extensive logistical complex that the Communists had created in Cambodia to sustain their war effort in South Vietnam. Since Abrams assigned the South Vietnamese Army a significant role in the operation, the Cambodian incursion would also present the first major test of Vietnamization. Over the coming months, officials in Washington and Saigon would anxiously wait to see if the achievements of 1969 had borne fruit.

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