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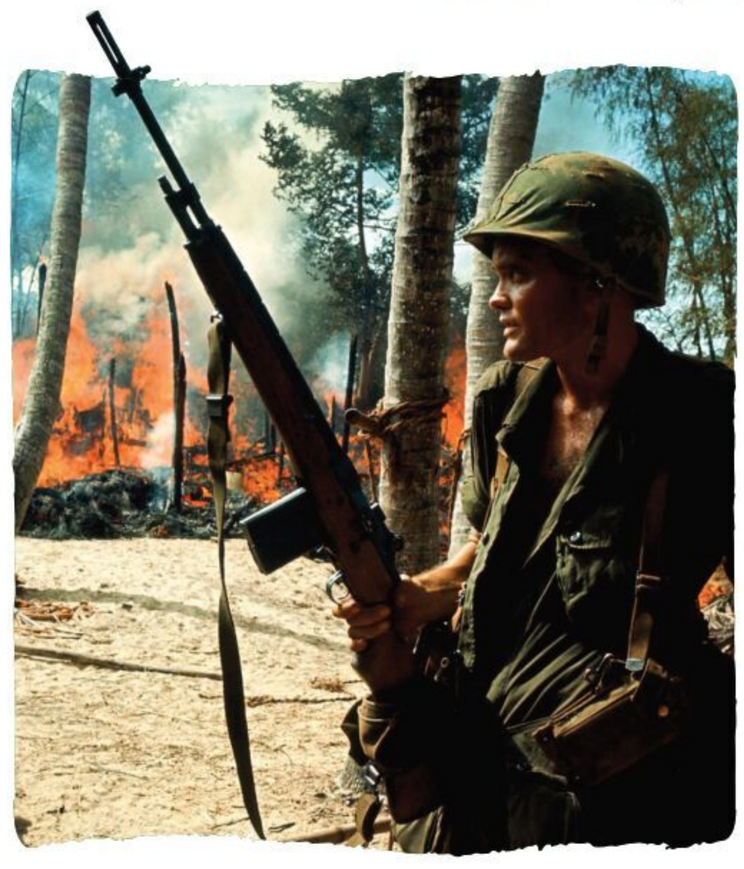



# STORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

UNCOVER THE CONFLICT THAT TORE TWO NATIONS APART







Digital Edition

FUTURE

FIRST EDITION

DIEN BIEN PHU • NORTH V SOUTH • ROLLING THUNDER • HAMBURGER HILL

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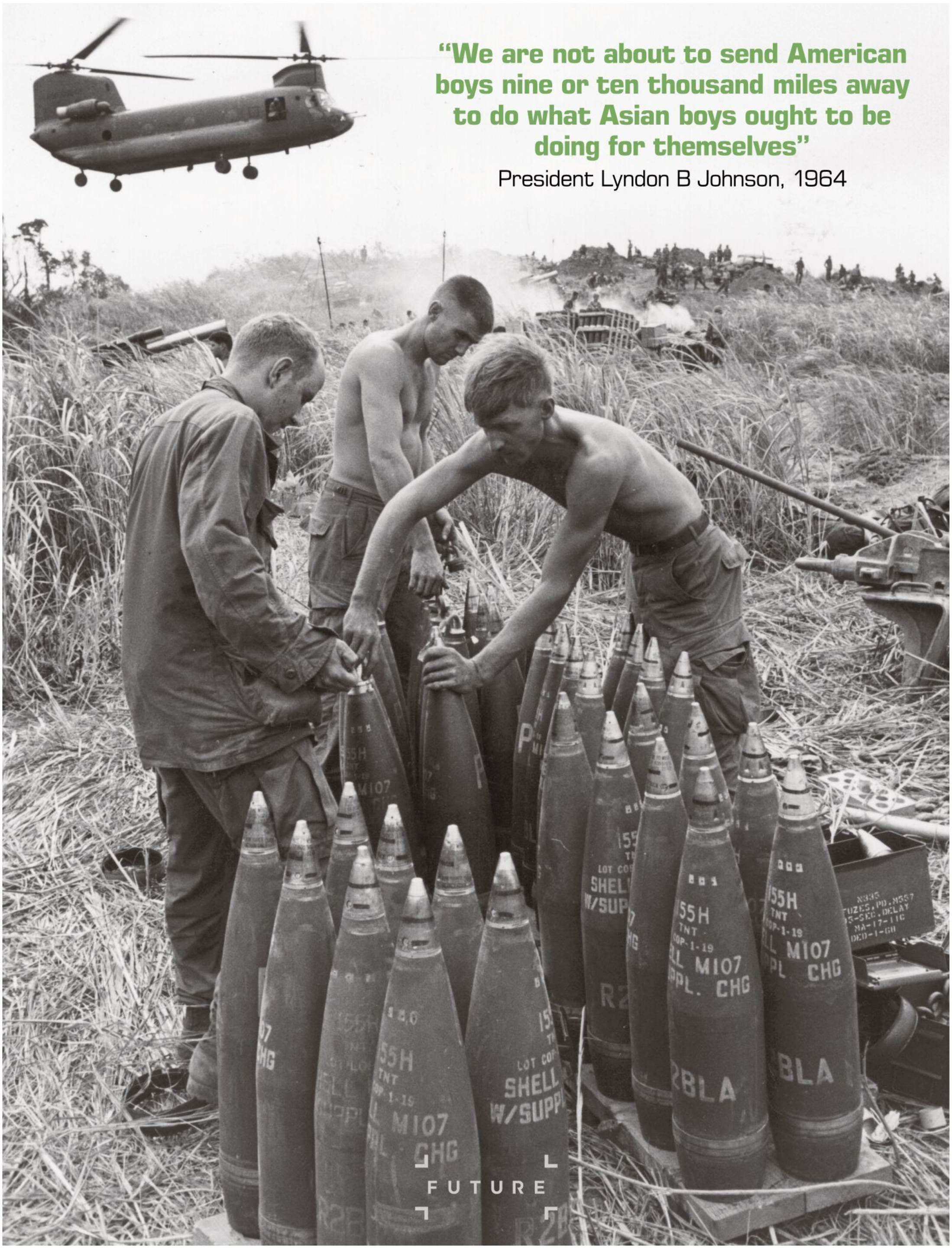


# WAR, CHILDREN!
## IT'S JUST A SHOT AWAY...

The morning of 8 March 1965 would change Vietnam forever, transforming a ruthless civil war into an international struggle the moment US troops raced ashore along the coast of Da Nang in the North. Neither country would ever be the same again.

Spanning two decades, the Vietnam War grew from an internal battle for a nation's destiny into a political and military catastrophe for the mightiest power on Earth. But what caused the war, who was waging it, and why did the US feel compelled to intervene in a conflict thousands of miles away in Southeast Asia when its allies refused to do so?

From the birth of Vietnam and its fight for independence to the Tet Offensive, widespread protests against US involvement and the Fall of Saigon, Story of the of the Vietnam War explores the shaping of a people and their homeland and the battles that would come to define it. Including the key players behind the engagements that decided the war and an in-depth look at the weapons and tactics they used, this history will immerse you in one of the most controversial chapters in the story of America, a tale of death and devastation that still haunts the corridors of the White House and the villages of Vietnam to this day.




Getty Images

# STORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

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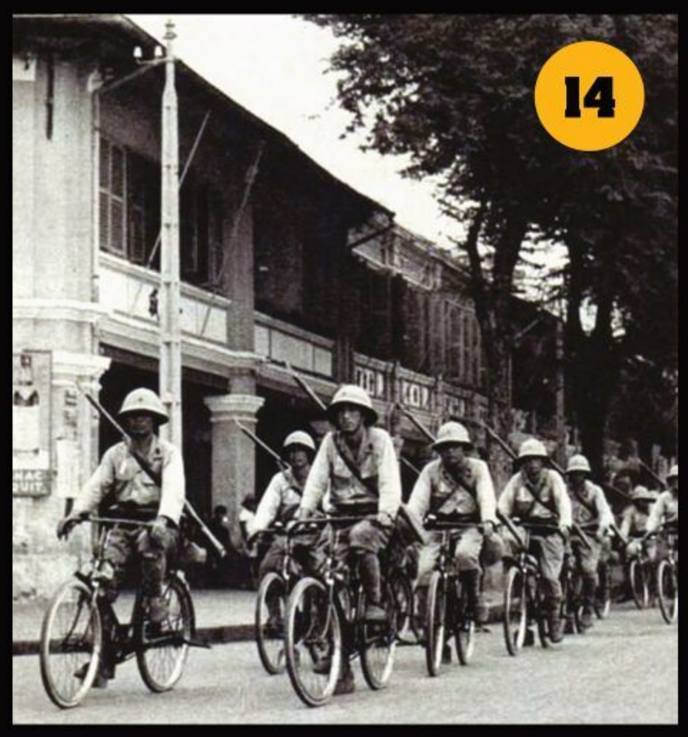



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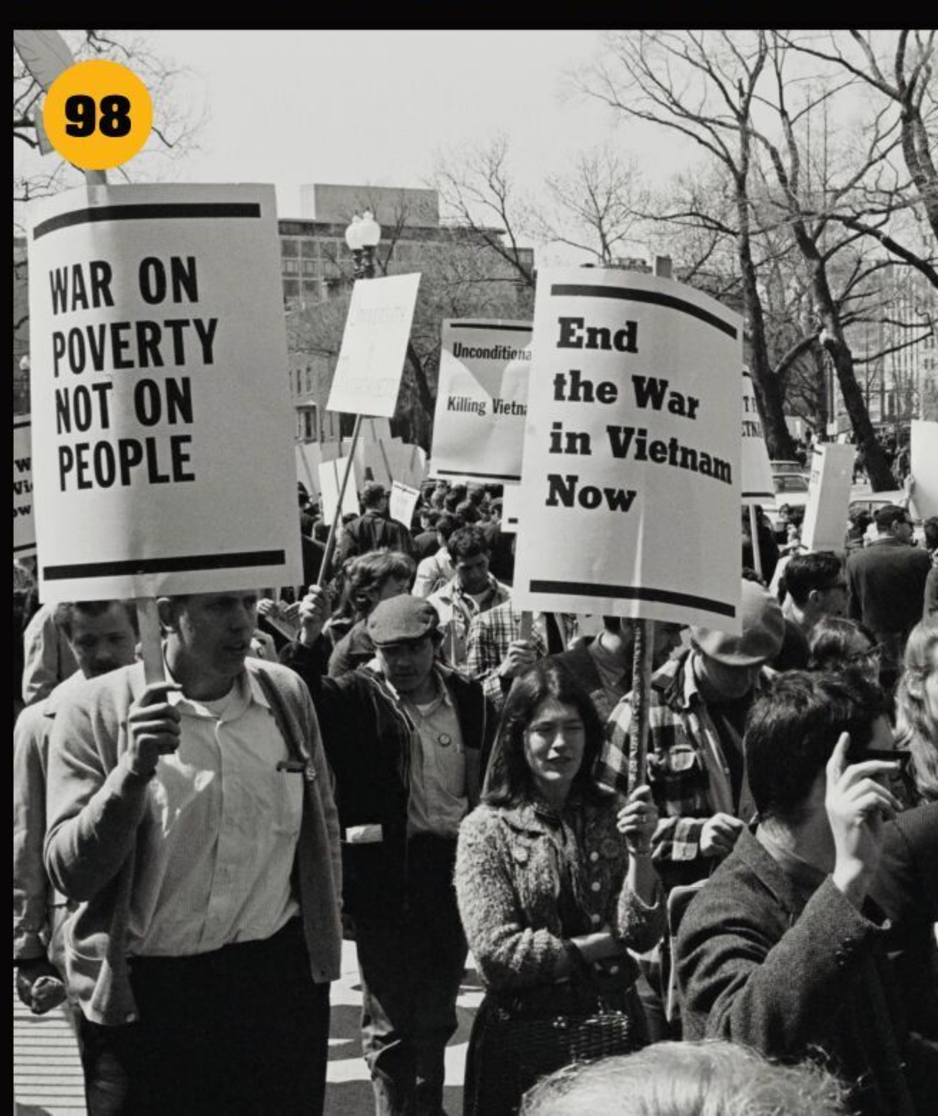
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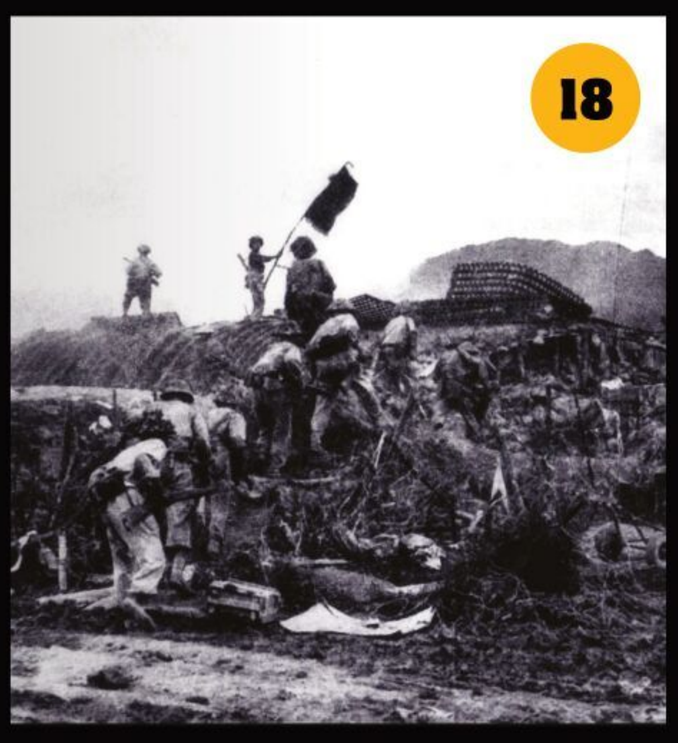
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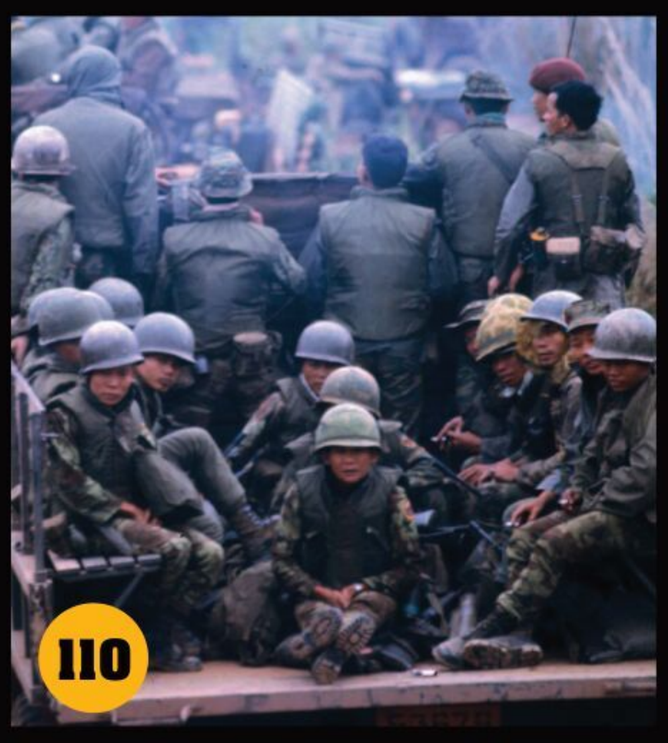
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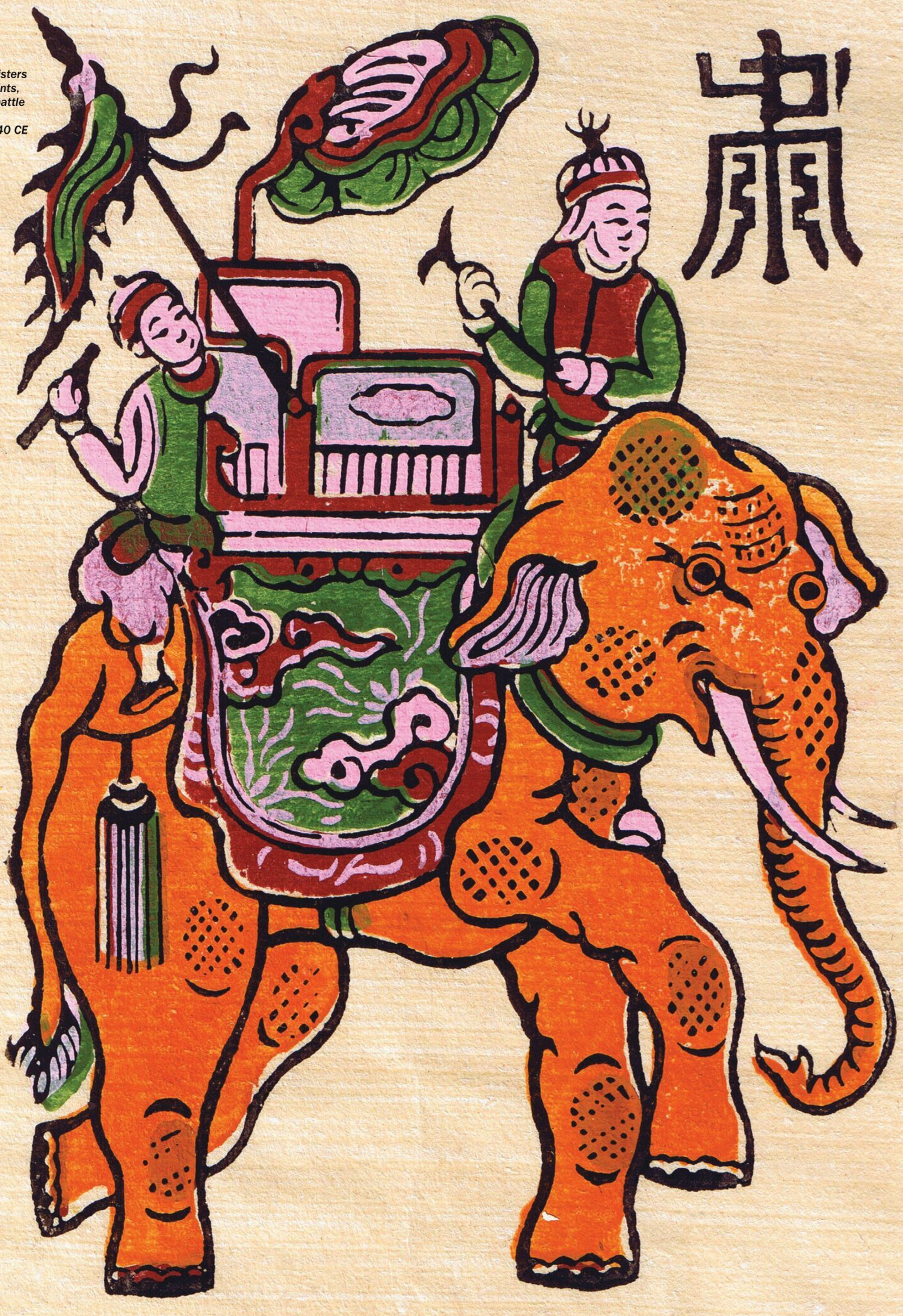
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*The Trung sisters atop elephants, riding into battle against the Chinese in 40 CE*

# THE MAKING OF A NATION

Resisting foreign invasion and Chinese rule, feuding dynasties and a plot to take the Champa – a rich and sophisticated society developed long before the Europeans had ever even heard of the Viets

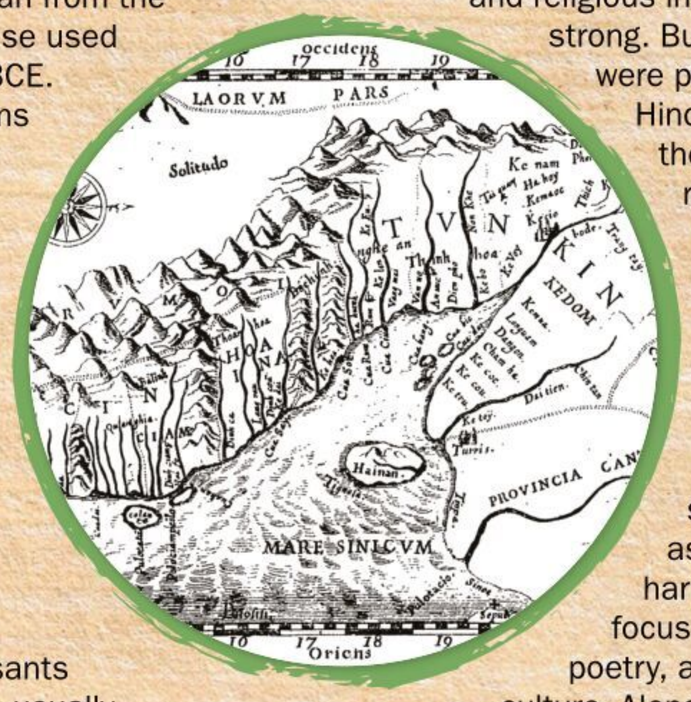
WORDS **ARISA LOOMBA**

Vietnam's peculiar geography has made it a convenient and dynamic focal point of trade, battle and the exchange of people, religions, ideas and world systems over its many centuries of existence. With its subtropical and monsoonal climate, home to rainforests, mountains and rivers, Vietnam is ideal for rice production. Rice has always been central to the Vietnamese identity and allowed the region to grow and flourish on the world stage as a major exporter.

Its long coastline and excellent positioning in the South China Sea made it a crucial stopover point for ships along the Silk Route. In this way, medieval Vietnam was something of a melting pot, attracting sea-goers from all over: Khmer Cambodians, Malay, Javanese and Indian people to name but a few. This geography also made the region resistant to outside attack, other than from the north, a route the Chinese used consistently after 111 BCE.

Two separate kingdoms controlled medieval Vietnam: the Bac Bo to the north, and the Champa to the south. By 300 BCE, the Bac Bo's area of control came to be known as Nam Viet, and its people as the Lac Viet. These people, more ethnically similar to the Chinese having once migrated from the north, were mostly peasants under a feudal system – usually rice and cattle farmers, fishermen or bronze, ceramic or weaving workers.

As this feudal system emerged, with land owned by emperors and monasteries, the Lac Viet lived on the land and paid tribute to their landowners. They were heavily taxed and widely exploited through unpaid labour, leading to regular – though rarely successful – rebellions.




For the most part after 111 BCE, Bac Bo was ruled by the Chinese for the next millennium. Some rebellions would achieve short-lived success, and Vietnamese independence would be restored. All too soon, though, Chinese military might would reinstate itself.

To the south ruled the Champa, presiding over the Cham people. Rather than being ethnically Chinese like the Lac Viet, the Cham had different origins: they were more closely related to the Malay, Polynesian and Austronesian ethnic groups and so looked physically different from those in the northern kingdom. They were more influenced by their western rather than northern neighbours.

The Khmer Cambodian and Indian cultural and religious incorporations were strong. Buddhism and even Islam were popular, but for a while Hinduism was actually the Cham's dominant religion. They worked in handicrafts and exported goods like sandalwood, ivory and aloe, or as sailors pirating in the South China Sea, patrolling for foreign ships to plunder. Cham society has been seen as fairly cohesive and harmonious, with a strong focus on nature, music and poetry, as opposed to material culture. Alongside rice, their diet was fuelled through fishing and hunting, having developed effective hunting tools such as arrowheads and spears.

In 111 BCE, Han China invaded the northern kingdom, Nam Viet, and began to exert and infiltrate high society with Chinese

administration. This was the beginning of a long period of attempted Sinicisation, with the governors and top officials of this new society all being Chinese, though some Vietnamese nobles still hung on to the highlands. Religion was often in flux between Buddhism and Confucianism in precolonial Vietnam. On the whole though, the Buddhism brought in by Indian traders and travellers from the subcontinent took hold and flourished. Ordinary people in the peasant classes generally followed Buddhism, while Confucianism was the reserve of the elite and governing classes.

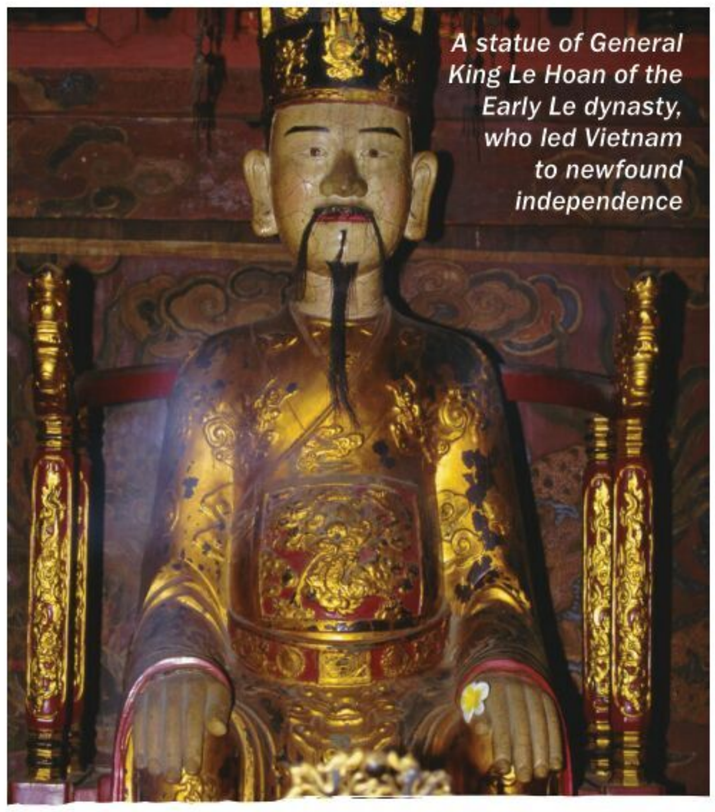
Rebellions were constant, but the most notable is without doubt that of the Trung sisters in 40 CE, a fierce display of Viet female agency and might that resounds and provides inspiration to this day. A murder committed by Chinese official Su Ding of a Viet man, Thi Sách, spurred his new widow Trung Trac and her sister Trung Nhi to lead a successful revolt against the Chinese, following which Trung Trac was crowned queen. This short-lived Vietnamese independence, however, was quickly crushed within just three years.

In 43 CE, the Han emperor sent his army to suppress the uprising, and the Trung sisters quickly committed suicide to avoid capture. The Trung sisters remain powerful national symbols of womanhood in Vietnam. Following this incident, the Han were careful to ensure that the Lac Viet couldn't rise up in such numbers again, and nearly 200 years passed without a major threat to Chinese authority.

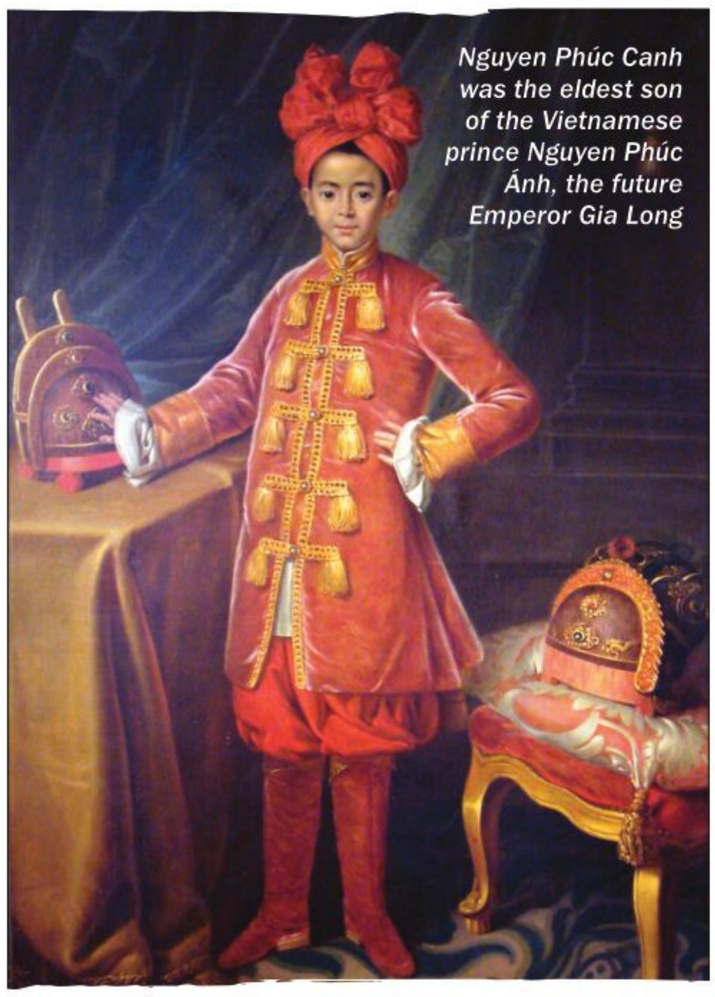
In the 6th and 7th centuries, several revolts began to spark up once more, but all of these eventually failed, and the Chinese stood fast in the region. In 618 CE the Chinese Tang dynasty took hold, marking a third major period of domination. They renamed the nation Annam, a name that would be in place for nearly 300 years. Under this Third Era of Northern Domination, Annam flourished as a trading post, supplying goods for China and establishing major urban settlements in the cities.

Following the Battle of Bach Dang, Nam Viet settled into a slow and stable pattern of life, which would subsist for the next thousand years. Very little would change for ordinary people, but the state would grow in administrative and political sophistication. Villages were given autonomy to follow their own specific cultures and religions, and the Viets grew into perhaps the most advanced Southeast Asian kingdom of the time.

Periodic agricultural reforms, breaking up the lands of overzealous estate owners, and an egalitarian approach to nobility and titles ensured relative peace and cohesion between rich and poor. Unrest took place, but never grew to become a real threat to the royal families.



*A statue of General King Le Hoan of the Early Le dynasty, who led Vietnam to newfound independence*



*Nguyen Phúc Canh was the eldest son of the Vietnamese prince Nguyen Phúc Ánh, the future Emperor Gia Long*

## BATTLE OF BACH DANG, 938 CE

### The decisive victory marking the end of Chinese rule and the dawn of a strong Vietnamese nation

In the 10th century, the Vietnamese finally obtained long-lasting independence from the Chinese following victory at the Battle of Bach Dang in 938 CE.

Rebellions in 858 CE, aided by Chinese rebels from Yunnan, served to severely weaken the Tang Chinese, and from 905 CE onwards, they conceded by allowing local Vietnamese governors to rule autonomously. Resistance to the Chinese grew in confidence, and the Chinese sent a fleet in 938 to subdue the unrest. Led by Viet general Ngo Quyen, the Chinese were defeated and pushed back in a historic victory.

Declaring himself king, Ngo established a new system of monarchical independence, striking a deal with the Chinese. It was agreed that Vietnam would become a vassal state of China, allowing for enough compromises to be made to appease the beast to the north but also providing breathing room for Vietnamese growth and independence. The Viet people would follow Chinese law and pay tributes but would receive political autonomy in return. They sent both money and products, such as animal skins, ivory, lacquerware and other local handicrafts and specialities from the tropical realm. In return the Chinese sent scrolls on philosophy, administration and literature. As follows the general theme, Chinese culture really only ever penetrated the aristocratic ranks in Vietnam.

Here marked the beginning of nine centuries of rule by a stable but fraught and tumultuous series of northern Viet dynasties, followed by the decimation of the Champa kingdom and Cham people before the arrival of the French.

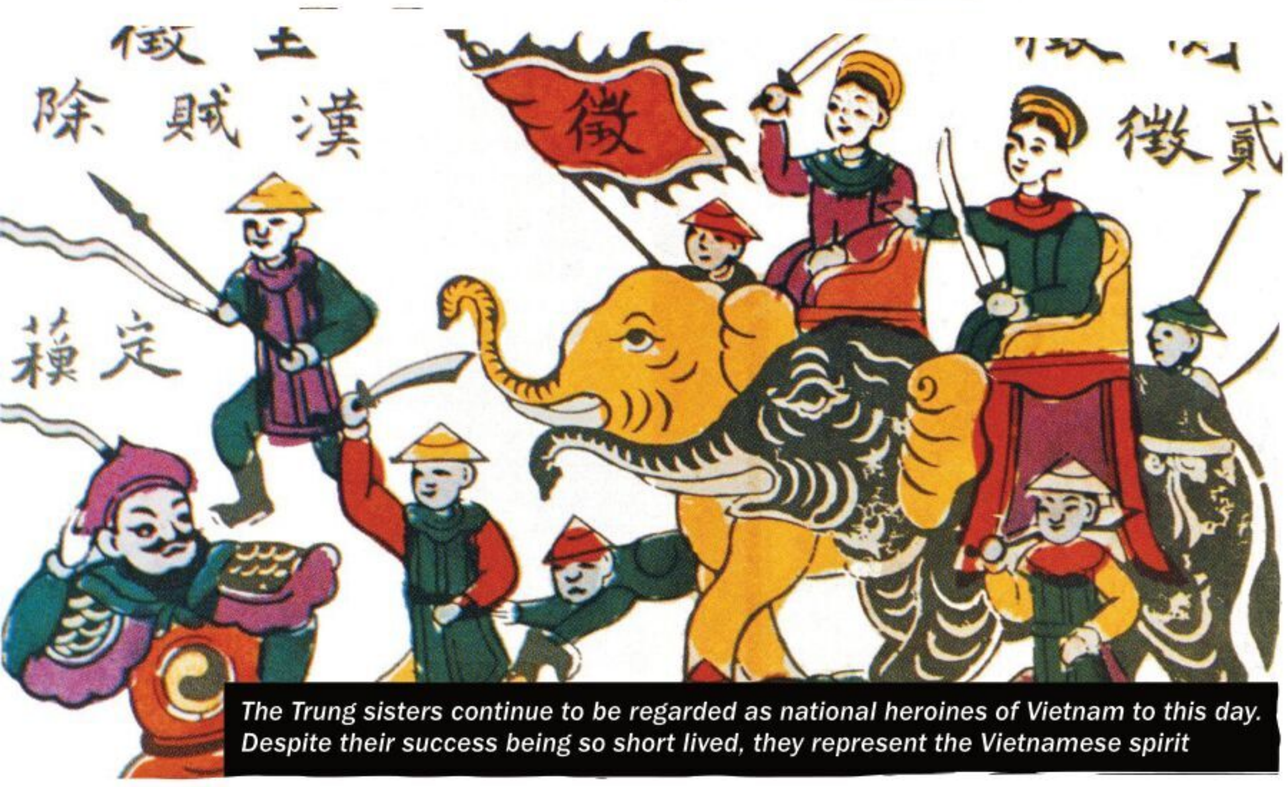



*After 1,000 years, Vietnamese forces led by Ngo Quyen at long last defeated Southern Han China on the river of Bach Dang, near Ha Long Bay in northern Vietnam*

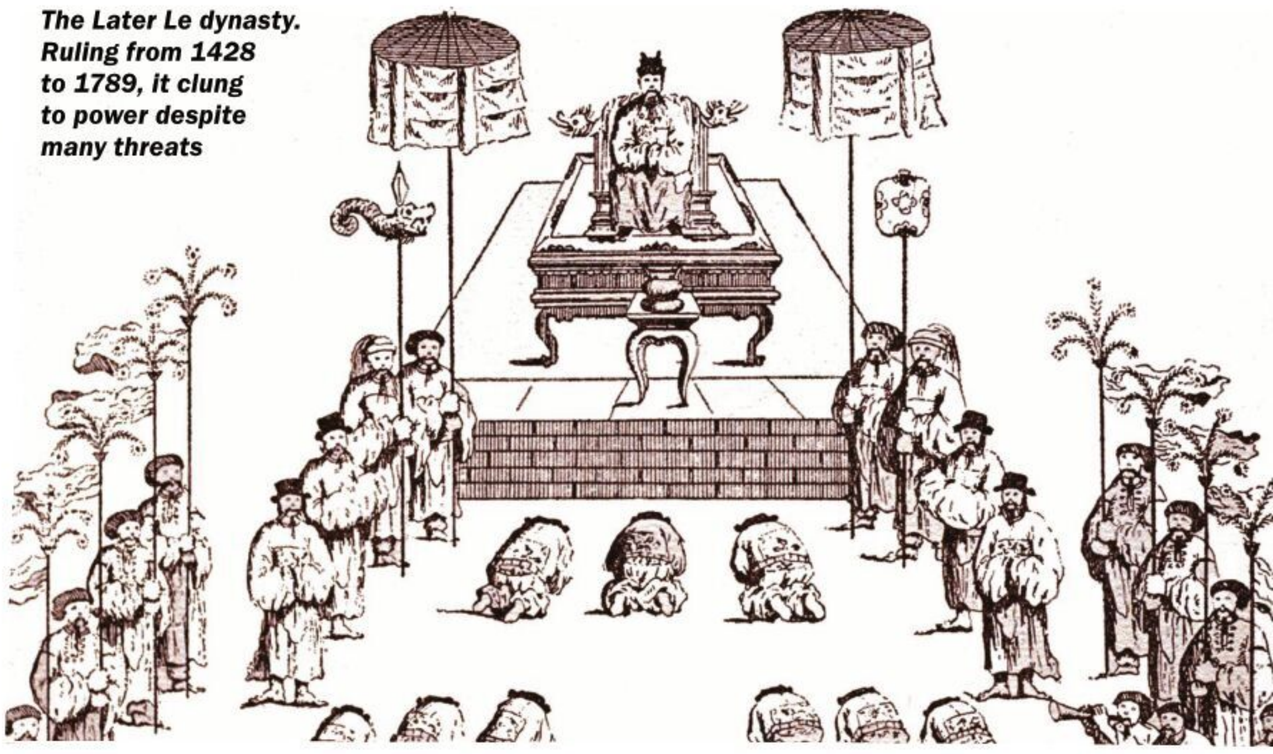
*Images: Alamy*



*Ruins of the Champa kingdom still stand today*




*The Trung sisters continue to be regarded as national heroines of Vietnam to this day. Despite their success being so short lived, they represent the Vietnamese spirit*



*The Later Le dynasty. Ruling from 1428 to 1789, it clung to power despite many threats*

During this period, civil wars were rife, as were invasions by a multitude of foreign powers. The Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Chinese tried their hand from the north, while the Cham rose up from the south. And from outside came the Mongols, Siamese, French and Japanese.

Whenever a weakness presented itself, such as in the sudden death of a king and the assumption of the throne by a child, who may have been the only surviving heir, the Song and Ming Chinese would seize the opportunity to invade, exploiting the confused nation, though they never again quite recovered the power they lost in 938. The Mongols, under Kublai Khan, also attempted to assert themselves in the 13th century, and the region experienced its first Western contact when Marco Polo disembarked in 1288.

The Le dynasty was Nam Viet's longest-ruling and most tyrannical dynasty, the one to finally succeed in southward territorial expansion. This followed a range of tactics by prior dynasties to take Champa, such as political marriage and making it a tributary state, though none had yet been successful in the long term. The desire to take Champa was one goal that united all of the northern dynasties. The Cham were at a trading peak between 800 and 1100 CE, but from the 13th century they were in almost continuous battle with the Lac Viet. These wars economically depleted the Lac Viet kingdom, pushing it into a deep recession and causing the Tran dynasty to crumble. The Le succeeded in conquering the Champa in 1470 when Le armies took the Cham capital and thousands of prisoners, including the entire royal family.

The Lac Viet, wanting to escape from their overpopulated homeland, began to migrate and settle former Cham regions, pushing its indigenous inhabitants further and further towards the coast. It is here, in small pockets near the Mekong Delta, that those Cham who didn't flee during this period still reside today, existing as a prominent but vulnerable Vietnamese minority. This officially signalled the end of the Champa as a powerful kingdom, now subsumed by the Nam Viet.

As the Le dynasty decayed and the kingdom began to decline, Christianity and a European and Jesuit presence slowly began to make itself known. Missionaries, mostly of Portuguese origin at first, began to spread Catholicism. The Vietnamese response to this was at first interest and acceptance, but this quickly turned to intolerance, shutting down missions and persecuting Europeans, even with death. Over time various European governments, such as the Dutch and French, began to interfere in dynastic feuds between the north and south, supplying ammunition, weapons and forces and straying far beyond a simple religious mission.

In the 1770s, the Tay Son rebellion, an uprising of poor and minority peasant workers against an oppressive lord, spurred serious French involvement for the first time, as the leaders of the rebellion sailed to Paris to ask for military backing. The success of the Tay Son revolution finally resulted in the unification of the north and south under the name of Viet Nam. As the new kingdom settled its way through early disputes, the French continued to intervene. This period would ultimately pave the way for greater and greater influence exerted by the French, finally coming to a head in 1887 when 1,000 years of Vietnamese independence and resistance to foreign influence would come to an end.

*The French were supported by Spanish troops during their capture of Saigon in 1859*

# FRENCH RULE

## Beginning with Christian missionaries, the French colonisation of Vietnam lasted over six decades, irrevocably altering the fabric of the nation

WORDS **FRANCES WHITE**

French influence on Vietnam began well before soldiers stormed its shores. In the early 16th century, French missionaries travelled to the foreign land to spread word of Christianity, with mixed results. It wasn't until the reign of Louis XVI that the French began to exert more power over the nation. It was with his help that for the first time in two centuries Vietnam became unified under Nguyen Anh, who reigned as emperor from 1802 to 1820. The step was small, but it was the first indication of how influential France would become over the fate of this nation.

While unification had been groundbreaking, throughout the 1840s and 1850s Vietnam was ravaged not only by revolts and uprisings but also natural disasters. Floods and a smallpox epidemic tore through the nation, crippling the already-weak leadership.

For France this perfect storm offered an opportunity: conquest. By 1857 Vietnam was ripe for the taking, and the man with his eyes on the prize was Napoleon III. The official story of his planned invasion was a reaction to the suppression of Christian missionaries across the country. In a principle called 'mission civilisatrice', or 'civilising mission', the French proclaimed it was their duty to colonise 'savage' places and civilise them with modern industrial methods and technologies. In reality France needed resources, raw materials and cheap labour, and Vietnam had it all.

French troops lashed out at Da Nang and its harbour in 1858. The aim was to turn it into a military base from which France could launch the rest of its conquest. The town was breached and occupied in just a day. The French then set their sights on a bigger goal: Saigon. Napoleon had been promised that Vietnamese Christians would rally in support of the French invaders, but the opposite occurred. Vietnamese resistance increased, slowing France's assault. Although Saigon was claimed in early 1859, the resistance prevented the French advancing further.

Back in Paris, worries stirred. If the French abandoned the conquest, they feared the British would move in and enjoy their spoils. With mounting pressure, a fresh fleet of 70 ships and 3,500 men streamed into Vietnam as reinforcements. After several bloody battles, the surrounding three provinces finally fell into French hands. For Emperor Tu Duc, the fate of his nation was written in blood. In 1862 he signed the Treaty of Saigon, ceding the conquered territories to France and allowing the French to open their much-desired ports. Vietnam agreed to pay a humiliating indemnity to the invaders. For the French, this was exactly the foothold they needed. Over the following five years additional southern territories were seized by France. They named this new colony Cochinchina.

It seemed that the French mission was complete, but ruling over the south of the nation wasn't enough. France wanted it all and set its sights on the north. An ill-fated attempt was made in 1873 to enter the Red River Delta, but it ended badly when the French naval officer Francis Garnier was killed by Chinese pirates near Hanoi.

In 1882 France returned to the challenge, this time with a force of 250 men. Henri Rivière led the troops to storm the citadel of Hanoi but was killed in a skirmish. Rather than dissuading Paris, the angered authorities determined to impose their rule with excessive military force. Control over northern Vietnam was achieved after France's victory over China in the Sino-French War in 1884, turning it into a French protectorate. Within ten years the French annexed Laos, adding to its growing collection. This new region consisted of Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, Cambodia and Laos and was named the Indochinese Union, or French Indochina.

With the power and control they desired finally in their hands, the French set about imposing a Western-style administration over their new colonies. Governor General Paul Doumer arrived in 1897 and set about

**"The French proclaimed it was their duty to colonise 'savage' places and civilise them. In reality, France needed resources and materials"**

eliminating any remaining vestiges of power still in Vietnamese hands. This included replacing all major figures within the bureaucracy with French officials. Even the few Vietnamese who had cooperated with the French found themselves demoted to minor or ceremonial positions. Vietnamese emperors were not excluded in the takeover and were swiftly disposed of if they proved uncooperative, replaced with those more receptive to French interests. As the bureaucracy expanded so too did the power of the invaders, and by 1925, 5,000 European administrators ruled an Indochinese population of 30 million.

Doumer's reach extended to all corners of French Indochina. He wished to exploit the nation's economic wealth as quickly as possible and started the rapid construction of railroads, bridges, harbours and highways to ship out Vietnam's valuable raw materials. The main natural exports of the nation were rice, coal, rubber and rare minerals. The only interest France showed towards local industry or economic development was when it could benefit investors, eager to receive a high return for their investments. This took the form of production of goods for immediate local consumption, such as breweries, paper mills, cement factories and textile factories. By 1930 some 100,000 Vietnamese were employed across all these industries and in mines.

The conditions and prospects for the majority of Vietnamese under French rule were limited, with people prohibited from travelling outside their districts without certain papers. The Vietnamese were not allowed to publish, meet or organise, and if they stepped out of line they could be imprisoned by French magistrates. A small class of wealthy Vietnamese emerged out of the colonial regime: landowners. New lands were not distributed fairly, but instead either given to collaborators or sold to the highest bidder. While the landlords reaped the benefits, the landless tenants worked the fields, paying outrageous rents of up to 60 per cent per crop. This resulted in the wealthy landowners – around three per cent of the total landowners – owning around 45 per cent of the total land.




*The French used propaganda materials to convince the locals of the benefit of French occupation*






*The Japanese invasion of Indochina was an effort to stop China importing arms through the region*

While land for rice cultivation quadrupled in size between 1880 and 1930, peasants' rice consumption decreased – and this was not due to increased consumption of alternate foods. While the wealthy cited improvements in medical care, education and transport, these claims have now been cast into some doubt. Before colonisation the majority of the Vietnamese possessed at least some degree of literacy, but by 1939, 80 per cent of the population was illiterate. Vietnam boasted only one university, with room for just 700 students from among its 20 million inhabitants. Additionally, medical care was drastically worse than that enjoyed their East Asian counterparts, with only two physicians for every 100,000 Vietnamese, compared to 76 in Japan and 25 in the Philippines.

With such terrible treatment, it is of no surprise that Vietnamese resistance groups rose in opposition to French occupation. Most notable was the growth of Vietnamese communism, spearheaded by a young man who later became known as Ho Chi Minh. Minh formed the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930, encouraging a peasant uprising that claimed the lives of hundreds of landlords and French officials. The French struggled to contain the chaos, and it took them until 1931 to re-establish control over Vietnam. But the party was not defeated. The communists continued to extend their influence among all levels of Vietnamese society.

France's iron grip was abruptly wrenched open when World War II broke out. For five years Indochina became the possession of Japan, after France had fallen to German occupation. 30,000 Japanese troops streamed into the country, and Indochina became the central base for the Japanese military in Southeast Asia. Ho Chi Minh leapt at this opportunity and formed the Viet Minh, with his long-term goal being to achieve Vietnamese independence. He fed information regarding Japan's movements to the Allied forces to curry favour, and when Japan surrendered in 1945, seized the chance



*Viet Minh insurgents took advantage of the Japanese surrender during WWII to force the abdication of French puppet Emperor Bao Dai*



*The First Indochina War began in 1946 and lasted until 1954*

and ordered a revolution. With French troops scattered and the Japanese defeated, nobody could stop Minh and his supporters, and they snatched Hanoi. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was born.

But the French were not willing to give up their crown jewel so easily. Determined to reclaim control, they worked with British forces to regain mastery of Cochinchina. This led to a split in Vietnam: the communist North and non-communist South. Although initial peace discussions between the two nations seemed positive, ultimately their opposing policies proved incompatible. No matter how they framed it, France wanted its colony back, and Minh wanted total independence. The result was inevitable, and war broke out once more.

France was confident in its ability to win. It had, after all, already done so once. French troops bombarded Haiphong in November 1946, killing thousands while hoping for a swift end to the disagreement. But France failed to understand that what the Vietnamese people wanted was something it could never provide – unity and independence. And this time the

**"France failed to understand what the Vietnamese wanted – unity and independence"**

Vietnamese knew fighting back could yield results. They knew the French, they knew their techniques and their lies. They rejected the move to appoint the former emperor as chief of state, beginning an aggressive guerrilla war with aid from China's communist government. This wasn't just a battle between two old enemies, but a struggle between communism and those who opposed it. With China bankrolling the Vietnamese, the US stepped up to funnel aid to France. As war ravaged the country, over 60 years of colonial horrors, exploitation and simmering resentment came to a head in the battle for a tiny mountain outpost, a battle that would decide the future of Vietnam.

## THE VIETNAMESE RESISTANCE

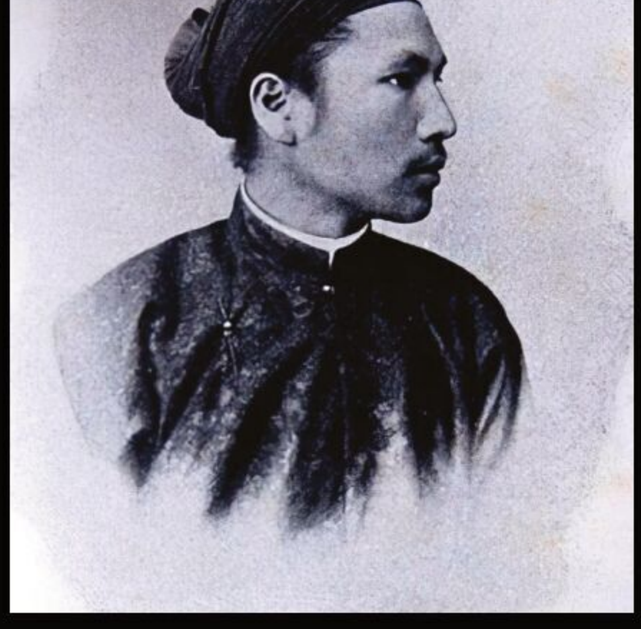
Translated as 'Aid the King', the Can Vuong movement was a desperate grab by the Vietnamese to expel the French

The Vietnamese were not unfamiliar with conquerors, and they were not the kind of people to take domination of their lands lying down. Pockets of resistance rose up to defy the French colonial rule, most notably the Can Vuong movement. With the aim of expelling the French and creating an independent Vietnam, they intended to install Hàm Nghi, the boy emperor, as ruler.

Taking place between 1885 and 1889, the Can Vuong movement began while the French were distracted by the Sino-French War. French General Henri Roussel de Courcy and an escort of French troops were attacked by thousands of insurgents during a visit to Hue. In retaliation the French looted the royal palace, forcing Hàm Nghi to flee for his life. Soon a rallying cry was sent by the exiled child emperor, calling his people to rise up. Thousands answered.

As the insurgents aimed their anger towards the conquerors – and also Vietnamese Christians – the French, horrified by tales of massacres, sent in troops to quell the uprising. Support for the rebellion was far from unanimous among the Vietnamese, and the queen mother deserted her son. The French enthroned the king's brother, with many Vietnamese leaders swearing their allegiance to the French-supported leader.

The movement came to a head during the Siege of Ba Dinh in 1887, where the Vietnamese resistance survived French bombardment for two months before abandoning their fortified camp. The Vietnamese lost thousands, while French deaths only numbered 19. The siege highlighted the disunity among the Can Vuong and spelled the end for the resistance. The movement rapidly collapsed, and Hàm Nghi was captured and deported to Algeria.



*Hàm Nghi was exiled to Algeria in 1888, where he married a French Algerian and had three children*

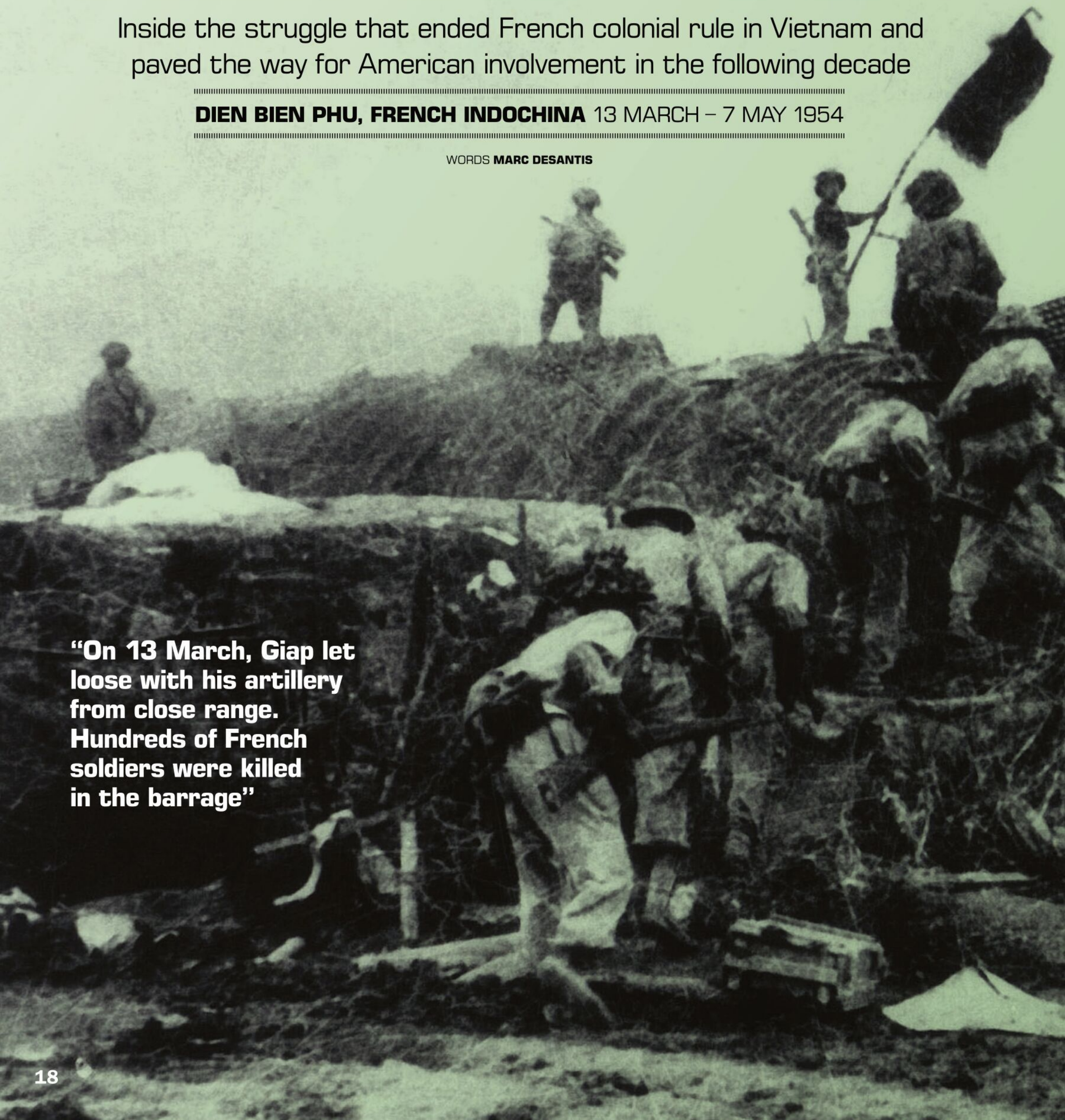
*Images: Alamy*

# THE BATTLE OF DIEN BIEN PHU

Inside the struggle that ended French colonial rule in Vietnam and paved the way for American involvement in the following decade

**DIEN BIEN PHU, FRENCH INDOCHINA** 13 MARCH – 7 MAY 1954

WORDS **MARC DESANTIS**



**"On 13 March, Giap let loose with his artillery from close range. Hundreds of French soldiers were killed in the barrage"**

Following the end of World War II, after the defeated Japanese had been withdrawn from Vietnam, France regained its colony, but it faced a strong and dedicated communist insurgency against its rule. Fundamentally, the French, as colonial masters, lacked the support of the Vietnamese people. Though there were some 190,000 French troops in the country, they could not defeat an insurgency with a strong nationalist appeal. By 1953, the price in blood had already been steep, with around 74,000 French troops having fallen.

The Vietnamese communists, the Viet Minh, were determined to eject the French from the country. France's top soldier in Vietnam, General Henri Navarre, believed that he could lure the communists into a battle that they would have no choice but to fight, a battle in which they would be pulverised. Afterwards, their leaders would have to meet the French at the negotiating table, where an end to the fighting could be achieved in a peace agreement.

To this end, Navarre decided to send a large force to occupy a strategic valley crossroads town named Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam's far northwest that stood athwart a Viet Minh supply route into Laos. On 20 November 1953, 800 French paratroopers were dropped into Dien Bien Phu. They were the first to arrive of an eventual 14,000 French troops who would defend the site against the Viet Minh.

The occupation of Dien Bien Phu was indeed a challenge to the Viet Minh. Its military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, developed a plan to eliminate it. To achieve that goal, a massive corps of labourers were mobilised to cut jungle trails, put down roads and carry supplies over distances of up to 805 kilometres to Dien Bien Phu. Artillery, including howitzers broken down into pieces, and mortars, ironically largely of US origins having been Korean War equipment captured by China, were lugged to the valley. These weapons would prove critical in the coming battle.

Dien Bien Phu was also an awkward place for the French to fight. They would be relying completely on resupply coming by aircraft. This would prove to be a fatal vulnerability as the coming battle unfolded. The French would soon discover that though they had compelled the Viet Minh to come out to fight, they had also made it possible for the enemy to trap them inside Dien Bien Phu.

Giap's soldiers (his force would comprise around 80,000 before the battle's end) encircled the French fortress. On 13 March, Giap let loose with his artillery from close range. Hundreds of French soldiers were killed in the barrage. One by one, the French strongpoints at Dien Bien Phu began to fall.

*Triumphant Viet Minh soldiers raise a flag over the French headquarters*



By 27 March, the Viet Minh had shut down the main airfield with their fire. There could be no resupply now except by uncertain airdrop. Wounded soldiers could not be removed from the beleaguered fortress either.

During the siege of Dien Bien Phu, the United States was solidly behind the French. In the US, the 'domino theory' was prevalent in much American strategic thinking. In their minds Vietnam was like a domino tile. If the country came under communist control, then so too eventually might Indonesia, Malaya, Burma, and Thailand. Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Formosa (Taiwan) and the Philippines would then be left vulnerable. That was a prospect that had to be avoided.

The French requested direct American support in the form of an airstrike against the communists. Though the thought of a heavy aerial bombardment of the Viet Minh did cross the minds of some American policy-makers (this was given the code name of Operation Vulture), as well as the use of a handful of small nuclear weapons, president Dwight D. Eisenhower ruled out both options.

American intervention would never materialise. President Eisenhower was unwilling to help the French with US military force unless the British agreed to do so also. They didn't, believing that there was little that they could hope to achieve by entering the conflict.

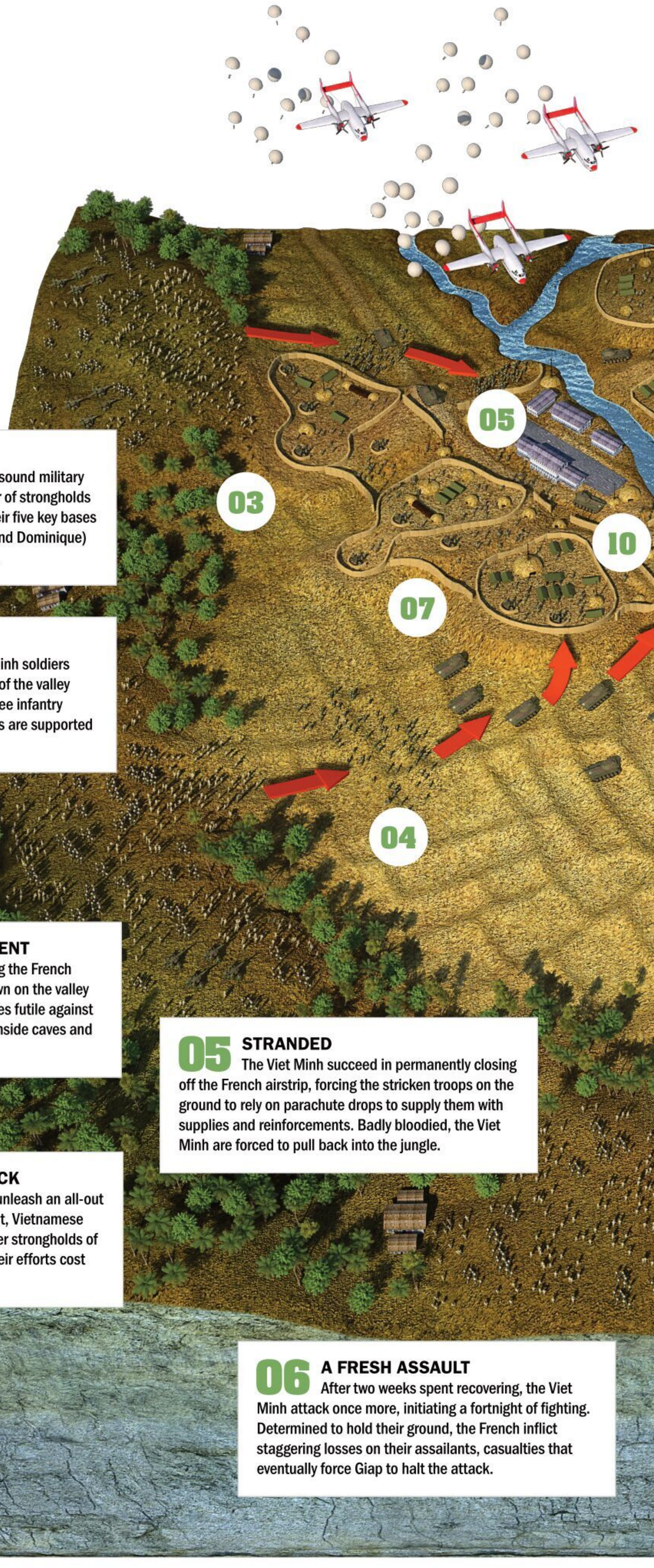
It was not that the Americans did nothing at all to aid the beleaguered French; they were just not very helpful. US cargo planes attempted to resupply the garrison but missed the drop zone. Over 100 tons of howitzer and mortar munitions were deposited into Viet Minh hands and then used to bombard the French.

Giap had enclosed Dien Bien Phu with trenchworks by early April. This allowed the Viet Minh to move about with little to fear from French fire. The final communist assault came on 5 May and continued for the next two days. By 7 May, the exhausted French garrison capitulated.

The cost to both sides had been enormous. More than 2,000 French troops had lost their lives, as had about 8,000 Viet Minh. Around 10,000 French prisoners were taken by the communists too. The ultimate cost to France would be greater still.

The fate of French Indochina was decided in Geneva, Switzerland. A diplomatic conference comprising the United States, the USSR, Britain and France had been scheduled since February and began on 8 May. The Viet Minh victory in the interim had a profound effect on the conference. In July, the Geneva Accords set down what was intended to be a temporary partition of Vietnam into a communist North and a non-communist South. The stage had been set for the next Vietnam War, a conflict that would suck the US into a vortex of bloodshed.

# DIEN BIEN PHU 1954




**01 THE FRENCH DIG IN**
Disregarding the foundations of sound military planning, the French construct a number of strongholds on flat, open ground flanked by hills. Their five key bases (Claudine, Huguette, Francoise, Eliane and Dominique) are named after Navarre's former lovers.

**02 SURROUNDED**
By early March, 49,000 Viet Minh soldiers were dug in along the slopes either side of the valley in which the French were positioned. Three infantry divisions and two independent regiments are supported by field guns and heavy mortars.

**03 BRUTAL BOMBARDMENT**
The Viet Minh begin pounding the French positions, mercilessly raining shells down on the valley floor for weeks. French counterfire proves futile against the enemy guns, which are positioned inside caves and bunkers and expertly camouflaged.

**04 THE VIET MINH ATTACK**
On 13 March the Viet Minh unleash an all-out assault. Following a huge bombardment, Vietnamese troops pour forwards, seizing the smaller strongholds of Gabrielle, Beatrice and Anne-Marie. Their efforts cost 7,000 casualties in just three days.

**05 STRANDED**
The Viet Minh succeed in permanently closing off the French airstrip, forcing the stricken troops on the ground to rely on parachute drops to supply them with supplies and reinforcements. Badly bloodied, the Viet Minh are forced to pull back into the jungle.

**06 A FRESH ASSAULT**
After two weeks spent recovering, the Viet Minh attack once more, initiating a fortnight of fighting. Determined to hold their ground, the French inflict staggering losses on their assailants, casualties that eventually force Giap to halt the attack.

**"It was not that the Americans did nothing at all to aid the beleaguered French; they were just not very helpful"**

**10 SURRENDER**
The French positions are overwhelmed one by one, and on the sixth day of the assault a mine ruptures the bunkers of Eliane, which are then flooded with Viet Minh soldiers. The French command post is stormed the next day, forcing them to surrender.

**09 HIDDEN NETWORK**
To lessen their casualties the Viet Minh excavate a series of trenches that completely encircle the French. Troops filter into position to await the start of another assault. It begins on the night of 1 May with raids on Huguette and Eliane.

**08 ISABELLE ISOLATED**
The southern stronghold of Isabelle, now severed from the main base, manages to hold out despite the Viet Minh 304th Division continuing to shell it. However, Dominique and Francoise have fallen, as have sections of Huguette and Eliane.

**07 A NUCLEAR OPTION?**
With supplies of ammunition and food rapidly dwindling and 3,000 injured men trapped inside the base, the French are becoming desperate. They discuss using nuclear weapons with the US, but President Eisenhower refuses to help without allied aid.

## OPPOSING FORCES

VS

### FRENCH UNION

**NUMBER OF TROOPS:**
14,000



**KEY LEADER:**
**General Henri Navarre**
As the architect for the strategy that culminated in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Navarre bears much responsibility for the French defeat.
**Strengths:** Intelligent and dedicated, Navarre understood the limits of French power in Vietnam.
**Weaknesses:** Badly miscalculated the strength and resourcefulness of the Viet Minh.

**KEY UNIT:**
**French Paratroopers**
The French paratroopers who fought at Dien Bien Phu were arguably the finest soldiers on either side.
**Strengths:** Immensely brave, elite infantrymen drawn from several countries, they were able to carry out any kind of operation asked of them.
**Weaknesses:** The vulnerable tactical position at Dien Bien Phu diminished their overall combat ability.

**KEY WEAPON:**
**Douglas C-47**



Heavily used by the French, the American-built C-47 was a transport version of the famed DC-3 airliner.
**Strengths:** Rugged and reliable, the C-47 was perfect for delivering troops to their drop zones.
**Weaknesses:** The C-47 could not overcome the strong Viet Minh anti-aircraft fire.

### DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

**NUMBER OF TROOPS:**
80,000



**KEY LEADER:**
**General Vo Nguyen Giap**
Chief of the Viet Minh, Giap was the mastermind of the operation that brought about the fall of Dien Bien Phu.
**Strengths:** Giap never lost sight of his military goals and was able to outlast both the French and the Americans.
**Weaknesses:** Giap's fighting strategies cost large numbers of his soldiers' lives.



**KEY UNIT:**
**Viet Minh regulars**
Viet Minh regulars were tactically adept and experts at camouflage and concealment, skills that would be very useful at Dien Bien Phu.
**Strengths:** Viet Minh regulars were tough, highly mobile and ideologically committed.
**Weaknesses:** More lightly equipped than their opponents.

**KEY WEAPON:**
**Soviet anti-aircraft gun**
Anti-aircraft guns, such as the Soviet-designed M1939 37mm cannon, severely hindered French resupply of the embattled Dien Bien Phu garrison.
**Strengths:** Good range, high rate of fire, explosive ammunition.
**Weaknesses:** Not useful against targets at high altitude.

*Map: Nicholas Forder / Images: Alamy, Wikipedia*

# THE STRUGGLE FOR VIETNAM'S SOUL


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Dividing Vietnam was supposed to avert violence. In truth it set two rivals on the road to destruction

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Relying on trumped-up charges and flawed theories, the US Government dragged its people to war

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The tools of war used by both sides

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A savage infantry battle saw both sides claim victory

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Meet the commanders who led from the front in an attritional war that neither side could win

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Lasting for over three years, the US's aerial bombardment of Vietnam remains a contentious operation to this day

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This special forces unit was so shrouded in mystery that even today military historians are still trying to piece their operations together

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An Australian colonel recalls a fight against overwhelming odds

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Climb inside the chopper that would become synonymous with the jungles of Vietnam




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# NORTH V

**"The Eisenhower administration was convinced that they would need to intervene in order to stop a wave of communism sweeping the East"**



*The 1954 Geneva Conference, where Vietnam was divided*

# S SOUTH

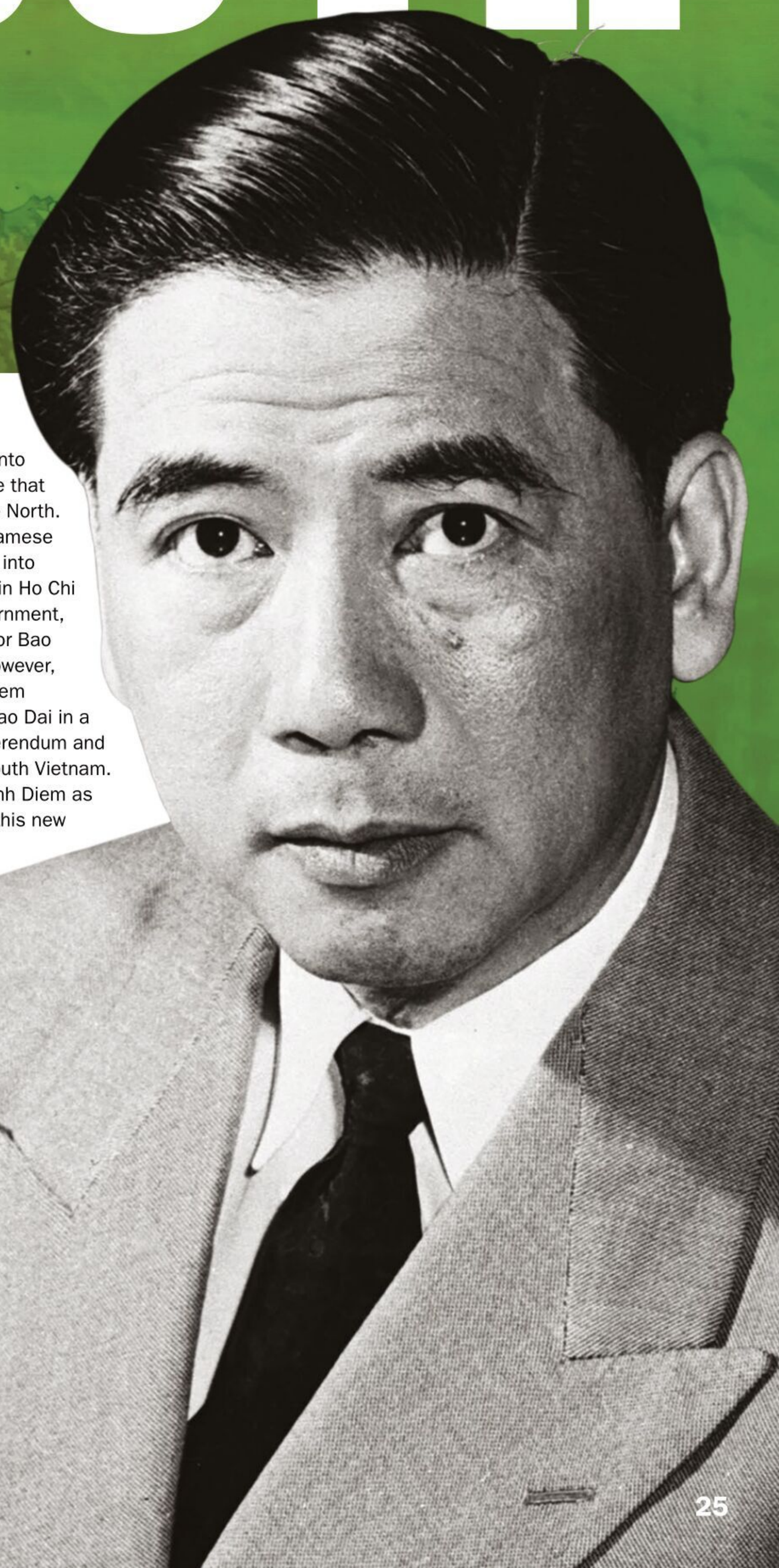
Dividing Vietnam into the North and South was meant to avert conflict. Instead it only served to fuel a bitter guerrilla war that would kill thousands

WORDS **CALLUM MCKELVIE**

Following the United Nations conference in 1954, it was decided that Vietnam was to be divided at the 17th Parallel, separating the country into both a North and South. The French military withdrew their troops from the North and the communist forces of Ho Chi Minh were given total control. Though the agreement stated explicitly that the division was not to be seen as a political or territorial boundary, soon two very distinct states began to emerge. The agreement stated that, in 1956, national free elections were to be held, but those elections never occurred and instead both the North and the South engaged in a bitter struggle involving armed warfare, propaganda and political manoeuvring.

Following the conference, US officials were far from pleased with the results. The oncoming elections, they felt, could only result in an overwhelming victory for Ho Chi Minh and result in a wholly communist Vietnam. Fearful of what was termed the 'domino theory', the Eisenhower administration was convinced that they would need to intervene in order to stop a wave of communism sweeping the East. They made it clear that they were not bound by the agreements and, along with the government of South Vietnam (which they played a pivotal role in establishing), refused to agree. Not one of the nine countries involved would sign the Final Declaration.

Instead, the United States sought to influence the development of South Vietnam, seeking to shape the government into an anti-communist state that would stand against the North. Ngo Dinh Diem, a Vietnamese politician who had gone into exile after refusing to join Ho Chi Minh's communist government, was selected as Emperor Bao Dai's prime minister. However, a year later, in 1955, Diem succeeded in beating Bao Dai in a government-backed referendum and became president of South Vietnam. The US deemed Ngo Dinh Diem as the ideal candidate for this new state and immediately provided the new



## PERSECUTION OF THE BUDDHISTS

President Ngo Dinh Diem's government persecuted Buddhists during his reign, resulting in mass protests

President Diem's government often favoured Roman Catholics over other religions, placing members of that religion in positions of office and prominence. While doing so, Diem's supporters also worked to make the lives of Vietnam's Buddhists a daily hell. This discrimination stretched from the granting of state land and finances for the building of churches and temples to catholic students being more likely to receive scholarships than Buddhist ones. Buddhist groups, unlike other religions, were also required to have special government permits in order to hold large meetings.

In 1963 tensions flared when Buddhists were prohibited from flying the Buddhist flag on Vesak, the birth of Gautama Buddha. When a protest was held troops opened fire, leaving nine dead. Instead of apologising for the incident, President Diem's government took a hard-line approach. In June, tensions increased when troops poured liquid chemicals onto the heads of praying Buddhists. On 11 June, Thich Quang Duc set himself on fire in protest, and other Buddhists followed his example. Mass protests continued to be held, and by August President Diem had declared martial law, the army tasked with raiding pagodas.

As a result of his persecution of Buddhists, officers in Diem's army began to silently arrange a coup, a plot that would result in Diem's assassination in November 1963.



*President Diem meeting Eisenhower during his 1957 trip to Washington*



*Ho Chi Minh meeting with Mao Zedong of the People's Republic of China*

*Images: Alamy, Getty Images, Wikipedia*

government with financial and diplomatic support, even helping resettle some 900,000 refugees from the North. President Diem refused to carry out the Geneva Accords and instead crafted a suffocatingly oppressive and autocratic regime.

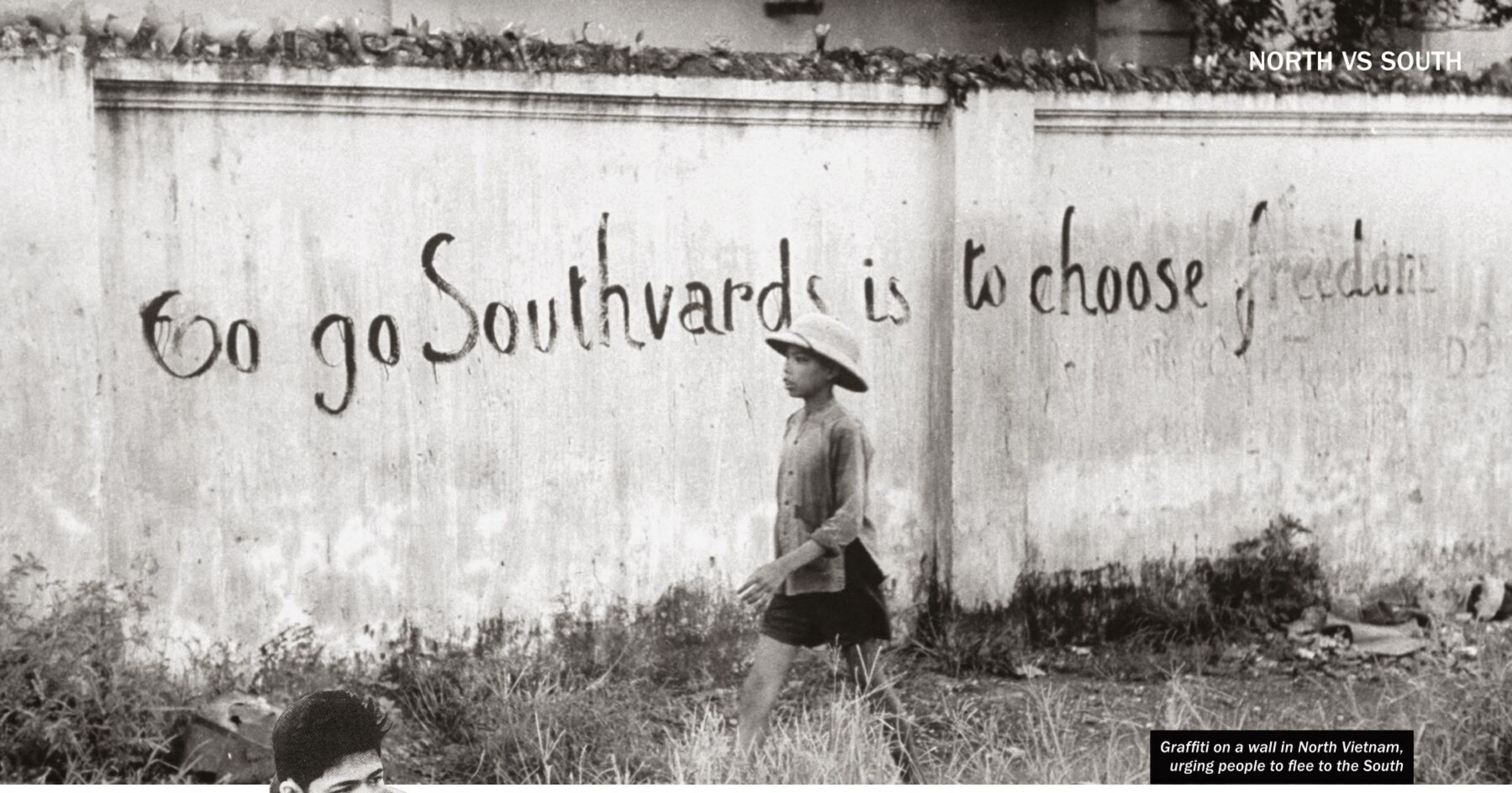
Almost immediately this harsh, authoritarian nature began to cause problems. President Diem himself refused to delegate authority, having an almost paranoid obsession with loyalty. He filled his government with members of his family, giving his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu vast amounts of power. Organisations such as the Personalist Labor Revolutionary Party used secret networks to help Diem control all political activity in Vietnam, silencing any competitors or dissident voices. The regime was rife with corruption and numerous local officials engaged in extortion and bribery. Not only this, but Diem was Roman Catholic and his government's hiring of members of the same religion for positions of office alienated much of the general public. Historian Lewis L. Gould stated that the Diem family had a "fundamental inefficiency" and a "narrow system of loyalty and trust" that greatly affected their capacity to rule.

Diem's oppressive state was also determined to stamp out any signs of communism in the South. For years, large areas of the countryside had been under the effective control of communist guerrillas along with a number of powerful politico-religious sects. In 1955, Diem launched an offensive campaign to oust these forces and regain control. As well as using the military, the Strategic Hamlet Program was launched and attempted to create new rural communities by offering peasants aid, financial support and 'protection'. However, it is suspected the programme alienated the peasants more than it assisted them. In 1956, Diem took his war on communism a step further when he instigated the controversial policy that any communist activity was to be punishable by death.

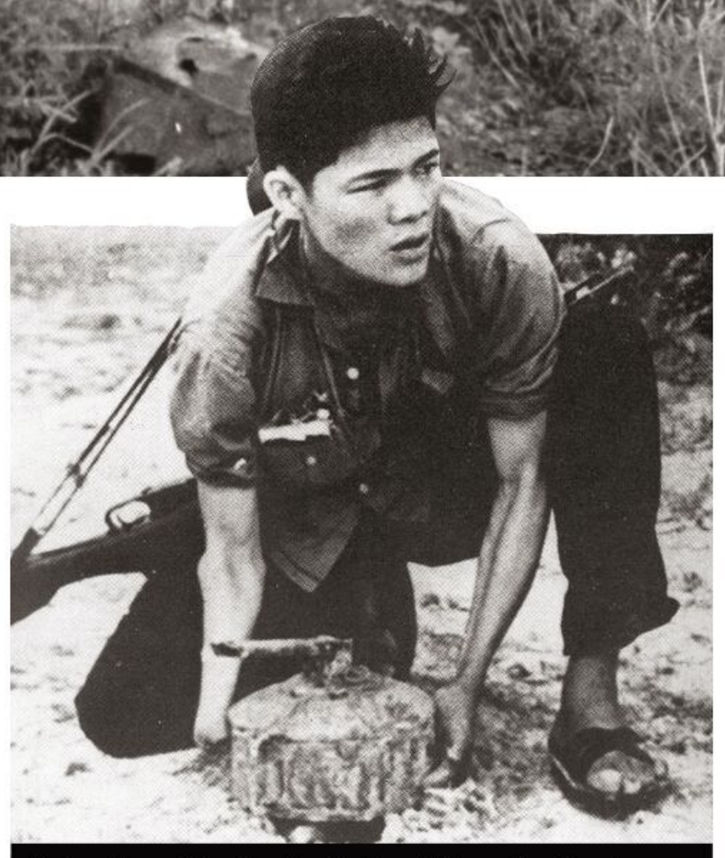
North Vietnam, meanwhile, had spent the time since the Geneva Convention crafting a new communist society with help from both China and the USSR (the two main communist powers at the time). Indeed, inspired by the former's 'five-year plan', Ho Chi Minh announced a three-year plan that he claimed would transform the country's agriculture. Traditionally, due to the mountainous terrain and quality of the land, the North had been forced to rely on imports to feed its population. The ruling communist party, Lao Dong now seized land and large cooperatives were formed. The landlords were publicly humiliated, with their private property (including their homes) taken and given to the public. Many were beaten and some 50,000 were executed, forcing Ho-Chi Minh to admit in August of 1956 that this policy had gone too far.

Similar to the South, Lao Dong also sought to influence political thought within their new state. They initiated a policy of religious and political suppression, with Catholics, Buddhists, academics and numerous others sent to 're-education' camps. In November of 1956, due to the harsh economic and agricultural policies, around 20,000 peasants revolted at Nam Dam and the resultant clash with the communist troops saw 6,000 executed.

Yet while the North's policies resulted in horrendous loss of life and the ridiculous targets set by the three-year plan were not met, by the end of the 1950s Lao Dong had overseen a number of economic and industrial




*Graffiti on a wall in North Vietnam, urging people to flee to the South*



*A guerilla soldier for the National Liberation Front, or Viet Cong*

improvements. By 1960 the country had constructed 100 new factories and developed the beginnings of a coal mining industry. A lack of trained experts prevented the industries from developing at the speed desired by Lao Dong, but the state had begun to shape some form of a fledgling economy.

Meanwhile, in the South, as a result of Diem's oppressive attacks against communism, a stronger militarised organisation was growing. On 20 December 1960, the National Liberation Front was officially formed, though the organisation (as a collection of smaller guerilla groups under the influence of the North) had been in operation for some time. The explicit intention of the Front was to overthrow the government of South Vietnam and reunify the country under a single communist leaders. The inspiration behind this organisation was fairly obvious, the NLF clearly attempting to evoke the Viet Minh, which had been so successful in ending the French colonial rule of Vietnam. The hope was that the NLF would do the same to the government of South Vietnam and also end US interference in the country. Yet the name was more than a simple nod; indeed an estimated 5–10,000 ex-Viet Minh members were sent undercover into South Vietnam, as the old organisation combined with the new.

President Diem nicknamed this group 'Viet Gian Cong San', which roughly translates as 'communist Traitors to Vietnam'. The US would use the shortened 'Viet Cong' to refer mainly to the fighting arm of the NLF but also to the organisation as a whole.

Why would a man or woman join the Viet Cong? Well, as historian Gordon L. Rottman stated, "The reasons a man or woman joined the VC are as varied and complex as individuals themselves. The most common was simply disillusionment with the government in Saigon and acceptance of the constant barrage of NLF propaganda."

**"The intention of the NLF was to overthrow the government of South Vietnam and reunify the country"**

Not every individual who joined was doing so out of communist or socialist ideology either, the various groups that merged into the NLF included members of the politico-religious sects and student groups.

The communist government was convinced that an eventual confrontation with both the South and their Western backers was inevitable and alongside developing their nation's social and economic policies began a programme of military expansion. The NLF was the perfect organisation through which the North could attempt to destroy the South without seeming to be directly involved. A 1964 memorandum prepared by RAND (an American thinktank) for the US Air Force stated, "They go to great lengths to camouflage their actual contribution and to perpetuate the myth that they are only lending moral support to the rebellion."

Yet why were the North so keen to keep their considerable involvement hidden? "It benefits the southern insurgents," the RAND report continues, "who have all the flexibility, mobility and freedom from responsibility of guerilla's (they need to maintain a presence or protect civil order, they can live off the land, and they are able to choose their targets)."

Both the USSR and China refused to act directly but provided advice and support. Crucially, they allowed the North to purchase weapons and items such as medicine, which furnished the supplies the NLF obtained independently. By 1959, the communist government had been building roads and preparing supply lines, most notably the famous Ho Chi Minh trail, for the movement of troops and military vehicles into South Vietnam. Yet the greatest contribution, the aforementioned RAND report states, was "the more intangible political and psychological support of the DRV". The North made sure that alongside the NLF's more direct military operations that they kept a constant flow of propaganda into the South. This, along with the policies and corruption of Diem's government, allowed the NLF, but also a general feeling of animosity, to grow within the South.

*American airstrikes using napalm and Agent Orange – instigated by President Kennedy – devastated the Vietnamese countryside*

# THE ROAD TO WAR

## How the United States became embroiled in a fractured Vietnam

WORDS **JAMES HORTON**

The rising tensions between the United States Government and the communists of Vietnam stretched across the terms of three sitting presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Although the three men differed in their principles and political nous, each was a servant to the ideological rhetoric and pressures of their time: that communism was the enemy and that its rise must be stopped. Therefore, an involvement in Vietnam that started as mostly financial support of a communist-opposed government inexorably grew as the years stretched on and the situation deteriorated. As the will of the Vietnamese population and the competency of the local US-backed leadership severely diminished between the years of 1955 and 1965, the sitting presidents found themselves embedded deeper and deeper in the conflict. War between the two nations' armies would become inevitable.

By 1954 Vietnam had wrestled free of its French colonial overlords but remained divided on whose leadership should fill the power vacuum. The Geneva Accords found a temporary solution to this problem by dividing Vietnam along the 17th Parallel, severing the country in half until elections could be held in 1956. Rebel leader and communist Ho Chi Minh's government ruled the North, and a US-backed styled democracy took hold in the South. The southern president and former prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem rose to power of South Vietnam (or 'Republic of Vietnam') in 1955 and enjoyed considerable US support. The Americans, ever antagonistic toward communism and wary that Ho Chi Minh's popularity was likely to win him nomination in the coming elections, advocated for the unification vote never to be held. Diem was happy to oblige, and Vietnam remained divided.

Ngo Dinh Diem was a staunch opponent of communism, but unfortunately for the Americans there was little else for them to enjoy about his leadership, aside from this essential trait. Diem had served under former Emperor Bao Dai and was known as a Vietnamese traditionalist from noble stock. However, he was a distrustful man and, as a Roman Catholic, differed from most of the Vietnamese population, who were Buddhist, on religious grounds. The US leadership had initially been impressed with Diem's ability to suppress his enemies, a characteristic he had demonstrated with aplomb in the build-up to his election to power in 1955. But this aggressive suppression evolved into outright oppression as the years of his reign continued.

Along with communists, Buddhists found themselves victims of Diem's ire. Suspected communists were rounded up and killed by Diem's secret police service, and Buddhist protests were squashed with impunity. Diem was loathe to relinquish any vestige of power and so ruled as an autocrat, trusting few outside of his immediate family. The aggressive persecution of his own people and his complete monopoly on power earned him many enemies at home and greatly unsettled his American allies in Washington.

Many in the rural villages of South Vietnam had an affinity for their communist cousins in the North, and Diem's actions only worked to drive these people into violent rebellion. The disenfranchised common folk unified into the North Liberation Front in 1960, which would come to be known by the Americans as the Viet Cong, or 'Vietnamese communists'. The

**"Suspected communists were rounded up and killed by Diem's secret police, and Buddhist protests were squashed with impunity"**



*Ngo Dinh Diem detested communism but ruled South Vietnam as an oppressive autocrat*





*The Strategic Hamlet Program moved villagers into fortified encampments to prevent interaction with the Viet Cong*

Viet Cong waged a guerrilla war on Diem's government, launching ambushes and then retreating to hide in the local villages. Their efforts were supported by Ho Chi Minh's communist North through supplies transported via the Minh Trail, which was a series of passageways that weaved from North to South Vietnam via Cambodia and Laos.

Rather than retract their aid for Diem, US President John F. Kennedy increased the support first offered by his predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Along with financial aid, Eisenhower had sent several hundred US military personnel to act as advisors for Diem's military efforts, starting in 1955. Kennedy increased the US military advisor presence substantially during his term in office, inflating the figure to over 10,000 US troops in South Vietnam by the end of 1962. This increased advisory support did little to quell the unrest, however, and the dissent grew yet further with the launch of the Strategic Hamlet Program that same year.

Diem and Kennedy were aware of the Viet Cong's potential influence over the rural South Vietnamese villagers, and so they strategised to physically remove the villagers from their homes and bunker them in fortified hamlets. The villagers themselves were set to work digging moats and planting stakes to defend a position they did not want to be trapped within. They had been moved, with force if necessary, to a place further from their farms and the resting places of their ancestors. Their reward was to reside under an armed guard of the South Vietnamese army while knowing all too well that it was the army personnel, not them, who were under threat from the Viet Cong. Instead of stifling Viet Cong recruitment, the hamlets turned more villagers against Diem's regime and bolstered the efforts of the NLF.

**"A war directly involving the US edged yet closer when the US Navy started supporting South Vietnamese raids on islands held by the communist North"**

1963 marked the collapse of Diem's government. With his faltering economic reforms frustrating those in the city and his army's oppressive presence frustrating the rural population, a military coup brewed among Diem's generals. The US were aware of these stirrings, and as Diem's strategies had been far from their liking, were not opposed to the idea. However, while Washington continued to debate how and when they should approach the usurping generals, Diem and his brother were captured and shot dead. Diem had been assassinated, and just a few weeks later the same fate would befall US President John F. Kennedy.

Kennedy's Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson, took charge of the US Government and the management of a South Vietnamese problem that had become more unstable since Diem's removal. It looked to the Americans that the South was becoming less able to defend itself against the communist tide. Rather than accept the US effort as a futile sunk cost, Johnson ploughed yet more resources into supporting South Vietnam. A war directly involving the US edged yet closer when the US Navy started supporting South Vietnamese raids on islands held by the communist North.

The US dared not attack North Vietnam directly at this stage for fear of provoking the Soviet Union and China, but its navy vessels performed covert reconnaissance



*Diem's oppression of Buddhists drove one monk to burn himself alive in defiant protest*

for their Vietnamese allies. To perform this task, the US Navy kept mostly to international waters but patrolled the Gulf of Tonkin, which bordered North Vietnam. As such the Maddox, a US warship, was close by when the South Vietnamese launched an island bombardment on their northern enemies in July 1964. The North Vietnamese were quick to realise that the US was likely involved in coordinating the attack and sent torpedo boats after the Maddox a few days later. The formidable US vessel suffered no loss of life and minimal damage during the attack, and after being reinforced by another warship went back to helping the South Vietnamese raiders.

However, late on 4 August, the US Navy captains were amazed to see that during a bout of rough weather, the North Vietnamese launched another ambush. This appeared to be a massively co-ordinated effort, as vessels came streaming toward the US ships through the darkness of the night from both the direction of land and further out from the sea. Like ghosts, these ambush vessels disappeared and reappeared from sonar detections as the Maddox engaged in evasive manoeuvres and unloaded firepower of its own.

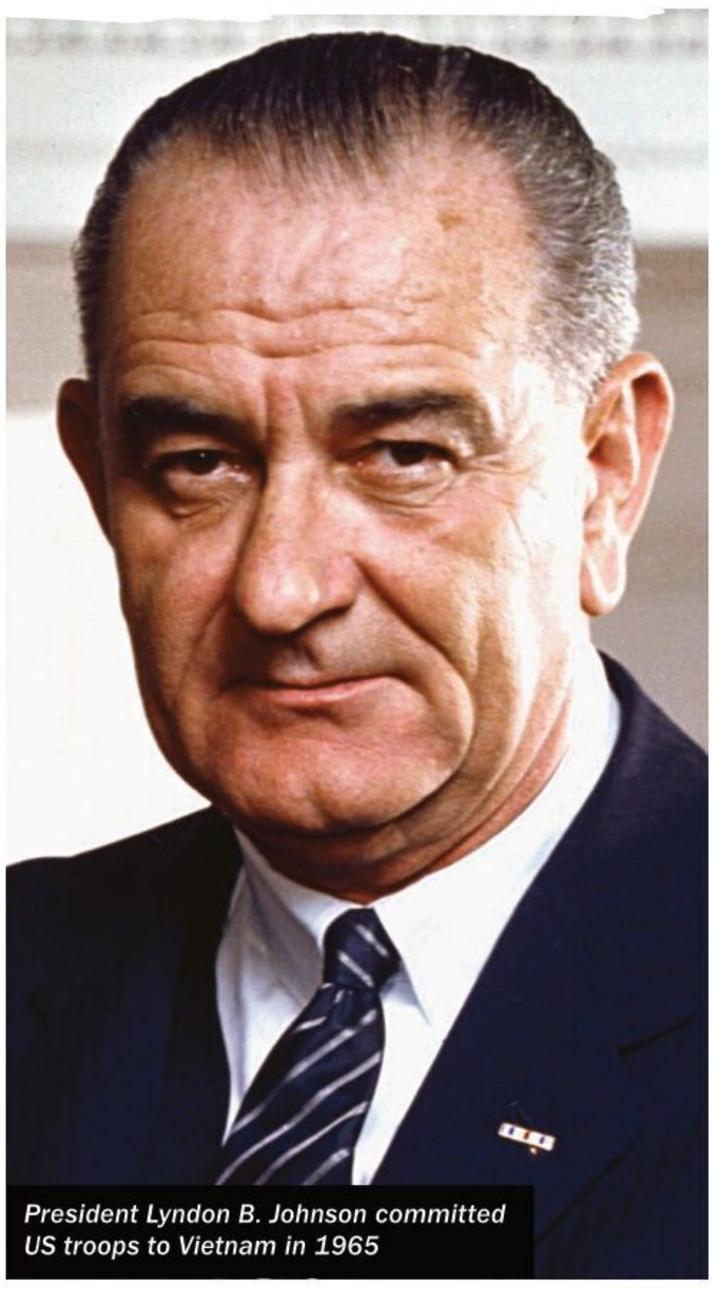
In the morning, as the Maddox sat unscathed, the crew found themselves scratching their heads and asking if the attack had ever happened. It would be revealed over the coming days that rather than North Vietnamese ambush boats, the sonar detectors on the Maddox had been detecting waves from the rough sea. But this truth didn't matter to Johnson. Washington had been receiving reports throughout the 'ambush', and Johnson quickly capitalised on the perceived aggression against the US to push the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution through Congress. This gave Johnson almost universal power to wage war in Vietnam any way he saw fit.

It did not take long for Johnson to fully flex his new legal powers. As a retaliatory measure to the imagined attack, he greenlit increased aerial bombing and herbicide attacks to destroy the Viet Cong and their jungle cover, including over the Ho Chi Minh trail. The following year he went yet further and committed US front-line soldiers to the war effort despite being warned that sending in the US Army would by no means assure victory.

Johnson spouted a defensive rhetoric for his monumental actions, stating that "The first reality is that North Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest."

With their president's misleading words at the forefront of their minds, 3,500 marines landed in Da Nang in March 1965 to unwanted fanfare. The marines spent most of that first day labouring in the heat as they unpacked their weapons of war while spies from the NLF watched from the beachside.

From their viewpoint, the Viet Cong soldiers wondered how the Americans would cope with the intense heat. They also speculated that this arrival marked the beginning of a much harsher war. Regretfully for the soldiers on both sides, they were soon proven right.



*President Lyndon B. Johnson committed US troops to Vietnam in 1965*

## DOMINO THEORY

### The misguided political theory that fuelled US involvement in numerous military conflicts

**The Cold War was not just a thinly veiled feud between the United States and the Soviet Union; it was a war of ideologies. The USSR was a one-party communist state, the US a capitalist republic. Communism was a growing force in the political sphere, and the USSR was the juggernaut spearheading its charge. Communism was also tightly intertwined with revolution, with the USSR's own origin stemming from violent beginnings. In the decades since its inception, other countries had begun to follow the USSR's lead, with other populous nations such as China embracing communism through revolution. The US feared the swell of communism, especially within Asia, and treated the ideology as an infection that could be spread from nation to nation.**

**This political theory spawned the 'domino theory', which espoused that if one nation fell to communism, its neighbours would subsequently fall – just like a row of dominoes. This metaphor also worked well in the minds of the Americans, as they visualised themselves as the stalwart defenders of democracy who could hold up the domino and prevent it falling. Today the domino theory has been disregarded, as history has showed us that the principle does not hold. Following the US's failure to prevent Vietnam falling to communism, the ideology spread to close neighbours Cambodia and Laos, but did not take hold elsewhere throughout Asia.**




*The domino theory was one of the primary reasons the US went to war with North Vietnam*

*Images: Alamy, Wiki*

# HEAD TO HEAD

Driven by opposing ideologies, the soldiers of both sides proved to be equally committed to the causes they served

## US ARMY GI



**M1 HELMET**
This headgear was the standard issue in the US Army since WWII.

**M16**
Replacing the heavy M14 in 1966, the M16 initially proved to be a problematic weapon, with several reports of soldiers being killed while attempting to clear a jam (a fault that trouble the M16 a lot). However, the gun's light weight and high rate of fire made it ideal for jungle warfare, and design changes eventually made it far safe to disassemble and clean

**BODY ARMOUR**
These sturdy zip-up flak vests commonly came with ammunition pouches and grenade hangers.

**UTILITY TROUSERS**
Olive-green lower garments came with two patch and two hip pockets and were made to endure all weathers and heavy wear.

**SMOKE GRENADE**
Coloured smoke grenades were frequently used to mark landing zones and casualty pick up points.

**JUNGLE BOOTS**
Before the introduction of sturdier jungle boots, flimsier footwear rotted quickly in the unforgiving conditions.

**"But also out here in this dreary, difficult war, I think history will record that this may have been one of America's finest hours, because we took a difficult task and we succeeded"**
**President R. Nixon**

# VIET CONG FIGHTER



**GRENADES**
The Viet Cong were armed with rocket-propelled grenades and mortars designed to destroy heavily armoured vehicles. They assembled these homemade devices from leftover explosives, tin cans and wires.

**ARMED BY ALLIES**
China and the USSR supplied the Viet Cong with Chinese versions of the Soviet AK-47 assault rifle. They were also armed with a range of light, medium and even heavy machine guns to take down helicopters.

**THE HIDDEN ENEMY**
One of the most powerful tactics of the Viet Cong was to disguise themselves as ordinary peasants, so they would wear civilian clothes and ambush unsuspecting enemies. However, the main force would later wear black uniform.

**"You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at those odds, you will lose and I will win"**
**Ho Chi Minh**

# IA DRANG

The US First Air Cavalry sought to oust the North Vietnamese from the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. What followed was a bloody battle that pitted elite infantry forces against each other

WORDS **WILLIAM E. WELSH**



**"More communists clad in mustard-coloured uniforms arrived to join the firefight"**



*US Army Major Bruce Crandall, who received the Medal of Honor for bravery during the battle, departs in his UH-1D helicopter after dropping off a load of riflemen at LZ X-Ray*

# PLEIKU PROVINCE, SOUTH VIETNAM
## 14–17 NOVEMBER 1965

Less than two hours after landing near the Cambodian border on 14 November 1965, an American 'Air Cavalry' battalion made contact with North Vietnamese regulars operating from a base camp in a mountain stronghold inside South Vietnam. In a sweep up a nearby mountain, an American rifle platoon spotted a squad of enemy troops that appeared to be retreating along a mountain trail and gave chase. The jungle swallowed the Americans, and they lost contact with their main force.

50 North Vietnamese came charging down the trail towards the US troops. Rounds hissed through the trees. Two American machine-gun teams swung into action, and a grenadier pumped rounds from his M79 'Thumper' into the enemy's flank. More communists clad in mustard-coloured uniforms arrived to join the firefight.

The young lieutenant leading the American platoon had committed the blunder that he had been warned against just minutes before. His company commander had said over the tactical radio, "Be careful, I don't want you to get pinned down or sucked into anything." In his desire to engage the enemy, the eager young officer had done precisely that. His platoon would have to hold on until help came – if it arrived before they were wiped out.

The war between the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the American-backed Republic of Vietnam, better known as North Vietnam and South Vietnam respectively, entered a new phase in 1965. Four years earlier, the US had 'stood up' its Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Among MACV's many responsibilities was ensuring that the South Vietnamese troops had American military advisors to coach them on battle tactics.

When it became apparent that South Vietnamese forces could not defeat the Viet Cong insurgency, the Americans brought in their own ground troops. At the same time, the North Vietnamese Politburo had decided to send regular army troops into action in South Vietnam. These troops arrived in the south by

### OPPOSING FORCES

| PEOPLE'S ARMY OF NORTH VIETNAM | VS | US ARMY |
|---|---|---|
| **UNIT:** B-3 Front | | **UNIT:** First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) |
| **LEADERS:** Brig. Gen. Chu Huy Man | | **LEADERS:** Lt. Col. Harold Moore |
| **INFANTRY:** 6,000 | | **INFANTRY:** 1,500 |
| **HEAVY ARTILLERY:** 0 | | **HEAVY ARTILLERY:** 12 105mm howitzers |

way of the Ho Chi Minh trail, a vast road and trail network built by labourers from the North that ran through eastern Laos and Cambodia.

Among the elite US ground forces that arrived in 1965 was Major General Harry Kinnard's 16,000-strong First Cavalry (Airmobile) Division, which established its base at An Khe in Binh Dinh Province. The division was built around the novel concept of moving troops before and during battle by helicopter.

The helicopter that was the mainstay of the air mobility concept was the ubiquitous utility helicopter, the UH-1, nicknamed 'Huey'. At this point in the Vietnam War it came in two versions: the elongated UH-1D, known as a 'Slick' transported troops, and the shorter UH-1B armed with rocket launchers and miniguns was known as a 'Hog'. Slicks ordinarily could carry their four-man crew as well as eight infantrymen, but the thin air of the highlands strained the engine, and in that altitude it could transport only five infantrymen.

After its arrival in September, the division conducted sweeps around its sprawling helicopter base at An Khe to clear the area of Viet Cong guerillas. Far bigger opportunities awaited it, though. When the North Vietnamese attacked the US Special Forces camp at Plei Me in the Central Highlands on 19 October, MACV Commander General William Westmoreland ordered Kinnard to engage and destroy enemy forces. At first the Americans believed they were fighting the Viet Cong, but they eventually realised they were up against well-trained, highly disciplined North Vietnamese regulars.

The Central Highlands had long been a sanctuary for communist operations in South Vietnam. The highlands "are a run of erratic

**"At first the Americans believed they were fighting the Viet Cong, but they eventually realised they were up against well-trained, highly disciplined North Vietnamese regulars"**

mountain ranges, gnarled valleys, jungle-strewn ravines and abrupt plains where Montagnard villages cluster, thin and disappear as the terrain steepens," wrote war correspondent Michael Herr. As such, they offered the North Vietnamese both a training ground and a sanctuary to recover from battle. For the American troops, who had little knowledge of the rugged high country and would have had great difficulty penetrating it without their helicopters, the highlands were "spooky beyond belief," said Herr.

Running the show for the communist People's Army of Vietnam in the Central Highlands in 1965 was Brigadier General Chu Huy Man, the commander of the division-sized B-3 Front. His three regiments were the 32nd, 33rd and 66th regiments. Hanoi wanted Man to destroy the Plei Me Special Forces Camp and any South Vietnamese forces sent to support it. Afterwards, his troops were to advance east to the coast, thereby splitting South Vietnam in half. But when Hanoi learned that the newly arrived First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) stationed at An Khe blocked a drive to the coast, it revised the final step. The North Vietnamese regulars were not to try to reach the coast: instead, they were to kill Americans.

American airpower broke attempts by the 32nd and 33rd regiments to capture the Special Forces Camp and to destroy the South Vietnamese relief force. After a severe mauling, Brigadier General Man withdrew his forces west into the Ia Drang Valley, which bordered the Chu Pong Mountains.

Kinnard sent his reconnaissance force, the First Squadron of the Ninth Cavalry, to scour the Ia Drang Valley in search of the enemy base camp. The Ninth Cavalry used light observation helicopters with large Plexiglas bubble canopies to peer into the foliage below for signs of the enemy. When they spied something promising, an aero-rifle platoon was deployed to explore the situation on foot. During the first week of November, the squadron found evidence indicating that the communists' base camp was situated on or near the Chu Pong mountains. Their reconnaissance was accurate, because the three North Vietnamese regiments were deployed on the eastern slopes of the Mountains, as well as in Ia Drang Valley located to the northeast.

Anticipating a large battle, Kinnard ordered Colonel Thomas Brown to have his Third Brigade ready for a helicopter assault into Ia Drang Valley. The brigade comprised Lieutenant Colonel Harold Moore's First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry; Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDade's Second Battalion, Seventh Cavalry; and Lieutenant Colonel Robert Tully's Second Brigade, Fifth Cavalry.



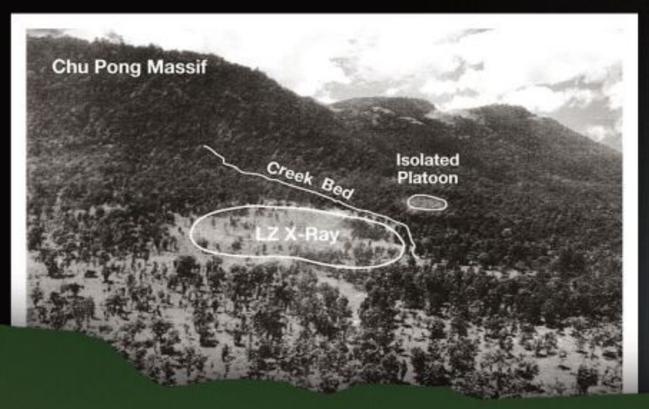
*North Vietnamese soldiers fighting to liberate South Vietnam underwent rigorous training in battlefield tactics*

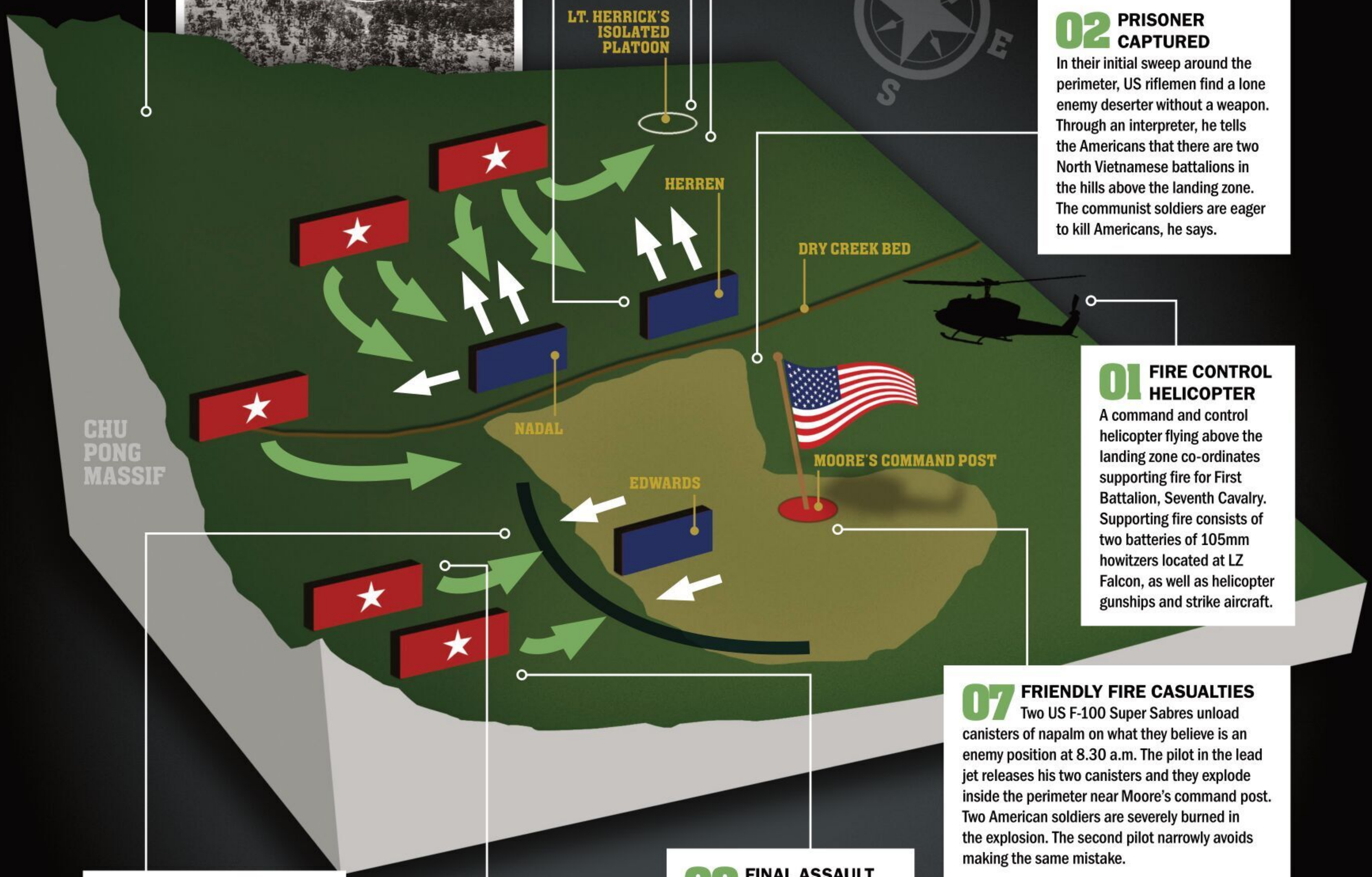
**10 B-52 STRIKES**
On the afternoon of the third day US B-52 bombers from Guam conduct bombing runs against North Vietnamese forces in the Chu Pong Mountains. The tactical B-52 strikes mark the beginning of Operation Arc Light. The Arc Light attacks against the Chu Pong Mountains continue for the next five days.

**03 ISOLATED PLATOON**
Elements of the 33rd and 66th regiments of the North Vietnamese B-3 Front stream downhill to attack Bravo Company. They encircle Bravo Company's Second Platoon. In the process of forming a defensive position the platoon loses one of its two invaluable M60 machine guns.

**04 FAILED RELIEF ATTEMPT**
By late afternoon all four companies of the First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry, have arrived at LZ X-Ray. An attempt to rescue the isolated platoon on the mountainside fails in the face of strong enemy resistance.

**08 SUCCESSFUL RESCUE MISSION**
Two fresh battalions arrive by midday. With his strength tripled, US Army Lt. Col. Harold Moore has enough men to hold the landing zone and also rescue the isolated platoon. A relief force rescues the encircled American platoon on the afternoon of 15 November. Of the 29 men from the platoon, only seven avoided serious injury. Nine died and 13 were wounded.




**02 PRISONER CAPTURED**
In their initial sweep around the perimeter, US riflemen find a lone enemy deserter without a weapon. Through an interpreter, he tells the Americans that there are two North Vietnamese battalions in the hills above the landing zone. The communist soldiers are eager to kill Americans, he says.

**01 FIRE CONTROL HELICOPTER**
A command and control helicopter flying above the landing zone co-ordinates supporting fire for First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry. Supporting fire consists of two batteries of 105mm howitzers located at LZ Falcon, as well as helicopter gunships and strike aircraft.

**07 FRIENDLY FIRE CASUALTIES**
Two US F-100 Super Sabres unload canisters of napalm on what they believe is an enemy position at 8.30 a.m. The pilot in the lead jet releases his two canisters and they explode inside the perimeter near Moore's command post. Two American soldiers are severely burned in the explosion. The second pilot narrowly avoids making the same mistake.

**05 ATTACK ON THE LANDING ZONE**
Two companies of North Vietnamese attack the landing zone from the south in an attempt to penetrate the perimeter. Charlie Company holds its ground, and this makes it possible for the helicopters to continue landing more troops and ammunition throughout the afternoon. By late afternoon, all four of Moore's companies have safely arrived in the landing zone.

**06 ENTRENCHED FOE**
By the morning of 15 November many of the communist soldiers are entrenched outside of LZ X-Ray in spider holes. These shoulder-deep, camouflaged positions offer protection against artillery barrages, bombs and rockets, with which the Americans hammer the enemy positions.

**09 FINAL ASSAULT**
The Americans string flare traps on the second night to alert them to a night-time attack. The North Vietnamese attack before dawn on 16 November, setting off the trip wires, thus giving the Americans warning that an attack is in progress. After attempting four times in the early morning to breach the south side of the perimeter, the North Vietnamese break contact for the final time.

**"Charlie Company holds its ground, and this makes it possible for the helicopters to continue landing more troops and ammunition"**

*A weary sergeant of Alpha Company First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry, has the '1,000-yard stare' characteristic of soldiers who have seen protracted fighting*

**"They were damned good soldiers, used cover and concealment to perfection and were deadly shots"**

Kinnard selected Moore's battalion to spearhead the assault scheduled for 14 November. Moore was the best choice for the mission because he had extensive combat experience from the Korean War. Based on the earlier findings, Kinnard decided to land Moore's battalion at the northeastern base of the Chu Pongs on the assumption that he would be landing behind the North Vietnamese and therefore could cut off their retreat. As subsequent events would prove, Moore landed among the enemy, not behind it.

## The cavalry arrives

LZ X-Ray was a narrow, 30-metre-long clearing with chest-high, yellow-brown elephant grass, scattered trees and massive termite mounds. The open woodlands at the base of the mountains gave way to thick jungle as soon as they began ascending the steep slopes.

Moore had 16 Huey Slicks to ferry his troops to LZ X-Ray. The clearing could only accommodate eight Slicks at a time, so the other eight would have to hover nearby until the first group had exited the landing zone. The helicopter pilots would have to make half a dozen 'lifts' to get the 440 men on the ground, a process that would take most of the first day.

Each US Army rifleman carried 300 rounds of ammunition for his newly issued M16 assault rifle, and each M79 grenadier had 36 rounds. Each rifle platoon had two M60 machine guns, each of which had at least four boxes of ammunition. In addition, each squad had two portable anti-tank weapon rockets to destroy enemy bunkers.

Moore's men assembled late in the morning near Plei Me for the shuttle to LZ X-Ray. The first lift carried Moore and Bravo Company. The 22.5-kilometre flight from Plei Me to LZ X-Ray took 13 minutes. At 10.35 a.m. the choppers rose skyward in a swirl of red dust. A few minutes out the pilots took their 'birds' down to treetop level for the final approach.

It was dry season in the mountains, and the streams that snaked across the plateaus were bone dry. The landing zone was veiled in grey smoke from artillery shells and aerial rocket artillery designed to kill any enemy soldiers in or near the clearing. The barrage stopped just seconds before the Slicks of the first lift flew down into the clearing.

Moore and his staff set up their command post next to a large termite mound. Dry ravines bracketed the clearing on the west and north. Shortly after noon the second and third lifts delivered more soldiers. To ensure that the helicopters could continue to land safely through the afternoon, Moore wanted to engage the enemy outside of the landing zone, not in it. Leaving Alpha Company to guard the landing zone, Moore ordered Captain John Herrin to explore the lower slope of the 457-metre mountain to the northwest that loomed over the landing zone.

The North Vietnamese were waiting for the Americans. The communist soldiers, who were drawn mainly from the rural peasantry, were patient, tenacious and tough. Each carried a Soviet-designed AK-47 rifle and three 'potato masher' grenades. Their platoons had machine guns and hand-held rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Their tactical doctrine called for inflicting heavy casualties on the Americans at the beginning of a battle and then breaking contact before they could be taken under fire by enemy long-range artillery or air strikes. If they had to fight a sustained battle, they fought from concealed positions close to the enemy so that the Americans would be reluctant to call in supporting fire for fear of causing friendly casualties. This tactic was known as 'clinging to the belt'.

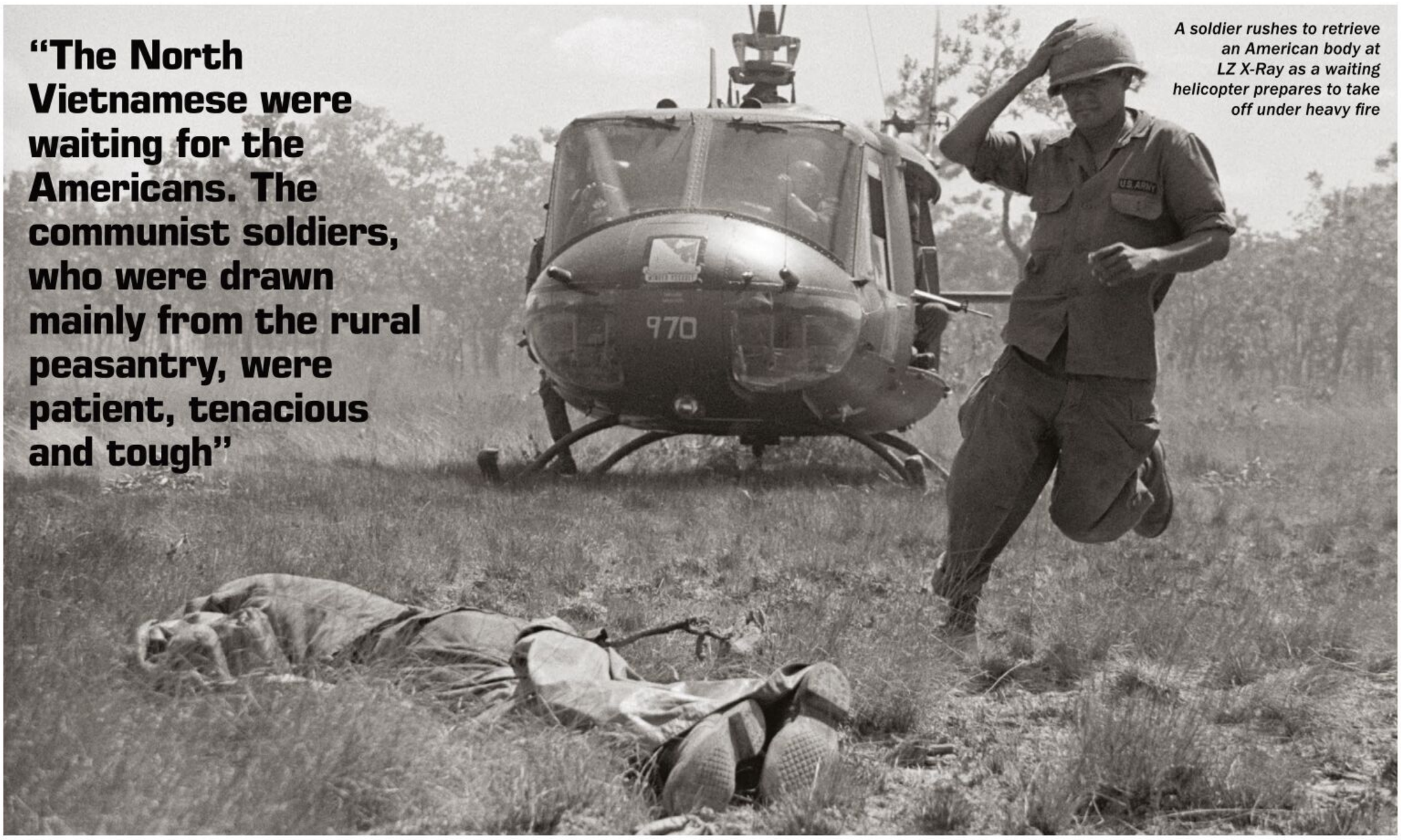
Captain John Herren's Bravo Company ascended the mountain with two platoons abreast and one behind. Al Devney's First Platoon held the left, Lieutenant Henry Herrick's Second Platoon held the right, and Lieutenant Dennis Deal's Third Platoon brought up the rear. Alerted by a mountaintop observation post that the Americans had landed, the North Vietnamese streamed down the mountain in large numbers.

Bravo Company ran headlong into large numbers of enemy troops just 30 minutes after it had left the landing zone. The communists quickly pinned down Devney's men, yet the savvy platoon leader maintained contact with the landing zone.

"They were damned good soldiers, used cover and concealment to perfection and were deadly shots," Moore said of the enemy. As soon as the firefight commenced, devastating American firepower struck the mountainside. In addition to the torrent of howitzer shells that screamed down on them, the North Vietnamese troops were pounded throughout the long afternoon with rockets, bombs and napalm.

To counter the American strike aircraft, the North Vietnamese situated on the mountain fired 12.7mm Russian-made heavy machine guns, which they used as anti-aircraft weapons. In mid-afternoon they finally succeeded in downing an A1-E Skyraider, the bullet-ridden plane plummeting from the sky before crashing in a fireball north of LZ X-Ray.

**"The North Vietnamese were waiting for the Americans. The communist soldiers, who were drawn mainly from the rural peasantry, were patient, tenacious and tough"**




*A soldier rushes to retrieve an American body at LZ X-Ray as a waiting helicopter prepares to take off under heavy fire*



*An air cavalry platoon sweeps through the elephant grass firing M16 rifles during heavy fighting at LZ X-Ray*

The communist soldiers quickly got behind Herrick's platoon, and it lost contact with the rest of Bravo Company. Engaged in a full-throttle firefight, Herrick's three squads pulled back shortly before mid-afternoon to a knoll on a ridge to await rescue. Their perimeter was only 23 metres in diameter.

A torrent of small-arms fire swept the knoll where Herrick's men lay prone. If they knelt, they were struck by AK-47 or automatic weapons rounds. The Americans laid their M16s flat and fired on full automatic. While establishing an effective defence on the knoll, Herrick was killed by an enemy round. Command eventually devolved, after two sergeants were killed in quick succession, to a third sergeant named Clyde Savage. In an effort to keep the enemy at bay, Savage called in air support and artillery fire that landed within 46 metres of the platoon's position to keep the enemy at bay.

"The bullets were clipping all around us, hitting men and trees and cutting the grass," said Savage. "There was a lot of fire coming in on us and they had people coming up at us, but they had a hell of a lot of fire coming down on them."

While the fighting on the mountainside raged, the Huey Slicks continued to arrive with additional platoons. Moore sent Captain 'Tony' Nadal with his Alpha Platoon troops to extend the battlefront on the mountain. They took up a position on the left flank of Bravo Company. In so doing, they blocked the communists from striking the landing zone directly from the mountain.

Moore retained Captain Bob Edwards' Charlie Company at the landing zone as a reserve. Charlie Company deployed on the south side of the perimeter to prevent the enemy from hooking around the Americans to the south and overrunning the landing zone.

Moore told his immediate superior, Third Brigade Commander Colonel Tim Brown, that he was hard-pressed by the enemy and could use another company of soldiers. Realising the dire nature of the situation, Brown mustered far more reinforcements than Moore requested. But it would take time to get many of them to the battlefield.

While arranging for two full battalions to arrive the following day, Brown gathered the closest reinforcements available to send that afternoon. Captain Myron Diduryk's Bravo Company of Second Battalion, Seventh Cavalry, was guarding Brown's headquarters south of Pleiku. Brown ordered Diduryk to prepare his men to fly via helicopter to LZ X-Ray.

Scheduled to arrive the next day on Brown's orders were Lieutenant Colonel McDade's battalion and Lieutenant Colonel Robert Tully's battalion. They would be moved later in the day to landing zones within several miles of LZ X-Ray. While McDade's men would be lifted by helicopter to LZ X-Ray on the morning of the second day, Tully and his men would have to march overland to LZ X-Ray through enemy-controlled territory, where an ambush was a real possibility.

By mid-afternoon the North Vietnamese had begun attacking the landing zone in large numbers. The small clearing was swept by a hailstorm of small-arms and automatic weapons fire. North Vietnamese mortar rounds and rocket-propelled grenades exploded inside the perimeter, which forced Moore to suspend helicopter landings for a short time. The last lifts of the day brought in Captain Louis Lefebvre's D Company, which was Moore's heavy weapons company, and Diduryk's rifle company. This gave Moore enough troops to adequately defend his entire perimeter.

The enemy made four unsuccessful attempts to penetrate the perimeter that night. On the mountainside, the encircled platoon benefitted from the support of an AC-47 'Spooky' gunship that circled overhead firing its miniguns outside the platoon's tiny perimeter.

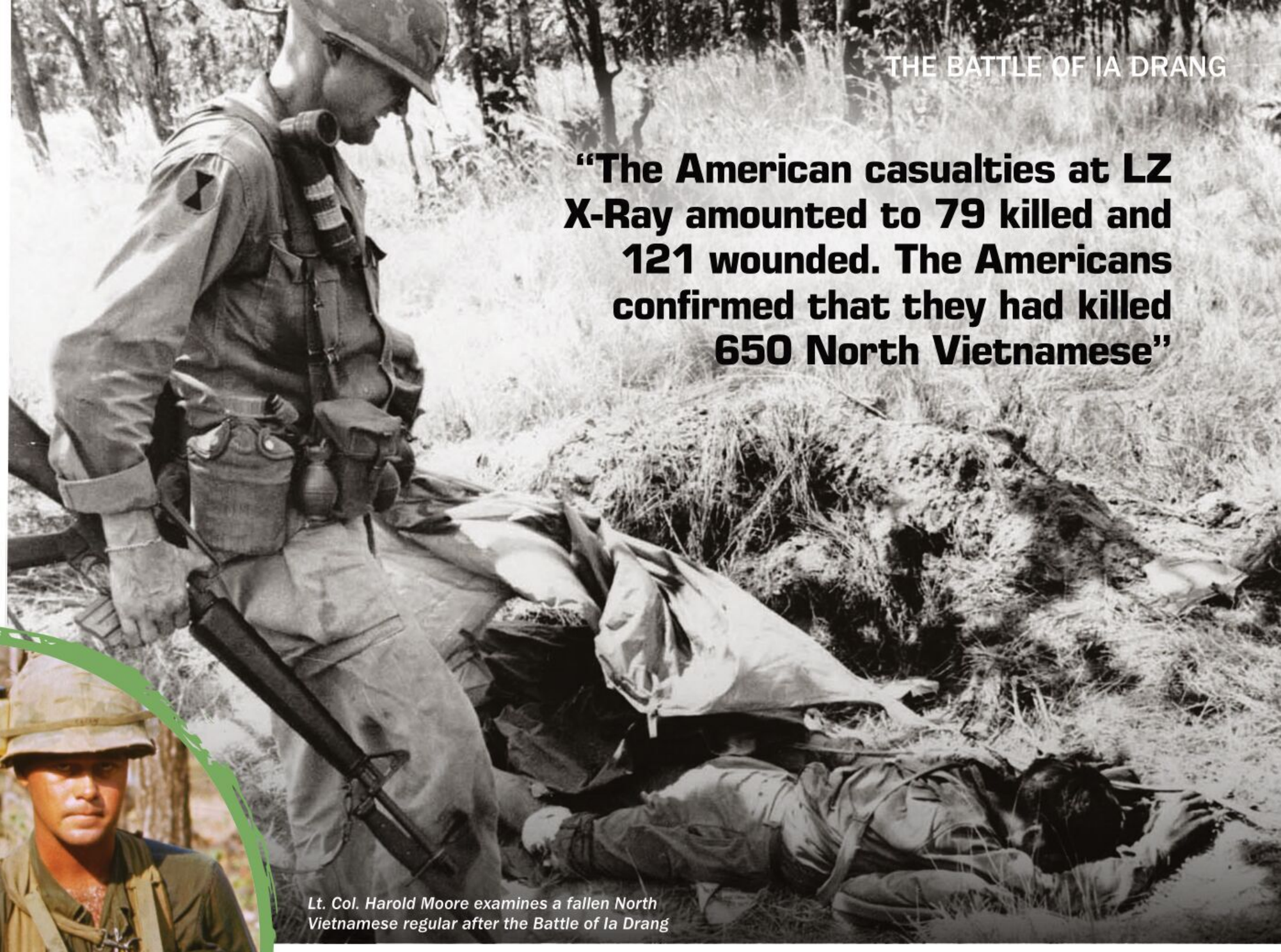
At dawn on 15 November, the second day of battle, a squad patrolling the bush south of the perimeter triggered a premature assault by a company-sized force of North Vietnamese troops. A furious firefight ensued in which Charlie Company struggled to hold its position.

Although he was wounded in the firefight, Charlie Company commander Captain Edwards continued to direct the defence of his section of the perimeter. He pleaded with Moore for reinforcements, but the battalion commander refused. When the situation became even more dire, Moore sent his last reserve, the battalion's reconnaissance platoon, to assist Charlie Company. Hand-to-hand fighting occurred, and the dead of both sides lay alongside each other in the elephant grass.

The North Vietnamese expanded their assault on LZ X-Ray by assailing the north and east sides of the perimeter too. Moore called Brown again by radio, urgently inquiring as to the status of the promised reinforcements. Brown said that Tully's battalion was on its way to join Moore.

Moore ordered each company to pop coloured smoke grenades just outside their position to mark it for the ground-attack aircraft and rocket-firing helicopters. Soon the area outside of the perimeter was rocked by a series of explosions as rockets, high-explosive bombs and napalm fell on communist positions. The air strikes eventually forced the North Vietnamese to break off their attack. The three-hour fight took a heavy toll on Charlie Company, which lost half of its strength. Shortly afterwards, Colonel Brown





**"The American casualties at LZ X-Ray amounted to 79 killed and 121 wounded. The Americans confirmed that they had killed 650 North Vietnamese"**

*Lt. Col. Harold Moore examines a fallen North Vietnamese regular after the Battle of Ia Drang*



*Members of the US 1st Air Cavalry march through forest en route to the Chu Phong Mountains in the Ia Drang Valley*

made a brief visit to the landing zone to inform Moore that he would be withdrawing his force the following day.

Additional elements of McDade's Second Battalion, Seventh Cavalry, arrived in the morning by helicopter, and Tully's battalion arrived safely at noon following a dangerous march through enemy-controlled territory. To avoid an enemy ambush, Tully had spread out his battalion rather than have it march in a single, vulnerable column.

The arrival of a large number of fresh troops put Moore's mind at ease. He dispatched three companies to rescue the isolated battalion. This time the communists did not contest their advance. The relief force entered the jungle shortly after 1.00 p.m., and helicopter gunships peppered the area over which they would be advancing with rocket fire.

Two hours after the relief force set out, it returned to the landing zone escorting the seven uninjured soldiers and carrying the wounded in ponchos. They also brought back their fallen comrades. The survivors were caked in blood and dirt. They had the vacant '1,000-yard stare' of battle-weary troops who had narrowly avoided being wiped out by a more numerous enemy. The North Vietnamese troops made no further attacks that day on the landing zone. Their chance to wipe out Moore's battalion had come and gone.

Helicopters evacuated Moore's troops on 16 November to Pleiku for rest and recovery. The other two battalions of the Third Brigade remained at LZ X-Ray that night. Both battalions departed on foot the morning of 17 November. The two battalions marched together but eventually split up to head for different landing zones. Tully's battalion continued on a northeast course for LZ Columbus, while McDade's battalion turned west towards LZ Albany. McDade had not taken any steps to protect his flanks, either by detaching small groups of soldiers to thrash through the brush alongside the trail or by walking barrages of artillery. His battalion would pay a heavy price for his negligence.

Brigadier General Man thirsted for revenge for the heavy casualties his force suffered at LZ X-Ray. He ordered two battalions to set up a classic L-shaped ambush, which would enable the communists to rake the column with small arms, automatic weapons, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars. They waited quietly in the elephant grass until the Americans were deep into the trap. Just as the front of McDade's column was entering the clearing at Albany, the North Vietnamese attacked. American airpower arrived eventually to drive off the enemy, but the battalion was destroyed as a fighting force.

The American casualties at LZ X-ray amounted to 79 killed and 121 wounded. The Americans confirmed that they had killed 650 North Vietnamese and estimated that the communist soldiers took with them approximately 1,000 of their slain comrades when they withdrew from the battlefield.

As for the debacle at LZ Albany, the Americans suffered 151 dead and 121 wounded. They estimated that the North Vietnamese lost 1,500 men as a result of US artillery barrages and airstrikes at Albany.

Although the three-day battle at LZ X-Ray is best described as a tactical draw, the Americans won a strategic victory in the larger Pleiku campaign, as they had prevented the North Vietnamese from splitting South Vietnam in two with a drive to the coast of the South China Sea. Man did his troops a great disservice at Ia Drang by not having large numbers of heavy weapons, particularly large anti-aircraft guns, to offset the American airpower. Many of these were left behind on the Ho Chi Minh trail as the infantry hurried forward to the battlefront in the highlands.

The Battle of Ia Drang "marked the first wholesale appearance of North Vietnamese regulars in the South," wrote Herr. "And no one who was around then can forget the horror of it or… get over the confidence and sophistication with which entire [North Vietnamese] battalions came to engage America in a war."

## FURTHER READING


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*Images: Alamy, Getty*

# GENERALS, GUERRILLAS AND THE COMMUNIST BONAPARTE

North Vietnamese forces were commanded by highly skilled generals who were opposed by commanders of varying quality from the United States and South Vietnam

## VO NGUYEN GIAP

### THE 'RED NAPOLEON'
### 1911-2013 *NORTH VIETNAM*

Politically minded from an early age, Giap worked as a history teacher and journalist before he joined the Communist Party. He began protesting against French rule in Indochina and joined with Ho Chi Minh the leader of the Viet Minh, to organise guerrilla activities against the Japanese during WWII.

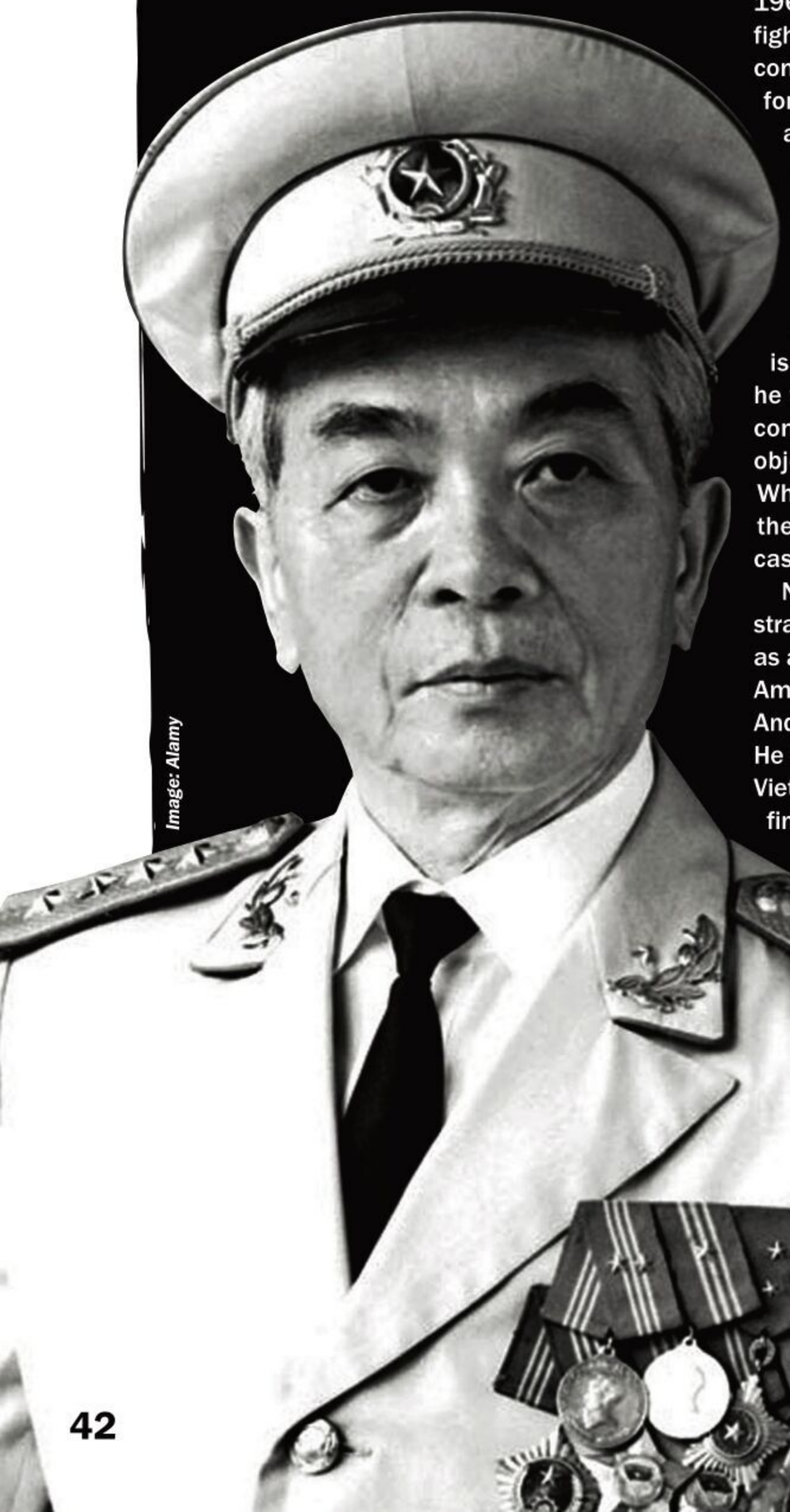


Image: Alamy

Giap cut his military teeth during the First Indochina War, when he commanded Viet Minh forces against the French. He was the victor of the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which led to the partition of Vietnam. As deputy prime minister and minister of defence of what was then North Vietnam, Giap was also the overall commander of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

Over the next decade he sent increasing amounts of troops to South Vietnam to fight growing American involvement. As early as 1967 he was confident that US forces were fighting an unwinnable war. He took direct command that year and mustered his forces for an ambush against the American fortress at Khe Sanh in early 1968. While the Americans reinforced Khe Sanh, Giap's men launched the Tet Offensive.

As the commander of North Vietnamese forces Giap was ultimately responsible for overseeing the offensive. However, the extent of his contribution to the planning is disputed. Some historians believe that he wrangled over the details with his senior commanders while others claim that he objected to the plan and even went abroad. What is not contested is that Giap did not stop the offensive even though it resulted in heavy casualties and tactical failure.

Nevertheless, North Vietnam's long-term strategic victory was later recognised by Giap as a turning point. "After the Tet Offensive, the Americans moved from the attack to the defence. And defence is always the beginning of defeat." He went on to oversee the complete North Vietnamese victory in the war. When Saigon finally fell in April 1975 Giap became the first general to comprehensively defeat US forces in a war. He remained deputy prime minister of the now unified Vietnam until 1991 and lived to the age of 102.

***Giap was nicknamed the 'Red Napoleon' and was heavily influenced by the French emperor as well as T. E. Lawrence***

## WILLIAM WESTMORELAND

### THE OVERCONFIDENT AMERICAN COMMANDER OF US FORCES
### 1914-2005 *US*

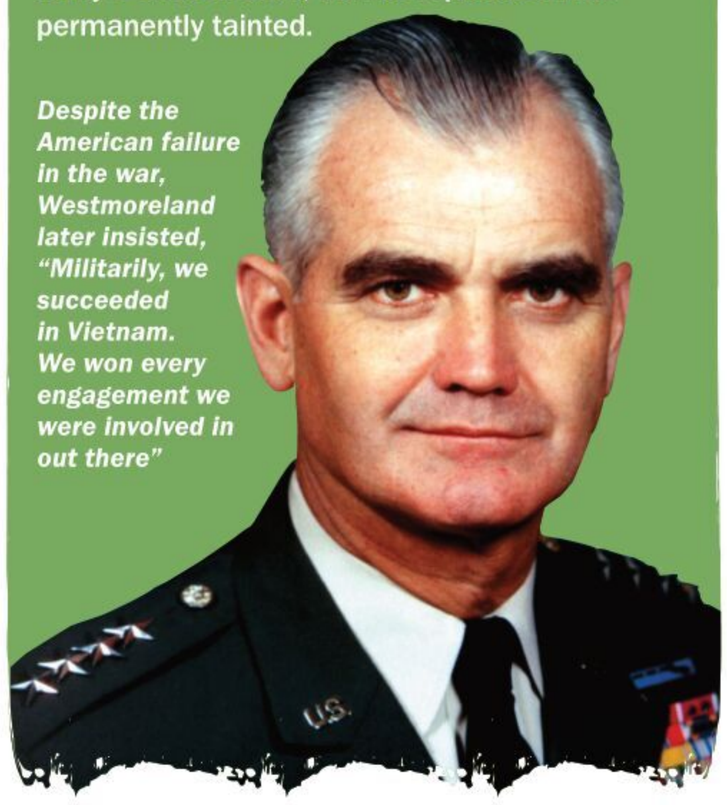
Born in South Carolina, Westmoreland graduated from West Point in 1936. He fought as an artillery officer during WWII in Tunisia, Sicily, France and Germany. A brigadier general during the Korean War, he subsequently commanded US forces in South Vietnam between 1964–68.

Despite his rise to high command Westmoreland's overconfidence proved his undoing. He continually underestimated the military ability of the North Vietnamese and believed wearing them down with attritional strategies would win the war. During the Tet Offensive he gave a notorious press conference in Saigon that was continually interrupted by the sound of artillery fire.

He declared to the media that the offensive was "about to run out of steam" and was merely "a diversionary effort to take attention away from the northern part of the country".

In the aftermath of the offensive Westmoreland requested a further 200,000 troops to supplement the existing 550,000 American troops in Vietnam. He was ultimately recalled to Washington to act as the US Army's chief-of-staff, but his reputation was permanently tainted.

***Despite the American failure in the war, Westmoreland later insisted, "Militarily, we succeeded in Vietnam. We won every engagement we were involved in out there"***



Source: Wiki/ United States Defense Visual Information Center



Image: Getty

*Vien was forced into exile following the Fall of Saigon in 1975 and spent the rest of his life in the United States. He became an American citizen in 1982*

# CAO VAN VIEN

## THE SKILLED DEFENDER OF SAIGON

## 1921–2008 *SOUTH VIETNAM*

Born in Laos to Vietnamese parents, Vien was initially a follower of Ho Chi Minh and fought against French rule. He was captured and earned a degree in French literature before joining the independent but French-affiliated Vietnamese National Army as an officer.

Extensively trained by the Americans, Vien was awarded the US Silver Star in 1964 and became South Vietnam's only four-star general.

Vien played a critical role during the Tet Offensive, leading the defence of Saigon against PAVN-VC forces. Often operating in back streets, he ordered counterattacks and fought with limited personnel. He used his own staff as combat troops and personally led divisions throughout the city, including in an attack on an air base.

The military headquarters of South Vietnam and Saigon itself was saved, but Vien later disagreed with American opinions about North Vietnamese intentions. He later criticised the American and South Vietnamese governments for not following up their tactical victory during the offensive.

# RATHVON M. TOMPKINS

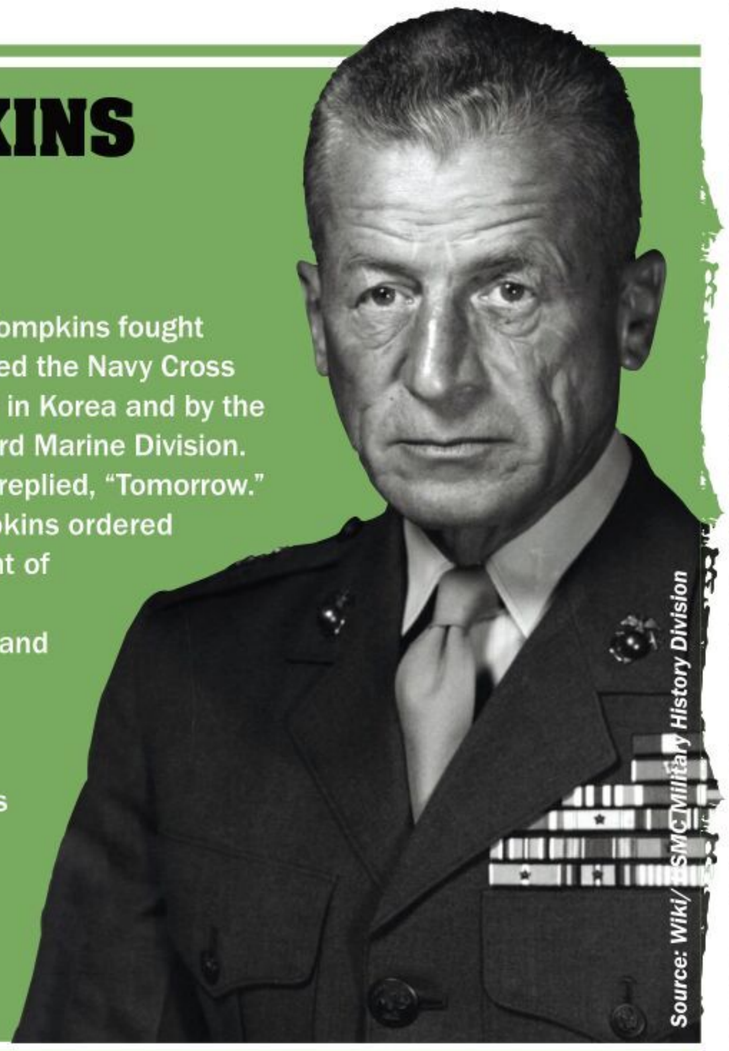
## THE DOGGED DEFENDER OF KHE SANH

## 1912–99 *US*

Commissioned as a US Marines lieutenant in 1936, Tompkins fought extensively in the Pacific during WWII and was awarded the Navy Cross and Silver Star for valour. He received the Bronze Star in Korea and by the time of the Vietnam War he was the commander of 3rd Marine Division. When asked how soon he could be in the country, he replied, "Tomorrow."

Commanding 24,000 men in January 1968, Tompkins ordered the defences at Khe Sanh to be reinforced in the light of North Vietnamese attacks. This transpired to be the preliminary deception assaults for the Tet Offensive and Khe Sanh was quickly encircled.

Every attack was repelled and the base was successfully defended until the encirclement was broken in April 1968. Throughout this time Tompkins made daily inspections of front-line troops and was decorated with the Distinguished Service Medal.



Source: Wiki/USMC Military History Division

*Tompkins served 36 years in the US Marines and when he retired he was awarded a second Distinguished Service Medal*



Image: Getty

*The son of a bricklayer, Tra was well regarded by his troops but later fell out with his superiors and became a pig farmer*

# TRA VAN TRA

## THE VIET CONG GUERRILLA WHO LEARNED FROM THE MISTAKES OF THE TET OFFENSIVE

## 1918–96 *NORTH VIETNAM*

Tra joined the Communist Party in 1938 and was arrested several times by the French during WWII. A Saigon-based commander in the Viet Minh, Tra used guerrilla tactics against the French during the First Indochina War. Upon the creation of North Vietnam he became a deputy chief-of-staff in the PAVN.

During the early 1960s Tra rallied and trained guerrillas in South Vietnam that became known as the Viet Cong. Despite this important role he was not given overall command over these forces, with the Tet Offensive in particular being directed by political commissars from Hanoi. Nevertheless, Tra's Viet Cong were in the vanguard of the offensive and took most of the casualties. He personally led the failed attack on Saigon and he learned much from the tactical mistakes of 1968.

In 1974 Tra managed to persuade many conservative strategists in Hanoi to change their plans for the final attack on Saigon. Although he was again not in direct command, Tra was a key architect of the 1975 Spring Offensive that ended the Vietnam War.

# FOSTER C. LAHUE

## THE COMMANDER OF TASK FORCE X-RAY DURING THE BATTLE OF HUE

## 1917–96 *US*

A native of Indiana, LaHue served as a US Marines junior officer in the Pacific theatre during WWII and was awarded the Silver Star while commanding 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, in the Korean War. Between March 1967 and April 1968 he served with the 1st Marine Division while commanding Task Force X-Ray as a brigadier general.

Comprising of four Marine battalions, X-Ray was significantly involved in the Battle of Hue. When North Vietnamese forces overran the city, the task force was called upon to retake it in conjunction with other American and South Vietnamese troops. LaHue's troops recaptured much of the south of Hue, which led him to believe that the citadel could be successfully stormed.

A brigade of 101st Airborne Division was also attached to X-Ray, which blocked a PAVN-VC retreat out of the city. American and South Vietnamese forces retook Hue on 2 March 1968 and LaHue was promoted to major general that August. He ended his career as a lieutenant general and chief-of-staff of the Marine Corps.

*During WWII LaHue fought in both the New Georgia and Admiralty Islands campaigns as part of the elite Marine Raiders*



Source: Wiki / USMC

# OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER

A costly sustained US bombing campaign against North Vietnam yielded mixed results WORDS **MICHAEL E. HASKEW**

Six days before US ground troops landed in significant numbers in Vietnam for the first time on 8 March 1965, American air assets had already begun a lengthy but apparently futile aerial bombing campaign, escalating the nation's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Operation Rolling Thunder was undertaken ostensibly to raise the flagging morale of the South Vietnamese people in their protracted conflict with a well-organised, determined communist insurgency and stifle the ability of North Vietnam to continue funnelling support to Viet Cong guerrillas in the South by disabling the country's industrial and transportation complexes. From the outset these goals were difficult to quantify, and strategic success was necessarily tempered by the prerequisite that air strikes would not provoke the direct military intervention of the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam's communist benefactors.

As 3,500 US Marines splashed ashore at Da Nang, Rolling Thunder was undertaken primarily by US Air Force planes flying from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand and the US Navy, with the carrier-based planes of Task Force 77 deployed from Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. Marine Corps and South Vietnamese aircrews also participated.

Operation Rolling Thunder ebbed and flowed across the skies of North Vietnam for 44 months. When it was over the cost proved staggering. A total of 922 American aircraft were shot down, with 1,054 personnel killed, wounded or captured. Estimates of North Vietnamese civilian and military casualties range from 30,000 to 200,000. Flying over 300,000 combat sorties, American planes expended more ordnance – 864,000 tons of bombs and missiles – against North Vietnam than during the entirety of the Korean War (653,000 tons) or the Pacific theatre during World War II (503,000 tons).

Rolling Thunder, however, was a limited offensive and the concept itself is a contradiction in terms. Potential targets were identified, evaluated and then approved or denied by civilian and military war planners, including President Lyndon B. Johnson himself, whose understandable concerns about limiting civilian casualties and reticence for attacking population centres negatively impacted the strategic optimisation of the air effort. Heavy bombing of Hanoi, the North Vietnamese capital, and mining the harbour of Haiphong, made military sense, but inherently restrictive rules of engagement prohibited such initiatives.

American commanders were further hesitant to deploy the potentially decisive Boeing B-52 Stratofortress heavy bomber in significant numbers, and therefore the majority of Rolling Thunder missions were flown by other aircraft, such as Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantoms, Air Force F-105 Thunderchiefs and the Navy A-4 Skyhawk, A-6 Intruder and A-7 Corsair.

Operation Rolling Thunder was directed primarily at North Vietnamese infrastructure, such as bridges, railroads and roadways, as well as ammunition dumps, barracks, oil and fuel depots, power plants and storage facilities. Some targets were heavily damaged in the attacks, but repairs were often accomplished quite efficiently. During the first month of air operations a total of 26 bridges in North Vietnam were destroyed.

As Rolling Thunder wore on, however, North Vietnamese air defence capability steadily improved. The Soviet Union and China supplied a variety of anti-aircraft guns, along with MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighter planes and the S-75 Dvina air-defence system, which deployed the deadly SA-2 Guideline radar-directed surface-to-air missile. In time Hanoi and its environs were ringed with the heaviest concentration of sophisticated air-defence weaponry in history. Although American planes were sometimes authorised to hit enemy radar sites, airfields remained off limits.

North Vietnamese fighters began to conduct hit-and-run attacks on American F-105 formations, quickly disengaging and returning to their bases, some actually located in China.

**"Rolling Thunder ebbed and flowed across the skies of North Vietnam for 44 months"**

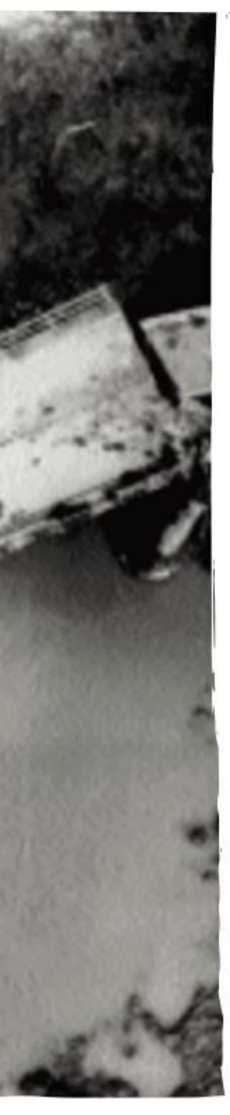


*A US reconnaissance plane, its shadow photographed, confirms the destruction of a North Vietnamese bridge*



*A destroyed textile factory in Nam Dinh, North Vietnam*

*Images: Alamy, Wiki / PD*





*Four F-105 Thunderchief bombers drop payloads above a target in North Vietnam during Rolling Thunder*

When opposing aircraft engaged in dogfights, kill ratios fluctuated but usually favoured the Americans. US Navy fliers, for example, shot down 29 enemy planes during Rolling Thunder, while losing only eight to MiG pilots. The vast majority of American combat losses were attributed to anti-aircraft guns and missiles. A total of 170 downed Navy airmen, including future senator John McCain, were held prisoner in the North, and the 160 who survived brutal internment were finally released in 1973. Among the Air Force personnel captured, Lieutenant Colonel James Robinson Risner, who led the very first Rolling Thunder mission, was shot down in September 1965. He was held prisoner for over seven years.

Operation Rolling Thunder was terminated on 2 November 1968, as President Johnson hoped to bring North Vietnam to the negotiating table and end the Vietnam War. Historians have debated the costs and benefits of Rolling Thunder for the last half century. While some assert that the nature of the limited offensive indeed delivered limited gains, others contend that it was destined to fail due to the exigencies of 'limited war' that prevented a global superpower from sufficiently flexing the muscle of potentially overwhelming air strength.

# MAC

*A US Army Special Forces captain contacts his base camp by radio while Vietnamese soldiers burn down a Viet Cong hideout*

# MACV-SOG




*Above: Unofficial insignia of MACV-SOG*

Embroiled in a secret campaign hidden within the wider Vietnam War, even the name of this special forces unit remained highly classified



**"MACV-SOG would soon become the most lethal, effective and covert special operations unit within the war"**

WORDS **LEIGH NEVILLE**

Their missions were secret: some remain so even to this day. Many of the special operations soldiers, sailors and Marines who conducted them took their stories to the grave. Their existence and the incredible operations they conducted were only officially acknowledged in 2001 after years of lobbying by SOG (Special Operations Group) veterans.

Like everything to do with SOG, its beginning was cloaked in secrecy. In 1961, US President John F. Kennedy ordered the CIA to begin establishing what he called "networks of resistance" in communist North Vietnam. The CIA was assigned the task of running covert operations within the region, including inserting undercover agents into the North and carrying out hazardous cross-border reconnaissance missions.

The CIA officers who initially undertook these missions were trained by US Army Green Berets and US Navy SEALs, but the officer running the programme was largely unsuccessful and the majority of agents were uncovered and suffered a terrible fate at the hands of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). With the failure of the CIA programme, these covert operations were instead handed to the United States military in late 1963.

To conduct these special missions, the army established the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam-Studies and Observations Group, or MACV-SOG, in January 1964. Its innocuous and lengthy title was part of an elaborate cover story to deceive the North Vietnamese and their Chinese and Soviet allies. According to the cover story, MACV-SOG was something of a knowledge-management 'think-tank', dedicated to analysing and disseminating operational 'lessons-learned' across the US military in South Vietnam.

To insiders, though, the initials SOG stood instead for Special Operations Group. MACV-SOG would soon become the most lethal, effective and covert special operations unit within the war. The largest and most well known element of SOG was the Ground Studies Group, which launched commando teams into North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia on what were known as strategic reconnaissance missions.

The Army Special Forces were no strangers to cross-border operations. Green Berets assigned to the Military Advisory Assistance Group had been training irregular anti-communist forces in Laos since 1961. Along with Green Berets, who made up the majority of the Ground Studies Group, SOG recruited Navy SEALs, Marine Force Recon and Air Force Special Tactics operators.

These men were then given cover stories and personnel records to match and assigned to one of three separate regional commands; Command and Control North (CCN), Command and Control South (CCS) or Command and Control Central (CCC).

SOG also established its own air wing – the Air Studies Group – that included surveillance and transport aircraft rigged for parachuting, along with unmarked helicopters that were equipped with a unique extraction system known as STABO. This saw operators literally hooked onto a winch and lifted straight out of the jungle.

For seaborne insertions, including into North Vietnam's Haiphong Harbour, the SOG created the Maritime Studies Group with 16 high-speed racing boats affectionately called Nasty Class Fast Patrol Boats. These could carry sea mines and torpedoes along with commando teams. The unit's historian described these Norwegian-built craft as capable of an impressive, "…44 knots at 75 tons displacement [with] a cruising range of approximately 725 kilometres."

The Psychological Studies Group was in charge of the psychological operations, or psy-ops, component of MACV-SOG. This group would pioneer the use of airborne broadcasting of propaganda, along with

use of spoof broadcasting stations that claimed to be based in the North but were in reality broadcasting from Saigon. This mysterious group also managed one of the biggest deception campaigns since World War II.

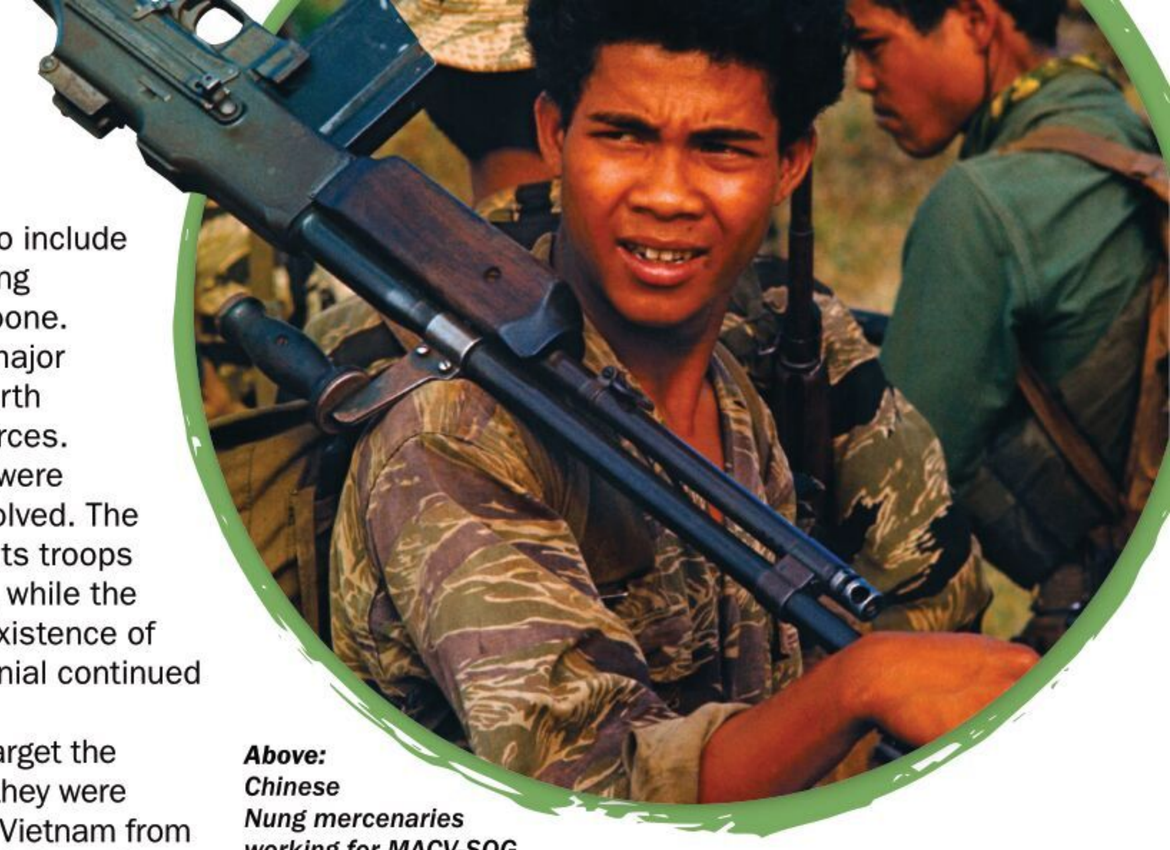
The largest component of SOG was the Ground Studies Branch's Reconnaissance Teams (RTs), or Spike Teams. These RTs were colourfully named after types of snakes or American states, such as RT Idaho or RT Diamondback. A typical mission would see either a six- or 12-man RT deployed. Of these, only three soldiers would be American – the team leader, assistant team leader and a radio operator. The remainder comprised indigenous soldiers, often Chinese Nung mercenaries or Montagnard hill tribesmen, who were especially skilled jungle fighters.

The RTs operated under Project Shining Brass, which saw joint US and South Vietnamese teams infiltrate up to 50 kilometres inside of Laos. Along with their primary reconnaissance mission, these RTs also conducted downed pilot and POW recoveries. Operations were soon expanded to include missions conducted in neighbouring Cambodia under Project Daniel Boone. Cambodia had quietly become a major staging area and sanctuary for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong (VC) forces.

These cross-border operations were always deniable for all parties involved. The North Vietnamese swore none of its troops ever entered Laos and Cambodia, while the Americans denied even the very existence of SOG and its recon teams. This denial continued long after the war.

The SOG's primary role was to target the infamous Ho Chi Minh trail. Since they were often bombed crossing into South Vietnam from the North, the NVA and Main Force VC would use a network of trails, roads and tracks in neighbouring Laos instead that were all, officially at least, neutral. The Ho Chi Minh trail offered them respite from American bombing – or so they thought.

Along with troop movements, the Ho Chi Minh trail was instrumental in resupplying the North Vietnamese regulars fighting in the South, along with supporting Viet Cong guerrilla units with weapons and ammunition. These supplies were often carried by truck, but bicycles, ox-carts and even elephants were also pressed into service.



***Above:** Chinese Nung mercenaries working for MACV-SOG Command and Control North*

# TIGER FORCE

This US Army long-range reconnaissance unit was developed to 'out-guerrilla the guerrillas' but instead was investigated for war crimes

Tiger Force was the nickname given to a 'Lurp', or long-range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP) platoon of the storied 101st Airborne Division. Its charismatic leader, Colonel David Hackworth, later gained fame through his political and military writings. During the Vietnam War, Tiger Force was considered a particularly effective unit, although it suffered heavy casualties. Indeed, like SOG, it was awarded its own Presidential Unit Citation.

The unit was, like many in Vietnam, unofficially recognised because of its high body count. This fact alone should have triggered warning bells. LRRPs, again like the SOG, traditionally attempted to bypass and avoid contact with the enemy due to their small numbers, relying on stealth and guile. Instead, a culture of barbarism seemed to take over the unit. Allegations spread of the routine murder of civilians; the widespread torture and execution of prisoners; the mutilation, scalping and cutting off the ears of enemy dead; and several other incidents too horrible to mention.

The unit was eventually scrutinised in what became the longest-running investigation into war crimes during the conflict. Incredibly, none of the soldiers were ever charged. Hackworth denies to this day any knowledge of these alleged atrocities and war crimes committed by men formerly under his command (he had moved to another posting before the reported atrocities began). In 2003, when faced with the accusations against his former unit, he allegedly told journalists that, "… every US bomb or rocket that struck a city or a village killing non-combatants was a war crime. Who investigated this?"

**"The unit was eventually scrutinised in what became the longest-running investigation into war crimes during the conflict"**

*Members of the Tiger Force platoon on patrol. Note the second soldier dressed as a Viet Cong guerrilla*

# CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

MACV-SOG conducted some of the most hair-raising covert missions in the history of special operations

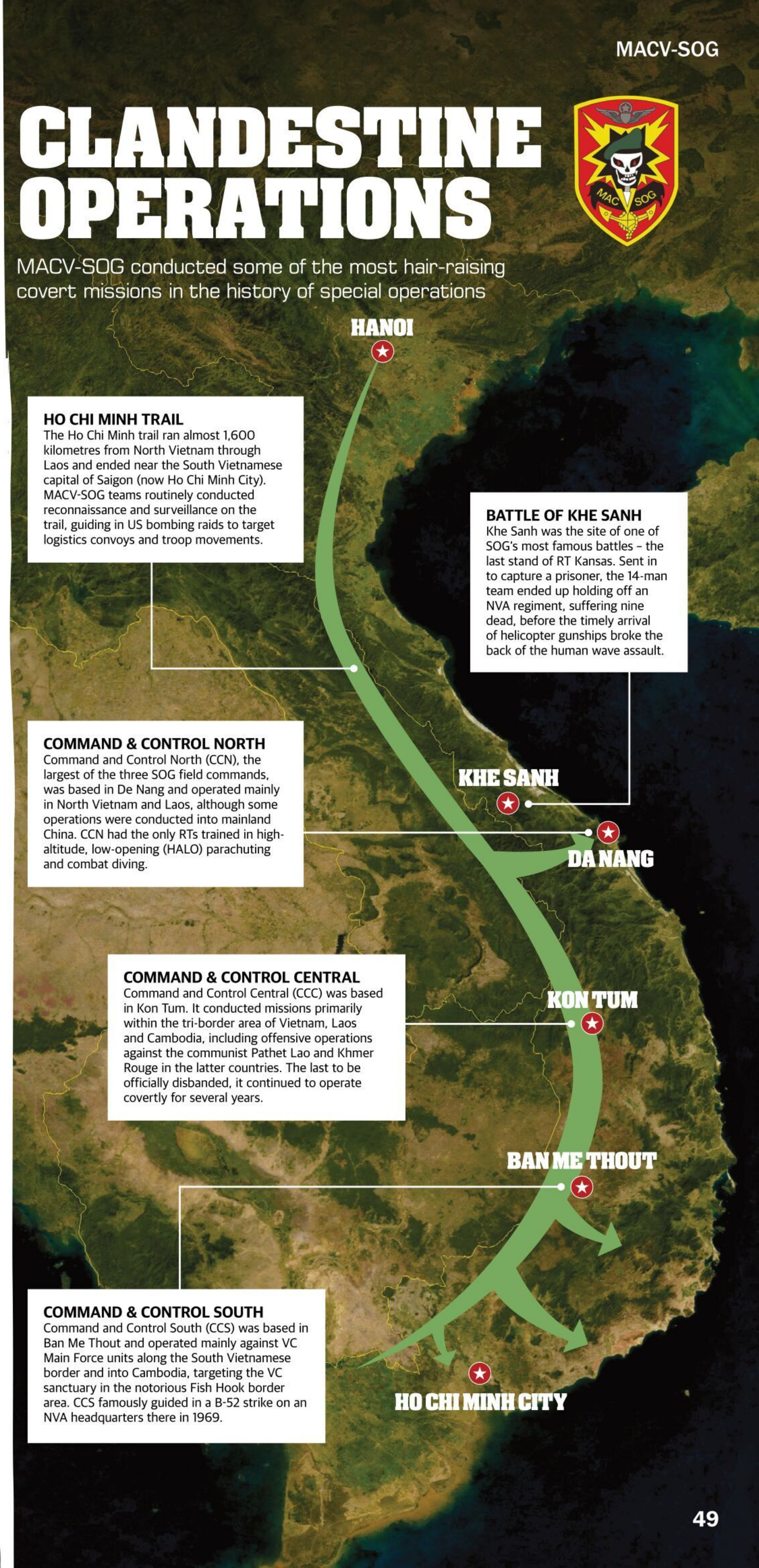
The trail became ever-more sophisticated, with its own air defence gun batteries and SA-2 surface-to-air missiles. The North Vietnamese even stationed specialist engineer units along the trail who were responsible for its upkeep and repair. For the South Vietnamese and Americans, it was a unique challenge. Much of the trail was concealed from the air by thick jungle canopy, while other, more exposed portions were camouflaged daily by the NVA.

MACV-SOG was given the mission to carry out strategic reconnaissance of the trail, surveilling choke points that could be targeted by secret US airstrikes and providing on-the-ground bomb damage assessments to the US Air Force. They also targeted specific high-ranking individuals – like NVA officers or VC tax collectors – that intelligence indicated would be travelling on the trail, killing or capturing them as required.

On these operations, the RTs carried nothing that could conclusively prove they were indeed American soldiers – their uniforms were locally made, their weapons were of foreign manufacture and they carried no identification



*An American soldier applies a makeshift bandage outside the US Special Forces camp at Ben Het*




**HO CHI MINH TRAIL**
The Ho Chi Minh trail ran almost 1,600 kilometres from North Vietnam through Laos and ended near the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). MACV-SOG teams routinely conducted reconnaissance and surveillance on the trail, guiding in US bombing raids to target logistics convoys and troop movements.

**BATTLE OF KHE SANH**
Khe Sanh was the site of one of SOG's most famous battles – the last stand of RT Kansas. Sent in to capture a prisoner, the 14-man team ended up holding off an NVA regiment, suffering nine dead, before the timely arrival of helicopter gunships broke the back of the human wave assault.

**COMMAND & CONTROL NORTH**
Command and Control North (CCN), the largest of the three SOG field commands, was based in De Nang and operated mainly in North Vietnam and Laos, although some operations were conducted into mainland China. CCN had the only RTs trained in high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) parachuting and combat diving.

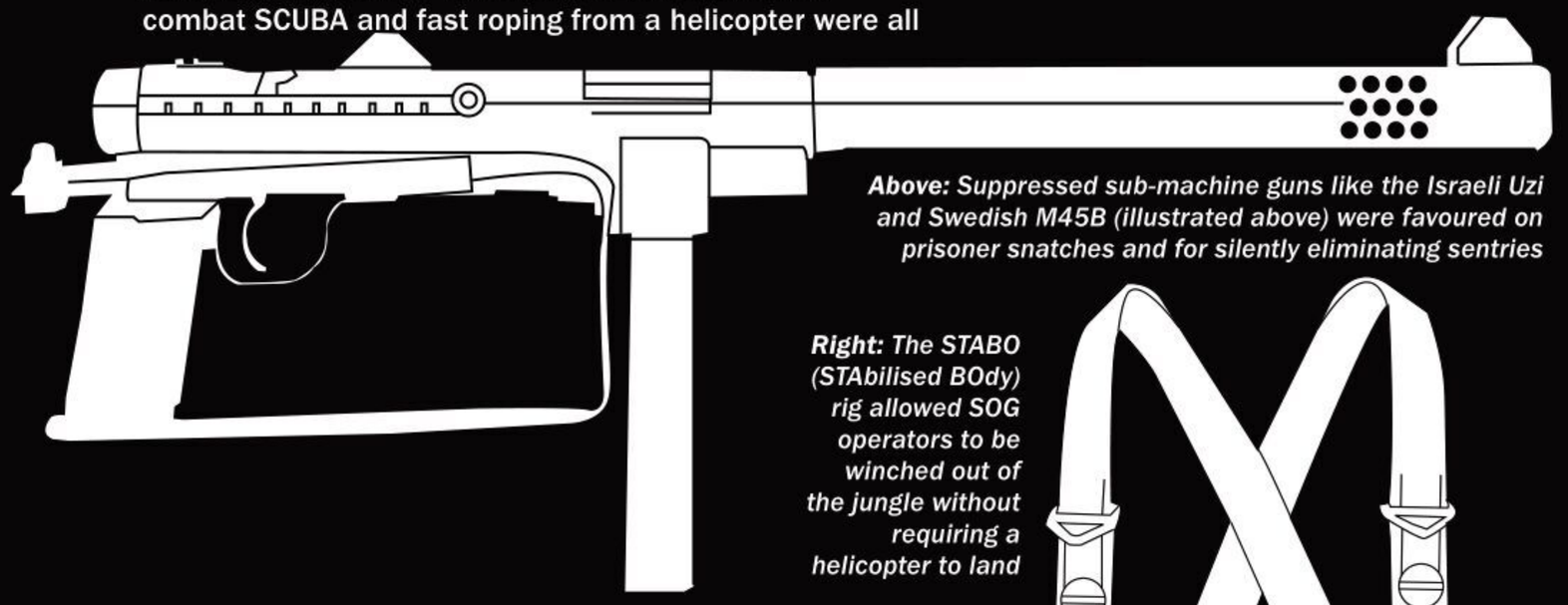
**COMMAND & CONTROL CENTRAL**
Command and Control Central (CCC) was based in Kon Tum. It conducted missions primarily within the tri-border area of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, including offensive operations against the communist Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge in the latter countries. The last to be officially disbanded, it continued to operate covertly for several years.

**COMMAND & CONTROL SOUTH**
Command and Control South (CCS) was based in Ban Me Thout and operated mainly against VC Main Force units along the South Vietnamese border and into Cambodia, targeting the VC sanctuary in the notorious Fish Hook border area. CCS famously guided in a B-52 strike on an NVA headquarters there in 1969.

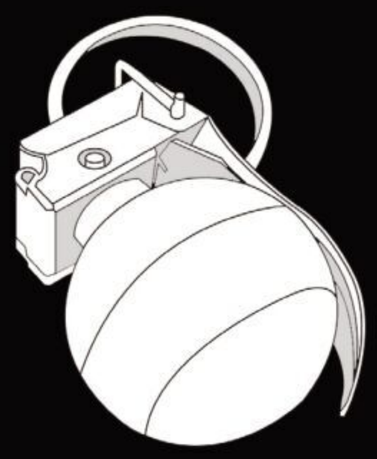
# JUNGLE

## Outnumbered and outgunned, SOG used special equipment to try to even the odds of survival

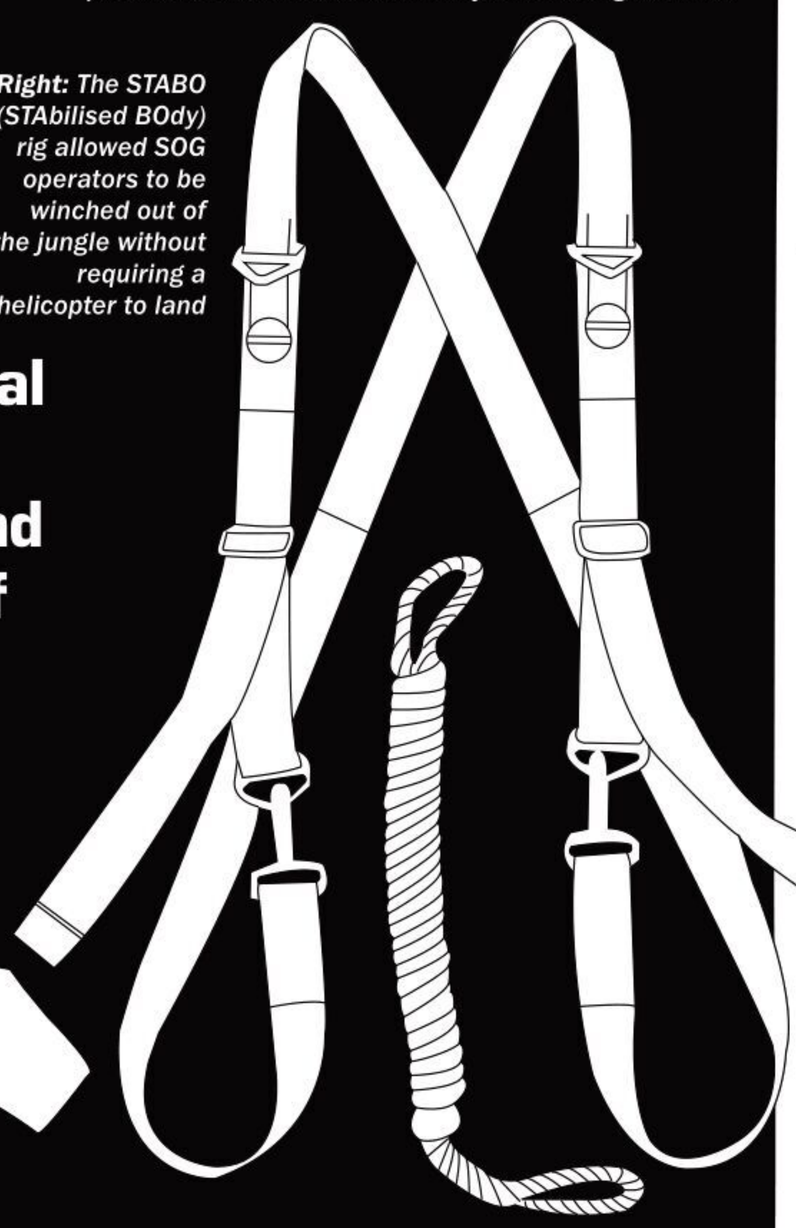
**The weapons and equipment carried by the RTs were designed to accomplish two things – aid them in covertly inserting into an area and to help them get out, particularly if an NVA reaction force was on their trail. The tiny RTs would be vastly outnumbered and needed every trick up their sleeve to discourage and slow pursuit until they could reach a safe landing zone. Many of today's special operations techniques were invented, tried and tested in the jungles of Vietnam by the SOG. HALO parachuting, combat SCUBA and fast roping from a helicopter were all**



*Above: Suppressed sub-machine guns like the Israeli Uzi and Swedish M45B (illustrated above) were favoured on prisoner snatches and for silently eliminating sentries*

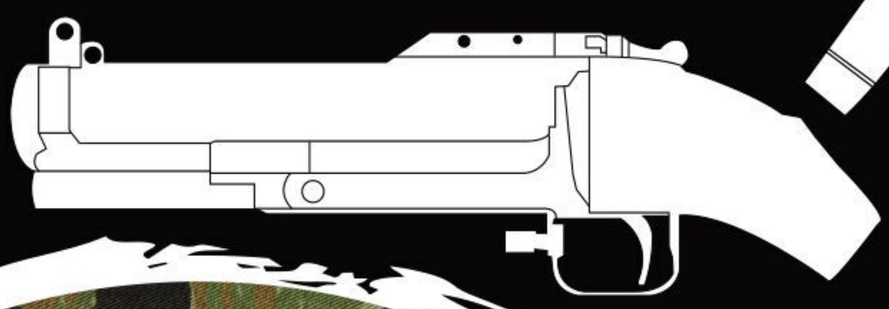


*Right: The STABO (STAbilised BOdy) rig allowed SOG operators to be winched out of the jungle without requiring a helicopter to land*



**"Many of today's special operations techniques were invented, tried and tested in the jungles of Vietnam by the SOG"**

*Below: SOG used cut down M79 grenade launchers with the stock and much of the barrel sawn off to reduce weight*



*Below: M18A1 Claymore directional mines were carried to protect remain-overnight positions and to set as booby-traps for pursuing NVA*






*Operators wore locally manufactured, non-US issue tiger-stripe pattern camouflage fatigues to help them blend in with the jungle*

or dog tags. Some teams even carried captured AK-47s and wore NVA fatigues to confuse the enemy (as they were so far from other US forces, the risk of friendly fire was minimal).

These teams also used a large number of exotic weapons. At least one SOG operator carried a futuristic 13mm Gyrojet Rocket Pistol as his sidearm, while another routinely totted a hunting bow (and used it in at least one firefight). Other weapons were highly modified for their unique needs – an M60 medium machine gun, for instance, was fitted with a Predator-style 500-round backpack and dubbed the 'Death Machine'.

The small teams needed all of the firepower they could carry, as they would typically end up in firefights with enemy units of far larger size. In fact, the RTs would do everything in their power to avoid a confrontation, preferring stealth over force. A perfect SOG mission would often involve zero contact with the enemy, with the RTs operating as the silent eyes and ears of the covert US bombing campaigns.

The NVA responded to the SOG missions with Chinese-trained hunter-killer units accompanied by tracking dogs. One SOG veteran, Frank Capper, remembered that, "…they'd have these hunter-killer units sitting on the primary and secondary insertion points, just waiting for us to arrive. We had teams get hit as soon as they jumped off the bird – totally destroyed."

If the teams couldn't avoid contact, they would attempt to overwhelm the enemy with weight of fire before breaking contact and heading for an emergency landing zone. The operators would use their radio to declare a 'Prairie Fire' emergency that would summon any US aircraft in the vicinity to assist, while a Hatchet Force launched to pull the compromised team out.

A Hatchet Force was typically comprised of five Americans and 30 indigenous soldiers, who would launch by helicopter to rescue RTs that had run into trouble. It was relatively commonplace for RTs to simply vanish after sending a contact report, wiped out to a man before the Hatchet Force could respond.

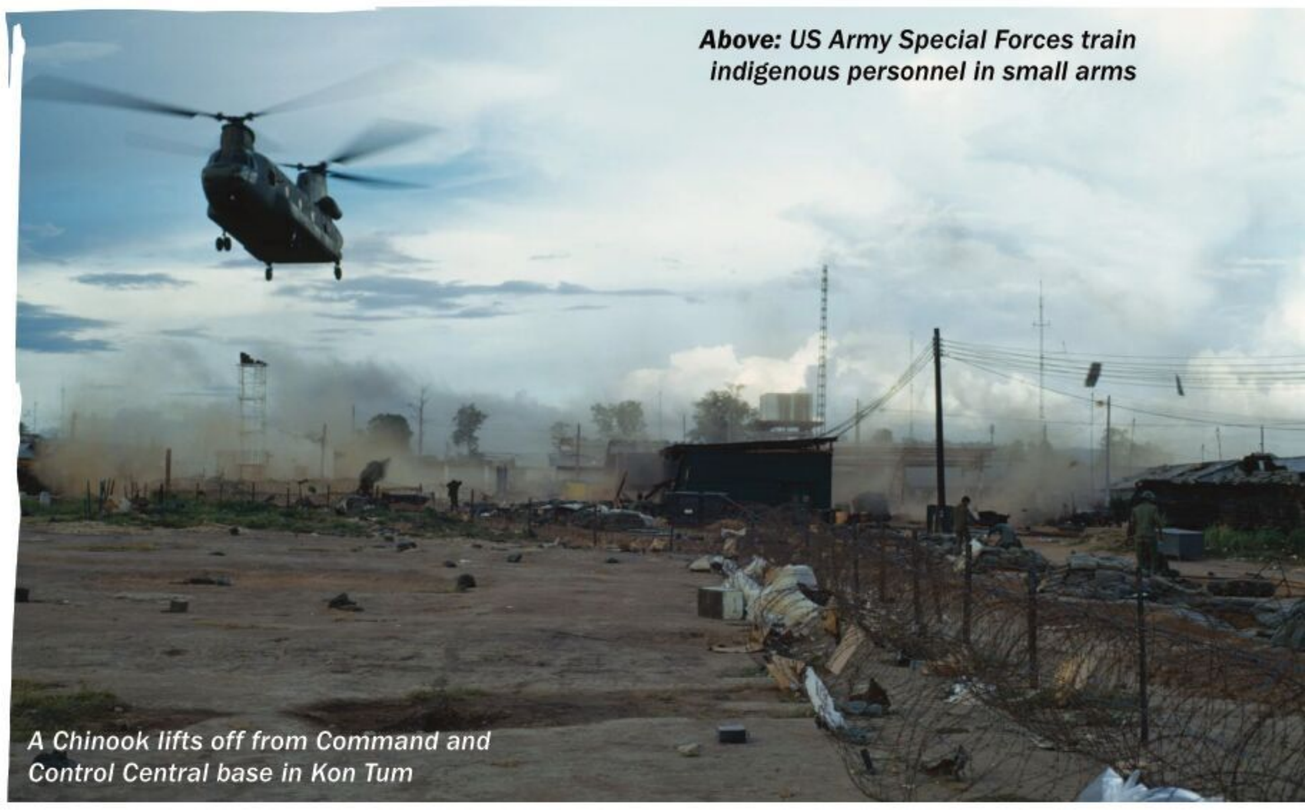
Along with their missions along the Ho Chi Minh trail, SOG conducted rescue operations to recover downed US aircrew and prisoners of war under Operation Bright Light. Intriguingly, SOG were not involved in perhaps the most well-known POW rescue mission of the Vietnam War.

The famous Son Tay mission in November 1970 seemed a perfect fit for SOG – CCN in particular – who had conducted secret reconnaissance missions in the area. It isn't known why the rescue operation was given to a newly established one-off task force, although inter-service politics likely played their part. In any case, the POWs had been moved and the raid was unsuccessful.

**"The NVA responded to the SOG missions with Chinese-trained hunter-killer units equipped with tracking dogs"**



A group of Montagnards show off the severed heads of Viet Cong they have collected, 1963



**Above:** US Army Special Forces train indigenous personnel in small arms

A Chinook lifts off from Command and Control Central base in Kon Tum

In a curious twist of fate, many of the Chinese advisers who had trained the North Vietnamese hunter-killer teams were quartered in a secondary school near the Son Tay prison. It was assaulted by the US raiders to stave off any interference with the main rescue mission, killing the bulk of the Chinese training cadre.

Even more in the shadows, SOG conducted some of the most audacious and fascinating psy-ops missions of the war. In perhaps the Psychological Studies Group's finest hour, the legend of the Sacred Sword of the Patriots League (SSPL) was created. The objective? To convince the North Vietnamese people that an entirely fictional, anti-communist resistance group was alive, well and flourishing in North Vietnam.

Using covert radio broadcasts, airborne leaflet drops and faked SSPL membership cards, the story of a 10,000-strong resistance front was gradually developed. SOG recon teams would plant fake SSPL documents on the bodies of NVA troops they killed in ambushes to sow seeds of doubt and mistrust. Radio sets rigged to only play SSPL propaganda stations were even covertly distributed to villages in the North.

Perhaps the most successful SSPL campaign saw the Psychological Studies Group mail thousands of expertly faked letters alleging involvement in the SSPL to North Vietnamese officers and communist party officials. Spies reported that at least some of those who received the letters were later relieved of their duties.

Their most audacious psy-op, however, was undoubtedly known as Paradise Island. Indigenous SOG operators from the Maritime Studies Group would interdict North Vietnamese fishing boats, seizing the crews and transporting them, blindfolded, to a secret island location.

There they were told that they had been captured by the SSPL and held for a short time. During the three weeks or so of captivity, the fishermen were treated to medical and dental care for any ailments, given new clothes, and fed well and often – in stark contrast to their lives in North Vietnam.

When they were released, they were supplied with gifts including an SSPL radio set to take home with them. Some were trained as double-agents, others were simply told to tell their families and villages of the fair treatment of the SSPL. Although Paradise Island may have had some successes, at least some fishermen planned their re-capture by SOG, as they apparently enjoyed the all-expenses paid holiday.

MACV-SOG officially operated between 1964 and 1972, when US efforts began to focus on the drawdown of US forces in Vietnam and the eventual transition of the war to the South Vietnamese. SOG was credited with severely impeding the resupply of enemy forces in South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh trail, capturing and killing large numbers of high-value targets and spreading disorder and doubt among the senior ranks of the NVA and communist party.

Although the exact numbers are hard to confirm, thousands of strategic reconnaissance missions were launched and at least a handful of successful Bright Light recovery missions were undertaken. At the height of the unit, some 2,000 US personnel were assigned to MACV-SOG, along with about 8,000 South Vietnamese, Montagnard and Nung Chinese agents. According to a US Senate report, 13 MACV-SOG operators were later awarded classified Medals of Honor.

All of that came at significant costs to the unit. 57 SOG operators were listed as missing in action. Even today, ten Recon Teams remain unaccounted for, although the members of one, Recon Team Maryland, were recently laid to rest, some 43 years after they were killed in an ambush in Laos. Their remains were discovered in 2009 by a Laotian farmer and the men were finally interred in Arlington National Cemetery in 2012 with full military honours.

Indeed, MACV-SOG suffered the highest casualty rates for a unit of its size since the American Civil War. At one point in 1968, for example, almost half of those assigned to the RTs were killed in action, while every single operator was wounded in action at least once. In all, 243 SOG operators lost their lives in their secret, undeclared war in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It can only be hoped that the jungles of Vietnam will one day reveal the whereabouts of those still missing.

*Images: Alamy, Getty, Shutterstock, TopFoto*

# ANZACS AT

## AN INTERVIEW WITH LIEUTENANT COLONEL HARRY SMITH SG, MC (RETD.)



**"The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia later selected this engagement as the most iconic moment of their war"**

# LONG TAN

WORDS
**TOM GARNER**

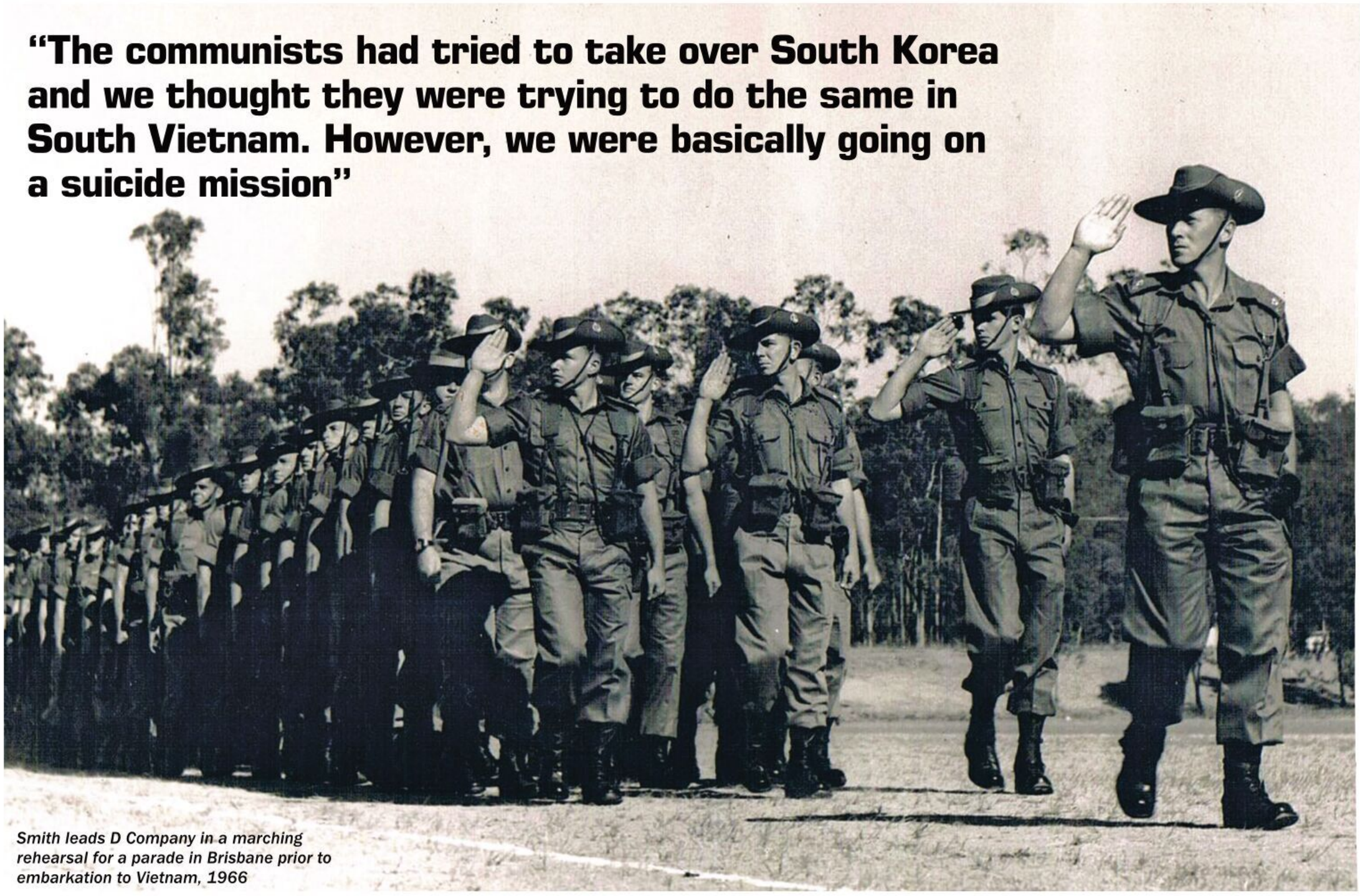
This decorated veteran successfully commanded 108 men against thousands of enemy soldiers during Australia's most remarkable battle of the Vietnam War

The Battle of Long Tan was a brutal event that came to define Australia's experience of the Vietnam War. Largely fought in a monsoon on 18 August 1966, 108 Anzac troops, primarily from D Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (6 RAR), fought off thousands of determined Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers and inflicted hundreds of casualties.

The Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia later selected this engagement as the most iconic moment of their war. Nevertheless, the battle was a torrential nightmare for D Company's commander, Major Harry Smith. This retired lieutenant colonel fought two battles as a result of Long Tan. The first saw him lead drenched and inexperienced soldiers to victory against overwhelming odds in terrible conditions. The second was his decades-long fight to persuade the Australian military establishment to properly recognise his men's courage. Smith now reveals how he won them both.

*Australian troops during their tour of duty in Vietnam*

**"The communists had tried to take over South Korea and we thought they were trying to do the same in South Vietnam. However, we were basically going on a suicide mission"**



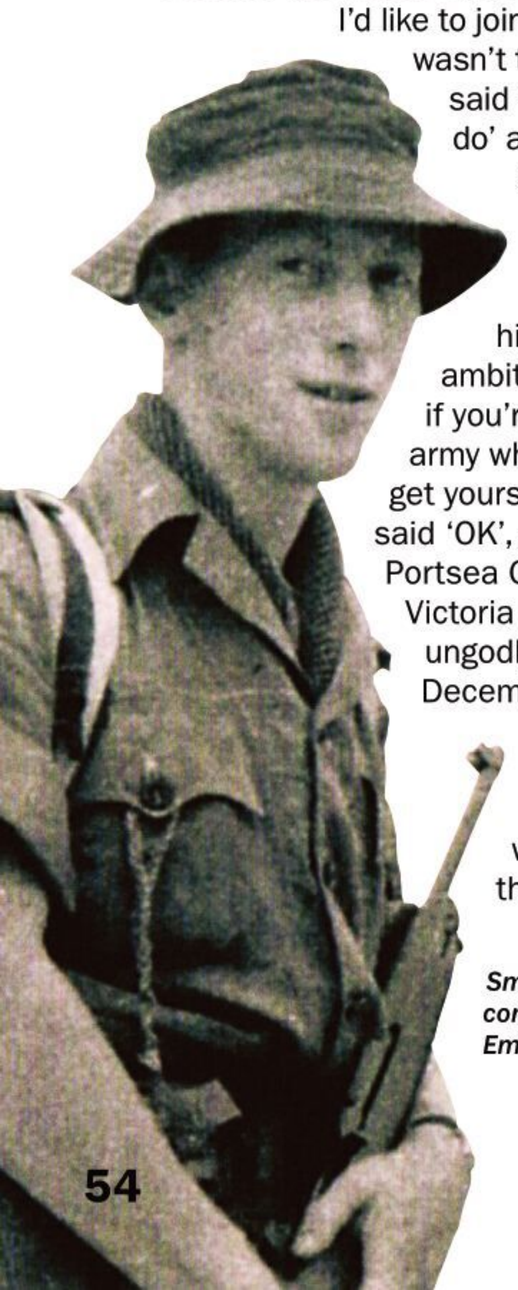
*Smith leads D Company in a marching rehearsal for a parade in Brisbane prior to embarkation to Vietnam, 1966*





## An officer in Malaya

Born in 1933 in Hobart, Tasmania, Smith was a metallurgist apprentice before he was called up for national service in January 1952. "By the time I got back to my old job they said, 'Mate, sorry about this but your job's gone. We couldn't afford to keep it vacant.' I said to my father, 'I've been in the cadets and done national service, I'd like to join the regular army. He wasn't terribly pleased but I said 'That's what I want to do' and he said 'OK'."



Smith enlisted as a private in the Australian Army, but his father encouraged him to widen his ambitions. "He said 'Son, if you're going to stay in the army why don't you try and get yourself a commission?' I said 'OK', got selected, went to Portsea Officer Cadet School in Victoria and graduated as an ungodly second lieutenant in December 1952."

After a few years, Smith gained his first combat experience when he participated in the Malayan Emergency between October 1955 and July 1957. The 'Emergency' was actually a bloody guerrilla war where Malayan communists fought against British rule. Commonwealth troops were deployed alongside British forces and Smith was posted as a platoon commander with 9 Platoon, C Company, 2 RAR.

*Smith pictured as a platoon commander during the Malayan Emergency in 1956*

Fighting primarily in the jungle, Smith's experiences in Malaya were invaluable given what was to come. "We used to be taken by British Saracen APCs [Armoured Personnel Carriers] and go up 3,000-4,000- metre hills covered in jungle. We usually stayed there for at least ten days. We'd maybe get an airdrop by parachute from New Zealand aeroplanes, which I think included Bristol Blenheims. They'd come over and drop the rations whenever we called for them and the British would give us a bottle of rum, which was great!"

As platoon commander, Smith would distribute special rations to keep up morale. "I'd go around the lines at 'Stand To' at night and dole out a capful of rum into their chocolate. We didn't have coffee in those days so we used to melt our chocolate down and add a bit of milk and rum, which became our nightcap."

Upon his return from Malaya, Smith – who was already a qualified paratrooper – trained to earn his green beret as a commando while remaining in the infantry corps. By July 1965 he was a major and posted to command D (Delta) Company, 6 RAR, at Enogerra, Queensland. Smith was soon advised that the battalion would be given a new deployment in June 1966: Vietnam.

## "A suicide mission"

As company commander, Smith trained his men hard for the forthcoming conflict to help their future performance. "I had one attitude to my soldiers, which was 'one singer, one song'. Whatever I wanted it had to be done. For instance, where other companies might have run in sandshoes, I ran them in boots. Some of them fell by the wayside but in the main they got through it. I'm sure that the resulting confidence they had in their ability to do things under pressure certainly helped them out at Long Tan."

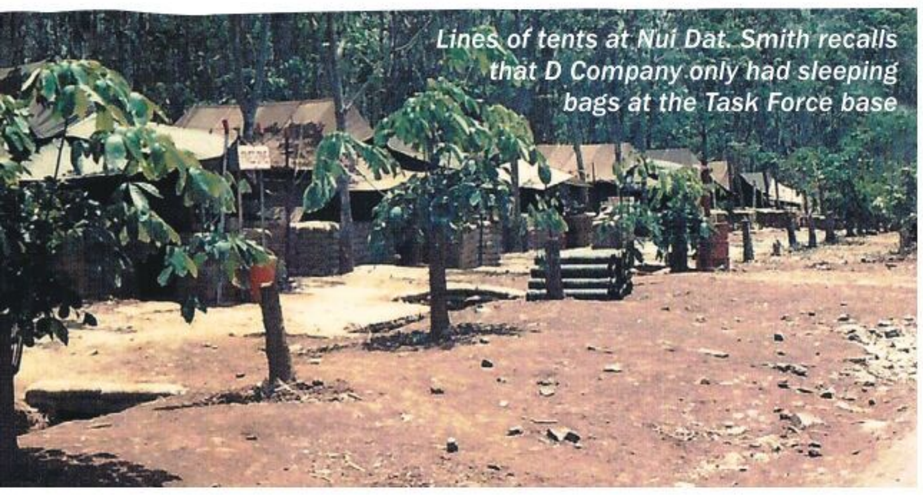
Among the soldiers of D Company were large numbers of inexperienced but determined conscripts. "They were very keen to show the regular soldiers what they could do and I thought they were a very good bunch. I ultimately had 68 national servicemen in my company at Long Tan, which was a majority of those I commanded."

Despite the vigorous training Smith admits that he and his fellow Australians knew little about the war in Vietnam. "We didn't know a lot except that we thought it would be similar to Korea. The communists had tried to take over South Korea and we thought they were trying to do the same in South Vietnam. However, we were basically going on a suicide mission."

Although Vietnam now seemed like a daunting prospect, it was a challenge that Smith and D Company were willing to accept. "I use the old story that if you have a pack of racehorses you've got to give them a run and that's what we were doing."



*Smith (centre) pictured with other Australian soldiers during the Malayan Emergency*



*Lines of tents at Nui Dat. Smith recalls that D Company only had sleeping bags at the Task Force base*

## Nui Dat

On 8 June 1966, D Company flew from Brisbane to Saigon and eventually arrived at the French resort of Vung Tau. Smith recalls that the atmosphere was surprisingly tranquil. "It was just like being on the Gold Coast in peacetime. There was no war going on there and we went in for supposed acclimatisation training for two weeks."

The atmosphere changed when the company was deployed 50 kilometres north to the 1st Australian Task Force base at Nui Dat in Phuoc Tuy Province. They arrived a week ahead of schedule. "There were rumours that the North Vietnamese 275th Regiment was coming down from the north and might take on the base."

Located on a rubber plantation, the base was new and the troops lived in basic conditions. "We initially just had plain sleeping bags, but after a month we got standard-issue canvas tents that we formed into a neat barracks area. All the tents were sandbagged up to chest height and a lot of work went into that. Fire trenches, command posts etc. were also constructed, and as a Vietnam base it was quite good."

## Chancing upon the enemy

In the early hours of 17 August 1966, Nui Dat was unexpectedly attacked. "At about 2.30 a.m. we got mortared and rocketed by the Viet Cong and, as we later learned, some of the North Vietnamese. My company area didn't get hit but 80-odd rounds fell and 40 people were wounded, with one who later died."

# D COMPANY'S SMALL ARSENAL

Harry Smith's men were well equipped but their weapons paled in comparison to the formidable armoury of their enemies

At the Battle of Long Tan, the various elements of the Viet Cong forces had a variety of weapons and plenty of ammunition at their disposal. This included AK-47 and SKS assault rifles, recoilless rifles, RPG-2 rocket-propelled grenades, light machine guns and mortars. By contrast, D Company were lightly armed with patrol weapons when they were unexpectedly hurled into the heat of battle.



## L1A1 RIFLE

D Company were primarily armed with this semi-automatic, magazine-fed rifle. It was the standard-issue rifle of the Australian Army between 1960–92 and is a British version of the Belgian FN FAL. The L1A1 was a reliable weapon in Vietnam because it could be used successfully in all environmental conditions. Each rifleman at Long Tan carried three, 20-round magazines: one in the weapon itself and two more in their webbing. There were another 60 rounds in boxes within their packs, but their small supply of ammunition meant that every shot counted.

**"The L1A1 was a reliable weapon in Vietnam"**



## M60 MACHINE GUN

This American-designed weapon was one of the iconic weapons of the Vietnam War. A belt-fed machine gun with a sustained fire of 100 rounds per minute, the M60 was used in every conceivable role, although it was most widely used by US infantrymen. It was also heavy and difficult to carry in the jungle. The two-man machine-gun teams in D Company carried six belts of 100, 7.62 rounds and also had the same number in their packs. There were three M60s per platoon, with one per section. There were also three in Smith's company headquarters support section.

## ARMALITE RIFLE

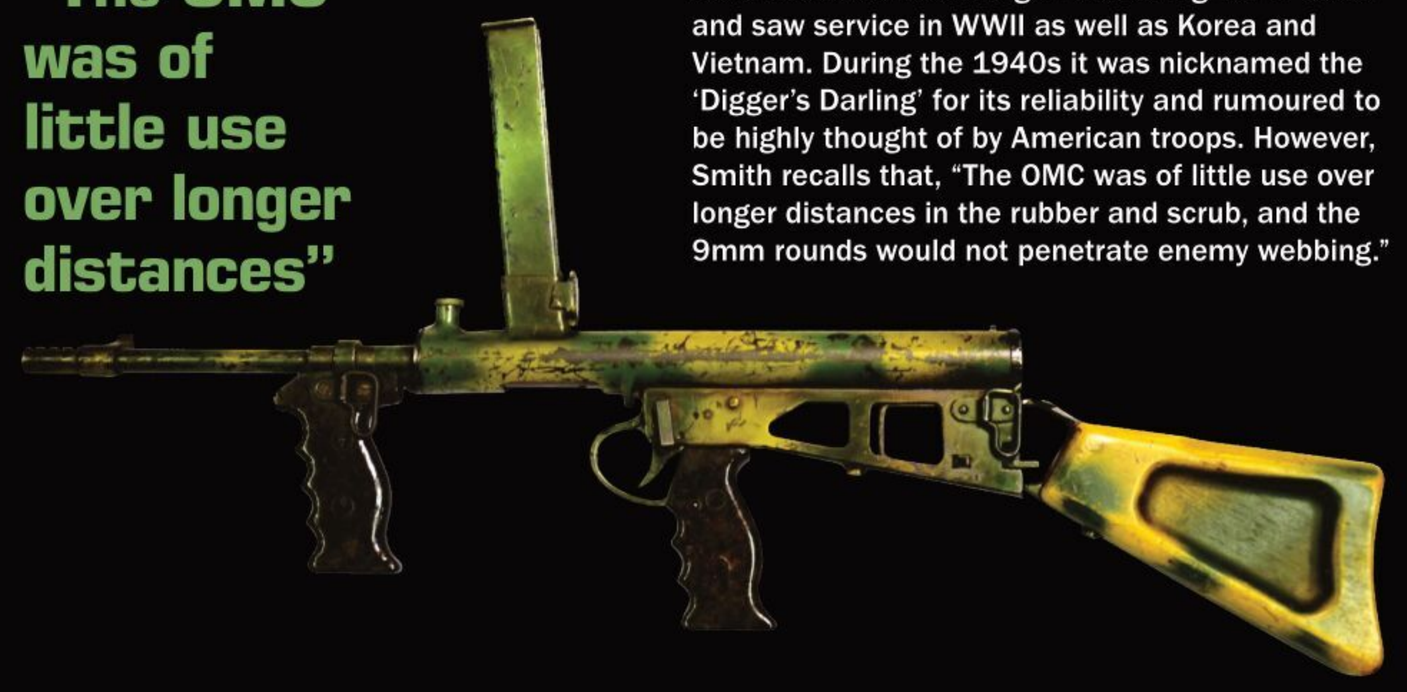
D Company had approximately 30 of these American assault rifles, which were mostly carried by commanding soldiers. Smith recalls there were problems with the Armalite bullet cases because there were no cleaning rods to push the rounds out.



## OWEN GUN

Known as the 'OMC' (Owen Machine Carbine), this Australian submachine gun was designed in 1939 and saw service in WWII as well as Korea and Vietnam. During the 1940s it was nicknamed the 'Digger's Darling' for its reliability and rumoured to be highly thought of by American troops. However, Smith recalls that, "The OMC was of little use over longer distances in the rubber and scrub, and the 9mm rounds would not penetrate enemy webbing."

**"The OMC was of little use over longer distances"**



The attack alerted Brigadier Oliver Jackson to the base's vulnerability to Viet Cong attacks and A, B and C Companies of 6 RAR were sent out the following morning to locate the enemy's firing positions. B Company patrolled east and discovered mortar bases and rocket positions towards Long Tan. They remained in the field overnight before D Company relieved them. "We had been looking after the APC area but we went out next morning to take over because B Company had gone out without equipment and rations."

Smith was in command of 108 men that included 105 soldiers of D Company. These were split into 10, 11 and 12 Platoons plus a company headquarters support section. There were also three forward-observation artillerymen from 161 Battery, Royal New Zealand Artillery. The soldiers of D Company believed the Viet Cong had since departed and were small in number. "We estimated that there were only 40–50 of them and that they'd long gone back to their home base in the jungle to the east of Long Tan. There was no way in the world that we expected anyone to be there."

Long Tan was an abandoned village that was dominated by a rubber plantation some four kilometres east of Nui Dat. After relieving B Company and sharing lunch with them, D Company took over patrolling duties. Smith decided to push further forward. "At around 2.30–3.00 p.m. I decided to head east because I reckoned that if the enemy was going to go anywhere they would have gone into the jungle to the east of the plantation. I also didn't want to be there overnight; it was bad for mosquitoes and it was much better to be in the jungle for security."

There was initially no sign of enemy activity but Smith spread his platoons out to widen the search. "B Company had gone halfway through the plantation that morning and saw nothing. However, I spread my company out just in case to ten metres between men so we were covering two sections in each platoon. We were covering 400 metres across and in depth and we slowly moved east in that formation."

It was 11 Platoon who first encountered the enemy. "We'd gone 200–300 metres up an oxcart road when up from the south came six to eight Viet Cong chatting away nonchalantly. They weren't aware of us and we weren't aware of them until they were right on us. My 11 Platoon sergeant, Bob Buick, opened fire and knocked one Viet Cong over. His mates dragged him away and he left behind an AK-47 assault rifle, which platoon commander Gordon Sharp picked up 11 Platoon quickly followed up and chased the enemy to the east."

**"My main aim was to kill the enemy, which is the role of the infantry, and I had to get my soldiers in the best situation where they could do that"**

Smith held D Company back to assess the situation. "We got a few mortar rounds fired from somewhere down south that landed near us. I moved the company about 300 metres to the northeast and decided that's where I would have a defensive position if anything happened."

At this point 11 Platoon was attacked full on. "I wouldn't say that they were ambushed but they were attacked by the North Vietnamese, who obviously moved forward into the rubber when they heard the sounds of the contact. I pulled them back to join us and we formed a company position."

This assault, which lasted about ten minutes, led to the battle beginning in earnest. "There was so much smoke from the artillery shells that you couldn't see a lot, but they finally located where we were. They started to put in what I believe was battalion-sized attacks on us."

## Monsoons and bombardments

D Company was now faced with a large enemy force of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops primarily from 275th Regiment but also from 5th Division and D445 Provincial Battalion. To this day, Smith does not know how many opposing soldiers he fought. "There are all sorts of figures. The enemy history has been rewritten many times, and their impression is they had three battalions each of about 600 men. That would mean we were potentially fighting 1,800 enemy soldiers. We were significantly outnumbered, but then again they weren't all up front in the line."

Smith was with the company headquarters that consisted of the company sergeant major (CSM), a batman, two signallers and three machine-gun crews. His platoons were further spread out and the terrain made visibility difficult. "The plantation had trees that were laid out in rows but there was a lot of 'dirty growth' that had been untended since the task force arrived. A lot of weeds had grown up between the trees and although it wasn't impassable it made it difficult to see down the lanes."

The visibility was also compounded by the onset of a monsoon. "It started to rain at about 4.30 p.m. It rained pretty much every afternoon but on this particular day there were thunderstorms and lightning and it really poured. It came down like no other rain that I'd ever seen in Malaya or in Vietnam before and after. The ground was just afloat with water and there was no point in trying to dig trenches because they just filled up. We had to lay on the ground."

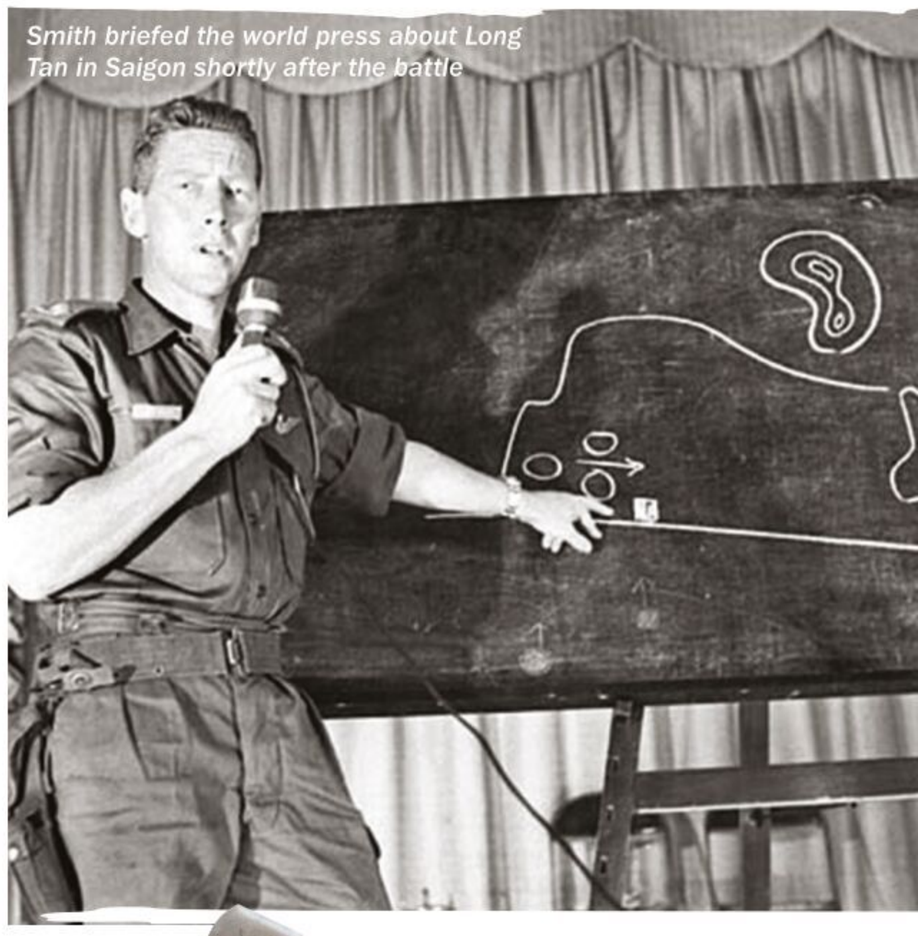
The precipitation was so bad that Smith struggled to even read his charts. "[Captain] Morrie Stanley was my artillery advisor and he and I were lying side by side trying to keep our maps clean of mud. This was so we could see exactly where the soldiers were and where we were going to put the next battery of fire."

Throughout the battle artillery support from Australian and New Zealand batteries located back at Nui Dat (together with additional American support) proved absolutely essential in holding the enemy at bay.

"We were saved by the artillery, who fired 3,500 rounds. That's a lot of high explosives, and I think if we had not had the artillery I would not be talking to you now. We had 24 guns firing, including six American 155mm self-propelled guns with 90-pound shells."



*Second Lieutenant Dave Sabben, commander of 12 Platoon, guards a captured Viet Cong gun the morning after the battle*



*Smith briefed the world press about Long Tan in Saigon shortly after the battle*

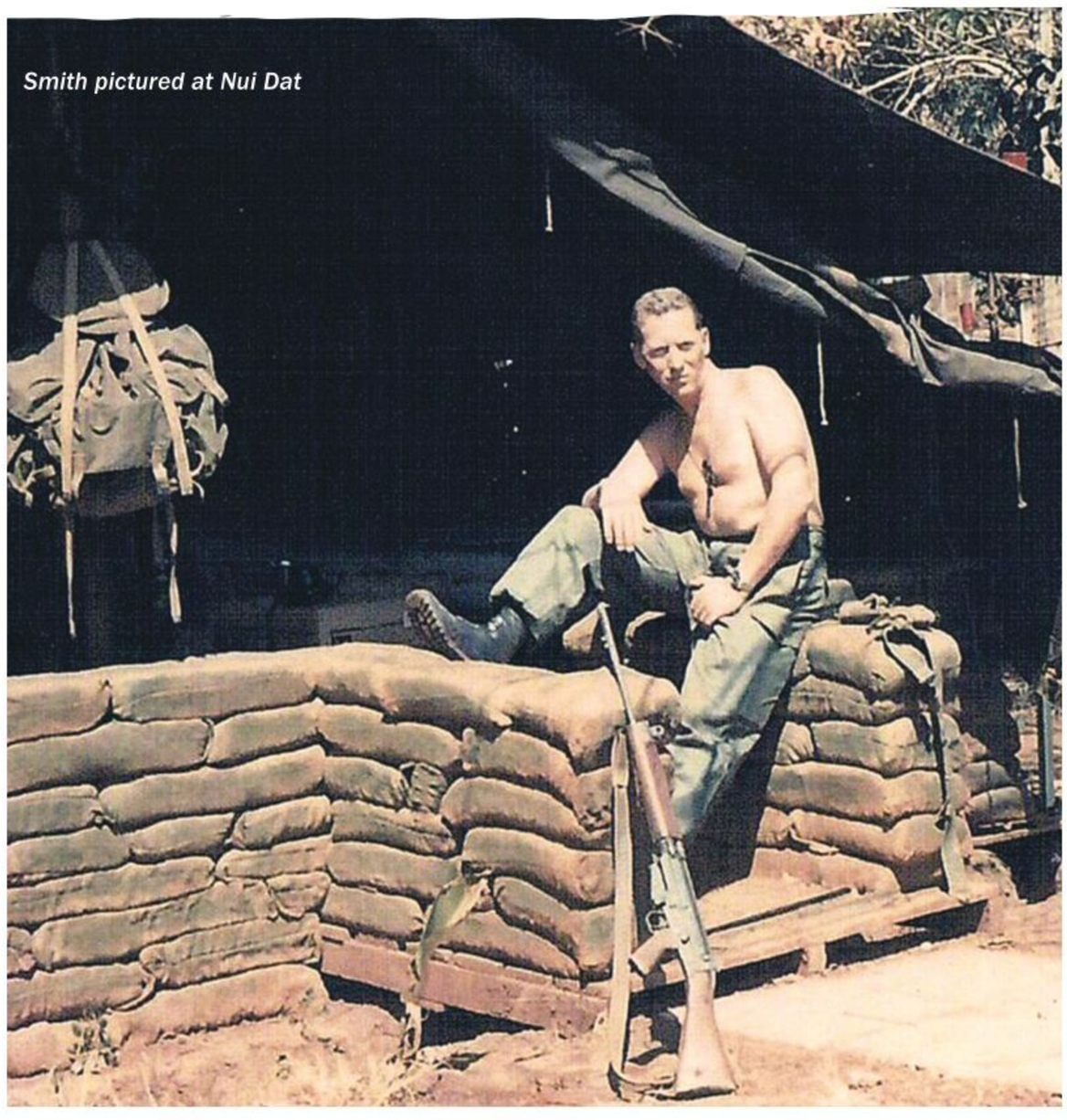




*Smith describes the numerically superior Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces he faced as "certainly very brave and didn't take cover behind trees"*



*Australian artillerymen from 105 Field Battery fire from Nui Dat, c.1969. At the Battle of Long Tan the battery used L5 pack howitzers to support D Company*



*Smith pictured at Nui Dat*

# 1ST AUSTRALIAN TASK FORCE

## Thousands of troops from Australia and New Zealand served in 1 AFT between 1966–72 and sustained many casualties

When the Australian Government initially became involved in the Vietnam War, it deployed 1 RAR to serve as the third infantry battalion of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade in 1965. It was soon replaced by a much larger, brigade-sized formation, which became known as 1st Australian Task Force (1 ATF). Eventually consisting of three infantry battalions, 1 AFT also included armoured, aerial, artillery, engineering and logistical units.

Based at Nui Dat, 1 ATF also included a peak number of 552 New Zealanders, including artillerymen, infantrymen and members of the NZSAS. At its height, the Task Force numbered over 8,000 men and saw extensive action from 1966 until its final withdrawal in March 1972.

1 ATF was not confined to operations in Phuoc Tuy and was occasionally deployed outside of its tactical area of responsibility. This included Operation Coburg and the Battle of Coral-Balmoral in 1968, which was the Task Force's largest battle in Vietnam. Long Tan became 1 ATF's most famous engagement, but there were other significant actions, including the battles of Hat Dich, Binh Ba and Long Khanh.

In total 478 Australian soldiers were killed and 3,025 wounded during the war along, with 37 New Zealand fatalities and 187 wounded. The majority of these casualties were sustained by 1 ATF.

**"478 Australian soldiers were killed and 3,025 wounded during the war, along with 37 New Zealand fatalities and 187 wounded"**

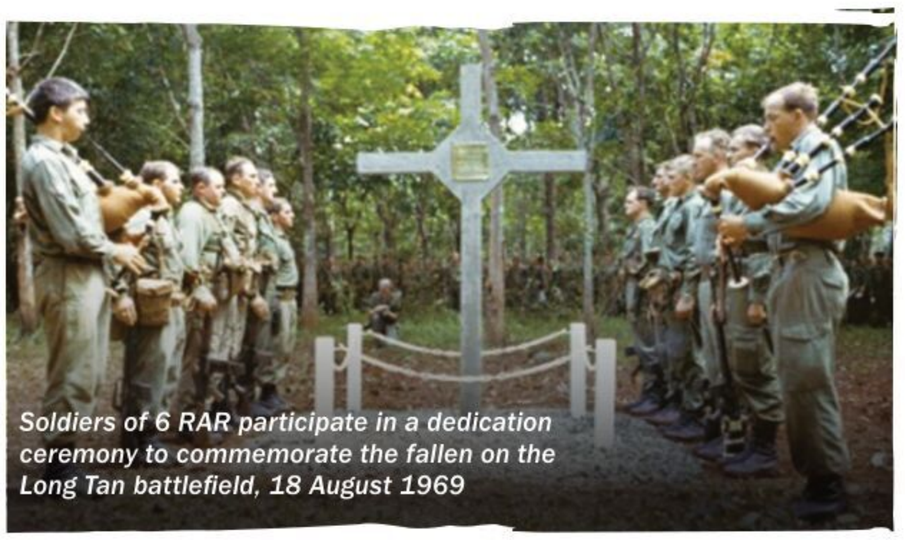
*Private Bruce Larner of 5 RAR waves in an American Huey helicopter during Operation Camden, August 1969*

***Below:** Australian soldiers march through Sydney before leaving for Vietnam*

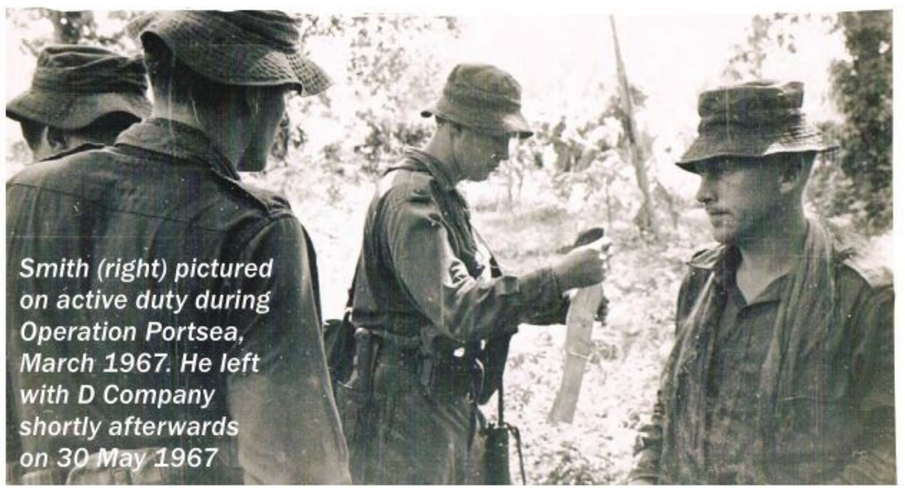




*Smith and CSM Jack Kirby (left) with a captured enemy machine gun from the battle*



*Soldiers of 6 RAR participate in a dedication ceremony to commemorate the fallen on the Long Tan battlefield, 18 August 1969*

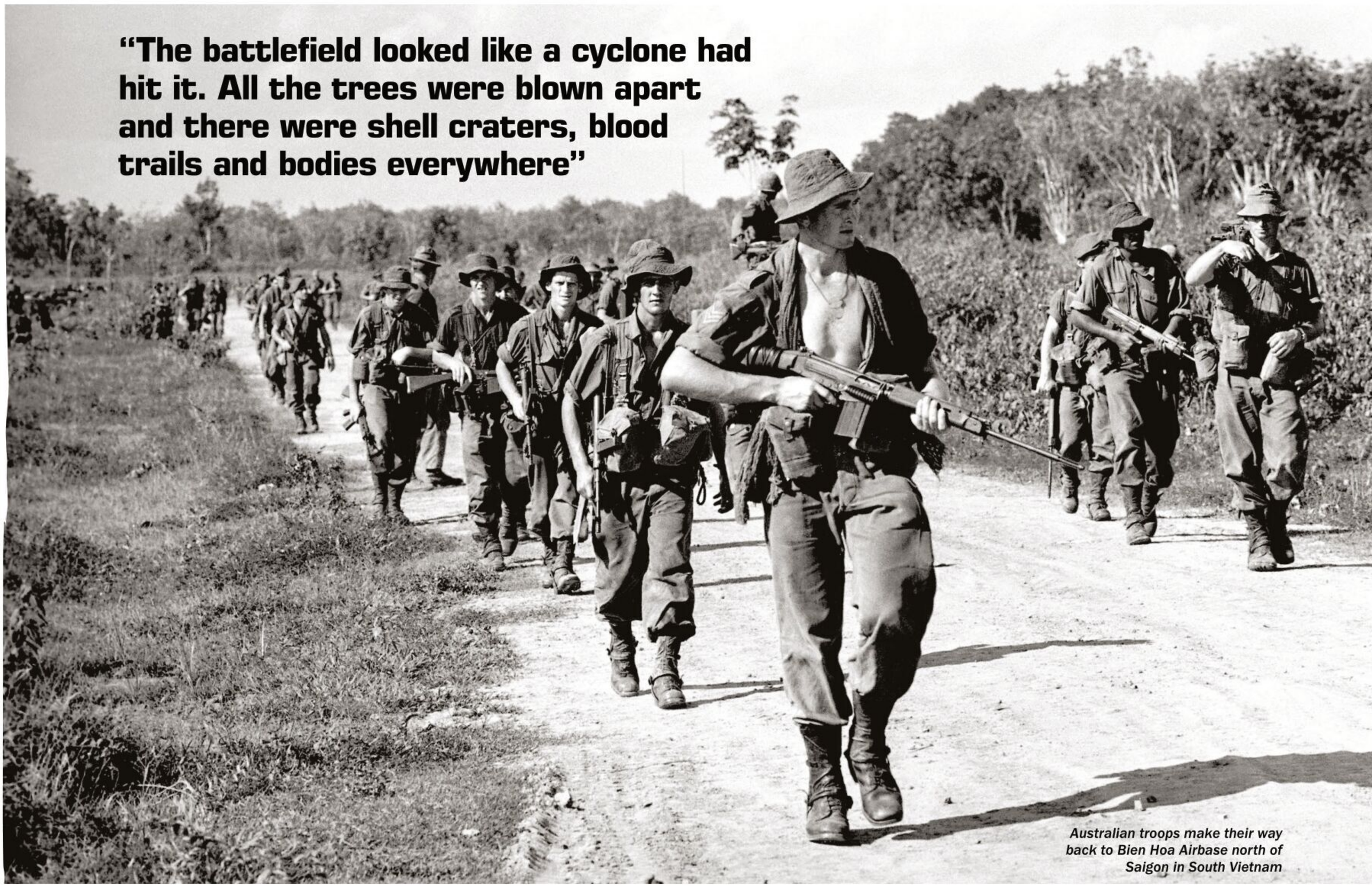


*Smith (right) pictured on active duty during Operation Portsea, March 1967. He left with D Company shortly afterwards on 30 May 1967*

Key to this bombardment was the radio communication between Smith, the artillery and his platoon commanders. "We constantly talked to each other. They would advise me where the enemy was coming in and I'd tell the artillery commander to move the artillery to where it was required. The platoon commanders controlled their own platoons and they did a bloody good job. I didn't tell them what to do."

On the battlefield itself Smith remained focused. "My main aim was to kill the enemy, which is the role of the infantry, and I had to get my soldiers in the best situation where they could do that. Whenever there was a lull in the battle I would go around the three platoons and check on how they were doing. I would also make sure that their machine guns were lined up and covering each other so that we had fields of fire where they could fire on the enemy."

The challenges of coordinating the battle meant that even fear itself was an afterthought. "People have said to me 'Were you frightened?' but I always say I wasn't because I was too busy. You're giving orders to platoons, passing information back to the CO and talking to the artillery commander. Certainly, whenever the enemy put in their main assaults they gave us a hard time but they never got inside our forward lines. They were just mown down by artillery




*Australian troops make their way back to Bien Hoa Airbase north of Saigon in South Vietnam*

and those that got through were mown down by my soldiers and their machine guns."

Although the Anzac artillery was of critical importance to D Company's survival, inaccurate small-arms fire from the Viet Cong was also significant. "They had a large number of tracer rounds in their ammunition. One thing about the enemy that was always good for us was that they fired high for some unknown reason. The tracer rounds used to go over our head in the main and as dusk came on it looked like fireflies going past."

Nevertheless, D Company was taking casualties and in the final company position the wounded were gathered very close to the fighting. "We had about 22 wounded and they had to be taken back to the company aid post, which was behind my headquarters. It was just a hole in the ground that wasn't very deep and the medical orderlies were usually bandsmen. However, one of them, Corporal [Phil] Dobson, was better than a doctor. He went around and tended the wounded and not one of them was lost. I was later able to get a Mention in Dispatches for him."

## "You will lose the lot of us!"

Despite the dangers posed by the enemy, Smith has since written, "I often think I had more trouble back at base than with the enemy." Although he was given artillery support from Nui Dat, Smith had particular difficulty receiving full support from his senior officers away from the battlefield.

"The problem was with the base headquarters. There were a number of requests I made for artillery and it was very difficult for them to agree to it. I was a young major and I think the lieutenant colonels etc. thought 'What does Harry Smith think he's trying to do? Run the battle?'. I just had to tell them I wanted it and I wanted it now."

His efforts were additionally hampered because the troops at Nui Dat were distracted by a music concert put on by the famous Australian singers Little Pattie and Col Joye. "The majority of people were more interested in the concert than they were in all the noise that was 4,000 metres away! It was a bit hard for them to come to terms with 'Here we are watching a concert and D Company is out there fighting a regiment of North Vietnamese'."

The most visceral disagreement between Smith and his superiors came when he believed that D Company would be overwhelmed. "I eventually wanted the whole regiment of artillery, i.e. all three batteries firing plus the American 155mm guns, but they said 'No, you can't have them'. I said 'Fire the bloody guns or you will lose the lot of us!'"

Smith received the full regiment of artillery fire after that exchange but his superiors' intransigence also extended to flight units. Fortunately for D Company, airmen of the Royal Australian Air Force disobeyed orders to deliver much-needed supplies. "Luckily we got ammunition because there were two helicopters that had flown the concert party to Nui Dat. They were initially told that they weren't allowed to fly out because it was contrary to Canberra regulations. However, one of the pilots said 'I'm the captain of my aircraft, I'm going. Harry Smith wants ammunition and I'm going to take it out'."

## Victory and devastation

D Company had now been fighting enemy forces for hours, with the North Vietnamese launching repeated and dogged assaults. "Tactically, they were in-depth like us and they would pull back, reorganise and come up again. They were certainly very brave and didn't take cover behind trees. Some of our soldiers said, 'We reckon they were drugged because they just kept on coming'. It was suicidal."

Nevertheless, the tenacity of Smith's men and the increased bombardment eventually took its toll. At 7.10 p.m. APCs from Nui Dat, along with soldiers from other companies, finally arrived to relieve D Company, but as




*Smith pictured just before he received the Military Cross from Brigadier Oliver Jackson. Smith had been recommended for the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) but his award was downgraded. Jackson, who was not present at Long Tan, controversially received the DSO instead*

Smith explains, "The enemy had already withdrawn and the battle had actually finished in our position before the APCs arrived. There's no doubt in my mind that we had defeated the enemy. The APCs got to within 300 metres south of us and they could see the Viet Cong disappearing in the gloom to the east. They turned right and chased them until they lost them in the dark."

The exhausted D Company were relieved for the night, but they returned to the battlefield with APCs the following morning. A scene of carnage greeted them. "The battlefield looked like a cyclone had hit it. All the trees were blown apart and there were shell craters, blood trails and bodies everywhere. The amount of high explosives that we landed on the enemy was horrendous and when we went back in the next morning it was no wonder that there were 245 bodies in bits and pieces on the battlefield. We found another 48 in a shallow grave just to the east, so the total for the battle that they couldn't drag away, and they did drag a lot away, was 293 bodies."

Despite the devastation, D Company managed to find two of their own missing men wounded on the battlefield. "They were from 11 Platoon and when we pulled them back into the company areas those two were thought to be dead. When we went back in the next morning we found them still alive! One of them, Jimmy Richmond, was wounded in the chest and couldn't move or breathe properly. He just lay there until we got back but he now lives not too far away from me on the Sunshine Coast."

The casualty figures from Long Tan were grim. Out of 108 men, 17 soldiers from D Company had been killed and 24 wounded, along with a corporal from 1 APC Squadron who was mortally wounded. 11 of Smith's men who were killed were national servicemen, but the opposing forces suffered even worse losses.

The combined fatalities of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops came to 293 as recorded by the Australians, but the true number is most likely much higher, along with an almost unverifiable number of wounded.

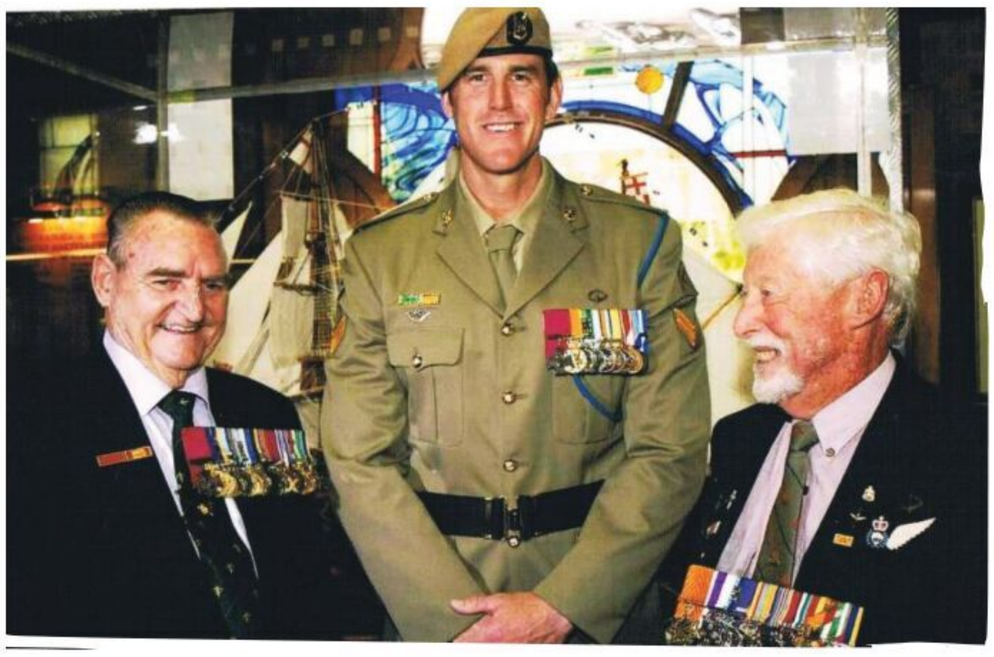
Adding to the bloodshed was the tragic possibility that the battle could have been prevented by Brigadier Jackson. "He had all the information provided by the South Vietnamese forces and civilians plus SAS patrols. If he had added two and two together there was enough information to say that a regiment of the enemy was there. We were able to survive but sadly I lost 17 of my soldiers killed and 24 wounded."

**"The incompetence of the Australian high command did not end after the battle"**

## Downgraded awards

The incompetence of the Australian high command did not end after the battle, and to add insult to injury, the official recognition of D Company's gallantry became mired in controversy. The Australian public were shocked at the deaths of the national servicemen, and Smith was ordered to make award recommendations at short notice. Complicating matters was an unusual quota system. "You were only allowed one medal per 150 men every six months. There was also only one MiD (Mention in Dispatches) per 100 men every six months, and there were also no unit citation awards in those days. We had to be very careful about who we recommended and it was a very difficult procedure."

Smith did what he could and recommended many of his men for prestigious awards, including a Victoria Cross for CSM Jack Kirby. However, only a few lower-grade medals and MiDs were awarded. Smith himself was recommended for the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) but his award was likewise downgraded to the Military Cross.





*Smith leads men from D Company to receive medals for gallantry at Long Tan, January 1967. Directly behind him is CSM Jack Kirby, who Smith recommended for the Victoria Cross. Kirby was instead awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal*

***Above:** Smith pictured with Australian Victoria Cross recipients Keith Payne (left) and Ben Roberts-Smith. His own Star of Gallantry is pictured at the far left of the medal ribbon next to the Military Cross*

*Australian artillerymen prepare to fire a 105mm gun in support of forces at Nui Dat, Vietnam*

*Images: Alamy, Big Sky Publishing and Harry Smith, Getty, Shutterstock*

Perversely, Jackson was highly decorated for reasons that Smith finds dubious, "The brigadier was given the DSO for his 'able, personal command of the battle'. This was in his citation, but he was actually 4,000 metres from the battle and never had anything to do with it. Nor did he give me any direction."

The reasoning behind the downgraded awards has long puzzled Smith. "I had a pretty hard slog to get my own troops awarded the medals that I recommended to them. I didn't know what the problem was. It was as though there was a veto and perhaps a feeling of 'You can't give awards to national servicemen because they wont be in the army for long. However, I really don't know what went on."

Although D Company received the US Presidential Unit Citation in 1968, the unfairness of the individual awards for Long Tan deeply frustrated Smith for decades. "I have always been very critical of the situation. Of the ones that I nominated half were downgraded and half were withdrawn.

"I couldn't do anything for 30 years because of the official secrecy period, but in 1996 I started tackling Canberra. I was eventually able to win and get those recommended in 1966 given the awards that I gave them."

A new system of awards had since been introduced, but many of Smith's men finally received proper recognition along with an Australian Unit Citation for Gallantry. "There were now Commendations of Gallantry so those who had been recommended for MiDs got the commendations. Others who I'd recommended for the Military Cross got the Cross of Gallantry. I was certainly very happy that the Governor-General presented these awards in August 2016."

Kirby, who died on another Vietnam tour in 1967, did not receive a posthumous Victoria Cross but Smith was awarded the Star of Gallantry (SG) in 2008 alongside his Military Cross. The SG is the second-highest military gallantry award in Australia and is surpassed only by the Victoria Cross.

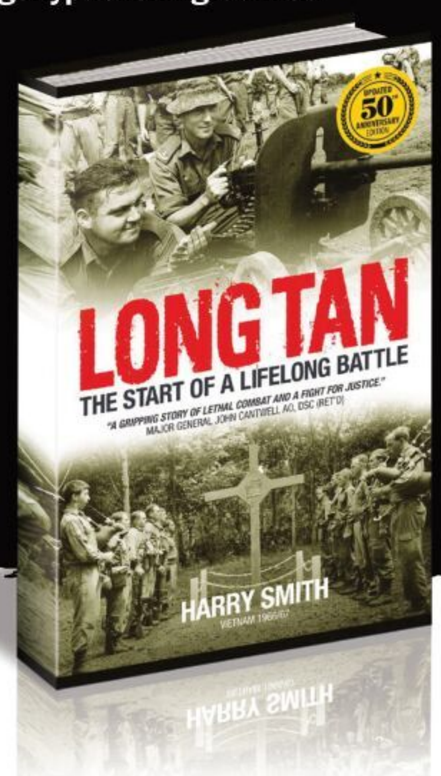
## "They performed outstandingly"

Although Australian soldiers fought many battles in Vietnam, Long Tan became the most famous. It is even the subject of a film titled *Danger Close*, which was internationally released on 8 August 2019.

Smith explains why he thinks the battle was important, "Long Tan wasn't a long battle like Coral-Balmoral, which went on for three weeks and had a lot more air and tank support. It was a very short, sharp, nasty battle where you had a company defeating a regiment of the enemy. That is what is significant about it." As the commanding officer of D Company, Smith still retains great pride in his men after over 50 years. "I feel honoured to have been the commander at Long Tan and very proud of my soldiers who fought as well as they did.

"I have to say that for young national serviceman and the regular army guys they performed outstandingly. Without them I wouldn't be alive today."

Harry Smith is the author of the autobiography *The Battle Of Long Tan: The Commander's Story*, which is published by Big Sky Publishing.
To purchase a copy visit:
**www.bigskypublishing.com.au**



Operator's Handbook

# UH-1H IROQUOIS 'HUEY'

## The 'sound' of the Vietnam War is not just a symbol of the US's involvement but also an outstanding aircraft that changed the rules of combat survival for the better

WORDS **TOM GARNER**

The Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter is one of the most iconic symbols of American involvement in the Vietnam War, and the distinctive noise of its rotor blades have led many American veterans to describe it as the 'sound of our war'. It first entered service in 1959, and over 16,000 of these powerful helicopters have been produced in the years since.

During the war the Iroquois was nicknamed 'Huey' thanks to its early 'HU-1' designation (which was later changed to UH-1). This name became so common that the AH-1 attack version was officially named the 'Huey Cobra'.

From 1965–73 the UH-1 Huey was the most common utility helicopter used in Vietnam and is the most produced variant of the model. It was primarily used to transport troops for aerial attacks, medical evacuations and transporting cargo. Hueys clocked up a total of 7,531,955 flight hours during the war and over 2,500 were destroyed.

Over ten per cent of all combat deaths in Vietnam occurred in helicopter operations, with 6,175 fatalities, but Hueys also helped to airlift over 90,000 patients. During World War II and the Korean War, hospitalisation time was measured in days, but Hueys could transport a wounded soldier from the field to hospital in less than one hour, dramatically increasing wartime survival rates.

This particular photographed aircraft is an 'H' model, a type that would have been used in Vietnam. It was stationed on a US Army base in Germany and now resides in the American Air Museum as part of the Imperial War Museum Duxford.

# UH-1H IROQUOIS ‘HUEY’

MANUFACTURER: BELL HELICOPTER TEXTRON (US)
INITIAL YEAR OF SERVICE: 1959
POWER PLANT: LYCOMING T53-L-11 TURBO SHAFT ENGINE DELIVERING 1,100 SHP
MAXIMUM TAKEOFF WEIGHT: 4,100KG
PAYLOAD: 2,200LB (IN ADDITION TO FUEL AND CREW OF 4)
SPEED: 220KPH
RANGE: 510KM
CEILING: 19,390FT
CREW: 4
PASSENGERS: 12 MAXIMUM
ARMAMENT: HIGHLY VARIABLE DEPENDING ON ROLE AND OPERATOR

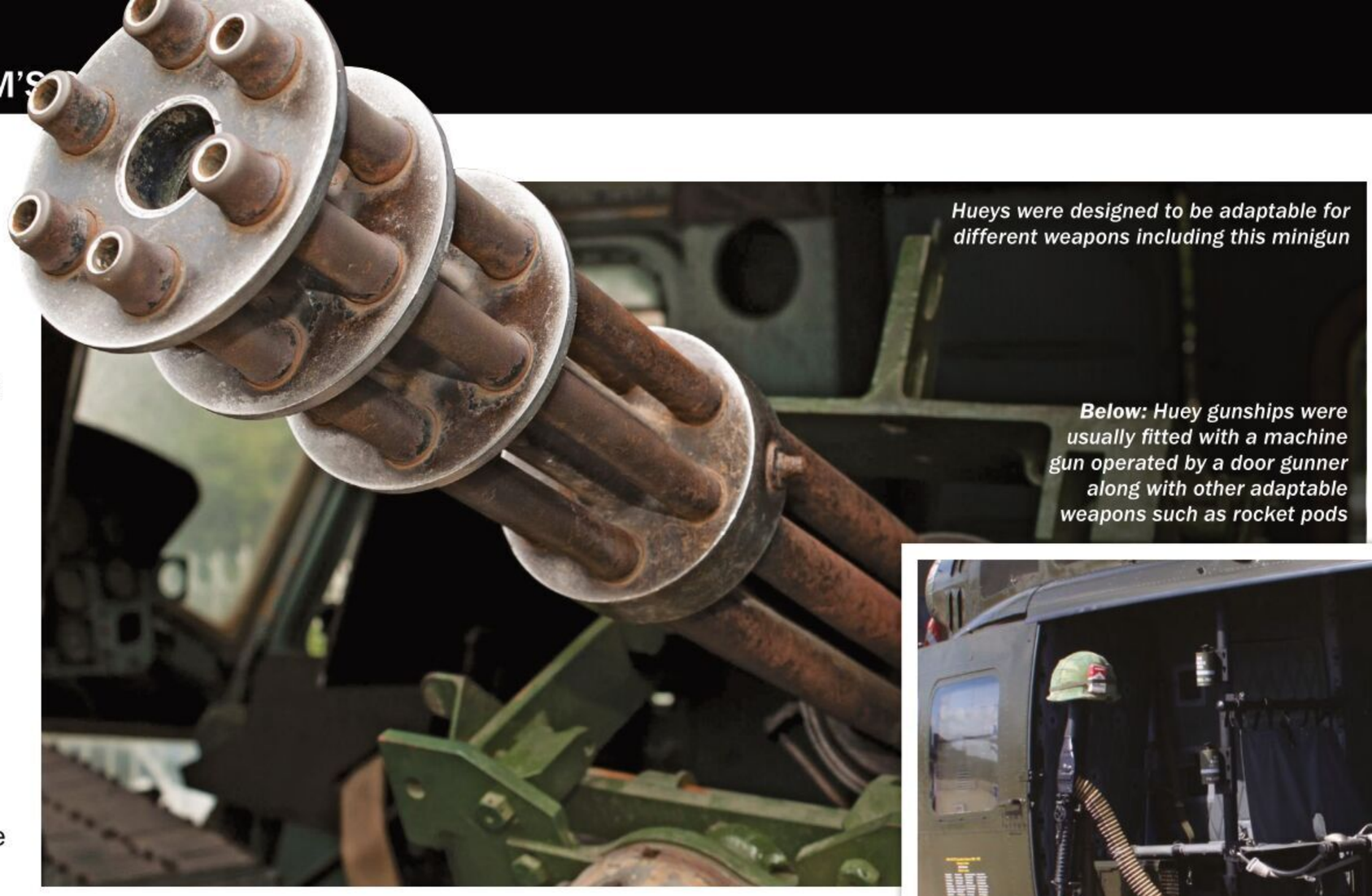
*The UH-1’s official name is ‘Iroquois’, but the helicopter was commonly named ‘Huey’ and the name stuck*

**“During World War II and the Korean War hospitalisation time was measured in days, but Hueys could transport a wounded soldier from the field to hospital in less than one hour, dramatically increasing wartime survival rates”**

## ARMAMENT

The Huey was lightly armed and vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire. Most were fitted with M-60D machine guns manned by the crew chief on the left and the door gunner on the right. 2,000 rounds of linked ammunition could be carried in the helicopter. These two crewmembers also carried an M-16 rifle and coloured smoke grenades to mark targets when receiving hostile fire or to mark landing zones.

The officially unarmed pilots often carried unauthorised weapons slung over their seats for personal protection. Hueys could also adapt to be armed with torpedoes, miniguns, air-to-surface missiles and rocket pods.

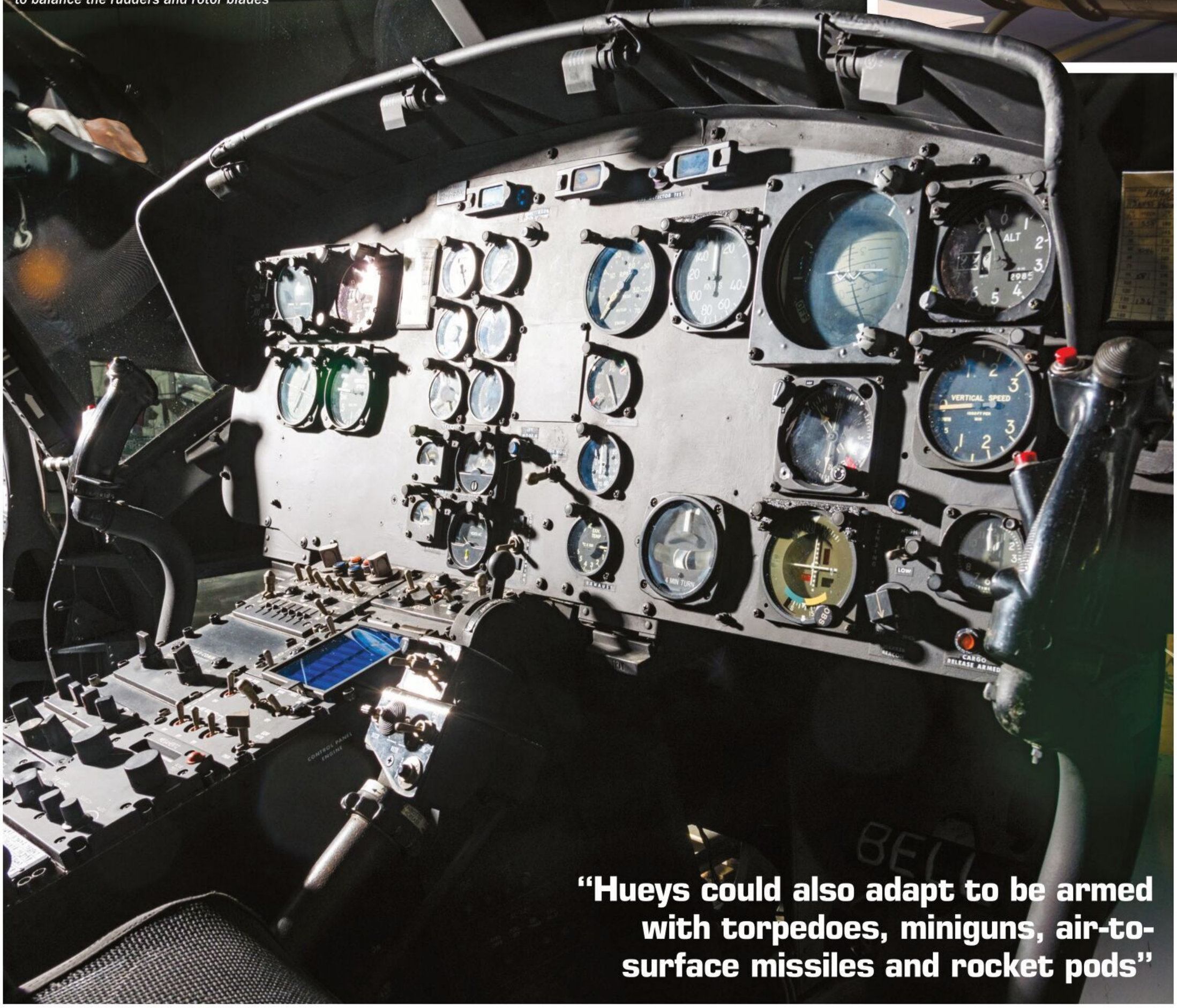


*Hueys were designed to be adaptable for different weapons including this minigun*

***Below:** Huey gunships were usually fitted with a machine gun operated by a door gunner along with other adaptable weapons such as rocket pods*



*1960s helicopters were not computerised and the pilot would spend a lot of time concentrating to balance the rudders and rotor blades*




**"Hueys could also adapt to be armed with torpedoes, miniguns, air-to-surface missiles and rocket pods"**

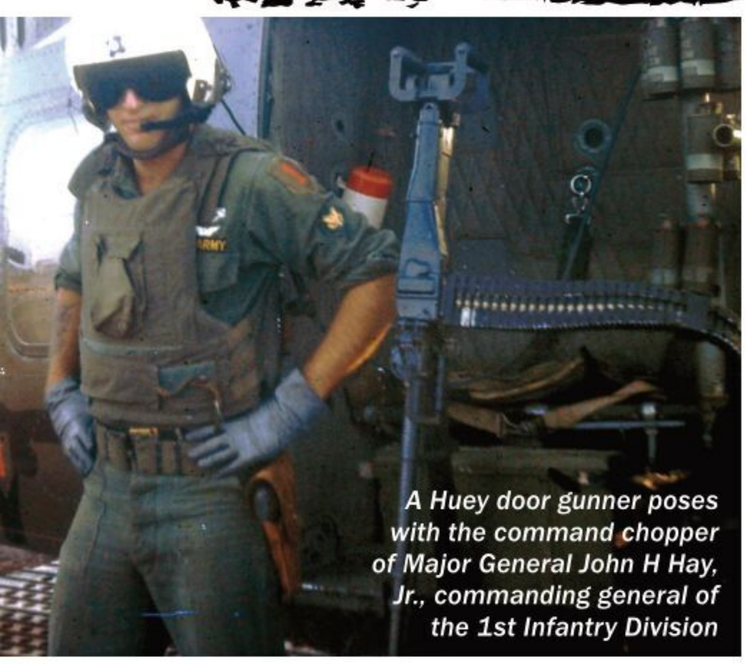


*Including the crew, a Huey could seat up to 15 people, usually American infantrymen*

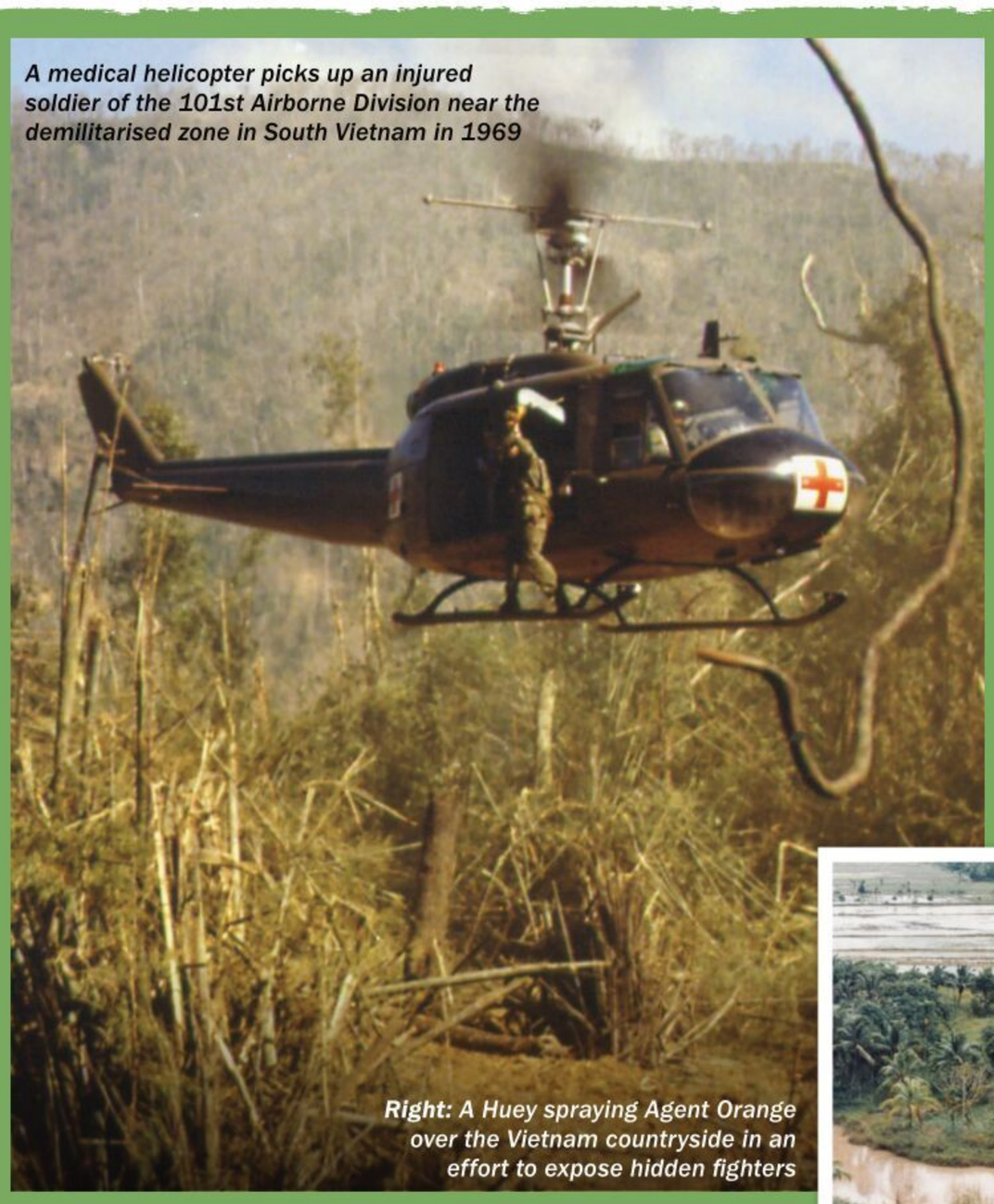
## CREW AND PASSENGERS

The Huey was manned by four crewmembers. The Aircraft Commander (or A/C) was the main pilot and in command of the aircraft at all times during a mission. The co-pilot assisted the A/C and flew the aircraft when needed. The crew chief was responsible for maintaining the aircraft while the door gunner assisted the crew chief and manned the right-door gun while flying. All crewmembers were issued with body armour jokingly referred to as ‘chicken plates’.

The main passengers were usually six to eight American infantrymen en route to, or returning from, combat zones, but the Huey could seat 15 people or house six stretchers.



*A Huey door gunner poses with the command chopper of Major General John H Hay, Jr., commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division*

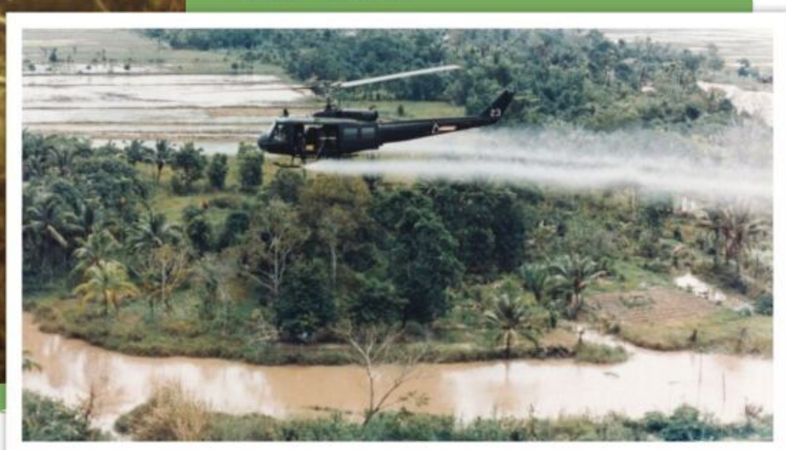


*A medical helicopter picks up an injured soldier of the 101st Airborne Division near the demilitarised zone in South Vietnam in 1969*

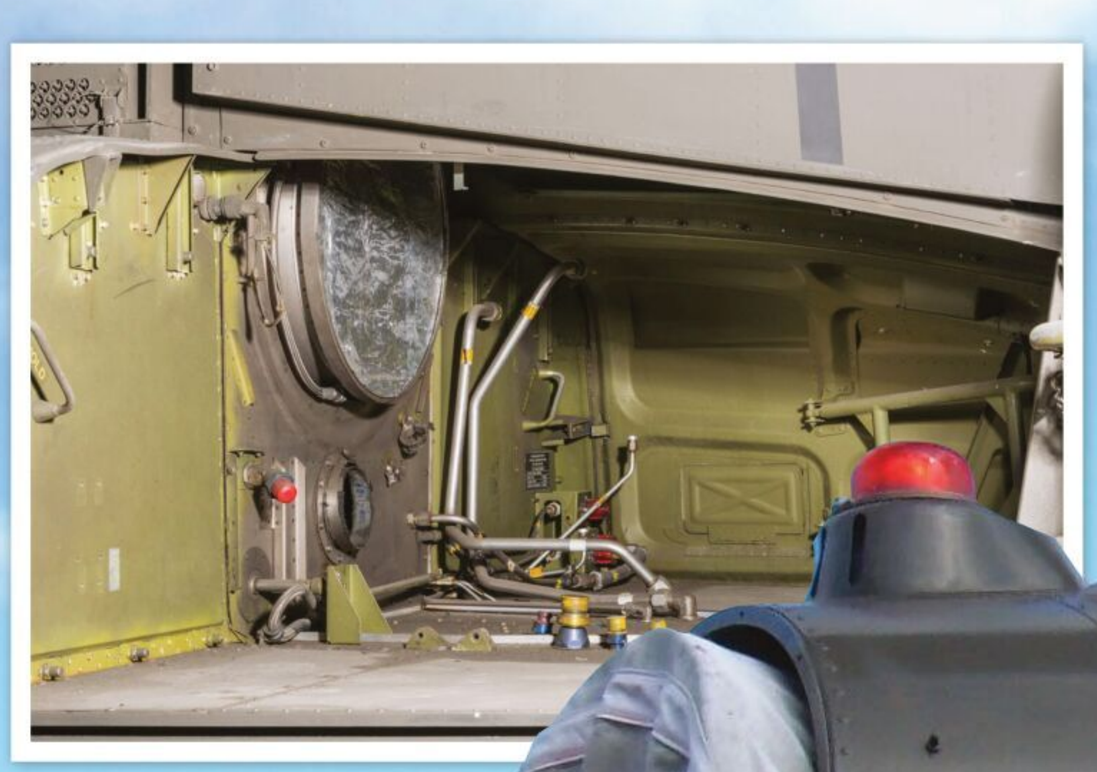
## MISSIONS

The Huey’s primary task was to carry infantry into combat, a procedure commonly called ‘combat assaults’, which involved a ‘package’ of eight to ten Hueys transporting the infantry. These were supported by two to three gunships and observed by a command and control helicopter that would hover overhead.

As a multi-purpose helicopter, the Huey had other missions including supplying food, water, ammunition and other necessities to infantry in the field or at forward bases. It was also used as a medical vehicle, transporting wounded soldiers to safety and treatment. Hueys are still used by various countries for fire-fighting missions, humanitarian aid, research operations and search-and-rescue duties.



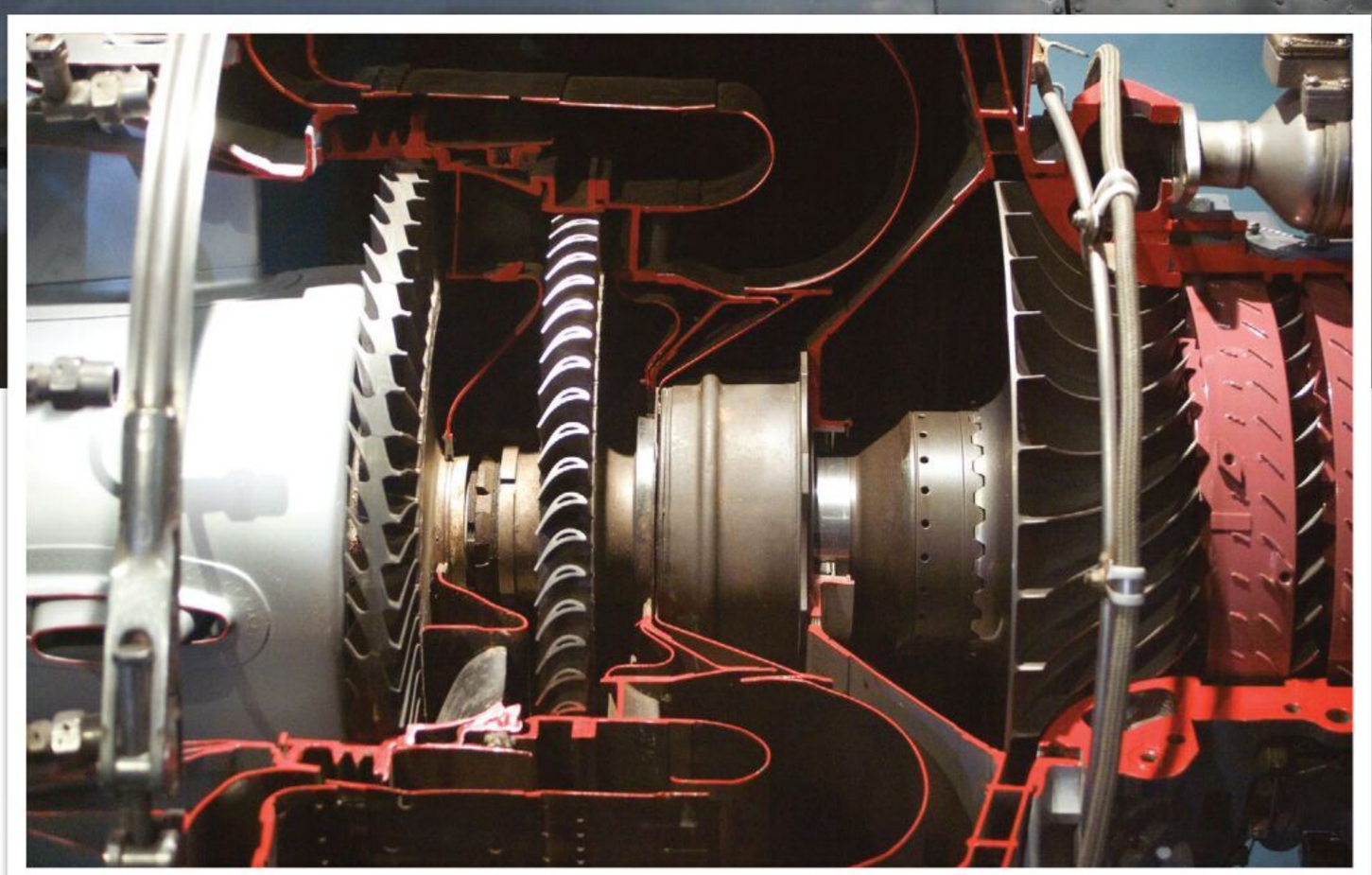
***Right:** A Huey spraying Agent Orange over the Vietnam countryside in an effort to expose hidden fighters*



***Above:** This small, empty space would have housed the turbine engine, enabling a greater amount of cargo and passenger space*

**"The Huey was one of the first helicopters to use a turbine jet engine, which was installed above the fuselage and close to the main rotor unit"**

*The rear of a UH-1H turbo shaft. This small but powerful engine enabled the Huey to fly at speeds of up to 220kph and a range of 510km*



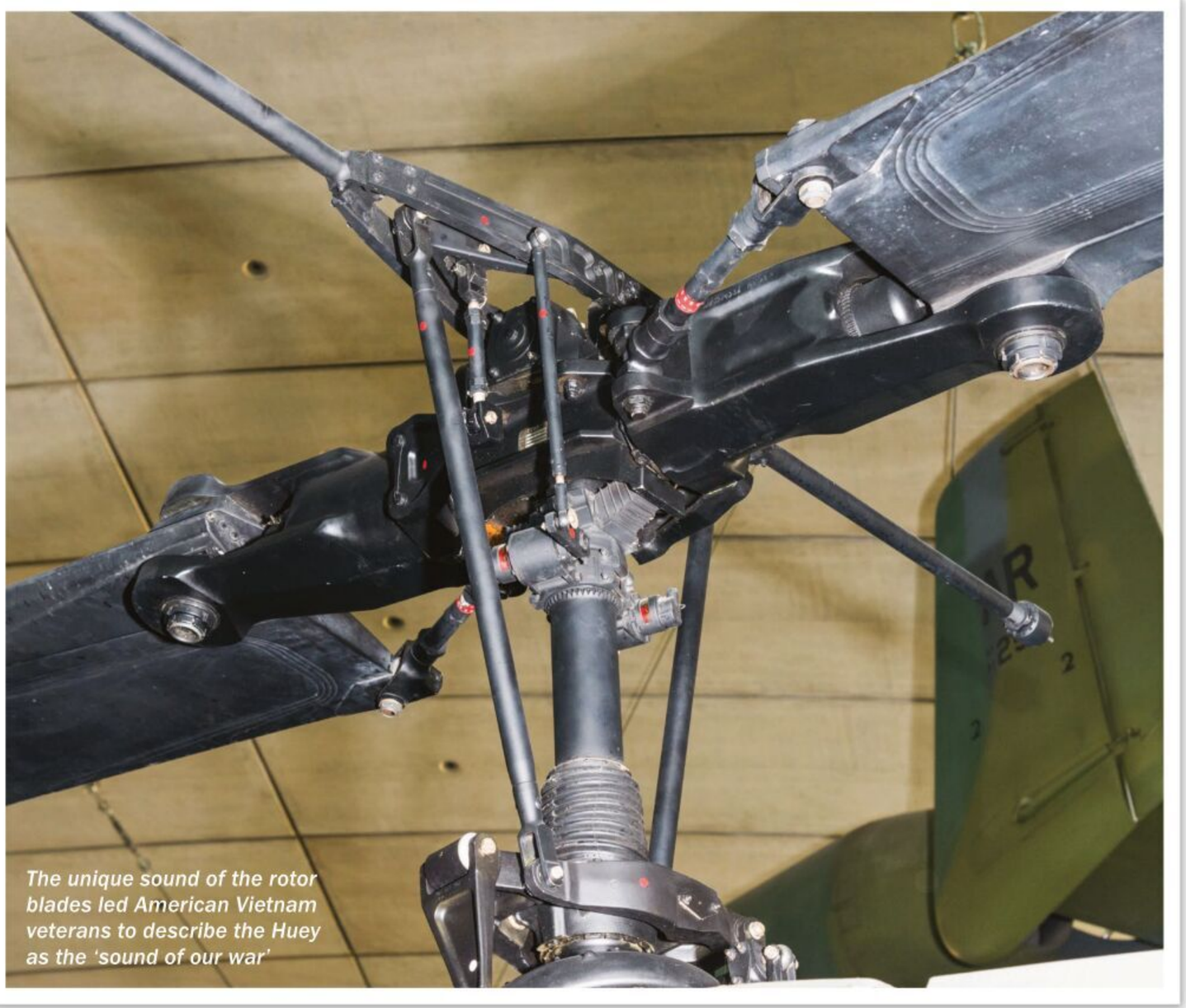
***Right:** A Lycoming T-53 turbine engine powered the Huey. Since 1955, over 19,000 have been produced for both helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft*

## ENGINE

Piston engines powered early helicopters, but this increased the aircraft weight and limited its flight capacity. The Huey was one of the first helicopters to use a turbine jet engine, which was installed above the fuselage and close to the main rotor unit. Turbine engines were expensive to build but they were durable, had great longevity and were very light considering their power output. Its small size meant that the helicopter could hold a larger cargo and transport more soldiers.



**“The Argentinean Army used nine Hueys against the British during the Falklands War”**



*The unique sound of the rotor blades led American Vietnam veterans to describe the Huey as the ‘sound of our war’*

## SERVICE IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Although the Huey is thought of as a quintessentially American helicopter, it has been used on active service by many other countries in different conflicts. During the Salvadoran Civil War (1979–92), the El Salvador Air Force received over 100 Hueys from the US, and these were heavily engaged in combat. Only 34 survived the war. The Argentinean Army used nine Hueys against the British during the Falklands War, and, in the 2007 Lebanon conflict, the Lebanese Army modified several UH-1Hs to carry 227 kilograms of high explosives, which they then used to strike Islamist militant positions.




*An armed Huey named ‘Death from above’ lands in an unidentified village in central El Salvador in 1984*

*Images: Alamy; Getty; Wiki*

**IWM DUXFORD**

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUMS

This UH-1H Iroquois Huey is housed in the fully refurbished and reopened American Air Museum at the Imperial War Museum Duxford in Cambridgeshire.
**For more details visit: www.iwm.org.uk/visits/iwm-duxford**

# DEADLOCK IN THE DEPTHS OF THE JUNGLE


**70 The Siege of Khe Sanh**
Awesome American firepower would ultimately settle a ferocious battle for Khe Sanh Combat Base

**78 A vision of hell**
Think your job's tough? A bad day at the office for Stuart Steinburg meant death and destruction

**88 The My Lai massacre**
Uncover the truth behind the worst atrocity of the entire war

**92 The Tet Offensive**
Aiming to drive the Americans out of Vietnam, the forces of the North used the cover of a lunar festival to prepare a massive assault

**98 Storm in the USA**
Increasingly aware of the carnage caused by US intervention, thousands of Americans voiced their opposition to the war

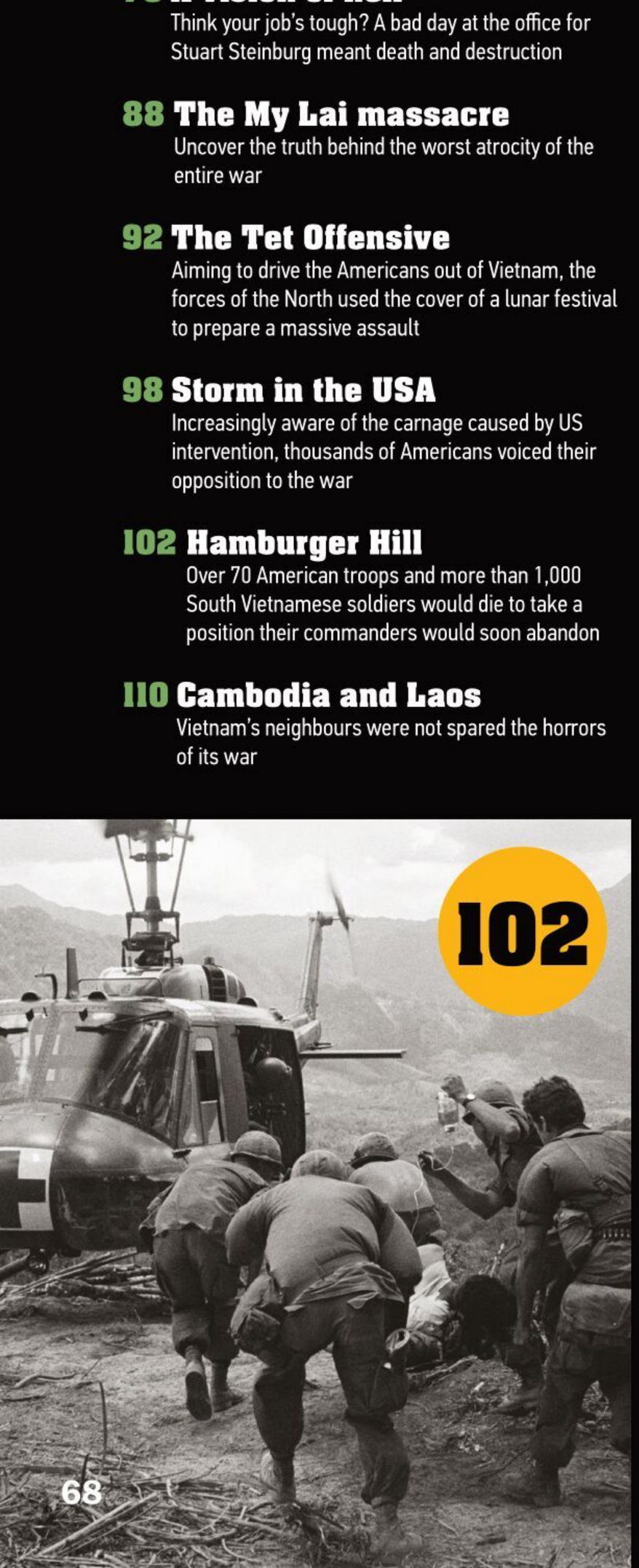
**102 Hamburger Hill**
Over 70 American troops and more than 1,000 South Vietnamese soldiers would die to take a position their commanders would soon abandon

**110 Cambodia and Laos**
Vietnam's neighbours were not spared the horrors of its war





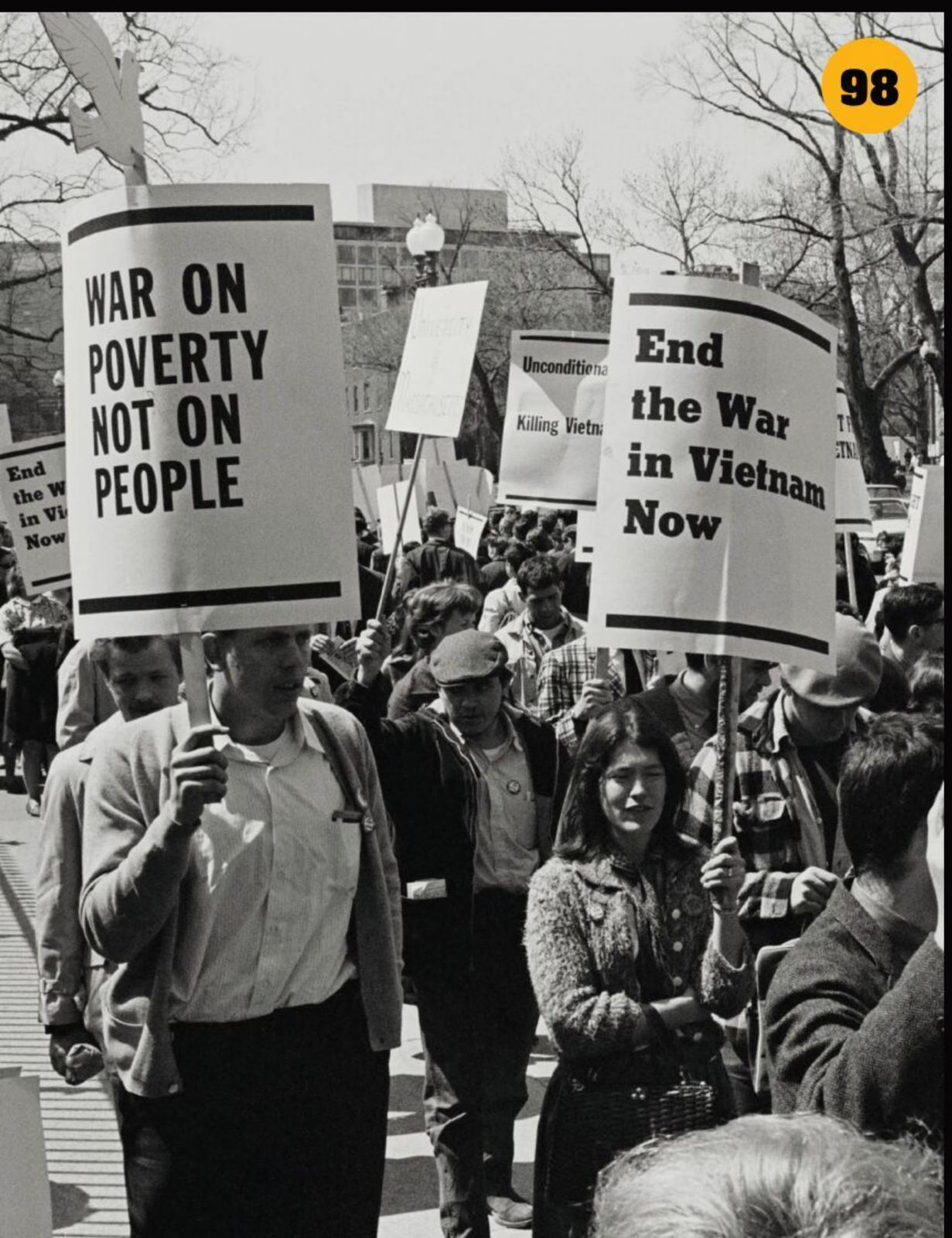


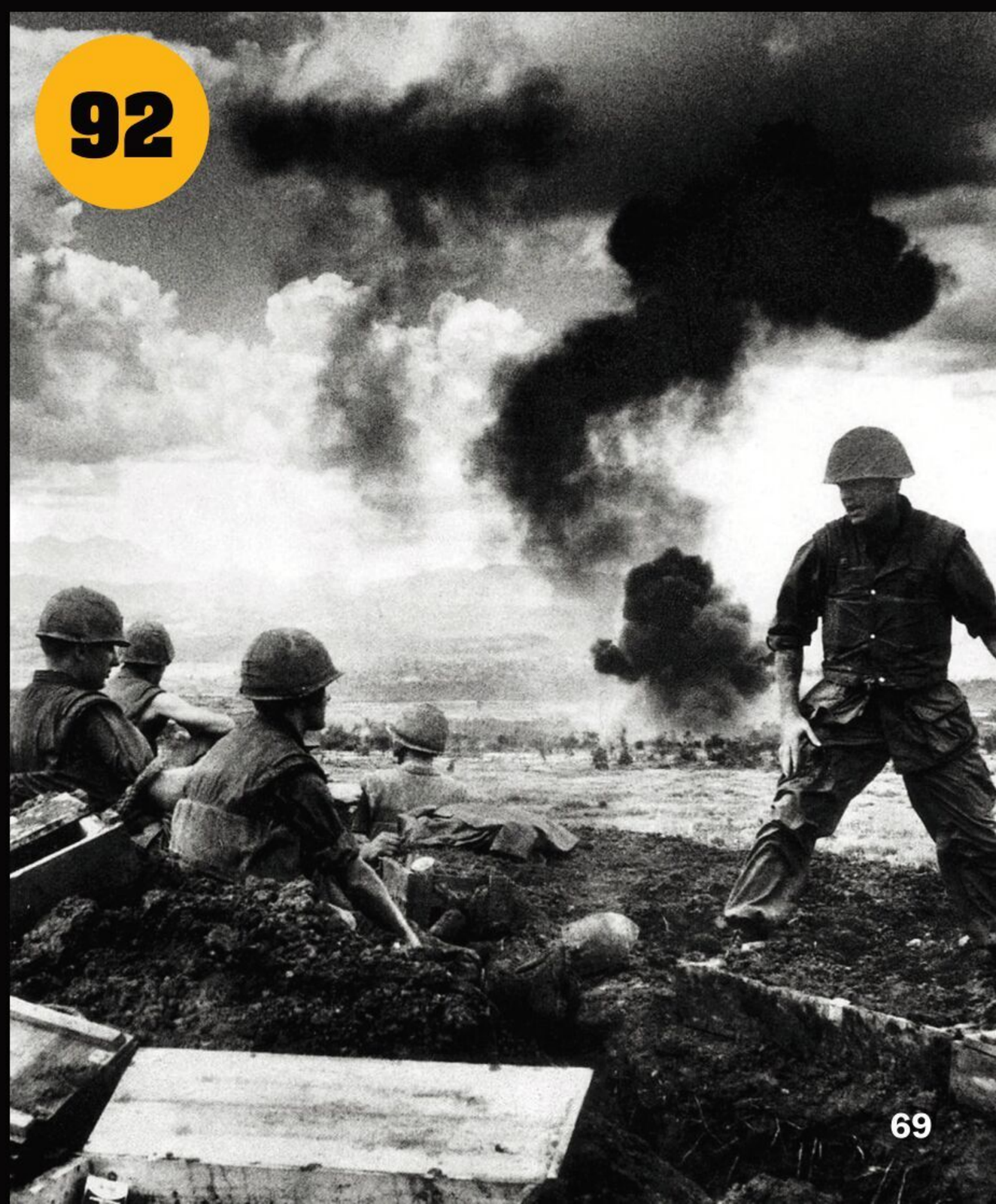
88



98




92



# SIEGE OF
# KHE SANH

The North Vietnamese besieged an isolated outpost in northwestern South Vietnam held by the US Marines, but their attack failed in the face of overwhelming American firepower

**QUANG TRI PROVINCE, SOUTH VIETNAM** 21 JANUARY – 8 APRIL 1968

WORDS **WILLIAM E. WELSH**



North Vietnamese artillery and mortar shells exploded atop American-held Hill 64 slightly north of Khe Sanh Combat Base in the predawn darkness of 8 February 1968. Communist sappers shoved Bangalore torpedoes through the triple concertina wire on the outpost's perimeter and unrolled spools of canvas so that the assault troops could breach the perimeter without being cut to ribbons. Khaki-uniformed troops armed with AK-47 assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and satchel charges streamed into the compound.

The 65 marines of Alpha Company of the First Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment, reeled under the shock of the attack. Some of the marines fought from the protection of trenches and bunkers, while others climbed out of the trenches and charged at the invaders to stop them from reaching the heavy weapons and bunkers. The marines fired M16 assault rifles and M60 machine guns, as well as M79 grenade launchers and one-shot disposable rocket launchers in an effort to check the enemy onslaught.

As the fighting grew in intensity, the shouts and screams of the combatants were drowned out by the roar of incoming artillery shells fired from American and North Vietnamese mortars and howitzers, as each side brought supporting fire to bear on the contested hill. After 90 minutes of fighting, the NVA had captured most of the compound, except for the trenches on the southern side of the stronghold. The communists broke off their attack at dawn. A Marine Corps relief column backed by a section of M48 tanks arrived after daybreak to mop up any remaining resistance.

**"Johnson required the members of the JCS to sign a pledge that they would not allow Khe Sanh Combat Base to fall to the enemy"**

The fight for Hill 64 was typical of the savage, limited attacks that the NVA made against the Marine Corps units garrisoning Khe Sanh Combat Base and its outlying hills during the 77-day siege of the military installation, which began on 21 January 1968.

During the course of the siege, General Vo Nguyen Giap orchestrated the movements of 34,000 soldiers in four divisions. Although Giap never resorted to using human-wave attacks like those that he had employed to defeat the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, his forces did inflict substantial casualties on the US Marines through their relentless artillery and rocket bombardment and in sharp clashes like the one for Hill 64.

"I don't want any damn Dinbinfoo," US President Lyndon Johnson famously told the joint chiefs of staff in the run-up to the

*US Marine tank crews inside the perimeter of the combat base watch as jet aircraft make bombing runs against enemy positions*

## OPPOSING FORCES

| NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY | US & SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY |
|---|---|
| **LEADER:** General Vo Nguyen Giap | **LEADER:** Colonel David Lownds |
| **INFANTRY:** 34,000 | **INFANTRY:** 6,000 |
| **HEAVY GUNS:** 200 | **HEAVY GUNS:** 40 |
| **LIGHT TANKS:** 16 | **MEDIUM TANKS:** 12 |

siege. To ensure there was no repeat of the French military disaster, Johnson required the members of the JCS to sign a pledge that they would not allow Khe Sanh Combat Base to fall to the enemy.

The North Vietnamese motive for the attack remains unclear to this day. On the one hand, Hanoi may have been seeking to tie down Marine Corps units and their supporting aircraft in advance of the Tet Offensive against South Vietnamese population centres, which began shortly after Khe Sanh was surrounded. On the other hand, North Vietnamese military leaders may have sought to try to capture Khe Sanh Combat Base in order to gain a great propaganda victory over the Americans.

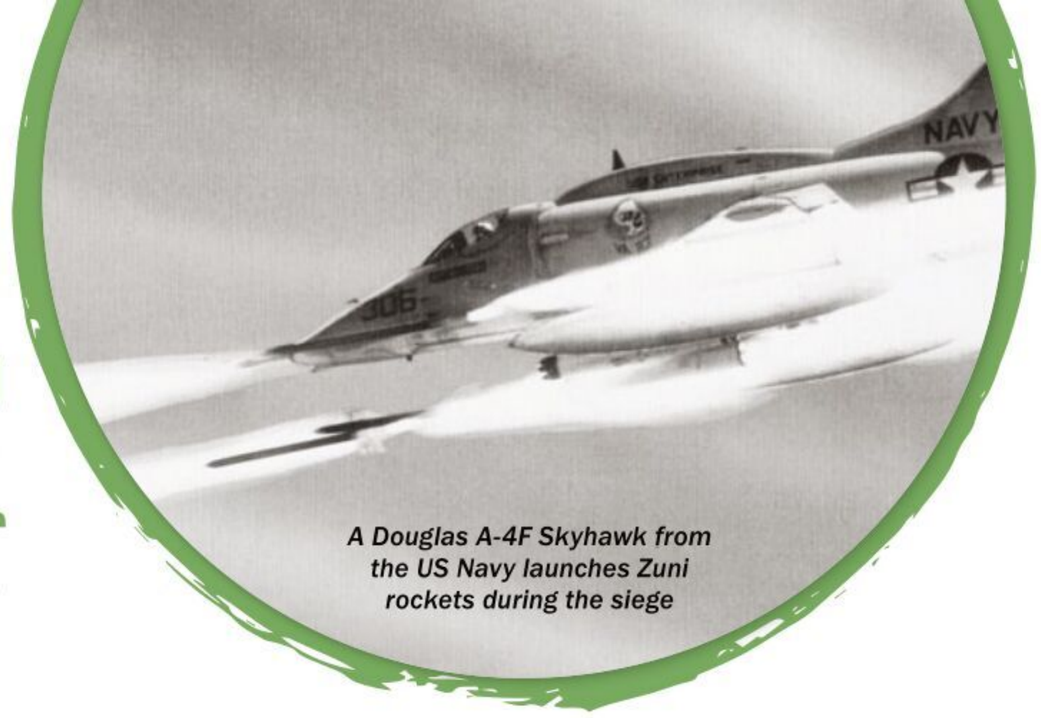
Khe Sanh Combat Base was perched on a triangular-shaped plateau on the south side of the Rao Quan River in the northwestern corner of the Republic of South Vietnam. It was located 23 kilometres south of the demilitarized zone and ten kilometres east of Laos.

The higher elevations of the picturesque hills of Khe Sanh are painted emerald green with double-canopy rainforest, while the lower elevations are a patchwork of green and brown with tall elephant grass. The Americans deemed control of the handful of hills northwest of the combat base essential to its overall defence, as enemy artillery placed on the hills would make the base indefensible.

The Marines who garrisoned the combat base took a beating from the weather as well as the enemy. It rained all year round in the region. What's more, a weather phenomenon known as the crachin (a grey drizzle that regularly descends across the country) occasionally caused thick, opaque clouds to drift close to the ground in the mornings, thus limiting visibility to a kilometre or less. Thick fog enveloped the landscape at night and well into the morning as a result of the interaction between the cool air in higher elevations and warm air in lower elevations. The North Vietnamese knew that the year-round cloud and fog would significantly hamper American air supply and air strikes.

**"The North Vietnamese knew that the year-round cloud and fog would significantly hamper American air supply and air strikes"**

The only road into the combat base was National Route 9, an east-west corridor that the North Vietnamese cut in early January 1968. After that, the Marines relied on resupply by helicopter and cargo aircraft such as the C-130 Hercules and C-123 Provider. The nearest US Marine installations were 19–24 kilometres east at the Rockpile and Camp Carroll, where 16 massive 175mm guns with the capability to fire beyond the horizon could bring additional fire to bear.




*A Douglas A-4F Skyhawk from the US Navy launches Zuni rockets during the siege*

In 1962, the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) built a primitive dirt airstrip three kilometres north of the village of Khe Sanh, and the US Army Special Forces established a Civilian Irregular Defence Camp next to the airstrip on the ground that would later become the combat base. The Special Forces' primary responsibility was to monitor enemy movement south along the clandestine logistics corridor known as the Ho Chi Minh trail, which funnelled men and supplies from North Vietnam through eastern Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam.

In 1966, a Navy Construction Battalion expanded the length of the airstrip and put down steel matting that would enable it to support the weight of cargo aircraft. The marines established a small garrison at Khe Sanh that year, largely at the behest of General William Westmoreland, who as commander of the US military forces in South Vietnam had authority over the Marine Corps forces stationed in the country. Westmoreland had

*Spent artillery shells are piled in heaps. The US forces fired tens of thousands of rounds and proved crucial in repelling NVA assaults*

his own motives for the build-up of equipment and troops at Khe Sanh. He saw it as a staging area for a possible strike into Laos to cut the trail, but US President Lyndon Johnson never approved the idea for fear that it might draw communist China into the war.

Leaving the Marines to guard the airstrip, the Special Forces relocated their camp to Lang Vei, ten kilometres to the southwest. As Marine operations increased in the Khe Sanh area, the NVA stepped up its activities in the locale as well. A Marine Corps patrol on 24 April 1967 collided with an enemy force approaching the base over the rough ground to the west. The rugged terrain, with its hills and ravines, offered good cover for the approaching North Vietnamese soldiers.

The Marines sent two rifle battalions of the Third Marine Regiment to engage the enemy. Over the course of the next 11 days the two sides fought a series of skirmishes as the Marines worked to clear the North Vietnamese from key hills northwest of the combat base. On 28 April the marines secured Hill 861, and on 5 May they captured Hill 881 North.

The NVA, as always, proved tenacious on the defence, and the Americans called in artillery fire and air strikes. Fighter-bombers of the First Marine Aircraft Wing flew 1,100 sorties and the big guns at the Rockpile and Camp Carroll fired 25,000 rounds. In addition, US Air Force B-52 Stratofortress bombers flew 23 strikes. The NVA, which like the US Marines removed their dead from the battlefield if possible, left behind 940 bodies, and the marines suffered 155 killed and 425 wounded in what became known afterwards as the Hill Fights.

Colonel David Lownds, the cigar-chomping commander of 26th Marine Regiment, arrived to take charge of operations at Khe Sanh Combat Base on 12 August 1967. A World War II veteran who had served as a platoon commander in Pacific theatre battles such as Iwo Jima, Lownds faced the challenge of trying to anticipate the enemy's plans and movements. When Lownds arrived there was no imminent threat of a large-scale attack, but that would change by the year's end. In the meantime, the Navy Seabees once again rebuilt the airstrip. Over the course of two months, beginning in August, they put a foundation of crushed rock under steel matting to deter erosion from monsoon rains. While the airstrip was closed resupply of the combat base was conducted by parachute drops.

As it became increasingly evident from intelligence data that the NVA was planning a major attack against the combat base, Lownds ordered his Marines to take preparations to safeguard themselves in the event of an attack. He also had combat engineers oversee work details that strengthened the perimeter defences. Lownds also fortified the weapons defences of the hilltop outposts.

To defend the combat base and hold key positions west and northwest of the base, Lownds had 5,000 men in the three battalions that constituted his 26th Marine Regiment. The First and Third Battalions of the 26th Regiment defended the base, while the Second Battalion of the 26th Regiment held Hill 558 – a position that would allow it to block enemy forces moving through the Rao Quan Valley towards the combat base.



*A sniper team takes aim during the Siege of Khe Sanh*

**"Lownds issued an order in mid-January requiring the Marines at Khe Sanh to wear their flak jackets and carry their rifles with them wherever they went"**





***Below:** A marine atop Hill 881 South uses a powerful set of US Navy ship binoculars to locate enemy targets for air strikes by fighter-bombers*

# KHE SANH 1968

The key hilltop outposts – Hill 881S, Hill 861 and 861A – were held by company-sized detachments. The rifle companies defending the hilltop outposts and the perimeter of the combat base routinely conducted patrols, but as the threat grew, platoon-sized patrols were restricted to within 460 metres of their perimeter to prevent costly ambushes.

Lownds issued an order in mid-January requiring the Marines at Khe Sanh to wear their flak jackets and carry their rifles with them wherever they went, so that they would be ready for battle in the event of a surprise attack. He also directed each Marine to build a foxhole next to the bunker where he slept, as well as near the location on base where he was assigned during the day.

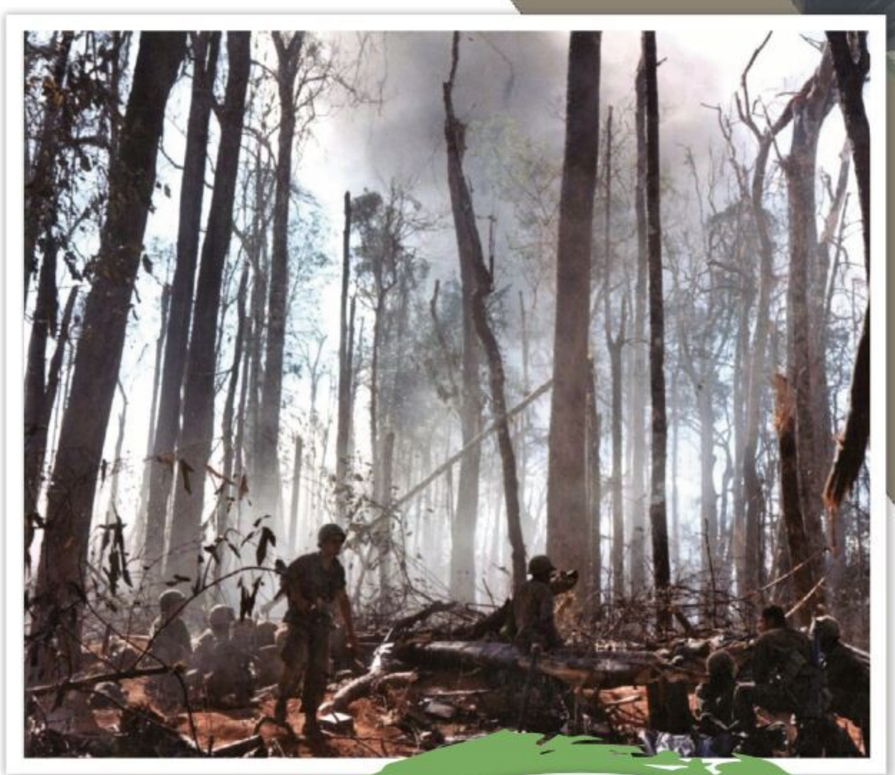
The artillerymen who manned the six 155mm and 18 105mm howitzers defending the combat base worked throughout January to pre-register coordinates of likely targets outside the perimeter in an effort to ensure that they could furnish quick and accurate supporting fire in the event of an attack on any number of different Marine-held locations. In addition to the howitzers, Lownds also had a platoon of M48A3 Patton tanks, as well as two platoons of M50A1 Ontos vehicles, each of which was armed with six 106mm recoilless rifles. Lownds distributed a small number of single 106mm recoilless rifles and 4.2-inch heavy mortars to the hilltop outposts to supplement their 81mm mortars and .50-calibre machine guns.

Westmoreland instituted a comprehensive bombing operation known as Operation Niagara at the beginning of January. The first phase consisted of surveillance and reconnaissance through aerial photography and electronic ground sensors designed to pinpoint NVA forces for attack by Air Force, Navy and Marine strike aircraft. He planned a follow-on phase in which fighter-bombers and B-52s would make air strikes based on the intelligence gathered.

The Marines caught a lucky break on 20 January when an NVA artillery officer deserted his unit. Eager to cooperate with the Americans, Lieutenant La Than Tonc informed the Marines that a major attack would unfold the next day against the combat base and hills 861 and 881 South. This was part of an effort from the NVA to capture the high ground, he said. The North Vietnamese intended to deploy artillery and mortars on the captured hills in preparation for assaults on the base. Lownds immediately put his forces on high alert.

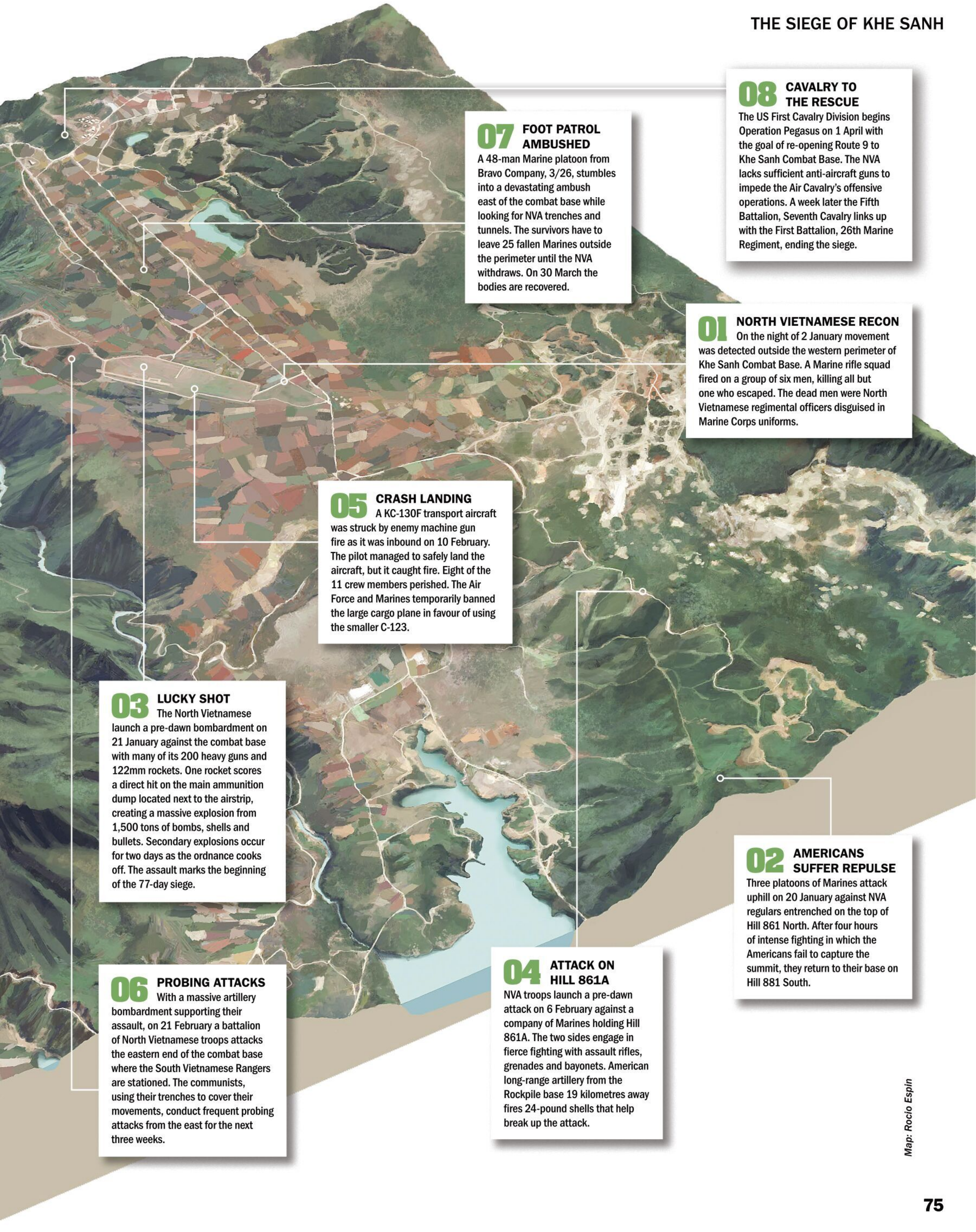
That night the North Vietnamese launched a battalion-sized attack against the 150 Marines of Kilo Company 3/26 manning Hill 861, three

**"The attack began at 12.30 a.m. with the NVA firing rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns to support troops who laid bamboo mats and ladders over the concertina and tangle-foot wire"**



***Below:** Airborne troops destroying enemy bunkers after an assault on Hill 875*





## 01 NORTH VIETNAMESE RECON

On the night of 2 January movement was detected outside the western perimeter of Khe Sanh Combat Base. A Marine rifle squad fired on a group of six men, killing all but one who escaped. The dead men were North Vietnamese regimental officers disguised in Marine Corps uniforms.

## 02 AMERICANS SUFFER REPULSE

Three platoons of Marines attack uphill on 20 January against NVA regulars entrenched on the top of Hill 861 North. After four hours of intense fighting in which the Americans fail to capture the summit, they return to their base on Hill 881 South.

## 03 LUCKY SHOT

The North Vietnamese launch a pre-dawn bombardment on 21 January against the combat base with many of its 200 heavy guns and 122mm rockets. One rocket scores a direct hit on the main ammunition dump located next to the airstrip, creating a massive explosion from 1,500 tons of bombs, shells and bullets. Secondary explosions occur for two days as the ordnance cooks off. The assault marks the beginning of the 77-day siege.

## 04 ATTACK ON HILL 861A

NVA troops launch a pre-dawn attack on 6 February against a company of Marines holding Hill 861A. The two sides engage in fierce fighting with assault rifles, grenades and bayonets. American long-range artillery from the Rockpile base 19 kilometres away fires 24-pound shells that help break up the attack.

## 05 CRASH LANDING

A KC-130F transport aircraft was struck by enemy machine gun fire as it was inbound on 10 February. The pilot managed to safely land the aircraft, but it caught fire. Eight of the 11 crew members perished. The Air Force and Marines temporarily banned the large cargo plane in favour of using the smaller C-123.

## 06 PROBING ATTACKS

With a massive artillery bombardment supporting their assault, on 21 February a battalion of North Vietnamese troops attacks the eastern end of the combat base where the South Vietnamese Rangers are stationed. The communists, using their trenches to cover their movements, conduct frequent probing attacks from the east for the next three weeks.

## 07 FOOT PATROL AMBUSHED

A 48-man Marine platoon from Bravo Company, 3/26, stumbles into a devastating ambush east of the combat base while looking for NVA trenches and tunnels. The survivors have to leave 25 fallen Marines outside the perimeter until the NVA withdraws. On 30 March the bodies are recovered.

## 08 CAVALRY TO THE RESCUE

The US First Cavalry Division begins Operation Pegasus on 1 April with the goal of re-opening Route 9 to Khe Sanh Combat Base. The NVA lacks sufficient anti-aircraft guns to impede the Air Cavalry's offensive operations. A week later the Fifth Battalion, Seventh Cavalry links up with the First Battalion, 26th Marine Regiment, ending the siege.

*Map: Rocio Espin*

# DEADLOCK IN THE DEPTHS OF THE JUNGLE

*Marines slept in bunkers beneath tall stacks of sandbags to protect them from daily bombardment by North Vietnamese mortars and artillery*

kilometres northwest of the combat base. Throughout the evening the defenders had braced themselves for the attack. They could hear sappers working on the northwest portion of the perimeter to cut paths through the dense rows of triple concertina wire and tangle-foot wire – barbed wire laid horizontally in a chequerboard pattern just above the ground.

The attack began at 12.30 a.m. with the NVA firing rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns to support assault troops. They laid bamboo mats and ladders over the concertina and tangle-foot wire to breach the perimeter. The NVA overran First Platoon, which was defending that section of the perimeter. This allowed assault troops to hurl satchel charges into sandbagged positions housing 50-calibre machine guns and recoilless rifles.

"We're being overrun!" First Lieutenant Jerrry Saulsberry shouted over the battalion radio network at 2.00 a.m. The Third Battalion's command group was on Hill 881S with India Company of the 3/26 at the time. "A Marine unit doesn't get overrun," replied Major Matthew Caulfield, the battalion operations officer. After learning that Kilo Company's Captain Norman Jasper was severely wounded and that the company's gunnery sergeant was dead, he instructed Saulsberry to hold on at all costs. In the meantime, Kilo Company's artillery forward observer coordinated barrages from the heavy guns and blasted reinforcements being funnelled into the attack. At the same time the Marines on Hill 881S began firing their mortars at the North Vietnamese attacking Hill 861 to the north. By 5.30 a.m. the NVA had withdrawn.

As the ground assault fizzled out, the NVA began shelling the combat base. They also conducted a minor probe against the combat base's western perimeter and overran the village of Khe Sanh just south of the combat base. Helicopters extracted a small group of Marines, who were in the village when the NVA attack began.

The ground attack on Hill 861 and bombardment of the combat base on 21 January marked the formal start of the siege. From that point on, US Air Force C-130 Hercules and C-123 Providers resupplied the combat base, and Marine helicopters carried supplies to the hilltop positions. The NVA shelled the combat base on a daily basis during the siege, making a concentrated effort with its mortars to target the lumbering cargo aircraft. The daily shelling also routinely killed Marines going about their business on the combat base. The constant shelling took a heavy psychological toll on the men guarding Khe Sanh.

Lownds received two fresh battalions of infantry in the first week of the siege: the First Battalion of the Ninth Marine Regiment and the elite ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion. Lownds

**"Marine artillerymen fired 500 high-explosive rounds into the suspected staging area, seemingly crippling the attack force"**

*The North Vietnamese launched failed ground attacks against Hills 861 and 861A early in the siege*




**"The ground attack on Hill 861 and bombardment of the combat base on 21 January marked the formal start of the siege"**

ordered 1/9 to deploy outside the combat base's western perimeter facing Khe Sanh village, and he instructed the rangers to deploy on the south side of the combat base to provide an extra layer of defence from that direction. In this way, the combat base was buffered on three sides. There was no need to buffer the base on the north side because it bordered the Rao Quan gorge. In addition, Westmoreland unleashed the second phase of Operation Niagara. As part of the operation, B-52s flying from Guam pummelled NVA troop concentrations and staging areas around the clock.

When the Tet Offensive began on 29 January a lull occurred in the intensity of the NVA's ground operations at Khe Sanh, but US tactical and strategic air strikes continued unabated against enemy ground forces in the area. When electronic sensors indicated the North Vietnamese were massing to attack Hill 881S on 2 February, artillerymen fired 500 high-explosive rounds into the suspected staging area, seemingly crippling the attack force.

As part of its plan to tighten the noose on the combat base, the NVA unleashed a fierce assault on the Lang Vei Special Forces camp on 7 February, which marked the first time communist troops used tanks in South Vietnam. At 12.30 a.m. three columns of NVA troops, spearheaded by a total of 11 PT-76 light tanks, smashed through the concertina wire protecting the perimeter. Defending the camp were 24 Green Berets and several hundred mountain tribesmen serving as irregular infantry.

The tanks rumbled through the camp firing at point-blank range at sandbagged bunkers and heavy and automatic weapon positions. The din was tremendous as small arms and automatic weapons chattered, mortars popped, rocket-propelled and hand-thrown grenades exploded and tank cannons roared. Green tracer rounds from NVA machine guns sliced eerily through the blackness. The defenders had two 106mm recoilless rifles and 100 one-shot M72 light anti-tank weapons. The Green Berets knocked out a total of seven tanks during the six-hour battle.

NVA sappers tried desperately to force those manning the camp's underground concrete command centre to surrender. They tried satchel charges, flamethrowers and thermite and tear gas grenades but still could not compel the several dozen individuals to give up. Lownds refused to send a relief column for fear that the column would be ambushed.

The NVA withdrew at daylight, and the survivors abandoned the camp later that day for the safety of the combat base.

In March the NVA began slowly withdrawing units to the safety of Laos. By early April the Siege of Khe Sanh was over. The Americans had suffered 199 killed and 830 wounded over the course of the siege. In addition, they had flown 24,000 ground-attack strikes and 2,700 B-52 sorties, inflicting staggering casualties. Although exact North Vietnamese casualties are unknown, estimates place their losses at around 10,000 men.

For their part, the North Vietnamese compelled the US Marine Corps to strip men and equipment from the heavily populated South Vietnamese coast, leaving major cities and towns vulnerable to communist attacks carried out as part of the countrywide Tet Offensive. The Americans technically won the siege by retaining control of the battlefield, but it was a pyrrhic victory that was overshadowed by the communist success in the Tet Offensive, which revealed that the North Vietnamese could strike at will anywhere they pleased in South Vietnam.



***Left:** A 105mm howitzer fires on enemy positions. US air and artillery strikes inflicted significant casualties on the North Vietnamese*

## FURTHER READING


- JONES, GREGG. **LAST STAND AT KHE SANH: THE U.S. MARINES FINEST HOUR IN VIETNAM** (BOSTON: DA CAPO, 2014)
- PISOR, ROBERT. **THE END OF THE LINE: THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH** (NEW YORK: NORTON, 1982)
- PRADOS, JOHN, AND RAY STUBBE. **VALLEY OF DECISION: THE SIEGE OF KHE SANH** (NEW YORK: DELL, 1991)


*Images: Alamy, Getty, Shutterstock*

DEADLOCK IN THE DEPTHS OF THE JUNGLE

**During the Vietnam War, this bomb disposal specialist was tasked with disarming and removing horrific explosive traps capable of decimating American units**

**Interview with Stuart Steinberg, US Army ret.**

# A VISION OF HELL

WORDS **TOM GARNER**

***Above:*** *Steinberg pictured while waiting for extraction from FSB Rifle, 11 February 1970. The photograph is captioned, "The Thousand Meter Stare"*

*This photograph was taken of mass detonations in the Qui Nhon Ammunition Dump as Steinberg and other members of 184th EOD arrived at the main gate*

It is January 1970, and in a remote corner of Vietnam a bomb disposal team is flown in by helicopter to a dangerous firebase that has been booby-trapped by North Vietnamese forces. This team is part of the US Army's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD), and among the specialists is experienced soldier Stuart Steinberg.

Steinberg's been destroying ordnance in Vietnam since September 1968 and has been called to every hazardous situation imaginable. Acute danger is an accepted part of the job, but while he is sweeping the firebase, Steinberg steps on something suspicious. He stops, digs down and finds a black wire that is ominously moving. When he looks up, Steinberg spots a North Vietnamese soldier pulling on the wire in the distance. The two men lock eyes for a moment, and in a split second Steinberg realises that a large bomb is about to detonate all around him. His survival will depend on two things: quick thinking and a pair of cutters.

This incident was only one of hundreds that Steinberg had to endure as an EOD specialist during the Vietnam War. He was working in one of the most stressful environments in what was already an intense conflict, and his story is a raw, visceral tale of technical expertise, boundless courage and profound comradeship.

## Enlisting for the EOD

Born in 1947 in Washington, DC, Steinberg was only 18 years old when he volunteered to join the US Army on 28 July 1966. Although he was not unwilling to serve, he was keen to avoid being drafted. "I enlisted because I had flunked out of college and the draft order was after me. They were drafting people into the Marines, and I didn't want that because there was then no doubt you were going to be an infantryman and sent to Vietnam. I wasn't opposed to going there, but I wanted to do something that would give me something to fall back on."

By 1966 American involvement in the Vietnam War was increasingly bloody and controversial, but Steinberg recalls that he was largely ignorant about the conflict: "I couldn't have even shown where Vietnam was on the map so I was not really thinking about it when I enlisted."

Steinberg underwent basic training before initially serving as a missile crewman in the Florida Everglades. He found himself doing a tedious job with bad colleagues. "What this job ended up entailing was rolling the missiles out of a barn, cleaning them and pulling them back in. It was a 'nothing' job, and a lot of the people that I was stationed with were racists and anti-Semites. The CO and sergeant were complicit in a lot of bulls**t that went on, including one guy who was a loan shark, and it was just horrible."

**"Steinberg was assigned to Utah, where he experienced a unique horror that threw him into the deep end of ordnance disposal"**

To escape his situation, Steinberg consulted a career counsellor, who suggested transferring to Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD). "I said, 'Why would I want to do that?', but he replied, 'You'll get a bonus for enlisting and you'll also get paid $55 extra a month on Hazardous Duty Pay'. At that time I was only making $90 a month so 55 bucks was a lot of money. I re-enlisted and left almost immediately for the first phase of EOD school, which involved chemical and biological weapons in Alabama."

Following this initial training, Steinberg learned more about his new role at a naval ordnance station in Maryland. His programme included courses in physics, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and learning about every kind of ordnance, including fuses and high-explosive rounds.

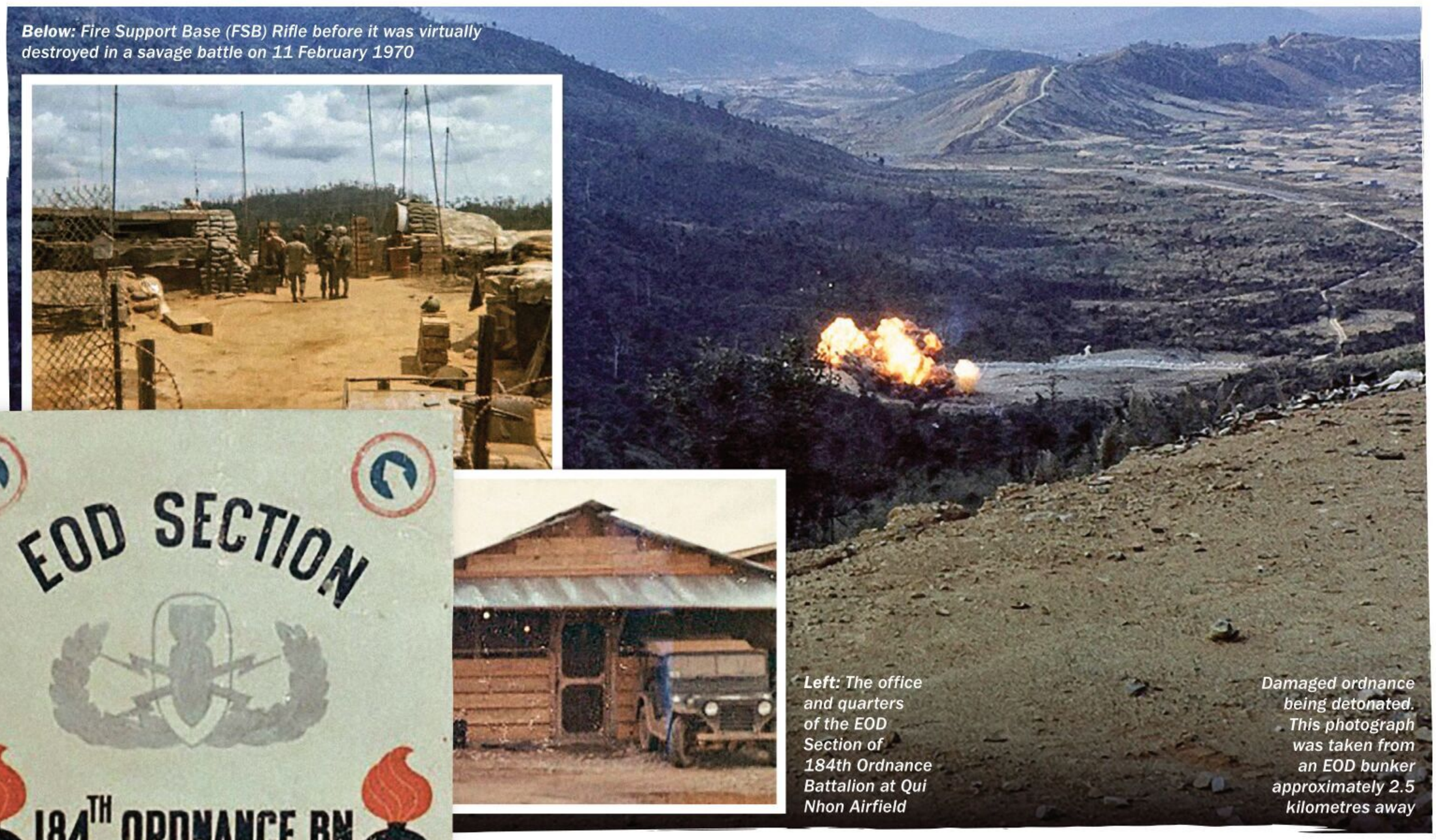
After graduating on 7 January 1968, Steinberg was assigned to Utah, where he experienced a unique horror that threw him into the deep end of ordnance disposal.

## Dugway Proving Ground

Established in 1942 and located approximately 140 kilometres southwest of Salt Lake City, Dugway Proving Ground was, and remains, a US Army facility to test biological and chemical weapons. In 1968 Dugway stored all kinds of ordnance, including leaking mustard gas rounds from WWI, and the job of Steinberg's EOD team was to "monitor all the different types of weapons systems, find leakers and then destroy them".

Dugway would be a gruelling assignment at the best of times, but on 13 March 1968 a terrible incident occurred when over 6,000 sheep and other animals were killed after a weapons test went hideously wrong. "They were testing a new delivery system of nerve gas. A pilot had flown out of Dugway and then made an arch to come back after dispensing the weapon. But the weapon malfunctioned and dumped about a ton of nerve gas on a sheep ranch."

Although no people were killed, the nerve gas was spread over vast tracts of land. "It




**Below:** *Fire Support Base (FSB) Rifle before it was virtually destroyed in a savage battle on 11 February 1970*

***Left:*** *The office and quarters of the EOD Section of 184th Ordnance Battalion at Qui Nhon Airfield*

*Damaged ordnance being detonated. This photograph was taken from an EOD bunker approximately 2.5 kilometres away*

killed everything in a 40,000-acre [162-square-kilometre] area. When I say 'everything', a lot of people know that cockroaches can survive a nuclear blast, but they can't survive nerve gas because they have a central nervous system. Everything that walked, crawled or flew in this area was dead."

Along with other specialists, Steinberg's task was to dispose of the animals' dead bodies. "Engineers came in, dug a huge pit and everything was shoved into it. We piled on thousands of tyres, set charges, tied it all together with detonating cord and then soaked it all in jet fuel. We set it off, and when the pit had cooled down after a few days they pushed all of the topsoil into the pit and put a fence around the area."

To protect himself from exposure to the nerve gas, Steinberg was heavily kitted out in protective clothing. "We wore rubber suits that covered your legs, top and boots, as well as a hood. You wore a gas mask, and we sometimes had to use an air pack so we could breathe clean air. Even though it was March and still fairly cold you were sweating like crazy inside these suits."

Such was the horror of the incident that Steinberg chose to go to war rather than remain in Utah. "The day we finished the cleanup, myself and the other guys on my team went down to the Enlisted Men's Club and got staggeringly drunk. The next day, three of us volunteered for Vietnam."

## An "existential doctor"

Despite increasingly negative coverage and protests, Steinberg was resolved to serve in Vietnam. "At that time my feeling was that I was trained for a combat job. My country was at war and as a volunteer I felt that was where I needed to be."

Steinberg would ultimately spend 18 months in Vietnam between 4 September 1968 and 24 March 1970. Six of those months were a voluntary extension of his original tour, and he would be promoted from the technical rank of specialist 4th Class (corporal) to specialist 5th Class (sergeant) during his active service.

When Steinberg landed in Vietnam he was shocked by the extreme change in temperature. "When we got off the plane it was so hot and humid it was like walking into a blast furnace. We landed at an air force base near Saigon and then were trucked to the main army base.

**"My feeling was that I was trained for a combat job. My country was at war and as a volunteer I felt that was where I needed to be"**

That's where they lined you up and sorted you out into whatever units you were going to."

During his time in Vietnam, Steinberg was attached to EOD units in different parts of the country, including 184th Ordnance Battalion and 25th and 287th Ordnance Detachments. Despite his various postings, the tasks remained the same. "The fundamental task was to identity, render safe and destroy any type of explosive ordnance, including improvised explosive devices. This included any sort of ordnance that the US and its allies or the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) were using."

EOD dealt with all kinds of ordnance that were often found by special operations units. "Whenever there was an airstrike there were always going to be duds. Long-range reconnaissance teams or special ops guys like the Green Berets or Navy Seals would go out on assessments after these airstrikes and discover duds on the surface. We would then fly in on combat assaults, get to where these things were and blow them up."

Detonating ordnance was not the only method of bomb disposal. "On some bombs, the type of fusing they had made them extremely dangerous. A lot of the fuses, particularly the Navy fuses, had anti-disturbance devices, so when you approached one of these weapons you didn't touch it. When we destroyed them, we would lay charges of C-4 [plastic explosive] along both sides of the bomb, tie it together with detonating cord and then use a non-electric blasting cap with a 15-20 minute timer on it. You'd pull the fuse lighter and then use all your ass to get far enough away so that you wouldn't have to worry about getting hit by shrapnel."

Ordnance disposal could even change landscapes, which was evidenced when Steinberg helped to blow up a foothill in the An Loa Mountains. "We went into a sophisticated cave complex that was full of ordnance and weapons. We brought in 40-pound [18-kilogram] cratering charges that looked like a giant stick of dynamite and were maybe three feet [0.9 metres] long. Various levels of the cave were lined with these charges and put on



*An American soldier inserts a blasting cap into a Claymore mine*



*A pair of US troops carefully search for mines to disarm*

*Steinberg pictured during his time with the 287th on Phu Bai Combat Base*

**"You'd pull the fuse lighter and then use all your ass to get far enough away so that you wouldn't have to worry about getting hit by shrapnel"**

a timer, before we got in our chopper and took off. When they went off they literally brought down the upper third of this mountain. Looking back, it was pretty destructive to the terrain."

Another large part of EOD's role was to prevent ordnance falling into enemy hands. "We would blow them up because if the enemy found these things they would saw them open, steam out the explosives and then turn them into IEDs, Claymore or antitank mines… When we were called out to mines or IEDs we would actually disarm them and bring them back to our unit, before destroying them in our demolition area."

EOD was crucial for saving many American lives in the field, and Steinberg and his colleagues were highly valued. "I always felt that we were 'existential doctors' and we were really respected by other units, particularly the infantry. We were saving lives, not only of those people directly involved but other people who might get lost, or by preventing the enemy from getting hold of the ordnance."

## Qui Nhon attacks

In early 1969, Steinberg was based at Qui Nhon Ammunition Base Depot in central Vietnam for four months. During this time the base came under attack several times from the Viet Cong as part of renewed Tet offensives. "Everyone seems to think that the Tet offensives of 1969–70 weren't much of a big deal by comparison with 1968, but they were. The Tet of 1969 hit every major installation in the country, including the ammo dump, which was maintained by the 184th Ordnance Battalion."

Steinberg was present when the Viet Cong attacked Qui Nhon on three separate occasions – on 24 February, 10–11 March and 23 March 1969. "They got into the dump, set their satchel charges and then disappeared. They managed to figure out where to come in and where they would not be in the line of sight of any of the guard towers, of which there were dozens. There were roving patrols including dogs, and outside the dump there were multiple ambushes."

184th Ordnance Battalion was dispatched to an extremely hazardous situation. "My team was called out each time the dump was hit. We were actually inside as different pads of various types of ammunition were mass-detonating. It was nothing short of a miracle that none of the EOD people were killed or even wounded. However, during the third dump attack on 23 March, the Ordnance Battalion did lose three men."

Despite surviving the Viet Cong attacks unscathed, Steinberg was not so lucky when he was blown up during a clean-up operation at Qui Nhon on 13 May 1969. "A round I was trying to get to our demolition area went off in the back of my truck. We had done everything to see if it was going to go off before I tried to move it. I sandbagged it in the back of the truck, and what saved my life was the spare tyre because it absorbed most of the blast. In a matter of seconds I had been blown out of the truck. I ended up with second-degree burns on my ears and neck and a lot of shrapnel in my shoulders. The force of the blast actually hit me in the lower back and pretty much wrecked my lower spine. It was a miracle it didn't kill me."

Steinberg recalls his disorientation after the explosion. "I was lying on the ground and my



*The summit of Hamburger Hill. This picture of the aftermath of the famous battle was taken by Gary Raines of the 287th EOD Ordnance Detachment shortly before Steinberg joined their unit*

**"I always felt that we were 'existential doctors' and we were really respected by other units, particularly the infantry. We were saving lives"**

eardrums had been perforated. It was like the ocean running through my head, and I remember one of my teammates bending over me and asking if I was OK. I then lost consciousness and woke up in military hospital, where they fixed me up, and four days later I was back at work. However, I got wounded a second time four days afterwards from an incoming attack!"

## A "friggin' nightmare"

After Qui Nhon, Steinberg went to the 25th Ordnance Detachment at a large base at An Khe before volunteering for a posting to Phu Bai in November 1969 with 287th Ordnance Detachment. The 287th had recently cleared ordnance left over from the Battle of Hamburger Hill in May 1969, and Steinberg soon found himself fighting his own engagements.

On 14 December 1969 Steinberg experienced his first combat assault, which he describes as "a friggin' nightmare". A Chinook helicopter was carrying a sling of ammunition and weapons to a firebase west of LZ (Landing Zone) Sally when it was hit by enemy ground fire. The jettisoned sling contained 150mm artillery shells that were armed with small anti-personnel 'bomblets' that had a variable time fuse. As Steinberg explains, "These things were really dangerous, and in the field you didn't screw with them, you blew them in place."

**"All of a sudden, I saw something that didn't look right. It was a mound of dirt that looked fresh, so I stopped. I then felt something moving under my foot"**

Steinberg flew with an aero-rifle platoon of the 17th Cavalry Regiment, who were "our security and real badasses". The EOD's task was challenging and was made worse when the enemy opened fire. "We stacked up artillery rounds, hundreds of grenades and thousands of small-arms machine gun rounds. We then set our charges, and most of the platoon men took off to secure the LZ. Just before I was ready to pull the timer we started taking enemy fire. This huge pile of s**t was about to go up, but we returned fire. Fortunately none of us were hit, and the enemy eventually broke off contact before we pulled the shot."

## Decorated for valour

Not long after the incident near LZ Sally, Steinberg found himself in a precarious situation at Fire Support Base Davis on 27 January 1970. His EOD team flew into FSB Davis on an 'artillery raid': a rapid strike where artillery and infantry units would fly into a remote area, set up a temporary firebase and fire rounds onto a particular area in order to prevent a build-up of NVA forces.

Danger was soon discovered. "We were in the first helicopter along with the pathfinders and the artillery unit. We got off the chopper and told the pathfinders to hold the location while we cleared the area. Almost immediately, we found an enemy mine marker, which was four stones in a diamond shape and one in the middle. That told us that the area had been booby-trapped."

Steinberg and his teammate Jim Qualls worked 90 metres apart while they checked the area for mines. "All of a sudden, I saw something that didn't look right. It was a mound of dirt that looked fresh, so I stopped. I then felt something moving under my foot and thought, 'What the f**k?' I set my weapon and demolition pack down on the ground, pulled out my knife and started flipping the dirt off in front of my right boot."

What Steinberg discovered soon turned into a dramatic life-or-death situation. "I dug down



*Mass-detonated 105mm high-explosive artillery rounds litter Qui Nhon Ammunition Dump after the Viet Cong attacks*

a few inches and saw a black communications wire. I then just happened to look up and saw an NVA soldier in a tree at the other end of the area. We were looking right at each other and he was pulling on something. When I looked down, this wire was being pulled away from me. Without thinking, I grabbed it and pulled as hard as I could. This jerked it out of the guy's hands, and I cut the wire with my side-cutters. I then threw a red smoke grenade, and gunships came in and fired at the tree line, which killed that guy and his buddy."

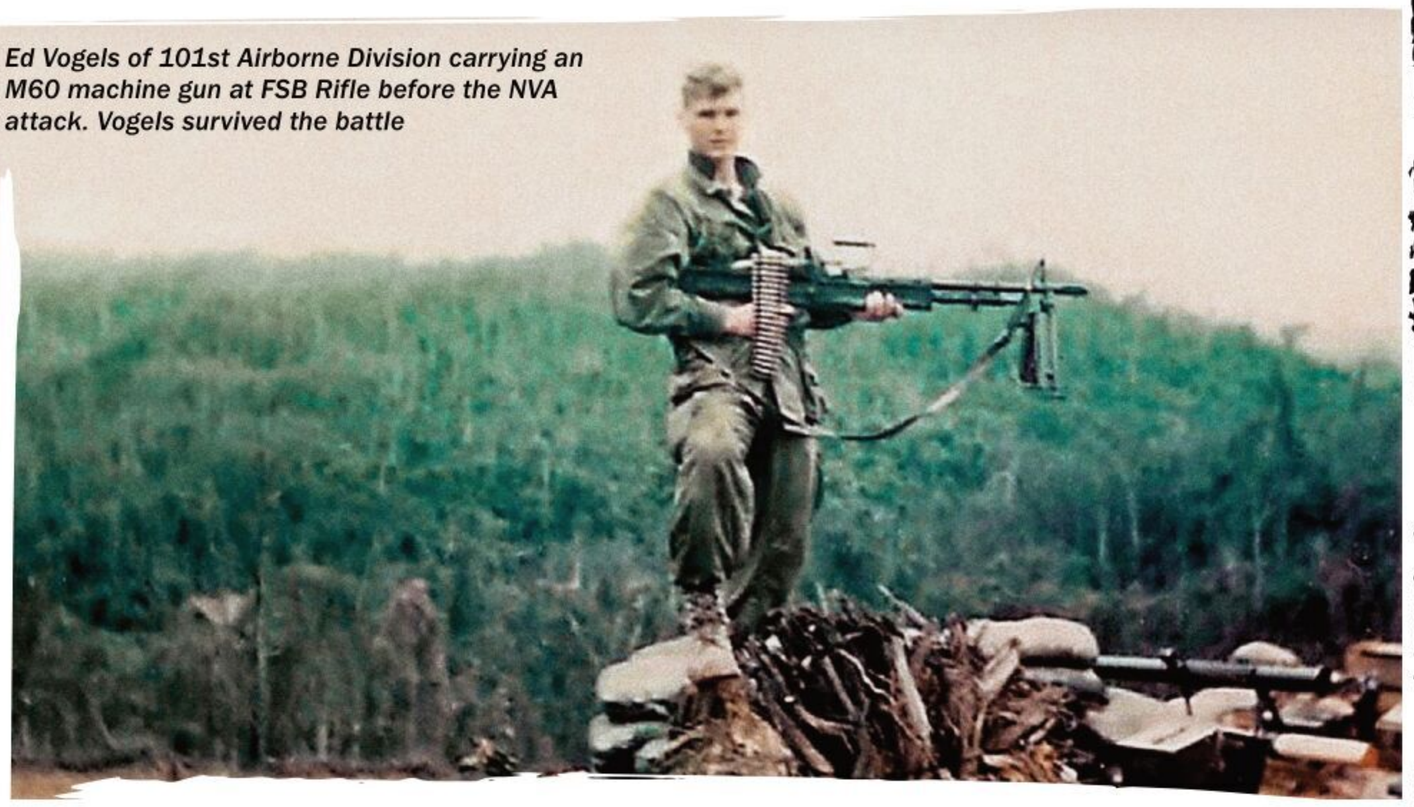
The encounter with the NVA soldier had not just been a close shave for Steinberg but for most of the American troops in the immediate area. "When we dug down we found that I was standing on top of a booby-trap, which was a 155mm artillery high-explosive round. Had it detonated, it would have wiped out a couple of helicopters and no doubt would have killed me, Jim and probably some of the pathfinders." For this action, Steinberg was awarded the Bronze Star with a 'V' device for valour, which was just one of several meritorious medals he received in Vietnam.

During his 18-month tour Steinberg was called out to approximately 300–400 ordnance disposal incidents in extremely intense environments. He recalls that although EOD teams often resorted to alcohol and even drugs to cope with the extreme pressure, they mainly helped each other to get through the war. "We drank a lot, and near the end of my time with the 287th some of us were smoking a little pot. However, the truth of the matter is, when you're in EOD you are all volunteers and you live together, including with the CO and first sergeant. You were really close with all the people that you served with because every day you're on calls with another member of your team and you're watching each other's back."

## "This is what hell looks like"

On 11 February 1970, Steinberg experienced the worst incident of his entire war when he was called out to FSB Rifle approximately 24 kilometres southeast of Hue. In the early hours of that morning, elements of 101st Airborne Division and 54th ARVN Infantry Regiment were overrun by NVA units. The North Vietnamese had planned the attack in advance. "NVA sappers had come into the wire one or two nights before the attack. They opened up all the Claymore mines and took out the C-4 before putting the mines back in the ground. Therefore, when the attack started and the infantrymen in their bunkers hit the Claymore chargers, nothing happened other than the blasting caps went off. That's how the NVA were able to get in."





*Ed Vogels of 101st Airborne Division carrying an M60 machine gun at FSB Rifle before the NVA attack. Vogels survived the battle*



*EOD members of the 184th Ordnance Battalion prepare to escort damaged ammunition to Tuy Hoa before dumping it in the South China Sea*

# EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL

The US Army's EOD specialists have their origins in the World Wars, where they took their cue from British developments in professional bomb disposal

**Bomb disposal became a formalised practice during WWI when the British Army dedicated a section of 'Ordnance Examiners' from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps to handle the growing problem of dud shells fired by both the Allied and Central powers.**

**Nevertheless, the US Army had no bomb disposal apparatus until WWII, when they took inspiration from the British, who had specialised their bomb disposal units during the Blitz of 1940. American bomb disposal was therefore initially planned as a civilian function, but in the wake of Pearl Harbor responsibility fell to the US Army for military purposes.**

**From 1942, American EOD soldiers were trained in Britain and began actively operating during the invasion of Sicily in 1943. EOD has been an essential component of the US armed forces ever since, and its soldiers have served in every American conflict since 1945, including Vietnam. Today, most US Army EOD personnel are part of the 52nd Ordnance Group, although some are organised under the National Guard. Despite the huge size of the army, EOD specialists number less than 1,200 soldiers and officers. This small size reflects their expertise but also the personal risks they are willing to take to dispose of dangerous ordnance.**



***Above:** A British NCO prepares to dispose of an unexploded bomb in 1918 during WWI*

***Below:** Lieutenant Mike Runkle of the US Navy (left) and Staff Sergeant Ben Walker of the US Army prepare charges to blow up stockpiled ordnance left by Al-Qaeda near Kandahar, Afghanistan, 23 December 2001*





**"They took all the bodies, put them in a sling, flew them out over the jungle and dumped them. I have never, ever got over this and it's a picture in my mind that's always there"**

*Steinberg and his teammate Paul Duffey (right) squat next to rocket-propelled grenades and satchel charges after clearing FSB Rifle*

After the base was penetrated, the NVA attacked with mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and satchel charges, as well as AK-47 fire. A pitched battle ensued inside the perimeter with close-quarters fire and hand-to-hand combat, before American gunships arrived and forced the NVA to withdraw.

When Steinberg and his team arrived a few hours later at 7 a.m., they saw a scene of devastation. "What happened at Rifle was so bad that I made it the title of my book: *This Is What Hell Looks Like*. This was actually a comment I made to my teammate Paul Duffey as we were flying over the LZ. We looked down and could see the destruction, carnage and bodies all over the place. I turned to Paul and said, 'Man, this is what f**king hell looks like.' There were bodies everywhere, both NVA and American soldiers. The defenders lost ten or 11 men and the South Vietnamese unit lost men too, but I couldn't figure out how many. The NVA also left behind a couple of dozen bodies."

Gunfire broke out upon the EOD's arrival. "A gunfight broke out right after we landed because the NVA had sent a patrol right near to the perimeter where our chopper was, and they got ambushed almost immediately. We were returning fire with four chopper gunners firing into the area, and in the end the 101st lost two more men during that ambush."

After this, the EOD began the grim task of clearing FSB Rifle. "We then went about our business. We had to strip the ordnance off all the dead bodies, disarm a couple of rocket-propelled grenades, two Bangalore torpedoes and ten to 15 feet [three to 4.5 metres] of tubing that was filled with TNT blocks. They were used to breach perimeter wire and were duds."

Despite the carnage, worse was to come when a large American helicopter came to collect the NVA dead hours later. "They took all the bodies, put them in a sling, flew them out over the jungle and dumped them. I have never, ever got over this, and it's a picture in my mind that's always there. It was a war crime because enemy dead are supposed to be repatriated. What they should have done is taken the bodies outside the perimeter, wind them up somewhere and allowed their soldiers to take their dead away."

## Leaving Vietnam

The horror at FSB Rifle came towards the end of Steinberg's tour, which ended on 24 March 1970. He was called out to dispose of ordnance even on his last day. "I went out to two simple incidents the morning I left, before I flew out. My CO (Andy Breland) had tried to stop me going out on calls during the last fortnight, but I said, 'Andy, that's not going to happen. I'm not going to sit here on my butt while other people are taking the flak for me not being on calls.'"

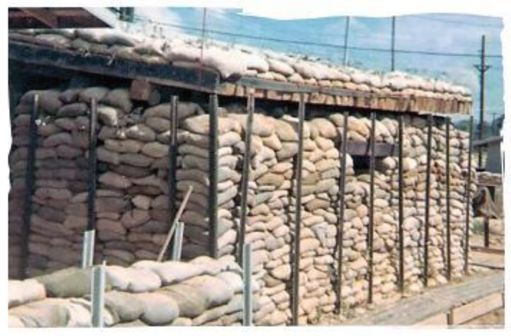
A large factor in Steinberg's dedication was worrying about leaving his colleagues. "There's an old adage that you fought for the men beside you. I really loved those guys in the 287th, and most of us are still alive. I felt guilty about finally leaving them because by then I knew I was really good at this job. I was afraid that if I left people

**NATIONAL VETERANS RIGHTS ASSOCIATION**

Stuart Steinberg is the chairman of the NVRA, which provides educational and administrative assistance to physically and psychologically wounded US veterans who are seeking medical and financial support for injuries suffered as a result of military service. **For more information visit: www.nationalveteransrights.org**



***Above:** Steinberg and Jerry Culp (left) working on 184th EOD Section's new building at Camp Vasquez*



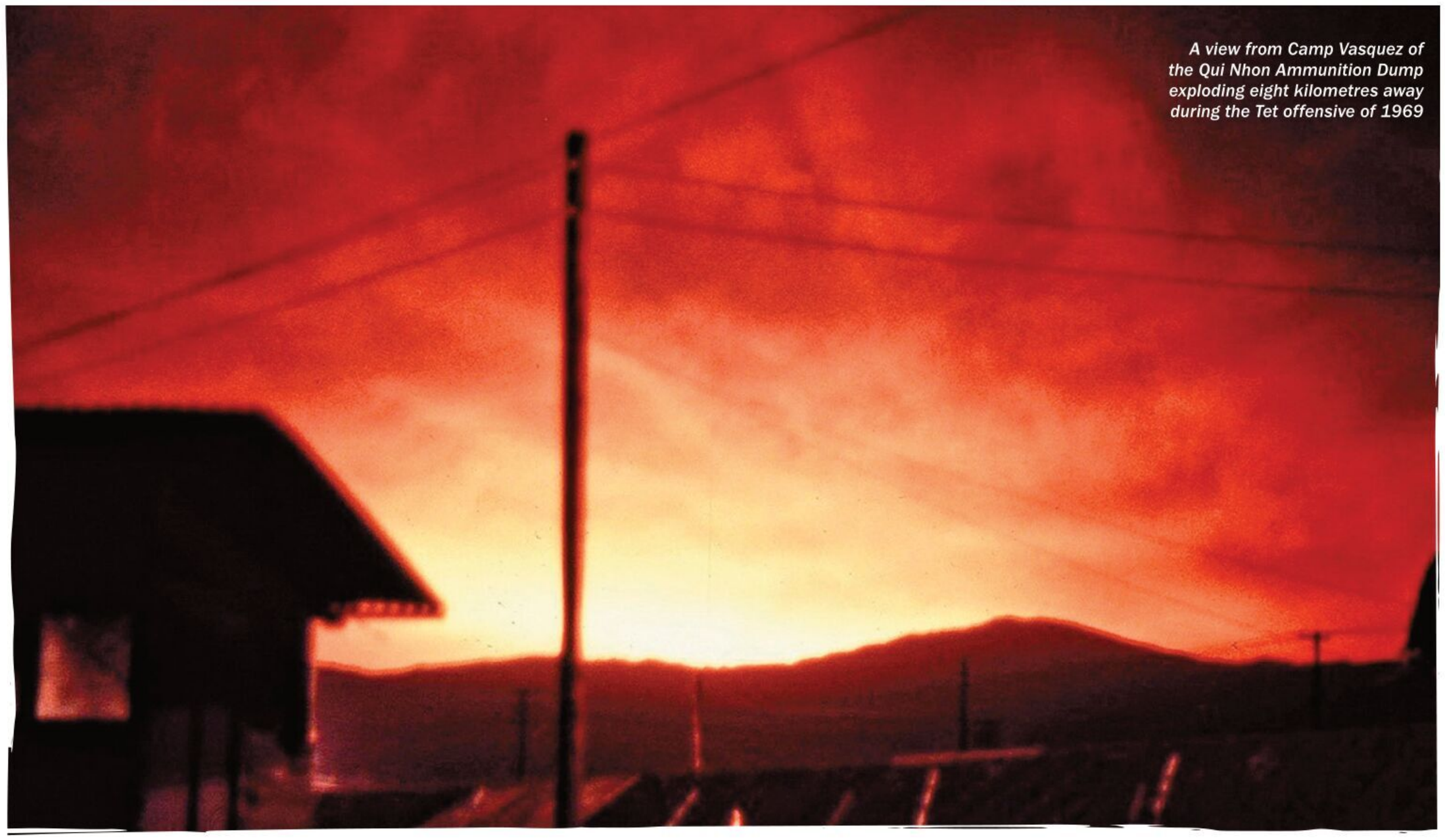
***Above:** The bunker for 25th EOD Ordnance Detachment at An Khe Combat Base*



***Above:** A pile of damaged ordnance prepared for demolition at Qui Nhon*



***Above:** Steinberg pictured during an operation with 173rd Airborne Brigade in the Central Highlands of Vietnam*



*A view from Camp Vasquez of the Qui Nhon Ammunition Dump exploding eight kilometres away during the Tet offensive of 1969*

would get hurt, wounded or even killed because I wasn't there. That never happened but other guys on the team got pretty seriously hurt afterwards."

Steinberg's guilt manifested itself on the plane journey home from Vietnam, where he and other returning soldiers felt unable to celebrate. "When we took off there was this huge uproar with everybody cheering and clapping. They were leaving and getting out of there alive. I did not take part in that and pretty much stuck to myself, but within a couple of minutes the plane was deadly silent. It was like that all the way back to the States. A lot of us were probably thinking about members of our units that we had lost and some of them, like me, may have been feeling guilty about leaving."

After leaving the US Army in 1971, Steinberg led "a very chequered life" but thrived professionally and became an attorney who specialised in capital murder investigations. He even went back to war many years later when he served with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime between 2009–10 in Afghanistan.

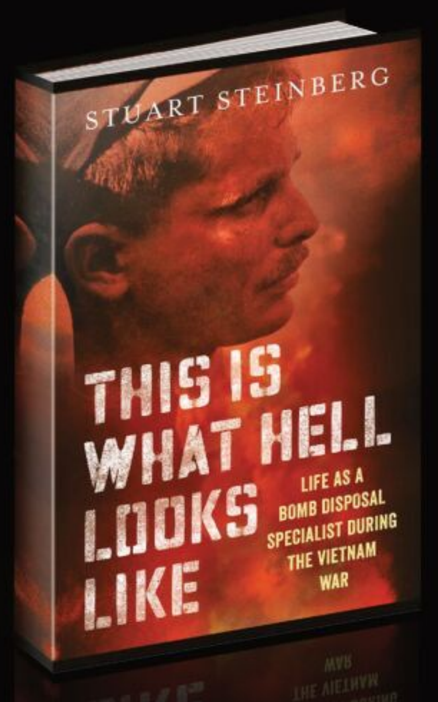
Steinberg acted as an advisor in counter-narcotics work to a brigade of Afghan police on the Iranian border and was struck by the similarities between the conflicts in Vietnam and Afghanistan. "Vietnam was asymmetrical

**"I was afraid that if I left people would get hurt, wounded or even killed because I wasn't there"**

warfare. The enemy was everywhere: 360 degrees, seven days a week, all year long. In that regard it was very similar to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because of the enemy's ability to use terrain to their benefit. To me, whether it's a jungle in Vietnam or some desert area along the Iranian border it's pretty much the same. You're out there looking out for bad guys or doing the job you were assigned to and hoping the enemy isn't going to be there."

Now active in veterans' affairs, Steinberg reflects that although the Vietnam War was a traumatic experience, he established friendships among his EOD teammates that have lasted until the present day: "It was the best time of my life because of the men I served with. They're just the greatest bunch of guys and you could never ask for better friends. Any one of us would do anything we could to help one of our own that was in need. Today, we're just as close as we ever were."

To read more about Stuart Steinberg's incredible story, you can purchase his autobiography, *This is What Hell Looks Like: Life As A Bomb Specialist During The Vietnam War*, which is published by Fonthill Media.
**For more information visit: www.fonthill.media**




*Images: Fonthill Media and Stuart Steinberg*

# THE MY LAI MASSACRE

**The massacre of civilians at My Lai has been called the most shocking episode of the Vietnam War. But who ordered it, and more importantly, why?**

WORDS **VICTORIA WILLIAMS**



*The bodies of the 504 victims were left on tracks and in ditches*

On 16 March 1968, around 100 members of Charlie Company were sent to the village of Son My on a search-and-destroy mission after receiving a tip-off that members of the National Liberation Front had taken over the area and were hiding out in the village's sub-hamlets. The area had already suffered multiple bombings, its crops and forest cover had been sprayed with the 'tactical herbicide' Agent Orange, and the ground was heavily mined by Vietnamese forces. Three months into their time in Vietnam, Charlie Company had already lost almost 30 men to mines and booby-traps. Because of these losses and the transfer of their more experienced officers, lower-ranking enlistees suddenly found themselves in leadership positions (the average age in the company was just 20).

Around this time, US forces had adopted the approach of destroying everything they could, with the logic that if they killed and impeded men faster than the Viet Cong could replace them, their enemy would have no choice but to admit defeat. Vietnamese forces relied primarily on mines, sniper fire and ambushes, and the US Army was growing increasingly frustrated with its enemy. Incentives were offered to encourage US soldiers to up their tallies – there were reportedly competitions between units to see which could achieve the highest body count. Slain civilians were often counted as enemies killed, and the distinction between Viet Cong and villager mattered less and less. The day before the massacre, at a memorial service for a fallen member of Charlie Company, captain Ernest Medina reminded the men of their losses and called for aggression in the face of the enemy. The company was told that anyone found in the Son My area should be assumed to be a VC member or sympathiser, and orders were given for the destruction of the entire village.

The company approached the sub-hamlet of My Lai just after daybreak. They found no Viet Cong – just women, children and old men preparing breakfast. Despite no sign of the Viet Cong they had been sent to find, the company's leader – Second Lieutenant William Calley, a man known for his hatred of the locals – issued the order to begin shooting. A few soldiers questioned Calley's instructions, but within minutes the massacre had begun.

Unarmed civilians were shot with M16 rifles. Mothers died trying to shield their children. One report recounts a grenade launcher being fired into a group of people. Calley reportedly rounded up several dozen inhabitants and forced them into a ditch before executing them en masse with his machine gun.

Sergeant Michael Bernhart was one of the company members troubled by Calley's orders. He later told a reporter, "They were shooting women and children just like anybody else… we met no resistance and I only saw three captured weapons. We had no casualties. It was just like any other Vietnamese village – old papa-sans [men], women and kids. As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing one military-age male in the entire place, dead or alive."

The company did not stop at shooting the villagers: women were raped and maimed before they were killed. Soldiers set fire to huts

*Charlie Company laid waste to the hamlet, destroying wells and burning buildings*



*Encouraged to treat all Vietnamese as potential enemies, some US troops committed war crimes*

and shot livestock. Witnesses recall old men being bayoneted and soldiers shooting women and children as they prayed. One soldier later admitted to scalping victims and cutting out their tongues.

The massacre ended with the arrival of warrant officer Hugh Thompson. The helicopter pilot was on a reconnaissance mission in the area when he spotted the fires and the piles of bullet-ridden bodies. “We kept flying back and forth … and it didn’t take very long until we started noticing the large number of bodies everywhere. Everywhere we’d look, we’d see bodies. These were infants, two-, three-, four-, five-year-olds, women, very old men, no draft-age people whatsoever.”

Thompson landed his helicopter between the soldiers and the fleeing villagers, threatening to open fire on Charlie Company unless the massacre ended. Ignoring Calley’s assertion that it was none of his business, he called in other pilots to help evacuate survivors. In 1998, he and two members of the crew received the Soldier’s Medal in recognition of their bravery. By the time a senior officer picked up the radio calls and ordered an end to the shooting, 504 villagers had been killed. Of the victims, 173 were children and 182 were women – at least 17 of which were pregnant.

Officers knew that news of the massacre would create an enormous scandal, so a decision was made to downplay the events. The US Army portrayed it as another victory. The cover-up efforts might have been successful were it not for Ron Ridenhour and Ron Haeberle. Ridenhour was a helicopter gunner in the 11th Brigade who had not been in My Lai on the day of the massacre but heard accounts from friends in Charlie Company. He found out as much as he could, then waited until his military service ended. A year later, he began to shed light on the true events, writing letters to congressmen, the State Department, the Pentagon and even President Richard M. Nixon. When he received no replies, he took the story to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh.



*Lieutenant William Calley (front, right) leaves a pre-trial hearing accompanied by his attorneys. A jury of six officers would later convict him of 22 counts of murder*

On the day of the massacre, combat photographer Ron Haeberle had accompanied the unit. He recalled confusion on their arrival in My Lai. “I heard a lot of firing and thought, ‘Hell, we must be in a hot zone.’ But after a couple of minutes we weren’t taking any fire, so we started walking toward the village. I saw what appeared to be civilians. Then I saw a soldier firing at them. I could not figure out



Trees pocked by bullet holes remind survivors of the harrowing events they witnessed



Captain Ernest Medina (right) and his attorney, F. Lee Bailey, attend a Pentagon press conference in the wake of an official examination of the original My Lai inquiry, 4 December 1969




Protestors at the March Against the Vietnam War in Washington, DC, 17 April 1965, organised by SDS and the Women's Strike For Peace

what was going on. I couldn't comprehend it." His shocking photographs of the soldiers, the village, the wounded and the casualties provided evidence of the company's actions.

Hersh published his interview with Ridenhour in early November 1969, and one of Haeberle's photographs of murdered villagers was printed on the front page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* days later. The exposition of the massacre and its cover-up caused an uproar, fuelling the already-growing anti-war movement and forcing Americans to question the popular image of US soldiers as brave and noble heroes. Troops in Vietnam began to wonder what else their superiors were keeping from them.

Shortly before the story and photographs hit the press, the US Army had finally ordered an investigation into the massacre. An inquiry was held, led by Lieutenant General William Peers. On 5 September 1969, Second Lieutenant Calley was charged with premeditated murder for his role in the deaths of 109 Vietnamese civilians, although he insisted first that the deaths were the result of an accidental airstrike and then that he was following orders from his commanding officer, Captain Ernest Medina. Peers' report implicated at least 26 officers in the cover-up attempt and recommended they all be charged.

The My Lai trial commenced in November 1970. To the horror of many, just 14 men were ultimately charged. 13 were later acquitted. There was only enough substantial evidence to convict Calley, who was found guilty of the premeditated killing of 22 unarmed civilians. Those soldiers willing to testify confirmed that he had ordered the company to kill every inhabitant of the village, despite the fact they were under no enemy fire. In March 1971, three years after the massacre, he was handed a life sentence. As the only soldier to be charged, some believed Calley was being used as a scapegoat. A telephone survey found that 81 per cent of members of the US public believed Calley's sentence was too severe. Several governors, including future president Jimmy Carter, publicly disagreed with the verdict. Calley did not serve life for his role in the killings. On 1 April 1971, President Nixon ordered that he be transferred from prison to house arrest. Following an appeal, his sentence was reduced first to 20 years, then ten. He was paroled in September 1974.

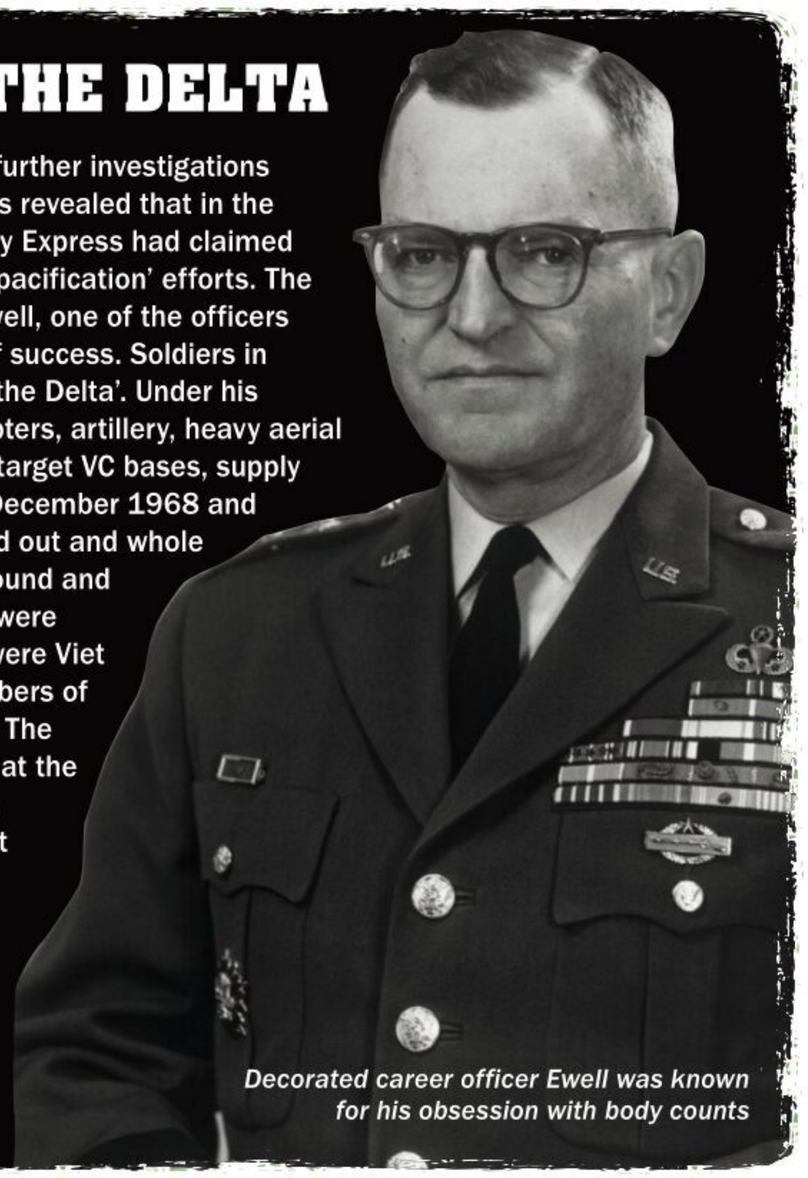
The effects of the My Lai massacre are still felt decades on. Soldiers who participated in the massacre were traumatised by their own actions. Private First Class Varnado Simpson, who went on to take his own life in 1997 as a result of severe post-traumatic stress disorder, shared his lasting shame in an interview for the book *Four Hours in My Lai*: "I did it. A lot of people were doing it, and I just followed. I lost all sense of direction."

In Vietnam, survivors and relatives of the victims still struggle to discuss the events of 16 March 1968. A museum has been created on the site of the hamlet, with reconstructions of razed homes and plaques bearing the names of those killed. More than 50 years later the atrocity, one of the largest publicised civilian massacres by US troops in the 20th century, still haunts the public memory.

## THE BUTCHER OF THE DELTA

In light of the attempted cover-up of My Lai, further investigations were made into US soldiers in Vietnam. It was revealed that in the Mekong Delta, an operation known as Speedy Express had claimed the lives of thousands of civilians as part of 'pacification' efforts. The operation was led by Major General Julian Ewell, one of the officers who promoted 'body counts' as a measure of success. Soldiers in his division came to call him 'the Butcher of the Delta'. Under his command, Speedy Express employed helicopters, artillery, heavy aerial bombardment and around 8,000 soldiers to target VC bases, supply lines and lines of communication. Between December 1968 and May 1969, over 3,000 air strikes were carried out and whole villages were decimated by the combined ground and air forces. Thousands of Vietnamese people were killed. The US military claimed the majority were Viet Cong soldiers, but reports and recorded numbers of seized enemy weapons exposed this as a lie. The US Army inspector general later estimated that the operation had killed 5,000 to 7,000 civilians.

Ewell went on to be promoted to lieutenant general before taking up position first as a military advisor in the Paris Peace Accords negotiations, then as Chief of Staff for NATO's Allied Forces Southern Europe. He never showed remorse and attempted to defend his actions in a book written with his former chief of staff.



Decorated career officer Ewell was known for his obsession with body counts

© Alamy; Getty Images

*Despite being repulsed, the attack on Saigon was a strike at the very heart of American imperial power in Vietnam*

# THE TET OFFENSIVE

It may have been a colossal military failure, but in many ways the Tet Offensive marked the turning point of the war

WORDS **HARETH AL BUSTANI**

In 1967, after a year of heavy losses, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap began to fear that North Vietnamese morale would soon begin to fracture. The two decided on a dramatic shift of policy, moving away from protracted, limited warfare towards planning one great decisive battle. Up until now, the communists had been fighting on three fronts: maintaining military pressure on the ground, mobilising support from the people of South Vietnam, and, crucially, eroding American public approval for US involvement.

They now believed it was time to concentrate their forces and seize swathes of strategic positions all across South Vietnam. This would, in turn, trigger a widespread general uprising against the South Vietnamese regime while simultaneously revealing to the US that the war was unwinnable, triggering a withdrawal.

In the United States, the anti-war movement was reaching new heights, with 30,000 protestors chanting "Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" outside the White House – loud enough for President Lyndon B. Johnson's family to hear. With an election year coming up, Johnson was desperate to reassure the public that the war would soon be won. Convinced the communists were one heavy loss from defeat, Johnson and General Westmoreland went on a propaganda media tour, asserting that the communists were too exhausted to launch any further offensive actions and that the end was in sight.

North Vietnam spent the next six months preparing for its grand, decisive strike, luring American forces into the Vietnamese hinterlands with an assault on Dak To and a concentration of forces around Khe Sanh. As the American lines spread thinner, the communists began scattering 84,000 Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) fighters through safe houses across all the major cities in South Vietnam. Weapons were smuggled across the Cambodian border, the tunnels of Cu Chi and the Iron Triangle and transported to the guerrilla fighters further south. Women and children carried these weapons through checkpoints, hiding them in agricultural produce or coffins.

Instead of traditional hit-and-run style attacks, Giap organised his army into several small units, instructing them to take strategic sites by surprise and hold them until reinforcements arrived. In Saigon, 35 battalions would split up and capture the Presidential Palace, the US Embassy, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and the headquarters of both the Vietnamese Navy and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. Another group would also break into the National Broadcasting Station and play a speech by Ho Chi Minh announcing the liberation of Saigon and a call for a general uprising across the South.

In the build-up to the attack, the Viet Cong (VC) staged several trial runs, attacking small holdings and attempting to hold them before retreating. US forces knew this was unusual and even captured documents outlining plans for a general assault across the South, with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff speculating "there may be a communist thrust similar to the desperate effort of the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge". However, Giap had made sure each individual unit only received instructions relating

to their direct tasks, so the Americans were unable to piece together the bigger picture.

Although the US did speed up troop movements to Vietnam, it did not believe the communists were capable of launching a massive assault. More importantly, the military had no idea when any such attack might take place. Keenly aware of the importance of the element of surprise, the communists picked the one date no one would ever expect: the Tet Lunar New Year Festival. As Tet drew nearer, both sides agreed to a ceasefire, and the Americans and ARVN believed the communists would never risk the public fallout of violating the most cherished of Vietnamese occasions.

As the US became increasingly overstretched, spreading military assets across the DMZ, Westmoreland grew anxious; he wanted to limit the Tet truce from the agreed week to just 24 hours. At the last minute, South Vietnam's President Thieu compromised, cutting it down to 36 hours.

Although most of the pieces were already in place, this left the VC and NVA with an incredibly tight window to catch their enemy off guard. The ceasefire would begin on the evening of 29 January; before the communists had time to mobilise their reinforcements. In anticipation of the event, Westmoreland placed his troops on maximum alert, with special focus on major strategic military, logistical and population centres.

On the evening of 29 January, as South Vietnam embraced the year of the monkey, revellers swarmed the streets beneath the brilliant bursts of traditional fire crackers. Suddenly, from the highlands of Pleiku to the coast of Danang, deep into the Mekong Delta down south, fireworks gave way to gunfire and explosions. Hours later, a wave of chaos swept through the capital of Saigon, as the VC and NVA spilled out of their safe houses towards their targets.

Dressed as South Vietnamese riot police, one group killed the guards outside the radio station and stormed through, riddling sleeping ARVN paratroopers with machine-gun fire. Armed with the tape of Ho Chi Minh and diagrams of the layout, they were horrified to learn the ARVN had already used a kill switch to take the power out. Meanwhile, lacking appropriate manpower, the assaults on the navy headquarters and Joint General Staff were rapidly repelled. Elsewhere, the Presidential Palace defences were far too strong, forcing the attackers to a nearby building, where 32 communists would perish in a lengthy last-ditch stand.

Despite these failures the Americans on the ground were overwhelmed as reports continued to pour in of attacks bouncing around, according to General Weyand, like a "pinball machine". At the American Embassy, 19 VC sappers blew a hole in the compound walls and darted through only to be wiped out in an arduous six-hour gunfight. Another group of sappers managed to breach the JGS compound, but once again, rather than pressing on, they followed orders and hunkered down, waiting for much-needed reinforcements that would never arrive.

Although the attacks across Saigon were decisively beaten back, the Western press had begun reporting it as soon as the violence broke out. One AP bulletin, which made it into all of the first-edition newspapers on the east coast of the US, read, "The Vietcong seized part of the US Embassy in Saigon early Wednesday... Communist commandos penetrated the supposedly attack-proof building in the climax of a combined artillery and guerrilla assault that brought limited warfare to Saigon itself." After the firefight was over, one *Washington Post* reporter described their bewilderment at Westmoreland "standing in the ruins and saying everything was great".

Meanwhile, 24 kilometres north of Saigon was the Long Binh command and logistical complex, which stretched out towards the sprawling Bien Hoa Air Base. After steady rocket and mortar fire, the communists launched a co-ordinated ground attack but were mowed down by American machine guns. In the northeast, as the 1-5 Armored Cavalry, 9th Infantry, made its way towards Long Binh it broke through an ambush only to have a bridge blown up beneath it. While its ACAVs were able to ford the stream, it had to abandon its tanks and press on.

The Cavalry forced its way through thick crowds of people in the city of Bien Hoa only to

**"They followed orders and hunkered down, waiting for much-needed reinforcements that would never arrive"**



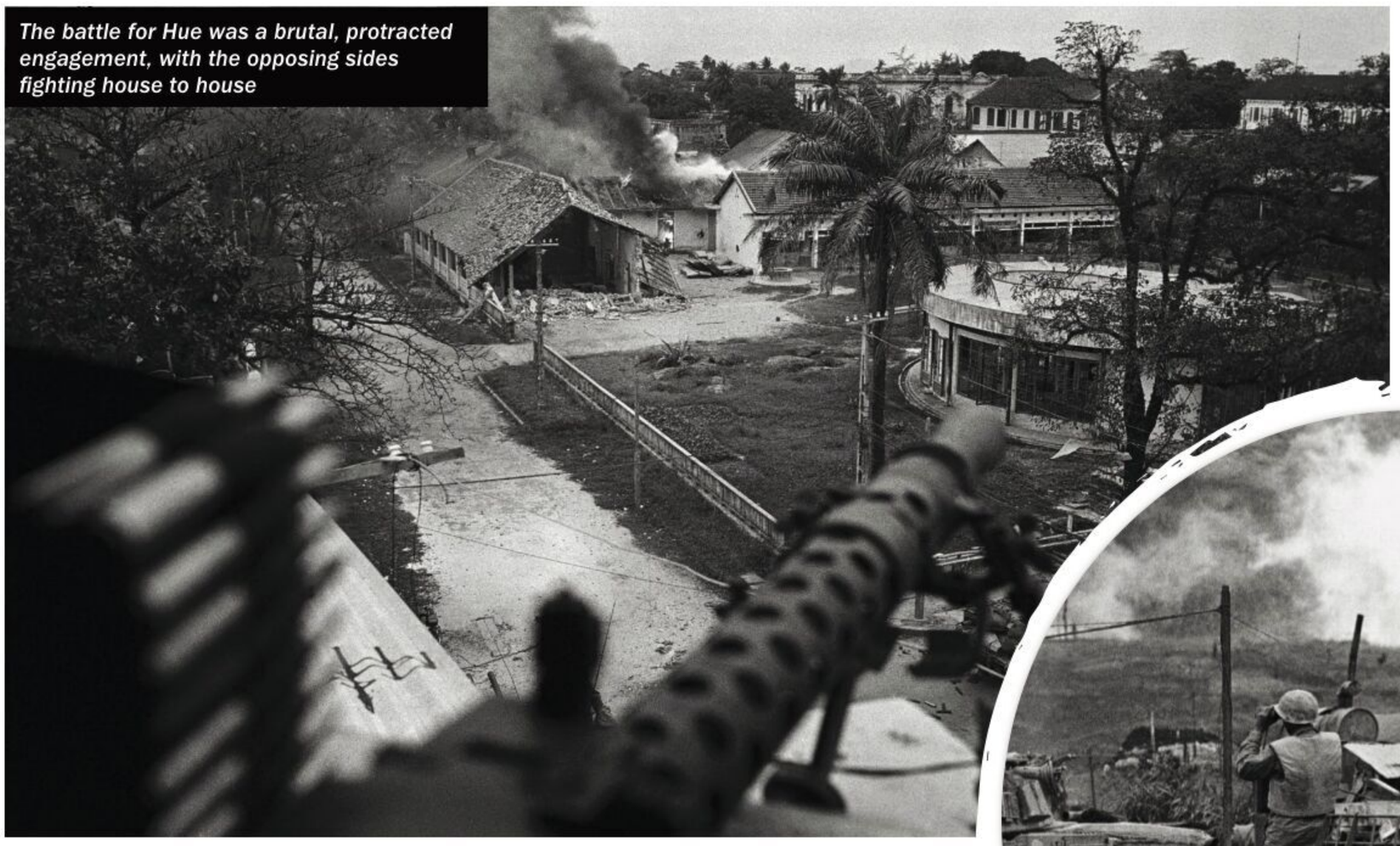
*By the time Johnson announced his withdrawal from the presidential race in March, 4,000 Americans had been killed in the Tet Offensive*

*In the defence of Khe Sanh, the US dropped the equivalent of ten Hiroshimas' worth of bombs on the North Vietnamese attackers*

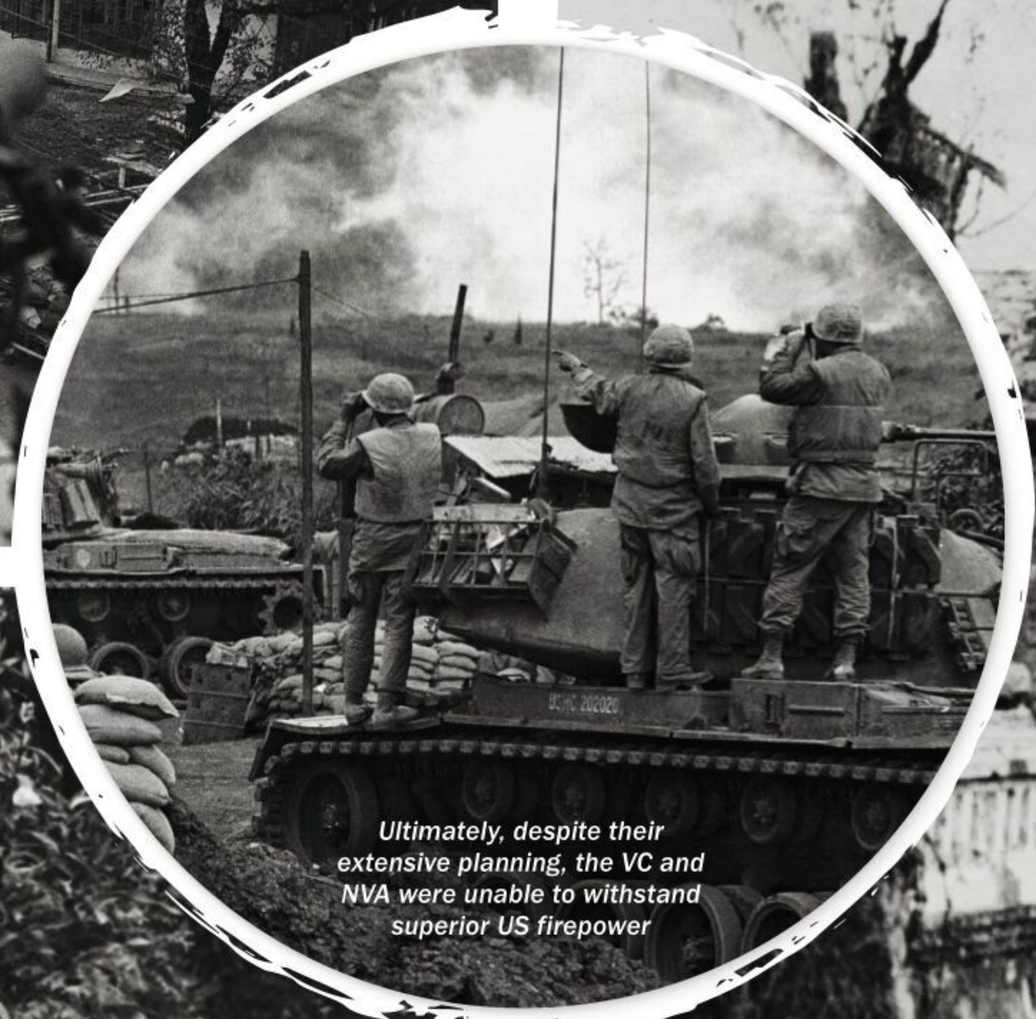
*The Tet Offensive would help pave the way for President Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, helping Nixon emerge victorious*

*Although the US was expecting a major VC and NVA attack, they never thought it would break out during Tet celebrations*

# DEADLOCK IN THE DEPTHS OF THE JUNGLE



*The battle for Hue was a brutal, protracted engagement, with the opposing sides fighting house to house*



*Ultimately, despite their extensive planning, the VC and NVA were unable to withstand superior US firepower*



*US Marines crouch behind a wall during the Tet Offensive*



*It's estimated that approximately 14,000 civilians were killed during the Tet Offensive*

discover it was surrounded by VC troops. After an almighty firefight, the squadron commander directed the Cavalry through a maze of streets from his helicopter, guiding them around a huge VC ambush – allowing them to smash through the rear just in time to relieve the air base. On 1 February, when one of the Cavalry officers heard that five more squadrons were converging on Saigon, he celebrated: "We knew that our enemy could never match our mobility, flexibility and manpower."

The pattern seen in Saigon, where attackers made initial shock gains only to be beaten back, was echoed across the country. The only exception was the old imperial capital city of Hue, which was split by a river; the new town occupied the south bank and the old walled Citadel the north. On 31 January, 8,000 NVA troops poured in and seized the Citadel, as well as sections of the new city. With some of the 1st ARVN trapped in the Citadel, and 200 Americans and Australians in the new city's MACV compound, the fighting was fierce. After initially underestimating the scale of the attack, the Marine command at Phu Bai called in reinforcements to encircle and cut off the communist supply lines.

Despite some relief, Hue proved exceptionally difficult to reclaim, as a gruelling battle of attrition ground its way through the narrow city streets. During their stay, the communists took the opportunity to indoctrinate and propagandise as much as they could. As fighting unfolded over the next month, civilians found themselves trapped in a dire situation, with the communists torturing and executing thousands suspected of being sympathetic to the Southern regime.

The urban setting of Hue neutralised the United States' two main advantages: superior firepower and mobility. The battle descended into house-to-house urban combat, where the defenders turned blocks into virtual fortresses, firing machine guns from the windows while launching spontaneous counter-attacks using back alleys.

Some of the American tanks went through numerous crews every day, repeatedly rushing and withdrawing under heavy fire, followed by infantry in flak vests. Snipers on either side duelled it out, providing cover for their footsoldiers in the streets, while Jeeps zoomed about offering drive-by bursts of support fire. Both sides had to wear gas masks as they fired tear gas at one another.

Keen to break the deadlock, the United States received ARVN permission to bring in the big guns and unleashed a storm of artillery on the VC positions, razing much of the city to the ground. By the time they recaptured the Citadel on 24 February, 116,000 of Hue's 140,000 residents were left homeless. While the US lost 216 men and the ARVN 384, a



**“Snipers on either side duelled it out, providing cover for their footsoldiers in the streets”**

staggering 5,000 NVA and VC fighters were killed in the battle.

Of the 84,000 communist troops that took part in the Tet Offensive, almost 58,000 were killed compared to just 4,000 Americans and 5,000 South Vietnamese soldiers. From a military perspective, it was a catastrophic strategic defeat, forcing the cadres to abandon long-held territory to regroup. The ARVN, meanwhile, had performed above all expectations, and Westmoreland truly believed that with a little more pressure the war could now be won.

With Westmoreland’s blessing, General Wheeler requested a call up of 206,000 more troops in order to deter any future attacks and maintain momentum. However, while Westmoreland had considered it a magnificent victory, Wheeler’s request sent a very different message. Despite the impressive body counts, the US had nothing to show for it. On the contrary, given how much Johnson and Westmoreland had emphasised that the VC and NVA were on their knees, the scale and intensity of the Tet Offensive utterly shocked the American public.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who was about to resign, advised President Johnson to reject the request for more troops, which would exact a heavy human and financial toll on the US and jeopardise the future of Johnson’s Great Society. Well into an election year, Johnson was in an impossible situation; he did not want to be seen as throwing the war, but doubling the number of troops would send the message that it was anything but won. When the request was leaked to the public it did little to assuage the growing American concerns that the country’s leaders were either utterly incompetent or lying to them.

On 13 March, Johnson denied the request, instead approving 24,200 army troops alongside 6,000 Air Force and support servicemen. Furthermore, at the end of the month, with Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy both running on peace platforms, the president delivered a shocking speech, signalling the ultimate personal defeat: “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.” The US had won the Tet Offensive and yet still seemed, to the American public, to be losing war. The tide had turned.

© Alamy; Getty; Wiki

# STORM IN THE USA

While Vietnam was being devastated by American machines of war, in the land of the free thousands of protestors made their voices heard

WORDS **BEE GINGER**



Initially the Vietnam War protests began among leftist intellectuals and peace activists who met in small groups on college campuses. However, in 1965, the United States began bombing North Vietnam in earnest and the protests gained prominence on a national scale.

Over the next three years, protests and anti-war marches gained a wide base of followers and supporters across the country. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organised numerous marches and arranged what were known as 'teach-ins', which allowed them to express their opinions on and opposition to how the war was being conducted. By the end of 1965, this small, liberal minority was making its voice heard over the vast majority of Americans who supported what was happening in Vietnam.

Alongside the students were other intellectuals, members of the popular hippie movement, prominent artists and an ever-expanding number of people said to have been embracing the popular drug culture at that time and turning their backs on authority. Disillusionment was becoming widespread. The war was costing in the region of $25 billion a year, and the tax-paying public had started to worry. More troops were deployed and more casualties reported daily.

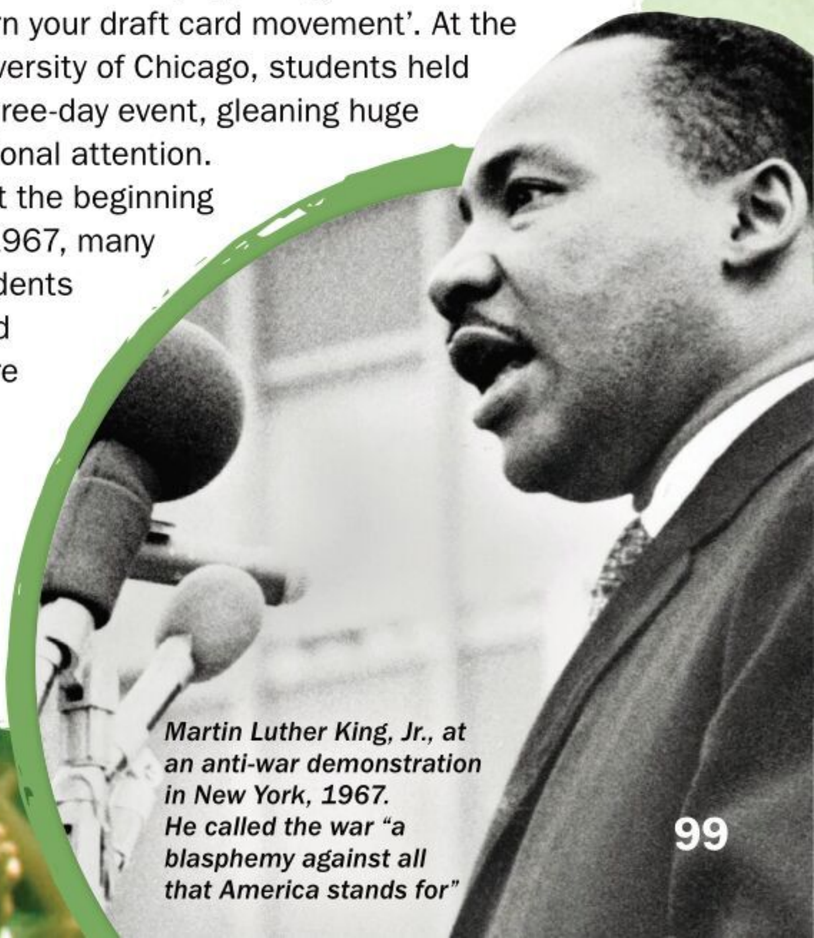
In the winter of 1969, the US Government implemented the first draft lottery since World War II. Each month, as many as 40,000 young men were called up under the draft system. This caused enormous controversy, not to mention a huge number of young men fleeing across the border to Canada to avoid being conscripted. Yet despite the widespread anger directed against the war, the anti-war movement needed a boost. It would come in the form of Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a civil rights leader, King condemned the war, primarily on moral grounds. But he also strongly opposed the diversion of federal funds from domestic programmes and highlighted the disproportionate number of African-American casualties in comparison to the total number of fatalities of the soldiers who fought so bravely in the conflict.

Demonstrations were spurred on by the change in the Selective Service System's draft policy. It was exposed that university students who were bottom of the class would have their place revoked and instead be drafted. The aforementioned peaceful teach-ins now became sit-ins where the students would take over administration offices.

Tensions ran high at many campuses, like Harvard, where protesters trapped the defence secretary Robert McNamara in a police car and bombarded him with questions about the war. Cornell University saw students trying to organise a national 'burn your draft card movement'. At the University of Chicago, students held a three-day event, gleaning huge national attention.

At the beginning of 1967, many students tried more



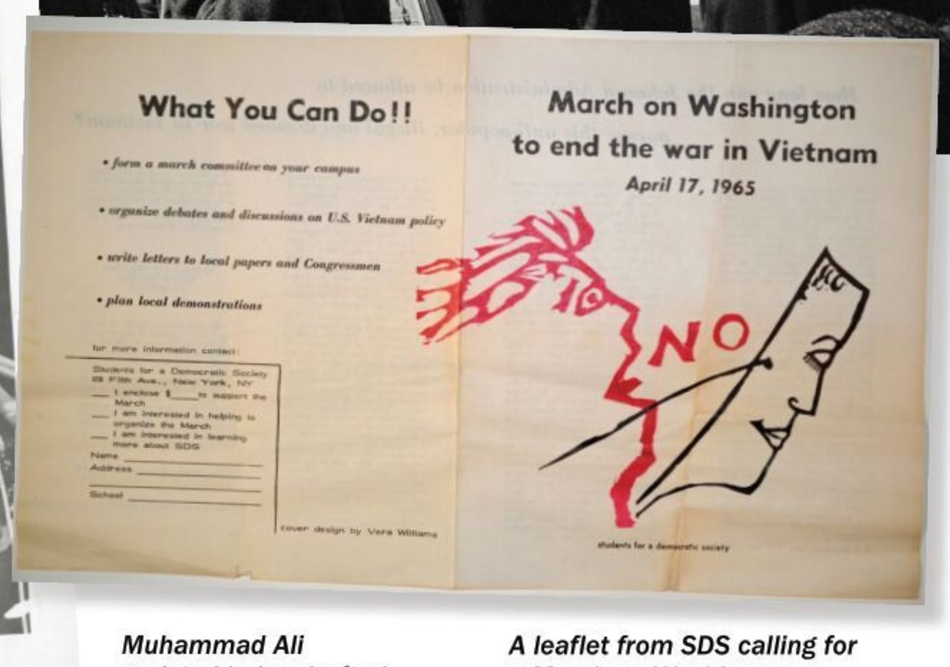
*Martin Luther King, Jr., at an anti-war demonstration in New York, 1967. He called the war "a blasphemy against all that America stands for"*




*Protestors at the March Against the Vietnam War in Washington, DC, 17 April 1965, organised by SDS and the Women's Strike For Peace*




*Muhammad Ali resisted being drafted, declaring himself a "conscientious objector"*




*A leaflet from SDS calling for a March on Washington to end the Vietnam War on 17 April 1965*

peaceful forms of dissent. They took out advertisements in newspapers and college and university publications, and they wrote letters to editors, politicians and state figures. However, it soon became apparent that these traditional tactics were no longer effective and that the government-private firm alliance was a huge contributing factor, as they were thought to have an economic incentive to perpetuate the Vietnam War.

Activists were now determined to interfere with these corporations after realising the monetary role universities were playing in supporting them. They benefited from the universities' investment and were permitted to recruit on campuses – and many of them were involved in the production of wartime materials.

Dow Chemicals was one such company. Based in Michigan, Dow specialised in the production of napalm (the use of this was already becoming increasingly controversial) and was the sole provider of this lethal substance to the military. The firm became a target of anti-war activism and was called into question about the morality of military tactics being used in Vietnam at that time. Dow claimed their product was only being used on military targets, but several allegations were circulating that it was in fact being used against civilians. As more news coverage reached the US, this argument was strengthened.

In October 1966, Dow experienced its first anti-war protest, and subsequent protests spread across the country to hundreds of universities. The following year, students in Wisconsin took over the Dow Commerce Building with a sit-in in order to prohibit more recruitment. The police were prepared for this and met them with clubs and tear gas, violently forcing them from the building. The protestors retaliated with name-calling and rock throwing, resulting in numerous casualties, ten of which were police officers, the other 11 protesters who were subsequently arrested. This sit-in was the first time an anti-war protest had turned violent, but it was far from the last.

In the years that followed rough confrontations became commonplace, with the culmination of this aggressive approach being the tragic Kent State University shootings (see boxout), an event that fuelled more violence, such as the Sterling Hall bombing, which resulted in the destruction of the Army Math Research Centre at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the death of a young scientist working there.

While chaos reigned at home, the US continued to suffer horrendous losses abroad. In January 1968, North Vietnamese communist troops launched the Tet Offensive against the United States. This not only shocked the country but also increased the levels of discontent immeasurably, bringing about the most intense period of anti-war demonstrations and protests.

By the beginning of February 1968, polls showed that a staggering 50 per cent of the population were against President Johnson's handling of the war. It was at this point that members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organisation began attending anti-war demonstrations. Many people were won over by the sight of these brave men, many of whom had been injured in the war themselves, joining the protesters in their wheelchairs and on crutches, standing up to the government and throwing away the medals they had previously been so honoured to wear. In turn, this led

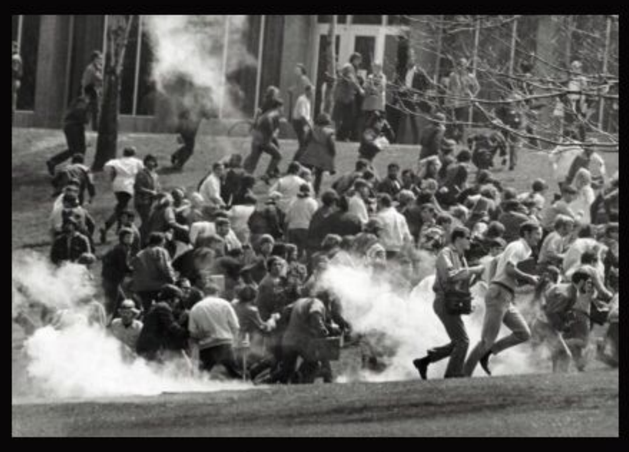
## KILLING IN THE NAME OF...

The protests that divided America during the Vietnam War were often marred by violence as passionate campaigners clashed with heavy-handed enforcers of the law. However, despite numerous incidents of brutality, it was the Kent State shootings of 4 May 1970 that would be etched in the United States' collective memory.

On that fateful day, students at Kent State University in Ohio had been protesting against the US invasion of Cambodia, an offshoot of the Vietnam War effort. Tensions on campus were at an all-time high following days of on-campus resistance. On 2 May, panicked authorities called for the Ohio National Guard. By the following day they were in place, locked and loaded.

The following day, as some students continued to voice their condemnation of the war, a number of Guards advanced on the crowd. Suddenly, 29 of the officers opened fire for 13 seconds. In that time they shot 67 rounds of ammunition, killing four students and gravely injuring nine, two of whom were walking to class and not even partaking in the protest.

In the aftermath of the Kent State shooting a student-led strike forced the temporary closure of both universities and colleges nationally. It is believed by political observers that the events of this horrendous day shifted the public's opinion against the war and may in some part have contributed to President Nixon's demise.



# ANATOMY OF A VIETNAM WAR PROTESTER

## US, 1955–75




**PICKET SIGNS**
Protesters used strong, powerful messages on their picket signs to take a stance against the Vietnam War. Messages on signs ranged from the peaceful 'make love, not war' to much more provocative and controversial ideas, such as comparing President Nixon to Hitler.

**HELMETS**
The iconic soldier's helmet was worn by actress Jane Fonda as she visited troops in Vietnam. While the visit stirred controversy as she sang anti-war songs with troops, later the Vietnam Veterans Against War movement saw thousands of ex-soldiers uniting against the conflict.

**FLOWERS**
Taking a passive stance while protesting against the conflict, demonstrators armed themselves with flower power to fight the government's brutality. At marches, protesters would carry flowers, placing them in soldiers' gun barrels and wrapping themselves in daisy chains.

**BOX OF MATCHES**
Despite more than 50 per cent of Americans opposing the war in Vietnam, the government reintroduced conscription, known as the draft. From 1964, students and protesters carried matchboxes with them for burning draft cards in response to the unfair and flawed conscription for such an unpopular war.

**BUTTONS AND BADGES**
Young and open minded, many protesters were politically engaged students. Badges and buttons were the easiest way to show their affiliation with movements, such as the Resistance, Greenpeace and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

**DRUGS**
It wasn't just a passion for politics that protesters became associated with. Alongside their anti-war stance, drugs were a big part of the hippie culture. Legal until the mid-1960s in the US, some protesters took LSD as a means of escaping the reality of war.

**BOOTS**
Protesters spent plenty of time marching and parading against the conflict and its inequalities, so a sturdy pair of boots was essential. In fact, one of the largest anti-war demonstrations was held on 15 November 1969 in Washington, DC, with more than half a million protesters campaigning against involvement in Vietnam.

**MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**
The 1960s and 1970s witnessed an unprecedented music revival, with the likes of The Beatles and Bob Dylan advocating pacifism. Protesters united over music, with anti-war folk singers often performing at rallies. As these sentiments grew, music became more aggressive, and rock took over from folk as the music of protest.

to many of the primary voters getting behind Eugene McCarthy, an anti-war Democrat.

In the face of such public opposition, President Johnson decided not to stand for re-election, enabling Vice President Hubert Humphrey to run for office. Despite being an opponent of the war, Humphrey announced in his candidacy speech that he would continue to send troops to Vietnam. In the end his promises proved irrelevant, with Humphrey losing the race for the White House to Richard Nixon, who swore in his presidential campaign to effectively restore law and order to the country following the anti-war protests as well as the rioting in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Unfortunately, Nixon's war policies only served to further divide the nation. In a speech in 1969 he referred to the anti-war protesters as being a "small, albeit vocal minority" who shouldn't be allowed to drown out the "silent majority" of Americans. This was not appreciated by the diligent protestors.

Tensions were simmering, and unrest was driven by incidents of official violence at demonstrations. More fuel was poured on the fire in 1971 with the first publication of the Pentagon Papers, exposing confidential details about the war that previously hadn't been released to the public. The American people began to further question the government and US military's accountability.

In response to the widespread criticism, the government worked hard to get its side of the story across to the universities. It gave a great deal of support to the American Friends of Vietnam, a pro-administration group. While this group could never compete in numbers or the intensity with the anti-war demonstrators, due to the violent consequences of some of the previous protests the government did experience a surge in support, as did some of the affiliated companies.

In the wake of the bloodshed, a record number of university students from Wisconsin signed up to work for Dow Chemicals. The local newspaper supported Dow, denouncing the students, and the pro-war group Young Americans for Freedom saw a significant increase in enrolment. Large majorities were said to feel that the demonstrations were 'acts of disloyalty' against the soldiers in Vietnam and that the Wisconsin protests had hurt the larger anti-war cause.

The protests continued to divide the nation until the end of the war. Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia in 1970 proved to be the catalyst for protests at over 1,300 campuses, 500 of which were forced to close due to faculty and student strikes.

Along with putting an end to Johnson's presidency, the protests resulted in the voting age in the US being lowered to 18 and, ultimately, forced a once-truculent government to listen to the voice of the people and withdraw from the war in 1973.

© Alamy; Getty; Kevin McGivern

*Wounded men of the 101st Airborne Division are helped down Hill 937. The battle proved a costly victory for the US forces*




# HAMBURGER

For ten days in May 1969, American and South Vietnamese forces threw themselves against large numbers of well-defended enemy troops

# HILL

## DONG AP BIA, REPUBLIC OF SOUTH VIETNAM
11–20 MAY 1969

WORDS **MARC DESANTIS**

The Tet Offensive of January 1968 had been an enormous blow against the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies, but not necessarily in the way the North Vietnamese had anticipated. While the Americans and South Vietnamese had suffered heavy losses, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) itself had been mauled and the Viet Cong irregulars in the South had been decimated. Coming out to fight the Americans in the open had proven extremely costly. From now on, the Viet Cong would focus on preserving its strength. Similarly, several regiments of the NVA regular troops had been horribly battered in combat and had needed rebuilding.

It was in the realm of public opinion, however, that communist North Vietnam, studiously working to eject the Americans and topple the South Vietnamese Government, achieved its greatest results. Never-ending American casualties for little measurable gain turned the Tet Offensive into a political victory for the communists in American public opinion, which became increasingly negative towards the war.

Among the Americans, there was a change of strategy too. General Creighton Abrams was named the new chief of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in June 1968, replacing General William Westmoreland in the post. That same year, US forces in Vietnam reached a wartime high of 535,000 military personnel. Despite this huge force, the US and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) had come no closer to achieving victory over the communist insurgency than when American involvement had begun years earlier.

Abrams introduced a different objective for American forces. Instead of Westmoreland's 'attrition strategy', which focused on finding and destroying the enemy's 'Main Force' units, Abrams emphasised 'pacification' of the Vietnamese countryside, which included the protection of the civilian populace. The strategy started to bear fruit, and it caused the communists severe trouble in sustaining their grip on areas they had long held.

Abrams, however, did not reject the idea of taking the fight to Main Force units. If they were found, they were to be attacked and destroyed. One heavy concentration was located in the A Shau Valley in the far north of South Vietnam, close to the Laotian border. The mountainous, jungle-cloaked and largely inaccessible A Shau had been a stronghold for the NVA since 1966, when a US special forces base there had been overwhelmed. The A Shau was a North Vietnamese bastion filled with stockpiles of weapons,



***Right:** General Creighton Abrams, who became the new chief of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, in June 1968*

ammunition, vehicles, food, water and many other supplies brought there via the Ho Chi Minh trail. This made the valley a prime staging area for attacks into the South, including the devastating Tet Offensive. Intelligence also revealed that the elite 29th NVA Regiment, as well as the 6th and 9th NVA Regiments, were currently present in the valley. To root them out, MACV initiated Operation Apache Snow.

This operation would not be the first US incursion into the A Shau. In April–May 1968, Westmoreland had launched Operation Delaware, in which the US 1st Cavalry Division had achieved only mixed results against a dug-in communist force amid terrible weather.

Operation Apache Snow would be led by the 'Screaming Eagles' of the US 101st Airborne. This division had gained immortal fame for its epic defence of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944. It had switched to helicopters and was now termed 'airmobile'. The 101st had also been to the A Shau before. In August 1968, during Operation Somerset Plains, the division had conducted a helicopter assault into the valley but achieved only limited success in making a dent in the communist forces there. Frustratingly, the big NVA units would not give battle, either moving away down the valley or up the steep mountainsides.

**"If the NVA behaved as they typically did and bolted, they'd be sacrificing all of the myriad supplies that would be left behind"**

## Apache Snow

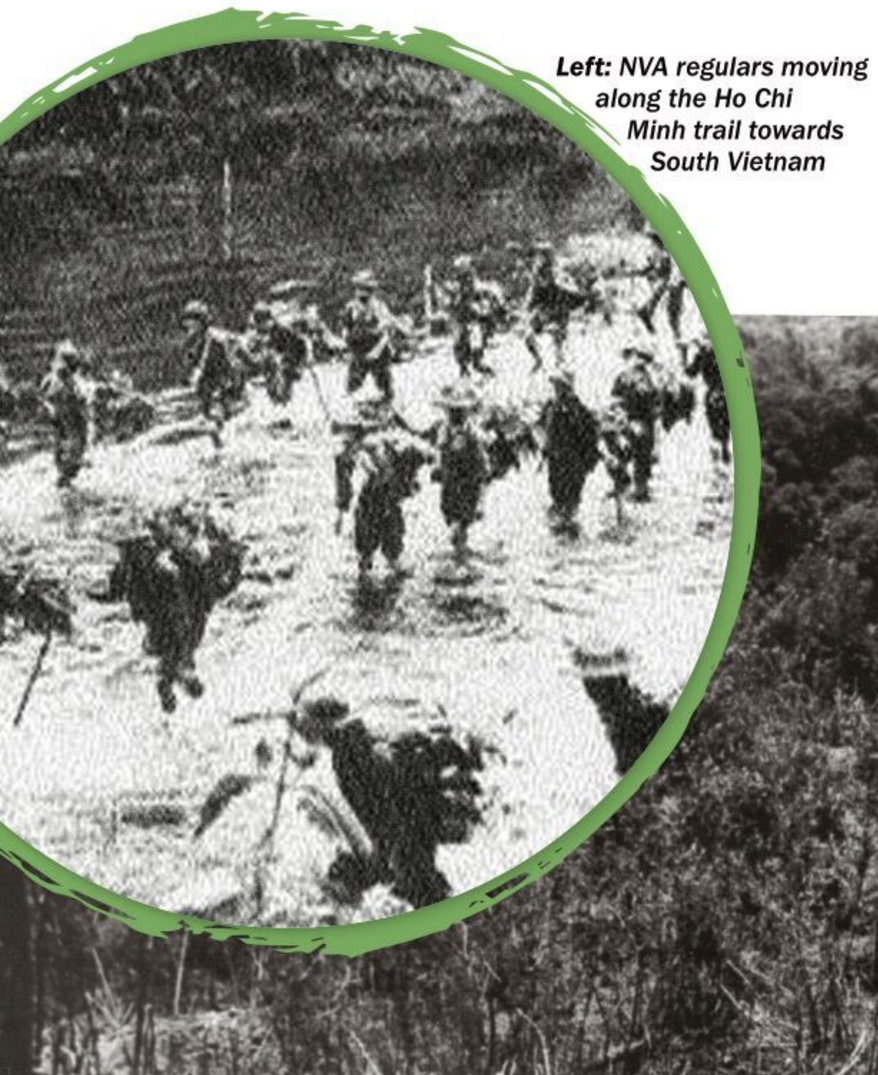
General Abrams gave the 101st Airborne another chance in May 1969. The objective of Apache Snow was to drive the NVA out of the valley. If the NVA behaved as they typically did and bolted, they'd be sacrificing all of the myriad supplies that would be left behind.

The attack was to be spearheaded by the 450 soldiers of 3/187th, or the 3rd Battalion of the 187th Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division, which was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Weldon 'Blackjack' Honeycutt. It was accompanied into the A Shau by the 1/506th Regiment and the 2/501st Regiment, also of the 101st Airborne. US Marines and ARVN forces would also take part, in supporting roles.

The target for the four companies of 3/187th, nicknamed the 'Rakkasans', was Dong Ap Bia, which the local Montagnards called the 'mountain of the crouching beast'. US military planners knew it by the more prosaic name of Hill 937, because it rose to a towering 937 metres in height.

On 10 May, a giant aerial convoy of UH-1 'Huey' transport helicopters lifted off and headed into the mountain valley. Lieutenant Frank Boccia, a young platoon leader of Bravo Company of the 3/187th, compared the cruising helicopters to "a swarm of giant green dragonflies". The landing zones were pounded by American warplanes and artillery before the paratroopers arrived. Huge, 15,000-pound (6,800-kilogram) 'daisy cutter' bombs were dropped to blast clear spots for the helicopters to touch down. The Rakkasans landed without meeting any resistance on the first day and spent the night there before launching their first move against the western side of the mountain.

The NVA was in hiding up in the mountain heights of Dong Ap Bia, waiting in a strongly fortified bunker system for the paratroopers to come to them. On 11 May, the Rakkasans conducted a reconnaissance in force to make contact with the NVA, making limited contact with their enemy in a series of firefights. They would soon learn that their prior assumptions about the willingness of the NVA to stand and fight were wrong.



***Left:** NVA regulars moving along the Ho Chi Minh trail towards South Vietnam*



*Troops from the US 101st Airborne Division ascend Dong Ap Bia after the battle*

## OPPOSING FORCES

### US ARMY

**LEADERS:**

**Major General Melvin Zais**, commander of the 101st Airborne Division;
**Colonel Joseph Conmy,** commander of 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division;
**Lieutenant Colonel Weldon Honeycutt**, commander of 3/187th Battalion ('Rakkasans')

**INFANTRY:** 1,800

**VS**

### PEOPLE'S ARMY OF VIETNAM

**LEADER:**

**General Ma Vinh Lan**
29th NVA Regiment

**INFANTRY:**
800



The NVA had conceived its defence of Dong Ap Bia as a chance to lure in and destroy an entire US battalion from within the security of their maze of bunkers, which were mostly protected against the tremendous firepower of American aircraft and artillery. By allowing the Americans to come close to their positions, the North Vietnamese also aimed to neutralise superior US firepower by making them reluctant to use it at all for fear of hurting their own men. The communists said they were 'grabbing the enemy by the belt' – that is, holding him close.

## Battle is joined

The 3/187th was badly mauled on the first day, 11 May, in a 'friendly fire' incident in which the battalion's command post was rocketed by AH-1 'Cobra' helicopter gunships. Two GIs were slain and 35 others were wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Honeycutt was himself seriously wounded in the accidental strike but remained in command of his battalion.

The terrain of Hill 937 heavily favoured the defenders. The approaches to the summit were jungle-choked ridges and slender trackways, with the NVA's bunkers skilfully sited to cover them. On 12 May, the NVA units ensconced on Dong Ap Bia revealed themselves fully as the Americans ascended. Deadly ambushes were sprung all over the mountain, and the men of the 3/187th were repelled.

The Rakkasans would mount daily assaults to reach the summit but were stopped time after time by the ferocious resistance of the infantrymen of the 29th NVA Regiment. Known as the 'Pride of Ho Chi Minh', these soldiers opened up on the advancing American paratroopers with AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and many other support weapons.

In the close confines of Hill 937, the Americans were at a disadvantage against an enemy who were difficult to spot until they fired. The NVA also launched its own counterattacks on the Americans. "My god, what have we gotten ourselves into?" Lieutenant Boccia would wonder.

Elsewhere in the A Shau, the NVA was not idle. On the night of 12–13 May, an elite assault force of the 6th NVA Regiment struck at Firebase Airborne, an American artillery base on the top of Dong Ngai, a mountain 6.4 kilometres to the north of Dong Ap Bia. The firebase contained three howitzers and two 81mm mortars, which were to provide support fire for Apache Snow. North Vietnamese sappers cut their way undetected through the concertina wires that had been strung around their position, and their comrades charged through in the early morning darkness of 13 May. With mortar rounds crashing into the base, the NVA soldiers roamed at will, tossing satchel charges and shooting the stunned Americans, who rushed to mount a defence.

The Americans succeeded in beating back the assault but only at great cost to themselves. 26 GIs were killed and 62 wounded. At least 40 NVA soldiers were also slain, and losses were likely far heavier, but the NVA adroitly managed to take many of their dead and wounded with them when they made their escape.

## A mountain fortress

The mountainous terrain of Dong Ap Bia, and the A Shau more generally, made the place a natural fortress. All of the advantages of height accrued to the defenders higher up. The men of the 101st also struggled to get their wounded off the mountain in a timely manner. The helicopters that granted the US Army unmatched mobility in Vietnam were seriously hindered in the A Shau. The choppers' long blades sometimes made it impossible for them to get close enough to the steeply sloped ground to land and pick up the wounded. Intense ground fire also made helicopter medevac runs extremely dangerous. One remarkably courageous pilot, 20-year-old Eric Rairdon, flew hair-raising missions in darkness and poor weather in his tiny OH-6 Cayuse observation chopper to ferry out the wounded. The gallant Rairdon, nicknamed the 'Saint', continued his flying heroics until he was hit in both legs during a mission on 18 May.

The terrain was a factor in other ways. Because of the narrowness of the paths leading up to the summit and the threats that NVA bunkers and other fighting positions posed, many of the 3/187th platoons had to be detailed to guard the flanks and rears of



*101st Airborne soldiers traverse the blasted terrain around Dong Ap Bia*

DEADLOCK IN THE DEPTHS OF THE JUNGLE

# HAMBURGER HILL 1969

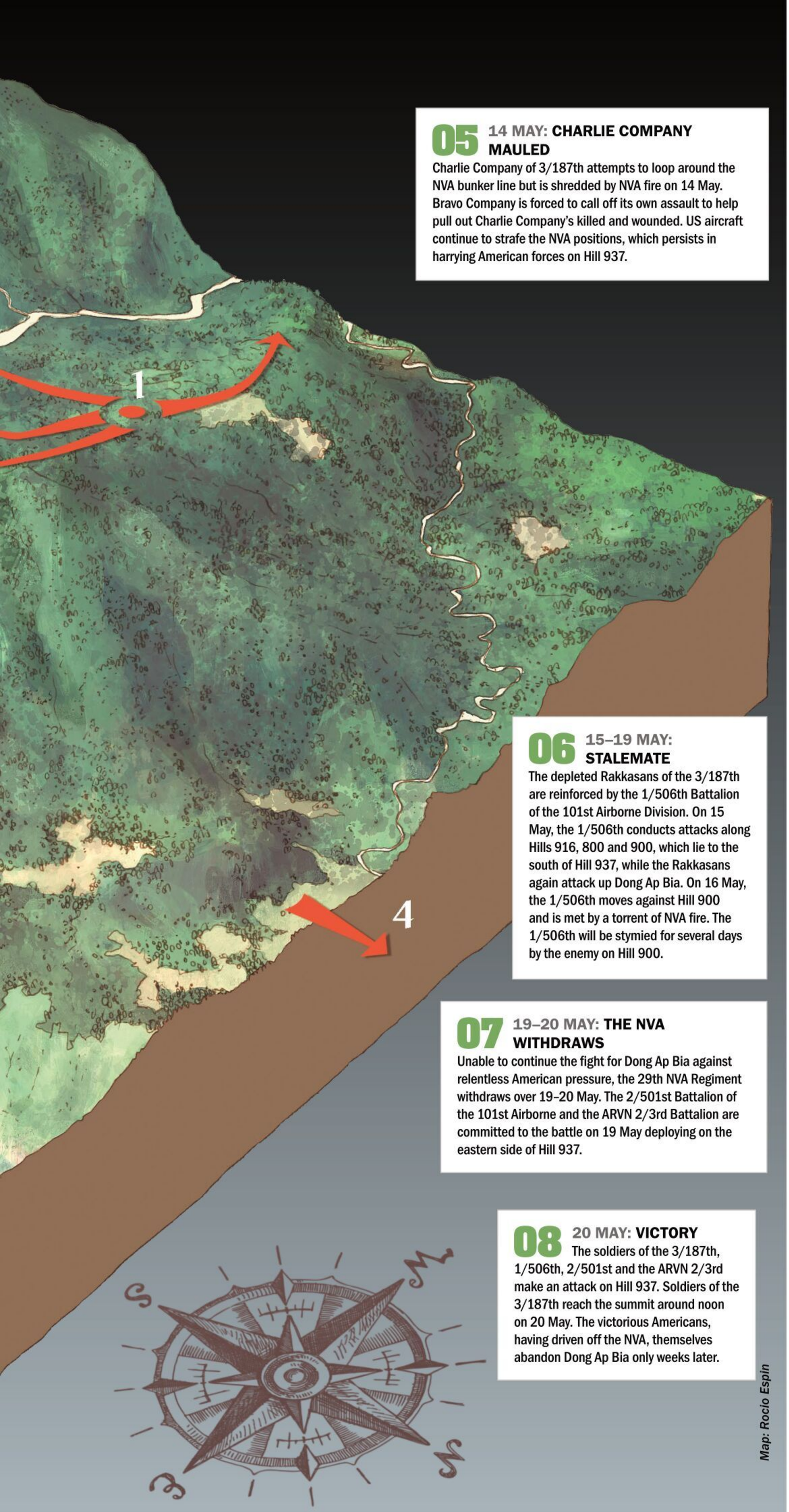
**01** **10 MAY: THE RAKKASANS ARRIVE**
After a heavy air and artillery bombardment of the landing zone (LZ), at 0710 on 10 May, a large force of paratroopers – 'Rakkasans' from the 3/187th Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division – touch down in the mountainous A Shau Valley.

**02** **11 MAY: RECONNAISSANCE IN FORCE**
Still unsure of enemy strength, on 11 May the paratroopers of the 3/187th make their first movement up Dong Ap Bia, or Hill 937, where the NVA's 29th Regiment is well entrenched. The 3/187th's battalion command post is accidentally hit in a 'friendly fire' incident.

**03** **12 MAY: THE NVA RETALIATES**
On 12 May, the Rakkasans make another attack on Hill 937, and the 29th NVA Regiment shows its full strength, opening up from its many firing pits and bunkers to hammer the Americans with rifle fire and rocket-propelled grenades. NVA positions are pulverised by American airstrikes and artillery, but the hardened North Vietnamese regulars stay put and will also launch counterattacks from them on the paratroopers throughout the battle.

**04** **12–13 MAY: ASSAULT ON FIREBASE AIRBORNE**
Led by sappers who cut their way through concertina wire, on the night of 12–13 May, NVA assault troops storm Firebase Airborne, a supporting artillery position not far from Hill 937 defended by soldiers of 2/501st Battalion. They are driven off only after severe losses to both sides. The paratroopers of 3/187th continue to make daily attacks on Dong Ap Bia.

**"The gallant Rairdon, nicknamed the 'Saint', continued his flying heroics until he was hit in both legs during a mission on 18 May"**




**05** **14 MAY: CHARLIE COMPANY MAULED**

Charlie Company of 3/187th attempts to loop around the NVA bunker line but is shredded by NVA fire on 14 May. Bravo Company is forced to call off its own assault to help pull out Charlie Company's killed and wounded. US aircraft continue to strafe the NVA positions, which persists in harrying American forces on Hill 937.

**06** **15–19 MAY: STALEMATE**

The depleted Rakkasans of the 3/187th are reinforced by the 1/506th Battalion of the 101st Airborne Division. On 15 May, the 1/506th conducts attacks along Hills 916, 800 and 900, which lie to the south of Hill 937, while the Rakkasans again attack up Dong Ap Bia. On 16 May, the 1/506th moves against Hill 900 and is met by a torrent of NVA fire. The 1/506th will be stymied for several days by the enemy on Hill 900.

**07** **19–20 MAY: THE NVA WITHDRAWS**

Unable to continue the fight for Dong Ap Bia against relentless American pressure, the 29th NVA Regiment withdraws over 19–20 May. The 2/501st Battalion of the 101st Airborne and the ARVN 2/3rd Battalion are committed to the battle on 19 May deploying on the eastern side of Hill 937.

**08** **20 MAY: VICTORY**

The soldiers of the 3/187th, 1/506th, 2/501st and the ARVN 2/3rd make an attack on Hill 937. Soldiers of the 3/187th reach the summit around noon on 20 May. The victorious Americans, having driven off the NVA, themselves abandon Dong Ap Bia only weeks later.

*Map: Rocio Espin*

advancing American units. This meant that the assault towards the summit could never be as strong as the airborne soldiers would have wished. Simply spotting the enemy amid the jungle foliage was hard. "The canopy was so dense," Lieutenant Boccia said, "that we could barely see a few feet ahead of us".

American firepower, in theory overwhelming, was also of limited help. A report released after the battle stated that American artillery landed 18,262 high-explosive shells on Dong Ap Bia, and that tactical air support had delivered over 1,088 tons of bombs, more than 142 tons of napalm and 31,000 20mm rounds. Though US warplanes flew many sorties against the mountain and artillery continuously lashed the communist positions, their effect was less than what the Rakkasans hoped for, and the deeply entrenched NVA remained immovable. The close proximity of the opposing forces also meant that the Rakkasans were sometimes hit by American munitions. In addition to the Cobra attack on 11 May, several other Rakkasan casualties were the result of friendly fire.

## The struggle continues

On 15 May, another battalion, 1/506th of the 101st Airborne, started to move against NVA positions on Hills 916, 800 and 900, which lay close to Hill 937. It would take days of fighting for it to finally get into position for an assault on Dong Ap Bia itself, however. On 14 May, an attempt by Charlie Company of the 3/187th to go around the NVA bunkers on Hill 937 turned into a fiasco. The NVA spotted the Americans and unleashed a hailstorm of fire against them. The Rakkasans' Bravo Company had to forego its own planned attack up the mountain in order to come to the rescue of the torn-up soldiers of Charlie Company. Lieutenant Boccia was stunned when he found them: "My god, my god," he said. "Bodies lay everywhere."

Other factors affected the American advance. The heat was awful, reaching 37.8 degrees Celsius. Rain fell hard and turned much of the mountainside into sucking mud.

Despite the difficulties, the Rakkasans' demanding commander, Lieutenant Colonel Honeycutt, kept pushing them onward, making repeated attacks toward the summit. Some soldiers complained about their hard-driving commanding officer to press reporters, who'd heard about the battle for Hill 937 and had begun showing up in the A Shau.

"That damn Blackjack [Honeycutt] won't stop until he kills every damn one of us," one said. It was around this time that the reporters learned that the soldiers had taken to calling Dong Ap Bia 'Hamburger Hill'.

By 18 May, the Rakkasans had taken very heavy casualties, as its companies had done the majority of the fighting. Major General Melvin Zais, commander of the 101st Airborne Division, intended to pull them out and replace them with another battalion, the 2/506th. Honeycutt vehemently objected to this move.

"After all the fighting this battalion's been through, after all the casualties we've taken," he barked at Zais, "if you pull us out now, it will forever be viewed as a disgrace by everyone in the division". Honeycutt insisted that the honour of taking the summit should belong to the 3/187th alone.

Honeycutt asked for a fresh company as reinforcements, and Zais agreed to give the 3/187th's commander one company from the 2/506th and leave the Rakkasans in the fight. In addition, on 19 May even more reinforcements would be poured into the battle for Hill 937 – the 2/501st of the 101st Airborne and the ARVN 2/3rd Battalion.

On the morning of 20 May, after another punishing air bombardment, the combined strength of the assembled American and South Vietnamese battalions were thrown at Dong Ap Bia. The summit would fall to the men of the 3/187th. The North Vietnamese opened fire on the Rakkasans with rifles and rocket-propelled grenades. The Americans answered with a storm of rifle fire aimed at the bunker openings. The NVA ducked inside and began rolling grenades down the mountain towards the GIs, but the advantage now lay with the Americans. Most of what remained of the 29th NVA Regiment had already fled to Laos, and

**"The paratroopers were facing troops, perhaps two platoons' worth, that had been left behind to make a suicidal last stand"**

the paratroopers were facing troops, perhaps two platoons' worth, that had been left behind to make a suicidal last stand. The Rakkasans blasted any fighting positions they found and reached the summit at noon. By late afternoon the mountain was in American hands.

The cost of seizing Dong Ap Bia was high for the 101st Airborne. 70 paratroopers had been killed in the fight for Hamburger Hill and another 372 wounded. The losses for 3/187th were especially heavy, with the Rakkasans suffering 39 men killed. The total losses of the North Vietnamese, who were adept at withdrawing with their dead and wounded, are impossible to know for certain, but the Americans afterwards counted 633 dead NVA regular soldiers.

Almost immediately, questions about the cost of taking Hill 937 began to be asked. On a tree trunk, an American soldier had put up a cardboard sign with the words "Hamburger Hill" written on it. Below them on the sign, another GI had acidly written, "Was it worth it?"

## After the battle

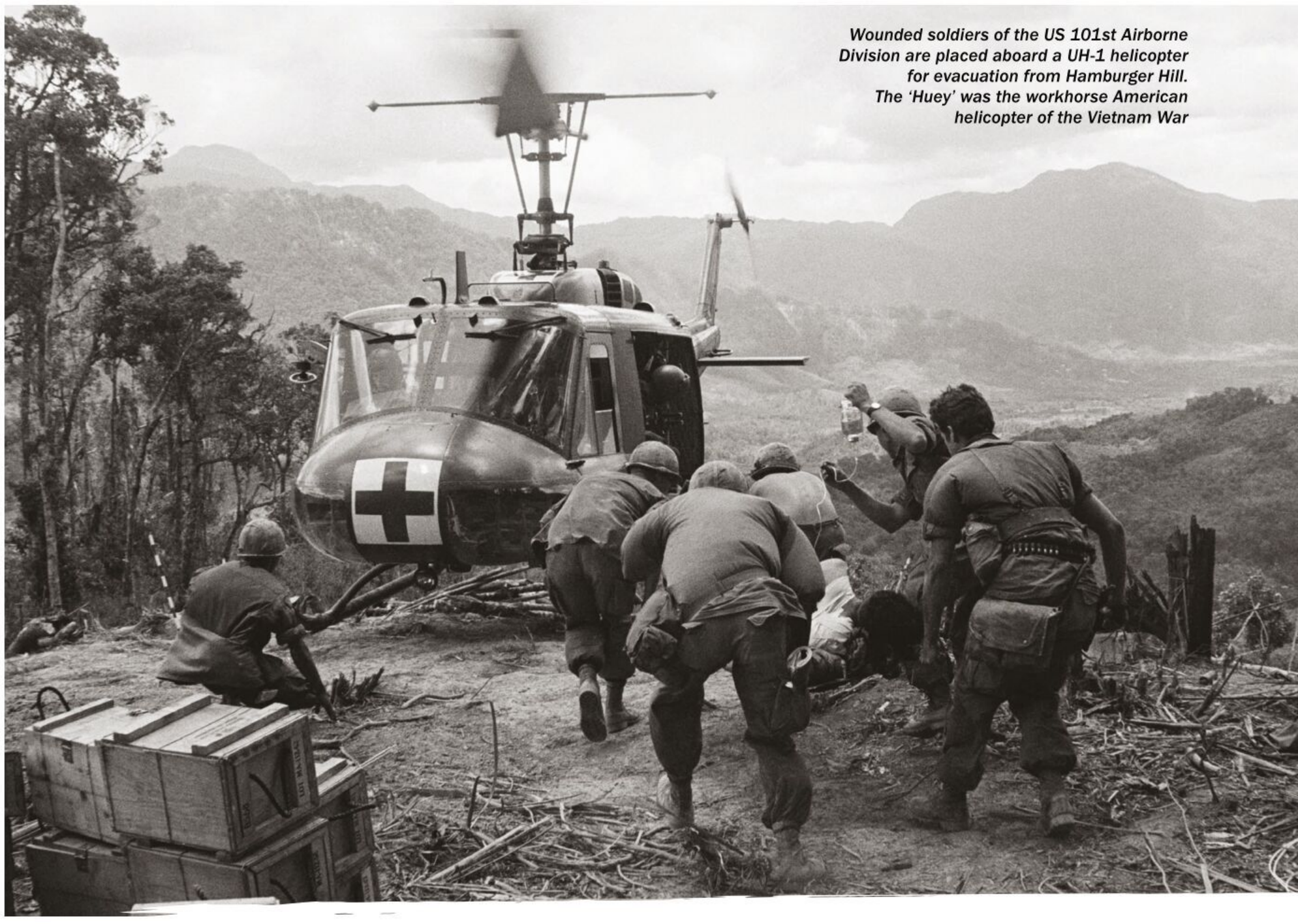
The bloody struggle for Hill 937 was different from most other clashes during the Vietnam War. With a handful of rare exceptions, such as the battles of Ia Drang, Hue and Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong rarely stood toe to toe with the Americans in a stand-up fight. Most encounters were instead sharp firefights that lasted only a short while, with the NVA melting away before the Americans



*A rocket explodes behind an American soldier during the fighting on Hamburger Hill*



*A derivative of the ubiquitous 'Huey' transport, the Cobra served as a helicopter gunship and provided close air support during the Battle of Hamburger Hill*



*Wounded soldiers of the US 101st Airborne Division are placed aboard a UH-1 helicopter for evacuation from Hamburger Hill. The 'Huey' was the workhorse American helicopter of the Vietnam War*

could bring their immensely superior firepower to bear. Most Americans who were killed in Vietnam died in one of these short, sharp combats, which occurred on a daily basis all over the country.

Hamburger Hill was more akin to the battles for Ia Drang, Hue and Khe Sanh, and since it lasted for ten days it attracted attention and scrutiny from the American public that tiny firefights, which in aggregate cost many American lives too, ordinarily did not. Despite serious opposition to the war, little criticism in the US had been levelled at the actual tactics that American forces were employing. Hamburger Hill, with its uphill frontal assaults against prepared enemy positions, attracted heavy condemnation.

One of the foremost voices raised against the battle was that of Democratic Senator of Massachusetts Edward Kennedy, brother of the assassinated President John F. Kennedy and a strong opponent of the war in Vietnam. On 19 May, Jay Sharbutt, an Associated Press reporter, filed a story on the costly and lengthy fight for Dong Ap Bia. US soldiers were criticising their own commanders for their tactical decision-making and the heavy casualties they were taking at Hamburger Hill. This spurred Kennedy to speak out. On the floor of the US Senate on 20 May, Kennedy complained that it was "both senseless and irresponsible to continue to send our young men to their deaths to capture hills and positions that have no relation to ending this conflict". With the Paris Peace Conference ongoing, Kennedy said, the US should not be conducting new military operations.

Kennedy would be strongly criticised by Republican senators for second-guessing the military leadership on the ground in Vietnam. *The New York Times* chided the Democratic senator for criticising military men on tactics when he was himself a civilian and 19,000 kilometres from the battlefield.

Yet it was on the same day that Kennedy spoke against the battle that a press report announced that US soldiers had christened Dong Ap Bia 'Hamburger Hill'. At the highest levels, Vietnam policy was changing. As a consequence of the notoriety of the battle and its costliness in lives, US Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird applied tougher restraints on further large-scale operations in Vietnam. President Nixon himself would announce his policy of 'Vietnamisation' on 8 June, less than three weeks after the battle's end. US forces would begin withdrawing from Vietnam, and the burden of combat operations would be handed over to the ARVN.

Hamburger Hill had its greatest impact not on the ground in Vietnam but in the minds of American policymakers and voters. In time, the costs of the war would be judged to be too high to continue, just as the price for taking Hill 937 had been soon after the battle. The men who died on that hill did not do so in vain.

*Images: Rocio Espin, Getty*

# CAMBODIA AND LAOS: THE CARNAGE SPREADS

## Neither of Vietnam's neighbours were safe from the conflict raging to the east

WORDS **NIKOLE ROBINSON**

Borders aren't enough to contain conflict, and both Cambodia to the southwest and Laos to the northwest felt the devastation of the Vietnam War. Along with a great loss of life and inhabitable land, political upheaval facilitated and fed the rise of nationalist-communist groups in both nations, causing years of civil war and unrest.

### Cambodia

Prince Norodom Sihanouk took a stance of neutrality in the Vietnam War, though he didn't stop the communists of North Vietnam from using bases or supply routes, allowing the continued movement of troops and arms through Cambodia. Sensing a shifting of power, in 1965 Sihanouk forged a deal with China and North Vietnam, allowing northern forces full access and permission to build permanent bases, as well as opening ports to supplies from China and the USSR. Though Sihanouk still tried to claim neutrality, he seemed to have picked a side, angering anti-communist members of his government and dividing the opinions of his populace.

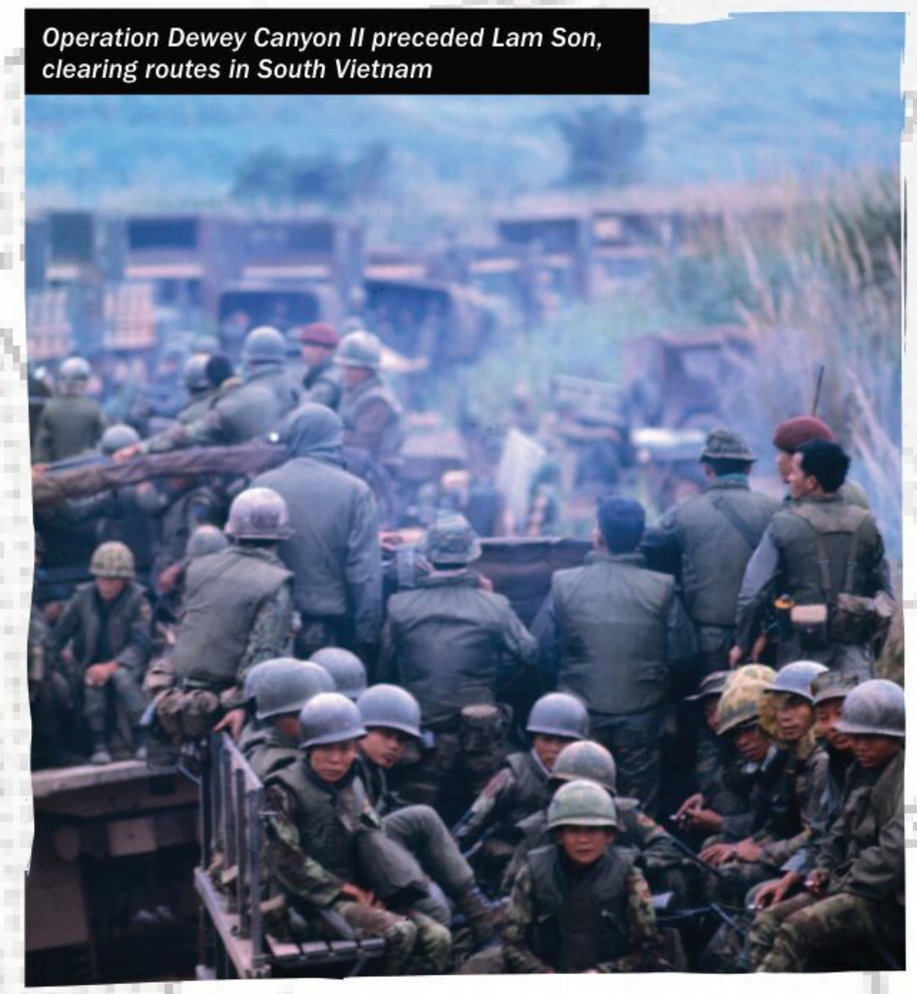
However, by the end of the 1960s Sihanouk seemed to have changed his mind again, feeling the effects of his break with Washington and the lack of aid from the US. Wanting to regain some semblance of neutrality, he looked to improve ties with the West, practically inviting the pursuit of communist forces in Cambodia as long as his own citizens were unharmed. The US Government had finalised plans to bombard Cambodia under newly elected President Richard Nixon, though these plans were kept quiet so as not to invite international outrage.

These secret bombings, part of Operation Menu, began in March 1970, and by the end of April 1970 the use of American ground troops was approved, with South Vietnamese and US forces beginning a full invasion of Cambodia. The American invasion stirred support for the Cambodian communist movement, the Khmer Rouge, by appealing to nationalist sentiments, claiming the United States was invading to take Cambodia for itself.

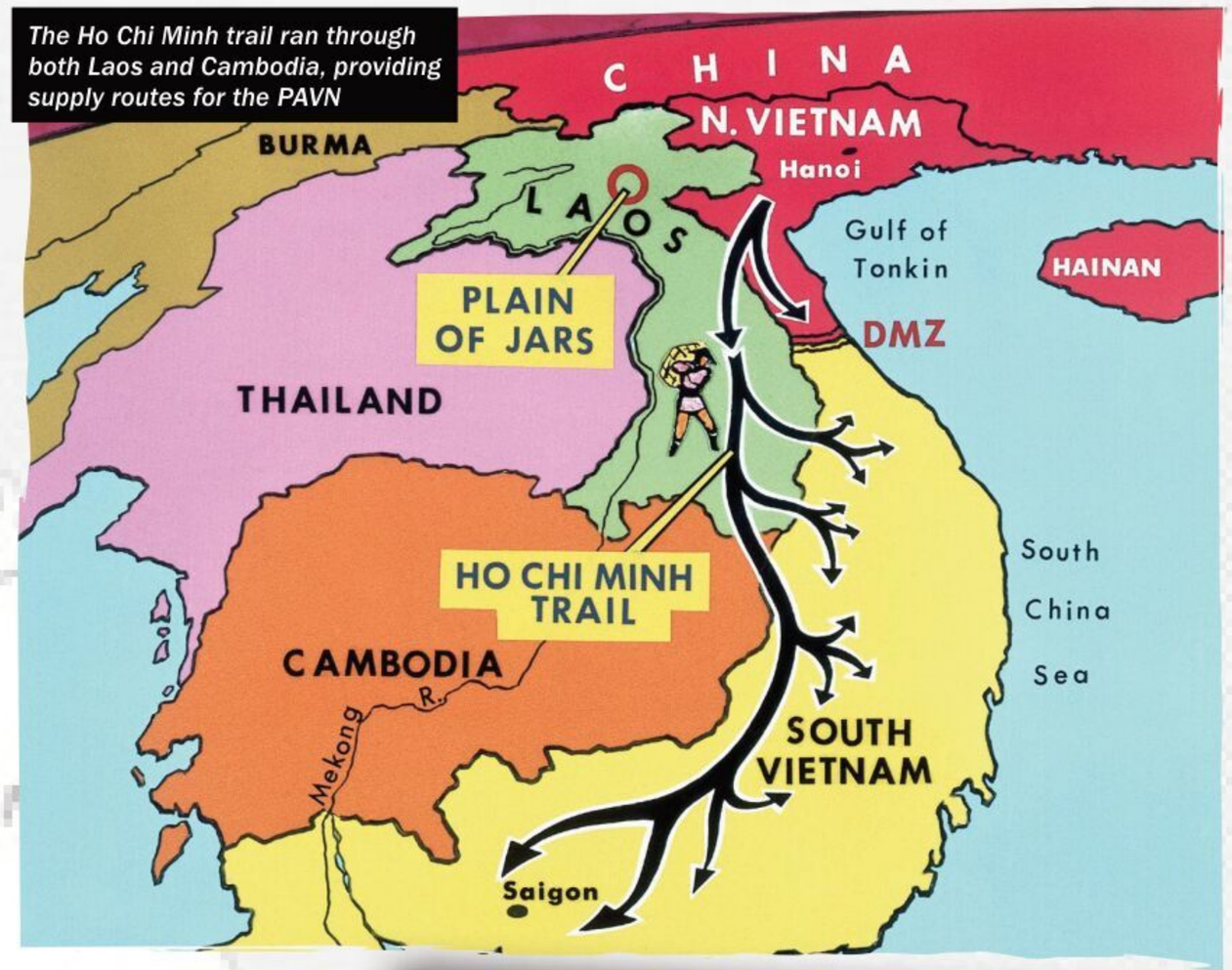
This movement was only furthered by Lon Nol's takeover



*Khmer Rouge fighters were armed and supported by North Vietnamese troops*



*Operation Dewey Canyon II preceded Lam Son, clearing routes in South Vietnam*

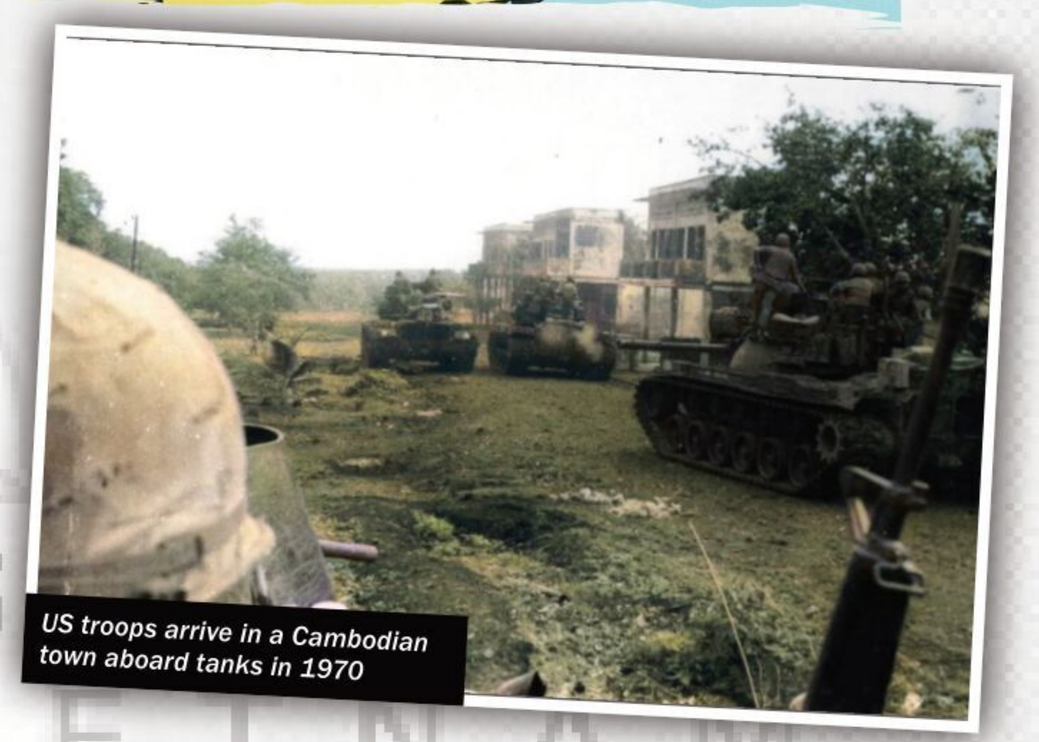



*The Ho Chi Minh trail ran through both Laos and Cambodia, providing supply routes for the PAVN*

in a 1970 coup and the creation of the anti-communist Khmer Republic, forcing Sihanouk to take refuge in Beijing. Pro-American Nol demanded the removal of North Vietnamese troops, but at the request of the Khmer Rouge they instead launched their own invasion in what had become a full-scale civil war.

Wanting to stop the spread of communism in Cambodia, the US commenced Operation Freedom Deal, bombing the eastern half of the country between May 1970 and August 1973, killing many civilians and leaving much of Cambodia in ruins. And with Pol Pot of the Khmer Rouge the victor in Cambodia at the end of the Vietnam War, unfortunately there was only more death to follow.

**"With Pol Pot of the Khmer Rouge the victor in Cambodia at the end of the Vietnam War, there was only more death to follow"**



*US troops arrive in a Cambodian town aboard tanks in 1970*

## Laos

Trouble was already brewing in Laos before the Vietnam War, with the Royal Lao Government clashing with the communist Pathet Lao, a guerrilla movement founded by Laotian Prince Souphanouvong and backed by the Viet Minh. In 1953, an invasion of 2,000 Pathet Lao and 40,000 North Vietnamese troops claimed territory in northeast Laos, beginning a civil war.

The fighting came to a temporary halt with the forming of a coalition government in 1957. However, the US was suspicious of the Pathet Lao's communist ideals, fearing that if Laos was to fall to communism, neighbouring states would follow. Backing the Royal Lao Government and fracturing the fragile peace, within a year the coalition had collapsed.

The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces strengthened their hold on Laos with another invasion in July 1958, fighting along the border. During this time, the Ho Chi Minh trail – a crucial supply route through Laos that linked North and South Vietnam – began to take shape, allowing much easier movement of troops and weapons for the communist forces.

Despite the 1962 signing of the International Agreement on the Neutrality of Laos setting up a second standstill, peace did not last. Instead, a CIA-backed 'secret war' began in Laos. The US launched an extended bombing campaign, commencing with Operation Barrel Roll in the north. Following up with Operation Tiger Hound, fire was focused on the Ho Chi Minh trail in an attempt to disrupt the supply route and block off access to South Vietnam.

Operation Lam Son 719 saw South Vietnamese troops crossing the border on 8 February 1971 to sever the trail from the ground. American troops were prohibited from entering Laos so instead provided air support. Though good progress was made, destroying supply caches and establishing bases along the way, the South Vietnamese were met with fierce resistance by the North. The South turned back on 9 March after taking Tchepone, though northern forces tried to cut them off. Both sides would claim victory, though the huge loss of life on both sides offset any gains.

By the time the Pathet Lao took power in 1975, one-tenth of the population had died in the conflict, with twice as many wounded. Around 2 million tons of bombs were dropped on the small nation between 1964 and 1973 in American campaigns, making Laos the most heavily bombed nation in history. With around 80 million bombs left unexploded, there are casualties of the war even today.



*Images: Wiki; Getty*

# VICTORY FOR THE NORTH


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# THE EASTER OFFENSIVE

With American forces withdrawing, the North Vietnamese saw a chance to win the war and launched an all-out attack

WORDS **EDOARDO ALBERT**

*NVA artillery in action, bombarding Kon Tum*

The Americans were sick of war. President Richard M. Nixon had won the 1968 presidential election in part by promising 'peace with honour'. With a new election due in November 1972, Nixon needed to be seen to have delivered on his promise. To ensure that, Nixon's secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, had opened peace talks in Paris with the North Vietnamese Government while the American military presence in South Vietnam had been scaled down from 550,000 to 156,000 men by the start of 1972, with further troop reductions scheduled to reduce the number of American troops in the country to 70,000 by the spring.

As the Americans removed their own troops, they were supplying and training the armed forces of the South Vietnamese Government in a process known as 'Vietnamisation'. The idea was to ensure South Vietnam would be capable of defending itself against attacks from North Vietnam after the American military had left.

However, while the peace talks were continuing in Paris, the government of North Vietnam was preparing plans of its own. The armed forces of the South Vietnamese government, known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), had faced its first major test in February 1971 when it attempted to attack and destroy a major NVA supply dump across the border in Laos.

While the operation achieved some of its aims, the part played by the ARVN was characterised by confusion among the commanders and timidity from front-line officers; it took huge American aerial support to extricate the ARVN forces. Although the president of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, declared the attack a great success, Hanoi drew a different lesson: that the ARVN was a paper tiger that could be brushed aside.

Meanwhile, the ongoing talks in Paris were making little progress. Neither side was willing to concede on their demands. But after the failure of the ARVN attack on Laos, the first secretary of the North Vietnamese Communist Party, Le Duan, concluded that a determined attack on the South would overthrow the government of President Thieu, forcing the Americans to agree to North Vietnamese terms or return to the battlefield themselves – a course of action that was clearly politically impossible for President Nixon. So with the political leadership of North Vietnam convinced that military action could either end the war on their terms or at least give them significantly more leverage at the bargaining table, the NVA began planning for a major offensive in the South.

The assault began at noon on 30 March 1972, Good Friday in the Christian calendar (hence the name 'Easter Offensive'). The NVA



*An NVA T59 tank captured by the South Vietnamese. Soviet supplies were crucial for the North Vietnamese*



*American air power was crucial in turning back the NVA attack, in particular targeting bridges and supply dumps*

had committed 14 divisions and hundreds of tanks to the assault, which was to have three main prongs.

The first, in the North, saw a force of 30,000 NVA soldiers and several hundred tanks cross the demilitarised zone (DMZ), which separated the North and South Vietnamese forces, and attack the string of ARVN strongholds just South of the DMZ. General Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander of the NVA forces, was aiming to take the towns of Quang Tri and Hue, the old imperial capital. The plan was for this initial attack to suck South Vietnamese reinforcements up into the Northern provinces before following it up with further attacks into the central and Southern provinces.

The second attack, into the Southern provinces, began on 5 April. Three NVA divisions, operating from bases within Cambodia, crossed the border and began their advance, with the town of An Loc as their immediate target. Should An Loc fall to the NVA forces, the way would be open for an advance upon the South Vietnam capital of Saigon.

The third phase of the assault plan also began on 5 April. Two NVA divisions operating from Laos launched an attack into the central provinces, with the city of Kon Tun as the initial target and the eventual aim of thrusting through to the coast and cutting South Vietnam in two. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) therefore faced a three-pronged attack, one in the North, another in the centre that threatened to cut the country in half, and a third in the South that might bring Saigon into the firing line. It was a huge and difficult challenge for an army that was only just finding its feet.

**"The commander in charge of the defence of the Central Highlands, Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu, began to crack under the unimaginable strain and became increasingly incapable of making any decisions"**

In the North, where the attack first began, the initial response was chaotic. ARVN forces fell back in disarray in front of an NVA assault that was much larger, more determined and better equipped than anything they had been led to expect. The NVA had timed their attack to coincide with a monsoon. The low cloud base that accompanied the torrential rain hampered the main military element that could have disrupted the advance: American airpower. However, ARVN forces began to stabilise their line around Quang Tri with the help of American military advisors.

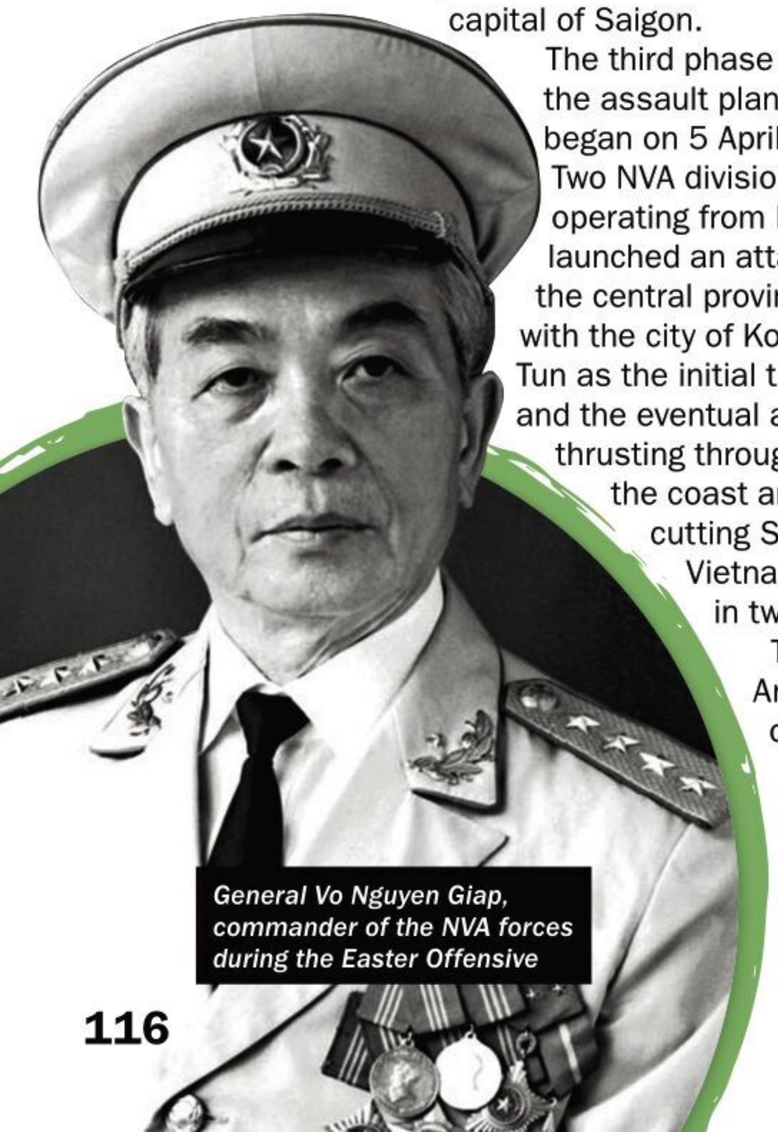
Although American forces had been drawn back from front-line combat duties, the newly instituted ARVN units had American advisors, ostensibly to help with training and tactics. But, in the chaos of the retreat and in many hurried, makeshift defensive actions, the 'advisors' became de-facto officers in the South Vietnamese army, issuing orders to ARVN soldiers. In particular, Captain John Ripley and Major John Smock led the defence and the mining of a crucial bridge carrying Highway 1 over the Cua Viet River. However, NVA forces managed to bypass the bridge and, in conditions of increasing chaos, Quang Tri city was evacuated and ultimately fell to the NVA on 2 May.

The pathway to Hue now seemed to lay wide open for the NVA to march through. President Thieu sacked the general responsible for the devastating defeat, installed a replacement and rushed Southern reinforcements towards the North. Meanwhile, the weather gods turned against the NVA: the clouds lifted and, with clear skies offering ground visibility, the Americans were able to unleash the full power of their air force upon the units of the NVA.

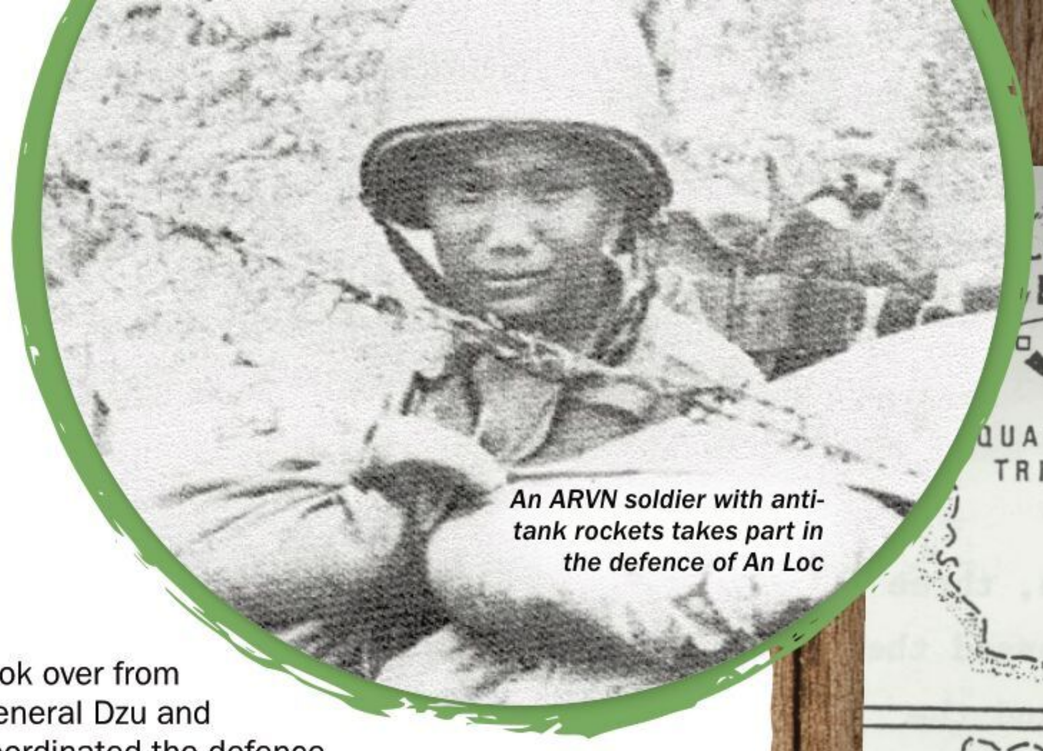
Operating as a conventional army, with tanks, logistics depots and truck convoys, the NVA was vulnerable to air attack and the American response was nothing short of devastating. Waves of B-52 bombers dropped payloads of bombs on critical NVA supply lines, while F-4 Phantoms and AC-119 and AC-130 gunships mounted low-level attacks on NVA troop concentrations and artillery bases. With American aerial support severely hampering – and in many cases destroying – NVA forces as they attempted to make their way to the front line, the North Vietnamese attack stalled and finally halted on 5 May.

Meanwhile, the attacks in the central and Southern provinces had also made initial progress before being stymied by the overwhelming American aerial response and stiffening defence by the ARVN. The commander in charge of the defence of the Central Highlands, Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu, began to crack under the unimaginable strain and became increasingly incapable of making any decisions. This indecision at the top of the chain of command was transmitted downwards, and the ARVN units began to disintegrate in the face of the NVA assault.

In these desperate circumstances, the American military advisor John Paul Vann



*General Vo Nguyen Giap, commander of the NVA forces during the Easter Offensive*



*An ARVN soldier with anti-tank rockets takes part in the defence of An Loc*

took over from General Dzu and coordinated the defence himself, issuing orders that ARVN officers, who were desperate for more determined and decisive leadership, were more than happy to carry out.

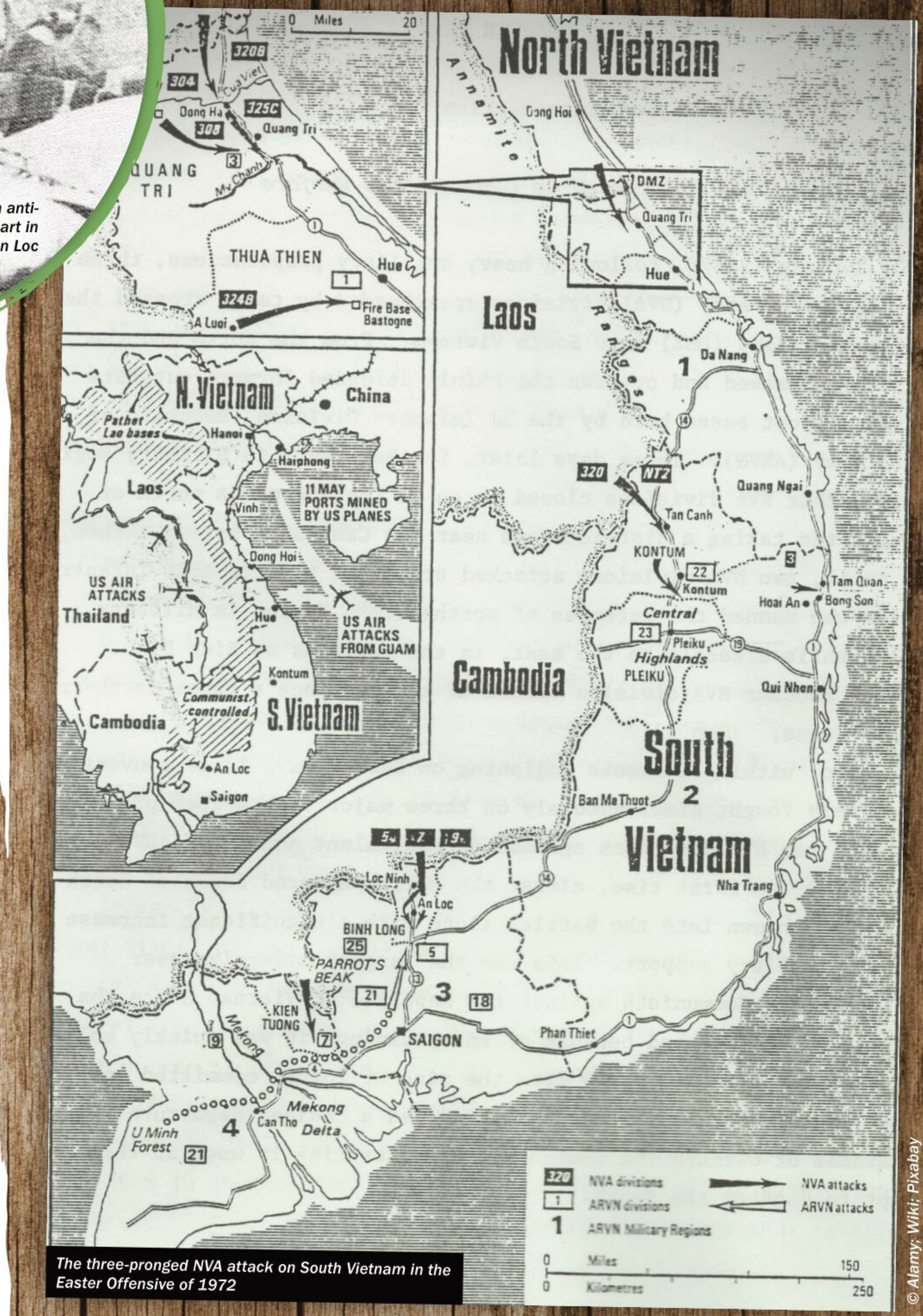
Vann identified the city of Kon Tum as the place where the ARVN would make its stand, and he personally helped organise its defences. The attack on Kon Tum commenced on 14 May, and the battle continued for nearly four agonising weeks until the ARVN forces, under Ly Tong Ba, a new and vigorous commanding officer, in concert with American airpower, forced the NVA to retreat.

In the South, the NVA succeeded in cutting off and surrounding the city of An Loc. An initial assault on 21 April was repulsed and the NVA instead set about besieging the city, pounding it with artillery and mortars. The defenders could only be supplied by airdrops and 448 missions were flown over the city, dropping much-needed munitions and supplies. The battle became a classic siege but one in which the besiegers were subject to constant American air attacks. The NVA attempted a final attack on 14 May but the ARVN forces repulsed it.

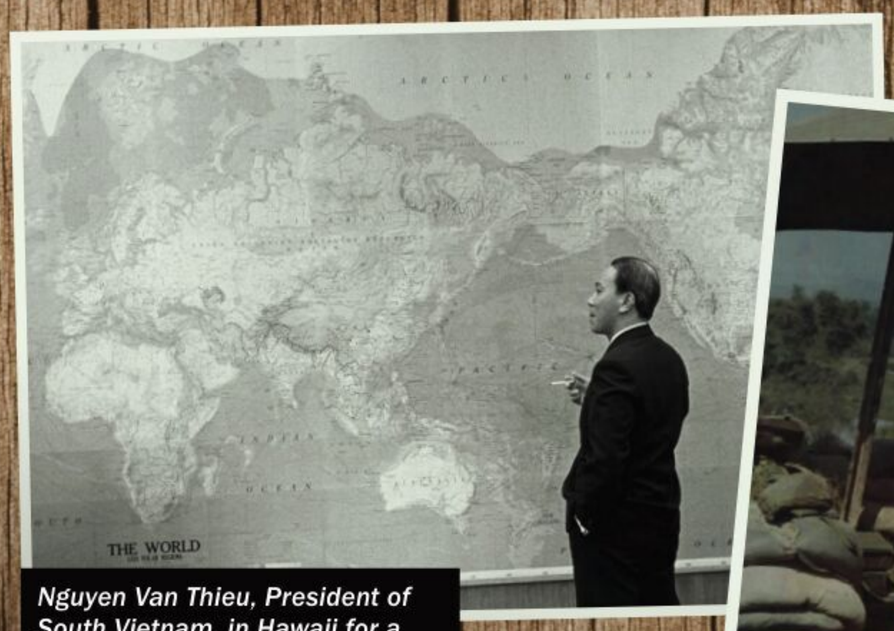
Elsewhere, American air attacks were wreaking havoc on NVA supply lines while, in response to the North Vietnamese attack, President Nixon authorised bombing raids on North Vietnam itself and the mining of its main supply port. 'Operation Linebacker', as the air interdiction was called, began to destroy the logistics hubs in North Vietnam that allowed the NVA to conduct the war in the South.

With NVA supplies and ground troops being decimated, the ARVN launched its own counterattack, aiming to retake the areas conquered by the NVA. But while the South Vietnamese did manage to regain control of most of the territory they had lost to the North, the ARVN counterattack fizzled out, the South Vietnamese forces not yet having the experience and know-how to launch a successful offensive.

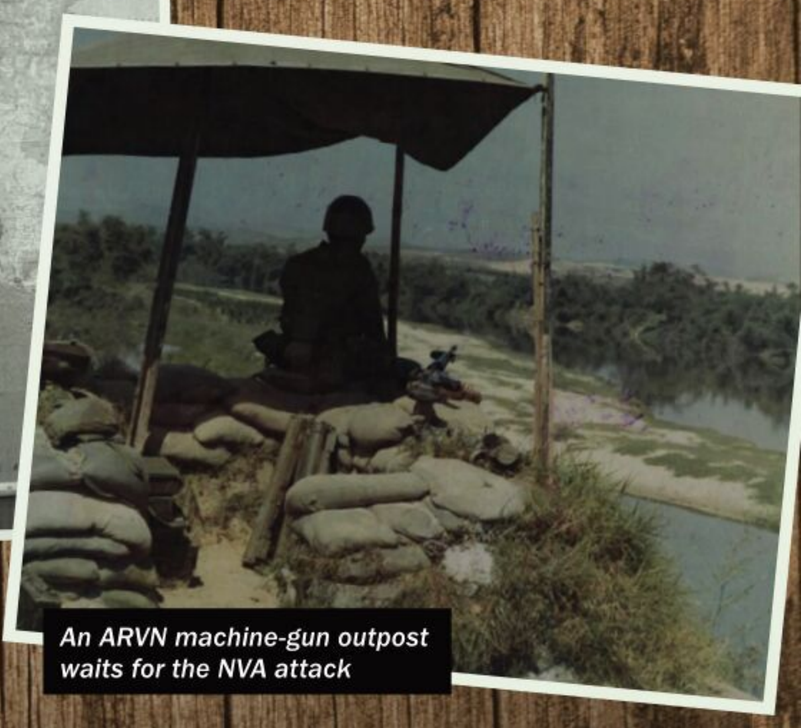
In the end, the Easter Offensive did not achieve the aims that the North Vietnamese Government had hoped. The South Vietnamese Government was still intact, its army had, in the end, acquitted itself well in defending the country, and the Americans had demonstrated the strategic importance of airpower in denying the NVA the ability to move troops and material to the front lines. More than 100,000 men had been killed on both sides of the conflict, and with military options now stalled for the time being, both sides had no option but to return to negotiations, and so the Paris talks resumed.




*The three-pronged NVA attack on South Vietnam in the Easter Offensive of 1972*




*Nguyen Van Thieu, President of South Vietnam, in Hawaii for a meeting with President Nixon*



*An ARVN machine-gun outpost waits for the NVA attack*

© Alamy; Wiki; Pixabay

# THE PARIS PEACE ACCORDS

The Paris Peace Accords provided the US with an escape route from an arduous war

WORDS **MICHAEL E. HASKEW**



*Diplomats sign the Paris Peace Accords on 27 January 1973*



*An American prisoner of war, released under the Paris Peace Accords, salutes as he comes home*

Their political and ideological differences were substantial – at times seemingly insurmountable. However, a path to peace, to extricate the United States from the costly quagmire of the Vietnam War, had to be found.

Years of virtually fruitless negotiations between the US and its South Vietnamese allies and the opposing shadow government of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (Viet Cong), along with its communist ally North Vietnam, had frustrated the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson. The points of contention were as prominent as the refusal of opposing Vietnamese governments to recognise the others' legitimacy and as apparently trivial as the type of table, round or rectangular, at which the negotiators would parlay.

At long last, however, the Paris Peace Accords, officially known as the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, were signed on 27 January 1973, brokered principally by US national security advisor and future secretary of state Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho. The diplomats were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the achievement, although Tho declined to accept. Among the major provisions were the withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam, repatriation of prisoners of war, clearing of American mines from North Vietnamese ports, withdrawal of foreign troops from neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, and a ceasefire followed by precise delineation of zones of control in South Vietnam.

The road to acceptable terms for American withdrawal from Vietnam through more than a decade of costly involvement had been frustrating at times, and though President Johnson had called a halt to Operation Rolling Thunder, an extensive bombing campaign against North Vietnam, in October 1968 to invigorate peace negotiations, little progress was made. American public opinion had already turned decidedly against the war, and the resulting turmoil greatly influenced Johnson's decision not to seek reelection that November.

After taking office in January 1969, President Richard Nixon pursued public policies of peace with honour and 'Vietnamisation', increasingly handing over responsibility for their own defence to the South Vietnamese. For several reasons, Nixon also pursued a policy of detente; diplomatic overtures to improve relations with the Soviet Union and communist China. Among them was the hope that the Soviets and Chinese might exert pressure on North Vietnam to bring the war to an end.

While negotiations in Paris lagged and worldwide media coverage conveyed a message of stalemate, Kissinger and Tho began their own sluggish discussions out of public view. Nixon initiated steady US troop withdrawals. Nevertheless, in the spring of 1970 he ordered a controversial incursion into neighbouring Cambodia to eliminate guerrilla bases and supply caches. Later, the president stepped up pressure on North Vietnam with Operation Linebacker, a sustained bombing campaign in response to the communist Easter Offensive of 1972. In early May, Nixon attempted to jump-start the talks with a major concession. He would agree to a ceasefire and the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam while allowing North Vietnamese troops in the South to remain there.

The sustained bombing and the failure of the Easter Offensive compelled the North Vietnamese to negotiate in earnest, and by the autumn of 1972 a tentative agreement was reached. However, the South Vietnamese Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu rejected the terms, particularly the provisions allowing communist troops to remain in the South and recognising the Viet Cong provisional government. Negotiations were suspended, and President Nixon authorised the "Christmas Bombing" of the North to force the communists to make concessions while threatening Thieu with the interruption of military and diplomatic aid to his shaky government.

Substantive peace negotiations resumed on 8 January 1973. A week later, President Nixon announced a halt to American offensive action in Vietnam, and on 27 January representatives signed the Paris Peace Accords at the historic Hotel Majestic. While the treaty allowed the US to exit the war, there was no lasting peace.

From the outset, both Vietnamese sides violated the treaty's terms. The fighting continued. Nixon assured Thieu that the US would respond accordingly if the communists continued to flout the Accords, but these promises proved hollow – particularly as Nixon's presidency became embroiled in the Watergate Scandal.

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong subsequently launched a full-scale offensive in the South in March 1975. Within days, organised resistance disintegrated, and on 30 April the communists occupied Saigon, the capital of the South. Images of communist tanks bursting through the gates of the Presidential Palace and the last American personnel being lifted by helicopter from rooftops while throngs of South Vietnamese panicked in the streets signalled the ignominious end of the Vietnam War, a dark and convulsive chapter in America's history.

© Alamy; Getty; Wiki



# EYE WITNESS

## THE FALL OF SAIGON, VIETNAM 30 APRIL 1975

WORDS **BEN BIGGS**

Back in March 1975, photographer Dirck Halstead was taking snapshots of the rich and famous, staying in plush hotels and living a "photographer's dream assignment" – but he wasn't happy. The war in Vietnam had passed a pivotal point and now the scales had swung firmly in favour of the communist North Vietnamese army and the Viet Cong.

As they made their relentless march towards Saigon, the Americans made plans to pull out. By 21 April, nine days before the final evacuation, Dirck found himself back in the country that had nearly killed him several years before, with what some from the outside looking in might find an unusual perspective…

"I have had a love-hate relationship with Vietnam for many, many years and this is not uncommon. I think if you ask most journalists that worked there they would say the same thing. Covering wars is about the most fun we get to do, because even though they can be terrifying, the emotional highs that come with it are equally extreme. I'm not sure that you would find as many fans of covering wars these days as you did then, because now wars are not fought in fun places generally.

"Vietnam was the exception to that. Vietnam was a fun place to be. The food was absolutely wonderful, it was sophisticated. Cocktail hour sitting on top of the Continental Palace or the roof of the Caravelle [both hotels] was wonderful. So there were a lot of creature comforts in Vietnam that other wars did not have. I think that for me it was a formative experience journalistically, as wars are for many journalists."

Saigon had been distanced from the front lines for two decades and, with US Ambassador Graham Martin planning to evacuate Americans and refugees under the radar, life went on with relative normality. "As most books will acknowledge, until the last week of the war, Saigon was remarkably unchanged. The bars were still open, the great restaurants were still [serving]… The war still had not come to Saigon and life went on very much as it had for most of the last 20 years. But all you had to do was look at the map. The tide was inexorable."

### DIRCK HALSTEAD



Over the last 50 years, award-winning photojournalist Dirck Halstead has worked for UPI and *Time* documenting several wars, witnessing the attempted assassination of two US presidents and accompanying Richard Nixon on his tour of China. One of the biggest moments of his career, though, was being in Saigon in the spring of 1975, when North Vietnam invaded.

Nine days before the final evacuation, Dirck boarded a helicopter to a point on the Saigon-Bien Hoa Highway where he would see some 'bang-bang'. A single ARVN battalion was holding back the entire North Vietnamese army at a village called Xuan Loc. "I would say that in that month leading up to the collapse you had plenty of chances for excitement – if you want to put it that way. There were opportunities to get onto helicopters, go into places like Xuan Loc. Everybody wanted to do that – in fact, I nearly came to blows with a *Time* magazine correspondent over getting on a helicopter to Xuan Loc."

At the village, Dirck had a close call. Xuan Loc had been torn apart and was eerily quiet, with just a few friendlies cowering in their nearby foxholes. But as their military escort, led by General Le Minh Dao, moved down the road looking for survivors, gunfire split the air around them and the village erupted. Their escort fled into the only Chinook helicopter available, leaving Dirck and a number of press wondering if that was going to be the end of the war for them, until the chopper returned an hour later to take them away from danger, just

**"The invasion had begun in earnest, with gunships streaking across rooftops, gunfire and explosions on the streets"**

## "They hung around the embassy in throngs, trying to squeeze onto the two black buses or over the walls"



*Flames erupt from a smouldering tank as North Vietnamese troops storm the city of Saigon*

as the North Vietnamese armoured division was bearing down on them. As strange as it might seem, even at this point Dirck was more embroiled in the unfolding story than in fear for his life: "I had great confidence in the capabilities of the military to get us out of there when the time came. All of us were privy to the planning, so we knew that at a certain time we had to assemble at a given point, get picked up by a bus or put on a helicopter. There was no anxiety on that score.

"We were all busy and every day the noose tightened on Saigon. So if you wanted to go see some bang-bang, you just had to go a little way up the highway. The great thing was that even during the last week when, literally, the fighting was on the bridges coming into Saigon, we still met for cocktail hour in the Continental Palace terrace. It was very strange."

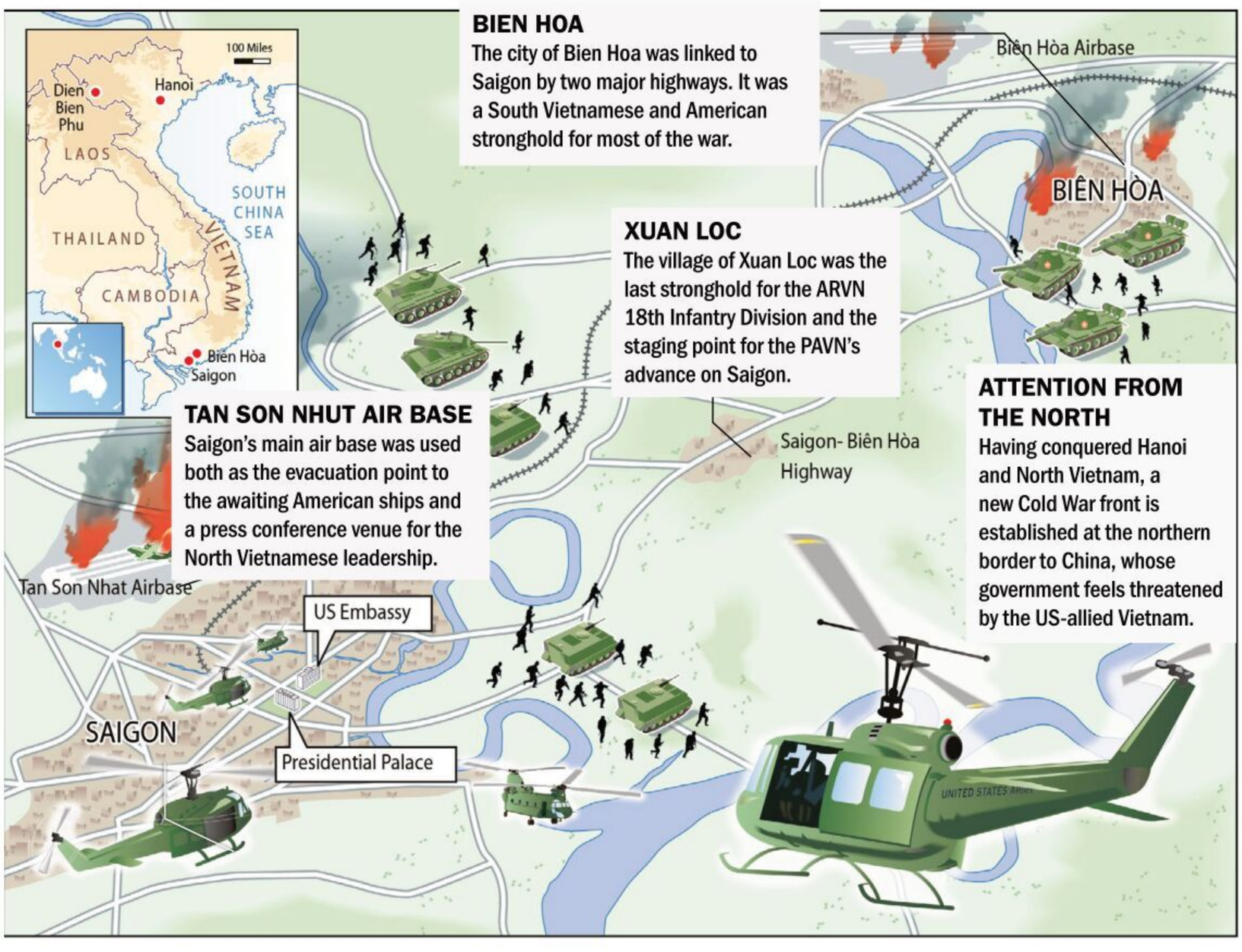
The climax in the days leading up to Saigon's final hour was intense. By 27 April, the weight of the 100,000-strong communist PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) was at Saigon's outskirts. In the city itself, the fear was that the massacre that had occurred in the city of Hue, perpetrated by the PAVN as the front line retreated in 1968, would happen again as the Americans withdrew. Flights full of refugees fleeing to American soil – both legal and illegal – poured out of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, owners of some of the city's most opulent houses traded in their properties for a pittance, while the cost of an American visa rocketed. While on the streets, a less salubrious scene was playing out: American workers swept down upon young Vietnamese women desperate to get out by the dozen and the US embassy simply allowed them to sign affidavits vouching for their support for these women – effectively, in Dirck's words, "subsidising a whole flock of instant pimps". He continued: "Civilians did everything they could to get out of there somehow, calling on any help that they could find – especially among the Americans – to escape. Their situation was desperate, but, of course, we're professional journalists so we don't get desperate – we just get more into the story." The same day an explosion tore apart the presidential suite in the Majestic Hotel, marking the end of a 40-month period without incident in Saigon. Meanwhile, in the North Vietnamese compound in Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the weekly press conference still went ahead. The representatives from Hanoi and its chief spokesman, Colonel Ba, were answering questions from the gaggle of press gathered there. Anticipation was ripe and one of the questions repeatedly put to the colonel was who would be safe if they stayed in the city once it was taken, to which Colonel Ba's ambiguous answer was, "Anyone who earns an honest living will be welcome."

Despite the ominous-sounding words of the North Vietnamese colonel, Dirck remained unperturbed. "The only personal decision that I felt was incumbent on me to make was the basic one: do I stay or do I go? There were strong reasons for both options. In my case, because I was a contract photographer, I did not necessarily have to go along with any decision that *Time* magazine made, though it was strongly recommended I did.

"All the staff people, with the exception of the Associated Press – I think [there had been] an order from their New York offices – had to leave and expedite the evacuation of all Vietnamese nationals working for them."

The next day, the invasion had begun in earnest, with gunships streaking across the rooftops, gunfire and explosions on the streets. Though most of the Western press bureaus had cleared their people, there still remained a thinning contingent of 'die-hard Westerners' – predominantly journalists and government officials, clinging on until the very last chopper out of there.

Dirck himself was approached by a Vietnamese colleague – his darkroom man – trying to get his



family out. He told him to fetch his family and meet him back there, but the word to evacuate came over the radio as soon as he had gone – "The temperature is 105 and rising" – leaving Dirck with little choice but to rush for the buses to the air base without his workmate.

Here, the sheer plight of those unable to escape became most apparent. They hung around the embassy in throngs, trying to squeeze onto the two black buses or over the walls to the embassy compound while US Marines pushed them back.

When they couldn't get on the buses, they surged in front, forming a line that blocked its path. With a Marine barking in his face, telling him to "Move it!" while pressing a handgun into his neck, the driver had no choice but to drive the bus straight into the mayhem, inevitably crushing several unfortunate people before it had cleared the crowd. Well aware of the final stages of the American withdrawal, the PAVN was focusing its attention on securing the city and clearing the last of the South Vietnamese resistance. Nevertheless, it wasn't about to let the Americans go without a little encouragement. Tan Son Nhut Air Base had already come under attack and, while the helicopters landed to pick up the remaining press workers and civilians, the Marines guarding the compound came under a rain of mortar fire. The Swift 22 chopper finally came for Dirck, taking him out of Saigon to the safety of a nearby US command ship.

"The evacuation for me involved three different ships. The first helicopter that took me out landed me on the USS Blue Ridge, which was the command ship. That's where a lot of the high-profile people like [Ambassador] Graham Martin were – they all landed on the Blue Ridge. But the problem with that was that it had no fixed-wing capability, so now my whole race was to get this film that was sitting in the middle of the South China Sea to the Philippines and then to New York. That was a real challenge and we had to petition the skipper of the Blue Ridge to get us off there, so that we could get to a carrier.

"I had been forbidden to leave the Blue Ridge, so when a helicopter came in from the Coral Sea to deposit some officers, I made a break for it. They were shouting, "Stop that man!", I jumped on the helicopter and yelled at the pilot to get me off there.

"[Saigon] is right up there [as a defining moment in my career]. The Nixon trip to China was the biggest story because there was so much competition to get on it and I was fortunate enough to be selected as one of six photographers to go on that trip. Everything was brand new and so historic… But looking back, I feel I was very blessed to have been able to go down this path and be there as history was being made in Vietnam."



*Under a barrage of explosions, the Marines loaded American and Vietnamese civilians, who feared for their lives, on to helicopters that brought them to waiting aircraft carriers*



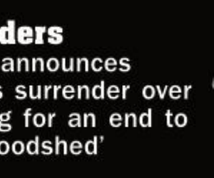
*Dirck Halstead on an evacuation ship in the South China Sea as Saigon falls to North Vietnamese troops in April 1975*

## THE DAY SAIGON WAS INVADED...

**03.45AM — Frequent Wind ends**
The refugee evacuation – Operation Frequent Wind – which had started the day before on 29 April, is halted

**03.50AM — The American ambassador Graham Martin is ordered to evacuate**

**04.00AM — PAVN 324th Division starts to enter Saigon**



**04.30AM — No more Vietnamese evacuees allowed**

**05.00AM — Martin escapes**
Ambassador Martin leaves the US embassy for a US Navy ship in the South China Sea

**06.00AM — PAVN moves into Saigon en masse**

**07.00AM — Final civilians and officials leave via the Tan Son Nhut Air Base**



**07.53AM — The majority of embassy Marines evacuate the city via helicopter just before 8am**

**10.24AM — South surrenders**
President Minh announces South Vietnam's surrender over the radio, calling for an end to 'unnecessary bloodshed'

**11.30AM — Ambassador Martin lands safely on the USS Blue Ridge**

**12.00PM — Independence Palace falls as tanks crash through the gates**

**12.15PM — New flag**
North Vietnam raises its colours – the flag of the Viet Cong – over the palace



**13.30PM — Final five Marines are rescued from the city**

**16.00PM — All American ships leave for home**

*© Corbis; Alamy; Getty; Ian Moores Graphics*

# WHAT IF...

# THE US HAD WON THE VIETNAM WAR?

## VIETNAM, 1955–1975

WRITTEN BY **CALUM WADDELL**

### DR ANDREW WIEST



Dr Andrew Wiest currently lectures at the University of Southern Mississippi and is the founding director of the Dale Centre for War and Society. His books include *The Boys Of '67: Charlie Company's War In Vietnam*, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism And Betrayal In The ARVN* and *Vietnam: A View From The Front Lines*. He has also organised trips for Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD to visit the country they once fought in. Wiest has developed a 'study abroad' programme for US students wishing to soak up life in Saigon or Hanoi.

**What would have happened if the United States had won the Vietnam War?**

There are a lot of academics and historians who look at Vietnam as a part of something much bigger – namely the Cold War. So if the US had won, the Cold War would probably have ended a little sooner and the dawn of that unilateral superpower controlling things would have come quicker. In Southeast Asia, everything would be radically different – including a faster and more thorough confrontation between the US and China. I doubt China would have sat by and let an American victory happen without repercussion – even though they were not exactly fans of the Vietnamese either. I don't think Beijing would have invaded Vietnam to repel the Americans, as they did in Korea, but it certainly would have been the US against China and Russia. And it would have been a war that was not just cold but glacial. American politics would certainly have been more tumultuous as well.

If you look at the US presidential elections since the 1960s, every one of them has been fought over Vietnam to one extent or another. It is still the most controversial aspect of a controversial time period. Had they come out of that smiling, with another greatest generation on their hands, US politics would have looked quite different. For instance, it is hard to see the Republican revolution taking place. Republicans typically have an aggressive foreign policy, it is one of their tropes, but if Democratic policy had won in Vietnam – because it was the Democrats who started the war in Southeast Asia – that would have taken a lot of heat away from their rivals.

**Would they have become involved in more conflicts?**

Yes, I think the US would have been much less gun-shy during the 1970s and 1980s. Reagan tinkered with it, but that use of force to solve conflicts didn't really come back until the first Bush and then with Bill Clinton. The reason the US did not rely on its military, on any great scale at least, to solve problems during the 1970s and the 1980s was all down to the country's failure in Vietnam.

**When the Vietnam War began to cross into Cambodia it created the environment in which Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge came to power. What resulted was a four-year holocaust. Could this have been avoided?**

If the US was ever going to win the Vietnam War it would have been during the Tet Offensive of 1968. That was the turning point and that was when the public, back in the United States, saw the North Vietnamese were not just going to retreat and surrender – it was literally a fight to the death.

Of course, there was no big, magical American victory during Tet, but let's imagine there was. Let's imagine the US had repelled that attack quickly and conclusively and the war was essentially over as a result. At that point in time, the Khmer Rouge was not a big player in the conflict. It is only after the US began its military incursions into Cambodia and the government in that country began to fall that everything became out of hand. A victorious US in Vietnam would not have required any entrance into Cambodia and, as a result, you




*If the US campaign in Vietnam had proven successful, we might have seen an even greater influx of American influence than has already happened*




almost certainly would not have seen the rise of the Khmer Rouge. They are intrinsically tied to how the Vietnam War progressed, no doubt about that.

**Would we ever have seen a situation like in Korea where the communist North and the democratic South are split down the middle, even to this day?**

No, that was never going to happen. One side was going to reunify the country, no matter what. So if there was a big American victory, one situation you have is reunification under non-communist rule. As a result of that, the turn towards Asia the US is presently taking would have happened then as opposed to now. We would have had an immediate conflict with China. Unlike the North Koreans, the North Vietnamese were much less likely to accept the scenario where the country remained split. If you look at their leadership, and their pronouncements and their goals, they were not going to go for a 'tie'.

In addition, the tactical situation in Vietnam was much trickier. This is because the border between North and South Vietnam is so long and porous that it would be very difficult to police – and that is why you had the Ho Chi Minh trail, the excursions into Cambodia and Laos and all of that other stuff. So it might be convenient to think that we could replay the Korean War and end Vietnam with a stalemate, but that was never going to happen. People forget the wanted reunification too – just under different circumstances.

**If John F. Kennedy had not been assassinated, would the Vietnam War have been avoided?**

That is a controversial question. There have

**"If the US was ever going to win the Vietnam War it would have been during the Tet Offensive of 1968"**

# HOW WOULD IT BE DIFFERENT?

## Real timeline

1945

**Vietnamese Declaration of Independence**
Based on the American Declaration of Independence, Ho Chi Minh asks the US and the West to oppose French colonial rule in Vietnam and support what will be "a free and independent country".
**2 September 1945**

**Ho Chi Minh contacts President Truman**
The Vietnamese revolutionary writes to Truman asking him to "urgently interfere" in the foreign rule of his country. Truman fears Vietnam becoming communist and instead backs the French.
**28 February 1946**

## Real timeline

**The Geneva Conference**
France agrees to the decolonisation of Vietnam. Free elections are promised, but the US suspects the communist Ho Chi Minh may win. It installs a brutal dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem, in South Vietnam. He is viewed by Ho Chi Minh and the North as a puppet ruler.
**21 July 1954**

**Assassination of Dinh Diem**
Diem – whose anti-Buddhist policies famously caused the monk Thich Quang Duc to immolate himself – is murdered in a brutal but mysterious coup d'état.
**2 November 1963**



## Alternative timeline

**US reunites Korea**
Fears that China would support the North prove unfounded. The US manages to push back the comparatively minimal army of Kim Il-sung and successfully reunites the two Koreas. Seoul aligns itself as a Western-friendly government.
**27 July 1953**



*A man suspected of supporting the Viet Cong is arrested and detained by US troops*



*A convoy of US tanks in Vietnam*

been so many arguments about this – and, of course, Kennedy's legacy is such a sacred thing in the States that it is political kryptonite to touch it. The pro-Kennedy forces argue he wanted to withdraw most of the 16,000 military advisors that were over there. However, before Kennedy there were only 600 military advisors over there. He had begun a war over there and I think there are two things that still would have hamstrung him even if he wanted out.

The first is that he still wanted his political party to win another term, and if the Democrats had wiped their hands of Vietnam there is a good chance they would not have achieved that. The second is that Kennedy wanted his brother to be the next man in the White House. To mess that up, by handing Vietnam to the communists, would have sunk this. I would also argue that Robert McNamara, who was Kennedy's confidant in the first place and the architect of the Vietnam War, was going to give him the same advice he gave Lyndon B. Johnson – which was to go in with all guns blazing. You have to remember that both Kennedy and Johnson faced the post-World War II consensus: to fight a difficult, problematic and long war against what they perceived as a communist threat or to embark on social changes back home – in particular the civil-rights movement. I believe Kennedy was also going to veer toward the civil-rights movement – just as Johnson did. But I don't think you get both – civil rights and the end of Vietnam. That mixture would have brought the Democrats down at the voting booth.

**Is there any way you can see that the Vietnam War may have been avoided?**

Asking anyone to do the right thing back then was difficult. Had Franklin Roosevelt lived, maybe things could have been avoided. He had a guy on his team who was a communist, namely Stalin, and Roosevelt was not a fan of European colonialism. So he may have sided with Ho Chi Minh's desire to have an independent Vietnam, free from French rule. Had he lived longer, with all of his clout, I think that is the best chance we would have had to avoid starting a war out there.

**Vietnam is now awash with KFC restaurants, Coca-Cola, multiplexes and other examples of American pop culture. So who really won the war?**

Well, that is the thing – they are now America's staunch allies. It shows that, first of all, as Sun Tzu said, the best tool to win a war is not always the military. It was American culture that eventually prevailed. If you look at things like *Rambo* and all these other Hollywood movies that attempted to justify the conflict, it is obvious how much impact it had on the US. But it was just a blip on the radar to the Vietnamese. It cost them many more lives, but it was all part of a bigger struggle for independence. Today, Vietnam has a huge young generation and this is all ancient history to them. They have moved on, but ironically it is the face of the US they now buy into.

### Gulf of Tonkin fabrication
North Vietnamese ships are reported to have fired on a US patroller, the Maddox, in the South China Sea. President Johnson uses the event to justify going to war. Declassified documents later confirmed that no attack happened. **2 August 1964**

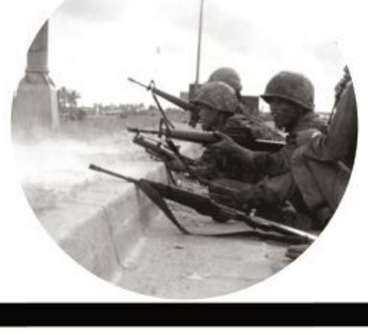
### Tet Offensive
On Vietnamese New Year, the North surprises the South with a sudden offensive. The city of Hue witnesses extensive fighting. South Vietnam and its allies suffer drastic losses.
**30 January – 3 March 1968**

### Free elections
Pressured into elections, US fears come true and Ho Chi Minh becomes president of Vietnam. However, believing this would expose the South Vietnamese to communist rule, the Eisenhower government argues the elections were fixed.
**January 1956**

### The My Lai Massacre
At My Lai, families are raped, tortured and killed by US soldiers. Lieutenant William Calley, who instigated the horror, walks free, but world opinion becomes opposed to 'America's war'.
**16 March 1968**

### Ho Chi Minh at the UN
Ho Chi Minh gives a rousing speech at the UN, but with the new Korea becoming an international trading partner, Western nations side with the US on Vietnamese reunification. **December 1956**

### Fixed elections?
President Eisenhower releases a statement claiming that, "After an extensive CIA investigation we can reveal the elections in Vietnam were rigged." South Vietnam is to continue with a 'democratic' regime headed by an interim coalition of allied countries.
**March 1956**



### Gulf of Tonkin fabrication
Johnson, respecting Kennedy's opposition to communism in Asia and Latin America, fabricates the Gulf of Tonkin incident to justify entering the war in Vietnam.
**2 August 1964**

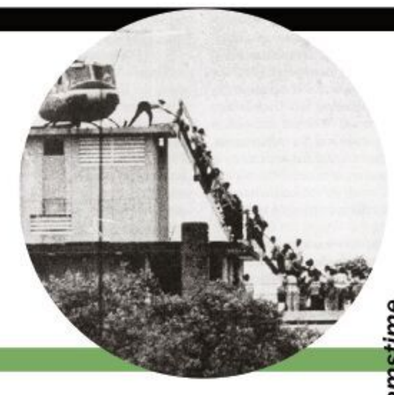
### Kennedy's speech
Concluding with how close the world came to nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy affirms that all communist countries must be treated as rogue states. Military involvement is increased heavily in Vietnam.
**October 1962**

### Paris Peace Accords
Nixon's government agrees to a cease-fire, with US ground troops and POWs returning home. The reunification of Vietnam is now a matter between the respective Saigon and Hanoi governments.
**27 January 1973**

### Failed Tet Offensive
The North Vietnamese conduct a failed attempt to take Saigon, Hue and other cities in South Vietnam. Forewarned about the attack, the US Army quickly repels their enemies.
**30 January – 14 February 1968**

### Cambodia's involvement
The White House offers to supply Cambodia's Communist Party of Kampuchea guerrilla fighters in aid and arms if they can offer the US details of the Ho Chi Minh trail supply route. The deal is only revealed decades later.
**August 1967**

### Fall of Saigon
The war ends with the North Vietnamese taking Saigon by force and celebrating a reunified country. Ho Chi Minh, who died in 1969, remains a national icon. Saigon is now known as Ho Chi Minh City.
**30 April 1975**



### Fall of Hanoi
On Ho Chi Minh's birthday, the North Vietnam capital collapses under the military might of the US army. The war is over. China becomes so concerned that Mao immediately agrees to a trade pact with Coca-Cola.
**19 May 1968**

© Daniel Sinoca; Dreamstime



# THE LEGACY OF THE WAR

## Vietnam's road to recovery would start with reunification and re-education

WORDS **NIKOLE ROBINSON**

With the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975, North Vietnam emerged victorious in a war that had ravaged both sides for almost two decades. The fighting had taken a huge toll. Cities, villages and farmlands had all been decimated by bombings, mortar fire and landmines – with many of these still live, posing further danger long after the war. The weaponisation of napalm left the lush greenery of Vietnam blackened and burnt, while use of the chemical herbicide Agent Orange and other deadly concoctions had infected food and water supplies across the country.

The human cost of the conflict was also high. It's estimated that 2 million civilians lost their lives, while around 1.3 million Vietnamese soldiers died for their country, with most of these casualties on the 'winning' side, if you could call it that. Millions more were left scarred – both physically and mentally – by a war that had seen the entire country become a battleground. Around 3 million people had no job to return to at the end, and almost 900,000 children lost their parents.

As tanks bulldozed through the gates of Independence Palace, the South Vietnamese seat of power, there was a mass exodus of South Vietnamese officials, soldiers and other refugees, fleeing in desperation from the repercussions of their opposition to the North. US troops that hadn't deserted Vietnam two years previously played a huge part in evacuations, and almost 140,000 refugees were relocated to the US as part of Operation New Life. Others escaped across the border into neighbouring Thailand. Most refugees left on boats, continuing into the 1990s as the new government and economy struggled to stabilise. Around 800,000 of these so-called 'boat people' reached a safe haven between 1975 and 1995, though the dangers of overcrowded boats, storms and piracy meant many never made it, with between 200,000 and 400,000 refugees lost at sea.

With the surrender of the South, the North consolidated power with the People's Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam, forming the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). They officially reunified the two halves of the country on 2 July 1976, creating the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Hanoi became its capital, while Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in honour of the revolutionary leader. The CPV's main goal was to build a strong and prosperous socialist state in the image of North Vietnam.



*Renamed Reunification Palace, this was the former seat of power for the Republic of Vietnam*



*A soldier views photographs of the Fall of Saigon*



*An all-female team searches for unexploded mines in Vietnam, January 2020*



*Refugees fleeing Saigon as a Northern victory begins to look increasingly likely*




*A Vietnamese-American pays his respects at a memorial near Little Saigon in California*

However, the war left many obstacles for this new government to overcome.

Although the National Social Democratic Front had been dissolved, a considerable number of its supporters remained. The CPV feared these loyalists – who had been fed anti-communist propaganda for years – would form a reactionary insurgency and try to seize back power. Members of the old government who had not fled were replaced and sent on 'retraining' courses to better align them with communist ideals.

South Vietnamese Army officers and soldiers were also told to report for reform and retraining. Those of higher rank or viewed as suspicious were sent to re-education camps, which implemented hard labour, brutal discipline and dire conditions. Some were held without formal charges for over 18 years.

The economy had suffered greatly after years of military spending, and when the CPV came into power inflation was running up to 900 per cent. Though the US had promised to pay $3.5 billion in reconstruction aid, with its pride stung after the South's defeat, this never materialised. The US made life even harder for the CPV by demanding it pay back millions borrowed by the old government and imposing a trade embargo, making imports and exports with the US and its allies impossible. Later involvement in Cambodia against the vicious Khmer Rouge incurred the wrath of China, leaving Vietnam with few allies who could provide aid in this crucial time of recovery.

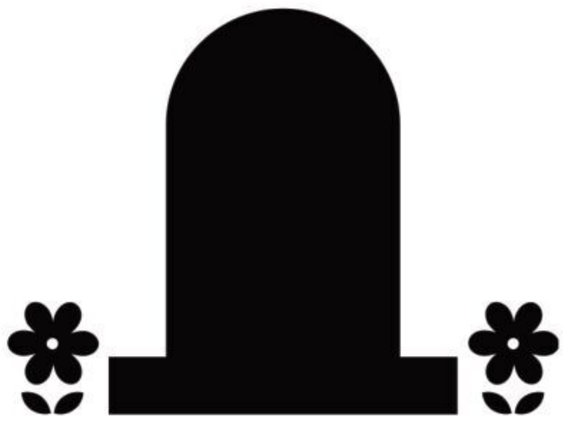
Despite this, the CPV put an emphasis on reconstruction and the construction of industry and developing agriculture. They nationalised businesses and confiscated private property, bringing them into the hands of the state. Former owners were forcefully relocated to 'New Economic Zones', many of which were sparsely populated mountainous forests with poor living conditions. Rural families were organised into agricultural collectives, though with little profit to be made and surplus produce expected to be handed over for redistribution, there wasn't a lot of incentive for farmers to work hard.

With inflation creeping back up, food shortages and strict rationing, it was clear socialist measures were failing. In 1986, new leadership turned towards the creation of a socialism-oriented market economy with the Doi Moi economic reforms, allowing small factories, businesses and farms to operate for profit. This would truly allow Vietnam to begin to heal, but not without a little corruption.

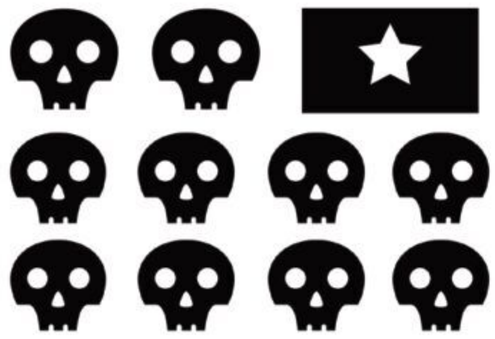
*All images © Getty*

# THE VIETNAM WAR
# IN NUMBERS

**2 MILLION**
VIETNAMESE CIVILIANS KILLED



Gravestone: Francielly_Costantin_Senra



**1,100,000**
VIETNAMESE AND VIET CONG SOLDIERS KILLED

Skull icon: Ruedi Luthi; Flag: Derek_Williams_Green

**58,200**
US AND CANADIAN FATALITIES



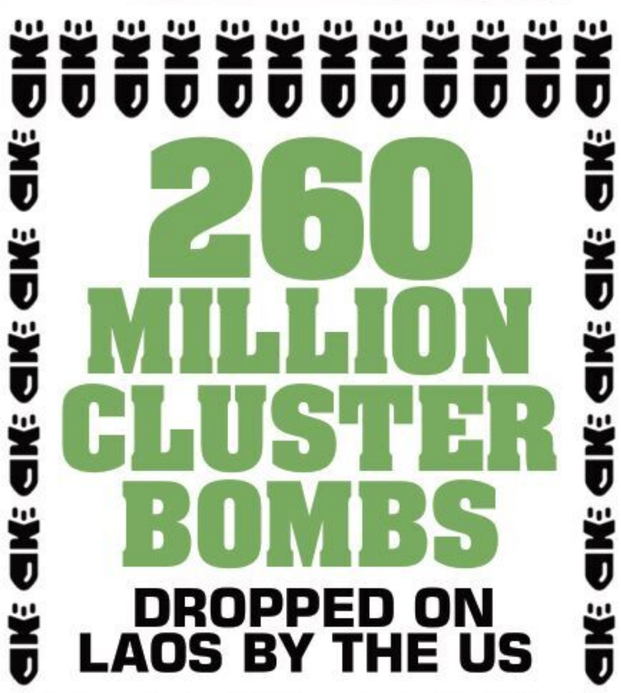
Skull icon: Ruedi Luthi; US Flags: Thanga Vignesh, Linseed Studio

**7.5 MILLION BOMBS**
DROPPED ON VIETNAM



Bombs: Adrien Coquet

**260 MILLION CLUSTER BOMBS**
DROPPED ON LAOS BY THE US



Bombs: Adrien Coquet



**2,709,918**
AMERICANS SERVED IN VIETNAM

Soldiers: ProSymbols

**240**
UNITED STATES SOLDIERS RECEIVED THE MEDAL OF HONOR



Medal: Adrien Coquet



**1,611**
AMERICANS STILL UNACCOUNTED FOR

Magnifying glass: Haykam

**70%**
OF US TROOPS KILLED WERE VOLUNTEERS



Hands: Adrien Coquet

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HISTORY of WAR

# STORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR

UNCOVER THE CONFLICT THAT TORE TWO NATIONS APART



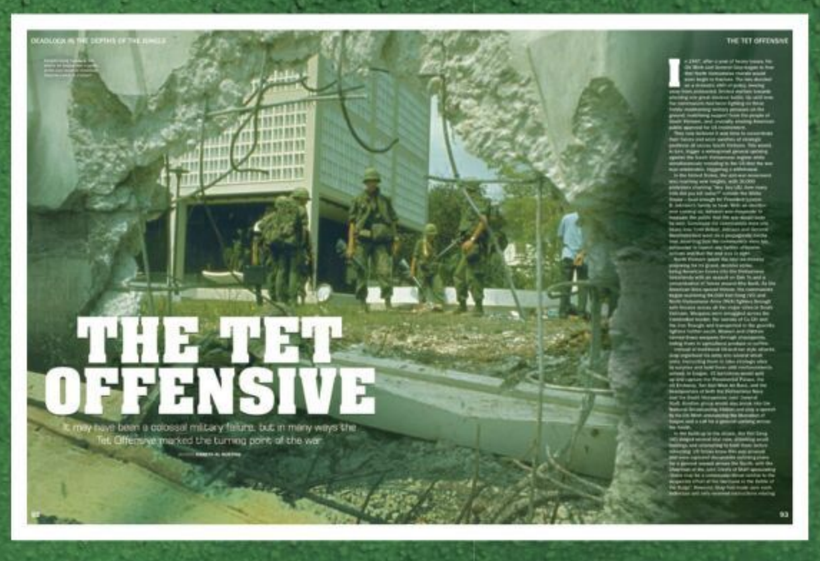

## BIRTH OF VIETNAM

How the country of Vietnam was shaped by invasions and insurrections




## THE PATH TO WAR

Fearing the spread of communism, the US decided to intervene




## THE TET OFFENSIVE

Determined to drive the US back, the Viet Cong unleashed a stunning assault




## FALL OF SAIGON

The seizure of the South's capital spelled victory for the forces of the North

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