

# A Strategy of Attrition: Why General Westmoreland Failed in 1967

A Monograph

by

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## **Abstract**

A Strategy of Attrition: Why General Westmoreland Failed in 1967, by MAJ Gregory P. Escobar, 39 pages.

General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, in 1967, failed because it reduced security across the countryside, ostracized the people within South Vietnam, and did not affect the South Vietnamese communists.

The purpose of this study is to examine the operational approach General Westmoreland used in 1967 to win the war in South Vietnam. This paper examines Westmoreland's strategy of attrition by looking at the buildup of troops leading into 1967 and then their utilization during four historic accounts by division level units. Offensive operations during Operation Junction City, by Task Force Oregon, the 1st Infantry Division, and The Z Division provide evidence that support failure in 1967. The study concludes that even with a half million soldiers, Westmoreland did not have enough forces to conduct offensive operations and secure the countryside. Ultimately, the year of offensive operations concluded in disappointment by Westmoreland and his staff. The lofty goal to destroy large Viet Cong formations and headquarters did not occur, leaving doubt in the minds of military leaders questioning the predicted cleanup phase of operations in 1968. The result only left the realities of the struggle that culminated in three hundred thousand wounded, 150 billion dollars spent, and more than fifty-eight thousand American names etched into a granite memorial.

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## Introduction

In 1964, General William C. Westmoreland flew into Saigon for the first time. Thirty-two years of military experience prepared him for command of military forces in Vietnam. Westmoreland was not the first US commander in the Republic of Vietnam, and certainly not the last, but he represented the American answer to a crisis. The Military Assistance Command assumed control of operations in Vietnam, in 1962, under General Paul Harkins two years prior. However, the US presence in Vietnam started twelve years earlier, in 1950. The fog and friction of war lingered over Vietnam long after World War II, for over thirty years. A significant amount of time had passed, but as the Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz noted, the enemy could not be compelled to do the will of a foreign power through force. Together, the Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon administrations failed to prevent the spread of communism into South Vietnam. General Westmoreland took command of the Military Assistance Command in the summer of 1964, during the Johnson administration, until the enemy's Tet offensive in 1968. General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition, in 1967, failed because it reduced security across the countryside, ostracized the people within South Vietnam, and did not affect the South Vietnamese communists.<sup>1</sup>

US involvement in Vietnam began during the Truman administration when the country provided support to French forces as they fought the first Indo-China War. On 4 February 1950, the US recognized pro-French regimes in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Assistance to these three countries would be the United State's effort in the region to prevent the spread of communism. In August of 1950, the US established the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Saigon. Four hundred twenty-eight soldiers attempted to prevent French defeat by providing weapons and munitions. The French were defeated leaving the future of the region in the hands of the Geneva Conference of 1954. The conference published

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 9-41; Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 3-20; Carl Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 119, 120, 75; Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2007), 393-408; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 6.



the Geneva Accords, which separated the region into four distinct countries. Laos and Cambodia claimed independence, North Vietnam established a Marxist state, and the remnants of the former French regime continued in South Vietnam. President Dwight D. Eisenhower expanded the mission of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in 1960, directing training for the South Vietnamese Army and pledged to prevent the communist expansion from North Vietnam. The Advisory Group in Saigon expanded to 685 soldiers until 1962. The mission in South Vietnam transitioned again from training and equipping the South Vietnamese Army to the execution of offensive and defensive operations with ground forces. The transitioning of missions in South Vietnam and increased US ground troops required the creation of a new operational command. President John F. Kennedy designated General Paul Harkins the first commander of the Military Assistance Command in 1962; however, Harkins remained in command two short years. President Lyndon B. Johnson replaced General Harkins, in 1964, with General Westmoreland after a series of failures that culminated in the assassination of the South Vietnamese president. Westmoreland was the best and brightest the US had to offer at the time. President Johnson anticipated Westmoreland would improve reporting, dialogue between other government agencies, and win the war for the US in South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

General Westmoreland's road to Vietnam started in July 1932, when he attended the US Military Academy. He graduated and commissioned in 1936 as an artillery officer. Westmoreland's key assignments during World War II included postings in Hawaii and then Fort Bragg with the 9th Infantry Division. During the war, Westmoreland commanded the 34th Field Artillery Battalion in North Africa and Sicily. He served as the executive officer of the 9th Division Artillery, then served as the division chief of staff at the rank of colonel, and later as the chief of staff of the 82nd Airborne Division. In 1950, Westmoreland served at the Command and General Staff College, and then in 1951 at the Army War College. He was never a student at either school, but received a diploma for the time he served as an instructor at both institutions. In 1952, Westmoreland commanded the 187th Airborne Combat Team in

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 58; Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 7, 3-20; Cosmas, *MACV: The Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973*, 393-408.

the Korean War and then returned to the Pentagon as a brigadier general in 1953. While at the Pentagon, he attended the advanced management program at Harvard University and then shadowed the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Maxwell D. Taylor. Following his service at the Pentagon, Westmoreland commanded the 101st Airborne Division and then assumed duties as the West Point superintendent. In 1963, Westmoreland commanded the XVIII Airborne Corps for a short period before receiving orders to serve in South Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

General Westmoreland became the deputy commander of the Military Assistance Command in January 1964 for two reasons. First, communications between General Harkins and the US Ambassador in South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, had deteriorated over time. The decline in interaction between Harkins and Lodge prevented progress toward a whole of government approach in South Vietnam, to the point that, neither man talked to one another in November of 1963. An intermediary from the Central Intelligence Agency passed information from the ambassador's country team to Harkins' Assistance Command. The situation came to a head after the coup, on 2 November 1963, which resulted in the assassination of the South Vietnamese president, Ngo Dinh Diem. Second, it gave General Westmoreland an opportunity to familiarize himself with the command, country, and political dynamics within the country; dynamics that continued to be contentious after General Westmoreland took command on 1 August 1964. South Vietnamese politicians competed for power within the country leaving their government divided until 1967. Competition between Catholics, Buddhists, and other internal factions vied for power within the South Vietnamese government, resulting in seven separate transitions in leadership during the three-year period. Six of the seven heads of state were military leaders who assumed control by force. In 1965, General Nguyen Van Thieu established a military council to run the South Vietnamese government after the previous chief of state, Phan Khac Suu, lost the confidence of his armed

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<sup>3</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 9-41.

forces within South Vietnam to govern. General Thieu remained in power until 1975 and provided a semblance of stability during his time as head of state.<sup>4</sup>

President Thieu understood that South Vietnam had a complex political environment that had developed over the centuries. Thieu understood Vietnamese history, however, the US advisors did not fully appreciate Vietnam's past. General Taylor admitted two things before his death in 1987. First, General's Taylor, Harkins, and Westmoreland did not understand the US military's inability to fight a counter insurgency in South Vietnam because each man had only encountered conventional warfare during their experiences, in World War II and Korea. Secondly, senior military leaders did not understand the history of the government and civilian population in South Vietnam. The failure to understand the Vietnamese people both in the north and in the south led military leaders to assume two things. First, Taylor assumed that the war in Vietnam was another Korean war and second, assumed that Harkins, Westmoreland, and their associated staffs understood the history of the Vietnamese people. Both revelations came too late in General Taylor's life. After years of reflection, and not until near death did Taylor confess, stating that involvement in the war is too dangerous a business to not "know the enemy, know our allies, and know ourselves."<sup>5</sup>

A multitude of cultures shaped the people in North and South Vietnam. Before 1945, a series of Chinese dynasties ruled over the Vietnam region until 1873. The Vietnamese monarch, Tu Duc, surrendered complete control of Cochinchina to French domination in 1887. France maintained control over the Vietnamese region for over sixty-five years. It was not until 1954 that the French southeast-Asian empire fractured into four separate countries. Once fractured, the US slowly increased aide and military forces to confront enemy forces in the region.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 123, 100-103, 229-230; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 41-43, 53-55, 57; Douglas Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 30th ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 4-8, 20-21, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The buildup of coalition troops in South Vietnam reached its climax in the fall of 1966. After eighteen months, General Westmoreland believed that he finally had enough troops to turn the tide and go on the offense. The force he commanded totaled over five hundred thousand soldiers. US forces, in the fall of 1966, reached between four hundred eighty thousand and five hundred thousand troops. Coalition forces at their peak totaled thirty-one maneuver battalions. Five allied countries provided over sixty-eight thousand troops to assist in the efforts toward pacification in South Vietnam. From the American perspective, soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, South Korea, and Thai forces provided soldiers with less training than American soldiers. The Australian, New Zealand, Thai, and Philippine government agreed to allow US commanders operational control of their armed forces while serving in South Vietnam, with South Korea being the exception. The South Korean government agreed that their forces would maintain an autonomous posture, but would keep a close working relationship with the US I Field Force commander, Lieutenant General Stanley R. Larsen. Westmoreland prioritized offensive operation in the southern portion of South Vietnam as part of his campaign plan, between November 1966 and May 1967, before moving north. During this six-month period, the weather allowed South Vietnamese soldiers to conduct pacification operations. Pacification targeted the rural population of the country and aimed to convince civilians to support the South Vietnamese government. It was critical to synchronize operations with the weather so that soldiers could maneuver freely across the different regions of the country unhindered by the country's monsoon season. Meanwhile, US commanders employed coalition forces through multiple approaches to assist in both attrition and pacification throughout South Vietnam of which all ultimately failed.<sup>7</sup>

General Westmoreland's approach in South Vietnam transitioned several times while he commanded in Vietnam. Westmoreland named his initial approach Operation Hop Tac, in 1965, which means cooperation in Vietnamese. Hop Tac focused operations in six provinces that surrounded Saigon. Operations in Hau Nghia, Binh Dong, Bien Hoa, Phuoc Tuy, Gia Dinh, and Long An provinces failed to

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<sup>7</sup> George L. MacGarrigle, *Combat Operations: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1998), 26, 6-7; Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 343-344.

elicit any cooperation from the South Vietnamese allies due to Saigon politicians, organized Buddhist opposition, and the faction-ridden South Vietnamese officer corps (Figure 1). Hop Tac did, however, serve as the prototype for a unified approach toward pacification. Over the next eighteen months, Westmoreland built combat power that would allow the US to begin a year of offensive operations. As forces deployed to South Vietnam, each fell under the commands of three separate Field Force commands; the equivalents of army corps headquarters.<sup>8</sup>

Westmoreland aligned his Field Force commanders geographically from North to South within corps tactical zones one, two, and three, however the field force numeric designation did not match the corps tactical zone number (Figure 1). Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt commanded the III Marine Amphibious Force in the I Corps Tactical Zone. As the northern field force commander, Walt conducted operation in five provinces: Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai province. Lieutenant General Larsen commanded within the II Corps Tactical Zone. Larsen's responsibility, as the I Field Force commander, included twelve separate provinces that were geographically separated east and west. The western highland included Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, Darlac, Quang Duc, Tuyen Duc, and Lam Dong provinces. While the eastern lowlands included Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan provinces. Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman and then Lieutenant General Bruce Palmer commanded the II Field Force command within the III Corps Tactical Zone. His command included eleven provinces: Tay Ninh, Binh Long, Phuoc Long, Hau Nghia, Binh Duong, Long An, Bien Hoa, Long Khanh, Gia Dinh, Phuoc Tuy, and Binh Tuy, plus the national capital, Saigon. The IV Corps Tactical Zone consisted of fifteen provinces South of Saigon but, had no US field force commander however, a senior military adviser, Brigadier General William R. Desobry, provided support to the South Vietnamese forces in the area.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 82-83; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 4, 13; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 23; Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 142-144, 192.

<sup>9</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 13.



Figure 1. Map of South Vietnam Corps Tactical Zones and Provinces

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, ii.

During the buildup, Westmoreland focused on three types of operations: clearing, securing, and searching and destroying. Clearance entailed deliberate operations to eliminate Viet Cong forces from areas identified for pacification. Securing operations protected the South Vietnamese government administrators and eliminated any elements of a shadow government, while search and destroy operations targeted enemy base areas. South Vietnamese forces focused their efforts on clearance and security operations while American forces increasingly executed search and destroy operations. South Vietnamese forces understood each of the three operations; however, the US military failed to communicate the three definitions to organizations outside South Vietnam. In 1968, the Military Assistance Command, changed the name search and destroy to sweeping operations, however, search and destroy remained the coined description both in and out of the military. Westmoreland's search and destroy tactics did attrite the enemy by producing significant enemy casualties, however the numbers were always acceptable to the North Vietnamese government. A senior official from Hanoi confirmed that the North Vietnamese army lost nearly one million troops with another million North Vietnamese soldiers wounded. Regardless of the high enemy casualty numbers, Westmoreland's strategy of attrition failed because the North Vietnamese willingness to accept casualties far exceeded Westmoreland's comprehension. US commanders observed the North Vietnamese will and capacity to sustain operations during multiple offensive operations in 1967, but failed to grasp the nature of the enemy. As a result, US commanders created large numbers of refugee camps, which ostracized the civilian population and failed to secure the countryside. Offensive operations, in 1967, within the four corps tactical zones repeatedly produced similar results throughout the year.<sup>10</sup>

The history of the South Vietnamese foreshadowed each failed operation during Westmoreland's year of offensive operations, in 1967. Successful negotiations during Geneva Conference of 1954 ended the Indochina war, but simultaneously marked the start of US involvement in South Vietnam. US assistance to South Vietnam escalated slowly by first assisting French military force but ultimately

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<sup>10</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 83; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 4; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 23; Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 142-144, 192.

transitioned to a US led effort that failed during the Kennedy administration. President Johnson handpicked Westmoreland to solve US led efforts in South Vietnam because Westmoreland represented the best and brightest that the US Army offered. Coupled with conventional combat experiences from World War II and Korea, Westmoreland applied his knowledge to destroy Viet Cong forces. Westmoreland's strategy of attrition depended on two things. The first was a large number of combat troops, and the second was a series of large-scale sweeping operations that would find and destroy the enemy. Of the many extensive operations, my research looks at four specific operations at the division size and larger. The largest of which started in February of 1967, named Operation Junction City.<sup>11</sup>

### **Operation Junction City: The Horseshoe**

In 1967, the number of US soldiers under General Westmoreland reached a half million, enabling offensive operations. As the year progressed, the Military Assistance Command executed sequential offensive operations, moving geographically from the southern portion of South Vietnam northward due to weather patterns in the region. The largest operations up to this point in the war began in February and lasted until April 1967 within the III Corps Tactical Zone (Figure 2). The II Field Force conducted Operation Junction City with the 25th Infantry Division and the 1st Infantry Division. Major General Fredrick C. Weyand commanded the 25th Infantry Division and Major General William E. Depuy commanded the 1st Infantry Division. Soldiers nicknamed the operation the Horseshoe because it established blocking positions in a u-shaped perimeter along the northern portion of War Zone C (Figure 2), and then allowed two brigades to clear from south to north. Over thirty-five thousand Americans conducted the two-month operation. Divided into two phases, the operation successfully killed over 2,700 enemy soldiers, destroyed five thousand enemy structures, and captured 850 tons of food within War Zone C, but still did not secure the countryside. Operation Junction City failed to prevent the enemy 9th

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<sup>11</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 20-31, 32-35; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 4; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 23; Cosmas, *Years of Escalation, 1962-1967*, 142-144, 192.



Division's escape into Cambodia, it cast doubt in the minds of the South Vietnamese people, and forced the South Viet Cong to adjust their tactics.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2. Map of III Corps Tactical Zone

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 32.

The first phase of Operation Junction City began on 22 February and lasted until 17 March 1967. Major General Wayand's 25th Infantry Division established the western blocking positions of the Horseshoe and commanded the two brigades responsible for clearing from the south. Major General Deputy established all of the eastern and northern blocking positions of the Horseshoe (Figure 3). In total,

<sup>12</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 14, 32, 41, 113, 141, 122; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 206, 272-273.

both commanders led eight brigades, each with four brigades for the entire two-month operation. Westmoreland intended to destroy elements of the People's Army of Vietnam and its 9th Division within War Zone C. If successful, Operation Junction City would create space for future operations by pacifying the northwest portion of the III Corps Tactical Zone. Lieutenant General Jonathan O. Seaman, II Field Forces commander, envisioned operation Junction City being a bold operation that would catch the enemy by surprise. The quick emplacement of blocking positions around the Horseshoe would be essential to prevent enemy forces from escaping during clearance operations.<sup>13</sup>

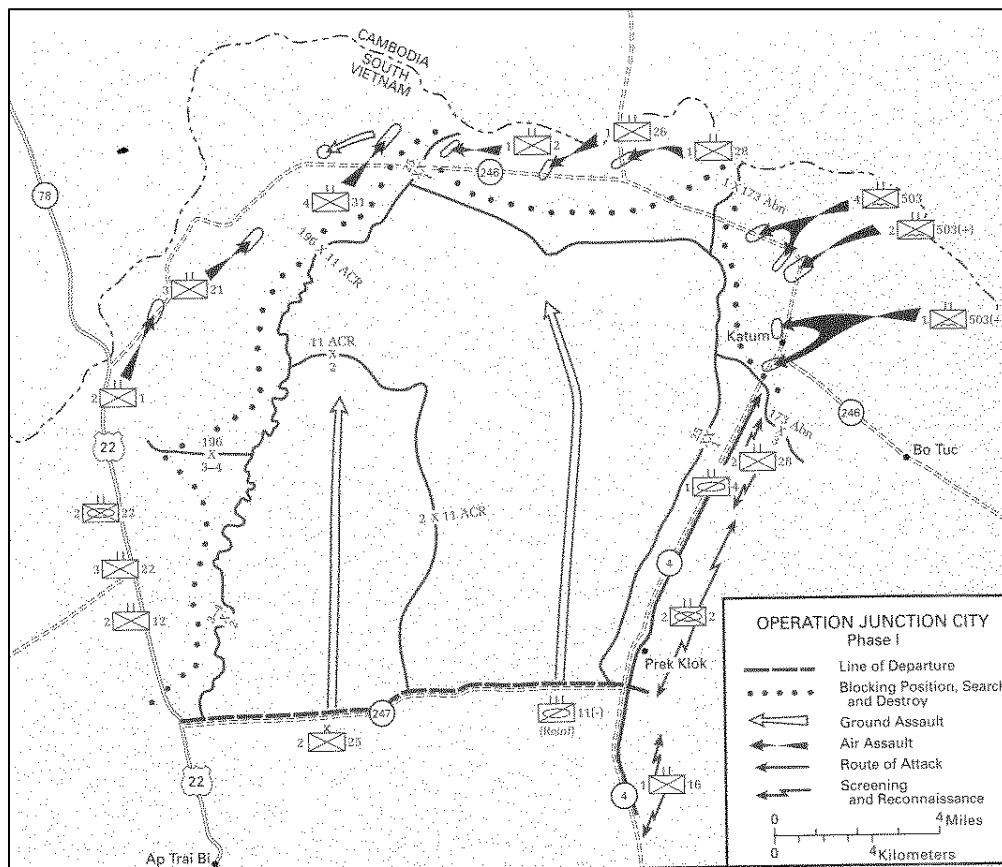


Figure 3. Operation Junction City Phase One

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 116.

The 25th Infantry Division and 1st Infantry Division established blocking position on 22 February along the outer cordon of the horseshoe (Figure 3). The first phase of the operation possessed

<sup>13</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 116, 113, 127.

simultaneity, but lacked surprise. The employment of forces occurred in three distinct means: helicopter, parachute, and vehicle. The air assault force consisted of eight separate infantry battalions, which established blocking positions from separate landing zones along the northern area of operations. The parachuting force consisted of one battalion from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, utilizing drop zones at the northeastern portion of the horseshoe (Figure 3). The ground force consisting of two separate brigades established the blocking positions on the southern most portions of the cordon. Neither division made significant contact while occupying blocking positions, which allowed clearance operations to begin on the morning of 23 February 1967.<sup>14</sup>

Two brigades task organized from the 25th Infantry Division cleared the Horseshoe from south to north. Second Brigade from 25th Infantry Division cleared on the western flank, while the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment cleared in the east (Figure 3). Between 22 and 27 February, thirty-five thousand soldiers conducted search and destroy operations within the horseshoe, but failed to make contact with any sizable enemy force. General Seaman reported fifty-four enemies and twenty-eight friendlies killed in action after the first six days of operation. Evidence showed large numbers of enemy troops had occupied the area, but escaped before the operation. American soldiers found countless empty enemy bases with well-constructed bunkers, complete with overhead cover, underground tunnel systems, and underground rooms with steel roofs. Discouraged by the results within the Horseshoe, each division commander expanded his area of operation both west and east respectively to search for and destroy the enemy. On 11 March, elements of 3rd Brigade from the 1st Infantry Division killed an additional two hundred enemy soldiers defending hastily established base camps by utilizing aerial strikes. The Air Force flew sixty-nine B-52 sorties during Phase One of Operation Junction City (1,541 preplanned sorties and an additional 453 immediate tactical strikes). The strikes accounted for a preponderance of effects on the enemy during

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<sup>14</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 116-118.

defensive operations. Units within 25th Infantry Division continued to identify abandoned regimental sized base camps, but failed to make significant contact with large numbers of enemy soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

Operation Junction City transitioned from Phase One to Phase Two on 18 March and lasted until 15 April 1967. The Air Force increased their support during the second half of Operation Junction City by adding an additional two thousand fighter-bombers and seven B-52 sorties. The additional sorties proved vital to both divisions during battalion sized enemy assaults. Due to unexpected failure during Phase One of Operation Junction City, Lieutenant General Seaman changed his approach during Phase Two. Instead of continuing to conduct large-scale field force operation Seaman empowered his division commanders so that each could destroy the enemy in their respective areas. The 25th Infantry Division and 1st Infantry Divisions maneuvered six brigades east of the Horseshoe (Figure 4). However, Phase Two of the operation allowed neither US divisions to maneuver on enemy forces. The Viet Cong massed battalion-sized formations against elements of the 1st Infantry Division once they moved into sector. During each engagement, US soldiers were able to destroy attacking Viet Cong with the use of well-established defenses, indirect fire support, and air integration. At no time did the 1st Infantry Division forces successfully conduct offensive operations during Phase two of Operation Junction City. The 25th Infantry Division attempted to interdict the enemy's 271st Regiment from escaping the area but failed to make contact before the element reached Cambodia and the operation concluded on 15 April. The II Field Force withdrew from War Zone C leaving no sizable presence in the area to prevent the enemy 9th Division from returning to the area. The absence left a vacuum US Special Forces attempted to fill with limited resources, leaving the local population doubting the US and South Vietnam government had the ability to prevent Viet Cong fighters from reentering the area.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 121-126; John Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive 1965-1968* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1988), 253.

<sup>16</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 126, 140, 143; Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam*, 253; Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 42.

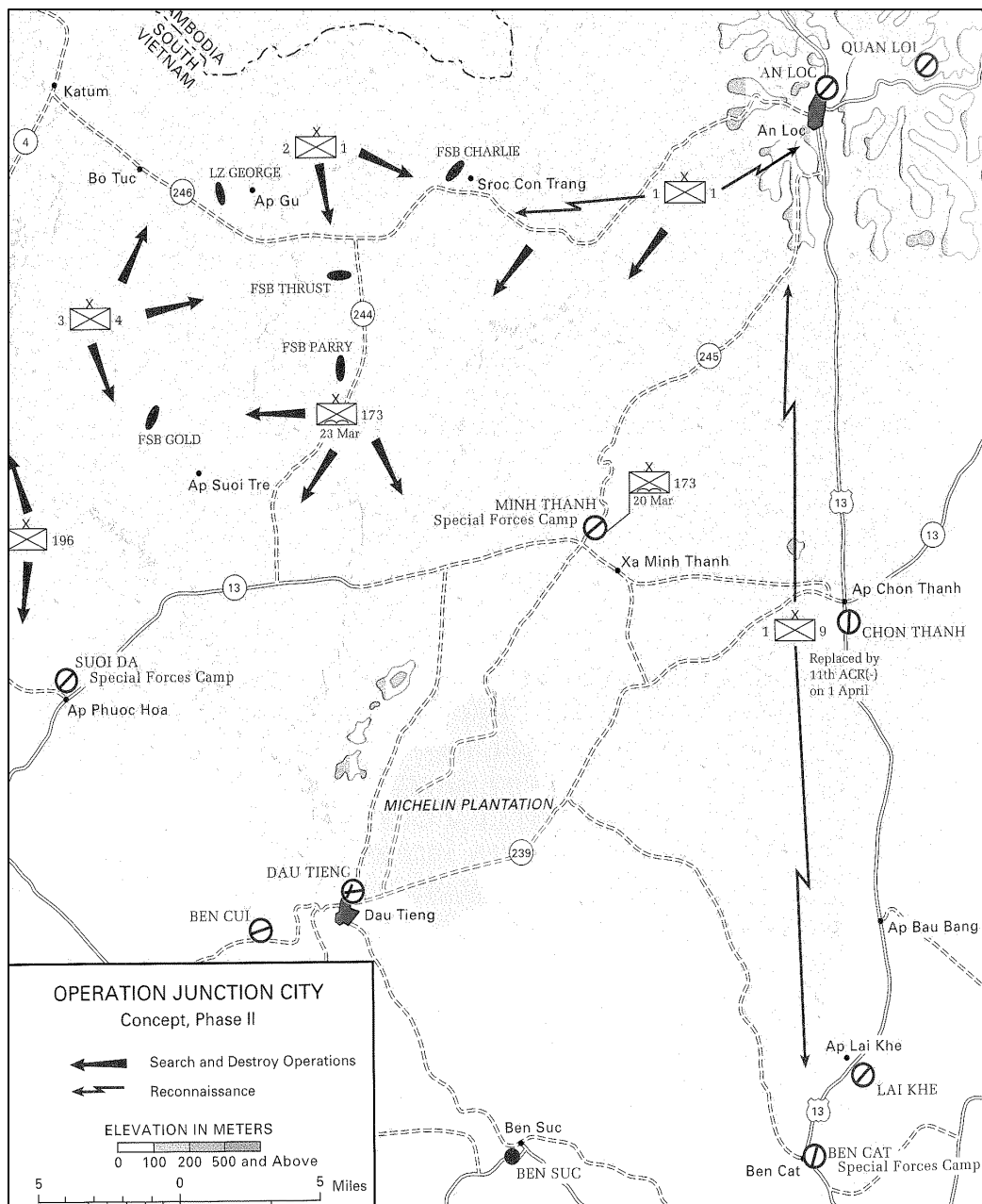


Figure 4. Operation Junction City Phase Two

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 128.

Junction City failed to prevent the enemy 9th Division from escaping into Cambodia, it cast doubt in the minds of the South Vietnamese people, and forced the South Viet Cong to adjust tactics. Seaman's Second Field Force failed to surprise the enemy 9th Division during Phase One and Phase Two of Operation Junction City. The 25th Infantry Division and 1st Infantry Division killed over two thousand

seven hundred enemy soldiers, destroyed five thousand enemy structures, and captured eight hundred and fifty tons of food within War Zone C. However, the II Field Force failed to conduct offensive maneuver operations against for the entire two-month operation. Enemy kills occurred because Viet Cong decisively engaged US forces with battalion sized formations while in the defense. Although the enemy took significant casualties, they maintained a rate of attrition within acceptable level because they controlled the tempo of the fight. Still, the Viet Cong learned a valuable lesson during Operation Junction City, which resulted in new tactics. After this operation, the Viet Cong reduced the size of offensive forces from battalion to company when conducting offensive operations. Between 1965 and 1967 battalion sized operation by the Viet Cong forces dropped from ten to one times a month. The Viet Cong continued to attack Westmoreland's field forces however unit composition consisted of a more mobile force that maneuvered in company size or smaller formations for the remainder of 1967.<sup>17</sup>

### **Task Force Oregon**

In 1967, North Vietnamese regular army units increased offensive operation in the demilitarized zone and portions of the I Corps Tactical Zone in South Vietnam. The Marine commander, Lieutenant General Lewis W. Walt, attempted to combat the increasing threats within his zone, but fell short due to the number of marines he had, resulting in a need for addition forces. General Westmoreland tasked his chief of staff, Major General Bill Rosson, to create a solution that would provide additional combat power to the I Corps Tactical Zone. Rosson's approved solution created a new division to augment the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force. General Westmoreland formed Task Force Oregon, which later became the Americal Division, on 20 April and assigned them battle space along the coast between Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. Rosson took command of the provisional headquarter and quickly relieved the 1st Marine Division stationed at Chu Lai with three US Army brigades from the I and III corps tactical zones. Once relieved, the 1st Marine Division moved north to Danang. Once in the I Corps Tactical Zone, the

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<sup>17</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 50; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 141-143; Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 95-96.

196th Infantry Brigade defended Chu Lai under Brigadier General Frank H. Linnell. Meanwhile 3rd Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division, under Colonel James G. Shanahan, and 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division, under Brigadier General Salve H. Matheson, executed offensive operations in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. Task Force Oregon successfully secured Chu Lai, however offensive operations in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai province ostracized the people and forced South Vietnamese communists deeper into the interior of the country.<sup>18</sup>

The first offensive operations for Task Force Oregon failed to destroy enemy forces during inland sweeps in the southern portion of the Quang Ngai province. General Westmoreland tracked progress through three metrics: enemy kills, kill ratios, and captured weapons. Major General Rosson focused his two maneuver brigades on three enemy basing areas: 122, 123, and 124 (Figure 5). Colonel Shanahan maintained operations in vicinity of Duc Pho while Brigadier General Matheson deployed inland to combat the suspected enemy base camps during the months of May and June. Matheson's first inland sweep targeted two Viet Cong regiments at base area 124. The brigade encountered little opposition between 11 May and 7 June, resulting in a reported four hundred enemy killed or captured and some 125 seized enemy weapons. On 8 and 9 June, Matheson deployed his brigade north to enemy base areas 123 and 122 respectively. Operations at base areas 123 and 122 resulted in minimal contact, which prompted Matheson to begin evacuating civilians from valleys in the area. The operation resulted in seven thousand civilian refugees, boosting the total refugee count at Duc Pho to over nineteen thousand civilians due to combat or herbicides. Once evacuated, the civilian population did not have a list of options to choose from during their relocation. US soldiers represented a dark and uncertain future; a darkness that set like night over South Vietnam with no hope of rising as each were moved to assigned refugee camps with no vision of ever leaving. The US and South Vietnamese government alienated evacuated civilians by not resourcing camps with adequate food, water, shelter, or jobs. American forces did provide metrics listing the total number of enemy kills, kill ratios, and captured weapons to validate the attrition of the Viet Cong. In total, Matheson reported killing 869 enemies, a ten to one enemy to friendly kill ratio, and the

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<sup>18</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 228-229, 242-243.

capture of 314 weapons. The numbers of weapons captured lead historians to question whom US forces killed when they reported that the 314 captured weapons came from enemy hiding spots named caches. Each metric signified Westmorland's measure of success but it failed address the enemies willingness to accept casualties and relocation deeper into the interior of the country.<sup>19</sup>

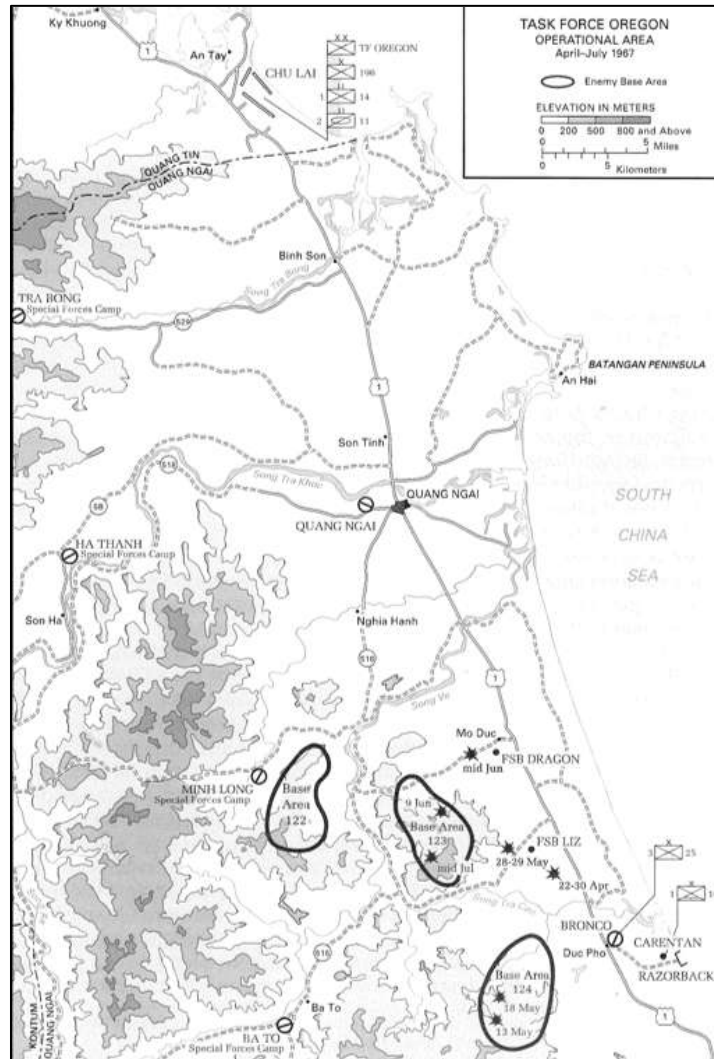


Figure 5. Map of Enemy Base Areas 122, 123, 124

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 234.

In August of 1967, Task Force Oregon moved operations to the northern portion of Quang Nai province. Intelligence suggested that two enemy regiments from the 2nd People's Army of Vietnam

<sup>19</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 228-229, 242-243; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 236, 238, 242-243.



Division were converging at base area 121, in preparation for an assault on Quang Ngai city (Figure 6). Major General Richard T. Knowles took command of Task Force Oregon, replacing Rosson, and named the new operation, Hood River. Between 2 - 13 August, Major General Knowles maneuvered nine battalions of US, Korean, and South Vietnamese soldiers through base area 121, resulting in 166 enemy kills, sixty-three captured weapons, twenty-one dead US soldiers, and 133 friendly wounded. Each metric provided General Westmorland with a measure of lethality against the Viet Cong. However, it continued to overlook the enemy's ability to move deeper into the interior of the country and its willingness to accept casualties. As before, Task Force Oregon continued to evacuate civilians from the battlefield, removing five hundred refugees into camps, which continued to ostracize the civilian population. It is unclear if an entire enemy division existed or escaped at base area 121, but reports confirmed increased activity around Quang Ngai city after Operation Hood River, leading historians to believe that the enemy division escaped deeper into the interior of the country.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 246-248.

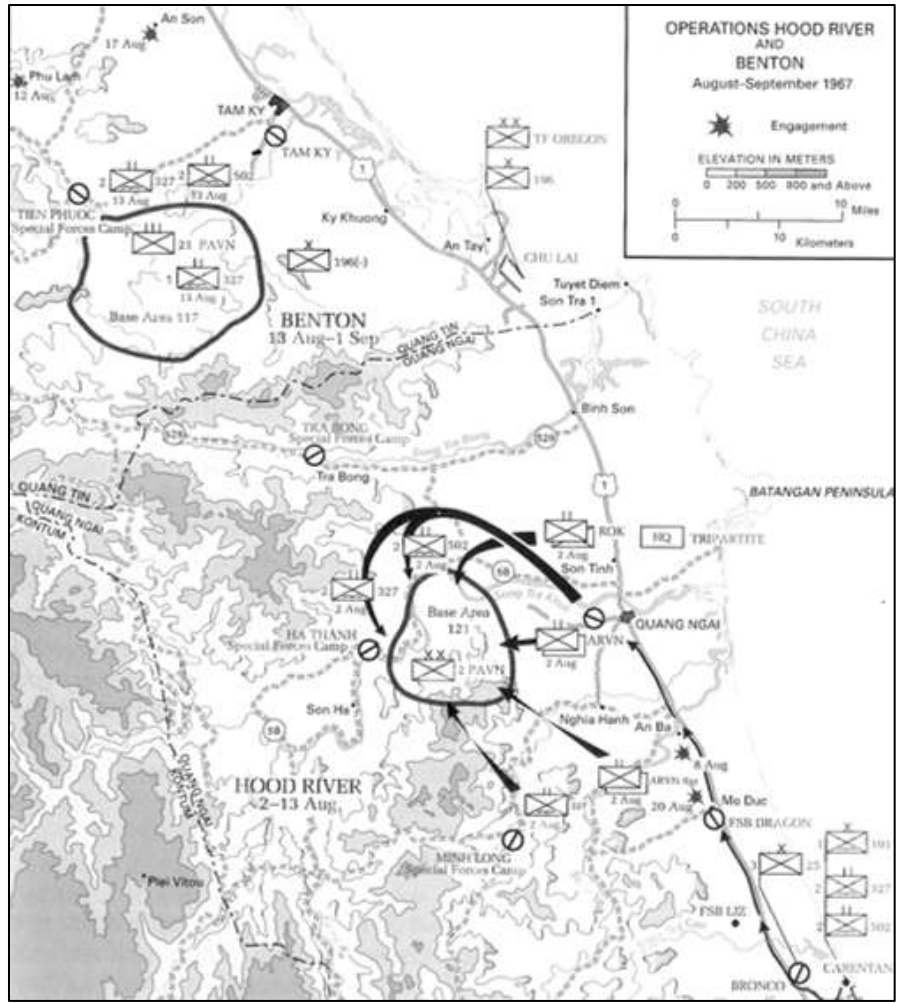


Figure 6. Map of Operations Hood River and Benton

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 247.

After disappointing results during Operation Hood River, Major General Knowles transitioned operations north to Quang Tin province. Intelligence suggested that a regiment from the 2nd Division of the People’s Army of Vietnam was protecting an artillery regiment in the vicinity of base area 117 (Figure 6). Two brigades conducted Operation Benton from 13 August to 1 September, providing five separate battalions from the 196th Infantry Brigade and 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division. During the operation, Task Force Oregon dropped five hundred tons of bombs, three hundred tons of napalm, and 2,100 artillery shells. A substantial allocation of ordinance intended to put both brigades in a position of relative advantage over their enemy during the operation. First Brigade of the 101st Infantry

Division killed 303 enemies and found 132 weapons in a cave, while sustaining forty-one friendly killed in action and 286 wounded. While the 196th Infantry Brigade killed one hundred enemies while sustaining four friendly killed in action and forty wounded. The number of casualties that the enemy received remained acceptable to the North Vietnamese government. Once casualty numbers reached a point making enemy units ineffective the units were able to move deeper into the interior of the country to refit or escape across the border. The gains that Task Force Oregon made during Operation Benton to find and attrite the enemy were again shadowed by the number of displaced civilians in Quang Tin province. Operation Benton relocated 1,200 civilian from the province to refugee camps. Additionally, two hundred additional civilians departed the province on their own due to violence used to destroy the Viet Cong and mass destruction in the area, which further ostracized the population.<sup>21</sup>

American forces did not know how to distinguish between the Viet Cong and the civilian population. In an attempt to create a free fire zone within areas of contention and prevent civilian casualties, the American military relocated the civilian population from rural areas to refugee camps. US commanders removed thirty thousand civilians from Quang Ngai province between June and September of 1967. In total, 168,000 refugees were relocated-twenty percent of the population in the province. A portion of the refugees volunteered to relocate to escape harassment from the Viet Cong or to escape living in a combat zone. However, forced relocation occurred for the preponderance of the population. Once relocated, the South Vietnamese government in Saigon alienated the civilians by not providing food, shelter, security, or employment for the refugees.<sup>22</sup>

Task Force Oregon successfully secured Chu Lai and destroyed a large number of Viet Cong forces within Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces, but simultaneously ostracized the people and forced South Vietnamese communists deeper into the interior of the country. General Westmoreland created Task Force Oregon to provide his northern commanders with additional military forces in the I Corps

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<sup>21</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 248-52; Everett C Dolman, *Pure Strategy* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 4-6.

<sup>22</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 254.

Tactical Zone. Both Major General Rosson and General Knowles followed General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition while in command and used three metrics: captured weapons, dead Viet Cong, and kill ratios. Task Force Oregon measured success by killing as many Viet Cong as possible within the Quang Tin and Quang Ngai province. However, the strategy overlooked the enemy's willingness to accept casualties and ability to move within the interior of the country. Additionally, the strategy took a toll on the civilian population because US forces could not differentiate between the civilians and the enemy. To mitigate collateral damage and unintended killing of civilians, Task Force Oregon moved twenty percent of the provinces' civilian population into refugee camps. Neither the US nor the South Vietnamese government properly resourced the growing number of displaced civilians across South Vietnam. The absence of detailed planning for refugee camps amplified an already debilitating event for the civilian population in the province. The US military and South Vietnamese government ostracized inhabitants once in refugee camps and gave no hope of returning to their destroyed homes and land. The American approach simply did not take into account the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people.<sup>23</sup>

### **The 1st Infantry Division: The Big Red One**

Operations within Lieutenant General Bruce Palmer's II Field Force proved less than optimal during the 1967 campaign and, in the case of his 1st Infantry Division it played into the plans of the enemy commander. Major General John H. Hay commanded the 1st Infantry Division during operations in 1967 and followed the directed strategy through his chain of command under Lieutenant General Palmer, and ultimately General Westmoreland. Also known as the Big Red One, the 1st Infantry Division executed General Westmoreland's strategy to attrite the enemy so that Viet Cong forces could not engage the civilian population within the III Corps Tactical Zone. General Nguyen Chi Thanh commanded elements of both the 7th and 9th enemy division's within the Big Red One's area of operations. Like Westmoreland, General Thanh fought a war of attrition within the III Corps Tactical Zone. Thanh

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<sup>23</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 254.

systematically selected the Big Red One as his target during the employment of the 271st and the 141st infantry regiments. In combination with the South Vietnam weather patterns, Thanh utilized monsoons during the wet season to maintain his operational tempo. The Big Red One lacked the initiative within the III Corps Tactical Zone during the summer of 1967 because they failed to understand the enemy's strategy of attrition; to conduct effective offensive operations; and to provide security across the countryside.<sup>24</sup>

The Big Red One failed to maneuver on the enemy in June of 1967 during Operation Billings. Like many previous large-scale operations, Billings did not maneuver on the enemy but occupied an enemy area of land, and then allowed the enemy to attack US forces. Conceptually, Operation Billings would attack the enemy 271st Regiment while the unit prepared to conduct a major attack in Phuoc Vinh. The operations began on 12 June, but the Big Red One did not find any sign of the enemy at its first suspected location. General Hay assumed that the enemy repositioned north in response to operations in the area. In response, he ordered his 3rd Brigade to an area called Landing Zone X Ray. On 17 June, the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment proceeded north behind a rolling artillery barrage but did not make contact with the enemy. Once in place, the battalion established a perimeter defense and lost the initiative. Two battalions from the enemy's 271st Infantry Regiment conducted a synchronized and rehearsed attack in force, resulting in fifty-seven US soldiers dead and 196 wounded in action (Figure 7). In response, the battalion called in B-52 air strikes and artillery barrages to cover the enemy withdrawal route. The Big Red One claimed killing 347 Viet Cong and captured one prisoner. However, after the engagement, the unit found only six enemy weapons. Like previous engagements with US forces, the Viet Cong seized the initiative through deliberate attacks. US forces only had effects on the battlefield after the enemy attacked and were able to utilize aviation and indirect fire assets.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 50; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 339.

<sup>25</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 342-43.

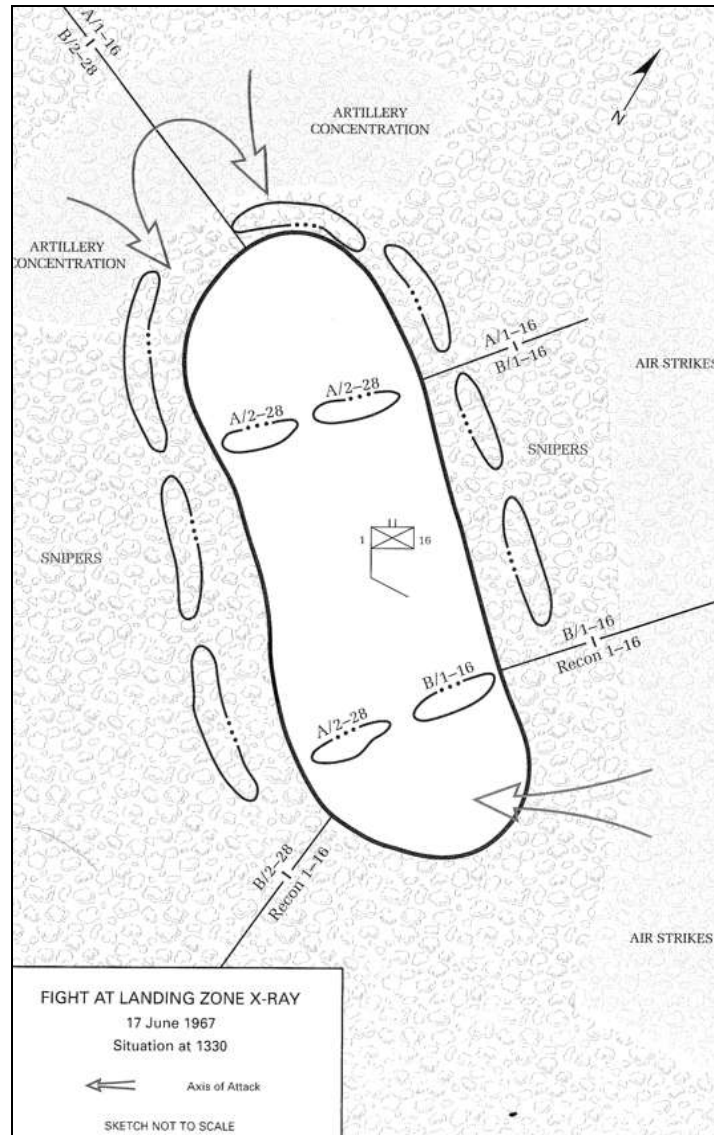


Figure 7. Landing Zone X-Ray

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 344.

An event that confirmed the Big Red One's claimed casualty count was an order that the enemy 141st Infantry Regiment received to assist the withdrawal of the 271st from the area. The assistance from the 141st gave Major General Hay multiple areas to defend simultaneously. Thanh had the 271st assault the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment and then followed up with assaults by the 141st Infantry Regiment within An Loc and Quan Loi province. However, operations by the 141st lacked the synchronization and apparent rehearsals that the 271st had during their attack on the Iron Rangers. An

assault on South Vietnamese regulars at Xa Tan Hung resulted in catastrophic results. The 141st Infantry Regiment received 144 killed in action and sixty-seven captured weapons because they did not synchronize their effort during its assault. This was a success for a South Vietnamese regular unit. However, friendly casualties still totaled fifteen killed in action, with forty-six wounded. To complicate the situation, civilian casualties continued to mass. During the attack at Xa Tan Hung, the Viet Cong wounded fifty civilians when a mortar barrage aimed at South Vietnamese regulars landed off target and into a village.<sup>26</sup>

The enemy's strategy of attrition continued against the Big Red One over the next couple of months. 1st Infantry Division positions continuously receiving enemy mortar and artillery barrages, which destroyed facilities, equipment, and personnel. On 27 June, a barrage of eighty 122-millimeter artillery rounds injured eighty-four soldiers at Phuoc Vinh. On 29 June, simultaneous artillery attacks on Phu Loi and Lai Khe dealt an additional fifty-nine casualties. In response, the US military responded with counter battery fires. The response was a system that utilized radar to identify the locations of enemy fire. Most times US forces found the system responsive, giving the US military a positive physiological effect but the system proved largely inaccurate. An investigation found that the rounds fired during the Phu Loi counter battery mission were completely ineffective. Of the 2,744 US artillery rounds fired in response, none hit their intended targets and each landed several kilometers from the actual enemy launch site.<sup>27</sup>

The Viet Cong continued to attrite the Big Red One through the remainder of the summer and into the fall months of 1967. Ultimately, General Palmer halted large-scale operations because US military commanders could not identify the enemy strategy until October of 1967. Historically, Viet Cong forces conducted refit operations in October. The month allowed enemy units to prepare for upcoming operations during the following winter and spring. A secret enemy base area in Long Nguyen province provided Viet Cong elements the time and resources to prepare for the next campaign. Determined to disrupt the enemy rest period, Major General Hay planned a large-scale offensive operation. The first

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<sup>26</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking The Offensive*, 345.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

sixteen days of Operation Shenandoah Two proved successful, resulting in 150 enemies killed in action. The results led Major General Hay to believe that the 271st had taken significant casualties, and were no longer combat capable. However, on 17 October the enemy proved otherwise by ambushing US forces at the battle of Ong Thanh (Figure 8). The battle resulted in fifty-six friendly killed in action, seventy-five wounded, and two missing soldiers. Among the dead included the 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Terry D. Allen, and his operations officer, Major Donald W. Holleder. The enemy losses are not clear, but reporting suggests that there were 101 enemies killed in action. After the fight, US forces found only two bodies. Post operation consultations between General Westmoreland and Hay found no single commander directly at fault. Hay admitted that his men fought valiantly but had been on the receiving end of a lethal ambush (Figure 8). If anything, Hay surmised that the biggest fault had been the overuse of proven tactics on the ground.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 349, 353, 361; Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 237.



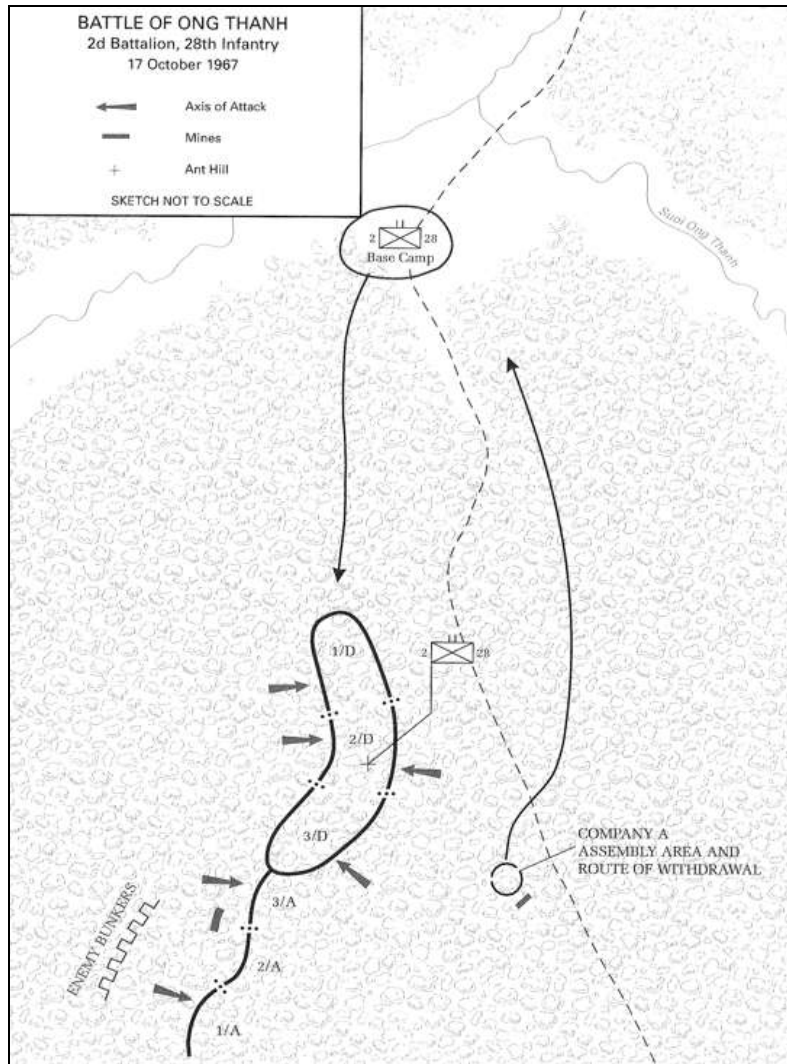


Figure 8. Battle of Ong Thanh

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 354.

Neither Lieutenant General Palmer, II Field Force commander, nor Major General Hay could decipher General Thanh's strategy of attrition, which led to failed offensive operations and insufficient security across the countryside. The Big Red One sustained a constant shortage of experienced leaders and soldiers at the battalion level and below. General Hay assumed that the experience of the leader led to failure during combat operations. To remedy this, Hay trained and evaluated battalion commanders, and then replaced each if not deemed competent. In some cases, unit shortages on soldiers dropped to eleven men per platoon, versus the standard thirty to forty man infantry platoon. Commanders and soldiers at

each level within the 1st Infantry Division failed to identify that the enemy's plans mirrored General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition. General Thanh targeted the Big Red One and waited for the units to move to a fixed location before attacking. General Hay ordered all major operations to stop between the months of July until October 1967 when Hay attempted to disrupt enemy refit operations.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Z Division**

The IV Corps Tactical Zone, the Mekong Delta, had little to no American presence before 1967. A limited number of US advisers conducted training and provided resources to the South Vietnamese Army South of Saigon. American military units did not conduct offensive operation within the Mekong Delta. For the South Vietnamese government and people the IV Corps Tactical Zone represented the breadbasket of the country. Unlike the zones north of Saigon, the Mekong Delta contained large numbers of interconnected rivers and canals that provided ample irrigation for the country's agricultural needs and contained a large portion of the South Vietnamese population. Over a third of the country's 17 million-people lived within the Mekong Delta and produced seventy-five percent of the country's rice. Of those 5.6 million, fifty thousand of the people within the Mekong Delta took part in the insurgency against the South Vietnamese government in 1967. The insurgents in the Mekong Delta composed forty-five percent of all insurgent forces throughout the entire country of South Vietnam. The Viet Cong force included twenty-one enemy battalions, which fought in eighty-one separate Viet Cong companies. The South Vietnamese Army countered the Viet Cong forces with thirty thousand South Vietnamese Soldiers distributed across three separate infantry divisions. American forces had a small presence limited to advising, but the terrain made operating in the area difficult. The presence of large population centers, complex waterways, and divided road networks created issues for the American logistical requirement within the Mekong Delta. General Westmoreland understood the political ramifications of conducting unilateral operations in the breadbasket of the country and the mobility restrictions posed by the terrain in the Mekong Delta. General Westmoreland's employment of US Combat troops within the MeKong Delta

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<sup>29</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking The Offensive*, 346.

had an insignificant affect on security across the countryside and did little to affect the South Vietnamese communists.<sup>30</sup>

General Westmoreland theorized that the South Vietnamese Army would benefit from collaborating with US military within the Mekong Delta and would improve militarily by conducting offensive operations stating, American units would “set an example of tactical aggressiveness.” The Military Assistance Command developed a contingency plan labeled the Z Division. Once approved, the 9th Infantry Division out of Fort Riley, Kansas executed operations within the the Mekong Delta. Major General George G. Eckhardt led the division, however only two of his three brigades conducted operations south of Saigon. The 3rd Brigade, led by Colonel Charles P. Murray, and the 2nd Brigade, led by Colonel William B. Fulton, conducted offensive operations in the IV Corps Tactical Zone, while 1st Brigade served as the Second Field Force reserve. General Westmoreland intended for Major General Eckhardt’s Division to provide the additional troops needed to break the stalemate between the Viet Cong and South Vietnamese army within the Mekong Delta.<sup>31</sup>

Third Brigade assisted the South Vietnamese Army to pacify the 377,000 civilians in Long An Province. Colonel Murray had a large degree of success during daytime operations but the Viet Cong owned the night, which led to overall failure. Before operations started within the province, the Military Assistance Command estimated that just over 86,000 people lived in secure areas. Starting in April 1967, Murray’s three battalions conducted a series of operations to assist in pacification but rarely conducted night operations. After a month of operations, the Viet Cong bloodied the American nose on 2 May killing seventeen and wounding forty-eight soldiers from one American company. Similar to engagement across the country, the Viet Cong attacked American forces while in the defense. During the enemy attack, US forces failed to kill or wound a single Viet Cong soldier (Figure 9). On 14 May, the Viet Cong infiltrated a South Vietnamese battalion’s compound completely unopposed (Figure 9). Enemy forces isolated the South Vietnamese unit by jamming the radios of their American advisors before killing thirty-

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<sup>30</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 393-395.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 154, 394-397, 401, 403.

one, wounded thirty-four, and stealing sixty-eight weapons. This time the South Vietnamese battalion reacted after losing the initiative, but only killed three Viet Cong soldiers. A third attack occurred on 10 June during a chance encounter, when two American mechanized companies identified an insurgent camp while on patrol (Figure 9). The engagement occurred late in the day and did have initial success. US forces killed thirty Viet Cong and sank twenty sampans as the enemy attempted to escape across the Song Vam Co Tay River. However, the Americans quickly lost the initiative as the sun set. American forces established a perimeter around the enemy and attempted to observe activity. Failure to clear the enemy area and an absence of naval patrolling along the river allowed the enemy to escape. The next morning the Americans could not find any enemy in the area. After the third engagement, patrolling in Long An province slowed and so did contact with the enemy. Between the months of July through September, enemy casualties continued when the Viet Cong choose to attack and American forces were able to employ artillery and aircraft to attrite the enemy while in the defense. Pacification numbers improved by November 1967 but not significantly. Over 120,000 people lived in secure areas at the end of Westmoreland's year of the offense operations, leaving the 257,000 in areas controlled by Viet Cong forces.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 398-401.



debarkation points before maneuver elements assaulted respective targeted locations. Second, the vessels greatly improved the morale of soldiers conducting offensive operations. While aboard barracks ships, soldiers had access to air-conditioned cabins, movie rooms, hot showers, and hot meals after each patrol. In addition to morale improvements, the readiness of soldiers operating from ships stayed higher because of the dryer climate aboard ship, which reduced skin infection and foot problems during riverine operations.<sup>33</sup>

The first of five riverine operations, named Operation Coronado One, began on 18 June to continue demonstrating to the South Vietnamese military how to be aggressive. Operation Coronado One, deployed an amphibious assault force that employed nearly eighty mechanized landing craft. The operation moved Colonel Fulton's two infantry battalions ashore with no contact and had few results on day one. The tide shifted to the enemy on day two resulting in significant US casualties when an American company walked into an enemy ambush (Figure 10). Midday, on 19 June, the American company found itself under fire from fortified enemy positions. Fulton directed his brigade to converge on the enemy battalion in an attempt to save his lost company and destroy the enemy. At nightfall, 2nd Brigade encircled the enemy battalion; however, it sustained fifty friendly killed in action, 150 wounded, and four destroyed helicopters used for medical evacuation. Similar to 3rd Brigade's action in Long An, 2nd Brigade encircled its enemy on three sides at nightfall, but failed to secure any escape routes along the Rach Nui river. To amplify the error, the navy pulled all patrol boats off the river at nightfall, which allowed all remaining enemy to escape under the cover of night. In the morning, 2nd Brigade found seventy enemy bodies along with ten captured weapons. Second Brigade sent a false report in of 256 enemy bodies and fifty weapons in an attempt to keep Colonel Fulton from being relieved of command; however, captured prisoners later reported that 170 Viet Cong were killed to include a battalion commander. During Operation Coronado One, the initial engagements proved less than favorable. Follow on objectives continued until the end of June with better results, with 250 enemies dead and one hundred

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<sup>33</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 401, 408, 414.

captured at the end of the operation. The results of Operation Coronado One proved that US forces were aggressive; however, the operation did not do more than establish a presence in the Mekong Delta.<sup>34</sup>

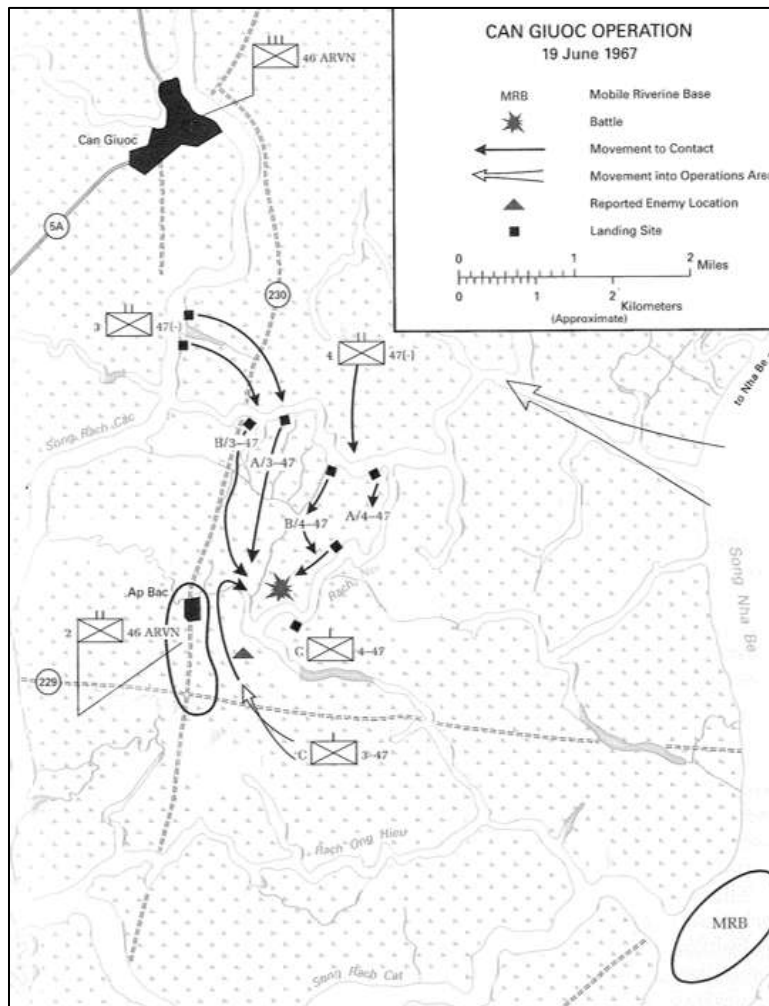


Figure 10. Map of Operation Can Giuoc

Source: MacGarrigle, *Taking The Offensive*, 417.

Westmoreland's employment of riverine operations within the Mekong Delta had an insignificant affect on security across the countryside and did little to affect the South Vietnamese communists. Riverine operations continued, on 29 June with Operation Coronado Two, until November of 1967, with Operation Coronado Five. Security across the Mekong Delta improved by nine percent over the course of the year; however, some 257,000 people still lived under Viet Cong control within Long An

<sup>34</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 416-420.

Province. At this rate of success, General Westmoreland would have Long An Province pacified in eight years. In total, the Z Division killed one thousand of the fifty thousand Viet Cong in the IV Corps Tactical Zone during the year of offensive operations. That is just two percent of the enemy fighting force and it took a year to do it. At this rate of attrition, Westmoreland would be able to destroy all remaining Viet Cong in the IV Corps Tactical Zone by 2016, just eleven years after his death in 2005 at the age of ninety-one. Efforts by the US to pacify the Mekong Delta failed. Ultimately, Westmoreland showed the South Vietnamese Army an aggressive approach that resulted in a fifteen to one kill ratio in Long An. Operations in the Mekong Delta only established an American presence.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion**

General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition in 1967 failed because it did not affect the South Vietnamese communists, it alienated the South Vietnamese people, and reduced security across the South Vietnam countryside. Westmoreland entered the war in South Vietnam with a multitude of combat experiences from World War II and Korea. These experiences led him to believe that a strategy of attrition that used lethal metrics to determine success, would lead to victory in 1967. The use of overwhelming force measured by enemy kills, enemy to friendly kill ratios, and captured weapons simply reinforced the strategy of attrition that Westmoreland used and failed to identify when failure or when the enemy adapted. Westmoreland's arrival in 1964 marked the beginning of a three-year buildup of troop levels that culminated, in 1967, with a half million US soldiers. The increased troop numbers failed to ensure success during Westmoreland's year of offensive operations. The failure does highlight Westmoreland's inability to break the mold, cast by repetitive experiences throughout his lengthy career, before entering South Vietnam. Thirty-two years of military experience affected and drove the decisions Westmoreland made in South Vietnam regardless of how different the war was to those experiences. The high level of violence and the kinetic nature of war required of US soldiers, in both World War II and Korea, drove Westmoreland to use a strategy of attrition and metrics that perpetuated that strategy.

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<sup>35</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 401, 421-430.



Westmoreland structured his strategy prior to entering Vietnam, in 1964, when he visited with his longtime mentor, retired General Douglas MacArthur, who cautioned him that the people in the region only respected and feared the use of mass amounts of firepower.<sup>36</sup>

The use of artillery and close air support assisted Westmoreland to use metrics that supported his strategy of attrition versus using metrics to both confirm and deny his approach. However, the destruction these weapons caused simultaneously ostracized the South Vietnamese civilian population. Placing civilians in refugee camps reduced the loss of innocent human life by creating free fire zones, but simultaneously destroyed the national will of the South Vietnamese people. South Vietnamese refugees lost their homes, jobs, and ability to sustain life once moved into camps. Operations by Task Force Oregon, the Big Red One, The Z Division, and actions during Operation Junction City cast doubt in the minds of the civilian population in South Vietnam. Large-scale sweeping operations had short-term tactical effects in the country but failed operationally because the enemy departed for a short period and then simply returned after US forces departed. The Viet Cong operated unopposed after American troops departed swept areas, leaving the civilian population to fend for themselves in the countryside or live in squalor as a refugee. Once in camps, an already ostracized population went without basic essentials and could not predict how long their captivity would be. Westmoreland admitted to the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the relocation of civilian but neither he nor his staff had creative ideas to differentiate between friendly versus enemy. Westmoreland approved a solution that removed as many civilians from the battlefield as possible. US forces removed civilians from their homes and placed them in refugee camps for two purposes. First, it allowed emptied areas to become free fire zones. Second, it attempted to deny large swaths of land to the Viet Cong by destroying villages and resources throughout South Vietnam. The destruction of resources, which included all agricultural production capability, continued to the extent that rice had to be imported to feed civilians in refugee camps. Westmoreland

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<sup>36</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 11-13, 18-26, 206; Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 6; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 3-6, 431-432; Karnow, *Vietnam*, 34, 59.

intended to leave refugees in camps until the end of the war, allowing US forces the freedom to engage the Viet Cong within the emptied provinces that became free fire zones.<sup>37</sup>

General Westmoreland had significant effects on the South Vietnamese Communists, however his strategy failed because he did not understand the history of the country and the enemy's willingness to accept casualties. The Vietnamese people had been at war and in constant turmoil since the conclusion of World War II. US involvement in South Vietnam was but a small snippet of the country's history. Westmoreland along with senior military leaders within his command assumed that the war in South Vietnam was another Korean War and failed to understand the complexity of the Vietnamese region. The Military Assistance Command recognized the newly established boundaries created by the 1954 Geneva Accords. The Viet Cong recognized the recently established country borders and then exploited them to gain an advantage over US efforts. The Viet Cong moved freely between South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam, which drastically differed, from the US experience fighting on a peninsula in Korea. Additionally, the Viet Cong were willing to accept more casualties to achieve their cause than General Westmoreland recognized. The strategy of attrition was a test of wills that the enemy would not allow itself to lose. Additionally, Westmoreland's strategy failed because the enemy continuously maintained the initiative and an acceptable casualty level. Rarely did US find, fix, and finish the enemy in the field. On all accounts, US forces maneuvered to a suspected enemy location, failed to find them, and then once in the defense got attacked. While defending, US forces were able to apply both artillery and aircraft to the Viet Cong to prevent catastrophic losses and destroyed large numbers of enemy forces, but even then the Viet Cong maintained an acceptable number of casualties. US military planners stated, "Americans ought to stick to the sort of conflict they understood – waged in open terrain by large infantry units, heavy artillery, and modern in combination of with ballistic missiles, supersonic aircraft, sophisticated ships and the latest in high technology." The use of highly technical weapons in the jungles of South Vietnam killed over one million Viet Cong however, that body count did not matter. The Viet

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<sup>37</sup> Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 152-153; MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 242-243, 436; Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 249.

Cong exploited the borders between South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, which allowed their forces to be resupplied and regenerate in unopposed areas.<sup>38</sup>

Large-scale sweeps successfully moved the Viet Cong out of the South Vietnamese countryside but the enemy returned quickly after US operations concluded. Secret bases and enemy camps were scattered across the South Vietnamese countryside. If US forces were lucky enough to find these underground base complexes, the structures were empty. The Viet Cong were masters of mobile operations and if the option to move deeper into the interior of the country was not an option Viet Cong forces slipped silently across the border into Cambodia. Even with a half million soldiers, Westmoreland did not have enough forces to conduct offensive operations and secure the countryside. The US force attempted to mitigate their absence with small Special Forces teams but the size and scale of the Viet Cong overwhelmed the undersized units. Ultimately, the year of offensive operations concluded in disappointment by Westmoreland and his staff. The lofty goal of destroying large Viet Cong formations and headquarters did not occur, which left doubts in the minds of military leaders questioning the predicted cleanup phase of operations in 1968. The result only left the realities of the struggle that culminated in three hundred thousand wounded, 150 billion dollars spent, and more than fifty-eight thousand American names etched into a granite memorial.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Karnow, *Vietnam*, 35, 50; Kinnard, *The War Managers*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 440-441; William Egan Colby and James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 7, 8, 373.

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