

THE ATTACK ON THE AMERICAN EMBASSY DURING TET, 1968:
FACTORS THAT TURNED A TACTICAL VICTORY
INTO A POLITICAL DEFEAT

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General Studies

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ABSTRACT

THE ATTACK ON THE AMERICAN EMBASSY DURING TET, 1968:
EFFECTIVENESS OF MARINE AND MILITARY POLICE RESPONSE, by Major
Robert J. O'Brien, 113 pages.

What could have made the Military Police (MP) and Marine Security Guard (MSG) response more effective, averting negative media coverage and public opinion? The Tet Offensive has been widely acknowledged as the turning point of the United States (U.S.) effort in Vietnam. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces attacked over 100 cities and towns on 31 January 1968, during the Tet holiday. At the epicenter of this cataclysmic event was the attack on the U.S. Embassy. Although this was a platoon level action, the publicity generated would be wildly disproportionate to the value of the Embassy as a military target. Controversy has continued unabated four decades later. The media role in conveying the outcome of the attack is still a subject of debate. The fact that the U.S. forces that successfully defended the Embassy were greatly outnumbered and not organized or equipped as combat troops was not portrayed in media reports.

This thesis first examines the attack on the U.S. Embassy during the Tet Offensive of 1968, and what factors turned a tactical victory into a political defeat. The Marine Security Guards (MSGs) and Military Police (MP) were effective at preventing the enemy from entering and holding the Chancery. The MSGs and MPs at the Embassy achieved a clear tactical victory, yet the action was portrayed as a political defeat. Two sets of factors contributed to this portrayal: the political situation, including shifting public opinion and declining media-military relations; and actions taken by the State Department that directly affected the conduct of the action at the Embassy.

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ACRONYMS

AP	Associated Press
ARVN	Army of Viet Nam
BEQ	Bachelor Enlisted Quarters
BN	Battalion
BOQ	Bachelor Officer Quarters
Cahn Sats	South Vietnamese National Police
CDR	Commander
Cholon	Chinese section of Saigon
CMIC	Combined Military Intelligence Center
COORDS	Combined Operations for Rural Development Offices
CQ	Charge of Quarters
CSS	Combat Service Support
DIME	Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
Dragon	MSG Radio Net
EOD	Explosive Ordnance Disposal
GVN	Government of Viet Nam
HN	Host Nation
ITR	Infantry Training Regiment
JGS	Joint General Staff (South Vietnam)
JUSPAO	Joint United States Public Affairs Offices
KIA	Killed In Action
LN	Local Nationals

MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MP	Military Police
MSG	Marine Security Guards
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer
NCOIC	Non Commissioned Officer In Charge
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OIC	Officer In Charge
PMO	Provost Marshal's Office
PSU	Personal Security Unit
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
R&R	Rest and Relaxation
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SMG	Sub Machine Gun (Beretta Model 12 at the Embassy)
SP	Security Police
SVN	South Viet Nam
T/E	Table of Equipment (USMC)
TAOR	Tactical Area of Responsibility
TO&E	Table of Organization and Equipment (US Army)
UPI	United Press International
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VC	Viet Cong
WACO	MP Radio Net
WIA	Wounded In Action

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Marine Security Guards (MSG) that defended the American Embassy in 1968 during the Tet Offensive could not have done anything more effectively. The fact that both of these units were non-tactical units makes their success even more notable. In fact that so many of the MSGs who first responded to the Embassy attack did so with .38 caliber pistols is notable for the valor such an action displays. That these poorly armed and outnumbered Marines quickly wrestled the initiative away from the attackers is miraculous. The attack on the embassy, while a clear tactical victory for the United States military, became a political and strategic victory for the Viet Cong.

While it is true that media coverage did have a role in turning American public opinion against the war, it is not the only factor. Public opinion had begun to turn against the war in the fall of 1967. This shift came on the heels of President Johnson's request for a 10 percent surtax on corporate and individual income taxes. The Johnson administration and the military attempts to show that progress was being made in Vietnam created a credibility gap that ensured that the shock to the American psyche caused by the Tet Offensive and the attack on the Embassy was maximized.

Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland did not perceive a direct threat to Saigon in general and the Embassy in particular. Although both men petitioned the President of South Vietnam to cancel the Tet holiday ceasefire and leave for the military, they did not offer U.S. combat units for the enhancement of security for Saigon. The Ambassador did not inform the Chief of Security for the Embassy, Leo Crampsey, that there was an increased threat of guerrilla attacks in Saigon the night of the attack, although General Westmoreland had alerted him.

The MPs and MSGs that defended the Embassy performed extremely well. Two tactical factors that were well beyond their control could have allowed them to deny access by the enemy to the grounds. Both of these factors were State Department decisions.

First, the MPs (the only security with M-16s) were able to put suppressive fire on the enemy point of entry, killing or wounding the first four enemy soldiers. The two MPs were killed by two embassy drivers, employees of the Department of State who were also Viet Cong guerrillas.

Second, another State Department decision that may have affected the outcome (or at least duration) of the battle was the fact that the MSGs did not have access to M-16s or M-14s. There was no stock of these weapons in the armory at the embassy. The Ambassador had the authority to secure these weapons, as was done after the battle. However, the ambassador had this authority prior to the battle, as evidenced by the fact that his personal protective services unit had access to two M-16s for a worst case scenario.

A number of factors prior to the battle, such as the political situation, the emerging credibility gap, and the poor media-military relations ensured that scenes of the U.S. MPs and Marines fighting for their own embassy would cause a negative impact on the public opinion.

The operational and strategic perspective held by Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland did not match the tactical realities on the ground. The attack on the American Embassy brought this disconnection between perception and reality into

harsh focus. The simple fact that the Viet Cong could attempt such an offensive was stunning.

The one thing that is clear is that the MPs and MSGs performed remarkably. The only measure of effectiveness that they did not meet was keeping the enemy completely off the grounds. This standard, though unreasonable, could have been achieved if the State Department had not hired two terrorists as drivers. The State Department could have also had a positive effect if M-16s or M-14s were stocked for emergency use.

The tactical victory achieved by the Marine Security Guards (MSGs) and Military Police (MPs) was overshadowed by the massive credibility gap that the Tet Offensive and attack on the Embassy magnified. Numerous factors such as the political situation and the worsening media/military relations occurred long before the battle took place. The media, in their quest to report the tragic aspects of the offensive and the Embassy battle overlooked the unmitigated valor of a force of poorly armed non-tactical troops who fought tenaciously to prevent entry into the chancery building and to neutralize the Viet Cong on the grounds.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On 31 January 1968, the Tet Offensive began, and as historian, Dr. James H. Willbanks, notes it “was the pivotal event of the long Vietnam War.”¹ Retired Ambassador David F. Lambertson, a political officer at the Saigon Embassy echoes this appraisal, stating “it was a shock to American and world opinion. The attack on the Embassy, the single most powerful symbol [of U.S. presence] signaled that something was badly wrong in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive broke the back of American public opinion.”²

The forces that responded to the attack on the American Embassy, United States Marine Security Guards (MSGs) and United States Army Military Police (MPs) achieved clear victory over the enemy. Their actions are even more significant due to their role as non-tactical units.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the factors that set the conditions for the battle and the psychological impact of the Embassy Battle on the American public. The unique confluence of factors originating from the disparate quarters of military, political, allied, enemy, and U.S. media unwittingly synchronized all elements to maximize the psychological impact on the American people. The marines and MSGs could not have done anything to avert negative effect on public opinion, the political defeat. Thus, a tactical victory became a strategic defeat.

The Tet Offensive of 1968 had dramatic repercussions politically and in the court of public opinion. The media centered their focus on the occurrence of the American Embassy battle because they had ready access to the buildings, not because of the

military importance of the battle. Media reports inflamed the already shifting American public and world opinion. The strained relationship between military command and reporters resulted in skewed journalism and less-than-honest press releases by the government. The media reports of the embassy battle bombarded the public with images that helped to destroy the credibility of the information reported by government officials, resulting in genuine public outrage. This was perhaps the most decisive point in the Vietnam conflict.³

Don Oberdorfer, writing the preface of his updated edition of *TET!* states, “at the dawn of the twenty-first century it is clear that the Tet Offensive of 1968 was the turning point of the U.S. war in Vietnam, and thus a historic event of lasting importance.”⁴

Perhaps the most significant impact of the Tet Offensive on political and military leaders was the realization that the United States could not solve a political problem solely through the application of military might. The U.S. military could not win the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese without a legitimate reliable and partner state.⁵

The impact on the American public’s psyche was profound. Author Keith W. Nolan states that “the Tet offensive was the watershed event of the Vietnam War” and that the first day of the offensive was “the day the war was lost in the hearts and minds of the American people.” The public could not reconcile the good news campaign of their leaders with news images of U.S. soldiers “engaged in a full blown firefight with Viet Cong sappers at the United States Embassy Compound in downtown Saigon.”⁶

The events at the embassy during the first hours of the Tet Offensive would receive worldwide attention; since the building symbolized American power and prestige in Vietnam. Perhaps more significantly, the embassy was a place that Americans could

relate to, as Don Oberdorfer noted, “the first understandable battle of the war.”⁷

Accessibility of the battle to reporters played a key role in the amount of print and television coverage the media gave to the embassy battle. All of the television networks, wire services, and print media maintained offices and residences in downtown Saigon, mere blocks away.⁸

While the Tet Offensive in general and the embassy battle in particular are significant for their military characteristics, more compelling is the psychological effect on the American public and resulting political consequences.⁹ Peter Braestrup, a reporter at the time of the attack writes in *Big Story* that “. . . our very preoccupation with the embassy fight that first morning exaggerated the event’s importance and ‘psychological effect.’”¹⁰ Reporters devoted far less attention to cover more significant battles such as the attack on Ton Son Nhut airport, the Phu Tho Racetrack, or the attack on the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff Headquarters across from Bachelor’s Officer’s Quarters (BOQ) #3. Braestrup goes on to say, “the embassy fight became the whole Tet Offensive on TV and in the newspapers during the offensive’s second day . . . newsmen did not warn their audiences it was . . . only one, inconclusive part of the whole.”¹¹

Public Opinion

The Tet Offensive, though it is the one discernible event that has been labeled the “turning point,” occurred after a number of events set the conditions for maximum public impact. Public opinion started to shift in the fall of 1967.¹² This shift occurred following the President’s announcement of a proposed 10 percent surcharge on the tax returns of corporations and individuals.¹³

The Johnson Administration, aware of the crisis of confidence brewing with the American public, engaged in an aggressive public relations campaign designed to bolster support for the war effort. This good news campaign would actually create the conditions for the “shock” experienced by the American public in the aftermath of Tet. The juxtaposition of the administration assertions that the enemy had been dealt a severe blow with the images of destruction in Saigon and Hue were just too much for most people to reconcile.

Alert Issued

Much has been written about the intelligence failure that preceded the Tet offensive. David T. Zabecki writing for the *Vietnam Magazine*, 40th Anniversary of Tet issue, writes that “even after the first full day of nationwide fighting, the allied command still didn’t have a clear picture of what was happening.”¹⁴ General William E. Westmoreland maintained in a press conference the evening of 31 January 1968, that the attacks on cities were a diversion for the main attack that was still to come at Khe Sahn.¹⁵

The allies at Khe Sahn were facing massed North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regular troops backed by artillery whereas the cities were attacked by Viet Cong that were relatively lightly armed. The South Vietnamese General Staff, trained by their American counterparts, focused on capabilities when analyzing intelligence, not on the enemy’s intentions or desires. It was abundantly clear to the allies that the enemy could not hold on to the cities even if he managed to take them.¹⁶ The allies accordingly oriented forces to the more pressing military threat.

The press drew a parallel between Khe Sahn and Dien Bien Phu. Although there were many differences, not the least of which was the United States’ ability to supply

Khe Sahn via air corridor, the analogy haunted President Johnson; who then insisted that his generals sign a pledge that Khe Sahn would not fall.¹⁷ The President made his conviction clear saying, “I don’t want any damn Dinbinphoo [sic].”¹⁸

General William E. Westmoreland, Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), although convinced that the enemy’s main effort was focused on Khe Sahn and the demilitarized zone (DMZ), took steps to protect the capital of Saigon in case of attack. Lieutenant General Frederick C. Weyand, “a former intelligence officer and future Chief of Staff of the Army,”¹⁹ was the Commander of the II Field Forces, in the III Corps Tactical Zone. General Weyand had 39 of 53 combat battalions deployed to the Cambodian border. Alarmed by the intelligence he was receiving he telephoned General Westmoreland on 10 January 1968 and requested permission to redeploy battalions to double the number in the Saigon defensive belt. General Westmoreland made a critical and fortuitous decision by agreeing to General Weyand’s request.²⁰ This deployment of troops prevented the communist second wave of attack from striking, and ensured the survival of the Military Police (MPs) in Saigon and Air Force Security Police (SPs) at Ton Son Nhut.²¹ Since the MPs and SPs were the only American organized resistance at the time, this action quite probably prevented the fall of Saigon.

The Americans had yielded the responsibility for the security of Saigon to the ARVN the previous December. This left only the 1,000 man 716th Military Police (MP) BN, and attached companies, which guarded 130 installations in the city, and provided police patrols, to defend the city proper.²² Many MPs rode in jeeps armed with M1911A1 pistols and twenty-one rounds. For the increased alert status prior to Tet, all

carried M-16 rifles. Their day-to-day duties primarily consisted of traditional military law enforcement and security guard duties at American installations.

General Westmoreland then personally alerted three key officials in Saigon. On 24 January, he briefed Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker about his mounting concerns of an enemy offensive and suggested the cancellation of the planned ceasefire. After consulting with Washington, Bunker and Westmoreland approached Nguyen Van Thieu, the President of South Vietnam with their concerns.

President Thieu agreed to a complete cancellation of the truce in the North (I Corps). He previously agreed to shorten the truce countrywide to 36 hours. However, the announcement that should have come from the government press office did not materialize. The office was closed for the Tet holiday at the time. As Don Oberdorfer in *TET!* observes, “. . . to the Americans, this was a telling indication of Vietnamese priorities between the holiday and the war, Tet won easily.”²³

The day after the night attacks on I and II Corps, President Thieu agreed to cancel the truce throughout the country. However, the president did not return to Saigon. It did not seem that the South Vietnamese government made a great effort to recall troops from leave.²⁴

General William Westmoreland telephoned Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk, the Headquarters Area Commander, on the morning of Tuesday, 30 January 1968. General Irzyk had operational control of the 716th Military Police (MP) Battalion (BN); although a Combat Service Support (CSS) element, it was the only unit capable of countering enemy attacks in the city. General Westmoreland stated, “I have strong indications that sappers may be operating in town tonight. Accordingly, I want your command on

maximum alert.”²⁵ General Westmoreland made these notifications personally. He did not delegate the responsibility to a deputy or staff officer. He personally conveyed the alert to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, President Nguyen Van Thieu, and to Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk. Alerts however, were a part of everyday life for soldiers in Vietnam. Most frequently, alerts came and went with no significant activity. Much of the intelligence prior to Tet was believed to be propaganda designed to boost the morale of enemy troops rather than an actual operational plan. One intelligence officer described his disbelief of the intelligence indications of a massive offensive saying, “if we’d gotten the whole battle plan, it wouldn’t have been believed. It wouldn’t have been credible to us.”²⁶

An American embassy had not been the target of an organized armed attack by hostile forces since the Chinese Boxer Rebellion of 1900.²⁷ Captain Robert J. O’Brien (no relation to the author), Officer in Charge (OIC) of the Marine Security Guard Detachment at the embassy in Saigon, received word from State Department Regional Security Officer Leo J. Crampsey that there was an increased threat of sappers in the city (all Marines not on duty would remain in their living quarters). Captain O’Brien immediately secured liberty, doubled the guard at all Department of State posts, including the embassy, and changed the Marine Security Guard (MSG) uniform from dress blue pants and khaki shirt to utilities.²⁸

The Headquarters Area Command, the 716th MP Battalion (BN), and the Marine Security Guard Detachment all received the alert, doubled the guard, and organized Quick Reaction Forces (QRF) of men not on duty. What was not expected was the immensity of the Viet Cong onslaught against the city of Saigon.

Media

The relationship that existed between the military and media prior to the Tet offensive had become strained. Although correspondents were allowed unfettered access and military transportation to battlefields, resentment on the part of journalists was beginning to mount. General William Westmoreland, over the objections of his staff, issued a memorandum to journalists requesting that they avoid stories that portrayed the South Vietnamese allies in a bad light.²⁹ Many journalists perceived this as an attempt by General Westmoreland to issue an order and they bridled at what they perceived as a trespass into their purview.

The Saigon Press Corps had long viewed the South Vietnamese government as corrupt and brutal.³⁰ The efforts by the Johnson administration and the MACV to enhance the South Vietnamese Government's image further alienated the press and underscored the "credibility gap."³¹ The nightly press briefings held by the MACV Office of Information became known among the Saigon press corps as "the five o'clock follies."³² The sarcasm and distrust evident in the remarks had become blatant hostility by the time the Tet Offensive occurred; so much that it seemed to Peter Braestrup, a reporter at the scene of the embassy battle, that the press was eager to see things go badly.

Overview of the Tet Offensive

During the early morning hours of 31 January, approximately 80,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas attacked over 100 cities throughout South Vietnam. The old imperial capital of Hue was assaulted. The current capitol of Saigon was attacked. Tet involved enemy attacks on 35 of 44 province

capitals, 36 district towns, numerous American military installations, and Government of Vietnam (GVN) facilities. “The goal was to achieve a popular uprising against the GVN (Government of Vietnam) and to show the American public that the very notion of security was null and void.”³³ “Communist forces were given the general order “Move Forward to Achieve Final Victory.”³⁴

The battle for Saigon had begun months before the opening shots were fired. Weapons and ammunition had been stockpiled for some time. Viet Cong sappers had familiarized themselves with the city by working as taxi drivers or pedal cab drivers and some had found employment on U.S. installations. “By the start of Tet, the communists had massed the equivalent of about 35 battalions around the capital and about 4,000 sappers within Saigon for the attack.”³⁵

The assault on Saigon, while proportionally accounting for a quarter of the enemy troop strength of the entire offensive, would garner disproportionate results in the international media. The attack on metropolitan Saigon was ambitious and targeted strategic assets. The Communists identified six primary targets in the Saigon area. Their objectives were: the headquarters of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS); the Independence Palace, which served as President Nguyen Van Thieu’s office; the American Embassy; Ton Son Nhut Air Base; the Vietnamese Navy headquarters; and, the National Broadcasting Station. Many secondary targets were also attacked, including Bachelor’s Officer’s Quarters (BOQ), Bachelor Enlisted Quarters (BEQ), the Phu Tho Racetrack, and Vietnamese police stations.³⁶ The attacks in the city of Saigon began at 0130 hours with the attack on the Imperial Palace. The building was one of the best-defended buildings in all of South Vietnam. The attack was driven off.

Nationwide, estimates of Viet Cong and NVA assets committed to the Tet offensive range from 67,000³⁷ (Oberdorfer) to 80,000³⁸ (Gilbert and Head). Of these forces, 20 men gathered a few blocks away from the embassy to mount the attack. Don Oberdorfer in *TET!* notes that: “This little group, numbering three hundredths of one percent of the total nationwide attack force, was destined to receive about three quarters of all the attention of the outside world in the first stunning hours of the Tet offensive.”³⁹ Tactically, this was a platoon action directed against a target of dubious military value. The military had long ago assumed direction of the war effort. Therefore, the tactical value of the Embassy was insignificant. The facility itself was sovereign U.S. soil, the symbol of the American presence in Vietnam and guarded by a handful of MPs and Marine Security Guards (MSGs).

Overview of the Embassy Battle

At approximately 0230 hours, the assault on the embassy began. Two vehicles with 20 Viet Cong sappers breached checkpoints on the road in front of the embassy, the outer line of defense. These checkpoints were the responsibility of the host nation (HN) government. The Vietnamese police on duty fled without firing a shot and without warning the embassy. At approximately 0240 hours, the vehicles fired on the MPs at the gate. The MPs on duty at the gate immediately returned fire, fell back behind the wall, and locked the gate. Moments later, the sappers used satchel charges to blow a hole in the 8-foot wall surrounding the embassy. The two MP guards fired on the intruders, killing the leaders. At 0247, they radioed for assistance. Before help arrived, both MPs, Specialist Charles L. Daniel and Private First Class William E. Sebast, were killed by enemy gunfire. A patrol that happened to be in the area responded to the Signal 300, the

MP brevity code for small arms fire and or explosion. The two MPs, Sergeant Jonnie B. Thomas and Private First Class Owen E. Mebust, had just dismounted when they too were killed. In the first 5 minutes of the attack, four Americans were dead. Before the end of the battle, Marine Corporal James Marshall would be the fifth to die, many more were wounded.⁴⁰

The Viet Cong attackers began firing B 40 rockets (also known as an RPG-2, a rocket propelled grenade) into the embassy doors. Leaderless, their attack stalled. The MSGs inside the embassy called for reinforcements to Marine House and MACV. At 0325, the MP Quick Reaction Force (QRF) arrived at John Fitzgerald Kennedy Circle, a short distance away. Simultaneously, Captain O'Brien, Marine Security Guard Detachment OIC, responded from Marine House with a reaction force.⁴¹ Acting in concert, the joint force annihilated the enemy, killing or capturing all enemy combatants.

Don Oberdorfer, a reporter at the scene, described the mood of the reporters present in his book entitled *TET!* He stated, "The embassy was officially declared secure at 9:15 A.M., six hours and twenty-eight minutes after the first call for help. The six-and-a-half-hour Viet Cong occupation seemed to many of them the most embarrassing defeat the United States had suffered in Vietnam."⁴²

Media Reaction

The Associated Press (AP) was the first news agency to report the attack on the embassy. Because they could not see over the eight-foot walls, they relied on second hand information from MPs in the outer cordon. An unnamed MP captain was quoted by AP saying, "... we are taking fire from up there [the upper floors of the chancery] . . . keep your head down." The AP then sent a bulletin stating that "the Viet Cong seized

part of the US Embassy . . . communist commandos penetrated the supposedly attack proof building.”⁴³ The AP stood by its story for several days. Peter Arnett, an AP reporter, continued to use the incorrect information from the unnamed MP captain about the Viet Cong entering the chancery after the compound was secured. He stated, “. . . we left it up to the reader to decide, somehow indicating our own doubt about the General’s [Westmoreland] statement.” He added “we had little faith in what General Westmoreland stated . . . often in the field we had reason to be extremely careful in accepting the General’s assessments of the course of a particular battle.”⁴⁴

Reporter Peter Braestrup did not blindly accept General Westmoreland’s assertion that the chancery had not been penetrated. He observed the battered but intact front doors, found all the other doors secure, saw superficial damage, and concluded that General Westmoreland’s explanation was entirely “plausible.”⁴⁵ A journalist who does not use powers of observation and deduction to determine the true course of events becomes little more than a bystander.

The media role in coverage of the Tet offensive remains controversial 40 years after the event. The reporting of events during the embassy battle became a microcosm for the problems debated for decades about the role of the media in shaping public and political opinion. Robert Elegant, a reporter in Vietnam, wrote in his book *How to Lose a War Reflections of a Foreign Correspondent*, that the military had “virtually crushed the Viet Cong” but that the war was ultimately lost due to “superficial and biased,” “skewed reporting” that depicted the Tet battles as an allied defeat. Elegant went on to say that a combination of reporters’ anti-war sentiment and shock due to the force of the Tet offensive led to an interpretation that “resisted all the evidence pointing to a much more

complex reality.” This reporting precluded the United States government from pursuing the war as rigorously as it had previously.⁴⁶ David F. Schmitz summarized Peters Braestrup’s analysis in *Big Story*, writing that reporters “overstated the shock” by “focusing on the most dramatic events such as the battle . . .” at the embassy.”⁴⁷ Braestrup blamed lack of staff among news organizations and a lack of knowledge among journalists about even the most basic military concepts. This led to a misreporting of the actual significance of the attack. The exaggerated media reports seem as similar to the actual battle as a witness who reports a violent assault when the event is actually cardio pulmonary resuscitation. The massive volume of reporting, misreporting, omission, and lack of context would have grave and irreversible consequences for the U.S. military effort in South Vietnam.

Host Nation Forces

Although the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) consistently outpaced U.S. casualties in those killed in action (KIA) and wounded in action,⁴⁸ their performance during the early hours of Tet was not impressive. During the fight for the embassy, South Vietnamese security forces’ participation was virtually nonexistent. Despite several calls from an aide to Ambassador Bunker, the captain in charge of the National Police precinct less than a block away from the embassy refused to send help.⁴⁹ The Military Police usually had a pool of 300 Vietnamese National Police, Military Police, and civilian security guards who accompanied MP patrols or augmented static guard posts. On the evening of Tet, only 25 had reported for duty. Brigadier General Irzyk, the Headquarters Area Commander stated, “although Vietnamese police and

military installations were located near the biggest battles in the city, the MPs received absolutely no assistance of any kind from them for upwards of the first 18 hours.”⁵⁰

The outer ring of security at the embassy was the responsibility of the host nation forces. On the evening of the attack, four Cahn Sat National Police officers were on duty in front of the embassy. When the attack started two hid and two fled. None offered any resistance to the Viet Cong or any warning to the American soldiers and marines.⁵¹

Radio Saigon announced that troops of local garrisons were to return from leaves immediately. Whether troops failed to listen to the radio, did not understand that the truce had been amended, or chose not to obey, the result was the same: few troops on leave returned to duty in Saigon.⁵² This would become a serious issue during the first twenty-four hours of the Battle of Saigon.

On a strategic level, the South Vietnamese government had not fully mobilized. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted in a meeting on 30 January 1968, “there is no excuse for the Vietnamese not lowering their draft age to below twenty.”⁵³ This illustrated that the government of South Vietnam was not completely committed to its own defense.

All of the previously stated issues combined to create the conditions that allowed the Tet offensive to achieve maximum impact. The South Vietnamese government had assumed responsibility for the security of Saigon. Every level of government assigned a higher priority to the holiday than they did security. The South Vietnamese were responsible for the outer ring of security for the embassy. They failed unequivocally. The attack on the Imperial Palace, President Nguyen Van Thieu’s office, was repelled immediately; due in part to the fact that several tanks backed by infantry were present.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers on duty were alert, competent, and effective.

The media, whether consciously or subconsciously, was spring-loaded to pounce on an event to air their own views; and the attack on the American Embassy became that venue. As Peter Braestrup writes in *Big Story*, reporters displayed a “built in suspicion of US claims” due to the overly optimistic public affairs campaign of the administration. Other journalists developed a “sour determination to counter official blindness with exposure to the mishaps and horrors of war.”⁵⁴ This had an effect on the reporting and a devastating impact on public opinion. The basic fact that the military won all the battles of the Tet Offensive including the engagement at the Embassy seemed to be lost in the overall tone of the reporting.

This thesis will examine the various factors that contributed to the conversion of the tactical victory at the American Embassy into a political defeat; Chapter 2 will show the significance of the Tet holiday in Vietnamese culture and how two separate decisions, ceding the security of Saigon to the SVG and the liberal Tet leave policy created a virtually defenseless city. The description of the Embassy sets the stage for the battle. The non-tactical role of the MSGs and MPs will be examined.

Chapter 3 will examine public opinion and the good news campaign that created false impressions about progress in Vietnam and inadvertently maximized the shock of Tet and the Battle at the Embassy. The rapidly deteriorating media--military relations will be examined.

Chapter 4 will use key parts of the battle to demonstrate the effectiveness and valor of the MSGs and MPs. The areas and reaction teams form the framework to

explain this. It is not a comprehensive account of the battle. The Viet Cong perspective using declassified CMIC documents will be used

Chapter 5 will offer conclusions and relevance for today and how a tactical victory can become a strategic political loss. Areas for further study by future scholars will be offered. The valor of the MSGs and MPs will conclude the thesis. The MPs and MSGs could not have been more effective. Their performance was well above their role as non tactical troops.

All of the factors alone could not have produced the shock wave that resulted from the Tet Offensive and the Battle at the Embassy. However, the convergence of these factors created a synergistic effect that was exponentially increased and had a devastating impact on the American public and support for the war in Vietnam. The next chapter will focus on the conditions that made Saigon vulnerable to this attack.

¹James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), xvi.

²Ambassador (retired) David F. Lambertson, Personal communication with author, 11 February 2009, Easton, Kansas.

³David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive; Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 160.

⁴Don Oberdorfer, *TET!* (Garden City, NY: Avon Books, 1971), xi.

⁵William Thomas Allison, *The Tet Offensive: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 72.

⁶Keith W. Nolan, *The Battle For Saigon; Tet 1968* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 2002), xi.

⁷Oberdorfer, 5.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Schmitz, xiii.

¹⁰Peter Braestrup, *Big Story* Abridged Edition (New Haven, CT: Anchor Book, 1978), 110.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Schmitz, 52.

¹³Oberdorfer, 81.

¹⁴David T. Zabecki, "Tet 40th Anniversary: The Battle for Saigon," *Vietnam Magazine* 20 (February 2008): 28.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶James R. Arnold, *Tet Offensive, 1968: Turning Point in Vietnam* (London, UK: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1990), 37.

¹⁷Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*: 25.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Zabecki, 26.

²⁰Arnold, 39.

²¹Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk, *Unsung Heroes Saving Saigon* (Raleigh, NC: Ivy House Publishing, 2008), 210.

²²Arnold 44.

²³Oberdorfer, 132.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Irzyk, 58.

²⁶Schmitz, 88.

²⁷Major Robert J. O'Brien, USMC, "The Night They Breached the Wall" (Monograph, Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, VA, 1976), 2. Note: Robert J. O'Brien was a Captain at the time of the attack on the Embassy, a Major when he wrote his monograph, and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

²⁸LTC (Ret) Robert J. O'Brien, Letter to Author, 5 December 2008.

²⁹Don North, "VC Assault on the U.S. Embassy," *Vietnam Magazine* 20, no. 5 (February 2008), 39.

- ³⁰Braestrup, 3, 4.
- ³¹Ibid., 5-6.
- ³²Ibid., 15.
- ³³Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 21.
- ³⁴Ibid.
- ³⁵James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 77.
- ³⁶Arnold, 41.
- ³⁷Oberdorfer, 4-5.
- ³⁸Gilbert and Head, 21; and Oberdorfer, 116.
- ³⁹Oberdorfer, 5.
- ⁴⁰Thomas L. Johnson and Mary R. Himes, *Assault on the American Embassy, Tet, 1968* (Ft McClellan, AL: The MP Museum, 1983), 10-15.
- ⁴¹Johnson and Himes 8-15.
- ⁴²Oberdorfer, 33.
- ⁴³Arnold, 55.
- ⁴⁴Braestrup, 85.
- ⁴⁵Ibid.
- ⁴⁶Schmitz, 160.
- ⁴⁷Ibid.
- ⁴⁸James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 42.
- ⁴⁹Oberdorfer, 22-23.
- ⁵⁰Irzyk, 193-194.
- ⁵¹Oberdorfer, 9-10.

⁵²Braestrup, 69.

⁵³Allison, 128.

⁵⁴Braestrup, 16.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

Significance of Tet Holiday

A number of factors created the unique set of circumstances that set the stage for the Embassy Battle. Among these were the Tet Holiday, the physical environment of Saigon, and as previously stated, the status of the MSGs and MPs as non-tactical units. These factors originate from very different sources yet had a significant impact on the battle at the Embassy.

Tet is defined simply as the Chinese Lunar New Year. It is much more compelling in the Vietnamese culture in that, it is a veritable super holiday that combines all the aspects of the western holidays in one celebration. It is a sacred time of year to honor ancestors and visit with relatives, forgive past grievances, and look forward to the New Year.

Tet is officially a weeklong celebration with the last three days of the week signifying the ushering in the New Year. After years of war, for Tet of 1968, the South Vietnamese Government loosened the restrictions on previous year's festivities. The midnight to 4 a.m. curfew was lifted.¹ The ban on fireworks was rescinded. Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk, Saigon Headquarters Area Commander, stated in his book *Unsung Heroes: Saving Saigon* that "During . . . the evening on January 30, Saigon was an unbelievably riotous and boisterous city filled with revelers. . . . The celebrating was . . . unabashedly uninhibited."²

Lee Lecaze, a *Washington Post* reporter, filed a story that was later pre-empted by the Tet attacks. He described the lack of a sense of urgency among the South Vietnamese

Government and ARVN troops in Saigon. The South Vietnamese Government was closed down for the holiday in spite of President Thieu's announcement canceling the ceasefires and ordering troops to full alert. Military headquarters did not appear to be reinforced. U.S. commanders were angered by the Vietnamese "lack of vigilance." The U.S. commanders found it "almost impossible to get in touch with Vietnamese officials about the cancellation of the cease-fire."³ The Vietnamese had either left the city or were reveling and unreachable.

The view stated above that there was a "lack of vigilance" does not tell the entire story. The reduced presence of South Vietnamese troops was a factor in Saigon. However, President Thieu was very much concerned about the morale of the armed forces and the morale of the population. He had to balance the threat against the appearance that the government feared the communists. President Thieu's and his government's credibility was very much at stake. There does not seem to be any evidence to indicate that Ambassador Bunker or General Westmoreland offered to fortify Saigon with U.S. combat troops during the Tet holiday.

The very idea of an attack during Tet was a monumental sacrilege because all ethnicities and religions observed the Tet holiday. An attack on this day would be so blasphemous that it was considered inconceivable. The North Vietnamese Government reinterpreted the lunar calendar to celebrate Tet early. However, several individuals paid heed to numerous intelligence indicators and took action. Brigadier General Phillip B. Davidson, (MACV G-2), after reading the reports of the battles in the cities of I and II Corps, told General Westmoreland, "this is going to happen in the rest of the country tonight or tomorrow morning."⁴ The General agreed and petitioned President Thieu to

cancel the ceasefire, but Thieu believed it would be bad for the morale of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces and send a particularly poor message to the citizens of South Vietnam.

The description of the physical characteristics of the embassy describes where the battle took place. The significance is the attention paid to security considerations as evidenced by the eight foot high reinforced concrete security wall that encompassed the compound, the four inch thick teakwood main doors and the anti-rocket façade that shielded the entire chancery building. These measures succeeded in preventing the enemy access to the chancery building itself.

Description of Physical Structure of Embassy

The American Embassy in Saigon was located at 4 Thong Nhut (Unity) Boulevard. It occupied 3.18 acres of land and assimilated two previously built structures. These were a villa (later the mission coordinator's house) and an adjacent smaller house that, prior to incorporation into the embassy compound, was the servant's quarters. The chancery building was constructed of materials that had been shipped from the United States, measured 208 by 49 feet, rose six stories, and had a heliport on the roof that was 75 by 49 feet. There were 240 offices and other rooms in the building. Security and attack resistance measures were incorporated into the design by the architects, originally Curtis and Davis of New Orleans with the final design by Adrian Wilson and Associates of Los Angeles. The façade was made of eight by four foot terra cotta blocks. The white lattice concrete was actually a façade that stood four feet from the actual building. This façade was designed as an anti-rocket screen. It performed as designed, detonating rockets fired at upper floors harmlessly away from the building.⁵ The first floor had a

granite slab facing the exterior. The main doors of the embassy were massive four-inch thick teakwood.

Directly adjacent to the Chancery Compound was the Consular Section Compound also known as Norodom Compound. This had an office building, the Office of Special Assistant (OSA) building, (see figures 1-3 American Embassy area, City of Saigon map, photo of chancery building) and a dog run. The Norodom Compound was where the day-to-day consular work, such as granting visas, was accomplished. The combined chancery and Norodom Compound were surrounded by an eight-foot high concrete wall, also reputed to be rocket proof.⁶

The front yard had twelve large concrete planters that bounded the front and north side of the chancery building.⁷ They were large enough to conceal and cover a man from small arms fire. The Viet Cong sappers used these during the battle to shield themselves from the MPs and Marines firing into the compound. They were removed after the battle and donated to a local park.

Two police kiosks were built into the wall--one on Mac Dinh Chi Street and the other on Thong Nhut Street. The host nation, South Vietnam, as is the case worldwide, was responsible for the outer ring of security. The kiosks were positioned and designed for the men on duty to protect the exterior of the embassy compound. The Vietnamese police or Cahn Sats occupied a compound less than one block away from the embassy.

The chancery building was the seat of power where the Ambassador worked. It housed secure communication links to the Pentagon and White House, as well as a treasure trove of classified documents. The chancery building is the actual embassy. The

term embassy was routinely used to denote the entire embassy compound. The distinction may seem fine, but became a critical indicator of success in the battle.

Mission, Organization, Training, and Equipment: MSGs

The primary mission of the MSG force at the embassy in Saigon was protecting classified information. MSGs were specially selected for the prestigious duty. All Marines including the MSGs attended infantry training. The organization and equipping of the MSGs reflects their non-tactical role.

The MSG detachment in Saigon numbered 95 men in January 1968 and was the largest in the world. They kept 24-hour security on a dozen outlying buildings spread throughout the city including the Ambassador's residence.⁸ They also provided VIP escorts through their personal security unit.

Major [at the time of publication of his monograph] Robert J. O'Brien, former Marine Security Guard Detachment Officer in Charge of the Saigon embassy describes the mission of MSGs (quoting from the MSG post report of January 1968) in his monograph, "The Night They Breached the Wall," "The MSG Detachments . . . around the world, had as its' primary mission, the security of classified material, and a secondary mission to protect American lives and property." The detachments are under the "operational control of and work directly for the Embassy Security Officer."⁹

MSGs patrolled the embassy and other facilities to prevent a breach of classified information. They checked for things such as a typewriter ribbon that was left in a typewriter to ensure the proper disposal of classified material and that sensitive areas were locked down when not in use.¹⁰

The Marine Security Guard was a special individual. He was handpicked for the duty; which was, as it remains today, the most prestigious duty in the Marine Corps. The individual Marine was required to have a spotless background check and impeccable training record. Each man had to reach a high state of physical fitness and “look like a Marine.” Most Marines assigned to embassy duty were veritable “talking recruiting posters.”

All Marines were, and still are, required to attend Infantry Training Regiment (ITR) after their initial boot camp. This stands in stark contrast to the Military Police who, at that time, completed the law enforcement-oriented Military Police School after basic training. As such, they had an exceedingly minimal familiarity with the infantry tactics of fire team movements and individual movement techniques.¹¹

The detachment went from a ten or twelve man unit with one non commissioned officer in charge (NCOIC) in 1965 to a 95-man unit task organized into five sections commanded by a Marine captain with five staff non commissioned officers (NCOs) in 1968. This was the largest MSG detachment in the world, the only one to have a personal security unit (PSU). The PSU was responsible for VIP security of the ambassador. The MSG was augmented by one MP section.¹²

The majority of the MSGs were organized into three sections (Sections I, II, and III) of 20 to 24 men with a staff sergeant designated as team leader. The uniform was usually a dress uniform.¹³ The primary weapon was a .38 caliber revolver with 5 rounds of ammunition. These MSGs provided security at 16 posts for 12 locations spread throughout the city of Saigon.

Section IV consisted of 12 men and a Staff Sergeant NCOIC guarding two to three posts at the ambassador's residence. They normally wore civilian clothes. Each MSG was armed with a .38 caliber revolver and a 9-millimeter Beretta sub machine gun (SMG).

Section V was the PSU that protected the Ambassador. They wore civilian clothes and were armed as directed by the State Department Embassy Security Officer. As Major (at the time of publication of his monograph) O'Brien notes they were "under the direct, exclusive supervision of the Embassy Security Officer [the unit] was a very selective, specially trained Personal Security Unit."¹⁴ This was the only unit of its kind at the time, and was the forerunner for the current Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) of the Department of the State.

The United States Army MP Section consisted of 10 MPs that were under the operational control of the MSG OIC. These uniformed MPs were armed with M1911A1 .45 caliber pistols and M-16 rifles. They carried 21 rounds of .45 caliber ammunition and 60 rounds of ammunition for the M-16s. Their primary duty was to provide external security at entrances and exit gates of the embassy compound.¹⁵

As previously stated, the MSG detachment Officer in Charge (OIC) was Captain Robert J. O'Brien. He was assisted by a Senior Staff NCO, Gunnery Sergeant Allen Morrison. Captain O'Brien reported to the Regional Security Officer of the Department of State, Leo Cramsey. Mr. Cramsey's assistant was Mr. Robert Furey.

To accomplish their mission, MSGs were equipped accordingly. Each Marine on duty was armed with a .38 caliber pistol. Procedures mandated that the 6-round revolver

be carried with one chamber empty for reasons of safety. Such a revolver, if dropped, could strike the ground in such a manner as to engage the firing pin, discharging a round.

Marines on duty carried no reloads for the revolver.¹⁶ MSGs that were off duty did not carry weapons. This was the norm established in Saigon. Personnel who did not specifically require a weapon for the performance of their duty did not carry one.

Furthermore, each individual did not necessarily have an assigned weapon, locked in an arms room that could be issued in the event of an emergency. The weapon of maximum firepower available was the diminutive 9-millimeter Beretta submachine gun (SMG). It was valued more for its concealability than anything else. It was a little bigger than a pistol, held 20 rounds and was capable of automatic fire. The MSGs did not possess flak jackets, helmets, M-16s or M-14s. It simply was not on their table of equipment (T/E).¹⁷

These were the weapons available to the Marine Security Detachment on 30 January 1968. These were the weapons that they would initially use to fight Viet Cong Sappers armed with AK-47s and B-40 rocket launchers. Several Marines later borrowed M1911A1.45s and M-16s from responding MPs.

The United States Army MPs' presence at the embassy was two men. During the day, one would man the main gate and one would man the vehicle gate, also referred to as the "side gate." When business hours ended, the main gate was locked and the side gate became a two-man post. In spite of the small presence of two dismounted MPs, they contributed a vital element to the battle. They had a radio and alerted the Provost Marshal's Office (PMO) immediately upon commencement of the attack. They also were both armed with M-16s and inflicted the first casualties on the enemy.¹⁸

Mission, Organization, Training, and Equipment: MPs

The MPs in Vietnam served in a variety of roles including combat functions. The MPs in Saigon primarily performed law enforcement and physical security duties. Their organization and daily employment reflected that of a civilian police department. MPs did not undergo combat training. The MPs in Saigon did have a prepared disaster plan. The plan addressed isolated terrorist incidents; it did not address tactical employment of the 716th MP BN. The MPs in Vietnam conducted combat missions; for the first time in the history of the U.S. armed forces, an MP unit was assigned a tactical area of responsibility (TAOR). The 18th MP Brigade was assigned a TAOR adjacent to Long Binh.¹⁹ The MPs in Saigon did not, however, have tactical responsibility for the city of Saigon.

The MPs in Saigon were tasked by their Table of Organization and Equipment and by the Headquarters Area Command to provide:

Mission: Enforcement of military laws, orders and regulations, to include control of traffic, stragglers, circulation of individuals, protection of property, handling of prisoners of war, and operation of checkpoints.²⁰

“The battalion had the . . . daily responsibility of committing 350 military policemen to the physical security of over 130 officer and enlisted quarters strung throughout Saigon and Cholon. During the Tet Offensive, when the Viet Cong made an all-out effort to capture Saigon, not one of these facilities fell to the enemy although 27 military policemen were killed in action and another 44 wounded while defending them.”²¹

Brigadier General Alvin F. Irzyk in his book, *Unsung Heroes: Saving Saigon*, uses crime statistics to underscore the law enforcement nature of the MPs: “During the

previous year, [1967] their [the MP's] statistics for Americans were six murders, fifteen suicides, 550 assaults, 1,688 larcenies, 3,767 traffic accidents with 87 fatalities, 15,000 curfew, uniform, or pass violations, and the usual scattering of forgery, weapons violations, fraud, black market deals, auto thefts, and morals charges.”²² The 716th Military Police Battalion was the largest MP battalion in the United States Army with an approximate strength of 1,100.²³ This included the attached units of the 527th MP Company, to the 90th MP detachment (Provost Marshal's Office) and a rifle security company of the 52nd Infantry Division.

The PMO was headed by LTC Richard E. George. This was not a command position. Subsequent to and because of the battle, the Provost Marshal and command functions in the 716th were combined. The PMO consisted of a section of 14 personnel including desk sergeants and radio operators.²⁴ The Provost Marshal's Office consisted of seven sections: the desk sergeant/radio operators, patrol sections, traffic section, physical security section, prisoner of war section, and confinement section for U.S. prisoners who had been charged with a criminal act. The organization functioned as a normal police organization with the added responsibility of physical security for 130 installations, primarily BOQs and BEQs throughout the Saigon/Cholon area.

The MPs in Saigon in 1968 were set up almost exactly like their civilian counterparts. Patrols were conducted by two MPs in a canvas-topped quarter-ton jeep with a Vietnamese military policeman or national policeman. The primary function of the Vietnamese policeman was to act as an interpreter. They had jurisdiction over Vietnamese nationals. The Provost Marshal usually employed two patrols per precinct in this manner. There were also gun jeeps that mounted an M-60 machine gun. These were

manned by an attached infantry soldier and were usually kept in reserve at the Provost Marshal's Office. It was standard practice to have two gun jeep teams standing by at all times.²⁵

The day-to-day operation MPs, were very similar to civilian law enforcement. A call, usually via the telephone, would come in to the desk sergeant. The desk sergeant ordinarily dispatched one patrol of two MPs and one Vietnamese policeman to render assistance as necessary and investigate the validity of the call. MPs were bound to their jeeps to communicate with the MP communications net because their tactical radios were vehicular mounted. If the patrol did not respond with a report quickly, the standard procedure was to dispatch an additional patrol.²⁶ These procedures were followed in the opening hours of the Tet attacks. MPs, including Sergeant Thomas and Private First Class Mebust would pay with their lives. They were the initial MP response to the "Signal 300" call for help from the MPs at the embassy.

When the Headquarters Area Commander, Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk, issued the alert to the Provost Marshal and 716th Battalion Commander, they immediately issued instructions to double the guard at all fixed posts and mobile patrols.²⁷ Additionally, all MPs not actually on shift were organized into 20 to 25-man QRFs and told to sleep in their uniforms.

Most MP units worked on a "one third" system. One-third worked a 12-hour day shift, one-third worked a 12-hour night shift, and one-third was on constant standby. This standby one-third is also used for "housekeeping" functions and short notice missions. When the Provost Marshal doubled the guard, he increased MPs on static posts from 175 to 350 for a 12-hour shift. Mobile Patrols increased to 41. An unknown

additional number of MPs manned MACV Headquarters, the Provost Marshals Office, and the Headquarters Area Command and the Armed Forces Radio Station.²⁸ Additional guards were posted at MP billeting areas such as the International Hotel.

Since the responsibility for the defense of Saigon, as stated previously, had been turned over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) on December 15, 1967, all U.S. tactical units had moved back to an outer ring of defense, 45 kilometers from the city center.²⁹ This handover of responsibility was intended to show progress in South Vietnam's ability to protect and govern itself. This decision also left the 716th MP BN as the only armed and organized U.S. unit in the city of Saigon

The 716th MP BN posted 350 men per day or 175 per shift to guard 130 U.S. installations. At approximately 1300 hours on 30 January 1968, the 716th Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Gordon D. Rowe, and Provost Marshal, Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. George, received the MACV alert from Brigadier General Irzyk. The Provost Marshal and Battalion Commander immediately made phone calls at 1300 hours from Brigadier General Irzyk's office to issue a warning order to their subordinates to double the guard, effective at 1800 hours.

The "maximum alert" issued by General Westmoreland via Brigadier General Irzyk did not have the expected effect for several reasons. First, alerts had become routine. As one 716th MP BN veteran put it, "Lieutenant Colonel Rowe [the 716 MP BN CDR] was a paranoid man. He had that battalion on alert every other day it seemed like. Ninety-nine times out of 100, nothing came of it."³⁰ Second, the battalion was prepared to react to terrorist attacks that had one or two point targets. The MPs would respond, isolate the area, and render aid to any wounded. The Viet Cong had only engaged in hit

and run type tactics up to this point, such as guerrillas engaged in sniping from buildings or from passing motorcycles. The biggest incidents were throwing a grenade or satchel charge into an establishment where American soldiers gathered.

The battalion enacted its previously prepared “disaster plan.” As author and MP Vietnam Veteran, Rick Young notes:

The disaster response plan was prepared to counter one, or at most, several terrorist-type attacks. Alert forces consisted of 25-man platoons that were dispatched in two and one-half ton trucks. Their mission was to cordon the area, prevent pilferage, and to assist emergency personnel, such as explosives ordnance disposal (EOD) and medical personnel. It was designed as a police-style response to a terrorist incident.³¹

As Mr. Young notes, this response was inadequate during Tet “with the hectic nightmare of city combat engulfed all around them.”³² This response was inappropriate and often yielded fatal results.

It seems incomprehensible that U.S. authorities in Saigon, with all the key U.S. infrastructure and headquarters facilities, would give up tactical responsibility to the South Vietnamese Government, which was beleaguered by inefficiency and corruption. It was stated previously that this was to show “progress” made by the South Vietnamese Government. It was also to address South Vietnamese sensibilities about having a large U.S. combat force in the capital city.

Don Oberdorfer writing in *TET!* states: “In the case of Saigon, the chief military worry of the Vietnamese leaders was the possibility of a coup, and they wanted military and police power firmly in their own hands. If the U.S. forces were deeply involved, that was a potential danger. There was always the possibility that the Americans someday might decide to use this power against the ruling regime.”³³ Regardless of the political machinations that led to the situation, the three U.S. units in Saigon proper that stood in

the path of the Viet Cong juggernaut were not tasked or equipped to conduct a combat mission; the Marine Security Guards, the Military Police and the Headquarters Area Command. They fielded approximately 95 men, 1,000 men, and 648 men respectively. The protection of the city was the responsibility of “a large contingent of ARVN soldiers and about 17,000 South Vietnamese police who patrolled the city streets.”³⁴

Brigadier General Irzyk, the Headquarters Area Commander, writing in *Unsung Heroes, Saving Saigon*, states that his unit was not a tactical command. None of the command’s enlisted personnel were tactical soldiers with a tactical mission. The overwhelming majority were not from the combat arms specialties of infantry, artillery, or armor. No section had trained as a tactical unit. The 716th Military Police Battalion, although armed for their role as security guards and law enforcement specialists, were not qualified for missions better suited to an infantry battalion. “But they were trained primarily as policemen--to do police work.”³⁵

The MSG detachment was equipped as security guards. The Military Police Battalion was clearly a law enforcement and security organization. The defense of the American Embassy in Saigon during Tet 1968 would default to these two units.

The next chapter will examine the political situation that existed prior to the Tet Offensive. Public opinion and the shift away from support of the war will be examined. The Johnson Administration’s good news campaign and the ironic contribution to the credibility gap will be described. The American Embassy and its psychological value as the tangible representation of American prestige in Southeast Asia will be described. Finally, media relations with the military and the resultant selective reporting will be addressed.

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- ¹Irzyk, 54.
- ²Ibid., 210.
- ³Braestrup, 72-73.
- ⁴David T. Zabecki, 28.
- ⁵Michael Patullo (former MSG), Telephone Interview by author, October 10, 2008.
- ⁶Oberdorfer, 3.
- ⁷Ibid., 24.
- ⁸Peter Lowe (former MSG), Interview by author, October 10, 2008, Portland, Maine.
- ⁹O'Brien, "The Night they Breached the Wall," 2.
- ¹⁰Oberdorfer, 10.
- ¹¹LTC (Ret) Willburn Meador, Former MSG in Saigon, 1968, Personal communication with author, October 2008, Ft Leavenworth, Kansas.
- ¹²O'Brien, "The Night they Breached the Wall," 3.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Ibid., 4.
- ¹⁵Ibid., 4-5.
- ¹⁶Warren Caudle, Electronic correspondence with author, January 20, 2009.
- ¹⁷Lieutenant Colonel (ret) Robert J. O'Brien, OIC of MSG Detachment, Saigon, 1968, Telephone interview by author, October 30, 2008.
- ¹⁸Thomas L. "Egor" Johnson, Crew Chief of Medical Evacuation Helicopter that responded to the Embassy, *Assault on the Embassy*. Interview by author, October 10, 2008, Wichita, KS.
- ¹⁹Rick Young, *Combat Police, US Army Military Police in Vietnam* (Bloomington, IN: 1st Books Library, 2003), 56.
- ²⁰Ibid., 52-53.

²¹Ibid., 71.

²²Irzyk, 60.

²³Ibid., 35.

²⁴Note: The PM and BN CDR functions were combined due to the unwieldy arrangement of two chains of command. This dual chain of command caused coordination problems during the battle and impacted negatively on the unity of effort for the Military Police response to multiple attacks.

²⁵SPC Rod Herrick, MP stationed in Saigon during Tet, Personal communication with author, December 2008.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Johnson and Himes, 2-3.

²⁸Irzyk, 59.

²⁹Oberdorfer, 137.

³⁰Sergeant First Class (Ret) Arthur Rivera, MP NCOIC that responded to Embassy, Telephone interview by author, September 12, 2008.

³¹Young, 123.

³²Ibid.

³³Oberdorfer, 136.

³⁵Irzyk, 38-9.

CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL SITUATION

Public opinion in 1967 began to shift. The prevailing attitude was that the American strategy was not working. In spite of a large commitment of U.S. forces, the enemy relied on small unit engagements and did not mass in sufficient numbers to allow the military to achieve a decisive victory. By October 1967, poll results for the first time showed a majority of Americans thought the war was a mistake. The Johnson administration responded with a rigorous public relations campaign to boost support for the war. Ironically, the optimism created would serve to maximize the shock when the Tet offensive occurred.

By 1967, the military had been involved with a commitment of ground troops for two years. As the war dragged on, it seemed that U.S. forces were fighting an elusive enemy. The Viet Cong used hit and run tactics, booby traps, and snipers to inflict casualties, and then melted away. The large set-piece battles where U.S. forces could bring their superior firepower to bear seemed more often than not to be out of reach.

An American senior officer, testifying before Congress, reflected the frustration the American people were beginning to feel. The enormous expenditure of artillery and bombs were calculated to be 12 tons for every square mile of North and South Vietnam.¹ Representative George Andrews of Alabama questioned the senior officer about the effect of the campaign:

“Do you have enough equipment?” asked the congressman.

“Yes sir,” the officer responded.

“Do you have enough planes?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you have enough guns and ammunition?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, why can you not whip the little country of North Viet Nam? What do you need to do it?” Andrews demanded in exasperation.

“Targets-targets,” came the reply.²

This monumental effort showed relatively meager results. A 1967 National Security Council study concluded that of 2 million small unit actions reviewed, less than one percent resulted in actual contact with the enemy.³ Statistics such as the one just cited added to the perception of the futility of the ground campaign.

Public Opinion

In 1965, less than 25 percent of Americans surveyed in one poll thought the war was a mistake. By the beginning of 1967, that number grew to 30 percent. By the fall of 1967, antiwar sentiment began to migrate from counter-cultures and college campuses to Middle America. October 1967 marked the first time a majority opposed the war, 46 percent against; 44 percent in favor.⁴

The lack of definitive progress, mounting casualties, and the first signs of negative economic effects combined to cause this shift in public opinion. The constant escalation of troop strengths in what was supposed to be a limited war had an extremely negative effect on public opinion. The increased number of troops on the ground in Vietnam caused the draft to become a major point of contention. It begged the question of how many of South Vietnam’s citizens were participating in the defense of their own country. American forces had reached “184,300 by the end of 1965, 385,300 on December 31, 1966, 448,800 by the middle of 1967, and 485,600 at the end of that year with a planned increase of over 40,000 troops in early 1968.”⁵

Representative Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, who had close ties to President Johnson and previously supported the war, changed his views in September 1967. He discovered that many Foreign Service Officers, military officers, and intelligence professionals privately harbored doubts about the course the war was taking. He stated "after listening to their side of the story for a year and a half, I've decided that Rusk and McNamara and the rest of them are wrong. We are dropping \$20,000-bombs every time somebody thinks he sees four Viet Cong in a bush. And it isn't working."⁶

The Johnson Administration's Good News Campaign

The message the American public was getting was that progress was slow and steady. Every minor battle was judged a victory based on the scorecard of the body count, a measure that was often inaccurate. Press releases underscored this with the number of U.S. casualties vs. the number of enemy dead. The point was that the United States was winning battles. The constant escalation in troops undermined this picture; if the United States was winning, why were more troops needed?

C. Dale Walton in *Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam*, wrote "Policy makers [in the Johnson administration] held irreconcilably contradictory desires: to maintain public support and to fight a highly limited war over which they could maintain effective control of escalation."⁷ Although the administration was able to prevent escalation in the sense that Vietnam did not erupt into a global conflict, the massive commitment of resources and troops continued to chip away at public support.

Success on the battlefield may have served to maintain public support. The problem with a war of attrition was that the NVA and Viet Cong were willing to sustain

and replace incredible losses. If losses became too heavy, they simply disengaged and the war went into a lull period.

President Johnson, well aware of the polls, knew he had to take action. He sought the advice of the “The Wise Men of American Foreign Policy” made up of such luminaries as General Omar Bradley, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, McGeorge Bundy, attorney Clark Clifford, Ambassador Averill Harriman, Henry Cabot Lodge, General Maxwell Taylor, and others. What the “Wise Men” did recommend to the President was more and better communication with the nation on the progress that was being made in Vietnam. Bundy argued that success had to be explained to the American people. “What is eroding public support” Bundy stated, “are the battles and deaths and dangers to the sons of mothers and fathers with no picture of a result in sight.”⁸ The emphasis and discussion had to be shifted to the “light at the end of the road.”

President Johnson took this advice in November 1967 and directed the start of a media blitz. This was headed by National Security Advisor Walt Rostow. General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker, and Ambassador Komer (in title only) were all recalled to the United States to take part.

General Westmoreland addressed a joint session of Congress on April 28, 1967. He stated, “We will prevail in Viet Nam over the communist aggressor.”⁹ His address was met with approval and thunderous applause. General Westmoreland’s trip to the United States was successful in that it rallied support for the war effort. That very success created the conditions that would lead to maximum psychological impact in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive and the Embassy Battle.

When General Westmoreland stepped off the plane at Andrews Air Force Base (AFB) on November 15, 1967, he told reporters “we are making real progress [in Vietnam]. Everybody is very optimistic that I know of who is intimately associated with the effort there.”¹⁰ Two days later in his first interview he said that he believed American troops could begin to withdraw “within two years or less.”¹¹ He rejected the very idea of stalemate. General Westmoreland’s confident manner, measured tones, and photogenic nature all combined to convey the image that he was absolutely in control and that victory was imminent.

He painted this same picture to President Johnson and his advisors. It seems evident that he believed fully in what he was telling the press and in his briefing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the president. He believed that the crossover point had been reached. The crossover point is that point at which the enemies’ casualties would exceed their ability to replace them.

On November 21st, General Westmoreland gave a speech to the National Press Club clearly showing optimism saying:

I am absolutely certain that whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing. We have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view.¹²

General Westmoreland and Ambassadors Bunker and Komer engaged in the public relations campaign because they ardently believed what they were saying was true. Pacification programs had started to take effect. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam was starting to display success on the battlefield. The South Vietnamese government appeared to have achieved some stability.

What was implied throughout all the good news stories was that the enemy was severely weakened and could not replace its battlefield losses. The message was clear that the situation was under control and the military dominated the battlefield. The enemy mounting a major offensive was treated as only a very remote possibility. General Westmoreland's National Press Club address stressed that the Viet Cong strength was declining at a steady rate. The next day's *Washington Post* lead story was headlined, "War's End in View, says Westmoreland."¹³

General Westmoreland, during an interview with a *Time* reporter defied the communists to mount a major offensive saying, "I hope they try something, because we are looking for a fight."¹⁴ Although he was seeking a pitched battle in which he would crush the enemy with massive firepower, could not have foreseen what was coming.

"The light at the end of the tunnel, [a term often misattributed to the General] critics joked, was probably a train headed toward Westmoreland, and on the night of January 29-30, it thundered through the RVN [Republic of Vietnam]."¹⁵ During the Tet ceasefire, the Viet Cong attacked over 100 cities and towns using 60,000 to 80,000 troops. No amount of progress in Vietnam and no public relations campaign could offset the utter shock and devastation to the American psyche. The credibility gap instantly transformed into an unbridgeable canyon.

The American Embassy as a Symbol and a Target

The embassy was sovereign U.S. soil, where the American flag was planted. Safety and security concerns were evident in the design. The 8-foot wall surrounding the compound, the rocket screen façade, and the helipad on the roof¹⁶ all attested to the incorporation of security concepts.

In 1965, a vehicle exploded in front of the old embassy, killing 22 people, one an American employee of the embassy.¹⁷ The wall surrounding the new embassy compound provided a greater standoff distance to provide protection from a similar such event. Significant security features were incorporated into the design for the new Embassy.

The symbolic nature of the embassy contributed to the massive coverage of the battle. However, the close proximity of many news agencies made it easy to get to. Many reporters lived in the Caravelle Hotel and Continental Hotel only six blocks away. CBS and ABC had their headquarters at the Caravelle as well. *Reuters* news service and *Time-Life* were located only four blocks away.¹⁸ There were other larger battles going on at BOQ #3, and at Ton Son Nhut airport, but journalists did not have far to travel to report on the embassy. Instead of commuting to the countryside to report on the aftermath of a battle, here was one they could report on as it unfolded, watching from a front row seat. Accessibility ensured that the embassy battle would garner a disproportionate amount of media coverage and scrutiny.

Media and Military Relations and Selective Reporting

Initial reports of the fighting erupting in Saigon and at the embassy were factually incorrect. Some of this can be attributed to the complete chaos that engulfed the city of Saigon. Numerous attacks were conducted simultaneously, overwhelming the ability of participants in the battle to accurately comprehend what was occurring.

The very term “embassy” was vague and was used to mean embassy compound rather than the chancery building itself. MPs on the Second reaction forces, which had to fight a skirmish to get to the embassy, were shaken. They knew that at least two of their comrades at the embassy were dead, their bodies lying in the street. They were fairly

sure two more of their fellow MPs were killed due to the last panicked radio call for help from the MP embassy guard post. This group of MPs passed on the initial erroneous report that Viet Cong sappers were on the upper floors of the embassy.

It is an oversimplification to say that the press was solely responsible for the overall negative impact. However, there had been a discernible shift in the relationship between the military establishment and the press when the administration started conducting an all out media campaign to show positive progress in Vietnam.

However, statements about hard realities seem to have been selectively edited. In the fall of 1967, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, gave a speech in which he pitched “the steady progress” party line but also laid out an unambiguous warning. General Wheeler stated that although the NVA and Viet Cong were facing manpower problems, they were not finished on the battlefield. They still had the capability to dispatch troop reinforcements from North Vietnam. He made his point succinctly by drawing an analogy to World War II saying: “there might be a *Battle of the Bulge* type of desperation thrust by the enemy.”¹⁹

The warning was selectively reported in major news outlets, either omitted or given very little emphasis. Peter Braestrup in *Big Story* made this analysis: “The journalistic focus in Washington and New York in December 1967 was on dissent and peace diplomacy, not the possibility of enemy attacks.”²⁰ The press was certainly not completely objective. More to the point, while the reporting was factual, the overall picture and tone was conveyed as they saw fit.

The Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) on 5 January 1968 published the translation of a captured enemy document that called for a “general

offensive and a general uprising.”²¹ This report got very little attention in the press. Several major newspapers did not even use the story. Newsmen and U.S. public officials did not seem to take it seriously.²² However, many news services had cancelled Rest and Recreation (R&R) leaves and were on full alert prior to Tet. As one journalist noted, “for months any journalist with decent sources was expecting something big at Tet.”²³

General Westmoreland, although clearly focused on Khe Sanh, gave several interviews prior to Tet that indicated that he believed a major offensive was about to occur. The first interview on 17 January 1968 was in the *Washington Evening Star*. Although this interview was generated by the Associated Press, very few publications chose to publish it. General Westmoreland stated that the communists “seem to have temporarily run out of steam” but that he expected “a resurgence of enemy initiatives just before or after Tet,” the Lunar New Year on 30 January. The second interview was with NBC for the “Huntley-Brinkley Report” on 22 January 1968. Just hours before the attacks on Khe Sanh’s outpost began; General Westmoreland told the interviewers the enemy activity he expected. He addressed the massive build up of enemy troops around Khe Sanh and what he foresaw for the upcoming Tet holiday. General Westmoreland stated, “I think his plans concern a major effort to win a spectacular battlefield success along the eve of Tet, which takes place at the end of the month.”²⁴

General Westmoreland also said that he thought the NVA would try to score a political or psychological victory to influence world opinion, particularly the South Vietnamese civilian populace.²⁵ Although General Westmoreland indicated that he believed the main attack would be in the area around Khe Sanh, he clearly and correctly

predicted the time frame of the offensive. These warnings would not be recalled by the media in the aftermath of Tet.

In 1968, television was not the ubiquitous medium that it is today. Viewers now are somewhat desensitized to graphic images conveyed nightly on their screens. This was not the case in 1968. David H. Petraeus, writing in *The American Military and the Lessons of VietNam*, notes that “In fact major wars or a nation’s revolution may influence perceptions even if individuals did not directly experience them. Individuals who never even approached the ‘front lines’ may be as influenced by such events as those who actually participated in the fighting.”²⁶

The tension was probably more intense for reporters and cameramen who visited combat scenes such as Khe Sanh. They visited for one or two days, filmed a report, and left. Marines became used to the combat conditions and adjusted accordingly.²⁷

Television’s ability to display graphic detail of shocking combat images into American homes magnified the effect. Hours of film footage would be edited into three or four minute reports and broadcast. All the complexities of national policy and the intricacies of military operations do not fit neatly into segments measured in mere minutes. There is no context and viewers are not usually asked to apply critical thinking or analysis.²⁸ Frequently, the entire story cannot be told in the time-compressed medium.

Don Oberdorfer writing in *Tet* noted that television’s “selective reality” was even more depressing for family members of service men who experienced the war via the television set. Whereas combat soldiers experienced long periods of inactivity, television viewers were bombarded nightly with only the most sensational images and accompanying dramatic stories. Since television showed only the worst events, a regular

viewer of Walter Cronkite or the Huntley-Brinkley shows probably “saw more infantry action over a longer span of days than most of the American troops who were in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive.”²⁹

Although the Tet Offensive is widely regarded as the turning point in the war, public opinion had already started to shift in October 1967. The public relations frenzy launched by the Johnson administration created unrealistic optimism. Much progress was being made in Vietnam; however, the enemy had a vote. General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General William Westmoreland, Commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, clearly communicated that the war was not over and that there was hard fighting ahead. Two of the nation’s senior Soldiers engaged in the public relations campaign not only out of loyalty to President Johnson, but because they believed it was true. They both issued caveats that the media and American public did not hear.

General Westmoreland, although he expected the main effort of the enemy thrust to be at Khe Sanh, transmitted accurate and timely warnings of the impending offensive. These warnings were largely ignored by the media and public at the time. They were certainly forgotten in the aftermath of Tet. This selective reporting had a major impact on the formation of public opinion.

The next chapter will examine key elements of the Battle at the American Embassy and the effectiveness of the MSGs and MPs. The chapter will use selected portions of the battle to demonstrate effectiveness. The performance is examined in the context of their respective non tactical roles. The MSGs had no infantry weapons other than what MPs on scene handed to them, but all had infantry training. The MPs had

minimal infantry weapons (M-16s and .45s) but no infantry training. The perspective of the Viet Cong sappers who survived the battle will be examined.

¹Oberdorfer, 93.

²Ibid.

³Schmitz, 48.

⁴Ibid., 53.

⁵George Donelson Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 446.

⁶Oberdorfer, 85.

⁷Walton, C. Dale, *The Myth of Inevitable US Defeat in Vietnam* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 40.

⁸Schmitz, 62.

⁹The New York Times, *Westmoreland Assures Congress*, Late City Edition, 116, no. 39, (Saturday, April 29, 1967), 10.

¹⁰Schmitz, 65.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., 69.

¹³Braestrup, 53.

¹⁴Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin 1991), 24.

¹⁵Gilbert and Head, 233.

¹⁶Braestrup, 98.

¹⁷Gunnery Sergeant William D. Kerakus (Ret), Marine Security Guard, Saigon Embassy, 1965, Interview by author, 10 October 2008.

¹⁸Braestrup, 75, 78.

¹⁹Ibid., 54.

²⁰Ibid., 55.

²¹Ibid., 63.

²²Ibid., 63.

²³Don North, “VC Assault on the US Embassy,” *Vietnam Magazine* 20, no. 5 (February 2008): 34-41.

²⁴Braestrup, 67.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶David H. Petraeus, *The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A Study of Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 1987), 17.

²⁷Oberdorfer, 241.

²⁸Petraeus, 106.

²⁹Oberdorfer, 242.

CHAPTER 4

THE BATTLE AT THE AMERICAN EMBASSY

The Battle at the Embassy developed rapidly with a number of actions occurring simultaneously. For the purposes of clarification, a timeline has been provided (see Appendix A, Timeline). Military Police (MP) and Marine Security Guard (MSG) are alike in that they are required to make decisions instantly that, in other units would be made by an individual of much higher rank. The MSGs and MPs exercised this initiative within the framework of the ad hoc, joint command's intentions. Individual initiative and infantry tactics would prove to be decisive factors for the effectiveness of U.S. forces.

The battle was characterized by joint cooperation and individual initiative, overcoming an enemy of superior number and superior firepower. There was a marked joint interservice cooperation and sublimation of egos. This cooperation significantly contributed to winning the battle.

MSG and MP forces were intermingled during the battle necessarily. As such, the battle will be described in reference to the physical location of the reaction teams. The description that follows, regrettably, is not an all encompassing description of the attack; it is outside the scope of this thesis. Thomas L. Johnson and Mary R. Himes' 1983 booklet, *Assault on the American Embassy, Tet 1968* stands as the premier work on the subject.

The battle will be described in order to show the effectiveness of the MSGs and MPs, non tactical troops that fought as infantry, without the benefit of infantry weapons and communications. The Marines and Military Police were obviously effective in that every member of the assault force was killed or captured. The Marines and MPs

successfully denied entry to the chancery building. At the outset of the battle, U.S. troops were outnumbered three to one. By all military measures, they were extremely effective. As stated previously, it is quite probable that they could have kept the Viet Cong Sappers off the grounds entirely if the MPs at the vehicle gate had not been killed by the Viet Cong Embassy drivers. This chapter will look at the actions of the MSGs and MPs in terms of location and reaction team assignment.

The Gate

As the attack began at 0245, the MPs at the side gate took several decisive steps. First, they immediately called the Provost Marshal's office with a Signal 300. This call initiated the response of the 527th MP Company Alert Force that would respond at 0335. Second, their effective fire killed two of the leaders of the attack force. The most compelling evidence of the MPs effectiveness comes from the intelligence debriefing of one of the sappers who survived the attack. Prisoner of War, Ngo Van Giang, stated that "immediately upon entering the inner area, four men of the unit were killed by US fire."¹ The original plan called for six men to enter the east gate, the vehicle gate MPs were manning. It was, in the words of the aforementioned sapper, "thwarted by intense US counter fire."² This plan seems to presume that the MPs would be neutralized prior to the Viet Cong's (VC's) arrival. Perhaps most significantly, the MPs' actions allowed Sergeant Harper the time to lock the main doors of the Embassy.³ The MPs were exposed to fire from the VC sappers breaching the wall and were killed by sappers approaching from behind.⁴

The Chancery

Harper took several decisive actions in the opening minutes of the attack. Stationed at post one, he was checking on post twelve in the adjoining Norodom Compound when the explosion occurred.⁵ Harper immediately raced back to the Chancery building. His effectiveness is evidenced by a number of actions. He returned to the Chancery and locked the 6-inch thick teakwood doors.⁶ After several B-40 rockets were fired into the doors, he pulled Corporal Zachuranic to a more covered position and provided first aid.⁷ He informed the Embassy duty officer of the aforementioned and arranged for evacuation to a higher floor of the wounded Zachuranic.⁸ Harper maintained his post throughout the battle and provided periodic status reports via telephone throughout the night.

The Roof

Staff Sergeant Rudy Soto's actions contributed to the success of the battle in spite of a weapons malfunction. From his rooftop observation point, he was able to keep Staff Sergeant Leroy Banks' Reaction Team informed about enemy strength and movements in the embassy compound. While it is impossible to determine if Sgt. Soto's rounds hit any of the sappers, they perceived that fire from the roof was effective.

At approximately 0245, Sgt. Soto heard the first explosion in the vicinity of Cholon, followed quickly by the second blast from the Presidential Palace.⁹ Looking down to Thong Nhut Street, he saw one group of Vietnamese men in front of the Embassy and another group approaching from the vacant lot across the street.¹⁰ Immediately after they breached the Embassy wall he transmitted the distress signal 10-13, on the Marine Security Guard net, alerting Marine House.¹¹ Soto reported to Marine

House that the sappers had hit Post One with rockets “two or three times.”¹² Further, Soto locked the roof door, in the event that the VC gained access to the Chancery.¹³ Had they gained entry to the building, preventing occupation of the roof preserved the helicopter landing pad for airmobile reinforcements. This action would also serve to deny attackers key terrain; a commanding view of the surrounding area. After his shotgun jammed, he fired five rounds from his .38 caliber pistol at the intruders.¹⁴ Although firing from six stories up, an extreme distance for such a weapon, one sapper who survived the attack reported taking fire from the roof. The sapper, Nguyen Van Sau, as a prisoner of war, stated that “American guards positioned on the second or higher floors of the embassy building shot four or five members of the attack force in the early stage of the battle.”¹⁵ It is impossible to determine if the four VC were killed by Soto’s shots or the MPs at the gate. What is important is that the VC assault force perceived that there was accurate deadly fire raining down from above. Soto’s act of desperation, combined with the MPs’ M-16 fire, broke the momentum of the assault. His action bought time for Banks and Captain Robert J. O’Brien’s team to respond.

Soto reported the movements of VC in the parking lot behind the Embassy to Banks.¹⁶ He identified a VC sapper leaning on the trunk of an Embassy car with a rocket launcher.¹⁷ This gave Banks better situational awareness of the enemy’s strength and posture.

Soto maintained his vigil on the roof until 0615 when a DUSTOFF helicopter was able to land. Soto helped the wounded man, Corporal Zachurnic, on board and lifted off with two civilian technicians from Page Communications.¹⁸ The DUSTOFF came under heavy ground fire and had to land in the rice paddies south of Saigon.¹⁹ Soto transferred

Zachuranic to a second DUSTOFF helicopter and stayed with him until doctors assessed his condition as stable.²⁰

Soto's immediate transmittal of the duress code activated the initial response of reinforcements. Since Marine House was only five blocks away, this rapid response further checked the momentum of the VC assault. As stated previously, his accurate fire from above was a cause of great concern to the attackers. The quick sounding of the alarm that summoned MSG reinforcements and notified Embassy Security Officers Crampsey and Furey is more significant due to the fact it took the MP Reaction Force almost forty-five minutes to reach the Embassy.

The Reaction Teams

A number of forces responded to assist at the Embassy. These included: planned reaction teams from Marine House, planned alert forces from the 716th Military Police Battalion, dispatched on duty MP patrols and MP patrols that heard the Signal 300 distress call. The single common denominator of forces that arrived to the battle safely was that they dismounted prior to reaching the objective and approached on foot. This basic infantry tactic was second nature to the MSG first responders, as they were all trained as infantrymen. It was not an ingrained reflexive practice for responding MPs.

1st Military Police Patrol Dispatched

Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Richard E. George, Saigon Provost Marshal, instructed the desk sergeant to dispatch a first precinct patrol to the Embassy. The patrol's task was to confirm that there was actually an attack on the Embassy.²¹ George gave specific instructions to have the patrol dismount two blocks from the Embassy. George, though

not an infantryman, had served with the 550th Military Police Detachment, 8th Special Forces Group, as an advisor to indigenous forces and commander.²² This experience undoubtedly made him more tactically proficient.

SGT Jonnie B. Thomas and SP4 Owen E. Mebust answered the call and proceeded to the Embassy. Although it has been hypothesized that they misunderstood the location of the “new” Embassy,²³ it seems more likely that they approached during a lull in the firing. Thomas and Mebust’s arrival preceded that of the MSG reaction teams and the subsequent shooting. The position of their patrol jeep,²⁴ on Thong Nhut Street in front of the unoccupied and locked main gate indicates that they were unaware of the danger. Additionally, both MPs had just returned from rest and recuperation (R&R) leave and were working their first shift since returning.²⁵ Regardless of the reason, whether they thought it was a false alarm or still had an R&R mindset, the position of their jeep and their actions at the scene show that they did not take a tactical approach to the situation.

Corporal George Moyer and SP4 Rick L. McAlister had departed the Embassy minutes before the attack. They were checking on the MP Gate Guards and visiting with SP4 Daniels, who was McAlister’s roommate. They approached the Embassy from the west on Thong Nhut Street, stopping west of the Norodom compound entrance. Their arrival preceded Thomas and Mebust’s arrival by seconds.²⁶ As Thomas and Mebust got out of their vehicle, they were shot by snipers in the vacant lot across Thong Nhut Street from the Embassy.²⁷ The sappers also hit the jeep with an RPG. Moyer then heard Daniels shout over the radio that the VC were in the compound.²⁸ Daniels said: “They’re coming in, they’re coming in, help me! Help me!”²⁹

Daniels' second radio call, with emotion and desperation clearly evident in his voice, dispelled any doubt about the level of danger at the Embassy. MPs usually responded to calls within their own patrol areas or precincts. Standard operating procedure dictated that in an emergency of this magnitude all available patrols city-wide could respond.³⁰ 1LT Earl T. Barnum and (PFC) Lawrence J. Miller were on patrol southwest of the Embassy and sped to the scene.³¹ As they turned a corner near the Presidential Palace an RPG fired from the building under construction across from the Palace hit their jeep.³² Both wounded men took cover, returned fire and withdrew to the South Korean Embassy one block away.³³ Barnham and Miller had driven into the middle of a firefight between VC attackers and the ARVN defenders of the Presidential Palace.³⁴ Although the MPs were rushing to assist at the Embassy, their tactical situational awareness was insufficient.

Just minutes later, Patrol 25, a jeep carrying three MPs and an M-60 machine gun committed the same error, driving into the firefight.³⁵ Although LT Barnham's jeep was still on fire and abandoned, the MPs proceeded. PFC Thomas C. Hiley and SP4 Harold R. Stafford were killed immediately. The third MP, though severely wounded, crawled out of the kill zone and joined Barnham and Miller.³⁶ MPs in Saigon had always responded as quickly as possible to render assistance and gain control of the event. The situation had turned from law enforcement into combat operations. As such, it demanded infantry style tactics, such as dismounting the vehicle, situational awareness, and tactical patience.

In spite of the difficulties faced by initial responding patrols, more on duty MP patrols responded rapidly and efficiently. MPs set up traffic control points to isolate the

area. Banks was stopped by such a roadblock located at the corner of Hai Ba Trung and Thong Nhut.³⁷ The MPs initially refused entry to the MSGs, stating “that VC were mortaring and attacking the Embassy.” The simple fact that the MPs arrived prior to Banks’ team indicates a rapid response. Their presence of mind to cordon the area rather than rush in shows sound tactical judgment.

Banks refused the order of the MPs, stating “I told him we were Embassy Marines and had come to fight the VC.”³⁸ In his statement, he reflected “our job and orders were to get to the Embassy and save it.”³⁹ This exchange illustrates Banks’ tenacity and aggressiveness. These are qualities that were instilled in every Marine at the Infantry Training Regiment.

The on duty MP patrols also placed the VC in the compound under fire quickly. This is evidenced by the statement of prisoner of war, Nguyen Van Sau. He states, “within five minutes after the VC entered the compound, American MPs positioned themselves on rooftops of nearby houses and fired into the compound at the VC, killing an unknown number of them.”⁴⁰

As stated previously, Soto’s fire from the roof was effective and caused enough concern to, at least initially, suppress their freedom of movement. The MPs’ fire from the gate killed two of their leaders. MPs quickly positioned themselves on roofs inflicting more casualties. O’Brien’s team arrived almost simultaneously and engaged the VC again. The rapid escalation of actions by MPs and MSGs certainly kept the VC off balance and unable to continue with their attack. These separate actions, though not specifically coordinated, were in concert.

Captain O'Brien's Reaction Team: Mac Dinh Chi Street Side

Captain O'Brien, the Marine Security Guard OIC, was a professional officer "who took his duties very seriously" stated author Thomas L. Johnson.⁴¹ O'Brien had conducted an inspection of all posts from 2300 to 0130.⁴² This included the fifteen posts throughout the city, in addition to the Embassy and the Ambassador's quarters.⁴³ They included the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) facilities, Joint United States Public Affairs Offices (JUSPAO), Combined Operations for Rural Development Offices (COORDS), Ambassador (by diplomatic rank, not function) Locke's and Komer's residences, and the Old Chancery.⁴⁴ O'Brien scheduled his next tour with Sergeant Fratarelli for 0300. O'Brien had taken the alert seriously, took all the precautions he could, and was studiously checking on the many facilities and subordinates in his charge.

At 0245, O'Brien was notified by Cpl. Dennis L. Ryan that the Embassy was under attack.⁴⁵ Ryan heard mortars flying overhead and explosions coming from the direction of the Embassy.⁴⁶ O'Brien ordered Ryan to awaken everyone and got Sergeant Fratarelli.⁴⁷ O'Brien, Fratarelli, Reed, Sergeant Patullo, and Corporal Inemer raced to the Embassy via Tran Coa Van and Mac Dinh Chi Streets. O'Brien's team dismounted at the Cahn Sat checkpoint at the corner of Mac Dinh Chi and Hung Thap Tu Streets.⁴⁸

O'Brien's tactical orientation is demonstrated by his decision to dismount at the Cahn Sat checkpoint. He made the decision to dismount because of the unknown tactical situation and he did not want to "get caught by VC fire while inside or dismounting from our vehicle."⁴⁹ O'Brien also had two Beretta 9 millimeter submachine guns (SMG) with

his team, one with Reed and one with Inemer. The use of SMGs further demonstrates O'Brien's tactical approach to the situation.

O'Brien's team attempted to contact the MPs at the side gate but instead saw five or six VCs in the Embassy yard.⁵⁰ O'Brien ordered Sergeant Reed to open fire with the SMG. This burst "dropped one or two VC."⁵¹ Due to the intense return fire, the team took up positions across the street and engaged the enemy in a firefight.⁵² The Marines were met by Embassy Security Officers Leo Crampsey and Robert Furey who joined in the battle.⁵³ O'Brien had correctly assessed the situation, pulled his force across the street and dispatched Sergeant Fraterelli to the vehicles to request reinforcements. Gunnery Sergeant Morrison, at Marine House had already dispatched Banks' team to the opposite side of the Embassy, the Norodom Compound. In the absence of orders or communications from the OIC, O'Brien, Gunnery Sergeant Morrison exercised personal initiative.

The MSGs and the Embassy Security Officers made numerous attempts to break and shoot the lock off the vehicle gate. O'Brien discussed the tactical situation with Crampsey. They agreed that due to the intense enemy fire, they would cover all entrances and exits, wait until dawn, and attack when more MPs and MSGs could be brought to bear. The same decision would be made on the Norodom Compound side by Banks and Gunnery Sergeant (GySgt) Morrison, which MP Lieutenant Ribich agreed to.⁵⁴ All of these men correctly evaluated the tactical situation. They had confirmed that the VC were not in the Chancery Building through Harper on Post One. Both groups, the Mac Dinh Chi side and the Norodom side, made the judgment that the VC held the

advantage. A frontal assault or scaling the walls would almost certainly result in a high level of casualties.

The OIC, Captain O'Brien, continued to develop the tactical situation throughout the night. He integrated six MPs that arrived at 0330 into his force.⁵⁵ He placed several MPs on roof tops which gave them a decisive edge over the enemy; the MPs were able to "fire down on the VC in the front yard."⁵⁶ He also kept his joint command informed, telling them he was taking fire from the mission coordinator's top floor⁵⁷ and of enemy movements. O'Brien also showed personal courage and "led from the front" positioning himself on the roof of the building directly to the rear of the mission coordinator's house.

As dawn approached, O'Brien sent Reed to radio Marine House for ammunition and reinforcements.⁵⁸ He re-deployed his troops along the rear wall of the compound and on the roofs of the adjacent buildings.⁵⁹ He improved his tactical position incrementally as the MSGs and MPs whittled the enemy force down.

O'Brien attempted to probe the enemy's defense by scaling the Embassy compound wall with Patullo.⁶⁰ The VC immediately shot Patullo as he appeared over the wall. O'Brien, with the assistance of an MP, SP4 Miles, applied a tourniquet to Patullo's leg and arranged a ground evacuation to the 17th Field Hospital.⁶¹ Although this attempt to enter the compound was unsuccessful, it confirmed the wisdom of his earlier decision to wait until dawn to attack.

Sergeants Bothwell, Johnson, and Wolff arrived at approximately 0640 with ammunition and weapons. O'Brien positioned the men on the roof of the Generator Building and on his original roof top position.⁶² Due to the increase in firepower and sound tactics, the MSGs, in O'Brien's words, "were able to keep up a steady, accurate

volume of fire on the VC in the parking lot, along the Chancery wall, and near the [mission coordinator's] house.⁶³ This action further reduced the enemy in the Embassy compound, thereby paving the way for the combined MP and MSG assault from Norodom compound as well as the MP assault through the vehicle gate.

Reed and Patullo demonstrated effective use of infantry tactics by the following action. They used cover and concealment and mutually supporting fires to eliminate several enemy soldiers. Johnson, Reed, and Wolff proceeded to the police compound with two Beretta SMGs and one .38 caliber pistol.⁶⁴ They climbed to the roof of a machine shop and used a bamboo pole to get under a roll of concertina.⁶⁵ They then low crawled across the generator building roof to take cover behind large ventilators.⁶⁶ The team led by Reed used sound infantry tactics by approaching from a less likely avenue of approach (due to the concertina), defeating the obstacle by field expedient means, and low crawling to a position of cover.

Reed's team was following O'Brien's order to, in Reed's words, "take two (2) men and some ammo and make an envelement [sic] [envelopment] on the enemy firing positions."⁶⁷ Reed, Wolff, and Johnson accomplished this through coordinated fire and movement. O'Brien realized the enemy on the side of the Chancery Building would have to be neutralized for the assault from Norodom Compound to succeed. Sergeant Johnson, in his words stated: "The Reaction Team in Norodom Compound under Banks and the MPs at the gate were being held down and unable to enter the compound by VC."⁶⁸

Reed and Johnson demonstrated effective coordinated fire that reduced the critical enemy position along the backside of the Chancery Building. Three VC were taking cover behind four concrete pillars alongside the Chancery.⁶⁹ Johnson engaged the VC as

Reed took up a position to his left.⁷⁰ When Johnson stopped to reload one VC stepped from behind a pillar and was immediately killed by Reed.⁷¹ The other two VC reoriented behind their cover to fire at Reed's position (perhaps thinking Johnson had moved).⁷² Johnson hit each man with five rounds, but one managed to crawl away, apparently killed by the MPs at the front gate.⁷³ Johnson stated recently that he believed that the VC were under the influence of some type of drug, due to the numerous bullets they absorbed. The MSGs on the roof on the Generator Building reduced the enemy force by three and denied the piece of key terrain to them.

O'Brien demonstrated effective command and control without communications equipment. He knew only the broad outline of the plan to attack at dawn. He resisted the urge to seize control, trusting Banks to do his job. At approximately 0730, O'Brien saw Banks' reaction team and Ribich's MP alert force entering the far side of the Embassy Compound from the Norodom pedestrian gate.⁷⁴ O'Brien's team linked up with Banks' and Ribich's teams moving toward the Mission Coordinator's House, where the last of the VC were taking refuge.⁷⁵ The integration of the three teams was seamless. This is evidenced by Banks tasking Reed (from O'Brien's team) to get some CS grenades from the armory and clear the generator building.⁷⁶ This coordination is further evidenced by the immediate perimeter put up around the Mission Coordinator's House.⁷⁷

O'Brien displayed personal valor and care for his Marines throughout the battle. As his team surrounded the Mission Coordinator's house, he was notified by Furey that Bothwell had been wounded in action attempting to storm the front door of the house.⁷⁸

The MPs and MSGs cooperated throughout the battle. O'Brien found Bothwell on the front porch and started to drag him to safety when a grenade went off nearby.⁷⁹

An MP, Miles, helped O'Brien evacuate Bothwell.⁸⁰ Another MP provided a gas mask that O'Brien selflessly placed on Bothwell.⁸¹ Bothwell and (MP) PFC Paul Healy had attempted to gain entrance to the ground floor when the VC shot Bothwell. This one episode is illustrative of the joint interservice cooperation that characterized the battle.

O'Brien and his team, which had never acted as an infantry unit, overcame numerous obstacles to bring the battle to a successful conclusion. He overcame the communications problem by sending runners back to the vehicle radio. He overcame the lack of communication with Banks' team by trusting his men to do the right thing, observing the situation and making a running appraisal based on incomplete information. He correctly determined that the VC were trapped in the courtyard. He exercised tactical patience by not attempting to make a massed frontal assault. This may have been an appropriate tactic if his men were all equipped with M-16s. He reached the same conclusion that Ribich, Banks, and Morrison had reached independently. If O'Brien had tried to commit forces piecemeal, the result could easily have been disastrous. The interservice cooperation, tactical patience, and adherence to standard infantry tactics served O'Brien's team well. He resisted the natural inclination of an officer to seize control of the entire situation. Working independently but towards the same goal, the different teams accomplished the mission.

Staff Sergeant Banks Team: Norodom Side

Staff Sergeant Banks made a number of decisions that positively affected the outcome of the battle of the Embassy. Circumstances placed him in a position to make these decisions which would normally be made by a higher ranking individual. Banks acted as a critical communications conduit to Morrison at Marine House, who in turn,

kept Ambassador Bunker and MACV informed. He shouldered responsibility far beyond his rank as a junior staff NCO.

Banks' team consisted of Sergeants Jimerson, Haas, and Spersud; Corporals Huss, Ryan, and Marshall; and Lance Corporal Caudle.⁸² Banks' team departed Marine House immediately after O'Brien's team. As stated previously, an MP roadblock stopped Banks' team about 300 yards from the Embassy and said the MSGs "were crazy to try to reach the compound."⁸³

Banks approached the situation using infantry tactics. Banks ordered his men to dismount, "form into two columns, and spread out."⁸⁴ Banks led the column along the front wall, planning to fire at the VC through the front gate.⁸⁵ Jimerson led the other column, using the trees along the sidewalk, spaced every 20 feet apart as cover.⁸⁶ Banks left Jimerson's column behind the trees to provide cover for his own column.⁸⁷ As Jimerson's team took up a position outside the Embassy compound wall, Jimerson was struck in the leg with a hand grenade that landed at his feet.⁸⁸ Jimerson kicked the grenade into the street, where it detonated, injuring no Marines.⁸⁹

Banks tactically deployed his men and made the best available use of cover and concealment during the approach to the Embassy. He also made an effort to reconnoiter and engage the enemy if possible. He left Jimerson's team to provide covering fire for his team to make the advance. Banks showed tactical patience by withdrawing his team to Norodom compound.

Just as Banks' team reached Norodom compound, the VC threw another grenade over the wall.⁹⁰ Ryan yelled "grenade" and all of Banks' team "hit the deck."⁹¹ The VC were also training automatic weapons fire on the Marines.⁹² The fact that none of the

MSGs were hit by the automatic weapons fire at short range shows the appropriate use of cover. Jimerson's and Ryan's alertness and timely warning displayed excellent tactical awareness. The MSGs instantaneous actions in "hitting the deck" showed that their infantry battle drills were so thoroughly ingrained as to be reflexive.

Banks moved his team into Norodom Compound, adjacent to the Embassy Compound, and deployed them effectively. Since a wall separated Norodom Compound from the Embassy Compound, he put two Marines on the roof of the OSA building in order to shoot over the wall into the Embassy Compound.⁹³ Banks posted Haas outside of the compound, with a light post for cover,⁹⁴ to cut off the escape route of any enemy that attempted to climb over the front wall.⁹⁵ Banks' effective deployment of his troops is demonstrated by the fact that he occupied the decisive terrain available (the roof of the OSA building) and that he protected his flank (posted Haas as security for his flank and to cut off enemy escape.)

Lieutenant Ribich 527th Military Police Company Alert Force

Sergeant Leslie R. Trent, the 527th Military Police Company Charge of Quarters (CQ) at the International Hotel, notified Sergeant Arthur "Pancho" Rivera to get his alert force ready to proceed to the American Embassy.⁹⁶ Rivera assembled his 11 men in minutes as he had instructed them to sleep in uniform.⁹⁷ The 716th MP Battalion intelligence officer briefed Rivera on the scant information that was available.⁹⁸

At the same time as Rivera was being briefed, Ribich, of Alpha Company, 716th MP BN was dressing.⁹⁹ The 716th Battalion Commander, LTC Rowe, briefed Ribich on the explosion at the Embassy and ordered him to lead the 527th MP Company reaction force.¹⁰⁰

Rivera and Ribich met at the alert force vehicle at approximately 0317 hours.¹⁰¹ They quickly exchanged information and made a plan to drive to JFK Circle, then dismount, and proceed on foot to the Embassy.¹⁰²

The alert vehicles were supposed to be stocked with extra ammunition, grenades, smoke and a PRC-10 Radio.¹⁰³ MAJ (ret) Frank Ribich stated to the author in 1987 that the shortage was not discovered until the reaction force was en route to the Embassy. Ribich conjectured that the items had been pilfered by sister units in the battalion as every company was required to have a reaction force that night due to the alert.¹⁰⁴

The reaction force reached John F. Kennedy Circle at 0325 hours.¹⁰⁵ Ribich had been an enlisted Special Forces Soldier.¹⁰⁶ He gave the order to “fan out in two fire teams behind me.”¹⁰⁷ He realized that MPs did not receive combat training in advanced individual training and quickly scratched out the basics of fire team movements in the dirt.¹⁰⁸ The team then moved out toward the Embassy.

The Viet Cong Sapper Survivors

Three Viet Cong sappers survived the attack on the embassy. Don Oberdorfer noted in *TET!* that two sappers survived the attack but disappeared into the South Vietnamese prison system.¹⁰⁹ LT Frank Ribich, Military Police (MP) Officer in Charge (OIC), saw one live sapper. The Vietnamese police demanded the release of the prisoner into their custody. The MPs got into a heated exchange with the Cahn Sats that devolved into a pushing match. After calling the Provost Marshal’s Office for guidance, the MPs were ordered to turn the sapper over to the Cahn Sats. LT Ribich surmised that the Cahn Sats took the prisoner into an alley and shot him.¹¹⁰ The status and very existence of the prisoners was a closely guarded secret after the attack. This was perhaps due to the fact

that the State Department did not want to advertise the fact that at least two of the local national State Department employees participated in the attack.

The three sappers were interrogated at the Combined Military Intelligence Center (CMIC) in Saigon. The Embassy Security Officer also interviewed the prisoners and conducted a raid in conjunction with the Vietnamese police on at least one of the houses that the sappers staged their operations from.

Peter Braestrup, in *Big Story*, noted that among the bodies of the Viet Cong that two might prove to be embassy employees instead of Viet Cong as there were U.S. identification cards on the bodies.¹¹¹ The reports from the CMIC, that will be cited later, indicate that they were embassy employees and Viet Cong guerrillas.

The three sappers who survived the attack are Nguyen Van Sau, a.k.a. "Chuc," CMIC source number 1828; Ngo Van Giang, CMIC source number 1890; and Dang Van Son, CMIC source number 2144. The recently declassified documents that detail their interrogations give an interesting perspective of the battle. Several thought that the Embassy was militarily insignificant as a target. They knew only that they were to hold the building for 36 hours. All believed the attack on the Embassy and the Tet Offensive to be a complete failure.

Nguyen Van Sau was wounded at approximately 0310 hours on the morning of the attack and was semi-conscious until being captured by U.S. forces.¹¹² Ngo Van Giang was wounded shortly after the attack began and was captured by U.S. troops the next morning on the west side of the embassy compound.¹¹³ Two MPs, Sergeant (SGT) Kuldass and Specialist Fourth Class (SP4) Singer captured a Viet Cong guerrilla on the west side of the compound in the map room. They followed a blood trail from the dog

run, where the guerrilla had apparently been attacked, to the point of capture. The prisoner had in his possession a U.S. consulate identification card.¹¹⁴ It seems evident that since only one Viet Cong was captured on the west side that this is Ngo Van Giang. The third sapper, Dang Van Son, a.k.a. “Toots”; CMIC source number 2144 was wounded moments after the attack began. The source suffered a head wound and did not regain consciousness until several days later.¹¹⁵ The man was not released from the hospital until June 1968. Dang Van Son was the unit cook¹¹⁶ prior to the attack and was judged by the interrogator to be of below average intelligence. The source was in the words of the interrogator “removed from the CMIC before the interrogation was completed and is no longer available for interrogation.”¹¹⁷ This coupled with the fact that the interrogator was a captain (as opposed to the SP4 to Staff Sgt that the other sappers had) seems to indicate that the embassy battle may have taken on additional urgency by June 1968.

Ngo Van Giang indicates that “Ba, an embassy driver” took part in transporting him prior to the attack and the attack itself.¹¹⁸ Ba is a common Vietnamese nickname signifying birth order. Additionally Sgt Richard L. Johnson of the MSG force indicated that he engaged an embassy driver know as “Soc Mau” who was armed with an AK-47 assault rifle.¹¹⁹

Leo J. Crampsey, the Chief of Embassy Security, conducted a thorough investigation after the attack. His follow-up report dated 10 February 1968 indicates that he conducted a raid with South Vietnamese police on the garage the sappers used to stage the attack. This led to the arrest of ten people, including a South Vietnamese policeman and a South Vietnamese Army officer.¹²⁰ However, his initial report on the attack

remains classified. Numerous MSGs indicated that several embassy drivers took part in the attack. An embassy vehicle entered the side gate just prior to the attack with Viet Cong concealed in the trunk. These men then shot the MPs from behind as the MPs were repelling the sappers entering the compound. Mr. Robert Furey, Assistant to Crampsey, confirmed this account.¹²¹

The MPs at the side vehicle gate (by one sapper's account) had killed at least the first two Viet Cong through the hole that was blasted in the compound wall and wounded another two.¹²² The MPs (by another sapper's account) may have killed four Viet Cong.¹²³ The sources differ slightly on the details, but it is clear that the MPs were effectively engaging the sappers until the embassy drivers killed them from behind. Since the on-duty MP patrols and MSG reaction force response was so rapid, it is entirely possible that the MPs could have defended the grounds until these forces arrived within minutes. Regardless, the MP fire deprived the sapper force from at least one and possibly two leaders. This action combined with Harper's presence of mind to secure the Embassy main doors denied the enemy his goal: entering and holding the Embassy.

State Department Reaction to the Battle

The State Department reaction, as represented by the Saigon Embassy, to the attack is clearly illustrated by several telegrams they sent to Washington, D.C. In these telegrams, they acknowledged that the American Embassy was the symbol of American commitment and that they foresaw a significant downturn in public opinion, although press reports were not entirely accurate. The telegrams also prove that they were aware at that time that two embassy drivers were involved in the attack.

Ambassador Bunker, in a telegram dated the day after the attack (1 February 1968) detailed a conversation he had with President Thieu. He stated that “we had a particularly critical public opinion problem at home in the light of what had occurred here...”¹²⁴ This telegram was declassified on 7 March 2009. In a similar telegram dated 6 February 1968 he asked President Thieu about the GVN intelligence failure and how so many VC could infiltrate Saigon. Thieu replied that they did expect the attack, but did not know the timing and that “identifying the VC groups was next to impossible as they came dressed as civilians mingling with the rest of the people celebrating Tet.”¹²⁵

Two Department of State Telegrams indicate that the ambassador and his staff were aware that Embassy drivers had taken part in the attack. The first, dated 27 March 1968 was declassified 28 February 2009. It states that “a detailed report concerning the participation of Nguyen Van De in the attack will be submitted after VC prisoner Ngo Van Giang has been fully exploited.”¹²⁶ As stated previously, Giang refers to an embassy driver he called Ba. The telegram goes on to say that “two Marine eyewitness statements have been taken and sworn before consular officials to the effect that de was found with two Viet Cong attackers and that he had a submachine gun on his body and a pistol stuck into his belt.”¹²⁷ The second telegram was dated 4 March 1968 is a synopsis of an Associated Press (AP) dispatch of 4 March. It stated that “American security officials trying to learn if there are still Viet Cong on the U.S. Embassy payroll are being thwarted by South Vietnamese police... [They] refused to let the Americans talk at length with two of the Viet Cong who participated in the attack on the embassy...” It went on to say that “The fact that any of the squad that attacked the embassy survived has been a closely guarded secret” because embassy officials announced that all attackers had been killed.¹²⁸

The fact that reporters caught Embassy officials lying to them quite probably lessened their credibility even further. However, this author could not find any contemporary published accounts of this story.

The next chapter will look at the importance of Information Operations and the relevance of the Embassy fight today. Questions that fell outside the scope of this thesis and recommendations for further study will be offered. The conclusion recognizes that the true story of the selfless sacrifices and valor of the men that fought that day against overwhelming odds went largely unrecognized.

¹Combined Military Intelligence Center (CMIC), Report US540-68, Interrogation of Ngo VanGiang, Source #1890 (12 March 1968), 2.

²Ibid.

³Johnson and Himes, 7.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 5.

⁶Ibid., 6.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Marine Occurrence Report 1-68 (Saigon Vietnam: American Embassy, 23 February 1968) Statement of Sgt Rudy A. Soto, Enclosure 10, page 1.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 2.

¹⁴Ibid., 1.

¹⁵CMIC Report 382-68, Interrogation of Nguyen Van Sau, Source #1828 (28 February 1968), 5.

¹⁶ Richard L. Huss, former MSG during Tet, Telephone Interview by author 10 January 2009.

¹⁷Marine Occurrence Report, Statement of Sgt Soto, 2.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., 3.

²⁰Ibid..

²¹Johnson and Himes, 1.

²²Andy Watson, "The Dragoon," *MPRA Quarterly* (Summer 2008): 13-15, 22. <http://www.mpraonline.org/> (accessed December 2008).

²³Johnson and Hines, 9.

²⁴Captain Oliver Rose, *The Tet Offensive in Saigon and the 716th Military Police Battalion Response* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, n.d.), 52.

²⁵Thomas L. Johnson, Interview by author, 27 December 2008, Wichita, Kansas. Note: Johnson is the author of *Assault on the American Embassy, Tet 1968*.

²⁶Rose, 20.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Oberdorfer, 9.

³⁰Herrick.

³¹Rose, 21.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Captain Robert J. O'Brien, Marine Occurrence Report 1-68 (Saigon Vietnam: American Embassy, 23 February 1968), 4.

³⁸Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Banks, Enclosure 3, page 1.

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰CMIC Report US382-68, Interrogation of Nguyen Van Sau, Source #1828 (28 February 1968), 5.

⁴¹Thomas L. Johnson, Interview by author, 27 December 2008, Wichita, Kansas.

⁴²Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of O'Brien, 1.

⁴³LTC (Ret) Robert J. O'Brien, Correspondence with Author, 5 December 2008.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Dennis L. Ryan.

⁴⁶Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Robert J. O'Brien, 1.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Banks, Enclosure 3, page 4.

⁵⁵Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of O'Brien, Enclosure 1, page 2.

⁵⁶Major Robert J. O'Brien, *The Night They Breached the Wall*, 16.

⁵⁷Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of O'Brien, Enclosure 1, page 2.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

- ⁶⁰Ibid., 3.
- ⁶¹Ibid.
- ⁶²Major Robert J. O'Brien, *The Night They Breached the Wall*, 17.
- ⁶³Ibid., 18.
- ⁶⁴Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Sgt. Richard L. Johnson, Enclosure 8, page 1.
- ⁶⁵Ibid.
- ⁶⁶Ibid.
- ⁶⁷Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Raymond E. Reed, Enclosure 9, page 1.
- ⁶⁸Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Sgt. Richard L. Johnson, Enclosure 8, page 1.
- ⁶⁹Ibid., 2.
- ⁷⁰Ibid.
- ⁷¹Ibid.
- ⁷²Ibid.
- ⁷³Richard L. Johnson, Electronic correspondence with the author, 20 January 2009.
- ⁷⁴Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Capt. Robert J. O'Brien, Enclosure 2, page 3.
- ⁷⁵Ibid.
- ⁷⁶Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Raymond E. Reed, Enclosure 9, page 1.
- ⁷⁷Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Sgt. Richard L. Johnson, Enclosure 8, page 2.
- ⁷⁸Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Capt. Robert J. O'Brien, Enclosure 2, page 3.
- ⁷⁹Ibid.
- ⁸⁰Ibid.

- ⁸¹Ibid.
- ⁸²Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Banks, Enclosure 3, page 1.
- ⁸³Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Jimerson, Enclosure 7, page 1.
- ⁸⁴Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Banks, Enclosure 3, page 1.
- ⁸⁵Ibid.
- ⁸⁶Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Jimerson, Enclosure 7, page 1.
- ⁸⁷Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Banks, Enclosure 3, page 1.
- ⁸⁸Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Jimerson, Enclosure 7, page 1.
- ⁸⁹Ibid.
- ⁹⁰Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Ryan, Enclosure 16, page 1.
- ⁹¹Ibid.
- ⁹²Ibid.
- ⁹³Marine Occurrence Report 1-68, Statement of Banks, Enclosure 3, page 2.
- ⁹⁴Ibid.
- ⁹⁵Ibid.
- ⁹⁶Johnson and Himes, 10.
- ⁹⁷Ibid.
- ⁹⁸Ibid.
- ⁹⁹Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁰Ibid.
- ¹⁰¹Ibid., 12.
- ¹⁰²Ibid.
- ¹⁰³Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁴MAJ (ret) Frank Ribich, Personal communication with author, October 1987, Fort McClellan, Alabama.

- ¹⁰⁵Johnson and Himes, 12.
- ¹⁰⁶Ribich.
- ¹⁰⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁸Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁹Oberdorfer.
- ¹¹⁰Ribich.
- ¹¹¹Braestrup, 102.
- ¹¹²CMIC Report Number 382-62, Prepared by Staff Sergeant T.L. Moran, 20 February 1969, page 5.
- ¹¹³CMIC Report Number US 540-68, Prepared by Specialist 4 (SP4) M. R. Dedrick, 12 March 1968, page 2.
- ¹¹⁴Johnson and Himes, 3.
- ¹¹⁵CMIC Report Number US 1571-68, Prepared by Captain Ed Gaskins, 11 June 1968, page 3.
- ¹¹⁶Ibid., 1.
- ¹¹⁷Ibid., 3.
- ¹¹⁸Ibid., 5.
- ¹¹⁹Richard L. Johnson, E-mail correspondence with author, 20 January 2009.
- ¹²⁰Department of State, Office of Security, Nguyen Van Sau report, 10 February 1968, page 4.
- ¹²¹Mr. Robert Furey, E-mail correspondence with author.
- ¹²²CMIC Report Number US 1571-68, page 3.
- ¹²³CMIC Report Number US 540-68, page 1.
- ¹²⁴State Department Telegram, (Form FS-502) dated 1 February 1968, Control: Saigon 17361, NARA RG 84, Entry 3372, page 4.
- ¹²⁵State Department Telegram, (Form FS-502) dated 6 February 1968, Control: Saigon 18269, NARA RG 84, Entry 3372, page 4.

¹²⁶State Department Telegram, dated 27 March 1968, Control Saigon 23147, NARA RG 84, Entry 3372, page 1.

¹²⁷State Department Telegram, dated 27 March 1968, Control Saigon 23147, NARA RG 84, Entry 3372, page 1.

¹²⁸Department of State Outgoing Telegram (Form DS 322), dated 4 March 1968, drafted by J. Madden, NARA RG 84, Entry 3372.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RELEVANCE TODAY

The tactical victory of the Battle at the Embassy devolved into a strategic political defeat for the United States. This was due to several converging factors. The shift in public opinion in the fall of 1967, the disparity between the good news campaign and events on the ground, and escalating troop requests created a perception with the American public long before the Tet attacks commenced.

This action was a clear tactical victory made possible by the valorous efforts of Marine Security Guards armed with .38 caliber pistols and law enforcement Military Police fighting Viet Cong sappers armed with AK-47s and B-40 rockets. This was not considered newsworthy. The press alone cannot be blamed for the negative backlash in public opinion after the Embassy battle. However, selective reporting certainly conveyed that it seemed like a defeat for the United States. The simple fact that the Viet Cong could mount a coordinated country-wide attack, wage attacks all over the city of Saigon, and hold the Embassy grounds hostage for hours was enough to push flagging American opinion over the edge. The Embassy was one small, but significant, part of the overall Tet Offensive.

Three factors may have been able to affect the outcome of the battle:

1. Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland could have insisted that President Thieu allow U.S combat troops into Saigon during the week of the Tet celebration.
2. Although it was not customary, Ambassador Bunker could have authorized M-16s for the MSGs at the Embassy.

3. The State Department could have exercised more thorough screening procedures for their employees.

These factors will be addressed in order:

First, President Thieu, as stated previously was wary of U.S. combat troops in Saigon. This was due to the fact that some officials of the U.S. government, if not involved, did not interfere with the coup d'état against President Diem. The environment where the occurrence of a coup was not improbable may explain the initially slow response of SVN police and ARVN troops. It is conceivable that these forces were waiting to determine what was going on before committing to action.

Second, United States Embassies rely on the host nation for the outer ring of security. Custom and the principles of the Vienna Convention precluded offensive weapons. However, the ambassador's bodyguard detail possessed several M-16s for a worst-case scenario. Vietnam was also a combat zone in a war with no front line. Junior NCOs had repeatedly requested M-16s and M-14s in weekly staff meetings prior to the attack.

Third, the driver known as "Soc Mau" was continuously chided by MSGs that he was really Viet Cong. Several MSGs expressed more serious reservations about his loyalty. However, he remained employed by the State Department.

The lesson learned from the first factor is that decisions made earlier can preclude taking action later on. The lesson that can be drawn from the second and third factors is that communication from the bottom rank to the top is just as important as vice-versa. The men who are actually in the environment probably have a better situational awareness for conditions on the ground.

The Marine Security Guards and Military Police were extremely effective in their defense of the United States Embassy. The tactical victory is more significant given their role and equipment that reflects their non-tactical nature. The decision to cede security of Saigon the previous December was, in and of itself, the correct one. When Ambassador Bunker and GEN Westmoreland got new information about the impending attacks, they did the appropriate thing by approaching President Thieu. However, at this critical juncture, the three men most responsible for the security of South Vietnam did not take adequate measures to protect the capital of Saigon.

The two most significant factors that the MSGs and MPs faced tactically--factors that could have lead to a speedier conclusion of the battle--were the result of decisions made far above their level. First, the decision that no M-16s were allowed on the Embassy grounds or at Marine House for the worst case scenario probably should have been reviewed after security was handed over to the SVG the previous December. This decision could only have been made by Ambassador Bunker. Hours after the attack was over and the Embassy secured, M-14s and claymore mines were present to defend the Embassy grounds.

Second, it is incomprehensible that Department of State Embassy drivers could retain employment and access to the Embassy when they were actually Viet Cong guerrillas. This failure, more than any other aspect of the battle, carries dire warnings for future operations, not only at embassies, but for military forces, military contractors, and anywhere that Americans could be a target.

Information Operations

The credibility gap created by the good news campaign of the Johnson administration conditioned reporters to mistrust anything the military had to say. The military's credibility, which was undermined so severely, led reporters to draw their own conclusions--sometimes about events they were ill equipped to interpret.

One MSG reported that after the battle the MSGs were using lengths of rope to flip the Viet Cong bodies over prior to searching them. This was a common practice in Vietnam to defend against the tactic of booby trapping bodies with grenades. The unidentified female reporter became enraged and actually physically struck a Marine accusing him of desecrating the bodies of the Viet Cong dead.

The military in Vietnam, inadvertently perhaps, or with good intentions, misled the press as to the progress of the war. This was done at the behest of the Johnson Administration and supported at all levels of command. Credibility, once lost, is almost irretrievable.

Relevance Today

As pointed out in this thesis, tactical victory alone is not enough to sustain a political strategic victory. Many factors such as the political situation, the diplomatic situation, economic factors and perceptions of the media converge and combine to create the big picture. To avoid repeating the lesson of the negative publicity in the aftermath of the embassy battle, military commanders must strive for transparency at all levels.

The many dimensions of the instrument of national power, summed up in the acronym DIME (Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic) should be addressed by military commanders. However, commanders should acknowledge their limitations in

influencing areas that are not military. The whole of government approach is necessary to ensure success in a counterinsurgency fight.

US forces in Iraq, by necessity, hire many Local Nationals (LNs) and Third Country Nationals (TCNs) for support services, particularly as interpreters. Soldiers at the lowest level must continually reevaluate these employees to ensure that they are not working for interests that oppose the U.S. forces. Screening by counterintelligence should be intensive. The U.S. forces should never rely too much on allies. Regardless of the level of perceived risk, the worst case scenario should be planned for and resourced.

Areas for Further Study

Many questions about the battle remain unanswered and are worthy of future examination. There was a large volume of fire coming from the apartment building across the street from the Embassy. This was verified by the large number of hits on the MEDEVAC helicopter that took Cpl. Zachuranic from the rooftop helipad of the Embassy. United States Army tactics for assaulting a building in an urban environment dictate that there is a security element that provides overwatching fire. I believe that there was such a force in this battle.

Another unanswered question is why Barry Zorthian, the public relations chief for the United States Embassy decided to notify wire services, television networks and print journalists. Don Oberdorfer, in *TET!* surmises that he may have attempted to garner future influence. Military situations are always fluid. A delay in notifying the media until a clear picture of the true status of events may have prevented the initial erroneous reports. The small arms fire that MPs on the second reaction force believed was coming

from the upper floors of the Embassy was quite likely coming from the Apartment building across the street.

Furthermore, examination of the initial report that Leo Crampsey, Chief of Embassy Security, would answer the questions surrounding the Embassy drivers who took part in the attack. The report exists and is in the National Archives, but has not, as of this writing, been declassified. This lesson, although embarrassing for the State Department, is of crucial importance to the future of military operations and the security of embassies that have increasingly become targets.

Perhaps most important of all questions that fell outside the scope of this thesis was the actions of our South Vietnamese allies. There was a South Vietnamese police station one block away from the Embassy. They absolutely refused to render assistance, even though an aide to Ambassador Bunker called the commander several times. To be fair, some of our allies performed brilliantly, such as the South Viet Nam ARVN Battalion at Ton Son Nhut airport. Even a comparatively small percentage of corruption can hamstring the best efforts to build a solid nation state.

Summary

This thesis examined the various factors that set the stage for the Battle of the Embassy. Many factors converged to transform a tactical victory into a political defeat. As previously stated, the only tactical factors that could have contributed to keeping the Viet Cong off the grounds entirely were outside the Marines and Military Police power to decide.

Although the Embassy Battle was one part of the larger Tet Offensive, it garnered significant coverage in the print and television mediums. The previously mentioned

factors of shifting public opinions, the emerging credibility gap, and the souring military/media relations almost ensured that any attack on the Embassy would be judged a political defeat. This thesis presented evidenced that clearly shows that the MSGs and MPs effectively defeated the enemy while operating under numerous disadvantages,

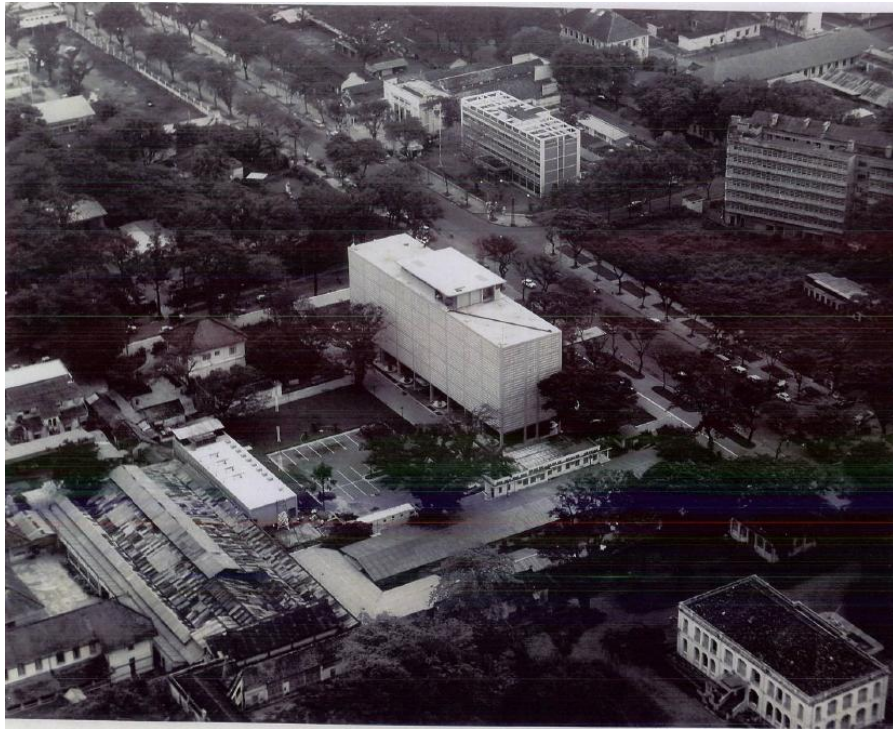
The tactical victory was turned into a political defeat for the factors previously stated and due to selective reporting. The heroism of SP4 Charles L. Daniel and PFC William E. Sebast, the MPs who died while fending off the attackers was not considered worthy of note. The valor of Cpl. James C. Marshall, who continued to fight after he was wounded, was not considered newsworthy. The sacrifices of SGT Jonnie B. Thomas and SP4 Owen E. Mebust, the first MPs to respond were noted by cameramen for the shock value that their bodies, laying in the street in front of the Embassy conveyed. Cpl. Warren Caudle's courage, armed with a .38 caliber revolver, facing Viet Cong with machine guns and rockets was not considered newsworthy. All of these men not only did their job, but went well above and beyond the call of duty. Thomas "Egor" Johnson put it best when he said, "To these men, (that took part in the Embassy Battle) the words Semper Fidelis--Always Faithful, mean something to them. The MPs' motto, Of the Troops, For the Troops, means something to them. The 716th MP BN motto of *Lex et Ordo* (Law and Order)--means something. On that day, they would rather die than stain their honor or let their friends down." They performed brilliantly and have not received the credit they so richly deserve.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Front View of the Chancery Building, Saigon, Vietnam, 1967

Source: Department of the State, "Embassy Press Kit," Saigon, Vietnam October 1967.



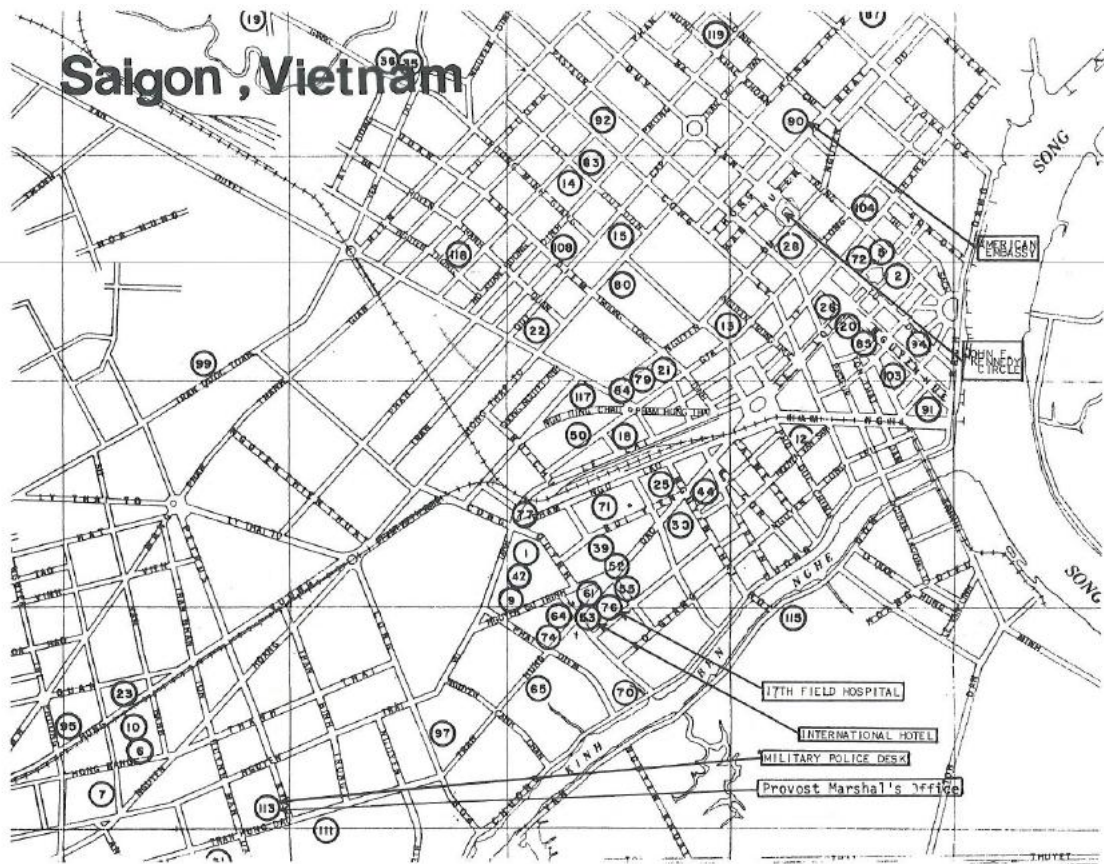
Overhead View of the American Embassy Compound

Source: Department of the State, "Embassy Press Kit," Saigon, Vietnam October 1967.



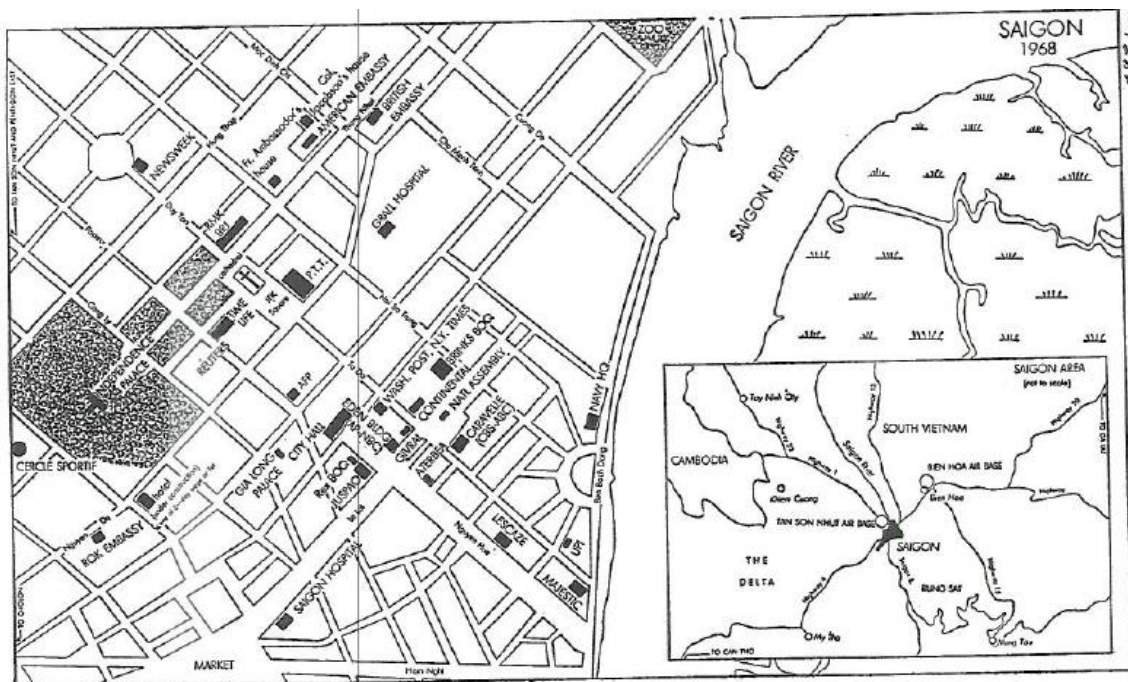
View from Across the Street of the American Embassy Compound

Source: Department of the State, "Embassy Press Kit," Saigon, Vietnam October 1967.



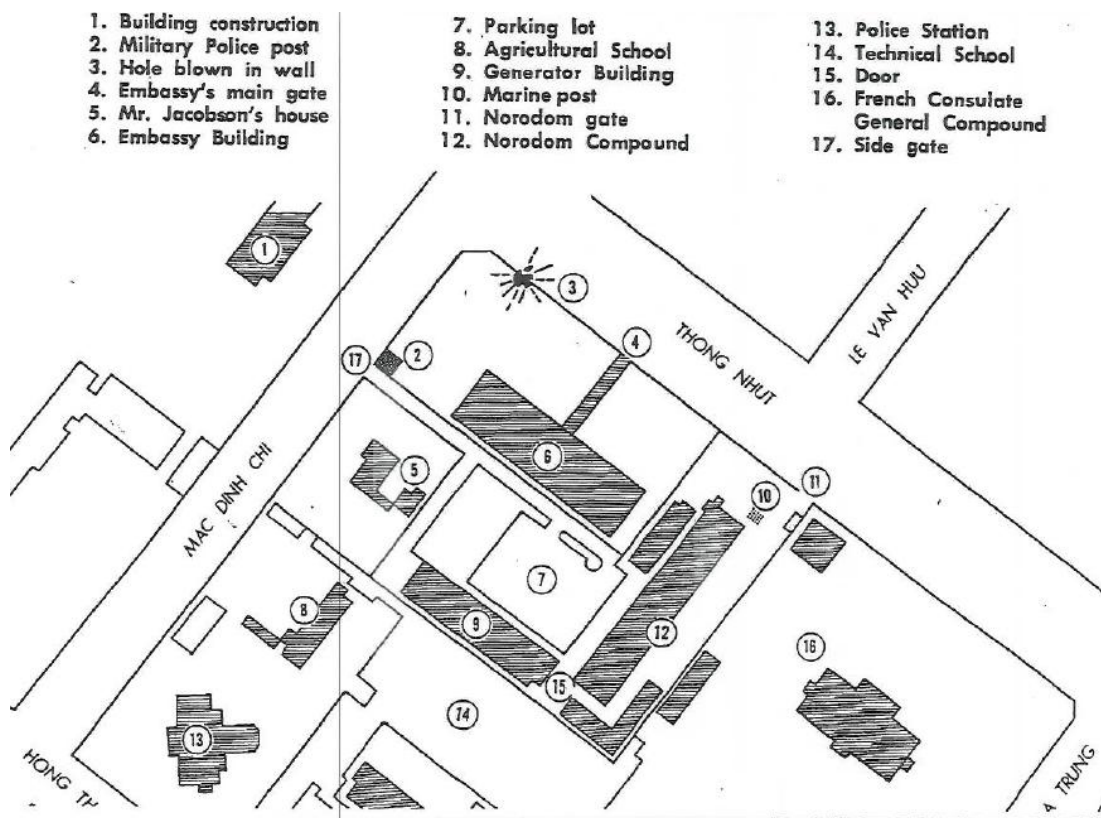
Street Map of Saigon, Vietnam

Source: Thomas L. Johnson, and Mary R. Himes, *Assault on the American Embassy, Tet, 1968* (Fort McClellan, AL: The MP Museum, 1983)



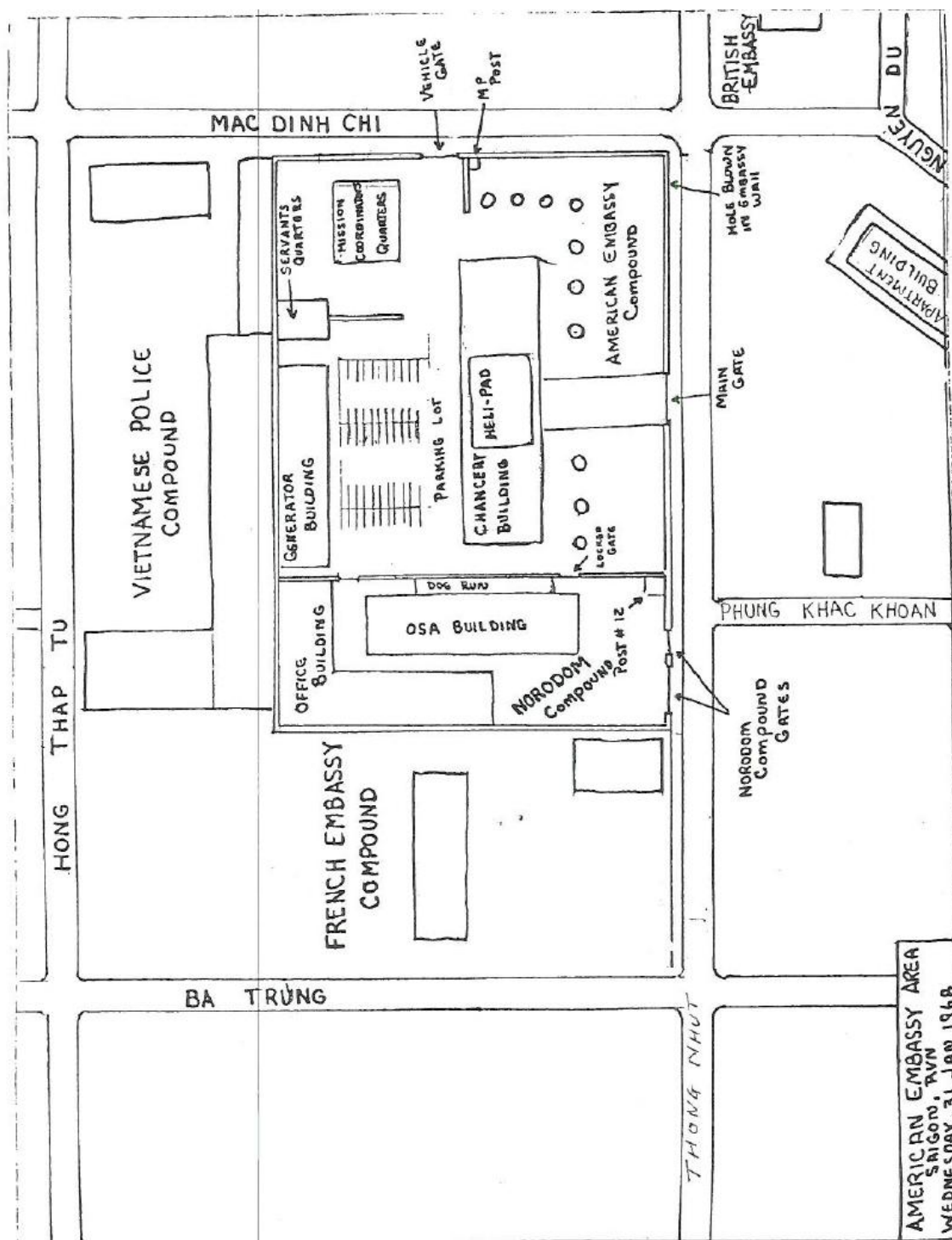
Street Map Showing Proximity of News Agencies

Source: Peter Braestrup, *Big Story* Abridged Edition (New Haven, CT: Anchor Book, 1978), 78.

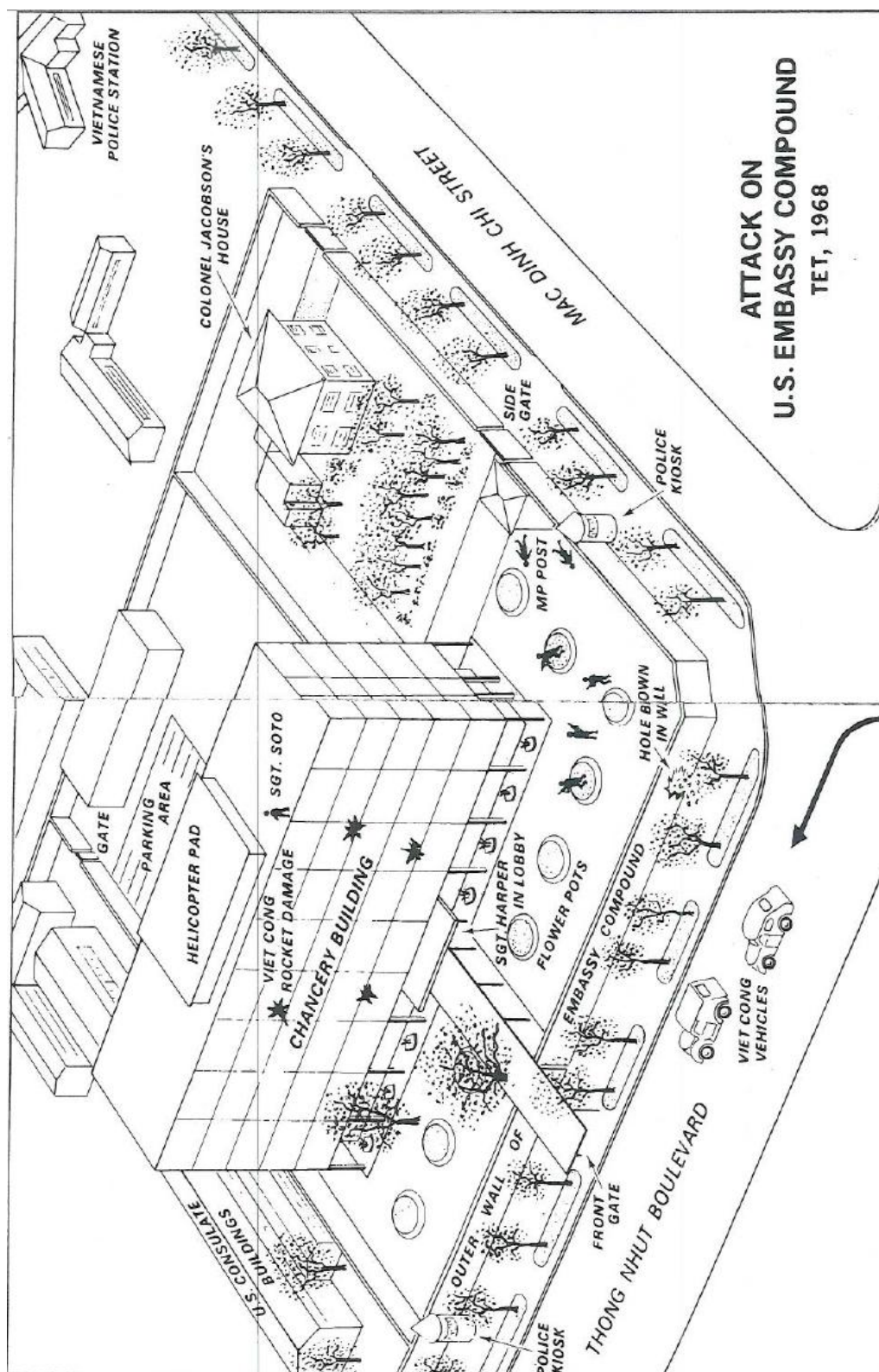


Map of American Embassy Compound

Source: Department of State, Press Kit, Saigon, Vietnam, Spring 1968



Source: Thomas L. Johnson, and Mary R. Himes, *Assault on the American Embassy, Tet, 1968* (Fort McClellan, AL: The MP Museum, 1983)



Source: Don Oberdorfer, *TET! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Inside jacket.

APPENDIX A

TIMELINE

All times are approximate. Due to the chaotic nature of the rapidly unfolding events, times were not accurately recorded. Times listed came from witness statements. Times that are preceded by “app” (approximate) have been extrapolated by the author through correlations to events of a known time. An asterisk (*) indicates significant conflict with other evidence.

31 January 1968		Source
0246	Signal 300	Johnson and Himes
0247	Embassy wall explosively breached	Johnson and Himes
0247-0253 (app)	MPs at vehicle gate killed	Johnson and Himes
	Harper locks front doors; slightly wounded	Johnson and Himes
	Zachuranic WIA	Johnson and Himes
0255	O’Brien’s team engages in firefight at vehicle gate	Johnson and Himes
0255-0300	Banks team arrives at Embassy	Banks
0300	Banks team arrives at Embassy	Schuepper & Jimerson
0300	Furey and Crampsey arrive	O’Brien
0305	Furey and Crampsey arrive	Inemer
0308	PMO notifies 716th MP Battalion to Ready Alert Force	716th Log
0315	Embassy attack confirmed	PMO Log
0317	LT Ribich and 11 men depart the international hotel	Johnson and Himes
0320	Medevac request made to MACV for Cpl. Zachuranic	Johnson and Himes
0325	LT Ribich and Alert Force arrive at JFK Circle	Johnson and Himes
0330	MP Alert Force arrives at Embassy	Wilson
0330	Gny. Sgt. Morrison talks to LT Ribich via phone	Morrison
0330	Six MPs (on duty patrols) arrive at Capt. O’Brien’s location	O’Brien
0330-0345	Embassy Security Officer Laurello advises Gny. Sgt. Morrison that the Ambassador has charged him with the defense of the Embassy	Johnson

0335	Banks, Jimerson, Spersud, Caudle, Huss, Wilson, two MPs take M-60 to rear of Norodom	Wilson
0341	Embassy requests urgent resupply of ammo	PMO Log
0345	Jimerson wounded in action (WIA)	Banks
0355 (app)	MP WIA giving first aid to Jimerson	Johnson and Himes
0355	Caudle confronts one VC in parking lot	Johnson and Himes
0359	Embassy reports receiving rocket and mortar fire; requests reinforcements	PMO Log
0350-0400 (app)	Crampsey, Furey and MP patrol attempt to shoot off lock on vehicle gate	Johnson and Himes
0400	On duty MP patrol arrives; M-60 placed in door of generator building	Johnson and Himes
0400 (*)	Ryan WIA Ariola relays call from Jacobsen (mission coordinator)	Banks Banks
0400	Jimerson carried to front of Norodom for ground ambulance evacuation	Wilson
0400	Spersud covers rear gate of Norodom	Spersud
0400	O'Brien and Ramsey on roof of building adjacent to Embassy	Johnson and Himes
0400	Ryan WIA (rocket shrapnel) Marshall, Wilson, and two MPs (Singer and unknown) on roof of OSA	Johnson and Himes
0400	Marshall kills one Viet Cong Ryan has two probable kills, one wounded	Johnson and Himes
0400-0430	Johnson and Wolff pickup Beretta submachine gun from Ambassador Komer's residence	Johnson
0405	Harper (by phone) reports Viet Cong are not in chancery	Banks
0405	More MPs arrive Marshall and Ryan on roof	Wilson
0410	Banks reports to Morrison (phone)	Johnson and Himes
0415	Ammo resupply arrives	PMO Log
0415	Banks speaks to Soto (radio)	Johnson and Himes
0420	General Westmoreland called PMO to request status. He orders Provost Marshal to make Embassy the "top priority"	PMO Log
0420 (*)	Black sedan fired on by MPs	Banks
0420-0430	Fratarelli fired on by Cahn Sats	Johnson and Himes
0429	Bravo Company Alert Force dispatched to Embassy	PMO Log
0430	OIC (Capt O'Brien) says he saw two Viet Cong enter COL Jacobsen's house	Inemer

0430	Ryan WIA, Marshall WIA. Ryan taken off roof of OSA	Schuepfer
0431 (*)	PMO requests that command [MACV] furnish chopper and/or armor for Embassy	PMO Log
0432	Alert Team A requests ammunition at Embassy; resupply complete at 0455	PMO Log
0438	B Company Alert Force arrives	716th Log
0440-0500	B Company takes up positions in front of Embassy	Johnson and Himes
0443	Small arms fire at Embassy continues	PMO Log
0445	Several medevac attempts made	Johnson and Himes
0500	Spersud acts as runner for ammunition	Spersud
0500	Schuepfer WIA: shot in hand	Schuepfer
0500 (*)	MPs shoot black sedan from both sides of street (this time is probably more accurate than the 0420 time cited by SSG Banks; Bravo Alert Force arrived at 0438)	Schuepfer
0521	Additional MP patrols arrive at the Embassy	PMO Log
0530	Command [MACV] has secured chopper for MP Alert Force to land on Embassy roof	PMO Log
0545	DUSTOFF En-route to Embassy	Johnson and Himes
0548	[Alert Force at] Embassy request more flares to land chopper	PMO Log
0549	Viet Cong still inside the Embassy compound	PMO Log
0550	Huss is pinned down at Generator Building	Huss
0600	A sniper "in the apartment" building killed CPL Marshall	Banks
0600	Marshall and Wilson were shooting at a lone Viet Cong when Marshall killed from "fire across the street."	Wilson
0610	Soto takes small arms fire "from the hotel across the street."	Soto
0615	The area near the Ambassador's quarters receiving small arms and mortar fire.	PMO Log
0615	DUSTOFF lands on the roof of Embassy	PMO Log
0625	OIC [Capt. O'Brien] calls for ammunition through Reed via radio	Johnson
0630	Patullo WIA attempting to scale wall; shot in leg	Reed
0634	Reinforcements at Embassy can't get in locked gates; attempts to get over wall met with intense fire.	PMO Log
0636	Small arms fire coming from "Arts [sic] building [apartment] across street from the Embassy being directed into the compound	

0645 (app)	(shortly after dawn) Sgts. Wolff, Bothwell, and Johnson bring ammo resupply to Embassy	
After 0645	From roof of generator building, Reed kills one Viet Cong Johnson kills one Viet Cong, wounds another that he believes was killed by the MPs at front gate	Johnson
0650	Wilson tells Huss that Ryan has been wounded and Marshall killed	Huss
0700	Command [MACV] tells PMO that a platoon from 101 st Airborne will land on Embassy roof. 101 st will work down and MPs will workup; “unknown at this time if the U.S. controlled the roof pad-also that the VC may be inside”	PMO Log
0700-0730	MPs Healy and Shook ram gate with quarter-ton jeep	Johnson and Himes
0715 (*)	101 st lands on roof of Embassy	PMO Log
0715	Spersud and two MPs capture one live Viet Cong	Spersud
0717	Chopper drops ammunition on roof	PMO Log
0730	Sweep of compound begins	Huss
0730	Rivera kills three VCs during sweep of compound	Johnson and Himes
0730	O’Brien saw Banks team begin sweep	O’Brien
0735 (app)	Sgt. Bothwell WIA	O’Brien
0742	Charlie Company sent 22 man team to MACV Annex for helicopter pickup	716th Log
0800 (*)	101 st Airborne lands on roof (This is probably the accurate time)	Johnson and Himes
0800	US troops have control of the Embassy grounds	PMO Log
0831	Intense ground fire prevents ammunition resupply helicopter from landing	PMO Log
0843	Charlie Company Air Assault cancelled	716th Log
0845	Charlie Company Alert Force pinned down by small arms fire at MACV chopper pad	PMO Log
0900	Harper hands out CS grenades and flak vests to MSGs from chancery door	Harper
0900	Embassy is reported as secured by U.S. forces	PMO Log
0930	Gny. Sgt. Morrison makes first direct radio contact with OIC, Capt. O’Brien	Morrison
1031	Embassy casualty report: 19 Viet Cong KIA, 4 MPs and 1 MSG KIA, 4 MPs WIA, [MSG WIA not reported] [6 MSGs WIA]	PMO Log
1046	MP V-100 armored car picks up Ambassador from ARVN compound	716th Log
1115	The U.S. National Colors raised at the Embassy	Johnson and Himes

1237	The 527th MP Company Alert Force is relieved at the Embassy	716th Log
2007	Alert Force A-2 at Ambassador's quarters at Pham Than Gian and Hai Ba Truong request reinforcements	PMO Log
2013	Alert Force A-2 at Ambassador's quarters pinned down by small arms fire	PMO Log
2015	A-2 receiving mortar rounds believed to originate from Hong Tap Tu and Gia Ba Truong	
1 February 1968		
0013	A-2 reports Ambassador's quarters now secure	PMO Log
0758	A-2 reports mortar firing from cemetery near Ambassador's quarters	PMO Log
1350	Armored Personnel/Carriers (APCs) are sweeping cemetery adjacent to Ambassador's quarters	PMO Log
1934	Claymore mines set up inside main gate of Embassy as a measure of "last resort"	PMO Log
2335	Flares requested by MP Alert Force at Embassy due to sniper fire	PMO Log

The last name in the source column indicates the Marine that wrote an individual statement for Marine Occurrence Report 1-68.

PMO Log is the DA Form 1594, "Daily Staff Journal or Duty Officer's Log" for the Provost Marshal's Office.

The 716th Military Police Battalion, as a separate entity, maintained a log of their own.

APPENDIX B.

RANK ABBREVIATIONS CONFORM TO THE SERVICE,

ARMY OR MARINE CORPS

MARINE RANKS

Captain	Capt.
Gunnery Sergeant	Gny. Sgt.
Staff Sergeant	SSgt.
Sergeant	Sgt.
Corporal	Cpl.
Lance Corporal	Lcpl.

ARMY RANKS

Lieutenant Colonel	LTC
Captain	CPT
First Lieutenant	1LT
Staff Sergeant	SSG
Sergeant	SGT
Specialist Fourth Class	SP4
Private First Class	PFC

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