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OPERATION JUNCTION CITY

(22 February - 14 April 1967)

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By early 1967, the US war in South Vietnam had surpassed the Korean War (1950-1953) in many respects: numbers of troops, budget, up-to-date hardware used, quantity of explosives, etc. In 1966 alone, American forces "used at least 83 million rounds of small arms ammunition per month, and per year, 10 million mortar and artillery rounds, 2 million bombs, 4.8 million rockets, 6.8 million grenades."¹

Despite that, the second strategic counter-offensive during the 1966-1967 dry season was less hard hitting. The US command acted with circumspection in both strategic and tactical operation, in "search and destroy" actions and in "pacification" likewise. Before, Westmoreland had been able to launch a "Five-Arrows general counter-offensive" - each arrow being pointed at the same time in a different direction - with 40,000 troops on the South Vietnam battlefield. Now, in Tay Ninh area alone, he had to mount to large-scale operations during the last quarter of 1966 - *ATTLEBORO* and *CEDAR FALLS* -

1. F. Herman, *America's Vietnam Policy - The Strategy of Deception*, New York, 1966.

and the results of these according to the US mass media were "disappointing."

And however the American forces had improved their organization and methods of fighting. In particular, as *AP* emphasized, instead of the infantry being supported in its assaults by aircraft and artillery, it became only a complement to air and artillery attacks.

On the "second front"¹ the setback was no less great. This front was the "rural pacification", a key campaign in the US Command's strategic objective to deprive guerilla warfare of its "roots and infrastructure". Peter Arnett admitted that "the history of pacification in South Vietnam is an inventory of bankruptcy of big plans, of US talented advisers' unbounded energy going in smoke." (*AP*, 8 January 1967)

The LAF, on the other hand, become stronger with every passing day. Guerilla detachments had been turned into real regular units. New weapons appeared, together with greater skill in handling modern armaments. Their base areas had continually been reinforced with a logistics network that was rapidly being consolidated. Holding the initiative, the LAF not only wiped out US troops in the plains but also in the mountains. They thwarted US search-and-destroy operations as well as sweeps in the liberated areas, such as at Tay Ninh and Plei-Jirang. So as to keep the initiative the LAF exploited a basic contradiction in the enemy's operations: the

1. "Rural pacification" was termed "the second front" by Lyndon Johnson.

necessity to group forces to carry out offensives but to spread them out to occupy terrain. The LAF's position of strength contributed to the campaign of persuasion among the puppet troops who "had reached a strength of 623,000 with regular army troops numbering some 302,808 men," but "The great challenge facing these units [158 battalions] is to alter the image of a defeated, demoralized army." (*Westmoreland - A Soldier Reports*)

The *Pentagon Papers* disclosed that, by early 1967, US high-ranking officials, and sometimes even Johnson himself, showed "concern" over the ever more obvious failure of the land war in South Vietnam. According to *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 January 1967, America was involved "in a strange war" that even President Johnson did not understand, a war that was not turning out very well and showed "no sign of improvement."

It was in this situation that the US Command launched Operation *JUNCTION CITY* in the hope of quickly reaching a "position of strength" to which the LAF would have to yield.

"The Biggest Operation of the War to That Time"

(*Gen. Westmoreland*)

JUNCTION CITY was according to Gen. Westmoreland "the biggest operation of the war to that

time." It was directed against the north of Tay Ninh Province where the Duong Minh Chau revolutionary base was situated, known as War Zone C. The operation lasted 52 days, from 22 February to 14 April 1967. Having acquired experience from the previous round (Operation ATTLEBORO), the US Command decided to use more sophisticated and efficient weaponry this time. The aims in view were basically the same as before, but this time the field of operations spread wider with larger combat formations utilizing varied methods for deep thrusts into the LAF zone.

It mobilized for this purpose nearly all US mobile forces available in Eastern Nam Bo (US Field Force II), including the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions, the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division, the 173rd Airborne Brigade the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, and the 1st Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division, totalling 9 brigades with 27 US infantry battalions. The armour totalled 11 battalions of which 3 were from the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment and 8 from the infantry divisions and brigades involved: more than 1,200 tanks and armoured cars in all. Artillery included 14 battalions which were grouped into two formations with 256 guns, including the 175 mm howitzers newly arrived from the United States. The Air Force strength involved totalled 9 squadrons (162 jets, 300 helicopters, 18 CH.47, almost 3 squadrons of aircraft carriers with about forty C.123 and C.130, and about 30 reconnaissance planes) intended to fly on average a hundred cover and support sorties per day. There were about 6

engineering battalions armed with huge bulldozers (Rome-plows) flame-throwers, "chemical units" and up-to-date techniques to clear forests, raze villages, destroy underground galleries, set up landing zones, repair communication lines and so on. All 50,000 US and puppet (4 infantry battalions) troops were placed under the command of Gen. J.D. Seaman, the commander of US Field Force II Vietnam. The operation was termed "the biggest ever offensive of the Vietnam War". Its main objectives were: to destroy the bases and leading organs of the NLF (thought to be located in War Zone C) to sack the stores and logistic network of the Resistance, to set up a security belt to ease the pressure on Saigon-Cholon, to wipe out part of the LAF's main force believed (by US intelligence agencies) to be positioned as follows: "In mid-January, relocation of enemy. The 271st Regiment was located on the Cambodian border near Lo Go, the 272nd Regiment had moved to the Michelin rubber plantation northeast of Dau Tieng, and the 273rd was outside War Zone C near Tan Uyen, about 25 km northeast of Saigon Headquarters of the 9th Viet Cong Division remain in the East sector of War Zone C and the 101st North Vietnam Regiment.. moved north to the vicinity of An Loc and Loc Ninh" which "resulted in a shift in the area of primary interest for the eastern and the west central section of War Zone C."

1. Lt.-Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, *Cedar Falls - Junction City, A Turning point*, Wash. D.C., 1974.

Also according to Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, as early as November 1966, Gen. Seaman's headquarters was planning Operation JUNCTION CITY and US intelligence agencies were busy carefully going through reports on "enemy intentions" coming from diverse sources such as "aerial observation and photography, sensors, patrol reports, sampan traffic counts, enemy probes of Regional and Popular Forces posts, agent reports, civilian movement reports, reports of increased anti-aircraft fire and captured documents..."

The theatre of operations for JUNCTION CITY was defined as the area of 1500 km, bounded in the west and north by the Kampuchean border, in the south by Highway 13 and in the east by the Saigon River. As directed by Gen. Westmoreland "the plan was to erect a vast horseshoe of troops around three sides of War Zone C, then to sweep up the centre with armoured and mechanized forces". By way of a prelude to JUNCTION CITY, two small-scale operations — *Gadsden* and *Tucson* — were launched as preparatory and diversionary manoeuvres. The US units spread over a vast area, over 140 km in diameter, running from Long Nguyen to Lo Go and passing through Dau Tieng, Suoi Da and Tay Ninh. Setting up the arc involved a parachute assault by a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, "the only airborne assault launched by American troops during the [Vietnam] war."

Tactical flexibility had been one of the LAF

1, 2. Gen. W.C. Westmoreland, op. cit.

Command's main principles since its creation: In face of the numerically superior GIs far from passively waiting for the blow to come the LAF made every effort to take the enemy by surprise. For this it was necessary to collect intelligence about the enemy and grasp his intentions in order to decide the direction of counter-attacks, troops needed to be mobilized and the concentration of armaments in order to force the enemy to disperse and place him on the defensive at the very moment he expected to regain the initiative.

One of the best achievements of the revolutionary forces' intelligence service was to put an agent (Sau Doc) into the enemy's High Command and lay hands on the enemy plans. Sau Doc had managed to become the close friend of Colonel Ngo, "one of the high-ranking officers working with Gen. Westmoreland and Gen. Cao Van Vien" (Chief of Staff of the puppet army — *Ed.*)

When Operation JUNCTION CITY started the Vietnamese command was already partly aware of its proposed attacks and the disposition of the forces involved. The LAF had consequently prepared a disposition to cope with its sudden surges. That disposition relied on guerilla warfare and self-defence units, on perfect knowledge of terrain and use of the surprise element. The LAF concentrated at key points were ready for the attack at the right moment to break the enemy prongs of attack hitting the enemy in both the front and the rear. The contradictions of the enemy's situation were to be fully exploited; between the frontal offensive and

behind-the-lines defence, between the concentration of forces and their dispersal, between the mobility needed for the offensive and the occupation of terrain by a stationary force. Local forces, making successive strong pushes forward, would intercept at the right time the advancing enemy columns. Their simultaneous attacks would place the GIs under continual strain, wear them down, and compel them to spread out thinly, thus creating weak points to be exploited by the LAF regulars. Conversely, local forces well backed-up by regulars could infiltrate behind the enemy's defence lines for small and medium-scale raids, and prepare the ground for the regulars' lightning manoeuvres. Once *JUNCTION CITY* had started, this combat array could be re-adjusted, developed and re-arranged as the battle unfolded.

The LAF counter-offensive comprised two main phases: the first aimed at containing the enemy advance, and the second at going over to the offensive, at pursuing and wiping out the enemy. The first phase, was conceived as a confrontation in which the enemy would have superiority in strength, air fire, artillery and armour. The LAF would try to reduce the enemy's combat potential to a minimum, hamper his advance towards his chosen objectives, while defending LAF positions. On the ground, the guerillas were entrusted with a fundamental task: the flexible defence of the terrain. By assuming responsibility for the bulk of defensive actions, they enabled the regular units to act as a mobile element able to gather in large numbers for "hammer blows" when necessary. Once

the US formations were contained in their main axis of attack and their reinforcement disposition was disrupted, the LAF would go on to counter-attacks with rapid pincer manoeuvres to split up and destroy them. The success of this phase would depend on the continuity of the encirclement, on the scissor movements and on the success of crucial engagements to get back enemy occupied terrain and drive the enemy into passivity. To this end, the LAF had to discover the enemy's strong points but above all his weak points on which they would concentrate their striking force. They had been putting continuous pressure on the enemy from bases set up around the War Zone, especially at Dau Tieng, Tay Ninh, Hon Quan and Loc Ninh. On the other hand the enemy had quite powerful forces which could be mobilized, concentrated forces in a relatively short time and, as well as airstrikes, a fearsome fire power coming from artillery and armoured units.

The shortcomings of the enemy's disposition show up under thorough analysis:

- Because plans had leaked into LAF hands and as the preparatory work of a large-scale operation was necessarily conspicuous, the element of surprise was almost eliminated. Such an operation called for the co-ordination of many units in reconnoitring landing zones, clearing roads, repairing communication lines, transport, movement by the logistic services, etc.

- The forces mobilized, though large, were not enough for such an extensive theatre of operations (almost 1,500 sq. km) their concentration in front

emptied the rear ; in addition, they were given too many missions at the same time, having to execute "search and destroy" operations, to destroy LAF depots to occupy terrain and to "pacify" it as well. Their shock troops would be broken into small units and become more vulnerable, especially in the rear. Should the enemy concentrate troops for forward movement, his occupation forces would lessen and it would be difficult for him to secure the already-won objectives ; if he abandoned these, the "pacification" goal would not be reached. This contradiction grew sharper and sharper as he penetrated into War Zone C and dispersal would have as much effect geographically (axes of action) as in affectations (diversity of tasks to be done) :

- The fielding of large concentrated formations does not harmonize with scattered minor engagements or with troop dispersal. The efficiency of big guns would therefore be restricted, as they could not provide effective support fire. The shock troops, engaged in isolated encounters with no tight encirclements, would be subject to increasing vulnerability in case of LAF counter-attack ; moreover, it was impossible for them to relieve one another efficiently, once dispersed.

- The armoured elements, also spread thinly along the communication lines, bolts, springboards and on disadvantageous terrain while fighting an elusive adversary, be deprived of objectives and the ability to use their full force. They would in fact make themselves easy targets.

The GIs Back in the "VC's New York Subway"

War Zone C had for decades been one of the innumerable *maquis* of the Revolutionaries who, since the forties, had been doing their best to build up and consolidate this vast sanctuary. A quite inaccessible retrenched camp with a network of underground galleries enabling them to disappear and reappear at will. With the US making air raids, especially by B.52 - they were impelled to extend and to bury deeper this "VC's New York Subway," as the Americans called it.

Operation *JUNCTION CITY* which took place there included, for the GIs, two phases: the preparation and execution.

A - Preparations (before 21 February 1967).

The enemy actions can be divided into four categories :

1. Reconnaissance.

From January 1967 onwards, reconnaissance flights took place and eight companies of commandos operated along Routes nos.4 and 13 and around Suoi Da to spot the offices, depots and regular forces of the Resistance. The "Tropic Lightning" Division sent various companies out on patrol. Those soldiers extended information from villages by bullying. A GI (Eugene Keys) said: "I was in the 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry of the 25th Division. In operation in January of 1967, we came across a village of women, young kids, and old men - no youngmen. We surrounded the village, then we forced all the civilians out to an open field and we called in a

Chinook, a large helicopter. At gunpoint we held these people until the Chinook arrived. Then we forced all of them onto the Chinook to be taken to Saigon, I believe, and then we destroyed all of their houses, we dumped all the rice in their wells, killed the chickens and livestock and left the place, a real scorched earth."¹

2. Preparations of Material

Parallel to the widening of the Suoi Da encampments and airfield was the repair of the bridges and the road surfaces of Highways 13 and 22 and of some local roads. In the meantime, huge bulldozers cleared both sides of those communication lines while defence outposts were set up to secure the transport of food stores, ammunition, weapons, fuel etc. to the encampments near the zone of operations. From 17 January to 9 February alone, on roads nos. 1, 13, 14 and 22, there were 5,500 journeys made by vehicles with over 14,000 tons of material.

3. Diversionary and Relief Actions

To hinder LAF movement, mines were laid by the enemy in a zigzag about forty kilometres long in the Suoi Da - Loc Ninh - Mount Tha La area. The preference was for up-to-date anti-personnel plastic charges called *Gravel mines* which ejected small grains, transparent to X rays and hard to pull out from wounds.

To drive the LAF away from its positions, the US Command launched two preliminary operations which were designed *Gadsden* and *Tucson*. *Gadsden*,

1. *The Winter Soldier Investigation*. Beacon Press, USA, 1972.

which lasted from 2 to 20 February, employed two brigades of the 25th Infantry Division under the command of Gen. Frederic C. Weyand: the 196th Light Infantry (Gen. Richard T. Knowles) and the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division (Col. Marshall B. Garth). Its operational area was some 30 km north-west of Tay Ninh City, in the vicinity of Lo Go on the Kampuchean border. There "it was suspected that elements of the 271st and 272nd Viet Cong Regiments, 70th Guard Regiment, 680th Training Regiment, and miscellaneous elements subordinate to the central (COSVN) - including several medical units might be encountered"¹. After twenty days' fighting "typified by small unit actions" in an area where "fortifications encountered were extensive and many were capable of withstanding very heavy artillery and air strikes" whereas "the enemy chose not to stand and fight but rather to employ guerrilla tactics," the exhausted GIs left the battleground with "29 killed and 107 wounded"². Operation *Tucson* started on 14 February, employing the 1st Brigade (Col. William B. Caldwell) and the 3rd Brigade (Col. Sidney M. Marks) of the 1st Infantry Division. It was directed at the southwestern part of Binh Long Province where the GIs expected to search and destroy "elements of the 272nd Regiment and the Phu Loi Battalion". It ended after four days "with great disappointment" for the GIs as "US casualties were 3 killed and 65 wounded" and the LAF "lost 13 killed" only. The booty included no more than "a few weapons and some

1, 2. Lt. - Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, op. cit.

small-arms ammunition and explosives". Its "search and destroy" operations hurriedly came to a close because the 1st Infantry Division had to spend the next four days, 18-21 Feb. "completing the primary mission of Tucson, positioning its troops and preparing them for Junction City"¹

4. Mobilization and Deployment of Forces

— In the southwestern sector of the operational area, from 11 to 19 Feb. 2 battalions of the 2nd Brigade and one of the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division with 4 guns and 400 vehicles from the US 11th Armoured Cavalry went South from Cu Chi and Trang Bang.

— In the Dau Tieng sector, from 17 to 21 Feb. 2 battalions of the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division and a formation of the 11th Armoured Cavalry including 1,500 men, 100 vehicles, six 105-mm howitzers and several 155 mm, 175 mm and 203.2 mm guns left Bien Hoa to assault west of Dau Tieng.

— In the Suoi Da sector, from 17 to 21 Feb. 2 battalions (one from the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, the other from the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division) and elements of the 11th Armoured Cavalry including sixty M.41 tanks, 10 M.113 armoured vehicles, 220 GMC lorries and 8 howitzers went from Tay Ninh to Suoi Da.

In the Bau Co sector, on 21 Feb. elements of the 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, with 50 vehicles, 4 guns and part of the 11th Armoured Cavalry

1. Lt. — Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, op. cit.

including a battalion of 105-mm howitzers went to position at Bau Co.

Thus, by 21 Feb, the enemy had pitched its disposition, an arc over 140 km across. This disposition comprised: in the west, up to Lo Go, the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division and the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, in the east, along Route No.13, the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, 1st Infantry Division; in the south, the 196 Brigade and the 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division plus a formation of the 11th Armoured Cavalry at Duoi Da, the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division and the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division plus elements of the 11th Armoured Cavalry at Dau Tieng. In the rear of the theatre of operations, there was the 173rd Airborne Brigade, stationed at Bien Hoa.

B — Execution

This stage comprised two phases of enemy actions, the first taking place west of Route No.4 (from 22 Feb. to 17 Mar.) and the second east of this route (from 18 Mar. to 14 Apr.).

1. Phase-I (22 Feb. — 17 Mar.)

During Phase I, the enemy would land 3 brigades (9 battalions) to attack the Cam Tum, Soc Moi, and Rum Duom areas, which were believed to shelter the headquarters of the Resistance and pitch an arc-shaped "bolt" at the northern border of War Zone C. At the same time, 2 US brigades and a puppet Marine grouping would attack the flanks (east and west), hem in and drive the revolutionary forces towards Trang Chanh. Mean-

while, armoured formations, supported by air strikes and artillery fire, would come from the south to split into numerous sweeps scouring the area. In conjunction with G I's acting in the main theatre of operations, units of puppet troops would launch moppings-up south of Trang Bang and Go Dau Ha to secure the rear.

For this phase: "Phase I—On order, II FFOR-CEV (2nd Field Force Vietnam—*Ed.*) in coordination and co-operation with the III ARVN corps conducts a major offensive into WZC (northern Tay Ninh Province) to destroy COSWN and VC/NVA forces and installations". It was also specified that for the combat forces should deploy as follows:—the 1st Infantry Division or *Big Red One* (Gen. John H. Hay, Jr.) employed 2 brigades, and was augmented by the 173rd Airborne Brigade plus 2 puppet units (named Task Forces Wallace). Later in Phase I, the 1st Brigade 9th US Infantry Division joined the 1st Division to keep Route 13 open from Lai Khe to Quan Loi.

— The 25th or *Tropic lightning* Division (Gen. Weyand) employed its 2nd Brigade with other units under its control, namely the 3rd Brigade (4th Infantry Division), 196th Light Infantry Brigade 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment and 2 puppet Marine battalions (named Task Force Alpha).

All these forces were placed under the command of Gen. Jonathan D. Seaman. For the first time in the Vietnam war a Field Force commander directed operations on the field. He opened a headquarters at Dau Tieng on "D-day".

On 22 Feb. 1967 (D-Day), after four waves of B-52 raids (15 sorties for each raid) and 7 continuous hours of airstrike along the Kampuchean border, 9 US battalions landed (one by parachute jump and 8 by helicopter lift) successively at Ca Tum, Soo Moi and Rum Dūn to set up a network of fortified points looking the western end of the border. Nine other battalions manoeuvred along Route No.22 (to cover the west flank) and Route No.4 (to close the encirclement in the east). Late in the evening "18 battalions, organized into 6 brigades, and one cavalry regiment were deployed around the horse-shoe. 13 mutually-supporting fire support bases also ringed the operational area."¹

According to *UPI*, the US Command tried to keep the operation wholly, secret until the last minute. The action was launched on 22 Feb, yet not until the following day did Gen. Westmorland issue a special communiqué and start a publicity campaign.

Still according to *UPI*, as a prelude, there were several B-52 carpet-bombings from midnight 21 Feb. to dawn 22 Feb, followed by a heavy pounding of the terrain by numerous guns and about 200 planes to support the landings. Initiating the operation, many C-130 cargo planes dropped a 750-man battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade 50 km north-northeast of Tay Ninh City to seal off the frontier at that place. Then 250 helicopters lifted the GIs into each side of this bridgehead to form a big arc north of War Zone C. Shortly afterwards, tanks and

1. Lt. — Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, op. cit.

armoured convoys coming from the south drove into the arc-shaped area to help in the Resistance forces.

In passing we should mention that this D-Day parachute assault was the first and only parachute jump in the Vietnam war as well as the first such assault since the Korean War. The US Command had to resort to parachuting because of "the urgency to place a large force on the ground as quickly as possible" (Lt.-Gen. John J. Tolson - *Airmobility*) so as quickly to have a drop zone necessary for the installation of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Command Post, the heavy equipment drop and the lightning locking of the Vietnam - Kampuchea border.

At 09.00 hours, Gen. John R. Deane, Jr. jumped, leading the parachute assault of the 2nd Battalion 503rd Infantry - the first US unit to have jumped during War World II (Operation *TORCH*, Africa) - on ricefields 300m wide and 2000m long near Ca Tum, 5 km from the Kampuchean border. The drop included an infantry battalion, a company of six 105 mm howitzers, an engineer group, a military police team, a telecommunication group and the Command Post of the 173rd Brigade. The latter, after exercises at the "Centre for Jungle Warfare Training" on an island southwest of Okinawa, had landed in May 1966 at Bien Hoa and Vung Tau.

The 2nd Battalion, once dropped, hastened to locate its companies around the drop zone which would receive during that day: six 105 mm guns and 240 shells, six 106,7 mm mortars and 15,000 rounds, 416 containers of 5 gallons each, 18,000

sand bags for the buttresses, 740 C-ration cases, 115,000 M.16 cartridges, 1,440 projectiles for M.79 grenade-projectors and 1,500 standard and smoke grenades.

All this cargo plus the troops required the use of twenty one C.130's - 13 for the personnel drop and 8 for heavy equipment.

Preparations for this jump had started several months earlier. Orders were transmitted to the 2nd Battalion commander in Oct. 1966 but without mentioning the drop zone. In the planning phase, only 4 officers of the brigade namely the commanding general, his deputy, and two key staff officers were, aware of the actual drop zone. Shortly afterwards, the battalion with all its material went and stayed for drilling at the Thu Duc Training Centre. In Jan. 1967, the training ended and on 11 Feb, the combat order with stress laid on two elements (surprise and speed) was transmitted to the battalion commander. He was then informed that two other battalions of the 173rd Brigade would take part in the landing but by helicopter and at different places.

The schedule for the parachute assault was:

- 21 Feb. At 19.00 hours, Lt.-Col. Robert H. Sigholtz; the Airborne Task Force Commander, briefed his battalion paratroops on the operation, showed them photos of the drop zone (without altitude indications) then sealed off the battalion area.

- 22 Feb. At 05.00 hours, the battalion proceeded to Bien Hoa airfield where its men were made

aware of the jump altitude and weather conditions.

At 08.25 hours, the C.130s took off.

At 09.00 hours, arrival at the drop zone; jump altitude was 1,000 feet. Each plane flew twice above the drop zone and was emptied after 26 seconds.

At 09.10 hours, termination of the jump for the whole battalion. The paratroops, with coloured strips clipped to their caps, used coloured planes and balloons for recognition. Once landed, they patrolled the drop zone.

At 09.25 hours, the heavy equipment drop commences and continued till evening.

At 10.00 hours, deploying of the battalion units installation of the brigade's Command Post and the fire support bases.

The two other heliborne battalions of the 503rd Regiment began landing by helicopter assault respectively at 10.35 hours (1st Battalion) and 14.20 hours (4th Battalion).

22 Feb. was a busy day for the Air Force. It had "flown 216 preplanned strike sorties in direct support of the ground operation".¹

On 23 Feb, the 2nd Brigade, 23rd Infantry Division, in conjunction with elements of the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment—which acted as the main spearhead—set out from Suoi Da for a two-pronged attack northwards. The first prong, with 2 infantry and 2 armoured battalions, took Route No. 4 for an encirclement of the eastern part of Trang

1. Lt. - Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, *op cit.*

Chanh. The second, with an infantry battalion and an armoured one, crossed Loc Ky to go south of Trang Chanh. In the meantime, the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division and an armoured battalion manoeuvred to secure Route No. 4 while an infantry battalion went north from Dong Pan to act in co-ordination with already-landed elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in order to hem in the southern part of Ca Tum where an airstrip capable of handling C.130's would be constructed. In the west, the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, in conjunction with the armoured elements, especially with the engineering units, operated on Route No. 22 to secure the west flank of the main-spearhead formations thrusting northwards from Suoi Da. Tactical air strikes to support ground actions numbered 175 for the day.

On 24 Feb, the Air Force flew a hundred sorties in support of the ground operation and hundreds of lorries brought materials for building airships to Ca Tum and Prek Klok, on Route No. 4.

In their manoeuvres along Routes 4 and 22, the US infantry formations worked in close co-ordination with units termed the "engineer task forces". These, including about 600 men coming from engineer battalions and "chemical companies", were charged with clearing jungle, levelling fortifications and razing villages.

The dozer infantry teams moved into action in several directions. They went into the jungle, in combat array with 2 bulldozers at the head followed by 4 abreast, with 2 more behind. Infantry followed

the bulldozers to "scorch and destroy". For patrols in the savanna, the GIs had bulldozers from these dozer-infantry teams in the lead or with them side by side. With supplies entirely brought in by air, these bulldozers, beyond their mission of providing the shock infantry with a less dangerous trail enabled the speedy setting up of landing zones and airstrips (in 15 minutes in case of emergency, for field-hospital helicopter landing-zones).

From 25 Feb. to 11 Mar., after encircling the area believed to shelter the leading organs of the Resistance, the US Command launched several mopping-up operations in various places. The north wing comprised 4 battalions of the 1st and 2nd Brigades, 1st Infantry Division and elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. It proceeded towards Trang Chanh from encampments located at Sóc Mòi and Rùm-Duon, acting in co-ordination with the 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division and the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment which formed the south wing. The latter, scattered in numerous small-scale formations, swept northwards while, at Ca Tum, part of the 173rd Brigade manoeuvred towards the Kampuchean border and, in the west, elements of the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry, marched on Trang Chanh.

With a view to strengthening its combat potential in the zone of operations, the enemy dispatched the puppet multi-battalion unit from Saigon to Tay Ninh, to clean up and bolt the western part of Trang Chanh 200 South Korean sappers with construction materials were sent to Ca Tum.

According to Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr., "a major innovation of the Vietnam War was the fire support base". The beginning of Operation JUNCTION CITY included a drive by the 1st Infantry Division to open a road through War Zone C for the purpose of establishing fire support bases from which the manoeuvring battalions would operate and receive their artillery support. "Because of the enemy's inclination to attack such installations, sophisticated target detection means including radar, sensor devices... were used to give warning of the enemy's approach" (1). As noticed by Hugh A. Mulligan, "the First Division was justifiably proud of its newly acquired 175 mm howitzers, which have an effective range of more than twenty miles." (*No Place to Die*)

During these days, our guerillas harassed the enemy, intercepted his points of attack, trying to create conditions for the regulars to launch forceful surprise attacks, especially rocket-attacks (Gen. Westmoreland later admitted that the appearance in Feb. 1967, on the LAF side, of 8,000 m range rockets was "a matter of concern" for security, particularly for American airfields and logistic bases). According to *UPI*, 24 Feb. 1967, the parachute jump, "the biggest since Dien Bien Phu", was a fiasco. Gen. John R. Deane, commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, who jumped first, came under fire while he was still over 200 metres high. As for the paratroopers, some had either their back or their

1. Lt.-Gen. John H. Hay, Jr, op. cit.

legs broken, many were cut down by the guerillas' fire after touching the ground.

Helicopters ferrying troops of his brigade (1st and 4th Battalions) also met with violent ground fire. Five of them were shot down in the first minutes. Three armoured vehicles were blown up by guerillas' mines. As for the infantry men, some stepped on minefields or grenade traps. Others were hit by well-concealed sniper fire. The US Command had to admit that 22 February was "not a very bright day."

The LAF, after harassing enemy troops for two days running, mounted on the night of 23 Feb. and on the 24 three fierce assaults on the 1st Infantry Division and the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment. *UPI* reported on 24 Feb. that during the night, 130 mortar rounds had fallen on the *Big Red One* troops stationed at Suoi Da, 10 km from Tay Ninh city, causing "great damage". According to the same source, another unit of this division received a mortar pounding that morning. Gen. Bernard W. Rogers later gave details: "On the early morning of 24 Feb., the 1st Battalion area received approximately 120 rounds of 82 mm mortars, all within a few minutes; two men were killed (including a company commander) and five wounded." On the same day, at 11.45 hours, the LAF directed machine gun and artillery fire at the 11th Armoured Cavalry at a point 6 km from the Kampuchean border and hit hard at the armoured personnel carriers in three bloody ambushes.

On 25 Feb., another disappointment for the 1st Battalion, 16th Regiment, 1st Infantry Division: besides, from our side blows, "it caught some 50-calibre machine gun rounds from a friendly mechanized unit conducting reconnaissance fire during the early hours of darkness" (Gen. Bernard W. Rogers). On the same day, the LAF laid a successful ambush in the surroundings of Ca Tum, inflicting several casualties on the GIs. Also near Ca Tum, they wiped out a company of South Korean sappers in a daring blitz raid.

On 26 Feb., another forceful attack on the 25th Infantry Division elements took place in the vicinity of Soc Ky: over a hundred of GIs were put out of action, 6 armoured vehicles destroyed, 4 aircraft downed. The US military spokesman admitted that "elements of the 25th Division suffered heavy losses."

On 28 Feb., other telling blows on US troops at Ca Tum: a company of the 1st Infantry Division was hit hard, another badly mauled, three helicopters were shot down. US reinforcements were intercepted and sustained 40 casualties. At night, a surprise attack destroyed 22 US tanks and armoured vehicles and a lightning raid into a US encampment killed or wounded 45 GIs. Fighting had been raging all day long south of Ca Tum. Here is an excerpt from an account carried in the Dec. 1967 issue of 1st Infantry Division's monthly magazine, *DANGER FORWARD*:

"At 08.00 on 28 Feb., Company B of the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, left the battalion's night defen-

sive position located along Route 4 and proceeded East on a search and destroy mission. 2500 m. to the front was the stream named Prek Klok; they would never reach it.

"The extremely slow movement through the thick and tangled jungle was made in two columns... Company B progressed a little over one km from its starting point that morning when fire broke out...

"Since the enemy was not dug in, the ordnance requested was CBU (cluster bomb units), which are delivered almost at tree-top level with a bursting radius of 30 metres. They could be delivered very close to friendly units and were a highly lethal weapon against enemy troops in the open, even in the jungle.

"Captain Ulm noted that much of the automatic weapons and small arms fire was coming from the trees and that the fire was extremely accurate. The company's efforts were now directed at the expertly camouflaged and well concealed snipers in the trees... It was not until 21.30 that Captain Ulm and his company, assisted by the relieving company, reached the landing zone with their 25 dead and 28 wounded."

Another salient feature: the guerilla war had reached an unprecedented scale. The enemy was hit at wherever he went or was stationed, was given respite and suffered from constant strain. Guerillas intercepted his offensives and hit deep behind his lines. Their minor engagements or those combining many formations' efforts enabled the

regulars to mount lightning assaults. Particularly, on the night of 28 Feb., the 11th Armoured Cavalry Regiment's vehicle park at Dau Tieng was attacked, destroying 29 tanks and armoured vehicles, inflicting bitter losses on the GIs (about 200 killed or wounded).

On 1 Mar. the LAF launched a fierce attack on an outpost of the 25th Infantry, guarding the Divisional headquarter at Dau Tieng.

On 3 Mar. they wiped out a 150-strong company of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in a cleverly-laid ambush. As disclosed by the US military spokesman in Saigon, a mine exploded and stopped the paratroops short while the guerillas came out and engaged them for half an hour in heavy fighting, cutting them down with grenades and bayonets. This hit-and-run action was so quick that when airstrikes and artillery fire were called in for rescue, the "guerillas had all disappeared."

In the following days, the LAF kept on hitting at the GI's formations. They not only attacked moving columns but also the forward command posts, logistic bases, artillery positions, even the rear and reinforcement assembly points. On the night of 5 March, they assailed the artillery base of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division and its encampments along Highway 22, inflicting 700 casualties, destroying 3 artillery emplacements, causing great damage to 18 105 mm howitzers and four 175 mm guns and setting 20 vehicles on fire. Then, on the evening of 5 March, they razed the enemy command post at Ben Ra, killing or wounding 300 GIs.

The LAF's fledgeling artillery units not only had provided the infantry with effective support fire but had also struck hard enemy positions and encampments. The successful concerted artillery and infantry actions marked a new progress made by the revolutionary armed forces and were a shock for the US Command.

On 10 and 11 Mar. during an attack on Route No. 4, the LAF knocked down 620 GIs, destroyed twenty 105 mm howitzers, 175 mm guns and 106,6 mm mortars as well as 204 vehicles including 42 tanks and M.113s.

They engaged the enemy in very heavy fighting south of Ca Tum where US men and equipment were concentrated for the construction of an airstrip capable of handling C.130's. According to *DANGER FORWARD*, Dec. 1967, on the evening of 10 Mar. "the 2nd Battalion (Mechanized) 2nd Infantry, commanded by Lt-Col. Edward J. Collins, was securing the perimeter of Artillery Fire Support Base II located at Prek Klock on Route 4, 20 km. north of Mount Ba Den. At 22.00 the Viet Cong commenced a heavy mortar attack on the small circle of US troops... For some 30 minutes, round after round of 120 mm, 82 mm, and 60 mm mortar ammunition exploded inside the base. In addition to the estimated 200 incoming rounds, the Viet Cong employed 75 mm recoilless rifles and RPG 2 anti tank weapons (small Soviet-made bazookas) against the perimeter of the base. Several trucks were hit; twenty US troops wounded. Cooks, maintenance crews, and medical personnel began carrying the wounded to

the airstrip; helicopters evacuated the injured as they arrived. In addition to the main attack from the east, the Viet Cong launched limited attacks from the northeast and southeast. Intense fire from enemy recoilless rifles and automatic weapons struck the A Company positions. Three of their armoured personnel carriers were hit by enemy RPG2 rounds; one truck had received a direct hit from a mortar round..."

From 12 Mar. onwards, US troops step by step withdrew to their rear, leaving behind only the 196th Light Infantry Brigade with its men stationed at Gieng Thi, Dong Pan, Bau Co and Tay Ninh City to secure Route No.4. For three weeks running, they had manoeuvred on a battlefield which gave them a lot of trouble. One of the difficulties they had to overcome was having to engage in fighting on a terrain with countless booby traps. US officers admitted there was no possible protection against them. "At each sortie, we discover a new device invented by the Viet Cong. It is not imagination that he is lacking in. We hardly told our men about a new type of booby-trap when we learnt of the existence of another." (*US News and World Report*, 6 Mar. 1967)

Another difficulty facing the GIs was the complex of underground galleries which enabled the Viet Cong "to be everywhere and yet nowhere". According to *Newsweek*, 13 Mar. 1967, one day, Bravo Company, going through a heavily forested area, went "as far as 15m into a Viet Cong camp" until the men realized that they were surrounded. But it

was too late. "The Viet Cong came from their trenches". After half an hour of Air Force strikes, the GIs could penetrate into the camp which was already deserted.

The US Command in Saigon admitted that the first phase of JUNCTION CITY was "disappointing" and, on 15 Mar. relieved Gen. Jonathan D. Seaman of his command.

Analyzing the reasons for the setback, an American officer wrote: "The Allied combat intelligence effort in Vietnam has a serious weakness that needs to be recognized and corrected... The importance of finding the enemy is paramount. A great deal of money and effort is being spent on new devices and in reorganizing or creating units and agencies in an effort to improve the effectiveness of intelligence. These efforts have improved intelligence but they still do not adequately answer the question Where is the enemy?"¹

As for the top US leaders, they did not hide their concern. In Mar. 1967, President Johnson spoke of Vietnam as a "serious, long-drawn-out, agonizing problem" and Mc-Namara said that the Viet Cong were "by no means beaten"². That was on the eve of the Guam Conference where US and puppet highest-ranking officials met to prepare for the intensification of the Vietnam War (20 Mar. 1967).

1. Major Robert M. Herrick, *Army*, USA June 1971.

2. Francis Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, London, 1972.

II - Second Phase (18 March-14 April)

After their frustrating actions west of Route No.4 followed by a partial damaging of their combat potential, US troops now manoeuvred east of this communication line. Phase 2: "It is ordered that II FFORCEV conducts coordinated airmobile and ground assaults in eastern War Zone C to destroy COSVN and VC/NVA forces and installations."

To this end, the enemy fielded 8 US brigades (23 battalions) and one puppet battalion of Rangers. Gen. Bruce Palmer now in command of the operation used new tactics: each brigade would sweep one sector while large reserve forces stayed behind lines to be used in turn and thus draw out the fighting. These tactics replaced Gen. Seaman's which had deployed large forces in several wings in different directions, in view of a large-scale encirclement as well as deep lightning thrusts.

Before starting the second phase, the US Command made some preparatory actions: reconnaissance planes flew continuously above the sector extending from the eastern part of Route No. 4 to Highway 13; Rangers landed to patrol from Suoi Da to Loc Ninh; helicopters mined the ground from the foot of Mount Ba Den to Loc Ninh; CH.47s poured defoliant (3,000 litres a sortie) on the vegetation along communication axes; engineer teams cleared both sides of Highway 13 which were stripped of all cover, using the *King Ranch* clearing method. This concept, developed on *King Ranch* property in Australia, consisted of dragging a heavy

long chain (at least 50 pounds per foot) strung between two tractors. For large trees or rocky soil, a steel ball 14 feet in diameter was placed the middle of the chain... and "the 1st Infantry Division used this concept to clear 1,500 trees in four hours."¹

The US forces were arranged as follows: in the east, the 1st Infantry Division with its headquarters at Minh Thanh and the command post of its 1st Brigade at Chon Thanh; the 1st Brigade, 9th Division, positioned along Highway 13 (at Chon Thanh, Hon Quan, Bau Bang); the 2nd and 3rd Brigades, 1st Infantry Division, stationed as before at Hon Quan and Lai Khe, on Highway 13. In the west, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade remained deployed on Route No. 4, from Giong Thi to Tay Ninh City. In the south, the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, stayed at Dau Tieng, the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry, at Trang Bang and the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bien Hoa.

Once the operation was initiated, two brigades would "bolt" the east and west flanks of the theatre of operations while five battalions, by turns, attacked the place chosen as objective whereas the remainder of the fielded forces secured the rear and stood as reserves.

To begin with, two heliborne brigades, acting in concert with armoured elements, manoeuvred one in the west (Dong Rum), the other in the east (Soc Con Trang), to form two pincer jaws around the Resistance forces.

¹ John H. Hay, Jr., *Tactical and Material Innovations*, Wash. D.C., 1974.

On 18 Mar., after positioning infantry and armoured elements north of Loc Ninh, a heliborne battalion of the 4th Infantry and another of the 173rd Brigade landed at Dong Rum while a battalion of the 4th Infantry and an armoured battalion manoeuvred from Suoi Da to meet them. These four battalions together formed many points of attack in different directions.

On 19 Mar., a battalion of the 1st Infantry, supported by armoured vehicles and the puppet 36th Battalion of Rangers, progressed westwards from Hon Quan to occupy Soc Con Trang. Shortly afterwards, two battalions of GIs landed here to form with them and with armoured elements two wings which, in the days to come, would sweep northwards and southwards.

Once the two flanks of the objective had been mopped up by the two brigades involved, five battalions landed in the middle and, on 1 Apr., two battalions—one of the 196th Brigade, the other of the 173rd Airborne—disembarked at Ca Tum and Soc Moi to act in coordination with armoured elements of the 196th Brigade which was moving northwards. Enemy units tried to encircle and "fine-comb" this area full of tunnels, trenches, underground works, galleries of varying dimensions and fortifications of all kinds which were to be neutralized by "tunnel rat" teams, the only ones of their kind in the world.

The "tunnel rats" were short, thin and wily GIs of (maximum height 1.58 m), non-smokers who could live and move about in gas-masks, for hours

in complete darkness. To probe and mop up the underground passages which extended from War Zone C to the Kampuchean border, they had singular weapons and equipment: tight waterproof fatigues, leather gloves and knee pads for darkness and crawling underground, a helmet with ear-muffs, a powerful electric torch for the darkness and to dazzle the adversary's eyes, a (22-caliber) silenced pistol, a knife, a mine-detector, some remote-controlled explosive charges and small smoke grenades to signal the galleries exit. In action, the "tunnel rats" exploded the underground galleries, the side passages connecting sometimes with vast rooms, demolished the first entrance with dynamite, injected gas into the exit hole. By so doing they had the gallery neutralized. Should the complex be a larger one, they used explosive charges together with containers of CS₃ which when pulverized by the blast emitted a toxic gas causing nausea and burns when breathed in.

Well equipped and specially trained, these "tunnel rats" however did not take the invisible and the unforeseeable into enough account. Local people still talk of this misfortune that happened to one of them. One day, a "tunnel rat", handling a mine-detector, cautiously entered a tunnel. Using his electric torch, he groped forward in the dark. Already trained to avoid traps on the ground, he slowly proceeded forward. Suddenly, his head touched something like a big salami; he reached out to push it away but this long cold thing wound round his neck; he had no time to scream or to unsheathe

his knife, the snake had already knotted tighter around his neck and badly bit his face. Outside, the other "tunnel rats" waited for their comrade. At last, the team leader pushed one of them into the tunnel. This man emerged soon after, panting and pale, dragging after him the violet-coloured corpse of the "tunnel rat".

During this phase, the LAF, learning from the experience of the last phase, used their three categories of troops in closer coordination. They made better use of the existing galleries, dug new ones parallel to US troops installations, especially new perpendicular ones which, like tentacles progressing relentlessly night after night, enabled them to engage the enemy in close-range fighting in front and on the flanks. By "holding the enemy round the waist", our men could bring their light armaments into full play. On many occasions, the GIs passed above them and only realized it once attacked from behind. By this way too, they managed to repeatedly come unseen up to the enemy's barbed wire fence to throw their grenades inside or to concentrate the striking force of their shock troops. Another salient point was that the LAF, adapting to circumstances, had made a long stride forward in their anti-mechanized troops tactics. On 18 Mar. during an assault mounted on an enemy convoy proceeding from Suoi Da to Loc Ninh, our guerillas blew up 9 vehicles. To retort, the GIs made landings at Dong Rum the following day. The guerillas again moved ahead for the fight and on 19 Mar., their mines caused great damage to 11 helicopters. Other heliborne

troops went on disembarking in the neighbourhood. They were intercepted on 21 Mar. by our regulars who wiped out a whole battalion (N Grouping), badly mauled another (B Grouping), destroyed 72 vehicles and 14 guns and shot down 9 helicopters. Shortly thereafter, mechanized elements of the 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, came from the west to outflank the LAF formations. These fiercely counter attacked and hit hard at the US elements which had to be relieved.

One of the bloodiest encounters took place around Suoi Tre, almost in the middle of War Zone C, about 90km northwest of Saigon.

According to Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, on 19 Mar., on a terrain of sparse woodland which had already been defoliated, US helicopters landed the 3rd Battalion of the 22nd Regiment and the 2nd artillery battalion, both of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, under the Command of Col. Garth. These battalions' mission was to establish a fire support base (GOLD) in support of Phase II of JUNCTION CITY. The US Command did not expect heavy action there but things turned out differently.

As the helicopters touched down, "three helicopters were destroyed and six more damaged with a toll of 15 killed and 28 wounded" by five heavy command-detonated charges "A VC claymore-type mine was also detonated against C Company of the 3rd Battalion wounding five infantrymen..."

B Company of the 3rd Battalion was assigned the eastern part of the defensive perimeter, A Company

the west. Later that day, the 2nd Battalion landed at Fire Support Base GOLD. Its last lift "drew enemy fire, and another seven choppers were damaged..."

On 20 Mar., at 04.30 hours, a night patrol of B Company operating outside the battalion perimeter reported movement around its ambush site. Minutes—then hours—passed and no further movement was detected. At 06.30, the patrol prepared to return to the camp. One minute later, "the base came under heavy attack from enemy 60 mm and 82 mm mortars. At the same time, the patrol was attacked by a massive VC force. Within five minutes the patrol had been overrun, and all of its men were killed or wounded."

The first mortar round had impacted on the doorstep of a company command post; some seconds later, another exploded outside the battalion headquarters. In all, about 650 mortar rounds fell while "the VC advanced toward the perimeter."

Some minutes afterwards, "the entire perimeter came under heavy attack by waves of VC emerging from the jungle and firing recoilless rifles, RPG2 rockets, automatic weapons, and small arms... During the first assault Company B reported that its 1st Platoon positions on the southeastern perimeter had been penetrated and that the reaction force from the 2nd Battalion was needed to reinforce that sector..."

— At 07.00: an observation aircraft arrived and began directing Air Force strikes against the assailants.

— At 07.11: B Company reported that its 1st Platoon "had been overrun and surrounded by a human-wave attack". Air strikes were called in to relieve the pressure on the company's perimeter; the forward air-controller directing these strikes "was shot down by heavy automatic weapon fire."

— At 07.56: B Company reported that "complete enemy penetration had been made" in the 1st Platoon sector and they "were desperate for ammunition resupply". Ammunition and a 20-strong relief force from A Company were rushed to assist B Company.

— At 08.13: the northeastern section of the perimeter was overrun by another wave of assailants... "The VC had penetrated the northern sector of the perimeter and that sector of the base was hit by RPG2 rocket rounds..."

— At 08.40: "the northeastern, eastern and south-eastern positions of the perimeter had withdrawn to a secondary defensive line around the guns of the artillery batteries. The northern, western, and southern sectors were managing to hold despite intense pressure from large numbers of VC who had advanced as close as 15 metres from the defensive positions. Attackers had infiltrated to within hand grenade range of the battalion command post and only 5 meters from the battalion aid station."

— By 09.00: the northern, western and southern sectors of the perimeter "were holding but still under VC pressure..."

Drawing lessons from a study of the battle, Gen. B.W. Rogers wrote: "The experience of the 3rd

Brigade, 4th Division, on 19 Mar. when it went into a "hot" landing zone with unfortunate results, supported the contention of many of us that, unless there are civilians in the area, troops should never be brought into a landing zone on an air mobile assault unless the zone and surrounding area have been covered by an artillery and air strike preparation."¹

On 26 Mar. the LAF intercepted a US battalion, wiped out a company of GIs and a puppet platoon of Rangers north of Dau Tieng.

On 30 Mar. a company of the 1st Infantry Division sustained heavy losses while sweeping northwest of Chon Thanh. Another company, landing to its rescue, had the same fate.

On 31 Mar., in the afternoon, two battalions of the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, disembarked to set up two defence dispositions. One was put out of action after a fierce attack made by the LAF in the early morning hours of the following day (1 Apr.). Parallel with the interception of the sweeping columns, the guerillas, in concert with the regular units of the LAF, launched mortar attacks on US combat groupings, the command post of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division was located, wounding its commander, Col. Grimsley (immediately replaced by Gen. Hellings Worth). On the evening of 9 Apr. LAF guns and machine guns surrounded the US artillery and armour park at Binh Phu with a pulverizing fire barrage and smashed the encamp-

1. Lt.-Gen. Bernard W Rogers, op. cit.

ments. The survivors had to run to Hon Quan for shelter.

While fighting the US formations in the main area of operations, the LAF, benefiting from a disjuncting of the enemy's disposition, went and struck elsewhere, chiefly at communication axes. Most outstanding was the battle on 20 Mar. when they wiped out a battalion-size convoy at Bau Bang, west of Highway 13. The following story of part of the battle is drawn from an account by Gen. Bernard W. Rogers, deputy commander of Phase 2, JUNCTION CITY :

"... At 00.30, 20 Mar. 1967, the VC attack resumed as Fire Support Base 20 was hit with mortar rounds, rifle grenades, rockets, and recoilless rifle fire... Lt. Festa's truck was hit, his sergeant wounded. It was apparent that the VC were well zeroed in... As the intensity of the fire increased, another M-113 was hit. Then another APC (Armoured personnel carrier) received direct hits in the front and left side from recoilless rifle rounds; three of the crew were wounded and the vehicle was set on fire. Two of 3rd Platoon tanks were hit...

"Within twenty minutes of the beginning of the mortar attack, the VC ground assault began with the main attack coming from the south and southwest with a secondary attack from the north. The massed troops of the 273rd VC Regiment emerged from the rubber trees and moved steadily forward under a fire of base..." Staff Sergeant George Hua reported that his unit had received 5 hits from 60 mm mortar rounds and so "we opened fire with everything we could

lay our hands on". A voice from Truck 10 came to Staff Sergeant Dorren in Truck 17: "They are swarming all over my truck... My people are down, shoot!" Dorren after hesitating a while, ordered the fire but the truck already "burst into a ball of fire as enemy mortar rounds scored direct hits".

Two more armoured personnel carriers were hit one of them Lieutenant Wolfe's truck. "Because the VC were in so close to his line of APC's, Wolfe had to pull back about 25 or 30 m and realign the platoon". Lt. Wolfe's truck was hit a second time by a RPG2 rocket; "the entire crew was wounded and evacuated to the medical clearing tent in the centre of the perimeter".

The hard-pressed men of the 2nd Platoon withdrew towards their positions south of the perimeter, firing intermittently. As they took up their positions, "they were hit with recoilless rifle fire and grenades".

Companies B and C received the order to join the battle. The 3rd Platoon of C Company from its position 5km to the South, "ran through a barrage of enemy fire" before reaching the perimeter. Meanwhile Col. Hazard, in an APC followed by another M-113 bearing his command group, moved up Highway 13 to the perimeter. Just short of the perimeter, his truck was hit and disabled. A tank had to get it out with a tow-rope. "The command truck, with its valuable communications equipment" could be finally pulled into the battalion's perimeter.

"The Enemy Was Returning..."

(Gen. Bernard W. Rogers)

From early Apr. the LAF, by their attack without let-up and their two-pronged more manœuvres which were more and more daring, compelled US troops to modify the structure of their combat array. Far from filling in the gaps of their "encirclement belt", the latter had, on the contrary, to spread thin to secure their rear and especially the communication lines in case of a pull out from the operational area.

On 14 Apr. 1967, JUNCTION CITY drew to a close without accomplishing any one of its objectives. This "operation of strategic importance" could neither seal off War Zone C, nor lay hands on the NLF's headquarters. It also failed to destroy the revolutionary base camp and its main depots. On the contrary, it became costly for the US in strength and materials: 14,000 men (mostly GIs) killed or wounded, more than 1,000 vehicles and 187 aircraft as well as about 90 heavy guns destroyed or damaged.

Parallel to their victorious attacks, the population and armed forces of Tay Ninh had carried out self-defence excellently. Thanks to high vigilance and the organization of their anti-aircraft system, a high sense of secrecy and clever concealment of troops as well as careful protection of civilian property, they had kept enemy-caused losses to a minimum. After the enemy's retreat, they went on strengthening their "fighting villages", summed up experience

to increase their combat capability and worked hard to increase production. Life in the resistance base quickly returned to normal in the stirring atmosphere of victory. Gen. Bernard W. Rogers admitted that "Reconnaissance flights over War Zone C following JUNCTION CITY revealed that the enemy was returning."

Referring to the "discouraging features" of the operation, he was careful to mention the "insufficient forces", the "routes too extensive for the number of troops available", the jungle "too thick" to hope ever to keep the adversary from getting away. It was "a sheer physical impossibility" to keep him from slipping away "whenever he wished" for he was in a terrain "with which he was familiar". As for the GI, "he lived with fear", "questioned his being and fighting in the far-off place" and faced a "dedicated, well disciplined, persistent, tenacious, and courageous" adversary. In passing we can note an event which happened on the very day Operation JUNCTION CITY ended: At 07.30 hours on 14 Apr. 1967, many GIs of the 3rd Brigade, US 4th Infantry Division, stationed at Dau Tieng, opposed the order to go for reinforcements. The US officers ordered to repress them. The latter fired back. The conflict which turned into a pitched battle, lasted thirty minutes during which 13 tents were burned, 3 helicopters destroyed and 50 GIs killed. The Dau Tieng base, kept in quarantine, was sealed off for three days running.

JUNCTION CITY had a corollary: it questioned the value of US efforts on the "second front". US

World and News Report reported on 23 Mar. 1967: "the Viet Cong still control 80 per cent of South Vietnamese territory" and, according to *Reuter* (4 May 1967), in the first four months of this year, the "pacification programme was on the brink of collapse."