We called it "Nine Streams." If the Embassy gave its approval, the project would enable us to score one on the Communists. Ever since the cease-fire, we had experienced nothing but frustration and disappointment in our dealings with Hanoi’s representatives. Time after time, the crafty Communist negotiators had skillfully used procedural obstacles to avoid meaningful business in the MIA talks. A favorite Communist ploy was the demand that the "modalities" for implementing the MIA provisions of the Paris Agreement must precede any actual exchange of information. At other times, Hanoi’s representatives insisted that "continuing combat in the liberated zone" precluded any efforts to collect information on the missing and the dead. Even though the reasons varied, the message was always the same. Concrete measures to resolve the fate of the missing and the dead were "not yet possible."

We hoped that the Nine Streams initiative would allow us to expose the Communist tactics for what they were — trans-
parent and cynical attempts to manipulate American public opinion by deliberately stalling the talks. We had already detected signs that this Communist gambit was achieving some success. Impatient with our failure to unravel the mystery of at least some of the 2,500 MIA cases in the year since the cease-fire, the MIA lobby had become increasingly critical of Washington. In the US Delegation, we were frustrated by the Communist stonewalling and fearful that Hanoi might succeed in its tireless efforts to lay the blame for the deadlock on our doorstep. The Nine Streams project was one of our efforts to fix the blame where it belonged -- at the feet of the Hanoi government. The idea for the project was born on 29 March 1974, the first anniversary of our withdrawal from South Vietnam.

"The 29th of March 1973 is a date that will be forever emblazoned in the history of our people; the day that the last American left South Vietnam." So wrote the North Vietnamese author of an article in Thong Nhat (Reunification), a Communist weekly that I had picked up a few hours earlier in the lobby of Hanoi's Hoa Binh (Peace) Hotel. The paper had attracted my attention because it was a commemorative edition celebrating the first anniversary of the American military withdrawal from South Vietnam. As our C-130 droned southward high over the South China Sea, I amused myself by reading the Hanoi version of MACV's stand down. In this article, a Hanoi journalist provided an eyewitness account of the departure of the last American "aggressor," a GI who had boarded a MAC charter flight on 29 March under the watchful eyes of two Communist control officers. This is Hanoi's account of that historic moment:

The last American soldier to board the airplane was named Bienco. The victors shook his hand, wished him well, and presented him with a post card depicting Hanoi's single-pedestal pagoda. The shocked Bienco gaped at them for a moment, stammered his thanks, and boarded the plane. Its doors closed, and MAC DC-9 #40619 taxied away, lifting off and disappearing into the heavens. It was 4:25 PM Hanoi time.

I was especially intrigued by the account of the parting gesture expressed by the two Communist officers. To Vietnamese readers, this act showed respect for the Vietnamese custom of magnanimity in victory. I wondered if it had really happened. I passed the article to one of my South Vietnamese counterparts, who scoffed, "It's pure propaganda, Dai Uy. The North Vietnamese don't give anyone anything -- ever. They're so stingy that when they defecate, they hide the results for fear someone will get it."

So much for the Paris Agreement's "era of national reconcil-
iation and concord." I retrieved the paper and directed my attention to a column that had caught my eye earlier. Under the heading, "Danh cho Quan Doi My--Uhung cai Chet Ky Quai" (Reserved for the American Military--Bizarre Deaths), appeared a collection of anecdotes about the war. To my surprise, two of the stories described incidents involving missing and dead American servicemen. The first article was entitled "Starved to Death at Nine Streams." (Nine Streams in Vietnamese folklore refers to the location of the gates of Hell.)

It is the end of 1967. Three American advisors and a unit of puppet special action raiders parachuted onto Mam Xoi hill of the Western Highlands. No sooner had their feet hit the ground when they were fiercely attacked by the Rang Dong (Sunrise) Engineering Group. The puppets found an escape route and fled. The three American advisors moved into the uninhabited valley known as Nine Streams. It is certain that they didn't understand the awful meaning of this name. This area does have nine streams, but there is nothing to eat there, despite what was shown on the sketch of the area they carried with them. After several days here, two of the Americans died, their bodies contorted with hunger. When our liberation soldiers entered the Nine Streams area, they found the surviving American breathing weakly. They had to pry open his mouth and force in some rice soup.

The Nine Streams episode was followed by another anecdote entitled "Died of Thirst."

The American corporal R. Ri-Vo, service number 466-723 was a member of the marines stationed on top of Hill 845 in Khe Sanh. Surrounded by Liberation Forces, the marines could hardly speak due to thirst-parched throats. The sunny month of May in Khe Sanh is terribly hot. Many Americans died or were near death from thirst, and they fought with one another over drinking water. At the foot of Hill 845 flowed a stream, whose blue waters beckoned.

On 24 May 1965, R. R-Vo went down the hill in search of water. He was neatly captured by Liberation Forces. R. R-Vo said, "Many of my friends have died of thirst. I selected this course of action in order to survive!" But after that he was killed by a bomb dropped from a B-52.

As I read the two articles, I saw a possibility that we could exploit them in our negotiations with the Communists. Even though both stories were probably fictionalized accounts dreamed up by some Hanoi propagandist, there was a remote possibility that we could cross-check the facts in the two stories and match them with specific MIA cases. In such an event, we could surface the stories as evidence that the Communists were deliberately withholding information about our MIA personnel. In the more likely event that the two stories were fiction, Hanoi would be hard-pressed to admit it. Such an admission would have meant that the North Vietnamese government was propagandizing its own people. If they were properly exploited, the Nine Streams articles would provide an excellent opportunity to embarrass Hanoi and call attention to the bad faith of the Communists on the MIA question.
Upon landing in Saigon, I shared my discovery with LTC Hank Lunde, who urged me to work out a proposed negotiating initiative based on the two articles. If nothing else, they suggested a new tactic in our never-ending efforts to get the stalled talks moving. Even though we doubted our chances of success, we felt that we could at least score some points against the Communists with a public relations coup of our own for a change (When the Communists scored, we called it "propaganda." When we scored, it was a "PR victory.").

The following day, I began work on a multi-pronged initiative that we quickly dubbed the "Nine Streams Project." I first checked the list of Americans who had died in captivity -- lists that the Communists had passed to us in Paris at the time of the signing of the cease-fire. Forty-one names appeared on the list, but none of them resembled the Vietnamized "Ri-Vo." It was easy to confirm that no marines had been deployed on Hill 845 near Khe Sanh on 24 May 1965, and a review of the Department of Defense master MIA list drew a blank on Corporal "Ri-Vo." Finally, I checked with our colleagues at the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in an attempt to match the events in the anecdote with any actual MIA cases. Again, the results were completely negative. Either the stories were fiction or the facts had been greatly distorted. Armed with this information, I drafted two requests for information to the PRG delegation, since both the Nine Streams area and Khe Sanh were located in "liberated zones" of South Vietnam. The requests quoted the two articles in their entirety and treated both cases as legitimate MIA business. I worded the request concerning the Nine Streams story as follows:

Request your delegation obtain additional information on these three Americans. In particular, the USDEL (US Delegation) requests information on the names of these three Americans, the locations of the graves of the two deceased Americans, the exact date of their death, and the fate of the one captured American. Our delegation has no record of any US POW being repatriated who was captured under the circumstances described in this article.

The Ri-Vo case provided an even better opportunity to exploit a Communist weakness, and I suggested this pointed query in a separate memo:

Since Corporal "R. Ri-Vo" was a captive of the PRG military when his death occurred, the PRG is responsible for resolving his status under the terms of Article 8 (b) of the Paris Agreement. Therefore, the USDEL requests the PRG Delegation to provide the following information:

a. Why was Ri-Vo's name not on the PRG list of those who died in captivity?

b. Where are his remains interred at this time?

To supplement these two requests, I prepared a strongly...
worded statement for Colonel Tombaugh to read at the upcoming session. The entire proposal amounted to an ambush of the Communists with a piece of their own propaganda. The plan called for the colonel to read the two anecdotes, pass the Communists the requests for information, and deliver his statement. Among other things, the statement chastised the Communists for their choice of war stories to entertain the North Vietnamese population. The following excerpts are taken from the actual statement:

"First, the United States Delegation deplores the fact that the tragic deaths of our servicemen on the battlefields of Vietnam should be so callously exploited in the propaganda organs of the DRV. The death of Corporal Ri-Vo, or the suffering of the three Americans in the Nine Streams valley are matters unsuitable for such heartless exploitation. The United States Delegation would like to remind the DRV Delegation that information of the type contained in these articles should rightly be exchanged in the forum of this organization. This is in keeping with Article 8 (b). The United States Delegation is shocked that such vital information on American casualties is withheld by the DRV only to appear in a DRV newspaper for the entertainment of the North Vietnamese population.

The US Delegation would like to point out that no one resembling Corporal Ri-Vo's name or description appears on the list of those who died in captivity turned over by the PRG. Must we thus assume that the PRG list is not, in fact, a complete list?

Finally, the US Delegation would like to repeat its disappointment that this vital information should surface on the back page of a Hanoi newspaper, rather than here at the conference table, as clearly dictated by the Paris Agreement. The United States Delegation hopes that the DRV Delegation will take steps to insure that this unfortunate tactic will not be employed again.

Finally, I suggested that we consider following up our attack with a press release to put the pressure on the Communists, who would most certainly be put on the defensive by our move if the colonel agreed, I was ready with a draft release. My proposed release challenged Hanoi to "confirm the two stories as either fact or propaganda." Having done my homework, I forwarded the entire proposal through LTC Lunde to Colonel Tombaugh.

Later that afternoon, Lunde called me into his office and smiled broadly as he suggested that my sharp eyes might yet enable me to live down the night I had spent in a Saigon jail. Colonel Tombaugh had enthusiastically endorsed the Nine Streams gambit. His reaction appeared on an office routing slip that Colonel Lunde suggested I save for posterity. The chief seldom displayed such enthusiasm.

This is excellent! A really top-notch tactical maneuver and the type of action which should be used to "pressure" the PRG as a part of a larger policy. Please prepare all in final -- I will push this through the Embassy as a "type-action" required. Depending upon PRG response -- we should be prepared with a hard-hitting news article
on this. I believe this is the type thing which possesses enough "news value" that it might be exploited by our "news hungry" press corps.

Predictably, the Embassy agreed to our entire proposal except the follow-on press release. Armed with the official go-ahead, our plan was to confront the Communists with the Nine Streams articles on 11 April. As the big day approached, we looked forward with unconcealed satisfaction to the reaction of the Communists when confronted with their own propaganda.

At the 11 April meeting, Colonel Tombaugh fired the first salvo in the Nine Streams campaign. The colonel waved a copy of Thong Nhat in front of the surprised Communist negotiators as he launched into his statement. Our opponents were clearly taken off guard by the ploy. LTC Son began to whisper something to his deputy, while Colonel Tu, the North Vietnamese chief, began to write rapidly on his note pad. As Tombaugh concluded his statement, both Communist officers adopted expressions that conveyed total unconcern. Not surprisingly, neither officer replied to our challenge to explain the Nine Streams articles. We had predicted that our opponents would take a few days or even weeks to devise a response to such an unexpected move. Our plan was to press the point and repeatedly challenge both Communist delegations to respond to our queries.

At first all went well. On 16 April, Colonel Tombaugh repeated our demand for an explanation of the articles and reminded the Communists that they had not yet replied to our queries. Once again the Communists were silent. Instead, they repeated their oft-stated position that resolution of the MIA issue must await American and South Vietnamese acceptance of a true cease-fire throughout Vietnam. Their argument was that lack of progress on the MIA issue stemmed from the "stubborn insistence" of the United States and South Vietnam on continuing the war. Needless to say, these Communist accusations dealt solely with alleged American and South Vietnamese violations of the Paris Agreement and totally ignored Hanoi's ongoing infiltration, which had commenced on the first day of the cease-fire. Then, on 18 April, the Communists unveiled their tactic to counter the Nine Streams campaign. Early in the session, Colonel Tombaugh reiterated our demand for clarification of the Nine Streams articles. Colonel Son, the PRC chief, countered with a lengthy prepared statement in which he warned that we should abandon our Nine Streams campaign. According to Colonel Son, the United States had used MIA
information for radio propaganda broadcasts during the war and was therefore in no position to criticize either the Hanoi government or the PRG for the Nine Streams articles.

Colonel Tombaugh sat impassively during Son's statement, but I knew what he was thinking -- what was Colonel Son talking about? As soon as we got back to the office, I phoned the United States Information Service (USIS). If we had made any radio broadcasts using the names of fallen Communists soldiers, the USIS people would know about it. I reached Wayne Hyde, who told me that he felt fairly certain that we had beamed several programs of casualty information to North Vietnam. He promised to check his records and report back to me. I passed this bad news to LTC Lunde, who had the unenviable task of reporting to Colonel Tombaugh. Lunde headed out the door as if he expected to be put to death for bearing bad tidings. I began to feel that the Nine Streams project had misfired.

When Wayne Hyde called me the next morning, the news was the worst. Colonel Son's allegations were correct. I listened in silence as Wayne described how the South Vietnamese station "Voice of Freedom" had broadcast the names of North Vietnamese soldiers killed in the south in 1966. Apparently, the program had been an attempt to counter Hanoi's persistent argument that the North Vietnamese Army was not fighting in the south.

Wayne didn't know how many fallen North Vietnamese soldiers had been named in the broadcasts, but he did have more detailed information on another similar program that had been broadcast by the Voice of America -- a clear American effort. From May 1972 until January 1973, the Voice of America (VOA) had broadcast the names of more than 8,000 NVA POWs in Vietnamese language transmissions beamed at North Vietnam. In an effort to weaken the Hanoi government's domestic support of the war in the south, we had aired the names of North Vietnamese prisoners, their date and place of birth, their parents' names, and even their date of infiltration into the south. In addition, Wayne pointed out that the programs had identified wounded North Vietnamese prisoners, named fifty Communist defectors, and even provided the names of ten North Vietnamese cadre who had been killed in action in Cambodia. The South Vietnamese Ministry of Defense had provided information for the broadcasts.

Between the VOA program and the South Vietnamese Voice of Freedom broadcasts, we were in no position to continue our attacks on the Communists for the Nine Streams articles. We had railed at Colonel Son for exploiting the fate of Corporal
"Ri-Vo" and three other Americans, but our side had played loose with the names of thousands of Communists soldiers. Colonel Son's return salvo had hit us in a vital spot. As I drafted a record of my conversations with Wayne, I knew that we had heard the last of the Nine Streams project -- at least from the American side.

The swift reversal of our fortunes on the Nine Streams matter caused a rethinking of the series of events that had led to Colonel Son's climactic pronouncement of 18 April. Had the whole thing been a ploy orchestrated by Hanoi to embarrass the United States? LTC Lunde considered it a possibility. He reasoned that since the Communists knew I could read Vietnamese, they may have deliberately planted the Nine Streams articles in Hanoi for me to pick up. I strongly doubted this interpretation of events (not wanting to be the fall guy) and called attention to the fact that the Communists had taken a number of days to respond to the Nine Streams challenge. But LTC Lunde pointed out that this could have been a ploy to allow time for us to trump up the issue before the Communists retaliated. There was some sentiment that, if the whole affair had been a trap, perhaps the Communists would attempt to use me as an instrument for still another gambit. One way to resolve the matter was to send me back to Hanoi soon. If I again found myself in possession of an apparently irresistible opportunity to score a propaganda coup against Hanoi, we would know the truth. Accordingly, we decided that I would travel to Hanoi on the next flight.

The return trip to Hanoi was uneventful and, in my opinion, proved or disproved nothing. But Communist failure to exploit the Nine Streams affair in the media convinced me that the episode had not been orchestrated. The regular PRG press conference came and went with no mention of our vulnerability. If the North Vietnamese had planned the whole thing to embarrass us, they would have been ready to trumpet the outcome to the world press, just as I had proposed when I thought we were in the driver's seat. As it was, we never heard a word about the matter after Colonel Son's statement. The Nine Streams affair had taught me an important lesson. Insofar as the war was concerned, everyone's hands were a little dirty. In the future, I would be more cautious in proposing bold attacks on our adversaries, lest the accusers once again become the accused.
X. THE YEAR OF THE TIGER

Somewhere in Vietnam's Central Highlands, an elderly village midwife awoke late one night to the sounds of something moving outside her door. When she opened the door to investigate, she discovered a magnificent tiger with jaws quite large enough to swallow her in one bite. The frightened woman fainted, but the quick tiger caught her as she fell. Gently placing her limp body on his back, the beast disappeared into the jungle before anyone could stop him. At his lair deep in the jungle, the tiger revived his captive by licking her hands. Upon awakening, the startled midwife discovered a beautiful tigress wailing in pain on the forest floor as she tried in vain to deliver her cubs. With a reassuring word and a skillful twist of her hands, the midwife performed her magic. The grateful tiger looked on as she assisted the tigress in delivering three tawny male cubs. Shortly thereafter, surprised villagers in the paddies looked up and saw their midwife enter the village -- riding proudly on the back of the majestic tiger!

The year 1974 was the Year of the Tiger. During the three-day Lunar New Year holiday, Vietnamese mothers entertained their children with traditional Tet fables that had been passed on from family to family for generations. Many Vietnamese believed that telling these stories enhanced the prospects for a prosperous and happy new year. I had long since ceased to scoff at Vietnamese customs and beliefs; thus, on this particular holiday, I listened attentively as a friend related the saga of the tiger and the midwife. As he finished the story, I thought wryly to myself that it had become dated. Not only were the tigers of Vietnam's rain forests all but extinct, but the legendary midwife would not doubt have found the tiger's lair occupied by the North Vietnamese Army if she had revisited the scene of her deed. One year after the arrival of peace in Vietnam, the opposing Vietnamese factions showed no sign of "national reconciliation and concord." To find happiness and prosperity in 1974, the Vietnamese people would need to rely on more than tiger tales.

The year was a hectic, frustrating, and soul-searching experience for me and many other Americans in Vietnam. It was simply not easy to observe the undoing of an ally for whom so many sacrifices had already been made. The ordeal of watching the balance tip inexorably against the South Vietnamese during 1974 was compounded by the knowledge that 1975 promised to be worse in every respect.

Even though I had deep personal reservations by the end of 1973 about the prospects for South Vietnamese survival, I had refrained from expressing my sentiments officially. Not only was I a newcomer to Saigon -- and a junior officer at that --
but I realized that the ARVN's actual performance during 1973 had apparently not supported my pessimism. My assessment was more a visceral reaction than an empirically supportable position. I had written home that an all-out NVA offensive would almost certainly trigger a collapse and our evacuation, but I could not have proven such a claim on the basis of facts then available. In fact, the South Vietnamese military had given an excellent account of itself during 1973. In the province of Chau Doc in the Mekong Delta, South Vietnamese rangers had scored an impressive victory in ejecting the NVA 1st Division from its redoubt in the Seven Mountains region. In the Central Highlands, the ARVN 23rd Division had worn down the NVA 10th Division and, after weeks of bloody position warfare, had forced the northerners to yield the decimated village of Truong Nghia. During the year, South Vietnamese territorial forces had played a major role in establishing control over ten to twenty percent of the country's "contested areas." (In my experience, this term was often a euphemism for de facto Vietcong control). Of course, these operations had been costly. Vietnam's first year of the "cease-fire" had cost the lives of more than 12,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and an estimated 45,000 Communist troops. Even if one considered the morale problems caused by military and economic realities, the South Vietnamese situation could have been much worse when fireworks ushered in the Year of the Tiger.1

The year 1974 was the beginning of the end for the Republic of Vietnam. The series of events that evolved during the year virtually assured the defeat of the South Vietnamese. But at the end of 1973, one could still argue that the South Vietnamese had a chance of survival despite the continuing NVA buildup and growing American disenchantment with the war. This was not the case twelve months later when the only unanswered question concerned the timing of the impending Communist victory. How much longer could the South Vietnamese stave off the inevitable? The Year of the Tiger had indeed marked the turning point in the fortunes of the Saigon government.

The year began on a bizarre note when South Vietnam waged a futile war with Communist China over a tiny group of offshore islands known as the Paracels. We watched apprehensively in the DAO operations center on 20 January as the two sides squared off for a showdown. A South Vietnamese naval task force steamed to the Paracels to reinforce the tiny garrison on the main island, while Chinese naval units approached from the north. Our intelli-
gence reported that ominously large numbers of Chinese MIG fighters flew over the area unchallenged by the South Vietnamese air force. (The VNAF lacked radar coverage of the Paracels, whereas the Chinese MIGs were operating with the advantage of their radar on Hainan Island.) A brief panic ensued when we learned that a DAO civilian employee was on board one of the threatened Vietnamese naval vessels. Gerald Kosh was a former Army green beret captain and Montagnard linguist who worked in Danang. Believing that the Paracel resupply mission would provide a good opportunity to observe the Vietnamese navy, Kosh had made a hasty decision and climbed aboard one of the departing vessels, unaware that the ship (the HQ-10) was steaming into battle with a superior Chinese task force.

When the Embassy heard that an American was on board the HQ-10, the reaction was predictable: Get him off that ship -- the sooner, the better. Tension in the operations center increased as Chinese MIG activity escalated and the two naval forces closed. Our liaison officer at Vietnamese Naval Headquarters finally persuaded the Vietnamese to transmit a message directing the adventurous Kosh to leave the HQ-10. Kosh dutifully obeyed and disembarked on the main island with the South Vietnamese reinforcements. A wave of relief swept through the operations center when word arrived that he was safely on terra firma. Meanwhile, the battle erupted, and a Chinese ship-to-ship missile sank the HQ-10 with great loss of life. Kosh had almost been the first American casualty of 1974. Within minutes, we received a report that Chinese MIG fighters had begun to strafe the main island in preparation for Chinese infantry landing forces. Disaster! Kosh had jumped out of the proverbial frying pan. The final transmission from the island reported that Chinese troops were landing. Minutes later, the Vietnamese garrison surrendered and Kosh was taken prisoner.

The Embassy explained to the press that Kosh had been an observer on what he had thought would be a routine mission. The explanation was substantially true. Kosh worked for the DAO Coordination and Liaison Section, and one of his main responsibilities was to report on the state of readiness of the Vietnamese armed forces. He was neither a CIA agent nor an advisor to the Vietnamese; he had merely "gone along for the ride," and the ride had led to internment on the Chinese mainland. Kosh was detained and questioned for eleven days before his release in Hong Kong with a group of South Vietnamese prisoners, thus ending one of the strangest episodes of the cease-
fire.

The Paracel Islands defeat did nothing to help the declining morale of the South Vietnamese, despite the government's attempts to use the episode as a rallying point. The "Heroes of Hoang Sa," (the name of the island in Vietnamese) received a warm, government-sponsored welcome when they returned to Saigon, and government propaganda banners and television programs temporarily redirected their wrath at the Chinese Communists. South Vietnamese naval officers blamed air force timidity for the disaster, claiming that A-37 and F5 fighters from Danang could have changed the outcome of the fighting. This charge ignored the fact that the air force command had wanted to engage the Chinese but had been overruled by the government. Since the VNAF did not have radar coverage of the skies over the Paracels, their pilots would have been in peril of ambush by superior numbers of Chinese fighters. For this reason, both President Thieu and Chairman of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, had opposed VNAF intervention in the ill-fated expedition.2

While the South Vietnamese fought the wrong war against the wrong enemy, Hanoi's leaders made fundamental decisions about the direction of the war in the south. According to the account of Hanoi's Senior General Van Tien Dung, the North Vietnamese decided by late 1973 that the cease-fire was a failure. President Thieu refused to negotiate a political solution that would give the Communists a share of power in the south, and Hanoi thus saw the use of force as the only viable alternative to pressure Thieu into political concessions. Thanks to the continuous buildup of its forces in the south during 1973, Hanoi now had the clout to accomplish this objective. Hence, North Vietnamese leaders declared with confidence that "the path of the revolution in the south is the path of revolutionary violence...since the enemy fails to implement the agreement and continues to pursue Vietnami- 

Thus, the year 1974 became a time of increased bloodletting on both sides as the newly equipped NVA showed off its increasing mastery of the combined arms attack. NVA armor, infantry,
and artillery now attacked in well-coordinated formations, unlike the clumsy attempts of the 1972 Easter Offensive when Communist tankers had attacked without infantry support. Hanoi's resort to a modern, conventional invasion force belied any notion that the war in the south was a people's war.

In October 1974, North Vietnamese leaders met to evaluate the results of their directives. After a series of meetings, they unanimously adopted a four-point assessment of the situation. This assessment appears in General Dung's account of the cease-fire period and contains strikingly accurate perceptions of the overall military and political situation. Taken together, Hanoi's conclusions indicate that North Vietnamese leaders believed that they had turned a decisive corner and that conditions were now favorable for a military showdown with the Thieu regime.

The first point in the North Vietnamese estimate dealt with the shifting balance between the opposing armies. Hanoi concluded that "the puppet troops were militarily, politically, and economically weakening every day, and our forces were quite stronger than the enemy in the south." Even though our mission in Saigon was slow to grasp the truth of this assertion, Hanoi's agents had reported accurately. During the summer of 1974, many of my Vietnamese friends focused their attention on Washington, where the Nixon administration was locked in battle with a hostile Congress over military aid for Saigon. When the requested 1.45 billion dollars bogged down, the Vietnamese were incredulous. Few could accept the notion that Washington would really let them down. Congress voted in August 1974 to fund only 700 million dollars of the administration's request, and President Nixon succumbed to Watergate and resigned. These twin disasters shocked the South Vietnamese, who needed President Nixon's hard-line commitment to their cause almost as much as they needed the aid bill. These two events alone would have been sufficient to affect the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese, but, in conjunction with the stepped-up combat, continuing corruption, and economic deterioration, the result was an unprecedented crisis in morale. The average South Vietnamese GI had fought more and had made ends meet on less ever since the American withdrawal. Now the Vietnamese simply could not accept the realization that their major ally was rapidly losing faith in their cause. Bitterness and disillusionment became widespread.

During the summer of 1974, the DAO conducted a survey to determine the economic status of RVNAF personnel. Interview teams of Vietnamese nationals queried more than 6,600 South
Vietnamese servicemen concerning their economic conditions. The final report was prepared by Tony Lawson, the Director of Special Studies. It did not present an encouraging picture of conditions in the Vietnamese armed forces. More than ninety percent of the men polled indicated that their pay and allowance were insufficient to meet their families' needs for food, clothing, and shelter. More than eighty-eight percent affirmed that their standards of living had eroded since 1973. and most bachelor soldiers stated that they could not afford to marry. An annex of quotations attached to Lawson's report showed all too clearly the economics of the cease-fire. These are only a few examples of comments by South Vietnamese officers:

An ARVN artillery commander: The use of ammunition is now very limited. The present allocation cannot satisfy the present battlefield requirements...We should move as often as possible in order to avoid the enemy's counterfire, but because of lack of fuel, the commander did not allow us to do so.

An ARVN regimental commander: Due to the shortage of fuel, there are many difficulties in the evacuation of wounded troops from the battlefield. We have to use hammocks and hondas for this operation. This aggravates the state of the wounds and exhausts the wounded soldiers during evacuation.

An ARVN battalion commander: The soldiers' life is miserable. Not only their food is poor, but uniforms are also very hard to get. Our unit is receiving only 50% of the authorized quantity of uniforms.... If the government feels pity for the soldiers, it should immediately provide the soldiers with the needed supplies. We don't ask for anything else. We are afraid that if we ask for too much, we may receive nothing.

An ARVN battalion commander: ...Government leaders are so unskillful that they did not formulate an economic plan for the country when the American troops were stationed in South Vietnam; therefore after the withdrawal of the American troops, the entire Vietnamese people became stricken by poverty, the officers and the troops are in famine.

Helicopter pilots are robbers, since each time they transport supplies to this unit they request some rice, or a portion of dry rations, or some money as a bribe. If their request is not satisfied they refuse to unload the supplies with the excuse that their aircraft are out of order or that the landing zone is not secure.

An ARVN regimental commander: The use of ammunition has been limited, while the regiment has frequently made contact with the enemy. Thus, I once personally paid five thousand piagters to RF troops to get one case of M79 rounds.

Upon hearing that the interview team worked for the DAO, one respondent caustically remarked that "the Americans inquire into the ARVN troops' living conditions merely to be aware of the fact, not for rendering further assistance." Another respondent bluntly told the interviewers: "If the (needed) support cannot be obtained from the Americans, then the Vietnamese people can continue fighting in the way their ancestors did. I blame the Americans for such a deteriorated situation..."
It is quite clear that RVNAF personnel are forced to live at less than reasonable subsistence levels, and that performance and mission accomplishment are seriously affected. Day to day survival in the face of worsening economic conditions has caused a deterioration of performance which cannot be permitted to continue, if RVNAF is to be considered a viable military force.

The North Vietnamese were also aware of these difficulties. Communist infiltrators in virtually every government military unit kept Hanoi posted on the continuing decline in morale. North Vietnamese leaders could keep up with growing congressional disenchchantment with the Thieu government by reading the New York Times. Hence, I was not surprised at the accuracy of their insights into South Vietnamese military weaknesses. Besides, the North Vietnamese had actually conducted battlefield tests of the ARVN during 1974. In August, for example, NVA forces seized the district capital of Thuong Duc and then successfully resisted South Vietnamese attempts to retake the town. Thuong Duc thus became the first district capital that was permanently lost during the cease-fire. General Dung described the capture and successful defense of Thuong Duc as "... a test of strength with the best of the enemy's forces" and made it clear that, in the battle for Thuong Duc, NVA forces had finally demonstrated superior firepower over the weakened South Vietnamese. Commenting on the impact of cuts in American aid to South Vietnam, Dung observed cryptically: "Nguyen van Thieu was then forced to fight a poor man's war." 

The second pillar of Hanoi's estimate concerned the vital question of continued American involvement in the war. According to Hanoi: "The United States was facing mounting difficulties both at home and in the world, and its potential for aiding the puppets was rapidly declining." With the "reactionary''Nixon out of the White House, Hanoi unquestionably felt less constrained militarily. One of my Communist counterparts insisted shortly after the Nixon resignation that Nixon had been "stubborn" and refused to "recognize the reality of the American defeat in Vietnam." Translated, this meant that Hanoi feared Nixon's penchant for such heavy-handed shows of military force as he had displayed in 1972 and 1973 when he ordered the mining of North Vietnam's waterways and twice resumed the bombing. Shortly after Nixon's resignation, one North Vietnamese lieutenant sarcastically told me that the Watergate revelations of official corruption in Washington were "no surprise" to him. "I have been an Americanologist for years," he boasted, "and I was therefore not surprised to hear..."
that Nixon was corrupt. After all, President Thieu is corrupt, and the father cannot be better than the son."

General Dung relates that, in the wake of Nixon's resignation, Hanoi's major concern was the single question: "Would the United States be able to send its troops back to the south if we launched large-scale battles that would lead to the collapse of the puppet troops?" Hanoi's leaders discussed this issue "heatedly" according to Dung, and ultimately deferred to the judgment of Party First Secretary Le Duan, who argued that, "having already withdrawn from the south, the United States could hardly jump back in, and no matter how it might intervene, it would be unable to save the Saigon administration." In arriving at this conclusion, Le Duan assessed Washington's position as follows:

The internal contradictions within the U.S. administration and among U.S. political parties had intensified. The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the entire United States and precipitated the resignation of an extremely reactionary president - Nixon. The United States faced economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis. Also, U.S. allies were not on good terms with the United States, and countries who had to depend on the United States also sought to escape U.S. control. U.S. aid to the Saigon puppet administration was decreasing.

How valid was Le Duan's conclusion? By the end of 1974, it was tested by a bold NVA initiative -- the seizure of Phuoc Long province. President Nixon had promised President Thieu that the United States would reintervene militarily in the event that Hanoi failed to respect the cease-fire. In his letter of 5 January 1973, the President had urged Thieu to end his objections to the Paris Agreement. The presidential letter concluded with this persuasive commitment:

Should you decide, as I trust you will, to go with us, you have my assurances of continued assistance in the post-settlement period and that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam.

While I spent the Christmas holidays on leave in the States, Hanoi's forces assaulted Phuoc Long province. By the time I returned to Saigon, the Communist flag flew over the provincial capital of Phuoc Binh, a mere seventy-five miles north of Saigon. There had been no American application of "full force" in response to Hanoi's seizure of the town: Former President Nixon could only observe helplessly from the sidelines at San Clemente and President Ford's hands had been tied by Congressional restrictions. Nor were there any South Vietnamese plans to retake the town from the superior NVA force. The operation was deemed beyond the RVNAF's capabilities, primarily for logistical reasons. In Hanoi, North Vietnamese leaders correctly interpreted their Phuoc Long victory as concrete proof that Le Duan's assumption had been valid: Americans would
never reintervene militarily in Vietnam. The Communists had a green light for using their military forces to conquer South Vietnam.

Within a week after the fall of Phuoc Long, I began to receive phone calls and visits from long-lost Vietnamese friends. Two officers whom I had met in the States suddenly contacted me for the first time in more than a year. I even heard from an interpreter who had worked with me in Hau Nghia province in 1971. Of course, all of them had an innocent pretext for getting in touch, but I knew the real reason for my sudden popularity. If the military situation continued to deteriorate, an American friend in Saigon would represent a possible avenue of escape. Not to be outdone in prudent prior planning, I discreetly began to ship my possessions to the States through the military post office. August 1975 would mark the second anniversary of my arrival in Saigon and the end of my tour. I wrote to my parents and told them not to be alarmed by the sudden flow of packages - I would be home before August.

The third element of Hanoi's appraisal of the military and political situation was an assessment of its own capability to support "revolutionary violence" in the south. Could the "great socialist rear base" sustain the kind of military operations required to topple the "stubborn puppet clique?" Like the other conditions, this one had vastly improved. In General Dung's words, "We had created a chain of mutual support, had strengthened our reserve forces and material and were steadily improving our strategic and political system." Six NVA reserve divisions were now available to support the sixteen front-line units already deployed on southern battlefields or in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. In Saigon, our intelligence analysts continued to track the alarming infiltration of NVA personnel, weapons, and equipment. DAO threat briefings regularly concluded with a sobering estimate of Hanoi's capability to sustain a major offensive on the scale of the 1972 onslaught for at least 12 months. A particularly ominous development was the formation of Hanoi's line divisions into army corps to facilitate the coordination of multi-divisional operations. The in-boxes of the analysts in our current intelligence section were treasure troves of hard information on the scope of the buildup. I saw many aerial photographs of seemingly endless convoys of Molotova trucks laden with war materiel and moving openly down the "Ho Chi Minh Highway," as some of us now called it. The arduous 100-day trek from
North Vietnam to the rubber plantations north of Saigon had become a two-week drive. To General Dung, the newly completed roads, trails, and pipelines were like "...endless lengths of sturdy hemp ropes being daily and hourly slipped around the neck and limbs of the monster who would be strangled with one sharp yank when the order was given."  

Finally, Hanoi's leaders analyzed South Vietnamese society, the subtleties of which had always eluded them. In spite of numerous "contradictions" in the southern political system, the "oppressed" South Vietnamese people had refused to recognize their plight and had twice ignored Hanoi's call for a "general uprising." Ironically, Hanoi had done better during the war in fathoming the moods of the American people than in understanding the South Vietnamese peasantry. In a final assessment of the southerners' mood, Hanoi's leaders concluded that "the movement to demand peace, national independence, and Thieu's overthrow in various cities was gaining momentum."  

Once again, Hanoi was partially off the mark in understanding the south. If there was any grass-roots movement in favor of independence in the south, it was the widely held sentiment that North Vietnam should leave the south alone and cease its drive to reunify the country. 

But some elements of the Hanoi analysis were accurate. By October 1974, many South Vietnamese were fed up with President Thieu, and they had unquestionably grown weary of the continued bloodletting. Thieu had become the visible object of their wrath and frustration at what was happening to their country. And they blamed him for almost everything. When 300 Catholic priests formed the "People's Anti-Corruption Movement for National Salvation and Peace Restoration," open demonstrations against President Thieu became increasingly common. In September, the anti-corruption movement had published "Indictment #1" in a Saigon newspaper, a vitriolic attack that accused Thieu and his wife of every conceivable form of corruption. The government ordered all copies of the document confiscated, but to no avail. Contraband mimeographed copies of the charges freely circulated in Saigon, one of which even found its way to my in-box, courtesy of an anonymous anti-Thieu employee. Some Vietnamese unfairly blamed the provisions of the hated Paris Agreement on Thieu, even though Hanoi and Washington had negotiated the treaty bilaterally. One officer even told the DAO survey team that President Thieu's anti-Communist credentials were questionable:

Servicemen now have less confidence in the govern-
ment, since the President's statements and actions seem quite contradictory. An obvious example of this is the fact that the Communist delegation has been allowed to stay in Tan Son Nhut, and provided with air conditioned sedans to move in Saigon.

By August, it was clear that President Thieu was rapidly losing most of his popular support outside of the Army officer corps from which he had emerged. At the request of our new commander, Colonel Jack Madison, I provided an in-depth briefing on the military-political situation. I described President Thieu's increasingly isolated position and ventured the opinion that, for the first time since the cease-fire, a coup d'état was a distinct possibility. "The likelihood of such a coup," I commented, "increases as the economic situation deteriorates and the 'no war, no peace' policy continues to result in casualties and refugees."

Nothing had transpired by November to change my mind. Public disenchantment with Thieu had penetrated the enlisted ranks of the military, but it had not yet affected the vast majority of the officer corps, who saw stability under Thieu as the only way to withstand NVA pressure. When Congress authorized only 700 million dollars for military aid in fiscal year 1975, many South Vietnamese concluded that Thieu himself was the major cause for American disenchantment with Vietnam.

The firings of a number of allegedly corrupt government employees and military men did little to appease the opposition, who would not be satisfied with anything less than Thieu's departure.

Not surprisingly, the deteriorating situation spawned an increase in anti-American sentiments. One of the girls in our office showed up one day with a book entitled "How the Americans Killed a Vietnamese President." The work interpreted the assassination of President Diem as an American-directed outrage against the Vietnamese people. As President Thieu's fortunes declined, increasingly large number of Vietnamese had begun to revise their recollections of the Diem era; they now tended to forget the excesses of Diem's secret police or the fact that many Saigonese had danced in the streets on learning of the demise of the Ngo brothers. The Diem era had been a time of relative peace. Thus, the Americans who (according to the author of the book) were responsible for the assassination were thus guilty by implication for the suffering that followed. On the day before the anniversary of the anti-Diem coup, the Embassy ordered all American offices closed at 2:00 P.M. Americans were strongly urged to go to their quarters and remain there until the following Monday.
Outside the gates of Tan Son Nhut, I skirted around a violent anti-Thieu demonstration as I headed for my quarters. The angry demonstrators had set fire to a green national police jeep after several thoughtless riot policemen had roughed up Father Tran Huu Thanh, the Anti-Corruption Front leader. The "Third Force," as the anti-Thieu forces called themselves, insisted their their goal was to create a government of "national unity" capable of resisting the Communists unhindered by corruption. To Hanoi's leaders, these demonstrations were proof that conditions were once again ripe for still another attempt to reunify the country.

As I cooled my heels in my billet that weekend, I wrote home that Thieu was a fool for waiting until the eleventh hour to tackle corruption. The tragedy of South Vietnamese politics was the fact that no one except the Communists waited in the wings to replace Thieu. For better or for worse, Nguyen van Thieu was still the only alternative to another series of debilitating coups similar to the ones that followed the assassination of President Diem. This time, however, the North Vietnamese Army was poised for the kill, and South Vietnam's generals knew better than anyone that they could risk no such shenanigans. Besides, Thieu continued to enjoy American backing. Even though President Thieu was rapidly approaching political bankruptcy by the end of 1974, this did not mean that the South Vietnamese were yearning for "liberation." President Thieu's unpopularity stemmed from his failure to move against corruption and his inability to continue playing the "American card," as symbolized by the American-imposed Paris Agreement and the cuts in US military assistance. Both of these shortcomings seriously weakened South Vietnam's ability to resist the North Vietnamese, and herein lay the root of Thieu's unpopularity. Even though Hanoi's assessment of the mood in the south made the usual references to a grass-roots longing for socialism, Hanoi had all but abandoned the fiction that the South Vietnamese people would spontaneously rise up against their government and welcome their North Vietnamese liberators. As my counterpart in Hanoi once told me, "The southerners have been seduced into accepting the Thieu regime by American wealth. We will have to educate them." South Vietnamese peasants had repeatedly expressed their distaste for communism by "voting with their feet" wherever Communist troops appeared. Hanoi's leaders were well aware that the only solution to this problem was the military seizure and subjugation of the south. No matter that the southern peasantry did
XI. "WHEN THE TIME IS RIPE, THEY WILL STRIKE"

Tinh was 18 years old. Hundreds of Americans knew him as the friendly bellhop at Saigon's Embassy Hotel. Several of my neighbors in the billet at 192 Cong Ly Street had virtually adopted Tinh and his younger brother. If one dropped in on Joan Pray or Jerry Jablonski, Tinh and his friends were an ever-present part of the social equation. Joan and Jerry had met Tinh during their stay at the Embassy before they moved to the DAO billet. Tinh's perpetual smile and willingness to assist them in their adjustment to life in Saigon had quickly led to a close friendship. Tinh was like a son to Jerry Jablonski even though Jerry had his own family in Washington, and Tinh's parents were alive and well in Saigon.

When Tinh received his draft notice, we held a going-away party for him in Jerry's apartment. I scrounged up a set of army fatigues, a flak jacket, and a steel helmet, and, with great ceremony, we suited up our teen-aged friend for a picture-taking session. The pictures show a beaming face under the oversized steel helmet as Tinh struggled to strike...
heroic poses for the camera.

But Tinh had no desire to be a war hero. He was far from thrilled at the prospect of reporting to Quang Trung Training Center - he was petrified. The escalated fighting had produced heavy casualties by then, and he had no desire to "hy sinh" (sacrifice himself) on the battlefield. There had even been a bitter debate among his American friends when one of them suggested providing funds to purchase an illegal deferment -- a common privilege in Saigon. In a series of confused events, Tinh managed to get himself arrested for draft-dodging, after which better judgment had prevailed and he had reluctantly answered the call to serve his country.

Six months later, Tinh was dead -- killed by a mortar round in the Delta during one of his first combat operations. Shocked, we attended his funeral at the National Cemetery. The cemetery sits on a hill just west of the Long Binh highway in Bien Hoa. Guarding the entrance was the statue of an exhausted soldier sitting on a rock, his helmet tilted back and a carbine across his lap. It was a poignant work of art inscribed with the words "Thuong Truc," (On Duty). As the funeral procession passed the statue, one of my Vietnamese passengers told of the sculptor's difficulty in locating a model for the work. None of
the superstitious Vietnamese GIs wanted to invite tragedy by allowing his image to sit outside a cemetery. By day, according to my passenger, the statue kept his silent vigil, but, at night, the local people insisted that they had seen him come to life and smoke a cigarette as he stood his lonely watch over his fallen comrades.

When we buried Tinh, the South Vietnamese were reporting more than 400 combat deaths each week. At Bien Hoa, the magnitude of this sacrifice took on real meaning. During Tinh's graveside service, I stood near two rows of open graves, each more than 100 meters long. Next to them were three more rows of fresh graves - each grave a mound of earth covered by a red and yellow South Vietnamese flag. One week later, I returned for a traditional second graveside service and noticed with horror that all of the graves had been filled and that workers were busily digging three more rows. I counted almost 400 new graves and, in a nearby tent, twenty wooden coffins were awaiting burial. As I left Bien Hoa that day, I was haunted by the piteous graveside wailings of the bereaved Vietnamese women and shaken by the realization that Saigon's official casualty reports were clearly deflated. I knew that all four military regions had large national cemeteries and that many militia soldiers were customarily interred in their native villages. If 400 South Vietnamese had been buried in Bien Hoa during the past week, then God only knew how many were actually dying, but the total was considerably higher than the number reported by the Ministry of National Defense. The South Vietnamese were paying heavily for their anti-communism.

Tiny Whitfield was an American civilian contractor. A native of the Florida panhandle, he worked for Northrop, helping the VNAF maintain its fleet of F5 fighter aircraft. I'd known Tiny since my first tour in Hau Nghia. He had married a girl from the Delta in 1969 and had no plans to leave Vietnam as long as there was work. Where else could he make $20,000 a year tax-free and live in a villa with two servants? But, by August 1974, Tiny had changed his plans. He was thoroughly fed up and ready to call it quits. Tiny explained to me that working with the Vietnamese Air Force at the Bien Hoa base had become a daily battle of wits between the American contractors and their Vietnamese counterparts — a battle that Tiny and his friends usually lost. "Every time we get a bird fueled up and ready for a test flight," he complained, "we can't find the
pilot who's supposed to fly it. By the time we run him down, they've done stole all the gas out of the damn aircraft and we have to start all over again." According to Tiny, morale at the Bien Hoa base was so poor that many pilots came to work and spent the day figuring out how to avoid flying. The threat from NVA antiaircraft fire had become so formidable that few pilots wanted to risk being shot down. Those aviators who did fly dropped their ordnance from so high that accuracy was almost non-existent. "I've tried for three days to get one F5 tested," Tiny fumed, "and we have already had to refuel it twice, even though it has yet to leave the ground. The damn VC are so close that they hit us with rockets the other night, but we still can't get no one interested in flying." Carrying an extra steel helmet and flak jacket I had loaned him, Tiny left my apartment, grumbling that Northrop could care less about his safety. To the best of my knowledge, this disintegration of VNAF morale had not been reported. The following morning, I related Tiny's alarming experiences to a colonel in the DAO Air Force Division. The colonel listened politely to my report and thanked me for my assistance. When the next weekly wrap-up went out, I looked in vain for any mention of declining morale in the air force.

Bill Laurie was a former military intelligence officer — one of the few who learned to speak Vietnamese well. He worked as an intelligence analyst in the DAO Current Intelligence Section. His area specialty was Military Region IV -- the Mekong Delta. By early December 1974, Bill was deeply concerned about a series of ominous indicators in South Vietnam's populous "rice bowl," and he expressed his concern in a pessimistic analysis that was included in the DAO "Weekly Wrap-Up." Embassy reaction came quickly from Deputy Chief of Mission Wolfgang Lehmann. Bill recalls the dispute in these words:

My report was based on extensive research, including a complex statistical framework which helped to conceptualize the operational modes of NVA/VC combat operations in the Delta. There was also some indication, though not evident to the casual observer, that something was funny, something was brewing; it didn't smell right. I projected in my report that we were about to see one of the most extensive and intensive high points ever to take place in the Delta, second of course only to Tet of 1968, and suggested that the Communist objective was to accelerate the bleeding process, and to place greater operational strain on the RVNAF. I had captured documents showing that the VC/NVA knew that RVNAF armaments and ammo supplies were at low levels and that they intended to compound the hemorrhage. The upshot of my analysis was: Hang onto your hats, folks, the you-know-what is going to hit the fan.

A few days later, the report came back from the Embassy, replete with Lehmann's comments in glaring red ink. No one was going to tell him about the Delta, since he had served as Consulate General in Can Tho for some months.

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Among those comments most clear in my mind are "Crap! Where did you get your info?" "Can this be substantiated?" and a number of other impolitely critical jibes.

Of course, three weeks later the roof fell in on the Delta. The enemy launched what was far and away the biggest and most widespread campaign since '68, expending more munitions against more targets than during the Tet attacks. The attacks were well-coordinated between VC military regions for the first time, and Communist troops came out fighting, willing to take casualties, and going like hell to draw blood. Not to seize capitals or anything like that, but to make the RVNAF burn itself out in response, to throw more sand in the gearbox by increasing the RVNAF's expenditure of men, supplies, and armaments. Vinh Binh province all but disappeared in a "black hole" of non-information, and in a number of other provinces there were areas where reporting was all but non-existent due to intense combat.

That Saturday, Mike Hanson and I were called to the Embassy to explain the whole thing to Lehmann, despite the fact that my report had laid out the whole thing -- erring only by underestimating what would take place.

I knew a young Vietnamese soldier named Nguyen Van Ba, who served in a militia company in the Delta province of Chuong Thien. Year in and year out, Chuong Thien was one of South Vietnam's bloodiest battlegrounds. Ba occasionally came to Saigon to visit his family. On one of these visits near the end of 1974, he shared this story with me:

Our company commander's name was Suong. He was well-liked by the men because our company never took any casualties under his leadership. The VC had passed the word through the people to the captain that he should not conduct operations into the outlying hamlets, and especially not into the Rung Tram forest. Whenever our unit left the outpost on an operation, the captain would have us "test fire" our weapons as we approached the operational area. The Vietcong, warned of our approach, would melt away. On these operations, we walked through the hamlets without searching or checking ID cards. We never contacted the VC, and no one ever tripped a booby trap. Back in the outpost, we slept at night without fear of mortar or sapper attacks. The VC had told the captain through the people that if we left them alone, we could live in peace together. Both sides respected the rules.

Then one day the MSS came and arrested the captain for accommodation with the enemy. Everyone was sorry to see him go -- his men, the villagers, and probably the Vietcong. Under his command, the war had gone away. His successor was a hard man -- a northerner -- and he quickly changed everything. We began to search the hamlets and run aggressive operations into the Rung Tram area. Casualties from booby traps mounted, and our outpost began to receive mortar fire several times a week. After that, our company began to shrink from losses like all the others in Chuong Thien. Now, our guards stay alert at night because of the danger of a sapper attack.

No one in Saigon was more stricken than General Murray by the decision of the U.S. Congress to cut the Vietnam aid bill by thirty percent. He was convinced that the South Vietnamese faced a military showdown with the Communists, and he believed firmly that both American aid and air power were essential to South Vietnamese survival. In his end-of-tour report, the general
offered these prophetic views on North Vietnam:

It could collapse internally. Russia and China, or both, could dry up the pipe; for that matter, nature in these parts could typhoon it to virtual submission. All these and more could happen. But they probably won't.

If the past records anything, it's their everlasting obstinancy. They will keep coming.

Their future big offensive is plainly written in the daily events that are casting their shadows of a showdown before.

They are not building roads for tourists. Constructing pipelines to support the oil industry. Piling up ammo caches just to make pyrotechnic displays. Pushing in tanks, field guns and ack-ack just for the logistical exercises.

When the time is ripe -- they will strike. And strike with violent power. And perhaps this time with air power.

General Murray had done everything possible to insure that Washington understood the urgency of South Vietnam's dilemma. When his superiors in the Pentagon requested guidance on the impact of reduced aid on the South Vietnamese military, Murray cabled bluntly that the prospects for South Vietnamese survival diminished as aid levels dropped below 1 billion dollars (the administration had requested 1.45 billion dollars). If US aid dropped to the 750 million dollar level, the general warned, "... funds would not support hard-core self defense requirements. Any chance of having Hanoi see the light and come to the conference table would be sharply diminished."

If aid fell to the 600 million dollar level, the general suggested that the United States might as well "... write off RVN as a bad investment and a broken promise."

The news of President Nixon's resignation and the slash in military aid to the 700 million dollar level hit Saigon only a few days apart. General Murray was shattered and responded readily to an Embassy request that he speak candidly to the press on the plight of the South Vietnamese. In an interview with a New York Times reporter, Murray unloaded on the congressional aid cuts. The South Vietnamese are "sacrificing blood for the lack of ammunition," he argued passionately and called attention to the fact that, despite the wishful thinking of the Congress and the American people, the war in Vietnam continued to produce heavy casualties.

Even though the Embassy authorized the interview, the general's blunt rhetoric triggered a sharp reaction from Washington. General Murray recalls the resulting brouhaha:

Then came the uproar from the Pentagon telling me 'not to get out in front.' In effect challenging State's authority to give me instructions and attempting to renege on the past agreement when the heat got scourching (author's note: DOD and State had agreed that the Defense Attache would be subordinate to the Embassy in the area of public relations).
I was miffed by the Gerry Freidheim phlegm. Only a few days before at a Pentagon news briefing as the spokesman for the Defense Department, when asked a question about Vietnam, he replied, "We don't have anybody out there any more." If so, then what the hell were you and I doing there? And when the stuff hit the fan what was he doing? Sending a message to a phantom?

Everything I said was authorized and I was for it. What I did was restrain Ann Bottorf (DAO Public Relations Officer) from tipping off the higher headquarters that I was going to say it. And say it for publication. A technical violation...

Can't you imagine it? If I had tipped off CINCPAC et al that I was going to tell the press the sorry facts about our eye-opening eye-dropper support, you know what would have happened? I'd be directed to furnish a prepared statement and instead of saying that the poor little guys "are sacrificing blood for lack of ammunition," I'd be directed to recite some bland prose like:

As the result of prudent fiscal restraints, the Armed Forces of South Vietnam have been obliged to appropriately modify their episodic combat methodology toward the maintenance of a cease-fire equilibrium.

I dropped by General Murray's office the day after the New York Times interview hit the streets. The general had just hung up the phone in disgust as I entered the room. It had been his third remonstrating phone call from the Pentagon. "I've had enough of their phone calls," he fumed. "I just told them that if I get one more call telling me to shut up, I'll hold a retirement press conference in Hawaii and really sound off -- to include revealing the names of those who tried to shut me up!" He was furious over the congressional aid cut because he knew that it probably portended the end of South Vietnam. With his departure from Vietnam and his retirement imminent, the conscientious Murray felt like a rat abandoning a sinking ship. It was naive and self-deluding, he argued, for Congress to believe that reductions in aid would force compliance with the cease-fire. A weakened South Vietnamese military could result only in increased North Vietnamese militancy. Within a few days of the blowup over his news release, General Murray departed Saigon and went into retirement, disillusioned and deeply disturbed by his unsuccessful efforts to influence what he regarded as a cynical and short-sighted policy.

During a September 1974 interview in Chicago, he prophesied that South Vietnam would be hard-pressed to survive another year because of the reductions in aid. "What we are doing now is sadistic," Murray argued, pointing out that South Vietnamese casualties mounted as American aid declined. But the conscience-stricken general's voice was ignored like a cry for help in downtown Manhattan. No one cared enough to get involved.

We met in the air-conditioned conference room of the United
States Information Service (USIS) in Saigon. Our group, known as the "Hanoi Watch Committee," convened every Thursday afternoon to exchange information on North Vietnam. Seated around the polished conference table were representatives from the CIA, State Department, the DAO, USIS, and the JMT.

At one particularly memorable session in late July 1974, a heated discussion focused on the subject of Hanoi's intentions in the south. CIA analyst Frank Snepp had started the debate by sharing the latest hot intelligence from a "highly placed source." Frank explained that his source had an excellent track record and had just reported on a new order from the Communist high command. The order informed all Communist cadre that, "If the GVN continues to be defeated, it will agree to implement the cease-fire, including the establishment of the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord and agreement on the demarcation of FRG/GVN zones of control."

Frank pointed out that the new order marked the first time that the Communists had mentioned to their cadre the possibility of a political settlement with President Thieu's government.

Jack Mace was more cautious. The DAO analyst pointed out that the new Communist directive also asserted: "We must continue to push the GVN so we can deliver a decisive blow in the spring of 1975." Arguing that the new information was insufficient evidence that the Communists had opted for a political settlement, Jack pointed out that continued increases in NVA infiltration and the recent establishment of NVA corps-level commands pointed to an impending military offensive.

Snepp countered by reviewing the latest intelligence gleaned from the diplomatic community. A Soviet diplomat had allegedly stated: "We've cut aid to the DRV and think that the Chinese have also. There is no major offensive in the offing." North Vietnamese diplomats had been heard to remark: "Peace is assured in the south now," and "We are seriously occupied in solving urgent economic problems now. The Thieu regime doesn't need to be pushed over the brink now. It is deteriorating all by itself." Frank also cited one neutral diplomat who had stated: "The Soviets are telling the North Vietnamese that Thieu is no pushover, but will fall as the US cuts aid." Furthermore, several neutral and Soviet sources had insisted: "Hanoi has been warned that if a major offensive is launched, they will not receive replacement military aid." One neutral diplomat had even remarked: "The North Vietnamese are bitter at the Soviets for cutting back military aid. They feel constrained in the military sphere."
But Jack remained unconvinced. He argued that Hanoi already had enough aid on hand to sustain a major military push in the south for many months. He refused to accept the validity of either the alleged Soviet aid cuts or the reputed split between Hanoi and Moscow. He felt that the war was building up to a decisive military showdown, not a resumption of political talks. When the end came, it would come with a bang, not a whimper. (President Thieu continued to urge his people to "kill all the Communists in Vietnam if necessary," and fight "to the last bullet, the last grain of rice." ) Jack saw the emergence of new NVA corps headquarters as a portent of offensive activity, but Frank leaned toward the less dramatic interpretation that the North Vietnamese had created the new command structure to facilitate the logistical support of their troops in the south.

The debate between Jack Mace and Snepp once again underscored the classic dilemma of the intelligence officer: Estimating enemy capabilities was relatively simple, but fathoming the enemy's intentions was an elusive task. In this instance, Frank and Jack simply put a different interpretation on the same set of facts. Two years later and long after Saigon had been renamed Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi's General Dung resolved the argument in Jack's favor. In his discussion of Hanoi's preparations for its 1975 offensive, Dung wrote:

To stage large-scale annihilating battles and firmly defend the newly liberated areas, it was no longer advisable to field only independent or combined divisions. In 1974 army corps were gradually formed and deployed in strategic areas most vital to insuring mobility...this represented a great step to maturity for our army and, at the same time, the most active step in preparing forces for the future general offensive.

As Colonel Madison's intelligence officer, I provided my assessment of the situation in a briefing on 16 August 1974.

Pointing out that the super powers had already created in Vietnam a volatile situation that they could perhaps no longer control, I added my own conclusions to the continuing debate:

Are the DRV's economic problems so serious that they restrict Hanoi's options in approaching the question of reunification? The North Vietnamese are hard; they are used to sacrifice. Their leaders are dedicated to reunification. The increasingly uttered conclusion that "Hanoi has opted for long term economic development at the expense of a quick solution in the south" makes the assumption that Hanoi's leaders think and act as westerners -- an assumption which has always led us to grief. There may be no quick solution in the south in the cards at this time, but it is my view that if Hanoi's "aging leaders" saw the opportunity -- no amount of typhoons, hog cholera, or additional sacrifice by the DRV peasantry would deter them from striking the final blow of their cherished revolution. The DRV may not launch a general offensive to topped the GVN if they
perceive that it is not necessary. Indeed, the current phased offensive, however costly to Hanoi, is showing signs of bringing about unprecedented economic and morale problems in the GVN. However ... the capability, and the will, for a prolonged offensive exists. I do not believe Soviet or Chinese pressure, economic problems, or American threats will deter Hanoi if invoking this option appears necessary.

Shortly after my briefing to Colonel Madison, I made another trip to Hanoi. The tree-lined boulevards of the North Vietnamese capital were bedecked with colorful displays of flags representing the Hanoi government and its PRG "ally." Scarlet and gold banners hanging at the intersections urged the people to "implement the transportation offensive!" When queried, Major Huyen replied innocently that the transportation offensive involved the repair of North Vietnam's roads and railroads that had been destroyed during the American bombing. When I countered that his government had just recently announced the completion of "reconstruction" and the commencement of a "new phase" of "economic development," the major's only reply was a benevolent smile.

XII. "HOGWASH!"

Eighteen days after the North Vietnamese seized Phuoc Long province, Major Le Tan Dai emerged from the jungle and approached a unit of surprised ARVN troops. The major had escaped from Song Be after NVA armor had overrun the city. As he fled the province headquarters, four NVA tanks lumbered into sight and commenced a point-blank shelling of the command bunker.

The major told a grim story. After several weeks of shelling, Song Be had been subjected to an artillery barrage of 3,000 rounds on 3 January. The attacking North Vietnamese forces had totaled almost two full divisions, supported by armor, antiaircraft units, and sappers. Opposing this formidable array of forces had been four RF battalions and a number of PF platoons. In late December, corps headquarters had reinforced the beleaguered militiamen with one regular ARVN battalion, followed in early January by two companies of airborne rangers. When NVA T-54 tanks entered the city, Major Dai watched South Vietnamese soldiers climb desperately onto the buttoned-up...