

## RECREATION

I found it awfully difficult to think of recreation in this war zone. American and Vietnamese soldiers were being killed daily and the VC never seemed to take it easy. Along with increased emphasis on pacification, came reorganization plans and a steady flow of new senior managers. We field officers were summoned to Saigon, usually on Saturday afternoons, to weigh in on new ideas and meet new arrivals. This provided field officers a chance to get together on Saturday nights where we exchanged experiences. Some were unreal. Bob Simon, now assigned to Muc Hoa, was really funny. Apparently, the whole province was under VC control except the 1,000 yards where Bob and the Province Chief resided. One of his nearby RD teams had been overrun one day and Bob debriefed his interpreter to determine what had happened. Bob said the conversation went something like this: Bob. "What happened?" "All dead, all dead." "Whole RD team?" Reply. "Yes, Yes, All dead." "Now calm down. Did any team members survive?" "Yes, Yes, "How many survived." "Yes, Yes." "I'm asking about the number?" "Many VC, all dead." At that point Bob jumped into his jeep, drove to the hamlet with another interpreter and investigated the incident. Casualties were 20 RD cadre killed and six wounded. The rest survived. "At least it wasn't that bad in Bien Hoa," I thought. Tales like Bob's were common.

One Saturday night Bill Wadkins and I were invited to Tet (Vietnamese New Year) party in Saigon. I looked and felt terrible. I had come in from a two-day operation and felt hungry and tired, but went anyway. By this time I was skinny and my face was dark. Nothing at the party interested me, except the cutest little Vietnamese girl imaginable talking with Bill's female friend. I went over and tried to meet her. Her name was Ngoc (Jade in Vietnamese.)



NGOC-1966

I asked her, "Would you like a beer?" "Nope," she said. "How about a coke?" "Nope." "How about dancing?" "I don't know how to dance." "What about a visit to the zoo or movies sometime?" "Maybe SOMETIME." By this time I had exhausted all the arrows in my quiver

except one. I said, "I have a great Mama San who makes wonderful Vietnamese soup, how about the four of us getting together for soup at our place Sunday morning at ten?" The two girls looked at each other, giggled and said " Sure." I gave directions to our Villa and said, "Well be ready at ten " Next day, we waited, waited, waited and were stood up. So much for the impression I made. We both were peeved, for Bill really liked his girlfriend and I was looking forward to a date with this gorgeous creature. About a month later, Bill's girl showed up at the villa, apologizing for the no show. She said she had to leave for Ben Tre that morning because her mother was ill and needed help. The bus left early so she asked Ngoc to go alone and pass the word, but she refused. She then said Ngoc was living with her sister, Trinh, and gave me the address. I decided to wash, shave, dress up and visit the place. A motorcycle was parked outside the address. Just as I approached the building I heard a high pitched voice hollering and screaming, followed by a guy running out the door ducking high heeled shoes thrown at him by the villainous, cute little Ngoc. I had no idea what happened and thought, "What the hell am I getting into?" It turned out Ngoc agreed to guard the motorcycle for a friend and her sister's boyfriend took it for a spin without asking. After her blood pressure returned to normal, she smiled and invited me in. What impressed me was how neat the place was kept. Everything was well squared away. "It could have passed inspection at the Merchant Marine Academy," I thought. She had just finished cooking cha gio (Vietnamese egg rolls) in the small kitchen and offered me some. It tasted great when dipped in nuoc mam, a fish sauce. I met her sister and she was stunningly beautiful. We went to the Rex movie that night and had a good time. When they turned on the lights during intermission, rats were running up and down the isles eating pop corn and whatever else was thrown on the floor. This didn't seem to alarm my friend as much as it did me.

As time progressed, I visited when I could and learned more about her. The story was incredible. Coming from a strict Buddhist family with strong tradition and custom, her parents had made an agreement with close family friends for her to marry their son. Ngoc had seen the guy a few times and thought to herself, "No Way!!!" Rather than cause a family revolt, she went along with the wedding plans (which in Vietnam is a really big deal.) Meanwhile, she decided to run away to Saigon and move in with a sympathetic friend who had invited her. The poor guy was stood up at the temple, alone and embarrassed. Ngoc became instantly infamous. All of Dalat knew her as the girl that vanished. This little shy, once well-behaved girl had a mind of her own.

When I checked into the Station, I could hardly recognize the place. New faces, new office space, new bosses, new everything. It was as though I returned to another planet. Ace  
BINH SON OPERATIONS

Binh Son hamlet proved hard to pacify. Our RD team had been pushed out and would be in jeopardy had it stayed. The area would have to be softened. The Province Chief decided to reinforce the RF and put constant pressure on the area. Every time the RF ran an operation there, they came back with their tail between their legs. They were all in daylight and there was no way to sneak through the eight mile rubber plantation to get there. Mostly, the VC would wait and spring an ambush before the RF entered the hamlet. After sustaining casualties, the RF would push forward, eventually driving the VC out across a shallow creek into the jungle. I got

wind of an upcoming operation and volunteered the PRU for participation. My plan was to move at night and position all 300 men between the creek and jungle. "This would be a hammer and anvil operation," I thought. We arrived at the edge of the plantation at dusk the previous day, driving about three miles through the rubber trees to the staging area. There we unloaded and I personally inspected everyone; all metal taped, entrenching tool, two canteens per man, pressure bandages, standardized loads, etc. Those that failed were sent back by truck.

We changed direction every fifteen minutes, working our way across the creek into high ground. There in a large circle we dug in. At first light we moved closer to high points above the water at each bend. There, as one would expect, we found VC camouflaged spider holes at practically every point. We occupied every one and were ready. Within the hour we spotted a local fisherman walking the river bank with cast a cast net draped over his arm. He never saw us. We kept in position until early afternoon when the RF unit entered the hamlet. No contact, nothing. The VC obviously had advanced word. They must have known about our plans also. Coordination ruined security. Had we not coordinated, however, we could easily cause a friendly fire incident.

## TAN UYEN OPERATIONS

The Dong Nai river cut through Bien Hoa's capital, past our PRU camp, then continued in a northerly arch into Tan Uyen District toward Long Khanh province. An east/west road ran directly to Xuan Loc, connecting the two capitals. The area to the north of this road was considered Indian country. Other than a few small villages, it was mostly forested. Many sizable Communist main force units were headquartered there, but we had little intelligence on precisely where and how many. To give our PRU small unit experience, I decided to flood the zone with six-man PRU teams. In addition to their ammo load, each team carried 24 colored smoke grenades, two HR-1 walkie-talkies and a VHF radio. Ten separate teams would be inserted along the river bank by sampan, then proceed due south until they reach the Xuan Loc road where they would be picked up by truck three days later. Once a recon team spotted a target, they were instructed to alert the L-19 forward air controller pilot flying above. While the pilot called for air support, the PRU team was to stand-by with an orange smoke grenade a safe distance from the target and position a second red smoke the same distance in the opposite direction. This way the target could be pin-pointed on call. It worked out much better than I ever imagined. The teams called in roughly 12 bomb strikes in two days, with only two teams drawing blanks. Every team, however, made it to the road successfully with no casualties. Everyone was pressing for bomb damage assessment (BDA's) but I ignored them. We ran these operations until the sightings practically ceased. I felt this to be a far better measurement of effectiveness than body count.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

Predictably, major organizational changes took place as the year developed. John Hart replaced Gordon Jorgenson as Chief of Station. John had extensive paramilitary experience in Korea, running operations behind enemy lines. About the same time, Ace Ellis, a likable and admired old OSS hand, replaced Tom Donohue. However, Ace would soon to be replaced by a

more ruthless and self-centered, aloof officer named Renz Hoeksema. Our new Station Chief introduced some significant organizational changes. He created Regional Officers-In-Charge (ROIC's) in each Corps, starting with I Corps where John Horgan, an old Miami FI officer, was put in charge. In effect, instead of fifth-four separate provinces reporting to Saigon through two programs, RDC/O (Revolutionary Development Cadre, Census Grievance, Provincial Reconnaissance) and RDC/P (Police Special Branch, Province Interrogation Centers, Unilateral Penetration Operations), the provinces would report directly to their respective ROIC, and the ROICs to Saigon. Next a Province Officer-In-Charge (POIC) was designated in each province. He could come from either the P or O side of the house. The decision was up to the ROIC. It was hard to keep track of the changes, but the biggest one was about to occur. I was summoned to Saigon by Ace Ellis who told me Lucien (Luigi) Conein had been selected by John Hart as the ROIC for III Corps, and that Robert Brothers would take over the O programs in Bien Hoa. Conein was legendary. He worked with Ho Chi Minh during WWII and was one of the first to parachute into Hanoi at war's end. He had once served with the French Foreign Legion and spoke fluent French. Moreover, he had extensive experience in Vietnam with the Special Studies Group in Saigon, working with such counter-insurgency notables as General Edward Landsdale of Philippine fame (nicknamed the Ugly American), Claude Fenner and Sir Robert Thompson, whose programs help counter the insurgency in Malaysia. Conein's greatest claim to fame occurred during the coup which overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem. Apparently, Big Minh used Conein as a conduit to gauge the American reaction to a change in government. President Kennedy said nothing, so the coup took place. I knew all this and was anxious to meet him. I picked him up in Saigon and we drove together to Bien Hoa. But not before he insisted on stopping off for a few quick drinks. Two hours later he said, "Call me three-fingered Luis, everyone does. See I'm missing two fingers." "How did you lose them?" I asked. "Everyone thinks they got shot off, but I really lost them changing a radiator belt, ha ha ha." He asked, "How come you're not drinking with me." I gave him my pet lie, "Because I get terrible migraine headaches and the pain is unbearable and lasts for days." "Glad I don't have that problem." He replied. We finally made it to Bien Hoa.

I showed him around, introduced him to the Province Chief (they got along fine speaking fluent French and drinking cognac,) then we drove to the PRU camp. "You're so fucking organized it hurts," he said, adding, "Nice set-up, what time do you usually arrive here each day?" "An hour after daylight for there's much to do." I replied. "Screw that," he answered, commenting, "This war will be going on for a long time, so no sense in hurrying." He then startled me, saying "John Hart wants to go out on the next PRU operation, would it be safe?" I answered, "Why don't you determine that after we go on Wednesday's PRU operation. The VC own Binh Son hamlet where we've been pressuring them for months. Understand they're back in and we plan to drive them out again." He agreed.

With all his advertised experience, I expected him to fit right in. We mustered around 200 men. I took the lead because I was familiar with the place, Luigi was in the middle, and a good man was at the end. We were all in radio contact with PRC-25s. Basically, we were repeating what was done on the previous operation into Bien Son. As I approached a known path, I told my interpreter to move 200 yard ahead, then stop and wait for me. I then began counting the men as they moved out of the rubber plantation onto the perpendicular trail. Only eighty men passed. I then called Conein and asked, "What's happening?" "We're stopped." He said. "Good. Now count the number of men in front of you." I asked. After a pause he replied, "There's nobody in front of me." "Christ!" I thought, he was the reason for the separation. I said, "I will shine my flashlight for a full second and you come to it, OK?" "Good, I see it" and another pause, followed by "Would you shine it again please?" Before flicking the light on, I had laid flat behind a fat rubber tree thinking some PRU might panic thinking it was the VC. But everything worked out and we joined the column together and moved on. We attacked out of the sun and caught the VC by surprise. We only fired at those with weapons, killing five and wounding two others. The rest

escaped. We did, however, capture some important documents, including the latest Central Office of South Vietnam Resolution. I thought Luigi was going to die in the heat. He was sweating, panting, and complaining the whole time. I couldn't wait for the operation to end.

## HOME LEAVE

After eight months in country, I was entitled to home leave. Before leaving, I briefed Bob Brothers about VC attempts to raid the camp and recommended strongly that he keep the security platoon outside the wire at night. Bob was an old SF hand and listened patiently, but didn't commit himself. For some reason, CIA officers often consider the men they replace complete idiots. Their attitude is, "Now that God is here, all will improve." I've seen it happen time and time again. I call this, "The pissing on the predecessor's grave syndrome." Although it was none of my business, both Luigi and Bob were heavy drinkers. Combined, they were an explosive mix. It worried me because I spent much time and effort in building RDC/O programs and they were beginning to gel. I left Vietnam for two weeks, not knowing what fate awaited me upon return. I spent time with my Mom and Dad who had worried every minute I was away. I played down the horror stories about VC atrocities, saying they were greatly exaggerated and not that bad. It didn't do any good; they could sense I was trying to calm them down. Nevertheless, I needed the rest and was able to gain a few pounds from my mother's great cooking. After ten days, I felt edgy and ready to return. Besides, I kept thinking about Ngoc and couldn't wait to see her again.

## TRANSITION TO I CORPS



called me in and said I would be headed for Danang as the Regional RDC/O staff officer. He initially had me slated for Kontum, but Jack Horgan, the ROIC, asked for me personally. Jack and I played golf together in Miami and was a good friend.

I climbed aboard an Air America helicopter on 15 November loaded with needed supplies for a CIA liaison officer with the 7th Cavalry (Air Mobile) brigade operating in the Ira Dang Valley. It would be called "The Valley of Death." But that was nonsense. The valley itself where we touched down was peaceful. It was in the hills surrounding the valley where death lingered. Fierce fighting was then taking place high on the southern hillside. Puffs after puff of black smoke marred the beautifully green landscape as Phantom jets peppered enemy positions. Every now and then napalm cut a fiery swath through the trees as if a giant dragon hissed flames and destruction. As I was watching the air strikes, a young man in his mid-twenties walked up and introduced himself. "I'm Pete Peterson with the company, and am sure happy to see you guys." He then filled me in on the grim situation. An American battalion ran into a buzz saw. It was the type nightmare we all feared, venturing into the unknown and being surprised by vastly superior, experienced NVA regulars (in this case a VC Regiment, roughly 5,000 men) equipped with AK-47s, RPG's, heavy machine guns and 82mm mortars. Without reliable intelligence, it was easy for units to get sucked into a bloody, inescapable enemy trap. Before battalion commander knew what was happening, his lead platoon was cut off, then the company, then the battalion. The place was swarming with well concealed NVA. But this would not be the Little Big Horn. The brave American soldiers fought like tigers under sensational leadership. They survived thanks to tremendous air and artillery support, steady streams of helicopters running a gauntlet of fire to resupply men, rescue the many wounded and evacuate the dead.

As I bid Pete farewell, little did I realize months later he would be killed in Laos. He was on the way to a remote site when a single bullet passed through the aircraft's windshield, striking him squarely between the eyes. He died instantly.

My thoughts were on Ira Dang as Jack filled me in on my new job. The man was extraordinarily direct and intelligent. This former military intelligence non-commissioned officer worked his way through Harvard after WWII before joining the Agency.



JACK HORGAN AND MYSELF-1966

He was creative having pioneered the ROIC concept and later the Phoenix program. Vietnam was Jack's element. He had a solid relationship with General Lewis Walt, the III Marine Amphibious Force Commander in I Corps as well as the Vietnamese I Corps Commander, General Lam and National Police Chief, Vo Lung. Most of Jack's staff was old Miami hands, including his deputy, Bob Wall, and the Regional RDC/P officer, Rocky Rothwell. Bob Wall, a former Army officer, was perfect for the job. Jack could see our major responsibility would be to support the Marines in I Corps. Unquestionably, Marines are the finest fighting force in the world. I can think of no word to describe their bravery, valor and heroism throughout the Corp's history. And in I Corps we had the best. In reality, we were an intelligence adjunct to III MAF, reporting directly to the Commanding General. Accordingly, we attended every morning staff meeting and coordinated all our efforts with their staff. It helped to have Jack represent CIA in this environment. He was knowledgeable, articulate, respected, and trusted because he went out of his way to cooperate. Bob, his Deputy, had field experience in Quang Ngai where he took over RDC/O from the legendary former Marine Raider and Bay of Pigs veteran, Rip Robertson. In short, I was elated with my assignment. I was among friends, there was much to accomplish, and our entire staff was highly competent, dedicated, and focused on supporting the war effort.

#### OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT I CORPS OCT 1966

The I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ) was a nasty place. Large enemy formations roamed throughout the western 5,000-foot-high mountain range, considered Southeast Asia's most forbidding tropical terrain. Overcast and dense clouds hung above triple canopied jungle, masking a network complex of enemy roads, trails and foot paths leading eastward. Eventually,

they funneled into valleys which pointed to the heavily populated coastal plain. In some respects it reminded me of the Blue Ridge Mountains in western Virginia where Lee's entire Confederate army could hide and strike Union forces at will, anywhere, anytime. Several Special Forces border Civilian Irregular Defense Groups surveillance camps had been constructed over the previous few years to serve as forts manned by a hodge-podge of mercenaries, Montagnards, Nungs, criminals and soldiers trained for combat by brave SF twelve-man A teams. They guarded such strategic approaches as Khe Sanh Valley in Quang Tri, A Loui, Ta Bat and A-Shau valleys in Thua Thien, Happy Valley SW of DaNang City, and Kham Duc in western Quang Tin near Laos. These camps became easy pickings for vastly superior enemy forces. By the end of 1967, the only remaining strongholds included Lang Vei, Khe Sanh, and Con Tien in Quang Tri and Kham Duc in Quang Tin. The enemy in these areas was mostly North Vietnamese regulars, equipped with AK-47s, RPG anti-tank rockets, and RPK machine guns, a far cry from the Chicoms 53s and Mausers we were up against in III Corps. When I arrived, the 324 B Division (AKA 620 Div) and 803 and 812 NVA Regiments were operating in Quang Tri, the 95th NVA Regiment in Thua Thien, the 803rd and 812th NVA 324 B Division in Quang Tin and the 1st VC Regiment, 409th NVA Battalion and the 3rd NVA Div 18th, 22nd NVA Regiment and 2nd VC Regiment in Quang Ngai. Combined, they represented a genuine challenge for the roughly 70,000 Marines in I Corps. And more NVA were coming. Moreover, sizable enemy VC Local and Main force guerrilla units and armed infrastructure cadre were spread throughout populated areas. To counter the threat, General Walt settled on a three-pronged "balanced strategy," calling for search and destroy operations against NVA and VC Main Force units, counter-guerrilla operations against the VC, and pacification. Key to his strategy, besides our RDC program, was the formation of Combined Actions Program (CAPs) where a few Marines would live, fight and sometimes die alongside the village PF. General Walt went out on a limb in supporting CAP, since General Westmoreland in Saigon was opposed to the idea. (The best book written on CAPs is *The Village*, written by my skin-diving buddy and close friend, Francis J. West (Bing)) Generally, the 3rd Marine Division fought big enemy formations in the north while, the 1st Marine Division operated throughout southern I Corps. For example, at the time Task Force X-ray (approximately 800 men) bounced around Quang Ngai like a lethal bowling ball. Moreover, all Marine units were supported by the very able 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) stationed at Danang East.

## REGIONAL RDC/O OPERATIONS

My role in I Corps was to oversee the management of operations I had run in III Corps. I Corps had the largest number of RD teams in country and province PRU programs were equally impressive. Security hinged on the number of RD teams, RF/PF, and Marines in a given area and the sun's position. Day and night security was as the different as white and black. Throughout the night in I Corps, except for the cities of Danang and Hue and province capitals, the GVN controlled about two-thousand meters around each district compound or fortified position. The remaining area either fell under VC control or was threatened. This meant all RD teams risked being wiped out by a superior enemy with little chance of support. It soon became clear RD was becoming a very dangerous occupation. As bureaucrats in Saigon and Washington applied the systems analyst's approach to pacification progress, the Agency was swamped in reporting requirements. Every province submitted weekly, monthly and semi-annual reports which had to be consolidated by the ROIC. If someone farted, Saigon wanted to know. One page reports became two, then three and five with no end to the madness. Geniuses in Washington introduced such measurements of effectiveness as the Allan Grading System, later evolving into the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES.) Moreover, we were asked to send cables on significant PRU operations to show Washington how great we were doing. Since we ran thousands of small PRU



operations in I Corps, I spent far too much time glued to my typewriter cranking out hundreds of after-action reports. I sent one once to Saigon describing an incident where the VC cut the eyes out of a Government sympathizer. Saigon's reply was, "Don't send us any more of those horror stories."

As our programs grew, so did our need for case officers. Jack addressed the problem initially by asking General Walt for an experienced man to help our RDC/O officer, Tom Harlen, in Quang Tri with the PRU program. He sent us Sergeant Whitlock, a truly outstanding Marine. He did wonders to the program and PRU results became magnificent. Similar to what I did in Bien Hoa, he built a camp for 300 men, turning the place into a fortress. The perimeter was ringed by six rows of barged wire and over 400 claymore mines. He accompanied his PRU on operations throughout the province. His performance was so impressive, Jack asked for another Marine to help out in Thua Thien. Again, the great General responded by sending us Sergeant Below, another outstanding warrior. He had a baby face, but was deceptively fearless and heroic. Sort of like Audie Murphy. Many of his operational after action reports were incredible. Before long, Jack would approach the General for even more assistance.

About this time, VC activity in Quang Tri city heated up considerably. Our officer there, Tom Harlen (Alias) began to lose it. This young man's hair turned completely grey within a few weeks. One night he called on the single side band at 2 am. "NVA battalions approaching the capital from three directions, request immediate evacuation." I answered. "No can do until daylight, but will try and get some artillery or air support. Hang in there. " I immediately called the III MAF Tactical Operations Center (TOC,) and asked for an update on Quang Tri city. Imagine my embarrassment when the answer came back, "All is Quiet." It became obvious, the guy had to go. Jack came up with a brilliant idea. He suggested Bob Brewer as a replacement. Surprisingly, Saigon was more than happy to agree. Apparently, Brewer hated staff work and became belligerent, he simply wanted to go to the field where he belonged. What a find. He was in a class by himself; an original officer from the Band of Brothers Easy Company, 506th Regiment, 101st airborne division, which parachuted behind enemy lines in France during the Normandy invasion, extensive counter-insurgency experience in the Philippines, and behind the lines operations in Korea, (Much more will be said of this Agency hero in later chapters.) We couldn't have asked for more.

## SAIGON MEETINGS

Every month a ROIC meeting was held in Saigon and Jack usually invited me to attend. I enjoyed the experience, found them highly educational and particularly amusing.. Each ROIC acted as though he were a War Lord sitting at the round table. The four included Kinloch Bull, IV Corps, Dean Almy II Corps, Lucien Conein III Corps and Jack I Corps. Each presented a security assessment, situation report and overview of Agency programs, problems, plans and operations. In my judgment, each could have been talking about another planet. Other than the killing, what was taking place in IV Corps was totally different than what we were experiencing in I Corps. The same holds true for the other Corps areas as well. We also listened to briefings by Saigon staff officers. Some suggestions were absolutely ridiculous. For example, one senior officer stated, "I

see no reason why we can't run audio surveillance operations in a hamlet?" He couldn't, but I could have given him hundreds of reasons why it was impossible. Obviously, the man had never visited a rural Vietnamese hamlet.

During my November visit, I learned Conein was in trouble. He had a little too much to drink one night at the Duc Hotel (an Agency constructed apartment building) and began dropping flower pots off the roof. John Hart hit the ceiling and exiled him to Da Lat in II Corps. Bob Wall was to become his designated replacement. I also discovered the VC hit my old PRU camp. My warnings to Bob Brothers fell on deaf ears. No sooner had I left when he pulled the security detail inside the wire. Shortly thereafter, the VC detonated four satellite antenna sized command detonated claymore mines, spreading ball bearings all over the compound. Fortunately, they hit at 3am when most PRU were sleeping in their cots below ground level. There were only six casualties.

## LIFE IN DANANG

Living condition in Danang were splendid. I was offered a small two bedroom bungalow near the beach inside the harbor. Six Nungs guarded the bungalow and a Vietnamese maid did the cooking. Although the hours were long, life was comfortable. On visits to Saigon, I tried desperately to convince Ngoc to come to Danang. Little did I know her uncle lived nearby. When I showed her a photo of my new place, she agreed to visit. I arranged transportation the following trip and we flew together on a US Military C-123. After bouncing around for four hours in terrible weather we landed, only to discover we were back in Saigon. This was bad news, for she was air sick and probably would never board another flight. Fortunately, she climbed aboard an Air-America flight the following morning. A few nights later, Bob Wall came over the house on some urgent business. When he saw Ngoc, I got the evil eye. He didn't say anything, but I knew he didn't approve. I could understand his viewpoint. When American soldiers are risking their lives in combat, we all felt guilty taking time off for recreation. Nevertheless, Sunday afternoon was free time unless there was a crisis.

It didn't take me long to go free diving off Monkey Mountain. Visibility was good there and I found some nice lobsters. There were also deadly sea snakes. I had never seen one before until a six-footer bumped into my face mask, then went slithering past my neck. "Ugh." Another time I was rounding a rock when a grenade exploded 20 meters away. I could see a million air bubbles and felt the shock wave. I found out the hard way that Vietnamese soldiers fish this way. One time we flew to Cuu Lao Re Island off Quang Ngai to look over the place as a possible holding area for captured VC. I took along my dive gear and a Hawaiian sling. The reef was crystal clear, but no fish. The island was picturesque and delightful. I felt it would be a shame to turn this lovely place into a prison camp. We never did.



BEACH AT CU LAO RE ISLAND

Danang itself was interesting. It had everything. Good security, excellent markets, many stores, all type of seafood, splendid restaurants, small movie house, taxis and wonderful beaches. In many respects it was nicer than Vung Tau. Our office was at 9 Gia Long Street which we rented from retired ARVN major, Nguyen Van Lien. We also leased the home next door where Jack lived, as well as several others nearby. They were all guarded by our paid Nungs.

Although Bob was a prude, Jack had a rotating antenna. He spotted this English volunteer nurse, Phyllis, and before long the two dated. (Years later, Phyllis and Jack were married and raised three children, including twin boys.) So Danang had it good points.

#### VC INFRASTRUCTURE (VCI)

Most Americans, including me, found it hard to understand the Communist Insurgent Infrastructure. We could comprehend guerrillas, for they were the ones in black pajamas shooting at us. Farmer by day, guerrilla by night, we thought. How wrong we were. Nowhere in my wildest imagination was I prepared for the degree of sophistication Communist organizations applied in implementing their subversive plan. They developed a system, much like cancer,

whereby the South Vietnamese population would consume themselves. By reading countless captured documents and prisoner debriefings, the fog began to clear. We were up against a giant, shadow terrorist establishment, as a political alternative to what they termed "the illegitimate South Vietnamese Government." Much as Osama Bin Laden looks upon his cause and terror tactics as a struggle to oust non-believers. Only the VCI were far more advanced.

The basic VCI organizational structure was the Party Committee headed by a Chairman. Under him came a Current Affairs Committee (CAC,) composed of subordinate Section Chiefs (usually Communist Party (CP) members) as well as the Chairman himself. The committee would plan and oversee day-to-day operations. Sections included; Security (assigned alias's, studied biographic records, ran counterintelligence operations, provided safe-houses for spies etc.,) Communications/Liaison (delivered messages, maintained contact with superior and subordinate organizations,) Military Proselyting (recruit spies within the SVN military and police,) Military Affairs (recruit and train guerrillas, plan and execute raids, assassinations, and other CAC approved terrorist activities,) Civilian Affairs (organize population into National Front Associations, including workers, youth, women, elders, farmers, etc.) Propaganda (leaflets, broadcasts, etc.,) Logistics, and others.

The Communists attempted to create such a Party Committee structure in every hamlet, village, district, city, province, region, including the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN.) Reports flowed up and down. For example, a Village Security Section Chief would report to his CAC as well as the District Security Section Chief, and so forth. You can imagine the mass amount of paper work involved. Moreover, every individual reported in alias

Armed Agitation/Propaganda Teams paved the way for Party Committee creation. Imagine, if you will, a North Vietnamese war room with pins on every South Vietnamese village. As a nucleus, thousands of southern born Viet Minh were trained by the northern Communists on how to move into a southern village and gain political control. Starting in the late 50s, these armed men infiltrated in four-man teams, returning to their home villages. At night, the teams would enter the hamlet with great fanfare, ringing bells, sounding bull horns, and firing weapons into the air. Villagers were intimidated in listening to Communist propaganda for hours on end. Elders eagerly attended, because they heard of many stories where resistors were singled out as Government spies and executed. We knew they were false, since we had a hand in running all informants. The teams stressed that every villager had a patriotic duty to rid the country of foreigners and their South Vietnamese puppets. Every individual who joined the movement was made to feel important and given an impressive role to play in the local Party Committee organizational structure. For example, a poor rice farmer, who hardly anyone noticed before, would suddenly receive recognition and an important job to fill. Hence, many joined. The Agitation/Propaganda (Ag/Prop) teams also had considerable success recruiting village youth. Most young villagers lived a boring life. They were easy pickings. All the VC had to do was wave a weapon in front of these wide-eyed and naive kids, promise them adventure and excitement, and they were ready to join the guerrillas. Their parents weren't about to intervene. In short, most villagers had little choice. They either had to act cooperative or risk being killed.

Once a villager was caught in the Communist web, they were subjected to incredible control measures. Besides Party Committee Control, every individual became part of a three-

man-cell. These cells generally consisted of a Communist Party member, an Associate Party member, and an aspiring Party member. Lower cells reported to more senior cells on loyalty, performance, and overall behavior. They would also engage in confessionals, called criticism/self-criticism sessions. Here the individual would table his shortcomings and discuss ways to improve. Fanatical dedication was required for Party acceptance. Cells were also circulated propaganda. The senior Party member would receive a news letter concerning a major world event. There would be no discussion no matter how much the story was distorted. In essence, everyone was being brain-washed.

The last Communist control mechanism were Associations under the National Liberation Front. Every villager had to belong to one or more. Association Chiefs were frequently double-hatted, functioning as a Party Committee Section Chief and Association Chief. Thus, a loyal and respected Party member might be in charge of his cell, a Party Committee Section, and the Farmers Association, all requiring significant reporting to the next higher echelon.

Before major NVA units began to invade the south, the VC gained its military strength predominantly from village guerrillas, augmented by local force (circa 50 men), main force (circa 500 men), regimental (2000 men) and division (6000 men) sized units. These numbers, of course, varied dramatically depending on recruitment success, attrition, and other factors. All these forces were created by the Party Committee (PC) structure through a system called "upgrading." I will explain. Say the PC recruited a twelve-man guerilla squad was able to dominate the village PF and police. They could then recruit additional guerrillas from a broader base. Through seduction, pressure and outright abduction, village guerrillas would exceed their authorized twelve-man quota. Those in surplus (usually the most trained and experienced) would be sent to the next higher level (District) where they would be assigned to the local force. Since districts contain many villages, the local force would soon exceed their allowed strength with the overflow sent to the province main force unit. Should village guerrillas, for example, need help in overrunning a local police station, PF outpost, bridge, or RD team, the village Party Committee CAC would ask district to send their fifty-man local force. Thus, more control meant more guerrillas. More guerrillas produced stronger local and main force units, greater population control and an even larger recruitment base. Hence, the VC clandestine infrastructure was the engine which drove the insurgency. No matter how legitimate these organizations may appear to some, they deliberately targeted innocent civilians for illegal executions, assassinations, and other forms of terrorism. The losses in actual deaths amounted to one World Trade Center loss per year in a country one tenth our size. Hence, VCI members became priority GVN targets. They were viewed much the same as Hamas, Hizbolla, Al-Qaeda, Abu Sayyaf, or any other terrorist organization.

## ICEX

As Agency supported programs matured, the volume of intelligence at province became overwhelming. Some of it was tactical, but most pertained to the VCI. As one would expect, the collector seldom shared exploitable intelligence with anyone. With spies everywhere, who could be trusted? Why should you pass a hot info and let others take credit for the operation? This

could be said of the National Police, Special Branch, RDC, PRU, Military Security Service MSS, and Sector and Sub-sector G-2s. In late 1966 they were all running operations against the VCI, but there was little coordination or cooperation. Besides, delays in reaching province often rendered information totally useless. Obviously something had to be done. The answer was to design a mechanism to ensure cooperation amongst all existing South Vietnamese organizations operating against the VCI, and that this be done at district as well as province levels.

Jack Horgan and Bob Wall grabbed the bull by the horns. They decided to run a pilot program in Quang Nam's five districts, starting with Dien Ban. Visits to these districts revealed few had 1/50,000 maps of their area, a war room or any files on VCI cadre. It was shocking. Most compounds had barely enough room for the sub-sector staff and advisors. Accordingly, Jack and Bob asked General Walt for supplies to build five, A-frame type, wooden District Intelligence and Operation Coordinating Centers (DIOCCs). The centers would be manned by representatives from Agency CG, PRU, RD and special branch, along with National Police and MSS personnel. They would be run by the District Chief's S-2 and advised by an American officer. Jack explained his initiative to John Hart in Saigon and used the term Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation (ICEX) as a way to describe the concept.

Fast forward to June, 2002. Islamic extremists have illegally infiltrated the United States and are planning acts of terror. The FBI isn't coordinating with CIA. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has lost control in tracking illegal aliens and have no complete access to identified or suspect terrorists. Remarkably, INS even issued visa extensions for World Trade Center terrorists after they already committed suicide and their names were highly publicized. The Coast Guard has its own reporting channels, so does Customs, Border Patrol, and state police. What is the U.S.'s planned remedy? Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation.

Jack Horgan felt ICEX was too much of a mouthful. He began looking for a symbolic alternative. The word was passed to all I Corps POICs, and Brian Mills, the RDC/P officer in Quang Ngai suggested Phuong Hoang, Vietnamese for Phoenix, the mythical bird that emerges from ashes. He won the contest.

Hear me. Phoenix was nothing more than a coordination and exploitation program directed against terrorists and those supporting terrorists. Organizations which came under the Phoenix umbrella were already working against the VCI. The only difference involved sitting down at the table to coordinate and exploit relevant, usable intelligence. It was not some devious, nefarious, CIA plot to assassinate unarmed civilians. Those that risked their lives going after armed terrorists were not murderers. They were legitimate military, paramilitary and lawful police forces facing terrorists, spies and non-uniformed armed insurgents. Blaming Phoenix for VCI deaths is like calling the FBI murderers because armed terrorists preferred to fight rather than surrender. Left wing, anti-war activists have greatly distorted history. John Milius and Francis Coppola wrote the movie, *Apocalypse Now*. The film depicts a CIA officer as blood-thirsty, out-of-control, cut throat, insane deviant, surrounded by victim's skull. What a travesty to our many courageous officers who served unselfishly to help South Vietnam remain free. Stone's JFK movie leads one to conclude CIA assassinated President Kennedy. Every movie I've ever seen on the Vietnam War is pure fantasy. *Platoon*, *the Deer Slayer*, *The Boys from Company C*, fall into that category. I consider such movies blatant propaganda, written by anti-war activists, far left

radicals and way out liberals who like to believe all this was true. What disturbs me more, however, is their rhetoric had the effect of legitimizing terrorism. They even considered the VCI a reasonable, political alternative, totally ignoring the fact they were terrorists. Moreover, they glowed during the Tet Offensive, ignored the slaughter of over 3,000 Vietnamese massacred in Hue City, sympathized with North Vietnam when they broke the Paris Peace Accords in 1975, and when thousands of unfortunate South Vietnamese were later rounded up and thrown into concentration camps after North Vietnam invaded in 1975. I bring this out now, so the reader will see the Phoenix program as it really was instead of some distorted concoction, written by agenda driven activists who never stepped foot on Vietnam soil, yet consider themselves experts.

Phoenix began to take on a life of its own. The clandestine Vietcong infrastructure became a top priority target. As long as it existed, pacification was impossible. VC Mafia tactics were far more effective in winning over the population than any "hearts and minds" program. ICEX/Phoenix came under the microscope of the Saigon Station staff and was eventually scrutinized by the Ambassador and Robert "Blowtorch" Komer. It didn't take Komer long to seize upon Phoenix as a way to make his mark in Vietnam. He had President Johnson's ear and was therefore politically powerful. Anyone standing in his way would be run over with a bulldozer. If anyone could move the program forward it was this overbearing, arrogant, mission-driven former CIA analyst. He acted as a ramrod to implement a "rifle shot" rather than a "shot gun" approach to the VCI. As the number three man in Saigon, he vetoed various "concept" papers until a "missions and functions" paper finally appeared before him which he accepted. "Anything else," he said, "would not be understood by the military." Although Komer would be the Phoenix czar, he needed someone to actually run the program. Here he fingered CIA's Evan Parker Jr., of the Parker pen company. He couldn't have made a better choice. Evan Parker was a first generation paramilitary officer, having served with OSS Detachment 101 as a liaison officer to Merrill's Marauders and the British. He was a GS-16 at the time, considered highly intelligent, soft-spoken, well organized, enormously respected and extremely capable. He also came from my parent Special Operations Division at Headquarters and later became its Chief, an organization I would later head.

Essentially, those in Saigon institutionalized what we were already doing in I Corps. By the summer of 1967, MACV agreed to assign military intelligence officers to DIOCCs and PLOCCs throughout the country. The name change to Phoenix (except in I Corps) was still in transition; thus, all the early program guidance written by Parker's staff was circulated as ICEX memos.

All of this meant nothing to us in I Corps, except added focus and high level attention to what we were doing. Many of the papers circulated were simply upgraded versions of what we already drafted to explain ICEX to Saigon.

## PERSONNEL CHANGES

In September 1967, John Hart was medically evacuated to the States due to a detached retina. The Chief of Field Operations, Lewis Lapham, was named as his replacement. This led to Jack Horgan's assignment to Saigon as Chief of Field Operations. Harry Mustakos, a former Marine, was Jack's designated replacement. Bob Wall had already transferred to III Corps and another former Marine, Jim Smith, became Deputy ROIC. Although I hated to see Jack leave, Harry was equally capable. I took a liking to Harry immediately. He was an experienced East Asia Division officer who had a keen mind and a good sense of humor. Unlike other officers I had witnessed, he did not belittle his predecessor, but built on what Jack started. The Marines adored him. He made it a point that one of us should attend every morning III MAF staff briefing. He had direct access to General Robert Cushman (who replaced General Walt,) keeping him informed on all our activities. I can't say enough about Jim Smith. He was a senior communications officer with operations experience, but at the time that was all I knew about him. "What luck, I thought, "two experienced, level headed, dedicated, hard-driving, superb officers who really fitted in." It wasn't until the year 2002 that I found out about Jim's past. I was watching the History Channel's account of 1st Marine Raider Battalion's defense of Henderson Field, Guadalcanal. Guess who the commentator was interviewing? Jim Smith!! Apparently Jim stood alongside Congressional Medal of Honor winner, Colonel Merritt Edson, throughout the battle of Bloody Ridge where 163 U.S. Marines lost their lives. To my knowledge, Jim never talked about his WWII experiences. Most likely he felt he did nothing more than his fellow warriors and that all the true heroes died in action. Unfortunately, Jim had to leave us after a few months when his wife became seriously ill. He was replaced by Ben Fuller, a seasoned foreign intelligence veteran and equally wonderful person.

## PRU INCIDENTS

RRU programs in I Corps were sometimes highly political, especially in Quang Nam and Thua Thien. PRUs in Quang Nam were mostly recruited from members the Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) or Vietnamese Nationalist Party. This organization's history is filled with clandestine intrigue and was heavily suppressed under French rule for its part in the 1930 Yen Be mutiny. Our PRU advisor at the time (mid-1967) was, Gary Williams, a young CIA officer. Both he and the RDC/O officer, Dick Hamasaki, could not trust the PRU Commander whose loyalty was more to the Party than to the program. The obvious risk was that PRUs could be used by the VNQDD to silence their political opponents as well as operate against the VCI. In a bold and dramatic move, not coordinated with Region, Gary made plans to relieve the PRU Commander. He mustered the entire armed PRU unit and asked them to lay down their arms before making the announcement. The majority listened, but a small group could size up what was about to happen. They began talking excitedly in Vietnamese, pointed at Gary, then raised their weapons and opened fire. Fortunately, most of the bullets whizzed by as Gary zigzagged across the road to safety. Nevertheless, a round caught him in leg. The culprits were arrested by the Province Chief and the program was eventually brought under control. We had to medically evacuate Gary, and were able to replace him with a Marine sergeant assigned to us by General Cushman.

We had a similar experience in Thua Thien. The leader there was also a political hack and refused to listen to Sgt. Below, our USMC PRU advisor who was doing a fantastic job. In this



case, we tried the "divide and conquer" approach. We formed an attack unit under a new PRU commander and let the old ineffective chief stay on as a figure head. It worked for a while, but the guy was extremely clever. He wormed his way back into the POIC's graces by promising to be more aggressive. Next thing we knew he undercut our Marine advisor with the POIC's help and regained power. Jack Horgan and I were outraged. Jack called in the POIC and fired him immediately. He was replaced by Billy Melton, an elderly and experienced paramilitary officer. From then on, Thua Thien had one of the best PRU programs in country.

Bob Brewer held high hopes for his Quang Tri RD program. He introduced many ideas which had worked in the Philippines against the Hucks, including handing out flutes so the Villagers could sing patriotic songs to the music. While he was on this kick, he wasn't at all interested in expanding his small PRU force. We tried to warn him the VC/NVA was much more dangerous than Communists in the Philippines, but he turned a deaf ear. Sure enough, one night four of his RD teams were overrun and decimated by the Communists. Only a handful of cadre survived. He then became a PRU believer and wanted to recruit at least 400 men. We agreed. The PRU advisor at the time was Marine Sgt Cassaneda. He wore jump wings on his camouflage uniform which must have triggered Bob's imagination. A number of his PRUs were jump qualified, so it made sense for him to drop a six-man team at night into a coastal village to investigate reported VC in the area. As the team boarded the Porter aircraft, Sgt Cassaneda confessed to Bob that he never before jumped and only wore the badge to impress the local Vietnamese. "Too bad." Brewer said, "There's a first time for everything and you will jump with your men." And he did. They landed softly in the sand, linked up, and hid behind a dune. While scanning the area the following morning, they were spotted by a villager. Just to be on the safe side, the Sergeant moved a few clicks to a new location. Early in the afternoon, a bugle blowing NVA battalion attacked their old position. They found nothing but footprints which led to their position. Cassaneda contacted a Marine Amtrack unit near the Dong Ha River, calling for immediate help. They responded with artillery and sent an Amtrack unit to rescue them. The small recon team put up a good fight and were extracted with only one PRU wounded. Bob put Cassaneda in for a medal and arranged for him to make four more jumps so he could qualify to wear his jump wings.

Two weeks later, Brewer arranged for the team (without an advisor) to parachute into triple canopy near the Ho Chi Minh trail. Upon landing in the trees, one of the PRUs thought the ground was only a few feet below him and released. He fell sixty feet to the ground and broke a leg. Needless to say, the PRUs had their hands full dragging the injured man to a suitable landing zone in the middle of NVA Territory. They were lucky to return.

As Phoenix gained momentum, ROICs became Regional Phoenix Coordinators, answering to the Regional Deputy for Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS.) In I Corps this position was filled by Ambassador Barney Koren. Like all blossoming bureaucracies, Phoenix soon became a full time job. Harry decided on easing his workload by having two deputies; one to handle routine station operations, and the other to focus on Phoenix. Since most of the RD programs contributed to Phoenix, he double hated me as his Phoenix Deputy and RDC/O staff officer. We had been already moving full steam ahead in building DIOCCs and convincing the various Vietnamese District Chiefs to cooperate. After all, it was their program, staffed by their S-2, and the effort included tactical as well as infrastructure intelligence. Mostly, we worked with the newly assigned Phoenix advisors (mostly Military Intelligence Captains) to help construct the center and assemble maps and files on known enemy units and VCI. For me, and my newly arrived US Army assistant, Major Thompson, it meant continuous visits to all districts in northern I Corps.



#### PHOENIX FIELD VISITS

After a few field visits, it was obvious the situation was desperate in some heavily contested areas. For example, it was virtual suicide to drive alone from Hue City to Vinh Loc District, Thua Thien. The only way to get there safely was to fly by helicopter. Our visits were designed mainly to boost morale and encourage action against the VCI. In some instances I felt guilty landing a mostly empty chopper when the District Chief was denied urgent ammunition delivery for lack of Vietnamese lift. When this happened, I made sure to stay long enough for the locals to ferry critically needed supplies in our Air America bird. It wasn't long before we were greeted with open arms.

On one occasion, I felt particularly embarrassed. Harry, as Region I Phoenix Coordinator, joined us on a trip to Dien Ban District, Quang Nam Province. As usual, the District Chief unloaded upon us with his woes. Apparently the night before our visit, the VC hit the compound and killed six RF soldiers. They also announced (using loudspeakers) they would be

back the next night with reinforcements and kill everyone who didn't surrender. The defenders numbered less than 35 men and had been calling I Corps headquarters for replacements. None had arrived. All the Vietnamese helicopters were committed elsewhere.. I was about to offer a twenty-man PRU force when Harry asked, "What I want to know is what are you doing about the Viet Cong Infrastructure?" Major Tommy Thompson and I almost fell over.

#### DANANG PRU

As the Phoenix program expanded throughout I Corps, we encouraged the Danang mayor to support a special Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Center in the city. He agreed to this and we assigned some of our most experienced PRU personnel to work there. The unit soon proved itself, having uncovered and captured several terrorist cells, including their weapons and explosives. Their effectiveness was not without cost. The VC assassinated captain Binh, the center chief, when his jeep was blown apart by a satchel charge. Most of the PRUs at the center followed me to I Corps and were totally loyal. We could depend on this unit to perform operations outside of city when needed. They later performed admirably in Hue City during the Tet Offensive.



DANANG IOCC STAFF (NO PRUs IN PHOTO)  
TRAN VAN PHU, FAR LEFT, MY FORMER  
BIEN HOA RDC INTERPRETER

Talk about unrealities. Ambassador Koran asked me to brief a visiting, high level, Saigon CORDS official on the I Corps security situation. I prepared what I considered a credible presentation with notes and maps. This guy was incredible. He showed up wearing a jungle jacket, carrying a bamboo cane. No sooner had I began, when he interrupted me, "Please explain in five minutes everything going on in I Corps. Smilingly, I walked up to the wall map, drew a red circle around every district headquarters and said, "In a nutshell, the VC control everything outside of the red circle and we are trying desperately to hang on to that one kilometer sliver of real estate inside. U.S. Marines are getting shelled daily at Con Tien, Cam Lo, the Rockpile, etc. etc. NVA units are roaming the Ho Chi Minh Trail, A-Shau Valley, and the entire western mountain chain. We're secure here in Danang, Hue and Province Capitals, but only because the enemy hasn't decided to attack in full force. This could happen any day." He seemed oblivious to what I had to say and grumbled something which I never heard. .

Another time the MACV G-2, General McChristian, visited Quang Tri and asked for a briefing on RD. Former Green Beret sergeant, Jack Donnelly, was our POIC at the time. Being tough and very unpolished, he thought it better to let Harry Pugh, a former Army officer, give the presentation. (A few months before, Donnelly was driving his jeep to an RD team along with the III MAF G-5. The jeep hit a road mine and Jack was blown from the vehicle into a rice field but miraculously landed uninjured. His passenger, however, suffered a crushed leg and had to be evacuated to the States.) While Harry pointed out the location of RD team four, he was interrupted by McChristian's loud question. "When was the last time you visited team four?" After a brief pause, Harry replied, "a week ago sir." The general responded, "How do you expect to pacify Quang Tin by sitting on your ass in Tam Ky?" At that instant, Jack stood up and said, "Don't answer that question Harry, I will tell the general how we are pacifying Quang Tin by sitting on our ass in Tam Ky." He then commenced to read McChristian the riot act. We found out about it when Jack flew to Danang and offered to resign. He said, "It was just too much of an affront for me to sit quiet and let this idiot shoot his mouth off." We didn't let him quit and reported the incident to Saigon. The general was way out of line calling our RD advisors lazy. (After the jeep explosion, Jack visited the team by motorcycle, staying away from tire ruts. Months after the McChristian visit, his bike veered off the road and he sustained a compound fracture of both his fibula and tibia. He had to leave Vietnam and limped for the remainder of his life.)

A month before the Vietnamese Presidential elections in September 1967, our CIA POIC in Quang Ngai reported newly arrived VC defected from camp where American and Vietnamese prisoners were being held. We immediately flew over the area and photographed the site he had identified on a 1/50,000 map. His description of terrain features, trails, etc. all checked out. We developed the film, turned some upside down, and mixed in several from other locations. Methodically, he went through our photographs separating those he could not identify and turning over the ones we had flipped. By early afternoon, I presented the complete package to Colonel Ken Haughton, III MAF G-2. He agreed we should conduct a rescue operation immediately, as it is standard VC procedure to move once one of their men is missing. However, US rescue operations require authorization from the Joint Personnel Recover Center (JPRC) in Saigon and had to first have General Cushman's blessings. Haughton argued the case and lost. General Cushman thought it might be a VC provocation to upset the coming election. The defector could not provide the names of any American prisoners, but from his description we concluded one was Special Forces Captain William Forbs Eisenbraun, captured in July 1965 when the Ba Gia SF camp was overrun. Another might have been PC Robert Garwood who reportedly was cooperating with the VC in return for preferential treatment. But we would never know for sure.

By late 1967, the war in and around the populated areas of I Corps consisted mainly of small-unit skirmishes. Since the terrain dictated squad sized patrols or ambushes, more than fifty percent of Marine casualties were caused by enemy mines and booby traps, which the Marines named "surprise firing devices". VC mines were ingenious. Many were made out of discarded tin cans, filled with explosives obtained from dud artillery rounds and bombs. Enemy guerrillas in black pajamas blended in with the local population or hid in the dense foliage. Marines were up against an often unseen enemy in an unfamiliar environment. For the most part, this activity took place in the countryside, leaving those living in cities, province and district capitals with a false sense of security. Dark clouds began to appear as intelligence confirmed the arrival of the NVA 31st Regiment (Red River Regiment) into Dai Loc District near Danang. Also the 2nd NVA Division moved into Que Son Valley, keeping the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry's 3rd Brigade busy in combat. Reports also disclosed the NVA 368B Artillery Regiment with its four independent battalions and five independent companies were now armed with 122mm and 140 rockets were camped in "Happy Valley," about 17 miles southwest of Danang. Quang Nam's main force VC battalions (R-20 & R-25) moved into Go Noi Island near the Quang Tin border. In short, it appeared as though the enemy's pistol was cocked and something bad was about to happen.

About this time an unauthenticated source came in with a bombshell. It was a detailed Communist plan to capture Danang and destroy the Marine Base at Danang East. The whole plot seemed illusionary. The plan called for VC frogman to blow the bridges connecting Danang City to III MAF Headquarters. The enemy would stage from several identified Quang Nam villages. Vietnamese I Corps Headquarters would be assaulted by combined NVA and Main force units, while another major VC force secured the Danang airfield before overrunning the city where the VC flag would fly forever. We were highly skeptical about the whole report, but passed it to the Marines anyway. We could not disseminate the information as a formal CIA intelligence report until we found out how and where our guy obtained the plan. Rather than ignoring the report completely, General Cushman took precautionary steps to counter these possible enemy initiatives. He doubled the guards at the bridge, ordering them to fire at drifting debris or drop grenades on any suspicious underwater movement. He assigned additional CAP units to the reported enemy staging areas and placed his forces on high alert.. He also kept several C-47 spooky gunships on standby and activated additional force reconnaissance patrols. Our CIA staff tried everything to make this agent come clean on where he was getting this information. It was like talking to a rock. The man insisted he was telling the truth.

During the month, two RAND Corporation analysts visited our office . One was Francis (Bing) West (later close friend and author of The Village) and the other Charlie Benoit, who was fluent in Vietnamese. They were most interested in visiting Dien Ban District to investigate South Vietnamese food sales to the VC. I was not there during closed door session they had with our ROIC, Harry Mustakos. I was busy planning to place a check point at a bridge choke point leading to a village near the district headquarters. Our unauthenticated source said he was receiving his intelligence from the Dien Ban District Party Committee Chairman who lived legally in a nearby village. We unfolded a 1/50,000 map for him to show the exact route he would take and to describe the meeting site as well as the surrounding features. He claimed the next scheduled meeting would on Wednesday at 1400. Furthermore, he planned to ride there on his Honda motorcycle. Early that day, I took a squad of Danang PRUs to the bridge where we photographed and recorded the names of everyone passing in either direction. While there, the two RAND visitors who met earlier with Harry approached in a jeep. I couldn't believe it. The road had reputation for frequent ambushes and was considered one of dangerous in I Corps. Since they insisted to continue, I offered them half of my armed PRU force to act as body guards. With great relief, Charlie and Bing returned that evening unscathed and reported that villagers were indeed making repetitious trips to the market, doubling their money each time they sold rice to the VC. As for my operation, our agent never crossed the bridge that day. He continued to lie about it at our next meeting. Surprisingly, most of the intelligence he passed turned out later to be true. He simply refused to tell us his actual source.

Before Christmas, I qualified for an R&R visit to Bangkok. . My flight was packed with GIs who needed the break a lot more than I did. Nevertheless, I took advantage of the opportunity to

sightsee, skin-dive and shop. The first thing I did was to take a taxi to lovely Patia Beach where a local boat owner took me to an idyllic island five miles offshore. The water was crystal clear but I saw mostly small aquarium size fish around the reef. I did manage to spear four small groupers with my Hawaiian sling for boat operator who wanted them to feed his family.. Little did I know such a meager catch would draw a big crowd on our return to the beach? I left me with the impression I had shot the reef's last grouper. I returned to the big city the next day where I visited a massive Buddhist temple trimmed in bright gold, wandered downtown shopping to by a new telephoto lens for my 35mm Pentax camera.

Like all such trips, it was too short, but enough to rejuvenate the batteries needed to continue working long hours, seven days a we

During the first week in January, my official request to marry a Vietnamese national was approved by headquarters. This was exceptional, since any CIA officer planning such a move had to submit his or her resignation along with such request. I felt confident it would come through after discussing the matter with Evan Parker, my SOG home base chief. When I mentioned my intent to him, he said, "Do you have a photo of her?" I then reached into my wallet and produced a colored picture of Ngoc. After looking at it quickly, he stated, "I would marry her too." First the marriage had to be conducted and recorded by Vietnamese officials, before it could be recognized and documented at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. This resulted in two separate ceremonies, both of which excluded any chance for a decent honeymoon. Moreover, had Ngoc left Vietnam on any visit Agency regulation for separated assignments compelled her to remain out of country. This applied to all CIA officers assigned there. Hence, to my knowledge I was the only case officer allowed to live with his wife during the war.

Throughout the month, the enemy made a concerted effort to cut Highway 9 and stop boat traffic along the Cua Viet River. South of the DMZ, the interlocking artillery bases at Con Thien, Camp Carroll, The Rockpile, Hill 881 and Khe Sanh came under increasing enemy attack. Soon these bases were cut off and could only be supplied only by air. Khe Sanh village also came under heavy enemy pressure. CIA officer Bob Brewer, Quang Tri's Province Officer in Charge, held a war counsel with ARVN 1<sup>st</sup> Division commander Major General Ngo Quang and his staff. General Quang agreed to send one of his best RF companies as reinforcements. Nine UH-1E helicopters from Danang would lift the 256 RF Company from Quang Tri City at 1700 on January 21.

Lt. Col Joseph Seymore, Brewer's Sector Advisor, volunteered to lead the mission because he was thoroughly familiar with the plan and it was getting too late to brief the pilots for an extended period of time. The relief force had planned to assault a designated LZ which was to be created by fixed wing bombers moments before insertion. The strike would be controlled by an Army L-19 observation plane. Unfortunately, a separate Marine Corps FAC was circling the area at the time and could not be contacted by radio. Thus, while the helicopters were hovering, the Army FAC was trying to get the other out of the way so the bomb strike could go forward. Apparently, Semore thought the strike had been canceled. He ordered the slicks to land the RF troops at the Old French Fort which, unknowingly, had become an NVA base camp. The enemy was well concealed and disciplined. They held fire until the assault helicopter company touched down. They then opened fire and with machine guns and B-40 rockets. Semore's chopper was struck while in the air and crashed, rolling upside down as it burned. The other helicopters managed to clear the area despite heavy damage. Two men on the ground tried to free Semore

from the skids, but he was already dead. Of the six men left behind, three died in action and three made it out alive to Ta Cong village but were wounded. Later in April 1968 Bob Brewer recovered Lt.Col Semore's remains at the Old French Fort.

On January 23, our Marine PRU advisor in Quang Nam, Sgt. William Polchow, was killed in action. Regrettably, I never had the opportunity to meet or brief him since he came through our regional office while I was in Bangkok. I normally made it a point of instructing new advisors to always bring a few elders along when departing VC controlled villages. Otherwise, there was a good chance they would be taken under fire. Such was the case with Sgt. Polchow. After sweeping an island hamlet off Hoi An, PRUs were boarding sampans when they came under fire. One round ricocheted off the water and sliced through Polchow's upper leg. The round severed a major artery and he bled to death before the medical evacuation helicopter could reach the hospital. His loss was mourned by all, particularly the lovely girl he had planned to marry, Pat Walsh, a civilian nurse volunteer at the Danang hospital. She later wrote the properly titled book, *Forever Sad the Hearts*, and directed the documentary, *The Other Angels*, the American Library Association's Editor's Choice award winner. Polchow is listed on the Vietnam War Memorial at 35 E line 18. His name is also inscribed aboard the Stardust Spacecraft. No words will ever describe the tragic loss of Polchow and other brave men like him.

While enemy activity in northern Quang Tri was heating up, elsewhere in I Corps, other than occasional small unit skirmishes, the security situation seemed calm. Marine operational sweeps hardly contacted resistance and VC incidents in the provinces were at an all time low. We received word from Saigon that a 24-hour truce was agreed upon over Christmas and a slightly longer, 36 hours, respite for the New Year's celebration. The enemy took advantage of the cease-fires and the halt in U.S. air operations, by moving supplies to their forward units.

Capitalizing on the holiday spirit, another cease fire was agreed to for Vietnamese Tet. Most of us took advantage of this expected peaceful period by taking leave. I eagerly made plans to visit Hue City with my wife, Ngoc. While she celebrated the holiday with close relatives, I would take photographs of the Tombs area and Imperial City with my new telephoto lens.

However, a few days before the month's end we received disturbing news. An alert Marine guard posted near the main Bridge connecting Da Nang to the Tien-sha Peninsula spotted two swimmers approaching the span. They fired, killing one enemy frogman while another surrendered. Shortly afterwards a Marine platoon positioned near the Route 1 Bridge crossing the Cu De River north of Da Nang saw another two enemy on a raft. Again, the Marines killed the VC. Two and a half hours later, on the other side of the main Da Nang Bridge, Armed Forces police noticed two VC in the water. The MPs shot and killed one swimmer and took the other prisoner. These were daring enemy attempts to isolate Marine Headquarters from the mainland. Most importantly, these incidents validated the most radical aspect of enemy plans reported previously by our unauthenticated agent. Hence, with the report's creditability now established III MAF ordered CAP teams, and additional Marine reinforcements to all the mentioned areas. Interestingly, the previous day a four-man Marine Force Reconnaissance Unit patrolling Elephant Valley north of Danang spotted a large NVA formation moving eastward.

Because of the cease fire, their request for artillery fire on the enemy was denied. On 28 January we began receiving creditable intelligence on pending enemy attacks in Quang Ngai, Quang Tin, and Quang Nam. Although our agent reported on a "general uprising," no one took it seriously. Communist propaganda most always overstated objectives, goals and accomplishments. There was a marked difference between what they wanted to do and what they could do. Nevertheless, each province did what they could to face their impending enemy attack. Had they asked for reinforcements or any other outside assistance, there wasn't any. All security forces were fully committed, including the U.S. Marines.

On 29 January 1968 our Police Special Branch agent in Quang Ngai city activated his emergency signal. He was instructed to tie a red rag on his bike's handlebars should he be ordered to evacuate prior to an enemy attack. A similar agent living in a rural Quang Tin village reported large NVA troops in his village preparing to attack Tam Ky City, the province capital. Our men in Hoi An also reported they expected to be attacked that night and were on a hundred percent alert.

Early morning on 29 January, I received a message from Jack Horgan, my former boss now Field Operations Chief in Saigon that he wished to meet me at the Danang airport where he expected to arrive around 10am. Since my wife and I were scheduled to depart at 1100, there seemed plenty of time to meet before we left for Hue. Jack's flight was delayed, however, so Ngoc decided to go alone. She didn't want to keep her relatives waiting at the Hue airstrip and not show up. I agreed, and planned to follow on a later flight. As fate would dictate, Jack's flight never arrived until 1800, too late for any flight to the Northern provinces. Hence, I stayed that night in Danang. And over dinner Jack filled me in on his new job and the latest from Saigon..

#### TET 1968 SOUTHERN I CORPS

I received a phone call from Harry Mustakos early the next morning. He sounded excited and told me to come to the office immediately. I soon learned that radio contact had been lost with our people in the three southern provinces. We quickly arranged for an Air America Porter aircraft to fly us these locations, starting with Quang Ngai. Both of us wore helmets and flak jackets, along with side arms, M-16 rifles, and ammo belts. When we landed outside Quang Ngai City, there was still sporadic fighting in the streets near the Province Chief's compound. The Agency house nearby was damaged but in relatively good shape. An RPG round blew a large hole in the bullet peppered front wall. It also looked as though a mortar round exploded on the roof, shattering every antenna. Amazingly, we soon learned all of our officers suffered no injury. Moreover, none asked to leave. These men obviously had stiff backbones, especially Reed Harrison, their chief. Although he was only a GS-12 grade officer, we considered his judgment and leadership abilities to be far superior to other team members more senior. Hence, he was put in charge and no one ever complained. (He would later leave the Agency to become a successful and wealthy lawyer.) The VC suffered severe casualties throughout the province, especially in their attack against Nghi Han District Headquarters. Facing a massed enemy frontal assault, defenders lowered their 105 artillery guns to zero elevation and fired canister rounds at the massed troops, tearing them apart with devastating carnage. The attacker's motivation was near spiritual. One slowly dying enemy soldier on the perimeter barbed wire fence spent his last minutes on Earth tearing apart his assault rifle.



After accounting for all our officers, we drove back to the airfield and flew to Tam Ky City, Quang Tin Province. We managed to make radio contact with one of our officers who met us at the dirt strip. As our jeep rounded the field's northeastern corner, I noticed a U.S. Marine in a prone position taking cover in a revetment. We could hear enemy fire coming from the eastern tree line which was way too far away for me to worry about. Security forces were still clearing the Province Chief's compound when we arrived at the two-story CIA house across the street. Other than roof damage, it looked fine. A 400 by 200 rectangular PRU compound was located directly west of the house. Any enemy attack from this direction would have to go through or around this compound. During the night, enemy forces tried to make it across the open field alongside the northern perimeter. When they got halfway, the PRUs caught them in a crossfire with devastating results. Those that made it through this gauntlet tried to enter a sand-bagged bunker on the street behind the CIA house. This gave our American PRU advisor a perfect M-79 grenade shot into the open entrance way. Many attackers were killed in this bunker. Our two top officers, Jack Donnelly and Harry Pugh, had prior Special Forces experience and stayed cool through the entire attack. Their main concern was the local jail a few hundred meters away. Had the VC been able to liberate and arm the prisoners, the situation could have turned deadly serious. To counter this possibility, they positioned a 75 mm recoilless rifle on the house's rear balcony and zeroed it in on the prison's main gate. Fortunately, the enemy never made it that far.

Harry and I then drove by jeep to the MACV compound where we met with the Province Senior Advisor (PSA), LtCol. Bolty. During the attack a mortar round exploded in the ceiling above the desk where he was seated, shattering his papers and blowing most of the room apart. Remarkably, he was untouched. Bolty mentioned he and the Vietnamese Province Chief decided to preempt the VC attack by firing artillery at the reported staging areas. The firing began at 0300. A few weeks later the Colonel learned from a captive that the VC commander decided to delay his attack until 0500. This decision proved fatal. Had the enemy attack gone off as scheduled, no "Spooky" gunship would have been available for air support, being heavily engaged elsewhere at this time over Quang Ngai and Hoi An cities. In fact, the enemy attacks in each province proved to be staggered in such a manner that the lone available gunship was able to fly and support all three provinces. This Air Force Douglas AC-47 transport equipped with 7.62mm Gatlin guns and floodlights proved to be a death ray for the enemy, but a magic wand for those in southern I Corps the night of 29/30 January 1968. Enemy losses were staggering. Over 1200 VC/NVA were killed around Tam Ky alone, and enemy losses in Quang Ngai City and Hoi An City came close to this number.

As we were winding down the meeting with LtCol Bolty, an officer interrupted us saying, "A NVA regiment has been reported a few kilometers away heading toward the MACV compound." Outside, barbed wire barricades were being slid across the entrance when Harry asked, "What do you think we should do?" Without hesitation I replied, "Let's get the hell out of here right now." He agreed, so we had the barricades moved and drove out the main gate to the dirt airstrip. A short while later we arrived there with no one in sight, including the VC. We spotted our Porter aircraft coming in for a landing from the east. We boarded and instructed him to take off downwind to avoid flying over the reported enemy approach route. On the way to Hoi An, we established radio contact with our Province Officer in Charge, Bill McCabe, who assured us everyone there was safe and things were under control. Since it was getting dark, we headed directly to Danang and landed shortly after sundown. We then drove in Harry's 1965 blue four-door Ford sedan to I Corps Headquarters, parking in front of the G-2 building. The compound is

square shaped with a ten foot concrete wall perimeter. The buildings inside form a U with the main gate at the north end. The Tactical Operations Center (TOC) was located at the base of the U, or the south end, where we headed.. Our main interest, of course, was to check on the attack expected at Tam Ky. Harry and I left our helmets, flack jacket and weapons in the car and walked to the TOC. There we met the I Corps G-2 (Intelligence) advisor, Col, Hand to see what reports he was receiving from Quang Tin. Apparently, all was quiet. Nevertheless, they still expected to be attacked soon. Around 0330 a barrage of RPG 7 rockets blew several holes though the back wall filling the room with dust and thick smoke. The lights went out so we searched in the dark looking for casualties, but there were none. The only two ARVN officers on duty at the time were well away from the explosions. By this time all hell had broken loose. The enemy was attacking I Corps Headquarters from the rear, less than 100 meters from where we were standing. Not wanting to go down without a fight, I asked Colonel Hand for a weapon. All he could produce, which I gladly accepted, was an M-16 and one magazine. I opened the door to the courtyard and was amazed to see everyone, except a lone US Marine, facing in the wrong direction. He was peaking around the corner eyeing the back wall where most of the incoming was coming from. He cradled an M-60 machine gun attached to a lengthy ammo belt draped over his shoulder. Two black ammunition boxes stood at his feet. I walked up to him, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Marine, I'm your backup. Let's kill as many as we can." He smiled, and we waited.

As my night vision improved, so did my assessment of the security situation. The roar of 50 cal. Machine gun fire from several ARVN M-113 personnel carriers inside the compound was reassuring. So were many fox holes, six feet apart, lining the inner wall. It would take a sizable force to storm this headquarters, I thought. Based on the amount of incoming fire, I felt this would never happen on this night.

Later on we learned from captured prisoners that the VC R-20th and V-25th Battalions had crossed the Cau Do River and penetrated the Hoa Vang village complex. With covering fire provided by 81mm and 82mm mortars, a reinforced company reached the I Corps headquarters compound. They attacked from two directions, from the south and the east, and paid a heavy price. Only five members of the original two attacking battalions survived uninjured.

By 0430 the shooting was over. A half hour later I suggested to Harry we climb into our vehicle and drive back to the office. He was a little concerned some edgy check point guard might decide to shoot at us, but agreed anyhow. An ARVN soldier opened the gate and let us out. I could tell from the look on his face that he thought we were crazy. Nevertheless, we made our way back home without difficulty, passing through check points about every few blocks. When we reached the office, we called our Quang Tin POIC for an update. All was still quiet there. However, a Marine from the III MAF TOC called by phone saying significant VC/NVA activity was currently taking place in Hue City and Quang Tri City. We tried to calling our men by single sideband radio but couldn't reach them. At 0800, another call came in from III MAF with shocking news that Hue City had been overrun.