

The *Tet* Offensive 1968

Editor's Note: This article is the first half of "Part V: The Hot War, 1968, The Tet Offensive" of a monograph about the role of Field Artillery in Vietnam (Parts I through VII) published in a series of 14 articles by General Ott in the Field Artillery Journal from January-February 1975 through the March-April 1977 editions. The entire series is online at sill-www.army.mil/famag.

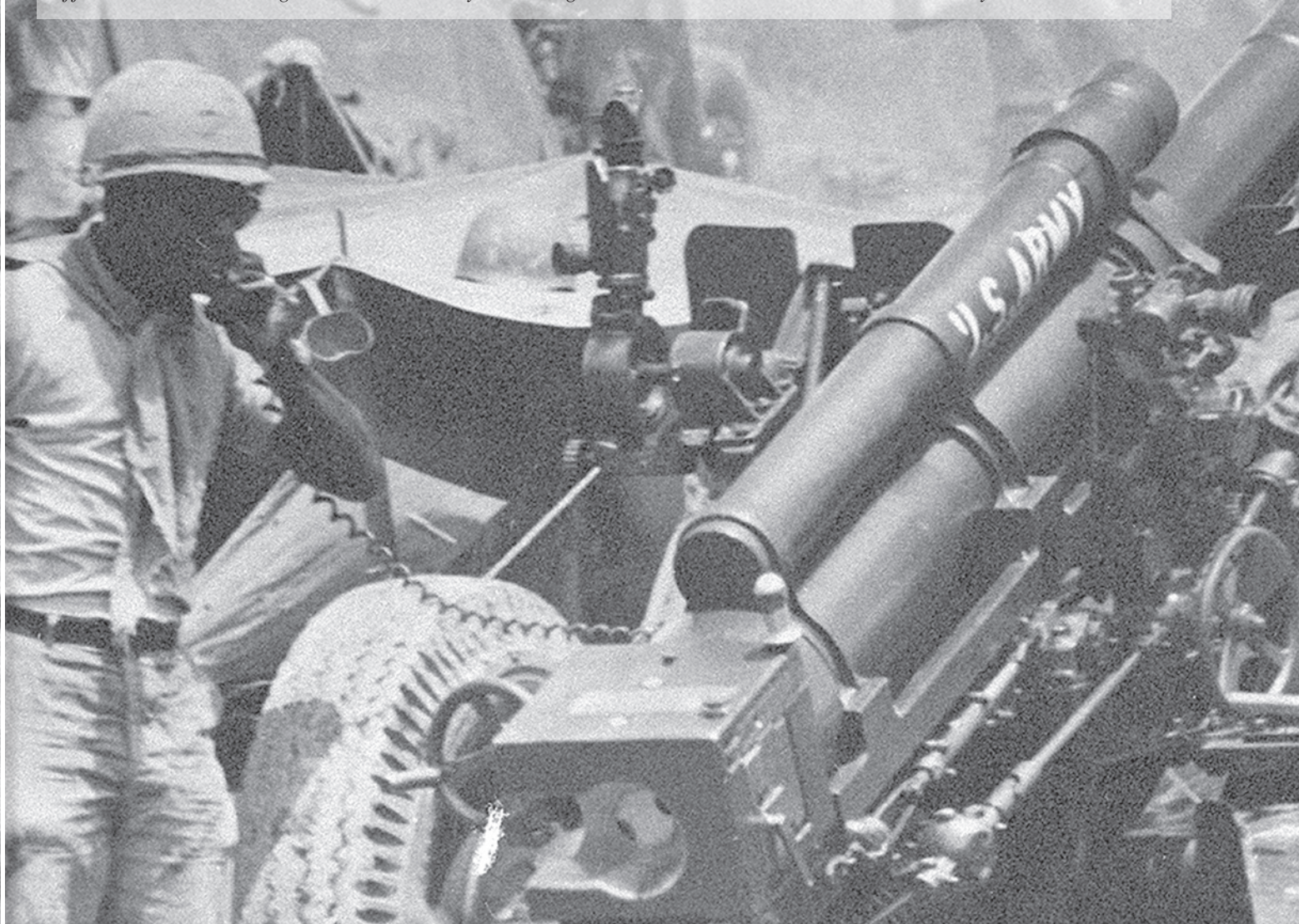
With a few alterations to increase clarity and the addition of a map, this article is a reprint of the original published in the January-February 1976 edition. It was selected for reprint because of its discussion of the value-effect of artillery in the Tet offensive and techniques used in urban operations, including clearance of fires. It discusses challenges Field Artillerymen faced in 1968 that might provide insights for Field Artillerymen in 2006 in counterinsurgency operations.

By Major General David E. Ott, Commandant of the Field Artillery School, 1973-1976

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General Ott's Introduction to the Series. This monograph illuminates some of the more important activities—with attendant problems, shortcomings and achievements—of the US Army Field Artillery in Vietnam. The wide variations in terrain, supported forces, density of cannons, friendly population and enemy activity that prevailed throughout South Vietnam tend to make every action and every locale singular.

Although based largely upon documents of a historical nature and organized in a generally chronological manner, this study does not purport to provide the precise details of history. Its purpose is to present an objective review of the near past in order to assure current awareness of the lessons we should have learned and to foster the positive consideration of those lessons in the formulation of appropriate operational concepts. My hope is that this monograph will give the reader an insight into the immense complexity of our operations in Vietnam. I believe it cannot help but also reflect the unsurpassed professionalism of the junior officers and NCOs of the Field Artillery and the outstanding morale and esprit de corps of the young citizen-soldiers with whom they served.



The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army in late 1967 launched several costly attacks. On 29 October, the Viet Cong attacked the South Vietnamese district capital of Loc Ninh, ran up the flag of the National Liberation Front and tried to hold the city. (See the map in Figure 1.) United States and South Vietnamese forces responded with massive air and artillery bombardments, but the enemy continued to press the attack despite heavy losses.

Similarly in early November, four North Vietnamese Army regiments fought US and South Vietnamese troops near Dak To. The US command deployed the equivalent of a full division from the heavily populated coastal lowlands to the battle area. Again, as at Loc Ninh, the enemy sustained heavy casualties.

A captured enemy document listed the objectives for the 1967 campaigns. These included encouraging units to improve the combat technique of concentrated attacks to annihilate relatively large enemy units and affecting close coordination with various battle areas throughout South Vietnam to achieve

timely unity.

The activity of late 1967 was a prelude to *Tet* 1968. A high-level prisoner later revealed that the assault on Loc Ninh had been ordered to test mass formations and inexperienced troops in preparation for the 1968 offensive.

Tet, the festival of the Asian lunar new year, usually was the occasion for a formal cease-fire. In 1968, however, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, using reserve forces and the larger supporting weapons, launched a series of massive coordinated attacks in what became known as the *Tet* offensive.

As revealed by captured enemy sources, the strategy for the offensive was based on the belief that the war would culminate in 1968 and that large-scale continuous attacks, in conjunction with a general uprising of the people, would precipitate the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam and the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, which would then be forced to accept a coalition government dominated by the National Liberation Front.

Political and military targets of the *Tet* offensive included provincial and district capitals and the government in Saigon



Figure 1: *Tet* Offensive



and its agencies, such as the Regional Development Cadres, the National Police and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. The enemy believed that, if widespread attacks were successful, the inability of the government to protect the people would become obvious and the credibility of that government would be undermined. Installations and facilities that were essential to the conduct of the war and difficult to defend became tactical targets.

In preparation for the *Tet* offensive, the enemy went to unprecedented lengths to assemble supplies and weapons and to infiltrate the cities. In Saigon, funeral processions concealed the movement of arms and ammunition. In Hue and Saigon, enemy troops in civilian dress escaped detection. In provincial centers, such as Quang Tri, Da Nang, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, Kontum City, Ban Me Thuot, My Tho, Can Tho and Ben Tre, the enemy infiltrated in strength.

The offensive began at 0015 on 30 January at Nha Trang. The same night 11 other cities in I and II Corps zones, as well as several military installations and airfields, came under attack. Enemy documents later revealed that these attacks were premature; the forces operating in these areas had not received the order for a one-day postponement of the offensive. The main

attack took place on the following night, 30-31 January, when enemy forces hit 18 cities throughout the country.

The allies cleared most of the cities within hours. However, in a few cities, particularly Saigon and Hue, the fighting continued for days.

Attack on the Hue Area. The attack on Hue commenced at 0340 on 31 January. Elements of the 800th, 802nd and 806th Battalions, 6th North Vietnamese Army Regiment, and the 804th Battalion, 4th North Vietnamese Army Regiment, initiated a rocket, mortar and ground assault on the city. Forces of the 4th Regiment soon occupied all of southern Hue except the Military Assistance Command (MAC) compound.

Meanwhile, to the north, two battalions of the 6th Regiment moved into the citadel, an old French fortress near the center of the city. By morning the flag of the National Liberation Front had been mounted on the flag pole of the citadel, and the enemy controlled all of the fortress except the South Vietnamese Army 1st Division Headquarters.

The allies acted immediately to relieve the pressure on the MAC and South Vietnamese Army compounds. While US and Vietnamese Marines, along with the 1st Division, bore down on the enemy forces to the south and within the

city itself, the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, sealed off Hue to the north and west. Each of the maneuver forces fought exceptionally well, but the actions of the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, were the most significant from a fire support aspect.

The 3rd Brigade blocking force was comprised of the 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry, and the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry. The 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 3rd Brigade, was committed to base camp defense and did not join the rest of the brigade until 19 February. On that day the 2nd Battalion, 501st Airborne, 101st Airborne Division, newly arrived from III Corps, also joined the 3rd Brigade. The 3rd Brigade direct support battalion, the 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery, established a fire support base at a South Vietnamese Army compound northwest of Hue.

On 3 February, the 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry, detected a large North Vietnamese force positioned near Que Chu, northwest of Hue. The battalion, supported by indirect artillery fire, aerial rocket artillery and helicopter gunships, attacked the well-fortified enemy position. By 5 February, the 2nd Battalion controlled the high ground in the Que Chu area overlooking the surrounding plains and, with precise artillery fire, was able virtually to stop all enemy

Riverine Artillery in Vietnam

The terrain of the Mekong Delta was a serious hindrance to fighting forces in Vietnam [including during *Tet*]. The delta is comprised of rivers and canals coupled with swamps and rice paddies. Roads and dry ground are scarce, and hamlets and villages have long since been built on what little dry ground there is. When Field Artillery shared dry ground with a hamlet, the firing unsettled the people whose support the allies were trying so hard to win.

Even when Field Artillery was positioned on dry ground, it was difficult to employ because the high water table made the ground soft. Without a firm firing base, cannons bogged down, were difficult to traverse and required constant checks for accuracy. All this lessened their responsiveness and effectiveness.

A fighting force in the delta could not rely on ground vehicles for transportation or supply. Vehicles seldom could move

the infantry close to the enemy, they were vulnerable to ambush and the scarcity of dry ground overly cramped and restricted supply operations and the activities of control headquarters and supporting Field Artillery

Even more significant than the use of helicopters in the delta was the formation of a Riverine Task Force which relied on watercraft to provide transportation, firepower and supply. The task force consisted of the 2nd Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, and the US Navy River Assault Flotilla 1.

Field Artillery support for the new Riverine Task Force was initially provided from fixed locations, but the support was less than adequate. Field Artillery needed to move and position itself to best support the ground action. This need was satisfied by the 1st Battalion, 7th Artillery, in December 1966 when the battalion first employed the LCM-6 [landing craft mechanized 6] medium-sized landing craft as a firing

platform for howitzers. The LCM could be moved to a desirable position and secured to the riverbank.

Internal modifications enabled the craft to accommodate the M101A1 howitzer, but it was not wide enough to permit the howitzer trails to be spread fully, limiting the on-carriage traverse. Other shortcomings were that the craft did not afford as stable a firing platform as was desired and excessive time was required to fire.

More successful were floating barges. The concept originated from a conference in the field between Captain John A. Beiler, Commander of Battery B, 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery, and Major Daniel P. Charlton, the Battalion Operations Officer. Their ideas prompted a series of experiments to determine the most suitable method of artillery employment with the riverine force.

The first experiment used a floating AMMI pontoon barge borrowed from the

movement.

Beginning on 9 February while the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry, maintained the blocking position, the 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry, entered the village of Bon Tri just south of Que Chu and encountered a well dug-in, regimental-sized enemy complex. For three days, US artillery air strikes and naval gunfire pummeled the positions.

On 12 February, the 2nd Battalion had to break contact without any substantial change in the situation. The 5th Battalion took over the assault, but it too was unable to dislodge the enemy. It remained for the 2nd Battalion again to pick up the assault on 21 February and finally secure the village.

Meanwhile the remainder of the 3rd Brigade, joined by the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, and the 2nd Battalion, 501st Airborne, had begun its move toward Hue from the northwest. On the morning of 21 February the brigade crashed into a strong enemy defensive position in the Ti Ti Woods, approximately five kilometers northwest of the city. Tube artillery, along with naval gunfire and aerial rocket artillery, enabled the brigade to breach the enemy positions.

The advance of the 3rd Brigade toward Hue necessitated close fire support coordination. Elements of the 1st Bat-

talion, 30th Artillery (155-mm), and 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery (8-inch self-propelled), had been situated at Landing Zone Nole since 20 February. From that position, these elements had been supporting the Vietnamese and Marine units in and around Hue. With the approach of the 2nd Brigade, coordination requirements became more exacting to avoid shelling refugees and friendly forces.

On 21 February, the South Vietnamese 1st Division commander requested a Field Artillery liaison party from the 1st Cavalry Division to help coordinate the fire support. The liaison party, which was dispatched the next morning, contributed to the success of the operation.

At 0730 on 24 February, US and South Vietnamese forces breached the southwest wall of the citadel and met only light resistance. An intense artillery preparation the night before had killed 161 enemies. With the citadel secured, the battle of Hue was officially over. The National Liberation Front flag, which had flown from the citadel tower since 1 February, came down.

The recapture of Hue had involved four US Army battalions, three US Marine Corps battalions and 11 South Vietnamese battalions. Ten Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army battalions had been committed in an attempt to

hold the city.

Colonel Richard M. Winfield, Jr., 1st Cavalry Division Artillery Commander, in summarizing the actions and problems of the artillery, emphasized the conventional quality of the operation and concluded with a description of clearance activities and their consequences:

“In the battle for Hue, the brigade was operating four battalions in the most conventional type of conflict that this division had ever been faced with. The brigade had its normal supporting artillery—three direct support batteries, a medium battery and, during the latter periods of the attack, an 8-inch battery. From the 3rd to the 26th of February, those units fired 52,000 rounds. In addition, 7,670 rounds of 5-inch to 8-inch naval ammunition and 600 tons of Air Force-delivered munitions were expended in the area.

“In the last stages of the operation, the division commander and I went into Hue and worked with the commanding officer of the 1st ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] forces. We took whoever was needed for fire control and clearance so that we wouldn’t have any major accidents against US Army, ARVN or Marine units or civilians who were all converging on Hue. This required tight and rigid fire control, which was exercised by both the GS [general support]

Navy and an M101A1 howitzer. Although the barge served its purpose, it was difficult to move and had a draft too deep for the delta area.

The barge selected was constructed of P-1 standard Navy pontoons (each seven by five feet) to form a platform 90 feet long by 28 feet, 4 inches wide. Armor plate was installed around its sides for protection. Ammunition storage areas were built on either end and living quarters in the center. This arrangement provided two areas, one on each side of the living quarters, that could be used to position 105-mm howitzers.

As the newer M102 weapon became available in Vietnam, it replaced the older M101A1 howitzer. A mount for the M102 was made by welding the baseplate of the howitzer to a plate welded to the barge deck. This mount permitted the howitzer to be traversed rapidly a full 6400 mils.

Three barges and five LCM-8s constituted an average floating riverine battery. Three LCMs were used as push boats, one each as the fire direction center (FDC) and command post and ammunition

resupply vessel.

Batteries could move along the rivers and canals throughout the delta region; they frequently moved with the assault force to a point just short of the objective area.

All the weapons had a direct fire capability, a definite asset in the event of an ambush. Then the howitzers often responded with Beehive rounds, which usually broke up the ambush in short order.

When a location for the battery was selected, the barges were pushed into position along the riverbank. The preferable position was one where the riverbank was clear of heavy vegetation. This facilitated helicopter resupply, which could then be accomplished on the bank as close as possible to the weapons. Clear banks also provided better security for the battery.

The barges normally were placed next to the riverbank opposite the primary target area so that the howitzers would fire away from the shoreline in support of the infantry. This served two purposes: weapons could be fired at the lowest angle possible to clear obstructions on the far bank and the helipad was not in the likely

direction of fire.

The barge was stabilized with grappling hooks, winches and standoff supports on the bank side. Mooring lines were secured around the winches and reeled in or out to accommodate tide changes so that the barges would not be caught on either the bank or mudflats at low tide.

Equipment to provide directional reference for the weapons—including aiming circle, collimator and aiming posts—was emplaced on the banks. Accuracy of fires proved to be comparable to that of ground-mounted howitzers.

Without these new developments in riverine artillery, US maneuver force activities in the delta area would have been seriously curtailed or often would have had to take place out of range of friendly Field Artillery. Instead, the Field Artillery was able to provide support when and where it was needed.

Editor’s Note: This sidebar was taken from General Ott’s article “Part III: Field Artillery Mobility—In Order to Win” from the May-June 1975 edition.

- Seize the Bien Hoa-Long Binh complex. Key targets: Bien Hoa Air Base, II Field Force Headquarters, III Corps Headquarters, prisoner-of-war camps between Bien Hoa and Long Binh, and the Long Binh ammunition storage area.
- Attack targets in the Hoc Mon area northwest of Saigon while blocking allied reaction by interdicting Route 1 between Saigon and Cu Chi; maintain readiness to exploit successes in the northern Saigon area.
- Block any attempted reaction by the US 25th Infantry Division from the Cu Chi-Dau Tieng region.
- Attack district and government installations in Thu Duc, between Saigon and Long Binh, and destroy the Newport Bridge over the Saigon River between Saigon and Long Binh.
- Contain the 1st Infantry Division in the Lai Khe area, and cut off Highway 13 at An Loc.
- Seize Tan Son Nhut Air Base and, possibly, the adjacent vice-presidential palace; take over the presidential palace along with the US and Philippine Embassies; hold or destroy installations of the government of Vietnam, such as the national police stations and power plants. Success here would cause the government and the United States to lose face and would propel a move to the conference table where the National Liberation Front would negotiate from a position of strength.
- Control Cu Chi; Duc Hoa, about 18 kilometers west of Saigon (including the South Vietnamese 25th Division Headquarters); Ba Ria, about 45 kilometers southeast of Saigon; Xuan Loc, east of Bien Hoa (18th Division Headquarters); My Tho; Ben Tre, south of My Tho on the Mekong Delta; and Phu Loi-Phu Chang.

Figure 2: Enemy Operational Plan in the II Corps Tactical Zone During the Tet Offensive

battalion commanders, by myself and by the senior officer whom I had placed in Hue to control those fires. We had 11 fire support agencies in Hue. Now this, of course, had an effect on our infantry units, which are used to operating when they want to shoot—they call for fire and the fire is there.

“When we have all these clearance requirements and you have to have minimum safe distances all around you, the fire becomes slow because of the clearance and becomes restricted both in the caliber of weapons and in the number of rounds you can fire. I would say that the fire support was adequate. It was tough to get, but it was certainly adequate.”

III Corps Tactical Zone. US plans in the III Corps tactical zone for early 1968 envisioned only 14 allied battalions remaining within a 29-mile radius of Saigon. Since early December 1967, defense of the capital itself had been the responsibility of the South Vietnamese command. The 5th Ranger Group, with a US 105-mm howitzer battalion (2nd Battalion, 13th Artillery) in direct support, was responsible for providing the necessary security. US forces thus released from the defense of Saigon were incorporated into plans for assaults on enemy base camps in the Cambodian border region. Thirty-nine battalions

were to operate against these camps.

As the US plans were set in motion, however, General [Fred C.] Weyand, commanding II Field Force, became concerned about the results. Enemy resistance along the Cambodian border was weak. This weakness, coupled with the large volume of enemy radio transmissions near Saigon, convinced him of the necessity for redeployment. He conveyed his conclusions to General [William C.] Westmoreland, [Commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, or MACV]. The result was a shifting of forces. By the time of the Tet attacks in the III Corps area, 27 US maneuver battalions were in the capital area and the remaining 25 outside.

The operational plan of the enemy in the III Corps tactical zone is outlined in Figure 2.

Attack in the Capital Military District. In the III Corps area, the Tet offensive began at 0300 on 31 January in the Long Binh-Bien Hoa complex with rocket and mortar attacks on the Headquarters of the 199th Infantry Brigade and II Field Force. By 0321, Saigon and Tan Son Nhut were also receiving heavy fire.

In order to control combat units in the Capital Military District (Gia Dinh Province), General Weyand ordered his Deputy Commander, Major Gen-

eral Keith L. Ware, and a small staff to Saigon to take operational control of all US units. Task Force Ware, with its headquarters situated at Capital Military District Headquarters, was operational by 1100 that same day and remained so until 18 February.

At the outset of the Tet offensive, only one US infantry battalion and four 105-mm howitzer batteries operated in Gia Dinh Province. Three of these batteries were in direct support of the South Vietnamese 5th Ranger Group.

For political and psychological reasons, General Westmoreland had refrained from maintaining US maneuver units in Saigon and several other large cities. Once the Tet attacks began and American maneuver battalions arrived in the Capital Military District, division and field force artillery units relocated and supported the relief of the district.

FA Fires in Saigon—Urban Operations. Fire support for American units in the Capital Military District, particularly in Saigon, posed serious problems for the artillery. Numerous homes and shops and heavy concentrations of people within the city limited the area where artillery could be fired.

When artillery could be employed, it was slow to respond because of difficulties in obtaining clearance to fire. Vietnamese military units in the city and the city government had not been placed under a single control headquarters. As a result, no centralized clearance activity was established. Artillery liaison officers were required to obtain clearance locally from the national police station in their areas of operations. The situation was corrected in June 1968 when the ARVN established a single military governor in the Capital Military District.

Artillery support was further limited in Saigon because buildings and other structures restricted the views of forward observers. Gunships and tactical air proved more adept at providing support because the pilots had better views of the target areas. As a result, specific enemy locations could be pinpointed and damage held to a minimum. For these reasons, most of the major Field Artillery engagements in the Capital Military District during the Tet offensive and counteroffensive occurred in the outer edges of Saigon and in other areas of the zone.

Particularly impressive during Tet was the fire support provided to the 1st Infantry Division in III Corps' tactical zone. The division killed more than

1,000 enemy troops. The *Big Red One* estimated that artillery and air strikes accounted for 70 percent of these enemy losses. The volume of Field Artillery fire increased substantially during the *Tet* offensive. The 1st Infantry Division recorded the rounds fired as shown in Figure 3.

Battle of An My. The most significant engagement during *Tet* for units of the 1st Infantry Division Artillery and the 23rd Artillery Group began on 1 February. The division had shifted its artillery south along Highway 13 to meet increased enemy activity between Lai Khe and Saigon.

On the morning of 1 February, elements of the division engaged units of the 273rd Viet Cong Regiment at An My, approximately 4,000 meters north of Phu Loi. The artillery began by providing blocking fires. Then at 1330, the artillery placed destructive fires upon enemy forces entrenched in the village.

Throughout the day, 3,493 rounds hit the northern half of the village and caused approximately 20 secondary explosions. A survey of the area before dark confirmed 201 enemy killed, and evidence supported estimates of more than twice that number. Once darkness set in, the artillery again provided blocking fires.

The next morning, the 1st Infantry Division found the remainder of the 273rd Regiment still entrenched in An My. The action resumed at 1030 with the artillery continuing to provide blocking fires. When rounds were fired on the village, numerous secondary explosions again resulted. After several hours of bombardment, friendly elements swept and secured An My and found 123 Viet Cong killed.

Prisoner reports later confirmed the report of the encounter. The 273rd Regiment had been moving south when it met the 1st Infantry Division at An My; the ensuing battle rendered the 273rd ineffective before it could reach its assigned objective and contribute to the *Tet* offensive.

The performance of the Field Artillery in the III Corps tactical zone during *Tet* caused General Weyand to observe that the Field Artillery was instrumental in blunting or defeating many of the assaults in the zone: “[FA’s] Timely responses, especially in the moments of fluid uncertainty during the initial phase of the attacks and in spite of clearance handicaps, contributed to the successes of the infantry and armored units.”

Other FA Actions in *Tet*. Numerous

Caliber	Daily Average Before <i>Tet</i>	Daily Average During <i>Tet</i>
105-mm	2,376	5,616
155-mm	925	1,459
8-inch	200	235
4.2-inch	1,100	1,570
Total:	4,601	8,880

Figure 3: 1st Infantry Division Rounds Fired During the *Tet* Offensive

smaller but significant Field Artillery actions occurred throughout Vietnam during *Tet*. For example, the 25th Infantry Division was plagued by enemy bunkers near the highway between Cu Chi and Saigon. Fires from the bunkers prevented free movement between the two locations. Numerous attempts to reduce the bunkers with artillery, air strikes and infantry assaults were unsuccessful. An 8-inch howitzer delivering assault fire finally eliminated the bunkers.

Also noteworthy were the actions of units of the 54th Artillery Group which prevented the collapse of the Xuan Loc Base Camp. On 2 February, Xuan Loc came under heavy attack. The quick, devastating fire of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 83rd Artillery, saved the post. Battery C fired 35 8-inch rounds and killed 80 of the attackers. During the period 1-18 February, similar missions supported the defense of Xuan Loc.

The 2nd Battalion, 40th Artillery (the direct support battalion of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade), was one of the first artillery units to respond to enemy attacks in III Corps. An observer detected the enemy launching rockets on II Field Force Headquarters and shifted fire onto the launching sites. Several of the firing points were neutralized before the enemy had fired all his rounds. The enemy suffered more than 50 killed.

In the IV Corps tactical zone, the enemy offensive included attacks against My Tho and Vinh Long. On 31 January 1968, the Mobile Riverine Force was placed under the operational control of the senior adviser in IV Corps. [See the “sidebar” to this article “Riverine Artillery in Vietnam” on Page 24 for more information.] The riverine force initially was moved to the vicinity of My Tho, and two of its battalions conducted a three-day operation north of the My Tho River in response to a multi-battalion Viet Cong attack on the provincial capital.

Then, on 4 February, the Riverine Force moved to the provincial capital of Vinh Long and engaged three enemy battalions trying to seize the city. The 3rd Battalion, 34th Artillery (105-mm towed), was in direct support of the Mobile Riverine Brigade. One battery was equipped with airmobile firing platforms, and two batteries were mounted on barges. The artillery battalion effectively delivered 8,158 rounds in support of the My Tho campaign.

At one point, a barge-mounted battery was required to make an airmobile deployment. The battery was provided a 1/4-ton jeep and a 3/4-ton trailer for a fire direction center (FDC). The barges were beached, and the pickup was made directly from them. This type of movement opened possibilities for deeper penetration into the Mekong Delta.

Finally, in the I Corps area on 12 February 1968, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 40th Artillery (105-mm), while in support of a South Vietnamese unit, became the first US Army artillery unit to fire improved conventional munitions in combat. The target was 40 to 50 North Vietnamese troops in the open. The battery fired 54 rounds of the new ammunition, resulting in 14 enemy killed.

The round was a controlled, fragmentation-type ammunition similar to the Air Force cluster bomb unit. “Fire Cracker” became the code word used when a forward observer wanted improved conventional munitions.

Editor’s Note: Selected articles from General Ott’s 14-article series will appear in subsequent editions.

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