

## PART TWO

## DESTINATION VIETNAM

The year 1965 saw the 6th Battalion, 27th Artillery busily engaged in improving its new home in Ft Bliss and in bringing its level of readiness for combat to ever higher levels. However, the Battalion's days as a stateside unit engaged in peacetime pursuits had become numbered, for events in the far off country of Vietnam were soon to profoundly affect its course and history.

Vietnam, a small country in Southeast Asia, had been troubled for years by a Communist insurgency movement. Led by a fiery patriot named Ho Chi Minh, a revolutionary organization known as the Viet Minh had been trying to overthrow the status quo and establish their own government for Vietnam ever since the Japanese occupation of that country in World War II. In 1945, in fact, Ho had succeeded in wresting control of the country from the Japanese puppet, the Emperor Bao Dai. When the French returned to Vietnam to re-establish its colonial control over that country, the Viet Minh saw that their only hope for a place in the future of Vietnam was through military conflict (a series of attempted accommodations with the French having failed). Thus, in December 1946 the "Indochina War" was begun.

The war lasted eight years, from 1946 to 1954. Ho's rebels capitalized on the anti-colonial feelings of the people. Their cause took on the added luster of a war of liberation from the supposed French oppressors. The French, meanwhile, encouraged the anti-communist Vietnamese nationalists to side with them in the struggle against the Viet Minh. This maneuver failed in spite of the fact that France granted self-government for Vietnam within the French union in 1949. The dissident nationalists refused to unite behind the French appointed chief of state, the Emperor Bao Dai. They felt that the French had not offered complete independence.<sup>1</sup>

In 1950 the French were defeated in a number of strategic locations due to the fact that the Viet Minh had begun to receive assistance from Communist China. The communist advance was temporarily halted in 1951 with the arrival of increased material aid for the French from the United States.

The years 1952-1954 saw the French position become precarious. The Viet Minh, using the techniques of guerilla warfare, increasingly gained control of the countryside while the more conventional French forces were

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<sup>1</sup>Fact Sheet # 2, HQ, II Field Force, AVX-IO, Subj: South Vietnam, p. 5.

restricted to the larger towns and places accessible by road. At this point, negotiations aimed at achieving a cease-fire were begun at Geneva, Switzerland. France, the Soviet Union, Communist China, Laos, Cambodia, the State of Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the Viet Minh) and the United States were represented.<sup>2</sup> Negotiations at first proved fruitless, for though France had proclaimed Vietnam to be fully independent, the communists still fought on. The Viet Minh then won a convincing victory at Dien Bien Phu. This stunning blow demonstrated to the world how ineffective the French effort had become, and how the French people had become distinctly unconcerned about achieving Vietnamese goals. Indochina had become a liability for France that was depleting its Army and undermining its prestige in Europe and Africa. As a result the negotiations at Geneva reflected the French desire for a cease fire more than the Vietnamese desire for territorial unity. The eventual treaty, signed on July 21, 1954, divided Vietnam into two separate entities, the north governed by the Viet Minh, with a more democratic regime set up in the south. Throughout the Indochina War, American influence was minor. The United States, not wanting to become involved in another Asian conflict so soon after the Korean War, did little more than observe the proceedings in spite of the fact that its delegates were under pressure from home not to give the impression of "approving a surrender to Communism."<sup>4</sup>

The years following the cease fire sowed the seeds of future problems for Vietnam. Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnam became "a full fledged Communist state, backed by a strong army and an ubiquitous party."<sup>5</sup> The government in the South, under Ngo Dinh Diem, was weak, snarled by red tape and unable to cope with the tremendous economic problems that beset the country. Moreover, the people were displeased with Diem's dictatorial policies and abolition of village councils and open elections. The Hanoi government saw that the Diem regime was so weak that it could easily be overthrown through subversion. It also noted that the American advisers (a huge program of economic and military aid was begun) had succeeded in convincing themselves that Diem was "spectacularly successful" in bringing the country onto solid footing. As the real situation was much worse than the Americans believed, Hanoi may well have concluded that a rebellion might easily succeed before the ponderous American program could get into high gear.<sup>6</sup> An organization called the National Liberation Front was created in 1960 to accomplish this. Its members became the "Viet Cong."

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>Bernard B. Fall, Vietnam Witness 1953-66 (New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), pp. 51-67.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, pp. 237-238.

Though forced to operate in the underground for a few years, the NLF began its program of open subversion. It concentrated at first on a systematic assassination of village chiefs and other prominent officials. These increased in frequency until in May 1961 President Kennedy stated in both houses of Congress that the Viet Cong had killed more than 4,000 civil officers during the previous year, or about 10 a day.<sup>7</sup> By isolating the outlying villages from control by the central (i.e. Saigon) government, the Viet Cong were allowed to operate almost at will in the rural areas. By late 1962 the insurgents had extended their control in varying degrees to about 80% of the Vietnamese countryside.<sup>8</sup> The Diem regime reacted by vastly increasing the size of the armed forces. America provided considerable materiel support and virtually trained the entire army with its MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) advisers. However, when deployed in tactical situations, it was discovered that this army was trained for "conventional" warfare, rendering it singularly ineffective when fighting guerillas such as the Viet Cong.<sup>9</sup> Thus the communist terror continued basically unchecked.

President Diem's regime was toppled in 1963 by a military coup. The country was no better off, however, for this government (and a whole series of subsequent governments) proved to be even more inept and weak than its predecessors. National instability, caused by the feuding political and religious factions, was predominant. Meanwhile the Viet Cong increased in numbers, both by recruitment from within South Vietnam and by infiltration from the North. Although the government forces implemented some guerilla tactics, they still could not provide a tolerable degree of security for its people.

As the Viet Cong threat increased, American support of the government of South Vietnam increased also. Washington admitted in March, 1962, that American pilots were flying combat missions in Vietnam. Time magazine stated on May 11, 1962 that the decision to "hold South Viet-Nam at all costs had been made in October, 1961. In February, 1963 American advisers to the Vietnamese Army were authorized to "shoot first." Still, the American commitment was piecemeal, with troops being assigned only as advisers.<sup>10</sup>

The United States' position slowly became intractable. Aircraft and troops began to stream into the little country. On August 2, 1964 an incident occurred which solidified America's intentions in Vietnam.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 283.

<sup>8</sup>Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams (New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), p. 325.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, p. 325.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 333.

Two US Navy destroyers on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin (just off the North Vietnamese coast) were attacked by North Vietnamese patrol boats. The US craft repelled two attacks and sank at least two attackers. President Johnson ordered a series of reprisal raids against North Vietnamese shore installations. On August 7th Congress voted a resolution which "left no doubt in anyone's mind as to America's intentions."<sup>11</sup> It also left no doubt that America could thereafter never renege on its promise without suffering considerable National loss of face throughout the world.

The increased American commitment took the form of a tremendous increase in the number of US troops assigned to Vietnam. From a mid-1965 level of about 60,000 men,<sup>12</sup> Free World Forces had increased to over 224,000 by the end of that year.<sup>13</sup> This is in addition to the ARVN (Army of Vietnam) forces, which by this time had grown to approximately 635,000.<sup>14</sup> The Viet Cong increased their commitment right along with the Americans. VC strength on January 1, 1965 was estimated at 103,000 men. By the beginning of 1966 their numbers had risen to 230,000 despite their loss of 34,000 dead and 11,000 captured.<sup>15</sup>

The war grew vastly in scope, though still remaining a limited conflict. Massive air strikes against North Vietnam rained destruction upon the enemy's war industries. His lines of infiltration and supply to the south were hit hard by the same means. Large, mobile battalions and divisions of American infantry scoured the countryside, forcing the VC from his jungle redoubts. In many ways it seemed that the huge American presence had seized the initiative from the VC; yet the enemy, still adhering to the rules of revolutionary warfare, often refused to fight unless it was to his advantage to do so. Many American combat operations produced only light contact with the enemy. As early as the last quarter of 1965, it had become apparent that the war would not be easily ended by throwing large numbers of Americans into the conflict. The VC still remained a remarkably effective military organization. Neither a dramatic, quick communist victory nor a crushing VC defeat seemed in the offing, but rather a long, dirty conflict in which the outcome would be vague, satisfying to neither side.

It was into such a situation that the 6th Battalion, 27th Artillery was to find itself. The Battalion was alerted for eventual movement to Vietnam

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<sup>11</sup>Fall, Witness, p. 337.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 312.

<sup>13</sup>Ltr, MACOI-C, Subj: Summary of Events, First Quarter, Calendar Year 1966, dtd 11 May 66, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Fall, Witness, p. 337.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid, p. 340.

on July 19, 1965.<sup>16</sup> This time frame was right in the midst of the first large call-up of forces for the Vietnam conflict.

Feverish preparation for movement were begun. On the 26th of July LTC Robert J. McKay assumed command of the Battalion. On August 2 the 27th was notified that they would be assigned to USARPAC upon embarkation. All equipment was to be ready for shipment by August 15th, all personnel had to be ready by September 18th. From the date of the alert until the date of embarkation, replacement and filler personnel plus more equipment were received. Included in this was the augmentation of six forward observer sections, two air observers and a metro section. On October 26th the Battalion was assigned to the 23d Artillery Group.<sup>17</sup>

First to depart Ft Bliss were two officers and seven enlisted men designated as equipment guards. They left Ft Bliss at 1845 hours, September 17, 1965, on the equipment train. After a trip of 32½ hours, the train arrived at Beaumont, Texas with all equipment intact. Several loads, particularly the huge boxes that contained the Battalion aircraft (an O-1 "Birdog" and an OH-13 helicopter) had shifted and come loose, forcing the guards to relash the boxes. The equipment guards then observed the loading of the equipment onto the USNS Dick Lykes. Seven days later the Dick Lykes weighed anchor and was on its way. It passed through the Panama Canal on October 2 and arrived off Vung Tau, RVN on October 31st. It began discharging its cargo at Saigon on November 4th, completing unloading on the 7th.<sup>18</sup>

En masse movement of personnel was begun shortly thereafter on October 2, 1965. Two increments of the main body were flown via American Airlines from the El Paso International Airport to the San Francisco International Airport. The first group of 75 left El Paso at 1700 hours, October 2nd, with the second group of 43 following 24 hours later. Both parties were transported by bus directly to shipside at the Oakland Army Terminal. Some of the men were carried first class. American Airlines required that each soldier have his rifle wrapped in paper before boarding. Each man was instructed not to tell any civilian where he was from, where he was going or what unit he was in. All personnel wore fatigues, soft caps, pistol belts and carried a combat cargo pack.<sup>19</sup>

The main body - 24 officers, 3 warrant officers and 544 enlisted men left Ft Bliss at 1820 hours, October 1, 1965 by train for the Oakland Army

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<sup>16</sup>Unit Historical Report, 1966, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, pp. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 2.

Terminal. The trip took 38½ hours. To prevent civilian demonstrations against troop movements, the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads prohibited telegraphic notification of the movement to any railroad dispatchers or minor officials. All arrangements were made by phone. The passenger agent on the train made frequent reports when the train stopped. The train passed through politically tense Berkeley, California at 0300 hours, October 3d. Squads of civilian police guarded each railroad crossing. A few hecklers were seen yelling at the troops in Berkeley. Finally, at 0930 hours, October 3, 1965, the train pulled into the Oakland Army Terminal onto a pier next to the troopship USNS W. S. Gordon. There were no accidents or incidents throughout the trip.<sup>20</sup> Of the total assigned strength, fifteen (15) personnel remained at Ft Bliss because of approved deferments for various reasons. These personnel were placed under the control of the 6th Artillery Group (AD).<sup>21</sup>

The USNS Gordon set sail from the Oakland Army Terminal at 1700 hours, October 4, 1965. It was the ship's second voyage since coming out of the mothball fleet. Over 3900 troops were aboard, including the personnel from the other battalions in the 23d Artillery Group. Living conditions were extremely crowded, with troops being stacked in bunks four layers high. Company grade officers were fourteen (14) to a stateroom, field grade officers six (6) to a room. The Battalion had planned an extensive training program, but some of these efforts were cancelled due to the crowded conditions. Physical training was conducted daily for all officers and enlisted men. PT was cancelled only four times during the voyage due to bad weather. By October 19th, the Gordon had reached White Beach Naval Station, Okinawa. The men were granted shore leave in the immediate area of the naval station. At 1900 hours that day a fire broke out in the brig. PFC Luis Rodriguez, US51532324, of Battery "A", died of smoke inhalation. SGT Richard W. Harmon Jr. and SP5 Thomas F. McDermott were hospitalized for smoke inhalation, and later released. SGT Harmon was later awarded the Army Commendation Medal for his heroic actions in rescuing personnel. The Gordon dropped anchor at Qui Nhon, Republic of Vietnam, on October 23, departing October 31. It then sailed to Vung Tau, RVN, stopping at Cam Ranh Bay enroute. It arrived at Vung Tau on November 2, with the personnel debarking the following day.<sup>22</sup>

At 0900 hours November 3, LCM's (Landing Craft Medium) began taking personnel from the USNS Gordon. Personnel had been on board ship 33 days. The LCM's landed at a US Army beach. The troops marched ashore in two single file columns and boarded waiting 2½ ton trucks for a ride to the Vung Tau Army Air Field. There they were directed by waiting USAF personnel to stand behind one of five numbered signs. A shuttle fleet of five C-130's began to arrive. While the engine continued to run, 78 soldiers boarded each aircraft. Baggage was stacked in the center aisle. The heat inside the aircraft (est-

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 2.

imated by the Battalion Surgeon to be 112 degrees) was stifling. After landing at the Bien Hoa Air Base the troops then boarded another fleet of 2½ ton trucks which took them to the staging area on the grounds of the Saigon University.<sup>23</sup>

The equipment ship, the USNS Dick Lykes, arrived in Saigon harbor on November 4. Details were sent to shipside to assist in unloading. Ten vehicles already available were driven to the Battalion area. The howitzers were unloaded by heavy crane onto barges in the Saigon river. These were then moved to a pier area near the famous Saigon floating restaurant. The APC's were similarly moved to the same location. These tracked vehicles then proceeded by convoy to the staging area. This occurred early on the morning of November 6 (local law required that convoys move through Saigon only during curfew hours to avoid the thick city traffic).<sup>24</sup>

The Battalion spent 16 days altogether in the staging area. While there they processed vehicles, drew supplies and made preparations for movement to tactical areas. The men also used the time to relax and unlimber from their long voyage.

"A" and Service Batteries were the first to assume their tactical positions, departing the staging area on November 10th. These two batteries jointly occupied an area east of Bien Hoa, near the "Widow's Village." Though this area was supposed to be a permanent location, it was not, for the battery's fires were found to disrupt the air traffic of the Bien Hoa Air Base. Air traffic had to be stopped whenever the battery fired to the north. Soon better locations for the two batteries were found adjacent to the base camp area of the 173d Airborne Brigade. The batteries moved on December 9th.<sup>25</sup>

The organization became a composite battalion on November 15, 1965. On that day four 8" howitzers were transferred to the 2d Battalion (175) (SP), 32d Artillery, with the 6/27th receiving four 175mm guns in return. The 13th howitzer, which the Battalion had brought from Ft Bliss as a "float", was also transferred to the 32nd Artillery.<sup>26</sup>

Bravo, Charlie and Headquarters Batteries displaced to their tactical positions near the town of Phuoc Vinh on November 19th. The wheeled vehicles moved by armed convoy from the 1st Division staging area to Phuoc Vinh, while the tracked vehicles went by convoy to the Song Be river crossing where a 50 ton ferry (provided by the 1st Engineer Brigade, 1st Infantry Division) took them across the river. The track vehicles closed into Phuoc Vinh on the 21st.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup>Unit Historical Report, 1966, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

All three of the batteries in Phuoc Vinh at first occupied temporary positions near the airstrip. As these areas were untenable from a ground defensive standpoint, within a week new areas were found. Headquarters Battery moved to an area between the District Chief's compound and the Phuoc Vinh school, while Bravo Battery occupied the old Headquarters Battery area. This move was accomplished in one day, with the Battalion re-assuming its mission that afternoon.<sup>28</sup>

The Battalion's personnel section moved within the 1st Infantry Division staging area at Di An into the area occupied by the 2d Battalion, 32nd Artillery. This was in preparation for the projected consolidation of all the 23d Artillery Group personnel sections. This consolidation did in fact occur, with the 6/27th and the 2/32nd joining the other sections at Tan Son Nhut Airbase on December 9th.<sup>29</sup>

General Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff, US Army, visited Charlie Battery at Phuoc Vinh on December 23d, staying 10 minutes. General Johnson talked to Lieutenant Colonel McKay, Captain McCallum and many of the men of the battery. He conveyed a personal message from President Johnson "that the people of the United States were behind the fine effort of the troops in Vietnam." He extended the President's best wishes for a Merry Christmas.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, p. 4.