

The Tet Offensive 1968

Early in 1968 the Communists launched a major offensive to coincide with the traditional Vietnamese New Year celebrations (29 to 31 January). It was a time of an agreed cease-fire. NVA/VC suicide troops struck in Saigon, Hue was temporarily occupied, news media reported immense damage in the South, and 19 suicide sappers broke into the compound of the American Embassy. They were all killed. In all 80 different cities, towns or military bases were attacked, more or less simultaneously. The people of the South refused to rally to the cause as the NVA leaders had hoped and the whole thing was a military disaster.

NVA General Giap was devastated.

He felt that the gamble was a total waste.

It was a resounding defeat for the NVA and VC.

And then Walter Cronkite, America's most respected journalist at that time, suggested that America wasn't winning the war. It was inaccurate, based on a 30 second TV grab and was not much better than stupid as the figures will show. However it created the first significant crack in President Johnson's belief that he could win both the war and re-election. As it turned out he did neither. Growing reluctance in America to support a war it wasn't winning, combined with Johnson's new reticence and a NVA fresh surge of hope that these things bought, meant that the beginning of the end had been reached.

Losses during Tet Offensive

Country/Force	Killed	Wounded	Missing
US, Korea, Australia	1,536	7,764	11
South Viet Nam	2,788	8,299	587 North Viet Nam /Viet Cong
45,000 not known		not known	
Civilian	14,000	24,000	
Homeless		630,000	

Hanoi was perfectly aware of the growing US peace movement and of the deep divisions the war was causing in American society. What Giap needed was a body-blow that would break Washington's will to carry on and at the same time would undermine the growing legitimacy of the Saigon Government once and for all. While Hanoi was sure that the Americans would tire of the war as the French had before them, the longer it took, the stronger the Saigon Government might become. Giap opted for a quick and decisive victory that would be well in time for the 1968 US Presidential campaign.

Giap prepared a bold thrust on two fronts. With memories of the victory at Dien Bien Phu still in his mind, he planned an attack on the US Marines' firebase at Khe Sanh. At the same time the NVA and the NLF planned coordinated attacks on virtually all South Vietnam's major cities and provincial capitals. Forced to defend themselves everywhere at once, the US & ARVN forces would suffer a multitude of small to major defeats which would add up to an overall disaster. Khe Sanh would distract the attention of the US commanders while the NVA/VC was preparing for D-day in South Vietnam's cities, but when this full offensive was at its height, it was unlikely that the over-stretched American forces would be able to keep the base from being overrun and Giap would have repeated his triumph of fourteen years before.

It's highly doubtful that the NVA/VC expected to hold all or even some of the cities and towns they attacked, but the NLF apparently did expect large sections of the urban populace to rise up in revolt. South Vietnam's city dwellers were generally indifferent to both the NLF and the Saigon Government, but the VC clearly expected more support than it actually got. The object of attacking the cities was not so much to win in a single blow as it was to inflict a series of humiliating defeats on the Americans and to destroy the authority of the Saigon Government. When the US/ARVN forces finally drove the NVA/VC back into the jungle, there would be left behind a wasteland of rubble, refugees, and simmering

discontent. This offensive would begin in January 1968 at the time of the Vietnamese Tet (New Year) holidays.

The first attack on Khe Sanh began shortly before dawn on January 21st, when the NVA attempted to cross the river running past the base. It was beaten back but followed by an artillery barrage which damaged the runway, blew up the main ammunition stores, and damaged a few aircraft. Secondary attacks were launched against the Special Forces' defenses at Lang Vei and against the Marines dug-in on the hills surrounding Khe Sanh, but these attacks were aimed more at testing the defenses than anything else. The next day, helicopters and light cargo aircraft flew in virtually every few minutes replacing lost ammunition, but the weather began turning worse.

While the world was watching the drama unfolding at Khe Sanh, however, NVA and VC regulars were also drifting into Saigon, Hue, and most of South Vietnam's cities. They came in twos and threes, disguised as refugees, peasants, workers,



and ARVN soldiers on holiday leave. In Saigon, roughly the equivalent of five battalions of NVA/VC gradually infiltrated the city without anyone informing or any of the countless security police taking undue notice. Weapons came separately in flower carts, coffins, and trucks apparently filled with vegetables and rice. There was also a VC network in Saigon and the other major cities which had long stockpiled stores of arms and ammunition drawn from hit-and-run raids or bought openly on the black-market. It was also no secret that VC drifted in and out of the cities to see relatives and on general leave from their units. Viet Cong who were captured during the pre Tet build up

were mistaken for regular holiday-makers or deserters. In the general pattern of the New Year merrymakers, the VC's secret army of infiltrators went completely unnoticed.

In the early morning hours of January 31st, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year, NLF/NVA troops and commandos attacked virtually every major town and city in South Vietnam as well as most of the important American bases and airfields. Almost everywhere the attacks came as a total surprise. Vast areas of Saigon and Hue were "liberated", and parades of gun-waving NVA/VC marched through the streets proclaiming the revolution while their grimmer-minded comrades rounded up prepared lists of collaborators and government sympathizers for show trials and quick executions.

In Saigon, nineteen VC commandos blew their way through the outer walls of the US Embassy and overran the five MP's on duty in the early hours of that morning. Two MP's were killed immediately as the action-team tried to blast their way through the main Embassy doors with anti-tank rockets. They failed and were pinned-down by the Marine guards who kept the VC in an intense firefight until a relief force landed by helicopter. By mid-morning, the battle had turned. All nineteen VC were killed, their bodies scattered around the Embassy courtyard. Five Americans and two Vietnamese civilians were also dead. The commandos had been dressed in civilian clothing and had rolled-up to the Embassy in an ancient truck. The security of the Embassy was not in serious danger, and the damage was slight; but this attack on 'American soil' captured the imagination of the media, and the battle became symbolic of the Tet Offensive throughout the world.

When the fighting at Tan Son Nhut was over, twenty-three Americans were dead, eighty-five were wounded and up to fifteen aircraft had suffered serious damage. Further fighting at Bien Hoa during the Tet offensive would take the NVA/VC death total in Saigon to nearly 1200.

The fighting within Saigon itself was pretty much over by February 5th but it carried on in Cholon until the last week of the month. Cholon was strafed, bombed, and shelled but the NVA/VC held on and even mounted sporadic counter-offensives against US/ARVN positions within the city and against Tan Son Nhut airport. B-52 strikes against communist positions outside Saigon came within a few miles of the city. When the NVA/VC were finally driven out of Saigon's suburbs, they retreated into the surrounding government villages and fought there. US and ARVN artillery and strike-aircraft bombed and shelled these supposedly pacified villages before troops moved in to reoccupy them. The NVA/VC repeated this tactic again and again in a clear effort to make the Saigon Government destroy their own fortified villages and, by doing so, further alienate the rural population. A month after the offensive began, US estimates put the number of civilian dead at some 15,000 and the number of new refugees at anything up to two

million and still the battles went on.

Elsewhere in South Vietnam, the success of the Tet offensive was erratic. Many of the attacks on the provincial cities and US bases were easily beaten back within the first minutes or hours, but others involved bitter fighting. In the resort city of Dalat, the ARVN put up a spirited defense of the Vietnamese Military Academy and the Pasteur Institute. Fighting in Dalat went on until mid-February and left over 200 VC dead.

South Vietnamese officials sifting through the rubble found mass graves after Hue was finally recaptured at the end of February. The total number of bodies unearthed came to around 2500, but the number of civilians estimated as missing after the Hue battle was nearly 6000. Many of the victims found were Catholics who sought sanctuary in a church but were taken out and later shot. Others were apparently being marched off for political "re-education" but were shot when American or ARVN units came too close. The mass graves within Hue itself were largely of those who had been picked up and executed for various "enemy of the people" offenses. There is some doubt that the NVA/VC had planned all these executions beforehand, but unquestionably it was the largest communist purge of the war.

Giap's ambition to win a massive victory against the Americans was thwarted by massive aerial bombardments of NVA positions. B-52's and strike aircraft dropped tons of bombs and napalm within a few hundred feet of Khe Sanh's perimeter. The NVA launched further attacks on February 17th, 18th, and 29th but massed artillery and air-strikes broke the first up fairly easily while the second involved heavy fighting. In early April, relief forces reached the base. A 1st Cavalry helicopter assault force landed near Khe Sanh as American and ARVN forces hit NVA positions along Route 9. On April 8, Route 9 was cleared from two miles outside of Khe Sanh to the firebase, itself; and Khe Sanh was relieved. On April 10th, Lang Vei was reoccupied. Fighting continued around Khe Sanh for a time but Giap had long since given up any hope of overrunning the base.

Giap had been frustrated at Khe Sanh and defeated in South Vietnam's cities. NVA/VC dead totaled some 45,000 and the number of prisoners nearly 7,000. But the shockwave of the battle finished Johnson's willingness to carry on. Westmoreland was pressuring Washington for 206,000 troops to carry on the campaign in the South and to make a limited invasion of North Vietnam just above the DMZ.

Clifford and an advisor group looked at the war to date and consulted CIA Director Richard Helms who presented the Agency's gloomy forecasts in great detail. On March 4th Clifford told Johnson that the war was far from won and that more men would make little difference. Johnson then turned to his chief group of informal advisors. He learned that they, too, like Clifford, had turned against the war. Johnson's "wise old men" had been told that recent CIA studies showed that the pacification program was failing in forty of South Vietnam's forty-four provinces, and that the NLF's manpower was actually twice the number that had been estimated previously. Tet had shown that the optimism of the previous year had been an illusion, and it now seemed that the enemy was far stronger and that the long efforts to win Vietnamese "hearts and minds" had largely been a disaster.

Johnson couldn't meet the generals' manpower requests without either depleting Europe of American troops or without calling up the active reserves. His most senior advisors had turned against the war. Johnson went on TV to announce a bombing halt of the North and America's willingness to meet with the North Vietnamese to seek a peace settlement. Johnson then said that he was not a candidate for reelection and would search for peace in Indochina.

General Creighton Abrams, Westmoreland's deputy commander, replaced Westmoreland as head of US forces in Vietnam. "Vietnamization" is usually credited to Nixon, but it began in the wake of the Tet Offensive and Johnson's turnabout.

Giap's gamble had another side effect. When the Tet Offensive began, many US officials believed that the NLF had offered the Americans a golden opportunity by fighting a pitched battle where it could be defeated in open combat. The massive losses it suffered bear this out. The VC was not broken by the Tet Offensive, but it was severely crippled by it; and, from then on, the North took on the main burden of the war. Further fighting in 1968 and the increasing activity of the Phoenix Program further decimated the NLF's ranks and the role of the North grew even larger.

The NLF had gone into the Tet Offensive in the hope of giving a death-blow to the Saigon Government and, if it couldn't capture power directly, it could at least gain a coalition leading to ultimate authority. The NLF's dream vanished in the rubble of South Vietnam's cities and it would be Hanoi that conquered Saigon two years after U.S. combat troops left Viet Nam on April 30, 1975.