APPENDIX D. THE ENEMY: UNCONTESTED TENANCY PRIOR TO THE ARRIVAL OF 1 ATF

Ernest Chamberlain

The Saigon government's Phuoc Tuy Province was about 55 kilometres from east to west and about 35 kilometres from north to south (an area of some 1,958 square kilometres – 2.86 per cent of the size of Tasmania). The province capital, Phuoc Le/Ba Ria Town, was about 110 kilometres by road south-east of Saigon via Route 15 (nowadays Route 51). In mid-1966, the official population of the province was about 105,000, including Ba Ria Town's population of about 10,000. Vung Tau (Cap St Jacques), 22 kilometres south-west of Ba Ria Town, had a further population of 42,000. Phuoc Tuy comprised six districts (early 1966 populations shown in brackets): Long Le (31,800), Long Dien (24,500), Dat Do (24,700), Duc Thanh (12,650) and Xuyen Moc (6,260). There were 29 villages and 129 hamlets in the province.

As the deep-draft river port at Saigon – the only one in the III Corps Tactical Zone – had a limited capacity, Route 15 was an important strategic route linking Saigon and Bien Hoa with the limited berthing facilities at Vung Tau port. The Route had been completed in 1896 during the French colonial period.[1]

1 A second, different 'Route 15' in southern North Vietnam was a major infiltration route from Vinh to the Mu Gia Pass (the principal entry point to the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos). During the war, US and South Vietnamese forces also conducted operations along Route 15 in the Kampong Cham area of Cambodia.

An early 1966 US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), technical survey described Route 15 as: 'an all-weather highway with an intermediate bituminous surface … with well-compacted macadam in good condition. … and limited off-road dispersal possibilities'.[2] The road surface was from 4.2 to 4.9 metres wide. With 11 significant bridges[3] on Route 15 within Phuoc Tuy Province, and many minor bridges and culverts, the route was highly vulnerable to interdiction by anti-government forces. Heavy rains during the wet season (May to October) could flood sections of the roadway and also restrict daytime vehicle passage. The route was overlooked by ranges of wooded and jungle-covered hills covering an area of about 80 square kilometres comprising, from the north-west to the south-east: the Nui Thi Vai – 467 metres high; the Nui Toc Tien – 221 metres high (2 kilometres east of Route 15); the Nui Ong Trinh – 504 metres high; and, reaching to the north-western outskirts of Ba Ria Town, the Nui Dinh – 491 metres high (whose summit is about 4 kilometres to the north of Route 15). Many caves and larger caverns were scattered throughout these granite hills – with crevasses and rock falls of larger boulders covered with vines and tree roots. These natural features and tunnels had been used by resistance elements over many decades. Several small isolated Buddhist temples and shrines were scattered throughout the hills.

To the west of Route 15 lay the Rung Sac/Sat ('Salty Jungle'), an area of about 1,250 square kilometres of tidal swamp, mangroves and nipa palm bordering Can Gio District of Gia Dinh/Bien Hoa Province. The Rung Sat encompassed villages within Can Gio and Quan Xuyen Districts, and the large island of Long Son[4] within Phuoc Tuy Province. The Long Tau River and the Soai Rap River ran through the Rung Sat and connected Vung Tau and South China Sea with Saigon.

2 USMACV/JGS Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam (CICV), 'Area Analysis Study 66-36 – National Route 15', 1 March 1966.

3 The Song (River) Dinh flows through Ba Ria Town and is bridged within the town at coordinates YS 375610.

4 Long Son Island (population 5,300) was dominated by Nui Nua Hill – 183 metres. 1 ATF conducted its 'first combat assault' and a 'search and destroy' operation (Operation Hayman) into Long Son Island, adjacent to the Rung Sat, in the period 8–12 November 1966; 1 ATF, 'OPORD 1/14/66', 4 November 1966, Australian War Memorial (AWM), AWM95 1/4/16.

The first Indo-China War

On 9 February 1946, the French forces reoccupied Ba Ria Province[5] – with columns advancing along Route 15 through Long Thanh and also through Xuan Loc, down Route 2 to seize Ba Ria Town. En route, the French briefly engaged a Viet Minh 'Republican Guard' force on Route 15 at Phuoc Hoa. Government machinery was re-established in the province under Bui The Kham as the province chief and Lieutenant Colonel Pougin de la Maissoneuve as the sector commander.[6] A small Viet Minh guerrilla unit – the Quang Trung force – was formed at Long Phuoc village in 1946, and by the end of that year had reportedly grown to 25 'secret self-defence guerrilla units'[7] covering 40 villages across the province. Rubber plantation workers in the Route 2 area provided recruits, and further units were raised: the 16 Detachment, the 307 Regiment (established in May 1948) and the 397 Regiment (December 1949, combining the 307 and 309 Regiments). During this period, the Viet Minh were mostly active in the central and eastern areas of Ba Ria Province – principally in the Dat Do area, and from their Minh Dam Secret Zone bases in the Long Hai hills. However, the 700-strong Viet Minh 300 Battalion operated against Route 15 – principally interdicting the route in the Phu My area on the Ba Ria Province/Bien Hoa border and to the north. In September 1947, the route was cut by the Viet Minh for almost five years. Road traffic from Saigon to Vung Tau was forced to travel eastward along Route 1 to Xuan Loc Town, and then south down Route 2 to Ba Ria and on to Vung Tau – a total distance of 155 kilometres, or to Long Hai on the shore of the South China Sea.

5 In October 1956, the Saigon Government of President Ngo Dinh Diem retitled their Ba Ria Province as Phuoc Tuy Province, which included the adjacent Can Gio District and Vung Tau. However, the communist side preferred the earlier title of Ba Ria Province. While the province capital was officially titled Phuoc Le (until 1982), it was commonly referred to as 'Ba Ria Town' by both sides.

6 Trần Văn Khánh (et al.) and the Executive Committee of the Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Party, *Lịch sử Đảng bộ tỉnh Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu 1930–1975* [*The history of the Party in Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Province 1930–1975*], Vol I, 1930–1954, Nhà Xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia [National Political Publishing House], Hà Nội, 2000 (hereafter 'the Ba Ria History'), and Le Thanh Tuong, *Monographie de la province de Baria Sud Vietnam*, Saigon, 1950.

7 EP Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion: Their story*, E Chamberlain, Point Lonsdale, 2016, p 12, fn 39.

According to the Viet Cong (VC) Long Dat History: 'At the beginning of 1951, all the Viet Minh elements were forced to move into the Minh Dam base area.'[8] However, on 15 March 1953, the Main Force Battalion 300 and the Long Dat local unit attacked Route 23 – and captured a French officer (Fardel, the commander of Dat Do). In late February 1953, French forces retook Phu My village, re-established a subsector there, and cleared Route 15. They then moved east of Ba Ria Town and cleared Route 23 to Dat Do. The Chau Duc History records that:

> In the first months of 1953, 96% of populated area [104 villages] was temporarily seized by the enemy, and our guerrillas were under great pressure. Co Trach village [i.e. the centre of Chau Duc District] was one of the only villages held by the Party.[9]

However, in early May 1953, a French officer, Captain Joseph Suacot (called '*la Panthère noire*' by the Viet Minh[10]), led elements of the 64 Vietnamese Infantry Battalion on a sortie into the Hat Dich.[11] The force was ambushed by the Viet Minh's 3 Company/300 Battalion – and Captain Suacot was killed. Six months later, on 5 November 1953, 3 and 4 Companies of 300 Battalion attacked a French convoy 2 kilometres from Binh Ba Subsector and killed Lieutenant Colonel de la Maissoneuve, the sector commander, a captain, a number of officers, and 60 soldiers of the local '65th BVN Battalion [sic]'[12] (BVN: *Bataillon Vietnamien*).

8 Phan Ngọc Danh and Trần Quang Toại, *Lịch Sử Đấu Tranh Cách Mạng Của Huyện Long Đất* [*The history of the revolutionary struggle in Long Dat district*], Nhà Xuất Bản Đồng Nai [The Dong Nai Publishing House], Đồng Nai, 1986, hereafter 'the Long Dat History', p 70.

9 Le Minh Duc and Ho Song Quynh (eds), *The history of the armed forces of Chau Duc District (1945–2014)*, The Truth – National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2014, hereafter 'the Chau Duc History 2014', p 81.

10 Nguyễn Công Danh and Lê Minh Nghĩa (et al.), *Lịch sử Đấu Tranh Cách Mạng Của Đảng Bộ Và Nhân Dân Huyện Châu Đức (1930–2000)* [*The history of the revolutionary struggle of the Party Chapter and the people of Châu Đức District (1930–2000)*], Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Giả, [National Political Publishing House], Hà Nội, 2004, hereafter 'the Chau Duc History 2004', p 84.

11 The small village of Hat Dich was located in the vicinity of YS 3477, about 11 kilometres west of the Duc Thanh District Sub-Sector. The Hat Dich area was defined in a US 9 Infantry Division report as an area of 190 square kilometres, bounded by coordinates YS 2693, YS 4093, YS 4078 and YS 2478, containing the jungle area south of the Binh Son Rubber Plantation and east of Route 15 to Route 2, with the Thi Vai Mountains on the south. G. McGarrigle, '9th Div Operations', Vietnam Center and Archive Texas Tech (VCAT), Item No. 1071514010, Chapter 9, p 3 (Map).

12 Hồ Sĩ Thành, *Đặc Khu Rừng Sác* [*The Rung Sac Special Zone*], Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ [Youth Publishing House], Ho Chi Minh City, 2003, p 10.

The river route between Vung Tau and Saigon – via the Saigon, Long Tau and Soai Rap rivers – was only occasionally interrupted. On 26 May 1951, the Viet Minh's 300 Battalion sank the 8,000-ton French vessel *Saint Loubenbier* on the Long Tau River using limpet mines – this was the largest French vessel sunk during that conflict.

On 21 July 1952, a Viet Minh commando and security element, disguised as auxiliary troops, attacked the *Le Centre de Repos* officer recreation centre in Vung Tau. Twenty French were killed and 23 wounded – including women and children.

Post-Geneva

Under the Geneva Accords of 20 July 1954, large numbers of Viet Minh were 'regrouped'[13] from the South to North Vietnam. Over a 300-day period, about 90,000 Viet Minh reportedly regrouped, in phases, to North Vietnam from six assembly areas, including the Ham Tan-Xuyen Moc area (10,700). Many ex-Viet Minh, including men born in Phuoc Tuy, later infiltrated back into the South beginning in the early 1960s. In 1955, large numbers of Vietnamese Catholics moved from the North and were settled in the South. The government of Ngo Dinh Diem settled many of these refugees in Phuoc Tuy – principally in the villages of Binh Gia, Binh Ba and Phuoc Tinh, but also in villages along Route 15 including Phu My, Ong Trinh South, Phuoc Hoa, Lang Cat and Long Huong. The Saigon government established posts along Route 15 manned by the Civil Guard/Civil Defence Force (*Bao An* – later the Regional Forces) and the paramilitary Self-Defence Corps (*Dan Ve* – later the Popular Forces), but bandits from the Rung Sat continued to harass travellers and commercial traffic on Route 15. As noted, night movement was not possible along the route.

The Ba Ria History relates:

> In 1956, after many armed clashes with the Saigon government's armed forces, the Binh Xuyen[14] [a paramilitary gangster group in Saigon driven out by president Diem] were defeated, fled, and

13 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p 9 and fn 24.

14 The Binh Xuyen were formed in the early 1920s as a loose coalition of gangs and contract labourers. From 1945, Binh Xuyen forces fought against the Viet Minh and from 1949, having been allowed to monopolize gambling in Saigon-Cholon and the trucking industry, became a self-funded element of the Vietnamese National Army. In 1955, the Binh Xuyen were almost wiped out by the National Army in the Rung Sat region. In 1956, a number of Binh Xuyen fighters joined the then nascent communist forces in Ba Ria Province.

> lodged their troops scattered throughout the Rung Sac (Long Thanh), the Nui Thi Vai Mountains, and the Giong Chau Pha jungle … At the beginning of 1957, the Eastern Region Inter-Provincial Committee deployed the unit led by Nguyen Quoc Thanh from the Rung Sac (Long Thanh) to the Giong jungle (Hat Dich) to build a base … in the Bung Lung (Hat Dich) area.[15]

At the beginning of 1958, the Military Committee of the communists' Eastern Region appointed Le Minh Thinh to take a section and a radio to Ba Ria and organise an armed force. After more than '20 days of cutting through the jungle and crossing hills, the group of Eastern Region military cadre safely reached central Phuoc Tuy'.[16] In June 1958, a provincial 40-strong VC C-40 Company was established with a base in the Bung Lung (Hat Dich) area in the west of the province.[17]

North Vietnam's Politburo Resolution No. 15 of January 1959 stated: 'The Way for the Vietnamese Revolution in the South' directed a 'violent revolution in the South'.[18] On 12 March 1960, as part of the broader Dong Khoi ('Simultaneous Uprising') movement, the Ba Ria Province Committee's C-40 Company attacked Binh Ba village on Route 2. This attack reportedly 'began the armed uprising movement across the whole Province'.[19] In April 1960, a second VC company, C-45 Company, was raised and operated to the west of Route 2 as a mobile unit to defend the Hat Dich base and to harass both Route 2 and Route 15. These elements operated under the communists' Chau Thanh District (retitled Chau Duc District in 1965).[20] With declining security, in 1960 the Saigon government established a Route 15 Security Task Force to protect commerce on the route and provide safety for Saigon elites travelling to their villas in Vung Tau and Long Hai. Nguyen Van Buu, a Vung Tau businessman, reportedly funded 300 quasi-official paramilitary soldiers to ensure his seafood shipments reached Saigon on Route 15.[21] In Phuoc Tuy, a 50-man Political Action Unit – the forerunner to the 1 Commando

15 The Ba Ria History, p 13.

16 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p 11.

17 While C-40 was established in August 1958, to maintain secrecy it was only officially announced in February 1960. Later, C-40 became C-440 and subsequently joined with C-445 to form D445 Provincial Battalion in early 1965.

18 Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's war: An international history of the war for peace in Vietnam*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2012, pp 39–43. See also Tai Sung An, 'Hanoi's 15th Plenum Resolution – 1959', VCAT, Item No. 23130010009.

19 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p 12.

20 VC Chau Duc District was formed from Chau Thanh and Duc Thanh Districts on 24 May 1965.

21 S. Methven, *Laughter in the shadows: A CIA memoir*, Naval Institute Press, 2014, pp 105–106.

Company/Province Reconnaissance Unit – operated in concert with these 'shrimp soldiers'.[22] However, commercial enterprises in Vung Tau utilising Route 15 to Saigon continued to pay the VC for safe passage. While strategically important for the movement of cargo to Saigon, also any 'closure to Saigonese holiday-makers due to enemy action tended to lower morale in the capital and serve as an indicator of Viet Cong encroachment'.[23]

According to the communist Tan Thanh District history, at this time 'the revolutionary movement along Route 15 was weak', and the senior communist cadre Tran Ngoc Buu was dispatched to the area to conduct 'armed propaganda' and develop an 'infrastructure' network.[24] Soon after, in July 1960 at Ben Tau near Hat Dich village, C-45 Company attacked and destroyed a 55-strong Civil Guard (i.e. Regional Force) force from the Phu My Special Sector, seizing 50 weapons including three machine guns. Hat Dich village became the first 'liberated village' in the province. The Chau Duc History relates that in December 1962:

> the C-45 Provincial Unit combined with village guerrillas to attack and destroy the Binh Ba post, seized a large number of weapons, ammunition and food, and captured three Western commercial managers … [who] were taken to the base for education and urged to pay taxes to the Front for their exploitation of the rubber.[25]

In 1962, the population of the province, excluding Vung Tau, was reportedly about 117,000. The Route 15 area was only lightly populated, with the villages and hamlets astride the route dependent on rice cultivation, fishing in the Rung Sat, salt processing, charcoal production and wood gathering in the foothills. The villagers along Route 15 were forbidden by the government to move more than 1,000 metres from the road. From Ba Ria Town north-west to the Bien Hoa Province border – a distance of 28 kilometres – the settlements were: Long Huong village, Phu/Chu Hai hamlet, Kim Hai hamlet, Long Cat hamlet, Phuoc Hoa village, Ong Trinh hamlets (north and south) and Phu My village

22 Methven, *Laughter in the shadows*, p 106.
23 Ian McNeill, *To Long Tan: The Australian Army and the Vietnam War 1950–1966*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, p 11.
24 Unknown authors, *Lịch sử Đấu Tranh Cách Mạng Của Nhân Dân Huyện Tân Thành* [*The history of the people's revolutionary struggle in Tan Thanh District*], Vung Tau, 2014.
25 The Chau Duc History 2014, p 112.

(2 kilometres from the border with Long Thanh District of Bien Hoa Province). The total population along Route 15 within Phuoc Tuy was about 18,000 – 15 per cent of the province's population.

In 1962, the VC's C-40 and C-45 Companies were reportedly combined as the C-445 Provincial Company (D445 Battalion's predecessor), and, with the C-20 Chau Thanh District Company, continued to operate principally in the more populated central and eastern regions of the province in the Binh Ba, Long Phuoc, Dat Do and Long Hai areas. In early 1962, the Saigon government established the headquarters of the Phuoc Bien Special Zone in a camp beside Route 15, 2 kilometres north of Phu My village, to control security across Bien Hoa, Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy provinces. To improve security on Route 15, artillery detachments of 105 mm howitzers were based at Phu My, Ong Trinh and Ba Ria; and six of the province's 23 strategic hamlets[26] were developed along Route 15 (at My Xuan, Hoi Bai, Kim Hai, Chu Hai, Phuoc Hoa and Phu My). Subsequently, from October 1962, strategic hamlets were also developed at Ong Trinh, Phuoc Loc and Lang Cat, and the strategic hamlet at Phuoc Hoa was further strengthened and incorporated the villagers of Hoi Bai.

The VC also developed fortified 'combat villages' with complex tunnel systems – the largest at Long Tan and Long Phuoc. On 5 March 1963, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and Regional Force (RF) forces – with supporting M113 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and 105 mm artillery – attacked the fortified VC village of Long Phuoc. Exploiting the extensive system of tunnels, the VC forces (the C-45 Provincial Company and the C-20 District Company) reportedly held out for 44 days before withdrawing.

In November 1963, president Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown in a military coup and a period of significant instability began with rapidly changing governments. The strategic hamlet program faltered, and the VC made significant gains in the countryside.[27] In February 1964, a high-

26 In 1962, the focus of the strategic hamlet program was on the six provinces around Saigon (including Phuoc Tuy) and Kontum Province. Initially, 11,316 strategic hamlets were planned country-wide. In Phuoc Tuy, as at 31 July 1963, reportedly 135 of the province's planned 162 strategic hamlets had been completed – covering 121,000 (87 per cent of the province's population), and 171 hamlet militiamen had been trained: see US Operations Mission (USOM), 'Notes on Strategic Hamlets', 15 August 1963, VCAT, Item No. 239070130036.

27 On 23 February 1964, the program was 'revitalized' as the 'New Life Hamlets' ('Ap Doi Moi') program – and in 1965 retitled 'Secure Hamlets' ('Ap Tan Sinh' – i.e. still 'New Life Hamlets', but in Sino-Vietnamese).

level CIA report for the US Administration noted that 'a recent report from COMUSMACV [the commanding general of MACV] estimates that in 23 of the Republic of Vietnam's 43 provinces, the Viet Cong dominate more that 50 percent of the area'. The same report states that 'the Viet Cong exercise 80% control in Phuoc Tuy. It thus appears that Phuoc Tuy should be considered as a possible addition to the list of [13] critical provinces'.[28]

Security responsibility for Phuoc Tuy fell to the ARVN III Corps Zone's 33 Tactical Zone – with its major force as the 5 ARVN Infantry Division, under Colonel (later president) Nguyen Van Thieu, headquartered in Bien Hoa. In the period 1963–66, the VC Ba Ria Province Committee group (up to 60 strong) and its special action element was centred in their Bung Lung base in a treed valley between the Nui Ong Trinh and the Nui Dinh, in the far south of the Hat Dich zone. Also at this time, to escape security forces, communist youth activists from Saigon – the Thanh Doan Saigon-Gia Dinh – established operating bases in the Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh hills.

The 'Sea Trail' from the north and the Battle of Binh Gia

The communist headquarters south of the Central Highlands – the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)[29] – began preparations in 1962 to receive arms and ammunition by sea from the North at two principal locations – Loc An/Ho Tram on the Phuoc Tuy coast north of Phuoc Hai village, and at Ben Tre (Kien Hoa Province) in the northern Mekong Delta. From Ben Tre, the off-loaded materiel – principally arms and ammunition – was moved north to Can Gio (in the Rung Sat), then via the Thi Vai River to Route 15, where porters of the Group 445B unit moved the loads across Route 15 (principally near Phu My) and up into the Hat Dich base area, and northward into the major VC base area of

28 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 'Memorandum/Weekly Report OCI No.1061/64: The Situation in South Vietnam', 28 February 1964, VCAT, Item No. 0410102003.

29 COSVN: directed from Hanoi and located in the Cambodia/South Vietnam border area north-west of Saigon, COSVN was the communist political and military headquarters responsible for South Vietnam south of the Central and Southern Highlands – an area termed 'Nam Bo' (equating to the French colonial 'Cochin China' region). The COSVN area covered 32 of the South's 44 provinces and nominally 69 per cent of its population.

War Zone D.[30] Landings were also made near Phuoc Hoa farther south on Route 15, and materiel was portered northward on the track between the Nui Toc Tien and the Nui Dinh into the Hat Dich base. The activities of Group 445B reportedly developed the Hac Dich base area, including Base Area 303, as a 'Thanh Dịa' ('Citadel') of COSVN's Eastern Nam Bo Region.[31] On 3 October 1963, the first shipment of 20 tonnes was landed on the coast at Loc An north of Phuoc Hai from a 40-tonne vessel – including 1,500 rifles, 24 machine guns and two 75 mm recoilless rifles (RCLs). By November 1963, the 'Sea Trail' to Loc An and Ben Tre regularly moved large tonnages, supplying the VC multi-regimental force with weapons for the Battle of Binh Gia (18 kilometres north of Ba Ria Town) in December 1964 and January 1965 – including AK-47s, B-40s and ammunition. The VC force at the Battle of Binh Gia, under a 'Campaign Headquarters', comprised the 271 and the 272 Main Force Regiments and the local C-445 and C-440 Companies. The communist victory at Binh Gia was a significant defeat for the Saigon government. Three ARVN ranger battalions (30, 33 and 38) suffered heavy casualties, and the 428-strong 4 Marine Battalion suffered 112 killed and 71 wounded. Three US advisers were captured: a captain, a sergeant and a private first class.

Route 15 insecure – and 'accommodation'

On 24 November 1964, an element of the 274 VC Regiment ambushed a four-vehicle ARVN convoy on Route 15 near Phuoc Hoa village – 15 ARVN/RF were killed (including a major) and 10 were wounded. A US Army sergeant was also killed. Four vehicles were destroyed – including two armoured vehicles – and three .30 calibre machine guns, one 60 mm mortar, 27 individual weapons and two radios were seized by the VC force. The MACV account summarised: 'VC activity along the heavily-travelled Route 15 is sporadic; the area of the ambush is, however,

30 Located about 40 kilometres north-west of Saigon, War Zone D was the VC designation for a major base area encompassing roughly 2,000 square kilometres that in 1965–66 was a haven for the 271, 272 and 273 Regiments – and, occasionally, the 274 Regiment. In the last days of June 1965, the US 173 Airborne Brigade – including 1 RAR – conducted a major search and destroy operation into the western area of War Zone D.

31 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p 31, fn 108, for a detailed explanation of Group 445B and its activities.

prone to such incidents'.[32] On 17 December 1964, the 272 VC Regiment reportedly destroyed six ARVN armoured vehicles on the route – but this may have been the foregoing ambush of 24 November 1964.

During 1964, the senior Chau Thanh District communist cadre reportedly negotiated an 'accommodation/local détente' with the ARVN officer based at Phuoc Hoa responsible for the security of Route 15, Major Nguyen Van Phuoc, who provided 50 M26 grenades and 2,000 rounds of ammunition to Vo Van Lot (the commander of VC Intelligence Unit 316). According to the Dat Do History:

> Thanks to our winning over of Major Phuoc,[33] we were able to render ineffective a whole Ranger Group (nine companies – more than 800 men), completely control Route 15, and safely move hundreds of tons of weapons from the Rung Sac across the Route to the Hat Dich.[34]

Such 'accommodation' arrangements – sometimes euphemistically referred to as 'mutual self-limitations' between isolated Territorial Forces along Route 15 and the VC were not uncommon.[35]

---

32 US MACV, 'Military Report, 21–28 November 1964', 30 November 1964, VCAT, Item No. F015800030978.

33 The suborning of Major Phuoc is also related in Trần Văn Khánh (et al.) and the Executive Committee of the Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Party, *Lịch sử Đảng bộ tỉnh Bà Rịa–Vũng Tàu 1930–1975* [*The history of the Party in Baria–Vung Tau Province 1930–1975*], Nhà Xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia [National Political Publishing House], Hà Nội, 2000, hereafter 'the Province Party History'. The Long Dat History refers to Major Phuoc's activities as lasting until January 1965, and also notes that Phuoc had formerly been a Binh Xuyen commander. Formed in the 1920s, the Binh Xuyen was a militarised group of heavily armed criminal gangs. The Binh Xuyen were almost wiped out by the Saigon government in 1955, but their forces were later used against the Vietnamese communists.

34 The Dat Do History relates: 'Our military proselytising cadre assigned a cadre to his [Major Phuoc's] unit to explain the Revolution's policies to Phuoc and his soldiers, and sent two Province reconnaissance cadre to be introduced to Phuoc – and proposed that Phuoc take them into the Phuoc Bien Commando Base [i.e. the Ranger base at Phu My airfield] to assess the situation.' (Trần Quang Toại and Đặng Tấn Hương (eds), *Lịch Sử Đấu Tranh Và Xây Dựng Của Đảng Bộ, Quân Và Dân Huyện Đất Đỏ (1930–2005)* [*The history of the struggle and development of the Party Committee, the forces and the people of Dat Do District (1930–2005)*], Nhà Xuất Bản Tổng Hợp Đồng Nai [Dong Nai Collective Publishing House], Biên Hòa, 2006, hereafter 'the Dat Do History'.)

35 The Territorial Forces (RF and PF) elements totalled about 4,000 men: all were understrength, some PF platoons had only 18–20 men, some RF Companies had only 30–80 men. The personal weapons of the RF and PF soldiers were the Second World War–vintage M1 and M2 carbines and the heavier Garand rifle. These Territorial Force troops were not capable of engaging VC Main Force regiments armed with AK-47 and SKS automatic rifles, RPD light machine guns and B-40 rocket-propelled grenades. Main Force VC elements were equipped with AK-47s from very early January 1965.

The 10 ARVN Division was formed in May 1965 and, headquartered in Xuan Loc, had responsibility for the 33 Tactical Zone. Its 52 Regiment often deployed into Phuoc Tuy Province. On 1 January 1967, the division was retitled the 18 ARVN Division. On 10 July 1965, 1st Battalion of the 274 VC Regiment[36] ambushed a 14-vehicle convoy – including two armoured vehicles – on Route 15 in the Phu My area. Some of the captured weapons were reportedly passed to local VC forces.

In July 1965, the US Provincial Representative reported that:

> The security situation in the districts of Duc Thanh and Xuyen Moc continues to remain critical as only the district towns [capitals] are under GVN control. All roads leading into the district capital of Duc Thanh and Xuyen Moc are cut and under VC control … The cutting of Hwy #15 has caused an economic pinch on incoming supplies and out-going marketings of fish. Much of the economy of this Province is based upon the fishing industry, and the cutting of Hwy #15 has stopped the flow of this commodity to the Saigon markets.[37]

36 Based on the 800 Dong Nai Battalion, and with infiltrated cadre from the 308 NVA Division, the 274 Regiment was founded in War Zone D north-east of Saigon in January 1964. The Dong Nai River flows south from the Central Highlands, through Bien Hoa, and joins the Saigon River 29 kilometres north-east of Ho Chi Minh City. In October 1964, the 274 Regiment assisted with the movement of arms and materiel landed on the coast north of Phuoc Hai for the Binh Gia Campaign. The regiment's principal battlefield was in southern Long Khanh Province – ambushing Route 20, attacking the railway line and strategic hamlets – including at Vo Su and Gia Ray. On 24 November 1964, its 800 Battalion attacked an ARVN convoy on Route 15 near Phu My, inflicting heavy casualties. In 1965–66, the regiment developed base areas in the Hat Dich and in the east of Route 2 in northern Phuoc Tuy Province. On the founding of the 5 VC Division in September 1965, the 274 and the 275 Regiments were subordinated to that formation. In October 1965, the 274's strength was 1,977. The 274 Regiment also ambushed ARVN troops on Route 15 on 1 August and 10 August 1966. Based on captured documents, in June 1966, the strengths of the Regiment's battalions were: 800 Battalion (formerly D1 unit) – 411; 265 Battalion (D2) – 401; 308 Battalion (D3) – 316. The Regimental Headquarters and its support companies (C16 to C23 inclusive) and the convalescent unit numbered about a further 660 personnel, for a total regimental strength of about 1,790. Seasonally, effective combat strength was seriously depleted by malaria (e.g. in August 1968, of 141 hospitalised 274 Regiment troops, 113 patients had malaria, 14 were for 'other causes', and four were wounded in action (WIA)).

37 USOM, 'Reports of USOM Provincial Representatives for the Month Ending 31 July 1965', 31 July 1965, VCAT, Item No. 6-20-19B7-116-UA17-95_001492. Also available at: spartanhistory.kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/6/32/6-20-19B7-116-UA17-95_001492.pdf. The next report for August 1965 noted the 'spurt of inflation caused by the closing of Route 15 to Saigon'.

At the end of August 1965, MACV assessed that 62.6 per cent of Phuoc Tuy's population were within 'dark blue' areas – that is, under government control – but 12.5 per cent were in 'red' areas under VC control.[38]

In early September 1965, COSVN formed the 5 VC Infantry Division under its Military Region 1 to command the 274 and the 275 Main Force Regiments – the 275 Regiment had originally been raised in the Mekong Delta. The division's base was in the May Tao Mountains with its initial area of operations in Long Khanh, Binh Tuy and Phuoc Tuy Provinces. The D445 Provincial Mobile Battalion was officially formed on 19 September 1965 – and only rarely operated in the Nui Dinh and Nui Thi Vai hills, and is not known to have harassed Route 15.[39]

In mid-October 1965, VC Military Region 1 (later Military Region 7 from late 1967) issued an 'Intelligence Order' directing province military intelligence staffs to provide information on the movement and deployment of enemy troops. Ba Ria was specifically cited: 'Observe the enemy movements on Route 15, especially on the route from Cap [i.e. Vung Tau] to Ba Ria and Phu My.'[40] In Bien Hoa Province, the Intelligence Order directed the observation of 'III Corps and the American and Australian troops [i.e. 1 RAR Battalion Group]'. Observation posts – 'Special Detachment – Route 15' – were established on the Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh features, manned by local VC elements, who reported to intelligence cadre equipped with high-frequency (HF) radios (US AN/GRC-9 or Chinese Communist 102E, 71B, transceivers). The US military signals intelligence (SIGINT) organisation in South Vietnam intercepted VC HF Morse communications and determined VC locations with direction-finding equipment.[41]

38 US MACV, 'US MACV Monthly Report of Rural Reconstruction Progress: 25 July – 25 August 1965', 11 September 1965, VCAT, Item No. F01570001007.

39 The battalion was actually formed earlier, on 23 February 1965, as the 'Ba Ria Province Concentrated Unit' with Bui Quang Chanh (aka Sau Chanh) 'as the "Battalion Commander'. For a detailed history of D445, see Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*.

40 The Intelligence Order by the G2 staff of Military Region 1 was captured by the US 25 Infantry Division on 18 May 1966, and the English translation can be found: 'Captured Documents (CDEC): Intelligence Order Stating That C2 Personnel Must Know the Enemies Tactical Position', VCAT, Item No. F034600110656, p 2.

41 For example, the headquarters of the 5 VC Division – nicknamed 'Fred' – was 'fixed' 25 times in the two months to 17 February 1966 in north-eastern Phuoc Tuy, south-eastern Long Khanh and in Binh Tuy Province.

The Rangers' victory on Route 15 at Kim Hai

On 11 November 1965, 3rd Battalion of the 275 VC Regiment attempted to ambush an ARVN convoy on Route 15 (the 52 Ranger Battalion and RF elements) at Kim Hai hamlet, Phuoc Hoa village (about 10 kilometres north-west of Ba Ria Town). However, forewarned, the ARVN force drove off the 275 Regiment elements and inflicted heavy casualties on the VC force.[42] However, the account in the 5 VC Division History relates a VC victory:

> From the beginning of November, Comrade Nguyen Thoi Bung [the 275th Regiment's commander – who later commanded the Regiment at the Battle of Long Tan in August 1966], together with Battalion Commander Hai Phung, engaged directly in the preparations for the battle on Route 15.[43] On 4 November, the 3rd Battalion deployed from its base at Song Ray to Long Thanh for the engagement. After three days of difficult and tiring movement, and avoiding discovery by enemy commandos and outposts, on 7 November the 3rd Battalion reached its fighting positions at the base of the Nui Thi Vai Mountain [sic]. The fighting strength of the battalion at this time was still low[44] – a company only had 40 weapons. The 1st Company (of the 1st Battalion) with a strength of only 45 was attached to the 3rd Battalion as a reinforcement. As a consequence, the problem required that the ambush had to be truly secret and a surprise if the intention to completely destroy two enemy companies and their vehicles was to be

42 The Ranger Force – the 3 and 4 Companies under the battalion executive officer – and the RF force were returning along Route 15 from an ambushing operation when they were warned by Phuoc Tuy Sector Headquarters and halted 2 kilometres short of the 275 Regiment ambush site. Air support from F-100 jet aircraft struck the VC positions. The Rangers reportedly recovered the first B-40 captured in South Vietnam.

43 This was the only significant engagement west of Route 2 involving the 275 VC Regiment during the period 1966 to early 1970. The ambush is mentioned briefly in 1 ATF's 'INTSUM No 1/66: Vung Tau', 21 May 1966 (AWM95 1/4/1) (as is the later 11–12 April 1966 battle against US forces during Operation Abilene at Tam Bo north of Nui Dat involving elements of the 274 VC Regiment, in a subsequent Intelligence Review: '1 ATF Intelligence Review No. 2', 29 October 1966, AWM95 1/4/14). See also 1 ATF, 'Troops Information Sheet No. 31, 13–19 February 1967', AWM95 1/4/30. The Kim Hai/Phuoc Hoa ambush is related in the Australian Army's official history, but the location is incorrectly cited as occurring at 'Binh Gia', and the outcome is incorrectly described as a win for the VC: 'The Viet Cong demonstrated their capacity to mount regimental-sized ambushes on 11 November 1965, when 275 Regiment ambushed and virtually destroyed the elite ARVN 52 Ranger Battalion near Binh Gia' (McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p 222).

44 However, captured 274 Regiment documents detail the strengths of the regiment's battalions in October 1965 as: 1st Battalion – 404; 2nd Battalion – 684; and 3rd Battalion – 486. The regiment's strength was 1,977.

> achieved … After a day of fierce fighting, the 3rd Battalion and the 1st Company of the 5th [i.e. 275th] Regiment had killed a large number of the enemy, inflicting heavy casualties on the 52nd Ranger Battalion and a Phuoc Tuy Sector provincial company, destroyed two helicopters, 16 mechanised vehicles, a jeep, captured six enemy and seized 12 weapons and two radios. We lost 16 comrades and a further 32 were wounded.[45]

According to a contemporary VC pamphlet titled *Victories in November 1965*, two Ranger companies were wiped out and 16 vehicles destroyed on 11 November 1965. However, as related in the 275 Regiment History,[46] a 'Traitor S' had defected and revealed the 275's ambush plans to the Ba Ria sector headquarters. Thus warned, the 52 Ranger Battalion force, the 701 RF Company, and the 31 RF Mechanised Platoon attacked and drove the compromised VC ambush force back into the hills. For defeating the 3rd Battalion/275 Regiment and 1 Company of its 1st Battalion at Kim Hai, the Vietnamese forces were awarded a US Presidential Citation on 18 November 1966.[47] A mid-November Saigon press report cited 'VC Piles Up Phuoc Le Ambush Toll for Burial: 150 Bodies Spotted in Village',[48] and a Joint US Public Affairs Office Report of 30 November 1965 noted '300' VC were killed in the action at Kim Hai.[49]

Soon after that engagement, US aircraft increased Operation Ranch Hand chemical defoliation missions in Phuoc Tuy Province[50] – spraying 60,000 litres in the period 18 December 1965 to 30 January 1966. This included missions to reduce roadside cover along Route 15 and the banks of the principal waterways in the Rung Sat.[51] In mid-December 1965,

---

45 Hồ Sơn Đài (ed.), *Lịch sử Su đoàn Bộ binh 5 (1965–2005)* [*The history of the 5th Infantry Division (1965–2005)*], Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân [The People's Army Publishing House], Hà Nội, 2005, hereafter 'the 5 VC Division History', pp 59–60.

46 Ho Son Dai – Senior Colonel (ed.), *The history of the 5th Infantry Regiment (1965–2015)*, The People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 2015.

47 Lyndon B. Johnson, 'Presidential Unit Citation Awarded to the 52d Ranger Battalion, Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and Attached Units', 18 November 1966.

48 *The Sunday Post*, Saigon, 14 November 1965.

49 JUSPAO Field Representative, 'Reports of USOM Provincial Representatives for Month Ending 30 November 1965', VCAT, Item No. 23970103001, p 30.

50 The inaugural Ranch Hand operations in South Vietnam were flown along Route 15 by US Air Force C-123 aircraft in the period 10–16 January 1962 at 150 feet and covering a 500-foot swathe – but avoiding crops.

51 After Operation Vaucluse, on 21 September 1966 1 ATF requested approval from Province Chief Lieutenant Colonel Le Duc Dat for defoliation in the Nui Dinh Hill mass because 'the foliage in this area provides concealment for VC movement and base areas'.

Chau Duc District ordered a five-day campaign on Route 15 of 'striking strategic hamlets, laying mines, digging holes on the road, and setting up mounds in the form of crocodiles' teeth'.[52]

1966: Route 15 queried in Washington – D445 into action – Vung Tau shelled

In US Senate Appropriation Hearings in late January 1966, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, was queried on the 'status of Route 15'. He responded: 'It is, I believe, closed at the present time, and if it isn't actually closed today it is closed off and on.' Senator Mansfield asked: 'Closed to the Americans?' Secretary McNamara responded: 'Well, it is not closed to a military convoy. We can fight our way through and over any road in the country, as a matter of fact. But it is closed to unarmed and unescorted traffic.'[53]

At the end of January 1966, the 2 Brigade/1 US Infantry Division conducted Operation Mallet – ambitiously described as 'a search and destroy operation to open Route 15'.[54] However, Phase 2 of the operation was conducted in the Binh Son area of Long Thanh District and did not extend into Phuoc Tuy Province.

On the other, eastern, side of the province, near the Minh Dam/Long Hai hills at Da Giang on Route 44 (Upper), the D445 Local Force Battalion ambushed a large group of ARVN trainees from the Long Hai non-commissioned officer (NCO) school on 8 January 1966. A MACV report noted 31 ARVN soldiers killed and 30 wounded – and three US advisers killed.[55] On Route 15, in January 1966, D445 Battalion reportedly ambushed and destroyed six trucks of the 'South Korean forces'.[56]

---

52 Captured document: 'Chau Duc District Directive', December 1965, USMACV/JGS Combined Document Exploitation Centre (CDEC), Saigon, Item No. 10-2287-66.

53 US Armed Services Committee, 'Appropriations, 89th Congress, S2792', 2 February 1966, VCAT, Item No. 2184815002, p 143.

54 A.G. Traas, *Engineers at war*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, 2010.

55 US MACV Military History Branch, 'Chronology of Significant Events during 1966', 27 April 1967, VCAT Item No. 13370149004.

56 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, p 56 and fn 197. That mention of South Korean troops may be a reference to the major RVNAF Operation Dan Tam 36 (late February – early March 1966) that extended into the Minh Dam Mountains. A Republic of Korea engineer company participated in that operation, part of the Republic of Korea's 'Dove Force' based at Bien Hoa from late February 1965.

On 12 March 1966, a force comprising VC sappers (240C Company) and an artillery element from 5 VC Division moved from the Minh Dam base and attacked and shelled the Vung Tau airfield and the Chi Linh Rural Development Cadre Training Centre in Vung Tau. According to a rallier from the 240C Sapper Company, the unit incorporated a platoon from D445 Battalion and had undergone training directed by Sau Chanh, the commander of D445 Battalion, prior to the attack on Vung Tau. According to the 5 VC Division History:

> In only 45 minutes of combat, 138 rounds of 82mm mortar and 75mm RCL were fired – together with 70 other rounds, and 25 B40s. The artillery and sappers of the 4th Regiment [274 Regiment] killed and wounded a large number of the enemy – including a senior officer [of major to full colonel rank], and destroyed nine enemy aircraft.[57]

The biography of Tong Viet Duong – the commander of the '70-strong sapper company', claimed 'almost 300 Americans were killed at the airfield while watching an outdoor movie – including a colonel'[58] and 37 aircraft (C130, AD6, T28 and L19s) were destroyed. The Royal Australian Air Force Caribou Flight at Vung Tau reported a shelling by 60 mortars on that date – four bombs impacted near the flight's hangar, and two DHC-4 Caribou were damaged.

About 17 per cent living under VC Control in Phuoc Tuy

According to a US military report in March 1966, of Phuoc Tuy and Vung Tau's population of 138,000 (Phuoc Tuy, 100,000; Vung Tau, 38,000), 87,000 lived in government-controlled areas, 22,000 in areas 'undergoing pacification', 12,000 in areas considered 'relatively free of VC', and 17,000 'living in VC-controlled areas'.[59] A curfew was in effect between 10 pm and 4 am – but was 'not rigidly enforced' and the 'VC infrastructure was established down to village and hamlet level'.[60] 'Approximately 32% of the population is Pro-GVN, 12% Pro-VC, and

57 The 5 VC Division History, p 74.
58 Xuan Bao, *The story of a war hero: Tong Viet Duong*, Dong Nai On-Line, 6 September 2012.
59 US 1st Infantry Division, 'Combat Operations After Action Report – Operation Abilene, April 1966', Defense Technical Information Centre (DTIC), AD387599.
60 Ibid.

56% are neutral'.[61] The VC had 'a high degree of control over the rural population and had little difficulty moving throughout the Province'.[62] The CIA assessed the VC 'militia and political cadre' in the province's 35 villages numbered '2.956'.[63]

In the period 30 March – 15 April 1966, the US 1 Infantry Division (with 173 Airborne Brigade that included the Australian 1 RAR Battalion Group) conducted Operation Abilene in Phuoc Tuy and Long Khanh Provinces. Operation Abilene had the aim of 'destroying the 94th [i.e. the 274] VC Regiment, the 5th [i.e. the 275] VC Regiment, and the May Tao Secret Zone'.[64] Support bases were established in the Courtenay Plantation area near the Long Khanh/Phuoc Tuy border from 29 March and subsequently farther south at the Binh Ba airstrip. In a 'southern' phase of Operation Abilene, on 4 April 1966, two US battalions conducted a search and destroy operation north and north-east of the VC-controlled village of Long Tan while an ARVN force searched the village – and then moved the villagers to Dat Do, Long Dien and Hoa Long.

VC victory at Tam Bo

1 RAR returned to Bien Hoa from Operation Abilene's Binh Ba logistic base area on 8–9 April 1966 by road and air to prepare for Operation Denver in the Song Be area of Phuoc Long Province.[65] On 11 April, Charlie Company/2nd Battalion of 16 Regiment of the US 1 Infantry Division engaged a VC force that included '800 Battalion' (i.e. 1/274 VC Regiment) in north-eastern Phuoc Tuy – about 5 kilometres south of the Long Khanh/Phuoc Tuy border and about 8 kilometres east of

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid. The US MACV 'Monthly Report of Revolutionary Development Progress: Population and Area Control' for May 1966 (dated 15 June 1966, VCAT, Item No. F01500010098), later showed Phuoc Tuy as 65 per cent 'controlled', with 24 per cent 'undergoing clearance' and 11.5 per cent 'under VC control'. At the end of June 1966, according to MACV, 70 hamlets in the province were classified as 'secured', six 'undergoing securing' and 35 'undergoing clearing'. Of the province's population, 65,900 were deemed 'secure' – that is, 64.3 per cent. US MACV, 'MACV Monthly Report of Revolutionary Development Progress: 1–30 June 1966', 15 July 1966, VCAT, Item No. F015700010112.

63 However, these figures were not considered 'completely accurate' due to 'input limitations'. CIA, Director of Current Intelligence Memorandum, 'Viet Cong Strength by Village', 12 May 1966, VCAT, Item No. F02920030138.

64 1 RAR, 'OPORD 7/66, Bien Hoa', 24 March 1966, AWM95 7/1/69.

65 US 1st Infantry Division, 'Combat Operations After Action Report – Operation Abilene, April 1966', DTIC, AD387599. On 8 April 1966, D445 Battalion's 4 Company mortared the US 1 Division support base at Binh Ba airstrip.

Route 2. Initially unsupported by other US companies, the 134-strong Charlie Company suffered 48 killed in action (KIA) and 58 wounded in action (WIA). Reportedly, the bodies of 41 VC were found on the battlefield, and 100–150 VC were assessed by MACV as having been killed or wounded in the engagement. That engagement on 11 April 1966 is known as the Battle of Cam My in US records and as the Battle of Tam Bo in Vietnamese communist accounts.[66]

Increased interdiction on Route 15 and in the Rung Sat

In late April 1966, the VC Chau Duc District directed their guerrilla elements on Route 15 in Chu Hai, Phuoc Hoa and Phu My villages to develop 'American Killing Belts' along Route 15. On 19 May 1966, the Ba Ria Province Unit assigned demolition tasks on Route 15 and on Route 2 to the Chau Duc District Unit – to counter US operations. West of Route 15, by early 1966, COSVN had established the Rung Sat Special Zone (Group 10/T.10) – with a reported strength of 600, to support the movement of materiel from Ben Het in the upper Mekong Delta and to interdict shipping transiting the Rung Sat. On 26 August 1966, Group 10 sappers attacked a US vessel, the *Baton Rouge Victory* (8,500 tons), on the Long Tau River with two limpet mines. Seven American civilian sailors were killed, and the vessel's captain was forced to run the ship aground.[67]

Clearing Long Phuoc and Long Tan – mid-1966

In the period 17–21 May, in the first phase of Operation Hardihood, the US 173 Airborne Brigade (without 1 RAR) and 3/43 Battalion of the ARVN 10 Division cleared the tunnels and bunkers of the VC's fortified

66 The battle took place at YS 5408620 – about 4 kilometres east of the site of the late September 1971 'Battle of Nui Le', when 4 RAR/NZ engaged elements of the 33 NVA Regiment. Detailed VC accounts are available in the captured notebook of the second in command of the 274 Regiment, Nguyễn Nam Hưng: see VCAT, Item No. F03460056029 (CDEC Log 11-1253-66 – with the Vietnamese text in CDEC Log 11-1259-66). The Battle of Tầm Bố is also recounted in Hưng's 2006 memoir: Nguyễn Nam Hưng – Major General, *Một Đời Chinh Chiến* [*A life at war*], Nhà Xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, Hà Nội, 2006.

67 Group 10 – later the 10 Sapper Regiment – reportedly lost 631 personnel killed during the war (319 Northerners and 312 Southerners).

Long Phuoc village. Elements of D445 and the Chau Duc District's 21 Company (C-21) resisted strongly, and the 173's 1/503 Battalion lost 19 killed and 90 wounded in the battle.[68] Half of Long Phuoc's 3,000 villagers were moved to Hoa Long, and others to Dat Do and to Long Dien.

The 1st Australian Task Force arrives

The 1st Australian Task Force Headquarters (HQ 1 ATF) was formally activated in Vung Tau on 20 May 1966. As agreed in the 17 March 1966 Military Working Arrangement with MACV, its directive included 'to conduct operations related to the security of Highway 15, as required'.[69] On 12 May 1966, Lieutenant General JO Seaman, commander II Field Force Vietnam (II FFV), issued his Campaign Directive for the 1966 wet season that included a task for 1 ATF: 'to clear and secure route QL15 from Vung Tau to Ba Ria [sic] and LTL2 [i.e. Route 2] within sector in coordination with appropriate ARVN commanders'.[70] On 19 May 1966, the Australian Chief of the General Staff expanded on 1 ATF's role, stating:

> The military reason for the deployment of the Australian Task Force in Phuoc Tuy Province under national command was to improve the military situation so that Route 15 from Vung Tau to Bien Hoa can be used for major military movements. This is required to allow the development of the port of Vung Tau in order to relieve the congestion of military shipping in the Saigon area.[71]

68 According to accounts of the fighting by the Ba Ria Province Headquarters dated 3 June 1966: 'In the period 17–25 May 1966 D445 Battalion – in coordination with Chau Duc District troops and the Long Phuoc guerrillas, killed 556 Americans and 45 wounded.' VC losses were reportedly 10 killed and 25 wounded. Captured Documents CDEC Log 09-1885-66, 29 August 1966, VCAT, Item No. F034600822587.

69 Mc Neill, *To Long Tan*, pp 238–240.

70 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p 240 and endnote 36, p 534.

71 McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p 238.

Vietnamese Government security forces in Phuoc Tuy in mid-1966

In June 1966, government troops in Phuoc Tuy and Vung Tau comprised 3rd Battalion of the 43 Regiment/10 ARVN Infantry Division, the 52 Ranger Battalion, 16 RF companies, 22 Popular Force (PF) platoons, and the 1 Commando Company (later the Provincial Reconnaissance Unit – PRU). The ARVN National Training Centre was located at Van Kiep on Ba Ria's eastern edge, and an ARVN NCO Training Centre operated near Long Hai village.

Along Route 15, the 701 RF Company was at Phu My, and the 673 RF Company was distributed between Ong Trinh North and Ong Trinh South. PF platoons had been established at Phuoc Hoa and Long Huong villages.[72] The RF and PF were under the command of the province chief/military sector commander, Lieutenant Colonel Le Duc Dat,[73] and those along Route 15 were under the control of Long Le district subsector at Hoa Long, commanded by Lieutenant Tran Tan Phat.[74] The 40-strong MACV Team 89 advisory team – headed by a lieutenant colonel – included Captain Mike Wells (AATTV) from early June 1966 as the operations and training adviser at sector headquarters in Ba Ria. Team 89 advisers also served in the subsectors at Long Le (Hoa Long), Long Dien and Dat Do; and 20 Team 78 personnel were assigned to the National Training Centre at Van Kiep and the NCO Training School at Long Hai. The 3rd Battalion of the ARVN 43 Regiment was located on Route 2 on Ba Ria's northern outskirts.

At the end of June 1966, according to MACV, 70 hamlets in the province were classified as 'secured', six 'undergoing securing' and 35 were 'undergoing clearing'. Of the province's population, 65,900 (i.e. 64.3 per cent) were deemed 'secure'; 3,800 of the population

72 By early October 1966, prior to 5 RAR's Operation Canberra/Robin, RF deployments on Route 15 were 578 RF Company at YS 285630 (Phuoc Hoa village); 609 RF Company at YS 264673 (Ap Ong Trinh); and 701 RF Company at YS 252745 (Phu My village). An ARVN unit occupied the Phu My post, 2 kilometres north of the village.

73 Lieutenant Colonel Le Duc Dat (born 1928) was the province chief from early 1964 until September 1967, when he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Truoc. Subsequently, in April 1972, during the communist Nguyen Hue Offensive, Colonel Le Duc Dat was killed at Tan Canh in the Central Highlands when commanding the 22 ARVN Infantry Division. Posthumously, he was appointed brigadier.

74 Phat was replaced in the second half of 1966 by Captain Vo Sanh Kim.

(i.e. 3.7 per cent) were reportedly under VC control.[75] This was a significant improvement over the MACV assessments for previous months. At the end of March 1966, VC control of the population had been reported as 17.1 per cent, at the end of April 15.6 per cent, and at the end of May 11.5 per cent. The resettlement of the villagers from Long Tan and Long Phuoc – and the location of 1 ATF adjacent to Hoa Long – significantly reduced the extent of the population under VC control.

The VC in Phuoc Tuy in mid-1966[76]

Subordinate to the VC's Military Region 1, the Ba Ria Province[77] Unit had approximately 16 subordinate elements and entities. The principal elements of the Province Unit's headquarters were a 'Staff' (73 members),[78] 'Political' personnel (27) and military staff (46). The Province Unit's operative elements were D445 Battalion (about 380 strong), a Ba Ria Town Special Action Unit (C610/982 – 34 members), the Long Dat District Unit (159), the Chau Duc District Unit (about 110), the Xuyen Moc District Unit (29), a small province reconnaissance unit, a rear services element, a medical element (46), a prisoner of war camp (14) and a military training school (18). Additionally, the Ba Ria Province Unit commanded, through its three district units, several village guerrilla units and militia elements (including at Phu My, Phuoc Hoa and Phu Hai

75 US MACV, 'MACV Monthly Report of Revolutionary Development Progress: 1–30 June 1966', 15 July 1966, VCAT, Item No. F015700010112. The report noted that the areas on the map depiction were 'not precise' and were only a 'rough approximation'.

76 The figures provided here have been compiled from captured documents in Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, Annex J, p 1, fnn 1–6.

77 In the following years, several reorganisations occurred that modified the geographic extent of 'Ba Ria'. In late 1966, the Viet Cong Military Region 1 (T1 – Eastern Nam Bo) was re-organised to comprise three provinces: Tay Ninh, Thu Dau Mot and Ba Bien. Ba Bien Province then comprised the former Ba Ria Province together with three districts of Bien Hoa Province (Long Thanh, Trang Bom and Binh Son) and districts of Long Khanh Province (including Dinh Quan).

78 'Staff' included the Finance and Economy Section that managed the budget – including tax collection. For example, in Chau Duc District, 10 per cent of farm produce was to be collected as tax in 1970. The Viet Cong also levied 'industrial taxes' on shops, vehicles, brick kilns, timber, sand, alcohol, etc.

on Route 15), and the VC Infrastructure[79] (VCI – including the Party and front entities). The VC province headquarters had encrypted HF Morse communications with Military Region 1 (later Military Region 7), and with its principal subordinate military units and districts. However, a primary means of contact within the province was by courier ('commoliaison') and employing a postal system utilising 'cover designators' and 'Letter Box Numbers'.[80] Also subordinate to VC Military Region 1, the 274 and 275 VC Main Force Regiments of 5 VC Division were the VC Main Force elements that operated within the province.

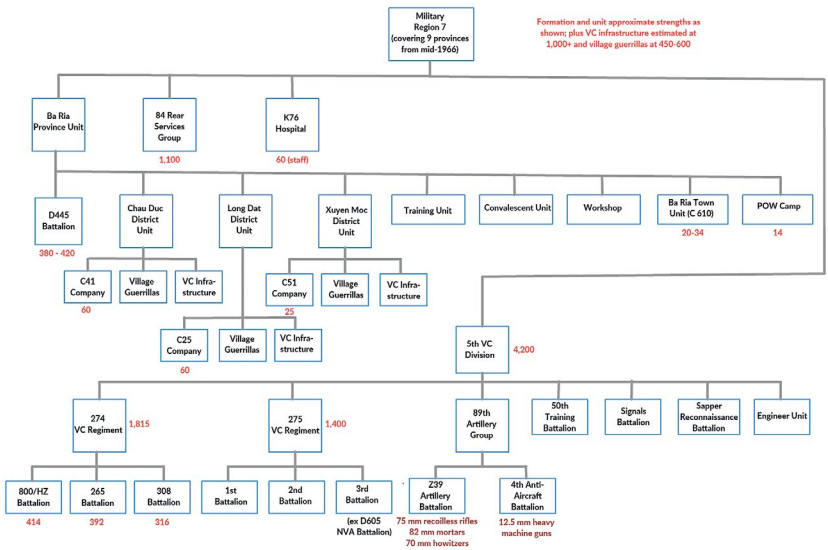

Figure A.2: VC organisation in Phuoc Tuy Province in mid-1966.
Source: Drawn and produced by Ron Boxall from details provided by Ernest Chamberlain.

79 The primary agency that directed communist efforts in the South was the People's Revolutionary Party – the southern arm of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP). The VWP managed the war in the southern half of South Vietnam through its Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), reinstituted in January 1961 to replace the Xu Uy Nam Bo (Nam Bo Regional Committee). Party structures controlled all geographic entities, military units and front organisations. In the South, the 'umbrella' front organisation was the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, formed in December 1960. Subsequently, a Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) was formed on 8 June 1969.
80 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, fn 200.

A 1 ATF view of the enemy

Reviewing VC activity in Phuoc Tuy in May 1966, Brigadier David Jackson declared that the province 'was not a backwater'.[81] 1 ATF's first intelligence summary (INTSUM),[82] supporting Operation Hardihood in central Phuoc Tuy, did not report any VC elements in the Route 15 area – but noted that the route 'was subject to VC interdiction'. Enemy forces listed as operating in the province comprised the 2,000-strong 274 VC Main Force Regiment (also known as the Dong Nai Regiment, 4 Regiment, 94 Regiment, Group 94, Q764 and Q4) and the 275 VC Main Force Regiment (1,800 troops – also known as the 5 Regiment, Group 45, Group 54, Q765 and Q5) – both formations of the 5 VC Division – and the D445 Local Force Battalion (550 troops). Several VC local companies were also listed in the INTSUM: C-20, C-300, C-70 and C-610 (the Baria Special Action Unit – located on the southern slopes of the Nui Dinh); and 'an estimated 400 local guerrillas, lightly armed were operating throughout the Province in 5 to 15-man groups'.[83] That INTSUM briefly referenced the 275 Regiment's failed ambush on Route 15 on 11 November 1965 against the 52 ARVN Ranger Battalion.

Having deployed to its Nui Dat base, the initial operations of the 4,500-strong Task Force[84] focused on securing its immediate Tactical Area of Responsibility, including 'reclearing' the villages of Long Phuoc and Long Tan. In June, a brief 1 ATF terrain survey of 'Zone Cherry' (Route 15) noted reliable indications of observation posts on the

81 Taped interview, Dr Bruce Horsfield, 20 August 1990, Burradoo NSW, AWM: AWM 3849628, Tape 1. During US operations in Phuoc Tuy Province in the period April to mid-September 1966, US forces reportedly lost 87 personnel KIA and 408 WIA – in Operations Abilene, Hardihood, Hollandia and Toledo. MACCORDS (MACV Civil Operations and Rural Development) Team 89 – based in Van Kiep, lost three KIA in a D445 ambush on 6 January 1966.

82 1 ATF, 'INTSUM No 1/66', 21 May 1966, AWM95 1/4/1.

83 In mid-July 1966, the CIA reported confirmed communist strength in the South as: Viet Cong Main Force combat strength at 59,035 (83 battalions) with 17,553 support personnel; North Vietnamese combat troops as 34,910 (55 battalions); and 103,600 'paramilitary combat personnel' (with a further 40,000 armed political cadre). A further 23 combat battalions were unconfirmed (six VC, 17 NVA). More than one-half of the 138 confirmed combat battalions were organised into 29 regiments (13 VC, 16 NVA), with most of the regiments controlled by five divisional headquarters. The confirmed infiltration rate from the North for June 1966 was 10,460 troops (both Northerners and Southerner 'regroupees'). CIA, 'The Status of North Vietnamese Infiltration into South Vietnam', 24 February 1967, VCAT, Item No. F029200040263.

84 At the end of June 1966, Australian forces in Vietnam totalled 4,487 with 2,830 personnel at Nui Dat and 1,011 with 1st Australian Logistic Support Group (1 ALSG) at Vung Tau. US military personnel in the Republic of Vietnam numbered 278,810. Others were: 'New Zealand – 150; Philippines – 57; Republic of China – 20; and Thailand – 19'. The 12-strong Spanish military medical team arrived in September 1966.

eastern heights of the Nui Ong Cau (part of the Nui Dinh complex and overlooking Route 2), and that VC mortars had been fired on 10 June 1966 from the eastern slopes of the Nui Dinh hills (from YS 361671 and YS 372670).[85]

A VC view of 1 ATF

The 2004 Chau Duc History described the introduction of Australian troops into the province as follows:

> The Australians – who were very experienced mercenaries having fought a counter-guerrilla war in Malaya, were given the task by their American masters to conduct pacification 'trials' in Ba Ria, in order to create a key defensive barrier for them for Saigon and to directly protect the military port of Vung Tau. The Australian military were very expert in ambush tactics, small-scale raids, moving in scattered half-section and section groups, and striking deep into our bases. They quickly adapted to the climate and the tropical jungle. They also bore hardship – and would conceal themselves in the marshy swamps for hours – and would put up with the heavy wind and rain throughout the night in order to ambush us. They could cross streams and swamps – and even traverse jungles of new bamboo that was thick with thorns in order to secretly approach their objective. Most dangerous of all was their ambush tactic in which they 'assimilated' into the terrain – and this cost us many killed and other losses. Cay Cay and Bau Lung were routinely under fire – and the hills and jungles, the villages and hamlets, and the base areas were torn apart and crushed.[86]

In September 1966, a rallier from the 274 Regiment's 1st Battalion related to his MACV debriefers that:

> The VC were very cautious in confrontations with the Australians … The Australians had considerable combat experience from the Korean War … In addition, the Australians were strongly supported by artillery and air force firepower – therefore the VC dared not cause the engagement to last long.[87]

85 'Area Analysis of Zone Cherry, Appendix 2 to Annex A (Intelligence) to Op Plan 1-66', June 1966, AWM95 1/4/3.

86 The Chau Duc History 2004, pp 148–149.

87 Le Van Sang (rallied at Binh Gia, 28 September 1966), 274 VC Regiment, US MACV/JGS Combined Military Interrogation Centre (CMIC) Interrogation Report 1325.

A high-level defector, North Vietnam Army (NVA) Lieutenant Colonel Le Xuan Chuyen (chief of staff/chief of operations of the 5 VC Division),[88] had a similar view:

> The Australian forces have much experience in conducting operations, bivouacking troops and attacking, but because they are too tall and big, it is difficult for them to keep from being seen and thus being shot at and wounded. The US forces have strong firepower, but because they are big and tall, they are easy to see. Their operation regulations are followed almost as if they were fixed and their attack capability lacks activeness and speed.[89]

VC observers in the hills

NVA Lieutenant Colonel Le Xuan Chuyen disclosed in his mid-1966 debrief that there 'was an observation post equipped with a 15-watt radio on the Thi Vai Mountain to conduct air observation and observe RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Air Force] activities along Route 15'.[90]

In July 1966, 1 ATF's 547 Signals Detachment, a SIGINT element, intercepted VC Morse communications – including the HF transmissions of the VC observation groups overlooking Route 15 and including one post that was nicknamed 'Dodo'.[91] At the end of July, the commanding general of MACV (COMUSMACV) General WC Westmoreland had personally urged that the VC observation and reporting posts monitoring the vulnerable Route 15 be eliminated ASAP – a 'Priority One Alfa task'.[92] On deployment to Vietnam, 547 Signals Detachment had no integral

88 Le Xuan Chuyen had defected on 2 August 1966, and was debriefed extensively.

89 US MACV/JGS CMIC, 'Interrogation of Le Xuan Chuyen, Saigon', 7 August 1966, VCAT, Item No. 4080124002, p 11.

90 Ibid, p 6, para 46.

91 Dodo's SIGINT 'station identifier' was RAD1963 and its 'notation' was VNGB (Vietnamese Guerrilla Morse) M7178. Another station, called 'Leech' (RAD255A, VNGB M7191) and probably associated with Dodo, also operated in the Thi Vai area. These stations were usually 'secure' in caves – with observers of Route 15 providing information to them by courier.

92 'ATF [was] ordered by General Westmoreland to capture VC radio station in our area (substation on Priority One Alfa).' Captain TJ Richards (OC 547 Signal Detachment), signal to DMI-A(Mi8) (Directorate of Military Intelligence-Army (Military Intelligence 8)), 2 August 1966, DMI-A, Army Headquarters. The Australian official history cites a later date for General Westmoreland's interest: 'In late [sic] July, 547 Signal Troop [sic] began picking up powerful Viet Cong radio transmissions from the Nui Dinh hills … General Westmoreland … seemed to attach particular importance to it. In October, he [General Westmoreland], sent word personally to the task force to "take it out"' (McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p 395).

radio direction-finding (DF) capability, either land-based or airborne, to determine the location of NVA/VC radio stations. Initially, 'fixes' on the location of Dodo were acquired by EC-47 aircraft of the US Air Force's 6994 Security Squadron.

From mid-July, patrols from 1 ATF's 3 SAS (Special Air Service) Squadron were tasked to eliminate Dodo – that is, tasked against the 'special target (a communications station)', the 'OPs and comms station', or the 'special target area' on Nui Ong Trinh Mountain (YS 680688) closely overlooking Route 15, and in the Nui Dinh hills (YS 3365). 'Fred' – a US vernacular term for an unidentified enemy radio transmitter – was also used in SAS reporting as a nickname for Dodo.[93]

On the return of SAS Patrol No 22 on 23 July, the 1 ATF commander and the operations officer spoke with the patrol commander (Sergeant E Tonna) on the deployment of further patrols to the 'special target area'. On 27 July, SAS Patrol No 31 led by Sergeant AG Urquhart killed five VC, including two VC women, in the Nui Dinh hills (at YS 351668). Captured documents indicated that the two women were couriers and food suppliers for the VC's Dodo observation posts and its radio team.[94]

However, Dodo was not silenced. The US airborne direction-finding (ARDF) 'fixes' were often unreliable – at times out by several kilometres: 'ARDF has been found wanting so far as its accuracy is concerned'.[95] In late July 1966, in order to more accurately locate Dodo, two AN/PRD-1 ground-based DF sets of equipment were allocated on loan to 547 Signal Detachment by the US 17 Radio Research Group at Long Binh, specifically to 'fix' Dodo, which would then be attacked and eliminated by 1 ATF SAS patrols. The PRD-1s were initially sited on Nui Dat hill within the 1 ATF base and at the ARVN National Training Centre at Van Kiep on the eastern outskirts of Ba Ria Town – and the fixes acquired were more accurate than the locations reported by the US ARDF.

Dodo was eventually eliminated on 24 October 1966, when a female VC radio operator (To Thi Nâu – also known as Ba Hoang, alias Minh Hoang – Military Proselytising Section, Hoa Long village) was captured

93 3rd SAS Squadron, 'Commanders Diary – Narrative', July 1966, AWM95 7/12/2. Also discussed in Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, Annex E, p E-14.

94 D Horner, *Phantoms of the jungle: A history of the Special Air Service*, Allen & Unwin, 1989, p 190.

95 Captain TJ Richards, transcript of an audio tape to DMI (Mi8), 13 September 1966, DMI-A, Army Headquarters, received October 1966.

by B Company, 6 RAR, on Nui Dinh Mountain (at YS 332657) together with a US Type RT-77 AN/GRC-9 radio.[96] In early August, SAS patrols were also conducted on the eastern-facing slopes of the Nui Dinh and in the Chau Pha Stream area – including a squadron-level raid on 10–11 August.

Securing Route 15

The limited capacity of port facilities to receive the incoming build-up of US forces into southern South Vietnam was of serious concern to MACV. While the Saigon Port could accommodate the unloading of materiel, a large number of US vehicles and personnel were planned to be landed at Vung Tau and moved via Route 15 to US military complexes at Bear Cat, Long Binh and Bien Hoa. The principal formations planned to arrive were the 196 Light Infantry Brigade (mid-August), the 4 Infantry Division (expected 2–16 September – its 2 Brigade had already arrived), the 11 Armored Cavalry Regiment (scheduled to disembark at Vung Tau beginning on 7 September),[97] the 199 Light Infantry Brigade (expected late November), and the 9 Infantry Division (expected late November).[98] As noted, General Westmoreland understandably took a close personal interest in the security of Route 15.

On 9 July 1966, the VC's Chau Duc District issued a directive for increased offensive activity to commemorate 20 July – the anniversary of the 1954 Geneva Accords. Village VC committees were ordered to organise 'special units to attack RVNAF on Route 15, sabotage roads and bridges, and build obstacles to block road traffic'.[99] A 'High Point' was scheduled for 23 July 1966. On 3 August, the military intelligence staff

96 1 ATF, 'Intelligence Review, Nui Dat', 29 October 1966, AWM95 1/4/14. Ms Nau was subsequently interrogated at 1 ATF – and was the object of the infamous 'water torture' incident – see McNeill, *To Long Tan*, pp 395–98; Ian McNeill and Ashley Ekins, *On the Offensive*: *The Australian Army in the Vietnam War, January 1967–June 1968*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2003 (including endnotes); and AWM file AWM98, R670/1/7.

97 With Route 15's security not guaranteed, the 11 Armored Cavalry Regiment personnel were flown from Vung Tau to Long Binh in US Air Force C-130 aircraft. The Regiment's advance party and equipment landed at Saigon on 18 August. The remaining eight vessels disembarked equipment at Saigon between 16 September and 9 October (499 wheeled vehicles, 483 combat full-tracked vehicles and 22 helicopters).

98 II FFV, 'Operation Report for Quarterly Period ending 31 October 1966, Saigon', 15 November 1966.

99 Nam Tien, 'Directive No. 73CV', 9 July 1966, MACV/JGS CDEC, VCAT, Item No. F0346/0003-0443-000.

of Chau Duc District sent a directive to VC village committees at Phu My, Phuoc Hoa and Chu Hai requiring them to collect intelligence on 'Route 15, the local terrain, and enemy elements'. These reports were to be submitted by 30 August 1966 in order to develop plans to 'to disrupt enemy lines-of-communications – Route 15'. The directive included examples of information required and a format.

In mid-July 1966, a report from HQ II FFV had indicated that elements of the 274 VC Regiment had occupied areas of the Nui Toc Tien and Nui Dinh hills, and threatened movement on Route 15.[100] On 16 July, 1 ATF launched Operation Brisbane – 6 RAR with an APC squadron and artillery support – into the area.[101] However, no enemy were found, and on 18 July, B/6 RAR conducted an uneventful three-hour APC-borne 'Road Runner' operation along the length of Route 15 from Ba Ria to Phu My. This was the first of 1 ATF's Road Runner operations, aimed at securing the main and secondary roads in the province – with the Route 15 area designated 'Road Runner West'.[102]

Heightened concerns – 274 VC Main Force Regiment

The captured diary of Nguyen Nam Hung – the second in command/chief of staff of the 274 VC Regiment (whose diary was captured by 5 RAR on 21 October 1966 in the Nui Thi Vai hills), indicated that in June and July 1966, elements of the Regiment were engaged in observing Route 15 in preparation for attacks in the Phu My area and interdicting the route.[103] As a light infantry formation, elements of the regiment could move swiftly from their base areas east of Route 2 and in the Hat Dich to

100 II FFV, 'HQ 1ATF Log Sheet 476', 15 July 1966, AWM95 1/4/4.

101 At 2020 hours on 15 July, a VC battalion was reported at YS 2963. The order for Operation Brisbane (16–18 July 1966) noted: 'recent intelligence reports indicate that the VC will attempt to ambush a convoy on Route QL 15 between mid-July and 30 July 1966', FRAG O 1-3-66, 18 July 1966. The mission was to 'search and destroy the enemy in GR 3164 … with a suspected enemy battalion located at YS 313649'. The 1 ATF Commander's Diary reported that the operation did 'not find trace of any large VC force … a very useful ground mobility exercise … and introduced SAS patrols secretly into the hills'. The official history noted: 'Airstrikes in the area prior to the operation may have forced the enemy away.' McNeill, *To Long Tan*, p 446.

102 Road Runner operations were formally initiated under 1 ATF, 'Op Plan 2/66', 24 July 1966, AWM95 1/4/5.

103 Chamberlain, *The Viet Cong D445 Battalion*, Annex N, p N-4, fn 14. See also, 1 ATF, 'Troops Information Sheet No. 31', 13–19 February 1967, AWM95 1/4/30.

the Route 15 area with little chance of detection. On 1 August 1966, the 274 VC Regiment attacked the base of the 2nd Battalion/48 Regiment at Phu My and ambushed an ARVN convoy nearby on Route 15 just north of Phu My.[104] ARVN casualties were 32 KIA (23 in the base, and nine in the convoy), 14 WIA and five missing in action (MIA); with 21 individual weapons and two crew-served weapons lost to the VC.

Soon after, on 10 August, the 274 Regiment's 265 (i.e. 2) Battalion attacked an ARVN 48 Regiment convoy of 15 trucks on Route 15 about 14 kilometres south of the border with Bien Hoa Province (YS 270660); and on 11 August an estimated VC battalion attacked the ARVN compound at Phu My on Route 15 (YS 237766). The ARVN sector headquarters in Ba Ria reported 18 VC killed and three ARVN killed and five wounded.[105] From mid-August 1966, the 274 Regiment observed Route 1 in Long Khanh Province, planning attacks on the strategic hamlets of Hung Nghia and Hung Loc, before conducting rice-portering operations in late August.

Clearing the way

Route 15 through Phuoc Tuy Province from Ba Ria to the developing US Bear Cat base in Bien Hoa Province (YT 155015 – about 30 kilometres north of the Phuoc Tuy/Bien Hoa border) had been classified as 'red' – meaning 'route is VC-controlled and a major military operation or engineer effort is required to clear it'. To secure the road deployment of 3 Brigade/4 US Infantry Division from Vung Tau along Route 15 to its Bear Cat base, II FFV mounted a corps-level operation, Operation Robin,

104 The ARVN convoy was ambushed on Route 15 at YS 236784. The ARVN 2/48 Battalion base was located at YS 238773 beside Route 15 – beside the Second World War airstrip about 2 kilometres north of Phu My village. The ARVN base was shelled by 57 mm RCLs, and the ARVN reaction force was reportedly ambushed by a VC battalion. Lost weapons included a .30 MG, a 60 mm mortar and 21 small arms; 10 trucks were damaged. See 1 ATF, 'INTSUM No. 62', 2 August 1966, AWM95 1/4/6, Part 2. The 5 VC Division History relates: 'In August, the 4th [i.e. 274th] Regiment organised an ambush of mechanised vehicles on Route 51 [i.e. previously Route 15], destroying seven military vehicles, 50 enemy, shooting down an aircraft and seizing two weapons.' Liberation Radio reported that on 1 August, 'the Liberation Armed Forces attacked an enemy military convoy on Highway 15 (Bien Hoa – Ba Ria). Two companies of the puppet Regiment 48 of Division 10 were put out of action after 10 minutes of fighting.' – 'One Puppet Company wiped out east of Saigon', *Vietnam Courier*, Hanoi, 8 November 1966.

105 1 ATF, 'Log Sheet 666', 10 August 1966, AWM95 1/4/6, Part 1: 'a battalion of 48 Regt ambushed on road near Phu My – 4 ARVN KIA, 6 WIA, 38 VC (BC) – claimed.'

beginning on 3 October 1966.[106] Route security for the three-hour move of the 3 Brigade to Bear Cat was provided by 1 ATF within Phuoc Tuy and by the US 173 Airborne Brigade in Bien Hoa Province.[107] Subsequent Route 15 security operations directed by Headquarters II FFV were titled Operation Duck and Operation Canary.

These operations were acknowledged in General Westmoreland's 1968 'Report on the War in Vietnam':

> After a brief training period, the task force came under the operational control of the U.S. II Field Force and moved to Phuoc Tuy Province with the mission of supporting pacification operations along Highway 15 and in the eastern portion of the critical Rung Sat Special Zone.[108]

Today Route 51 – previously Route 15 – is a four-lane highway, built up along its length from Ba Ria to Phu My.[109] With a population of over 23,000, Phu My is a large industrial town and the district capital of Tan Thanh District. Industries in Phu My include a steel mill, chemical plants and electricity generation – reportedly providing 35–40 per cent of Vietnam's total electricity requirements. Phu My also includes the major Thi Vai-Cai Mep deep-water container port that is also visited regularly by international tourist liners. An international airport is being constructed north of Phu My in the Long Thanh area. There are smaller ports along Route 51, including on the Dinh River at Ba Ria Town. Particularly on weekends, traffic on Route 51 from Ho Chi Minh City/Bien Hoa is extremely heavy with domestic tourists travelling to Vung Tau and Long Hai. Popular tourist attractions in Phuoc Tuy Province include the former 'resistance bases', and temples and shrines in the Nui Thi Vai and Nui Dinh hills.

106 The equipment and cargo of the 3 Brigade arrived by ship at Saigon, with personnel moving in 50-vehicle truck convoys from Vung Tau along Route 15 to Bear Cat – a three-hour journey.

107 An 11 Armored Cavalry Regiment report related that: 'On 4 October, the 2nd Squadron conducted a route reconnaissance of Route 15 from Bien Hoa to Baria … During the period 10-17 October, the 1st Squadron was under the operational control of the 173d Airborne Brigade participated in Operation Robin.' 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 'Operational report lessons learned', 31 October 1966, DTIC, AD386101.

108 General WC Westmoreland, 'Report on the War in Vietnam (as of 30 June 1968)', Section II, VCAT, Item No. 168300010017. p 222.

109 Until recently, most road travel from Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City to Vung Tau was via Bien Hoa and then via Route 51. However, since February 2015 the shortest and fastest route is the tolled Ho Chi Minh City – Long Thanh Expressway, which joins Route 51 at Long Thanh.

For decades, the insecurity of South Vietnam's major highways had been a major impediment, frustration and embarrassment to governments in Saigon – suggestive of a failing state. In September 1966, following the arrival in country of further significant allied military formations, the securing of the strategic Route 15 to Vung Tau – to at least 'amber' status – was in prospect. The newly arrived 1 ATF was to play a key role in that operation.

This text is taken from *Vietnam Vanguard: The 5th Battalion's Approach to Counter-Insurgency, 1966*, edited by Ron Boxall and Robert O'Neill, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.