Operation CEDAR FALLS

Lori S. Tagg, USAICoE Command Historian

On January 8, 1967, the US Army and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) launched Operation CEDAR FALLS in the Iron Triangle just 13 miles north of Saigon. This was the first corps-level operation in Vietnam and the first large-scale combined operation involving 16,000 American troops and 14,000 ARVN. The objective was to search out and destroy enemy forces and basing areas in the region. According to an after-action report by Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV),

“In a 19-day operation, 20 infantry and armored units under control of the II Field Force sealed off and thoroughly searched the region. Killing 720 enemy and capturing 213, the troops discovered a vast ‘underground city’ beneath the jungle floor with chambers extending as far down as four levels and tunnel complexes several miles long. The headquarters of the enemy’s Military Region IV was largely destroyed along with enough rice to feed 13,000 Viet Cong for a year. Over 500 Viet Cong took advantage of the disruption and the proximity of Allied forces to defect to the government side. Our troops also captured 490,000 pages of enemy documents, an invaluable intelligence find.”

The operation has been highlighted in several sources as a textbook case of excellent intelligence support. In 1966, Maj. Gen. Joseph McChristian, the MACV J2, had launched Operation RENDEZVOUS, an all-source intelligence collection effort to compile detailed information about personalities, units, and activities within the enemy’s Military Region IV. Sources of intelligence included direction-finding equipment, side-looking airborne radar, infrared, photographs, and reports from intelligence agents and long range reconnaissance patrols. Combined Intelligence Center personnel plotted all collected information of enemy activities on maps over an extended period of time until patterns of activity and locations emerged.

By late 1966, RENDEZVOUS had confirmed that a large concentration of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces used the area known as the Iron Triangle for staging operations.
into the South Vietnamese capital. The area gave them easy access to both road and river transportation routes and, because of its proximity to the Cambodian border, served as a distribution point to pass supplies brought in on the Ho Chi Minh Trail to other units further south. Intelligence personnel focused their prime collection efforts in areas of intensive or unusual activity.

Using this intelligence, McChristian recommended that Gen. Westmoreland delay another operation to launch CEDAR FALLS earlier than planned: "By late 1966, an analysis of information obtained from RENDEZVOUS established patterns which convinced me that a quick strike against Military Region IV would not only prove tactically successful but would probably seriously disrupt the region." Using the results of pattern analysis, Westmoreland and II Field Force commander Lt. Gen. Jonathan Seaman, planned a series of ground spoiling attacks and massive air strikes in the area before ground troops penetrated the Viet Cong sanctuary and destroyed the existing infrastructure.

McChristian's report, *The Role of Military Intelligence 1965-1967*, offered the following details on the Army's intelligence support during the execution of the operation:

When the decision had been reached to attack Military Region IV, we were able to provide II Field Force with a wealth of intelligence on the area...in a matter of hours by using our two automatic data processing systems. In the actual operations, teams from all the combined centers were dispatched to both the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions for use as their commanders saw fit. However, in addition to the research and analysis support rendered by MACV J2, the intelligence units under our operational control also were tasked with providing support both before and during the operation. The 525th Military Intelligence [MI] Group supported CEDAR FALLS through subelements, including the 135th MI Group, 149th MI Group, and 1st MI Battalion (Air Reconnaissance Support [MIBARS]).

Detachment A of the 1st provided aerial photographic coverage of access routes and potential targets within the area. After the operation began, the detachment provided local support to the G2s and S2s of the divisions and separate brigades,
working closely with the imagery interpretation sections of the MI detachments, including 76 missions in support of the 173d Airborne Brigade alone.

The 149th MI Group, which had been gathering intelligence from Operation RENDEZVOUS for the preceding six months, provided specific collection support to Operation CEDAR FALLS as well. Representatives located with the intelligence sections of the divisions and separate brigades had the mission of assuring timely dissemination of information reports and keeping their headquarters advised of new requirements. Agents within the target area enabled the group to furnish information on the location of a munitions storage area, routes of march, and river traffic within the triangle.

Intelligence support organic to the five tactical units participating in the operation came from their MI detachments and special operations units working with the divisions and separate brigades. Communications security teams also were deployed to the forward command posts to assist the commander in maintaining security of friendly communications. Prisoner-of-war and detainee interrogation sections established refugee screening camps in the forward base camps. All civilians within the area of operations were detained, and literally thousands of refugees were screened each day. Before deployment, the interrogation teams received detailed briefings from both order of battle and imagery interpretation personnel who provided aerial photographs with overlays for the interrogators to use as a base for questioning. Prisoner detention facilities were set up and counterintelligence and interrogation personnel worked in consonance. Counterintelligence personnel checked the blacklist while the interrogations were going on and obtained positive leads on many individuals who either provided information on enemy units and installations or proved to be Viet Cong themselves. They also accompanied local medical teams into the surrounding area and questioned the local populace for information on enemy intentions and dispositions.

An album of photographs captured during CEDAR FALLS provided valuable information for later operations in South Vietnam.
Imagery interpretation and order of battle personnel worked together to provide hard targets to the attacking units. Month-old photographs of the entire area of operations were received from the 1st MIBARS. Apparent targets on these photos were rechecked and rephotographed by Army and Air Force aerial reconnaissance elements. New photographs were compared with order of battle holdings, and updated intelligence then was passed to the various G2s for exploitation by infantry troops.

In the initial assessment, the success of CEDAR FALLS was undisputed. Over two weeks, ground forces located, searched, and destroyed hundreds of tunnels, some three stories deep and housing headquarters offices, medical facilities, storage, and the district’s signal and cryptographic center. The operation was an intelligence windfall, and Lt. Gen. Seaman called it “the biggest intelligence breakthrough in the war” up to that time. Soldiers found code books, campaign plans and maps, and a list of ARVN officers who had been supplying the enemy with information and US weapons and ammunition. Using this information, US and ARVN counterintelligence agents captured enemy agents and traitors and broke up several underground networks throughout the region. Almost immediately, the number of sabotage and guerilla attacks dropped significantly. Intelligence gathered also contributed to the success of Operation JUNCTION CITY along the Cambodian border the following month. Of lasting importance, McChristian stated, “The success of such operations in a war in which sound intelligence meant so much reflected the close cooperation between tactical units and the intelligence elements supporting them.”

In the final analysis, CEDAR FALLS was of limited success. The US did not have enough troops to maintain a permanent presence in the Iron Triangle and, shortly after the operation, the Viet Cong moved back. Because the area was now a free-fire zone, however, life there was infinitely more perilous for the enemy. Reportedly, captured documents later indicated that the Viet Cong found Operation CEDAR FALLS to have been a significant hit to their infrastructure, forcing them to establish base areas further from Saigon and hampering their operations during the Tet Offensive in the late winter of 1968.

**For More Information:**
