

## OPERATION VAN BUREN

USMACV opened 1966 with spoiling attacks against the enemy in the vicinity of Saigon and in the Central Highlands and with protective operations for the rice harvests underway in the coastal areas of the central South Vietnamese provinces. The 1st Brigade was committed to the latter task in conjunction with the Korean 2d Marine Brigade and the 47th ARVN Regiment. The operation was named VAN BUREN. The 1st Brigade (-), consisting of the 2-327th and 2-502d, was ordered to take action against VC elements, believed to be of the 95th NVA Regiment, in the mountains southwest and north of Tuy Hoa in Phu Yen Province, approximately 100 miles north of Phan Rang. The VC in the area were exerting pressure against the population in this area to supply them with rice.

By 17 January, both the 2-327th and the 2-502d had established base areas near Tuy Hoa, after moving from Phan Rang by LST and Air Force C-130's and C-123's. (The 1-327th remained at Phan Rang.) Patrolling was initiated on 18 January north and northwest of Tuy Hoa. A Tet cease-fire was observed by both sides on 20-23 January. On 21 January, Company B, 2-502d secured a landing zone at Hoi Tin and assisted with the evacuation of Vietnamese children, nuns, and priests from the Mang Lang Orphanage to Tuy Hoa. The relocated orphanage was sponsored by the men of the 2-502d for the duration of their stay in the area.

On 28 January 1966, Colonel James S. Timothy relinquished command of the 1st Brigade to Brigadier General Willard Pearson, who had been serving as the Assistant Division Commander of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell since July 1965. General Pearson was a native of Pennsylvania, who enlisted in the U. S. Army Reserve in 1935, was later commissioned, and entered on active duty in 1940. BG Pearson had served in the Pacific during World War II. After the war ended, he attended the Command and General Staff College. In 1946, LTC Pearson was assigned to the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina where he served as a battalion commander and a staff officer for the Division G3, G4, and G1. After the Korean War broke out, Pearson was sent overseas to serve as the Senior Advisor of the Korean 6th Division. He later became a regimental executive officer in the 24th Infantry Division. The next twelve years were spent earning his masters degree in business, attending the Army War College, commanding the 1st Battle Group of the 9th Infantry Division, working at various general staff levels, and finally earning a second masters degree in International Relations. Prior to assuming duties as the Assistant Division Commander of the 101st Airborne Division, General Pearson was serving as the Chief of Staff of the Allied Land Forces in Southeast Europe.

With BG Pearson in command, units of the brigade intensified their activities. Between 6 and 8 February, for example, the 2-502d twice developed significant contacts with the enemy, and with the aid of a 1-327th Task Force on the second occasion killed over 100 VC. At one point in the fight, hand-

to-hand combat with the enemy took place. During this period also, the brigade's first Congressional Medal of Honor was earned by 1LT James A. Gardner. Gardner was leading a platoon of the 1-327th to relieve a company pinned down by the enemy near the village of My Canh. Without regard for his own safety, he led an assault across an open rice paddy, personally destroying two enemy bunkers with hand grenades. After reorganizing his platoon and resuming the advance, Gardner charged an enemy machine gun emplacement, which had pinned down his platoon for a second time. As he destroyed this position with a grenade, he came under fire from a fourth position. Advancing upon this bunker, he was mortally wounded but managed to destroy the position with another grenade as his last effort.<sup>30</sup>

After three more weeks of continuous patrolling, which produced numerous VC supply caches and sporadic contact with the enemy, Operation VAN BUREN was terminated on 20 February. Residents of the Tuy Hoa area had been able to harvest over 30,000 tons of rice, much of which would have gone to the VC had not the 1st Brigade been watchful and aggressive. In addition, USMACV estimated that Operation VAN BUREN had resulted in 679 killed, 49 captured, and the relocation of 4,700 residents to safe areas. 177 VC defected to the Allies during the operation.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>General Order Number 49, Headquarters, Department of the Army, 30 November 1967.

<sup>31</sup>Westmoreland, "Report," p. 123.