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covered shelters now at most bases. At Da Nang an enemy 122-mm rocket round made a direct hit on a shelter housing a fully armed F-4. There was no damage to the aircraft, and only minor surface damage to the shelter. In all, 573 concrete covered shelters will be constructed in South Vietnam; 408 at USAF/VNAF bases, and 165 for Marine/Navy aircraft. At about \$26,000 per shelter, the one known aircraft save at Da Nang has already paid for 20% of the shelter program. (On March 20 an undetermined number of 122-mm rocket rounds hit the Marine Air Base at Chu Lai. Six A-4s were destroyed and nine damaged. These aircraft were not parked in revetments, nor were any of the planned covered shelters complete for them."

By massing his forces near his sanctuaries to shorten his lines of communication and by husbanding his resources, the enemy was able to mount his offensive. How was airpower used to respond to the enemy initiative? Two time periods were analyzed and compared: the six-week span of the Fourth Offensive, and the eight weeks immediately preceding the offensive. In many respects, the period of the offensive could be labeled "business as usual" for airpower. Much of the air effort was associated with the vigorous spoiling attacks and preemption campaigns the Allies were continuing on the ground.

The enemy's attacks increased the urgency of some airstrikes, but the overall volume barely budged. Figure 8^{38/} shows the total number of strike sorties (less B-52s) and how they were allocated in-country versus out-country, and among the corps. The weekly average of total sorties flown increased almost five percent during the offensive, and the fighter

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and attack aircraft continued the out-country air war at a slightly higher level. The additional sorties that were available in-country were allocated almost exclusively to the two northern corps; I CTZ received an average of 111.3 additional sorties per week, and II CTZ gained an average of 162.6 sorties above its normal weekly ration. In absolute terms, these increases represented only slightly larger slices of the total amount, but the relative impact was much more pronounced--within I CTZ the number of sorties flown rose nearly 8 percent, and in II CTZ air activity jumped 34.5 percent. Still, the enemy offensive produced no gross discontinuities in the allocation of tactical airstrike sorties. The slight surge that did occur might be attributed as much to Allied initiative as well as to that of the enemy.

As opposed to preplanned strike sorties, the number of immediate requests for airstrikes provides an index of the urgency of combat operations. Figure 9^{39/} shows the number of immediate airstrikes provided by in-country USAF gunships (AC-47s and AC-119s). Similar data for all other fighter and attack aircraft are shown in Figure 10.^{40/} During the period of the offensive, gunship immediates increased 56 percent, while all other immediates rose only 20 percent. Since gunship activity was confined to hours of darkness, the relative increases tended to support what was already known--the enemy showed a marked preference for night attacks.

The greatest increases in immediates came in I and II CTZs. The statistics for I CTZ were somewhat skewed by the unique operations of the

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RESPONSES TO IMMEDIATES IN-COUNTRY AC-47S & AC-119S

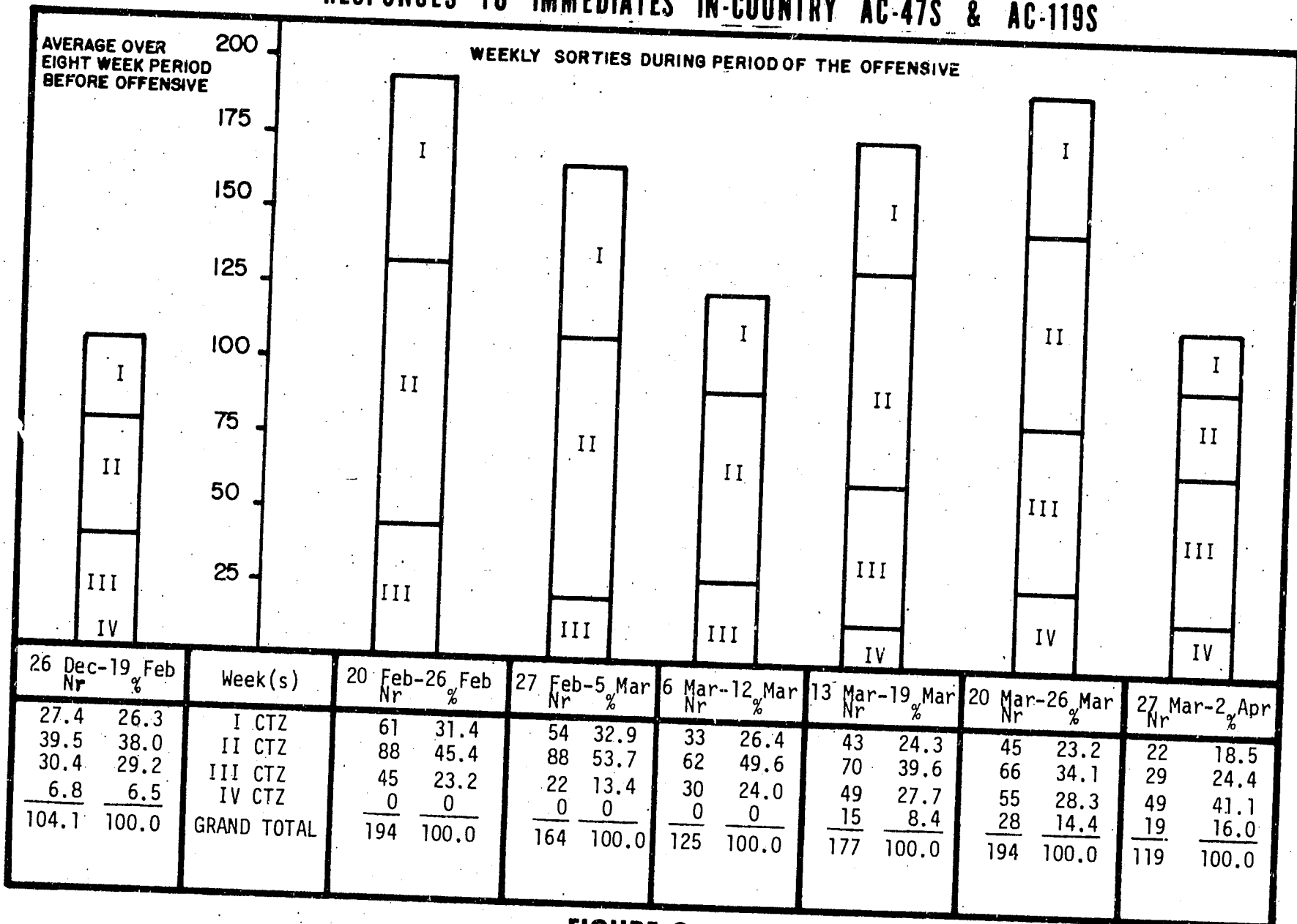


FIGURE 9

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TACTICAL AIR IMMEDIATE SORTIES USAF & USMC

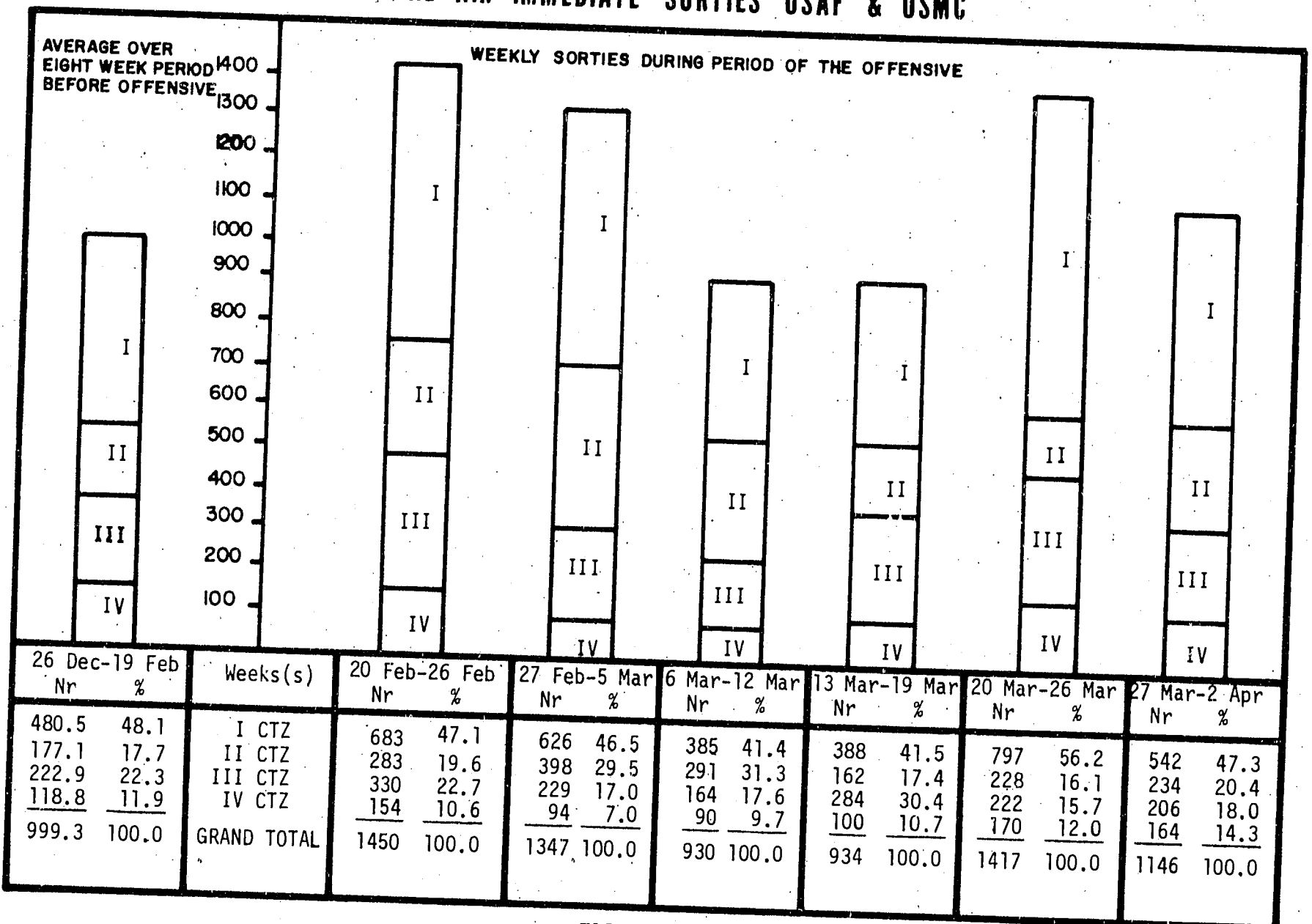


FIGURE 10

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ARC LIGHT SORTIES

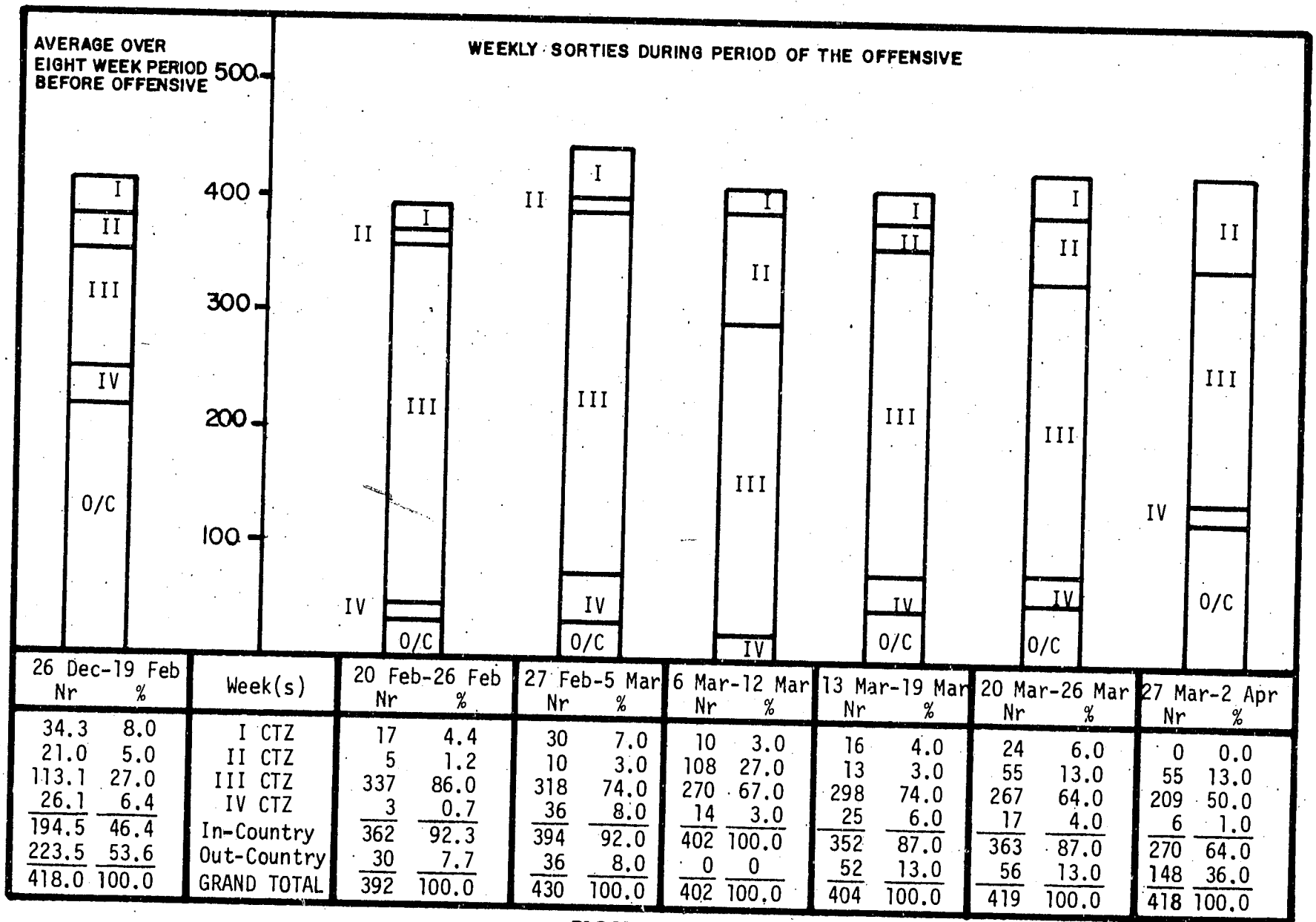


FIGURE 11

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1st Marine Air Wing in that area (see Chapter III), and the increases in II CTZ were, again, more relative than absolute. The urgency of operations in IV CTZ was recognized as low, but the rather constant level of immediates in III CTZ was misleading; a massive amount of airpower was shifted into III CTZ, and it came in the biggest parcel of them all-- ARC LIGHT.

The B-52 bombing operations, known as ARC LIGHT, were used as a reserve; their weight was shifted dramatically to meet the enemy's main thrust and to blunt his initiative. Before the offensive, ARC LIGHT sorties were being expended in favor of out-country targets (53.6 percent) over in-country targets (46.4 percent). During the offensive, 87 percent of the ARC LIGHT operations were flown in-country (Fig. 11).^{41/}

The air response to the Fourth Offensive must not, however, be measured merely by magnitude of change. Throughout the offensive, fighter and attack aircraft continued their front-line duties of interdiction and close support; thus, their heavy contribution to the Allied success was less visible in the limelight of this overview.

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CHAPTER III

THE FIGHTING IN III CORPS

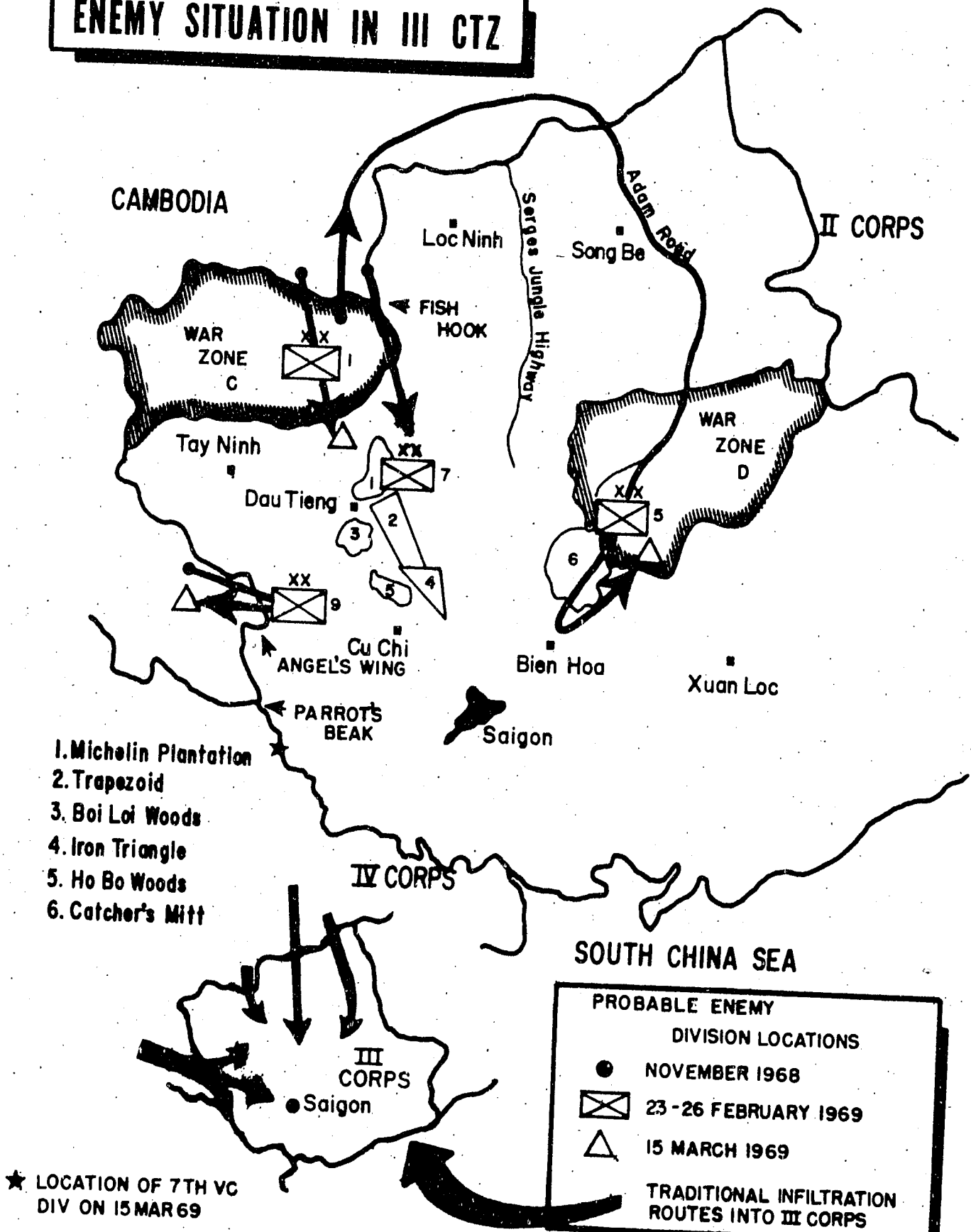
Saigon and the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex were the ultimate targets for the VC/NVA, and the enemy's plans for a Fourth Offensive included those critical areas as objectives. The infiltration routes (Fig. 12) that the enemy had traditionally used pointed like arrows from base areas and sanctuaries along the Cambodian border toward these two areas. Especially dangerous to the security of the Capital Military District ((CMD), which encompasses Saigon, was the route from the Ba Thu cantonment in the Angel's Wing/Parrot's Beak salient in Cambodia, less than 50 kilometers west of the capital.^{1/}

In late 1968, the enemy threatened Saigon with four Divisions: The 1st, 5th, 7th, and 9th (Fig. 12). During the period prior to the Fourth Offensive, they were situated in the border areas along the infiltration routes, and it was axiomatic that the offensive would involve movement of some of them (if not all) along the infiltration routes toward the center of III CTZ.^{2/} In addition to the four divisions (containing an average of 5,200 men each), the enemy could call upon various independent regiments and battalions, both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, located throughout the corps area. Allied intelligence estimated that by February 1969, the enemy had a total of 89 maneuver battalions^{3/} available for the Fourth Offensive in III CTZ--the largest concentration of VC/NVA strength in South Vietnam.

The enemy ostensibly had the manpower for conducting another Tet

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ENEMY SITUATION IN III CTZ



- 1. Michelin Plantation
- 2. Trapezoid
- 3. Boi Loi Woods
- 4. Iron Triangle
- 5. Ho Bo Woods
- 6. Catcher's Mitt

PROBABLE ENEMY DIVISION LOCATIONS

- NOVEMBER 1968
- ⊠ 23-26 FEBRUARY 1969
- △ 15 MARCH 1969

TRADITIONAL INFILTRATION ROUTES INTO III CORPS

★ LOCATION OF 7TH VC DIV ON 15 MAR 69

FIGURE 12
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Offensive aimed at Saigon, Bien Hoa/Long Binh, and other population centers in III CTZ. He could also conduct attacks by fire and ground assaults against other targets, both military and civilian, and could interdict friendly lines of communication (LOCs) in the corps. The enemy's offensive plans, however, included some inherent preparatory actions on his part which were subject to Allied preemption. First, he had to move men and supplies from the border areas into the center of the corps. At the same time, the enemy had to preposition supplies in caches along the routes and in base areas with which to sustain the fighting once it started. Next, the enemy needed relatively safe assembly points near the objectives to be assaulted. And finally, he required orderly movement from the assembly areas to the targets in order to have coordinated attacks that would achieve goals of the offensive. These were the enemy's requirements; they were all vital for a successful offensive. If the Allies could preempt them, the offensive would fail.^{4/}

The Allied concept of operation for III CTZ was based on a "no-risk" defense of Saigon. From a position of strength in the CMD and along the approaches to the capital, Headquarters II Field Forces Vietnam (Hq II FFV) and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), III Corps deployed the majority of forces in key positions radiating out from the CMD. Along the borders and in remote areas, mobile combat forces conducted screening operations to detect enemy movement toward areas within III CTZ. This reconnaissance was augmented by extensive use of electronic surveillance systems and by programs of ARC LIGHT strikes and artillery interdiction.^{5/}

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The Allied troop dispositions in the late fall of 1968 in III CTZ were generally as follows: CMD forces directly defending Saigon, with the 25th, 5th, and 18th ARVN Divisions deployed in tactical areas from west to east a short distance out from Saigon. Complementary Free World Military Assistance Forces (FWMAF) were deployed throughout III CTZ: the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, and the 199th Infantry Brigade were in the western CMD with areas of operations extending out beyond the district boundaries. To the northwest, the 25th Infantry Division was located in Tay Ninh Province across the infiltration routes from Cambodia. The 1st Infantry Division had an area of operations (AO) extending from the CMD north and then east above Saigon, across the approach routes from War Zone D (Fig. 12). In Long An Province, southwest of the CMD, the 1st Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division conducted operations under control of Hq II FFV, while the division's other two brigades were farther south in IV CTZ. The 11th Armored Cavalry was in the Bien Hoa/Long Binh area, and the Royal Thai and Australian forces were situated to the east and southeast of Saigon, respectively.^{6/}

The capability of II FFV to deal with the enemy threat was increased in early November 1968 by the movement of the airmobile 1st Cavalry Division from I CTZ to the northern tier of III CTZ (Operation LIBERTY CANYON). Its elements were deployed in a line across the infiltration routes in northern III Corps, giving particular attention to restricting the enemy's movement toward the center of the corps.^{7/} The friendly forces in III CTZ totaled 108 maneuver battalions, spread throughout the corps, as against the 89 VC/NVA battalions mentioned previously.^{8/} All of the Allied units were conducting aggressive spoiling operations designed to preempt the enemy's Fourth Offensive

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and insure that the VC/NVA could not repeat their success of Tet 1968.^{9/} The Air Force continued routine programs of support for the ground operations during the period of November 1968 to January 1969, keeping pace with the Army's preparations for an enemy offensive. As the Tet time-frame neared, air activity was intensified to forestall the major and sustained escalation of the fighting that was predicted.

Air Reconnaissance

The intensification of air activity began with an increase in visual reconnaissance (VR) by the Forward Air Controllers (FACs) in III CTZ. During the enemy buildup preceding the 1968 Tet Offensive, many FACs had detected and reported increases in the enemy's movement--specifically, heavy trail use. Plans were made in the last two months of 1968 and in early 1969 for more VR throughout III CTZ in the hope that similar intelligence would be obtained and used to counter the offensive that the VC/NVA were planning.^{10/}

Headquarters, 7AF, directed that the Direct Air Support Center in III Corps (III DASC) intensify the VR of the areas around Saigon, Bien Hoa/Long Binh, and War Zone D.^{11/} The DASC responded by augmenting the normal effort with two O-2 and five O-1 aircraft. The O-2s were utilized for night coverage of the Bien Hoa VR area, and the O-1s were given to FACs in other critical areas for daytime coverage. Additionally, III DASC was determined to make every effort to increase VR throughout III CTZ, commensurate with aircraft and crew availability.^{12/}

The intensified VR program began officially on 14 February 1969, but

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prior to that date, both the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), on 1 February, and III DASC, on 10 February, began to expand the VR in anticipation of an enemy offensive around the Tet period.^{13/} By 14 February, the degree of effort had heightened so that during the second half of the month the total hours flown by FACs in III Corps increased considerably. The CMD was given VR 24 hours per/day, and both the CMD and Bien Hoa/Long Binh were covered by a rocket watch during the night. In addition, the crucial areas were well-covered, and the FACs flew double coverage on all borders and coasts, and concentrated on the infiltration routes and known base areas.^{14/}

A considerable amount of infrared surveillance (RED HAZE) was concentrated in the same general areas as the increased VR during the period prior to the Fourth Offensive. The base areas and infiltration routes from Cambodia were covered, as were the assembly areas toward the center of the zone, such as War Zone D. The CMD and the coastal approaches to the capital also received RED HAZE coverage. The USAF infrared surveillance program averaged five targets being flown each night in III CTZ, as the Allies maintained a continuing watch for indications of an offensive aimed at Saigon and the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex.^{15/}

Allied Operations, November 1968 - February 1969

Although the Allied preemptive measures during November and December 1968 and January 1969 slowed the enemy's redeployment to the south and southeast, they were not able to stop it altogether. The enemy was forced to delay his movements and break up his major units into small groups to infiltrate through the Allied AOs. The loss of vital materiel that was captured and

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destroyed during the Allied operations forced the enemy to divert manpower to logistical supply and caused him problems in supporting those units already in intermediate areas.^{16/} Also, the enemy's reconnaissance units were hindered in their vital missions of scouting and screening to cover movement of major VC/NVA units toward objectives in III CTZ.

Close air support (CAS) in III CTZ during the period of November 1968 through January 1969 totaled 16,738 sorties, 6,479 by VNAF and 10,259 by Free World air.^{17/} Fighter aircraft continued to average 100-150 sorties per day. The sorties that were not flown in CAS were directed against the infiltration routes and against staging and supply storage areas, further restricting the movement of the enemy's troops and materiel into critical areas.^{18/}

During the same period, 298 separate targets were struck by B-52s in the III CTZ. In November, the ARC LIGHT strikes were concentrated in the northern and western portions of the corps near the Cambodian border, primarily in War Zone C and across the infiltration routes. In December 1968 and January 1969, the Allies noted enemy units moving from the border areas toward the center of III CTZ. It was not known then, but only elements of the VC/NVA 5th Division were succeeding with the infiltration into the intermediate staging areas in preparation for the Fourth Offensive. As the enemy moved in, so did the ARC LIGHT strikes--into the base areas such as the Boi Loi and Ho Bo Woods, the Trapezoid, and Catcher's Mitt (Fig. 12).^{19/} Although the broad Allied preemptive measures had not prevented the movement toward the center of III CTZ, they did severely curtail and disrupt it.

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February 1969

As the Tet time-frame approached, the Allies initiated a series of spoiling operations, the BOWIE WINNERS and KEEP-OUTs, to strike the enemy in his staging areas and prevent his moving additional men and supplies into III CTZ. The KEEP-OUTs (Fig. 13) were area denial operations conducted on 13 and 16 February 1969, employing air-delivered mines in both land and water areas along the Angel's Wing - Parrot's Beak to the west of Saigon. The region had been a traditional infiltration route into III CTZ for both troops and supplies, beginning in a large cantonment complex in Cambodia and extending eastward to Saigon. Laced with canals, marshes, and occasional patches of dry land, the area is one in which ground operations and ambushes are relatively difficult. The tempo of enemy activity in the area had been increasing, so the KEEP-OUTs were planned to counter the trend and hopefully to help stop the flow of men and materiel necessary for an offensive.^{20/}

The concept of operations for KEEP-OUT I and II included the seeding of selected trails and dry land areas with CBU-34s (Antipersonnel mines) and the waterways with MK-36 mines. Under the direction of FACs, F-100s of the 31st Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) were to place the CBU-34s into the target zones and as soon as this was done, F-4s from the 12th TFW were to plant the MK-36 mines in the water routes.^{21/}

On 12 February, the participating FACs and strike flight leaders were briefed by the II FFV Air Liaison Officer (ALO). The concept of operations, the tactics to be employed, and the strike procedures were explained to

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OPERATIONS IN III CTZ

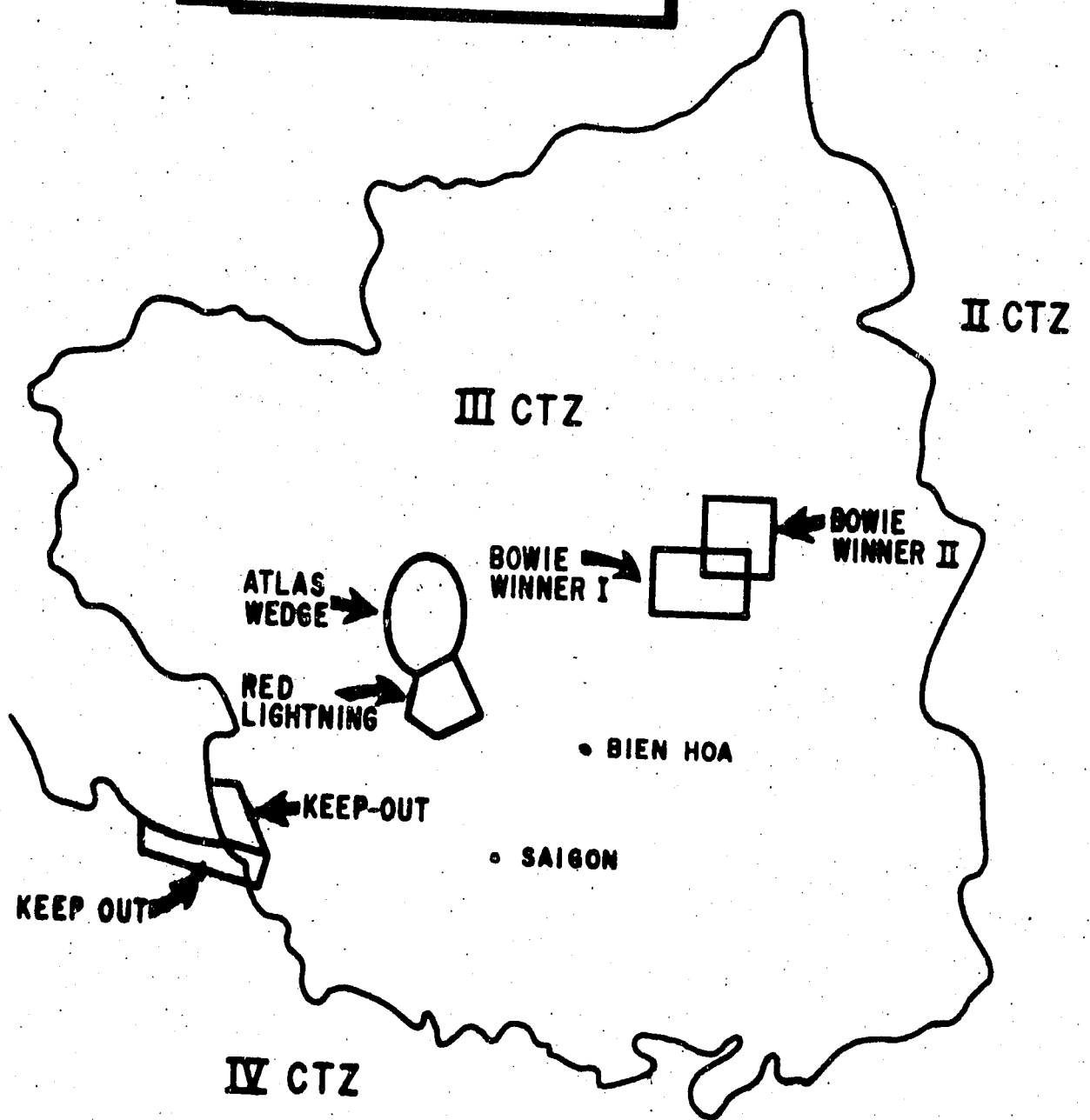


FIGURE 13

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insure that all the participants knew exactly what was expected of them. ^{22/}

Late the next afternoon, KEEP-OUT I began with the placing of the CBU-34s followed by the MK-36s. The plans called for a reseeding operation to take place on the morning of 16 February. The FACs again directed the fighters in placing the munitions, and by noon, KEEP-OUT I was completed. ^{23/}

KEEP-OUT II was essentially the same as KEEP-OUT I, but in a different area and with a different method of ordnance delivery to lessen the time involved. Later, on 19 February, and again on 21 March, two similar operations--KEEP-OUT III and KEEP-OUT IV were initiated in the same general area. ^{24/}

The results of KEEP-OUT I and II were not immediately discernible. While there was evidence of MK-36 detonations, there was no information regarding the effectiveness of the CBU-34. Enemy activity was noted in the areas that had been seeded, but ground operations were not planned into the region to assess the results. ^{25/}

BOWIE WINNER I (Fig. 13) directed airstrikes and artillery against the enemy staging area in southeastern War Zone D on 15 February. Intelligence and reconnaissance sources indicated that advanced elements of the VC/NVA 5th Division were located there in January 1969, and the enemy buildup was expected to continue, reaching a peak by the middle of February. ^{26/} The operation was designed to destroy the massed enemy soldiers and supplies, and to upset the enemy's timetable for attack to the south.

The concept of operations for BOWIE WINNER I featured the delivery of

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CBU-28 (DRAGON TOOTH) mines against the area, along with CS-2 persistent gas brought in by Army helicopters, all under the direction of FACs.^{27/} Then, ten ARC LIGHT strikes were scheduled against base camps and suspected troop concentrations, followed by CBU-49 delayed-fuze bomblets seeded into the strike boxes via the COMBAT SKY SPOT (CSS) technique.^{28/}

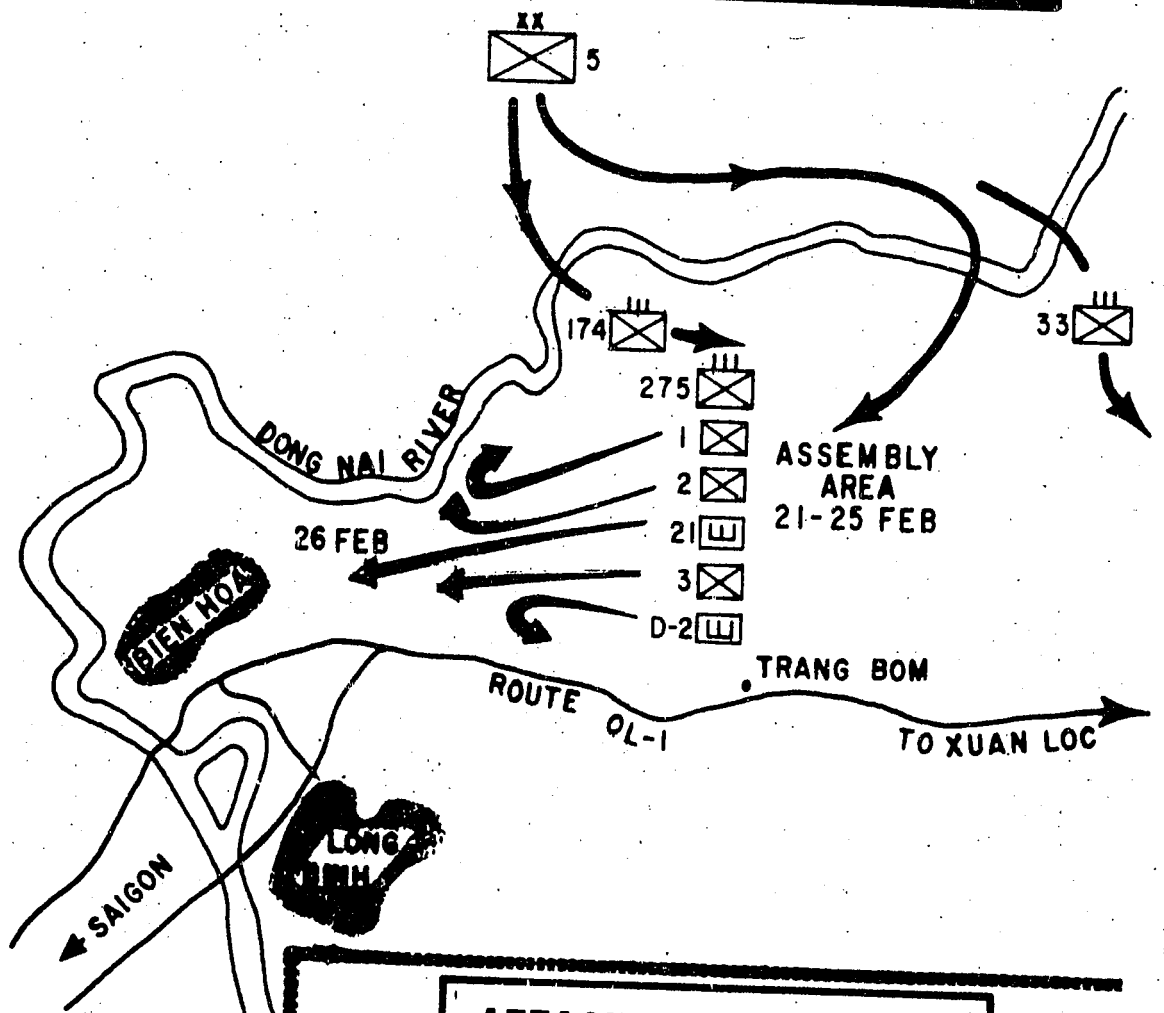
Prestrike preparations were carried out on 13 and 14 February. The operation began early on the 15th with the delivery of the CBU-28s, followed closely by the CS-2 brought in by Army helicopters. The FACs marked the targets for the gas, although they had little previous experience working with Army helicopters. There were no difficulties, however, with this phase of BOWIE WINNER I, but the FACs did find it difficult to wear helmets over the required gas masks. Also, one FAC encountered the gas at 1,500 feet above ground level (AGL), but climbed to a higher altitude and continued with his mission. The strike pilots, on the other hand, did not report detecting any of the gas in their aircraft while delivering ordnance in or through the gassed areas.^{29/}

The CBU-28s and CS-2 deliveries ended late in the afternoon of 15 February. Shortly thereafter, alternating ARC LIGHT strikes and CBU-49 strikes began and continued throughout the night, ending just before daylight. Then, additional ARC LIGHT sorties were flown and the last CBU-28s were expended, completing BOWIE WINNER I.^{30/}

Allied commanders decided to carry out another such operation immediately in the same general area, but a little farther to the east. Since the new

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ATTACKS ON BIEN HOA & LONG BINH



ATTACK ON LONG BINH 23-25 FEBRUARY 1969

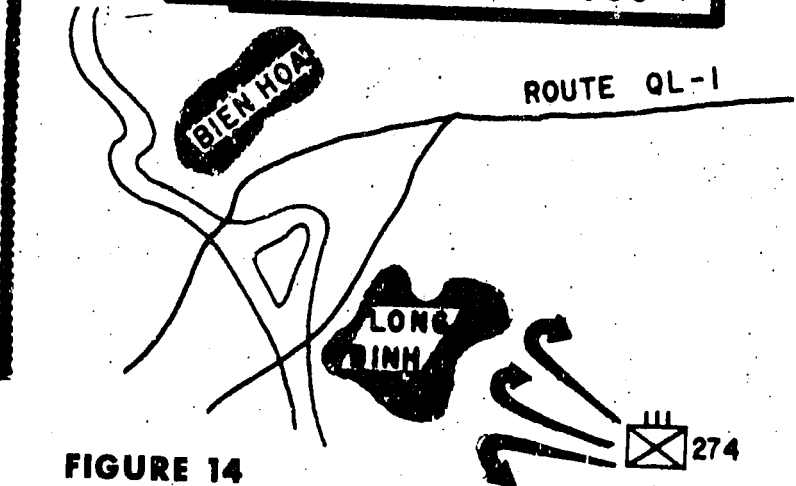


FIGURE 14
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operation--BOWIE WINNER II--was basically the same as the previous one, and much of the original plan was applicable, it was possible to execute the operation a short time after the decision was made to proceed.^{31/} Because of the increasing buildup of intelligence concerning the area, Allied commanders also decided to expend two ARC LIGHT strikes on lucrative targets before the main operation was executed. Believing that the enemy would enter the ARC LIGHT boxes once BOWIE WINNER II began, the decision was made to cover the two strikes with CBU-49 delayed-fuze bomblets.^{32/}

BOWIE WINNER II was begun on the morning of the 21st, when the first missions expending CBU-28s were flown, followed by the CS-2. In the afternoon, more CBU-28s were expended and ARC LIGHT strikes took place, continuing until 0445 hours on the 22nd. Each ARC LIGHT was covered during the night by fighters delivering CBU-28/49s on CSS missions. In mid-morning, additional CBU-28 deliveries began, lasting until the end of the operation that afternoon.^{33/}

After BOWIE WINNER I and II ended, post-strike BDA by the FACs and ground troops revealed a number of fortifications destroyed and secondary fires and explosions. However, the immediate BDA did not reveal the total impact of the operations, for later reports indicated that they markedly disrupted the enemy attack on Bien Hoa/Long Binh.^{34/}

The Fourth Offensive

Some of the heaviest fighting during the enemy's Fourth Offensive took place in the Bien Hoa/Long Binh area (Fig.14) between 23 and 26 February.

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The fighting was anticlimactic; what had been planned and anticipated were coordinated assaults on the critical areas in III CTZ by major enemy units during the Tet time-frame. What actually took place was something else-- the VC/NVA could not achieve the success they had hoped for. ^{35/}

The enemy planned to attack the Bien Hoa/Long Binh complex with elements of the 5th Division supported by at least two separate regiments. According to intelligence sources, the attack plan divided the complex into two parts, the dividing line being Highway QL-1 running from between the two installations to the east toward Xuan Loc. The northern part contained Bien Hoa city and the Air Base which were objectives of the 5th Division; in the southern portion, the Long Binh Post was to be attacked by two regiments under the direction of the enemy's Military Region 7. ^{36/}

The 275th VC Regiment and the 174th NVA Regiment drew the assignments of attacking the Bien Hoa Air Base (BHAB) from the east and north, respectively, while the 5th Division's other regiment, the 33d, would move out of War Zone D to the east, possibly to exploit any part of the plan that proved successful. The attack plan south of Highway QL-1 included an assault on the Long Binh Post by the 274th VC Regiment and supporting units, possibly with help from the 33d Regiment off to the east. The enemy's remaining regiment, 95A, was to occupy a blocking and reserve role in the VC U-1 Province some distance farther away to the east. ^{37/}

During the last two months of 1968, Allied Commanders in III CTZ had intensified their defensive efforts around Bien Hoa/Long Binh. In November,

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they had organized a Bien Hoa Tactical Area Command (BHTAC) to coordinate all efforts in defense of the complex.^{38/} Bien Hoa Air Base itself received special attention. In December, Maj. Gen. Richardson, Deputy Commanding General, II FFV, and the Commander of the Base Security Police Squadron, assessed the base defenses, the result of which was the transfer of an Armored Cavalry troop to the control of the Security Police for perimeter defense. The unit had Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) equipped with 20-mm VULCAN cannon, and M-551 tanks (Sheridans) armed with 152-mm cannon. These, along with two helicopters provided informally by the Commanding Officer of the Army's 145th Aviation Battalion, aided greatly in base defense when the enemy finally appeared.^{39/}

The elements of the 5th VC Division prepared to initiate the attack on Bien Hoa on the night of 22-23 February, but as the movement to the objectives began, the enemy's units ran into trouble. The 174th VC Regiment met resistance to the north, could not penetrate, and turned back. The 33d NVA Regiment started toward the south, was engaged by artillery fire and B-52 strikes and was driven off.^{40/} The remaining attack regiment, the 275th, with attached Sappers, was ultimately the only enemy unit that approached its objective--the story of what happened to this regiment is the story of the "Battle of Bien Hoa".

The 275th Regiment had remained in southern War Zone D until the night of 20 February when it crossed the Dong Nai River, and moved to an assembly area eight kilometers north of Trang Bom. There it prepared for the attack

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which was supposed to take place on the night of 22-23 February. Elements of the regiment, with attached units, were given the following tasks: ^{41/}

- Headquarters, 275th - Control the operation from a position seven and one-half kilometers east of Bien Hoa Air Base.
- 1/275th - Attack Bien Hoa Air Base from the east, concentrating on the helipad and billeting areas.
- 2/275th - Enter Bien Hoa Air Base from the south, attack the base headquarters, destroy the ammunition dump, the POL area, and all aircraft.
- 3/275th - Occupy two hamlets to the east and attack ARVN units in that area; hold a line between the two hamlets against expected Allied reaction forces. (It was also expected to extend VC/NVA control into Bien Hoa City.)
- 21st Sapper-Reconnaissance Battalion - Attack III Corps Headquarters following a barrage by 107-mm rockets.
- D-2 Sapper Battalion and a company of 1/275th - Attack the Bien Hoa Prisoner-of-War (PW) Camp to the east of the base.

On the night of the scheduled attack, however, the units did not move into the assault positions. Reportedly, the attack was postponed because of the enemy's concern over the disclosure of the attack plan by a knowledgeable platoon leader who had rallied to the GVN on 17 February. ^{42/}

Despite the delay in the main assault, BHAB received an ABF on the night of 22-23 February, which resulted in two aircraft destroyed, eight damaged, and a large amount of other materiel destroyed or damaged. ^{43/} Also there is evidence that some units targeted against Bien Hoa Air Base from the south attempted a ground probe, or attempted to carry out a portion of the planned main assault. Between 0200 hours and 0300 hours on the morning of 23 February,

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a patrol from the Security Police Squadron was checking the base perimeter in the southeast just after the initial attack by fire. The patrol spotted movement just outside the concertina wire, and the watchtowers on the southeastern portion of the base began to receive small-arms fire from a row of houses outside the base nicknamed "Turkey Row". The area was illuminated and seven men were observed coming out of a house on "Turkey Row" toward the base perimeter. They were taken under fire at once as were the probable sources of the incoming small-arms fire. The men fled back to the house. A short time later, perhaps three or four minutes, perimeter guards saw what appeared to be the VC/NVA setting up a heavy weapons position to the rear of "Turkey Row". The Commander of the 3d Security Police Squadron moved one of the U.S. Army Sheridan M-551 tanks into action and engaged the VC/NVA with 152-mm cannon fire. Army helicopters were also on the scene, and the tremendous volume of firepower from all defending forces totally destroyed the enemy position. At least one opinion has been advanced that this firepower turned back an attack by an enemy sapper unit, possibly one of those units that had not been notified of the postponement of the main assault.^{44/}

During the incident on the night of 22-23 February, the versatility of the FACs was graphically demonstrated. The III DASC radio room had been forced to move underground due to the enemy's attack-by-fire. The new location severely limited its long-range capability. A FAC on station above Bien Hoa relayed all radio transmissions from the DASC, in addition to his normal duties. The FAC also supported an outpost under attack in the immediate area with his rockets until a Spooky (AC-47) could be sent to the scene.^{45/}

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Following the route of the enemy in the rear of "Turkey Row", sporadic small-arms and automatic weapons fire continued. At 0700 hours, the firing stopped and the ARVN 23d Defense Force Group swept "Turkey Row", while the 3d Security Police Squadron checked the southern perimeter. Both operations yielded negative results.^{46/}

The main attack elements of the 275th Regiment remained dispersed north of Trang Bom from 21-25 February awaiting orders. They were not detected by the increased Allied VR. Finally, on the 25th, they received new instructions--they were to move that same night to an assembly area three kilometers north of Ho Nai. From there, the VC/NVA were to launch their attack on the morning of the 26th.^{47/}

The movement toward the objective began. During the night the attacking force was further reduced. A portion of the 1st Battalion was ordered to stay with the regimental headquarters as a reserve. The remainder of the battalion, along with the D-2 Sapper Battalion, was either diverted or got lost and did not appear at Bien Hoa Air Base on the 26th. The 2d Battalion suffered a similar fate--for some reason it also failed to show up in the action that followed. Out of all of the units originally targeted against BHAB, only the 3d Battalion, 275th Regiment, and the 21st Sapper-Reconnaissance Battalion proceeded on their missions as planned.^{48/}

At 0300 hours, 26 February, this force was spotted by Security Policemen on the eastern perimeter of the base, and a short time later, by a sentry in the 101st Airborne Division cantonment. As one source said, "They blew

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the whistle--and the war was on!"^{49/}

The Allied forces immediately engaged the VC/NVA. Later in the morning, fighting became widespread to the east of the base perimeter as the enemy split up in response to Allied pressure. BHAB itself received small-arms/automatic weapons (SA/AW) fire from several locations to the east, but a torrent of fire from the base's armored vehicles, small-arms, and a 90-mm recoilless rifle kept the enemy harassment at a low level.^{50/}

As the Allies conducted operations to fix and destroy the enemy, the fighting became centered around two villages to the east, Dong Lach and Ho Nai. As soon as the enemy's occupation of the villages was recognized, the Allied forces surrounded them and prepared to finish the enemy off, but first an attempt was made to get the civilians out of the area. The ARVN brought a vehicle equipped with a loudspeaker up to the battle area and called upon the villagers to evacuate. The ARVN also broadcast an appeal to the VC/NVA from one of their captured officers to "Chieu Hoi" (rally to the government), which some 60 enemy soldiers subsequently did.^{51/}

The ARVN III Corps Commander, General Tri, had held off the destruction of the villages as long as possible, but by later afternoon he decided to strike into the houses, so the enemy wouldn't escape after dark.^{52/} The attacks in and around the villages began in earnest, supported by USAF and VNAF strike aircraft, and light fire teams controlled by the respective FACs. Two FACs on station above the area directed U.S. fighters, F-100s and F-4s, in expending their ordnance, some of which was placed as close as 350 meters

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from the end of the main runway at Bien Hoa Air Base.^{53/} The Vietnamese A-1s also struck at the enemy; these were controlled by a VNAF FAC in an APC near the scene of the fighting.^{54/} The Allies continued to make use of the loudspeaker and alternated airstrikes with Psychological Warfare broad-^{55/}casts.

By 1900 hours on 26 February, the "Battle of Bien Hoa" was over. The enemy's reinforced 3d Battalion, 275th Regiment, was destroyed, and those soldiers not killed or captured tried to evade the Allied noose by exfiltrating to the east. The total results of the battle were as follows: the enemy lost 276 KIA and 66 captured; 100 individual and 40 crew-served weapons were captured along with a goodly amount of equipment and munitions.^{56/}

In concert with the enemy's attack at Bien Hoa, he also moved against Long Binh Post. The attack began at 0230 hours on 23 February when the Post received 78 rounds of mixed rocket/mortar fire and a weak ground probe by elements of the 274th VC Regiment. Although the ABF caused some damage, the ground probe did not succeed in penetrating the installation. Later that same morning, Royal Thai forces engaged an estimated VC company in a bunker complex four kilometers south of Long Binh. Fifty-six of the enemy's troops were killed, all by the supporting tactical fighter aircraft. Just as this contact was ending, another enemy unit directed small-arms fire at the post perimeter. The Allies reacted swiftly, engaged the enemy with reinforcements and struck at him from the air. The contact lasted until about 1545 hours, and cost the enemy 158 killed and six PWs.^{57/}

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Prisoner interrogations and searches of enemy bodies at Long Binh revealed the length to which the enemy had gone in preparing his troops for the attack on the post. It seems that the assault forces expected an easy time of it--they had been told by their commanders that the installation contained only "clerks and typists", but no combat troops. The captured enemy soldiers reported they had also been promised as much food as they wanted from C-Ration stocks which they expected to capture. The latter was borne out by the discovery of many can openers on the persons of those troops killed and captured.^{58/}

On the 24th, there were small clashes to the south and on the 25th the Allies assaulted a bunker complex in the area. There was also an incident near the PW compound at the post, but no decisive fighting developed. For all intents and purposes, the Long Binh portion of the larger battle was over on the 25th,^{59/} for the fighting that took place to the north and east was considered part of the "Battle of Bien Hoa".

The enemy's Fourth Offensive and the "Battle of Bien Hoa" received widespread attention in the U.S. press. An example of the distorted coverage given to the offensive and, specifically, the fighting at Bien Hoa/Long Binh, appeared in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on 26 February. The article read, in part:

*"REDS SEIZE TWO SUBURBS OF SAIGON, REPEL 2000 IN HOUSE-TO-
HOUSE FIGHTS: AIR BASE HOLDS OFF ATTACKERS.*

*"Communist raiders seized two villages on Saigon's northern
fringes today and turned back 2000 Allied soldiers in house-
to-house fighting. United States divebombers and artillery*

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left the battlefield aflame.

"American and South Vietnamese tanks were counter-attacking the guerrillas in Dong Lach and Ho Nai, just outside the huge U.S. Air Base at Bien Hoa, 15 miles northeast of Saigon.

"The fighting began just at dawn today, opening the fourth day of nation-wide Red offensive which, U.S. spokesmen said, has left at least 3000 enemy dead and about 200 Americans and 417 South Vietnamese killed...."

During the period of 22 February to 1 March 1969, the VC/NVA carried out an increased number of ABF, and limited ground actions in the remainder of III CTZ. In the heart of the zone, Saigon took nine 122-mm rocket rounds, a minor probe in the city's 9th Precinct, and a few terrorist incidents. In the northwest, Tay Ninh Province experienced ABFs and ground probes against Allied installations. Fire Support Base (FSB) Diamond, southwest of Tay Ninh City, was attacked by the enemy resulting in 206 VC/NVA KIA. The Dau Tieng Base Camp received ABF, with ground probes, as did the Cu Chi Base Camp of the 25th Infantry Division.^{60/} The period was characterized by similar activity in other sections of III CTZ, with 299 enemy-initiated incidents occurring compared with 47 the week before. Of these, 144 were ABFs.^{61/}

After the 23-26 February period, the enemy's Fourth Offensive lost its momentum. During ABFs, attempted LOC interdiction, and terrorism became the VC/NVA's main tactics, although a few ground assaults of note took place during March.

Two of these ground attacks took place at Landing Zone (LZ) Grant in western Tay Ninh Province.^{62/} The first one was carried out by two enemy

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battalions on 8 March, and resulted in 157 enemy KIA and two PWs. The second assault, on 11 March, was initiated by a single VC/NVA battalion which lost 86 KIA and four PWs. On the Allied side, these attacks caused 16 KIA, 50 WIA, and one 155-mm Howitzer destroyed.

Toward the end of March, on the 24th, the VC/NVA also attacked two ARVN battalions in Long Khanh Province, losing 190 KIA. Later, on the 30th, the enemy assaulted an ARVN night defense position in Tay Ninh Province, resulting in 35 enemy KIA and one PW.^{63/} As the month of April began, the Fourth Offensive was clearly over. Allied intelligence sources indicated the enemy's units were retiring to base areas and avoiding, for the most part, contact with Allied forces. As of 31 March, the enemy appeared to be evaluating the effects of the Fourth Offensive and deciding on future courses of action.^{64/}

Red Lightning, Atlas Wedge, Project DART

RED LIGHTNING and ATLAS WEDGE, two major spoiling operations of the Allies, continued during March, along with Project DART. Operation RED LIGHTNING (Fig. 13) was targeted against a concentration of VC/NVA troops and supplies in the Trapezoid area. Intelligence sources indicated the enemy was there in force, so Allied commanders decided to destroy or inflict heavy casualties on the enemy's troops.^{65/}

RED LIGHTNING began on the morning of 10 March with the delivery of CBU-24s (a cluster bomblet identical to CBU-49, but without delay fuzing), and then ARC LIGHT strikes were flown. At 1330 hours, Army CH-47s began

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the delivery of CS under FAC direction. Later, the ARC LIGHT boxes were seeded with CBU-24/49s and artillery fire was directed into the area. Additional CBU sorties followed and, at first light on 13 March, ground units from the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions began sweep operations.^{66/}

RED LIGHTNING resulted in 436 bunkers and fighting positions destroyed and 103 secondary explosions. In addition, 8,000 pounds of rice were destroyed, along with a vast amount of equipment. The post-strike VR by FACs on the ARC LIGHT boxes revealed 9 VC/NVA killed-by-air, pots and pans scattered throughout the area, and indications of heavy foot traffic in the area. The results from the sweep operations were not immediately available.^{67/}

ATLAS WEDGE (Fig. 13) was planned to find and destroy elements of the 7th NVA Division and the 96th NVA Artillery Regiment which were reportedly in the Michelin Plantation area. The operation began on 17 March with Allied ground units closing the area and fighters delivering strikes into the plantation. (ARC LIGHT was not allowed within the plantation for political reasons.)^{68/}

Initially, 22 ARC LIGHT strikes were expended in an arc around the northern portion of the operation. As ATLAS WEDGE continued, the CG, II FFV, ordered increased targeting to take advantage of the enemy's disrupted condition and to catch the units that had fled the plantation. Ten more ARC LIGHTs were flown in the south and, as the enemy sought refuge toward the Cambodian border, 35 were expended on known base camps and suspected rallying points in that direction.^{69/} Allied ground units pulled out of the plantation on the 28th, ostensibly because the operation was completed. Then on

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the 30th, a four-battalion force swept back into the area and caught some of the enemy's soldiers who had either returned or come out of hiding, adding to the total casualties for the operation.^{70/}

The confirmed body count for ATLAS WEDGE was 444. Food, many weapons, and other equipment were destroyed or captured. The total effect was not known, however, because BDA for a significant part of the territory struck by ARC LIGHT was not obtainable.^{71/} An intangible result of ATLAS WEDGE, however, was obvious--no longer could the enemy count on the Michelin Plantation as a haven.

Project Deployable Automatic Relay Terminal (DART)^{72/} was designed to monitor vehicular and personnel movement in critical areas and to provide the information to Allied forces for interdiction efforts. The system was made up of three basic elements; the sensors, an airborne relay link, and the central DART facility. The sensors were emplaced across infiltration and supply routes and were activated by the enemy as he transited the area. This information was sent to the airborne relay link (an EC-121 on station, orbiting some distance away), which passed the data to the DART facility for interpretation and evaluation. The facility then fed the data to Allied agencies, which carried out various measures to deal with the source the sensors had originally detected.^{73/}

The DART system arrived in South Vietnam in early 1969 and became operational in III CTZ on 1 March. Although it came too late to have an effect on the enemy's Fourth Offensive, the system, according to one source, held great promise for future preemptive and interdiction efforts.^{74/}