Footprints of War

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Published by University of Washington Press

Sutter, Paul S. and David Andrew Biggs. 
Footprints of War: Militarized Landscapes in Vietnam. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81740.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81740
CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

American military intervention after 1964 was marked not only by unprecedented destruction but also by extraordinary construction. Lt. Gen. Carroll H. Dunn, in charge of US military base construction in 1972, remarked:

In February 1966, the Directorate of Construction was established in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, to provide centralized management of the U.S. program. Embracing ports, airfields, storage areas, ammunition dumps, housing, bridges, roads and other conventional facilities, the construction program was probably the largest concentrated effort of its kind in history.1

Contrasted with the Americans’ urban sprawl, too, were the persistent constructive efforts of NLF and People’s Army supporters to maintain critical bunkers and shelters despite unimaginable waves of bombing. Trần Mai Nam, a North Vietnamese journalist traveling through the hills above Huế in 1967, recalled:

But soon my eyes are drawn to some precise points on this picture. Little houses scattered among the bomb craters. For a quarter of a century, bombs and bullets have not stopped raining on this narrow strip of land. Those mud and straw houses, so tiny, breathe an indomitable courage like those fighters who keep themselves going on wild plants, go barefoot. On my
left lie the ruins of an enemy outpost destroyed by the P.L.A.F. On my right, a long trail of denuded nothing running up into the mountains, indicating the run of B-52s. . . . This was where the B-52s made their first raid on the Tri-Thien area. Before the bombing, the enemy dropped millions of leaflets over the area, carrying a photograph of these planes and information about their formidable cargoes of death.2

Working out of landscapes defined by earlier layers of military construction and destruction, American and Vietnamese combatants escalated their efforts after 1965. The American base-building effort to 1972 turned older bases and airstrips into base cities with round-the-clock air traffic and tens of thousands of American troops. Meanwhile in the hills thousands of NLF and North Vietnamese volunteers operated thick networks of trails crossing high mountains with trucks, diesel fuel pipelines, and ammunition bunkers. Matched with these duel constructive efforts were unprecedented acts of violence. The B-52 strikes noted by Trần Mai Nam brought a destructive capacity several orders of magnitude greater than bombing during the French war. Besides saturation bombing, Americans introduced new ecologically destructive technologies such as chemical defoliants and mass drops of napalm that had devastating effects on both natural and built environments.

While levels of construction and destruction were unprecedented, the logics behind these new landscape constructions followed older patterns. Communist forces returned to original strategic zones such as Hòa Mỹ despite repeated American and RVN attempts to clear the area. The former tactical zones reemerged as critical gateways. While the American constructive presence, especially its sprawling bases, transformed horizons on the coast with radio towers, jets, and row upon row of barracks, for communists the many small shacks dotting the bomb-cratered hills held an equally important symbolic value. B-52 strikes in the area in 1966 produced lines of craters visible from space, but the underlying logic of this space—the gateway function of the strategic zones and the concentration of foreign troops along Highway 1—had not changed much since 1947.

In some senses, the American struggle to escape this historical spatial logic, a contest between the coastal highway and the highland forests, led war advocates to propose ramping up the intensity of bombing and destruction. Harvard political theorist Samuel Huntington, in a famous essay supporting the American war effort, even revisited the old notion of “creative
destruction” as articulated by Werner Sombart in *Krieg und Kapitalism* (1913) and Joseph Schumpeter in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942). Huntington noted, as did Sombart, that the intensive bombing was slowly turning South Vietnam into an urban nation. Refugees from the mountainous conflict areas flooded into cities such as Saigon and Danang while other new villes popped up around bases at Nha Trang, Pleiku, Buôn Ma Thuột, Kon Tum, Chu Lai, and Quy Nhơn. After three years of base-building and strategic bombing, Huntington noted that South Vietnam had a greater percentage of its population living in urban areas than Sweden, Canada, and all of Southeast Asia except Singapore. Most of the surge, of course, was due to war refugees living in slums, but Huntington nevertheless seized on it and drew wide attention in the United States. Possibly this was a means of escaping Vietnam’s history and its landscapes.

Huntington wrote: “The effective response [to national liberation movements] lies neither in the quest for conventional military victory nor in the esoteric doctrines and gimmicks of counter-insurgency warfare. It is instead forced-draft urbanization and modernization which rapidly brings the country in question out of the phase in which a rural revolutionary movement can hope to generate sufficient strength to come to power.” Aside from the moral problems inherent in this deadly means of encouraging urban development, Huntington’s thesis also failed to appreciate a key feature of the NLF’s revolutionary movement. It, too, was focused on an urban and industrial future. While communist networks lacked the concrete-hardened edges of airport runways, docks, and bunkers, their vision for Vietnam was an urban, socialist one built out of cities. While political cadres stressed smashing feudalism and imperialism in villages and the cities, they did not advocate physically smashing the villages and cities. Destroying physical landscapes, as NLF forces learned in their 1968 Tết Offensive in Huế, threatened to unravel popular support that was vital to sustaining their cause. Villages, cities, and even the mountain bases were not just temporary communities to be evacuated after the conflict. To carry out a socialist revolution, party leaders understood that historic landscapes were important as platforms for “cultivating” new followers and launching new construction out of the old.

This chapter follows the spatial tensions dividing American, ARVN, and communist logics of landscape as Americans brought new technology, especially aerial technology, to float above the layered surfaces below. It begins
with the Americans’ amphibious entry, on the coast, of US Marines in 1965 and then traces Vietnamese responses to the fighting, especially protests and fighting on the streets of Huế. Rather than following central political maneuvers and military decision making in Sài Gòn or Hà Nội, it focuses on the landscapes of the central coast and what engagements in those spaces meant for evolving, global debates over creative destruction in Vietnam.

AERIAL VISIBILITY

From the first days in 1943 when Army Air Force planes began their flights over Indochina, one of the biggest challenges facing Americans in Vietnam was literally seeing the land surface below. Especially in the highlands, dense forests and cloud cover obscured it. When American aid officials attempted to reach many towns in 1950, they found roads in disrepair and runways too short to land DC-3s. After 1954 much of the civilian aid given to the Republic of Vietnam went into the construction of runways and the installation of navigational equipment. After the ARVN’s attempted coup in 1960 and the formation of the National Liberation Front, American aid for airbases went into overdrive. The airbase and depots at Phú Bài mushroomed into a web of roads and compounds, plus a runway long enough for jets. American aid paid for construction of an aerial platform allowing increased surveillance, faster troop transports, and a workaround for the friction of terrain. In the early days of the United States’ expansion after 1960, new airstrips popped up like small islands carved into the hills beside ARVN outposts.

At Nam Đông and the A Sầu Valley, new airfields became a vital link for keeping the bases supplied in the event of attack. By late 1961 the dirt runways and helipads became the bases’ primary link to Huế as PLAF forces cut the roads. American covert aid concentrated on a string of three bases in A Sầu as ARVN teams bulldozed an all-weather road along the valley floor (plate 3). Seeing these bases from above with the sea in the background revealed their closeness to the coast. At eleven thousand feet, the A Sầu Valley was but a ten-minute flight from Phú Bài (figure 5.1). However, besides the friction of difficult terrain limiting movement on the ground, dense cloud cover for much of the year obscured aerial views and made landings treacherous (figure 5.2). Forests straddling the mountainous Vietnam-Laos border were almost always shrouded in low clouds.
The American drive to see wider areas on both sides of the DMZ, in Laos and in neighboring China led to technological advances in several aspects of aerial surveillance, especially high-altitude aerial photography. Views from eleven thousand feet produced a sense of proximity between mountains and sea, while views from seventy thousand feet showed proximity to Chinese bases on Hainan Island as well as PAVN camps in the north. Just days before he left office in 1961, President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the National

Figure 5.1. Oblique view of A Shau airfield, November 1961. Source: Frame 08, Mission J5921, ON#69611, Record Group 373, US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.
Photographic Interpretation Center as a clearinghouse where several thousand photo interpreters, working for intelligence services and the military, pored over newly snapped images of central Vietnam to assess the military assets of communist forces. This new photographic effort was part of a broader American campaign to innovate high-altitude spy planes and satellite photography to monitor Cold War adversaries. Concerns over activity on the trails in Laos drew some of the first high-altitude spy missions using the new U-2 aircraft. Figure 5.3 shows the winding path of one U-2A plane at seventy thousand feet as it photographed the DMZ and Chinese military bases on southern Hainan Island.

From 1961 until the end of the war, this unending stream of high-altitude spy photography over Vietnam became a staple of presidential briefings on the “Vietnam situation.” Year after year, the photography and interpretive reports of the National Photographic Interpretation Center improved, shaping US policy and reliance on this aerial perspective. The center produced a series of photographic intelligence reports focused on road building in the Laos panhandle with excerpted images from U-2s and other aircraft outlining...
PAVN rest areas and bivouacs. The American desire to view Vietnam from high altitude even figured into the space race programs as the United States launched a series of keyhole photographic satellites, codenamed CORONA, under the cover of its civilian Discovery program. By 1965 these satellites, carrying twin cameras, produced high-resolution black and white prints covering long segments (keyholes) of territory roughly thirty kilometers wide and 240 kilometers long.6

All of this photographic imagery, however, could not cut through the clouds, foliage, tunnels, and camouflage hiding much of the PLAF and PAVN infrastructure below. The Americans’ need to see through dense layers of vegetation brought one of the most controversial aerial technologies, herbicide spraying, in an attempt to physically modify the landscape to suit the aerial perspective. From the first tests of herbicides in 1961, senior policymakers including John F. Kennedy and Ngô Đình Diệm themselves acknowledged the legal and ethical challenges of such a tactic.7 Considering the growing network of villages and upland strategic areas under communist control as well as concern about communist gains around key cities such as Huế, the US Department of Defense along with its RVN counterpart viewed the use
of herbicides for clearing rights of way as a top priority for securing roads and exposing communist base areas to aerial surveillance. A secret US history of the herbicide program noted President Kennedy’s particular concerns about the international political optics of this program. At a September 25, 1962, meeting with the RVN’s secretary of state, Kennedy replied to RVN requests for immediate crop destruction in the highlands with the following two concerns: “First that the GVN could differentiate between Viet Cong crops and Montagnard crops and secondly, that the usefulness of such an exercise would outweigh the propaganda effect of communist accusations that the US was indulging in food warfare.” Americans understood the propaganda downside to this tactic, but their aerial bias led them to downplay the spillover effects of destroying crops. The very notion that a reconnaissance officer in a spotter plane might be able to differentiate which crops went to Montagnards and which to communist soldiers ignored what was then common knowledge about the communist reliance on swidden crops.

The American decision in 1963 to start spraying highland crops signaled an abrupt shift from clearing lines of communication and base perimeters to a direct attack on the communist trail network. A joint US-RVN team targeted three hundred hectares of crops in the southern tip of the A Sầu Valley for crop destruction on February 16, 1963. After delays from bad weather and the observance of the Tết holiday, a chemical crew in an H-34 helicopter marked with the gold- and red-striped flag of the RVN took off from Đà Nẵng. This southern end of the valley marked a key junction where the Hồ Chí Minh Trail in Laos met paths running east toward Nam Đông and the coast. The first five flights carried an arsenical herbicide (later known as Agent Blue) used for killing rice. The last two flights carried Agent Purple, a precursor to Agent Orange with the same dioxin-tainted herbicide, 2,4,5-T. It attacked woody vegetation and broadleaf crops such as cassava. Flying the slow-moving helicopter near the ground exposed the crew to ground fire, and the crew aborted most of the runs. Helicopter pilots also contended with steep terrain, radarless navigation, and rapidly changing weather conditions. After one week they had sprayed just fifteen hectares.

While these spray missions had little if any effect on the fighting in the A Sầu Valley, they added potent fodder for antiwar activists and galvanized the prowar camp in Hà Nội. Local NLF leaders in the valley decried the “poisonous sprays” dropped by the “US-puppet regime.” General Võ Nguyên Giáp, commander of the People’s Army, drew on this new phase in the spray missions
to accuse the United States of engaging in chemical warfare and violating the 1925 Geneva Protocol. He brought a formal complaint to the International Control Commission that the spray missions in A Sầu violated two articles of the 1954 Geneva Accords too. While the RVN government produced radio broadcasts and newspaper articles explaining that the herbicides were not poisonous to humans, DRV and NLF “Liberation Radio” programs amplified their charges. On June 6 the DRV ran a radio program likening the sprayings to the Nazi gas chambers used in the Holocaust.10

As communist forces expanded their networks in the A Sầu Valley in 1964–65, this new chemical approach held limited positive benefits while exposing new ecological challenges. MACV initiated a series of intensive spray operations in late 1965 and early 1966 in a last-ditch effort to secure the badly embattled special forces bases in the highland valley. PAVN and PLAF forces continued to expand their own posts on the slopes fringing the valley floor, and they cut off travel by road to Huế. MACV sent thousands of gallons of Agent Orange to the base perimeters via C-123 cargo planes outfitted with sprayers on the wings. This new spray aircraft delivered a two-hundred-meter-wide path of herbicides over a distance of six kilometers. The planes filled their tanks at Đà Nẵng, sprayed in circles around the airstrips, then returned for more runs (plate 4). Because Agent Orange was an herbicide that killed broadleaf vegetation but not grasses, it destroyed woody brush but then opened the valley to fast-growing grasses and reeds that thrived in the heavy rainfall and open sun. One of the most pernicious grasses was an invasive that hitchiked from American bases in Guam: elephant grass (Pennisetum purpureum). This grass, along with species of cane and the food crop sorg-hum, thrived in the defoliated perimeters of the bases, producing a two-meter-tall savannah. Communist troops adapted to the grass, forging new paths and adding new camouflage.11

In addition to advancing new forms of high-altitude photography and aerially sprayed herbicides, American forces also brought new radio technologies for communications and war. Built into the expanded base facilities at Phú Bài in 1962 was a state-of-the-art radio-listening post operated by the US Army Security Agency’s Eighth Radio Research Unit (RRU). Managed by the National Security Agency and operating until the end of the US military’s encampment, the Eighth RRU was one of the most heavily defended sites in the province. Surrounded by networks of trenches encircled by minefields, it enabled long-distance secret communications and supported a novel radio
detection program designed to “peer through” mountain foliage to locate PLAF and PAVN radio transmissions.\textsuperscript{12}

The Phú Bài station was part of a top-secret network of electronic listening stations that US intelligence agencies had operated across mainland Southeast Asia since 1961. Airborne radio direction finding (ARDF) had become an important feature in electronic warfare since World War II, and technological innovations accelerated rapidly during the Cold War. An ARDF hit, for example, led ARVN forces and their US advisers into the disastrous Battle of Ấp Bắc on January 2, 1963. As the war expanded in 1963, so did the RRU facilities. One NSA analyst at the Eighth RRU in Phú Bài later broke the NSA’s code of secrecy and told journalists that he and hundreds of other NSA and military communications specialists worked at these stations, triangulating signals and calling in airstrikes.\textsuperscript{13}

After the 1963 coup toppled Diệm and brought in a ruling junta of ARVN generals, the US MACV moved quickly to expand radio operations from the secret RRUs to more public broadcasting including one American staple of the Cold War, the Voice of America (VOA). The stretch of highway between Huế and the bases at Phú Bài turned into a frontier for American and South Vietnamese broadcasting. On May 12, 1964, US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge requested that the junta’s leader at the time, General Nguyễn Khánh, locate a parcel near that stretch of highway for the United States to install radio antennas for VOA. With a US consulate in Huế and the RRU facility at Phú Bài, this was the ideal location for a forward transmitter to send American radio programs into communist-controlled areas. Because of this highly symbolic land use, implanting the “voices” of America in Vietnam’s airwaves while taking valuable village fields, General Khánh personally signed the decree awarding the land just five days after the passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.\textsuperscript{14} Compared with the Diệm era, when Ngô Đình Cẩn would have stringently opposed such a move, the ARVN generals ensured a speedy transfer.\textsuperscript{15}

While the expansion of these American radio transmitters and the research units reflected American concerns over airspace in Vietnam, the creation of radio broadcasting facilities opened up new opportunities for Vietnamese voices as well. Just south of the new VOA antennas on Highway 1, US engineers refurbished the transmitter and towers for Radio Huế (Đài Phát Thanh Huế). Radio Huế, like the VOA, broadcast a variety of Western and Vietnamese pop music as well as “Voice of Freedom” programs aimed at
listeners in “controlled” and “liberated” areas. Linked to Radio Huế’s studio in the European quarter of Huế, the radio station would become an important protest tool when Buddhist and student demonstrators took over the studio in 1966.

AMPHIBIOUS LANDINGS

All of this aerial activity, however, could not alleviate the worsening situation for the RVN in mid-1964. While visual evidence confirmed the expanding construction of communist trail networks in the hills, photography could not halt them without commitments to large-scale bombing. The gains of PLAF and PAVN troops, especially in the A Sầu Valley in 1964, triggered rapid American responses to prevent what by July looked to be a dire situation. Nine months after Diệm’s assassination, communist forces had regained control over most of former Interzone IV. American special forces units and ARVN soldiers struggled to retain the camps at Nam Đông and A Lưới and required constant helicopter support. After communist soldiers destroyed the US base at Nam Đông, the Tonkin Gulf Incident in August 1964 provided the US president with a pretext to order bombing in North Vietnam while escalating military actions in the south.

The subsequent American move to rapidly escalate the air war in February 1965 did, according to local sources, check the advances of northern troops via bombing north of the DMZ. However, it did little to prevent over ten thousand PAVN soldiers already south of the DMZ from operating. These men and women came primarily from two PAVN divisions, the 324th and 325th, comprised mostly of natives from the central coast. ARVN military commanders—most of them also native sons—wrote sobering reports that a “sea change” was continuing in the countryside despite the bombing. The bombing had little effect on the PAVN and NLF battalions active in the hills west of Quảng Trị, Huế, and Đà Nẵng. They had built bunkers, new tunnels, and defensive positions around the A Sầu Valley and along the trails in Laos. After the assaults in July 1964, PLAF forces took back the agricultural development centers at Hòa Mỹ and Nam Đóng. The next summer, in 1965, they moved downhill from one settlement to the next, taking over villages and even crossing Highway 1 in several coastal areas. One evening, several squads even returned to the strategic hamlet Thanh Thủy Chánh just outside Huế and razed the bamboo palisades.
Recalling Huntington’s comments about American bombing and “forced-draft urbanization,” the South Vietnamese commander provided a sobering corrective. Cities alone would not save South Vietnam. Without the countryside, the new urbanites would starve. Furthermore, communist military operations suggested that after surrounding the cities they would not stop. These ground truths, the necessity of food and access to fields, brought RVN and US leaders to an understanding that US soldiers would be needed to protect the air bases and reclaim the urban fringes to prevent an impending invasion.

The American ground war in Vietnam began on the central coast on March 8, 1965, when two battalions of the US Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade landed on the beach near Đà Nẵng. Their first mission was to secure the perimeters of the American base complex there. A month later two more battalions arrived and were airlifted by helicopter to Huế–Phú Bài. Given concerns about local responses to foreign troops, the military government in Sài Gòn limited the American troops to small tactical areas of responsibility (TAORs) around each base. The TAOR in Đà Nẵng consisted of two hills west of the airbase and at Phú Bài the bare land across the highway from the airport. The marines moved a larger force from Okinawa to Vietnam in late April 1965 to expand a third base for fighter jets at Chu Lai, then described as an “uncultivated waste” on the beach seventy-five kilometers south of Đà Nẵng.19

Even with these first landings, American military commanders were highly aware of the symbolic significance of a mission that they envisioned as different from the “expeditionary” missions of French soldiers. They even changed their name to reflect this aim. A marine history of the landings noted: “on 7 May 1965, III Marine Expeditionary Force was redesignated III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF) for political reasons. The word, expeditionary, smacked too much of the gunboat imperialism of a bygone era and had been used by the French forces which entered Vietnam at the end of the Second World War.”20 This relatively small detail points to a deeper problem for US ground forces in Vietnam, embedding in a landscape long defined by foreign military occupations.

The marines’ mission was amphibious not just in the traditional sea-to-land sense but also in terms of their mixed military-civil presence in old villages such as Phú Bài. Their tactical area overlapped with the outer hamlets of Phú Bài Village (figure 5.4). As a protective force for the airbase, the marines also engaged in civilian duties termed “civic action.” Civic action, military
leaders proposed, would distinguish the American military occupation from earlier armies as the “amphibious” name change suggested. Communist propaganda already labeled the Americans as invaders (kẻ xâm lược), linking them with earlier French, Japanese, Chinese, and Mongol invaders. In contrast, revolutionary campaigns were described as the “resistance” (kháng chiến) or the “national resistance against foreign invaders” (toàn quốc kháng chiến chống ngoại xâm).

The marine mission was also amphibious in the sense that American soldiers integrated their operations with South Vietnamese troops. This was a conscious effort to break with the Japanese and French forces that segregated
themselves in the 1940s. From mid-1965 this image of American and Vietnamese soldiers working side by side in local civic and military affairs circulated widely in American media. The marines called this integrated fighting unit a combined action company, later a combined action platoon (CAP). Four of these integrated teams assembled as a company in Phú Bài in mid-1965, and a former US Special Forces adviser, First Lieutenant Paul Ek, headed them. Following the model of special forces advisers in the highlands, Ek sought to “blend” his teams in everyday life. He took an intensive course in Vietnamese at Okinawa and gave his teams a two-week course on Vietnamese customs and the unique nature of their combined mission before they arrived at Phú Bài.²¹ In an interview he stressed the importance of this strategy of embedding in the village landscape: “We tried to get the people to accept us as members of the community. The Marines’ training was geared to teach them as much as we could about Vietnam and the Vietnamese people so that they could actually live with them in a close relationship, not as an occupational force but as members of that village . . . at the same time carrying out their primary mission of a military capability.”

Becoming “members of the community,” however, was both difficult to imagine and dangerous to carry out. The marines spent much of their energy bouncing back and forth between military and nonmilitary activities: policing checkpoints, providing free medical care, setting up ambushes, repairing roads, interrogating prisoners, and teaching English. Some in the US military championed this blended approach to counterinsurgency, but many others criticized it for forcing soldiers trained in military boot camps to place themselves in situations for which they’d received little training.²² The Americans also had little sense of the history of their Vietnamese allies in the village. Many of the Popular Force paramilitaries came from families who had affiliated with the Cần Lao just a few years earlier. Their bid to win over Việt Cộng sympathizers was often undermined by allies who had a reputation for past violence.

While the Americans in the CAPs lacked a deep knowledge of the village’s history or the personal histories of their local allies, from time to time their detective work revealed glimpses of the underground networks moving food, supplies, and people from village markets into the hills. For instance, they observed that older women tended to smuggle rice. An extreme drought in summer 1965 forced the NLF to seek additional rice in lowland village markets, providing cash for women to buy it at the markets. These older women
acted as mules, buying rice in quantities slightly larger than permitted and delivering the surplus to underground caches. Since the French war, the RVN had placed strict limits on amounts of rice that villagers could store in their homes or buy at the market. The CAPs and the Popular Forces recorded patterns of activity that appeared unusual, identifying individuals where possible. When Lieutenant Ek and his Vietnamese counterpart detained several women, they admitted right away to working as food carriers for the NLF. The CAP interrogators then attempted to recruit them as double agents, but only one woman turned, revealing the location of several rice caches. The other women endured the detentions and weeks later were caught buying rice again.²³

A story that played well with American audiences at home, American policymakers repeatedly highlighted these CAP success stories to boost support for their rapidly expanding, conventional buildup. Civic action success offset the bad news coming in via secret channels from the highlands. The CAPs, especially the teams at Phú Bài Village, reinforced the arguments of MACV commander General Westmoreland asking Congress for more combined activity together with funds to carry out strategic bombing on PAVN troops in the highlands. Marine commanders advertised CAP operations as “little victories” in press reports that were republished in the 1966 US Senate spending bill for the war. The US$4.7 billion appropriations bill supported an increase in ground troops to over four hundred thousand persons and included funds for building new ports, roads, and base facilities. In the middle of floor debate about troop numbers and the enormous costs, military experts mentioned a report titled “Phu Bai: Model of Counterinsurgency” that emphasized the blended approach.²⁴ The article downplayed the military aspects of CAP work and instead emphasized their socially constructive aims:

Civic action is conducted at all levels, from an individual marine teaching a child to read, all the way up the scale to the use of large units on projects which are national in scope. An example of a really large project would be the development of the Ohio River Valley by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The extensive road net built by the Roman legions in the time of the Caesars is another . . . civic action is taken at every level and, in a campaign of the sort we’re conducting in Vietnam, it’s often those individual or group local projects which pay the biggest dividends.²⁵
The strange reference to Roman legions hints at the imperial scale of this building project for what was to be an occupation army. Roman roads may have been durable, the ancient world’s autobahns, but first and foremost they conveyed Roman armies. Juxtaposed against the obvious windfall that the bill brought to American construction and engineering firms, the “success stories” from villages like Phú Bài were targeted at winning support from skeptical senators who were more interested in President Lyndon Johnson’s domestic War on Poverty. The Senate nonetheless passed the spending bill, voting 93–2 in favor.

What the civic action reports did not emphasize, however, was the intensely dangerous nature of this work for foreign soldiers attempting to embed in the ancient landscape. Village inhabitants, by contrast, had been forced to adapt to several decades of police sweeps, detentions, and military actions. In many cases, persons who appeared least likely to carry out violent attacks—seniors and young women—became the most dangerous. Women often had an easier time crossing checkpoints and patrols, and some volunteered to carry out suicide attacks. While military-age men in the villages often left to avoid detention or conscription into the ARVN, women stayed behind, procuring supplies and providing the NLF with intelligence. While American reports highlighted the CAPs’ successful ambushes and detective work, party histories emphasize NLF successes. On one occasion, an NLF commando force attacked a CAP team in its residence on Highway 1 at Đạ Lề Village. A month later two women from Đạ Lề Village smuggled antipersonnel mines inside their bags and detonated them in an infirmary where Americans were receiving treatment, killing several US soldiers and an American nurse.26

WAR IN THE HIGHLANDS

While Americans attempted to eliminate the NLF’s political infrastructure in coastal villages, combined PAVN-PLAF units focused a series of attacks on US-ARVN bases in the highlands, including a successful defeat of the A Shau Special Forces Base on March 9 and 10, 1966.27 In their spatial and environmental logics, the communist attacks on American bases in the hills were mirrors of the American operations in the lowland villages. Where Americans struggled to move from an aerial perspective to one grounded in the daily movements of people in village markets and on the roads, the communist forces attempted to use force on the ground to destroy the Americans’ aerial platform.
Compared with the Americans’ “success story” in Phú Bài Village, communist forces pointed to their “success story” in the devastating assault on A Shau. A vicious battle that left several hundred dead and wounded, it demonstrated how after years of trail construction and with material support from China and the Soviet Union, communist ground networks could severely limit the Americans’ aerial platform.

At A Shau in the winter of 1966, communist forces used a thick layer of low clouds hanging over the valley to conceal their early preparations for the assault. They opened the attack with 80-mm guns planted on the mountain slopes with views of the base below the cloud line and views of incoming aircraft above the clouds. Among the first targets of their assault was the radio communications hut on the base. The first strikes commenced at 3:50 A.M., instantly cutting radio links to Phú Bài and Đà Nẵng. Only after four hours of artillery barrages did US soldiers reestablish a radio contact and call for air support. However, when the bombers and gunships arrived, they could not see PAVN troops through the clouds, and batteries of anti-aircraft guns in the hills began shooting down American planes from the ridgeline. An AC-47 Spooky, a DC-3 plane with heavy guns mounted on one side, circled over the camp to provide covering fire, but 80-mm guns destroyed it. American cargo planes attempted to drop ammunition and rations inside the embattled camp, but they dropped many supplies in areas already overrun. ARVN and US Marine transport helicopters attempted to land and effect a rescue, but several were attacked with heavy fire and destroyed. At sundown, PAVN-PLAF forces launched a new attack on the base with 75-mm recoilless rifles, reducing many buildings to rubble.

The following day, PAVN-PLAF infantry commenced a ground assault, moving through dense thickets of elephant grass that concealed their movements. Because the grass had rapidly spread around the defoliated perimeter, covering a belt of landmines, ARVN troops would not move out into the grass to engage the communist troops. On the evening of the second day, communist forces overran the base. Of 434 persons in the camp—US special forces, Nung guards, ARVN soldiers, interpreters, and civilians—248 went missing while 172 were confirmed killed. What the after-action report described as “the disaster at A Shau” was not an isolated incident either. Across the highlands, mixed PAVN-PLAF forces engaged in similar large-unit offensives. The surviving Americans fled the base and their dead comrades on March 10. Only two months later on a dry, cloudless day in May did a detachment
of soldiers from Đà Nẵng bring nine helicopters to the grisly scene at A Shau to bury the dead. They found twenty-four Vietnamese bodies and only one American. They collected information on the Vietnamese bodies and buried them on-site; then they lifted the lone American body in a body bag and flew it to Đà Nẵng for the journey home. Investigators suspected more bodies were concealed in the thick elephant grass covering the destroyed perimeter of the cratered airstrip, but they feared attack from communist snipers or inadvertently setting off landmines.28

While there are no communist after-action reports available, one captured document from Nguyễn Đức Bống, a platoon leader in the PAVN 325A Regiment suggests that these offensives took a devastating toll on communist troops too. Bống’s notebook detailed a blacklist of individuals who criticized the wisdom of the attack on A Shau after a large percentage of men died, especially in the second wave of assaults through the grass. The notebook recorded personal details of the troops killed, destined to inform families at home. The platoon commander recommended measures to “purify the unit politically,” too, sending soldiers who were too shell-shocked to fight to perform support duties.29 However, neither the notebook nor the soldiers reached their destinations. An American infantry unit destroyed the platoon when they assaulted another mountain base later that summer.

**BOMBING THE HILLS, MOVING SOLDIERS BY AIR**

Such bitter encounters with PAVN-PLAF forces in the highlands in 1965–66 produced a sobering realization among American policymakers at home. They could not win the war in the mountains with air support alone; instead, they approved an increase of several hundred thousand American ground troops along with assault helicopters and high-altitude bombers. General Westmoreland drastically expanded aerial attack capabilities, advancing what would become a signature feature of the war, helicopter-borne “air cavalry” offensives. Considering the three elevational zones of the central coast, this air cavalry approach signaled a new effort not just to dominate the air above fighting zones in the hills but to quickly ferry hundreds of soldiers by helicopter to the fighting. Additional marine and army units arrived on the coast in mid-1966 to fill out these operations, expanding camps along Highway 1 and outside the air bases. They mounted helicopter-borne search-and-destroy missions into the coastal hills, often clearing lone huts and attacking lone
individuals caught in these areas. To seal off the hills, MACV ordered heavy bombing in the highlands too. Around South Vietnam’s borders, they dropped electronic sensors and increased air surveillance. PAVN units, however, countered with “mop up” operations, overrunning isolated camps and rebuilding new tactical areas around these ruined camps.\(^{30}\)

As American troops continued to pour into Vietnam’s ports and communist forces expanded areas of control in the highlands, the deforested, bare hills in between once again became a volatile battlefront. US Marines encountered especially strong resistance near Hòa Mỹ in December 1966 when they launched sweeps in the hills while establishing new camps along Highway 1. The PAVN 324th Division had been expanding its offensives eastward from trails in Laos along Highway 9, the region’s main highway connecting Laos with Quảng Trị Province and the coast. One of the 324th’s battalions, the Sixth, operated with the PLAF 802nd Battalion further south in Thừa Thiên–Huế Province with the aim of reopening the east-west trail system to Hòa Mỹ. As the marines pushed west into the same hills, both forces met in a series of scattered attacks near this former “cradle of the revolution.” Over one thousand PAVN-PLAF soldiers opened attacks on the American camps, assaulting base perimeters along Highway 1 with small weapons and lobbing artillery and rockets inside. The marines had not expected communist attacks deep in the lowlands on the highway, and MACV added three more battalions (over 1,500 men) to counterattack while bomber aircraft razed the hills with napalm and B-52s engaged in saturation bombing around Hòa Mỹ. On Christmas Day 1966, the marines opened Camp Evans, named for the first American killed in the communist offensives.\(^{31}\) The battles continued for four more months with no substantial gains in territory.

This particular location, the marine camp on Highway 1, and the communist movements through Hòa Mỹ, represented in the starkest of environmental terms the difficult position of American and ARVN forces along the highway. Communist forces repeatedly attacked not only from the mountains but also from the marshes and dunes. The Americans responded by calling in intensive bombing strikes on both sides. American bombing over a four-month period leveled Hòa Mỹ and ten surrounding hamlets in the hills. When communist soldiers attacked the camp from the coastal dunes, an AC-47 Spooky gunship emptied three thousand pounds of bullets on them. A map of recorded American bombing missions derived from a US Department of Defense database shows the intensity of bombing in just this four-month period (plate 5).\(^{32}\)
This sudden escalation of troops and bombing in 1967 produced an unprecedented phase of base construction along the coast while pounding the hillsides with thousands of tons of munitions. Here the idea of creative destruction was being tested in the extreme. The cratering of the hills produced the “forced-draft urbanization” that Samuel Huntington described, sending refugees from bombed areas fleeing for their lives to refugee camps near American bases on the highway. The bare hills and “waste lands” that had borne the brunt of fighting in many past wars now received most of the American bombs dropped in the course of these expanded operations. This search-and-destroy campaign with bombing and helicopter assaults was no longer isolated to a few remote bases in the mountains or civic action around the air bases.

The fighting around Hòa Mỹ and Camp Evans in 1967 was one small part of a much wider string of operations in the belt of low hills fringing the central coast. Figure 5.5, derived from the same bombing database as in plate 5, shows the clustering of bombing operations in central Vietnam in 1966 and 1967. South of the DMZ, the densest areas of bombing occurred in the foothills. North of the DMZ, American bombing concentrated on the coast,
where PAVN forces traveled by rail or road before turning inland to the trails in Laos. A tally of all the bombs dropped in the missions captured in this frame counted 110,000 tons. Eighty-one percent of these were general-purpose bombs while 8 percent were incendiaries (napalm, white phosphorus) and 4 percent were cluster bombs. For comparison, the area in figure 5.7 is roughly equivalent to the area of West Virginia or Norway (62,000 square kilometers). In just this one part of Vietnam, the tonnage dropped in these two years amounted to more than half of all bombs dropped over Western Europe in 1943.\textsuperscript{33} With the exception of some battlefields in World War I, nowhere on earth had received so many bombs in such a concentrated space.

**WAR AND THE CITY**

While the greatly expanded areas of US bombing and military operations may have, à la Huntington’s theory, produced a bifurcation of populations and landscapes, cities such as Huế were never wholly insulated from the war. Military and political conflict in Huế did not begin with the 1968 Tết Offensive but instead grew out of earlier student and Buddhist protests against the Sài Gòn government, the military, and especially the US troop buildup. The rapid escalation in American military operations in 1966, especially the increased bombing in the hills, triggered a new current of popular resistance on the streets among a spectrum of people, including ARVN military leaders, Buddhist leaders, and even officials in Huế.

After protests by students and Buddhist monks against the Diệm government, a new Struggle Movement led by a Unified Buddhist Church emerged on the streets of Huế and Đà Nẵng in 1966. Protests erupted in March 1966 when the head of the military junta in Sài Gòn, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, removed a charismatic ARVN commander of I Corps, General Nguyễn Chánh Thi. Thi had a long career in the Vietnamese military, was active in past coup attempts against Diệm, and was a Buddhist. Like many military leaders in central Vietnam, he was alarmed by the Kỳ government’s antidemocratic policies and by Kỳ’s ready acquiescence to American requests to expand military operations. Thi, together with other military, civilian, and Buddhist leaders in central Vietnam, refused orders from Sài Gòn to break up student protests, leading Kỳ to order his removal.\textsuperscript{34}

Considering the mostly urban and coastal spaces where US military and civilian agencies pursued civic action, the Struggle Movement in Huế was a
direct challenge to the notion that Vietnam’s urban areas were firmly allied with the Americans. After General Thi’s ouster, student protesters descended on Radio Huế, where they commenced broadcasting anti-American programs. Huế’s civilian and military leaders offered no resistance. Radio station staff in Huế and Đà Nẵng allowed the students to broadcast for several hours each day. Neither Huế’s police nor ARVN troops followed orders from Sài Gòn to remove the students for several months. Given the “radio corridor” established by the United States from 1963 to 1964 with antenna farms and the RRU at Phú Bài airfield, this move struck at the heart of US ambitions to win Vietnamese hearts and minds over the airwaves. In Huế and Đà Nẵng, city officials and staffers encouraged what Kỳ and others argued was an open rebellion against Sài Gòn and a public condemnation of the expanding American military presence, especially its bombing missions.35

While protesters aimed their anger at the military junta too, they eventually clashed with US soldiers in Huế. On March 26 a US enlisted man pulled down an anti-US banner. The move triggered an immediate response on Radio Huế where protesters and their ARVN supporters demanded that the enlisted man publicly apologize and replace the banner. General Westmoreland ultimately intervened, offering an apology to prevent a spectacle.36 Protests continued that spring as more American troops arrived. In May an American soldier shot an ARVN soldier who accompanied the protesters, triggering another wave of anti-US protests with strong support from ARVN soldiers. After the man’s funeral on May 26, protesters burned down the US Information Service library in Huế. Kỳ then ordered the ARVN’s First Division, the Huế military unit whose leaders had refused to put down the protests, to relocate to Quảng Trị. In protest of this move, protesters sacked the US consulate.

As American-made tanks driven by pro–Sài Gòn military units approached the city to restore order, the protesters adopted a new tactic of resistance, placing family ancestral altars wrapped in Buddhist flags in the middle of city streets. This symbolic act, placing one’s ancestral altar in the path of approaching tanks, was a highly unusual but deeply effective form of protest. The tanks avoided the altars and waited outside the city limits of Huế and Đà Nẵng.37 This small-scale act of family-centered defiance highlighted a deep conflict for many Vietnamese whose family ties reached beyond the urban periphery into the same stretches of countryside subjected to carpet bombing and search-and-destroy missions. Many of Huế’s families were but one generation
removed from ancestral villages, and many thousands of youths had left families in the countryside for schools in the city. Because of family ties linking students (and ARVN soldiers) to ancestral homelands in the war zones, American military actions in these hilly border zones often had indirect impacts on young people living in Huế. Base construction also exacerbated tensions as the RVN seized village lands, especially areas with tombs. During the escalated fall 1966 operations, marines operating at Phú Bài took one hill in a hamlet of Dạ Lề and renamed it LZ Tombstone for the many graves around the makeshift landing zone.  

38

The communist Tết Offensive that began on January 30, 1968, marked a pivotal turning point in the spatial and landscape terms of the conflict. The Battle of Huế began in the early morning hours on the Lunar New Year, January 31, 1968, and lasted over a month as over four thousand PAVN-PLAF forces took control of the city, flying the NLF’s red and blue flag with its central gold star above the citadel. This takeover was a surprise, and it punched a hole through Huntington’s urbanization theory, proving that the cities were not impregnable strongholds of American sympathizers.

For many communist troops and their families, it was also a return of sorts. The 1968 battle was not the first Tết offensive in recent memory but the second. Several thousand Việt Minh youth fled the city when French troops invaded Huế in February 1947. That year the Việt Minh Trần Cao Vân Regiment together with irregulars fought unsuccessfully at blown bridges and trenches to thwart the invasion. They retreated to the safety of the tactical zone at Hòa Mỹ and redoubts in the highlands. This regiment, later named the 101st, became a part of the People’s Army 325th Division in 1951. After 1954 soldiers in the regiment relocated north while extended families stayed behind, many of them suffering reprisals for being “VC in the region.” Twenty years later in 1967, the Trần Cao Vân Regiment fought in the Trị-Thiên front along Highway 9 in Quảng Trị. In May 1967 its political leaders reorganized with cadres from PLAF divisions and local district committees to form a Tactical Region IV Party Committee to coordinate the attacks from January 20 to 31. 39 The Trần Cao Vân prepared for a large-scale assault on the US Marine camp at Khe Sanh in the hills on Highway
9 just south of the DMZ.\textsuperscript{40} In May 1967 artillery units from the regiment probed American and ARVN defenses along the highway with rocket attacks. On May 27 a PLAF artillery unit sent rockets into Huế to test the city’s defenses, hitting the American MACV office, the ARVN First Division headquarters, and the broadcasting office of Radio Huế. During the fall these units stockpiled over sixty-one thousand tons of supplies at caches in the hills along trails and at recovered tactical zones at A Lưới and Nam Đông.\textsuperscript{41}

In social terms the communist assault on the city was also significant because Vietnamese troops had not led a major military assault against other Vietnamese troops defending the city since the Nguyễn fleet’s invasion in 1801. Despite communist propaganda that repeatedly characterized the war as a resistance struggle against American “invaders” and Vietnamese “lackeys,” this violent shift resulted in widespread destruction in the city and inadvertent killing of many civilians; it blurred the boundaries between liberators and invaders. As American and ARVN units eventually cut off PAVN-PLAF troops inside the old walled city, the communist units fought a violent, devastating retreat to the hills, leaving entire companies for dead along with hundreds of civilians caught in the crossfire.

Communist preparations for the attack, secretly hiding weapons and soldiers at homes inside the city, also illustrated the intense ideological differences dividing neighbors and families. Under the noses of ARVN soldiers and secret police, the PLAF smuggled into the city caches of weapons needed to supply several thousand soldiers. By December 1967 soldiers from the PLAF’s Phú Xuân Sixth Regiment (1,800 soldiers), four infantry battalions (1,300 soldiers), one rocket company (100 soldiers), and another 1,000 local soldiers had managed to move into the city without detection.\textsuperscript{42} Just outside the city in the hills, soldiers from the PLAF Ninth and Fifth Divisions and various special units added another 4,000 soldiers, who secretly took up positions outside the city to block movements of American and ARVN soldiers from such bases as Phú Bài.\textsuperscript{43}

This secretive and successful preparation for the offensive highlights the vital role that families played in supporting, hiding, and feeding the troops. Many people who had in past eras suffered as “Việt Cộng in the area” supported the troops. North Vietnamese veterans of the battle recounted hiding with families for several weeks, taking care not to let neighbors hear
their distinctive northern dialect. Communist forces transported weapons that arrived in trucks carrying flowers and fruit to the holiday markets. Fake funeral processions delivered coffins filled with weapons and ammunition, and supporters buried them at pagodas and churches. Baskets of rice and vegetables concealed explosives. Communist soldiers arrived dressed in civilian clothes and some even in ARVN uniforms; they mixed into crowds gathered for Tết celebrations and holiday markets.

The offensive began under heavy cloud cover that prevented American helicopters from safely reaching the city and helped communist units reach their targets. On January 31, 1968, at 2:30 A.M., PLAF forces poured shells and rockets at several dozen preselected targets in the city. Then, PAVN-PLAF infantry forces met at designated points and took over the citadel region north of the river, the old imperial city. By morning light, a giant NLF flag with a gold star in the middle was visible on the flagpole atop the old imperial fort in front of the royal palace. Over the next few days, PLAF forces on the other side of the river in the European quarter attacked government offices and almost overran the American MACV office before US Marines from Phú Bài reinforced the post. The ARVN First Division, quartered inside a walled fort in the citadel, barely held off repeat waves of attacks. Over the next several days, PAVN and PLAF soldiers walked freely inside the old imperial city while troops across the river in the “new town” fought American units and inflicted heavy casualties.

As the clouds lifted days later, descriptions of the fighting blanketed radio and television airwaves, conveying scenes of NLF flags and street fighting to stunned global audiences. On February 6, CBS News aired a segment following two companies of US Marines who had broken out from the MACV headquarters and were fighting to take two city blocks around Huế University and the provincial headquarters. The news cameras followed as the marines blasted giant holes through homes and university buildings, coming up against communist forces crewing machine guns. At the end of the segment, the marines reached their objective and hoisted a US (not RVN) flag at the province headquarters, tearing up the captured NLF flag. Such television accounts showed millions of viewers worldwide a degree of carnage that belied the confident reports of social scientists such as Huntington. CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite traveled to Vietnam two weeks after the Tết Offensive ended, reporting from Sài Gòn, Huế, and other cities. When he
returned, he delivered a historic condemnation of the American war effort that galvanized public opinion against the war.\textsuperscript{48}

The physical destruction brought by a month of fighting, conveyed in photographs and statistics, underscored the heavy costs to the city’s mostly civilian population. Heavy shelling and use of tanks had destroyed over ten thousand homes and left 40 percent of the city’s population homeless. More than five thousand civilians were listed as dead or missing.\textsuperscript{49} In July 1969 the chief of the ARVN’s military history division released a 490-page account of the Tết Offensive, devoting over forty pages with graphic images to the battles in Huế. This account highlighted the mass arrests of RVN officials and their subsequent killings by communist forces as they fled the city with the prisoners under fire. Drawing from captured NLF documents, it detailed plans for targeted arrests as well as assessments of the offensive after the retreat on February 23.\textsuperscript{50} The official PAVN history of the war naturally avoids a discussion of the killing of over 1,300 “traitors” and “puppets” and the disposal of their bodies in a mass grave; however, it does in somewhat circuitous terms acknowledge breakdowns of discipline as communist forces fled under heavy fire from ARVN and US troops. The history states: “Our soldiers’ morale had been very high when they set off for battle, but because we had made only one-sided preparations, only looking at the possibilities of victory and failing to prepare for adversity, when the battle did not progress favorably for our side and when we suffered casualties, rightist thoughts, pessimism, and hesitancy appeared among our forces.”\textsuperscript{51}

The urban experience of such devastating violence in Huế also catalyzed artists who produced some of the era’s most famous songs and stories about the war. They noted scenes of dead bodies, wrecked homes, and people everywhere wearing white headbands in the weeks after the fighting, mourning deceased relatives and friends. The urban battles, because of their immediacy, highlighted the violence of fighting that had been raging in the hills for years; perhaps better than news stories, artistic responses pointed to the war’s complex scarring of personal relationships and family histories. One of South Vietnam’s most popular singers, Trịnh Công Sơn, wrote such songs as “Ballad for the Dead,” recounting grisly scenes from his hometown:

\begin{quote}
Xác người nằm trôi sông, phơi trên ruộng đồng
Trên nóc nhà thành phố, trên những đường quanh co
\end{quote}
Author Nhã Ca’s *Mourning Headband for Huế* relates in more personal details how the communist siege and American bombing shattered family and neighborly relations. She’d traveled to Huế before Tết to attend her father’s funeral. She then spent several weeks hunkered in a bomb shelter, carefully rationing out stores of food and moving during pauses in the fighting. After surviving the fighting, she returned to Sài Gòn and published stories about the siege in a pro-peace newspaper, *Hòa Bình*. Her stories detailed a non-aligned view on the terrors faced by civilians as families desperately sought to protect teenage boys and vulnerable loved ones from one side or the other.

**MILITARY CITY-BUILDING**

While the American political response at home to the Tết Offensive developed in surges of protests and debates through the summer’s Republican and Democratic party conventions to the November election, the military response was rapid and unprecedented. Within months new bases mushroomed along the central coast. MACV moved out from Sài Gòn’s airport to a sprawling air base facility thirty kilometers north. It created a new Forward Command at Phú Bài and turned the hills of Vùng Phèn and the lands above Đà Lệ into a military city, lights blazing all night around helipads and a busy runway. Just weeks after the fighting in Huế had subsided, US Navy construction battalions (Seabees) arrived to repair damaged infrastructure and quickly erect scores of prefab barracks, hangars, and roads for some forty-five thousand troops slated to follow.

The communist offensive had caused severe disruptions to the existing infrastructure, especially the marine bases along Highway 1, disrupting flows of all materials from bullets to c-rations to oil. Sapper battalions had blown most of the major bridges from Huế to the DMZ, and infantry units had taken the mountain pass separating Huế from Đà Nẵng. They blew pipelines and
damaged the tanks supplying aviation fuel to Phú Bài. During the fighting in February, US forces required resupply by air when the winter clouds parted. US troops consumed more than 2,600 tons of supplies each day that month. An additional 45,000 US Army troops were due to arrive by the summer, so the demand for housing and logistics facilities was particularly acute. As MACV moved its offices, General Westmoreland ordered the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division to relocate to the hills above Dạ Lề. Following President Johnson’s emergency request to Congress for increased troops and spending, he added to the division a brigade (3,000 men) of the Eighty-Second Airborne Division and a US Marines Regimental Landing Team (approximately 1,000 men) from Southern California. The forward command included army and marine generals who negotiated with the navy and air force for coordinated campaigns involving units from all branches.

The Seabees destined for Huế set off from Port Hueneme, California, in January 1968 with a fleet of transport ships carrying prefab buildings, bulldozers, cranes, and tools to repair broken infrastructure around Huế and construct the new army base. The annual yearbook of MCB Team 8 provides a vivid pictorial account of activities in the area. As the Battle of Huế wound down, MCB 8 repaired the fifteen-kilometer road connecting Thuận An with Huế, including vital bridges and the petroleum-oil-lubricant pipeline running from a tank farm near the coast to Phú Bài (figure 5.6).

As had the marines before them, the Seabees devoted part of their efforts to rebuilding civilian infrastructure; however, the team was not prepared for the extent of broken buildings, rubble, and trash they encountered that spring. Photographs in the yearbook detail the skeletal hulls of buildings in Huế—the shot-up Huế University building, blown bridges, and piles of rubble inside the citadel. When the Seabees arrived at the site for the army base, the marine staging area LZ Tombstone, they found the hill covered in a thick layer of garbage. The fighting in February covered the hill in empty tins, shell casings, boots, and boxes (figure 5.7). Two snapshots in the yearbook, one of a boy lacing up a pair of combat boots and the other of him and other boys inspecting materials in the rubbish heap, point to the high level of material consumption during the fighting. When MCB 8 arrived, accompanying ARVN troops permitted Dạ Lề’s villagers to visit the rubbish piles to collect anything they wanted before bulldozers razed the site.

As the American military supply chain expanded on the central coast in 1968, nearby villages became mired in this new construction and its material
flows, especially wastes. MCB 8’s bulldozers shaved the hilltop and carved out roads linking the army base with Phú Bài. The bulldozers plowed through several dozen tombs before ARVN and village protests forced them to reroute roads and buildings around them. By summer, army engineers and a private firm, Pacific Architects and Engineers, arrived to complete construction of cantonments for the 101st Airborne Division’s Camp Eagle. By September army units were in place and the base was operational. Residents of Dạ Lê no longer dared to venture to their old hamlet, Dạ Lê Thượng, now laying partially inside a perimeter of minefields and exploding incendiary fougasse devices. A network of watchtowers, perimeter lights, and machine gun

**Figure 5.6.** Reconstructed petroleum-oil-lubricant tank farms near Thuận An. Source: US Navy Mobile Construction Battalion Eight, *MCB 8: Hue, Phú Bai, 1968* (Minneapolis: American Yearbook Company, Military Division, 1968), 9.
emplacements guarded the outside fringes too, as soldiers looked for any movement as a sign of an attack.\textsuperscript{57}

Inside the fence, Camp Eagle was in material and cultural terms a small city. The skies buzzed with activity as helicopters took off and landed around the clock, ferrying troops and supporting a new network of hilltop firebases in the mountains. Each unit at Camp Eagle had its own club, and the base featured an amphitheater, the Eagle Entertainment Bowl, to host performers such as comedian Bob Hope and shows of dancing girls and rock and roll bands playing to crowds of ten thousand or more.\textsuperscript{58} Some villagers sought day-labor work inside, lining up by entrance gates; several dozen worked blue collar jobs. The base produced great volumes of trash, and villagers helped haul it to makeshift dumps while others picked through it. In anthropologist James Trullinger’s 1975 interviews with residents of Đạ Lề, villagers repeatedly recalled the dangerous trips to visit family tombs on the hilltops. One recounted being shot at by troops while attempting to clean a tomb with his son.\textsuperscript{59}

By 1969 this constellation of military camps had grown as large as Huế. The camps, the roads, and even some of the hilltop firebases formed a new infrastructure visible from space. The following photograph, a declassified image taken from a top-secret American spy satellite on March 20, 1969,
shows the extent of this buildup after one year (figure 5.8). In the top center of this image, the squarish outline of the Huế Citadel gives a spatial reference. Each side measured two and a half kilometers in length. The 101st Airborne Division was headquartered at Camp Eagle while the MACV Forward Command and US Marine units were located at Phú Bài Combat Base. This section of what Washington’s photo interpreters called a keyhole image was about one-third of the long, rectangular frame. A close-up detail from the image shows the city-like nature of these new base areas with buildings and roads forming dense grids (figure 5.9). The hedgerows of fields and households are visible on the fringes of the base.

In a violent reprise of the ancient founding village and upland satellite model, the US military established fire support bases (firebases) on the hilltops to direct artillery fire into the highlands. Like their ancient analogues, each firebase was like a hamlet, connected for supplies and direction to its parent base. Camp Eagle was a political and material center near Highway 1, sending people and materials via helicopter to these mountaintops. In figure 5.8, the white filament of a gravel road, provincial Route 547, snakes west from the base across the Perfume River into the hills. This road, like the root of a plant edging further into the soil, provided a vital conduit for truck convoys carrying artillery shells, troops, armaments, c-rations, beer, fuel, spare parts, and napalm to satellites such as Firebases Birmingham and Bastogne.
From the moment of their violent creations to their evacuation several years later, the firebases were the most concentrated destructive sites of the war. The US military, the world’s largest logistics organization in 1968, produced manuals with step-by-step instructions to guide commanders in rapidly constructing these hilltop fortresses. The following quote from a First Cavalry guide gives a sense of the destructive powers available:

If the proposed site is one of dense jungle where it would take ground crews considerable time to clear even the smallest opening, it would be to the commander’s advantage to use more efficient means, such as large Air Force bombs that would completely demolish all vegetation in the drop area. The 750-pound bomb called the “Daisy Cutter” detonates approximately ten feet above the ground, completely destroying all vegetation within a ten-foot radius and knocking down trees in a considerably larger area. The 10,000-pound bomb (instant LZ) performs the same devastation but over a much larger area . . . it is important that preparatory fire play a large part in clearing fire bases.  

Figure 5.9. Phu Bai Combat Base, March 20, 1969. Source: CORONA Frame DS1050-1006DF129, courtesy of US Geological Survey Earth Resources Observation and Science Center.
In the hills west of Camp Eagle, military commanders ordered the “instant LZ.” After the initial bombing, they followed additional guidelines. Cargo helicopters dropped drummed napalm in “flame drops” that incinerated the downed trees and burned away brush along the perimeter. An even larger helicopter, the CH-54 Skycrane, airlifted bulldozers and then howitzers as troops and engineers built bunkers, gun emplacements, and set up camp. Within days construction was complete. Helicopters from base camps ferried howitzers, shells, provisions, and people daily. Helicopters with spray rigs visited periodically to douse the base perimeter with herbicides and DDT to kill mosquitoes.

**Figure 5.10.** Firebase Spear, April 2, 1971. Caption on the original photo reads: “Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 321st Artillery, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) is inserted.” Source: Box 8, Information Officer Photographic File, 101st Airborne Division, Record Group 472, US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.
This airborne network of bases and firebases tested the limits of the American aerial platform to the extreme. However, even with the new base cities and a force of over five hundred thousand American soldiers on the ground, this system could not regain control over the highlands. In addition to communist attacks, the dense vegetation, steep slopes, and ever-present clouds challenged this hilltop approach. Figures 5.10 and 5.11 illustrate these challenges of this terrain as US forces with the 101st Airborne attempted to clear one hilltop and then airlift materials. In the center of each image, a CH-47 helicopter hovers over the site, giving a sense of scale. Despite the proximity of helicopters, big guns, and radio contact, firebases often lacked visibility of the lands below and remained shrouded in clouds from the skies above. In the fall and winter months, heavy rains added to soldiers’ troubles, turning denuded hilltops into thick slopes of sticky mud.

Figure 5.11. Firebase Spear, completed, April 22, 1971. Source: Box 8, Information Officer Photographic File, 101st Airborne Division, Record Group 472, US National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.
From the opening days of the Tết Offensive through 1968 and 1969, this escalation in US troops and expansion of firebases was accompanied by a threefold increase in bombing compared with the 1966–67 period. Figure 5.12, depicting the same stretch of central Vietnam as in figure 5.5, shows US aerial bombing missions from January 1968 through December 1969. Using the comparison to World War II bombing in Europe, bombing in these two years was equal to almost double the volume of all Allied bombs dropped over Western Europe in 1943. Bombing intensified greatly over the Hồ Chí Minh Trail in Laos, and it extended westward from the cratered hills into the forested peaks, especially around the A Sầu Valley.

**COMMUNIST RIGHT OF WAY**

While Americans extended their airborne networks from base cities to firebases on the hilltops, communist forces ramped up their own infrastructure
development along the trail networks and around base areas. CIA intelligence memorandums developed from U-2 and CORONA photographs reported that in the A Sâu Valley, PAVN-PLAF forces had, since their victories in mid-1966, expanded their own network of all-weather roads, improved wired communications (to avoid detection of radio transmissions), and even cleared the old runways on abandoned special forces bases, perhaps in anticipation of their own air cargo drops. After fending off the Tết Offensive, US bombers pounded these abandoned bases and any site that suggested evidence of communist camps. The CIA report highlighted suspect depots and camps in Laos, and it provided a map showing over two hundred miles of gravel roads that PAVN-PLAF engineers had completed linking the trails in Laos with battlefronts along Highway 9 in Quảng Trị and in the A Sâu Valley (figure 5.13). Along these roads, still serviced by the 559th Transportation Group, construction units expanded vehicle depots, added anti-aircraft guns, reinforced barracks, and ran an eight-inch pipeline supplying diesel and kerosene.61

These top-secret discoveries in 1968 and 1969 pointed to a corresponding communist urbanization scheme that, contrary to the American construction along the coast, was establishing altogether new Vietnamese urban
corridors in lands that before 1945 were hardly mapped. While the American bombing campaigns and military assaults after Tết were undoubtedly destructive for thousands of men and women working on the trail system, the systematic wasting of hilltops, communist roads, and large swaths of forests was a double-edged sword. In the short term, it forced trails to be rerouted, wires and pipelines to be reconnected. In the long term, the violent clearing of old growth rainforest and indigenous claims by B-52 Stratofortresses and napalm drops opened the slopes to communist state-builders.

With respect to the urbanization of networks in the region, the CIA map also pointed to another troubling spatial fact. As PAVN-PLAF engineers pushed their roads east, they would eventually reach the new roads and corridors that Americans had extended west from bases on the coast. Near the DMZ, the embattled marine camp at Khe Sanh marked the 1968 boundary while near Huế after the Tết Offensive, PAVN-PLAF engineers controlled Route 547 east to the 101st’s Firebase Bastogne. If one viewed these dueling construction campaigns from space, one might even imagine they were two sides attempting to connect.

**HAMBURGER HILL**

While American pilots and firebase gun crews may have cursed the low clouds and heavy rain, the same torrential rain turned communist roads to muck and stalled this construction effort every fall and winter. Communist fighting was intensely seasonal. PAVN-PLAF forces planned a 1969 winter-spring offensive after the rains eased after they built up caches and troops over the rainy winter. This seasonality played into the timing of the 1968 Tết Offensive, and a year later it guided the first follow-up battle with reinforced American troops where the highways met.

This battle, later known by Americans as the Battle of Hamburger Hill, took place on the hills overlooking the embattled highway junction where the communist “highway” from Laos ran into the A Sâu Valley and the start of Highway 547. As the clouds and rains lifted in March 1969, both sides concentrated on this road junction as essential for advancing and protecting their efforts. The communists’ Trị Thiên Region Committee ordered several thousand troops to the valley to protect road-building efforts and push east to the American firebases. With Camp Eagle fully operational, US Army planners were eager to draw upon their networks of firebases and helicopter
groups to break the communist forces. The Trị Thiên Committee moved a regiment (approximately three thousand soldiers) of the PAVN 324th Division into the western hills above the junction of Highway 547 and 548 (figure 5.12). Soldiers dug trenches around hilltop bunkers and moved heavy guns including anti-aircraft weapons to the peak of A Bia Mountain. The PLAF Sixth Regiment, one of the main forces at the Battle of Huế, supported the effort, even cutting rice rations over the fall and winter to stockpile food for the battle.\(^\text{62}\)

Comparing US military histories of the battle with People’s Army histories, it may come as no surprise that both sides suffered high casualties but nevertheless claimed victory in what was by all accounts a meat-grinder engagement. One American report published by the air force in October 1969 paid close attention to coordinated ground and air-based attacks on communist troops on the hill. US-ARVN forces fought for ten days to take the peaks on A Bia. The fighting left over a thousand soldiers wounded and several hundred dead. As aerial bombing and artillery reduced the mountain to a moonscape, after the battle there was little of anything to claim. US-ARVN troops did not dare to build a firebase so deep in communist territory. Meanwhile, the PAVN-PLAF forces retreated to safe havens in Laos. Both sides waged smaller battles in the valley throughout the summer. Perhaps most important from an environmental standpoint was the decision by the US command after May 31 to designate the entire valley a Specified Strike Zone, meaning that air-strikes could be ordered without observing on the ground local allied units. A radio listener at Phú Bài or a photo interpreter could present evidence of communist troop movements to a commander, who could then order bombing at designated coordinates. This strike zone opened the valley to saturation bombing and increasing use of defoliants.\(^\text{63}\)

As with the Tết Offensive, news of Hamburger Hill at this remote highway junction jolted US debates at home. Newspaper reporters in Sài Gòn wrote of the fierce resistance posed by PAVN troops and the cost of these battles in American lives. Two \textit{Los Angeles Times} stories on May 28 and June 18 epitomized popular responses against these dangerous insertions into the mountains. The first headline read, “US Troops Abandon Viet Hill, Center of Congressional Storm,” and the second read, “Reds Back on Viet Hill; US General Ready to Fight.”\(^\text{64}\) Heavy casualties and the seeming pointlessness of these battles deep in the mountains energized antiwar protests in the United States.
CHEMICAL WARFARE AND AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

In addition to widespread public protests in the United States about these deadly stalemate battles, by 1969 scientists, environmental activists, and some military leaders began to express concerns about the environmental effects of US activity. In particular, the Department of Defense and the Department of State were concerned about 1968 reports that the herbicide 2,4,5-T in Agent Orange contained high concentrations of the contaminant, 2,3,7,8-TCDD (dioxin). While communist propaganda had since 1963 likened the chemical spraying to poison gas attacks, the troubling findings in 1968 suggested that if the operations were exposing people to dioxin, there might be a shred of truth to the claim. In January 1968 the American ambassador contracted senior scientists from the American Association for the Advancement of Science to commence investigations of the herbicide’s alleged toxicity. The full report appeared in the association’s flagship journal *Science* in January 1969. The report was inconclusive, but it galvanized scientists and the public at large to investigate a bevy of alleged health impacts from exposure to dioxin. The *Science* article triggered a public debate at American universities and around the world, even leading to the coining of a new word, ecocide, to describe the intentional destruction of South Vietnamese forests. US agencies, including the Department of Defense, and the president had since 1963 expressed concerns that targeted destruction of forests and fields might result in such charges of war crimes; antiwar activists seized on the reports and published their own accounts of ecocide.\(^65\)

At the heart of this debate were the many chemicals that American troops used in Vietnam to open paths through forests or attack enemy camps. Besides Agent Orange and tactical herbicides, the US military introduced a broad suite of other chemicals to combat adversaries in jungle environments as well as to protect American bases from human and insect assaults. Chemical platoons assigned to individual bases managed supplies of tactical materials such as napalm and Agent Orange. They also managed use of pesticides inside the bases and defoliation using diesel fuel. The US Army introduced airborne drops of tear gas (CS and CS\(_2\)) to push soldiers from underground bunkers above ground. American combat activities in war zones such as the A Sáu Valley involved a mix of tactics with soldiers, helicopter assaults, aerial bombing, electronic surveillance, and chemical spraying.
Teasing out military and scientific debates over the toxicity of Agent Orange from broader concerns about the war and chemical pollution in the 1960s remains difficult even fifty years later. While press reports in 1969 and 1970 focused on Agent Orange, they largely ignored the broader role of chemical units in both US-ARVN and PAVN-PLAF forces. Most large units had chemical companies or platoons for managing tactical chemicals such as explosives as well as nontactical disinfectants, insecticides, solvents, and other chemicals. While American antiwar activists in 1969–70 focused on Agent Orange, few paid much attention to the fact that the same dioxin-containing herbicide had been used at home in gardens and along rights of way since the late 1940s.

Also lost in the Agent Orange–centered history is a more nuanced understanding of the wide array of other chemicals (many also later banned) used by American forces. For the 101st Airborne at Camp Eagle, the Tenth Chemical Platoon of the Army Chemical Corps managed the delivery of tactical chemicals like Agent Orange to war zones as well as spraying the base with DDT for mosquitoes. The chemical corps was formed in 1918 during World War I when US Army troops encountered gas attacks in Europe. After 1945 the chemical corps expanded its responsibility to biological, radioactive, and nuclear weapons, and during the 1950s it supervised the development of herbicides like Agent Orange for use in the challenging highland forests of Indochina. It also managed supplies of napalm and the tear gas CS. When the 101st Airborne set up at Camp Eagle, the Tenth Chemical’s unit of officers, soldiers, and assault support helicopter pilots managed this chemical stockpile.

A one-day snapshot of the Tenth Chemical’s operations at Camp Eagle suggests the scope of chemical activities. On the morning of January 21, 1970, helicopter pilots with the Tenth Chemical Platoon commenced aerial spraying around Firebase Bastogne with a 2:1 mix of Agent Orange (350 gallons) and diesel (200 gallons). Using a UH-1 Huey helicopter with a spray rig, they made five trips from Camp Eagle to the firebase. In the afternoon, Tenth Chemical soldiers at the helipad loaded a CH-47 Chinook helicopter with drums of napalm for a “bulk flame drop” (figure 5.14). Crew on board strapped a dozen drums together (660 gallons), and once over the target they pushed it out the rear hatch. As the drums fell to the ground, a fighter jet swooped in and strafed it with bullets to create a giant fireball that singed the ground and suffocated anyone hiding below. The Tenth Chemical ran eleven bulk
flame drops that afternoon, targeting a coastal area of marshes and dunes where the 101st Airborne’s Third Brigade was fighting. After these missions concluded at 3:30 p.m., the Tenth Chemical ran one final operation reserved for dusk, a “sniffer mission.” The “sniffer” crew piloted a “Huey” fitted with a high-tech, ammonia-sniffing device. They flew low and slow, just above the treetops, to record minute traces of ammonia in the air. For each ammonia trace detected, they recorded map coordinates, setting targets for air attacks that night or the following morning. Figure 5.14, which pictures a different chemical platoon loading a CH-47, details a “bulk CS drop,” in which crews dropped barrels of CS instead of napalm to produce giant clouds of tear gas over suspected communist tunnels.

Even though US military planners worked closely with RVN counterparts to select target zones for the herbicide spraying months in advance of missions, problems of spray drift and accidental destruction of noncombatant or “friendly” crops highlighted the volatile ecological and political effects of
the chemicals. A US military review of the herbicide program noted that thousands of farmers petitioned the South Vietnamese military for damage to crops. The highly volatile form of 2,4,5-T used in Agent Orange tended to drift several kilometers with the wind. Another American study noted that failures to compensate farmers posed deep political and tactical problems. Some disgruntled farmers joined the insurgents, and American attempts to reimburse farmers presented opportunities for widespread corruption as the South Vietnamese government lacked sufficient oversight to verify crop damage claims.68

In both strategic and economic ways, Agent Orange’s physical drift into friendly fields or onto allied soldiers pointed to deeper, underlying problems with the logic of using an herbicide to fight a war. Pilots of the sprayer planes, flying missions on predetermined coordinates, did not attempt to distinguish friends from enemies on the ground. After the Tết Offensive, many students and antiwar activists in South Vietnam began to protest the overall destructiveness of American operations; chemical damage only added to their claims. More scientific reports published in 1969 pointed to dioxin’s potential hazards to fetal development, so US military leaders attempted to justify the noncivilian impacts of defoliation, even in such fought-over places as the A Sầu Valley. The following excerpt from a 1970 planning document illustrates how far the military’s logic of mitigating damage to civilians had been stretched. It explained: “Intelligence estimates indicate approximately five regiments or a total of 10,000 NVA/VC troops are located within the target area. No friendly or pro GVN inhabitants are known to be living in the area and the Montagnard population is estimated to be approximately 9600. The resultant native population density of the entire area is less than four individuals per square kilometer.”69 This strange math, averaging the indigenous population across the area of the entire spray run, reflected a grim attempt to distract from the likelihood that concentrated villages of highlanders were squarely in the spray paths and would be exposed to a potentially teratogenic chemical while also losing their crops. This diminished valuing of highlander lives drew increasingly severe responses from South Vietnamese allies who faced criticism from senior leaders and protesters.70

In heavily bombed areas of the A Sầu Valley, much of the herbicide washed into circular, muddy ponds left by thousands of bomb craters. Residues of the oily herbicides broke down over several weeks in sunlight and washed into the A Sáp River, where people fished and turned the water to irrigate rice
paddies. While the herbicide degraded, the heavier dioxin molecules settled in the sediment of the crater ponds. The former special forces bases, overrun by communist troops in 1966, were especially targeted for spraying and bombing in 1969 and 1970. A 1968 CORONA image (plate 6) shows white dots of bomb craters running in lines, the results of saturation bombing runs visible from space. Additional circles indicate bombing runs that took place after the 1969 battles. The spray missions visible in plate 6 reflect the plant-centered logic of herbicide spraying. The A Sáp River through the A Sầu Valley was a rice-growing area, so a different herbicide, Agent Blue, was used as it targeted grasses. Runs of Agent Orange and Agent White covered the mountain slopes on both sides of the valley. These selective herbicides killed trees and broadleaf crops. When the fall and winter rains hit, these defoliated (and napalmed) forests tumbled down the slopes in mudslides, clogging and flooding the valley.

Besides the international and local political fallout from this chemical war, defoliating broadleaf plants also brought new ecological challenges. By selectively killing broadleaf plants, Agent Orange in effect created grasslands, and communist troops adapted, forging new paths and adding new camouflage. PAVN-PLAF veterans also adapted to the napalm attacks, changing camouflage from light green (grasses) to gray (defoliated trees) to black (napalmed hillsides) as they traveled. Veterans interviewed by the author near Huế repeatedly touched on the challenges that spraying posed for camouflage. One veteran of a PLAF unit described how American helicopters dropped “gasoline bombs” (bulk flame drops) that singed hills black while suffocating people hiding underground. After these runs hit his area, he covered himself in blackened char to avoid being spotted by American planes.

In North Vietnamese stories, these chemically devastated landscapes formed a popular backdrop in many war stories and later war movies. Traveling through post-spray hillsides in 1967 near Huế, North Vietnamese journalist Trần Mai Nam wrote: “We march in the desolate gray of the forest. Around us, giant trees, their foliage stripped by poison chemicals, thrust their stark branches into the sky. Their ghostly silhouettes march across a low and cloudy sky, heavy like a soaked quilt. . . . here, on these mountains once green with heavy growth, such a rage against nature seems insane. One finds himself asking: ‘But what do they want?’ Is it possible that the superforts [B-52s] fly all the way from Guam, so far through the air, just to change the color of this forest?” By 1969 photographs of the dead trees and gray hillsides began appearing in American antiwar newspapers and pamphlets. In 1970 one
antiwar activist, Barry Weisberg, published the first journalistic book on the subject, *Ecocide in Indochina: The Ecology of War*. Weisberg popularized the North Vietnamese argument that the military herbicide program amounted to a war crime and backed it up with pictures. Agent Orange spraying ceased in April 1970 after President Richard Nixon ordered a partial ban on the 2,4,5-T herbicide, and spraying of all tactical herbicides ceased in 1971.

While audiences in Hà Nội, Washington, and Sài Gòn seeing pictures of blackened hillsides or color photographs of grayscale lands may have imagined total annihilation of South Vietnam’s forests, the spray missions were usually very targeted. For the most part, they followed both communist and American roadways. In the 1960s, few Americans questioned the spraying because the same herbicides were used commercially at home for almost identical purposes, clearing rights of way along roads, powerlines, and airport runways. Power companies in the United States and Canada even employed helicopters with sprayers to deliver 2,4,5-T over rugged terrain in rural areas. Plate 7, a compilation of all recorded spray runs in the province, shows the spraying concentrated along the mountain highways (547 and 548) and around the communist tactical zones at Hòa Mỹ, Nam Đông, and the A Sáu Valley. In addition to the communist tactical zones and routes, sprayer planes also doused American firebases guarding the highways running to the coast. Three firebases on Highway 547, Birmingham, Bastogne, and Veghel, were exposed to both fixed wing spraying and perimeter spraying by army helicopters.

Of all the firebases in Vietnam in 1969–70, Firebase Bastogne was one of the most sprayed and attacked. The last stop on the gravel road running west from Camp Eagle, it was a mirror in some respects to communist gateway camps such as Hòa Mỹ. However, while communist tactical areas quickly moved people and supplies through, the firebases were troublingly static and confined spaces. Soldiers and materials arrived by truck or helicopter, but those stationed there did not venture far on foot from the heavily defended, defoliated perimeters. Besides problems of terrain and these air-supported networks, the name of this firebase in particular, Bastogne, provides some clues to the American military’s view of this terrain and the struggle. The name derived from a Belgian town in the hilly Ardennes forest, the site of the 101st Airborne’s successful defense against a Nazi German offensive in the December 1944 Battle of the Bulge. Army leaders viewed the firebase’s location in communist-controlled hills as one liable to large-unit sieges, as
Bastogne had been in World War II. The 101st Airborne’s victory in 1944 also rested on critical reinforcements arriving by air including paratroopers and food. At that point, however, all similarities ended.

VIETNAMIZATION AND BASE CLOSURES

As this escalation of the war after 1968 delivered few tactical victories for MACV-ARVN forces, President Nixon and other US leaders opted to remove American grounds troops and “Vietnamize” their war effort. In central Vietnam this resulted in substituting ARVN soldiers in the American aerial platform as MACV-ARVN planners attempted an unprecedented push west on highways 9 and 547 across the border deep into Laos. Operation Lam Sơn 719 began in the Huế–Quảng Trị area in February 1971, and it was in some respects a last-ditch effort not unlike the 1953 French Operation Atlante described by Bernard Fall in Street without Joy. US and RVN military leaders attempted to destroy the main corridors of the communist trails in Laos by sending more than twenty thousand ARVN soldiers by tank, helicopter, and plane to communist base areas in Laos. More than ten thousand American troops, including units from Camp Eagle and Phú Bài, played a supporting role, flying aircraft and coordinating bombing strikes. Soldiers from Huế’s ARVN First Division and other regional units traveled by helicopter above the bombed-out pavement of Highway 9 in Quảng Trị into Laos.

The operation, while bold in conception, was a disaster for the ARVN. In Laos ARVN soldiers attempted an airborne landing in the middle of what, by 1971, were trail cities, heavily fortified mountain bases supporting several thousand soldiers. PAVN-PLAF units here were reinforced with anti-aircraft batteries and tanks, and they shot down over one hundred aircraft and seized many ARVN artillery guns. Several years of Soviet and Chinese aid produced heavily armored, formidable defenses there. Roughly two thousand South Vietnamese soldiers were killed with another six thousand wounded. An ARVN general concluded that the essential weakness for ARVN troops was “lack of ground mobility,” but the ARVN units struggled with the aerial platform as well as the terrain. During five years of American operations, ARVN troops had fought mainly as infantry units while Americans operated most of the helicopters and operational control over high-altitude air strikes and aerial surveillance. While American units such as the 101st Airborne may have excelled in using these aerial technologies, ARVN troops had not.
The PAVN-PLAF victory derived from strong ground defenses in their base areas and increased sophistication on the airwaves. Communist radio operators took advantage of weak radio discipline by ARVN soldiers who routinely gave away positions by not speaking in code. Twenty-five years after Việt Minh forces established the first nationwide radio network, PAVN-PLAF units had in 1971 a plentiful supply of Chinese-made radio sets along with captured American Motorola backpack units. Communist radio operators by 1971 used radio-jamming technologies to cut off South Vietnamese units and interfere with the airborne radio-finding missions too. In his history of the operation, the ARVN general commended the communists on their radio discipline, taking special notice of a female voice he’d heard on the communist radio nets issuing combat orders. The presence of this female voice signaled both the total participatory effort involving women on the communist side as well as superior radio discipline. This operational disaster combined with widespread public outrage in the United States over President Nixon’s ordering saturation bombing deep inside Laos and Cambodia pressured the rapid removal of US troops. Troop levels were decreased from more than five hundred thousand in 1969 to fewer than fifty thousand in 1972.

LEAVING THE BASES

The American base closures in 1972 created a new “ruins” problem just as chaotic as the evacuations in 1954. The reduction in troops hollowed out an urban infrastructure of airstrips, radio towers, camps, and roads that primarily American funds and advisers had built since the early 1950s. On the plateaus of the central highlands, American bases at Kon Tum and Pleiku dwarfed the villages after which they were named. On the central coast, especially after 1966, such American bases as Camp Evans and Camp Eagle supported encircling towns of refugees and ARVN veterans. Like American bases elsewhere, these towns depended on the base for much of their income. The rapid American departure stunned local authorities and ARVN commanders. At Camp Eagle more than ten thousand men with tons of equipment disappeared in the first two weeks of January 1972. Compared with the process of building these spaces, the removals were frenzied. They left behind ghost towns to ARVN allies who would have to face new assaults from the mountains.

The turnover of Camp Eagle became a flashpoint for local protests in Huế, too, not about American troops leaving so much as over the ruins they left
behind. Further angering ARVN generals was the news that American forces were not simply giving back these properties but selling them via long-term international loans. Per the terms of base agreements, the United States charged the RVN for all improvements on these lands.\textsuperscript{79} Officially, MACV maintained that the bases would continue to support Vietnamese units in fighting communist adversaries. However, in practical terms, when American troops evacuated they took most essential elements of the base. This was not only due to the US military’s need to conserve resources, redeploying them elsewhere, but also because the US military did not legally own much of the equipment. Given the rapid timeframe for base construction, the United States had paid construction companies such as Pacific Architects and Engineers to build and operate key parts of base infrastructure.\textsuperscript{80} When the American military mission ended, property transfers between the US and South Vietnamese militaries did not include the contractors. The US military had also repositioned usable equipment such as fire trucks and radio equipment to smaller enclaves. Camps such as Camp Eagle were left without defenses and littered with industrial wreckage, garbage landfills, and pits of discarded chemicals. Essential systems—high voltage generators, perimeter lighting, air conditioners, water pumps, water treatment plants, telephone switchboards, radios, and signal equipment—disappeared.\textsuperscript{81}

On January 21, 1972, NBC Nightly News aired a short segment showing the official transfer ceremony at Camp Eagle. The segment started with the lowering of the American flag while a bugler played “Taps”; then it cut to images of gutted buildings with empty holes left from removed air conditioning units. It finished by following American soldiers loading one of the wall-mounted units into a jeep.\textsuperscript{82}

\textbf{FILLING THE VOID}

Just two months after the Americans cleared out of Camp Eagle, PAVN-PLAF forces launched one of the largest conventional mass offensives, the Easter Offensive, to take the central coast. An estimated forty thousand soldiers in infantry and artillery units marched with several hundred tanks across the DMZ down Highway 1 to Quảng Trị, taking the town’s nineteenth-century citadel and surrounding areas. On Highway 9, the main east-west road linking the coast with Laos, PAVN-PLAF units marched east past Khe Sanh with
ease. They overpowered ARVN units stationed in former American bases, connecting with the groups that had marched south to Quảng Trị. In the A Sầu Valley, just as the winter cloud cover was starting to thin, communist forces marched to A Lưới past A Bia Mountain (Hamburger Hill) and started down Highway 547 toward Firebase Bastogne (figure 5.15). ARVN troops on the hilltop base took heavy fire all summer while US bombers pulverized the surrounding area. The PAVN 324th and PLAF Sixth Regiments seized Bastogne in July and then turned its guns toward Camp Eagle.\textsuperscript{83} The speed of these communist advances surprised US and RVN leaders alike as they realized that American efforts to open paths with herbicides and bombs now aided PAVN units driving Soviet tanks over widened roads.

While military leaders and foreign journalists saw the 1972 communist offensive as a show of force during peace negotiations in Paris, locally in Huế journalists focused on the fight at Firebase Bastogne and fears of a total collapse. Malcolm Browne, famous for his iconic photograph of Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức’s self-immolation in 1963, reported on the fall of Bastogne for the New York Times. As American B-52s pounded communist forces with round-the-clock bombing north of Quảng Trị, communist units in A Sầu Valley hit Bastogne and neighboring firebases with “several thousand shells a day.” Browne described a tidal wave of the communists’ heavily armored military onslaught along Highway 547 followed by the equally catastrophic American air bombing campaign that stalled it. A map of US bombing missions from July 1972 to the final day of bombing, February 22, 1973, shows the extent of this targeted, intense bombing. Concentrated on the large PAVN-PLAF troop movements north of Quảng Trị and west of Bastogne, American bombers dropped more tons of bombs on these two areas in six months than they had over three years of fighting from 1965 to 1967.

CEASE-FIRE AND RUINS

Except for one important point, the Paris Accords signed on January 27, 1973, reprised the Geneva Accords of 1954. It produced a cease-fire, called for the creation of an international control commission, and permitted foreign nations to continue supporting their Vietnamese allies with existing levels of weapons and equipment. However, in one critical geographical aspect it differed: US negotiators dropped their demand that communist forces evacuate their tactical areas in the mountains of South Vietnam. An ARVN general in a history of the conflict’s final years noted that communist forces had made uncontested claims to these territories that they again governed as they had before 1954. However, with the advances on Quảng Trị and Huế, they demonstrated the capacity to take these cities by force against a well-armed adversary.

Unlike Geneva, the Paris Accords signed on January 23, 1973, legalized communist government in highland areas, recognizing provisional revolutionary government (PRG) councils. There would be no political voids or troop relocations. After the cease-fire began on February 22, the PRG took every opportunity to challenge stipulated boundaries of the liberated zones in South Vietnam. They planted NLF flags at every key crossing point on roads and
rivers, asking international observers to map each flag. Their resolve to hold highland areas and endure American bombing stemmed from experiences in 1954 and 1968. PAVN-PLAF networks in the mountains had never been stronger than in 1973, while ARVN forces struggled to defend the emptied American bases.

After several failed general offensives, party leader Lê Duẩn paused. He emphasized building more political and material infrastructure in the hills. Mountain valleys such as A Sầu were no longer just corridors; they would become future towns. During the cease-fire, PRG troops played what one ARVN general called a “game of flags” where at night they moved boundary markers into RVN territory. By day, ARVN troops moved the flags back. International observers were like umpires officiating the contest.

In material and landscape terms, what was most different in 1973 from 1954 was the quick retreat of American support for South Vietnam’s coastal networks of bases, highways, depots, electric grids, ports, ammunition supplies, heavy weapons, and especially airplanes. The military and industrial infrastructure that two decades of US congressional appropriations had funded could not continue without new imports of heavy equipment, ammunition, and especially oil. The OPEC oil embargo in 1973–74 created severe shortages and price hikes for petroleum supplies in the United States too. This interruption in the global supply of oil meant delays in the supply chain to bases in Vietnam. (Ironically, oil explorers in 1974 identified offshore oil fields off the southern coast of Vietnam.)

This final phase of the war before the communists launched their spring 1975 offensive highlighted a key weakness in the American militarization-urbanization strategy. The petroleum, chemical, electronic, and mechanical supply lines that enabled the world’s most modern military to develop landscape-altering campaigns of airborne assaults and surveillance could, in their sudden absence, render these landscapes a liability. Even worse, the clearing of forests and hilltops to insert advance forces opened up ideal spaces for communist forces to position their own units. Communist histories about the 1973–74 period detail a steady expansion of military campaigns aimed to further hobble South Vietnam’s military infrastructure. Party political leaders organized wave after wave of political protests in southern cities while military sapper units attacked ARVN infrastructure, blowing pipelines and crippling equipment. In June 1974 commandos detonated explosives destroying petroleum tanks and ammunition bunkers near Phú Bài. A tally of the damage...
inflicted from February to September 1974 included destruction of more than forty-seven thousand tons of bombs and bullets and fourteen petroleum tanks and seizure of the highest mountaintop observations posts within sight of the coast. In these six months of small-scale battles, the communist forces around Huế had for the first time gained an aerial advantage over their adversaries.

In contrast with previous communist offensives that took advantage of lingering cloud cover, a newly combined People’s Army II Corps (comprising the PAVN 324th and PLAF Sixth Regiments) planned the spring 1975 offensive in Huế to occur after the cloud cover had lifted. This was a first. With South Vietnam’s military forces running out of vital supplies and no signs of American high-altitude bombers, they used the bright, clear skies to their advantage. With forces positioned north and south of Huế, they started their siege of the coast at 5:45 a.m. on March 8. Over the next two weeks, these units fought their way into Huế, taking control of the airstrip at Phú Bài and rushing past the abandoned barracks at Camp Eagle. The final Huế-area battles with ARVN troops concluded on March 24 and 25 at the beaches along Thuận An. The symbolism of the location—the point where French marines had started their invasion in 1884 and again in 1947—was not lost on communist military historians. The following morning at 6:30 a.m., members of the PLAF Sixth Regiment climbed the historic citadel in front of the Noon Gate and raised the blue-and-red NLF flag above the city. The war, at least in Huế, was over.