



In Defense of Saigon

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Tet, 1968...whole city blocks destroyed in Saigon fighting! May, 1968... more destruction and something new: rockets!

October...the city waits. "Flash!" the communications man relays the word from the spotter, "Azimuth... three-four-hundred mills! Range... four-thousand meters!" A rocket is on the way to Saigon.

The two-man artillery spotting team is part of a "round-the-clock" surveillance system guarding Saigon. They operate from "Flash Towers" ringing the city, offering an unobstructed view of the surrounding rice paddies and jungle growth.

"Flash!" Another tower has spotted the same rocket launch.

The reports are radioed to the

"Fire Support Coordination Center" (FSCC) at Capital Military Assistance Command (CMAC) Headquarters in Saigon. The Tactical Operations Center says, "No friendlies in the area." The FSCC calls a fire mission to a nearby artillery battery and a barrage is laid down on the launch site. Elapsed time: less than four minutes.

This is just one way that CMAC makes it hot for the VC. Radar that can detect the movements of people, spots "Charlie" before he gets to his launch area. Who knows how many Communist artillery squads have been blasted before they got their ordnance off the ground?

Defending Saigon from rockets and mortars is not the only job of CMAC. Defending Saigon from everything is

the whole mission. From his headquarters at Camp Le Van Duyet, Major General F.K. Mearns, Commanding General, CMAC, directs the movements of two infantry brigades, an artillery battalion and an air cavalry unit. Ready to support this team are U.S. Air Force "Spooky" C-47 gunships, forward air controllers, and fighter-bombers.

These units, under the operational control of CMAC, fight side by side with the Vietnamese Navy, Marines, Rangers, Airborne, National Police, Regional Forces and Popular Forces controlled by Major General Nguyen Van Minh, Commanding General, Capital Military District. (CMD) The operations run by CMAC and CMD units are a scaled down version of just

Capital defense forces search a sampans on a river near Saigon.

about every phase of the whole Vietnam conflict.

The ground soldier, as usual, is the man who really does the job for CMAC. The 199th Light Infantry Brigade and the newest addition to the CMAC team, the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, are constantly sweeping the rice paddies and nip-papalm outside of Saigon. The infantry gets down to the nitty-gritty and destroys "Charlie's" bunkers and weapons caches, often only one day after they have been in place.

"Charlie's" ability to build bunkers is phenomenal. Since CMAC was organized in June, 1968, over 3,000 enemy bunkers have been destroyed by U.S. units defending Saigon. Weapons caches are found almost daily. Most are small, but occasionally the jackpot is hit. Such was the case recently when 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne troops unearthed thirty-four 122mm rockets and eleven 107-mm rockets just miles from the heart of the Vietnamese Capital.

The 82nd Airborne paratroopers are now working an area formerly the responsibility of the 3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. Before their departure in early October, 1968, the "Tropic Lightning" soldiers set a brilliant record in the CMAC area of operations. The 82nd Airborne is losing no time in rivaling its predecessor.

Staying on the offensive in the outlying areas is still not enough to stop the Communists from entering Saigon. There are some who will slip through. Infiltrators, who would sabotage the city and spread terror, must be found



by the Vietnamese National Police. The only way to check infiltration is to search as many people, vehicles and watercraft as is humanly possible.

The National Police conduct a "population control" program in which whole city blocks are cordoned off and the houses searched, one by one. The people in the cordoned area are then checked against census figures and must produce a valid ID card. Using this method the National Police have caught many VC tax collectors, propagandists, terrorists and sappers, and members of the Viet Cong political infrastructure.

Searching vehicles at "mobile checkpoints" is another job for the Police. Prodding through farm produce, looking under sedans with the aid of a mirror, searching luggage and checking ID cards is a tedious process but it does pay off. A recently searched bus yielded a mortar base plate and two machine gun barrels.

The National Police Harbor Patrol keeps an eye on sampans using Saigon's waterways. They also have underwater demolition teams that periodically inspect bridges for explosive charges planted by Communist skin divers.

Bridges are a prime target for the Communists. They will try anything to blow one up. The 199th Light Infantry Brigade, National Police and ARVN troops guard the bridges but CMAC's engineers devise the methods of combating each of "Charlie's" different approaches to bridge destruction.

Lights have been installed on all the bridges in Saigon so that any approach, by land or water, can be more easily observed. This makes it more difficult for the VC to tie an explosive charge to the bridge from a sampan. The Communists' answer was explosive charges disguised as floating debris. Wooden piers were built around bridge supports so that any "debris" would explode harmlessly against wood pilings. Now and then a concussion grenade is tossed in the water to make those enemy skin divers a little nervous about getting too close.

CMAC, ever conscious of current trends also uses historical devices

including a flock of geese guards. Geese are being used at a number of bridges in the Saigon area to warn against approaching sappers or water traffic. When they do react, their honking can be heard up to 300 meters away. The VC may cry, "Fowl play!" But after all, this is war.

In addition to bridges, CMAC must protect a number of critical installations in and around Saigon. Past events prove that the American Embassy and the Presidential Palace are prime targets of the Communists. In case of an enemy attack, CMAC would take direct control of the Embassy defense and augment the American MP contingent already stationed there for routine security. The Presidential Palace is guarded by ARVN troops and National Police who coordinate their activities with those of CMAC.

Coordination and cooperation between U.S. and Vietnamese forces can probably best be seen in the combined River Assault Group (RAG) operations. RAG boats are Navy landing craft used in the navigable waterways to deliver troops to an area not readily accessible by land or air. A large part of the Saigon area is delta land, making river assault capability a necessity.

Most of the RAG boats in the CMAC area of operations are run

by the Vietnamese Navy. In a typical operation, American and Vietnamese troops will be transported by RAG boats to a suspected enemy location along the bank of a river. While the soldiers storm ashore, the Vietnamese RAG boats pour suppressive fire into the river bank area and set up blocking positions up and down stream to cut off those avenues of escape.

River patrol is the everyday job of the Vietnamese Navy. It's basically the same operation as the National Police Harbor Patrol only the area to be covered is much larger and offers more coves and streams ideal for concealing an illegal sampan loaded with enemy supplies...supplies that may wind up as a booby trap in a rice paddy, a paper wrapped explosive charge hurled from a passing motorbike, or small arms ammunition for a VC company marching on Saigon.

Major General Nguyen Van Minh, Military Governor of Saigon-Gia Dinh and Commanding General of the Capital Military District, knows that Saigon is a city wide open to attack. There have been attacks in the past and there is reason to believe the Communists will try it again. This time though, General Minh and his forces with the assistance and advice of CMAC will have the capability to take the punch out of the major assault before it occurs. ▲

Vietnamese National Policeman checks a motorist.





ARVN troop guards the Presidential Palace in Saigon (top). Infantryman of the 82nd Airborne Division stands behind enemy rockets found eight miles outside the city (right). Traffic passes bunkers protecting bridge guards (above).

