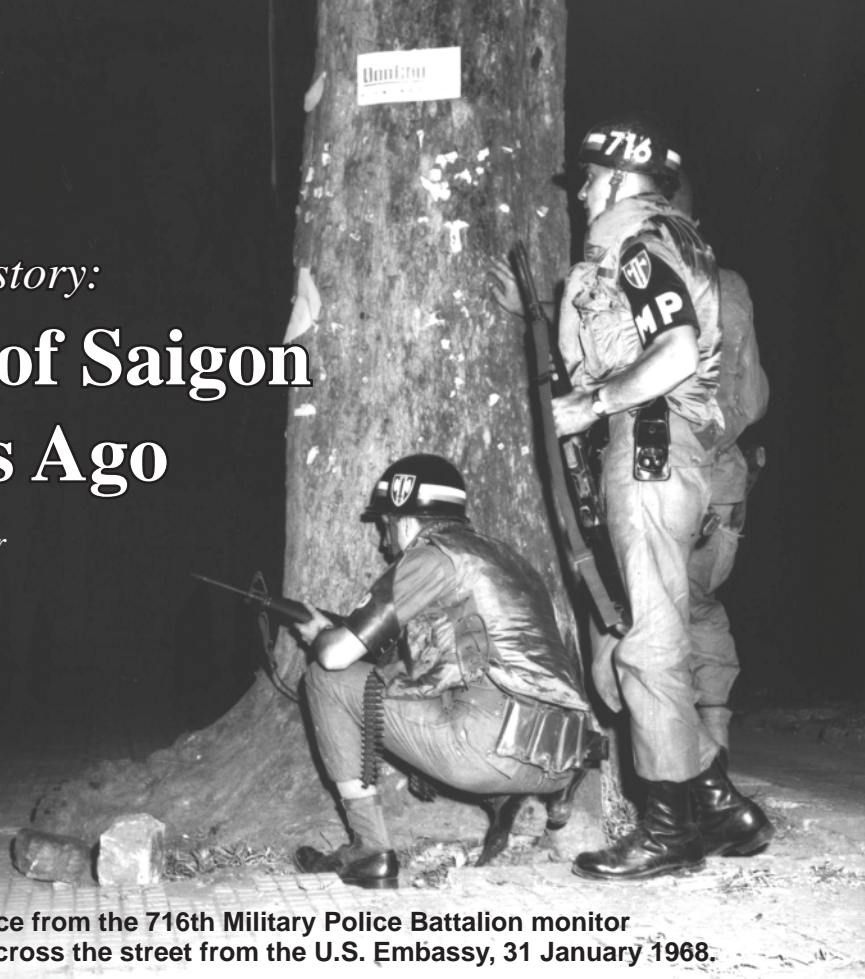


*Looking Back in History:*

# The Battle of Saigon Forty Years Ago

*By Mr. William A. Oberholtzer*



**Military police from the 716th Military Police Battalion monitor Vietcong activity across the street from the U.S. Embassy, 31 January 1968.**

*On 31 January 1968, members of the Military Police Corps would face one of their most difficult trials. Coordinated attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and other areas throughout the city exacted a harsh toll on military police and infantry security units. There were numerous casualties; but despite the adversity, the embassy would be recaptured and the Vietcong defeated. Steps toward changing the military police from a service branch to a combat support branch were finalized. After witnessing the courage and determined actions of the military police, Army leaders were convinced of their abilities in frontline combat. The battles for the U.S. Embassy and Saigon have been and should remain constant topics of study within the U.S. Army Military Police School. The heroism, tactics and above all, sacrifice of these Soldiers should not be forgotten.*

—Andy Watson, Historian, U.S. Army Military Police School

On 31 January 2008, we marked the 40th Anniversary of the Tet Offensive and the Battle of Saigon. The Battle of Saigon was the direct result of a well-planned terrorist attack that called for violent, widespread, and simultaneous military action throughout the city by Vietcong units and their sympathizers. The North Vietnam Defense Minister, Vo Nguyen Giap (the master planner), was possibly one of the best tactical commanders of the 20th century. Only he had the skills to supervise the elaborate synchronization necessary to strike at the heart of the South Vietnam government and the American military nerve center in Saigon. For all of Giap's intricate planning to bring the 1968 Tet

Offensive to fruition, he made errors in judgment when selecting his targets in Saigon. According to Colonel Richard E. George (Retired), who served as Saigon's Provost Marshal in 1968, "The two major Vietcong errors were their failure to attack and eliminate both the provost marshal compound and the 716th Military Police Battalion Headquarters." Due to these mistakes, the military police were able to blunt an all-out assault on Saigon and defeat the enemy. By not attacking the 716th Headquarters, the Vietcong allowed the military police to continue as the eyes and ears of the command and to swiftly respond with reaction forces to firefights throughout the city. When captured Vietcong were asked about

the first defensive resistance, they replied without hesitation, “The military police.”

During the Battle of Saigon, the Military Police Corps lost a staggering number of personnel—27 killed in action and 44 wounded. Most of the casualties occurred when a military police reaction force, responding to an attack on Bachelor Officer Quarters (BOQ) 3, was ambushed in an alley. Another location with a high concentration of casualties was the U.S. Embassy.

Military police, in an instant, switched from the role of “cop” to “combat Soldier.” They quickly adapted to street and house-to-house fighting. They did this with ease, skill, and determination—much to the dismay of the Vietcong. General William Westmoreland, commander of the American Military Forces in South Vietnam, said some years later, “Members of the Military Police Corps were called upon to fight numerous skirmishes in Saigon, each of which had a direct bearing on the rapid defeat of the enemy. Though usually outnumbered, they were victorious.” Brigadier General Albin F. Irzyk, Saigon area commander, remarked, “Their performances as combat troopers can be described in only the most glowing of superlatives.” Colonel Richard E. George, the Saigon area provost marshal stated, “These brave men won a costly change of image for the military police, one for which all past, present, and future members of the Military Police Corps can justifiably point to with pride and humility—for this was indeed the Corps’ finest hour.” During an awards ceremony honoring military police who defended Saigon, General Creighton W. Abrams, Deputy U.S. Commander in Vietnam, commented, “When raw courage, capability, and will to fight are required, military police will meet the standards.”

The most sacred Vietnamese holiday is Tet, a lunar holiday. If the American people were to celebrate Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year’s Day, and Independence Day in one week, it might compare to the sacred feelings that the Vietnamese hold for Tet. It is a time of celebrations, family gatherings, forgiveness of enemies, and preparation for the coming year. Tradition called for a truce during Tet, allowing Soldiers on both sides to stand down for the duration of the holiday and enjoy time with family and friends. In 1968, the holiest day of Tet fell on 30 January, ushering in the Year

of the Monkey. Due to fears of a massive aerial retaliation by the United States on North Vietnam after the start of the Tet Offensive, Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam, allowed his people to celebrate the holy day on 29 January.

Giap planned a feint attack in hopes of further overextending American assets. Early in January 1968, 20,000 communist troops surrounded the Marine fire base at Khe Sanh, outnumbering the Marines four to one. Some observers believed this was a replay of Dien Bien Phu, a major French defeat in their war with the Vietminh. Giap knew that he could not defeat the Americans in a head-to-head confrontation; therefore, Khe Sanh was staged as a decoy. Other attacks took place along the Cambodian border, drawing American attention away from Giap’s principal targets—Saigon and Hue.

While the Americans and South Vietnamese were preoccupied with the defense of Khe Sanh, Vietcong units began to slip into Saigon in final preparation of the forthcoming attack. After their failed attempt to capture Saigon in 1967, Vietcong units stockpiled arms, ammunition, high explosives, and men in Saigon and other towns and cities. They slipped many of the weapons and ammunition into the city under the guise of funeral processions, even going as far as to bury the weapons in coffins, only to unearth them hours before the attack. Lieutenant General Fred Weyand, commander of II Corps, became uneasy with reports of large enemy troop movement, the flow of Vietcong deserters drying up, and talk from captured infiltrators of “something big” about to happen. Lieutenant General Weyand expressed his concerns to General Westmoreland, who then ordered 15 maneuver battalions to fall back near Saigon. The first night of Tet was quiet, except for the usual celebrations taking place throughout Saigon and the country. No one expected the enemy to break the truce because the Vietcong had hinted that if all went well, the truce (which began 27 January) might be extended beyond 3 February and a permanent armistice could be established. This final deception by the enemy caused feelings of euphoria for South Vietnamese and American diplomats. But that euphoria was shattered on the morning of 31 January.

Three days into the truce, Brigadier General Irzyk summoned Colonel George and Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Rowe, commander of the 716th

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—Colonel Richard E. George

Military Police Battalion, to his office for a situational briefing. They discussed the possible infiltration of Vietcong sapper units in Saigon. Brigadier General Irzyk instructed them to prepare for possible enemy action. While Colonel George and Lieutenant Colonel Rowe were meeting with Brigadier General Irzyk, an alert message was sent to all units under Irzyk's command. As a result of the briefing and the alert notification, they changed duty commitments—all walking patrols were switched to motorized patrols, selected headquarters and communications centers were assigned extra guard posts, all Vietnamese personnel were removed from U.S. military police patrols, radios were placed on continuous dispatch, and all personnel were ordered to wear flak jackets and steel helmets. Military police reaction teams were organized and placed on standby.

In the late evening hours of 30 January, communist infiltrators left their hiding places and mixed with the celebrating crowds of South Vietnamese citizens. Recently unearthed weapons were test-fired, being masked by the sound of fireworks. By the early morning hours of 31 January, the enemy was ready. A command post was established in the Quang Buddhist Pagoda by the Vietcong, and groups of communist soldiers were in place near their targets, having been led there by local communist agents and sympathizers.

With clouds low in the sky, 20 members of a Vietcong sapper unit began loading a small truck and an old taxicab with high explosives and weapons. Their target—the U.S. Embassy—was only a few blocks away. The air was filled with tension and anticipation as the 23 men of Vietcong C-10 Sapper Battalion quickly and quietly finished loading the vehicles. At 0245 hours, the men climbed into the truck and taxicab for the short ride to the embassy. Each man was deep in thought as he contemplated his assignment and chances of survival, which were slim. Nguyen Van Muoi drove one of the vehicles by the U.S. Embassy on Thong Nhut Boulevard. As he rounded the embassy a second time, mortar fire began to drop on the city. Leaning out the window of his vehicle, Muoi yelled, "Tien!" (which means forward). The Peugeot truck and taxi parked next to the south wall of the 4-acre U.S. Embassy compound, and the sappers began to unload the vehicles.

At this time, Specialist Charles Daniel and Private First Class William Sebast, members of Charlie Company, 527th Military Police Company, were on guard duty at the Mac Dinh Chi entrance of the U.S. Embassy compound. All was quiet, until an explosion breached a hole in the compound wall near the military police guard post. Turning their attention toward the wall, Specialist Daniel and Private Sebast

killed two Vietcong soldiers crawling through the opening. Specialist Daniel radioed, "They're coming in! They're coming in!" While focusing their attention on the wall, Specialist Daniel and Private Sebast were shot in their backs by other attacking Vietcong. Due to their valiant stand and sacrifice, Marine Sergeant Ronald Harper had time to race to the main embassy building and close and secure the large teak doors. This action prevented the sappers from entering the embassy as they had planned. Although the doors were the target of rocket-propelled grenades, they remained intact and locked.

Meanwhile, calls for help began to pour into military police headquarters by phone and radio. One officer commented, "The calls for help came in by radio and phone faster than we could handle them. We have maybe half, maybe only one-third of the calls on the log." The following is a sample of the staff duty log for the 716th Military Police Battalion:

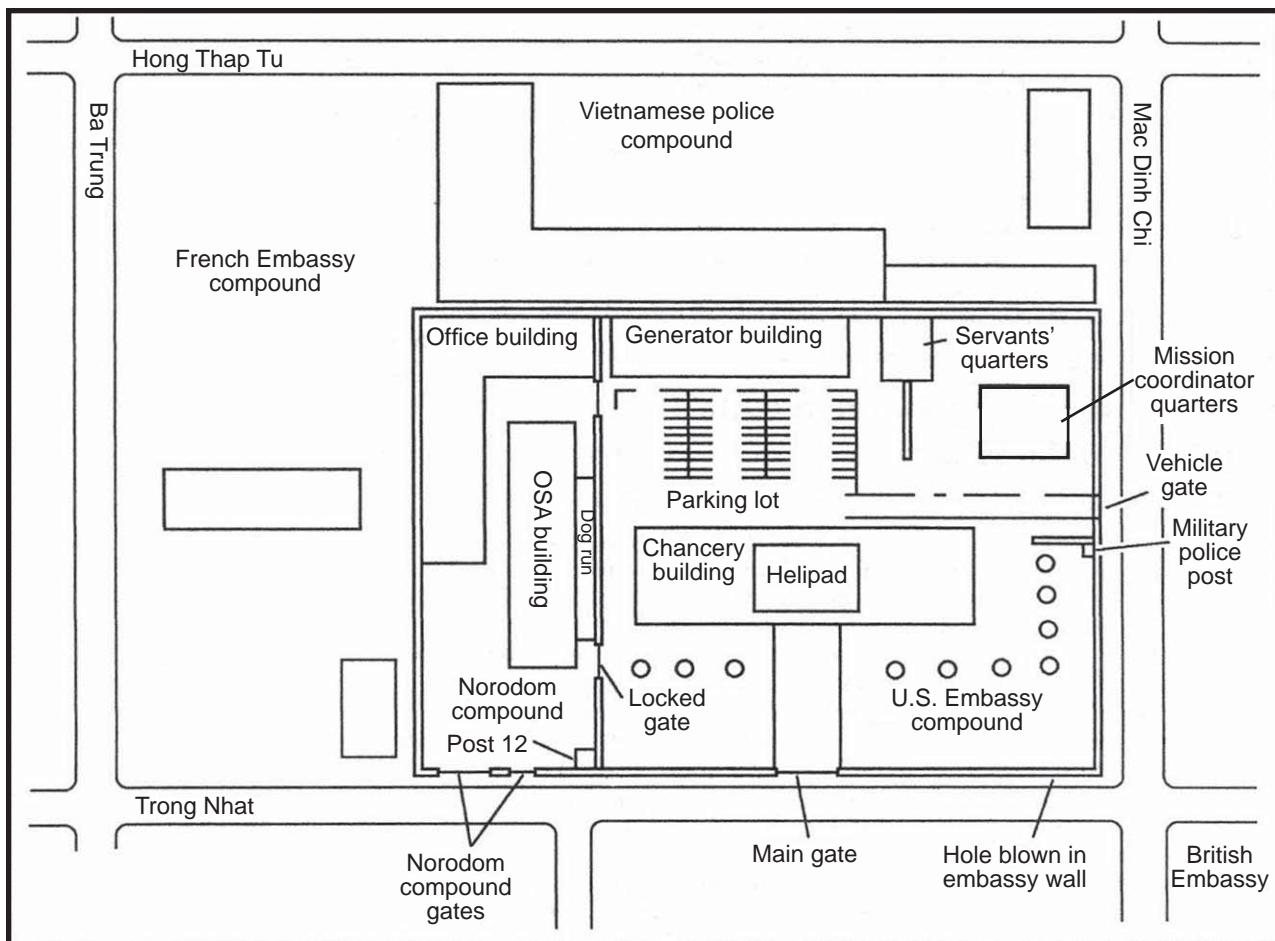
- 0300: BOQ 3 reports enemy action.
- 0315: U.S. Embassy under attack.
- 0317: Explosion at Townhouse BOQ.
- 0318: BOQ 1 under attack.
- 0319: McArthur BOQ under attack.
- 0321: Report of hostile attack at Rex BOQ.
- 0325: Explosion at BOQ 2.
- 0340: Automatic-weapon fire and attack at BOQ 3.
- 0341: Military police at U.S. Embassy request urgent ammo resupply.

The area provost marshal, Lieutenant Colonel George, was briefed at 0300 hours about the developing situation, especially the situation at the U.S. Embassy. He ordered a reaction force led by First Lieutenant Frank Ribich and Sergeant Arthur Rivera to be dispatched to the compound. The force was on the road 17 minutes after being notified.

Before the reaction team's arrival, Sergeant Jonnie Thomas and Specialist Owen Mebast responded to Specialist Daniel's call for assistance. Sadly, they were ambushed by a Vietcong sniper as they arrived at the main gate of the embassy.

Approaching the embassy, Lieutenant Ribich and Sergeant Rivera assessed the situation. Heavy automatic-weapon fire was coming from an apartment building opposite the embassy, so Lieutenant Ribich sent Sergeant Rivera and his team to secure the building and street. In a matter of minutes, Sergeant Rivera's team had secured the area. While Rivera was securing the apartment building, Ribich made contact with Marine Sergeant Leroy Banks and they established a joint command, allowing Banks to continue to direct the Marine portion of the embassy





**Drawing of the U.S. Embassy compound and surrounding area.**

reaction force while coordinating with Lieutenant Ribich. This arrangement proved to be effective.

Private First Class Paul V. Healey, 716th Military Police Battalion, was on patrol about 0300 hours when the calls for assistance came across the military police radio net. His patrol responded to enemy activity near the Philippine Embassy, where Healey engaged a Vietcong in a firefight and eliminated him. Hearing that the U.S. Embassy was under attack, Healey's patrol raced to the area to help. Healey would later earn the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism during the battle. At 0420 hours, General Westmoreland ordered the 716th Military Police Battalion to clear the embassy and grounds, explaining that it was their first priority. Meanwhile, a resupply of ammunition had arrived and a 50-man reaction force was enroute. When everything was in place, the force waited. Lieutenant Ribich made contact with the military police net control station and was connected directly to General Westmoreland. Westmoreland ordered Ribich to initiate the attack as soon as possible since the security of the embassy was a first priority. Lieutenant Ribich responded with, "Airborne." The attack began well before dawn.

Across Saigon, near Tan Son Nhut Airport, a 25-man military police reaction force was approaching BOQ 3 in response to a reported enemy attack. Members of the force were riding in a 2½-ton truck and two jeeps. Circling the block once, the lead jeep pulled into an alley near the BOQ. Well into the alley, the convoy began to slow down, and then all hell broke loose. Military policeman John R. Van Wagner recalls, "Suddenly there were two loud explosions and bright flashes of light behind me. Automatic-weapon fire swept the alley, and we ran for the BOQ. We knew it was bad in there, but we didn't know how bad until almost noon."

A company-size force of Vietcong was preparing to hurl an attack at the Vietnamese Joint General Staff Headquarters when the American convoy appeared in the alley. The last two vehicles absorbed the full force of the attack. At a range of less than 10 feet, the Vietcong poured their maximum firepower into the convoy. They killed 16 military police Soldiers and wounded 21 others in the ambush and subsequent rescue attempts. Finally, after 14 hours of heavy fighting, military police and infantry (with armor support) were able to secure the area and recover the dead and wounded.



**Soldiers advance into the alley behind BOQ 3 in Saigon, 31 January 1968.**

Back at the embassy, Ribich signaled his men that it was time to attack and clear the embassy grounds of the enemy. Ribich's team entered the front compound, while Sergeant Rivera—with his team and the Marine contingent—entered the parking area through the Norodom compound. The American Forces entered the compound and began to systematically clear the embassy grounds with grenades and small arms fire.

During the assault, the Marines and military police killed 21 Vietcong sappers. Lieutenant Ribich killed the twenty-second Vietcong, who attempted to join the fight while driving a taxi. The final sapper was severely wounded and captured. In the assault to retake the embassy, one Marine was killed and several military police and Marines were wounded. As the military police were completing their operation, a platoon of 101st Airborne Soldiers landed on the embassy roof and General Westmoreland arrived by car. After a thorough search, the embassy was declared secure.

A force of 2,000 to 3,000 Vietcong had slipped into the city with the intent of toppling the Saigon government and its American allies. The only U.S. Forces instantly available for combat were fewer

than 300 military police; however by dawn, the 716th Military Police Battalion would have 800 men in action. How could such a small, vastly outnumbered force of military police hold and defeat an enemy of superior strength?

The answer to that question is found in the comments of the U.S. mission coordinator, who stated, "I saw raw courage tonight on the part of the Marine guards and military police. I saw them advance straight into the direction of enemy fire and silence that fire. If you want to be braver than that, I would rather not be around." Lieutenant Colonel Gordon D. Rowe, commander of the 716th Military Police Battalion, said, concerning the performance of his military police, "We delayed their plans long enough to upset their mission. We converted from a military police battalion to a tactical infantry battalion in less than 3 hours, and in essence, we were unassisted for the first 12 to 18 hours."

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