

Red Thunder Tropic Lightning

The background of the cover is a collage of various images related to the Vietnam War. At the top, there's a red banner with the title. Below it, a yellow and red striped banner. The main background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a military jacket, with several photographs and patches pinned to it. The photographs show soldiers in combat, children in a war-torn area, and a soldier holding a child. There are also several military patches and medals, including a yellow patch with a red lightning bolt, a yellow patch with a red eagle, and a gold medal with a red ribbon. The overall tone is somber and historical.

The World of a
Combat Division in Vietnam

ERIC M. BERGERUD

RED THUNDER, TROPIC LIGHTNING

**The World of a
Combat Division in Vietnam**

ERIC M. BERGERUD

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Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning

**To Those Who Served in
the 25th Division
During a Hard War**

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25th Division Huey helicopters flying out of Trang Bang carry infantry on a small “search-and-destroy” mission into the Ho Bo Woods

The light M551 Sheridan tank, deployed to Vietnam in 1969, was not popular with the crews

A track prepares to tow a truck damaged by a mine in Tay Ninh during 1969

25th combat engineers await the dangerous job of clearing terrain near Nui Ba Den in 1969

Nui Ba Den Mountain

C. W. Bowman is helped out of a tunnel found in the Ho Bo Woods during 1967

Some tents in the mud constituted Cu Chi base camp in the early stages of U.S. involvement

Close to Saigon, Cu Chi received many visits by VIPs—Ann-Margret was a favorite

25th Division Headquarters at Cu Chi in late 1968

A 25th Division mechanized unit rests at Dau Tieng base camp in 1969

The crew of a 25th Division track prepares to embark from Dau Tieng base camp in 1969

Infantrymen resting on the shady side of a track on a hot day

A combat soldier writes a Christmas letter

A track escorts a convoy on Highway 1 toward Cu Chi

A track stands solitary guard along a road as a storm approaches

An infantryman rests after the attack on Firebase Gold

A Vietnamese soldier who died at Firebase Gold

Firebase Gold under attack during March 1967

A soldier on patrol near the Ho Bo Woods in 1967

At the beginning of what developed into a large firefight, a
platoon leader calls in artillery support

Infantryman Jerry Liucci carries his M60 machine gun
during fierce fighting around Hoc Mon

Anxious *Wolfhounds* wait to board their helicopters on the first
day of the Tet Offensive of 1968

American troops move cautiously into an area pounded by
air strikes and artillery in Tay Ninh

Two monks walk down a provincial road near Dau Tieng

Prisoners, ages nine and sixteen, captured along the Vam Co
Dong River

The captured boys were carrying powerful RPGs

The town of Trang Bang, the scene of several large battles, was
in the middle of a longtime Front stronghold

A child scavenges through an American garbage dump at a
temporary perimeter in Tay Ninh province

A pair of local “fun girls”

Unless a unit was in the “boonies,” Vietnamese children were
regular visitors

Two infantrymen negotiate prices for beer and soda with the
local merchants who traveled to American outposts

Preface

THIS BOOK EXAMINES the world confronted by the men of an American combat division during the Vietnam War. Although the unit in question is the 25th Infantry Division, this is not a unit history or standard military chronology. Instead, I try to view all of the major parts of the soldiers' world—including subjects as diverse as climate, living conditions, deadly combat, and morale. The world inhabited by the soldiers of the 25th Division was not theirs alone; the men and women who served with other frontline units in Vietnam will immediately recognize the major landmarks. Using the 25th Division as a focal point, I hope to help the people of today better understand what the Vietnam War was like in fact, not fiction.

This work is based on a variety of sources. The documentary foundations come from a great number of 25th Division records generated during the war, the most important of which are the large quarterly Division reports. They, in turn, are complemented by the quarterly reports that came from II Field Force, Vietnam, the Army headquarters for the units operating in the provinces near Saigon. The Center of Military History, Department of the Army, provided these documents to me while I was doing research on the village war in a Vietnamese province. I used this research to write *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Westview Press, 1991), which deals with the political and military struggle waged by both sides in an important part of the 25th Division's area of operations.

The most important resource is a collection of tapes and correspondence from veterans of the 25th Division. But tape transcriptions and informal correspondence rarely take a form that readers are used to seeing in print: People do not speak the way they write. In addition, the context for events described was often developed through very lengthy narratives. If some of the quotes appear long, bear in mind that I transcribed several tapes that were over four hours in length. Consequently, I did edit the transcriptions. I also arranged sentences so they followed a clear chronology. I did not indicate where one part of the transcription ended and another commenced; had I done so, the responses would have been covered with ellipses (. . .) and much harder to follow. And though I changed a few terms

so the lay reader would understand what was described, I was extremely careful not to alter the meaning of any person's account. Overall, the majority of the accounts are very nearly true transcriptions: I made few, if any, changes in the words used, though I did alter grammatical forms that sound perfectly fine but look like errors on paper. Rather than employing footnotes, I have injected a small number of comments explaining points that might not be clear to the reader (comments are found within brackets followed by my initials [—EMB]). If most accounts appear well put, that reflects the intelligence and sensitivity of the respondents.

Although the matter never came up, I would not have accepted anonymous accounts. Any author who contends that men and women who served in Southeast Asia will not discuss Vietnam publicly is dishonest. I did, however, alter many accounts myself. When men described the deaths or injuries of comrades, I deleted the names of the victims, and I omitted names in any descriptions of embarrassing or tragic episodes. Details like this could only hurt people and would do nothing for the story I present in these pages. In any case, all the tapes and letters that were used in this research are in the public record. For the moment they are in my possession, but I hope they will find a permanent home where they can help other students of the war. Only a small percentage of the accounts I compiled appear in this book, yet they encompass a broad range of issues concerning Vietnam. In a genuine way, I am privileged because I was able to listen to these accounts. I have tried to do them justice, but the intense feeling and sheer power of the voice cannot be duplicated.

I must deal with the accuracy of accounts given twenty years after the fact. No doubt, time has eroded some of the details and thrown a fog around some chronology. Remarkably, however, I do not think this happened very often. In this regard, possessing the 25th Division's documentation was invaluable. When men remembered the exact date of an action, it appeared in the records every time. Furthermore, between the records and a large body of oral evidence, I became fairly well immunized from outright falsehood. I am a trained researcher and skeptic, but only on a handful of occasions did I decide someone was creating fantasy. Perhaps some of the details are wrong. On the other hand, war is extraordinarily intense, and it etches some moments deeply in the mind.

Twenty years is not too long a time to try to put the war into perspective. I have seen hundreds of letters written by young soldiers during the war, but though they are very interesting, they reveal an unavoidable lack of mature judgment. If time is an enemy in the realm of detail, it is a friend in

the more important area of context. Twenty years ago, the men and women I interviewed could have perhaps done better at describing what happened; today, however, they have a much better idea of *why* things happened. That is a trade well worth making.

Inevitably, I have made errors somewhere. Nevertheless, I sincerely believe that this volume is based on the most honest historical data I have ever used. The motivation of the respondents is beyond reproach: There is no financial gain involved, none has a public reputation to rescue from critics, and no respondents attempted to glorify themselves. They want to teach, and they want the truth about Vietnam as they saw it to be known. Few researchers are as lucky as I have been.

Although the 25th Division lacks the widespread reputation of some of the elite Army units, no other division can match its literary pedigree. After World War II, 25th veteran James Jones recounted wartime life in his famous trilogy. More recently, some aspects of the 25th's tour in Vietnam have been well portrayed. Al Santoli, author of two splendid oral histories concerning Vietnam—*Everything We Had* and *To Bear Any Burden*—served with the 25th. Two British journalists, Tom Mangold and John Penycate, wrote *The Tunnels of Cu Chi*, an interesting account of the war that developed around the enemy safe zone in the Ho Bo and Boi Loi woods. Director Oliver Stone was with the 25th in Vietnam and relayed his views of the war in the movie *Platoon*. Larry Heinemann was another 25th Division veteran; his powerful novel *Paco's Story* won the National Book Award. Heinemann's earlier work, *Close Quarters*, is a vivid chronicle of field life in the Tropic Lightning Division and, in my opinion, one of the greatest of American war novels.

I would like to thank the people at Westview Press for taking on this project. Senior Editor Peter Kracht gave good advice and encouragement throughout. Project Editor Deborah Lynes did an excellent job of bringing order out of chaos. Copy Editor Joan Sherman has made me appear a better writer than is the case.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude toward the 25th Infantry Division Association. In particular, Morgan Sincock, editor of *Flashes*, the association's wonderful newsletter, helped me far above and beyond the call of duty. Most of the veterans who helped with this research are members of the association, and many helped me contact other veterans who do not belong. Obviously, all who participated shared things that touched their lives deeply. It was not, I know, always easy. I think almost all shared the same motivation: Simply put, they want other Americans to know more

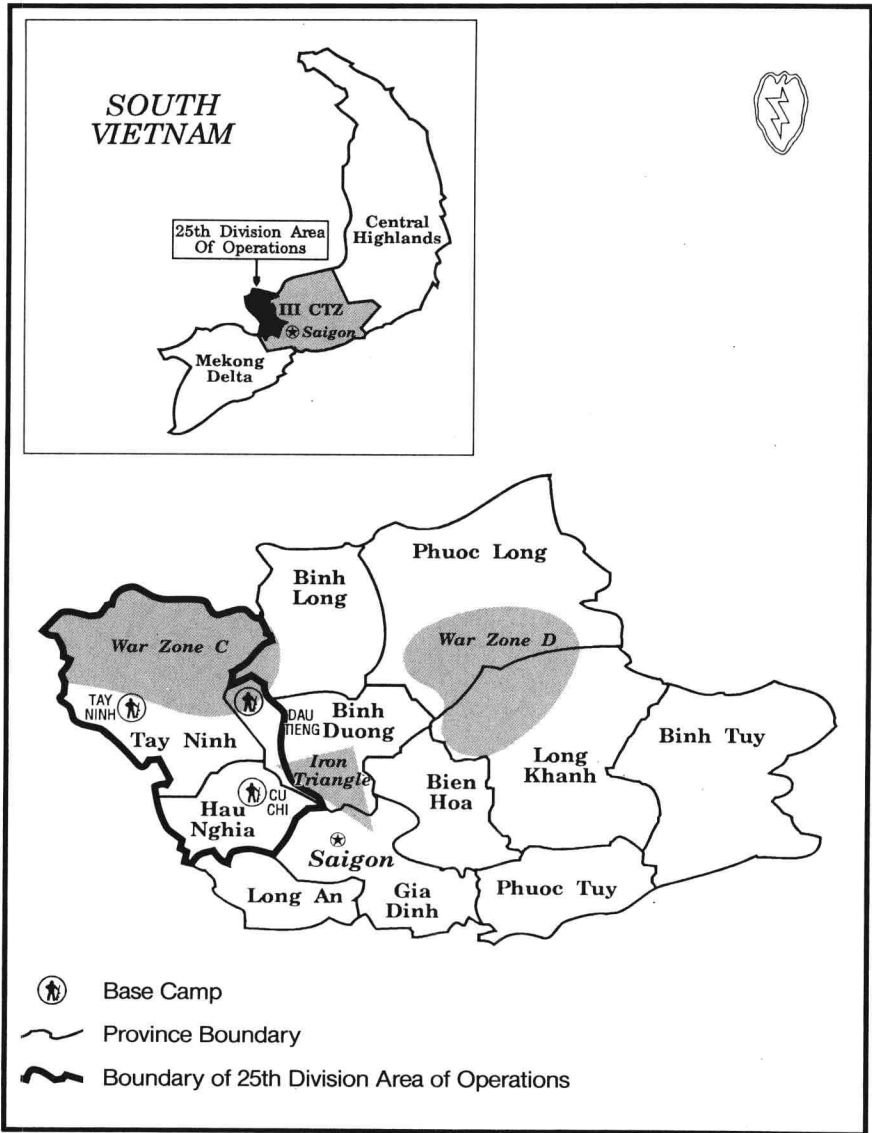
about the war as it actually happened. They did a splendid job. Any faults in this presentation are mine alone. Below is a list of people who helped me.

Eric M. Bergerud

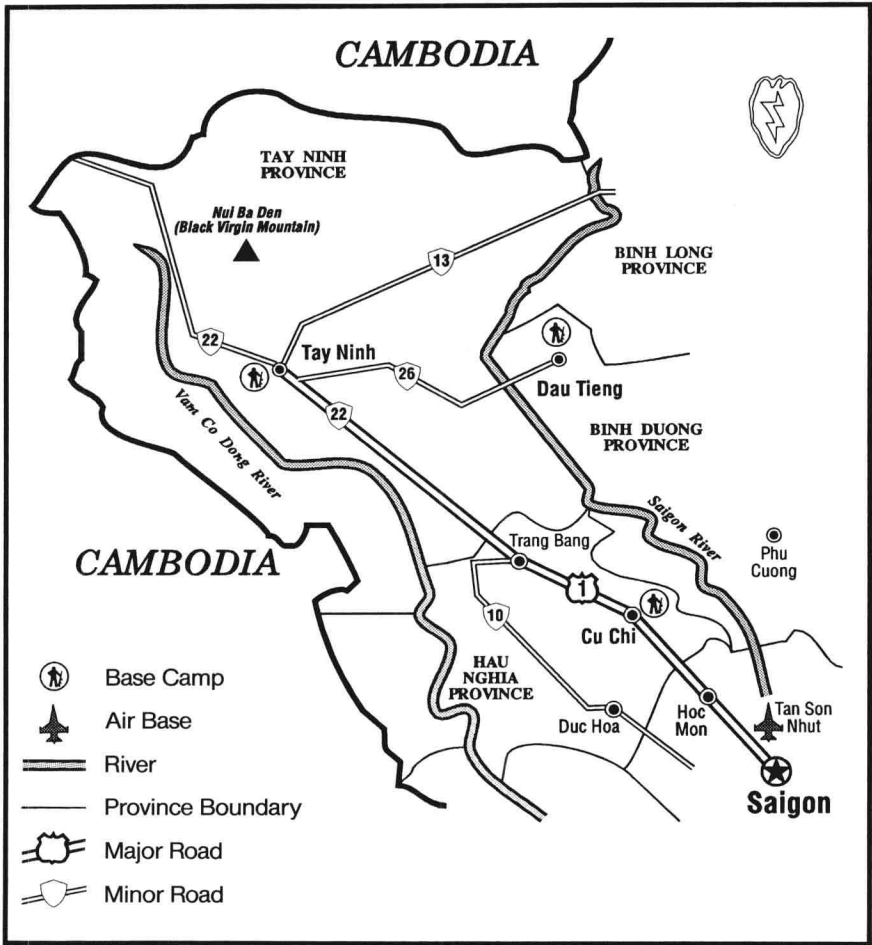
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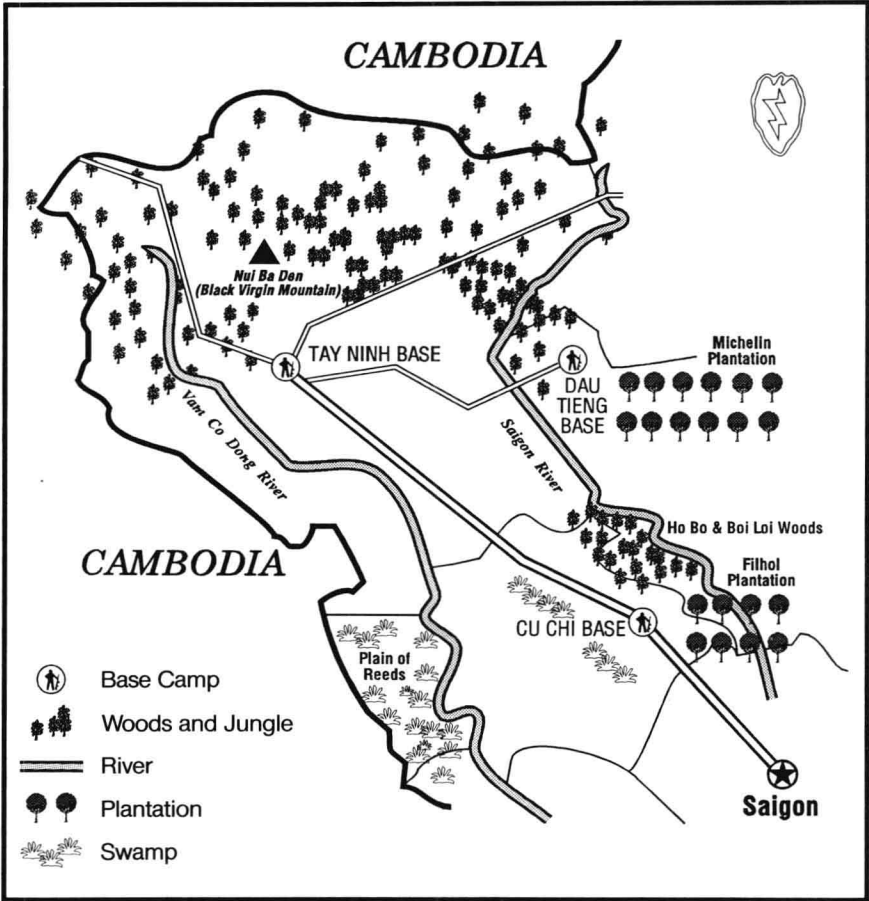
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Provinces in Saigon area: III Corps Tactical Zone (III CTZ)



25th Division Area of Operations (AO): Administrative Boundaries and Lines of Communication



25th Division AO: Terrain

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