

# Virginians at War

## Vietnam War: Tet Offensive

### Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

In the decade following the Korean War, America led the fight against communist aggression around the world. Decades of political upheaval in Vietnam, a small country in southeast Asia, pitted the communists from North Vietnam against South Vietnam.

In the late 1950s, the United States sent troops to Vietnam, and in 1964, the conflict escalated into an all out war. As the Vietnam War dragged on, and frustrations grew, opinion back in the US turned against the war, causing internal strife across the nation. In 1975, after nearly two decades and over 58,000 US troops killed in action, the United States withdrew from Vietnam, leaving a legacy of questions and doubts for our country, and our soldiers.

As 1967 drew to a close, intelligence reports pointed towards a major offensive push by the North Vietnamese at Khe Sanh. As the US leadership prepared for what it believed would be a decisive victory, the North Vietnamese infiltrated South Vietnam. And on the day of the Vietnamese New Year known as Tet, launched attacks on 13 of the 16 provincial capitals of South Vietnam. Although considered a military victory for US troops, the Tet Offensive was not seen as such back home, and public opinion began to turn against the war.

#### **TET Offensive 1968**

DEMENT: We got involved very heavily with Khe Sanh, now you may remember that Khe Sanh was a Marine base, there were five thousand of them surrounded by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. It looks like the North Vietnamese were using Khe Sanh as part of a deception, because meantime they were planning this great Tet Offensive.

WALKER: Tet was a situation where it was a map, a tapestry of battles, all over the country. If you look at a map, they have maps that show spots where all these fights took place. It was basically, it was a tapestry of all these battles.

BARRETT, JR.: Tet of '68, the people had to make a choice because the VC are right there, and you either fought them or went along with them. Most of them chose, at least the ones I dealt with, chose to support the government and the Americans.

BLAIR: The Tet Offensive changed the complexion of that war totally. The enemy was divided into local forces, regional forces, and the main force, the North Vietnamese.

RAWLS: They was sort of told that if they infiltrated the cities and started fighting, that the populace would rise up and join them, and this didn't happen. So they were isolated in the towns, they were wiped out before they could leave the cities. The cities got hit harder than the countryside.

KEOGH: Tet was not a river phenomenon. It was a shore-based phenomenon, where the NVA and the Vietnamese, the VC, could terrorize the most people and could kill the most people.

RAWLS: Probably the thing that surprised the most people was how well coordinated it was, that it hit all over the country at about, essentially the same time, the same day and essentially the same time.

## **THE ATTACK**

BANDS: The worst, worst time was Tet in January. The last week of January '68 we were attacked and I remember living in a foxhole for a week. When it hit, it was at night and everything around me turned blood red. It was just blood red from the explosions and the...you talk about fireworks, that's the best fireworks I've ever seen in my life but you're so scared, you know, but then the shrapnel and the stuff from the bombs going off, and the word was passed down the line that they're trying to get in, into the base.

LEE: It was tough. Again, it was the beginning of Tet Offensive that was just, so much going on. For the first two weeks, at least every two to three hours, the alarm would go off that we should get up and run to the bunker because we are under, under fire.

CARTER: When you went out in the field, you didn't know where the front line was, there was no front line. I mean, [ ] was everywhere, I mean all over, they had tons where they would come and go.

HARCUM: We were fighting I guess what you'd call the VC, and these guys would be right in the village with us during the daytime, and they would come in and cut our hair in the daytime, and cut our throat at night.

ASHTON: I was scared like everybody else, everybody's scared you know. But, I mean you just try to, try to stay controlled and do what you're supposed to do. I was young, 17, 18 years old, and then you're put into positions of responsibility. At 19 years old you're responsible for 6, 7 other men. You know, to keep them alive and yourself alive.

OWEN: It was a Chinook helicopter, a double [ ] Chinook, and we radioed in, they had, for a pickup. And we settled into this little cove-like, little flat places and we walked around, and we checked it out and we secured it, and we didn't think anyone was there. And the helicopter was on its way and he had a backup behind him, and we popped some smoke and they came on in and picked us up, and just as we cleared the treeline a little bit, we got some ground fire and we took a hit to the front. And it just shook the whole helicopter, when it hit the ground everyone was just thrown clear of it . But a lot of us were covered with fuel that was already on fire. I was, I was on fire, and I was being shot at, and I was running to them. Kip ran me down and jumped up on my back and rode me down to the ground, I outweighed him probably about forty pounds, but he came running after me and, and he rode me down and put his hand over my mouth so I wouldn't breathe in the flames, and I was on fire, burned about 30, 35% of my body. He rode me down and got the fire out, dragged me back, but there were guys up in the helicopter, they were just...I knew they weren't getting out, even when I got back there, there was just char. The helicopter behind us started laying down some fire, all these Hueys with the door gunner and everything, they came around beside us and there was...it was over as fast as it started probably, but the damage had been done. There was fire everywhere, you could smell...death. You know, that's the worst smell you ever wanna smell is burning flesh. I don't know. So that was me.

SOLOMONSON: For me it was a matter of...I identified really closely with them as brothers, because they were so close to my age, and I had brothers that age. And so to me it was just like giving care to family. As much destruction and cruelty and

horrific sights as there were, when I was in there, what I saw around me was tremendous love and concern for fellow men. And that was extended to the Vietnamese casualties as well, so that's how you do it.

RAWLS: The thing that bothered you more than the deaths were the disabilities, and the age of the kids you saw. They were, they were tough and a lot of them had good attitudes, most of them had good attitudes. They were doing what the government asked them to do.

WALKER: We were kind of sitting big, dumb, and happy on that road. Nobody bothering us, again it was just too quiet. Then all the radio traffic started. We could just constantly see artillery going off, that night about 12:30 the next morning, we got the call. We need ammunition, we're running out. So we dug out the ammo, and just absolutely piled it on the tanks, that's all we could do, is pile it on the tracks, you know. We started out. Pleiku was about 20 kilometers, 10, 12 miles, something like that. Joe was literally running out of ammo, they were running out. And they'd run out of main gun, they were shooting with pistols. Went down to where those tanks were, I thought they were going to hug us, you know, in the middle of everything. So we got there in just the nick of time that day, that was the first day.

BANDS: Tet was just...it was chaotic, it was just chaos, it was so much going on. If you, if you ever heard the expression of hell on earth, then sometimes I feel we walked through it.

COUSINS: We were then sent to the North edge of Saigon, went to this village to evacuate all the people in the village. The village was a known VC village. But we're not going to kill the people, we're going to take them and displace them, disperse them, do something with them into one of the hamlets or wherever. One of the guys is in the picture, bringing an old lady out from one of the hooches, and trying to get her to leave, to get her on some kind of vehicle and help her because we weren't sure how well she could...she squatted down in the center of the street, a Lieutenant whose name is on the wall came up and tried to talk to her and encourage her and offer assistance to help her get out before something happened to her. When he looked away from her, she reached into her jammies, pulled a 9mm pistol and shot him through the throat, into the head, killed him instantly. She was killed, and I have no ill feelings about her death, because this was a nice guy. He was a really nice man and trying to do something that was right, trying to save this woman's life. And his life ended very quickly.

BANDS: So many, so many brave young Marines, young kids, 18, 19 years old. Here I've been in the Marine Corps over 12 years by that time. And the heroics, and what they went through, and the things they did. You never forget them, you just...they'll always be with me, always. Proud, proud of them.

KEOGH: They're sort of our unsung, but the best that this country produced. Young warriors, hard-nosed, do your job kind of guys, in the best tradition of the naval service. Without a lot of kudos or a lot of pats on the back from anybody, other than what we generated internally.

OWEN: Later on in life, I wondered, you know, why was I spared when so many weren't.

### **REALITY AND PERCEPTION**

RAWLS: When I began to hear from my wife, we realized there was a...that what the press was portraying and the real, real situation were two different things. That it was, from everything I know, and have heard, it was portrayed sort of as a defeat over here. But it wasn't, it was a military victory, a political defeat now, but a military victory.

BLAIR: The war was a tactical and operational success. The politics of the war had nothing to do with the fighting of it. We did better things for the Vietnamese people than are being done for them now.

BANDS: You know, we trust people, we're awful generous in the things we offer to people, in these foreign countries, to others. But yet they'll turn around and use it to kill us off or get rid of us.

RANDOLPH: The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese lost. Their only thing, saving grace they had was they didn't care how many people they lost. To us, to lose one person was like losing one hundred to them.

WALKER: The only thing they gained was political. In this country. That was a big victory for them. Anybody who participated will tell you we basically destroyed them. For all intents and purposes destroyed the hardcore VC. There were no more VC per se, left in I know the central highlands. We crippled the North Vietnamese army during Tet. But when you took a look at the big picture and overlaid it with the units involved, and who's involved and the numbers, they didn't recover from that

until 1972. I mean, we just literally destroyed the North Vietnamese Army. Their grand scheme to cut the country in half at the highlands for instance, that was their primary dream at that point, and it was to cause the populace to rise up in their support. It didn't happen, it didn't happen at all, and they lost a generation during that fight. I mean they lost, I don't know how you recover from that.

## WHY WE FOUGHT

RANDOLPH: I do solemnly swear that I will defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies, both foreign and domestic, and that I will obey the orders of the officers appointed over me, so help me God. So when you get orders to go somewhere, to do something, that is your obligation. I am a black American. I did everything that the United States asked me. I'm proud of that uniform. But was told when we came out of Vietnam, do not travel in it. Get out of it. I'm fighting for America. This country, I love, born, raised, and have worked all my life to make America a great place as I can. I love it.

COUSINS: The horrors of war....of seeing people maimed, both sides, by the way. Seeing innocent people that have suffered, it makes one wonder that anybody who openly advocates war, oo, they...there's something wrong here. By saying that, there are instances where that is the only alternative. It's sad to say that there are people in this world who the only thing they know is force.

DOYLE: There's lots of reasons to fight, and defense of your family, your country, are probably the best I think. But what is defense of your country, is a pretty open question. And, that's for politicians to decide, not soldiers.

BLAIR: If the war was lost, and it was, it was lost somewhere else. It wasn't lost in Vietnam.

RAWLS: I'm not a military man, I'm certainly not a politician, but you got the idea the war was being fought from Washington and not from Vietnam.

EDGERTON: You don't fight for your country. You enlist to serve your country, but when the time comes, you fight for yourself and the man next to you.

Soldiers fight for each other. When the bullets are flying and the politics is very far away.

OWEN: So many lives, so many dreams...so many aspirations of young people would never been lost. I hope this country never sees another war like that. Ever. But for the experience I received from being in the Army, man I tell you, I'm proud. I'm proud of what I did. I'm proud that I was a soldier, you know, and I'm proud I served my country.

**Interested in learning more? Join us at [vawarmemorial.org/learn](http://vawarmemorial.org/learn) for more films and resources! Contact [education@vawarmemorial.org](mailto:education@vawarmemorial.org) with any questions or if you have a correction for this film's transcript.**