

Tet Offensive – 1968

As an amateur student of history, I believe that 1968 was one of the most significant years in modern US history. Last week, I wrote an article about the USS Pueblo and I plan on having several more columns from 1968 during this year.

In late January in Vietnam, a coordinated series of North Vietnamese attacks on more than 100 cities in South Vietnam called the Tet Offensive began. The Tet Offensive had both battlefield impacts and had an impact on politics in the US, leading to President Johnson deciding not to run for re-election.

Tet refers to one of the most important holidays in the Vietnamese calendar, celebrating the lunar new year. In previous years, this holiday had been the occasion for an informal truce in the War. We saw something similar during the Christmas holiday during WWI. However, in early 1968, the North Vietnamese higher military command decided to use the holiday as a coordinated offensive of surprise attacks aimed at breaking the stalemate in Vietnam. It was the belief of the North Vietnamese that the attacks could cause the fall of the Republic of Vietnam to collapse and cause rebellion among the South Vietnamese people. The hope was that the US would withdraw from the war. On 21 January 1968, the North began a massive artillery bombardment of the US Marine garrison at Khe Sanh as a diversion to the main offensive. On 30 January, the North Vietnamese attacked 13 cities in central South Vietnam, just as many families were starting their celebration of the new year. Over the next day, over 120 attacks were conducted, including an attack on the US Embassy. After initial success and with forces spread too thin, the US and South Vietnamese forces managed to repel the attacks. Some of the most intense fighting took place in the city of Hue. The battle lasted over there weeks. The North massacred over 2,800 people who were sympathetic to the US. 150 Marines were killed along with 400 South Vietnamese troops. The North suffered about 5,000 killed most killed by US air and artillery strikes.

Prior to the Offensive, General Westmoreland had claimed that the end of the war was in sight. However, the Offensive proved that the war was far from over. After the Offensive, Westmoreland requested another 200,000 troops for the war. However, support for the war dropped in the US. On 27 February 1968, CBS anchor Walter Cronkite said “more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.’ It has been reported that President Johnson said “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.” On 31 March, President Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election and called for negotiations to end the war. It took another five years before an end of hostilities was reached.

Many of my Vietnam Veterans of America brothers and sisters have personal and tragic stories from the battlefield. We must honor and thank them for their commitment to our country.