

Vietnam: The Course of a Conflict



James H. Willbanks



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Preface

Five decades after the end of the Vietnam War, the Army is still coming to grips with how the conflict affected American soldiers and the institution itself. The war challenged the US military in unexpected ways while also testing the nation's social cohesion. The conflict evolved over time, from an advisory effort to a campaign largely characterized by conventional combat operations, often against a near peer adversary—the North Vietnamese Army. In its last years, the US Army once again took up an advisory role as it gradually returned responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese government. The US military's withdrawal in 1973 and North Vietnamese victory in 1975 ensured that the war's legacy would remain fraught, for both American society and its Army.

This collection traces the evolution of America's involvement in Vietnam. The author of these chapters, James H. Willbanks, has devoted much of his professional life to service in and study of the conflict. As a young US Army Infantry officer, Jim served as an advisor to the South Vietnamese Army during the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive in 1972. He served 23 years in uniform, received a Doctorate in History, and after retiring from active duty, continued his service as the Director of the Department of Military History at the US Army Command and General Staff College. In 2016, he was appointed the George C. Marshall Chair of Military History at the college, the position from which he retired in 2018. Jim published 12 books on Vietnam during his career. He also published multiple article-length works on Vietnam, 11 of which appear in this volume. These chapters cover, albeit loosely, the course of the conflict, from the initial advisory effort and the buildup of conventional forces through the Tet Offensive and the ultimate decision to “Vietnamize” the war.

Because of its broad treatment, this volume is relevant to the challenges faced by current military professionals. Its chapters offer insights on security assistance, conventional combat operations, irregular warfare, and other related subjects. While the Vietnam War is now five decades in the past, the experiences of the Soldiers who fought it can and should be used to illuminate the path ahead for today's Army. CSI – The Past is Prologue!

Donald P. Wright

Combat Studies Institute

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Introduction

The Vietnam War, An Overview

The war in Vietnam was the second longest war in United States' history and certainly one of the most contentious. The fighting between the United States and the government of South Vietnam on one side and North Vietnam and the Viet Cong (VC) on the other lasted from the mid-1950s until the mid-1970s and spread into Laos and Cambodia.

The genesis of US involvement in Vietnam can be found in the confrontation that developed between East and West following the end of World War II. The United States first became involved in Vietnam in 1950 when it began supporting France in the latter's effort to defend its colonial presence in Vietnam. With the emergence of the Cold War, the US turned to a policy of containment to counter what was perceived as the spread of Communism. Support for the French was seen as a way to contain Communism in Southeast Asia. Despite more than \$2.6 billion in American military aid, the French were eventually defeated by the communist-dominated Viet Minh. The subsequent Geneva Conference in 1954 resulted in the temporary partition of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel, essentially establishing two Vietnams with Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) holding sway in the north and the non-communist State of Vietnam in the south under Emperor Bao Dai.

This resulted in the next phase of the war in which, for the better part of the next ten years, the US would support the government of Ngo Din Diem, Bao Dai's prime minister who succeeded him in 1955 after a questionable national election. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his successor, John F. Kennedy, threw their support behind Diem in the hopes that he and a non-communist Republic of Vietnam would act as a counterweight to the Communist-controlled North. Diem's corrupt and unpopular regime was unable to deal with the insurgency that grew in the south after Diem refused to conduct the elections in 1956 that had been called for by the Geneva Accords. The US supported Diem in this decision and mounted a significant effort to build South Vietnamese forces capable of defending against the insurgency.

Diem launched a military campaign against the former Viet Minh cadres left in the south. The Communist Party in Hanoi, focused on rebuilding the war-torn North, initially favored maintaining a political emphasis over military action in the South, hoped to cause the collapse of the Diem regime in the south by increasing internal political pressure. Nevertheless,

fighting broke out in 1957 when Diem sent his troops into the Communist strongholds. Throughout the rest of 1957 and into 1958, Diem's forces were successful in these operations, killing or capturing a large number of suspected Communists.

Faced with the failure of purely political means to bring down the Diem government, the Central Party Committee in Hanoi made a momentous decision. At the Fifteenth Party Plenum in January 1959, a secret resolution was signed, authorizing the use of revolutionary violence to complement the political struggle, both focused on the overthrow of the government in the South. Hanoi began to send equipment and personnel southward along what would become the Ho Chi Minh Trail to join in the fight. Scattered and sporadic acts of terror evolved into a sustained campaign fostered in part by northerners that had infiltrated back into South Vietnam to take leading positions in the growing insurgency. To direct this effort, the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) was founded on 20 December 1960. The NLF was a classic united-front organization, which included participation by non-communist nationalists who joined the NLF to defeat the US-backed Diem government in Saigon; despite protestations to the contrary during the war, Hanoi later admitted that it had controlled the NLF and directed virtually every aspect of the war in the South.

In 1961, in response to the rapid growth of the insurgency and based on the recommendations of a team sent to Vietnam to report on the conditions and assess future American aid requirements, President John F. Kennedy decided to increase US support for the Diem regime, signing a military and economic aid treaty with the Republic of Vietnam. Some \$65 million in military equipment and \$136 million in economic aid were delivered that year. By the end of 1961, the number of US military advisors had increased to over 3,200. These advisors, who had previously been involved only in training and high-level staff work, were now advising South Vietnamese ground combat units in the field at the battalion and regimental levels.

To coordinate all US military support activities in South Vietnam, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was established in Saigon in 1962. As the insurgency grew, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) proved increasingly unable to handle the expanding threat. By this point in the war, all communist armed units in the South had been unified into a single People's Liberation Armed Force (PLAF) in 1961. This force, which became popularly known as Viet Cong (VC), a derogatory slang expression for "Vietnamese communists," numbered about 15,000

and would grow rapidly as more and more North Vietnamese soldiers flowed down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to join the fight in the South. By the end of 1962, the NLF, including both political and armed elements, had grown to an estimated 300,000 members.

Meanwhile, the ARVN continued to experience severe internal problems, to include rampant corruption and poor leadership, and remained largely ineffective in combating the rapidly growing insurgency. This was demonstrated only too clearly at the Battle of Ap Bac on 2 January 1963. Although the battle was reported as a great victory for the ARVN because the Viet Cong quit the battlefield after the fighting, the outcome had been just the opposite—in reality, a small VC force had soundly defeated a much larger force from the 7th ARVN Division before withdrawing from the area in good order.

While his military forces struggled to combat the insurgents in the field, Diem, a Catholic, and his regime became less and less popular as he turned to more repressive measures in an attempt to curtail dissident elements within South Vietnamese society. Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, head of the secret police, identified militant Buddhists as a source of trouble for the regime. Charging them with harboring Communists and supporting anti-Diem forces, Nhu launched a campaign against the Buddhists to bring them under control. The situation came to a head in May 1963 when ARVN troops fired into a crowd of Buddhist demonstrators in Hue who had taken to the streets to protest Diem's discriminatory policies. This was followed in June by the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in protest at a Saigon intersection, an act that made bold headlines around the world and caused maximum consternation in Washington. When Nhu sent his special forces into a number of Buddhist monasteries, resulting in the killing of several monks and the arrest of many others, this set off a wave of student protests in Hue and Saigon in which 4,000 students were rounded up and arrested by government troops. The Communists seized the opportunity to fuel anti-Diem sentiment to create further political instability.

Ultimately the Kennedy administration lost faith in Diem and gave tacit approval for a coup led by a group of South Vietnamese generals. During the course of the coup that occurred in early November 1963, Diem and his brother were assassinated.

Barely three weeks later, President Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Baines Johnson became president, inheriting the worsening situation in Vietnam where the war was going badly for the South Viet-

namese and their 16,000 American advisors. In Saigon, the coup, which resulted in General Duong Van Minh taking control of the government, ushered in a tumultuous year that was marked by successive coups and increasing instability.

By mid-1964, the VC forces in the south, now including 35,000 guerrillas and 80,000 irregulars, were routinely defeating the ARVN in battle. President Johnson was caught in a quandary; he could not afford to be seen as “soft on communism” in Vietnam, but he also did not want to widen the war and risk bringing the Chinese into the conflict as has happened in Korea. He was also concerned that a larger war effort would result in a domestic backlash that would threaten his Great Society welfare programs. Hoping to keep the war limited, he wanted to send a message to Ho Chi Minh and the other leaders in Hanoi as a warning not to escalate the war in the south.

Johnson got that opportunity on 2 August 1964 when North Vietnamese patrol boats fired on the US destroyer *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin. After Johnson asserted that there had been a second attack on 4 August—a claim that later proved to be false—he sought a Congressional resolution authorizing him to respond to the provocation. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed both the House and the Senate with only two dissenting votes, authorizing the president to take “all necessary measures to repel attacks... and prevent further aggression.” This resolution effectively gave the president complete authority for full-scale US intervention in the Vietnam War. Johnson responded for the Tonkin Gulf incident by ordering retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam.

Concurrently, Hanoi began to send regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA, as the People’s Army of Vietnam or PAVN were more popularly known) units down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos to join the insurgents fighting in the south. Heretofore, North Vietnamese troops had gone south as fillers for the Viet Cong; the arrival of NVA main force units on the battlefield in the south represented a sea change in the nature of the war. The ARVN had been unable to stem the tide of the insurgency and now they were also faced with an invasion of regular troops from the North.

In the latter months of 1964, the Communists stepped up their attacks, hitting Bien Hoa air base, bombing an American officers’ quarters in Saigon, attacking the ARVN in Tay Ninh province on the Cambodian border, and occupying most of Binh Dinh province on the north central coast. In January 1965, when the VC struck the US base at Pleiku, Johnson again ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam.

By this time, the president and his advisers had come to the conclusion that the American intervention was necessary to keep the Saigon government from collapsing. Johnson, still wanting to keep the conflict limited and hoping to get his message through to Hanoi, ordered a sustained bombing campaign against targets in North Vietnam in what became known as Operation ROLLING THUNDER. This operation, which Johnson hoped would cause Ho and his advisers to abandon the war in the South, began in February 1965 and would continue in fits and starts for the next three years. It would be hampered by restrictions imposed by the White House and a complicated command and control arrangement; in the end it would prove to be one of the most ineffective air campaigns in history. Meanwhile on the ground, the ARVN continued to reel under the Communist onslaught. In addition to its combat ineffectiveness, the South Vietnamese forces were also beset by widespread corruption and desertion—113,000 ARVN soldiers would desert their units by the end of the 1965.

In March of 1965, with the ARVN on the verge of collapse, US involvement escalated when Johnson began sending American ground combat troops to Vietnam. Ostensibly, these troops were to protect American airfields in South Vietnam; the first two US Marine battalions landed near Da Nang and began conducting defensive operations around the huge US base there. GEN William Westmoreland, MACV commander, believing that the VC were making preparations for a major offensive and convinced that the South Vietnamese could not handle the new level of fighting, requested additional US troops. The Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed and began to send more troops; the plan was that the American units would guard US military enclaves. Under this plan, the US troops were to be limited to operations within a 50-mile radius of their bases. However, as more American units arrived, they soon transitioned from defensive to offensive operations. The first Marine battalions would ultimately be followed by seven US Army divisions, two US Marine Divisions, and four separate US Army brigade-sized units. US ground troops in South Vietnam numbered 180,000 by the end of 1965; by mid-1966, the number increased to 350,000.

GEN Westmoreland, the commander of American forces in Vietnam, launched a series of large-scale search and destroy operations to find and kill the enemy. Meanwhile, the Communist forces, directed by Hanoi, had settled in for a protracted war designed to exhaust the American will. The result was a bloody war of attrition that caused heavy casualties on both sides.

The war in Vietnam caused deep divisions on the home front in the United States and contributed to the social upheaval of the 1960s. The

failure to achieve any meaningful progress against the VC and North Vietnamese, the spread of the antiestablishment counterculture, the graphic coverage of the fighting by the media, and the credibility gap that developed between successive presidential administrations and the American public seriously undermined support for the war.

By late 1967, there were nearly 500,000 American troops in South Vietnam and US forces had dealt serious blows to the Communists, but the bitter fighting continued to rage all over the country. President Johnson launched a public relations campaign emphasizing that progress was being made in order to bolster public support for his administration's handling of the war. In the midst of this campaign, the communists launched a massive general offensive during the Tet (New Year) holiday in 1968. Although the offensive resulted in a significant defeat for the Communists at the tactical level, the shock and scope of the attacks stunned the American public and convinced a demoralized Johnson not to run for reelection. The Tet Offensive proved to be a great psychological victory that changed the nature of the US commitment in Vietnam and issued in the next phase of the war and ultimately led to the withdrawal of all US forces from Vietnam, although it would take four more years.

Richard Nixon was elected in 1968, largely because he promised to end the war and achieve "peace with honor." To do this, he announced that he would "Vietnamize" the war and American objectives shifted from winning the war to a prolonged disengagement, during which US forces were gradually withdrawn as the responsibility for fighting the war was shifted to the South Vietnamese. While this was being done, the fighting continued. Neither the massive bombing campaigns of both South Vietnam and North Vietnam, or the expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos brought the war any closer to an end.

Dissatisfied with the bloody stalemate, North Vietnam launched an all-out invasion of the south in the spring of 1972. Although initially successful, North Vietnamese forces were eventually turned back by a massive application of American airpower. In the wake of the offensive, Nixon proclaimed Vietnamization a success. Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger had been conducting secret peace negotiations with communist representatives in Paris. By October 1972, Kissinger and his North Vietnamese counterpart, Le Duc Tho, had forged a tentative peace agreement. However, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam voiced violent opposition to the terms and demanded 69 amendments to the agreement. The North Vietnamese angrily walked out of the negotiations. Nixon ordered a massive bombing campaign against Hanoi and Haiphong. After 18 days, the North

Vietnamese agreed to return to the negotiating tables, but the agreement that was worked out was not substantially different from the one that had been agreed to earlier in October.

The Paris Peace Accords were signed on 27 January 1973. The terms of the agreement called for an in-place cease-fire and the withdrawal of all US troops by March 1973. There was no mention of the North Vietnamese troops left in South Vietnam when the cease-fire went into effect, but Nixon promised Thieu that the United States would support South Vietnam if Hanoi violated the terms of the cease-fire.

The signing of the accords signaled the end of the war for the United States, but only issued in a new phase in the war for the Vietnamese. Nixon continued to make promises to President Thieu, but he was increasingly beset by the Watergate Scandal. In early August 1974, he resigned and, subsequently, Congress reduced military aid to Vietnam. In December 1974, Hanoi launched a final offensive in the south. The South Vietnamese forces fell back in disarray as the North Vietnamese troops marched inexorably southward. On 30 April 1975, North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon and South Vietnam surrendered unconditionally.

Although US forces, which had not been defeated on the battlefield, had been gone for two years when Saigon fell, the North Vietnamese triumph represented the first time that the United States had lost a war. More than 58,000 Americans had been killed and over 300,000 wounded. South Vietnam had fallen to the communists. The war had sharply divided American society and made Americans question the veracity of their own governmental institutions. The legacies of the war would last for many years to come.

Chapter 1

Training Indigenous Forces for Counterinsurgency

The US Experience in Vietnam

Contemporary counterinsurgency theory recognizes the necessity to establish a legitimate government that is able to address the fundamental needs of the people. To accomplish this, the host nation must defeat the insurgents (or render them irrelevant), uphold the rule of law, and provide a basic level of essential services and security for the populace. Key to all those tasks is developing an effective host-nation security force.¹ The necessity for viable indigenous forces is what we call in the United States, “a blinding glimpse of the obvious.” However, just because this requirement is obvious does not mean that achieving such a task is easy. Unfortunately, this fact became only too apparent as US forces in Vietnam became more involved in training the South Vietnamese army to combat the burgeoning insurgency that began to grow in the late 1950s.

Arguably, the US training mission in Vietnam can be divided into five loosely defined phases; this effort began with American assistance to the French in the First Indochina War and ended with the withdrawal of all US forces following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. In the early days of the First Indochina War, the US had little involvement.² However, beginning in 1950, when the war had transformed itself, at least in the minds of senior US policy makers, into a war to check the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia, the US would become increasingly involved in that war. The first members of Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina (MAAG-I) arrived in Saigon in September 1950, but there was very little American involvement in training Vietnamese forces during this initial phase of the US mission in Vietnam—US efforts focused on providing military aid to the French and involved primarily the transfer of weapons, munitions, and other equipment to French forces.³ By 1954, the United States was funding 80 percent of the French War effort in Indochina, providing France with more than \$2.6 billion in military aid from 1950-1954.⁴

After their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the signing of the Geneva Accords, the French began their two-year long withdrawal from

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Vietnam. During this period, which marked the second phase of the US training mission in Vietnam, the Americans and French worked together to bolster the South Vietnamese armed forces. President Dwight D. Eisenhower decided that with the departure of French forces looming, the United States would undertake the daunting task of building South Vietnamese forces capable of withstanding the Communist insurgency. Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway warned that such an undertaking would be “hopeless” unless “a reasonably strong, stable, civil government” existed first.⁵ Secretary of State John Foster Dulles disagreed, arguing that “one of the most efficient means of enabling the Vietnamese government to become strong is to assist it in reorganizing the National Army and in training that Army.”⁶

In the end, Dulles won the argument, but Ridgway’s warning would ultimately prove to be quite prescient. The crux of the problem was that the Saigon regime headed by Ngo Dinh Diem was hampered by corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency, while deep social, ethnic, and religious differences plagued the countryside.⁷ These factors would greatly inhibit the effort to build and train a viable South Vietnamese force able to combat the insurgency.

With President Eisenhower’s decision to go forward with the training mission in Vietnam, Ridgway and the other Joint Chiefs of Staff acceded and the effort to “advise and assist” the government of Vietnam in training military forces to defend the nation began to gain momentum. In February 1955, the Training Relations and Instruction Mission was established in Saigon. A Franco-American effort in the beginning, TRIM, as the mission became known, was formed to create and train the South Vietnamese Army. In November of that year, replacing MAAG-I, Military Advisory Assistance Group, Vietnam (MAAG-V) was established. By early 1956, the departing French had effectively handed off the mission of building the South Vietnamese armed forces to the Americans.

With the French gone, the third phase of the US training effort began. The objective of the American effort during this period was to build a multi-layered security system in South Vietnam based on three pillars. At the base would be the Self-Defense Corps, a part-time militia made up of local villagers who banded together to defend themselves against guerrilla raiders. Next came the Civil Guard, company-sized militia organized at the province level to provide regional security and constabulary duties. At the apex of this arrangement would be the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

ARVN would be formed from the remnants of the Vietnamese National Army (VNA), which had been created by the French in 1950 out of units that had been native auxiliaries to the French Union Forces in their fight against the Vietminh. The US training advisors were faced with a daunting challenge—how to transform the VNA into a viable force that could defend the fledgling Republic of Vietnam against the growing insurgency. The VNA suffered from a number of serious maladies. First of all, it was tainted in the eyes of many South Vietnamese people because of its previous role as part of the French colonial forces. Additionally, the VNA was organized primarily in small units which were concentrated in non-combat arms. It lacked senior command experience and the senior officer ranks that existed were highly politicized.⁸ Making matters worse, the VNA was rife with corruption.

By 1954, the VNA, numbering some 150,000 men, suffered from desertion and defection and according to one US report, had experienced “a complete breakdown of combat capabilities.”⁹ It was on this unsteady foundation that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam would be built.

The first item of business was to assist in the recovery of American equipment that had been provided to the French and Vietnamese forces and to assist in the establishment of a viable logistics capability to support the new South Vietnamese Army. Accordingly, the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission, known as TERM, was created in February 1956. This organization would be subordinate to MAAG-V and, besides focusing on logistics, would also provide a manpower pool of personnel who could be utilized as trainers and advisors.

In the beginning, the key question in the creation of the new Army of the Republic of Vietnam was: “What kind of army was this to be?” In the early years of the US training mission in Vietnam, there was some effort to train the South Vietnamese forces for civic action and pacification. However, over time as the insurgency gained momentum, less and less emphasis was given to the special aspects of counter-guerrilla warfare; the focus shifted to preparing the force for the worst threat scenario—guerrilla main force units and an external invasion from North Vietnam.¹⁰ In so doing, the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam was greatly influenced by the recent US experience in South Korea, which had seen a conventional invasion by North Korean forces almost result in the demise of the Republic of Korea. Accordingly, the American training mission in South Vietnam focused its efforts on creating a South Vietnamese military force built around field divisions that mirrored US Army light infantry divisions that was expected to handle both internal security and resist a

North Vietnamese invasion.¹¹ US tactical doctrine would be used to train these forces. In effect, the US training mission tried to make the ARVN look like the US Army.¹²

Arguably, there was a period of time during the early days of the US training mission when a counter-guerrilla force may have been more effective in countering the fledgling insurgency. However, in the end, the ARVN was structured and trained to meet a possible external attack by the PAVN, not the actual struggle against the National Liberation Front.¹³ In 1959, there would be a recognition that internal subversion and the externally-supported insurgency were the most dangerous immediate threats, but this realization would prove ultimately too late to change the thrust of the American effort to train the South Vietnamese forces to meet that threat and the primary objective remained to create and sustain a conventional force.¹⁴

By this time, after having gone through more than 200 changes to the tables of organization and equipment, the objective force for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam became seven standard divisions of 10,450 men each organized into three army corps.¹⁵

The organizational considerations aside, the more critical task was to train the troops that would man those units. By the end of 1959, a South Vietnamese Army service school and training system had been established that included eighteen schools and training centers which focused on individual basic and specialized training. These schools and centers trained about 20,000 soldiers a year. In addition, a robust off-shore school program was established that provided individual training for key officer and enlisted specialists in US schools located in the United States and selected US schools in several overseas locations.

While the US training mission experienced success in addressing individual training needs, collective and unit training proved to be problematic for a number of reasons. The Americans had an extremely difficult time convincing the South Vietnamese military leadership of the necessity for collective unit training. Many were political appointees who believed their careers depended more on political alignments than military performance.¹⁶ Accordingly, they were more interested in palace intrigue than exerting the time and effort to recruit and train a viable military force.

Meanwhile the insurgency continued to grow. Given the increased demands of the fight against the insurgents, the South Vietnamese forces often lacked the time and manpower to devote to collective training; rising operational requirements made it impossible to institute effective training

exercises for units already constituted due to the demands of the war that kept most of the force committed in the field.¹⁷

There was some attempt to free up South Vietnamese forces for training by relying more on the paramilitary forces to assume greater responsibility for local security. However, the US effort in Vietnam suffered from a distinct lack of unity of command and the military had little influence over the police and paramilitary forces, which remained under the purview of American civilian advisors. When these forces proved incapable of providing security in the country side, the ARVN had to become more involved in internal security functions, which further impeded its training and professional development and made it less capable of combating the Viet Cong.¹⁸

In addition to trying to train the South Vietnamese forces while they were in contact with the enemy, the US training mission was hampered by a number of other significant difficulties, not the least of which was providing sufficient numbers of effective American advisors. These advisors had a difficult job and were charged to work alongside the South Vietnamese to assist in increasing their combat capabilities. US advisors, eventually assigned down to battalion level, were responsible for training, conducting staff operations, establishing a logistics system, and assisting in operational planning. In the beginning, the US advisors were forbidden from accompanying ARVN forces on combat operations, but that restriction was loosened in mid-1961 as the insurgency continued to grow in strength and intensity.

In addition to those with the main headquarters and operational divisions, there were also advisors assigned to the South Vietnamese Army service school and training system. Still more advisors were working in the pacification effort at the district level and Special Forces teams rotated in and out of South Vietnam to work on mobile training teams to train selected South Vietnamese units and to work with the Montagnards under the CIA-sponsored Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) program.

To provide command and control for the advisory effort and manage the ever increasing US training mission, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was established on 8 February 1962. Despite the establishment of the new command and the increase in the number of training advisors, the training mission still suffered from serious problems. Finding sufficient numbers of qualified American military personnel to serve as advisors and trainers remained problematic. Many of those selected for advisor duty had little or no combat experience; very few had any practical experience whatsoever in counter-guerrilla training. Very few spoke Vietnamese

or were familiar with Vietnamese culture. Thus, many of those selected for advisor duty were ill-prepared for such a demanding assignment and this severely limited the effectiveness of the entire advisory effort.¹⁹

In addition to the difficulties encountered in the advisory effort, the greatest obstacle to improving the training of the South Vietnamese armed forces was the lack of qualified leadership in the ARVN ranks at all levels, both officer and noncommissioned officer. This situation was an unfortunate byproduct of the rapid expansion of the South Vietnamese military forces, which did not have a strong base of experienced leaders on which to build.²⁰

While the Americans were striving to increase the combat capability of the South Vietnamese forces, the other side was making its own preparations. Once Hanoi realized that South Vietnamese Premier Ngo Dinh Diem was not going to conduct the elections called for in the 1954 Geneva Accords, Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues decided to turn to force of arms to achieve a reunification of Vietnam under Communist control. By the end of the decade, there had been a steep increase in the size and strength of the externally supported insurgency that was growing in the South.

Despite the increased advisory effort, by 1963 South Vietnam was in trouble both militarily and politically. The South Vietnamese military was routinely defeated in the field, while the Diem regime suffered from its own ineptitude and heavy handedness. Perhaps the best example of this situation was the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963, in which an outnumbered and outgunned Viet Cong force inflicted a stunning defeat on elements of the 7th ARVN Division. This was only one in a long series of defeats suffered by the South Vietnamese forces. In November of 1963, the military and political situations came to a head when a number of Diem's generals launched a coup on 1 November. During the coup, Diem and his brother were assassinated. Just three weeks later, President Kennedy was himself assassinated. Under the Kennedy administration, the number of US personnel in Vietnam grew to over 160,000, but the increased political turmoil had seriously undermined the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese forces, resulting in little appreciable progress against the insurgency.

In Washington, the new president, Lyndon Johnson, affirmed that he would continue the course in Vietnam set by his predecessor. However, he was faced with a two-fold problem: (1) how to deal with an externally supported insurgency, and (2) how to combat what was effectively becoming an invasion of conventional forces from North Vietnam moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to join the fight in the South. By this time,

clearly the US aid and advice provided to this point had failed to result in an effective fighting force in the South Vietnamese armed forces. The survival of the government of South Vietnam was in grave doubt, ultimately necessitating the massive intervention of US combat forces to stabilize the situation and save the Republic of Vietnam from total military defeat.²¹

Under the auspices of the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which effectively gave the president the authority to do whatever he thought necessary to stem the tide in Vietnam, Johnson attempted to use air power to convince the North to abandon its aims and goals in the south. This had little effect, so Johnson eventually committed US ground troops. The first group of Marines was ostensibly sent to protect US airfields, but they soon found themselves conducting offensive combat operations against the VC and PAVN. They were followed in rapid order by additional deployments of US ground forces. By 1967, there would be over 400,000 US troops in Vietnam. As the number of American troops grew, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, senior US commander in Saigon, put those forces in the field and told them to seek out and destroy the enemy main force units in what became bloody a war of attrition.

With the arrival of US ground troops, the fourth phase of the US advisory effort began. During this period, the focus of MACV shifted from the advisory effort and building the South Vietnamese forces to the conduct of combat operations by conventional American forces against the VC and PAVN. The ARVN were effectively shunted aside and relegated to pacification and providing security for the civilian population. By 1966, “the buildup [had] eclipsed what had previously been an advisor ‘show’” and the training effort had, at least in practice, been relegated to “a secondary endeavor.”²² According to US Army historian Jeffrey J. Clarke, advisory activities focused on training South Vietnamese “became adjuncts to the operations of the larger American ground combat units in almost every locale.”²³

The American advisors soldiered on; however, with the decrease in emphasis on the advisory effort, the training mission suffered from insufficient resourcing. In terms of manpower, the priority of fill went to US combat units, not the advisory structure.²⁴ This meant that the advisory teams were often under-strength and filled with personnel who did not meet the requirements for their positions (rank, branch, or experience): by 1968, MACV had about 2,500 fewer advisers assigned than authorized.²⁵ In this situation, the main qualification for being assigned as an advisor was often availability—vulnerability to overseas tour—and there was lit-

tle or no screening. The prevalent attitude was that any Army officer was qualified to serve as an advisor.²⁶ Many of those selected for assignment as advisors received little specialized training in the government, politics, or recent history of South Vietnam.²⁷

Although most of those assigned as advisors tried very hard to accomplish the mission, they were confronted with many challenges. They found themselves in an alien culture with very few guidelines about how to proceed. As one advisor who served later in the war observed, “Americans and South Vietnamese lived in two different worlds. Part of the problem was the linguistic and cultural barrier between us—a barrier that was almost impossible for the advisor to break.”²⁸

It soon became apparent that there were other systemic problems in the US advisory program. In addition to the problems previously noted, individual 12-month advisor tours, which in most cases translated to even shorter tours actually on the ground working with their South Vietnamese counterparts, resulted in “revolving door advisors” that caused too much turbulence and impeded the development of trust and rapport—and by extension the improvement of the advised units.²⁹ In addition, short tours provided advisors little opportunity or incentive to tackle long-term problems. The entire advisory effort focused on the short term problem—combat effectiveness of small units—rather than addressing more fundamental systemic problems—leadership, command and control architecture, professionalism, and eradication of corruption. Compounding this situation was the problem of obtaining an accurate picture of the Vietnamese Army’s progress because there was no standard method for rating the morale and combat effectiveness of Vietnamese units.³⁰ While the advisors tried to overcome these difficulties, they continued to labor in the shadows as the main focus of US energy remained on the “big fight” against the VC and NVA.

As for the South Vietnamese forces themselves, they continued to suffer from a low state of training. The increased level of enemy activity made it almost impossible to pull forces out of the line for training. The force continued to suffer from poor leadership and corruption, while combat field strength deteriorated due to high desertion rates. Efforts to improve leadership met with only minimal success; one senior US advisor reported that the “[South Vietnamese] officer corps seemed to lack aggressiveness, leadership ability, and a full professional commitment to their profession.”³¹

In 1968, the Communists launched the Tet Offensive, achieving near complete surprise. Fighting raged up and down South Vietnam. The allied forces, once having recovered from the stunning surprise, reacted well and

the Viet Cong was severely crippled by the fighting that continued into the fall of that year. To the surprise of many, the ARVN, despite many of its longstanding problems, did not collapse and in most cases acquitted itself fairly well.

Despite the outcome of the Tet Offensive at the tactical level, it proved to be a great psychological victory for Hanoi and effectively ended the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson. In November of 1968, Richard Nixon won the presidential election and, upon taking office, initiated a policy in pursuit of what he called “Peace with honor.” This policy had four components: Vietnamization—a shift of the responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese, a renewed emphasis on pacification, the withdrawal of US troops, and secret negotiations conducted by Henry Kissinger with North Vietnamese representatives in Paris.

The announcement of Vietnamization in June 1969 ushered in the fifth and final phase of the US advisory effort in Vietnam. Over the next four years, the focus for MACV slowly shifted away from large-scale US combat operations toward all of those activities designed to increase the capability of the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for the war as US forces were gradually withdrawn. This period was marked by an increased mobilization effort in South Vietnam that fueled an expansion of the territorial security forces and the enlargement and modernization of the South Vietnamese regular forces, putting even greater demands on the US training mission.

The requirement to shift the responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese provided a tremendous challenge for Gen. Creighton Abrams, who had succeeded General Westmoreland, as commander of MACV. He was faced with trying to increase the combat capability of the South Vietnamese armed forces, while still having to fight the war, even as the forces he needed to provide cover for the Vietnamization process, and eventually the advisory corps itself, were being down-sized on a regular basis.

Training the Vietnamese had, in theory, received high priority throughout the war, but, as previously stated, in practice too little attention had been given to this critical function since the commitment of US ground troops in the war. With the initiation of Vietnamization came orders to transfer the responsibility for the fighting to the RVNAF; MACV’s focus shifted to improving the training and advisory effort.³²

In the rush to increase the capabilities of the South Vietnamese as US troops were withdrawn, there was a steep increase in the number of advisors assigned to training the South Vietnamese. During 1969, the overall

strength of the field advisory training teams increased from about 7,000 to 11,900 and then to 14,332 in 1970.³³ As part of this increase, more advisors were assigned to the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) pacification effort with the duty of training the Regional and Popular Forces, who with the departure of US troops, had to assume more responsibility for local security while ARVN assumed responsibility for the war against the PAVN and remaining VC main force units.³⁴

Not only were more advisers assigned to the CORDS effort and to the combat units in the field, there was also a significant increase in the number of advisors assigned to work with the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) training base in an effort to improve the quality of training for the South Vietnamese forces. By the end of 1972, the RVNAF would become the largest and most modern military force in Southeast Asia, but even vast amounts of the best equipment in the world were meaningless if the soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen did not know how to use it or did not have the leadership and motivation to put it to use in the field against the enemy. Even with the new policy in place, improving South Vietnamese training continued to be an uphill battle. By the beginning of 1968, the ARVN training system consisted of 56 training centers of various types and sizes. There were nine national training centers (not including the airborne and marines who had their own training centers) and 37 provincial training centers. MACV, through its Training Directorate, provided US advisors at the RVNAF schools and training centers where they assisted RVNAF commandants in the preparation and conduct of training programs.

As previously stated, Vietnamization was instituted in 1969. The first real test of the South Vietnamese forces came in the spring of 1970 when 50,000 South Vietnamese troops joined 30,000 US troops in the invasion of Cambodia. During that operation, the South Vietnamese, accompanied by their American advisors and fighting alongside US forces, acquitted themselves very well.

However, in the next major test in 1971, the South Vietnamese did not do so well. In February of that year, Nixon and South Vietnamese President Thieu sent 17,000 South Vietnamese troops into Laos toward Tchepone along Highway 9 targeted against enemy base areas and critical sites along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This would be the first true test of Vietnamization since the South Vietnamese troops would attack alone without US ground troops or accompanying American advisors. The operation started out reasonably well, but the North Vietnamese reacted quickly, throwing four divisions against the forces from 1st ARVN Corps. By April, the South Viet-

names were retreating back to Vietnam in disarray. Despite the fact that President Nixon proclaimed Vietnamization a success, ARVN performance in Lam Son 719 demonstrated that there was still a long way to go.

Emboldened by the events in Laos, the Military Committee in Hanoi made the decision to go for broke. On Good Friday, 30 March 1972, the NVA launched a massive three-pronged attack that saw 130,000 troops attack Quang Tri in the north, Kontum in the central highlands, and An Loc, just 65 miles away from Saigon. This offensive was characterized by high intensity conventional operations that included the use of tanks, SA-7 Strela heat-seeking missiles, and a myriad of other sophisticated weaponry obtained from China and the Soviet Union. The subsequent fighting was bitter and the NVA ultimately captured Quang Tri. However, in the end, the South Vietnamese forces, bolstered by their US advisors, and supported by a massive American air campaign, prevailed and held Kontum and An Loc against repeated attacks and even retook Quang Tri in September of that year.

Nixon had the victory he was looking for and subsequently declared Vietnamization a resounding success, thus providing him the rationale for US withdrawal from Vietnam. To make a long story short, in early 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed and all US troops were withdrawn by 31 March. The war, however, was not over for the Vietnamese. It continued to rage for two more years. The South Vietnamese, without the support promised by President Nixon, who would leave office in disgrace, held their own throughout 1973 and into 1974, but then it all unraveled. When the North Vietnamese launched their last major offensive in March of 1975, the South Vietnamese had neither the means nor the will to defeat the enemy and succumbed in just 55 days.

In the end, it was not the insurgency that defeated the Republic of Vietnam; rather it was PAVN main forces conducting conventional operations that resulted in the fall of Saigon. It is true that the United States bears a large part of the blame for the ultimate outcome because it failed to provide the promised military support. However, it is also true that the South Vietnamese forces were found wanting when the North Vietnamese pressed the attack. Given the amount of treasure, blood and effort expended by the US in the attempt to build viable indigenous forces in South Vietnam, it is appropriate to ask the obvious question—what went wrong? To be sure, there was some success in the US effort in light of the expansion of South Vietnamese forces from 150,000 in 1956 to the over a million South Vietnamese in uniform in 1973. As previously stated, the South Vietnamese held on for a time after US forces departed, but, in the

end, they succumbed to the final North Vietnamese offensive. Why did the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam fare so badly in 1975?

To answer that question, one must go back to the very beginning. The first major mistake made was the inaccurate assessment of the relative threats to the Republic of Vietnam during the mid- to late-1950s. This resulted in the South Vietnamese armed forces being configured and prepared for the wrong “war” at the wrong time; in the end, the South Vietnamese military proved inadequate for both the counterinsurgency mission and conventional operations. During the period of the conflict when it was primarily an internal insurgency, US training efforts were often inappropriate and largely ineffective. The US military was late in emphasizing true counterinsurgency operations that integrated both military and political action, preferring instead to train the South Vietnamese in conventional infantry tactics.³⁵ Timely and detailed knowledge of the opposing force in the early days of the conflict would have provided the US with at least the opportunity to establish the correct priorities in helping the South Vietnamese military meet the actual threat at the time.

Compounding this problem was the fact that from the very beginning, the US government agencies, both in Washington and Saigon, were not organized or sufficiently coordinated to plan and control the massive, sensitive and interwoven programs demanded by the situation in Vietnam. Consequently, when unity of effort was required to confront the insurgency, no such unity existed. This manifested itself in often divergent efforts between those in the US military who were trying to foster a more capable South Vietnamese military and US governmental civilians, who were involved in nation building. This situation had a serious negative impact on the security situation in the countryside, but true unity of effort would not be sufficiently addressed until the establishment of CORDS in 1967.

The training effort also suffered from a lack of focus. With the deployment of US combat troops in 1965, the effort to bolster the South Vietnamese forces became a secondary effort and suffered from a lack of resources. The ARVN were relegated to pacification security missions while the US units took the fight to the Viet Cong and the PAVN. When Vietnamization was instituted in 1969, the focus went back to increasing capacity in the South Vietnamese armed forces, but this proved to be too late. Additionally, the emphasis was on the conduct of combat operations, rather than training. As the South Vietnamese forces assumed more responsibility for the war, they spent more and more time in the field and less and less time in training. The South Vietnamese forces were worn down by the demands of

the war, particularly during the large, high-profile operations in Cambodia in 1970, Laos in 1971, and the 1972 North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

There were also continuing problems with those Americans who were charged with increasing the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Part of establishing a viable and effective advisory effort is selecting and training the right personnel to meet the unique demands of the advisory mission: not everyone has the training, experience, maturity, and temperament to be an effective advisor. The selection of officers and non-commissioned officers to be advisors must involve a conscious process to find the right personnel to fill these crucial assignments. In a 1965 RAND study, Gerald C. Hickey delineated the requirements for being an effective advisor, which were professional competence and experience, adaptability to foreign cultures, ability to work with foreign nationals, and language skills; additionally, Hickey recommended that those selected for advisory duty be volunteers.³⁶ He also emphasized that the skills necessary for working effectively with foreign nationals can be taught only partially.³⁷ Once having selected the right personnel to be advisors, there is a need for a comprehensive training program that focuses on preparing the advisor for the cultural obstacles they will have to overcome.³⁸ This is true whether the culture is that of Vietnam or Afghanistan. The training must address those aspects of the culture that are least familiar to the advisor, which include customs, traditions, history, religion, ethnic groups, government, etc.³⁹ This was not always the case during the US effort in Vietnam and the training mission suffered accordingly.

Time is crucial and is directly related to the effectiveness of the training mission when dealing with indigenous troops. The US found in Vietnam that the one-year tour for the training advisors, which was originally eleven months in the early days of the advisory effort, generally limited the effectiveness of the average advisor. Twelve months was not of sufficient length to build rapport and achieve a level of trust and influence needed to facilitate the improvement of the advised unit over time.⁴⁰ Tour lengths for advisors should be of sufficient duration to provide the necessary time to do the job and to assure continuity.⁴¹

Time is also critical at the strategic level. In Vietnam, there was an established Army, but still the advisory effort to build capacity and capability in the ARVN required an extended period of time to show any progress. When involved in advising another nation's defense forces, the United States and the Army must be prepared to underwrite that commitment if the advisory effort is to have any chance of real success in addressing the long-term problems in building effective indigenous forces.

All of the aforementioned factors are critical, but perhaps there are two factors that had the greatest impact. It is important not to forget the South Vietnamese role in this process. In the case of Vietnam, the raw material from which the South Vietnamese armed forces had to be built from—the VNA—was fatally flawed. As has been previously stated, the forces of the Republic of Vietnam suffered seriously from lack of leadership at all levels, but particularly among the ranks of its senior officers. Those in power failed to recognize the critical role of training and this contributed to a repeating cycle of poor training and poor combat effectiveness.⁴² US training advisors proved their professional competence in training foreign personnel and units in technical skills. However, they were less successful in advising in political-military matters because of their lack of background, training, and education.⁴³ One of the most serious failures in this area was the inability to build a strong and reliable leadership base in the ARVN. As one post-war report stated, “given the nature of the social base, the politicization of the military and the background of the military leaders, the odds for success [in the effort to build viable South Vietnamese military forces] were not good.”⁴⁴

Another key reason for the ultimate failure of the US training mission was the conscious decision to form the South Vietnamese forces in the image of US forces. This is a natural tendency when assisting an emerging nation to organize, equip, and train them in one’s own image, but it proves difficult to alter or reverse if the guiding premises prove to be faulty during the conflict.⁴⁵ Using American doctrine to organize and train the South Vietnamese forces made no allowance for Vietnamese culture or the Vietnamese way of war. This had an impact on the acceptability of the advice to the South Vietnamese and to their willingness to act on it.

Forming the ARVN in the American image had another impact that, in the long run, proved fatal for the ARVN. Trying to export the American way of war to Vietnam made them dependent on high levels of expensive and sophisticated American combat support, making lavish use of technology and firepower. When that support was withdrawn in 1973, the South Vietnamese found themselves unable to withstand the onslaught of the PAVN once the North Vietnamese launched their final offensive. As one post-war report observer, the ARVN, by 1975, had “forgotten how to walk” and “could longer afford to ride or fly.”⁴⁶ The ultimate outcome of this situation was the decisive defeat of the ARVN in the field and the demise of the Republic of Vietnam as a sovereign nation.

In conclusion, there are many lessons that can be drawn from the American training mission in Vietnam that can assist in the current train-

ing efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Vietnam example clearly demonstrates that external aid and advice, especially when based on misconceptions, cannot provide a client state the requisite leadership, determination, and cohesion to defeat a pervasive and sophisticated insurgency.⁴⁷ It was beyond the capacity of the US forces to impart to the South Vietnamese a sufficiently high level of morale and will to enable them to prevail in the end. US combat forces could hold the Viet Cong and PAVN at bay, but they would not be there forever. Perhaps the famous T. E. Lawrence said it best when discussing how to train indigenous forces: “Better they do it imperfectly than you do it perfectly, for it is their country, their war, and your time is limited.”⁴⁸ That was a lesson that became only too clear during America’s experience in Vietnam and it is just as true today.

Notes

1. FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2006), 6-1.
2. The First Indochina War began in 1946 and lasted until the French were defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.
3. BG James Lawton Collins, Jr. *Vietnam Studies, The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975), 1.
4. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, Fourth Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 51.
5. Quote from Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1983), 224.
6. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 2; Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years*, 228.
7. Andrew J. Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations, 1942-1976* (Washington, DC: United States Army, Center of Military History, 2006), 305.
8. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, vol. VI, *Asia and the Pacific* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1977), 159.
9. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 225.
10. Spector, 263.
11. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 12.
12. David M. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 24-27, 153.
13. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Omnibus Executive Summary*, (McLean, VA: BDM Corporation, April 1980), ii-12; Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 9.
14. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 15-16.
15. Cao Van Vien, Ngo Quang Truong, Dong Van Khuyen, Nguyen Duy Hinh, Tran Dinh Tho, Hoang Ngoc Lung, and Chu Xuan Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The US Adviser* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 28; Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years*, 295-302. In 1961, two new infantry divisions and a fourth corps headquarters would be activated to cope with the growing insurgent threat.
16. Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations*, 311.
17. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 16.
18. Collins, 8; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 321-324.
19. Gerald C. Hickey, *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, March 1965), v-xi.
20. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 75.
21. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vi-1; Collins, *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, v, 127.

22. HQ, USMACV, "Command History 1966," 30 June 1967, 452; Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1988), 145; Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 128.
23. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 145.
24. Clarke, 187.
25. Vien, Truong, Khuyen, Hinh, Tho, Lung, and Vien, *The US Adviser*, 8.
26. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vi-30; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 61.
27. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 289; Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 61.
28. Stuart A. Herrington, *Silence Was a Weapon: The Vietnam War in the Villages* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 191.
29. Vien, Truong, Khuyen, Hinh, Tho, Lung, and Vien, *The US Adviser*, 70; Clarke, *Advice and Support: the Final Years*, 63; *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vi-30.
30. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 295.
31. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 76.
32. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 369.
33. USMACV, "Command History, 1970," volume 2, vii-63 to vii-79.
34. The Civil Operations and Rural (originally Revolutionary) Development Support program was formed in 1967 to coordinate the US civil and military pacification programs. It was a unique military-civilian hybrid organization that fell under US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. For more information, see Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Westview Press, 1998).
35. Toczek, *The Battle of Ap Bac, Vietnam*, 155.
36. Hickey, *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart*, xii.
37. Hickey, 28.
38. Robert D. Ramsey III, *Advising Indigenous Forces: American Advisors in Korea, Vietnam, and El Salvador*, Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper No. 18. (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 59. This is an excellent and comprehensive study of three major American advisory efforts that provides a detailed discussion of specific lessons learned in each case.
39. Hickey, *The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart*, xii-xv.
40. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 293.
41. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vi-31.
42. Collins, *Vietnam Studies*, 124.
43. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vi-31.
44. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, ii-12.
45. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, ii-13.
46. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, ii-12.
47. *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam*, vi-7.
48. Quotation of T. E. Lawrence, by Col. E. F. Pelosky, USA Chief Army Division, in Defense Attache Office, US Embassy Saigon, "Army Division Final Report," Executive Summary, 18 June 1975, US Army Center of Military History.

ry. The quote was actually a paraphrase of Lawrence that originally appeared in an article titled “Twenty-Seven Articles,” by T. E. Lawrence which was first published in *The Arab Bulletin*, dated 20 August 1917. The article was reprinted in *Infantry* magazine in the November-December 2007 issue. The actual wording of the quote is: “Better the Arabs do it intolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are here to help them, not to win it for them.”

Chapter 2

More Flags

Free World Military Forces in Vietnam

The Vietnam War is generally thought to be a war in which American forces fought beside their South Vietnamese allies, without any outside assistance. In truth, more than 40 nations provided assistance of some type to the Republic of Vietnam in its struggle against the Communists. Five nations joined the United States in providing direct military assistance; they were the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. Four of these nations provided combat troops that fought alongside American and South Vietnamese soldiers in the field; the Philippines provided a military civic action battalion that supported the South Vietnamese forces in Tay Ninh Province. The purpose of this paper is to examine the events that led to the commitment of what became known as Free World Military Forces in Vietnam.

In order to understand why and how those nations who made up the Free World Military Forces became involved in Vietnam, one must first understand how the United States came to be in Southeast Asia. The US first became involved in Vietnam by supporting French forces against the Viet Minh during what became known as the First Indochina War. After the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and subsequently withdrew from Indochina, the United States picked up the gauntlet. The first US advisory troops were sent to Vietnam in 1954 and the American commitment grew steadily until 1965 when the first US combat troops were introduced into South Vietnam.

From the earliest days of American involvement in Southeast, US policy makers made certain assumptions about the conflict in Vietnam. As the Korean war had been perceived as a battle against North Korean and Chinese Communist aggression, US policy makers saw the war in Vietnam as yet another opportunity to combat Communist aggression. In Korea, the US had enlisted allies in the fight against Communism, thereby adding to the forces arrayed against the Communists and lending credibility to the American effort there. As retired Lt. Gen. Stanley R. Larsen wrote after the war, "It is not at all surprising that in the early sixties, when the nature of

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the US commitment to Vietnam was taking shape, the idea of multilateral aid was being considered.”¹

This idea can be traced to a 11 November 1961 memorandum to President John F. Kennedy from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara that noted the need for multilateral action. Rusk and McNamara wrote: “From the political point of view, both domestic and international, it would seem important to involve forces from other nations alongside of United States forces in Viet-Nam...Our position would be greatly strengthened if the introduction of forces could be taken as a SEATO [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization] action, accompanied by units of other SEATO countries.”² It was thought that such international participation would help in ameliorating any charges of American imperialism in Southeast Asia and help achieve the kind of consensus enjoyed by United Nations forces during the Korean War. However, nothing came of these early ideas at this time. President Kennedy’s focus was on Laos since the security situation in Vietnam did not look that acute at the time. However, by late 1963, the Laos question had been settled at least tentatively by the 1962 Geneva Accords and the situation in South Vietnam had grown increasingly unstable with the death of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem during a coup in early November.

Shortly thereafter, President Kennedy himself was assassinated. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, was left to deal with the growing crisis in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, he, too, would come to the conclusion that international support would be essential to providing credibility for American efforts in Southeast Asia. In the spring of 1964, Johnson launched an international appeal for “free nations” to come forth to support a beleaguered South Vietnam in its fight against communism. The president firmly believed that if it could be demonstrated that “free world” allies were banding together in Vietnam against the Communist forces, then the inevitable charge of American imperialism might be forestalled.³

At a news conference on 23 April 1964, Johnson publicly put forward this idea, saying that he anticipated that the United States would send more military aid to Saigon, but also said he hoped: “we would see some other flags in there, other nations...and that we could all unite in an attempt to stop the spread of communists in that area of the world, and the attempt to destroy freedom.”⁴

Some historians have suggested that the “More Flags” program was really the brain child of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, but there is little doubt that President Johnson, who had built his political career on com-

promise, achieving consensus, and coalition building, saw the value in Rusk's approach and made it his own; the search for international support would remain a priority until Johnson left office.

A week after the president made his comments at the press conference, the "More Flags" program was made official in a 1 May 1964 cable from Secretary of State Rusk to all of America's embassies worldwide. The message stated: "The United States Government has decided to call upon other nations of the Free World to express their support in the form of political and material contributions to the Vietnamese Government."⁵ Several countries were already providing technical assistance, development funds, and humanitarian aid, but Rusk instructed the American ambassadors to press their host governments for increased support if they were already contributing and firm commitments from those nations not yet contributing.

Rusk said, "The nature and amount of the contributions being sought are not for the present as significant as the fact that their being made."⁶ While not expressly stated, the idea was to get as many "flags" as possible to demonstrate international support not only for the Government of South Vietnam, but also for US policy in Southeast Asia. The most important factor was that an allied nation sent aid, any aid to South Vietnam, because by doing so, that country, *ipso facto*, showed it supported the US position there.⁷ Thus, the program to enlist aid for South Vietnam in its battle against communism would also contribute to the legitimacy of the US involvement and proof of international approval of America's Vietnam policy.

The first priority for enlisting aid for the South Vietnamese was aimed at the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization had served as a vehicle for the United States to ally itself with the government of South Vietnam and also provided potential allies for the war. SEATO membership included the United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, The Republic of the Philippines, Pakistan, and the United States. This was a disparate group, many of which had little in common except a fear of communism. Vietnam's relationship to the treaty was a protocol state, the same status conferred upon Laos and Cambodia; protection was offered to these states in a protocol to the treaty.

The diverse makeup of SEATO and the fact that the members each had their own perception of the communist threat made it virtually impossible for its members to take concerted action. The flags of SEATO were

not war banners. Thus, the appeal based on the SEATO Treaty did not automatically trigger a response by member nations. Many of the member nations declined active participation with the US because their domestic situations ruled against such involvement. According to one study, the failure of most of the SEATO nations to respond to the US call for “more flags” suggests that the majority of the member nations did not consider the protocol state of South Vietnam to be worth the political or military risk of committing combat forces on its behalf.⁸

In a memorandum dated 25 May 1964, McGeorge Bundy, Presidential Assistant for National Security Affairs, recommended that a high-level conference be called to consult with SEATO allies in order to obtain specific support commitments. However, the proposed conference never took place and this was the last attempt to solicit support under the SEATO umbrella. Ultimately, the Treaty itself proved faulty and the organization was ineffective; therefore, the requested support was not forthcoming from most of the treaty members. Although the US effort to enlist third-country participation in Vietnam would still be mounted under the titular auspices of SEATO, it was, as one of President Johnson’s advisers later described as “a very shaky vehicle indeed.”⁹

Rusk’s initial call for “more flags” did not produce much results. In a 2 July 1964, circular telegram from the President to US ambassadors around the world, a clearly frustrated Johnson wrote, “I am gravely disappointed by the inadequacy of the actions of our friends and allies in response to our request that they share the burden of Free World responsibility in Viet Nam. It has now been nine weeks since the Secretary of State instructed your Embassy to seek assistance from the Government to which you are accredited. While the tenor of the Government’s verbal response has indicated sympathy, the actual performance does not demonstrate that they recognize their share of this responsibility or that they realize how significant we consider it that they should discharge that responsibility.” He continued, “I am charging you personally with the responsibility of seeing to it that the Government to which you are accredited understands how seriously we view the challenge to freedom in Viet Nam and how heavy the burden of responsibility for defending that freedom falls on those governments who possess freedom in their own rights.” He closed by saying, “I hope to see evidence of your success in the very near future.”¹⁰

In response, US ambassadors throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America renewed their efforts in trying to persuade countries to pitch in and help South Vietnam with development funds, medical and engineering advisers, and food. This early effort was not targeted on securing

foreign combat troops, but that would change with time. The normal procedure was for the American embassies to solicit aid from their host countries in accordance with a list of desired aid prepared by Headquarters Military Assistance Command Vietnam. When a country agreed to provide some assistance, the US government then informed the South Vietnamese government, which in turn would make a formal request for aid from that country.

Despite the diplomatic efforts of the US ambassadors, only 15 countries responded to the initial American request. Only six of the responding nations offered any significant help; these nations included South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Nationalist China and this was largely nonmilitary aid. The “More Flags” program was obviously not coming anywhere near what Johnson expected from it.

On 1 December 1964, Johnson convened a meeting of his closest advisors in the White House. At this meeting, the discussion centered around how to best achieve the US objectives in Vietnam. It was agreed that every effort would be expended to end North Vietnam’s support of Viet Cong operations in South Vietnam; to re-establish an independent and secure South Vietnam; and to maintain the security of other non-Communist nations in Southeast.¹¹ These objectives portended an increase in US commitment to the war. If anything, this led to a commensurate increase in the effort to enlist international support for South Vietnam and US policies in Southeast Asia.

During the meeting, the President stressed securing “assistance for the GVN [Government of Vietnam] and for our efforts on its behalf from our allies.”¹² He expressed his continued dissatisfaction with the “More Flags” program and charged his advisors to develop a new plan to increase international participation.

In subsequent discussions, the decision was made not to invoke SEATO, but rather to arrange international assistance for South Vietnam purely on a bilateral basis with several “key allies,” to include Great Britain, Thailand, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. It was decided to ask Thailand to provide military support to South Vietnam, as well as intensify its own counterinsurgency efforts in Thailand. British Prime Minister J. Harold Wilson was to be briefed on the situation and asked for support. William P. Bundy of the State Department would speak to Australia and New Zealand about the possibility of sending small combat units when and if the United States moved to the second phase of its strategy of increasing military pressure against the Communists.¹³ The Philippines were

to be asked for a commitment of approximately 1,800 men. The meeting closed with an agreement to explore any and all possibilities for more outside aid. This meeting and the agreements reached marked a turning point in the “More Flags” program; from that point on, the effort to seek international support for South Vietnam shifted from securing primarily humanitarian and economic aid to obtaining military related aid and ultimately combat troops that would fight alongside South Vietnamese and American soldiers.

Realizing that getting other nations to commit combat forces in South Vietnam would be a difficult sell, Johnson knew that something had to be done to “sweeten the pot” in order to entice those nations who might otherwise not want to get involved. On 15 December 1964, the president directed the State Department to notify America’s allies that the United States would pay the entire cost of any free world military aid commitment to South Vietnam. As Robert Blackburn said, “If Lyndon Johnson, using ideological arguments and diplomatic pressures, could not convince other countries to adopt America’s Vietnam policy as their own, he would now attempt to bribe them into doing so.”¹⁴ Still, there was no immediate response from most of America’s allies and only the Philippine, Korean, and Nationalist Chinese governments, who were already providing non-military aid, made it known through diplomatic channels that they might consider providing military assistance to South Vietnam. Therefore, the attempt to buy support did not have the desired results; not one previously uncommitted country chose to offer assistance.

It must be noted at this point that the effort to enlist allies for South Vietnam was from the beginning an American initiative. While President Johnson actively courted outside support to help fight the war, the South Vietnamese government was decidedly ambivalent about the whole matter. In a meeting in Washington, the Secretary of state impressed upon the visiting Vietnamese foreign minister “the absolute necessity that his Government take more active measures to obtain Third Nation assistance.”¹⁵

According to Chester Cooper, former director of Asian affairs for the White House, the US quest for more flags had gotten off to a slow start in late 1964 because it required “the application of considerable pressure for Washington to elicit any meaningful commitments” from other nations, but also because of the “lassitude, even disinterest of the Saigon government,” which was too preoccupied with the continuing internal political turmoil. Moreover, Cooper asserts, “Saigon appeared to believe that the program was a public relations campaign directed at the American people.”¹⁶

Part of the South Vietnamese attitude in this matter could be traced back to Vietnamese culture and history. The Vietnamese people had struggled for a thousand years to repel foreign invaders who wanted to carve a national identity for themselves among the diverse peoples of the Indochinese peninsula and the South Vietnamese were less than excited about inviting more foreign troops to their land. Consequently, from the very beginning of the “More Flags” program, requests for aid for South Vietnam would originate from Washington, not from Saigon, which merely went along with Washington’s actions. Thus, according to Cooper, this left “Washington to play the role of supplicant in the quest for Free World support.”¹⁷

Despite Saigon’s ambivalence, the American effort to solicit Free World support received additional emphasis as the United States became more directly involved in the war in 1965. It became increasingly important to portray the war as not merely an American war, but rather one in which free nations banded together against the forces of Communism. Accordingly, the Johnson administration continued to press its overseas missions for action on behalf of the “Many Flags” program. As a spur to their orders to continue pushing the program, Secretary of State Rusk sent a cable to all US embassies in January reaffirming the president’s undiminished personal interest in the program, saying: “President continues to place very high priority on obtaining broadest possible Free World support for South Viet-Nam.”¹⁸

Even as the President and the Joint Chiefs discussed the deployment of a Marine expeditionary brigade to Da Nang, there was renewed talk about securing combat troops from other nations. In late February 1965, the Joint Chiefs recommended the deployment of a Republic of Korea Army division for counterinsurgency and base security operations. The Chiefs acknowledged two considerations that would be applicable to all allied forces deployed to South Vietnam. The first was how the force would be supported logistically and the second addressed command and control relationships.

With the first US Marine battalion on its way to Da Nang, the State Department requested Ambassador Maxwell Taylor’s view on the advisability of forming an international combat force in South Vietnam. Taylor had already expressed reservations about sending Marines to Da Nang, stating that he felt that such an approach might encourage the government of Vietnam to let the US government assume an even greater share of the burden. Likewise, he was not enthusiastic about soliciting foreign troops for Vietnam. However, as the Johnson administration

moved toward full-scale deployment of US troops to Vietnam, the motivation to broaden the international nature of the forces confronting the Communists only increased.

In a high-level policy meeting at the White House on 1 April 1965, there was much discussion about increasing US troop levels in Vietnam. At the same time, it was agreed that the possibility of deploying third-country allied troops in combat roles should be the object of “urgent exploration.”¹⁹ The decision was made to solicit combat troops from Australia and New Zealand.

There was much discussion over the advisability of obtaining troops from the Republic of Korea, which had already indicated a willingness to send troops. The South Vietnamese had expressed some reluctance in having the Koreans in South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the decision was made to secure concurrence and cooperation from Saigon on possible contributions from other countries, including South Korea.

On 3 April, a report from Gen. William Westmoreland, senior US commander in South Vietnam, added additional impetus to the decision to both send US forces and to secure allied troops. Westmoreland reported that recent evidence had revealed that elements of the 325th Division of the People’s Army of Vietnam (what became known as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA) were operating in South Vietnam; this information meant that the nature of the war was changing and South Vietnam was now facing an invasion from the north.

The discussions and decisions that resulted from the 1 April meeting were codified on 6 April with the issuance of National Security Action Memorandum 328. This document charged the State Department to explore with the Korean, Australian, and New Zealand governments the possibility of providing combat forces to join the of US troops that were deploying to South Vietnam. This effort received additional impetus on April 15 when Washington sent Westmoreland a message that more US troops would be sent in view of the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam.

As the war escalated, so did Johnson’s call for allied assistance. He began pulling every lever at his command—the SEATO treaty, diplomatic pressure, personal entreaties, and the disposition of US foreign aid—to broaden allied involvement in South Vietnam. What had started out as a request for all kinds of aid now meant combat troops, not just economic and technical assistance. With nearly twenty years of allied “containment policy” against communism on the line in South Vietnam and international

opinions mounting against US policy in Southeast Asia, the president was understandably eager to avoid going it alone.²⁰

At a conference in Honolulu on 20 April 1965, the deployment of one Australian battalion at Vung Tau and one Korean regimental combat team of three battalions at Quang Ngai was approved. These forces had previously been offered by the two nations during separate negotiations. Ambassador Maxwell Taylor was directed to secure the concurrence of the government of South Vietnam. Later it was decided that the Republic of Korea would be asked for a division rather than a regimental combat team.

In early May, General Westmoreland set forth the procedures and command relationships that would govern the employment of allied forces when they arrived in-country. The Commander US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam would assume operational control of what would be called Free World Military Forces. These forces would retain national command identity, but accept operational control by senior US commanders. The United States in turn would provide administrative and logistical support.

While Westmoreland and his staff worked out the procedures for integrating the allied troops into the command structure, Australia and Korea prepared to send the troops that they had promised. The first to respond was Australia, which formed a task force around the nucleus of the Royal Australian Regiment. This task force arrived in June 1965 and was placed under the operational control of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade, operating from Bien Hoa in III Corps. Additional elements such as a 105-mm battery, a field engineer troop, two signal troops, and an air reconnaissance flight would bring the Australian commitment to 1,557 by the end of 1965.

Also in May 1965 the government of New Zealand decided to replace its engineer detachment, which had been sent earlier, with a combat force. In July, a 105-mm howitzer battery arrived in South Vietnam and was also placed under the 173rd to provide fire support for the Australian task force. By the end of the year, there were 119 Kiwi soldiers in South Vietnam. Ultimately, General Westmoreland wanted Australia and New Zealand to deploy a full Australian-New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) brigade during the next year.

The Republic of Korea had initially deployed a task force consisting of an army engineer battalion with associated support and self-defense troops that focused early efforts on civic action projects. The main body of this force had arrived in March 1965 and was based at Di An in Bien Hoa Province. In accordance with the decisions made at the Honolulu Con-

ference in April, the US requested additional South Korean forces and in August, Seoul agreed to the deployment of an Army infantry division, one Marine corps regiment, and one field support command troops. Accordingly, the ROK Capital Infantry Division and the 2nd Marine Brigade were completely deployed by early November 1965, a total of 20,620 soldiers. These forces were placed under the de facto operational control of US Commanding General Field Forces Vietnam and given security duties at Cam Ranh Bay and Qui Nhon.

By end of 1965, President Johnson, despite the arrival of the ANZACs and the Koreans, was still very unhappy with the general response to his repeated calls for allied support. There had been some commitments from several countries, but generally the response was much less than Johnson had hoped and in no way contributed toward the international consensus that he was trying to portray. As the war escalated, the appeal for support increasingly fell on deaf, and in many cases, hostile ears. As the unpopularity of the war grew in foreign countries, US embassy personnel could do little to convince most of America's allies to become involved in America's problems in South Vietnam. Fear of adverse domestic and world opinion specifically affected the decisions of many of the nations from which Johnson sought support.

Some current and former allies were more vocal in their response to Johnson's escalation of the war and subsequent requests for allied assistance. The French under Charles de Gaulle were extremely caustic toward US policy in Southeast Asia. Not only did they refuse to provide support, but ultimately the French condemned the United States for the war in Vietnam and effectively joined the Communist in branding the US a "neocolonial aggressor" in Southeast Asia.²¹

With no hope of swaying de Gaulle, Johnson turned his focus on Great Britain. British Prime Minister Harold Wilson had supported the US position in South Vietnam in the early days. However, as the war went along, the British became less and less enthralled with Johnson's escalation of the war. Nevertheless, Johnson, wanting desperately to avoid any suggestion that the US was waging a "colonial war," pressed Wilson for a British troop commitment in Vietnam. Saying he would settle for a "company of bagpipers," he declared that there should be a contingent of three to four hundred Britons in Vietnam and a British aircraft squadron or two.²² Such was not to be the case. Wilson, although still supportive of US aims in Vietnam, had to consider a mounting anti-war sentiment at home and did not think it was prudent for his nation to become mired in the war there. Additionally, he, like many of America's

allies in Europe, was concerned that the United States was becoming obsessed with the war in Vietnam to the exclusion of its commitments in Europe. The British Prime Minister would soon find his own political position at peril because of his support of Johnson and thus any hope of assistance in Vietnam from Great Britain was lost.

Johnson had earlier asked for support from the Federal Republic of Germany. The Germans responded with a grant of \$40 million in aid for the South Vietnamese, emphasizing complete support for US policy in Vietnam. This aid and such public pronouncements were received well in Washington, but the truth of the situation was much more complex. While Germany supported the US attempt to stem the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, there were many in the Bonn government who were, like the British, very worried about the United States becoming so weakened by the war in Vietnam that it would not be able to fulfill its European defense obligations. As far as sending troops outside Germany, this was still a sensitive issue that was forbidden by the Federal constitution.

Having gotten little in the way of real support from his European allies, Johnson renewed the campaign for “More Flags” among America’s Asian and Pacific friends. Thailand had long been closely monitoring the situation in Vietnam, realizing that the conflict had potential for spilling over into their own country by way of Cambodia. They had first sent troops to South Vietnam in 1964 in the form of a 16-man Royal Thai Air Force contingent. Johnson was not happy with this level of Thai support and wrote Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn requesting that his country find some way to increase the level of combat support to South Vietnam. It was imperative for Johnson to have more Asian representation to his “many flags” program to prove to the American public that the program was more than a political charade. Additionally, the addition of more troops from Thailand and other nations would help offset Westmoreland’s spiraling requests for additional US forces to fight the war.

In December 1965, the Thai government announced that it was considering sending an 800-man combat battalion to South Vietnam. More than 5,000 Thais volunteered to fill the force. However, the Thai government told Washington that the cost for sending this battalion would be that the US would fund, equip, and supply the force. The US agreed and on 17 February 1966, the Royal Thai Military Assistance Group Vietnam was activated in South Vietnam with the Thai Air Force contingent becoming a subordinate element of that group. Over the years, the Thai commitment in Vietnam, at the continual requests of the US government, would grow to over 11,000

troops. It would cost the United States approximately \$50 million annually to train, equip, and supply the Thai units in Vietnam.²³

The US also asked the Philippines to supply troops and the response and resultant costs mirrored those experienced with securing Thai forces. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, who agreed to send a 1,500-man engineer unit to South Vietnam, was motivated as much by the desire for financial aid for his country as by the concern for the Vietnamese. In return for sending the Philippine troops, the US military assistance program not only paid for the Philippine force, but also granted Marcos several types of military aid, much of it for use in the Philippines itself rather than in South Vietnam. By mid-October 1966, the 2,000-man 1st Philippine Civic Action Group Vietnam was established at a base camp on the outskirts of Tay Ninh City. This force consisted of an engineer construction battalion, medical and rural community development teams, a security battalion, a field artillery battery, and logistics and headquarters element. The Philippine force would cost the United States \$39 million between 1967 and 1969.

As efforts to enlist additional nations failed to reap any meaningful results, the Johnson administration focused on getting those allies already in Vietnam to increase their commitments. The Australian commitment, at Washington's urging, grew from one battalion to two and included numerous headquarters, support, and aviation units. Additional troop deployments and the arrival of RAAF C-130 Hercules air transports swelled the Australian contingent to its peak in October 1967 when it numbered over 8,000 troops in South Vietnam. Over time, in response to American requests, the New Zealand commitment grew to approximately one thousand combat and artillery support troops. Unlike Thailand and the Philippines, both Australia and New Zealand bore the costs of maintaining their forces in South Vietnam themselves. These two nations were very concerned that a Communist victory in Vietnam might have an impact on the rest of Southeast Asia and the western Pacific. Prime Minister Keith Holyoake of New Zealand said, "South Vietnam is something of a test case in Asia. If the Communists have their war there, they will move on to probe elsewhere, in Thailand, Malaysia, and farther west. Every Communist step forward is a step closer to Australia and New Zealand."²⁴ The Australian leadership agreed with Holyoake, and despite growing annoyance with the war at home, both Australia and New Zealand maintained a strong presence in South Vietnam right up until the end of the American phase of the war.

The Johnson administration also convinced South Korea to increase its commitment and ultimately the total number of Korean troops reached almost 50,000. This was an important commitment because Korea was an

Asian nation that itself had repulsed Communist aggression with international assistance. South Korean President Chung Hee Park proudly explained that his country's participation in South Vietnam "would not only solidify our national security but also contribute toward strengthening the anti-Communist front of the Free World."²⁵

Despite Park's proclamation, South Korea's motivation was not entirely altruistic. The material cost of South Korean participation in the war was paid by the United States. It amounted to \$1 billion from 1965 to 1970. Additionally, the United States gave South Korea \$150 million in development loans and \$600 million in profits from military procurement, contracts for services, and construction projects.

Although Johnson never totally gave up on his effort to enlist other international participation in the war, his decision to bomb North Vietnam in June 1966 effectively ended any hope of widening the allied effort. The time of the greatest buildup was during fiscal year 1966, after which there was a leveling off period with a steady decrease in the number of Free World Military Forces as the war went on. When Richard Nixon assumed office and began the drawdown of US troops, the members of the Free World Military Forces also began to withdraw their troops from South Vietnam.

During the war, thousands of Australians, New Zealanders, Koreans, Thais, and Filipinos fought alongside American and South Vietnamese troops. Total casualties suffered in Vietnam by Free World Military Forces was 5,241, of which 4,407 were Korean and 475 were from Australia and New Zealand.²⁶ There is no doubt that these forces contributed to the overall allied war effort, but Lyndon Johnson's dream of an international consensus supporting US presence and aims in South Vietnam never materialized, despite an inordinate amount of effort to make it so. The international response to the continued US presence in South Vietnam, the mounting unpopularity of the war around the world, and Saigon's ambivalence doomed Johnson's efforts. Ultimately, the war would remain America's war.

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Chapter 3

Operation JUNCTION CITY

Finding, Fixing, and Finishing an Elusive Enemy in a Counterinsurgency Environment, Vietnam, 1967

Operation JUNCTION CITY was a massive two and one-half month sweep of War Zone C aimed at opening the area for continued clearing operations which would permanently eliminate a major enemy sanctuary area. The operation was designed to find the enemy, fix him in place, and finish him so that pacification efforts could go forth in the area. JUNCTION CITY was an excellent example of force generation and the use of shaping operations to influence the battlefield. However, it also demonstrated the difficulties in conducting counterinsurgency operations against an enemy that included both guerrillas and main force units who both enjoyed ready access to cross-border sanctuaries. In the end, the operation achieved some significant results in terms of enemy killed and equipment and supplies captured or destroyed. General Bernard W. Rogers, the 1st Infantry Division's assistant division commander, claimed that JUNCTION CITY was a "turning point" in the war, but the operation, despite its success at the tactical level, was more closely akin to a staircase in what General Dave Palmer characterized as "an escalating military stalemate."¹ In the end, the enemy proved difficult to find, fix, and finish.

The operation, which began on 22 February 1967, was designed to root out the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Headquarters and cripple the 9th Viet Cong Division. Under the control of II Field Forces, Vietnam (IIFV), about 35,000 men were deployed in the field during various stages of the operation. When it was launched, it was the largest operation of the war to that point in time.

US ground combat forces were first committed in Vietnam in March 1965 when the 9th Marines landed at Da Nang. The Marines were followed by the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 1st Infantry Division, the 101st Airborne Division, and the 1st Cavalry Division. By the end of 1965, there were more than 184,000 US ground troops in Vietnam.

The year 1966 was a period of accelerated build-up and marked the beginning of major offensive operations by US and South Vietnamese

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forces. By 1967, the focus of US combat operations was to find and destroy VC and PAVN forces in the field in a war of attrition. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) was hindered by policy constraints which denied him the authority to strike enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. He was limited to waging a strategic defensive within friendly borders. To prevail in such a contest, Westmoreland determined that he could win only if he made the war so costly that Hanoi called its troops home and abandoned its attempt to reunify Vietnam under communist control.² Accordingly, while the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was concerned with protecting and pacifying population centers, US and allied units sought to engage communist elements in the less settled areas near the western borders with Cambodia and Laos and in other insurgent strongholds throughout the South.³ These operations generally took the form of search and destroy attacks conducted away from large populated areas and in localities where the enemy was strong. They entailed violent assault by infantry and armor forces, capitalized on allied airmobility, and, with the use of heavy supporting fires, sought to find, fix, and destroy the enemy and his base areas.⁴

As the number of Army combat forces in Vietnam grew larger, General Westmoreland established two corps-level commands under MACV.⁵ I Field Force, Vietnam (IFFV) was responsible for II Corps Tactical Zone (the Central Highlands) and II Field Force, Vietnam (IIFV) was responsible for III Corps Tactical Zone (the area bounded by the Central Highlands on the north and the Mekong Delta on the south). Reporting directly to the MACV commander, the field force commanders were the senior Army tactical commanders in their respective areas of responsibility.

Lt. Gen. Jonathan O. Seaman assumed command of II Field Force Vietnam in March 1966. Seaman was a 1934 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and served in World War II in both the European and Pacific theaters. Headquartered at Long Binh, II Field Force Vietnam was activated on 15 March 1966, becoming the largest corps-level command in Vietnam and one of the largest in Army history. As the commander of IIFV, Lieutenant General Seaman was responsible for US forces within III Corps Tactical Zone, an area of operations that included the eleven provinces surrounding Saigon. Seaman's area of responsibility contained major VC base areas northeast and northwest of Saigon, including War Zones C and D, the Iron Triangle, and the Boi Loi Woods. In addition, he was also responsible for defending the main enemy avenues of approach from Cambodia that directly threatened Saigon, the capital city

of the Republic of Vietnam. Lieutenant General Seaman was very familiar with the area, because before he assumed command of IIFV, he commanded the 1st Infantry Division, which had operated in III Corps Tactical Zone since its arrival in Vietnam in July 1965.

By this point in the war, US and South Vietnamese forces were dealing with a hybrid threat. They had to contend with the externally supported insurgency, but they also had to deal with main force VC and North Vietnamese units in a more conventional context. Based on MACV priorities, Lieutenant General Seaman focused his efforts on the latter, while leaving the insurgency and pacification effort in his area of operation to the ARVN and South Vietnamese militia forces, who were better equipped to deal with spreading Saigon's influence among their own people.

Seaman was most concerned with the threat that the main force VC and North Vietnamese units, operating out of sanctuaries in Cambodia and the base areas previously mentioned, posed for Saigon. He had extensive forces at his disposal, but he also had a very large area of responsibility. Rather than sit back in a defensive role and let the enemy come to him, he wanted to take the war to the enemy where they were strongest. The problem, as he had learned only too well during his time in command of the Big Red One, was that it was difficult to bring the battle to the enemy on anything but their terms. Given the restriction against crossing into Cambodia, the key to success against the main enemy forces was to isolate them in their base areas inside Vietnam and preclude their escape to Cambodia once the battle was joined. Given the vastness of the area of operations and its proximity to the border, this was a continual problem.

In May 1966, with these challenges in mind, Lieutenant General Seaman directed his staff to plan an operation to clear War Zone C and eliminate it as a base of enemy operations. Ideally, the operation would pave the way for follow-on pacification efforts to counter any residual influence of the Viet Cong in that area. The operation, which would be called JUNCTION CITY, was to commence in January 1967. While IIFV was planning for that operation, Lieutenant General Seaman also directed his staff to plan for a similar strike into the Iron Triangle, another key enemy base area which represented a "dagger pointed at the heart of Saigon."⁶ This operation would be called CEDAR FALLS.

For both operations, Seaman wanted to find, fix, and destroy the enemy forces in zone before they could escape to sanctuaries in Cambodia. As IIFV planning went forth on both plans, intelligence reports indicated a major buildup in the Iron Triangle area. Lieutenant General Seaman was

very concerned with the growing threat there since it was closer to Saigon than the objective area for JUNCTION CITY. A buildup in the Iron Triangle might portend an impending attack on the capital city. Accordingly, he recommended to Westmoreland that JUNCTION CITY be postponed in favor of CEDAR FALLS. Doing so would alleviate any immediate threat to Saigon and would also make an additional division available for JUNCTION CITY because the 9th Infantry Division was on its way over and would be assigned to IIFV upon arrival. Westmoreland agreed with Seaman's recommendation; CEDAR FALLS would go first and then the attack into War Zone C would be launched immediately after its completion.

The Iron Triangle was the name for an area about 300 square kilometers located some 30 kilometers northwest of Saigon that included the Thanh Dien Forestry Reserve. It had been a major staging area for the Viet Cong since the earliest days of the war. Lieutenant General Seaman defined the CEDAR FALLS mission as the destruction of enemy forces, installations, and infrastructure of the enemy in zone. Specifically, the operation would target the VC Military Region IV headquarters and the 272nd VC Regiment. Seaman wanted to eliminate the ability of the Iron Triangle to serve as a sanctuary and base of enemy operations. This included not only a direct assault against the VC in the area, but also the relocation of the civilian population and the destruction of their homes in order to deny support for the VC in the area. Once the civilians were evacuated, the region would be declared a "specified strike zone," meaning anyone subsequently found in the area would be considered an enemy combatant.⁷

Operation CEDAR FALLS began on 8 January 1967. It included two Army divisions, one light infantry and one paratroop brigade, and one armored cavalry regiment in addition to a number of South Vietnamese Army battalions—a total of 30,000 US and South Vietnamese troops. The plan called for a "hammer and anvil" operation in which part of the allied force assumed blocking positions as the "anvil," while the rest of the force was inserted throughout the area of operations to drive the enemy into the established blocking positions. At the same time, the entire area would be encircled by US troops to prevent the enemy from escaping. During the operation, the enemy proved to be very elusive, fleeing across the border into Cambodia or hiding in a complex system of tunnels that pervaded the area. There were no large scale engagements during the operation, which ended on 26 January 1967, but Allied troops engaged in several small scale fights and discovered a number of enemy supply caches. Concurrently, engineers were involved in jungle clearing operations and chemicals were used to defoliate parts of the area in order to deny the enemy a

sanctuary so close to Saigon. During the operation, the 5,987 inhabitants of the village of Ben Suc, which had long supported the VC, were rounded up for relocation and the village was destroyed. CEDAR FALLS resulted in 750 confirmed enemy soldiers killed and 213 captured.⁸ Additionally, a large amount of weapons, ammunition, rations, and other supplies were captured or destroyed. Friendly losses were 72 US soldiers killed in action (KIA) and 337 wounded in action (WIA).

From Seaman's and Westmoreland's perspective, CEDAR FALLS had been a resounding success. Seaman wrote that the operation "demonstrated the value of extended operations within VC controlled areas" and the enemy would now have to "re-evaluate the relative capabilities of their forces as opposed to ours."⁹ However, claims that "the Iron Triangle is no more" were grossly overblown. In reality, as soon as the US and South Vietnamese troops left the area, the VC quickly reoccupied their base areas. Additionally, CEDAR FALLS became a public relations nightmare following critical reporting of the forced evacuation of the residents of Ben Suc and the village's subsequent destruction.

Nevertheless, Generals Westmoreland and Seaman, believing that CEDAR FALLS was a step in the right direction and hoping to maintain momentum, subsequently launched Operation JUNCTION CITY. The objective area for the operation was War Zone C, a 50- by 30- mile flat, marshy area along the Cambodian border about 45 miles northwest of Saigon. The thousand-square-mile area was bounded by the Cambodian border to the north and west, while its eastern boundary ran parallel to Highway 13. It included portions of Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Binh Duong provinces. The area was of particular concern to both MACV and IIFV because of its location between Saigon and the Cambodian border and it had long provided a popular jumping off point for enemy forces and supplies infiltrating into Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Additionally, War Zone C was the normal operating area for the 9th VC Division, one of the enemy's best formations. War Zone C was also thought to contain the location of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the senior headquarters for all enemy operations in the southern half of South Vietnam.

The objective of JUNCTION CITY was to drive deep within War Zone C to find and destroy COSVN, while also seeking out and destroying the 9th VC Division and 101st NVA Regiment, another unit reported to be in the area. Additionally, all enemy base camps and installations within the area of operation were to be destroyed. Ultimately, Lieutenant General Seaman hoped not only to attrite enemy forces, but also to "pro-

vide a shield for revolutionary development in the area” in follow-on pacification efforts.¹⁰ As part of the operation, IIFV was to establish a Special Forces Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) camp and airfield at Prek Klok. The initial concept called for the objective area to be cordoned off by friendly forces, while additional allied forces would then attack into the cordoned area to destroy enemy forces, supply depots, and base camps caught in the trap.

The planning for JUNCTION CITY was complex due to the size of the area of operations and the number of units involved. One of the main problems for Lieutenant General Seaman and his planners was how to generate maximum combat power on the ground in the most rapid fashion. If sufficient combat power could not be generated throughout the area of operations quickly enough, the enemy could easily avoid combat and escape to sanctuaries across the border in Cambodia before they could be engaged, just as they had during CEDAR FALLS.

To conduct this operation, IIFV committed 35,000 allied troops, including elements of the 1st and 25th Infantry Divisions, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, a brigade from the 4th Infantry Divisions, as well as several ARVN units. Although the divisions and brigades had organic units assigned and in-country, commitments to missions in other areas prohibited some of the organic units from participating in the operation. Thus, the task organization for the beginning of the operation included the following:

- 1st Infantry Division
- 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division
- 3rd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division
- 173rd Airborne Brigade
- TF Wallace (ARVN)
- 25th Infantry Division
- 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division
- 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division
- 196th Light Infantry Brigade
- 11th ACR (-)
- TF Alpha (ARVN)

For this operation, IIFV had at its disposal a total of 22 maneuver battalions, fourteen artillery battalions, and three ARVN battalions. This

task organization facilitated task force operations in which combined arms operations at battalion and squadron level were commonplace.

Because of the size and scope of the operation, IIFV had to coordinate a major troop and logistical buildup that might give away the operation prematurely. Therefore, planning for the operation was conducted under strict security controls.

As the combat forces prepared for battle, Lieutenant General Seaman directed two deception operations to cover the movement of troops and supplies into areas adjacent to War Zone C. Operation GADSDEN was conducted by the 25th Infantry Division along the Cambodian border in the extreme western portion of the area, while Operation TUSN was conducted by the 1st Infantry Division in the area east of the Michelin rubber plantation.¹¹ Lieutenant General Seaman hoped that these shaping operations would serve two purposes; first, they would position the western and eastern blocking forces and hopefully they would cause the 9th VC Division to move its 271st and 272nd Regiments into the objective area for the operation to come.

The JUNCTION CITY planners devised a two-phased operation that used the same “hammer and anvil” approach that had been employed in Operation CEDAR FALLS, but on a much larger scale. The plan called for five US brigades to form a giant, inverted horseshoe-shaped cordon formed by blocking positions in the western half of War Zone C. Once the cordon was in place, other forces would attack north to drive the enemy into the blocking positions. The plan called for the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and the 196th Light Infantry Brigade to take up blocking positions in the west of the objective area along the Cambodian border, roughly four to five miles east of Highway 22 and Highway 246. The 1st Infantry Division would block in the north, along Highway 4. The 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division would seal off the eastern section. Once the blocking forces were in place, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment on the right and the 2nd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, on the left would sweep from the south into the giant inverted horseshoe. The idea was to push the enemy forces into the US blocking positions where they could be destroyed.

Since almost 250 helicopters were needed to move the eight infantry battalions under control of the 1st Infantry Division, the three battalions from the 173rd Airborne Brigade would conduct a combat parachute jump into their assigned blocking positions. Lieutenant General Seaman hoped to put the maximum number of troops on the ground in the least amount of

time before COSVN and the 9th VC Division could evacuate the area. The operation required timely deployments and tightly controlled movements to generate the required combat power and seal off the cordon. Fire support would be provided by 17 artillery battalions and over 4,000 close air support sorties. Airspace control and coordination over the objective area would be a large concern.

JUNCTION CITY began at 0700 hours on 22 February with the parachute drop by the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Some 840 paratroopers from the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, boarded 16 C-130 aircraft at Bien Hoa and parachuted into drop zones in northern Tay Ninh Province near Ca Tum, only seven miles from Cambodia.¹² This unopposed parachute landing was the only major US combat jump of the war.

Concurrently, 249 helicopters, in the largest single-day airmobile operation in the history of Army Aviation, inserted eight infantry battalions into the north blocking positions.¹³ Lieutenant General Seaman hoped that the simultaneous insertion of so many forces would surprise the enemy. However, the level of surprise was hard to ascertain; there was little contact initially.

The following day, the southern forces positioned along Highway 247 began sweeping north into the horseshoe. The 2nd Brigade, 25th Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (-) attacked against only light opposition; however, some tanks and APCs were damaged by mines and RPG fire. Both units began to uncover significant caches of enemy supplies and equipment, as well as numerous fortifications and base camp areas.¹⁴ At the same time, units operating on the periphery of the horseshoe discovered enemy base areas as they conducted patrols around their blocking positions. Contact with the enemy remained light, with enemy forces reported at squad size or smaller.¹⁵

On 24 February 1967, Lieutenant General Seaman sent a message to the Commanding Generals of the 1st and 25th Divisions directing them to conduct a thorough search of western War Zone C.¹⁶ The 2nd Brigade, 25th Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment were directed to continue their drives northward into the blocking positions. The attackers continued to encounter enemy base camps and supplies. Significant amounts of weapons, ammunition, rice and miscellaneous supplies were captured and/or destroyed.

On 28 February, elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade discovered the VC's Central Information Office, including an underground photographic laboratory complete with film. Shortly thereafter, a company from the 173rd made contact with an enemy company east of Katum. An intense engage-

ment followed in which casualties were high on both sides; 20 US paratroopers were killed and 28 wounded while the VC sustained 39 killed.

That same day, a company from 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, made contact with a well dug-in and concealed enemy force near the Prek Klok River. After pinning down the lead platoon with heavy fire, the VC initiated a ground assault which overran the American unit, killing or wounding nearly every soldier. The VC then turned their attention on the rest of the company and a bitter firefight ensued. Close air support was called in as reinforcements were directed to relieve the embattled company. Two companies were inserted by helicopter after several airstrikes, which finally forced the enemy to break contact. When the reinforcements linked up with the company, which had by now taken casualties of nearly 50 percent, they all began to move to an LZ for the night. An inspection of the battlefield the next morning revealed 144 enemy dead and 40 weapons. US casualties for this fight were also heavy, with 25 KIA and 28 wounded. An intelligence analysis of the contact later indicated that the first company had probably stumbled into an enemy staging area for a planned attack against convoy activity along Route 4.

For the next ten days, there were many daily contacts within the JUNCTION CITY area of operations, but most of them were platoon or smaller in size. Lieutenant General Seaman had hoped to find and engage larger enemy forces, but the enemy battalions, for the most part, avoided contact. During the course of the operation during this period, allied forces uncovered dozens of major base camps and captured enormous quantities of enemy equipment and supplies.

At this point, Lieutenant General Seaman decided to abandon his northern positions opposite the Cambodian border; he wanted to extend the search for the main enemy formations, which had so far proved very elusive. On 1 March, Seaman directed the 1st Infantry Division to move against what had been identified as the 101st Regiment and possibly COSVN's intelligence bureau, both thought to be southeast of Katum and east of Route 4. At the same time, he ordered the 25th Infantry Division to send at least half of its forces into an area known as the Elephant's Ear west of Highway 22, where intelligence reports indicated the 271st VC Regiment was located.

On 10 March, the 272nd VC Regiment attacked the 168th Engineer Battalion, which was building a Special Forces base camp near Prek Klok. The engineers were defended by the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry and the 2nd Battalion, 33rd Artillery. The enemy decision to again commit large elements against an American position was possibly prompted by the en-

trapment of an element of the COSVN in the pincer movement along the Cambodian border. A prisoner later indicated that the attack was a diversion to draw off allied forces which reportedly threatened the military staff section of COSVN.¹⁷

The attack began at 2208 hours with a heavy bombardment by 60, 82, and 120mm mortars. When the indirect fires were lifted, two VC battalions attacked the infantry from the east and southwest. At the same time, the VC launched a secondary attack against Artillery Base One. The infantry, with very effective close air support, held the perimeter against the main VC attack, but the artillery, firing their howitzers point blank into the attackers, eventually broke the attack and drove off the enemy. The next morning, 197 enemy KIA were found on the battlefield.

On 18 March, JUNCTION CITY entered Phase II, which focused on clearing the eastern sector of War Zone C. For this phase, Lieutenant General Seaman and IIFFV gained control of 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, and 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division. The 173rd Airborne Brigade was not scheduled to be part of Phase II, but at the urging of the 1st Infantry Division commander, the airborne brigade was subsequently retained and attached to the Big Red One. At the same time, the 3rd Brigade, 1st Division relinquished responsibility for the security of Prek Lok SF Camp and surrounding area to the 196th Light Infantry Brigade and departed the operation for another mission in support of revolutionary development operations elsewhere. During the course of Phase I, US forces had combed the area inside the horseshoe; 835 VC/NVA were reported killed, 15 were captured, and 264 individual and crew-served weapons were captured, along with enormous amounts of supplies and equipment.¹⁸ Seaman was disappointed that the results of Phase I had not been greater and that COSVN had not been found.

With the western portion of War Zone C cleared in Phase I, the plan for Phase II was to conduct search and destroy missions in the eastern portion of the area. Lieutenant General Seaman planned to continue to coordinate the operation, but he would allow the commanders of the 1st and 25th Division to operate independently within their respective assigned areas of operation. He hoped this would give the two commanders the necessary flexibility they needed to respond to developing situations in their respective assigned areas of responsibility. This approach resulted in several sharp battles.

During the night of 19 March, a troop of the 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry from the 9th Infantry Division was attacked in its defensive position at Bau Bang by the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 273rd VC Regiment. During the course of the intense battle that ensued, the cavalrymen but-

toned themselves up inside their armored personnel carriers while artillery inside the perimeter fired antipersonnel “beehive” rounds at the vehicles to sweep off the attackers.¹⁹ While the troop held on, the 5th Cavalry’s Troops B and C fought their way into the beleaguered perimeter to assist their comrades. Throughout the night, the US Air Force flew 87 close air support sorties under illumination to help turn back the attackers. Ultimately, the combined firepower of armored cavalry, supporting artillery, and close air support caused the enemy to break contact. The battle resulted in 227 enemy killed; US casualties included three killed and 63 wounded.

In the early morning hours of 21 March, at Fire Support Base (FSB) Gold near Suoi Tre, the 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery and the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry, from the 3rd Brigade, 4th Division, came under heavy attack by two Communist regiments, the 273rd from the 9th VC Division and the PAVN 16th Regiment (also known as the 70th Guards Regiment). Under cover of an intense, walking mortar barrage, approximately 2,500 enemy troops attacked, breaching FSB Gold’s defensive perimeter. The human wave attacks were backed up by a tremendous volume of RPG rockets, recoilless rifle shells, and automatic weapons fire. The hand-to-hand fighting was intense, but the defenders held on grimly, thanks in part to the large volume of effective close air support that was employed against the VC. At one point, the artillerymen fired “beehive” rounds directly into the attackers, but the attackers kept coming. As the battle wore on, the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry, fought its way into FSB Gold to join the beleaguered defenders. The battle continued into the daylight hours, when FSB Gold was finally relieved by elements of the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor. The 70-vehicle tank and mechanized infantry column completely shattered organized enemy resistance and the surviving attackers fled back into the jungle. General Hoang Cam, commander of 9th VC Division, later acknowledged that his forces had suffered heavy losses during the battle for Suoi Tre. Unfortunately, so had the defenders; 31 Americans lost their lives and 187 more were wounded.

On 24 March, Lieutenant General Seaman was succeeded by Lt. Gen. Bruce Palmer, Jr. as the commanding general of II Field Force, Vietnam. Palmer, based on the recommendations of his staff, decided that the search in southeastern War Zone C had run its course and was about to give the order to terminate operations in that sector when new intelligence revealed that the 271st Regiment was moving through the area toward Katum. Accordingly, Palmer ordered the 196th Light Infantry Brigade north to intercept them.²⁰ However, the VC regiment was moving so fast that when the 196th reached Katum, the enemy had already moved through the area to the east.

The 271st Regiment would subsequently be involved in the last major battle of JUNCTION CITY, which took place near Ap Gu at Landing Zone (LZ) George, located 23 miles north of Dau Tieng (Tri Tam) and only three miles from the Cambodian border. The 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Alexander M. Haig, had occupied LZ George on 26 March. Five days after occupying the LZ, Company B was moving east from the LZ when it became under heavy attack and was pinned down. Haig committed his A Company to come to aid of B Company. Both companies were able to withdraw to the defensive perimeter near the LZ, which had been reinforced by elements of the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry. In the early morning hours of 1 April, the 271st VC Regiment and the 1st VC Battalion of the 70th Guards attacked in force. On the northeast portion of the perimeter, defended by C Company, the enemy succeeded in breaching the perimeter, but the American troops pushed back until a combination of artillery, helicopter gunships, and close air support eventually drove off the attackers. During this battle, the US sustained 17 KIA, while 600 enemy soldiers were killed.

Although Operation JUNCTION CITY was originally planned to have only two phases, General Palmer, hoping to build on the success at Suoi Tre and Ap Gu, decided to extend the operation with a Phase III that kicked off on 15 April. A brigade task force of one mechanized battalion from the 25th Infantry Division and an ARVN battalion made constant sweeps through War Zone C searching for the enemy. At the same time, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade was released from the operational control of IIFV and sent north to I Corps Tactical Zone. Units from the 9th Infantry Division temporarily moved into the area vacated by the 196th. However, the Phase III sweeps turned up little. With almost no enemy contact made during this phase, the major friendly effort was directed toward upgrading and clearing roads, building bridges, and setting up the Prek Klok SF camp.

On 4 May 1967, General Palmer terminated Operation JUNCTION CITY. On the tactical level, Operation JUNCTION CITY was a success. Communist propaganda organs claimed that the operation had cost the US and ARVN more than 14,000 killed in action, as well as 800 armored vehicles destroyed and 119 artillery pieces captured. Actual totals included 218 killed and 1,576 wounded in action. Additionally, three tanks, four helicopters, five howitzers, and 21 armored personnel carriers were lost. IIFV claimed 2,728 enemy killed, with an undetermined number of wounded.²¹ The allied forces also seized 490 weapons, 850 tons of rations, 500,000 pages of documents, and more than 5,000 bunkers and other military structures destroyed.²²

When JUNCTION CITY was terminated on 14 May 1967, it had achieved a record as the most successful operation to that date in terms of confirmed enemy losses. MACV and IIFV claimed that all major objectives for the operation had been accomplished, with the exception of the location and destruction of COSVN. Despite the inability to eliminate the senior enemy headquarters, the consensus was that a turning point had been reached.²³

In retrospect, however, JUNCTION CITY failed to yield any long-term strategic advantage. In the end, the enemy was able to escape across the border into their Cambodian sanctuaries. The multiple assaults on the periphery of the horseshoe achieved tactical surprise, but by the end of D-Day, the shape and purpose of the cordon became clear to the enemy and they quickly dispersed. As one account stated, "It was a sheer physical impossibility to keep him [the enemy] from slipping away whenever he wished. The jungle was just too thick and too widespread to keep him from getting away."²⁴ There were some sharp battles on the periphery of the horseshoe, where allied forces inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy at Soui Tre and Ap Gu. Despite the destruction of some VC formations, the preponderance of the enemy, including the ever elusive COSVN headquarters escaped to fight another day. Gen. John Hay, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, explained several factors that contributed to this situation, which included the proximity of "a privileged sanctuary," the extreme difficulty in establishing "a seal with sufficient troop density to deny infiltration routes," and the difficulty in gaining complete surprise "as a result of extensive repositioning of troops and logistical support prior to D-Day."²⁵ While JUNCTION CITY was in progress, War Zone C had been effectively denied to the communists as a viable base and staging area, but II Field Force was unable to preclude enemy forces from escaping the trap that the planners had envisioned.

Brig. Gen. Rogers, the 1st Infantry Division's assistant division commander, described a more lasting shortcoming of the operation. "One of the discouraging features of both CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY," wrote Rogers, "was the fact that we had insufficient forces, either US or South Vietnamese, to permit us to continue to operate in the Iron Triangle and War Zone C and thereby prevent the Viet Cong from returning."²⁶ As historian Gregory Daddis points out, JUNCTION CITY was supposed to provide a "shield for revolutionary development," but there was no plan for American units to stay around to do that.²⁷

Thus, War Zone C was far from neutralized. Although three enemy regiments were shattered in the fighting, the losses were only temporary and they would be back in force in less than a year later. Nevertheless,

JUNCTION CITY had shown that the major VC operating and supply bases in South Vietnam were vulnerable to superior US firepower and mobility. As a result, the Communists moved their headquarters across the border into Cambodia. With the White House unwilling to approve the expansion of large-scale land operations across the border, American planners were left with little choice but to pursue a defensive campaign with the objective of wearing down the VC and PAVN through attrition.

While large, multi-division operations into enemy war zones like CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY produced some significant results in terms of keeping enemy main-force units at bay in their remote base areas, these operations left the heavily populated areas to the ARVN to handle. Westmoreland could not afford to keep substantial forces away from their bases more than a few months at a time without risking their own local security at those bases. When the US forces were pulled back from the more remote areas, the enemy reoccupied their base areas and began conducting operations again. IIFV, like its counterpart in the Central Highlands, did not have enough troops to protect its own base areas and the populated areas and, at the same time, generate enough combat power to drive the enemy out of their operating areas. Consequently, it could not occupy those areas to deny them to the enemy in any permanent way. Ten days after JUNCTION CITY, War Zone C was “literally crawling with what appeared to be Viet Cong.”²⁸ The three regiments of the 9th VC Division were rated combat ineffective at the termination of the operation, but the enemy repeatedly demonstrated an ability to replace his losses.²⁹

Operation JUNCTION CITY demonstrates the difficulty of dealing with a combat situation that includes both insurgents and enemy conventional forces in counterinsurgency operations. The key to such operations is to “clear, hold, and build,” but often there is only enough combat power to clear the area in question, but not to hold it. This situation is made infinitely more difficult when there are inviolate sanctuaries across an international border which friendly forces cannot cross to pursue the enemy. The result in this case was that areas like the Iron Triangle and War Zone C remained enemy strongholds that were repeatedly fought over from the time of CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY through to the end of the fighting in 1975.³⁰ Operations like JUNCTION CITY were impressive in size and scope, but they achieved no lasting strategic benefit, as Brig. Gen. John S. Brown, observed “as long as the communists had the means and will to continue such an uneven contest.”³¹ In the end, the result was a bloody stalemate as casualties continued to mount on both sides.

Notes

1. Bernard W. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1971), v; Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1978), 108.
2. Palmer, 3.
3. US allies in South Vietnam were known as Free World Military Forces, which included Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Korea, and the Philippines.
4. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 134.
5. In the north, III Marine Amphibious Force controlled all US forces in I Corps Tactical Zone, the five provinces south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).
6. Stafford T. Thomas, "Operation Cedar Falls," in James S. Olson, *Dictionary of the Vietnam War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 328; Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 15.
7. George L. MacGarrigle, *The United States Army in Vietnam: Taking the Offensive, October 1966 to October 1967* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1998), 97.
8. Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 106; Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 74.
9. Quote in Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 77.
10. US Grand Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, *Report on the War in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1969), 133-134.
11. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 84-85.
12. Project CHECO Report: Operation JUNCTION CITY, Headquarters PACAF, 17 November 1967, 2.
13. Combat Operation After Action Report (COAAR), Operation Junction City, HQ II Field Force Vietnam, 9 August 1967, 22; *MACV Command History, 1967*, Vol. I, 390.
14. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 103.
15. After Action Report (AAR), Operation Junction City, HQ 1st Infantry Division (1st Brigade Attachment), 8 May 1967, 3.
16. COAAR, II Field Force, 21.
17. CHECO Report, 8.
18. COAAR, II Field Force 24.
19. These rounds were a version of canister grapeshot rounds, each containing 8,000 steel dart-like flechettes.
20. MacGarrigle, *Taking the Offensive*, 136.
21. CHECO Report, 37.
22. COAAR, II Field Force, 34.
23. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 153.
24. Rogers, 153.
25. Rogers, 153.
26. Rogers, 158.
27. Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 222n65.

28. Rogers, *Cedar Falls-Junction City*, 158.

29. CHECO Report, 39.

30. In 1972, the 9th VC Division, by then made up primarily of North Vietnamese regular soldiers, played a major role in the siege of An Loc during the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of that year.

31. Brig. Gen. John S. Brown, "Lopsided Tactical Win, Strategic Question Mark," *Army*, January 2017, 70.

Chapter 4

The 1968 Tet Offensive

Turning Point in the Vietnam War

The 1968 Tet Offensive proved to be the turning point of the Vietnam War and its effects were far-reaching. Despite the fact that the Communists were soundly defeated at the tactical level, the Tet Offensive resulted in a great psychological victory for the other side at the strategic level that set into motion the events that would lead to Richard Nixon's election, the long and bloody US withdrawal from Southeast Asia, and ultimately to the fall of South Vietnam.

To understand how and why this happened, one must first go back to the previous year. After more than two years of bitter fighting, many Americans believed that the war had degenerated into a bloody stalemate.¹ Gen. William Westmoreland, senior US commander in Vietnam, did not see it that way and by his primary metric—the body count—the US and allied forces were making significant headway against the enemy on the battlefield. At a meeting of his senior officers in October 1967, he said, “Our strategy has achieved success as attested by the fact that the enemy has not won a single tactical victory of significance during the past year. His guerrilla ranks have been progressively eroded and a number of his main force units have been destroyed.”²

At home, however, the prevailing perception of the war was decidedly different. A public opinion poll in September 1967 showed that for the first time more Americans opposed the war than supported it.³ By this point, President Lyndon Johnson's popularity had dropped to below 40 percent, a new low since he had first entered office.

Anti-war protests continued to grow in size; in October 1967, 35,000 demonstrators marched on the Pentagon. It was clear that the American public was becoming increasingly polarized over the war. Even many of those who supported the war effort were dissatisfied with the president's inability to craft a winning strategy in Southeast Asia.

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The president, sensing that his public support had been shaken by the clamor of the anti-war faction and facing reelection in 1968, could ill afford to ignore the growing restlessness of the electorate. Concerned about public opinion, Johnson ordered a media blitz to convince the American people that the war was being won and that administration policies were succeeding in Southeast Asia. In what became known as the “Success Campaign,” administration officials took every opportunity to try to repudiate the perception that the war was stalemated and repeatedly stressed that progress was being made. As part of this effort, the president called Westmoreland home in mid-November 1967 to make the administration’s case. In a number of venues, the general did just that; upon his arrival at Andrews Air Force Base, Westmoreland told waiting reporters, “I have never been more encouraged in the four years that I have been in Vietnam. We are making real progress.”⁴

Two days later, in a television interview with Steve Rowan of CBS News, he said that he thought American troops could begin to withdraw “within two years or less.”⁵ During an address at the National Press Club, he claimed that “we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view.” He closed his remarks there by saying, “It [victory] lies within our grasp—the enemy’s hopes are dim. With your support we will give you a success that will impact not only on South Vietnam, but on every emerging nation in the world.”⁶ Westmoreland later said that he was concerned at the time about fulfilling the public relations task, but he nevertheless gave a positive, upbeat account of how things were going in the war, clearly believing that a corner had been turned. His comments helped build expectations among the American people that would soon be dashed in the most dramatic fashion.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, even as Westmoreland spoke, the Communists were finalizing preparations for a countrywide offensive designed to break the stalemate and “liberate” South Vietnam. The decision to launch the general offensive was the result of years of internal struggle and heated debates over both policy and military strategy within the Communist camp. These struggles were principally over the timing involved in shifting from a protracted war toward a more decisive approach to winning the war. By this time, Le Duan, a one-time organizer of the resistance in the South and by 1967 secretary-general of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi, had become critical of the protracted war strategy. The war was not going as well as the Communists hoped, chiefly because the commitment of large numbers of American troops had blunted North Vietnamese infiltration and imposed heavy casualties in the South. To Le Duan, the aggressive

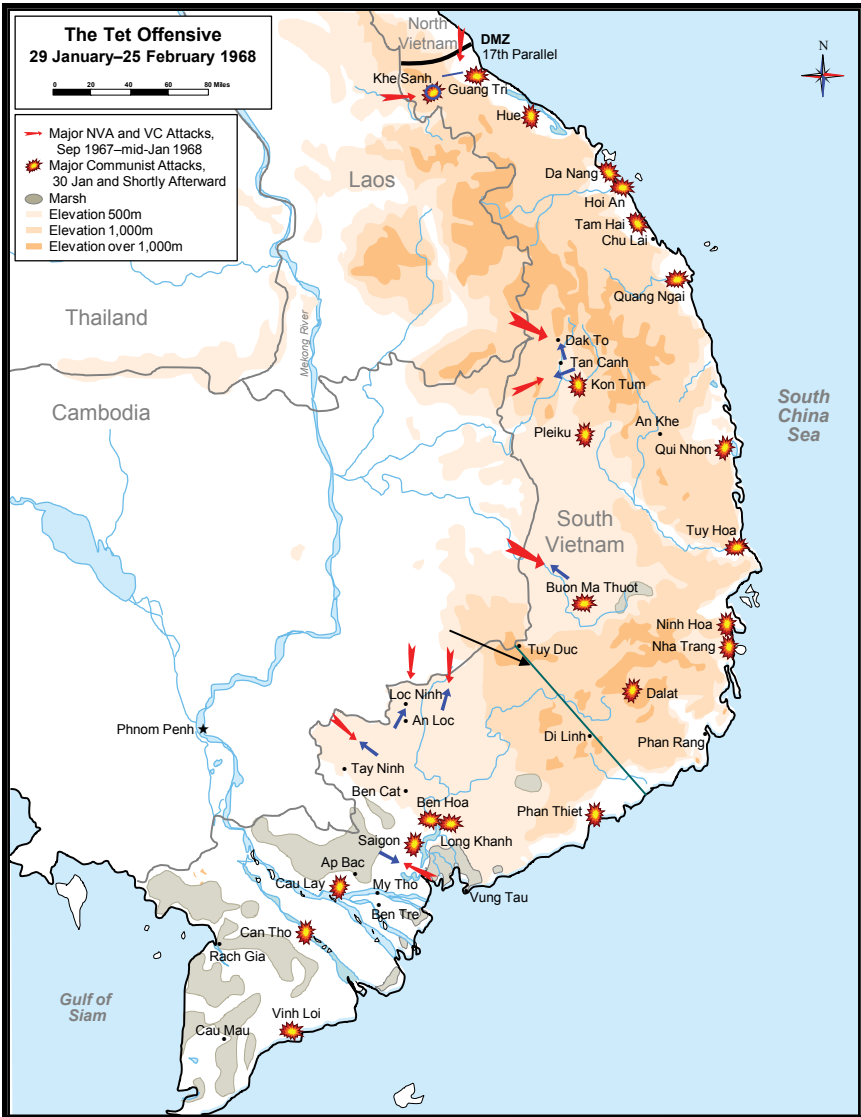


Figure 4.1. The Tet Offensive, 1968. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

American tactics during the early part of 1967 did not bode well for the successful continuation of a protracted approach to prosecuting the war. However two areas of potential allied weakness had emerged. The South Vietnamese Army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam or ARVN) still had significant problems and it was clear that US public opinion in support of the war had begun to waiver. For these reasons, Le Duan advocated a more aggressive strategy to bring the war to an earlier conclusion.

Le Duan was joined by a number of supporters, chief among those being Gen. Nguyen Chi Thanh, head of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the senior military headquarters in the southern half of South Vietnam. Thanh joined Le Duan in arguing for a more aggressive strategy.⁷ He called for a massive general offensive against the cities of South Vietnam using local guerrillas, main force VC, and North Vietnamese regulars (People's Army of Vietnam or PAVN). Taking the opposite stance was Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who believed that the timing was not right for a general offensive. In the end, Le Duan and Nguyen Chi Thanh prevailed, and the more cautious proponents of protracted war were defeated by those who advocated a nationwide general offensive.⁸ The 13th Plenum in April 1967 passed Resolution 13 which called for a "spontaneous uprising in order to win a decisive victory in the shortest possible time."⁹ As the discussions about the new offensive continued, Nguyen Chi Thanh died of a heart attack, but the planning went forward. Giap was out on medical leave and departed for Hungary. The responsibility for planning the offensive fell to Giap's deputy, Gen. Van Tien Dung.

With the new offensive, the Communists hoped to gain a decisive victory. The plan for the new offensive, dubbed Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia (General Offensive – General uprising or TCK-TKN), was designed to ignite a general uprising among the people of South Vietnam, shatter the South Vietnamese armed forces, topple the Saigon regime, and convince the Americans that the war was unwinnable. At the very least, the decision makers in Hanoi hoped to position themselves for any follow-on negotiations, which conformed to their "fighting while negotiating" strategy.¹⁰

The target date for launching the offensive was the beginning of Tet Mau Than (New Year of the Monkey) 1968, which fell at the end of January. Dung's plan called for a preparatory phase that would be conducted in the later months of 1967. During this period VC and PAVN forces would launch a number of attacks in the remote outlying regions along South Vietnam's borders with Cambodia and Laos. Communist attacks at Loc Ninh, Song Be, and Dak To coupled with the siege of the Marine base at Con Thien just south of the Demilitarized Zone, also in I CTZ, diverted allied forces to the remote border areas.

As part of this preparatory phase, several PAVN divisions would move to positions threatening Khe Sanh, the remote Marine outpost near the Laotian border manned by a single Marine regiment. The area had already been the site of bitter fighting in 1967 as both sides vied for control of the high ground surrounding the Marine base. The subsequent North Vietnamese build-up in the latter months of 1967 was all part of a grand feint to

draw US forces away from the populated areas, which would be the ultimate objectives of the general offensive to come in early 1968.¹¹

The plan for the offensive itself called for a series of simultaneous attacks against American bases and South Vietnamese cities and towns. General Dung specifically targeted previously untouched urban centers such as Saigon in the south, Nha Trang and Qui Nhon in central South Vietnam, as well as Quang Ngai and Hue in the northern part of the country.

Dung's plan was predicated on three assumptions. First, he assumed that the ARVN would not fight when struck with a strong blow. Second, he believed that the Saigon government had no support among the South Vietnamese people, who would rise up against President Nguyen Van Thieu if given the opportunity. Third, he assumed that both the people and the armed forces of South Vietnam despised the Americans and would turn on them if given a chance.

Although there is some disagreement among American scholars about the phasing of the actual offensive, Gen. Tran Van Tra, commander of the Communist forces in the South from 1963 to 1975, asserted some years after the war that the plan for the offensive called for three distinct phases.¹² Phase I, which was scheduled to begin on 31 January 1968, was a country-wide assault on South Vietnamese cities, ARVN units, American headquarters, communication centers, and airbases to be carried out primarily by Viet Cong main force units. It was hoped that the southern insurgents would be able to infiltrate their forces into the attack positions and target areas before the offensive started.

If the general uprising did not occur or failed to achieve the overthrow of the Saigon government, follow-on operations would be launched in succeeding months to wear down the enemy and lead either to victory or to a negotiated settlement.¹³ According to Tra, Phase II of the offensive began on 5 May and that Phase III began on 17 August and ended on 23 September 1968.¹⁴ It is clear that to Hanoi and the NLF, the Tet Offensive, which is usually seen to cover a much shorter time period by many American historians, was a more prolonged offensive that lasted beyond the action immediately following the Tet holiday.

US military intelligence analysts knew that the Communists were planning some kind of large-scale attack, but did not believe it would come during Tet or that it would be nationwide. Still, there were many indicators that the enemy was planning to make a major shift in its strategy to win the war. In late November, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) station in Saigon compiled all the various intelligence indicators and published

a report called “The Big Gamble.” This was not really a formal intelligence estimate or even a prediction, but rather “a collection of scraps” that concluded that the Communists were preparing to escalate the fighting.¹⁵ This report also put enemy strength at a much higher level than previously supposed. Military intelligence analysts at Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) strongly disagreed with the CIA’s estimate, because at the time, the command was changing the way it was accounting for the enemy and was reducing its estimate of enemy capabilities.

Nevertheless, as more intelligence poured in, Westmoreland and his staff came to the conclusion that a major enemy effort was probable. All the signs pointed to a new offensive. Still, most of the increased enemy activity had been along the DMZ and in the remote border areas. In late December 1967, additional signals intelligence revealed that there was a significant enemy buildup in the Khe Sanh area. Deciding that this was where the main enemy threat lay, General Westmoreland focused much of his attention on the northernmost provinces.

Concerned with the situation developing at Khe Sanh and a new round of intelligence indicators, Westmoreland requested that the South Vietnamese cancel the coming countrywide Tet ceasefire. On 8 January 1968, the chief of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), Gen. Cao Van Vien, told Westmoreland that he would try to limit the truce to 24 hours.¹⁶ However, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu argued that to cancel the 48-hour truce would adversely affect the morale of his troops and the South Vietnamese people. Nevertheless, he agreed to limit the cease-fire to 36 hours, beginning on the evening of 29 January. Traditionally, South Vietnamese soldiers returned to their homes for the Tet holiday and this fact would play a major role in the desperate fighting to come.

On 21 January, the North Vietnamese began the first large-scale shelling of the Marine base at Khe Sanh, which was followed by renewed sharp fights between the enemy troops and the Marines in the hills surrounding the base. Westmoreland was sure that this was the opening of the long anticipated general offensive. The fact that the Khe Sanh situation looked similar to that which the French had faced when they were decisively defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 only added increased urgency to the unfolding events there.

Accordingly, Westmoreland ordered the commencement of Operation NIAGARA II, a massive bombing campaign focused on suspected enemy positions around Khe Sanh.¹⁷ He also ordered the 1st Cavalry Division from the Central Highlands to Phu Bai just south of Hue. Additionally, he

sent one brigade of the 101st Airborne Division to I Corps to strengthen the defenses of the two northernmost provinces. By the end of January, more than half of all US combat maneuver battalions were located in the I Corps area, ready to meet any new threat.

Essentially, the Allied forces were preparing for the wrong battle. The Tet Offensive represented, in the words of National Security Council staff member William Jorden, writing in a February 1968 cable to presidential advisor Walt Rostow, “the worst intelligence failure of the war.”¹⁸ Many historians and other observers have endeavored to understand how the Communists were able to achieve such a stunning level of surprise. There are a number of possible explanations. First, allied estimates of enemy strengths and intentions were flawed. Part of the problem was that MACV had changed the way that it computed enemy order of battle and downgraded the intelligence estimates about Viet Cong (VC)/People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) strength, no longer counting the National Liberation Front local militias in the enemy order of battle. CIA analyst Sam Adams later charged that MACV actually falsified intelligence reports to show progress in the war.¹⁹ Whether this accusation was true is subject to debate, but it is a fact that MACV revised enemy strength downward from almost 300,000 to 235,000 in December 1967. US military intelligence analysts apparently believed their own revised estimates and largely disregarded the mounting evidence that the Communists not only retained a significant combat capability but also planned to use that capability in a dramatic fashion.

Given those grossly flawed intelligence estimates, senior allied military leaders and most of their intelligence analysts greatly underestimated the capabilities of the enemy and dismissed new intelligence indicators because they too greatly contradicted prevailing assumptions about the enemy’s strength and capabilities. It was thought that enemy capabilities were insufficient to support a nationwide campaign. One analyst later admitted that he and his colleagues had become “mesmerized by statistic of known doubtful validity...choosing to place our faith in the ones that showed progress.”²⁰ These entrenched beliefs about the enemy served as blinders to the facts, coloring the perceptions of senior allied commanders and intelligence officers when they were presented with intelligence that differed so drastically with their preconceived notions.

Another problem that had an impact on the intelligence failures in Tet deals with what is known today as “fusion.” Given the large number of indicators drawn from a number of sources operating around South Vietnam, the data collected was difficult to assemble into a complete

and cohesive picture of what the Communists were doing. The analysts often failed to integrate cumulative information, even though they were charged with the production of estimates that should have facilitated the combination of different indicators into an overall analysis. Part of this problem can be traced to the lack of coordination between allied intelligence agencies. Most of these organizations operated independently and rarely shared their information with each other. This lack of coordination and failure to share information impeded the synthesis of all the intelligence that was available and precluded the fusion necessary to predict enemy intentions and prevent the surprise of the enemy offensive when it came.

Even if the allied intelligence apparatus had been better at fusion, it would still have had to deal with widely conflicting reports that further clouded the issue. While the aforementioned intelligence indicated that a general offensive was in the offing, there were a number of other intelligence reports indicating that the enemy was facing extreme hardships in the field and that his morale had declined markedly. It was difficult to determine which reports to believe. Additionally, some indicators that should have caused alarm among intelligence analysts got lost in the noise of developments related to more obvious and more widely expected adversary threats. Faced with evidence of increasing enemy activity near urban areas and along the borders of the country, the allies were forced to decide where, when, and how the main blow would fall. They failed in this effort, choosing to focus on the increasing intensity of activity and engagements at Khe Sanh and in the other remote areas.

Westmoreland and his analysts failed to foresee a countrywide offensive, thinking that there would be perhaps a “show of force,” but otherwise the enemy’s main effort would be directed at the northern provinces. When indications that North Vietnamese Army units were massing near Khe Sanh were confirmed by the attack on the Marine base on 21 January, this fit well with what Westmoreland and his analysts already expected. Thus, they evaluated the intelligence in light of what they already believed, focusing on Khe Sanh and discounting most of the rest of the indicators that did not “fit” with their preconceived notions about enemy capabilities and intentions; they thought it simply out of the question that the Communists would launch an offensive to capture towns and cities.

For these reasons, the Tet Offensive achieved almost total surprise. This is true even though a number of attacks were launched prematurely against five provincial capitals in II Corps Tactical Zone and Da Nang in I Corps Tactical Zone in the early morning hours of 30 January. These early

attacks, now credited to enemy coordination problems, provided at least some warning, but many in Saigon continued to believe that these attacks were only meant to divert attention away from Khe Sanh.²¹

The next night, the situation became clearer when the bulk of the Communist forces struck with a fury that was breathtaking in both its scope and suddenness. More than 84,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers launched coordinated, nearly simultaneous attacks against major cities, towns, and military installations that ranged from the Demilitarized Zone in the north far to the Ca Mau Peninsula on the southernmost-tip of South Vietnam. In the north, Communist forces struck Quang Tri, Tam Ky, and Hue, as well as the US military bases at Phu Bai and Chu Lai. In the center of the country, they followed up the previous evening's attacks and launched new ones at Tuy Hoa, Phan Thiet, and the American installations at Bong Song and An Khe. In III Corps Tactical Zone, the primary Communist thrust was at Saigon itself, but there were other attacks against the ARVN corps headquarters at Bien Hoa and the US II Field Force headquarters at Long Binh. In the Mekong Delta, the VC struck Vinh Long, My Tho, Can Tho, Dinh Tuong, Kien Tuong, Go Cong, and Ben Tre, as well as virtually every other provincial capital in the region.

The Communist forces mortared or rocketed every major allied airfield and attacked 64 district capitals and scores of lesser towns, villages, and hamlets. In all, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops attacked 39 of South Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals, five of six largest cities to include Saigon, 71 of 242 district capitals, some 50 hamlets, virtually every allied airfield, and many other key military targets, including all four military region headquarters. An American general remarked that the situation map depicting enemy attacks "lit up like a pinball machine."²²

In Saigon, eleven Communist battalions comprised of more than four thousand troops attacked every major installation in the urban core, including Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Independence Palace (which served as President Thieu's office), the headquarters of South Vietnam's Joint General Staff, the Vietnamese Navy headquarters, and the national radio broadcasting station. Meanwhile, three Viet Cong divisions launched simultaneous attacks on the American bases outside the city to prevent US reinforcements from entering the city.

In one of the most spectacular attacks of the entire offensive, nineteen Viet Cong sappers conducted a daring raid on the US Embassy, a \$2.6 million, six-floor building just opened in September 1967. The VC never made it into the main embassy building and all of them had been wiped

out by 0300, but this small squad of VC sappers had proven in dramatic fashion that there was no place in Vietnam that was secure from attack.

Far to the north, the longest and bloodiest battle of the Tet Offensive began when 7,500 NLF and North Vietnamese overran and occupied Hue, the ancient imperial capital that had been the home of the emperors of the Kingdom of Annam. Hue was venerated by both sides and had remained remarkable free of war until this time. It was actually two cities with the modern city on the southern side of the Song Huong, or Perfume River, and the Old City, or Citadel, a picturesque place of gardens, pagodas, moats, and intricate stone buildings on the north side of the river.

In the early morning hours of 31 January, ten VC and North Vietnamese battalions simultaneously occupied both the new and old cities. The subsequent fight by US Marines and ARVN troops to retake the city would last nearly three weeks and result in heavy casualties on both sides.

These spectacular attacks which ranged from the DMZ to the tip of the Ca Mau peninsula in the far south, were unprecedented in their magnitude and ferocity. The attacks were completely unexpected, because they contradicted both the key assumptions made by the military and the optimistic reports that came out of the Johnson administration in the closing months of 1967. The carefully coordinated attacks, as journalist Stanley Karnow writes, “exploded around the country like a string of firecrackers.”²³

At home in the United States, the news of the widespread attacks and vivid images of the bitter fighting came as a great shock to the American people. Television news anchor Walter Cronkite perhaps said it best when he asked, no doubt voicing the sentiment of many Americans, “What the hell is going on: I thought we were winning the war.”²⁴

As previously stated, US intelligence had gathered some information of infiltration into southern population centers and captured documents that outlined the general plan. However, Westmoreland and his intelligence staff were so convinced that Khe Sanh was the real target and that the enemy was incapable of conducting an offensive on such a massive scale that they viewed the captured documents as a diversionary tactic. “Even had I known exactly what was to take place,” Westmoreland’s intelligence officer later conceded, “it was so preposterous that I probably would have been unable to sell it to anybody.”²⁵ Westmoreland, himself, later admitted that he had not anticipated the “true nature or the scope” of the attacks.²⁶ Consequently, the US high command had seriously under-estimated the enemy’s potential

for a major, nation-wide offensive and the allies were almost overwhelmed initially by the audacity, scale, and intensity of the attacks.

In truth, the Tet Offensive turned out to be a disaster for the Communists, at least at the tactical level. While the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong enjoyed initial successes with their surprise attacks, allied forces recovered their balance and responded quickly, containing and driving back the attackers in most areas. The first surge of the offensive was over by the second week of February and most of the battles were over in a few days, but heavy fighting continued for a while in Kontum and Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands, Can Tho and Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta, and the Marines were still under siege at Khe Sanh. Protracted battles would also rage for several weeks in Saigon and Hue, but in the end, allied forces used superior mobility and firepower to rout the Communists, who failed to hold any of their military objectives. As for the much anticipated general uprising of the South Vietnamese people, it never materialized. The Communists had planned the offensive, counting on the general uprising to reinforce their attacks; when it did not happen, they lost the initiative and were forced to withdraw or die in the face of the allied response.

During the bitter fighting that extended into the fall, the Communists sustained staggering casualties. Conservative estimates put Communist losses in 1968 at around 45,000 killed with an additional 7,000 captured. The estimate of enemy killed has been disputed, but it is clear that their losses were huge and the numbers continued to grow as subsequent fighting extended into the autumn months. By September, when the offensive had run its course, the Viet Cong, who bore the brunt of much of the heaviest fighting in the cities, had been dealt a significant blow from which they never completely recovered; the major fighting for the rest of the war was done by the North Vietnamese Army.

The offensive resulted in an overwhelming defeat of the Communist forces at the tactical level, but the fact that the enemy had pulled off such a widespread offensive and caught the allies by surprise ultimately contributed to victory for the Communists at the strategic level. Although the US and allied casualties were much lower than those of the enemy, they were still very high; on 18 February 1968, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam posted the highest US casualty figure for a single week during the entire war—543 killed and over 2,500 wounded. Total US casualties for the offensive included 3,700 killed and 11,000 seriously wounded from 29 January to 31 March. The South Vietnamese suffered more than 7,600 killed and 18,000 wounded. These casualty figures combined with the sheer scope and ferocity of the offensive and the vivid images of the

savage fighting on the nightly television news stunned the American people, who were astonished that the enemy was capable of such an effort (the charges about biased reporting and its impact on public perceptions will not be addressed here).²⁷ They were unprepared for the intense and disturbing scenes they saw on television because Westmoreland and the administration had told them that the United States was winning and that the enemy was on its last legs.

Although there was a brief upturn in the support for the administration in the days immediately following the launching of the offensive, this was short-lived and subsequently the president's approval rating plummeted. Having accepted the optimistic reports of military and government officials in late 1967, it now appeared to many Americans that there was no end to the war in sight. The Tet Offensive severely strained the administration's credibility with the American people and increased public discontent with the war.

The Tet Offensive also had a major impact on the White House. It profoundly shook the confidence of the president and his advisors. Despite Westmoreland's claims that the Tet Offensive had been a great victory for the allied forces, Johnson, like the American people, was stunned by the ability of the Communists to launch such widespread attacks. One advisor later commented that an "air of gloom" hung over the White House. When Westmoreland, urged on by Gen. Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, asked for an additional 206,000 troops to "take advantage of the situation," the president balked and ordered a detailed review of US policy in Vietnam by Clark Clifford, who was to replace Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense. According to the Pentagon Papers, "a fork in the road had been reached and the alternatives stood out in stark reality."²⁸

The Tet Offensive fractured the administration's consensus on the conduct of the war and Clifford's reassessment permitted the airing of those alternatives. The civilians in the Pentagon recommended that allied efforts focus on population security and that the South Vietnamese be forced to assume more responsibility for the fighting while the United States pursued a negotiated settlement. The Joint Chiefs naturally took exception to this approach and recommended that Westmoreland be given the troop increase he had requested and be permitted to pursue enemy forces into Laos and Cambodia. Completing his study, Clifford recommended that Johnson reject the military's request and shift effort toward de-escalation.²⁹ Although publicly optimistic, Johnson had concluded that the current course in Vietnam was not working. He was further convinced that

a change in policy was needed after the “Wise Men,” a group of senior statesmen whom he had earlier turned to for counsel and who had previously been very supportive of administration Vietnam policies, advised that de-escalation should begin immediately.

With these debates ongoing in the White House, Congress got into the act on 11 March when the Senate Foreign Relations Committee began hearings on the war. The House of Representatives initiated their own review of Vietnam policy the following week.

Meanwhile, public opinion polls revealed the continuing downward trend in the president’s approval rating and his handling of the war. This situation manifested itself in the Democratic Party presidential primary in New Hampshire, where the president barely defeated challenger Senator Eugene McCarthy, a situation which convinced Senator Robert Kennedy to enter the presidential race as an antiwar candidate.

Beset politically by challengers from within his own party and seemingly still in shock from the spectacular Tet attacks, Johnson went on national television on the evening of 31 March 1968, and announced a partial suspension of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and called for negotiations. He then stunned the television audience by announcing that he would not run for reelection; the Tet Offensive had claimed its final victim. The following November, Richard Nixon won the presidential election and began the long US withdrawal from Vietnam.

Historians are reluctant to draw “lessons learned” from historical events. History never repeats itself; there are just too many variables involved in situations that are separated in time. This is particularly true when comparing the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. There are more differences than similarities between the two wars and because they differ in so many significant ways, attempting to apply any lessons from Vietnam to the situation in Iraq is fraught with peril. That being said, however, there are some broad, general lessons learned in Vietnam that can inform US actions, not only in Iraq, but in any contemporary situation in which the government of the United States, or any national government for that matter, contemplates intervention and the use of military force; this is particularly true with regard to the 1968 Tet Offensive.

There are two very important and closely-related lessons that can be gleaned from the Tet Offensive. The first has to do with the importance of objectivity in intelligence. Westmoreland and other senior officials were blinded to the indications that a countrywide offensive was imminent because they did not conform to their own preconceived notions about the

enemy capabilities and allied progress in the war. Even when the offensive was launched, the initial reaction at Westmoreland's headquarters was to place the attacks within the framework of those notions, seeing them as diversionary actions meant to focus attention away from what was seen as the main objective at Khe Sanh. Military planners must remain open-minded with regard to enemy capabilities and intentions, particularly when indicators run in the face of previous assessments. In the case of the Tet Offensive, intelligence became an extension of Westmoreland's optimism and not an accurate reflection of the enemy's capabilities. This gross failure of intelligence set the stage for the spectacular impact of the Tet attacks.

The second lesson drawn from the Tet Offensive is closely intertwined with the intelligence issue. Senior military commanders and policy makers must recognize the importance of building realistic expectations while resisting the inclination to put the best face on the military situation for political or public relations reasons. Johnson and Westmoreland built a set of, as it turned out, false expectations about the situation in Vietnam in order to win support for the administration's handling of the war and dampen the antiwar sentiment. These expectations, based on a severely flawed (or manipulated if one believes Sam Adams) intelligence picture, played a major role in the impact of the Tet Offensive. The images and news stories of the bitter fighting seemed to put the lie to the administration's claims of progress in the war and stretched the credibility gap to the breaking point. The tactical victory quickly became a strategic defeat for the United States and led to the virtual abdication of the president. North Vietnamese General Tran Do, perhaps said it best when he acknowledged that the offensive failed to achieve its major tactical objectives, but said, "As for making an impact in the United States, it had not been our intention—but it turned out to be a fortunate result."³⁰ That result occurred because Westmoreland and the Johnson administration let political considerations overwhelm an objective appraisal of the military situation. In doing so, they used flawed intelligence to portray an image of enemy capabilities in order to garner public support. When this was revealed by the vivid images of the Tet fighting, the resulting loss of credibility for the president and the military high command in Saigon was devastating both to the Johnson administration and the allied war effort.

The Tet Offensive and its aftermath significantly altered the nature of the war in Vietnam. The resounding tactical victory was seen as a defeat in the United States. It proved to many Americans that the war was unwinnable, effectively toppled a president, convinced the new president to

“Vietnamize” the war, and paved the way for the ultimate triumph of the Communist forces in 1975. In assessing the Tet Offensive and the lessons to be learned from it, perhaps journalist Don Oberdorfer said it best when he wrote, “The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong lost a battle. The United States Government lost something even more important—the confidence of its people at home.”³¹

Notes

1. The US had first committed ground combat troops in Vietnam in March 1965 when the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade came ashore on Red Beach Near Danang. A month later, President Lyndon Baines Johnson authorized the use of US combat troops in offensive operations in Vietnam. The initial contingent of Marines was followed by more US troops and by the end of 1967, the total number of US troops in Vietnam numbered just under half a million.
2. Speech, Papers of Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Box 14, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas (hereafter LBJ Library).
3. George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 141.
4. "War Gains Called Very Encouraging by Westmoreland," *New York Times*, 16 November 1967, 1.
5. Transcript, Interview with Gen. William C. Westmoreland, USA, and Steve Rowan, CBS, Friday, 17 November 1967, William C. Westmoreland Papers, Box 14, LBJ Library.
6. Transcript of address by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Commander, US Military Assistance Command Vietnam to National Press Club (21 November 1967), William C. Westmoreland Papers, Box 14, LBJ Library.
7. Merle Pribbenow, "General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 2008, 8-13.
8. For best discussion of the contentious debate that led to the launching of the Tet Offensive, see Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 87-108.
9. Cecil Currey, "Giap and Tet Mau Than 1968: The Year of the Monkey," in Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, eds., *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 82.
10. In Vietnamese, the stratagem, *danh vu dan* means "talking while fighting."
11. John Carland, "An NVA General Looks Back," *Vietnam*, December 2002, 35.
12. Tran Van Tra, "Tet: The 1968 General Offensive and General Uprising," in Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huyn, eds., *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 1993), 45-51.
13. William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 264.
14. Tran Van Tra, "Tet: The 1968 General Offensive and General Uprising," 48-51.
15. Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 120; William C. Gibbons, *The US Government and the Vietnam War*, 4 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985-1995), 4: 942-43.
16. Memorandum For Record, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Subject: Meeting with General Vien, 1730 hours, 8 January, dated 9 January 1968, William C. Westmoreland Papers, Box 15, LBJ Library.
17. The initial Operation NIAGARA was an intelligence gathering effort to determine the nature of the North Vietnamese buildup around Khe Sanh earlier

in January 1968. NIAGARA II was a massive bombing campaign using that intelligence.

18. Quoted in David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 84.

19. Sam Adams, a CIA analyst, charged that MACV had falsified enemy strength figures in order to show progress in the war. These charges led to a CBS News TV documentary entitled “The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception.” Gen. Westmoreland subsequently sued the television network for \$120 million for defaming his honor, naming Adams as one of the codefendants. Westmoreland withdrew his suit before it went to trial. See Sam Adams, *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth, 1994) and Don Kowet, *A Matter of Honor* (New York: Macmillan, 1984).

20. Senator Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making on Vietnam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), IV: 556–58.

21. That part of the force was ineplicably operating with a lunar calendar that was 24 hours off from that being used by the rest of the attackers.

22. Quoted in James R. Arnold, *The Tet Offensive 1968* (London: Osprey, 1990), 50.

23. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 536.

24. Quoted in Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941–1975* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 262.

25. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 421.

26. Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 556.

27. See Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1994).

28. Senator Gravel Edition, *The Pentagon Papers*, IV: 549.

29. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2d ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 567–70.

30. Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 547.

31. Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 32.

Chapter 5

The Battle of Hue

On 8 March 1965, elements of the US 9th Marine Expeditionary Force came ashore in Vietnam at Da Nang, ostensibly to provide security for the US air base there. A month later, President Lyndon Johnson authorized the use of US ground troops for offensive combat operations in Vietnam. These events marked a significant change in US involvement in the ongoing war between the South Vietnamese government and their Communist foes. Heretofore, US forces had been supporting the South Vietnamese with advisors and air support, but with the arrival of the Marines, a massive US buildup ensued that resulted in 184,300 American troops in Vietnam by the end of 1965. This number would rapidly increase until there were over 319,000 troops in-country by the end of 1967.¹

Eventually US ground troops were deployed in all four corps tactical zones and actively conducted combat operations against the Viet Cong (VC) and their North Vietnamese counterparts, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN—also known as the North Vietnamese Army or NVA). The first major battle between US forces and PAVN troops occurred in November 1965 in the battle of the Ia Drang Valley. Over the next two years, US forces conducted many large-scale search and destroy operations such as MASHER/WHITE WING, ATTLEBORO, CEDAR FALLS, and JUNCTION CITY. These operations were designed to find and destroy the enemy forces in a war of attrition. However, by the end of 1967, the war in Vietnam had degenerated into a bloody stalemate. US and South Vietnamese operations had inflicted high casualties and disrupted Communist operations, but the North Vietnamese continued to infiltrate troops into South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Gen. William Westmoreland, Commander of US forces in Vietnam, was very optimistic that progress was being made; on 21 November 1967, he appeared before the National Press Club in Washington and asserted, "We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view. I am absolutely certain that, whereas in 1965 the enemy was winning, today he is certainly losing. The enemy's hopes are bankrupt."² Events in 1968 would prove him wrong.

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The plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive was born in the summer of 1967. Frustrated with the stalemate on the battlefield and concerned with the aggressive American tactics during the previous year, Communist leaders in Hanoi decided to launch a general offensive to strike a decisive blow against the South Vietnamese and their US allies.³ This campaign was designed to break the stalemate and achieve three objectives: provoke a general uprising among the people in the South, shatter the South Vietnamese armed forces, and convince the Americans that the war was unwinnable. The offensive would target the previously untouched South Vietnamese urban centers. The Communists prepared for the coming offensive by a massive buildup of troops and equipment in the south. At the same time they launched a series of diversionary attacks against remote outposts designed to lure the US forces into the countryside away from the population areas.

In the fall of 1967, the plan went into effect with Communist attacks in the areas south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating Vietnam's two sections and along South Vietnam's western border in the Central Highlands. The main effort of this preliminary phase of the offensive began on 21 January 1968 at Khe Sanh in northwestern South Vietnam, where two PAVN divisions lay siege to the Marine base there. Believing that the Communists were trying to achieve another Dien Bien Phu; President Johnson declared that Khe Sanh would be held at all costs.⁴

With all eyes on Khe Sanh, the Communists launched the main offensive itself in the early morning hours of 31 January 1968, when 84,000 North Vietnamese and VC troops, taking advantage of the Tet (lunar New Year) ceasefire then in effect, mounted simultaneous assaults on 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five of the six autonomous cities, including Saigon and Hue, 64 of 242 district capitals, and 50 hamlets.⁵ Many of the South Vietnamese troops were on holiday leave, so the Communist forces initially enjoyed widespread success. Within days, however, all of the attacks in the smaller towns and hamlets were turned back. Heavy fighting continued for a while in Kontum and Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands, in Can Tho and Ben Tre in the Mekong Delta, and in Saigon itself.

The longest and bloodiest battle of the Tet Offensive occurred in Hue, the most venerated place in Vietnam. The city, which is located astride Highway 1, ten kilometers west of the coast and a hundred kilometers south of the DMZ, was the capital of Thua Thien Province and South Vietnam's third largest city, with a wartime population of 140,000. Hue was the old imperial capital and served as the cultural and intellectual center of Vietnam. It had been treated almost as an open city by the VC and North

Vietnamese and thus had remained remarkably free of war. Although there had been sporadic mortar and rocket attacks in the area, Hue, itself, had been relatively peaceful and secure prior to Tet in 1968. Nevertheless, the city was on one of the main land supply routes for the Allied troops occupying positions along the DMZ to the north, and it also served as a major unloading point for waterborne supplies that were brought inland via the river from Da Nang on the coast.

Hue was really two cities divided by the Song Huong, or River of Perfume, which flowed through the city from the southwest to the northeast on its way to the South China Sea ten kilometers to the east. Two-thirds of the city's population lived north of the river within the walls of the Old City, or Citadel, a picturesque place of gardens, pagodas, moats, and intricate stone buildings. Just outside the walls of the Citadel to the east was the densely populated district of Gia Hoi.

The Citadel was an imposing fortress, begun in 1802 by Emperor Gia Long with the aid of the French and modeled on Peking's Forbidden City. Once the residence of the Annamese emperors who had ruled the central portion of present-day Vietnam, the Citadel covered three square miles and really included three concentric cities and a labyrinth of readily defensible positions. It was protected by an outer wall 30-feet high and up to 40 feet thick which formed a square about 2,700 yards on each side. Three sides were straight, while the fourth was rounded slightly to follow the curve of the river. The three walls not bordering the river were encircled by a zigzag moat that was 90 feet wide at many points and up to 12 feet deep. Many areas of the wall were honeycombed with bunkers and tunnels that had been constructed by the Japanese when they occupied the city in World War II.

The Citadel included block after block of row houses, parks, villas, shops, various buildings, and an airstrip. Within the Citadel was another enclave, the Imperial Palace compound, where the emperors had held court until 1883, when the French returned to take control of Vietnam. Located at the south end of the Citadel, the palace was essentially a square with 20-foot high walls that measured seven hundred meters per side. The Citadel and the Imperial Palace were a "camera-toting tourist's dream," but they would prove to be "a rifle-toting infantryman's nightmare."⁶

South of the river and linked to the Citadel by the six-span Nguyen Hoang Bridge, over which Route 1 passed, lay the modern part of the city, which was about half the size of the Citadel and in which resided about a third of the city's population. The southern half of Hue contained

the hospital, the provincial prison, the Catholic cathedral and many of the city's modern structures, to include government administrative buildings, the US Consulate, Hue University, the city's high school, and the newer residential districts.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 1st Infantry Division was headquartered in Hue, but most of its troops were spread out along Highway 1, from Hue north toward the DMZ. The division headquarters was located at the northwest corner of the Citadel in a fortified compound protected by 6-to-8-foot high walls, topped by barbed wire. The closest South Vietnamese unit was the 3rd ARVN Regiment with three battalions which was located five miles northwest of Hue. A fourth ARVN battalion was operating some miles southwest of the city. The only combat element in the city was the division's Hac Bao Company, known as the "Black Panthers," an elite all-volunteer unit that served as the division reconnaissance and rapid reaction force. Security within the city itself was primarily the responsibility of the National Police.

The only US military presence in Hue when the battle began was the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) compound, which housed 200 US Army, US Marine Corps, and Australian officers and men who served as advisers to the 1st ARVN Division. They maintained a lightly fortified compound on the eastern edge of the modern part of the city south of the river about a block and a half south of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge.

The nearest US combat base was at Phu Bai, eight miles south along Route 1. Phu Bai was a major Marine Corps command post and support facility that was the home of Task Force X-Ray, which had been established as a forward headquarters of the 1st Marine Division. The task force, commanded by Brig. Gen. Foster C. "Frosty" LaHue, Assistant Commander of the 1st Marine Division, was made up of two Marine regimental headquarters and three battalions—the 5th Regiment with two battalions and the 1st Regiment, with one battalion. Most of these troops, including Brigadier General Lahue, had only recently arrived in the Phu Bai area, having been displaced from Da Nang, and they were still getting acquainted with the area of operations when the Communists launched their attack on Hue.

In addition to the US Marines, there were also US Army units in the area. Two brigades of the 1st Cavalry Division were scattered over a wide area from Phu Bai in the south to LZ (Landing Zone) Jane just south of Quang Tri in the north. The 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division had recently been attached to the 1st Cavalry and had just arrived at Camp Ev-

ans (located north along Highway 1 between Hue and Quang Tri), coming north from its previous area of operations.

Opposing the allied forces in the Hue region were 8,000 Communist troops, a total of ten battalions, including two PAVN regiments of three battalions and one battalion each respectively. These were highly trained North Vietnamese regular army units that had come south either across the DMZ or more likely, down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were armed with AK-47 assault rifles, RPD machineguns, and B-40 rocket propelled grenade launchers. In addition, the PAVN had 107mm, 122mm, and 140mm free-flight rockets, 82mm and 120mm mortars, recoilless rifles, and heavy machineguns. The North Vietnamese units were joined by six Viet Cong main force battalions, including the 12th and Hue City Sapper Battalions.⁷ A typical main-force VC infantry battalion consisted of 300-600 veteran, skilled fighters. The VC soldiers were armed similar to the PAVN with the exception that they did not have some of the heavier weapons.⁸ During the course of the battle for Hue, the total Communist force in and around the city would grow to 20 battalions when three additional infantry regiments were dispatched to the Hue area from the Khe Sanh battlefield.

Before the Tet Offensive began, the Communists had prepared extensive plans for the attack on Hue, which would be directed by Gen. Tran Van Quang, commander of the B4 or Tri Thien-Hue Front. The plan called for a division-size assault on the city, while other forces cut off access to the city to preclude allied reinforcements. Quang and his senior commanders believed that once the city's population realized the superiority of the Communist troops, the people would immediately rise up to join forces with the VC and PAVN against the Americans and the South Vietnamese, driving them out of Hue. Possessing very detailed information on civil and military installations within the city, the Communist planners had divided the city into four tactical areas and prepared a list of 196 targets within the city. They planned to use more than 5,000 soldiers to take the city in one swift blow.

Communist documents captured during and after the Tet offensive indicate that enemy troops received intensive training in the technique of city street fighting before the offensive began.⁹ Extremely adept at fighting in the jungles and rice paddies, the PAVN and VC troops required additional training to prepare for the special requirements of fighting in urban areas. This training, focusing on both individual and unit tasks, included offensive tactics, techniques, and procedures to assist in taking the city and defensive measures to help the Communists hold the city once they had seized it.

While the assault troops trained for the battle to come, VC intelligence officers prepared a list of “cruel tyrants and reactionary elements” to be rounded up during the early hours of the attack.¹⁰ This list included most South Vietnamese officials, military officers, politicians, American civilians and other foreigners. After capture, these individuals were to be evacuated to the jungle outside the city where they would be punished for their crimes against the Vietnamese people.

The enemy had carefully selected the time for the attack. Because of the Tet holiday, the ARVN defenders would be at reduced strength. In addition, bad weather that traditionally accompanied the northeast monsoon season would hamper aerial resupply operations and impede close air support, which would otherwise have given the allied forces in Hue a considerable advantage.

The city’s defense hinged in large part on the leadership of Brig. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, commander of the 1st ARVN Division, regarded by many US advisers as one of the best senior commanders in the South Vietnamese armed forces.¹¹ A 1954 graduate of the Dalat Military Academy, he had won his position through ability and combat leadership and not because of political influence or bribery, as was the case with many of his ARVN peers.

On the morning of 30 January, the beginning of the Tet holiday, Truong received reports of enemy attacks on Da Nang, Nha Trang, and other South Vietnamese installations during the previous night. Sensing that something was up, he gathered his division staff at the headquarters compound and put them and his remaining troops on full alert. Unfortunately, over half of his division was on holiday leave and out of the city. Believing that the Communists would not attack the “open” city directly, Truong positioned the forces left on duty around the city to defend outside the urban area. Therefore, when the Communist attack came, the only regular ARVN troops in the city were from the Hac Bao “Black Panther” reconnaissance company, which was guarding the airstrip at the northeastern corner of the Citadel.

Unknown to Truong as he made his preparations for whatever was to come, there was clear indication that there would be a direct attack on his city. On the same day that the South Vietnamese commander put his staff on alert, a US Army radio intercept unit at Phu Bai overheard Communist orders calling for an imminent assault on Hue. Following standard procedure, the intercept unit forwarded the message through normal channels. Making its way through several command layers, the intercept and asso-

ciated intelligence analysis did not make it to the Hue defenders until the city was already under attack.¹²

Even as the intelligence report made its way slowly through channels, the Viet Cong had already infiltrated the city. Wearing civilian garb, Communist troops had mingled with the throngs of people who had come to Hue for the Tet holiday. They had easily transported their weapons and ammunition into the city in wagons, truck beds, and other hiding places. In the early morning hours of 31 January, these soldiers took up initial positions within the city and prepared to link up with the PAVN and VC assault troops. At 0340 hours, the Communists launched a rocket and mortar barrage from the mountains to the west on both old and new sectors of the city. Following this barrage, the assault troops began their attack. The VC infiltrators had donned their uniforms, met their comrades at the gates and led them in the attack on key installations in the city.

The PAVN 6th Regiment, with two battalions of infantry and the 12th VC Sapper Battalion, launched the main attack from the southwest and moved quickly across the Perfume River into the Citadel toward the ARVN 1st Division headquarters in the northeastern corner. The 800th and 802nd Battalions of the 6th Regiment rapidly overran most of the Citadel, but Truong and his staff held the attackers off at the 1st ARVN Division compound, while the Hac Bao Company managed to hold its position at the eastern end of the airfield. On several occasions, the 802nd Battalion came close to penetrating the division compound, so Brigadier General Truong ordered the Black Panthers to withdraw from the airfield to the compound to help thicken his defenses there.

By daylight on 31 January, the PAVN 6th Regiment held the entire Citadel, including the Imperial Palace. The only exception was the 1st Division compound, which remained in South Vietnamese hands; the PAVN 802nd Battalion had breached the ARVN defenses on several occasions during the night, but each time, they were hurled back by the Black Panthers.

The story was not much better for the Americans south of the river in the new city. It could have been worse, but the North Vietnamese made a tactical error when they launched their initial attack on the MACV compound. Rather than attack immediately on the heels of the rocket and mortar barrage, they waited for approximately five minutes. This gave the defenders within the compound an opportunity to mount a quick defense. The PAVN 804th Battalion twice assaulted the MACV compound, but the attackers were repelled each time by quickly assembled defenders

armed with individual weapons. One US soldier manned an exposed machine gun position atop a 20-foot wooden tower; his fire stopped the first rush of North Vietnamese sappers who tried to advance to the compound walls to set satchel charges, but he was killed by a B-40 rocket. The PAVN troops then stormed the compound gates where they were met by a group of Marines manning a bunker. The Marines held off the attackers for a brief period, but eventually the PAVN took out the defenders with several B-40 rockets. This action slowed the North Vietnamese attack and gave the Americans and their Australian comrades additional time to organize their defenses. After an intense firefight, the Communists failed to take the compound, so they tried to reduce it with mortars and automatic weapons fire from overlooking buildings. The defenders went to ground and waited for reinforcements.

While the battle raged around the MACV compound, two VC battalions took over the Thua Thien Province headquarters, police station, and other government buildings south of the river. At the same time, the PAVN 810th Battalion occupied blocking positions on the southern edge of the city to prevent reinforcement from that direction. By dawn, the North Vietnamese 4th Regiment controlled all of Hue south of the river except the MACV Compound.

Thus in very short order, the Communists had seized control of virtually all of Hue. When the sun came up on the morning of January 31, nearly everyone in the city could see the gold-starred, blue-and-red National Liberation Front flag flying high over the Citadel. It was clear that the Communists now controlled Hue. While the PAVN and VC assault troops roamed the streets freely and consolidated their gains, political officers began a reign of terror, rounding up the South Vietnamese and foreigners on the special lists. VC officers marched through the Citadel, reading out the names on the lists through loudspeakers and telling them to report to a local school. Those that did not report were hunted down.¹³ The detainees were never seen alive again; their fate was not apparent until after the US and South Vietnamese forces recaptured the Citadel and nearly 3,000 civilians were found massacred and buried in mass graves.

As the battle erupted at Hue, other Communist forces had struck in cities and towns from the DMZ to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the south and Allied forces had their hands full all over the country. The northern provinces were no exception, and it would prove difficult to assemble sufficient uncommitted combat power to oust the Communists from Hue. Additionally, US and South Vietnamese forces had been moved to the west to support the action in and around Khe Sanh, thus reducing the number of troops

available in the entire northern region. This situation would have a major impact on the conduct of operations to retake Hue from the Communists.

General Truong, who only had a tenuous hold on his own headquarters compound, ordered his 3rd Regiment, reinforced with two airborne battalions and an armored cavalry troop, to fight its way into the Citadel from their positions northwest of the city. En route these forces encountered intense small arms and automatic weapons fire as they neared the Citadel. They fought their way through the resistance and reached Truong's headquarters late in the afternoon.

As Truong tried to consolidate his forces, another call for reinforcements went out from the surrounded MACV compound. This plea for assistance was almost lost in all the confusion caused by the simultaneous attacks going on all over I Corps. Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the South Vietnamese forces in I Corps, and Lt. Gen. Robert Cushman, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) commander, were not sure what exactly was happening inside the city. The enemy strength and the scope of the Communist attack was less than clear during the early hours of the battle, but the allied commanders realized that reinforcements would be needed to eject the Communists from Hue. Accordingly, Cushman ordered TF X-Ray to send reinforcements into Hue to relieve the besieged MACV compound.

While both ARVN and US commanders tried to assess the situation and made preparations to move reinforcements to Hue, the North Vietnamese quickly established additional blocking positions to prevent those reinforcements from reaching the beleaguered defenders. The PAVN 806th Battalion blocked Highway 1 northwest of Hue, while the PAVN 804th and K4B Battalions took up positions in southern Hue. At the same time, the 810th Battalion dug in along Highway 1 south of Hue.

Responding to III MAF orders, Brig. Gen. Foster LaHue, commander of Task Force X-Ray, dispatched Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (A/1/1), to move up Route 1 from Phu Bai by truck to relieve the surrounded US advisers. The initial report of the attack on Truong's headquarters and the MACV compound had not caused any great alarm at LaHue's headquarters. The task force commander, having received no reliable intelligence to the contrary, believed that only a small enemy force had penetrated Hue as part of a local diversionary attack; little did he know that almost a full enemy division had seized the city. He therefore sent only one company to deal with the situation and it would take some time for LaHue to grasp what his Marines were dealing with in Hue, even after receiving

reports about the size of the enemy in the city.¹⁴ He later wrote that “Initial deployment of force was made with limited information.”¹⁵

Not knowing exactly what to expect when they reached the city, the Marines from A/1/1 headed north as ordered, joining up with four M-48 tanks from the 3rd Tank Battalion en route. The convoy ran into sniper fire and had to stop several times to clear buildings along the route of march. When the convoy crossed the bridge that spanned the Phu Cam Canal into the southern part of the city, the Marines were immediately caught in a withering cross-fire from enemy automatic weapons and B-40 rockets that seemed to come from every direction. They advanced slowly against intense enemy resistance, but became pinned down between the river and the canal, just short of the MACV compound they had been sent to relieve. During the fight, the company commander, Capt. Gordon D. Batcheller, was wounded, as were a number of his Marines.

With his Company A pinned down, Lt. Col. Marcus J. Gravel, the battalion commander of 1/1 Marines, organized a hasty reaction force: himself, his operations officer, some others from his battalion command group, and Company G, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (G/2/5), a unit from another battalion that had just arrived in Phu Bai earlier that day. Gravel had never met Capt. Charles L. Meadows, the Company G commander, until that day, and he later said that the only planning he had time to accomplish was to issue the order: “Get on the trucks, men.”¹⁶

With little information other than that their fellow Marines were pinned down, the relief force moved up the highway, reinforced with two self-propelled twin-40mm guns. The force met little resistance along the way and linked up with A/1/1st Marines, now being led by a wounded gunnery sergeant. With the aid of the four tanks and the 40mm self-propelled guns, the combined force fought its way to the MACV compound, breaking through to the beleaguered defenders at about 1515 hours. The cost, however, was high; 10 Marines were killed and 30 were wounded.

Having linked up with the defenders of the MACV compound, Gravel received new orders from LaHue, directing him to cross the Perfume River with his battalion and break through to the ARVN 1st Division headquarters in the Citadel. Gravel protested that his “battalion” consisted of only two companies, one of which was in pretty bad shape, and that part of his force would have to be left behind to assist with the defense of the MACV compound. Nevertheless, LaHue, who still did not have a good picture of the full extent of the enemy situation in Hue, radioed back that Gravel was to “go anyway.”¹⁷ Sending Gravel’s battered

force to contend with the much stronger PAVN and VC north of the river would ultimately result in failure.

Leaving Company A behind to help with the defense of the MACV compound, Gravel took Company G, reinforced with three of the original M-48 tanks and several others from the ARVN 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, and moved out to comply with LaHue's orders. Leaving the tanks on the southern bank to support by fire, Gravel and his Marines attempted to cross the Nguyen Hoang Bridge leading into the Citadel. As the infantry started across the bridge, they were met with a hail of fire from a machine gun position at the north end of the bridge. Ten Marines went down. LCpl. Lester A. Tully, who later received the Silver Star for his action, rushed forward and took out the machine gun nest with a grenade. Two platoons followed Tully, made it over the bridge, and turned left, paralleling the river along the Citadel's southeast wall. They immediately came under heavy fire from AK-47 rifles, heavy automatic weapons, B-40 rockets, and recoilless rifles from the walls of the Citadel.

As mortar shells and rockets exploded around them, the Marines tried to push forward but were soon pinned down by the increasing volume of enemy fire. Gravel determined that his force was greatly outnumbered and decided to withdraw. However, even that proved very difficult. According to Gravel, the enemy was well dug-in and "firing from virtually every building in Hue city" north of the river.¹⁸ Gravel called for vehicle support to assist in evacuating his wounded, but none was available. Eventually, the Marines commandeered some abandoned Vietnamese civilian vehicles and used them as makeshift ambulances. After two hours of intense fighting, the company was able to pull back to the bridge. By 2000 hours, the 1st Battalion had established a defensive position near the MACV compound along a stretch of riverbank that included a park (which they rapidly transformed into a helicopter landing zone). The attempt by the Marines to force their way across the bridge had been costly. Among the casualties was Maj. Walter D. Murphy, the S-3 Operations Officer of the 1st Battalion, who later died from his wounds. Captain Meadows, commander of Company G, lost one third of his unit killed or wounded "going across that one bridge and then getting back across the bridge."¹⁹

At Phu Bai, despite detailed reports from Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, Brigadier General LaHue and his intelligence officers did not have a good appreciation of what was happening in Hue. He later explained, "Early intelligence did not reveal the quantity of enemy involved that we subse-

quently found were committed to Hue.”²⁰ Even when the Marines from Hue reported what they were dealing with, LaHue and his staff failed to grasp the gravity of the situation.

The intelligence picture in Saigon was just as confused; General William Westmoreland, Commander of US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, cabled Gen. Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, that the “enemy has approximately three companies in the Hue Citadel and Marines have sent a battalion into the area to clear them out.”²¹ This repeated gross underestimation of enemy strength in Hue resulted in insufficient forces being allocated for retaking the city.

With Brigadier General Truong and the 1st ARVN Division fully occupied in the Citadel north of the river, Lieutenant Generals Lam and Cushman discussed how to divide responsibility for the effort to retake Hue. They eventually agreed that ARVN forces would be responsible for clearing Communist forces from the Citadel and the rest of Hue north of the river, while Task Force X-Ray would assume responsibility for the southern part of the city. This situation resulted in what would be, in effect, two separate and distinct battles that would rage in Hue, one south of the river and one north of the river.

In retaking Hue, Lam and Cushman were confronted with a unique problem. The ancient capital was almost sacred to the Vietnamese people, particularly so to the Buddhists. The destruction of the city would result in political repercussions that neither the United States nor the government of South Vietnam could afford. Cushman later recalled, “I wasn’t about to open up on the old palace and all the historical buildings there.”²² As a result, limitations were imposed on the use of artillery and close air support to minimize collateral damage. Eventually these restrictions were lifted when it was realized that both artillery and close air support would be necessary to dislodge the enemy from the city. However, the initial rules of engagement played a key role in the difficulties incurred in the early days of the battle.

Having divided up the city, Cushman, with General Westmoreland’s concurrence, began to make arrangements to send reinforcements into the Hue area in an attempt to seal off the enemy inside the city from outside support. On 2 February, the US Army 1st Cavalry Division’s 3rd Brigade entered the battle with the mission of blocking the enemy approaches into the city from the north and west. The brigade helicoptered the 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry (2/12 Cav), into a landing zone about 10 kilometers northwest of Hue on Highway 1. By 4 February, the cavalry

troopers had moved cross country from the LZ and established a blocking position on a hill overlooking a valley about six kilometers west of Hue. This position provided excellent observation of the main enemy routes into and out of Hue.

During the same period, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry (5/7 Cav) conducted search and clear operations along enemy routes west of Hue. On 7 February, they made contact with an entrenched North Vietnamese force and tried for the next 24 hours to expel the communists. However, the enemy held their position and stymied the Cavalry advance with heavy volumes of automatic weapons and mortar fire. On 9 February, Headquarters 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, ordered 5/7 Cav to fix the PAVN in place, while directing 2/12 Cav to attack northward from its position. The latter ran into heavy resistance near the village of Thong Bon Ti, but continued to fight its way toward 5/7 Cav's position. For the next ten days, the two cavalry battalions fought with the entrenched communists, who held their positions against repeated assaults. Despite the inability of the cavalry troopers to expel the North Vietnamese, this action at least partially blocked the enemy's movement and inhibited their participation in the battle raging in Hue.

For almost three weeks, the US cavalry units tried to hold off the reinforcement of Hue by North Vietnamese troops from the PAVN 24th, 29th, and 99th Regiments. They were reinforced on 19 February, when the 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry (2/501st) was attached to the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, from the US Army's 101st Airborne Division. The battalion was subsequently ordered to seal access to the city from the south. Also on that day, the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry (1/7 Cav), relieved from its base defense mission at Camp Evans, deployed south to the Hue area. While these US Army units saw plenty of heavy action in these outlying areas and contributed greatly to the eventual allied victory at Hue, the fighting inside the city was to remain largely in the hands of South Vietnamese troops and US Marines.

As allied reinforcements began their movement to the area, the ARVN and Marines began making preparations for counterattacks in their assigned areas. Making their tasks more difficult was the weather, which took a turn for the worse on 2 February, when the temperature fell into the 50's (Fahrenheit) and the low clouds opened up with a cold drenching rain.

As the rain fell, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's "bobtailed" 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, was ordered to attack to seize the Thua Thien Province headquarters building and prison, a distance of six blocks west of the MACV

compound. At 0700, Gravel launched a two-company assault supported by tanks to take his assigned objectives, but the Marines immediately ran into trouble. An M-79 gunner from Company G recalled, “We didn’t get a block away [from the MACV compound] when we started getting sniper fire. We got a tank...went a block, turned right and received 57mm recoilless which put out our tank;” the attack was “stopped cold” and the battalion fell back to its original position near the MACV compound.²³

By this time, Brigadier General LaHue had finally realized that he and his intelligence officers had vastly underrated the strength of the Communists south of the river. Accordingly, he called in Col. Stanley S. Hughes, new commander of the 1st Marine Regiment, and gave him overall tactical control of US forces in the southern part of the city. Assuming control of the battle, Hughes promised Gravel reinforcements and gave him the general mission to conduct “sweep and clear operations...to destroy enemy forces, protect US Nationals and restore that [southern] portion of the city to US control.”²⁴ In response, Gravel ordered Company F, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (F/2/5), which had been placed under his operational control when it arrived the previous day, to relieve a MACV communications facility near the US consulate, which was surrounded by a VC force. The Marines launched their attack, fighting most of the afternoon, but failed to reach the US Army signal troops, losing three Marines killed and 13 wounded in the process. At that point, Gravel’s troops established night defensive positions; during the night, Gravel made plans to renew the attack the next morning.

The next day, the Marines made some headway and brought in further reinforcements. The 1st Battalion finally relieved the MACV radio facility in the late morning hours and after an intense three-hour fight, reached the Hue University campus. During the night, the Communist sappers had dropped the railroad bridge across the Perfume river west of the city, but they left untouched the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal.

At 1100 hours, Company H, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (H/2/5), commanded by Capt. Ronald G. Christmas, crossed the bridge over the canal in a convoy, accompanied by Army trucks equipped with quad .50-caliber machine guns and two ONTOS, which were tracked vehicles armed with six 106mm recoilless rifles. As the convoy neared the MACV compound, it came under intense enemy heavy machine gun and rocket fire. The Marines responded rapidly, and in the ensuing confusion, the convoy exchanged fire with another Marine unit already in the city. As one Marine in the convoy remembered, “our guys happened to be out on the right side of the road and of course nobody knew that. First thing you know everybody

began shooting at our own men...out of pure fright and frenzy.”²⁵ Luckily, neither of the Marine units took any casualties. Company H joined Lieutenant Colonel Gravel where the 1st Battalion had established a position near the MACV compound. The PAVN and VC gunners continued to pour machine gun and rocket fire into the position, and by day’s end, the Marines at that location had sustained two dead and 34 wounded.

On the afternoon of 2 February, Colonel Hughes decided to move his command group into Hue, where he could more directly control the battle. Accompanying Hughes in the convoy that departed for the city was Lt. Col. Ernest C. Cheatham, commander of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, who had been sitting frustrated in Phu Bai while three of his units—F, G, and H companies—fought in Hue under Lieutenant Colonel Gravel’s control. Hughes quickly established his command post in the MACV compound. The forces at his disposal included Cheatham’s three companies from 2/5 Marines and Gravel’s depleted battalion consisting of Company A, 1/1 Marines and a provisional company consisting of one platoon of Company B, 1/1, and several dozen cooks and clerks who had been sent to the front lines to fight.²⁶

Hughes wasted no time in taking control of the situation. He directed Gravel to anchor the left flank with his one-and-a-half-company battalion to keep the main supply route open. Then he ordered Cheatham and his three companies to assume responsibility for the attack south from the university toward the provincial headquarters, telling him to “attack through the city and clean the NVA out.” When Cheatham hesitated, waiting for additional guidance, the regimental commander who, like everyone else going into Hue, had only the sketchiest information, gruffly stated, “if you’re looking for any more, you aren’t going to get it. Move out!”²⁷

Cheatham devised a plan that called for his battalion to move west along the river from the MACV compound. He would attack with Companies F and H in the lead and Company G in reserve. Although the plan was simple, execution proved extremely difficult. From the MACV compound to the confluence of the Perfume River and the Phu Cam Canal was almost 11 blocks, each of which had been transformed by the enemy into a fortress that would have to be cleared building by building, room by room.

The Marines began their attack toward the treasury building and post office, but they made very slow progress, not having yet devised workable tactics to deal with the demands of the urban terrain. As the Marines, supported by tanks, tried to advance, the communists hit them with a withering array of mortar, rocket, machine gun, and small arms fire from

prepared positions in the buildings. According to Cheatham, his Marines tried to take the treasury and postal buildings five or six different times. He later recalled, "You'd assault and back you'd come, drag your wounded and then muster it [the energy and courage] up again and try it again."²⁸

The Marines just did not have enough men to deal with the enemy entrenched in the buildings. The frontage for a company was about one block, and with two companies forward, this left an exposed left flank, subject to enemy automatic weapons and rocket fire. By the evening of 3 February, the Marines had made little progress and were taking increasing casualties as they fought back and forth over the same ground.

The following morning, Colonel Hughes met with his two battalion commanders. Hughes ordered Cheatham to continue the attack. He told Gravel to continue to secure Cheatham's left flank with his battalion, which now had only one company left after the previous day's casualties. As Gravel ordered his Marines into position to screen Cheatham's attack, they first had to secure the Joan of Arc School and Church. They immediately ran into heavy contact with the enemy and were forced to fight house-to-house. Eventually they secured the school, but continued to take effective fire from PAVN and VC gunners in the church. Reluctantly, Gravel gave the order to fire upon the church and the Marines pounded the building with mortars and 106mm recoilless rifle fire, eventually killing or driving off the enemy. In the ruins of the church, the Marines found two live European priests, one French and one Belgian, who were livid that the Marines had fired on the church. Gravel was sorry for the destruction, but felt that he had had no choice in the matter.²⁹

With Gravel's Marines moving into position to screen his left flank to the Phu Cam Canal, Cheatham launched his attack at 0700 on 4 February. It took 24 hours of bitter fighting just to reach the treasury building. Attacking the rear of the building after blasting holes through adjacent courtyard walls with 106mm recoilless rifle fire, the Marines finally took the facility, but only after it had been plastered with 90mm tank rounds, 106mm recoilless rifles, 81mm mortars, and finally CS gas.

In the rapidly deteriorating weather, the Marines found themselves in a room by room, building by building struggle to clear an eleven by nine block area just south of the river. This effort rapidly turned into a nightmare. Fighting in such close quarters against an entrenched enemy was decidedly different from what the Marines had been trained to do. Accustomed to fighting in the sparsely populated countryside of I Corps,

nothing in their training had prepared them for the type of warfare demanded by this urban setting.³⁰ Captain Christmas later remembered his apprehension as his unit prepared to enter the battle for Hue, “I could feel a knot developing in my stomach. Not so much from fear—though a helluva lot of fear was there—but because we were new to this type of situation. We were accustomed to jungles and open rice fields, and now we would be fighting in a city, like it was Europe during World War II. One of the beautiful things about the marines is that they adapt quickly, but we were going to take a number of casualties learning some basic lessons in this experience.”³¹

It was savage work—house-to-house fighting through city streets—of a type largely unseen by Americans since World War II. Ground gained in the fighting was to be measured in inches and each city block cost dearly, as every alley, street corner, window, and garden had to be paid for in blood. Several war correspondents who moved forward with the Marines reported the fighting as the most intense they had ever seen in South Vietnam.

The combat was relentless. Small groups of Marines moved doggedly from house to house, assaulting enemy positions with whatever supporting fire was available, blowing holes in walls with rocket launchers or recoilless rifles, then sending fire teams and squads into the breach. Each structure had to be cleared room by room using M-16 rifles and grenades. Taking advantage of Hue’s numerous courtyards and walled estates, the PAVN and VC ambushed the Marines every step of the way. Having had no training in urban fighting, the Marines had to work out the tactics and techniques on the spot.

One of the practical problems that the Marines encountered early was the lack of sufficiently detailed maps. Originally their only references were standard 1:50,000-scale tactical maps that showed little of the city detail. One company commander later remarked, “You have to raid the local Texaco station to get your street map. That’s really what you need.”³² Eventually, Cheatham and Gravel secured the necessary maps and numbered the government and municipal buildings and prominent city features. This permitted them to coordinate their efforts more closely.

Making the problem even more difficult was the initial prohibition on using artillery support and close air support. The Marines had a vast arsenal of heavy weapons at their disposal: 105mm, 155mm, and eight-inch howitzers, helicopter gunships, close air support from fighter-bombers, and naval gunfire from destroyers and cruisers with five-inch, six-inch, and eight-inch guns standing just offshore. However, because of the initial

rules of engagement that sought to limit damage to the city, these resources were not available to the Marines at the beginning of the battle.

Even after Lieutenant General Lam lifted the ban on the use of fire support south of the river on 3 February, the Marines could not depend on air support or artillery because of the close quarters and the low-lying cloud cover. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel later explained part of the difficulty, "Artillery in an area like that is not terribly effective because you can't observe it well enough. You lose the rounds in the buildings in the street...and you have a difficult time with perspective."³³ Additionally, the poor weather, which also greatly limited close air support, had a negative impact on the utility of artillery because the rounds had to be adjusted by sound when the flashes were swallowed by the low clouds and fog.

The Marines had other firepower at their disposal. They used tanks to support their advance, but found they were unwieldy in close quarters and drew antitank fire nearly every time they advanced. The Marines were much more enthusiastic about the ONTOS with its six 106mm recoilless rifles, which were used very effectively in the direct fire mode to suppress enemy positions and to blow holes in the buildings so the Marines could advance.³⁴ Despite their preference for the 106mm recoilless rifle, the Marines made use of every weapon at their disposal in order to dislodge the PAVN and VC troops.

Progress was slow, methodical, and costly. On 5 February, there was a particularly bloody battle when Captain Christmas' H/2/5 Marines took the Thua Thien province capitol building. Using two tanks and 106mm recoilless rifles mounted on Mechanical Mules (a flat-bedded, self-propelled carrier about the size of a jeep), the Marines advanced against intense automatic weapons fire, rockets, and mortars. Responding with their own mortars and CS gas, the Marines finally overwhelmed the defenders in mid-afternoon.

The province headquarters had assumed a symbolic importance to both sides. A National Liberation Front flag had flown from the flagpole in front of the headquarters since the initial Communist takeover of the city. As a CBS television crew filmed the event, the Marines tore down the enemy ensign and raised the Stars and Stripes. This was a politically sensitive situation; the Marines should have turned over the provincial headquarters building to the ARVN and continued the fight, but Captain Christmas told his gunnery sergeant, "We've been looking at that damn North Vietnamese flag all day, and now we're going to take it down."³⁵ To Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, this proved to be the turning point of the battle for Hue. He later said, "When we took the province headquarters, we broke their back. That was a rough one."³⁶

The provincial headquarters had served as the command post of the PAVN 4th Regiment. With its loss, the integrity of the North Vietnamese defenses south of the river began to falter. However, the fighting was far from over. Despite the rapid adaptation of the Marines to street fighting, it was not until 11 February that the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, reached the confluence of the river and the canal. Two days later, the Marines crossed into the western suburbs of Hue, aiming to link up with troopers of the 1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne Division, who were moving in toward the city. By 14 February, most of the city south of the river was in American hands, but mopping up operations would take another 12 days as rockets and mortar rounds continued to fall and isolated snipers harassed Marine patrols. Control of that sector of the city was returned to the South Vietnamese government. It had been very costly for the Marines, who sustained 38 dead and 320 wounded. It had been even more costly for the Communists; the bodies of over a thousand VC and PAVN soldiers were strewn about the city south of the river.³⁷

While the Marines had fought for the southern part of the city, the battle north of the river had continued to rage. Despite the efforts of the US units trying to seal off Hue from outside reinforcement, Communist troops and supplies made it into the city from the west and north, and even on boats coming down the river. On 1 February, the 2nd ARVN Airborne Battalion and the 7th ARVN Cavalry had recaptured the Tay Loc airfield inside the Citadel, but only after suffering heavy casualties (including the death of the cavalry squadron commander) and losing 12 armored personnel carriers. Later that day, US Marine helicopters brought part of the 4th Battalion, 2nd ARVN Regiment, from Dong Ha into the Citadel. Once on the ground, the ARVN attempted to advance, but were not able to make much headway in rooting out the North Vietnamese. By 4 February, the ARVN advance north of the river had effectively stalled among the houses, alleys, and narrow streets adjacent to the Citadel wall to the northwest and southwest, leaving the Communists still in possession of the Imperial Palace and most of the surrounding area.

On the night of 6-7 February, the PAVN counterattacked and forced the ARVN troops to pull back to the Tay Loc airfield. At the same time, the North Vietnamese rushed additional reinforcements into the city. Brigadier General Truong responded by redeploying his forces, ordering the 3rd ARVN Regiment to move into the Citadel to take up positions around the division headquarters compound. By the evening of 7 February, Truong's forces inside the Citadel included four airborne battalions, the Black Panther company, two armored cavalry squadrons, the 3rd ARVN Regiment,

the 4th Battalion from the 2nd ARVN Regiment, and a company from the 1st ARVN Regiment.

Despite the ARVN buildup inside the Citadel, Truong's troops still failed to make any headway against the dug-in North Vietnamese, who had burrowed deeply into the walls and tightly packed buildings. All the time, the PAVN and VC seemed to be getting stronger as reinforcements made it into the city. With his troops stalled, an embarrassed and frustrated Truong was forced into appealing to III MAF for help. On 10 February, Lieutenant General Cushman sent a message to Brigadier General LaHue directing him to move a Marine battalion to the Citadel. LaHue ordered Maj. Robert Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, to prepare for movement to Hue. On 11 February, helicopters lifted two platoons of Company B into the ARVN HQ complex (the third platoon from the unit was forced to turn back when their pilot was wounded by ground fire). Twenty-four hours later, Company A, with five tanks attached, plus the missing platoon from Company B, made the journey by landing craft across the river from the MACV compound, along the moat to the east of the Citadel and through a breach in the northeast wall. The next day Company C joined the rest of the battalion. Once inside the Citadel, the Marines were ordered to relieve the 1st Vietnamese Airborne Task Force in the southeastern section of the Citadel. At the same time, two battalions of Vietnamese Marines moved into the southwest corner of the Citadel with orders to sweep west. This buildup of allied forces inside the Citadel put intense pressure on the Communist forces, but they stood their ground and redoubled efforts to hold their positions.

The following day, after conferring with President Nguyen Van Thieu, Lieutenant General Lam authorized allied forces to use whatever weapons were necessary to dislodge the enemy from the Citadel. Only the Imperial Palace remained off limits for artillery and close air support.

The mission of the 1/5 Marines was to advance down the east wall of the Citadel toward the river, with the Imperial Palace on their right. At 0815 on 13 February, Company A moved out under a bone-chilling rain, following the wall toward a distinctive archway tower. As they neared the tower, North Vietnamese troops opened up on them with automatic weapons and rockets from concealed positions that they had dug into the base of the tower. The thick masonry of the construction protected the enemy defenders from all the fire being brought to bear on them. Within minutes, several Marines lay dying and 30 more were wounded, including Capt. John J. Bowe, Jr., the company commander. These troops, fresh from operations in Phu Loc, just north of the Hai Van Pass, were

unfamiliar with both the situation and city fighting; finding themselves “surrounded by houses, gardens, stores, buildings two and three stories high, and paved roads littered with abandoned vehicles, the riflemen felt out of their element.”³⁸

Under heavy enemy fire, the Marine advance stalled; in the first assault on the south wall, the Marines lost 15 killed and 40 wounded. Major Thompson pulled Company A back and replaced them with Company C, flanked by Company B. Once again, the Marines were raked by heavy small arms, machine gun, and rocket fire that seemed to come from every direction, but they managed to inch forward, using airstrikes, naval gunfire, and artillery support. The fighting proved even more savage than the battle for the south bank. That night Major Thompson requested artillery fire to help soften up the area for the next day’s attack. At 0800 on 14 May, Thompson renewed the attack, but his Marines made little headway against the entrenched North Vietnamese and VC. It was not until the next day when Capt. Myron C. Harrington’s Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (D/1/5) was inserted into the battle by boat that the wall tower was finally taken, but only after six more Marines were killed and more than 50 wounded. That night, the PAVN retook the tower for a brief period, but Captain Harrington personally led the counterattack to take it back.

On the morning of 16 February, Major Thompson’s Marines continued their push southeast along the Citadel wall. From that point until 22 February, the battle seesawed back and forth while much of the Citadel was pounded to rubble by close air support, artillery, and heavy weapons fire. The bitter hand-to-hand fighting went on relentlessly. The Marines were operating in a defender’s paradise—row after row of single story, thick-walled masonry houses jammed close together up against a solid wall riddled with spiderholes and other enemy fighting positions. The Marines discovered that the North Vietnamese units in the Citadel employed “better city-fighting tactics, improved the already formidable defenses, dug trenches, built roadblocks and conducted counterattacks to regain redoubts which were important to...[their] defensive scheme.”³⁹ The young Marines charged into the buildings, throwing grenades before them, clearing one room at a time. It was a battle fought meter by meter; each enemy strongpoint had to be reduced with close quarter fighting. No sooner had one position been taken than the North Vietnamese opened up from another.

M-48 tanks and ONTOS were available, but these tracked vehicles found it extremely difficult to maneuver in the narrow streets and

tight alleys of the Citadel. At first, the 90mm tank guns were ineffective against the concrete and stone houses; the shells often ricocheted off the thick walls back toward the Marines. The Marine tankers then switched to concrete-piercing fused shells that “resulted in excellent penetration and walls were breached with two to four rounds.”⁴⁰ Then the tanks proved invaluable in assisting the infantry assault. One Marine rifleman later stated: “If it had not been for the tanks, we could not have pushed through that section of the city. They [the North Vietnamese] seemed to have bunkers everywhere.”⁴¹

As a result of the intense fighting, Hue was being reduced to rubble, block by block. By the end of the battle, estimates tallied ten thousand houses either totally destroyed or damaged, roughly 40 percent of the city.⁴² Many of the dead and wounded were trapped in the rubble homes and courtyards. Enemy troops killed by the Marines and South Vietnamese troops lay where they had fallen. One of the MACV advisers later wrote: “The bodies, bloated and vermin infested, attracted rats and stray dogs. So, because of public health concerns, details were formed to bury the bodies as quickly as possible.”⁴³ For those who fought in Hue, the stench and horrors of the corpses and the rats would never be forgotten.

By 17 February, 1/5th Marines had suffered 47 killed and 240 wounded in just five days of fighting. Constantly under fire for the whole time, the Leathernecks, numb with fatigue, kept up the fight despite having slept only in three to four-hour snatches during the battle and most not even stopping to eat. The fighting was so intense that the medics and doctors had a very difficult time keeping up with the casualties. To take the place of the mounting casualties, Marine replacements were brought in during the battle, but many of them were killed or wounded before their squad leaders could even learn their names. Some replacements arrived in Hue directly upon their completion of infantry training at Camp Pendleton, California. The rapid rate of attrition was evident in that there were Marine KIAs found still wearing their stateside fatigues and boots.⁴⁴

On 18 February, with what was left of his battalion completely exhausted and nearly out of ammunition, Major Thompson chose to rest his troops in preparation for a renewal of the attack. They needed time to clean their weapons, stock up on ammunition, tend the walking wounded, and gird themselves for the next round of bitter fighting. The following morning, Thompson and his Marines resumed the attack toward the Imperial Palace. They inched forward, paying dearly for every bit

of ground taken. After 24 more hours of bitter fighting, they secured the wall on 19 February, but had virtually spent themselves in doing so.

As the US Marines had fought their way slowly toward the Imperial Palace, the Vietnamese Marine task force entered the battle. At 0900 on the 14th, the South Vietnamese launched their attack from an area south of the 1st ARVN Division headquarters compound to the west. They were then to make a left turning movement to take the southwest sector of the Citadel, but did not get that far because they immediately ran into heavy resistance from strong enemy forces as they engaged in heavy house-to-house fighting. During the next two days, the South Vietnamese advanced less than 400 meters. To the north of the Vietnamese Marines, the 3rd ARVN Infantry Regiment in the northwest sector of the Citadel was having problems of its own and making little progress. On the 14th, the enemy forces broke out of their salient west of the Tay Loc airfield and cut off the 1st Battalion, 3rd ARVN Regiment in the western corner of the Citadel. It would take two days for the ARVN to break the encirclement, and then only after bitter fighting.

It was later learned that the enemy was having his own problems. On the night of 14 February, a US Marine forward observer with ARVN troops inside the Citadel, monitoring enemy radio frequencies, learned that the PAVN were planning a battalion-size attack by reinforcements through the west gate of the Citadel. The forward observer called in Marine 155mm howitzers and all available naval gunfire on preplanned targets around the west gate and the moat bridge leading to it. The forward observer reported that he had heard "screaming on the radio" monitoring the PAVN net.⁴⁵ Later, it was confirmed by additional radio intercepts that the artillery and naval gunfire had caught the North Vietnamese battalion coming across the moat bridge, killing a high-ranking North Vietnamese officer and a large number of the fresh troops.

Shortly after this incident, US intelligence determined that the PAVN and VC were staging out of a base camp 18 kilometers west of the city and that reinforcements from that area were entering the Citadel using the west gate. Additionally, a new enemy battalion had been identified west of the city and a new regimental headquarters two kilometers north of the city with at least one battalion. Acting on this intelligence, elements of the US 1st Cavalry Division, were ordered to launch coordinated assaults on the city from their blocking positions to the west. On 21 February, the 1st Cavalry troopers attacked and were able to move up to seal off the western wall of the Citadel, thus depriving the North Vietnamese of incoming supplies and reinforcements and precipitating a rapid deterioration of the enemy's strength inside the Citadel. The

North Vietnamese were now fighting a rear guard action, but they still fought for every inch of ground and continued to throw replacements into the fight.

As elements of the 1st Cav advanced toward Hue from the west and action continued in the Citadel, fire support coordination became a major concern. On 21 February, Brig. Gen. Oscar E. Davis, one of the two Assistant Division Commanders for the 1st Cav, flew into the Citadel to take overall control of the situation in order to serve as the area's fire support coordinator. He co-located his headquarters with Brigadier General Truong in the 1st ARVN Division headquarters compound.

For the final assault on the Imperial Palace itself, a fresh unit, Capt. John D. Niotis's Company L, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, was brought in. By 22 February, the Communists held only the southwestern corner of the Citadel. Niotis led his Marines along the wall to breach the outer perimeter of the palace. Once inside, they were faced by devastating fire from the entrenched Communists. Niotis ordered his Marines to pull back so plans could be made for another approach.

While the Marines prepared for the next assault on the Imperial City, it was decided that it was politically expedient to have the Palace liberated by the South Vietnamese.⁴⁶ On the night of 23-24 February, the 2nd Battalion, 3rd ARVN Regiment, launched a surprise attack westward along the wall in the southeastern section of the Citadel. The North Vietnamese were caught off guard by the attack, but quickly recovered. A savage battle ensued, but the South Vietnamese pressed the attack. The Communists, deprived of their supply centers to the west by the link-up between the 1st Cavalry and 2/5th Marines, fell back. Included in the ground gained by the South Vietnamese attack was the plot upon which stood the Citadel flagpole. At dawn on the 24th, the South Vietnamese flag replaced the Viet Cong banner that had flown from the Citadel flagpole for 25 days. Later that day, the ARVN 1st Division reached the outer walls of the Citadel, where it linked up with elements of the 1st Cavalry Division. The last Communist positions were quickly overrun by the allied forces or were abandoned by VC and North Vietnamese troops, who fled westward to sanctuaries in Laos.

On 2 March 1968, the battle for Hue was officially declared over. It had been a bitter ordeal. The relief of Hue was the longest sustained infantry battle the war had seen to that point. The losses had been high. In the 26 days of combat, the ARVN lost 384 killed and more than 1,800 wounded, plus 30 missing in action. The US Marines suffered 147 dead

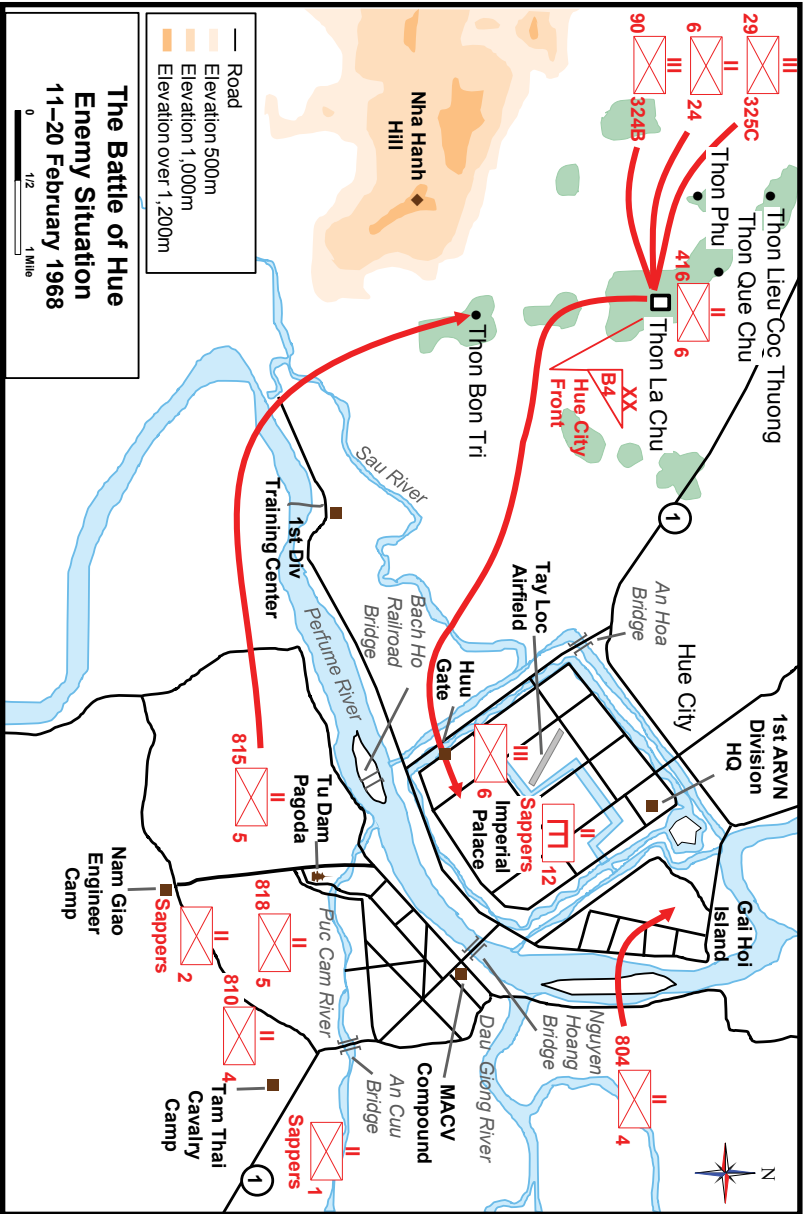


Figure 5.1. The Battle of Hue: Enemy Situation. Map courtesy of CSI Press staff.

and 857 wounded. The US Army suffered 74 dead and 507 wounded. The allies claimed over 5,000 Communists killed in the city and an estimated 3,000 killed in the fighting in the surrounding area.

Although the US command had tried to limit damage to the city by relying on extremely accurate 8-inch howitzers and naval gunfire, the house-to-house fighting took its toll and much of the once beautiful city lay in rubble. In the 26 days of fighting to retake Hue, 40 percent of the city was destroyed, and 116,000 civilians were made homeless (out of a pre-Tet population of 140,000).⁴⁷ Aside from this battle damage, the civilian population suffered terrible losses from the communist attackers: some 5,800 were reported killed or missing. In the months after the battle was over, South Vietnamese authorities discovered that Viet Cong death squads had systematically eliminated South Vietnamese government leaders and employees. Nearly 3,000 corpses were found in mass graves—most shot, bludgeoned to death, or buried alive, almost all with their hands tied behind their backs.⁴⁸ The victims included soldiers, civil servants, merchants, clergymen, schoolteachers, intellectuals, and foreigners. It was estimated that many of the other missing South Vietnamese were executed by the VC and PAVN during the battle or as they withdrew from the Citadel.

The fighting had been intense and bloody, but in the end the allies had ejected the Communists and recaptured the city. The battle of Hue is a textbook study of the difficulties involved in combat in an urban area. There are a number of factors that played a key role in the conduct of the battle and are worthy of particular note; they include intelligence, command and control, training, rules of engagement, medical support, and population control.

Intelligence, or the lack thereof, had a major impact on the course of the battle for Hue. The intelligence system completely failed to anticipate that an attack on Hue was imminent. Even when there were attack indicators, they were not provided to the commanders on the ground who could have best used the warning. Once the attack was launched, the intelligence systems failed to provide an adequate appreciation for enemy strength and intentions in Hue. This greatly inhibited the effectiveness of the allied response, especially in the early days of the battle when both the ARVN and Marines were unclear as to how many enemy units were in the city. This resulted in a piecemeal approach that saw units thrown into battle against vastly superior numbers.

Command and control was also a crucial factor. The division of labor between the ARVN, Marine, and Army forces resulted in a lack of coor-

dination and unity of effort that inhibited the attempt to retake the city. This can be seen even before the battle began. When a radio intercept indicated that an attack on Hue was impending, it was the convoluted command channels that led to a sluggish response and the failure of the Hue defenders to be alerted in time.⁴⁹ Until Brigadier General Davis was placed in overall charge on 21 February, the various allied forces had acted in isolation of each other. The Marines took their orders from Task Force X-Ray, the ARVN obeyed the commands of Brigadier General Truong, and the US Army troops to the west, largely ignorant of what the Marines and ARVN forces were doing inside the city, operated on their own. The result was three separate battles that raged simultaneously with no overall commander coordinating allied efforts. By the time that Brigadier General Davis was given overall control, the battle was effectively over. As one Marine later remarked, Brigadier General Davis “didn’t have anything to coordinate, but he had the name.”⁵⁰

The lack of an overall hands-on commander meant that there was no general battle plan for retaking Hue, no one to set priorities, no one to deconflict the requests for artillery and close air support, and no one person to accept the responsibility if things went wrong. Also, there was no overall system to ensure an equitable distribution of logistical resupply. The Marines and Army scrambled to take care of their own, and the ARVN got next to nothing. It was a command arrangement that almost guaranteed difficulty in achieving any meaningful unity of effort.

The command and control situation caused problems in other areas as well. With no single commander orchestrating the battle, it was difficult to coordinate the isolation of the city from outside reinforcement as the Marines and South Vietnamese tried to clear the city. This permitted the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to rush replacements in to take the place of the troops they lost during the intense fighting. Thus, they were able to replenish their ranks even as the fighting intensified and after they began to take increasing numbers of casualties. When the elements of the 1st Cavalry Division effectively sealed the city from the northwest on 21 February, it had a decisive impact on the battle inside the city. Perhaps this could have been achieved earlier had there been a single commander to better synchronize the efforts of the units outside the city with those fighting inside the city.

The command and control situation additionally had the potential for increased fratricide because of the lack of coordination between the battles north of the river and those south of the river. The piecemeal insertion of forces also contributed to the potential of fratricide, as can be seen in the incident on 3 February.

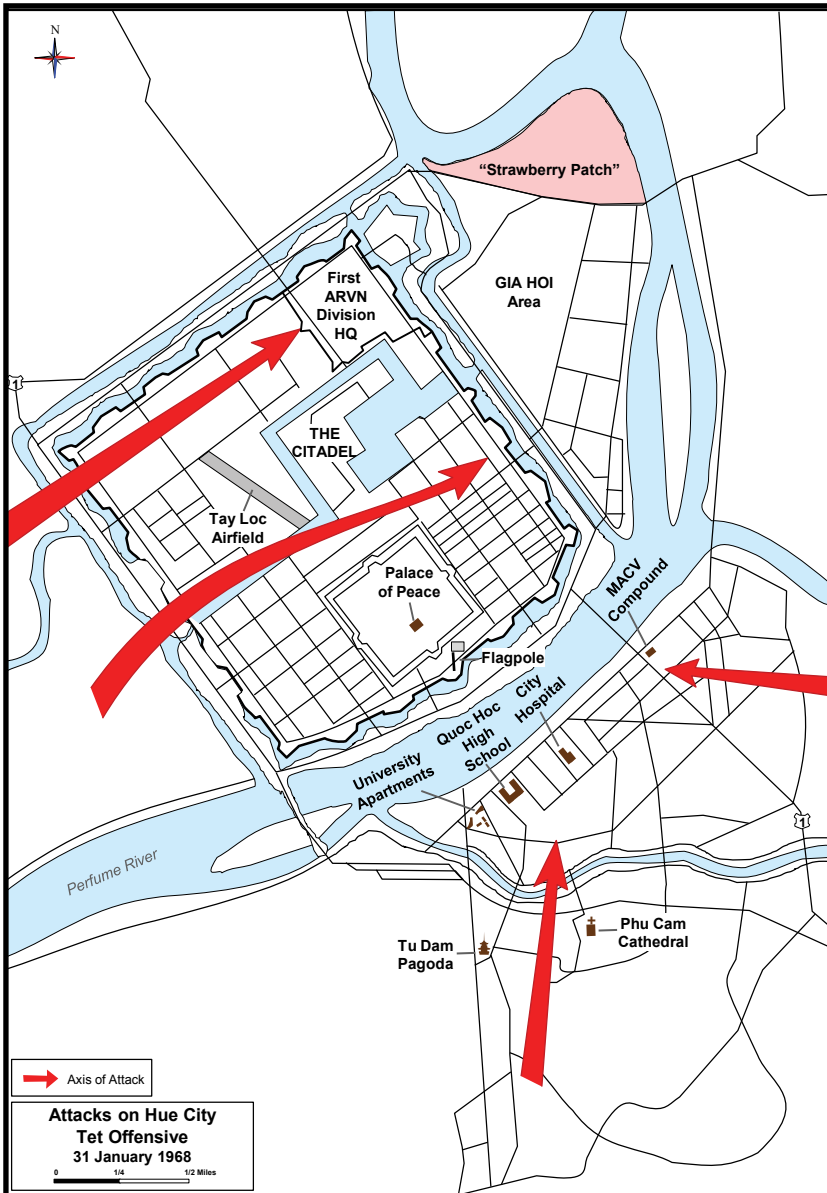


Figure 5.2. Attacks on Hue City. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

Training played a key role in the conduct of the battle for Hue, particularly on the part of the Marines from TF X-Ray. The struggle for the city was made even more difficult by the fact that the allies were unprepared for the type of fighting required during combat in a built-up area like Hue. The Marines who played such a crucial role in the retaking of the

city were accustomed to fighting an enemy in jungle or open terrain away from populated areas of any significance. They had no training for urban warfare and essentially had to develop their own tactics, techniques, and procedures as they went along. The first three days of the battle had been a bloody learning process as the Marines went through what was in effect on-the-job training in house-to-house fighting.

Not having any previous experience with fighting in a city, the Marines had to learn by trial and error. The tactics that they had used so effectively in previous operations in I Corps had little application inside the city. The Marines had to devise ways to defeat the entrenched enemy who used the myriad of buildings, walls, and towers so effectively.⁵¹ Different techniques were tried. One of the best utilized an eight-man team. Four riflemen covered the exits while two men rushed the building with grenades and two other riflemen provided covering fire. The team would rotate the responsibilities among the eight men and move on to the next building. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, commander of 2/5 Marines, later described the tactics used: "We hope to kill them inside or flush them out the back for the four men watching the exits. Then, taking the next building, two other men rush the front. It sounds simple but the timing has to be just as good as a football play."⁵²

The Marines learned quickly that more heavy weapons were needed. Tactics of fire and maneuver would not work in street fighting without the threat of heavy weapons. Objectives often could be reached only by going through buildings. Tanks, 106mm recoilless rifles, and 3.5-inch rocket launchers proved essential in the house-to-house fighting. The rocket launchers, called "bazookas" in WW II, were easily the more portable and, according to some Marines, the most effective.⁵³ The 106mm recoilless rifles were also extremely effective. They were used in three ways. The gun could be employed singularly, either mounted on jeeps or mules or carted around by hand (even though it weighed over 400 pounds dismounted). Or, it could be used in a unit of six on the ON-TOS tracked vehicles. The Marines used these weapons to create holes in compound walls and the sides of buildings, through which they would rush. They were also extremely useful for providing suppressive fire and as counter-sniper weapons.

Tear gas was used as an effective weapon to chase enemy troops from their bunkers and spider holes. The Marines had tried using smoke grenades on the treasury building south of the river, but what little smoke they produced was quickly dispersed by the breeze coming off the river. One Marine officer suggested using an E8 tear gas launcher, which he had seen

stacked against the wall of an ARVN compound adjacent to the MACV compound. The launcher, about two feet high, could hurl as many as 64 35mm tear gas projectiles up to 250 meters in four five-second bursts of 16 each. Unlike the grenades, the E8 could flood an entire area so that every room and bunker would be permeated by the gas. The Marines used the CS dispenser very successfully throughout the remainder of the battle, and one company commander credited this approach with limiting his casualties during the fighting.⁵⁴

In the early days of the battle when the Marines were trying to work out ways to deal with the entrenched enemy in the city, they had to do it largely without the artillery and close air support that they were so accustomed to using. The rules of engagement initially agreed upon by the allied senior commanders limited the use of artillery and close air support to minimize the damage to the historic and symbolic city. This made it extremely difficult during the early days of the battle for the Marines to dig the North Vietnamese out of their prepared positions inside the city. These restrictions, which the Marines generally obeyed, were later abandoned when the allies argued successfully that adhering to that standing order was causing unacceptable casualties. Nicholas Warr, who had served as a platoon leader in C Company, 1/5 Marines, during the battle for Hue later wrote, “These damnable rules of engagement...prevented American fighting men from using the only tactical assets that gave us an advantage during firefights—that of our vastly superior firepower represented by air strikes, artillery and naval gunfire—these orders continued to remain in force and hinder, wound and kill 1/5 Marines until the fourth day of fighting inside the Citadel of Hue.”⁵⁵

Because of the initial restrictions on artillery and air strikes and the fact that most of the available artillery from Phu Bai was directed at interdiction of enemy escape routes to the rear and not on the city itself, the Marines had to use their own mortars for close-in fire support, using them as a “hammer” on top of the buildings. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham later observed, “If you put enough [mortar] rounds on the top of a building, pretty soon the roof falls in.”⁵⁶ The mortars also proved useful against enemy soldiers fleeing from buildings being assaulted by the Marines. By pre-registering on both the objective building and the street to that building’s rear, the Marines were able to inflict heavy casualties by shifting fire from the objective to the rear street as they pushed the enemy soldiers out the building.⁵⁷

The intensity of the bitter fighting resulted in a tremendous amount of casualties. Because the bad weather inhibited medical evacuation by heli-

copter, it soon became apparent that there was a need for forward medical facilities. The 1st Marine Regiment established the regimental aid station at the MACV compound with eight doctors in attendance. This facility provided emergency care and coordinated all medical evacuation. Each of the forward battalions had its own aid station. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, commander of 2/5 Marines, later lauded this highly responsive medical support, declaring that it was “a throwback to World War II. [I] had my doctor...one block behind the frontline treating the people right there.”⁵⁸ The Marines used trucks, mechanical mules, and any available transportation to carry the wounded back to the aid stations. From there, Marine and Army helicopters were used for further evacuation, often times flying with a 100-foot ceiling. In the battle for Hue, if a Marine reached an aid station alive, his chances of survival were close to 99 percent.⁵⁹

Due to the heavy fighting in the city, population control quickly became a problem. In urban warfare, the people are often caught in the middle between the two opposing forces. Hue was no exception. The initial attack provided the first trickle of civilians seeking refuge in the relative safety of the MACV compound. The trickle would become a flood over the next weeks, creating a logistical and security nightmare for the US and South Vietnamese forces in Hue, as the refugee problem reached staggering proportions. Every turn in the fighting flushed out hundreds of Vietnamese civilians of every age. Whole families were able to survive the shelling and street warfare by taking refuge in small bunkers they had constructed in their homes. Out of the rubble came old men, women, and children, waving pieces of white cloth attached to sticks. Something had to be done about this growing flood of refugees and displaced persons as the battle continued to rage.

A US Army major from the MACV advisory team was placed in charge of coordinating the effort to manage the refugee situation. Temporary housing was found at a complex near the MACV compound and at Hue University, where the number of refugees swelled to 22,000. Another 40,000 displaced persons were in the Citadel area across the river. Most of the refugees were innocent civilians, but some were enemy soldiers or sympathizers—and many were ARVN troops trapped at home on leave for the Tet holidays. All of these ARVN soldiers who were fit for duty were put to use helping the Marines and MACV advisors with the refugees.

In addition to dealing with shelter for the refugees, US and South Vietnamese officials had to restore city services, including water and power; eliminate health hazards, including burying the dead; and secure food. With the assistance of the local Catholic hierarchy and American resour-

es and personnel, the South Vietnamese government officials tried to restore order and normalcy in the city. By the end of February, a full-time refugee administrator was in place and the local government slowly began to function once more.

In conclusion, the battle of Hue is worthy of study when considering the complexities and requirements for urban operations. It was a bloody affair that resulted in a severe casualty toll, largely because of the aforementioned reasons, not the least of which were intelligence failures and lack of centralized command and control. It was only through the valor of the individual Marines and soldiers, both American and South Vietnamese, that they prevailed against a determined enemy under combat conditions in an urban environment that far exceeded anything that any of the allies had previously experienced. However, the victory at Hue proved irrelevant in the long run. Despite the overwhelming tactical victory achieved by the allies in the city and on the other battlefields throughout South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive proved to be a strategic defeat for the United States. US public opinion, affected in large part by the media coverage of the early days of the offensive, began to shift away from support for the war.⁶⁰ On 31 March 1968, the full impact of the Tet offensive was demonstrated when President Lyndon Baines Johnson announced a halt of all bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th parallel and gave notice that he would not seek reelection to a second term in the White House. Thus, the Communists won a great strategic victory. However, in doing so, they lost an estimated 30,000 fighters and the Viet Cong would never recover. Nevertheless, the Tet Offensive resulted in a sea change in US policy in Vietnam and the United States soon began its long disengagement from the war.

Despite the outcome of the war, the battle of Hue remains a classic study in urban warfare that clearly demonstrates not only the rigors and demands of fighting in a built-up area, but also the valor and fortitude demanded of the soldiers who are to fight in such situations. The Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers retook the city from the Communists and paid for the effort in blood; many of the lessons they learned the hard way are just as valid for urban fighting today as they were in 1968.

Notes

1. US military troop strength reached its peak of 543,300 in April, 1969.
2. Transcript of Westmoreland's speech in Peter Braestrup, *Big Story*, 2 vols. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), II: 3-10.
3. For best discussion of the contentious debate that led to the launching of the Tet Offensive, see Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 87-108.
4. The Viet Minh defeated the French forces in a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954 after a two-month siege. The French subsequently withdrew from Vietnam. See Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004).
5. Several attacks were launched prematurely against five provincial capitals in II Corps Tactical Zone and Da Nang in I Corps Tactical Zone in the early morning hours of 30 January. These early attacks, now credited to enemy coordination problems, provided at least some warning, but many in Saigon continued to believe that these attacks were only meant to divert attention away from Khe Sanh.
6. Edward F. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam: From Da Nang to the DMZ, Marine Corps Campaigns, 1965-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1997), 189.
7. The Viet Cong, or as it was more properly known, the People's liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), included regular forces, called main force VC, full-time guerrillas, and a part-time self-defense militia. The main force VC battalions were organized, trained, and equipped similarly to the PAVN battalions.
8. Pham Van Son, *Tet - 1968* (Salisbury, NC: Documentary Publications, 1980), 458.
9. Van Son, 459.
10. Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!* (New York: Avon, 1972), 225.
11. George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2000), 17; Keith W. Nolan, *Battle for Hue* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 3.
12. James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 98.
13. Pham Van Son, *Tet - 1968*, 272-276.
14. Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968, A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 141.
15. Jack Shulimson, Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith and David A. Dawson. *US Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1997), 171.
16. Shulimson, et al., 172.
17. Shulimson, et al., 173.
18. Shulimson, et al., 174.
19. Shulimson, et al., 174.
20. Shulimson, et al., 174.
21. Westmoreland message to Wheeler, dated 31 January 68, Westmoreland Messages, Westmoreland Papers, Center of Military History, quoted in Shulimson, et al., *US Marines in Vietnam*, 174.

22. Quoted in Shulimson, et al., *US Marines in Vietnam*, 176.
23. Shulimson, et al., 176.
24. 1st Marines (Rein), 1st Marine Division (Rein) Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY), dated 20 March 1968, 11 (hereafter referred to as 1st Marines AAR).
25. 1st Marines AAR, 13; Marine quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 176.
26. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam*, 198-199.
27. Quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 179-180.
28. Shulimson, et al., 179-180.
29. Shulimson, et al., 182.
30. 1st Marines AAR, 79.
31. Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History* (New York: Penguin Book, 1997), 545.
32. Quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 185.
33. Shulimson, et al., 186.
34. Shulimson, et al., 186.
35. Quoted in Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam*, 206; Nolan, 77-9.
36. Quoted in Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 161.
37. Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 191.
38. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam*, 209.
39. Quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 201.
40. 1st Marines AAR, 80.
41. Quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 202.
42. Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 183.
43. Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 162.
44. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam*, 213.
45. Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 204-205.
46. Shulimson, et al., 211; Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 172.
47. Shulimson, et al, 219.
48. Shulimson, et al., 214.
49. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive*, 98.
50. Quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 223.
51. 1st Marines AAR, 79.
52. Quoted in Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 141-142.
53. 1st Marines AAR, 81.
54. Capt. G. R. Christmas, "A Company Commander Reflects on Operations Hue City," in *The Marines in Vietnam 1954-1973, An Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Edwin H. Simmons, et al (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 1974), 162.
55. Nicholas Warr, *Phase Line Green: the Battle for Hue, 1968* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 124.
56. Quoted in Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 188.
57. Christmas, "A Company Commander Reflects on Operations Hue City," 161-162.

58. Shulimson, et al, *US Marines in Vietnam*, 219.

59. Shulimson, et al., 219.

60. There are indications that public opinion had already begun to shift by the end of 1967, but the Tet Offensive certainly accelerated this shift.

Chapter 6

Intelligence Failures on Both Sides in the Tet Offensive

In the first two days of the Tet Offensive, which began on 30 January 1968, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops attacked 39 of South Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals, five of six largest cities to include Saigon, 71 of 242 district capitals, some 50 hamlets, virtually every allied airfield, and many other key military installations. The offensive stunned the White House, MACV, and the American people. Adding to the impact of the surprise attacks was that they followed in the wake of assurances from both the military and the Johnson administration that progress was being made in the war and that the end was in sight.¹ Despite the fact that the Communists were soundly defeated at the tactical level in the bitter fighting of 1968, the Tet Offensive resulted in a great psychological victory that proved to be the turning point of the war which set into motion the events that would lead to Richard Nixon's election, the long and bloody US withdrawal from South East Asia and ultimately to the fall of South Vietnam.

Enemy Intelligence Indicators

Any consideration of Tet and its aftermath must always begin by asking how the Communist offensive achieved such a stunning surprise. US military intelligence analysts knew that the Communists were planning something. Still, there were many indicators that the enemy was planning to make a major shift in its strategy to win the war. One of the first indications of this change came in March 1967 when South Vietnamese troops captured a document that made the first mention of a major direct assault on Saigon. Over the ensuing months, there would be a steady stream of additional indicators.

That the enemy might be up to something began to become apparent in April and May when there were a series of sharp fights between US Marines and North Vietnamese troops in the hills surrounding the remote base at Khe Sanh near the Laotian border in I Corps. At about the same

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time, additional North Vietnamese forces launched the first of numerous attempts to capture or destroy the Marine base at Con Thien, located just south of the DMZ. In both cases, the engagements were different than the normal pattern of enemy attacks—more intense and longer in duration. Why the enemy was increasing the level of combat in those particular areas would not become apparent until much later.

On 16 October 1967, ARVN units in the Mekong Delta found a three-page memorandum from the regional party committee, dated 2 September, that used the phrase “winter-spring campaign” and discussed preparations for a new offensive. On 25 October, ARVN units operating in the Tay Ninh area captured another document, which discussed a three-pronged offensive designed to defeat the South Vietnamese forces, destroy US political and military institutions, and instigate a countrywide insurrection of the popular masses. According to the captured document, this projected offensive bore the abbreviated designation TCK-TKN for Tong Cong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia (General Offensive-General Uprising).² At about the same time, ARVN troops captured yet another document that discussed sapper training and techniques for VC and PAVN personnel to use against South Vietnamese mechanized equipment.

On 27 October, the Communists attacked Loc Ninh, a district capital in Binh Long Province, III Corps. Contrary to normal practice, they tried to hold the town, suffering terribly when US forces supported by artillery and air support drove them out. Intelligence officers were puzzled as to why the enemy had stood and fought, risking certain heavy losses for what was essentially a meaningless objective. This battle marked the first time that the Communists had staged coordinated attacks by large units from different divisions. It would later become known that the VC had been practicing urban assault tactics and large-scale coordinated attacks in preparation for the coming offensive.

On 4 November, a US patrol operating in the Central Highlands southwest of the village of Dak To ran into a North Vietnamese main force unit dug into a hillside. As at Loc Ninh, the Communists stayed and fought, sending in elements of the NVA 1st Division and two additional regiments to continue the battle which lasted for two weeks. The intensity and duration of the fighting at Dak To did not conform to the normal engagement pattern of the Communist forces in the region.

In addition to the attack at Loc Ninh and the intense fighting at Dak To, there were other signs that something unusual was afoot. There had been a flurry of attacks in Dinh Tuong province, where traditionally the VC tested

new tactics. Additionally, intelligence indicated that Communist desertion rates were down; several reports indicated that this was because the enemy troops had apparently been told that victory was near and that the entire country would soon be liberated.

Over the next two months, several other captured documents indicated that a new offensive was in the offing. Perhaps the best known of these documents was a military directive issued by COSVN B-3 Front Command, which controlled Communist operations in the central part of South Vietnam. This document fell into allied hands in mid-November 1967. It called for “many large scale, well-coordinated combat operations” to “destroy or disintegrate a large part of the Puppet [ARVN] army.” Of particular note were directions to “annihilate a major US element in order to force the enemy to deploy as many additional troops to the Western highlands as possible.”³

On 19 November the picture became clearer when US troopers from the 2nd Battalion, 327th Airborne, operating in Quang Tin Province in I Corps, captured a thirteen-page notebook containing a document entitled “Ho Chi Minh’s Order for Implementation of General Counteroffensive and General Uprising during 1967 Winter and 1968 Spring and Summer.” This document was translated and disseminated to both US and South Vietnamese intelligence agencies in the form of a detailed memorandum from the Defense Intelligence Agency. The US Embassy in Saigon even put out a press release containing a number of details from the notebook and document. Still, the dissemination of this intelligence appears not to have had a major impact on allied thinking or preparations.

On 25 November 1967, allied forces in Tay Ninh province captured a ten-page document. Dated 1 September 1967, it was essentially a training manual entitled “Clearly Understand the New Situation and Mission: Take Advantage of Victories to Surge Forward and Complete Defeat the US and Puppet Enemy.” It contained a general outline of the strategy and objectives of a new offensive.

Thus, there was a good deal of fairly explicit intelligence available to the US and South Vietnamese in the last few months leading up to the offensive—intelligence that gave indications of significant action pending by the Communists. In late November, the CIA station in Saigon compiled all the various intelligence indicators and published a report called “The Big Gamble.” This was not really a formal intelligence estimate or even a prediction, but rather “a collection of scraps” that concluded that the Communists were changing their strategy.⁴ This report also put

enemy strength estimates at a much higher level than previously supposed. Military intelligence analysts at MACV strongly disagreed with the CIA's assessment, because at the time, the command was changing the way it was accounting for the enemy and was reducing its estimate of enemy capabilities.

Nevertheless, as more intelligence poured in, Westmoreland and his staff also came to the conclusion that a major "countrywide effort" was probable. All the signs pointed to a new major offensive. Still, most of the increased enemy activity had been along the DMZ and in the areas adjacent to the Cambodian and Laotian borders. Additional intelligence, particularly signals intelligence, revealed that there was a significant build-up in the Khe Sanh area, near the Laotian border in I Corps Tactical Zone. Believing that this was where the main enemy threat lay, General Westmoreland focused much of his attention on the northernmost provinces.

Meanwhile, the indications that the enemy was planning something big continued to pile up. On 4 December, the 198th Light Infantry Brigade operating in Quang Nam Province captured yet another document that apparently was a directive which delineated the objectives for a coming all-out offensive that would be, according to the document, accompanied by VC cadres operating in the populated areas to support an uprising of the people.

On 4 January 1968, US troops in the Central Highlands captured a document entitled Operation Order No. 1, which called for an attack against Pleiku prior to Tet. A few days later, ARVN soldiers captured a similar order for an assault on Ban Me Thuot, although no date was specified.

Just before Christmas 1967, intelligence reports indicated a 200 percent increase in truck traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos in October and November. Westmoreland and his staff realized that the enemy was conducting a major build-up in preparation for some type of new offensive. However, neither Westmoreland, nor any of his intelligence officers, had any inkling that the Communists had the capability to launch such a widespread attack as they did. Westmoreland's focus remained on Khe Sanh where he believed the main enemy threat lay.

Alarmed by the situation developing at Khe Sanh and the new intelligence indicators, Westmoreland requested that the South Vietnamese cancel the coming Tet cease-fire countrywide. On 8 January, the chief of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), Gen. Cao Van Vien, told Westmoreland that he would try to limit the truce to 24 hours. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu argued that to cancel the 48-hour truce would adversely affect the morale of his troops and the South Viet-

namese people. However, he agreed to limit the cease-fire to 36 hours, beginning on the evening of 29 January.

Both Westmoreland and the White House were preoccupied with the developing situation at Khe Sanh. Westmoreland remained convinced that the PAVN buildup in the area presaged a Communist attempt to take the northernmost provinces. Accordingly, Westmoreland ordered the US 1st Cavalry Division from the Central Highlands to Phu Bai just south of Hue. Additionally, he sent one brigade of the 101st Airborne Division to I Corps to strengthen the defenses of the two northernmost provinces. By the end of January, more than half of all US combat maneuver battalions were located in the I Corps area, ready to meet any new threat.

On 21 January, the North Vietnamese began the first large-scale shelling of the Marine base at Khe Sanh, which was followed by sharp fights between the enemy troops and the Marines in the hills surrounding the base. In a message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Westmoreland wrote, "These attacks [20-21 January] were probably preliminary to a full-scale attack on Khe Sanh. I believe that the enemy will attempt a country-wide show of strength just prior to Tet, with Khe Sanh being the main event."⁵

Westmoreland was sure that the bombardment of Khe Sanh was the opening of the long indicated general offensive. The fact that the Khe Sanh situation looked similar to that the French had faced at Dien Bien Phu only added increased attention to the unfolding events there.

At the request of Maj. Gen. Fred C. Weyand, II Field Force commander, Westmoreland approved strengthening Saigon's defenses, but not much else was done in a significant way to strengthen other cities and towns. Westmoreland had already determined, at least as far as he was concerned, that the main enemy thrust would come in the north. When the opening attacks of 30 January were followed by even more widespread attacks the next day and night, MACV and the White House were stunned by the offensive's scope and intensity.

Attack Achieves Maximum Surprise

The Tet Offensive represented, in the words of National Security Council staff member William Jorden, writing in a February 1968 cable to presidential advisor Walt Rostow, "the worst intelligence failure of the war."⁶ Nevertheless, after the war, some of those officers who held posts as commanders and intelligence officers in Vietnam at the time of the Tet Offensive asserted that Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) headquarters was fully aware that there had been a change in North Viet-

namese strategy, but was surprised only by the actual scale and level of coordination of the Tet attacks.⁷

Many historians and other observers discount such claims and have endeavored to understand how the Communists were able to achieve such a stunning level of surprise. There are a number of possible explanations. First, allied estimates of enemy strengths and intentions were flawed. Part of the problem was that MACV, in an effort to show progress in the war, had purposefully downgraded the intelligence estimates about VC/PAVN strength. CIA analyst Sam Adams later charged that MACV actually falsified intelligence reports to show progress in the war.⁸ Whether this accusation was true is subject to debate, but it is a fact that MACV changed the way it counted the enemy, revising enemy strength downward from almost 300,000 to 235,000 in December 1967. US military intelligence analysts apparently believed their own revised estimates and largely disregarded the mounting evidence that the Communists not only retained a significant combat capability but also planned to use that capability in a dramatic fashion.

Former South Vietnamese Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung, in a postwar monograph written for the US Army about the 1968 offensive, asserts that allied intelligence analysts dismissed many of the captured documents as so much wishful thinking on the part of the Communists.⁹ Some analysts felt that the documents represented merely an expression of the hopes and intentions of the Communists, rather than something they clearly had the capabilities to accomplish—at least as those capabilities were known and assessed by allied commanders and intelligence analysts.

Thus, the allies greatly underestimated the capabilities of their enemy and dismissed new intelligence indicators because they too greatly contradicted prevailing assumptions about the enemy's strength and capabilities. It was thought that enemy capabilities were insufficient to support a nationwide campaign. These entrenched beliefs about the enemy served as blinders to the facts, coloring the perceptions of senior allied commanders and intelligence officers when they were presented with intelligence that varied with their preconceived notions.

In the same vein, enemy documents and other evidence were discounted because the analysts did not think that the Communists would want to incur inevitable heavy losses for such questionable objectives. Even if the Communists could occupy any cities, did they have the strength to hold them against the strong reaction of the allied forces? Thus, the reports did not pass the logic test for allied military intelligence analysts. Such an evaluation depends, of course, on who is defining what is logical.

Some allied analysts even believed that the enemy was actually reverting to the first or defensive phase of his revolutionary war strategy. They thought that US search-and-destroy operations conducted in 1967 in War Zones C and D and the Iron Triangle, the critical areas between Saigon and the Cambodian border, had forced the Communists to return to a more defensive posture and that the enemy did not have the capability to go from there to a general offensive.¹⁰ Even when the analysts agreed that there was a general offensive being planned, they thought it would come sometime in the distant future, because Giap had always talked about the war lasting for a protracted period. These perceptions overshadowed information suggesting indications of an impending escalation.

Another problem that had an impact on the intelligence failures in Tet deals with what is known today as “fusion.” The data collected was difficult to assemble into a complete and cohesive picture of what the Communists were doing. The analysts often failed to integrate cumulative information, even though they were charged with the production of estimates that should have facilitated the combination of different indicators into an overall analysis. Part of this problem can be traced to the lack of coordination between allied intelligence agencies. Most of these organizations operated independently and rarely shared their information with each other. That was true even within the military intelligence structure. This lack of coordination and information sharing impeded both the synthesis of all the intelligence that was available and precluded the fusion necessary to prevent the surprise of the enemy offensive when it came.

Even if the allied intelligence apparatus had been better at fusion, it would still have had to deal with widely conflicting reports that clouded the issue. While the aforementioned intelligence indicated that a general offensive was in the offing, there were a number of other intelligence reports indicating that the enemy was facing extreme hardships in the field and that his morale had declined markedly. It was difficult to determine which reports to believe. Additionally, some indicators that should have caused alarm among intelligence analysts got lost in the noise of developments related to more obvious and more widely expected adversary threats. Faced with evidence of increasing enemy activity near urban areas and along the borders of the country, the allies were forced to decide where, when, and how the main blow would fall. They failed in this effort, choosing to focus on the increasing intensity of engagements around Khe Sanh area and in the other remote areas.

Despite the mounting intelligence, General Westmoreland and his intelligence analysts failed to predict a countrywide offensive. They

thought there would be perhaps a “show of force,” but otherwise the enemy’s main effort would be directed at the northern provinces. When indications that PAVN units were massing near Khe Sanh were confirmed by ground attacks against the firebase on 21 January, this fit well with what Westmoreland and his analysts already expected. Thus, they evaluated the intelligence in light of what they already believed, focusing on Khe Sanh and discounting most of the rest of the indicators that did not “fit” with their preconceived notions about enemy capabilities and intentions.

The impact of surprise in Tet Offensive cannot be overstated. The scope and ferocity of the attacks stunned the American people, and although the offensive resulted in an overwhelming defeat of the Communist forces at the tactical level, the sheer fact that the enemy had pulled off such an offensive and caught the allies by surprise ultimately contributed to the strategic Communist victory and the turning point of the war.

What about the other side? Planning for the Offensive

While it is clear that there was a massive intelligence failure on the part of the Americans, it is appropriate to look at the other side to see what role intelligence played in the planning and preparation for the general offensive. The PAVN and VC suffered horrendous casualties during the 1968 Tet Offensive and this causes one to question the efficacy of the Communist intelligence effort prior to launching the bloody attacks. This question should be addressed on two levels: (1) what were the Communists trying to achieve with the offensive and (2) on what assumptions and intelligence assessments did they base their plan for the offensive.

The decision to launch the general offensive in 1968 was the result of years of internal struggle and heated debates over both policy and military strategy within the Communist camp. There is no time here to go into the full nature of these struggles, which were principally over the timing involved in shifting from a protracted war toward a more decisive approach to winning the war, but, in the end, the more cautious proponents of protracted war were defeated by those who advocated a nationwide general offensive.

The official history of the PAVN lists the following objectives for the General Offensive-General Uprising:

Annihilate and cause the total disintegration of the bulk of the puppet [South Vietnamese] army, overthrow the puppet regime at all administrative levels, and place all governmental power in the hands of the people.

Annihilate a significant portion of the American military's troop strength and destroy a significant portion of his war equipment in order to prevent American forces from being able to carry out their political and military missions.

Crush the American will to commit aggression and force the United States to accept defeat in South Vietnam and end all hostile actions against North Vietnam.¹¹

The Communists had experienced severe setbacks on the battlefield in 1966-1967, but they still determined that the time was right to launch the general offensive. This is difficult to understand unless one takes into account the role of the concept of *khoi nghia* in Vietnamese Communist ideology. The Vietnamese idea of a general offensive, which in Maoist thought requires a long struggle, was speeded up by the belief that a general uprising, or *khoi nghia*, would accompany and support the general offensive in achieving the decisive victory. Through *dau tranh*, the two-pronged Vietnamese strategy of simultaneous military and political struggle, the revolutionary consciousness of the people would be gradually raised over time until it would explode in a "great spontaneous combustion."¹² In the minds of the Communists planners, the general offensive would succeed because the general uprising, seen as the culmination of many years of political *dau tranh*, would help offset the military advantages of the Americans and sweep the Saigon regime from power. Thus, the general uprising was their ultimate weapon; in the end, ideological purity and revolutionary zeal would prevail, even in the face of superior American mobility and firepower.

Ideology notwithstanding, a review of a number of Communist documents reveals that members of the Politburo in Hanoi were realistic enough to project three possible outcomes for the general offensive and general uprising. In their own words, they were:

First: We would win great victories on the important battlefields, our attacks and uprisings would succeed in the large cities, and the American will to commit aggression would be crushed, forcing them to agree to negotiations to end the war in accordance with our goals and conditions.

Second: Even though we won important victories in many locations, the enemy would have forces left. Relying on his large bases and with additional reinforcements brought in from the outside, the enemy would launch counterattacks to retake the important positions and the large cities, especially Saigon, in order to continue the fight against us.

Third: The United States would send in reinforcements, expand the war into North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and force us to react in order to transform the nature of the war and to break out of their current posture of defeat.¹³

Having identified those potential outcomes, the Communist leadership then proceeded to let sound military judgment be overcome by revolutionary zeal and what was essentially wishful thinking. As one participant later observed, they “planned for one possibility—that the general offensive-general uprising would certainly secure victory, meaning we did not plan for possible changes or developments in the situation; we never discussed possibilities two and three laid out in the orders and instructions we received.”¹⁴ Another Vietnamese commentator noted, “the three outcomes actually were in essence only one possible outcome.”¹⁵

No allowances were made for what would be called today “branch plans.” The same Communist observer admitted, “this mistake grew out of our belief that if we were to launch a general offensive and uprising then we had to gain a decisive victory...our mistake was also the result of a mistaken perception on our part...with an enemy who possessed tremendous resources...any result was possible—either a victory or a temporary defeat.”¹⁶ However, in practice, the Communists planned for the best case, and ignored other possible outcomes.

Intelligence Failings on the Communist Side

Given the heavy losses sustained and the failure to achieve tactical success during the offensive, it is clear that the Communists were guilty of some of the same failings that beset MACV in the months and days leading up to the launching of the offensive. In recent years, there have been a number of unit histories, journal articles, and other publications that provide new insight into the other side’s pre-offensive planning. A review of these sources reveals that the major failures in Communist planning were incorrect assessment of both friendly and enemy capabilities, erroneous reporting, and the influence of ideology and “wishful thinking” on sound military judgment.

In all of the sources examined, there is almost universal agreement that the Communist assessment of the situation prior to making the decision to launch the general offensive was seriously flawed. A journal article on the Tet Offensive in the Saigon-Gia Dinh sector has this to say about that assessment: “The Central Committee’s assessment underestimated the capabilities of the puppet army and puppet government...the response of the American military forces... [and] the capabilities of our political forces.”¹⁷

The overestimation of the capabilities of their political forces was particularly critical, because it meant that the general uprising that the Communist planners counted on to help offset American military advantages never materialized. Thus, many of the PAVN and VC attacks were doomed from the beginning, given that they were often launched in the face of concentrated American firepower.

It is difficult to fathom how the Communists, who had been bloodied badly by the Americans in the fighting of the previous two years, could underestimate the reaction of the US military. Perhaps they were blinded by their own ideological hubris.

The Communists' failure to properly understand the intelligence picture with regard to the strengths and weaknesses of the American and South Vietnamese forces had a catastrophic impact on the scope of the goals set for their troops in the offensive. According to one Ministry of Defense document, the Communists "set goals that did not match the realities of the actual situation at that time."¹⁸ Lt. Gen. Tran Do, in a 1986 address reviewing the successes and failures of the Tet Offensive, asserted that they had "set inappropriate, unreasonable goals for Tet 1968."¹⁹ The author of an article in a Vietnamese military history journal is even more emphatic in his criticism of the Communist planners and their appreciation of the battlefield realities and the subsequent consequences. He states: "If at that time we had been more intelligent, if we had evaluated the situation in a more concrete manner, in a more practical manner, or what our comrades commonly call a more truthful manner, the goals we set for ourselves would have been more realistic."²⁰

In an assessment of the Tet Offensive in the official PAVN history, the authors state:

We were *subjective* [italics added] in our assessment of the situation, especially in assessing the strength of the mass political forces in the urban areas. We had somewhat underestimated the capabilities and reactions of the enemy and set our goals too high...we made only one-sided preparations, only looking at the possibilities of victory and failing to prepare for adversity.²¹

There are several reasons cited in the documents examined for this flawed assessment, but the most often cited explanation centers around "subjectivism." In the Vietnamese language, *Chủ Quan*, "subjectivism," is the opposite of *Khách Quan*, or "objectivism." To understand the Vietnamese usage of "subjectivism," it is appropriate to turn to Webster's *New World Dictionary* which defines "subjectivism" as "any

philosophic theory that restricts knowledge...by limiting external reality to what can be known or inferred by subjective standards of truths.” In the case of the Tet Offensive, the Communists had already decided on the outcome of the campaign based on their interpretation of “subjective” truths and were not to be swayed by any realities that flew in the face of that truth. Attributing their tactical failures and losses to subjectivism in planning is a recurring theme in the Vietnamese assessments of the Tet Offensive.

An official history of the war in Eastern Cochin China concludes that “The primary error was our subjective [unrealistic] assessment of the balance of forces, from which we set goals that were too high and threw our entire force into an effort to overrun and capture the cities while neglecting the need to consolidate our hold on the rural countryside.”²²

A similar report documenting the Tet Offensive in the Tri-Thien-Hue theater also acknowledged the role of “subjectivism” in the conduct of planning for the offensive in that region. The report stated:

We failed to fully see the enemy’s dominant position right in our own Tri-Thien theater. This led us to be subjective, to fail to anticipate many measures, and to not stay close to real-world realities so that we could promptly adjust our measures for dealing with the enemy.²³

Thus, it is clear that the Communist planners were just as guilty as MACV in failing to heed the indicators that ran contrary to their already predisposed opinions about the possibility of victory. This subjective assessment of enemy capabilities came from a combination of wishful thinking, ideological “groupthink” and hubris. Despite the realities of the battlefield, the leaders in Hanoi and the campaign planners had already decided that it would be a great success. One report acknowledged that “In actuality, our plan and our intention at the time allowed for only one eventuality: that is, that we definitely were certain to win a decisive victory. No one was allowed to harbor any doubts or to even think about the possibility of winning only a partial victory.” The Communists forgot the fact that in any battle or engagement, the opponent “gets a vote.”

This approach, once the decision was made to launch the offensive, was reflected in the reporting from the field in the months and days leading up to the offensive. In the Saigon-Gia Dinh sector, the “reports from lower levels to higher levels generally did not accurately or nearly accurately reflect the realities of the situation (the usually exaggerated accomplishments and did not report errors and shortcomings).”²⁴ A similar

assertion can be found in an article in the Tet 20th anniversary commemorative issue of the Vietnamese military history journal. Citing the mistakes made in assessing the enemy strengths before the offensive was launched, the article states, “another important factor was that reports from lower levels were not truthful...these lower level reports puffed up our achievements, making it more likely that higher levels would commit the error of subjectivism [over-optimism].”²⁵ Such reports tended to downplay American and South Vietnamese strengths, which contributed to the defeat of the Communist attacks once the initial surprise of the offensive was overcome.

There was a pressure to conform to the party line, especially on those who might have looked at the situation and determined that the timing for the offensive was ill-advised. One report on the offensive sums up the situation in the following manner: “We did not have the courage to accurately reflect and present to higher authorities the difficulties we faced and to suggest ideas to overcome those difficulties.”

The result of all this was a hubris that infected both the planners and those who would conduct the actual attacks once the offensive was launched. The offensive was seen almost as a sure thing. A 1988 *Military History Magazine* article discusses this feeling of impending success:

Everyone, from the highest-ranking cadre to the lowliest front-line soldier, concentrated on one thing: finishing them off. That was why at the time we burned the huts in our headquarters, because we thought we were leaving and we weren't coming back. In actual fact everyone concentrated on one outcome and one outcome only...and we didn't need to see whether something was contrary to scientific military principles.²⁶

This hubris led to an operational myopia that was just as debilitating to the Communists as it had been to MACV. Having come to the conclusion that conditions were favorable for launching the general offensive-general uprising, the planners and decision-makers were not interested in any intelligence or assessments that may have been contrary to their preconceived notions.

Impact of the Offensive on the Communist Forces

The outcomes of this miscalculation were devastating to the other side. Conservative estimates put Communist losses in 1968 at around 40,000. This number has been disputed, but a review of just a sampling of the historical documentation on the outcome of the offensive demonstrates how badly the Communists had miscalculated when they decided to launch the offensive.

A report from the Tri-Thien-Hue theater acknowledged that the Communist forces fighting there had suffered heavy losses:

we had 3,600 wounded soldiers alone, not counting guerrillas and village-level cadres, our organizations were in disarray, we were short of food and ammunition, our combat power had declined, and our agents and organizations in the villages and the city had either been driven up into the mountains or had lost contact with our headquarters.²⁷

The horrendous losses incurred by the Communist forces are further reflected in a Vietnamese history of Group 559, the unit tasked with maintaining the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This history notes that “eight times as many wounded were sent back to the rear area [in 1968] as during 1967.”²⁸

These losses were staggering in their effect on the National Liberation Front and the Viet Cong. An official history of Military Region 9, which encompassed what the NLF called Western Nam Bo (the Mekong Delta), discusses the situation in late 1968-early 1969 in the following manner:

As for our forces, our main force units were suffering a severe shortage of personnel. Where province units had each possessed two or three battalions before the Tet Offensive, now each province had only one battalion, and each battalion had a strength of only around 100 men. Districts had previously each had a full company, and some districts had 2 or 3 companies, but now each district had only one company made up of a few dozen cadre and soldiers, and some districts had only a platoon left.²⁹

An official history of Military Region 8, Central Nam Bo (operational area just south of Saigon) noted similar difficulties in the aftermath of the offensive in late 1968:

we suffered heavy casualties and were not capable of fighting a protracted battle to finish off the enemy. Our civilian mass movement continued to decline and weaken in each passing day. Our military command cadres at all levels were confused and disorganized in their efforts.”³⁰ Similarly, a history of the war in Eastern Cochin China acknowledges that the shortcomings of the planning and preparation for the offensive “left behind heavy consequences on the battlefield that lasted for the next several years.”³¹

Conclusion

While it cannot be denied that there was a major breakdown in American intelligence that contributed to the devastating psychological impact of the Tet Offensive, it is just as clear that there was a similar breakdown in the intelligence area on the other side as well—one which costs them 40,000 of their best soldiers. While American leaders failed to anticipate the offensive because they were blinded by the inability to overcome their already preconceived notions about enemy strength and the need to be positive in order to support a beleaguered presidential administration at home, the Communists suffered their own form of intelligence blindness. Their failures can be attributed to hubris and ideological fervor. In both cases, the intelligence failures are tantamount to what one of my mentors called, “Drinking your own bath water.” Intelligence is what it is; using, abusing, or ignoring intelligence indicators for political or ideological purposes is a dangerous proposition that normally has drastic consequences. That is particularly true in the case of the Tet Offensive. In the end, the Communists survived their intelligence failures and went on to achieve ultimate victory. We, on the other hand, did not and the price was defeat for America and extinction for the Republic of Vietnam.

Notes

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2. Hoang Ngoc Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-69* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1981), 33.
3. Quoted in John Prados, "The Warning That Left Something to Chance: Intelligence at Tet," in Marc Jason Gilbert and William Head, eds., *The Tet Offensive* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 146-147.
4. Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, 120.
5. Message, Westmoreland to JCS, CINCPAC, 22 January 1968, Box 69, NSF, Country File-Vietnam, Westmoreland Papers, LBJ Library, Austin, TX.
6. Quoted in David F. Schmitz, *The Tet Offensive: Politics, War, and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 84.
7. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1988), 429-430.
8. Sam Adams, "Vietnam Cover-Up; Playing War with Numbers," *Harpers's*, May 1975; *War of Numbers: An Intelligence Memoir* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth, 1994). Adams, a CIA analyst, charged that MACV deliberately downplayed the number of guerrillas in South Vietnam and that this deception played a major role in the surprise of the Tet Offensive.
9. Lung, *The General Offensives of 1968-69*, 38.
10. Lung, 39.
11. The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam*, translated by Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 214-215.
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14. Ministry of Defense, Vietnamese Institute for Military History, *The 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, Translated by Robert J. Destatte and Merle L. Pribbenow for US Army Center of Military History (Washington, DC, 10 July 2001), 99.
15. Quoted in Ministry of Defense, Vietnamese Institute for Military History, *Military History Magazine*, "Special Edition: 20 Years After Tet 1968," Issue 2 (26), 1988, 49.
16. Ministry of Defense, Vietnamese Institute for Military History, *The 1968 Tet Offensive and Uprising in the Tri-Thien-Hue Theater*, Translated by Robert J. Destatte and Merle L. Pribbenow for US Army Center of Military History (Washington, DC, 10 July 2001), 109.

17. Ministry of Defense, Military History Institute of Vietnam, *The Offensive in the Saigon-Gia Dinh Sector (1968)*, Translated by Merle Pribbenow (Hanoi, 1988), 74.
18. Ministry of Defense, Military History Institute of Vietnam, *The Offensive in the Saigon-Gia Dinh Sector (1968)*, Translated by Merle Pribbenow (Hanoi, 1988), 70.
19. Quoted in Ministry of Defense, Vietnamese Institute for Military History, *Military History Magazine*, “Special Edition: 20 Years After Tet 1968,” Issue 2 (26), 1988, 48.
20. Ministry of Defense, Vietnamese Institute for Military History, *Military History Magazine*, “Special Edition: 20 Years After Tet 1968,” Issue 2 (26), 1988, 52
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30. Senior Colonel Cao Minh, et al, *Military Region 8: Thirty Years of Resistance War (1945-1975)* (Hanoi, People’s Army Publishing House, 1998), Translated by Merle Pribbenow, 646 and 659.
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Chapter 7

CORDS/Phoenix

Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future

by Dale Andrade and James H. Willbanks

As the United States ends its third year of war in Iraq, the military continues to search for ways to deal with an insurgency that shows no sign of waning. The specter of Vietnam looms large, and the media has been filled with comparisons between the current situation and the “quagmire” of the Vietnam War. The differences between the two conflicts are legion, but observers can learn lessons from the Vietnam experience—if they are judicious in their search.

For better or worse, Vietnam is the most prominent historical example of American counterinsurgency (COIN)—and the longest—so it would be a mistake to reject it because of its admittedly complex and controversial nature. An examination of the pacification effort in Vietnam and the evolution of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program provides useful insights into the imperatives of a viable COIN program.

Twin Threats: Main Forces and Guerrillas

In Vietnam, the US military faced arguably the most complex, effective, lethal insurgency in history. The enemy was no rag-tag band lurking in the jungle, but rather a combination of guerrillas, political cadre, and modern main-force units capable of standing toe to toe with the US military. Any one of these would have been significant, but in combination they presented a formidable threat.

When US ground forces intervened in South Vietnam in 1965, estimates of enemy guerrilla and Communist Party front strength stood at more than 300,000. In addition, Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese main forces numbered almost 230,000—and that number grew to 685,000 by the time of the Communist victory in 1975. These main forces were organized into regiments and divisions, and between 1965 and 1968 the enemy emphasized main-force war rather than insurgency.¹ During the

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war the Communists launched three conventional offensives: the 1968 Tet offensive, the 1972 Easter offensive, and the final offensive in 1975. All were major campaigns by any standard. Clearly, the insurgency and the enemy main forces had to be dealt with simultaneously.

When faced with this sort of dual threat, what is the correct response? Should military planners gear up for a counterinsurgency, or should they fight a war aimed at destroying the enemy main forces? Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the overall commander of US troops under the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) faced just such a question. Westmoreland knew very well that South Vietnam faced twin threats, but he believed that the enemy main forces were the most immediate problem. By way of analogy, he referred to them as “bully boys with crowbars” who were trying to tear down the house that was South Vietnam. The guerrillas and political cadre, which he called “termites,” could also destroy the house, but it would take them much longer to do it. So while he clearly understood the need for pacification, his attention turned first to the bully boys, whom he wanted to drive away from the “house.”²

Westmoreland’s strategy of chasing the enemy and forcing him to fight or run (also known as search and destroy) worked in the sense that it saved South Vietnam from immediate defeat, pushed the enemy main forces from the populated areas, and temporarily took the initiative away from the Communists. South Vietnam was safe in the short term, and Communist histories make clear that the intervention by US troops was a severe blow to their plans.³ In the end, however, there were not enough US troops to do much more than produce a stalemate. The Communists continued to infiltrate main-force units from neighboring Laos and Cambodia, and they split their forces into smaller bands that could avoid combat if the battlefield situation was not in their favor.

The enemy continued to build his strength, and in January 1968 launched the Tet Offensive, a clear indication that the Americans could never really hold the initiative. Although attacks on almost every major city and town were pushed back and as many as 50,000 enemy soldiers and guerrillas were killed, the offensive proved to be a political victory for the Communists, who showed they could mount major attacks no matter what the Americans tried to do.

Counterinsurgency, or pacification as it was more commonly known in Vietnam, was forced to deal with the twin threats of enemy main forces and a constant guerrilla presence in the rural areas. MACV campaign plans for the first two years of the war show that pacification was as im-

portant as military operations, but battlefield realities forced it into the background. In January 1966, Westmoreland wrote, "It is abundantly clear that all political, military, economic, and security (police) programs must be completely integrated in order to attain any kind of success in a country which has been greatly weakened by prolonged conflict."⁴ He looked to the enemy for an example of how this was done. "The Viet Cong, themselves, have learned this lesson well. Their integration of efforts surpasses ours by a large order of magnitude."⁵

Westmoreland knew that he lacked the forces to wage both a war of attrition and one of pacification, so he chose the former. The argument over whether or not this was the right course of action will likely go on forever, but undoubtedly the shape of the war changed dramatically after the Tet Offensive. The enemy was badly mauled and, despite the political gains made, militarily lost the initiative for quite some time.

As the Communists withdrew from the Tet battlefields to lick their wounds, the ensuing lull offered a more propitious environment for a pacification plan. Westmoreland never had such an advantage. When American ground forces entered the war in 1965, they faced an enemy on the offensive, but in June 1968 the new MACV commander, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, confronted an enemy on the ropes. Abrams plainly recognized his advantage and implemented a clear-and-hold strategy aimed at moving into rural enclaves formerly dominated by the VC. A Communist history of the war notes that "[b]ecause we did not fully appreciate the new enemy [allied] schemes and the changes the enemy made in the conduct of the war and because we underestimated the enemy's capabilities and the strength of his counterattack, when the United States and its puppets [the South Vietnamese] began to carry out their 'clear and hold' strategy our battlefronts were too slow in shifting over to attacking the 'pacification' program."⁶

To cope with the new battlefield situation, the Communist Politburo in Hanoi revised its strategy in a document known as COSVN Resolution 9.⁷ North Vietnam considered its Tet "general offensive and uprising" to be a great success that "forced the enemy [US and South Vietnam] to sink deeper into a defensive and deadlocked position," but admitted that new techniques were required to force the Americans out of the war.⁸ Rather than fight US troops directly, Resolution 9 dictated that guerrilla forces would disperse and concentrate their efforts on attacking pacification. The main objective was to outlast the allies: "We should fight to force the Americans to withdraw troops, cause the collapse of the puppets and gain the decisive victory."⁹ Implicit in the plan was a return to more traditional hit-and-run guerrilla tactics with less emphasis on big battles.

Between late 1968 and 1971 the battle for hearts and minds went into full swing, and the government made rapid advances in pacifying the countryside. Historians and military analysts still debate the merits of Abrams's strategy *vis-à-vis* Westmoreland's, but the bottom line is that the two generals faced very different conflicts.¹⁰ There was no "correct" way to fight; the war was a fluid affair with the enemy controlling the operational tempo most of the time. The successes in pacification during Abrams' command owed a lot to the severely weakened status of the VC after the 1968 Tet Offensive. Even so, with US President Richard Nixon's order to "Vietnamize" the war, the South Vietnamese would be left to cope with both the enemy main forces and the Communist insurgency in the villages. Pacification alone simply could not do the job.

Essentials of Counterinsurgency

Insurgencies are complex affairs that defy all attempts at seeking a common denominator. The counterinsurgent's strategy will depend on how he is organized and how he chooses to fight. The enemy is never static, and every situation will differ from the next. Still, when an insurgency is stripped to its essentials, there are some basic points that are crucial to any COIN effort.

Security forces must be prepared to use armed force to keep the enemy away from the population. To conclude that large-scale operations play no role in COIN is a mistake. The big-unit war of 1965 and 1966 robbed the Communists of a quick victory and allowed the South Vietnamese breathing space in which to begin pacifying the countryside. Without the security generated by military force, pacification cannot even be attempted.

At the same time, government forces must target the insurgents' ability to live and operate freely among the population. Given time, insurgents will try to create a clandestine political structure to replace the government presence in the villages. Such an infrastructure is the real basis of guerrilla control during any insurgency; it is the thread that ties the entire insurgency together. Without a widespread political presence, guerrillas cannot make many gains, and those they do make cannot be reinforced. Any COIN effort must specifically target the insurgent infrastructure if it is to win the war.

These objectives—providing security for the people and targeting the insurgent infrastructure—form the basis of a credible government campaign to win hearts and minds. Programs aimed at bringing a better quality of life to the population, including things like land reform, medical care, schools, and agricultural assistance, are crucial if the gov-

ernment is to offer a viable alternative to the insurgents. The reality, however, is that nothing can be accomplished without first establishing some semblance of security.

Key to the entire strategy is the integration of all efforts toward a single goal. This sounds obvious, but it rarely occurs. In most historical COIN efforts, military forces concentrated on warfighting objectives, leaving the job of building schools and clinics, establishing power grids, and bolstering local government (popularly referred to today as nation-building) to civilian agencies. The reality is that neither mission is more important than the other, and failure to recognize this can be fatal. Virtually all COIN plans claim they integrate the two: The Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan and the defunct Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq were attempts to combine and coordinate civilian and military agencies, although neither really accomplished its objective. In this respect, the development of the CORDS program during the Vietnam War offers a good example of how to establish a chain of command incorporating civilian and military agencies into a focused effort.

Foundation for Successful Pacification

During the early 1960s, the American advisory effort in Vietnam aimed at thwarting Communist influence in the countryside. The attempt failed for many reasons, but one of the most profound was the South Vietnamese Government's inability to extend security to the country's countless villages and hamlets. This failure was, of course, the main factor leading to the introduction of American ground forces and the subsequent rapid expansion of US military manpower in 1965. (US troop strength grew from 23,300 in late 1964 to 184,300 one year later). The huge increase in troop strength exacerbated the already tenuous relationship between the military mission and pacification. As a result, many officials argued that the latter was being neglected.

In early 1965, the US side of pacification consisted of several civilian agencies, of which the CIA, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US Information Service, and the US Department of State were the most important. Each agency developed its own program and coordinated it through the American embassy. On the military side, the rapid expansion of troop strength meant a corresponding increase in the number of advisers. By early 1966, military advisory teams worked in all of South Vietnam's 44 provinces and most of its 243 districts. The extent of the military's presence in the countryside made it harder for the civilian-run pacification program

to cope—a situation made worse because there was no formal system combining the two efforts.

In the spring of 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration turned its attention toward pacification in an attempt to make the existing arrangement work. Official trips to South Vietnam as well as studies by independent observers claimed there was little coordination between civilian agencies. Most concluded that the entire system needed a drastic overhaul. Johnson took a personal interest in pacification, bringing the weight of his office to the search for a better way to run the "other war," as he called pacification. American ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge received written authority from the president to "exercise full responsibility" over the entire advisory effort in Vietnam, using "the degree of command and control that you consider appropriate."¹¹

It was not enough. Westmoreland was cooperative, yet the civilian and military missions simply did not mesh. After a trip to South Vietnam in November 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara told Westmoreland, "I don't think we have done a thing we can point to that has been effective in five years. I ask you to show me one area in this country...that we have pacified."¹²

McNamara's observation prompted quick action. In January 1966, representatives from Washington agencies concerned with the conduct of the war met with representatives from the US mission in Saigon at a conference in Virginia. During the ensuing discussion, participants acknowledged that simply relying on the ambassador and the MACV commander to "work things out" would not ensure pacification cooperation. A single civil-military focus on pacification was needed; however, the conference ended without a concrete resolution.¹³

Although Johnson was displeased by slow progress and foot dragging, the embassy in Saigon continued to resist any changes that would take away its authority over pacification. Then, at a summit held in Honolulu in February 1966 with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, Johnson pushed an agenda that tasked the South Vietnamese Army with area security, allowing the US military to concentrate mostly on seeking out enemy main forces. Johnson also demanded greater American coordination in the pacification effort and called for a single manager to head the entire program. In April he assigned Robert W. Komer, a trusted member of the National Security Council, the task of coming up with a solution. Johnson gave Komer a strong mandate that included unrestrained access to the White House—a key asset that was put

in writing. That authority gave Komer the clout he needed to bring recalcitrant officials into line.¹⁴

Other steps followed in quick succession. In August 1966 Komer authored a paper titled “Giving a New Thrust to Pacification: Analysis, Concept, and Management,” in which he broke the pacification problem into three parts and argued that no single part could work by itself.¹⁵ The first part, not surprisingly, was security—keeping the main forces away from the population. In the second part he advocated breaking the Communists’ hold on the people with anti-infrastructure operations and programs designed to win back popular support. The third part stressed the concept of mass; in other words, pacification had to be large-scale. Only with a truly massive effort could a turnaround be achieved, and that was what Johnson required if he was to maintain public support for the war.

It was Westmoreland himself, however, who brought the issue to the forefront. Contrary to popular belief, the MACV commander understood the need for pacification and, like a good politician, figured it would be better to have the assignment under his control than outside of it. On 6 October 1966, despite objections from his staff, he told Komer: “I’m not asking for the responsibility, but I believe that my headquarters could take it in stride and perhaps carry out this important function more economically and efficiently than the present complex arrangement.”¹⁶

Komer lobbied McNamara, arguing that with 90 percent of the resources, it was “obvious” that only the military “had the clout” to get the job done. Komer believed that the US Defense Department (DOD) was “far stronger behind pacification” than the Department of State and was “infinitely more dynamic and influential.”¹⁷

Now the DOD was on board, but the civilian agencies uniformly opposed the plan. As a compromise, in November 1966 the Office of Civil Operations (OCO) was formed, with Deputy Ambassador William Porter in charge. The OCO combined civilian agencies under one chain of command, but failed to bring the military into it. The entire plan was doomed from the start.

The OCO was really no different from the old way of doing business because it kept the civilian and military chains of command separate. Johnson was deeply dissatisfied. So in June 1966 Komer went to Vietnam to assess the situation. He wrote that the US Embassy “needs to strengthen its own machinery” for pacification. Komer met with Westmoreland, and the two agreed on the need for a single manager. “My problem is not with Westy, but the reluctant civilian side,” Komer told the president.¹⁸

The Birth of CORDS

In March 1967, Johnson convened a meeting on Guam and made it clear that OCO was dead and that Komer's plan for a single manager would be implemented. Only the paperwork remained, and less than two months later, on 9 May 1967, National Security Action Memorandum 362, "Responsibility for US Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development)," established Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS.¹⁹ The new system unambiguously placed the military in charge of pacification. As MACV commander, Westmoreland would have three deputies, one of them a civilian with three-star-equivalent rank in charge of pacification, and there would be a single chain of command. Komer took the post of Deputy for CORDS, which placed him alongside the Deputy MACV commander, Abrams. Below that, various other civilians and civilian agencies were integrated into the military hierarchy, including an assistant chief of staff for CORDS positioned alongside the traditional military staff. For the first time, civilians were embedded within a wartime command and put in charge of military personnel and resources. CORDS went into effect immediately and brought with it a new urgency oriented toward making pacification work in the countryside.²⁰ (See figure 7.1)

The new organization did not solve all problems immediately, and it was not always smooth sailing. At first Komer attempted to gather as much power as possible within his office, but Westmoreland made it clear that his military deputies were more powerful and performed a broad range of duties, while Komer had authority only over pacification. In addition, Westmoreland quashed Komer's direct access to the White House, rightly insisting that the chain of command be followed. Westmoreland naturally kept a close watch over CORDS, occasionally prompting Komer to complain that he was not yet sure that he had Westmoreland's "own full trust and confidence."²¹ Their disagreements were few, however, and the relationship between the MACV commander and his new deputy became close and respectful, which started the new program on the right track.

Time was the crucial ingredient, and eventually Komer's assertive personality and Westmoreland's increasing trust in his new civilian subordinates smoothed over many potential problems. According to one study, "[a] combination of Westmoreland's flexibility and Komer's ability to capitalize on it through the absence of an intervening layer of command permitted Komer to run an unusual, innovative program within what otherwise might have been the overly strict confines of a military staff."²²

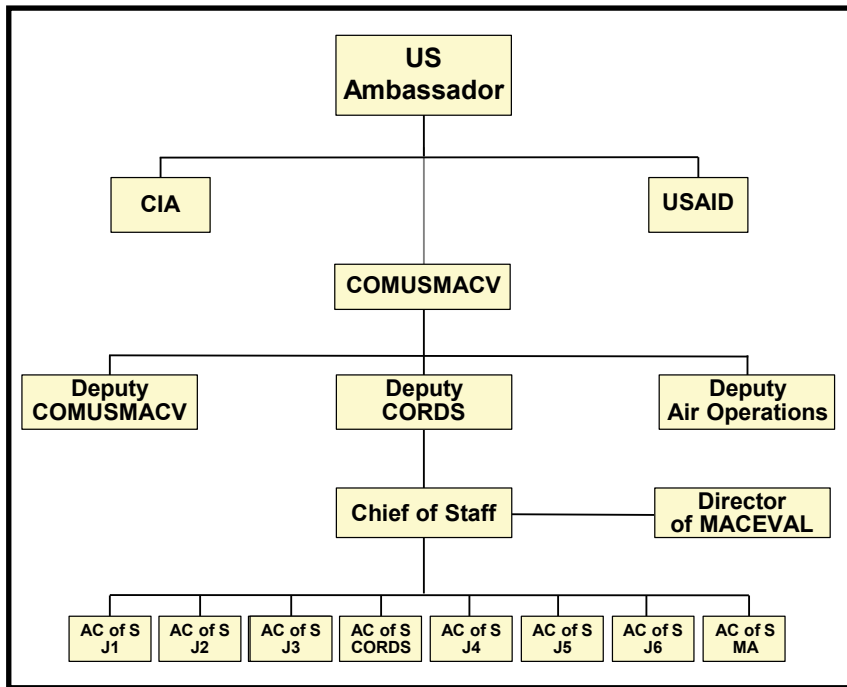


Figure 7.1. Structure of the US Mission Showing the Position of CORDS, 1967. Courtesy of the Center for Military History.

With the new organization, almost all pacification programs eventually came under CORDS. From USAID, CORDS took control of “new life development” (the catch-all term for an attempt to improve government responsiveness to villagers’ needs), refugees, National Police, and the Chieu Hoi program (the “Open Arms” campaign to encourage Communist personnel in South Vietnam to defect). The CIA’s Rural Development cadre, MACV’s civic action and civil affairs, and the Joint US Public Affairs Office’s field psychological operations also fell under the CORDS aegis. CORDS assumed responsibility for reports, evaluations, and field inspections from all agencies.²³

CORDS organization. At corps level, the CORDS organization was modeled on that of CORDS at the MACV headquarters. (See figure 7.2) The US military senior adviser, usually a three-star general who also served as the commander of US forces in the region, had a deputy for CORDS (DepCORDS), usually a civilian. The DepCORDS was responsible for supervising military and civilian plans in support of the South Vietnamese pacification program within the corps area.²⁴

Province advisory teams in the corps area of responsibility reported directly to the regional DepCORDS. Each of the 44 provinces in South

Vietnam was headed by a province chief, usually a South Vietnamese Army or Marine colonel, who supervised the provincial government apparatus and commanded the provincial militia as well as Regional Forces and Popular Forces (RF/PF).

The province advisory teams helped the province chiefs administer the pacification program. The province chief's American counterpart was the province senior adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The province senior adviser and his staff were responsible for advising the province chief about civil-military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs.

The province senior adviser's staff, composed of both US military and civilian personnel, was divided into two parts. The first part handled area and community development, including public health and administration, civil affairs, education, agriculture, psychological operations, and logistics. The other part managed military issues. It helped the province staff prepare plans and direct security operations by the territorial forces and associated support within the province.

The province chief exercised authority through district chiefs, and the province senior adviser supervised district senior advisers, each of whom had a staff of about eight members (the actual size depending on the particular situation in a district). District-level advisory teams helped the district chief with civil-military aspects of the pacification and rural development programs. Also, the district team (and/or assigned mobile assistance training teams) advised and trained the RF/PF located in the district.

All members of the province team were advisers; they worked closely with the province chief and his staff, providing advice and assistance, and coordinating US support.

CORDS gains muscle

Sheer numbers, made possible by the military's involvement, made CORDS more effective than earlier pacification efforts. In early 1966, about 1,000 US advisers were involved in pacification; by September 1969—the highpoint of the pacification effort in terms of total manpower—7,601 advisers were assigned to province and district pacification teams. Of those, 6,464 were military, and 95 percent of those came from the Army.²⁵

CORDS' ability to bring manpower, money, and supplies to the countryside where they were needed was impressive. Some statistics illustrate the point: Between 1966 and 1970, money spent on pacification and econom-

ic programs rose from \$582 million to \$1.5 billion. Advice and aid to the South Vietnamese National Police allowed total police paramilitary strength to climb from 60,000 in 1967 to more than 120,000 in 1971. Aid to the RF/PF grew from a paltry \$300,000 per year in 1966 to over \$1.5 million annually by 1971, enabling total strength to increase by more than 50 percent. By 1971 total territorial militia strength was around 500,000—about 50 percent of overall South Vietnamese military strength. Advisory numbers increased correspondingly: In 1967 there were 108 US advisers attached to the militia; in 1969 there were 2,243.²⁶ The enemy saw this buildup as a serious threat to his control in the countryside, and Communist sources consistently cited the need to attack as central to their strategy.²⁷

What effect did all of this have on the security situation? Numbers alone do not make for successful pacification, but they are a big step in the right direction. By placing so much manpower in the villages, the allies were able to confront the guerrillas consistently, resulting in significant gains by 1970. Although pacification statistics are complicated and often misleading, they do indicate that CORDS affected the insurgency. For example, by early 1970, 93 percent of South Vietnamese lived in “relatively secure” villages, an increase of almost 20 percent from the middle of 1968, the year marred by the Tet Offensive.²⁸

The Phoenix Program

Within CORDS were scores of programs designed to enhance South Vietnamese influence in the countryside, but security remained paramount. At the root of pacification’s success or failure was its ability to counter the insurgents’ grip on the population. Military operations were designed to keep enemy main forces and guerrillas as far from the population as possible, but the Communist presence in the villages was more than just military. Cadre running the Viet Cong infrastructure (VCI) sought to form a Communist shadow government to supplant the Saigon regime’s influence.

In 1960, when Hanoi had formed the Viet Cong movement (formally known as the National Liberation Front), the VCI cadre was its most important component. Cadre were the building blocks of the revolution, the mechanism by which the Communists spread their presence throughout South Vietnam. Cadre did not wear uniforms, yet they were as crucial to the armed struggle as any AK-toting guerrilla. The cadre spread the VCI from the regional level down to almost every village and hamlet in South Vietnam. A preferred tactic was to kill local government officials as a warning for others not to come back.

Indeed, the VC's early success was due to the VCI cadre, which by 1967 numbered somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000 throughout South Vietnam. The VCI was a simple organization. Virtually every village had a cell made up of a Communist Party secretary; a finance and supply unit; and information and culture, social welfare, and proselytizing sections to gain recruits from among the civilian population. They answered up a chain of command, with village cadre answering to the district, then to the province, and finally to a series of regional commands which, in turn, took orders from Hanoi.

The Communists consolidated their influence in the countryside by using a carrot-and-stick approach. The VCI provided medical treatment, education, and justice—along with heavy doses of propaganda—backed by threats from VC guerrillas. The VC waged an effective terror campaign aimed at selected village officials and authority figures to convince fence-sitters that support for the revolution was the best course. In short, the VCI was the Communist alternative to the Saigon government.

The South Vietnamese Government, on the other hand, was rarely able to keep such a presence in the villages, and when they could, the lack of a permanent armed force at that level meant that officials were usually limited to daytime visits only. Unfortunately, in the earliest days of the insurgency (1960 to 1963), when the infrastructure was most vulnerable, neither the South Vietnamese nor their American advisers understood the VCI's importance. They concentrated on fighting the guerrillas who, ironically, grew stronger because of the freedom they gained through the VCI's strength and influence.

The VCI was nothing less than a second center of gravity. By 1965, when the United States intervened in South Vietnam with ground troops, Communist strength had grown exponentially, forcing Westmoreland to deal with the main force threat first and making pacification secondary.

The US did not completely ignore the VCI. As early as 1964 the CIA used counterterror teams to seek out and destroy cadre hiding in villages. But the CIA had only a few dozen Americans devoted to the task, far too few to have much effect on tens of thousands of VCI. The advent of CORDS changed that, and anti-infrastructure operations began to evolve. In July 1967, the Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) was created. It was basically a clearinghouse for information on the VCI, information that was then disseminated to district advisers.²⁹ Unfortunately, given the lack of anti-VCI operations during the first three years of the war, little intelligence was available at the start. A few organizations, such as the RF/PF, actually lived in the villages and gathered information, but their main task was security, not intelligence gathering.

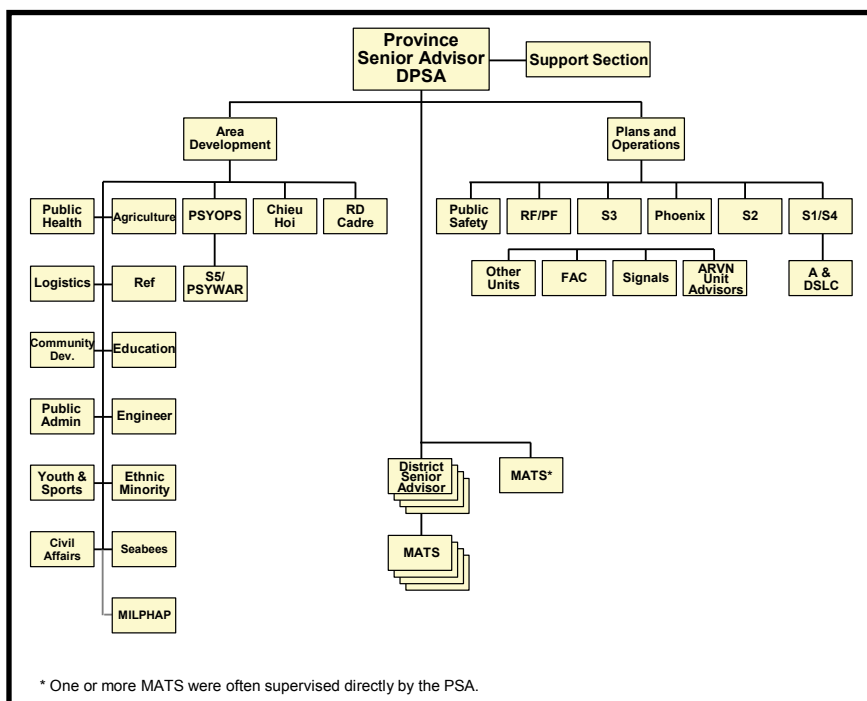


Figure 7.2. Organization of CORDS at the Provincial Level. Courtesy of the Center for Military History.

Phoenix rising

In December 1967 ICEX was given new emphasis and renamed Phoenix. The South Vietnamese side was called Phung Hoang, after a mythical bird that appeared as a sign of prosperity and luck. CORDS made Phoenix a high priority and within weeks expanded intelligence centers in most of South Vietnam's provinces.

At this stage, the most important part of Phoenix was numbers. CORDS expanded the US advisory effort across the board, and the Phoenix program benefited. Within months all 44 provinces and most of the districts had American Phoenix advisers. This proved vital to the effort. Only by maintaining a constant presence in the countryside—in other words, by mirroring the insurgents—could the government hope to wage an effective counterinsurgency. By 1970 there were 704 US Phoenix advisers throughout South Vietnam.³⁰

For the Phoenix program—as with most other things during the war—the Tet Offensive proved pivotal. The entire pacification program went on hold as the allies fought to keep the Communists from taking entire cities.

If there was any doubt before, Tet showed just how crucial the VCI was to the insurgency, for it was the covert cadres who paved the way for the guerrillas and ensured that supplies and replacements were available to sustain the offensive. On the other hand, the failure of the attacks exposed the VCI and made it vulnerable. As a result, anti-infrastructure operations became one of the most important aspects of the pacification program.

In July 1968, after the enemy offensive had spent most of its fury, the allies launched the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC), which devoted new resources to pacification in an attempt to capitalize on post-Tet Communist weakness. While enemy main forces and guerrillas licked their wounds, they were less able to hinder pacification in the villages.

Under the APC, Phoenix emphasized four aspects in its attack on the VCI:

Decentralization of the old ICEX command and control (C2) apparatus by placing most of the responsibility on the provinces and districts. This included building intelligence-gathering and interrogation centers (called District Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Centers, or DIOCCs) in the regions where the VCI operated.

Establishment of files and dossiers on suspects, and placing of emphasis on “neutralizing” (capturing, converting, or killing) members of the VCI.

Institution of rules by which suspected VCI could be tried and imprisoned.

Emphasis on local militia and police rather than the military as the main operational arm of the program.³¹

This last aspect was crucial. While military forces could be used to attack the VCI, they had other pressing responsibilities, and anti-infrastructure operations would always be on the back burner. So the program concentrated on existing forces that could be tailored to seek out the VCI, the most important of these being the RF/PF militia, the National Police, and Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU).

Recruited locally, the RF/PF were ideally suited to anti-VCI operations because they lived in the villages. In addition to providing security against marauding VC guerrillas, the RF/PF reacted to intelligence sent from the DIOCC. The National Police had two units specially tailored to VCI operations: the intelligence-gathering Police Special Branch and the paramilitary National Police Field Force. For the most part, however, the police did not perform well, although there were exceptions. PRUs, which

were recruited and trained by the CIA, were the best action arm available to Phoenix. However, as was generally the problem with CIA assets, PRUs were not numerous enough to deal effectively with the VCI. Never numbering more than 4,000 men nationwide, the PRU also had other paramilitary tasks to perform and so were not always available.³²

DIOCCs

The district was the program's basic building block, and the DIOCC was its nerve center. Each DIOCC was led by a Vietnamese Phung Hoang chief, aided by an American Phoenix adviser. The adviser had no authority to order operations; he could only advise and call on US military support. The DIOCC was answerable to the Vietnamese district chief, who in turn reported to the province chief. DIOCC personnel compiled intelligence on VCI in their district and made blacklists with data on VCI members. If possible, the DIOCC sought out a suspect's location and planned an operation to capture him (or her). Once captured, the VCI was taken to the DIOCC and interrogated, then sent to the province headquarters for further interrogation and trial.³³

Because Phoenix was decentralized, the programs differed from district to district, and some worked better than others. Many DIOCCs did little work, taking months to establish even the most basic blacklists. In many cases the Phung Hoang chief was an incompetent bureaucrat who used his position to enrich himself. Phoenix tried to address this problem by establishing monthly neutralization quotas, but these often led to fabrications or, worse, false arrests. In some cases, district officials accepted bribes from the VC to release certain suspects. Some districts released as many as 60 percent of VCI suspects.³⁴

Misconceptions about Phoenix

The picture of Phoenix that emerges is not of a rogue operation, as it is sometimes accused of being, but rather of one that operated within a system of rules. Special laws, called *An Tri*, allowed the arrest and prosecution of suspected communists, but only within the legal system. Moreover, to avoid abuses such as phony accusations for personal reasons, or to rein in overzealous officials who might not be diligent enough in pursuing evidence before making arrests, *An Tri* required three separate sources of evidence to convict any individual targeted for neutralization.

If a suspected VCI was found guilty, he or she could be held in prison for two years, with renewable two-year sentences totaling up to six years. While this was probably fair on its surface, hardcore VCI were out in six years at most and then rejoined the guerrillas. The legal system was never

really ironed out. The US has the same problem today: Accused terrorists held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and in other prisons fall within a shadowy middle ground that our policymakers and legal system have yet to deal with.

An assassination bureau? Between 1968 and 1972 Phoenix neutralized 81,740 VC, of whom 26,369 were killed. This was a large piece taken out of the VCI, and between 1969 and 1971 the program was quite successful in destroying the VCI in many important areas.³⁵ However, these statistics have been used to suggest that Phoenix was an assassination program. It was not. People were killed, yes, but statistics show that more than two-thirds of neutralized VC were captured, not killed. Indeed, only by capturing Viet Cong could Phoenix develop the intelligence needed to net additional Viet Cong. Abuses did occur, such as torture, which US advisers could not always halt, but most advisers understood the adage that dead Viet Cong do not tell about live ones.

Phoenix was also accused of sometimes targeting civilians, because the VCI did not wear military uniforms. But the VCI was an integral—indeed paramount—aspect of the insurgency and a legitimate target. We Americans should have done a better job of pointing this out to critics.

Contracting out the dirty work? Another charge was that Phoenix relied on other units to neutralize the VCI. Of the 26,000 VCI killed, 87 percent died during operations by conventional units. How effective was Phoenix if it accounted for only 13 percent of those killed in action? A later study found that a still-low 20 percent of the killed or captured neutralizations came from Phoenix assets, with most of the rest caught up in sweeps by regular units or by the RF/PF. Both claims are almost irrelevant: Direct physical action was the conventional force, RF/PF part of a two-part job. The bottom line should have been 26,000 VCI permanently eliminated, never mind by whom.

Statistics themselves caused problems. During the first two years of Phoenix, each province was given a monthly quota of VC to neutralize, depending on the size of the infrastructure in the province. The quotas were often unrealistic and encouraged false reporting—or the capture of innocent people with whom South Vietnamese officials had a grudge. The quotas were lowered in 1969, and thereafter no VC could be counted in the total unless he or she had been convicted in court.³⁶

Aiming low?

Others critics attacked Phoenix for netting mostly middle—and low-level VC while senior leaders eluded capture. In fact, in 1968, before the VCI adapted to aggressive pursuit by Phoenix, about 13 percent of neutraliza-

tions were district and higher level cadre. In 1970 and 1971, that figure dropped to about three percent.³⁷ The drop, however, masks two positive results: Thanks to Phoenix, ranking VC had been forced to move to safer areas, thereby removing themselves from the “sea of the people” (which did not negate their ability to control village populations, but did make the job more difficult); and by attacking mid level Viet Cong, Phoenix actually severed the link between the population and the Party-level cadre calling the shots—a serious blow to the VCI.

Communist Testimony to Phoenix’s Success

In the end, attacking the VCI was not as difficult as it might seem. The VCI was a secret organization, but to be effective in the villages it had to stay among the population, which made it vulnerable. Guerrillas could melt into the bush; in contrast, the VCI had to maintain contact with the people.

Although they were not completely successful, anti-infrastructure operations were a serious problem for the enemy, and he took drastic steps to limit the damage. By 1970, Communist plans repeatedly emphasized attacking the government’s pacification program and specifically targeted Phoenix officials.³⁸ District and village officials became targets of VC assassination and terror as the Communists sought to reassert control over areas lost in 1969 and 1970. Ironically, the VC practiced the very thing for which critics excoriated Phoenix—the assassination of officials. The VC even imposed quotas. In 1970, for example, Communist officials near Danang in northern South Vietnam instructed VC assassins to “kill 1,400 persons” deemed to be government “tyrant[s]” and to “annihilate” anyone involved with the pacification program.³⁹

Although the anti-infrastructure program did not crush the VCI, in combination with other pacification programs it probably did hinder insurgent progress. In Vietnam, with its blend of guerrilla and main-force war, this was not enough to prevail, but it seems clear that without Phoenix, pacification would have fared far worse. Communist accounts after the war bear this out. In *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow quotes the North Vietnamese deputy commander in South Vietnam, Lt. Gen. Tran Do, as saying that Phoenix was “extremely destructive.”⁴⁰ Former Viet Cong Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang wrote in his memoirs that “Phoenix was dangerously effective” and that in Hau Nghia Province west of Saigon, “the Front Infrastructure was virtually eliminated.”⁴¹ Nguyen Co Thach, who became the Vietnamese foreign minister after the war, claimed that “[w]e had many weaknesses in the South because of Phoenix.”⁴²

Clearly, the political infrastructure is the basic building block of almost all insurgencies, and it must be a high-priority target for the counterinsurgent from the very beginning. In Vietnam the allies faced an insurgency that emphasized political and military options in equal measure, but before the Tet Offensive weakened the Communists sufficiently to allow concentration on both main-force warfare and pacification, it was difficult to place sufficient emphasis on anti-infrastructure operations. Yet in just two years—between 1968 and 1970—the Phoenix program made significant progress against the VCI. What might have happened had the Americans and South Vietnamese begun it in 1960, when the Viet Cong were much weaker?

Assessing Pacification in Vietnam

Historian Richard A. Hunt characterizes the achievements of CORDS and the pacification program in Vietnam as “ambiguous.”⁴³ Many high-ranking civilians and other officials who participated in the program, such as Komer, CIA director William Colby, and Westmoreland’s military deputy, Gen. Bruce Palmer, assert that CORDS made great gains between 1969 and 1972.⁴⁴ Some historians disagree with this assessment, but clearly the program made some progress in the years following the Tet Offensive. The security situation in many areas improved dramatically, releasing regular South Vietnamese troops to do battle with the North Vietnamese and main-force VC units. The program also spread Saigon’s influence and increased the government’s credibility with the South Vietnamese people.

Evidence suggests that one of the reasons Hanoi launched a major offensive in 1972 was to offset the progress that South Vietnam had made in pacification and in eliminating the VCI.⁴⁵ In the long run, however, those gains proved to be irrelevant. Although the South Vietnamese, with US advisers and massive air support, successfully blunted North Vietnam’s 1972 invasion, US forces subsequently withdrew after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. When the fighting resumed shortly after the ceasefire in 1973, South Vietnamese forces acquitted themselves reasonably well, only to succumb to the final North Vietnamese offensive in 1975. In the end, Communist conventional forces, not the insurgents, defeated the South Vietnamese.

Lessons Learned

Despite the final outcome, there were lessons to be learned from Vietnam. The US military applied some of these lessons to conflicts in the Philippines and El Salvador during the 1980s, and now that counterinsur-

gency is again in vogue, it would be wise for planners to reexamine pacification operations in Vietnam. The most important lessons to heed follow:

Unity of effort is imperative; there must be a unified structure that combines military and pacification efforts. The pacification program in Vietnam did not make any headway until the different agencies involved were brought together under a single manager within the military C2 architecture. Once CORDS and Phoenix became part of the military chain of command, it was easier to get things done. The military tends to regard pacification tasks as something civilian agencies do; however, only the military has the budget, materiel, and manpower to get the job done.

An insurgency thrives only as long as it can sustain a presence among the population. Make anti-infrastructure operations a first step in any COIN plan. Immediately establish an intelligence capability to identify targets, and use local forces to go after them.

Do not keep the anti-infrastructure program a secret or it will develop a sinister reputation. Tell the people that the government intends to target the infrastructure as part of the security program. Locals must do most of the anti-infrastructure work, with the Americans staying in the background.

Establish a clear legal framework for the pacification program, especially the anti-infrastructure effort. If this is done immediately and the program is run consistently, people will be more likely to accept it. Legality was a problem in Vietnam, and it is clearly a problem today.

An insurgency will not be defeated on the battlefield. The fight is for the loyalty of the people, so establish a government-wide program to better the lives of people in the countryside. Improvement must go hand in hand with anti-infrastructure operations, or the population will likely regard government efforts as repressive.

Above all, Americans must never forget that the host nation is responsible for maintaining security and establishing viable institutions that meet the people's needs, especially since the host nation will have to do the heavy lifting for itself after US forces leave.

These lessons might seem obvious, and it is true that with hindsight they might be easily identified; however, in practice, they are hard to execute. This should not, however, stop us from trying to apply the lessons

learned in Southeast Asia to Iraq and Afghanistan. CORDS was one of the Vietnam War's success stories, and its well-conceived, well-executed programs and successful synthesis of civilian and military efforts offer a useful template for current and future COIN operations.

Notes

1. Thomas C. Thayer, *How to Analyze a War Without Fronts: Vietnam, 1965–72* (Washington, DC: Defense Research Projects Agency, 1975), 788–89.
2. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 175.
3. For an important source from the Communist perspective, see Merle L. Pribbenow, trans., *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002).
4. Message, Westmoreland Military Advisory Command 0117 to Brig. Gen. James Lawton Collins, Jr., Washington, 7 January 1966, Westmoreland files, US Army Center of Military History (CMH), Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..
5. Message, Westmoreland Military Advisory Command 0117 to Brig. Gen. James Lawton Collins, Jr..
6. Pribbenow, *Victory in Vietnam*, 237.
7. Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) Resolution 9, 4, 19. English translation available at the Texas Tech Virtual Vietnam Archive, item no. 4080418002.
8. Resolution 9, 4, 19.
9. Resolution 9, 4, 19.
10. The leading source taking the viewpoint that Gen. Creighton Abrams had the only correct strategy is Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1999).
11. Lyndon B. Johnson to Henry Cabot Lodge, 28 July 1965, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..
12. Robert S. McNamara, quoted in Military Advisory Command Vietnam Command History, 1965, 229, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..
13. Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, DC: CMH, 1991), 18–19.
14. National Security Action Memorandum 343 of 28 March 1966 charged Robert W. Komer with assuring “that adequate plans are prepared and coordinated covering all aspects [of pacification]. [Komer] will also assure that the Rural Construction/Pacification Program is properly coordinated with the programs for combat force employment and military operations.”
15. Memorandum from Komer to John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, Department of Defense, “Giving A New Thrust to Pacification: Analysis, Concept, and Management,” 7 August 1967.
16. Westmoreland Historical Briefing, 17 October 1966, cited in Scoville, 38.
17. Komer, *The Organization and Management of the New Model Pacification Program, 1966–1969* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 1970), 38.
18. Memorandum from Lyndon B. Johnson to Komer, Subject: Second Komer Trip to Vietnam, 23–29 June 1966, 1 July 1966, 6, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

19. Johnson to Komer, National Security Action Memorandum 362, "Responsibility for US Role in Pacification (Revolutionary Development)," online at <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/NSAMs/nsam362.asp>, accessed 27 March 2006.

20. For more detail on the CORDS organization, see Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support*, 62–68.

21. Scoville, 72.

22. Scoville, 76.

23. Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 93.

24. The CORDS organization in IV Corps was different. Because there were fewer US forces in the Mekong Delta than in the other corps areas, IV Corps had no US three-star general.

25. These figures have been compiled by the authors from several sources. For statistics on 1969–70, see Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965–1973* (Washington, D.C.: CMH, 1988), 373.

26. Thayer, *How to Analyze a War Without Fronts*, 884–87.

27. The history of the North Vietnamese 9th Division points out that one of its primary missions in 1969–1970 was to "frustrate the enemy's pacification plan." See *Su Doan 9 [9th Division]* (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Quan Doi Nhan Dan [People's Army Publishing House], 1990), 100.

28. Hamlet Evaluation Survey (HES) Annual Statistical Analysis, 1968–71, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

29. The Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation Program (ICEX) was established by MACV Directive 381-41, "Military Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation for Attack on the VC Infrastructure; Short Title: ICEX," 9 July 1967, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. For a detailed study of ICEX, see Ralph W. Johnson, "Phoenix/Phung Hoang: A Study of War-time Intelligence Management" (Ph.D. diss., The American University, 1985).

30. Dale Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1990), Appen. A-2, "Resource Allocations."

31. Andrade, 87–91.

32. Data on the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU) is scarce, but some useful documents exist. For general information see MACV "Fact Sheet: Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU), RVN," 16 October 1969. For neutralization statistics see Thayer, *A Systems Analysis View of the Vietnam War, 1965–1972*, 10: (publishing information unavailable), 91.

33. Deputy Undersecretary of the Army John Siena to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Subject: Memorandum of Army Vietnam Trip, 28 August 1969, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

34. Memorandum of Army Vietnam Trip, 61; Military Advisory Command CORDS-PSD, "Fact Sheet: Legal Processing of VCI Detainees," 8 June 1970, 3, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

35. Andrade, *Ashes to Ashes*, Appendix A-1, "Phoenix/Phung Hoang Neutralization Results."

36. Phuong Hoang 1970 End of Year Report, 11 May 1971, 4–5, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

37. MACCORDS-PSD, “Fact Sheet,” 2.

38. By mid-1969, US Army division operational reports contained numerous references to captured enemy plans that aimed to “disrupt pacification,” in particular the Regional Forces/Popular Forces (RF/PF) and Phoenix programs, because these were a constant threat to Communist domination in the villages. See also memorandum to William Colby from Wilbur Wilson, Deputy for CORDS, Subject: Motivation of [Government of Vietnam] GVN Leadership in the Phung Hoang Program, 24 June 1971, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

39. “Military Activity Plan of Sub-Region 5: July–September 1970, no. 25/ KH,” from captured document log no. 09-1366-70, 3, Historians files, CMH, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C..

40. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 602.

41. Truong Nhu Tang, *A Viet Cong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985), 268.

42. Nguyen Co Thach, cited in Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA’s Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 246.

43. Hunt, *Pacification*, 252.

44. Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989); Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on US-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, (Santa Monica: Rand, R-967-ARPA, 1972); Bruce Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (New York: Touchstone, 1984). Taking the opposite stance from Colby, Komer, and Palmer are William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), and William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War* (New York: Mentor, 1987), among others.

45. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merele L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 283; Hunt, *Pacification*, 255.

Chapter 8

Vietnamization

An Incomplete Exit Strategy

By the fall of 1968, US involvement in Southeast Asia had reached a pivotal point. The Communist forces had been defeated decisively on the battlefield during the Tet Offensive earlier that year, but in the process they had reaped a tremendous psychological victory. Although US troop levels were at an all-time high and much had been said about the “light at the end of the tunnel,” the sheer scope and ferocity of the Communist attacks had been startling, and the cries to get out of Vietnam reached a new intensity. A shaken Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election. Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon squared off in a fight for the soon-to-be-vacated White House.

During his campaign, Nixon made the war in Vietnam a major element of his platform, promising “new leadership that will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.”¹ He proclaimed: “The nation’s objective should be to help the South Vietnamese fight the war and not fight it for them. If they do not assume the majority of the burden in their own defense, they cannot be saved.”² Despite his later protestations to the contrary, such pronouncements gave many voters the impression that Nixon had a “secret plan” for ending the war, and this no doubt was a factor in his victory at the polls in November.

On 20 January 1969, Richard Milhous Nixon was inaugurated as the 37th president of the United States. Once elected, Nixon faced the same problems in Vietnam that had confronted Lyndon Johnson. Escalation and commitment of increased numbers of American troops had not worked; the Tet offensive had demonstrated that fact only too clearly. The resultant stalemate was unacceptable not only for those clamoring for a US pull-out, but also for an ever-increasing sector of the American people who had supported the war, but would no longer tolerate a long-term commitment to what appeared to be an unwinnable war. The only answer was to get out of Vietnam, but the problem was how to devise an exit strategy that would

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allow the United States to withdraw gracefully without abandoning South Vietnam to the Communists.

On his first day in office, Nixon immediately set about to find a solution, issuing National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM 1), titled "Situation in Vietnam," which was sent to selected members of the new administration, requesting responses to 29 major questions and 50 subsidiary queries covering six broad categories: negotiations, the enemy situation, the state of the armed forces of South Vietnam, the status of the pacification effort, the political situation in South Vietnam, and American objectives.³ The memorandum was sent to, among others, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the US Embassy in Saigon, and Headquarters Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). The memorandum, according to Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser at the time, was designed "to sharpen any disagreements so that we could pinpoint the controversial questions and the different points of view."⁴ Chief among the new president's concerns were the viability of the Thieu government and the capability of the South Vietnamese to continue the fight after any US withdrawal.⁵

If Nixon wanted divergent views and opinions on the war, he certainly found them in the wide range of responses to what became known as the "29 questions." Kissinger and his staff summarized the responses to NSSM 1 in a 44-page report, which revealed that there was general agreement among most respondents that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) could not in the foreseeable future defend against both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army (or more accurately, PAVN, the Peoples Army of Vietnam).⁶ In the same vein, most respondents agreed that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) probably could not stand up to serious political competition from the National Liberation Front (NLF) and that the enemy, although seriously weakened by losses during the Tet Offensive, was still an effective force capable of being refurbished and reinforced from North Vietnam.

Despite agreeing on these points, there was disagreement among the respondents about the progress achieved to that point and the long-range prognosis for the situation in Southeast Asia. There were two opposing schools of thought in this matter. The more optimistic group, best represented by the MACV response and shared by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Admiral John S. McCain, Jr. (commander in chief, US Pacific Forces), held that the North Vietnamese had agreed to peace talks in Paris because of their military weakness, that pacification gains were real and "should hold up," and that the "tides are favorable."

Although the MACV opinion emphasized that significant progress was being made in modernizing the ARVN, it warned that the South Vietnamese could not yet stand alone against a combined assault, stating that “the RVNAF simply are not capable of attaining the level of self-sufficiency and overwhelming force superiority that would be required to counter combined Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnamese Army main force offensives.”⁷ Accordingly, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., MACV commander, stressed in his response that any proposed American troop withdrawal had to be accompanied by a concurrent North Vietnamese withdrawal from South Vietnam.

Differing strongly with the MACV report and definitely representing a decidedly more pessimistic view were the responses from the State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, and civilians in the Defense Department, all of which were highly critical of Saigon’s military capabilities and US progress to date. The Defense Department went so far as to say that the South Vietnamese could not be expected to contain even the Viet Cong, let alone a combined enemy threat, without continued and full American support. These respondents agreed that pacification gains were “inflated and fragile” and that the Communists were not dealing from a position of weakness on the battlefield and had gone to Paris only for political and strategic reasons—to cut costs and to pursue their aims through negotiation—rather than because they faced defeat on the battlefield.⁸

Thus, there existed two divergent opinions about the long-term projection for the future of South Vietnam and its military forces. What had been designed as a means to clear the air on the Vietnam situation and assist in developing a viable strategy had only served to obfuscate things further for the new president. Henry Kissinger wrote, “The answers [to NSSM 1] made clear that there was no consensus as to facts, much less as to policy.”⁹ Thus, Nixon faced a serious dilemma. He had promised to end the war and bring the troops home, but he could not, as Kissinger later observed in his memoirs: “Simply walk away from an entire enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and 31,000 dead as if we were switching a television channel.”¹⁰ The new president had to devise an exit strategy to get the United States out of Vietnam, without “simply walk[ing] away.” While the survival of South Vietnam remained an objective, it manifestly was not the prime goal, which was to get the United States out of Vietnam. Nixon and his advisers began to consider how the US could disengage itself from the conflict and at the same time give the South Vietnamese at least a chance of survival after the American departure. They acknowledged that this would not be easy and might even prove impossible in the long run.

Despite the uncertainty involved in trying to strengthen the South Vietnamese armed forces, the president and his closest advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers, agreed that this was the only feasible course of action if the United States was ever to escape from Vietnam. Nixon ordered American representatives to take a “highly forceful approach” to cause President Thieu and the South Vietnamese government to assume greater responsibility for the war.¹¹ Unspoken, but still clear to all involved, was the implication that an assumption of greater combat responsibility by the RVNAF would precede a resultant withdrawal of American forces, which by this time totaled 543,000.

To get a better sensing for the situation on the ground in Southeast Asia, Nixon directed Laird to go to South Vietnam to conduct a firsthand assessment. On 5 March 1969, the secretary of defense, accompanied by Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, arrived in Saigon. There they were briefed by senior MACV officers, who emphasized the view that significant improvements were being made in the South Vietnamese armed forces. Laird instructed General Abrams to speed up the effort so that the bulk of the war effort could be turned over to the Saigon forces as soon as possible. Abrams repeated his earlier warning that the South Vietnamese were not prepared to stand alone against a combined threat. Nevertheless, Laird, citing political pressures at home, directed Abrams to improve the RVNAF and turn over the war to them “before the time given the new administration runs out.”¹² As historian Lewis Sorley points out, this was not a new mission for Abrams; he had been working on this effort since his days as Westmoreland’s deputy in Saigon.¹³ However, the urgency was a new factor.

Despite Abrams’ warning, Laird returned to Washington convinced that the South Vietnamese could eventually take over prosecution of the entire war, thus permitting a complete US withdrawal. A former Republican Congressman with 17 years in the House, Laird was anxious to end the war because he realized the traditional grace period afforded a new president by the public, the press, and Congress following his election victory would be short-lived. Anti-war sentiment on Capitol Hill was growing, and Laird knew that Nixon would feel the brunt of it if he did not end the war quickly. Moreover, if the war in Vietnam continued much longer, Laird reasoned that it would weaken American strength and credibility around the world in places far more important to US security than Southeast Asia. He believed that any effort to prolong the conflict would lead to such strife and controversy that it would seriously damage Nixon’s ability to achieve an honorable settlement. Therefore, according to Deputy Assis-

tant Secretary of Defense Jerry Friedheim, Laird was “more interested in ending the war in Vietnam rather than winning it.”¹⁴

Laird told Nixon that he believed the president had no choice but to turn the entire war over to the South Vietnamese in order to extricate US forces and placate both the resurgent anti-war movement, as well as the ever-growing segment of the American population who just wanted the war to go away. He proposed a plan designed to make the South Vietnamese armed forces capable of dealing not only with the ongoing insurgency, but also with a continuing North Vietnamese presence in the south. Laird argued that the large US presence in country stifled South Vietnamese initiative and prevented them from getting on with taking over the war effort. He told Nixon that he believed the “orientation” of American senior commanders in Vietnam “seemed to be more on operations than on assisting the South Vietnamese to acquire the means to defend themselves.”¹⁵ Laird wanted the senior US military leaders in South Vietnam to get to work on shifting their focus from fighting the war to preparing the South Vietnamese to stand on their own. Accordingly, he recommended withdrawing 50,000-70,000 American troops in 1969.

In a National Security Council meeting on 28 March, the president and his advisers discussed Laird’s recommendations. In attendance was Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, then serving as General Abrams’ deputy in Saigon. He reported to the president that substantial improvement in the South Vietnamese forces had already been made and that MACV was in fact close to “de-Americanizing” the war. According to Henry Kissinger, Laird took exception to Goodpaster’s choice of words and suggested that what was needed was a term like “Vietnamization” to put the emphasis on the right issues. In very short time, this term was adopted as the embodiment of Nixon’s efforts to turn over the war to the South Vietnamese.¹⁶

Laird later described the objective of the new program before the House Armed Services Committee as “the effective assumption by the RVNAF of a larger share of combat operations from American forces” so that “US forces can be in fact withdrawn in substantial numbers.”¹⁷ Such statements were clearly aimed at selling the new policy to Congress and the American public. Alexander M. Haig, then a member of Nixon’s National Security staff, later described Laird’s plan as a “stroke of public relations genius” but pointed out that it was “a program designed to mollify American critics of the war, not a policy for the effective defense of South Vietnam.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, Laird, according to Henry Kissinger, had convinced himself that Vietnamization would work and it became his top priority.¹⁹

Nixon was quickly won over by Laird's arguments, later writing, "It was on the basis of Laird's enthusiastic advocacy that we undertook the policy of Vietnamization."²⁰ It may not have taken very much to convince the president to endorse this approach; Haig maintains that Nixon had begun talking about troop withdrawals shortly after his inauguration and Laird's Vietnamization plan provided the rationale he was looking for.²¹ It would enable the president to initiate a phase-down of combat operations by US troops with the ultimate goal of complete withdrawal. However, Nixon realized that American forces could not be pulled out precipitously. Although the situation was improving in South Vietnam, there was still a significant level of fighting. Time was needed to make the RVNAF sufficiently strong enough to continue the war alone. Thus, American forces would have to continue combat operations to gain the necessary time to build up the South Vietnamese forces.

In early April 1969, Nixon issued planning guidance for the new policy in National Security Study Memorandum 36 (NSSM 36), which directed "the preparation of a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war" that would address "all aspects of US military, para-military, and civilian involvement in Vietnam, including combat and combat support forces, advisory personnel, and all forms of equipment."²² The stated objective of the requested plan was "the progressive transfer of the fighting effort" from American to South Vietnamese forces.

Nixon's directive was based on a number of assumptions. First, it was assumed that, lacking progress in the Paris peace talks, any US withdrawal would be unilateral and that there would not be any comparable NVA reductions. This was a significant change from previous assumptions, because it meant that the South Vietnamese would have to take on both the VC and the NVA. Second, the US withdrawals would be on a "cut and try" basis, and General Abrams would make periodic assessments of their effects before launching the next phase of troop reductions. Third, it was assumed that the South Vietnamese forces would willingly assume more military responsibility for the war. Based on these three assumptions, the American troop presence in South Vietnam was to be drawn down eventually to the point where only a small residual support and advisory mission remained.

Thus, the Nixon administration, despite assessments from a wide range of government agencies that agreed that the RVNAF could never combat a combined VC-NVA threat, devised a program to prepare the South Vietnamese to do just that, instructing the American command in

Saigon to develop plans for turning over the entire war effort to Saigon. All that was left to institute the new strategy was a public announcement.

On 8 June 1969, President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu at Midway and publicly proclaimed for the first time the new American policy of “Vietnamization.” Nixon stated that there would be a steady buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while American troops were gradually withdrawn. He emphasized that the ultimate objective was to strengthen RVNAF capabilities and bolster the Thieu government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the Communists. Before closing, Nixon announced that he was pulling out 25,000 troops and that at “regular intervals” thereafter, he would pull out more. According to the president, this withdrawal of US forces was contingent on three factors: 1) the progress in training and equipping the South Vietnamese forces, 2) progress in the Paris negotiations, and 3) the level of enemy activity.²³

Privately, President Thieu was not pleased with the American president’s announcement. According to Nixon, Thieu, realizing what the end state of US withdrawals meant, was “deeply troubled,” but Nixon later claimed he “privately assured him [Thieu] through Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker that our support for him was steadfast.”²⁴ Thieu and many of his generals were upset with another aspect of “Vietnamization” and that was the word itself. The South Vietnamese leaders took exception to the whole concept and the connotation that the ARVN were “finally” stepping up to assume responsibility for the war. To the South Vietnamese who had been fighting the Communists since the 1950s, the idea that the war would now be “Vietnamized” was insulting. As one former ARVN general wrote after the war, “It was after all our own war, and we were determined to fight it, with or without American troops. In my opinion, Vietnamization was not a proper term to be used in Vietnam, especially when propaganda was an important enemy weapon.”²⁵

Despite the sensitivities of the South Vietnamese, Henry Kissinger recorded that “Nixon was jubilant. He considered the announcement a political triumph. He thought that it would buy him the time necessary for developing our strategy.”²⁶ A later memorandum revealed that Nixon hoped that his new policy of Vietnamizing the war would demonstrate to the American people that he “had ruled out a purely US solution to the problem in South Vietnam and indeed had a plan to end the war.”²⁷

To solidify the new strategy, Nixon met with Laird and General Wheeler upon his return from Midway. The purpose was to discuss a mission change for General Abrams. The current mission statement, which had been issued by President Johnson, charged MACV to “defeat” the enemy and “force” his withdrawal to North Vietnam. As a result of the discussions following the Midway announcement, a new order to Abrams that would go into effect on 15 August directed him to provide “maximum assistance” to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam, to increase the support to the pacification effort, and to reduce the flow of supplies to the enemy down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With this order, the effort that had begun by General Abrams when he assumed command of MACV became official White House policy. Nixon’s new strategy hinged on transferring the responsibility for fighting the war to the South Vietnamese, while Henry Kissinger worked behind the scenes in Paris in an attempt to forge a cease-fire and subsequent peace agreement. Thus, Nixon hoped to extricate the United States from Southeast Asia and achieve “peace with honor.”

The Vietnamization effort would be implemented in three phases. In the first phase, responsibility for the bulk of ground combat against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces would gradually be turned over to the RVNAF. During this phase, the United States would continue to provide air, naval, and logistic support. The second phase consisted of developing capabilities in the RVNAF to help them achieve self-reliance through an increase in artillery, air, naval assets and other support activities. The second phase proceeded simultaneously with the first phase, but it would require more time. Even after the bulk of US combat forces were withdrawn, US forces would continue to provide support, security, and training personnel. The third phase involved the reduction of the American presence to strictly a military advisory role with a small security element remaining for protection. It was assumed that the advisory and assistance presence would be gradually reduced as South Vietnam grew in strength, but the new strategy, at least as it was described initially, always included leaving a small residual force in South Vietnam “for some time to come,” as Laird told a House subcommittee in February 1970.²⁸

The South Vietnamese took statements such as this and many more like it as evidence of a promise that the United States would not desert them. As the cries for complete US withdrawal increased in volume, the idea of a residual US force in Vietnam would eventually be abandoned and this change would have a devastating impact on the fortunes of South Vietnam.

While the United States continued to conduct combat operations with American forces, the new Vietnamization policy focused initially on modernizing and developing the South Vietnamese armed forces. This effort was not a new initiative, but during the earlier years of US involvement in Vietnam, particularly during the period of American buildup (1965-1967), it had been of secondary importance as US military leaders focused on the conduct of operations by American units in the field. With the election of Richard Nixon and his subsequent emphasis on Vietnamization, the effort to strengthen and modernize the South Vietnamese forces became a top priority for MACV.²⁹

When Nixon met with President Thieu at Midway in June 1969 and announced the initiation of the Vietnamization policy, Thieu expressed significant concerns about the capabilities of his forces in light of the inevitable US troop withdrawals. Abrams was told to work with the South Vietnamese to develop a recommendation on how to further improve the force structure and fighting capability of the RVNAF. The subsequent improvement program, which became known collectively as the “Midway increase,” was approved by Laird on 18 August 1969. At the same time, Laird directed MACV and the Joint Staff to review all ongoing and projected programs for improving the RVNAF, telling them to consider not just force structure and equipment improvements, but also to look at new ways to improve leadership, training, and to develop new strategy and tactics best suited to South Vietnamese capabilities.

On 2 September, Abrams responded to Laird’s guidance, pointing out in very clear terms that, in his opinion, proposed modernization and improvement programs, even with the Midway increase, would not permit the South Vietnamese to handle the current combined threat. Citing poor leadership, high desertion rates, and corruption in the upper ranks of the RVNAF, Abrams reported that he thought that the South Vietnamese forces could not be improved either quantitatively or qualitatively to the extent necessary to deal with a combined threat; he clearly stated that he thought what the secretary of defense wanted simply could not be done in the time-frame expected and with the resources allocated.³⁰

Laird could not accept Abrams’ assessment, because if he did, it meant that he would have to admit that the United States could never gracefully exit South Vietnam, particularly in light of the increasingly obvious fact that the North Vietnamese were not going to agree to a bilateral withdrawal of US and PAVN troops from South Vietnam. On 10 November, he directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to come up with a new plan that would, one way or the other, create a South Vietnamese military force that could

“maintain at least current levels of security.”³¹ He told the military planners to assume unilateral US withdrawals that would reduce American military strength first to a “support force” of 190,000-260,000 troops by July 1971 and then to a much smaller advisory force by July 1973. He was effectively telling the planners for a third time to come up with a viable Vietnamization program but with the new caveat that they were not to assume a significant residual US support force.

It appears that Abrams and his staff, realizing that despite their great misgivings, the die was cast with regard to eventual US withdrawal and they attempted to devise the best plan possible given Laird’s adamant directives. To comply with the secretary’s orders, the military planners assumed a reduced Viet Cong threat and a declining PAVN presence in South Vietnam, while virtually ignoring Hanoi’s forces based just outside the borders of South Vietnam. Based on these somewhat questionable assumptions, MACV submitted its new recommendations at the end of December.³² In January 1970, the Joint Chiefs included these assumptions in the Phase III RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Plan, which called for an increase in RVNAF strength to 1,061,505 over a three-year period (mid-1970 to mid-1973) and the activation and equipping of 10 new artillery battalions, 24 truck companies, and six more helicopter squadrons.

Laird thought this plan was finally a step in the right direction, but he was concerned that MACV planners still had not accepted that there would be no large residual American support force and suspected that the military was trying to stall the withdrawal process. Accordingly, in mid-February 1970, Laird flew to Saigon to meet with Abrams and Thieu to impress upon them the urgency of the situation. He voiced disappointment about what he perceived as the lack of any new or fresh approaches from MACV regarding the implementation of the Vietnamization program. While in Saigon, he met separately with senior South Vietnamese generals who expressed concern with the Phase III plan and reiterated earlier requests for additional artillery, to include long-range 175-mm artillery pieces and air defense artillery, and again asked for financial assistance to improve the lot of their soldiers.

When Laird got back to Washington, he ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to reevaluate the proposed Phase III plan in light of the South Vietnamese requests and to come up with a more comprehensive plan. Two months later, the Joint Chiefs submitted the revised plan, which became known as the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Plan, or CRIMP. This plan, which covered the 1970-1972 fiscal years,

raised the total supported South Vietnamese military force structure to an even 1.1 million.³³

CRIMP had a significant impact on the entire RVNAF. As in the past, the ARVN got the largest share of the improvements, eventually receiving 155-mm and 175-mm long-range artillery pieces, M-42 and M-55 anti-aircraft weapons, M-48 tanks, and a host of other sophisticated weapon systems and equipment. By the end of 1969, the US had supplied 1,200 tanks and armored vehicles, 30,000 machine guns, 4,000 mortars, 20,000 radios, and 25,000 jeeps and trucks. The new equipment and weapons received in the two years following the approval of CRIMP enabled the ARVN to activate an additional division (3rd Infantry Division), as well as a number of smaller units, to include 25 border ranger battalions, numerous artillery battalions, four armored cavalry squadrons, three tank battalions, two armored brigade headquarters, and three anti-aircraft battalions. By the beginning of 1972, the South Vietnamese army strength would increase to 450,000 and consist of 171 infantry battalions, 22 armored cavalry and tank squadrons, and 64 artillery battalions.³⁴

The territorial Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF) also benefited greatly from CRIMP. As Vietnamization gained momentum, MACV and Washington planned to fill the gaps left by departing US divisions with an expansion of the RF/PF, which would hopefully be able to take over the major share of territorial security and support of the pacification program. This expansion effort involved a significant increase in numbers and improved equipment. Under CRIMP, the RF and PF received newer, more modern weapons, including M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns, and M-79 grenade launchers; all were vast improvements over the hodgepodge of older cast-off weapons with which they previously had been armed. The influx of new 105-mm howitzers enabled the Joint General Staff to activate eventually a total of 174 territorial artillery sections to provide support for the RF, PF, and border ranger forces, thus vastly improving the fire support available to the territorial forces while reducing the burden on the regular artillery forces, who could then focus on supporting the regular maneuver battalions in their combat operations.³⁵ In addition to the new equipment, the manpower strength of the Regional and Popular Forces was increased to get more government troops into the countryside to support the pacification effort. The command structure of the Regional Forces was improved and several RF group commands were formed.

The ground forces were not the only beneficiaries of CRIMP. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) also received a windfall, growing from 17,000 in late 1968 to 37,000 by the end of 1969, and ultimately to

64,000 by 1973. Along with this increase in the number of personnel, there were also significant upgrades in aircraft and command-and control-capability. The VNAF's older propeller-driven aircraft began to be replaced by A-37 and F-5A jet fighter-bombers, thus vastly increasing ground-support capability. VNAF's cargo hauling capability was also improved with the upgrading of the C-47 fleet to C-119 aircraft initially, and eventually to C-123 and C-7 aircraft. The helicopter fleet (unlike the US arrangement, where most of the troop-carrying and attack helicopters belonged to the Army, VNAF controlled all the helicopters in the South Vietnamese inventory) was greatly enlarged and improved as US Army aviation units began to redeploy, turning over their aircraft and equipment to newly activated Vietnamese helicopter squadrons. Late in 1972, as the United States prepared for total withdrawal, VNAF, under the provisions of a special program called Enhance Plus, received 32 C-130A four-engine cargo planes and additional C-7 cargo planes, F-5A fighter-bombers, and helicopters.

During this period, the Vietnamese Air Force grew to six times its 1964 strength and, by 1973, operated a total of 1,700 aircraft, including over 500 helicopters. By then it had six air divisions, which included a total of 10 A-37 fighter-bomber squadrons, three A-1H attack helicopter squadrons, three F-5E fighter-bomber squadrons, 17 UH-1 helicopter squadrons, four CH-47 helicopter squadrons, 10 liaison and observation squadrons, three C-7 squadrons, four AC-47, AC-119, and EC-47 squadrons, and other additional training units. In terms of equipment, VNAF, by the time of the US withdrawal in 1973, would be one of the most powerful air forces in Southeast Asia.

The Vietnamese Navy (VNN) also underwent significant expansion during the Vietnamization period. The navy numbered only 17,000 in 1968, but it would reach 40,000 by 1972. To increase the capability of the VNN and to meet the goals of the Vietnamization program, MACV instituted two new programs in 1969. The first was called the Accelerated Turnover of Assets (ACTOV), which was designed to rapidly increase naval strength and training and, at the same time, accelerate turnover of ships and combat responsibility from the US Navy to the South Vietnamese Navy. The second program was called the Accelerated Turnover of Logistics (ACTOVLOG), which was aimed at increasing naval logistical support capabilities.

The VNN received two small cruisers in May 1969. Shortly thereafter, the US Navy Riverine Force began to turn over its vessels and river-patrol responsibilities to the VNN. By mid-1970, over 500 US

brown-water navy boats had been transferred to the South Vietnamese. In September of that year, the VNN took over the ships and mission of the Market Time coastal interdiction program. By 1972, the Vietnamese Navy operated a fleet of over 1,700 ships and boats of all types, to include sea patrol craft, large cargo ships, coastal—and river-patrol craft, and amphibious ships.

In terms of the sheer volume of materiel and modern equipment, Vietnamization worked. By 1970, South Vietnam had made a quantum leap in terms of modernization and was one of the largest and best-equipped military forces in the world. Unfortunately, however, equipment and sheer numbers were not the only answers to the problems facing South Vietnam as it prepared to assume ultimate responsibility for the war. The fighting ability of the South Vietnamese armed forces had to be improved. To do this, MACV increasingly placed more emphasis on training and the advisory effort, which had been ongoing since the earliest days of US involvement in Southeast Asia. US advisers were found in essentially three areas: they advised South Vietnamese combat units, served in the training base, and worked in the province pacification programs.

MACV Headquarters provided the advisory function to the Joint General Staff (JGS), the senior headquarters of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. However, only a part of MACV Headquarters staff personnel actually served in a true advisory capacity. In 1970, only 397 out of 1,668 authorized spaces in MACV's 15 staff agencies were designated officially as "advisers" to the GVN and the JGS.³⁶ Nevertheless, as the war continued and more US forces were withdrawn, the MACV staff agencies became increasingly more involved in purely advisory functions.

Just below the JGS level were four South Vietnamese corps commanders who were responsible for the four corps tactical zones (later, military regions) that South Vietnam comprised. Initially, their US counterparts were the senior US field force commanders in each of the corps tactical zones.³⁷ In this capacity, the senior US commander was assisted by two deputies who worked directly with the South Vietnamese forces. His deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) was the principal adviser to the ARVN corps commander in the area of pacification and development. Additionally, the senior US commander had another deputy, who served as the senior adviser to the corps commander and was actually the chief of the US Army Advisory Group attached to the ARVN corps headquarters. As such, he and his staff provided assistance, advice, and support to the corps commander and his staff in

command, administration, training, combat operations, intelligence, logistics, political warfare, and civil affairs.

Later, as additional US units and the senior American field-force headquarters were withdrawn, the advisory structure changed. During 1971-1972, four regional assistance commands were established. The regional assistance commander, usually a US Army major general, replaced the departing field-force commander as the senior adviser to the South Vietnamese corps commander in the respective military regions.³⁸ The mission of the Regional Assistance Commander was to provide assistance to the ARVN corps commander in developing and maintaining an effective military capability by advising and supporting RVNAF military and paramilitary commanders and staffs at all levels in the corps in military operations, training, intelligence, personnel management, and combat support and combat service support activities. To accomplish this, the Regional Assistance Commander had a staff that worked directly with the ARVN corps staff. He also exercised operational control over the subordinate US Army advisory groups and the pacification advisory organizations in the military region. As such, he and his personnel provided advice, assistance, and support at each echelon of South Vietnamese command in planning and executing both combat operations and pacification programs within the military region.

Below the senior US adviser in each military region, there were two types of advisory teams: province advisory teams and division advisory teams. Each of the 44 provinces in South Vietnam was headed by a province chief, usually a South Vietnamese Army or Marine colonel, who supervised the provincial government apparatus and also commanded the provincial Regional and Popular Forces. Under the CORDS program initiated in 1967, an advisory system was established to assist the province chiefs in administering the pacification program. The province chief's American counterpart was the province senior adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The province senior adviser and his staff were responsible for advising the province chief in civil and military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs. The province senior adviser's staff, which was made up of both US military and civilian personnel, was divided into two parts. The first part dealt with area and community development, to include public health and administration, civil affairs, education, agriculture, psychological operations, and logistics. The other part of the staff dealt with plans and operations, and focused on preparing plans and assisting with the direction of military operations by the territorial forces within the province.

The province chief exercised his authority through district chiefs. To provide advice and support to the district chiefs, the province senior adviser supervised the district senior advisers, who each had a staff of about eight members (although the actual size in each case depended on the particular situation in that district). The district level advisory teams assisted the District Chief in the military and civil aspects of the pacification and development program. Additionally, the district team (and/or assigned mobile assistance training teams) advised and trained the RF/PFs located in the district. By the end of 1967, a total of 4,000 US military and civilian personnel were involved in the CORDS advisory effort. When Vietnamization was officially declared in 1969, total US Army advisory strength stood at about 13,500, half of which were assigned to CORDS organizations.³⁹ This increase was due to the expansion of the pacification program following the 1968 Tet Offensive. In addition to CORDS advisory teams, there were also advisory teams with RVNAF regular forces. In January 1969, MACV, in an attempt to upgrade the capability of the regular ARVN divisions, initiated the Combat Assistance Team (CAT) concept. Under this plan, the emphasis was on reducing the number of tactical advisers in the field and changing their mission from “advising to combat support coordination” at the ARVN division level. The Division Combat Assistance Team’s mission was to advise and assist the ARVN division commander and his staff in command and control, administration, training, tactical operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and certain elements of political warfare. The division senior adviser was usually a US Army colonel, who exercised control over the regimental and battalion advisory teams.

Each ARVN division usually had three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and several separate battalions, such as the cavalry squadron and the engineer battalion. The regimental advisory teams were normally composed of from eight to twelve US Army personnel (they were eventually reduced in strength as the drawdown of US forces in country gradually reduced the number of advisers assigned) and were usually headed by a US Army lieutenant colonel and included various mixes of officers and non-commissioned officers. The separate battalion advisory teams usually consisted of one or two specialists who advised the South Vietnamese in their respective functional areas; for example: cavalry, intelligence, engineering, logistics, etc.

Elite ARVN troops, such as the airborne and ranger units, were organized generally along the same lines as regular ARVN units, but the highest echelon of command in these units was the regiment.⁴⁰ Each of these regiments was accompanied by an American advisory team, which

was headed by a colonel and was similar, but somewhat larger than those found with the regular ARVN regiments. The advisory structure for the Vietnamese Marine Corps was similar to the ARVN, but the advisers were US Marine Corps personnel.

US advisers did not command, nor did they exercise any operational control over any part of the South Vietnamese forces. Their mission was to provide professional military advice and assistance to their counterpart commanders and staffs. The idea was that these advisory teams would work themselves out of a job over time as the ARVN and VNMC began to assume more responsibility for planning and executing their own operations.

In addition to the US advisers assigned to the CORDS effort and those serving with South Vietnamese combat units in the field, there were also a significant number of advisers assigned to support the RVNAF training base in an effort to increase the training of the South Vietnamese forces. By the end of 1972, South Vietnam would have one of the largest and most modern military forces in Southeast Asia, but even vast amounts of the best equipment in the world were meaningless if the soldiers, sailors, and airmen did not know how to use it or did not have the leadership and motivation to put it to good use in the field against the enemy. Training the Vietnamese had, in theory, received high priority throughout the war, but in practice too little attention had been given this critical function before the initiation of Vietnamization. Even with the new policy in place, improving South Vietnamese training proved to be an uphill battle.

The ARVN training system consisted of 56 training centers of various types and sizes. There were nine national training centers (not including the airborne and marine divisions, which had their own training centers) and 37 provincial training centers. This extensive system of schools and training facilities was under the control of the RVNAF Central Training Command (CTC), which had first been established in 1966. This command was advised and supported by the MACV Training Directorate, which was responsible for providing advice and assistance in the development of an effective military training system for the RVNAF. As such the training directorate provided US advisers at the RVNAF schools and training centers, where they assisted RVNAF commandants in the preparation and conduct of training programs.

At first glance, the RVNAF training system of schools and training centers in 1968 was an impressive arrangement, but deeper investigation revealed that it was less than effective in producing the leaders and soldiers necessary to successfully prosecute the war. MACV had made numerous

proposals to the Vietnamese Joint General Staff and Central Training Command for improving the personnel capacity and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese training facilities, but these recommendations received little attention from the RVNAF high command. As the MACV Command Overview stated, “Despite CTC and MACV efforts, little progress was made in 1969 in these areas due to the complex personnel changes required, JGS reluctance to give the program a high priority, and refusal by RVN field commanders to release experienced officers and NCOs [non-commissioned officers] from operational responsibilities.”⁴¹

By early 1970, the US authorities were so disturbed by this situation that the Army chief of staff dispatched a fact-finding team to Vietnam led by Brig. Gen. Donnelly Bolton, to tour RVNAF training facilities, to provide an objective assessment of the training capabilities of the South Vietnamese, and to examine the state of US training assistance. This team found the efforts of both South Vietnamese and the US military training advisers in Vietnam to be less than adequate. The MACV Training Directorate, responsible for providing advisers to RVNAF training facilities, was at only 70 percent of assigned strength, and all the US training advisory detachments in the field were likewise under strength. The quality of advisory personnel assigned to train the South Vietnamese at the RVNAF schools was also an issue, since it appeared to the team that often those deemed unfit to serve in more prestigious operational and staff positions were placed in the RVNAF training billets. Col. (later Maj. Gen.) Stan L. McClellan, a member of the Bolton team, wrote, “It was clear that top professionals were not being assigned to training advisory duties.”⁴²

General Abrams agreed with the findings of the Bolton team and urged Bolton to recommend to the Joint Chiefs of Staff upon his return to the Pentagon that they send more and better training advisers to Vietnam. He was very concerned with filling the ranks of his advisory teams with personnel at their authorized grade level (for instance, lieutenant colonels in positions authorized lieutenant colonels, and so forth), thereby reducing the number of low-ranking advisers with little or no combat experience. Abrams told Bolton, “It’s time that they [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] recognize in Washington that the day of the US fighting force involvement in South Vietnam is at an end. All we have time for now is to complete the preparation of South Vietnam to carry on the task.”⁴³

At the same time Abrams was trying to convince the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the critical importance of the advisory mission in South Vietnam, he was bringing pressure on the RVNAF high command to make improvements to their training system. In a March 1970 letter to Gen.

Cao Van Vien, chief of the Joint General Staff, Abrams urged senior South Vietnamese commanders to get behind the training effort. He wrote, "Arrangements for support of CTC activities must be widened and accelerated. As a first order of effort it is essential to enlist the personal interest and assistance of corps, divisional tactical area, and sector commanders each of whom...is a user of the product of the training system, and should contribute to improving the quality of the product."⁴⁴

Due in large part to Abrams' urging and the realization that US forces were in fact going to be withdrawn, the RVNAF high command began to put more emphasis on improving their training system. The fact that the United States contributed 28 million dollars to expanding and improving the South Vietnamese facilities also helped. Eventually there would be a total of 33 major military and service schools, 13 national and regional training centers, and 14 division training centers. By 1970, the South Vietnamese leaders began to transfer experienced officers and NCOs to the training centers. Although field commanders only reluctantly gave up their veteran small-unit leaders, by the end of 1971 nearly half of the South Vietnamese training instructors were men with combat experience. Also by this time the number of US training advisory personnel was increased and by the end of 1971 there were more than 3,500 US advisers directly involved in training at most of the training centers and major RVNAF schools.⁴⁵

Even as the South Vietnamese began to realize the necessity of upgrading their training programs, the quality and quantity of US advisers remained an issue. This was true of not just the advisers in the training centers, but also the advisory personnel at all levels, both with field units and with CORDS advisory teams. In December 1969, as the Vietnamization policy began to gather momentum and the above-cited changes in force structure, equipment, and training were instituted, Secretary Laird, realizing the criticality of the advisory effort to the Vietnamization process, asked the service secretaries to look at what could be done to upgrade the overall advisory effort.⁴⁶ Before this time, service as an adviser was seen by many in the US Army as much less desirable than field command with a US unit, and many officers and NCOs avoided advisory duty. More often than not, the selection process for determining who would become an adviser was largely due to who was available for overseas duty when advisory billets became vacant due to rotation or casualties.⁴⁷

For those selected to become advisers, the training program was limited to a six-week course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, followed by eight weeks of Vietnamese language training at the Defense Language Institute.

Thus, many assigned as advisers had neither the experience, the training, or the inclination to be an adviser. Laird set out to change the situation; he wanted to put the best people in as advisers. He did not get much help initially from the Army; Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor said he would continue to study the problem but did not offer any useful solutions.⁴⁸ The Army was trying to deal with severe personnel problems. The demands of the war resulted in Army officers and noncommissioned officers returning to Vietnam for multiple tours, some separated by less than a year and the demand for advisers only exacerbated the strain on the personnel system. Nevertheless, Abrams continued to urge that more emphasis be placed on assigning qualified combat experienced officers to adviser duty. He demanded “guys who can lead/influence...the business of pacification,” officers who “feel empathy toward the Vietnamese...appreciate their good points and understand their weaknesses;” he wanted advisers who “can pull ideas and actions out of the Vietnamese” in pursuit of two major goals: “pacification and upgrading the RVNAF.”⁴⁹

Laird agreed with Abrams in demanding that the advisory posts be filled and ordered the service secretaries to send “only the most highly qualified” personnel to be advisers. Eventually the message got through to the services and by the end of 1970, there was “an infusion of top-flight military professionals into South Vietnam’s training advisory effort.”⁵⁰ The advisory effort also benefited from the US troop drawdown because as more American units departed, the number of available combat assignments declined, thus freeing up for advisory duty large numbers of those officers who would have gone to US units. During 1969, the overall strength of the field advisory teams increased from about 7,000 to 11,900 and then to 14,332 in 1970.

While Abrams focused on improving the advisory effort, President Nixon and Secretary Laird continued to push for more and faster troop reductions. Nixon had announced the first US troop withdrawal at Midway, but he and Laird were given new motivation to expand their withdrawal plans by former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford. In June 1969, he published an article in *Foreign Affairs* that urged the unilateral withdrawal of 100,000 troops by the end of the year, and of all other personnel by the end of 1970, leaving only logistics and Air Force personnel.⁵¹ Nixon, never one to shrink from a challenge, stated at a press conference that he could improve upon Clifford’s schedule. This statement received a lot of attention in the press and effectively committed the United States to a unilateral withdrawal from South Vietnam, thus removing the promise of troop reductions (or the pace thereof) as a bargaining chip for Kissinger

in his dealings with the North Vietnamese in Paris. This would have serious consequences for peace negotiations and the efficacy of the eventual cease-fire agreement.

The first redeployment of 25,000 US troops promised by President Nixon was accomplished by 27 August 1969 when the last troops from the 1st and 2nd Brigades of the 9th Infantry Division departed the Mekong Delta. In the months following the Midway announcement, there were continuing discussions about the size and pace of the US withdrawal. Laird had come up with several options for the rest of 1969 that ranged from withdrawing a total of 50,000 troops, at the low end, to 100,000 at the high end; in between were a number of different combinations of numbers and forces. In a memorandum to the president, Laird cautioned him to be careful about withdrawing too many troops too quickly as this would have serious consequences for the pacification program.⁵² Laird's warning proved timely. On 6 August, as soldiers from the 9th Infantry Division prepared to depart South Vietnam, there was a Communist attack on Cam Ranh Bay. Five days later, the Communists attacked more than 100 cities, towns, and bases across South Vietnam. An official North Vietnamese history of the war revealed that the politburo in Hanoi had concluded after the Midway announcement that the United States had "lost its will to fight in Vietnam" and thus the Communists, believing they were in a position to dictate the degree and intensity of combat, launched the new round of attacks.⁵³

When Nixon had made his announcement in June about the initial US troop withdrawal, he emphasized that one of the criteria for further reductions would be the level of enemy activity. These new Communist attacks clearly went against Nixon's conditions, and accordingly, he announced that he was delaying a decision about additional troop withdrawals. This caused an uproar in Congress and the media. On 12 September, the National Security Council met to discuss the situation. Kissinger reported that "a very natural response from us would have been to stop bringing soldiers home, but by now withdrawal had gained its own momentum."⁵⁴ Kissinger had sent the president a memorandum two days before the meeting, expressing concern about the administration's "present course" in South Vietnam. He warned that "Withdrawals of US troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public; the more US troops come home, the more will be demanded. This could eventually result, in effect, in demands for a unilateral withdrawal. The more troops are withdrawn, the more Hanoi will be encouraged."⁵⁵ Kissinger would be proven right, but during the NSC meeting, he was the only dissenter to the decision to go ahead with the scheduled troop reductions. On 16 September, Nixon ordered a sec-

ond increment of 35,000 American troops to be redeployed by December. According to Kissinger, the withdrawals became “inexorable...[and] the President never again permitted the end of a withdrawal period to pass without announcing a new increment for the next.”⁵⁶

On 15 December, Nixon ordered a third increment of 50,000 to be redeployed before April 1970. On 20 April 1970, he announced that even though 110,000 US troops had been scheduled to be redeployed during the first three increments, a total of 115,000 had actually departed Vietnam. The second phase of the withdrawal, from April 1970 to April 1971, would reduce the total US strength by a further 150,000. By the end of 1970, only about 344,000 US troops remained in South Vietnam; the 9th Infantry Division, the 3rd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, the 1st Infantry Division, the 3rd Marine Division, two brigades of the 25th Infantry Division and the entire 4th Infantry Division had been redeployed. As these US forces prepared to depart, they suspended combat operations and the RVNAF took over responsibility for their respective operational areas.

From the initial announcement of US troop withdrawals in June 1969 to the end of November 1972, the United States brought home 14 increments, reducing total US strength in Vietnam from a peak of 543,400 to a residual force of 27,000. Once the initial departure of US forces began, the RVNAF was forced to assume more responsibility for the war, regardless of the progress of Vietnamization and pacification. This was the situation that confronted General Abrams. Faced with a war that continued to rage, he had to increase the efforts to prepare the RVNAF to fill the void on the battlefield left by the redeploying US forces. He was essentially fighting for time.

When Abrams assumed command of MACV in 1968, he knew that something had to be done to improve the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Even before President Nixon had announced Vietnamization as the new US policy in South Vietnam, General Abrams had taken measures to increase the effectiveness of the RVNAF training base. However, this had not historically been the focus of MACV's efforts. Abrams had inherited the long-standing US mission of closing with and defeating the Communists to force them to withdraw from South Vietnam. With Nixon's announcement of the Vietnamization policy and the receipt of the new mission statement, Abrams was directed “to assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed forces to take over an increasing share of combat operations” and focus on (1) providing “maximum assistance” to the South Vietnamese to strengthen their forces, (2) supporting the pacification effort, and (3) reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy.⁵⁷

General Abrams, although continuing to have serious misgivings about the accelerated US troop withdrawals, understood his marching orders and stepped up measures to improve the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese units. This was not a new problem for Abrams; since his assumption of command, he had been concerned that the United States and South Vietnamese forces were essentially fighting two different wars. Abrams had sought to end the division of roles and missions between American and South Vietnamese combat forces by the adoption of a single combined allied strategy, thus eliminating “the tacit existence of two separate strategies, attrition and pacification.”⁵⁸ Abrams described this “one war” concept as “a strategy focused upon protecting the population so that the civil government can establish its authority as opposed to an earlier conception of the purpose of the war—destruction of the enemy’s forces.”⁵⁹ This approach had already effectively been instituted by Abrams, but was formalized in the MACV Objectives Plan approved in March 1969 and was eventually adopted jointly by the US and Saigon as the Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, which specified that the “RVNAF must participate fully within its capabilities in all types of operations...to prepare for the time when it must assume the entire responsibility.”⁶⁰

As soon as the new plan was signed, Abrams set out to make sure that MACV forces fully accepted his “one war” concept, forever eliminating the division of labor that too often had fragmented allied efforts. Thus, Abrams was already shifting the focus of MACV when he received the official change of mission from President Nixon. Armed with the new “one war” combined strategy and urged by his commander in chief to Vietnamize the war, Abrams hoped to bring the combat situation under control while at the same time shifting the preponderance of the responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese as American troop withdrawals increased in size and frequency. One way that he wanted to do this was to have the ARVN fight side by side with the American troops in the field in combined operations.

American and South Vietnamese units had conducted combined operations prior to the adoption of the “one war” policy, but during earlier operations, the South Vietnamese troops usually filled a secondary, supporting role on the periphery of the main action. Many American combat commanders were reluctant to operate with South Vietnamese units and typically regarded the ARVN as no more than “an additional burden” that had to be taken in tow, more “apt to cause problems...than be helpful.”⁶¹ Although this situation changed somewhat for the better after the 1968 Tet offensive, Abrams, faced with the urgent task of Vietnamizing the war, ordered closer cooperation between the American and South Vietnam-

ese forces. The hope was that American units would serve as models for Saigon's soldiers by integrating the operations of the two national forces more closely together. This had worked very well in South Korea and had eventually improved the fighting abilities of the Republic of Korea armed forces. Abrams and his advisers manifestly hoped that the Korean model would also work with the South Vietnamese.

Although the effort to integrate the South Vietnamese troops into the main battle effort would prove to be uneven and varied from corps tactical zone to corps tactical zone, several new programs were instituted in accordance with Abrams' directives. In I Corps Tactical Zone, Lt. Gen. Richard G. Stillwell, the US XXIV Corps Commander, worked very closely with the ARVN commander, Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Ngo Quang Truong, integrating the South Vietnamese units into operational plans as a full partner. Under what was essentially a US/ARVN combined command, the South Vietnamese forces operated closely with the US 3rd Marine Division, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), and the 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.⁶² After Stillwell was replaced by MG Melvin Zais later in 1969, the new commander continued Stillwell's emphasis on combined operations and other US forces in I Corps stepped up their cooperative efforts with the ARVN. Abrams was extremely pleased with the performance of the ARVN forces in I Corps; and later in 1969, he ordered the US 1st Cavalry Division south, reoriented remaining American combat forces in the region toward area security, and eventually sent home one of the two American marine divisions there.

In II Corps Tactical Zone, US commanders also pursued combined operations but with less success. Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, commander of I Field Force and his counterpart, Lt. Gen. Lu Lan, commander of ARVN II Corps, jointly established the "Pair Off" program, which called for each ARVN unit to be closely and continually affiliated with a US counterpart unit. Operations were to be conducted jointly, regardless of the size unit each force could commit, and coordination and cooperation were effected from corps to battalion and districts. Under this program, the US 4th Infantry Division and the US 173rd Airborne Brigade joined forces with the ARVN 22nd and 23rd Infantry Divisions. During the period following the initiation of the Pair Off program, three significant combined operations were conducted in II Corps, and each achieved a modest level of success. However, this approach did not work as well as the combined operations in I Corps for a number of reasons. First, the two corps-level headquarters, unlike those in I Corps, were not co-located, and this made coordination

more difficult. Additionally, the ARVN field commanders in II Corps were not as enthusiastic about working with US forces as were MG Truong and his fellow ARVN commanders in I Corps. Consequently, the motivation to learn from the Americans was not present, and this affected coordination and cooperation between the two national forces.

In III Corps Tactical Zone, US II Field Force Commander Lt. Gen. Julian Ewell and his counterpart, Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, commander of ARVN III Corps, instituted a program called *Dong Tien* (Progress Together). The three major goals of this program were: to increase the quantity and quality of combined and coordinated joint operations; to materially advance the three major ARVN missions of pacification support, improvement of combat effectiveness, and intensification of combat operations; and to effect a significant increase in the efficiency of utilizing critical combat and combat support elements, particularly army aviation assets.⁶³ This program called for the close association of ARVN III Corps and US II Field Force units on a continuing basis. Under this concept, as an ARVN battalion reached a satisfactory level of combat effectiveness, it was to be phased out of the program and returned to independent operations. The *Dong Tien* program had a positive effect on ARVN units throughout III Corps. The 1st US and 5th ARVN Infantry Divisions worked very closely together, and the repetitive combined operations prepared the ARVN division to assume the American unit's area of operation when it was redeployed in 1970. When the 5th ARVN Division moved its command post to Binh Long Province and assumed control of the old "Big Red One" area, a major milestone in the Vietnamization process had been passed.

Although these combined operations were not all successful, they were instrumental in most cases in increasing the battlefield proficiency of the RVNAF units. Thus, they helped pave the way for the South Vietnamese commanders and troops to assume new responsibilities as more US forces began to withdraw. Unfortunately, however, these programs could not eliminate many of the long-standing problems that haunted the RVNAF and would ultimately be one of the contributing factors to the downfall of the South Vietnamese regime. The expanding RVNAF suffered from a lack of technical competence, weak staff officers, inexperience at planning and executing large-scale combined arms operations, and a number of other serious maladies. Leadership, particularly at the senior levels, lay at the root of all RVNAF weakness. This problem greatly concerned General Abrams and his senior commanders as they tried to prepare the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for the war. Programs such as Pair Off and *Dong Tien* were designed to help bolster RVNAF leadership and

combat skills, but they could not fully repair long-term ills in the South Vietnamese system.

By the end of 1969, Vietnamization had made progress in several areas. The modernization effort had resulted in the equipping of all ARVN units with modern equipment. The advisory effort had received new emphasis and the RVNAF training system was improving. The redeployment of US troops had forced the RVNAF to assume more responsibility for the war, as the number of battalion-size operations conducted by the South Vietnamese almost doubled between 1968 and 1969. Still, combat performance of the South Vietnamese was uneven at best. Some units, such as the 51st ARVN Infantry Battalion, did very well against their Communist opponents, while others, like the 22nd ARVN Infantry Division, were largely ineffective in the field (the 22nd had conducted 1,800 ambushes during the summer months of 1969 and netted only six enemy killed).⁶⁴

The MACV Office of Information publicized the increased participation of RVNAF emphasizing that, in time, the South Vietnamese forces would be able to stand on their own.⁶⁵ Despite these claims, many advisers felt that the South Vietnamese were still too dependent on US forces for support and worried about their ability to carry on the war by themselves after the United States withdrew. The MACV public relations statements were correct in one sense—it was clear that time would be necessary before the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the North Vietnamese. The key question for many was whether there was enough time left before all US units were withdrawn.

Vietnamization received its first test in the spring of 1970 when Nixon ordered an attack into the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. This was a combined attack which involved 32,000 American soldiers and 48,000 South Vietnamese troops. The main attack into the “Fishhook” region was made by elements of the 1st Cavalry Division, 25th Infantry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. At the same time, South Vietnamese forces conducted an attack into the “Parrot’s Beak” region. Both attacks went very well, and the allied forces located and destroyed numerous large Communist base camps, capturing an impressive array of supplies and material, to include more than 16 million rounds of various caliber ammunition; 45,000 rockets; 2,900 individual weapons; 2,500 crew-served weapons, 5,500 land mines; 62,000 grenades; 14 million pounds of rice; and 435 vehicles.⁶⁶

The South Vietnamese forces, most of which were under the command of Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, supported by US artillery, tactical air, and helicopter gunships, performed well, accomplishing all assigned missions.

Nixon announced that the South Vietnamese performance in Cambodia was “visible proof of the success of Vietnamization.”⁶⁷

The truth of the situation was somewhat less than Nixon wanted to believe. Many of the South Vietnamese units that had participated in the incursion were mostly from elite units, rather than the mainstream of South Vietnamese troops. In addition, there had been no intense fighting in the ARVN sector because most of the Communist soldiers there fled when the allied forces launched the invasion. Nevertheless, South Vietnamese artillery continued to demonstrate an inability to provide support for their own troops, so the ARVN commanders continued to rely heavily on US fire support. Therefore, the picture of South Vietnamese capabilities that Nixon attempted to paint was somewhat misleading.

The significant shortcomings that still existed in the RVNAF were amply demonstrated the following year when operation LAM SON 719 was launched as part of a continuing effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and deny the North Vietnamese sanctuaries; the specific objective of the attack was a series of base areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos just adjacent to Military Region I. This time, although US air support would participate in the operation, American ground troops were prohibited from crossing the border, so the South Vietnamese forces would attack by themselves without US units or American advisers. The attack along Highway 9 into Laos kicked off at 0700 on 8 February and went reasonably well at first. The South Vietnamese secured their initial objectives, but then became bogged down along the highway. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese had rushed reinforcements to the area, and a major battle ensued that lasted for another month. While some South Vietnamese soldiers fought valiantly, many more fought poorly or fled in panic. The operation ended with ARVN units fleeing back across the border in disarray. US sources listed South Vietnamese losses as 3,800 killed in action, 5,200 wounded, and 775 missing.⁶⁸ Nixon tried to put the best face on the situation, but the truth was that the South Vietnamese had performed very poorly on their own. With no US support on the ground and without their American advisers, the South Vietnamese were not able to handle the North Vietnamese regulars in pitched battle.⁶⁹

LAM SON 719 demonstrated that Vietnamization had not been the success that Nixon had previously proclaimed and that the improvement of the South Vietnamese forces was very much still a work in progress. US and South Vietnamese military officials worked hard to bolster the morale and confidence of the ARVN after the debacle in Laos. Training programs were intensified and new equipment was issued to replace that which had been lost during the LAM SON operation. At the same time, the US troop

withdrawals continued unabated. By January 1972, only 158,000 Americans remained in South Vietnam, the lowest number since 1965.

The North Vietnamese watched the US withdrawals closely and decided that it was time to put Vietnamization to the final test. Acknowledging that Nixon's Vietnamization policy had begun to increase the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese, they nevertheless believed that the US did not have enough combat power left in South Vietnam to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat if Hanoi launched a new offensive. Accordingly, the *politburo* in Hanoi ordered a massive invasion of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese attack began on 30 March 1972 when three divisions attacked south across the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam toward Quang Tri and Hue. Three days later, three more divisions moved from sanctuaries in Cambodia and pushed into Binh Long Province, the capital city that was only 65 miles from Saigon. Additional North Vietnamese forces attacked across the Cambodian border in the Central Highlands toward Kontum. A total of 14 NVA infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments (including 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles) participated in the offensive, which was characterized by large-scale conventional infantry tactics, supported by tanks and massive amounts of artillery fire and rockets. This was a scale of warfare that the South Vietnamese had seldom experienced. At first, they were almost totally overwhelmed. South Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri fled in the face of the North onslaught, abandoning the city and fleeing south. At An Loc and Kontum, the ARVN soldiers fared better but suffered horrendous casualties during the North Vietnamese attacks. The battles raged all over South Vietnam into the summer months. US advisers and American air power enabled the South Vietnamese to hold on and eventually prevail, even retaking Quang Tri in September.

Nixon declared Vietnamization a resounding success. There were all kinds of evidence to the contrary. The South Vietnamese had indeed withstood the North Vietnamese onslaught, but it had been a near thing that could have gone either way. The South Vietnamese had fought well in many cases, but in others they had not. General Abrams stated that "American airpower and not South Vietnamese arms" had caused the North Vietnamese defeat.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Nixon and his advisers trumpeted the idea that the South Vietnamese victory demonstrated that Vietnamization had been a success. Jeffrey Kimball writes, Nixon "needed Vietnamization to succeed, and because he did, he wanted to believe it could."⁷¹ Thus, for better or worse, Vietnamization was officially validated and the South

Vietnamese victory became one of the underlying rationales for complete US withdrawal and Nixon's "peace with honor."

While the fighting continued in South Vietnam, Henry Kissinger had been striving to hammer out a peace agreement in Paris. By the fall of 1972, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, the lead North Vietnamese negotiator, were close to an agreement but by December were at an impasse again. When the North Vietnamese walked out on the talks, Nixon launched what became known as the "Christmas bombing." Beginning on 18 December and for the next 11 days, US B-52s, F-105s, F-4s, F-111s, and A-6s struck targets all over North Vietnam, dropping over 40,000 tons of bombs. Shortly thereafter, the North Vietnamese negotiators returned to the table in Paris. Kissinger and Tho finally reached an agreement and at 0800 Sunday Saigon time on 28 January, the cease-fire went into effect.

Under the terms of the cease-fire agreement, the United States agreed to "stop all its military activities against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" and remove remaining American troops, including advisers, from South Vietnam within 60 days.⁷² US forces departed South Vietnam as agreed, with the last troops leaving Saigon on 29 March 1973. That day, the last 61 American POWs known to be held by the North Vietnamese were released. Vietnamization was over once and for all. America was out of Vietnam.

Unfortunately for the South Vietnamese, the Paris Accords did not address the more than 100,000 North Vietnamese troops that remained inside the borders of South Vietnam. The cease-fire was short-lived and combat returned as both sides tried to grab as much territory as possible. For the rest of 1973 and most of 1974, the North and South Vietnamese fought each other all over South Vietnam.

Nixon had coerced Thieu into acquiescing to the Paris Accords, promising that the United States would come to the aid of the South Vietnamese if North Vietnam tried another major offensive. With this in mind and using weapons and equipment stockpiled during 1972, the South Vietnamese initially held their own against the North Vietnamese. However, as these stocks began to wane, Thieu had no one to turn to for support. Nixon, reeling from the impact of the Watergate investigation, was fighting for his political life and was unable to generate any interest in the plight of the South Vietnamese. On 9 August 1974, Nixon resigned from the Presidency. Thieu and his countrymen had always relied on Nixon's promises to intervene if the North Vietnamese violated the cease-fire. Now Nixon was gone. Nixon's successor, Gerald Ford, promised that "the existing com-

mitments this nation has made in the past are still valid and will be fully honored in my administration.”⁷³

This was a commitment that Ford could not keep given the prevailing sentiment in Congress. When the North Vietnamese decided to test the South Vietnamese with a limited attack against Phuoc Long Province, the ARVN fought poorly and the North Vietnamese routed the defenders, killing or capturing 3,000 soldiers, took control of vast quantities of war materiel, and “liberated” the entire province. The United States did nothing.

Both Saigon and Hanoi were shocked. Thieu finally realized that his forces had been relegated to fighting a “poor man’s war” while the North Vietnamese, still being resupplied by China and the Soviet Union, got stronger every day. The North Vietnamese decided that the time was ripe for a knockout blow. Believing the United States would not or could not intervene, they planned a two-year strategy that called for large-scale offensives in 1975 to create conditions for a “general offensive, general uprising” in 1976.⁷⁴

The North Vietnamese launched their offensive on 10 March 1975 with an attack on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. They overran the city in two days and then turned their attention on Pleiku and Kontum. The South Vietnamese, realizing they were on their own without any hope of US support, fell back in panic. When Thieu decided to shorten his lines by withdrawing his forces out of the Highlands, supposedly to concentrate his forces for a major effort to retake Ban Me Thuot, the retreat rapidly turned into a rout. While the Communist forces in the Highlands attacked toward the sea, additional Communist troops in the northern provinces drove southward from Quang Tri. One by one, the coastal cities and bases fell. The Communists drove rapidly down the coast and on 30 April 1975, their tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon and the war was over. The demoralized South Vietnamese forces had collapsed in less than 55 days; Vietnamization had failed its ultimate test.

In the final analysis, Vietnamization provided a suitable (at least from the American perspective) cover for the withdrawal of the United States from South Vietnam, but it was an incomplete strategy that failed in its stated objective, which was to prepare the South Vietnamese to defend themselves after the departure of US troops. That objective had always been predicated on continued US support, and America’s failure to honor that commitment led to the downfall of South Vietnam.

Whether Nixon and Laird were only looking for a “decent interval” as some have suggested or really thought that Vietnamization would actually succeed in preparing the South Vietnamese to defend themselves is subject

to debate. Both Nixon and Kissinger have written after the fact that they believed the strategy would have worked had not Congress cut off aid to the South Vietnamese. Jeffrey Kimball challenges such pronouncements and writes that Nixon's policies "unnecessarily prolonged the war, with all of the baneful consequences of death, destruction, and division for Vietnam and America."⁷⁵

When one contemplates what could have been, there are, as Lewis Sorley suggests, "too many what ifs."⁷⁶ However, it is clear the performance of the South Vietnamese forces in 1975 demonstrated that Nixon's exit strategy had been tragically flawed, at least in its execution. Once the North Vietnamese began their attack in December 1974, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, which had wavered but ultimately held under tremendous pressure with US support in 1972, found themselves abandoned by the United States and performed abysmally in a fight that turned out to be for the very life of their nation. The war was clearly lost on the battlefield by the South Vietnamese, but that does not absolve the United States of its large share of the responsibility for the debacle. Despite gains made in preparing the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for the war, the United States rushed to sign the Paris Peace Accords, which left more than 150,000 North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam. Later, when the North Vietnamese attacked and the United States failed to live up to the commitment made by Nixon, this doomed the armed forces of South Vietnam.

The army that had become so dependent on US firepower and support lost its will and was unable to fight on its own when the promised support was denied it. Despite all the time and treasure expended in getting them ready to defend themselves, they proved woefully inadequate for the task when abandoned by the United States. Arguably, the situation may have been different had the United States demanded that North Vietnamese forces be withdrawn from South Vietnam in 1973 and continued to provide the promised long-term support as it had to the Republic of Korea forces, but such was not the case. And in the end, Vietnamization, when coupled with the flawed Peace Accords and the failure of the United States to honor promises made by two presidents, proved to be an incomplete exit strategy. It extricated the United States from Vietnam but failed to ensure the continued viability of its ally in Saigon. In the end, Nixon's strategy achieved neither peace for the South Vietnamese nor honor for the United States. The final result was that the United States lost the first war in its history, and the Republic of South Vietnam ceased to exist as a sovereign nation.

Notes

1. Robert B. Semple, "Nixon Vows to End War With a 'New Leadership,'" *The New York Times*, 6 March 1968.
2. Semple, "Nixon Withholds His Peace Ideas," *The New York Times*, 11 March 1968.
3. National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 1, Henry A. Kissinger, Special Assistant for National Security, for the Secretaries of State and Defense and the Director of Central Intelligence, 21 January 1969, DepCORDS Papers, US Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC.
4. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 238.
5. In December, Nixon had seen an intelligence assessment made by the CIA that was very critical of the Thieu government and the capabilities of the RVNAF. This assessment is contained in Message, Wheeler JCS 14581 to Abrams 12217 December 68, subject: RVNAF capabilities, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC.
6. Memo, Henry A. Kissinger for Members of the National Security Council Review Group, 14 March 1969, Subject: Summary of Responses to NSSM 1 Vietnam Questions, DepCORDS Papers, US Army Center of Military History. Actual agency responses are found in the Thomas C. Thayer Papers, Folders 13, 20, 134, and 136, US Army Center of Military History.
7. Kissinger memo.
8. Kissinger memo.
9. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 239.
10. Kissinger, 227–28.
11. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 198.
12. Interview (transcribed) of Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, by Col. William D. Johnson and Lt. Col. James C. Ferguson, 1976, Andrew J. Goodpaster Papers, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.
13. Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt, From the Battle of the Bulge to Vietnam and Beyond: Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 254–56.
14. Interview of Jerry Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1969–1973, by William H. Hammond, 3 October 86, US Army Center of Military History.
15. Memo, Laird to the President, 13 March 69, subj: Trip to Vietnam, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives and Records Administration.
16. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 272. By all accounts, "Vietnamization" became the accepted term for Nixon's new policy at this meeting. However, Abrams biographer Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt*, 254–56, maintains that Abrams started the process of helping the South Vietnamese armed forces become more capable when he assumed command from General Westmoreland in 1968 and that Nixon and Laird merely adopted the "Vietnamization" label and formalized it as administration policy (accompanied by US troop withdrawals). Nixon said

virtually the same thing earlier in *No More Vietnams* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 105.

17. US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearings on Military Posture, Part I*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 1970, 7023–7024.

18. Alexander M. Haig, Jr. with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 226.

19. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 262.

20. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 392.

21. Haig, *Inner Circles*, 225–29.

22. National Security Study Memorandum 36, Kissinger to SecState, Sec-Def, and DCI, 10 April 69, subject: Vietnamizing the War, US Army Center of Military History; Nixon, *Memoirs*, 392; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 272.

23. Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the President, 1969* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 443. The assessment of RVNAF progress and level of enemy activity would be left to Abrams' on-site evaluation.

24. Nixon, *RN*, 382.

25. Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Indochina Monographs: Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 18. In fact, the South Vietnamese had been fighting before the US ground troops arrived and their annual casualty figures were always higher than US numbers throughout the war.

26. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 274.

27. Talking Paper, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, 3 October 69, subject: US Objectives in Southeast Asia, Thomas C. Thayer Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

28. US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Department of Defense, *Hearings on Department of Defense Appropriations for 1971, Part I*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 1970, 311.

29. Even before Nixon assumed office, plans had been developed to increase the size of the RVNAF. Under what became known as the May-68 Plan, MACV had instituted a program to increase and modernize the South Vietnamese armed forces. This program focused on developing the RVNAF into a balanced force with command, administration, and self-support capabilities to continue the fighting successfully after the withdrawal of US and NVA troops. However, it is important to note that at no time during the discussion and implementation of the May-68 Plan did anyone, including MACV, ever consider the “prospect of a unilateral American withdrawal that would leave South Vietnam facing a combined Viet Cong and North Vietnamese threat.” This was to change under Nixon and Laird.

30. Jeffrey C. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years, The US Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1987), 354.

31. Memo, Laird to Chairman, JCS, 10 November 69, subject: Vietnamization–RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Aspects and Related US Planning, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

32. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 355.
33. Clarke, 356; Military History Branch, Headquarters, USMACV, "Command History, 1970," 2:VII – 4-16.
34. Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, 39.
35. Hinh, 42.
36. Cao Van Vien, Ngo Quang Truong, Dong Van Khuyen, Nguyen Duy Hinh, Tran Dinh Tho, Hoang Ngoc Lung, and Chu Xuan Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The US Adviser* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 10.
37. This was not true in IV Corps, where there was never a corps-level US headquarters; in that region, a designated US major general served as the senior adviser. In I Corps, the III Marine Amphibious Force commander served as the senior adviser.
38. The exception to this was Military Region II, where John Paul Vann, a civilian, was in charge. He could not technically command, so his headquarters was designated Second Regional Assistance Group, rather than a command. His military deputy, an Army brigadier general, exercised command on behalf of Vann.
39. Vien, et al., *The US Adviser*, 7–8, 10.
40. Eventually however, the airborne brigades and marine regiments would form an airborne and marine division respectively.
41. David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland, *The Vietnam Experience: South Vietnam on Trial, Mid-1970 to 1972* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1984), 55.
42. Fulghum and Maitland, 54.
43. Quote in Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 317; Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 56–57.
44. Quote in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 56.
45. Vien, et al., *The US Adviser*, 175.
46. Memo, Laird to Service Secretaries, 16 December 1969, subject: Quantity and Quality of US Advisers in Vietnam, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
47. This was the author's personal experience; advisory duty was not seen as "career enhancing." The author, as a newly promoted captain with two years in the Army and not even having commanded a company, was assigned in late 1971 as an adviser to a South Vietnamese infantry regimental commander. Before departing for Vietnam, I attended the Military Assistance Training Advisor course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, followed by a Vietnamese Language course at the Defense Language Institute (Southwest Branch) at Fort Bliss, Texas.
48. Memo, Resor to Secretary of Defense, 2 February 1970, subject: Quantity and Quality of US Advisers in Vietnam, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
49. Memorandum for Record, Brig. Gen. Albert H. Smith, Jr., MACV J-1, 15 December 1969, subject: General Abrams' Guidance on Selecting Advisers, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
50. Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 56.

51. Clark Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 4 (July 1969), 610.
52. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 275.
53. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Report to General Vo Nguyen Giap, A Consolidated Report on the Fight Against the United States for the Salvation of Vietnam by Our People*, Hanoi, 1987, 26. The North Vietnamese found that they could not sustain the August attacks because they had not fully recovered from the losses incurred during the 1968 Tet Offensive.
54. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 283.
55. Kissinger, 1480-1482.
56. Kissinger, 1480-1482.
57. Message, Wheeler JCS to McCain and Abrams, 6 August 1969, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
58. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 362.
59. Samuel Lipsman and Edward Doyle, *The Vietnam Experience: Fighting for Time* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983), 53.
60. JGS-MACV Combined Campaign Plan 1969, 30 September 1968, Southeast Asia Branch Files, US Army Center of Military History.
61. Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 162.
62. Truong, 117.
63. II FFORCEV Circular Number 525-1, 26 June 1969, subject: The Dong Tien (Progress Together) Program, Long Binh, South Vietnam.
64. Lipsman and Doyle, *Fighting for Time*, 70.
65. Message, Wheeler to Abrams, 4 July 1969, subject: Publicizing ARVN Performance; Message, Abrams to Wheeler, 8 August 1969, subject: Publicizing ARVN Achievements, both in Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
66. Fact sheet, "Impact on the Enemy of the Cambodia Operations," released by MACV, 14 May 1970, in Southeast Asia Branch Files, US Army Center of Military History.
67. Nixon, *Public Papers, 1970*, 536. In a memo from Nixon to Haldeman, on 11 May 1970, the president said that he wanted him to devise "...a positive, coordinated administration program for getting across the fact that this mission has been enormously successful."
68. Headquarters, XXIV Corps, "Combat Operations After Action Report, Operation LAM SON 719," 14 May 1971, 90.
69. The North Vietnamese did not come off unscathed and suffered heavy casualties, many of them inflicted by the US air support. It would take the North Vietnamese another year to crank up the next offensive.
70. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, 482.
71. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 182.
72. The entire agreement, including the Protocols on the Cease-Fire and the Joint Military Commission, Prisoners and Detainees, the International Commis-

sion of Control and Supervision, and Mine Clearing in North Vietnam is found in Walter S. Dillard, *Sixty Days to Peace: Implementing the Paris Peace Accords, Vietnam 1973* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1982), 187–225.

73. Letter, Ford to Thieu, 10 August 1974, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

74. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 19–20.

75. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, 371.

76. Sorley, *A Better War*, 384.

Chapter 9

LAM SON 719

Richard M. Nixon won the 1968 presidential election, promising to achieve “Peace with Honor” in the Vietnam War. Upon taking office in January 1969, he charged his administration with finding a way to disengage in Vietnam. After much discussion, in June, he announced at a conference with South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu that the US would be transferring responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese forces as American troops were gradually withdrawn from the war zone. This process became known as Vietnamization; the objective of the program was to build increased capabilities in the South Vietnamese armed forces so they could take over the fight as US forces were withdrawn.

The first real test of Vietnamization came in the spring of 1970 when Nixon ordered an attack into the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. This was a combined attack which involved 32,000 American soldiers and 48,000 South Vietnamese troops. The main attack into the “Fishhook” region was made by elements of the 1st Cavalry Division, 25th Infantry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. At the same time, South Vietnamese forces conducted an attack into the “Parrot’s Beak” region. Both attacks went very well, and the allied forces located and destroyed numerous large Communist base camps, capturing an impressive array of supplies and material.

During this operation, the South Vietnamese forces, supported by US artillery, tactical air, and helicopter gunships, performed well, accomplishing all assigned missions. Nixon announced that the South Vietnamese performance in Cambodia was “visible proof of the success of Vietnamization.”¹

The Cambodian incursion may have bought time for the allies, but it had an unforeseen result. Deprived of its sanctuaries and bases in Cambodia, Hanoi had to turn entirely to cross-country routes through Laos from North Vietnam for the resupply of its forces in the south. In order to offset the loss of the Sihanoukville overland route and the large quantities of supplies seized by US and South Vietnamese forces during the Cambodian incursion, the communists initiated a vast program to increase the capabilities of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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The Ho Chi Minh Trail was not merely a road. It was, in fact, a complex network of trails, bicycle paths, roads (some capable of handling heavy truck, tank, and armored personnel traffic), base camps, and storage facilities. By 1971, it stretched from North Vietnam through the Mu Gia, Ban Karai, and Ban Raving Passes in the Annamite (or Truong Son) Mountains to Tchepone and Muong Nong in Laos, just across the border from Khe Sanh in Quang Tri Province. From two key base areas in this region, 604 and 611, the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran south toward other base areas located along South Vietnam's 1,300-kilometer border with Laos and Cambodia.

The North Vietnamese boasted after the war that they had built over 13,000 kilometers of trails and roads as part of the system, and that it had been built, maintained, and defended by Transportation Group 559 using an estimated 100,000 NVA and Laotian volunteers and forced laborers.² US intelligence estimated that between 1966 and 1971, 630,000 NVA troops, 100,000 tons of foodstuffs, 400,000 weapons, and 50,000 tons of ammunition moved from North Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³

After the allied invasion of Cambodia, the NVA took additional steps not only to improve the Trail, but also to fortify it so that it could be used without interference from US or South Vietnamese forces. In the fall of 1970, twenty antiaircraft battalions were moved into Laos to provide air cover for the Trail against allied aircraft. These new units came equipped with a wide range of sophisticated weaponry, including 12.7-mm and 14.5-mm machine guns, 23-mm cannons, and over 200 antiaircraft guns (37-mm, 57-mm, 85-mm, and 100-mm). These weapons provided a significant improvement of the air defense umbrella over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Besides the insertion of air defense units, other NVA combat units were also moved to Laos to protect the vital supply line, bringing the total Communist troop strength in Laos to an estimated 22,000 (7,000 NVA combat troops, 10,000 men in logistics and support units, and 5,000 Communist Pathet Lao), all under a new corps command, the 70B Corps, which assumed operational control of the 304th, 308th, and 320th NVA Divisions. Under the protection of these forces, intelligence reports estimated that by the end of 1970, the NVA were infiltrating six thousand combat troops through Laos down the Trail every month into South Vietnam.⁴ In addition to reports of increased infiltration, US intelligence also had picked up indications that an unusually heavy stockpiling of weapons, ammunition, and equipment had taken place in Base Area 604 near Tchepone. Intelligence reports indicated that the North Vietnamese were also intent on rebuilding their sanctuaries in Cambodia.

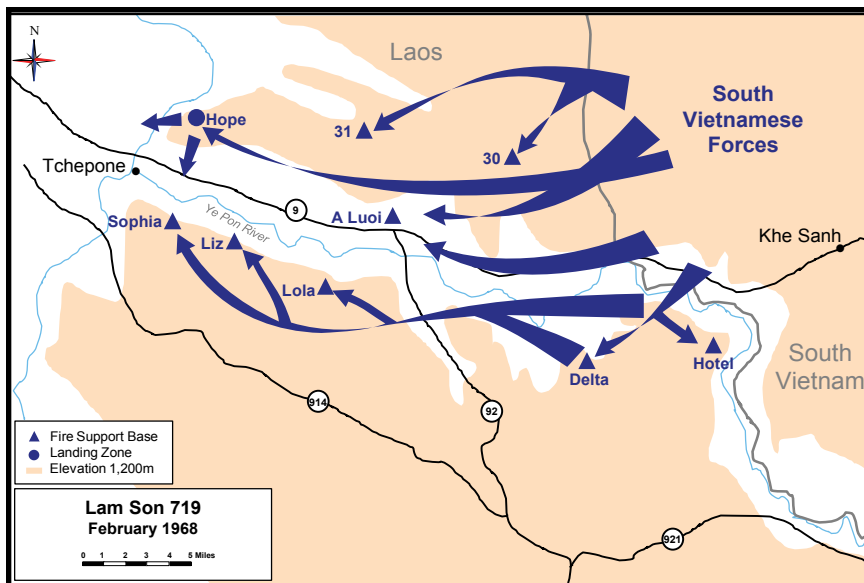


Figure 9.1. Lam Son 719, February 1971. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

President Nixon and his military advisers were alarmed at the build-up in Laos and the renewed enemy activity in Cambodia. Unless something was done, the North Vietnamese would soon be in position to directly threaten Quang Tri, the northernmost province in South Vietnam, and, by a short march from Base Area 611 through the A Shau Valley, could easily attack the ancient capital of Hue. Intelligence analysts believed that the influx of troops and new weapons in Laos and Cambodia might be in preparation for a Communist offensive against the two northern provinces in South Vietnam either early in 1971 or more likely in the US election year of 1972, when less than 50,000 US troops would remain in South Vietnam and Nixon would be busy running for re-election.⁵

The president faced the same problem that had confronted him when the communists had threatened Phnom Penh. He had to do something about the North Vietnamese in Laos or the enemy build-up there could have a devastating effect on Vietnamization and plans for US withdrawal from Southeast Asia. If he was going to do something to address the situation in Laos, he could not afford to wait, because US strength and combat power in country were dwindling daily and he did not think the South Vietnamese could do it entirely on their own.

Perusing a series of studies commissioned in November 1970, Nixon came to the conclusion that his only option was to conduct a preemptive strike against the Communists. The question was where to focus the attack. An am-

phibious thrust into North Vietnam, aimed at Vinh, was initially considered, but Kissinger countered with a recommendation to repeat the Cambodian incursion to take advantage of the gains made by the earlier operation.

Nixon sent Gen. Alexander Haig to Saigon to discuss this idea with Gen. Creighton Abrams, the commander of MACV, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, and South Vietnamese President Thieu. In subsequent discussions, they all agreed with Kissinger's assessment that there was a pressing need for a new allied offensive. General Abrams proposed an ambitious operation that included a main attack into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail supported by a secondary attack into Cambodia. Abrams argued that if the Communist supply routes could be interdicted in Laos and Cambodia for just one dry season, their ability to launch a large-scale offensive in South Vietnam would be "significantly curtailed, if not eliminated, for an indefinite future."⁶ Therefore, he proposed a plan whereby US forces would set up blocking positions along the DMZ and establish a forward support base adjacent to the border to support a South Vietnamese attack into Laos to seize Tchepone.⁷ The attack would be followed by search and clear operations to destroy Communist base areas and interdict traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A smaller attack into Cambodia would seek to destroy a new enemy base area being constructed in the vicinity of the Chup rubber plantation adjacent to Military Region III.

Haig returned to Washington and related Abrams's plan to Kissinger and the President. According to Kissinger, Nixon liked the plan immediately, but "was determined not to stand naked in front of his critics as he had the year before on Cambodia."⁸ Therefore, he set about to build a working consensus for the offensive among his advisers. To do this, he set up a series of briefings for his key advisers and Cabinet members in which he could take them on one at a time.

On 23 December, Haig briefed Nixon again, but this time with Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird present. After the briefing, Nixon told Laird that he was in favor of the proposed operation and wanted Laird to look into the plan when he visited Saigon early in January. According to Kissinger, Laird backed the concept of a cross-border operation to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, arguing that it would buy at least a year and that a successful major offensive operation by the South Vietnamese without US ground support would be clear evidence of the success of Vietnamization.⁹

On 21 December 1970, Nixon approved the Laos operation in principle, subject to final review before execution. Shortly thereafter, the JCS authorized General Abrams "to contact General Vien [Chief of the

South Vietnamese Joint General Staff] and effect such planning and coordination as you deem appropriate in preparation for the Laos plan.”¹⁰ A follow-on message directed Abrams to prepare contingency plans for just what he had suggested to Haig: a South Vietnamese cross-border operation into Laos via Route 9, just south of the DMZ, supported by American air and naval forces and a concurrent South Vietnamese attack into Cambodia to destroy a major enemy base area being developed in the Chup rubber plantation.¹¹

Due to the Cooper-Church Amendment which had been passed after the Cambodian incursion, American ground troops were forbidden to cross the border into Laos. Additionally, no advisers could accompany ARVN units in the attack. US support was limited to close air, helicopter, and long-range artillery support (operating from South Vietnamese fire bases on the border). Nevertheless, the president believed that the ARVN were capable of conducting these attacks in combination with the American combat forces that remained at the beginning of 1971. Admiral Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, assured him that the South Vietnamese could do the job if protected by American airpower.¹² The South Vietnamese were also confident. General Abrams had briefed the concept to President Thieu and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff in early December and reported that “President Thieu’s reaction...was favorable and he felt it should be done.”¹³

While MACV worked on the contingency plans, Nixon and his advisers continued to discuss the proposed operations. Following Laird’s return from Saigon, the President held a meeting in the Oval Office on 18 January, 1971, attended by Kissinger, Laird, Haig, Moorer, Secretary of State William Rogers, and Richard Helms, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Laird reported on his trip and conversations with Abrams, Bunker, and Thieu. In an almost three-hour briefing, Laird reviewed the military and political situation in South Vietnam and then discussed the proposed operations into Laos and Cambodia. In the discussion that followed, the consensus was that the campaign, if successful, would interrupt the North Vietnamese build-up and delay any planned Communist general offensive, gaining at least six more months for the Vietnamization program to proceed and permitting US troop withdrawals to continue on schedule and dissuade the Communists from further adventures.¹⁴ Additionally, Nixon felt that a successful operation might convince the Communists to negotiate in good faith and further stressed that the operations might “prove decisive in the overall conduct of the war.”¹⁵

Another key factor in the discussions was, as Admiral Moorer had observed in an earlier memorandum to Laird, that the operation represented the last opportunity for the South Vietnamese to mount a major operation against the enemy's sanctuaries while American forces were strong enough to provide backing.¹⁶ Haig wrote later that those who briefed the President on this plan were optimistic about its success, but all agreed that the "key factor was all-out US military support of ARVN."¹⁷

This is a rather revealing commentary on the prevalent thinking on the state of the Vietnamization process, but as General Haig pointed out in his memoirs, the success of Vietnamization "had little to do with its military effectiveness. Vietnamization was a success not in Vietnam but in the United States, where as the Secretary of Defense [Laird] and his faction had hoped and intended, it has lessened opposition to the war in Congress and the news media by offering a program that promised a definitive end to American casualties...but reduced American casualties had little to do with the military effectiveness of the armed forces of South Vietnam."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Nixon gave tentative approval to proceed with the detailed planning for the cross-border operation into Laos, to be code-named LAM SON 719.

As the military planning continued, Kissinger began to have doubts about the operation. On 25 January, he met with Admiral Moorer. Kissinger reasoned that if the Tchepone area was so clearly critical to the North Vietnamese resupply effort that they would no doubt fight hard to retain it. Concerned about the potential for high South Vietnamese casualties, he questioned the ability of the ARVN forces to operate by themselves without US advisers and air controllers on the ground with them.¹⁹ Moorer assured him that the South Vietnamese were capable of handling the attack and that US airpower could isolate the battlefield to keep the force ratios on a manageable level. Kissinger reported his conversations with Moorer in a memorandum to the president and arranged for Moorer to talk to Nixon the next day. When he met with the president, Moorer was "emphatic in his reassurances" to the president that the operation was sound, saying that "decisive" results were probable.²⁰

Although Nixon was convinced by such projections, Secretary of State Rogers was not. In a meeting on 29 January, he urged the president to reconsider his decision, asserting that the operation was too risky. He pointed out that when General Westmoreland as MACV commander had looked at a similar operation, he had estimated that it would take four US divisions to accomplish the mission. The current plan under consideration

involved the use of far fewer South Vietnamese troops. Therefore, to Rogers, an ARVN defeat was almost assured and he felt that the damage to the Vietnamization effort might be irreparable. Additionally, he believed that Nixon's opponents in Congress would charge that the operation was contrary to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Cooper-Church Amendment.²¹ According to Kissinger, Nixon had already considered most of Rogers' objections and thought that the Secretary of State "simply did not know what he was talking about."²² The president ordered that the operation be launched and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the official order on 4 February 1971.²³

LAM SON 719 was to be a combined RVNAF-US operation conducted under several constraints. No joint command was established for the control of the operation.²⁴ The overall ground commander of the operation in Laos was Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commanding general of the ARVN's I Corps. His US counterpart, Lt. Gen. James W. Sutherland, commanding general of XXIV Corps, would command all involved US Army forces and coordinate American support for the operation. Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., commander of the 7th Air Force, would command and coordinate all US Air Force resources that would support the operation.

The campaign was to be a spoiling attack, one that was designed not so much to take and hold terrain objectives but rather to disrupt the enemy's plans and forestall a new offensive. The objective of operation LAM SON 719 was to seize Base Area 604 in the Tchepone area, located at a strategic junction of supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail about 50 kilometers from the border with South Vietnam. After securing Tchepone, the South Vietnamese would, for the remainder of the dry season, interdict the Trail and destroy logistical facilities in the area. The actual invasion of Laos would commence on 8 February and last 90 days until monsoon rains would force the curtailment of operations. The attack was to be made by some of the ARVN's best troops, including the ARVN 1st Division, 1st Armored Brigade, three Ranger battalions from I Corps, and most of the elite Airborne and Marine Divisions from the Joint General Staff's strategic reserve. Initially 16,000 South Vietnamese troops would be employed when the operation was launched; later, reinforcements would increase this number to 20,000. Approximately 10,000 US combat, engineering, and other troops would support the operation from Quang Tri Province.

The complex plan involved four phases. In Phase 1, the 1st Brigade of the US 5th Infantry Division was to clear and secure Route 9 from Dong Ha to the Laotian border. Additionally, it would secure Fire Support Base Vandegrift, an abandoned US Marine fire base, and Khe

Sanh, where a headquarters would be established to coordinate all helicopter assaults, close air support, long range artillery fires, and logistical support. The US 45th Engineer Group would repair the airfield at Khe Sanh and prepare it for C-130 traffic. The engineers would also repair Route 9 to the Laotian border. Simultaneous with the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division operation, the US 101st Airborne Division would take over responsibility for the ARVN 1st Infantry Division area of operation in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces when the ARVN moved into Laos. Other US forces would secure the area south of the DMZ and adjacent to the Vietnamese-Laotian border. An ARVN task force from the 1st Armored Brigade was to follow the 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division, and after Khe Sanh was secured, move to the northwest to screen the northern flank.²⁵ The US portion of Phase I was code-named DEWEY CANYON II.²⁶

Also during this phase, 6,500 troops from the ARVN 1st Airborne Division and 3,000 troops from the Vietnamese Marine Corps were to be pre-positioned in the I Corps region. These forces were to be moved by US Air Force cargo aircraft to airfields at Quang Tri and Dong Ha. All of Phase I was expected to require five to eight days for completion.²⁷ Once Route 9 in South Vietnam was secured by US forces, South Vietnamese forces would move to occupy assembly areas and attack positions just short of the Laotian border in the vicinity of Khe Sanh and Lao Bao.

Phase II would begin with a three-pronged ARVN attack west along the highway to Tchepone, supported by 7th US Air Force close air support and US XXIV Corps helicopters and long range artillery. The main thrust along the highway would be made by the ARVN Airborne Division reinforced by the 1st Armored Brigade; this attack would be made by ground movement and successive heliborne assaults and was ultimately aimed at seizing A Luoi, the intersection of Routes 9 and 92.

Once the initial objective was secured, the Airborne Division would air assault into Tchepone while the armored forces continued the attack by road to link up in Tchepone with the airborne forces. The flanks of the main attack were to be protected in the south by a parallel attack conducted by the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, which would establish fire bases on the high ground south of Route 9 between A Loui and Tchepone. In the north, the South Vietnamese flank would be protected by the South Vietnamese 1st Ranger Group, which would conduct helicopter assaults to establish blocking positions to prevent the enemy from moving south to impede the main attack along the highway. The attack helicopters of the US 2nd Squadron, 17th Cavalry (Air), were to locate and destroy anti-aircraft weapons, find

enemy concentrations, and carry out reconnaissance and security missions, which included the rescue of air crews downed in Laos.²⁸ A Vietnamese Marine brigade would be held in reserve at Khe Sanh. Two days prior to the start of Phase II, US tactical air was to begin a concentrated campaign to suppress enemy air defenses (lasting from three to seven days).

Phase III, which would commence after the capture of Tchepone, called for the South Vietnamese to conduct search-and-destroy missions in Base Area 604 and throughout the area south of Tchepone. The 1st Airborne Division was to establish blocking positions northwest of Tchepone along Route 91 and southeast of Tchepone along Route 9 in order to isolate the area. At the same time, the 1st Infantry Division was to conduct search and destroy operations in its assigned area just to the south of the Xe Pon River, while the 1st Ranger Group would continue its blocking and screening positions on the northern flank. The ARVN forces would be limited to a corridor no wider than fifteen miles on either side of Route 9 and to a penetration no deeper than Tchepone.

Phase IV, the final phase, addressed the withdrawal of the South Vietnamese forces from Laos. This was to be done in one of two ways, depending on the situation at the time. Under the first option, the Airborne Division would withdraw directly to the east along Route 9 to cover an attack to the southeast into Base Area 611 by the 1st Infantry Division on the way back into South Vietnam. The second option was an attack by both divisions into Base Area 611. Both options included provisions for the insertion of RVNAF elements to stay behind and harass the enemy in Base Areas 604 and 611 after the main body of South Vietnamese troops had withdrawn.

The plan also included a deception phase. In an attempt to mislead the North Vietnamese as to the main attack, a naval task force carrying US Marines from the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit and including two aircraft carriers would steam in the Tonkin Gulf seventy kilometers off the port city of Vinh in North Vietnam. The mission of this task force was to feign an amphibious assault on Vinh to draw North Vietnamese attention as the South Vietnamese forces entered Laos. It appears that this part of the plan worked and the amphibious task force in the Tonkin Gulf did indeed get the attention of the North Vietnamese high command, giving the South Vietnamese attackers a few days respite from a major NVA reinforcement effort in Laos.

It was believed that Communist espionage cells were active within the RVNAF high command, therefore Abrams had directed that the number

of personnel involved in joint planning for the operation be held to a bare minimum.²⁹ Units that were to play a part in the operation were not notified until 17 January and the Airborne Division, which was scheduled to lead the assault, was not given detailed plans until 2 February, less than a week before the scheduled D-Day on 8 February. Despite these measures, there were later indications that NVA agents had infiltrated the I Corps staff and were able to get copies of detailed plans for the operation.³⁰

In an attempt to preclude premature press coverage of the operation, MACV briefed American reporters off the record about the impending campaign and then imposed a brief embargo on reporting troop movements until the operation was actually launched.³¹ This proved to be a bad move, because the imposition of the embargo was itself an indication of an upcoming operation. Although the embargo was lifted on 4 February, word had leaked and there were already speculative stories in both US and international newspapers that there would soon be an allied attack into Laos.³²

Despite the difficulties with maintaining secrecy about the operation, US and ARVN commanders were very optimistic about the potential outcome of the ambitious plan. Colonel Arthur W. Pence, the senior advisor to the ARVN Airborne Division, reported after the operation:

It was apparent at this time that...Intelligence felt the operation would be lightly opposed and that a two-day preparation of the area prior to D-Day by tactical air would effectively neutralize the enemy antiaircraft capability, although the enemy was credited with having 170 to 200 antiaircraft weapons of mixed caliber in the operational area. The tank threat was considered minimal and the reinforcement capability was listed as fourteen days for two divisions from north of the DMZ.³³

Both US and ARVN commanders and planners apparently were emboldened by the modest success of the Cambodian incursion. However, three significant differences between the attack into Laos and the Cambodian incursion exerted major influence on the ultimate outcome of LAM SON 719. Although it was to be a combined operation and XXIV US Corps would provide logistical support, long range artillery, and helicopters, US personnel would be prohibited from operating on the ground in Laos. This meant that not only would no US combat troops accompany ARVN forces as they had in Cambodia, but also no US advisers would go with the South Vietnamese into Laos. The South Vietnamese had become accustomed to relying on their advisers to coordinate US assets, thus marking the first time that most of the ARVN would go into battle without their American

counterparts. Once they crossed into Laos, the South Vietnamese forces would be on their own against the NVA.

The second difference between the Laotian operation and the Cambodian incursion was that the terrain and, to a great extent, the weather would play major roles in the outcome of the battle. Whereas the terrain in Cambodia had been relatively easy going, the objective area for LAM SON 719 was rugged, covered with dense undergrowth, and, along the Xe Pon River, which paralleled Route 9 to the south, by double-canopy jungle. Route 9 itself was an unimproved road, little better than a cart path in many places. The highway was dominated on both sides by high ground that provided excellent defensive terrain for the NVA defenders. The weather was also a significant factor. By the time of the operation, the northeast monsoon would be just ending and flying weather would be marginal, often limiting flight operations by helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. Additionally, the area would be subject to intermittent rainfall that at times could be heavy and inhibit trafficability for armored vehicles. Thus, terrain and weather would not favor the attacker in this operation.

The third key difference between LAM SON 719 and the Cambodian operation was that this time, despite intelligence estimates to the contrary, the enemy stayed and fought. After the battle, it became known that the NVA had long suspected an ARVN offensive into Laos adjacent to Military Region I and had begun preparations to counter such a move as early as October 1970, when they began to build defensive fortifications, prepare ambush sites, preregister artillery strikes on potential allied landing zones, and reposition supplies and ammunition.³⁴

By the time that the ARVN launched their operation, there were over 22,000 NVA troops in the area surrounding Tchepone and Hanoi ordered that Base Area 604 was to be held, sending additional reinforcements that would bring the total enemy troop strength in the area to over 36,000.³⁵ By the end of the campaign, the North Vietnamese were to throw elements of five divisions with supporting armor and artillery into the battle.³⁶

According to Gen. Bruce Palmer, Abrams was more than aware of the potential dangers posed by the differences between the Cambodian incursion and LAM SON 719. It may have looked very much “like sending a boy to do a man’s job” in an extremely hostile environment, but the US commander was counting heavily on US B-52 strikes, suppressive fires by US tactical air support, and the tactical mobility provided by US assault helicopters accompanied by their own armed escort helicopters to “even

the odds” for the South Vietnamese.³⁷ Palmer later described the situation as “a big gamble.” Failure would bring Vietnamization into serious question and might result either in keeping US forces in Vietnam longer, or in generating such pressure at home as to cause the United States to abandon its hapless ally.³⁸ If it worked, it would be a boost for the South Vietnamese and validate the Vietnamization process, but if anything went wrong, it would be a disaster for both South Vietnam and the United States.

Phase I of the operation was launched by US forces on 29 January at 0400. During this operation, the 1st Brigade, 5th US Mechanized Infantry Division, began clearing South Vietnam from Route 9 north to the DMZ. Additional US forces re-occupied the firebase at Khe Sanh and the 45th Engineers began refurbishing its damaged airstrip. At the same time, additional American troops secured Route 9 to the border and began repairing the road. By 5 February, the US forces had finished most of their tasks and had taken over security for the ARVN assembly areas near the border.³⁹

The lead ARVN forces, consisting of the 1st Armor Brigade, with two South Vietnamese airborne battalions (the 1st and 8th) and the 11th and 17th Cavalry Regiments, crossed the line of departure on schedule at 0700 hours 8 February 1971. Unfortunately, the weather had turned bad on 6 February and air strikes that were supposed to neutralize NVA anti-aircraft guns along Route 9 had to be canceled. Nevertheless, the 4,000-man armored column attacked west along the Route as planned. The column, led by M-41 tanks and M-113 armored personnel carriers, pushed nine kilometers into Laos on the first day, but were slowed by dense jungle and huge bomb craters adjacent to the route that limited their advance. The road itself was in disrepair and the ARVN 101st Combat Engineer Battalion had to construct detours where the road was totally destroyed, further slowing the progress of the armored column.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the airborne forces inserted on the northern flank took their first objectives against sporadic enemy resistance.

The ARVN 1st Infantry Division, on the southern flank, also secured their initial objectives with little enemy contact. It was later determined that Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap and the commander of 70B Corps were restraining their forces until they decided whether the ARVN attack along Route 9 was for real or merely a deception to cover the main attack elsewhere. By 9 February, they had decided that the attack along the highway was in fact the main attack and the commander of 70B Corps ordered the 308th (“Iron”) Division, located in an assembly area near the DMZ, to begin moving toward Route 9 to reinforce the NVA units already there.

Additionally, the North Vietnamese high command ordered the 2nd NVA Division to move from positions farther south to the Tchepone area to blunt the ARVN armored column on Route 9.

Heavy rains turned Route 9 into a quagmire, further impeding the advance of the South Vietnamese armored column. Nevertheless, by 10 February, the attackers had reached their first objective, A Luoi, and had linked up with an airborne battalion that had been brought in earlier that day by US helicopters. The South Vietnamese main attack along the road had reached a point halfway to Tchepone, opposed only by light enemy sniper fire. At the same time, ARVN forces on both the northern and southern flanks closed on positions adjacent to A Luoi. In the north, the 3rd Airborne Brigade established two firebases (30 and 31) while 21st and 39th Ranger Battalions established two outposts, Ranger Base South and Ranger Base North, to provide early warning of any NVA reinforcement coming south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This effectively gave the ARVN a network of four mutually supporting bases in the north. At the same time, the ARVN 1st Infantry Division established five firebases (Hotel, Blue, Delta, Delta 1, and Don) south of Route 9, to secure that flank from enemy attack.

So far, the South Vietnamese had made good progress against relatively light NVA resistance. However, on 11 February, the attack ground to a halt. For reasons that were inexplicable at the time, the ARVN force just stopped attacking. This gave the North Vietnamese an opportunity to move in additional reinforcements. There were already elements of three infantry regiments, a tank battalion, and an artillery regiment in the area and the NVA high command gave orders for four more infantry regiments and part of a tank regiment to join the battle. As these forces began to close on the area, the South Vietnamese remained stationary. It became clear that the ARVN attack needed to get moving to regain the momentum before the enemy forces gained the initiative, but Lieutenant General Lam and his major subordinate commanders were silent. In the absence of orders, the South Vietnamese forces in Laos sat where they were.

General Abrams was furious and went to see Gen. Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, in Saigon to convince him to energize the attackers. On 16 February, Abrams and Sutherland met with Vien and Lam at Lam's forward command post in Dong Ha. At this meeting it was decided to move the 1st ARVN Division further west along the southern escarpment to establish fire support bases from which to support the resumption of the airborne-armored thrust westward along Route 9 to Tchepone. It was estimated that it would take three to five days for the 1st Division elements to get into position. The order was given, but unfortu-

nately for the attackers, by this time, the NVA had positioned reinforcements to block the resumption of the South Vietnamese attack. The ARVN had lost the initiative and never regained it for the duration of the battle.

After the operation, it was determined that President Thieu had a hand in the halting of the ARVN attack. On 12 February, he told Lam to be careful as he moved west and that if he incurred 3,000 casualties to cancel the operation.⁴¹ Thieu was apparently worried that potentially high casualty figures in Laos would have a negative impact on the upcoming national elections to be held in the fall. Also, he was concerned about losing the ARVN general reserve (which consisted of the Airborne Division, 1st Armored Brigade, and the South Vietnamese Marines). Maybe more significant, these forces were effectively Thieu's palace guard and provided protection against any potential coup; thus he was reluctant to expose them to destruction. Regardless of Thieu's motivation, his order effectively guaranteed that the attack would come to a halt as the ARVN commanders became more focused on preventing casualties than on pursuing the attack. Once the attack lost momentum and came to a halt, it became almost impossible to get it started again.

When the South Vietnamese forces attack stalled along the road, new NVA reinforcements were committed to the battle area. On 18 February, the 308th NVA Division was identified in action for the first time on the northern flank. The 2nd NVA Division appeared in front of the lead ARVN units and the 24B Regiment of the 305th NVA Division was identified by South Vietnamese troops south of Route 9. More ominous, ARVN forces began to sight enemy tanks and an NVA prisoner stated that there was an NVA tank regiment in the area. By early March, the North Vietnamese outnumbered the South Vietnamese forces by a two-to-one margin. Heavy mortar and large caliber artillery fire increased on all South Vietnamese positions. The would-be attackers soon found themselves under attack by a much stronger enemy than they had anticipated.

To make matters worse for the South Vietnamese, intermittent rain and dense fog repeatedly grounded all aircraft. The few helicopters that were able to fly had to be kept at low altitude and this made them very vulnerable to enemy ground fire. Resupplying the ARVN attack became particularly difficult and dangerous under these conditions.

On 19 February, Lam and his division commanders met with President Thieu. Lam briefed the president on the situation, stressing the sightings of new NVA units in the area. Thieu told Lam "to take his time and...expand search activities toward the southwest."⁴² This was a meaningless order

that essentially told Lam to keep doing what he was doing, which was effectively nothing.

By 20 February, the South Vietnamese had completely lost the initiative. Using Soviet-made T-54 and PT-76 tanks and heavy artillery, the NVA struck hard with repeated frontal assaults against the ARVN positions, particularly the airborne and ranger units on the northern flank. Virtually every South Vietnamese unit was soon in heavy contact with the enemy.

The NVA tactics were to surround the ARVN positions, cut their aerial resupply lines with heavy antiaircraft fire, while pounding them continually with mortar, rocket, and artillery fire. Next they would storm the positions, using combined infantry-armor assaults where possible.

The ARVN fought back, but they were usually severely outnumbered and compounded matters by repeatedly demonstrating the inability to coordinate maneuver and artillery fire support. Additionally, South Vietnamese artillery was of much shorter range than the NVA's 130-mm and 122-mm guns and could not provide effective counterbattery fire. Consequently, the South Vietnamese depended on US close air support and attack helicopters for survival. Unfortunately, however, the allied air support was less effective than planners had anticipated for a number of reasons. First, the weather was often bad, grounding both helicopters and fixed wing support aircraft or degrading their effectiveness when they could fly. Additionally, the absence of US advisers meant that the airstrikes that were flown were not closely coordinated. To make matters worse, the enemy air defense system was much denser and more effective than intelligence analysts had predicted. The NVA had also learned that they could minimize the impact of US tactical air support by "hugging the belts" of the ARVN so that the American fighter-bombers and attack helicopters could not get at the NVA without putting their South Vietnamese allies at risk. B-52 "arc light" bombing missions were very effective, but only when the NVA massed for an attack.⁴³

The NVA, with elements of four divisions, increased the intensity of their attacks on the South Vietnamese positions. The NVA had isolated the 39th Ranger Battalion at Ranger Base North on 19 February, surrounding the base with over 2,000 troops. Over a three-day period, the NVA pounded the position and then pursued the Rangers as they attempted to break out. Of a total of 430 Rangers when the battle started, 178 were killed or missing and 148 were wounded. The 39th was finished as a unit, but they had taken a toll on the enemy; reconnaissance photo analysts counted 639

NVA bodies on the ground around Ranger Base North.⁴⁴ The North Vietnamese then turned their attention on Ranger Base South, occupied by the 21st Battalion and the remnants of the 39th Battalion. After two days of heavy fighting, Lieutenant General Lam decided that the Rangers' position was untenable and ordered the South Vietnamese defenders to withdraw to Fire Support Base 30. The result of these actions rendered another Ranger battalion combat ineffective and severely shook the confidence of the survivors.

One aspect of the battle at Ranger Base North set the tone for the lasting public perception of LAM SON 719. Although most of the Rangers there fought valiantly, a few unwounded soldiers lost their nerve and tried to climb aboard helicopters evacuating seriously wounded soldiers. The aircrews attempted to prevent these troops from escaping the battle, but some soldiers deserted by clinging to the helicopters' skids and riding back to South Vietnam. Several of these individuals were photographed hanging on to the helicopters for dear life and this became the enduring image of operation LAM SON 719.⁴⁵

Many Americans protested this perception. Lt. Col. Robert F. Molinelli, commander of the 2nd Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, who flew in support of the battle at Ranger Base North, said "The ARVN Rangers were outnumbered six or eight to one. For three days we were unable to get supplies to them. When they were low on ammunition, they went out and took NVA rifles and fought on. When they decided to move off their hill, they beat their way right through that North Vietnamese regiment, killing them with their own guns and ammunition. Seventeen of their men [Rangers] did panic and they did leave hanging on helicopter skids. There were a lot more who did not."⁴⁶ Despite such protestations, it proved almost impossible to overcome the initial impression given by the media coverage of panic-stricken ARVN soldiers fleeing the Communists.

As these events unfolded, President Thieu became more and more upset with Lieutenant General Lam's indecision and poor conduct of the battle. On 23 February, he summoned Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, hero of the Cambodian incursion, from his III Corps headquarters to Saigon and turned over command of LAM SON 719 to the more dynamic Tri. Leaving Saigon to take over his new position, Tri's helicopter crashed and he was killed. Lieutenant General Lam retained command of the operation in Laos.

NVA pressure did not let up. The North Vietnamese overran the 3rd Airborne Brigade at Fire Support Base 31 on 25 February, capturing Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, the brigade commander, and his entire staff. A South Vietnamese counterattack failed, but killed 250 NVA and destroyed eleven PT-76 and T-54 tanks in the process. In the course of the defense of FSB 31 and subsequent counterattack, the ARVN airborne forces suffered 155 killed and over 100 captured.

Shortly thereafter, the NVA attacked Fire Support Base 30. What had become a pattern for the NVA attacks repeated itself with similar results. Lieutenant General Sutherland described the developing situation in a message to General Abrams:

I am very concerned about the discipline and morale of the airborne division. Lieutenant General Dong [division commander] has developed a defeatist attitude and this same attitude is reflected in some of his subordinate commanders. For example, an operation was planned and executed today to resupply FSB 30, evacuate dead and wounded and transport some 21st Rangers to the Ranger FSB. The wounded and four bodies were evacuated. 94 healthy troops, but not including all the rangers, rushed to the choppers and boarded. The airborne infantry commander was among those who managed to get aboard the choppers. I have been told, but it has not been confirmed, that the brigade commander went to FSB 30 at approximately 1800 hours to take charge of the situation. I suspect that before this night is finished, the airborne troops may walk off and abandon FSB 30.⁴⁷

The South Vietnamese did not abandon the fire support base immediately, but it survived only a few days longer. Eventually, the fire base's guns were all damaged and the 2nd Airborne Battalion was given orders to evacuate the base.

On 28 February, President Thieu inserted himself in the action once again. He had decided that the mission of LAM SON 719 should shift from destroying the NVA base area to "taking" Tchepone, which by itself had no real military value. Focusing on Tchepone was purely a public relations ploy which, if accomplished, would permit Thieu to declare victory and withdraw his forces from harm's way, thereby gaining political capital for the upcoming fall elections. Accordingly, he ordered the Airborne Division to be replaced by the remainder of the Marine Division, which had been moved to Khe Sanh. This order was ludicrous. The Airborne Division, although embattled, was still in relatively good shape and no sound

reason was offered for replacing them. Moreover, the Marine Division had never fought as a division and was an unknown quantity. To make matters worse, the relief of one division with another in the face of intense enemy opposition is one of the most difficult tasks in modern warfare.

These factors were not lost on Lieutenant General Lam, who flew to Saigon to propose an alternate plan. He recommended to Thieu that the 1st ARVN Infantry Division (reinforced with its 2nd Regiment, which had been moved from its previous position near the DMZ) assault by helicopter into Tchepone. The Marine Division would follow the 1st Division and the Airborne Division would be given an order to assume the mission of protecting the northern flank. Thieu agreed and the next day, 1 March, informed Abrams and Ambassador Bunker of the change in the original plan.

Abrams was not happy with this development. The objective of occupying and destroying the enemy base areas in Laos had been given up in favor of what he saw as a meaningless effort to get South Vietnamese forces into Tchepone for political, rather than sound military reasons. Nevertheless, Abrams could do nothing except concur with Thieu's order.

The NVA had gained control of the high ground overlooking Route 9 from the north, but they had paid a high price. Repeated B-52 strikes took a terrible toll on the North Vietnamese, inflicting casualties that MACV estimated to be one combat effective NVA regiment a week.⁴⁸ This probably prevented the North Vietnamese from massing enough forces to completely annihilate ARVN units along the highway.

From 3 to 6 March, elements of the 1st ARVN Division executed a series of heliborne assaults to the west along the southern escarpment, establishing three bases named Lolo, Liz, and Sophia. The NVA resistance to the 1st Division moves was heavy; 11 helicopters were shot down and 44 others damaged as they brought ARVN troops into Fire Support Base Lolo. On 6 March after a heavy pounding of the NVA positions by fighter-bombers and B-52s, two infantry battalions from the 2nd Regiment of the 1st ARVN Division were lifted by 120 US UH-1 Huey helicopters from Khe Sanh to LZ HOPE, four kilometers northeast of Tchepone. On 7 March, South Vietnamese troops entered Tchepone. The ARVN had reached their objective, but by this time, the NVA forces had increased to 12 infantry regiments, two tank battalions, an artillery regiment, and at least 19 anti-aircraft battalions.⁴⁹ The South Vietnamese forces in Laos were in a precarious situation.

On 9 March, Lam flew once again to meet with Thieu and the heads of the Joint General Staff. This time he went to make a case for the immediate

withdrawal of his forces from Laos. Having stressed the exposed position of the ARVN forces, he proposed to disengage them and extract them by helicopter, with the 1st Division, the western most unit, leaving first, followed by the airborne, and lastly the marines.⁵⁰ General Vien agreed with Lam. Abrams and Ambassador Bunker, also in attendance, strongly disagreed with the withdrawal and urged President Thieu to reinforce his beleaguered forces in Laos with the ARVN 2nd Infantry Division, then in Quang Ngai Province, and fight it out to the finish with the Communists. Abrams and Bunker argued that political and public relations had to be considered. Abrams enumerated his arguments against the withdrawal in a message to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs:

Whether it might not appear the RVNAF forces had been forced to withdraw despite the heavy casualties inflicted on the enemy; how such a move would be interpreted by the South Vietnam, American, and international press; the effect this would have on the political situation in South Vietnam [where national elections would be held in the following fall].⁵¹

Thieu, however, was unwilling to risk more casualties, as well as the potential destruction of his best division (the Airborne Division) and the bulk of his strategic reserve. Accordingly, he gave the order to terminate the operation and to begin the withdrawal.⁵² According to General Davidson, who was MACV J-2 at the time, Abrams privately observed that Thieu had lost his nerve and never forgave him.⁵³

Lieutenant General Lam began to withdraw his forces on 12 March. This was a difficult maneuver for a force in contact and outnumbered by the enemy. By this time, the NVA had moved a total of five divisions into the area to inflict as much damage on the ARVN as possible. They placed heavy anti-aircraft fire on the evacuation helicopters, ambushed ARVN elements moving by road, and kept the pressure on the South Vietnamese fire bases. The retreat took 12 days and was a near disaster. The NVA attempted to surround and destroy the South Vietnamese units and only US tactical air support and attack helicopters prevented a complete rout. The airborne and armored forces withdrew along Route 9 while the units on the flanks were extracted by US helicopters.

The North Vietnamese did everything possible to prevent the South Vietnamese from escaping, pursuing with tanks and other armored vehicles. The panic that ensued in some South Vietnamese units was reminiscent of that shown earlier by the Ranger deserters at Ranger Base North. Lt. Col. William N. Preachey, commander of the 158th Aviation Battalion,

who flew support missions for the South Vietnamese throughout most of LAM SON 719, described the nature of the South Vietnamese withdrawal:

They [the ARVN troops] would do absolutely anything to get out of Laos. The healthy would run over the dead and wounded. We would hover at six or seven feet and the crew chief and gunner would lay on their bellies and pull people up. If you got on the ground they would turn the helicopter over. A later tactic was to run and jump on the shoulders of people and grab on to the skids. The helicopters would go up to 3,000 or 4,000 feet, and after five or ten minutes, they'd get tired and turn loose. I can still see the bodies coming through the sky.⁵⁴

The last ARVN troops crossed back into South Vietnam on 24 March and the operation was officially terminated on 6 April 1971, forty-five days after the South Vietnamese forces had first entered Laos.⁵⁵

Assessing LAM SON 719 is difficult. On the day that his forces reached Tchepone, President Thieu proclaimed LAM SON 719 “the biggest victory ever...a moral, political, and psychological Dien Bien Phu.”⁵⁶ Likewise, the Nixon administration began a campaign to convince the American public that, despite clear evidence to the contrary, the operation had been a success. President Nixon had reported in February that “the operation has gone according to plan” and that ARVN was “fighting in a superior way.”⁵⁷ Administration spokesmen described the South Vietnamese withdrawal from Laos as merely “mobile maneuvering.” This was obviously spin, but even after the war, Nixon continued to maintain that the operation had achieved its objective; he wrote in his memoirs, “the net result [of LAM SON 719] was a military success but a psychological defeat,” brought on by negative television coverage of the withdrawal.⁵⁸

While Nixon’s assessment of the operation is clearly subject to debate, there is no doubt that the many in the US news media took almost violent exception to administration pronouncements about South Vietnamese performance and the results of the operation.⁵⁹ James McCartney, wrote in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:

The South Vietnamese have invented a new kind of warfare in Laos. They avoid fighting whenever they can, they flee an area when the Communists start showing up on the battlefield, and they consistently claim ‘victory’ or ‘success’ when the operation involved is over...many US military men used to criticize the South Vietnamese for a tendency to ‘cut and run’ when a battle

loomed in Vietnam. Now, when the South Vietnamese flee, Pentagon spokesmen are inclined to praise their “mobility.”⁶⁰

The Cleveland *Plains Dealer* challenged the administration, writing, “Rather than the military success President Nixon has acclaimed, it appears the Laos incursion was a defeat that has bolstered Hanoi’s confidence.”⁶¹ A relatively balanced account of the operation in the Philadelphia Bulletin observed, “Without our air cover and without 51 battalions of US troops holding the fort...[one] can only guess at how much worse the situation might have been.”⁶² Essentially agreeing with the most negative assessments by the US news media, the North Vietnamese ridiculed the operation and called it “the heaviest defeat ever” for “Nixon and Company...a fine picture of Vietnamization indeed!”⁶³

An objective assessment of the Laotian campaign lies somewhere between Nixon’s public pronouncements about the operation and the perceptions portrayed in the US media. From a purely military standpoint, the results of the campaign were mixed. Saigon reported that the operation had cost 1,160 government troops killed, 4,271 wounded, and 240 missing. Many in the media, including The Associated Press and Newsweek magazine challenged these figures and put the actual casualty count at 3,800 killed, 5,200 wounded, and 775 missing.⁶⁴

According to XXIV Corps official figures, which were close to those reported by the media, Saigon casualties included 9,000 killed, wounded, and captured, a casualty rate of nearly 50 percent. US casualties included 253 killed or missing in action and 1,149 wounded. In terms of equipment, the US lost 108 helicopters destroyed and 618 damaged (20 percent of which were expected to never fly again).⁶⁵ The US Air Force lost seven fighter-bombers and four pilots were killed in action.⁶⁶ The ARVN lost 211 trucks, 87 combat vehicles, 54 tanks, 96 artillery pieces, and all of the combat engineer equipment (bulldozers, graders, etc.) that had accompanied the attackers.⁶⁷

Allies reported 19,043 enemy killed. They also reported 1,123 crew-served and 3,745 individual weapons captured and 110 tanks, 13 artillery pieces, 270 Molotova trucks, 13,630 tons of munitions, 15 tons of 122-mm rockets, 7,010 meters of pipeline, and 1,250 tons of rice destroyed.⁶⁸ It is important to note that while these results are impressive, most of them occurred in the earlier part of the campaign before the South Vietnamese lost the initiative.

Despite the casualties inflicted on the North Vietnamese and the capture or destruction of enemy supplies, the South Vietnamese combat per-

formance had been, at best, uneven. President Nixon, trying to put the best face on what he knew had been a near disastrous performance, credited the South Vietnamese with having done a laudable job against the best that the North Vietnamese could offer. He proclaimed: “General Abrams...says that some [ARVN] units did not do so well, but 18 out of 22 battalions conducted themselves with high morale, with great confidence, and they are able to defend themselves man for man against the North Vietnamese.”⁶⁹ This assessment is at best questionable. Some units fought very well, but others, even some of the elite forces, broke and ran under heavy NVA pressure.

South Vietnamese weaknesses were only too obvious. As before, the politicized senior leadership represented a serious problem. Although Lieutenant General Lam was the overall ground commander, he was virtually ignored by the commanders of the Airborne and Marine Divisions, both themselves lieutenant generals who were more accustomed, as commanders of national strategic reserve forces, to answering directly to Saigon rather than responding to a corps commander.⁷⁰ They contested Lam’s orders and directives at every opportunity. Although Lam appealed to President Thieu for support, Thieu refused to reprimand Lam’s subordinate commanders, even when their actions bordered on insubordination to Lam during the heat of the battle. Thieu did not wish to offend the two other generals, one of whom commanded his primary anti-coup force (the Airborne) and the other of whom commanded a large portion of his strategic reserve. Once again, political considerations proved more important than military necessity.

Lam himself was no bright shining star. As Gen. Bruce Palmer wrote after the war, Lam’s “reputation as a combat commander was only mediocre, but...[he] was considered to be a loyal, capable administrator.”⁷¹ Prior to LAM SON 719, Lam had survived as a corps commander by his political skills and his support of President Thieu. He had very little experience in directing multi-division conventional operations. The intensity of combat in Laos and the demands of the operation were too much for Lam. Lieutenant Colonel Darron of the XXIV Corps headquarters subsequently discussed Lam’s actions during the operations, concluding:

I remember seeing him one morning toward the end of the operation when things were worms in Laos...he was laying back, kind of in a crucified position, leaning back against his bunker...looking up at the sky with his eyes closed, and he was obviously under a terrible, terrible strain. Frankly, I think he was just in over his head.⁷²

Lam's ineptitude was evident throughout the operation. Brig. Gen. Sidney B. Berry, assistant commander of the 101st Airborne Division, reported after the operation that "planning and coordination for Lam Son 719 were, at the Corps Commanders' level, of unacceptably low quality."⁷³

Lam was woefully unprepared to conduct an operation the size and complexity of LAM SON 719, but he was not alone and, unfortunately for the South Vietnamese, planning and coordination inadequacies were not limited solely to the Corps Commander level. ARVN commanders at all echelons displayed serious difficulties in command and control, particularly with regard to coordinating combined arms operations, including the ability to employ infantry, armor, and artillery in concert and the proper use of reserve forces.

General Vien, Chairman of the RVNAF Joint General Staff, described the results of these difficulties:

Deployed in an unfavorable terrain, our 300-vehicle armored force was impotent against enemy tanks and unable to assist the Airborne Division in breaking the enemy encirclement or regaining the initiative. By contrast, the enemy armor had proved aggressive and dangerous; it had taken advantage of a familiar though unfavorable terrain to lay ambushes or close in on our strongpoints and finally combine with infantry to assault and overrun them. Our infantry units shunned maneuvers when engaged and failed to use their organic fire to destroy the enemy, relying entirely on supporting firepower. The I Corps and the division commanders involved all had reserves, but they failed to use them to overcome difficulties and regain the initiative. Even our available firepower was not properly used especially during the first month of the operation because of poor coordination.⁷⁴

The absence of US advisers was readily apparent in the increased coordination difficulties repeatedly demonstrated by the South Vietnamese forces. Many of the things that the ARVN commanders had routinely relied upon their US advisers to accomplish were not done or were done poorly. Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland wrote, "Long accustomed to working with American advisors, subordinate ARVN commanders had difficulty without them in arranging fire support and resupply. The senior American advisor and the overall ARVN commander were operating from different bases. Several senior ARVN commanders folded, prompting President Thieu to intervene and start issuing orders himself as far down as regiment, in many cases without General Abrams' knowledge."⁷⁵

Perhaps the gravest concern to MACV was the South Vietnamese inability to coordinate their own fire support, which led to a subsequent over-reliance on external US assets. Many in both MACV and the RVNAF Joint General Staff realized that the only thing that had stood between the South Vietnamese and a total rout in Laos was US air support. Flying against intense anti-aircraft artillery and ground fire, US Army helicopters flew over 160,000 sorties and US tactical aircraft flew more than ten thousand strikes in support of the South Vietnamese forces.⁷⁶ The South Vietnamese dependence on US air support was extremely troubling, for this support would disappear when US troop withdrawals were completed. If the ARVN could not handle their own fire support, they were in for a difficult time against the North Vietnamese once the Americans were gone.

One of the most significant and lasting outcomes of LAM SON 719 was its detrimental effect on South Vietnamese morale and esprit. Despite President Thieu's bombastic statements, the South Vietnamese forces who retreated from Laos knew they had been defeated. US Marine Corps adviser Maj. William Dabney, who flew over Laos as an airborne coordinator, contrasted the Vietnamese Marines before and after operation, saying, "These were brave men, well led, well supplied, who had a certain elan and a certain confidence in themselves when they went in. When they came out, they'd been whipped. They know they'd been whipped and they acted like they had been whipped."⁷⁷

In the process of retreating from Laos under heavy pressure, many South Vietnamese dead had been left on the battlefield. One ARVN officer later described the situation: "This came as a horrendous trauma to those unlucky families who in their traditional devotion to the cult of the dead and their attachment to the living, were condemned to live in perpetual sorrow and doubt... Vietnamese sentiment would never forget."⁷⁸

While Thieu claimed victory, the soldiers and their families had no illusions about the outcome of the operation and they were demoralized by what they saw as a clear defeat at the hands of the North Vietnamese. Thieu took steps to lessen the downward spiral of morale. He banned US news magazines *Time* and *Newsweek* and several opposition newspapers whose coverage of the operation trumpeted the negative aspects of the operation in Laos. Additionally, he kept the hard-hit Airborne and Marine Divisions in I Corps, rather than returning them to their normal bases around Saigon. He did not want these troops telling stories about the near disaster in Laos. Nevertheless, South Vietnamese morale and confidence had been dealt a serious blow.

There is no doubt that LAM SON 719 had been a defeat for the ARVN and a setback to Vietnamization, but it nevertheless achieved at least a modicum of the original objectives. Lieutenant General Sutherland forwarded the following assessment to Abrams in late March:

LAM SON 719 has been expensive in terms of US support costs, but its achievement so far indicates that in terms of damage inflicted upon the enemy, disruption of his expected offensive operations, evidence of the effectiveness of the Vietnamization program, and benefits which will accrue in the future it has been an unquestionably a highly valuable and productive operation.⁷⁹

Sutherland's assessment of the operation may have been a bit overblown and his comments about the effectiveness of Vietnamization are certainly subject to debate, but there is ample evidence that LAM SON 719 at least temporarily disrupted the NVA build-up in Laos. While the South Vietnamese losses had been severe, the North Vietnamese forces suffered as badly, if not worse, losing by some counts up to one half of the North Vietnamese troops committed to the operation.⁸⁰ While these estimates may be high, there is little doubt that the operation cost the Communists dearly in men and equipment that probably would have been used in a major NVA offensive against Military Region I later in 1971. Thus, LAM SON 719 was an important factor in delaying the next major Communist offensive; it would take nearly a year for the North Vietnamese to replace the men and equipment lost in the effort to destroy the South Vietnamese along Route 9. This gave the South Vietnamese and the Vietnamization effort a brief, but needed respite from NVA pressure. As Keith Nolan noted in *Into Laos*, "Vietnamization had been tested, had strained but had not cracked, and now had continued room to grow."⁸¹

Immediately after the conclusion of LAM SON 719, President Nixon proclaimed, "Tonight I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded." Then he announced that he was accelerating the withdrawal of US troops. An additional 100,000 troops would be brought home by November 1971.⁸² He promised that "American involvement in Vietnam was coming to an end," but he refused to set a date for total withdrawal, saying that doing so would give away "our principal bargaining counter to win release of the American prisoners of war...[and] would remove the enemy's strongest incentive to end the war sooner by negotiation."⁸³

The newly announced withdrawals would leave 184,000 American troops remaining in South Vietnam at the end of 1971. In June 1971, Secre-

tary of Defense Laird declared that 90 percent of combat responsibility had been turned over to the ARVN and two months later, announced that Phase I of Vietnamization had been completed.⁸⁴ This meant that from that time on, ground combat responsibility would be entirely assumed by the RVNAF.

Despite administration claims about the success of LAM SON 719, the operation raised serious questions about Phase II of Vietnamization. During this phase, the South Vietnamese were to develop air and naval support systems and artillery, logistical, and maintenance systems to replace those that since 1965 had been supplied by the United States. How long this would take was unknown, but LAM SON 719 had demonstrated that the RVNAF still had a way to go toward the final objective of self-sustainment on the battlefield. It was acknowledged that while the South Vietnamese worked toward this goal, the US would need to maintain a level of combat support, particularly air support which had been so critical in Laos, while it gradually pulled out of the remaining American ground forces. Gen. Phillip Davidson described the situation in 1971 as follows:

Lam Son 719 demonstrated that, while Vietnamization had made progress, the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces had deep flaws which made final success of the concept years, probably decades, away. Above all, the operation showed ARVN's complete dependence on the United States forces.⁸⁵

Notes

1. Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the President, 1970* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 536. In a memo from Nixon to Halde- man, on 11 May 1970, the president said that he wanted him to devise "...a positive, coordinated administration program for getting across the fact that this mission has been enormously successful."
2. David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, Mid-1970 to 1972 (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1982), 65.
3. Fulghum and Mailand, 65.
4. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 273.
5. Memorandum, dated 19 January 1971, Subject: Meeting Between the President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Henry Kissinger, Richard Helms, Vietnam Subject Files, Nixon Presiden- tial Materials, National Archives and Records Administration.
6. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 991.
7. After the operation, there was significant effort on many of the principals involved in putting together this plan to distance themselves from the original decision to launch the operation. In his memoirs, Kissinger puts the blame on General Abrams for having misled him about the operation's prospects for suc- cess. This appears to be a case of Kissinger wanting to be absolved from respon- sibility after the fact. The South Vietnamese also disavowed any responsibility for the controversial decision to launch the operation; one former ARVN officer, Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, *Indochina Monographs: Strategy and Tactics* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 73, wrote: "The Cambodian foray in 1970 and the Laos operation to Tchepone in 1971 came into being only because MACV originated them, promoted them, and supported them." This was not entirely the case, since Gen. Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff had been proposing a similar operation since 1965. Moreover, he and President Thieu both agreed to the raid into Laos when General Abrams presented it to them. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 576-577, wrote that General Abrams was the only one who has not "ducked responsibility for the concept and the results of the operation."
8. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 994. The response to Nixon's announce- ment that US and South Vietnamese troops had crossed the border into Cambo- dia resulted in a firestorm of protest that resulted in the shooting of demonstra- tors at Ken State and Jackson State.
9. Kissinger, 994-995.
10. Message, McCain to Abrams, 062132 December 70, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
11. Message, McCain to Abrams, 080435 December 70, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
12. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 999.

13. Message, McCain to Abrams, 6 December 1970; Message, Abrams to McCain, 071130Z December 1970, both in Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

14. Memorandum, dated 19 January 1971, Subject: Meeting Between the President, Secretary Rogers, Secretary Laird, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Henry Kissinger, Richard Helms, Vietnam Subject Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives and Records Administration; H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 239.

15. H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries* (New York: Putnam, 1994), 239.

16. Willard J. Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1971-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979), 19.

17. Haig, *Inner Circles*, 273.

18. Haig, 273.

19. Kissinger's concerns were transmitted to Abrams in Message, Moorer Specat to Abrams, 26 January 1971, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

20. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 999. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 576, writes that Moorer, a "distinguished navy airman, but one who never served in Vietnam...understood little of the complexities of ground operations and virtually nothing about the peculiarities of infantry fighting in Indochina." Perhaps that is why the Chairman had such faith in airpower to protect the South Vietnamese and produce decisive results. This is an age old (and continuing) debate between those who fight on the ground and those who fight in the air. One would have thought that the Army Chief of Staff at the time, Gen. William Westmoreland, could have pointed out the dangers in such an operation as LAM SON 719, but Davidson reports that Westmoreland told him that he, Westmoreland, had not been consulted about the operation until after it had been launched. Davidson reports that both Moorer and Laird rebutted Westmoreland's claim, saying that he had been consulted prior to the operation and concurred with it. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1005, agrees that Westmoreland knew beforehand.

21. Memo, Haig for Kissinger, 1 February 1971, subject: Meeting With the Vice President, et al., 29 January 1971, White House Central Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives and Records Administration.

22. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 999-1000. Kissinger maintains that even though Nixon approved execution of the mission, he was concerned with follow-on phases of the initial assault that called for the ARVN airborne forces to be lifted by US helicopters to overwatch positions along Route 9. He questioned whether the touching down of American helicopters on Laotian soil constituted "ground combat in Laos," proscribed by the Cooper-Church amendment. He directed Admiral Moorer to study whether this part of the attack could be eliminated or done without South Vietnamese soldiers. Kissinger asserts that Nixon had already made up his mind to go through with the whole operation, but that his question added a level of uncertainty among his senior military advisers. He wrote: "The uncertainty and hesitation suggested by his [Nixon's] request for further study of the airborne operation was bound to be magnified as it moved down in the military hierarchy."

23. Message, CJCS to MACV, 042053Z February 1971, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

24. In fact, according to XXIV Corps, Combat After Action Report for Operation Lam Son 719, 3, both Lieutenant General Sutherland's XXIV Corps staff and Lieutenant General Lam's I Corps staff worked on independent plans for the operation until 7 January 1971 when authorization was given for combined planning. A combined planning cell was established and the completed plan was briefed on 16 January. The US XXIV Corps/ARVN I Corps combined plan was approved for execution by the Joint General Staff and General Abrams on 21 January.

25. Headquarters XXIV Corps, Operations Order, LAM SON 719, 23 January 1971, 2.

26. The original DEWEY CANYON had been a 1969 Marine operation directed in the area south of Khe Sanh and it was hoped that designating Phase I of LAM SON 719 as DEWEY CANYON II would have some deception value.

27. Headquarters XXIV Corps, Operations Order, LAM SON 719, 23 January 1971, 3.

28. Donn A. Starry, *Armored Combat in Vietnam* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1980), 190-191.

29. Lt. Gen. James Sutherland, Senior Officer Debriefing, 31 August 1971, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.

30. Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 72. There is much conjecture on what the North Vietnamese knew and when they knew it. It is clear that the North Vietnamese expected some type of action in Laos after the allied attack into Cambodia, but it is also clear that they were unsure as to timing of the South Vietnamese attack.

31. Message, Abrams SPECAT to McCain, 29 January 1971, subject: Planning for Laos-LAM SON 719, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

32. Terence Smith, "US B-52's Strike Foe's Laos Bases Around the Clock," *New York Times*, 1 February 1971; "Some Daylight on the Blackout," *Washington Daily News*, 4 February 1971; Ralph Blumenthal, "US News Blackout in Saigon Tried to Keep Even Its Existence Secret," *New York Times*, 5 February 1971.

33. Col. Arthur S. Pence, Vietnam Series Interview, by 1LT Thomas Turlenko, 6 May 1971, US Army Center of Military History.

34. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh. *Indochina Monograph: Lam Son 719* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 168, reported that an NVA sergeant from the 24B Regiment, 304th Division, who defected to the South Vietnamese side during the battle said that his unit had been given orders to counteract a possible ARVN offensive along Route 9 five months before it was launched.

35. Why there was not more concern with the enemy and his potential for rapid reinforcement is unknown. Gen. Phillip Davidson, former MACV J-2 (Intelligence), wrote in *Vietnam at War*, 579, that there were ample US intelligence reports that estimated that the NVA could reinforce the Tchepone area with at least eight NVA infantry regiments with associated artillery support within

two weeks. Thus, he points out, it was apparent that the ARVN assault troops, numbering less than three divisions, might find themselves fighting at least four NVA divisions, with possibly more on the way. Discounting these estimates was clearly a failure in the planning process that would have dire consequences on the ultimate outcome of the operation.

36. Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 164.

37. Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 110.

38. Palmer, 110.

39. The engineers estimated that they would need four days to make the Khe Sanh airfield operational again, but they were off by over a week. The condition of the old airstrip was such that virtually a new one had to be built and the first airplanes were not able to land there until 15 February.

40. Despite the efforts of the ARVN engineers to repair the road, it remained virtually impassable to all but tracked vehicle traffic for the remainder of the operation. Since no wheeled vehicles could negotiate the road, the ARVN forces in Cambodia relied entirely on US helicopters for resupply of fuel, ammunition, rations, and critical spare parts.

41. President Thieu was worried how potentially high casualty figures in the Laotian campaign would affect the upcoming national elections to be held in the fall. Also, he was concerned about losing the ARVN general reserve (which consisted of the Airborne Division, 1st Armored Brigade, and the South Vietnamese Marines). Maybe more significant, these forces were effectively Thieu's palace guard and provided protection against any potential coup; thus he was reluctant to expose them to destruction.

42. Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 73.

43. The B-52s usually flew in three-ship cells and bombed from high altitude. Consequently, they required large targets and a three kilometer safety zone between friendly positions and the enemy to preclude bombs from accidentally falling on friendly troops. The NVA were aware of these restrictions and refrained from massing until the last minute and tried to stay as close to the ARVN as possible.

44. Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 78-79.

45. Craig Whitney, "Saigon's Rangers Driven From an Outpost in Laos," *New York Times*, 22 February 1971.

46. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 79-80.

47. Message, Sutherland to Abrams, 021420Z March 1971, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

48. Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 112.

49. Starry, *Armored Combat*, 195.

50. Message, Sutherland to Abrams, 100850Z March 1971, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

51. Message, Abrams to Moorer, 11 March 1971, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.

52. Phillip Davidson wrote in *Vietnam at War*, 384, that Thieu “sneeringly suggested that a United States division should accompany them [ARVN reinforcements].” Since Congressional constraints forbade the use of US troops, this effectively shut off any further complaints about the withdrawal from Abrams.

53. Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 112.

54. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 90.

55. While this was going on, South Vietnamese forces from III Corps attacked the NVA base in the Chup rubber plantation in Cambodia. The attack went reasonably well at first, but when the Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Tri, who had led the earlier campaign into the Parrot’s Beak, was reassigned and subsequently killed in a helicopter crash, the operation came to a halt.

56. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 90.

57. Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard M. Nixon*, 6 vols. 1971 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1971-1975), 160.

58. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 499.

59. The most comprehensive study of the Nixon administration’s confrontation with the US news media over the conduct and meaning of LAM SON 719 can be found in William H. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1996), 401-492.

60. James McCartney, “S. Vietnamese ‘Succeed’ by Backing Away,” *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 18 March 1971.

61. “Hanoi Supplies Still Moving,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 12 April 1971.

62. “‘Hacking’ It in Laos,” *Philadelphia Bulletin*, 23 March 1971.

63. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 90.

64. “Assessing the Laos Invasion,” *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971, 25-26. The NVA claimed 16,400 allies killed, including 200 Americans.

65. Headquarters, XXIV Corps, After-Action Report, Lam Son 719, 1 April 1971, 90.

66. Directorate of Operations Analysis, Headquarters Pacific Air Forces, *Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (CHECO) Report – LAM SON 719, 30 January-24 March ‘71, The South Vietnamese Incursion Into Laos* (Honolulu, 24 March 1971), 123.

67. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 585.

68. Headquarters, XXIV Corps, After-Action Report, Lam Son 719, 1 April 1971, 90.

69. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 91.

70. Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, commander of the Marine Division, actually outranked Lieutenant General Lam.

71. Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 109.

72. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 91.

73. Fulghum and Maitland, 72.

74. Gen. Cao Van Vien and Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, *Indochina Monographs: Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 102.
75. Quoted in Keith William Nolan, *Into Laos* (New York: Dell, 1986), 360.
76. John J. Tolson, *Vietnam Studies: Air Mobility, 1961-1971* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of the Army, 1973), 251-252.
77. Quoted in Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, 90.
78. Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 140.
79. Message, Sutherland to Abrams 211040Z March 71, Abrams Papers, US Army Center of Military History.
80. Nolan, *Into Laos*, 360.
81. Nolan, 361.
82. Nixon, *Public Papers, 1971*, 524-526.
83. Nixon, 524-526.
84. Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, 68.
85. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 588.

Chapter 10

The Battle of An Loc

A Case Study in ARVN Combat Performance

Douglas Pike described the battle of An Loc during the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive of 1972 as “the single most important battle in the [Vietnam] war.”¹ Beginning in April, a desperate struggle raged between three North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions and the greatly outnumbered South Vietnamese defenders.² The nearly three-month siege resulted in horrendous losses on both sides and culminated in the blocking of the North Vietnamese thrust toward Saigon. This was the last major battle in which US support, primarily advisers and air support, was available to South Vietnamese forces.

During the course of the battle, the besieged South Vietnamese defenders would hold out against a sustained North Vietnamese attack of an intensity seldom seen in the Vietnam War. At the end of the fierce fighting, the city remained in South Vietnamese hands. Since the defenders in An Loc included elements of a number of different South Vietnamese ground combat units, the battle provides a unique opportunity to assess South Vietnamese combat performance under some of the most severe circumstances of the war.³

The North Vietnamese Spring Offensive of 1972 consisted of a three-pronged attack, designed to strike a knock-out blow against the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. The attackers employed conventional tactics and introduced advanced weaponry not seen in any previous Communist offensive in South Vietnam. According to captured documents and information obtained from NVA prisoners of war after the invasion, the campaign was designed to destroy as many ARVN forces as possible, thus permitting the North Vietnamese to occupy key cities, putting the Communist forces in a posture to threaten Saigon and the Thieu government.⁴

The Communist offensive began on Good Friday, 30 March 1972, when three NVA divisions under the control of the B-5 Front attacked south across the Demilitarized Zone toward Quang Tri and Hue. Addition-

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al North Vietnamese forces under the direction of the B-3 Front attacked Kontum in the Central Highlands. Three days later, three NVA divisions under the B-2 Front headquarters attacked into Binh Long Province in Military Region III (MR III). A total of 14 NVA divisions and 26 separate regiments, including more than 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles, participated in this offensive, known as the Nguyen Hue Campaign.

The coordinated enemy thrusts, characterized by a ferocity never before experienced by the South Vietnamese forces, were initially successful, particularly in the north where the NVA quickly overran Quang Tri, virtually routing the defending South Vietnamese (ARVN) forces. Additional Communist forces threatened Hue and Kontum.

Military Region III, comprised of the 11 provinces that surrounded Saigon, was located between the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta. Binh Long Province is located in the northwestern portion of the region and is bordered on the west by Cambodia. The capital of the province is An Loc, a city of 15,000, which lies only 65 miles north of Saigon. An Loc, surrounded by vast rubber plantations totalling 75,000 acres, sits astride Route 13 (QL-13), a paved highway leading directly from the Cambodian border to the South Vietnamese capital. Because of its proximity to Communist base areas in Cambodia, the city had endured the rigors of war since the early 1960's. Due to its strategic location on one of the main attack axes between Cambodia and Saigon, An Loc figured prominently in the North Vietnamese strategy in 1972. As the NVA offensive began, the 5th ARVN Infantry Division, commanded by Brig. Gen. Le Van Hung, was the only South Vietnamese division operating in Binh Long Province. Before the battle in An Loc was over, he would be given control of Task Force 52 (a two-battalion task force from 18th ARVN), the 3rd Ranger Group, the 74th Border Ranger Battalion, and the Binh Long Province RF/PF troops. Additionally, the 1st Airborne Brigade would be inserted into Binh Long for part of the battle.

By this time in the war, President Nixon had instituted his "Vietnamization" program, designed to turn over the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese. The ultimate objective of this program, first instituted in 1969, was to increase ARVN capabilities and bolster President Nguyen Van Thieu's government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against both the Viet Cong and the Communists from North Vietnam. Ultimately, the strengthening of ARVN capabilities would ultimately permit the withdrawal of US troops.

As one of the most critical aspects of the Vietnamization program, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), the senior US military headquarters in Vietnam, increased the advisory effort to assist in improving the quality of the ARVN force. This was not a new program; US advisers had been serving with South Vietnamese units since 1955. However, the importance of the advisory program had increased as the number of American combat units dwindled. By 1972, most US ground combat forces had been withdrawn and the only Americans on the ground in combat roles were advisers who served with ARVN forces in the field. There were US advisers at corps, division, and regimental levels; additionally, in the elite airborne, ranger, and marine units, there were American advisers with each battalion. There were also advisers with each South Vietnamese province and district headquarters. These advisers would figure prominently in the ARVN defense against the North Vietnamese invasion.

The Nguyen Hue Offensive began in Military Region III on April 2nd with attacks by the 24th and 271st NVA Regiments against 25th ARVN Division fire bases along the border with Cambodia in Tay Ninh Province. Although there had been earlier intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese were making preparations for offensive operations in MR III, there was little indication that there would be any action on the scale of that which had occurred in Quang Tri in MR I. The attacks in Tay Ninh, supported by tanks, rocket, and heavy mortar fire, seemed to confirm earlier intelligence that the main North Vietnamese effort in the region would come in that province. Thus, while the South Vietnamese were surprised at the ferocity of the enemy attacks and the use of tanks, the attacks themselves coincided with expectations that any significant attacks in MR III would come in Tay Ninh.⁵

For three days after the North Vietnamese attacks in Tay Ninh, events were relatively quiet in Binh Long Province. Senior US advisers with the 5th ARVN Division picked up indications of increased enemy activity in the area, but analysts at MACV in Saigon insisted that the main enemy effort would continue to focus on Tay Ninh. These analysts would soon be proven wrong.

At approximately 0650 on the morning of April 5th, the war came to Binh Long Province with a major tank-supported attack on Loc Ninh, a district town located on Route 13, approximately half-way between An Loc and the Cambodian border. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, III Corps Commander, and Maj. Gen. James F. Hollingsworth, his American adviser, determined that the attacks in Tay Ninh were a diversion and that Binh Long would be the target of the NVA main effort. Accordingly, the generals sent all possible support to Binh Long.

Loc Ninh was defended by a small ARVN force of about 2,000 troops (mostly from the 9th Regiment of the 5th ARVN Division and the local regional force garrison) and their seven American advisers. The initial attack against the town was relentless, employing tanks and large volumes of artillery, mortar, and rocket fire. Hollingsworth directed all available tactical air support to assist the beleaguered garrison. Skillful coordination of these assets by the American advisers in Loc Ninh inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. Ultimately, however, sheer numbers overwhelmed the defenders. Repeated human wave attacks supported by tanks and heavy artillery fire resulted in the NVA overrunning the ARVN positions late in the afternoon of the 7th. While some of the ARVN soldiers and several advisers managed to escape, the rest of the South Vietnamese and the remaining American advisers were either killed or captured.⁶

The B-2 Front plan for taking An Loc involved the use of three NVA divisions and supporting forces. By this time in the war, although some Communist formations still carried the traditional Viet Cong designations, these divisions were organized and equipped as main-force North Vietnamese Army units manned primarily by North Vietnamese soldiers who had come down the Ho Chi Minh trail from the north. These units ranged in size from 7,000 to 9,000 soldiers; additionally, 10,000 other NVA troops in various types of support units would participate in the battle for An Loc.⁷ According to the North Vietnamese plan, the 9th VC Division, considered one of the elite NVA divisions, was targeted against An Loc itself. The 7th NVA Division was tasked to interdict supplies and reinforcements from reaching An Loc from Saigon by cutting Route 13 south of An Loc, between Chon Thanh and Lai Khe. The 5th VC Division, which initiated the offensive campaign in Binh Long by capturing Loc Ninh, was to join the 9th VC Division in its assault on An Loc after Loc Ninh had been secured.

As the battle unfolded in Loc Ninh, the NVA also attacked an ARVN regimental-sized task force (TF-52) from the 18th ARVN Division that was under the operational control of the 5th ARVN Division Commander. The task force had been conducting operations from two small fire bases between Loc Ninh and An Loc. The NVA overran the ARVN positions and forced the survivors of the task force to withdraw into An Loc.

Shortly after the fall of Loc Ninh, the 9th VC Division made its opening move against An Loc by seizing the airstrip at Quan Loi, just three kilometers northeast of the city. Meanwhile, south of the city, the 1st ARVN Airborne Brigade, which had been moved by truck to Binh Long from Saigon, was directed to move north up Route 13 from Lai Khe to

reinforce the An Loc garrison. The airborne forces immediately ran into heavy contact with elements of the 7th NVA Division entrenched along the highway. It became clear that the North Vietnamese were determined to interdict any attempt to reinforce or resupply An Loc by road. The loss of Quan Loi airstrip and the blocking of QL-13 meant that An Loc was surrounded and cut off from the outside. Thus, began a siege that would last nearly three months.

After the seizure of Quan Loi, a brief lull in the battle occurred while the NVA prepared for the main attack on the city itself. By the afternoon of April 12th, ARVN forces in and immediately around the city had grown to a total of nine infantry battalions, consisting of regular infantrymen from elements of the 5th and 18th ARVN Divisions, rangers, and territorial forces. Brigadier General Hung, 5th ARVN Division Commander, was given operational control of all South Vietnamese units in the city, approximately 3,000 soldiers, who were outnumbered 6-to-1 by the NVA forces surrounding An Loc.

The preparations for the initial NVA direct attack on An Loc began in the early morning hours of April 13th, when North Vietnamese gunners brought a wide range of guns, rockets, and mortars to bear on the city. Shortly after dawn, the NVA forces began a coordinated tank and infantry attack on the city from the northeast. Soviet-made T-54 and PT-76 tanks attacked down the main north-south street into the city. Panic ensued among the ARVN defenders, who had never encountered tanks in battle before. Several units broke and ran. The situation stabilized somewhat when an ARVN soldier knocked out one of the lead tanks with an M-72 Light Antitank Weapon (LAW), thus demonstrating that infantry soldiers could stop tanks.

The battle raged for three days as the NVA advanced house to house. Casualties were heavy on both sides. The ARVN situation was tenuous at best. After three days of combat, the NVA had lost 23 tanks, but had forced the ARVN defenders into a small redoubt in the southern part of the city, measuring only 1,000 meters by 1,500 meters. The NVA forces held the northern part of the city; in many cases the opposing forces were separated only by the width of a city street. On several occasions, the attackers almost succeeded in taking Brigadier General Hung's 5th ARVN Division command bunker.

The critical factor in thwarting the initial North Vietnamese attack was American air support, coordinated by the US advisers with the ARVN units on the ground in An Loc. While Air Force, Navy, and Marine fighters and

fighter-bombers, AC-130 gunships, and Army armed helicopters worked in close with the defenders in contact with the attacking NVA forces, Major General Hollingsworth directed B-52 strikes against North Vietnamese staging areas in the rubber plantations around the city. This air support made the difference in the pitched battles that raged for the first three days, saving the outnumbered ARVN from almost certain defeat. This set the pattern for the action that followed during the next two months.

After three days, the intensity of the fighting in the city abated somewhat as the NVA attack lost momentum due to the continual airstrikes. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese tightened their stranglehold on An Loc, completely encircling the city. The North Vietnamese shelled the city heavily; 25,000 artillery rounds and rockets fell during the first three days of the NVA attack. They continued to fire between 1,200 and 2,000 rounds per day into the city for the next week as they regrouped for a renewed assault.

On April 16th, Lieutenant General Minh, III Corps Commander, directed the 1st Airborne Brigade to break contact along Route 13 and board helicopters for an assault into the high ground just to the southeast of An Loc on April 16th to reinforce the city. That same day, Minh received operational control of the 21st ARVN Division, which had been operating previously in the Mekong Delta area. He ordered the 21st to move to Lai Khe and assume the previous mission of the departed airborne brigade to attack north up Route 13 to relieve An Loc.

The original plan for NVA forces to overrun and occupy An Loc no later than April 20th failed. The main attack by the 9th VC Division had been repulsed due to the effectiveness of the American air support. The North Vietnamese revised the attack plan and repositioned forces for a new attack from the east. Once again, the 9th VC Division would make the main attack against the city, with supporting attacks against the 1st Airborne Brigade positions southeast of An Loc by elements of the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions. In order to counter the American air support, the NVA moved up additional antiaircraft weapons, including Soviet-made SA-7 Strela heat-seeking antiaircraft missiles and ZSU-57-2 self-propelled antiaircraft guns to provide cover for the new attack.

The second major attempt to take An Loc began in the pre-dawn hours of April 19th with a massive artillery bombardment of both the city and the 1st Airborne Brigade positions southeast of An Loc. The attacks against the airborne forces were successful, overrunning one battalion and driving the two other battalions out of their positions and into the city.

ORDER OF BATTLE BINH LONG PROVINCE, APRIL–MAY 1972	
North Vietnamese Army (35,500)	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (4,500 +/-)
B-2 Front	5th Infantry Division
5th VC Division	9th Regiment (-)
7th NVA Division	1st Armored Cavalry Squadron
9th VC Division	7th Regiment (-)
69th Artillery Command	8th Regiment
20th Regiment	Task Force 52
101st Regiment	3rd Ranger Group
203rd Tank Regiment	74th Border Ranger Battalion
202nd Special Weapons Regiment	Binh Long Province RF-PF
429th Sapper Group	1st Airborne Brigade (OPCON)

Figure 10.1. The Battle of An Loc: Order of Battle. Courtesy of the author.

The main NVA attack against the city was less successful. The ARVN defenders and their advisers continued to fight off repeated ground assaults and employed close air support to bring devastating fire against repeated human wave attacks. The fighting was intense, but the air support permitted the defenders to beat back the attackers.

By the 20th of April, the North Vietnamese attacks abated somewhat. However, the NVA continued to pour 100mm tank gun fire, rockets, and artillery and mortar rounds into the city. As the enemy shelling continued without let-up, the conditions in An Loc deteriorated to a new low. The defenders and the unfortunate civilians who were unable to leave before the NVA attacked lived underground, venturing outside only at great risk. The enemy fire was extremely accurate and one adviser put the odds for surviving five minutes outside in the open at “only 50-50.”⁸

Most buildings in the city had been destroyed by the repeated ground attacks, shelling, and air strikes. The city was strewn with mounds of rubble, shattered trees, garbage, and dead domestic animals. One adviser described the scene as “looking like Berlin at the end of World War II.”⁹

The human toll inside the city was ghastly; the streets and rubble were littered with bodies, both military and civilian. One adviser reported that “the bodies of men, women, and children are everywhere.”¹⁰ The smell of death permeated the air. Under these conditions, innumerable diseases, including cholera, soon ran rampant through both the civilian and soldier ranks. To avoid a full-fledged epidemic, bodies were buried in mass graves, some containing 300-500 corpses, by soldiers operating bulldozers during the infrequent lulls in the shelling. Many bodies had to be reburied after exploding shells churned up the original graves.

Antiaircraft fire had increased to the level that it became almost impossible to resupply the defenders by air. Medical supplies were exhausted and little could be done for the increasing number of casualties. The food and ammunition status was not much better. Virtually nothing could get into the city; consequently, there was no way out for the wounded. The dire situation, coupled with the continuous artillery bombardment, had a demoralizing effect on ARVN resolve and morale plummeted. The advisers were afraid that the South Vietnamese troops would break if the NVA attacked in force again and they redoubled their efforts to bolster the confidence of their ARVN counterparts. Under these bleak conditions, the defenders, now numbering approximately 4,000 troops, with the arrival of the two airborne battalions, prepared themselves for the next North Vietnamese onslaught.

The NVA once again changed their plans. Captured enemy documents revealed that the 9th VC Division commander was reprimanded for failing to accomplish his mission after two attempts. A new plan called for the 5th VC Division to make the main attack, supported by elements of the 7th NVA and 9th VC Divisions.

The attack began at 0500 hours on May 11th with the customary heavy opening NVA artillery barrage. During the next twelve hours, the city was struck by 10,000 rounds of enemy indirect fire. Under this artillery cover, the NVA attacked from the north and northwest with tanks and infantry. The enemy forces were successful in forging two salients in the ARVN lines, almost bisecting the ARVN defensive perimeter. The fighting was intense and the ARVN defenders were close to the breaking point on several occasions. However, continuous tactical air support prevented the South Vietnamese from being overrun. The airspace over the city was extremely crowded as Air Force, Navy, and Marine close air support aircraft, AC-130 gunships, Army Cobra attack helicopters, and B-52s vied for position to place ordnance on the attackers. Skillful coordination by the advisers working with the Air Force forward air controllers made maximum use of all available

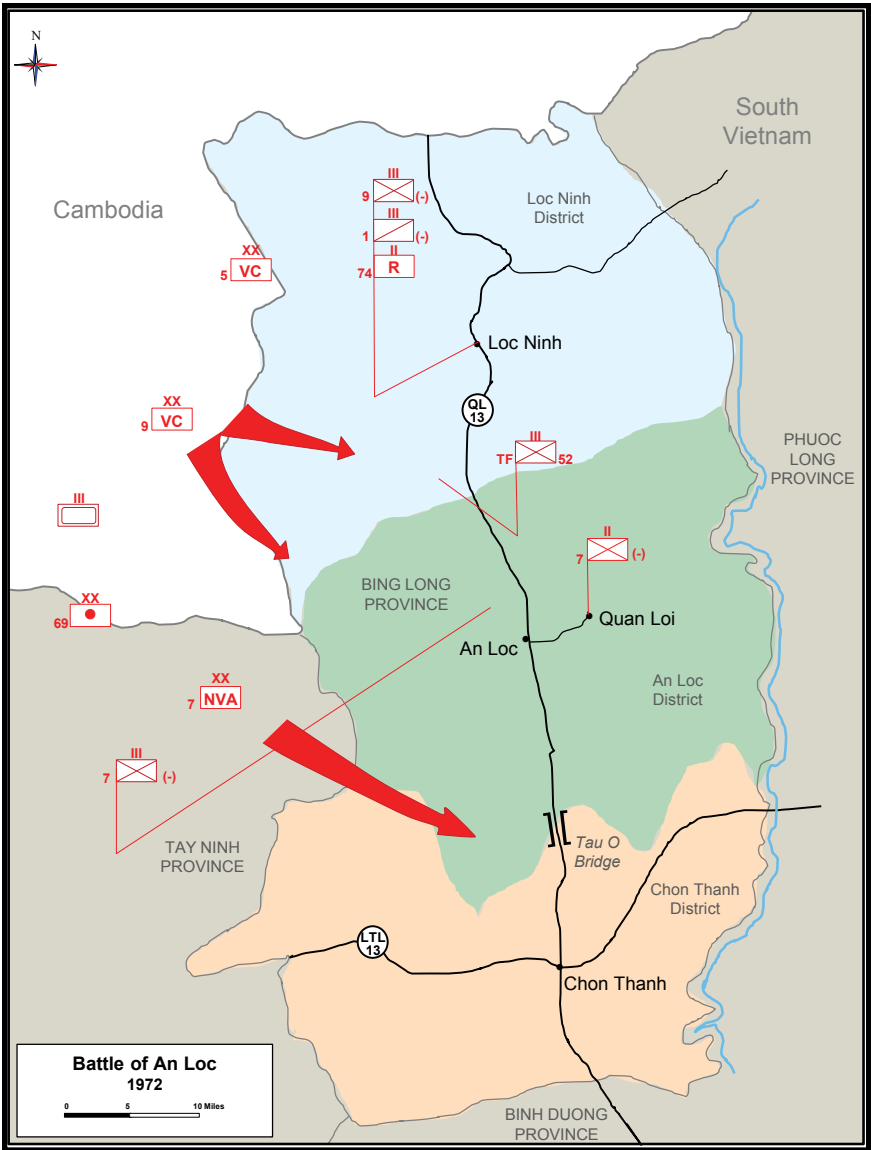


Figure 10.2. The Battle of An Loc. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

air assets. This made the difference and, once again, saved the day for the ARVN defenders.

During the course of the battle, 297 sorties of tactical air support were flown on May 11th and approximately 260 sorties each on the following four days. Additionally, on 11 May, 30 B-52 strikes were made against the enemy positions surrounding An Loc. This air support, flown in the face of

some of the most severe anti-aircraft fire ever encountered in South Vietnam, broke the NVA attack, enabling the ARVN forces to stabilize their lines, and eventually reduce both salients.

Unfortunately for the defenders in An Loc, the battle along Route 13 by the 21st ARVN Division did not go well. The Division had fought up the highway almost inch by inch, sustaining heavy casualties, including several US advisers who were wounded or killed in action. The ARVN attacks were not coordinated and they were unable to defeat the entrenched North Vietnamese forces along the road. Although the 21st Division was unsuccessful in opening the road and affecting the linkup with the forces in An Loc, its efforts were not wasted. In the process of trying to force the NVA positions, the 21st tied down most of one NVA division, making it unavailable for the fight in An Loc. This was a major contribution to the ultimate outcome, because the presence of one more NVA division in the direct assault on the city would almost certainly have tipped the scales in the attackers' favor.

By the end of May, although the fighting continued, the tide had turned in favor of the defenders. The around-the-clock air strikes had taken a horrendous toll on the NVA forces; ARVN intelligence later estimated that the NVA forces attacking An Loc sustained 10,000 casualties in April and May.¹¹ The North Vietnamese had reached their culminating point and they were never again able to mount a large-scale attack on An Loc in 1972. In early June, Lieutenant General Minh was able to send reinforcements into An Loc and to withdraw the battered survivors of the 5th ARVN Division. On June 18th, he declared the siege of An Loc broken.

That did not mean that peace had come to An Loc, however, as the shelling continued, although on a much reduced scale. The fighting around the city continued sporadically until late summer. On July 9th, Hollingsworth's deputy, Brigadier Richard Tallman, three of his officers, and an ARVN interpreter were killed shortly after landing at An Loc for an inspection tour. Two other American officers, one of whom was the author, were wounded in the same attack and were evacuated to Saigon by helicopter.¹²

By mid-July, the battle of An Loc was all but over. The continuous shelling, estimated at over 78,000 rounds during April-May period, had reduced the city almost to total ruins.¹³ The ARVN defenders had sustained 5,400 casualties, 2,300 of whom were either dead or missing.¹⁴ As one adviser later described it, "The graves, burned out vehicles, and the rubble were mute testimony to the intensity of the battle that had been fought there."¹⁵ Nevertheless, the city of An Loc remained in ARVN hands. In spite of the costs, the defenders and their advisers, with the help of American tactical airpower,

had decisively defeated three of the finest divisions in the North Vietnamese Army and held the city against overwhelming odds, preventing a great threat to Saigon and destroying the better part of three enemy divisions. It is estimated that the North Vietnamese suffered 10,000 soldiers killed and 15,000 wounded during the bitter battle for the city.¹⁶

As previously stated, the bitter fighting at An Loc provided a unique opportunity to assess ARVN fighting capabilities under some of the most extreme conditions of the entire war. Despite the fact that the North Vietnamese had been defeated, the performance of the South Vietnamese troops during the demanding battle for An Loc had been uneven at best. In the South Vietnamese army, as with any army, the performance of the soldiers normally reflects the quality of the leadership of their officers and noncommissioned officers. This was particularly true in the life or death struggle for An Loc.

Some units had fought with almost superhuman valor and skill. Lt. Col. Laddie Logan, a US advisor in An Loc, remarked after the battle that "The 81st [Ranger Battalion] never gave up an inch of ground, and they never left a single one of their dead unburied, even under the heaviest artillery fire."¹⁷ The airborne rangers were among the best troops in the South Vietnamese forces and acquitted themselves well during the intense fighting in An Loc. The commander of this unit, whose radio callsign was "Tiger 36" called in his own airstrikes and personally led several counterattacks against the North Vietnamese across the thin strip of no man's land that bisected the city and separated the two sides. He was an inspirational leader who led from the front and his troops responded accordingly.

Many of the ARVN took everything the NVA threw at them and stood fast, despite enduring almost unspeakable hardship and taking horrendous casualties. The 3rd Ranger Group, commanded by Col. Nguyen Van Biet, had over a thousand soldiers when the NVA launched their first attack; after three months of fighting, all but 346 were dead or wounded. There was little medical support, but the soldiers, for the most part, had continued to fight, doing the best they could under the horrendous circumstances.

The performance of the territorial forces (RF/PF) under the command of Col. Tran Van Nhut was generally outstanding throughout the siege of An Loc. Nhut was a charismatic leader, who was highly visible to his troops during the battle. Before the battle, he made sure his RF/PF soldiers were well-equipped and well trained. Once the battle started, they responded to his leadership and example. Many had lost one or more of their family members and seen their homes destroyed during the battle. They

had a cause to fight for and that is what they did, acquitting themselves very well against the North Vietnamese regulars; their morale remained high throughout the fighting despite heavy casualties.¹⁸

The effect of Nhut's leadership was evident early in the battle. When the tanks attacked on the morning of 13 April, the ARVN soldiers and their advisors fell back in front of the armored assault. The soldiers were panic-stricken and the defense looked like it was about to disintegrate when one of Nhut's PF soldiers grabbed several M72 LAWs (Light Antitank Weapons) and standing out in the open stopped the lead tank in its tracks.¹⁹ This fearless act galvanized the defenders, who then realized that the North Vietnamese tanks could be stopped. This realization settled everyone down and stabilized the situation.

The performance of the Binh Long sector troops remained noteworthy for the duration of the siege. In April and May after the NVA had tightened the ring around An Loc, reconnaissance operations by the 5th ARVN Division ceased almost completely. However, the Binh Long reconnaissance and intelligence platoon, often dressed as civilians, repeatedly infiltrated the enemy lines to gather intelligence, returning with useful information that was repeatedly used for targeting by the ever-present close air support.

The airborne brigade and the ranger battalions also performed extremely well. When the airborne were inserted into the high ground east of the city early in the battle, they soon found themselves in heavy fighting. The 6th Battalion fought well, but sustained so many casualties that it was rendered combat ineffective. The other two airborne battalions fought their way into positions on the eastern side of the city and played a major role in blunting NVA attacks from that direction.²⁰

The townspeople had nothing but praise for the Regional and Popular Forces, the airborne brigade, and the ranger battalions. The rangers had a particularly good relationship with the locals. They shared their food with the civilians, who in turn cooked for the rangers and did their laundry. If one of the civilians was wounded, the ranger medics attended to them.

However, not all the South Vietnamese soldiers covered themselves with glory. Many of the townspeople of An Loc had nothing but scorn for some of the soldiers of the 5th ARVN Division. Soldiers of the division engaged in considerable looting and in some cases even fired into houses to force the occupants out so they could loot the unoccupied buildings.²¹ Some 5th ARVN troops were observed selling the food and medical supplies that had been delivered by parachute. On several occasions, 5th

ARVN soldiers fired on airborne and ranger troops who were attempting to retrieve airdropped supplies for their own units.

The most demoralizing display of poor discipline was apparent in several incidents involving what one adviser called “the Olympic wounded.”²² On at least two separate occasions, American evacuation helicopters braved intense ground fire to land in or near the city to pick up casualties only to have certain “wounded” ARVN soldiers drop their more severely injured compatriots to clamor aboard the departing helicopters.

Such instances indicated a lack of leadership in the units those troops came from. As previously stated, leadership was the key determining factor in the soldiers’ performance; where the leaders were aggressive and physically shared the same hardships as their soldiers, the soldiers’ performance was exemplary. Col. Walter F. Ulmer, senior advisor to the 5th ARVN Division, later related one such case. During the last major attack on An Loc, the NVA had surrounded part of an ARVN battalion in the city jail on the night of 10-11 May.²³ The South Vietnamese soldiers had run low on ammunition and were virtually defenseless. The NVA sent a message to the ARVN commander, telling him that he had fought well, that he was surrounded, that he could surrender with honor and would be protected, but if he did not surrender, he and his soldiers would be killed. He replied that he was not about to surrender on those terms. In a few hours, the NVA overran his position. The battalion commander and his soldiers fought to the last man. Their bodies were found on 12 June when the 7th ARVN Regiment, cleared the area in house-to-house fighting.²⁴ The commander and his men had willingly made the supreme sacrifice; such valor is uncommon in any army.

In another case, the regimental commander of the 7th Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Quan (after the battle promoted to colonel on the spot by President Thieu during his visit to the city) was himself wounded three times during the early days of the battle. For the critical period in mid-May, he commanded while being propped up in his cot.²⁵

In yet another notable instance, a small Ranger fire base at Tong Le Chon outside the city, was besieged by vastly superior numbers. The Rangers never gave up and turned back repeated North Vietnamese attacks. The fire base held out even after the fighting began again following the ceasefire in January 1973; it did not succumb to the North Vietnamese until late 1974.

The brutal fighting at An Loc brought out the best and worst in men. Many ARVN fought courageously against overwhelming odds, tenaciously turning back wave after wave of tank and infantry attacks while suffer-

ing under the seemingly never-ending indirect fire. However, for all those heroic soldiers who fought well and hard, there were others who demonstrated a lack of discipline and even cowardice under fire.

Despite this mixed performance, the ARVN held against the repeated NVA assaults and when the battle was over, the city (or what remained of it) was still in South Vietnamese hands. President Nixon promoted the victory as a vindication of his Vietnamization program, declaring that the South Vietnamese had clearly demonstrated that they were ready to prosecute “their war” without American help. While this might have been politically expedient for a president who was trying to disengage from Vietnam, the truth was that the battle for An Loc had been a very near thing. It was true that the ARVN had held An Loc, but there were two other key ingredients that played a major role in the South Vietnamese victory: US airpower and the role of the advisers on the ground with the ARVN units.

Tactical air support was so critical that the city would almost certainly have fallen without it. A total of 247 B-52 missions and 9,203 tactical air strikes were flown against the North Vietnamese in Loc Ninh, An Loc, and along Route 13.²⁶ Additionally, Air Force C-130 Spectre gunships and Army Cobra attack helicopters played major roles in the city’s defense. By most accounts, this air support was the key ingredient in the victory. Members of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations traveled to Saigon in late 1972 to investigate the conduct of the South Vietnamese defense against the North Vietnamese invasion. During one of the briefings presented to the committee at MACV Headquarters, the briefer was asked what would have happened if US air support had not been available; the briefer replied: “We would be meeting some other place today.”²⁷

Gen. Creighton Abrams, former MACV Commander, later stated that in his opinion, “American air power, and not South Vietnamese arms, had caused his [the North Vietnamese] losses.”²⁸ This evaluation was echoed by participants at all levels. Brig. Gen. John R. McGiffert, Major General Hollingsworth’s deputy in MR III, when asked after the battle what he thought about the ability of the ARVN to hold An Loc without American tactical air support, replied, “No contest—never would have hacked it.”²⁹ This may have been a harsh assessment, but even South Vietnamese generals agreed that the city would have fallen if it had not been for the responsiveness of both Army attack helicopters and US Air Force air support. Gen. Cao Van Vien, of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, stated after the war, “Without this [tactical air] support, the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] success in stalling the enemy invasion would have been impossible.”³⁰

There is absolutely no doubt that US air support prevented the defenders from being overrun. If that had happened, three NVA divisions would have had very little to stop them from making a direct assault on Saigon. Tactical airpower saved An Loc and it may also have saved Saigon.

US air support also took the form of aerial resupply, which played a critical role in the ability of the ARVN defenders to hold out for almost three months. As the North Vietnamese tightened the ring around An Loc and increased the number of anti-aircraft weapons in the area, the skies over An Loc soon became deadly. Initially, the C130s from 7th US Air Force had a difficult time in delivering logistical supplies to the defenders in An Loc and most of the parachute drops went to the enemy in April. After much trial and error to determine the optimum procedures, the US Air Force made 238 successful air drops of 3,100 tons of food, medical supplies, and ammunition in May and June. Without this resupply, the defenders could not have held out. As one report stated after the war, "In combination with the resilience of the defenders, and the responsiveness of the air strike forces, the successful air resupply of An Loc became a decisive factor determining the Allied victory."³¹

While air support in all its forms was essential to the victory at An Loc, American advisers there played a pivotal role, as well. They served in several key capacities. The advisers stayed with their counterparts on the ground throughout the battle, sharing their fate on a daily basis. Some advisers in MR I had been pulled out when the NVA attacked and this had a devastating effect on the ARVN units and their ability to withstand the North Vietnamese invasion. As the physical embodiment of US commitment to the South Vietnamese, the mere presence of the advisers in An Loc stiffened the resolve of the ARVN commanders in time of desperate peril. The advisers provided encouragement to their counterparts, a function that should not be underestimated. This encouragement was particularly important during the darkest hours of the intense North Vietnamese attacks in April and early May.

Next and maybe most importantly, the advisers acted as the link between the ground and the critical American tactical aircraft and helicopters supporting the battle. Without advisers and their radios, the ARVN defenders would have been unable to talk to the aircraft. The advisers were tireless in coordinating the around-the-clock air strikes that prevented the North Vietnamese forces from overwhelming the city. Brigadier General McGiffert said that the ARVN defenders would not have been able to hold out if the advisers had not been there controlling the air strikes. He said of the advisers, "their primary duty and their primary reason for existence

was coordination of US tacair [tactical air support] and without them it [the defense of An Loc] would have just been damn near impossible.”³²

The last role performed by the American advisers in An Loc is less tangible—leadership by example. When ably led, many of the ARVN soldiers fought bravely and maintained their fighting edge under the most trying circumstances. Unfortunately, when the leadership was not so able, the troops panicked and fought less than valiantly. Some ARVN commanders, notably those in the ranger and airborne units, were shining examples of outstanding combat leadership under extreme pressure, but there were other instances where officer leadership was lacking. On several occasions, the situation was only a breath away from crumbling, but according to numerous accounts, the advisers “were the glue that kept them [the ARVN] together.”³³

Another part of the leadership problem was the level of tactical competence of many of the ARVN commanders. The situation in An Loc was far removed from the circumstances that the ARVN had dealt with in the past in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. Facing tanks and massive enemy artillery was a far cry from chasing insurgents through the jungle. As one adviser later described the situation that existed in An Loc during the battle, “Regimental and higher level leadership was not tactically or psychologically prepared for a battle of the duration and intensity of the Binh Long campaign; battalion level leaders lacked preparation for the close coordination necessary between fire and maneuver elements.”³⁴ The Americans provided the expertise in handling the high intensity conventional battle that characterized the struggle for An Loc.

While there is no doubt that US airpower and the American advisers played critical roles in the defense of An Loc, it must be acknowledged that none of that would have mattered if the South Vietnamese soldiers had not held their ground. Perhaps Gen. Creighton Abrams, MACV commander, said it best when he observed, “I doubt that the fabric of this thing [the ARVN defense] could have held together without US air. But the thing that had to happen before that is the Vietnamese, some numbers of them, had to stand and fight. If they didn’t do that, ten times the air we’ve got wouldn’t have stopped them. We wouldn’t be where we are this morning if some numbers of the Vietnamese hadn’t decided to stand and fight.”³⁵

In the final analysis, the ARVN and their American counterparts, working together and supported by massive amounts of US airpower in all its forms, won a great victory at An Loc. As *Time* magazine correspondent Rudolph Rauch quoted one of the American advisers in An Loc in early June: “The only way to approach the battle of An Loc is to remember that

the ARVN are there and the North Vietnamese aren't. To view it any other way is to do an injustice to the Vietnamese people."³⁶

Despite a number of problems, the South Vietnamese soldiers had endured unbelievable hardship and still triumphed in the end. Although there had been some serious shortcomings, the South Vietnamese put up a "stubborn, even heroic...defense."³⁷ In doing so, they demonstrated that with sufficient continuing support from the United States they had at least a chance of surviving even after all American combat troops were gone.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to these soldiers who endured so much was the one inscribed on a monument erected by the grateful people of An Loc in honor of the 81st Rangers. This monument stood amidst a cemetery especially built for the members of that unit who had fallen during the defense of the city. It read:

An Loc Xa Vang Danh Chien Dia

Biet Cach Du Vi Quoc Vong Than.

This translates to: "Here, on the famous battlefield of An Loc Town, The Airborne Rangers have sacrificed their lives for the nation." Such sacrifice was not limited to the Airborne Rangers and An Loc remained free because of the South Vietnamese soldiers, supported by American airpower and joined by their advisors, stood and fought against almost overwhelming odds.

The real tragedy for the Republic of Vietnam is that the sacrifices made by its soldiers in An Loc (and Quang Tri and Kontum) ultimately proved to be in vain. With US help, the South Vietnamese had not only survived the North Vietnamese onslaught that began on Good Friday in 1972, they had won a great victory. In the aftermath of that victory, Saigon had agreed to the Paris Peace Accords largely because of Richard Nixon's repeated promises that America would continue to support the South Vietnamese in their struggle. Once the Americans troops were gone, the South Vietnamese held their own during the fighting that continued into 1974, but when the North Vietnamese upped the ante in December of that year, the promised support was not there and the South Vietnamese fell in less than 55 days.

Notes

1. Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press), 229.

2. The North Vietnamese forces were actually called the Peoples' Army of Vietnam, or PAVN, but the more popular name for the Communist troops from the north was NVA, for North Vietnamese Army. The South Vietnamese army was called the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. Those designations, NVA and ARVN, will be used for the duration of this study.

3. The only ground combat element in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces not represented at An Loc was the Vietnamese Marine Corps. The author served as an adviser with two separate regiments during the battle of An Loc and was there several months before being wounded and evacuated.

4. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Special Intelligence Report: The Nguyen Hue Offensive—Historical Study of Lessons Learned (Saigon: Military Assistance Command Vietnam, January 1973), C-1.

5. Military History Branch, Headquarters, US Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Command History, 1972-73 (Saigon: Military Assistance Command Vietnam, 1973), J-1. Hereafter referred to as MACV Command History, 1972-73.

6. One advisor, Maj. Thomas Davidson, managed to elude the North Vietnamese and escaped to the south, reaching An Loc after four days.

7. Maj. Gen. James F. Hollingsworth, "Communist Invasion in Military Region III," Unpublished Narrative, 1972, Microfiche Reel 44, University Publications of America: Records of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, 21.

8. Philip C. Clarke, "The Battle That Saved Saigon," *Reader's Digest*, March 1973, 154. Part of the enemy's accuracy was explained when six young women were discovered with radio transmitters concealed in their brassieres. Accused of relaying information to enemy gun crews, the women were tied up and left in an area where NVA artillery subsequently killed them.

9. "An Adviser's Three-Month Nightmare Ends," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 4 June 1972, 1.

10. Ian Ward, "North Vietnam's Blitzkrieg – Why Giap Did It: Report From Saigon," *Conflict Studies*, October 1972, 5.

11. Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 134.

12. In addition to Brigadier Tallman, the others killed included Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Kuick, Maj. Peter Bentson, 1LT John Tod, and Sergeant Son, a Vietnamese interpreter.

13. Headquarters, 21st Infantry Division (ARVN), "After-Action Report—Binh Long Campaign, 1972" (Saigon, July 1972), C-1.

14. Maj. John Howard, Unpublished Student Paper: "The War We Came to Fight: A Study of the Battle of An Loc, April-June 1972" (Ft Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff College, June 1974), 29.

15. Howard, 1.
16. Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, 134.
17. "A Tale of Two Broken Cities," *Time*, 15 January 1973, 26.
18. K. G. Mortensen, *The Battle of An Loc, 1972* (Parkville, Victoria, Australia: Gerald Griffin Press, 1996), 57.
19. The author personally witnesses this action.
20. For a detailed first-hand account of the airborne brigade role in the Battle of An Loc, see Mike McDermott, *True Faith and Allegiance: An American Paratrooper and the 1972 Battle of An Loc* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012).
21. MACV, Command History, 1972-73, Vol. II, J-21.
22. Howard, "The War We Came to Fight," 18.
23. The initial 5th ARVN Senior Advisor was Col. Bill Miller, but he was replaced by Colonel Ulmer when he left Vietnam to assume command of a brigade in the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.
24. Mortensen, *The Battle of An Loc, 1972*, 51.
25. Tragically, this courageous officer was killed in May 1973, when his helicopter was shot down not far from Lai Khe.
26. "Battle of An Loc Ends," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, June 18, 1972, 1.
27. Committee of Foreign Relations, United States Senate, *Staff Report: Vietnam, 1972* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1972), 2.
28. Jeffrey C. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years – The US Army in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: The Army Center of Military History, 1987), 482.
29. Interview with Brig. Gen. John R. McGiffert, Deputy Commanding General, Third Regional Assistance Command, by Walter S. Dillard, Military Assistance Command, History Branch, 10 October 1972 in Saigon.
30. Gen. Cao Van Vien and Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, *Indochina Monographs: Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington, D.C.: The US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 109.
31. A.J.C. Lavalley, ed. *United States Air Force Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Airpower and the 1972 Spring Offensive* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air Command and Staff College, 1976), 91.
32. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, 484.
33. McGiffert Interview; see also Gen. Creighton Abrams' comments quoted in Lewis Sorley, ed. *Vietnam Chronicles The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 842.
34. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Col. Jack Conn," (Saigon, Vietnam, February 1973), K-1-3.
35. Quoted in Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 826.
36. Rudolph Rauch, "A Record of Sheer Endurance," *Time*, 26 June 1972, 26.
37. Pike, *PAVN*, 224-225.

Chapter 11

The Final 55 Days and the Fall of Saigon

The Paris Peace Accords were signed on 27 January 1973, by the United States, the Republic of Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. Under the provisions of the agreement, a cease-fire in place was initiated and the United States agreed to a total withdrawal of all troops, military advisers, and other military personnel from South Vietnam within sixty days. Unfortunately, the Accords did not address the estimated 150,000 North Vietnamese (NVA, as they were known by most Americans, but more correctly, PAVN—People's Army of Vietnam) troops that remained in South Vietnam.¹

For the United States, the war was over. For the South Vietnamese, the cease-fire was but a momentary lull that preceded a move into the next phase of the war against the Communists—one in which they would have to stand alone without any assistance from the United States.

When the cease-fire went into effect, the South Vietnamese controlled most of the populated parts of South Vietnam, but PAVN forces occupied the extreme north and northwestern part of Military Region I south of the DMZ, northwestern Kontum Province in the Central Highlands, and parts of Phuoc Long Province and northern Binh Long Province in Military Region III along the Cambodian border.

After a brief period of calm following the cease-fire, intense fighting broke out all over South Vietnam as both sides vied for control of contested territory. US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker later wrote, quoting a US pacification official in Lam Dong Province, that the “cease-fire appeared to have initiated a new war, more intense and more brutal than the last.”² In the first three weeks after the official cessation of hostilities, there were over three-thousand violations of the cease-fire.

The North Vietnamese forces attempted to secure strategically advantageous positions that could eventually be used as points of entry for war supplies and to screen infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Between the end of January and July, there were significant battles in Quang Ngai,

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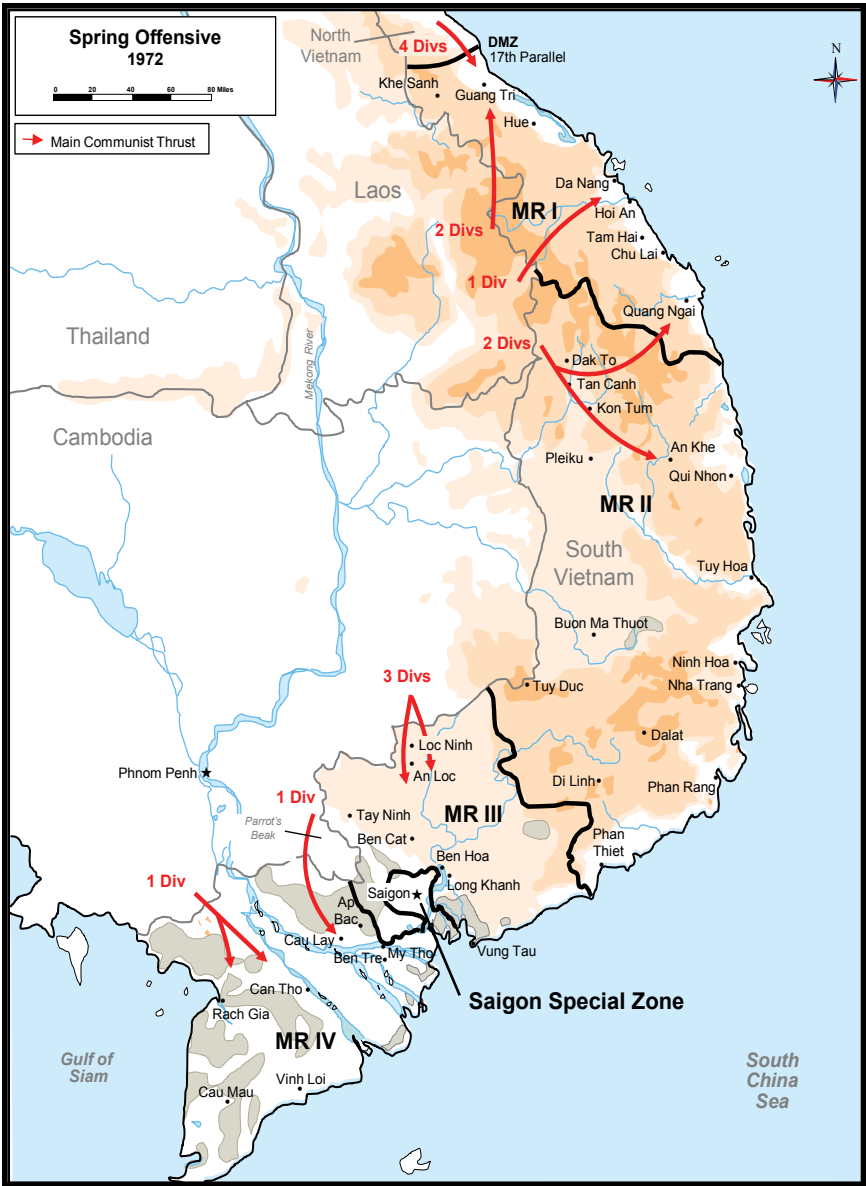


Figure 11.1. South Vietnam, the Spring Offensive, 1972. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

Kien Phong, Kontum, and Pleiku provinces, which resulted in heavy casualties on both sides.

Alarmed at these battles and intelligence reports of the North Vietnamese build-up, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu went

to the United States to confer with President Nixon in early April 1973. He complained about PAVN cease-fire violations and told Nixon that there were reliable reports that the Communists were preparing for a general offensive. Thieu found the American president “preoccupied and absent minded” during the meeting, but Nixon reiterated previous promises to support Saigon and spoke of renewed military aid at the “one billion dollar level.”³ Nixon, however, had other more pressing problems. The Watergate scandal was picking up momentum and the president was distracted by the mounting controversy. Kissinger wrote later that “Nixon clearly did not want to add turmoil over Indochina to his mounting domestic perplexities.”⁴

Thieu, still worried about the veracity of Nixon’s promises and wanting to gain as much territorial advantage over the PAVN as possible, returned to Saigon and ordered his forces on the offense. Accordingly, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) conducted attacks in the coastal lowlands, the Mekong Delta region, the western mountainous area close to the Cambodian and Laotian borders, and in several provinces surrounding Saigon. In October, the North Vietnamese responded with their own offensive designed to secure additional territory and keep open their supply lines. In these actions, the South Vietnamese held their own against the PAVN, but the “cease-fire war” claimed 26,500 ARVN dead in 1973 and would result in almost 30,000 the following year.

As the fighting continued into 1974, the South Vietnamese began to experience severe shortages in ammunition, fuel, spare parts, and other war material. As war stocks dwindled and were not replaced, Thieu was relegated to fighting a “poor man’s war.” On 9 August 1974, the South Vietnamese, in the midst of combatting the largest Communist offensive since the cease-fire, were dealt a devastating blow by the resignation of President Nixon. His successor, Gerald Ford, sent assurances that Nixon’s promises of support would be honored, but the new president was not in a position to make good on these promises. This became apparent in October when Congress appropriated only \$700 million in military and economic aid for the year ending 30 June 1975, a significant reduction from the \$1 billion originally requested.⁵ The “one-two punch” of Nixon’s resignation and the subsequent reduction in military aid had a devastating impact on South Vietnamese morale.

The Politburo in Hanoi, emboldened by Nixon’s demise and the reduction in US military aid to Saigon, decided to launch an attack as a test case to see what the United States would do if the South Vietnamese got into

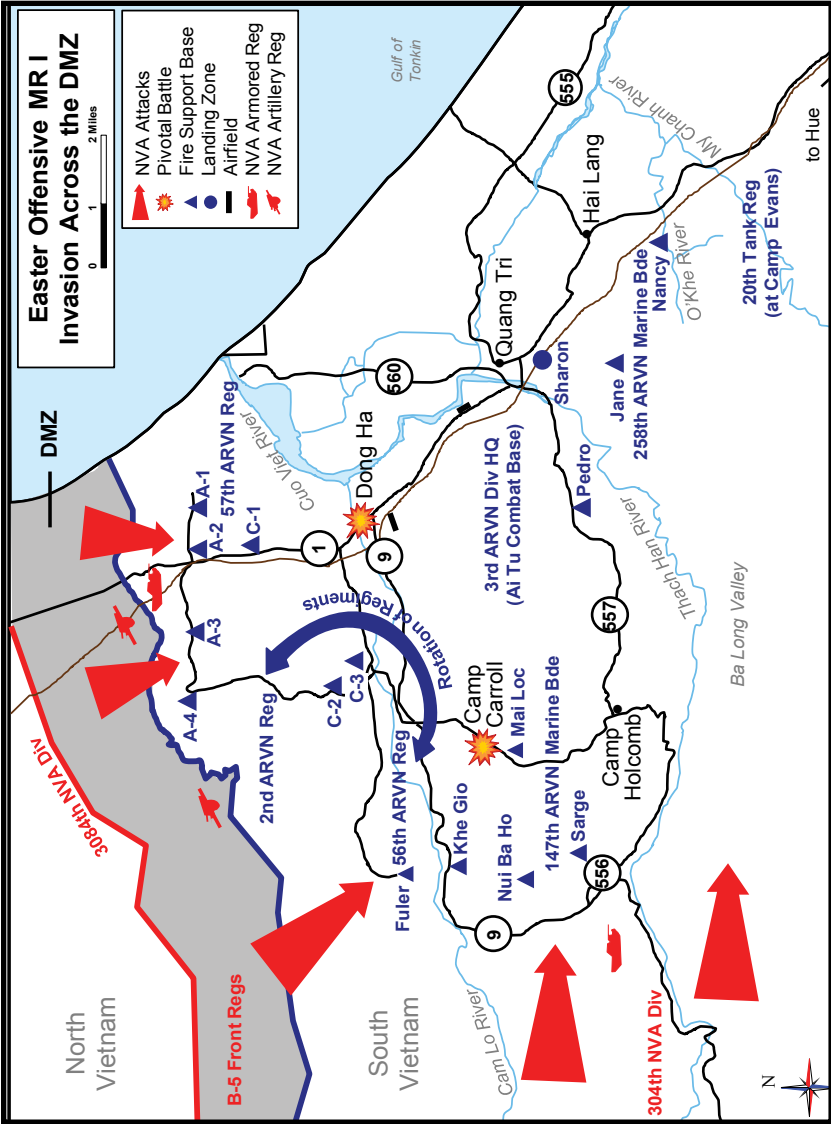


Figure 11.2. Easter Offensive, Invasion Across the DMZ. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

serious trouble on the battlefield. The site of this attack would be Phuoc Long Province, a relatively isolated area only lightly defended by four Regional Force (local militia) battalions and a number of Popular Force (home guard) platoons. The PAVN 301st Corps, consisting of the newly formed 3rd Division, the veteran 7th Division, a tank battalion, an artillery regiment, and local sapper and infantry units, launched the attack on 13 December 1974, rapidly defeated South Vietnamese outposts and focused their main attack on the Song Be airfield. Saigon rushed reinforcements to the area, but the North Vietnamese overwhelmed the ARVN forces and the battle was over by the first week in January. The North Vietnamese had taken the entire province in just a matter of days. South Vietnamese losses were staggering—of 5,400 ARVN and regional defense forces (RF/PF) committed to the battle, only 850 survived.

The loss of Phuoc Long Province had a crushing effect on both the South Vietnamese population and the armed forces. Making matters much worse in Saigon was the lack of any meaningful response from the United States. In his first State of the Union address on 15 January 1975, President Ford did not even mention South Vietnam. A few days later at a press conference, Ford said that he could foresee no circumstances in which the United States would become actively involved in the Vietnam War again.⁶

The South Vietnamese were stunned. Not only had the United States cut them off materially, now it had publicly disowned them. Gen. Cao Van Vien, former Chairman of Joint General Staff, wrote after the war that Ford's statement shook the South as nothing had since the Tet Offensive in 1968:

The apparent total indifference with which the United States and other non-Communist countries regarded this tragic loss reinforced the doubt the Vietnamese people held concerning the viability of the Paris Agreement. Almost gone was the hope that the United States would forcibly punish the North Vietnamese for their brazen violations of the cease-fire agreement. The people's belief in the power of the armed forces and the government was also deeply shaken.⁷

The fall of Phuoc Long Province marked a major turning point in the Vietnam War. It demonstrated the impotence of both South Vietnam and the United States and signaled the beginning of a series of events that would ultimately result in the fall of South Vietnam.

Word of the ARVN defeat at Phuoc Long reached the members of the 23rd Plenum of the Lao Dong Party while it was still in session in

Hanoi. The North Vietnamese leaders were jubilant. For the first time since 1972, the PAVN had “liberated” an entire province and rocked the already shaky confidence of the South Vietnamese. The inability of the ARVN to defend against the PAVN assault and Ford’s inaction and public declaration convinced the North Vietnamese leadership that the time had come to commence the final offensive. Saying, “Never have we had military and political conditions so perfect or a strategic advantage so great as we have now,” First Secretary Le Duan directed the military leadership to develop plans to take advantage of the situation.⁸ The result was an ambitious two-year strategy calling for widespread major attacks in the South in 1975 to create the conditions for a general offensive and uprising in 1976.

On 9 January, the day after the 23rd Plenum adjourned, the Central Military Committee and General Staff met to develop detailed plans for the opening phase of the new offensive. The decision was made to focus the initial effort on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands (MR II), where a successful attack would give the North Vietnamese another province and provide staging areas and avenues of approach for a future follow-on attack to seize Pleiku, the most important city in the region. The Politburo approved the plan and ordered Gen. Van Tien Dung to go south to take command of “Campaign 275,” as the new offensive was to be called.

Even though the South Vietnamese military leaders in Saigon were not privy to what the North Vietnamese planned in the Highlands, they knew that the PAVN would try to take advantage of its victory in Phuoc Long. They looked to President Thieu for guidance, but none was forthcoming, for Thieu was apparently still in a state of shock over the loss of an entire province. His indecision during the battle for Phuoc Long had resulted in the loss of a large number of soldiers and equipment that could not easily be replaced. Thieu’s inability to deal with the mounting crisis would have disastrous results when the North Vietnamese continued their offensive.

The Joint General Staff recommended to Thieu that he consider a different plan of defense that took into consideration the new situation on the battlefield. They advocated “truncation” or a shortening of the South Vietnamese lines to more defensible positions. Thieu refused to even consider the JGS recommendations and demanded that no territory be given up to the North Vietnamese without a fight. Former Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem maintains that one reason for Thieu’s refusal to discuss the new strategy was that even after having lost Phuoc Long province,

Thieu continued to hold “the belief that the Americans would never tolerate a takeover of South Vietnam by the Communist.”⁹

Such was not to be the case. Ford realized that Congress and the American people would never agree to a new direct involvement in South Vietnam, but he sought to get additional funds for military aid to Saigon in order to honor the promises that he and his predecessor had made to the South Vietnamese president. However, Ford’s administration was already being blamed for rising unemployment, ballooning national debt, and the continuing energy crisis that had followed the 1973 Arab oil embargo and in his attempt to aid the South Vietnamese, Ford was blocked at every juncture by a hostile Congress. Nevertheless, his administration lobbied hard for a supplemental military aid request, trying to convince Congress that a reduction in aid would “seriously weaken South Vietnamese forces during a critical period when Communist forces in South Vietnam were getting stronger and more aggressive” and that it was imperative to “show the world that the US is standing firmly by its commitments and continues to be a reliable and steadfast ally.”¹⁰ Despite the administration’s efforts, the new request for aid met stiff opposition in Congress. Eighty-two members of the bipartisan Members of Congress for Peace Through Law sent a letter to the president saying that they saw “no humanitarian or national interest” to justify aid to Southeast Asia.¹¹

In February 1975, in an attempt to garner support for his military aid request, Ford sent a bipartisan Congressional delegation to South Vietnam to assess the military, political, and economic situation. He hoped that this trip would convince the members of the delegation that South Vietnam would fall without additional US aid.

The delegation arrived in Saigon on 26 February and met with Ambassador Graham Martin and his staff. According to Saigon-based CIA analyst Frank Snepp, the delegation immediately assumed an adversarial relationship and was “suspicious” of Martin, “hostile” to his staff, and “determined to rely as little as possible” on embassy personnel for briefings, input, or advice.¹² During a frantic round of meetings, discussions, and trips to the field, the delegation members quickly formed a negative opinion of Thieu, his administration, and the entire situation in South Vietnam. When they met with President Thieu, he confronted them directly, noting the promises of five US presidents and saying, “The issue now boils down to one simple question: is the commitment made by the US to be of any value? Is the word of the US to be trusted?”¹³ The members of the delegation vigorously assailed Thieu with concerns and issues to the point that Ambassador Martin later apologized for their “rude and contemptuous” behavior.¹⁴ The trip that President Ford

had hoped would convince the legislators to approve the additional aid for Saigon had exactly the opposite effect.

Upon returning to Washington, Representative Paul McCloskey (Republican, California) published a report that concluded that the North Vietnamese “will overcome the South within three years” regardless of what the United States did with regard to additional military aid.¹⁵ A week after the return of the congressional delegation, the Democratic caucus in both the House and Senate voted to oppose any further aid to South Vietnam and Cambodia.

When the congressional delegation departed Saigon, they had been given copies of the latest DAO intelligence report, which clearly showed that the North Vietnamese were in a position to launch a major offensive. The report said that the North Vietnamese had increased its strategic reserve from two divisions to seven, thereby making more than 70,000 additional soldiers available for commitment in the south to augment the 200,000 combat soldiers and 100,000 support troops that were already there. The report further stated that these forces could be moved to positions in the Central Highlands in less than 15 days. Predicting that there would soon be a major offensive in the northern half of South Vietnam, the report concluded that “the campaign is expected to assume country-wide proportions and a number of indicators point to the introduction of strategic reserve divisions from NVN.”¹⁶

The DAO intelligence estimate was surprisingly accurate. While budget deliberations continued in the United States, the North Vietnamese made preparations for the commencement of Campaign 275. In late January, the PAVN began moving additional forces into Darlac Province. Five main force infantry divisions, fifteen regiments of tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft, and engineers, a total of 75,000-80,000 North Vietnamese troops, began to close on Ban Me Thuot. When the battle began, the ARVN defenders would include one regiment from the 23rd ARVN Division, a Ranger group, and various regional force units.

General Dung’s plan was relatively simple, employing a tactic that he had developed and first used against the French in 1952 called “the blossoming lotus”—a plan of operation in which the attack would avoid outlying strong points and began at the center of the enemy positions, then spread outwards “like a flower bud slowly opening its petals.”¹⁷ He intended to begin the attack by striking elsewhere in the Central Highlands so as to misdirect South Vietnamese attention from his main attack; then he would sever all access routes from the highland provinces to the II Corps

lowlands (Pleiku to Nha Trang), thus precluding ARVN reinforcement of the Ban Me Thuot area. Once this was achieved, the main attack would be made on the city itself.

Although ARVN intelligence correctly predicted that the PAVN were making preparations to take Ban Me Thuot, Lt. Gen. Pham Van Phu, II Corps commander, disagreed with this assessment, believing that the enemy's moves toward Ban Me Thout were secondary in nature and that the main objective would be Pleiku or Kontum. This perception was reinforced by Dung's diversionary attacks conducted by the 968th PAVN Division on numerous outposts and firebases north and west of Kontum and Pleiku. Fooled by these opening attacks, Phu kept the 23rd ARVN Division in place at Pleiku and even when confirmation was received that the 320th Division was moving on Ban Me Thuot, he sent only one regiment, the 53rd from the 23rd ARVN Division, to reinforce the city.

On 4 March, PAVN troops cut Route 19 in two places between Qui Nhon and Pleiku. On 5 March, additional North Vietnamese forces blocked Route 21 in three places between Ban Me Thuot and the coast. Three days later, the 9th Regiment of the 320th Division cut Route 14 north of Buon Blech, thus completing the isolation of Ban Me Thuot. By midday on 9 March, it became apparent to even Lieutenant General Phu that the PAVN were focusing their efforts on Ban Me Thuot. He rushed the 21st Ranger Group to Buon Ho, 20 miles north of the city and called the JGS for reinforcements, who promptly told him that none were available.

The battle for Ban Me Thuot itself began at 0200 hours on 10 March when the North Vietnamese launched a two-pronged, three-division, tank and infantry attack. The honor of making the initial attack went to the 320th Division, the unit that Dung had commanded early in his career, which attacked from the north to take the ammunition depot and a small airstrip for light aircraft. This attack was successful and the depot and airstrip were captured by mid-afternoon. A second part of the 320th attack was directed at Phuong Duc airfield, east of the city, where the 53rd ARVN Regiment put up a stiff fight, stalling the PAVN attack.

While the 320th attacked in the north, the F-10 Division and elements of the 316th Division attacked from the south. This attack was aimed at the sector headquarters and it quickly became a pitched battle in which the ARVN defenders fought well, inflicting heavy losses on the PAVN attackers. However, the tide of the battle turned when the ARVN, demonstrating a long-standing inability to coordinate fire support, dropped an artillery

round intended for the attacking PAVN tanks on the sector command post, knocking out communications and killing and wounding many key personnel.¹⁸ At that point, the ARVN defense virtually fell apart and the sheer force of numbers overwhelmed the South Vietnamese.

By nightfall, the North Vietnamese controlled most of the center of the city while the South Vietnamese retained isolated positions on the airfield and along the perimeter in the east, west, and south. The battle continued into the night with the PAVN using flame throwers to rout out the ARVN defenders. The next day, 11 March, the Communist forces increased the intensity of their attack. By noon, they had taken the 23rd ARVN Division Command Post and most of the remaining South Vietnamese positions, capturing many senior officers, including the province chief and the deputy commander of the 23rd Division.

As the battle began in Ban Me Thuot, President Thieu made a momentous decision, one that would eventually prove the undoing of his nation. Reeling from the disastrous loss of Phuoc Long and with Darlac province under heavy attack, Thieu came to the conclusion that he had to do something drastic before all was lost. The RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) were overextended and stretched dangerously thin. The preponderance of the strategic reserve was already committed. Previously, Thieu had demanded that everything be held “at all costs.” However, the loss of Phuoc Long in January and the impending fall of Ban Me Thuot demonstrated to the South Vietnamese president that this strategy was no longer viable.

On 11 March 1975, as the PAVN were in the process of overrunning the 23rd Division command post in Ban Me Thuot, Thieu met over breakfast with General Vien and Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, his assistant for security affairs. Thieu said, “Given our present strength and capabilities, we certainly cannot hold and defend all the territory we want.”¹⁹ Accordingly, he had decided that RVNAF forces should focus on protecting only the populous areas deemed most essential. Looking at a small-scale map, he outlined the areas he considered most critical. He said that MRs III and IV were vital and had to be held at all costs. Any territory already lost in these regions had to be recaptured. This area, which contained most of South Vietnam’s population and national resources, would become the “untouchable heartland, the irreducible national stronghold.”

With regard to MRs I and II, Thieu, according to General Vien, appeared less sure of himself. There had been almost continuous combat in MR I since the cease-fire and the PAVN were particularly strong there.

Still Hue and Da Nang were important. Therefore, in MR I, it would be a matter of “hold what you can.” With regard to the Central Highlands, Ban Me Thuot had to be held because of its economic and demographic importance and the key coastal cities also had to be defended. In order to accomplish what he wanted, Thieu drew a series of phase lines on the map that indicated how the RVNAF would withdraw if unable to stand against the PAVN onslaught. If the South Vietnamese were strong enough, they would hold the territory up to Hue or Da Nang. If not, they were to fall back to the south to Quang Ngai, then Qui Nhon, and ultimately a final defensive line just north of Tuy Hoa. This new strategy, later described as “light at the top, heavy on the bottom,” revealed that Thieu was planning to trade space for time.²⁰ He was effectively “truncating” South Vietnam, just as his generals had previously recommended. General Vien later wrote that he vocally supported the president’s new plan during the meeting, but privately had serious doubts because he “believed it was too late for any successful redeployment of such magnitude.”²¹

Thieu’s decision was not a bad one from a purely military standpoint. Seven of the ARVN’s thirteen divisions were deployed in MR’s I and II, defending only one-fifth of the population. Shortening his lines and withdrawing these forces to assist in the defense of MR’s III and IV, where over twelve million people resided, made sense. However, withdrawal of forces under fire is one of the most difficult military maneuvers to attempt. If it is not done in an orderly and controlled fashion, it can turn quickly into a disaster. Thieu’s strategy, if applied earlier, may have worked, but his decision to attempt a massive withdrawal under heavy enemy pressure at this juncture, poorly planned and even more poorly executed, resulted in the unraveling of the South Vietnamese armed forces and would have fatal ramifications for the Republic of Vietnam as a whole.

By the evening of 11 March, the North Vietnamese had captured most of Darlac province. However, remnants of two ARVN battalions still fought inside Ban Me Thuot and the South Vietnamese also still held Phuoc An airfield, about 30 kilometers east of the city. The ARVN attempted a counterattack by the 21st Ranger Group, which made it to the outskirts of Ban Me Thuot before foundering when Brig. Gen. Le Van Tuong, commander of the 23rd ARVN Division, halted the Rangers and ordered them to secure a landing zone outside of the town to protect the evacuation of his wife and children by helicopter.²² Having lost the momentum, the Rangers tried to resume the attack, only to run into stiff resistance by PAVN reinforcements who had been brought into the fight while the Rangers evacuated Tuong’s family. A perfect opportunity to relieve Ban Me Thuot was lost.

President Thieu ordered Lieutenant General Phu to mount another counterattack. Phu ordered the 44th and 45th Regiments of the 23rd Division to be airlifted to Phuoc An from Pleiku. This attempt was doomed from the beginning because of major problems with helicopter support. Over a three-day period, the number of operational CH-47 helicopters being used for the movement to Phuoc An dwindled from twelve to one due to maintenance problems and the lack of spare parts. The result was that by 14 March, only the 45th Regiment and one battalion from the 44th had arrived at Phuoc An. When the counterattack kicked off on 15 March, it did not get very far because by this time they were hopelessly outgunned by the PAVN, who were in blocking positions astride the road. Because of poor planning and continued helicopter availability problems, the ARVN had commenced the counterattack without artillery or tank support.

The situation was made worse by the poor leadership that extended all the way to the top. On 16 March, Brigadier General Tuong, 23rd ARVN Division commander who had aborted the successful Ranger attack and now in command of the counterattack, once again demonstrated his unfitness for command. He received a very slight facial wound and, rather than continue the mission, had himself evacuated by helicopter to the safety of a hospital at Nha Trang. Not surprisingly, the attack, beset by inadequate leadership and wholesale desertion, stalled. Indeed, by the next day, it turned into a retreat as the would-be attackers joined columns of refugees fleeing east. The remaining ARVN positions in Ban Me Thuot were overrun and the South Vietnamese holdouts were either killed or captured. On 18 March, the PAVN overran the airfield at Phuoc An, thus eliminating the last staging area from which the ARVN could launch a counterattack. All of Darlac province had fallen to the Communist troops.

The fall of Ban Me Thuot was only a prelude to further disaster. The rapidity of the South Vietnamese collapse stunned Dung and his generals. North Vietnamese Maj. Gen. Tran Con Man said after the war:

In the attack in Ban Me Thuot we surprised the South Vietnamese. On the other hand, the South Vietnamese troops surprised us, too, because they became so disorganized so quickly. We did not expect that to happen. We thought that after the attack on Ban Me Thuot the South Vietnamese would draw the line there and fight back. We had expected a very intense and long battle with the South around Ban Me Thuot.²³

Just as surprising was the fact that the United States had done nothing to come to the aid of the faltering RVNAF. General Dung recovered quickly

from his shock and saw the great opportunity before him. With the fall of the ARVN in Darlac Province, there were no organized South Vietnamese forces between the PAVN and the South China Sea. Dung was very close to cutting South Vietnam in two, isolating RVNAF units at Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh, and farther north in MR I. Attempting to seize the advantage, Dung advised Hanoi that he planned to turn his forces north to take Pleiku and Kontum.

While Dung made preparations to continue the attack, Thieu and his generals tried to decide what to do about the situation. They met on 14 March at Cam Ranh and Thieu asked Lieutenant General Phu if he could retake Ban Me Thuot. Phu pleaded for reinforcements only to be told that there were none. Thieu explained his new strategy and ordered Phu “to re-deploy its [II Corps] organic forces in such a manner as to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot at all costs.”²⁴

Phu was stunned and at first thought the president was joking.²⁵ In order to have the combat power to conduct a counterattack on Ban Me Thout, he would have to pull the remainder of his forces from Kontum and Pleiku, effectively abandoning these key cities to the North Vietnamese. Once he overcame his dismay at what he had been ordered to do, Phu conferred briefly with his staff, then ordered a withdrawal from Kontum and Pleiku to the sea by way of Route 7, a little used logging road that ran 200 kilometers southeast from Pleiku to Tuy Hoa on the coast.

The withdrawal would commence two days later. On each of four days, a convoy of 250 vehicles would leave Pleiku and move down Route 7 to Tuy Hoa. The 20th Combat Engineer Group would lead the first column, repairing bridges and refurbishing the road as they went. The Ranger groups would bring up the rear in the last column. While the lead elements prepared to move out on the ground, the South Vietnamese Air Force would concentrate on evacuating aircraft, personnel, and family members.

Lieutenant General Phu and his staff were among the first to depart, leaving Col. Le Khac Ly, Phu’s chief of staff, to travel with the convoy. However, the actual command of the convoy was given to newly promoted Brigadier General Pham Duy Tat, commander of the II Corps Rangers. Since Tat was busy preparing his six Ranger groups to move out, the planning for the withdrawal was left to Ly.²⁶

Ford administration officials, already uneasy about the loss of Ban Me Thuot, were surprised by the sudden South Vietnamese withdrawal from Pleiku. Their concerns heightened when Thomas Polgar of the Central In-

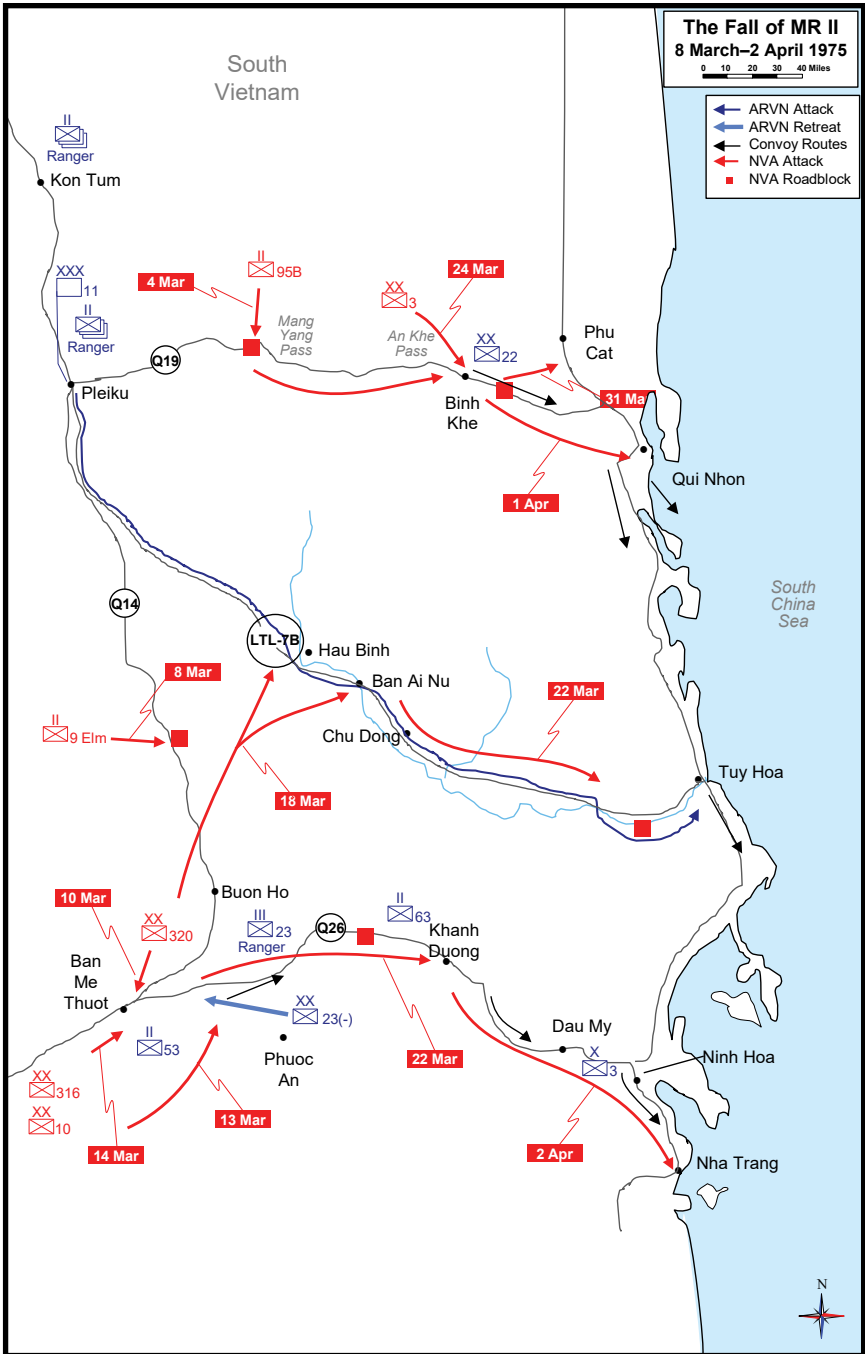


Figure 11.4. The Fall of MR II. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

telligence Agency cabled Washington that “the game was over.”²⁷ Despite such gloomy assessments, the administration continued to accentuate the positive. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Army Chief of Staff, called the redeployment “prudent action.”²⁸ This assessment was to change very rapidly and as the evacuation began to fall apart the White House and the Pentagon became increasingly alarmed.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground in II Corps was well on the way to getting out of hand. What purportedly started out as a tactical repositioning of forces rapidly began to look like a panicked withdrawal. Word of the evacuation got out prematurely and some commanders in Kontum began their own withdrawal without waiting for orders from II Corps. When the PAVN began shelling Kontum, more soldiers and civilians fled down the road to Pleiku.

Things were no better at Pleiku. Panic broke out when Colonel Ly informed unit commanders that they had to prepare to move. While some of the more aggressive of the regular force commanders questioned the order to evacuate, the Regional and Popular Forces, perceiving rightfully that they were about to be abandoned, began to riot in the streets. Soon thereafter, as the chaos grew, the regular forces also panicked. In Colonel Ly’s words, “the troops, the dependents became undisciplined. Troops were raping, burning things and committing robbery. The troops became undisciplined when they heard the order. I can’t blame them. There was no plan to take care of the troops’ dependents.”²⁹ In the midst of this confusion, the PAVN began shelling the airfield. The demolition of ammunition dumps and fuel storage areas by departing ARVN soldiers only added credence to a growing perception that Pleiku was in imminent danger of being abandoned to the North Vietnamese, thus creating panic among both soldiers and civilians.

When the first convoy departed on the night of 16 March, the panic assumed a new dimension. One reporter later wrote that physicians abandoned their hospitals, policemen shed their uniforms, and arson and looting were rampant.³⁰ Civilians grabbed what meager belongings they could carry and rushed after the army. A Catholic nun remembered “babies and children were put into oxcarts and pulled. Everyone was in a panic. People were trying to hire vehicles at any price.”³¹

The desperation to get out of Pleiku increased when a rumor spread that Thieu had made a deal with Hanoi. Supposedly, Hanoi would guarantee the neutrality of the remainder of South Vietnam if Thieu abandoned the northern provinces. Such rumors added to the mounting panic of the civilian population. There is evidence to suggest that this and similar ru-

mors were planted by PAVN propaganda units and Communist agents who had penetrated the military and civilian government of South Vietnam.³² Regardless of their origin, the rumors had a devastating impact on the military, who began to question the worth of fighting against the inevitable.

The retreat from Kontum and Pleiku—over secondary roads through rough country—would have been difficult under the best of conditions. However, with the North Vietnamese in close pursuit and crowds of panic-stricken civilians intermingled with the military units, the retreat disintegrated into total anarchy. By 18 March, over 200,000 troops and refugees were packed tight and strung out along a short stretch of road in what became known as the “convoy of tears.”

Chaos reigned. Unit integrity disappeared, as did all semblance of control. Units were blocked by the hordes of civilians and could not move. The civilians, many of whom had rushed out of Pleiku with only what they could carry on their backs, had little food or water. Additionally, they were harassed by roving bands of deserters. This chaotic mass of humanity made it almost impossible for the ARVN to establish a cogent defense along the road.

When the ARVN began to evacuate Pleiku, General Dung, although once again taken by surprise, recovered quickly. Realizing that he had a chance to destroy an entire South Vietnamese corps, he ordered the 320th Division to move from its position along Route 14 to strike the escaping South Vietnamese in the flank. At the same time, he directed the 968th Division to strike the rear of the column while B-1 Front forces were told to cut Route 7B in front of the lead column. This was a traditional Viet Cong ambush technique, but never before had it been used on such a large scale.

As night fell on 18 March, the PAVN opened fire on the densely packed soldiers and refugees along Route 7. Shortly thereafter, the 320th PAVN Division struck near the head of the column at Cheo Reo. As the same time, other PAVN units hit the rear of the main column near the town of Thanh An at the crossroads of Routes 14 and 7. Throughout the night, the PAVN shelled the column and raked it with small arms, machine gun, and antitank fires. The effect on such closely packed soldiers, vehicles, and civilians was devastating. One wounded soldier evacuated from Cheo Reo, describing the PAVN attack along the road, said, “They hit us with everything. People were lying all over the road as we tried to fight our way out. Soldiers died and the people died with them.”³³

Some units fought valiantly against overwhelming odds, but eventually unit discipline disintegrated and the situation rapidly deteriorated. As at Ban Me Thuot, hundreds, if not thousands, of ARVN soldiers deserted in



Figure 11.3. South Vietnam: The Final Days. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff. the face of the enemy to try to find their families and take them to safety. Others just tried to save themselves. General Thin, the former commander of the Corps artillery, later praised those leaders who tried to keep their units together, but described how things generally came apart:

We must salute the battalion commanders and lower officers for having marched with their units but they were no longer able to control their finished and tired men. The soldiers kept shouting insults at Thieu for this impossible and terrible retreat. Some

reached the limit of their despair and killed the officers. An artillery battalion commander who was marching in the retreating column was shot to death by some Rangers who wanted his beautiful watch. The despair was so great that at one point two or three guerrillas arriving at the scene could make prisoners of a hundred Rangers. Wives and children of retreating soldiers died of hunger and sickness on the road. It was a true hell.³⁴

On 21 March, the PAVN overran the rear of the main body, quickly moved down the road and took Che Reo, completely severing Route 7. During the course of the next week, the PAVN wrought havoc up and down the length of the South Vietnamese column. On 27 March, the survivors at the head of the ARVN column linked up with soldiers from a Territorial Force unit that had been fighting east of Tuy Hoa, but the withdrawal had been an unmitigated disaster. Only some 20,000 of the 60,000 troops that had started out from Pleiku and Kontum finally reached Tuy Hoa, and most of these were not fit for combat; only about 700 of the original 7,000 Rangers escaped.³⁵ General Vien reported that in the span of just ten days “75 percent of II Corps combat strength...had been tragically expended.”³⁶ The withdrawal had also been a nightmare for the refugees. Of the estimated 400,000 civilians who had attempted to flee Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, and Cheo Reo, only about 60,000-100,000 got through.³⁷

The loss of materiel and equipment was equally staggering. Hundreds of artillery pieces and armored vehicles had been abandoned in Pleiku or destroyed on the road. Nearly 18,000 tons of ammunition, a month's supply for the corps, was left in depots in Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku, and Kontum.³⁸ Scores of operational aircraft were left for the enemy at Pleiku.³⁹

One former South Vietnamese general later said that the retreat from Pleiku was “the greatest disaster in the history of ARVN.”⁴⁰ One of his fellow generals was even more emphatic, saying that it “must rank as one of the worst planned and the worst executed withdrawal operations in the annals of military history.”⁴¹ As drastic as these assessments may seem, they are accurate. The South Vietnamese gave up Pleiku and Kontum virtually without a fight. Lieutenant General Phu directed an ill-timed, ill-planned, and poorly executed withdrawal that decimated almost an entire corps. Plans to retake Ban Me Thuot were now out of the question. This “self-inflicted defeat,” as General Vien later described it, “amounted to a horrible nightmare for the people and armed forces of South Vietnam. Confusion, worries, anxiety, accusations, guilt and a general feeling of distress began to weigh on everybody's mind.”⁴²

The South Vietnamese had lost six entire provinces in a very short period of time and their confidence was fatally shaken. Arnold Isaacs, Saigon correspondent for the Baltimore Sun, witnessed the debacle in II Corps and wrote: "There was a feeling of a vital part come loose. After suffering so much for so long for so little reward, these [ARVN] soldiers had now experienced a betrayal that even their remarkable resilience could not bear. Deserted by their officers and left to the terrible shambles of the road from Pleiku, they had been robbed even of the chance to redeem their pride by fighting back...it was impossible to believe they would ever again be an army."⁴³ As bad was the defeat in the Central Highlands, an even worse calamity was unfolding 200 miles to the north.

The commander of I Corps in Military Region I was Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, one of Thieu's best field generals. He had established a sound defense in his area of operations and for the first two months of 1975, his forces had done very well, successfully countering PAVN attacks at Quang Tri, Hue, and along Route 1. This all changed with the fall of Ban Me Thout and the disaster in II Corps. President Thieu was convinced that the target of the new North Vietnamese offensive was ultimately Saigon, and at the urging of the JGS began to pull forces from I Corps to protect the capital city. In March, he ordered Truong to release the Airborne Division for immediate redeployment to the Saigon area. Thieu then told Truong that he was to hold Da Nang at all costs, implying (to Truong at least) that he was to consider the rest of MR I expendable.

Under the assumption that he had been ordered to give up most of I Corps, holding only Da Nang, its seaport, and the immediate surrounding area, Truong began the redeployment of his forces. As the South Vietnamese units began to move from Quang Tri, the local people, suspecting that they were to be abandoned to the North Vietnamese, became frightened and began fleeing Quang Tri for Da Nang. By 18 March, the highway was inundated with terrified refugees frantic to escape. The next day, the North Vietnamese troops reoccupied the ruins of Quang Tri without a fight (they had taken the city during the 1972 Nguyen Hue Campaign, but lost it when the South Vietnamese conducted a successful counterattack in September of that year).

That day Lieutenant General Truong returned to Saigon for another meeting with President Thieu to discuss the situation. Truong explained that he would try to retain both Hue and Chu Lai for as long as possible before the final defense of Da Nang, which would become a stronghold to block the PAVN advance south. Thieu reluctantly agreed to Truong's plan.

Despite Thieu's less than ringing endorsement of his plan, Truong returned to Da Nang determined to "fight a historic battle."⁴⁴ However, in his absence, the situation had gotten much worse. The flow of refugees into Da Nang was growing daily, and long-range PAVN artillery had begun shelling the I Corps forward headquarters near Hue. North Vietnamese troops had swept aside the regional forces screening the withdrawal of the South Vietnamese troops from Quang Tri and were now attacking the next ARVN defensive line along the My Chanh River, halfway to Hue. Additional PAVN forces attacked the 1st ARVN Division and 15th Ranger Group in their positions strung out along Route 1 south of Hue. Additionally, the PAVN had begun to shell the highway itself, which was jammed with motorcycles, autos, buses, trucks, and masses of people on foot.

By this time, the South Vietnamese forces in MR I were opposed by five PAVN main force divisions, nine separate infantry regiments, three sapper regiments, three tank regiments, eight artillery regiments, and 12 antiaircraft regiments, the equivalent of nearly nine divisions. The PAVN plan was to attack the South Vietnamese positions in I Corps simultaneously from the north, west, and south and to drive Truong's forces into Da Nang where they could be surrounded and destroyed. As the first move, General Dung ordered the B-4 Front and 2nd Army Corps to cut Route 1 and isolate Hue. Indecision on the part of Thieu and conflicting orders to Lieutenant General Truong ultimately joined to make this task much easier for the North Vietnamese. The situation was best explained by one US observer who told a *Time* magazine correspondent:

It was like a yo-yo. First, Thieu gave the order to pull back and defend Danang. Then he countermanded it and ordered that Hue be held. Then he changed his mind again and told the troops to withdraw. A reasonably orderly withdrawal turned into a rout.⁴⁵

The orders to abandon Hue were not well received by the soldiers of the 1st ARVN Division, many of whose families lived in the area. ARVN Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Diem, division commander, told his men, "We've been betrayed. We have to abandon Hue. It is now *sauve qui peu* [every man for himself]. See you in Da Nang."⁴⁶ Given this guidance, the withdrawal of the division quickly became a fiasco. The roads to the coast were already overrun with civilian refugees and as the chain of command broke down under Brigadier General Diem's edict, many ARVN soldiers simply melted into the crowd and began to look for their families. While this disaster was in the making, the PAVN entered the Citadel in Hue unopposed. The withdrawal from Hue in late March was

a complete disaster that rivaled the one in the Highlands in scope. The South Vietnamese had started the battle in northern I Corps in reasonably good condition. Many soldiers and Marines fought valiantly, but confusing orders leading to the abandonment of strong defensive positions demoralized the troops. Poor leadership, the disintegration of unit integrity and discipline, and concern over family members quickly led to panic and total chaos. Things were so bad that the troops did not even bother to destroy the weapons and equipment they left behind. One officer reported that he had left 37 tanks, all fueled and operational, on the beach when he and his men rushed to the boats.⁴⁷ Another senior officer, coming ashore at Dan Nang, summed up the general attitude, when he told a reporter, "I don't even know where my wife and family are. Why should I care about my division command?"⁴⁸ Only about one-third of the troops finally made it to Da Nang and untold numbers of civilians died in the panic-stricken evacuation. The 1st ARVN Division, the pride of the army, "was lost as an identifiable unit" and never reconstituted.⁴⁹

While this disaster was unfolding, Lieutenant General Truong also had to deal with the PAVN attacks in southern MR I, where the situation was not much better. Tam Ky, capital of Quang Tin Province had fallen to the Communists on 24 March. Further south in MR I, the North Vietnamese had stepped up their attacks on Quang Ngai Province, cutting Route 1 midway between the city of Quang Ngai and Chu Lai.

Meanwhile, the situation in Da Nang itself had become even worse. The city was under attack in the north from two PAVN divisions, reinforced by a tank regiment and two artillery regiments; in the south, two additional reinforced divisions attacked the district towns of Duc Duc and Dai Loc. As the North Vietnamese pressed the city from all sides, the mass of humanity, both military and civilian, inside the city was in total disarray. By this time, Da Nang, a city of 300,000 was inundated with nearly two million refugees from Quang Tri, Hue, and Quang Tin, all clamoring to get out. The situation was made much worse by thousands of stragglers and deserters who preyed on the refugees and looted the city. A high-ranking officer from I Corps later recalled that Da Nang was "seized by convulsions of collective hysteria."⁵⁰ The result, according to Maj. Gen. Homer Smith, of the US Defense Attache Office in Saigon, was that "the pandemonium which overtook reason in Da Nang literally wrested control of the city from all official presence."⁵¹ All order and discipline had broken down. An attempt to stage a massive airlift failed when hordes of refugees overran the airfield and mobbed the airplanes as they tried to take off.

From Saigon, Thieu tried to rally his forces. On 26 March, he went on the radio and issued an Order of the Day urging his soldiers to stop the enemy advance “at all costs.” He proclaimed, “I have led you through many dangerous circumstances in the past. This time, I am again by your side and, together with you, determined to fight and win!”⁵² Unfortunately, the troops and civilians in I Corps were long past rallying and Thieu’s urging had little or no effect.

As night fell, the North Vietnamese shelled Da Nang airport and the naval base. At the same time, they fired on the I Corps command post and other key military installations in the city. Although the ARVN 175-mm guns attempted counter-battery fire, it was largely ineffective and the PAVN kept firing into the city. Under this pounding, what remained of the defenses of Da Nang collapsed and Lieutenant General Truong called President Thieu to request immediate evacuation of the city. General Vien reports that Thieu, although very concerned about the situation, was very noncommittal in his response to Thuong’s request. Apparently, the president did not want another disaster like the one in the Central Highlands, but as in previous instances, he was less than direct in providing the I Corps commander guidance as to what he wanted him to do. As soon as Lieutenant General Truong hung up the telephone, the North Vietnamese shelling severed the lines between Da Nang and Saigon. Truong, believing that the situation was hopeless, decided to withdraw what was left of his forces from Da Nang. Truong ordered the displacement of his troops to three embarkation points where they would be evacuated by sea.

At dawn on 29 March, the evacuation began. A dense fog had settled in along the coast and the tide was low. Accordingly, the ships could not get to the beach. Even though the troops had to wade and swim out to the ships, the embarkation went smoothly at first. However, by midmorning the PAVN artillery shells began to fall on the beaches and the operation became a rout. It was a repeat of the disaster at Hue. Thousands of soldiers and civilians ran for the sea where they drowned trying to reach the safety of the ships. Thousands of others died under the continuous artillery fire. Only about 50,000 of the two million civilian refugees managed to escape Da Nang.⁵³ Approximately 6,000 Marines and 4,000 soldiers made it to the rescue ships, but in Lieutenant General Truong’s words, “not many [others] got out.”⁵⁴

By 30 March, the PAVN occupied Da Nang and controlled all of Military Region I, taking over 100,000 South Vietnamese soldiers captive in the process.⁵⁵ With a few notable exceptions, there were no

pitched battles in the I Corps area of operations prior to the fall of Da Nang. The South Vietnamese military in the region, in most cases, merely ceased to function as a fighting force. Not many of the 50,000 South Vietnamese soldiers stationed in and around the city even raised their rifles in its defense.

One observer remarked that “Da Nang was not captured; it disintegrated in its own terror.”⁵⁶ Faced with superior numbers and firepower and beset by poor leadership, lack of discipline, rumor, conflicting and confusing orders, and concern for family members, the South Vietnamese troops, for the most part, quit fighting and began to fend for themselves. One senior officer described the situation:

stragglers mixed up with the populations and boarded civilian barges and commercial ships. Frustrated, hungry, and leaderless, they went wild and some of them indulged in inadmissible acts of banditry. Billions of dollars of equipment was destroyed and left to the enemy. Thus fell the second biggest city of Vietnam. She had gone through a stage of insanity before she died of suffocation.⁵⁷

By 1 April, the PAVN held all of MR I and most of MR II. In the process of taking these areas, they had destroyed the preponderance of two ARVN corps, over one half of ARVN’s effective fighting strength. One division, the 22nd ARVN, managed to hold out in MR II, controlling the three cities of Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, and Nha Trang, but eventually North Vietnamese reinforcements began to flow into the area from the north. The ARVN defenders were overwhelmed and had to be evacuated by sea. Only about 2,000 officers and men escaped. By mid April, the North Vietnamese completed the destruction of the few pockets of RVNAF resistance and the remaining provinces along the coastline “fell like a row of porcelain vases sliding off a shelf.”⁵⁸

The loss of Military Regions I and II rocked South Vietnam to its very foundation. Half the country had been given a way with relatively little resistance. The loss of Da Nang, the nation’s second largest city, was, in the words of South Vietnam’s Deputy Premier Dr. Phan Quang Dan, “the worst single disaster in the history of South Vietnam.”⁵⁹ In addition to the loss of territory, the South Vietnamese, fleeing in panic, abandoned mounds of ammunition, supplies, and equipment to the advancing North Vietnamese. In the Qui Nhon depot alone, over 4,410 tons of ammunition was left.⁶⁰ VNAF left behind thirty-three A-37 jet fighters on the runway at Da Nang and nearly sixty aircraft at Phu Cat Air Base.⁶¹

Evacuation of the northern two military regions, as Gen. Phillip Davidson has written, turned into “a craven, every man for himself scuttle for the exits.”⁶² In rare cases, the South Vietnamese troops, when ably led, fought well, in many of these cases demonstrating skill and valor. For the most part, however, the soldiers followed their leaders, who more often than not were the first to abandon the battlefield. The army collapsed, as one observer wrote, “like a house with its timbers eaten away by termites, which has continued to look sound until the moment it crumbles.”⁶³ Since the initiation of Vietnamization, a question mark had always hung over the existence of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Always before, the question had been how many years can they hold out? Now the question was how many weeks will they fight?

Observing the fall of the northern half of South Vietnam and realizing that Thieu and his forces were on the ropes, the Politburo in Hanoi decided that it was not necessary to wait until 1976 to launch the final offensive. General Giap first recognized that the time was right for the final blow. He had concluded that it was highly unlikely that the United States would interfere on the battlefield and that the South Vietnamese forces, being wiped out at the rate of more than a battalion a day, were so weakened that they “cannot cope with the ever stronger forces of the Vietnam revolution, militarily or politically.”⁶⁴

Le Duan, the Party First Secretary, agreed with Giap and together they convinced their colleagues that it was time to crush the “puppet” administration with a decisive campaign designed to end the war. On 25 March, the Politburo cabled General Dung to “make a big leap forward” to seize a “once in a thousand years opportunity to liberate Saigon before the rainy season,” thus insuring the “reunification of the Fatherland.”⁶⁵

Responding to these orders, Dung pushed his forces more than a thousand miles down the coast in rapid fashion, accomplishing one of the largest and most complex feats of the war. Massive columns of troops, equipment, and vehicles, many captured from the South Vietnamese, moved down the coastal highway toward Saigon. Other elements closed on the capital city from the west and south.

On 3 April, General Dung arrived at his new command post west of Loc Ninh, only 65 miles north of Saigon. By this time, he had at his disposal 16 infantry divisions supported by tanks, sappers, artillery, and antiaircraft units and organized into five corps (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and Tactical Force 232, a newly formed corps-size formation of four divisions). As these forces maneuvered toward attack positions, Dung and

his staff completed their plans for what would be called the “Ho Chi Minh Campaign.”

As Dung marshaled his forces, Thieu surveyed the South Vietnamese troops available for the defense of the capital. These comprised three divisions (5th, 18th, and 25th) in ARVN III Corps and three in IV Corps (7th, 9th, and 21st) plus remnants of the Marine and Airborne Divisions, several armor battalions, some depleted Ranger groups, and the survivors of the debacles in I and II Corps, a total of approximately 60,000 troops. The South Vietnamese were clearly outnumbered, but sheer numbers do not tell the whole tale. While the North Vietnamese, riding a tide of victory, began to step up their offensive, the RVNAF were disorganized, demoralized, and already demonstrating the characteristics of a beaten army even before the climactic battle for Saigon began.

The civilian population, too, was distraught because of the unending string of North Vietnamese victories, which fell, as one despairing government official said, “like an avalanche.”⁶⁶ Unfortunately, fear and shared adversity did nothing to draw the people together behind the government and the army. The primary concern seemed to be one’s own fate. One journalist observing the growing sense of panic and desperation in Saigon noted “that no spirit of support or sacrifice has been summoned.”⁶⁷ The South Vietnamese at all levels were terrified of a Communist victory, but most did little or nothing to forestall it.

Terror began to spread among the people, civil servants, and military. Catholics and anyone who had anything to do with supporting or working with Americans were particularly frightened. Ironically, statements by officials in the United States served to feed the spreading hysteria. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee, said that those considered “seriously endangered” in Vietnam included “all those who served in the administrative machine of the government of South Vietnam, in the various legislative bodies in the provinces, in the various police forces, [and] all those who worked for the United States in its various programs.”⁶⁸ Defense Secretary James Schlesinger said that as many as 200,000 Vietnamese might be massacred in a Communist takeover.⁶⁹ Such statements were widely reported in Saigon, fueling the desperation and terror. Although the past performance of the Communists in such instances as the Hue massacre were grounds for alarm, the fear that overcame South Vietnamese society was a gross over-reaction and caused almost complete paralysis when it came time to defend the city.

The South Vietnamese became even more frightened when word spread that the US was making plans to evacuate Americans from Saigon. Ambassador Martin tried to quash such rumors. He continued to maintain the official US view that the South Vietnamese, if provided additional aid, could stabilize the battlefield. His deputy, Wolfgang Lehman, told listeners at one embassy meeting a few days after the fall of Da Nang that in his view, "Militarily, the North Vietnamese do not have the capability to launch an offensive against Saigon."⁷⁰

This statement was preposterous. By the end of the first week of April, except for a few small enclaves in Phan Rang and Phan Thiet on the coast, two-thirds of South Vietnam was now in North Vietnamese hands. Six of the ARVN's thirteen divisions had vanished, along with many more troops in Ranger, territorial, air force, and support units. Losses of weapons, combat vehicles, aircraft, supplies, and equipment were staggering. On the other hand, the North Vietnamese, piling up victory after victory, were advancing on Saigon almost unscathed. General Dung wrote, "The numbers killed and wounded was very small in proportion to the victories won, and the expenditure in terms of weapons and ammunition was negligible."⁷¹

The Ford administration was stunned by the suddenness of the South Vietnamese collapse in I and II Corps. On 22 March, President Ford had written to Thieu, pledging that he was "determined to stand firmly behind the Republic of Vietnam at this crucial hour. With a view to honoring the responsibilities of the United States in this situation, I...am consulting on an urgent basis with my advisers on actions which the situation may require and the law permit."⁷² Thieu responded on 25 March, just as Hue was abandoned to the Communists, with a letter of his own describing the "grave" military situation and making an appeal for "the Government of the United States of America [to] live up to its pledge" to "safeguard the peace in Vietnam." He specifically requested that Ford "order a brief but intensive B-52 air strike" against the enemy's concentration of forces and logistic bases within South Vietnam and "urgently provide us with necessary means to contain and repel the offensive."⁷³ Ford replied with a letter to Thieu in which he said: "You and your people may be assured of my continued firm support and of my resolve to do everything I can to help the RVN. Once again, I am confident that our joint endeavors will be successful."⁷⁴ Ford added that he needed a first-hand assessment of the military situation in South Vietnam and that he was sending Army Chief of Staff Frederick Weyand to Saigon. According to his close adviser Nguyen Tien Hung, Thieu was not impressed by Ford's assurances because he believed that Ford and his advisers were downplay-

ing the seriousness of the situation and were backing away from previous commitments. Hung reported that Thieu complained: “Ford doesn’t seem to care. He is going off on vacation to Palm Springs while we are dying. When is he going to respond?”⁷⁵

General Weyand arrived in Saigon on 27 March. He immediately called on President Thieu and assured him of President Ford’s “steadfast support.”⁷⁶ After meeting with Ambassador Martin and Major General Smith, Weyand and his party spent the next six days in making a comprehensive assessment of the military situation and conducting inspection trips to various places throughout South Vietnam. Prior to departing Saigon, Weyand told President Thieu, “We will get you the assistance you need and will explain your needs to Congress.”⁷⁷

Weyand returned to the United States on 4 April and met the next day with the president at Palm Springs. While deeply pessimistic about the situation, he told Ford that he thought one more infusion of dollars and arms might somehow rescue American purposes in South Vietnam. He reported that the government of the Republic of Vietnam was on the “brink of a total military defeat,” but the South Vietnamese were fighting hard with all available resources.⁷⁸ Weyand said that they would not be able to recapture lost territory, but with more ammunition and equipment, they could probably establish a strong defense around Saigon. He proposed that Ford submit a supplemental aid request to Congress for \$722 million to replace the material lost in the disastrous retreat from I and II Corps.⁷⁹ With this equipment, according to Weyand’s assessment, the South Vietnamese could outfit eight infantry and Ranger divisions and another 27 independent regiments formed from existing territorial forces—a force that approximated the Communist forces advancing on Saigon. Weyand said that the supplemental request, aside from meeting the material needs of the RVNAF, would provide a psychological boost to the South Vietnamese people, who were “very near the brink of a slide into the kind of hopelessness and defeatism that could rapidly unravel the whole structure.”⁸⁰

There was disagreement even within the administration about Weyand’s plan and the wisdom of any attempt to obtain further aid for Saigon. First, many of the president’s advisers believed that it was unlikely that Congress would approve such a request. One administration memo during this period stated: “Any request for supplemental military assistance, however, is likely to be turned down cold. There is strong criticism of ARVN abandonment of supplies and abuse of women and children in the chaos of retreat.”⁸¹ Ford’s staffers, having polled Congress, informed the president that many legislators would not support him and others would actively op-

pose any new aid requests. Some advisers doubted that the South Vietnamese could hold out long enough for the aid to reach them, even if by some miracle Congress authorized part or all of the funds. They cited a Defense Intelligence Agency assessment of 3 April that gave South Vietnam only thirty days.⁸² Nevertheless, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, always mindful of the symbolism of American actions, urged Ford to request the full \$722 million proposed by General Weyand in order to send a signal not only to South Vietnam, but also to America's other allies around the world, that the United States would stand by its commitments.⁸³

Given the evolving disaster in South Vietnam, Ford faced an uphill battle to convince Congress to allocate more money for South Vietnam. On 3 April, the president had suggested in a press conference that 55,000 American lives had been wasted because Congress refused to honor commitments made under the terms of the Paris agreement. "I think it is up to the American people to pass judgment on who was at fault or where the blame may rest," he stated.⁸⁴ This incensed many in Congress. Senator Richard Byrd said, "Some commitments are invented where no commitments exist, and then Congress is blamed for not living up to those commitments."⁸⁵ On 8 April, Senator Henry Jackson (Democrat, Washington) charged that Nixon had made "secret agreements...in writing" without consulting Congress and demanded to know the nature of these promises.⁸⁶ The Ford administration responded that Nixon had promised nothing in private that he had not promised many times in public. This was true as far as Ford knew at the time, because extant evidence suggests that the new president had not himself yet seen the entire file of Nixon-Thieu letters himself.⁸⁷ Despite Ford's explanation, many in Congress were convinced that there had been a secret deal with Thieu.

At this juncture, President Ford, against protests by domestic adviser Robert Hartmann and Press Secretary Ron Nessen but urged on by Henry Kissinger, went before a joint session of Congress on 10 April to ask for the full \$722 million military aid supplement and another \$250 million for economic aid and refugee relief. Ford asserted that the current debacle in South Vietnam was due to "uncertainty of further American assistance," because the reduction in aid "signaled our increasing reluctance to give any support to that nation struggling for its survival." He asked Congress to help him "keep America's word good throughout the world." The president insisted that the supplemental aid to Saigon "must be swift and adequate" and that failure to act would only lead to "deeper disaster."⁸⁸ He asked Congress to approve the bill by 19 April, only nine days away. If doubt existed about the likely congressional response to the

new aid request, it was quickly dispelled by the reaction on the floor to the president's speech. Not one clap of applause greeted Ford's appeal for additional aid for Saigon, and two Democrats even walked out in the middle of the speech.⁸⁹

Despite the administration's efforts, the supplemental aid request was doomed from the beginning. Events in Cambodia did not help the situation. The Communist Khmer Rouge had been on the verge of completely overrunning Cambodia for some time. Two hours before the president spoke to Congress, Ambassador John Gunther Dean cabled from Phnom Penh requesting initiation of Operation EAGLE PULL, the final phase of the American evacuation from the Cambodian capital. The end of US involvement in Cambodia, which included five years of effort and the expenditure of more than a billion dollars, occurred on the morning of 17 April when the victorious Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh.

The shadows of the imminent fall of Cambodia and the ongoing disaster in South Vietnam loomed as Congress considered the president's military aid request. As White House staffers had predicted, even previous supporters of US policy in South Vietnam, such as Senator Byrd, spoke against new aid for Saigon. Byrd announced that "any additional military support for either Cambodia or South Vietnam would fall into the hands of those we are now opposing" and expressed "considerable doubt that additional expenditure of American funds, except for humanitarian purposes, would change the course of events."⁹⁰ Other legislators were even more adamant. Representative Bella Abzug wrote the president, charging that the "wrong policies and illegal military intervention for the past decade" of the US government were "largely responsible for the current tragic plight of the South Vietnamese." She demanded that Ford "cease at once all military aid to the discredited government of President Thieu."⁹¹

Administration representatives received a chilly reception during congressional hearings on the aid request. Secretary of State Kissinger testified before the House Committee on Appropriations, saying "South Vietnam has nowhere else to turn. Without our help, it has no hope, even of moderating the pace of events which it has bravely resisted for years." He further warned that "if the US projects the impression of abandoning people who have dealt with us for so long, totally—without making any effort to achieve control over the situation, it would not help our international position."⁹² These arguments fell on deaf ears.

Congress denied the president's request and then focused their attention on the expected evacuation of US citizens. When the administration asked for a waiver of legal restrictions on military force so that Vietnamese citizens who had worked for the United States could be evacuated with the Americans, liberals in both houses denounced the proposal in the most extreme terms. In the House of Representatives, Bella Abzug loudly pronounced: "This legislation is just an excuse to enable the United States to remain in Vietnam and to use military force if necessary to maintain control...so that if we do not happen to like what happens there we can again re-engage the United States in the affairs of that country. It borders on a new Gulf of Tonkin resolution."⁹³ It was clear that the South Vietnamese would receive no further help from the United States.

In a nationally televised speech on 4 April, a thoroughly demoralized and disillusioned Thieu blamed everyone for the military defeats, attributing the disasters to treachery by Montagnard troops (in the territorial forces), cowardice and defeatism in the armed forces, the intrigues of foreign agents, and even the broadcasts of "foreign radio stations such as the BBC and the Voice of America." Rather than personally accepting a large part of the responsibility, he then attacked the United States for failing to come to South Vietnam's aid as two presidents had promised. "One wonders," he said, "whether US commitments can be trusted and whether US words have any value." Having bitterly chastised the Americans, Thieu then said that only the United States could provide the miracle that would save the day. If American aid continued to arrive "drop by drop...we will lose our land gradually to the North Vietnamese Communists until the day when we lose it all. Therefore, I hope that the American people and Congress now will see clearly the real situation...and the consequences of their actions over the past two years and that they will assist us in a more practical, more rapid, more efficient and more adequate manner so that we can defend our remaining territory."⁹⁴

Such was not to be the case. How far the fortunes of Thieu and his nation had fallen was made strikingly clear on 8 April when 1st Lieutenant Than Trung, a VNAF F-5E fighter pilot, made two bombing runs on Independence Palace and then flew to the PAVN-occupied airfield at Phuoc Long where he landed to a hero's welcome.⁹⁵ Thieu, long frightened about the possibility of a coup, was all but immobilized by this attack on the palace, which was later found to have been an isolated act and not part of a coup. However, it clearly demonstrated that the situation was beginning to unravel.

While Thieu worried about coup attempts and President Ford and his advisers battled with Congress, General Dung, his staff, and field units finalized preparations for launching the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Dung's plan called for a three-pronged attack on Saigon. The main attack would be in the east and would be led by 4th Army Corps, consisting of the 6th, 7th, and 341st Divisions. They were to leave their positions in Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces north and northwest of Saigon, march easterly along the foothills of the southern Highlands, occupying Lam Dong Province and then attacking from there to take Xuan Loc, capital city of Long Khanh Province and the key ARVN stronghold defending Saigon along Route 1. In order to tie down South Vietnamese forces defending Saigon so they could not reinforce Xuan Loc, the recently organized 232nd Tactical Force, consisting of four PAVN divisions, would drive up from the Delta and cut Route 4. At the same time, the 3rd Army Corps would increase its attacks in the Tay Ninh area to keep the 25th ARVN Division in place and divert attention away from the move east by 4th Army Corps.

By 8 April, 4th Army Corps was in position around Xuan Loc. The next day the 341st Division launched the main attack from the northwest following a 4,000 round mortar, artillery, and rocket barrage, which set a large part of the city on fire. Supporting attacks were conducted from the north-northeast and east by the 7th and 6th Divisions respectively. Attacking with T-54 tanks, the 341st Division pushed toward the heart of the city. By dawn the next day, the North Vietnamese held the police station, the CIA compound, and the local Ranger base. However, the 18th ARVN Division, under Brig. Gen. Le Minh Dao, put up a stiff fight, fighting hand-to-hand in many cases. One of the reasons that these soldiers fought so well is that they were ably led. Brigadier General Dao and his officers stayed and fought alongside their men, a situation not often seen in the earlier debacles to the north in MR's I and II. Too, the soldiers fought hard because they were not worried about their family members, most of whom had been evacuated to Saigon before the main battle began.

On the morning of 10 April, the ARVN forces counterattacked, causing the PAVN to yield ground. Maj. Gen. Le Trong An, the North Vietnamese corps commander, ordered reserve regiments from the 6th and 7th Divisions into the fight, but the ARVN doggedly held on to their positions in and around Xuan Loc. Dung, who had become accustomed to gaining ground without a fight, was impressed with "the enemy's stubbornness."⁹⁶

The JGS saw that Dao and his troops had a chance to stop the North Vietnamese onslaught and rushed reinforcements from the 25th ARVN Di-

vision and the 1st Airborne Brigade to the Xuan Loc area. There were now more than 25,000 ARVN troops committed to the defense of Xuan Loc, almost a third of what remained of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

With VNAF flying close support, the soldiers of the 18th ARVN began to get the upper hand in the battle. Encouraged by the RVNAF's determined resistance, Major General Smith sent a message to the Joint Chiefs, declaring that the South Vietnamese "had won round one" of the battle for Xuan Loc. He lauded the "valor and aggressiveness of GVN troops" and concluded that their performance "appears to settle for the time being the question, 'Will ARVN fight?'"⁹⁷

Meanwhile, General Dung, not wanting to get tied down in a battle on the periphery of Saigon, urged his forces to redouble their efforts to annihilate the defenders. He ordered more reinforcements into the battle and told the 2nd Army Corps, which was in the process of taking Phan Rang, to continue south along the coast to seize Phan Thiet, then swing westward to hit Xuan Loc from that direction if the South Vietnamese still held the city by the time they got there. The battles that ensued were hard fought on both sides. The 18th ARVN Division fought valiantly, but by 15 April, sheer numbers and superior firepower turned the tide. Brigadier General Dao was forced to evacuate his forces from inside the city. On 16 April, helicopters extracted the survivors of the 43rd Regiment. That same day, the PAVN finally overran the 52nd Regiment, which by this time had lost 70 percent of its original strength.

The North Vietnamese had taken Xuan Loc in what would prove to be the last major battle of the war; after Xuan Loc fell, there was nothing between the North Vietnamese forces and Saigon. According to Col. William E. Le Gro, a member of the Saigon DAO who watched the battle at Xuan Loc unfold, the South Vietnamese had fought "splendidly," forcing the PAVN high command to use the battle as a "meat grinder," sacrificing its own units to destroy irreplaceable ARVN forces.⁹⁸ The 18th ARVN had held out for three weeks against overwhelming odds, destroying 37 PAVN tanks and killing over 5,000 attackers. Had the rest of the South Vietnamese fought as valiantly as the 18th ARVN Division, the outcome of the war might have been drastically different.

On 16 April, Thieu sent Nguyen Tien Hung to Washington as his personal emissary to plead Saigon's cause one last time. With him, Hung took the file that contained letters from Nixon and Ford promising support for the South Vietnamese. His mission was to petition Ford for a loan of three

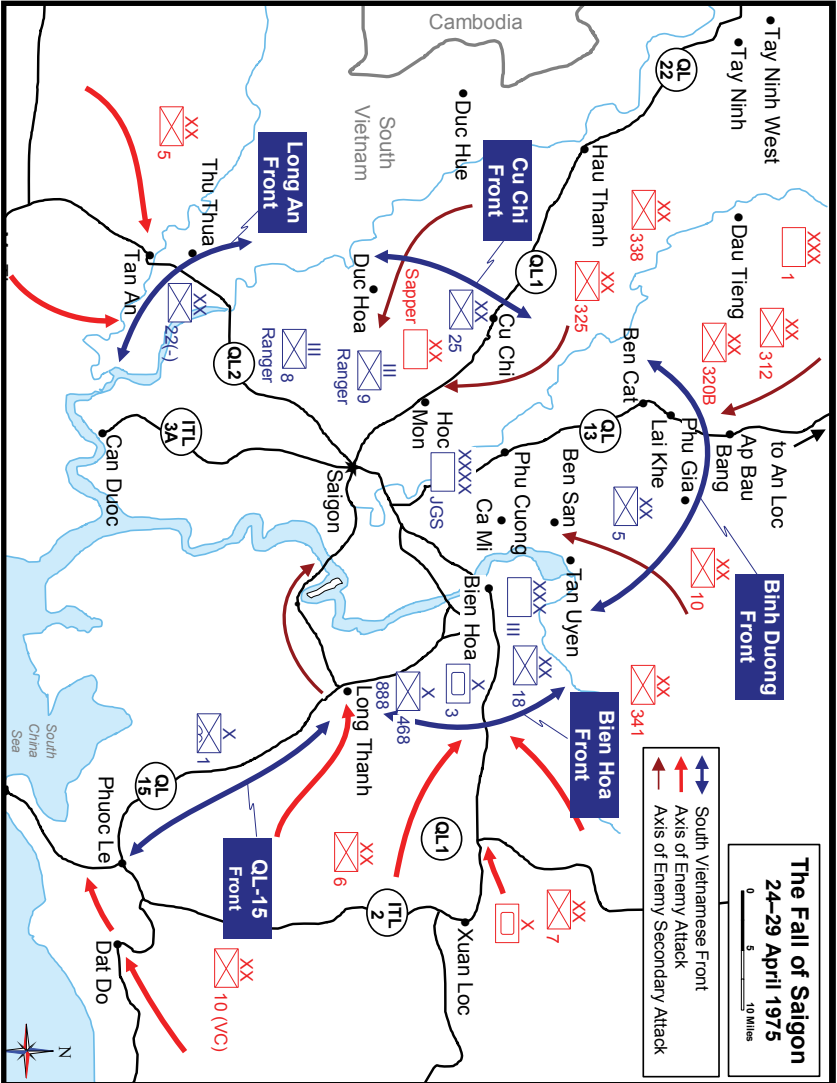


Figure 11.5. The Fall of Saigon. Graphic courtesy of CSI Press staff.

billion dollars a year for three years, at an interest rate to be determined by Congress. In a letter that Hung presented to Ford, Thieu said this money would be a “‘freedom loan,’ a loan that would permit us to defend ourselves against the aggressors and give us a reasonable chance to survive as a free country.”⁹⁹ Thieu believed that he could still hold on and resist the Communists in the Mekong Delta if assured of continued American support. Hung was sent, he later admitted, “to play the part of a cabinet minister turned beggar.”¹⁰⁰

Unfortunately for the South Vietnamese, it was too late even for begging. On 17 April, the administration’s final aid request was effectively killed when the Senate Armed Services Committee voted not to approve the additional aid for Saigon. Although the bill was still being debated in other committees, it was a dead issue. Hung later wrote that he was overwhelmed by the news of the Armed Services Committee vote. His mission disintegrated because “there was no one to talk to about the Freedom Loan.”¹⁰¹

Thieu’s position and personal safety had become precarious. On 18 April, PAVN sappers struck the Phu Lam radar station on the outskirts of Saigon. Lieutenant General Toan, III Corps commander, called to inform the president of the new development. He also confirmed that the defense in Xuan Loc was on the verge of collapse and that Phan Rang had fallen. Then he told Thieu that ARVN soldiers had “bulldozed and leveled” Thieu’s ancestral grave site outside Phan Rang.¹⁰² This was a terrible insult and demonstrated just how far Thieu had fallen in the eyes of his countrymen. By this time, wrote former ARVN Brig. Gen. Lam Quang Thi, Thieu had become “the most hated man in Viet Nam.”¹⁰³

Later on 18 April, a group of political moderates and opposition figures confronted Thieu and told him that they would publicly demand his resignation if he did not voluntarily step down within six days. Thieu responded by arresting several high-ranking military officers, including II Corps commander Lieutenant General Phu, who he insisted were more responsible than was he for the military disaster. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen wrote after the war that Thieu had believed until almost the last moment that the Americans would not let him and his countrymen go down in defeat; but the South Vietnamese president finally realized that time had run out.¹⁰⁴ His capital was surrounded by the North Vietnamese Army, his people no longer supported him, and it was now painfully clear to all concerned that the US had abandoned Thieu and the South Vietnamese.

On Sunday evening, 20 April, Ambassador Martin called on President Thieu. He brought with him the latest CIA intelligence estimate. The picture

he painted was desperately bleak. Martin stopped short of telling Thieu that he should resign but, saying that he was speaking only as a friend and not in an official capacity, commented that the decision to leave office was Thieu's and Thieu's alone to make. Thieu listened quietly to all this and assured the Ambassador that he would "do what is best for the country."¹⁰⁵

Later that day, Thieu was visited by French Ambassador Jean-Marie Merillon, who told Thieu that he had heard rumors that various generals were prepared to force him out if he did not resign.¹⁰⁶ There is some controversy about whether there really was a movement to remove Thieu. General Vien, the JGS chairman, later maintained that Merillon was wrong: "I am certain that on our side there was absolutely no pressure from any general to force [Thieu] to resign."¹⁰⁷ However, Vien has admitted meeting with a group that included Defense Minister Tran Van Don, Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can, and Economics Minister Nguyen Van Hao, but has insisted that this group met to discuss the situation and not to plot against Thieu.¹⁰⁸

Regardless of the nature of the meetings, the next day, in an effort to preempt any ouster, Thieu called the key members of his government to Independence Palace. He began by relating the details of his discussions with Ambassadors Martin and Merillon. He then said he would base his decision on their reaction and whether they considered him an obstacle to peace. No one said a word. According to presidential adviser Hung, Thieu decided at that moment to resign.¹⁰⁹

The next day Thieu appeared before a joint session of the National Assembly. In this nationally televised three-hour speech, a rambling and emotional tirade, he vilified the United States for failing to live up to its commitments. "The United States has not respected its promises. It is inhumane. It is not trustworthy. It is irresponsible," he proclaimed.¹¹⁰ Likening the recent congressional debate over the supplemental aid request to "bargaining at the fish market," he said that "I could not afford to let other people bargain over the bodies of our soldiers." He then announced his decision to resign and turn over the government to Vice President Tran Van Huong. Thieu concluded: "I depart today. I ask my countrymen, the armed forces, and religious groups to forgive me my past mistakes I made while in power. The country and I will be grateful to you. I am very undeserving. I am resigning, but I am not deserting."¹¹¹

By the time Huong assumed office, the North Vietnamese, moving closer to Saigon every minute, were not interested in negotiations with the new president or anyone else. The official North Vietnamese news agency called the change in leadership a "puppet show" and denounced the new government as the "Thieu regime without Thieu."¹¹²

By this point, American attention had shifted to the evacuation. On 23 April, Ford spoke at Tulane University in New Orleans. The president said, "America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Viet Nam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned."¹¹³ That same day, Ambassador Martin cabled Kissinger that it would soon be time to execute Operation FREQUENT WIND, the American evacuation of Saigon.¹¹⁴

While the new South Vietnamese government vainly searched for a way to save Saigon, General Dung and his staff completed preparations for the final assault. Dung's plan, a variation of the "blossoming lotus" tactic used so effectively at Ban Me Thuot, called for quick thrusts to seize five key points in the city: Independence Palace, Joint General Staff headquarters, the National Police headquarters, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and the Special Capital Zone headquarters, whose commander controlled the ARVN troops defending the city. Dung reasoned that once these vital "nerve centers were smashed...the Saigon army and administration would be like a snake without a head. What remained of their system of defense and repression would fall apart, the masses would rise up...and Saigon would be quickly liberated."¹¹⁵

Saigon was defended by the remnants of five ARVN divisions arrayed in a ring 30 to 50 kilometers from the center of the city. Dung did not want to get into a prolonged battle with these forces and did not want them to withdraw into the city, where his troops would have to fight them house-to-house. Therefore, he proposed to divide his forces. While one part of his troops tied down the ARVN troops on the outer perimeter, the other force would drive for the center of the city. To facilitate this scheme, he planned to send forces to secure the major roads, bridges, and key positions leading into Saigon to prepare the way for an armored thrust that would strike for the key installations. At the same time, he proposed to use artillery, a battery of SA-2 anti-aircraft missiles, and a group of captured A-37 bombers to shut down Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

Dung set the attacks on the perimeter for 26 April and the main attack on the city center to follow the next day. After finalizing the plan, Dung ordered his forces, now totaling over 130,000 troops, into attack positions. The 4th Army Corps (three divisions), having captured Xuan Loc and Trang Bom, would continue down Route 1 from the east to attack Bien Hoa and then Saigon itself. The 2nd Army Corps (four divisions) moved down Route 2 toward Ba Ria and Vung Tau.

In the southwest, the 232nd Tactical Force (four divisions) and several independent regiments prepared to attack the ARVN positions along Route 4

to cut off access to Saigon from the Mekong Delta. In the northwest, the 3rd Army Corps (four divisions) prepared to attack the 25th ARVN Division in their positions along Route 1 vicinity of Trang Bang and Cu Chi. As the other corps completed their moves, the three reserve divisions of the 1st Army Corps arrived at assembly areas east of Ben Cat. The climactic battle for the survival of the Republic of South Vietnam was about to begin.

On 26 April, the North Vietnamese launched supporting attacks by the 6th, 7th, and 341st Divisions against Bien Hoa and the former US base at Long Binh. At the same time, the 304th and 325th Divisions attacked ARVN positions at Long Thanh in an attempt to cut Route 15, the remaining overland link between Saigon and Vung Tau on the coast. The 312th Gold Star Division struck Ba Ria, at the base of the Vung Tau peninsula. These attacks were meant to hold ARVN defenders in place, so that they could not reinforce Saigon when the city came under direct attack.

In the early morning hours of 27 April, the North Vietnamese main attack on Saigon began. As the Communists troops closed in on the city, South Vietnamese politicians were embroiled in a debate over who should lead the nation. Although many felt that President Huong would step aside soon after assuming office in favor of someone stronger who could either lead the fight against the Communists or negotiate an accommodation, he had not done so. Huong was a well-meaning man, but he was sick and not up to the demands of the crisis at hand.¹¹⁶ He soon came under intense pressure to relinquish his office. After a period of vacillation, Huong, citing a respect for the Constitution, said that if the National Assembly no longer wanted him as president, it was up to them to vote him out of office. The Assembly replied that it was up to Huong to resign. At the same time, a heated debate broke out in the Assembly between those who supported the elevation of Gen. Duong Van (“Big”) Minh, old-line Thieu supporters, and still others who believed that Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky should be made president to carry on the fight.

While this issue was under debate, the North Vietnamese Army continued to close the ring around Saigon. Finally, on 27 April, shortly after four PAVN rockets landed in the city, Huong recalled the National Assembly “to choose a political personality to replace the head of state and negotiate with the other side.”¹¹⁷ At 1845, Senate President Tran Van Lam called the Assembly into session and read a letter from President Huong. Conceding that “we are lost” and “have no choice but to negotiate,” Huong announced that he was prepared to turn over the reins of government to General Minh, who long had boasted of contacts in the Communist camp.¹¹⁸ After the letter was read, Defense Minister Tran Van Don, along with General Vien

of the JGS and Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, commander of the Saigon defenses, gave a briefing on the bleak military situation. Shortly thereafter, the Assembly, with one third of the members abstaining, voted to make Minh president, charging him to “carry out the mission of seeking ways and means to restore peace to South Vietnam.”¹¹⁹ Those who voted for the new president clearly hoped that he would use his contacts to open negotiations with the North Vietnamese.¹²⁰ These were unrealistic hopes. The Communists held the upper hand on the battlefield and final victory was in sight. The Politburo had already unanimously decided against a negotiated settlement, regardless of any political changes in Saigon.¹²¹

At dawn on 28 April, PAVN commandos from 4th Army Corps took the far end of the Newport Bridge, only five kilometers from the center of Saigon, cutting the only remaining land route between the capital and Bien Hoa.

PAVN infiltrators had been entering the city for several days, joining the columns of refugees streaming into Saigon to get away from the fighting. Once inside the city they reconstituted themselves in groups of ten to fifteen men. Each group had an assigned target. The target list included key installations such as barracks, munition dumps, and police stations. These groups would go into action as the main PAVN body began its attack on Saigon. Other infiltrators were assigned to protect bridges to preclude the South Vietnamese from trying to block PAVN tank and mechanized columns from entering the city. An Italian reporter later wrote that he had been told by a high ranking North Vietnamese officer that over 1,500 commandos infiltrated the city in the week before the South Vietnamese surrendered.¹²²

At 28 April at 1715, as the North Vietnamese were making final preparations for the assault on Saigon, President Huong officially stepped down in a ceremony at Independence Palace. Huong spoke first, addressing Minh: “General, your mission is very heavy, [but] if you wholeheartedly save the country...and strive to restore peace and ensure that bloodshed stops, the meritorious service you render will be remembered forever by younger generations.”¹²³ When Minh took the podium, he said, “I can make you no promises. In the days ahead we will have nothing but difficulties, terrible difficulties. The decisions to be taken are grave and important, our position is a difficult one.”¹²⁴ He paused for a moment and one reporter later wrote that he and his colleagues present thought that Minh was going to announce surrender.¹²⁵ However, the new president continued, “The order to our soldiers is to stay where they are, to defend their positions, to defend with all their strength the territory remaining to us.” Then he announced: “I accept the responsibility for seeking to arrive at a cease-fire, at negotiations, at peace

on the basis of the Paris Accords. I am ready to accept any proposal in this direction.” As a gesture of good faith, he announced that he would release all political prisoners and lift the restrictions on the press.¹²⁶ He concluded by appealing to those attempting to flee the country to “remain here to join us and all those with good will in building a new South for the future.”

Just as Minh finished his speech, five captured A-37s made an attack on Tan Son Nhut, destroying three AC-119s and several C-47s.¹²⁷ This was the only North Vietnamese air strike of the war. A North Vietnamese colonel later explained the raid to Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani:

The planes took off from and returned to Phan Rang. Trung [the same pilot who had bombed Independence Palace] was the squadron leader. He had a good knowledge of the airport and its defense system. For a week we’d been training the other four pilots, since they were accustomed to Migs. During the attack they maintained radio silence, so they would not be discovered. Surprise was important. We thus succeeded in hitting many enemy planes still on the ground. The puppets thought we could never attack the airport because our comrades were still in Camp Davis. In fact we thought about it for a long time before giving the signal for the operation, but we had to do it. The air force was Saigon’s last defense, and it was indispensable to attack Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa.¹²⁸

The air attack on Tan Son Nhut served as one sort of answer to Minh’s attempt to foster negotiations. However, the Communists broadcast the following response over Radio Liberation an hour after Minh’s speech:

After the departure of the traitor Nguyen Van Thieu, those who are replacing him, namely the clique Duong Van Minh, Nguyen Van Huyen and Vu Van Mau, are holding fast to their war, to keep their present territories while calling for negotiations. It is obvious that this clique continues stubbornly to prolong the war in order to maintain American neocolonialism. But they are not fooling anyone. The fighting will not stop until all of Saigon’s troops have laid down their arms and all American warships have left South Vietnamese waters. Our two conditions must be met before any cease-fire.¹²⁹

While North Vietnamese pilots attacked Tan Son Nhut and the South Vietnamese transferred power to General Minh, PAVN forces moved into position for the final assault on Saigon. To the southeast of the city, the 325th PAVN Division reached the town of Nhon Trach, from with its long-range

130-mm guns could fire on Tan Son Nhut. To the west of the capital, another PAVN Division under Maj. Gen. Di Thien Tich spent the daylight hours under cover. When it became dark, they moved into attack positions along the Van Co River, which flowed along Saigon's southwestern edge.¹³⁰ Dung later wrote, "there was no longer any safe place" for the government forces.¹³¹

To the east of Saigon, following an overnight artillery barrage, the final assault on Bien Hoa began. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, ARVN III Corps commander, had already left Bien Hoa for Saigon. When the artillery fire began, the rest of Toan's staff also fled.¹³² *Time* magazine reported that Toan had privately conceded the battle for Saigon was already lost and quoted a US military observer as saying that most of the ARVN top leadership had virtually resigned themselves to defeat: "Their morale and their leadership was just flowing away."¹³³ The impact of this situation on what was supposed to be the climactic battle for Saigon was devastating. As one young pilot from the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) later said, "We—the young ones—we expected to continue fighting. But how could we fight when there were no generals to lead us anymore?"¹³⁴

In the early morning hours of 29 April, the North Vietnamese began a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut. During the attack, two US Marine security guards were killed. LCpl. Darwin Judge and Cpl. Charles McMahon, Jr. were the last American servicemen to die in the Vietnam War.¹³⁵ The rocket attack was followed by shelling from the long-range 130-mm guns located near Nhon Trach. Chaos broke out as South Vietnamese soldiers and airmen tried to board anything that flew. The crew of one already overloaded C-130 pushed soldiers off the rear cargo ramp so that the aircraft gained enough ground speed to take off. Another plane, a C-7 Caribou transport, spun off the runway, crashed, and burned. VNAF pilots manned anything that would fly and took off for Thailand. This symbolized the disintegration of the Vietnamese Air Force; eventually 132 aircraft were flown to U Tapao Air Base in Thailand.¹³⁶ Later that day, Lt. Gen. Tran Van Minh, VNAF commander, and a group of 30 armed senior air force officers rushed into the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut and demanded that they be evacuated immediately. Major General Smith directed his assistant air attache, Lt. Col. Dick Martin, to inform the officers that they would be shot on the spot unless they surrendered their weapons and calmed down. They did so and Martin placed them under lock and key in a nearby office. Later, they were evacuated. In its final assessment, the DAO later reported that this incident "signaled the complete loss of command and control" of the air force "and magnified the continued deterioration of an already volatile situation."¹³⁷

While desperation and terror reigned at Tan Son Nhut, President Ford convened a meeting of his advisers in the White House. After much discussion, President Ford directed the implementation of the final phases of FREQUENT WIND.¹³⁸ The artillery and rocket attacks had effectively ruled out Tan Son Nhut for any further evacuation by fixed wing aircraft. Over the next several days, US helicopters airlifted some 7,100 American and South Vietnamese military and civilian personnel out of Saigon, many of them from the roof of the Embassy. Navy ships ferried more than 70,000 South Vietnamese to American vessels in the South China Sea. In one of the many tragedies of the war, the Americans left behind 420 South Vietnamese who had worked for them and had been promised evacuation. Col. Harry Summers, an Army officer assigned to the US Embassy, later wrote that this incident was “a shameful day to be an American” and that the evacuation of the embassy was “the Vietnam War writ small.”¹³⁹ As had happened in the larger sphere, the Americans had made promises that they did not fulfill.

When the American evacuation began in earnest, chaos engulfed the city. Mobs took to the streets, overturning cars, setting fire to buildings, and looting. Former residences and offices of Americans were the primary targets for the looters, who took everything they could carry, even bathroom fixtures. One reporter later wrote: “In a flash it became an orgy of people opening drawers, ripping down curtains, emptying refrigerators, taking sheets, blankets, dishes...it was an impressive show of rage, frenzy, and joy by people bent on plunder.”¹⁴⁰

The North Vietnamese columns advanced slowly on the center of the city, encountering very little resistance. The Saigon military command had virtually ceased to exist. Shortly before 1900, the new chief of the Joint General Staff, Lt. Gen. Vinh Loc, issued his first and only Order of the Day, admonishing his officers and soldiers against “running away like a mouse,” he promised, “From now on, I and the commanding generals will be present among you...day and night.”¹⁴¹ Shortly afterward, Loc boarded a helicopter for the evacuation ships. Most other senior commanders had already departed. A reporter who observed the collapse of the South Vietnamese armed forces and the civil government in Saigon later wrote: “Like a puppet no longer supported by its strings, the whole government apparatus of Saigon was collapsing. There was no order, no army, no authority other than that of the guns and weapons that many, a great many still had and were using.”¹⁴²

Just after 0500 on 30 April, Ambassador Martin, carrying the furled American flag that he had taken from his office, departed by CH-46 helicopter for the USS *Blue Ridge* standing off the coast in the South

China Sea. At 1024, President Dong Van Minh announced the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Vietnam. Almost immediately, the South Vietnamese soldiers began to divest themselves of weapons and uniforms, attempting to melt into the crowds to avoid retribution from the victors. Some chose another way. One ARVN colonel went to Lam Son Square, site of the memorial to South Vietnamese war dead. He saluted the huge statue of a South Vietnamese soldier and shot himself with his pistol.¹⁴³

By noon, General Dung's 2nd Corps tanks rumbled through the outskirts of Saigon and rolled into the city unimpeded, followed by open trucks full of heavily armed PAVN soldiers. One column of tanks rolled down Thong Nhut Avenue across Cong Ly Boulevard toward Independence Palace. The lead tank, Number 843 commanded by Major Nguyen Van Hoa, crashed through the gate of the palace.¹⁴⁴ Other tanks followed, parking in a semicircle on the palace grounds in front of the steps. One PAVN soldier jumped down from his tank, ran up the steps, and began jubilantly waving the blue-and-red flag with the yellow star of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Neil Davis, a war correspondent for Reuters, asked the soldier his name and the young man replied, "Nguyen Van Thieu."¹⁴⁵ On that ironic note, the Vietnam War was at an end.

There is no doubt that the South Vietnamese were decisively defeated in the field during the actions of 1974-75. However, the United States cannot escape a large part of the blame for this defeat. Nguyen Van Thieu signed the Paris Accords only at the urging of Richard Nixon, who repeatedly promised that the United States would provide military aid and support to South Vietnam if the North Vietnamese attempted to take advantage of the situation after the cease-fire. In its haste to conclude the peace negotiations, the United States agreed to leaving over 150,000 PAVN soldiers in South Vietnamese territory when the cease-fire went into effect. When the North Vietnamese made their move, the United States failed to provide the promised support. The failure to honor that commitment dealt a devastating blow to South Vietnamese morale and fighting spirit. Without the continued support and backing of the United States, the South Vietnamese ceased to function as a cogent fighting force and collapsed in 55 days.

Many have asked whether this defeat was inevitable. Nothing in war is inevitable, but the signing of the Paris Peace Accords leaving 150,000 enemy troops in South Vietnam clearly set the preconditions for defeat. One can only wonder what would have happened if the US had insisted that the North Vietnamese troops be withdrawn as a condition of the Paris Accords. Even given the provisions of the Accords as signed, the situation

was not completely lost. With US support in 1972, the South Vietnamese had resisted an all-out assault by 130,000 North Vietnamese troops. One can only wonder what would have transpired if the United States had provided the promised support when the PAVN began their final offensive in 1974-75. Tragically, such was not the case and the results were calamitous for both the Republic of Vietnam, which ceased to exist as a sovereign nation, and the United States, which lost the first war in its history and abandoned its comrades on the field of battle.

Notes

1. William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam From Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1981), 2. This number did not include an estimated 100,000 regular troops in Laos and Cambodia.
2. Message, Bunker to Kissinger, 2 March 73, NSC Convenience Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, NARA.
3. Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 163; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 315.
4. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, 318.
5. The total amount was also to cover all shipping, as well as the operational costs of the US Defense Attache Office in Saigon, thereby leaving only \$500 million for the South Vietnamese.
6. Gerald R. Ford, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1975), book 1, 56.
7. Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1985), 67-68.
8. Quoted in Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 22.
9. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, 28. The authors also maintain, 30, that according to PRG Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang, Thieu's faith in the Americans was due to the "ingrained Confucianism" of Vietnamese culture: "Among the very deepest feelings on one raised in a Confucian society is the inhibition against betraying those with whom one enjoys a relationship of trust...[Thieu was] betting on the American geopolitical investment in South Vietnam...a relationship of personal commitment had been created. Trapped in his Vietnamese habits of thought, Thieu imagined that this relationship must prevail, regardless of apparent political realities and logic."
10. Memorandum, Timmons to Ford, Subject: Foreign Aid Legislation, 12 August 1974, William E. Timmons Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
11. Letter, Members of Congress for Peace Through Law to Ford, 6 February 1975, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
12. Frank Snapp, *Decent Interval* (New York: Random House, 1977), 162.
13. Transcript of Thieu address to Congressional Delegation, 1 March 1975, Robert K. Wolthuis Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
14. Vien, *Final Collapse*, 76; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 259-262.
15. US Congress, House of Representatives, Extension of Remarks, Report of Representative Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., "The North Vietnam-South Vietnam Confrontation," 94th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (14 March 1975), 6775-6779; Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., "Report, Vietnam Fact-Finding Trip, 24 February-3 March 1975," 14 March 1975, Walthuis Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
16. All figures and estimates are from USDAO Saigon, Monthly Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis, January 1975, Robert K. Wolthuis Files, Vietnam Fact Sheets, Gerald R. Ford Library. By this time, according to the

report, the PAVN had 17 divisions already in the south, supported by 500 tanks and 500 artillery pieces. Additionally, they had over 200 air defense weapons of various calibers, including surface to air missiles. These figures do not include 40,000 PAVN soldiers operating inside Cambodia or a separate campaign or 50,000 support personnel in Laos.

17. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977). 31-32.

18. Dung, 31-32.

19. The description of this fateful meeting comes from Vien, *Final Collapse*, 77-82.

20. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Why the Vietnamese Collapsed," *Washington Post*, 5 April 1975.

21. Vien, *Final Collapse*, 78, also wrote: "I said something to the effect that this redeployment was indeed necessary, and I had embraced such an idea for a long time. But so far I had kept it to myself and considered it an improper proposal. First of all, it conflicted with the prevailing national policy, and second, if I had made such a suggestion, it could well have been interpreted as an indication of defeatism."

22. Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1978), 84.

23. Larry Englemann, *Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 302. This is a comprehensive oral history in which soldiers and civilians, both American and Vietnamese, describe what it was like in the spring of 1975 as the PAVN carried out its final offensive against the Republic of Vietnam. It provides the perspectives of a wide range of participants and observers, including soldiers, generals, ambassadors, journalists, children, doctors, and even those from the other side.

24. Vien, *Final Collapse*, 86.

25. Alan Dawson, *55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 58. According to Dawson, a UPI reporter who was in Vietnam in 1975 and reported on the fall of South Vietnam, Phu was told by Thieu to carry out the order to evacuate or be replaced and jailed.

26. The Americans from DAO, CIA, and other organizations working in Pleiku knew nothing about the evacuation until informed by Col. Ly on 15 March. The South Vietnamese had taken the Americans completely by surprise, but by nightfall, the Embassy, using Air America, was able to evacuate 450 American and Vietnamese employees of the various US agencies in Pleiku.

27. Englemann, *Tears Before the Rain*, 63.

28. Drew Middleton, "Saigon Defenses Now Are Stretched," *New York Times*, 20 March 1975.

29. Quoted in Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 94.

30. Denis A. Warner, *Certain Victory: How Hanoi Won the War* (Kansas City: Sneed, Andrews and McKeel, 1978), 60-61.

31. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, 58.

32. Dawson, *55 Days*, 13; Vien, *Final Collapse*, 146.
33. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, 60.
34. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 95-96.
35. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, 96.
36. Vien, *Final Collapse*, 95.
37. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Last Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 259.
38. Defense Attache Office, US Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 15 June 1975, 5-28.
39. Stuart A. Herrington, *Peace With Honor* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 123.
40. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 96.
41. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, 96.
42. Vien, *Final Collapse*, 95.
43. Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 345.
44. Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 272.
45. "The Anatomy of a Battle," *Time*, 14 April 1975, 16-17.
46. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 109.
47. Don Oberdorfer, "Danang Diary: From Threat to Panic to Collapse," *Washington Post*, 7 April 1975.
48. Bernard Weintraub, "Saigon's Forces Are in State of Shock After Decision to Quit Northern Area," *New York Times*, 27 March 1975.
49. Defense Attache Office, US Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 15 June 1975, 5-15.
50. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 111.
51. Maj. Gen. Homer D. Smith, "The Final Forty-Five Days in Vietnam." Unpublished paper, US Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., 22 May 1975, 6.
52. Broadcast quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 365.
53. Warner, *Certain Victory*, 75.
54. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 111; Lam Quang Thi, *Autopsy: The Death of South Vietnam* (Phoenix: Sphinx Publishing, 1986), 158-159.
55. It is estimated that more than two million civilian refugees were left stranded in MR I after the evacuation of Da Nang.
56. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 363.
57. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 112.
58. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 380.
59. "Growing Gloom in a Shrunken Land," *Time*, 7 April 1975, 28-33.
60. Defense Attache Office, US Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 15 June 1975, 6-31.
61. William W. Momyer, *United States Air Force Southeast Asia Monograph Series: The Vietnamese Air Force, 1951-1975, An Analysis of Its Role in Combat* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1975), 76.

62. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), 706.
63. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 361.
64. Tran Van Tra, *Southeast Asia Report, No. 1247, Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B-2 Theater, vol. 5, Concluding the 30-year War* (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Van Nghe Publishing, 1982), 125.
65. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, 120-121.
66. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 392.
67. "The Communists Tighten the Noose," *Time*, 21 April 1975, 14.
68. US Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on Emergency Military Assistance and Economic and Humanitarian Aid to South Vietnam*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 15 April 1975, 35-36. Kissinger had replaced William Rogers as Secretary of State in 1973.
69. John W. Finney, "Pullout of 5,000 to Leave 1,000 Americans in Saigon," *New York Times*, 16 April 1975.
70. Herrington, *Peace With Honor*, 172.
71. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, 62.
72. Letter from Ford to Thieu, 22 March 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
73. Letter from Thieu to Ford, 22 March 1975, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library; Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 286-287.
74. Letter from Ford to Thieu, 25 March 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
75. Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 291.
76. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 April 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
77. Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 300.
78. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 April 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
79. US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Assistance to the Republic of South Vietnam for Fiscal Year 1975*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 21 April 1975, 3. This money would be used to provide 744 artillery pieces, 446 tanks and armored personnel carriers, more than 100,000 rifles, over 5,000 machine guns and 11,000 grenade launchers, about 120,000 tons of ground and air munitions, and about 12,000 trucks.
80. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 April 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
81. Memorandum, Kempton B. Jenkins to Jack Marsh, 2 April 1975, J. O. Marsh Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
82. Le Gro, *From Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 171.
83. Transcript, Kissinger Press Conference, 5 April 1975, Vernon Loen and Charles Leppert Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
84. Gerald R. Ford, *Public Papers of the President of the United States, 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), 420-421; Transcript of Press Conference, 3 April 1975, David Gergen Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

85. "Seeking the Last Exit from Vietnam," *Time*, 21 April 1975, 8.

86. "Criticism of the Congress is Muted by Schlesinger," *New York Times*, 7 April 1975.

87. David L. Anderson, "Gerald R. Ford and the Presidents' War in Vietnam," in *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975*, David L. Anderson, ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 196. The best account of the Nixon-Thieu letters is found in Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*. Altogether, there were twenty-seven letters from Nixon to Thieu and four from President Ford. On 21 April, Ford was interviewed on live television and radio by Eric Sevareid and Bob Schieffer about the situation in South Vietnam. When the president faulted Congress for not appropriating the requested military aid, he was asked about "secret agreements" between Nixon and President Thieu and he replied that "The personal correspondence between President Nixon and President Thieu corresponds with the public record." The transcript of this program can be found in the David Gergen Papers, 1974-77, General Subject File, Gerald R. Ford Library.

88. Address by President Gerald R. Ford to Joint Session, 10 April 1975, Loen and Leppert Files, Congressional Liaison Office, Gerald R. Ford Library; Ford, *Public Papers, 1975*, 459-473.

89. The two who walked out were freshmen Democrats Toby Moffett of Connecticut and George Miller of California.

90. Byrd's comments quoted in Memorandum from Kempton B. Jenkins to J. O. Marsh, John O. March Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

91. Letter, Abzug to Ford, 3 April 1975, Robert K. Walthuis Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

92. Transcript of Kissinger testimony before Committee on Appropriations, 21 April 1975, Nessen Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.

93. US Congress, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, 22 April, 1975, 1268.

94. Speech quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 414-415.

95. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, 82. Tiziano Terzani, an Italian journalist, in *Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 39, quotes Col. Con Man, editor of *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, the North Vietnamese armed forces newspaper, on the incident:

Nguyen Than Trung has been a Party member ever since he was a student. It was the Party that ordered him to join the Saigon air force and go to the United States where he obtained his pilot's license. Such a man was important for a crucial occasion, and for this reason Trung did not reveal himself and had never been used before. The bombing of Doc Lap Palace was a blow well worth the trouble. The air force was Thieu's trusted weapon, one of the foundations of his power. With the bombs of 8 April we wanted to destroy that trust, to spread suspicion within the air force itself. The attack succeeded magnificently.

96. Dung, *Great Spring Victory*, 80.

97. Message, Smith to CJCS, 13 April 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

98. Le Gro, *From Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 173. Although VNAF had done an admirable job in the early phases of the battle for Xuan Loc, a large part of the PAVN victory was due to the degradation of VNAF close air support caused by extremely accurate artillery fire which continued to fall on Bien Hoa air base, damaging six F-5A fighters and fourteen A-37 Dragonfly fighter-bombers and seriously curtailing air operations from the base. The South Vietnamese, already greatly outnumbered, were unable to hold their positions in the absence of effective close air support.

99. Text of letter is found in Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 320-321.

100. Hung and Schechter, 323.

101. Hung and Schechter, 327.

102. Hung and Schechter, 326.

103. Thi, *Autopsy*, 187.

104. Dong Van Khuyen, *Indochina Monographs: The RVNAF* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1979), 387.

105. Account of the meeting is from Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 330.

106. Hung and Schechter, 335-336; Olivier Todd, *Cruel April: The Fall of Saigon* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), 293-294.

107. Vien, *Final Collapse*, 143.

108. Vien, 143; Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval*, 324, maintains that this group called on Thieu to convince him to resign.

109. Hung and Schechter, *The Palace File*, 331.

110. Hung and Schechter, 331-332.

111. With the assistance of US officials, Thieu departed Saigon for Taiwan.

112. Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 422.

113. *Washington Post*, 25 April 1975; Ron Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1978), 108.

114. Message, Martin to Kissinger, 23 April 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

115. Message, Martin to Kissinger, 23 April 1975.

116. Huong was 71 years old and suffered from asthma and arteriosclerosis.

117. From a radio broadcast recalling the members of the National Assembly quoted in Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 22.

118. Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 439.

119. Isaacs, 439.

120. According to Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 432-433, and Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 23-24, the French Ambassador, Jean-Marie Merillon, was a strong proponent of what became known as the "Minh solution" and tried to convince everyone he knew in the Saigon government that the elevation of Minh might save Saigon.

121. Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War* (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1978), 253.

122. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 26.

123. Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 440; Todd, *Cruel April*, 341.
124. Speech quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 442-443; Todd, *Cruel April*, 342-343; Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 41.
125. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 41.
126. In order to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese his sincerity, Minh later wrote to Ambassador Martin requesting the evacuation of all American personnel in the Defense Attache Office "within twenty-four hours beginning April 29, 1975, in order that the question of peace for Viet Nam can be settled early." Text of letter is in Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, 478.
127. Defense Attache Office, US Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 16-E-14.
128. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 43.
129. Quoted in Todd, *Cruel April*, 343.
130. Wilford G. Burchett, *Grasshoppers and Elephants, Why Vietnam Fell* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 38-39.
131. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, p109.
132. Brig. Gen. Tran Quang Khoi, "Fighting to the Finish," *Armor*, March-April 1996, 23.
133. "Preparing to Deal for Peace," *Time*, 5 May 1975, 12-14.
134. Englemann, *Tears Before the Rain*, 248.
135. Defense Attache Office, U. S. Embassy Saigon, Final Assessment, 16-B-4; Col. Harry G. Summers, Jr., "Final Days of South Vietnam," *American History* (April, 1995), 67. Two other Marines died taking part in the evacuation when their helicopter crashed into the sea. They were Captain William C. Nystul and First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea.
136. Momyer, *The Vietnamese Air Force*, 79. Among the aircraft that reached U Tapao Air Base in Thailand were 26 F-5 fighters, 27 A-37 fighter-bombers, several gunships, and numerous transport planes.
137. USDAO Saigon, Final Assessment.
138. Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 256; Snapp, *Decent Interval*, 292-299.
139. Harry G. Summers, "Final Days of South Vietnam," *American History*, April 1995, 68. Another tragedy that also had similar symbolic implications to many was the 4 April crash of an Air Force C-5A transport loaded with 243 "Baby Lift" children and 37 American women, mostly secretaries and staff from the US embassy. Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), wrote: "Americans saw it all on television. For many of them the plane crash symbolized much of the horror and futility of the American involvement in Vietnam. Whatever their good intentions, the Americans had never comprehended Vietnamese culture or politics. Modern technology seemed mocked and defeated by Vietnamese tenacity."
140. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 76.
141. Order quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 467, and Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 66-67. Gen. Cao Van Vien, former Chief of the Joint General Staff had departed

with his family by airplane for the United States, without even bothering to turn in his resignation.

142. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 77.

143. Dawson, *55 Days*, 7-8; Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, 87.

144. An article commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon in *Time* magazine, "The Final 10 Days," 24 April 1995, 25-35, related the experiences of Major Hoa.

145. Olson and Roberts, *Where the Last Domino Fell*, 263; Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, 175.

Appendix 1

Glossary of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AAA.....	anti-aircraft artillery
AB.....	airbase
ABC.....	American Broadcasting Company
AATTV.....	Australian Army Training Team Vietnam
AAR.....	After Action Report
ACAV.....	armored cavalry assault vehicle
AFB.....	Air Force Base
AID.....	Agency for International Development
AIM.....	Air Intercept Missile
ANZAC.....	Australian New Zealand Army Corps
AO.....	area of operation
AP.....	Associated Press
APC.....	armored personnel carrier
ARVN.....	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASA.....	Army Security Agency
ASPB.....	Assault Support Patrol Boat
AWOL.....	Absent Without Leave
BDA.....	bomb damage assessment
BOQ.....	bachelor officers' quarters
BTR.....	Soviet-manufactured armored personnel carrier
CAP.....	Combined Action Program
CAS.....	close air support
CBU.....	cluster bomb unit
CCC.....	Command and Control, Central (SOG)
CCN.....	Command and Control, North (SOG)
CCP.....	Combined Campaign Plan
CCS.....	Command and Control, South (SOG)
CEFEO.....	French Far East Expeditionary Force
CG.....	Commanding General
CGDK.....	Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia)
CI.....	counterintelligence
CIA.....	Central Intelligence Agency
CICV.....	Combined Intelligence Center Vietnam
CIDG.....	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CIIB.....	Current Intelligence Indicators Bureau
CINCPAC.....	Commander-in-Chief, Pacific
CIO.....	Central Intelligence Organization

CJCS Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
CMD Capital Military District
CMR..... Capital Military Region
CNO Chief of Naval Operations
COMUSMACV Commander, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CORDS Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
COSVN Central Office for South Vietnam
CP..... command post
CTC..... Central Training Command
CTZ..... Corps Tactical Zone
DCG Deputy Commanding General
DAO Defense Attaché Office
DEROS Date Eligible for Return from Overseas *or* Date of Expected
Return from Overseas
DIA..... Defense Intelligence Agency
DIOCC District Intelligence and Operations Coordination Committee
DK..... Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia under Khmer Rouge)
DMAC..... Delta Military Assistance Command
DMZ..... Demilitarized Zone
DOD..... Department of Defense
DRAC Delta Regional Assistance Command
DRV Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam
ELINT electronic intelligence
FAC forward air controller
FANK..... *Forces Armées Nationales Khmères* (Cambodian Army, 1970-75)
FAR *Forces Armées Royales* (Laotian Army)
FFV Field Force, Vietnam
FFORCEV..... Field Force, Vietnam
FO forward observer
FRAC First Regional Assistance Command
FSA Forward Support Area
FSB Fire Support Base
FSCC..... Fire Support Coordination Center
FULRO United Front of Struggle for the Oppressed Races
FWMAF..... Free World Military Assistance Forces
GPWD..... General Political Warfare Department
GVN..... Government of (South) Vietnam
H&I..... Harassment and Interdiction (Fire)
HES..... Hamlet Evaluation System
Huey..... UH-1 Iroquois helicopter
HUMINT..... human intelligence

HQ.....headquarters
 ICC..... International Control Commission
 ICCS..... International Commission of Control and Supervision
 ICP.....Indochinese Communist Party
 IFFV..... I Field Force, Vietnam
 IG..... Inspector General
 IFFV..... II Field Force, Vietnam
 IPW..... interrogation of prisoners of war
 JCS..... US Joint Chiefs of Staff
 JGS..... South Vietnamese Joint General Staff
 JMC..... Joint Military Commission
 JUSPAO.....Joint US Public Affairs Office
 KSCB..... Khe Sanh Combat Base
 KIA.....Killed in Action
 KIA/BNR.....Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered
 KPRP..... Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party
 LAW.....light antitank weapon
 LCU..... landing craft, utility
 LBJ.....Long Binh Jail
 LLDB.....*Luc Luong Dac Biet* (RVN Special Forces)
 LOC..... line of communication
 LOH..... Light Observation Helicopter
 LRRP..... long-rang reconnaissance patrol
 LZ.....landing zone
 MAAG..... Military Assistance Advisory Group
 MAAG-V.....Military Assistance Advisory Group-Vietnam
 MAC.....Military Airlift Command
 MACCORDS..... Military Assistance Command Civil Operations and
 Revolutionary Development Support
 MACV-SOG.....Military Assistance Command Vietnam Studies and
 Observations Group
 MACV..... Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
 MAF..... Marine Amphibious Force
 MAP.....Military Assistance Program
 MAT..... Mobile Advisory Team
 MAAT.....Mobile Advisory Training Team
 MEDCAP..... Medical Civic Action Program
 MEDTC.....Military Equipment Delivery Team, Cambodia
 MEDVAC..... Medical Evacuation, also known as “dust off”
 MIA.....Missing in Action
 MOS..... Military Occupation Specialty

MP	Military Police
MR	Military Region
MRC	Military Revolutionary Council
MRF	Mobile Riverine Force
MSTS	Military Sea Transportation Service
MTT	Mobile Training Team
NAVFORV	Naval Forces, Vietnam
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NIC	National Interrogation Center
NICC	National Intelligence Coordination Committee
NKP	Nakhon Phanom Air Base (Thailand)
NLC	National Leadership Committee
NLF	National Liberation Front
NP	National Police
NSA	National Security Agency
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSC	National Security Council
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army (PAVN)
NVN	North Vietnam
NZTTV	New Zealand Training Team Vietnam
OB	order of battle
OCO	Office of Civilian Operations
OJT	on-the-job training
ONTOS	Marine self-propelled multiple 106mm recoilless rifle
OPLAN	operations plan
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PAVN	People's Army of (North) Vietnam
PBR	Patrol Boat, River
PCF	Patrol Craft, East (Swift Boat)
PEO	Program Evaluation Office
PF	Popular Forces
PFF	Police Field Forces
PGM	Motor Gunboat
PHILCAG	Philippines Civic Action Group
PIOCC	Province Intelligence and Operations Coordinating Committee
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces
POL	petroleum, oils, and lubricants
POW	prisoner of war
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRD	Pacification and Rural Development

PRG.....	Provisional Revolutionary Government
PRK.....	People's Republic of Kampuchea
PROVN.....	Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam
PRU.....	Provincial Reconnaissance Unit
PSA.....	Province Senior Adviser
PSDF.....	People's Self-Defense Force
PSYOP.....	Psychological Operations
PSP.....	pierced steel plate
PT.....	Motor Torpedo Boat (Patrol Torpedo)
PW.....	prisoner of war
PX.....	Post Exchange
PTSD.....	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
QL.....	Quoc Lo (National Route)
RAAF.....	Royal Australian Air Force
RAC.....	Regional Assistance Command
RAG.....	River Assault Group
RAR.....	Royal Australian Regiment
RD.....	Revolutionary (or Rural) Development
RDF.....	radio direction finding
RF/PF.....	Regional Forces/Popular Forces
RLAF.....	Royal Lao Air Force
RLG.....	Royal Lao Government
ROC.....	Republic of China
ROE.....	rules of engagement
ROK.....	Republic of Korea
ROTC.....	Reserve Officers Training Corps
RPDC.....	Regional Pacification and Development Council
RPG.....	rocket-propelled grenade
RRU.....	Radio Research Unit (ASA)
R&R.....	rest and recreation
RTAVF.....	Royal Thai Army Volunteer Force
RVN.....	Republic of (South) Vietnam
RVNAF.....	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAC.....	Strategic Air Command
SAM.....	surface-to-air missile
SAR.....	search and rescue
SDS.....	Students for a Democratic Society
SEALs.....	Sea, Air, Land Teams (US Navy special forces units)
SEATO.....	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SF.....	Special Forces

SIGINTsignals intelligence
 SITREPsituation report
 SLARside-looking airborne radar
 SOG.....Special Operations Group, later Studies and Observations Group
 SOIsignal operating instructions
 SOPstandard operating procedures
 SRAG.....Second Regional Assistance Group
 STDStrategic Technical Directorate (RVN)
 SVN.....South Vietnam
 TACTactical Air Command
 TAOR.....Tactical Area of Responsibility
 TDYtemporary duty
 TERMTemporary Equipment Recovery Mission
 TFTask Force
 TOC.....Tactical Operations Center
 TO&E.....Table of Organization and Equipment
 TOW.....tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided missile
 TRAC.....Third Regional Assistance Command
 TRIM.....Training Relations and Instruction Mission
 UN.....United Nations
 UPI.....United Press International
 USUnited States
 USA.....United States of America; US Army
 USAFUS Air Force
 USIAUS Information Agency
 USAIDUS Agency for International Development
 USARVUS Army, Vietnam
 USISUS Information Service
 USMACVUnited States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
 USMCUS Marine Corps
 USN.....US Navy
 USO.....United Services Organization
 USOM.....US Operations Mission
 USG.....US Support Activity Group
 USUnion of Soviet Socialist Republics
 VCViet Cong
 VCI.....Viet Cong Infrastructure
 VNA.....Vietnamese National Army
 VNAF.....Republic of Vietnam Air Force
 VNMC.....Republic of Vietnam Marine Corps
 VNN.....Republic of Vietnam Navy

VNQDD*Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang* (Vietnamese Nationalist Party)
VOA..... Voice of American
VVAW Vietnam Veterans Against the War
WIA..... wounded in action
WSO.....weapons systems officer

Appendix 2

The Vietnam War, A Chronology

1859–1954

- February 1859 – French capture Saigon
- 1860 – Fall of Cochinchina
- 1862 – Treaty of Saigon cedes three southern provinces
- 1863 – Annexation of Cambodia
- 1874 – Tu Duc signs Treaty of Saigon, recognizing French sovereignty over all of Cochin China
- 1884 – Treaty of Hue confirms French protectorate over Annam-Tonkin
- 1885 – Battle of Hue: Emperor Ham Nghi leads resistance
- 1888 – Ham Nghi captured and exiled to Algeria
- 1897 – French governor-general Paul Doumer's reorganization and centralization of the colony
- 1904 – Phan Boi Chau founds Reformation Society
- 1908 – Uprising in Hanoi; massive anti-tax revolt in Annam
- 1916 – Rebellion in Cochinchina and Annam
- 1925 – Phan Boi Chau tried in Hanoi
- 1930 – Major uprisings in Tonkin-Annam
- May-June 1940 – Fall of France to Germany; Japanese landing in Indochina
- March 1945 – Japanese coup; return of French
- 1945 – Deer Team parachuted into northern Vietnam
- 2 September 1945 – Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnamese Declaration of Independence
- 12 September 1945 – British troops arrive to accept Japanese surrender
- 22 September 1945 – French troops come back
- 24 September 1945 – General strike called; start of first war of independence
- 26 September 1945 – LTC Peter Dewey killed in Saigon
- 19 December 1945 – Vietminh attack French in the north
- 31 May 1946 – Republic of Cochinchina proclaimed in name of France

December 1946 – Battle of Hanoi
12 March 1947 – Truman Doctrine proclaimed
December 1949 – Chinese Communist Party victory in China
June 1950 – Communist Invasion of South Korea
29 June 1950 – First US military aid (8 C-47s) provided to France
July 1950 – Melby-Erskine Mission to Vietnam
September 1950 – Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) Indochina established with BG Francis Brink as commander
October 1950 – Vietminh attack Cao Bang
October 1950 – Alessandri Plan fails (disaster on RC4)
January-June 1951 – Vietminh General Offensive
November 1951-February 1952 – French Riposte
1952 – French institute “*jaunissement*” program
September 1952-May 1953 – Vietminh Winter-Spring Campaign
7 April 1954 – President Eisenhower espouses the Domino Theory
7 May 1954 – French surrendered at Dien Bien Phu
21 July 1954 – Geneva Accords signed
27 July 1954 – Cease-fire in Northern Vietnam
11 August 1954 – Cease-fire in Southern Vietnam
25 May 1954 – Last French Ship departs Haiphong Harbor
26 June 1954 – Diem returns to Saigon
21 July 1954 – Geneva Accords signed
8 September 1954 – Manila Treaty is signed creating Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)
24 October 1954 – Eisenhower decides to back Diem government with \$100 million

1955–1963

23 October 1955 – Diem calls for National Referendum
April 1956 – French Expeditionary Corps departs South Vietnam
20 Jul 1956 – Deadline for holding reunification elections in accordance with Geneva Accords passes

2 November 1956 – Peasant uprising in the North

10 August 1957 – VC attack Minh Thanh village (Thu Dau Mot Province)

October 1957 – Communists establish Field Unit 250 in the South (20 companies)

22 October 1957 – VC attack US MAAG and USIS installations in Saigon

4 April 1959 – President Eisenhower delivers a speech in which he links American vital interests with the survival of a non-communist state in South Vietnam

May 1959 – 15th Lao Dong Party Plenum in Hanoi orders armed *dau tranh* in the South

8 July 1959 – two US Army personnel killed in VC attack on Bien Hoa billets

11 November 1960 – paratroop coup against Diem fails

1960 – National Liberation Front formed in the south

6 January 1961 – Soviet Premier Khrushchev announces support for all “wars of national liberation”

16–17 April 1961 – Bay of Pigs invasion fails

April 1961 – Kennedy administration faces crisis in Laos; MAAG Laos established

May 1961 – Vice President Johnson visits Saigon; President Kennedy approves sending Special Forces to South Vietnam

May 1961 – Fourteen nations meet in Geneva to address situation in Laos

9 June 1961 – Diem requests additional US military advisors

November 1961 – Special Forces deployed to Central Highlands to work with Montagnards

January 1962 – US Air Force launches Operation RANCH HAND, the aerial spraying of defoliants to deny cover to the Viet Cong

6 February 1962 – US Military Assistance Command Vietnam (USMACV) created with headquarters in Saigon; General Paul D. Harkins assumes command

March 1962 – Strategic Hamlet Program launched

May 1962 – McNamara makes his first visit to South Vietnam
23 Jul 1962 – Geneva Accords recognizing neutrality of Laos
2 January 1963 – Battle of Ap Bac (3 US advisors KIA and 8 WIA; 5 US helicopters shot down)
11 April 1963 – 100 men of 25th Infantry Division sent to Vietnam to serve as door gunners
September 1963 – US 14th Aviation Battalion arrives in Vietnam
1-2 November 1963 – Diem and his brother assassinated during coup led by Generals Tran Van Don and Duong Van Minh
22 November 1963 – President Kennedy assassinated in Dallas
24 November 1963 – President Johnson affirms US support of the new South Vietnamese government
21 December 1963 – McNamara memo to LBJ
31 December 1963 – 16,300 US troops in Vietnam

1964

2 January 1964 – President Johnson approves OPLAN 34-A, which includes covert military operations against North Vietnam carried out by South Vietnamese forces and Asia mercenaries
30 January 1964 – General Nguyen Khan overthrows Duong Van “Big” Minh
8-12 March 1964 – Secretary of Defense McNamara visits South Vietnam and affirms that America will remain in South Vietnam for as long as it takes to win the war
17 March 1964 – LBJ approves NASM 288
6 June 1964 – RF-8 off carrier *Kitty Hawk* shot down in Laos
23 June 1964 – General Maxwell D. Taylor replaces Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador to Saigon
6 July 1964 – VC attack Nam Dong; Captain Roger C. Donlon awarded Medal of Honor
2 and 4 August 1964 – Gulf of Tonkin incidents
5 August 1964 – Operation PIERCE ARROW retaliatory strikes begin
10 August 1964 – Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed by Congress

15 August 1964 – North Vietnamese Politburo decides to send main force PAVN units south

11 October 1964 – VC attack Tay Ninh City

1 November 1964 – VC launch mortar attack on Bien Hoa

2 November 1964 – LBJ wins US presidential election

24 December 1964 – VC bomb Brinks Hotel in Saigon

24 December 1964 – Operation BARRELL ROLL (air strikes in Laos) begins

31 December 1964 – About 23,000 Americans are now serving in South Vietnam.

1965

7 February 1965 – Operation FLAMING DART begins

2 March 1965 – Operation ROLLING THUNDER begins

8-9 March 1965 – 3rd Battalion n, 9th Marchines, 9th Marchine Expeditionary Brigade, 3rd Marchine Division lands near Da Nang

11 March 1965 – Operation MARCHKET TIME (naval blockade) begins

6 April 1965 – NSAM 328 authorizes US personnel to take offensive action to secure “enclaves” and to support the Army of the Republic of Vietnam

3-12 May 1965 – 3,500 men of the 173rd Airborne Brigade arrive in Vietnam

28-30 June 1965 – 173rd Airborne Brigade commences first large-scale US offensive action in War Zone D

23 October – 2 November 1965 – 1st Cavalry Division battles NVA in Ia Drang Valley

November 1965 – Widespread antiwar demonstrations in US

31 December 1965 – Total US strength in South Vietnam: 181,000

1966

24 January-6 March 1966 – Operation MASHER/WHITE WING – largest search and destroy operation to date

31 January 1966 – US resumes bombing of North Vietnam

4-8 March 1966 – Operation UTAH – Marchines’ first major battle with PAVN near Quang Ngai

12 April 1966 – B-52s bomb targets in North Vietnam for the first time
30 June 1966 – Battle of Srok Dong
9 Jul 1966 – Battle of Minh Thanh Road
28 Jul 1966 – Operation PRAIRIE begins
14 September-24 November 1966 – Operation ATTLEBORO
2 December 1966 – a single-day record of 8 US planes shot down over Hanoi
31 December 1966 – Total US strength in South Vietnam: 385,000

1967

8-26 January 1967 – Operation CEDAR FALLS
16 February 1967 – Communist ground-fire downs 13 helicopters, a record number for a single day
22 February-14 May 1967 – Operation JUNCTION CITY – largest US operation to date – 22 battalions
28 February 1967 – COMNAVFOR establishes the Mekong Delta Mobile Riverine Force
10-11 March 1967 – US aircraft bomb the Thai Nguyen steel works near Hanoi, the first bombing raids on a major industrial target
4 May 1967 – Ambassador Robert W. Komer becomes General Westmoreland's Deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS)
22 June 1967 – 130-man company of 173rd Airborne Brigade virtually wiped out in an ambush at Dak To
2-14 Jul 1967 – Operation BUFFALO
3 September 1967 – General Nguyen Van Thieu elected president of South Vietnam
4-7 September 1967 – Battle of Que Son Valley
11 September-31 October 1967 – siege of Con Thien
29 September 1967 – contingent of Thai combat troops arrive in South Vietnam
29 October-3 November 1967 – Battle of Loc Ninh
3-22 November 1967 – Battle of Dak To
4 December 1967 – Battle of Tam Quan

27 December 1967 – Battle of Thon Tham Khe

31 December 1967 – Total US military strength in South Vietnam:
488,000

1968

20 January-14 April 1968 – Battle of Khe Sanh

30 January-26 February 1968 – Tet Offensive

30 January-7 February 1968 – Battle of Saigon

31 January-2 March 1968 – Battle of Hue

10-17 February 1968 – Weekly US casualties: 543 KIA; 2,547 WIA

February 1968 – Westmoreland requests 206,000 more troops

11 March-7 April 1968 – Operation RESOLVE TO WIN

16 March 1968 – Civilians massacred at My Lai

31 March 1968 – LBJ announces a partial bombing halt and that he
will not run again

1-15 April 1968 – Operation PEGASUS

8 April-31 May 1968 – Operation COMPLETE VICTORY

10 April 1968 – President Johnson announces that General Creighton
Abrams will succeed Westmoreland as COMUSMACV in June

10-12 April 1968 – Battle for Lang Vei

22 April 1968 – Clark Clifford announces that the South Vietnamese
government will take more responsibility for the fighting

3 May 1968 – United States and North Vietnam agree to begin formal
negotiations in Paris on 10 May

3-10 May 1968 – Highest US weekly hostile casualty toll of the war:
562 KIA

12 May 1968 – Peace talks begin in Paris

5-13 May 1968 – North Vietnamese “Mini-Tet” offensive

13 May 1968 – Delegates from the US and North Vietnam hold their
first formal meeting in Paris

23 June 1968 – Khe Sanh combat base abandoned

4 Jul 1968 – PAVN attack Dau Tieng

30 September 1968 – battleship *New Jersey* goes into action, shelling PAVN positions in the DMZ

31 October 1968 – President Johnson announces a complete bombing halt over North Vietnam; Operation ROLLING THUNDER ends (922 aircraft lost during duration of operation)

November 1968 – Richard M. Nixon elected president and promises “peace with honor”

31 December 1968 – Peak US annual combat deaths: 14,592; an additional 150,000 were wounded; total US strength in South Vietnam: 536,000

1969

25 January 1969 – Formal truce negotiations begin in Paris

18 March 1969 – President Nixon orders the secret bombing of communist base camps and supply depots in Cambodia; Operation MENU B-52 bombings of Cambodia begin (would not terminate until April 1970)

29 March 1969 – US combat deaths for the week raise the total to 33,641 KIA – more than KIA in the Korean War

30 April 1969 – Peak US troop strength in South Vietnam: 543,482

10–20 May 1969 – Battle of Hamburger Hill

1 Jun–2 Jul 1969 – Siege of Ben Het

8 Jun 1969 – President Nixon meets with President Thieu at Midway; announces the planned withdrawal of 25,000 American combat troops

4 August 1969 – Secret negotiations between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam’s Xuan Thuy begin outside Paris

17-26 August 1969 – Battle of Que Son Valley

29 August 1969 – Withdrawal of first 25,000 troops completed

4 September 1969 – Ho Chi Minh dies

16 September 1969 – President Nixon announces that he will withdraw an additional 35,000 troops

15 November 1969 – “Moratorium” – massive antiwar demonstrations in the United States

15 November 1969 – 20 helicopters destroyed in attack on 4th Infantry Division’s Camp Radcliffe at An Khe

15 December 1969 – President Nixon announces that an additional 50,000 American troops will be withdrawn by 15 April 1970

21 December 1969 – Thailand announces that it will withdraw its 12,000-man contingent from South Vietnam

31 December 1969 – US troop strength in South Vietnam: 474,000

1970

18 March 1970 – General Lon Nol ousts Prince Norodom Sihanouk and seizes power in Cambodia

27 March 1970 – South Vietnamese forces, supported by US helicopters, attack Communist base camps across the Cambodian border

4 April 1970 – An estimated 50,000 persons gather in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate support for President Nixon's conduct of the war in Vietnam

11 April 1970 – Senators Frank Church and John Sherman Cooper propose an amendment forbidding the funding of American ground operations in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos

1 May-30 Jun 1970 – Cambodian Incursion begins; American forces totaling 30,000 cross into the Fishhook of Cambodia

2 May 1970 – Antiwar demonstrations break out on a number of US college campuses

4 May 1970 – Four students fatally shot during protest at Kent State University; additional protests break out at 400 other colleges

1-23 Jul 1970 – Siege of Fire Base Ripcord

15 October 1970 – President Nixon announces that a further 40,000 American troops would be withdrawn by the end of the year

21 November 1970 – Raid on Son Tay POW Camp

21 November 1970 – US warplanes carry out the heaviest and most sustained bombing of North Vietnam since 1 November 1968 – 200 fighter-bombers and 100 support aircraft take part

30 December 1970 – US Navy ends its four-year role in inland waterway combat and turns over mission to South Vietnamese Navy

31 December 1970 – Congress repeals Tonkin Gulf Resolution; US military strength in Vietnam: 335,000

1971

30 January-6 April 1971 – Operations DEWEY CANYON and LAM SON 719 (Laos Campaign)

28 March 1971 – Assault on Fire Base Marchy Ann

7 April 1971 – President Nixon announces that 100,000 American troops will leave South Vietnam by the end of the year

24 April 1971 – 500,000 antiwar protesters converge upon Washington, DC; 150,000 take part in a similar demonstration in San Francisco

26 Jun 1971 – Last Marine combat unit departs South Vietnam

8-9 Jul 1971 – Last US positions along the DMZ turned over to ARVN

6 August 1971 – Last troops of the first US Army combat unit to enter Vietnam – 4th Battalion, 503rd Infantry – are pulled out of the field

9 September 1971 – Korea announces that most of its 48,000 troops in South Vietnam will depart by June 1972

8 October 1971 – Operation JEFFERSON GLENN concluded – final major US operation in Vietnam by 8 battalions from 101st Airborne Division

12 November 1971 – President Nixon announces that an additional 45,000 American troops will leave South Vietnam during December and January

1972

13 January 1972 – President Nixon announces withdrawals that will reduce American troop strength in South Vietnam to 69,000 by 1 May

30 March 1972 – PAVN launches Nguyen Hue Campaign (or as it became known, the Spring, or Easter, Offensive) to seize Quang Tri, An Loc, and Kontum

3 April 1972 – USS *Kitty Hawk* joins the two carriers already on station off Vietnam

5 April 1972 – US Air Force fighter-bombers begin reinforcing the units operating from Thailand

6 April 1972 – Operation LINEBACKER – US planes strike North Vietnamese installations north of DMZ; lasts until October

8 April-25 Jun 1972 – Siege of An Loc

28 April 1972 – President Nixon states that American strength in South Vietnam will fall to 49,000 by 1 July

1 May 1972 – Quang Tri City falls to the North Vietnamese

8 May 1972 – President Nixon orders US Navy to mine Haiphong Harbor

15 May 1972 – USS *Ticonderoga* – seventh aircraft carrier to be stationed off Vietnam, dispatched to South China Sea; US Navy planes down 16 MiGs during the month; a total of 47 MiGs were shot down during the Spring Offensive air battles while 18 US fighters were downed

9 Jun 1972 – John Paul Vann killed in helicopter crash in Central Highlands

29 Jun 1972 – General Frederick C. Weyand replaces General Abrams as COMUSMACV

9 Jul 1972 – BG Richard Tallman and four other US officers KIA in An Loc

1 August 1972 – TF Gimlet – the last US ground combat unit in South Vietnam, deactivated

11 August 1972 – Last US combat forces are withdrawn from South Vietnam; only 44,000 US personnel remain in South Vietnam

29 August 1972 – President Nixon announces withdrawal that will reduce total US strength in South Vietnam to 27,000 by 1 December

16 September 1972 – South Vietnamese forces recapture Quang Tri City

8-11 October 1972 – Lengthy secret meetings in Paris between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho produce a tentative settlement of the war, to include a cease-fire

11 November 1972 – US Army turns over Long Binh base to South Vietnam

14 December 1972 – Paris peace talks are suspended

18-29 December 1972 – President Nixon orders Operation Linebacker II (“Christmas Bombing”)

30 December 1972 – Bombing north of the 20th parallel ends after the North Vietnamese agree to negotiate a truce

1973

8-18 January 1973 – Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho resume negotiations in Paris, reaching an agreement that is similar to the one that had been previously rejected

15 January 1973 – President Nixon suspends American military operations against North Vietnam

23 January 1973 – Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho initial an agreement ending the war and providing for the release of POWs

27 January 1973 – formal Paris Peace Accords signed

27 January 1973 – LTC William B. Nolde killed by artillery in An Loc – last American to die before the cease-fire went into effect; 4 Americans KIA in the war's last week

12-27 February 1973 – Operation HOMECOMING – first 142 of 587 US POWs returned; last known 67 POWs released 29 March 1973

28 March 1973 – US 1st Aviation Brigade departs; cut-off date for the Vietnam Service Medal

29 March 1973 – MACV closes down and last US troops depart South Vietnam; only military contingent remaining is Defense Attaché Office (limited to 50 military positions)

4 June – 15 August 1973 – Nixon administration works out a compromise with Congress to permit continued US bombing in Cambodia until 15 August

Total US casualties: 58,183 killed – 47,356 due to hostile action and 10,795 were not-combat related; 153,363 WIA (hospitalized only) Source: National Archives and Records Administration)

January-December 1973 – “War of the Flags”

10-30 October 1973 – ARVN QUANG DUC campaign

1974-1975

April-May 1974 – ARVN conduct Svay Rieng operations in Cambodia

May-September 1974 – NVA Offensive in MRs I and II

5 August 1974 – Congress makes sharp cuts in the amount of military aid going to

9 August 1974 – Richard M. Nixon resigns presidency

December 1974 – January 1975 – Battle for Phuoc Long Province

January 1975 – Khmer Rouge offensive in Cambodia

26 February-2 March 1975 – Flynt CODEL visits South Vietnam

10 March 1975 – Campaign 275 launched; battle of Ban Me Thuot begins

11 March 1975 – President Thieu decides to “shorten” his lines

16 March 1975 – II Corps commander begins to withdraw forces from Pleiku and Kontum

18 March 1975 – NVA forces overrun last ARVN positions at Phuoc An airfield; Darlac Province falls

19 March 1975 – Quang Tri abandoned by ARVN

24 March 1975 – Tam Ky falls

24 March 1975 – Quang Ngai falls

26 March 1975 – Hue abandoned by ARVN

27 March 1975 – General Weyand arrives in Saigon for firsthand assessment

30 March 1975 – Da Nang falls

1 April 1975 – Qui Nhon and Nha Trang fall

3 April 1975 – Cam Ranh Bay falls

8 April 1975 – VNAF fighter makes two bomb runs on Independence Palace

9-20 April 1975 – Battle of Xuan Loc

10 April 1975 – President Ford addressed joint session of Congress to ask for supplemental aid package for South Vietnam and Cambodia

17 April 1975 – Khmer Rouge enter Phnom Penh; Congress votes not to support supplemental aid request

21 April 1975 – Nguyen Van Thieu resigned as president of the Republic of Vietnam

26-30 April 1975 – NVA launch Ho Chi Minh Campaign

29-30 April 1975 – Operation FREQUENT WIND commences; last Americans and thousands of South Vietnamese are evacuated from Saigon

29 April 1975 – Machine Lance Corporal Darwin Judge and Corporal Charles McMahon, Jr. killed by rocket fire at Ton Son Nhut

30 April 1975 – NVA forces enter Saigon; President Dzung Van “Big” Minh surrenders unconditionally to North Vietnamese



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