
A RAID TOO FAR

Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos

James H. Willbanks, Texas A&M University Press, 2014, 296 pages, \$35.00

INVASION OF LAOS, 1971

Lam Son 719

Robert D. Sander, University of Oklahoma Press, 2014, 304 pages, \$29.95

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After more than 40 years, there is still no comprehensive analysis of the Nixon Administration's policy of "Vietnamization." Thankfully, two recent works on the South Vietnamese Army's 1971 invasion of Laos go some way toward remedying this gap. James H. Willbanks' *A Raid Too Far: Operation LAM SON 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* and Robert D. Sander's *Invasion of Laos 1971: LAM SON 719* are both well-researched and engaging pieces; they are welcome additions to the historiography of the wars in Vietnam. Written from different perspectives and motivations—despite their

common subject—the books are more complementary than redundant.

Both books provide meticulous tactical and operational details and analysis of the corps-level attack by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) on North Vietnamese military installations inside Laos in early 1971. However, where Willbanks confines himself to providing the strategic setting for the operation itself, Sander provides a much lengthier section on the evolution of the strategic situation confronting the United States in Southeast Asia. His narrative summary of North Vietnamese development of their

infiltration routes into the south is concise, but it clearly conveys the criticality both sides attributed to those routes in the way the war ultimately played out. By doing so, Sander's narrative becomes an operational history of U.S.-led efforts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, of which the ARVN invasion was simply the largest single event. Willbanks, by contrast, uses Lam Son 719 as a vehicle to expound on the successes and failures of President Richard Nixon's policy of Vietnamization as a whole.

Coming on the heels of the "Sanctuary Offensive" into Cambodia in 1970, Lam Son 719 (the name honors the birthplace of fifteenth-century Vietnamese national hero Le Loi) was conceived as a spoiling attack to prevent the North Vietnamese from launching a major offensive against the Republic of Vietnam in 1971. U.S. military leaders in Vietnam, including Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, commander of the U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, endorsed the operation despite their knowledge of both internal and external obstacles to success.

The internal obstacles included a South Vietnamese military culture that valued compliance with authority over initiative. More importantly, South Vietnamese senior leaders lacked proficiency at comparatively simple tasks like air-ground integration, as well as the complexities of synchronizing the efforts of a multi-brigade joint force. Externally, the greatest handicap facing the ARVN was a prohibition against U.S. forces conducting military operations outside the borders of South Vietnam. Legislated by Congress in the wake of the Cambodian incursion, the law barred U.S. ground forces from accompanying ARVN units into Laos in any capacity, even as advisors. As Willbanks writes, "for the first time ARVN would go into battle without their American advisors," upon whom they were overly reliant for access to and integration of "enablers" such as close air support, medical evacuation, and logistical support.

Willbanks and Sander pull no punches in their sketches of the positions taken in Vietnam, in Washington, and in

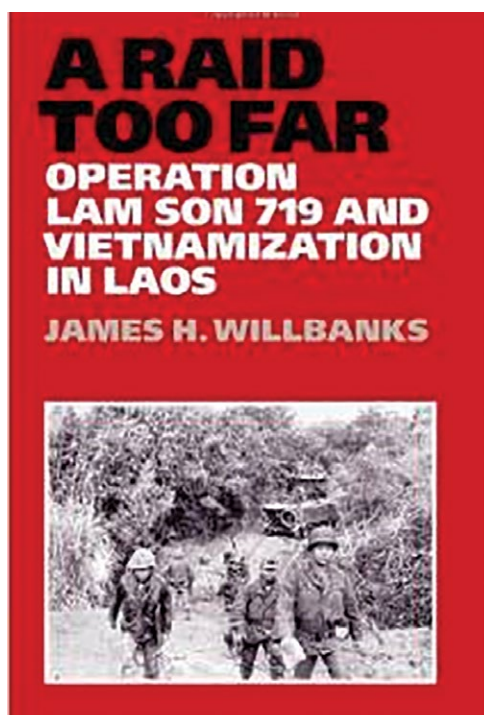
Paris where Henry Kissinger hoped to secure a cease-fire deal with the North Vietnamese that would allow the U.S. to declare victory and disengage from a politically damaging war. Nixon needed Lam Son to succeed in order to justify the Vietnamization policy he had adopted in 1969. Kissinger needed Lam Son to succeed as a way to pressure the North to reach an agreement. Nguyen Van Theiu, South Vietnam's embattled president, needed the operation to succeed in order to safeguard the continued flow of supplies and military hardware to his country and thus prevent a Communist victory.

Finally, Abrams needed Lam Son to succeed because of his considerable investment in building up the reputation of senior ARVN commanders, including Lt. Gen. Hoang Xiang Lam, the commander of the ARVN I Corps. The number of competing agendas during both planning and execution is illuminating, and helps explain why the ARVN I Corps, after enjoying a brief period of success, ultimately sustained an operational defeat of significant proportions.

Sander's treatment of the debacle at Landing Zone Lolo on 3 March 1971 demonstrates his encyclopedic knowledge of the U.S. units, officers, and men who flew alongside him in support of the ARVN during Lam Son. His dispassionate description of the planning, equipment, and leadership challenges that adversely affected successful execution of

this mission makes his analysis of Army shortcomings all the more damning.

Without resorting to invective, Sander uses contemporary sources to show that, even as late as 1971, American planners and commanders exhibited a shockingly low appreciation for the skill of North Vietnam's army. Worse, the decision to entrust the mission to a newly created battalion without prior experience with planning or coordinating rotary-wing aircraft in combat can only be described as criminally negligent. Sander's work, already much more deeply involved in detailing this event than Willbanks' follows up with an excellent discussion of the second- and



third-order effects of the loss or damage of 53 aircraft during a single mission.

The best chapters of *Raid* focus on various ARVN units' actions during the course of the six-week operation. Although the attack was timed to occur between the two monsoon seasons, poor weather and late winter temperatures conspired with the difficult terrain and a determined enemy to deny a rapid and smooth advance to the attacking forces.

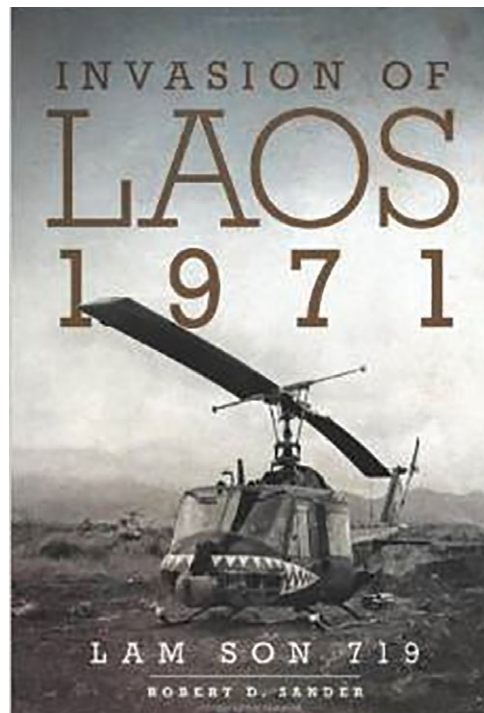
Here for the first time, scholars will find carefully researched arguments written in clear and unemotional prose that conclusively disprove the derogatory generalizations of the ARVN soldier's supposedly innate lack of character and martial ability. Indeed, Willbanks, a Vietnam veteran who advised an ARVN regiment during the 1972 battle for An Loc, explicitly hopes that *Raid* will silence critics whose simplistic and reductionist arguments are inspired by media photos of a handful of panic-stricken ARVN soldiers clinging to the skids of American helicopters to escape the North Vietnamese counterattacks.

The conclusions that both Willbanks and Sander reach will not surprise anyone. Both authors make admirable use of documentary evidence, diaries, letters, personal interviews with participants, contemporary media, and a host of secondary material to identify the numerous problems that beset such an ambitious plan. Nixon, National Security Advisor Kissinger, Gen. Alexander Haig, President Thieu, and Abrams share in the responsibility for the operation's failure. Readers will perhaps be surprised that both Sander and Willbanks treat Army Chief of Staff Gen. William Westmoreland with some sympathy.

Westmoreland was in the minority in opposing Lam Son 719 from the beginning. He based his opposition on his own assessment, conducted when he was the commander in Vietnam, that such an operation would require a minimum of four U.S. infantry divisions to guarantee success. Finally, neither author believes that Lt. Gen. Hoang Xanh Lam, commander of the ARVN I Corps and overall commander of the operation, possessed the professional education and experience, or the intellectual capacity, for such responsibilities. Both men correctly identify that, by 1971, Thieu was more concerned with personal loyalty than competence in his senior military officers.

Both *Raid* and *Invasion* are good history of a kind all

too infrequently encountered today—exhaustively researched, dispassionately written, and highly readable. Anyone already familiar with Willbanks' previous writing will find this latest contribution sustains a tradition of excellence established long ago. Should *Invasion* prove to be Sander's only contribution to the body of work on the Vietnam War, he will nevertheless have done the historical profession and the Army a profoundly important service. Anyone with an interest in the Vietnam War will value both studies, as will strategists and policy planners looking to identify pitfalls to the execution of future large-scale operations by a U.S.-trained host-nation force. For the



professional military officer who seeks to learn the antecedents of today's emphases on security force assistance and regionally aligned forces, *Raid* and *Invasion* are essential texts. Finally, thinking Americans of all political leanings would benefit greatly from reading both books in order to better understand the linkage between domestic politics and American foreign policy. ■

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