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SEN GEN VAN TIEN DUNG ARTICLE: "GREAT SPRING VICTORY"

[Volume I of Two-Volume Supplement]



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SEN GEN VAN TIEN DUNG ARTICLE: "GREAT SPRING VICTORY"

Part I: "Revolutionary Violence"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 1 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Article entitled "Great Spring Victory" written by Sen Gen Van Tien Dung; Part I: "Revolutionary Violence"]

[Text] In the spring of 1974 after the Giap Dan Tet, a conference of high-ranking military cadres was convened at house No 33, Pham Ngu Lao Street, Hanoi, including delegates from the various battlefields, armed services, branches and divisions, and representatives of various organs of the Defense Ministry and the General Staff to discuss and study the resolution of the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum held in October 1973. Comrades Le Duan and Le Duc Tho called on the conference to explain the tasks set forth in the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum resolution. Also on this occasion, the VWP Central Committee Political Bureau, the National Assembly and the government decided to bestow the military rank of general on some high-ranking cadres and top leading cadres of the army. President Ton Duc Thang addressed the conferees.

Each army cadre and combatant was elated to be enlightened by the party Central Committee regarding the progress and bright prospects of the revolution. We considered the instructions given at the conference by the Comrade First Secretary of the party Central Committee and President Ton Duc Thang as orders of the party and state for the entire army to surge forward. By then, more than a year had passed since the signing of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam. This was a great victory for the revolutionary struggle of our nation and at the same time a shameful defeat for the U.S. imperialists. However, our people in the south had not been able to enjoy a single peaceful day. The U.S. puppets had signed the agreement but remained unwilling to implement it. They continued to pursue Vietnamization, which was in fact a neocolonialist war.

To increase the strength of the puppet army so that it could stand on its own and become decisively superior to our army, the United States--before and after its military withdrawal--had sent to the south nearly 700 aircraft, more than 500 artillery pieces, nearly 600 tanks and armored cars, many warships, much ammunition and other materiel. Immediately after the signing of the agreement, the United States and Thieu loudly called for "territorial immersion" and concentrated forces on implementing such plans as the 3-year 1973-1975 pacification program, the 6-month pacification program from March to August 1973, the Ly Thuong Kiet military plan and the 5-year 1974-1979 army construction plan, which were aimed at destroying the revolutionary armed forces and organizations and our bases in the areas under their control in the countryside and in the cities. These plans were also aimed at eliminating the "leopard skin" pattern. They mounted an economic blockade against and nibbled at our liberated areas adjacent to the cities and in the mountainous regions and proceeded toward eliminating the liberated zone and the liberation armed forces as well as the people's administration in an attempt to control the entire south.

Faced with this situation, the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum held in October 1973 set forth the method of combining the political, military and diplomatic struggles and pointed out: The path of the revolution in the south is the path of revolutionary violence. No matter what the situation, we must firmly grasp the opportunity and the strategic offensive line and effect flexible leadership to advance the southern revolution. True revolutionary strength is both an urgent and a basic requirement in the new situation.

In March 1974 the Central Military Party Committee went into session to thoroughly study and implement the party Central Committee resolution. The committee asserted: "The Vietnamese revolution may develop through various transitional stages, and it can only achieve success by way of violence with the support of political and military forces; if the war resumes on a large scale, a revolutionary war will be waged to win total victory." "The southern revolution must firmly grasp the concept of strategic offensive. We must resolutely counterattack and attack the enemy, and we must firmly maintain and develop our active position in all respects." The spirit of the 21st Plenum resolution is that since the enemy fails to implement the agreement and continues to pursue Vietnamization--which is actually a neocolonialist war--in an attempt to seize all the south, we have no alternative but to conduct a revolutionary war to destroy him and liberate the south.

The conference of the Central Military Party Committee not only stressed the general method of "counterattacking and attacking" but also presented measures for applying this method in each region as well as operational methods for each battlefield. The resolution of the Central Military Party Committee was approved by the Political Bureau. Following the Central Military Party Committee resolution, the General Staff, with the General Political Department and the General Logistics Department, immediately began studying and formulating strategic combat plans as well as combat plans for each battlefield; urgently organized and trained regular armies and technical armed branches; drafted plans for preparatory and maintenance activities and, at the same time, ordered the various battlefields to step up activities, conduct offensive and uprising waves, win victories and seize the initiative in order to change the battlefield situation and to facilitate large-scale offensives to be launched everywhere in 1975. Between April and October 1974 the various localities and units--from Tri-Thien to western Nam Bo and the areas surrounding Saigon-Gia Dinh--simultaneously stepped up their activities, repeatedly counterattacking and attacking the enemy and rapidly winning ever greater victories.

Those localities which firmly grasped the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum resolution and the Central Military Party Committee resolution and fully understood the concept of force and the offensive ideology not only succeeded in foiling the enemy's pacification program and in firmly defending our liberated areas and the bases in enemy-controlled areas, but also further expanded the liberated areas and drove the enemy into an embarrassed, passive and cornered position.

We paid special attention to the outcome of a battle which destroyed the district capital of Thuong Duc in the 5th Region. This was a test of strength with the best of the enemy's forces: We destroyed the enemy forces defending the Thuong Duc district capital sub-sector. The enemy sent in a whole division of paratroopers to launch repeated and protracted counterattacks in a bid to recapture this position, but we heavily decimated the enemy forces, firmly defending Thuong Duc and forcing the enemy to "give up."

Evaluating the Thuong Duc battle and other annihilating battles against the enemy's main forces in Chu Nghe and Dak Pek in the Central Highlands, the General Staff reported to the Central Military Party Committee that the combat capability of our mobile main force troops was now altogether superior to that of the enemy's mobile regular troops, that the war had reached its final stage and that the balance of forces had changed in our favor.

Therefore, we could and had to shift from attacking chiefly to destroy vital enemy forces to attacking not only to destroy the enemy but also to liberate the people and hold the land; and from our main forces operating chiefly to destroy the enemy's regular forces on the jungle and mountain battlefields to destroying the enemy and liberating the areas adjacent to cities, the lowlands and the cities themselves.

To stage large-scale annihilating battles and firmly defend the newly liberated areas, it was no longer advisable to field only independent or combined divisions. Larger mobile armies composed of various armed branches were needed to serve as powerful fists which would be used at the most important opportunities to operate along the main directions and carry out the main tasks with a view to seriously destroying the enemy's regular forces. The Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee agreed with this assessment and ordered that it was necessary to immediately organize mobile armies subordinate to the high command. In 1974 army corps were gradually formed and deployed in strategic areas most vital to insuring mobility. Along with organizing forces, another urgent task was to replace the army's equipment with good, modern equipment. Great quantities of materiel such as tanks, armored cars, missiles, long-range artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns which the U.S. imperialists had unsuccessfully sought to destroy during their 12-day B-52 blitz against the north, were gradually sent to the various battlefields. For the first time our mechanized long-range artillery and good tanks made their way to the very rubber forests in Nam Bo. This represented a great step to maturity for our army and, at the same time, the most active step in preparing forces for the future general offensive.

Big forces and modern equipment were still not enough. It was also necessary to organize the battlefields so as to be able to fully develop the strength of these big forces and modern equipment. A key problem was that a network of good communications lines was needed to insure mobility. The construction project of a strategic route east of the Truong Son mountain chain, which had been started in 1973, was speeded up with extreme urgency to link Route 9 in Quang Tri with eastern Nam Bo. Our state and people spent immense efforts and material resources on this project. Aided by thousands of vehicles and various types of machinery, tens of thousands of troops, workers, engineers, youth volunteers and civil laborers braved untold difficulties and hardships caused by the elements as well as enemy bombs and shells, working day and night to hack away at the mountain, broaden mountain passes, move rocks, build roads, lay sluices and build bridges--thus creating a splendid wonder flanking the west side of the fatherland. This 8-meter-wide, all-weather road permitted two-way passage for rapidly moving large trucks and heavy military vehicles and was used night and day to transport hundreds of thousands of tons of materials of all types to insure powerful attacks.

A pipeline running from Quang Tri to the Central Highlands and Loc Ninh was capable of fueling tens of thousands of vehicles of various types moving to and fro along the route. We could boast a splendid image of more than 20,000 km of strategic communications lines running from north to south and campaign lines branching from west to east atop the range of towering mountains guarding the fatherland's western flank. These old and new communications lines resembled endless lengths of sturdy hemp ropes being daily and hourly slipped around the neck and limbs of the monster who would be strangled with one sharp yank when the order was given. The wire communications line was also extended to Loc Ninh; communications were established between Hanoi and the various battlefields. While the people in the south were driving back the enemy almost everywhere to regain their right to mastery, tens of thousands of youths throughout the north--from the villages, municipal wards, organs and schools to enterprises--enthusiastically joined the armed forces and set out for the battlefront.

The resolutions of the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum and the Central Military Party Committee, coupled with the timely, correct leadership of the Political Bureau, had tipped the situation of the battlefields to our advantage and mobilized the might of the entire country for the front line. Once again, the party had traced the path for the southern revolution to achieve success--the path of revolutionary violence, the path of offensive strategy and resolute struggle on all three fronts--military, political and diplomatic--to achieve total victory.

Part II: "Opportunities"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 2 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[text] From July through October 1974 the General Staff agencies were busily and urgently working. Comrades in the Central Military Party Committee and in the Political Bureau were following up the situation and guiding the study and formulation of combat plans for 1975-76. A breath of fresh, stimulating air then swept across our party and people: The revolution in the south was developing according to the resolution of the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum and the resolution of the Central Military Party Committee issued in March 1974.

The battlefield situation was changing to our advantage. Our people and armed forces had seized the initiative to gradually but firmly advance the revolutionary tide, continuously counterattacked and attacked the enemy and every day won rapid, ever greater victories. Region 9 firmly grasped the strategic targets, attacked and defeated all enemy land-grabbing operations, wiped out more than 2,000 enemy outposts and liberated more than 400 hamlets containing nearly 800,000 people. Region 8 had overrun 800 enemy outposts and liberated an additional 200 hamlets with more than 100,000 people. Region 7 was maintaining its offensive against the enemy, had defeated all of the enemy's pressure-relieving operations and firmly defended its bases north of Saigon, while the struggle in the areas around Saigon was being intensified to firmly maintain the liberated enclaves and to heavily defeat the enemy's counterattacks. Region 5 had intensified the offensive; expanded its bases in the adjacent areas of Nong Son, Thuong Duc, Tien Phuoc, Minh Long and Xa Bot; intensively attacked the enemy in the delta; wiped out nearly 800 enemy outposts and liberated 250 hamlets with 200,000 people.

In the highlands we attacked, annihilated and forced the enemy to withdraw from Dak Pek, Chu Nghe, Mang But, Mang Den and Le Minh, and we expanded the liberated area and the strategic corridor. In Tri Thien we continued to pin down the puppet marine division and its mobile strategic division and to hold the cities' surrounding areas.

We then improved our antipacification operations. The enemy became passive and utterly weakened. Its pacification-landgrabbing plan was essentially thwarted in many delta areas, especially in the Mekong Delta. The morale and combat strength of the puppet troops were clearly declining. Since early that year, 170,000 men had deserted. Their total manpower had decreased by 15,000 men since 1973, with a heavy loss in combat strength. Their mobile strategic forces--the marine division in Tri Thien and the airborne division in Thuong Duc--had bogged down. The reduction of U.S. aid made it impossible for the puppet troops to carry out their combat plan and build up their forces.

In fiscal 1972-73 the United States had given the puppet troops \$2,168 million in military aid. This aid was reduced to \$964 million in fiscal 1973-74 and to \$700 million in 1974-75. Nguyen Van Thieu was then forced to fight a poor man's war. Enemy firepower had decreased by nearly 60 percent because of bomb and ammunition shortages. Its mobility was also reduced by half due to lack of aircraft, vehicles and fuel. Thus, the enemy had to shift from large-scale operations and heliborne deep-thrust and tank mounted attacks to small-scale blocking, nibbling and searching operations.

To sum up, following our 2 years of struggle to demand implementation of the Paris agreement and withdrawal of U.S. and satellite troops, the enemy was essentially waging a neocolonialist war against our revolutionary warfare which combined military attacks with political struggle. The most noteworthy point in this ever expanding struggle between us and the enemy was that the more active and vigorous we became, the weaker and more passive the enemy became, thus bringing the balance of forces a step further in favor of the revolution.

The cool fall weather of October 1974 reminded our military cadres of the coming campaign. The Political Bureau and Central Military Party Committee held a conference to hear the General Staff present its strategic combat plan. On various maps, charts and comparative force diagrams hanging all over the walls of the conference room the Combat Department of the General Staff adequately presented all aspects on the enemy's situation and ours, and developments on all battlefields from the signing of the Paris agreement to October 1974.

Following discussions on the report, the conference unanimously assessed the situation in the south based on the following four facts:

1. The puppet troops were militarily, politically and economically weakening every day, and our forces were quite stronger than the enemy in the south.
2. The United States was facing mounting difficulties both at home and in the world, and its potential for aiding the puppets was rapidly declining.
3. We had created a chain of mutual support, had strengthened our reserve forces and materiel and were steadily improving our strategic and political systems.
4. The movement to demand peace, improvement of the people's livelihood, democracy, national independence and Thieu's overthrow in various cities was gaining momentum.

At this conference a problem was raised and heatedly discussed: Would the United States be able to send its troops back to the south if we launched large-scale battles that would lead to the collapse of the puppet troops? Everyone clearly realized and paid special attention to this: After signing the Paris agreement on Vietnam and withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam, the United States had faced even greater difficulties and embarrassment. The internal contradictions within the U.S. administration and among U.S. political parties had intensified. The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the entire United States and precipitated the resignation of an extremely reactionary president--Nixon. The United States faced economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis. Also, U.S. allies were not on good terms with the United States, and countries who had to depend on the United States also sought to escape U.S. control. U.S. aid to the Saigon puppet administration was decreasing.

Comrade Le Duan drew an important conclusion that became a resolution: "Having already withdrawn from the south, the United States could hardly jump back in, and no matter how it might intervene, it would be unable to save the Saigon administration from collapse."

While we discussed the 1975 strategic combat plan, another very important question was raised: Where to establish the main battlefield? On all the southern battlefields the enemy had deployed his forces in a strong and mobile position. Specifically, in the First Military Region adjoining the socialist north the enemy had five main-force divisions, and in the Third Military Region, including the Saigon defense line, the enemy had three main-force divisions from the three divisions in the Fourth Military Region.

As for the Second Military Region, including the Central Highlands, the two main-force divisions defending it were spread over many areas. However, the Central Highlands was a very mobile battlefield and had much potential for developing southward along Route 14, or eastward along routes 19, 7 and 21. This is an area of highlands with only small variations in altitude. There, one can easily build roads, develop his technical and mobile capabilities and bring his strength into full play. In short, this was an extremely important area strategically. The conferees unanimously approved the General Staff's draft plan which chose the Central Highlands as the main battlefield in the large-scale, widespread 1975 offensive. However, the Political Bureau realized that in order to reach a final decision on strategy it was necessary to study the situation ever more carefully, fully supplement strategic combat plans and thus vigorously pursue the many tasks involved in accomplishing this goal while calling the comrade leaders from the southern battlefields to the north to hear their reports and conduct careful discussions in order to achieve unanimity in pursuing the strategic objective, utilizing their extensive familiarity with realities on each battlefield.

Early in December 1974 brothers Pham Hung, Tran Van Tra and Hai Van in Nam Bo and brothers Chu Huy Man and Vo Chi Cong in the Fifth Region were also invited to Hanoi. The Political Bureau worked separately with these brothers and heard their detailed reports on the situation. From 3 to 5 December the Standing Committee of the Central Military Party Committee successively heard the brothers from Nam Bo and the Fifth Region report on their combat objectives and plans for each battlefield. Many meetings preceded the Political Bureau's extremely important conference lasting from 18 December 1974 to 8 January 1975.

Also attending the conference, in addition to the comrades in the Political Bureau, were the comrade leaders on various battlefields, the comrades in the Central Military Party Committee and the comrade deputy general staff chief in charge of combat operations. All the comrades in the Political Bureau expressed their views and very carefully discussed them. It must be noted that during the 20 days of the conference the Political Bureau's assessment of the situation and its discussions were influenced by the increasingly obvious week-by-week achievement of major strategic objectives which further hardened iron resolve. While the Political Bureau was meeting, great news came from the south: The main force units in eastern Nam Bo, in cooperation with the provincial forces, had attacked and liberated Phuoc Binh City and all of Phuoc Long Province. This was the first province in the south to be completely liberated.

At first, the United States aggressively sent the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier "Enterprise" leading a special Seventh Fleet force from the Philippines toward the Vietnamese coasts, and ordered the Third U.S. Marine Division onto emergency alert status. The warlike clique in the Pentagon threatened to resume bombing the north. Finally U.S. Defense Secretary Schlesinger, who wanted to ignore the Phuoc Long event, stated that this was not a massive offensive by North Vietnam. He ignored Thieu's pitiful cries. U.S. Ambassador Martin in Saigon told Thieu that the United States was not yet ready to provide support.

It was obvious that the United States was in this position: Having withdrawn from Vietnam, the United States could hardly return. All the conferees analyzed the enemy's weakness which in itself heralded a new opportunity for us. To fully exploit this great opportunity we had to conduct large-scale annihilating battles to destroy and disintegrate the enemy on a large-scale. The situation at that time was extremely favorable. In the south a crisis might take place, creating a great opportunity for us. If we fought in the most rapid and prompt manner, this would certainly lead to the collapse of the Saigon administration more quickly than we could have otherwise expected.

On 8 January 1975, 2 days after the Phuoc Long victory, Comrade Le Duan concluded the discussions of the conference. He said: All participants are very enthusiastic and determined. This conference was attended by comrades from Nam Bo and the Fifth Military Region. The situation is now clear to everybody. We are determined to fulfill the 2-year plan. Two years are both a short time and a long time. The struggle in the south, supported by strong forces from the north, has grown into a national struggle. U.S. troops have withdrawn from the south, and our armed forces are present there. Meanwhile, the masses' struggle is gaining momentum. All these facts are characteristic of a time of good opportunity. We must hold firm to the favorable military, political and diplomatic conditions which are the main features of the revolution now. In the south, we have gained new strength, played an active role on the battlefield and succeeded in creating an interrelated and interdependent position from the Tri-Thien area to the Mekong Delta region. We have built up a powerful striking force; in the eighth and ninth regions our striking force is taking shape and developing. We have secured a stepping stone in the urban areas where our mass movement is flourishing. The world supports us.

After analyzing the weak position of the enemy, Comrade Le Duan went on: Striking a strategic blow in 1975, Nam Bo will have to create an interrelated and interdependent position throughout the region, bring military pressure closer to Saigon, annihilate as many enemy main-force units as possible and create conditions for localities to deploy forces when opportunities arise.

In the Mekong delta region military pressure must be brought closer to My Tho. We have agreed that this year the attack on the Central Highlands will begin. He pointed to a map behind him and said: Attacks must be unleashed toward Ban Me Thuot and Tuy Hoa. The Fifth Region will have to form a liberated area from Binh Dinh Province northward, and the Tri-Thien forces will have to control an area from Hue to Danang. These predicted victories will result in a change in the balance of forces. We will have to fight continuously until the rainy season and win repeated victories. If our attacks are strong, the enemy will face the danger of disintegrating quickly. When we fight in the peripheries of cities, we must smash enemy main-force units. When we fight in the cities, we must strive to accurately hit and crush enemy nerve centers.

The north must provide the material and technical needs of the troops. This is a basic factor in winning victory. We should win a victory whenever an opportunity is offered. Let us discover if there are any other ways of launching an offensive earlier than originally planned. The General Staff should be in a better position than we are to study this matter.

The conference of the Political Bureau, which was held from 18 December 1974 to 8 January 1975, was of historic significance. It correctly assessed the actual situation, grasped the law of revolutionary war and promptly pointed out new factors so that it could equip itself with the strategic determination to win victory. Toward the end of the conference, the Political Bureau stressed more and more vigorously the need to launch offensives earlier than originally planned. This desire is based on scientific study. We must grasp opportunities after they are discovered; if we miss them, we will be guilty before the nation.

Comrade Le Duan's conclusion was totally approved by all participants in the conference and transformed into a resolution which affirmed: Never before have military and political conditions been more propitious and never have strategic opportunities been so favorable for achieving a people's national democratic revolution in the south and advancing toward a peaceful reunification of the fatherland now that the movement of the three Indochinese countries is launching a strong offensive and winning ever greater victories.

The Political Bureau was resolved to mobilize the greatest efforts by the entire party and all troops and people in both parts of the country during the 1975-76 period; to step up the military and political struggle in coordination with the diplomatic struggle with a view to quickly and comprehensively changing the balance of power in our favor; to intensively carry out preparatory work; and to create conditions for the launching of a general offensive and uprising to annihilate the enemy forces, topple the puppet administration from the central to local levels, win power for the people, liberate the south and advance toward reunifying the country.

This strategic determination was reflected in the 2-year 1975-76 strategic plan. According to this plan, widespread, large surprise attacks would be launched in 1975, creating conditions for the general offensive and uprising in 1976. This in 1976 we would launch the general offensive and uprising to completely liberate the south.

Apart from this basic 2-year plan, the Political Bureau included in the 1975 plan an extremely important project or guideline of action--that is, if opportunities presented themselves early or late in 1975, South Vietnam had to be liberated that year.

Part III: "Important Battlefield"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 3 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] On 9 January 1975, 1 day after the conclusion of the Political Bureau conference, the standing body of the Central Military Party Committee went into session. Comrades Vo Chi Cong, Chu Huy Man, Hoang Minh Thao and Le Trong Tan were invited to attend so they would be able to thoroughly understand and implement the Political Bureau resolution. We heard a report by the General Staff on the objectives, requirements and tasks of the Central Highlands campaign. While in session, we received reports that the enemy had dispatched an airborne division from the Central Highlands to Danang. This indicated that the enemy had not yet discovered the presence of our forces and our preparations in the Central Highlands.

Only at this conference of the standing body of the Central Military Party Committee did the idea about mounting an attack on Ban Me Thuot become clear-cut. Everybody recognized the importance of an attack on this city, but it was necessary to study the actual situation on the spot to find a fighting method for insuring lightning success.

The conference had just started when Comrade Le Duc Tho arrived unannounced. He opened the door, entered and joined us in the conference. Later on we knew that the Political Bureau was somewhat troubled because the idea of an attack on Ban Me Thuot had not been clearly outlined in the combat plan; therefore, it sent Comrade Tho to join us and present his idea that such an attack was essential. He said enthusiastically: "We must definitely raise the problem of liberating Ban Me Thuot and Duc Lap. It would be absurd if with almost five divisions in the Central Highlands we could not attack Ban Me Thuot." Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap, secretary of the Central Military Party Committee, concluded the conference by establishing the areas and targets of the offensive, the objectives of the campaign and the orders for deploying and using forces. He also suggested the fighting methods that should be applied, greatly stressing the principle of force, secrecy and surprise, and advised that it was necessary to deceive the enemy into concentration on defending areas north of the Central Highlands.

The Central Highlands campaign was codenamed "Campaign 275." At that time on the Central Highlands front, Comrade Vu Lang, the front commander, left for the Ban Me Thuot area with some cadres to assess the situation. At the request of comrades Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, the Political Bureau sent me to the Central Highlands battlefield as a representative of the Political Bureau, the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command to take field command. The comrades of the Political Bureau in turn embraced and shook hands with me, wishing me "Bon voyage" and victory. As a revolutionary military man, leaving for combat duty on the battlefield was a great source of joy for me. I was elated to be entrusted with this task by the Political Bureau. I felt joy and great confidence about carrying out an important party resolution which I had thoroughly understood. I had felt like this during the Route 9 campaign in the spring of 1971 and during the spring-summer campaign in Quang Tri in 1972. I told Comrade Tran Van Tra following the Political Bureau conference: "This time I will fight in the Central Highlands until the rainy season. Then I will go to Nam Bo to join you in studying the battlefield situation and making preparations for military activities in the 1975-76 dry season.

The entire army was geared up for battle. On 26 January 1975 Comrade Phung The Tai, deputy chief of the General Staff, and I visited the 1st Army Corps, then stationed in Ninh Binh to entrust it with specific tasks for 1975. I talked with and encouraged the troops before they participated in the campaign. I said: "The activities of this army corps must be in harmony with activities of the entire battlefield, and its heart-beat must be combined with the heartbeats of the entire south. Each blow unleashed by the army corps must be strong, properly timed with other strong blows and designed to knock out the enemy. I hope the battle drums of the army corps as well as its victory bugle calls will be heard majestically in this symphony of the entire army and people. I would like to ask whether you 'musicians' here are capable of this or not. If you musicians say 'yes' the conductor--the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command--will be ready to raise the baton at the right moment, when the opportunity arises."

All the troops present shouted in unison: "We can do it, we can do it" and "We're determined to win, we're determined to win." At this time in the Central Highlands we had the 320th, 10th and 968th divisions--divisions that had gained much combat experience on the Central Highlands battlefield. Toward the end of December 1974 the High Command decided to dispatch the 316th Division to this front. This division, recognized for its glorious combat tradition over the past 2 decades and more, had traveled extensively up and down the country and fought victoriously during the anti-French war. During the war against the United States and its henchmen, it had left to perform its international duty for a long period of time. Prior to its departure for the Central Highlands, I visited it when it was bivouacking in Tan Ky, Nghe An Province.

In my talk with the division cadres, after informing them of developments in the situation, of the determination of the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee, and of the army's duty to win victories in the future, I pointed out the strong points to be developed and weaknesses to be overcome by the division prior to its departure, even while on the move by mechanized means. I quoted from a poem entitled "Always Keep in Our Hearts" by an author whose name I could not remember-- which described the common bitter score that must be settled by all Vietnamese:

"In our country after 30 years of bearing arms,

"The moon still remains divided into halves.

"Beckoning are battlefields, opportunities and duty;

"Now is the time for us to set out together with the people of the entire country,

"To restore our moon to its full glory."

"The enemy we will encounter," I told the division cadres, "is different from all those you have so far encountered. He is much more stubborn, cunning and experienced. He is better armed, and his combat maneuvers are more crafty. However, he is an enemy without a just cause who suffers from historical defeat, who is beset with all kinds of difficulties, growing poorer and poorer both morally and materially and declining in terms of both position and strength. It would be unjustifiable if the 316th Division could not defeat the puppets, considering their general decline and the rising position of the southern revolution."

The division cadres and combatants raised their fists and shouted at the top of their voice: "We're determined to win, we're determined to win." They pledged they would go far, reach any destination and fight victoriously.

On the decision of the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee, an organ representing the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command on the Central Highlands front was formed. It was composed of myself; Comrade Dinh Duc Thien, head of the General Logistics Department; Comrade Le Ngoc Huyen, deputy chief of the General Staff; and a number of highly experienced cadres from various organs of the General Staff and from various armed services and branches. Comrade Thien had gained much experience in organizing transport activities in support of the frontline from the anti-French war and especially from the Dien Bien Phu campaign. During the anti-U.S. war, he had led the logistical branch in overcoming all difficulties and hardships and insuring the transportation of all types of supplies for the armed forces to defeat the enemy's war of destruction in the north and support the southern battlefields, and particularly in insuring the success of the Route 9 campaign in the spring of 1971 and the campaign to liberate Quang Tri in 1972. He was an active revolutionary who never talked about retreating.

Good-humored, he was active, daring and capable in carrying out great undertakings. Nevertheless, being over 60 years of age and susceptible to emotional stress, he often displayed bad temper over things that displeased him. We had known and understood each other since our first meeting in the U.S. colonialists' prison before the August Revolution.

I told Brother Thien while patting his shoulder: "The opportunity has come. The Political Bureau has already divided the work. Old man, if you succeed this time, you may then rest in peace."

Brother Le Ngoc Huyen had fought with me since the early days of the general uprising in the Second Combat Zone and in the 320th Delta Division until the end of 1953. He had fought against the Americans on different battlefields before joining the General Staff. He understood me well--not only my views on active offensives against the enemy, conduct in combat, faithful observance of orders and my attitude toward cadres, combatants and the people, but also my personal ideas concerning the application of the art of combat to each particular circumstance. He did not need instructions. Once the leader had established the target and the fighting method, he would see to it that the objective would be achieved. After being briefed on his duty, he left for the Central Highlands to join the Central Highlands Front Command in surveying the battlefield situation and preparing combat plans.

The comrade cadres from various organs of the General Staff and the various armed services and branches were those who had accompanied me during the Route 9 campaign in the spring of 1971 and the 1972 general offensive. They were experienced in coordinating staff affairs among various armed branches. All of them were active and capable and understood well my work methods and leadership. Called upon to join this campaign, every one of them was elated and in high spirits.

In fighting the enemy, our leading cadres applied general principles, but each one had his own fighting methods. As for myself, I had been sent by the party to attend a 15-day military training class prior to the August revolution. After North Vietnam was completely liberated, I was invited to study at a foreign military institute, but I was mainly trained and improved in our struggle during which I matured and changed from being a party member operating clandestinely in an independent party chapter to a person engaged in independent revolutionary activities when I could not contact the party. This process of struggle helped forge my independence and boldness. I never overestimated the enemy but always looked for and capitalized on his weak points, even when I operated clandestinely as well as when my division-size unit was encircled in an area still under temporary enemy control in Thai Binh during the anti-French resistance in 1972.

I also have my own way of fighting. Early in 1952, as commander of the 320th Division-size unit, I organized and commanded a raid on Phat Diem town. I led my units in slipping through enemy positions in the outer peripheries of a defense line about 20 kilometers long and suddenly attacked Phat Diem town annihilating the enemy nerve center and occupying the town for one day. Then I led my units back to attack enemy positions in the outer peripheries. My friends called this tactic the "parachute" or "blooming lotus" method.

I thought much of the coming battle and especially of the method of attacking Ban Me Thuot provincial capital, the largest in the Central Highlands. The Phuoc Long victory indicated that in 1975 we were quite capable of liberating provincial capitals and cities.

It was certain that it was more difficult to attack the provincial capitals in the Central Highlands than the Phuoc Long provincial capital. At that time the Central Highlands, which was composed of the five provinces of Kontum, Gia Lai, Phu Bon, Darlac and Quang Duc, was a jungle and mountain battlefield connected with bordering city areas. When we were preparing to attack the Central Highlands, the enemy had a main force division, seven Ranger multibattalion units--the equivalent of 10 regiments--and four tank and armored car regiments. They were deployed in a well-organized defense position. [words indistinct] the enemy misjudged our designs. He believed that if we attacked the Central Highlands we would attack its northern part; therefore, he concentrated forces to defend Pleiku and Kontum. He left lesser forces in Darlac in the southern Central Highlands. Ban Me Thuot city, the Darlac provincial capital, with a population of 150,000, was a political and economic center of the enemy, and the 23d Division headquarters was located there. The enemy was also mistaken in his assessment of us; he believed that in 1975 we were not strong enough to attack major provincial capitals and cities and that even if we attacked them we would not be able to defend them from counter-attack. Therefore, although Ban Me Thuot was a vitally important position, prior to our attack the enemy had not deployed very strong forces there, and those that were there had many gaps. In areas closer to the center of the city, enemy forces were stretched even more thinly. If we succeeded in liberating Ban Me Thuot, we would succeed in smashing the enemy's defense system in the Central Highlands and creating a dangerous and mobile combat position which might change the situation of the battlefield.

When the decision to attack Ban Me Thuot was definitely taken, I sent a cable to the Central Highlands telling Comrade Le Ngoc Thuyen not to go to Hanoi to make reports but to stay to further study the situation in Ban Me Thuot city and go to the command post of Comrade Dong Si Nguyen at Headquarters 559--that is, the Truong Son units--so he could meet me on my way to the Central Highlands. I hastily prepared to go to the front. I came to salute Comrade Truong Chinh before setting out. The comrade inquired about the troops' status and preparatory work and wished us success. Comrade Le Duc Tho met me, shook hands and said: "If we are victorious in this large battle, it will certainly create a very favorable new position for us. Stay healthy."

Late in January 1975 I came to Comrade Le Duan's home. He pointed out the importance of the attacks on Ban Me Thuot and attacks throughout the Central Highlands and asked me if our forces were sufficient. I answered: Our troops are sufficient. If they are adequately used, we will gain the upper hand. He also asked if it would be necessary to send in more forces. The same thing had happened on various occasions when I set out to conduct campaigns in past years. Comrade Le Duan frequently concerned himself with questions about what was lacking in the preparations of the forces and what assistance we might need from the party Central Committee. Brother Le Duan also told me to think soundly and devise accurate fighting methods. He said: We can achieve great success on the Central Highlands battlefield. If we win victories, we might be able to liberate the south this year, as predicted. I successively called on, shook hands with and said goodbye to Comrades Vo Nguyen Giap, Song Hao, Hoang Van Thai and Le Quang Dao in the Central Military Party Committee. We had the same views and were in the same frame of mind. We did not say much to each other when we parted. However, the man who went to the battlefield and those who stayed behind had the same idea: This time, I certainly must effect a change that would be completely different from results of my previous missions.

Part IV: "The Path to the Front"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 5 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] I promptly organized a group of cadres to accompany me to the western highlands. The group had the code name "A-75". Due to the importance of the campaign, my movements had to be kept under the strictest secrecy and everything had to be done to distract the enemy's intelligence. According to plans, after my departure, the press would carry a number of reports on my activities as if I were still in Hanoi. Daily, the Volga sedan would make the trips from my house to the General Headquarters at 7 am and 2 pm and from the General Headquarters to my house at 12 noon and 5 pm sharp. Late in the afternoon, the troops would come to the courtyard at my house to play volleyball as usual, because I have the habit of playing volleyball after the afternoon working hours with them.

I signed in advance the messages of greetings on the occasion of the Army Days of the USSR and GDR -- February -- and of Mongolia -- March 1975 -- to be sent out when the time came. I prepared in advance New Year gifts and cards to be brought to the families of my revolutionary base at the approach of the Tet. All the preparations -- beds, hammocks, clothes and knapsacks of everyone in the A-75 group -- were made at the office of the General Headquarters; no preparations were to be made at private quarters.

My personal secretary, who lived with his family in a community area, would pretend serious illness on the eve of the departure. An ambulance would bring him to a hospital, and the next morning he would begin his journey from the hospital. According to what had been decided upon, in all communications, information, liaison and discussions during this campaign, Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap would be referred to as Chien, and I as Tuan.

On 5 February 1975, that is, the 25th day of the 12th lunar month, I went to Gia Lam airfield to take a plane for Dong Hoi. Hanoi was full of flowers at the approach of the new spring. I was in a general's uniform instead of the pajama-type clothes of the cadres going to the B region. This was to give the impression that I was going to Quang Binh to make an inspection of the troops there. Accompanying me that day was Comrade Dinh Duc Thien. My personal secretary had also gone to the airfield. Only comrades Phung The Tai, deputy chief of General Staff, and Le Van Try, commander of the Air Force Air Defense Corps, came out to see us off.

At 1030 am sharp, the AN-24 plane took off, 2 hours later than scheduled. On the plane, I recalled the words of the comrades in the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee, reminded myself of the great responsibility entrusted me by the party and pondered over our coming fighting method in the western highlands. As brother Ba--Comrade Le Duan -- had said, we should think carefully and adopt a correct fighting method. Brother Dinh Duc Thien, who sat next to me on the plane, said: This time we move out a general to fight. Surely we will win.

Entering this campaign, everywhere and everyone, from the leading cadres to the troops, was optimistic and filled with the spirit of achieving merits.

I was anxious to reach the battlefield immediately on the same day so as to perfect the fighting method that I was mulling over in my mind, and I attentively followed each and every one of the enemy's activities. According to our intelligence reports, on 9 and 10, December 1974, on the 4th story of the Independence Palace, Thieu held a meeting with the commanders of army corps of military regions of the puppets so as to assess our activities in 1975. They arrived at the following conclusion:

In 1975, we might fight on a scale larger than that of 1974, but it would not be as that of 1968 and would be less than that of 1972. We still were incapable of striking at big provincial capitals or cities, and even if we did strike at them we would be unable to hold them. We were only able to attack small and isolated provincial capitals such as Phuoc Long and Gia Nghia. Our main requirements in 1975 were to seize 2 million people in the delta, especially the Mekong River Delta and to expand the liberated areas in the mountain regions. Our aim was to achieve success to pressure them to implement the Paris agreement on Vietnam. They believed that in early 1975, our direction of attack would be to strike at the Third Military Region, mainly Tay Ninh, in an attempt to use Tay Ninh as the capital of the PRGRSV. With regard to the time of the offensive, the enemy thought that we would attack either before or after the Tet until June 1975, when the rainy season would come and we would stop for a rest.

On the strength of such an assessment of us, Thieu ordered the puppet generals to immediately and relentlessly strike at the liberation armed forces first to smash our preparations plan. Puppet Premier Tran Thien Khiem met with commanders of military regions and subregions to immediately launch an accelerated pacification campaign and a general flaring up of activities for 3 months beginning from 1 January 1975, with a view to checking the Viet Cong's winter-spring campaign. However, because of this assessment, they did not change their strategic deployment of maintaining strength at two ends--the first and third tactical zones. Neither did they greatly reinforce the second tactical zone that included the western highlands.

In early 1975, they had 1,351,000 troops, out of which there were 495,000 regular force troops, 475,000 regional troops, and 381,000 armed civil guards, comprising 13 main force divisions and 18 Ranger multibattalions. They deployed their forces as follows: In the first Military Region, there were five main force divisions, including two reserve divisions and four Ranger multibattalions, 21 battalions and a number of artillery companies and squads comprising 418 artillery pieces, five armored battalions and six tank and armored vehicle detachments comprising some 449 vehicles, and one air force division which included 96 fighter planes. Most of the main force units defended Hue and Danang.

In the Second Military Region, there were two main force divisions, seven Ranger multibattalions, 14 battalions and a number of artillery companies and platoons comprising 382 artillery pieces, five armored battalions and 13 tank and armored vehicle detachments comprising 477 vehicles and two air force divisions including 138 fighter planes. Most of the main force troops were deployed to hold the western highlands, the delta and the coastal region. In the Third Military Region there were three main force divisions, seven Ranger multibattalions, 14 battalions and a number of artillery companies and platoons comprising 376 artillery pieces, seven armored battalions and 15 tank and armored vehicle detachments comprising 655 vehicles, and two air force divisions including more than 250 fighter planes. Saigon was defended in its surrounding areas entirely by main force units.

In his Fourth Military Region, the enemy had three main force divisions, 18 civil guard intergroups, 15 artillery battalions and 55 artillery companies consisting of 380 guns, five armored battalions and 17 armored platoons consisting of 493 armored vehicles, one air force division including 72 fighters, and 580 assorted boats and launches. The enemy's main force units defended the Can Tho-Chuong Thien-Route No 4 area and the border. The enemy committed a great strategic error in assessing our strength. This error led to formulation of incorrect plans for deploying his forces and incorrect combat policies and signaled a great setback for him.

Our plane landed at Dong Hoi. Comrade Dong Si Nguyen, commander of the 559th Troop Command, with vehicles of the 559th Troop Command from Quang Tri, was on hand to meet us at the airport. We went to Quang Tri by car. The roads passing Le Thuy and Ho Xa were in very poor condition, and we had a very bumpy ride. One of our comrades said these roads were the worst in Indochina. Coming to the bank of the Ben Hai River, we boarded a motor boat going upstream. It was sunny, but the weather was very cool. Late in the afternoon, we landed at a river port in the southern part of the river and went to the 559th Troop Command in western Gio Linh.

Part IV Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 6 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Part IV: "The Path to the Front"]

[Text] The 559th Troops, as their name indicates, came into being in May 1959 and are subordinate to the Rear Service General Department. These troops and the Army Rear Service Branch are part of the history of combat building and development, and they manifest the revolutionary offensive spirit, a firm grasp of revolutionary violence, and clearheadedness in combat support activities. All accomplishments of our rear service cadres and combatants have been feats of arms. A rule of revolutionary war is to start with small units and proceed to large-scale corps and branches and then attack the cities, and the nerve centers of the enemy government. Only in this way could we defeat the enemy and liberate the fatherland. Thus, we had to have an ample number of wide roads and facilities for transportation of mechanized equipment to insure enough grain, food, ammunition and weapons for the frontline.

The strategic route east of the Truong Son Range, which was completed in early 1975, was the result of the labor of more than 30,000 troops and shock youths. The length of this route, added to that of the other old and new strategic routes and routes used during various campaigns built during the last war, is more than 20,000 kms. The 8-meter wide route of more than 1,000 kms, which we could see now, is our pride. With 5,000 kms of pipeline laid through deep rivers and streams and on mountains more than 1,000 meters high, we were capable of providing enough fuel for various battlefronts. More than 10,000 transportation vehicles were put on the road, including a number of vehicles sent from various military zones, localities and the Communications and Transportation Ministry to improve the transportation facilities.

Like an efficient housewife, the Rear Service Branch supported the army's annual plan while practicing thrift, creating reserves daily and monthly throughout the southern battlefront, and waiting for the great opportunity. It would then have to perform its duties for our troops at home and fulfill its internationalist obligations to our fraternal countries.

It was extremely encouraging that during the campaign our combatants conducted operations with mechanized equipment, and on the battlefield they had enough to eat. Even our A-72 ration was excellent. Following this campaign, our combatants on the battlefield began to receive a number of heavy guns and ammunition locally produced by our national defense workers beginning in 1973. This was also the beginning of a technical revolution in the National Defense Production Branch.

The more I went to the battlefield, the more I realized the great strength of the socialist North Vietnamese rear base. The rear base is a factor deciding victory in a revolutionary war. Undergoing sacrifices and hardships, our heroic people in the rear did all they could and sent everything necessary in support of the frontline, including their most beloved sons and husbands.

Upon coming to the 559th Troop Command Headquarters, I met Comrade Le Ngoc Tien who had just come from the Central Highlands by car to meet me as he had promised. Lying in a cottage, I could not sleep, although night had long since descended, because I kept thinking about the coming campaign in which we must achieve victory in the Central Highlands and, particularly, about how we were going to conduct the attack on Ban Me Thuot. We should fight hard to cause the enemy's quick collapse. My usual combat method again came to mind--launching surprise attacks against the enemy, conducting a lightning offensive, and smashing the enemy's command. However, I wondered if all this could actually be carried out.

We woke up early the following morning and set to work. Comrade Hien reported on the situation in the Central Highlands and proposed a combat plan. I asked comrades Dinh Duc Thien and Dong Si Nguyen about the preparedness of the rear service. They answered that all combat-support items had been brought to the battlefield and proposed that the coming battle be a big one. They said they could provide any amount of rice, ammunition, gas and vehicles needed for troop transportation. Their answers assured us greatly. Regarding logistics supplies, the greater the battle and the greater and more rapid the victory, the lower the necessary supply level. In addition, enemy material and technical facilities will be seized and used to supplement ours.

The following day, Comrade Thien returned to Quang Binh to direct the shipment of ammunition from there to the battlefield to supplement the ammunition needed in the Central Highlands and give instructions on the priority order in shipping various types of ammunition. As for us, we continued to go farther into the rear. Our vehicle's number plate was repainted and the marking TS-50 was added to it. This marking meant priority No 1 for the Truong Song troops.

On the strategic route, our combatants were actively building or repairing the roads. Female shock youths sang and laughed while working. They smiled and waved at us when we passed. They said: Commander, the lunar New Year is drawing near, yet we have not got any letters from home. We stopped and gave them a few hundred hairpins as gifts. Groups of trucks roared while moving northward after bringing ammunition to the battlefield. The brother drivers stretched out their hands, saying: Commander, we are now on the eve of the lunar New Year and we have no cigarettes left. We handed them some cigarettes as Tet presents.

On the way, we met Division 316 going on a military operation. This was the first time this division had used 500 trucks to move its men and equipment to the battle-front. An order had been given to this division: From the time its men set out until the time they opened fire, they must have absolutely no radio contact, so as to keep their operation secret. We intercepted an enemy radio message saying Division 316 could no longer be seen and no one knew where it was going. Our combatants riding the trucks were strong, healthy and joyful. They waved their hats and hands and sang to the roar of tanks and armored cars and the thud of long-range artillery guns, anti-aircraft guns and trucks of all types which followed one another, forming an endless line like a big waterfall flowing to the front.

The road to the front at that time of year was very beautiful.

On the eve of the lunar New Year we slept under the command of Engineer Division No 470 stationed at I A Drang. A few days before, enemy A-17 aircraft conducted a bombing run near this place, setting two of our vehicles afire.

Cadres and combatants of our infantry divisions happily welcomed the lunar New Year festival. Electric lights equipped with shades for protection against enemy planes were used everywhere. On the morning of the first day of the lunar New Year, the brothers displayed flowers, glutinous rice cakes, pork-pies, cigarettes, candy and jams on a large table. We enjoyed the festival with them and wished them new armed exploits in the new year. The brothers sang and recited poetry. My secretary--who was not a poet but who was born in the land of the Perfume River and the Ngu Binh Mountain--read an extemporaneous 4-line poem:

Brother Tuan is away from home during this lunar New Year festival
Because of our country's great undertaking.
The battlefield expects him here
To continue to score armed exploits as beautiful as flowers.

Part V: "Battle Position Arrangements"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 7 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] On arrival in the Central Highlands, I established the command post west of Ban Me Thuot, near the headquarters of the Front Command. Our residence was in a green forest adjacent to a forest of "khopj" trees, the dry leaves of which covered the ground like a yellow carpet. Whenever someone walked on these dry leaves, they cracked as crisp griddle-cakes do, and the noise could be heard in every part of the forest. A small spark might set the forest afire. Combatants of signal and communications units had to work hardest here. Whenever a fire broke out and destroyed communication wires, these combatants set out to quench the fire and returned with their bodies as black as coal miners. Another problem was caused by herds of 40 to 50 elephants which snapped communication wires, even though some of these had been hung on high tree branches.

I immediately convened a meeting with the comrades responsible for the front. On behalf of the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command and according to their decision, I declared the establishment of the Central Highlands Front Command, composed of Lt Gen Hoang Minh Thao, commander; Sen Col Nguyen Hiep, political commissar; Sen Col Phi Trieu Ham, deputy political commissar; and Maj Gen Vu Lang and Senior Colonels Phan Ham, Nguyen Lang and Nguyen Nang, deputy commanders.

On reviewing the front situation, we noted that at that time the main enemy force in the Central Highlands was composed of 1 division and 7 Ranger multibattalion units equivalent to 10 regiments, 4 armored car regiments, 8 artillery battalions and 1 air force division which were concentrated to defend mainly the northern part of the Central Highlands. The enemy stationed eight infantry regiments and four armored car regiments in the northern part of the Central Highlands and stationed only two infantry regiments in the southern part, because of the following belief of puppet Gen Ham Van Phu, commander of the 2d Military Region, II Corps: Pleiku would certainly be attacked because it was the seat of the corps command post, because it would constitute a convenient stepping stone for launching an attack on Binh Dinh and also because it was near the supply corridor and rear bases of the liberation troops. Phu was obsessed with the idea that he who could master the Central Highlands would become master of the whole of South Vietnam, that the decisive blows to be dealt by the liberation troops in the Central Highlands would be directed at Pleiku and Kontum, and that if Pleiku and Kontum were lost, Ban Me Thuot would also be lost. Though the enemy forces in the Central Highlands had to be stretched to defend numerous targets and though he had only a limited mobile force in the military region, the enemy could mobilize to resist us by bringing in troops from the First and Third Military Regions if we did not launch attacks in these regions in conjunction with attacks in the Central Highlands. The enemy still had the capability of sending reinforcements to the Central Highlands to defend this region.

Our forces participating in the campaign were composed of the main force units in the Central Highlands and units of the High Command and the Fifth Military Region, which were rather well prepared, had high determination and enthusiasm, and were quite adequately supplied. Many of these units were familiar with the battlefield and had much combat experience. The road network to insure mobility during the campaign had already been completed. The stockpiling of supplies had been completed, and command posts at various levels were established and stabilized. A comparison with the enemy over the entire area of the campaign showed that our infantry was not much superior to the enemy's. However, because we concentrated the majority of our forces in the main area of the campaign, we achieved superiority over the enemy in this area. As for infantry, the ratio was 5.5 of our troops for each enemy soldier. As for tanks and armored vehicles, the ratio was 1.2 to 1. In heavy artillery, the ratio was 2.1 to 1. But our troops were still affected by certain shortcomings, such as uneven combat standards and inexperience in street combat and large-scale joint operations by various armed branches.

During our debate at the Front Command Headquarters, we quickly achieved an identity of views on the tasks to be carried out during the campaign. We spent more time discussing fighting methods but finally achieved an identity of views.

During the 1968 Mau Than Tet general offensive, we used mainly well-trained forces to attack cities, although the balance of forces tilted much in favor of the enemy. As a result, we could not permanently occupy any city. During a month-long offensive in 1972, we annihilated the puppet 3d Division and liberated the whole of Quang Tri Province on 1 May, but during the subsequent rainy season, activities on our battlefields slowed down. They concentrated paratroop and marine divisions and a number of independent regiments to counterattack with the support of U.S. air and naval forces in order to recapture Quang Tri. After foiling the enemy counterattacks, defending the old Citadel and the city for 86 days, we ultimately could keep only the area north of the Trieu Phong district, the old Citadel and the destroyed city.

This time we drew experience from previous campaigns but based ourselves mainly on the strategic tasks and requirements, the characteristics of our situation, and specific battlefield conditions. It followed that tactics during the Central Highlands campaign should involve, on the one hand, using forces of division or regiment size to cut communication Routes 14, 19 and 21 in order to divide the enemy forces strategically and cut off and isolate the Central Highlands from the coastal delta. On the other hand, according to the goals of the campaign, the tactics should involve isolating Ban Me Thuot from Pleiku, and Pleiku from Kontum, simultaneously and actively carrying out diversionary tactics to attract the enemy to the northwestern part of the Central Highlands in order to enable our side to maintain secrecy and surprise in the south until we opened fire on Ban Me Thuot. Diversionary tactics would enable us to organize relatively strong regiment-sized combined arms surprise attack forces. Rather than position them for attacks, we would be able to move them from remote areas and bypass targets outside the city to suddenly and deeply thrust into the city. We would then be able to act in conjunction with sapper and infantry units secretly positioned there previously to rapidly annihilate key targets and positions. After attacking and occupying springboard areas in the city, we would be able to attack from within the city to annihilate isolated bases which had lost contact with their headquarters and were consequently plunged into panic. At the same time, it would be necessary to form a powerful combined arms reserve force to readily defeat enemy counterattacks aimed at recapturing Ban Me Thuot.

It was impossible to attack Ban Me Thuot city directly at the beginning of the campaign because when I arrived at the front, the comrades stationed at the spot had previously positioned powerful forces between Duc Lap and Dak Soong with a view to annihilating the enemy and liberating part of Route 14 to clear the strategic corridor leading to Nam Bo. Moving troops back would waste time and simultaneously create numerous difficulties, especially in view of the need to maintain secrecy. It was, therefore, necessary to attack Duc Lap first and then attack Ban Me Thuot the next day after isolating Duc Lap and deploying forces to encircle it tightly.

We continued to study the situation in Ban Me Thuot city more carefully. After infiltrating Ban Me Thuot for reconnaissance purposes, a battalion cadre returned and reported that the city was very large, as large as Haiphong. We know that Ban Me Thuot was not as large as Haiphong and that it appeared larger in the eyes of our scout because it was rather large, had many high buildings and was brightly lit by neon lamps. We asked some revolutionary organizations in the city to get out and report on the situation. Comrade Bui San (Dang Tran Thi), member of the Standing Committee of the party committee for the 5th Region, and Comrade Can, secretary of the Darlac Provincial Party Committee, also came to our command post and informed us of the political situation, the movements in the region and the situation of our organizations. When talking with Comrade Vo Chi Cong at a meeting of the Central Military Party Committee in Hanoi, I had already proposed that people should be sent to make preparations and grasp the situation so that on my arrival in the Central Highlands, I might meet and work with them. We had just captured a spy of the puppet 45th Regiment and, on interrogating him, gathered additional information on the situation.

Throughout the preparatory period, we closely and firmly followed the enemy troop situation and movements hour by hour. By listening to enemy radio stations, we learned that the enemy commanders had ordered reconnaissance elements to find our 10th Division at all costs. Our campaign command ordered that more secrecy should be kept about our strength, that reconnaissance cadres and agents should venture out only on receiving orders to that effect, and that troops should continue to carry out diversionary tactics to make the enemy believe that the 10th Division was still stationed in the northern part of the Central Highlands.

For several days in a row, enemy artillery shelled areas around Ban Me Thuot to support reconnaissance and Ranger groups carrying out activities further in our direction. Enemy aircraft bombed our key defense positions in northern Kontum, enemy reconnaissance planes flew daily over Duc Co and northwestern Kontum, and more enemy troops were moved to Pleiku.

Part V Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 8 Apr 76 p 3 HK/WA

[Part V: "Battle Position Arrangements"]

On the evening of 25 February, in a forest of Darlac and amid the regular explosions of enemy shells, we and the Central Highlands Front Command met and decided to attack and occupy Ban Me Thuot. We had a plan to attack the enemy before he could strengthen his defense forces and a plan to attack the enemy according to previously proven tactics. On behalf of the High Command, I ratified and signed the map indicating the lines to be followed by our troops to advance toward Ban Me Thuot. Comrade Commander Hoang Minh Thao and Comrade Political Commissar Nguyen Hiep put their signatures beside mine. We shook hands and wished one another success. After signing, I voiced my opinion as follows:

We should attack the enemy in a way and at a moment quite unexpected by him so as to inflict the greatest surprise. This method would prove very dangerous to the enemy. We should use all measures and forms, concentrate our thoughts and strive to maintain the factors of secrecy and surprise in order to attack the enemy according to the plan to attack before he could strengthen his forces. If we allowed the enemy to strengthen his forces and be on guard, we should attack according to the second plan; in the latter case, it would be likely that more difficulties would arise, but we would certainly be victorious anyway. Up to that moment, the enemy had not yet thought about the possibility of our organizing an offensive with large-scale forces. The enemy had not yet clearly realized that our forces were on this side of Ban Me Thuot since he could not detect our movements. In the coming days, it would be necessary to continue to make the enemy believe that our main thrust would be toward Kontum and Pleiku to provide an opportunity for our plan. It would be necessary to intensify activities in Kontum and Pleiku in the coming days to further confirm the enemy's mistaken belief.

Some questions now arose. First, what form of attacks should be launched on large cities and municipalities? Considering that we were at the final stage of the revolutionary war and that we had become stronger than the enemy, we should certainly launch large-scale destructive attacks and liberate cities and towns. There could be no alternative. As far as our advantages in an attack on Ban Me Thuot were concerned, we had nearly three divisions against the enemy's one regular regiment of the 23d Division and three civil guard multibattalion units. Thus, the enemy was in a weak and isolated position. However, he was in a large city which had a very complex layout, and he had an organized defense system at his disposal. Furthermore, coordinating large forces among the various armed branches to attack a big city was still new to us. These were the issues that deserved consideration.

In the attack on Ban Me Thuot city, we would use a force many times stronger than that of the enemy, consisting of strong spearheads of attack composed of various combined arms and various sapper and **infantry battalions** which had been secretly deployed well in advance to thrust directly into the city center and occupy the two airfields, quickly destroying the enemy's nerve center and then fanning out to annihilate enemy troops outside the city. This fighting method involved two difficult tasks: First, it was necessary to effect combat coordination and command in accordance with unified plans concerning times and activities so as to be able to bypass the enemy's outlying defense positions and move close to the city. Second, it was necessary to maintain secrecy and gain the advantage of surprise over the enemy until we opened fire. By satisfactorily carrying out these two tasks, the enemy would be quickly knocked out in a period of less than even the 7 to 10 days which you comrades had initially planned. The **balance** of forces here allowed us not only to destroy the enemy and occupy the city, but also to keep a reserve force to destroy counterattacking enemy forces, firmly **defend our gains** and develop our offensive position. This was because the entire Central Highlands area was isolated from the rest of the **southern** battlefield, not just Ban Me **Thuot--not to** mention that the coordination of our activities between the various battlefields and the Central Highlands further limited the enemy's ability to send big reinforcements to this battlefield.

It must be added that it would be best to capture key enemy leaders so as to settle the battle more quickly. This was of course very difficult to realize because key enemy leaders always stayed deep inside their defenses and were heavily guarded. We held thorough discussions and agreed on a new fighting method characterized by boldness and surprise.

It must also be said that the Ban Me Thuot battle would be a key battle opening the campaign. Quickly bringing down the enemy, **destroying him**, liberating and firmly defending the city, repelling the enemy's counterattacks and developing the battle gains were closely interrelated actions that would be taken not only in the attack on Ban Me Thuot but also in the whole Central Highlands campaign.

By maintaining the element of surprise concerning the target, the time and the fighting method, isolating the enemy and bringing into play a decisively superior force without the enemy's knowledge, **we would insure fewer losses and quicker victory** in battle. The dry season was very important to us. We must not waste even a day or an hour in launching repeated attacks and scoring successive victories. In short, this was our fighting method aimed at destroying the enemy and liberating a big city like Ban Me Thuot. This was a very creative fighting method that reflected the ideology and active offensive spirit of a revolutionary army. It was the result of a careful, scientific process to survey, study and analyze all problems with a view to accurately determining a solution and conducting a highly developed military campaign. By realizing this goal, we would gain more experience to continue liberating other cities on the Central Highlands front, like Phu Bon, Gia Nghia, Pleiku and Kontum.

Second, after selecting a correct fighting method, it was necessary to realistically and closely organize combat actions for each regiment, battalion and lowest-level unit, as well as for each wing, spearhead or armed branch. Especially, it was necessary to organize mechanized units to conduct deep surprise thrusts and to coordinate combat activities within the city. With only high determination and boldness, but without good close combat coordination, we might not be able to win or quickly finish the battle and might be subject to serious losses.

Third, it was necessary to correctly implement various policies. Ban Me Thuot city was a political, economic, social and religious center in the Central Highlands. Its population was composed of Montagnards, Catholics, Protestants and Buddhists, as well as bourgeois plantation owners and foreign residents who had lived there for decades under neocolonialism. The situation, therefore, was very complex. Upon entering the city, our troops must maintain a correct attitude and conduct themselves properly. They must strictly implement all prescribed policies, observe discipline, assist the local party committees, win the people's hearts and quickly stabilize the people's lives after liberation.

Fourth, it was necessary to set up a military management system after liberation. Once the tasks and the organ were established, the leader must be chosen. Military management affairs would be both complex and new. I would discuss this issue with brother Bui San and the Darlac Provincial Party Committee. Nevertheless, the matter now stood as follows: If we had an organization, a staff in charge of it and the participation of the armed forces, we would be able to do this. Here we had an advantage--Comrade Colonel I Bloc, who was of an ethnic minority nationality and was a man loved and respected by the local people. We exchanged views with the 5th Region Party Committee and suggested to the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command that if the city was liberated, Comrade I Bloc should be promoted to the rank of senior colonel and appointed chairman of the Ban Me Thuot Military Management Committee.

Fifth, Ban Me Thuot city served as the rear base of the 23d Division. The base areas of the various regiments and a network of large storage facilities were situated there. The city also had many enterprises and industrial establishments of the bourgeoisie. It was necessary to satisfactorily protect these establishments and restore their operations. This would be a very complex task: Public property must be controlled; the people's property must be respected; and the property belonging to the bourgeoisie must be dealt with in accordance with set policies. Comrade Nguyen Lang, deputy commander in charge of logistics, would help the local authority carry out this task. Vehicles, equipment and weapons must be collected. Grain, food and other things which were of use to the army must be satisfactorily maintained.

Sixth, it was necessary to apply experiences gained in Phuoc Long. After liberation, we could immediately use POW's, especially soldiers who were drivers of trucks, tanks, armored cars and road-building vehicles, or artillerymen, in the course of our operations. If we were in a strong and victorious position, we would be able to do this. In short, we must pay utmost attention to making use of captured materiel and POW's in combat operations. Of course, we must be vigilant and closely guard them.

Part V Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 9 Apr 76 p 3 EK/WA

[Part V: "Battle Position Arrangements"]

[Text] The last problem I want to discuss with you is the fact that the deadline for us to start attacking Ban Me Thuot was drawing near. If preparatory efforts had been prolonged, our plan could have been exposed. It was necessary to launch the attack on schedule, because the other battlefields were to coordinate their operations with ours.

We knew that the enemy would find it very difficult to resist us on all fronts in South Vietnam. Though Ba Me Thuot was the main city in the Central Highlands, other places were also considered important by the enemy because they were nearer Saigon and Danang. Thus, once attacked simultaneously on many battlefields, the enemy would be forced to look at the overall picture to see what direction our main strategic offensive would follow; thus he would not immediately deploy his general reserves. At the beginning, he would use forces of the army corps to resist us, but the forces of III Corps were not numerous, and, since the roads leading to the Central Highlands and Ban Me Thuot had been cut off, the possibility of military airlifts would be limited. Therefore, our activities were very important, and the greatest efforts had to be made to preserve secrecy. Comrades at the front had to go to the spot to help various units, especially men of the 316th Regiment who had just arrived and who were not familiar with the battlefield and therefore could not engage in combat too soon. Nevertheless, it was not advisable to prepare too slowly or to procrastinate. The Central Military Party Committee and the High Command thought an attack on Ban Me Thuot would strongly shake the overall battle position of the enemy and that the success of this particular campaign and that of the battle in general would bring about a deep change that would plunge the enemy into rather great internal disturbances. There was no alternative: Since the enemy was waging a counterrevolutionary war, we had to wage a revolutionary war. As long as he continued the war, he would become weaker; as long as he continued the revolutionary war, and fought according to the tactics that had been adopted, we would become stronger.

There were still many tasks to do. Since we had exchanged views and reached unanimous agreement, and since these views had become resolutions, we had to do our best to cooperate to satisfactorily fulfill our mission -- that is, annihilate the enemy, liberate Ban Me Thuot city and expand the offensive to liberate all of beloved South Vietnam. The Front Command had to assign comrades to specifically prepare for the attack on Ban Me Thuot and assign others to specifically supervise, guide and help units deploy forces in positions that would split and encircle the area according to plan. Since the meeting was attended by almost all the persons concerned -- such as representatives of the various divisions armed branches, and organs -- on behalf of the Central Military Party Committee and High Command, I ratified the resolution and combat project of the General High Command, and I ratified the resolution and combat project of the Central Highlands Front Command.

Exerting all our strength and intelligence, we had to carry out numerous tasks to insure that the factors of surprise, swift attack and rapid conclusion of the battle favored us until our long-range shells exploded on the enemy in Ban Me Thuot city. We had to fully insure that all party committees from high to low and all cadres and combatants fully realized the significance of this battle; that they displayed a high spirit of valor, shrewdness and creativity while fighting; and that they understood and implemented exactly the fighting methods we had discussed. If we did this, we would certainly win complete victory.

Since the enemy was still mainly concerned about defending the northern part of the Central Highlands, we intensified our diversionary activities, mobilized people in the liberated areas of Kontum and Pleiku to actively build and repair roads and directed troops to cooperate with localities in holding many meetings to greet troops coming to liberate Pleiku and Kontum.

On 1 March, the 968th Division destroyed two posts along Route 19, west of Pleiku, adjacent to Thanh Na district. The enemy thus became more convinced that our side was preparing to attack Pleiku, and he hurriedly sent the 45th Regiment from Thuan Man, at the bifurcation of Route 14 leading to Phu Bon, to Thanh An on 3 March.

Seeing that the enemy had fallen into our trap, I advised Comrade Hoang Minh Thao to instruct the 968th Division to attack more vigorously, to provide additional large shells to the regiment to enable it to pound Cu Hanh airfield and also to instruct Comrade Thanh Son, the division commander, to implement the tactic of creating disturbances.

On 4 March, the 95th Regiment and the 3d Division of the 5th Military Region destroyed a series of positions and cut two portions of Route 19 east and west of An Khe. The enemy sent 2 regiments of the 22d Division from Binh Dinh to clear the area east of An Khe and sent the 2d Cavalry Brigade from Pleiku to clear the area west of An Khe. Pham Van Phu did his best to strengthen the defense of the northern part of the Central Highlands, mainly Pleiku. He ordered the 4th and 6th Ranger multibattalion units to advance northwest of Kontum and Pleiku in order to look for the 10th and 320th divisions, which had previously dealt the enemy heavy blows from 1972 to 1974. The enemy artillery and aircraft focused his attacks on any areas in which he thought our troops were stationed or our artillery established.

Meanwhile, the 320th Division remained quiet west of Route 14; it was stationed only 4 kilometers from the portion of this route linking the Ya Leo bridge with (?Phi Se). On 3 March, this division had sent the 9th Battalion to cross Route 14; then it turned around east of Thuan Man district town and was ready, on receiving orders, to occupy the stretch of road between Thuan Man and Cheo Reo to prevent the enemy from coming from Phu Bon to strengthen his positions along Route 14 or from fleeing Thuan Man toward Cheo Reo. It must be said that this battalion moved very skillfully and secretly. Though detached from the division and acting independently, it installed secret telephone wires underground along Route 14 to establish daily contact with the division, which was stationed more than 20 kilometers away. It was precisely this 9th Battalion which later was the first unit of the 320th Division to intercept enemy troop formations east of Phu Bon when they were withdrawing from Pleiku to Phu Yen along Route 7. The 10th Division was at that time secretly concentrating troops and artillery in areas adjacent to Duc Lap and Dak Soong, southwest of Ban Me Thuot, and actively making overall preparations to open fire on time according to plan.

On 5 March, the 25th Division got out to cut Route 21, on the stretch east of (?Si Kut) and destroyed a convoy of more than 80 vehicles. Thus, as of 5 March, enemy troops were isolated from the delta; however, they still could communicate between the southern and northern parts of the Central Highlands, because we had not yet cut Route 14. Every day about 60 to 80 military and civilian vehicles of the enemy circulated normally.

At this point, I must say clearly why we did not cut Route 14 at the same time we cut Routes 19 and 21. Our plans did include tightly blocking Route 14 to isolate Ban Me Thuot from Pleiku; the question was, when to do so? If we cut off Route 14 at an early date, our intention to attack Ban Me Thuot would be exposed. Also, to cut Route 14 at two places north and south of Thuan Man district town, it would be necessary to attack and seize the town; if we attacked and seized this town, the enemy would know that we had a division north of Ban Me Thuot. Under such circumstances, the enemy would find a way to send additional forces to strengthen Ban Me Thuot and would clear roads by using helicopters to land troops or by launching attacks to clear Route 14. If he did this, the fighting might soon become intensive and thus the factor of secrecy prior to the attack on Ban Me Thuot would vanish.

Our intention was to start attacking Ban Me Thuot and simultaneously to attack Thuan Man district town and to cut Route 14; however, we should have a large force available, because if the enemy learned of our intention to attack Ban Me Thuot before we cut the route and sent reinforcements of regiment size or larger from Pleiku southward by Route 14, we should immediately maneuver troops and prepare ambushes to annihilate these reinforcements and, at the same time, block Route 14. Carrying out this plan was not easy. We had to watch the situation closely and make careful calculations. The man who directly commanded this battlefield was the commander of the 320th Division. Enemy vehicles were traveling the road without incident. In combat we could not at all times understand the enemy's intentions and acts. Moreover, our opponent in this battle was perfidious and strong. Therefore, we had to consider the pros and cons and make careful calculations before giving orders to the 320th Division to attack the enemy and cut the route.

An incident occurred: At noon of 5 March, a battalion of the 320th Division destroyed a 14-vehicle military convoy and two 105-mm guns on Route 14 between western Thuan Man and Ban Me Thuot, seizing all weapons and capturing prisoners of war, among them an artillery first lieutenant and his wife. The 320th Division reported to the Front Command that during the past 2 days the enemy had sent another battalion of the 45th Regiment to Thuan Man and that this battalion was searching for our troops on the western side of Route 14 in an effort to detect our whereabouts. Our forces tried to elude the enemy and refrained from opening fire in order to maintain secrecy. The movements of enemy troops on Route 14 became more intensive. The 320th Division decided to attack this enemy convoy on 5 March because it guessed that the enemy might have gradually sent units of the 45th Regiment to strengthen the defense of Ban Me Thuot. The 320th Division suggested that orders be issued to occupy the Route 14 battleground, block the route, attack Thuan Man and annihilate the entire battalion of the 45th Regiment defending Thuan Man.

Comrade Vu Lang briefed me on this situation and asked for my instructions. I understood the 320th Division's concern about its responsibility as well as the tension, which was mounting as the division was forced to be silent, while waiting for an opportunity to serve the interests of the entire front. Being a large unit, the division was naturally tense while hiding from the enemy reconnaissance elements and small units, which trembled with fear while searching for our troops.

Part V Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 10 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Part V: "Battle Position Arrangements"]

[Text] Reviewing enemy activities of the past few days, we knew that he was cautious in dealing with us and had not yet devised any specific plan of action. He continued to focus his attention on the western Central Highlands and was busy clearing Route 19. In short, his assessment of the situation remained unchanged. We were able to maintain secrecy. We had to continue to do so and deceive the enemy as long as we could in order to intensively prepare for the key battle. After further discussing the battle situation with Comrade Le Ngoc Hien, I gave orders to the 320th Division to continue to lie in wait, to avoid engagements with the searching reconnaissance units and not to attack the enemy on Route 14. Everybody had to do what had been decided upon.

Meanwhile, I instructed the Front Command to have the captured artillery first lieutenant interrogated. At midnight my secretary reported to me on the results of the interrogation: the attacked enemy convoy has carried some personnel of a company of the 45th Regiment to Ban Me Thuot for a rest, and new recruits would be sent the next morning to replenish the regiment's units in Pleiku. The trip of the 14-vehicle convoy from Pleiku to Ban Me Thuot was not unusual and was not designed to strengthen the defense of Ban Me Thuot. But because the enemy had been attacked, he was now aware of our presence on Route 14, some 30 kilometers south of Pleiku.

My secretary further reported to me on a new incident: The Front Command reported that a group of officers of our artillery regiment had had an engagement with the enemy west of Ban Me Thuot on 5 March while on a reconnaissance mission. One of our combatants was wounded and captured with his diary. I thought: "We will attack Ban Me Thuot within 4 days. What will the enemy do in the coming days? So far, he has misunderstood us as far as our main offensive target is concerned; but if similar incidents revealing our secrets continue to occur, the enemy will certainly reassess the situation. He is now intensively seeking to understand our intentions." I telephoned Comrade Vu Lang to remind him to closely check the implementation by each soldier of all regulations on the preservation of secrecy.

On the morning of 6 March, the intelligence staff cadre reported to me that according to monitored enemy information the enemy had moved the 3d Battalion, 53d Regiment; an armor company; and a civil guard battalion to Quang Nhieu, 11 kilometers northeast of Ban Me Thuot. Immediately after that the chief combat operations officer of the battlefront telephoned a report on how each of the enemy spearhead elements had been conducting search operations in this area. Our artillery, tank and engineer units, which had been preparing movement routes and reassembly areas here, withdrew to the rear for concealment. However, if the enemy prolonged his search operations to 8 March, our preparations for launching an attack on the city from the north would be affected. The enemy might have captured some of our combatants with documents and begun to suspect that we would attack from this direction. Nevertheless, even though the enemy knew about our artillery positions north of Ban Me Thuot, he certainly could not be sure of our preparations to attack the city, even though he might assume that we were prepared to shell the city as we had done before. The enemy could not find out anything else here.

After talking with brother Le Ngoc Hien, I asked him to go to the front command post and to see to the following with the command staff: Our elements from Quang Nhieu would continue to avoid the enemy to maintain their concealment, but they should be prepared to wipe out completely any enemy spearhead if it went deep into our staging areas. The enemy's behavior in this direction should be carefully watched so that we could take appropriate, concrete countermeasures, depending on each circumstance. If the enemy did not withdraw to Ban Me Thuot until the afternoon of 6 March--the enemy's normal rule here was to conduct a 1-day search if he suspected something, and if nothing could be detected, he withdrew--the 320th Division would be ordered to prepare to overrun the Chu stronghold on Route 14, north of Bunon Ho on 7 April in order to attract the enemy toward this direction, creating conditions for our units from Quang Nhieu to continue their preparatory tasks. If the enemy continued to conduct searching operations on 7 March, on 8 March the 320th Division would attack Thuan Man, completely sever Route 14 to attract the enemy troops from Ban Me Thuot and at the same time be prepared to attack enemy troops coming from Pleiku.

Just as we expected, at noon on 6 March we intercepted the following enemy report: The puppets had taken one of our seriously wounded combatants to a hospital and were trying to save his life so that the 23d Division commander could personally interrogate him. However, our combatant who was then carried by our troops from the enemy hospital to his unit.

On 7 March we overran Chu Te in 30 minutes, allowing us to strengthen our blocking positions on Route 14, but the enemy had still not withdrawn from Quang Nhieu. On 8 March Division 320 attacked and occupied Thuan Man district town and severed Route 14. At noon the enemy forces in Quang Nhieu hastily abandoned their operations and withdrew to Ban Me Thuot. On 9 March we occupied Duc Lap district town, Dak Soong and Nui Lua as planned, completely opening the north-south strategic corridor east of Truong Son. To the north we annihilated Thanh An district town and on Route 19 we were closing in west of Pleiku city. So, by 9 March we had annihilated two enemy elements, completed our strategic and campaign maneuvers, severed the Central Highlands from the delta and the south from north of the Central Highlands, and totally besieged and isolated Ban Me Thuot city. Another step had been completed in our war of wits against the enemy, with another victory for us.

However, the enemy remained overconfident and our operations had further exacerbated his mistaken estimates. When we overran Duc Lap district town the enemy still thought we were trying to open Route 14 to Nam Bo and continued trying to counter our attacks west of Pleiku. It would be too late and too difficult for the enemy to react now, even though it knew for sure that we would attack Ban Me Thuot. Nothing could break our deployment of forces now.

On 9 March I sent a message to the Central Military Party Committee and to the Political Bureau, reporting combat results from 1 March until the liberation of Duc Lap and citing some main features of the entire campaign plan. This plan had not been mentioned before, merely for the sake of secrecy. The last part of the message said: We will attack Ban Me Thuot on 10 March. Further development of the situation and major remarks, if any, will be reported later. We are all fine. Brothers Thien and 559 have positively supported this campaign. All requirements have been met. Units are up to strength, and troops are strong and have sufficient weapons and equipment. Troop morale is high. Never before could such a powerful, concentrated attack be staged here as it will be this year. Only books and newspapers are in short supply or arrive late. Wish you all in the Central Military Party Committee and the Political Bureau good health. [signed] Tuan.

After checking all the reserve ammunition depots in the rear and receiving the plan to continue to ship ammunition to meet all eventualities, Comrade Dinh Duc Thien went along the western side of Truong Son to the command post. For some days now he had been conducting a final inspection of all preparations made by the rear units. At 1900 on 9 March we gradually began calling all units by telephone. They all reported that they had completed all preparations and had accomplished the prescribed objectives. The movement of the unit assigned to the Route 14 position was the most complicated and difficult because it had to move 85 mm flat trajectory guns on bamboo rafts across the Xre Poc River. Units coming from south of the city had also arrived in the assigned positions from which they would launch attacks.

The assault units of the various armed branches which were to attack enemy strongholds with their armored vehicles only after the offensive order was given were now in combat formations, ready for the attack. Their commanders promised me they would resolutely fulfill their missions. I hoped that they would do a good job, win victories with minimum casualties, fight quickly and fulfill their duties. I asked them to convey my best regards to their soldiers before they went to battle.

On the night of 9 March we were at the command post, watching developments in the situation and awaiting D-hour. Staff officers sitting around me could not conceal their joy and emotion as the important moment drew near. For those soldiers who were braced for the fighting that night, waiting for D-hour was like waiting for New Year's Eve to come. All our soldiers, from the top brass to the rank and file, had been awaiting this "New Year's Eve" for many years now. What a tranquil night in the Truong Son Range: But tens of thousands of men were moving to their targets.

All commanders, some of whom had white hair, were now checking their plans on maps for the last time. It was certain that at this moment the puppets from Saigon to the Central Highlands could not guess how we were going to act. Nor could they calculate our strength. We had led them from one mistake to another in assessing the situation here.

We all hoped that D-hour would begin with many advantages. Our great rear was quiet and peaceful at this hour. We were sure that the comrades in the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee were restlessly following the situation on this battlefield. The great rear was doing its best to satisfy all our needs and requirements for launching a large-scale offensive and winning great victories on the frontline. Our rear was really heroic and great.

I told Front Commander Hoang Minh Thao on the phone: We should go ahead with our plan. Nothing has been changed. Make sure the signal task is performed well. This will help you command your units and control the situation. Be in close contact with me by all three means in order to promptly exchange our views and handle the situation properly. After the situation is controlled and decisions are made, orders must be given to the lower echelons to carry them out immediately without further discussion. Wish you success.

Part VI: "Attack on the Stronghold"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 12 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] At 0200 sharp on the morning of 10 March, the offensive on Ban Me Thuot was heralded by the fire from sapper units directed against the Hoa Binh and city airfields. Long-range artillery began destroying military targets in the city. From a point 40 kilometers from Ban Me Thuot, our tank unit started their engines, knocked down trees which had been cut halfway in advance, headed for Ban Me Thuot, on the xre poc rover, Modern ferryboats were rapidly assembled, while tanks, armored vehicles, antiaircraft guns, and antiarmored car guns formed queues to cross on the ferries. The mountains and forests of the Central Highlands were shaken by a fire storm.

From the command post, I could clearly hear the regular and rapid explosion of our shells. I called Hoang Minh Thao and we talked over a telephone equipped with a tape recorder. Here is a report on some aspects of the situation that day:

No sooner had the artillery opened fire than the lights in the city went off. The city airfield was ablaze, and so was the Mai Hac De depot. Tanks were moving into areas and waiting. Sappers had occupied the city airfield. At 0400, a unit thrust toward the 6-point intersection and met a unit of the 95th regiment. At 0630, our troops entered the rice depot. At 0700, our troops occupied the Mai Hac De munitions depot. The enemy fled southwest to Chi Lang hamlet. At 0710, our infantry units came to within 300 meters of the sector. At 0705, [time as heard], our troops intercepted an enemy armored force advancing toward the 23d Infantry Division. At 0725, the guns stopped firing. At 0730, our tanks advancing from the north and west arrived in the Mai Hac De area, that is, the armored car area. The units which had made a deep thrust had passed the broadcasting station area and were advancing to the 23d Division's communications center. At 0745, our tanks infiltrated the operations command center of the sector, and one began firing on the command post of the 23d Division. The northern part of the city was occupied. In the southern part of the city, our troops had entered the army church and (?cut off) peak 560. At 0915, Hoa Binh district town, including the command area and the underground shelters, was completely occupied. We annihilated part of the enemy forces while the remainder fled southward, pursued by our troops. But still our troops could not enter the armored car area.

The enemy air force had acted, concentrating its attacks on the northern part of the city. We ordered the 3d regiment, which was equipped with antiaircraft guns, to come and begin firing at the enemy aircraft. At 1000, our troops attacked and seized the Anh Dao Hotel at the 6-point intersection crossroad. At 1100, two of our tanks started attacking the enemy sector command who asked their superiors for permission to withdraw. The only places where enemy aircraft could land safely were the stadium and the flag-staff field--all the other areas were occupied by our forces. At the Hoa Binh airfield, we captured four blockhouses, the control tower and the signal tower. The enemy directed the 3d Battalion there to resist, but this attempt failed. At 1430, the enemy sector command fled from its headquarters. At 1515, we intensively shelled the training center.

Therefore, by 1700 on 10 March, we had occupied the major part of the city, and while we had attacked the area of the 23d Infantry Division and the sector command post we had not yet completely occupied it. The enemy's artillery was paralyzed right at the beginning and the support provided by his tactical air force was not very effective. However, both the enemy forces in the airfield area and the 53d Regiment rear counter-attacked rather fiercely.

I ordered the front to hold the areas occupied, hunt down remnant enemy troops in these areas, take precautions--especially at night--against the enemy's regrouping in order to counterattack us, make adequate preparations so as to be able to clearly see the targets and organize attacks to knock out the 23d Infantry Division, to direct the whole of the 10th Division from Duc Lap to the northwest of the city to stand ready to smash enemy counterattacks from 11 March onward and to comply with all policies well once they entered the city.

It must be noted that only on 10 March did the enemy clearly realize that we intended to attack Ban Me Thuot, and although he was stunned, it was already too late. Since strategic Route 14 had already been cut, regiments belonging to the enemy's 23d Division stationed in Pleiku did not dare to move by road, and they did not have enough airborne means to go to the rescue of Ban Me Thuot. The regiments were also very confused and agitated because the majority of the families, wives and children of the commanders and soldiers were living in Ban Me Thuot city. An additional factor was that we were violently shelling Pleiku airfield to prevent the enemy from sending troops to Ban Me Thuot.

On the morning of 11 March, I received a message reporting that at 0720 our heavy artillery shelled the 23d Infantry Division, wiping out 16 houses, that our tanks and infantry were advancing toward the 23d Infantry Division and that the enemy was facing a dangerous situation. Thirty minutes later, our tanks and infantry descended upon the 23d Infantry Division from four directions. The enemy troops were given the order to hold on to the last.

At 0815, we learned that the deputy commander and part of the staff of the 23d Infantry Division had already fled the division. We continued to attack and discovered two underground shelters. It was reported that Col Nguyen Cong Luat, chief of Darlac Province and concurrently sector commander, and the assistant to the 23d Division deputy commander were captured by our troops. In an attack on another underground shelter at the 23d Infantry Division base, our troops captured 13 more of the enemy, including 4 captains and Col Vu The Quang, division deputy commander. In many places, enemy troops brandished white flags while fleeing and were captured in the coffee forest.

At 1030, we intercepted a message sent by the enemy's 21st Ranger Multibattalion Unit to a high level. The message said: At present, the multibattalion command, the 23d Reconnaissance Company and the artillery unit are facing a very tense situation. Darlac sector has been lost; the 23d Division Command has been lost and so have the 21st Multibattalion Unit rear and the 24th Multibattalion Unit frontline; the 72d and 96th battalions are stationed behind the sector command where there are many Viet Cong tanks, and cannot, therefore, do anything; the 21st Multibattalion Unit is ineffective and cannot rescue the 23d Division. At present, munitions are nearly exhausted; there remain only two guns and 100 shells. If not resupplied, we will be plunged into a most dangerous situation.

Part VI Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 13 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Part VI: "Attack on the Stronghold"]

[Text] After seizing the command post of the 23d Division and the armored car area, our troops overran the 45th Regiment rear base and then occupied the military police, police and communications areas and the regional force training school. Our partisan units met at the 23d Infantry Division Command Headquarters, and our armed action unit entered Ban Me Thuot city. Basically, the battle was over by 1030 on 11 March 1975.

"Basically, the battle is over"--these words were jotted down on the incoming message record by an operations cadre at our command post. Our men's elation cannot be described. I told our men present at the command post: The fact that it took us only a little more than a day and a night to attack and occupy so large a city proves that the enemy can find no means to resist our strength.

A comrade at the command post added: Completing the attack on Ban Me Thuot in little more than a day and a night is a wonderful feat. I have been in this battlefield for 11 years, but this time the preparations made by our troops and their movements were the best I have ever seen. How happy we are! This is the first time we have been transported to attack the enemy and occupy his territory. When we attacked Pleiku in 1968, we endured very great hardships, could occupy only the radio station and had to withdraw in 3 days. It is wonderful that this time we could enter such a large city so rapidly.

I ordered the immediate interrogation of the two puppet colonels to obtain additional information on the situation for a timely forecast of future developments. Comrade Mac Lam of the Military Intelligence Department, who had much experience in interrogation, went first to personally interrogate Col Vu The Quang, deputy commander of the 23d Division. Quang said: Your attack on Ban Me Thuot was not expected by our General Staff or by the Americans. After the Phuoc Long battle, Saigon came to the conclusion that the Viet Cong might attack a number of smaller cities such as An Loc and Gia Nghia but would not be able to attack large cities such as Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku and Tay Ninh. When Ban Me Thout was attacked, Saigon thought that the attack was a diversionary tactic to conceal the intention to attack Gia Nghia. To defend the 2d Military Region, Saigon must hold Nha Trang which has the second base of the II Corps Command, the 5th Logistics Command, and the airfield and seaport. There must a division to defend Qui Nhon, a regiment to defend the Mo Drac pass, a regiment from the Ca pass southward, and a regiment to defend Nha Trang. Nha Trang and Phan Thiet are more important than Qui Nhon. Qui Nhon is important only as long as Pleiku and Kontum remain.

The 23d Division can be regrouped but it would take as much as 3 months to restore 50 percent of its numerical strength. If you attack Nha Trang now, conditions would favor you as the people there are confused. You need to be careful about naval artillery, especially the 76-mm guns, because there are few 122-mm guns. In this area, the Saigon air force has more facilities for their activities. But according to pilots in Phuoc Long, each day there were only 30 F-5 sorties for the entire region, and the remaining sorties were made by A-37 aircraft. It would be easier to carry supplies by sea, but morale is low and no defense positions have yet been formed. Saigon can now rely only on the marines and paratroops--but the latter now lack confidence. At present, if the marines or paratroops are badly mauled, the morale of the Saigon armed forces will collapse.

Knowing tha Quang was formerly mayor of Cam Ranh, our men asked him about the enemy defense situation in this harbor. He said: Cam Ranh has no defense capabilities at all. Cam Ranh just puts on an appearance. The houses built by the army corps face the sea for the breeze. By using your present fighting method, you will win immediate victory if you attack. It would take at least 3 months to reorganize the defense of Cam Ranh. Anyway, it is unlikely that its defense can be reorganized because many materials are lacking. Ever since the U.S. withdrawal, there has been a shortage of nylon sandbags, barbed wire, cement and vehicles. In view of this, collapse is very likely.

We were thus able to see the enemy situation more clearly. On the morning of 11 March, I sent the following cable to Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap:

To **Brother Tien**:

1. We have complete control of Ban Me Thuot city and have occupied major targets such as the 23d Infantry Division area, the Darlac sector, the armored car area, the artillery area and the city airfield. We are hunting down remnant enemy troops still hiding in the city. According to initial reports, we have captured nearly 1,000 prisoners of war whom we have yet to classify into various categories. We have also seized a large amount of military booty. The fighting from Duc Lap to Dak Soong is finished, and 12 guns and nearly 100 tons of shells have been seized.

2. We are continuing to expand operations to destroy the surrounding targets such as the 45th Regiment base, the 53d Regiment rear base, Buon Ho, and Ban Don and are increasing our forces to firmly occupy Hoa Binh airfield.

3. On 11 March, the Darlac Military Management Committee began its activities. I propose that comrade Y Bloc be promoted to colonel and appointed chairman of the committee.

4. In view of the situation, it appears that morale among the enemy troops in the Central Highlands is worsening and that they are weak and isolated. Our forces are still both strong and enthusiastic, our rear service is able to carry out its mission, and weather conditions remain favorable. For the time being, I intend both to consolidate Ban Me Thuot and stand ready to foil any enemy counterattack while expanding our operations to the surrounding areas in order to become the complete masters of Darlac Province. If we extend operations to eastern Phu Bon we can either annihilate or encircle the enemy and from there we can extend operations northward to Pleiku to encircle and annihilate the enemy and isolate him at Kontum. The southward extension of operations may be postponed. I have exchanged views with brothers Dinh (Dinh Duc Thien) and Lam (Le Ngoc Hien) here, whom you surely know. I suggest that you exchange views with the Military Party Committee, report to the Political Bureau and then give us instructions. [signed] Tuan.

Part VII: "Racing With the Enemy and the Weather"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 14 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] The Ban Me Thuot battle was a lightning flash that staggered and confused the enemy. The puppet clique in Saigon wanted to conceal its serious setback, striving to argue that Ban Me Thuot was still in its hands. Its spokesman held a news conference, saying that the report on the fall of Ban Me Thuot was completely false. As soon as French newsman (Paul Andry) reported that Ban Me Thuot was really under our control, he was shot dead by the puppet police at their headquarters.

We advocated and suggested that the Central Military Party Committee and High Command not immediately release any news report on the Ban Me Thuot battle through our press and radio station but let the enemy boast and be half-dead later because it would not be able to make an announcement after the whole province of Darlac was liberated.

On the afternoon of 11 March, I asked Comrade Hoang Minh Thao to immediately carry out a number of urgent tasks: Fill the remaining underground shelters in the township; search for and rescue our detained brothers and sisters; demolish enemy positions around the township and slightly beyond like Buon Ho, Re Poc, Lac Thien, Ban Don, Duc Xuyen and Khanh Duong; and strive to gain time to consolidate our organizations, supply weapons and improve technical skills in order to stand ready to advance farther. The immediate task for a commander at that time was to take full advantage of the favorable situation to urgently develop the victory, because only by satisfactorily developing it could we consolidate the past victories and win new victories more rapidly and easily. But how to develop the victory? In what direction? To what degree? With what force? This was a problem to be pondered and weighed very carefully. This was a race with the enemy and the weather to expand the victory.

In the Western highlands at that time, the enemy still had at his disposal his 2d Army Corps, a large regular force, and his local troops in Kontum and Pleiku, except for a part of these forces that were being annihilated in Duc Lap, Dac Soong, Nui Lua and Ban Me Thuot city. His real capability consisted of the 2d Army Corps with its Ranger multibattalions which were motivated to counterattack and retake Ban Me Thuot or to intensify the defense of remaining positions and towns in the Western highlands, open communications lines and stand on the defensive until the rainy season. We should also pay attention to the fact that the enemy would mobilize one or two divisions from other battlefields to counterattack if our operations decreased. In the Western highlands, the rainy season would arrive in about 2 months. It would be a great obstacle to the operations of our troops, especially the large battle groups equipped with heavy weapons. During this 2-month period, we should have a battle plan according to which we could attack with such an intensity that we could score a rapid and neat victory and maintain our victorious position until the end of the rainy season when we would continue our offensive. Moreover, during the same period of time, our troops' fervor would increase and they would grow stronger while the enemy troops would become weaker, thus offering us an opportunity to win immediate victory, overfulfill the 1975 plan and fulfill even the 1976 plan in the Western highlands before the arrival of the rainy season.

I, comrades Dinh Duc Thien and Le Ngoc Hien and others in the command began to exchange views and discuss the problem on the evening of 11 March and on the morning of 12 March. I sent a report on the situation in the Western highlands and on our plans to the Political Bureau and High Command. At the same time, I suggested that the High Command order the troops on the Tri-Thien front to boldly advance to Route 1 in order to prevent the enemy troops from moving to the Western highlands. I deemed it necessary to add that after winning the first battle of Ban Me Thuot, that is, after making outstanding progress along with scoring this resounding victory, our troops should also disclose and overcome their weaknesses, such as the lack of alertness and the use of old fighting methods. But, we thought a great deal about this question: After the Ban Me Thuot battle, how will the enemy operate on the Western highlands battlefield? What will he do on the southern battlefield? What will be the reaction of the Americans and the ringleaders of the Saigon puppet army and administration?

At that time, the enemy in the Central Highlands, faced with our dangerous and violent attacks, rapidly disbanded. In one day or more, it lost two important nerve centers: the command network of the regional forces for all of Darlac Province and the headquarters of the 23d puppet Division.

The enemy certainly was going to counterattack to recapture Ban Me Thuot. However, Ban Me Thuot was already in an isolated situation. Roads were cut off and large airfields seized. Therefore, if the enemy landed its troops by air, its activities would be restricted. It would have to use the mobile force of the 2d Corps. Even if it also used its general reserve force, it would not be easy for it to recapture Ban Me Thuot, because we had a strong force deployed to attack enemy reinforcement troops.

From 10 March, we coordinated our activities on the other southern battlefields. Therefore, the enemy had to make a general review of all the battlefronts to see if it could actually concentrate on its attacks against Ban Me Thuot.

Besides their military difficulties, the U.S.-puppets encountered political, moral, and economic difficulties. It was not certain that supplemental U.S. aid would arrive. The Ford administration also had other difficulties in the Middle East and even in the United States itself.

As for us, our rapid, repeated victories at the Ban Me Thuot battle greatly encouraged and gave confidence to all our units in all battlefields. Our units were still powerful. Our logistical forces suffered very few losses and were even reinforced with what we had captured from the enemy. During our discussion about the situation of grain and ammunition, Comrade Dinh Duc Thien stretched his hands and gladly said: We have gained a profit which is not 4 times greater, but 10 times greater than what we have invested. Our grain and ammunition is sufficient, even plentiful. We have enough for our use not only until the rainy season, but also throughout the dry season of next year. We also have a lot of vehicles and ammunition, and we seized many enemy vehicles and large amounts of enemy ammunition at the Mai Hac De ammo depot in Ban Me Thuot. Let us launch more violent, bigger, and more rapid attacks if possible.

The problem then was to rapidly develop our attacks so the enemy would not have enough time to cope with them and to prevent heaven from causing obstacles to our activities. A race with the enemy and heaven began on the morning of 12 March.

After careful deliberation the comrades in the Command Headquarters and I concurred that we would send a large part of our forces reserved for this campaign northward along Route 14 to exterminate the enemy and liberate Pleiku and isolate Kontum.

Part VII Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 15 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Part VII: "Racing With the Enemy and the Weather"]

[Text] To carry out this plan it was necessary on the one hand to quickly destroy the remaining enemy in areas adjacent to Ban Me Thuot city and completely liberate Darlac Province; and on the other to stand ready to foil any attempt by enemy reinforcements to counterattack and recapture Ban Me Thuot, thereby firmly defending the liberated area.

As for Ban Me Thuot City itself, the military management committee should make its first public appearance at an early date so as to call on puppet troops and administration personnel to show themselves and hand in their weapons, to organize an air defense system and evacuate the people, to set up the administration at the basic level and organize self-defense forces for the city, and to immediately restore normal operations to insure the people's lives--operations like hospitals, schools, markets, the power plant, the waterworks plant, stores, enterprises and so forth. The greatest and most urgent problem facing Ban Me Thuot at the time was to supply grain and food for the people in the city and its surrounding areas so that they could stabilize their lives. Some warehouses containing rice, salt, canned goods and medicines seized from the enemy in the city were opened for distribution to the people.

On the afternoon of 12 March I received a message from Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap, which said, in effect: The Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee, elated over our armed forces' great and resounding victories in both the primary and secondary directions, convey their warm congratulations to all cadres, combatants, party members, youth union members, national defense workers and people on the Central Highlands front.

The Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee held a conference and assessed the situation as follows: The strategic and campaign plans formulated by the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee have been proved correct. The victories scored in Ban Me Thuot, Duc Lap, the Route 19 area and other places indicate that we are capable of winning great victories more quickly than initially planned. A striking fact is that morale among the enemy has seriously declined. In face of this situation, it is necessary to adopt a spirit of urgency and forcefulness and to promptly seize the opportunity to win great victories. Brothers Le Duan, Le Duc Tho and Vo Nguyen Giap are in complete agreement with the front that in Ban Me Thuot we must quickly destroy remaining enemy units, extend our operations to the areas surrounding the city and stand ready to intercept enemy reinforcements. We must rapidly extend our operations toward Phu Bon to destroy all vital forces of the enemy and seize Pleiku with a view toward capturing this province. We should isolate and destroy Kontum later and finally march south.

Only a few minutes later brother Vo Nguyen Giap cabled me again with this information: According to latest reports, the enemy was planning to rely on forces which had yet to be completely destroyed, like part of the 53d regiment, the 21st Ranger multibattalion unit and some positions adjacent to Ban Me Thuot, especially Buon Ho and Phuoc An.

The enemy was also planning to send in as reinforcements from one to two regiments of regular troops and Rangers supported by aircraft to mount a counterattack in a bid to recapture Ban Me Thuot.

At the Command Headquarters, a newly received report revealed that the 45th Battle Group and the core command of the 23d Division of the puppets had been airlifted by helicopter from Pleiku to Buon Ho at noon on 11 March; and another battle group would be heli-lifted to Phuoc An on 12 March. Meanwhile, the puppet air force was being mobilized to a high degree; and the U.S. Air Force in Thailand was making unusual preparations. Therefore, the most urgent task was to concentrate our forces on quickly destroying enemy units and bases around Ban Me Thuot and annihilating enemy reinforcements.

The two aforementioned messages strongly encouraged all of us. The assessment of the situation and the instructions for action in the Central Highlands provided by the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee completely accorded with our views, thoughts and plans. Such clear-sighted assessment and views as well as the understanding and unanimity of views between the Political Bureau and the field command were one of the decisive factors in all victories. Elated by the victories already achieved and firmly confident of future victories, we quickly proceeded with our operations. I sent Comrade Le Ngoc to meet with the comrades of the Central Highlands Front Command immediately and to discuss specific measures to develop the victories already gained in the campaign. Meanwhile, Comrade Dinh Duc Thien left the Command Headquarters for the various logistics units, troop stations and storage depots to inspect and encourage his personnel. We also planned to move the Command Headquarters forward to meet the developments of the situation. In this way the staff cadres of the Command Headquarters would be able to closely watch the situation on a daily basis and study troop movements and the terrain around Pleiku while planning fighting methods and the deployment of troops and firepower for the battle of Pleiku to destroy the nerve center of the enemy's II Command. We also telephoned Hanoi to request weather forecasts for April and May 1975 in the Central Highlands.

On 12 and 13 March the enemy did not acknowledge the fact that we had liberated Ban Me Thuot. Meanwhile, radio stations and news agencies of the Western world were still uncertain about this development. The enemy's MR II was trying to cope with the situation by itself. In various flight formations, A-37 aircraft unloaded their bombs on Ban Me Thuot city, and enemy reconnaissance planes made repeated passes over the eastern part of the city. Just as we had foreseen, the 45th Regiment belonging to the 23d puppet Division was airlifted from Pleiku to Phuoc An, an area east of Ban Me Thuot city, where we had prepared our forces that were ready to fight. Another key battle in the Central Highlands was about to start.

Part VIII: "Smash the Counterattack"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 16 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] From noon on 11 March to dawn on 14 March, our front command post was busy and tense but very enthusiastic. Thousands of news reports from our units and hundreds of technical reconnaissance reports seized by our troops were continuously sent to our front command post. Our race with the enemy really began as soon as the gunfire died down in Ban Me Thuot city. Our offensive gunshots quickly spread along Route 14 and to Buon Ho, Ban Don, Dat Ly, the base of the 53d Regiment, the rear of the 45th Regiment and to other places. Our weapons and equipment continued to spread toward targets around Ban Me Thuot.

The 320th Division sent a unit along Route 14 which launched an attack further south, liberated Buon Ho district town, and chased the enemy to Dat Ly; another unit launched an attack northward to Ta Leo bridge and took firm control of an 80-kilometer stretch of Route 14. The 10th Division moved toward the east of Van Me Thuot, took a firm position and stood ready to intercept any enemy reinforcements coming to liberate Ban Me Thuot.

At noon on 12 March, we formed a position to encircle the Phuoc An subsector and district town. The puppet subsector commander fled with the subsector policemen. Units of the 316th Division and the Regiment 95-B wiped out enemy troops in trenches in the city and freed our brothers and sisters detained by the enemy in Ban Me Thuot prison. These units then advanced and occupied the area of the 23d Division training school, tracked and captured a number of the remaining enemy fleeing to rubber plantations west of the city and called on enemy civil defense groups and local force platoons to surrender. The sapper troops firmly held Hoa Binh airfield and repelled enemy units coming from the 53d Regiment base to reoccupy the airfield. Our long-range artillery units readjusted their firing coordinates, and our antiaircraft defense units concentrated their formations on the eastern part of the city in order to readily attack enemy airborne troops. Our tank and armored car detachments reached their regrouping positions and prepared to launch new attacks along the roads leading to Ban Me Thuot, Lac Thien and Phuoc An.

In the city, after the gunfire had died down, people hurriedly dug antiaircraft defense shelters or evacuated to areas surrounding the city. Military police units were set up, led the people to evacuate to the west of the city, blocked the road leading to the east, and captured stubborn reactionaries trying to flee. Our troops gave rice and salt to poor families before the evacuation. Our antiaircraft defense units' fire covered the city and firmly counterattacked enemy aircraft on bombing or reconnaissance missions.

Throughout Darlac Province, enemy troops were like snakes which had lost their heads. In Ban Don, the majority of the enemy troops came out and surrendered while others left their positions and fled. The puppet lieutenant colonel commanding the rear base of the 45th puppet Regiment had to command both his own troops and remaining troops of the 53d Regiment. The commander of the 53d puppet Regiment cabled to his superiors requesting rescue and proposing that napalm bombs be dropped on our formations to enable his troops to flee.

While spreading to areas around Ban Me Thuot city, our troops met with enemy groups coming out to surrender and captured vehicles and 105-mm guns. A-37's came to bomb Ban Me Thuot city and enemy reconnaissance planes intensified activities over Phuoc An and Hoa Binh airfield.

At our command post, the operation map was covered with circles and red crosses marking the places where our troops had annihilated the enemy and taken full control of targets, red arrows showing the advance of our units, and overlapping blue arrows indicating the direction of enemy withdrawal to adjacent forests. There were also diaries written with different handwriting and different pens by comrades in charge of following the situation. Telephone calls came in. When listening carefully telephone operators could not help being gleeful on hearing the news of victories reported from the battlefields. Comrades serving in the command post worked and walked quietly and handed cigarettes which had just been delivered from the rear to staff cadres who were listening on the telephone.

Spring had just begun. Since new green leaves had not yet fully developed on the "khopj" trees of the Central Highlands forests, the noontime sunshine was very hot. The humming of all kinds of insects and the crowing of pheasants near the house were heard simultaneously with remote gunfire and the droning of OV-10 reconnaissance planes hovering in search of targets, together with the calls "Hello, ZA-75 speaking" from the command post.

It was noon on 12 March--the height of command activity in the fight against the enemy counterattack--when suddenly, all telephone lines of the command post were cut off. We heard neither a bomb explosion nor the droning of aircraft. Our repeated phone calls went unanswered. Commanding comrades stopped working, shook their heads and looked at one another in silence. The comrade in the signal staff rushed out from the underground bunker to look for the cause of the telephone breakdown. Meanwhile, the roaring of a herd of elephants became louder and louder from a distance of about 300 meters from the command post. We realized that, disturbed by the explosion of bombs and shells on the battlefield, the elephants left their area and were heading for our command post on their way toward the Vietnam-Cambodia border. The command post defense unit was immediately sent out to check the advance of the elephants, but with the order that they should not fire upon the elephants in accordance with the disciplinary regulations on the need to preserve precious wild animals. The unit was ordered to do nothing to excite the elephants so that they would not trample the command post and destroy it. Everyone was instructed to enter the A-shaped underground shelter, if need be, to avoid the mighty beasts. Fortunately, the elephants passed by the command post while our troops remained quiet. We expressed pity for our signal comrades who went out to mend the telephone wires which had been broken by the elephants. Long lengths of wire had been carried away by the elephants.

On the nights of 12 and 13 March we took turns sleeping, leaving cadres on duty to follow the situation. Although the forests were quiet at night, we could not sleep soundly for long periods. We tossed about and thought of various problems before dozing off and awoke amid the telephone call "hellos" from the bunker of the cadres on duty, sounds of the deer by the brook and the sound of the quick pace of a cadre on duty coming to wake us to report on the situation.

On 13 March, we received a flash cable from Hanoi. As soon as they finished transcribing a portion of the cable, the code breakers gave me each line of the message as soon as it was deciphered. Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap conveyed to me the opinion of the Political Bureau and Central Military Party Committee after reading my previous cable report. The Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee informed me that the other battlefields had begun to coordinate their operations and advised us to check and supervise the annihilation of enemy units coming to counterattack, to try to destroy as many enemy forces as possible within Ban Me Thuot and the adjacent areas and to quickly encircle Phu Bon. The Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee envisaged that if a large portion of the enemy forces were destroyed, if Ban Me Thuot city and many other district towns were lost, and if Route 19 was cut off, the remaining enemy forces in the Central Highlands would regroup in Pleiku or might be forced to make a strategic retreat and to abandon the Central Highlands.

Therefore, the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee instructed us that it was necessary to immediately encircle Pleiku, to block both the land and air routes of the enemy and to make adequate preparations to annihilate them. It appeared that the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee had at an early date foreseen the enemy's strategic retreat from the Central Highlands. Moreover, the battle position arrangements taken according to the campaign strategy before the day we opened fire to attack Ban Me Thuot had also been contemplated in order to prevent the enemy from either sending reinforcements to rescue the Central Highlands or fleeing the Central Highlands easily.

Part VIII Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 17 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Part VIII: "Smash the Counterattack"]

[Text] Waves of enemy helicopters continued to land troops in areas of Phuoc An and west of Hoa Binh airfield. The 44th Regiment, part of the 45th Regiment and the remaining troops of the 53d Regiment who had fled there experienced their most frightening moments. While trying to land, they trembled with fear because many had already been shot down by various types of anti-aircraft guns. No sooner had they touched the ground--even before they could regroup--they fled in disorder to avoid the high-trajectory direct fire of our infantry. They panicked when they saw our tanks and armored cars rushing toward them.

The enemy airborne units were annihilated one by one, and the remaining troops ran away, mixing with one another and gradually withdrawing toward Route 21. They were followed in retreat by local troops, local administration personnel and also the Rangers. They left behind many vehicles, artillery pieces, rifles and much ammunition. Our units then used the armored cars to pursue the enemy troops, took to the highway to overtake the fleeing enemy formations and formed teams to meet the enemy troops along the road and capture the remaining troops.

At that time our staff, military intelligence and operational cadres found it difficult to mark the enemy unit designations on the map because enemy formations on the battlefields had retreated in disorder and because the enemy radio broadcasts were so confusing that it was impossible to distinguish units calling for rescue from units answering the calls. Meanwhile, flights of enemy aircraft hovering at high altitude could not support enemy troops on the ground.

At dawn on 14 March, after reading a general report written by the standing detachment comrade who was on the night shift, I concluded: The main force of the puppet 23d Division --comprising the 44th and 45th regiments west of Ban Me Thuot--had been annihilated after 2 days of fighting; the remaining troops of the 53d Regiment and the 21st Ranger multi-battalion unit also met with the same fate; the enemy II corps' counterattack in the Central Highlands has thus been smashed, and the enemy was plunged more deeply into a passive position and would suffer still more defeats. We would continue to expand operations according to the existing plan which had been agreed to by the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee.

On 14 March I cabled to the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee, informing them that I had received their messages Nos 3, 4, 7 and 10, that I was very enthused by their spirit and intention to expand the campaign, and that we promised to do our best to arrange and guide implementation according to unfolding battlefield developments in order to meet the aforementioned requirements--that is, to shorten the time and overfulfill the 1975 plan in 2 or 3 months, which would even meet the plan forecast for 1976.

I reported on initial developments in the campaign to the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee so that they might have a better understanding of the situation. I pointed out that we had to induce the enemy to act according to our intentions, to make him misunderstand our principal offensive direction and to continue to build on his misunderstanding until we launched an offensive in the principal direction in order to preserve the factor of surprise during the campaign. From 1 to 9 March 1975, before launching the offensive on Ban Me Thuot, I deployed troops according to the campaign arrangements and attracted the enemy's attention to Kontum and Pleiku, cut off roads and isolated the principal targets. Therefore, only when I was about to open fire on Ban Me Thuot did the enemy sound the alarm and think of strengthening his forces, but it was then too late because his troops had been stretched out and pinned down in other regions.

I reported that attacks on the main targets in Ban Me Thuot city consisted of joint operations by various armed branches in four columns. This was coordinated with movements of seasoned units and infantry battalions that secretly advanced toward the city by bypassing outposts near the Ban Me Thuot city outer perimeter, using large military forces and carrying them by mechanized means at high speed along major road axes and directly attacking inside the city. This was done with a view to immediately smashing the two leading organs of the enemy command--that is, the 23d Infantry Division and the sector command post.

From the south we simultaneously launched two infantry battalions which had been secretly positioned; one of these battalions attacked the 23d Infantry Division while the other attacked the sector command post. At the same time, two other columns proceeded from the west and northeast--each supported by infantry, tanks, artillery and antiaircraft units--and launched a deep thrust into the city center. Moreover, a spearhead was launched from the southwest; this consisted of an infantry battalion and a tank company, and the battalion was to advance simultaneously with the tanks and attack the main target. Finally, an infantry company carried by armored cars advanced with a tank company while two other infantry companies which had been positioned about 2 kilometers from the main target--that is, the 23d Infantry Division--waited for the arrival of the tanks. Thus they constituted a spearhead composed of an entire infantry battalion with the tank and armored car support. They directly attacked the main target just as our artillery started doing its job.

The enemy had no time to react and was unable to bring in other forces. We had a rapid victory in Ban Me Thuot. There we practiced a method of bold surprise attack which called for very good organization of very complex joint operations; we did our best to meet these requirements. However, after attacking and smashing the enemy, we detected shortcomings requiring rapid solutions. Understanding of the situation and working methods had not yet caught up with new circumstances and requirements and were still affected by old-fashioned practices, (?accumulated shortcomings and delay). Persons able to make decisions and organize swift action had not yet emerged conspicuously. There were still cases of failure to firmly direct troops and to use radio sets, although they were available; instead, secret codes continued to be used, and telephone wires were clumsily dragged along. There was also the failure to use vehicles seized from the enemy and to dare to employ POW's who could drive to drive cars to carry our troops. Therefore, our troops had to trudge along. Though the enemy troops were confused and were disintegrating--which was unlike a situation in which they were organized and had made defensive preparations and were waiting for us--our side, before launching an attack, still proceeded according to the full routine, made nighttime preparations and waited till morning to attack. Though the enemy air force launched only limited attacks, flew at a high altitude and dropped bombs inaccurately, our troops were not allowed to move about in daytime but were compelled to wait, delay and waste time. Repeated warnings had to be made about these shortcomings which were being overcome. The campaign developed quickly, and it was large and very complex; as result, opportunities to win more victories followed one upon another.

However, local party committee echelons were confused by all the tasks that had to be done, like working in broad daylight instead of moonlight and moving from dense forests to cities; these sudden changes upset their usual thoughts, organization and manners--changes concerning the shift from simple to large-scale work. In my opinion, this state of affairs had come about in the Central Highlands and could also appear on other battlefields. It stemmed from the old-fashioned assessment of the enemy strength and the thoughts and working method that were not yet compatible with new conditions. It was now necessary to act rapidly, display mobility, gain time and simultaneously improve organizational and leadership capabilities, make decisions, assume responsibility as unit commanders entrusted with tasks, and dare to act and assume responsibility instead of thinking that everyone should bear the responsibility. During this campaign, Central Highlands cadres and troops would mature much more in the new combat circumstances. I proposed that more time be spent training troops to be mobile and versatile. Rapidly, urgently and consistently improving the ability to organize and to command; and teaching cadres and combatants to drive enemy vehicles of all types and to use our own and the enemy's radio equipment. The various armed branches should learn how to use enemy weapons and equipment like artillery, armored cars, and construction machines. I said that in the near future great attention should be paid to seizing the enemy's equipment and using it to attack him.

Finally, I informed the Central Military Party Committee and the Political Bureau that I agreed with the propaganda moves mentioned in Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap's message. Concerning enemy efforts to conceal and deceive, I said we should carry out certain tasks at the right time. In my opinion, as soon as we basically completed liberation of Darlac Province, the news might be spread by newspapers and over the radio. When spreading the news, it would be advisable to simultaneously publish the statement of the People's Revolutionary Committee of Darlac Province, the composition of the committee, the battle results, and POW statements.

Part IX: "The Turning Point in the War"

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 19 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Text] On 15 March 1975 I received a reply from the Political Bureau signed by Comrade Le Duc Tho, and another from the Central Military Party Committee signed by Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap. At a meeting in Hanoi these two bodies had carefully read my message of 14 March, agreed with our opinion and approved our proposals. The passages dealing with experiences drawn from our diversionary tactics, with fighting methods and with the training of cadres and combatants in using captured weapons and technical equipment as well as the passages dealing with the shortcomings and the command method of the Central Highlands troops were transmitted by the Central Military Party Committee to the General Staff for rapid dissemination to other battlefields. The proposals for coordinating the various battlefields were transformed by the Political Bureau and Central Military Party Committees into instructions which were then sent to various military regions for implementation.

After receiving the message from the Political Bureau and Central Military Party Committee, on the basis of the latest developments in the Central Highlands situation, we met and discussed the implementation of the plan to expand operations toward the north. The Central Highlands Command fully agreed to the draft plan and resolved to concentrate on implementing it at all costs, because after so many years of fighting the Americans on this Central Highlands battlefield, the comrade cadres in the command were more elated than anyone else by the recent resounding victories and were confident of further victories.

In 1968 and 1972 we had already fought great battles in the Central Highlands, but those victories were not so rapid, resounding and great as those won this year. At that time our forces were not so strong as now, and our rear support bases and road networks were not quite adequate. Also, the enemy at that time had very powerful U.S. fire and logistics support and was not occupied in other areas, so that he was able to concentrate on resisting us in the Central Highlands. This time, however, prospects were bright for liberating the Central Highlands. If we acted wisely and rapidly we might finish our job before the 1975 rainy season. Any difficulties might have forced us to wait until the 1975-1976 dry season. Accordingly the comrades clearly perceived the weight of their responsibility for the overall situation--very heavy but very glorious--and they enthusiastically and proudly contemplated the immediate prospects.

Comrade Hoang Minh Thao frequently confided to us: Apart from other important and decisive reasons, one reason for the southern revolution's successes to date was that we had mastered part of the Central Highlands and that the Central Highlands compatriots were valiant and indomitable. Over the years I had thought day and night of liberating the Central Highlands completely, and I did my best to insure that the revolution required the Central Highlands compatriots of various nationalities for their meritorious deeds.

On 15 March and on the morning of 16 March we received a number of technical news items and some comments by Western radio stations.

Though the reports were scattered and low-level and the comments brief, they were very important in assessing the current enemy situation in the Central Highlands. For example, a U.S. news agency reported that on 15 March the price of a Pleiku-Saigon air ticket rose to as much as 40,000 piasters, because there were so many people competing for air tickets to Saigon on 15 March. At noon on 16 March we intercepted a message from enemy aircraft taking off from Pleiku, telling one another to land in Nha Trang. Why did they have to take off from one place and land in another which was farther away, even though we had not yet intensively shelled the Pleiku airfield?

At 1500 on 16 March Hanoi sent a message saying that the forward command post of the enemy II Corps had moved to Nha Trang. At 1600 the same day, news came from Thuan Man that the observation station on the Ia Leo bridge had spotted a long convoy of vehicles running from the My Thanh junction toward Phu Bon. At that time we were still concentrating on Ban Me Thuot, but we now began to pay special attention to the Pleiku and Kontum areas and to Routes 14 and 19. We also paid great attention to any news relating to Pleiku, the II Corps and the strategic roads leading to the delta.

After receiving these reports, at about 1900 on 16 March staff cadres in the command post held a lively debate. Even before reaching any conclusion and making any final assessment, they all felt that the enemy was doing something in the Central Highlands after receiving two painful blows and suffering defeat in Ban Me Thuot. One comrade suggested the possibility that the enemy would concentrate the remainder of his Central Highlands troops in Nha Trang and would then use them and the strategic general reserve troops to counterattack and reoccupy Ban Me Thuot from Route 21. He argued: The "Dragon House" in Hanoi--that is, our High Command headquarters--had reported that the enemy paratroop division was strengthening the Central Highlands and the Red Beret unit had appeared in Phu Bon. If these troops had come to Phu Bon they might go down to Khanh Duong and this division's command might be established in Nha Trang. To support his argument, he recalled the Central Military Party Committee's 13 March message reporting the enemy's intensified counterattack aimed at reoccupying Ban Me Thuot and pointing out the need for us to concentrate on annihilating him.

Another comrade retorted: The Central Military Party Committee's message raised three points. First, the enemy might intensify his counterattack. Second, if he were annihilated, he would withdraw and regroup in Pleiku; we should then try to encircle this area. The third point envisaged the enemy's strategic retreat. If so, the news reaching us today indicated that the enemy might either increase his troops to counterattack or withdraw to Nha Trang. The reports about the Red Beret troops' appearance in Phu Bon would have to be verified because before the enemy could go to Phu Bon he would have to counterattack along Route 14 through Buon Ho district town. Since we had occupied this entire stretch of road and deployed a large force there, would the enemy dare attack there? If the enemy wanted to withdraw, he would have to withdraw his entire army corps and only then would the army corps command be able to retreat to a safe place. If he wanted to withdraw, by what means and along what road could he do so? He could not easily expect to take Route 21 and counterattack to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot. Encountering defeated troops fleeing to Nha Trang along Route 21 would suffice to demoralize the counterattacking forces.

Other comrades opined that although the Central Military Party Committee's message pointed out three possibilities, we had in **fact** already beaten the counterattacking forces, were ready to continue beating them and were also discussing preparations for sending ~~troops~~ troops to encircle and destroy Pleiku. It was now possible that having recently suffered two heavy defeats, the enemy was now so weakened that he would have to flee. We must therefore properly carry out both previous tasks--that is, on the one hand **rapidly** annihilate the counterattacking troops and, on the other, quickly prepare to deploy our forces to encircle Pleiku. If the enemy retreats, he can go neither north nor south because our campaign positions have already been established and the strategic roads cut off.

I pondered the aforementioned reports and attentively **considered the views of other** comrades. In **fact**, on 13 March the Central Military Party Committee envisaged all three possibilities. On our party, when deploying campaign positions prior to opening fire we had already considered these three possibilities. After annihilating Ban Me Thout we would stand ready to annihilate the enemy not once, but many times more; we would attack not only the puppet II Corps but would have to fight also the general reserve force sent in by Saigon by air, because we had cut off and tightly blocked strategic routes 19, 14 and 21 to prevent the enemy from going either north or south.

Perhaps the reports on the paratroops' appearance in Phu Bon were inaccurate, for on the previous day there were reports of some unusual moves on the part of the U.S. Air Force in Thailand, but then nothing unusual occurred. The situation might now develop very quickly because the enemy--after being subjective and having been taken completely unaware at the outset and after having suffered two painful blows--might now make frenzied and even more wrong moves. If he increased troops to counterattack, he would meet more difficulties, become even more bogged down and would likely suffer greater losses. If he retreated, he would go from the frying pan into the fire. Though hard news was scanty, the debate was likely and lengthy and gave us some food for thought and action.

Part IX Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 20 Apr 76 p 3 HK/WA

[Part IX: "The Turning Point in the War"]

[Text] I ordered the various communications networks and monitoring stations to gather information about the enemy; cabled Hanoi to inquire about the general situation throughout the battlefield; and ordered the gathering of news from broadcasts by international radio stations. I urged the Central Highlands command to have a firm grasp of the situation of the 95th and 25th regiments and the 320th and 10th divisions on Routes 19, 14 and 21; and ordered that it must stand ready to provide the 25th Regiment on Route 21 with reinforcements.

At 2100 on 16 March the comrade on alert duty received the news that the enemy was retreating from Pleiku: A convoy of trucks had passed the Vinh Thanh crossroads to move along Route 7, the ammo dump in Pleiku was exploding. Fires had broken out in the city. The command headquarters was alive with activity. A map of communications lines in the Central Highlands was spread on the table. Flashlights and magnifying glasses traced Routes 19, 14, and 7 on the **map** to determine blockade points, shortcuts and directions of attack, and the distances between the nearest units and Route 7 were calculated to set the time for action.

I phoned and spoke directly with Comrade Kim Tuan, then commander of the 320th Division. Before the attack on Ban Me Thuot, I had several times asked about Route 7 and was informed that this route had long been abandoned by enemy troops with bridges left un-repaired and no ferryboats. Two days earlier, I had asked Comrade Kim Tuan about this route and had received the same answer. Now, upon learning that the enemy was retreating along Route 7 and that our unit did not yet have any concrete information about this route and had not yet begun to closely pursue the enemy, I severely criticized the top unit leader. I emphatically told Comrade Kim Tuan: "This is a shortcoming, a reproachable mistake. At this time, the slightest hesitation, mistake, fear of hardship or delay would mean failure. If the enemy escapes, you will be responsible."

In such moments, I do not expect any excuses from my subordinates which might lead them to make less effort. I want them to carry out their tasks in the strictest and most complete manner.

Having been in many battles and campaigns with my subordinates and having encountered the most complex and urgent circumstances, I, as a commander, make strict demands on my subordinates, and they understand me well. Therefore, after my orders had been given, they resolutely carried them out and usually achieved success.

Holding the phone receiver, I recalled scenes of disorderly retreats of the enemy during both the anti-French and anti-U.S. wars--such as those of (Le Pave) and (Charton) on Route 4 during the campaign to liberate the border areas, of the U.S. Marine brigade from Khe Sanh in 1968, of the 1st Division and Ranger and other brigades of the puppets on Route 9 in southern Laos in 1971, and of the 3d puppet from Quang Tri in 1972. The enemy had many times fled in the face of our offensive strength and usually applied different deceptive maneuvers to insure his retreat. But now a whole regular corps of the puppets was hastily fleeing in retreat, abandoning the Central Highlands--a strategically important region.

Why such a retreat? And who had given the order for it? Was it true that the thunderous blow we had dealt at Ban Me Thuot had had such a shattering impact on the enemy? It was true that our well-placed blow had begun to have its effects only a few days after its delivery. It was true that the enemy had been stunned and been rendered strategically confused. The enemy had again made another grave strategic mistake. The order for the retreat of the II Corps must have been given by the central puppet administration in Saigon. Thus, the situation had developed beyond the scope of our campaign and had become a strategic matter. For the first time in the Indochinese war a modernly equipped enemy corps had to abandon an important strategic area and flee during the course of a campaign. This situation would lead to many other important events and might even lead to a quick end to the war with ourselves as the victor. The enemy could not easily smooth out this problem which would trigger both military and political reactions and would affect even the United States; even the United States would not be able to settle this complex problem.

Now a great opportunity had presented itself to us. To firmly grasp this opportunity we must first of all annihilate the retreating enemy forces right on the Central Highlands battlefield and prevent them from escaping to the lowlands. They must be quickly and neatly destroyed to further accelerate changes in the war situation.

Recalling past events and reflecting on current developments, I felt both joy and anxiety. Throughout the night of 16 March we supervised and encouraged the 320th Division to conduct urgent operations, while ordering the Central Highlands command to mobilize more armored cars, trucks, artillery and supplies to help the 320th Division pursue and destroy the enemy. At the same time, we ordered the 5th Military Region forward command in Binh Dinh to mobilize the regional forces of Phu Yen to block Route 7 and prevent the enemy from escaping to Tuy Hoa; cabled the 968th Division, ordering it to march quickly into Pleiku and overrun all enemy positions while in pursuit of the fleeing enemy formations and to attack them from behind; and cabled the 559 Command to send the 470th Engineer Battalion to occupy Kontum and Pleiku, put out fires, guide the people to safe areas and take over all the equipment and storage facilities left behind by the enemy.

From the time these orders were given to the time they were carried out by the various units, especially the order to pursue and destroy the fleeing enemy, we anxiously awaited field reports and it seemed that the time went by all too slowly.

In fact, immediately after receiving the order, the 320th Division urgently conducted operations during the night of 16 March and on the morning of 17 March a unit quickly crossed the jungles to cut Route 7 and stop the enemy east of Phu Bon. Enemy forces were stopped both east and west of Phu Bon. On 18 March our main force caught up with the fleeing enemy, liberated Phu Bon city, destroyed the enemy forces kept at bay there and continued sweeping toward Cung Son. Meanwhile, two divisions of regional troops from Phu Yen destroyed Son Hoa bridge and joined the 320th Division in liberating Cung Son. The enemy forces became panic-stricken and they disintegrated. Six ranger multibattalion units, three armored regiments, various organs of II Corps and many tanks, artillery pieces, engineering vehicles and trucks were subjected to virtual destruction.

Part IX Continued

Hanoi NHAN DAN in Vietnamese 21 Apr 76 p 3 BK/WA

[Part IX: "The Turning Point in the War"]

[Text] Puppet Col Pham Duy Tat, commander of the Ranger force in the 2d Military Region, made the following declaration to us about the puppet units withdrawing from the Central Highlands:

On the afternoon of 14 March, while I was going to various units to reexamine the defense situation in Pleiku, I received a call from the military region headquarters telling me to attend a meeting at the office of Pham Van Phu, commander of the 2d Corps. Phu said he had just come back from a meeting in Cam Ranh with Nguyen Van Thieu, Tran Thien Khiem, Cao Van Vien and Dang Van Quang. Here is Phu's account of the meeting.

Thieu asked Vien: Do we still have reserve forces to reinforce the 2d Corps? Vien replied: No.

Thieu then turned to Phu, asking: If there are no reinforcement troops, how long will you be able to defend the area? Phu answered: I can defend for a month if I get maximum air support, sufficient air borne materiel, weapons, ammunition and reinforcement troops so as to compensate for our recent heavy losses. I will stay in Pleiku to fight and I will die there.

Thieu said: These conditions cannot be met, and the PLAF is conducting violent attacks. Therefore, we must withdraw from Kontum and Pleiku so as to preserve our forces and use our troops to defend the Delta and the coastal area. There, we will have more convenient access to supplies.

Thieu then asked: Could Route 19 be used [for our withdrawal]? Vien answered: In the history of the Indochina war, no forces have been able to withdraw along Route 19 without being badly mauled by the revolutionary forces.

Thieu again asked: How about Route 14? Vien answered: Withdrawal is all the more impossible along Route 14.

All those attending the meeting then realized that the only choice left was Route 7, which had not been used for a long time and was in bad condition, but it could provide an element of surprise. Brig General Tran Van Cam asked: How about the province chiefs, the regional forces and the local people? Shall we also organize their withdrawal?

Phu replied: According to Mr Thieu's order, the regional forces should be left behind, and no information about the withdrawal should be given to the province chiefs. Let them continue to defend. Let us complete our withdrawal, and let them continue to defend. Let us complete our withdrawal and let them find out about it later. The regional forces here consist only of highlanders. Let them return to the highlands.

After completing his explanation, Phu ordered Cam and Ly, chief of staff of the 2d Corps, to work out a withdrawal plan.

On the morning of 15 March, Phu and the major staff of the 2d Corps withdrew to Nha Trang by plane, on the grounds that they would establish a forward command to direct the attacks to recapture Ban Me Thuot. Thus, Phu did not defend Pleiku to his death as he had promised. Troops of technical units withdrew to Phu Bon, taking along their families. This caused the people to clearly realize the puppet administration's intention to leave Pleiku. Puppet officers and troops were then terrified, and their families moved to the airfield in large numbers and vied with one another to get a place on the plane, thus creating a chaotic situation. Those who did get to the airfield used every kind of vehicle to flee to Phu Bon. Traffic congested as everyone wanted to be first to go. People insulted and even fought each other, thus causing more disorderly scenes on the road.

Meanwhile, the 22d Ranger Multibattalion Unit also withdrew from Kontum.

When the puppet 25th Multibattalion Unit arrived at Thanh An, it was overtaken by the PLAF, which launched fierce raids and inflicted heavy losses to it.

According to the plan, the 2d Corps command and combat units had to establish a defense line at Phu Bon and wait for heavy mechanized units and technical units to pass the area. When these units arrived at Phu Bon on 16 March, they were too tired and fed up with the situation. Therefore, they stopped and refused to move further. The troops and vehicles of these units were not only in the city, but also on the roads around the city. Traffic in the city was congested because puppet troops and vehicles arrived in large numbers. These troops then destroyed property and looted the streets, thus causing great disorder.

On 16 April, the PLAF began attacking a unit of the 23d Ranger battalion in (Ban Bleik) Pass, inflicting heavy losses on it. On 17 April, the liberation troops again shelled the enemy command in Phu Bon city, causing significant losses to the 23d Ranger Multibattalion. At that time, the units of the regional force at Phu Bon were disbanded and deserted and fled, thus rendering the situation in the city more confused. The PLAF again launched attacks and seized a section of the road between the eastern part of Phu Bon city and Tu Na Pass, causing the rapid collapse of the enemy's defense of Phu Bon.

The 7th Multibattalion Unit on 17 March called for air support. A formation of A-37 aircraft came to drop bombs but hit the unit's troops. Almost a full battalion was annihilated. On the morning of 18 March the unit was attacked once again by the liberation troops. It sustained serious losses. Only a few troops succeeded in escaping. The liberation troops advanced and occupied Phu Bon.

Phu ordered us to abandon all heavy weapons and war materiel to flee from Phu Bon. I ordered the troops to abandon all vehicles and artillery pieces and to walk around the woods, skipping the pass. The 3rd armored squadron also abandoned all its vehicles and ran into the woods after being intercepted on many occasions by the liberation troops. On the section of road from the Tu Na mountain pass to Son Hoa district, the remnants of the troops had to hide themselves in the woods. Officers and soldiers brought their families with them. Hundreds and thousands of people followed them, thus revealing their whereabouts. The liberation troops constantly pursued and attacked them. Consequently great numbers of us were scattered and lost. The troops, tired and without commanding officers, abandoned all their weapons and equipment during their flight. The soldiers at Phu Tuc and regional posts surrendered or left their ranks and their posts and were seized by the liberation troops.

The 6th Ranger Multibattalion Unit was the rear guard column which had the responsibility of guiding the remnants of the other units back to Son Hoa. On the morning of 20 March the liberation troops began their surprise attack against the first detachment of the 6th Ranger Multibattalion Unit, causing fairly heavy losses. During the following days, the unit took flight but was still pursued and attacked. Only a small number of troops were able to run back to Tuy Hoa. The liberation troops' rapid deployment to the eastern part of Phu Bon township to check the road to the Tu Na mountain pass decided the failure of the Saigon troops' withdrawal from the Central Highlands.

Thus, it was obvious that the Ban Me Thout battle was truly redoubtable and powerful. Next, the battle which annihilated the reinforcement troops in the eastern part of Ban Me Thout was truly quick and neat.

All of this caused panic and confusion among the enemy, not only at the divisional and military zone level, but also up to the enemy leading organ--the Saigon puppet administration. After their errors in tactics and campaign, and after sustaining severe blows by our hands, the enemy committed an error in strategy: Panicked, the Saigon administration ordered all its troops to pull back from the Central Highlands to the lowland with a view to maintaining its forces and safeguarding territory. However, the enemy could neither pull its forces back to the lowland nor safeguard its territory. We annihilated them as they fled.

Once an error in strategy was committed, defeat in the war was certain; it would come sooner or later. The only thing is that it was we who led the enemy to commit this error, stepped up that process by the enemy, and created that turning point in the war. By becoming faster, bolder, more decisive, and more active, and by rushing forward on the impetus of victories, we were certain to win the war.