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From Khe Sanh to Chepone



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FOREWORD

From Khe Sanh to Chepone Highway 9 stretches on exactly 60 kilometres, an insignificant distance for motorized units, let alone heliborne troops. And yet, 20,000 Saigon troops supported by 2,000 US aircraft and setting out from Khe Sanh on February 8, 1971, never reached Chepone. And when they wanted to come back to Khe Sanh, this also proved impossible: the near totality of the men and material was wiped out. By its scope, this battle on Highway 9 was one of the greatest battles fought and victories won by the Liberation forces in Indochina since 1945. Pending a more complete record, this is a summing-up of the operations and an attempt to bring out their significance.

OPERATION LAOS

HIGHWAY 9

From the 20th to the 15th parallel, over about six hundred kilometres, a mountain range running parallel to the sea-coast, the Truong Son, constitutes a natural frontier between Laos and Viet Nam. This great wall more than 1,000 metres above sea level can only be crossed by roads through a few breaches. Through the Ai Lao Pass rising to 410 m. in altitude, Highway 9 is the easiest approach from South Viet Nam to the eastern part of southern Laos and thence, to the middle basin of the Mekong.

This road begins at Dong Ha, an important market-town about twenty kilometres from the demarcation line on the 17th parallel and the biggest US-puppet advanced base in this area, where it meets Highway I, which runs through the whole length of Viet Nam along the sea coast, from the frontier with China to that with Cambodia. Dong Ha is connected with the sea by the Cua Viet River which affords passage for ships of several hundred tons burden.

Soon leaving the narrow coastal strip, Highway 9 stretches westward and reaches the first shoulders of

the Truong Son at ten or twelve kilometres from Dong Ha, on the way to Cam Lo. Climbing uphill and meandering in sinuous and ever deeper valleys, between formerly wooded peaks, it crosses the watershed between the Mekong and the Quang Tri River at km 63 (Ai Lao Pass). Then sloping down toward the frontier, it runs through Khe Sanh (km 65) and Lao Bao before entering Lao territory at km 83.

Following the steep valley of the Chepone River along the latter's northern bank, the road runs between two precipitous massifs overgrown with brambles and forests. It is dotted with a few *ban* (villages) the most important being Ban Dong at km 103. Twenty-two kilometres farther, it reaches Chepone (Sepone), a district capital of the Lao province of Savannakhet and an important communications hub at the confluence of four valleys. Beyond Chepone, the road winds its way through a relatively flat zone of glade-dotted forests over more than one hundred kilometres and connects two other district capitals, Muong Phine (from which starts Highway 23 leading to Saravane) and Phalane (about one hundred kilometres from Chepone). After Phalane, Highway 9 enters a relatively populated land of rice-fields and reaches Savannakhet on the Mekong River, after covering a total of 328 km. In its last section, it runs through Dong Hen then Seno, an important air base at the crossing with Highway 13. The latter links together all the main centres on the east bank of the Mekong: Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Thakhet, Pakse in Laos, with Stung Treng and Kratie in Cambodia, before sloping down towards Saigon via Loc Ninh, Hon Quan and Thu Dau Mot.

Thus, Highway 9 runs through the breadth of Laos in its narrowest part bordering on South Viet Nam.

The Vietnamese section of Highway 9 was made famous by the battle of Khe Sanh in the spring of 1968 (Operation *Dewey Canyon*). There, big US forces had been pinned down and battered by the South Vietnamese PLAF, while the population of the whole coast-line area had risen during the Tet offensives. In July 1968, despite Johnson's injunction to stick it out at Khe Sanh, this base had to be evacuated by the American troops. The Lao portion was then liberated by the Neo Lao Haksat forces from the Vietnamese frontier to Phalane. All attempts by the Vientiane army to infringe this region in Phalane and Muong Phine were foiled. The liberated regions still constituted a wide area more than one hundred kilometres in breadth extending from the Khmer-Lao frontier to the Plain of Jars and to the vast rear bases in northern Laos.

Now, a few words about the climatic conditions in this region. From November to April, the prevailing northeast monsoon casts its dampness on the Truong Son's eastern slopes and on the sea-coast, but once over the mountain ridge, it turns into a dry wind so that during this period, in southern Laos, the weather is all the time sunny, with thick night and morning fog covering the whole landscape, especially the valleys and ravines. With the reversal of the monsoon, in Laos the rainy season begins in May and lasts until October, while on the Vietnamese side it is still fairly wet owing to the southeast wind.

Why did the US command pick this highway for its armed aggression against Laos in February-March 1971?

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THE SITUATION IN INDOCHINA IN 1970

South Viet Nam

The initiative in combat was all the year round firmly in the hands of the patriotic forces whose unrelenting attacks exacted a heavy toll from the enemy, both in men and materials.

"Vietnamization", beset with more and more hazards, was doomed to failure. The year's battle-count runs as follows:

Enemy losses:

— 420,000 troops killed, wounded or captured including 110,000 GIs and South Korean, Thai, Australian, New Zealand and Chiang Kai-shek mercenaries;

— 5,900 war planes and helicopters downed, blasted to pieces on the ground or seriously damaged;

— 14,100 military vehicles (among them 7,400 tanks and armoured cars) destroyed, set ablaze or damaged;

— 680 ships, motor-boats, and military junks sunk, set ablaze or put out of action;

— 1,850 heavy artillery pieces blown up or put out of commission;

— 1,000 depots (fuel, arms and ammunition, military equipment) burnt down or destroyed.

Fiasco of "pacification":

— 12 sub-sector CPs, among them 6 in the Mekong Delta, wiped out;

— 6 "pacification" operations foiled with heavy losses:

+ in Thang Binh sector (about 40 km south-south-east of Da Nang), from February 1 to March 15, 1,450 enemy troops wiped out;

+ at Bien Bach (some 240 km southwest of Saigon in the Mekong Delta), 1,000 enemy troops put out of action;

+ in Giong Trom district (about 70 km south-southwest of Saigon in the Mekong Delta), 2 river flotillas put out of commission, 400 enemy personnel killed, wounded or captured, 40 vessels and motor junks sunk or set ablaze;

+ in the northwest of Hue, from April 30 to May 10, an operation by 7 enemy battalions was thwarted, 1,200 enemy troops put out of action, 50 planes and choppers destroyed;

+ in the region of U Minh forests (about 250 km southwest of Saigon in the Mekong Delta), fiasco in December of the first phase of an extensive "pacification" campaign due to extend over the first quarter of 1971: 2 operational bases wiped out, 5 regiment, battalion, and river

... flotilla CPs annihilated or badly mauled, 7 battalions and fluvial flotillas and 13 companies wiped out, 30 vessels sunk or set ablaze, 10 planes and helicopters destroyed on the ground or heavily damaged, 12 artillery pieces wrecked, 3 pacification and assassination teams eliminated (Phoenix teams), more than 2,000 enemy troops killed, wounded or taken prisoner after 18 days of fighting.

— Many popular uprisings over wide regions weakened, neutralized or destroyed the coercive apparatus which had been painfully set up by the enemy, especially in the Mekong Delta, the coastal strip of central Trung Bo and the Tay Nguyen Highlands. In March and April, more than half of the "strategic hamlets" were made ineffective or dismantled. With "Vietnamization," the population of South Vietnamese cities is hard hit by forcible impressment into the army, tax increases, and inflation. Opposition and resistance against the Thieu-Ky-Khiem clique kept growing.

Laos

As soon as Nixon came to power in 1969, a tremendous military effort was made by Washington in an attempt to regain the initiative in Laos, going to the length of launching a vast offensive for occupying the Plain of Jars. The vigorous riposte of the patriotic forces succeeded in driving out all American-bolstered mercenaries. The 1970 battle-count for Laos runs as follows:

— 30,000 enemy troops killed, wounded or captured including 310 Thai mercenaries and 160 Saigon puppets, 38 battalions (among them 2 Thai battalions) wiped out or decimated, 240 military vehicles blasted to pieces, 375 US planes downed, 8,500 fire-arms seized or destroyed;

— From February 11 to 22, failure of Operation *Ku Kiet* in the Plain of Jars, the enemy being completely expelled from the whole area (Xieng Khoang liberated on February 21);

— Attapeu district capital on the edge of the Bolovens Plateau fell into the patriots' hands on April 28;

— Liberation of Saravane district capital on June 9, more than 500 Vientiane mercenaries put out of action and a great quantity of arms and equipment seized;

— Vang Pao's bandit forces, set up and commanded by the CIA, driven to the verge of disbandment;

— The liberated zones, consolidated and extended, constitute a wide region in one piece from the frontier with China to that with Cambodia.

Cambodia

To stave off the failure of his "Vietnamization" plan, Nixon had Cambodia's neutralist government overthrown and this country invaded by US-Saigon troops. This proved a miscalculation. By trying to turn the Cambodian "oasis of peace" into a bastion for aggression in Indochina, Washington threw the Khmer people and their Head of State into the ranks of the fighters in the armed struggle against American imperialism. Norodom Sihanouk's appeal on March 23 for a

national resistance against the American aggressors and their puppets aroused all sections of the Khmer population. A Khmer National United Front came into being. The National Union Royal Government of Cambodia was set up and many of its members led the resistance within the country. The National Liberation Armed Forces grew up at an unprecedented pace.

To stave off the complete collapse of the Lon Nol-Matak regime, at the end of April, the Americans and their Saigon puppets started their invasion of Cambodia. This move triggered off a serious political crisis in the US and a wave of angry indignation throughout the world. By the end of June, Nixon was compelled to pull his GIs out of Khmer territory but still kept Thieu's mercenaries there.

By the end of 1970, the whole northeastern part of Cambodia and wide zones in the remaining ten provinces, totalling about three-fourths of the Cambodian territory with a population of 4 million, had been liberated by the NLAF.

Phnom Penh was besieged on all sides and completely isolated from the rest of the country by land as well as by water, which won Lon Nol the nickname, given him by foreign diplomats, of "mayor of Phnom Penh". The economy of the occupied zones was on the verge of bankruptcy.

A heavy toll had been inflicted on the enemy:

— 58,000 Lon Nol puppets, 30,000 Thieu puppets and 12,000 GIs killed, wounded or captured ;

— 3,300 military vehicles including 2,400 tanks and armoured cars destroyed, 200 others seized ;

— 70 vessels sunk or damaged ;

— 450 planes and helicopters downed, destroyed or damaged. Lon Nol's nascent aviation was annihilated in one night ;

— 250 artillery pieces put out of commission ;

— 3,000 fire-arms and an armament plant destroyed, 29,000 weapons and 1,000 tons of ammunition seized..

North Viet Nam

All US provocations and acts of sabotage and blackmail were foiled by the DRVN, which kept advancing vigorously in its construction of socialism, recording remarkable successes in all spheres—economic, political, cultural and social.

The people and the government of the DRVN were more resolved than ever to fulfil the last wishes of President Ho Chi Minh : to struggle for the defence of the North, the liberation of the South, the peaceful reunification of the Fatherland. North Viet Nam was fully complying with its national duty to the South and its international obligation to the Lao and Khmer peoples in the common struggle against American aggression.

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The convening of the *Summit Conference of the Indo-chinese Peoples* in April 1970 was a leading political event. On this occasion, the authentic representatives

of the Vietnamese (North and South), Khmer and Lao peoples sealed the militant solidarity of the three Indochinese nations with close collaboration in all spheres, based on respect for each country's sovereignty and the will of its people in the struggle against the American imperialist aggressors.

A PROJECT HATCHED YEARS AGO

Washington is not unaware that the ever more stinging reverses suffered by its troops and puppets in Indochina are closely bound to the mutual support of the three Indochinese peoples—Vietnamese, Lao and Khmer. To cut all communications linking the three Indochinese countries together, to isolate the national resistance in each country in order to strangle it, such has always been the Pentagon's intention. In its eyes, an American victory would be impossible as long as the "umbilical cord" constituted by the liberated zone of middle and southern Laos is still in existence.

Various attempts have been made and schemes hatched with a view to blocking this "corridor". McNamara's famous "electronic barrier" with its prolongation stretching as far as the Mekong is a project which has remained on paper ever since 1966, because it is beyond America's resources. In 1968, discomfited by the stunning blow of the Tet offensives and general uprisings, Westmoreland explicitly demanded 200,000 GI reinforcements to launch an invasion of southern Laos. This was denied him by Johnson, the risks being too great, the effort too back-breaking

and success highly unlikely. But the scheme was not given up, and Abrams, his successor in Saigon, for months engaged in preparatory measures in anticipation of J-Day when he would be given the green light. For he had had definitively to renounce Westmoreland's dream: to seek and destroy the regular forces of the NFL, and had turned his attention to the other project: to try "to cut off the enemy's supply line". The issue was all the more pressing as the Khmer people had also risen up in armed struggle.

Reconnoitring was systematically carried out by air with all modern means for topography and photography. Eventual targets in Laos for bombing raids or military inroads were determined by platoons of helicopter-borne American "Green Berets". Large-scale defoliation was carried out. Air bombings and artillery poundings were brought to unprecedented intensity. According to the American press, Laos was inflicted the most violent bombings and shellings ever recorded in the history of war.

In the Pentagon's reckoning, the strategic objectives of such a move were worth the risks taken. It would place the other side before a dilemma: either to elude the fight, which would result in the cutting off of all supplies to the revolutionary and patriotic forces in South Viet Nam, Cambodia and southern Laos; in such an event one could hope if not to stifle the struggle against the Americans and their puppets, at least to prevent the NFL, the KNUF and the Pathet Lao from launching any large-scale offensives. Or to accept the combat and then be smashed by the "unimaginable"

might of US aviation and artillery. This would tip the balance of forces in favour of the Americans and create a decisive turning point in the Indochina war. By the same stroke, the more than likely success of this adventure would bolster the morale of homesick GIs and of puppets of various kinds who were getting uneasy over Washington's "disengagement". Such a showy exploit would allow Nixon to get out of the war with his head high, i. e. to bring the "boys" home while keeping his puppets in power in Saigon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane.

The American people and Congress being more and more hostile to Nixon's policy and putting restrictions on the extension of the war into Laos and Cambodia, the puppet troops were to foot the bill in place of the GIs, for a large-scale commitment of Americans in Laos would create insuperable political difficulties for the White House. This alternative presented advantages: besides saving American lives, it would be eloquent proof of the success of "Vietnamization", the keystone of Nixon's Indochina policy. Of course one should gain a victory or at least avoid a too patent setback. To this end, the cream of the puppet troops was to be used, with maximum US air support. Thus appearances would be saved. There would be no American aggression in Laos because no large units of US ground forces would be involved whereas the pilots, well, would be in the air, not on Lao soil! By such a daring move, Nixon would gain two presidential mandates, one in Saigon, at the end of the year, the other in Washington, a year later.

POWERFUL MEANS USED

As has been said above, the troops thrown into Laos were picked from the cream of Saigon's army, above all from its general strategic reserves: paratroops, marines, rangers, the 1st I.D. and armoured units.

Saigon has only one *Paratroop Division*, the first battalions of which came into being in the ranks of the French Expeditionary Corps and fought against the nation. Since 1966, this Division has comprised 9 shock battalions grouped into 3 brigades and including "tough" veterans coming from other units and given intensive training. Directly placed under the puppet General Staff, it is equipped with the most up-to-date armaments and moves about by helicopter. It is the pride and the hope of the enemy's command in its plan for "Vietnamization". It was engaged in its entirety in the aggression in Laos.

Saigon has also only one *Marine Division*, another crack unit, one brigade of which (the 147th) was sent to Laos in March, when the aggressors found themselves in dangerous quicksand. Towards the end of the operation, as the debacle threatened to turn into a total disaster, a second brigade was committed, but managed to stay away from the fray. Each infantry battalion of this Division comprises 800 men equipped with American weapons comparable to those in the hands of US troops. Each brigade comprises 3 infantry battalions and one artillery battalion.

Contrary to the "paratroops" and the "marines" who are to operate on the whole territory of South Viet Nam, wherever the General Staff deems it necessary,

the "rangers" are put at the disposal of the command of each military region. They have thus the advantage over the other units of the strategic reserves of being better acquainted with the terrain on which they operate. The "rangers" are specially trained and equipped for counter-guerilla warfare in the mountainous regions of Central Viet Nam which make up nine-tenths of the territory. The Pentagon's intention is to turn these units into some kind of "foreign legion" in their own country, to turn them into sanguinary desperadoes, given to murder and plunder, deprived of all human conscience, not flinching from any crime against their own people. They are mostly entrusted with scouting, probing the ground, seeking contact with hostile troops, opening the way to other units. They now comprise 6 combat groups, of 3 battalions each, stationed in the various military regions (one group for each region and two for that of Saigon). The first group, stationed in the 1st region, was committed in Laos.

The 1st *Infantry Division* is the eldest and the best of all ten puppet infantry divisions. American officials had boasted that it could bear comparison with any US division. It was called into being by Ngo Dinh Diem after native auxiliary units of the French Expeditionary Corps were regrouped south of the 17th parallel. It was to assume the role of a spearhead in a "march to the North" then considered imminent. Of all similar Saigon units, it was the most strongly built, with 4 whole regiments and a powerful artillery. Leaving one regiment in the rear, the US Command dispatched the three others, the senior ones, to Laos.

The newly constituted *armoured units* comprise several "armoured detachments", each being the equivalent of a US squadron or armoured battalion. In the initial stage of the operation, two of these detachments (the 17th and 11th) were sent into action, followed later on by two others. They made up an "armoured brigade with a special mission," the main striking force of the aggression.

However, to the puppet generals' mind, the operation would be unthinkable without American participation.

As early as the end of January, Abrams launched Operation *Dewey Canyon II* aimed at positioning the forces intended for the aggression: to this purpose, the puppet troops were concentrated in the region of Dong Ha whereas the region of Khe Sanh was occupied by US troops and turned into a springboard for invasion, while Highway 9 was opened as far as the frontier. The US troops were thus to dig themselves in in positions already made famous by the stunning losses suffered by the US marines in 1966 and 1968, such as Gio Linh, Bai Son, Cam Lo, Hill 241 (or *Camp Carroll*), Tan Lam (or *Rockpile*), Sa Muu (or *Vandergrift*), Ta Con (or *Khe Sanh base*), Khe Sanh (or *Khe Sanh town*), Lang Vay, Lao Bao, Ta Puc, etc.

American units included the 1st Brigade of the 5th Motorized Infantry Division as well as part of the 101st Airborne Division and Americal Division.

In all, 30,000 American and puppet troops were mustered at the start, their number rising later on to some 45,000 men.

A most important role was imparted to the US air forces, considered the real striking force, with some

2,000 planes including initially 600, later on 800, helicopters of all types, 50 B.52 heavy bombers, the remainder being jet fighter-bombers. Besides the sheer number of war planes, the operations were made all the fiercer by the infernal tempo of the sorties. USIS revealed on March 22 that within the frame of *Operation Lam Son 719*, 145,700 sorties totalling 57,900 flying hours had been performed by US helicopters from January 29 to March 11. *AFP* correspondent Felix Bolo reported 400 flights by B.52s and 13,000 by fighter-bombers. The volume of bombs and air-to-ground projectiles fired was not made known, but it was commensurate with the intensity of air intervention.

Mention should also be made of the direct participation of the 7th Fleet, which sent hundreds of its carrier-borne planes into the fray, ensured the supply by sea of the Highway 9 front and kept North Viet Nam under a constant threat of invasion by several thousand marines on board American ships cruising off the Vietnamese shore.

Lastly, let it be pointed out that if the command of the operation was nominally in the hands of general Hoang Xuan Lam commanding the puppet 1st Military Region, he was in fact under the supervision of the American generals Weyand and Sutherland. For the initiative, the American magazine *Newsweek*, in its issue of February 12, revealed that *Dewey Canyon 11* had been picked by Nixon himself out of more than ten schemes elaborated by Abrams' staff and submitted to him by the Pentagon. According to the same source, the green light to the aggression was given at the last minute by a "sudden order from Washington". Thus,

even though the code-name *Lam Son 719* had been substituted for the American appellative *Dewey Canyon II*, this "Vietnamization" by no means affected the role played by Nixon in this new enlargement of the war in Indochina.

UNFOLDING OF THE OFFENSIVE

Pending the green light from Washington, Abrams sought to create confusion and queer his adversary's pitch. It was reported that an important Saigon contingent had just landed in the Bolovens Plateau (nearly 200 kilometres south of Chepone) for a major action against enemy bases there. A US press agency disclosed that a big marine force of the 7th Fleet was poised off North Viet Nam's coast for an amphibious operation. A news embargo was clamped on the press for several days. Washington also let the rumour be spread that tactical atomic weapons could be used.

All this because Nixon was not without knowing that it would be risky for him to rush headlong into Laos. After the Cambodian move in May 1970, the Lao adventure would in all probability draw heavy fire on his policy, both in the United States and in the world. Besides, in the military field, the adversary had constantly shown grim determination, intelligence and resourcefulness, and certainly had unpleasant surprises in store for him. However, the chances of success were

so tempting that after days of wavering and many meetings of the National Security Council, Nixon gave Thieu orders to announce the launching of the operation. For, just as puppet officers later confessed after their capture by the Lao PLAF, he thought that absolute air supremacy would stave off all risks of annihilation for the aggressors. It would suffice, at a pinch, to send to the hot spot a swarm of helicopters protected by a flock of F.4 Phantoms, B. 52s, Cobras — choppers armed with rockets and quick-firing machineguns — and the unit in distress would be lifted to safety, whereas the opponent's crack troops would be overwhelmed by a deluge of fire.

Thus, on February 8, the bulk of the attacking forces crossed the border and was deployed along either side of Highway 9 in an arc some fifteen kilometres from Lao Bao, while the operational HQ moved to Ta Con (Khe Sanh base).

Hundreds of choppers packed with paratroopers, rangers, foot soldiers, arms and war materials left Dong Ha in successive waves and dropped troops into Laos a dozen kilometres north and south and along Highway 9. The force fielded comprised three groups:

The northern group occupied the hilly area of Chaki-La Tuong - Lang Sen, northwest of Lao Bao, near the frontier, with a marked salient to the west. It consisted of the First Ranger Combat Group and the Third Paratroop Brigade. Supposedly very strong, it was assigned the task of protecting the northern flank, the main direction from which, the US command surmised, hostile reinforcements would come.

The southern group was positioned in the hilly area lying between the Se Pone river valley and the Se La Nong river (southwest of Lao Bao). It was made up of the 2nd and 3rd Regiments of the First Infantry Division landed on the hills of Phu Co Roc, Phu Co Boc and Phu Coc Tom, where guns, ammunition and prefab fortifications were helilifted. In the mind of the US command, such high-perched and inaccessible positions would be impregnable.

The central group, the main striking force, made up of the "Special Mission Armoured Brigade" together with the 17th and 11th Detachments, rushed westward from Lao Bao (kilometre 83) along Highway 9 where helilifted elements had prepared bridgeheads while warding off all possible ambushes. Another part of the armoured brigade made up of the 4th and 7th Detachments and the 2nd Paratroop Brigade was kept in reserve on the frontier.

In total, 20,000 Saigon troops with hundreds of American advisers in Saigon uniform had penetrated into Laos.

The whole jumping-off area was held by US troops who moved their ordnance towards the frontier to fire their shells as far as possible into the Lao hinterland.

A concerted plan had been mapped out with the Vientiane quislings, who made many diversionary attacks. Starting from Savannakhet and Seno, a mobile group encroached upon the liberated zone around Phalang (kilometre 223 on Highway 9). The 33rd Mobile Group threatened the area south of Muong Phine, on Highway 23.

On the Bolovens Plateau, other Vientiane battalions attempted incursions into the Attapeu region.

The first target of the Saigon troops was to take Ban Dong, 20 km from Lao Bao, within the shortest time possible (2 days at the latest after the beginning of the operation) then Chepone, 22 km farther, two or three days later. In the third stage, the enemy would advance toward Muong Phine, 40 km to the west and even farther, to make a junction with the Vientiane troops in the Phalane area, thus completely cutting off the "corridor".

The puppet command made no secret that its troops would remain in Laos as long as necessary to disrupt completely their adversary's communications, at least till the beginning of the rainy season (May).

ENEMY ADVANCE STOPPED SHORT AT BAN DONG, THE NORTHERN GROUP CUT TO PIECES

On their very first landing, the aggressors ran up against stiff opposition by the patriotic forces who downed a great number of helicopters. On February 8, three landings of the First Infantry Division on Phu Co Boc and Tam Luong failed and 10 choppers were shot down. On February 10, all the enemy attempts to airdrop troops on Chaki were foiled and 23 choppers blasted. From February 8 to 10, the invaders lost a

total of 60 helicopters in Laos, and it was an uphill task for the enemy command to deploy its troops north and south of Highway 9.

With regard to the bulk of the enemy striking force, its advance along the highway was delayed by road obstructions and skilfully-laid ambushes. The most murderous ones were set in the Kaki bridge area, halfway between the frontier and Ban Dong. There, from February 9 to 11, the patriotic forces wiped out 5 companies (a paratroop battalion) and destroyed 30 vehicles (mostly armoured). The main force was forced to dig in at Ban Dong, a thrust westward being thought too risky. The helicopters lost in Lao territory from February 5 to 11 totalled 88, including a command helicopter which crashed on February 10, killing one colonel, one lieutenant-colonel and three majors, all staff officers of the First Military Region.

Meanwhile, in the Phalane sector, the patriotic forces assaulted the Vientiane forces and, on February 11, wiped out one battalion, compelling the survivors of the mobile group to fall back to Dong Hene. In the wake of their offensive in that sector, the patriots liberated Nong Boua Lao and Huoi Mun about fifty kilometres south of Phalane, and routed the 33rd Mobile Group of the Vientiane army south of Muong Phine.

On February 13, in a furious assault near La Tuong, 9 km north of Ban Dong, the patriots put out of action the 21st Ranger Battalion positioned on five hills forming a system of entrenched strong points. Meanwhile, some kilometres further, the freshly-landed 6th Battalion of the 3rd Paratroop Brigade licked the dust

after a one-hour fierce battle; the patriots took many prisoners and fire-arms.

On February 19, the South Viet Nam PLAF hammered at the 39th Ranger Battalion stationed on Hill 500, in Vietnamese territory, about one kilometre from the frontier (1), and 3 km northeast of Lang Sen; they wiped out an enemy company and occupied its positions, beating off all counter-attacks and downing 6 choppers. On February 20, they made short work of the remnants of the reputedly most battle-seasoned enemy battalion, capturing many prisoners and all arms and equipment.

Events took a bad turn for the aggressors. The Western press revealed that the enemy command had contemplated replacing General Hoang Xuan Lam by General Do Cao Tri who at that time was commanding an operation in the eastern part of Cambodia. But the latter was killed on February 23 in a chopper crash in Tay Ninh province as he was flying to Cambodia to hand over his responsibilities.

On February 24, an enemy company was trounced at Huoi Sane near the frontier; the major commanding the battalion to which that company belonged was taken prisoner. Thus in 17 days' fighting in Laos, the enemy took 3,000 casualties and lost 165 aircraft downed and 72 military vehicles destroyed.

(1) On US-made maps, the frontier passes farther east and consequently Hill 500 was erroneously ascribed by the Western press to Laos.

On February 25, the patriotic forces won one of the most brilliant victories in that campaign. Covered by tanks for the first time on that battlefield, the liberation forces overran in broad daylight Hill 456 (code-named Hill 31 by the enemy) about a dozen kilometres north of Ban Dong, not far from La Tuong, Chaki and Lang Sen. By nightfall they had completely destroyed the 3rd Paratroop Battalion, two artillery companies and the HQ of the 3rd Paratroop Brigade. All the enemy forces were annihilated, over 120 men captured including the colonel commanding the brigade and his staff. The northern group being crushed, the right flank of the enemy forces was thus dangerously exposed. The US-puppet command desperately tried to launch a counter-attack. On February 26, a column of 30 tanks and M.113 armoured personnel carriers with 200 paratroopers on board left Ban Dong in an attempt to recapture Hill 31. Intercepted half-way, it was entirely routed after an epic tank engagement: all the enemy vehicles were either destroyed (17) or captured undamaged (13) by PLAF men: the 200 paratroops of the 8th Battalion, 2nd Paratroop Brigade, were put out of action. The following days, the enemy hurled into action fresh armoured forces of the 17th and 11th Detachments in an effort to set foot again in the northern sector but suffered new losses. On March 3, the 17th Armoured Detachment was wiped out, the 11th Detachment decimated and the 8th Paratroop Battalion completely liquidated in that sector, losing 400 men and 100 armoured vehicles.

THE SOUTHERN GROUP SHATTERED, "LEAP-FROG" MOVES CHECKED, THE CENTRAL GROUP CRUSHED

South of Highway 9, things went from bad to worse for the First Infantry Division. After tightening their stranglehold on Hill 405 at Phu Ke Gio, 16 km south-southwest of Lao Bao, the patriotic forces wiped out the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment on February 27; 4 km further east, on Hill 619 of Phu Coc Tom, the 3rd Battalion of the same Regiment met the same fate on March 1. The following days, the patriotic forces inflicted heavy losses on the regimental CP and the 1st Battalion: the 3rd Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division was put out of action, many prisoners taken, 35 aircraft downed, and 17 guns destroyed or seized.

The enemy command tried to save the situation by rushing in fresh troops. The 369th Marine Brigade was dispatched from Cambodia to Quang Tri province. The 2nd Paratroop Brigade and two new armoured detachments (the 4th and the 7th) were sent to reinforce the Central Group at Ban Dong, whereas the 147th Marine Brigade was to strengthen the Southern Group in replacement of the exhausted 3rd Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, which had been withdrawn to Ban Dong. Two regiments of the puppet 2nd Infantry Division stationed south of Da Nang filled the vacuum left on Highway 9 (Vietnamese territory) by the 2nd Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division now operating in Laos. Three battalions of the US 101st Airmobile Division

were moved to the Khe Sanh - Dong Ha area as reinforcements. The forces taking part in the aggression now ran to 45,000 men. Another 100 helicopters and 170 armoured vehicles were fielded.

Learning the lesson of past setbacks, the enemy thought that his "hilltop bolts" would run the risk of being stormed by an adversary who would have enough time to muster his forces and work out an effective plan of attack. Relying on the mobility of US helicopters, the puppet troops applied the "leap-frog" tactics consisting in setting up fire-bases on inaccessible peaks, shelling all the suspected areas around or carrying out B.52 carpet bombings, then helilifting to another height a few days later. Faced with such a tactics, the liberation forces would have neither the time nor the means to spring an attack before the Saigon troops were whisked away together with their heavy guns, plastic sandbags, prefab shelters and barbed wire entanglements. It was thus actually an elusive, not an offensive, movement.

Another advantage of this tactics would be its psy-war effect. Saigon and Washington had boasted that they would rapidly take Chepone, and had repeatedly announced the occupation of this townlet. But their troops were marking time, their helicopters were downed in great numbers and Chepone was still out of their reach. So the "leap-frog" tactics would give an appearance of progress.

The 1st and 2nd Regiments, all that remained of the First Infantry Division, were to carry out these "leap-frog" moves. The chosen points were the various peaks on the mountain ridge south of the Se Pone valley overhanging Highway 9 up to the south of Chepone. The

names of famous film stars were given to these positions: "Sophia" (Loren) to Hill 748, "Liz" (Taylor) to Hill 690, "Lollo" (Lollobrigida) to Hill 723... There was no time left to "Vietnamize" them to conceal the American stamp marking the operation.

On March 6, a landing was attempted on a peak of the steep Phu Tapang mountain only three kilometres from Chepone. The enemy psywar services hastened to broadcast the "capture" of the town; Thieu and his wife sent congratulatory messages and gifts to the "victors of Chepone", but no permission was granted by the US-puppet command to press correspondents to visit the locality, although the Pathet Lao flatly denied the "capture".

The "leap-frog" moves by chopper soon proved to be very costly. Thus, on March 6, 16 helicopters (6 Flying Cranes) were downed on the slopes of Phu Tapang. The positions built on more or less inaccessible peaks were not immune from artillery pounding, which outstandingly contributed to the failure of that tactics. Powerful enemy forces, artillery as well as infantry, were blotted out in next to no time by PLAF heavy shellings. This intense fire-power together with the PLAF ack-ack and tanks came as the greatest and most unpleasant surprises for the aggressors.

On March 12, "Sophia", defended by the 2nd Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, was assaulted after being invested on all sides. Casualties were so severe that evacuation was ordered. But facing thick flak, the Americans lost 10 choppers and had to give up the rescue operation. The survivors fled helter-skelter. Many

of them surrendered to the patriots, who also captured ten heavy guns.

The enemy, now in utter confusion, tried to flee toward the frontier. On March 16, the patriotic forces' command on the Southern Laos front issued orders not to let the enemy escape. The same day the Khe Sanh PLAF command also issued an appeal to officers and men of the Saigon army urging them to surrender or cross over to the side of the revolutionary forces.

Shortly after the fall of "Sophia", the patriotic forces encircled Hill 723 ("Lollo"), 9 km west-southwest of Ban Dong, a stronghold held by the First Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division and 4 infantry and artillery battalions. The battle, begun on March 16, raged till the following day. The enemy was thrown into disarray then wiped out. Apart from a handful of men who succeeded in crossing the jungle and reaching Hill 660 ("Brown") 6 kilometres to the east, almost all the First Regiment (over one thousand men) were killed or wounded and 200 taken prisoner. A large quantity of war materials including 16 guns was seized or destroyed. The attempt to evacuate "Lollo" by chopper and the air strikes made to try and save that position resulted in 28 enemy aircraft being downed on March 16 alone.

Of the enemy forces operating on Lao territory, there remained only the exhausted central group, positioned at Ban Dong, composed of the Armoured Brigade, a paratroop brigade, the 2nd Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division (on Hill 660 or "Brown"), reinforced by the remnants of two other regiments crushed at "Sophia"

and "Lollo", and finally the marines of the 147th Brigade on Hill 550 or "Delta 1", and of the 248th Brigade, which so far had not yet brought itself to venture far from the Vietnamese frontier and join the fighting. Desperate efforts were made to bring all these forces back to Viet Nam with minimum losses.

While the patriotic forces stormed "Lolo", other units increased their pressure on the big base of Ban Dong (also called A Luoi).

That base, which stretched over 8 km between Ban Dong and Kaki bridge, was defended by the 11th, 4th and 7th armoured squadrons of the "Special Mission Brigade", several battalions of the First Brigade, remnants of the 3rd Paratroop Brigade, and 4 artillery battalions. On March 17, all exits from A Luoi were cut off: the road section between Kaki bridge and Lao Bao was solidly held and the air space unrelentingly controlled by the A.A. batteries of the patriotic forces. On March 18 after an infernal shelling the liberation forces, supported by tanks and covered by ack-ack which completely crippled enemy air activity, assaulted the enemy in many thrusts. They broke through his defences and overran his resistance nests one by one, destroying tanks, casemates, bunkers and guns.

Fighting raged on throughout March 19 and the following morning: all of "A Luoi" base, from Ban Dong to Kaki bridge, fell into the hands of the patriotic forces. Only a few elements managed to escape in small groups towards Huoi Sane, near Lao Bao. Thinking that everything was lost, the commander of the armoured brigade gave the "cut-and-run" signal to his men, who in

their headlong flight even forgot to destroy their engines. The patriots captured a dozen tanks undamaged and turned them against enemy aircraft and bunkers. They even succeeded in trapping two choppers coming to evacuate the runaways: only upon landing did the airmen realize their mistake, but it was too late and the two choppers were taken intact.

Thus after three days of furious combat at Ban Dong, the patriotic forces wiped out the main enemy force of one armoured brigade with all three detachments together with a paratroop brigade and four artillery battalions. They gained mastery of the battlefield after blasting to pieces or seizing over 200 M.41 tanks and M.113 armoured personnel carriers, 22 big guns and downing or seizing over 80 helicopters and planes. This battle marked the greatest disaster ever suffered in such a short confrontation by the aggressors in Indochina since 1945.

Also on March 20, while PLAF units were after the survivors of "A Luoi", other patriotic forces raided fire-base "Brown" on Hill 660, 4km southwest of Ban Dong, where the 2nd Regiment had been suffering heavy casualties since March 17. The patriotic forces occupied the base after killing or injuring 500 men of the puppet 1st Infantry Division, capturing 250 others including officers up to field ranks and downing 30 choppers and an F.4 Phantom fighter-bomber. If the enemy losses since March 17 were added, the battle-count at fire-base "Brown" was: 1,500 enemy troops killed or wounded, 250 others taken prisoner, 50 aircraft shot down and 450 fire-arms captured.

On March 21 and 22, after encircling the A Luoi survivors at Huoi Sane village, the patriots mowed them down in an assault mounted on March 22. Thus all the enemy military vehicles committed to Operation Lam Son 719 on Lao territory were put out of commission. Only a small number of Saigon soldiers managed to reach the frontier on foot without their engines.

Meanwhile on March 22, on Hill 550 ("Delta 1"), 6 km south of Huoi Sane, the 147th Marine Brigade came under a smashing attack made by the PLAF in broad daylight with tank cover and artillery barrage. In a lightning action which started at 4 p.m., the patriots gained control of the battlefield at 8 p.m. They put out of action hundreds of enemy troops, and seized or destroyed a large quantity of weapons and war material including 12 big guns. This was the last battle of that 43-day campaign in Laos.

A true stampede began for the enemy forces having escaped from the disaster. Typical of that total debacle was the sight of Saigon soldiers trying to cling to the choppers' skids and being kicked down by American airmen! Masters and valets only thought of saving their own bacon! The Americans ended by plastering the choppers' skids with grease to prevent the Saigon soldiers from hanging on to them, leaving the poor devils in the lurch!

A fine picture of "Vietnamization" indeed!

RESULTS OF THE CAMPAIGN IN LAOS

Nixon had thus suffered the heaviest defeat ever recorded in a single campaign and in so short a time. The results of the operation were laid down in a special

communiqué issued by the High Command of the Lao PLAF on March 23 :

"(...) Through 43 days and nights of strenuous, resourceful and resolute fighting, we have achieved tremendous successes and won a glorious victory.

"We have wiped out important forces and a large quantity of war material of the Americans and their Saigon puppets. These forces belong to all of their units and armed services : paratroops, armour, marines, rangers, regular infantry, most of them drawn from the general reserves, the hard core of the Saigon puppet armed forces.

"We have killed or wounded 15,400 enemy troops (including 200 Americans), and captured 1,000 others (among them many field and subaltern officers).

"In terms of units, we have wiped out two brigades of the Paratroop Division, the 1st Special Mission Armoured Brigade (four detachments), the 147th Marine Brigade, and the 1st and 2nd Infantry Regiments ; badly mauled the 3rd Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, the 1st Ranger Combat Group and the 258th Marine Brigade.

"We have put out of action eight artillery battalions and decimated five others.

"In terms of war means, we have destroyed or captured 496 aircraft (mostly helicopters), 586 military vehicles (among them 318 tanks and armoured cars), 144 heavy artillery pieces and big-caliber mortars, more than 5,000 other weapons and a large quantity of important documents and military equipment. We have foiled the main tactical moves of the enemy : long-distance heliborne movements, armour spearheads, hilltop

bolts, "leap-frog", and intense artillery pounding in support of infantry.

"We have successfully defended the liberated areas, Chepone town, the people's lives and properties, our bases and storage depots, and kept communications and transport going.

"The great victory of our armed forces and people fighting in southern Laos shoulder to shoulder with the South Viet Nam PLAF and people on Highway 9 against Operation *Dewey Canyon II* (later dubbed *Lam Son 719*) together with the great victory over the enemy's Operation *Toan Thang 1-71* in northeastern Cambodia, bears a great strategic significance and a special political and military importance.

"It is a stunning blow at the US imperialists' perfidious scheme to prolong and expand their war of aggression in Indochina, to pit Indochinese against Indochinese, and to "Vietnamize" their war; it is a heavy blow at the reactionary doctrine of Nixon and Company.

"It is a very hard blow at the aggressive will of the Americans and their Saigon puppets, which has shattered their already sinking morale.

"This victory testifies to the great strength and prodigious growth of our armed forces in courage, intelligence, military talent and combat skill.

"It greatly rejoices and stimulates our armed forces and people and those of the fraternal Indochinese countries, and gladdens our friends throughout the world.

"It will have a great influence on the situation of the war on the Indochinese battlefield, creating favourable conditions for the development of the war of

resistance of the Lao, Vietnamese and Khmer peoples, and opening up brilliant prospects.

“It will have a great impact on the political situation in the United States, subjecting the bellicose Nixon clique's policy to stronger opposition from the American people, sharpening its internal contradictions, aggravating the US imperialists' already insoluble difficulties, and vigorously increasing the support of the American and world peoples to the just struggle of the Indochinese peoples.”

ON THE OTHER INDOCHINESE THEATRES OF OPERATIONS

The open aggression against Laos made Indochina one single battlefield where the imperialists waged a neo-colonialist war, the main tool of which being constituted by puppet — mostly Saigon — armed forces and US aviation. By launching its main thrust into the Chepone area, the US command left the other fronts relatively exposed, even in Cambodia where a large-scale operation code-named *Toan Thang 1-71* (Total Victory) had been conducted with 20,000 troops in Kompong Cham and Snuol (along Highway 7).

The Indochinese peoples' armed forces turned this to account by dealing the aggressors and their lackeys very heavy blows on the other battlefields in the three countries. The important victories won in South Viet Nam, in northern Laos and particularly in Cambodia further aggravated the strategic character of the US defeat in southern Laos.

ON THE REAR AREA OF THE CHEPONE FRONT

As mentioned above, the northern part of Quang Tri province — on a strip about ten kilometres wide

on both sides of Highway 9 in Vietnamese territory — constituted the immediate rear area for Operation *Lam Son 719*. The Khe Sanh region was the jumping-off base and the centre from which to direct and co-ordinate the operations, the control point for supplies and reinforcements to be sent to the enemy troops operating in Lao territory. In this sector logistic bases were set up and reserve troops, materials and weapons were concentrated, ready to be airlifted to any threatened spots of the northern, southern or central groups of the aggressive forces.

The South Viet Nam PLAF efforts in this sector mainly consisted in attacking the military and logistic bases, depots, transport means, supply convoys by land and water, and "security" forces — mostly Americans — stationed on the heights dominating this sector, particularly north of Highway 9.

Thus, as early as January 30, the US base at Tan Lam (*Rockpile*) was pounded by the patriots. Then on February 11, came the turn of the operational HQ of the First Military Region, established at Dong Ha. The advanced operational base of Ta Con (*Khe Sanh base*) about 15 km from the frontier and its satellites were repeatedly attacked as early as February 6. On March 15, twelve helicopters and several heavy guns were destroyed or damaged at Ta Con and Lao Bao. The shelling of Ta Con on March 16 blasted 17 helicopters on the runway. That of Ta Puc, seat of the CP of the northern group near the frontier (16 km west-northwest of Ta Con) on the same day knocked out three others. Two days after, Ta Con,

Ta Puc, Lao Bao were again pounded: four 155-mm and 175-mm guns were wrecked. On March 22, Ta Puc was fiercely assaulted. Between March 12 and 22, it lost 500 men killed or wounded, 14 guns, 41 vehicles and 5 helicopters destroyed or heavily damaged. On the same day, the US base at Lang Vay, between Khe Sanh and the frontier, was also attacked and 3 helicopters put out of commission.

Lastly, on March 23, the patriots launched a masterly strike by infantry and artillery against Ta Con. After a furious shelling the assault troops succeeded in penetrating the enemy defences and swooped on the technical installations and helicopter park, wrecking 18 depots, 18 vehicles (6 tanks) and 40 choppers. About 100 GIs (mostly pilots and technicians) were killed or wounded.

Enemy depots and logistic bases were choice targets. On February 18, 7 km southeast of Dong Ha, Ai Tu base was set afire; 30,000 175-mm shells and 4 fuel storage depots were set ablaze. Meanwhile, Tich Tuong depot 7 km further south-southeast went up in flames and burnt for half a day.

The worst hit logistic base was no doubt Sa Muu, code-named *Vandergrift*, the most important one on Highway 9. In February, it was shelled 8 times, twice on the 28th, when 240,000 litres of fuel were set afire, 23 vehicles and 15 depots of material destroyed. On March 7, a new pounding set ablaze 1,000,000 litres of fuel and blew up 100,000 shells. On the 10th, the 10th strike destroyed 14 vehicles and 2 helicopters, and put out of action 85 GIs. The same day, Cam Lo logistic

base, about 10 kilometres west of Dong Ha, met with the same fate and went up in flames, burning until March 12. Lastly, by the end of the operations in Laos, three depots near Quang Tri town: Ai Tu, La Vang and Tan Dien were hit in the period from March 18 to 21.

Enemy camps defending Highway 9 such as the advanced position of Zoc Mieu near the demilitarized zone, Hill 241 code-named *Camp Carroll*, the strong points of Lao Bao, Khe Soc, A Chinh (covering Ta Con in the northeast) came under continual attacks. On February 23, a US armour park was completely smashed on Hill 420, 12 km southeast of Lang Vay. On the 26th, another met with the same fate on Hill 205, 4 km east of Lao Bao, where 4 tanks, 3 heavy guns and one radar station were destroyed and 30 GIs killed or wounded.

Enemy communications, extended over 80 kilometres of road, mostly in mountainous country, came under murderous PLAF assaults, which particularly hit the convoys sent to the frontier to retrieve the survivors of the disaster in Lao territory. The 15-km section from Lao Bao to Khe Sanh was called by an AFP correspondent an "alley of ambushes". This can be said of the whole section of Highway 9 in Vietnamese territory. Thus, on February 20-21, three ambushes took place in Tan Lam and Sa Muu in which 21 US military vehicles were destroyed and 120 GIs killed or wounded. By February 22, the number of enemy vehicles knocked out since January 31 reached 166, including about 50 tanks and armoured cars. On February 28,

10 vehicles were blasted west of Sa Muu; on March 1, 11 vehicles were put out of commission and 30 GIs killed or wounded in another ambush. On March 3, the 9th ambush in 25 days on Highway 9 wrecked 8 vehicles. On March 22-23, on the 8-kilometre section between Lao Bao and Lang Vay two ambushes were laid against enemy forces retreating from Laos in disorder: within a week 120 vehicles were destroyed, 12 aircraft downed, and over 900 men killed or wounded.

Enemy vehicles in well-defended parks were also smashed. On February 18, a raid against Khe Sanh park put out of commission 4 vehicles and 5 helicopters. Another park at O Giang, near Tan Lam, was attacked on the 23rd: 5 vehicles knocked out and 15 GIs killed or wounded.

Water transport between Dong Ha and Cua Viet estuary was also hard hit. On January 28, a transport ship was damaged. Between February 16 and 18, 3 cargo-boats were sunk. From February 22 to 24, 4 others met with the same fate. On the 27th, a 45m-long barge loaded with military equipment and material was wrecked.

Lastly, another event worthy of notice was the defection by mid-March of the 4th Battalion of the 54th Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division (the only regiment of this division having escaped disaster in Laos, for having not taken part in the operation): as the commander tried to force his men into action, the battalion mutinied and killed him. This fact gives an idea of the mood of the puppet troops heavily decimated by this campaign.

Two months of activity by the PLAF in South Viet Nam on the immediate rear area of the Chepone front resulted in a disaster for the enemy. With the losses suffered by the 59th Ranger Battalion (northern prong of the aggressive forces against Laos) on Hill 500 on February 19-20, his losses amounted to nearly 7,000 troops wiped out (including 4,000 GIs killed, wounded or captured), 863 military vehicles (236 tanks and armoured cars) blasted, 234 planes and helicopters destroyed or downed, 72 heavy guns and mortars put out of commission, 42 vessels and barges sunk or damaged, 41 logistic depots destroyed, millions of litres of fuel and thousands of tons of military equipment and material set ablaze or wrecked (January 31 - March 31).

All told, the total losses of *Operation Dewey Canyon II* (Lam Son 719) in round figures amounted to:

- 23,000 men killed, wounded or captured (including many senior officers and several thousand GIs), i.e. half of the forces involved;
- 730 planes and helicopters downed, destroyed on the ground, damaged or captured (mostly helicopters);
- 1,400 military vehicles (550 tanks and armoured cars) destroyed, damaged or captured;
- 200 heavy guns and mortars destroyed or captured;
- about forty vessels and barges sunk or damaged;
- about forty logistic depots destroyed or set ablaze.

These are unquestionably the heaviest losses ever inflicted upon the imperialist aggressors in a single campaign, in the history of the liberation war of the Indochinese peoples during the past twenty-five years.

OTHER SECTORS IN LAOS

The Americans launched, with Vientiane troops reinforced by Thai units, several attacks on other sectors of Laos to support the principal front of Chepone.

The two diversionary attacks on the *western sector of Highway 9* were, as we have seen, repulsed, one at Phalane where one enemy battalion was put out of action on February 11, the other south of Muong Phine. Pushed back to Dong Hene, 35 km west of Phalane, the enemy suffered on March 21 a violent shelling by the Lao PLAF, which hit particularly the airfield, the barracks, and the centre for the training of Vientiane officers.

Further south, mention should be made of the operations in the *Bolovens Plateau*. This region is of great strategic importance because it dominates the whole of southern Laos as far as the frontiers with the liberated zones of Cambodia and South Viet Nam; it offers an ideal observation post to keep watch over the "Laos corridor" and guide US bombers, chiefly B.52s, in their criminal missions. The Lao PLAF, who had liberated Attapeu and the Sekong Valley in April 1970, put pressure on the eastern part of the plateau. Several Vientiane mobile combat groups including Thai battalions were sent to Pakse in the direction of the

Bolovens Plateau where they planned to carry out sweeps. They were harassed by the revolutionary guerrillas and pinned down. On March 8, strong units of the Lao PLAF launched an attack in the Nam Luc region. After violent fighting, the enemy was driven out of this region on March 10 with one battalion wiped out and three others heavily decimated. The Nam Luc position, the most important guiding post for US aircraft in the whole of central and southern Laos, code-named *PS.22*, fell into the hands of the patriotic forces.

In the northwestern sector of the Bolovens Plateau enemy raids on the liberated zone coming from the direction of Khong Sedone, 50 km north of Pakse, were also repulsed. On March 17, the Vientiane 44th Battalion was cut to pieces in a deadly ambush and its remnants had to fall back on Khong Sedone.

In the North, in the *Plain of Jars*, in Xieng Khoang province, where operated the forces of bandit chief "General" Vang Pao, organized, armed and directly commanded by Americans of the C.I.A., the enemy suffered heavy defeats. Ousted from this region in 1970, he clung to the edge of the plain, chiefly the peaks in the southwestern part with the bases of Long Cheng, Sam Thong and Ban Na, and the western part with the important centre of Muong Soui. On Feb. 3, the Lao PLAF swept him out of this last base and the Phu So position as well, killing or wounding 130 enemy troops, destroying or seizing 34 heavy guns and mortars and 4 military vehicles. One thousand inhabitants cooped up in this sector by the enemy were liberated before US

aircraft could come and take them away to "refugee camps" set up near Vientiane.

On Feb. 12, the Lao patriots launched furious attacks in the Long Cheng region, putting out of action 230 enemy troops. Two days later, on Feb. 14, in a violent offensive on Long Cheng and its outpost, Ban Na, 500 enemy troops were killed or wounded (including many US "advisers" and Thai troops). Thus in Long Cheng the patriots put out of action 200 enemy troops, set on fire 8 depots containing 5,000 tons of munitions and one million litres of fuel. In the course of the attack, three enemy helicopters were brought down by PLAF A.A. guns.

On March 21-22, in another region of the Plain of Jars the PLAF swept the enemy out of Hintang, putting out of action 200 Vientiane puppets.

The third sector where vigorous counter-attacks were made by the Lao PLAF was *Pak Hu-Luang Prabang*. As early as Feb. 2, on the northern flank of the royal capital, 4 Vientiane battalions tried to encroach on the liberated zones around Pak Hu. Immediately, the guerrillas riposted, driving them back to their starting bases after killing or wounding 110 of their men. PLAF pressure kept growing in the following weeks and a large-scale offensive was under way in this region by the second half of March. On March 21 to 23, the patriots attacked Pak Hu CP, Luang Prabang airfield and at least 4 other enemy positions in this sector. They inflicted severe losses on the CP of Tactical Group 872, that of Battalion BV-101 and Luang Prabang military airbase. In 3 days, 250 Vientiane puppet troops

were killed or wounded, 45 others taken prisoner, and 4 T.28 fighter planes, 3 helicopters, 2 military vehicles and 2 motor-launches destroyed. More than 100 others gave themselves up to the revolutionary forces who besides seized over 200 weapons.

Throughout the territory, March thus registered the heaviest losses inflicted on the enemy in this dry season: 13,600 enemy troops (including 12,000 Saigon puppets, over 1,000 Vang Pao pirates in the service of the American CIA, 400 Thai mercenaries and 100 Americans) were killed, wounded or captured, 4,000 weapons (including 100 heavy guns and mortars) destroyed or seized. Besides, the patriots crippled or seized 500 military vehicles intact, half of them armoured cars and tanks, shot down or destroyed on the ground 300 aircraft, the majority of them helicopters.

Those bitter reverses dealt a hard blow at the sagging morale of the Vientiane puppet troops. In March, several cases of collective desertion by rightist forces were noted. On March 4 and 5, 165 men and officers in 3 localities of Xieng Khoang province crossed over to the patriotic forces' side with arms and baggage. In the Pak Hu sector, a company chief, his deputy and 40 men did the same. On March 23 and 26, 160 other enemy officers and men in this sector followed suit.

OTHER SECTORS IN SOUTH VIET NAM

While the best Saigon units were hard pressed along Highway 9, and Highway 7 (Cambodia), the South Viet Nam PLAF stepped up their actions throughout the

country, particularly against the "pacification" forces in two zones: the coastal areas of Central Trung Bo from Da Nang to Cam Ranh, and the Mekong delta, that is the most populous regions of South Viet Nam. Against a background of hundreds of daily attacks by small guerilla units or regional troops, there took place several large-scale offensives or real campaigns, which inflicted heavy losses on the enemy in a relatively short time.

In southern *Quang Tri* and in *Thua Thien* (region of Hue) so far in the charge of the puppet First Infantry Division, the operations on Highway 9 put the enemy to a hard test. From February 1 to March 22, communication lines, transport means, logistic and military bases were attacked. The regional troops and guerilla units put out of action 1,100 enemy troops, destroyed 70 vehicles, 10 military trains, downed 13 planes and helicopters and captured many prisoners. Hue city was assaulted on the night of February 19.

Communications between Da Nang and Hue constituted a choice target for the patriots, both in the northern (*Thua Thien* province) and southern sections (*Quang Da* province) of the famous Hai Van Pass. Between February 21 and 23, 30 US vehicles were blasted and about one hundred GIs put out of action in this sector.

In *Central Trung Bo*, in the week preceding the open US-puppet invasion of Laos, the PLAF put out of action 2,000 enemy personnel and seized or forced the evacuation of 23 positions from February 1 to 7.