

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF MILITARY HISTORY
Department of the Army
Washington, D. C. 20315
HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPT FILE

CALL NUMBER

Col. Legro
~~OMH-137~~
ey-5

TITLE

The Fall of Vietnam

OFFICE OF ORIGIN

US Army Center of Military History
Department of the Army
Cecil E. Spurlock
1978

RETURN TO ROOM

OCMH FORM 10 Replaces OCMH FORM 10 1 Jun 62
10 March 71 which will be used until exhausted.

B18686

THE FALL OF VIETNAM

Chapter I

Before the Fall

Cecil E. Spurlock

"Vietnamizing" the War

Soon after taking office in January, 1969 President Nixon took the first tentative steps, through private diplomatic channels and at the Paris peace talks, to implement the "secret plan for achieving a just peace in Vietnam" to which he had alluded during the presidential election campaign. Six weeks later, after it had become clear that such an approach would lead nowhere, the new President embarked upon the next phase of his plan. At a press conference on March 5th Nixon, emphasizing that "there are no plans to withdraw any troops at this time," revealed that he had "asked for a reexamination of our whole troop level in South Vietnam, and especially a reexamination of the South Vietnamese effort and the training program of South Vietnam forces."

A few days later Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird was dispatched to South Vietnam to make a first-hand study of those questions. On 19 March, soon after his return, Secretary Laird appeared before the Senate Armed Forces Committee and proposed that the war gradually be turned over to the South Vietnamese, with a "substantial number" of the replaced U.S. troops being returned to the U.S. Laird requested an additional \$156 million to begin the implementation of the Vietnamization program.*

The North Vietnamese responded with a strong attack on the Nixon administration's incipient "Vietnamization" policy. The Lao Dong Party daily NHAN DAN accused Nixon of "attempting to fool public opinion" and for "adopting a stubborn attitude at the Paris talks."¹ Premier Pham Van Dong, to the puzzlement of Hanoi watchers, condemned the U.S. for "continuing to deescalate the war" and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of all U.S. and allied troops.²

The diplomatic offensive launched by the U.S., however, may have prompted the National Liberation Front delegation at the Paris talks to

* Planning for "Vietnamization" actually began in May, 1968, when MACV submitted the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Program (CRIMP) to CINCPAC

present its 10-point program for an "over-all solution." its first concrete proposal after months of repetitive propaganda, on May. The "10 Points" continued to demand the unilateral, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces and that the U.S. renounce President Thieu, but suggested that the NLF might participate in an "installed" coalition government in Saigon. A week later the U.S. delegation made counter-proposals calling for the withdrawal of both U.S. and North Vietnamese troops and for the holding of internationally supervised elections in South Vietnam. Hanoi responded by accusing the Nixon administration of "using flowery words in an attempt to ease the pressure for an end to the U.S. aggressive war against Vietnam."³ This fundamental division over the question of the establishment of a coalition government prior to elections versus the holding of internationally supervised elections as the first step in the formation of a new government was to deadlock the Paris talks until the agreement reached in January 1973 and, in a resurrected form, create an impasse at the political talks between the South Vietnamese government and the Provisional Revolutionary Government after the signing of the Paris Agreement.

The third phase in the implementation of the Nixon administration's Vietnamization policy was inaugurated by a meeting between presidents Nixon and Thieu at Midway on 8 June 1969. A Joint Communiqué issued at the conclusion of the conference announced that 25,000 U.S. combat troops would be withdrawn and expressed opposition to efforts to "impose any form of government such as a coalition government, without regard to the will of the people of South Vietnam," called for internationally supervised elections, and expressed President Thieu's willingness to negotiate directly with the NLF. At Paris, a NLF spokesman termed the refusal of Nixon and Thieu to accept a coalition government for South Vietnam "an obstacle to all progress" at the talks and characterized the troop withdrawal announcement as a propaganda measure intended to "calm the demands of the American people and mislead world opinion."⁴ Hanoi termed the U.S. troop withdrawal a "perfidious measure which cannot deceive U.S. public opinion."⁵

In late July President Nixon and Secretary Laird visited South Vietnam. Gen. Abrams, the MACV commander, was instructed that henceforth the primary mission of U.S. troops would be to enable South Vietnamese forces to assure full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam. On his way back to the U.S. Nixon stopped over in Guam, where he enunciated a principle that would become known as the "Nixon Doctrine": the U.S. would continue to furnish military aid, but Asian nations should increasingly assume the burden of their own defense.

At home, anti-war forces had been gearing up for a campaign against the Vietnamization policy. The overall strategy of that effort had ^{apparently} been delineated at the Emergency Action Conference of the Stockholm Conference on Vietnam, held 16-18 May, which was attended by Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh, heading the NLF delegation, Nguyen Minh Vy, representing North Vietnam, and a U.S. delegation made up of representatives of the World Peace Council and the Student National Coordinating Committee. On the weekend of 4 July representatives of various anti-war groups were summoned to a meeting in Cleveland, Ohio.* The meeting was attended by delegates of the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Young Socialist Alliance, and the Student Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. After the meeting a New Mobe spokesman announced that an intensive campaign against the Vietnam war would be launched across the U.S., the highlights of which would be a nation-wide Vietnam Moratorium Day on 15 October and a "March Against Death" scheduled to be held in Washington in mid-November. On 6 October Tran Buu Kiem, chief PRG delegate at the Paris talks, wrote an open letter to the U.S. anti-war leaders urging "the active and massive participation of American youths in the fall struggle movement," and called for a "quick and complete" withdrawal of U.S. forces. On the eve of the Moratorium Day a similar letter from Premier Pham Van Dong to his "Dear American friends" wished the "fall offensive" "splendid success" and remarked that "Our people's struggle is precisely the struggle for peace and justice that you are waging."⁶

* Soon thereafter representatives of the Students for a Democratic Society met with North Vietnamese officials in Cuba. See CR, 12 September 1977.

It was against that background that President Nixon decided to make a major TV address to appeal for public support for his Vietnam policy. In his November 3d address the President, expressing disappointment over the lack of progress at the bargaining table, announced that a plan had been adopted for cooperating with the South Vietnamese in completely withdrawing U.S. combat ground forces "on an orderly, scheduled timetable," with the rate of withdrawal depending on three factors: progress at the Paris talks, the level of hostilities, and progress in strengthening the South Vietnamese armed forces. Nixon assured the American people that his strategy -- the twin approach of negotiations and the Vietnamization of the war, accompanied by the withdrawal of U.S. forces -- would permit the U.S. to disengage from the war even if negotiations failed.

The North Vietnamese responded to President Nixon's appeal for public support with an "official government statement" which urged Americans "to renew their just demands that Nixon immediately and unconditionally withdraw all U.S. troops."⁷ Two days later Hanoi demanded that "the U.S. must withdraw completely and unconditionally from South Vietnam, and give up clinging to the Saigon puppet administration," and claimed that "The just aspirations of the majority of the American people were strongly expressed in the Moratorium Day protest against the war of aggression in Vietnam on 15 October. It is clear that Nixon disregards those urgent demands."⁸ On 7 November Radio Hanoi declared that "The Nixon administration tries to exert maximum military pressure in order to secure a position of strength in the negotiations."

Comments by the North Vietnamese-NLF leadership on the Vietnamization policy during 1969 were characterized by a curious dichotomy. On the one hand that policy was ridiculed as one doomed to inevitable failure. The NLF's Liberation Radio asked, "How can even a man as stupid and naive as Nixon think that the puppet traitors can do alone what they could not do when they had 500,000 U.S. aggressor troops fighting for them?"⁹ In late 1969 Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese Defense Minister, told an Hungarian journalist that U.S. attempts to "Vietnamize" the war in South Vietnam

would "end in tragedy for the South Vietnamese Army and for the withdrawing American troops."¹⁰ But on the other hand we have seen that Hanoi and the NLF denounced every initiative taken by the Nixon administration to implement that policy as a "perfidious trick" or an "attempt to influence public opinion," and on one occasion even denounced the Nixon administration for "deescalating the war."

Only after the fall of South Vietnam, with the publication in 1975 of an update of the official history of the Lao Dong Party, was it possible to clear up that apparent contradiction. In that document Lao Dong Party historians admitted that the Politburo was concerned that Vietnamization might succeed:

"Our Party estimated that the situation at that time could develop in either of two ways: first, if the U.S. troops suffered heavy casualties and encountered great difficulties, the White House would be forced to conclude the war early by means of a political solution; second, if the all-round attack by our soldiers and people was not sufficiently strong and the U.S. was enabled to temporarily recover, in part, from their difficulties, it would prolong the war, seek ways to deescalate from a position of strength, and carry out its policy of 'Vietnamizing' the war."¹¹

A review of the domestic scene in the United States in late 1969, 1970, and 1971 shows that the North Vietnamese had ample reason to be concerned that the U.S. might be able to "temporarily recover" and succeed in carrying out the Vietnamization policy. A Gallup poll taken after President Nixon's November 3d TV address revealed that 64 percent of Americans approved of the way he was handling the Vietnamese situation. An attempt to renew the moratorium movement, centering on a series of demonstrations in April and May 1970, this time focusing on the theme of the relationship between high taxes and war expenditures, drew far less participation than in 1969. Whereas 50 members of Congress participated in the 15 October 1969 demonstrations across the nation, fewer than a dozen were present at the May 1970 demonstrations. Indeed, the increasing violence associated with

the anti-war movement, such as the bombings at the Capitol and the University of Wisconsin, alienated a large segment of the American public. In 1971 U.S. combat deaths, which totaled 14,500 in 1968, dropped to 1,400 and continued to decline. War costs, which were \$26.5 billion in 1969, had declined to \$12 billion in 1971.

The diminishing of public concern over Vietnam was reflected in Congress. In December 1969 the House, by a vote of 333-55, approved an administration-sponsored resolution endorsing Nixon's efforts to negotiate a "just peace in Vietnam," and in 1970 and 1971 Congress decisively rejected several "end the war" proposals. In the fall of 1971 the Senate voted overwhelmingly to extend the draft.

Thus despite the corrosive effects of the prolonged My Lai trial in 1969-1970 and the Pentagon Papers affair in 1971, and the flare-up in student unrest following the incursion into Cambodia in the spring of 1970 and the South Vietnamese operation in southern Laos in 1971, all signs pointed to a steady lessening of domestic pressure in the U.S. President Nixon's popularity with the American public, indeed, reached a high point after 15 July 1971, when he accepted an invitation to visit Communist China the following year.

The North Vietnamese, therefore, were faced with the prospect that by the end of 1972 there would remain in Vietnam only a "residual force" of 20,000 to 30,000 U.S. technicians and advisors supporting a South Vietnamese army of more than a million men, with increasingly modern weapons and equipment and powerful U.S. air and naval support. U.S. war expenditures would have declined by about 90 percent in comparison to 1969 and the U.S. casualty rate would be very low, with a corresponding decrease in anti-war sentiment in the U.S. What the North Vietnamese needed, and called for continually, was a "total and unconditional" withdrawal of U.S. military support, one so complete and so sudden that it would result in the collapse of the Thieu regime.

Hanoi's preoccupation with the Vietnamization program may explain its decision to launch a major offensive in South Vietnam in the spring of 1972, at a time when there were still nearly 100,000 U.S. troops there, instead of waiting until later in the year, when there would have been fewer than 50,000*, a decision which puzzled many observers at the time. The goal of the North Vietnamese appears to have been to draw some of the remaining U.S. troops into combat and perhaps force the U.S. not only to suspend the withdrawal schedule but even send some units back to South Vietnam.** Among the evidence supporting this conclusion are the contention in the revised Lao Dong Party history that "if the U.S. troops suffered heavy casualties and encountered great difficulties, the White House would be forced to conclude the war early by means of a political solution"; the emphatic but erroneous claim made early in the offensive by the PRG Foreign Minister, Mme. Nguyen Thi Binh, that a U.S. 1st Cavalry Division unit had entered the fighting; and the assertion made in a North Vietnamese military journal that as a result of the 1972 offensive Nixon "had been forced to partly re-Americanize the war."¹² According to the Lao Dong Party history, the policy adopted by the Politburo to counter the Vietnamization policy was to "continue to comprehensively develop our strategic offensive posture and promote the military offensive and political offensive, combined with the diplomatic offensive...to defeat the 'Vietnamization' plot of the U.S. imperialists."¹³

* The North Vietnamese timetable, indeed, may well have been delayed by the joint U.S.-South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia in the spring of 1970 and, a year later, by Operation Lam Son 719, a two-months long foray by South Vietnamese forces into Base Area 604 in southern Laos, to which the North Vietnamese had sharply increased the flow of supplies after December 1970.

** In their report "Vietnam: December 1969" Senate Foreign Relation Committee staff members Richard Moose and James Lowenstein made the following assessment: "Were the North Vietnamese to launch a massive attack at any point in the course of the U.S. withdrawal, the United States would be faced with the prospect of either halting -- or even reversing-- the process of withdrawal...or being forced...to effect an accelerated, complete withdrawal which would be interpreted at home, and probably abroad, as a military defeat."

The 1972 "Easter" Offensive

The North Vietnamese "Easter" offensive began precisely at noon on 30 March 1972, when the 304th, 308th, and 324B divisions, along with supporting armor and artillery units equipped with T-54 tanks and long-range 130mm guns, poured across the DMZ. Within three days the heavily outnumbered ARVN 3d Division, which had been formed only six months earlier, had abandoned the northern half of Quang Tri Province and formed a defensive line at the Cua Viet River, along with Marine and Ranger reinforcements. On 9 April the North Vietnamese launched a massive assault against the South Vietnamese positions west of Quang Tri City but were thrown back with heavy losses. The NVA 324B Division, moving down the A Shau Valley, laid siege to Fire Base Bastogne, a key defensive position 20 kilometers west of Hue. The ARVN 1st Division, under MG Pham Van Phu, repulsed a strong NVA attack on that position on 11 April.

On 5 April the North Vietnamese opened a second front by sending three divisions -- the 5th, 7th, and 9th -- across the Cambodian border into Binh Long Province. Loc Ninh, a district capital, fell two days later. All that stood between the invaders and Saigon were fewer than 7,000 men of the ARVN 5th Division and 3d Ranger Group at the provincial capital, An Loc, only 37 miles to the north. On 13 April the NVA launched an assault on An Loc spearheaded by 40 tanks and within 24 hours had captured half of the town, while other NVA units attacked the towns of Lai Khe and Chon Thanh below An Loc. The besieged ARVN defenders, compressed into an area about one mile square, would be subjected to 78,000 rounds of artillery fire -- 10,000 rounds on 11 May alone -- which left not a building standing or a tree unsplintered. More than 1,000 of the ARVN garrison had been wounded by 18 April.

The North Vietnamese kept up relentless pressure on the Quang Tri front. On 20 April advance elements of a fourth NVA division -- the 325th -- crossed the DMZ. By the 28th the heavily outnumbered South Vietnamese Marines abandoned Dong Ha and fell back toward Quang Tri City. On the same day the ARVN 1st Division withdrew from Fire Base Bastogne, which had been

under seige for nearly a month. On 1 May the 8,000 ARVN troops in Quang Tri City, endangered by encirclement, fell back to within 15 miles of Hue.

Meanwhile a third front had been opened in the Central Highlands. On 8 April NVA forces cut Rt. 14 between Kontum and Pleiku in several places. The NVA 320th and 2d divisions fought their way toward Kontum City, while in neighboring Binh Dinh Province the NVA 3d Division overran the district capital of Hoai Nhon on the coast and cut Rt. 19 at An Khe Pass. The NVA strategy in the Central Highlands was apparently to achieve what they nearly succeeded in achieving in 1965 -- cutting South Vietnam in half. By 28 April NVA units had surrounded Kontum City.

Although the North Vietnamese failed to draw U.S. units into combat and the U.S. command pointedly announced that the withdrawal would proceed as scheduled, the offensive had an immediate impact on Congress. On 9 April Sen. Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a television interview that the issue of cutting war funds would be a "very live" issue in Congress. The recent enemy offensive in Vietnam, he said, proved that Vietnamization "is not a valid way to end the war" and that "the negotiation process is all." Sen. McGovern insisted that the new offensive "proves the Vietnamization program is a failure" and that the war "is a hopeless venture." On 16 April the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted to approve a cutoff of funds for all U.S. combat operations in Indochina after December 31st, subject to the release of U.S. POW's. On 20 April the House Democratic Caucus voted 144-58 in favor of a resolution to set a date to "end U.S. military involvement in and over Indochina."

After the fall of Quang Tri City, however, the military situation in South Vietnam began to stabilize. ARVN forces in Quang Tri, under the command of the new I Corps commander, LG Ngo Quang Truong, formed a defensive line south of the My Chanh River 25 miles north of Hue with Airborne and Marine units from the strategic reserve. On 13 May the South Vietnamese launched counterattacks in Quang Tri and around Hue, and on the 15th recaptured Fire Base Bastogne. On the 25th a NVA drive across the My Chanh

was repulsed. On 7 June NVA units which had held part of Kontum City since 25 May were driven out after two weeks of heavy fighting, and to the south an ARVN relief force made up of the 21st Division and 3d Airborne Brigade reopened Rt. 13 and linked up with the garrison in An Loc. On 28 June 20,000 ARVN troops launched a drive to retake Quang Tri City. Despite the movement of 20,000 fresh North Vietnamese troops across the DMZ in late August, bringing the total communist forces in Military Region I to six divisions and several independent regiments, the ARVN drive made steady progress and ended with the recapture of the provincial capital on 15 September.

U.S. airpower played an important role in gradually turning the tide in the south by supporting the ARVN ground forces, which generally fought well but were outnumbered on all three major fronts and faced superior numbers of tanks and artillery. By 10 April the U.S. had assembled a force of 70 B52's and could call on 220 Air Force jets in South Vietnam and 280 naval fighter-bombers aboard four carriers in the South China Sea, and within a month the U.S. air armada had grown to nearly 1,000 planes and six carriers. On 10 April B52's began bombing North Vietnam for the first time since November 1967 and a week later Navy fighter-bombers and B52's hit targets in the area of Haiphong and Hanoi.

Before launching the offensive the Politburo foresaw the possibility that "the U.S. might renew the bombing of the North for a certain period of time and within certain limits."¹⁴ But it failed to foresee two major developments. The first was President Nixon's order on 8 May to mine the North Vietnamese ports. The second was the extraordinary effectiveness of the U.S. laser and TV-guided "Precision Guided Munitions." In late May, F4 fighter-bombers using such "smart bombs" knocked out the Long Bien Bridge across the Red River at Hanoi without the loss of a single aircraft and the Ham Rong Bridge, which spanned a deep gorge on Rt. 1 in Thanh Hoa Province, was knocked out by a 2,000-pound "smart bomb" on the first attempt, after having withstood six years of conventional bombing. Within a week or so no major highway or railroad bridge in North Vietnam was still intact. By

June Hanoi admitted that the intensified U.S. bombing was causing it "very difficult" economic problems.¹⁵

On 2 May Secretary of State Kissinger and Le Duc Tho held a secret meeting in Paris. According to one source, Le Duc Tho, flushed with the recent communist military triumphs, refused to consider either a deescalation of the fighting or a ceasefire, but demanded the ousting of the Thieu regime and the imposition of a coalition government.¹⁶ The official proposal for an internationally supervised ceasefire made by Nixon on 8 May, when he ordered the mining of North Vietnamese ports, was rejected by Hanoi a week later. On 1 June the Lao Dong Party Politburo, commenting on the port mining and intensified bombing and apparently referring to Nixon's trip to China in February 1972 and the Moscow Summit in late May, declared that "The Nixon clique was able to carry out that scheme because there were new, complicated developments in the international situation; and affirmed that "our people must be stalwart, increase their vigilance...and continue to fight and win under all circumstances."¹⁷ On 15 June President Podgorny flew to Hanoi and reportedly suggested it was time for the North Vietnamese to negotiate seriously with the U.S.¹⁸ After his return from China on 24 June Kissinger suggested that China was urging Hanoi to negotiate a settlement with the U.S. But Hanoi remained adamant and in August accused Russia and China of "departing from the great, all-conquering revolutionary thoughts of the new era and ...bogging down on the dark, muddy road of compromise."¹⁹

Hanoi, however, was increasingly feeling the effects of the blockade and the stepped-up U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. The heaviest air bombardment of the war took place in September and the first part of October. Furthermore, it was evident that the North Vietnamese were not going to make any more major military gains in the South, and may have wanted to profit from the forthcoming U.S. presidential elections. On 22 October Premier Pham Van Dong indicated that Hanoi was prepared to accept a ceasefire and five days later the U.S. halted bombing north of the 20th parallel. On 23 November Tho suddenly revived his demand for the ouster of Thieu and ruled out the DMZ as a boundary line. To put pressure on the North

Vietnamese, President Nixon ordered the implementation of "Operation Linebacker," during which more than 20,000 tons of bombs were dropped on the Hanoi-Haiphong area between 18 and 30 December.

The Paris Agreement

The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam signed at Paris on 27 January 1973 called for a ceasefire in South Vietnam and a cessation of U.S. bombing in North and South Vietnam, effective 28 January. The U.S. role in Vietnam was to be terminated within 60 days, with the withdrawal of all U.S. troops, the dismantling of U.S. bases, and the return of U.S. POW's.

Politically, the PRG and the Republic of Vietnam were obliged to consult at the various governmental levels "in the spirit of national conciliation and concord" (Article 12). The highest consulting body, the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, made up of equal representation from the PRG, the RVN, and the "third force," was authorized to organize the general elections called for by Article 9, as well as local elections, under international supervision. Decisions regarding the elections were to be based on unanimous agreement of the three factions. As a general principle, reunification was to proceed peacefully, step-by-step, and "without coercion or annexation by either party, and without foreign interference" (Article 15).

It soon became apparent that because of a number of glaring deficiencies it would be all but impossible to supervise or enforce the Agreement. Although a Two-Party Joint Military Commission made up of delegations of the RVN was set up to determine which forces controlled which areas, nothing was said about the criteria for determining such control, and no sanctions were specified for ceasefire violations. The overall supervisory organ, the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS), a force of 1,600 Canadians, Indonesians, Hungarians, and Poles, was ineffectual from the outset, especially because of the reluctance of the two communist delegations to investigate alleged communist violations and

the reluctance of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to allow the ICCS free access to areas under their control.* Politically, the outstanding difficulty was the problem of how to define the "third force" and determine how representatives would be appointed from it.

From the South Vietnamese point of view, the most serious deficiency of the Paris Agreement was its silence about the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South. There were, however, a number of clauses in the Agreement, the Act of the International Conference held in March 1973 as called for by the Paris Agreement, the Laotian Cease-Fire Agreement in February 1973, and the supplementary communique issued in June 1973 which, if observed, would have rendered the presence of North Vietnamese troops a moot question:

Article 15(b) of the Paris Agreement stipulated that "North and South Vietnam shall respect the demilitarized zone on either side of the provisional military demarcation line." Article 7 affirmed that all parties would refrain from introducing additional personnel or weapons, except on a one-for-one replacement basis. And in Article 20(b) North Vietnam agreed that "foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Laos and Cambodia, totally withdraw from and refrain from introducing into those two countries troops, military advisers, and military personnel, armaments, munitions, and war materiel."

Article 8 of the Act of the International Conference obliged all parties to "respect the independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and neutrality of Cambodia and Laos."

Under the terms of the Laotian Cease-Fire Agreement, signed on 21 February 1973, all armed forces of foreign countries were to "completely and permanently cease all military movements in Laos" (Article 2b) and were to withdraw from Laos within 60 days after a provisional government had been formed.*

* Since the Lao coalition government was formed on 5 April 1974 the North Vietnamese should have been out of Laos by 5 June 1974.

The supplementary communique issued in June 1973 stipulated that "In conformity with Article 15(b) of the Agreement...military equipment may transit the Demilitarized Zone only if introduced into South Vietnam as replacements pursuant to Article 7 of the Agreement and through a designated port of entry."

North Vietnam's assessment of the significance of the Paris Agreement was summed up by generals Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung as follows: "The Paris Agreement on Vietnam represented a great victory for our people and reflected the extremely heavy defeat of the U.S. imperialists....From that point on the military and political situation all over our nation as well as on the southern battlefield underwent a basic change. The inevitability of the victory of the people's democratic national revolution in the South became clear and was irreversible."²⁰ In the words of MG Hoang Minh Thao, NVA commander on the Central Highlands front during the final offensive, "We fought the Americans to force them out in order to change the balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy by means of the strategic offensive of 1972 and the diplomatic struggle that led to the Paris Agreement of 1973. Only then did we advance to overthrowing the puppets by means of a large strategic annihilation battle in the general offensive and uprising of the spring of 1975, in order to victoriously conclude the war."²¹ Just prior to the 1975 spring offensive DRV Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh declared that "The Paris Agreement has provided our people with an additional sharp weapon for struggling to win new victories in order to complete the attainment of independence and democracy in the South."²²

North Vietnam Prepares

"During 1973 and 1974," noted a North Vietnamese military commentator after the fall of South Vietnam, "we continually increased our military and economic strength and prepared transportation facilities for the decisive strategic battle that would take place."²³

Prior to the Easter Offensive of 1972 virtually all supplies moved down the "Ho Chi Minh Trail," the construction of which began in May 1959

on the instructions of Ho Chi Minh.* The "trail" was in fact "a truly vast road network consisting of five or six north-south routes and dozens of east-west routes" which totalled 11,230 kilometers in length.²⁴

"Beginning in the spring of 1973," we are informed by a remarkable series of articles on North Vietnamese logistical activities after the Paris Agreement, "the entire 559 Command, having clearly been shown the path of advance in the new phase, endeavored to create strong transformations on the strategic route."²⁵ With the cessation of U.S. bombing, the North Vietnamese were free to embark on a project to consolidate the various Ho Chi Minh Trail routes into a single improved route--"Ho Chi Minh Boulevard." Furthermore, the cargo boats used on Laotian rivers and streams in conjunction with Ho Chi Minh Trail logistical movements were increased in size and power and "travelled in convoys at high speeds a distance of 500 kilometers the year around."²⁶

The North Vietnamese occupation of northern and western Quang Tri Province and the expansion of their area of control in the western part of Military Region I (encompassing the five northernmost provinces in South Vietnam) erased the DMZ as a barrier and facilitated the development of a vast logistical complex in South Vietnam. A large supply base was established at Dong Ha, which was situated on a major north-south artery and the Cua Viet River, and work was begun on a new road extending southward from Rt. 9 at Khe Sanh along the western edge of South Vietnam. By late 1974 this "Truong Son" road, a two-lane crushed rock all-weather road (some segments of which were asphalted), made up of both improved existing roads and new roads, would reach the vicinity of Loc Ninh some 375 miles south. As the road was extended southward a number of logistic bases were developed, especially in the Se Su area (Base Area 701) in western Pleiku Province and at Bu Gia Map near the southern terminus in Binh Long Province. The volume of work done on the new "Truong Son" road and its branches (totaling 1,672 kilometers) in the two years between the ceasefire and

* Hence the designation of "Command 559," which was responsible for building roads, moving supplies, and defending the trail complex.

the 1975 spring offensive was almost exactly equal to the amount of work done on the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex between 1964 and 1972.²⁷ The road included three all-weather branch roads into Quang Tri, Kontum and Tay Ninh provinces and necessitated the building of many bridges and underwater crossings of steel or concrete. At the larger rivers ferries were stationed to ferry tank and artillery units. The new road system provided much more direct access to central and southern South Vietnam than the old route passign through southern Laos and Cambodia and was capable of handling all logistics traffic when the Ho Chi Minh Trail was affected by the monsoon rains.

The "Truong Son" military engineers and transportation forces were reorganized into divisions and regiments. Truck Division 571, organized in 1973, was responsible for the 500-kilometers-long segment from the port of Dong Ha to the Se Su River depot in western Pleiku. Truck Division 471 was responsible for transporting cargo southward from Se Su to Binh Long.²⁸ The new logistical complexes and roads, and the relative absence of aerial interdiction, allowed the movement of troops and cargo on an unprecedented scale. "At dockside at the Dong Ha port depot area there was busy, urgent activity, with as many as a hundred trucks being loaded at one time. The rapid loading of cargo created conditions for the transportation troops to operate efficiently in battalion-sized units, with each battalion transporting about 500 tons. One battalion followed another...Three to five days later the cargo arrived at the receiving points of Zone 5 or the Se Su supply depot."²⁹

"After the spring of 1973," we are informed by a commentator writing after the fall, "a new battlefield position had been created with regard to roads and bridges. Previously the trucks made a run from one waystation to another, where their cargo was unloaded, and the trucks of that waystation would transport it to the next one. Only after being loaded and unloaded dozens of times did it reach the battlefield. But now operations were on a larger scale; the transportation troops organized convoys of 300, 500, or

even 1,000 trucks....The quantity of cargo brought to the battlefields increased at a rapid rate. If the volume of supplies reaching southern South Vietnam, the most distant battlefield, was 100 in 1971-72, by 1972-73 it had increased to 150 and by 1973-74 to 200." ³⁰ And during the 1974-75 dry season the volume of cargo reaching that area was three times greater than the previous year, the volume reaching the Central Highlands doubled, and the volume of cargo destined for Zone 5 increased four-fold.³¹ Within the first six weeks of 1975 the 471st Truck Division delivered 10,000 tons of cargo to the southern Central Highlands and in a period of four months the 3d Transportation Regiment transported 37,732 tons of strategic cargo,³² while according to the U.S. Secretary of the Air Force only 9,500 tons reached South Vietnam during the six months of the 1970-71 dry season.³³

The improved transportation network also facilitated the movement of troops. "Those who traveled on the Truong Son routes in the past cannot forget the long columns of troops on the dusty trails...the tired soldiers climbing passes while carrying the wounded on stretchers...nor forget the poor meals of salt, fat meat, and bamboo shoots. After the spring of 1973 troop transportation was motorized. People going north or south, whether individually or in large groups, traveled by truck or boat. The route segments were extended and waystations were built on a larger scale....If in the past the troops walked to reach the most distant battlefields, and had to pass through 50 or 60 waystations, now they could remain aboard their trucks or boats. They reached the battlefields with their ranks intact and in good health, and could rapidly enter combat."³⁴

The waystations were of two types. The first, for cargo trucks, centered around mess halls which were set up about every 100 kilometers, and included medical stations and facilities for the repair and maintenance of trucks and POL lines. The waystations for troops ("tram giao luu") included truck parks, mess halls, barracks, medical clinics, food warehouses, chicken and pig farms, etc. Typical of them was Station 15 in the Laos-Cambodia-Vietnam triborder area, which is described as follows:

"There were 22 barracks, each of which had four rooms with a capacity of 10-15 each. The station's clinic had 50 beds and two ambulances to transport wounded and ill soldiers. The granary had a capacity of 250 tons of rice. In the warehouses there were tens of tons of canned meat, powdered eggs, lard, fish paste, sugar, milk, etc....The station included a farm, equipped with a Worker-Peasant 7 tractor which cultivated an area of nearly two hectares. The food production unit was equipped with large plastic barrels and could salt dozens of basket loads of vegetables at a time. With such facilities the station was capable of providing thousands of meals a day. Every day the station received hundreds of guests, and many battalions lived in the 'bivouac' manner in the surrounding jungles." ³⁵

An important part of the North Vietnamese logistical system was the network of POL pipelines. Work began on extending the main line southward in the summer of 1968, when a 42-kilometer long segment was laid from Nghe An province to Ha Tinh Province, a project which was completed by August of that year. By 1971 the pipeline, having crossed the Truong Son mountain range via the Mu Gia Pass, had reached a point south of Rt. 9 in southern Laos. In early 1971 the pipeline construction effort was upgraded with the reorganization of the army's POL section into a regular Department of the POL General Department. In April of that year a 100-kilometer long line connecting Hanoi with Hai Hung was completed in 12 days. After the U.S. mined the North Vietnamese ports in May 1972 a line was laid connecting Hai Hung with Langson, a town on the Chinese border. On 15 June 1972 gasoline began to flow from Langson to Hanoi, and thence to the south. By the end of 1972 the line had been extended to the Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia triborder area, and would reach Bu Gia May, near Loc Ninh, on 4 February 1975.³⁶ The new pipeline, with its branch lines, pumping stations, and underground storage facilities along the route, greatly improved North Vietnamese logistical capabilities. All trucks were now free to transport cargo other than POL. The fueling stations along the route could handle 24 trucks at a time.³⁷

The POL pipelines were well-camouflaged and difficult to detect from the air. The line was laid across the bottom of placid streams and rivers

and was suspended over such deep, swift rivers as the Srepoc. To deceive aerial observers the suspended pipeline was camouflaged with jungle vines and a cable was strung across the stream at water level to ripple the water surface and diffuse the pipeline's shadow. The South Vietnamese cut the POL lines many times by air strikes or long-range ground patrols, but specialized NVA pipeline regiments quickly repaired the damage.

In 1973 and 1974 the North Vietnamese were concerned with reorganizing and retraining the People's Army in preparation for the general offensive. The North Vietnamese army had made a number of mistakes in the 1972 offensive, when it attempted large-scale combined arms attacks for the first time. In theory the North Vietnamese opened assaults with massive barrages from 130mm guns, then sent in T-54 tanks and other armored vehicles followed closely by infantry. In fact, however, during the 1972 offensive the North Vietnamese often used tanks piecemeal, and as often as not the armored vehicles outdistanced the infantry, who followed too far behind and were vulnerable to air attacks. At An Loc, for example, the NVA squandered armor in a series of uncoordinated attacks: a total of 86 tanks were destroyed in and around the city. Throughout 1973, therefore, the NVA High Command stressed intensified combined arms training, an emphasis reflected in the many articles on combined arms operations and "campaign art" appearing in military journals.

A major deficiency of the North Vietnamese in the 1972 offensive was that although they launched "combined arms" attacks the infantry, tanks, and artillery were often under their own independent command, which made effective coordination all but impossible. The first step taken to correct that deficiency was the consolidation of independent regiments into divisions. A new division, the 341st, was created in southern North Vietnam and the 338th Training Division was converted into a regular infantry division. In 1974 two divisions -- the 4th and 8th -- were created from independent regiments in the Mekong Delta. In the fall of 1974 the North Vietnamese army carried its reorganization a step further by ordering the formation of "mobile strategic corps" made up of several divisions and subordinate to the High Command. The 1st Corps was created in southern North Vietnam and the 2d Corps in the Quang Tri-Quang Nam area.

Military and Political Developments: 1973

In mid-January 1973, when it became evident that the Paris Agreement would soon be signed, both sides launched "land grabbing" attacks. The North Vietnamese concentrated their efforts in the Military Region II area around Saigon. Although their attacks failed in the northern and northeastern provinces of that region, the NVA succeeded in taking 144 hamlets in the provinces northwest and west of Saigon. By 3 February, however, the South Vietnamese had retaken all of the hamlets lost to the NVA. The South Vietnamese launched an offensive thrust in the Queson just below the DMZ, and north of Quang Tri City ARVN Marines attempted to advance to the more easily defended Cua Viet River. On the eve of the ceasefire the North Vietnamese captured the fishing village of Sa Huynh on the coast of Quang Ngai Province, thus obtaining a potential supply port. The ARVN 2d Division succeeded in retaking Sa Huynh after a three-week campaign.

In Military Region I, in the spring of 1973 the NVA, preoccupied with developing their logistical bases in northern Quang Tri and western Thua Thien, largely refrained from provoking the South Vietnamese. In the Central Highlands the NVA units concentrated their efforts on ARVN outposts which were situated near the NVA logistical complex in western Pleiku or hindered the progress of the new north-south road, which was being extended from the Dak To area southward through the Plei Trap Valley in western Kontum and would reach the vicinity of Bu Prang in Quang Duc Province by May 1973. In western Military Region III, on 26 February the North Vietnamese began a siege of Tong Le Chan, an ARVN Ranger outpost near the Cambodian border which hindered logistical movements from Cambodia into Binh Long Province. Elsewhere in Military Region III the North Vietnamese kept up constant pressure in the Ho Bo and Boi Loi areas north of Cu Chi and in the area of Long Nguyen between Cu Chi and Lai Khe. In the Mekong Delta, in March and April the NVA 3B Division attacked Hong Ngu District town in Kien Phong Province to gain a port on the Mekong River near the Cambodian border. The NVA division was eventually pushed back across the border by the ARVN 9th Division. In the Seven Mountains area of Chau Doc Province elements of the NVA 1st Division were expelled after weeks of hard fighting.

The weaknesses of the implementation provisions of the Paris Agreement soon became apparent. On 5 February the ICCS observer teams took up positions in South Vietnam to monitor the cease-fire. Four days later its chairman complained that it was impossible to effectively supervise the truce because of the inability of the Saigon government and the Viet Cong to agree to clear lines separating the territory they held. Another weakness was the inability of the ICCS itself to reach agreement. On 10 March the head of the Canadian delegation accused Hungary and Poland of rejecting the Canadian request to investigate Saigon's complaint that the North Vietnamese had installed SAM missiles at Khe Sanh. The Hungarian delegation was quoted as saying, "Our standpoint has not changed. There is no proof of North Vietnamese missiles at Khe Sanh." Ten days later ARVN forces launched a major assault to break the communist siege of an outpost at Rach Bap, 22 miles north of Saigon, after Hungarian and Polish members refused to consider the incident. Early in April the ICCS met to consider a South Vietnamese complaint about the siege of Tong Le Chan, but the Hungarian and Polish delegates refused to send observers to the scene. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong apparently adopted a policy of harassing ICCS teams. On 7 April two ICCS helicopters were shot down in northern Quang Tri Province, with the loss of nine ICCS observers. Communist forces fired on or hit ICCS helicopters on numerous other occasions. After two Canadian members were treated as POW's after being captured by the Communists in the Mekong Delta, the Canadian Government decided that any further participation in the ICCS would be futile and announced that Canada would withdraw by 31 July.

Although the North and South Vietnamese reached an accord on the exchange of POW's, the political talks between the PRG and Saigon delegations, which began on 5 February at Paris, soon deadlocked. On 25 April Nguyen Van Hieu, head of the PRG delegation, introduced "Six Points" which called for the setting up of the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord and the holding of "free and democratic general elections in South Vietnam."³⁸ In June the "Six Points" were "clarified": a Council of 36 members -- 12 each for the PRG, Saigon, and "third force" factions -- would be formed "as soon as possible." Similar councils would be formed at the provincial, city, district, village, and ward levels. A constituent assembly

would be elected to draft a constitution, after which general elections would be held "as soon as possible."³⁹ The Saigon government, expressing concern that the communists may seek to take advantage of the lack of a specific timetable, proposed that the Council be formed on 26 June 1973 and that general elections be held two months later.⁴⁰

After a series of discussions between Secretary of State Kissinger and Le Duc Tho on ways to strengthen the ceasefire, the two sides issued a 14-point joint communique on 13 June which called for a halt to all military activity in South Vietnam on 15 June. The communique was followed by a temporary pause in the tempo of combat activity. On 5 July, however, heavy fighting erupted west of Kontum, where the NVA 10th Division had driven a regiment of the 23d Division from the village of Trung Nghia. Other major clashes were reported in July and August in an area 25 miles north of Saigon, near Hue, and at an ARVN Ranger outpost at Ly Thai Loi in Pleiku Province.

Fighting grew in intensity in late September. On 22 September the NVA 320th Division began an assault on the ARVN Le Minh Ranger camp at Plei Djereng, which lay astride Rt. 14 between the Plei Trap Valley and the Se Su logistical complex. The camp fell after a heavy artillery bombardment and a tank-led infantry assault. Farther south, in Quang Duc Province, the Bu Prang Ranger camp blocked the new North Vietnamese road from being extended to the Loc Ninh-Bu Gia Map area. The NVA began a heavy artillery shelling of Bu Prang and the nearby camp of Bu Bong on 30 October. On 4 November those positions fell to tank-led infantry assaults but were soon retaken. In the Mekong Delta a sharp clash left 80 communists and 32 South Vietnamese dead, the highest fatality count suffered by the ARVN in the Delta since the ceasefire.

The intensified fighting in the South in the fall of 1973 was apparently related to the convening of the 21st Plenum of the Lao Dong Party, which met in Hanoi in early October. According to the NVA Chief of Staff, Van Tien Dung, the 21st Plenum made the pivotal decision that "The path of

revolution in the South is the path of revolutionary violence." -- that South Vietnam was to be taken by military force. As for the reason for this fundamental shift in strategy, we are told only that "since the enemy had failed to implement the Paris Agreement and continued to pursue Vietnamization...in an attempt to seize all of the South, we had no alternative but to conduct a revolutionary war to destroy him and liberate the South."⁴¹ Another high-ranking North Vietnamese military commentator adds that after the 21st Plenum "the High Command began to study and draft a plan and strategy to completely liberate the South. At that point the work of preparing forces and stockpiling materiel began to be carried out, the building of strategic roads was accelerated, and the battlefields developed their offensive posture, which created new, advantageous conditions."⁴²

In an apparently coordinated development, on 4 October PRG State Minister Nguyen Van Hieu walked out of the 28th session of the political talks in Paris. And on 15 October the High Command of the Liberation Armed Forces warned Saigon against attempting a military solution and ordered the communist forces "to resolutely retaliate for the acts of war of the Saigon regime, no matter where, in appropriate forms."⁴³ Five days later the communist forces received a second order to "fight back" in the "new phase" of the post-truce period.

From 26 to 28 October some 200 long-time, more or less professional anti-war activists met at Germantown, Ohio, at the invitation of Tom Hayden, who had visited Hanoi with Jane Fonda earlier in the month, to map future strategy and reinvigorate the flagging anti-war movement. The delegates represented 15 organizations, including the American Friends Service Committee, the Indochina Resource Center, the Coalition for Peace and Justice, the War Resisters League, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women Strike for Peace, and others. According to a newsletter of Hayden's "Indochina Peace Campaign," a "coordinated grassroots network of citizens committed to stopping finally all U.S. intervention in Indochina," the participants "shared the view that the anti-war movement now has the objective capacity to actually force an end to U.S. aid to the Thieu and Lon Nol

dictatorships." A State Department document termed the resulting effort "a sophisticated, long-term, coordinated campaign to pressure Congress into elimination or drastically cutting American assistance to South Vietnam".⁴⁴

The Indochina Peace Campaign had four stated objectives:

"First, demand that the 1973 Paris Agreement be implemented;

"Second, create friendship and understanding with the Indochinese people through medical aid to Indochina and other cultural programs;

"Third, broaden and unite the anti-war movement, supporting amnesty and the rights of all Americans forcing repression because of opposition to the war; and

"Fourth, agitate around the Watergate crisis to wrench policymaking from Indochina out of the hands of the Executive."⁴⁵

Military and Political Developments: 1974

By January 1974 a buildup by the NVA 5th Division in the Cambodian province of Svay Rieng, which juts to within 40 kilometers of Saigon, was posing a threat to the mid-delta region. In February the ARVN 7th and 9th divisions launched an operation against Base 470, centering around the village of Tri Phat at the juncture of Kien Tuong, Kien Phong, and Dinh Tuong provinces near the Cambodian border, to disrupt that buildup. To forestall a NVA drive along Route 1 to Go Dau Ha, which would have isolated Tay Ninh Province, the ARVN 5th Division moved across the border into the "Parrot's Beak" area of Svay Rieng in late April. The operation inflicted serious losses on the NVA 5th Division and succeeded in forestalling the NVA drive. It proved, however, to be the last division-sized "preemptive" operation the South Vietnamese could muster in outlying areas, due to the increasing restrictions placed on ammunition, fuel, and flying hours.

In March, Le Du n and Le Duc Tho convened a meeting of the Central Military Party Commission in Hanoi to discuss the 21st Plenum's resolution of October 1973. After concluding that "we must resolutely counter-attack and attack the enemy, and we must firmly maintain our active position in all respects," the Commission "presented measures for applying this method in each region as well as operational methods for each battlefield." After the Commission's resolution was approved by the Politburo, "the High Command, 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...and ordered the various battlefields to step up their activities...and win the initiative in order to change the battlefield situation and to facilitate the large-scale offensives to be launched everywhere in 1975."

Until the spring of 1974 Hanoi had concentrated on consolidating and reequipping its forces and in removing South Vietnamese positions threatening its expanding logistical network. Its new strategy would be to occupy strategic areas in all parts of South Vietnam in preparation for the final assault. In April the NVA 5th Division, based in Tay Ninh, attacked the ARVN outpost at Duc Hue, west of the Vam Co Dong River in Hzu Nghia Province. The NVA force failed to take the post but occupied most of the district. By June the ARVN 25th Division had retaken the lost territory. Meanwhile, the NVA 33d and 274th regiments attacked Regional Force posts along Rt. 2 in the Long Khanh-Phuoc Tuy area. By the end of May the ARVN 18th Division had repulsed the NVA regiments. On 16 May the NVA 7th and 9th divisions moved into the "Iron Triangle" area north of Saigon. The main objectives of the NVA divisions were Phu Giao, the capture of which would open the way for an attack on Phu Cuong, the capital of Binh Duong Province, and Ben Cat, the fall of which would isolate the ARVN 5th Division base at Lai Khe and expose the ARVN 25th Division at Cu Chi. The Iron Triangle fighting lasted six months. Although the NVA failed to achieve their objectives, the manpower and material resources of the South Vietnamese were severely strained.

In the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, the NVA attempted to gain access to the coast south of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province. The NVA 2d Division took Ky Tra, 13 kilometers south of Tam Ky, on 5 May, but the ARVN succeeded in retaking the worn and reopening Rt. 1 to Tam Ky. In Quang Nam Province the NVA concentrated on Da Trach, in the western part of the Thu Bon Valley, Duc Duc at the western tip of the valley, and the district capital of Thuong Duc, which controlled access to the Quang Nam lowlands. On 18 July Da Trach fell to the NVA following an artillery barrage of 5,000 rounds. Duc Duc was captured on 24 July after one of the biggest battles since the ceasefire, and Thuong Duc fell on 7 August after a barrage of 12,000 heavy artillery rounds.

In Thua Thien Province the NVA attempted to take the outposts in the hinterland controlling access to Hue and Phu Bai. On 28 August the newly formed NVA 2d Corps, made up of the 304th, 324th, and 325th divisions, launched coordinated attacks on all ARVN positions in the Mo Tau-Hill 300 area southeast of Hue. The South Vietnamese were forced to abandon their positions at Nui Bong and on hills 273, 300, and 224. In southern Thua Thien Province, only Mo Tau remained, and the NVA 324th Division now controlled terrain overlooking the Phu Loc lowlands and Phu Bai, which was regained only after three months of hard fighting by elements of the ARVN 1st Division and 15th Ranger Group. In Quang Nam Province the outposts at Minh Long and Gia Vuc fell on 21 September. By year's end the hard-pressed ARVN 2d Division could field battalions of only 300 men each.

In the Central Highlands the NVA continued to attack ARVN positions threatening their logistic corridors. The outpost of Tieu Atar, near the Cambodian border in Darlac Province, fell on 30 May after being pounded by more than 1,000 rounds of heavy artillery. On 19 August the NVA 10th Division overran Mang But, 50 kilometers north of Kontum. Dak Pek, an outpost in the mountains north of Kontum, fell on 16 May after a 7,000-round artillery barrage. In the early fall of 1974 the NVA 3d Division blocked Rt. 1 in northern Binh Dinh and threatened Phu Cat. The ARVN 22d Division succeeded in forcing the 3d Division back into the An Lao Valley by the end of the year.

In October 1974 a joint conference of the Politburo and the Central Party Military Commission was convened in Hanoi to evaluate the results of the stepped-up fighting in South Vietnam and outline Hanoi's strategic plan for 1975.

The over-all situation in the South was assessed as follows:

"1. The puppets are becoming increasingly weak militarily, politically, and economically. Our forces have become stronger than those of the enemy in the South.

"2. The U.S. is encountering an increasingly greater number of difficulties at home and abroad, both political and economic, and its capability to aid the puppets is steadily decreasing.

"3. We had the initiative throughout 1974 on the battlefields and were able to create an integrated strategic position. We further strengthened our forces and materiel stockpiles, and further developed our network of strategic and campaign roads.

"4. The campaign demanding peace, democracy, and the overthrow of Thieu in the cities has risen to a high level."⁴⁷

The fighting at Thuong Duc in Quang Nam Province was viewed as "a test of strength with the best of the enemy forces....The enemy sent in a whole division of paratroopers...but we decimated the enemy forces."* The NVA High Command reported that the Chu Nghe and Dak Pek victories in the Central Highlands proved that "the combat capabilities of our mobile main-force troops are now altogether superior to those of the enemy's regular troops.... The war has reached its final stage and the balance of forces has changed in our favor."⁴⁸ The Politburo and the Central Party Military Commission concluded that "we could and had to shift from attacking chiefly to destroy vital enemy forces to attacking not only to destroying the enemy forces but also to liberate the people and hold the land; and from our main forces operating chiefly to destroying the enemy's regular forces on the jungle and mountain battlefields to destroying the enemy and liberating the areas adjacent to the cities and the lowlands, and the cities themselves."⁴⁹

* In fact, the ARVN Command committed only one airbrigade to the Thuong Duc fighting

The 1975 strategic plan was discussed in broad outline. Ultimately, the conference approved the High Command's recommendation that the Central Highlands be the focal point of the 1975 military effort. The Politburo, concluding that further study was necessary before the specific details could be worked out, ordered the principal commanders in the South -- Pham Hung, Tran Van Tra, Chu Huy Man, and Vo Chi Cong -- to Hanoi to attend a series of meetings on 3-5 December."⁵⁰

According to the NVA Chief of Staff, a question "heatedly discussed" at the conference was that of "whether the U.S. would be able to send its troops back to the South if we launched large-scale attacks." Agreement was reached on the following analysis: "After signing the Paris Agreement on Vietnam and withdrawing its troops from Vietnam, the U.S. has encountered even greater difficulties and embarrassments. The internal contradictions within the U.S. administration and between the U.S. political parties has intensified. The Watergate scandal has seriously affected the entire U.S. and has precipitated the resignation of an extremely reactionary President -- Nixon. The U.S. is facing economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment, and an oil crisis....U.S. aid to the Saigon puppet administration is decreasing."⁵¹

A high-ranking commentator writing under the pseudonym of Si Tam echoed that analysis of the U.S. domestic scene: "In the U.S., the collapse of the Nixon Administration was a new manifestation of the over-all, continual crisis of the U.S. imperialists over a period of nearly 20 years. The heavy defeats of the U.S. in its war of aggression exacerbated that crisis. With recession accompanied by increasingly serious inflation, the spectre of an economic crisis is pressing down hard on the U.S....The Ford administration, which inherited the defeats of the Nixon administration and is in a weaker position than any previous U.S. administration, is passively resisting the increasingly developing tendency among the U.S. people and Congress to oppose the policy of continuing to impetuously aid the Saigon administration and to oppose the U.S.'s continuing, long-term involvement in Vietnam and Indochina."⁵²

On 8 October a PRG spokesman at the Paris political talks issued a statement which declared that "The U.S. is continuing its military involvement and its interference in the internal affairs of South Vietnam" and that "The fascist Nguyen Van Thieu clique...is fiercely stepping up the war and driving its troops into bloody land-nibbling operations and pacification raids," and demanded "the overthrow of Nguyen Van Thieu and his gang, who constitute the main obstacle to the solution of the political issue in South Vietnam."⁵³ The PRG delegation walked out of the talks, vowing it could not return until Thieu was overthrown.

The Poor Man's War

U.S. and North Vietnamese observers agree that the turning point in the military situation in the south came in mid-summer of 1974. At a press conference in September 1975 Secretary of State Kissinger claimed that "The military situation in Vietnam was relatively good until last June. At that time we had to impose cuts -- no new equipment could be sent, and only inadequate ammunition. That brought about a reduction in the ammunition expended by the Vietnamese Army. This in turn led to an increase in casualties, to a loss of mobility, and therefore to a deterioration in the military situation."⁵⁴

In January 1975 the Lao Dong Party monthly HOC TAP offered a similar analysis: "Beginning in July 1974 the activities of the puppet army were concentrated principally on stopping the attacks of the liberation armed forces and relieving blockades in areas retaken by the liberation armed forces. But even in those activities they were bogged down and defeated and revealed many weaknesses....In the first quarter of 1974 they were capable of retaking 50 percent of the outposts taken by the liberation armed forces, while in the third quarter of 1974 that capability was only 30 percent. The firepower and mobility of the puppet army has clearly declined. In the first quarter of 1974 the number of artillery rounds it fired monthly declined to about 75 percent of the rounds fired monthly in 1973. The number of daily combat missions flown amounted to only about half the number flown in 1973 and about one-fifth the number flown in 1972.

The number of airplanes in the South at present is 70 percent less than during the high point of the war, and the number of helicopters has declined by 80 percent. The puppet troops' stocks of bombs and ammunition have declined. They are encountering great difficulties with regard to fuel, and with regard to the maintenance, repair, and use of the various types of airplanes, tanks, warships, and heavy weapons."

In the same month TAP CHI QUAN DOI NHAN DAN, the People's Army monthly, commented on the decline in the South Vietnamese army's mobility and logistical capabilities: "For a long time now the Saigon puppet army has relied on a high degree of mobility, especially by air. Now they are encountering difficulties in that regard. Although they have a large number of motor vehicles, many of them are inoperative. The decline in air mobility has strongly affected the combat capability, which has already declined, of the puppet army....Insufficient and slow supply is increasingly creating a psychology of disgust and lack of confidence, even among the commanders. The logistics problem is now a continuing nightmare for the puppet army."

In his authoritative summary of the final stage of the war, Van Tien Dung added his analysis of the effect of the reduction in U.S. military aid to South Vietnam: "The reduction in 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 U.S. had given the puppet troops \$2.168 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 forced to fight a poor man's war. The enemy firepower was reduced by nearly 60 percent because of bomb and ammunition shortages. Its mobility was cut in half due to a shortage 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." 55

This shift to small-scale, infantry-oriented operations and reduced artillery and air support, at a time when the North Vietnamese were greatly increasing their fire-support and mobility capabilities, resulted in a sharp increase in ARVN casualties. In the words of Si Tam, "The reduction in U.S.

aid greatly affected the puppet army's operational and developmental plans, and forced it to reduce fire support, reduce air and land mobility, etc. A whole series of reductions led to important tactical changes and pull-backs." 56 The head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, quoted in VIETNAM COURIER, estimated that "the Saigon military forces have declined by 11 percent and have lost a number of their best field commanders." 57 The depletion of the ranks of ARVN units was noted by a North Vietnamese analyst: "The regular army has the same number of units but their effective strength has diminished. For instance, a battalion was previously composed of 500 men, but now is only 300-400 strong. The militia have also been considerably weakened; there are some battalions with only 200 men. Many Popular Force units have been dissolved to replenish others." 58

"Nguyen Van Thieu's only hope," concluded one analyst, "is to rely on the support and assistance of the U.S. But the U.S. imperialists are encountering the greatest difficulties ever at home and abroad, the country is being torn apart internally, inflation is rampant, the economy is in a recession and economic depression is threatening, and U.S. prestige and influence in the world have declined. The fact that the U.S. Congress cut in half the amount of military aid money the Pentagon requested for Thieu for the 1974-75 fiscal year and reduced economic aid by 20 percent in comparison to the previous fiscal year reflects the difficult situation of the U.S. administration. In such a situation it is certain that the U.S. imperialists, no matter how obstinate, must think carefully about whether they should jump in to save a drowning person, lest they also be submerged in trouble and defeat." 59

Phuoc Long

After the top NVA commanders left the South for Hanoi, the NVA launched a large-scale offensive on Phuoc Long Province northwest of Saigon. The first blow fell on Dong Xoai subsector, defended by the ARVN 341st Regional Force Battalion, on 14 December. Duc Phong (on Rt. 14) and Bo Duc subsectors were overrun the following day. On 26 December radio contact was lost with Dong Xoai after a 1,000-round artillery barrage. The NVA force pushed southwest to the outskirts of the provincial capital, Phuoc Binh, a town of 25,000 75 miles northwest of Saigon, which was besieged by the NVA

7th and 3d divisions, a tank battalion, and an independent infantry regiment. Heavy antiaircraft fire made it impossible for the ARVN to heli-lift more than two Ranger companies into Phuoc Binh. The NVA kept up their devastating artillery fire, especially after 3 January, when the rate of fire increased to about 3,000 rounds a day. On 6 January Phuoc Binh fell. Of the more than 5,000 ARVN troops in the province, fewer than 850 made their way back to South Vietnamese lines.

On 18 December, four days after the assault on Phuoc Long began, the Politburo convened an "extremely important" conference in Hanoi, which included the participation of Central Military Commission members and key commanders. The conference paid close attention to the U.S. reaction: "At first the U.S. aggressively sent the nuclear-powered carrier Enterprise to lead a Seventh Fleet task force from the Philippines toward Vietnamese waters. The U.S. 3d Marine Division on Okinawa was ordered on alert and the warmongers in the Pentagon threatened to resume bombing Vietnam, but in the end the U.S. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger wanted to ignore Phuoc Long and asserted that 'that does not amount to a large-scale North Vietnamese attack'."⁶⁰ On 21 January President Ford, when asked at a press conference whether there were circumstances in which the U.S. might actively intervene, replied "I cannot foresee any at the moment."

On 9 January, at the conclusion of the conference, First Party Secretary Le Duan summarized the 1975-1976 strategic plan: "In Nam Bo an integrated position must be created throughout the region. We must increase pressure on Saigon and kill many more regular troops...In the Mekong Delta we must increase pressure on My Tho. We have agreed to begin this year's fighting with an attack in the Central Highlands....We must attack at Ban Ne Thuot and Tuy Hoa. Zone 5 must be liberated from Binh Dinh northward, and the Quang Tri-Thua Thien forces will have to control the area from Hue to Danang. Such great victories will bring about a change in the balance of forces. We must attack continually until the rainy season and win resounding victories." Thus "widespread attacks will be launched in 1975 to create conditions for the general offensive and uprising in 1976." The Politburo included in the 1975 plan an "extremely important guideline": if opportunities presented themselves in 1975, South Vietnam was to be liberated that year."⁶¹

"The prospects of that opportunity," noted Si Tam, "are very attractive to our military men. It was estimated that the puppet regular forces had declined by only 20,000 in 1974, but they were incapable of retaking Phuoc Long. If, during the spring, we attacked and further reduced those forces by 50,000 to 100,000, it was certain that a new situation would arise."62

CHAPTER I - NOTES

Key to Notes:

FBIS: Foreign Broadcast Information Service (Asia/Pacific edition)

CR: Congressional Record

ND: Nhan Dan

QDND: Quan Doi Nhan Dan

TCQDND: Tap Chi Quan Doi Nhan Dan

VTD: Van Tien Dung, Great Spring Victory

HT: Hoc Tap

1. ND 13 April 1969
2. FBIS 2 May 1969
3. ND 17 May 1969
4. New York Times, 9 June 1969
5. FBIS 10 June 1969
6. CR 30 October 1969
7. FBIS 6 November 1969
8. FBIS 8 November 1969
9. FBIS 6 November 1969
10. New York Times, 12 December 1969
11. TCQDND February 1975
12. TCQDND December 1972
13. TCQDND February 1975
14. TCQDND February 1975
15. ND 5 June 1972
16. Kalb, Kissinger
17. TCQDND February 1975
18. Kalb, Kissinger
19. Kald, Kissinger
20. HT June 1975
21. TCQDND October 1975
22. TCQDND January 1975
23. TCQDND October 1975
24. QDND 24 May 1976
25. QDND 24 May 1976
26. QDND 25 May 1976
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THE FALL OF VIETNAM

Chapter II

The Central Highlands Campaign

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The Central Highlands

As normally defined, the Central Highlands encompass the provinces of Kontum, Pleiku, Darlac, Phu Bon, and Quang Duc -- and according to some reckonings Tuyen Duc and Lam Dong -- and account for 30 percent of the total land area of South Vietnam. The northernmost part, corresponding roughly to Kontum Province, includes the most rugged terrain in the Highlands. Moving south from Kontum, the terrain flatens and the jungles thin out. Roughly half of Pleiku Province consists of a flat plateau extending into eastern Cambodia. The Darlac Plateau, south of Pleiku, features undulating plains with scattered hills and is the largest and relatively most level of the series of plateaus making up the Central Highlands. In southern Darlac the low terrain resulted in the formation of a number of lakes, including Lake Lac, the largest in South Vietnam. The southernmost part of the Central Highlands consists of the Muong Plateau, centering on Quang Duc Province, and the Di Linh Plateau, which corresponds roughly to Lam Dong Province. LG Hoang Minh Thao, commander of the NVA Central Highlands Front during the final offensive, pointed out the advantage enjoyed by the North Vietnamese with regard to military geography: "With regard to terrain, we were able to use the remoteness of the mountains and jungles to serve as well and limit the effect of the enemy's firepower. One of our regiments could prevent two or three enemy regiments from opening a road."¹

More than 30 distinct ethnic groups, with a total population of about 1 million, live in the region. The principal "montagnard" ethnic groups include the Sedang in northern Kontum, the Bhanar in southern Kontum, the Jarai in Pleiku, the Rhade in Darlac, and the Muong in Quang Duc. The Vietnamese population, totalling only about 200,000, is concentrated largely in the major cities.

Under French domination the Central Highlands area was given a special status -- the "Pays montagnard du sud" -- and was administered

separately. The French forbade Vietnamese settlement in the region. Emperor Bao Dai retained that status after Vietnam was granted semi-independence in 1949. After 1954 the Republic of Vietnam placed the Central Highlands under direct Vietnamese rule and attempted to integrate the montagnards into the life of the nation. Under President Ngo Dinh Diem, 90 "Land Development Centers," populated by Vietnamese settlers, were set up. In 1959-1964 montagnard dissidents formed the Front unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées (FULRO) and in the same year seized Bannethuot and a number of military installations and demanded an autonomous tribal state. Another revolt which flared up in the fall of 1965 resulted in a number of concessions being made to the montagnards. Under the terms of a 1968 agreement with the Saigon government, FULRO was allowed to form its own political party and its military units were allowed to retain their own identity although merged into the ARVN Regional Forces. In late 1973 the FULRO movement, fueled largely by Vietnamese encroachment on montagnard land, revived and by late 1974 there were nearly 1,000 FULRO troops operating in the Central Highlands.

A series of important strategic roads fan out from the Central Highlands to the other parts of South Vietnam. Route 14 extends southward from the 17th Parallel, passes through Kontum City, Pleiku City, and Bannethuot, and connects with Route 13 northwest of Saigon. Route 5 connects Kontum with Mo Duc on the coast south of Quang Ngai. Route 19, which begins at Stung Treng on the Mekong River in eastern Cambodia, passes through Pleiku Province and continues on, past the Many Yang and An Khe passes, to Qui Nhon on the coast. Route 21 extends from Bannethuot, crosses the mountain range separating the Central Highlands from the coastal plain via M'Drak Pass, and continues on to Ninh Hoa, just north of Nha Trang.

Military strategists have long recognized the strategic importance of the Central Highlands. The French General Delange wrote in 1954: "In the view of the Viet Minh Command, the area running across from Quang Ngai to the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos and extending southward from Quang Nam to Pleiku is a strategic area of operations that can be used as a base for advancing south into the southern part of the Central Highlands, to the

coast, to lower Laos, or to northeastern Cambodia....By controlling that area they will be able to coordinate resistance war activities and forces, an essential condition for the general offensive."²

In December 1973 the Viet Minh launched a major campaign to dominate that area by attacking in central and lower Laos and taking Thakhet and French outposts along Routes 12 and 9. The Viet Minh then attacked northern Kontum and pushed southward, forcing the French to abandon Kontum and withdraw to Pleiku in early February 1954. Ten days later Viet Minh forces were attacking French positions in the vicinity of Pleiku City. With the landing of Operation ATLANTE forces on the central coast the Viet Minh were forced to alter their strategy and concentrate on cutting Route 19 to isolate Pleiku and on opening secondary fronts in Darlac and along the coast to disperse the French forces.

The next major communist campaign in the Central Highlands began in the summer of 1965 with the infiltration of the first regular NVA regiments into South Vietnam since 1954. The objectives of the first phase of the campaign, from January to May, were to cut Route 19 and exert pressure in northern Binh Dinh and Kontum and isolate Kontum and Pleiku from the coast. The tempo of the fighting slowed with the advent of the monsoon season in the Central Highlands in May. But in October, at the beginning of the dry season, the NVA launched a much more extensive effort. The NVA 2d and 18th regiments attacked Phu Cu, Bong Son, and Phu Ly in northern Binh Dinh. Secondary fronts were opened in Phu Yen Province north of Binh Dinh and in Quang Duc Province in the southern Central Highlands to draw attention to those areas. The principal blow was to be struck at the Special Forces camp at Plei Me in the Ia Drang Valley 40 kilometers southwest of Pleiku, after which the NVA intended to take Pleiku and thus, with NVA control of Route 19 and northern Binh Dinh, effectively cut South Vietnam in half. After a month of hard fighting units of the U.S. 1st Air Cavalry Division, which had been dispatched to An Khe in September, defeated three NVA regiments in the first major clash between NVA and U.S. regular units.

As pointed out in Chapter I, another North Vietnamese attempt to cut South Vietnam in half came in 1972, when NVA units blocked Rt. 19 for two weeks despite determined efforts by the South Koreans to reopen it, occupied Hoai Nhon District in northern Binh Dinh, and were driven away from Kontum City only after weeks of hard fighting.

In 1975 the North Vietnamese faced a vastly different strategic situation in the Central Highlands. Gone were the U.S. 4th and 1st Air Cavalry divisions, the 173d Airborne Brigade, and other powerful U.S. units which had helped thwart NVA drives in 1965 and 1968. Gone was the elite Korean Capitol Division, which was responsible for keeping open Route 19 between Pleiku and the coast. And gone were the great mobility of the U.S. troops (the 1st Air Cavalry Division alone had over 500 helicopters at its disposal) and the enormous support provided by U.S. fighter-bombers and B52's, which had enabled the hard-pressed South Vietnamese turn the tide in the Central Highlands in 1972.* Now the North Vietnamese faced only the ARVN 22d and 23d divisions, five Ranger Groups, and five armored regiments -- a total of about 35,000 regulars -- which were responsible not only for the defense of the seven highland provinces of Military Region II but for its four coastal provinces as well. Furthermore, with their newly constructed Truong Son road along the eastern edge of the Highlands the NVA for the first time had north-south mobility equal to that of the South Vietnamese.

* A NEW YORK TIMES correspondent who visited Pleiku two weeks before the beginning of the 1975 Central Highlands Campaign remarked that "The ARVN have only one helicopter gunship available at night for the whole military region. Many helicopter pilots fly only 6 or 8 hours a month. This has made it difficult to find communist concentrations." (NYT 20 February 1975). He later noted the effects of the military aid cut in the Central Highlands: "There were shortages of everything. Troops in the field were allotted two hand grenades per patrol; 105mm and 155mm howitzers were limited to firing four rounds a day; and helicopter flying hours were cut by 80 percent to save fuel. Some fighters and helicopters were grounded for a lack of spare parts at Pleiku air base." (NYT Magazine, 25 May 1975)

Planning the Central Highlands Campaign

On 9 January 1975, one day after the conclusion of the Politburo conference, the Central Military Commission held a high-level meeting attended by the southern commanders, who had been ordered to Hanoi early in December, to discuss the 1975-1976 strategic plan. It was decided that Banmethuot would be the principal objective of the Central Highlands Campaign, and the field commanders were assigned the mission of working out a detailed plan for that operation. At the conclusion of the meeting Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap reviewed the campaign plan, the principal objectives of which were, as reported by Si Tam:

"Annihilating an important part of the enemy's manpower and inflicting heavy damage on the puppet II Corps. Annihilating four or five infantry regiments, one or two armored regiments, and many Regional Force and Popular Force battalions and companies, and smashing the puppets' control network.

"Liberating Darlac, Phu Bon, and Quang Duc (the key among which is Darlac), and the cities of Banmethuot, Cheo Reo, and Gia Nghia. The key objectives are Banmethuot and the three important district capitals of Duc Lap, Thuan Man, and Kien Duc.

"Expanding the strategic Central Highlands corridors to Nam Bo and the Zone 5 lowlands, consisting of Rt. 14 from Gia Nghia to Rt. 20 and thence to Nam Bo, and the corridors from the Central Highlands to the three provinces of Zone 5 (Binh Dinh, Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa). Carrying out strategic interdictions, expanding the area of operations, increasing the new mobile capabilities of the Central Highlands main-force troops, and creating a new strategic situation.

"Attacking the enemy while they are in a vulnerable, surprised position and have not yet made defensive preparations."³

The campaign in the Central Highlands, code-named "Campaign 275," was slated to last only until the onset of the rainy season in October.

"Then," Van Tien Dung told Tran Van Tra, "I will go to Nam Bo to join you in studying the battlefield situation and making preparations for military activities in the 1975-1976 dry season."⁴

The Central Highlands Campaign plan would be carried out in stages. Forces of division or regiment size would cut routes 14, 19, and 21 "to divide the enemy forces strategically and isolate the Central Highlands from the coastal lowlands." Then Banmethuot would be isolated from Pleiku and Pleiku from Kontum, while diversionary attacks would be launched "to attract the enemy to the northwestern part of the Central Highlands to enable our side to maintain secrecy and surprise in the southern part of the Highlands until we began the attack on Banmethuot."⁵

Van Tien Dung was named to represent the Central Military Commission and the High Command in the South and to provide over-all guidance. He and his entourage, including Dinh Duc Thien, head of the General Logistics Department, and Le Ngoc Hien, Deputy Chief of the High Command, flew from Hanoi to Dong Hoi on 5 February and from there traveled by automobile to the headquarters of Command 559 near Gio Linh. Dung's "A75" group then headed south along the Trung Son highway, stopping to celebrate the first day of the Tet holidays at the headquarters of the 470th Military Engineer Division in the Ia Drang Valley, where two of the convoy's vehicles were destroyed by VNAF A37 jets. The group continued south and set up the headquarters of the Central Highlands Front Command near the Srepoc River west of Banmethuot. LG Hoang Minh Thao was appointed Commander of the Central Highlands Front, Col. Nguyen Hiep was named Political Commissar, and Col. Phi Trieu Ham was brought in to serve as Deputy Political Commissar.

The Banmethuot Plan

On 25 February, after two weeks of preparation, the Central Highlands Front Command met to review the plan to attack Banmethuot. The strategic design of the Command was expressed by Si Tam: "If the puppet troops could

not hold Banmethuot they would be swept completely out of all of Darlac, then Phu Bon and Quang Duc as well, and then their troops in Pleiku-Koncum would be completely isolated and would have no route along with to withdraw to the coastal lowlands. But that was not all: once the liberated area had been expanded to all of the southern Central Highlands our troops could advance into the coastal lowlands of Central Vietnam, thus creating a strategic interdiction between Military Region I and Saigon."⁶ The Banmethuot plan provided for a number of contingencies:

"1. If, after the preparations for the campaign had been completed, the enemy did not strengthen the defenses of Banmethuot, we would launch a surprise attack and win a quick victory. We would use four infantry regiments reinforced with tanks and artillery to make a secret deep penetration and coordinate with pre-deployed sappers to attack and take a number of key objectives in Banmethuot, then pour in forces from all directions to win complete victory.

"2. If the enemy makes defensive preparations at Banmethuot, we will take Duc Lap (a district town more than 50 kilometers southwest of Banmethuot) to force the enemy to send reinforcements there. We will annihilate the reinforcements then, taking advantage of the enemy's confusion, penetrate Banmethuot, prevent the enemy from concentrating, then attack from all directions to win complete control.

"3. If the enemy makes a determined stand, we will first besiege Banmethuot and fight a battle of attrition. Then we will successively take the small towns of Cheo Reo and Gia Nghia and the district towns, thus causing the enemy in Banmethuot to be isolated and in a precarious position in the midst of the liberated Central Highlands. Finally, we will launch an all-out, decisive attack."⁷

By February the North Vietnamese had achieved overwhelming numerical superiority in the Central Highlands. The NVA 320th, 10th, and 968th divisions had been deployed in the Darlac-Pleiku area. The NVA 316th Division was en route from its base area in Nghe An Province in North Vietnam.

The NVA 3d Division was moving southward down the An Lao Valley toward the passes on Route 19 west of Pleiku. The South Vietnamese forces in the Central Highlands included the 23d Division, six Ranger Groups, and four armored regiments. According an analysis supplied by the North Vietnamese, the NVA had a 5.5-1 superiority in infantry, a 1.2-1 superiority in tanks and armored vehicles, and a 2.1-1 superiority in heavy artillery. In the Bannethuot area the North Vietnamese would have concentrated, by the eve of the attack on that city, ^{the equivalent of} three infantry divisions, supported by several field artillery and anti-aircraft regiments, an armored regiment, and numerous other support units, which faced the 53d Regiment of the ARVN 23d Division and three Regional Force battalions." 8

Despite the great disparity in the balance of forces, the North Vietnamese drafted an elaborate to assure success. First of all, fighting would be stepped up in the other parts of South Vietnam, especially in Military Region I and the area west of Saigon, to prevent the South Vietnamese from sending significant reinforcements to the Central Highlands. A series of diversionary attacks would be launched in Kontum and Pleiku to draw ARVN forces there. Routes 19 and 21 would be cut to isolate the Central Highlands from the coastal lowlands. Then Rt. 14 would be cut by the 320th Division between Pleiku and Bannethuot. Since large NVA forces had already been deployed near Duc Lap as the result of an earlier plan to take that town in order to extend the Truong Son highway to its terminus near Loc Ninh, it was decided to go ahead with the attack there, to avoid wasting time and to assure secrecy. Then, a day after the attack on Duc Lap was launched, Bannethuot itself would be attacked.

To defend Bannethuot the ARVN maintained Regional Force garrisons in fortified positions at Phuoc An to the east, Ban Don to the west, and Buon Ho to the north. Those forces, plus smaller garrisons at Lac Thien to the southwest and on Rt. 14 south of Bannethuot, blocked all roads leading into the city. Thus Van Tien Dung decided to use the strategy he

had employed in 1952 when, as commander of the 320th Division, he had slipped through the French outposts and launched a surprise attack on the town of Phat Diem. After occupying Phat Diem for a day his units moved out to attack the enemy positions on the outer perimeter. This was called the "parachute" or "blossoming lotus" strategy. By adopting that strategy Dung hoped to take Banmethuot in two or three days, instead of the seven to ten days called for in the original plan. ⁹

The assault on Banmethuot would be carried out in stages. The first attacks would be launched early in the morning by sappers of the 198th Sapper Regiment under Col. Bui Hien, supported by sporadic light and medium artillery fire. About two hours later battalions moving up from positions a few kilometers from the city would attack key targets within Banmethuot. At 0700 the heavy artillery regiments would unleash a massive barrage against the main objectives, and by that time the infantry and armored regiments moving into the city from staging areas as far as 40 kilometers away would enter the fighting.

The objective, Banmethuot, was a sprawling city of nearly 150,000 at the junction of routes 19 and 21 in central Darlac Province. If Pleiku was the military capital of the Central Highlands, Banmethuot was the political and cultural center. The city proper was inhabited largely by Vietnamese. In the suburbs and the hinterland there were numerous montagnard settlements, most of them Rhade. Although a number of modern three-and-four story buildings had been built in Banmethuot after half of the city had been destroyed during the Tet Offensive in 1968, it retained its reputation of being one of the most charming cities in South Vietnam. Among the key military and political objectives in the city were the headquarters of the 23d Infantry Division, situated just south of the center of town; the Mai Hac De supply depot and the communications center on the southwestern edge of the city; the base camps of the 8th Armored Squadron and the 145th Artillery Battalion on the northwestern edge of town; the Provincial (Sector) Military Headquarters in the east-central part of the city; and City Field,

a landing strip for single-engine aircraft and helicopters, situated to the north. The base camp of the 45th Regiment was located at the intersection of Rt. 14 and the road leading to Phung Duc Airfield. Phung Duc Airfield, eight kilometers east of Banmethuot, was capable of handling large cargo planes.

Preparations and Diversions

North Vietnamese military engineer units were to play a vital part in the Central Highlands Campaign by improving the communist road network, participating in diversionary actions intended to keep the attention of the South Vietnamese focused on Pleiku, and assuring that strong NVA units could achieve surprise at Banmethuot.

Improvement of the road leading south from the Se Su logistical complex in western Pleiku began in November, 1974, when the NVA 7th Military Engineer Regiment began to prepare pontoon ferry landings at rivers along the route. Since there were numerous rivers and streams to be crossed and only a few pontoon ferries, the regiment developed the "mat rolling" method: assembling a ferry, moving troops and equipment across the river, then disassembling the pontoon, loading it aboard trucks, and catching up with the column before it reached the next river. In all, the regiment built nearly 300 kilometers of new roads, improved more than 900 kilometers of old roads, and prepared 14 ferry slips.¹⁰

In addition to the launching of diversionary attacks in Kontum and Pleiku, the NVA High Command ordered the construction of a number of "decoy roads." The 1st Battalion of the 7th Military Engineer Regiment was assigned the task of connecting Rt. 220, which began north of Kontum, with Rt. 19 east of Pleiku. Other "decoy" road segments were built northwest and northeast of Pleiku and southeast of Kontum City. Southwest of Banmethuot NVA military engineers worked on a road leading away from the Banmethuot area in the direction of Duc Lap, an activity which caught the attention of the 23d Division in Banmethuot and reinforced its belief that the NVA forces in southern Darlac were interested in Duc Lap, not Banmethuot.¹¹

In the Bannethuot area, the activities of the military engineers were essential to the success of the plan. The first blows in Bannethuot would be struck by infiltrated detachments of the 198th Sapper Regiment, but to take and hold the city it would be necessary for the NVA to send in tanks and large infantry units before the South Vietnamese could send in reinforcements. Since the South Vietnamese had established blocking positions on the major highways leading into Bannethuot, to achieve surprise the NVA units would have to travel overland through heavily forested terrain.

In February the NVA 575th Military Engineer Regiment was ordered to build a "road" from a point about 40 kilometers west of Bannethuot right up to the city's outskirts, with branch roads leading toward the 45th Regiment base camp and Phung Duc Airfield northeast of the city and one branch road which would bring tanks and mechanized infantry into the city from the west. In all, the roads totalled 83 kilometers in length. The regiment was given 21 days to complete the job.

The regiment, working largely at night and in small groups, utilized open spaces and logging trails as much as possible and camouflaged any alteration done to the terrain. By the beginning of March the road neared settled areas in the Bannethuot vicinity. On 7 March a regimental work party encountered a group of 20 montagnards in the jungle and, fearing that they would alert the South Vietnamese, detained them. On the morning of 8 March the final segment was completed. The NVA engineers had sawed hundreds of trees three-fourths of the way through near ground level along the last several kilometers of the route, carefully concealing the saw marks with soil. Explosive charges had been concealed to blow apart large trees and other obstacles. When the NVA artillery opened up in the early morning hours on the day of the attack the charges would be set off and tanks of the 273d Armored Regiment would start out from the bivouac area, with bulldozer blade-equipped tanks knocking down the presawed trees to open a path for the other tanks and the mechanized infantry.¹²

Southwest of Banmethuot the NVA engineers faced a major problem. Pontoon ferries had to be assembled to ferry the troops and heavy equipment of the 10th Division, which would double back to Banmethuot immediately after taking Duc Lap, across the Srepoc River. Because of the rough terrain elsewhere along the river, it was necessary to establish a crossing point on the south side of Route 14, only a few kilometers from an ARVN strongpoint at Tho Thanh Village, about 8 miles southwest of the city. Here the plan devised by the NVA was to keep the two ARVN Regional Force companies garrisoning Tho Thanh pinned down with a heavy artillery barrage the night before the attack. Then the regiment's Bridge and Ferry Battalion, which had just arrived from North Vietnam, would haul the cumbersome ferry components by truck across Rt. 14, past Tho Thanh, and to the assembly site, the blacked-out trucks being guided by engineers wearing cloaks made of white parachute cloth. By 0700 on 10 March three 35-ton ferries were to be assembled to ferry small infantry units and 85-mm guns across the Srepoc. Then the ferries would be connected to form a bridge to facilitate the movement across the river of the 10th Division the following morning. 13

Another important part of the North Vietnamese battle plan was to have accurate artillery fire from the very beginning. In late 1974 the NVA 675th Artillery Regiment sent 15 survey teams to survey an area of about 300 square kilometers in the Banmethuot area. By the time they completed their assignment the teams had marked 600 survey points. The main body of the regiment, which was the first artillery regiment formed in the People's Army and had fought at Dienbienphu, was ordered to Darlac Province from western Kontum in late December. The regiment bivouaced near the Cambodian border west of Banmethuot, under strict orders to remain hidden. Two days before the attack the regiment was ordered to leave its bivouac area and move its artillery to preselected positions north and west of Banmethuot. 14

On 4 February Command 559 was ordered to lay a new telephone line from Station 1 in Nghe An Province to southwestern Darlac by 28 February.