

The 49th Military Engineer Regiment was assigned the final 75 kilometers of the line, 65 kilometers of which passed through thick jungles and hilly terrain. By 27 February the first telephone call was completed from the Central Highlands to Pleiku.<sup>15</sup>

Then NVA communications units extended the telephone line from the Central Highlands Front headquarters to the divisions and regiments in the Banmethuot area. By 0500 on 9 March the network was complete. The use of telephone lines enabled the North Vietnamese to maintain secrecy and gave them an important advantage over the South Vietnamese, who in most cases communicated by easily intercepted radio messages.

By January the ARVN II Corps command was aware of the presence of the NVA 3d Division east of Pleiku, the 10th Division to the north, the 95th Regiment to the west, and 198th Regiment to the south, and noted that the NVA were building roads and fire-support bases and moving toward Vo Dinh, on Rt. 14 north of Kontum. Concluding that the 10th Division intended to attack Kontum, IICorps Commander LG Pham Van Phu sent the 6th, 21st, 22d, 23d and 24th Ranger Groups there. His assumption that the NVA attack would come at Tet was reinforced when ARVN intelligence learned that "the 10th and 3d divisions are celebrating Tet in advance."<sup>16</sup> In February the South Vietnamese, noting the sudden appearance of the 968th Division and the 26th Regiment, along with a large number of tanks, in the Pleiku area, shifted the 44th Regiment of the 23d Division from Banmethuot to Pleiku and its 45th Regiment to Thuan Man, a district town at the intersection of Rt. 14 and a dirt road leading to Cheo Reo, the capital of Phu Bon Province.

The North Vietnamese began a series of diversionary attacks intended to lure additional ARVN forces to the northern Central Highlands on 28 February, when the 9th Regiment of the 968th Division attacked the ARVN outpost on Mt. Vuong in northern Kontum. The next day the 19th Regiment of the 968th Division took the Chot My and Dong Tam outposts on Rt. 19

east of Pleiku. The ARVN II Corps command responded by sending the 45th Regiment from Thuan Man to Thanh An on 3 March and the Joint General Staff sent the 7th Ranger Group from Saigon to Pleiku. On the same day the NVA 320th Division sent a battalion to block the dirt road between Thuan Man and Cheo Rec.

As reported by Si Tam, on 4 March the Central Highlands Front Command met and analyzed the situation as follows: "The enemy has been drawn to the northern Central Highlands. Darlac is vulnerable. In Banmethuot there is only the main headquarters of the 23d Division. The 53d Regiment of that division has sent a battalion to reinforce Duc Lap, and its other two battalions are conducting sweeping operations. The 8th Armored Squadron has sent a detachment to Duc Lap. The enemy's forces and defensive network are in disarray."<sup>17</sup> Two days later the NVA High Command informed the Central Highlands Front Command that "the other battlefields are ready to open fire to coordinate with the Central Highlands" and that "The puppets' principal defensive concern is still the Quang Tri-Thua Thien area. The Airborne Division is still stationed in Military Region I. The puppet III Corps is taking precautions against our coming down into the lowlands and is trying to retake Mt. Ba Den. In the Central Highlands they still believe that the principal concern is the Kontum-Pleiku area. The puppet Joint General Staff and the CIA share that opinion."<sup>18</sup>

On 5 March the NVA 95th Regiment and 3d Division cut Rt. 19 east and west of An Khe. Pham Van Phu responded by sending two regiments of the 22d Division from Binh Dinh to clear the area east of An Khe and the 2d Armored Cavalry Squadron was dispatched from Pleiku to reopen the road west of An Khe. Phu also ordered the 4th and 6th Ranger Groups to search for the NVA 10th Division, which had suddenly dropped out of sight, northwest of Pleiku. On the same day the NVA 25th Regiment cut Route 21 east of Chu Cuc and ambushed a convoy of more than 80 trucks moving toward Banmethuot. With the cutting of Rts. 19 and 21 the Central Highlands had been isolated from the coast.

Although the North Vietnamese mobilized local corvée labor to dig up segments of Rt. 14 between Kontum and Pleiku while they were blocking routes 19 and 21, the 320th Division, the main body of which was deployed five kilometers west of Rt. 14 between Ye Lao Bridge and Chau Xe, was ordered to avoid contact.\* According to plan, the 320th Division would cut Rt. 14 by taking Thuan Man at the same time Bannethuot was being attacked. But an incident on 5 March threatened to upset the North Vietnamese timetable: a battalion of the 320th ambushed a convoy of 14 trucks on Rt. 14 south of Thuan Man and captured an artillery First Lieutenant. The 320th Division reported to the Front Command that the South Vietnamese had just sent a battalion of the 45th Regiment to Thuan Man to locate 320th Division and that the ARVN were steadily increasing traffic on Rt. 14, perhaps intending to gradually return the 45th Regiment to the Bannethuot area. The division requested permission to block Rt. 14, attack Thuan Man, and wipe out the 45th Regiment battalion now reinforcing the montagnard Regional Force garrison. When an interrogation of the captured ARVN Lieutenant showed that the II Corps command intended to send recruits to fill out the units in Pleiku, and not send troops to Bannethuot, Van Tien Dung ordered the 320th Division to continue to avoid contact.<sup>19</sup>

On the same day, a North Vietnamese artillery detachment on a reconnaissance mission clashed with an ARVN unit north of Bannethuot. One badly wounded North Vietnamese cadre, with a diary in his possession, was captured. The following day the Central Highlands Front Command was informed that the 3d Battalion of the 53d Regiment, an armored detachment, and a Regional Force battalion had been sent to the hamlet of Quang Nhieu,

---

\* The Central Highlands Front Command incorrectly assumed that ARVN intelligence had lost track of the 320th Division. In fact, the South Vietnamese had been aware all along that the 320th Division had "taken up ambush positions straddling the road" between Pleiku and Bannethuot (NYT, 20 February 1975). General Phu, however, incorrectly assumed that its mission would be to isolate Pleiku.

11 kilometers northeast of Banmethuot. The units of the 320th Division were ordered to continue to avoid contact. The Front Command, fearing that if the ARVN units continued their searching operations until 8 March preparations for the attack on Banmethuot from the north would be jeopardized, informed the 320th Division that if by the afternoon of the following day the ARVN units had not returned to Banmethuot it was to attack the Chu Xe outpost on Rt. 14 17 miles north of Buon Ho to draw the ARVN forces in that direction, thus allowing the NVA units in the Quang Nhieu area to continue their preparations. If the ARVN force continued its operations around Quang Nhieu on 7 March, the next morning the 320th Division was to take Thuan Man and draw ARVN attention there.

On 7 March units of the 320th Division took the montagnard Regional Force outpost at Chu Xe, but the ARVN units were not withdrawn from Quang Nhieu. The following morning other units of the 320th assaulted and took Thuan Man after an hour of heavy artillery shelling. The ARVN II Corps command responded by withdrawing the 3d Battalion of the 53d Regiment and supporting units from Quang Nhieu to Banmethuot. The 21st Ranger Group was moved by helicopter from Kontum to Buon Ho, on Rt. 14 40 kilometers north of Banmethuot, to prepare to reopen the road.

At 0710 on the morning of 9 March two regiments of the NVA 10th Division began a 10,000-round artillery shelling of Duc Lap, then followed with an infantry assault that was supported by the close-up direct fire of the rapid-fire guns of the 234th Anti-Aircraft Regiment. Within hours the NVA mastered Duc Lap and the nearby outposts at Dac Soong and Nui Lua. Banmethuot was now completely isolated. Van Tien Dung concluded that "Victory now belonged to us. Now, even if the enemy were certain we would attack Banmethuot it was too late...our battlefield position had been set and nothing could break it."<sup>20</sup> At 1900 the Front Command contacted its units by telephone. All reported that they were ready and in position.

At 1130 on 9 March the II Corps Commander, LG Pham Van Phu, convened a meeting at his headquarters in Pleiku which was attended by BG Le Trung Tuong, commander of the 23d Division; Col. Pham Duy Tat, a Catholic from Quang Binh Province in North Vietnam, commander of Military Region II Ranger units; BG Pham Ngoc Sang, commander of the 6th Air Division; and the sector commanders at Pleiku and Bannethuot. According to BG Tran Van Cam, deputy commander of II Corps, Phu opened the meeting by expressing his belief that the North Vietnamese were about to launch a major attack in the Central Highlands. "What followed," reported Cam, "a long debate on where the North Vietnamese would attack." Gen. Cam proposed strengthening the defenses of Bannethuot and Gen. Tuong requested permission to send the 45th Regiment of the 23d Division to Bannethuot immediately. Gen. Phu, insisting that no matter where the North Vietnamese attacked first their main objective would be Pleiku, expressed confidence that if the need arose reinforcements could be helilifted to Bannethuot in time."<sup>21</sup> (In fact, due to a shortage of helicopters it would take four days to move the 45th Regiment to Bannethuot, not the one day envisioned by Phu.) Later in the day Phu flew to Bannethuot to meet with Col. Vu The Quang, Deputy Commander of the 23d Division, who was placed in command of all ARVN forces in Darlac Province.\*

During the night of 9 March the NVA Central Highlands Front Command awaited "H-Hour" in a "very tense" atmosphere. There was much concern that some units would not arrive at the staging areas in time. Once the fighting began, some units would have to travel as far as 40 kilometers to reach Bannethuot, while other units would have to cross the Srepoc River. There was a real possibility that ARVN units conducting sweeping operations around the city might intercept some of the NVA units and upset the plan timetable.<sup>22</sup>

---

\* North Vietnamese sources say nothing about Bannethuot being placed on alert, but according to Abiul Aziz, an Indian national who survived the Bannethuot attack, at 1900 a loudspeaker truck of the Information Service announced a 2300 curfew. At midnight, he reported, "paramilitary forces took up ambush positions on the main streets." (TIEN PHONG, No. 38, 1977)

## The Battle of Banmethuot

At 0203 (Saigon time) on 10 March the medium-range guns of the NVA 675th Artillery Regiment began to shell Phung Duc Airfield, City Field, the base camp of the 8th Armored Squadron, the Mai Hac De supply depot, 231 Division headquarters, and Sector headquarters. Whether by accident or by design, one of the first salvos scored a direct hit on the municipal power plant, plunging the city into darkness. Within minutes ARVN artillery flares were illuminating the city. The North Vietnamese artillery fire, which would continue intermittently until 0700, was intended both to support the sappers of the 198th Sapper Regiment attacking City Field, Phung Duc Airfield, and the Mai Hac De depot and to enable the combat engineers to take advantage of the noise to set off explosions to open the assault roads. The engineers near Tho Thanh took advantage of the artillery explosions to blast the rock on the banks of the Srepoc so that the ferries could load vehicles.

Under the cover of the early-morning artillery barrage, sappers emerged from a neighboring rubber plantation and blasted their way through the perimeter fence of City Field. The ARVN commando company defending the landing strip withdrew to the operations center area in the northeast corner and took up defensive positions. North Vietnamese accounts provide few details of the sapper assault on ARVN defenses at Phung Duc Airfield, but admit that "the enemy counterattacked very fiercely."<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, a company of sappers under the command of Capt. Truong Cong Trinh assaulted the Mai Hac De depot on the southwestern edge of town. The depot, which sprawled over an area of 1.4 square kilometers, was surrounded by nine rows of barbed wire and two sheet metal fences. The lead platoon, led by Sgt. Tran Van Duc, breached the first sheetmetal fence and ran toward the second. In the pitch darkness, 20 of the sappers slipped into a deep trench between the two fences. Miraculously, none of them was injured by the sharpened bamboo stakes on the

bottom of the trench. A few minutes later several jeep loads of ARVN soldiers on a perimeter patrol passed by. Pvt. Trieu Kim Thanh, a new sapper on his first combat mission, fell victim to temptation and sprayed the last jeep with his AK-47 assault rifle, killing its occupants. The other jeeps sped off. Company Executive Officer Dao Duy Hung placed Bangalore torpedoes under the barbed wire fences, opening a breach for the rest of the company. The small ARVN garrison concentrated in the barracks area, centered around a two-story blockhouse.

At 23d Division Headquarters, Col. Vu The Quang, having received reports of the scattered sapper attacks and relatively light shelling, concluded that "The Viet Cong are only carrying out a diversionary attack. They want to pin our forces down in Banmethuot so that they can easily take Duc Lap, and also want us to send the 44th and 45th regiments back to Banmethuot so that they can attack Pleiku-Kontum." His only redeployment was to shift the 21st Ranger Group, in commandeered civilian vehicles, from Buon Ho to the village of Dat Ly 10 kilometers north of the city.<sup>25</sup>

The first North Vietnamese tanks entered the battle for Banmethuot at about 0430, when a company of five tanks moved south on Phan Chu Trinh Street toward the Nga Sau intersection just south of the southern tip of City Field. The intersection, a traffic circle where three major streets crossed, was defended by a Montagnard Regional Force battalion and by police units. When the tanks neared the intersection they came under heavy fire from ARVN positions atop multistory buildings and in bunkers. Two of the tanks, having outdistanced the infantry, were knocked out. Shortly before 0500 the remaining tanks were ordered to City Field to assist the stalemated sappers. There the tanks fired into ARVN positions on the water tower, on the radar antenna tower, and at the MP post. Despite the NVA tanks, the ARVN defenders managed to hold out at City Field until mid-afternoon.<sup>26</sup>

At 0600 ARVN Regional Force defenders were driven from two hills -- Chu Eboa, 3.5 kilometers northwest of Banmethuot and Chu Dluoc, 3.5 kilometers southeast of the town -- by elements of the 316th Division, which gave the North Vietnamese excellent artillery observation posts. Tank-led infantry columns entered Banmethuot from the northwest, north, southwest, and southeast. By noon of 10 March the NVA would have brought into Banmethuot the 316th Division, the 95A Regiment, the 23d Armored Regiment, the 198th Sapper Regiment, and numerous anti-aircraft and other supporting units.

While the NVA sappers were attacking their objectives, the 2d Battalion of the 148th Regiment, 316th Division quietly took up positions in a cemetery outside the perimeter of the 8th Armored Cavalry Squadron base camp on the western edge of the city. According to plan, the battalion would assault the armored camp after it was shelled by NVA heavy artillery later in the morning. But at 0500 the battalion's position was discovered. The ARVN garrison immediately saturated the area, inflicting "a number of casualties" on the North Vietnamese, who hadn't had time to dig in. The ARVN sent several armored personnel carriers, followed by several squads of infantry, on a sortie to repulse the North Vietnamese. That counterattack and three others were repulsed. At 0700 North Vietnamese heavy artillery began to heavily shell the armored camp and the nearby artillery base. Despite the heavy artillery shelling, the ARVN garrison continued to turn back the NVA assaults. Around noon NVA tanks appeared on the scene. Platoon Leader Nguyen Quang Trung was informed by a battalion runner that he had been named company commander and was ordered to lead the 2d Company in an assault against the artillery base. Trung, we are told, "realized that something had happened in the rear of the company's formation." Supported by the tanks, the NVA overcame strong resistance and within an hour had taken both camps. The 4th and 5th battalions of the 148th Regiments then moved east along Phan Boi Chau St. By 1700 the regiment controlled the northern sector of the city, from the armored-artillery area to the Nga Sau intersection.<sup>27</sup>

The Mai Hac De depot was also subjected to heavy artillery fire between 0700 and 0730. NVA tanks then advanced into the depot complex from the north and west. Despite the NVA tanks, the ARVN garrison managed to hold on to the eastern part of the depot until past noon. At about 1300 ARVN artillery began to fire into the depot. During the afternoon an ARVN counterattack from the east was repulsed.

When the heavy artillery barrage subsided at about 0730, a North Vietnamese infantry battalion emerged from a coffee plantation just south of City Field on the eastern edge of the city and advanced toward provincial headquarters, which had been heavily damaged during the barrage, and the adjacent provincial military headquarters (Sector). The NVA assault was stopped short: "We and the enemy fought for every house and every street corner."<sup>28</sup> VNAF fighter-bombers bombed and strafed the NVA positions. Stymied at the provincial headquarters, the NVA battalion shifted its attack to the nearby Sector headquarters. There, too, it encountered stiff resistance: "Enemy troops clustered in bunkers fought back fiercely. M60 machineguns spewed out bullets to form a net of fire stopping our troops." The commander of the NVA company leading the assault was wounded and the NVA situation became "very urgent."<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, the 4th Battalion, 24th Regiment, 10th Division, moved toward its objective, the 23d Division headquarters. The artillery barrage had blown apart a segment of the perimeter fence. The assault battalion took the first bunker, but the ARVN defenders "fired back furiously" and "tanks and armored vehicles came from many directions to close off the breach." The North Vietnamese launched a second assault on the 23d Division headquarters, but were again unsuccessful. By nightfall the NVA forces, strengthened by the arrival of the southwest column, which had taken the communications center west of the headquarters, were in control of most key positions around the headquarters compound.<sup>30</sup>

Thus at the end of the first day the North Vietnamese had taken the armored and artillery base camps, City Field, and the northern part of the city, and the Hai Hac De area. But the ARVN still held 23d Division headquarters, Sector headquarters, the central part of the city -- including the Nga Sau area -- and the 45th Regiment base camp and Phung Duc Airfield on the eastern outskirts.

In the morning of the 10th Vu The Quang had sent two battalions of the 53d Regiment and a detachment of the 8th Armored Squadron to counterattack to the west and north. "Those regulars," admitted a North Vietnamese observer, "fought very stubbornly; one assault followed another, and on all sectors of the battlefield there was fierce fighting."<sup>31</sup> Another North Vietnamese participant noted the resistance put up by the ARVN defenders: "After a period of confusion the enemy awoke and fired profusely in all directions, firing into our formations from defensive positions, strong points, streetcorners, and buildings. They stopped our columns with direct fire and arched fire, by armored vehicles and tanks, and even by infantry assaults. There was hand-to-hand fighting at some points in the city."<sup>32</sup> Due to the heavy North Vietnamese antiaircraft fire, not a single South Vietnamese helicopter could land in the city. In the afternoon the 21st Ranger Group, which had been sent to Phung Duc Airfield early in the morning, was ordered to fight its way into the city.<sup>33</sup>

At 0630 on the following morning the NVA tanks at City Field were sent to help other tank units, the 95A Regiment, and the 148th Regiment clear up ARVN resistance in the Nga Sau intersection area, where the South Vietnamese had established strong defensive positions during the night. The ARVN had established strong positions at the Radio Banmethuot compound, the Thang Long Theater, and around the cathedral, but the center of their resistance was the four-story, reinforced concrete Anh Dao Hotel. After firing many B40 RPG and recoilless rifle rounds into the hotel, NVA infantry entered the hotel, killing 12 and capturing four.<sup>34</sup> By about 1030

the last pockets of ARVN resistance in the Nga Sau area had been cleaned up.

At 0730 the North Vietnamese unleashed a massive heavy artillery barrage on the 23d Division headquarters compound. Thirty minutes earlier a VNAF fighter-bomber, making a very low pass over the headquarters, had released its bombs too soon and scored two direct hits on the division operations center. After the artillery barrage was lifted the NVA assault battalion blasted its way through the layers of concertina wire and entered the headquarters compound. An artillery round had hit the gasoline dump, which was burning furiously. The fire was spreading within the compound and the situation was becoming "very complicated." The ARVN garrison, despite the artillery barrage and the loss of the division operations center, continued to put up stiff resistance.

At 1130 the North Vietnamese intercepted a radio message from the 21st Ranger Group: "The Group headquarters, 23d Reconnaissance Company, and artillery are now in a very tense situation. Darlac Sector headquarters has been lost and 23d Division headquarters has been lost. The rear area base of the 21st Ranger Group has also been lost...The 72d and 96th battalions are now behind Sector headquarters. There are many VC tanks there, so we can do nothing. The 21st Ranger Group is powerless and cannot save the 23d Division headquarters. The Group is almost out of ammunition. We have only two artillery pieces left and 100 rounds. If we do not receive supplies we will be in great danger."<sup>35</sup>

Supported by tanks, the NVA force assaulting 23d Division headquarters knocked out the ARVN bunkers one by one, in some cases crushing them under the tank treads. By noon the North Vietnamese had taken the entire headquarters compound. Vu The Quang, Deputy Commander of the 23d Division, and Col. Nguyen Cong Luat, Darlac Province Chief, were captured.

After taking the 23d Division headquarters the North Vietnamese units concentrated on mopping up the remaining pockets of resistance, especially in the central market area. By early afternoon the NVA had won complete control of the city. A battalion of the 53d Regiment, including the regimental commander, continued to hold out at the 53d Regiment base camp in the southeastern outskirts. The small ARVN garrison at Phung Duc Airfield would continue to hold out for more than a week. The district seats of Ban Don, Lac Thien, and Buon Ho were taken on the 12th, 13th, and 14th.

On 14 March two battalions of the ARVN 45th Regiment, 23d Division, which had been helilifted from Pleiku to Buon Ho on the 11th, were landed near the village of Nong Trai on Rt. 21 between Banmethuot and Phuoc An, a district seat about 35 kilometers to the east. On the morning of 15 March elements of the NVA 10th Division, moving east along Rt. 21, encountered an ARVN blocking force at Bridge 2. Having just been landed there by helicopter, hadn't had time to dig defensive works and had no tanks or artillery, but succeeded in delaying the far superior NVA force for a full day. At 0900 the next morning the tank-led NVA force continued its advance along Rt. 21. When it reached the bridge near Nong Trai a company of the 45th Regiment stopped the North Vietnamese advance with anti-tank weapons, recoilless rifles, and flamethrowers. NVA artillery began a heavy bombardment of the Nong Trai area. Then tank-led columns advanced on Nong Trai from the southwest and northwest against "fierce resistance." At 1130 the two NVA columns linked up in the middle of the village.<sup>36</sup>

After taking Nong Trai the NVA force, equivalent to nearly two divisions, sped on toward Phuoc An, where the 44th Regiment of the 23d Division and a field headquarters of the 23d Division were landed during the 15th. At Phuoc An the 44th Regiment and remnants of the 45th and 53d regiments and the 21st Ranger Group, along with the 269th and 262nd Regional Force battalions, took up defensive positions. At 1600 on the 16th

Phuoc An was attacked from the west and south. The next day the badly mauled ARVN units withdrew to Chu Cuc west of Phuoc An on Rt. 21, with VNAF fighter-bombers knocking out several bridges on Rt. 21 as the column withdrew. The NVA force attacked Chu Cuc and routed the 23d Division remnants on the 18th. MG Le Trung Tuong, commander of the 23d Division, was seriously wounded when his helicopter was shot down by NVA anti-aircraft fire near Phuoc An on 16 March.<sup>37</sup>

#### The Withdrawal from the Central Highlands

Si Tam summarized the strategic dilemma of President Thieu and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff after the fall of Banmethuot as follows:

"Could he send in the Airborne Division from Quang Nam-Danang? No! The combat region in Military Region I was becoming increasingly hot. Send some Ranger groups from Saigon? No! The cities of Tay Ninh and Binh Long were being threatened and another threat was being posed by the 'main-force VC regiments' which were quietly moving down into Long Khanh, Phuoc Tuy and Binh Tuy provinces bordering on the Saigon-Gia Dinh area. Send one of the three divisions in the Mekong Delta to replace the Rangers guarding Saigon, then send the Rangers to launch an operation to retake Banmethuot? That was also impossible, for although we had few main-force troops in Military Region IV the rural areas of that large and highly populated area were not quiet."<sup>38</sup>

On 13 March the Politburo and the Central Military Commission sent the following analysis to the Central Highlands Front Command"

"In case the enemy loses a large part of his manpower and loses the city of Banmethuot and many district towns and subsectors, and if the strategic interdiction of Rt. 19 is carried out well, it is possible that the enemy will concentrate their remaining forces in the Central Highlands

at Pleiku. We must also consider the possibility that they will have to carry out a strategic withdrawal. Therefore, we must immediately surround Pleiku and make good preparations to annihilate the enemy in both eventualities." 39

On the same day, President Thieu ordered LG Ngo Quang Truong, the I Corps commander, to urgently draft a plan to withdraw all I Corps troops to the Danang area. On the 14th Thieu, accompanied by Chief of Staff Cao Van Vien, Premier Tran Thien Khiem, and military aide Dang Van Quang, went to Cam Ranh to confer with Gen. Phu and key members of his staff. Phu's request for reinforcements to retake Banmethuot was refused. Instead, Thieu ordered him to withdraw all regular forces from Pleiku and Kontum, to defend the coastal provinces and prepare to retake Banmethuot during the rainy season.

The first phase of the withdrawal was to begin the following morning -- only 16 hours after the meeting at Cam Ranh--with the main force setting out on the 16th. The entire operation was to be completed within three days. To assure surprise, the II Corps staff was to spread the rumor that II Corps was launching an operation to retake Banmethuot. All movements by air or land would have to appear to be deployments for the Banmethuot operation. The withdrawal was to be carried out along Route 7B, a little used, unpaved road which ran from the My Thach intersection south of Pleiku to Cheo Reo, capital of Phu Bon province, and thence southeast through the district towns of Phu Tuc and Cung Son, to its terminus at Tuy Hoa on the coast.<sup>40</sup>

A "high-ranking officer," who had participated in planning the withdrawal and who was captured on 18 March at Cheo Reo, gave his NVA interrogators the following account:

"When we first heard the urgent order we were terrified, but later we were confident. General Phu relayed President Thieu's instruction:

'Compete in rapid movement and make good use of time. We must cleverly deceive the communists. We are traveling by vehicles and they are traveling by foot.' He believed that, and began to withdraw on the 15th. On the 15th and 16th we carried out the plan exactly as if we were carrying out a major troop movement to retake Bannethuot. Helicopters took the 45th Regiment and the field headquarters of the 23d Division to Phuoc An, the last district town we held in Darlac. At that time, in the Phuoc An area we also had the 45th Regiment, the 21st Ranger Group, and a number of Regional Force units, which formed a rather strong force about 30 kilometers east of Bannethuot. Meanwhile, our infantry, armored, and artillery units from Kontum and Pleiku followed Rt. 14 to My Thach intersection and then took Rt. 7 to Cheo Reo. With that troop deployment we thought that you would have to guard against our retaking the Thuan Man and Buon Ho district towns and then Bannethuot. Until the morning of the 17th we were unworried, convinced that we had tricked you and tied down your divisions around Bannethuot, and that therefore our withdrawal would be smooth and we would slip through."

When asked, "Supposing that you had succeeded in withdrawing along Route 7 to Phu Yan, what do you think would have been the fate of the 23d Division regiments and the 21st Ranger Group positioned at Phuoc An to keep us in Bannethuot?" the "high-ranking officer" replied:

"I thought that the 23d Division would receive very strong air support and could hold out at Phuoc An at least until the 18th. The ruse was intended to keep you tied down in Bannethuot and allow us to withdraw via Rt. 7. Also, we could thus assemble the remnants of the units routed at Bannethuot. After that the 23d Division would rapidly withdraw along Rt. 21 to Khanh Duong and Khanh Hoa. When drafting the plan we calculated that you wouldn't learn of our intention until 18 March, by which time it would be too late, for both the column on Rt. 7 and that on Rt. 21 would have escaped."<sup>41</sup>

On the morning of the 15th, most of the II Corps staff was flown to Nha Trang. The 44th Regiment and a field headquarters of the 23d Division were helilifted to Phuoc An. The withdrawing forces were divided into three groups: the first, made up of three Ranger Groups, an armored regiment, and a combat engineer regiment, had the mission of defending Cheo Reo and improving the road between Cheo Reo and Tay Hoa. The second group consisted of the remaining II Corps staff, three artillery battalions, the M48-equipped 21st Armored Regiment, two armored reconnaissance companies, and a number of miscellaneous troops. The third group consisted of three Ranger Groups, an armored regiment, and the remaining artillery.<sup>42</sup>

Long convoys began to leave Pleiku in the afternoon of 16 March, but the full-scale evacuation did not begin until 2000. According to an eyewitness, "The order had come to explode the ammunition depots in Pleiku City. Big explosions followed smaller ones. Then columns of black smoke rose up from the fires set off by the explosions of fuel tanks."<sup>43</sup> Several dozen airplanes which could not be flown out because of a lack of spare parts were destroyed at Cu Hanh Air Force Base near Pleiku.\* Although the civilian population was not officially informed of the evacuation, the word soon spread and hundreds of civilian vehicles joined the procession, with as many as 200 people squeezed into the beds of army trucks.

According to Van Tien Dung, the Central Highlands Front Command picked up information from Western radio stations which helped it analyze ARVN intentions in the Central Highlands, such as a news item that the

---

\* According to a NYT article written just after the fall of South Vietnam, "Pleiku air base was abandoned so precipitously that several dozen planes and helicopters were left intact, along with expensive radar and communications facilities." (NYT Magazine, 25 May 1975). But according to a North Vietnamese war correspondent who visited Pleiku soon after the withdrawal, "At Cu Hanh Air Force Base we at first saw only the wreckage of a C130 transport plane and a few helicopters that had been destroyed, so we assumed that the enemy had transferred most of the other airplanes elsewhere before the Liberation Army attacked Pleiku. But then we saw that the number of airplanes destroyed by the enemy in the revetments totalled at least 70, including A37 jets, A1K's, C130's, C147's, L19's, OV10's, etc. The communications equipment they destroyed was strewn around the runway." (QDND, 28 April 1975)

price of an airplane ticket from Pleiku to Saigon had jumped to 40,000 piasters. At 1800 on 16 March the NVA High Command in Hanoi informed the Central Highlands Front Command that an advance command post of II Corps had been shifted from Pleiku to Nha Trang. An hour later the Front Command received a report from Thuan Man that an NVA observation post at Ya Tho Bridge had spotted a long convoy heading toward Cheo Reo on Rt. 7 from Nghinh intersection.<sup>44</sup>

At about 1900 on the same day the Front Command staff held a "seething debate" about the intentions of the South Vietnamese. One aide suggested that the ARVN intended to regroup the Central Highlands forces at Binh Giang to retake Banmethuot via Route 21, and pointed out that there had been a report from Hanoi that the Airborne Division may be sent to the Central Highlands. Another insisted that the ARVN were evacuating the Highlands altogether. Yet another expressed concern that the ARVN forces in Pleiku might attempt to retake Banmethuot via Rt. 14. At 2100 the Front Command received a report that the ARVN were abandoning Pleiku and that ammunition dumps there were exploding.

The NVA command spent the next several hours pouring over maps of the Central Highlands and marking troop deployments. Van Tien Dung informed 320th Division commander Gen. Kim Tuan, who had reported two days previously that Rt. 7 was impassable, that he would be held responsible if the ARVN forces escaped. The 320th Division was ordered to intercept the withdrawing column from the south.<sup>45</sup> A tank battallion and a detachment of the 675th Artillery Regiment were ordered to set out for Rt. 7. The 968th Division and 95th Regiment, which had been launching light attacks to keep the ARVN pinned down in Kontum and Pleiku, were ordered to take the Phu My intersection, 10 kilometers south of Pleiku City at the intersection of Rts. 19 and 14.<sup>46</sup>

At midnight on 16 March, Vo Thanh My, commander of the <sup>66th</sup> Regiment, 320th Division, called Ngo Quang Nhiem, commander of the 9th Battalion of

The 66th Regiment, and informed him of the evacuation. Nhiem, whose unit was about 30 kilometers south of Cheo Reo, was ordered to take Hill 164, three kilometers southeast of Cheo Reo, by no later than 0800 the following morning. Another regiment of the 320th was dispatched to occupy the A Lu bridge, on Rt. 7 about 30 kilometers northwest of Phu Tuc, while a third regiment was sent northward on Rt. 14 to take the My Thach intersection.<sup>47</sup>

The 9th Battalion, taking along only essential equipment, set out cross-country for Route 7. Since the skies were overcast and the troops had to travel in pitch darkness over the rough terrain, they were ordered to use torches to light the way. A member of the battalion who had fought for years in the Central Highlands thought to himself: "In 1972 the Central Highlands were saturated day and night with innumerable noises. Every night at least several dozen B52's dropped bombs. Why, at this time, when we thought the enemy would let loose with everything, did we hear only the occasional sound of artillery?"<sup>48</sup>

By 0800 the 9th Battalion had reached its objective and dug camouflaged ambush positions on the high ground overlooking Rt. 7 four kilometers southeast of Cheo Reo. All morning it waited for the first ARVN military vehicles. Meanwhile, "many miscellaneous vehicles passed by carrying large numbers of old people and children." At 1600 an ARVN convoy of four M41 tanks and six GMC trucks full of troops sped past the ambush position toward a bridge across the I-A-To River. The 9th Battalion knocked out the first and last vehicles and systematically eliminated the rest. Thirty ARVN soldiers riding Honda motorcycles were killed."<sup>49</sup>

During the night of the 17th and the early morning of the 18th the ARVN forces in Cheo Reo -- all of the second group to leave Pleiku and part of the first -- prepared to run the gauntlet between Cheo Reo and Phu Tuc. At daybreak VNAF fighter-bombers strafed and bombed NVA positions along the road. ARVN artillery fired into the ambush area. In Cheo Reo

BG Tat, the II Corps Flap commander, and BG Dong, the armored commander, led a Ranger Group and an armored squadron in an attempt to open Rt. 7. About 50 M48 and M41 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and self-propelled guns were placed in front, followed by a long convoy of trucks. At 0700 the column set out. One of the lead tanks was knocked out. As a bulldozer was pushing it off the road, the tank exploded, blocking the road. The ARVN tanks left the road and advanced in the direction of the NVA positions, firing as they went. The trucks also left the road, moving east over relatively flat terrain.<sup>50</sup>

The ARVN tanks did considerable damage among the NVA positions. The 9th Battalion commander reported that he "felt as if his insides were afire." The battalion began to run low on B40 and B41 P&G rounds, and Company 11 ran out of ricks. The concentrated ARVN fire, admitted a participant, caused "considerable difficulties" for the North Vietnamese. A number of ARVN tanks reached the steel bridge across the Ba River. Under the weight of the tanks, however, the bridge collapsed, dumping three of them into the river. At dusk the remaining tanks formed defensive formations in the sparsely wooded fields. "All night," we are told, the ARVN and NVA units "wrestled in the jungle." The fighting continued all the next day.<sup>51</sup>

At about noon on the 18th the NVA artillery began to shell Cheo Reo. At 1300 Pham Van Phu sent a message to BG Cam in Cheo Reo ordering the remaining units to "open a path of blood" to save themselves, and to destroy vehicles that could not be taken along. All personnel were to attempt to make their way to Cung Son. At 1600 the North Vietnamese stepped up the artillery barrage, shelling the town relentlessly for a full hour. BG Cam and some of his aides left Cheo Reo by helicopter for Tuy Hoa. In the early afternoon ARVN tanks and infantry units in Cheo Reo counterattacked but were repulsed. At 1700 the 3d and 48th regiments of the 320th Division attacked Cheo Reo from the north, south, and southeast. By 1000 on the 19th the NVA had taken the town.<sup>52</sup>

On the night of 22 March the NVA 968th Division, 95th Regiment, and a regiment of the 329th Division launched a final assault against the ARVN 19th Armored Regiment and a Ranger Group at My Thach intersection. A North Vietnamese correspondent who visited the scene soon after the battle reported seeing "burned-out hulks of M48 tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers lying in a vast field."<sup>53</sup>

Between 20 and 23 March the North Vietnamese forces moved eastward along Rt. 7. Subsector Headquarters at Phu Tuc was taken. The NVA continued to hold the Son Hoa Bridge near Cung Son, thus blocking a long column of military and civilian vehicles. A Ranger Group and an armored regiment that had reached Cung Son before the NVA blew up the Son Hoa Bridge counterattacked but was beaten back by the NVA force, which now amounted to more than two divisions. By 1700 on the 24th the NVA overran Cung Son.

North of Chien Hoa, on Rt. 19, a regiment of the NVA 3d Division had attacked ARVN positions near An Khe pass on the morning of 10 March. The ARVN base camp at Vuon Xosi, a resettlement village of more than 1,000 tin-roofed houses, was surrounded. An NVA psychological warfare team appealed by loudspeaker for the ARVN battalion defending the village to surrender, but before the Political Commissar could complete the appeal a South Vietnamese flag was run up over the ARVN command bunker and the battalion opened fire. The fighting, according to a North Vietnamese participant, "became extremely fierce." One North Vietnamese attack after another was stopped by ARVN artillery and by ARVN troops firing from bunkers. Early the next morning the ARVN garrison managed to withdraw. The 3d Division now controlled a 5-kilometer long stretch of Rt. 19.

When the evacuation of the Highlands began the 3d Division divided into two columns: one advanced east, attacking the Binh Khe and Phu Phong

subsectors. On 22 March the western column took hills I, Z, and N, opening the way for the assault on An Khe, which was taken on 23 March. On the 25th the eastern column took the ARVN positions at Thu Thien Ha. Two regiments of the ARVN 22d Division blocked Rt. 19 to the east.

On Rt. 21, between Banmethuot and Nha Trang, the ARVN 3d Airborne Brigade held M'Drak Pass against the NVA 10th Division and other units pressing from the west.

In a book on the Central Highlands Campaign published in 1977, the J-4 of the NVA 3d Corps commented on the campaign as follows: "The fighting there and the resounding victories that were won were not a matter of course and even more so not simple and easy. In 30 days of fighting, from 4 March to 3 April, each day about 23 tons of small-arms ammunition were expended. Who said we didn't have to fight because the enemy fled in panic? We didn't fight, but had to expend a thousand tons of ammunition? Perhaps we supply people ate the ammunition in place of rice!"<sup>54</sup>

CHAPTER II - NOTES

1. TCQDND March 1976
2. Vinh Loc, Plaine, 1968
3. QDND 28 March 1976
4. VTD
5. VTD
6. QDND 28 March 1976
7. QDND 29 March 1976
8. VTD
9. VTD
10. TCQDND October 1975
11. ND 25 March 1976
12. QDND 26 May 1976
13. TCQDND October 1975
- 14. ND 20 September 1975
15. QNDN 25 May 1975
16. QEND 29 April 1976
17. QNDN 29 April 1976
18. QNDN 29 April 1976
19. VTD
20. VTD
21. QNDN 3 June 1976
22. VTD
23. TCQDNG June 1975
24. QDND 4 April 1975
- 25. QDND 30 March 1975
26. QDND 28 August 1975
27. QDND 11 March 1976
28. SGGP 19 October 1975
29. QDND 11 March 1976
30. TCQDND June 1975
31. TCQDND June 1975
32. QDND 10 March 1976
33. QDND 10 March 1976
34. QDND 10 April 1975
35. VTD
36. QDND 18 March 1976
37. QDND 10 May 1975
38. QDND 31 March 1976
39. QDND 31 March 1976
40. QDND 31 March 1976
41. QDND 1 April 1976
42. TCQDND July 1975
43. QDND 1 April 1976
44. VTD
45. VTD
46. VTD
47. QDND 19 May 1975
48. ND 23 September 1975
49. QDND 19 March 1976
50. ND 24 September 1975
51. ND 24 September 1975
52. TCQDND July 1975
53. QDND 21 April 1975
54. QDND 16 April 1977

THE FALL OF VIETNAM

Chapter III

Hue, Danang, and the Central Coast

Cecil E. Spurlock

---

The Military Situation in Military Region I: 1973-1975

Until mid-1974 the South Vietnamese succeeded in stabilizing the military situation in Military Region I, comprising the northernmost five provinces. The three full-strength Marine brigades manning the northern Quang Tri front had not been challenged, perhaps because the North Vietnamese did not want to risk retaliation against their logistical complexes south of the DMZ. By occupying such strategic areas as Dong Ong Gio and Hill 367, admitted NVA LG Le Tu Dong, "succeeded in disrupting our lines of communication and created difficulties in the relationships among the three areas [mountains, foothills, and lowlands], between the military forces and the political forces, and between the leadership and the masses,"<sup>1</sup> and resulted in the lowland rural areas being "completely controlled by the enemy."

Southwest of Hue and Phu Bai the ARVN 1st Division had established a strong defensive complex in the Mo Tau-Mt. Bong area. The Airborne Division, the principal mission of which was to defend the Song Bo Valley approach to Hue, served as a reaction force.

The deterioration in Military Region I began in June 1974, when I Corps commander Ngo Quang Truong was ordered to send the 1st Airborne Brigade to beef up the strategic reserve in Saigon. The result was that the Marine Division's area of responsibility was extended southward 10 kilometers into Thua Thien Province. Truong also shifted the 15th Ranger Group and the 1st Armored Brigade from Quang Nam to Thua Thien.

In August 1974 the NVA 324th Division overran Mt. Bong and the ARVN outposts on three nearby hills. Of its key defensive positions in southern Thua Thien, the ARVN 1st Division retained only Mo Tau. By October the 324th had taken Mo Tau and consolidated its hold on the high ground south of Phu Bai. From the heights long-range artillery prevented

use of Phu Bai Air Force Base, Hue's only airfield. The airport remained closed until mid-December, when the 54th Regiment of the 1st Division and the 15th Ranger Group retook Mo Tau.

"After August 1974," noted LG Le Tu Dong in his analysis of the Thua Thien-Hue front, "the enemy's pacification plan was stalmated. When threatened in southern Thua Thien they had to send forces to Mo Tau and Hill 303. In many places they had to pull back. Because they had to send Regional Force units to the outer perimeter, they had to thin out their forces manning the inner defenses." The ARVN forces, he remarked, "had taken many casualties" and had to resort to "blocking positions, ambushes, minefields, and other tactics".<sup>2</sup> The shift in ARVN tactics in mid-1974 from liberal use of air and artillery firepower to infantry tactics to conserve ammunition, a development noted in Chapter I, resulted in sharply increased casualties in Military Region I. The ARVN 2d Division suffered such a high attrition rate that it had to limit its area of operations to the Quang Ngai lowlands.

The South Vietnamese defensive posture in northern Military Region I was further weakened in January, 1975 when the Marine Division was ordered to send a company from each battalion to form a new Marine brigade -- the 468th -- for the strategic reserve in Saigon. Ngo Quang Truong was able to reoccupy the key positions of the defensive line southwest of Hue and Phu Bai, but only at the expense of further weakening the forces guarding northern Thua Thien. Omniously, toward the end of February the NVA 325th Division, having been relieved on the My Chanh River line, was moving into northwestern Thua Thien and the recently upgraded 341st Division had moved across the DMZ.

As noted in Chapter II, at about the same time the Central Highlands Campaign began the NVA launched a series of attacks in all regions of South

Vietnam to keep ARVN forces pinned down so that they could not send reinforcements to the Central Highlands. In Military Region I the NVA attacks began on 8 March. Communist forces overran Mai Linh district capital in northern Thua Thien, sending 25,000 refugees into Hue. On the same day NVA units attacked villages in Phong Dien, Quang Dien, Vinh Hien, and Vinh Loc districts in northern Thua Thien and Phu Loc and Phu Thu in the southern part of the province. Early the next morning the K33 sapper unit infiltrated the Dong Toa gasoline depot east of Hue and blew up tanks containing 200,000 gallons of gasoline.<sup>3</sup> On 10 March units of the NVA 2d Division attacked the Phuoc Lam and Tien Phuoc district capitals northwest of Tam Ky, capital of Quang Tin Province.

On March 8th, 9th, and 10th elements of the NVA 2d Corps attacked ARVN 1st Division positions in the Mt. Bong-hill 303-Mo Tau area southwest of Hue. In that area, admitted Van Tien Dung, the South Vietnamese forces "defended strongly, counterattacked fiercely, and prevented us from developing our attack."<sup>4</sup>

#### Thua Thien-Hue

On 17 March, after the fall of Banmethuot and the abandoning of Pleiku, the NVA High Command ordered the Tri-Thien Military Region command to "boldly send forces from the mountains to the lowlands and press up against the main roads and the outskirts of Hue." The NVA 2d Corps was ordered to "step up the attack from the west and carry out a strategic interdiction between Hue and Danang."<sup>5</sup> On the afternoon of 19 March the Marine units defending the Thach Han River line pulled back to form a line along the My Chanh River. Later that night North Vietnamese units crossed the Thach Han and occupied Quang Tri City. On the same day the Politburo decided to launch a large-scale attack to smash the Thua Thien-Hue defensive complex.<sup>6</sup>

On the 20th the Politburo, having concluded that Saigon intended to concentrate its forces on holding Military Regions III and IV and form

enclaves at Danang in Military Region I and perhaps Cam Ranh in Military Region II, in hopes of "creating a strong position and achieving a political solution." It decided to transform what had been termed a "strategic offensive" into a "general offensive and uprising" all over South Vietnam. The NVA 2d Corps was ordered to step up its attacks, bypass ARVN defenses, concentrate on cutting Rt. 1 and interdicting the port at Cua Thuan, and prevent the 1st Division and other ARVN forces from withdrawing from Thua Thien. Specifically, the Corps was ordered to interdict Rt. 1 by taking ARVN positions in the vicinity of Phu Loc, a district capital 35 kilometers south of Hue.<sup>7</sup>

At 0550 on 21 March NVA artillery which had been pulled up a hillside the previous night began a 40-minute shelling of ARVN defenses on Hill 560, Hill 494, and Mt. Kim Sac near Phu Loc. At 0630 the 18th Regiment of the 325th Division launched a strong ground attack. After 15 minutes the 9th Battalion of the 18th Regiment took Hill 494 and the helicopter pad southeast of Hill 560. After taking Hill 520 the 7th Battalion developed its attack southwest of Hill 560. After 9 hours of stiff fighting the 18th Regiment had wiped out the ARVN 61st Regional Force Battalion and taken hills 560, 494, and 520. By 1100 on 22 March the 18th Regiment controlled a three-kilometer long segment of Rt. 1 from east of Bat Son to east of Bach Thach. According to one North Vietnamese account, "thousands of vehicles turned around in chaos."<sup>8</sup>

On the afternoon of 21 March the 101st Regiment of the 325th Division took Hill 329 and pursued its defenders to Hill 275. At noon on 22 March the 15th Ranger Group, in danger of being surrounded, withdrew by sea and northward along Rt. 1. On 22 and 23 March the 325th Division attacked elements of the 15th Ranger Group at Bat Son and Truoi Bridge. On the morning of 24 March the 101st Regiment bypassed Truoi Bridge and advanced to La Son intersection. Its 2d Battalion quickly took Nong Bridge and advanced to Phu Bai Bridge.<sup>9</sup> In its assault on Hue from the south, the 325th Division was joined by the 203d Armored Brigade, a unit of which moved toward Thuan An, and numerous other units.

On the 22d the NVA 308th and 341st divisions, with supporting armored and artillery units, crossed the My Chanh River. The 147th and 258th Marine Brigades fell back to form a line extending from Huong Dien on the coast to An Lo, on Rt.1 20 kilometers north of Hue, and the south bank of the Song Bo River. Units of the ARVN 1st Division defending Hon Vuong east of Hue and the Mo Tau area southwest of the city were ordered to withdraw to the military port at Tan My, 10 kilometers east of Hue. Units defending the Hill 303 area southwest of Mo Tau began to withdraw to the Tu Hien river mouth on the coast 20 kilometers southeast of Hue. The NVA 324th Division, which had been operating in the vicinity of Hill 303, advanced northward past La Son, Phu Bai, and Phu Thu and moved toward Tan My. From the north, the NVA 341st Division bypassed Phong Dien and Huong Dien and advanced toward Cua Thuan.

On the morning of the 23d NVA heavy artillery opened up on Tan My, Tu Ha, An Lo, Huong Thuy, Huong Dien, Mang Ca, and the Phu Bai airfield. By the morning of the 24th Hue had been surrounded. The Hue garrison began to withdraw from the city. One column withdrew toward Thuan An, another to Cu Lai six kilometers south of Thuan An, and a third moved wouth toward Tu Hien. At 0900 on the 25th the NVA 324th Division attacked Tan My, Thuan An, and Tu Hien. Meanwhile, the NVA "Phu Xuan" Regiment moved into Hue across the Nguyen Hoang, Cau Moi, and Bach Ho bridges after crossing the Perfume River at the Tuan ferry crossing southwest of the city. The 101st Regiment of the 325th Division entered the city from the south along Rt. 1. At sunrise on the 26th the 101st Regiment assaulted the Phu Van Lau Palace in the Citadel. At 0600 a large NLF flag flew above the Citadel.

Le Quang Hoa, a North Vietnamese general who visited Hue soon after its fall, saw hundreds of South Vietnamese bodies floating on the Perfume River and along the coast. At Thuan An, he reported, "We went through a battlefield where tanks, armored vehicles, and trucks were still smouldering and enemy bodies lay stewn about."<sup>10</sup>

South of Hue, the 18th Regiment of the NVA 325th Regiment, after helping reduce the ARVN pocket at Tu Hien, between 26 March and 28 March took Thua Luu and the ARVN outpost at Tho Son, and advanced to Phu Gia and the ARVN outpost at Lang Co, at the foot of Hai Van Pass, which marked the boundry between Thua Thien and Quang Nam.<sup>11</sup>

#### Danang

Just before the attack on Banmethuot the North Vietnamese also stepped up pressure at several points south of Danang. On 10 March the NVA 2d Division attacked the Phuoc Lam and Tien Phuoc subsectors, which guarded the northwest approach to Tam Ky, capital of Quang Tin Province. The NVA 304th Division intensified its attacks against the Dai Loc subsector on Rt. 14, midway between Thuong Duc and Dien Ban. A regiment of the NVA 320B Division, moving down from the area of Duong Hue and Nui Vang, concentrated on Nghia Hanh District, southwest of Quang Ngai City.

Just to the north of Quang Ngai City a number of independent NVA units attacked ARVN outposts. One such unit was the 81st Battalion, which had been founded on 25 February 1975 by consolidating companies and platoons from Son Tinh, Duc Pho, Tu Nghia, and Dong Son districts. On 15 March the battalion overran the Go Soi strongpoint, which protected the western approaches to Binh Son on Rt. 1 15 miles north of Quang Ngai. The next day the 1st Battalion, 4th Regiment, ARVN 2d Division and a squadron of eight tanks failed in an attempt to retake the outpost.<sup>12</sup>

Two days later the 81st Battalion and other NVA units were ordered to move overland to intercept the ARVN garrison which was being withdrawn from Tra Bong, about 15 miles to the southwest. The North Vietnamese claim to have wiped out two companies of the 69th Regional Force Battalion in the course of heavy fighting on 19 and 20 March.<sup>13</sup>

On 22 March the Quang Ngai Provincial Party Committee convened a meeting of high-ranking provincial cadres to announce plans for an all-out attack on Quang Ngai City to exploit the withdrawal of most regular ARVN troops to Quang Nam. On the night of the 23d the VAN units operating north of the provincial capital were ordered to cut Rt. 1A between Binh Son and Son Tinh. The order was given to attack the city itself on the following morning.<sup>14</sup>

At 0740 on 24 March NVA artillery unleashed a heavy barrage against the Ong Be railroad station, the sector military headquarters, provincial headquarters, and other objectives in Quang Ngai. At 1000 one NVA column pressed against ARVN defenses from the northwest, while the 52d Regiment of the 320B Division and other units attacked the district town of Nghia Hanh southwest of the city. At 1400 on 24 March Nghia Hanh fell to the NVA. The ARVN Regional Force garrisons at Mo Duc and Tu Nghia district towns withdrew into Quang Ngai City.

Just after midnight on 25 March the ARVN forces in Quang Ngai -- the 11th Ranger Battalion, two battalions of the 6th Regiment of the 2d Division, and various Regional Force units -- set out on Rt. 1 toward the 2d Division headquarters at Chu Lai, 25 miles to the north. The 11th Battalion and nine tanks spearheaded the column. The convoy was halted at the O Song bridge, one kilometer south of Binh Son. The ARVN column, nearly 3 kilometers long, came to a halt. Behind the military units stretched a long column of more than 10,000 civilians.

At 0200 the 11th Ranger Battalion and the armored vehicles attacked NVA positions in an effort to break through the roadblock. The NVA on ridges west of the road fired PRG rounds, recoilless rifles, 82mm mortars, and machineguns into the ARVN formation. Five of the armored vehicles and a number of trucks were knocked out. The ARVN, taking what cover they could find along the sides of the road, "fought back furiously." At daybreak the

ARVN, taking advantage of a morning mist, formed into four columns to "open up a path of blood." By noon, after 10 hours of continuous fighting, 450 of the ARVN force, including the commander of the 11th Ranger Battalion, had been killed. The North Vietnamese claim that 650 were captured and 57 vehicles were destroyed.<sup>15</sup>

With the elimination of the Quang Tri City garrison the NVA secured complete control of the province and thus isolated Military Region I from the rest of the country.

At 1830 on 20 March the NVA 2d Division, which had been fighting the ARVN 12th Ranger Group in the Tien Phuoc-Phuoc Lam area northwest of Tam Ky since 10 March, was ordered to prevent the ARVN 2d Division and 12th Ranger Group from withdrawing to Danang and Chu Lai and, if possible, take Tam Ky. The NVA 2d Division staff worked through the night to draft an offensive plan. The essential features of that plan was that the 2d Division would divide up into battalion-sized column, infiltrate the defensive lines of the 4th and 5th Regiments of the ARVN 2d Division to the vicinity of the key objectives, then take one after another. During the night of the 21st the NVA 2d Division deployed its forces in driving rain.<sup>16</sup>

By the night of the 23d several battalions of the NVA 2d Division had slipped through ARVN lines and taken up positions just outside Tam Ky. At 0500 on the 24th North Vietnamese unleashed a heavy preparatory barrage, concentrating on the area south of the Tam Ky Bridge, the Truong Xuan intersection, the ARVN tank park at Ky Son, and the positions of the ARVN 2d Division battalion defending Ky Bich airfield.

The 2d Battalion of the NVA 2d Division's "Ba Gia" Regiment split into three columns and moved toward its major objective, the Tam Ky Bridge. From the northwest the regiment's 3d Battalion assaulted the Ky Bich airfield.

Meanwhile, the rest of the NVA 2d Division and other units raced eastward from Tien Phuoc toward the Truong Xuan intersection, with heavy supporting artillery fire. ARVN blocking positions along the road were obliterated by self-propelled AA guns firing at point-blank range. The reserve company of the Ba Gia Regiment was thrown into the fighting to take the Truong Xuan intersection and cut off the ARVN escape route.

At 0700 the 6th Battalion of the Ba Gia Regiment reported that the village of Khanh Tho Dong on the eastern outskirts of Tam Ky had been taken. At 0715 an NVA reconnaissance officer reported that NVA artillery had knocked out 50 ARVN artillery pieces. Minutes later the Military Region 5 headquarters reported that Tam Ky sector headquarters personnel were burning documents. The headquarters of the ARVN 2d Division, its 4th and 5th regiments, and the 12th Ranger Group were reported paralyzed by NVA artillery fire. At 0810 the NVA 2d Division commander ordered an all-all assault on Tam Ky.

Northwest of Tam Ky the lead NVA tank, No. 707, emerged from the scrub forest and into Ky Bich airfield, most of which had been secured by the 3d Battalion of the Ba Gia Regiment. The tank crossed the airfield and sped toward the center of Tam Ky along Tran Cao Van Street. A grenade thrown from a rooftop wounded two NVA infantrymen on the tank but did not damage it. The tank continued on to the northern end of the Tam Ky Bridge and kept the ARVN defenders there pinned down.

At 0811 Major Giang, commander of the 2d Battalion of the Ba Gia Regiment south of the bridge ordered his heavy weapons company to rake ARVN positions south of the bridge. Giang led his battalion across the bridge and advanced north along Route 1. The 3d Battalion advanced along the railroad track while the 8th Battalion moved in the direction of provincial headquarters. By 1000 Tam Ky was reported secured.\*

---

\* According to U.S. intelligence sources, the NVA 711th NVA Division participated in the assault on Tam Ky. No mention of it, however, is made in the North Vietnamese accounts.

The NVA 2d Division units reformed during the night of the 24th. The following morning the division's 8th Regiment and the 52d Regiment of the 320B Division, and other units, entered the district town of Tuan Duong, headquarters of the ARVN 12th Ranger Group, which had withdrawn during the night. The ARVN Rangers had not had time to set off demolition charges at Tuan Duong as they had at Tien Phuong. Thus the ARVN fire support base on Mt. Que, the forward command post of the ARVN 3d Division, and a number of other installations fell to the NVA intact.

Meanwhile, the Division Commander received orders from Military Region 5 headquarters to advance on Danang from the south along Rt. 1. The 2d Division, the units of which were operating 70 to 90 kilometers south of Danang, would have to cross three rivers and take the district towns of Ba Ren, Vinh Dien, Nam Phuoc, and Hoa Vang. The division set out in two parallel columns, following Rt. 1 and the north-south railroad.

The North Vietnamese, who were unfamiliar with the terrain, sent a reconnaissance squad ahead on bicycles. The NVA 2d Division crossed the Thu Bon River during the night of the 25th. Early on the morning of the 26th the NVA reconnaissance squad returned to report that it had located the Ba Ren bridge and that it was defended by a unit of the ARVN 3d Division. The NVA 2d Division commander ordered the 8th Regiment, spearheaded by tanks, to take the bridge. The ARVN unit defending the bridge, supported by two F-5 jets, "poured fire" into the NVA column. The NVA tanks laid down a smokescreen to prevent the South Vietnamese jets from knocking out the bridge, but one of the F-5's dived in and scored a direct hit on the span with a napalm bomb, which set fire to the wooden planking.

The NVA regimental commander sent tanks left and right of the bridge along the riverbank. Firing armor-piercing shells at a range of 200 meters, the NVA tanks knocked out the ARVN bunkers on the opposite bank. But the ARVN resistance continued to be strong enough to prevent the NVA from

crossing. Meanwhile, the bridge continued to burn. After nightfall most of a NVA company was able to cross the bridge before the center span collapsed, dropping a number of NVA troops into the river. The NVA who made it across the bridge laid down supporting fire while others swam across the river. The NVA heavy weapons were taken across on boats.

On the morning of the 27th Military Region 5 reported that the ARVN had pulled out of Da Tinh, Boi Xa, and Hoi An the previous day, and that some elements of the ARVN Marine Division had escaped by ship. The NVA 2d Division was ordered to begin its final push on Danang on the morning of the 28th and to enter the city by the 30th.

An ARVN artillery base in the district town of Vinh Dien north of the Thu Bon River fired into the NVA columns. The Ba Gia Regiment was ordered to Vinh Dien, while the 3d and 6th regiments attacked north along Rt. 1. At 0500 on 27 March the attack on Vinh Dien began. Within a few hours the ARVN 3d Division's southernmost defensive perimeter had been breached. The NVA units, now riding in commandeered civilian vehicles, moved north toward Hue.

Near Dien Tho the Ba Gia Regiment intercepted a radio conversation between an ARVN Captain and a Lieutenant.

Captain: "I know, I know, Lieutenant, get to the point, I'm not stupid! Reinforce you with what? There are no more reinforcements."

Lieutenant: "Captain, my men are scattered all over. The communists are shelling us with heavy artillery and are about to attack."

Captain: "Lieutenant, you think I don't know that? I repeat -- the Colonel has ordered your company to defend to the death! Defend to the death!"

Lieutenant, angrily: "Motherfucker! To hell with defending to the death!"

At the Bo Mung bridge the NVA columns encountered another ARVN blocking force. Within hours the 2d Division overcame the last defensive line of

the ARVN 3d Division south of Danang and reached the outskirts of the city.\*

The NVA 304th Division, which completed its operation in the Dai Loc area on 15 March, was ordered on the 20th to attack Danang from the west. The 304th Division, attacking from two directions, broke through the lines of the ARVN 369th Marine Brigade, advanced east along Rt. 14 and attacked Ai Nghia and Hieu Duc on the 28th.

North of Danang, three ARVN Marine battalions had held blocking positions at Lang Co, at the foot of Hai Van Pass, since 22 March. At 1800 on the 27th the NVA 325th Division was ordered to "Proceed rapidly to the foot of Hai Van Pass to annihilate the enemy blocking position at Lang Co and create a staging area for penetrating the defense line north of Danang." At dawn the next morning the 325th Division, the 203d Armored Brigade, and other units overcame ARVN resistance at Lang Co--killing about 150 of the ARVN defenders-- then crossed Hai Van Pass and advanced south along Rt. 1 toward Danang.<sup>17</sup>

At 0800 on 28 March, NVA heavy artillery on high ground began to hit Danang Air Force Base, Cua Dai, the Nuoc Man airfield, My khe beach, and other targets.

South of Danang, NVA forces attacked Nuoc Man airfield at 0130 and had captured it by 0930. At Tuyen Hoa intersection elements of the NVA 2d Division encountered a detachment of ARVN Marines moving toward the Son Tra Peninsula. After a brief firefight the NVA captured an M113 armored personnel carrier and forced its driver to drive toward ARVN I Corps Headquarters. At the deserted headquarters the NVA entered the command bunker of I Corps Commander Ngo Quang Truong, where they found battle maps laid out on the table and the electric fans still running. The NVA force then split up into two columns, one moving toward City Hall, the other toward the Trinh Minh The Bridge.<sup>18</sup>

Moving in from the west, the NVA 304th Division and other units penetrated Danang Air Force Base, while a 2d Division battalion entered the airbase from the east.

The tank-led NVA column moving down Rt. 1 from the north entered Danang via Ly Thai To Street and moved toward the center of the city. Skirmishes broke out on Trung Nu Vuong, Phan Chu Trinh, Le Dai Hanh, and other streets. At noon the three NVA columns linked up in the center of the city. Small detachments of ARVN Marines held out on the Son Tra Peninsula until late in the afternoon.

#### Qui Nhon to Cam Ranh

After the fall of Cheo Reo the NVA 3d Division advanced in two directions along Rt. 19. One column moved west to help take An Khe, which fell on 23 March. The eastern column took ARVN 22d Division forward positions at Thu Thien Ha on 25 March. The entire 23d Division, now joined by the 968th Division, pressed against the 42d Regiment, serving as the rear guard of the 22d Division. Meanwhile, the 41st and 47th regiments of the 22d Division were being evacuated at Qui Nhon.

The recently formed Tay Son Regiment was ordered to attack Qui Nhon from the northwest. After moving overland all day and night of 30 March, at 1000 on 31 March the regiment launched its attack. The regiment advanced under heavy artillery fire from ARVN fire support bases in the hills around Qui Nhon and naval vessels off shore. The regiment captured Doi Bridge just north of the city and the fire support base on Hill No. 1, where it dug in to block the withdrawal of the 42d Regiment.

Soon a small ARVN column of a jeep, a troop-laden truck, and seven Hondas sped toward Doi Bridge. Refusing to heed a signal to stop, the ARVN troops fired into the roadblock and sped on. The communists opened up with machinegun fire and PKG rounds, one of which scored a direct hit and killed nearly 40 troops in the truck.

By 1600 the Tay Son Regiment had taken Provincial Headquarters. Heavy fighting raged in other parts of the city. Heavy artillery rounds rained down on the Phu Cat and Go Quanh airfields. Throughout the night of the 31st the forward headquarters of the 22d Division and the other ARVN bases underwent heavy bombardment. "The sky around Qui Nhon was brilliant red," reported one witness.<sup>19</sup>

Pitched battles raged all night on Vo Tanh and Nguyen Hue streets and the area around Qui Nhon airfield. "We had to fight from morning to noon on 1 April to complete the annihilation of the obstinate policemen" resisting from the upper floors of multistory buildings on Gia Long Street, reported a North Vietnamese participant.<sup>20</sup> Thus by noon of the 1st the communists had mastered Downtown Qui Nhon.

Shortly after noon an ARVN column of nearly 200 vehicles -- tanks, armored vehicles, jeeps, and trucks -- approached Qui Nhon from the Binh Khe area via Phu Tai Road. The convoy entered Qui Nhon along Quang Trung Street, then turned onto Nguyen Hue Street, firing as it went. An NVA company fired on the convoy from a cemetery on Quang Trung Street, knocking out an M48 tank, a GMC truck, and two 155mm artillery pieces. A brisk battle ensued, in the course of which Col. Kieu Van Thanh, Deputy Commander of the 42d Regiment, was captured.<sup>21</sup>

One North Vietnamese account claimed that "the 22d Division was annihilated to the last man."<sup>22</sup> Another was probably closer to the mark when it reported that more than 1,000 ARVN soldiers and policemen surrendered on the morning of 2 April.<sup>23</sup>

On 31 March the NVA 320th Division overcame the last ARVN resistance on Rt. 7B and the Song Ba River. The next day its 3d Regiment took Tuy Hoa and captured BG Tran Van Cam, the II Corps Chief of Staff, and BG Vi Van Binh, the II Corps Inspector General, on the beach. The 320th Division then turned south on Rt. 1 toward Deo Ca pass, on the Phu Yen-

Rangers under the command of BG Pham Duy Tat came under attack a few days after they began to prepare defensive positions at the pass.

At M'Drak Pass on Rt. 21, just east of Khanh Duong, the hard-pressed 3d Airborne Brigade, which had blocked the advance of the NVA 10th Division and other units since 18 March, were being surrounded and battered by heavy artillery fire.

At Nha Trang, shortly after midnight on 1 April Col. Ly Ba Pham, the Khanh Hoa Province Chief, reported to LG Pham Van Phu that the provincial administrative organs and the city police were paralyzed. At 0600 Phu's Chief of Staff reported that he had flown over Binh Dinh between 1900 and 2300 the previous night but had been unable to contact the 22d Division. Shortly thereafter Phu received a message from BG Cam that Phu Yen was in danger of being overrun.<sup>24</sup>

At 0715 on the 1st Phu took a helicopter from Nha Trang and flew along the Phu Yen coast in the Tuy Hoa vicinity. He was unable to establish contact with Gen. Cam or any ARVN military unit. An hour later he established contact with Vice Admiral Minh, who replied that Tuy Hoa had been overrun and the Phu Yen Province Chief had been wounded, but that he had heard nothing about the fate of Gen. Cam.

When Phu returned to Nha Trang at 0900 he learned that the 10th Division had broken through at M'Drak Pass and was advancing along Rt. 21 toward Ninh Hoa. At 1000 Phu met with BG Tat, BG Luong (Commander of the 2d Air Division), Vice Adm. Chau, and Col. Ly, the II Corps Chief of Staff, at Corps headquarters to discuss defensive measures. During the meeting Phu was informed that 2,000 ARVN prisoners had broken out of the stockade and that some had stolen weapons and were looting. The situation in Nha Trang was becoming increasingly chaotic. Phu terminated the meeting, after ordering the Corps

headquarters moved to the airfield, that all nonessential elements be evacuated, and that all units remain in place.

Col. Ly Ba Pham, who had served as both Province Chief and Mayor of Nha Trang, had just been named commander of the Nha Trang front. But since the Nha Trang defense perimeter was anchored by BG Thuan's Noncommissioned Officers School, Vice Adm. Chau's Naval Training School, BG Canh's Airforce Training School, and BG Tuong's 2d Air Division, Col. Pham recommended that Phu appoint a higher ranking officer. At 1100 Phu telephoned BG Thuan and invited him to Corps headquarters to discuss his appointment as commander of Nha Trang's defenses.

Earlier that morning Thuan had telephoned Gen. Nguyen Kao Tri, head of the Military Training School Department in Saigon, to ask permission to evacuate the schools. Tri replied that Thuan would have to obtain the permission of Phu. When the two met Phu refused permission to evacuate the schools and told Thuan that contact had been lost with the other units in Khanh Hoa, so the two would fly by helicopter to Phan Rang, where they would take a C47, which was capable of flying over the province at a high altitude for a long period of time, to attempt to contact the units. They left Nha Trang at noon.

Province Chief Ly Ba Pham had been closely following Phu's movements. At 1130 Pham was informed by the commander of the company defending Corps headquarters that "Headquarters personnel have received permission to return home to prepare to evacuate their families because the communists were only a few kilometers from Nha Trang." At 1230 Pham, after learning that Phu had left Nha Trang by helicopter, telephoned Thuan at the Noncommissioned Officers Training School. No one answered.

An hour later Pham ordered the local troops and police with whom he could establish contact, as well as the district chiefs of Dien Khanh,

Vinh Xuong, and Ninh Hoa districts, to withdraw to Phan Rang. Then Pham went to the airfield to request an airplane to go to Phan Rang to make preparations to receive the troops. But just as we was about to take off he learned that "The President has ordered that Nha Trang be defended. Gen. Oanh has been placed in command." At noon Gen. Oanh had been ordered to evacuate all personnel of the Air Force Training School to Tan Son Nhut in Saigon and was organizing the evacuation. when, at 1430, he received a message from President Thieu appointing him area commander.

Oanh immediately called a staff meeting and appointed Gen. Luong commander of the air base and named Vice Adm. Chau to succeed Pham as Province Chief and Mayor of Nha Trang. He radioed Saigon to request permission to bomb Duy Khanh bridge and the bridge at Ru Ru Pass to slow down the North Vietnamese advance and requested that illumination flares be dropped over Nha Trang at night to facilitate the maintenance of order in the city.

Pham Van Phu returned to Nha Trang at 1830 and told Oanh and Luong that he had flown around the province all afternoon but had failed to establish contact with any units on the ground. Oanh told Phu that he would need an infantry division to defend Nha Trang, and that if the 10th and 320th divisions linked up an even stronger force, with air and naval support, would be needed.

Luong informed Phu that the situation in Nha Trang had become increasingly chaotic after a rumor was spread that there would be an evacuation to Phan Rang. Phu became very angry when Luong suggested that Phu's absence had caused the rumor. At that moment a staff officer interrupted the conference and invited Phu to the operations room to receive instructions from President Thieu.

A few minutes later Phu returned to the conference room and announced that President Thieu had given Phu all operational control in Military Region 2. Phu appointed Oanh commander at Nha Trang. Oanh indicated that he would willingly accept the assignment, but only on condition that he be given a full-strength infantry division. Phu looked at Oanh, then at Luong, then said with emotion, "I will take responsibility for evacuating the 2d Air Division and the Nha Trang air base personnel. You may all evacuate. If the President asks, I will take responsibility. We have no other course than to withdraw to defend Phan Rang."

On the night of 1 April Phu flew to Phan Rang to hold an urgent meeting with the commander of the 6th Air Division and the Ninh Thuan Province Chief. The following morning Phu returned to Nha Trang to oversee the evacuation, then went to Phan Thiet to inspect its defenses. Around noon Phu met with Thuan to discuss what to say to President Thieu, then sent Thuan to Saigon to report on the situation.<sup>25</sup>

#### Phan Rang

On 1 April President Thieu, after receiving a report from Gen. Phu at Nha Trang that the situation there was hopeless, reportedly told Cao Van Vien that "If we abandon Nha Trang and Cam Ranh we must by all means hold Phan Rang. As long as we hold Phan Rang our airplanes can strike as far north as Danang, but if we lose Phan Rang the communists will be able to attack Saigon by air." Thieu then instructed Vien to integrate the remaining territory of Military Region II (Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces) into Military Region III. LG Toan, the III Corps Commander, was ordered to go to Phan Rang to make a first-hand inspection.

Gen. Toan was less than enthusiastic. His forces in Tay Ninh, Binh Duong, and Long An were understrength and he was preoccupied with building up defenses in Long Khanh and Binh Tuy. But on the morning of 2 April he flew to Phan Rang. En route he stopped at Phan Thiet, where he met with Col. Nguyen Van Tu, the Ninh Thuan Province Chief, who had evacuated

the provincial staff to Phan Thiet on 1 April. Toan informed Tu of the plan to defend Phan Rang and ordered Tu to accompany him to Phan Rang.

After returning to Saigon Toan met with Cao Van Vien and reported on his meeting with Pham Ngoc Sang, commander of the 6th Air Division, who informed Toan that a communist battalion could take the air base. Toan recommended that a forward headquarters of Military Region III be established at Phan Rang. He also recommended that MG Hieu, Deputy Commander of Military Region III, be passed over in favor of Nguyen Van Nghi, who had been promoted to Lieutenant General in 1974 for meritorious service as commander of Military Region IV, a position he lost in late 1974 due to political pressure from Thieu's opponents. Since then Nghi had been commander of the Long Thanh Training Center.

At 0730 on 4 April Nghi set out for the Military Region III headquarters at Bien Hoa. Toan briefed Nghi on the military situation in Military Region III, expressing special concern over the increasing infiltration of North Vietnamese sappers and commandos. He then analyzed the situation at Phan Rang, pointing out that the communists had only two routes along which to attack the city. One was Rt. 11 from Dalat, where the only NVA force at that time was the NVA 812th independent regiment, which had no tanks or heavy artillery. The other was Route 1. Toan was aware of the presence of the 10th Division in the Nha Trang-Cam Ranh area, but predicted that the communists would not be able to attack Phan Rang without pausing to regroup. He expressed concern that the NVA 1st Corps might be sent down the coast from North Vietnam, but insisted that it would take months to move the corps 1,000 kilometers. At 1030 the two left for Phan Rang.

After inspecting the Phan Rang area by air and on the ground, Nghi concluded that since no defensive works had been built at Phan Rang he would need at least a strong division, with an engineer regiment to build

of North Vietnamese units. Nghi, who lacked sufficient forces to hold the mountains north of the airfield, feared that if the North Vietnamese occupied the high ground they could shut it down. He ordered most of the 6th Air Division to Bien Hoa, keeping only a squadron of A37 fighter-bombers and 10 helicopters.

By 10 April the deployments had been made and some fortifications had been completed. Nghi received reports that the troops' morale was good. Col. Nguyen Van Tu was replaced as Province Chief by Col. Lien, which improved civilian morale.

But Gen. Nghi became increasingly worried over developments to his rear. The North Vietnamese assault on Xuan Loc began on 9 April. Rt. 1 had been interdicted between Long Khanh and Binh Tuy, which in effect isolated Phan Rang from Saigon. Nguyen Van Hien, the Deputy Commander of III Corps, committed suicide. On 11 April the fighting around Xuan Loc intensified. ARVN paratroopers sent to reinforce its garrison was pinned down in a rubber plantation near the city. The 3d Armored Squadron and 8th Regiment of the 5th Division had been to break the siege. Thus Military Region III had thrown all available units into the fighting at Xuan Loc.

The battle for Phan Rang began early in the morning of 14 April, when artillery of the NVA 3d Division, directed from the division command on a mountain northwest of Du Long, began to heavily shell ARVN positions in the Du Long area. The ground assault by elements of the 3d Division began at 0550. The ARVN paratroops and Rangers, who occupied the high ground on both sides of the road, "resisted stubbornly, contesting each hill and each segment of road," but by evening had been forced out of some positions around Du Long.

At the same time, elements of the NVA 10th Division, which had moved overland and taken up positions north and northwest of Phan Rang Air Force

Base, launched a probing attack which was repulsed after several hours of hard fighting.

At 0300 on 15 April, BG Sang reported to Nghi that his reconnaissance pilots had spotted several convoys, one of them with at least 200 vehicles, moving south toward Du Long on Rt. 1. Nghi ordered the remaining A37's to take off at daybreak to bomb the NVA columns and knock out the remaining bridges. At 0500 the Rangers reported that tanks had broken through to Du Long. By late afternoon on the 15th the NVA had taken Du Long, overran ARVN positions at Kien Kien and Ba Thap, and advanced to My Tuong. The ARVN Airborne and Ranger forces withdrew to form a new line about 10 kilometers north of Phan Rang.

Gen. Tran Van Don, who had just been appointed Minister of Defense, and Gen. Toan flew to Phan Rang to meet with Nghi. Nghi requested that Toan send him the 1st Airborne brigade, but Toan informed him that the 1st Airborne was still pinned down in a rubber plantation near Xuan Loc and was taking heavy casualties, and that no other Airborne or Marine units were available. As the meeting ended Tran Van Don urged Nghi to "hold out as long as you can."

Nghi called in BG Sang, BG Nhat (the 2d Division Commander), Col. Luong (commander of the Airborne Brigade), and Col. Biet (Commander of the Ranger Group) to discuss plans to retake the lost positions at Du Long, which had to be retaken on the 16th to prevent the NVA from placing long-range artillery there to shell the air base. In the afternoon Gen. Sang reported that the bridges on Rt. 1 north of Phan Rang had been knocked out. That night C130's brought in enough aviation fuel for the A37's to operate for four days.

On the 15th the North Vietnamese had assembled a strong assault force south of Du Long. At 0500 on 16 April the attack began, with the

4th and 5th battalions of the 203d Armored Brigade leading the way, following by units of the 325th Division. The North Vietnamese advance was slowed by A37's flying out of Phan Rang AFB and by an Airborne battalion at Go Den, which reported to Nghi at 0600 that it was "resolutely" stopping the North Vietnamese tanks. But by 0700 the armor-led "deep penetration force" had entered the outskirts of Phan Rang and by 1000 had captured the Ninh Thuan Sector Headquarters, after first blocking Phan Rang Bridge just south of the city to prevent the garrison from escaping.

Early in the morning Nghi had ordered his nine A37's to bomb and strafe the NVA column while it was piled up because of the knocked-out bridges. The A37's attacked targets around Du Long despite very heavy anti-aircraft fire, but accidentally knocked out some of the artillery pieces supporting the Airborne battalion at Go Den. By the time the planes returned to Phan Rang AFB they could not land because of the shelling by long-range NVA artillery south of Du Long and were ordered to Bien Hoa.

Meanwhile, the NVA 3d Division and elements of the 10th Division were taking ARVN positions around the airbase. At 0730 Nghi telephoned III Corps Headquarters at Bien Hoa to report that the air base had been surrounded and to ask for air support and an Airborne brigade. Toan replied, "I'm also very hard up here. Let me study the situation and then I'll make a decision." Nghi slammed down the receiver. At 0800 BG Sang recommended that Nghi command his units from a helicopter but Nghi insisted that that was not yet necessary.

Heavy machine gun fire from a hill north of the air base began to hit Nghi's quonset hut. Nghi was informed that the hill had just been taken from a 2d Division reconnaissance company and that the North Vietnamese had also just taken the bomb depot north of the air base, thus threatening Gate No. 3 on the northeastern perimeter. Nghi ordered

Gen. Nhat to send a 2d Division unit to retake the bomb depot and defend Gate No. 3. At 1030 BG Sang reported that the NVA unit that had taken the bomb depot had penetrated the air base and occupied a slightly elevated area in the middle of the base, effectively cutting the base in two. From that position the NVA fired recoilless rifles into the Military Region III forward headquarters and hangars in the southern part of the air base.

After taking Phan Rang City, one unit of the 325th Division advanced northeast to take the military port. Another column moved west on Rt. 11 to join in the assault on the air base. After taking the base's main gate on Rt. 11 it moved on to attack from the rear the 4th Regiment of the 2d Division, which had been holding back the 968th Sapper Regiment and 812th Independent Regiment attacking from Dalat. Thus within five hours the NVA column had covered more than 40 kilometers in an encircling maneuver.

Nghi ordered Col. Luong to take the remaining two airborne companies to accompany Nghi and his headquarters staff to Gate No. 1. Luong reported that Gate No. 1 had already been closed off by NVA tanks. Nghi then ordered that the force escape by cutting through the fence.

After slipping out of the air base the group of about 300 concealed themselves in woods just north of Rt. 11 south of the air base, which was heavily patrolled by North Vietnamese tanks. Nghi intended to wait until dark, cross Rt. 11, and proceed to Ca Na, about 20 kilometers to the south, where the group would take trucks to Phan Thiet. At 1900 an airborne reconnaissance patrol returned to report the way was still not clear. At 0200 on the morning of the 17th Col. Luong crossed Rt. 11 and approached the hamlet of My Duc, intending to ask the people there about the whereabouts of the NVA troops. An NVA patrol, however, discovered Col. Luong and his men and opened fire.

Nghi's group scattered in various directions. Nghi and Sang hid in an irrigation ditch and were soon captured. James Lewis, a CIA officer

who had been sent to Phan Rang a few days previously, was captured nearby.

At 1400 on the 16th the 4th Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade and other units caught up with an airborne battalion which was fleeing south on Rt. 1 toward the port of Ca Na and killed or captured the entire unit.<sup>26</sup>

CHAPTER III - NOTES

1. HT May 1975
2. HT May 1975
3. QDND 15 June 1975
4. VTD
5. QDND 2 April 1975
6. HT June 1975
7. QDND 2 April 1975
8. QDND 26 March 1976
9. ND 24 January 1976
10. ND 2 February 1976
11. ADND 13 July 1975
12. QDND 26 June 1975
13. HT September 1975
14. HT September 1975
15. QDND 15 June 1975
16. QDND 9 April 75
17. QDND 16 June 1975
18. ADND 28 June 1975
19. QDND 29 April 1975
20. QDND 2 April 1975
21. QDND 29 April 1975
22. QDND 25 October 1975
23. ADND 29 April 1975
24. QDND 12 April 1976
25. QDND 27 April 1975, QDND, 13 & 14 April 1976
26. QDND, 26 & 27 April 1976, TCQDND August 1975, QDND 12 & 13 May 1975

fortifications. Toan promised to send the 2d Airborne Brigade to Phan Rang immediately, to be followed later by the 2d Division. Nghi complained that the 2d Division, which had just been evacuated from Quang Ngai, was too understrength and battered to do the job. Toan replied that no full-strength divisions were available and that the Airborne and Marine brigades had suffered heavy casualties and were being reorganized. Toan did, however, agree to send Nghi the 31st Ranger Group.

None of the units at Nghi's disposal were at full strength. The 2d Airborne Brigade consisted of two infantry battalions and an artillery battalion, but in fact the two infantry battalions together barely equalled one full-sized battalion. The 31st Ranger Group had all three of its battalions, but its total strength was only about 800 men, half of whom were deserters who had just been released from the stockade. The 6th Regiment of the 2d Division had been sent to defend Phan Thiet. Both of the two 2d Division regiments dispatched to Phan Rang were far understrength: the 4th Regiment consisted of a regular battalion and a Regional Force battalion, and the 5th Regiment was equally patchwork. Nghi also had four Regional Force battalions of Ninh Thuan Sector, an armored squadron, and the 6th Air Division.

In deploying his meager forces Nghi sought to take as much advantage as possible from the terrain. To the north, the segment of Rt. 1 extending from Ba Rau through the district seat of Du Long (about 20 kilometers north of Phan Rang) to Rung Dua passed between high hills and over numerous bridges. Here Nghi deployed the 2d Airborne Brigade and the 31st Ranger Group, with supporting artillery placed along Route 1. The Air Force would, if necessary, knock out the bridges. The 4th Regiment of the 2d Division was assigned the mission of blocking Rt. 11 at Ngoan Muc Pass, while the 5th Regiment was assigned to defend Phan Rang Air Force Base, which had a perimeter 21 kilometers long.

"Thundering Tiger" commando teams were helilifted to mountains 20 to 30 kilometers north and west of Phan Rang to report on the movement