

Indochina Monographs

Lam Son 719

by

Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh



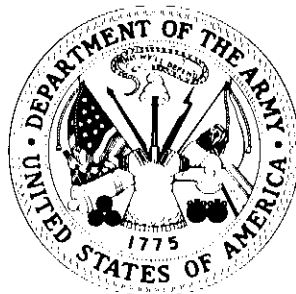
U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Indochina Monographs

This is the first of a series of studies to be published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History that have been written by officers who held responsible positions in the South Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian forces during the war in Indochina. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and other necessary support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The monographs were not edited or altered and reflect the views of their authors--not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense. The authors were not attempting to write definitive accounts but to set down how they saw the war in Southeast Asia.

Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

Preface

For several years, the eastern part of the Laotian panhandle was used by North Vietnam as a corridor for the infiltration of personnel and materiel required to sustain its war efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia. In addition to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the eastern panhandle contained many logistic installations and base areas. After the 18 March 1970 change of government in Cambodia which closed the port of Sihanoukville to the enemy, this trail-base area complex in lower Laos became even more important to North Vietnam in its prosecution of the war in the South. The real hub of this entire complex, where transportation and storage activities were coordinated, was Base Area 604 located west of the Demilitarized Zone and surrounding the district town of Tchepone.

To disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies into South Vietnam, a ground attack was launched across the Laotian border against this enemy hub of activity on 8 February 1971. Operation LAM SON 719 was conducted by I Corps with substantial U.S. support in firepower and helilift but without the participation of U.S. advisers with those ARVN units fighting in Laos. As a test of Vietnamization, this operation was to demonstrate also the progress achieved in combat effectiveness by the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. Further, LAM SON 719 achieved the objective of forestalling a Communist offensive in the spring of 1971.

This monograph will present a critical analysis of all aspects of LAM SON 719 from the planning stage to the withdrawal from lower Laos. In its preparation, I have drawn primarily from my own experience

as an ARVN infantry division commander and from interviews with Vietnamese unit commanders and staff officers who participated in the operation. My work would not have been complete without the valuable contributions of several associates to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude.

General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, RVNAF, has provided me with a unique insight into LAM SON 719 from the highest level of our armed forces. Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, who was Commander of the Central Logistics Command, RVNAF at the time, has contributed his account of combined logistic support for the operation. Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commander of IV Corps and later I Corps, under whose command and leadership I had served for several years, has enlightened me with his highly professional and analytical comments on tactical problems concerning the ARVN and especially the 1st Infantry Division. Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, Assistant Chief of Staff J-3, JGS, has briefed me in detail concerning his personal involvement in the early planning stage of the operation. Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Assistant Chief of Staff J-2, JGS, has been of great assistance with his intimate knowledge of NVA forces, their activities on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the enemy logistic structure in the area of operation.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia
31 July 1977

Nguyen Duy Hinh
Major General, ARVN

Contents

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT	9
<i>The Ho Chi Minh Trail System</i>	9
<i>Enemy Situation in Northern Military Region 1</i>	19
<i>Enemy Situation in the Laos Panhandle</i>	21
<i>The Area of Operation</i>	25
III. THE PLANNING PHASE	32
<i>How It All Started</i>	32
<i>The Basic Operational Plan</i>	35
<i>Division Planning and Preparations</i>	40
<i>U.S. Support</i>	43
<i>Solving Logistic Problems</i>	47
<i>Observations</i>	53
IV. THE OFFENSIVE PHASE	58
<i>Preparing to Cross the Border</i>	58
<i>Securing Ban Dong</i>	65
<i>The Enemy Counteracted</i>	75
<i>The Loss of Fire Support Base 31</i>	81
<i>Tchepone Was the Objective</i>	88
V. THE WITHDRAWAL PHASE	98
<i>The Disengagement</i>	98
<i>The Valiant ARVN 1st Infantry Division</i>	104
<i>"Lock Its Head, Grip Its Tail"</i>	108
<i>Black Panther Raids</i>	121
VI. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS	126
<i>The Balance Sheet of LAM SON 719</i>	126
<i>United States Combat Support</i>	133
<i>Observations and Evaluation</i>	140
<i>Lessons Learned</i>	156

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
VII. OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	164
<i>Appendix</i>	
A. TASK ORGANIZATION, ARVN I CORPS, FOR LAM SOM 719	172
B. TASK ORGANIZATION, U.S. XXIV CORPS, FOR LAM SON 719	175
GLOSSARY	178

Tables

<i>No.</i>	<i>Page</i>
1. GVN Released Results for LAM SON 719	128
2. LAM SON 719 Cumulative Casualties	129
3. Major Items of Equipment Lost or Destroyed	130
4. Enemy Casualties, LAM SON 719	131
5. Enemy Equipment Losses	132
6. LAM SON 719: U.S. Army Aviation Support Sorties	134
7. U.S. Army Aircraft Damaged and Destroyed	135
8. U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Support	135
9. Bomb Damage Assessment, U.S. Tactical Air	136
10. B-52 "Arc Light" Operation Summary, LAM SON 719	137
11. BDA Results on 55 Arc Light Targets	138
12. U.S. and ARVN Artillery Support	139

Charts

1. Task Organization, LAM SON 719, Early February 1971	41
2. U.S. Army Aviation Task Organization	46

Maps

1. The Ho Chi Minh Trail	11
2. The Trail System, Lower Laos, 1970	13
3. The Border Area, Military Regions 1 & 2	14
4. The Logistical Area of Tchepone	17
5. Enemy Deployment, Northern MR 1	20
6. Laos and North Vietnam	22
7. Enemy Disposition, Early February 1971	23
8. The Area of Operation	26
9. The Main Trail System and Base Areas	29
10. Operation Plan, Phase I (Dewey Canyon II)	37
11. Operation Plan, Phase II	38
12. U.S. Army Logistics Plan, LAM SON 719	49
13. ARVN Logistics Plan, LAM SON 719	50
14. Integrated Transportation System, LAM SON 719	52
15. The Attack Toward Khe Sanh	59
16. Consolidation of the Assembly Area	62
17. The Advance to Ban Dong	66
18. Enemy Situation, Last Week of February 1971	78

<i>No.</i>	<i>Page</i>
19. Attack of FSB 31	83
20. The Attack Toward Tchepone	94
21. Friendly Operations, Early March 1971	105
22. Enemy Situation, Late March 1971	112
23. Raids Across The Border	123

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The overall situation throughout South Vietnam began to improve soon after American troops were committed to the ground war; and as the enemy gradually lost the initiative, his main force units were driven away from populated regions and other areas vital to the defense of the country. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) regained their poise and, with increased United States assistance and support, were greatly strengthened.

The exertions made by the Communists during the 1968 general offensive seriously depleted their strength. The huge losses they incurred during this campaign — 200,000 troops killed, taken prisoners or rallied to the GVN — caused entire units of the enemy's main force to be paralyzed and considerably weakened his infrastructure. Consequently, as of late 1968, it became evident that the improved military situation provided the opportunity for an energetic revitalization of the Republic of Vietnam. To consolidate the gains, the United States found it necessary to further strengthen the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam and increase American assistance in all forms. Firepower and troop morale of ARVN combat units were quickly improved as a result of force structure increases, the creation of new units and the delivery of modern weapons such as the M-16 rifle, M-60 machine-gun and M-79 grenade-launcher.

In 1969, the new Nixon administration reemphasized efforts begun in the last part of the Johnson administration to obtain a lasting peace in Indochina. New efforts were made in Paris and the United States adopted a more flexible negotiating stance aimed at reaching an early compromise. While at the Midway meeting of 8 June 1969, the President of the United States and the President of the Republic of

Vietnam proclaimed a new course of action, which the U.S. referred to as "Vietnamization." Under the doctrine of Vietnamization, the United States would begin removing its combat troops and turning over the prosecution of the war to the soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam. To facilitate the withdrawal of United States troops, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam were to be rapidly expanded and modernized and the United States would also assist and strengthen the development and economy of the Republic of Vietnam by increasing non-military aid as well.

The years 1969 and 1970 witnessed an unprecedented development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam. Their total strength was rapidly increased from 700,000 in early 1968 to nearly one million in late 1970. Major ARVN combat forces consisted of ten infantry divisions fully equipped with modern weapons, including heavy artillery and armored vehicles. The general reserve forces consisted of the Airborne and Marine Divisions, both up to strength and thoroughly combat-worthy. In addition, armor, artillery, engineer and logistic capabilities were rapidly improved and training facilities were developed in order to provide for the needs of a 1,000,000-man army.

The Air Force and Navy were also strengthened. The Air Force, which had 16,000 men in 1967, was boosted to 45,000 men in 1970. Its five air wings were upgraded into five full-fledged air divisions, equipped with A-37 and A-1H fighters and modern UH-1 helicopters. The Navy also experienced a rapid development from 16,000 men in 1967 to 40,000 in late 1970. New naval units were created as a number of U.S. vessels operating at sea and in rivers were turned over to the Vietnamese Navy. Amphibious Task Force 211 was created at Dong Tam and became fully operational in late 1969. River Patrol Force 212, created in mid-1970, was assigned patrol and interdiction duties on rivers and canals. United States naval vessels operating on the high seas were also gradually turned over to the Vietnamese Navy.

In addition to regular forces, the territorial forces similarly underwent major changes. The numerical strength of the Regional Forces, whose units were responsible for local security at the province and

district levels, rose from 150,000 in early 1968 to 280,000 in late 1970. The number of their fighting units increased accordingly from 880 to 1,600 companies. The Popular Forces, responsible for security in villages and hamlets, numbered 250,000 by late 1970 as compared to 150,000 in 1968, an increase from 4,100 to 7,200 combat platoons. Noteworthy is the fact that these territorial forces were supplied with new basic weaponry just like their regular counterparts and were greatly improved in terms of training, command and control, and logistics.

As the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces developed following the Midway agreement, the United States and other free world forces gradually stood down and redeployed. Of the ten U.S. divisions fighting in Vietnam, only six remained as the year 1971 began.

During the period that United States combat forces were actively fighting the ground war, major units of the Vietnamese regular forces were assigned the primary role of pacification support. The 1968 Communist offensive, however, caused a significant change in the responsibilities of the RVNAF. Since most of the targets of this offensive were cities and urban centers, Communist forces were pitted directly against the ARVN. This general offensive resulted in a military defeat for the enemy and two facts became immediately apparent. One was that the RVNAF had the capability to meet and cope with such challenges. The second was that the people of South Vietnam were still strongly anti-communist. They refused to respond to the call of the Communists for a general uprising and their wide response to the general mobilization law afforded the manpower needed to enlarge the national armed forces.

Even though the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam could not replace the redeployed United States and other free-world forces on a numerical basis, they made every effort to fill the vacuum. In the beginning, this was not a very difficult task. The enemy's post-offensive strength had considerably dwindled while the combat effectiveness of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam was improving as each day passed. New weapons and equipment stimulated ARVN morale. Concurrently, United States troops cooperated with the Vietnamese armed

forces to capitalize on the enemy's diminishing strength. Major operations were launched successively which succeeded in forcing the enemy from his bases and driving him over the national boundaries.

The enemy's weakness and the Allied successes of 1969 and 1970 were favorable to the implementation of the Vietnamization program. ARVN units were redeployed to gradually replace United States troops and assume more combat responsibilities. The northernmost DMZ area was taken over by units of the 1st Infantry Division. By the end of 1969, the northern part of II Corps area and the entirety of IV Corps area were defended by the armed forces of Vietnam. In other corps areas, whenever a United States infantry unit was leaving, adjacent Vietnamese units immediately expanded their operational responsibilities to cover the evacuated area as well.

The Vietnamese Air Force continued to develop and provided more effective support for friendly ground units. The Navy also was given more responsibilities at an accelerated pace. By September 1970, the inner perimeter of Operation Market Time, which was designed to interdict sea infiltration routes to the Communists, became the sole responsibility of the Vietnamese Navy. By the end of 1970, twelve of the fourteen joint United States-Vietnamese naval operations in progress were conducted entirely by the Vietnamese Navy. The other two operations, Solid Anchor (south of Cape Ca Mau) and the outer perimeter of Market Time, were subsequently completely turned over to the Navy of the Republic of Vietnam.

The years 1969 and 1970 were a period when the Republic of Vietnam took advantage of the enemy's declining strength and power. Pacification and development campaigns were launched in rapid succession, designed to reoccupy and rehabilitate the countryside. As early as at the end of 1968, the Hamlet Evaluation System indicated that the pacification program had more than restored the conditions that had existed in the countryside prior to the Communist general offensive. In late 1970, 95 percent of the hamlets of the Republic of Vietnam were recorded as secure and fairly secure (HES categories A, B and C). When compared to 1967, an additional five million people had come under the authority of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam.

Achievements in other areas also pointed to the success of the pacification effort during the initial stages of the Vietnamization program. The number of Communist personnel defecting to the Government of the Republic of Vietnam reached its peak in 1969 (47,000) and remained very high in 1970 (32,000). Many of the Communist senior cadre chose to come over to the side of the government. At the same time, popular sentiment against the Communists continued to rise in the aftermath of their 1968 general offensive.

In early 1970, the People's Self-Defense Force numbered as many as 3-1/2 million members, supplied with approximately 400,000 weapons of various types, a significant force politically and militarily. The territorial forces, comprised of the Regional and Popular Forces, in coordination with the para-military forces including Police, Rural Development cadre, Armed Propaganda cadre, Provincial Reconnaissance units and People's Self-Defense forces, succeeded — with support from ARVN units — in driving the enemy from the populated areas and reducing his infrastructure. His local guerrilla bases were eliminated by these forces while his major bases in country were being destroyed by the Armed Forces of Vietnam and those of the United States.

As the pacification program continued to improve, the people who had taken refuge in the more secure urban areas were able to return to their home villages and resume farming. Rural development programs steadily changed the outlook of the countryside of South Vietnam. Schools sprang up almost everywhere, attended by large numbers of eager children. As a result of the agricultural development and technical guidance programs, extensive use of fertilizers and improved rice hybrids, and finally the implementation of the Land-To-The-Tiller program, agricultural production in South Vietnam improved considerably. Rice production in 1969 increased by 700,000 metric tons as compared to the preceding year. In 1970, this figure rose by another 400,000 tons. Total agricultural production in 1970 reached the 5.5 million tons mark, exceeding even the 1964 figure which had been the highest in South Vietnam since World War II. Besides rice crops, other agricultural products were plentiful. Fisheries became highly productive as a large

number of the fishing fleet units made use of newly imported motors. The results of these rural development programs were apparent throughout South Vietnam in the gleaming prosperity of the countryside: great expanses of green ricefields, the great number of motor bicycles on the roads, the TV antennas on rooftops, and the fleet of motorized sampans crisscrossing the waterways.

Against this favorable setting for increasing self-sufficiency, 1970 also provided a major event that diminished still more the Communist threat and boosted the morale of the people of South Vietnam. Prince Sihanouk was overthrown as Chief of State of neighboring Cambodia. For many years, Cambodia, under Sihanouk's rule, had been a sanctuary for the Communists; they had built on Cambodian territory near the border areas a network of bases from which they mounted attacks against the Republic of Vietnam. It was on this "neutral" territory that Communist war supplies and materiel dispatched from North Vietnam were stored before being brought to use in South Vietnam. The seaport of Sihanoukville had also served as a major supply port for the enemy for many years.

At the end of March 1970, after General Lon Nol had taken over, ARVN III and IV Corps sent a few reconnaissance patrols into the border area adjacent to the provinces of Hau Nghia and Kien Tuong and found a number of Communist supply caches in the area. In late April, with the concurrence of the new Cambodian government, and the cooperation and support of United States units, III and IV Corps launched a large offensive against Communist sanctuaries on the other side of the border. This offensive was joined in early May 1970 by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, 1st Air Cavalry Division and armor elements. While United States units swept into enemy bases and command complexes adjacent to the border, west and north of Tay Ninh province, ARVN forces progressed deeper into Cambodia flushing out Communist units and searching for supply caches.

Unable to resist the advancing U.S. and ARVN units, Communist forces fell back into Cambodia and, in cooperation with Khmer Rouge units, threatened Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, and a number of

other cities. This prompted the new Cambodian government to appeal for help. Responding to this request, III Corps forces assisted in the relief of Cambodian provinces under pressure west of Tay Ninh, while IV Corps helped clear the enemy threat from provinces south of Phnom Penh. During these relief operations, ARVN engineers reestablished road communications on National Route No. 1 between Phnom Penh and Saigon and built a major logistic base at Neak Luong, 40 miles south of the Cambodian capital. A Vietnamese Marine brigade was deployed to Neak Luong with the mission of assisting with the security of Phnom Penh, if required. In the meantime IV Corps units and the Vietnamese Navy mounted operations to clear the Mekong River, a vital supply route for the Cambodian capital.

This crossborder, offensive campaign was a resounding success. By 30 June 1970, which was the deadline for United States forces to withdraw from Cambodia, Allied forces had eliminated 5,000 enemy troops, and captured 9,300 tons of weapons, ammunition and assorted supplies, and 7,000 tons of rice. Most enemy bases had been overrun and destroyed. The amount of materiel and supplies seized was enough for the enemy to sustain a military campaign in his COSVN area of South Vietnam for at least six months.¹

After the Cambodian incursion the RVNAF continued to conduct small-scale crossborder operations as required by the situation or to assist the Cambodian government when requested.

The operations into Cambodia resulted in significant improvements in security in South Vietnam and, just as important, the morale of the population as well as of our troops was stimulated in the belief that, despite the continued redeployment of United States and Free World Military Assistance forces and the deadlocked Paris talks, the U.S. was still striving for a satisfactory solution to the war and Vietnamization was going to work.

¹COSVN, the Central Office for South Vietnam, was the enemy headquarters responsible for the geographical area under GVN Military Region 3, Military Region 4 and the five southern provinces of Military Region 2.

This was a difficult time for the enemy. His system of bases and sanctuaries on both sides of the Cambodian border was apparently paralyzed and continued to be harassed. The port of Sihanoukville (redesignated Kompong Som) no longer was a free port of entry for his supplies and our Operation Market Time on the high seas off the Vietnam coastline was effectively interdicting infiltration by sea. To continue supporting its war in the South, it appeared that North Vietnam would have to rely solely on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the supply route along the rugged Truong Son mountain range. Therefore, an invasion of the Laos Panhandle became an attractive idea; such an operation would retain the initiative for the RVNAF, disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies to South Vietnam, and greatly reduce the enemy's capability to launch an offensive in 1971.

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CHAPTER II

The Operational Environment

The Ho Chi Minh Trail System

A by-product of the First Indochina War, 1946-1954, the footpath system that ran North-South along the Truong Son Mountain Range of Vietnam became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail; for a long time it had served the strategic purposes of the Viet Minh. From its jungle redoubt of North Vietnam's highlands, the Viet Minh High Command was faced with the pressing need for a secure communication system that would enable it to direct the war effort in South Vietnam and support its subversive activities in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. National Route No. 1 which ran parallel to the coastline was not practicable because of French control. Sea routes were available but the risks of running into French naval patrols and foul weather were forbiddenly high. Besides, the Viet Minh did not have a reliable, organized sea transportation fleet. Considering these circumstances, the heavily jungled mountains of the Truong Son Range lent themselves to the establishment of a secure line of communication generally free from observation and attacks.

It was this footpath system that kept the Viet Minh resistance in South Vietnam alive with fresh troops, weapons and ammunition. By the end of the First Indochina War, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been well developed although it was only a system of jungle paths connected by local secondary roads and suitable only to movement by foot, animals and bicycles. Soldiers moved on foot but military supplies, although usually carried by manpower, were sometimes transported on bicycles, oxcarts, horses or elephants. The narrow, steep pathways meandered

through dense jungles, across streams and mountains and a journey on the trail was exhausting and slow.

For a time after the Geneva Accords in 1954, the trail was practically abandoned since the war had ended. Then, when South Vietnam, under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem, began restoring its stability and proving that it could stand on its own after repudiating reunification with North Vietnam, the Central Committee of North Vietnam's Communist Party decided on a new course of action against South Vietnam. In May 1959, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) High Command activated Transportation Group 559 under the direct control of its Rear Service (Logistics) Department. Group 559 was to be a special unit in charge of moving men and supplies into the South for the support of the insurgency effort which had just been initiated under the form of a "war of liberation." The trail's old pathways were rehabilitated and widened, and new ones were surveyed and projected. Group 559's task of enlarging this strategic axis of infiltration was pushed ahead with vigor and determination.

The increase of subversive activities against South Vietnam was in almost direct proportion to the development of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, since the Communist war effort in the South was largely sustained by a constant flow of cadre and troops from the North. At this early stage, the flow was sporadic because the journey was harsh and long for the men and the means of transporting supplies still primitive. But as pathways were eventually enlarged into roads, the means of transportation were also improved.

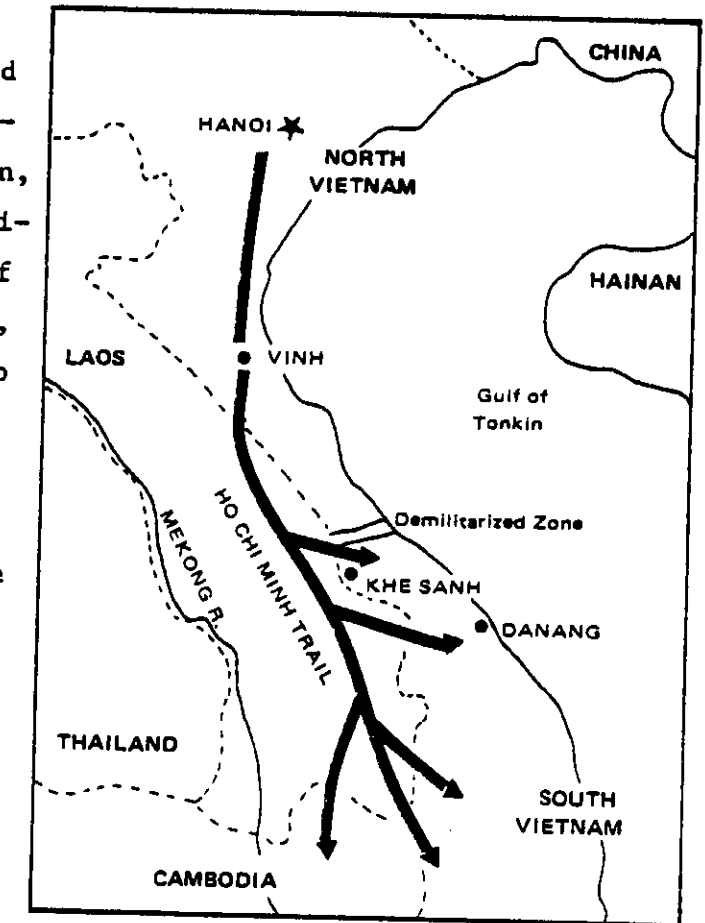
Prior to 1965, the Ho Chi Minh system was close to the Vietnam border, but after the United States became involved in the war and bombings increased, the Communists gradually shifted toward the west where they found the densely jungled areas of lower Laos and eastern Cambodia perfect sanctuaries for the movement or concentration of troops and the storage of weapons and war materiel.

By the end of the 1960's, the Ho Chi Minh trail had become an elaborate system of nearly 2,000 miles of pathways and roads, including some natural waterways. (Map 1) It started at Vinh, ran through the

Mu Gia Pass and other lesser passes such as Ban Karai and Ban Raving, penetrated into lower Laos and finally came out in northern Cambodia and the Tri-Border area of South Vietnam. In several areas, the trail system was so extensive that it could be compared to a cobweb of criss-crossing roads making up a corridor of from 30 to 50 miles wide, complete with bridges (over or under water), culverts, river crossing ramps, much of it concealed under dense jungle canopies. With the assistance of Pathet Lao guerrillas, the estimated 50,000 troops of NVA Group 559 and about 100,000 Vietnamese volunteers and forced laborers maintained this vital artery.

To protect the corridor, the Communists established an elaborate defense and security system. The duty of Pathet Lao units was to intensify guerrilla activities and launch periodic attacks in order to keep the Royal Lao Army confined to the cities and towns along the Mekong River. The protection of the trail system and storage areas was performed by Group 559 itself. Augmented by infantry units and unattached militiamen, the group defense forces included anti-aircraft units armed with all types of light and heavy weapons, from 12.7-mm, 14.5-mm and 23-mm heavy machineguns to 37-mm, 57-mm and 100-mm anti-aircraft cannons.

Group 559 installed a forward headquarters in the southern panhandle of North Vietnam from where it controlled many 'binh trams' (literally troop stations). In 1970 there were about 40 such stations, from Vinh to the Cambodian border, under the control of a number of intermediary headquarters. Each binh tram was a self-contained, logistical complex



Map 1 - The Ho Chi Minh Trail

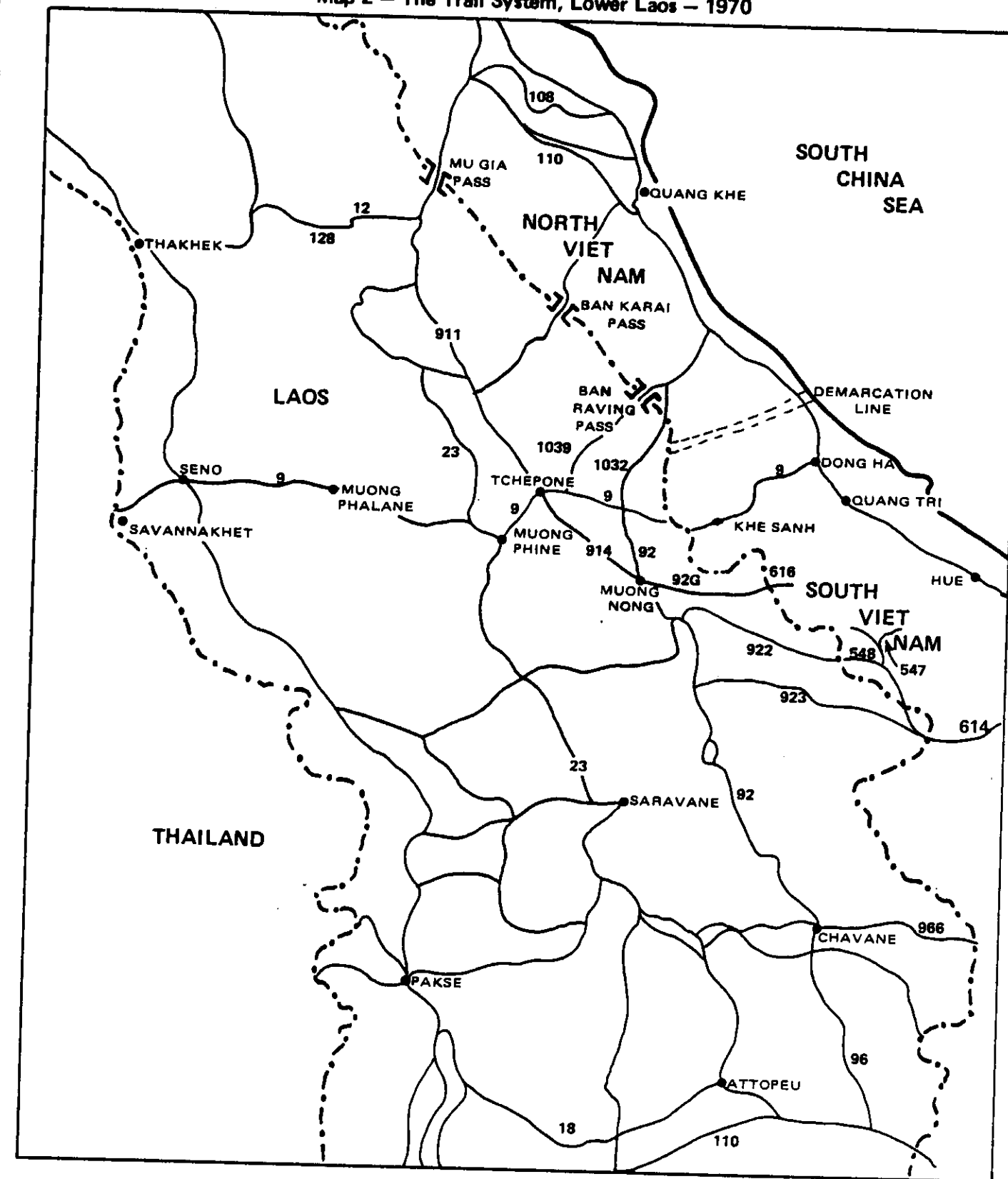
responsible for a well-defined area. Its subordinate units usually consisted of engineer troops, surface and waterway transportation elements, maintenance units, quartermaster and medical units, warehouses, and a certain number of way stations to support troop movements.

During the cessation of bombings in North Vietnam, trucks moved by convoy from Vinh down the trail. Upon reaching the Laotian border, they formed units of five to eight vehicles and usually moved only at night or in foul weather in order to avoid the round-the-clock bombing by United States Air Force planes. As a result, binh trams were usually separated from one another by a day's journey and their parking areas were scattered and well concealed. The vehicles moving on the trail only transported supplies and heavy materials. Light equipment was either carried on men's backs or by animals. Since troops had to march, they moved by day or night, using pathways different from those used by trucks. New recruits or replacements usually entered the system at Vinh in North Vietnam and often marched over 100 days to reach their final destination in South Vietnam. In view of this long journey, they had to rest and recuperate at way stations where they received food, medicine and indoctrinations. Combat units usually moved by battalions of 500-600 men each and they often suffered substantial losses from disease and constant bombings by the U.S. Air Force.

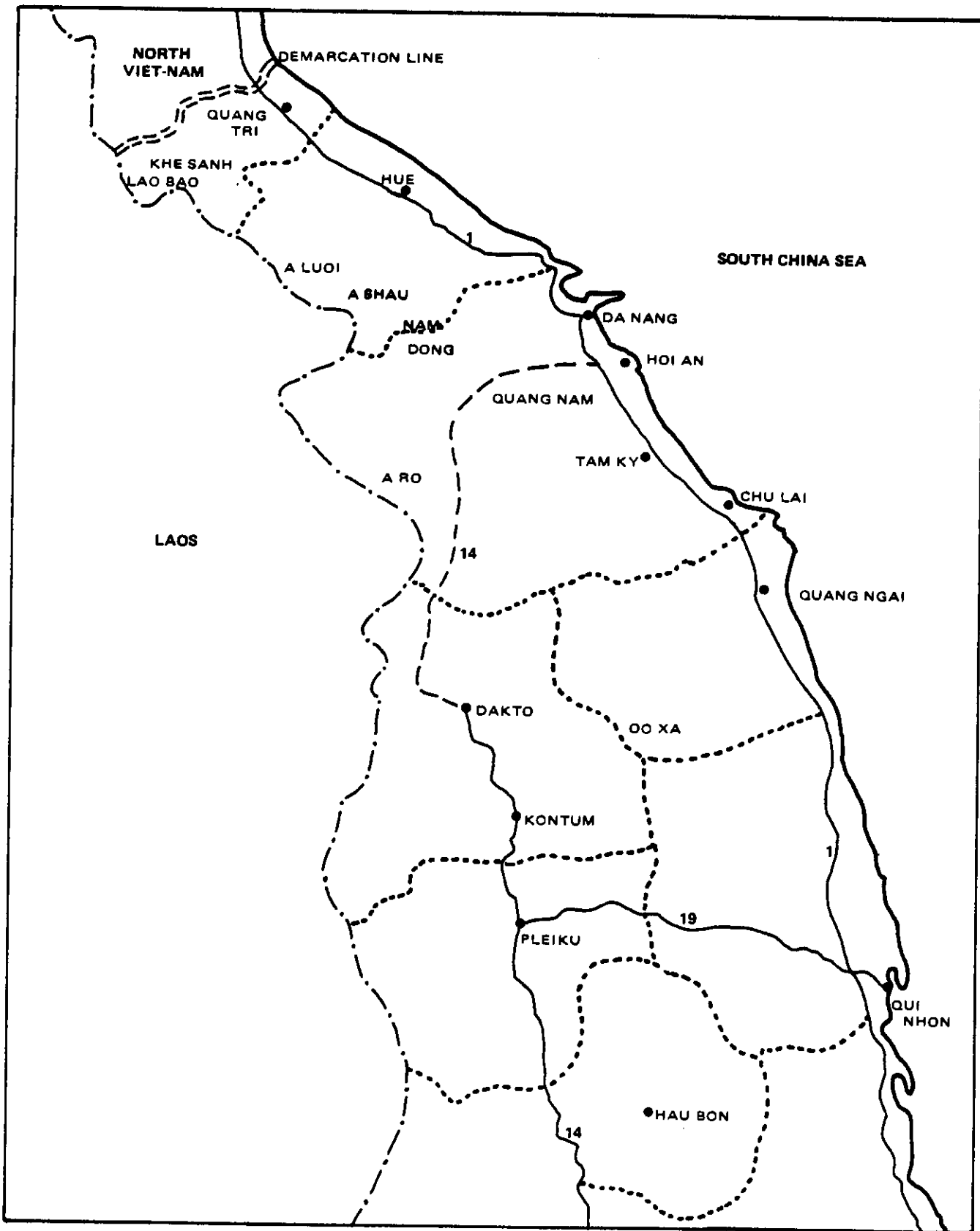
The extensive use of vehicles posed a fuel supply problem for the Communists. Until they built a pipeline system from Vinh to the Mu Gia Pass in 1968, all fuels were transported by trucks but by February 1969 the main pipeline had been extended to the Muong Nong area in Laos, west of the A Shau valley. (Map 2) Fuel storage areas along this line became one of the major targets for bombings by American planes.

As the insurgency intensified in South Vietnam, efforts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh supply line increased. As early as the first few years of the First Republic, President Ngo Dinh Diem implemented several plans aimed at controlling the territory adjacent to the Laos border. In Military Region 1, agrovilles were established in such areas as Lao Bao, A Shau, A Luoi and Nam Dong. (Map 3) ARVN units regularly conducted reconnaissance patrols deep into the border areas adjacent to

Map 2 - The Trail System, Lower Laos - 1970



Map 3— The Border Area, Military Regions 1 & 2



Laos, particularly in the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Kontum. The enemy base area of Do Xa, which lay astride the boundary of MR-1 and MR-2, was a target for frequent ARVN attacks. In 1958, repair work began on the abandoned stretch of GVN National Route No. 14 which paralleled the Laotian border and connected Kontum with Hoi An in Quang Nam Province but the onset of the insurgency interrupted the work which was never resumed.

During the period from 1960 to 1965, as the fighting escalated, the GVN was unable to do anything against the Laos infiltration route but the United States made a significant contribution in 1961 when it helped organize the highlands Montagnards into combat units (CIDG's) and develop the Vietnamese Special Forces for the defense of the border areas. Against Communist activities on the Ho Chi Minh trail, however, neither the U.S. Army Special Forces nor their Vietnamese counterparts ever interdicted the Communist logistics system to a significant degree, even during the period of maximum effort. Also, the idea of building the "McNamara Line" of sensors across the Truong Son mountain range at the southern boundary of the DMZ was never fully implemented as planned.

The surveillance and interdiction of the trail, therefore, lay primarily in the hands of the U.S. Air Force whose reconnaissance planes covered the trail system around the clock. Ground electronic sensors planted along jungle pathways, river crossings, and mountain passes picked up vehicle and other man-made noises, transmitted them to overflying planes which relayed the information to terminal stations to be analyzed and interpreted. The electronic monitoring of enemy activities on the trail system helped record the number of vehicles and men moving along the trail; consequently, intelligence on Communist infiltration was remarkably reliable.

In addition to surveillance, a major task for the United States Air Force was to interdict this infiltration. All types of aircraft were used including B-52 strategic bombers, sophisticated fighter-bombers and several types of gun ships. The U.S. Air Force claimed that its bombs and improved weapons systems inflicted heavy losses to the enemy in terms of personnel, vehicles and materiel moving down the

trail. In fact, in early 1971, the Air Force released the story that this interdiction was so effective that only one ton out of every 32 tons shipped from North Vietnam ever reached its final destination in South Vietnam.¹ Subsequent NVA offensive operations in South Vietnam demonstrated that the U.S. Air Force claim was greatly exaggerated.

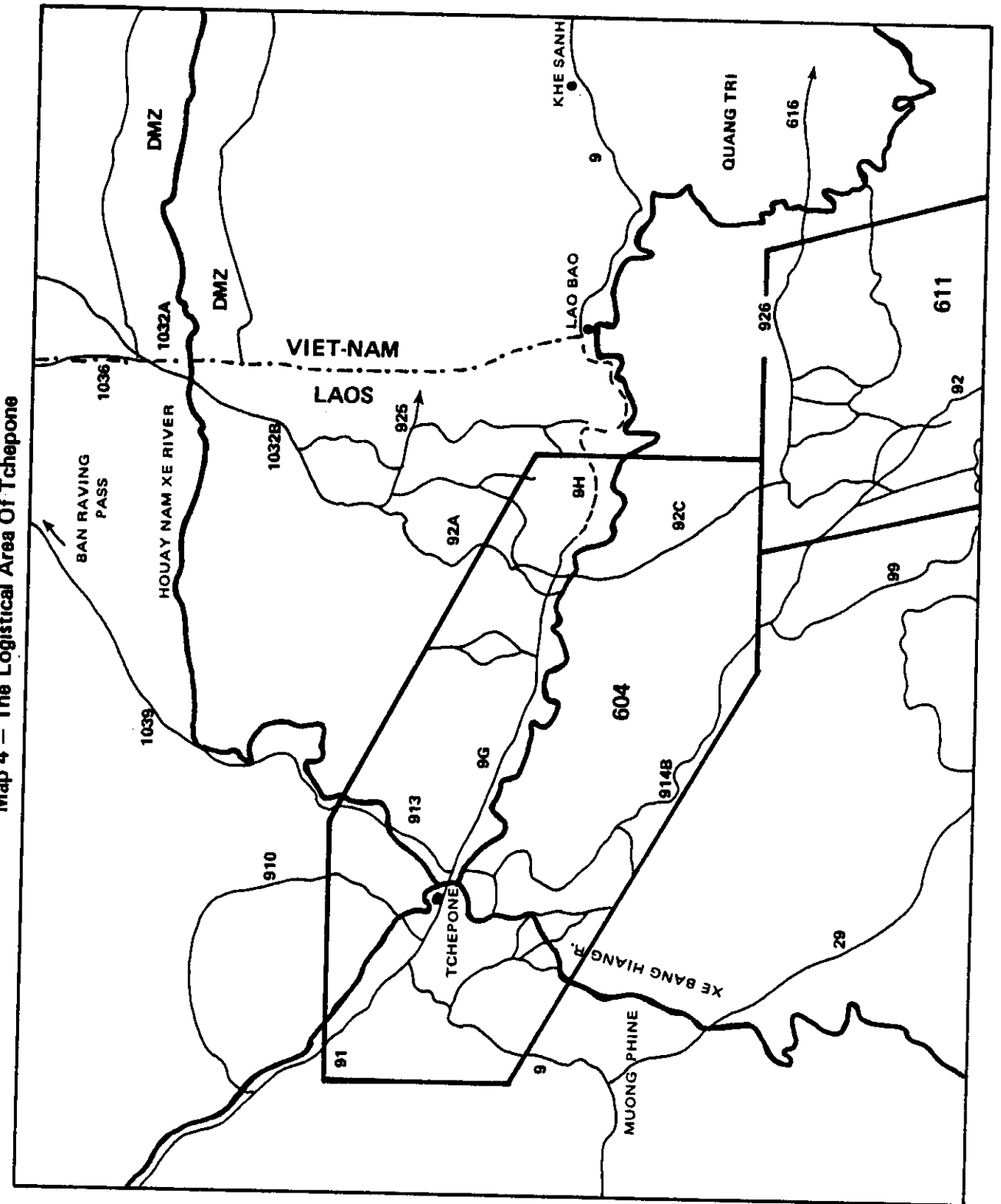
Among the targets of intensive bombing were the mountain passes and roads which were pounded day and night. The enemy's efforts to repair the damage were complicated by his lack of heavy machinery, but he was resilient and stubborn. No sooner was a mountain road destroyed than a detour was completed.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail could supply about 50 percent of the enemy's combat needs; in other words, the trail was capable of sustaining Communist forces in RVN Military Regions 1 and 2. The port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia was used to support forces operating in RVN Military Regions 3 and 4. The coup in Phnom Penh during March 1970, however, closed the port. The Ho Chi Minh Trail then became essential for the enemy to support the entire war in South Vietnam. As a result, the NVA Transportation Group 559 received special reinforcements and during the second half of 1970, the enemy made a determined effort to develop logistical base area 604, adjacent to Quang Tri province. (Map 4) Concurrently, he improved the existing base and road system in the eastern part of lower Laos. After his seizure of the cities of Attopeu and Saravane in Laos, he widened his trail system to the west in order to increase the flow of supplies and to complicate the U.S. Air Force's interdiction efforts.

At the beginning of 1970, the enemy's plan to rehabilitate Route 1036 was suspended for some time due to extensive United States bombing along the Laotian border. Nevertheless, he succeeded in opening Route 1039 through the Ban Raving Pass which connected with Route 913. This gave the enemy an additional route into Tchepone, the communications center for base area 604. In the meantime, Route 1032A in North Vietnam

¹"Untold Story of the Ho Chi Minh Trail", U.S. News and World Report, February 15, 1971.

Map 4 - The Logistical Area Of Tchepone



allowed him to move his trucks to the western edge of the DMZ. Here his supplies were usually floated on the Houay Nam Xe River and then on the Xe Bang Hiang River southwesterly toward Tchepone where they were picked up before reaching the town.

To the south, the enemy had already completed Route 616 which cut across the Xepon River and deep into South Vietnam. The existence of this east-west infiltration route was detected for the first time on 1 January 1970 but subsequent surveillance indicated that enemy activities on it were light. The heaviest traffic was always reported on the north-south axis, moving from base area 604 on Routes 96, 926 and 914 toward base area 611.

By January 1971, Route 1032A had been connected with Route 1032B which gave the enemy an additional roadway into lower Laos from North Vietnam. Recordings made by electronic sensors indicated that of every four trucks leaving North Vietnam, one always moved on this route regardless of the bombings by United States planes west of the DMZ. Aerial photos also revealed that the enemy had built several alternate bypass routes in this area in order to avoid concentrated bombings and ensure the flow of traffic. Reconnaissance planes further reported that east-west Route 925 had been widened but terminated approximately two-and-a-half miles from the GVN border. This appeared to indicate that the enemy wanted to project another infiltration route into the Khe Sanh area, west of Quang Tri but subsequent air reconnaissance showed that the enemy was using Route 616 for truck traffic and his activities were increasing substantially south of base area 611.

All of these indications clearly confirmed the enemy's efforts to open additional infiltration roads, develop storage areas, transshipment points and truck parks, and to make the entire area just west of Quang Tri Province an intricate logistical and transportation complex complete with pipelines and bypass roads. Furthermore, all these activities progressed with little interruption despite continuous bombings. The efforts were most conspicuous in base areas 604 and 611. On the other hand, to increase his protection capabilities, the enemy also moved additional anti-aircraft and combat units into these areas.

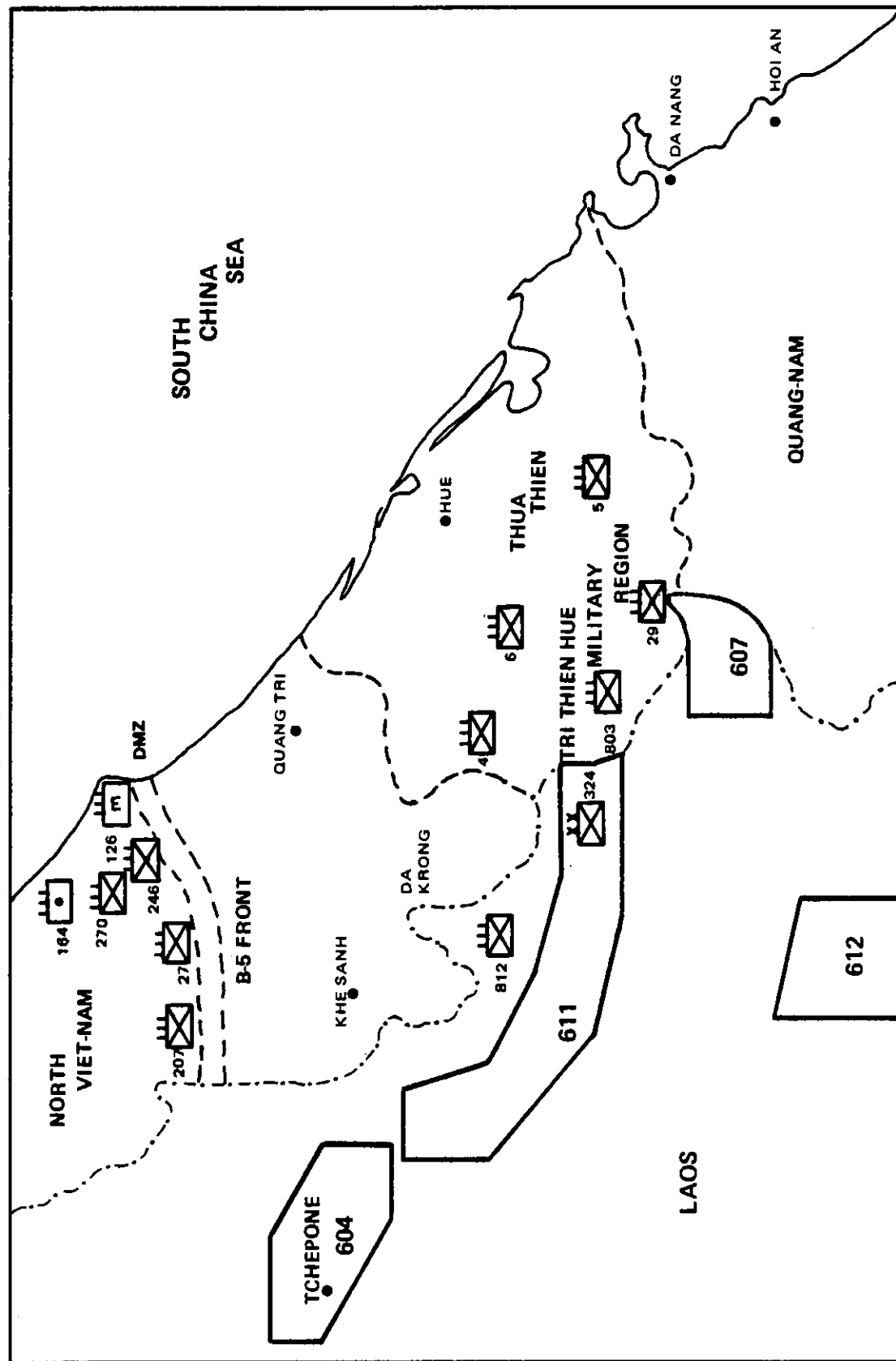
Enemy Situation in Northern Military Region 1

In South Vietnam proper, no significant enemy activities were recorded in northern MR-1 during the entire first half of 1970. Enemy initiatives in this area consisted only of attacks by fire and small-scale, sapper attacks. Targets were usually remote, small-size fire support bases and outposts. The enemy main force units devoted this entire period to building roads, refitting troops, and storing food and supplies, but intelligence reports revealed that enemy forces were preparing to launch an offensive campaign against the two northernmost provinces of MR-1, probably in January 1971. Another agent's report disclosed that North Vietnam might strike forcefully into Quang Tri and Thua Thien during the spring and summer of 1971 with a goal to occupy the plains area of these two provinces. At the boundary area between Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, the enemy had further extended the newly rehabilitated Route 616 into the Da Krong River valley, apparently with a view to facilitate his supply movements into MR-1.

In terms of force structure, in the DMZ area, the enemy's B5 Front forces consisted most notably of three infantry regiments: the 207th, 27th, and 246th which were all deployed for the defense of this area; a number of artillery battalions; the 33d Sapper Battalion and the 126th Naval Sapper Regiment. Both of these sapper units usually conducted attacks along the DMZ area, against National Route No. 9 and the Cua Viet River. The 270th Regiment had the apparent mission of protecting the Vinh Linh area, north of the DMZ while the 164th Artillery Regiment was conducting training and defending the coastal area. (Map 5)

In the enemy Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region, the enemy main force consisted of three regiments under direct control of the MR headquarters — Regiments 4, 5, and 6 — and a number of sapper battalions which usually operated within the MR and sometimes penetrated into the plains area of Thua Thien Province to interdict traffic on National Route No. 1. In addition, west of Thua Thien and in base area 611, the 324B NVA Division, supported by the 675th Artillery Regiment, was almost always deployed with its three infantry regiments, the 812th, 803d, and 29th.

Map 5 - Enemy Deployment, Northern MR I



Enemy Situation in the Laos Panhandle

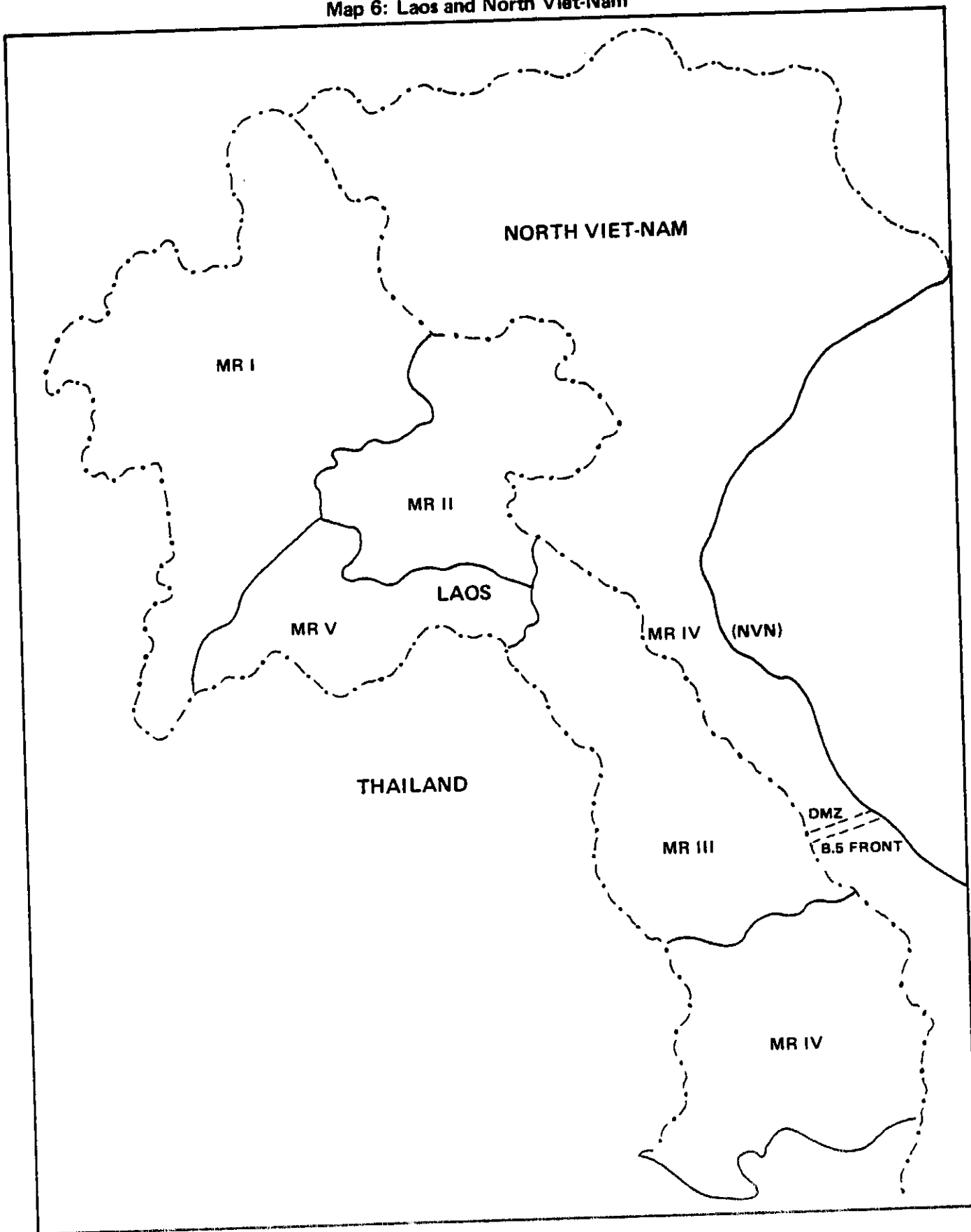
The enemy had a sizable combat force in Laos. (Map 6) Within the Royal Lao MR III area, this force was estimated at 42,000 men, consisting of 13 NVA battalions (5,000 men), 20 Pathet Lao battalions (5,000), and about 32,000 troops and cadres of Transportation Group 559. Further south in Royal Lao MR IV, enemy strength was estimated at 22,000 troops who made up 17 NVA battalions (7,000 men), 21 Pathet Lao battalions (4,000 men) and about 10,000 troops and cadres belonging to six binh trams of the 559th. In northern Laos, enemy strength was estimated at 33,000, consisting of 16,000 NVA and 17,000 Pathet Lao troops. However, intelligence estimates precluded the participation of these elements in any engagement west of Quang Tri.

Air reconnaissance and agent reports further confirmed the enemy's stepped up logistical activities and augmentation of combat forces at base areas 604 and 611 since the beginning of the lower Laos dry season. In October, 1970, an agent report revealed that a division-size unit, approximately 10,000 strong, was leaving the Mu Gia Pass and moving south. It was believed at that time that this was the 320th NVA Division with its three organic regiments, the 48th, 52d, and 64th. Subsequent intelligence reports confirmed that the 52d Regiment was located west of the DMZ and the 64th Regiment was building roads in Quang Binh Province, north of the DMZ. It was, therefore, probable that the 48th Regiment was the unit which was moving into base area 604.²

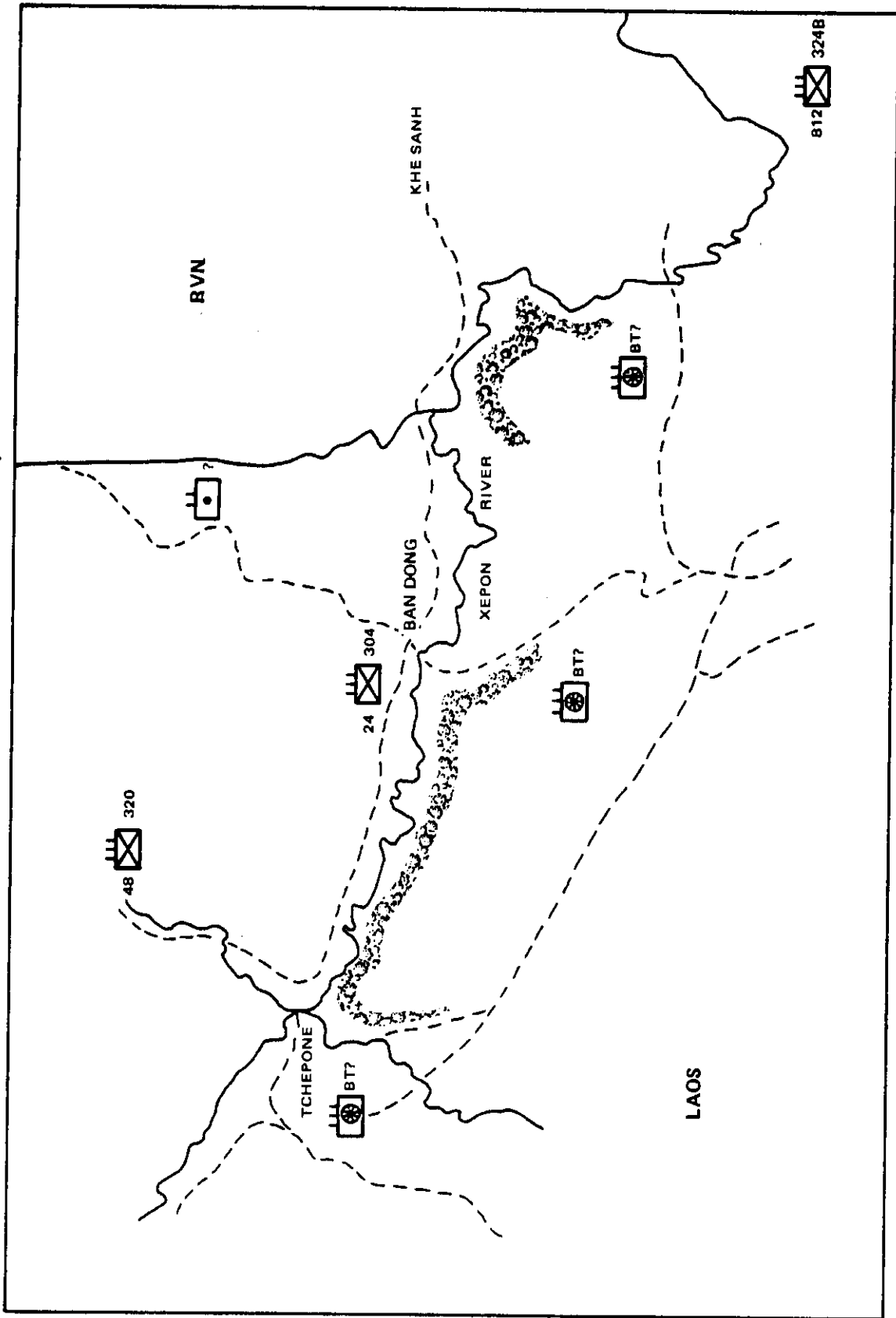
A rallier from the enemy B-7 Front reported that the 9th and 66th Regiments of the 304th NVA Division had returned to North Vietnam, leaving behind the 24B Regiment which used to operate west of Khe Sanh. (Map 7) Air reconnaissance missions revealed traces of an enemy unit in the area west of Quang Tri. This was believed to be an element of the 24B Regiment. At the same time, the enemy 81st Artillery Battalion was

²All enemy units referred to in this monograph are infantry unless otherwise specified.

Map 6: Laos and North Viet-Nam



Map 7 - Enemy Disposition, Early February 1971



reported north of National Route No. 9. The detection of tracks in this area further indicated the presence of artillery pieces.³

In late December, 1970, aerial photography and air reconnaissance revealed an enemy effort to open Route 616 to vehicle traffic. This road appeared to head toward the Laotian salient, west of Quang Tri where the 812th Regiment, NVA 324B Division was reported. In this same area, the enemy was also increasing his logistical efforts and probably his engineer, logistical and anti-aircraft capabilities. Other intelligence data obtained from prisoners of war and an enemy cadre who had rallied to the Royal Lao Army indicated that the 141st and 9th Regiments (separate) were also operating in lower Laos under control of the Communist Southern Laotian Front. It was probable that the 141st Regiment would move back to Quang Nam after being refitted.

In the meantime, the enemy 2d Division seemed to be going through a refitting process with its two regiments, the 1st and 3d, in an area north of base area 612. This division was probably preparing to return to Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces in southern MR-1, but it was possible for it to be deployed as reinforcement to the Tchepone area in Laos if required.⁴

In addition to Communist combat units reported in the proposed operational area west of Quang Tri Province or in its vicinities, there were eight binh trams that had been recently reinforced with approximately 20 anti-aircraft battalions.⁵ Not all of these battalions were fully equipped but since each battalion could have from 2 to 16 anti-aircraft

³U.S. XXIV Corps Operation Order, LAM SON 719, dated 23 January 1971, Annex B (Intelligence), p. B-5.

⁴No distinction is made here between NVA and Viet Cong units because it does not make sense to dwell on this technicality when 3/4 of the so called Viet Cong units were made up of NVA troops and the majority of their commanders and staffs were North Vietnamese.

⁵U.S. XXIV Corps Operation Order, LAM SON 719 dated 23 January 1971, Annex B (Intelligence): Appendix 2 (Anti-Aircraft Capability), p. B-2-1.

weapons, it was estimated that the enemy's medium caliber anti-aircraft artillery deployed in the proposed operational area numbered from 170 to 200 pieces of 23-mm to 100-mm in caliber.

In summary, enemy forces in the area of operation were estimated at three infantry regiments (Regiments 48/320, 24B/304, and 812/324B), an artillery element and the binh tram units whose most important capability was anti-aircraft. Total enemy strength in the area was estimated at 22,000 to include 7,000 NVA combat troops, 10,000 men belonging to logistic units, and 5,000 Pathet Lao soldiers. (Map 7)

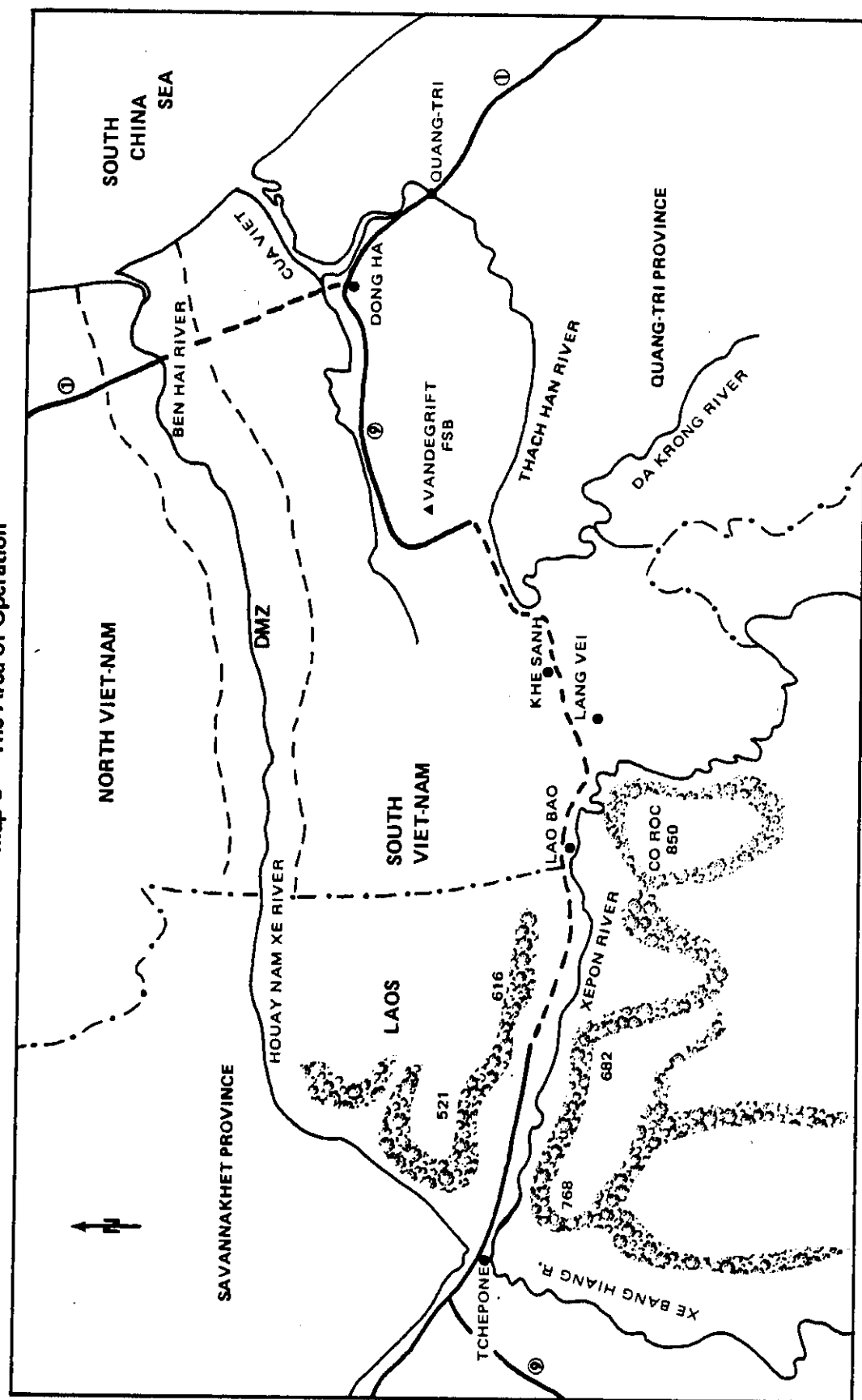
The enemy's capability to reinforce within a short time (2 weeks) was estimated at eight regiments which were: the 52d and 64th Regiments of the 320th Division, the 29th and 803d Regiments of the 324B Division, the 3d and 1st Regiments of the 2d Division, and the 141st and 9th Separate Regiments, all supported by artillery elements. Additionally, enemy reinforcement capabilities from North Vietnam were also considered by planning staffs and field commanders.

Finally, in January 1971, agent reports disclosed that Communist units located north of the DMZ had received alert orders. The enemy B-5 front was reported making preparations to face an attack by allied forces against the provinces of southern North Vietnam. Remembering his losses during the Cambodia incursion of the previous year, it appeared that the enemy was consolidating his general defensive posture, and would devote particular attention to the security of his infiltration and supply corridor in lower Laos during the remaining months of the 1971 dry season.

The Area of Operation

To inflict maximum damage on the enemy logistic and infiltration corridor system, all intelligence indicated that Tchepone would be the decisive objective area. This area was unpopulated except for a few Montagnards living in the vicinity of Khe Sanh - Lang Vei and a very sparse population in Tchepone itself. Intelligence revealed that all villages and towns whose names appeared on our maps had been evacuated or largely destroyed by the protracted war. (Map 8)

Map 8 -- The Area of Operation



North of the Thach Han River, the terrain of Quang Tri Province could be divided into three general regions: (1) the lowlands bordering on the sea, which was flat terrain not exceeding 10 meters in elevation; (2) the piedmont region which ran west from National Route No. 1 to a depth of between 15 and 20 kilometers with an average elevation of about 300 meters; (3) and the westernmost mountainous region of the Truong Son Range with elevations up to 1,600 meters.

The vegetation of Quang Tri province reflected the characteristics of these three geographical regions. The flat coastal plains were usually inundated, which permitted rice planting and the agglomeration of farming villages. The piedmont region was dry and sterile with vegetation not taller than a man's height, consisting mostly of scattered bushes. The mountainous region was generally covered by rain forests whose trees grew taller further to the west. These were double and triple canopied forests with very dense undergrowth consisting mostly of bamboo and thorny underbushes. River valleys in this region were fertile and favored crop planting. The Lao Bao Valley, for example, was renowned for its coffee and fruit trees.

The primary line of communication (LOC) in the province was National Route No. 1 which ran north-south close to the coastal plains. A secondary LOC was National Route No. 9 which ran from a junction with Route No. 1 in the vicinity of Dong Ha west to the Laotian border. From Dong Ha to Son Lam hamlet (close to FSB Vandegrift), Route No. 9 was a two-lane, all weather, hard surfaced road, occasionally subjected to enemy harassment. West of FSB Vandegrift it became a dirt road usable only in good weather; this stretch was insecure and had several destroyed bridges. The Khe Sanh airfield, which had been abandoned for a long time, would require extensive repairs to be operational.

The Thach Han River, a major tributary of the Cua Viet River, was a major waterway linking the cities of Quang Tri and Dong Ha with the sea. Because of its proximity to the DMZ, this river was continually a target for minings and sabotage by enemy frogmen.

To the west beyond the Laotian border, the terrain was predominantly mountainous. The area of operation on this side of the border was

characterized by three prominent features. The first of these was the Xepon River which ran south and then parallel to Route No. 9 until it reached Tchepone where it met the Xe Bang Hiang River, the primary north-south waterway in the area. During the rainy season, when most ground lines of communication were inundated, the enemy used the Xe Biang Hiang River to float supplies downstream.

The second prominent terrain feature was the Co Roc Highland adjacent to the Laotian border and just south of Route No. 9. This highland had several peaks with elevations ranging from 500 to 850 meters which dominated Route No. 9 to the east and west. It also provided excellent observation into the Khe Sanh area. The vegetation in the Co Roc area consisted primarily of bamboo and brushwood, offering adequate cover and concealment.

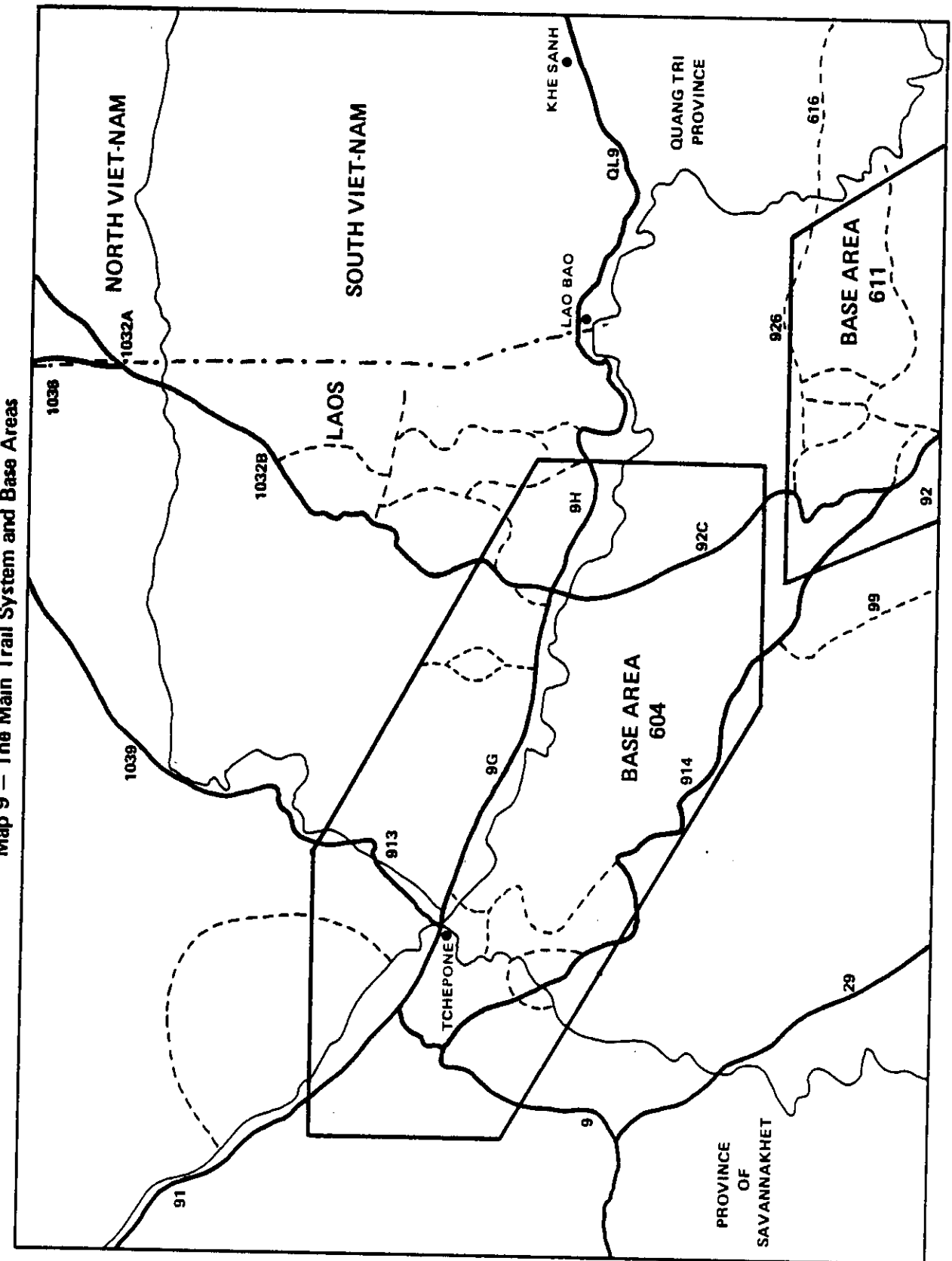
The third significant terrain feature was a high escarpment whose ridgeline extended all the way to Tchepone, parallel to and south of Route No. 9 and the Xepon River. Several peaks of this ridgeline were 600 to 700 meters high and offered excellent observation over Route No. 9 and the Tchepone area. Much of the area was covered by dense jungle and thick brushwood except for a few places which had been cleared for farming.

The terrain north of Route No. 9 was hilly and heavily vegetated against a backdrop of relatively high peaks which restricted operations in this area almost entirely to infantry. Around Tchepone, the terrain was much lower, sparsely vegetated and more appropriate for armor vehicles.

Route No. 9 from Khe Sanh to Tchepone was a one-lane, unevenly surfaced dirt road with destroyed bridges and culverts. Dominated by the high escarpment to the south, this road was easily interdicted. It also was difficult to prepare bypasses due to the river to the south and the hilly terrain to the north.

In addition to Route No. 9, which was an old public road, the enemy had completed in the area west of the Laotian border an extensive, criss-crossing system of lines of communication. (Map 9) Most important of these was Route 1032 which connected with Route 92 and offered direct access from North Vietnam and the western DMZ area into base area 604, then base area 611, and from there into South Vietnam either by Route 92 or Route 616 or Route 922 further to the south. Another route, designated

Map 9 - The Main Trail System and Base Areas



Route 1039, also originating in North Vietnam passed through the Ban Raving Pass and offered access into Tchepone and base area 604 then connected with either Route 29 to go further south or with Route 914 which led into base area 611 and from there into South Vietnam. All these routes were well-maintained two-lane roads practicable for large trucks at least during the dry season. Due to extensive bombings, the enemy had built several alternate routes which were well concealed by vegetation and often under double and triple canopies. In addition to main routes, the enemy also built narrow pathways crisscrossing the entire area. These were difficult to observe from the air and were convenient for concealing troop movements.

February in the Tchepone area was the transitional period from the northeast to the southwest monsoons. The northeast monsoon, which brought rains and cloudiness to Central Vietnam above the Hai Van Pass from October to March, was the dominant weather factor. The Truong Son mountain range deflected much of this wet weather on the Laotian side but in the area of operation, the skies were generally covered. The amount of cumulus buildup in this area depended on the strength and depth of the monsoon. Average temperature during February was 22°C in the lowlands and about 18°C in mountainous regions.

As of mid-March, the southwest monsoon gradually picked up, resulting in a relative improvement of the weather and higher ceilings. The average temperature was warmer than in February but this was a period of showers during which the skies were temporarily covered. Beginning in May, however, rainfall became heavier over the Truong Son Range while in the eastern lowlands, the weather was dry and hot.

In general, during the period considered for the operation, the weather was fairly good but quite unpredictable. From experience, it was estimated that the area of operations would be cloudy and hazy in the morning. The weather was favorable for air operations only from 1000-1200 hours until mid-afternoon. The 2,500-foot ceiling in the lowlands would allow only a 1,000-foot altitude in the area of operation. This was recognized as a major handicap since all aircraft used in support missions would be located in the lowlands and would have to be

flown first to the Khe Sanh airfield. Low ceilings and hazardous mountains would force helicopters flying frontline support missions to follow natural avenues of approach such as valleys and rivers which the enemy could interdict with ease. This handicap was going to be an important factor affecting the course of combat operations.

CHAPTER III

The Planning Phase

How It All Started

To the South Vietnamese political and military leaders, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had always been like a thorn in the back to be removed at any cost whenever there was a chance. The possibility that something could be done about it began to take shape as the war intensified and U.S. combat forces helped regain the military initiative in 1966.

One of the leading Vietnamese strategists, General Cao Van Vien, who was both Chairman of the Joint General Staff and Minister of Defense at that time, was the first to advocate the severance of the Communist lifeline. In a testimony given before members of the National Leadership Committee, who ruled the country from June 1965 to September 1967, General Vien propounded an offensive strategy, called the "strategy of isolation and severance" for the effective defense of South Vietnam. This was in essence a two-pronged strategy aimed at isolating the Communist infrastructure and guerrillas from the population within South Vietnam by pacification on the one hand, and severing North Vietnam's umbilical cord with its southern battlegrounds on the other. To implement this severance action, he proposed to invade North Vietnam's southern panhandle with the objective of seizing the city of Vinh, the northern terminal of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and at the same time establishing a strong defense line across northern Quang Tri Province to run the entire length of National Route No. 9 from the eastern coast to the Mekong River bank. This operation assumed the participation of U.S. and other Free World Military Assistance Forces. The attack against the two southernmost North Vietnamese provinces — Thanh Hoa and Nghe An — and their

eventual occupation, would serve as leverage for bargaining in truce negotiations while the defense line along Route No. 9 would give the RVN a reasonable chance to defend itself after its forces would have been withdrawn from North Vietnam's panhandle. Such was the general outline of General Vien's strategy which subsequently became the widely-commented subject of several lectures and magazine articles.¹

General Vien's concept remained only that because South Vietnam was unable to perform this momentous task all by itself.

In early January 1971, General Crichton W. Abrams, COMUSMACV, called on General Vien at the JGS and suggested an operation into lower Laos. With the unrealized concept still nurtured in his mind, General Vien gladly agreed. Meeting with General Vien again a few days later, General Abrams explained his concept of the operation on a map. U.S. forces were to clear the way to the border by conducting an operation inside South Vietnam. The main effort was to be conducted by RVNAF airborne and armor forces along Route No. 9 in coordination with a heliborne assault into Tchepone. The purpose was to search and destroy base area 604. Other RVNAF units would be employed to cover the northern and southern flanks of the main effort. For the support of the operation, maximum U.S. assets would be provided. After searching and destroying base area 604, ARVN forces would shift their effort toward base area 611. At the end of the meeting, both General Abrams and General Vien agreed to have staff officers work out an operational plan.

General Vien then reported his discussions with General Abrams to President Nguyen Van Thieu because he knew this cross-border operation was going to have international repercussions. Being a military man himself and well versed in military strategy, President Thieu immediately approved the operation.

Recognizing the political realities, General Vien had long since abandoned the idea of an invasion of North Vietnam as part of an operation to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but still his concept differed somewhat from that presented by General Abrams. General Vien advocated

¹"Vietnam: What Next? The Strategy of Isolation," Military Review, April 1972.

an airborne operation into Tchepone as the first step. Then after searching, the paratroopers would attack east to link up with an armor-infantry task force moving along Route No. 9. After link-up, the forces could shift their effort southward toward base area 611. General Vien conceived the foray into Laos to be a raid, an operation of short duration and ordered his J-3 to look for drop-zones around Tchepone. Later, because he felt he should go along with the MACV concept in order to obtain the necessary U.S. support assets, he abandoned this concept and did not even discuss it with General Abrams.

In mid-January the J-3, JGS, Colonel Tran Dinh Tho, and his MACV counterpart flew to Da Nang. Colonel Tho's mission was to brief Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, Commander of I Corps and MR-1 on the concept of the operation. The meeting took place discreetly at Headquarters, US XXIV Corps. General Lam was taken to a private briefing room where, in front of a general situation map, Colonel Tho explained how the operation was to be conducted as conceived by the Joint General Staff.² The main effort of the operation, he said, was to be launched along National Route No. 9 into Laos with the objective of cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the region of base area 604 and destroying all enemy installations and supplies stored there. After this mission had been accomplished, the operational forces were to move south and sweep through base area 611 to further create havoc to the enemy's logistic system before returning to South Vietnam. This operation was to be conducted and controlled by the I Corps Command which, in addition to its organic units, would be augmented by the entire Airborne Division and two Marine brigades. The third Marine brigade and the Marine Division Headquarters would be available if required. As to U.S. forces, they were going to conduct operations on the RVN side of the border and provide the ARVN operating forces with artillery, helilift and tactical air support. This concept of operations thus coincided in near totality with the one initially proposed by COMUSMACV.

²After the exclusive briefing for General Lam, Colonel Cao Khac Nhat, G-3 I Corps, took Colonel Tho aside and told him, "Why exclude me from the briefing? I have already completed the operational plan."

After this exclusive briefing, General Lam met in private with Lieutenant General Sutherland, Commander U.S. XXIV Corps. General Sutherland's staff had already begun planning after receiving the MACV directive on 7 January, but now joint planning could begin in earnest. A joint planning committee with strictly limited membership began working on the operational plan at the headquarters compound of U.S. XXIV Corps. The only I Corps staff members involved were the G-3 and the G-2. On the U.S. side, the same restriction on the planning staff was initially observed. Both staffs worked closely together in a specially arranged area with limited and controlled access.

On 17 January, planning guidance was provided by I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps to participating units under the guise of "Plans for the 1971 Spring-Summer Campaign" and on 21 January, General Lam and General Sutherland flew to Saigon, where, during a meeting at MACV Headquarters, they submitted the plan to the Chairman of the JCS and the MACV Commander.³ Intelligence estimates on which the detailed operational concept was formulated were also carefully reviewed. Subsequently on the same day, General Lam personally presented his operational plan to President Thieu.

The Basic Operational Plan

The combined operation was code-named LAM SON 719.⁴ It was to be executed in four phases during an indefinite period of time with the objective of destroying enemy forces and stockpiles and cutting enemy lines of communications in base areas 604 and 611.⁵

³This date was obtained from U.S. XXIV Corps After Action Report which records: "21 January: XXIV Corps/I Corps received approval of detailed concept." Ibid. p.3.

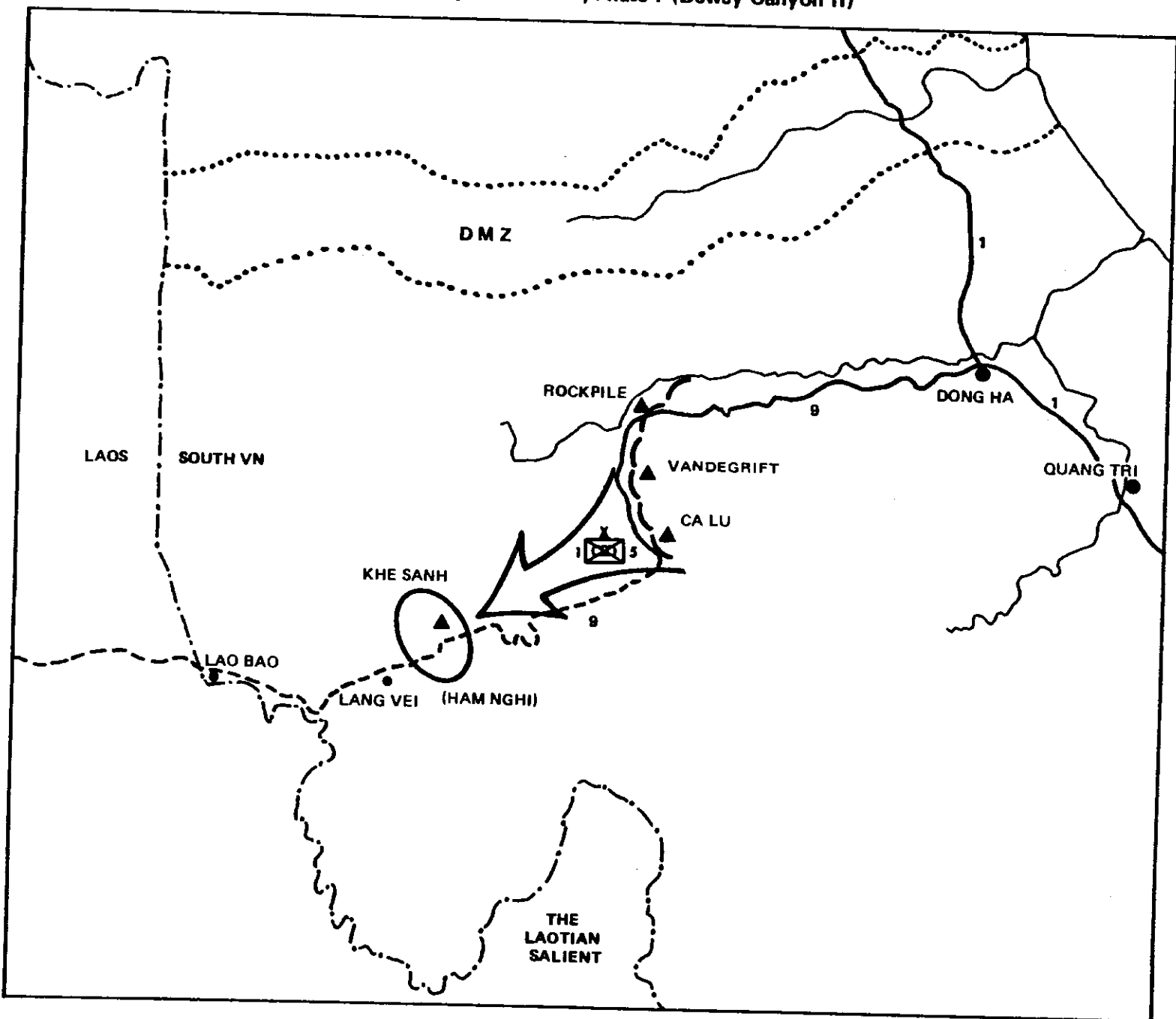
⁴Lam Son was the birthplace of Le Loi, a national hero second only to Tran Hung Dao in popular reverence. Le Loi ejected the Chinese from Vietnam in the early 15th Century.

⁵The directive given by U.S. XXIV Corps to the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and the Da Nang Support Command stated that these units should be prepared to provide support for I Corps operations forces for at least 90 days, in other words, until the onset of the Laotian rainy season in early May 1971.

In Phase I, which was to be called Operation Dewey Canyon II, the 1st Brigade, U.S. 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), reinforced, was to advance on D-Day, occupy the Khe Sanh area, and clear Route No. 9 up to the Laotian border, ARVN troop assembly areas, and forward artillery positions required for support of the operation. (Map 10) In the meantime, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), while continuing its operations in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, was to conduct artillery attacks by fire in the A Shau Valley, west of Thua Thien Province from D-Day to D+4 (a diversionary action) and in cooperation with the 2d Regiment, 1st ARVN Infantry Division to be prepared to defend the areas south of the DMZ. The U.S. 45th Engineer Group was assigned the mission to repair Route No. 9 up to the Laotian border and rehabilitate the Khe Sanh airstrip for C-130 use. Tactical air was to be provided by the U.S. 7th Air Force, B-52 strikes by CINCSAC, and gunships and artillery by units of U.S. XXIV Corps. During Phase I, ARVN forces were to complete their movements toward assembly areas and be prepared to attack on order across the border into lower Laos.

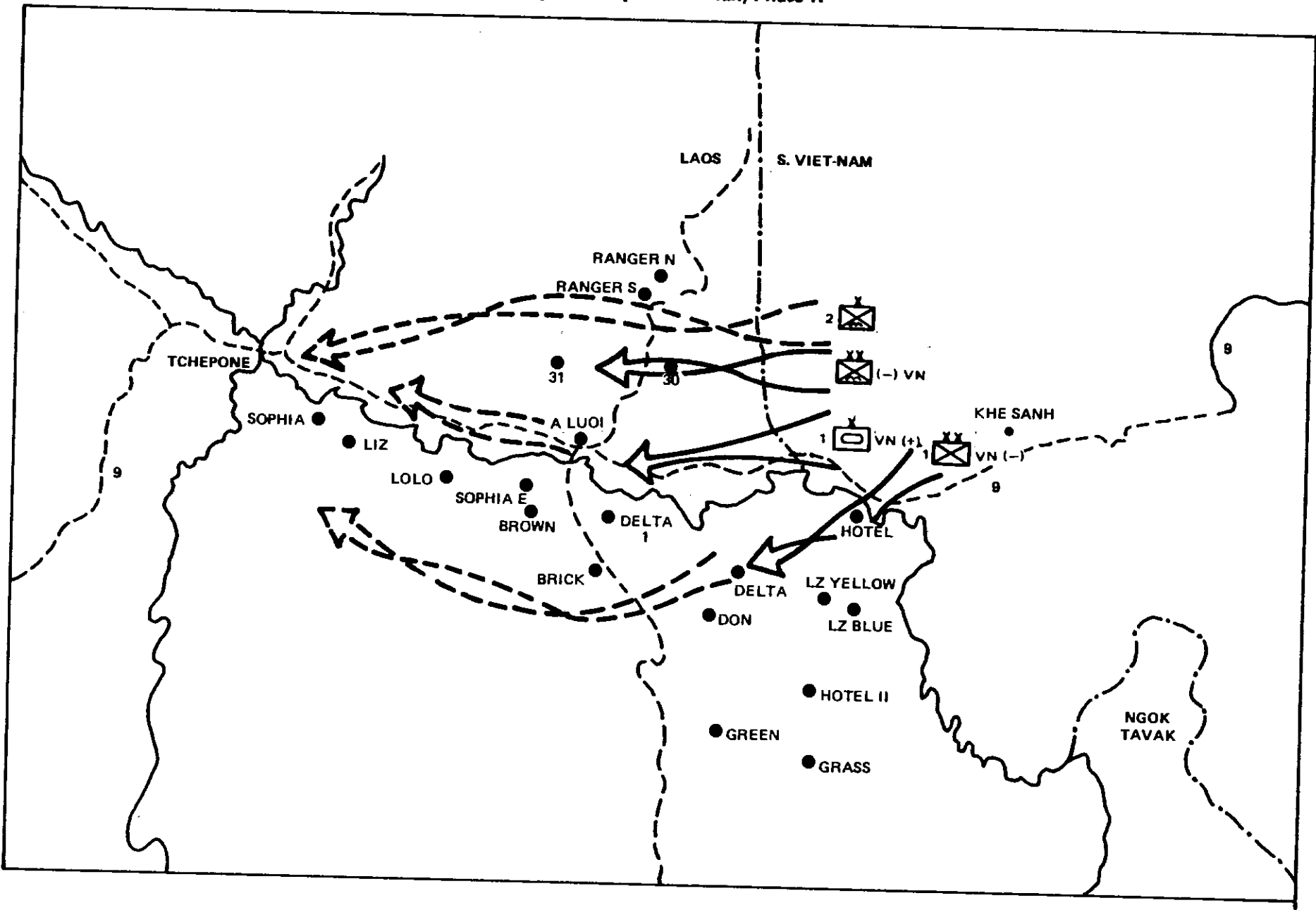
In Phase II, on D-Day, I Corps forces, following intensive preparation fires, were to launch their attack into lower Laos. The major effort was to be conducted along Route No. 9 by the ABN Division reinforced by the 1st Armor Brigade, engineer and artillery elements. While the 1st Armor Brigade (with its two squadrons 11 and 17) and engineer troops moved along Route No. 9, repairing it as they progressed, an ABN battalion was to be helilifted into Objective A Luoi (geographical name: Ban Dong) and two other ABN battalions were to establish fire support bases — one eight kilometers northwest and the other eight kilometers northeast of A Loui — to the north. (Map 11) Battalions of the 1st Infantry Division's 1st and 3d Regiments were to be inserted by helicopter and establish FSBs on the Co Rôc elevation south of Route No. 9 to protect the I Corps southern flank. The 1st Ranger Group with its three battalions, the 21st, 37th and 39th, was to be helilifted north of Route No. 9 to occupy blocking positions more than 16 kilometers to the northeast of A Loui and protect the northern flank of the ABN Division. After the completion of this troop movement, the armor brigade would attack westward from Objective A

Map 10 - Operation Plan, Phase I (Dewey Canyon II)



37

Map 11 - Operation Plan, Phase II



38

Luoi to link-up with the third ABN Brigade which was to be helilifted into Tchepone. The Marine 147th and 258th Brigades would serve as I Corps reserves at Khe Sanh.

Also during Phase II, the U.S. 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) was to continue operations west of Quang Tri Province and the U.S. 101st ABN Division (Airmobile) was to continue security operations as during Phase I and provide reinforcements and combat support as required. The ARVN "Black Panther" (reconnaissance) company, 1st Infantry Division, in the meantime, was to be attached to the U.S. 101st ABN Division and employed in rescue missions, if required, to extract U.S. crew members shot down in Laos.

Phase III was to be initiated after the successful occupation of Tchepone. It was to be the exploitation phase during which search operations would be expanded to destroy enemy bases and stockpiles. The ABN Division would search the area of Tchepone while the 1st Infantry Division would conduct search operations to the south. The 1st Ranger Group, meanwhile, would continue holding blocking positions to the north. During Phase III, the mission of U.S. forces was unchanged; they would continue to provide fire support, helilift and tactical and strategic air for ARVN units.

Phase IV was the withdrawal phase. On order, I Corps forces were to withdraw toward the border by one of two alternate routes called Options 1 and 2. In Option 1, the ABN Division and the 1st Armor Brigade were to withdraw to Objective A Luoi to support and cover the 1st Infantry Division which was to attack and search the western part of base area 611 then move on southeastward, followed by the ABN Division. In the meantime, the 1st Armor Brigade, augmented by the 1st Ranger Group from its northern positions and having been separated from the ABN Division, was to withdraw toward Khe Sanh along Route No. 9. The Marine 147th and 258th Brigades were to conduct operations into the Laotian salient toward Objective Ngok Tovak at the same time as the 1st Infantry Division began its attack to the southeast. Option 2 differed from Option 1 only during the last stage of the withdrawal when, after sweeping through base area 611, the 1st Infantry Division, to be followed by the ABN Division, was to

change direction and move eastward through the Laotian salient toward an area near Route No. 9. The mission of U.S. forces during this final phase was to remain unchanged.

On 22 January, XXIV Corps and I Corps completed preparation of their operational orders. On D-Day, 30 January the Forward CP of I Corps was to be established at Dong Ha; it was to include a small command element to be located at Ham Nghi FSB, south of Khe Sanh. The Forward CP of the U.S. XXIV Corps was to move to Quang Tri combat base the day before. The I Corps forces were to cross the border on 8 February. During a combined briefing session held at Dong Ha on 2 February, the I Corps operation orders were disseminated to all participating units.⁶ (Chart 1)

To assist in the execution of LAM SON 719, MACV planned a diversion in the form of a maneuver involving U.S. naval and marine units off the coast of Thanh Hoa Province (North Vietnam).

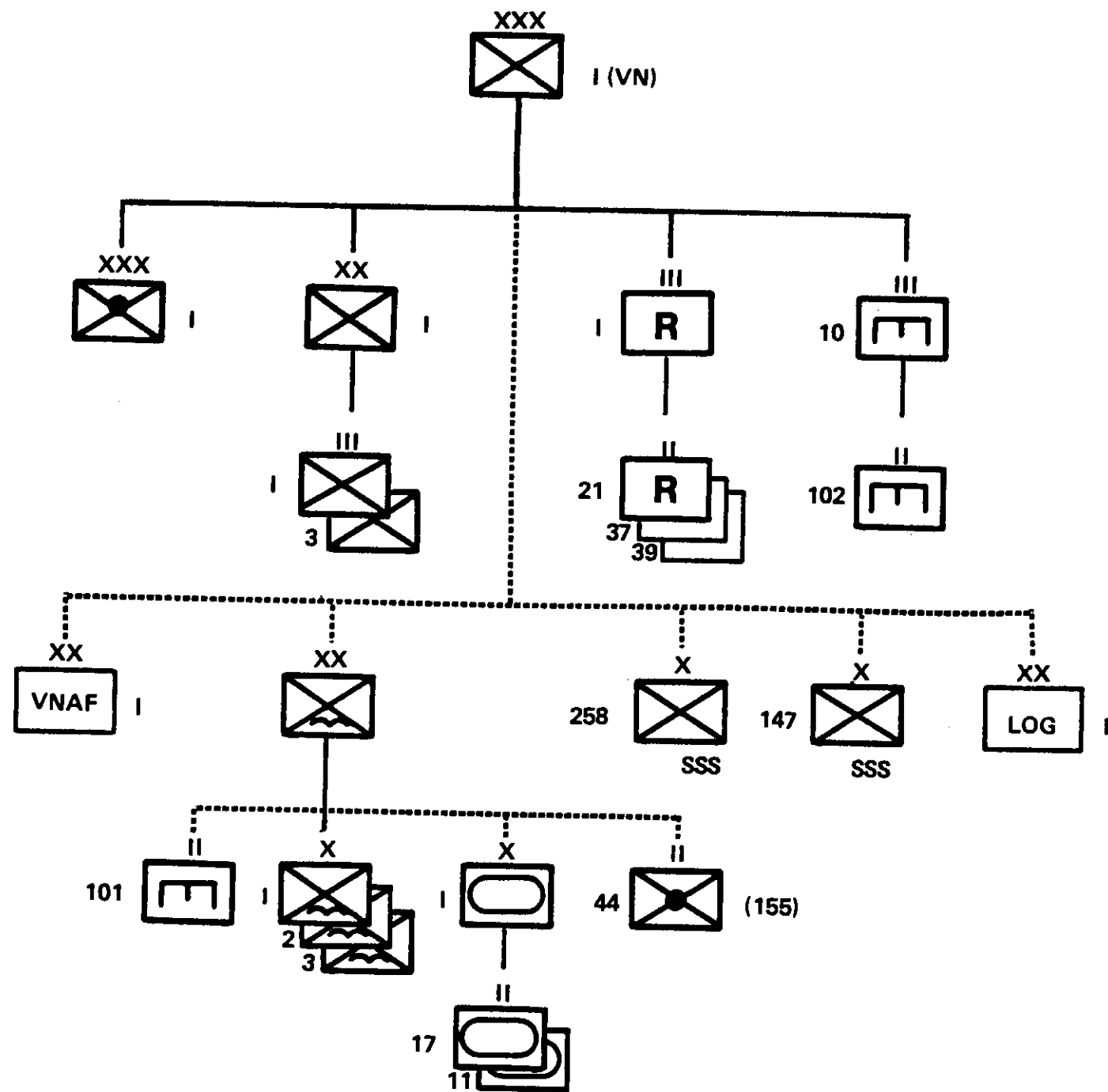
Division Planning and Preparations

The main effort of LAM SON 719 was assigned to the Airborne Division and on 18 January 1971, during a meeting at I Corps Headquarters, the division commander, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong, learned this for the first time. He immediately ordered his division, at the ABN Division rear base in Saigon to begin preparations for deployment. Meanwhile, the U.S. advisory team on 27 January visited headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, to receive first hand briefings and report on ABN preparations. ABN units deployed on an operation in War Zone C (north of Tay Ninh) were withdrawn to receive additional training by U.S. advisers on communications and the employment of U.S. gunships and supply and medevac helicopters, as well as air-ground communications with supporting U.S. tactical aircraft.

General Dong flew to Dong Ha on 1 February 1971 and was followed during the next few days by his staff, the U.S. ABN Division advisory team, and combat and support units.

⁶For details on participating units, see Appendix A.

Chart 1 - Task Organization, LAM SON 719, Early February 1971



----- Operational Control

The ABN Division began its operational planning only after it received detailed guidance from the I Corps commander on 2 February during the combined staff meeting at Dong Ha, where the I Corps Forward CP was now located.

The combat plan developed by the Airborne Division called for successive heliborne operations to occupy Objectives 30, 31 and A Luoi in coordination with an armor-infantry thrust along Route No. 9. Intermediate objectives, on which fire support bases would be established, would be seized in the advance to Tchepone, after which battalion-sized blocking positions would be occupied around Tchepone. The heliborne operations to occupy A Luoi and Tchepone would be conducted as soon as the armor-infantry thrust progressed near the objectives. This was to be a coordinated advance so timed as to provide immediate link-up at the objectives. (Map 11)

Initially, the armor-infantry thrust consisted of two squadrons, the 11th and 17th of the 1st Armor Brigade, the 1st Airborne Brigade (with its three battalions: 1st, 8th and 9th), the 44th Artillery Battalion (155-mm) and the 101st Engineer Battalion. This task force was to advance along Route No. 9, repair roads as it moved and link-up with heliborne units. The 3d Airborne Brigade (three battalions: 2d, 3d and 6th) would be the heliborne force assigned to occupy objectives and establish FSBs north of the road. For the assault on Tchepone, the mission was given to the 2nd Airborne Brigade which consisted of three battalions, the 5th, 7th and 11th. The troop pick-up point for airborne operations would be Ham Nghi Base. The Airborne Division operation plan was presented to Lt. General Hoang Xuan Lam on 3 February who immediately approved it in principle.

Of the two Marine brigades to be provided by the JGS, the 258th Brigade with one artillery and three infantry battalions was operating in an area southwest of Quang Tri. The other brigade, the 147th after regrouping its detached units, completed its movement by C-130 to Dong Ha on 3 February. Both brigades were to be employed as I Corps reserves and given the temporary mission of security for ARVN forces on the RVN side of the border.

The I Corps organic forces that participated in the operation were the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Ranger Group and 1st Armor Brigade, all immediately available. The 1st Armor Brigade with its two squadrons was attached to the Airborne Division. The 1st Ranger Group was assigned the security mission on the northern flank of the operational area. Its three lightly equipped battalions would be deployed in screening positions facing north.⁷ The 1st Infantry Division, meanwhile, would deploy its two regiments, the 1st and 3d, to its area of operation south of Route No. 9 with the mission of blocking enemy forces from the south and simultaneously searching enemy base area 611. Its two other regiments, the 2d and 54th, which would not participate in the operation, but would remain where they were, east of the DMZ area and west of Hue, respectively.

U. S. Support

It was apparent that due to the lack of helicopters, tactical air and long-range artillery, I Corps could not conduct such a large scale operation away from its support bases without assistance. United States support was therefore required, not only to compensate for I Corps' lack of assets but also to provide the kind of mobility and firepower needed for combat against a heavily defended enemy stronghold in rugged terrain. Therefore, the U.S. XXIV Corps was charged with planning for this substantial support.

An outstanding feature of LAM SON 719 was the conspicuous absence of U.S. combat troops and U.S. advisers who were not authorized to go into

⁷General Lam considered the Ranger Group adequate for this mission, which was to provide the main body early warning of any enemy force approaching on his flank and to delay and force him to concentrate until heavier combat power could be placed against him. It would have been advantageous to assign this mission to a mobile, armor-equipped force, but not only did the rugged terrain preclude this, but General Lam needed his armor and his 1st Division for the main effort. Furthermore, he wanted to keep the 1st Division available for a sweep south through base area 611.

lower Laos. U.S. advisers could still provide assistance to ARVN staffs but only at command posts located on the RVN side of the border. Even division senior advisers were not authorized to fly over lower Laos.⁸

To compensate for the absence of advisers who always helped in communicating with U.S. units for support, it was decided to assign a Vietnamese serviceman-interpreter to each of the FAC teams and to the 7th Air Force airborne command and control center. It was also planned that one member of each division advisory team would be airborne over the AO of their respective units. This was intended to alleviate some of the problems related to language and communications.

The U.S. 108th Artillery Group received the mission of augmenting the firepower of I Corps Artillery. This group consisted of the 8th Battalion, 4th Artillery (with four 8-inch howitzers and eight 175-mm guns), the 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery (with the same number of artillery pieces), and B-Battery, 1st Battalion, 396th Artillery (with four 175-mm guns). As required, the 108th Artillery Group could be augmented by the 5th Battalion, 4th Artillery (with eighteen 155-mm self-propelled howitzers), which was the direct support unit of the U.S. 1st Infantry Brigade (Mechanized).

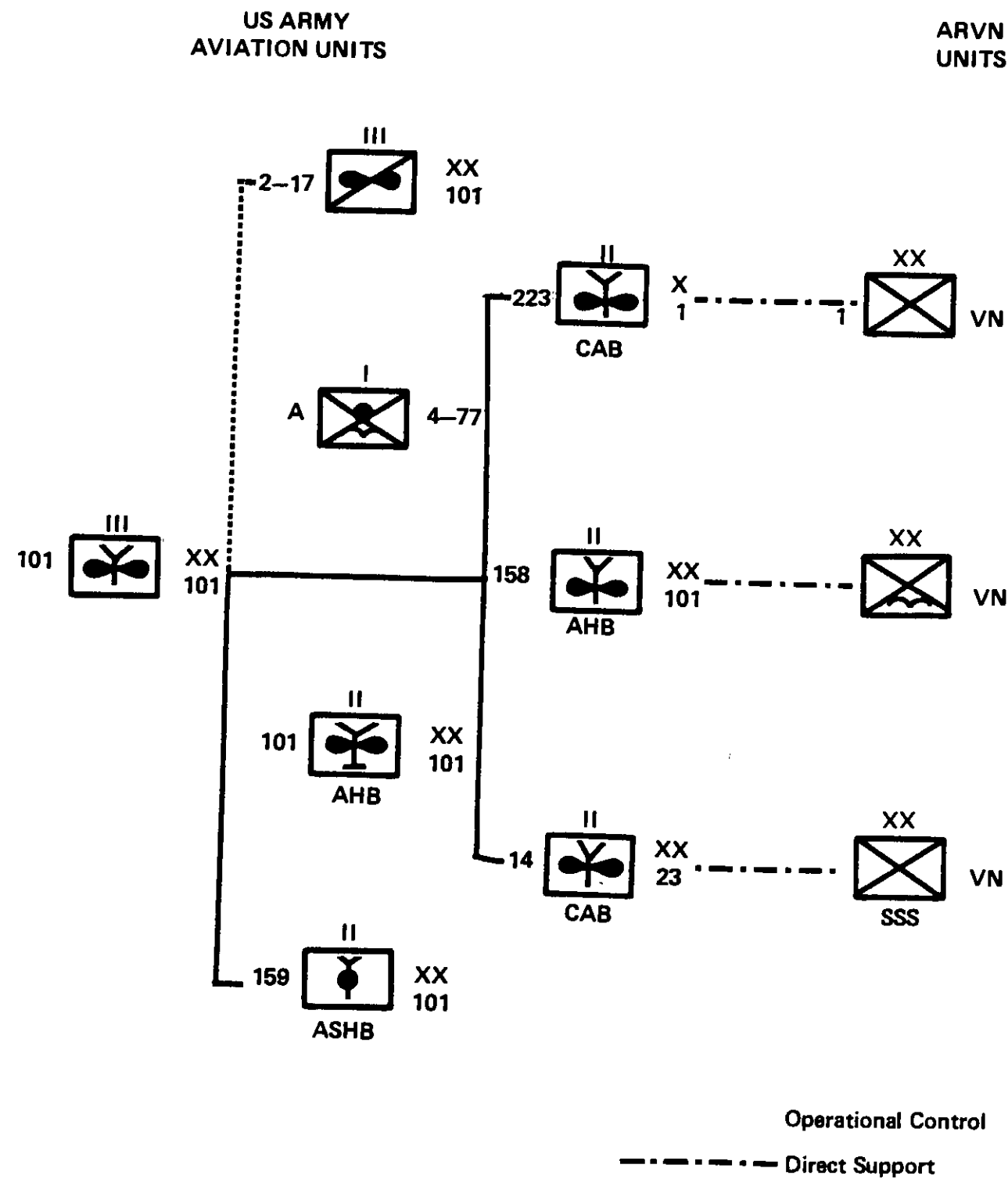
Procedures for coordination and liaison were clearly established. Fire coordination was to be effected at I Corps FSCC between fire support elements of I Corps and XXIV Corps, and communications with I Corps artillery was to be maintained through U.S. advisers. Plans were also made to provide for close coordination between supporting and supported units. This was done by an exchange of liaison officers between the U.S. 108th Artillery Group and ARVN infantry divisions and brigades operating separately. Fire support requests from ARVN units in Laos could be routed through either one of two alternate channels. The first channel was from requesting units to division or separate command posts where the U.S. 108th Artillery Group's liaison officers would receive and

⁸After Action Report on LAM SON 719; 1 April 1971, by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, p. 3.

forward all requests to supporting units. Through the second channel, operational units were able to send fire support requests directly to their liaison officers posted at the U.S. 108th Artillery Group CP where the requests would be immediately routed to the fire direction centers (FDC) of supporting units. Fire coordination with the U.S. 4/77 Aerial Artillery Battalion was to follow the same channels as those of the 108th Artillery Group to which the battalion would attach liaison officers to collect fire data or requests.

Of prime importance to the entire operation was the mobility support provided by United States helicopters of all types. The U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) was assigned this support responsibility. Having to continue its current missions inside South Vietnam which were greatly expanded due to the redeployment of a number of ARVN units and to provide operational support in lower Laos at the same time, the 101st Airborne Division obviously could not meet all the requirements with its organic assets, so the division was augmented with four Assault Helicopter Companies (UH-1H), two Assault Support Helicopter Companies (CH-47), two Air Cavalry Troops and two Assault Helicopter battalion headquarters, all detached from other U.S. divisions. This reinforcement was to be more substantial on days when special requirements arose. Each U.S. assault helicopter battalion was made responsible for providing direct support to an ARVN major unit. Thus the 158th Assault Helicopter Battalion was assigned to support the ARVN Airborne Division and its reinforcements and the 223d Combat Assault Battalion was to provide support for the ARVN 1st Infantry Division while the 14th Combat Assault Battalion would support the Vietnamese Marine brigades. Each of these support battalions was to attach a liaison team to the ARVN unit to be supported and each U.S. battalion commander was required to visit the ARVN unit he supported every day. In case additional support units were provided, they would be placed under the operational control of these commanders. The commander of the 101st Aviation Group, 101st Airborne Division was to exercise operational control over all assault, assault support and aerial weapons helicopter units. (Chart 2) In addition, an Assistant Commander of the 101st Airborne Division was designated as the aviation support coordinator.

Chart 2 - U.S. Army Aviation Task Organization



To solve problems related to tactical air support, certain flexible arrangements were made. An airborne command and control center of the United States 7th Air Force (AFCCC) was to operate around the clock aboard a C-130 aircraft to receive support requests, provide guidance for preplanned tactical air sorties, to make decisions on the employment of assets, and to ensure that additional sorties would be available in case of emergency. All forward air controller (FAC) teams, each assigned a Vietnamese interpreter, were to cover the areas of operation assigned to ARVN divisions and separate brigades. Initially, 200 tactical air sorties were planned for each day. Emergency tactical air support requests would be initiated by ground units and sent to the airborne FAC team which would relay them to the 7th Air Force AFCCC, also airborne, for immediate action. Preplanned sorties would have to be requested through the normal channel which went from the Tactical Air Control Parties (TACP), attached to ARVN divisions, to I Corps Fire Coordination Control Center/Direct Air Support Center (FSGC/DASC) and from there to the XXIV Corps Forward Direct Air Support Center at Quang Tri. To facilitate air support missions in bad weather or at night, an air support radar team (ASRT) of the U.S. Marines at Quang Tri would be provided at Khe Sanh from where it could cover the entire area of operation in lower Laos. A number of U.S. naval air sorties to be launched from aircraft carriers USNS Hancock, Kitty Hawk and Ranger was also planned. Finally, LAM SON 719 was to receive the highest priority in strategic air sorties provided by the United States Strategic Air Command.

Solving Logistic Problems

In addition to combat and combat support planning, an important area that required extensive pre-arrangements was logistics. Unfortunately, the ARVN 1st Area Logistics Command, which was responsible for logistical support for I Corps and MR-1, was excluded from the operational planning staff because of security and restrictive measures. Therefore, when this logistic command received orders to make prepara-

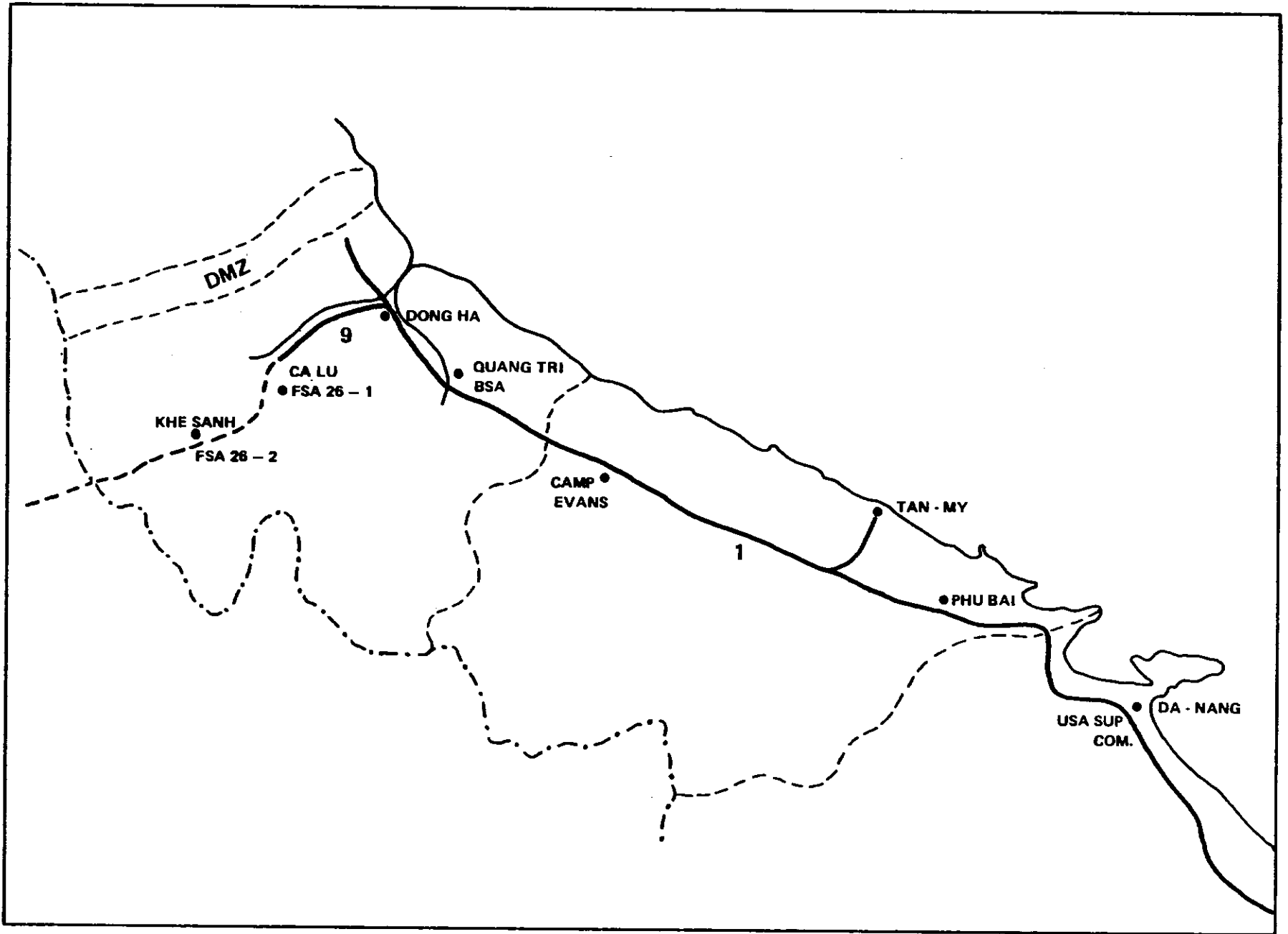
tions for support, it was too late. But this tardiness was in no way an insurmountable obstacle. A big, helping hand was extended by the U.S. Army Support Command, Da Nang. U.S. support and the division of tasks between U.S. and ARVN logistics units were planned as follows: from D-day to D+8 I Corps units were to receive the same support from U.S. logistic agencies as United States units. During the period from D+9 to D+17 the ARVN 1st Area Logistics Command was to gradually take over responsibility for the support of operational forces. U.S. logistic agencies would be deployed to the assembly area ahead of time and would initiate support activities when the operation was launched. Under the delegation of authority from and with reinforcements provided by the Da Nang Support Command, the U.S. 26th General Support Group (GSG) was to establish a base support area (BSA) at Quang Tri to be operational on D-Day. Two forward logistic agencies were also to be established: Forward Support Area (FSA) 26-1 in the Ca Lu - Vandegrift area to begin operations on D-day, to be followed by FSA 26-2 at Khe Sanh which would become operational during the period from D+4 to D+6. (Map 12)

During the initial period, no significant difficulties were encountered by U.S. logistic units in supplying ARVN forces because most supply items were similar with the exception of some special types of ammunition, for example 57-mm recoilless, and more particularly, combat rations. The ammunition items were no longer available in the U.S. supply system and ARVN combat rations were radically different from U.S. C-rations. As a result adequate ARVN combat rations were immediately shipped to class I supply points operated by United States forward support areas.

On its part, the ARVN 1st Area Logistic Command planned to establish three main support areas at Phu Bai (near Hue), Quang Tri and Khe Sanh. (Map 13) To facilitate coordination of activities and the maintenance of security, it was decided that U.S. and ARVN logistic agencies would be co-located and there should be an exchange of liaison officers as well as logistic data between the two staff elements at Da Nang and in forward support areas.

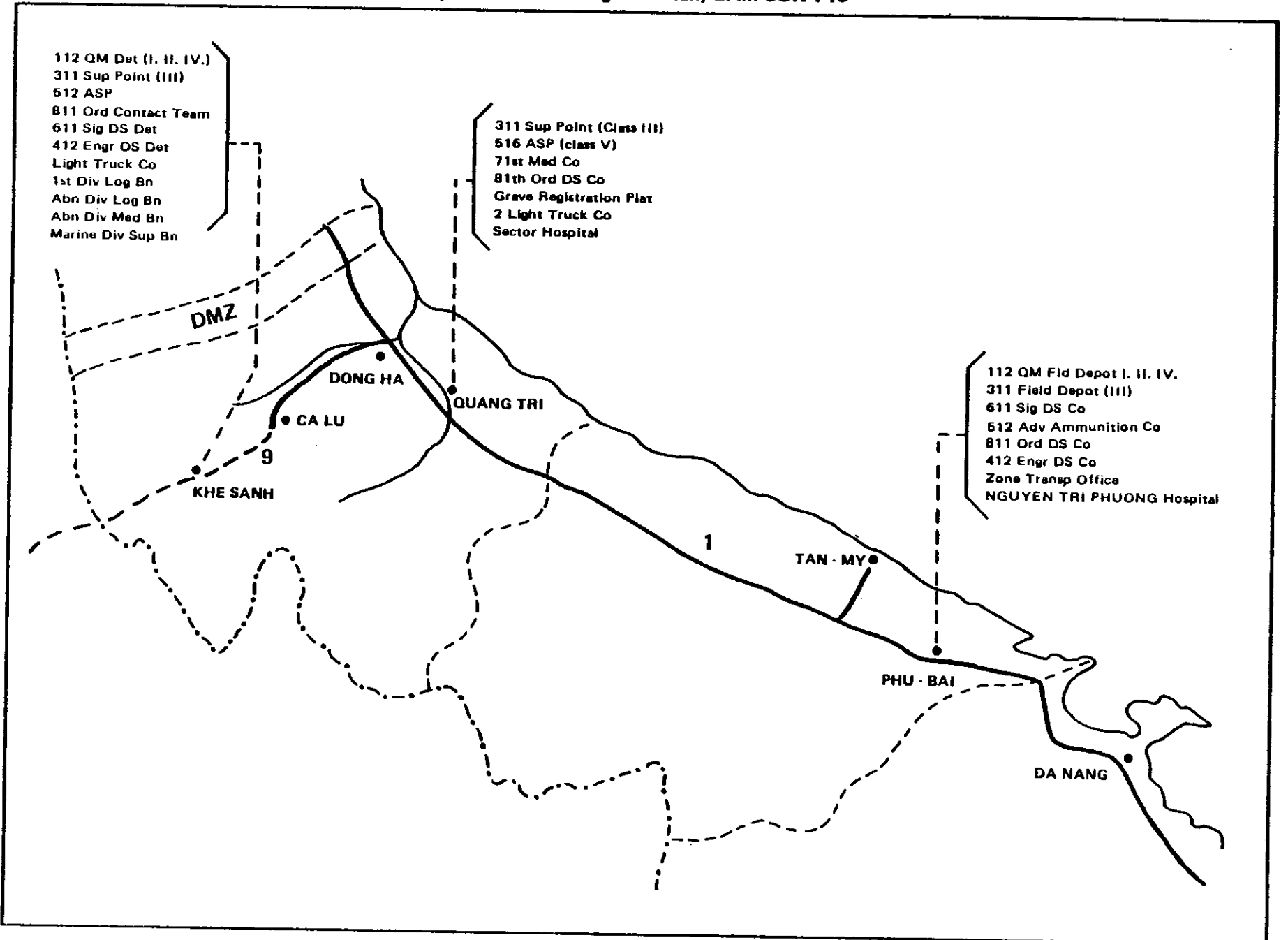
Map 12 - U.S. Army Logistics Plan, LAM SON 719

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Map 13 - ARVN Logistics Plan, LAM SON 719

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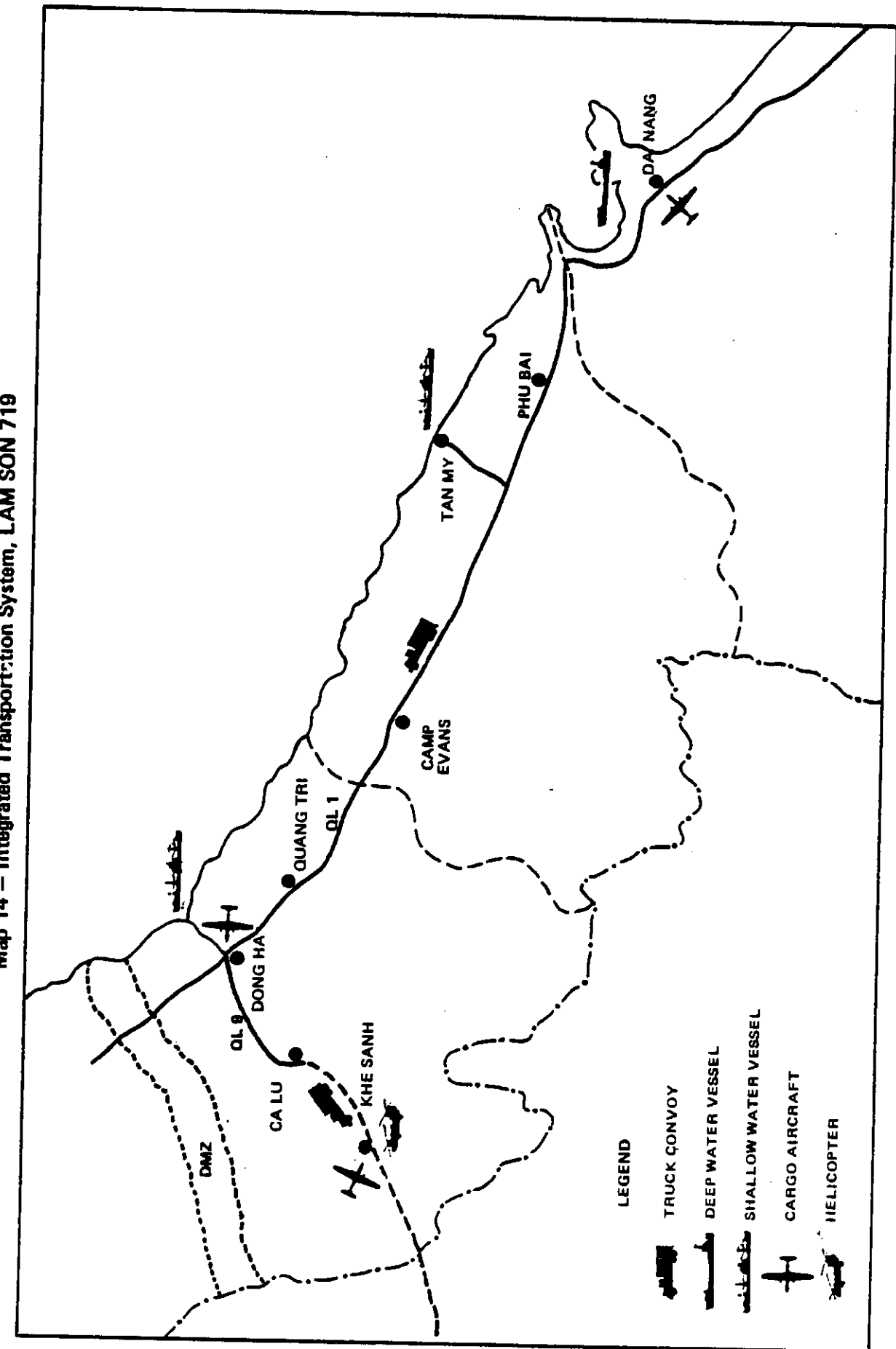
The most vital consideration in logistic support planning was supply routes and transportation. The major axes of road communication available were Routes No. 1 and No. 9. While No. 1 was a two-way all-weather road from Da Nang to Dong Ha, truck traffic from the Dong Ha junction had to move westward on No. 9. This was possible only to Vandegrift base. From Vandegrift to the Laotian border, No. 9 was extensively damaged with many destroyed bridges. Therefore, U.S. engineer units were charged with repairing and rehabilitating this stretch of road. The control of traffic movements on Routes No. 1 and 9 would require very close coordination between U.S. and ARVN traffic management agencies.

In sea transportation, the port of Tan My and the Dong Ha ramp, about 8 miles upstream from the Cua Viet rivermouth, were to serve as major shipping points. Both facilities were operated by U.S. forces. Most ARVN supplies would be shipped by LST to Tan My where they would be unloaded with the assistance of U.S. terminal personnel. For the shuttle of supplies between Tan My and Dong Ha, a number of American intercoastal ships would be used to assist the ARVN 1st ALC. (Map 14)

In air transportation, the two existing airfields at Quang Tri and Dong Ha were ready for immediate use. The abandoned airstrip at Khe Sanh, however, needed extensive repairs by U.S. engineer units and was scheduled to become operational on D+6 to accommodate C-130 cargo planes. Several U.S. C-130 planes were also earmarked for the ARVN to transport emergency supplies directly to Khe Sanh. Due to the sizable quantity of helicopters required to support the operation, the supply of aviation fuel was an important problem. ARVN quartermaster units were assigned additional assets for the transportation of fuels, and the establishment of forward storage facilities and supply points.

To move supplies to forward combat units operating along Route No. 9, ground transportation was planned. For those units operating far from the road, helicopters would be used both for resupply and medical evacuation. As to the movement of heavy items of supply to forward areas, the only means available would be large U.S. cargo helicopters.

Map 14 - Integrated Transportation System, LAM SON 719



Observations

The entire planning process — and the resultant operations plan — for LAM SON 719 indicated a carefully considered decision arrived at by responsible U.S. and GVN political and military authorities. The authorities of each country — the US and the GVN — considered in their decisions the best intelligence available to them at the time and each approached the problem with the best interests of his own country in mind. Of course, each was influenced by the political and military factors peculiar to his own country. Tchepone, the crossroads of enemy supply routes, appeared to be a well selected objective since all enemy logistic and infiltration movements south had to go through this area. According to intelligence reports, this was indeed an area where important enemy storage facilities were located. The time had finally arrived to sever by ground attacks the lifeline which had sustained enemy warring capabilities for so many years. This was a sound and bold decision following several years of reconnaissance and interdiction efforts from the air.

The time frame selected for the operation was also appropriate in that the dry season in the Laotian panhandle had begun three months earlier. After his substantial losses in Cambodia during 1970, the enemy was using the dry season to the maximum for the movement of replacements south and to replenish his supplies; the enemy was conducting an aggressive "logistic offensive." The amount of supplies in transit and in these storage facilities was substantial and if we succeeded in destroying them, the blow on the enemy would be most devastating. He would be in serious trouble, not only from our spoiling actions during the remaining three months of the dry season, but also because time was running out for the movement of supplies for that year.

Despite the continuation of redeployments, United States military presence in South Vietnam was still substantial enough to support a large-scale offensive by the ARVN. If this offensive were deferred, U.S. support would no longer be as adequate and as effective. This was

meet all the unforeseeable challenges? The events that subsequently occurred during the operation left no doubt as to the answer to this question. Then there was the questionable wisdom in selecting a single road axis for the major effort of the offensive. Hemmed in by dense jungle and rough mountainous terrain, this type of road did not lend itself readily to heavy logistic activities. In South Vietnam, such difficulties in road transportation could be removed by the alternate use of waterways or U.S. airlift facilities. But in lower Laos, jungles, rough mountains and steep valleys, added to the stubbornness of the enemy, created serious problems that should have received more attention. While there were plans for infantry units to advance and withdraw using different routes, mechanized and armor units were confined to Route No. 9. The holding of this route required the relative superiority of friendly forces, which was not the case.

Next was the tactic of establishing fire support bases. In view of the single axis available to progress through mountains, the effective control of the area of operation and the conduct of search activities depended on the capability of our forces being deployed on both sides of the road, north and south. In our case, the operational plan called for the advance of infantry forces through a series of fire support bases. Each new leap forward necessarily required an additional number of these bases. The use of fire support bases had been successful in South Vietnam but this success depended a great deal on the overwhelming firepower and initiative of United States forces in the face of a less endowed enemy. To be effective in lower Laos, it was apparent that fire support bases would have to enjoy the same conditions. The question was: would it be feasible? If it was not — without the benefit of firepower and initiative in the area of operation — fire support bases were apt to become defensive positions tying down sizeable forces which otherwise might be used for offensive.

A comparison between friendly and enemy forces in lower Laos also resulted in hard thinking even during the initial phase. As intelligence estimates had made it clear, enemy forces in the area of operation included three infantry regiments, not to mention the eight or so binh

trams, each equivalent to a regimental size force in terms of ground defense and antiaircraft capabilities. Within a period from one to two weeks, the enemy was capable of reinforcing with up to a total of eight additional infantry regiments, not to mention artillery and other units from North Vietnam. To defeat these 11 infantry regiments and the defense forces of the binh trams, I Corps committed, according to the initial plan, only eight infantry regiments or brigades. Our forces enjoyed the advantage of an armor brigade but our tanks might be of little value off the main axis. Even if, at the limit of its capabilities, I Corps would bring in two additional regiments (the remaining Marine brigade and the third regiment of the 1st Infantry Division), it would only have 10 regimental size units and the balance would still be in favor of the enemy. Additional reinforcements would be highly improbable and any such effort to obtain them would certainly meet with difficulties.

In the effort to obtain the tactical advantage in the area of operations and to compensate for the lack of force superiority, the planners of LAM SON 719 expected too much from the support of United States tactical air and air cavalry gunships. The question that should have been asked then was: how effective would air power be in support of ground combat troops deep in the Truong Son mountain range? If the bombings of North Vietnam had been an indication of this effectiveness, then were the results to be obtained exactly what we had desired? Over the years, the U.S. Air Force had bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail heavily. Was the effect of these bombings enough to paralyze the enemy's activities on the battlefields of South Vietnam and Cambodia? Too much was expected from airpower and this problem should have been weighed with caution by the planners.

Then there was the role to be played by helicopters. With the exception of mechanized forces operating along Route No. 9 which would be resupplied by road transportation according to plans, all other operational units would have to depend on helicopters for movement of troops and artillery, supply and medical evacuation. This was the only means practicable as long as these forces were required to operate considerable distances from roads and fire support bases. There was no doubt that

the U.S. would provide enough helicopters to satisfy requirements. But there was cause to doubt the effectiveness of helicopters in the expected combat situation, considering the terrain and weather in lower Laos and the enemy's antiaircraft capabilities. This was a serious question which required careful consideration.

As the time approached for D-day, however, ARVN and U.S. commanders and staffs alike appeared to be confident of success. As a testimony to this confidence, I think it appropriate to excerpt here a passage of the report filed by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, senior adviser of the Airborne Division. In this after-action report, Colonel Pence described the mood that prevailed during a meeting at Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps prior to Phase I of LAM SON 719. He wrote:

"It was apparent at this time that United States intelligence felt that the operation would be lightly opposed and that a two-day preparation of the area prior to D-Day by tactical air would effectively neutralize the enemy antiaircraft capability although the enemy was credited with having 170 to 200 antiaircraft weapons of mixed caliber in the operational area. The tank threat was considered minimal and the reinforcement capability was listed as fourteen days for two divisions from north of the DMZ."⁹

The RVN military leaders thought that ARVN forces had a tough mission ahead but would be able to carry it out with the support of the United States. The decision had been made. I Corps forces were like the soldier on the firing line who had armed his rifle and taken aim. All he had to do now was to squeeze the trigger.

⁹ After Action Report on LAM SON 719 dated 1 April 1971 by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, p. 2.

CHAPTER IV

The Offensive Phase

Preparing to Cross the Border

To assist I Corps forces in making preparations for their cross-border offensive, XXIV Corps implemented Phase I of LAM SON 719 exactly as scheduled, at 0000 hours on 30 January 1971. Code-named DEWEY CANYON II, this operation consisted of securing staging and assembly areas for I Corps units in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province adjacent to the Laotian border, including Khe Sanh Base and Route No. 9. As part of a deception plan, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Air mobile) launched heavy attacks by fire and reconnaissance patrols into the A Shau valley farther to the south. This move was to divert the enemy's attention from the area where the main action was about to unfold.

Almost simultaneously the 1st Brigade, U.S. 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) advanced west from Fire Support Base Vandegrift in two elements. The main effort, Team A, 3/5 Cavalry reinforced by engineer troops, advanced along Axis Gold, following Route No. 9 toward Khe Sanh. The secondary effort, a task force of the 3/5 Cavalry (-), proceeded southwesterly along Axis Brown from the Rockpile area to north of Khe Sanh. (Map 15) Thanks to the element of surprise, the lead element managed to progress six kilometers before daylight along the highway without enemy contact.

The U.S. 14th Combat Engineer Battalion immediately followed the attacking cavalry forces, restoring nine of the eighteen required bridges and nine of the 20 required culverts along the road. At Khe Sanh, U.S. Army engineers were to survey a site planned for an assault airstrip which was to run parallel to the old, unserviceable PSP airstrip. This assault airstrip, scheduled to be completed on 3 February, was to be

While U.S. units continued to expand their control in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri, ARVN units began to move into the staging area. The Airborne Division Headquarters and the 3d Airborne Brigade, along with support units were successively airlifted from Saigon to northern Quang Tri, beginning on 1 February. By 4 February the entire 3d Airborne Brigade with supporting artillery had closed into its assembly area south of Khe Sanh. The Forward Command Post of I Corps had opened at the Dong Ha airfield on 30 January. The tactical command post of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division was also established and initiated operations in its vicinity.

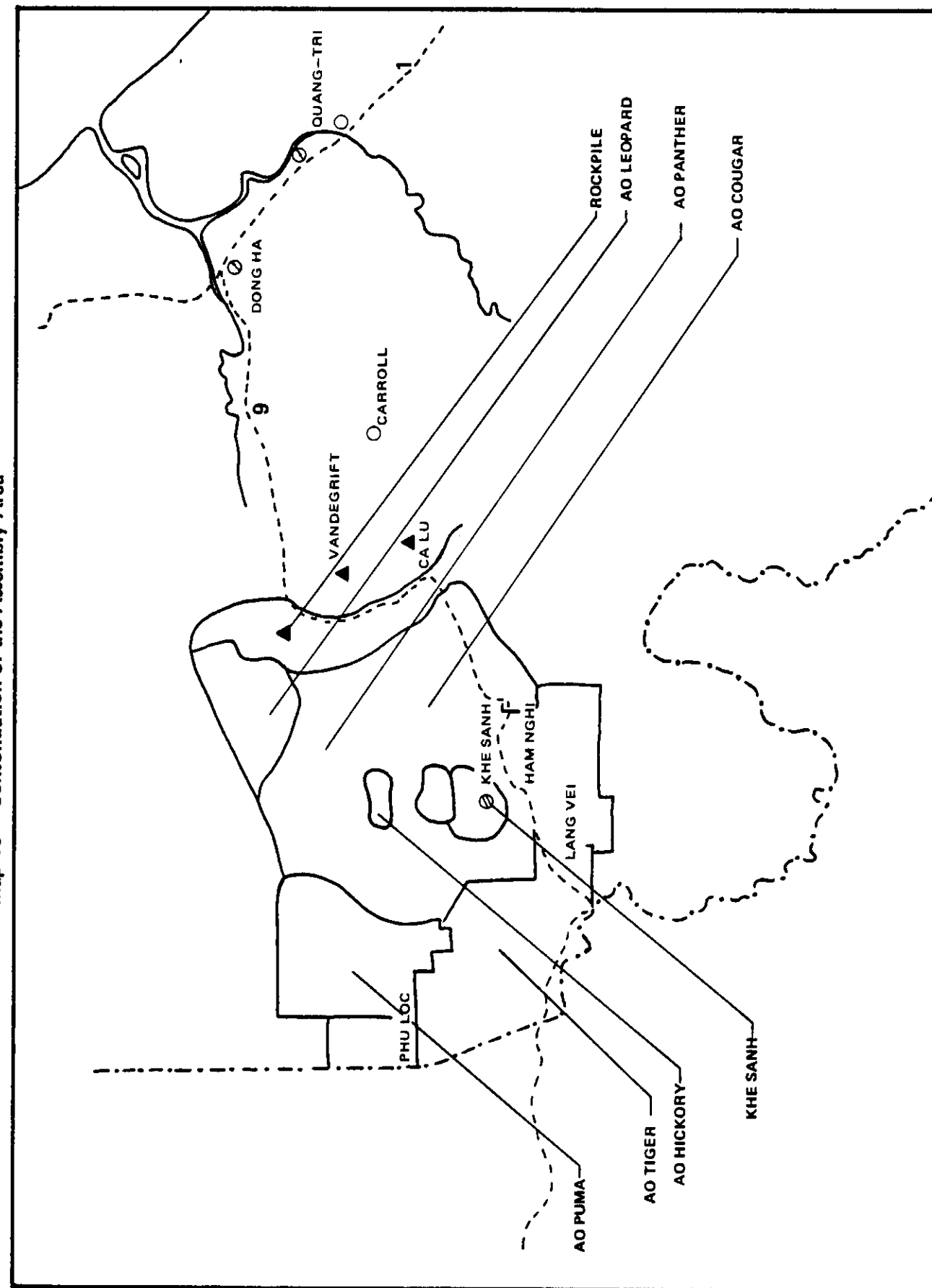
On 2 February, the first combined operational meeting was held at the headquarters of I Corps Forward, attended by all RVNAF and U.S. commanders and detailed operational orders were issued. Immediately after this meeting, ARVN units feverishly completed their preparations for the big operation that promised numerous challenges.

The next day, the 1st Ranger Group (21st, 37th and 39th Ranger Battalions) was helilifted into the Phu Loc area northwest of Khe Sanh to defend a fire support base to be established there.

The Khe Sanh assault airstrip was completed on 4 February but test landings by C-130 aircraft revealed that additional compacting would be required. On 5 February, the 1/1 Cavalry Task Force reached the border on Route No. 9. This unit immediately deployed along the border and assisted ARVN units entering the assembly area. All U.S. units were assigned specific areas of responsibility to secure the assembly area and support ARVN forces. (Map 16)

The 2d ARVN Airborne Brigade arrived at the Dong Ha airfield on 6 February while other ARVN units — the 1st Armor Brigade, 1st Airborne Brigade and 3/1 Infantry Regiment — moved overland to the Ham Nghi (Khe Sanh) area. Upon arrival, the 1st Armor Brigade and the 1st Airborne Brigade, which were both scheduled to move out by way of Route No. 9 on D-Day Phase II, immediately entered the assembly area adjacent to the border. That evening, a regrettable incident occurred. A United States Navy aircraft mistakenly attacked the ARVN forward elements destroying one M-113 armored personnel carrier; additionally, six ARVN

Map 16 — Consolidation of the Assembly Area



personnel were killed and 51 armor and airborne personnel wounded. These were the first ARVN casualties of Operation LAM SON 719.

On the logistic side, immediately following in the steps of the U.S. engineers who were repairing and opening roads, U.S. logistic units were displacing forward to establish support facilities and Forward Support Area (FSA) 26-1 at Ca Lu south of Vandegrift was opened on 30 January. Advance elements of Forward Support Area 26-2 arrived at Khe Sanh on 3 February and this facility was operational two days later. Ground transportation soon became difficult because the road section between Vandegrift and Khe Sanh was only trafficable one way. Despite this, U.S. and ARVN convoys, combat and logistic alike, moved day and night.

During the first days, and as originally planned, ARVN units were supported by U.S. logistic facilities. As soon as ARVN units reached the assembly area, they were issued supplies in preparation for action. This activity proceeded smoothly except for some difficulties in the issue of combat rations. Vietnamese combat rations were not similar to American C-rations. Instead of a self-contained package of individual meals, each Vietnamese ration consisted of three separate items: instant rice, canned meat or fish, and condiments. These were packaged individually but issued collectively by the carton. American logistics personnel were unfamiliar with these rations and with ARVN issue and accounting procedures so to solve the problem some Vietnamese specialists were detached to FSA 26-2. During this same period, ARVN logistic units dispatched advance teams to Khe Sanh to establish their own support facilities including ammunition and fuel supply points, which were scheduled to initiate operations on D-Day + 17 (16 February).

Probably taken by surprise, enemy troops in Quang Tri reacted very slowly and weakly during the first days. Although some mine explosions occurred along the routes of advance, floating mines appeared on the Cau Viet River, and a few rockets were fired into rear support bases, other activities of Communist units in northern Quang Tri Province showed no significant changes. The northwestern corner of Quang Tri, in particular, remained very quiet.

The weather was favorable during the first few days of the operation and our air support was effective. On 4 and 5 February, however, the weather turned unfavorable; low clouds, interspersed with rain, delayed some troop landing plans and interfered with the activities of engineer units, particularly road repairs and rehabilitation work being conducted at the Khe Sanh airstrip. Although the weather during 6 and 7 February was better than the preceding two days, it was not adequate for effective preemptive airstrikes by the United States Air Force. Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland, Commander of XXIV Corps, communicated this information to Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, Commander of I Corps who decided that the cross-border operation should go ahead as planned despite the lack of adequate preemptive airstrikes.¹ Apparently General Lam would not modify his orders without consulting President Thieu who had approved the original plan. To compensate for this, General Lam requested that U.S. air cavalry fly ahead of the ARVN thrust. But because the air cavalry could not cross the border ahead of ARVN units, the RVNAF and U.S. corps commanders agreed that, at precisely 0700 hours on D-day Phase II (8 February) the Airborne Division would send a combat team across the border to be immediately followed by air cavalry.² This compromise seemed to satisfy both U.S. political restrictions and the I Corps desire for additional support.

¹After-Action Report on LAM SON 719 dated 1 April 1971 by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, pp. 7, 8.

²Specific instructions from COMUSMACV prohibited any U.S. Army elements from entering Laos in advance of the RVNAF border crossing.

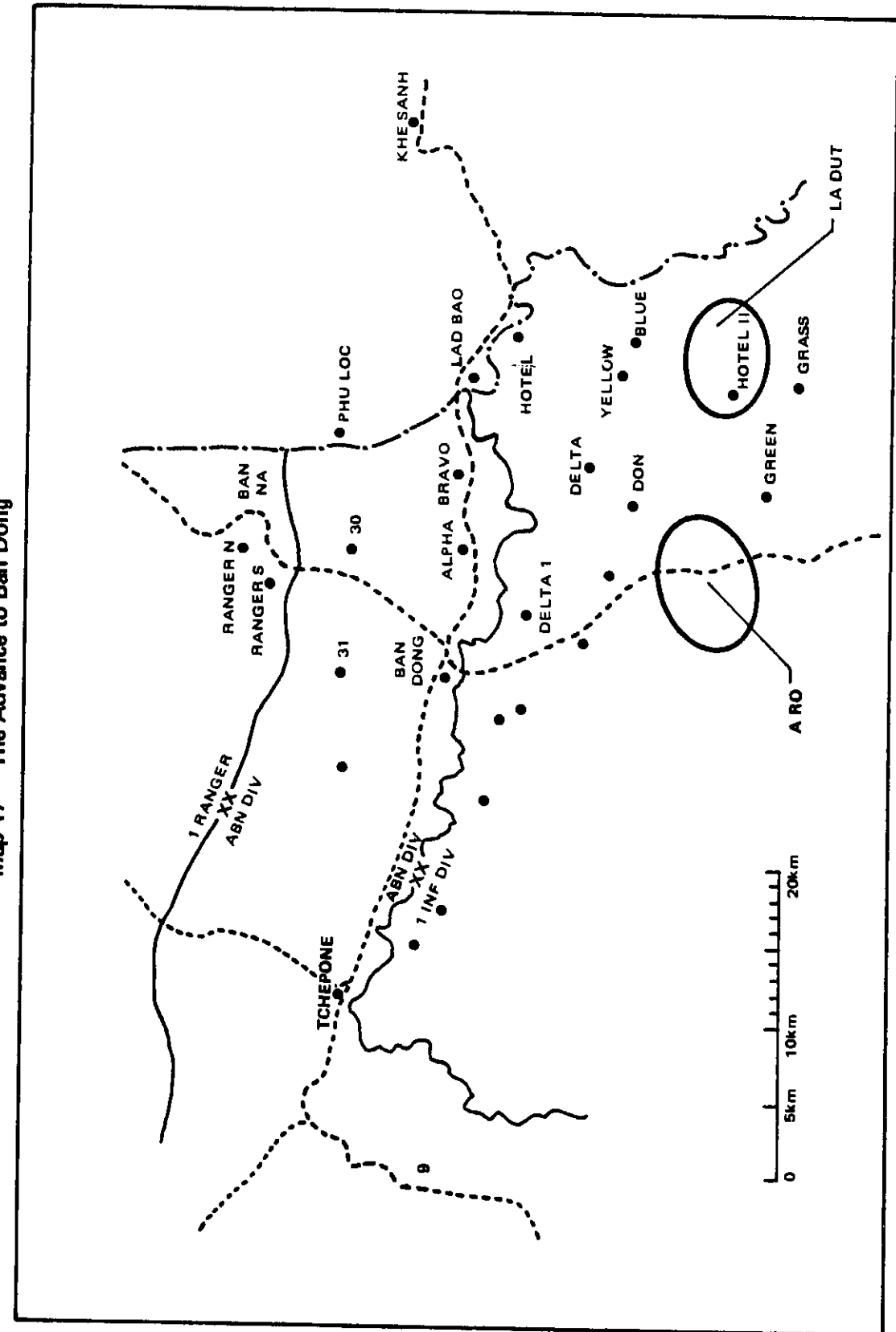
Securing Ban Dong

In the early hours of 8 February, 11 Arc Light sorties were flown against targets in lower Laos as well as to support troop landing zones. The Airborne Division had positioned artillery batteries at Lao Bao in the immediate vicinity of the border to support the main thrust along Route No. 9. Everything seemed to be ready and at 0700 the first airborne-armed team crossed the border. A moment later, it was followed by a flight of U.S. air cavalry helicopters which eventually took the lead to cover the main ARVN task force. The ARVN soldiers, after so many days of waiting, were now cheerfully waving from their armored vehicles at foreign and local press reporters. The press embargo, which had been imposed during the initial stage for security reasons, had been lifted a few days earlier and a number of reporters were already at the border. This first task force consisted of the 1st Armor Brigade (11th and 17th Armor Squadrons) reinforced by the 1st and 8th Airborne Battalions, the 101st Combat Engineer Battalion and a platoon of bulldozers. The road on the Laotian side of the border had been cratered and cut by ditches at many places, and the armored elements provided support for the engineer repair crews. Many parts of the roads were destroyed beyond quick repair and the engineers had to build detours. Sporadic enemy fire was received but it was insignificant in the face of our mighty armored force and the brave airborne troops and they advanced rapidly. Ahead of the column and on the mountain slopes north and south of the axis of advance, air cavalry gunships struck at enemy air defense positions. (Map 17)

All supporting firepower provided by U.S. forces was coordinated by the U.S. 108th Artillery Group. The 155-mm and 8-inch howitzers and long-range guns hit against deep targets in lower Laos beginning at 0800 hours. The 108th Group expertly and effectively performed its support mission.

Meanwhile, U.S. air cavalry teams expanded their range in search of the enemy. Toward the north, not far from the border, by a stream

Map 17 - The Advance to Ban Dong



nearly two kilometers south of Ban Na, U.S. gunships attacked four enemy tracked vehicles at 0820 hours. One vehicle was towing a 37-mm anti-aircraft gun; the gun was immediately destroyed. At 1100 hours, air cavalry reconnaissance spotted enemy armored vehicles northwest of Landing Zone 31, about eight kilometers north of Ban Dong. Results of the gunship attack on these vehicles could not be verified immediately but this was the first evidence of enemy armored units in the area of operations.

While armored and infantry forces were progressing into Laos along the road, the northern and southern flank security elements were heli-borne. The 4/3 Infantry Battalion was transported to Landing Zone Hotel in the Co Roc area by helicopters at 1100 hours without enemy contact. The 2d Airborne Battalion reached Landing Zone 30 ten kilometers north of Route No. 9 unhampered. At 1300 hours, however, near Landing Zone Ranger South, five kilometers northwest of LZ 30, the 21st Ranger Battalion's insertion was met with fire from 12.7-mm antiaircraft machine-guns; 11 rangers wounded and the troop insertion continued while U.S. air cavalry attacked the gun positions. This U.S. gunship activity resulted in a number of enemy troops killed and several trucks destroyed, but more significantly, these attacks caused numerous secondary explosions from a network of fortifications which lasted over a period of an hour.

At 1620 hours, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 3d Infantry Regiment were helilifted into two areas in the vicinity of Landing Zone Blue, four kilometers southwest of LZ Motel. Immediately thereafter, the 2/3 Battalion was engaged by the enemy. Friendly forces sustained five wounded while the enemy lost nine killed and one 12.7-mm machinegun, one AK-47 assault rifle and one Chicom radio captured.

At 1655 hours, U.S. air cavalry gunships attacked a suspected target two kilometers east of Landing Zone 31, causing numerous secondary explosions with flames reaching 1,500 feet in the air. Reconnaissance aircraft reported the fire lasted until just before daylight the following morning. After the attack on this target, the 3d Airborne Brigade Headquarters and 3d Airborne Battalion occupied Landing Zone 31 unopposed.

Toward nightfall, near Fire Support Base Phu Loc at the border, the command post of the 1st Ranger Group and the 37th Ranger Battalion were

subjected to an enemy attack by fire consisting of 50 rounds of 82-mm mortar and 105-mm howitzer; three soldiers were killed and 15 wounded.

By nightfall of the first day, the ARVN armored column had moved nine kilometers into Laos. Though enemy resistance was weak, the column could not move more rapidly because of the bad road conditions and the dense jungle on both sides of the road.

During the day, on the Vietnamese side of the border, U.S. units continued to expand their operations to consolidate security for ARVN rear bases. The pioneer road from the Rockpile to Khe Sanh was opened to track vehicles by 1635 hours providing another vehicular access to Khe Sanh.

In support of the first day of the cross-border operation, U.S. forces had flown 11 B-52 sorties expending 719 tons of bombs which caused 40 secondary explosions, and performed 468 helicopter gunship and 52 tactical air missions, destroying 11 gun emplacements and 40 trucks, damaging 18 trucks and causing 13 secondary explosions and 23 fires. Four huge "commando vault" bombs had been used to clear landing zones. During the night, C-130 gunships had also destroyed additional enemy trucks moving near Ban Dong, the next objective.

On 9 February, the weather suddenly became very poor. Heavy rain made the road a quagmire, preventing the engineers from working. Heli-borne troop insertions were delayed and logistical buildup efforts were halted. Those units already in Laos endeavored to consolidate their positions or increase the range of their patrols. Throughout the day, there were only two minor contacts made by the 21st Ranger Battalion near the Ranger South area and by the 8th Airborne Battalion north of Landing Zone Alpha approximately 10 kilometers west of the border with insignificant results reported by each unit.

The next day, 10 February, the weather improved but did not permit heliborne operations until late in the afternoon when the 4th Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, completed an assault into Landing Zone Delta, 10 kilometers due west of LZ Hotel at 1630 hours. The armored thrust meanwhile resumed at a stronger pace after a day of marking time. At 1700 hours the 9th Airborne Battalion was inserted into Landing Zone A

Luoi (Ban Dong), approximately 20 kilometers from the border. Enemy antiaircraft fire was heavy, but thanks to the dedicated support of air cavalry teams, the landing was completed at 1720 hours. Two hours later, advance elements of the armored column linked up with the 9th Airborne Battalion at A Luoi. This was the greatest success of the day.

The same day was marked by several other events. Troops of the 3d Airborne Battalion, operating approximately one kilometer east of Fire Support Base 31, were engaged by the enemy at 1230 hours. They suffered light casualties but captured six Molotova trucks loaded with ammunition. Extending their search north, this team found a cache of fourteen 82-mm mortars, four 122-mm rocket launchers and nine AK-47 assault rifles.

Meanwhile, near the area of operations of the 21st Ranger Battalion, a flight of four VNAF helicopters bound for Landing Zone Ranger South was hit by enemy 37-mm antiaircraft artillery fire at 1300 hours. Two helicopters were downed and all passengers were presumed killed. The first helicopter carried two ARVN colonels, the G3 and G4 of I Corps. The second helicopter reportedly carried a number of foreign correspondents. It was suspected that the I Corps G3 had carried with him an operational map of LAM SON 719 along with signal operating instructions and codes. The loss of these documents to the enemy would be extremely significant. A thorough search of the area for the downed helicopters produced no results.

The linkup on Route No. 9 between the armored and airborne troops at Landing Zone A Luoi (Ban Dong) nearly 20 kilometers deep into enemy territory was an encouraging achievement. I Corps Headquarters therefore decided to push the operation further westward. Reinforcements were to be sent on 11 February to increase security on the northern and southern flanks before further advance was made. At 1430 hours, the 3/1 Infantry Battalion was heliborne to be inserted into Landing Zone Yellow but because of last-minute intelligence reports of important enemy concentration nearby, the battalion was diverted to Landing Zone Don, four kilometers southwest of LZ Delta. During the same period, toward the north, the 39th Ranger Battalion was deployed in the area of Landing

Zone Ranger North, two kilometers west of Ban Na in coordination with the 21st Rangers which had been manning Ranger South since 8 February.

In order to obtain additional fire support for the planned movement all major fire support bases were consolidated and reinforced. At Fire Support Base 30, one 105-mm battery and one 155-mm battery were deployed. Fire Support Base 31, the command post of the 3d Airborne Brigade, had a six-piece 105-mm battery. Light bulldozers were helilifted into these fire support bases to help fortify the defenses. Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong), Fire Support Base Hotel of the 3d Infantry Regiment, and Fire Support Base Delta of the 1st Infantry Regiment (1st Infantry Division) also received an adequate number of artillery pieces.

From 11 to 16 February, while I Corps staff in the rear was planning the next moves, ARVN units in the forward area in lower Laos expanded their operations and continued the search for the enemy, increasing the number of contacts and caches uncovered. In the ranger's area, on the northern flank, the 37th Ranger Battalion operating near Fire Support Base Phu Loc and protecting the northwestern approaches to Khe Sanh was continuously subjected to enemy attacks by fire and probes. At 1100 hours on 12 February, the battalion, supported by U.S. gunships, engaged an enemy force three kilometers north-northwest of the base. The results were as follows: on the friendly side, four rangers killed, six wounded, and one UH-1G helicopter shot down by 12.7-mm fire; enemy troops suffered 13 killed, one captured and ten AK-47 assault rifles seized.

The 39th and 21st Ranger Battalions, which operated around Landing Zones Ranger North and Ranger South respectively, were probably the units most frequently in contact with the enemy. At 1825 hours on 11 February, the 21st Ranger Battalion engaged the enemy four kilometers northeast of its base killing 11 Communist troops, but later, at 2200 hours suffered six wounded from an enemy attack by fire consisting of forty 82-mm mortar rounds. During the afternoon of 13 February, the 39th Battalion engaged a large enemy force at three kilometers west-southwest of Landing Zone Ranger North, killing 43 enemy personnel and seizing two 37-mm antiaircraft artillery guns, two 12.7-mm machineguns, a substantial amount of ammunition and assorted types of equipment.

The 39th Battalion had only one killed and 10 wounded. Meanwhile, the 21st Ranger Battalion made sporadic contacts with the enemy throughout the day without significant results. Light contacts continued during the following days.

In the area of operations of the Airborne Division, no additional major units were inserted after the initial deployment but the ones already in place were expanding their search activities. The 1st Armored Brigade launched two reconnaissance missions of combined armored/airborne forces north and south of Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong). In the afternoon of 11 February, the northern element engaged an unknown-size force. Friendly losses were two M-113 armored personnel carriers destroyed, one killed and one wounded. At approximately the same time, another M-113 detonated a mine, causing nine wounded. In the afternoon of 15 February, an element of the 17th Armored Squadron came upon two Russian trucks three kilometers north of Ban Dong and destroyed an estimated six tons of rice.

Around Fire Support Bases 30 and 31, the 2d and 3d Airborne Battalions pushed further out. Their companies made sporadic contacts and proved superior to enemy forces in the area. In the morning of 12 February in particular, an element of the 2d Airborne Battalion engaged the enemy five kilometers southeast of Fire Support Base 30, killing 32 enemy troops, seizing 20 individual weapons and destroying three crew-served weapons. Friendly forces had only three killed. Other sporadic contacts were all in favor of friendly forces. At 1430 hours on 14 February, Fire Support Base 31 received an attack by fire which resulted in six airborne troops killed, three wounded and one bulldozer damaged. The following day, toward noon, Fire Support Base 31 received 122-mm rockets which killed two and wounded four.

In the meantime, south of Route No. 9, the 1st Infantry Division introduced more troops into action. The 3/1 Battalion had been transported to Landing Zone Don in the afternoon of 11 February, and the 2/1 Battalion was helilifted to Landing Zone Delta 1, six kilometers southeast of Ban Dong, in the afternoon of the following day to push further west. On 16 February, the 2/3 Infantry Battalion was inserted

at Landing Zone Grass, 12 kilometers northeast of Muong Nong, to push further south toward the enemy's Base Area 611. LZ Grass was the southernmost position held by friendly forces in the area of operation.

Throughout this period, various units of the division searched for the enemy and made many contacts which produced substantial results to include several enemy caches. At 1615 hours on 11 February, the 3/1 Battalion observed a target one kilometer southeast of Landing Zone Don which had been hit by airstrikes. The battalion discovered 23 enemy bodies and seized two 12.7-mm machineguns, four AK-47 assault rifles and one Chicom radio. In the afternoon of 12 February, this battalion found a cache three kilometers south-southwest of Landing Zone Don which contained 600 individual weapons, 400 82-mm mortar rounds, numerous rounds of assorted ammunition and the bodies of 50 enemy troops killed by airstrikes. Late in the afternoon, at three kilometers south of Landing Zone Don, the 1/1 Battalion discovered an enemy camp containing substantial amounts of food along with military clothing, equipment and ammunition, particularly 12.7-mm rounds. On 13 February, the 3/1 Battalion found another cache with thirty 75-mm recoilless rifles, fifty 55 gallon drums of gasoline and substantial quantities of other types of equipment. At the same time, six kilometers north-northeast of Landing Zone Grass, the 2/3 Battalion seized three new Russian trucks.

As of 13 February, contacts being made by elements of the 1st Division forces were increasing. During the afternoon of that day, the 1/1 Battalion engaged an enemy element three kilometers south-southwest of LZ Don, killing 28 enemy troops and seizing a storage area which contained an East German machinegun, seven RPDs, one B40, one B41, two SKS, gasoline, generators and huge quantities of food along with kitchen utensils. On 14 February, the 2/3 and 1/3 Battalions each received an attack by fire of an estimated one hundred 82-mm mortar rounds. The 1st Battalion had one killed and seven wounded and the 2d Battalion had 16 wounded. Even though enemy attacks by fire and actual contacts increased during the next few days, all the units of the 1st ARVN Division continued to seize substantial amounts of enemy supplies and materiel.

Meanwhile, in northwest Quang Tri Province, U.S. units continued their security operations. Their efforts were mainly directed northward toward the DMZ, particularly north of the Rockpile. In the evening of 11 February, Forward Support Area 26-1 at Vandegrift received six 122-mm rockets which resulted in four U.S. troops killed and two wounded. On 14 February at 0215 hours, Dong Ha City and its airfield, where the forward CP of I Corps was located, received 25 rounds of 122-mm rockets which killed one civilian and wounded 14 others but the airfield suffered only light damage.

In addition to the big guns of the 108th Artillery Group, U.S. air support was an important factor during the first week of the incursion. Each day, from 500 to 800 sorties of air cavalry gunships were flown in addition to approximately 100 sorties of tactical bombers and, depending upon available targets, a number of missions by B-52 strategic bombers. Losses inflicted on the enemy by these airstrikes were very significant.³ But despite the devastating U.S. air and artillery support, enemy anti-aircraft gunners took a heavy toll of helicopters; and the U.S. air cavalry, as well as the RVNAF, had to increase their efforts to silence the Communist guns.

³Bomb damage assessments were extremely difficult and hazardous to conduct in this dense, heavily defended area. As a consequence, only 10% of the B-52 targets struck during LAM SON 719 were reconnoitered later on the ground and even those that were entered by ground troops were so torn up by craters and splintered trees that accurate assessments were impossible. Nevertheless, by putting together all sources of information—prisoner and rallier interrogations, aerial observation and photography, ground reconnaissance, document exploitation, agent reports and communications intelligence—analysts concluded that enemy losses to U.S. air attacks were substantial.

By the end of the first week of the invasion of Laos, the I Corps armored-airborne advance along Route No. 9 had become much slower and more cautious. Securing and repairing this road had become vital to guarantee a logistical life line for ARVN forces in the event inclement weather precluded the use of helicopters. A network of fire support bases had been established along the road to ensure artillery support and while the task force proceeded westward, its flanks were effectively protected. An airborne brigade and a ranger group secured the northern flank while two regiments of the 1st Infantry Division were deployed along the southern flank.

According to the operational plan, the Airborne Division and the 1st Infantry Division were expected to advance westward, each step forward to be solidly anchored on a fire support base. The planners of LAM SON 719 apparently believed that this tactic, coordinated with the massive support by the USAF and U.S. Army air cavalry, would help accomplish the mission with minimum losses. But because of this procedure, the operation progressed slowly and did not exactly meet the expectations of U.S. counterparts. In Saigon, General Abrams, COMUSMACV, in a discussion with General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the JGS/RVNAF, expressed his wish to see the operational units reach Tchepone as quickly as possible.⁴ Then, in the afternoon of 16 February, in the forward command post of I Corps at Dong Ha airfield, Generals Vien and Abrams met with Generals Lam and Sutherland for two-and-a-half hours. After a review of the general situation, a decision was made to step up the operation by having the 1st Infantry Division quickly occupy the higher mountain tops south of the Xepon River and establish fire support bases there to support the Airborne Division's push toward Tchepone. They estimated that this would take three to five days. But, as later events were to prove, battlefield developments seldom occur exactly as planned. Enemy reactions were becoming stronger with each day and the test of strength more arduous.

⁴Message 00843, 141435Z Feb 71, COMUSMACV to CJCS.

The Enemy Counteracted

Nearly a week had passed since Ban Dong was occupied. Except for a few clearing activities conducted by units of the 1st Infantry Division, the forward movement of ARVN forces seemed to have stalled. The heliborne insertion of troops through the fierce enemy air defense screen in the afternoon of 10 February had enabled friendly forces to quickly occupy this objective. The linkup with armored forces had also been made immediately thereafter. Fire Support Base Ban Dong was now well entrenched with six 105-mm and six 155-mm howitzers and adequate ammunition and supplies. However, as of 16 February, six days after the capture of Ban Dong, there had been no further progress by ARVN troops toward the objective Tchepone. In the meantime, the enemy had increased his air defense capabilities along the mountain slopes to the south. Enemy attacks by fire, which were initially conducted with assorted mortars and 122-mm rockets, were now occasionally augmented by long-range artillery. ARVN armored units had tried to advance but could not make much progress. The dense forests bordering the road required careful, time-consuming reconnaissance to avoid ambush and this made the armored column's movement extremely slow.

On 17 February, it rained hard and the helicopters rested idly on the airfields. However, since early morning, an armored infantry task force consisting of the 17th Armored Squadron and the 8th Airborne Battalion operating north of Ban Dong had been engaging the enemy. The results were four friendly troops killed while the enemy suffered 36 killed. Sixteen AK-47 assault rifles and a quantity of military clothing and equipment were seized. Toward noon, this task force made another contact four kilometers north of Ban Dong and captured one PT-76 amphibious tank, two Russian trucks, one 12.7-mm machinegun and two 7.62-mm machineguns. The PT-76 tank was only slightly damaged and was towed back to A Luoi. To the south, the 1st Infantry Division continued to make contacts and receive attacks by fire.

In the early morning of 18 February, the 1st Airborne Battalion, while conducting an Arc Light bomb damage assessment two kilometers north of LZ Bravo, made light contact with the enemy and found a command post. Captured documents indicated that this was the command post of the 308th NVA Division and traces found in the area were rather recent. Toward noon, U.S. air cavalry spotted and attacked an enemy truck convoy nine kilometers west-northwest of Ban Dong destroying one truck, and damaging another and a tracked vehicle. Nearby, at two places two-and-a-half kilometers to the east, the 2d Troop, 17th Armored Squadron found and cut three pipeline sections four inches in diameter. Two sections were destroyed while the third one was made unusable. During the day, other airborne units and elements of the 1st Infantry Division were subjected to sporadic attacks by fire and ground contacts and a few helicopters were shot down.

All these activities were quickly eclipsed by reports of heavy enemy troop concentrations around the 39th and 21st Ranger Battalions. Both battalions were being subjected to attacks by fire and ground attacks and the fighting lasted all night while friendly artillery, tactical air and flareships responded quickly in support of the embattled rangers.

The next morning, enemy pressure on the 21st Ranger Battalion gradually diminished but heavy pressure persisted on the 39th Battalion in the Ranger North area. The battle continued over 19 February. Enemy troops here were confirmed to be elements of the 102d Regiment of the 308th Division, all with new weapons and clothing. Before launching an assault, the rangers reported, the enemy made extensive use of recoilless rifles and mortars; his fire was very accurate. The strongest enemy attacks were directed at the eastern flank of the rangers which was their weakest spot. However, the 39th Battalion continued to hold its positions with support from U.S. artillery and tactical air.

Meanwhile, information concerning the enemy's growing capabilities became clearer with each day. His air defense network was becoming dense and heavy artillery was committed. ARVN artillerymen confirmed that, in addition to the various types of mortars and rockets commonly

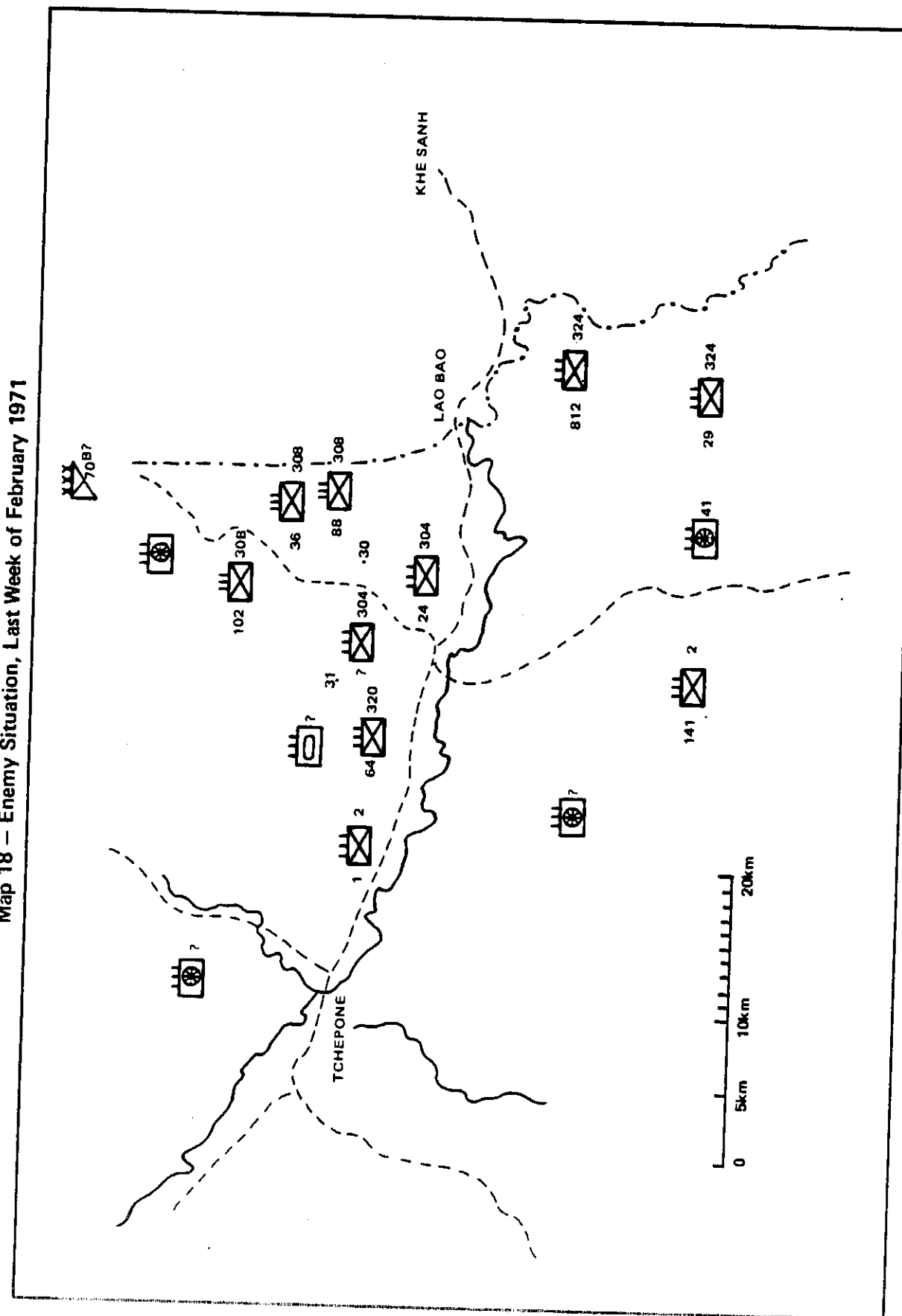
used in South Vietnam, the enemy had also fired quite a few rounds of 122- and 105-mm field guns and howitzers and possibly 85- and 130-mm field guns as well. In addition to three pipeline sections found and destroyed, captured documents also suggested the existence of pipeline throughout Base Areas 604 and 611. And the presence of enemy armor became increasingly apparent.

Enemy main force units in the area of operation were confirmed during the first days to be the 1st Regiment of the 2d (Yellow Star) Division, 24B Regiment of the 304th Division and elements of the 675th Artillery Regiment. A prisoner from the 14th Air Defense Battalion of the 2d Division disclosed that the subordinate units of this division (1st, 3d and 141st regiments) had been moving east from the Tchepone area since early February to block the ARVN advance.

Enemy opposition grew stronger with each day around Ban Dong and the area of Route 1032B for which the rangers were responsible. On 10 February, the 21st Ranger Battalion engaged an element of the enemy's 88th Regiment. The next day, the 37th Ranger Battalion engaged a battalion-size unit near FSB Phu Loc. The discovery of the command post of the 308th Division on 18 February further confirmed reports that this division had joined in the fighting (the 308th Division had three regiments: 36th, 88th and 102d).

On 11 February, two prisoners disclosed that the 64th Regiment/320th Division had arrived in lower Laos on 4 February and was operating in the Ban Dong area. On 14 February another prisoner of the 64th Regiment gave the location of each battalion of this regiment. He also reported an NVA armored unit with an estimated fifteen PT-76s in the same area southeast of Fire Support Base 31 where signs of enemy tracked vehicles had been detected. The vehicles were subsequently attacked. Toward the south, in the area of operations of the 1st Infantry Division, captured documents confirmed the location of Binh Tram 41 two kilometers south of Landing Zone Blue with the 4th Air Defense Battalion, the 75th Engineer Battalion, and an unidentified infantry regiment providing additional security. This infantry regiment might have been the 141st Regiment of the 2d Division. (Map 18)

Map 18 - Enemy Situation, Last Week of February 1971



While firefights were raging in the Ranger North area, on 19 February President Thieu visited I Corps Forward CP at Dong Ha. General Lam reported the critical situation faced by the 39th Rangers and the increasingly forceful enemy reactions which were making the planned push toward Tchepone by the Airborne Division highly questionable. In the presence of ARVN division commanders, President Thieu told him to take his time and, under the present circumstances, perhaps it would be better to expand search activities toward the southwest to cut off Route 914 which led into Base Area 611.

During the night of 19 February, the enemy continued to attack the 39th Battalion while launching uninterrupted attacks by fire to hold the 21st Battalion in check. Seven fixed-wing gunships and six flare-ships were used in support of the 39th Battalion and, from 0730 to 1430 hours on 20 February, 32 tactical air sorties were flown in support of the rangers. Efforts to resupply and evacuate their casualties were made with strong support from tactical air, gunships and artillery. Some helicopters managed to land in the area, ammunition was delivered and some wounded evacuated. But upon takeoff, two helicopters were damaged by enemy fire. One had to land in the positions of the 21st Ranger Battalion (Ranger South) and the other managed to land at Fire Support Base 30.

In the afternoon, reconnaissance aircraft reported sighting an estimated 400 to 500 enemy troops encircling the 39th Battalion. At 1710 hours on 20 February, radio contact with the 39th Ranger Battalion was lost. At 1856 hours, I Corps CP received information that the able-bodied personnel of the battalion had fought their way out and reached the 21st Ranger Battalion positions with most of the wounded and all of their weapons but with very little ammunition left. Those who reached the 21st Ranger Battalion numbered nearly 200; 107 were still able to fight but 92 were wounded. Total losses were 178 dead and missing and 148 wounded. Intelligence reports indicated enemy casualties to be 639 killed with a corresponding number of weapons destroyed (423 AK-47s, 15 B40/B41s and numerous automatic weapons).

With most of the wounded of the 39th Ranger Battalion still stranded in the 21st Rangers' positions, this unit received intense attacks by fire, including 130-mm artillery, on the night of 21 February. Plans were made to evacuate the wounded rangers the following day. Toward noon on 22 February, the area around the battalion position was subjected to a heavy barrage of fire involving tactical air, air cavalry, aerial artillery and ground artillery for nearly an hour while 13 medical evacuation helicopters were airborne, ready to go in. All of them landed and successfully picked up 122 wounded as well as one U.S. pilot who had been stranded there since his aircraft was shot down. The ranger force remaining in combat position at Ranger South numbered approximately 400 men including 100 from the 39th Battalion but two days later, on 24 February, the battalion was ordered by the I Corps commander to withdraw to FSB 30. From there they were helilifted to FSB Phu Loc.

While the 39th Ranger Battalion was holding out, numerous activities took place in other areas. U.S. air cavalry continued to search for and destroy pipelines. Units of the 1st Infantry Division moved further south, striking along Route 92 and finding a number of enemy installations, but also making numerous contacts and receiving attacks by fire. The 8th Airborne Battalion and armored elements engaged the enemy two kilometers north of Ban Dong, destroying one T-34 tank and a 23-mm gun position. This was another strong indication of enemy armor involvement. On the friendly side, a number of U.S. helicopters were shot down while on supply, medical evacuation or support missions.

The corps commander had concluded that the position held by the 21st Rangers and the survivors of the 39th was untenable. A maximum effort in air and artillery support was required for each resupply and evacuation mission and he had other pressing demands for this support. The position was not an objective in itself and there was no military advantage in sacrificing a ranger battalion in a doomed attempt to hold it. The corps commander was looking toward his objectives in the west and he wished to conserve as much of his combat power as possible for the main mission.

In the southern sector of the 1st Division, within objective area A-Ro, the 2/3 Battalion came into heavy contact with the enemy on 23 February. The 3/3 Battalion was brought in to reinforce but the enemy would

not disengage. On 24 February, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division requested a B-52 mission and the two battalions pulled back an hour prior to the airstrike; they counterattacked immediately thereafter. Results were verified to be 159 enemy bodies left in place along with numerous weapons. Still, the enemy remained deployed around Fire Support Base Hotel 2, causing a delay in the plans to move the 105-mm artillery battery out and close the base in order to send the 3d Infantry Regiment westward with the mission of cutting off Route 914 as directed by President Thieu during his 19 February visit.

The Loss of Fire Support Base 31

The withdrawal of the 21st Ranger Battalion left the northern flank of the Airborne Division exposed and Fire Support Bases 31 and 30 now bore the brunt of enemy attacks. They had been under pressure since the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 3d Airborne Brigade were inserted. Established in the immediate vicinity of the Communist north-south supply line, both bases were able to monitor closely enemy troop movements as well as signs of enemy armored activities. Each battalion left but a small force to defend the bases while a larger force fanned out in security and search activities, but this mobile force was not sufficient to prevent the enemy from moving close to the bases and setting up mortars and antiaircraft guns to interdict supply and medical evacuation attempts.⁵ Each helicopter landing or departing usually resulted in heavy attacks by fire.

To strengthen the security of Fire Support Base 31, which was a more important position and seemed to be more heavily threatened because it housed the 3d Airborne Brigade headquarters, plans were made to helilift the 6th Airborne Battalion to a mountain range northwest of the base on 13 February. This mountain range controlled a valley running a southeasterly course to Fire Support Base 31 and the valley was the source for attacks by fire against friendly positions. Although B-52

⁵ Airborne units routinely secured their fire support bases in this manner. Other ARVN units also employed this technique when the terrain and enemy situation made it appropriate.

bombs had cleared the landing zone and its approaches, the fleet of helicopters bringing in the first elements of the 6th Airborne Battalion was subjected to heavy attacks by fire immediately upon landing. The remaining elements of the 6th Battalion were diverted to alternate landing zones nearby. Upon touching the ground, the battalion spread out its troops over nearly a kilometer but continued to receive enemy artillery fire. The battalion then broke up and withdrew south, to near Fire Support Base 31. It had lost 28 KIA, 50 WIA and 23 MIA during this short venture. Between that time and its eventual evacuation on 19 February, the 6th Battalion was unable to carry out any significant mission. The northwest mountain range remained under enemy control and FSB 31 continued to hold under heavy enemy pressure.

(Map 19)

A company of the 3d Airborne Battalion operating southwest of FSB 31 received a rallier who was a sergeant, platoon leader in the 24B Regiment of the 304th Division. He reported that the Communists had been preparing to counter the RVNAF-US operation since October 1970. Rear service units of Group 559 had in fact received orders to prepare for combat and an army corps size headquarters called the 70th Front was designated in October 1970, to command the 304th, 308th and 320th divisions, a number of artillery regiments, an armored regiment, a number of air defense regiments and other support units. To counter Operation LAM SON 719, the 70th Front Headquarters was sent to lower Laos along with NVA combat units. The 24B Regiment along with advance elements of the 9th and 66th Regiments had infiltrated the border area west of Quang Tri since 9 February. From all these new revelations it appeared that the enemy would make a determined effort to defend his base areas.

The situation heated up following the evacuation of ranger positions in the north and as a result of heavy enemy attacks. The 31st and 32d Companies, 3d ABN Battalion operating in the mountain ranges northeast of Fire Support Base 31 received orders from the division to move south and meet an armored task force composed of the 17th Armored Squadron and two companies of the 8th Airborne Battalion coming