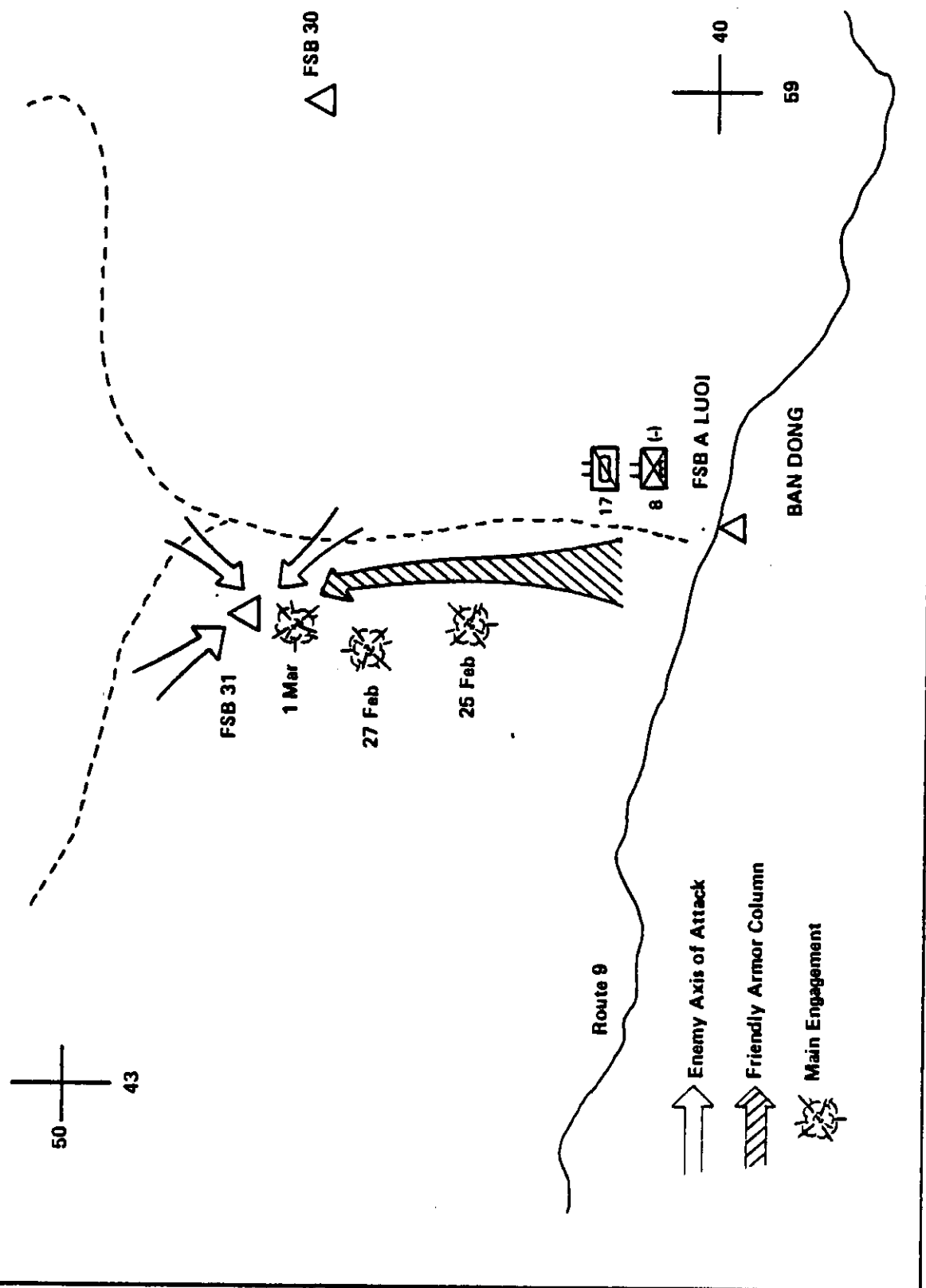


Reference: Map 1:100,000
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as reinforcement. Remaining at the base were a 105-mm artillery battery, the command section of the 3d Airborne Artillery Battalion and the 33d and 34th Rifle Companies. The 34th Company had suffered heavy combat casualties and was left with only 60 men. Outside the base there was only the 3d Reconnaissance Company deployed on a mountain to the west. On the night of 23 February, a team of Communist sappers was spotted as it attempted to infiltrate the base from the west. Fifteen Communist troops were killed on the spot. The enemy continued to launch attacks by fire and kept our helicopters from providing support. Many of our dead and wounded were left on the base for three or four days as evacuation was not possible.

At 1100 hours on 25 February, Fire Support Base 31 received massive attacks by fire, including fire from 130-mm field guns. At 1300 hours, the 31st Company to the south reported enemy armored movements. The base responded with artillery fire and called for artillery support from Fire Support Bases 30 and A Luoi. The forward air controller's aircraft (FAC 229) was not in the air because of a confusion in grid coordinates and did not arrive until 1400 hours. By that time, fire from small weapons was being received from all directions and enemy tanks had reached the southern perimeter of the base. The first flight of fixed-wing tactical aircraft to reach the base destroyed a number of enemy tanks on the spot and held back the armored thrust against the southern perimeter. At 1520 hours, an estimated 20 tanks supported by enemy infantry troops moved in from the northwest and the east. At precisely the same time, an F-4 aircraft was hit and erupted in flames but the pilot ejected. The Hammer FAC aircraft left its position to direct effort to rescue the U.S. pilot, interrupting air support for Fire Support Base 31. After a fierce artillery barrage, the enemy assaulted. At that time, a helicopter of the advisory team for the Airborne Division was the only aircraft flying overhead. It turned its M-60 machinegun fire on the enemy but it was in vain! Artillery from A Luoi and Fire Support Base 30 continued to fire in support but could not stop the enemy tanks attacking on the hill slopes. Forty minutes later, the base was overrun. It is possible that had the FAC remained

on station above the battle that U.S. airpower could have been employed to hold the firebase. A number of airborne troops managed to break out but the commanders of the 3d Airborne Brigade and 3d Artillery Battalion were captured by the enemy.⁶ The weather thereafter worsened and aircraft could not provide support. ARVN losses at Fire Support Base 31 were 155 killed and missing with a corresponding number of individual weapons and six 105-mm howitzers. The enemy lost an estimated 250 killed and eleven PT-76 and T-54 tanks.

Between 25 February and 1 March, on its way to relieve Fire Support Base 31, the armored-infantry task force composed of the 17th Armored Squadron, the 8th Airborne Battalion and remaining elements of the 3d Airborne Battalion fought three major battles on 25 February, 27 February and on the night of 1 March 1971. They lost 27 KIA, 186 WIA, one MIA, three M-41 tanks and 25 armored vehicles destroyed. The enemy sustained 1,130 killed, two captured, over 300 assorted weapons seized, 17 PT-76 and six T-54 tanks and two Molotova trucks destroyed. The prisoners disclosed that the 24B Regiment and the 36th Regiment of the 308th Division, reinforced by the 202d Tank Regiment, had taken part in recent battles. The 24B Regiment was the unit which attacked Fire Support Base 31 while the 36th Regiment was operating to the south. Cumulative enemy losses during these battles equaled one-half of the strength he initially committed.

Even before the attack on Fire Support Base 31, Fire Support Base 30 of the 2d Airborne Battalion had been the target of repeated enemy attacks by fire involving all sizes of ammunition in the Communist inventory. Because of the accurate enemy anti-aircraft fire, helicopter takeoffs and landings were very risky. Each resupply mission was

⁶ Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, commander of the 3d Airborne Brigade, was forced by the Communists to make a radio statement denouncing LAM SON 719 shortly after his capture.

planned and prepared as if it had been a landing of combat troops. On 27 February, resupply efforts were made; smoke cover, artillery, gunships and tactical air were used but the enemy still shot down an aircraft which interrupted the supply attempts. Supplies were running low while the number of dead and wounded increased but could not be evacuated. The base fought desperately to defend itself.

Up to this point, the direction taken by enemy reactions seemed rather clear. The main forces committed consisted of the 304th, 308th and 2d (Yellow Star) Divisions along with elements of the 320th and 324B Divisions and armored and artillery units. The NVA strategy appeared to concentrate on massing the infantry, armor and artillery force necessary to isolate and overwhelm—one by one—the RVNAF fire bases. The enemy took advantage of the rugged terrain to disperse his logistic, engineer and air defense units into small elements which were well entrenched in fortified positions established throughout the area and ARVN forces made contact wherever they moved; only by summoning concentrated firepower were they able to overpower the enemy.

The enemy appeared to have coped effectively with friendly mobile forces, heliborne insertions of troops and artillery positions. His mortar fire, which was sustained by adequate reserves of ammunition, was now supplemented by long-range artillery. This came as a new experience for ARVN forces who were not fully prepared to cope with massive and sustained attacks by fire and the conventional armor-supported infantry attack that overran FSB 31 was probably the first Communist large-scale combined arms attack in the Indochina theater.

The difficulties that Fire Support Base 31 had experienced and Fire Support Base 30 was now experiencing showed that enemy reactions largely consisted of attacks by fire and air defense. Attacks by fire were designed to create tension and cause attrition. Anti-aircraft fire was aimed at disrupting communications, supply and medical evacuation by helicopters, and isolating the bases.

On the friendly side, several shortcomings were evident from the very beginning of the operation. First, high-level headquarters were located too far from the combat zone and from each other. As a result,

they had difficulties coordinating with each other. The U.S. XXIV Corps Forward, for example, was located in Quang Tri while I Corps Forward was in Dong Ha. Coordination was thus difficult and often slow. Second, the tactical command post of I Corps at Ham Nghi Base was apparently weak. Officers on duty there were all in the junior grades; key staff officers meanwhile remained at Dong Ha. Though the I Corps commander was frequently at Ham Nghi during the day, staff operations were still hampered by the absence of senior staff personnel with enough authority and competence to provide immediate solutions to battlefield emergencies as they arose. This was a noteworthy shortcoming and it contributed to the loss of Fire Base 31 and the inadequate coordination between RVNAF commands in the withdrawal.

Third, the U.S. XXIV Corps had no representative in the forward area with authority to coordinate the activities of those units supporting the RVNAF forces such as the 101st Aviation Group, the 1/5 Mechanized Brigade, and the 108th Artillery Group. All these units communicated directly with the ARVN divisions they supported. As a result, coordinating the allocation of support assets among the ARVN divisions became extremely difficult. The divisional advisory staffs meanwhile had no authority to handle the coordination of support and had to refer every action to Quang Tri. Solutions, therefore, were worked out on the basis of expediency, requirements and good will.

In addition, the Airborne Division complained that there was only one forward air controller aircraft for the entire area covered by the division. Since the airborne division was involved in several operations simultaneously conducted in different directions this represented a major handicap. This problem was quite evident during the battle at Fire Support Base 31.

Counterattacks by the enemy revealed the weakness of ARVN anti-tank weaponry. The Airborne Division reported that the M-72 light anti-tank weapon was ineffective against armored vehicles which continued to move after being hit. Lieutenant General Lam immediately notified the Central Logistical Command. As a result over 300 3.5" rocket launchers with ammunition, all previously considered obsolescent and placed in storage

pending return to the United States, were hastily transported to the front for distribution to combat units. XXIV Corps also gathered a number of 90-mm recoilless rifles to help the ARVN airborne forces. However, the M-72 light anti-tank weapon was later re-tested at the Quang Trung Training Center and proved to be effective. As regards ARVN armor units, this was their first significant confrontation with enemy tanks. ARVN gunners proved to be confused and hasty, firing from too far away and often too soon, thereby frequently causing deflections. Enemy tanks, moreover, seldom moved in the open but mostly lay in ambush, well concealed in the jungle.

A number of units also failed to carry adequate clothing when this was a period of lingering cold in the mountains and forests of the Truong Son Range. The Central Logistic Command was required to have field jackets and blankets air delivered to units during combat.

Tohepone Was the Objective

After capturing and destroying Fire Support Base 31, Communist forces continued to encircle and harass ARVN fire bases. North of Route No. 9, Fire Support Base 30 continued to bear the pressure of heavy artillery attacks each day and was cut off from the rear by an almost impenetrable air defense net. The ARVN armored task force which tried to pick up the survivors of the 3d Airborne Battalion from Fire Support Base 31 was repeatedly engaged by NVA armor-supported infantry.

South of the road, the targets of enemy encirclement were Fire Support Base Hotel 2, seven kilometers southwest of Landing Zone Don, and the 2/3 and 3/3 Battalions of the 1st Infantry Division on mobile operations along Route 92 nearby. On 27 February, despite heavy air strikes which attempted to silence enemy air defense guns, a big H-53 helicopter was hit and exploded in the air while trying to sling-carry a 105-mm howitzer. It was then decided to close Fire Support Base Hotel 2 and send the 3d Regiment northwestward on a mission to interdict and disrupt Route 914. This plan could not be carried out immediately because there still remained a battery of 105-mm howitzers whose extri-

cation proved difficult. During the night, I Corps Headquarters ordered the destruction of the artillery pieces in the base; the defending unit was then to proceed on foot to join the 3d Regiment. The 2d and 3d Battalions of the regiment were also ordered to move their wounded north to find a suitable pickup point for medical evacuation helicopters. In the morning of 28 February while on their way, these units came upon a target hit by B-52s and found the bodies of 157 enemy troops along with numerous weapons destroyed. During that day, medical evacuation efforts were not successful because of intense enemy fire from 82-mm mortars and small arms directed at the pickup zone and one UH-1H was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire and burst into flames.

The situation by this time was becoming increasingly tense throughout the area of operations. Truck convoys were frequently attacked on Route No. 9 in Laos and on the RVN territory, the enemy increased efforts to ambush convoys and attack rear bases. The ARVN westward drive was stalled. In the midst of this situation, I Corps Headquarters received a directive from President Nguyen Van Thieu to have the Marine Division relieve the Airborne Division. He must have realized that such a relief under the combat conditions on that battlefield would be very hazardous. Besides, the Airborne Division was still a strong unit; it had suffered some losses but these losses were not yet too serious. What then caused him to order its replacement? The most probable answer could be that he was really worried over the additional losses that the Airborne Division would sustain in protracted combat. He certainly would like to keep this elite unit intact at all costs. In any event, the Marine Division was a poor choice for the relief. Despite the combat worthiness of its individual brigades, it had never fought as a division.

It was probably with this bothering thought that in the afternoon of 28 February, Lieutenant General Lam flew to Saigon with an alternative to present to the President. During his meeting with President Thieu, Lam's plan was adopted. Instead of the Marine Division, the 1st Infantry Division with three regiments under its command was selected to proceed northwest from its present positions to occupy

Tchepone. The Airborne Division would provide protection for the northern flank and secure Route No. 9. The Marine Division was to deploy two brigades behind the 1st Division; its remaining brigade would serve as the corps' reserve.

Tchepone, a tiny town whose civilian population had fled long ago, now had only scars and ruins left. By this time, it had become more of a political and psychological symbol than an objective of practical military value. There was nothing of military importance in the ruined town; enemy supplies and war materiel were all stored in caches in the forests and mountains. Lines of communication were located east and west of Tchepone, not in the town proper. Despite all this, the Tchepone road junction was near the center of NVA logistics activity in the Laos panhandle and it was understandable that it became a symbol of great importance. The RVN information agencies, the press (both foreign and domestic), all contributed their share in making Tchepone the place to reach at all costs so the ARVN effort now seemed to be more directed at setting foot in Tchepone than trying to destroy the NVA logistical system which was the real objective of the offensive.

Meeting with Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams in the afternoon of 1 March, President Thieu made known his plan to relieve the Airborne Division and expressed his desire to helilift two infantry regiments into the areas surrounding Tchepone. He also disclosed that the JGS/RVNAF had been ordered to reinforce I Corps with a number of tanks and that the Marine Division had been sent to the northern front. General Abrams took this opportunity to defend the U.S. position in the face of Senator Tran Van Huong's complaints that the U.S. was not providing adequate support to RVNAF forces operating in lower Laos. These complaints had given rise to all sorts of rumors speculating on the difficulties ARVN forces encountered in lower Laos. President Thieu stated that the change of plan did not result from losses sustained by the Airborne Division but came about because the 1st Infantry Division was more familiar with the lower Laos terrain and, being an organic unit of I Corps, was more accustomed to working with the corps and would respond better to the I Corps commander during this difficult operation.

While high-level officials were reviewing the plans to arrive at appropriate decisions, at the subordinate levels preparations and assignments were already underway. The I Corps commander needed reinforcements in lower Laos and in the northern area of MR 1 so on 25 February, the U.S. XXIV Corps ordered the U.S. 101st Airborne Division to be prepared to send its 3d Airborne Brigade to the Demilitarized Zone to replace the ARVN 2d Infantry Regiment. This regiment had five battalions; one remained in place while the other four were redeployed on 28 February. On 29 February, the 11th Brigade/U.S. 23d Infantry Division was pulled out of the area south of Hai Van Pass (southern MR 1) and also sent to reinforce the northern sector and all U.S. forces in northern Quang Tri or operating in support of ARVN forces were placed under operational control of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division. The forward command post of this division relocated in Quang Tri from its former position further south. In order to coordinate operational support, a joint coordinating group was set up and placed under the Commander of the 108th Artillery Group. This group operated from the tactical CP of I Corps at Fire Support Base Ham Nghi (Khe Sanh) as of 1 March. Coordination and control of U.S. support was thus made possible in the forward combat area instead of being referred to Quang Tri as in the past.

More RVNAF forces were also committed to the new effort. The command section of the 369th Marine Brigade and support elements were airlifted directly to Khe Sanh beginning on 1 March and this movement was completed two days later. The 2d Infantry Regiment was ready. The 4th and 7th Armored Squadron of the 1st and 2d Infantry Divisions were brought in to reinforce armored elements in lower Laos. I Corps Headquarters also relocated the 77th Border Ranger Battalion (+) from Quang Tin and reassigned it to provide security for Fire Support Base Ham Nghi, freeing other forces for combat and the corps' tactical control CP there was strengthened.

While these preparations were made for the push into Tchepone there were increasing reports of enemy armor presence throughout the area of operation. In the early morning of 1 March, C-130 gunships

reported sighting an estimated 8 enemy tanks moving near Route No. 9, approximately eight kilometers west of A Luoi. The gunships attacked and destroyed some of the tanks. Toward noon, tactical air sighted two T-54 tanks south of the road between A Luoi and the border, attacked and destroyed one.

Meanwhile, in the north, the 17th Armored Squadron was heavily engaged and Fire Support Base 30 of the 2d Airborne Battalion remained under siege. At Fire Support Base 30, fierce fighting took place on 3 March from 0100 to 0900 hours. After heavy attacks by fire, enemy infantry, supported by armor, approached friendly positions. The base was located on a high mountain with steep slopes and enemy tanks were used only to provide direct fire support. C-130 gunships and two Arc Light strikes diverted at the last minute helped the 2d Airborne Battalion hold its ground. When the gunfire ended, a search around the base produced 98 enemy bodies, 26 AK-47s, eight B-40s and two machine-guns right on the perimeter of defense. Friendly casualties were one killed and four wounded. However, as a result of repeated enemy attacks by fire during the preceding days, all 12 artillery pieces (six 105-mm and six 155-mm) had been damaged. In the afternoon of 3 March, the 2d Airborne Battalion was ordered to abandon its positions and move out to evacuate its wounded and conduct mobile operations. The damaged artillery pieces at the base were destroyed before the battalion left.

During the night of 3 March, the 17th Armored Squadron, reinforced by the 8th Airborne Battalion, engaged a battalion-size enemy force five kilometers north of Ban Dong. Results of the battle were 383 enemy killed, two detained, 71 individual and 28 crew-served weapons seized. Friendly forces suffered over 100 killed and wounded and 10 armored vehicles damaged. In the early morning of 4 March, after two resupply and medical evacuation attempts had proved unsuccessful because of heavy enemy fire, an Arc Light strike was made and, following it, a third attempt succeeded in evacuating 77 airborne wounded. Only one UH-1H helicopter was shot down and an airborne company was brought in as reinforcement. The next day, a column of armor-supported airborne troops linked up with the 17th Armored Squadron to resupply it and evacuate

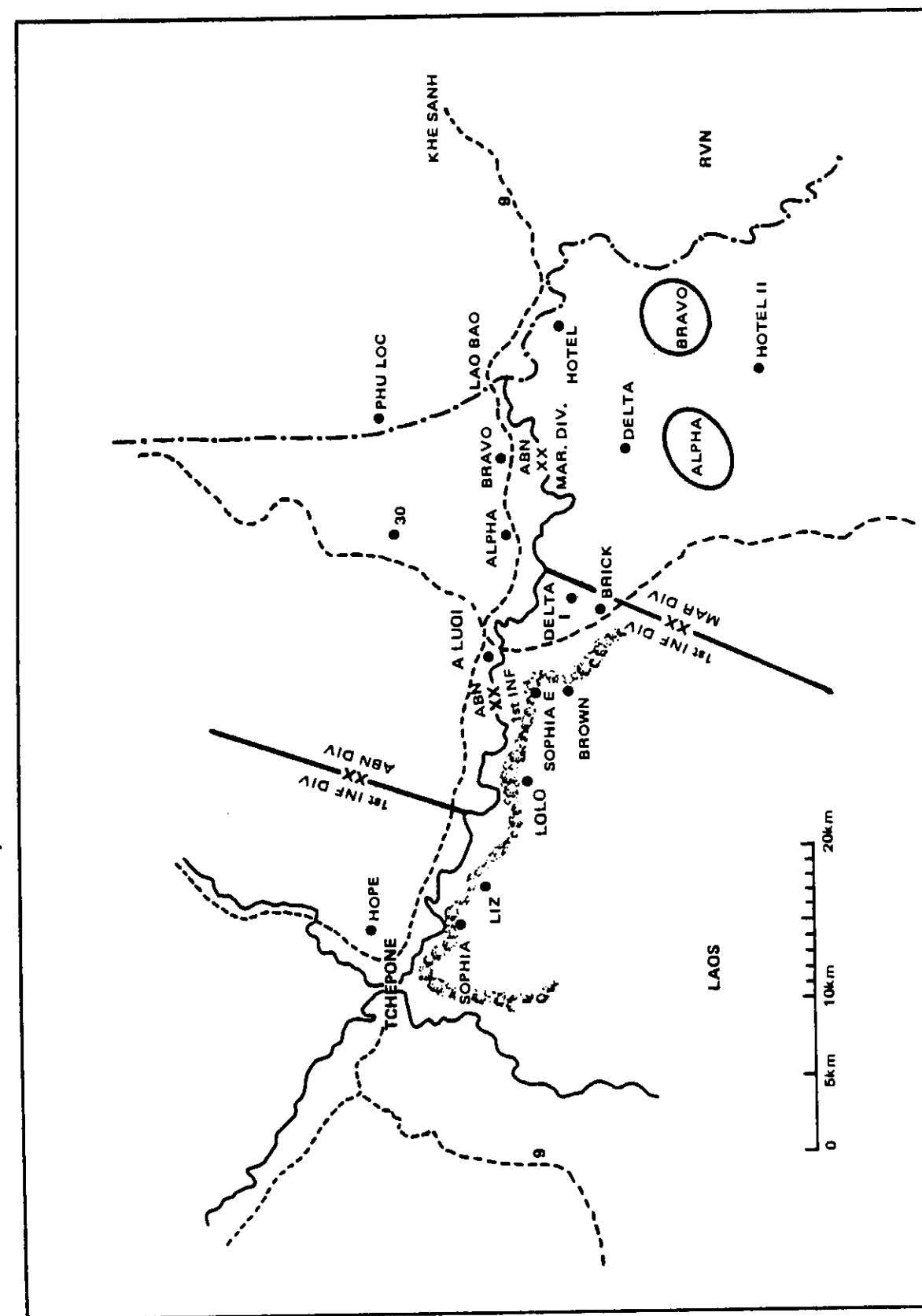
the remaining 43 armored wounded. Cumulative enemy losses for the period from 25 February to 3 March throughout the lower Laos area of operation were 1,536 killed. These losses amounted to about one regiment per week.

While the enemy endeavored to annihilate Fire Support Base 30 and the 17th Armored Task Force, the relief plan was being carried out, marking the beginning of a new offensive phase. (Map 20) Between Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong) and the border, the Airborne Division set up two fire support bases, Alpha and Bravo, to consolidate the security of Route No. 9. The 1st Ranger Group with its remaining two battalions (21st and 37th) was deployed northwest of Khe Sanh and provided security for Fire Support Base Phu Loc. The 369th Brigade, kept in reserve by the corps, conducted security operations south of Khe Sanh.

On 2 March, the 7th Marine Battalion, 147th Brigade, began landing troops in Fire Support Base Delta. The 2d Battalion of the 3d Regiment, which had suffered from combat attrition at Hotel 2, was sent to the rear to reorganize while other elements of the regiment moved out to operate in the areas of Delta 1 and Brown. For three consecutive days, the 147th Brigade Headquarters and the remaining 2d and 4th Battalions were inserted into Delta. Immediately thereafter, the 2d and 4th Marine Battalions moved out to operate in the area of objective Alpha. The entire 258th Brigade, meanwhile, was inserted at FSB Hotel. The 8th Battalion assumed security of the base and operated in the Co Roc area while the 1st and 3d Battalions searched for the enemy in the area of objective Bravo. Marine activities during this time resulted in 361 enemy killed and 51 weapons seized. Also, 153 enemy personnel killed by airstrikes were found by marine troops.

On 3 March, in execution of the plan to enter Tchepone, the 1st Battalion of the 1st Infantry Regiment was inserted at Landing Zone Lolo 13 kilometers southeast of Tchepone. The landing had met with strong enemy opposition and had been postponed twice because of additional preparations required for the landing zone. The 1/1 Battalion finally touched ground at the price of 11 helicopters shot down, 44

Map 20 - The Attack Toward Tchepone



others hit by gunfire and two D4 bulldozers destroyed after being dropped from the air. The following day, the 1st Regiment Headquarters, the 2/1 Battalion and a battery of 105-mm howitzers were brought into Landing Zone Lolo. Fire Support Base Lolo was thus established. The 4/1 Battalion meanwhile landed at Landing Zone Liz, six kilometers west-northwest of Lolo.⁷ The various units then moved out to search the area but only a few light contacts were made with minor results.

In the morning of 5 March, in order to continue its westward push, the 2d Infantry Regiment of the 1st Division was scheduled to occupy Landing Zone Sophia, four-and-a-half kilometers southwest of Tchepone at 1100 hours but unexpected bad weather delayed the operation. After preemptive airstrikes, at exactly 1320 hours five UH-1Hs landed safely. Sporadic gunfire was received but posed no major threat. By nightfall, Landing Zone Sophia had eight 105-mm howitzers in position with adequate ammunition. Searching further out the 4th and 5th Battalions found the bodies of 124 enemy troops and seized 43 AK-47s, nine 12.7-mm machineguns, four RPD automatic rifles, nine B-40 rocket launchers, three radios, military clothing, equipment and food supplies. After securing Fire Support Base Sophia, the 2d Regiment was now in a position to control Tchepone from its mountain base and keep the areas surrounding the town within range of its artillery.

⁷ English names were chosen for objectives, firebases and the like primarily to facilitate communications with U.S. support units. During the First Indochina War. The French had followed a parallel practice (at Dien Bien Phu, for example). Perhaps feminine names were selected to bring some softness into the virile world of combatants at war. "Lolo", "Liz", and "Sophia" were chosen by Colonel Vu Van Giai, the very effective deputy commander of the 1st Division who assisted in maneuvering the division during this period. He had served for several years in the DMZ area, in coordination with U.S. combat units, and he naturally followed their practice in naming firebases. The small return that the NVA might have enjoyed by exploiting these names for propaganda value—as proof that the Americans were still in charge despite Vietnamization—was certainly overridden by the practicality of having words the Americans could understand and pronounce.

For the next two days, throughout the areas of operation of the 1st Infantry and the Marine Divisions, friendly units caught the spirit of the new offensive. They fought aggressively, repeatedly engaged the enemy, and defeated him everywhere. In the morning of 5 March, in the area of Objective Alpha, the 4th Marine Battalion killed 130 enemy troops and seized 25 assorted weapons including two 82-mm mortars. Friendly forces sustained six killed and 42 wounded. The 4/1 Battalion made contact near Landing Zone Liz, killing 41 Communist troops and seizing 15 weapons along with two mortars. By 6 March, engagements were increasing and occurring everywhere, but friendly forces suffered only light casualties while inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. More importantly, they were now within easy reach of Tchepone, the final objective that President Thieu had ordered them to take just three days earlier.

In the afternoon of 6 March, Khe Sanh received an attack by fire of an estimated 22 rounds of 122-mm rockets and two U.S. troops were killed and 10 wounded. Elsewhere, the enemy appeared to take no significant initiative but he was increasing his use of surface-to-air missiles in lower Laos. Earlier, on 2 February, a Mohawk aircraft flying west of the demilitarized zone reported an unidentified missile fired from the ground which exploded approximately 100 meters away, causing no damage to the aircraft. Subsequently, 14 instances of surface-to-air missile firing were photographed or reported by forward air controllers, army pilots, tactical air and reconnaissance aircraft. Missile transportation equipment and antenna vans along with other equipment related to surface-to-air missile systems were also sighted in the tri-border area.

The day selected to enter the ultimate objective, Tchepone, was 6 March. A total of 120 U.S. helicopters were assembled to carry out the assault. In addition to B-52, U.S. tactical air strikes or air cover sorties were scheduled every 10 minutes. Elements of the 2/17 U.S. Air Cavalry reconnoitered targets, prepared landing zones and covered the assault. An enemy attack by fire on Khe Sanh Base forced the huge assemblage of U.S. helicopters to depart 90 minutes earlier

than planned, but preparations for this operation had been so carefully executed that when the first helicopters carrying the 2/2 Battalion landed at Landing Zone Hope four kilometers northeast of Tchepone, only sporadic gunfire was received. By 1343 hours both the 2d and 3d Battalions along with an element of the 2d Reconnaissance Company and the tactical command post of the 2d Infantry Regiment had landed safely at Hope. Searching the adjoining areas and occupying key positions, the 2d Regiment only made light contacts but found the bodies of 102 enemy troops killed by B-52s and seized five 12.7-mm machineguns and one anti-aircraft artillery gun. Extending its search further south toward Tchepone, the 3/2 Battalion found a cache of an estimated 1,000 tons of rice and 2,000 gas masks along with 31 enemy bodies and numerous weapons destroyed by B-52s. Nearby, the 2/2 Battalion found an area devastated by B-52s with nearly 100 enemy bodies and assorted weapons shattered to pieces. After the two reinforced ARVN battalions had made assault landing near the objective and rapidly exploited their success, the district town of Tchepone was practically under ARVN control, dominated as it was by the array of artillery pieces to the south. The most remote terrain objective of LAM SON 719 was attained.

CHAPTER V

The Withdrawal Phase

The Disengagement

In the early morning of 7 March, the first enemy reactions to the 1st Division's presence at Tchepone occurred in the form of artillery and mortar fire against Fire Support Base Lolo. The first attack, which was brief and light, caused only five casualties, but the second attack was heavier as indirect fire poured in from all calibers of guns from 82-mm mortars to 152-mm artillery. More than 20 soldiers were hit - three were killed - and all of the bulldozers used in the construction of fortifications were damaged. While the troops on Lolo were digging in under this heavy bombardment, Fire Support Base A Luoi was also subjected to a heavy attack by fire. NVA artillery fell on the positions intermittently throughout the day, disrupting the scheduled heliborne supply and evacuation runs.

On the same day, the Black Panther (Reconnaissance) Company of the 1st Infantry Division, which had been attached to the US 101st Airborne Division from the beginning of the campaign, landed troops about five kilometers west-southwest of Ban Dong to rescue the crew of a U.S. aircraft which had gone down two days before. The Black Panthers scored a major combat exploit by rescuing all the Americans and subsequently made contact with the enemy, sustaining light casualties but killing more than 60 Communist troops. During this violent action, they also seized 30 NVA automatic rifles, destroyed an anti-aircraft gun position, and found another 40 NVA soldiers killed by airstrikes.

The 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry, on a mission to assess B-52 bomb damage in an area east of Tchepone, found a smashed weapons supply

point that contained 150 rocket launchers (122-mm), 43 grenade launchers, 17 heavy machineguns, eight 82-mm mortars and 57 AK-47 rifles, all damaged beyond use. Nearby, the battalion found two Communist tanks destroyed by airstrikes and an ammunition storage area which it marked for future disposal (B-52 strikes conducted later on this target resulted in approximately 2,000 secondary explosions). While the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry reconnoitered east of Tchepone, the 4th Battalion, 1st Infantry conducted a similar mission in the heights southeast of Tchepone and found the bodies of 112 enemy troops and seized 32 medium mortars, five 12.7-mm machineguns, six grenade launchers and 18 AK-47 rifles.

Meanwhile the 2d Regiment launched the first foray into Tchepone, to find only a shambles of the former district seat, and no human beings in sight. On their way out, the reconnaissance troops killed a squad of NVA soldiers and found a cache containing eight 82-mm mortars, two tons of rice and other military equipment.

During the morning of 8 March, while marine and airborne units made sporadic contacts with the enemy in all other areas with varying degrees of success, Fire Support Base Lolo continued to receive attacks by fire which caused all planned resupply and evacuation flights into the base to be cancelled.

The 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry continued to search the areas around Tchepone and found 52 dead enemy soldiers along with three heavy machineguns, 44 rifles and about 50 heavy artillery rounds destroyed by airstrikes.

Late afternoon found the units of the 2d Regiment assembled near the banks of the Tchepone River. That night, two battalions of the 2d Regiment moved past Tchepone on the east and crossed the river to the southern side. On 9 March at 0900 hours, the regiment began to climb the ridge to FSB Sophia. The invasion of Tchepone had been completed.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant General Lam, Commander of I Corps, arrived at the Presidential Palace in Saigon to report to President Thieu on the situation. General Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, was present at that meeting and heard General Lam present the rationale for

the withdrawal and the outline of how it would be executed. Why did General Lam and General Vien recommend to President Thieu that the apparently successful operation into Laos be terminated so far ahead of schedule? The 2d Infantry had not nearly completed its mission in the hills east of Tchepone where great quantities of NVA military supplies were stored, and only a brief reconnaissance had been conducted into the town itself. No ARVN reconnaissance in force had reached the Xe Bang Hiang River, the principal waterway that flows from north to south west of the town, although the ARVN commander in this zone had requested that CBU-42 (time-delay bomblets) be sewn on the west bank to make it difficult for the NVA to concentrate there. Coincidentally, of course, this barrier also inhibited any ARVN crossing of the river in this area, although it was the western side of the Tchepone complex that was suspected of containing numerous supply depots and huge quantities of war materiel. The river would have to be crossed to complete the task.

Why was the river not crossed? The answer is that a careful military estimate was made, based upon all the pertinent information available at the time, and the conclusion was inescapable: it was time to get out. First was the problem of terrain. In a tactical sense, ARVN forces were facing an uphill task, progressing as they did from the lowlands, with which they were familiar, to the highlands where the well-entrenched enemy enjoyed the advantage. The only road available for troop and supply movements ran through steep mountains and dense forests. The enemy had operated in this region for many years, was familiar with it and knew all the trails. He could cut the road or lay ambushes almost anywhere. To the west past Ban Dong, this road ran through a range of high mountains. All along the slopes the NVA had positioned a dense array of antiaircraft guns, big and small. These guns not only fired at aircraft but also at ARVN troop columns and truck convoys moving to and from Tchepone.

The forests of the Truong Son Range are especially formidable obstacles to cross-country movement. The bases of the tall trees are girded by bamboo thickets, dense and thorny. These forests do not permit armored operations and thorny bamboo greatly hampers movements

of infantry soldiers. But enemy troops were familiar with the terrain, had pre-dug fortifications and knew all the paths and trails. The NVA soldiers enjoyed this important advantage.

The weather was a factor which also worked for the enemy and seldom favored the ARVN side with its numerous helicopters and strong airforce. As presented in the terrain description of Chapter II, lower Laos is usually obscured in fog from dawn until mid-morning, sometimes until noon. Aircraft could usually operate after the fog lifted until late afternoon, but only if there was no rain and even if it didn't rain low clouds sometimes prevented the full use of ARVN's air support.

On the other hand, the endless mountains and forests provided good concealment for enemy deployments within the area of operations as well as for the movement of reinforcements from far away. Our failure to detect all of these movements presented ARVN commanders with many unwelcome surprises. Even those enemy units which had not previously operated in the Laos panhandle had the support of veteran units to provide guides, assistance and advice.

In short, the enemy was thoroughly familiar with the terrain in lower Laos and ARVN troops were not. The terrain and weather favored the defenders and handicapped the attackers. The area was especially disadvantageous for our mechanized and armored forces which were restricted to narrow jungle roads on which two vehicles could not pass and on which entire columns could often be jammed or stalled by one disabled vehicle.

The NVA strength and reinforcement capability was the second factor that influenced the decision to initiate the withdrawal. Estimated enemy forces in the immediate area of operation consisted of three infantry regiments, rear service elements capable of local defense, and artillery elements especially notable for their air defense capability. It was estimated that the NVA could reinforce, within two weeks, with up to eight infantry regiments and the equivalent of an artillery regiment.

Heavy artillery and armor also strengthened the enemy's capabilities. First among these was the enemy's dispersed and well concealed 130-mm

and 152-mm heavy artillery. ARVN's stationary fire support bases on hilltops, therefore, were easy targets for enemy artillery fire. The second factor in the enemy's capability of deep concern to the leadership in Saigon was the enemy armor strength that had become apparent. The planners of LAM SON 719 had failed to give sufficient consideration to the threat of NVA armor, and now this threat had become a reality. Even though enemy armor was under daily attack from the air, Fire Support Base 31 had been lost because of the enemy's effective coordination of armor and infantry forces. In other places the enemy used his tanks as highly mobile field guns moving them individually over trails to ambush ARVN armored vehicles on the roads. The maneuvering of tanks on such a large scale over forest trails known only to the enemy posed a great threat to ARVN armored vehicles which were confined to congested one-way roads strewn with disabled vehicles. Moreover, NVA tanks had thicker armor and mounted guns of a larger caliber than the ARVN tanks, 100-mm versus 76-mm and had a significantly greater armor-defeating capability.

Thirdly, even after a month of intensive attack the enemy's air defense capabilities showed no signs of being subdued and he had positioned surface-to-air missiles west of the border or at the Ban Raving Pass. These missiles had Route No. 9 from Khe Sanh to Ban Dong within effective range, a challenge that the U.S. Air Force had to face. Around the ARVN's besieged bases, even after waves of airstrikes, enemy anti-aircraft guns would reappear close to their original positions. Also, anti-aircraft batteries were deployed along helicopter avenues of approach; those positioned on the mountain slopes between Ban Dong and Tchepone seemed impossible to uproot. This enemy capability practically neutralized the ARVN advantage of helicopter mobility and logistic support.

In contrast to the enemy who had large uncommitted reserves in North Vietnam, our reserves were limited indeed. The Airborne and Marine Divisions constituted the entire general reserves of the RVN and they were already committed. Committing the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Ranger Group required an extreme effort made possible only

with the help of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division which replaced these two units in the lowlands of Thua Thien Province. And now, in the light of the enemy's reinforcement and strength on the battlefield, it was becoming apparent that the ARVN force committed to LAM SON 719 was too small for the task. General Abrams recommended that the ARVN 2d Infantry Division be sent in to reinforce, and the division was preparing plans to turn over its area of responsibility in MR 1 to the U.S. 23d Infantry Division.¹ Still, in the view of the RVN leadership, one additional division would be insufficient to ensure total victory and would result in a higher casualty figure for our forces in Laos. Also, removing the 2d Division from MR 1 would leave more of the vital lowland areas of MR 1 undefended. The only reasonable course of action was an orderly withdrawal to conserve as much of the committed force as possible. Further reinforcing this conclusion was the fact that the political and psychological objective of the campaign had been achieved; the RVNAF had entered Tchepone. It was apparent that President Thieu had decided, at the outset, that once Tchepone had been entered by RVNAF, the withdrawal should begin without delay.

The main features of the withdrawal plan were outlined to President Thieu at the 9 March meeting. The 2d Infantry Regiment would close Fire Support Base Sophia and establish a new fire base (called Brick) near Route 92 about nine kilometers south of Ban Dong. The units of the 2d Regiment would be picked up at various landing zones in the Sophia-Liz area and inserted into landing zones south and west of Fire Support Base Brick. Thereafter, the 2d Regiment would move southwest, searching for and destroying installations of Communist Binh Tram 33 and interdicting

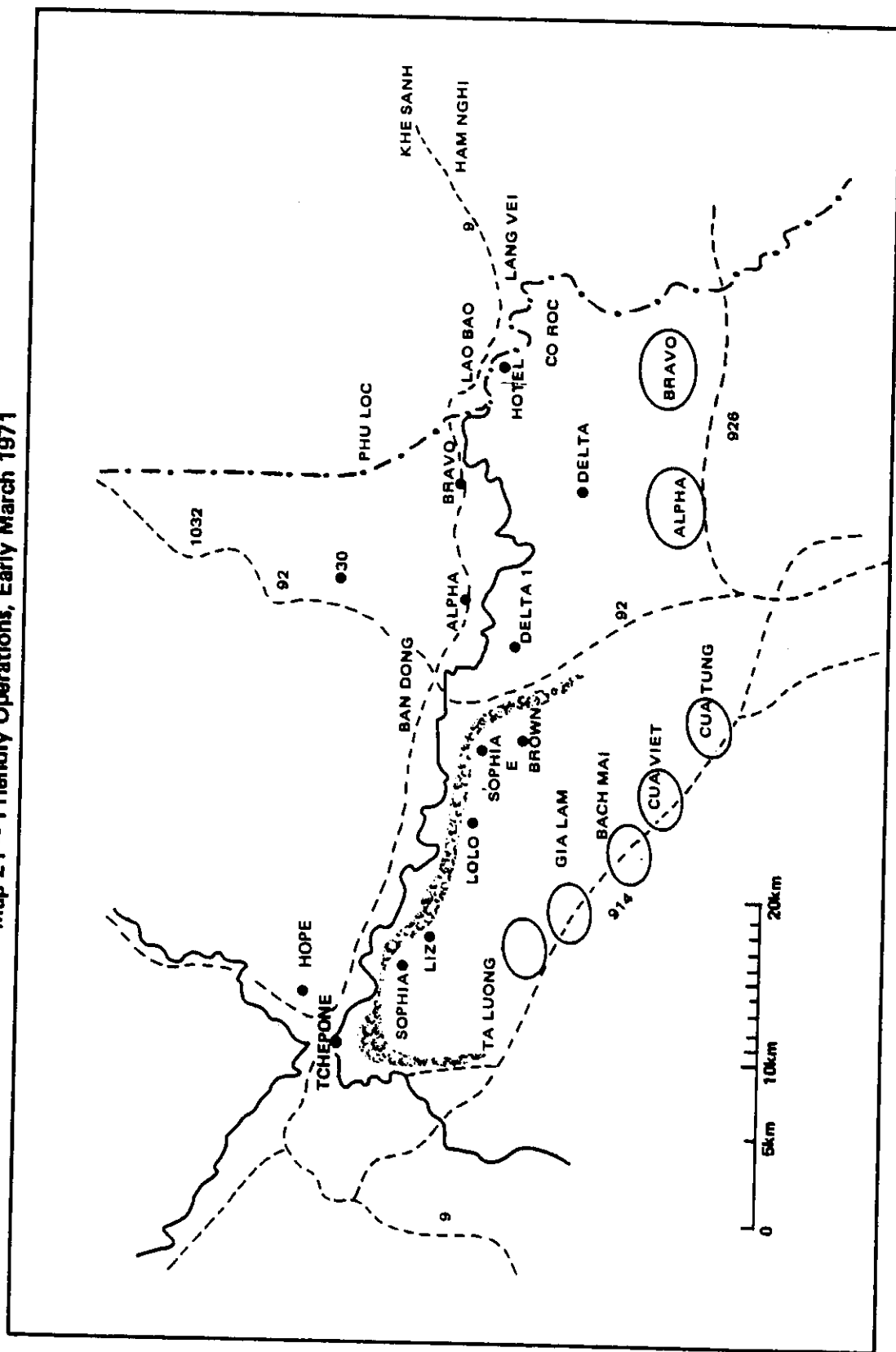
¹According to General Cao Van Vien, General Abrams mentioned sending the ARVN 2d Infantry Division into lower Laos to President Thieu who countered that a U.S. division should be sent alongside. The matter was dropped because U.S. ground forces were not authorized to enter Laos. The planning done by the ARVN 2d Division and the U.S. 23d Division was accomplished without orders or direction from the JGS.

Route 914. The 1st and 2d Regiments would conduct operations in the area of Route 914 for seven to ten days. The withdrawal would then proceed in the following order: first, the 1st Division, then the Airborne Division; Fire Support Base Lolo would close thereafter to be followed by Fire Support Base Brick; the 3d Infantry Regiment in the area of Brown and Fire Support Base Delta I would pull out after closing FSB A Luoi. After the withdrawal of the Airborne Division, the 147th and 258th Marine Brigades would move out from the areas of Fire Support Bases Delta and Hotel. The entire withdrawal, according to Lieutenant General Lam's estimate, was scheduled for completion by 31 March. After resting and reorganizing for about two weeks, the 1st Infantry Division, two Marine brigades and one Airborne brigade would conduct operations into the eastern sector of enemy Base Area 611, the A Shau Valley and the Laotian salient. The Khe Sanh Base would probably close on 15 April.

The Valiant ARVN 1st Infantry Division

While the withdrawal plan was being explained to the President, the 1st Infantry Regiment began to move toward objective area Ta Luong. (Map 21) Advance elements reported sighting enemy tanks near the area. Further north, near Route No. 9, at 10 kilometers southeast of Tchepone, observation teams of the 1st Regiment also reported sighting a Communist armored group. ARVN artillery opened fire and disabled five enemy tanks. Meanwhile, the Marine sector was very active. The battalions received heavy attacks by fire, and, searching out 10 km south-southeast from their bases, found a NVA camp that had been bombed by B-52s with 5,000 heavy artillery rockets along with numerous other weapons and substantial volumes of ammunition all destroyed. In the morning of 10 March, the 1st Marine Battalion engaged the enemy twice, the first time in a light encounter and the second time fighting a battalion-size unit with the following results: 72 enemy killed and 20 small arms, one recoilless rifle, and four grenade launchers seized. The Marine losses were only six killed and 19 wounded.

Map 21 - Friendly Operations, Early March 1971



The 1st Infantry Regiment continued to search the areas of Ta Luong and Route 914 and was able to assess the substantial damages inflicted by B-52 bombing runs. In two areas approximately 10 kilometers south and southeast of FSB Sophia, the 4th Battalion found the bodies of 72 Communist troops, 12 Soviet trucks, eight tracked vehicles, three 122-mm towed cannons, two 37-mm anti-aircraft artillery guns, four 12.7-mm machineguns, two 122-mm rocket launchers, 400 AK-47 rifles, thirty two 82-mm mortars, 18 B-40s, 60 Chicom radios and huge quantities of food of all types. Most of these supplies were blown to bits by B-52 bombs. The battalion also captured five prisoners of war.

During the morning of 10 March, the 2d Regiment on Fire Support Base Sophia received a heavy attack by fire. The attack wounded 13 soldiers and damaged six of the eight 105-mm howitzers at the base. On 11 March, 2d Infantry Regiment elements operating around the fire support base had increasing contacts with the enemy. At 1100 hours, a reconnaissance element operating approximately one kilometer southeast of the base engaged a Communist patrol killing eight and seizing their weapons. According to plans, the 2d Infantry Regiment was to move this day, on foot, to Landing Zone Liz from where it would be helilifted eastward. Between 1400 hours and nightfall, the 2d Battalion was removed from Landing Zone Liz and deposited on Landing Zone Brown. The 5th Battalion landed approximately one kilometer north of Landing Zone Sophia East where the headquarters of the 2d Regiment had already relocated while the 4th Battalion continued to secure Fire Support Base Sophia. Late that afternoon, an element of the battalion engaged the enemy approximately 1,000 meters south of the base but casualties were light on both sides.

During the day, 1st Infantry Regiment forces continued to search the Ta Luong area and found more substantial damage caused by B-52 attacks. On 12 March, the evacuation of the 2d Regiment was completed. The 3d Battalion from Liz landed approximately 1,000 meters south of Sophia East and the 4th Battalion was the last unit to leave Sophia. In order to facilitate the movement of troops, U.S. tactical air bombed and destroyed the eight 105-mm howitzers left on the base and another 105-mm battery was brought to Sophia East from Khe Sanh. The units of

the 1st Infantry Regiment, whose headquarters was at Fire Support Base Lolo, were the forces located deepest to the west.

On the fronts manned by the Airborne and Marine Division, engagements and attacks by fire followed an increasing trend. Meanwhile, two M-41 tank troops reassigned by JGS from MR 2, were moving into lower Laos to reinforce the 4th Armored Cavalry Squadron. U.S. air support was becoming more effective since Vietnamese interpreters flying with forward air controllers had become more familiar with the situation. Resupply operations were conducted throughout the battle area thanks to the daring and the noble spirit of sacrifice of U.S. Army helicopter crews.

Upon the 2d Infantry Regiment's withdrawal from the area west of Lolo, NVA forces, probably elements of the 1st and 31st Regiments of the NT-2 Division, began to encircle units of the 3d Infantry Regiment. Beginning on 13 March, the battalions operating in the Ta Luong area (Objectives Gia Lam and Bach Mai) were gradually forced to withdraw north and Fire Support Base Lolo began to receive uninterrupted attacks by fire. On 14 March, the intensity of these attacks increased. During the day, the base received an estimated two hundred 122-mm rockets and one hundred 152-mm artillery rounds. Thanks to their solid shelters and trenches, the regiment had only three killed and two wounded but one D-4 bulldozer and two 105-mm howitzers were seriously damaged. In the meantime, the enemy had moved up to the base and small arms fire was being directed at supply aircraft, causing medical evacuation and resupply attempts to be called off. On 15 March, the base could not be resupplied (nor could Delta or A Luoi, both of which were under attacks by fire). The various units on and around the base were running out of ammunition and the number of wounded in need of evacuation was increasing. A withdrawal plan was hastily prepared. The headquarters of the 1st Regiment and the battalions outside the base would move east. The 4th Battalion would serve as the rear guard protecting the regiment in its effort to break through enemy encirclement. The plan was carried out satisfactorily but the enemy tightened its hold on the 4th Battalion. Finally, this unit fought its way out with the enemy

in pursuit, all the while rejecting the NVA demands for it to surrender.

On 17 March, close to the banks of the Tchepone River, the battalion was intercepted and the fighting lasted all day, with tactical air and gunships providing dedicated support. The battalion commander and his deputy were both killed. Most of the company commanders and officers of the battalion were also killed and the few survivors managed to escape to an area near Route No. 9. There, in the late afternoon of 18 March, U.S. helicopters with tactical air support conducted a daring rescue. Three helicopters were hit and one fighter-bomber exploded in the air but the thirty two survivors of the 4th Battalion were rescued and flown to the rear.² The battalion had accomplished well its rear guard mission and in the process, had sacrificed nearly every man. The fight put up by Fire Support Base Lolo and the units of the 1st Infantry Regiment had resulted in 1,100 enemy killed, causing severe losses to two main force regiments of the Communist NT-2 Division.

"Lock Its Head, Grip Its Tail"

While the 1st Regiment was subjected to heavy attacks which eventually caused it to pull out of the Lolo area, the battalions of the 2d Regiment continued to conduct reconnaissance in force and search the Cua Tung and Cua Viet objective areas along Route 914. In three areas, approximately one-and-a-half, six and seven kilometers southeast of FSB Sophia East, the 2d and 3d Battalions found many logistical installations and camps destroyed along with decomposed bodies of enemy troops. Supported by helicopter gunships, they destroyed five enemy trucks.

In the southeast, activity in the Marine sector began to pick up. The 147th Marine Brigade Headquarters at Fire Support Base Delta received 400 incoming rounds which killed eight marines. The 7th

²The next day, additional troops managed to reach safety. The reported strength of the 4th Battalion on 19 March was 82 men.

Battalion, operating outside the base, received a corresponding number of artillery rounds and had five wounded. Other units of the brigade, the 2d and 4th Battalions, continued to search objective area Alpha, approximately five kilometers south of Fire Support Base Delta.

During the afternoon of 16 March the headquarters of the 3d Infantry Regiment (1st Division) and its 4th Battalion were picked up in the Delta 1 area and taken to Ham Nghi Base along with a number of supporting units. The 3d Battalion had been taken out for rest and reorganization two days before. The 1st Battalion remained to secure the base (Delta 1).

Meanwhile, the enemy was beginning to harass Khe Sanh. For the second day running, this fire support base was hit by mortar fire which wounded four Americans and damaged two helicopters and a number of vehicles.

On 17 March, Communist gunners stepped up their shellings of other targets. In RVN territory, at the border, Fire Support Bases Phu Loc and Lao Bao were attacked by 130-mm artillery but the losses were small.

Fire Support Base A Luoi received attacks by fire practically every day and Fire Support Base Delta and the 7th Marine Battalion were pinned down. In a small engagement, the 7th Battalion killed 16 enemy troops while suffering only five casualties. A NVA recruit just assigned to the 812th Regiment, 324B Division rallied to the Marines and disclosed that the entire 324B Division was in the "Route 9 campaign" with its 29th, 803d and 812th regiments. The 29th Regiment had recently suffered heavy losses and the 812th Regiment was engaging the 147th Marine Brigade.

In the meantime, in the area of the 2d Regiment, the 5th Battalion received an intense early morning attack of an estimated 300 rounds of mortar and artillery fire. The battalion continued its search operations and, thanks to intensive air support, scored a major victory in the area near Landing Zone Brown, killing nearly 100 enemy and capturing a large number of weapons and a ton of ammunition. In accordance with the withdrawal plan, the headquarters of the 2d Infantry Regiment was

evacuated to Delta 1 while its battalion proceeded east on foot.

From 18 March on it seemed that the enemy was well aware of the ARVN withdrawal and there were signs of the enemy concentrating a regimental size unit northwest of Fire Support Base A Luoi while pressure increased around Fire Support Base Delta of the 147th Brigade. The base began to receive fire from 130-mm field guns and NVA infantry had infiltrated close enough to fire at aircraft. There were about 10 antiaircraft guns positioned on the mountain slopes around the base that could not be silenced. The 2d and 4th Battalions operating to the south were recalled to sweep the area around Delta and to prepare for the withdrawal.

By mid-day of 18 March the 1st Infantry Regiment, with its 1st, 2d and 3d battalions, after falling back from the Lolo area, arrived in an area approximately 2,000 meters southwest of Fire Support Base A Luoi. There they were picked up by helicopters and flown to Khe Sanh. The survivors of the 4th Battalion were also flown back in the late afternoon. Next came the turn of the 5th Battalion, 2d Regiment, which boarded helicopters from an area adjacent to Landing Zone Brown.

Immediately thereafter, from about 1600 hours and continuing through the night of 18 March, the remaining three battalions of the 2d Infantry Regiment, the 2d, 3d and 4th, received heavy attacks west of the Brown area. The NVA followed up its artillery with ground assaults. The next morning the 4th Battalion made a preliminary report that it had 33 wounded and five missing. The 2d Battalion had similar casualty figures while enemy losses were unknown.

For four days now, reports flowed into I Corps headquarters of strong attacks that included very heavy bombardments by heavy artillery and tank attacks. Reports of ARVN losses, including the decimation of the 4th Battalion, 1st Infantry, were very disturbing to General Lam, as were the many indications that the enemy was reinforcing and maneuvering to prevent the orderly ARVN withdrawal from Laos. So, on the night of 18 March, General Lam called his division commanders to a conference at Ham Nghi Base (Khe Sanh) to hear their assessments and recommendations. They each recommended that disengagement proceed as quickly

as possible; General Phu, commanding the 1st Division, displayed anxiety for the first time in the campaign.

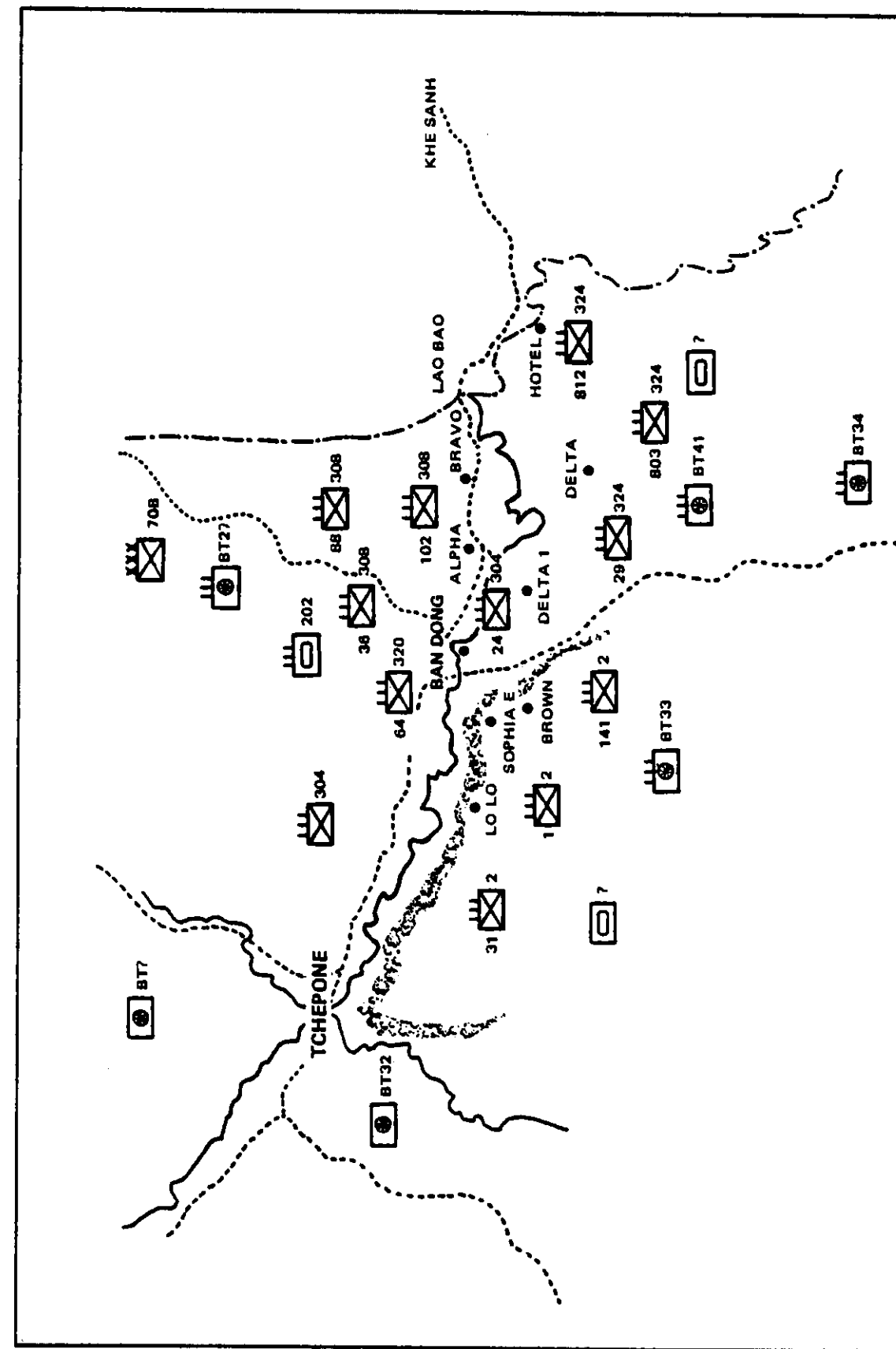
When the conference was over, General Lam ordered that the withdrawal proceed at a quicker pace and that preparations begin immediately for the extraction of the 2d Regiment from the Brown area and Fire Base Delta 1 where all its battalions were under heavy attack and in danger of being cut off and destroyed.

On the morning of 19 March, abandoning Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong), ARVN armored elements and attached airborne units moved overland to take positions along a line near Fire Support Base Alpha. The 2d Airborne Battalion operating to the north and having made a contact with the enemy during the day, would be helilifted from a landing zone north of Base Alpha. After the elements from Ban Dong had arrived at Alpha, the remaining forces of the 1st Infantry Division were also picked up, including the battalions of the 2d Regiment from the Brown area and the 2d Regiment Headquarters along with the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment from Base Delta 1.

Information received during the night added some clarity to the situation. Almost all the airborne battalions were in contact with the enemy. The 7th, 8th, 9th and 11th Airborne battalions had relatively light engagements with minimal losses on both sides. The 1st Airborne Battalion, however, had 18 casualties and reported killing 80 enemy troops, capturing five prisoners and seizing five AK-47 rifles. The 2d Airborne Battalion also suffered relatively high losses, with 18 killed and 57 wounded. Enemy losses were unknown. On the Marine side, Base Delta was still experiencing heavy enemy pressure. The 7th Marine Battalion constantly received attacks by fire and ground attacks. The enemy even used a noxious gas but suffered heavy casualties with 42 killed. Marine losses were light.

The 19th of March was a day of intense activities. All ARVN units in Laos reported enemy contacts. A synthesis of information received from prisoners, ralliers and the combat units gave a rather clear picture of enemy dispositions on the battlefield. The 308th NVA Division with its 36th, 102d and 88th regiments was attacking from the north. (Map 22)

Map 22 - Enemy Situation, Late March 1971



The 64th and 24th Regiments (respectively from the 320th and 304th Division) continued to encircle the Ban Dong area east of Route No. 9. The 2d Division was trying to annihilate the remaining forces of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division. The 324th Division deployed its 29th and 803d Regiments to attack the 147th Marine Brigade while its 812th Regiment pinned the 258th Marine Brigade down around Hotel and at Co Roc. The enemy apparently wanted to catch the entire ARVN force in his trap. In the manner of a hunter, he set about to kill his prey by "locking its head and gripping its tail." This was his strategy of annihilation for which he had coined this metaphorical phrase.

In the RVN territory, all Communist main and local force units stepped up their operations. Mine attacks and ambushes occurred daily on the LOC, Route No. 9. Enemy sappers continually probed logistical installations and the enemy launched a psychological warfare campaign aimed at publicizing the NVA victories along Route No. 9.

Beginning in early morning, north of Ban Dong, the 8th and 9th Airborne Battalions were under attack. The 8th Battalion had 32 casualties while the 9th Battalion immediately to the east inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. Only light engagements were reported along Route 9 while Ban Dong Base began to be evacuated after most of the artillery pieces had been lifted out by helicopters.

The armored logistic convoy set out, towing damaged vehicles and guns under the protection of airborne units and other armored elements while the enemy continued to exert pressure on the rear of the column. At 0730 hours, approximately two kilometers north of Ban Dong, forward air controller aircraft reported sighting four enemy tanks moving down. Approximately four kilometers east of Ban Dong Base, the logistic convoy was ambushed and all 18 vehicles were immobilized. Some of the lead vehicles were hit by direct fire and destroyed. The road had only one lane; the vehicles behind were stalled in the ambush zone. While the battle was in progress no reports were received from the convoy commander; his superiors were therefore unaware of what was happening to the convoy. Losses incurred during the ambush were neither reported nor even analyzed afterwards. According to reports from an observation

plane, four M-41 tanks and three M-113 APCs, each towing a 105-mm howitzer, were apparently damaged among the 18 stranded vehicles. Road security for the movement of this convoy was the responsibility of armor and airborne units but during the attack, the convoy never initiated any request for air support or gunships. Apparently the ambush caught the convoy by surprise and it ended as quickly as it began. Later the commander of the 1st Armored Brigade requested tactical air to destroy the ambushed vehicles and his request was immediately granted in order to prevent the enemy from capturing usable equipment.

On the front manned by the Marine Division, the situation was even more serious. The units of the 258th Brigade were increasingly engaged by the enemy and the encirclement of Fire Support Base Delta did not relax in any way. Supplies could not be delivered and the 2d and 4th Battalions were intercepted on their way to the relief of the base. Inside the base, five of the ten 105-mm howitzers were out of action due to enemy fire and the number of marines killed and wounded kept increasing.

In the area of the 1st Division, Fire Support Base Delta 1 was hit by numerous 122-mm rockets and 75-mm recoilless rifle rounds which put four 105-mm howitzers out of action and caused 1,400 rounds of 105-mm ammunition to explode. The 2, 3d and 4th Battalions of the 2d Infantry Regiment west of Sophia East were involved in skirmishes throughout the day.

Late afternoon saw the enemy attack more fiercely and tactical air as well as C-130 gunships were called in to provide support. By midnight all three battalions reported having consolidated their positions. The 3d Battalion had 47 casualties after killing 87 Communist troops and seizing 49 AK-47s and 17 grenade launchers. Among the enemy bodies were those of two company commanders of the NVA 2d Division. The 2d Battalion had light casualties but reported killing 85 enemy, seizing 47 AK-47s and several other crew-served weapons. The 4th Battalion reported killing 195 enemy troops and seizing 59 AK-47s and numerous other weapons.

During the day, U.S. air support substantially increased, with 686 sorties of helicopter gunships, 246 tactical air sorties and 14 B-52 missions which dropped 1,158 tons of bombs.

Late in the afternoon of 19 March, Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams were received by President Thieu. President Thieu disclosed he had directed a cautious withdrawal which would be completed from 5-8 April. When the withdrawal was complete, he planned to have about three battalions launch a raid against Muong Nong, the center of Communist Base Area 611, and wanted strong U.S. air support for this raid.

On 20 March, the U.S. Air Force and Army helicopters exerted their maximum effort, with 1,388 gunships sorties, 270 tactical air strikes and 11 B-52 missions dropping 909 tons of bombs. Around 1300 hours, the 3d Battalion, 2d Regiment was extracted from the area west of Sophia East by U.S. Army helicopters which flew through heavy antiaircraft fire to evacuate it to Ham Nghi Base. In the process, 28 of the 40 helicopters involved were hit. Plans for the extraction of the 4/2 Battalion were subsequently aborted because the first helicopter attempting to land was hit by fire and exploded in the air. Before nightfall, the artillery pieces at Fire Support Base Alpha along with the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions were transported back to Vietnam. Plans provided for the 2d and 4th Battalions, 2d Regiment, to be picked up the next day, followed by the regimental headquarters, its artillery, and the 1st Battalion, 3d Infantry from Fire Support Base Delta 1. The two 2d Regiment battalions were ordered to find a more secure pick up zone.

In the meantime, the 1st Armored Brigade, reinforced by the 7th and 8th Airborne Battalions, had arrived at Phase Line Alpha the preceding evening. The armored and airborne elements deployed to provide security for Route No. 9 from Alpha to Base Bravo. At 2100 hours the NVA attacked the 8th Airborne Battalion and 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron south of Alpha but were repulsed with heavy losses.

Around Fire Support Base Delta of the 147th Marine Brigade, on this same day, Communist suicide troops reached the defense perimeter and dug in. Small arms fire from these pockets made helicopter landings and takeoffs even more difficult. Supply deliveries could not be made but the 7th Marine Battalion and the troops of the 147th Brigade held on because they had previously received a ten-day reserve of supplies which would permit them to continue fighting.

On 21 March, at 0300 hours enemy action became intense in the area to the west, where the 2d and 4th Battalions of the 2d Regiment were stranded two kilometers east of Sophia East. The Regiments of the NVA 2d Division were determined to attack and annihilate these two battalions but they were not successful. In the process, the enemy lost 245 killed, 52 B-40s and B-41s, seven machineguns, seven 60-mm mortars, five 82-mm mortars, eight flame throwers, nine 12.7-mm machineguns and 65 AK-47s. Friendly losses were 37 killed, 58 wounded and 15 missing. This ARVN victory caused enemy pressure to relax and the remaining forces of the 1st Infantry Division were transported by U.S. helicopters to Ham Nghi Base before nightfall. Meanwhile, the headquarters of the 1st Airborne Brigade, the 5th Airborne Battalion and the troops of the artillery unit left at Fire Support Base Alpha were also safely evacuated south. Fire support bases Alpha and Delta 1 were thus closed on that day and ARVN forces pulled back near Fire Support Base Bravo, five kilometers west of the RVN border.

The situation in the areas manned by the 1st Infantry and the Airborne Division had been resolved but, over in the Marines' area, there was an eruption of fire. The 29th and 803d Regiments of the 324B Division were determined to destroy Fire Support Base Delta. These two enemy units began attacking fiercely at dawn of 21 March. Mortar and direct artillery fire (the latter believed to come from tank guns) was very accurate. All 175-mm guns from the RVN side of the border were mobilized to provide close fire support to the Marines. In the morning, 13 tactical air sorties provided additional support. A B-52 mission was diverted to the area and crushed an enemy battalion (a PW later reported this battalion had lost 400 men from this B-52 action). The attack was checked and the base held firm. A casualty count showed that the Marines had 85 killed, 238 wounded and 100 weapons damaged while enemy forces suffered 600 killed, five detained and an estimated 200 individual and 60 crew-served weapons seized. After the battle, the 147th Brigade and the 7th Marine Battalion ran short of supplies. Thanks to air support, seven U.S. UH-1H helicopters were able to land, bringing ammunition and evacuating wounded. These helicopters were

able to return to their base but all bore battle scars. An eighth helicopter was shot down.

During this period the enemy greatly increased his interference and jamming of our radio communications. Several frequencies were so badly jammed that communications became impossible. In many instances, enemy radio operators argued and exchanged insults with ours. These heated verbal exchanges occurred most frequently when the enemy intensified his attacks against the marines. To return the courtesy, our operators also intercepted and jammed enemy radio frequencies. During one of these interceptions, marine operators overheard a female voice giving combat orders. In general, South Vietnamese units did not make enough effort to safeguard radio communications security, often using the most rudimentary of self-devised code systems. This episode of reciprocal interference and jamming was perhaps more damaging to our side than to the enemy who was usually more disciplined. The extent of this damage, if any, could never be ascertained because of the intense fighting.

In the morning of 21 March, Vandegrift logistical base was penetrated by Communist sappers and 10,000 gallons of aviation fuel exploded into flames. Along Route No. 9, near Fire Support Base Bravo, the 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron and 8th Airborne Battalion were heavily engaged. There were nearly 100 casualties while four M-41 tanks and 13 armored personnel carriers were damaged. This battleground looked forlorn after the attack, with damaged vehicles abandoned and scattered across the road, making passage extremely difficult.

During the day, U.S. air support remained at a high level to help relieve the enemy pressure and facilitate the withdrawal of ARVN forces. There were 788 helicopter gunship sorties, eleven B-52 missions dropping 921 tons of bombs and 157 tactical air sorties which destroyed 37 enemy vehicles and one field gun and damaged 18 other vehicles.

During the night of 21 March, the 1st Armored Brigade and the 1st and 8th Airborne Battalions left their positions along Route No. 9 and moved east through the jungle in search of a point to cross the Xepon River. Successful in avoiding enemy contact, the convoy of nearly 100 vehicles meandered through the dense jungle until about noon the next

day when it came out near the banks of the river, about one kilometer south of Route No. 9. The brigade was provided with a helicopter to help it find a crossing point and the commander of the Airborne Division had helicopters prepared to airlift light bulldozers as well as tree-cutting equipment to help set up a crossing point for the armored vehicles. During the dry season, the Xepon River is usually shallow but the current is swift and the banks are steep, in many places ten meters straight down. A crossing point for vehicles was therefore not easy to find. Meanwhile, the 9th Airborne Battalion had crossed the river and secured the eastern bank. In late afternoon, two D-2 bulldozers and other pieces of equipment were lifted in by U.S. Army CH-54 helicopters and the river-crossing site was prepared.

Meanwhile, forward air controller aircraft sighted an estimated 20 enemy armored vehicles closing in pursuit nine kilometers to the west by way of Route No. 9 and called in tactical air. The lead tank was hit and went up in flames. Enemy antiaircraft gunners returned the fire and one F-100 aircraft was shot down. The pilot was not seen ejecting. Two more flights of aircraft were called in and two more enemy vehicles were destroyed. Artillery support following the air-strikes finally caused the enemy armored formation to break up and the vehicles to seek concealment.

Why did the armored convoy leave Route No. 9 and make a cut through the jungle to find a way to cross the river when there was only a final stretch of five kilometers left to cover until the Lao-Viet border? The reason was never officially explained but Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat, Commander of the 1st Armor Brigade, later told this writer that had his unit not taken to the jungle to seek a way out, he did not believe a single vehicle could have made it back to Vietnam. Route No. 9 was a one-way road, not only littered with abandoned vehicles and rigged with mines all along, but every section of it could conceal a Communist ambush site. It was so treacherous that no one dared venture on it. The withdrawal along Route No. 9 surely did not proceed as planned in an orderly and controlled manner.

Early the next morning, 23 March, while Khe Sanh Base was still finishing off Communist sappers who had infiltrated earlier, the ARVN armored column crossed the Xepon River and the lines of the U.S. 1st Mechanized Infantry Brigade, 5th Division. The convoy returned with 98 vehicles left behind, among them 22 M-41 tanks and 54 armored personnel carriers. Aerial and photo reconnaissance showed that the ARVN units had left 21 tanks, 26 armored personnel carriers, 13 bulldozers, two graders and 51 vehicles at a night bivouac area on Route No. 9. U.S. air force helicopter gunships and artillery were used to destroy these vehicles to keep the enemy from using them. Khe Sanh Base, in the meantime had received four attacks by fire during the night, all by 122-mm artillery, but damage was insignificant.

In lower Laos, meanwhile, fighting was still fierce around Fire Support Base Delta. The airdropping of supplies on the base was not successful and ammunition stocks had dropped to an alarming level. Enemy troops had penetrated and established a firm foothold inside the Marines' perimeter. Late in the afternoon, the enemy launched a new attack, this time supported by ten flame-throwing tanks. The Marines blew up the first two tanks with light antitank weapons. The third tank detonated mines and the fourth was hit by tactical air. But the remaining tanks continued to advance. The headquarters of the 147th Brigade had to move out of its position. The 2d and 4th Battalions supported the 7th Battalion to break the enemy's encirclement and withdraw toward the 258th Brigade (Fire Support Base Hotel). The enemy seemed to have anticipated this move and he intercepted the troops of the 147th Brigade in an ambush. A pitched battle ensued with enemy tanks and infantry. The following morning, 23 March, all battalion commanders of the 147th Brigade, though wounded, managed to maneuver their battalions to link up with the 258th Brigade. Eventually, isolated teams of marines who had been cut off from their units also followed suit. Almost immediately thereafter, 230 wounded were evacuated and, before nightfall, the entire 147th Marine Brigade with its 2d, 4th and 7th Battalions were transported by U.S. Army helicopters to an area near Ham Nghi Base. There were initially 134 missing reported but they

gradually came back, leaving the entire brigade with only 37 missing. The battle at FSB Delta had cost the enemy an estimated 2,000 troops, seriously hurting his 29th and 803d Regiments.

Around noon of 23 March the last vehicles of the armored convoy crossed the border and the remaining airborne elements successively reached the forward positions of the U.S. 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (mechanized). Because of enemy armored presence reported near the border, the U.S. brigade had recently been reinforced with a tank battalion (1/77 Armor). During the day, 23 March, U.S. air support continued at a high level: 756 helicopter gunship sorties, 11 B-52 missions dropping 941 tons of bombs which caused 77 secondary explosions, and 283 tactical air sorties.

In the morning of 24 March, as if propelled by the momentum of the pursuit, many Communist armored vehicles appeared on the Laotian side of the border. Near Route No. 9 and south of the road, between 1000 hours and noon, U.S. air cavalry reported up to five different locations of enemy armored vehicles near the border. The U.S. air cavalry and tactical air attacked and destroyed 10 Communist tanks, not counting those suspected of being damaged.

In the area of Fire Support Base Hotel, the remaining elements of the 258th Marine Brigade began to feel enemy probes. Not wishing to fight another Delta battle, the Marine Division commander ordered its evacuation. In the late afternoon, U.S. helicopters lifted out all six 105-mm and four 155-mm howitzers, and all of the Marines. Immediately upon reaching Khe Sanh, the 258th Brigade was sent to Lang Vei to set up a fire support base and take over an area of operations. On this same day, the 2d Regiment, 1st Infantry Division also deployed its units to provide security for Ham Nghi Base. The 54th Infantry Regiment from Hue received orders to move to Khe Sanh and relieve the 2d Regiment which needed some rest. ARVN units including the 5th Regiment, 2d Division were also deployed to gradually replace U.S. units west of Quang Tri. On 25 March, upon special orders from I Corps, the Marine Division dispatched two reconnaissance teams to the Co Roc area to control a vantage point essential for the security of Khe Sanh Base. On this day,

25 March, there were only two small ARVN reconnaissance teams left on Laotian territory.

Black Panther Raids

As I have previously mentioned, about a week earlier, on the afternoon of 19 March, President Thieu informed Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams that he had ordered a cautious pullback of RVNAF forces to South Vietnam. He conceived the possibility of the withdrawal lasting until 5 - 8 April 1971, to be followed by a surprise raid conducted by a regimental size force and directed at Muong Nong, the heart of Communist Base Area 611. Operation LAM SON 719 had the objective of disrupting two Communist base areas, one was Base Area 604 whose heart was Tchepone, the other, Area 611, centered on Muong Nong. All ARVN operations had been confined to Base Area 604. As far as Base Area 611 was concerned, the incursion went only as far as its northern boundary. The idea of further attacks into Muong Nong was, therefore, simply a follow-up action to finish the incomplete operation. But, by 25 March 1971, most ARVN forces had already left lower Laos. Only two small Marine reconnaissance teams remained there, operating stealthily in the hilly area of Co Roc.

For several days, while the withdrawal was feverishly taking place in lower Laos, the logistical and command installations at Khe Sanh (Ham Nghi) had been gradually deploying to the rear, too. U.S. forces such as the 5th Mechanized Brigade and units of the 101st Airborne Division continued to provide security on the RVN territory and the area along Route No. 9 up to the border. But upon crossing the border, the Marine units were assigned responsibility for the Lao-Viet border in cooperation with the 1st Ranger Group still stationed northwest of Khe Sanh.

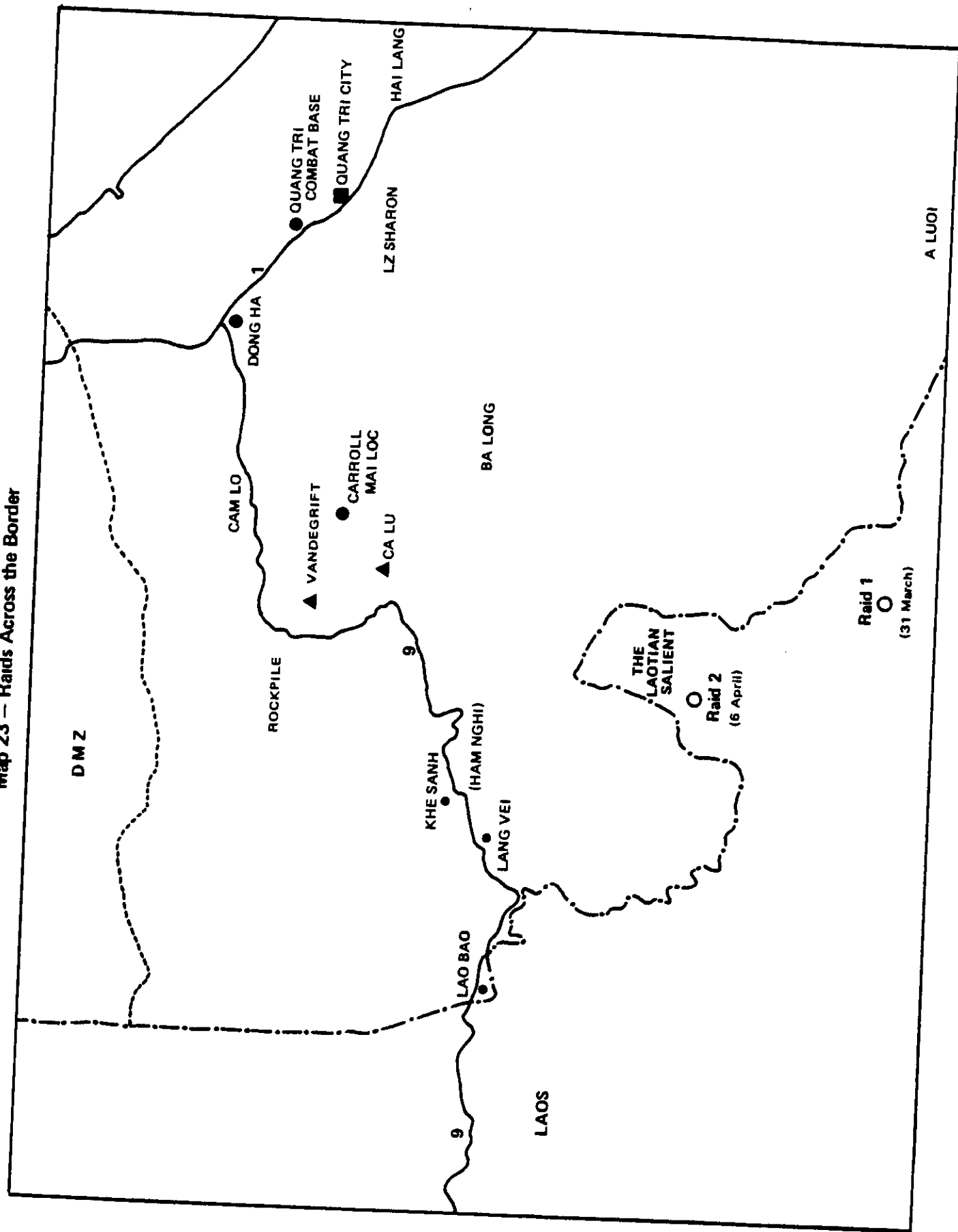
Although it no longer had any battalions in Laos, I Corps, whose forward command post was still located at Dong Ha, had an outstanding mission: the raid into Muong Nong. At this point, the world press as well as public opinion in South Vietnam and the United States tended

to view Operation LAM SON 719 as an incomplete campaign, being too hastily terminated. Photographs of the battered ARVN forces in retreat taken by war correspondents, coupled with moving news reports created unfavorable feelings toward the RVN. The operation had received too much publicity and its objective had been misinterpreted as being decisive by some reporters. To terminate the operation at this time, well before the lower Laos rainy season, would surely be branded a defeat by public opinion. Moreover, the RVN military spokesman in his vague style of public announcement reiterated during a press conference after 25 March that the lower Laos operation was not really over and RVN forces were still attacking Communist logistical routes. To get itself off the hook, the GVN surely had to continue Operation LAM SON 719. The attacks against the Ho Chi Minh trail complex would continue, but less for military gains, than for face-saving purposes, particularly in light of the fact that Communist troops had just launched a series of attacks in Quang Nam, Quang Tin and even in MR-2.

After repeated bombings by B-52s throughout the night of 28 March extending into the early morning of 29 March, reconnaissance aircraft were sent to check the Muong Nong area. There were two serious obstacles there which prompted the raid to be called off: enemy antiaircraft guns had laid out an intense barrage of fire and the dense fog in the area would make air support almost impossible. Prolonged airstrikes would compromise the target and the units which were to conduct the raid as well as those supporting it would be subjected to further difficulties. The raid was, therefore, rescheduled for 31 March, but against another target.

In the early morning of 31 March, in the projected area of operation, a wave of B-52 strikes was followed by 22 tactical air sorties, all designed to prepare a landing zone south of the Laotian salient approximately 40 kilometers southeast of Lang Vei. (Map 23) However, at 1030 hours reconnaissance aircraft reported continued heavy enemy antiaircraft fire. Preparations of the landing zone by airstrikes were resumed and at 1130 hours a Black Panther unit of the 1st Infantry Division, about 200 men and supported by the 2/17 Air Cavalry Squadron of

Map 23 - Raids Across the Border



the U.S. 101st Airborne Division landed without problems. In the meantime, a forward air controller aircraft and a communication relay aircraft circled over the area. The Black Panther unit searched the area and found the bodies of 85 enemy troops killed and 18 weapons destroyed by B-52 action. Continuing their search, the troops only made light contacts with the enemy. On the night of 31 March, enemy vehicles were heard moving to the south and the information was immediately reported to the forward air controller. The forward air controller verified the information and called for an air attack in which five enemy vehicles were destroyed. The following morning, friendly troops continued the operation and found an enemy fuel dump hit by airstrikes along with a destroyed tunnel complex housing tracked vehicles.

The next afternoon, the Black Panthers were picked up by U.S. Army helicopters and transported to Hue while President Nguyen Van Thieu was visiting the operational headquarters of I Corps at Dong Ha and the units which had fought in lower Laos. To foreign and local press reporters gathered there, he expressed his belief that the lower Laos operation had been the greatest victory of all and announced a new phase of attacks against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

In the meantime, the evacuation of Khe Sanh continued. After President Thieu's visit, the Airborne Division boarded aircraft bound for Saigon. On 2 April, the 8/4 Artillery Battalion, the last U.S. heavy artillery unit, left Khe Sanh, heading southeast. On the night of 4 April, the entire Marine Division left the Laotian border area and redeployed near Quang Tri. Vietnamese and U.S. logistical installations at Vandegrift and Khe Sanh had by now all relocated. On 5 April, the ARVN 4th Armored Squadron and the 77th Ranger Battalion were the last units to leave the border area, bound for Dong Ha.

On 6 April, another raid of the Black Panther forces of the 1st Infantry Division was initiated against another area of the Lao-Viet border salient approximately 22 kilometers southeast of Lang Vei. At 1000 hours after preparatory airstrikes, the reinforced Black Panther company landed unopposed. The search it conducted lasted until late afternoon without making contact with the enemy. At one location, the

Black Panthers found 15 enemy bodies and 17 weapons along with large quantities of food and an intricate network of tunnels, trenches and huts, all destroyed. In the course of the operation, U.S. tactical air destroyed three antiaircraft gun positions. The Black Panthers were extracted at 1700 hours the same day.

A few hours before the Black Panther unit ended its second raid into enemy bases on the other side of the border, the last ARVN and U.S. units were on their way out of Khe Sanh. The 5th and 54th Infantry Regiments moved to Cam Lo where they boarded trucks to return to their respective parent units. The U.S. 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry Task Force was the last unit to board helicopters leaving Khe Sanh, thereby ending Operation LAM SON 719.

CHAPTER VI

A Critical Analysis

The Balance Sheet of LAM SON 719

The picture of ARVN soldiers hanging on the skids of a helicopter which evacuated them from lower Laos and other equally dramatic photographs showing battered I Corps troops returning back across the Laotian border caused grave concern among South Vietnamese, military and civilian alike. Their concern deepened when they read the tantalizing news articles first carried by American newspapers and magazines then picked up by the foreign and Vietnamese press which all reported that the ARVN incursion into lower Laos was being terminated. The GVN military spokesman had a hard time denying these reports. He announced that this was simply an exchange of operational forces and for all practical purposes, LAM SON 719 was still underway and that ARVN forces were continuing their destructive forays against Communist logistical bases and infiltration routes on the other side of the border. President Nguyen Van Thieu echoed this line during his press conference at Dong Ha on 1 April 1971, but news about raids in lower Laos no longer interested Vietnamese public opinion which was more concerned about the real outcome of the well-publicized campaign. In the absence of official announcements, rumors and speculations proliferated. Everyone wanted to know the truth about friendly losses. But when official results were later made public, no one seemed to believe that they reflected the truth.

Despite the high figure of ARVN casualties which the GVN confirmed at nearly 6,000, there was still suspicion that the true figure was being concealed from public view. Newsweek magazine correspondents estimated this figure unofficially at nearly 10,000. But their figure

was definitely inflated because the highest level of ARVN strength committed during the entire operation reached only 17,000. It is obvious that if the casualties had been 10,000 as reported by these correspondents, certainly not very many ARVN units would have been able to make their way back to the border, which was not true. Reports on enemy losses, similarly, were regarded as being inflated. Also the general public believed that more U.S. helicopters had been destroyed than official announcements indicated. (Table 1)

RVNAF and United States casualties including killed, wounded and missing as reported through military channels for all of LAM SON 719 totaled 9,065. Most of the 7,683 RVNAF casualties were incurred by the tactical units that participated in the operations in Laos; the 1st Infantry Division and the Airborne Division absorbed over one-half of this total. (Table 2)

I Corps casualties thus represented about 45% of the maximum 17,000 troops that were committed during the most active phase of the operation. For LAM SON 719, I Corps had deployed a total of 42 battalion-size combat units of which 34 actually fought in lower Laos. Four ARVN battalions suffered losses so severe that they had to be reconstituted; six others, while suffering losses considered "moderate," still managed to fight as units. As to U.S. casualties they were incurred partly in combat activities conducted in South Vietnam, partly in helilift and air support activities in Laos.

Equipment and materiel losses for both U.S. and ARVN forces are outlined in Table 3. On the ARVN side, the most noteworthy losses were the 87 combat vehicles (to include M-113 armored personnel carriers and similar vehicles), 54 light tanks (M-41), 96 artillery pieces (of both 105-mm and 155-mm), 31 bulldozers, and over 1,500 radio sets. Most tanks and armored vehicles were damaged and destroyed during combat but the losses also included those left behind which were not able to maneuver around ambush sites. Among the 96 artillery pieces lost, the majority had been damaged by enemy counter-battery fire before being left behind in evacuated fire support bases; the remaining were destroyed by ARVN artillery troops prior to their withdrawal. No

Table 1 - GVN Released Results for LAM SON 719¹

ALLIED LOSSES			ENEMY LOSSES	
UNITED STATES			TROOPS	
Dead: 102			Dead: About 13,000	
Wounded: 215			(Saigon government figure)	
Missing: 53			Captured: About 50	
			(Saigon government figure)	
SOUTH VIETNAM			WEAPONS	
	Official figure	Unofficial report	Captured or Destroyed:	
Dead:	1,146	3,800	1,968 crew-served	
Wounded:	4,236	5,200	4,545 individual	
Missing:	246	775		
HELICOPTERS			VEHICLES	
Destroyed: 92			Captured or Destroyed:	
Cost about \$30 million			100 tanks 291 trucks	
Damages to others about \$10 million				
PLANES			SUPPLIES	
Destroyed: 5			Captured or Destroyed:	
Cost about \$8 million			128,000 tons of ammunition	
			1.3 million drums of gasoline	
			7,600 yards of pipeline	
			Food, medicine and clothing	

¹This information was published in the American Newsweek magazine, April 5, 1971, p. 29.

Table 2 - LAM SON 719 Cumulative Casualties²

UNIT	FRIENDLY			
	KILLED	WOUNDED	MISSING	TOTAL
XXIV Corps -				
101st Airborne Division	68	261	17	346
1st Bde, 5th Inf Division	55	431	3	489
11th Bde, 23rd Inf Division	47	256	7	310
XXIV Corps Artillery	9	76	0	85
Other Support Forces	38	125	11	172
Total	215	1149	38	1402
I Corps -				
1st Infantry Division	537	1607	537	2681
Airborne Division	455	1993	0*	2448
Marine Division	355	770	63	1188
1st Armored Brigade	54	364	0	418
1st Ranger Group	93	435	27	555
I Corps Troops	55	314	24	393
Total	1549	5483	651	7683
Sum-Total (Adjusted)	1764	6632	689	9065

* It was not true that there was absolutely no MIA for the Airborne Division. Based on first hand information, the author knew that a number of Airborne officers and troops were captured by the enemy.

² Excerpt from "An Assessment of the Performance of South Vietnamese Forces During Operation LAM SON 719: 30 January - 6 April 1971" by Headquarters, US XXIV Corps, dated 3 May 1971.

Table 3 - Major Items of Equipment Lost or Destroyed³

ITEMS	US	RVNAF	TOTALS
Small Arms Individual Weapons	363	2,107	2,470
Small Arms Crew Served Weapons	98	320	418
Trucks	67	211	278
Combat Vehicles	76	87	163
Tanks	17	54	71
Artillery	4	96	100
Radios	61	1,516*	1,577
Bulldozers	6	31	37

* Figures provided by RVNAF and used as the basis for requisitioning replacement items. Apparently not all were combat losses.

³ After Action Report, LAM SON 719, Headquarters, US XXIV Corps, dated 14 May 1971, p. 90.

engineer machinery was brought back. In fact, the 101st Combat Engineer Battalion and a platoon of the 118th Engineer Land Clearing Company lost all of their heavy equipment.

As to the enemy, his human losses were considerably higher than those suffered by the RVNAF. (Table 4)

Table 4 — Enemy Casualties, LAM SON 719⁴

Enemy Losses Reported By	U.S.	RVNAF	Total
Killed	4,795	14,565*	19,360
Captured	8	49	57

* Includes enemy personnel killed by U.S. tactical air and B-52s discovered by ARVN troops conducting operations in Laos.

To counteract the ARVN incursion into his most vital logistic base area, the enemy deployed, and the figures were later confirmed, 12 infantry regiments belonging to five different divisions, and at least an armor regiment and an artillery regiment. Total enemy combat strength thus committed in the LAM SON 719 area of operation was estimated at 30,000, not to include reserve elements. In addition, the enemy logistic structure in the general area of operations also had from 10 to 20,000

⁴After Action Report, LAM SON 719, Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, 14 May 1971, p. 90.

men. Out of this total, the enemy lost an estimated 20,000 men or about one half. But while his losses caused by actual combat engagements could be generally verified, his casualties inflicted by artillery and aerial bombings could only be estimated. Bomb damage assessments could only be obtained on approximately 10% of all B-52 missions. Even in those areas where search and bomb damage assessments were conducted an accurate body count was not always possible, partly due to the immensity and ruggedness of the terrain and partly due to the unbearable stench produced by masses of badly decomposed human bodies.

Enemy equipment losses throughout the campaign were also substantial; major categories are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 — Enemy Equipment Losses⁵

Items	Quantity	Observations
Individual Weapons	5,170	Reported by USAF (RVNAF ground troops confirmed 422 trucks)
Crew Served Weapons	1,963	
Vehicles	2,001	
Combat Vehicles	11	U.S. verified 88
Tanks	106	
Artillery/Mortars	13/93	U.S. verified 20,000 tons
Radios	98	
Ammunition	170,346 tons	
Rice	1,250 tons	

⁵Ibid, p. 91.

Most enemy vehicles were destroyed by U.S. gunships and tactical air. So were enemy tanks of all types which largely consisted of the amphibious PT-76's and a number of T-34's and T-54's, all Russian-made. The ammunition destroyed included an important quantity of artillery shells and rockets, also Russian-made. In addition, the enemy fuel pipeline originating in North Vietnam and running through the LAM SON 719 area of operations was cut in several places.

United States Combat Support

No account of LAM SON 719 would be complete without mentioning the importance of U.S. support. In closing the balance sheet on friendly and enemy losses, credit should be duly given to the role performed by U.S. Army Aviation, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Naval Air for without them, LAM SON 719 could hardly have been possible.

Topping the scale and from the point of view of the ARVN infantryman, U.S. Army Aviation units contributed by far the most important kind of support. In total, U.S. Army gunships and other types of helicopters flew over 90,000 sorties for the benefit of ARVN forces, to include nearly 24,000 gunship sorties, over 34,000 trooplift sorties and nearly 20,000 logistic-related sorties. (Table 6)

To carry out their vital support mission, U.S. Army Aviation units suffered losses in Laos amounting to 82 aircraft of all types destroyed and over 600 aircraft damaged but recoverable. (Table 7) U.S. Army pilots and crew members who sacrificed their lives in combat numbered 55 while 178 others were wounded and 34 were listed as missing in action.

The performance of the U.S. Air Force in support of LAM SON 719 was no less impressive. A total of 9,000 tactical air sorties were flown, to include 7,000 over lower Laos. The highest daily number of sorties reached 277 on 8 March 1971. (Table 8)

During the course of the operation, a total of 25 "Commando Vault" bombs (15,000-lb) were dropped by C-130 aircraft to clear landing zones and also to strike against specific targets such as warehouses, vehicle parks and enemy troop concentrations. Armed fixed-wing aircraft such

Table 6 — LAM SON 719: US Army Aviation Support Sorties

Type Sorties	(a) In Laos (South Vietnamese Support)	In South Vietnam			(d) Total (b+c)	(e) Total South Vietnamese Support (a+b)	(f) Total Sorties (a+d)
		(b) South Vietnamese Support*	(c) US Support	(e) Total South Vietnamese Support (a+b)			
Gunship	17,014	6,864	10,295	17,159	23,878	34,173	
Trooplift	13,098	21,101	16,580	37,681	34,199	50,779	
Medical Evacuation	909	585	1,244	1,829	1,494	2,738	
Air Cavalry	7,284	4,453	6,150	10,603	11,737	17,887	
Logistics	7,523	11,809	39,533	51,342	19,332	58,865	
Total	45,828	44,812	73,802	118,614	90,640	164,442	

* Estimates based on available LAM SON 719 experience factors; during the initial weeks of the operation, no records were kept of the division of support in South Vietnam between US and South Vietnamese Forces.

Table 7 — U.S. Army Aircraft Damaged and Destroyed

Type Aircraft	Damaged*	Destroyed			Grand Total
		In Laos	In South Vietnam	Total	
OH6A	25	4	6	10	35
OH58	15	4	2	6	21
UH1C	63	7	1	8	71
UH1H	316	43	10	53	369
AH1G	158	20	6	26	184
CH47	26	3	0	3	29
CH53	13	1	1	2	15
CH54	2	0	0	0	2
Total (Non-hostile)	618 (4)	82 (0)	26 (5)	108 (5)	728 (9)

*Aircraft receiving any degree of combat damage but is economically repairable.

Table 8 — U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Support

	<u>In Laos</u>	<u>In South Vietnam</u>	<u>Total</u>
Total Sorties Flown	7104	2010	9114
Average Sorties/Day	103	29	132
Highest Number of Sorties on Any One Day (8 March 1971)			277
Total Ton Ordnance Delivered	10931	3100	14031
Number of Aircraft Lost			7

as AC-119 "Stingers" and AC-130 "Spectres" and AC-130 "Candlestick" flareships were particularly effective in attacking and destroying enemy trucks moving by night and in providing close support for ARVN forces engaged in fire-fights. These aircraft accounted for about 50-60 enemy trucks destroyed. The results obtained by U.S. tactical air support to include both U.S. Air Force and U.S. Naval Air are outlined in Table 9.

Table 9 — Bomb Damage Assessment, U.S. Tactical Air

	In Laos	In South Vietnam	Total
Enemy Killed by Air	3103	61	3164
Secondary Explosions	6694	234	6928
Secondary Fires	779	207	986
Destroyed: Structures/Bunkers	471	421	892
Trucks	197	1	198
Tanks	59	0	59
Antiaircraft Weapons	165	2	167
Radar Sites	1	0	1

Total losses and casualties incurred by USAF tactical air units in support of the operation amounted to seven aircraft destroyed (3 F-4's, 1 F-100, 1 A-7, 1 A-1, and 1 O-2) and 4 pilots killed in action. Other pilots who had been shot down over Laos were all rescued.

U.S. Naval aircraft also contributed significantly to the support of LAM SON 719 with nearly 1,900 sorties launched from U.S. carriers Hancock, Kitty Hawk and Ranger.

A particularly important role in air support was performed by the B-52s in the annihilation of enemy installations, rear bases and troop concentrations. In Operation LAM SON 719, B-52 sorties were also used to clear landing zones and to provide close support for ARVN forces in

many emergency situations. Several ARVN units learned how to use B-52 strikes in their plans for combat maneuvering with skill. Total B-52 strikes in support of LAM SON 719 amounted to 622, to include 421 for the benefit of ARVN forces and 201 in support of U.S. forces. (Table 10)

Table 10 — B-52 "Arc Light" Operation Summary, LAM SON 719

		PHASE I (Planning)	PHASE II (8 Feb - 5 Mar 71)	PHASE III (6 Mar - 15 Mar 71)	PHASE IV (16 Mar - 7 Apr 71)	Total
NOMINATED	I Corps	0	175	90	132	397
	U.S.	8	93	39	212	352
	TOTAL	8	268	129	344	746
SCHEDULED	I Corps	0	158	86	129	373
	U.S.	7	87	39	175	308
	TOTAL	7	245	125	304	681
DIVERTS	I Corps	0	93	86	153	332
	U.S.	0	16	0	16	32
	MACV	0	10	2	15	27
	TOTAL	0	119	88	184	391
ABORTS		0	9	6	17	32
STRIKES	I Corps	0	189	97	135	421
	U.S.	7	37	20	137	201
	TOTAL	7	226	117	272	622
NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT		18	670	359	807	1854
TONS OF BOMBS		456.75	14435.50	9261.75	22,705.25	46,859.25

The assessment of bomb damage inflicted by B-52 missions was nearly impossible to carry out, however. In general, only about 10% of all B-52 targets were searched through by ground troops; their BDA reports are summarized in Table 11. In addition secondary explosions were observed by B-52 air crews and other aerial observers over 480 targets.

Table 11 — BDA Results on 55 Arc Light Targets

Categories of Damage	Quantities
KIA	2644
WIA	12
INDIVIDUAL WEAPONS	1541
CREW SERVED WEAPONS	82
MORTARS	93
ROCKET LAUNCHERS	300
AAA	16 (INCLUDES 23MM, 37MM and 57MM WEAPONS)
AA/AW	41 (INCLUDES 12.7MM WEAPONS)
TRUCKS	72
TRACKS	11 (INCLUDES ONE TANK)
ARTILLERY PIECES	13
AMMUNITION	933 TONS
FOOD	1101 TONS
STRUCTURES	890
BICYCLES	300
BUNKERS	176
FUEL	151,925 GALLONS

Last but not least, U.S. artillery units, despite their location on the RVN side of the border, contributed significantly to the effective support of ARVN forces due to their long range and accurate fire. Their support was particularly useful at night or in bad weather. (Table 12)

Table 12 — U.S. and ARVN Artillery Support

	Caliber	Number of Tubes	Missions	Rounds	Number Pieces Combat Loss
US	105mm	6	111	3197	0
	155mm	28	5738	132278	0
	175mm	20	6946	36695	4
	8 inch	8	2373	16392	0
TOTAL		62	15168	208962	4
ARVN	105mm	152	Unknown	240709	70
	155mm	48	Unknown	70228	26
	TOTAL	200	Unknown	310937	96
TOTAL		262	15168* (US ONLY)	519899	100

*This figure does not include 4969 missions flown by two batteries of U.S. Aerial Field Artillery (24 helicopters).

In summary, during their 45-day incursion into lower Laos, ARVN forces of I Corps inflicted on the enemy heavy casualties amounting to at least 50% of the combat forces he had committed to the area of operation. A sizeable dent had thus been made into the participating elements of five NVA divisions, the 2d, 304th, 308th, 320th, and 324B, and the logistical units in Base Areas 604 and 611.

In exchange for these results, I Corps suffered casualties equivalent to 45% of the combat strength it had committed in the operation not to mention substantial losses in equipment. Although not a protracted campaign, SAM SON 719 brought about profound repercussions among the South Vietnamese people. Despite official claims of a "big victory" and mass demonstrations to celebrate the "lower Laos victory," the people still were shocked by the severe losses incurred. Perhaps the greatest emotional shock of all was the unprecedented fact that ARVN forces had to leave behind in Laos a substantial number of their dead and wounded. This came

as a horrendous trauma for those unlucky families who, in their traditional devotion to the cult of the dead and their attachment to the living, were condemned to live in perpetual sorrow and doubt. It was a violation of beliefs and familial piety that Vietnamese sentiment would never forget and forgive.

Observations and Evaluation

Operation LAM SON 719 was terminated unexpectedly and in haste. Despite official denials to the contrary by GVN authorities, the fact could not be hidden from the inquisitive media reporters of the Free World. The campaign had lasted only 45 days, much shorter than its intended duration, but it was long enough to create a disquieting impact on the troops and population alike. Much speculation had arisen about the merits of the operation measured against the losses and casualties that I Corps had suffered. Was it worth all the bloodshed and the bodies and wounded left behind? Was it a victory or a defeat? Popular sentiment seemed to be aroused by the dramatic accounts and personal feelings of the I-Corps troops who returned from Laos. Almost without exception, they did not believe they were victorious.

To political and military leaders of South Vietnam, the Laotian incursion offered further proof of close cooperation between the U.S. and RVN in the face of the enemy's threat. They had long coveted such an action but knew that South Vietnam alone could not destroy the war-sustaining lifeline from North Vietnam so they had welcomed the American initiative with unconcealed enthusiasm.

The general situation at that time also lent itself to a focus of attention on our objectives in lower Laos. The turnabout in Cambodia's political attitude and the resulting cross-border operations of 1970 brought about encouraging prospects of denying safe havens and storage areas to the enemy in that terminal section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The prospects would look still better if the Communist lifeline could be cut at its most sensitive point — in lower Laos. Domestically, the Vietnamization program was making excellent progress. After the Cambodian

incursion of 1970, the RVNAF felt as if they had matured overnight and desired another chance to prove it. With every passing day, the security situation looked better and better despite our anticipation of additional reductions in U.S. combat forces; at the beginning of 1971 a total of over 250,000 U.S. troops had already departed since the Vietnamization program was initiated and another redeployment increment was scheduled in the near future. Politically, two important events, the RVN and U.S. presidential elections, in late 1971 and 1972 respectively, were drawing near. These and the improved military situation in South Vietnam joined hands to provide the rationale for LAM SON 719.

Once the decision had been made, the combined planning for the operation between Vietnamese and American staffs became a shining example of close and effective cooperation. By the time the J-3, JGS relayed the official decision to the I Corps commander and briefed him on the general concept of the operation, the initial planning process was already underway by the I Corps and the U.S. XXIV Corps staffs. This was made possible by an instant exchange of data concerning the enemy situation, U.S. support, characteristics of the area of operations, especially those pertaining to North Vietnam and the target area which were almost exclusively provided by the G-2, U.S. XXIV Corps. Everything that should be known by I Corps about the enemy was made available including order of battle on NVA forces in North Vietnam and Laos, the status of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and enemy activities on it, the situation in Base Areas 604 and 611, and disposition of enemy units and detailed information on the enemy's anti-aircraft capabilities in the area of operation. Aerial photos were scrutinized with particular care. Our intensive study and planning resulted in estimates that bolstered confidence. The enemy's opposition would be initially light. His anti-aircraft system would be effectively neutralized by our devastating firepower. Our helilift capabilities and mechanized assets would make short work of the occupation of key objectives. Initially, it was thought that Tchepone could be ours after three days of combat.⁶

⁶Reference Message No. PT008443, datetimed 141435Z Feb. 71 from COMUSMACV to CJCS and CINPAC.

Naturally, after that, our search activities would expand and continue until the enemy's logistical system in the area of operation was effectively strangled. Although there was no official record of the anticipated duration of the campaign, it could be inferred from public statements and private comments made by authorities that the operation was to last until the onset of the rainy season in lower Laos, or about early May 1971. From then on, monsoon rains over the Truong Son Mountain Range would inhibit the enemy's infiltration and logistic activities.

The close coordination between I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps continued during the entire course of the operation by a constant exchange of combat information which resulted in appropriate modifications of the original plan and even better cooperation. Intelligence continued to be an important aspect of the combined effort. Initial data provided by U.S. forces were corroborated and complemented by battle reports and intelligence gathered from enemy prisoners and ralliers which in time became particularly important with regard to the confirmation of enemy units, the movements of enemy troops and the day-to-day situation along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All these data were shared between the U.S. and ARVN staffs.

During the initial phase of the campaign, the advance of ARVN units was bold, swift and effective. The concept of maneuvering along ridgelines by helilift combined with a series of fire support bases allowed an audacious progress, well supported by artillery. Heliborne movements were coordinated with an armor thrust; these forces linked up at predetermined objectives along the axis of the main effort. Both the northern and southern flanks of this effort were also protected and once the final objective was attained, the actual search of the target area and exploitation of combat gains could be expanded.

This was a sound concept whose success depended on the superiority enjoyed by ARVN in terms of heliborne mobility, air power and mechanized capabilities. Swift progress made step by step and from peak to peak, and occupation of dominating terrain features by a series of mutually supporting fire support bases where the essence of that concept. It was in fact the faithful transplant of a combat tactic that had worked for so

many years in South Vietnam and should work in lower Laos, given the considerable concentration of resources. This also offered the ARVN forces an opportunity to put into combat practice what they had learned from combined operations with U.S. forces.

The rough, jungled terrain of lower Laos proved particularly difficult for ARVN forces. In every advance, they were apt to be engaged by the enemy in heavy firefights. At almost all prominent terrain features in the area, they met head on with solid defensive positions deployed by enemy logistic units. This defense system, consisting of mutually supporting, well dug-in, crescent-shape, covered trench segments, which the enemy called "horseshoe blocks," was extremely difficult and time-consuming to break through since their destruction would require accurate, highly concentrated artillery fire.

One of the first major problems that our forces had to face, in addition to the enemy's blocking positions, was his elusive but devastating anti-aircraft system. The most common weapon he used against our aircraft was the 12.7-mm heavy machinegun which constantly switched firing positions. In addition, throughout the area, there were about 200 AAA pieces from 23-mm up to 100-mm, some of them radar-controlled. Even these heavy weapons frequently changed their firing positions which were usually well concealed. In general, the enemy's anti-aircraft system seemed to be well coordinated and its fire controlled with skill and discipline. His heavy machineguns such as 12.7-mm, 14.5-mm or even 23-mm, were arranged in a diamond or circle pattern, affording mutual protection and providing a well-coordinated fire trap. For example, one weapon could open fire to draw our aircraft to it and when our aircraft made the attack, it would enter another weapon's field of fire. Enemy AAA positions not only changed frequently, they also moved in uncomfortably close to our units in coordination with an envelopment and attack by infantry troops. As a result, they were extremely difficult to destroy and the price our helicopters had to pay when lifting troops, delivering supplies or evacuating the wounded was high.

Another enemy weapon that was least expected in view of the adverse terrain in lower Laos was the tank. Since the very first days of the operation, our troops had detected and reported traces of tracked vehicles. Then enemy prisoners provided additional information which pointed to the presence of an armor regiment in the area. It was only later when some of these tanks made their appearance that they were observed and attacked by U.S. aircraft. Then, a combined infantry-armor attack against FSB 31 made it all too clear that tanks were being used extensively by the enemy although in a rather unorthodox manner. In his attack against FSB 30, for example, the enemy used tanks only to provide direct support fire, and at FSB Delta, his flame-throwing tanks repulsed a counterattack by our Marine troops. The enemy's employment of armor was even more unorthodox in that tanks were used individually to ambush our troops along well concealed jungle paths, as if they were playing a hide-and-seek game. This tactic worked because the enemy knew well the system of paths that crisscrossed the area. Against our armor or truck convoys, enemy tanks were usually positioned in ambush, then suddenly opened fire and withdrew quickly into jungle paths. In addition to PT-76's, the enemy also employed medium T-54 and T-34 tanks whose 100-mm and 85-mm guns had a greater firepower than our 76-mm M-41 light tanks. Confined to a one-way road with little room for cross-country maneuvers, ARVN armor units found themselves in an extremely disadvantageous position.

While enemy infantry troops seemed to have excellent anti-tank capabilities with their B-40 and B-41 teams and their ambush tactics, our infantrymen were not well prepared against enemy tanks. ARVN airborne troops, for example, complained about the ineffectiveness of the M-72 light anti-tank weapon.⁷ As a result, old 3.5" rocket launchers

⁷It is possible that one of the problems the troopers experienced with the LAW was related to firing the weapon at very close range, shorter than the minimum arming distance of the projectile.

and new 90-mm recoilless rifles were quickly brought in as replacements. Even U.S. gunships during the early stage of the operation were not armed with HEAT rockets which were required to knock out tanks. Our head-on collision with enemy tanks, therefore, was obviously a big tactical surprise.

Enemy artillery also posed a challenge that could not be easily met. In the first place, mortars of all calibers formed close rings of fire around our positions. Their continuous firing indicated that the enemy had an ample supply of ammunition which was probably pre-positioned. Next came recoilless rifles, rockets and artillery of all types. For the first time in the war, ARVN forces came to grips with the deadly fire of enemy 152-mm howitzers and 130-mm guns which had a range far greater than their own 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers. Enemy artillery was emplaced in scattered, individual positions, some dug into mountain slopes to elude our counterbattery fire. In action, several pieces would open fire at the same time from several directions, making them all the more difficult for our forces to locate. Without field radar, ARVN forces had to rely on their technique of crater analysis which did not produce accurate results.

The enemy effectively coordinated all his capabilities, to include antiaircraft, artillery, mortars and massive infantry formations to envelop and overrun our FSBs as well as our mobile units. As soon as a FSB was established or a unit had debarked on a landing zone, the enemy's encirclement process would begin, first by mortars which moved in at close range around the position and opened fire every time helicopters landed or took off. Then, antiaircraft teams and infantry units advanced to complete the ring, always keeping as close as they could to our position, while from many directions further away, enemy artillery guns zeroed in to create a continuing state of tension within our base. The surrounding web of antiaircraft weapons, mortars and artillery gradually became so thick that the base was effectively isolated and no resupply or medical evacuation activities could be conducted. A FSB was usually occupied and defended by an ARVN battalion which normally deployed from two to three companies to man a security

belt around the base. This ARVN tactic worked fine in South Vietnam in most situations. However, in the face of a more concentrated encirclement combined with artillery fire and ground attacks and frequently with an armor thrust, this ARVN defensive tactic proved to be less effective. Under these conditions, a single battalion was eventually overpowered and lost the initiative. The final attack to overrun a base was usually conducted with a massive concentration of infantry troops usually outnumbering the defenders by three to five times without regard to losses.

In the face of these difficulties which ARVN forces were not prepared to meet, Operation LAM SON 719 bogged down as soon as it reached Ban Dong. First the rangers, then the paratroopers, and finally the armor troops, all had the chance to prove their gallantry in combat and indeed inflicted severe losses to the enemy. But by this time, the ARVN forces had lost their initiative and our vigorous offensive thrust was blunted. The state of inconclusive, see-saw fighting continued until the beginning of March when, with increased U.S. helilift and firepower support, the 2d Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division succeeded in landing in Tchepone, the major terrain objective of the entire operation. For all its merits, this exploit was more a symbolic gesture than a real achievement. It merely meant that "we were there."

The 2d Regiment did not stay long in Tchepone. The imbalance of forces by that time precluded any attempt at holding and exploiting this objective. Our success in reaching Tchepone was largely due to a flexibility in plans and the awesome capability of U.S. helicopters. The real prize, however, was not to be found there. It was located further west where the enemy's more important supply caches still lay unsheltered on the ground. But ARVN forces could not get there nor could they afford to linger long in Tchepone. As swiftly as they came in, they were extracted in haste before the enemy had time to regroup and react. A previous prolonged search of the area of Route 914 by the 1st Division had shown that enemy reactions were swift. This was another indication of our inability to achieve what had been originally intended. It was true that U.S. helicopters helped with the maneuvering

of our forces but the overall tactical imbalance that prevailed at that time made it impossible for ARVN forces to hold terrain and exploit the gains. This was a truth that no one could deny.

Throughout the operation, the role played by U.S. combat support was particularly illustrious. It was evident that without this support, no incursion would have been possible, much less on such a large scale. The fact that ARVN forces were able to progress into Laos as far as Tchepone was a measure of the significance of United States support. When enemy resistance developed into such proportions that no further progress was possible, it became all the more obvious that without U.S. combat troops in the rear and without U.S. helicopters and tactical air support for the frontline, it would have been impossible to withdraw with any satisfactory degree of unit integrity.

U.S. support assets were plentiful, but it appeared that during the early stage of the operation, their control and coordination were not entirely satisfactory. Part of the problem seemed to derive from the physical separation of major operational headquarters. The U.S. XXIV Corps Forward CP was installed at Quang Tri Base while its counterpart, I Corps Forward CP was at Dong Ha, about 10 miles to the northwest. Still, another important element of I Corps Forward CP, the operational control staff, was located further west at Ham Nghi Base (Khe Sanh) which was 35 miles southwest of Dong Ha. Operating on the principle of cooperation and coordination, both the U.S. and ARVN staffs found it difficult to work effectively while physically separated. At Ham Nghi Base, an important hub of support activities where all ARVN divisions' rear echelon headquarters and U.S. forward support agencies were located, there was no official representative of the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps with authority for control and coordination. All decisions pertaining to support and the distribution of support assets had to be made at the Quang Tri Base. As a result, at the forward echelon, the direction of support effort suffered from delays and the coordination of support activities was too loose for a fast changing tactical situation which required timely decisions on the spot.

This shortcoming was remedied however, when a U.S. Joint Coordinating Group (JCG) was established on 1 March 1977 under the control of the Commander, U.S. 108th Artillery Group who represented the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps. Members of the JCG included the deputy commander U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) who acted as an aviation officer, a representative of the G-3, U.S. XXIV Corps, and a representative of the U.S. 7th Air Force (not a permanent member). Co-located with I Corps Tactical Control CP at Ham Nghi Base, this Joint Coordinating Group proved to be extremely effective in the rapid coordination of U.S. combat support assets. Working hand in hand with the I Corps commander and his staff who provided timely data for the planning of support operations, the JCG chief and his aviation officer were able to assist them in the process of operational planning and decision-making by providing expert advice.

Although a combined operation, LAM SON 719 had an unusual character of its own. It was the first large-scale operation undertaken without the direct participation of U.S. advisers. Long accustomed to the presence of advisers which they found reassuring and invaluable, especially in difficult combat situations, ARVN regimental and battalion commanders went into Laos with apprehensive feelings. They realized that this was going to be a difficult challenge and they were not too sure they could handle the problem of communications with supporting U.S. units. This had always been an exclusive service provided by their advisers in addition to regular and routine advisory assistance. But they had to accomplish all requirements by themselves this time, and despite some apprehensions, they all felt proud and believed they could excel without their advisers. After all, as unit commanders, they were accustomed to assuming responsibility which they routinely discharged without difficulty whether it was administrative work, troop training or the conduct of combat operations with only ARVN support. Their self assurance and determination was demonstrated throughout LAM SON 719. Due to special arrangements to provide Vietnamese interpreters aboard FAC and AFCC aircraft, ARVN unit commanders handled the problem of calling for U.S. support quite professionally.

U.S. advisers could have helped more had they been permitted to do so. As it was, only one member from each division advisory team was allowed in the air at any time over his division's tactical area of responsibility. The division senior advisers were not allowed to overfly Laos at any time. Although the advisers in the air over the divisions monitored the situation closely and helped greatly in difficult problems of support, they were often overwhelmed by requests for assistance from several divisional units which were being engaged by the enemy simultaneously. Confined to the divisions' rear echelon CPs inside South Vietnam, the senior advisers were able only to expedite support through reports or map studies.

The question has often surfaced concerning President Thieu's personal influence on the operation. From the beginning it was obvious that his influence was decisive. It was he who approved the idea of launching an offensive into lower Laos, concurred with the general concept of operation and decided to augment the forces for I Corps. The JGS only acted with his approval. The attachment of the Airborne and Marine Divisions to I Corps for the offensive effort, for example, could not have been done without President Thieu's personal approval. But the selection of 8 February as D-day, as far as I can determine, was a recommendation of the combined planning staffs of I Corps and the U.S. XXIV Corps. President Thieu had been briefed on this selected date by the I Corps commander. Therefore, without strong reasons for a change, the I Corps commander apparently felt committed to the decision that he had recommended and obtained from the President.

But President Thieu's role was not confined just to the decision to proceed with the operation. At least on two occasions, the directives he gave to the I Corps commander clearly affected the course of the operation itself. During a visit to I Corps on 19 February, in the company of a central government delegation, he received an operational briefing presented by the participating ARVN field commanders. During this briefing they outlined for him the serious difficulties being met by ARVN units in lower Laos with the implied suggestion that a deeper incursion would be inadvisable. At that time, the Ranger 21st and 39th Battalions were being heavily engaged and FSBs 30 and 31 began

to detect strong enemy pressure. President Thieu made a few remarks to the effect that ARVN forces should take their time and should conduct search operations in the vicinities of their present positions while waiting for developments. From that day on, the Airborne Division would not make any further advance.

The second time involved the decision to push into Tchepone. On 28 February, President Thieu met again with the I Corps commander in Saigon. By this time, progress on the ground had been stalled for over two weeks and the foreign press was publicizing daily ARVN's inability to advance further. During this meeting, it was President Thieu who decided that ARVN forces should go into Tchepone. As a result, General Lam produced his plan to occupy Tchepone and President Thieu ordered the JGS to reinforce I Corps with the entire Marine Division and additional armor elements. The attack against Tchepone was conceived merely as a short-term raid to be conducted primarily for its propaganda and morale value. Although President Thieu suggested that the Marine Division be used to relieve the Airborne Division in the main effort, General Lam convinced him that the 1st Division would be better in this role, while the marines could be employed to protect the rear and the LOC. The division commanders present also agreed that the advance, except for the raid to Tchepone, should be suspended until the enemy's intentions and capabilities became more clear. The field commanders and General Lam also persuaded President Thieu that reinforcement with the 2d Division in Laos would not improve the situation. Now that the initiative had been largely assumed by the NVA, a much more potent force than the 2d Division would be required to recapture it. Finally, President Thieu's desire to conduct a raid-in-force into Muong Nong ceased to be a practicable course of action by the time the withdrawal was beginning and General Lam exercised his command prerogatives by not attempting it. It was clear that President Thieu listened carefully to the recommendations of his field commanders, that he did not arbitrarily impose rigid instructions upon them, but that he allowed them the latitude in the execution of plans and orders that combat commanders must have.

The conduct of the operation was also plagued by dissension verging on insubordination among some ARVN field commanders. Lieutenant General Lam was never able to exercise full control over the commanders of the Airborne and Marine Divisions who were his equals in rank. Of the two, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong, the paratrooper, proved to be more submissive, but he did not always carry out the I Corps commander's orders in a strict manner. Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, Commander of the Marine Division, who was more senior in rank than the I Corps commander, delegated his command authority to his deputy, Colonel Bui The Lan, who directly exercised operational control over the entire division. While occasionally present at the Marine Division's rear echelon CP, General Khang never attended any official operational briefings presided over by the I Corps Commander. Because of this, the Marine Division acted independently on a few occasions when the odds were against it. For example, it made its own decision to abandon FSB Hotel and withdraw its troops from Laos.

President Thieu and General Vien, Chief of the JGS, were probably aware of the discord among their subordinates, but they took no remedial action. Perhaps General Lam did not ask for such an action. Or perhaps the matter was so delicate among these generals, who were all considered pillars of the regime, that it defied any easy solution.

This dissension among commanders adversely affected staff coordination between I Corps and the Airborne and Marine Divisions. Many reports were delayed; at times, there were no reports at all. As a result, I Corps was unable to control the situation effectively, especially when the enemy pressure began to increase significantly. Because of this, General Lam chose an organic unit of I Corps, the 1st Division, for the Tchepone mission instead of the Airborne or Marine Division.

LAM SON 719 was further impeded by advance news dispatches in the press. During the preparatory period, reporters were not allowed into the Quang Tri area but this aroused their curiosity and gave rise to speculation. The press seemed to be able to pick up leads and develop them into news dispatches that gave every detail of the operation as of the end of January 1971. Thus, the advantages of surprise were lost very

early and the enemy had ample time to prepare. As early as during the first days of February, Tchepone had already been mentioned as an objective. After that, U.S. Government officials publicly praised the merits of the Laotian campaign which would ensure the continued redeployment of U.S. forces. Then on 8 February, the day I Corps forces crossed the border into Laos, President Thieu went on TV to personally break the news to the Vietnamese public. As the operation continued, press reports increasingly focused on the small district town of Tchepone as the final objective. To the RVN, it had become an objective to be attained at all costs.

While the RVN announced that its troops had occupied Tchepone, North Vietnam quickly and loudly disclaimed it. The GVN in the meantime received foreign press reporters with a total lack of enthusiasm and did not allow them easy access to battleground visits as it had during other operations. This increased suspicion and speculation. Subsequent press articles and pictures depicting the withdrawal of ARVN troops from Laos further confused attempts at assessing the offensive campaign correctly, particularly by foreign observers. However, with the exception of the minority elite in big cities, the South Vietnamese general public was not influenced by the foreign press. Still, the initial publicity about LAM SON 719 looked embarrassingly hollow in their eyes in view of the hasty termination of the operation. This impression lingered on despite official announcements of victory and the ribbons and medals awarded to the "victorious" troops of I Corps.

If the premature conclusion of the Laotian campaign could not be effectively screened from the outside world, it was all too clear to insiders that the campaign was an unfinished job. The intended and desired goal to sustain combat until the onset of the rainy season in order to strangle the enemy's supply route could not be accomplished. Only 45 days after ARVN forces had crossed the border, they were already back in South Vietnam. The two lesser raids that were subsequently conducted sought to enhance the public image of the RVNAF more than to achieve military gains. Finally, the returns produced by LAM SON 719 in terms of enemy caches destroyed were not even as impressive

as those of the Cambodian incursion. For one thing, ARVN forces had stopped short of the real prize, the area west of Tchepone where most of the enemy's supplies lay vulnerable on the ground. For another, the search and destruction of Base Area 611 could not be carried out as planned because the tactical balance no longer favored the continuation of the operation in that direction.

Regardless of these shortcomings, a substantial number of the objectives had been accomplished which required ARVN units to fight hard and incur great sacrifices. Topping the honor roll, the 1st ARVN Infantry Division stood up to its reputation as the number one ARVN combat unit. The division's organic units maneuvered with skill and were well led; its well disciplined troops fought with gallantry and dedication. During its 42 days of operation in Laos, the division was extremely active south of Route No. 9. Switching its effort during the final days, it successfully pushed toward Tchepone and occupied it. During the withdrawal, some of its units were heavily engaged and suffered losses. Despite this, the 1st Infantry Division accomplished its mission with top honors.

Long considered as the elite unit of the RVNAF, the Airborne Division did not perform as brilliantly as its reputation would indicate during LAM SON 719. Despite the enemy's superiority in maneuvering forces and his employment of new weapons, the fact that the division was unable to hold FSB 31 seemed to be indicative of its lack of contingency planning for such a situation. But our airborne units fought extremely well as individual elements. One of the division's brigade commanders was missing in action—probably captured by the enemy; and five out of nine of its battalion commanders were either killed or wounded. This testified to the intense fighting that the division had to face but by and large, the division accomplished nothing spectacular in its assigned mission. During the final stage, the division also failed to provide effective flank protection for the major effort and secure Route No. 9 even with the reinforcement of four armor squadrons. This failure greatly complicated the ARVN withdrawal from Laos.

As for the Marine Division, it was the first time it had participated in an operation as a division. Accustomed to operating separately at brigade level, and in view of the traditional autonomy of its brigades, the division seemed to have problems of command and control. The 147th Marine Brigade did not succeed in clearing the enemy pressure around FSB Delta despite continuous efforts for several days. Then the division made its own decision to withdraw from FSB Hotel and its positions on the Co Roc promontory, apparently to avoid facing a difficult battle. This action clearly reflected the autonomy enjoyed by the division commander, Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, who did not consider himself under the control of the I Corps commander but still made tactical decisions that affected the latter's conduct of the operation. Despite this, Marine units fought extremely well during sustained combat under heavy enemy pressure. Regardless of losses, they always retained unit integrity and cohesiveness.

The 1st Ranger Group was heavily engaged as soon as it was deployed. Its 39th and 21st Battalions responded well to the enemy's massive attacks and also inflicted severe losses on enemy units. The early withdrawal of this Group did not allow a correct evaluation of its performance.

As to ARVN armor units, their employment in LAM SON 719 was perhaps one of the very few occasions of any large concentration during the war. The 1st Armor Brigade was committed initially with only two squadrons; this total was later increased to four in addition to two troops of M-41 light tanks redeployed from MR-2. These reinforcements were introduced to offset some losses but still the deployment of all these armored forces on a short stretch of narrow jungle road not even 20 kilometers in length and affording no room for maneuver represented perhaps one of the unwise moves on the part of the tactical commanders involved.⁸ If this decision was deliberate, then perhaps they had

⁸The commanders of ARVN I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps were both armor officers.

seriously underestimated the enemy's capabilities or the restrictions dictated by the terrain in that area. As a result, the 1st Armor Brigade was at a great disadvantage when faced with enemy tanks deep in the jungle. In those circumstances, ARVN armor officers were naturally unable to make effective use of combat tactics they had learned in Western service schools. The brigade commander was also not resourceful enough to meet this unusual combat challenge. The outcome was evident: only one-third of the total number of armored vehicles committed managed to return home after accomplishing nothing substantial. If someone was to be held responsible for this failure, the question would arise as to whether it should be the commander of the brigade or his superior, who committed this unit to such an undesirable and impossible situation.

In contrast, I Corps artillery performed exceptionally well during the entire operation. Fire coordination between ARVN and U.S. supporting units was extremely flexible and effective. Divisional artillery units providing direct support in Laos fared less well, however. Their deployment was also limited. Each infantry regiment or brigade was supported by only one 105-mm battery and one 155-mm battery. Given the number of artillery pieces left behind in Laos after the hasty withdrawal, one may wonder whether we should have committed more artillery assets to the battle.

The 1st Air Division, Vietnam Air Force, did not play a significant role in providing close air support for I Corps forces. Its participation and contributions were rather modest even by RVNAF standards due to the availability of the United States Air Force. The 1st Area Logistics Command, by contrast, proved to be resourceful and capable enough to meet the challenge of providing support for a corps-size operation on short notice. Its lack of initial preparations were more than offset by the solid backing given by U.S. logistical agencies.

Lessons Learned

LAM SON 719 reflected quite accurately the strengths and weaknesses of the RVNAF combat effectiveness in almost every area: organization, command, leadership, motivation, operating techniques, planning, and execution. It was impeded by certain significant errors and shortcomings that made the entire effort fall short of its intended goal.

Foremost among the most significant problems of LAM SON 719 was perhaps timely tactical intelligence. To give due credit to the intelligence effort, one must admit that intelligence estimates concerning the operation were definitely accurate or nearly accurate as far as enemy capabilities in antiaircraft weapons and troop reinforcements were concerned. However, they were less accurate in other areas. Enemy artillery and armor capabilities were not listed as significant factors. In addition, reports on the area of concentrated supplies were not entirely accurate. Several enemy prisoners in fact disclosed that most supplies caches had been evacuated to areas outside the AO. The enemy appeared not to be surprised at all; by contrast, he had been prepared and expecting our forces to come in. This led to the conclusion that several things concerning the enemy had eluded our collection capabilities. Once more, the Vietnam war seemed to have taught us some useful things about intelligence and security. To be more effective, a more extensive collection network would seem to be indicated with emphasis on human intelligence in the areas under enemy control. Then, analysis, evaluation and interpretation of enemy capabilities should be made with the full cognizance that they were apt to change very rapidly and as a result, estimates would have to concentrate not only on the current situation but also on how it was going to change. At the same time, for an operation of that scale and importance, a more conscious effort at deceiving the enemy by a comprehensive deception scheme perhaps would have helped offset the adverse effect of publicity and effectively confused the enemy. What we did for LAM SON 719 was certainly not enough for the purpose contemplated.

Planning and preparations for the offensive were another major area that needed improvement. The operational plan for LAM SON 719 was adequate only so long as the operation progressed smoothly and ARVN forces were able to hold the initiative. It should have taken contingencies into full consideration and been able to respond to them with resourcefulness. The extent and intensity of enemy reactions, for example, were one contingency that planners apparently overlooked. Then the enemy could well reinforce his resistance by diversionary actions elsewhere in South Vietnam, too. The absence of contingency planning was a glaring deficiency of LAM SON 719. ARVN units were also not thoroughly prepared when they went into Laos. Elite troops like the paratroopers, for example, had problems using the M-72 light anti-tank weapon. Several other units did not have enough warm clothes and blankets for their troops. FSB 31, which was supposed to serve as a major supporting base during the entire course of the operation, had only a most rudimentary defense system: a single concertina ring thrown around it. The command and control center of the 3d Airborne Battalion, which was responsible for the defense of FSB 31, was sheltered only by 12 PSP sheets protecting the battalion headquarters, its S-3 section, and communications and medical elements. With this kind of defense and protection, how could FSB 31 hold out against enemy 130-mm shells and tanks? Obviously, planning and preparations should have been more extensive, more careful.

The problem of preparations was closely related to the need to preserve secrecy. How to proceed with preparations at the unit level while keeping them from being detected by the enemy? That was a major problem that needed to be solved. At the JGS level, even the J-2 was not informed about the operational plan until the campaign had started. He did not have the opportunity to contribute to the planning process either his intelligence data or his own expert assessment of the enemy's capabilities. I Corps staff agencies other than the G-2 and G-3 divisions, and those of participating units were similarly left out. It seemed as though the whole undertaking had been just a contingency action to meet a difficult situation.

As far as command and control were concerned, the most important problem to be solved was insubordination on the part of general reserve unit commanders who like many other generals considered themselves the pillars of the regime. The I Corps commander apparently bowed to the political powers of these generals and this adversely affected his conduct of the operation. The unsubmitive attitude of the Marine and Airborne Division commanders was actually inexcusable in that they placed themselves above the national interest and let their personal pride interfere with the task of defeating the enemy. For the operation to succeed as planned, the problem of effective command had to be satisfactorily solved above everything else because it affected the relationship between subordinate staffs and the control of the operation itself. At least, the I Corps commander should have been given the authority to require that his orders be strictly carried out.

The arrangements for effective operational control did not necessarily require the traditional echelons of tactical command posts as had been organized: main CP, forward CP and tactical control CP. In view of effective signal communications and the availability of command ships, the tactical control CP and the forward CP could be combined into one. Its location was immaterial as long as the CP was able to exercise effective control and coordination of subordinate units. At this operational CP, there should have been adequate staff personnel, a clear division of responsibilities among staff elements and full authority should have been given them to solve every problem at hand without having to refer to another echelon of command. The effective functioning of this CP would inspire confidence among subordinate units and their staffs. The breaking down of I Corps headquarters into three echelons for the control of LAM SON 719 required a dilution of its limited staff personnel with the end result that no echelon was able to function properly.

ARVN units that participated in the operation definitely lacked a system of accurate and timely reporting. This was not only a matter of training or experience but also a matter of loyalty. A higher command's exercise of control was only as effective as its subordinate

units' reporting was reliable. In the case of LAM SON 719, this reporting was most deplorable. Because the intensity of the fighting did not permit frequent visits by the I Corps and division commanders, they depended entirely on reports for the control of the situation. But reports by their subordinate units were slow, inaccurate, and sometimes non-existent. During the operation, there were several instances in which division commanders lost control of their units. Even the I Corps commander sometimes did not know the major events affecting his divisions.

A significant development which turned out to be extremely valuable for the effective support of the operation was the creation of the Joint Coordinating Group (JCG) by the XXIV Corps as of the beginning of March 1971. The group exercised operational control of all U.S. support activities. Its centralized coordinating authority was instrumental in providing timely and appropriate support for every ARVN combat need during the operation. Co-located with the I Corps tactical control CP, the Joint Coordinating Group assisted it with invaluable data for effective planning. An organization of this type was clearly indicated for every combined effort in which the U.S. only played a supporting role. On its part, the ARVN could have benefited more if it had established a counterpart "support coordination center" or equivalent to coordinate ARVN support activities with those of U.S. units through the JCG. This would have enabled the operational commander to monitor closely the flow of support activities and plan his tactical moves more systematically.

In the area of combat tactics, a most remarkable feature of LAM SON 719 was the use of semi-fixed fire support bases installed on high peaks. This tactic was a duplication of the American usage in South Vietnam. But the situation in lower Laos did not favor the installation of these FSBs for the reason that the area of operation had been under enemy control for a long time; the enemy was well entrenched and well organized for defense. The several peaks in the area gave the enemy an advantage in observation which resulted in accurate indirect fire on our fixed fire control bases. The amount of troops deployed for the defense of

each FSB was also not adequate. The inevitable result was that our units were immobilized in these FSBs and gradually became fixed targets for enemy encirclement and attacks. Most of the 96 artillery pieces lost in Laos resulted from our system of lame-duck FSBs. This system could have been replaced by other alternatives such as mobile FSBs, selection of lower, more accessible sites and increased use of mortars to augment artillery firepower. A system of mobile FSBs would have fully utilized the U.S. helilift capabilities; it would also have afforded better defense and greater opportunities to keep the offensive moving. Heliborne operations as a tactic were thoroughly put to test during the Laotian campaign because they were conducted in an area of operation where fighting was more intense than in any past experience in South Vietnam and where the enemy's antiaircraft system was effective. But the U.S. Army's rules governing these operations seemed to hold fast and were proved valid. However, their execution could stand some improvement in terms of coordination and fire support; in any case, it should be done with expertise and attention to details.

First, it appeared that the enemy would have been confused if more landing zones (LZ) had been prepared than were really needed. B-52 strikes should not be used too far in advance of the actual landings. After that other types of firepower could be used to prepare LZs. Experience showed that it would be better to divide the area into several sectors, each sector assigned to a particular type of firepower so that all the various types firepowers available could be applied at the same time to achieve a maximum effect: tactical air, aerial artillery, air cavalry, ground artillery, etc. The use of firepower should not be confined to the preparation of LZs; it should also be directed against avenues of approach and areas where enemy artillery or troops concentration were suspected. Shortly before the landings, all firepower should be concentrated for the last time on the selected sites. Next, air cavalry elements would carry out their classic reconnaissance mission. Since they were familiar with LZ sites, local terrain and flight approaches, the air cavalry commander should be made responsible for fire coordination. When landings began, support fire

should be continued but diverted to other pre-selected areas. Aircraft-laid smoke screens could be useful to conceal landing activities; they could also be used elsewhere to deceive the enemy. Air cavalry reconnaissance, in the meantime, should extend its coverage to protect landings. For command and control purposes during landings, at least two command ships should be utilized, one above the pick up zone (PZ) and the other above the LZ. Each should have command authorities aboard with full power to solve contingency problems. Both the air mission commander and the ground commander should be airborne together at the LZ. Alternate troop commanders should be designated in advance to take over in case of accidents. All protective fires and reconnaissance flights should continue until the landings are completed.

A basic weakness of ARVN forces participating in LAM SON 719 was their lack of ground mobility. Since the concept of operation evolved around the extensive use of helicopters, ARVN forces tended to be over-dependent on them. They used helicopters indiscriminately for every activity, even for short movements which could have been made more effectively by marching. This was a serious mistake that not only overtaxed U.S. helilift units but also incurred their complaints. The use of helicopters should have been conceived more judiciously and then only for extensive movements such as a shift of effort direction, the move toward Tchepone, or an exploitation of gains and creating surprise for the enemy. More troops movements should have been made by marching to ensure discretion and initiative. In this regard, the 1st Infantry Division was particularly commendable. Another shortcoming of ARVN units at battalion and lower levels was their failure to maneuver when being engaged. After the first contact, they tended to stop and wait for support rather than conduct probes and maneuver to attack or close in on the enemy. This shortcoming indicated a need for additional training for small-unit leaders.

With regard to combined-arms tactics, there was no doubt that ARVN units had received extensive training but in actual combat they seemed to falter easily. In the face of a formidable enemy, neither the airborne nor the armor units displayed evidence of effective

cooperation and teamwork. Armored vehicles were mostly used for transportation. When an engagement was made, infantry troops left tanks unprotected in the jungle and tanks were compelled to fend for themselves, alone. It was apparent that because of this lack of teamwork and mutual protection, the Airborne Division and the four armor squadrons could not operate effectively along the road and in the jungle of lower Laos.

Another serious shortcoming was the employment of reserves. During LAM SON 719, all participating divisions had their own reserve force. I Corps, on its part, had a reserve force consisting of a Marine brigade and a Ranger group. But the strange thing was that in no instance during the course of the operation was a reserve force thrown into combat to help clear an area from heavy enemy pressure. All reserve forces were used piecemeal at the rear echelon. No commander ever thought of using them at the forward echelon to his advantage. When a FSB was threatened with being overrun, the only course of action our unit commanders took was to destroy the artillery, abandon the base and extricate their troops by helilift. It was apparent that to be more combat effective, ARVN units needed to learn how to organize reserves and employ them decisively on the battlefield.

A lesser but no less dangerous shortcoming was the lack of communications security. In general, ARVN units at lower levels were not disciplined enough in the application of security procedures concerning radio communications. At corps and division levels, however, these procedures were more strictly observed through the systematic encoding of messages sent by CW radio or radioteletype. But at lower level units, which made extensive use of FM voice radio sets, communications were usually sent in clear text in sheer disregard of basic encoding procedures. ARVN commanders were accustomed to talking freely over radio networks, using the most rudimentary system of codes. Something was missing in the enforcement of communications discipline among ARVN units.

Finally, the withdrawal operation conducted by I Corps was such that this experience should be examined with utmost candor. First of

all, withdrawing under enemy pressure was always a difficult operation which should be carefully planned and executed. The time allowed for its execution was too short. The extrication of troops by helicopters naturally increased their vulnerability when compared to a withdrawal on foot. However, some movements to the rear on foot were not executed in a satisfactory manner. Our forces suffered serious losses on routes selected for withdrawal because of combined armor-infantry ambushes laid by the enemy. During the withdrawal, the Airborne Division and the entire armor force were unable to ensure protection for their own movements. The Marine units, however, fared much better; their withdrawal was a successful operation.

In summary, LAM SON 719 was a bloody field exercise for ARVN forces under the command of I Corps. Nearly 8,000 ARVN soldiers and millions of dollars worth of valuable equipment and materiel were sacrificed. The realities of battles fought in Laos certainly taught us many invaluable lessons that the RVNAF would have to learn in order to defend South Vietnam effectively. Many of these lessons—those that were appropriate for such treatment—became subjects of instruction at RVNAF service schools and training centers.

CHAPTER VII

Observations and Conclusions

LAM SON 719 was a combined RVNAF-US operation conducted under several constraints. No U.S. ground combat troops were allowed to cross the border into Laos. There was no joint command for the control of operations. Both the ARVN I Corps commander, who directed the operational effort in Laos, and the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps, his senior adviser, worked together on an equal footing in keeping with the principle of cooperation and coordination. In contrast to the usual practice, ARVN forces went into combat without their advisers; neither could they expect a helping hand from U.S. or other Allied infantry troops while on Laotian soil. On the other hand, U.S. combat support for the offensive effort was greatly increased in terms of firepower and helilift. This support was vital since the objectives of the operation lay outside the RVN national border in a terrain which was not only unfamiliar and difficult but also held for a long time by the enemy and organized into an important logistical base area.

To break the RVN attempt to strangle their lifeline, which was the only one remaining in the entire southern Indochina area, the North Vietnamese Communists reacted swiftly. Elements of five infantry divisions with their armor and artillery support and all logistic units operating in the area were eventually thrown into the battle. This combat force was estimated at over 40,000 men. In an effort to compensate for his inferiority in firepower, the enemy employed the tactic of massive infantry attacks. In response, our devastating firepower inflicted severe losses on the enemy; about one half of his committed combat strength was sacrificed. An enemy regiment went into Laos in

early February 1971 with approximately 2,000 men. After 45 days of combat, it was reduced to a total strength of 600 to 900. These losses required replacements, and to keep his severely mauled main force units in the north up to combat strength, the enemy was forced to reduce the amount of replacements earmarked for his units further to the south in both Vietnam and Cambodia.

Although the supply caches that our forces found in Laos were not as large as those captured in Cambodia the previous year, the amount of enemy materiel and supplies destroyed was quite substantial according to statistics which included bomb damage assessment of only 10% of the B-52 targets. The true amount could have been much greater had all strike targets been carefully searched. Of particular importance, sections of the enemy's fuel pipeline system were destroyed in at least seven areas. The quantity of enemy ammunition and other supplies expended or destroyed during this campaign also reduced his supply level to a considerable extent. In fact, in the aftermath of LAM SON 719, there were many indications that enemy units, throughout all of South Vietnam and Cambodia, began to feel the pinch of supply and personnel shortages.

These losses and expenditures naturally had to be replaced or replenished, and to meet these heavy demands, the enemy required more resources, more manpower, and more time. Despite its short duration, LAM SON 719 effectively disrupted the enemy's north-south supply system. This effect was nearly total in the area of operation, somewhat less west of it. Our intelligence revealed that enemy personnel manning the supply base system sustained about 50% casualties along with sizable materiel losses. In addition, the destroyed and mined roads that ARVN forces left behind caused the enemy more difficulties long after the incursion had ended. ARVN troops had also received the opportunity to observe first hand the road net, terrain and disposition of enemy logistic facilities which contributed to our target development.

On the part of the RVN, the offensive it had launched into Laos obviously meant much more in another aspect. Simultaneously with this effort, the RVN also initiated a large sweeping operation through

several other Communist bases located in Cambodia. This conduct of two simultaneous major offensive operations beyond the national border would have been impossible for the RVN just two years earlier. More significantly, while our troops were operating outside the border, the military situation at home was quiet, security improved, and the re-deployment of U.S. combat troops continued at a steady pace. All these accomplishments would have been impossible without considerable progress in the combat effectiveness of the RVNAF and in the Vietnamization and Pacification programs.

In lower Laos, ARVN forces had proved their fighting ability. At least three quarters of all infantry battalions fought with professional effectiveness despite the absence of U.S. advisers and the overwhelming numerical superiority of enemy forces which were also supported by substantial firepower. This fact alone imparted self-confidence to those units which engaged such great odds.

The swiftness and forcefulness with which enemy forces reacted to our incursion gave credence to intelligence reports that the enemy had been preparing to launch an offensive of his own some time during the year. Had it not been for LAM SON 719, the enemy's planned offensive, which occurred in the spring of 1972, may have come up to a year earlier. As it was, the RVNAF were much further along in the process of Vietnamization by Easter 1972 than they were in early 1971 and better prepared to cope with the great and widespread offensive the NVA eventually launched. This delay forced upon the enemy was one of the most important outcomes of LAM SON 719.

On the other hand, subsequent intelligence reports also indicated that the enemy was concerned that after LAM SON 719, the RVN would strike into the A Shau Valley and try to destroy Base Area 611. This concern on the part of the enemy revealed two things. First, he would be preoccupied with consolidating the defense of this base area and, as a consequence, would have less time to devote to any offensive activity. Second, despite his boastful claims of victory, the enemy apparently respected the RVNAF capabilities.

The above analysis serves to point out the main objectives that both the RVN and the U.S. had expected to achieve through LAM SON 719: more time for the Vietnamization process and the strengthening of the RVN to justify the continued redeployment of U.S. forces. From all indications, this objective was achieved. It permitted President Nixon to announce, only one day after the last raid into Laos had ended, that an additional 100,000 troops would be withdrawn between early May and the end of November 1971. This would reduce total U.S. combat strength in South Vietnam to 184,000. So, in the final analysis, although LAM SON 719 was not a total tactical success, it certainly helped the RVN and the U.S. to achieve some of their more important strategic objectives. In return, the RVN had to pay a high price and in the process exposed some of its weaknesses in the areas of defense and security.

In the first place, the general reserve forces, which consisted of the Airborne and the Marine Divisions, proved to be insufficient for the defense posture of the RVN. During LAM SON 719, both divisions were unable to achieve total success despite a rather limited objective and the participation of the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Armor Brigade. On the enemy side, the NVA reserve forces which were thrown into the battle effectively blunted our offensive thrust in spite of serious losses, a clear indication of the enemy's ever-increasing military might. In addition, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had become a sophisticated, convenient and flexible infiltration system and its thousand-odd miles of well-concealed jungle roads had proved to be difficult to interdict and hold.

Next, was the continued RVNAF dependence on U.S. support demonstrated by LAM SON 719. In retrospect, one may wonder how the Laotian incursion would have proceeded without U.S. artillery, air and other combat support assets. The RVNAF had been trained and conditioned for several years in the use of U.S. firepower either through the U.S. advisory effort or through combined operations with U.S. combat units. The Vietnamization program which was designed to enable the RVNAF to assume the combat burden, apparently had not provided enough firepower and mobility for self-support. It was understood that in the long run, the RVNAF would have to develop a combat doctrine of their own supported

by their limited capabilities. However, this goal was not in reach within the foreseeable future. In the immediate present, LAM SON 719 made it all too clear that not only was North Vietnam's combat strength increasing, its capabilities surpassed the RVN's by a large margin in terms of anti-aircraft weapons, armor and artillery. The question posed at that time appeared to be whether the RVN, without U.S. presence and support, could meet the challenge presented by the enemy's continued expansion and development.

LAM SON 719 did not come as a surprise for the enemy as intended. This was a profound disappointment for our side. We had tried to keep the planning and preparation process as leak-proof as possible, even at the expense of carefully preparing our units for the challenge. But the enemy had correctly anticipated our possible action five months in advance.¹ To counter it, he had activated a Corps level control headquarters, Front 70B, as early as in October, 1970 to exercise control over the 304th, 308th and 320th Divisions. The battleground had also been carefully prepared. To the dismay of ARVN units, they found that regardless of their direction of advance in the area of operation, they encountered well-organized defense positions. Enemy artillery was also pre-registered to every hilltop susceptible of becoming a landing zone for our helicopters. In addition, enemy prisoners testified that a substantial part of supply caches had been removed to other areas. What we had hoped to be a surprise turned out to be something the enemy had planned for as a contingency ever since the Cambodian incursion was terminated. On the contrary, the surprise, in some areas, was ours.

¹Deposition made by a Communist sergeant from the 24B Regiment, NVA 304th Division who defected to our side. Enemy units had received orders to counteract a possible ARVN offensive along Route No. 9 five months before it was launched.

We did not expect to meet head on with T-54 tanks and 130-mm guns in the jungles of Laos. Neither did we suspect that Route No. 9 would be such a problem, heavily mined and riddled with fire ambushes. We had no idea that the enemy had developed to such an extent his defense of our area of operation.

The rapid and determined reaction of the enemy to our incursion also presented additional complications. Even though we enjoyed modern and effective air support, we were unable to neutralize his antiaircraft system. His artillery did not suffer much from our counter-battery fire. As to his mortars, they were beyond our capability to destroy or drive away. In a concerted effort, his antiaircraft weapons, artillery and mortars joined fires to neutralize our superiority in air mobility. Our infantry was eventually forced on the defense by the numerical superiority of enemy units whose firepower was also no less overwhelming. We did not anticipate that the enemy's armor would be a major threat, especially in the Laotian jungle. We were wrong. As a matter of fact, we were unable to counter it effectively regardless of the manner in which it was deployed. We had 300 armored vehicles but they could barely control twelve miles of road. It is obvious that our commanders and planners had underestimated the enemy's ability to react. We did so because we viewed the enemy through our own lens and judged him according to our experience. Most of our combat decisions were based on subjective reasoning with the end result that neither our strategy nor our tactics seemed responsive enough to the kind of warfare the enemy was waging. The great military strategist, Sun Tzu, had said centuries ago: "Know thy enemy, know thyself, a hundred battles fought, a hundred victories assured." This was perhaps just military common sense but how many of our current military commanders really grasped that simple truth and put it to work? Besides, it seemed that our side was still complacent with its outdated vision of a guerrilla type enemy which had existed only a decade ago.

The major tactical error of LAM SON 719 centered, then, on a rigid application of familiar operational patterns that had so far succeeded reasonably on the battlefields within South Vietnam. These ingrained

habits did not go unnoticed by the enemy who always reviewed every detail following an engagement. But these tactics simply did not work in the rugged terrain of the Truong Son Range, a long-held enemy base area. Despite the advantage of U.S. firepower and airmobility, I Corps did not always know how to employ it effectively although the heliborne thrust into Tchepone conducted by the 1st Infantry Division was a successful maneuver. By contrast, the enemy proved resourceful enough to take maximum advantage of the terrain and to develop his strengths accordingly while minimizing his weaknesses. Because of his resourcefulness, the effectiveness of our FSB system, our armor and our airmobility were greatly reduced. Even our firepower became less devastating than it should have been.

Finally, both the RVN and the U.S. really missed the chance for a big victory during LAM SON 719 on a battleground which was decisive for the outcome of the war. Because of the significance of the panhandle, the enemy had thrown into combat almost all of his reserve forces - 12 regiments confirmed and three others probable - and he seemed determined to go all-out, win or lose. On our part, we hesitated, we procrastinated and we passed up a big chance of winning when the chips were all down. For one thing, we failed to foresee the big stake, plan for it carefully and commit sufficient forces to ensure success. When we went in, we knew that the objective was important. We believed our firepower was superior enough to destroy the massive concentration of enemy forces which resisted us. But we did not use it fully to our advantage to reach our objective as quickly as possible. As new enemy units arrived in the area, tilting the balance of forces in his favor, we only considered withdrawing to avoid undue losses. Was it an error in planning or a lack of planning? The 2d Infantry Division was available for commitment. It could have been redeployed without risk because the U.S. 23d Division (Americal) was in its area to provide security. But we did not commit the 2d Division for the simple reason that we were not sure we could win. As to committing more forces to ensure victory, the RVNAF simply did not have them available.

In lower Laos, our enemy had once more proved that his war machinery was effective. He also proved he was determined and capable enough to muster his force for the protection of his vital area. As individuals, the enemy troops who were captured or rallied to our side all proved to be weary of the war and utterly demoralized. But within their own ranks and during combat, under the stimulation of command and Party cadres, they were apt to become fearless. During the operation, their repeated waves of assault were so fierce that some were reported occasionally to have been drugged prior to engagement. Whatever the truth, the fact must be admitted that enemy command and control was effective. North Vietnam also demonstrated it could see far ahead, plan for its goal realistically and implement its plans with resolution. In addition to having effective command and control, NVA units were well disciplined, well trained and exceptionally well indoctrinated. Their obvious advantage was positive and determined leadership, both military and political.

The South Vietnamese soldier was definitely superior to his enemy as an individual. He was more experienced, better trained and wiser. In general, he had fought with determination and professionalism against a numerically superior enemy who endeavored to protect his vital life-line. Despite the protractedness of the war and overwhelming hardships and privations, he still fought on and accepted sacrifices. This was evident during LAM SON 719.

The immediate results of LAM SON 719 were impressive indeed. However, the far-reaching impact of this operation only materialized a long time afterwards as the situation in both South Vietnam and Cambodia began to improve. But the repercussions of this imperfect exploit seemed to indicate that the long-term struggle of South Vietnam needed to be forged by sharper tactical skills and guided by an appropriate and more effective strategic leadership. This was perhaps the greatest lesson that we could derive from LAM SON 719.

APPENDIX A

TASK ORGANIZATION, ARVN I CORPS
FOR LAM SON 719

Hq, I Corps
I Corps Arty
64th Arty Bn
1st ALC I Corps
71st Med Gp
I Corps Sig Bn
1st MP Bn
111th Trans Co
116th Trans Co
118th Trans Co
1st Armored Bde
7th ACS
11th ACS
17th ACS
4th ACS (Prov) (OPCON) (D+40)
1st/3d Armored Cav
1st/8th Armored Cav
1st Ranger Gp (+)
21st Rngr Bn
37th Rngr Bn
39th Rngr Bn
77th Rngr Border Defense Bn
3d Co 79th Rngr Border Defense Bn
10th Engr Gp
101st Engr Bn (OPCON to Abn Div)
102d Engr Bn
118th Engr LC Co

1st Inf Div

1st Inf Div Arty

48th Arty Bn (-)
B/11 (105)
B/48 (155)
C/10 (155)

14th Arty Bn (-)
A/48 (155)

62d Arty Bn
A/62 (105)
B/14 (105)
C/48 (155)

11th Arty Bn (-)
C/11 (105)
A/10 (155)

1st Engr Bn
1st Med Bn
1st Sig Bn
1st Log Bn

1st Regt

1st Bn, 1st Inf Regt
2d Bn, 1st Inf Regt
3d Bn, 1st Inf Regt
4th Bn, 1st Inf Regt

2d Regt

1st Bn, 2d Inf Regt (OPCON 54th Regt D+53 to D+68)
2d Bn, 2d Inf Regt
3d Bn, 2d Inf Regt
4th Bn, 2d Inf Regt
5th Bn, 2d Inf Regt

3d Regt

1st Bn, 3d Inf Regt
2d Bn, 3d Inf Regt
3d Bn, 3d Inf Regt
4th Bn, 3d Inf Regt

54th Inf Regt

1st Bn, 54th Regt
2d Bn, 54th Regt
4th Bn, 54th Regt

Abn Div (+) (OPCON)

Abn Div Arty (-)

44th Arty Bn (155)

1st Abn Med Bn
1st Abn Service Bn
1st Abn Signal Bn

1st Abn Bde

1st Abn Bn
8th Abn Bn
9th Abn Bn
1st Arty Bn

2d Abn Bde

5th Abn Bn
7th Abn Bn
11th Abn Bn
2d Arty Bn

3d Abn Bde

2d Abn Bn
3d Abn Bn
6th Abn Bn
3d Arty Bn

Marine Division (OPCON)

Hq Bn

Service Bn

Medical Bn

A Btry, 48th Arty Bn (-) (155)

147th Bde (D+1)

2d Inf Bn
4th Inf Bn
7th Inf Bn
2d Arty Bn
C Btry, 20th Arty Bn (155)

258th Bde

1st Inf Bn
3d Inf Bn
8th Inf Bn
3d Arty Bn
D Btry, 48th Arty Bn (-) (155)

369th Bde (D+32)

5th Inf Bn
6th Inf Bn
9th Inf Bn
1st Arty Bn

5th Inf Regt, 2d Inf Div

1st Bn, 5th Inf Regt
2d Bn, 5th Inf Regt

101st Combat Aviation Group
 101st Avn Bn (AH) (Ambl) (D-1 to D+67)
 158th Avn Bn (AH) (Ambl) (D-1 to D+67)
 159th Avn Bn (AH) (Ambl) (D-1 to D+67)
 5th Trans Bn (D-1 to D+67)
 14th Avn Bn (OPCON) D+2 to D+63
 71st AHC (D+25 to D+59)
 116th AHC (D+34 to D+36 & D+50 to D+53)
 174th AHC (D+25 to D+67)
 132d ASHC (D+25 to D+63)

223d Avn Bn HHC (OPCON) (D+2 to D+67)
 48th AHC (D+2 to D+67)
 173d AHC (D+2 to D+67)
 282d AHC (D+34 to D+36 & D+50 to D+51)
 235th AWC (D+38 to D+56)
 238th AWC (D+2 to D+56)
 D/227th AWC (D+28 to D+66)
 179th ASHC (D+23 to D+66)
 756th Med

2d Sqdn (Ambl), 17th Air Cav
 C/7/17 Cav Sqdn (OPCON)
 B/7/1 Cav Sqdn (OPCON)

67th Med Gp
 237th Med Det
 571st Med Det

34th Gen Spt Gp (-)
 34th Avn Det (DS)
 34th Co Spt Gp (AM&S)

58th Trans Bn
 610th SG Trans Co
 142d DS Trans Co
 263d GS Avel Co

MHHS 463d, 1st MAW (OPCON D+1)

1st Bde, 5th Inf Div (Mech) (+) (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl)
 D+32 to D+67)

1st Bn, 11th Inf (Mech)
 3d Bn, 187th Abn Inf, 101st Abn Div (OPCON D-1 to D+67)
 1st Bn, 61st Inf (Mech) (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl) D+26 to
 D+31 and D+57 to D+67) (11th Bde, 23d Div D+32 to D+56)
 3d Sqdn, 5th Cav
 1st Bn, 77th Armor
 5th Bn, 4th Arty (DS)
 1st Bn, 82d Arty (-) 23d Div (Atch) (DS) (D-1)
 Co A, 4th Bn, 12th Armor
 Co A, 7th Engr
 Co P, 75th Ranger

298th Sign Co
 Co B, 23d Med Bn, 23d Div (OPCON D+31 to D+48)
 75th Support Bn
 Trp F, 8th Cav (OPCON D+2 to D+67)

11th Bde, 23d Inf Div (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl) D+32 to D+66)
 1st Sqdn, 1st Cav (OPCON 1st Bde, 5th Inf Div (Mech) D-1 to
 D+56) (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl) D+67)
 2d Bn, 1st Inf (D+21)
 4th Bn, 3d Inf, 23d Inf Div (OPCON 1st Bde, 5th Inf Div (Mech)
 D-1 to D+56)

H Troop, 17th Cav
 Co C, 26th Engr Bn
 6th Bn, 11th Arty (-)
 Btry C, 1st Bn, 82d Arty
 Btry C, 6th Bn, 11th Arty
 Btry A, 3d Bn, 82d Arty
 11th Spt Bn (Prov)

Hq, USASUPCOM - DNG
 26th GSG
 8th Trans Gp
 39th Trans Bn
 57th Trans Bn
 Co C, 11th Motor Trans Bn (+)
 2d Maint Bn
 63d Maint Bn
 FSA Maint Bn
 FSA 26-1
 FSA 26-2

Glossary

AAA	Antiaircraft Artillery
AA/AW	Antiaircraft Automatic Weapon
ABN	Airborne
AFCCC	Air Force Command and Control Center
AHB	Assault Helicopter Battalion
ALC	Area Logistics Command
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASHB	Assault Support Helicopter Battalion
ASRT	Air Support Radar Team
BSA	Base Support Area
BDA	Bomb Damage Assessment
CAB	Combat Assault Battalion
CIDG	Civil Irregular Defense Group
CINCSAC	Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command
COMUSMACV	Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FDC	Fire Direction Center
FSA	Forward Support Area
FSB	Fire Support Base
FSCC	Fire Support Coordination Center
GSG	General Support Group
HES	Hamlet Evaluation System

JGS	Joint General Staff (VN)
JCG	Joint Coordinating Group
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff (U.S.)
KIA	Killed-in-Action
LAW	Light Anti-Tank Weapon
LOC	Line of Communication
LZ	Landing Zone
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MIA	Missing-In-Action
MR	Military Region
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PHILCAG	Philippine Civic Action Group
POW	Prisoner of War
PSP	Pierced Steel Planking
PZ	Pick Up Zone
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
TACP	Tactical Air Control Party
USAF	United States Air Force
USN	United States Navy
USNS	United States Navy Ship
WIA	Wounded-In-Action