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Final Test of the Saigon Army

BUI THIEN HUNG

The Contending Forces Before the Popular Offensive

Prompted by their own economic and military power the United States nurtured the illusory hope of turning the Saigon puppet army into an efficient mercenary army. They hoped to make up for its moral weakness by an enormous supply of weapons and training it through the use of examples drawn from imperialist anti-guerilla wars around the world. The Saigon puppet army, which was founded, organized, equipped and trained by the Americans, was unlike other mercenary armies, in that it was a regular army, well-structured, with important effective forces, relying in addition on the omnipresent regional forces, considerable police forces, intelligence units and numerous "pacification" brigades. Before the signing of the Paris Agreement on Viet Nam the effective forces of the Saigon army rose to a total of 1,100,000 men in the army, air force, navy and different armed services; and was composed of regular troops, "land security

Together with the powerful offensives of the Liberation Armed Forces and the insurrections and mutinies in the Saigon army, the tempestuous uprisings in many cities and towns, districts and villages at the end of 1974 and early 1975 constituted the combined forces which drove the Thieu puppet administration irrevocably to its downfall. It was the unprecedented development in breadth as well as in depth of the movement in the cities and towns that produced a turning-point in the revolution in South Viet Nam. When the general offensives and uprisings broke out in the spring of 1975 the movement actively contributed to the disintegration of the Saigon puppet administration, and US imperialist schemes of turning it into a machine of counter-revolutionary violence, in a final attempt to achieve US neo-colonialist ambitions in South Viet Nam, were thereby foiled.

forces" (i.e. the regional armed forces) and police forces.

The army was composed of 260,000 men divided into 13 infantry divisions numbered 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 18, 21, 22, 23, 25, a paratroop division, a marine division and 15 independent regiments. It also comprised 15 regiment-sized groups of "rangers", 22 squadrons of armoured vehicles, artillery units equipped with 1,500 106.7-mm. mortars and 105-mm. guns and guns of larger calibres, 7 battalions of A.A. artillery with 168 guns.

The air force was composed of 45,000 men organized in 6 divisions, numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and comprising 66 squadrons with 1,800 aircraft of various types (among them 500 fighters: A37, F5, A-1..., 900 helicopters, more than 300 reconnaissance planes and 80 cargo planes). These aircraft were based in modern air-bases and airfields built by the USA such as Tan Son Nhat, Da Nang, Phu Bai, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh, Can Tho, Bien Hoa, Phan Rang, Pleiku and so on.

The navy was composed of 30,000 men and 1,600 ships, 165 of which belonged to 6 coastal squadrons and 4 fluvial flotillas based in the 1st Military Zone; 120 belonged to 6 coastal squadrons operating in the 2nd Military Zone; 700 belonged to 4 coastal squadrons and 6 fluvial flotillas operating in the 3rd Military Zone; 600 belonged to 4 coastal squadrons and 9 fluvial flotillas operating in the 4th Military Zone. These ships were generally anchored in the naval bases and military ports.

of Thuan An, Da Nang, Cam Ranh, Phan Rang, Ham Tan, Vung Tau, Nha Be, Saigon, Ca Mau, Rach Gia.

The "land security forces" of the puppet army were composed of 140,000 *bao an* (security forces), 110,000 *dan ve* (rural militia) and 400,000 armed *phong ve dan su* (civil defence corps). The police numbered 120,000 men. The security forces, rural militia and police filled the network of posts in the villages and communes and in cooperation with "Phoenix" brigades, launched brutal "pacification" operations in the rural areas.

The puppet army was deployed according to the strategy of "surface warfare" aimed at "ensuring maximum national security": a military control system was set up composed of nearly 10,000 posts; 267 military sub-sectors in district centres as well as hundreds of military bases provided with modern equipment left by the US expeditionary corps when it withdrew from Viet Nam as stipulated by the Paris Agreement. The network of posts and military sub-sectors formed a defence system of the Saigon puppet army in the rural areas, along land and fluvial communication routes, and in regions surrounding big military bases and towns. The US and puppets set up a great number of posts in order to break up the theatre of operations, check the development of guerilla activity, and hinder the movement of regular and regional units of the liberation forces.

Each sub-sector was an important stronghold composed, in general, of a system of posts with solid foundations and additionally defended by 15 to 20 barbed wire fences and a cleared area 200 — 300 metres wide. As peripheral shields, the Thieu administration built strategic hamlets and regroupment zones in the defence sectors of the post system. They were surrounded by a series of fences which divided the land according to a grid.

The system of posts and military sub-sectors was not only defensive; it was also the puppets' coercive machine in the countryside; and constituted bases from which mopping-up, encroachment and "pacification" operations were launched.

The building of the Saigon puppet army and its deployment was a colossal plan pieced together during twenty years. It was the pride of many US leaders and more than one military commentator in the world recognized that the United States had provided the Saigon regime with "the strongest army in Southeast Asia" and a defence system which was very difficult to destroy.

However, this was not enough to reassure the Americans when they had to withdraw from Viet Nam in conformity with the Paris Agreement. They tried to further reinforce the Saigon army, especially by using these three fundamental strategic methods:

1. To weaken the economic and military potential of North Viet Nam, the great rear base of the revolution and people's armed forces of the South,

by launching a massive surprise attack with B52 strategic bombers in December 1972.

2. To provide the Saigon Army with massive reinforcements, with weapons and war material, and to modernize it by implementing the "Program of Accelerated Vietnamization".

3. To bring into full play a pernicious diplomatic policy in order to limit world support to the Vietnamese people's revolutionary struggle. At the same time, the USA continued granting the Saigon puppets military and economic aid worth 2 to 3 billion dollars yearly; and maintained air and naval forces in Thailand and the Pacific, entrusting them with a permanent "role of dissuasion" hoping in this way to check the development of the revolutionary movement in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia.

After the Paris Agreement, over 23,700 men of the US expeditionary corps as well as the commands of the land forces, the No. 7 air group and the MACV had to withdraw from Viet Nam, but they still remained in Southeast Asian bases. Apart from those who had served their time and were repatriated to the USA, all US troops withdrawn from Viet Nam were sent to Thailand and divided among 8 US bases there (*AFP*, 13-2-1973). The HQ of the 7th Air Group left Tan Son Nhat to settle at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand under the name of USSAG serving as a stand-by unit ready to intervene in Indochina. The Pentagon also transferred the advanced CP of the 13th Air Group from Clark

base (Philippines) to Udon base in Thailand. It also reinforced the bases at Utapao (Thailand) and Andersen (Guam) with B52s and kept 4 aircraft-carriers of the 7th Fleet permanently in the Southeast Asian waters as a "deterrent force" vis-à-vis Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia. As even the Pentagon has admitted, the US "deterrent force" in Southeast Asia in the period following the Paris Agreement were composed of 54,000 men stationed in Thailand, 60,000 on board ships of the 7th Fleet, 18,000 on military bases in the Philippines, 14,000 on Guam, 6,000 in Taiwan and about 25,000 in Hawaii: a total of 177,000 men with the most modern aircraft and ships at their disposal. The high-command of these forces was installed in Thailand, mainly concerned with air-force and navy mobilization.

The United States not only hoped that these three strategic methods, would enable the Saigon puppet regime to stand on its own feet, but it also counted on them to put the puppet army in a position to encroach on the zone under the PRG control, absorbing it completely in the period 1973 to 1975. The plan was thus, that from 1976, the year of the 200th anniversary of "the foundation of the USA, the Viet Nam problem would disappear from the American political scene. This would leave Washington free to embed US neo-colonialism in South Viet Nam and, in spite of the 1973 Paris Agreement on Viet Nam, transform it into a separate state evolving in orbit around America.

To put into effect the combativeness of the Saigon army while their signature on the Paris

Agreement was still fresh, the Nixon-Kissinger tandem ordered Thieu to engage all his forces in encroachment and "pacification" operations without delay so as to improve his strategic position and rapidly tip the balance of forces in his favour.

During the first months of 1973, after almost all Saigon forces had been mobilized in this way, particularly the strongest mobile units, the Saigon Army managed to encroach on some coastal sectors of Central Trung Bo and certain zones in the delta of Central Nam Bo. These temporary results turned the heads of the American leaders who were already planning to wipe out the other zone of control, the other armies, the other administration in South Viet Nam, destroying the revolutionary fruits gained by the Vietnamese people during 20 years of resistance against American aggression.

However, the Vietnamese people saw through the designs of the US and puppets and clearly discerned the invincible and irresistible trend of the revolution in the South, confirmed by the signing of the Paris Agreement. Under the clear-sighted leadership of the Viet Nam Workers' Party, they, on the one hand, respected the Agreement and struggled energetically to force the US and puppets to implement it strictly. On the other hand, they redoubled their vigilance, prepared to resort to revolutionary violence to frustrate the Americans' design of pursuing the "Vietnamized" war. After the first months of 1973 which were marked by flagrant violations of the Paris Agreement

by the Saigon army and the US-puppet administration the Vietnamese people saw the warlike nature of the enemy demonstrated more clearly than ever. This only confirmed them in their conviction of "the necessity of using revolutionary violence, and their resolution to resort to revolutionary war to defeat the US-puppet neo-colonialist war"¹. In the light of this conception, the Vietnamese people and their armed forces reaffirmed their determination to defend the fruits of the revolution; in the rear as at the front, they coordinated all their efforts to overcome immediate difficulties rapidly and efficiently resist and repel attempts at "pacification" and encroachment by the Saigon army while trying to strengthen their potential in all fields.

The puppets' "pacification" and encroachment operations ran into the full force of the people's war on certain fronts, and were checked step by step. The operation launched in Chuong Thien province, in the middle of the Mekong River delta, involving nearly 30 Saigon battalions, and lasting from March to August 1973, was a typical example. Not least in that it was foiled. The assailants failed to "destroy the lair of the Viet Cong"; on the contrary, the revolutionary forces in the Mekong River delta rapidly made their presence known and

1. General Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung in their article written on the occasion of the celebration of victory and of the 85th anniversary of the birth of President Ho Chi Minh.

felt. The puppets were unable to occupy any commune in Chuong Thien, whereas the field of action of the people's armed forces was enlarged. With regard to the encroachment operation on Chu Nghe (western Pleiku) launched in September 1973 and involving nearly a division of Saigon troops, it was crushed by the people's armed forces in 9 days. The failure of these two operations, one in the plains and the other in the highlands, marked the first setback of the Saigon puppet army encroachment strategy.

Faced with this new situation, the command of the revolutionary people's armed forces sent out a general directive to its units on October 15, 1973, ordering them to take vigorous action to repel the encroachment and pacification operations of the Saigon troops, and punish both the troops on the spot, and the bases from which such operations originated. As of this date, a significant number of the "pacification" and encroachment operations of the Saigon puppets came to nothing throughout the theatre of operation in the South. Every now and then they were beaten back as, for example, in the Mekong River delta in western Nam Bo.

In many places, the military successes of the revolutionary people's armed forces created favourable conditions for the masses to carry out an effective resistance against "pacification" and encroachment operations of the Saigon puppet troops in neighbouring regions, or against the police operation in the zones under Saigon control.

In some places, the people's struggle in coordination with the guerilla activity pinned the enemy down in their posts. As a result of this situation the Pentagon bosses had to recognize in late 1973 that the Saigon troops were having increasing difficulty in dealing with the growing resistance they were meeting from the armed forces and people of the South, from the Tay Nguyen Highlands to the Mekong river delta (*US News and World Report* of Jan. 28, 1974). The US and Thieu had to provisionally shelve their plan of "land expansion" making the "defence of the land security", i.e., "pacification" No. 1 objective.

In order to achieve this objective, the US and Thieu both consolidated their network of occupation bases, and in particular tried to strengthen the defence capacity of submilitary sectors in district centres and multiply posts in the villages and communes to serve as "protective shields" around their "pacification" schemes.

As for the revolutionary forces, they started by intercepting encroachment and "pacification" operations of the Saigon army, before passing to the stage of attacking the bases from which they originated. They seized a whole series of posts held by their "land forces" and "pacification" forces in the villages and communes, especially in Quang Ngai province and the Mekong river delta. They started by razing "pacification" and encroachment bases of the Saigon troops which had been set up in the liberated zone (Dac Pet, Tong Le Chan, Iaxut, etc).

Then they attacked military sub-sectors in order to gain control of district centres in the highlands and midlands (Thuong Duc, Chuong Nghia, Minh Long). The revolutionary people's armed forces were already in a position to wipe out the Saigon puppet army's groups of strong points one by one, and annihilate entrenched troops in units of battalion size and even several battalions at a time. These military successes both stimulated and gave effective support to the people's uprisings. The population was beginning to encircle and threaten the enemy in many fronts, forcing them to withdraw from a series of posts guarded by rural militia and security forces. This happened in the villages and communes of many provinces in the plain and meant that they were gradually able to win back zones which Saigon forces had seized control of. As a result, in mid-1974 the Saigon army was in the following situation:

— The defence ensured by sub-sectors in district centres in the mountain regions could not withstand the new blows of the liberation forces. The Saigon troops could no longer recapture the fallen sub-sectors by counter-attacking. Such was the case at Thuong Duc, for example, a district centre situated very near the port of Da Nang: the enemy tried in vain to seize it back during 8 months.

— The occupation and coercion which was part and parcel of the setting-up of a dense network of posts in the populous rural areas could no longer

resist the three-pronged attack¹: people's war at regional level. The command of the Saigon army was forced to withdraw its troops from nearly 1,000 small posts in the Mekong River delta. The garrisons were needed to reinforce the strong points, thus raising the effectives concentrated there to one or two companies, or even a battalion, so as to prevent them from being annihilated.

The irreversible abandonment of military sub-sectors and district centres in the mountain region, the withdrawal of troops from a series of small posts in the plain and their "tactical regrouping" were evidence of a second setback for the Saigon army.

From December 1974, the South Viet Nam people and armed forces, particularly in the Mekong River delta and eastern Nam Bo, drove the Saigon puppet troops into another corner within a short space of time. They seized thousands of enemy posts and liberated Phuoc Long, the first province of the South to be completely liberated. These successes indicated an irreversible general decline of the Saigon army, now being driven to a defensive strategic position over the whole theatre of operation in the South.

Having pursued the Viet Nam war for two years after the Paris Agreement, the US and Thieu not only suffered military defeats but also met with numerous political and economic difficulties. In 1974,

1. Military attack, political activity, agitation and propaganda among enemy troops.

the US imperialists were faced with great difficulties which they had thought they could avoid after the withdrawal of the expeditionary corps from Viet Nam. Then the floodgates of Watergate affair, of which one of the important causes was the aggressive war in Viet Nam, broke out. The prestige of Nixon the war-monger plummeted and he had to resign from the presidency. The US economic recession was accompanied by growing inflation. All this had repercussions for the Thieu puppet regime. As US aid to Saigon diminished, the Saigon economy reached crisis-point. Life was very difficult for the people under Thieu's control in general, and the men of the Saigon army in particular. In addition to the general degeneration of the Thieu regime, this situation aggravated the already low morale of the army and seriously affected its combativeness just at the moment when it faced hard trials in the battlefield. The more it was defeated, the more it got bogged down in insurmountable major contradictions: the contradictions between too high strategic ambitions and limited real capacities, between too great demands of combat missions on the one hand, and an exhausted potential, eroded combativeness and sagging morale on the other. Meanwhile, the revolutionary forces saw its strength rising steadily, thanks to a correct leadership and an intensive preparation of the battlefield. They created considerable military forces and a firm strategic position in anticipation of the final confrontation with the enemy. In late

1974, the balance of forces that Washington had tried to keep in equilibrium was clearly in favour of the revolutionary forces. In this favourable situation, the command of the revolutionary people's armed forces of the South passed the strategic resolution to liberate the whole of the South, defeating the neo-colonialist aggressive war of the USA completely.

At this point, the Command of the Saigon army and the Pentagon, after their own sources, had analysed the situation as follows:

In 1975 the liberation forces launched big offensives, but their scope was not so great as in 1972. Therefore, the liberation troops were not in a position to attack important provincial capitals or towns; even if they did attack them they would not be able to hold them. Their main objective would only be to expand the liberated zone in the highlands, and to win over to their side about two million inhabitants in the plain particularly in the Mekong River delta. Their aim in launching offensives would be to put pressure on Washington and Saigon to implement the Paris Agreement. Their attacks would be aimed at the 3rd Military Zone, especially Tay Ninh; they would begin just before or after the Lunar New Year of 1975 and last till the end of June the same year. Confident of the accuracy of these predictions, the US and Thieu deployed their forces in the following manner:

According to the documents of the Thieu administration that have fallen into our hands after the

liberation of the South, the Saigon army was composed of 1,351,000 men in early 1975. There were 495,000 regular troops, 475,000 regional troops and 380,000 civil defence troops i.e, a total of 13 regular divisions and 18 commando groups thus deployed:

In the 1st Military Zone adjoining the North was the great military base of Da Nang and the powerful defence system of Thua Thien-Hue: 5 regular divisions of which 2 formed the strategic reserve, and 4 commando units, 21 battalions and artillery companies and platoons equipped with 418 guns, 5 tank squadrons and companies with 449 tanks and armoured cars, 1 air division of 96 fighter planes. The major part of these forces was concentrated in positions from which to defend Hue and Da Nang.

The 2nd Military Zone included the whole of the Tay Nguyen Highlands and the coastal provinces of the Centre, from Binh Dinh to Binh Thuan: 2 regular divisions (Nos. 22 and 23), 2 commando units, 14 battalions and many companies and platoons of artillery with 382 guns, 5 armour squadrons and 13 tank companies equipped with 477 tanks and armoured cars, 2 air divisions with 138 fighter-planes. The main part of the regular forces was reserved for the defence of Tay Nguyen.

In the 3rd Military Zone, the crucial theatre of operations of the Saigon army, the leading organs of the army and administration were concentrated, as well as 3 regular divisions, seven commando groups, 16 battalions, companies and platoons of

artillery with 376 guns, 7 armour squadrons and 15 tank companies with 655 tanks and armoured cars, 2 air divisions with more than 250 fighter-planes. All regular forces were concentrated around Saigon.

In the 4th Military Zone (provinces of the Mekong River delta) there were 3 regular divisions, 18 *bao an* (security) groups, 15 battalions and 55 companies of artillery with 380 guns, 5 armour squadrons and 17 tank companies with 493 tanks and armoured cars, 1 air division with 72 fighter-planes, 580 war vessels and launches of all types. The regular forces were concentrated in positions from which to defend Can Tho, Chuong Thien, Highway No. 4 and the Viet Nam-Cambodia border.

Generally speaking, the areas for which these very important military forces were responsible were too vast and their scattered positioning showed many weak points and faults particularly along the hundreds of kilometres of coast in the Centre. Besides, they were affected by general disintegration of morale and were not prepared to meet a general offensive and general uprising on the part of the people and their armed forces. Meanwhile, the revolutionary forces stood ready to engage in a decisive confrontation under the watchword "the whole country to the fray"; the powerful people's armed forces were well-supplied, were highly mobile, and were guided by experienced leaders at all levels. This was the fruit of a long process of minute and secret preparation, carried out during the struggle and under very difficult conditions.

This was also the fruit of the art of conducting a war in a way which will bring about changes in the balance of forces in the battlefield and drive the enemy inexorably towards collapse.

The Tay Nguyen Campaign

Contrary to the predictions of the US and Thieu, the general offensive and the uprisings of the people and their armed forces in the South started on March 4, 1975, with the Tay Nguyen battle in the 2nd Military Zone.

Tay Nguyen is a vast highland region, occupying a position of strategic importance. During twenty years' of resistance against American aggression, the people and armed forces in Tay Nguyen had established firm revolutionary bases there, transforming the region into a field of operations, and now they helped admirably with moving out large strategic units. This meant that they were able to deploy and attack the Saigon troops from a very strong position.

It was necessary for the people's armed forces to dislocate the defence network of the Saigon troops, and choose points of attack in such a way as to provoke a chain-reaction which would shake the whole defence system in the region. This would create favourable conditions in which to defeat the enemy on other theatres of operation and end up fully liberating the South. In accordance with this plan, the people's armed forces opened fire on the provincial capital of Buon Me Thuot on March 10, 1975. Quickly breaching the external defence lines

of the town, they attacked the main objectives straight away: the airfield, the parks of armoured cars and artillery, and the HQ of the 23rd Division, the main force defending Buon Me Thuot. In less than two days, they had wiped out all resistance and won control over the provincial capital.

For the Saigon generals and US advisers, this was not only a telling blow but an unexpected disaster.

Buon Me Thuot had been calm since early March, whereas the provincial capital Pleiku was gravely menaced by the revolutionary forces. The revolutionary forces razed the posts of the Saigon army, and cut off strategic communication lines, Highways 14 and 19. The Command of the 2nd Saigon Army Corps sent Division 22 and several commando and armoured car units to Highway 19 as a relief force. At the same time, it transferred the major part of Division 23 based in Buon Me Thuot to Pleiku to reinforce the defence of the town; In fact, Pleiku sheltered the HQ of the 2nd Army Corps as well as that of Division 22 and Air Division No. 6. General Pham Van Phu, commander of the 2nd Army Corps, estimated that the revolutionary armed forces would attack Pleiku, the key centre of the Saigon troops in Tay Nguyen. When Buon Me Thuot was attacked, he persisted in his belief that this was the action of a minor force, perhaps a commando unit, which it would be easy for him to annihilate. On March 11, Phu sent a 170-vehicle supply convoy

from Nha Trang, along Highway 21 in the direction of Buon Me Thuot. The convoy was intercepted by the people's armed forces, which destroyed 120 vehicles and seized 32 others. On March 13 and 14, Saigon sent to the rescue of Buon Me Thuot a force equivalent to a division and composed of the best units of paratroopers, commandos and armoured cars. They were about to seize Phuoc An district centre on Highway 21, 35 km from Buon Me Thuot, planning to use it as a springboard for their counterattack. But they were outstripped by the people's forces which seized the base of the 45th Infantry Division, the military sub-sector and the town of Phuoc An and dug themselves in to lie in wait for the arrival of Saigon reinforcements. When these arrived, they were crushed at Phuoc An and in the surrounding regions between 13 and 16 March. Parts of Division 23, Armoured Regiment No. 8, commando Group No. 22 Bao An (security) Group No. 926 and several other battalions of *bao an* and *dan ve* (rural militia) were put out of action at the same time.

A 130-vehicle convoy carrying troops, arms and munitions, Saigon's last effort to try to save Buon Me Thuot, was also wiped out on Highway 21 on March 15.

Saigon Brigadier General Tran Van Cam, assistant to Pham Van Phu, commander of the 2nd Army Corps and the 2nd Military Zone, gave an account of what had taken place in the 2nd Army Corps:

"At 11.30 on March 9, 1975 General Pham Van Phu held a meeting with us. Present were Brigadier General Le Trung Tuong, commander of Division 23, Colonel Vu The Quang, assistant commander, Colonel Pham Duy Tat, commander of the commando force of the 2nd Military Zone, Brigadier General Pham Ngoc Sang, commander of the 6th Air Division and the Colonels commanding the sectors of Buon Me Thuot, Pleiku, etc. Phu informed us that the liberation troops were about to attack Tay Nguyen. A long discussion was held on the question of the likely targets of their attacks. By then we knew that 3 divisions of the liberation troops were hiding in the region 2 of them in Pleiku. The third, Division 3, had, according to our information, left Pleiku for Buon Me Thuot. This last piece of information caught our attention because Division 3 was a reputedly strong division. We also received the news that Division 10 had reached Tay Nguyen. I expressed the opinion that it was necessary to reinforce the defence of Buon Me Thuot and Brigadier General Tuong demanded the immediate transfer of Regiment 45, the pillar of Division 23, to Buon Me Thuot to reinforce his garrison. These proposals were turned down by Phu who pinned his hope on helicopters. If Buon Me Thuot was to be attacked, he said, we would send reinforcements there by helicopters. And he decided to keep a large number of reserve troops in Pleiku. We estimated that the liberation troops would attack with modest numbers of

troops. After passing all eventualities in review, we finally inclined towards the opinion of General Phu who held that whatever the point of attack of the liberation troops, Pleiku would remain the No. 1 centre of gravity." Brigadier General Tran Van Cam concluded: "We lost Buon Me Thuot because you managed to hide your troops so well, in absolute secrecy, and this led us to make errors of judgement. When you opened fire, we still had not made up our minds how to deal with the situation."

For the Saigon army, Buon Me Thuot was a key position in the Tay Nguyen defence system. Its collapse made the defence of Pleiku and Kontum difficult. Thus, the offensive against Buon Me Thuot was a death-blow coming as it did to a vital point. It shook the whole enemy defence system of Tay Nguyen and put Pleiku and Kontum in a very precarious situation, the more so as strategic Highways 14, 19 and 21, were entirely cut off. This led Thieu to decide promptly to withdraw his troops from Pleiku and Kontum by interprovincial Highway 7 and regroup them at Hau Bon, in order to round up his forces before sending them to the coastal province of Phu Yen. But the liberation troops, sent in pursuit along Highway 16, seized Hau Bon provincial capital, cutting off their retreat. A big unit of the people's forces, operating on Highways 14 and 7B, blocked the retreat of the Saigon troops. Son Hoa bridge had been destroyed by liberation regional forces,

and this prevented them from escaping to Tuy Hoa (Phu Yen province). From March 18 to 20, the people's forces surrounded, cut off and decimated the enemy along Highway 7. On March 24, the rest of the Saigon troops fled Pleiku and Kontum, composed of 6 commando groups, 3 armoured regiments and other units, and were annihilated. The same Brigadier General Tran Van Cam told this story of the retreat:

"General Phu and the command of the 2nd Corps were to fall back by air. The remaining troops, under my command, would withdraw by road, and would split up into three columns: the first, composed of 3 commando groups, 1 armoured squadron and 1 engineer group would be responsible for defending Phu Bon provincial capital and opening Phu Tuc road in Tuy Hoa. The second column would be composed of the remaining staff of the Army Corps, 3 artillery battalions, Armoured squadron 21 with all the M.48 tanks, 2 armoured reconnaissance companies and various troops. The third column would comprise 3 commando groups, 1 squadron of armoured cars and support artillery. The air force would withdraw according to its own plan.

"D day was fixed for March 16. The leading detachment reached Phu Tuc without a hitch. But on May 17, at 5.30 p.m., the main column, very compact, comprising several thousand vehicles and guns was suddenly blocked southeast of Phu Bon. Detachments of liberation troops pursued ours to

Cung Son, while at Phu Bon a blocking force intercepted and destroyed our tanks on the road itself.

"On the morning of May 18, this bolt had proved itself to be a veritable barrier. Under the direct command of Brigadier General Tat and Colonel Dong, a commando group and an armoured squadron tried in vain to open the road up. Chaos spread through the column. At 5 p.m. we received a cable from General Phu: "The situation is complicated. If you linger in Phu Bon, you run the risk of being annihilated. Break through if you can; if not, destroy the vehicles and continue on foot". He ordered me to transfer the command to Brigadier General Tat and lead the staff to Tuy Hoa. At 6 p.m., I got into an airplane together with 14 men sent by General Phu and flew to Tuy Hoa. On the way, my plane was attacked by very strong A.A. fire. The next morning, I made a reconnaissance flight over Phu Bon. No more shooting, but an apocalyptic sight: trucks, tanks, armoured cars were immobilized in disorder; many of them in flames. Impossible to establish liaison with the troops on the ground. The only news was that Colonel Dong, commander of the armoured unit, was lost in the jungle after abandoning his vehicles. The retreat ended in a fearful way in Phu Bon, with the destruction of all the forces of the 2nd Corps and the 2nd Zone..."

While the enemy troops were being pursued along Highway 7, the people, everywhere in Tay Nguyen, were being supported by the regional people's armed forces in their effort to rise up and seize

power. Within three days, from March 17 to 19, all the military forces and the coercive machine of the Saigon puppet administration were crushed in the three provinces of Kontum, Pleiku and Hau Bon.

After wiping out the enemy troops in Tay Nguyen, large units of the people's armed forces pushed their offensive in the direction of the coast in the Centre, following Highways 19, 7 and 21. One of them, which was operating on Highway 19 and in Binh Dinh province, rapidly overran An Khe base on March 23. In coordination with another unit coming from Tay Nguyen, it fought a great battle there, from Phu Phong to Go Quanh airfield, (Binh Dinh province) annihilating the major part of the Saigon 22nd Division. The remaining forces were entirely put out of action and dispersed by the revolutionary regional troops and the people's own campaigns. A third large unit, coming from Tay Nguyen along Highway 21, annihilated the 3rd Paratroop Brigade which was holding Phuong Hoang pass, liberating Khanh Duong district, Khanh Hoa province. Meanwhile, the people's regional troops were attacking the enemy without respite in concert with the people of the other provinces of the 2nd Zone, and they rapidly seized power in rapid succession over the following:

On April 1, in Binh Dinh province and Qui Nhon provincial capital,

On the same day, in Phu Yen and Tuy Hoa provincial capital,

On April 2, in Lam Dong and Bao Loc provincial capital,

On April 2 and 3, in Khanh Hoa, Nha Trang provincial capital and Cam Ranh military port,

On April 4, in Tuyen Duc province and Da Lat, provincial capital.

Quang Duc province with its capital Gia Nghia had already been liberated on March 24.

The Saigon army had lost the initiative, shown subjectivism and been mistaken in predicting its adversary's intentions and in taking its own decisions of strategic defence, right from the first stage of the encounter with the revolutionary people's armed forces of the South.

The victory of the Tay Nguyen campaign assumed a strategic significance of extreme importance. After the loss of Tay Nguyen, the strategic defence system of the Saigon army throughout the theatre of operation in the South was threatened with being cut in two. The 3rd Military Zone was menaced and the 1st Zone isolated. The whole military system and the coercive machine were badly shaken.

As Generals Vo Nguyen Giap and Van Tien Dung have written, "With this victory (Tay Nguyen) the revolutionary war advanced to a new stage: from an offensive of strategic value to the strategic general offensive throughout the theatre of operations in the South."

The Hue — Da nang Campaign

As of early March, the people and armed forces of the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien had intensified their military and political activities in coordination with the Tay Nguyen campaign, and stood ready to act boldly to annihilate the enemy and liberate this sector as well as the coast of the 5th Zone.

Over the past twenty years, the theatre of operations of Tri Thien-Hue and the coast of the 5th Zone, including Da Nang city, had witnessed many people's uprisings, and great military offensives carried out by the revolutionary forces. After 1972, the political force of the masses, as well as the revolutionary armed forces in the area, developed vigorously. Large units of regular forces benefited from the favourable conditions in the region to establish themselves and deploy their battle formations against Hue and Da Nang.

Hue and Da Nang were the strongest defence sectors of Thieu's 1st Military Zone. The revolutionary people's armed forces in the northern part of the Zone annihilated the puppet 1st Infantry Division and liberated Thua Thien province and Hue City, thus destroying the whole enemy defence system in this zone. In the southern part of the region, they annihilated the 2nd Division, liberating Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. They completely isolated Da Nang City — a land-sea-air military base — before surrounding, attacking and seizing it by combining military offensive with people's uprising. The revolutionary people's armed

forces of Thua Thien-Hue gave battle on a grand scale according to a plan worked out in advance, only a few days after the Tay Nguyen campaign, and they ended their campaign by overpowering and disarming all Saigon troops in the 1st Military Zone.

The puppet military forces in Thua Thien-Hue were composed of over 40,000 men, including some of their most seasoned troops, such as the 1st Infantry Division and Marine brigades. They were entrenched behind a fortified defence line set up many years ago north and west of Hue.

In the first ten days of March, the people's armed forces fiercely attacked a certain number of positions on this defence line, putting into effect a large-scale scheme of diversion. During this time, some groups of activists crossed the outer defence into the plain to mobilize the masses and intensify guerilla activity in the enemy's rear.

On March 17, the revolutionary forces severed Highway No. 1 in many places between Hue and Da Nang. On March 18, the Saigon troops abandoned the Quang Tri front to fall back on My Chanh river where they launched several counter-attacks to push back the periphery of the western front around Hue. On March 19, they withdrew from Quang Tri provincial capital. On the same day, the people's armed forces decided to launch a major offensive to destroy the Thua Thien-Hue defence system. On March 22, the attack against Hue began from several directions. The main column, which was then attacking the enemy in Nui Bong, changed direction, headed for Highway No. 1, severed

it, then seized Phu Loc district centre, hampering the enemy in its withdrawal to Da Nang. Another column, in coordination with regional troops, cut off the enemy retreat towards the sea through the Tu Hien estuary.

From the north, the Phong Quang Infantry Unit crossed the My Chanh river in force, overran Phong Dien and Huong Dien district centres and attacked the Thuan An estuary. The people's artillery pounded Phu Bai airfield, the HQ of the Saigon 1st Division and rained fire on the Sinh river confluence and the Thuan An estuary. From the west, a column of the people's armed forces marched directly on Hue along Highway No. 12. The enemy defence network was broken through and dislocated. On the night of March 24, all Saigon troops in the Thua Thien — Hue region were encircled by the revolutionary forces. After they had made several vain attempts at breaking through the encirclement, disorder and panic broke out in the enemy ranks. The command of the 1st Division fled in such haste that they did not even take time to inform the colonel chief of the province police. The support points of the defence ring west of Thua Thien — Hue disintegrated under the heavy blows of the people's forces attacking their internal defence lines.

Meanwhile, electricity and water-supply workers in Hue city organized resistance to prevent the Saigon troops from destroying the machines and materiel. Self-defence detachments and information

and propaganda brigade organized by the youth, school and college students in the city appeared on the streets, calling on the people through loud-speakers to rise up, disregard the Saigon order to evacuate, and join the revolutionary forces. The self-defence detachments occupied many key points in the city, mounting guard over public service buildings, on bridges and in the streets, pending the arrival of the revolutionary forces.

On the morning of March 25, the revolutionary forces entered the city from different directions, while the people in revolt seized power. The Saigon troops which had withdrawn in disorder to the Thuan An and Tu Hien estuaries were annihilated.

Hostilities ended late on the afternoon of March 26; the whole defence system of the Saigon army in Thua Thien—Hue region had been wiped out. This was a crushing blow dealt at Thieu's new plan of strategic regrouping along the coast of Trung Bo.

After the fall of Hue, Thieu declared that Da Nang would "hold out to the bitter end". For twenty years, the US imperialists had been trying to turn Da Nang into a land-sea-air military base: it was impressive, modern, very solid, defended by land, air and naval forces, which operated independently and could keep on fighting for a very long time when the different branches were coordinated. Da Nang was the lair of the 1st Army Corps, the best-defended hiding place of the HQs of large units of various US and puppet forces, Thieu had concentrated more than 100,000 men there to