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PREPARATIONS FOR THE BATTLE OF BUON ME THUOT

Memoirs of General Van Tien Dung

Editor's Note: On January 9, 1975, the Standing Committee of the Military Commission of the Viet Nam Workers' Party Central Committee met to discuss the implementation of the resolution of the 21st Plenum of the Viet Nam Workers' Party Central Committee held in October 1974 which says in essence: As the enemy does not fulfil the Paris Agreement on Viet Nam and continues his "Vietnamized" war which is essentially a neo-colonialist war aimed at conquering the whole of south Viet Nam, we have no alternative but to carry on our revolutionary war to destroy them and liberate the South.

General Van Tien Dung, Chief of the General Staff of the Viet Nam People's Army, was appointed by the Political Bureau of the Viet Nam Workers' Party Central Committee commander of the south Viet Nam Central Highlands front. This front was chosen as the curtain-raiser of the strategic campaign in 1975. The first target of the Central Highlands campaign was Buon Me Thuot, capital of Dac Lac province.

In the following article General Van Tien Dung relates how he acted to fulfil his task. The article consists of excerpts from his memoirs "Great Spring Victory" recorded by Hong Ha, staff reporter of the daily Nhan Dan.

On the proposal of Comrades Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, the Political Bureau sent me to the Central Highlands front to command the fighting on behalf of the Political Bureau, the Military Commission of the Party Central Committee and the High Command (of the Viet Nam People's Army - Ed.)

The members of the Politburo took turns in embracing me, shaking hands with me and wishing me good success and great victory.

For me — a revolutionary soldier — to go to the battlefield was a great joy. I felt boundless enthusiasm at being assigned the job of commander. To put into execution an important and perfectly planned resolution of the Party was a source of happiness for me, like joining the Highway 9 Operation in the Spring of 1971 and the Spring-Summer Operation in Quang Tri province in 1972. I told Comrade Tran Van Tra (Commander of the People's Armed Forces in south Viet Nam — Ed.) following the meeting of the Politburo: "I shall carry on fighting in the Highlands till the beginning of the rainy season, then I'll join you in Nam Bo (formerly Cochinchina) in surveying the

front and preparing for the 1975-1976 dry season campaign."

Our entire army was eagerly preparing for the battle. On January 26, 1975, together with Comrade Phung The Tai, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, I visited the First Army Corps stationed in Ninh Binh province to assign to it concrete tasks for 1975. I encouraged the men before they left for the front: "The activities of the Army Corps must be closely and harmoniously coordinated with those on the front. The heart beat of the Army Corps must chime with that of the whole of south Viet Nam. The punches directed by the Army Corps must be smart and accurate and timed in with the powerful blows of other units so as to "knock out" the enemy. I hope that the drum beat urging our men to charge, as well as the victorious clarion of the Army Corps, will burst out triumphantly in harmony with the full orchestra of our entire army and people. I ask now: 'Can the musicians here present be ready to join in?' If they can, then the conductors, who are the Military Commission of the Party Central Committee and the High Command, will be ready to raise their batons at the right moment."

"We can, we can. Determined to win, determined to win!" the men shouted in unison.

There were then in the Central Highlands the 10th, 320th and 968th Divisions which had rich experience in fighting on the Highlands front. Late in December 1974, the High command decided to move to the Central Highlands the 316th Division which had a glorious tradition, having fought victoriously for over 20 years in many distant places during the war against French colonialism. Later, during the war against the US aggressors and their henchmen, this division had been sent to fulfil an internationalist call of duty for a long period. I called on this division when it was encamped at Tan Ky, in the western part of Nghe An province, before it left for the Central Highlands.

I told the Division's commanding officers about the situation, the determination of the Political Bureau and the Military Commission, and the task of the army to win victory. I also indicated the strong points to develop and the weak points to be overcome between then and the day of its departure and even during its first motorized operations. I

recalled these two verses whose author's name I did not remember but which had always burnt in my heart, and which express the anger and bitterness of every Vietnamese, anger which still had to be held in check:

*This land, whose people have
been holding gun for
thirty years
Still shines under a noon
torn in half.*

(A reminiscence of Nguyen Du's verses describing the bitterness of separation between Kieu and her lover, used here as an allusion to the artificial partition of Viet Nam under the Geneva Agreements of 1954—Ed.)

"The battlefield, the opportunity, our task, it is time for us to go, with all that in mind, to join all our countrymen in making our land shine with the full moon. The enemy we are going to face is somewhat different from the one you fought recently. They are more stubborn, trickier, and more experienced, and have more weapons and equipment, and their operational manoeuvres are more perfidious. However, they are pursuing an unjust cause, have met with one setback after another, are facing difficulties in all fields, declining morally and materially, and weakening both in strength and position. There's no reason therefore why you 316th Division cannot defeat the puppet troops while they are weakening and while the south Viet Nam revolutionary forces are sweeping forward like a tidal wave."

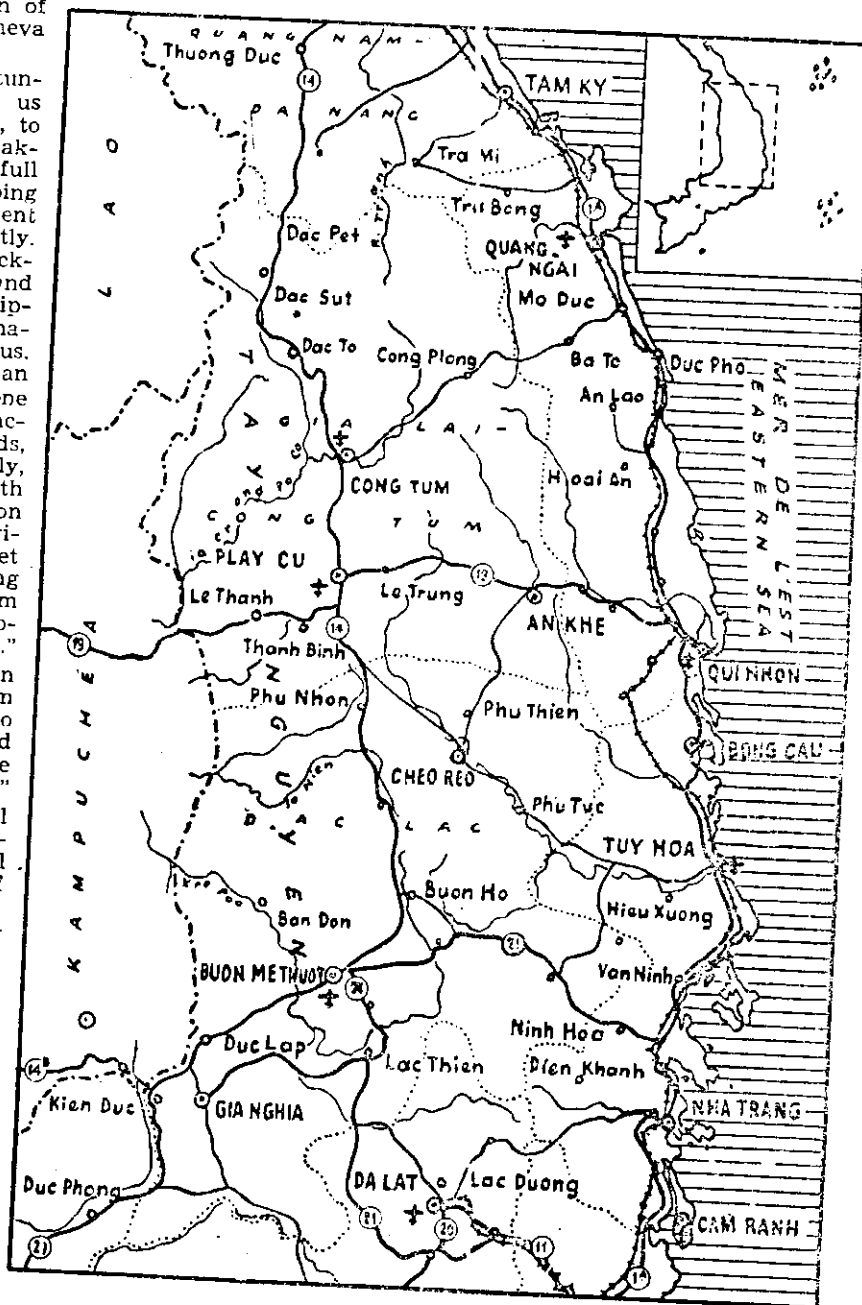
The Division officers and men raised their fists, shouting from their full lungs: "Determined to Win! Determined to Win!" and promised, "We will go on to the end, we will fight till victory!"

By decision of the Political Bureau and the Military Commission of the Party Central Committee, a leading body of the Commission and the High Command on the Central Highlands front was formed, composed of myself, comrade Dinh Duc Thien, Director of the VPA's General Logistics Department; comrade Le Ngoc Hien, Deputy-Chief of the General Staff, and a number of experienced officers of the General Staff and various armed services and branches.

Comrade Thien had gained many experiences during the anti-French war, in the transport of munitions to the front, especially during the Dien Bien

Fu Campaign. During the anti-US war he led the Logistics Service in overcoming innumerable difficulties and ensuring the transport of all necessary supplies to the front, helping defeat the enemy's air and naval war of destruction in the North and giving assistance to various Southern battlefields, especially in ensuring victory for the Highway 9 Operation in the Spring of 1971 and the Operation to liberate Quang Tri province in 1972. He was a staunch revolu-

tionary, cheerful, brave and daring, but as he was "on the wrong side" of 60, was rather irascible, and when displeased, would often get angry and lose his temper. We knew and understood each other for we had been in the same jail in the French colonial days before the August Revolution. I patted Thien on the shoulder and told him: "The time has come, man. The Political Bureau has given orders to us to win this battle and take it on to victory. We



will win, and the couple of us, old chaps, may die with our mind at peace."

Comrade Le Ngoc Hien was fighting side by side with me soon after the 1945 General Insurrection in the Second War Zone and in the 320th Division (then code-named Dai Doan Dong Bang) till the end of 1953. He returned to the General Staff after fighting the Americans on many battlefields. He was very familiar with my eagerness for active offensive, my combativeness, my obedience of orders, my behaviour toward officers and men, and the people at large, and also my particular approach to operational art in face of any given situation.

So he needed no long explanations. Provided that the objective and method of fighting were determined beforehand he would try by every means to carry them out.

After being instructed and briefed on his duties, he left for the Central Highlands in advance so as to join the local front's command in surveying the terrain and working out operational plans.

The officers of the General Staff and various armed services had been together with me during the Highway 9 Operation in Spring 1971 and the 1972 General Offensive. They were experienced, active, dynamic and

well accustomed to my style of work and command. They were all excited and enthusiastic to be taking part in this campaign.

Our commanding officers kept to the common principles of combat. But each of us had his own method. I was sent by the Party on a 15-day military course prior to the August Revolution (1945) and only after the complete liberation of north Viet Nam in 1954 did I have an opportunity to attend a military institute abroad. However, trained and maturing in the process of struggle from the time when I was a member of an underground Party cell working on its own, and accustomed to carrying out revolutionary activities on my own initiative during the time when I lost contact with the Party, I was used to act daringly, never over-estimating the enemy, instead always trying to discover his weak and exposed points, whether it was when I had to carry out underground activities or when my whole division was encircled, as during the anti-French resistance war in 1952 in the enemy-occupied area of Thai Binh (rice-growing province southeast of Hanoi — Ed.)

I too have my own method of fighting. Early in 1952, as commander of the 320th Division, I organized and commanded the Phat Diem surprise attack. I led

my men to infiltrate into the enemy's outer positions for a distance of 20 kilometres, then we suddenly made a deep thrust into Phat Diem township and wiped out the enemy's command post, held the town for one day before turning back to attack the outer positions. My men called this "parachuting" or the "blossoming lotus" method.

I pondered a good deal over the forthcoming battle and especially over how to strike at Buon Me Thuot, the biggest provincial capital in the Central Highlands. The Phuoc Long victory (north of Saigon — Ed) showed that in 1975 we were fully capable of liberating provincial capitals and other cities. But certainly it would be more difficult to attack the provincial capitals in the Central Highlands than Phuoc Long town.

The Central Highlands, then composed of five provinces — Kontum, Gia Lai, Phu Bon, Dac Lac and Quang Duc — were a battlefield of jungle — mountains bordering on some dangerous areas surrounding enemy-held cities. When preparations for our attack in the Central Highlands were underway, the enemy had there one main force division, seven multi-battalion ranger units equivalent to ten regiments and four tank and armoured squadrons. These forces were arrayed in fully

prepared defensive positions. However, they had made a miscalculation about our intentions, thinking that we would strike in the north if we were going to attack the Central Highlands. Therefore, they mustered their forces to defend Pleiku and Kontum (north of Buon Me Thuot—Ed); and left fewer troops in Dac Lac, that is, the southern part of the Central Highlands. Buon Me Thuot, capital of Dac Lac province with its 150,000 inhabitants, was a political and economic centre of the enemy and the headquarters of the puppets' 23rd Division. Here too, the enemy had wrongly assessed our intention: they believed that in 1975 we were not yet strong enough to attack big provincial capitals and cities and that if we did attack these centres, we could not hold them against their counter-attacks. That is why, though Buon Me Thuot was a key position, the enemy forces stationed there were rather weak and exposed, and in fact the deeper we moved into the provincial capital, the weaker we found the enemy positions to be.

Once Buon Me Thuot was liberated, we believed the enemy's defensive system in the Central Highlands would be smashed, creating for us a favourable mobile position likely to change the situation on the whole battle-front.

After the decision to attack Buon Me Thuot had been confirmed, I cabled comrade Le Ngoc Hien in the Central Highlands, recommending him to stay there to make a more detailed survey of the situation in Buon Me Thuot instead of going to Hanoi to report, then to return to the HQs of Comrade Dong Si Nguyen of command 559 (Truong Son Forces), in order to meet me on my way southward to the Central Highlands.

I stepped up preparations to go to the front. I went and took leave of Comrade Truong Chinh, who asked me about the health of our men, about our preparations, and wished me good success. I met Comrade Le Duc Tho who shook hands with me and said: "If this major battle is won, it will provide us with a new, and very advantageous position. Look after yourself, man."

Late in January 1975, I called on Comrade Le Duan. He reminded me of the importance of the Buon Me Thuot battle and the

Central Highlands campaign as a whole, then asked me:

"Have you got enough men?"

"Enough, I think," I replied.

"If we know how to make proper use of them, we can get the upper hand of the enemy."

"Do you need more forces?" he repeated.

He was doing what he had done in my previous campaigns: asking me about the forces at my disposal, and whether we needed some more aid from the Party Central Committee, just to make sure.

This time, he told me: "Think hard, comrade, and try to find out a correct method of fighting. The Central Highlands battlefield

can be a place to do big things. Victory there can lead to a possibility which we are contemplating: to liberate south Viet Nam this year."

I then took leave of Comrades Vo Nguyen Giap, Song Hao, Hoang Van Thai and Le Quang Dao of the Military Commission. Knowing that we shared the same views and will, we did not have much to say when parting. Yet, both those who were going to the front and those who stayed behind to work in the rear area fully agreed on one point: that this time we must bring about a change entirely different from those resulting from my previous operations.

The Way to the Front

ACCORDING to our intelligence reports, on December 9 and 10, 1974, on the fourth floor of the Independence (Presidential—Ed.) Palace in Saigon, Thieu met commanders of all the puppet army corps and military areas to speculate on our activities in 1975. They came to the following conclusion:

In 1975, we (the liberation forces) could launch a campaign on a larger scale than in 1974 but smaller than in 1968, and not so powerful as in 1972. It was impossible for us to strike at provincial capitals or major towns and cities, or if we could, it was impossible for us to hold them, except for small and isolated provincial capitals like Phuoc Long, Gia Nghia and so on. They believed that our main objective in 1975 was to take back two and a half million people in the plains, particularly in the Mekong river delta, and widen the liberated mountain areas. Our objective, they believed, was to win some victories in a bid to force them to implement scrupulously the Paris Agreement on Viet Nam. They believed that early in 1975, the direction of our attacks would be the Third Corps Area, mainly Tay Ninh, which we would eventually turn into the seat of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam. As to the time to trigger our offensive, the enemy guessed that we would begin our campaign before or after Tet (Lunar New Year's Festival) and would fight until June 1975, when we would take a rest because the rainy season would be setting in. Proceeding

from this appraisal, Thieu ordered the puppet army generals to make pre-emptive attacks on the liberation forces in an attempt to foil our preparations. Tran Thien Khiem, the then puppet premier, conferred with the chiefs of the military areas and military sectors and asked them to launch "urgent and instant pacification" operations and "massive concerted offensives" for three months as from January 1st, 1975, to "deter the Viet Cong's Winter-Spring campaign". In view of such an appraisal of the situation, the enemy omitted to change their strategic disposition of forces with stronger forces at the two ends of south Viet Nam (the 1st and 3rd Corps Areas).

In consequence, the 2nd Corps Area, which included the Central Highlands, had not been reinforced significantly.

Early in 1975, the enemy had 1,351,000 troops including 495,000 regulars, 475,000 regional troops, 381,000 armed "Popular Defence" guards, with 13 main force divisions and 18 multi-battalion ranger units. The enemy's battle array was as follows:

— The First Corps Area had five regular divisions (including two general reserve divisions) and four multi-battalion ranger units, 21 artillery battalions and a number of artillery batteries and platoons with 418 pieces, five armoured regiments and six tank and armoured squadrons, with 449 vehicles, and one air force division with 96 fighter planes. The bulk of regular forces were holding Hue and Da Nang cities.

— The Second Corps Area had two regular divisions and seven

multi-battalion ranger units, 14 artillery battalions and a number of artillery batteries and platoons, with 382 pieces, five armoured regiments and 13 tank and armoured squadrons with 477 vehicles, and two air force divisions with 138 fighter planes. Most of the regular forces were scattered to defend the Central Highlands, the plains and coastal areas.

— The Third Corps Area had three regular divisions and seven multi-battalion ranger units 14 artillery battalions and a number of artillery batteries and platoons with 376 pieces, seven armoured regiments and 15 tank and armoured squadrons with 655 vehicles, and two air divisions with 250 fighter planes. All of the regular forces were stationed around Saigon.

— The Fourth Corps Area had three regular divisions, 18 multi-battalion "civil guard" units 15 artillery battalions and 55 artillery batteries and platoons with 380 pieces, five armoured regiments and 17 armoured squadrons with 493 vehicles, one air force division with 72 fighter planes and 580 ships and craft of various kinds. The regular forces were stationed in Can Tho and Chuong Thien areas, along Highway 4 and the border line.

Strategically, the enemy had made a serious mistake in their appraisal of our forces and intentions, a mistake leading to a wrong line-up of forces and wrong combat plans which portended a heavy setback for them.

Our plane landed at Dong Hoi airfield where Comrade Dong Si Nguyen, Commander of "Unit 559", was waiting for us, with a number of cars of the Command, which had come from Quang Tri.

We drove to Quang Tri. The road winding through Le Thuy and Ho Xa was terribly bumpy. Some of our men called it "the worst road in Indochina". At the Ben Hai river bank, we went upstream onboard a wooden sampan with an outboard motor. It was a sunny day but the weather was exceptionally cool there. Late in the afternoon, we landed on the southern side of the river and walked to the HQs of Command 559, west of Gio Linh.

"Unit 559" was so called because it came into being in May 1959. It was attached to the General Department of Logistics. Like the logistics service of our army, this unit has a long history of building, fighting and

development. It used to be a perfect example of the revolutionary principle of always maintaining an offensive position, making good use of revolutionary violence and having a clear and long perspective of the situation in order to ensure success in action. Everything that our logistics officers and men had achieved had been crowned with success.

The law of our revolutionary war was to advance from the use of small units at first to the ultimate capability of employing whole army corps, and armed services coordinated on a large-scale, and then to launch attacks against towns and cities, and smash the enemy's nerve centres in order to defeat them and liberate our country. All this required wide roads and adequate mechanized means of transport to supply adequate food, weapons and ammunition to the front. The strategic road west of the Truong Son Range, which finished building in 1975, was a product of the heroic labour of more than 30,000 armymen and young labour volunteers. This road helped bring the total length of strategic and operational roads built throughout the war to 20,000 kilometres. The finished 8-metre-wide and 1,000 km-long road now lay open before us. A 5,000-km pipe-line running across deep rivers and streams and along mountains, many of them over 1,000 metres high, was ready to provide enough fuel to the battlefronts. More than 10,000 trucks were deployed, coming from various military zones, localities and the Ministry of Communications and Transport, ready as an additional transport force for the front.

Like a good housewife, the logistics service had on the one hand to fulfil its yearly plans for supplying the army, and on the other hand, to store up reserves on a daily and even monthly basis, on the whole south Viet Nam front waiting for opportunities to fulfil both its domestic tasks toward our combatants and its international obligations toward fraternal countries. And, a very heart-warming thing was to see our combatants moving toward the front by mechanized transport, and eating their fill at the front. Even our A.72 C rations were pretty good.

Also in the recent campaign, our men on the battlefields began receiving a large quantity

of heavy guns and ammunition produced early in 1973 by our own national defence workers. This can be regarded as an initial step of the technical revolution in our national defence industry.

The farther we moved toward the front, the clearer we saw the great strength of socialist north Viet Nam as the rear area. The rear is a factor decisive to the victory of a revolutionary war. The heroic people in the rear, enduring and overcoming innumerable difficulties and hardships, did everything they could and sent everything needed by the front, including their beloved sons and husbands.

Upon arriving at the HQs of Command 559, I saw comrade Le Ngoc Hien, who had arrived by car from the Central Highlands and was already there to meet me.

Inside the thatch-roofed house where I stayed, the night had fallen long ago, but I still lay awake, thinking hard of the coming campaign. What should we do to win victory in the Central Highlands, particularly how should we attack Buon Me Thuot? How should we fight in order to quicken the enemy's collapse?

A customary combat method of mine recurred to my mind: give surprise and surprise again to the enemy, with lightning blows that would smash at once their nerve centres. But would the actual conditions permit us to do this?

Next morning, we got up early to work. Comrade Hien reported on the situation in the Central Highlands and gave his ideas about the combat plans. I asked comrades Dinh Duc Thien and Dong Si Nguyen about logistics preparations. They told me that everything needed for the fighting was already available for action and proposed that a large-scale battle be launched, because there were enough food, ammunition, fuel and even troop-carriers at our disposal. Their assurances set our mind at rest. As far as logistics work is concerned, big battles ending with big and quick victories not only reduce supply work but also enable us to capture more enemy material and technical equipment to replenish our own forces.

On the following day, comrade Dinh Duc Thien returned to Quang Binh province to speed up the transfer of ammunition

to the Central Highlands front. While we continued our southward trip, he personally directed the transfer by telling the men what kind of munitions they should take and in what order. The signboards of our cars were painted over with the letters TS. 50, meaning that they had the priority Number One reserved for our troops on the Truong Son front.

On the strategic road, our sappers were repairing damaged sections and girl volunteers were singing while working, talking and laughing merrily, and waving goodbye to us.

"Hey Chief!" One of them shouted. "Tet is drawing near, and we haven't had any letters from home!"

We stopped and presented the girls with some hundred hairpins as gifts.

Long convoys of trucks which had just brought ammunition to the front, were rolling back to the North along the road. Some drivers put their hands through their cabin doors and yelled: "Hey Chief! We're already on the eve of Tet, and we haven't got a single cigarette left!"

We handed them a number of packets as gifts for Tet.

On our way southward, we caught up with the 316th Division. For the first time, the whole division was going to the front by mechanized means—on 500 trucks. It had been ordered absolutely not to use its radio devices from the moment it set out until the moment it opened fire, in order to keep secret. We had intercepted enemy radio reports saying that they had lost sight of our 316th Division and knew nothing more of its whereabouts. Our combatants on the trucks looked healthy and happy, singing and waving their hats to us, while tanks, armoured cars and heavy trucks tugging artillery pieces and other vehicles of all kinds rumbled along the road, following one another in an endless procession toward the battlefield.

How beautiful the road to the front was in that season!

On the eve of Tet, we took a rest at the HQs of the 470th Engineering Division installed at Ia Drang. A few days earlier, enemy A.37 aircraft had bombed a place nearby setting afire two vehicles. Still, our officers and men in the Division HQs were welcoming Tet in all tranquillity, with electric light shaded

for anti-airraid purposes and illuminating all parts of the compound.

On the first day of Tet, our men displayed on the tables

glutinous rice cakes, meat-pie, sweets, cakes and jam, and cigarettes. We all enjoyed Tet and wished one another fresh exploits in the new year.

Deployment

ARRIVING in the Central Highlands, I set up my headquarters in an area west of Buon Me Thuot, near the Front Command's Headquarters. The place where we settled down was in a green forest, next to a palm-tree grove whose fallen leaves covered the ground like a golden carpet. Whenever people trod upon them, the leaves crackled like girdle-cakes. A mere spark here could set the forest on fire, causing great difficulties for our liaison agents as telephone lines kept breaking down. Every time, after having connected the wires again, they would come back with faces black like miners just out of a pit. Yet, another trouble was that whenever a herd of from 40 to 50 elephants moved through our area, they would snap the telephone lines although these were hung high on the trees.

On behalf of the Military Commission of the Viet Nam Workers' Party Central Committee and the VPA High Command, I conferred immediately with the Front Commanders. As we had decided, I declared the formation of the Central Highlands Command with Lieutenant-General Hoang Minh Thao as Chief; Colonel Nguyen Hiep, Political Commissar; Colonel Phi Trieu Ham, Deputy Political Commissar; Major-General Vu Lang and Colonels Phan Ham, Nguyen Lang and Nguyen Nang deputy chiefs.

Reviewing the situation, we agreed that the enemy regular forces in the Central Highlands then included one infantry division, seven multi-battalion ranger units (equivalent to 10 regiments) four armoured regiments, eight artillery battalions and one air division. Their main object was to defend the northern area of the Central Highlands, where they had stationed eight infantry regiments, four armoured regiments, while there were, in the southern part, only two infantry regiments.

The enemy had so deployed their forces because Major-General Pham Van Phu, Commander of the Second Corps Area and Second Army Corps of the puppet army, had predicted that

Pleiku would certainly be attacked, because it was the seat of the Army Corps Headquarters, and, besides serving as a good springboard for widening our attacks in the direction of Binh Dinh province, it was situated conveniently near the Liberation Army's supply line and rear bases. Phu had always been obsessed by what the imperialists and their stooges believed to be an axiom: "He who controls the Central Highlands will control the whole of south Viet Nam" and by the belief that the Liberation Army's decisive blow in the Central Highlands must be dealt at Pleiku and Kontum, and that once Pleiku and Kontum were lost, Buon Me Thuot would fall too.

Although the enemy forces, in the Central Highlands had to be scattered to defend many possible targets, and their reserve forces in the Second Corps Area were limited, they could still move some units from the First and Third Corps Areas to the Central Highlands, if we did not mount attacks there in coordination with those in the Central Highlands battlefield, to prevent them from being still capable of sending reinforcements to defend the Central Highlands.

Our forces engaged in the campaign comprised regular units in the Central Highlands, regular units from the High Command, and those from our Fifth Military Zone, which were all rather well replenished and well prepared, had a high determination and were in fine spirits. Many of these units were familiar with this theatre of operation, and had had many fighting experiences. The network of roads designed to facilitate the movements of our troops during the campaign had already been built, our men were pretty well supplied materially, and the commands at various echelons had been set up and were ready for the campaign. Compared with the enemy in the whole campaign area, our infantry was not much superior in numbers. But due to our concentration of troops we had achieved superiority in the key area of the campaign. We

Incomplete