

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

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