Laos: A Class by Itself

From the first day of Lam Son 719 the U.S. servicemen flying over Laos encountered ferocious North Vietnamese air defense. For the helicopter pilots ferrying troops and supplies, flying Cobra gunships and medevac helicopters, and scouting the enemy in defenseless light observation helicopters (LOHs, or "Loaches"), Laos was an entirely new kind of warfare. The enemy had prepared the ground better than ever before to defend against American airmobility. "We're fighting a conventional war out there," a Huey crewman said of the Laos incursion. "Choppers ... [are] not built to tangle with these defenses." Antiaircraft artillery lined the valley leading to Tchepone, and 12.7MM machine guns were deployed with overlapping fields of fire on high ground a kilometer or so from every potential landing zone. A helicopter dodging fire from one direction found itself careening toward another machine gun position.

In Vietnam and Cambodia, U.S. pilots had encountered only limited 12.7MM fire, whereas in Laos 12.7MM fire scored the vast majority of helicopter hits and "kills." In spite of the heavy concentration of larger caliber weapons and antiaircraft artillery—23MM, 37MM, and 57MM "flak" guns—pilots still found the 12.7MM machine gun to be the most dangerous. The 12.7MM tracer round "looks like a basketball" coming past, one shaken flier reported.

Helicopters returned to Khe Sanh with their Plexiglas fronts blasted in, their sides and blades punctured with bullet and shrapnel holes, their seats splattered with blood. It was a sobering experience for the cocky and highly decorated pilots and crewmen of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and the other air cavalry units assigned to the operation. "This is two, maybe three times worse than Cambodia," Warrant Officer Clarence J. Romero, a Loach pilot, wrote in his diary after three days of flying in Lam Son 719. "Laos is in a class by itself .... It's only a matter of time before I get killed." (Romero survived, leaving combat after three weeks with a shrapnel wound in the shoulder.) On the same day, Major Burt Allen brought in his helicopter pierced with bullet holes. "I've been flying for six months, took my first hit yesterday, and since then have taken thirteen," he said. "We had a hundred percenter, seven choppers hit out of seven." The NVA antiaircraft defenses in Laos were considered by many to be the heaviest in all of Indochina, surpassing even the home defenses of North Vietnam.

Equipped for the first time in the field with a formidable array of firepower, the NVA adapted new tactics to defend its logistics network in Laos. In South Vietnam enemy soldiers had often allowed U.S. helicopters and planes to pass overhead without firing on them, for fear of revealing their positions. In Laos, however, the NVA shot at virtually every target, though they usually let the escort of Cobra gunships and Loaches pass before firing on the troop-carrying helicopters. Their thick concentrations of weapons gave the NVA the confidence to slug it out with the sky cavalry. In addition to being placed around potential landing zones, antiaircraft guns were positioned along the escarpments north and south of Route 9, which offered the best navigational route through the mountains. In the frequent bad weather, the valley was the only route to the forward bases, and the helicopters had to run a gauntlet of fire.

Even the normally safe zone of high altitude disappeared in Laos. "They hit us at 2,500 feet," Warrant Officer Harold Smith reported after his Huey limped back to Khe Sanh dripping fuel. "In Vietnam I've never even been fired at above 1,500 feet." To counter this, pilots adopted "nap of the earth" tactics, flying just above tree level. But near landing zones or firebases, no tactic seemed to work. "Up in those hills, they have 360 degree vision," said Captain Wayne Baker. "They just sit there waiting for you, and when they open up, all you can do is break for the border."

Pilots quickly learned to avoid the areas of greatest threat in the highlands. Every day they traded information on enemy gun positions, evasion tactics, and flying routes. Communication was not always effective, however, and cooperation between U.S. and ARVN pilots, also flying in support of Lam Son 719, was often shaky. Early in the operation, pilots' lack of familiarity with the terrain cost the lives of the I Corps operations and logistics officers and of four news photographers—old Vietnam hands Larry Burrows of *Life* and Henri Huet of AP, as well as UPI's Kent Potter and Keisaburo Shimamoto of *Newsweek*. All were on a flight of four VNAF helicopters flying to Ranger Base South. "They picked the wrong bend in the river and turned north before they should have," recounted Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. Molinelli, commander of the 2d Squadron, 17th Cavalry, who was airborne and within sight at the time. "They were heading right for the heaviest concentration of 37MM guns in that part of Laos. They were in a flight of four Hueys, at 1,500 feet, in line and at eighty knots. We saw them coming and were calling them on all frequencies to warn them away. The first [with the ARVN colonels] blew up in midair, and the fourth [with the newsmen] took a hit in the mast and lost a blade."

Machine guns and antiaircraft artillery were not the only weapons taking a heavy toll on the helicopters. Mortar fire, dispersing shrapnel in a wide circumference, proved especially dangerous to helicopters setting down on a landing zone. Early in Lam Son 719 a group of troop-carrying "slick ships" was landing at one of the northern firebases when mortar shells began raining down on the clearing. "When they burst on the east side of the landing zone, we flew up to the west side; when they started falling on the west side, we flew back to the east side," recounted First Lieutenant Clifford C. Whiting, his helicopter pocked with twenty-five shrapnel holes after the mission. As the choppers hovered for seventy long seconds, the South Vietnamese refused to disembark. "We were sitting ducks," said another pilot. "Finally we had to push and kick them [the ARVNs] out." The American pilots expressed resentment that ARVN troops often made no effort to pin down enemy troops or to suppress mortar fire and antiaircraft fire near the landing zones. In fact, with no American soldiers or advisers on the ground, there were few personnel experienced enough to explain a unit's needs to the pilots or to coordinate loading and unloading.

Later, during the retreat from Laos, the extraction of troops proved as difficult as had their insertion. With the enemy in close pursuit, some South Vietnamese troops were hard pressed to break contact with the enemy and create a safe pickup zone. Each time units paused long enough to clear even a rudimentary landing zone, the NVA poured mortar fire into their positions. U.S. planes and helicopters of the 158th Aviation Battalion, led by Lieutenant Colonel William N. Peachey, conducted a daring rescue of one such battalion—the 2d Airborne—which was trapped north of FSB Alpha. After having been pushed off Firebase 30 during the first week of March, the unit had been fighting the enemy for two weeks. On the nineteenth, Peachey attempted to rescue them but was frustrated by enemy troops who were within fifty meters of the landing zone all day. The battered unit, with its fifty-seven wounded men, moved during the night to what was hoped to be a safer landing zone.

The next morning Cobras and tactical aircraft under Peachey's command blasted the jungle beside and behind the troops, enabling the soldiers to get far enough ahead of the enemy to stomp down the eight-foot-high elephant grass into an LZ for the orbiting choppers. Fearful of drawing mortar fire, however, the ARVN soldiers repeatedly refused to release smoke grenades to mark their location, and in the haze of smoke from gunship fire and burning grass, the helicopters could not find the troops. Finally, Peachey brought his own command helicopter down to drop smoke grenades, but on his way out enemy riflemen hit the helicopter, wounding Peachey in the shoulder. Debris struck his face, knocking him unconscious. His copilot struggled to pull the helicopter out of the LZ.

Peachey regained his senses at about 1,000 feet. Every light on the control panel glared red—most of the chopper's systems were down. Neither Peachey's controls nor his mike worked. He shook the copilot's arm and shouted, "Land the damn thing or we're gonna crash!" "No, no," the copilot yelled back, "we can make it to Khe Sanh." "You're gonna land this goddam thing or I'm gonna blow your head off!" Peachey shouted. The copilot obeyed. He pushed the helicopter down, making a rough landing just as the hydraulic fluids ran out. The two pilots spent only minutes on the ground before another helicopter picked them and the ARVN soldiers up. All made it safely back to Khe Sanh.

The heavy losses inflicted on U.S. helicopters during Lam Son 719 brought into question the viability of air cavalry in a conventional conflict. Commanders often overused and misused helicopters, too often expecting them to fight the infantryman's battle. Yet few disagreed with Brigadier General William J. Maddox, Jr., director of U.S. Army Aviation, when he reminded critics that without the 100,000 sorties flown by helicopters, the battle in Laos would indeed have been a fight "tree by tree along Highway 9." Still, airmobility exacted a steep price. Fifty-five U.S. pilots and crewmen lost their lives, 178 were wounded, and 34 were listed as missing in action. Many more helicopters were hit but managed to fly back to Khe Sanh. Overall, the U.S. listed 108 helicopters lost and 618 damaged. Even so, many aviators felt that not all losses were reported so that the picture of helicopters' survivability would be rosier. Said one colonel: "If they can cut the tail number out of the wreckage and glue a new chopper onto it, they'll never admit that the aircraft was lost."

A North Vietnamese 12.7MM machine-gun team fires on U.S. aircraft at Ranger Base North during Lam Son 719.

Many of the 147th Brigade stragglers found their way to friendly positions. During the withdrawal many soldiers at the firebases looked for any opportunity to escape the battlefield, and they tried to clamber aboard overcrowded helicopters. To reduce the number of trips through anti-aircraft fire, Brig. Gen. Berry ordered his pilots to bring out as many Vietnamese as possible in each flight. Seeing helicopters filled to overflowing, and afraid of being abandoned, the soldiers panicked. "They would do absolutely anything to get out of Laos," said Lt. Col. Peachey, who flew throughout most of Lam Son 719:

> The healthy would run over the dead and wounded. We would hover at six or seven feet and the crew chief and gunner would lay on their bellies and pull people up. If you got on the ground, they would turn the helicopter over. A later tactic was to run and jump on the shoulders of people and grab on to the skids. The helicopters would go up to 3,000 or 4,000 feet, and after five or ten minutes, they'd get tired and turn loose. I can still see the bodies coming down through the sky.

The armored brigade and Airborne troops withdrawing along Route 9 fought through ambushes and steady harassment, losing many of their vehicles. U.S. planes destroyed the damaged and abandoned vehicles to prevent the North Vietnamese from making use of them. "Route 9 was cluttered full of junk," said marine Lieutenant Colonel Robert Darron, flying in a FAC plane. "Tanks and trucks and all kinds of things . . . stretched about a mile." About nine kilometers west of that site, Darron also spotted twenty enemy armored vehicles, led by T54 tanks, rolling down Route 9 in pursuit of the ARVN column. U.S. planes bombed the tanks, but North Vietnamese gunners firing the 12.7MM machine guns on the tanks claimed one F-100 Supersabre and its pilot.

To avoid more ambushes, the task force, with 100 armored vehicles and the 1st and 8th Airborne Battalions, left Route 9 and crashed through dense jungle searching for a way back. Finally the column crossed the Sepone River and returned to Vietnam on March 23. By March 25, forty-five days after they had entered the country, most South Vietnamese troops had quit Laos.

As the South Vietnamese retreated toward Khe Sanh, NVA tanks appeared in five locations on the Laotian side of the border but were driven back by gunships and fighters. The North Vietnamese pursuit had a momentum that seemed to carry across the border. Khe Sanh itself had come under increasing attack from artillery and sappers, so units hurriedly packed up to leave (see photo essay, page 92). ARVN launched two small face-saving raids into a border region called the Laotian Salient that jutted into Vietnam. By the time the second raid concluded on April 6, Khe Sanh had again been abandoned, and Operation Lam Son 719 was over.

No sooner had the operation ended than Saigon and Hanoi traded boasts of great victories, each presenting opposing versions of the campaign. Reviewing his Airborne troops at Dong Ha, President Thieu told them, "This is the biggest victory ever . . . a moral, political and psychological Dien Bien Phu," in which the South Vietnamese had killed more than 13,000 North Vietnamese at a cost of fewer than 6,000 ARVN killed and wounded.

In its own account of Lam Son 719, published shortly after the battle, Hanoi trumpeted "the heaviest defeat ever" for "Nixon and Company," and ridiculed the cooperation between the Americans and ARVN, especially during the withdrawal. Hanoi alleged that the helicopter pilots had "plastered the choppers' skids with grease to prevent the Saigon soldiers from hanging onto them, leaving the poor devils in the lurch! A fine picture of Vietnamization indeed!" The North Vietnamese claimed that they had killed, wounded, and captured 16,400 men, including 200 Americans, in the "Route 9-Southern Laos victory." According to U.S. XXIV Corps figures, Saigon had lost more than 9,000 killed, wounded, and captured, a casualty rate of nearly 50 percent. U.S. support forces, both helicopter crews in Laos and ground troops in Vietnam, had lost 253 killed and missing and 1,149 wounded, for a total of 1,402 American casualties.

For all of the casualties, ARVN had accomplished some of its objectives by interrupting the enemy logistical build-up in Laos and halting the flow of materiel into South Vietnam. According to Lt. Gen. Sutherland, Lam Son 719 had forestalled an enemy offensive for at least six months, or until the beginning of the next rainy season in Laos, which, as a rule, would provide another few months' breathing space. Yet at best the invasion had scored only short-term gains. Within a week of the climactic battles at Firebase Delta, reconnaissance aircraft reported North Vietnamese traffic moving freely down the trail, and a month later activity had resumed around Tchepone. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese continued to upgrade their conventional combat forces in Laos and consolidated their hold on the panhandle. Hanoi knew that the ARVN had spent itself and was unlikely to invade Laos again. With American bombing declining, North Vietnam felt more secure than ever in its Laotian sanctuary. Even though it would require time to restore war materiel, Hanoi could do so virtually unimpeded by the ARVN or U.S. forces.

South Vietnam, meanwhile, reverberated from the shock of Lam Son 719. Thieu banned U.S. news magazines *Time* and *Newsweek* and several opposition newspapers whose coverage of the operation conflicted with Thieu's version of events. He also kept the hard-hit Airborne and Marine Divisions in the north, rather than returning them to their bases around Saigon, where their bloodcurdling stories were bound to circulate among the public and their families. These units were filled out with many sons of upper-class South Vietnamese. Now these influential families were grief stricken, and because dead and wounded had been left in Laos, many families had no bodies to venerate. According to a Vietnamese commentator, the families were thus "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."

Many in South Vietnam, including those in the military, found fault with the Lam Son 719 plan and with its execution. The use of fixed firebases, in slavish imitation of American tactics in South Vietnam, came in for severe criticism. Firebases in territory already prepared by the enemy merely presented him with fixed targets to hammer with artillery. Critics said that firebases should have been moved frequently to thwart artillery attacks and that ARVN failed to perform aggressive patrolling required for firebase security. The helicopter, designed to free infantry from the "tyranny of terrain," became itself tyrannized by flying through anticircraft fire to ARVN's fixed positions.

The inexperienced ARVN generals, mired in parochial disputes and disagreeing over military strategy, seemed beset by inertia. A strong North Vietnamese reaction had been expected, and intelligence, though it missed the threat of armor, had correctly predicted (albeit from the wrong direction) NVA reinforcement within two weeks. Armed with this information, the South Vietnamese nevertheless allowed opportunities to slip away through indecision. General Lam in particular proved himself unequal to his post and responsibilities. "I remember seeing him one morning towards the end of the operation when things were worms in Laos . . . ," said Lt. Col. Darron of the XXIV Corps headquarters staff. "He was laying back, kind of in a crucified position, leaning back against his bunker . . . looking up in the sky with his eyes closed, and he was obviously under a terrible, terrible strain. Frankly, I think he was just in over his head."

Many junior officers and men in the ranks were understandably bitter about their superiors' failings. One Vietnamese Marine lieutenant spoke for many when he told adviser Major William Dabney of the U.S. Marines, "It is my perception that the Americans were using us [troops] as training aids for the senior staff."

The future of Vietnamization

The performance of Saigon's troops, who were slated to take over all ground combat responsibility in the summer of 1971 at the completion of Vietnamization's Phase I, received mixed reviews. A lasting impression of ARVN in Lam Son 719 came from the panic of disorganized retreat. But in fact many of the South Vietnamese had performed well in individual battles; MACV took some heart from the ARVN performance. Citing XXIV Corps figures of more than 14,000 enemy killed, the MACV Command Overview said, "The results were obvious: the NVA had taken still another beating." General Abrams passed on his enthusiasm to Washington, and President Nixon credited the South Vietnamese with having tied down some of the enemy's best divisions and with having disrupted his supply lines for six weeks. "General Abrams . . . says that some [ARVN] units did not do so well," said Nixon, "but 18 out of 22 battalions conducted themselves with high morale, with great confidence, and they are able to defend themselves man for man against the North Vietnamese."

Those closer to the scene than President Nixon or even General Abrams tended to disagree with that assessment. They said the South Vietnamese knew they had suffered a defeat and that their morale might prove difficult to restore. Maj. Dabney, who flew over Laos as an airborne coordinator, contrasted the Vietnamese Marines before and after the operation. "These were brave men, well led, well supplied, who had a certain élan and a certain confidence in themselves when they went in," Dabney said. "When they came out, they'd been whipped. They knew they'd been whipped and they acted like they'd been whipped."

Although, as President Nixon said, ARVN soldiers might have been able to handle NVA regulars, the South Vietnamese succumbed to a numerically superior, conventional army, one with armor and artillery. After Lam Son 719 Saigon and MACV had to confront the probability of further conventional warfare. It was not until 1970 that plans were approved for a combined arms school where officers would learn to employ jointly infantry, armor, and artillery. Now this program took on pressing importance; soon MACV and RVNAF planning groups began to collaborate on *The Combined Arms Doctrinal Handbook*, which was to become a key element in RVNAF training. Shortly after the conclusion of Lam Son 719, General Abrams requested the urgent shipment to Vietnam of a battalion of fifty-four M48 tanks, more sophisticated than the M41, to counter the NVA's Soviet-supplied armor. MACV and RVNAF planners hurriedly devised an abbreviated training program of six months (as opposed to the norm of one year) for Vietnamese tank crews.

For the United States, Lam Son 719 raised questions about Phase II of Vietnamization in which South Vietnam was to develop air and naval support systems and artillery, logistical, and maintenance systems to replace those that since 1965 had been supplied by the United States. Although no timetable was established for the completion of Phase II, U.S. planners admitted that it would take longer than Phase I had because of the complex training involved. The Laos operation had been possible only because of the enormous air support and logistical effort mounted by the United States. While the war continued and peace negotiations remained stalled, the U.S. would need to maintain that level of support even as it gradually pulled out of the war on the ground.

while the battalion's other two companies patrolled the mountain ranges northeast. Another battalion had already been thrown off the mountain range to the northwest, losing over 100 killed, missing, and wounded in less than a day. The mountain range and the valley that ran to FSB 31 belonged to the enemy, and from there the North Vietnamese pounded away at the base with artillery and mortars.

Airborne Division commander Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong feared that with his men stuck in static firebase positions, their usual aggressiveness had been stifled by General Lam's plan. Dong felt ill-used by Lam. "He remarked on many occasions," said the U.S. adviser, Colonel Arthur Pence, "that General Lam considered the Rangers the first cousins, the Airborne the distant cousins and the 1st ARVN Division the son." Dong also criticized U.S. air support for its inability to supply FSB 31. But enemy antiaircraft fire drove off any helicopters attempting to land. Col. Pence suggested dropping supplies by parachute, but Dong declined, not wanting to risk lowering morale by letting his men know how desperate their plight was. Over four days the number of casualties mounted and evacuation was impossible.

Several of the supporting American helicopter pilots decided to attempt a daring descent into the base to take out the most seriously wounded. Led by Lieutenant Colonel William N. Peachey, commander of the 158th Aviation Battalion, the helicopters braved the antiaircraft fire and flew into FSB 31. When they touched down, however, most able-bodied soldiers stayed in their bunkers, for the arrival of helicopters brought a new round of enemy mortar and artillery fire. With few men to help them into the helicopters, the seriously wounded remained behind, and only some walking wounded made it into the aircraft and escaped FSB 31. The Hueys pulled out the dead in sling loads swinging beneath.

At Col. Pence's suggestion, Dong ordered Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat, commander of the armored task force under Dong's control, to move some tanks of the 17th Armored Squadron north from A Luoi to reinforce FSB 31 against ground attack. By radio Dong ordered Companies 31 and 32, which were patrolling the mountains northeast of the firebase, to link up with the tanks and lead them back. The tanks never arrived at the firebase; the reason why was never suitably explained.

Colonel Pence maintained that Colonel Luat simply ignored Dong's orders and a follow-up order from General Lam. Although the armor was attached to the Airborne Division, and thus under Dong's command, "General Dong had absolutely no control over the task force commander," said Pence. "General Dong did everything he could do . . . except call the commander in and shoot him." The American senior adviser to the armored brigade told a different story. According to Colonel Raymond Battreall, the armor commander had received conflicting orders from Generals Lam and Dong, and the column of five M41 tanks with accompanying infantry halted as ordered by the Airborne Division commander south of FSB 31. Moreover, in the coming confusion, Battreall said, the inexperienced Airborne Division staff simply forgot about the armored element and neglected to issue any orders. Whatever the reasons, the armor column was still several kilometers southeast of FSB 31 on February 25.

Conventional warfare

On that day the North Vietnamese sent a rain of artillery fire into the base and followed up with the first large-scale conventional attack of the war. Hanoi was changing the face of the war, abandoning ambushes and hit-and-run attacks and resorting to conventional warfare. The North Vietnamese turned long-range heavy artillery onto their target, brought up tanks powered by ample diesel fuel, and attacked with infantry regiments of some 2,000 men. Throughout the war, MACV had longed for such large NVA targets to destroy with U.S. firepower. But now that the North Vietnamese were showing their faces, U.S. forces possessed little means to affect events.

A pall of smoke, dust, and haze caused by artillery, air strikes, and napalm hung over FSB 31, rendering the slopes of the 456-meter-high hill invisible to the U.S. forward air controller, who was flying at nearly 4,000 feet to avoid antiaircraft fire. Just after noon, the men of the 31st Company saw enemy tanks south of the base and they called artillery from FSB A Luoi and FSB 30. Directed by the FAC, a flight of tactical aircraft destroyed several of the tanks and drove back the armored thrust.

After another fierce artillery barrage an hour later North Vietnamese infantry and camouflaged tanks, PT76s and T54s, closed on the base from the northwest and east. The North Vietnamese had FSB 31 surrounded. The South Vietnamese had seen before the thinly armored PT76 amphibious tanks, little more than armored cars. But the sight of Soviet T54s—huge thirty-two-ton battle tanks with 100MM cannons and 12.7MM machine guns—crashing toward them came as an overwhelming shock. The outer defense of FSB 31 consisted of but one ring of concertina wire.

At that moment a U.S. Air Force F-4 Phantom was hit by antiaircraft fire and the pilot and crewmen ejected, parachuting down into the jungle far from the battle. The forward air controller left his station high above FSB 31 to track the airmen and direct their rescue by helicopter. His absence left the remaining aircraft without instructions or guidance, interrupting the air support that was crucial for the beleaguered base. It was an egregious mistake.

With no planes to slow its advance, another column of tanks and infantry attacked from the north. A lone helicopter attacked the column with its M60 machine guns but NVA soldiers rolled onto their backs and fired up, driving it off. The NVA tanks and infantry breached the defenses and fought their way into the firebase, capturing it within forty minutes. Some of the Airborne troops broke out; most were captured. The victorious tanks spread throughout the base. "The tanks were there, big and ugly," said Lt. Col. Peachey, flying overhead and peering down through the haze. "They were on top of the bunkers, doing 360 degree turns, driving around and around."

Brigade commander Col. Tho and his staff were trapped in a collapsed bunker. They raised FSB A Luoi on the radio and reported that North Vietnamese soldiers were tearing the top off the bunker. They asked for artillery fire on their own positions, and it came but apparently without effect. The men surrendered, and shortly after their capture they made statements over the North Vietnamese radio denouncing Lam Son 719.

ARVN soldiers rush wounded comrades to a medevac helicopter, which has landed near an armor unit at FSB A Luoi

able-bodied Rangers lost their nerve and tried to climb aboard the last medevacs leaving Ranger Base North. When they were repulsed, they deserted by clinging to the runners and riding back to Vietnam, where they were photographed by television cameras and reporters clustered at Khe Sanh waiting for word of the first major battle of the Laotian campaign. The sight of ARVN soldiers clinging to helicopter skids to escape from Laos and the North Vietnamese became the enduring image of Operation Lam Son 719.

Although Lt. Gen. Sutherland exaggerated in calling the battle "a great victory for the Rangers," the fact that many more men had fought courageously tended to be overlooked. Reporters asked the only American witness, Sp4 Fujii, about healthy Rangers pushing past wounded to get aboard helicopters. Fujii had already told his rescuers that the Rangers had trampled him in their rush for the helicopters. But to the press he denied that it had occurred, adding, "I think the Vietnamese Rangers are some of the most professional and qualified Vietnamese soldiers I ever worked with, and I would like to work with them again." Lt. Col. Molinelli expressed similar sentiments. "Seventeen of their men did panic and they did leave hanging on to helicopter skids," he said. "There were a lot more who did not." In spite of the many protestations, however, the image conveyed by the pictures persisted.

Another casualty of the Ranger base battles, although an indirect one, was ARVN Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri, commander of III Corps and hero of the 1970 Cambodian incursion. The Ranger battles north of Route 9 had been the first major enemy blows against the South Vietnamese invasion and the first challenge for Gen. Lam. He had deployed the lightly armed Rangers to the north to delay NVA reinforcements heading toward Route 9 until heavy firepower could be brought in. By his indecision and poor staff coordination during the battles, however, Lam had glaringly exposed his inadequacies.

Disappointed in Lam's performance, President Thieu summoned Gen. Tri from his III Corps headquarters to Saigon and on February 23 turned over command of Operation Lam Son 719 to the dynamic general. Leaving Saigon to take over, Tri perished in a helicopter crash, and General Lam retained his post.

Attack on Firebase 31

Located eight kilometers north of A Luoi and virtually astride a Communist north-south supply line on Route 92, Fire Support Base 31 protected the north flank of the main column after the withdrawal of the Rangers, and it now bore the brunt of North Vietnamese attacks. Headquarters for the 3d Airborne Brigade and Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, the base also held the 3d Airborne Battalion. Two of its companies, the 33d and 34th Rifle Companies—the latter reduced by casualties to sixty-five men—defended FSB 31.