

Lam Son 719

At dawn on February 8, 1971, South Vietnamese armored personnel carriers, each with a dozen soldiers crouching amid wilting brush camouflage, clanked and rumbled down Route 9, crossing into Laos. The terrain ahead had been raked with artillery fire throughout the night, and the skies overhead began to buzz with American-piloted troop helicopters and shark-nosed Cobras searching for enemy ambush sites. Behind the troops a ragged column of armor, infantrymen, and supply trucks stretched twenty kilometers through Lang Vei to Khe Sanh, the abandoned marine combat base. Khe Sanh had been reactivated as the forward base for Operation Lam Son 719, the long-awaited invasion of Laos in order to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

With the friskiness of schoolboys embarking on adventure, the South Vietnamese bantered as they advanced. "Hey, this is the second time we're going into a foreign country without our passports," said a paratroop veteran of the Cam-



bodian incursion, provoking laughter on all sides. Some soldiers talked, as men often do, about women in the land ahead. But on this D-Day some did not share the confidence that came from progressing without a sign of enemy opposition. Waiting for his unit to move out, Ranger Sergeant Ngo Van Thi pulled his blanket tighter around his shoulders to ward off the morning chill and said, "I've already fought in Cambodia, and now I'm going into Laos... I think it will be harder than Cambodia."

That Lam Son 719^{*} would be harder was guaranteed by a red and white painted sign the men passed as they crossed from South Vietnam into Laos. It read: "Warning—No U.S. Personnel Beyond This Point." Neither U.S. ground troops nor advisers were going to enter Laos during the operation, which was expected to extend for three months and involve the best soldiers South Vietnam could put into the field: the ARVN 1st Infantry Division and 1st Armored Brigade from I Corps and a Ranger group. Airborne troops and Marines, whose battalions and brigades constituted the national reserve, were being brought together as divisions for the first time to join in Lam Son 719. The plan, the brain child of General Creighton Abrams, was first to send troops on a quick strike to Tchepone, a transhipment point forty-two kilometers inside Laos. Other troops were to man fire support bases inside Laos to protect exposed flanks. All were eventually to withdraw south and southeast through North Vietnamese base area 611, the region in Laos attacked by the 9th Marines two years earlier in Operation Dewey Canyon.

The 16,000 South Vietnamese embarking on Lam Son 719 equaled about one-half the combined Vietnamese-U.S. force that had invaded Cambodia in April the previous year. Later reinforcements would swell the Vietnamese force to 20,000. Although American ground troops and advisers were barred from Laos, U.S. helicopter and airplane pilots were exempt from the ban against fighting there, and, in fact, Lam Son 719 depended heavily on U.S. fire support and logistics. Some 10,000 U.S. combat, engineering, and support troops remained in Quang Tri Province to provide security, logistical and combat support, and to maintain and arm 2,000 fixed-wing aircraft and 600 helicopters. Meanwhile, to mislead Hanoi about the real objectives of the attack, a naval task force carrying U.S. Marines made ready to steam into the Tonkin Gulf.

At the Lao-Viet border American advisers to Vietnamese units halted and, as the first day of Lam Son 719 wore on, one U.S. adviser after another handed over a map case to his counterpart, shook hands, and wished him good luck. In practice, at the battalion and company level, advisers performed the role of fire support coordinators. In the chaos of battle, they took over the radios, calculating dis-

tances, marking targets, calling in artillery, coordinating with other nearby units, and chartering with forward air controllers who were themselves orchestrating aerial ballets of gunships and tactical air support. Lam Son 719 was predicated on air mobility and the might of American firepower to suppress NVA opposition, and South Vietnamese battalion and company commanders were going to have to coordinate fire support by themselves for the first time, articulating the complicated jargon of shorthand figures, facts, and numbers in English or through interpreters flying with forward air controllers. The success of Lam Son 719 depended on many factors—coordination of ground troops, the tenacity of the North Vietnamese, the boldness and efficiency of the plan itself. But at the tactical level the operation was going to succeed or fail in large part because of the leadership of the officers and the skill of the ARVN soldiers.

The troops entering Laos remarked on the lush greenery of the jungle, so different from the ravaged Khe Sanh plateau where chemical defoliants and countless tons of bombs had denuded the red earth. When a convoy of armored vehicles halted, however, the soldiers noted that not a single bird chirped. Perhaps the preparatory artillery strikes had chased away the birds, some suggested. There was virtually no resistance as the troops advanced, and that very absence of opposition was worrisome. A correspondent riding in the armored column reasoned that NVA patrols must surely be following and watching. But "with Cobra gunships firing rockets all around us," he wrote, "we advanced the next day 25 clicks into Laos. There was no return fire and I felt it was an NVA tactic to draw us in deeper."

Problems of planning

From concept to execution, the plan for Lam Son 719 had taken shape in just a few weeks and in tight security. This had numerous ramifications. Because Communist espionage cells were active within ARVN, the joint planning committee had a strictly limited membership involving only the intelligence and operations staff members of I Corps under Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, who was to command the operation, and U.S. XXIV Corps, headed by Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland, Jr. Units did not learn they would play parts in Lam Son until January 17, and the Airborne Division that was to lead the operation received no detailed plans until February 2, less than a week before the February 8 D-Day.

In the end, secrecy was breached on all sides. According to one CIA source, Vietnamese Communists had infiltrated the translating and printing shops at I Corps head-



American Division troops ride APCs toward Lang Vei as part of Dewey Canyon II, the U.S. operation to clear Route 9 to the Lao-Viet border for the South Vietnamese invasion.

^{*}The South Vietnamese had named many of their operations Lam Son, the birthplace of fifteenth century hero Le Loi, who led a ten-year fight to expel the Chinese from Vietnam. The numerals signify the year 1971 and the Route 9 area.

ARVN firebases, notably Lolo and A Luci.

On March 9 the battalions and the 2d Regiment command post set out to climb the ridge to Firebase Sophia. Cautious about ambushes, the troops maintained radio silence so as not to disclose their location and moved their positions every two hours during the night. They arrived safely at the firebase the following day, and the ARVN "occupation" of Tchepone, a principal terrain objective of Operation Lam Son 719, was complete.

Disengagement begins

Their goal achieved, President Thieu and General Lam ordered South Vietnam's withdrawal from Laos beginning on March 9. During the remainder of March, ARVN forces were to fall back toward Vietnam, destroying base areas and supplies in their paths. General Abrams urged Thieu to reconsider. He suggested that instead of retreating, "we send the ARVN 2d Division from I Corps Tactical Zone as reinforcement into Laos to accomplish the mission's original objective—the disruption of the enemy's supply system until the rainy season halted all movement on the trails."

Finding the reasons for withdrawal compelling, Thieu declined. The terrain, which the enemy knew, and the weather, which hampered air support, both favored the North Vietnamese. Their air defenses showed no signs of weakening. Despite U.S. countermeasures, antiaircraft fire remained devastating. The North Vietnamese had also moved SAM missiles into Laos west of the Ban Raving Pass, and these represented a new threat to air support. Though discounted before the invasion, NVA armor was proving decisive. The NVA's ability to maneuver tanks over hidden forest trails, while the ARVN was confined to congested one-way roads, gave the enemy another advantage. In addition, the North Vietnamese were clever at employing the tanks as highly mobile field guns, even using them to conduct ambushes and then escape through a seemingly impenetrable forest. It was the NVA capacity to reinforce that proved most significant. One month into the operation, North Vietnamese forces already out-



At FSB Sophia, the westernmost ARVN campment inside Laos, soldiers peer behind a battery of 105MM howitzers as B-52s make a strike on a ridge overlooking Tchepone.

numbered ARVN two to one, and more regiments were on the move toward the Route 9 area. Yet ARVN had reached its limit, as the one Marine brigade in national reserve dramatized. South Vietnam might have sent another division, as Abrams urged, but that would have left its area of operations in South Vietnam exposed to enemy troops or sappers already in I Corps Tactical Zone.

As events soon demonstrated, the advantages held by the North Vietnamese translated equally well into attacking a withdrawing army as thwarting an invading one. When it became apparent to the North Vietnamese that withdrawal was underway, they concentrated on choking off resupply and evacuation helicopters, on attacking increasingly undermanned firebases, and on ambushing forces retreating on the ground. The North Vietnamese suffered great losses, especially to tactical air strikes and B-52s, but as usual they considered the sacrifice of men secondary to the attainment of their political and military goals—in this case manhandling South Vietnam's best divisions while at the same time seeming to throw them out of Laos. Only a well-trained, coordinated, and disciplined army can effect an orderly retreat. In the case of the army of South Vietnam, withdrawal quickly became a rout. The ordeals of the 4th Battalion, 1st Regiment, 1st Division, and the 147th Marine Brigade epitomize the most trying aspects of the withdrawal.

On March 11 the 1st and 2d Regiments began pulling

back from the westernmost bases, Sophia, Liz, and Lolo, and leapfrogging into other bases to the east. Both were to fan out along Route 914, searching for enemy base areas. After the 2d Regiment had left Firebase Sophia, U.S. fighters bombed the base, destroying the eight abandoned 105MM howitzers to keep them from falling into enemy hands. At Firebase Lolo the 1st Regiment found itself surrounded by the North Vietnamese. With all air supply and the possibility of evacuation cut off, the 1st Regiment planned a breakout on foot, with the 4th Battalion holding the base in a rear-guard action.

Most of the regiment did manage to escape, and then the 4th Battalion, rejecting NVA calls to surrender, fought its way out. For two days the battalion kept on the run, with the enemy in close pursuit. Near the Sepone River, the North Vietnamese intercepted the battalion, and the resulting firefight lasted most of the day. The battalion commander and most of the officers died in the battle. The survivors escaped and worked their way toward Route 9, where on the following afternoon U.S. helicopters and tactical aircraft mounted a daring rescue. Two helicopters took fire and crashed and one fighter plane, hit by the enemy, exploded. The choppers managed to pull out the remnants of the 4th Battalion—just thirty-two men. The following day another fifty stragglers reached safety. In fulfilling its rear-guard mission for the regiment, the battalion had sacrificed more than three-quarters of its men.

At Fire Support Base Delta the 147th Marine Brigade faced its own trial by fire. Having moved up from the A Shau Valley, two regiments of the North Vietnamese 324th Division—the 29th and 803d—surrounded Delta, while the division's 812th Regiment attacked the 258th Marine Brigade at Firebase Hotel in the Co Roc Highlands. With ten antiaircraft guns positioned in the hills around Delta, the North Vietnamese closed down air access to the base while pounding it steadily with 130mm artillery. NVA infantry, called "suicide troops" by the South Vietnamese, reached the defense perimeter and dug in. At dawn on March 21, an intensive barrage of mortars and direct fire from tanks signaled an attack, but with artillery fire, tactical air support, and a B-52 strike (which a prisoner later revealed had caught his battalion squarely, killing 400 men), the marines held the base, though at a cost of more than 300 killed and wounded.

Ammunition began to run out, however, and the next day the NVA overran the base. They launched the assault from positions inside the marine perimeter, supported by ten flame-throwing tanks. NVA infantrymen rushed over the bodies of their slain comrades to charge into the base. The marines knocked out four tanks, then fell back. Trying to break out, the three battalions ran into NVA ambushes. The troops scattered. One survivor recounted:

The last attack came at about 8:00 P.M. They shelled us first and then came the tanks moving up into our positions. The whole bri-

gade ran down the hill like ants. We jumped on each other to get out of that place. No man had time to look for his commanding officer. It was quick, quick, quick or we would die... When I was far from the hill, with about 20 other marines, there was a first lieutenant with us. We moved like ghosts, terrified of being ambushed by the North Vietnamese. We stopped moving many times when there was firing—not daring to breathe.... Our group bumped into a North Vietnamese unit, and we ran again like ants. And the lieutenant, he whispered to us, "Disperse, disperse, don't stick together or we will all be killed." After each firing, there were fewer and fewer of us.

A marine who escaped Delta described the agony of the Vietnamese leaving their wounded comrades. They lay there crying, knowing the B-52 bombs would fall on them. They asked buddies to shoot them, but none of us could bring himself to do that. So the wounded cried out for grenades, first one man, then another, then more. I could not bear it. We ran out at 8:00 P.M. and about midnight we heard the bombs explode behind us. No more bodies! They all became dust.

Two members of a helicopter recovery team at Firebase A Luoi turn their backs to dust whipped up as a Huey "slick" hoists a light observation helicopter, which has been shot down by NVA antiaircraft fire. Although ground troops were forbidden from entering Laos, American pilots flew in support of Lam Son 719.



General Dong ordered a counterattack by 31 and 32 Companies, supported by the armored task force located to the southeast. But communication was poor, and conflicting reports about the disposition of friendly and enemy troops left the situation hopelessly confused. The weather also worsened, precluding further air support. Fire Support Base 31 remained in North Vietnamese hands, at a cost to them of an estimated 250 KIAs and eleven PT76 and T54 tanks destroyed. The Airborne suffered 155 killed and over 100 captured and had lost its battery of 105MM howitzers. The 3d Battalion was decimated. The Airborne survivors felt particularly bitter toward the armor unit that had failed to come to their rescue.

Fire Support Base 30 lasted less than a week longer. Although enemy tanks could not ascend the precipitous slopes to the mountaintop base, the tanks' cannons added direct fire to the indirect fire falling on the base from artillery and mortars. B-52 strikes and fixed-wing gunships helped the 2d Airborne Battalion to hold the base for a time. By March 3, however, all the base's artillery—six 105MM and six 155MM howitzers—had been damaged, and the 2d Battalion received orders to destroy its guns and evacuate the base.

A few days earlier, the tanks of the 17th Armored Squadron had finally joined the battle north of Route 9, fighting the North Vietnamese to little better than a standstill in the first toe-to-toe armored battle of the Indochina War. In the five days between February 25—the day FSB 31 fell—and March 1, the relief column, consisting of five M41 tanks, numerous APCs, the 8th Airborne Battalion, and remnants of the 3d Battalion, barely outgunned the NVA tanks and infantry in three major battles. With the help of U.S. air strikes, the ARVN destroyed seventeen PT76 and six T54 tanks and killed a reported 1,130 soldiers in the process. The ARVN lost twenty-five APCs, as well as three of the five M41 tanks. ARVN also lost over 200 killed and wounded.

Two days later in the same vicinity, the reinforced tank column encountered a battalion of North Vietnamese soldiers without armor and, aided by B-52 strikes, virtually wiped it out, recording nearly 400 killed. In the week of battle, the ARVN armor had performed well, killing the equivalent of a regiment of North Vietnamese soldiers. But it had not arrived in time to prevent the fall of the firebases, and now the ring of armor to the north of FSB A Luoi was all that stood between the North Vietnamese and the main ARVN column dug in on Route 9.

On to Tchepone

With the main armored column mired at A Luoi for three weeks and ARVN losses mounting, President Thieu and General Lam decided to launch an airborne assault to take Tchepone, now more a political and psychological symbol than a valuable military target. South Vietnamese

and U.S. leaders, as well as correspondents, had focused on Tchepone as one of the main objectives of Lam Son 719. Now the goal seemed to be merely to set foot in it rather than to destroy the North Vietnamese logistical system. If his forces could "occupy" Tchepone, Thieu would have a political excuse for curtailing the Lam Son 719 operation and withdrawing his forces without total loss of face. Disturbing information later reached Washington about Thieu's intentions: that he had originally ordered his commanders to halt the operation when ARVN casualties topped 3,000 and that he had always wished to pull out in any case at the moment of "victory"—presumably the taking of Tchepone—in order to parade at the head of his troops, thus accumulating political capital for the fall elections.

A small town on Route 9, Tchepone had been abandoned long ago by its civilian population. It was a clutter of ruins and bomb craters. Surrounding forests and mountains, especially to the west, held caches of war materiel, and enemy lines of communication existed to the east and west, by-passing the town proper. Tchepone itself had no military significance.

The operation to take Tchepone nevertheless began on March 3. Largely because of its familiarity with, and obedience to, General Lam, the 1st ARVN Division was chosen instead of the weakened Airborne to make the assault. Two brigades of the Marine Division reserve moved into Firebases Delta and Hotel, releasing 1st Division troops to move westward. This brought the reserve not only for Lam Son 719 but for the entire nation down to one Marine brigade. The 1st Division moved west, establishing against strong enemy resistance a string of three bases named Lolo, Liz, and Sophia on the escarpment south of the Tchepone River and Route 9. (Lolo and Sophia were firebases, Liz only a landing zone.) Eleven helicopters were shot down and forty-four others were hit as they brought one battalion into Firebase Lolo. "They put in five hours of airstrikes and Cobras on that hillside," said one pilot of a downed chopper. "Then we went in and it sounded like a million people opened up on us." At Firebase Sophia, only four-and-one-half kilometers from Tchepone, two battalions of the 2d Regiment set up eight 105MM howitzers, which put the town easily within range.

On March 6 an armada of 120 Huey helicopters, protected on all sides by Cobra gunships and lighter planes, lifted the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 2d Regiment from Khe Sanh to Tchepone—the largest, longest helicopter assault of the war. Losing only 1 helicopter to antiaircraft fire en route, the fleet set down the troops amid sporadic gunfire at LZ Hope, four kilometers northeast of Tchepone. Thanks to intensive B-52 and tactical air strikes, little resistance came on the ground. For two days the two battalions prowled the deserted Tchepone region, including the shambles of the town itself, finding little but bodies of enemy soldiers killed in air strikes. The NVA response to the assault on Tchepone was to increase fire against