

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-



bodiam 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 ~~Tha~~espone, a transhipment point 100 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 Laotian 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-

Preceding page: ARVN troops roll down Route 9 toward Laos at the opening of Operation Lam Son 719.

tances, marking targets, calling in artillery, coordinating with other nearby units, and chattering with forward air controllers who were themselves orchestrating aerial battles of gunships and tactical air support. Lam Son 719 was predicated on six 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 ~~fall~~ 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-

*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.



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

quarters and latched copies of the plans, probably including sites of proposed helicopter landing zones and firebases. In any event, such espionage was scarcely required to divine the general thrust of the plans.

MACV briefed American reporters off the record on the impending action but then, to enhance security, imposed a rare press embargo on the reporting of troop movements. The ~~embargo~~, Henry Kissinger wrote later, "proved to be a naive mistake." Communists and other news sources not bound by the embargo published reports of the incursion into Laos, and the very word of the embargo when it reached Washington tipped off news editors that something of that nature was in the offing. The result was that even before the embargo was lifted on February 4, word of the impending operation was on the front pages of newspapers in the States, and their editorial pages were cautioning against the expedition.

"The worst may have happened already," Senator George Aiken of Vermont complained on February 2. "The enemy certainly knows what is happening. I think the American people should have the same privilege." The embargo was lifted on February 4, and newspapers released stories about the build-up of American troops and engineer units who, with Operation Dewey Canyon II, had begun to reopen the base to Khe Sanh and rebuild the roads for a penetration across the Laotian frontier.

U.S. officials attempted to manage the press further by withholding military transportation from the newsmen clamoring to cover the invasion. There was no civilian transport in the area, but military officials invoked an obscure Department of Defense rule against competing with civilian airlines in carrying passengers across international boundaries. That rule had not been invoked in the Cambodian incursion. Reporters could get to the war zone only in the few helicopters flown by Vietnamese, and of those who resorted to this, four photographers were shot down on February 10 (see sidebar, page 88).

The plans for Lam Son 719 were kept closely held for so long that the units involved had too little time for tactical planning and preparation. This was particularly important because many of the units, principally the Airborne troops and Marines, had worked only as separate battalions and brigades and had no experience of maneuvering together or of cooperating in adjoining areas. Commanders and upper level staff members were unaccustomed to working in concert. Except at the highest levels, the U.S. and ARVN staffs did not work together in coordinating plans for the operation. "Planning was rushed, handicapped by security restrictions, and conducted separately and in isolation by Vietnamese and Americans," concluded Brigadier General Sidney B. Berry, assistant commander of the 101st Airborne Division, who took charge of helicopter support. "Planning and coordination for Lam Son 719 were, at the Corps Commanders' level, of unacceptably low quality."

Since the operation lacked a unified system of command and control, coordination posed nearly insurmountable problems. Command posts were located at Khe Sanh, Dong Ha, and Quang Tri, and inevitably there were lapses in communication between them. Problems of communication went beyond the physical location of headquarters. As national reserve units, the elite Airborne and Marine units normally answered to Saigon, the Joint General Staff and President Thieu, but for Lam Son 719 they came under the control of I Corps and were subordinate to overall commander Gen. Lam. Except for the heads of the 1st Division and 1st Armored Brigade in I Corps, no commanding general had allegiance to Lam, and in the highly politicized ARVN, allegiance was as important as rank. In fact Marine commander Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, a strong supporter of Vice President Ky, actually outranked Lam and, moreover, was critical of the Lam Son 719 plan. "We [felt] very unhappy with the poor command," General Khang said later.

Gen. Lam had survived as commander of I Corps for five years because of his administrative and politicking skills. One of Thieu's possible motives in launching Lam Son 719 was to build Lam into a hero, thus enabling him to bring Lam to Saigon as head of the Joint General Staff, replacing General Cao Van Vien who wished to step down. But first Lam needed to conduct an operation of a magnitude and diversity he had never before attempted. Lam Son 719 represented his first great military challenge.

Despite signs of inadequate preparation, in late January and early February, as the planning for Lam Son 719 progressed, U.S. and ARVN commanders and staffs waxed confident. Following a briefing at XXIV Corps headquarters, General Arthur W. Pence, senior adviser to the Airborne Division, summarized the planners' mood:

It was apparent at this time that United States intelligence felt that the operation would be lightly opposed and that a two-day preparation of the area prior to D-Day by tactical air would effectively neutralize the enemy antiaircraft capability although the enemy was credited with having 170 to 200 antiaircraft weapons of mixed caliber in the operational area. The tank threat was considered minimal and the reinforcement capability was listed as 14 days for two divisions from north of the DMZ.

This intelligence outlook was quite inaccurate. As it turned out, the only correct prognosis proved to be about the reinforcements available to the North Vietnamese, although they were already stationed in the south in the A Shau Valley and in base area 612 and did not have to come from the DMZ. Poor weather over Laos in the two days prior to the beginning of Lam Son 719 prevented preparatory air strikes from being carried out, so the enemy's antiaircraft weapons were never attacked.

Tactical aircraft did take to the air, only to be turned back by the weather. At twilight on February 6 one navy pilot mistook the ARVN task force poised at the border for enemy positions. The plane dropped cluster bombs, killing



At twilight on February 6, a U.S. pilot accidentally bombed ARVN troops poised for the Lam Son 719 strike into Laos. Here a soldier is caught in the blast of a cluster bomb.



six, wounding fifty-one, and destroying an armored personnel carrier. "It is sad to lose men in this way," said Lieutenant Colonel Bui The Dung of the first ARVN casualties of Lam Son 719. The attack by friendly fire underscored the difficulties ARVN and U.S. support forces would face in coordinating firepower and contributed to a reluctance on the part of ARVN to trust in U.S. tactical air power at close quarters.

The South Vietnamese crossed into Laos along three parallel lines (see map, page 81). The Rangers and 1st Infantry Division moved by helicopter toward landing zones on the northern and southern flanks, while the 4,000-man armor-airborne column (the 1st Armor Brigade and 1st and 8th Airborne Battalions) advanced along Route 9,

Forward into Laos. On the first day of the invasion, February 8, 1971, ARVN troops prepare to enter Laotian territory via helicopter (left) and on foot (below)

which lay in the broad Sepone River Valley with mountains rising on both sides. The mission of the armor brigade, a company of seventeen M41 Walker Bulldog tanks plus M113 armored personnel carriers, was to open and secure Route 9 to Ban Dong, about twenty kilometers inside Laos, then to push the final twenty-two kilometers to Tchepone. (The armor brigade was later to be reinforced.)

Inside Laos

Fear of ambushes in the dense jungle on both sides of the road slowed the advance, as did huge bomb craters, hidden from reconnaissance aircraft by thick grass and bamboo. The first day's progress amounted to only a tedious nine kilometers. "It was like battering down a bamboo tunnel," said Japanese photographer Akihiko Okamura, who had defied the press ban and hidden in one of the armored vehicles. The ARVN 101st Combat Engineer Battalion

cleared parts of the road and used its bulldozers to construct detours where the road was totally destroyed. In spite of the engineers' efforts to open the road, throughout Lam Son 719 Route 9 remained virtually impassable to all but tracked vehicles, so the ground line of communication was never completely opened. Since no trucks or jeeps were able to negotiate the terrain, the troops along Route 9 became totally dependent on overtaxed U.S. helicopters for resupply of fuel, ammunition, food, and spare parts.

Heavy rains on the second day turned Route 9 into a red quagmire. The engineers could not work. The armor could not move. On the third day the weather cleared and the column drove to Ban Dong, linking up with another airborne battalion, the 9th, which landed at LZ 10moi near the close of day. The men set about constructing a camp and patrolling in the vicinity while awaiting orders to continue westward. The main South Vietnamese thrust had reached halfway to Tchepone, opposed only by sporadic sniper fire.

The situation on the flanks was different. At 8:20 on the opening morning, U.S. gunships north of Route 9 made contact with enemy armor, attacking four tracked vehicles, one of which had a 37MM antiaircraft gun in tow. Before noon, gunships spotted more armored vehicles northwest of a hilltop landing zone designated 31, eight kilometers north of Ban Dong. The 3d Airborne Battalion and 3d Airborne Brigade headquarters occupied LZ 31 without any hostile fire and turned it into a firebase with a battery of six 105MM howitzers. The 2d Airborne Battalion had meanwhile reached LZ 30, also located north of Route 9. The 2d Battalion brought in a 105MM and 155MM batteries.

Northwest of LZ 30, enemy 12.7MM machine guns fired on a fleet of helicopters carrying the 21st Ranger Battalion to a landing zone called Rangers South. Three days later, just as the armor column was reaching Ban Dong, the 39th Ranger Battalion deployed to Rangers Bone Martin. With the establishment of this northernmost outpost—little more than a bivouac—the network of four mutually supporting bases on the north flank of Route 9 was in place.

General Lam considered the Ranger bases to be observation and listening posts; the Rangers were to provide early warning to the main column of any enemy force moving south. Light infantry without armor or artillery, the Rangers were expected to delay any NVA advance until heavier firepower could be brought to bear.

South of Route 9, three battalions of the 3d Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, occupied LZs Hotel and Blue against scattered resistance on the first day of Lam Son. Within days other 1st Division battalions flew westward, establishing LZs Delta, Don, and Delta 1, the last just six kilometers southeast of Ban Dong. With the 1st Division manning these five firebases, the southern flank was secured.

While awaiting further orders from I Corps, the South Vietnamese patrolled the areas around their ten Laotian bases—which began to come under mortar and 122MM

rocket fire—and encountered increasingly heavy enemy resistance. A patrol from Ranger North killed a reported forty-three North Vietnamese and seized two 37mm anti-aircraft artillery guns. In the southern sector, patrols from the 1st Division's firebases not only ran into enemy soldiers, but they also found major enemy caches that held individual weapons and ammunition, as well as recoilless rifles, petroleum in fifty-five-gallon drums, and huge quantities of food. They also discovered bodies of enemy soldiers killed by U.S. air strikes, twenty-three in one location, fifty in another. American air strikes were so widespread that the discovery of enemy soldiers killed from the air became a common occurrence.

By February 11 the armored column in place at Bm Dong awaited orders from General Lam's I Corps headquarters to continue the offensive. But no orders arrived, and the commanders had little initiative to move aggressively toward Tchepone. Probing Route 9 some two or three kilometers to the west of Firebase A Luoi, APCs and bulldozers repeatedly ran into minefields which, although cleared by ARVN soldiers with mine detectors, were reseeded during the night. Meanwhile Firebase A Luoi began to take mortar and rocket fire during the day as well as at night. The daytime firing became so heavy that after a week the tank patrols could advance no more than a few hundred meters.

In the absence of orders from I Corps headquarters, Lam Son 719 stalled for several critical days. In Saigon on February 14, General Abrams urged General Cao Van Vien to get the South Vietnamese units to Tchepone as quickly as possible. Abrams' plan for Lam Son 719 hinged on taking Tchepone rapidly, but two more days passed without any progress. On February 16 Abrams and XXIV Corps commander General Sutherland met with Generals Vien and Lam at the I Corps forward command post at Dong Ha. Together they decided to extend the 1st Division's line of firebases on the mountaintops south of Route 9 to cover the Airborne's push to Tchepone, estimating that it would take three to five days for the 1st Division to get into position. Three to five days, however, represented a fateful block of time for Operation Lam Son 719. Each day that passed the South Vietnamese were squandering opportunities. The battlefield balance was shifting away from them, and the reactions of the North Vietnamese were daily growing stronger.

North Vietnam joins the battle

North Vietnam's reaction to the invasion built gradually. In the first days after ARVN crossed into Laos, Hanoi's attention was also drawn to the U.S. naval task force, augmented by two aircraft carriers and escort vessels, cruising in the Tonkin Gulf seventy kilometers off the port city of Vinh. The mission of the force was to begin an attack on Vinh. Each day the 31st Marine Amphibious Unit prac-

ticed aboard the ships for an air assault. The helicopters went through the motions of loading troops, without actually emplaning them, then flew to a point just beyond the twelve-mile territorial limit. Jets from the carrier continually flew overhead as if providing air cover for a landing force. The possibility of an attack on Vinh seemed real enough that Hanoi moved some troops north from the DMZ to the Vinh region.

As the South Vietnamese build-up in Laos continued, however, Hanoi decided that the thrust into Laos was the real threat at hand and committed the 70th Corps Communist troops to battle. The 70th Corps controlled three divisions already in the area, the 304th, 308th, and 320th. (Indeed, an ARVN airborne battalion patrolling in the wake of a B-52 strike discovered the 308th Division command post just two kilometers north of Route 9.) The 2d NVA Division had also moved up from the south to the Tchepone area and began shifting to the east in early February to blunt the ARVN's armored advance. Hanoi continued to respect the U.S.-ARVN diversions by deploying just one regiment—the 64th of the 320th Division—from the DMZ region. By early March, Hanoi had massed 36,000 troops in the Lam Son 719 area, outnumbering ARVN by more than a two-to-one margin.

The North Vietnamese tactics were to mass forces for attack, overwhelming the outnumbered foe. Lam Son 719's isolated firebases presented the NVA with excellent opportunities to encircle them and defeat them one by one. The first step was to cut the firebase's aerial supply lines with antiaircraft fire and to demoralize the men defending the base with round-the-clock mortar, rocket, and artillery barrages. Next the Communist soldiers would storm the base, using a combined infantry-armor force wherever it was possible.

The ARVN's counterpunch was firepower from artillery and supporting aircraft. But their artillery provided them with no great advantage since it had a shorter range than the NVA's 130mm and 122mm guns, and the NVA offered no fixed targets. As for tactical air, helicopter and fixed-wing gunships and jets stayed on the ground in bad weather and, when they flew, had to contend with fierce antiaircraft fire. Although B-52s traveled above the antiaircraft screen and bombed through bad weather, the Stratofortresses required large targets located beyond a safety zone of three kilometers from friendly forces. If the North Vietnamese did not mass until their final attack, or if they stayed close to the ARVN bases, holding their ground by ambushing ARVN patrols (and at the same time cutting the ARVN's ground relief route), they effectively thwarted the B-52 as the protector of a firebase. In fact the closer the NVA came to the ARVN perimeter, the more they disarmed the ARVN's firepower superiority, because experienced commanders even in the best of circumstances hesitated to call in artillery or tactical air support close to their own men.



Concussion-shocked troops stagger from their vehicle, which hit a land mine on Route 9 in Laos west of Firebase A Luoi.



Ranger bases under siege

The North Vietnamese moved first against the more lightly defended Ranger and Airborne bases north of Route 9. They threw nooses around Ranger Base North and South and on February 18 began tightening them with artillery and mortar barrages, followed by infantry attacks. Fighting lasted throughout the night, as artillery and tactical air sought the enemy, and flareships patrolled overhead.

The next morning the NVA infantry withdrew from Ranger Base South, while keeping up pressure with artillery fire, and moved against the 39th Battalion at Ranger Base North. Accurate recoilless rifle fire and mortar rounds fell for hours on the base and then the NVA infantry, the 102d Regiment of the 308th Division, all in crisp uniforms and using new automatic weapons, attacked from the east where the Ranger defenses were weakest. With the help of artillery and tactical air support, the Rangers held off the attacks. For a second day the exhausted soldiers fought on after dark.

As the enemy pressure intensified, President Thieu, visiting I Corps headquarters, advised General Lam to proceed cautiously and postpone taking Tchepone. Instead, Thieu suggested more extensive search activities toward the southwest in an effort to cut off Route 914, while awaiting further developments. Lam naturally obeyed and in so

doing surrendered any momentum Lam Son 719 had acquired. By standing still, the South Vietnamese were playing right into enemy hands.

During daylight on February 20 some helicopters braved the antiaircraft fire to bring ammunition to the 39th Battalion at Ranger Base North and evacuate wounded. North Vietnamese gunners brought down a medevac helicopter, and wounded American crewman Specialist 4 Dennis Fujii was stranded at the base after several attempts to rescue him failed. Fujii remained to help treat the Vietnamese wounded as well as to call in many of the tactical air sorties flown that day. A rescue helicopter finally succeeded in picking up Fujii, but it was hit as it lifted out and crash-landed at Ranger South. Tactical air continued to pound enemy positions. "[Ranger North] looked like World War II must have," air force Captain William Cathey, an F-4 pilot with the 40th Tactical Fighter Squadron, said of the apocalyptic scene. "We put a napalm strike within 100 meters of [ARVN] troops. That was tight. We could see them in the trenches."

By late afternoon nearly 2,000 North Vietnamese soldiers had encircled the 39th Battalion, which had dwindled to fewer than 300 able-bodied Rangers. With certain defeat looming, the battalion commander shut down his radio and ordered retreat toward Ranger Base South six kilometers away. Carrying their wounded,

the men fought their way through the North Vietnamese lines. "The ARVN Rangers were outnumbered six or eight to one," said Lieutenant Colonel Robert F. Molinelli, commander of the 2d Squadron, 17th Air Cavalry, who observed the 39th from above. "For three days we were able to get supplies to them. When they were low on ammunition, they went out and took NVA rifles and ammunition and fought on. When they decided to move off their hill, they beat their way right through that North Vietnamese regiment, killing them with their own guns and ammunition."

One hundred ninety-nine survivors reached Ranger Base South by nightfall; 107 were still able to fight. Casualties in the three-day fight exceeded 75 percent. Of a total of about 430 Rangers, 178 were killed or missing and 143 had been wounded. The 39th Ranger Battalion was finished as a unit. It had taken a toll of the enemy, however: Reconnaissance photo analysts counted 639 North Vietnamese bodies on the slopes of Ranger Base North.

The North Vietnamese now shifted their attention to Ranger Base South, increasing their artillery fire and turning their long-range 130mm field guns onto the base. The following day the Americans and South Vietnamese organized a huge effort of coordinated firepower and air support in order to evacuate wounded. Over thirteen wounded helicopters were airborne and en route to Ranger

Bombs from B-52 Stratofortresses pound a ridge five kilometers away as soldiers watch from Firebase A Luoi. Despite the bombing, North Vietnamese artillery on the ridge resumed firing twelve hours later.

Base South, a combination of tactical aircraft, air cavalry gunships, and aerial and ground artillery surrounded the base with a curtain of fire, suppressing suspected enemy positions for nearly an hour while the helicopters landed behind smoke screens and picked up 122, including Sp4 Fujii.

Four hundred men, including 106 from the 39th Battalion, held Ranger Base South for another two days before General Lam declared their position untenable. The amount of air and artillery support required for each resupply and evacuation flight outweighed the military advantage of the position, and Lam chose not to sacrifice another battalion in a doomed attempt to hold it. He ordered the 21st Battalion to withdraw five kilometers southeast to FSB 30, from which they were evacuated and returned to South Vietnam.

Although the Rangers had been driven from their positions, and the 39th Battalion decimated, the most ominous casualty of the battle at Ranger Base North may have been the pride of the Army of South Vietnam and, by extension, the policy of Vietnamization itself. A number of

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 KAs 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 battles 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, bypassing 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 Motel, 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

ARVN firebases, notably Lolo and A Luai.

On March 9 the battalions and the 2d Regiment command post set out on foot 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, Thieu 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-

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 unmanned 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 withdrawal.

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

back from the westernmost bases, Sophia, Lin, 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 brigade 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.



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