# A BETTER WAR

## THE UNEXAMINED VICTORIES AND FINAL TRAGEDY OF AMERICA'S LAST YEARS IN VIETNAM

LEWIS SORLEY

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Richard Greenhouse

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# Lam Son 719

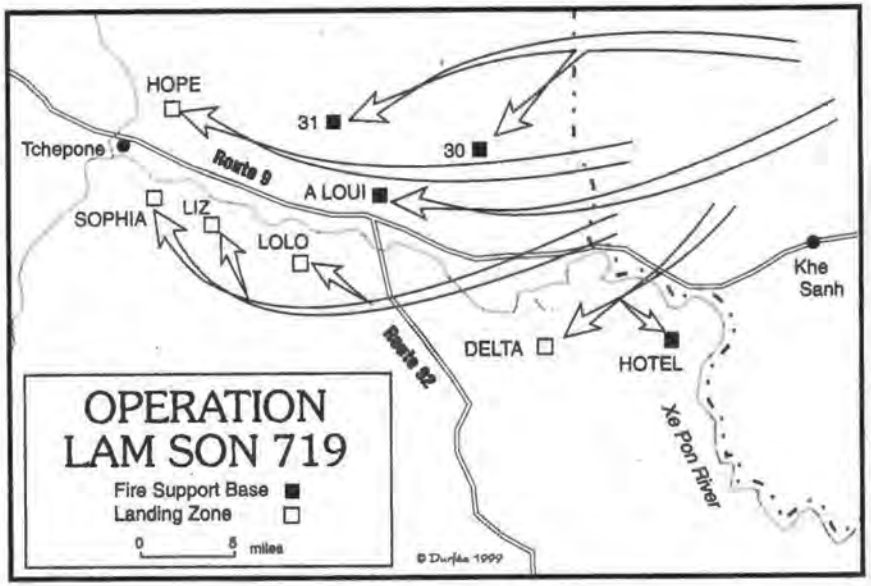
On 1 February 1971, as U.S. armor and mechanized forces were moving to open Route 9 west to the Laotian border in a preparatory stage of the Laotian incursion, Abrams cabled McCain to advise that "the bulk of the enemy's combat units in the region are located in the vicinity of Tchepone," the operation's ultimate objective.[1] Whatever else might happen, it was clear that the disposition and strength of enemy forces in and near the area of operations were not going to come as any surprise to the attackers.

By early February, stated a later North Vietnamese history, "our combat forces in the Route 9–south Laos Front had reached 60,000 troops, consisting of five divisions (308th, 304th, 320th, 324th, 2nd), two separate infantry regiments (27th and 278th), eight regiments of artillery, three engineer regiments, three tank battalions, six anti-aircraft regiments, eight sapper battalions, plus rear service and transportation units. This campaign was our army's greatest concentration of combined arms forces in its history up to that point."[2] On the defensive in Laos, the enemy was going to be able to amass and sustain a much larger force than he could have projected into South Vietnam.

Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, I Corps, was in command of the thrust into Laos. The U.S. counterpart in Military Region 1 was Lieutenant General James W. "Jock" Sutherland, an armor officer who commanded the XXIV Corps. MACV depended heavily on Sutherland and his headquarters to advise, support, and encourage Lam and the Vietnamese during the operation. Lam had under his command for the operation the 1st Infantry Division, the Airborne Division, the Marine Division, the 1st Armored Brigade Task Force, and a Ranger group, the best troops South Vietnam possessed.

On 8 February 1971 these forces began crossing the border into Laos and Lam Son 719 was under way. Alongside the route, a hundred yards before the border, was posted a sign that read: "WARNING, NO U.S. PERSONNEL BEYOND THIS POINT."

The mission was to disrupt the enemy's lines of communication and destroy stocks of war matériel—especially in Base






Area 604, centered on Tchepone—thereby setting back the enemy's timetable for aggression, protecting American forces during their withdrawal, and providing more time for South Vietnamese forces to develop. This ground thrust was an integral part of the larger effort to thwart enemy aggression by denying him the wherewithal to carry it out, a complement to the intensive air interdiction campaign along the entire line of communication in the Laotian panhandle and against the target box system that sought to block the entry points into the trail system.

The plan called for an armor task force to drive west along Route 9 toward Tchepone while—by occupying a string of fire support bases to be established paralleling the axis of advance—the Airborne and Rangers protected the northern flank, the 1st Infantry Division protected the southern flank, and the Marine Division constituted the reserve. Later the armor would link up with airborne elements to be helilifted to Tchepone. Leading the way into Laos was the ARVN 1st Armored Brigade Task Force, reinforced by two airborne battalions. Next an ARVN airborne brigade headquarters and one of its battalions moved into position, followed by another airborne brigade and then a ranger battalion. Other units followed.

In the wake of a broadcast by President Thieu announcing the operation, Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma issued a formal statement of protest. The language of the statement, said a MACV analyst, suggested that it was merely pro forma, couched in the mildest terms that would permit him to claim neutrality. Phouma also stated that "certainly the primary responsibility rests with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam which, scornful of international law . . . , began and continues to violate the neutrality and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Laos."[3]

North Vietnam's Madame Binh meanwhile cabled an urgent message to sympathizers in the United States: "EARNESTLY CALL

YOU MOBILIZE PEACE FORCES YOUR COUNTRY. CHECK U.S. DANGEROUS VENTURES INDOCHINA."[4]

FROM THE OUTSET it was hard going. Route 9 was at best a narrow, twisting, nearly unimproved surface, or so it looked from the air. The reality was much worse. "Jock told me yesterday that on that Route 9 some of those weather cuts that were in that road were twenty feet deep," Abrams said a few days after the operation commenced. "They missed that in the readout of the aerial photography."

Given the restricting Cooper-Church amendment, no advisors accompanied South Vietnamese units into Laos, and of course no American units participated. Air support of all kinds was allowed, however, as was artillery and logistical support from the South Vietnamese side of the border. This generated a massive operation in support of the incursion. Early on, Abrams visited the primary base for all this activity, a reopened Khe Sanh. "It's *hard* to believe," he marveled, "the helicopters, the trucks, the artillery, the amount of equipment that is in that whole thing up there. I'll tell you, I've never seen anything like it in the time I've been here. It's quite remarkable—fifty-three Chinooks, really something."[5]

U.S. heavy artillery lined up along the border to provide fire support included eighteen 155mm howitzers, sixteen 175mm guns, and eight 8-inch howitzers. But the huge amounts of aviation support were the real story of U.S. support for Lam Son 719.

Seventh Air Force kept up its interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, during the first week of Lam Son 719 destroying a new second high number of trucks for the dry season, but that was now only part of its massive efforts. "I'm flying roughly 12,000 support sorties a month in addition to this," said Clay, referring to the number of individual aircraft missions being launched for various purposes. "I'm flying 21,000 sorties a month in airlift. I'm flying roughly 850–900 sorties a



month in recce. That's all maintenance capability, whether you expend ordnance or not," meaning that every one of these flights generated a maintenance requirement. "There's a limit to what you can do in generating sorties."

ON 10 FEBRUARY advance elements of the armor column linked up with an airborne battalion at A Luoi, some twenty kilometers into Laos, despite truly miserable weather that had set in the previous day. On the same day ARVN I Corps Headquarters, already struggling with the complex tasks of coordinating a multidivision attack under difficult terrain and weather conditions, suffered a serious setback when a helicopter crash resulted in the deaths of two of its most important staff officers, the chief planner and the chief logistician.[6]

From about 12 February on, ARVN forces more or less held in place and hunkered down, not a wise tactic in an operation of this kind. Later it was asserted, by Davidson among others, that President Thieu had issued secret orders to his commanders to halt the advance when 3,000 casualties had been sustained.[7] Nguyen Tien Hung, a former special assistant to Thieu, later cast doubt on that claim, writing that "Thieu insists he never gave such an order."[8]

The next day Vien invited Abrams to meet with him. Vien described President Thieu's visit and briefings in I Corps on 12 February, and "said that after a thorough discussion of intelligence and dispositions, President Thieu directed that the ARVN forces not advance further at this time beyond the western positions they now hold." Vien thought this would be a hold of three to five days and affirmed that they still intended to go to Tchepone. Abrams in turn pointed out the disadvantages of remaining in static positions, "giving the enemy both time and opportunity to organize his reaction in a more effective way."

Subsequently General Sutherland provided some further insight, cabling Abrams that the South Vietnamese had modified the original plan primarily because of heavy enemy contact by

the Rangers and the airborne forces on the northern flank of the penetration, and the demonstrated inability of the armor brigade to move rapidly along Route 9.[9]

For quite some time enemy forces had remained cautious and were, in fact, somewhat slow to reinforce. Their first serious counterattack came on the night of 18 February, when two NVA battalions struck the ARVN 39th Ranger Battalion northeast of Ban Dong. Subsequently the major battles of the operation took place on that northern flank of the penetration, especially at Fire Support Bases 30 and 31. On 19 February, eleven days into the attack, MACV J-2 was carrying just six enemy regiments committed against ARVN forces in the Lam Son area of operations. Clearly that wasn't going to last much longer. J-2 concluded that these could be reinforced immediately by three additional regiments from the south and within two days by three more regiments from the west and north.

"The real significance of that Lam Son operation," said Potts, "is the enemy has everything committed, or en route, that he has, with the exception of the 325th Division and the 9th Regiment out of the 304th. So if they're hurt, he's really going to be beat for a long time." And, agreed Abrams, "of course we're trying to welcome them all, best we can." Meanwhile a rallier confirmed earlier intelligence by revealing the identity and location of a new headquarters—designated the 70B Front—controlling the NVA divisions in the Lam Son area of operations, the 304th, 308th, and 320th.[10]

On 20 February, MACV analysts counted eighteen battalion-size ARVN task forces in Laos, mostly involved in search-and-clear operations, with the westernmost elements still about where they had been a week earlier, roughly halfway to Tchepone. Enemy forces were massing to attack, thereby becoming rich targets for reprisals by allied air attacks. When NVA assaults drove ARVN's 39th Rangers off their position, tactical air fell upon the massed enemy forces, killing more than 600 in the one battle. At one point, seven fixed-wing gunships and six flareships



were supporting the Rangers.[11] Tac air had a field day with enemy armor, too, destroying seventy-four tanks and damaging twenty-four more to practically wipe out an armored regiment.[12]

On 23 February, farther south, a VNAF helicopter carrying III Corps commander Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri—then directing the operations of some 17,000 ARVN troops in Cambodia—crashed and burned, killing him and a staff officer. Tri was considered a fine field commander, scarce enough in the upper reaches of ARVN leadership, which made this a very serious loss. It turned out to be even more of one when it was learned that he had been slated to move almost immediately to I Corps to replace General Lam, who was proving inadequate to his heavy new responsibilities in command of Lam Son 719.[13]

As late as 27 February, three weeks into the operation, MACV J-2 was carrying only seven enemy regiments in the Lam Son area of operations, up from six with the arrival of the 324B Division's 29th Regiment. Of the twenty-one enemy battalions then committed, five were assessed as having been rendered combat ineffective due to casualties. Nevertheless, fierce fighting was in progress all along Route 9 and at the positions ARVN had staked out north and south of it, especially at Fire Support Base 31 to the north. There an enemy attack that included tanks overran a brigade headquarters of the 1st Division and captured the brigade commander. The 39th Ranger Battalion was also pressured into abandoning its position, joining the nearby 21st Ranger Battalion, after which both were evacuated from Laos.

"What we're in up here," Abrams observed at the end of February, "in both Laos and Cambodia, is a real tough fight. We're just going to have to stick with it and *win* it. We've got the tickets to do it, and that's what's going to be done. We've been in them before. And we've been inundated by the prophets of doom before, as we are now. The one thing that's better about this than any of the rest of them is that some of the units they're fighting with up there in Laos—we used to fight them in Hue.

And this is a better place to fight them. And some of those units that they're fighting over there in Cambodia, we used to fight them in the precincts at one time, down there in Saigon. This is just a better place to do that. I mean, as long as you're going to have to fight, I think this is a better ring than the one we had."

As March began, said General Fred Weyand, Sutherland was reporting by secure phone that "the enemy is all over that goddamn area and seems to be getting stronger, if anything. And so there's a real fight going on up there. Particularly that indirect fire thing is worrying." Just how worrying was demonstrated at Fire Support Base 30, where more than a thousand incoming rounds from such indirect fire weapons as mortars and artillery—reportedly including 152mm howitzers—knocked out all the friendly artillery and forced ARVN forces to withdraw. Meanwhile the enemy was paying a heavy price. MACV estimated that "B-52s alone were inflicting losses that were the equivalent of about one combat-effective NVA regiment per week."[14]

THE POOR CONDITION of Route 9, and the inability of ARVN forces to keep it secure, meant that virtually all resupply and medical evacuation for ARVN forces had to be done by air, the bulk of it by U.S. air. Calculating that in any given twenty-four-hour period a helicopter could fly for between five and eight hours, Abrams noted that in Laos the South Vietnamese had "eighteen battalions over there, and ten batteries of artillery—and all the resupply and everything that's got to be done for those eighteen battalions and ten batteries in the five to eight hours every twenty-four. Well, there isn't a lot of sightseeing going on."

A couple of weeks into the thing there wasn't a lot of flying going on, either, at least not compared with the huge requirements the operation was generating. By about 23 February it became apparent that U.S. Army aviation support for Lam Son



719 was having some problems. Not only was the intense and well-sited enemy antiaircraft weaponry making operations extremely difficult—every mission, even dustoff medical evacuations, had to be planned and executed like a full-scale combat assault—but maintenance problems were causing many helicopters to be out of service just when they were needed most.

Sutherland had apparently been slow to recognize and report these problems, much less act aggressively to deal with them. Another senior officer present on the ground judged him to be "very passive," really "a negative factor" in the operation. Until 23 February, a MACV staff officer told Abrams, "I think it's fair to say we had no feel that his helicopter situation was quite as acute."

This news precipitated intense reaction at MACV. "The way this thing is supposed to work," erupted Abrams, "is that, once I said *what* the priorities were and *what* was going to be done around here, *goddamn it,* then these—USARV's responsible to have maintenance people up there, keeping track of this, *goddamn it!* And they should *know* what's happening! That's their job! That's McCaffrey's responsibility! And that's what hasn't been done."

Abrams asked his deputy, Fred Weyand, how it looked to him. "Well," he began, focusing on Sutherland, "I guess I'm not too forgiving on Jock. I recognize the truth of what you're saying, but goddamn it, you've got a corps commander up there who's supposed to be keeping track of every fucking bird in the place every hour of the day. There's something wrong there. You've got an organizational problem of *some* kind. He just doesn't know what the hell's going on." Weyand recalled that there had been a battalion on Route 914 for two days before Sutherland was aware of it, even though they knew it at MACV. "That tells me that the coordination and tie-in between his headquarters and Lam's is not fully effective."

There followed a *long* pause, several minutes. Then Abrams

said, "I guess I'd better go up and talk with General McCaffrey now. I just feel we've got to get some people up there today who can be feeding the facts back. Move the goddamn men and the tools and the stuff and get with it."[15]

Colonel Sam Cockerham was acting commander of the 1st Aviation Brigade when he got orders to fly north immediately in an aircraft provided by General Abrams. When Cockerham arrived, Abrams was already there, slumped down on a leather sofa in Sutherland's office. "Worst fucking OR [operational readiness] rate I've seen in U.S. Army aviation history!" he exploded by way of conversational openers. "The entire concept, the entire national strategic concept, is at stake here!" he thundered at Sutherland. Abrams said he was going to give Cockerham all the theater resources in Vietnam to get the operationally ready rate up to USARV standards. That was 80 percent, 5 percent higher than worldwide Army standards.

Abrams asked Cockerham how long that would take. It was then Monday at about 1:00 P.M. "By Wednesday night I'll have it up to standard," Cockerham replied, perhaps not realizing how bad things were. The UH-1C gunship OR rate, for example, then stood at 25 percent. "I want a back channel from you to me every twenty-four hours," Abrams told Cockerham as he left. The meeting made a deep impression on Cockerham, and not just because of the massive task that had been dumped in his lap. "General Sutherland was like a dog with his tail tucked under," he recalled. "I thought the job was beyond him. He wasn't prepared. Abrams worked around him."[16]

Brigadier General Sid Berry, then assistant division commander of the 101st Airborne, also played a pivotal role in restoring order to the realm of Army air support. Taking over responsibility for coordinating all Army aviation in the operation, he went in harm's way over and over again to make things happen. Said an advisor who was there at the time, "General Berry flew to the most critical areas and got things done that lesser men would not touch."[17] Pretty soon things were back in



sync. When Lieutenant General Julian Ewell, visiting Vietnam from his assignment with the U.S. negotiating team in Paris, went up to Khe Sanh to have a look around, he was impressed. "Their OR rate when I was up there Sunday was 79 percent," he said, "which I considered astronomical."[18]

EFFORTS TO PUSH through to Tchepone with helilifted infantry, rather than continuing efforts to advance along the inadequate road, began 3 March when a battalion of the 1st Division was inserted to establish a landing zone (LZ) called Lolo, the first in a planned chain of positions extending west toward Tchepone. The assault was met with intense enemy fire—seven helicopters were destroyed and many others damaged—but the troops got into position. The next day two more battalions were brought in, along with artillery and supplies, building up strength on Lolo. Also on 4 March a battalion was airlifted to establish LZ Liz, farther west and closer to Tchepone; again it attacked into the teeth of intense enemy fire. On 5 March two fresh battalions were inserted west of Liz to set up LZ Sophia. Next was LZ Hope.

On 6 March two battalions of the 1st Division were airlifted to the vicinity of Tchepone, in the heart of enemy Base Area 604, the primary objective of the operation. A daisy chain of 276 UH-1 helicopters picked up ARVN troops at Khe Sanh and deposited them at LZ Hope near Tchepone; most ships made three round trips. "No aircraft were lost to ground fire during this operation," recalled Cockerham. "We were using armor tactics as the basis for our operations, designating an objective, intermediate objectives, and so on. We would secure them, then build an air tunnel so as to deny the enemy direct fire and indirect fire observation. We had one aircraft disabled in the final LZ due to engine failure."[19]

That same day General Abrams met with General Vien to review the enemy situation. "I said the operation has shaped up into two things," Abrams told Sutherland. "The flow of logistics

must be stopped, including Route 914, and a major battle, which might even be the decisive battle of the war, must be won. I urged the employment of the 2d ARVN Division in Lam Son 719 now. Politically, psychologically and militarily, President Thieu can accept nothing less. We have the resources to do it. It means another month of hard fighting. General Vien agrees with all this; I truthfully think it is the way he feels anyway. He said he would take it to the President."[20]

By this time, XXIV Corps reported to Abrams, General Lam, having gotten some elements to Tchepone, "apparently feels that he has accomplished the mandate given him by President Thieu and is now turning to a more cautious approach as he awaits further instructions from Saigon." Among ARVN commanders "the general feeling is that their mission has been accomplished and it is now time to withdraw. They do not concede that there is still much to be done in inflicting maximum damage or that there is now the opportunity to exploit initial successes with even more telling results."[21]

Assessing the ARVN assault into the Tchepone area, a MACV analyst concluded that "the enemy was slow to react to this, both due to his severe losses and to the rapidity with which ARVN forces moved out after they had remained in the Route 9 area for so long." Later, when Sir Robert Thompson arrived for one of his periodic visits, MACV briefed that "for approximately ten days the enemy was unable to regain the initiative and mount any major counterattacks against ARVN as they were moving rapidly into the Tchepone area." But then, when ARVN forces moved south of Route 9 toward Route 914, the 2nd NVA Division moved to counter that and major battles erupted there.[22]

On 9 March, Generals Vien and Lam recommended to President Thieu that the overall operation be terminated, far ahead of schedule. Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh wrote that "a careful military estimate was made, based upon all the pertinent information available at the time, and the conclusion was inescapable: it was time to get out." And, added Hinh, "it was apparent that President Thieu had decided, at the outset, that once Tchepone had been entered by RVNAF the withdrawal should begin without delay."[23]



Abrams wanted to push the thing, recommending to Thieu that instead of withdrawing he reinforce with the 2nd ARVN Division. Thieu declined, reportedly saying he would do so only if a U.S. division were also committed. Of course both Thieu and Abrams knew that was prohibited, so the response effectively ended discussion of reinforcing the operation. Thieu's unwillingness to commit more forces, said General Vien, "reflected his concern that ARVN divisions were unprepared for a strategic task."[24]

During a visit to Vietnam, Haig had strewn a certain amount of chaos in his wake. At XXIV Corps (Forward) on 18 March he told Sutherland that "Washington would like to see ARVN stay in Laos through April."[25] The following day he visited II Field Force and told Davison "his tentative conclusion is that the time has come for an orderly close-out of the ground operations in Laos."[26] Both field commanders dutifully reported these Haig observations to Abrams, who must have been somewhat bemused.

Pulling out wasn't the way Abrams would have played it. "I'm just more and more convinced that what you've got here is maybe the only decisive battle of the war," he concluded. "And they've got a chance to—it'll be *hard*—a chance to *really* do it." The enemy was committing everything he had, just asking for it, really, given the history of the war. "When we've focused firepower on him, he hasn't been able to hack it." Already, said Potts, "he's lost *half* of his tanks, *half* of his AAA, and *ten* of his thirty battalions."

Friendly losses were heavy, too, though proportionally not as severe. U.S. Army helicopters were being hit hard, with twenty-three lost in combat and six more operational losses during the second week of March alone. ARVN forces counted up

1,118 killed in action, more than 4,000 wounded, and 209 missing, along with much equipment that was destroyed or had to be abandoned during the withdrawal phase.[27]

Weyand pointed out that air cavalry had been in the Tchepone area for ten days or more before ARVN got there on the ground, and that this had been useful in acquiring targeting data later used by B-52s, including strikes on stores that ground forces had not been able to extract or destroy in place. This intelligence was supplemented by what long-range reconnaissance patrols acquired, and by reports from ARVN unit commanders. As a result, concluded Weyand, "there's been massive destruction far beyond, I would guess, what was done in Cambodia."

By 18 March the enemy had detected the withdrawal of ARVN units from the Route 9 area and directed his forces to surround, annihilate, and destroy those isolated units where they could. The enemy also told his people that some ARVN forces were rebelling against their leaders, that some were running away into the interior, and that the ARVN had been defeated. "It looks like to me a back-stiffening effort," said Potts. "My interpretation of these message intercepts is that this whole thing is one hell of a bloody battle," Abrams replied. And bloody it was. In one firefight after another the ARVN, while taking substantial casualties, inflicted disproportionately heavier ones on the enemy—37 versus 245, 85 versus 600, on and on.

Many of these enemy losses were caused by U.S. airpower, which delivered huge amounts of munitions on massed enemy forces. During the forty-two days the South Vietnamese operated cross-border, 1,280 B-52 sorties were flown in support, about 30 a day, every day, for the whole period. Later General Vien would write that the operation was "hampered by bad weather and insufficient air support, including helicopters."[28] If that judgment is correct, it is difficult to imagine what level of air support would have been sufficient. Some 600 U.S. helicopters were committed to the battle on a daily basis. And there



was so much bombing, recalled General Sid Berry, "that by afternoon the setting sun would be shining through so much smoke and dust that you couldn't see it." Through 24 March, U.S. tactical air flew more than 8,000 attack sorties, an average of nearly 150 sorties a day every day—the equivalent of one every ten minutes around the clock. And every night, all night, three forward air controllers, three flareships, and three gunships were on station, one each for the Rangers, the Airborne Division, and the 1st Infantry Division. Even the tactical airlift support was such that, at peak periods, there was a C-130 arriving at Khe Sanh on the average of every eight minutes.[29]

Throughout the operation deficiencies at high command levels continued to undermine the abilities and performance of South Vietnam's troops. Colonel Ray Battreall, a very experienced officer who watched most of this firsthand from I Corps Forward at Khe Sanh, later provided some useful insight into the challenges confronting General Lam. Because during normal operations the two division sectors of his I Corps were separated by the Hai Van Pass, observed Battreall, the corps headquarters had never before conducted a multidivision tactical operation. Rather, "Lam followed the example of his predecessors in attending to administrative and logistic matters and exerting little, if any, influence over division tactical operations."

Now, said Battreall, Lam Son 719 presented General Lam with a "nearly insuperable array of new challenges." For the first time he and his staff were working from a field command post distant from their usual fixed headquarters at Danang. They were trying to execute an operations order much of which they did not understand. Neither the corps headquarters nor subordinate units, Battreall concluded, "truly grasped the responsibilities inherent in attachment, the differences between a zone of action and an axis of advance, or the full meaning of the word 'secure.' "

The Airborne and Marine divisions, though highly competent when operating at brigade level, had little experience in

being employed as full divisions, meaning that "the division commanders and their staffs were totally unprepared for their tasks." Since both of these division commanders were senior in rank to Lieutenant General Lam, they were "severely miffed" at being subordinated to him. "The Marine commander did not accompany his division from Saigon," recalled Battreall, "and the Airborne commander refused to attend LTG Lam's command briefings." And finally Lam wasted the armor brigade by attaching it to the Airborne Division, "which had no idea what to do with it."[30]

Whatever his inadequacies, Lam got very little cooperation and even less obedience to orders from several of his senior supposed subordinates in the operation. Weyand called this "really the hairiest problem we have out there. We've got a whole bunch of units that, when they want to, they operate independently, and it doesn't make any difference whether it's Lam or who it is." President Thieu's very costly tolerance of such chaos seemed to demonstrate essential insecurity.

Even so, thought Weyand, there were positive indications for the future. He saw "a significant difference between the style of leadership, and the real effective leadership, of guys like Truong and Minh," who during an earlier period "were regimental commanders and division commanders, as opposed to—take the other extreme—your Vinh Locs and Lu Lans. And now even getting down to a man like General Lam, who's somewhere in between. But you're finding these corps commanders are like the corps commanders we'd like to think we had, who understood development of a fire plan, coordination of fires, precision and all that, techniques that are so important."[31]

Colonel Battreall gave Lam high marks for accomplishing as much as he did under the circumstances. "All initial objectives were seized," he noted, "and the ferocious NVA counterattack, while it overran Ranger positions in the North and the Airborne at Hill 30, never progressed further. Apparently unshaken by the



counterattack, LTG Lam calmly committed the 1st Infantry Division to the east–west ridge south of Highway 9 with the mission of seizing Tchepone."

Several days later, Battreall recalled, he saw a badly shaken U.S. air cavalry squadron commander describe the horrendous antiaircraft defenses surrounding Tchepone and recommend against the planned airmobile assault there. "LTG Lam pondered for a moment and then replied, 'No, we have B-52s. We will use them, and then we will go.' And so it happened," said Battreall. "The antiaircraft was obliterated and several meters of dirt blown off the tops of the ridges, exposing what had been underground warehouses. The 1st Infantry Division assaulted almost unopposed and methodically destroyed everything of military value before commencing what turned out to be a bloody and hard-fought withdrawal. It took real guts for Lam to make that decision, and he made it quite alone with no U.S. advisor twisting his arm. Whatever he did before or after cannot detract from that moment."

By 25 March, recorded General Hinh, "most ARVN forces had already left lower Laos." Unfortunately, "the intended and desired goal to sustain combat until the onset of the rainy season in order to strangle the enemy's supply route could not be accomplished."[32] That was true, but it by no means conveyed an accurate impression of what had been achieved.

Some troop elements had done conspicuously better than others. The ARVN armored units had been especially disappointing. Early in the operation the 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry had encountered NVA armored elements in a fight at Fire Base 31 and performed brilliantly, destroying six enemy T-54 tanks and sixteen PT-76s without any friendly losses in the first major tank-to-tank engagement of the war.[33] After that, though, the armor floundered. Not only did they contribute little to offensive operations, they came out of Laos with only a fraction of the equipment they took in. Of 62 tanks only 25 were brought back, and of 162 armored personnel carriers only

64 were salvaged. The reason MACV knew these sorry statistics was that a U.S. advisor met them at the border and made a personal count. Had the losses been due to heavy combat, that would have been one thing, but in the main they were just vehicles that had broken down or run out of gas and been abandoned.

The Airborne Division's 3rd Brigade headquarters was captured and its 3rd Battalion essentially annihilated.[34] En route to Tchepone five of the division's nine battalion commanders were killed or wounded.[35] During the withdrawal phase some units panicked, with able-bodied men rushing medical evacuation helicopters, seeking a place on board or, as documented in some widely circulated photos, clinging to the skids of the ships. Not only did the once proud airborne, defending Fire Support Base 30, commandeer medevac flights, but the airborne infantry battalion commander was one of those who forced his way aboard.[36]

Later Abrams reflected on what the American staff had been doing while South Vietnam's armored forces were in a desperate struggle. "And the battle was still *raging*," he recalled. "We were getting on, and doing things, and—everybody was—doing pretty good. They'd got over some of the shocks. But what was the *staff* doing? *Goddamn it,* they were in there gathering *photos* and *making charts* and so on, all about the goddamn armor equipment that had been *lost* over there in *Laos* on Route 9! *That* was the *thrust* of the *working* and the *thinking* of the damn *staff!* Now—there wasn't *any* way to get that *back*. The *bill* had already been paid! There was a fucking *disaster!! But there's no point in that being the whole damn subject of conversation, the whole subject of thought, from there on!! Now there's got to be some pos—. That's* what will lick you. That's what will lick you. The guy that doesn't get licked is the guy that never even thinks he *can* be! The thought never comes to his *mind!* He has the patience to accept disaster and disappointment—and *outrage*—but he keeps after it."



# 16

# Aftermath

THE NORTH VIETNAMESE suffered terribly in Lam Son 719. "We believe that during the operation the enemy lost the equivalent of 16 of the 33 maneuver battalions they had committed in the area of operations," said a MACV analyst. "In addition, we believe that he's lost at least 3,500 of the 10,000 to 12,000 rear service personnel that were operating in the area prior to the operation." Added Potts, "that's not just ineffective battalions, that's a complete loss of those battalions." And at least 75 of some 110 enemy tanks were assessed as destroyed. The U.S. intelligence community concluded that the NVA lost more than 13,000 killed in action defending their supply lines, along with large quantities of tanks, ordnance, and supplies.[1] In his monograph on the campaign, Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh put enemy losses at 19,360 killed in action, along with more than 5,000 individual weapons, nearly 2,000 crew-served weapons, more than a hundred tanks, and large quantities of ammunition and rice.[2]

Later, MACV J-2 reported, it was learned from a Polish military advisor to the International Control Commission that "the North Vietnamese were both surprised and hurt by the Lam Son operation. He said that discussions with NVN officials showed that they had lost heavily in personnel, particularly good

reserve units which were chewed up. He further believed that they had lost heavily in weapons and supplies. He also pointed out that they suffered a political loss at home because they could not hide their significant military losses." Also, it was reported, North Vietnamese officials had revealed to a source an exact number of 16,224 casualties as a result of Lam Son 719.

Subsequently a surprising source, the French military mission in Hanoi, concluded that "Lam Son 719 had a devastating effect upon the morale of the NVA and of the civilian population of North Vietnam. According to the French analysis," said MACV J-2, "the destruction of nearly two North Vietnamese divisions, and increased defections during the same period, caused the morale of all but the NVA officer corps to disintegrate."[3]

In March CIA's Office of Economic Research submitted a special report to Laird and Kissinger stating that "large-scale enemy military operations in South Vietnam for the remainder of 1971 were probably impossible and that Hanoi would have to undertake a major resupply campaign before any offensive could be launched in 1972."[4]

U.S. forces, even though they had not been on the ground in Laos, also paid a price, including a total of 107 helicopters lost and at least 544 more damaged. "Everybody's got a bullet hole in his aircraft," said one officer. Even so, that represented a loss rate of only around 21 per 100,000 sorties—one combat loss for every 963 flying hours[5]—an indication of both how battleworthy the choppers had proved to be and what a huge air operation had been mounted.[6]

General Weyand summed up his view of the incursion as a whole by saying, "I don't see how we could say anything other than that that operation was worth it. I think it's going to prove to have been terribly decisive."

Subsequently Haig published an extremely negative account of how U.S. forces had performed in supporting the South Vietnamese during Lam Son 719, charging that artillery was mal-



positioned out of range, that aviation support was inadequate, and that Abrams "had never left his headquarters to assess the battle zone in person."[7] Abrams in fact visited XXIV Corps on 15 January, during the preparatory stages of the operation, and again on 12 February and 11 March, and also made visits to Danang on 16 and 24 February and 11 March. In Saigon, he met with President Thieu just before the operation and again on 22 February. Also, his calendar shows twenty-seven meetings with General Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, during Lam Son 719 itself and in the final preparatory stages. In addition he spoke daily by secure telephone with Sutherland at XXIV Corps.

Haig later added that "President Nixon and those of us in the White House involved in the planning were appalled by the Defense Department's handling of the operation which resulted in the serious mauling of an ARVN which had been recently rejuvenated under Vietnamization and at great expense to the American people."[8] But Haig also conceded, concerning the origins of the operation, "I would say that the pressure came from here, from the White House."[9]

James Schlesinger, who in 1973 succeeded Laird as Secretary of Defense, commented that "the military in Vietnam were pushed into the invasion of Laos by civilian officials who thought it would be a good idea. And when it failed, General Abrams was beaten up and there were calls for his removal. It was quite unjust, but not untypical."[10]

Haig has written that on the third day of the operation, "the President called me to his office. The President was in a cold rage. Without preamble, he told me that he was relieving General Abrams of command in Vietnam immediately. 'Go home and pack a bag,' he said. 'Then get on the first available plane and fly to Saigon. You're taking command.' " Haig took the prospect in stride. "I had no doubt that I could do the job; I knew the ground, I knew the enemy, and I knew what the

President wanted," he recalled. But, fortuitously, he advised the President to wait a day before acting. After that brief cooling-off period, Nixon changed the orders rather substantially, instructing Haig merely to visit Vietnam, assess the situation there, and report his findings.[11]

While Haig, relegated to observer status rather than assumption of command, continued to insist in later years that Abrams had mishandled the whole operation, Nixon very quickly came to quite a different conclusion. "The P [President] got into a review of Laos," wrote H. R. Haldeman in his diary for 13 May 1971, "and the fact that casualties were way down now since Laos, just as they were after Cambodia; that there's been no spring offensive, despite the largest materiel input ever in Vietnam, including at Tet; and that it's really remarkable proof of the effectiveness of the operation, but doesn't give us any credit."[12]

DURING LAM SON 719 a public opinion survey of the rural populace, conducted late in the operation and based on sampling in thirty-six provinces, was taken in South Vietnam. The results were astounding: 92 percent favored the operation, 3 percent opposed it, and the remainder had no opinion. Those in favor represented the highest percentage ever recorded on any question on any of these periodic surveys. It was an informed opinion, thought Abrams, because the results of the operation were on the radio every hour and on television every night. "So the people are aware that it's a big price."

Later evaluations of Lam Son 719 were mostly negative, fueled in part, perhaps, by the persistent outlook of those who opposed the war, but also as a function of the price the ARVN had paid and the residual deficiencies it had exhibited. Counterbalancing this were the extremely heavy casualties inflicted on the enemy and the disruptive effects of what had been essentially a preemptive attack. These diverse results were reflected in some very conflicted assessments. Shelby Stanton provided a case in point. "Operation Lam Son 719 was a dismal failure," he concluded, then on the very next page noted that throughout 1971 there was little combat action in South Vietnam because "the NVA units were still suffering from the combined Cambodian-Laotian shocks."[13]



Interestingly, Henry Kissinger was similarly ambivalent in his judgments, observing that "the operation, conceived in doubt and assailed by skepticism, proceeded in confusion." But then, only seven pages later, Kissinger offered the view that "the major enemy thrust in 1972 came across the Demilitarized Zone, where Hanoi's supply lines were shortest and least affected by the operations in Cambodia and Laos. The farther south the North Vietnamese attempted to attack in 1972, the weaker was their impact, because their sanctuaries and supply system had been disrupted by our operations in the previous two years." Thus "the campaigns of 1970 and 1971, in my view, saved us in 1972."[14]

The enemy was jubilant about the operation's outcome, at least from the vantage point of a later history of PAVN. "From the beginning of the war against the Americans," read this account, "this was the first time our army had been victorious in a large-scale counter-offensive campaign and had been able to annihilate enemy forces."[15]

Ambassador Bunker saw it realistically. "The enemy understood that we were after his jugular," he said in a 30 March 1971 reporting cable to the President. "The network represents his lifeline to the south. Without it he is finished. He was bound to react. He threw in almost all his readily available reserves, heavy artillery and tanks. In what proved to be a bloody battle involving some of the hardest fighting of the war, ARVN inflicted far heavier casualties on the enemy than they themselves sustained."[16]

AT ONE POINT during these Laotian and Cambodian cross-border operations, President Thieu called General Abrams in to talk about them. "And then," recalled Abrams, "he wanted to go

over leadership. He started with the corps commanders. He said, 'Start at the DMZ and go down to Ca Mau and tell me about the commanders,' which I did. 'Well,' he said, 'if I have to remove some corps commanders, who do I add?' So I told him then that the one I can recommend, without any reservations at all, and with all the humility of an American who doesn't really know Vietnamese, is General Truong. I think he's proved, over and over and in *all* the facets—pacification, military operations, whatever it is." Soon Truong was commanding IV Corps.

When Lam Son 719 was all over, Ambassador Bunker had some comments to make at a commanders conference. "Well," he began, "I think we've got the same problem we've had for the four years *I've* been here. That's the kind of reporting you get in the press. Sometimes they seem to have a vested interest in failure." Nevertheless, Bunker continued, the results had been positive. "I think it's been extremely helpful, this whole operation. It's good to see the President's [Thieu's] attitude toward it, apparently the attitude of the Vietnamese. It's given them, I think, pride in what they've been able to do. I do want to say also that I think what we've done, our forces, on the ground and in the air—not only here, not only in Laos and Cambodia—has been magnificent, the decisive factor, really, in the whole thing. It's been a great performance. And I think the facts will speak for themselves when we get through with this, despite the press."

Abrams saw it the same way. "I certainly join you on that," he said. "It's a struggle. It was a hard *fight,* but its effects for the rest of this year, I think, are going to be substantial. He [the enemy] committed a *lot* to that Lam Son operation, and it's getting pretty badly hurt." In a subsequent conversation with Sir Robert Thompson, Abrams put the thing in a wider perspective. "I think the way we feel is that we've sort of arrived at a crossover point," he said. "The Vietnamese have developed in a whole lot of things, across the spectrum—internal security,



they're seriously at work on economic problems, and they face it as a reality, and they're meeting it with reality—not always with perfection, none of us are, but all those things, and their armed forces. And it's gone over the point where I think the North Vietnamese can be successful against them. The *war* won't stop, but North Vietnam has now got a much tougher problem than they *ever* had before."

There came a point, not long after the raid into Laos, when Abrams thought the South Vietnamese were approaching self-sufficiency. "Coalition government is capitulation," he concluded. "And the South Vietnamese *don't* have to do that. As a matter of fact, if the South Vietnamese had a way of getting ammunition, and POL, they're almost in a position where they could tell everybody else to blow it out their ass. I'm saying that on the basis—look at the damned depots that we've just about finished here—tools, power—and the logistical setup they've got in the Air Force—overhaul. We're talking now about surviving. No more Santa Claus stuff—now we're talking survive. I mean, I'm not advocating any of this, I'm just saying that—."

DURING THE SAVAGE battles along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos, other significant fighting had for several years been surging back and forth in northern Laos. General George Brown, then commanding Seventh Air Force, once told the visiting General Wheeler of the intense air support that Laotian commander Vang Pao had received, "more than any commander in the history of the warfare there." Then Brown went up to Vientiane, where he talked to Vang Pao about results achieved in the air campaign. "Well, you know, Americans *like* BDA [bomb damage assessment]," Vang Pao told him, "and we like *Americans,* and they come back when they get good BDA." They played it differently with the Thais, Brown found. Vang Pao "said his forward air guys, they don't give BDA to the Thai pilots, because Thai Buddhists don't like to kill people. So that's the way the whole thing works. But at least he admits it."

Cache seizures in the Plaine des Jarres had confirmed that the enemy planned a substantial campaign. The take included twelve tanks, which prompted Abrams to observe that "this is not the stuff you take to a family homecoming. This is *real*. Shows you what those bastards have in mind." On the positive side, though, he thought "that typewriter captured there is probably going to screw things up more than anything else."

Abrams admired Vang Pao as the most capable of the Lao commanders, a "spiritual, religious, military leader all wrapped up in one. If there's a guy in *all* of Laos to support," he observed, "he's the guy. To hell with all the rest of them. *That* fellow's got spirit. We could use *him here*." And Abrams viewed the fighting in northern Laos as an important component of the overall campaign. "We don't want that thing to get out of hand in the Plaine des Jarres," he told the staff. "It's in our interests that it not. If *that* gets out of hand, you run the risk of having *all* the goddamn bombing stopped in Laos. At least, that's the way I see it—as a possibility. We're approaching doing it with mirrors here."

The previous spring things had heated up again in northern Laos, and in the relations between MACV and Embassy Vientiane. "Godley wired me yesterday asking for all kinds of air support," the J-3 told Abrams. "I wired him back asking for target recommendations." That triggered a discussion of the budget crunch in Washington, how the B-52 sortie rate was already under enormous pressure, and how just bombing jungle up in the Plaine des Jarres, with nothing to show for it—the inevitable result of bombing without solid targeting intelligence—would just fuel those who argued that the B-52s weren't accomplishing anything anyhow, so they could safely be cut back even further. "The fact that there's no goddamn intelligence that's worth a shit" coming out of Vientiane, "the fact that the thing has never been tactically run on a sound basis up there, just by a bunch of guys playing soldier—none of that's taken into account," Abrams complained.

They also thought Ambassador Godley was talking out of



both sides of his mouth. "I talked with Shaplen, the *New Yorker* guy, yesterday," Abrams observed at one point. "He said he'd been up in Vientiane, and it is really too bad that Vang Pao couldn't get the air support. And of course he gets that from those *bastards* up there in Vientiane." General John Lavelle, who had taken command of Seventh Air Force, observed that, meanwhile, "I have a wire from Ambassador Godley, saying that they've had more air support than *ever*, accomplished more—thanked me personally." Abrams was not surprised. "Historically, historically, you'll get it from him that way. This other stuff comes out at the same time. That's the way the game's played, and it's just *awful*."

Inside South Vietnam, with the large number of ARVN forces operating cross-border, the Territorial Forces were carrying the load. In Military Region 4, operations in the U Minh Forest, long an enemy stronghold, had generated the highest weekly total of ralliers in nearly two years. Outposts were being built there, noted MACV, and the people "realize there's a permanent presence going in." Ambassador Bunker recalled visiting a 33rd Regiment base in the Delta, where he asked General Truong if he planned to stay there. "Yes, forever," Truong replied.

OTHER BATTLES WERE being fought in Cambodia where, during Lam Son 719, the South Vietnamese had an equal number of troops deployed in cross-border operations in that country. Before the dual operations began, Abrams coached his field commanders. "Now what we're headed into here, the way he's gathering in Chup and the way they're gathering up there in Laos, is one hell of a battle. Now both of those have got to be won, and they *are* going to be won," he emphasized. He then predicted that the battles were going to last about two months. "We'll give these two things anything it takes that we've got! And I *want* it done!" The battles, he said, were "of critical importance to the rest of 1971 and 1972. It's an opportunity to

deal the enemy a blow which probably hasn't existed before as clearly cut in the war. Those *are* military operations, and I'm not pushing this now as sort of a parochial love of a great battle. It's not that at all. I think it's critical. The risks in getting it done were all known and understood in the beginning, and it was felt that it was time to take the risks."

Ambassador Bunker, just returned from consultations in Washington, was able to comment on the decision-making calculus as he had observed it there. "One of the things I think was of great concern," he stated, "is the point that General Abrams has just made—the risk involved if this didn't succeed. And what we'd do, through our policy here—how it would affect the elections, Thieu's position, and the whole situation in Vietnam. There were a good many other things that were taken into consideration—what the effect would be in the northern part of Laos, what the effect would be on the Chinese, and on Souvanna's position. The principal thing was the risk involved in getting into Laos and the South Vietnamese getting chewed up. But these were all weighed very carefully. And the President, of course, made the decision. Obviously I'm glad the way it turned out."

General Abrams described Lam Son 719 as "the largest battle of the war to date."[17] As the results of the operation began to be reflected in the enemy's reduced level of tactical activity, diminished logistical throughput into South Vietnam, reduced rate of personnel infiltration, and concentration on restoration of his lines of communication, Abrams reached a dramatic conclusion. "I'm beginning to have a conviction about Lam Son 719 that that was really a death blow," he said during discussion of a new assessment of the enemy's situation in mid-August 1971.

A GI in Vietnam, Private First Class Clyde Baker, felt so strongly about the thrust into Laos that he wrote to President Nixon on the matter. "In my opinion the Cambodian operation and this operation are the 2 most intelligent moves we have made since we have been in S. Vietnam," he stated. "This operation may end the war and may save hundreds of lives in the long run, and everyone here is putting out 100%." Baker closed with a small apology: "I'm sorry for the lousy handwriting, but I'm writing this letter down inside a tank."[18]



After the 1970–1971 dry season campaign, MACV concluded that, based on all available intelligence, the enemy had succeeded in moving only 9,000 short tons of supplies through the Laotian panhandle into South Vietnam and Cambodia, just 14 percent of the 67,000 short tons he had input into the system and only 40 percent as much as the previous year's throughput. "This forced him to continue a protracted war strategy in the Republic of Vietnam," said MACV, "and it limited his capabilities in Cambodia." That was, perhaps, at least a partial answer to Abrams's earlier question as to the real state of the war.

DURING A LATE APRIL 1971 visit to Vietnam, Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor provided some telling insights into where things could go from there. "It might be fair to say he's in fact achieved the objective of getting us to withdraw ground troops at a fairly steady and significant rate," Resor observed. "He's done that, of course, by the effect he's had in the United States, and that's what's caused it here." Resor suggested the possibility that the enemy's next objective might be to get the U.S. air effort similarly reduced, and to block having a residual U.S. force in South Vietnam.

After that, Resor continued, the goal might be to get military assistance and economic aid to South Vietnam cut off. "And again, working the same way that he's had success before, in other words to try to get Congress to stop appropriating that kind of funds so that the South Vietnamese would essentially be out of ammunition."[19] That was, as things turned out downstream, pretty much the way it was going to evolve.