

## CHAPTER VIII

### Summary and Conclusions

Prior to the invasion of 1972, Hanoi had launched several large-scale offensive campaigns in South Vietnam, such as the 1968 "General Offensive - General Uprising" which included the siege on Khe Sanh Base, all with the commitment of multi-division forces. But none of these initiatives equaled the 1972 Easter Offensive -- or the Nguyen Hue Campaign as the enemy called it -- in scale and in importance. Undoubtedly, Hanoi had intended it to be a decisive military effort.

The importance and decisiveness of this effort were readily apparent by the forces Hanoi had committed -- at least ten infantry divisions and hundreds of tanks and artillery pieces. The Hanoi leadership always timed its major efforts to exert maximum impact on American domestic politics. The 1972 Easter Offensive was in line with this policy. And true to their doctrinal precepts, the Communist leaders of North Vietnam evidenced little concern for personnel and equipment losses, provided that the ultimate objectives set forth by their Politbureau could be attained.

From its very beginning, this offensive was an ultimate challenge for South Vietnam. At various times in some geographical areas, victory appeared to be within reach of the enemy. Indeed, the initial stage of Hanoi's offensive had been successful beyond the capability of its forces to exploit. In northern Military Region 1, NVA units had in rapid succession taken one firebase after another in the DMZ area -- 14 in all -- with little resistance from ARVN forces. In Military Region 3, three of Hanoi's divisions rapidly overwhelmed ARVN forces

and seized Loc Ninh. In this area alone, they annihilated two ARVN regiments and laid siege to An Loc. In the Central Highlands, two other NVA divisions overran Dakto-Tan Canh and a series of firebases on Rocket Ridge overlooking Kontum City. The initial momentum of the NVA offensive was awesome.

After these unexpectedly easy victories, NVA forces concentrated their attacks during late April on Quang Tri City, captured this provincial capital and advanced toward Hue. This ancient city of great political importance was in grave danger. By mid-May, NVA forces in Military Region 2 were in position to slash across the width of South Vietnam from Kontum to Binh Dinh. Additionally, by the middle of May in Military Region 3, the enemy had seized a portion of An Loc just one hundred kilometers north of Saigon. NVA forces were also in control of several large, though remote areas which local governments had evacuated. However, the RVNAF consolidated its defense and stalled the momentum of the enemy invasion.

Even though United States strength in South Vietnam had been greatly reduced, both logistic and combat support was responsive and effective. Immediately following the initial attacks by the enemy, the United States initiated an emergency program to provide support to battered RVNAF units on all battlefields to assist them in regaining their strength and initiative. Combat support was provided by massed air and naval firepower against NVA units, their supply lines and bases.

Injected with new vigor, ARVN units resisted with determination. The enemy's desperate attempt to overwhelm our units again with his local numerical superiority was countered with B-52 and tactical air strikes. As he increased his assaults with massed infantry, the heavier his losses became. Finally, this attrition caused his offensive to run out of steam.

As long as they were given a clear mission and adequate logistic support, RVNAF units always accepted combat and fought well. During the longest and bloodiest siege of the war, the defenders of An Loc had refused to surrender. At Kontum, a fresh division was brought in for the defense of the city and it effectively drove back every enemy

attack. In northern MR-1, three RVNAF divisions not only held Hue against the ferocious onslaughts of six enemy divisions but also crossed the My Chanh line to counterattack and ultimately recaptured Quang Tri City.

Equipped with effective, light-weight antitank weapons, ARVN soldiers quickly realized that they could disable the T-54 tanks whenever they came within killing range. The enemy therefore paid a high price in tanks. Our resilient soldiers also came to realize that enemy artillery could not pound them at will when the USAF responded forcefully. So they dug in and endured the siege. Most astounding was the fact that their morale did not collapse even among the less reliable RF and PF soldiers. During this time of grave emergency, Saigon also rose to the occasion by quickly replacing the ineffective, politically-appointed generals with professionals who had combat experience.

By mid-June, the RVNAF had wrested the initiative from the invaders. There was no morale collapse among the South Vietnamese population or among RVNAF troops. Well-planned U.S. airstrikes continued to take a heavy toll of NVA combat strength and the enemy had to withdraw his three badly mauled divisions from the An Loc area. The direct threat on Saigon was removed although NVA forces began to infiltrate into the Mekong Delta where they endeavored to wreck the GVN pacification achievements. In the Central Highlands, the same story was repeated. After heavy losses incurred in Kontum, the enemy retreated into the jungle to lick his wounds. In the coastal lowlands of Military Region 2, the NVA 3d Division was also dealt heavy blows during the fierce battles of May. It finally broke contact, and the ARVN forces retook the two northern districts of Binh Dinh Province.

In spite of these failures and losses the enemy continued his offensive. He injected two additional divisions into Quang Tri Province and pushed a third division into southern Military Region 1, increasing his total combat forces in this region to eight divisions, by far the greatest concentration of NVA forces in any military region during the war. He seemed poised for a big final attack against the RVN elite

units north of the Hai Van Pass -- the Airborne, Marine and 1st Divisions. If he succeeded in defeating these units, Hue, the most tempting and desirable prize, would readily fall into his hands.

To obtain additional strength for this final showdown, Hanoi committed its last division which had been moved from Laos into the battle. However, NVA logistic support was no longer adequate for large scale operations due to relentless U.S. airstrikes. To oppose this formidable force on the northern frontline, South Vietnam committed its best troops whose combat effectiveness had become legend. I believe that Hanoi was convinced that if NVA forces could destroy our three elite divisions the remainder of the RVNAF could be easily defeated. Even though on the RVN side there were less troops on the line, we had the support of U.S. strategic and tactical air, naval gunfire and superior mobility. The tactical odds therefore were about even despite the fact that NVA forces always enjoyed the initiative with regard to time and place of attack.

Many observers believed that Hanoi should have acted more cautiously after NVA forces lost the initial momentum and suffered subsequent defeats. But the Hanoi leadership was stubborn and intransigent, bent as always on the most belligerant course of action. The showdown was inevitable, and Hanoi apparently believed it could win. Hanoi's easy victories during April and May seemed to confirm this belief. Gearing up for the showdown, Hanoi probably continued to think that the RVNAF would collapse and only a final blow would be necessary to hasten the process.

Another possibility that might explain Hanoi's desire for a quick victory was its concern about the political discussions which were taking place between the United States and Russia and Red China. Was it possible that Russia and China, who supplied Hanoi with nearly all its war supplies, could be persuaded by the U.S. to reduce their support in the near future?

Furthermore, a military victory during the U.S. presidential election year might inhibit the chances of the incumbent being re-elected. Hanoi remembered how its 1968 offensive had affected the

course of U.S. internal and international politics. Was it not possible that a Communist victory during 1972 would promote the election of a new president who would repudiate the commitment to support South Vietnam? In the final analysis, I believe this may have been Hanoi's objective for some time. In any event, the bloodiest battles of the war raged on for three months in the northernmost corner of South Vietnam.

But North Vietnam no longer had the forces needed to win. On the contrary, the odds were working against the enemy. As the fighting continued, Hanoi's chances of losing were increasing, not only militarily but also politically. Weakened and finally exhausted, the NVA forces were no match for the bolder South Vietnamese units. Contrary to the assessment of several observers, I believe that the last NVA effort in Quang Tri and Thua Thien failed to provide the enemy with any significant political advantages. Falling back in the wake of their defeat, NVA forces dispersed and switched to a less sanguine course of action: a well-orchestrated land and population grab campaign in preparation for a standstill ceasefire. And thus ended the 1972 NVA offensive.

In retrospect, Hanoi's conventional invasion of the South did not help it attain the major objectives desired. Although always the defender with an extremely disadvantageous strategic posture, South Vietnam emerged stronger than ever. Hanoi's effort had been thwarted by U.S.-RVN determination. The American response during the enemy offensive was timely, forceful and decisive. This staunch resolve of the U.S. to stand behind its ally stunned the enemy. Additionally, it brought about a strong feeling of self-assurance among the armed forces and population of South Vietnam.

Another major factor that contributed to Hanoi's military failures during 1972 was the reliability of RVNAF units. When Hanoi initiated its offensive, some had thought that it would be an ultimate test of Vietnamization and were not confident that the RVN could meet the challenge. But instead of defeat, the RVNAF had achieved quite the contrary.

Throughout the long months of the enemy offensive, the RVNAF performed like the mature, professional, dedicated fighting force it had become. Although this excellent performance was attributable to

several factors, a definite tribute must be given to the U.S. advisers, especially the U.S. regional assistance commands. Even during this period of emergency, the U.S. advisory effort continued to help the RVNAF support machinery run smoothly, whether it was recruiting, equipping, training or replacing losses.

The constant input of fresh and trained manpower kept the RVNAF revitalized and helped maintain combat effectiveness in the forward areas.

The RVNAF logistic system functioned efficiently, keeping all combat units resupplied.

Intelligence collection and accurate reporting kept field commanders constantly abreast of the situation and were instrumental in formulating successful battle plans.

Improved command and control in the field also resulted in better morale for commanders and troops alike.

All of these achievements contributed to the ultimate RVNAF success in containing and defeating the most vigorous offensive North Vietnam had ever unleashed on the South and without the assistance of U.S. advisers, it would not have been possible.

The final credit for our victory should go to the individual South Vietnamese soldier, regardless of branch or service. His gallantry, courage and determination were of the highest standard. No less admirable were the sacrifices and hardships endured by the common South Vietnamese people during this long ordeal. While modern weapons might help turn the tide of a battle, they could never replace the individual soldier on the battlefield. No matter how sound a battle plan or how good a commander, our success could never have been achieved without courageous soldiers. The average South Vietnamese soldier, who grew up in war, was not only audacious and devoted to the cause for which he had been fighting but he always took pride in his career and his heart was filled with love for his family, his comrade-in-arms and his people. He was indeed a heroic warrior who represented the noblest traditions of the Vietnamese people, a most ardent patriot, and an outstanding soldier. His success during 1972 had helped forge

a new national spirit of solidarity and survival that was to prevail in the post-cease-fire years.

## Glossary

AO	Area of Operation
APC	Armored Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Common abbreviation used to refer to regular army forces to include airborne and ranger units
ARDF	Airborne Radio Direction Finding
CAV	Cavalry (U.S.)
CBU	U.S. Air Force anti-personnel bombs dropped in clusters
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam (Communist Party)
CP	Command Post
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRAC	Delta Regional Assistance Command
FRAC	First Regional Assistance Command
FSB	Fire Support Base
FSCC	Fire Support Coordination Center
FWMA(F)	Free World Military Assistance (Forces)
GVN	Government of South Vietnam
HALO	High Altitude, Low Opening
JGS	Joint General Staff, RVNAF
LTL	Vietnamese interprovincial route (Lien Tinh Lo)
LZ	Landing Zone
LAW	Light Antitank Weapon
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
Main Force	Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military units subordinate to COSVN, military regions, or other higher echelons of enemy command
MR	Military Region (RVN)