

AN LOC

April 8-July 11, 1972

DESPITE THE SUCCESS OF THE NVA in blunting the South Vietnamese incursion into Laos in early 1971, the government in Hanoi could not be satisfied with the progress of the war. Over the previous few years, any hopes of winning a "People's War," based on the Maoist model of subversion, guerrilla pressure, and open battle, had faded; and the Communists had been forced to accept a steady reduction of influence in key areas of South Vietnam.

The U.S.-backed policy of pacification, coupled with the crippling of the VC in the Tet Offensive of 1968, had allowed the Saigon authorities to reclaim control of all but 10 of their 45 provinces. A U.S. withdrawal may have been effected, but the campaign in the South, from the Communist point of view, had stagnated.

Hanoi could, of course, rebuild the VC using North Vietnamese "fillers" infiltrated down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This would take time, however, during which the South's armed forces—already increased to more than a million men under Vietnamization—would be greatly improved and strengthened.

An alternative was to take immediate advantage of the U.S. withdrawal, hitting the ARVN while it was still psychologically dependent on the Americans, and gambling on the fact that U.S. politicians would be unlikely to authorize a recommitment of force now that their involvement in an unpopular war was running down. As 1972 was a U.S. presidential election year, during which no candidate would dare to alienate public opinion, arguments in favor of a full-scale conventional invasion of the South during that year seemed persuasive.

Le Duan, First Secretary of North Vietnam's ruling Lao Dong party, put such arguments to the Soviet leadership when he visited Moscow in the spring of 1971. They were sympathetic, recognizing that, if the South was defeated, it would not only put President Nixon at a disadvantage in forthcoming superpower



"Hold them and I'll kill them with airpower. Give me somebody to bomb and I'll win."

MAJOR GENERAL JAMES HOLLINGSWORTH, SENIOR U.S. ADVISER, ARVN III CORPS, APRIL, 1972

talks, but would also create a unified Vietnam indebted to the Soviet Union and obliged to act as a counter to Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. Le Duan received promises of substantial aid, chiefly in terms of modern arms.

By the end of the year, the NVA had been transformed from an essentially guerrilla army into a modern conventional force, equipped with T-34, T-54/55 and PT-76 tanks, long-range 130mm artillery pieces, mobile SAMs, and fleets of trucks. To make full use of the latter, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was widened, supply dumps were located at key points close to intended invasion routes, and forces were built up along the borders of South Vietnam. Ominously for the South, General Vo Nguyen Giap, Minister of Defense in Hanoi and victor of Dien Bien Phu, was put in overall command.

Giap's plan was a complex one. Instead of concentrating his substantial forces—over 200,000 men—in one place, he divided the assault into three separate operations, designed to confuse and weaken the ARVN response. The attack would begin around the DMZ, with a full-scale multidivisional advance south toward Hue and Da Nang, with other forces pressing in from the A Shau valley in the west. This, it was argued, would force President Thieu to commit reserves to protect his northern provinces, upon which a second assault would emerge from Cambodia to threaten Saigon through Tay Ninh and Binh Long provinces, while other forces entered the Mekong Delta.

Once again, ARVN reserves would have to be committed, leaving few available to face the third and final attack, through the Central Highlands to take Kontum and aim for the coast in Binh Dinh province. This would split South Vietnam in two, leading to its collapse or, at the very least, a peace agreement on Hanoi's terms.

The plan had certain basic flaws—particularly in its failure to concentrate NVA forces, leaving them vulnerable to



Off-duty ARVN soldiers (ABOVE) inspect an abandoned NVA tank in a street of An Loc. With the help of massive U.S. air support, South Vietnamese troops managed to prevent a strong Communist force from overrunning the town during the 1972 Easter Offensive.



Advancing on foot and atop APCs, ARVN troops cross marshland in an operation to clear Route 13, the main road connecting Saigon with the besieged defenders of An Loc.

AN LOC/2

An ARVN APC moves down a street in Quang Tri City, which has been devastated by bombardments and airstrikes during the battle for its control. The

ARVN eventually managed to recapture the battered town in September, 1972, more than four months after it had fallen to the Communists.

piecemeal defeat—and it took little account of the potential impact of U.S. and South Vietnamese air attack. Indeed, the offensive was affected by airpower before it began, for as early as December, 1971, the NVA buildup was monitored and selected strikes were carried out against force concentrations and supply

dumps close to the DMZ. By then, the allies were convinced that the North would attack during the Tet celebrations in February, 1972; when they passed off peacefully, the ARVN relaxed. At the same time, American (and world) attention shifted to China, where Nixon's historic visit dominated the news. It was just what Giap wanted.

The offensive began at noon on Thursday, March 30, 1972, on the eve of the Easter weekend. ARVN firebases just south of the DMZ were suddenly swamped with artillery fire, chiefly from Soviet-supplied M-46 130mm field guns north of the border, beyond the range of the U.S.-built 105mm and 155mm pieces in ARVN hands. Simultaneously, three NVA divisions—a total of 30,000 men, backed by up to 200 tanks—swept across the DMZ to overwhelm outposts manned by the inexperienced ARVN 3d Division, which fell back in great confusion about ten miles toward Dong Ha on the Mieu Giang River.

The situation was saved by the destruction of the Dong Ha bridges—blown up, in the absence of precise orders, by prudent U.S. advisers—and by the arrival of the ARVN 20th Tank Regiment, equipped with U.S. M-48s. Blocked at Dong Ha, the NVA shifted some 12 miles west to Cam Lo, aiming to cross the river and link up with the NVA 324th B Division, already moving east from the A Shau valley.

Despite a lack of air support because of poor weather, the ARVN appeared to have consolidated a defense line, but it did not last. On Easter Sunday, April 2, the firebase at Camp Carroll, subjected to a deluge of artillery shells and rockets, suddenly collapsed, opening up a huge gap at just the point where the NVA divisions advancing south and east were aiming to link up. They poured through the gap, taking the bridge at Cam Lo and forcing the ARVN to pull back again, this time to the east, creating a new defense line that stretched in an arc from the Cua Viet River near the coast, through Dong Ha to the Thach Han River close to Quang Tri City.

Refugees were already clogging the roads leading south to Hue but, despite panic in the ARVN 3d Division, the line held, shored up by Vietnamese Marines, the crack ARVN 1st Division, and the ubiquitous 20th Tank Regiment. Furthermore, as the weather cleared, Nixon authorized the commitment of U.S. airpower, sending fighter-bombers north of the DMZ for the first time since 1968 and ordering air reinforcements into the war



Nixon's visit to China

President Nixon's visit to Peking in late February, 1972, was an indication of U.S. awareness of the growing importance of international power politics to the Vietnam War. Throughout the 1960s, North Vietnam enjoyed virtually unlimited support from the two Communist "giants"—China and the Soviet Union—by portraying the conflict in the South as a "war of independence" against "lackeys of the imperialist West."

The situation began to change in 1968, as a Sino-Soviet split emerged. A series of events—the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the announcement of the Brezhnev Doctrine outlining the "right" of the Soviet Union to intervene in the affairs of "deviant" Communist states, the Cultural Revolution in China—led in 1969 to a buildup of forces on both sides of the Sino-Soviet border. The United States recognized an opportunity for driving a wedge between Hanoi and its supporters, particularly China. Although Nixon, shown (RIGHT) meeting Mao Tse-tung, produced no concrete proposals concerning Vietnam from his visit, it was obvious to the North that

China was prepared to seek a rapprochement with the United States that could only result in a cut in support levels. When, less than three months later, Nixon visited Moscow with new arms control proposals, the Soviets appeared to be following a similar line, fearful that Sino-American links would surround the U.S.S.R. Although both Communist powers still provided arms and equipment, Hanoi was being forced to the conference table.



Tank action at Dong Ha

By March 31, 1972, the NVA attack south of the DMZ in MRI had overrun outlying ARVN firebases and was approaching the Mieu Giang River, northwest of Quang Tri City. The ARVN commander, General Vu Van Giai, hastily established a defense line on the south bank of the river. Included in his formations was the newly formed 20th Tank Regiment, equipped with U.S.-supplied M-48A3s—one of which is shown (RIGHT), trapped in a crater in Quang Tri.

Initially deployed to guard bridges over the river at Dong Ha, the regiment got off to a good start when it hit an NVA column moving south along Route 1, destroying nine PT-76 and two T-54 tanks for no loss. This threw the NVA into confusion, disrupting their advance until April 2, when they tried to by-pass Dong Ha to the west, through Cam Lo. On that occasion, the South Vietnamese tankers destroyed a further 16 T-54s.

The NVA paused to build up their forces and to bring forward Soviet-supplied AT-3 Sagger wire-guided antitank missiles. On April 27, under heavy artillery support, the



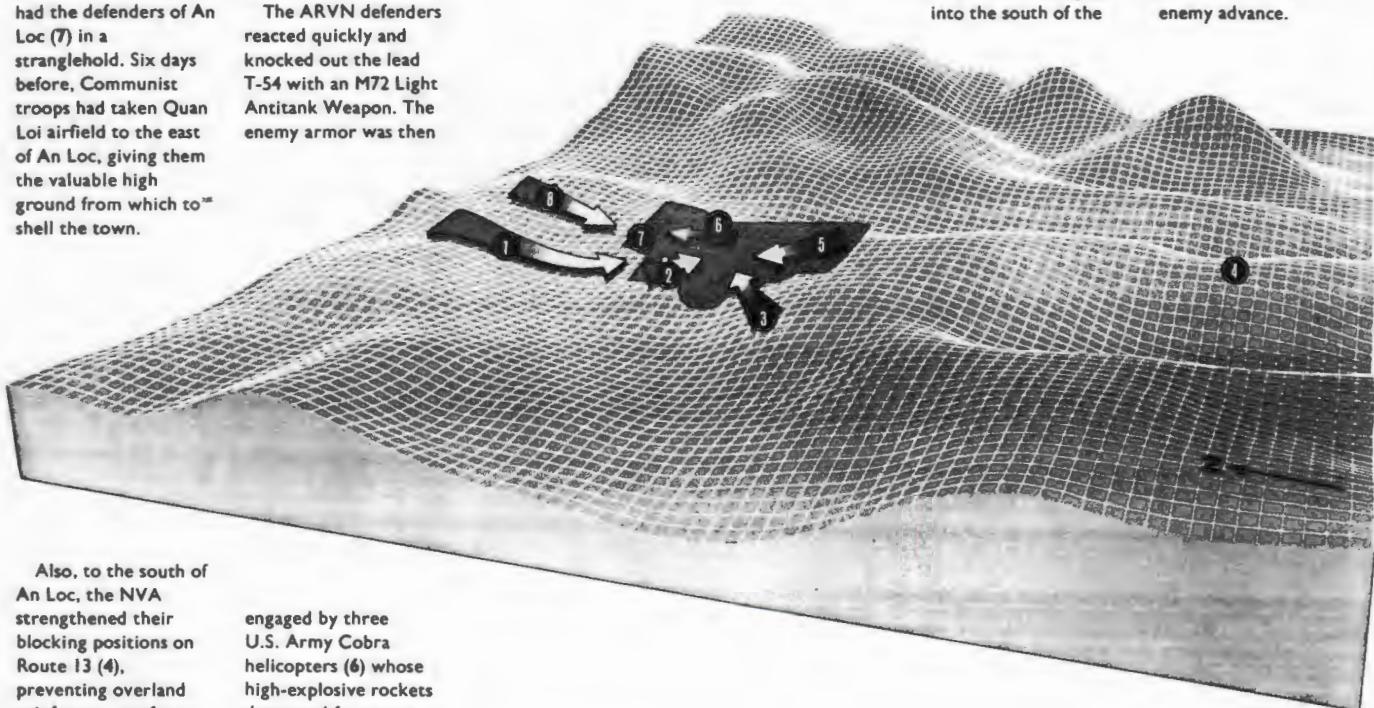
Communists renewed their attack all along the line. The 20th Tank Regiment, ordered to move west to plug a reported gap, began to suffer losses. These were exacerbated by a lack of supplies and a general panic among

other ARVN units in the area. By May 2, the regiment had been forced to retreat south of Quang Tri City, having lost or abandoned all its vehicles. Nevertheless, its actions had helped to disrupt the NVA advance.

By April 13, 1972, Communist forces, made up of the NVA/VC 9th Division and the NVA 7th Division, had the defenders of An Loc (7) in a stranglehold. Six days before, Communist troops had taken Quan Loi airfield to the east of An Loc, giving them the valuable high ground from which to shell the town.

Communist T-54 tanks (8), accompanied by infantry, rumbled into An Loc from the northeast. The ARVN defenders reacted quickly and knocked out the lead T-54 with an M72 Light Antitank Weapon. The enemy armor was then

The next assault (1) came at 1015 from the northwest, with Communist tanks and infantry advancing (2) into the south of the town. Again, however, formidable airpower (3 and 5), including USAF A-37s from Bien Hoa, blunted the enemy advance.



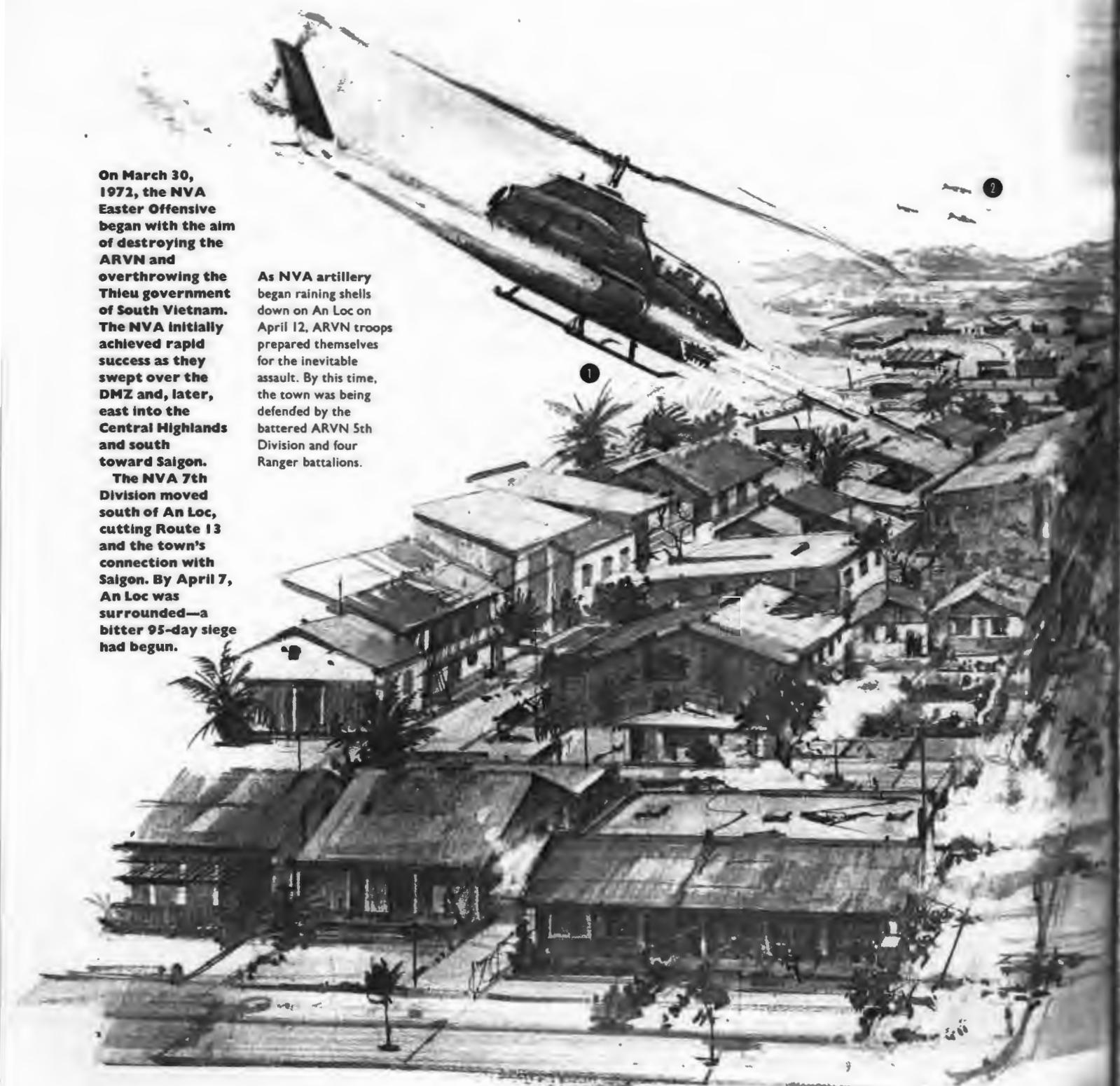
Also, to the south of An Loc, the NVA strengthened their blocking positions on Route 13 (4), preventing overland reinforcements from Saigon. At dawn on April 13, six

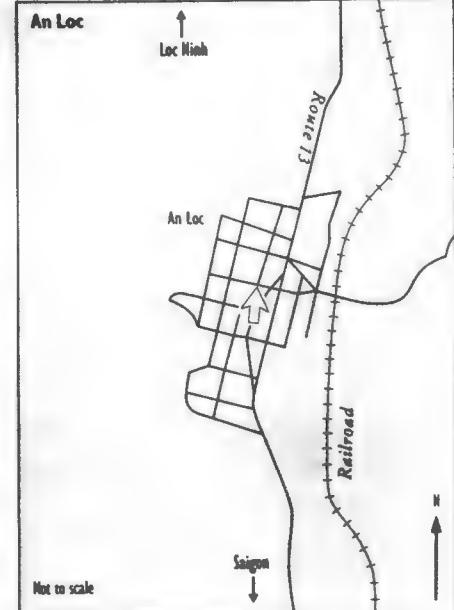
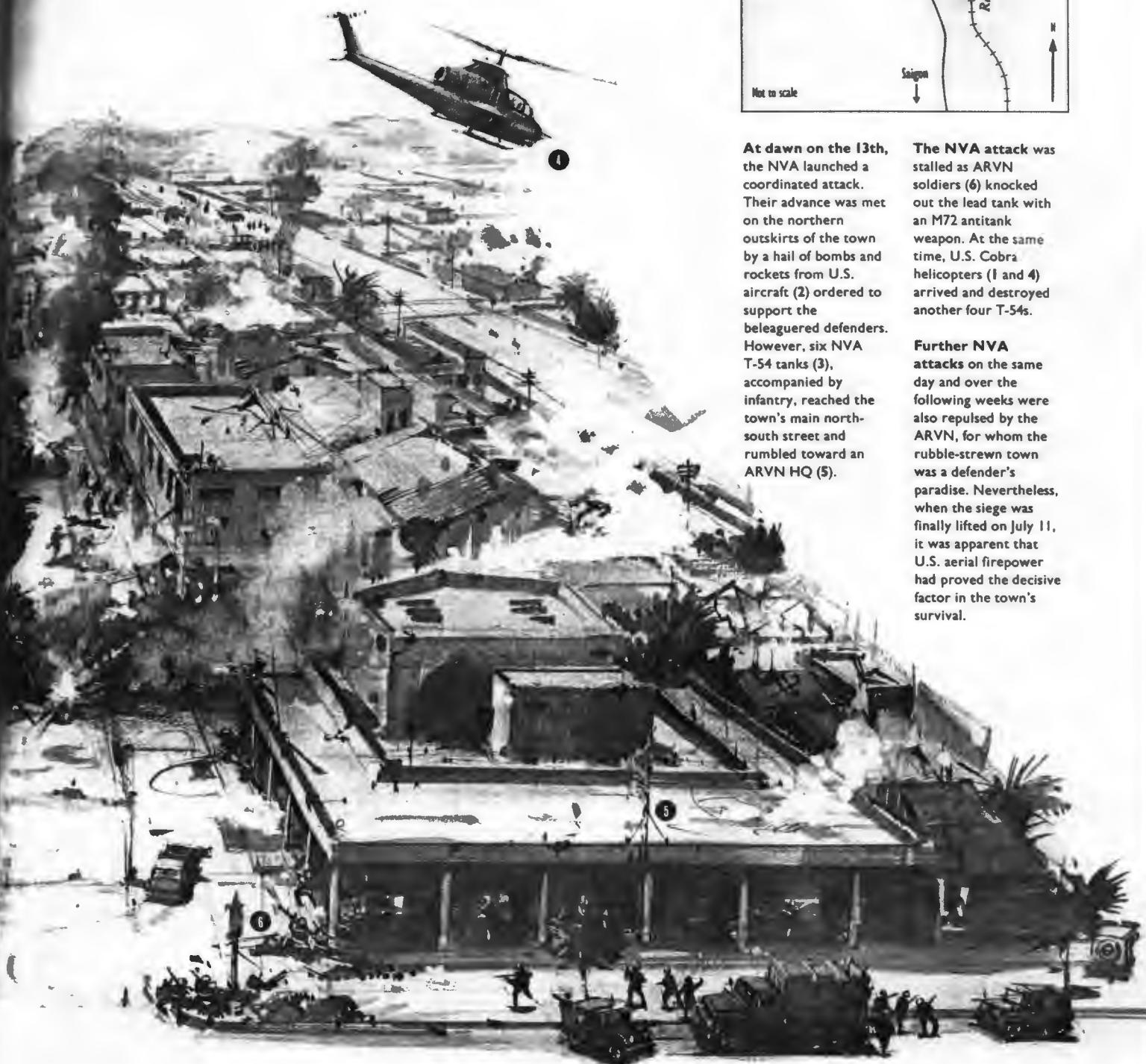
engaged by three U.S. Army Cobra helicopters (6) whose high-explosive rockets destroyed four more tanks and stalled the attack.

On March 30, 1972, the NVA Easter Offensive began with the aim of destroying the ARVN and overthrowing the Thieu government of South Vietnam. The NVA initially achieved rapid success as they swept over the DMZ and, later, east into the Central Highlands and south toward Saigon.

The NVA 7th Division moved south of An Loc, cutting Route 13 and the town's connection with Saigon. By April 7, An Loc was surrounded—a bitter 95-day siege had begun.

As NVA artillery began raining shells down on An Loc on April 12, ARVN troops prepared themselves for the inevitable assault. By this time, the town was being defended by the battered ARVN 5th Division and four Ranger battalions.





At dawn on the 13th, the NVA launched a coordinated attack. Their advance was met on the northern outskirts of the town by a hail of bombs and rockets from U.S. aircraft (2) ordered to support the beleaguered defenders. However, six NVA T-54 tanks (3), accompanied by infantry, reached the town's main north-south street and rumbled toward an ARVN HQ (5).

The NVA attack was stalled as ARVN soldiers (6) knocked out the lead tank with an M72 antitank weapon. At the same time, U.S. Cobra helicopters (1 and 4) arrived and destroyed another four T-54s.

Further NVA attacks on the same day and over the following weeks were also repulsed by the ARVN, for whom the rubble-strewn town was a defender's paradise. Nevertheless, when the siege was finally lifted on July 11, it was apparent that U.S. aerial firepower had proved the decisive factor in the town's survival.

AN LOC/4

zone. By April 6, additional USAF squadrons were on route to Southeast Asia, while four extra carriers joined the Seventh Fleet task force off the coast.

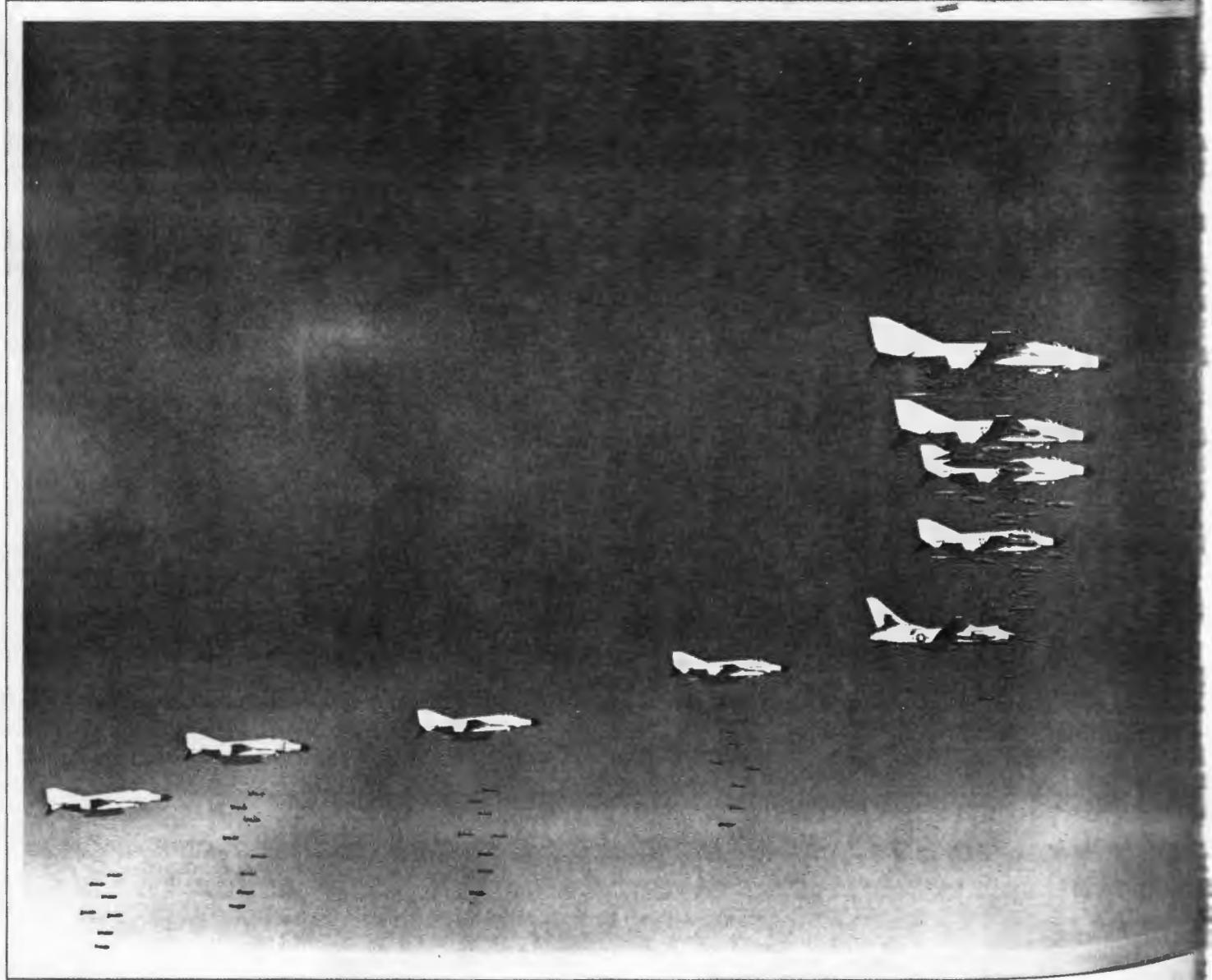
This was just as well, for, by now, Giap's second assault had materialized. On April 2, NVA/VC forces crossed the border from Cambodia, threatening Tay Ninh City. Thieu hurriedly committed reinforcements from the Mekong Delta (itself about to be attacked), only to discover that this was a feint. On April 5, a much more dangerous attack began, as the NVA/VC 9th Division suddenly advanced on Loc Ninh to the east. Defended by an infantry regiment and a Ranger battalion, the town fell in less than 24 hours, opening up a direct route to

Saigon—Route 13 through An Loc and Lai Khe.

Realizing the danger, Thieu ordered his 5th Division into An Loc, with the ARVN 21st Division and parts of the 9th Division—withdrawn from the Delta—entering Lai Khe to create a second line of defense. He was only just in time: as the ARVN 5th Division completed its move, reinforced at the last moment by two Ranger battalions, the NVA 7th Division swept in from the west, cutting Route 13 to the south, between An Loc and Lai Khe. As the NVA/VC 9th Division closed in from the north and east, taking the outpost of Quan Loi and its important airfield on April 7, An Loc was surrounded. NVA commanders confidently

predicted that they would be in Saigon itself by the 20th.

NVA artillery began to soften up An Loc on April 12, causing some damage, but forcing the ARVN defenders—by now reinforced by a further two Ranger battalions, flown in on the 10th—to dig in. Major General James Hollingsworth, senior U.S. adviser to the ARVN III Corps, did all he could to help, persuading MACV commander General Creighton Abrams to provide maximum air support. Thus, when the Communists moved out of the surrounding hills and rubber plantations to attack An Loc at dawn on April 13, they did so through a deluge of bombs, rockets, and cannon shells delivered by U.S. aircraft.



Nevertheless, a group of six T-54 tanks, accompanied by infantry, did survive to penetrate the town's perimeter, lumbering down the main street from the northeast toward the ARVN headquarters. The lead tank was hit and disabled by an ARVN soldier using a U.S.-supplied M72 LAW (Light Antitank Weapon) and, as the other five tried to maneuver around it to continue the advance, three U.S. Army AH-1G Cobra gunships appeared overhead. Firing their 2.75in armor-piercing rockets, they disabled a further four tanks, scattering the infantry and halting the attack.

The NVA tried again at 1015 hours, this time with 10 tanks advancing from the northwest, but the combination of

LAWs and Cobra gunships, joined by USAF A-37 Dragonfly ground-attack aircraft from Bien Hoa, took its toll. As the streets of An Loc filled with burning enemy tanks, ARVN morale soared, but not for long: despite the U.S. airstrikes, Communist troops pressed on relentlessly, seizing the vital airstrip and reducing the defenses to an area less than a mile square.

Thieu ordered his personal guard, the ARVN 1st Parachute Brigade, to reinforce An Loc (they arrived by parachute late on the 13th), but the defenders were beginning to wilt. Without U.S. air support—including B-52s, committed to strike NVA concentration areas in the surrounding countryside—An Loc

U.S. tactical air support, 1972

When the NVA Easter Offensive began on March 30, 1972, President Nixon was swift to offer support to the embattled ARVN. No U.S. ground combat units were available, but tactical airpower was. Within hours, USAF fighter-bombers and B-52s from Thailand and Guam, plus USN and Marine aircraft from the Seventh Fleet offshore, had been committed to the fray.

The NVA had been expecting such a reaction. All their units committed to the South had Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and antiaircraft guns attached, while the offensive had been timed to coincide with overcast skies. But the Americans were by now extremely experienced, and their countermeasures were both swift and effective. F-4 or F-105 "Wild Weasels" flew SAM-suppression missions, while OV-10 Bronco FACs (Forward Air Controllers) called in wave after wave of fighter-bombers, gunships, and attack helicopters.

At the same time, in a rerun of the earlier Arc Light strikes, B-52s—operating in three-aircraft "cells"—flew from Thailand and Guam to deliver devastating weights of high explosives. On May 11/12, for example, during the battle of An Loc, B-52 cells appeared over the battle area every 55 minutes for 30 consecutive hours. Elsewhere, newly developed laser-guided "smart" weapons enhanced accuracy and proved particularly useful against NVA armor. In the northern provinces of South Vietnam between April 1 and August 15, it was estimated that U.S. aircraft destroyed 285 tanks. The NVA had no effective response.

F-4 Phantoms, shown (left) in formation with an RB-66, played an important role in

U.S. tactical air support for ARVN forces in 1972.

Thieu and Ky: leading the South

Born in Annam in 1923, Nguyen Van Thieu (BELOW RIGHT) graduated from the Vietnamese Military Academy in 1949 and attended the U.S. Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth in 1957. By 1963, Thieu was commanding the ARVN 5th Infantry Division, participating in the coup to overthrow President Diem.

In 1965, as one of the "Young Turks," he played a leading role in overthrowing General Khanh, after which he was appointed Chairman of the National Leadership Committee. When elections were held in 1967, he became President of South Vietnam. Reelected in 1971, he faced the difficult task of preserving his country as the U.S. made peace with the North and withdrew. In 1975, when the NVA invaded, Thieu made a series of military decisions which proved disastrous, allowing the Communists to advance rapidly toward Saigon. On April 21, he resigned and fled.

Nguyen Cao Ky (BELOW LEFT) was born near Hanoi in 1930 and first saw military service in 1950, when he was drafted into the Vietnamese National Army, established by the French. He was subsequently trained as a pilot, and his promotion was rapid in the postindependence air force. By 1965, when he participated in the "Young Turk" rebellion, he was already a lieutenant general. He was elected to the Armed Forces Councils prime minister, a post he continued to fill, despite howls of protest from Buddhists and other political factions he suppressed, until the elections of 1967, when he became vice-president under Thieu. However, Ky refused to stand in the presidential elections of 1971, accusing Thieu of vote rigging; instead, he reverted to his military rank of air marshal. In April, 1975, he fled Saigon, and settled in California.



would probably have fallen, leaving the road to Saigon protected by little more than the ARVN 21st Division. As that formation was displaying a distinct lack of effectiveness in its efforts to push north from Lai Khe, the situation would have been desperate.

In the event only one regiment (belonging to the ARVN 9th Division) made any progress, by-passing NVA roadblocks to the east, but it soon found itself caught in a no-man's-land swept by enemy fire. Only 120 survivors—all of them wounded—broke through to An Loc on April 15, leaving the road still blocked behind them. The NVA settled down to conduct a siege, reducing An

Loc to rubble as they poured artillery fire down from the nearby hills. USAF C-130s had to be brought in to drop supplies to the battered defenders, while fighter-bombers, gunships, and B-52s offered round-the-clock support.

With NVA assaults in both north and south apparently stalled, it looked as if Thieu had made the right responses. But Giap still had a final card to play—his third attack, through the Central Highlands. As early as April 12, the NVA gave notice of their intentions in this area by attacking "Rocket Ridge" overlooking Dak To. They followed this up on the 23rd with a full-scale assault on isolated ARVN outposts, defended by elements of

the 22d Division, at Tan Canh, Dak To II, and Ben Het. The offensive caught the ARVN commander, Colonel Le Duc Dat, unprepared. As a result, despite the presence of the vastly experienced John Paul Vann, now chief adviser to the ARVN II Corps, the outposts quickly fell. As ARVN survivors pulled back toward Kontum, Vann (soon to be killed in a helicopter crash) took it upon himself to organize a defense of the city, moving ARVN Rangers and units of the 23d Division from elsewhere in MR II. By early May, Kontum was under siege, its survival dependent on U.S. air support.

Any hope of reinforcing Kontum was dashed by events farther north. On April





27, the NVA began to probe the Cua Viet-Thach Han defense line, achieving an unexpected success when the already demoralized ARVN 3d Division collapsed.

Amid rumors that the enemy had broken through to the west, ARVN soldiers abandoned their positions to flee south toward Quang Tri City. Instead of investigating the truth of such rumors, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the ARVN I Corps, ordered the 20th Tank Regiment to move to the west: when the M-48s began to leave Dong Ha, units on their flanks joined the withdrawal, convinced that the end was near.

Looters (LEFT)
scavenge in a shell-torn street of
Dong Ha during
the NVA Easter
Offensive.

Men of the ARVN
21st Division fight
their way along
Route 13 toward
the beleaguered
town of An Loc.



The 3d Division commander, Brigadier General Vu Van Giai, tried to stop the panic, but to no avail. By May 1, the NVA had seized Quang Tri City, adding to the chaos by shelling Route 1 to the south, by now jammed with soldiers, civilians, and abandoned equipment. An estimated 20,000 people died.

Ironically, the fall of Quang Tri City highlighted the central flaw in Giap's strategy. Because of the attacks elsewhere—by this time stalled around An Loc and Kontum—there were no NVA reserves available to exploit what could have been a decisive thrust in the northern provinces.

Instead, Thieu was given time to restore order by sacking Lam, arresting Giai, and turning I Corps over to Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, one of the South's most experienced commanders. He formed a new defensive line about 25 miles north of Hue, on the My Chanh River, halting the panic by threatening to shoot all deserters and looters. Lacking the strength to pursue their advantage, the NVA had no choice but to allow this consolidation to take place.

This pattern was repeated elsewhere, for while the crisis was occurring in the northern provinces, NVA assaults in Binh Long province and the Central Highlands were being blocked, then turned back, using a combination of U.S. airpower and ARVN resolve. At An Loc, the NVA/VC 5th Division—tasked with

destroying the town when it was obvious that the 9th Division had failed—mounted a major assault on May 9.

In response, Hollingsworth called in the B-52s, and for the next five days, they appeared over the battle area to pulverize enemy approach routes. By the 14th, the Communists had had enough; although they did not pull back from An Loc or Lai Khe (the siege of An Loc was not officially lifted until July 11, after 95 days), they tried no more open assaults. Around Kontum, U.S. air support prevented an NVA victory, even though small groups of sappers did manage to infiltrate the city. By late May, the worst was over.

Fighting continued, especially in the north, until September, when Quang Tri City was reoccupied by the ARVN after a particularly tough battle. But by then it had been obvious for some time that Giap's strategy had failed. His inability (or unwillingness) to concentrate his forces gave the South the opportunity to blunt and then counterattack each NVA offensive in turn, while the weight of U.S. fire support was decisive.

In the northern provinces alone, ships of the Seventh Fleet fired over 160,000 tons of shells against land targets between

Communist soldiers captured during the offensive grimace with discomfort.

The NVA lost an estimated 100,000 men during the hard-fought campaign.

April and September, while over South Vietnam as a whole some 700 U.S. fighter-bombers and 170 B-52s had been on constant call. With An Loc and Kontum acting as rocks in the stream of the Communist advance, Giap's chances of victory were slim.

By September, 1972, the North Vietnamese had lost about half their committed force—an estimated 100,000 men—against a South Vietnamese casualty figure half that size. The NVA remained in possession of a 10-mile strip of territory just south of the DMZ, as well as a few enclaves close to the Cambodian border, but this was small compensation for such enormous losses. As long as the Americans were prepared to commit their air (and naval) assets to the protection of the South, Hanoi could not hope to win, particularly when elements of those assets were also being used to bomb North Vietnam itself. It was, indeed, a lesson learned the hard way.

THE WAR YEARS

Feb. 21, 1972 President Nixon begins an official visit to China.

March 30/ April 1, 1972 The NVA Easter Offensive begins with an attack south from the DMZ toward Quang Tri City.

April 5, 1972 The NVA open up a second offensive from Cambodia into Binh Long province, north of Saigon.

April 8 The NVA open up a third offensive from Laos and Cambodia into the Central Highlands. In Binh Long province, An Loc is surrounded.

May 8, 1972 President Nixon orders the mining of North Vietnamese ports and increased bombing of "war-related" targets in Operation Linebacker.

May 13 USAF F-4 Phantoms use laser-guided bombs to cut the Thanh Hoa bridge in North Vietnam.

May 20 Summit meeting in Moscow between President Nixon and First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev.

June 28, 1972 The ARVN, with U.S. air and naval support, begin a counteroffensive in Quang Tri province.

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