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Indochina Monographs

Lam Son 719

by

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Indochina Monographs

This is the first of a series of studies to be published by the U.S. Army Center of Military History that have been written by officers who held responsible positions in the South Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian forces during the war in Indochina. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and other necessary support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The monographs were not edited or altered and reflect the views of their authors--not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense. The authors were not attempting to write definitive accounts but to set down how they saw the war in Southeast Asia.

Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

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Preface

For several years, the eastern part of the Laotian panhandle was used by North Vietnam as a corridor for the infiltration of personnel and materiels required to sustain its war efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia. In addition to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the eastern panhandle contained many logistic installations and base areas. After the 18 March 1970 change of government in Cambodia which closed the port of Sihanoukville to the enemy, this trail-base area complex in lower Laos became even more important to North Vietnam in its prosecution of the war in the South. The real hub of this entire complex, where transportation and storage activities were coordinated, was Base Area 604 located west of the Demilitarized Zone and surrounding the district town of Tchepone.

To disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies into South Vietnam, a ground attack was launched across the Laotian border against this enemy hub of activity on 8 February 1971. Operation LAM SON 719 was conducted by I Corps with substantial U.S. support in firepower and helilift but without the participation of U.S. advisers with those ARVN units fighting in Laos. As a test of Vietnamization, this operation was to demonstrate also the progress achieved in combat effectiveness by the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. Further, LAM SON 719 achieved the objective of forestalling a Communist offensive in the spring of 1971.

This monograph will present a critical analysis of all aspects of LAM SON 719 from the planning stage to the withdrawal from lower Laos. In its preparation, I have drawn primarily from my own experience

as an ARVN infantry division commander and from interviews with Vietnamese unit commanders and staff officers who participated in the operation. My work would not have been complete without the valuable contributions of several associates to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude.

General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, RVNAF, has provided me with a unique insight into LAM SON 719 from the highest level of our armed forces. Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, who was Commander of the Central Logistics Command, RVNAF at the time, has contributed his account of combined logistic support for the operation. Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commander of IV Corps and later I Corps, under whose command and leadership I had served for several years, has enlightened me with his highly professional and analytical comments on tactical problems concerning the ARVN and especially the 1st Infantry Division. Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, Assistant Chief of Staff J-3, JGS, has briefed me in detail concerning his personal involvement in the early planning stage of the operation. Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Assistant Chief of Staff J-2, JGS, has been of great assistance with his intimate knowledge of NVA forces, their activities on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the enemy logistic structure in the area of operation.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia
31 July 1977

Nguyen Duy Hinh
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The overall situation throughout South Vietnam began to improve soon after American troops were committed to the ground war; and as the enemy gradually lost the initiative, his main force units were driven away from populated regions and other areas vital to the defense of the country. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) regained their poise and, with increased United States assistance and support, were greatly strengthened.

The exertions made by the Communists during the 1968 general offensive seriously depleted their strength. The huge losses they incurred during this campaign — 200,000 troops killed, taken prisoners or rallied to the GVN — caused entire units of the enemy's main force to be paralyzed and considerably weakened his infrastructure. Consequently, as of late 1968, it became evident that the improved military situation provided the opportunity for an energetic revitalization of the Republic of Vietnam. To consolidate the gains, the United States found it necessary to further strengthen the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam and increase American assistance in all forms. Firepower and troop morale of ARVN combat units were quickly improved as a result of force structure increases, the creation of new units and the delivery of modern weapons such as the M-16 rifle, M-60 machine-gun and M-79 grenade-launcher.

In 1969, the new Nixon administration reemphasized efforts begun in the last part of the Johnson administration to obtain a lasting peace in Indochina. New efforts were made in Paris and the United States adopted a more flexible negotiating stance aimed at reaching an early compromise. While at the Midway meeting of 8 June 1969, the President of the United States and the President of the Republic of

Vietnam proclaimed a new course of action, which the U.S. referred to as "Vietnamization." Under the doctrine of Vietnamization, the United States would begin removing its combat troops and turning over the prosecution of the war to the soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam. To facilitate the withdrawal of United States troops, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam were to be rapidly expanded and modernized and the United States would also assist and strengthen the development and economy of the Republic of Vietnam by increasing non-military aid as well.

The years 1969 and 1970 witnessed an unprecedented development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam. Their total strength was rapidly increased from 700,000 in early 1968 to nearly one million in late 1970. Major ARVN combat forces consisted of ten infantry divisions fully equipped with modern weapons, including heavy artillery and armored vehicles. The general reserve forces consisted of the Airborne and Marine Divisions, both up to strength and thoroughly combat-worthy. In addition, armor, artillery, engineer and logistic capabilities were rapidly improved and training facilities were developed in order to provide for the needs of a 1,000,000-man army.

The Air Force and Navy were also strengthened. The Air Force, which had 16,000 men in 1967, was boosted to 45,000 men in 1970. Its five air wings were upgraded into five full-fledged air divisions, equipped with A-37 and A-1H fighters and modern UH-1 helicopters. The Navy also experienced a rapid development from 16,000 men in 1967 to 40,000 in late 1970. New naval units were created as a number of U.S. vessels operating at sea and in rivers were turned over to the Vietnamese Navy. Amphibious Task Force 211 was created at Dong Tam and became fully operational in late 1969. River Patrol Force 212, created in mid-1970, was assigned patrol and interdiction duties on rivers and canals. United States naval vessels operating on the high seas were also gradually turned over to the Vietnamese Navy.

In addition to regular forces, the territorial forces similarly underwent major changes. The numerical strength of the Regional Forces, whose units were responsible for local security at the province and

district levels, rose from 150,000 in early 1968 to 280,000 in late 1970. The number of their fighting units increased accordingly from 880 to 1,600 companies. The Popular Forces, responsible for security in villages and hamlets, numbered 250,000 by late 1970 as compared to 150,000 in 1968, an increase from 4,100 to 7,200 combat platoons. Noteworthy is the fact that these territorial forces were supplied with new basic weaponry just like their regular counterparts and were greatly improved in terms of training, command and control, and logistics.

As the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces developed following the Midway agreement, the United States and other free world forces gradually stood down and redeployed. Of the ten U.S. divisions fighting in Vietnam, only six remained as the year 1971 began.

During the period that United States combat forces were actively fighting the ground war, major units of the Vietnamese regular forces were assigned the primary role of pacification support. The 1968 Communist offensive, however, caused a significant change in the responsibilities of the RVNAF. Since most of the targets of this offensive were cities and urban centers, Communist forces were pitted directly against the ARVN. This general offensive resulted in a military defeat for the enemy and two facts became immediately apparent. One was that the RVNAF had the capability to meet and cope with such challenges. The second was that the people of South Vietnam were still strongly anti-communist. They refused to respond to the call of the Communists for a general uprising and their wide response to the general mobilization law afforded the manpower needed to enlarge the national armed forces.

Even though the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam could not replace the redeployed United States and other free-world forces on a numerical basis, they made every effort to fill the vacuum. In the beginning, this was not a very difficult task. The enemy's post-offensive strength had considerably dwindled while the combat effectiveness of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam was improving as each day passed. New weapons and equipment stimulated ARVN morale. Concurrently, United States troops cooperated with the Vietnamese armed

forces to capitalize on the enemy's diminishing strength. Major operations were launched successively which succeeded in forcing the enemy from his bases and driving him over the national boundaries.

The enemy's weakness and the Allied successes of 1969 and 1970 were favorable to the implementation of the Vietnamization program. ARVN units were redeployed to gradually replace United States troops and assume more combat responsibilities. The northernmost DMZ area was taken over by units of the 1st Infantry Division. By the end of 1969, the northern part of II Corps area and the entirety of IV Corps area were defended by the armed forces of Vietnam. In other corps areas, whenever a United States infantry unit was leaving, adjacent Vietnamese units immediately expanded their operational responsibilities to cover the evacuated area as well.

The Vietnamese Air Force continued to develop and provided more effective support for friendly ground units. The Navy also was given more responsibilities at an accelerated pace. By September 1970, the inner perimeter of Operation Market Time, which was designed to interdict sea infiltration routes to the Communists, became the sole responsibility of the Vietnamese Navy. By the end of 1970, twelve of the fourteen joint United States-Vietnamese naval operations in progress were conducted entirely by the Vietnamese Navy. The other two operations, Solid Anchor (south of Cape Ca Mau) and the outer perimeter of Market Time, were subsequently completely turned over to the Navy of the Republic of Vietnam.

The years 1969 and 1970 were a period when the Republic of Vietnam took advantage of the enemy's declining strength and power. Pacification and development campaigns were launched in rapid succession, designed to reoccupy and rehabilitate the countryside. As early as at the end of 1968, the Hamlet Evaluation System indicated that the pacification program had more than restored the conditions that had existed in the countryside prior to the Communist general offensive. In late 1970, 95 percent of the hamlets of the Republic of Vietnam were recorded as secure and fairly secure (HES categories A, B and C). When compared to 1967, an additional five million people had come under the authority of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam.

Achievements in other areas also pointed to the success of the pacification effort during the initial stages of the Vietnamization program. The number of Communist personnel defecting to the Government of the Republic of Vietnam reached its peak in 1969 (47,000) and remained very high in 1970 (32,000). Many of the Communist senior cadre chose to come over to the side of the government. At the same time, popular sentiment against the Communists continued to rise in the aftermath of their 1968 general offensive.

In early 1970, the People's Self-Defense Force numbered as many as 3-1/2 million members, supplied with approximately 400,000 weapons of various types, a significant force politically and militarily. The territorial forces, comprised of the Regional and Popular Forces, in coordination with the para-military forces including Police, Rural Development cadre, Armed Propaganda cadre, Provincial Reconnaissance units and People's Self-Defense forces, succeeded — with support from ARVN units — in driving the enemy from the populated areas and reducing his infrastructure. His local guerrilla bases were eliminated by these forces while his major bases in country were being destroyed by the Armed Forces of Vietnam and those of the United States.

As the pacification program continued to improve, the people who had taken refuge in the more secure urban areas were able to return to their home villages and resume farming. Rural development programs steadily changed the outlook of the countryside of South Vietnam. Schools sprang up almost everywhere, attended by large numbers of eager children. As a result of the agricultural development and technical guidance programs, extensive use of fertilizers and improved rice hybrids, and finally the implementation of the Land-To-The-Tiller program, agricultural production in South Vietnam improved considerably. Rice production in 1969 increased by 700,000 metric tons as compared to the preceding year. In 1970, this figure rose by another 400,000 tons. Total agricultural production in 1970 reached the 5.5 million tons mark, exceeding even the 1964 figure which had been the highest in South Vietnam since World War II. Besides rice crops, other agricultural products were plentiful. Fisheries became highly productive as a large

number of the fishing fleet units made use of newly imported motors. The results of these rural development programs were apparent throughout South Vietnam in the gleaming prosperity of the countryside: great expanses of green ricefields, the great number of motor bicycles on the roads, the TV antennas on rooftops, and the fleet of motorized sampans crisscrossing the waterways.

Against this favorable setting for increasing self-sufficiency, 1970 also provided a major event that diminished still more the Communist threat and boosted the morale of the people of South Vietnam. Prince Sihanouk was overthrown as Chief of State of neighboring Cambodia. For many years, Cambodia, under Sihanouk's rule, had been a sanctuary for the Communists; they had built on Cambodian territory near the border areas a network of bases from which they mounted attacks against the Republic of Vietnam. It was on this "neutral" territory that Communist war supplies and materiel dispatched from North Vietnam were stored before being brought to use in South Vietnam. The seaport of Sihanoukville had also served as a major supply port for the enemy for many years.

At the end of March 1970, after General Lon Nol had taken over, ARVN III and IV Corps sent a few reconnaissance patrols into the border area adjacent to the provinces of Hau Nghia and Kien Tuong and found a number of Communist supply caches in the area. In late April, with the concurrence of the new Cambodian government, and the cooperation and support of United States units, III and IV Corps launched a large offensive against Communist sanctuaries on the other side of the border. This offensive was joined in early May 1970 by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, 1st Air Cavalry Division and armor elements. While United States units swept into enemy bases and command complexes adjacent to the border, west and north of Tay Ninh province, ARVN forces progressed deeper into Cambodia flushing out Communist units and searching for supply caches.

Unable to resist the advancing U.S. and ARVN units, Communist forces fell back into Cambodia and, in cooperation with Khmer Rouge units, threatened Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, and a number of

other cities. This prompted the new Cambodian government to appeal for help. Responding to this request, III Corps forces assisted in the relief of Cambodian provinces under pressure west of Tay Ninh, while IV Corps helped clear the enemy threat from provinces south of Phnom Penh. During these relief operations, ARVN engineers reestablished road communications on National Route No. 1 between Phnom Penh and Saigon and built a major logistic base at Neak Luong, 40 miles south of the Cambodian capital. A Vietnamese Marine brigade was deployed to Neak Luong with the mission of assisting with the security of Phnom Penh, if required. In the meantime IV Corps units and the Vietnamese Navy mounted operations to clear the Mekong River, a vital supply route for the Cambodian capital.

This crossborder, offensive campaign was a resounding success. By 30 June 1970, which was the deadline for United States forces to withdraw from Cambodia, Allied forces had eliminated 5,000 enemy troops, and captured 9,300 tons of weapons, ammunition and assorted supplies, and 7,000 tons of rice. Most enemy bases had been overrun and destroyed. The amount of materiel and supplies seized was enough for the enemy to sustain a military campaign in his COSVN area of South Vietnam for at least six months.¹

After the Cambodian incursion the RVNAF continued to conduct small-scale crossborder operations as required by the situation or to assist the Cambodian government when requested.

The operations into Cambodia resulted in significant improvements in security in South Vietnam and, just as important, the morale of the population as well as of our troops was stimulated in the belief that, despite the continued redeployment of United States and Free World Military Assistance forces and the deadlocked Paris talks, the U.S. was still striving for a satisfactory solution to the war and Vietnamization was going to work.

¹COSVN, the Central Office for South Vietnam, was the enemy headquarters responsible for the geographical area under GVN Military Region 3, Military Region 4 and the five southern provinces of Military Region 2.

This was a difficult time for the enemy. His system of bases and sanctuaries on both sides of the Cambodian border was apparently paralyzed and continued to be harassed. The port of Sihanoukville (redesignated Kompong Som) no longer was a free port of entry for his supplies and our Operation Market Time on the high seas off the Vietnam coastline was effectively interdicting infiltration by sea. To continue supporting its war in the South, it appeared that North Vietnam would have to rely solely on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the supply route along the rugged Truong Son mountain range. Therefore, an invasion of the Laos Panhandle became an attractive idea; such an operation would retain the initiative for the RVNAF, disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies to South Vietnam, and greatly reduce the enemy's capability to launch an offensive in 1971.

CHAPTER II

The Operational Environment

The Ho Chi Minh Trail System

A by-product of the First Indochina War, 1946-1954, the footpath system that ran North-South along the Truong Son Mountain Range of Vietnam became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail; for a long time it had served the strategic purposes of the Viet Minh. From its jungle redoubt of North Vietnam's highlands, the Viet Minh High Command was faced with the pressing need for a secure communication system that would enable it to direct the war effort in South Vietnam and support its subversive activities in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. National Route No. 1 which ran parallel to the coastline was not practicable because of French control. Sea routes were available but the risks of running into French naval patrols and foul weather were forbiddenly high. Besides, the Viet Minh did not have a reliable, organized sea transportation fleet. Considering these circumstances, the heavily jungled mountains of the Truong Son Range lent themselves to the establishment of a secure line of communication generally free from observation and attacks.

It was this footpath system that kept the Viet Minh resistance in South Vietnam alive with fresh troops, weapons and ammunition. By the end of the First Indochina War, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been well developed although it was only a system of jungle paths connected by local secondary roads and suitable only to movement by foot, animals and bicycles. Soldiers moved on foot but military supplies, although usually carried by manpower, were sometimes transported on bicycles, oxcarts, horses or elephants. The narrow, steep pathways meandered

through dense jungles, across streams and mountains and a journey on the trail was exhausting and slow.

For a time after the Geneva Accords in 1954, the trail was practically abandoned since the war had ended. Then, when South Vietnam, under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem, began restoring its stability and proving that it could stand on its own after repudiating reunification with North Vietnam, the Central Committee of North Vietnam's Communist Party decided on a new course of action against South Vietnam. In May 1959, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) High Command activated Transportation Group 559 under the direct control of its Rear Service (Logistics) Department. Group 559 was to be a special unit in charge of moving men and supplies into the South for the support of the insurgency effort which had just been initiated under the form of a "war of liberation." The trail's old pathways were rehabilitated and widened, and new ones were surveyed and projected. Group 559's task of enlarging this strategic axis of infiltration was pushed ahead with vigor and determination.

The increase of subversive activities against South Vietnam was in almost direct proportion to the development of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, since the Communist war effort in the South was largely sustained by a constant flow of cadre and troops from the North. At this early stage, the flow was sporadic because the journey was harsh and long for the men and the means of transporting supplies still primitive. But as pathways were eventually enlarged into roads, the means of transportation were also improved.

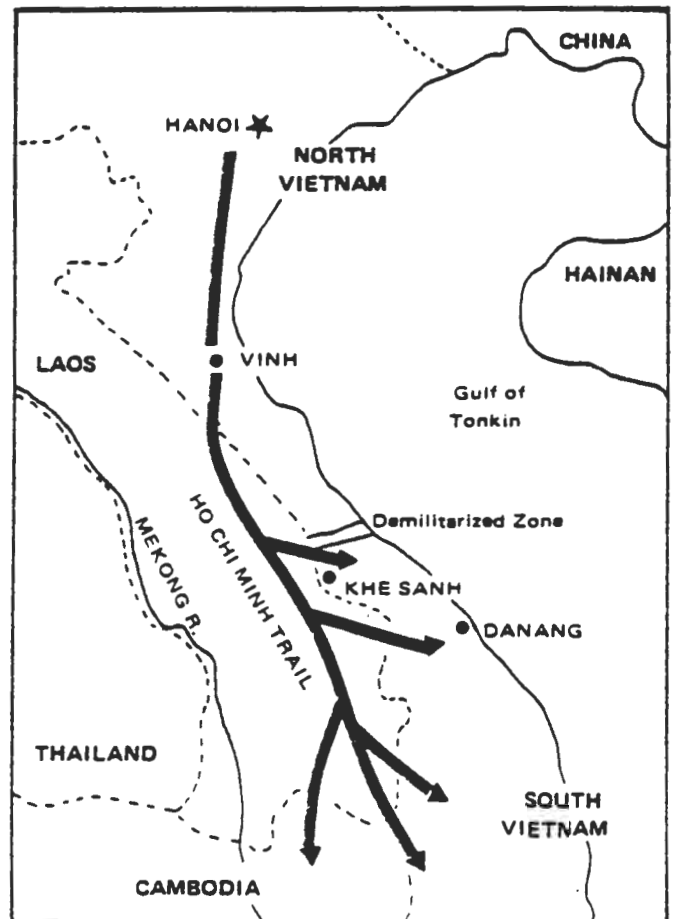
Prior to 1965, the Ho Chi Minh system was close to the Vietnam border, but after the United States became involved in the war and bombings increased, the Communists gradually shifted toward the west where they found the densely jungled areas of lower Laos and eastern Cambodia perfect sanctuaries for the movement or concentration of troops and the storage of weapons and war materials.

By the end of the 1960's, the Ho Chi Minh trail had become an elaborate system of nearly 2,000 miles of pathways and roads, including some natural waterways. (Map 1) It started at Vinh, ran through the

Mu Gia Pass and other lesser passes such as Ban Karai and Ban Raving, penetrated into lower Laos and finally came out in northern Cambodia and the Tri-Border area of South Vietnam. In several areas, the trail system was so extensive that it could be compared to a cobweb of criss-crossing roads making up a corridor of from 30 to 50 miles wide, complete with bridges (over or under water), culverts, river crossing ramps, much of it concealed under dense jungle canopies. With the assistance of Pathet Lao guerrillas, the estimated 50,000 troops of NVA Group 559 and about 100,000 Vietnamese volunteers and forced laborers maintained this vital artery.

To protect the corridor, the Communists established an elaborate defense and security system. The duty of Pathet Lao units was to intensify guerrilla activities and launch periodic attacks in order to keep the Royal Lao Army confined to the cities and towns along the Mekong River. The protection of the trail system and storage areas was performed by Group 559 itself. Augmented by infantry units and unattached militiamen, the group defense forces included anti-aircraft units armed with all types of light and heavy weapons, from 12.7-mm, 14.5-mm and 23-mm heavy machineguns to 37-mm, 57-mm and 100-mm anti-aircraft cannons.

Group 559 installed a forward headquarters in the southern panhandle of North Vietnam from where it controlled many 'binh trams' (literally troop stations). In 1970 there were about 40 such stations, from Vinh to the Cambodian border, under the control of a number of intermediary headquarters. Each binh tram was a self-contained, logistical complex



Map 1 - The Ho Chi Minh Trail

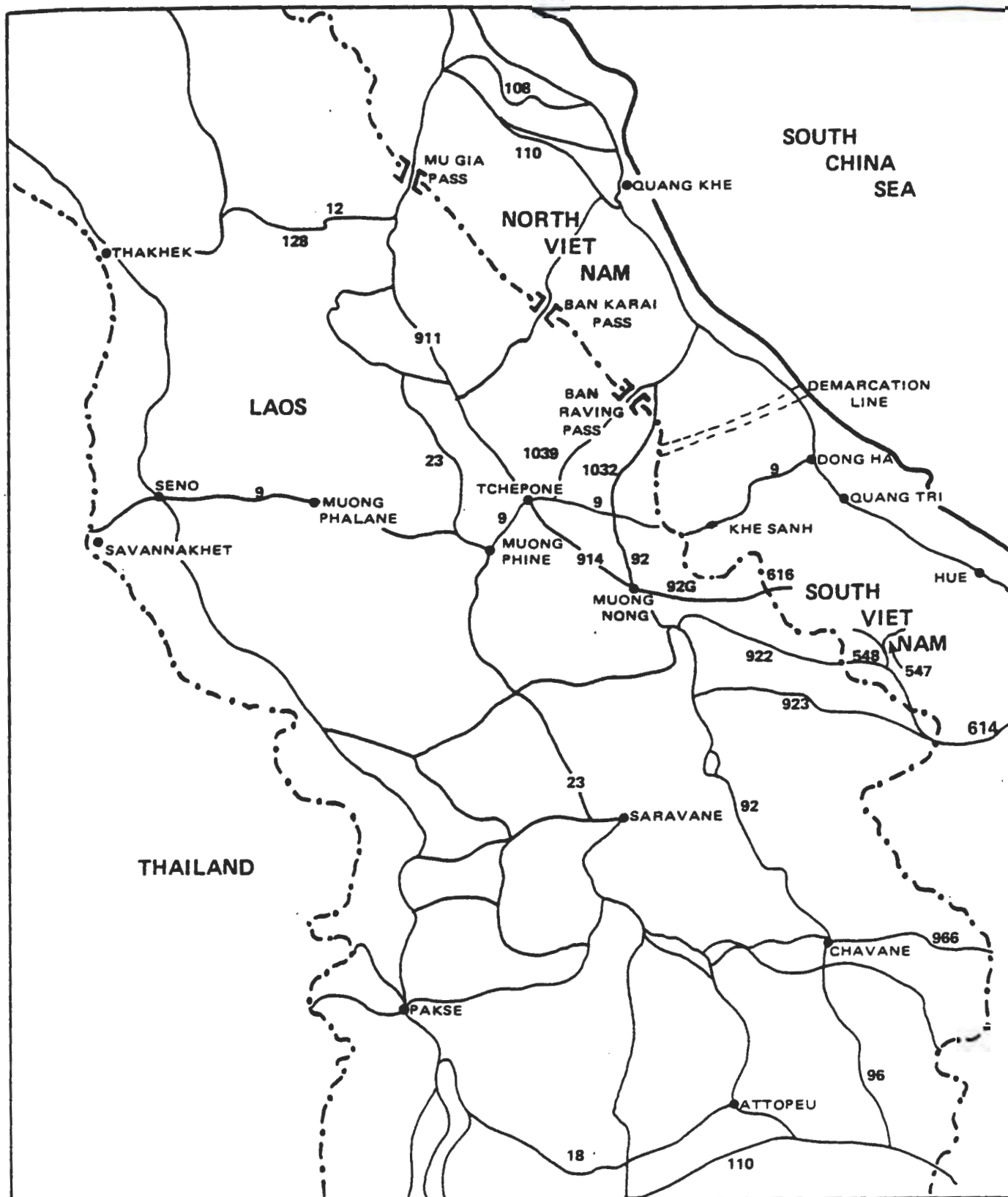
responsible for a well-defined area. Its subordinate units usually consisted of engineer troops, surface and waterway transportation elements, maintenance units, quartermaster and medical units, warehouses, and a certain number of way stations to support troop movements.

During the cessation of bombings in North Vietnam, trucks moved by convoy from Vinh down the trail. Upon reaching the Laotian border, they formed units of five to eight vehicles and usually moved only at night or in foul weather in order to avoid the round-the-clock bombing by United States Air Force planes. As a result, binh trams were usually separated from one another by a day's journey and their parking areas were scattered and well concealed. The vehicles moving on the trail only transported supplies and heavy materials. Light equipment was either carried on men's backs or by animals. Since troops had to march, they moved by day or night, using pathways different from those used by trucks. New recruits or replacements usually entered the system at Vinh in North Vietnam and often marched over 100 days to reach their final destination in South Vietnam. In view of this long journey, they had to rest and recuperate at way stations where they received food, medicine and indoctrinations. Combat units usually moved by battalions of 500-600 men each and they often suffered substantial losses from disease and constant bombings by the U.S. Air Force.

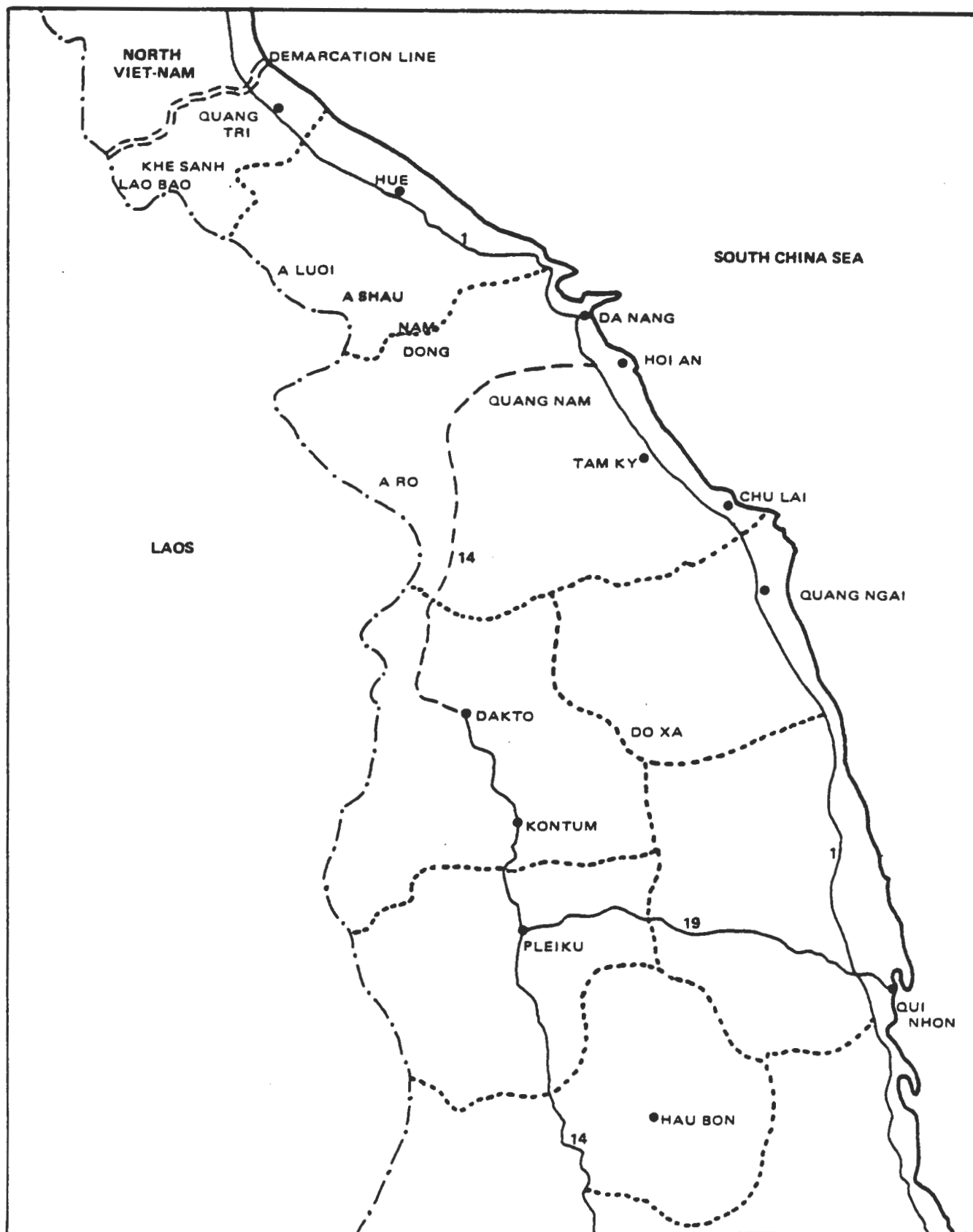
The extensive use of vehicles posed a fuel supply problem for the Communists. Until they built a pipeline system from Vinh to the Mu Gia Pass in 1968, all fuels were transported by trucks but by February 1969 the main pipeline had been extended to the Muong Nong area in Laos, west of the A Shau valley. (Map 2) Fuel storage areas along this line became one of the major targets for bombings by American planes.

As the insurgency intensified in South Vietnam, efforts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh supply line increased. As early as the first few years of the First Republic, President Ngo Dinh Diem implemented several plans aimed at controlling the territory adjacent to the Laos border. In Military Region 1, agrovilles were established in such areas as Lao Bao, A Shau, A Luoi and Nam Dong. (Map 3) ARVN units regularly conducted reconnaissance patrols deep into the border areas adjacent to

Map 2 - The Trail System, Lower Laos - 1970



Map 3— The Border Area, Military Regions 1 & 2



Laos, particularly in the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Kontum. The enemy base area of Do Xa, which lay astride the boundary of MR-1 and MR-2, was a target for frequent ARVN attacks. In 1958, repair work began on the abandoned stretch of GVN National Route No. 14 which paralleled the Laotian border and connected Kontum with Hoi An in Quang Nam Province but the onset of the insurgency interrupted the work which was never resumed.

During the period from 1960 to 1965, as the fighting escalated, the GVN was unable to do anything against the Laos infiltration route but the United States made a significant contribution in 1961 when it helped organize the highlands Montagnards into combat units (CIDG's) and develop the Vietnamese Special Forces for the defense of the border areas. Against Communist activities on the Ho Chi Minh trail, however, neither the U.S. Army Special Forces nor their Vietnamese counterparts ever interdicted the Communist logistics system to a significant degree, even during the period of maximum effort. Also, the idea of building the "McNamara Line" of sensors across the Truong Son mountain range at the southern boundary of the DMZ was never fully implemented as planned.

The surveillance and interdiction of the trail, therefore, lay primarily in the hands of the U.S. Air Force whose reconnaissance planes covered the trail system around the clock. Ground electronic sensors planted along jungle pathways, river crossings, and mountain passes picked up vehicle and other man-made noises, transmitted them to over-flying planes which relayed the information to terminal stations to be analyzed and interpreted. The electronic monitoring of enemy activities on the trail system helped record the number of vehicles and men moving along the trail; consequently, intelligence on Communist infiltration was remarkably reliable.

In addition to surveillance, a major task for the United States Air Force was to interdict this infiltration. All types of aircraft were used including B-52 strategic bombers, sophisticated fighter-bombers and several types of gun ships. The U.S. Air Force claimed that its bombs and improved weapons systems inflicted heavy losses to the enemy in terms of personnel, vehicles and materiel moving down the

trail. In fact, in early 1971, the Air Force released the story that this interdiction was so effective that only one ton out of every 32 tons shipped from North Vietnam ever reached its final destination in South Vietnam.¹ Subsequent NVA offensive operations in South Vietnam demonstrated that the U.S. Air Force claim was greatly exaggerated.

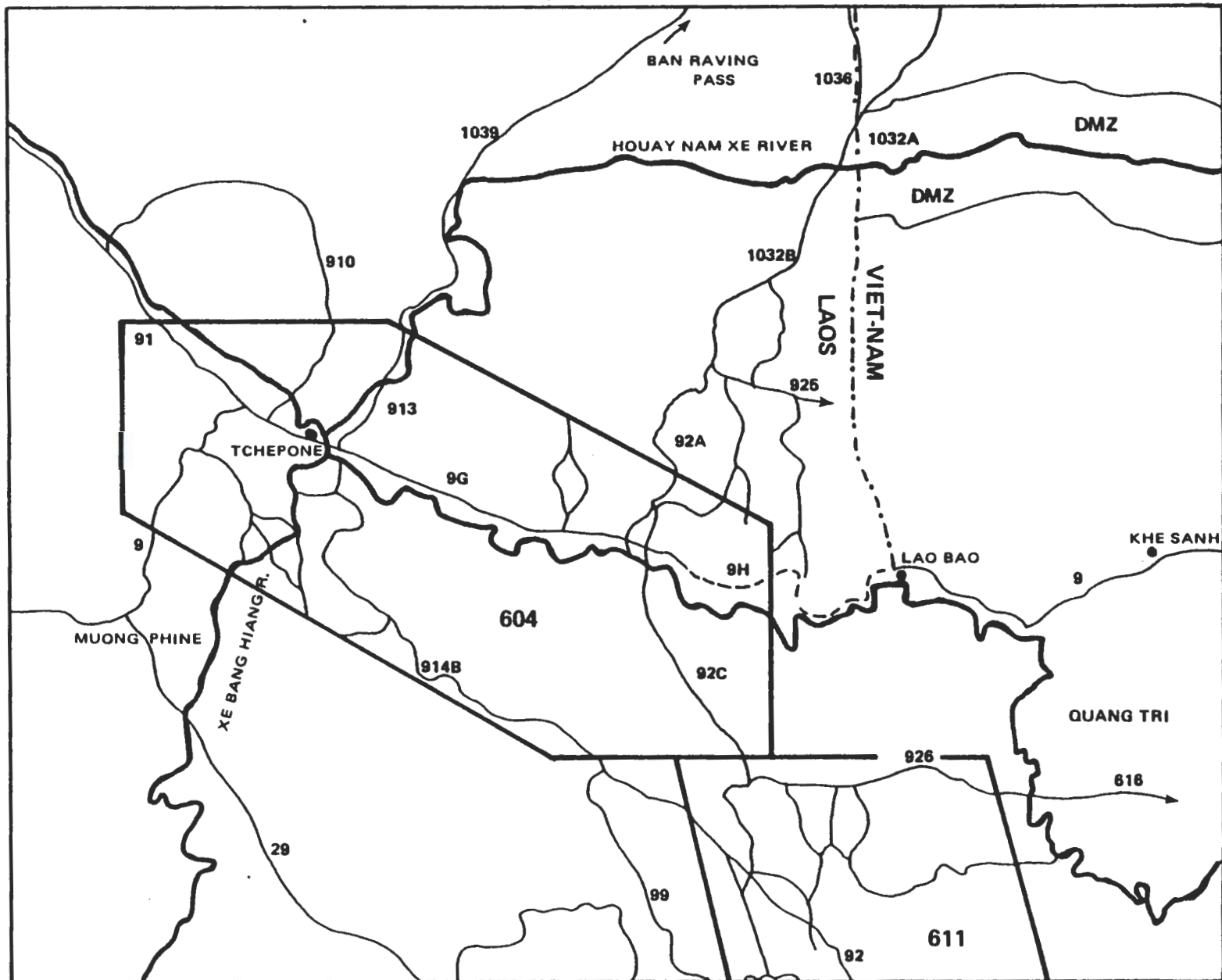
Among the targets of intensive bombing were the mountain passes and roads which were pounded day and night. The enemy's efforts to repair the damage were complicated by his lack of heavy machinery, but he was resilient and stubborn. No sooner was a mountain road destroyed than a detour was completed.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail could supply about 50 percent of the enemy's combat needs; in other words, the trail was capable of sustaining Communist forces in RVN Military Regions 1 and 2. The port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia was used to support forces operating in RVN Military Regions 3 and 4. The *coup* in Phnom Penh during March 1970, however, closed the port. The Ho Chi Minh Trail then became essential for the enemy to support the entire war in South Vietnam. As a result, the NVA Transportation Group 559 received special reinforcements and during the second half of 1970, the enemy made a determined effort to develop logistical base area 604, adjacent to Quang Tri province. (Map 4) Concurrently, he improved the existing base and road system in the eastern part of lower Laos. After his seizure of the cities of Attapeu and Saravane in Laos, he widened his trail system to the west in order to increase the flow of supplies and to complicate the U.S. Air Force's interdiction efforts.

At the beginning of 1970, the enemy's plan to rehabilitate Route 1036 was suspended for some time due to extensive United States bombing along the Laotian border. Nevertheless, he succeeded in opening Route 1039 through the Ban Raving Pass which connected with Route 913. This gave the enemy an additional route into Tchepone, the communications center for base area 604. In the meantime, Route 1032A in North Vietnam

¹"Untold Story of the Ho Chi Minh Trail", U.S. News and World Report, February 15, 1971.

Map 4 — The Logistical Area Of Tchepone



allowed him to move his trucks to the western edge of the DMZ. Here his supplies were usually floated on the Houay Nam Xe River and then on the Xe Bang Hiang River southwesterly toward Tchepone where they were picked up before reaching the town.

To the south, the enemy had already completed Route 616 which cut across the Xepon River and deep into South Vietnam. The existence of this east-west infiltration route was detected for the first time on 1 January 1970 but subsequent surveillance indicated that enemy activities on it were light. The heaviest traffic was always reported on the north-south axis, moving from base area 604 on Routes 96, 926 and 914 toward base area 611.

By January 1971, Route 1032A had been connected with Route 1032B which gave the enemy an additional roadway into lower Laos from North Vietnam. Recordings made by electronic sensors indicated that of every four trucks leaving North Vietnam, one always moved on this route regardless of the bombings by United States planes west of the DMZ. Aerial photos also revealed that the enemy had built several alternate bypass routes in this area in order to avoid concentrated bombings and ensure the flow of traffic. Reconnaissance planes further reported that east-west Route 925 had been widened but terminated approximately two-and-a-half miles from the GVN border. This appeared to indicate that the enemy wanted to project another infiltration route into the Khe Sanh area, west of Quang Tri but subsequent air reconnaissance showed that the enemy was using Route 616 for truck traffic and his activities were increasing substantially south of base area 611.

All of these indications clearly confirmed the enemy's efforts to open additional infiltration roads, develop storage areas, transshipment points and truck parks, and to make the entire area just west of Quang Tri Province an intricate logistical and transportation complex complete with pipelines and bypass roads. Furthermore, all these activities progressed with little interruption despite continuous bombings. The efforts were most conspicuous in base areas 604 and 611. On the other hand, to increase his protection capabilities, the enemy also moved additional anti-aircraft and combat units into these areas.

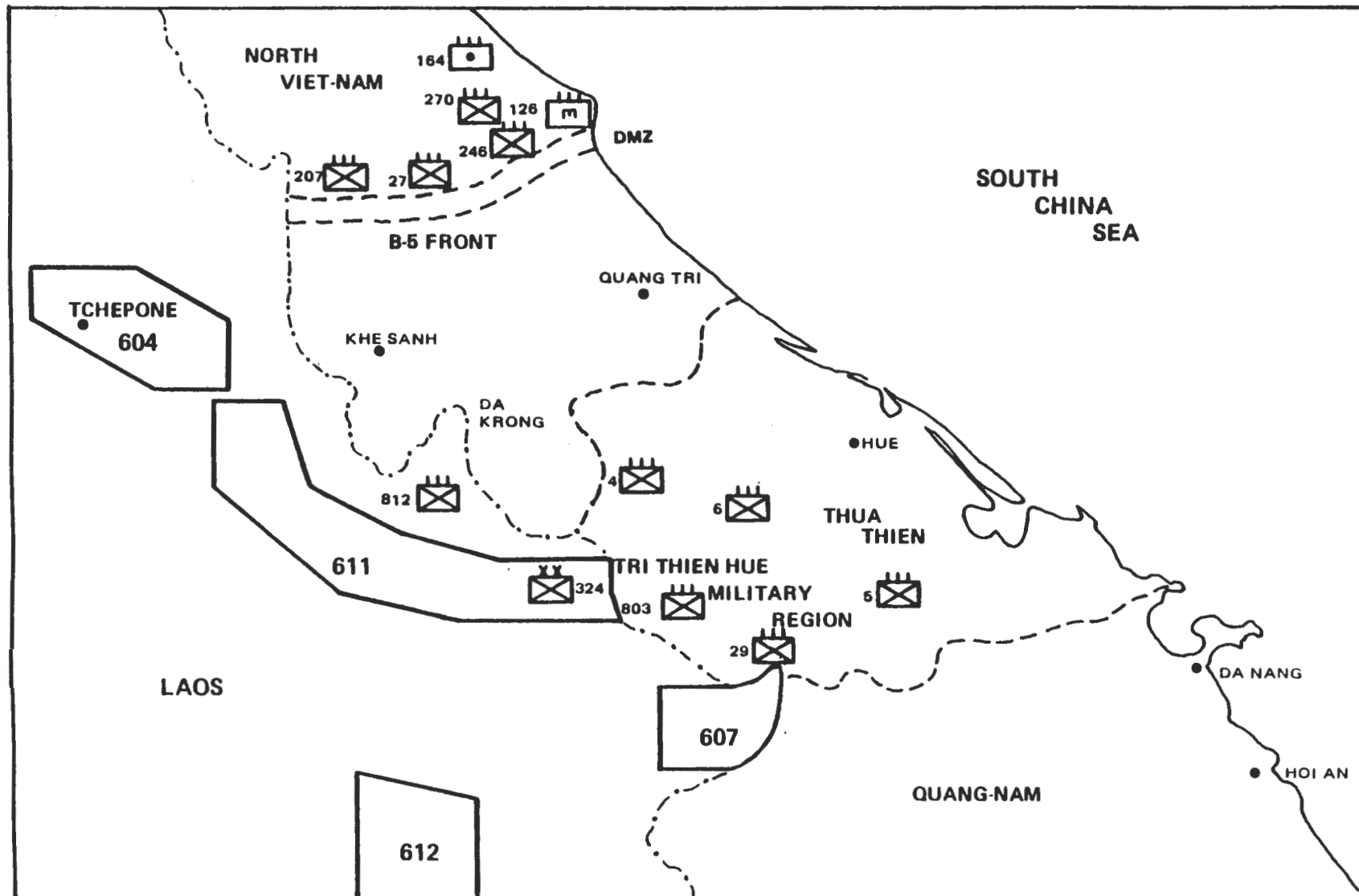
Enemy Situation in Northern Military Region 1

In South Vietnam proper, no significant enemy activities were recorded in northern MR-1 during the entire first half of 1970. Enemy initiatives in this area consisted only of attacks by fire and small-scale, sapper attacks. Targets were usually remote, small-size fire support bases and outposts. The enemy main force units devoted this entire period to building roads, refitting troops, and storing food and supplies, but intelligence reports revealed that enemy forces were preparing to launch an offensive campaign against the two northernmost provinces of MR-1, probably in January 1971. Another agent's report disclosed that North Vietnam might strike forcefully into Quang Tri and Thua Thien during the spring and summer of 1971 with a goal to occupy the plains area of these two provinces. At the boundary area between Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, the enemy had further extended the newly rehabilitated Route 616 into the Da Krong River valley, apparently with a view to facilitate his supply movements into MR-1.

In terms of force structure, in the DMZ area, the enemy's B5 Front forces consisted most notably of three infantry regiments: the 207th, 27th, and 246th which were all deployed for the defense of this area; a number of artillery battalions; the 33d Sapper Battalion and the 126th Naval Sapper Regiment. Both of these sapper units usually conducted attacks along the DMZ area, against National Route No. 9 and the Cua Viet River. The 270th Regiment had the apparent mission of protecting the Vinh Linh area, north of the DMZ while the 164th Artillery Regiment was conducting training and defending the coastal area. (*Map 5*)

In the enemy Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region, the enemy main force consisted of three regiments under direct control of the MR headquarters — Regiments 4, 5, and 6 — and a number of sapper battalions which usually operated within the MR and sometimes penetrated into the plains area of Thua Thien Province to interdict traffic on National Route No. 1. In addition, west of Thua Thien and in base area 611, the 324B NVA Division, supported by the 675th Artillery Regiment, was almost always deployed with its three infantry regiments, the 812th, 803d, and 29th.

Map 5 - Enemy Deployment, Northern MR I



Enemy Situation in the Laos Panhandle

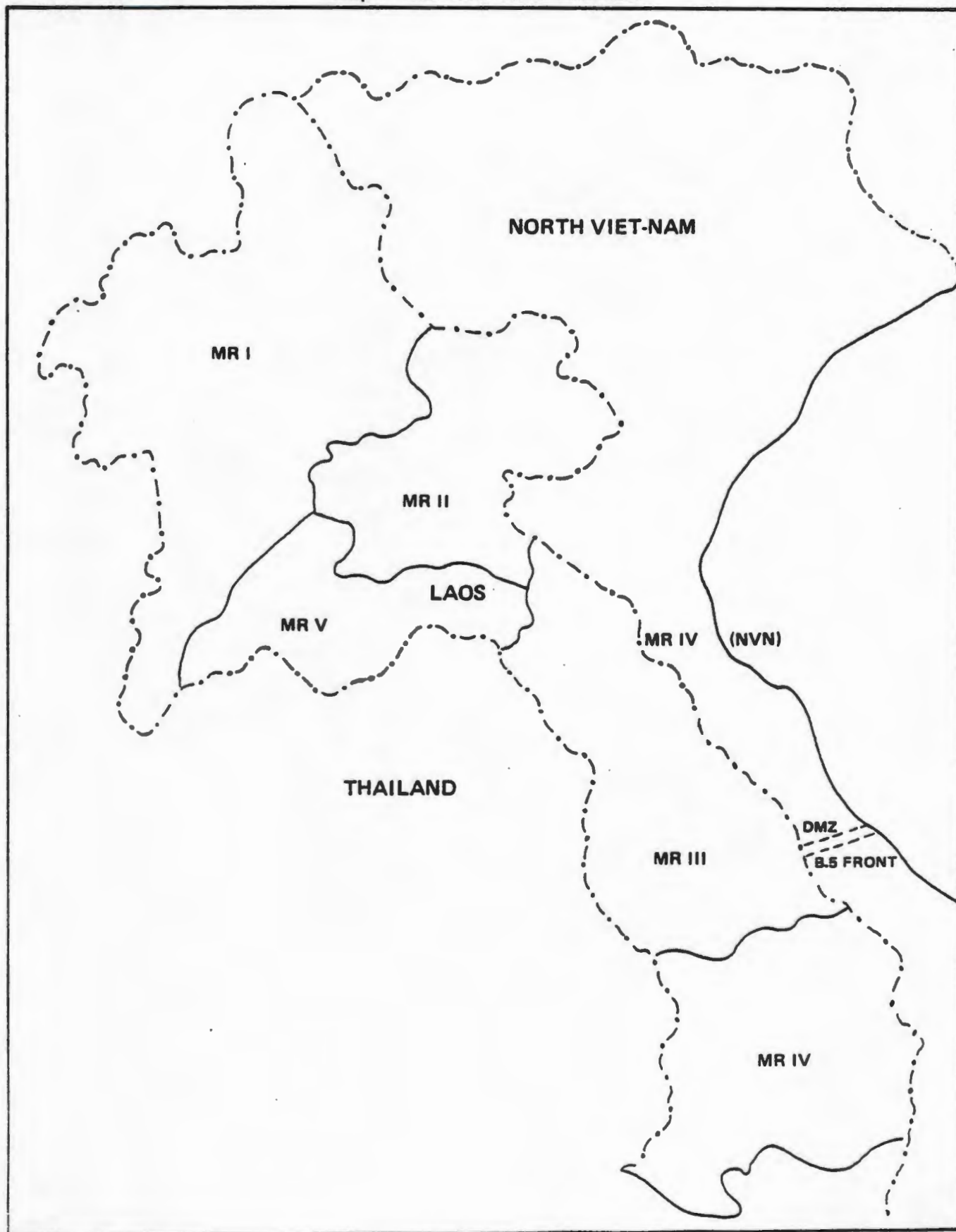
The enemy had a sizable combat force in Laos. (Map 6) Within the Royal Lao MR III area, this force was estimated at 42,000 men, consisting of 13 NVA battalions (5,000 men), 20 Pathet Lao battalions (5,000), and about 32,000 troops and cadres of Transportation Group 559. Further south in Royal Lao MR IV, enemy strength was estimated at 22,000 troops who made up 17 NVA battalions (7,000 men), 21 Pathet Lao battalions (4,000 men) and about 10,000 troops and cadres belonging to six binh trams of the 559th. In northern Laos, enemy strength was estimated at 33,000, consisting of 16,000 NVA and 17,000 Pathet Lao troops. However, intelligence estimates precluded the participation of these elements in any engagement west of Quang Tri.

Air reconnaissance and agent reports further confirmed the enemy's stepped up logistical activities and augmentation of combat forces at base areas 604 and 611 since the beginning of the lower Laos dry season. In October, 1970, an agent report revealed that a division-size unit, approximately 10,000 strong, was leaving the Mu Gia Pass and moving south. It was believed at that time that this was the 320th NVA Division with its three organic regiments, the 48th, 52d, and 64th. Subsequent intelligence reports confirmed that the 52d Regiment was located west of the DMZ and the 64th Regiment was building roads in Quang Binh Province, north of the DMZ. It was, therefore, probable that the 48th Regiment was the unit which was moving into base area 604.²

A rallier from the enemy B-7 Front reported that the 9th and 66th Regiments of the 304th NVA Division had returned to North Vietnam, leaving behind the 24B Regiment which used to operate west of Khe Sanh. (Map 7) Air reconnaissance missions revealed traces of an enemy unit in the area west of Quang Tri. This was believed to be an element of the 24B Regiment. At the same time, the enemy 81st Artillery Battalion was

²All enemy units referred to in this monograph are infantry unless otherwise specified.

Map 6: Laos and North Viet-Nam



The Enemy Counteracted

Nearly a week had passed since Ban Dong was occupied. Except for a few clearing activities conducted by units of the 1st Infantry Division, the forward movement of ARVN forces seemed to have stalled. The heliborne insertion of troops through the fierce enemy air defense screen in the afternoon of 10 February had enabled friendly forces to quickly occupy this objective. The linkup with armored forces had also been made immediately thereafter. Fire Support Base Ban Dong was now well entrenched with six 105-mm and six 155-mm howitzers and adequate ammunition and supplies. However, as of 16 February, six days after the capture of Ban Dong, there had been no further progress by ARVN troops toward the objective Tchepone. In the meantime, the enemy had increased his air defense capabilities along the mountain slopes to the south. Enemy attacks by fire, which were initially conducted with assorted mortars and 122-mm rockets, were now occasionally augmented by long-range artillery. ARVN armored units had tried to advance but could not make much progress. The dense forests bordering the road required careful, time-consuming reconnaissance to avoid ambush and this made the armored column's movement extremely slow.

On 17 February, it rained hard and the helicopters rested idly on the airfields. However, since early morning, an armored infantry task force consisting of the 17th Armored Squadron and the 8th Airborne Battalion operating north of Ban Dong had been engaging the enemy. The results were four friendly troops killed while the enemy suffered 36 killed. Sixteen AK-47 assault rifles and a quantity of military clothing and equipment were seized. Toward noon, this task force made another contact four kilometers north of Ban Dong and captured one PT-76 amphibious tank, two Russian trucks, one 12.7-mm machinegun and two 7.62-mm machineguns. The PT-76 tank was only slightly damaged and was towed back to A Luoi. To the south, the 1st Infantry Division continued to make contacts and receive attacks by fire.

In the early morning of 18 February, the 1st Airborne Battalion, while conducting an Arc Light bomb damage assessment two kilometers north of LZ Bravo, made light contact with the enemy and found a command post. Captured documents indicated that this was the command post of the 308th NVA Division and traces found in the area were rather recent. Toward noon, U.S. air cavalry spotted and attacked an enemy truck convoy nine kilometers west-northwest of Ban Dong destroying one truck, and damaging another and a tracked vehicle. Nearby, at two places two-and-a-half kilometers to the east, the 2d Troop, 17th Armored Squadron found and cut three pipeline sections four inches in diameter. Two sections were destroyed while the third one was made unusable. During the day, other airborne units and elements of the 1st Infantry Division were subjected to sporadic attacks by fire and ground contacts and a few helicopters were shot down.

All these activities were quickly eclipsed by reports of heavy enemy troop concentrations around the 39th and 21st Ranger Battalions. Both battalions were being subjected to attacks by fire and ground attacks and the fighting lasted all night while friendly artillery, tactical air and flareships responded quickly in support of the embattled rangers.

The next morning, enemy pressure on the 21st Ranger Battalion gradually diminished but heavy pressure persisted on the 39th Battalion in the Ranger North area. The battle continued over 19 February. Enemy troops here were confirmed to be elements of the 102d Regiment of the 308th Division, all with new weapons and clothing. Before launching an assault, the rangers reported, the enemy made extensive use of recoilless rifles and mortars; his fire was very accurate. The strongest enemy attacks were directed at the eastern flank of the rangers which was their weakest spot. However, the 39th Battalion continued to hold its positions with support from U.S. artillery and tactical air.

Meanwhile, information concerning the enemy's growing capabilities became clearer with each day. His air defense network was becoming dense and heavy artillery was committed. ARVN artillerymen confirmed that, in addition to the various types of mortars and rockets commonly

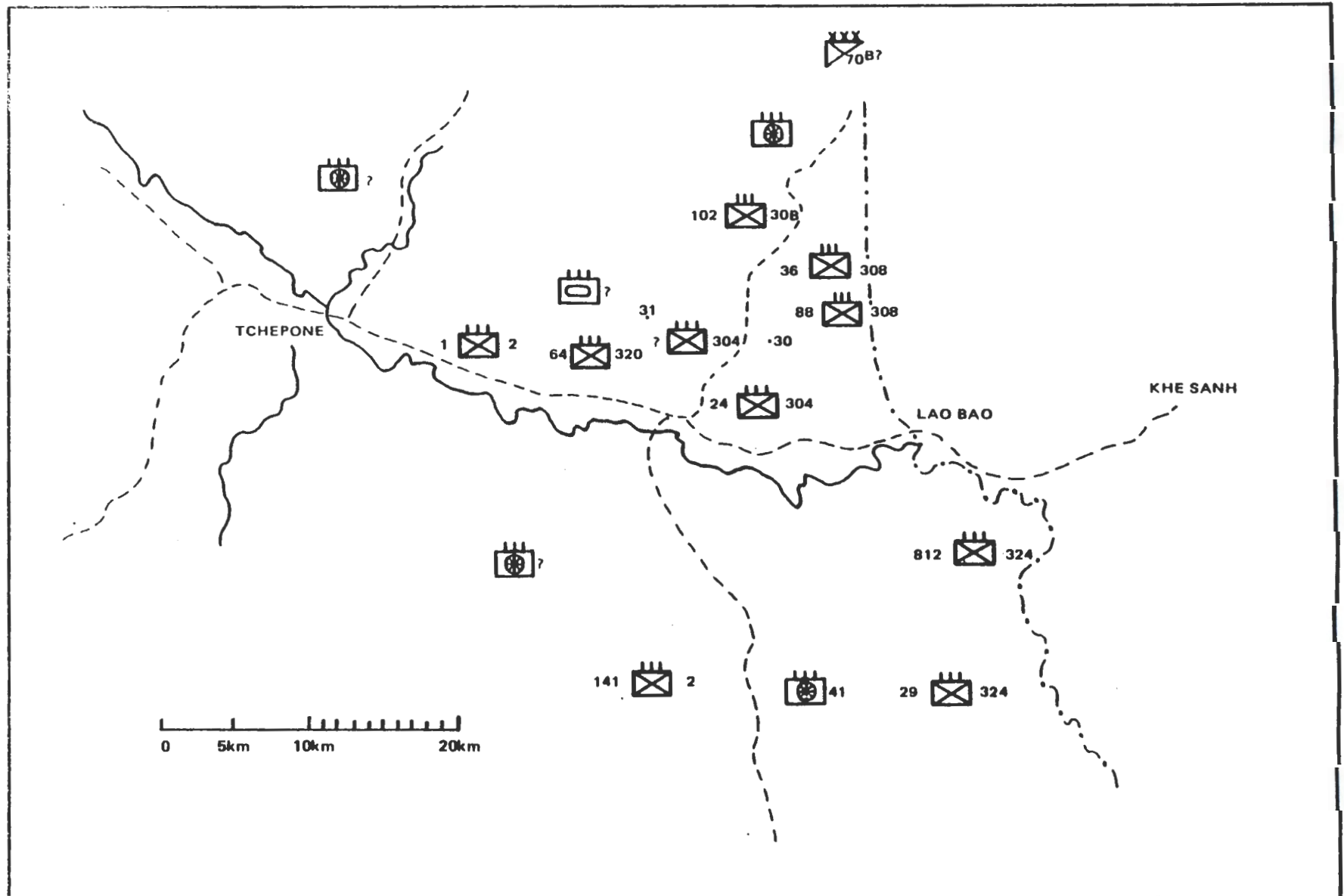
used in South Vietnam, the enemy had also fired quite a few rounds of 122- and 105-mm field guns and howitzers and possibly 85- and 130-mm field guns as well. In addition to three pipeline sections found and destroyed, captured documents also suggested the existence of pipeline throughout Base Areas 604 and 611. And the presence of enemy armor became increasingly apparent.

Enemy main force units in the area of operation were confirmed during the first days to be the 1st Regiment of the 2d (Yellow Star) Division, 24B Regiment of the 304th Division and elements of the 675th Artillery Regiment. A prisoner from the 14th Air Defense Battalion of the 2d Division disclosed that the subordinate units of this division (1st, 3d and 141st regiments) had been moving east from the Tchepone area since early February to block the ARVN advance.

Enemy opposition grew stronger with each day around Ban Dong and the area of Route 1032B for which the rangers were responsible. On 10 February, the 21st Ranger Battalion engaged an element of the enemy's 88th Regiment. The next day, the 37th Ranger Battalion engaged a battalion-size unit near FSB Phu Loc. The discovery of the command post of the 308th Division on 18 February further confirmed reports that this division had joined in the fighting (the 308th Division had three regiments: 36th, 88th and 102d).

On 11 February, two prisoners disclosed that the 64th Regiment/320th Division had arrived in lower Laos on 4 February and was operating in the Ban Dong area. On 14 February another prisoner of the 64th Regiment gave the location of each battalion of this regiment. He also reported an NVA armored unit with an estimated fifteen PT-76s in the same area southeast of Fire Support Base 31 where signs of enemy tracked vehicles had been detected. The vehicles were subsequently attacked. Toward the south, in the area of operations of the 1st Infantry Division, captured documents confirmed the location of Binh Tram 41 two kilometers south of Landing Zone Blue with the 4th Air Defense Battalion, the 75th Engineer Battalion, and an unidentified infantry regiment providing additional security. This infantry regiment might have been the 141st Regiment of the 2d Division. (Map 18)

Map 18 – Enemy Situation, Last Week of February 1971



While firefights were raging in the Ranger North area, on 19 February President Thieu visited I Corps Forward CP at Dong Ha. General Lam reported the critical situation faced by the 39th Rangers and the increasingly forceful enemy reactions which were making the planned push toward Tchepone by the Airborne Division highly questionable. In the presence of ARVN division commanders, President Thieu told him to take his time and, under the present circumstances, perhaps it would be better to expand search activities toward the southwest to cut off Route 914 which led into Base Area 611.

During the night of 19 February, the enemy continued to attack the 39th Battalion while launching uninterrupted attacks by fire to hold the 21st Battalion in check. Seven fixed-wing gunships and six flare-ships were used in support of the 39th Battalion and, from 0730 to 1430 hours on 20 February, 32 tactical air sorties were flown in support of the rangers. Efforts to resupply and evacuate their casualties were made with strong support from tactical air, gunships and artillery. Some helicopters managed to land in the area, ammunition was delivered and some wounded evacuated. But upon takeoff, two helicopters were damaged by enemy fire. One had to land in the positions of the 21st Ranger Battalion (Ranger South) and the other managed to land at Fire Support Base 30.

In the afternoon, reconnaissance aircraft reported sighting an estimated 400 to 500 enemy troops encircling the 39th Battalion. At 1710 hours on 20 February, radio contact with the 39th Ranger Battalion was lost. At 1856 hours, I Corps CP received information that the able-bodied personnel of the battalion had fought their way out and reached the 21st Ranger Battalion positions with most of the wounded and all of their weapons but with very little ammunition left. Those who reached the 21st Ranger Battalion numbered nearly 200; 107 were still able to fight but 92 were wounded. Total losses were 178 dead and missing and 148 wounded. Intelligence reports indicated enemy casualties to be 639 killed with a corresponding number of weapons destroyed (423 AK-47s, 15 B40/B41s and numerous automatic weapons).

With most of the wounded of the 39th Ranger Battalion still stranded in the 21st Rangers' positions, this unit received intense attacks by fire, including 130-mm artillery, on the night of 21 February. Plans were made to evacuate the wounded rangers the following day. Toward noon on 22 February, the area around the battalion position was subjected to a heavy barrage of fire involving tactical air, air cavalry, aerial artillery and ground artillery for nearly an hour while 13 medical evacuation helicopters were airborne, ready to go in. All of them landed and successfully picked up 122 wounded as well as one U.S. pilot who had been stranded there since his aircraft was shot down. The ranger force remaining in combat position at Ranger South numbered approximately 400 men including 100 from the 39th Battalion but two days later, on 24 February, the battalion was ordered by the I Corps commander to withdraw to FSB 30. From there they were helilifted to FSB Phu Loc.

While the 39th Ranger Battalion was holding out, numerous activities took place in other areas. U.S. air cavalry continued to search for and destroy pipelines. Units of the 1st Infantry Division moved further south, striking along Route 92 and finding a number of enemy installations, but also making numerous contacts and receiving attacks by fire. The 8th Airborne Battalion and armored elements engaged the enemy two kilometers north of Ban Dong, destroying one T-34 tank and a 23-mm gun position. This was another strong indication of enemy armor involvement. On the friendly side, a number of U.S. helicopters were shot down while on supply, medical evacuation or support missions.

The corps commander had concluded that the position held by the 21st Rangers and the survivors of the 39th was untenable. A maximum effort in air and artillery support was required for each resupply and evacuation mission and he had other pressing demands for this support. The position was not an objective in itself and there was no military advantage in sacrificing a ranger battalion in a doomed attempt to hold it. The corps commander was looking toward his objectives in the west and he wished to conserve as much of his combat power as possible for the main mission.

In the southern sector of the 1st Division, within objective area A-Ro, the 2/3 Battalion came into heavy contact with the enemy on 23 February. The 3/3 Battalion was brought in to reinforce but the enemy would

not disengage. On 24 February, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division requested a B-52 mission and the two battalions pulled back an hour prior to the airstrike; they counterattacked immediately thereafter. Results were verified to be 159 enemy bodies left in place along with numerous weapons. Still, the enemy remained deployed around Fire Support Base Hotel 2, causing a delay in the plans to move the 105-mm artillery battery out and close the base in order to send the 3d Infantry Regiment westward with the mission of cutting off Route 914 as directed by President Thieu during his 19 February visit.

The Loss of Fire Support Base 31

The withdrawal of the 21st Ranger Battalion left the northern flank of the Airborne Division exposed and Fire Support Bases 31 and 30 now bore the brunt of enemy attacks. They had been under pressure since the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 3d Airborne Brigade were inserted. Established in the immediate vicinity of the Communist north-south supply line, both bases were able to monitor closely enemy troop movements as well as signs of enemy armored activities. Each battalion left but a small force to defend the bases while a larger force fanned out in security and search activities, but this mobile force was not sufficient to prevent the enemy from moving close to the bases and setting up mortars and antiaircraft guns to interdict supply and medical evacuation attempts.⁵ Each helicopter landing or departing usually resulted in heavy attacks by fire.

To strengthen the security of Fire Support Base 31, which was a more important position and seemed to be more heavily threatened because it housed the 3d Airborne Brigade headquarters, plans were made to helilift the 6th Airborne Battalion to a mountain range northwest of the base on 13 February. This mountain range controlled a valley running a southeasterly course to Fire Support Base 31 and the valley was the source for attacks by fire against friendly positions. Although B-52

⁵ Airborne units routinely secured their fire support bases in this manner. Other ARVN units also employed this technique when the terrain and enemy situation made it appropriate.

bombs had cleared the landing zone and its approaches, the fleet of helicopters bringing in the first elements of the 6th Airborne Battalion was subjected to heavy attacks by fire immediately upon landing. The remaining elements of the 6th Battalion were diverted to alternate landing zones nearby. Upon touching the ground, the battalion spread out its troops over nearly a kilometer but continued to receive enemy artillery fire. The battalion then broke up and withdrew south, to near Fire Support Base 31. It had lost 28 KIA, 50 WIA and 23 MIA during this short venture. Between that time and its eventual evacuation on 19 February, the 6th Battalion was unable to carry out any significant mission. The northwest mountain range remained under enemy control and FSB 31 continued to hold under heavy enemy pressure.

(Map 19)

A company of the 3d Airborne Battalion operating southwest of FSB 31 received a rallier who was a sergeant, platoon leader in the 24B Regiment of the 304th Division. He reported that the Communists had been preparing to counter the RVNAF-US operation since October 1970. Rear service units of Group 559 had in fact received orders to prepare for combat and an army corps size headquarters called the 70th Front was designated in October 1970, to command the 304th, 308th and 320th divisions, a number of artillery regiments, an armored regiment, a number of air defense regiments and other support units. To counter Operation LAM SON 719, the 70th Front Headquarters was sent to lower Laos along with NVA combat units. The 24B Regiment along with advance elements of the 9th and 66th Regiments had infiltrated the border area west of Quang Tri since 9 February. From all these new revelations it appeared that the enemy would make a determined effort to defend his base areas.

The situation heated up following the evacuation of ranger positions in the north and as a result of heavy enemy attacks. The 31st and 32d Companies, 3d ABN Battalion operating in the mountain ranges northeast of Fire Support Base 31 received orders from the division to move south and meet an armored task force composed of the 17th Armored Squadron and two companies of the 8th Airborne Battalion coming

Map 19 - Attack of FSB 31

Reference: Map 1:100,000
SE ASIA - Sheets 6242
6342

50
43

FSB 31

1 Mar

27 Feb

26 Feb

△ FSB 30

Route 9

→ Enemy Axis of Attack

▨ Friendly Armor Column

✱ Main Engagement

17

8

FSB A LUOI

BAN DONG

40
59

as reinforcement. Remaining at the base were a 105-mm artillery battery, the command section of the 3d Airborne Artillery Battalion and the 33d and 34th Rifle Companies. The 34th Company had suffered heavy combat casualties and was left with only 60 men. Outside the base there was only the 3d Reconnaissance Company deployed on a mountain to the west. On the night of 23 February, a team of Communist sappers was spotted as it attempted to infiltrate the base from the west. Fifteen Communist troops were killed on the spot. The enemy continued to launch attacks by fire and kept our helicopters from providing support. Many of our dead and wounded were left on the base for three or four days as evacuation was not possible.

At 1100 hours on 25 February, Fire Support Base 31 received massive attacks by fire, including fire from 130-mm field guns. At 1300 hours, the 31st Company to the south reported enemy armored movements. The base responded with artillery fire and called for artillery support from Fire Support Bases 30 and A Luoi. The forward air controller's aircraft (FAC 229) was not in the air because of a confusion in grid coordinates and did not arrive until 1400 hours. By that time, fire from small weapons was being received from all directions and enemy tanks had reached the southern perimeter of the base. The first flight of fixed-wing tactical aircraft to reach the base destroyed a number of enemy tanks on the spot and held back the armored thrust against the southern perimeter. At 1520 hours, an estimated 20 tanks supported by enemy infantry troops moved in from the northwest and the east. At precisely the same time, an F-4 aircraft was hit and erupted in flames but the pilot ejected. The Hammer FAC aircraft left its position to direct effort to rescue the U.S. pilot, interrupting air support for Fire Support Base 31. After a fierce artillery barrage, the enemy assaulted. At that time, a helicopter of the advisory team for the Airborne Division was the only aircraft flying overhead. It turned its M-60 machinegun fire on the enemy but it was in vain! Artillery from A Luoi and Fire Support Base 30 continued to fire in support but could not stop the enemy tanks attacking on the hill slopes. Forty minutes later, the base was overrun. It is possible that had the FAC remained

on station above the battle that U.S. airpower could have been employed to hold the firebase. A number of airborne troops managed to break out but the commanders of the 3d Airborne Brigade and 3d Artillery Battalion were captured by the enemy.⁶ The weather thereafter worsened and aircraft could not provide support. ARVN losses at Fire Support Base 31 were 155 killed and missing with a corresponding number of individual weapons and six 105-mm howitzers. The enemy lost an estimated 250 killed and eleven PT-76 and T-54 tanks.

Between 25 February and 1 March, on its way to relieve Fire Support Base 31, the armored-infantry task force composed of the 17th Armored Squadron, the 8th Airborne Battalion and remaining elements of the 3d Airborne Battalion fought three major battles on 25 February, 27 February and on the night of 1 March 1971. They lost 27 KIA, 186 WIA, one MIA, three M-41 tanks and 25 armored vehicles destroyed. The enemy sustained 1,130 killed, two captured, over 300 assorted weapons seized, 17 PT-76 and six T-54 tanks and two Molotova trucks destroyed. The prisoners disclosed that the 24B Regiment and the 36th Regiment of the 308th Division, reinforced by the 202d Tank Regiment, had taken part in recent battles. The 24B Regiment was the unit which attacked Fire Support Base 31 while the 36th Regiment was operating to the south. Cumulative enemy losses during these battles equaled one-half of the strength he initially committed.

Even before the attack on Fire Support Base 31, Fire Support Base 30 of the 2d Airborne Battalion had been the target of repeated enemy attacks by fire involving all sizes of ammunition in the Communist inventory. Because of the accurate enemy anti-aircraft fire, helicopter takeoffs and landings were very risky. Each resupply mission was

⁶Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, commander of the 3d Airborne Brigade, was forced by the Communists to make a radio statement denouncing LAM SON 719 shortly after his capture.

planned and prepared as if it had been a landing of combat troops. On 27 February, resupply efforts were made; smoke cover, artillery, gunships and tactical air were used but the enemy still shot down an aircraft which interrupted the supply attempts. Supplies were running low while the number of dead and wounded increased but could not be evacuated. The base fought desperately to defend itself.

Up to this point, the direction taken by enemy reactions seemed rather clear. The main forces committed consisted of the 304th, 308th and 2d (Yellow Star) Divisions along with elements of the 320th and 324B Divisions and armored and artillery units. The NVA strategy appeared to concentrate on massing the infantry, armor and artillery force necessary to isolate and overwhelm—one by one—the RVNAF fire bases. The enemy took advantage of the rugged terrain to disperse his logistic, engineer and air defense units into small elements which were well entrenched in fortified positions established throughout the area and ARVN forces made contact wherever they moved; only by summoning concentrated firepower were they able to overpower the enemy.

The enemy appeared to have coped effectively with friendly mobile forces, heliborne insertions of troops and artillery positions. His mortar fire, which was sustained by adequate reserves of ammunition, was now supplemented by long-range artillery. This came as a new experience for ARVN forces who were not fully prepared to cope with massive and sustained attacks by fire and the conventional armor-supported infantry attack that overran FSB 31 was probably the first Communist large-scale combined arms attack in the Indochina theater.

The difficulties that Fire Support Base 31 had experienced and Fire Support Base 30 was now experiencing showed that enemy reactions largely consisted of attacks by fire and air defense. Attacks by fire were designed to create tension and cause attrition. Anti-aircraft fire was aimed at disrupting communications, supply and medical evacuation by helicopters, and isolating the bases.

On the friendly side, several shortcomings were evident from the very beginning of the operation. First, high-level headquarters were located too far from the combat zone and from each other. As a result,

they had difficulties coordinating with each other. The U.S. XXIV Corps Forward, for example, was located in Quang Tri while I Corps Forward was in Dong Ha. Coordination was thus difficult and often slow. Second, the tactical command post of I Corps at Ham Nghi Base was apparently weak. Officers on duty there were all in the junior grades; key staff officers meanwhile remained at Dong Ha. Though the I Corps commander was frequently at Ham Nghi during the day, staff operations were still hampered by the absence of senior staff personnel with enough authority and competence to provide immediate solutions to battlefield emergencies as they arose. This was a noteworthy shortcoming and it contributed to the loss of Fire Base 31 and the inadequate coordination between RVNAF commands in the withdrawal.

Third, the U.S. XXIV Corps had no representative in the forward area with authority to coordinate the activities of those units supporting the RVNAF forces such as the 101st Aviation Group, the 1/5 Mechanized Brigade, and the 108th Artillery Group. All these units communicated directly with the ARVN divisions they supported. As a result, coordinating the allocation of support assets among the ARVN divisions became extremely difficult. The divisional advisory staffs meanwhile had no authority to handle the coordination of support and had to refer every action to Quang Tri. Solutions, therefore, were worked out on the basis of expediency, requirements and good will.

In addition, the Airborne Division complained that there was only one forward air controller aircraft for the entire area covered by the division. Since the airborne division was involved in several operations simultaneously conducted in different directions this represented a major handicap. This problem was quite evident during the battle at Fire Support Base 31.

Counterattacks by the enemy revealed the weakness of ARVN anti-tank weaponry. The Airborne Division reported that the M-72 light anti-tank weapon was ineffective against armored vehicles which continued to move after being hit. Lieutenant General Lam immediately notified the Central Logistical Command. As a result over 300 3.5" rocket launchers with ammunition, all previously considered obsolescent and placed in storage

pending return to the United States, were hastily transported to the front for distribution to combat units. XXIV Corps also gathered a number of 90-mm recoilless rifles to help the ARVN airborne forces. However, the M-72 light anti-tank weapon was later re-tested at the Quang Trung Training Center and proved to be effective. As regards ARVN armor units, this was their first significant confrontation with enemy tanks. ARVN gunners proved to be confused and hasty, firing from too far away and often too soon, thereby frequently causing deflections. Enemy tanks, moreover, seldom moved in the open but mostly lay in ambush, well concealed in the jungle.

A number of units also failed to carry adequate clothing when this was a period of lingering cold in the mountains and forests of the Truong Son Range. The Central Logistic Command was required to have field jackets and blankets air delivered to units during combat.

Tchepone Was the Objective

After capturing and destroying Fire Support Base 31, Communist forces continued to encircle and harass ARVN fire bases. North of Route No. 9, Fire Support Base 30 continued to bear the pressure of heavy artillery attacks each day and was cut off from the rear by an almost impenetrable air defense net. The ARVN armored task force which tried to pick up the survivors of the 3d Airborne Battalion from Fire Support Base 31 was repeatedly engaged by NVA armor-supported infantry.

South of the road, the targets of enemy encirclement were Fire Support Base Hotel 2, seven kilometers southwest of Landing Zone Don, and the 2/3 and 3/3 Battalions of the 1st Infantry Division on mobile operations along Route 92 nearby. On 27 February, despite heavy air strikes which attempted to silence enemy air defense guns, a big H-53 helicopter was hit and exploded in the air while trying to sling-carry a 105-mm howitzer. It was then decided to close Fire Support Base Hotel 2 and send the 3d Regiment northwestward on a mission to interdict and disrupt Route 914. This plan could not be carried out immediately because there still remained a battery of 105-mm howitzers whose extri-

cation proved difficult. During the night, I Corps Headquarters ordered the destruction of the artillery pieces in the base; the defending unit was then to proceed on foot to join the 3d Regiment. The 2d and 3d Battalions of the regiment were also ordered to move their wounded north to find a suitable pickup point for medical evacuation helicopters. In the morning of 28 February while on their way, these units came upon a target hit by B-52s and found the bodies of 157 enemy troops along with numerous weapons destroyed. During that day, medical evacuation efforts were not successful because of intense enemy fire from 82-mm mortars and small arms directed at the pickup zone and one UH-1H was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire and burst into flames.

The situation by this time was becoming increasingly tense throughout the area of operations. Truck convoys were frequently attacked on Route No. 9 in Laos and on the RVN territory, the enemy increased efforts to ambush convoys and attack rear bases. The ARVN westward drive was stalled. In the midst of this situation, I Corps Headquarters received a directive from President Nguyen Van Thieu to have the Marine Division relieve the Airborne Division. He must have realized that such a relief under the combat conditions on that battlefield would be very hazardous. Besides, the Airborne Division was still a strong unit; it had suffered some losses but these losses were not yet too serious. What then caused him to order its replacement? The most probable answer could be that he was really worried over the additional losses that the Airborne Division would sustain in protracted combat. He certainly would like to keep this elite unit intact at all costs. In any event, the Marine Division was a poor choice for the relief. Despite the combat worthiness of its individual brigades, it had never fought as a division.

It was probably with this bothering thought that in the afternoon of 28 February, Lieutenant General Lam flew to Saigon with an alternative to present to the President. During his meeting with President Thieu, Lam's plan was adopted. Instead of the Marine Division, the 1st Infantry Division with three regiments under its command was selected to proceed northwest from its present positions to occupy

Tchepone. The Airborne Division would provide protection for the northern flank and secure Route No. 9. The Marine Division was to deploy two brigades behind the 1st Division; its remaining brigade would serve as the corps' reserve.

Tchepone, a tiny town whose civilian population had fled long ago, now had only scars and ruins left. By this time, it had become more of a political and psychological symbol than an objective of practical military value. There was nothing of military importance in the ruined town; enemy supplies and war materiel were all stored in caches in the forests and mountains. Lines of communication were located east and west of Tchepone, not in the town proper. Despite all this, the Tchepone road junction was near the center of NVA logistics activity in the Laos panhandle and it was understandable that it became a symbol of great importance. The RVN information agencies, the press (both foreign and domestic), all contributed their share in making Tchepone the place to reach at all costs so the ARVN effort now seemed to be more directed at setting foot in Tchepone than trying to destroy the NVA logistical system which was the real objective of the offensive.

Meeting with Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams in the afternoon of 1 March, President Thieu made known his plan to relieve the Airborne Division and expressed his desire to helilift two infantry regiments into the areas surrounding Tchepone. He also disclosed that the JGS/RVNAF had been ordered to reinforce I Corps with a number of tanks and that the Marine Division had been sent to the northern front. General Abrams took this opportunity to defend the U.S. position in the face of Senator Tran Van Huong's complaints that the U.S. was not providing adequate support to RVNAF forces operating in lower Laos. These complaints had given rise to all sorts of rumors speculating on the difficulties ARVN forces encountered in lower Laos. President Thieu stated that the change of plan did not result from losses sustained by the Airborne Division but came about because the 1st Infantry Division was more familiar with the lower Laos terrain and, being an organic unit of I Corps, was more accustomed to working with the corps and would respond better to the I Corps commander during this difficult operation.

While high-level officials were reviewing the plans to arrive at appropriate decisions, at the subordinate levels preparations and assignments were already underway. The I Corps commander needed reinforcements in lower Laos and in the northern area of MR 1 so on 25 February, the U.S. XXIV Corps ordered the U.S. 101st Airborne Division to be prepared to send its 3d Airborne Brigade to the Demilitarized Zone to replace the ARVN 2d Infantry Regiment. This regiment had five battalions; one remained in place while the other four were redeployed on 28 February. On 29 February, the 11th Brigade/U.S. 23d Infantry Division was pulled out of the area south of Hai Van Pass (southern MR 1) and also sent to reinforce the northern sector and all U.S. forces in northern Quang Tri or operating in support of ARVN forces were placed under operational control of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division. The forward command post of this division relocated in Quang Tri from its former position further south. In order to coordinate operational support, a joint coordinating group was set up and placed under the Commander of the 108th Artillery Group. This group operated from the tactical CP of I Corps at Fire Support Base Ham Nghi (Khe Sanh) as of 1 March. Coordination and control of U.S. support was thus made possible in the forward combat area instead of being referred to Quang Tri as in the past.

More RVNAF forces were also committed to the new effort. The command section of the 369th Marine Brigade and support elements were airlifted directly to Khe Sanh beginning on 1 March and this movement was completed two days later. The 2d Infantry Regiment was ready. The 4th and 7th Armored Squadron of the 1st and 2d Infantry Divisions were brought in to reinforce armored elements in lower Laos. I Corps Headquarters also relocated the 77th Border Ranger Battalion (+) from Quang Tin and reassigned it to provide security for Fire Support Base Ham Nghi, freeing other forces for combat and the corps' tactical control CP there was strengthened.

While these preparations were made for the push into Tchepone there were increasing reports of enemy armor presence throughout the area of operation. In the early morning of 1 March, C-130 gunships

reported sighting an estimated 8 enemy tanks moving near Route No. 9, approximately eight kilometers west of A Luoi. The gunships attacked and destroyed some of the tanks. Toward noon, tactical air sighted two T-54 tanks south of the road between A Luoi and the border, attacked and destroyed one.

Meanwhile, in the north, the 17th Armored Squadron was heavily engaged and Fire Support Base 30 of the 2d Airborne Battalion remained under siege. At Fire Support Base 30, fierce fighting took place on 3 March from 0100 to 0900 hours. After heavy attacks by fire, enemy infantry, supported by armor, approached friendly positions. The base was located on a high mountain with steep slopes and enemy tanks were used only to provide direct fire support. C-130 gunships and two Arc Light strikes diverted at the last minute helped the 2d Airborne Battalion hold its ground. When the gunfire ended, a search around the base produced 98 enemy bodies, 26 AK-47s, eight B-40s and two machine-guns right on the perimeter of defense. Friendly casualties were one killed and four wounded. However, as a result of repeated enemy attacks by fire during the preceding days, all 12 artillery pieces (six 105-mm and six 155-mm) had been damaged. In the afternoon of 3 March, the 2d Airborne Battalion was ordered to abandon its positions and move out to evacuate its wounded and conduct mobile operations. The damaged artillery pieces at the base were destroyed before the battalion left.

During the night of 3 March, the 17th Armored Squadron, reinforced by the 8th Airborne Battalion, engaged a battalion-size enemy force five kilometers north of Ban Dong. Results of the battle were 383 enemy killed, two detained, 71 individual and 28 crew-served weapons seized. Friendly forces suffered over 100 killed and wounded and 10 armored vehicles damaged. In the early morning of 4 March, after two resupply and medical evacuation attempts had proved unsuccessful because of heavy enemy fire, an Arc Light strike was made and, following it, a third attempt succeeded in evacuating 77 airborne wounded. Only one UH-1H helicopter was shot down and an airborne company was brought in as reinforcement. The next day, a column of armor-supported airborne troops linked up with the 17th Armored Squadron to resupply it and evacuate

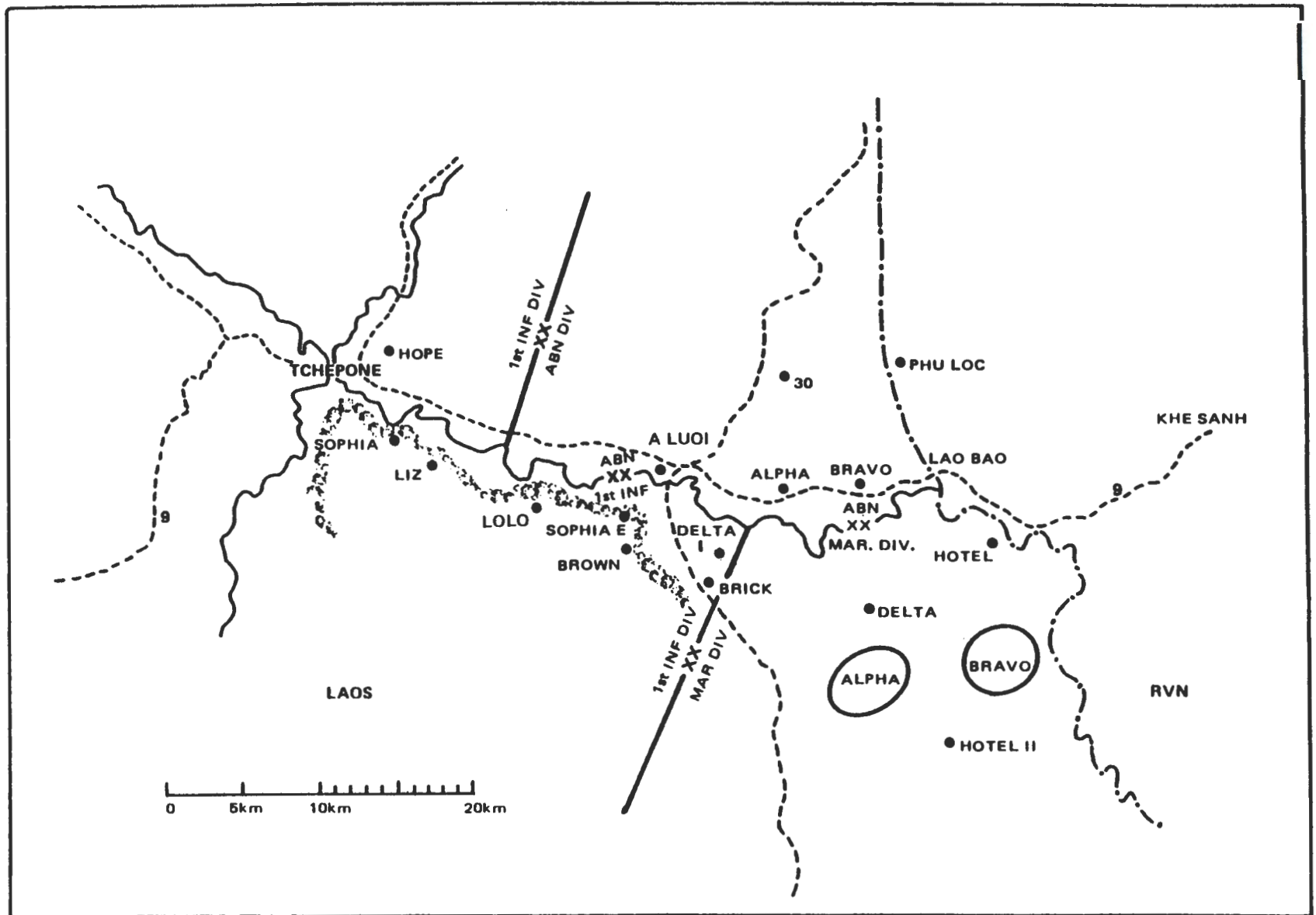
the remaining 43 armored wounded. Cumulative enemy losses for the period from 25 February to 3 March throughout the lower Laos area of operation were 1,536 killed. These losses amounted to about one regiment per week.

While the enemy endeavored to annihilate Fire Support Base 30 and the 17th Armored Task Force, the relief plan was being carried out, marking the beginning of a new offensive phase. (Map 20) Between Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong) and the border, the Airborne Division set up two fire support bases, Alpha and Bravo, to consolidate the security of Route No. 9. The 1st Ranger Group with its remaining two battalions (21st and 37th) was deployed northwest of Khe Sanh and provided security for Fire Support Base Phu Loc. The 369th Brigade, kept in reserve by the corps, conducted security operations south of Khe Sanh.

On 2 March, the 7th Marine Battalion, 147th Brigade, began landing troops in Fire Support Base Delta. The 2d Battalion of the 3d Regiment, which had suffered from combat attrition at Hotel 2, was sent to the rear to reorganize while other elements of the regiment moved out to operate in the areas of Delta 1 and Brown. For three consecutive days, the 147th Brigade Headquarters and the remaining 2d and 4th Battalions were inserted into Delta. Immediately thereafter, the 2d and 4th Marine Battalions moved out to operate in the area of objective Alpha. The entire 258th Brigade, meanwhile, was inserted at FSB Hotel. The 8th Battalion assumed security of the base and operated in the Co Roc area while the 1st and 3d Battalions searched for the enemy in the area of objective Bravo. Marine activities during this time resulted in 361 enemy killed and 51 weapons seized. Also, 153 enemy personnel killed by airstrikes were found by marine troops.

On 3 March, in execution of the plan to enter Tchepone, the 1st Battalion of the 1st Infantry Regiment was inserted at Landing Zone Lolo 13 kilometers southeast of Tchepone. The landing had met with strong enemy opposition and had been postponed twice because of additional preparations required for the landing zone. The 1/1 Battalion finally touched ground at the price of 11 helicopters shot down, 44

Map 20 — The Attack Toward Tchepone



others hit by gunfire and two D4 bulldozers destroyed after being dropped from the air. The following day, the 1st Regiment Headquarters, the 2/1 Battalion and a battery of 105-mm howitzers were brought into Landing Zone Lolo. Fire Support Base Lolo was thus established. The 4/1 Battalion meanwhile landed at Landing Zone Liz, six kilometers west-northwest of Lolo.⁷ The various units then moved out to search the area but only a few light contacts were made with minor results.

In the morning of 5 March, in order to continue its westward push, the 2d Infantry Regiment of the 1st Division was scheduled to occupy Landing Zone Sophia, four-and-a-half kilometers southwest of Tchepone at 1100 hours but unexpected bad weather delayed the operation. After preemptive airstrikes, at exactly 1320 hours five UH-1Hs landed safely. Sporadic gunfire was received but posed no major threat. By nightfall, Landing Zone Sophia had eight 105-mm howitzers in position with adequate ammunition. Searching further out the 4th and 5th Battalions found the bodies of 124 enemy troops and seized 43 AK-47s, nine 12.7-mm machineguns, four RPD automatic rifles, nine B-40 rocket launchers, three radios, military clothing, equipment and food supplies. After securing Fire Support Base Sophia, the 2d Regiment was now in a position to control Tchepone from its mountain base and keep the areas surrounding the town within range of its artillery.

⁷ English names were chosen for objectives, firebases and the like primarily to facilitate communications with U.S. support units. During the First Indochina War. The French had followed a parallel practice (at Dien Bien Phu, for example). Perhaps feminine names were selected to bring some softness into the virile world of combatants at war. "Lolo", "Liz", and "Sophia" were chosen by Colonel Vu Van Giai, the very effective deputy commander of the 1st Division who assisted in maneuvering the division during this period. He had served for several years in the DMZ area, in coordination with U.S. combat units, and he naturally followed their practice in naming firebases. The small return that the NVA might have enjoyed by exploiting these names for propaganda value—as proof that the Americans were still in charge despite Vietnamization—was certainly overridden by the practicality of having words the Americans could understand and pronounce.

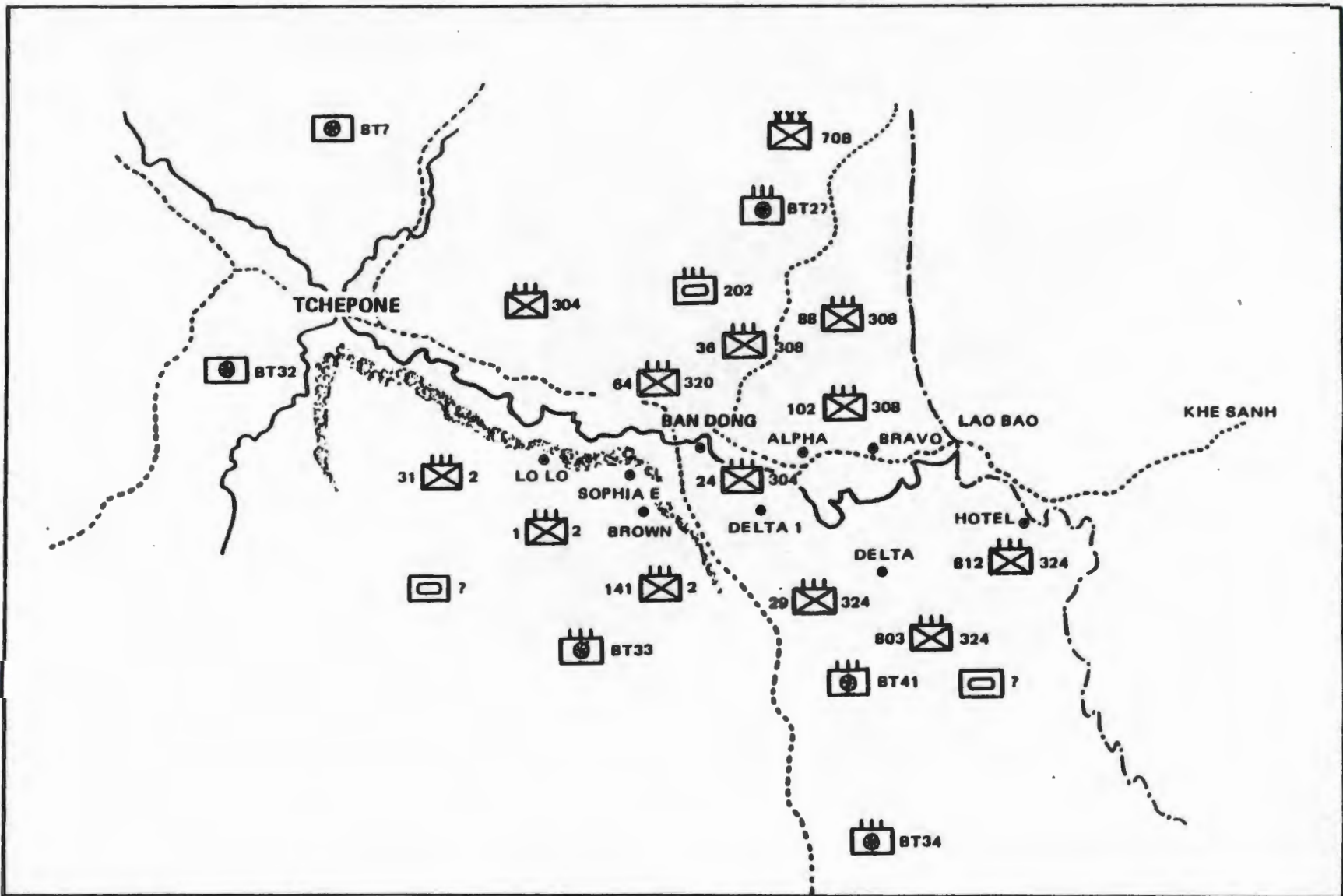
For the next two days, throughout the areas of operation of the 1st Infantry and the Marine Divisions, friendly units caught the spirit of the new offensive. They fought aggressively, repeatedly engaged the enemy, and defeated him everywhere. In the morning of 5 March, in the area of Objective Alpha, the 4th Marine Battalion killed 130 enemy troops and seized 25 assorted weapons including two 82-mm mortars. Friendly forces sustained six killed and 42 wounded. The 4/1 Battalion made contact near Landing Zone Liz, killing 41 Communist troops and seizing 15 weapons along with two mortars. By 6 March, engagements were increasing and occurring everywhere, but friendly forces suffered only light casualties while inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. More importantly, they were now within easy reach of Tchepone, the final objective that President Thieu had ordered them to take just three days earlier.

In the afternoon of 6 March, Khe Sanh received an attack by fire of an estimated 22 rounds of 122-mm rockets and two U.S. troops were killed and 10 wounded. Elsewhere, the enemy appeared to take no significant initiative but he was increasing his use of surface-to-air missiles in lower Laos. Earlier, on 2 February, a Mohawk aircraft flying west of the demilitarized zone reported an unidentified missile fired from the ground which exploded approximately 100 meters away, causing no damage to the aircraft. Subsequently, 14 instances of surface-to-air missile firing were photographed or reported by forward air controllers, army pilots, tactical air and reconnaissance aircraft. Missile transportation equipment and antenna vans along with other equipment related to surface-to-air missile systems were also sighted in the tri-border area.

The day selected to enter the ultimate objective, Tchepone, was 6 March. A total of 120 U.S. helicopters were assembled to carry out the assault. In addition to B-52, U.S. tactical air strikes or air cover sorties were scheduled every 10 minutes. Elements of the 2/17 U.S. Air Cavalry reconnoitered targets, prepared landing zones and covered the assault. An enemy attack by fire on Khe Sanh Base forced the huge assemblage of U.S. helicopters to depart 90 minutes earlier

than planned, but preparations for this operation had been so carefully executed that when the first helicopters carrying the 2/2 Battalion landed at Landing Zone Hope four kilometers northeast of Tchepone, only sporadic gunfire was received. By 1343 hours both the 2d and 3d Battalions along with an element of the 2d Reconnaissance Company and the tactical command post of the 2d Infantry Regiment had landed safely at Hope. Searching the adjoining areas and occupying key positions, the 2d Regiment only made light contacts but found the bodies of 102 enemy troops killed by B-52s and seized five 12.7-mm machineguns and one anti-aircraft artillery gun. Extending its search further south toward Tchepone, the 3/2 Battalion found a cache of an estimated 1,000 tons of rice and 2,000 gas masks along with 31 enemy bodies and numerous weapons destroyed by B-52s. Nearby, the 2/2 Battalion found an area devastated by B-52s with nearly 100 enemy bodies and assorted weapons shattered to pieces. After the two reinforced ARVN battalions had made assault landing near the objective and rapidly exploited their success, the district town of Tchepone was practically under ARVN control, dominated as it was by the array of artillery pieces to the south. The most remote terrain objective of LAM SON 719 was attained.

Map 22 – Enemy Situation, Late March 1971



The 64th and 24th Regiments (respectively from the 320th and 304th Division) continued to encircle the Ban Dong area east of Route No. 9. The 2d Division was trying to annihilate the remaining forces of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division. The 324th Division deployed its 29th and 803d Regiments to attack the 147th Marine Brigade while its 812th Regiment pinned the 258th Marine Brigade down around Hotel and at Co Roc. The enemy apparently wanted to catch the entire ARVN force in his trap. In the manner of a hunter, he set about to kill his prey by "locking its head and gripping its tail." This was his strategy of annihilation for which he had coined this metaphorical phrase.

In the RVN territory, all Communist main and local force units stepped up their operations. Mine attacks and ambushes occurred daily on the LOC, Route No. 9. Enemy sappers continually probed logistical installations and the enemy launched a psychological warfare campaign aimed at publicizing the NVA victories along Route No. 9.

Beginning in early morning, north of Ban Dong, the 8th and 9th Airborne Battalions were under attack. The 8th Battalion had 32 casualties while the 9th Battalion immediately to the east inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. Only light engagements were reported along Route 9 while Ban Dong Base began to be evacuated after most of the artillery pieces had been lifted out by helicopters.

The armored logistic convoy set out, towing damaged vehicles and guns under the protection of airborne units and other armored elements while the enemy continued to exert pressure on the rear of the column. At 0730 hours, approximately two kilometers north of Ban Dong, forward air controller aircraft reported sighting four enemy tanks moving down. Approximately four kilometers east of Ban Dong Base, the logistic convoy was ambushed and all 18 vehicles were immobilized. Some of the lead vehicles were hit by direct fire and destroyed. The road had only one lane; the vehicles behind were stalled in the ambush zone. While the battle was in progress no reports were received from the convoy commander; his superiors were therefore unaware of what was happening to the convoy. Losses incurred during the ambush were neither reported nor even analyzed afterwards. According to reports from an observation

evacuated to Delta 1 while its battalion proceeded east on foot.

From 18 March on it seemed that the enemy was well aware of the ARVN withdrawal and there were signs of the enemy concentrating a regimental size unit northwest of Fire Support Base A Luoi while pressure increased around Fire Support Base Delta of the 147th Brigade. The base began to receive fire from 130-mm field guns and NVA infantry had infiltrated close enough to fire at aircraft. There were about 10 antiaircraft guns positioned on the mountain slopes around the base that could not be silenced. The 2d and 4th Battalions operating to the south were recalled to sweep the area around Delta and to prepare for the withdrawal.

By mid-day of 18 March the 1st Infantry Regiment, with its 1st, 2d and 3d battalions, after falling back from the Lolo area, arrived in an area approximately 2,000 meters southwest of Fire Support Base A Luoi. There they were picked up by helicopters and flown to Khe Sanh. The survivors of the 4th Battalion were also flown back in the late afternoon. Next came the turn of the 5th Battalion, 2d Regiment, which boarded helicopters from an area adjacent to Landing Zone Brown.

Immediately thereafter, from about 1600 hours and continuing through the night of 18 March, the remaining three battalions of the 2d Infantry Regiment, the 2d, 3d and 4th, received heavy attacks west of the Brown area. The NVA followed up its artillery with ground assaults. The next morning the 4th Battalion made a preliminary report that it had 33 wounded and five missing. The 2d Battalion had similar casualty figures while enemy losses were unknown.

For four days now, reports flowed into I Corps headquarters of strong attacks that included very heavy bombardments by heavy artillery and tank attacks. Reports of ARVN losses, including the decimation of the 4th Battalion, 1st Infantry, were very disturbing to General Lam, as were the many indications that the enemy was reinforcing and maneuvering to prevent the orderly ARVN withdrawal from Laos. So, on the night of 18 March, General Lam called his division commanders to a conference at Ham Nghi Base (Khe Sanh) to hear their assessments and recommendations. They each recommended that disengagement proceed as quickly

as possible; General Phu, commanding the 1st Division, displayed anxiety for the first time in the campaign.

When the conference was over, General Lam ordered that the withdrawal proceed at a quicker pace and that preparations begin immediately for the extraction of the 2d Regiment from the Brown area and Fire Base Delta 1 where all its battalions were under heavy attack and in danger of being cut off and destroyed.

On the morning of 19 March, abandoning Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong), ARVN armored elements and attached airborne units moved overland to take positions along a line near Fire Support Base Alpha. The 2d Airborne Battalion operating to the north and having made a contact with the enemy during the day, would be helilifted from a landing zone north of Base Alpha. After the elements from Ban Dong had arrived at Alpha, the remaining forces of the 1st Infantry Division were also picked up, including the battalions of the 2d Regiment from the Brown area and the 2d Regiment Headquarters along with the 1st Battalion, 3d Regiment from Base Delta 1.

Information received during the night added some clarity to the situation. Almost all the airborne battalions were in contact with the enemy. The 7th, 8th, 9th and 11th Airborne battalions had relatively light engagements with minimal losses on both sides. The 1st Airborne Battalion, however, had 18 casualties and reported killing 80 enemy troops, capturing five prisoners and seizing five AK-47 rifles. The 2d Airborne Battalion also suffered relatively high losses, with 18 killed and 57 wounded. Enemy losses were unknown. On the Marine side, Base Delta was still experiencing heavy enemy pressure. The 7th Marine Battalion constantly received attacks by fire and ground attacks. The enemy even used a noxious gas but suffered heavy casualties with 42 killed. Marine losses were light.

The 19th of March was a day of intense activities. All ARVN units in Laos reported enemy contacts. A synthesis of information received from prisoners, ralliers and the combat units gave a rather clear picture of enemy dispositions on the battlefield. The 308th NVA Division with its 36th, 102d and 88th regiments was attacking from the north. (Map 22)

plane, four M-41 tanks and three M-113 APCs, each towing a 105-mm howitzer, were apparently damaged among the 18 stranded vehicles. Road security for the movement of this convoy was the responsibility of armor and airborne units but during the attack, the convoy never initiated any request for air support or gunships. Apparently the ambush caught the convoy by surprise and it ended as quickly as it began. Later the commander of the 1st Armored Brigade requested tactical air to destroy the ambushed vehicles and his request was immediately granted in order to prevent the enemy from capturing usable equipment.

On the front manned by the Marine Division, the situation was even more serious. The units of the 258th Brigade were increasingly engaged by the enemy and the encirclement of Fire Support Base Delta did not relax in any way. Supplies could not be delivered and the 2d and 4th Battalions were intercepted on their way to the relief of the base. Inside the base, five of the ten 105-mm howitzers were out of action due to enemy fire and the number of marines killed and wounded kept increasing.

In the area of the 1st Division, Fire Support Base Delta 1 was hit by numerous 122-mm rockets and 75-mm recoilless rifle rounds which put four 105-mm howitzers out of action and caused 1,400 rounds of 105-mm ammunition to explode. The 2, 3d and 4th Battalions of the 2d Infantry Regiment west of Sophia East were involved in skirmishes throughout the day.

Late afternoon saw the enemy attack more fiercely and tactical air as well as C-130 gunships were called in to provide support. By midnight all three battalions reported having consolidated their positions. The 3d Battalion had 47 casualties after killing 87 Communist troops and seizing 49 AK-47s and 17 grenade launchers. Among the enemy bodies were those of two company commanders of the NVA 2d Division. The 2d Battalion had light casualties but reported killing 85 enemy, seizing 47 AK-47s and several other crew-served weapons. The 4th Battalion reported killing 195 enemy troops and seizing 59 AK-47s and numerous other weapons.

During the day, U.S. air support substantially increased, with 686 sorties of helicopter gunships, 246 tactical air sorties and 14 B-52 missions which dropped 1,158 tons of bombs.

Late in the afternoon of 19 March, Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams were received by President Thieu. President Thieu disclosed he had directed a cautious withdrawal which would be completed from 5-8 April. When the withdrawal was complete, he planned to have about three battalions launch a raid against Muong Nong, the center of Communist Base Area 611, and wanted strong U.S. air support for this raid.

On 20 March, the U.S. Air Force and Army helicopters exerted their maximum effort, with 1,388 gunships sorties, 270 tactical air strikes and 11 B-52 missions dropping 909 tons of bombs. Around 1300 hours, the 3d Battalion, 2d Regiment was extracted from the area west of Sophia East by U.S. Army helicopters which flew through heavy antiaircraft fire to evacuate it to Ham Nghi Base. In the process, 28 of the 40 helicopters involved were hit. Plans for the extraction of the 4/2 Battalion were subsequently aborted because the first helicopter attempting to land was hit by fire and exploded in the air. Before nightfall, the artillery pieces at Fire Support Base Alpha along with the 2d and 7th Airborne Battalions were transported back to Vietnam. Plans provided for the 2d and 4th Battalions, 2d Regiment, to be picked up the next day, followed by the regimental headquarters, its artillery, and the 1st Battalion, 3d Infantry from Fire Support Base Delta 1. The two 2d Regiment battalions were ordered to find a more secure pick up zone.

In the meantime, the 1st Armored Brigade, reinforced by the 7th and 8th Airborne Battalions, had arrived at Phase Line Alpha the preceding evening. The armored and airborne elements deployed to provide security for Route No. 9 from Alpha to Base Bravo. At 2100 hours the NVA attacked the 8th Airborne Battalion and 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron south of Alpha but were repulsed with heavy losses.

Around Fire Support Base Delta of the 147th Marine Brigade, on this same day, Communist suicide troops reached the defense perimeter and dug in. Small arms fire from these pockets made helicopter landings and takeoffs even more difficult. Supply deliveries could not be made but the 7th Marine Battalion and the troops of the 147th Brigade held on because they had previously received a ten-day reserve of supplies which would permit them to continue fighting.

On 21 March, at 0300 hours enemy action became intense in the area to the west, where the 2d and 4th Battalions of the 2d Regiment were stranded two kilometers east of Sophia East. The Regiments of the NVA 2d Division were determined to attack and annihilate these two battalions but they were not successful. In the process, the enemy lost 245 killed, 52 B-40s and B-41s, seven machineguns, seven 60-mm mortars, five 82-mm mortars, eight flame throwers, nine 12.7-mm machineguns and 65 AK-47s. Friendly losses were 37 killed, 58 wounded and 15 missing. This ARVN victory caused enemy pressure to relax and the remaining forces of the 1st Infantry Division were transported by U.S. helicopters to Ham Nghi Base before nightfall. Meanwhile, the headquarters of the 1st Airborne Brigade, the 5th Airborne Battalion and the troops of the artillery unit left at Fire Support Base Alpha were also safely evacuated south. Fire support bases Alpha and Delta 1 were thus closed on that day and ARVN forces pulled back near Fire Support Base Bravo, five kilometers west of the RVN border.

The situation in the areas manned by the 1st Infantry and the Airborne Division had been resolved but, over in the Marines' area, there was an eruption of fire. The 29th and 803d Regiments of the 324B Division were determined to destroy Fire Support Base Delta. These two enemy units began attacking fiercely at dawn of 21 March. Mortar and direct artillery fire (the latter believed to come from tank guns) was very accurate. All 175-mm guns from the RVN side of the border were mobilized to provide close fire support to the Marines. In the morning, 13 tactical air sorties provided additional support. A B-52 mission was diverted to the area and crushed an enemy battalion (a PW later reported this battalion had lost 400 men from this B-52 action). The attack was checked and the base held firm. A casualty count showed that the Marines had 85 killed, 238 wounded and 100 weapons damaged while enemy forces suffered 600 killed, five detained and an estimated 200 individual and 60 crew-served weapons seized. After the battle, the 147th Brigade and the 7th Marine Battalion ran short of supplies. Thanks to air support, seven U.S. UH-1H helicopters were able to land, bringing ammunition and evacuating wounded. These helicopters were

able to return to their base but all bore battle scars. An eighth helicopter was shot down.

During this period the enemy greatly increased his interference and jamming of our radio communications. Several frequencies were so badly jammed that communications became impossible. In many instances, enemy radio operators argued and exchanged insults with ours. These heated verbal exchanges occurred most frequently when the enemy intensified his attacks against the marines. To return the courtesy, our operators also intercepted and jammed enemy radio frequencies. During one of these interceptions, marine operators overheard a female voice giving combat orders. In general, South Vietnamese units did not make enough effort to safeguard radio communications security, often using the most rudimentary of self-devised code systems. This episode of reciprocal interference and jamming was perhaps more damaging to our side than to the enemy who was usually more disciplined. The extent of this damage, if any, could never be ascertained because of the intense fighting.

In the morning of 21 March, Vandegrift logistical base was penetrated by Communist sappers and 10,000 gallons of aviation fuel exploded into flames. Along Route No. 9, near Fire Support Base Bravo, the 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron and 8th Airborne Battalion were heavily engaged. There were nearly 100 casualties while four M-41 tanks and 13 armored personnel carriers were damaged. This battleground looked forlorn after the attack, with damaged vehicles abandoned and scattered across the road, making passage extremely difficult.

During the day, U.S. air support remained at a high level to help relieve the enemy pressure and facilitate the withdrawal of ARVN forces. There were 788 helicopter gunship sorties, eleven B-52 missions dropping 921 tons of bombs and 157 tactical air sorties which destroyed 37 enemy vehicles and one field gun and damaged 18 other vehicles.

During the night of 21 March, the 1st Armored Brigade and the 1st and 8th Airborne Battalions left their positions along Route No. 9 and moved east through the jungle in search of a point to cross the Xepon River. Successful in avoiding enemy contact, the convoy of nearly 100 vehicles meandered through the dense jungle until about noon the next

day when it came out near the banks of the river, about one kilometer south of Route No. 9. The brigade was provided with a helicopter to help it find a crossing point and the commander of the Airborne Division had helicopters prepared to airlift light bulldozers as well as tree-cutting equipment to help set up a crossing point for the armored vehicles. During the dry season, the Xepon River is usually shallow but the current is swift and the banks are steep, in many places ten meters straight down. A crossing point for vehicles was therefore not easy to find. Meanwhile, the 9th Airborne Battalion had crossed the river and secured the eastern bank. In late afternoon, two D-2 bulldozers and other pieces of equipment were lifted in by U.S. Army CH-54 helicopters and the river-crossing site was prepared.

Meanwhile, forward air controller aircraft sighted an estimated 20 enemy armored vehicles closing in pursuit nine kilometers to the west by way of Route No. 9 and called in tactical air. The lead tank was hit and went up in flames. Enemy antiaircraft gunners returned the fire and one F-100 aircraft was shot down. The pilot was not seen ejecting. Two more flights of aircraft were called in and two more enemy vehicles were destroyed. Artillery support following the air-strikes finally caused the enemy armored formation to break up and the vehicles to seek concealment.

Why did the armored convoy leave Route No. 9 and make a cut through the jungle to find a way to cross the river when there was only a final stretch of five kilometers left to cover until the Lao-Viet border? The reason was never officially explained but Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat, Commander of the 1st Armor Brigade, later told this writer that had his unit not taken to the jungle to seek a way out, he did not believe a single vehicle could have made it back to Vietnam. Route No. 9 was a one-way road, not only littered with abandoned vehicles and rigged with mines all along, but every section of it could conceal a Communist ambush site. It was so treacherous that no one dared venture on it. The withdrawal along Route No. 9 surely did not proceed as planned in an orderly and controlled manner.

Early the next morning, 23 March, while Khe Sanh Base was still finishing off Communist sappers who had infiltrated earlier, the ARVN armored column crossed the Xepon River and the lines of the U.S. 1st Mechanized Infantry Brigade, 5th Division. The convoy returned with 98 vehicles left behind, among them 22 M-41 tanks and 54 armored personnel carriers. Aerial and photo reconnaissance showed that the ARVN units had left 21 tanks, 26 armored personnel carriers, 13 bulldozers, two graders and 51 vehicles at a night bivouac area on Route No. 9. U.S. air force helicopter gunships and artillery were used to destroy these vehicles to keep the enemy from using them. Khe Sanh Base, in the meantime had received four attacks by fire during the night, all by 122-mm artillery, but damage was insignificant.

In lower Laos, meanwhile, fighting was still fierce around Fire Support Base Delta. The airdropping of supplies on the base was not successful and ammunition stocks had dropped to an alarming level. Enemy troops had penetrated and established a firm foothold inside the Marines' perimeter. Late in the afternoon, the enemy launched a new attack, this time supported by ten flame-throwing tanks. The Marines blew up the first two tanks with light antitank weapons. The third tank detonated mines and the fourth was hit by tactical air. But the remaining tanks continued to advance. The headquarters of the 147th Brigade had to move out of its position. The 2d and 4th Battalions supported the 7th Battalion to break the enemy's encirclement and withdraw toward the 258th Brigade (Fire Support Base Hotel). The enemy seemed to have anticipated this move and he intercepted the troops of the 147th Brigade in an ambush. A pitched battle ensued with enemy tanks and infantry. The following morning, 23 March, all battalion commanders of the 147th Brigade, though wounded, managed to maneuver their battalions to link up with the 258th Brigade. Eventually, isolated teams of marines who had been cut off from their units also followed suit. Almost immediately thereafter, 230 wounded were evacuated and, before nightfall, the entire 147th Marine Brigade with its 2d, 4th and 7th Battalions were transported by U.S. Army helicopters to an area near Ham Nghi Base. There were initially 134 missing reported but they

gradually came back, leaving the entire brigade with only 37 missing. The battle at FSB Delta had cost the enemy an estimated 2,000 troops, seriously hurting his 29th and 803d Regiments.

Around noon of 23 March the last vehicles of the armored convoy crossed the border and the remaining airborne elements successively reached the forward positions of the U.S. 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (mechanized). Because of enemy armored presence reported near the border, the U.S. brigade had recently been reinforced with a tank battalion (1/77 Armor). During the day, 23 March, U.S. air support continued at a high level: 756 helicopter gunship sorties, 11 B-52 missions dropping 941 tons of bombs which caused 77 secondary explosions, and 283 tactical air sorties.

In the morning of 24 March, as if propelled by the momentum of the pursuit, many Communist armored vehicles appeared on the Laotian side of the border. Near Route No. 9 and south of the road, between 1000 hours and noon, U.S. air cavalry reported up to five different locations of enemy armored vehicles near the border. The U.S. air cavalry and tactical air attacked and destroyed 10 Communist tanks, not counting those suspected of being damaged.

In the area of Fire Support Base Hotel, the remaining elements of the 258th Marine Brigade began to feel enemy probes. Not wishing to fight another Delta battle, the Marine Division commander ordered its evacuation. In the late afternoon, U.S. helicopters lifted out all six 105-mm and four 155-mm howitzers, and all of the Marines. Immediately upon reaching Khe Sanh, the 258th Brigade was sent to Lang Vei to set up a fire support base and take over an area of operations. On this same day, the 2d Regiment, 1st Infantry Division also deployed its units to provide security for Ham Nghi Base. The 54th Infantry Regiment from Hue received orders to move to Khe Sanh and relieve the 2d Regiment which needed some rest. ARVN units including the 5th Regiment, 2d Division were also deployed to gradually replace U.S. units west of Quang Tri. On 25 March, upon special orders from I Corps, the Marine Division dispatched two reconnaissance teams to the Co Roc area to control a vantage point essential for the security of Khe Sanh Base. On this day,

25 March, there were only two small ARVN reconnaissance teams left on Laotian territory.

Black Panther Raids

As I have previously mentioned, about a week earlier, on the afternoon of 19 March, President Thieu informed Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams that he had ordered a cautious pullback of RVNAF forces to South Vietnam. He conceived the possibility of the withdrawal lasting until 5 - 8 April 1971, to be followed by a surprise raid conducted by a regimental size force and directed at Muong Nong, the heart of Communist Base Area 611. Operation LAM SON 719 had the objective of disrupting two Communist base areas, one was Base Area 604 whose heart was Tchepone, the other, Area 611, centered on Muong Nong. All ARVN operations had been confined to Base Area 604. As far as Base Area 611 was concerned, the incursion went only as far as its northern boundary. The idea of further attacks into Muong Nong was, therefore, simply a follow-up action to finish the incomplete operation. But, by 25 March 1971, most ARVN forces had already left lower Laos. Only two small Marine reconnaissance teams remained there, operating stealthily in the hilly area of Co Roc.

For several days, while the withdrawal was feverishly taking place in lower Laos, the logistical and command installations at Khe Sanh (Ham Nghi) had been gradually deploying to the rear, too. U.S. forces such as the 5th Mechanized Brigade and units of the 101st Airborne Division continued to provide security on the RVN territory and the area along Route No. 9 up to the border. But upon crossing the border, the Marine units were assigned responsibility for the Lao-Viet border in cooperation with the 1st Ranger Group still stationed northwest of Khe Sanh.

Although it no longer had any battalions in Laos, I Corps, whose forward command post was still located at Dong Ha, had an outstanding mission: the raid into Muong Nong. At this point, the world press as well as public opinion in South Vietnam and the United States tended

AGRI PAT

CHAINS 15
CHAINS 20

THERESA 65
20

LOTUS
324 80

LOTUS 32
LOTUS 51
LOTUS 19
LOTUS 53

FIRE 111
BOATS 6 174
TRAPS 48

DANNY
TRAPS 16

DRAGON 20 KIRKL
TIMBER 5

ICS TAKING
INCOMING

TRAPS 20 -
TRAPS 15

JOKER 99 DOWN
CHAINS 20,
SERPENT 20
CAV

LOYAL 307

ALPHA