Thiet Giap!
The Battle of An Loc, April 1972

by
Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks,
U.S. Army, Retired
The Battle of An Loc was one of the most important battles of the Vietnam War. It took place during the 1972 North Vietnamese Spring Offensive, after most U.S. combat troops had departed South Vietnam. The battle, which lasted over two months, resulted in the virtual destruction of three North Vietnamese divisions and blocked a Communist attack on Saigon. The sustained intensity of combat during this battle had not been previously seen in the Vietnam War.

Although this battle occurred after the high point of American involvement in Vietnam, when U.S. forces were in the process of withdrawing from that country, Americans played a key role in the action. South Vietnamese ground forces and their U.S. Army advisers, working in close cooperation with U.S. Army and Air Force air support, proved a combination capable of resisting defeat and seizing victory.

Because the Battle of An Loc did not involve large numbers of American troops, little has been written about the battle or American participation in it. Jim Willbanks' study focuses on the conduct of the battle and the role American combat advisers and U.S. air power played in defeating the North Vietnamese forces during the spring of 1972.

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To all the American men and women who answered their nation’s call and served in the Republic of Vietnam, but especially to those who made the supreme sacrifice with their lives, to include Brigadier General Richard Tallman, Lieutenant Stanley Kuick, Major Richard Benson, First Lieutenant Richard Todd (killed by incoming artillery in An Loc on 9 July 1972), and Lieutenant Colonel William B. Nolde, the last American who died in Vietnam before the negotiated cease-fire went into effect. (Nolde was killed in An Loc on 27 January 1973, just eleven hours before the guns stopped firing.)
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PREFACE

The genesis of this paper goes back to 1972 in a hospital ward in the 3d Field Hospital in Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. Having just been evacuated from the besieged city of An Loc, I thought that someday I would attempt to write of the desperate battle that was fought there during the massive North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

Twenty years after the fact, as part of a master's degree program at the University of Kansas, I began drawing together the many aspects of this key battle that blocked the North Vietnamese attack on Saigon. The result is the following study.

Aside from the obvious personal interest that this battle held for me, I also wanted to address the critical contribution of U.S. advisers and American close air support to the eventual South Vietnamese victory in defeating the 1972 North Vietnamese offensive in Military Region III. The body of literature on the war in Vietnam grows daily, but the emphasis of most of these works falls within two categories: historical overviews and first person accounts. These books usually focus on the height of American involvement, when large numbers of U.S. troops and units were actively conducting combat operations. Very little has been written about the American commitment in the latter part of the war when U.S. participation was embodied in a handful of advisers who remained with the Vietnamese units in the field and the few air elements left in country.

This paper focuses on the role of U.S. advisers and American tactical air power in the latter part of the war, specifically the 1972 Easter Offensive. While I was a participant in this battle, this study is by no means a memoir or a personal account. The purpose of this paper is to examine the battle of An Loc to determine the contribution made by the American advisers and flyers.

I have relied on my own personal experience for context but have attempted to document the story of the battle from multiple sources. My research drew heavily on primary sources, such as unit histories, official communiqués, operational summaries, intelligence reports, after-action reports, and a limited number of first person accounts. The research also considered the South Vietnamese point of view by examining the U.S. Army Center of Military History Indochina Monograph Series, in which former senior South Vietnamese military leaders discuss a variety of issues germane to the Vietnam War, including the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) performance during the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion.
A limited number of North Vietnamese sources are also considered. While these works are very political in nature, they provide a glimpse of the Communist perspective and the strategy that led to the North Vietnamese decision to launch a large-scale offensive in 1972.

Most primary sources for this study are available in the Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

I am indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Ramsey III and Colonel Richard M. Swain of the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for giving me the opportunity to publish this study.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of groups and persons that I would like to thank for their contribution to this effort.

First, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Ted Wilson of the University of Kansas for his kind guidance and encouragement in what has become a reconstruction of one of the most significant emotional events in my life. I greatly appreciate his patience, indulgence, and wise counsel.

I am also indebted to Mr. Dan Doris and the staff of the Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for their superb and timely assistance during the research for this paper.

I also express my appreciation to my fellow instructors in both the Center for Army Tactics, the Directorate of Joint and Combined Operations, and the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for their insight, comments, and recommendations for improving this study. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Mr. Don Gilmore for his professionalism and expertise in editing this paper.

A special heartfelt thanks goes to my wife, Diana, who served on the home front and supported me through the difficult times addressed in this study. I also commend her and our children, Jennifer and Russell, for their support during the preparation of this paper. Lastly, I am grateful to my mother and father, Master Sergeant (U.S. Army, Retired) and Mrs. James E. Willbanks, for their unfailing love and support over the years.
I. INTRODUCTION

The sun had just come up in An Loc, the capital city of Binh Long Province in South Vietnam; it was 13 April 1972. The author, at the time a U.S. Army infantry officer serving as an adviser with the army of South Vietnam (the ARVN), was on the roof of a building putting up a radio antenna. It had been a relatively quiet night with regard to enemy probes and ground attacks, but there had been a significant increase in the number of incoming rockets and artillery rounds. The ARVN infantry task force that the author advised had just moved into the city the day before. It had withdrawn under intense North Vietnamese Army (NVA) pressure from two firebases to the north that it had previously occupied.

I and Major Raymond Haney had joined the regimental task force after the original advisory team members had been wounded and subsequently evacuated during the withdrawal from the north. The replacement advisory team arrived in An Loc by helicopter on 12 April to find the city nearly panicked. Artillery rounds and rockets were falling steadily on the city, and the helicopter that brought the officers into the city hovered only long enough for them to jump off the aircraft into a freshly dug hole in the city soccer field as artillery rounds impacted near the landing zone. During the evening, the South Vietnamese soldiers prepared for the inevitable North Vietnamese attack, and they were up early for whatever the day would bring.

As I finished installing a radio antenna, I heard a tremendous explosion and ran down the stairs to the front of the building. Frantic South Vietnamese soldiers ran by shouting, "Thiet Giap!" I had never heard this phrase before, but as the soldier ran around the corner of the building, it became all too apparent that the cry meant "tank"; advancing down the street from the north was a line of North Vietnamese T-54 tanks! So began the Battle of An Loc, described by Douglas Pike as "the single most important battle in the war."

For the next four months, a desperate struggle raged between 3 North Vietnamese divisions (estimated at over 36,000 troops) and the greatly outnumbered South Vietnamese defenders, assisted by their U.S. Army advisers. The 66-day siege of An Loc would result in horrendous losses on both sides and would culminate with South Vietnamese forces blocking the North Vietnamese thrust toward the South Vietnamese capital in Saigon.

Although this battle occurred after the high point of American commitment in Vietnam, American forces were active and key
participants in the action. The American advisory effort had become increasingly more important as American combat troops were withdrawn. During the Battle of An Loc, American advisers on the ground, working in consonance with American air power, would prove to be the key ingredients to the South Vietnamese victory.

The Battle of An Loc, although one of the key battles in the entire Vietnam War, has been discussed only briefly in the literature about the war. The purpose of this study is to examine the battle in detail to determine the extent of the American contribution to the victory. This battle will then be compared with the performance of the South Vietnamese forces against the North Vietnamese invasion of 1975 in an effort to assess the impact of an absence of American participation in the latter action. The focus of the study will be on the American military's role in thwarting the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion; it will not debate the relative merits and demerits of the Vietnamization process or the efficacy of the eventual American withdrawal from South Vietnam.
II. THE NORTH VIETNAMESE SPRING OFFENSIVE

The North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972 consisted of a massive, coordinated three-pronged attack designed to strike a knockout blow against the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. In the offensive, the North Vietnamese used conventional tactics and introduced weaponry far exceeding that employed during any previous guerrilla campaigns.

This was a radical departure from earlier North Vietnamese strategy. The NVA decided to employ conventional tactics for this offensive for several reasons. First, they did not believe that the Americans, with only 65,000 troops left in Vietnam, could influence the strategic situation. Furthermore, they did not think that the political situation in the United States would permit President Nixon to commit any new troops or combat support to assist the South Vietnamese forces. Additionally, they believed that a resounding NVA military victory would humiliate the president, destroy his war politics, and perhaps foil his bid for reelection in November.

The North Vietnamese Strategy

The architect of the North Vietnamese campaign was General Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu. According to captured documents and information obtained from NVA prisoners of war after the invasion, Giap's campaign was designed to destroy as many ARVN forces as possible, thus permitting the North Vietnamese to occupy key South Vietnamese cities, putting the Communist forces in a posture to threaten President Nguyen Van Thieu's government. At the same time, Giap hoped to discredit Nixon's Vietnamization and pacification programs, cause the remaining American forces to be withdrawn quicker, and ultimately to seize control of South Vietnam.

A subset of Giap's strategy called for a Communist provisional government to be established in An Loc as a precursor to the assault on Saigon. Although the North Vietnamese hoped to achieve a knockout blow, a corresponding objective was to seize at least enough terrain to strengthen their position in any subsequent negotiations.

The offensive began on 30 March 1972, when three NVA divisions attacked south across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam toward Quang Tri and Hue. Three days later, three more divisions moved from sanctuaries in Cambodia and pushed into Binh Long Province, the capital of which was only sixty-
Map 1. NVA Easter Offensive, 1972
five miles from the South Vietnamese capital in Saigon. Additional North Vietnamese forces attacked across the Cambodian border in the Central Highlands toward Kontum (see map 1). A total of 14 NVA infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments (including 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles) participated in the offensive.4

The North Vietnamese invasion was characterized by large-scale conventional infantry tactics, accompanied by tanks and massive artillery support. The enemy thrusts were initially successful, particularly in the north, where the NVA quickly overran Quang Tri, threatened Hue and Kontum, and generally routed the defending ARVN forces.

Military Region III

Military Region III (MR III), comprised of the eleven provinces that surrounded Saigon, was located between the Central Highlands and the Mekong River delta. The enemy activity in this region began in the early hours of 2 April with attacks by the 24th and 271st NVA Regiments against elements of the 26th ARVN Division in several firebases near the Cambodian border in northern Tay Ninh Province. The North Vietnamese attacked with infantry and tanks (American-made M-41 tanks previously captured from ARVN forces), supported by heavy mortar and rocket fire. Although there had been earlier intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese were making preparations for offensive operations, there was little indication that there would be attacks on the scale of those in Military Region I. While intelligence had shown an increase in enemy activity in Tay Ninh Province in March, the general feeling at Headquarters, MACV, was that the enemy would not try to attack the towns along Highway QL-13. It was felt that ARVN operations along the Cambodian border would prevent the NVA from massing for an all-out attack like the one at Quang Tri in the north. Thus, while the South Vietnamese were surprised at the ferocity of the enemy attacks and the use of tanks, the attacks themselves coincided with expectations that any significant attacks would occur in Tay Ninh.5

The initial assaults on the outlying South Vietnamese posts would prove to be diversionary attacks designed to mask the movement of three North Vietnamese divisions (5th VC, 7th NVA, and 9th VC) taking up their final attack positions in Binh Long Province.6

Map 2. Key locations, Binh Long Province, MR III
Binh Long ("Peaceful Dragon") Province is located in the northwestern portion of Military Region III and is bordered on the west by Cambodia (see map 2). The capital of the province is An Loc, a city of 15,000, which lies only 65 miles north of Saigon. An Loc, a thriving and prosperous city surrounded by vast rubber plantations totaling 75,000 acres, sat astride QL-13, a paved highway leading directly from the Cambodian border to the South Vietnamese capital. Because of its proximity to Cambodia and the accompanying Communist base areas, the city had endured the rigors of war since the early 1960s. Due to its strategic location between Cambodia and Saigon, An Loc figured prominently in the North Vietnamese strategy. Seizure of An Loc would provide a base for a follow-on attack on the South Vietnamese capital city to seize President Thieu's seat of government.

At the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive in MR III, the Saigon government had only a single division, the 5th ARVN, operating in this critical area. This division, a regular South Vietnamese infantry division, was dispersed throughout Binh Long Province.

The Vietnamization Program

By this time in the war, President Nixon had instituted his "Vietnamization" program, designed to turn over the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese. During the 1968 election campaign, Nixon had pledged to bring American troops home and secure an honorable peace in Vietnam. As part of this plan, he directed that a "highly forceful approach" be taken to cause President Thieu and the South Vietnamese government to assume greater responsibility for the war. This program, first called "Vietnamization" by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, sought to make preparations to turn over the war to South Vietnam. This was to be accomplished by a progressive buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while, at the same time, steadily withdrawing American troops. The ultimate objective was to strengthen ARVN capabilities and bolster the Thieu government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the Communists from North Vietnam.

In order to accomplish program objectives, Nixon directed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the senior U.S. military headquarters in Vietnam, to provide maximum assistance to the South Vietnamese to build up their forces, support the pacification program, and reduce the flow of supplies and materiel dispensed to
Communist forces in the south. Between 1969 and 1972, the Thieu government, with American aid, increased the size of its military forces from 825,000 to over 1 million. American military aid provided the ARVN with over 1 million M-16 rifles, 12,000 M-60 machine guns, 40,000 M-79 grenade launchers, and 2,000 heavy mortars. The ARVN military schools were improved and expanded to handle over 100,000 students a year. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was increased to 9 tactical wings, 40,000 personnel, and nearly 700 aircraft. By 1970, the South Vietnamese military was one of the largest and best equipped in the world.

Equipment and numbers were not the only answers to the problem of the South Vietnamese becoming self-sufficient on the battlefield. In order to improve the quality of the ARVN force, MACV increased the advisory effort. This program was not a new effort; Americans had been serving with Vietnamese units since 1955. However, the importance of the advisory program had increased as the number of American combat units dwindled. By 1972, most U.S. ground combat forces had been withdrawn, and the only Americans on the ground in combat roles were advisers who served with ARVN forces in the field.

The American advisory structure closely paralleled that of the Vietnamese military command and control organization. Headquarters, MACV, provided the advisory function to the Joint General Staff (JGS), the senior headquarters of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).

Just below the JGS level were four South Vietnamese corps commanders who were responsible for the four military regions that comprised South Vietnam (see figure 1). Their U.S. counterparts were the commanders of the four regional assistance commands, whose responsibilities included providing assistance, advice, and support to the corps commander and his staff in planning and executing operations, training, and logistical efforts. As the corps senior adviser, the regional assistance commander, usually a U.S. Army major general, exercised operational control over the subordinate U.S. Army advisory groups in the military region.

Under the U.S. regional assistance commander in each region, there were two types of advisory teams: province advisory teams and division advisory teams. Each province in each military region was headed by a South Vietnamese colonel. His American counterpart was the province senior adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The
province advisory team was responsible for advising the province chief in civil and military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs. Additionally, the province team advised the regional and popular forces, which were essentially provincial militia.

There was a division combat assistance team (DCAT) with each ARVN infantry division. This advisory team's mission was to advise and assist the ARVN division commander and his staff in command, administration, training, tactical operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and certain elements of political warfare. The division
senior adviser was usually an Army colonel, who exercised control over the regimental and battalion advisory teams.

Each ARVN division usually had three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and several separate battalions—such as the cavalry squadron and the engineer battalion. The regimental advisory teams were normally composed of from three to five U.S. Army personnel (they had been larger earlier, but the drawdown of U.S. forces in country gradually reduced the size of the American teams with the ARVN units). The regimental teams were usually headed by an Army lieutenant colonel and included various mixes of captains and noncommissioned officers. The separate battalion advisory teams usually consisted of one or two specialists, who advised the South Vietnamese in their respective functional areas, e.g., cavalry, intelligence, engineering, etc.

Elite ARVN troops, such as the airborne and ranger units (and the Marines in MR I), were organized generally along the same lines as regular ARVN units, except the highest echelon of command in the ranger units was the group (similar to a regiment). The airborne brigades were organized into a division. There was also an airborne division advisory team headed by an American colonel. Each of the airborne brigades was accompanied by an American advisory team, which was headed by a lieutenant colonel and was similar, but somewhat larger, than those found with the regular ARVN regiments because they included advisers down to battalion level.

U.S. Army advisers did not command, nor did they exercise any operational control over any part of the ARVN forces. Their mission was to provide professional military advice and assistance to their counterpart ARVN commanders and staffs in personnel management, training, combat operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and psychological-civil affairs operations.12 As U.S. combat forces withdrew from South Vietnam, the U.S. Army advisers increasingly became the focal point for liaison and coordination between ARVN units and the U.S. Air Force, as well as other elements of U.S. combat support agencies still left in country.

By early 1972, there were just 5,300 U.S. advisers in the whole of Vietnam.13 Only a small fraction of this number were actually involved in advising units conducting combat operations. In Binh Long Province, the 5th ARVN Division, in and around An Loc, was accompanied by a small division advisory team consisting of ten to fifteen advisers who worked with the division headquarters and several small teams of two to five persons with each of the division's
subordinate regiments. (The rest of the division advisory team were at the division base camp in Lai Khe.) The division senior adviser at the time of the North Vietnamese offensive was Colonel William ("Wild Bill") Miller. In addition to the division team, there was also a province team, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Corley, with the Binh Long Province headquarters in An Loc. Most of this advisory team, except Corley and a small party, would be evacuated after the start of the battle. Other American advisers accompanied the ARVN reinforcements that would be brought in during the course of the battle. These few Americans (never numbering more than twenty-five during the course of the battle) would find themselves in the thick of the combat action once the North Vietnamese attack began in earnest.

Although there were few American forces operating on the ground in combat roles in Vietnam, U.S. tactical air power was still much in evidence throughout the theater of operations. U.S. Air Force and Marine aircraft operated from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand, while the Navy and other Marine aircraft operated from carriers in the South China Sea. B-52 heavy bombers flew missions in both North and South Vietnam regularly from bases in Guam and Thailand. Prior to the 1972 offensive, the B-52s had been used mostly in the strategic role, but during the Eastertide battles, the big bombers were used increasingly in the tactical support role. Additionally, U.S. Army armed helicopters continued to fly ground support missions throughout South Vietnam. The availability and responsiveness of this American aerial firepower would prove critical in the conduct of the battles to come.
III. THE BATTLE OF AN LOC, PHASE I

The NVA Plan in MR III

The focus of the North Vietnamese main effort in Military Region III was on seizing An Loc, the capital city of Binh Long Province. Once An Loc was taken, the path would be clear for a direct assault down Highway QL-13 to Saigon.

The plan for taking An Loc involved the use of three NVA divisions and supporting forces (see table 1). By this time in the war, although some of the North Vietnamese formations still carried the traditional Vietcong (VC) designations, the divisions were organized and equipped as main-force NVA units manned primarily by North Vietnamese soldiers who had come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the north.

Table 1. Estimated NVA Troop Strength*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5th VC Division</td>
<td>9,230</td>
<td>3,830</td>
<td>Total 3,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HQ &amp; Support</td>
<td>4,680</td>
<td>HQ &amp; Support</td>
<td>1,395</td>
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<tr>
<td>275th Regt</td>
<td>1,560</td>
<td>42d Artillery Regt</td>
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<tr>
<td>174th Regt</td>
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<td>208th Rocket Regt</td>
<td>835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E8 Regt</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>271st AAA Regt</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9,230</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th NVA Division</td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Forces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HQ &amp; Support</td>
<td>4,100</td>
<td>205th NVA Regt</td>
<td>1,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>141st Regt</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>101st Regt</td>
<td>760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>165th Regt</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>203d Tank Regt</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>209th Regt</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>(includes 202d Special Wpns Regt)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,800</td>
<td>429 Sapper Group (-)</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,130</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th VC Division</td>
<td>10,680</td>
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<tr>
<td>HQ &amp; Support</td>
<td>4,680</td>
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<tr>
<td>271st Regt</td>
<td>2,000</td>
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<td>272d Regt</td>
<td>2,000</td>
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<td>95th Regt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10,680</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: The total estimated North Vietnamese forces committed to the Battle of An Loc were 35,470. Additionally, intelligence projections estimated that the committed units received more than 15,000 replacements during the course of the siege.

*Strengths are prior to the Battle of An Loc, April 1972.

The 9th VC Division, considered one of the elite NVA divisions, was targeted against An Loc itself. The 7th NVA Division was tasked to interdict supplies and reinforcements from reaching An Loc from Saigon by cutting QL-13 south of An Loc, between Chon Thanh and Lai Khe (see map 3). The 5th VC Division was to initiate the offensive campaign by capturing Loc Ninh, the northernmost town in Binh Long Province. After securing this foothold, the North Vietnamese forces would move on An Loc.1

The Assault on Loc Ninh

At 0650 on the morning of 5 April, the 5th VC Division crossed the Cambodian border and attacked Loc Ninh (see map 4). This district town was defended by approximately 1,000 soldiers from elements of the 9th ARVN Infantry Regiment and an attached armored cavalry squadron (which was deployed north of the town) from the 5th ARVN Division, part of an ARVN border ranger battalion, and a small number of local territorial forces. The NVA attacked initially from the west with a heavy ground assault led by at least one tank and supported by artillery, rockets, and mortars. These attacks were violently executed, and only skillful employment of tactical air strikes prevented the defenders from being overrun that day. The situation had stabilized, but the attackers had been successful in forcing the defenders into small compounds in the northern and southern ends of the town.

The commander of Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC) was Major General James F. Hollingsworth, a graduate of Texas A&M University, a protégé of General George S. Patton Jr. during World War II, and a veteran of the Korean War. He had served one previous tour in Vietnam as the assistant division commander of the 1st Infantry Division and was the holder of three Distinguished Service Crosses and five Purple Hearts. He and his ARVN counterpart, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, commander of III Corps, the senior ARVN headquarters in MR III (located in Bien Hoa), realized the seriousness of the situation at Loc Ninh.2 Intelligence reports had indicated for months that an attack was on the way, but Hollingsworth and Minh believed that the main attack would come in Tay Ninh Province based on previous intelligence.3 This was despite the fact that the advisers of the 5th ARVN Division began getting indications of increased NVA activity in Binh Long and around An Loc during the period 1–3 April.

The intensity of the attack on Loc Ninh ultimately convinced Minh and Hollingsworth that this was the real opening shot of the
offensive and that an attack of major proportions was imminent. Accordingly, they directed all available air support north to Binh Long to assist the 5th ARVN Division elements in Loc Ninh.

On the morning of 6 April, the defenders heard tanks moving around the southern end of the airstrip. At 0530, the NVA attacked from three directions supported by twenty-five to thirty T-54 and PT-76 tanks.

The ARVN forces and their seven American advisers inside the small compounds fought desperately against the North Vietnamese onslaught. The American advisers coordinated and directed U.S. tactical air support from Bien Hoa Air Base, the aircraft carriers USS Constellation and USS Saratoga, and other attack aircraft flying from bases in Thailand, including AC-130 Spectre gunships. The volume of well-placed air strikes and AC-130 fire enabled the tenacious defenders to hold the NVA at bay for two days (see map 4).

When the NVA tried to get through the defenses of the southern compound, an AC-130 gunship, according to Major General Hollingsworth, “slaughtered” them in the wire and “destroyed the better part of a regiment.”

The four-engine propeller-driven aircraft was originally designed as a cargo carrier, but it had been armed and modified earlier in the war to carry out interdiction missions against North Vietnamese men and materiel moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam.

An AC-130 Spectre gunship. These aircraft were on station over An Loc for the entire battle and proved highly effective against the NVA attackers.
Map 4. The Loc Ninh-An Loc vicinity
The aircraft was initially armed with 7.62-mm Vulcan miniguns, 20-mm Vulcan, and 40-mm Bofors automatic guns. It was also equipped with a variety of tracking equipment, to include a Black Crow radar (used to pick up vehicle ignitions), low-light-level television camera, infrared detector, ground target radar, and a strong searchlight. These well-armed, versatile aircraft would prove crucial in the coming battle for An Loc.

U.S. Air Force fighters stopped three mass attacks on the compounds by what was known as "snake and nape," a mixed ordnance load of conventional high-drag bombs, cluster bomb units (CBUs), and napalm. As the North Vietnamese troops massed for attacks on the remaining ARVN positions, the repeated tactical air strikes and accurate AC-130 fire wrought terrible damage.

However, the next day, 7 April, the sheer force of NVA numbers prevailed, and the repeated human-wave attacks, supported by 75-mm recoilless rifles, 122-mm rockets, 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers, BTR-50 armored personnel carriers, and tanks, eventually overwhelmed the defenders. The southern compound fell at around 0800; the remaining ARVN positions in the northern compound were overrun about 1630.

Less than 100 of the Loc Ninh defenders escaped to An Loc; the remainder of the ARVN troops and American advisers were killed or captured by the victorious North Vietnamese forces. One adviser, Captain Mark Smith (who had virtually assumed command of the ARVN soldiers when the 9th ARVN Regiment's commander, Colonel Nguyen Cong Vinh, had surrendered), was last heard from as he called in air strikes on the NVA troops overrunning his own position in the southern compound. He was wounded multiple times, captured, and not repatriated until the spring of 1973.

Another adviser in Loc Ninh, Major Thomas A. Davidson, part of the Binh Long Province advisory team, escaped through the wire just as the North Vietnamese troops entered one end of his command bunker in the northern compound. He and his Vietnamese interpreter evaded the NVA for the next four days, barely avoiding capture on numerous occasions and finally reaching an ARVN Ranger battalion in the northern part of An Loc. One other adviser, Captain George K. Wanant, Loc Ninh district adviser, also escaped but was captured by the North Vietnamese near Cam Le Bridge thirty-one days later.

As the final attack on Loc Ninh unfolded, Task Force 52 (TF 52), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Thin, was conducting operations from two small firebases located between Loc Ninh and An
Loc near the junction of LTL-17 and QL-13. This task force had been formed from a battalion of Thinh's own 52d Regiment (2-52) and one from the 48th Regiment (1-48), both originally from the 18th ARVN Division, which had been moved from the 18th Division base in Xuan Loc (Long Khanh Province) in late March and placed under the operational command of the 5th ARVN Division to serve as part of the border screen for the division. The task force was accompanied by three U.S. Army advisers, Lieutenant Colonel Walter D. Ginger, Captain Marvin C. Zumwalt, and Sergeant First Class Floyd Winland.

On 6 April, Brigadier General Le Van Hung, the 5th ARVN Division commander, at the urging of Colonel Miller, his U.S. adviser, ordered Lieutenant Colonel Thinh, to mount an attack to reinforce the beleaguered Loc Ninh garrison. Thinh attempted to accomplish this task with his northernmost battalion (2-52), but the battalion ran almost immediately into an ambush as they moved toward the junction of LTL-17 and QL-13. During this ambush the battalion came under heavy enemy attack from several directions, and it was forced to withdraw to its original firebase. The NVA unleashed an artillery barrage on both firebases, pouring down more than 150 rounds of 82-mm mortar and 105-mm howitzer fire and 122-mm rockets from the south and northwest. Barely able to defend themselves against these attacks, the task force was unable to comply with General Hung's order to assist the garrison at Loc Ninh. As the NVA attacks on TF 52 increased in intensity, it became apparent that Loc Ninh could not hold out much longer, and Colonel Miller realized that they were about to lose Thinh's forces as well. On the morning of 6 April, Lieutenant Colonel Ginger radioed to Colonel Miller that the NVA forces had nearly completed the encirclement of TF 52.

On the morning of 7 April, after numerous attempts, Colonel Miller finally convinced General Hung, who was badly shaken by the events at Loc Ninh, that something had to be done quickly to preclude the destruction of the task force. Hung ordered Lieutenant Colonel Thinh to evacuate the firebases and move the task force to An Loc.

At 0830 on the morning of the 7th, the lead element, complete with trucks towing artillery pieces and water trailers, moved east along LTL-17 toward the junction of 17 and QL-13. Near the junction, the convoy ran into a strong ambush (in the same area as the previous day's action); the survivors of this brief, but violent, ambush withdrew once again back to the firebase, abandoning three 105-mm howitzers and numerous vehicles. The NVA gunners increased the volume of artillery into both ARVN firebases.
It was clear that the NVA was not going to let TF 52 evacuate their position without a fight. At 0900, General Hung ordered Lieutenant Colonel Thin to destroy the task force’s heavy weapons and vehicles and withdraw on foot to An Loc.\(^7\)

Thin directed that 2-52 continue to hold the northern firebase as a rear guard, while the command group and 1-48 attempted to force the enemy positions along LTL-17 to break through to QL-13. The destruction of vehicles and equipment (to include 105-mm ammunition) was not complete when the lead elements moved out. They soon passed the site of the two previous ambushes, marked by both destroyed and undamaged ARVN vehicles. Shortly after that, the 1-48 was taken under direct and indirect fire by the NVA and their movement stalled. Meanwhile, 2-52 had departed the northern firebase and ran into the rear of 1-48 where it had been stopped by the North Vietnamese. A near panic situation ensued in the ARVN ranks, and unit integrity began to break down as the forces became intermingled.

In the process of trying to regain control of the situation and get the task force moving toward An Loc, Thin and his command group, accompanied by the American advisory team, ran into a large ambush and Captain Zumwalt was wounded in the face by a fragment from an enemy B-40 rocket. Lieutenant Colonel Ginger determined that Zumwalt was too badly injured to continue and requested extraction by helicopter. Leaving several wounded ARVN soldiers with the Americans, Thin and the remnants of the task force pressed on for An Loc.

For the next thirty-six hours, Lieutenant Colonel Ginger and his small band of comrades fought off continual enemy attacks at very close range. Tactical aircraft, AC-130 Spectre gunships, and helicopter gunships were called in to aid the beleaguered group, while repeated efforts were made to pick them up. The Americans were completely surrounded, and NVA ground fire prevented U.S. Army helicopters from landing. Two aborted rescue attempts resulted in the wounding of one crewman on the first medevac and the death of Chief Warrant Officer (WO-2) Robert L. Horst, the pilot of the second.\(^8\)

At 0800 on 8 April, Ginger’s men were finally extracted under extremely heavy fire by an American OH-6 helicopter. By the time the party was picked up, both Ginger and Winland were also wounded. The helicopter picked up Ginger’s party plus six ARVN soldiers hanging on the skids; a total of twelve personnel flew on a helicopter designed to carry four. A second OH-6 extracted additional ARVN
wounded. Ginger, Zumwalt, and Winland were evacuated to 3d Field Hospital in Saigon.

The pilot of the lead OH-6, Captain John B. Whitehead, D Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, received the Silver Star and was nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor for braving intense ground fire to effect the rescue. Sergeant First Class Winland would later receive the Distinguished Service Cross for his valorous actions during the withdrawal operations and subsequent evacuation attempts.

The remainder of TF 52, only 600 of the original 1,000 soldiers, reached An Loc after a week of infiltrating through the NVA positions astride QL-13. They joined the defenders girding themselves for the coming attack. The next day, the regiment was joined by Major Raymond Haney and Captain James H. Willbanks (the author), who arrived by helicopter from the 18th ARVN Division headquarters in Xuan Loc, to replace the evacuated advisory team.

As the attacks on Loc Ninh and TF 52 unfolded, General Minh and Major General Hollingsworth became convinced that An Loc would be the primary objective of the enemy attack. They also realized that if An Loc fell, the North Vietnamese would have very little between them and Saigon. Accordingly, the decision was made to hold An Loc at all costs. South Vietnamese President Thieu radioed the senior ARVN officers in An Loc that the city would be defended to the death. This had a psychological impact on the enemy as well as the defenders. By directing that the city be held "at all costs," Thieu all but challenged the North Vietnamese to take it. In the weeks that followed, the NVA became virtually obsessed with the desire to overrun An Loc, even long after it had ceased to hold any real military significance.

On the American side, some advisers had been pulled out of Quang Tri when the enemy offensive had started in Military Region I, and this had had disastrous effects on the morale of the South Vietnamese forces there. Hollingsworth determined that the stakes were too high to risk a reoccurrence this close to Saigon. He notified the advisers in An Loc that they were there for the duration. Thus, the American advisers prepared to share the fate of their ARVN counterparts in the coming battle. This proved to be a crucial factor in convincing the South Vietnamese defenders that they would not be left in the lurch to face the repeated North Vietnamese attacks alone.

While concerned about the welfare of his advisers, Hollingsworth was excited about the opportunity to get the NVA to stand and fight.
He later said, "Once the Communists decided to take An Loc, and I could get a handful of soldiers to hold and a lot of American advisers to keep them from running off, that's all I needed." He told the advisers in An Loc, "Hold them and I'll kill them with air power; give me something to bomb and I'll win."

**The North Vietnamese Turn on An Loc**

On 6 April, the enemy forces arrayed in and around Loc Ninh had begun moving south toward An Loc. Under cover of darkness and moving stealthily through the jungle and rubber plantations, the NVA forces took up positions encircling the provincial capital.

As the pressure on An Loc increased, General Minh, III Corps commander, ordered two battalions of the 3d Ranger Group to An Loc to bolster the ARVN defenders. Additionally, on 7 April, Minh was given operational control of the 1st Airborne Brigade, which had previously been located in Saigon as the Joint General Staff strategic reserve. He ordered the brigade, consisting of the 5th, 6th, and 8th Airborne Infantry Battalions and the 81st Ranger Group, to move to Lai Khe to assume the mission of III Corps' reserve; he told them to deploy north of Lai Khe along QL-13.

On the evening of 7 April, North Vietnamese forces from the elite 9th VC Division attacked the Quan Loi airstrip, just three kilometers northeast of An Loc, where the U.S.-ARVN helicopter rearming and refueling areas were located. The attack was characterized by repeated human wave attacks and the use of tear and nausea gas by the attackers. The two companies from the 7th ARVN Regiment defending the airfield were unable to hold against the NVA attacks, and they were ordered to destroy their equipment and withdraw to the city.

With the loss of Quan Loi, it appeared that the North Vietnamese were trying to isolate and encircle An Loc. Hollingsworth advised Minh to order the 1st Airborne Brigade to attack north to secure QL-13, An Loc's lifeline to Lai Khe and ultimately Saigon. With the 5th Battalion in the lead, the brigade attempted to push north but immediately came under heavy attack from North Vietnamese forces entrenched along the highway. It was clear that the NVA were determined to interdict any attempt to reinforce or resupply An Loc by road. The loss of Quan Loi airstrip and the blocking of QL-13 by the NVA meant that the city was surrounded and cut off from the outside. Thus began a siege that would last for over two months.

Over the next several months, the forces in An Loc would undergo a protracted attack, marked by repeated human wave assaults and
continuous heavy shelling at levels seldom seen during the conduct of the entire Vietnam War. To withstand the intensity of this prolonged level of combat would demand almost superhuman endurance on the part of the defenders and their advisers. Additionally, the absence of any significant friendly artillery support and surface resupply would demand the utmost from American air support, both for firepower and resupply.

With the seizure of the Quan Loi area, the NVA gained control of the high ground overlooking the city from which to direct accurate artillery fire and rockets into the city. Still, the NVA made no move to attack the city on the ground for several days. North Vietnamese documents later revealed that the ARVN's rapid withdrawal from Loc Ninh and the other border outposts surprised the NVA and upset their planning timetable. They had expected the securing of Loc Ninh and the outlying border posts to take more time, which would have permitted them to continue to build up the logistics base in Binh Long Province in preparation for the attack on An Loc. Their success in the initial attacks on Loc Ninh and TF 52 had far exceeded their greatest expectations, and they needed time to regroup and continue the buildup for the main thrust on the provincial capital.
A column of T-54 tanks destroyed during the initial assault on An Loc, April 1972

The defenders had their own logistical problems. With the blocking of QL-13, all resupply had to be flown in by helicopters. On 12 April, intense antiaircraft fire downed a VNAF CH-47 helicopter attempting to bring supplies into the city. The amount and types of antiaircraft fire indicated that the NVA had greatly strengthened the ring around the city, and it became very difficult to get helicopters into and out of the city. The NVA had all avenues of approach covered with massive .51-caliber, 23-mm, 37-mm, and 57-mm fire. Additionally, they had introduced the SA-7 Strella heat-seeking antiaircraft missile, similar to the American-made Redeye shoulder-fired heat seeker. Furthermore, a system of early warning spotters enabled the North Vietnamese to identify incoming aircraft so that their gunners would be ready to fire. The result was a devastating pattern of antiaircraft fire every time an aircraft got close to the city.

Within the city, the situation was becoming extremely grim. Artillery and rocket fire were increasing, and patrols outside the defensive perimeter ran into heavy enemy concentrations. Refugees streaming into the city from the north reported sighting tanks, artillery, and other heavy equipment—all headed south. An ARVN officer who was captured by the NVA at Loc Ninh, but escaped and made his way to An Loc, reported that his captors told him that they were going to take An Loc at “any” cost. This and other intelligence indicated that the enemy was preparing for an all-out assault on the city.
Reinforcements were flown into An Loc during the relative lull following the NVA attack on Quan Loi. The 1st and 2d Battalions of the 8th ARVN Regiment and the regimental reconnaissance company were flown in on 11 and 12 April.

By the afternoon of 12 April, ARVN forces in and around the city had grown to a total of four regiments (nine infantry battalions), consisting of regular infantrymen from elements of two divisions, rangers, and territorial forces (see map 5). This force of about 3,000 soldiers would be outnumbered 6 to 1 by the 3 NVA divisions advancing on An Loc.

At Headquarters, Third Regional Assistance Command, in Long Binh, General Hollingsworth and his deputy, Brigadier General John R. McGiffert, read the intelligence reports and determined that the enemy's main attack on An Loc was about to begin. They met with U.S. Air Force representatives at Lai Khe and planned B-52 missions and tactical air strikes on suspected enemy positions around An Loc for the next day.

The Battle for An Loc

During the early hours of 13 April, enemy artillery increased dramatically in volume all over An Loc. The whole spectrum of NVA weapons was brought to bear, including Soviet-made 57-mm and 75-mm recoilless rifles, 100-mm and 76-mm tank guns, as well as 107-mm and 122-mm rockets and all types of heavy mortars. It was also reported that the NVA used Soviet-made 130-mm howitzers. In addition to the Soviet weapons, the NVA also employed American-made 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers captured from the ARVN forces during the Lamson 719 incursion into Laos in 1971 and at Loc Ninh and TF 52 firebases. A total of 7,000 shells and rockets would fall on the city during the next 15 hours, a rate of one round every 8 seconds.

Shortly after dawn, the NVA forces began a combined tank and infantry attack from the northeast. The Soviet-made T-54 and PT-76 tanks moved down Ngo Quyen Street, the main north-south street in An Loc, toward the 6th ARVN Division command post in the southern section of the city. The South Vietnamese troops, who had never faced tanks in battle before, were panic-stricken; the forces in the north of the city that took the initial brunt of the tank assault quickly fell back in the face of the NVA attack.

The key event for the South Vietnamese forces in this early attack occurred as the tanks moved toward the center of the city. Private
Note: All advisers used sketch maps of An Loc similar to this one, with each block numbered for ease of identification.


Map 5. The defense of An Loc, 12 April 1972
An NVA T-54 killed near the center of the city by the 8th Regiment of the 5th ARVN Division

Binh Doan Quang, a soldier from the local territorial forces destroyed one of the lead tanks with an M-72 light antitank weapon (LAW). This was a galvanizing act that demonstrated that the enemy tanks could be stopped and greatly enhanced the confidence of the badly shaken defenders. Word spread quickly and the ARVN soldiers began to emerge from their holes and fire at the tanks.

Two other factors contributed to ARVN efforts to stabilize their defensive lines. First, the NVA were extremely inept in their use of coordinated armor and infantry in the attack. Although most of the tank crews had recently returned from tank training in the Soviet Union, they quickly demonstrated that they did not understand the use of combined arms tactics. The tanks routinely attacked without infantry, persisted in advancing along roads when cross-country movement would have been safer, and, when speed and initiative were called for, proceeded slowly and indecisively. This failure to apply the most basic tenets of combined arms tactics left the North Vietnamese tanks unprotected against the ARVN defenders, who found them easy prey for their LAWs, once they overcame the initial shock of the armored attack.

During the confusion of the initial attack, one North Vietnamese tank crew demonstrated that even the NVA had that small percentage of people who “don’t get the word.” Thinking that the city had been secured by the NVA infantry, they rolled into the city with all hatches open, completely oblivious to the fact that the soldiers in the fighting positions were ARVN, not NVA. The tank made it all the way to the
An ARVN defender at An Loc. Using M-72 LAW missiles, such defenders knocked out several North Vietnamese tanks.

southern part of the city before it was knocked out by an ARVN soldier with an M-72 LAW.26

But what thwarted the North Vietnamese onslaught was the well-executed air support that struck the enemy well forward of the ARVN positions and prevented the NVA from reinforcing their initial success in the northern part of the city. While A-6s, A-7s, F-4s, and A-37s and VNAF A-1s and A-37s dropped their bombs on the NVA forces massing around the city for the attack, the ARVN forces, supported by Army AH-1G Cobra attack helicopters and Air Force AC-119K Stinger and AC-130 Spectre gunships, were able to defend against the reduced number of NVA infantry and tanks that escaped the air strikes and assaulted the city.

The Cobras from F Battery, 79th Aerial Rocket Artillery, and F Troop, 9th Cavalry, were particularly effective in hitting the tanks in the close confines of the city streets. During the initial NVA assault, they caught one tank column attacking south near the 8th ARVN Regiment's command post. They knocked out the lead tank, one in the middle, and the last tank in the column, effectively stopping the attack
in its tracks. Another Cobra, flown by Captain Bill Causey with Lieutenant Steve Shields as gunmen, was eventually credited with killing or disabling five tanks during the first week of the battle for An Loc.27

For the remainder of the 13th and the next two days, the American advisers directed repeated air strikes against the NVA forces, which were sometimes as close as twenty meters to friendly troops.28 The tenacity of the defenders and the continuous air strikes prevented the enemy from expanding its foothold in the northern part of the city.

A fighter aircraft destroyed this North Vietnamese ZSU57/2 antiaircraft weapon near the center of the city
An A-37 with the various types of ordnance it was capable of carrying. These aircraft provided close air support during the intense fighting in An Loc in April and May.

The house-to-house fighting continued unabated. Lieutenant Colonel Edward B. Benedit, one of Colonel Miller’s deputies, later recalled: “The enemy pounded and pounded. He’d hit and take a house, then reinforce at night, and next day take the next house and the next.”

The civilian citizens of An Loc were not immune to the death and destruction going on all around them. One of the NVA T-54 tanks made it into the center of the city, where it rolled into a Catholic church. Huddled inside were old men, women, and children conducting a prayer service. The tank fired its cannon and machine guns, killing well over 100 of the innocent civilians.

As the battle inside the city raged, General Hollingsworth directed B-52 strikes on NVA staging areas very close to the city. Each B-52 strike, code-named Arc Light, consisted of three aircraft, each carrying up to 108 MK-82 500-pound conventional bombs. The devastation wrought by these missions was immense. One B-52 strike
caught an entire battalion in the open before it reached the northwest approach to the city. The bombs killed an estimated 100 attackers, destroyed at least 3 tanks, and broke the back of the NVA attack on that part of the city. These strikes would prove the difference between victory and defeat countless times during the next two months.

The NVA increased the heavy shelling on the city, but the ARVN defenders "circled the wagons" and used tactical air power to hold the NVA ground attacks at bay while the B-52s worked on the enemy staging areas. General McGiffert later commented on the effectiveness of the B-52 strikes and the tactical air sorties of 13 through 15 April thusly: "I really believe that without these the city would have fallen, because I think the infantry would have gotten in with the tanks."

Air support in all its forms had a tremendous impact on the outcome of every battle. Patrols after the first assault on An Loc
confirmed more than 400 enemy dead, half of whom were killed by air. During the first two weeks of the battle for the city, over 2,500 air strikes were flown in support of the ARVN forces in and around An Loc. The U.S. Air Force had been a key factor in the stabilization of a very serious tactical emergency.

The North Vietnamese forces were undeterred by the heavy casualties inflicted on them by the continuous air strikes. They continued to press the attack, still leading with tanks. On 14 April, one such attack, accompanied by small groups of infantry, came within 500 meters of the 5th Division Command Post in the center of the city before it was beaten back by the defenders.

After two days of intense fighting and relentless shelling, the ARVN morale remained high. Recovering from the initial shock of the armored attack, the ARVN soldiers had rallied and reorganized their defenses. The presence of the American advisers and the around-the-clock tactical air support they controlled demonstrated to the defenders that they were not going to be left to fend for themselves.
The advisers were busy. Colonel Miller and his fellow American officers in the 5th ARVN Division’s command bunker worked twenty-four hours a day, stopping only briefly to grab quick naps. Huddled around a plywood map table, they planned and coordinated the battle. The ARVN commander and his staff had little training or experience in handling operations as complex as those demanded by the NVA attack. The American officers acted as General Hung’s staff; they advised him on troop dispositions, planned air strikes, coordinated support, and processed intelligence. They spoke constantly with the forward air controllers coordinating the air support vital to the defense of the city. They also planned the next day’s missions and attempted to coordinate the air resupply drops.

The advisers with the regiments and battalions also had their hands full. They advised their counterparts on defenses and tried to bolster their morale. Their primary function, however, was to coordinate the air strikes that had been allocated to their respective units by the advisers in the 5th ARVN Division’s command bunker.

To coordinate the allocated air strikes, the advisers talked directly to the forward air controllers (FACs) of the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, who were orbiting over the city in O-2Bs, small Cessna fixed-wing aircraft with push and pull motors. These “good old boys,” as one adviser called them, were the true heroes of the air war. Their job was to fly “low and slow” over the battlefield to coordinate with the ground troops and direct the aircraft to their targets. The FAC aircraft were unarmed, except for smoke rockets, which were
used to mark the targets. Since most of the fighter-bomber aircraft did not have the same kind of tactical radios that the ground forces had, the FACs, who had both kinds, acted as the link between those on the ground who needed the ordnance put on target and those aircraft carrying the ordnance.

The normal procedure was for the senior advisers in the 5th ARVN Division's command post to coordinate requests for air support by talking to what became known as the "King FAC," who parceled out available tactical aircraft sorties to various other FACs who had been given area responsibility for different parts of the city and surrounding area. The FACs talked directly with the advisers on the ground to learn the nature of the target to be struck. They then spoke with the inbound fighter-bombers and directed them to the targets, using smoke rockets and adjustment instructions relayed from the ground. For the duration of the entire battle, the FACs and advisers, working closely together, were able to make the best use of all available aircraft and munitions to help the outnumbered defenders in very tenuous situations.
The ever-present U.S. Air Force greatly bolstered the ARVN's morale, which got another boost on 14 April when General Minh ordered the 1st Airborne Brigade to disengage along QL-13 and move by helicopter to reinforce the 5th ARVN Division forces at An Loc. The 6th Battalion conducted the initial combat assault by helicopter into an area adjacent to Windy Hill and Hill 169, the high ground three kilometers to the southeast of the city. The combat assault was made unopposed, but shortly thereafter, the airborne troopers made heavy contact with the enemy, sustaining moderate casualties. The American advisers with the unit called in tactical air support and the situation stabilized.

The next day, the remainder of the brigade was inserted in the same area southeast of the city. The brigade headquarters, along with the 5th and 6th Battalions, occupied positions east of the city. The 81st Ranger Group assaulted into a landing zone southeast of Hill 169 and began moving toward An Loc. The 6th Battalion began to construct a firebase for the six 105-mm howitzers from a battery of the 3d Artillery Battalion that were airlifted in that morning by CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

The pressure on An Loc increased on 15 April when the NVA once again renewed their attacks on the city in earnest. Two separate tank-led thrusts were made during the course of the day, but both were turned back after pitched battles. The outcomes of both of these battles were extremely close; in the latter attack, the NVA attackers once again almost took the 5th ARVN Division's command post, with one tank making it to within 200 meters of General Hung's command bunker, firing directly into it and killing three division staff officers. As the defenders held tenaciously to their small piece of terrain, tactical air support once more provided the difference between victory and defeat. In one attack at 1400 that day, tactical aircraft destroyed nine of ten attacking tanks.

Meanwhile, President Thieu, realizing the criticality of holding An Loc to prevent a direct thrust on Saigon, had earlier ordered the 21st ARVN Infantry Division from its base in the Mekong delta to Binh Long Province to reinforce III Corps' forces. General Minh ordered the new division to attack north from Lai Khe to open the highway to An Loc. By 16 April, the 21st had moved north and was attacking the heavily entrenched NVA forces at Tau O Bridge on QL-13 south of the city. Unfortunately, they were having a difficult time of it and were not able to relieve any of the pressure on the ARVN defenders in An Loc to the north.
By late on 16 April, the battle inside An Loc had abated somewhat. The enemy shelling was still heavy, but there was a lull in the ground attack. After three days of combat, the enemy had lost twenty-three tanks, most of them T-54s. Still, the NVA forces held the northern part of the city, and in many cases, the opposing forces were separated only by the width of a city street. Meanwhile, the NVA tightened its stranglehold on An Loc. The city had received 25,000 rounds in the previous 5 days, and it would continue to receive between 1,200 and 2,000 enemy rocket, artillery, and mortar rounds per day.

General Hollingsworth reported on the 16th to General Abrams, commander of MACV in Saigon, that “there was a great battle at An Loc yesterday, perhaps the greatest of this campaign. The enemy hit us hard all day long with all he could muster—and we threw it back at him. The forces in An Loc realized that they had to fight and they fought well.”

In truth, the fighting ability of the ARVN during the initial NVA onslaught had been less than uniformly outstanding, yielding half of the city in the face of heavy ground, armor, and artillery attacks. However, the fact remained that the ARVN had held, and at least the southern half of the city was still in South Vietnamese hands.

The NVA Change Their Plan

Although the defenders did not know it at the time, the first phase of the battle had ended. The enemy's initial plan to seize the city had been thwarted. The main attack, conducted by the 9th NVA Division, supported by the 3d and 5th Battalions of the 203d Tank Regiment, had been unsuccessful—largely due to the continuous pounding by B-52s, fighter-bomber aircraft, AC-130 Spectre gunships, and attack helicopters. Accordingly, the North Vietnamese modified their plan.

The original North Vietnamese plan had called for An Loc to be overrun and occupied by NVA forces no later than 20 April. Due to the American tactical air support, the ARVN defenders were able to hold out, and the original Communist timetable was no longer achievable. Accordingly, the NVA headquarters ordered a renewed main attack on An Loc from the east by the 9th VC Division, supported by secondary attacks on the airborne brigade south of the city by elements of the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions. In an attempt to negate the impact of American air power, additional antiaircraft weapons were emplaced around An Loc.
By a twist of fate, the revised NVA plan of attack came into ARVN hands on 18 April. On that day, an ARVN Ranger element engaged NVA forces near Tong Le Chon firebase, just outside the city. The Rangers found a handwritten report on one of the enemy bodies after the battle; the report was from the 9th VC Division's political commissar assigned to the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the North Vietnamese headquarters. This report addressed the failure of the NVA attack to take An Loc in accordance with the initial plan. The report cited two reasons for this failure. First, the intervention of American air power had been devastating on the attacking forces. Secondly, the lack of coordination between armor and infantry forces in the attack had allowed the ARVN forces to regroup and reorganize their defenses. The report also contained a narrative of the modified plan to take the city.

With this plan, the enemy was very confident that the city could be seized within a matter of hours. In fact, the NVA were so confident of victory that Radio Hanoi broadcast a report that the city would be taken and the People's Revolutionary Government established in An Loc by 20 April.

Captured North Vietnamese soldiers later reported that after the initial attack, their leaders increased efforts to exhort them to do their utmost to defeat the ARVN "puppets." There were also reports that North Vietnamese tankers were found chained in their tanks. Whether this was actually true or merely a symbolic gesture on the part of the NVA soldiers, it is indicative of the North Vietnamese commitment to take the city.

The defenders inside the city realized that they had only a momentary respite before the NVA attacked once again. On 17 April, Colonel Miller, senior adviser to the 5th ARVN Division, reported to General Hollingsworth that An Loc continued to sustain heavy shelling and that he believed the enemy planned to continue its stranglehold on the city and then attack in mass. Although the ARVN troops still held the city, Colonel Miller was pessimistic regarding their capability to carry on: "The division is tired and worn out; supplies minimal, casualties continue to mount, medical supplies are low; wounded a major problem, mass burials for military and civilians, morale at a low ebb. In spite of incurring heavy losses from U.S. air strikes, the enemy continues to persist."

The situation in An Loc was indeed bleak. The U.S. and Vietnamese Air Forces attempted to resupply the city on a daily basis, but the enemy antiaircraft fire made it increasingly difficult to drop
the supplies so the defenders could recover them. Extremely heavy casualties had been sustained by all ARVN units. Evacuation of the wounded was nearly impossible, because the VNAF evacuation helicopters either refused to fly into the city, or if they made it into the city, they refused to touch down long enough to load the wounded. Those few courageous South Vietnamese airmen who did try to pick up the wounded were usually shot down or their aircraft heavily damaged by enemy ground fire.

The Second Attack

It was under these conditions that the defenders prepared themselves for the next NVA assault. The attack began in the early morning hours of 19 April, with a massive bombardment by rockets and artillery on both the city and the 1st Airborne positions on Windy Hill and Hill 169, southeast of the city. Following the heavy artillery preparation, the three regiments of the 9th VC Division (271st, 272d, and 95th) conducted the main attack on An Loc itself.

At the same time, the North Vietnamese launched a supporting attack with two NVA regiments, the 275th and the 141st (from the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions respectively), on the scattered elements of the 1st Airborne Brigade around the city. This attack was extremely violent, but the 5th Airborne Battalion was able to repulse the NVA from their positions east of QL-13 just outside the city. Tactical air support and B-52 strikes inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. However, the 6th Airborne Battalion in and around the firebase on Hill 169 was eventually overwhelmed. A small force of about eighty paratroopers was able to break out and was later extracted. Two companies made it into the city and joined the besieged defenders. Stragglers and escaped prisoners from the 6th Airborne Battalion continued to turn up in An Loc for several weeks, but the 6th Battalion as a unit was virtually out of the operation until it was reconstituted in late May.46

The result of this action was that NVA forces were able to occupy the dominant terrain previously held by the South Vietnamese paratroopers; these positions provided them unencumbered observation of ARVN defenses throughout the southern and eastern parts of the city.

Meanwhile, the main enemy attack on An Loc by the 9th VC Division did not go as well for the NVA. The 5th and 8th Airborne Battalions assumed positions in the rubber plantation just south of the city and were able to block the NVA thrust from that direction. In An
Loc itself, the defenders and their advisers continued to repulse repeated ground assaults and employed close air support to bring devastating fire on enemy massed formations attacking all over the city. The fighting was intense, but the air support permitted the defenders to beat back the attacks.

By 22 April, the ground assaults had abated somewhat, but the artillery and rocket attacks had increased significantly, almost to the point of continuous "bombardment" according to one adviser. Nonetheless, the situation had stabilized; the NVA still held the northern part of the city, while the ARVN occupied the southern portion.

That night, the ARVN decided to see if they could improve the situation. The 81st Airborne Ranger Group, which had moved into the city and occupied defensive positions on the perimeter, launched a limited counterattack to eliminate several enemy lodgments in the northern sector of the city. Their aggressive attacks, among the first South Vietnamese offensive actions since the NVA invasion began, were supported by a Pave Aegis AC-130, a specially outfitted Spectre gunship with a 105-mm cannon. Sergeant First Class Jesse Yerta, light weapons adviser with the 81st, employed the Spectre's fire in the form of a rolling barrage to support the ARVN attack. In order to bring the supporting fire in close, Yerta moved with the lead assault element and repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire. He was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that night.

The attack by the 81st was mildly successful, but the tactical situation remained virtually unchanged from 22 April until 10 May. While both sides jockeyed for position and the opposing forces