The Third Indochina War: The First Half-Year

HONG NGU
Mar - Apr 1973

- Enemy attack
- Counterattack
- Enemy retreat

0 2 MILES
0 2 KILOMETERS

Map 7

...to infiltration and interdict the Mekong convoys as they moored at the Vietnamese Navy Base of Tan Chau before churning on into Cambodia. In March, the NVA concentrated above Hong Ngu in Cambodia the 207th Regiment, 6th NVA Division; the 174th Regiment, 5th NVA Division; the 272d Regiment (detached from the 9th NVA Division, which remained in the area of Minh Thanh and Michelin plantation of South Vietnam’s Military Region 3); and elements of the 75th Artillery Group. With the 207th leading, supported by artillery, the North Vietnamese attacked from Prey Veng Province, Cambodia—NVA base area 704—toward Hong Ngu. Not only did they meet immediate heavy resistance, but their rear area was pounded by B-52’s and tactical bombers. The U.S. air effort in support of the Cambodian campaign to clear the Mekong banks from the Vietnam border to Phnom Penh was in full swing. (Map 7)

Benefits to the ARVN defense of Hong Ngu and Tan Chau were substantial. Several reliable reports told of heavy casualties and damage to the NVA’s storage areas. One B-52 strike on 23 April 1973 north of the border between the Mekong and the Hong Ngu stream probably caught a large portion of the attacking force. Survivors reported seeing impressed civilians carrying the bodies of more than 100 NVA soldiers from the area. Many bunkers were destroyed, and the scent of death was heavy in the air.

In mid-April, the ARVN 15th Infantry, 9th Division, together with the 2d Armored Cavalry Squadron and a Regional Forces Group, counterattacked. Although casualties were heavy, excellent VNAF and Vietnamese Navy support helped enable the ARVN troops to clear the east bank of the Mekong from Hong Ngu to the Cambodian frontier. Not only was control of this stretch of the river never again seriously threatened, but also the thrust inflicted heavy casualties and dealt a damaging blow to enemy morale. By the end of May, one battalion of the 207th NVA Regiment had only 100 men. By the 4th of May, when the Hong Ngu fighting had wound down to intermittent small contacts and light shellings, 422 enemy dead had been counted, while ARVN casualties were 94 killed, 743 wounded, and 36 missing.

Civilian casualties in the action were by far the highest since the cease-fire, over 300, of which 80 were killed by NVA artillery. Almost 300 houses were destroyed by enemy fire. In the second week of April alone 123 high-explosive 122-mm. rockets slammed into Hong Ngu.
Sparring in the Highlands

The situation in regard to isolated outposts was much the same in Military Region 2 as in Military Region 3. There was a deep but fragile arc of outposts manned by ranger border defense battalions and territorials extending north from Kontum City, and one isolated border camp, Plei Djereng, west of Pleiku. All had to be supplied by air.

Mang Buc, just inside Kontum Province on the border with Quang Ngai Province, was north of Kontum with no usable road in-between. To the southwest, over ridges rising to 2100 meters, was Dak To, the only remaining position along Route 14 from Dak To to Kontum was in enemy hands, and Dak To itself was of little concern to the North Vietnamese because they were building a new highway that would bypass the camp on the west. South of Mang Buc and northeast of Kontum was the isolated camp of Chuong Nghia (also known as Plateau Gi). It too posed no particular problem for the North Vietnamese since they built a road by-passing it. (Map 8)

West of Pleiku, on the slopes of the high plateau above the valley of the Se San River, was Camp Le Minh at the village of Plei Djereng. This post posed different problem for the NVA. It was on the edge of a base area being expanded from Duc Co. It was also on Route 509 leading directly to Pleiku. And it was astride the Route 14 complex that was under construction and would eventually link Khe Sanh in Quang Tri Province with the Bu Dop-Loc Ninh logistical center north of Saigon. For the ARVN the problem was familiar: only a major operation could open Route 509 from Pleiku to Plei Djereng, and the forces for that were not available. Thus Le Minh had to be supplied by air.

The most important ARVN tasks in the Kontum-Pleiku defense were to keep the enemy from closing Highway 14 between the two cities, prevent NVA artillery from interdicting Pleiku Air Base or hitting the military logistical centers in the area, and keep Highway 14 open to Ban Me Thuot and Highway 3 open through the Mang Yang Pass. The western trace of the defense, which left much of the terrain uncovered, was anchored in Thanh An District on Highway 19 about midway between the junction of Highways 19 and 14 and the NVA’s base at Duc Co. From Thanh An, the trace went north bending toward Highway 14.

The forward positions west of Kontum were just east of Polei Krong and the adjacent village of Trung Nghia near the confluence of the Dak Bla and Krong Poko rivers. The NVA had attacked Polei Krong and Trung Nghia during the cease-fire land grab and still occupied Polei Krong, which it appeared determined to hold, not only to provide a good point of departure for an attack on Kontum but also because Polei Krong was astride one of the best north-south lines of communication. This area became the scene of some of the heaviest fighting in Military Region 2 during the summer and early autumn of 1973. Southwest of Kontum, on Three Points Mountain (Hill 700) overlooking Provincial Route 3B and the Dak Bla River, was the isolated outpost of Doi Ba Cham, accessible only by helicopter.

In mid-May, VNAF aerial observers saw two 130-mm. guns being moved into position northwest of Kontum. Primarily through agent reports, ARVN intelligence officers learned of NVA plans to use artillery against ARVN artillery batteries in the Kontum City area. Shortly afterwards, heavy attacks by fire hit the ARVN fire bases and positions of the 53d Infantry Regiment. 23d ARVN Division, northwest of the city on Eo Gio Hill and Bases N and R. Two NVA ground attacks against Doi Ba Cham were repulsed. Artillery bombardments by the NVA’s 40th Artillery Regiment, employing 130-mm. gun and 122-mm. rocket fire, continued against forward ARVN positions and artillery batteries during the first week of June, while elements of the 10th NVA Division conducted ground probes against three forward ARVN positions. On 7 June, a major attack by battalions of the 66th Regiment, 10th NVA Division, and the 24th Independent NVA Regiment, supported by at least 10 T-54 tanks and by fire from 130-mm. guns and 122-mm. rockets, struck ARVN positions at Trung Nghia and Polei Krong. The attack drove a regional force battalion and elements of the 44th ARVN Regiment from their positions, affording the NVA control of positions 17 kilometers west of Kontum City.

Even as the 10th NVA Division was pressing hard against the Kontum perimeter, the 320th NVA Division was trying to force contraction of the ARVN defenses west of Pleiku as well as those protecting Highway 14 north of the city. In early May, ARVN intelligence learned that at least one battalion of the 95-B Regiment, 10th NVA Division, had moved out of the Chu Pao Pass area and into a base near Plei Monoun, just south of the Yali Falls, there to prepare for attacks on the ARVN ranger base at Plei Mrong.

In late March a more serious situation was developing in Thanh An district on Highway 19 where elements of the 320th Division began moving from Duc Co toward the ARVN base at Thanh Giao. In the first week of April, the defenders were pounded by 18 separate bombardments and beat off five major ground attacks, although an outer defense perimeter was forced to pull back. Examination of shell fragments disclosed the presence of 130-mm. guns and 120-mm. mortars. It was obvious that the NVA wanted more buffer space east of Duc Co.
VNAF's aerial observers saw a new compound of 34 buildings being erected near the airfield, and photos disclosed extensive new road construction. VNAF bombers attacked a crossing on the Se San River, which forms the Cambodian border at this point, and destroyed 13 medium ferries while ARVN's aggressive defense at Thanh Giao caused the NVA to back off for a few weeks.

By 1 May the 320th Division's 64th Regiment was bivouacked north of Thanh Giao and the 48th remained to the south. Nevertheless, no significant attacks took place, and the ARVN 47th Regiment, 22d Division, having moved from Binh Dinh Province, stiffened the defenses in Thanh An District.

The RVNAF II Corps Commander, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, could deploy the 47th Regiment to reinforce Pleiku with confidence that the 22d Division could control the situation in Binh Dinh without it. Over a year having passed since the 22d was badly mauled in Kontum, the division was well on the way to recovery. In northern Binh Dinh the division nibbled at enclaves seized by the Communists in January, finding that the NVA 3d Division was barely effective. The 12th NVA Regiment was in western Tam Quan District, and the 2d and 21st Regiments had pulled out of Hoai Nhon to refit and receive replacements west of the An Lao River in Hoai An District. The fighting strength of the enemy battalions was probably under 200 men each. Having lost heavily in LANDGRAB 73 and in post- cease-fire engagements, the division's morale, as well as its strength, was at a low point, while the ARVN 22d Division was gaining strength and appeared to be imbued with the confidence and drive of its commander, Brig. Gen. Phan Dinh Niem. In any event, with the 6th Ranger Group operating in Tam Quan District, the 40th and 42d Regiments in Hoai Nhon, and the 41st Regiment in Phu My, the 22d ARVN Division as mid-summer approached controlled the main lines of communication and populated coastal regions of Binh Dinh Province.

The South Vietnamese outnumbered the NVA and VC forces in Military Region 2. The ARVN 22d and 23d Divisions had a total of seven regiments in Binh Dinh, Kontum, and Pleiku Province. There were also the 2d Ranger Group, detached from III Corps, and battalions of the 7th Rangers from IV Corps. In all there were 18 Ranger battalions in MR 2 in the summer of 1973. On the other side of the ledger, the enemy had his 3d, 10th, and 320th Divisions, the first two with three regiments and the third with two. The NVA also had four separate regiments and as many as 40 understrength independent battalions but total enemy combat strength in MR 2 was probably under 30,000. The NVA nevertheless demonstrated at Trung Nha and Polei Krong an ability to concentrate the forces required at a vulnerable objective to achieve temporary success. On the other hand, the enemy failed to concentrate against any decisive objectives in Pleiku or Binh Dinh Provinces, even though the RVNAF was spread thinly throughout the corps area. The activity in MR 2 during the early summer of 1973 illustrated a perennial truth about main force combat success and failure in Vietnam: despite overall numerical and qualitative inferiority, the NVA could concentrate forces, achieve temporary fire and maneuver superiority, attack with some degree of tactical surprise, and overwhelm local RVNAF defenses.

Logistics and Infiltration

By the end of June, at least three NVA transportation regiments were moving supplies along the northern section of Highway 14 from the Khe Sanh area into the A Shau Valley. At least three major storage depots were moved out of Laos into South Vietnam, probably to be located in the new Highway 14 area. As much as 10,000 short tons of supplies were moved into the B-3 front and NVA Military Region 4 during June. This amount was evidently part of the estimated 50,000 short tons which crossed the DMZ into Quang Tri during the first weeks after the cease-fire. The Highway 14 network inside South Vietnam would, when completed, provide an alternate to much of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Significantly, when the roads in the southern Laos panhandle were washed out in the southwest monsoon, the Route 14 net in the northern highlands of South Vietnam would be dry and trafficable.

Enemy logistical developments received close attention at DAO and by the J2 of RVNAF. A competent intelligence estimate, employing conservative criteria, concluded that as of the end of May 1973, the NVA had moved supplies into Laos and South Vietnam in sufficient quantities to support offensive operations in South Vietnam at the 1972 (31 March 72-January 73) level for 13 to 18 months and that these supplies would be sufficient to begin a similar offensive by July 1973. Replacements, however, had not yet been received in the numbers required to bring combat units up to the strengths preferred by the NVA for launching an offensive.

From January through June, 65,000 replacements arrived in South Vietnam. This compared to over 92,000 during the same period of 1972. Even when reassigned ex-prisoners of war were added to the totals, a picture of understrength enemy units remained. The RVNAF JGS had estimated enemy casualties during 1972, killed, permanently disabled, or died of wounds, at over 178,000. Even if generous adjustments were made for possible exaggerations, there was no question but that losses were extremely heavy and an estimated 39,000 more
enemy soldiers were permanently put out of action during the first six months of 1973. Thus the enemy still had some catching up to do in regard to replacements (RVNAF losses were also heavy in 1972 with over 40,000 killed. Although much lower than those incurred during the Nguyen Hue offensive, casualties in the first half of 1973 were substantial: 15,800 killed, 5,000 dead from non-combat causes, 73,700 wounded in action, and 16,000 injured from noncombat causes.)

Guns and tanks were also moving south. A reasonable estimate, proved accurate by information acquired subsequently, was that the NVA had brought about 140 new 122-mm. and 130-mm. guns into South Vietnam since January 1973, and that about half of these went to COSVN with the rest to Military Region 5 and the B-3 Front. About 250 new tanks also entered the country, also going to COSVN with smaller equal shares to the B-3 Front and MR5.

The SA-7 “Strella”

Amid the remarkable increase in NVA antiaircraft strength in South Vietnam the gravest threat to VNAF planes, particularly in the southern part of the country, was the SA-7 hand-held missile. From the cease-fire until the end of June, there were 22 reported SA-7 attacks on VNAF aircraft, 8 of which shot down the planes. The following tabulation gives the date / province / aircraft and result:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Aircraft</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Quang Tri</td>
<td>A-37</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb</td>
<td>Dinh Tuong</td>
<td>UH-1H</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Dinh Tuong</td>
<td>A-1H</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Dinh Tuong</td>
<td>AC-119</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Binh Duong</td>
<td>UH-1</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Dinh Tuong</td>
<td>UH-1</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Dinh Tuong</td>
<td>A-37</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>CH-47</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>An Xuyen</td>
<td>UH-1</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Binh Long</td>
<td>A-1H</td>
<td>Destroyed, pilot missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Binh Long</td>
<td>AC-119</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Binh Long</td>
<td>A-1H</td>
<td>Destroyed, pilot missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar</td>
<td>Binh Long</td>
<td>F-5A</td>
<td>Destroyed, pilot missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Quang Tri</td>
<td>UH-1 (ICCS)</td>
<td>Destroyed, 7 killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>L-19</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Kien Phong</td>
<td>A-1G</td>
<td>Destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Kien Hoa</td>
<td>UH-1</td>
<td>Destroyed, 1 killed, 3 wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Kien Phong</td>
<td>L-19</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr</td>
<td>Kien Phong</td>
<td>L-19</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>UH-1</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>CH-47</td>
<td>Destroyed, 5 killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>UH-1 (two)</td>
<td>Missed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The concentration of firings and successful attacks in Binh Long Province reflected the intensity of the VNAF air support provided during the effort to relieve the siege of Tong Le Chon. The rather low ratio of successful firings—slightly better than one out of three—was attributable in large degree to effective countermeasures adopted by the VNAF. As the SA-7 was fired, it had a distinctive flash which could often be seen from the air, followed by a characteristic smoke and vapor trail. With attack aircraft flying in pairs, one or the other of the pilots might see the missile coming and take or direct evasive action. High-energy flares were sometimes tossed out or mechanically ejected, frequently causing the missile’s heat-seeker to lock on and track the flare and burst a harmless distance from the plane. Helicopter crews were also alert to watch for missiles, and in order to reduce infrared emissions, UH-1 helicopters were modified. The hot-spot on the fuselage below the main rotor was shielded and the exhaust diverted upwards by means of an elbow attached to the tailpipe. But regardless of these moderately effective measures, the result of this contest between air and ground was an environment that forced reconnaissance and attack aircraft above optimum operating altitudes and virtually eliminated the employment of large helicopter formations.

As the NVA was preparing for the assault on Trung Nghia in Kontum, as NVA regiments were making their futile but bloody attempts to continue the attack out of Cambodia into Hong Ngu, and as the ring was being drawn ever more tightly around Tong Le Chon, the diplomats were meeting again in Paris to assert once more the desire of all parties for a real cease-fire and a lasting peace in Vietnam. The communiqué that issued from the conference marked the beginning of a period which in Saigon was called “Cease-fire II.”

Note on Sources

Statistical information on cease-fire violations was principally derived from DAO Saigon Quarterly Assessments, March and June, 1973. The RVNAF/JGS reports on this subject were the primary source used by DAO in publishing its Quarterly Assessments. The general situation prevailing in the country during this period was described with reference to DIA, DAO, Saigon, U.S. Embassy and J2/JGS reports, studies, and assessments. Particularly helpful in this regard were the contributions of Gen. Phan Dinh Niem, commander of the ARVN 22d Infantry Division, who filled in many blanks and corrected some erroneous data concerning the activities and deployment of his division and other forces in the highlands and in Binh Dinh.
Cease-Fire II in MR 1 and 2

June-August

The third Indochina war reached a milestone of sorts on 13 June 1973 when the four parties to the original agreement got together in Paris and issued a communique calling upon themselves to observe the provisions of the 28 January cease-fire. The communique was followed by a decline in combat activity that reached the lowest level since the brief hiatus following the LANDGRAB campaign, but this pause was also temporary. The United States then shored up its commitment to Vietnam by assigning one of its toughest, most experienced diplomats, Graham Martin, to be Ambassador in Saigon. Meanwhile, members of the Canadian delegation to the ICCS began making preparations to leave Vietnam, having announced on 29 May that they had come to supervise a cease-fire but instead were observing a war. The Canadians had had no illusions concerning the feasibility of their task. They gave it the best they could, enduring considerable hardships and dangers, and suffering casualties in the bargain.

Dr. Kissinger held a press conference in Paris in which he released the text of the joint communique to take effect at noon on 15 June. His questioners were justifiably skeptical, and Dr. Kissinger barely concealed his own doubts:

What was signed today is an amplification and a consolidation of the original agreement. It is not a new agreement. . . . It is our hope that by what has been done today a significant step has been taken in the consolidation of peace in Vietnam and Indochina. . . . the history of Indochina is replete with agreements and joint declarations. I am not naive enough to pretend to you that the mere fact of having again agreed to certain words in itself guarantees peace; but I will also say that since all parties have worked so seriously for the past three weeks, we have every hope that they will match this effort with performance and therefore there is fresh hope, and we hope a new spirit, in the implementation of the agreement, which in itself is maintained. [Department of State Bulletin, July 9, 1973, p. 46.]

The communique would have no lasting effect because it had no power of enforcement behind it. It contained no requirement that North Vietnam abandon its fundamental objective; neither did it promise sanctions against any party that chose to ignore its provisions. Perhaps, viewed from Saigon, it provided some reason to hope that South Vietnam could count on enough U.S. support to continue the defense of the country.

There was naturally high interest in Saigon about what effect the communique would have on the level of combat. For the reporting offices of the Defense Attaché Office, notably the Operations Division, 15 June marked the beginning of a new reporting period: “Cease-fire II.” Based on statistics collected from South Vietnam’s JGS and reported as indicators of combat activity, some restraint was imposed by both sides during the first week of Cease-fire II. Table 4 illustrates general declines in activity, comparing the period from 10 June to noon on the 15th (only 5 1/2 days) with the period from noon on the 15th through the 21st.

Fifteen instances of increased activity, indicated by asterisks, occurred in the period following Cease-fire II. Little significance can be attached to any of these instances, except to note that Military Region 1 reported a sharp increase in “incoming artillery” and all regions except Military Region 3 reported an increase in “friendly killed-in-action.” There was an abrupt decline in RVNAF offensive indicators in MR 3: “Artillery rounds fired” were 3,712, down from 38,745, and there were no “VNAF sorties flown,” compared to 236 the preceding period. Cease-fire II appeared to have the least effect, on both sides, in Military Region 4. Changes were small in most categories.

Early Assessments

The military intelligence community in Vietnam collected considerable information about an enemy buildup but few signs that a major offensive was imminent. Instead, it was faced with contrary, or at least ambivalent, data emphasizing the so-called political struggle and claiming adherence to the cease-fire. At the end of July, the Intelligence Branch of DAO noted that construction on the NVA’s new logistical corridor inside South Vietnam, Route 14, was continuing, that the pipeline was being extended, and that ammunition shipments into South Vietnam were at a high level. But these preparations notwithstanding, no new offensive was seen in the offing. The RVNAF J2 had independently reached similar conclusions in a study showing considerable understanding of the situation and of enemy capabilities and intentions.

About a month and a half before Cease-fire II, the President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, discussed his personal estimate with the cabinet. The gist of his remarks, which reached the American Embassy, corresponded to the view held there.
TABLE 4: COMBAT LEVEL INDICATORS, JUNE 1973

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>MR 1</th>
<th>MR 2</th>
<th>MR 3</th>
<th>MR 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incidents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Jun</td>
<td>Jun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22*</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major contacts</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor contacts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incoming arty</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40*</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rounds arty</td>
<td>1696</td>
<td>2210*</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VNAF sorties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scheduled</td>
<td>12280</td>
<td>5580</td>
<td>14762</td>
<td>11144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flown</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly killed</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly wounded</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>114*</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemy killed</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemy wounded</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilians killed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilians wounded</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

*Increased activity.
that the Communists were not likely to attack in strength during 1973. Thieu said that the Communists would enjoy the best advantage if they would wait until near the end of President Nixon's term to launch their offensive. He believed they would not move sooner realizing that President Nixon would not become apparent for many months. He could not have known that two days later Nixon would “accept full responsibility” for the Watergate affair and dismiss his four closest political advisers. Neither could he have predicted that Nixon would leave office 15 months later. The Communists also were undoubtedly surprised by the political turmoil in Washington and would not be quite ready by the time of Nixon's departure in August 1974 to begin the final drive. In the summer of 1973, almost everyone on the scene—Communists, South Vietnamese, and Americans—could agree on three things: the Communists were not ready for a new offensive; they were incapable of resuming guerrilla warfare; and the nature and tempo of military activity in support of the political struggle would remain about the same for the balance of the year. In fact, some analysts were extending their predictions of relative quiescence well into 1974.

Communist resolutions and military directives circulating among troops in South Vietnam in the summer of 1973 reiterated and expanded the general guidance of COSVN Resolutions 2 and 3. As corroborated by the interrogation of ralliers, these documents seemed to direct a holding action in the South while the armed forces were reconstituted and strengthened. They admitted to a present inability to pursue successfully a large-scale offensive, but expressed confidence and pride in the preparations under way—the system of roads, pipelines, airfields, and refurbished main forces—that would offer them this option in the near future. Although their propaganda carried no hint, by late summer the Communists had abandoned the illusion that there could ever be a political settlement, or a tripartite council, or an election that would serve their purposes. The summer of 1973 found the Communist leadership as well as the common soldiers badly demoralized. Peace had not come as promised, the battlefields were still very dangerous, and the RVNAF were showing strength nearly everywhere. Although the South Vietnamese knew the U.S. Congress had voted that American bombing in Cambodia would stop on 15 August, they also heard President Nixon say that on the day the last U.S. bomb fell in Indochina he would “work with the Congress in order to take appropriate action if North Vietnam mounts an offensive which jeopardizes stability in Indochina and threatens to overturn the settlements reached after so much sacrifice by so many for so long.” The South Vietnamese, however, could not know that Nixon’s vice-president would be forced to resign in disgrace within two months, that Nixon had already lost all his ability to work with the Congress concerning Vietnam, and that he would be out of office himself within a year.

On 4 July 1973 the enemy’s South Vietnam Liberation Army issued a directive for the conduct of the struggle in the second half of the year. Signed by Maj. Gen. Tran Do, the army’s Deputy Political Officer, it was essentially an exhortation to bolster sagging morale among the cadre. The cadre was told that a great advantage had been won through the terms of the cease-fire but that efforts must be redoubled, particularly in proselytizing, if final victory was to be grasped. Furthermore, all cadre would have to work toward modernization of the Liberation Army and correct such tendencies as “pacifism, rightism and passivism.” Local military units would be strengthened and their combat efficiency improved. Another order, COSVN Directive 934, turned up in Long An Province in August. Dated the 7th, it recognized the “new opportunities” afforded by the joint communiqué of 13 June. The United States, according to COSVN, had been forced to abandon its previous policies with regard to Vietnam and would probably not intervene again militarily. Meanwhile, the Liberation Forces would consolidate and rebuild and encircle South Vietnamese controlled areas. These resolutions followed on the heels of To Huu’s visit in May during which COSVN’s propaganda and training cadre was roundly criticized for inefficiency in carrying out its ideological and educational responsibilities. Thus, following a temporary downturn in activity, a new phase of combat was about to begin.

Trung Nghia

When the ARVN 44th Regiment, 23d Division, was driven out of Trung Nghia by a tank-infantry assault on 8 June 1973 the South Vietnamese immediately tried to retake the position. Casualties mounted on both sides as successive attempts failed to dislodge the deeply entrenched enemy, who enjoyed the advantage of observation from the heights of Ngoc Bay Mountain. In early July, the 44th gained a few meters and dug in on the eastern edge of the village of Ngoc Bay but could move no farther, despite the employment of massive artillery preparations and air strikes. (Map 9)

Stalled in the attempt to take Trung Nghia by frontal assault, General Toan determined that an approach from the south against the positions at Plei Djo Drap, directly across the Dak Bla River from Trung Nghia, would strike the defenses in the flank and force a withdrawal. He therefore directed the
Cease-Fire II in MR 1 and 2
23d Division, reinforced with rangers, to attack north from the base at Plei Mrong.

The southwest monsoon, in full force over the western highlands of Pleiku and Kontum Provinces in early August, allowed the NVA to maneuver in daylight since aerial observation was spotty and artillery and air strikes consequently much less effective. Plei Mrong and its camp, called Ly Thai Loi by the ARVN, was situated on Provincial Route 3B south of the Yali Falls of the Krong Bolah and the enemy concentration around Plei Monoun. The ARVN move north caused activity to pick up during the week of 4-10 August when the NVA 28th Reconnaissance-Sapper Battalion of the B3 Front launched seven separate attempts to take the camp, supported by 75-mm. and 130-mm. gunfire. ARVN Ranger units in the field north and south of the camp also came under attack. A few days later a battalion of the 95B Regiment, 10th NVA Division, hit the ARVN 22d Ranger Border Defense Battalion at Doi Ba Cham, just north of Plei Mrong, but was repelled, leaving 150 dead on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the ARVN 45th Regiment, 23d Division, advancing in the Plei Monoun area to the Krong Bolah River, encountered other elements of the 95B Regiment. Combat with the 95B continued throughout the month in the Plei Mrong sector, and its losses were substantial, probably as many as 200. But despite these losses, the 95B was successful in preventing the ARVN from closing on the Dak Bla River.

The NVA was nevertheless suffering from the bombardment at Trung Nghia. Damage to the NVA 24B Regiment was so severe that it was withdrawn to the Dak To area for recuperation and replaced by elements of the 66th and 28th Regiments, 10th Division. The 28th, recently strengthened by replacements from the North, took up the defense of Trung Nghia while the 66th held Plei Djo Drap. (At this time it became apparent that the 24B Regiment was attached to the 10th Division, while the 95B, the third regiment of the 10th, was taking its direction from B3 Front.) Meanwhile, South Vietnam's tired 444th Regiment was replaced in the attack by the 42d Regiment of the 22d Division, flown to Kontum in C130s from Binh Dinh Province. This fresh regiment, and a small but important change in tactics, made the difference. Rather than engage in large infantry assaults, the 42d methodically eliminated enemy bunkers, one by one, using platoon-sized assaults supported by 81-mm. mortars firing delayed-fuze rounds which blew away overhead cover and killed or exposed the occupants. Prisoners of war later attested to the effectiveness of this technique, particularly the use of delayed fuzes.

On 1 September 1973, the 42d Regiment began the final assault on Trung Nghia, advancing cautiously to find that except for a few isolated riflemen the enemy had withdrawn. The 28th NVA Regiment, depleted by casualties and malaria, limped north along the Poko River. Some of its wounded, left behind and captured, revealed that forces defending Trung Nghia had suffered losses of 30 percent on the whole, and that in some units with considerable sickness casualty rates were as high as 60 percent. On the other hand, the 42d's casualties were light. Furthermore, the ARVN replacement system was working well and in mid-September the two divisions, the 22d and the 23d, were at about 90 and 85 percent strength, respectively.

While the 42d Regiment entered Trung Nghia, the 53d Regiment, 23d ARVN Division, advanced along the south bank of the Dak Bla River and occupied Plei Djo Drap, vacated by the withdrawing 66th NVA Regiment, which crossed the river to recuperate. Trung Nghia was cleared of all enemy by 7 September, and the 42d entered Polei Krong on the 16th. During the rest of the month mopping-up operations cleared enemy remnants from the slopes of Ngoc Bay Mountain, while skirmishing between the ARVN Rangers and elements of the NVA 95B continued around Plei Mrong. But as the success of the 42d Regiment transformed gloom and frustration into euphoria at South Vietnam's II Corps headquarters, a major blow fell on Plei Djereng.

Plei Djereng-Le Minh

One of the few impediments to the steady projection of the NVA's logistical corridor down the length of the western highlands of South Vietnam was an ARVN camp at Plei Djereng, called Le Minh, manned by the 80th Ranger Border Defense Battalion. The position, situated astride Route 613 and blocking free movement from Communist-controlled Plei Djereng into the NVA logistical base at Duc Co and east to Pleiku, was an obvious enemy objective. (Map 9)

There was ample warning of an impending attack. A master sergeant from an NVA reconnaissance company turned himself in to Thanh An District, Pleiku, on 16 September and said that the NVA 26th Regiment of the B3 Front would attack Plei Djereng before the end of September. Considerable reliance was attached to the master sergeant's report because his knowledge of the 26th Regiment's order of battle confirmed other information previously collected.

Armed with this intelligence, the battalion commander at Le Minh intensified his security operations around the camp. On 22 September, only one company was inside the camp perimeter together with several families belonging to the battalion; the other two were patrolling outside the wire, although they did not range far from the camp. About
noon the 26th NVA Regiment began an assault
employing a heavy artillery bombardment including
122-mm. and 130-mm. guns, mortars, and rockets
and accompanied by T-54 tanks. As the battle raged
through the afternoon, radio contact with the camp
was lost, and the battalion commander was mortally
wounded. Rain and poor visibility prevented
VNAF support. No reinforcement was attempted
by the corps commander, although two teams of
Ho Rangers (long range reconnaissance patrols)
were moved by helicopters into the battle area to
reestablish communications and attempt to rally the
defenders. In the face of overwhelming NVA
strength, this mission had no chance of success. The
Rangers reported seeing 6 T-54 tanks, while VNAF
pilots after the attack counted 10 and destroyed 3.
but this was two days later; rain and poor visibility
prevented the VNAF from providing support
during the attack. Of 293 men in the 80th Ranger
Border Defense Battalion when the battle began,
200 were killed or captured in this short, violent
action.

Until the attack on Le Minh, the corps commander,
Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, had enjoyed a
deserved reputation as a forceful, if not brilliant,
field commander. President Thieu, visiting Pleiku
on 1 October along with Chief of the Joint General
Staff, General Cao Van Vien, to commemorate the
16th anniversary of II Corps, harshly rebuked Gen­
eral Toan for not reacting to the advance warning
of the attack and taking steps to reinforce or at least
provide adequate artillery support to the defenders.
For General Toan, who some observers felt would
be awarded his third star on the occasion of the
President's visit, the reprimand was indeed a shat­
tering experience. Although Toan would eventually
become a lieutenant general and was to employ his
forces with considerable skill during his remaining
time in command, far greater significance than
the blow to his ego was the possibility that his lapse
at Le Minh (as viewed by President Thieu), may
have started a decline of confidence in his ability
that culminated in his relief 11 months later.

In any event, Toan seemed to recover rapidly and
immediately proposed a plan to retake Le Minh. His
subsequent actions revealed, however, that he was
less interested in Le Minh than in destroying the
NVA 320th Division. President Thieu had directed
him to use whatever means necessary to prevent the
enemy from concentrating and seriously threatening
South Vietnamese forces or territory in Military
Region 2. General Toan, with some justification,
considered the other NVA division in the highlands,
the 10th, to be less than a major menace, having
recently experienced heavy casualties in the fighting
around Trung Nghia. He therefore decided to con­
centrate on the 320th, which he believed would be
capable of major offensive operations by early 1974,
if not crippled in the meantime.

His plan, which he began implementing in mid-
October, involved building and occupying strong
points along Provincial Route 509 from Pleiku west
to Le Minh as bait to entice the 320th into concen­
trating in the open terrain where Toan could de­
stroy its battalions with air and artillery. He built
another strong position where a road used by the
NVA into Base Area 701 crossed Provincial Route
6C about 10 kilometers north of and within artillery­
supporting range of Plei Me. The position was in
relatively open, rolling brush land, and General
Toan, whose background was armor, manned it
with a task force consisting of a battalion of M-48
tanks, a reconnaissance squadron, a four-gun battery
of 155-mm. howitzers, and a regional force battal­
on, hoping that the 320th would accept the chal­
lenge to its line of communication. Instead, howev­
er, the 320th kept the pressure on Thanh An Dis­
trict, along Highway 19, and against the ARVN
outposts west of Pleiku along Provincial Route 509.
Attacks by fire were frequent and heavy, but
throughout the summer little ground changed hands
and the 320th Division was never seriously hurt.
Behind the screen of the 320th, the NVA 470th
Logistical Group moved in from Cambodia and set
up its headquarters in Duc Co.

By early October, General Toan directed that
operations in Binh Dinh be turned over to the
province chief and that only one regiment of the
22d Division, the 40th, remain in the coastal prov­
ce. The fighting commander of the 22d, Brig.
Gen. Phan Dinh Niem, who had been wounded
more than a dozen times in his long career in battle,
had moved his command post to Than An District,
Pleiku. His 47th Regiment was west of Pleiku with
the 21st Ranger Group advancing in the direction of
Plei Djereng on Provincial Route 509. In mid­
October the 40th was airlifted into Pleiku and as­
signed to operate west of Pleiku, generally along
Provincial Route 565. The 41st Regiment, with the
21st Tank Regiment, was moving on Highway 19
toward Thanh Giao; the 42d Regiment, following
its victory at Trung Nghia, was in reserve.

The 23d Division was still responsible for opera­
tions in Kontum Province and had its 44th Regi­
ment, supported by territorials, securing the north­
western approaches to the city, while the 45th and
53d Regiments were closing in on Hill 727 west of
Kontum City, the last major lodgment of the enemy
east of the Krong Bolah River. The 22d Ranger
Group at the same time was advancing on Hill 727
from Plei Mrong. Thus, while the victory at Trung
Nghia had restored some relative stability to the
sector northwest of Kontum and had reduced the
threat to the ARVN artillery, logistical and air bases
around the city, the situation in western Pleiku
Province was far from settled. Pleiku Airbase and artillery fire bases in the province had been rocketed, and the 320th Division was responding to General Toan’s extension of outposts along Provincial Route 509 by moving out from its Plei Djereng base to attempt to force their contraction. To exploit this perceived opportunity to put the 320th out of action, General Toan had the entire 22d Division airlifted by VNAF C130’s to Pleiku.

While elements of the 48th Regiment, 320th Division, harassed the ARVN advanced base at Plei Blong 3, near Pleiku, the 2d Bn of the ARVN 40th Regiment fought a fierce engagement with an enemy battalion, supported by five T-54 tanks, southwest of Plei Blong 3 on the afternoon of 23 October. Losses were heavy on both sides. Although other bloody skirmishes followed, none presented General Toan with the opportunities for even gradual attrition such as he enjoyed at Trung Nghia against the NVA 10th Division. In western Pleiku Province, the 320th had room for maneuver and was not committed to defend a small piece of terrain as the 10th was at Trung Nghia. The decision to give up the offensive and pull back to defensible positions in a shallow strip west of Pleiku was, however, forced upon General Toan by the turn of events in Quang Duc.

Quang Duc

Quang Duc, the mountain province where Vietnam bends westward and the Annamite Range begins to slope down to the terrace of the Dong Nai, was important commercially for its vast timber resources and militarily, for both sides, because of the lines of communication that passed through it. After the NVA had closed surface travel from Saigon to Phuoc Long by the direct route through Binh Duong, the only land access available to the South Vietnamese was via Ban Me Thuot and Quang Duc. As far as the NVA was concerned, Quang Duc was pivotal to the extension of its Route 8B to the Vietnamese border. Before reaching the Phuoc Long border of South Vietnam’s Military Region 3, Highway 14 was joined at the little hill town of Kien Duc by Local Route 344, coming over from the Quang Duc Province capital of Ghia Nghia. This road junction was vital because its control provided an alternate route from Ban Me Thuot—through Dak Song and Ghia Nghia on Provincial Route 8B.

Important as well was the road junction at Dak Song, where Provincial Route 8B left Highway 14. (Map 10)

Until mid-May 1973 when the NVA’s projection of its new line of communication reached Bu Prang and while the South Vietnam’s access to Phuoc Long through Quang Duc remained unthreatened, neither side paid much attention to Quang Duc. ARVN engineers were working on local roads, primarily to improve access to the timber preserves in the northeast section of the province, and the only enemy activity of any note was mining to harass and delay this project. Only three regional force battalions were located in the province. They were supported by six 105-mm. howitzer platoons (12 guns), which had no occasion to fire since the cease-fire. Additionally, 27 popular force platoons were scattered about the province. These territories were nearly all Montagnards, and the province population was 60 percent tribal.

Around the beginning of May, a regional force patrol, moving out from its lonely outpost near Bu Prang, made contact with an NVA reconnaissance party and killed four. The rest of May and June were quiet until enemy harassment of the RF positions around Bu Prang began in early July, evidently in response to the unusually aggressive patrolling ordered by Col. Nguyen Hau Thien, Quang Duc’s province chief. Mortar attacks, accompanied by some light infantry probes, continued through July, as did RF forays into the “old” Bu Prang positions on the border west of the Tuy Duc crossroads. In the last week of August, Colonel Thien tried a reconnaissance in force with two RF battalions. Both met heavy resistance short of their objectives on the border and returned to camp. This inconclusive skirmishing took on an ominous note in early September when the first evidence appeared disclosing that COSVN had sent two battalions of its 271st Regiment from southwest of Tay Ninh City up to Quang Duc. The presence of an NVA main force regiment was a new and dangerous development in Quang Duc. Colonel Thien asked for reinforcement and was given an RF battalion from Darlac Province. He complained about the poor performance of the Darlac battalion, and General Toan agreed to replace it with another battalion from Khanh Hoa. This gave Colonel Thien a force of four RF battalions, two of his own Quang Duc battalions and two from Khanh Hoa. He located the entire force at the mutually supporting bases of Bu Prang and Bu Bong, each with a platoon of 105-mm. howitzers.

The NVA 271st Independent Regiment had been roughly handled by the ARVN and VNAF in the
Cease-Fire II in MR 1 and 2

QUANG DUC CAMPAIGN
30 Oct - 10 Dec 1973

- Enemy attack
- Counterattack
- Retreat direction
- Enemy retreat direction

Due An

Map 10
early months of 1973 in marsh and ricelands along the Vam Co Dong River and the Cambodian border in Hau Nghia Province and southern Tay Ninh. COSVN had pulled it back to Cambodia in April for reorganization and recuperation. Afterwards the regimental headquarters and two of its battalions, the 8th and 9th, were trucked to Bu Dop in northern Phuoc Long Province, while the other, the 7th, was sent to operate under Long An Province authority. (When the 271st Regiment was committed to battle in Quang Duc, it had three battalions; the third was evidently an infantry battalion from the Tay Ninh-Svay Rieng Military Region (C-50), probably attached to the 271st during the reorganization phase in April.) Leaving Bu Dop, the 271st marched through Bu Gia Map and arrived northwest of Bu Prang in late August, ready to assist in the defense of the new line of communication and to deny the ARVN use of Highway 14 in the border region. Successive attempts by the Quang Duc territorials failed to gain any ground west of the Tuy Duc crossroads, as the rest of Quang Duc Province remained relatively quiet.

Meanwhile, NVA preparations for the Quang Duc campaign continued. A task force headquarters, designated Unit 95, was established at Bu Dop in Phuoc Long Province, and the NVA 205th Independent Regiment was assembled there for movement to Quang Duc. The 205th had been operating since the cease-fire in South Vietnam's Military Region 3, and before moving to Bu Dop it had been in northern Binh Duong Province east of the Michelin plantation. Three more maneuver elements joined the task force at Bu Dop before its composition was complete: the 429th Sapper Regiment, the 46th Reconnaissance Battalion, and a tank battalion (probably the 20th) from the COSVN 26th Armor Group. Artillery support was provided by the 208th Artillery Regiment, 69th Group, COSVN, which had been operating in Binh Long. Antiaircraft artillery, including 23-mm. automatic cannons, joined the force as well as a detachment equipped with SA-7 antiaircraft missiles.

Unit 95 had reached division strength, but this was not yet realized at South Vietnam's II Corps headquarters. Given the meager defenses in Quang Duc, it was surprising that the NVA leadership committed a force of such overwhelming size. The fact that it did so appeared to reflect the inadequacy of NVA tactical intelligence, which had been demonstrated on several occasions, and a respect for RVNAF capabilities. Such a commitment also underscored the importance attached to the principal objective—construction and protection of the line of communication. Much later, after the major engagements were over and the Communist leadership considered the threat to its line of communication significantly diminished, South Vietnamese intelligence officers discovered that continued offensive operations by the enemy's Quang Duc task force were designed to draw RVNAF into the province and keep them occupied, thereby reducing the forces available for employment against the B3 Front. Had the forces been available, General Toan might have accommodated the enemy in this regard. They were not, however, and Quang Duc security had to revert to territorials and Rangers.

By the end of September 1973, reconnaissance and survey parties from the 208th Artillery Regiment had selected firing positions and observation posts near the Tuy Duc crossroads at Bu Prang, Bu Bong, and Kien Duc. Firing batteries moved into Quang Duc by the end of October with their 85- and 122-mm. field guns and 120-mm. mortars. To insure consistency in survey and firing, the only maps authorized for use in the 208th Artillery were the 1:50,000 series printed in Hanoi.

The NVA 205th Infantry Regiment, with the 429th Sapper Regiment attached, arrived in assembly areas near Bu Prang in mid-October, and on 21 October the 208th Artillery began a five-day rehearsal preparatory to the attack. Meanwhile, the NVA 271st Regiment with the 46th Reconnaissance Battalion moved toward Dak Song.

The 208th Artillery began softening up Bu Prang and Bu Bong on 30 October. Each day 122-mm. rockets and mortar and artillery shells fell on the two camps. The camp commander kept his four RF battalions outside the perimeter, patrolling near the Tuy Duc crossroads, and the local defense of the two positions was the responsibility of an RF company, an engineer platoon, and the two platoons of artillery. The attack began just before dawn on 4 November. The NVA 205th Regiment, with the 429th Sappers and two companies of tanks and armored personnel carriers, overran the badly outnumbered and outgunned defenders. They destroyed two ARVN howitzers, towed the other two away, and outside the camps dispersed the four RF battalions. During the assault on Bu Bong, the commander of the NVA 205th was seriously wounded and had to be evacuated.

General Toan responded rapidly to the situation in Quang Duc Province, although he had available only sketchy information concerning the enemy's strength and dispositions. He immediately ordered the ARVN 23d Division to pull the 53d Infantry out of western Kontum and get it started toward Ban Me Thuot. As this order was being executed, a blow fell on Dak Song, the camp controlling access to Route 8B, the only land access to Quang Duc from Ban Me Thuot. The defenses at Dak Song crumbled under assault of the NVA 271st Regiment; Gia Nghia, the province capital, was cut off. But the 53d ARVN Infantry was on the way; by 8 November, its 1st Battalion was approaching Dak Song. The 2d
Cease-Fire II in MR 1 and 2

The 53d ARVN Infantry, was flown into the airfield west of Gia Nghia and began north on Highway 14 toward Bu Prang and

Meanwhile, the NVA 205th Regiment began exn the next phase of its orders: it turned over the newly won positions at Bu Prang to another element of the task force deploying south generally along High­

3d Battalions available (the 1st was still near Dak Song), the ARVN 53d Infantry was to defend the Kien Duc road junction. The NV A 205th began probing these defenses on 21 November. On the 23d Communist leaflets were dropped near Kien Duc, signed by the Commander National Liberation Front Forces, advising ARVN officers and men to stop trying to retake Bu Prang, Bu Bong, and Dak Song and threatening Gh Nghia with tanks if the South Viet­

Casualties were moderately heavy on both sides; the 53d lost 40 killed, 40 wounded, and 80 missing. The NVA 205th quickly began to replace some of its losses; about 100 fresh troops, newly arrived from North Vietnam, joined the regiment at Kien Duc on 8 December.

Meanwhile, General Toan flew to Saigon to report on the Quang Duc situation to President Thieu and General Vien. The President told him not to be concerned about lost outposts, but to direct his efforts to the destruction of the NVA forces in Quang Duc. These instructions no doubt pleased General Toan. That same day he ordered the 23d Division commander to put his command post in Gia Nghia and to fly his 45th Regiment to Nhon Co. Within hours six C-130's landed elements of the 23d Division at Nhon Co, although the airfield there was under intermittent artillery and rocket attack. That night and the next day, the 21st ARVN Rangers removed the last road blocks on Route 8B south of Dak Song. Casualties were heavy, but the first convoy since September soon rolled into Gia Nghia from Ban Me Thuot.

Although the commander of the 53d Infantry had recovered from his wound and asked for the mission of retaking Kien Duc, Colonel Tuong, commanding the division, assigned the task to the 45th. This regiment was fresh, while the 53d's battalions had been in nearly constant action for a month. Following an intense and effective artillery and air preparation, the 23d Division Reconnaissance Company and the 3d Battalion, 45th Infantry, led the attack into the trenches, bunkers, and rubble at the Kien Duc road junction. The NVA 205th was forced to retire with heavy losses; its 1st Battalion lost 40 percent of its strength at Kien Duc, and its sapper company was so decimated that it was disbanded after the battle. A rallier later reported that the 205th lost more than 200 killed and 400 wounded in its Quang Duc campaign.

The 23d ARVN Division, using its 44th Regiment, continued effective operations during December and early January, primarily in the Bu Prang - Bu Bong area, against the NVA 271st Regiment's forces remaining there. With the route again secured from Ban Me Thuot through Gia Nghia to Phuoc Long, General Toan's responsibilities in the highlands and Binh Dinh demanded that the 23d leave Quang Duc Province to deal with more pressing threats.

In Quang Duc the NVA exploited the benefits of prolonged and detailed preparation and capitalized on its ability to concentrate overwhelming force against lightly defended objectives. Although these factors combined to produce success in the initial battles, the RVNAF, employing with particular skill its newly developed capability of rapid air deploy­
ment, its professional application of close air support and artillery fire, and its experienced regular infantry, won the campaign. The NVA was denied the use of Highway 14 through Quang Duc, its line of communications in the border region around the Tuy Duc crossroads remained subject to harassment and interdiction, and the RVNAF were able to regain and keep control of the logistical route to Phuoc Long. Quang Duc proved once again that the South Vietnamese, provided sufficient ammunition, fuel, and maintenance support, could overcome the traditional advantages enjoyed by the attacker.

Military Region 1

For the NVA, the last half of 1973 was a period for rebuilding and expansion. The intense fighting in the B-3 Front area, from Kontum to Quang Duc, was the direct result of the determination of the NVA to expand its logistical system—particularly the Route 14 complex—and prevent RVNAF encroachment into base areas and lines of communication. The level of combat in South Vietnam’s Military Region 1 was comparatively low, simply because the NVA’s northern Quang Tri and western highland bases and logistical routes were neither seriously threatened nor interfered with. The North Vietnamese continued construction and stockpiling activities in full view of RVNAF positions and made little effort to camouflage. They did attempt to prevent aerial observation and photography, and the density of their antiaircraft defenses denied manned flight over sensitive areas such as Khe Sanh and Cam Lo. Since the enemy required no additional terrain or routes for his logistical activities, there were only minor adjustments in the line of contact.

As Cease-fire II came to MR 1, General Truong, commanding I Corps, made some adjustments in defensive sectors assigned to his divisions north of the Hai Van Pass. The Marine Division retained responsibility for the northern approaches in Quang Tri Province and was given operational control of the 51st Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, which replaced the Airborne Division west of Highway 1. The Airborne Division was assigned the defense of the Co Bi-An Lo Bridge sector, while the 1st Infantry Division was responsible for the western and southern defenses of Hue as far south as Phu Loc District and the Hai Van Pass. South of the Hai Van Pass, the 3d Infantry Division held Quang Nam Province and the northern district of Quang Tin Province, which included the Que Son Valley. The 2d Infantry Division was spread from the valley southward to cover the rest of the region to the boundary of Binh Dinh Province.

The Marine Division’s sector was the most stable and least active in the region, if not in the entire country. Opposing riflemen exchanged invective rather than bullets. The Marine Division commander, Brig. Gen. Bui The Lan, reported in early July that no rifle or artillery fire had been directed against his troops since March. He said that he would respond in kind to any attack against his positions and that one of his targets would be Dong Ha city itself, which was within range of his artillery. The Communists undoubtedly understood the risks associated with any significantly heightened activity in the Quang Tri sector. They were rebuilding Dong Ha, and its small port was rapidly becoming a major storage and transhipment point for military supplies. VC activity in the marine rear was all but wiped out, although fragments of the infrastructure probably still functioned clandestinely among the 27,000 refugees settled in Hai Lang District. The 51st Infantry was six rifle battalions and 12 PF companies, all from Quang Tri Province. The PF companies and some of the RF companies were integrated with marine companies occupying the same positions. General Lan was quite pleased, saying that the PF companies were the equal of the RF.

He attached two of the RF battalions to marine brigades in the line where they were assigned sectors to defend, while two other battalions, seriously understrength after malaria-ridden tours in the western mountains, were shifted to coastal areas of operations east of Quang Tri City. General Lan also had some armor under his control—the 18th Cavalry Squadron with a troop of M-41 tanks and two troops of armored personnel carriers and a reinforced company of M-48 tanks. Later in the year he was to gain control of a Ranger group, but he had to return the 51st Regiment to the 1st Division west of Hue. The stability of the main front enabled General Lan to keep three battalions in reserve and to rotate battalions to Saigon for two-week periods of rest and family visits. In spite of extended tours of duty, morale at the Marine Division was the best in the armed forces.

Meanwhile, the NVA, also taking advantage of the cease-fire in Quang Tri, in December withdrew its 320B Division to Thanh Hoa Province in North Vietnam. Following the 308th and 312th Divisions the 320B became the third NVA infantry division to deploy home from the Quang Tri front since 1972 offensive.

The most sensitive part of the Hue defenses was the sector guarding the critical An Lo Bridge. Over 15 kilometers from the Imperial City, the An Lo Bridge carried Highway 1 across the Song River at the mouth of the Song Bo Valley. Not only was this sector the northwestern gateway to Hue, but its control by the enemy would isolate the Marine Division. The Airborne Division was ge
Itel'iOl,ating morale and weak leadership began to fantry
insect, the Ngoc Ke Trai, that the forward
GI shallow south of the An Lo Bridge, the eas'oned replacements. By December 1973, the
GI was out of action, and the ranks were filled with
Casualties resulting from the enemy assaults
in the Song Bo Valley forced the
manders of the division on 31 October but could make no
noticeable headway in solving the division's tactical
and morale problems. These were too much the
results of conditions beyond the control of the com-
mander: an extended front under continuous enemy
pressure, the debilitating effects of cold, wet, ty-
phoinal weather; inadequate supply to the forward
infantry outposts; and the worsening economic
strait in which the men found themselves.
If the 3d Infantry's control of the situation in the
Song Bo—Ngoc Ke Trai sector was unsettled and
worrisome to the 1st Division commander, the 54th
Infantry Regiment's hold on the southern ap-
proaches to Hue inspired little confidence either.
The 54th held Mo Tao Mountain and other key
positions in the Song Ta Trach sector. The Ta
Trach River, which was the main tributary of the
Song Huong—the famous Perfume River that flows
through the heart of Hue beneath the walls of the
ancient Citadel—formed a natural corridor into the
city. Although the forward positions were in con-
tested terrain, the NVA maintained only light pres-
sure throughout the last part of 1973.
The 54th's sector of responsibility was wide; it
extended south to Phu Loc District and the northernend of the Hai Van Pass. After winding north
through the Pass, Highway 1 in Phu Loc paralleled
the railroad along the beach, over numerous cul-
vers and bridges. At Phu Loc a great massif, whose
highest peak was Bach Ma at 1448 meters, tumbled
down to end abruptly at the bay. Bach Ma was an
ideal site for severing Thua Thien and Quang Tri
Province from the rest of the country. Neither side
occupied it at cease-fire, but the ARVN soon after
established an outpost at the summit. The NVA
followed suit, and by August 1973 two ARVN RF
companies faced a small enemy force less than 100
meters away.
During clear weather, Bach Ma provided good
observation of Highway 1 at Phu Loc, but as the
rainy season arrived, clouds rested on the summit
not only obscuring vision but making resupply of
the forces on top virtually impossible by helicopter.
Although an informal understanding had been
reached with the North Vietnamese—they would
stop firing at VNAF helicopters from their positions on the mountain if the VNAF fighter-bombers would stop attacking their positions—the weather closed in by late August, and all resupply had to be carried up the steep mountain trail on foot. It was no surprise, therefore, when the RF on Bach Ma abandoned their positions in the face of a relatively light enemy attack on 12 October. The event was viewed mostly as a psychological setback at I Corps headquarters, and no plans to retake the positions were seriously considered, since Bach Ma's importance as an observation post would be nil until the dry season returned to Thua Thien. Nevertheless, its loss represented another small chink in South Vietnam's armor, one that would go unreppaired until the end.

Given the overwhelming NVA capability for rapid reinforcement from the north, the thin line of shallow positions held by the overextended RVNAF, and the extreme vulnerability of the sector to isolation from the south, it was not surprising that an attitude of gloom pervaded General Thi's headquarters in the months following Cease-fire II. Nor was it surprising that General Thi clung to the belief—or perhaps a hope expressed as a belief—that U.S. B-52's would be decisive in saving Quang Tri and Thua Thien in the event of an NVA offensive. After all, massive U.S. air and naval power was required to turn back the NVA's assault in 1972. And that time the enemy started behind his own goal line; this time he was already on the ARVN 30. Although having scant confidence that U.S. bombing would be resumed, DAO and USSAG planners cooperated with I Corps in keeping target folders current, and direct liaison between I Corps and USSAG was established for this purpose. General Thi had observed that since the NVA had placed thousands of tons of supplies and equipment in open, visible storage throughout northern Quang Tri and Western Thua Thien, the B-52s could wipe them out in 10 days. He added, significantly, that his three divisions could successfully defend the two northern provinces against a determined enemy attack, but only with U.S. air support. This assessment was shared by the chiefs of intelligence and operations branches, DAO.

Cease-fire II began in southern Quang Nam Province on an ominous note scarcely noticed at DAO, or for that matter at South Vietnam's JGS. The ARVN 78th Ranger Battalion received a number of concentrated bombardments on its positions guarding the Thu Bon Valley approach to the flatlands south of Da Nang. One of its companies was forced to abandon its position and rejoin the battalion, which received prompt orders from I Corps to hold its position. Although the attacks subsided, they were an unperceived precursor to violent assaults in 1974. But at the time, the late summer and fall of 1973, the NVA's 711th Division was the only sizeable main force element facing the ARVN 3d Division in Quang Nam and northern Quang Tin, and the 3d, with the help of Rangers and territorials, could deal with this threat adequately.

Meanwhile, as the rice harvest was coming in during September and October, NVA-supported local Communists became active in the hamlets along the coast and in the larger valleys, and security deteriorated in the wake of bridge-minings and assassinations. Still, by the first anniversary of the cease-fire, General Nguyen Duy Hinh, who was proving to be one of the most effective division commanders in the RVNAF, was so much in control of the situation that he could keep an entire regiment, the 2d Infantry, in reserve, and each of the committed regiments, the 56th in southern Dai Loc and northern Duc Duc Districts of Quang Nam, and the 57th in the Que Son Valley, could hold a battalion in reserve. The division's fighting and headquarters positions were dug deeply into hillsides with connecting tunnels, and General Hinh was justified in his confidence that his division could protect Da Nang and the lowlands against the NVA 711th. Five of South Vietnam's district seats of Quang Nam, however, were within range of NVA 130-mm. guns, and their security was questionable. Of these, Thuong Duc and Duc Duc were the most vulnerable.

While the ARVN 3d Division concentrated south and west of Da Nang, the ARVN 2d Division had the formidable task of securing the coastal piedmont and plains from the Binh Dinh boundary north to Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, a distance of 135 kilometers. Fresh from its victory at Sa Huynh, the 2d Division was to support the territorials in clearing the lowlands west of Highway 1 of the remnants of VC units. By October, the division could claim substantial success in this mission, and the emphasis shifted to continuing the pressure on local VC units until they withdrew into the foothills. The division's battalions, reinforced with Rangers and territorials, pushed into the piedmont to block the enemy's supply lines to the coast, find and destroy supply bases, deny access to the rice harvest, protect refugee villages, and secure Highway 1 against enemy attack. Added to these generalized missions was one very specific requirement, imposed not only by orders from I Corps but compelled by the honor of the division: defend Sa Huynh. The 4th Infantry Regiment was assigned this mission, keeping two battalions entrenched in the hills overlooking the small fishing village. The 4th, with one RF battalion attached and another under the command of the district chief, was responsible for security in Duc Pho District of Quang Ngai, but its control extended scarcely 5,000 meters west of Highway 1.
The 5th Infantry Regiment, 2d ARVN Division, had missions parallel to the 4th, but operated in the central coastal district of Mo Duc. The 5th was reinforced by two RF battalions, but its success in maneuvering west of Highway I was also limited, although security along the highway was reasonably well maintained. North of Quang Ngai City, in Son Tinh District, the 11th Ranger Group had the responsibility, but it was probably among the least effective units of this kind. With battalions that could muster only 225 to 300 men for operation, its performance was desultory at best. The group's 68th Battalion typified the general lack of combat efficiency characteristic of the other two battalions, and for that matter, most of the 12 RF battalions in Quang Ngai. The 68th was driven from its dug-in positions on Hill 252—in the important Cong Hoa Valley approach to Quang Ngai City—in October by an inferior VC unit. After stalling in attempts to make the hill, it was sent—somewhat as punishment for failure—to an active area south of Chu Lai. There, on the night of 17 December, the 95th VC Sapper Company of Binh Son District infiltrated the sleeping battalion command post, caused over 50 casualties including the battalion commander and his deputy, and carried away an 81-mm. mortar, eight PRC-25 radios, 15 M-16 rifles, .50-caliber pistols, and five binoculars.

The 6th Infantry Regiment of the 2d Division was responsible for the sector from Chu Lai to the division boundary north of Tam Ky and like the other two regiments, engaged in numerous contacts with local VC through the fall and winter of 1973. There were 6 major bridges and at least 25 shorter spans along the stretch of Highway I in the 2d Division sector. All had to be protected, and the mission was nearly always assigned to territorials. Many water-sappers—underwater demolition teams—got to the Ba Bau Bridge south of Tam Ky a day after Christmas and dropped it in the river. Christmas, they blew up the Tra Can Bridge in Pho District, right under the noses of an RF company. Maj. Gen. Tran Van Nhut, the 2d Division Commander, was so incensed at this debacle—that he slapped the captain in jail. According to General Nhut at the time, at least a part of the problem of territorial ineffectiveness in Quang Ngai Province was traceable to the fact that a very high percentage of the RF, PF, and Peoples' Self-Defense Force troops had relatives in the Communist family loyalties often took precedence over military orders and duties.

The night after Christmas, VC units entered two resettlement villages across the river from Quang Ngai, killed a village chief and nine others, and destroyed at least six houses. This attack differed from the routine sapper assaults on RVNAF installations and lines of communication in that it was part of a country-wide Communist campaign to destroy South Vietnam's refugee settlement program, which against formidable obstacles was achieving some success. But the enemy attacks in Quang Ngai against these already tragic figures were particularly brutal.

The campaign against the refugees started in May. The first attack in Quang Ngai Province was described as minor in the sense that there were no reported casualties. The VC had entered a hamlet in Son Tinh District and burned the tents the people were living in while they were working on permanent houses. The Social Welfare Service of Quang Ngai promptly replaced the tents only to have them burned again a few days later. The frequency and intensity of attacks increased in July as the VC moved in with mortars and civilian casualties began to mount. The constant mortaring of two sites in Mo Duc led to their abandonment. Duc Pho resettlement sites not only suffered mortar attacks, but VC sappers infiltrated and destroyed houses with demolitions, some with the occupants still inside. In other hamlets the VC entered at night and sowed footpaths with antipersonnel mines.

The attack on An Tinh Hamlet in Son Tinh District on 6 September was a classic in execution. VC sappers entered at 0300, and after they were inside the fence another VC unit began mortaring the nearby outpost, effectively confining the defenders to their little fortress. As the mortar fire began, the sappers moved methodically through the hamlet, throwing incendiary grenades into the dry, thatch houses and firing B-40 rockets. Because the people had taken cover in their bunkers, only five were seriously wounded, but all 322 houses burned to the ground in a spectacular blaze fed by high winds. The tragedy was visible for miles. But the people of An Tinh were a stubborn lot, and by the end of October they had rebuilt once more.

As the cease-fire anniversary came and went in southern Military Region I, the situation resembled more than anything else the conditions in the Mekong Delta: ARVN regulars had control of the major population centers and the important lines of communication; the NVA was more or less on the ropes but recovering, rebuilding, and receiving replacements; and South Vietnamese territorials were taking the brunt of the Communist attacks—attacks that eroded morale, exacerbated already strained economic conditions, and contributed to a slow but perceptible decline in the population considered under government influence or control.
Note on Sources

The statistics relating to cease-fire violations before and after the joint communique were derived from the DAO Saigon Quarterly Report, June 1973. The situation prevailing at the time was described with reference to the DAO Saigon Monthly Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis and the RVNAF J2/JGS Study: "Enemy Situation in RVN 45 Days after the 13 June Joint Communique."

Captured enemy documents and interrogation reports provided by J2/JGS were used in describing enemy plans and activity. Intelligence information reports of DAO, Saigon and offices of the U.S. Embassy, Saigon, were also consulted.

Much of the information concerning Quang Duc came from the author's own notes and recollections of his visit there immediately after the ARVN recaptured Kien Duc.

General Niem was again very helpful in providing information and comments concerning combat actions in Military Region 2. Similarly, Generals Truong and Hinh, commanders respectively of I Corps and the 3d ARVN Division, assisted greatly in assuring accuracy in the description of activity in Military Region 1.
Cease-Fire II in MR 3 and 4

The Delta Rice War

While post-cease-fire fighting in the northern and central provinces of South Vietnam alternately surged and subsided as opposing sides grappled for key terrain, the war in the Mekong Delta became a contest for the rice harvest. Nearly 90 percent of Communist rice requirements, to be filled from South Vietnam sources, were requisitioned in the delta.

For the South Vietnamese, the rice war meant that enemy lines of communication had to be interdicted to prevent shipment of rice to delta base areas as well as to collection points in Cambodia where much of it was transshipped to Communist units in South Vietnam's Military Regions 2 and 3. Intelligence efforts were therefore concentrated on rice requisitioning, transport, and storage. The Joint General Staff had estimated that some 338,000 metric tons of rice had been collected in the delta during the 1972 harvest, and the object was to cut this drastically in 1973. For the Communists, the rice war meant controlling more rice-producing hamlets, protecting the forays of rice-requisitioning parties, securing canals used for the movement of rice boats, and preventing intrusions by the RVNAF into storage areas.

The South Vietnamese were motivated by more than the simple purpose of denying the rice to the enemy; besides the obvious political imperative to reduce—or at least limit—the enemy's influence over the delta's population and resources, South Vietnam needed the delta's rice to feed its own people and armed forces. By September 1973, a shortage of rice was already developing in Saigon.

An early season drought had disrupted planting, and shipments of delta rice for the year were 326,500 metric tons, considerably behind that of 1972 (465,500). Furthermore, raging floods had struck the coastal lowlands of the northern provinces of MR 1 and MR 2, destroying much of the rice crop and stores.

The enemy's rice production in areas under his control in South Vietnam was negligible, and only forces north of COSVN's domain were normally provided any rice from North Vietnam. Consequently, heavy demands were placed on Cambodian and delta rice. All sizeable NVA forces in Cambodia were sustained by Cambodian rice, and much of this rice was also delivered to COSVN forces inside South Vietnam. The Cambodian rebel forces were experiencing shortages of their own and by the fall of 1973 were becoming increasingly reluctant to permit the NVA to fill rice requisitions in Cambodia. Competition for rice resulted in armed clashes between the two Communist allies and increased the importance of South Vietnam's delta rice.

Since the defeat of Cambodia's 32d Brigade at Phnom Penh in May 1973, the entire Cambodian-South Vietnamese border region from the Gulf of Thailand to the eastern edge of South Vietnam's Hong Ngue District in Kien Phong Province was controlled by NVA and Khmer Communist forces. The only Cambodian government presence was at Samma Leu, a small navy river station north of the border. The frontier area, in some places as deep as 35 kilometers into Cambodia, contained major NVA supply routes and rear service centers. The two most significant centers were in the O Mountain complex, opposite the Seven Mountains in South Vietnam's Chau Doc Province. One was the rear base of the NVA 1st Division, the NVA 195th Transportation Group, and the 200th Rear Service Group; the other was NVA Base Area 704, which contained part of the NVA 207th Regiment's supply area.

Near O Mountain was the southern terminus of the Ho Chi Minh trail, the beginning of infiltration corridor I-C serving Communist units throughout the southwestern delta and providing conduits for illegal commerce in rice and other commodities between South Vietnam's border provinces and the NVA's Cambodian base areas. While markets flourished on the Cambodian side of the border for trade with the NVA forces in contraband rice and other commodities, South Vietnam garrisoned its border, established blocks on the canals, rivers, and trails that crossed the frontier, and patrolled the region vigorously with ARVN and navy units. A major campaign was also started in the summer of 1973 to destroy or force the NVA 1st Division out of its redoubt in the Seven Mountains. Earlier post-cease-fire battles around Hong Ngue had severely damaged NVA forces in this region. Now, as the RVNAF began its offensive against the NVA 1st Division and imposed a well-planned, though indifferently executed, rice blockade, the pinch was felt. As if this were not trouble enough for the Cambodian-based NVA, the Khmer Communists decided to force the NVA to leave the border region entirely.
They prohibited sales of Cambodian rice to NVA and VC units, creating a serious rice shortage. Consequently, COSVN directed that the required rice be requisitioned from South Vietnam's delta and that the blockade be broken. Information concerning this COSVN directive was obtained from ralliers and captured documents. The main methods to be used: (1) district and province cadre were to bag rice in the hamlets and move it to secure caches; (2) armed units were to secure all routes used for the movement of rice; (3) armed units were to enter South Vietnamese controlled areas and seize rice; (4) Cadre were to negotiate deals with South Vietnamese villagers who would transport purchased rice to Communist areas; (5) all units were to begin farming on land under their control with the aim of self-sufficiency; and (6) women and children living in VC-controlled hamlets were to enter South Vietnamese markets, buy small quantities of rice and bring it to VC areas, making as many trips as possible but keeping each purchase small to reduce the risk of suspicion and discovery.

In the border area the enemy achieved the most success with tactics number four and six and relied on the mechanism of the market itself to provide the rest of the rice requirement. For example, a kilogram of rice in South Vietnam brought 80 piastres in June and 180 piastres in September, while on the border, in the VC market at Ca Sach, a kilogram commanded 115 piastres in June and 250 in September. The price differential offered in the markets in Cambodia was worth the risk to some smugglers and consequently drew significant amounts of rice across the border.

According to estimates, at least 600 tons of rice was smuggled out of the delta each month, August through October, from the Tan Chau market across the Mekong and up the small canals that laced the swamp and paddy fields to the border. The scope of this smuggling operation depended on complicity on the part of local regional and popular forces, as well as on the Vietnamese Navy at Tan Chau. Reliable evidence indicated that some high-level officials were involved and profiting from the trade. Other routes were used to transport clandestine rice in the border area, but the Hong Ngu-Ca Sach arrangement was the largest.

Meanwhile, fears began to mount in Saigon that Communist rice-procuring would lead to runaway inflation in rice and other commodities. Orders went out from Saigon directing province chiefs to crack down on illegal trade and to tighten the blockade. Thereupon, the chiefs of Chau Doc, Kien Giang, and Kien Phong established restricted, controlled, and free trade zones in each province. The entire border was designated a restricted zone, meaning that no commodity could cross legally. Parts of the Seven Mountains and the Tram Forest of western Ha Tien in Kien Giang Province were also declared restricted zones. Controlled zones were established, primarily in Hong Ngu District, in which citizens could legally possess only limited quantities of commodities. Except for a five-kilometer radius around the district town itself, all of Hong Ngu was either restricted or controlled. Those parts of Chau Doc and Ha Tien adjacent to the Seven Mountains and the Tram Forest became controlled zones, while other parts were free trade zones in which goods could move without restrictions.

The blockade was barely under way when Military Region 4, responding to the Saigon rice delivery plan, instituted far more stringent controls. The Saigon plan, aimed at preventing a rice shortage in the capital and the Central Highlands, made it illegal in the border provinces to move rice or paddy (unmilled) rice anywhere without specific permission, except for small amounts for family consumption. Any unauthorized movement, whether across the border or not, was grounds for arrest and confiscation.

Elements of all police and military forces were employed in the blockade and collection plan. Navy and marine police were responsible for stopping and searching all craft on major waterways. Combined checkpoints were manned by RF, PF, National Police, military police, and sector intelligence sections at all major land crossing points. Each village organized a mobile inspection team made up of police, PF, and local officials, while RF and PF established check points on the roads and highways. Airmobile operations, using regular ARVN forces, were conducted regularly against known VC market places. To check on the entire operation, General Nghi, the region commander, assigned police from the Military Region 4 Special Branch to report directly to him on any evidence of corruption in local officials and units. Inefficiency and corruption in the execution of the plan nevertheless continued to undermine the blockade. Even so, there is no doubt that the blockade worsened the existing rice shortage among the enemy forces in Cambodia.

Desertions increased in the Communist ranks as men became progressively more despondent and hungry. Ralliers and prisoners of war told of extremely austere diets and of little hope for relief. Although relatively ineffective in Hong Ngu, the RVNAF blockade in the Seven Mountains of Chau Doc was very tight; the province chief gave it the highest priority and his personal attention. It was in large measure responsible for one of the most resounding RVNAF military victories of the post-cease-fire period: the destruction of the NVA 1st Division.

The attack to drive the 1st NVA Division out of the Seven Mountains was launched in early July.
1973 by the 44th Special Tactical Zone, where principal forces consisted of the 7th Ranger Group and the 4th Armor Group (armored personnel carriers). The Seven Mountains was a chain of rugged, forested, cave-pocked peaks stretching in a ragged line from the Cambodian border at Tinh Bien 25 kilometers to below Tri Ton, a district headquarters in the shadow of Nui Co To, the southernmost peak in the chain. Although the tallest of the seven was only 700 feet high, rising as they did from a featureless, often flooded plain, they were spectacular prominences and gave the impression of far greater size.

Just north of the border in the Seven Mountains, Nui O was one of the main bases of the NVA 1st Division, which had moved there from battles around Phnom Penh in the summer of 1972. Establishing defenses as far south as Nui Co To, the 1st Division was primarily responsible for screening the region, which passed to the west of the mountains. Secondary objectives included protecting rice collection teams, proselytizing, and harassing South Vietnamese communities and military installations throughout the region.

As the 44th's offensive began, intelligence revealed that the NVA 1st Division Headquarters had pulled out of the Nui O base and was established in the Cambodian town of Kampong Trach, north of Tri Tien.

The NVA 52d Regiment was operating in Cambodia north of Ha Tien, while the 101D Regiment and most of the 44th Sapper Regiment were in the border region south of Nui O. The attacks by fire conducted by the 101D Regiment in Tinh Bien and Tri Ton increased in late July, and the 44th Special Tactical Zone reacted, not only to reduce the threat to the districts, but also to break the screen protecting infiltration corridor 1C. In late August, a number of sharp contacts between elements of the 101D and ARVN Rangers resulted. Units from the NVA 1st Division infiltrated into positions in Nui Co and Nui Co To mountains during September, and a concerted drive was started by the 44th Special Tactical Zone to dig them out. The 101D Regiment received 300 fresh replacements from North Vietnam in August and moved into position on Nui Dai in September. As the Rangers, with up to 10 battalions operating, and territorials maneuvered into the mountain strongholds, casualties mounted and the rocketing and mortaring of populated areas by the NVA continued.

Just as a stalemate seemed to have been reached, casualties and the RVNAF blockade began to weaken the 101D and the other 1st Division units and the enemy began to break. NVA hospital records recovered by RVNAF near Nui Dai disclosed that units of the 1st NVA Division had lost nearly 900 soldiers to sickness and wounds from the cease-fire to 20 September. Captured on 2 October, two prisoners of war from the 101D revealed that the NVA 1st Division had been deactivated. Soldiers from the 44th Sapper and 52d Infantry Regiment were transferred to the 101D, which had only 300 men left. The 101D then became a brigade, assumed control of the artillery and support units of the 1st Division, and began operating directly under NVA Military Region 3.

By the end of October, with its battalions down to less than 200 men each, the 101D withdrew from the Seven Mountains into its Cambodian sanctuary. Although it continued to operate in the border region, it never again presented a serious threat to South Vietnamese forces in Military Region 4. The RVNAF 44th Special Tactical Zone and its 7th Ranger Group had accomplished its mission.

**Tri Phap**

There was more to the rice war than the illegal trade and skirmishes along the border. And there was more to infiltration in the delta than that which took place in Kien Giang Province along corridor 1-C. Dinh Tuong Province, with its bustling market capital of My Tho, was the key province in the eastern delta. Through My Tho passed Highway 4 to Saigon, a major channel of the the Mekong, and several large canals. One of three principal NVA infiltration routes, corridor 1-A crossed the Cambodian frontier near the border between Kien Phong and Kien Tuong Provinces, traversed the maze of canals through the Plain of Reeds, and ended in the watery wasteland called the Tri Phap (listed as Base Area 470 by allied intelligence) where those provinces join Dinh Tuong. A branch of corridor 1-B from the “Parrot’s Beak” of Svay Rieng Province entered the Tri Phap from the northeast. An insurgent base established during the 1945-1954 war, the Tri Phap was partly covered with brush, with little land suitable for cultivation, essentially a swamp that over the years had been laced with permanent fortifications and hidden storage areas. No allied force had succeeded in occupying or inflicting any serious damage to the installations or enemy forces in the Tri Phap. Immediately after the cease-fire, RVNAF units in Dinh Tuong were preoccupied with maintaining security in the central and northern reaches of the province and could not divert the forces necessary to clean out the Tri Phap, even though they were aware of increased enemy activity there.

A document captured on 9 August disclosed that the Z-18 Regiment of NVA Military Region 2 was moving into the Tri Phap from Cai Bay District in northern Dinh Tuong Province and that it would probably be replaced in Cai Bay by the Dong Thap-
1 Regiment. Information in the document pertaining to planned attacks in northern Dinh Tuong was confirmed by attacks on several outposts on 8 August. Furthermore, aerial photography showed that fields north of the Tri Phap had been planted in rice, part of the NVA’s effort to become self-sustaining in the delta. With pressure mounting along Highway 4, however, IV Corps could not then challenge the NVA activities in and north of the Tri Phap. Nevertheless, the RVNAF repulsed, with heavy losses to the enemy, numerous battalion-sized attacks against outposts and fire bases in Cay Bay, Cai Be, and Sam Giang Districts during July and August. In the first week of September alone, enemy casualties in the region were 144 killed, while those of the RVNAF were 17 killed and 78 wounded.

The surge in enemy attacks, which continued through November, was motivated in part, as in the border provinces, by the harvest and marked by Communist attempts to gather as much of it as possible. But beyond that, the enemy objectives were to protect the installations in the Tri Phap, expand the base area there, and use the infiltration corridors from Cambodia without interference from the RVNAF. Success in these ventures would force contractions of the RVNAF defenses along Highway 4, demoralize the soldiers of the ARVN 7th Division charged with the responsibility, and support the proselyting campaign among South Vietnamese troops.

As the year wore on, RVNAF units slowly wore down the four main force regiments in NVA Military Region 2—the Z-18th, Z-15th, E-24th, and DT-1. Despite receiving hundreds of fresh replacements from the north, these regiments gradually lost ground to aggressive attacks. The NVA 207th Regiment, which had suffered so badly in its disastrous Hong Ngui campaign, was required to provide soldiers to replace losses in the E-24th Regiment. These demoralized soldiers were intercepted en route to the Tri Phap area in September; their casualties were heavy and 14 were captured. The NVA 6th Division was disbanded that fall, and its depleted regiments were assigned to NVA Military Region 2. The RVNAF Joint Operations Center provided data on casualties in December that showed nearly 40 percent of all enemy killed during the last half of 1973 died in the delta. Although the figures were estimations the ratio was probably very close to reality, supported as it was by weapons captured and corresponding RVNAF casualties.

The year ended in a flurry of Communist activity throughout the delta. Incidents of ground attacks and attacks by fire reached the highest level since the cease-fire. Losses were heavy on both sides, but no significant changes in the tactical situation were apparent. Nevertheless, a steady erosion of security was under way and most evident in Chuong Thien and northern An Xuyen Provinces, where the 21st ARVN Division was only marginally effective against persistent enemy operations to expand control. Four NVA regiments operated in Chuong Thien—the 95A, 18B, D-1 and D-2—and they were adequately supported with weapons, ammunition, and replacements through the Kien Giang corridor, despite the frequent successful RVNAF operations near the Cambodian border against this logistical route.

As the first anniversary of the cease-fire approached, no early decision was foreseeable in the delta. Although harassed by increasingly threatening RVNAF offensives, the NVA still maintained control over major infiltration corridors into the delta and managed to gather enough rice to sustain its forces, though some troops were on short rations. Communist strategy had undergone no great modifications; it still focused on acquiring rice, proselyting, and eroding South Vietnam’s territorial and population control. Despite severe personnel losses and a few minor military defeats, the NVA was gaining in the delta.

RVNAF Delta Dispositions

The three ARVN divisions in the delta were reacting differently to the deteriorating situation in Military Region 4. True to their records of past performance and in concert with the nature of the leadership they received, they ranged from highly effective to consistently poor. On the high side was the 7th Division, operating principally in Dinh Tuong. Commanded by spartan and austere Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khoa Nam, who was later to command IV Corps and still later to take his own life after the capitulation, the 7th had become particularly skillful in rapid deployment, netting significant catches along the infiltration corridors. As the year drew to a close however, severe rationing of fuel, imposed to compensate for spiraling costs, drastically limited the division’s mobility. The permanent withdrawal of RF and PF from exposed positions balanced this disadvantage somewhat, in that General Nam less frequently had to dispatch troops in what were often futile but costly attempts to rescue besieged outposts; he could select areas of deployment more likely to result in combat with major units or large infiltrating groups. Employing advantages of surprise, superior mobility, and firepower, including effective coordination with the VNAF, the 7th was usually the clear winner in that kind of encounter. Going to the relief of outposts too often drew the relief force into an ambush in which all advantages lay with the enemy.

Major changes in the 9th Division took place toward the end of the year. Its commander, Maj.
Cease-Fire II in MR 3 and 4

To replace Brig. Gen. Tran Ba Di, was replaced by Brig. Gen. Van Lac. Of more immediate impact was the reorganization which drew all Rangers out of South Corps and eliminated the 44th Special Tactical Unit. This change required the 9th to assume responsibility for Chau Doc and northern Kien Giang provinces, as well as Kien Phong. It turned over its southern provinces of Vinh Long and Vinh to the 7th Division, recovered its 14th Regiment, which had been under the operational control of the 7th, and released its 15th Regiment to the operational control of the ARVN 21st Division in Chau Doc Province. Thus, with two infantry regiments, General Lac replaced the equivalent of the Ranger regiments in the northern districts of the border provinces. It was feasible only because the enemy main force in the area had been so greatly damaged in the Hong Ngoc and Chau Doc battles.

In June 1973 the 21st ARVN Division, which had so far the worst for discipline and effectiveness among the divisions in the delta, was given a new commander, Brig. Gen. Le Van Hung, who had done well at An Loc. Although General Hung (who was also to die a suicide) had nowhere to bring the division but up, progress was slow. He gradually replaced ineffective subordinates with combat-proven officers, many from airborne and Ranger units, and observers noted some slight improvements in morale and combat effectiveness. General Hung employed the 15th Regiment, under his operational control from the 9th Division, exclusively in Long My District of Chau Doc, while the three organic regiments, the 31st, 32d, and 33d, operated throughout the rest of Chau Doc and northern An Xuyen. The 32d and 33d had few contacts with the enemy, other than receiving attacks by fire; but in late December, the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, was ambushed while marching to the relief of an RF outpost, and more than 100 of its men were killed. This event illustrated again long-standing defects in leadership and training in this regiment and supported the DAO's year-end assessment that the division was no more than "marginally combat effective."

Because the territorials were raised and stationed in their home provinces and districts, their numerical strength in each military region was largely a function of the local population. With a population of over seven million, Military Region 4 was authorized nearly three times as many territorials as Military Region 1, and twice as many as were authorized Military Regions 2 and 3.

The regional force soldiers in Military Region 4 were assigned to 144 battalions and 125 separate companies and were employed by 18 Sector Tactical Commands. But nearly all units were seriously understrength due to a combination of factors: combat losses, desertions, ineffective recruiting, and the "flower soldier" practice whereby a soldier was carried on the rolls but for a fee paid to the unit commander he was never required to be present for duty. Overall, RF strength in the delta was less than 30 percent of authorized, and NCO strength was even lower. While most of the battalions carried assigned strengths of 350 to 400 men, out of an authorized 561, some, such as those in Ba Xuyen and Chau Doc Provinces, were down to 300. With such a reduced assigned strength, as few as 150 soldiers would be present for operations in a typical Chau Doc Thien battalion, a battalion smaller than a company. Quite understandably, as unit strengths declined, so did combat ability and morale, while desertions increased. Remarkably, the territorials in a few sectors, notably Kien Tuong and Go Cong, maintained high assigned strengths, a reflection of inspired leadership. But overall desertions exceeded recruitments, and strengths continued their slow but steady erosion.

Declining strengths influenced another debilitating situation. A well-intentioned unit training program for territorials had been devised by Central Training Command and ordered executed by the JGS, but the demands of combat on the depleted units made it progressively more difficult for the more embattled of the sector commanders to release RF and PF units for training. Combat efficiency in the most active sectors thus declined still further.

In early 1974, General Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, ordered the JGS to investigate, study, and report on the territorials of MR 4. The study revealed some interesting facts. During the first three months of 1974, for example, MR 4 territorials lost 8,852 men killed, wounded, or missing during mobile operations away from fixed bases. In these engagements, they accounted for 5,344 enemy killed or captured, a ratio of about 1.6 to every enemy casualty, excluding the uncounted enemy wounded. The relative weapons losses in these operations was also instructive. While the RF and PF lost about 1,600 weapons, they salvaged about 1,800 of the enemy's. But the most revealing and alarming discovery concerned the comparative losses during enemy attacks on territorial outposts. In the same three-month period, RF and PF casualties, including missing, were nearly 1,300, while enemy losses were only 245, a ratio of 5 to 1. Weapons losses in defensive engagements were even worse—1,000 lost against 100 recovered. The obvious conclusion was that mobile operations by territorials were immensely more profitable than defense of fixed outposts. But the JGS team also found that only 1,219 out of 22,884 offensive operations involving units of company size and larger resulted in combat with the enemy, a poor record attributed to weaknesses in intelligence, operational planning,
and techniques. While this judgment was at least partially valid, benefits were derived even from mobile operations that netted no enemy. The confidence of the population in their local forces was strengthened, and the enemy was often compelled to move or discontinue his activities while the territorials maneuvered through the area.

There were 3,400 outposts, watch towers, and bases to be defended in MR 4. These ranged from large complex positions with supporting artillery to remote mud forts garrisoned by weak, understrength PF platoons. The futility of attempting to defend the vast delta from isolated posts scattered about the paddies, canals, and swamps had been recognized by General Nghi as well as the JGS, but despite the strong desire to reduce the number of posts, to do so would remove all government presence from many contested villages and hamlets, surrendering the population to the Communists. In 1973, nevertheless, MR 4 withdrew forces from 97 outposts while 193 were lost to enemy attacks. Meanwhile, emphasis on mobile operations was increased. Operating in their home provinces, some RF battalions earned hard-fought reputations for aggressiveness and success. Unfortunately, a battalion's achievement in its native sector often impelled the corps commander to deploy it to another province under the operational control of an ARVN division. As often as not, the division would employ the battalion in a particularly hazardous role and give it inadequate logistical and administrative support. Fresh morale problems would develop and, tragically, superior RF battalions were reduced to the level of the majority.

The Vietnamese Navy in the delta was charged with providing security on the major waterways, patrolling the coastline to prevent enemy supply boats from entering, and supporting ARVN and territorial force operations. Although the Navy could boast of low desertion rates, a generally well-maintained fleet of small craft, and higher morale than in the rest of the armed forces, its performance in the delta was far below what it should have been. In good measure, the reason for its ineffectiveness lay in an aversion to coordinating operations with the other services. Although General Nghi, as region commander, had all the authority he needed to direct coordinated operations involving all forces in the delta, by the time this authority filtered down through the structure it had lost its force. ARVN sector and sub-sector commanders, as well as commanders of tactical units, exercised no authority over naval units and naval commanders consequently remained independent and aloof, often unwilling even to attend sector planning and briefing sessions.

There were, happily, some exceptions to this rule. A case in point was the Navy's role in special operations to interdict the NVA's infiltration route through Kien Giang into Chuong Thien (Infiltration Corridor 1-C). The "brown-water" navy—that is, the shallow draft boats plying the rivers and canals—was especially successful intercepting enemy attempts to cross the Cai Lon River and its tributaries. But while combined operations enjoyed some success interfering with enemy movement along interior routes, the "blue-water" navy failed to intercept the enemy's supply craft sailing down the coast from Cambodia. The blue-water boats were too deep of draft to follow suspicious sampans into the shallow inshore waters, and the brown-water responsibilities ended where the waterways emptied into the Gulf of Thailand.

The blue-water navy in the delta operated from two major bases. The 4th Coastal Flotilla, with 26 patrol craft, was based at An Thoi on Phu Quoc Island and was responsible for coastal waters down to the border of An Xuyen Province. There the 5th Coastal Flotilla assumed responsibility which extended around the Ca Mau and northeast along the coast to the MR 3 boundary. The 5th operated 27 patrol craft from Nam Can, a former $50 million U.S. Navy base with excellent dry dock facilities. The brown-water fleet, with 362 boats, operated from 17 locations throughout the delta.

**RVNAF Economics and Morale**

A melancholy accompaniment to the slow but steady erosion of government influence in the delta was being heard, not only in the delta, but throughout South Vietnam. The outward appearances of a bustling, growing economy, as seen in the prosperous looking shops and restaurants of Saigon and in the dense, noisy traffic that choked its boulevards, scarcely disguised a stagnant commercial and industrial situation but still misled the casual observer. The truth was that galloping inflation had taken hold, and those that suffered most were those to whom the country owed the most, those upon whose strength and constancy survival depended: the soldiers, airmen, sailors, and officers of the RVNAF. The consumer price index rose 65 percent during 1973, but more devastating to the serviceman and low paid public official, whose incomes were fixed at a bare subsistence level, was the fact that rice doubled in price during the year. An unfortunate combination of international and domestic events was responsible for South Vietnam's worst year economically since 1965-66. In 1972 the NVA offensive and poor weather had reduced the expected rice crop, and that disappointing harvest was followed by an even less productive one in 1973. The deficit had to be compensated for by imports at a time when rice on the world market was soaring. This fact, in combination with the domestic shortage, drove the price to the consumer even higher.
South Vietnam's tough rice control program was doubtless of some benefit, but it could not thoroughly dampen market-driven trends.

Meanwhile, the U.S. aid dollar, as well as other forms of foreign assistance to Vietnam, was declining in value under the influence of worldwide inflation. Imported commodities therefore entered the country at drastically inflated costs. Cooking oil, laundry soap, and brown sugar, for example, were all selling at 200 percent above 1972 prices; driven by the international petroleum crisis of 1973, gasoline rose by 213 percent and kerosene by 196 percent. And while import prices climbed, South Vietnam's opportunities to earn foreign exchange declined with the departure of the U.S. forces. The U.S. withdrawal also aggravated high levels of unemployment. In 1969, about 160,000 Vietnamese were direct employees of the United States; by September 1973, the number had dropped to less than 20,000. This decline was matched by the disappearance of jobs whose functions indirectly depended on the U.S. payroll in Vietnam.

The severe unemployment greatly affected the families of soldiers because a soldier's family could only survive if it had a source of income other than military pay. Disquieting evidence that the depressed economy and inflated market were having deleterious effects on RVNAF morale and effectiveness began to appear in mid-1973. Reports of particularly heinous instances of venality surfaced, sometimes in official channels, but more frequently in private conversations between DAO people and RVNAF officers whose sensibilities were offended by the corrupt practices of their countrymen, even though they understood the conditions that impelled some to seek dishonorable means to supplement their livelihood. And even when corruption was not mentioned, the serious economic plight of officers and soldiers was cited as contributing to defeats and portending future disaster. Here are some examples:

On 15 December the Communists attacked a position in the Song Bo corridor west of Hue defended by a company of the 1st ARVN Division. According to the new 3d Infantry commander, Col. Hoang Mao, the company incurred only light casualties before breaking and running in panic. Similar performances occurred in other regimental positions, and Colonel Mao attributed this conduct to poorly trained draftees with low morale. The regiment had borne the weight of the NVA's attacks that autumn, and its extended period in the line had aggravated its declining morale, but the root cause of the problem was widespread disaffection in the ranks traceable to the growing deprivations suffered by military families.

The Airborne Division was the elite of the ARVN. It could still boast an all-volunteer force and the high esprit that went with special and rigorous training. But even it was not immune to South Vietnam's economic malady. In a despairing interview with a trusted American friend, a young paratrooper captain, battle tested in Cambodia, An Loc, and Quang Tri, told of demoralization in the airborne as largely the result of worsening economic conditions. Another reason for low morale was the continued commitment of the division—trained and psychologically equipped for difficult offensive operations—in a static defensive role in northern MR 1. Add to this the fact that the division bases were at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa and the soldier's families lived on or near them. In any event, this dedicated 29-year-old veteran deplored the decline of discipline in the division, which he said could be traced to the absence of the airborne spirit in leaders who had recently joined the division, a spirit hard to kindle in the bunkers and trenches of Thua Thien Province.

More importantly, he cited the desperate economic conditions among the troopers' families, which the officers and noncommissioned officers were powerless to relieve. As a direct consequence, the empathetic leader was loath to punish severely any soldier whose derelictions were traceable to despair or concern for his suffering family. Absences, even some desertsions, went unpunished, and alcoholism and drug addiction increased, as did incidents of "fragging." (Slang for the practice of murdering or attempting to murder officers or noncommissioned officers; derived from fragmentation grenade, the usual weapon of choice.)

The division commander, Brig. Gen. Le Quang Luong, was acutely aware of the problems; his personal leadership and concern for his men no doubt prevented collapse. In fact, the division fought some of its most effective and gallant engagements in the months following.

Illegal trading in fuel used by the South Vietnamese Navy was a favorite means of income augmentation in the delta. An incident in September in southern An Xuyen Province is illustrative. In September near Vam Song Ong Doc, a small fishing port at the mouth of the Ong Doc River, a Navy boat was reportedly sunk by gunfire and three sailors were wounded, apparently in an ambush set by the VC. But the facts were quite different. It seems that Navy vessels regularly sailed up the coast and called at Vam Song Ong Doc to sell diesel fuel, a commodity in great demand by the fishing fleet as well as the Communists, who used it in their boats. The 412th RF Battalion had been watching this for some time and finally demanded 1,000 piastres (about $2) per 55-gallon drum sold. After the crew refused, reportedly explaining that all the proceeds had to be sent to the Chief of Naval Operations in Saigon, the RF attacked. Some accommodation was apparently arrived at because before long the boats
were again engaged in the diesel trade, though the market had been moved upriver. Preoccupation with this illegal operation distracted the Navy from its important mission of intercepting Communist boats that were infiltrating the coast with impunity from the Ong Doc River to An Xuyen's northern border.

There were a few documented cases wherein RVNAF officers and soldiers sold weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment and supplies for cash, knowing full well that they were trading with the enemy. But the most despicable of all cases of venality—and reports of these were widespread and persistent enough to deserve credence—were the demands of VNAF helicopter crews for payment from ground troops for the evacuation of casualties. This is not to say that this practice was the rule, but that it happened at all was a vivid commentary on a pernicious flaw and the conditions which spawned it.

A typical colonel in the RVNAF was paid less than 40,000 piastres per month, the equivalent of about $80.00, this after about 20 years of service, virtually all of it in wartime. Of course he received a few other emoluments, but basically he was supporting a family group of perhaps 10 people on $80 per month. At prices prevalent in the winter of 1973, half of his earnings went for rice. This meant, among other things, that every able person in the family had to bring in some income. Practices ranging from simple nepotism through the entire gamut of activity that well-fed, comfortably-housed Americans might call malfeasance understandably became part of the system. The wonder is that so many honest, devoted officers and public servants managed, through strength of character and with the help of friends and families, not only to survive but also to take care of their less fortunate subordinates.

Ranger Reorganization

In September 1973, a JGS evaluation of the structure and employment of Ranger forces culminated in a recommendation from General Vien to President Thieu. Approved by the President, it was developed by 31 December into a plan of reorganization. Essentially the plan's major purpose was to reconstitute a small strategic reserve for employment by the JGS and small reaction forces for the first three military regions. The planners accepted the unpleasant fact that the two general reserve divisions—the Airborne and Marine—were probably permanently committed in Military Region 1; a Ranger reorganization would result in a slight surplus of uncommitted battalions and help restore some flexibility to the RVNAF as a whole. The planners also took into account the deterioration of South Vietnamese control in the western and Central Highlands but with unwarranted optimism calculated that Rangers would eventually be redeployed to frontier posts in lost or contested sectors. In any event, the fact that Ranger battalions were programmed for deployment on the borders in the indefinite future provided uncommitted battalions for the present for reserve or other missions.

The planners also recognized the unique situation along the Cambodian border in Military Region 4. The Rangers of 44th Special Tactical Zone around the Seven Mountains and the ARVN regulars and territorials in other reaches of the frontier had all but eliminated the enemy main-force threat and were dealing with some success with infiltration. Thus the decision was made to eliminate the 44th Special Tactical Zone and deactivate its nine Ranger battalions, with officers and men reassigned to battalions in the northern part of the country. This made tactical sense, but unfortunately, the delta Ranger battalions had been recruited in the delta, and the soldiers showed their displeasure at being reassigned from their home provinces by deserting in great numbers. By 1 January 1974, the original 54 Ranger battalions had been reorganized into 45, and each belonged to one of 15 Ranger groups (regiments). Rather than having three different types of battalions—organic to regiments, border defense, and separate—all were to follow one table of organization and equipment.

The new concept of operations for Rangers visualized that 27 forward defense bases, mostly along the Laotian and Cambodian borders in Military Regions 1, 2, and 3, would be occupied by a minimum of one Ranger battalion each. At this time, however, only six of these border posts were occupied by Rangers; the others were inaccessible because of enemy operations or were in enemy hands. Each military region was to keep one Ranger group in reserve, dedicated to the reinforcement or rescue of any threatened or besieged Ranger base. A 30-man Ranger headquarters was established in each of the three military regions where Ranger battalions were assigned to oversee training and administrative matters. Its commander was the corps commander's adviser on Ranger employment. At year's end, Ranger deployment and strength was as shown in Table 5.

Military Region 3

RVNAF efforts to open lines of communication to beleaguered bases, interdict NVA logistical routes, and damage enemy base areas and the NVA's response to these actions raised the level of combat in Military Region 3 after Cease-fire II. There were a number of sharp contacts, particularly in Tay Ninh and Binh Duong Provinces, but no
**Cease-Fire II in MR 3 and 4**

TABLE 5: ARVN RANGER DEPLOYMENT, 31 DEC. 1973

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Strength, 1 Feb. 1974</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MR 1*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>384 409 385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>382 415 398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th</td>
<td>489 442 480</td>
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<tr>
<td>15th</td>
<td>530 530 502</td>
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<tr>
<td>MR 2#</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>421 457 454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>582 575 598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st</td>
<td>258 377 365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22d</td>
<td>406 412 463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23d</td>
<td>388 372 424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24th</td>
<td>584 371 372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th</td>
<td>357 327 351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31st</td>
<td>590 572 595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32d</td>
<td>642 662 603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33d</td>
<td>508 710 470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Reserve)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th**</td>
<td>422 452 472</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All MR 1 battalions understrength because of desertions of Rangers transferred from MR 4.

#The 4th and 5th Groups were assigned to the general reserve in the Saigon area but were deployed along Highway 1 in Binh Dinh, under the operational control of MR 2. The MR 2 Groups were understrength because of recruiting difficulties in the highlands where all were deployed.

**The 7th Group was located at the Long Binh Base near Saigon.
Angel's Wing
Parrot's Beak

Map 11
strain changed hands. The VNAF carried out navy raids against NVA bases in Tay Ninh, Binh Long, and Phuoc Long Provinces, and the NVA retaliated with a rocket attack on Bien Hoa on 6 November that destroyed three F-5A fighters and a sapper raid on the Shell petroleum storage at Nha Be on 2 December that virtually wiped it out. The Communists also sent water-sapper teams to South Vietnamese Navy docks near Saigon and tank six small craft. Just a few miles southwest of Saigon, on 15 December, they ambushed an unmarked U.S. Joint Casualty Resolution Center Team killed a U.S. Army captain, the first American civilian to die by Communist fire after the cease-fire. This incident effectively ended all efforts by casualty resolution teams to enter areas not considered absolutely immune from enemy intrusion.

Behind the screen of harassing and sometimes destructive attacks, and beyond the range of effective RVNAF interference, Communist forces in military Region 3 built warehouses, workshops, and antiaircraft positions, receiving new weapons, combat vehicles, and replacements while embarking a logistical and training base that spread cross the northern border of MR 3 from Bu Dop in Binh Long to Lo Go in Tay Ninh. The Communists were also concentrating freshly arrived battalions of tanks, artillery, and antiaircraft weapons, other with infantry replacements for the division that were protecting the buildup. By September they had completed the deployment of the 367th Upper Group from Phnom Penh to Tay Ninh for this employment in the Saigon area.

The NVA strategy in Tay Ninh called for continuing pressure along lines of contact, preventing RVNAF from probing too deeply into the base, and undermining the fragile hold the RVNAF attained on the vital corridor between Tay Ninh and Saigon. This pressure was exerted from several directions and spilled over prominently into corresponding Ninh Province through which the corridor led into the northwestern suburbs of Saigon. To the Cambodian salient of Svay Rieng Province, called the Parrot's Beak, NVA forces probed RVNAF outposts along the Yam Co Dong River. A river port of Go Dau Ha was kept under constant threat. Since the port was the junction of national Routes 1 and 22, only 10 kilometers from Cambodian frontier, its loss would sever Tay Ninh and isolate sizable South Vietnamese forces to the north. (Map 11)

The NVA prevented any RVNAF forays toward northern Tay Ninh base along local Route 13 (LL-13); this road led into the NVA's growing quarters, logistical, and political complex and Lo Go, Thien Ngon, Xa Mat, and Katum. Moving within range of the ARVN's 25th Division forward base at the Tay Ninh airfield, the ARVN outpost and communications relay station on Nui Ba Den mountain, and the RF base at Soui Da, the NVA regularly harassed these positions with artillery, mortar, and rocket fire and made resupply of Nui Ba Den hazardous by frequently directing antiaircraft fire and SA-7 rockets at VNAF helicopters.

The NVA exerted strong pressure against the Tay Ninh-Saigon corridor from its forward combat bases along the Saigon River from the Michelin Plantation in Dau Tieng Province to the Ho Bo Woods. The Ho Bo area was flat, almost featureless terrain, laid with trenches and tunnels, deeply pockt with ragged lines of bomb craters left by numberless waves of B-52s, its shattered plantations overgrown with head-high weeds and dense brush. Nearly 10 years of battle litter defaced the countryside, and a tangle of tank-tread marks gave it the appearance of an abandoned armored training ground. Hidden beneath were the bunkers and fighting positions of several NVA main force units, the principal occupants being the 101st Infantry Regiment.

The 101st had entered Nam Bo, the southern battlefield, in 1966 from North Vietnam and had been a more or less constant resident of the Tay Ninh-Hau Nghia-Binh Duong region since its first punishing engagements with the U.S. 1st Infantry Division that year. In the summer and fall of 1973, it was backing up local battalions harassing ARVN territorials and elements of the 25th Infantry Division generally north of Highways 1 and 22.

Principal targets for NVA artillery and mortar attacks were Khiem Hahn, a forward base protecting the northern approach to Go Dau Ha; Trang Bang, a principal town and defensive position astride Highway 1 midway between Tay Ninh City and Saigon; Cu Chi, the main base of the ARVN 25th Infantry Division; and the defensive position at Trang Lap north of Highway 1. Although a night rarely passed without some kind of attack against these or smaller posts, major contacts were infrequent. But in one major engagement in late September, the 2d Battalion, 49th Infantry, 25th Division, was caught in a devastating ambush in a rubber plantation between Highway 22 and Khiem Hahn. More than half the battalion were casualties, including 43 killed, and the battalion lost nearly 150 weapons and 18 field radios. Shortly afterward some command changes were made in the 25th, including the division commander and commanders of the 46th and 49th Regiments. The road to recovery was long and slowly travelled for the 49th Infantry, but on the other hand, the 50th Infantry of the 25th Division, during the last half of 1973, enjoyed more successes than failures in sweep operations around Phu Hoa, and in southeastern Binh Duong and Hau Nghia Provinces.
In the only other major contact in the Tay Ninh-Saigon corridor up to the cease-fire anniversary, a Hau Nghia Regional Force battalion met a battalion of the NVA 101st Regiment, reinforced by a local company, northeast of Trang Bang. When the smoke cleared, the Hau Nghia battalion, among the best RF units in MR 3, collected 32 enemy weapons on the battlefield and buried 56 NVA soldiers. RF casualties were 19 killed and 33 wounded.

In the last half of 1973 in southern Binh Long and western Binh Duong Provinces, very little combat took place. The NVA continued its buildup in the Minh Thanh Plantation and the Lai Khe-Ben Cat area, shifted its artillery southward into the Long Nyugen area from where it increased the weight and frequency of attacks against the ARVN bases. The only ground engagement of note took place in early January just west of Chon Thanh when the 2d Battalion, 8th Infantry, ARVN 5th Infantry Division, was struck hard by the 7th Battalion, 209th Infantry, NVA 7th Division. Charged with blocking Highway 13 and preventing any ARVN advance toward Minh Thanh, the 7th Battalion killed 36 ARVN soldiers in this engagement, wounded 26 others, and captured 85 weapons.

The most significant action during this period in MR 3 took place along Highway 1A between Song Be and Saigon. Continuing to isolate the Phuoc Long capital of Phuoc Binh, NVA troops used artillery, mortars, rockets, and ground attacks against all RVNAF posts and positions along the 75-kilometer stretch of road between Phu Giao and Song Be. They bombarded the airfield at Song Be and attacked the Don Luan post, but the heaviest action took place south of the Phu Giao base as the NVA 7th Division attempted to block the highway and blow the bridge over the Song Be river. The NVA intention was not only to deny ARVN the use of the road and isolate the garrisons north of the bridge, but also to screen the movement of artillery and supplies south from Bu Dop in northern Phuoc Long to forward combat bases in the dense forests north of Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc. In fact, the NVA itself was using sections of Highway 1A between Bu Dop and Phu Giao for the movement of artillery.

The ARVN 5th Division was roughly handled by the NVA 7th Division between Lai Khe and Phu Giao, and one result of the 5th's consistent failures was the relief of its commander and his replacement in November by Col. Le Nguyen Vy. (Colonel Vy was later to take his own life upon the surrender of his division to the NVA on 30 April 1975.) The 18th ARVN Division fared much better under the leadership of an aggressive commander, Brig. Gen. Le Minh Dao (who was to surrender to the Communists after a gallant defense of Xuan Loc in April 1975), and Highway 1A was kept open as far as Phuoc Vinh. The 18th also saw action around Xuan Loc and in its southern sector of Phuoc Tuy, but nothing decisive was accomplished by either side.

The NVA seige of Tong Le Chon continued through the year, and the 92d Ranger Battalion's defense was rapidly becoming legendary. But the cost was high. After a brief respite following Cease-fire II, the shelling resumed, moderately enough at first, but reached crescendo proportions later in the year as the NVA added 120-mm. and 160-mm. mortars and 122-mm. and 130-mm. howitzers and guns to the batteries ranging on the camp. Anti-aircraft artillery, including 37-mm. and 57-mm. guns from the newly formed 377th Anti-aircraft Artillery Division at Loc Ninh continued to make supply difficult and evacuation next to impossible.

The NVA 200th Battalion, which had been used in local security missions in the Tay Ninh logistical area, was assigned to the infantry element of the NVA siege force. One of its platoon leaders rallied to the South Vietnamese side in September with some interesting comments on the conduct of the operation. He said that in June the NVA organized a company to collect parachuted supplies that fell outside the Tong Le Chon perimeter, which between April and June amounted to about 80 percent of all supplies dropped. After June, according to this rallier, VNAF techniques had improved to the point where only 10 percent of the drops were recoverable by the company. He asserted that an understanding had been reached between the ARVN Rangers and the NVA whereby the C-130s dropping supplies would not be fired upon so long as the company would not be opposed as it collected the supplies outside the perimeter. This assertion cannot be corroborated, but it fits the general character of the situation at Tong Le Chon.

If there was a tacit withholding of fire against the C-130s at Tong Le Chon, it certainly did not apply to helicopters. Many attempts were made to fly helicopters into Tong Le Chon to evacuate casualties and land replacements. Between late October and the end of January, 1974, 20 helicopters attempted landings; but only 6 managed to land and 3 of these were destroyed by fire upon landing. In the last week of December 1973, a CH-47 Chinook helicopter was destroyed as it landed, the 13th helicopter hit by enemy fire on a Tong Le Chon mission during December alone. Casualties were 9 killed and 36 wounded. Another crashed and burned in January, and as the anniversary of the cease-fire came and went, 12 seriously wounded soldiers of the 92d Ranger Battalion remained in the beleaguered camp.

South Vietnam's leadership was concerned and frustrated over the NVA buildup north of Saigon. Largely beyond reach of ARVN artillery and protected by large and mobile NVA infantry formations, the NVA was openly constructing a modern,
mechanized, heavily fortified logistics and communications center. In late October President Thieu decided to attack this enemy complex with air strikes. The concentrated attacks did not begin until 7 November, and South Vietnam made known that they were in response to the NVA’s 6 November rocketing of Bien Hoa Air Base, an indication it still felt obliged to rationalize offensive operations in terms of retaliation for NVA cease-fire violations.

Not a part of the concentrated program, a single attack was made in late October against Xa Mat in Tay Ninh Province, a small hamlet on the border with Cambodia which had been named as a “point of entry” in Article 4 of the “Protocol to the Agreement Concerning the International Commission of Control and Supervision,” but at which no ICCS team had been posted for the simple reason that the Communists did not want their activities at Xa Mat observed. The only report DAO received concerning the air attack was through an agent who passed through Xa Mat. According to his account, the market, a fuel dump, and about 60 structures were destroyed.

Another separate attack was made on 6 November, the day the NVA rockets destroyed three F-5As at Bien Hoa, when the VNAF made 33 fighter-bomber sorties against NVA concentrations around the ARVN base at Don Luan. Military Region 3 claimed the destruction of numerous fighting positions, about 100 enemy soldiers killed, and four secondary explosions.

From 7 November to 5 December, spotty records revealed about 800 sorties of fighter-bombers, including A-1s, F-5s and A-37s were flown. It began with attacks against Bo Duc and Loc Ninh areas. Although the results of the Bo Duc strike were not reported, Military Region 3 claimed good results against Loc Ninh storage facilities, including fuel, and antiaircraft positions. A contrary version was given by Brig. Gen. Le Trung Truc, a VNAF officer on detached duty in the office of the President. General Truc said that most of the bombs landed miles from the targets, that attacking fighters released at excessively high altitudes to avoid antiaircraft fire, and that poor targeting, poor execution, and low VNAF morale were to blame for the meager results. Criticisms such as these, from RVNAF commanders as well as from U.S. observers, persisted throughout the campaign and certainly had some merit. Even the enemy antiaircraft gunners complained, according to an agent reporting on a Katum strike, that the VNAF flew too high to be reached by their 37-mm. guns.

Lest there be an assumption that VNAF fighter pilots lacked courage to fly through flak, they did habitually assume high risks in attacking enemy forces while in support of ARVN infantry. The inhibition against flying too low through heavy antiaircraft fire stemmed more from the realization that no ARVN unit was in peril and perhaps more cogently that, under the constraints on military assistance, lost airplanes would not be replaced and damaged ones would be grounded for months awaiting repair. On the strikes against Loc Ninh on 30 November and 3 December, pilots reported flak between 4,000 and 12,000 feet and bomb release altitudes were between 7,000 and 10,000 feet. While these release altitudes were too high for precision bombing and rocketing, they did produce some visible results, although VNAF attacks had no lasting effect on the enemy’s capabilities.

Attempts by the JGS and Military Region 3 to assess the damage to NVA installations were frustrated by the lack of an aerial photographic system in VNAF as well as by the remotesness of the areas attacked and the dense foliage that concealed many of the targets. Agents filtered back with a few reports, and these were probably accurate as far as they went but were far from comprehensive. Pilot reports were also used to assess bomb damage but these may well have been colored by wishful observations. A brief summary of the campaign is given in Table 6.

### Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location and Targets</th>
<th>Sorties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late Oct</td>
<td>ZA-MAT installations</td>
<td>/ not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market</td>
<td>fuel dump, 50 houses destroyed; 50 civilians killed.</td>
<td>Source of report: agent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Nov</td>
<td>DON LUAN base area, supplies, artillery position</td>
<td>/ 33 fighters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 soldiers killed; 6 combat positions destroyed; 4 secondary explosions.</td>
<td>Source of report: MR 3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Nov</td>
<td>BO DUC tank regiment (3 battalions), weapons, and ammunition storage</td>
<td>/ Not reported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results not reported.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Nov</td>
<td>LOC NINH airfield construction, fuel and other military stores, AAA positions</td>
<td>/ 36 fighters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 AAA position, many structures and installations destroyed.</td>
<td>Source of report: MR 3. All of the targets were north of Loc Ninh in rubber plantation west of junction of Highways 13 and 14, except for two targets adjacent to Highway 14.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Nov</td>
<td>LO GO food storage</td>
<td>/ not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 motorbikes, 18 bicycles, 4 oxcarts, ammunition, 6,000 kilos of rice and 2,000 liters of gasoline destroyed; many houses and supplies destroyed; many NVA cadre and soldiers killed including 32 from COSVN financial affairs section.</td>
<td>Source of report: two separate agents. Likely that this report refers to 10 November strike since MR 3 reported no strike on LO GO on 8 November.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Nov</td>
<td>LO GO Hq installations, shop, supplies</td>
<td>/ 34 fighters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Nov</td>
<td>PHU Giao positions of Hq 7th NVA Div and 209th NVA Regt; artillery positions</td>
<td>/ 40 fighters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many structures, combat positions, and tunnels destroyed.</td>
<td>Source of report: MR 3. Strike was not part of the campaign against the NVA logistical base, but part of support given ARVN defending Highway 1A near Phu Giao.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12 Nov / THIEN NGON Hq installations, artillery, airfield construction, AAA positions, storage. / 53 fighters
11 structures and many combat positions and trenches destroyed; 73 structures damaged. Source of report: MR 3 and VNAF photography.

13 Nov / MINH THANH rice storage and artillery positions. / 18 fighters
15 secondary explosions. Source of report: MR 3. Minh Thanh was not part of the COSVN logistical complex, but was important forward operating base.

14-22 Nov / PHUOC LONG artillery, AAA positions, supplies. / 122 fighters
Damage not reported by MR 3. Strikes were not part of campaign against enemy logistics, but rather in support of Phuoc Long Sector against growing enemy threat at Phuoc Binh-Song Be

17-22 Nov / AN LOC area tanks, bridge, trucks, installations. / 78 fighters
5 tanks, 3 trucks, 2 bridges, 4 AAA positions, 15 structures, and 1 ammunition supply point destroyed. Source of report: MR 3. Strikes were in support of the ARVN Rangers defending AN LOC.

23 Nov / KATUM command posts, barracks, supply points, tracked vehicles, AAA positions, trucks, construction equipment. / 684-1s; 44 F-5s.
69 structures, 5 fuel dumps, 1 supply dump, 6 AAA positions, 17 bunkers destroyed or damaged. Source of report: MR 3 and VNAF A2.

27 Nov / LOC NINH structures, tracked vehicle repair shop, 2 bridges, AAA and artillery positions. / 96 planned, about 75 flown: A-37s, A-1s, and F-5s.
106 structures, 6 AAA positions, 1 bridge destroyed; 1 bridge damaged; 1 fuel storage site burned. Source of report: MR 3 and VNAF A2. Strikes were clustered around junction of Highway 13 and local Route 17, about 9 kilometers south of Loc Ninh. They were more important in support of An Loc defense than in connection with campaign against the NVA logistical buildup.

30 Nov / LOC NINH installations, supplies, fuel dumps, AAA positions. / 41 A-1s; 27 F-5s.
167 structures, 9 AAA positions, 6 bunkers destroyed; 16 secondary explosions. Source of report: VNAF A2. Targets were north of Loc Ninh in the plantation and along Highway 14A. Heavy flak was encountered.

30 Nov / MINH THANH and PHU GIAC artillery positions and troop assemblies; logistical sites. / 17 fighters
Results not reported. Strikes in support of ARVN at Phu Giao and Chon Thanh.

5 Dec / BU DOP installations / 23 A-1s, 17 F-5s, 18 A-37s
45 buildings, 2 AAA positions, 1 ammunition storage site destroyed; fuel dump burned; many secondary explosions. Source: VNAF A2.

14, 27, 29, 30, and 31 Dec / TONG LE CHON area logistic, artillery, and AAA positions. Troops; bridge. / 65 A-1s, 46 F-5s
1 AAA position, 1 122-mm. rocket site, 3 mortar positions, 3 boats, 95 structures, and 1 supply dump destroyed; 8 secondary explosions and one large fire. Source of report: VNAF A2. Strikes served dual purpose of attacking large logistical complex in the Sroc Con Trang area (called the "Fish Hook" by Americans) and support of Rangers at Tong Le Chon.

Cease-Fire Anniversary

On the first anniversary of the Paris Agreement in early 1974, the Communists issued statements presenting their views on the cease-fire and the situation in South Vietnam. Hanoi published a "White Paper" assailing U.S. and South Vietnamese "provocations." Its charges were accompanied by the rattle and roar of thousands of trucks coursing south across the DMZ and through Laos in a mammoth "transportation offensive" started in December 1973. Thousands of tons of supplies were accumulating in the southern stockpiles, and by the cease-fire anniversary the NVA had sufficient stocks to support an offensive comparable to that of 1972 for over a year. Meanwhile, NVA engineers extended their fuel pipelines into the A Shau Valley in Thua Thien Province, and the Laotian pipeline was passing through the tri-border junction into Kontum Province. During the year following the cease-fire, the NVA increased its artillery and tank strength in the south at least four-fold.

Despite some surges of concentrated effort, such as the MR 3 air campaign of November and the aborted attempts to advance on the NVA logistical base at Duc Co, the RVNAF was unable to interfere significantly with the NVA's steady accumulation of logistical and combat strength. One major inhibiting factor was the growing density of NVA antiaircraft defending the major logistical corridors and troop concentrations. In the year following the cease-fire, the NVA added one air defense division and at least 12 regiments to the expeditionary force so that by the cease-fire anniversary 2 air defense divisions and 26 regiments were deployed in South Vietnam. Included in the force were SA-2 and SA-7 missiles and radar-controlled guns; these, in particular, forced the VNAF, which had none of the sophisticated electronic counter-measures employed by the U.S. Air Force in such a high-threat environment, to operate above effective attack altitudes.

Preparations for resuming the offensive were being made north of the DMZ in concert with the buildup in the South. The NVA strategic reserve was being reconstituted, and most of its fighting elements were being concentrated in Thanh Hoa Province between Hanoi and Vinh. Here the NVA I Corps was organized in the fall of 1973, and the 308th, 312th, and 320B Divisions, having returned from southern Laos into the western highlands of...
South Vietnam, and by the end of January 1974 its 9th and 19th Regiments were already there.

As the RVNAF leadership and the DAO observers in Saigon viewed the situation, the warning was clear: although there existed a rough parity of military power deployed in the South, considering the obviously heavier requirements on South Vietnam to protect a dispersed population and long lines of communication, the RVNAF could retain not even one division in general reserve. The planned defense possessed no flexibility whatsoever, and adjustments were possible only by giving up terrain and usually population along with it. On the other hand, the NVA not only possessed considerable flexibility in choosing objectives and selecting forces to employ, but it also had six full-strength infantry divisions, adequately supported by artillery, tanks, and supplies, to throw into the battle at the decisive moment. Furthermore, improvements made in roads southward and the absence of U.S. air interdiction reduced North Vietnamese deployment times to the point where a surprise appearance of the NVA reserve became a worrisome possibility.

Note on Sources

References used in describing the situation in the delta during the last half of 1973 included, most importantly, reports and studies made by J2/JGS, translated and retained by DAO Saigon Intelligence Branch; similar reports of raider interrogations and captured documents; DAO Intelligence Summaries and reports; operational reports and intelligence information from headquarters IV Corps; reports from the U.S. Consul General, Can Tho; a JGS report on the status of territorial forces in Military Region 4; and the author's own notes recorded during meetings with the J2/JGS, and visits to Military Region 4.

The section on morale in the RVNAF was derived largely from reports by U.S. Military Attaches who had regular contact with knowledgeable Vietnamese officers, from DAO Saigon Economic Reports, and from recorded observations made by liaison officers of DAO Intelligence Branch.

Information on the Ranger reorganization came from the DAO Saigon Quarterly Assessment, December 1973, and reports from offices of the U.S. Embassy.

Combat activity and the air campaign in Military Region 3 came from personal observation by the author, reports by the principal liaison officer from DAO Intelligence Branch with the VNAF, and information reports from the Consul General, Bien Hoa, the U.S. Embassy, and DAO Saigon.
The Decline of U.S. Support

U.S. military assistance to South Vietnam was "service funded." This meant that, unlike other programs funded by Congress in a military assistance appropriations act, the money for support of the Vietnamese military was contained in the Army, Navy, and Air Force sections of the Department of Defense appropriations bill. A carryover from the days of active U.S. military participation in the war, the Military Assistance Service Funded (MASF) program for Vietnam became obsolete with the departure of American forces from Indochina in January 1973. But months passed before the Defense Department, the Services, and the Congress could adjust to the changed situation with a new military assistance program. In the interim, DAO Saigon requisitioned supplies and equipment for the RVNAF under continuing congressional resolution authority, based on the program of assistance developed jointly with South Vietnam's Defense Ministry and JGS in early 1973 and in anticipation of adequate funds in the Defense Appropriation Act for fiscal year 1974.

The U.S.-funded part of the RVNAF budget for fiscal year 1974 called for expenditures of $1.1 billion. But on 19 December 1973, Rear Adm. T. J. Bigley, Director for East Asia and Pacific Region, International Security Affairs (ISA) Department of Defense, cabled General Murray warning that the Senate committee had reduced service-funded military assistance for Vietnam and Laos to $650 million of new obligational authority in the 1974 Defense Appropriation bill. The House committee had recommended slightly more than $1 billion, and the two committees in conference agreed to $900 million. Admiral Bigley told General Murray that Vietnam's share of the $900 million would be about $813 million. Although the ceiling for Vietnam and Laos spending during the fiscal year was set by the Congress at $1,126 million, General Murray was asked for ideas on how the Vietnam MASF program could be adjusted to the lower limit of FY 74 money. (Msg, Bigley to Murray, 192200Z Dec 73, Log 907-73.)

Meanwhile, Headquarters Department of the Army, taking note of the reduction being contemplated in the Congress, suddenly cut off all operational and maintenance funds for Vietnam for the rest of the fiscal year. When General Murray found out about this, he asked Ambassador Graham Martin for authority to tell Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, Commanding General of the Central Logistics Command, that the Vietnamese could adopt some procedures to conserve supplies until the new appropriation made more money available. The Ambassador refused on the grounds that disclosure would be too unsettling politically. The near disastrous result was that the South Vietnamese continued requisitioning and using up supplies at their usual rate. With a four-month order-to-ship time, the supply line dried up in April and the system was never to recover.

Less than 24 hours later, Admiral Bigley had General Murray's reply, which was prefaced with the remark that General Murray was not able to discuss the cut with the South Vietnamese authorities because of the political sensitivity. He would leave that onerous task to Ambassador Martin. He also pointed out that Admiral Bigley's request for an immediate response precluded a detailed review of the MASF program; he could offer only rough observations. First, the source of prior year funds—theoretically $313 million which would bring the Laos and Vietnam programs up to the $1,126 million ceiling authorized by Congress—had not yet been identified, and about $723 million of the FY 74 program had already been obligated. This meant that if the true ceiling turned out to be $813 million—that is, if the additional $313 million could not be found—only $90 million remained to carry the Vietnam program for the six months remaining in the fiscal year. Add to this about $200 million worth of unbudgeted critical shortages already identified—shortages that were the result of the unexpectedly heavy combat actions of 1973—and anyone could see that a dangerous situation was developing.

General Murray's list of critical shortages included $180 million for ground ammunition, $5 million for medical supplies, $4.3 million for subsistence, $8 million for air ammunition, and an undetermined sum to buy or operate more landing ships, tank (LST), as a hedge against the enemy's capability to close the land route to Hue. General Murray tentatively identified budgeted savings of $3 million by eliminating the RVNAF dependent shelter program, a project that had high morale value for the armed forces and had been promised by President Nixon. Improvements to lines of communication would also be cut, and spare parts for ships and...
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aircraft reduced to a critical level. Although he offered some other saving alternatives, General Murray admitted that none was feasible. He also noted that the considerable cost of packing, crating, handling, and shipping of military assistance supplies had not been budgeted; these costs would also have to be borne within the ceiling.

The day after Christmas, Ambassador Martin sent his analysis of the military assistance situation to the White House. Trailing General Murray's hurried response by six days, the Ambassador's message contained a more complete review, and the short-falls in the program had been refined by General Murray and his staff. Consequently, the shortage cited by Ambassador Martin was more than double that earlier anticipated by General Murray. The Ambassador's message is quoted here in full (Msg, Martin to White House, 26 Dec 73, Log 930-73):

1. It seems quite clear that a new review at the highest levels of the future priorities to be accorded U.S. Military Assistance to the Vietnamese violates of the Paris agreements has successfully concentrated, quite properly, on the still existing deficiencies in the ARVN in order to correct and improve them, such concentration leads us to overlook the inescapable fact that the process of "Vietnamization" so ably implemented by General Abrams and the assistance of all the U.S. Armed Services has, in fact, worked out very well. The ARVN has not only held well, but has up to now kept the other side off balance. If we remain constant in our support, and determined to carry out the commitments we have made at the highest level, we have every right to confidently expect that the GVN can hold without the necessity of U.S. armed intervention. Therefore, the additional resources necessary to discharge the commitments already made will, in reality, return enormous dividends in the achievements of U.S. objectives not only in southeast Asia, but throughout the world.

2. Perhaps it will contribute to perspective to recall that in the last six months we have witnessed an evident consolidation of internal support for President Thieu and his administration; the reorganization of that administration to better cope with the economic realities, and the conclusion of economic agreements, including the FRG and Japan which will help surmount current problems and act as a catalyst in attracting other donors. The joint GVN and U.S. actions in publicizing massive North Vietnamese violations of the Paris agreements has successfully conditioned world reaction to accept the strong GVN reactions to these DRVN violations as quite proper and natural responses to North Vietnamese aggression. The highest officials of the Polish and Hungarian ICCS Delegation have privately informed us that they estimate the NVN/Vic forces control 20 percent less territory than on January 28, 1973. Politically, the NVN/Vic proselytizing has clearly been unsuccessful. Obviously, Moscow and Peking have been informed that, both politically and militarily, the initiative is passing to the GVN side.

3. Yet the military capability of NVN forces is now greater than at the time of the Easter 1972 offensive. Whether it will be utilized in another major force offensive or be maintained as a deterrent to GVN elimination of PRG forces is a decision which, I believe, has not yet been taken in Hanoi. It will be greatly influenced on their estimate of the will, the morale, and the military capability of the RVN. This in turn, will be greatly conditioned on the RVN estimate of the present validity of our commitments to them.

4. It is a bit hard here in Saigon to determine the practical effects of the just passed defense appropriation bill on our ability to carry out the commitments made solemnly and unequivocally by the U.S. to the GVN. However, we have received some preliminary indications of Washington thinking that trickle half

way around the world. If these are only partly true, then we are in considerable danger of very soon being in open, glaringly obvious default of those commitments.

5. The immediate repercussions on the increasingly evident self-confidence and up-beat morale of the GVN and the ARVN, while not possible to calculate with precision, will certainly be adverse and could be more serious. The short-range effect on our relations with the Soviets, the Chinese, the Middle East and even with Europe, should we wish on our commitments here, can be determined in the White House. But it seems self-evident that the one most serious precious commodity we possess just now is the faith of others in the constancy and reliability of American commitments. The cost of our failure to keep it here, even in dollar terms, will be incalculably greater than the immediate sums that now seem to be in question.

6. I am quite aware that reserves of all the services have been dangerously depleted by the emergency demands of enhance, enhance plus, and the recent emergency requirements for Israel. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the armed services can find ways to meet our requirements, if only our civilian leaders will unequivocally establish the overriding national priority that must be accorded meeting these requirements.

7. Before the January agreements, at the time of the January agreements, after the January agreements, again at the time of the June communique, and most especially at the San Clemente meeting in April between President Nixon and President Thieu, we have reiterated the commitment that we will maintain the armament level existing on a one-for-one replacement basis. Yet, almost from the beginning every action we have taken seems, upon review, to have been calculated to convince senior officers of the ARVN that we were not really serious about keeping that pledge. Of the many examples I will mention only two:

8. The fact is that with 32 percent of the VNAF total personnel strength in training, it is understandable that maintenance of VNAF aircraft would constitute a problem. Both the VNAF and we have instituted corrective action with the help of the USAF. Yet when suggestions are received from Washington to add 8 perfectly flyable F5A's to those scheduled to be removed for "corrosion control," and it just so happens that the addition of this particular number coincides with the need perceived in Washington for Iran and Korea repayment, the RVNAF and ARVN quite naturally wonder about the purpose of this kind of game playing. The current end result is that President Thieu has ordered the VNAF to inflict maximum possible damage in retaliatory raids in response to DRVN violations of the ceasefire, but to lose no aircraft in the process since all will be desperately needed when a major force attack is made. Consequently, the VNAF, although willing and able to aggressively press low level attacks, are not permitted to fly low enough over targets to achieve the precision results of which they are capable. If I could inform President Thieu that replacements of F5A's would be automatic, the results would be startling. Under present circumstances I cannot do this, despite the fact that we are committed to do so.

9. The second example is that despite the commitment for one-for-one replacement, despite the pace of the fighting since the 'ceasefire' in January and June which has resulted in a greater total of casualties than the total of U.S. casualties during our years of active engagement, USARPA's tentative ammunition replacement through the balance of this fiscal year would leave a projected balance on 1 July far below the ceasefire level that represents a minimum safety position against both enemy capabilities and also present estimates of their intentions. The following table graphically illustrates the problem. [In thousands. First figure is cease-fire level; second is projected, end June.]


10. These rounds have been selected as examples because they are unique to ARVN ammunition requirements. As used in the Delta the 40 MM round has effectively increased mobility of ARVN forces in resisting enemy activities. The 60 MM and 81 MM ILLUM are mortar rounds substituting for heavy artillery requirements within the small ARVN defense perimeters. The 66 MM LAW is the main ARVN weapon for defense against the very real enemy tank threat which now exists.

11. These are only two examples, but are enough to underscore the problem. The quickest, easiest and least expensive way to achieve the objectives we have formally set for ourselves is to reaffirm the priorities already established and permit the armed services to proceed with the implementation of the programs they now have before them. Original estimates were made on the assumption that the ceasefire would be reasonably respected by the other side. Given the increased level of military activity throughout South Vietnam we estimate that we will need a minimum of $494.4 million more than the projected $1,126 in FY 74. This is broken down as follows:

- $180 for ground ammunition.
- $69.7 for equipment not called forward or above program levels.
- $200 for priority RVNAF requirement (estimate).
- $10 for medical supplies.
- $3 for operate additional LST's.
- $4.3 for subsistence.
- $9 for air munitions.
- $18.4 for POL.
- $494.4 total.

12. The addition of this total of $494.4 million to the $1,126 billion brings us to the total of $1.126 billion which we will need in the fiscal year to reasonably discharge our commitments. I reiterate I am fully aware of the burden this will put on the services but I also reiterate my conviction that, given clear and unequivocal intent and goals by the highest levels, their ingenuity and resourcefulness will find the way to implement such decisions.

The next day Admiral Bigley clarified the funding situation somewhat in a message to General Murray. (Msg, Bigley to Murray, 272200Z Dec 73, Log 936-73.) Since $826.5 million had already been obligated, only $300 million remained for both countries for the last half of the fiscal year, despite the fact that $562.1 million of unobligated prior year funds remained.

Meanwhile, General Murray clarified the requirement for funds above the originally budgeted amount and specifically identified the critical need for ammunition funds. (Murray to Brig. Gen. Richard H. Thompson, ODCSLOG, DA, 2 Jan 74, Log 09487.) About $221 million was necessary to build up ammunition stocks and only $43 million remained of unobligated FY 74 funds. General Murray was not a patient man; considerate of others, thoroughly professional, perceptive, and highly skilled in the use of colorful language, but not patient. From Christmas on he had been on the receiving end of a plethora of vague—and sometimes inaccurate—messages from Washington and Honolulu concerning cuts in the MASF program, none of which provided him or the RVNAF staffs the information they required to plan fuel and ammunition usages, flying hours, maintenance or any other budgeted military activity for the next six months. His small capacity for forbearance virtually disappeared by 1 January, and he asked for the answers he had been searching for—since first warned of the impending MASF reductions. In a message to CINCPAC and the Department of Defense (ISA), he put it this way (Msg, Murray to Brig. Gen. Charles A. Jackson, CINCPAC/J8, 11 Jan 74, Log 038-74):

1. During the past month there has been a deluge of front and back channel messages from services and DSAA on FY 74 status and impact of new legislation.
2. Information appreciated but nothing conclusive or consistent enough to lock in on where we actually stand. No two messages cite the same figures, and volume of information has created much concern, many questions and virtually no answers.
3. Cannot determine whether funds here have been cut or, if so, from what to what. Reduction intimated, but nothing concrete. Concerned chiefly that dollar apportionment among RVNAF services may be out of balance before year-end since MILDEP handles funds separately.
4. Understand FY 74 ceiling for Vietnam and Laos $1,126 million, including $900 million NOA (new obligatory authority). Reportedly, $814 million of NOA is Vietnam and $86 million Laos. Do not know Laos and Vietnam breakout of total $1,126 million or significance of $226 million difference above NOA. All too inconclusive to establish meaningful priorities for requisitioning balance of year or to know to what extent service and country priorities should be inter-related.
5. Basic questions (applicable to Vietnam—not Laos) are:
   A. Do we now have FY 74 country dollar ceiling to be managed overall as in regular MAAG, or do our services at Washington still have separate ceilings managed through channels to DAO service divisions?
   B. What is country ceiling (or service ceilings)?
   C. What are other dollar restrictions, if any, e.g., MPA, FEMA etc.?
   D. What is NOA dollar limitation, and what is service break-out of NOA, if service ceilings apply?
   E. What is exact significance of difference between NOA and ceiling, and what is service breakout, if service ceilings apply?
   6. Propose CINCPAC become focal point for clarifying current funding status and for funneling DSAA and MILDEP funding developments to DAO balance of FY 74. This in consonance with MASF category IV procedures and would eliminate or reduce uncertainties, confusion and message traffic. Also assist in staying within ceiling constraints. With ground ammo alone running at over a million dollars a day, matters can get quickly
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The response he got from Hawaii shed some light—diffused though it was—on the subject. The news was not all comforting. (Msg, Jackson to Murray, 160413Z Jan 74, Log 053-74.) The Defense Department comptroller had determined that Vietnam's share of the new obligatory authority would be about $820.5 million rather than the original $3-814 million estimate. But the question regarding the $1,126 million ceiling, and where the money would come from to permit obligations up to it, was not definitely answered. The administration was planning to ask the Congress to raise the authorization to $1.4 billion for FY 74; this, according to CINCPAC would "allow use of all possible dollars, including prior years." CINCPAC reminded General Murray, although General Murray was already painfully aware of it, that much of the $820.5 million of FY 74 money had already been obligated, and the ceiling increase was required to authorize additional obligations, assuming that prior year funds could be found and used.

Answers to General Murray's other questions were deferred for further study. But the most crucial issue, how much total money would be available for the FY 74 program, remained in doubt, although Washington advised General Murray on 20 January that a supplemental increase would be requested of Congress to bring the country program up to $1,054.8 million. (Msg, Maj. Gen. Peter C. Olenchuck, ODCSLOG, DA, to Murray 202208Z Jan 74, Log 066-74.) This amount would reduce the concern in Saigon substantially, but Congressional response to such a request would most likely be negative. Meanwhile the war continued and supplies dwindled as moratoriums were imposed on requisitioning pending the outcome of the budgetary impasse.

General Murray did not wait for further definitive word from Washington or Hawaii. Early in January he began a series of conferences with the RVNAF logistics staff, principally with General Khuyen and General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, to impress upon them the need to conserve supplies, particularly ammunition. Without divulging all that he knew about the FY 74 program, he urged them to apply strict controls against the likelihood of diminished resources. General Vien reacted immediately. New available supply rates (ASR) were applied on all critical ammunition items on 25 February, reducing further the ASRs General Vien had ordered on 25 January. Meanwhile, General Murray continued to receive new interpretations of the money situation from Washington. The $1,126 million ceiling on obligations during FY 74 for Vietnam and Laos, whether from current or prior year funds, was reiterated.

Against this ceiling, the Department of Defense had allocated $700 million for the Army (of which $301 million was ammunition for Vietnam), $26 million for the Navy, and $400 million for the Air Force. Since $826.5 million had already been obligated as of 30 November 1973, only $229.5 million remained for all services (and this included funds for Laos). In this message, General Murray was advised that the Department of Defense was planning to ask Congress to raise the ceiling to $1.6 billion, rather than to $1.4. (Olenchuck to Murray, ODCSLOG, DA, 0422107Z Feb 74.)

General Murray viewed this information with some skepticism, since he understood the mood of the Congress and the effects of Watergate on President Nixon's Vietnam commitments about as well as anyone did in Washington. The most he could plan on was the Vietnam share of the $1,126 million, which by this time had been refined by the Department of Defense to $1,059 million.

In early February, General Murray tried to explain in a message to CINCPAC and Washington why the ceiling imposed overly severe restrictions on the Vietnam program, how the situation had changed since the program's drafting in early 1973, and the impact of those changes on RVNAF requirements. Since the FY 74 program had been agreed upon, significant price increases had occurred in equipment and fuel and the level of combat anticipated for a cease-fire period did not pertain. Increasing enemy capabilities created a high-threat environment; an inflation rate of 65 percent in South Vietnam drove subsistence costs correspondingly up; the imposition of a ceiling after 75 percent of the funds had been obligated left no flexibility for adjustment of priorities; the inability to identify the status of prior year funds to be applied to the $1,054 million ceiling created the possibility of overcommitment and compelled the suspension of all Army requisitions for the past two months; the apparent inclusion of other unanticipated costs within the ceiling, such as packing, crating, handling, and shipping further reduced the amounts available for RVNAF support; and bookkeeping adjustments had placed considerable FY 73 costs onto FY 74 funds. (Msg, Murray to Lt. Gen. William G. Moore, CoS, CINCPAC, 091033Z Feb 74, Log 130-74.)

Vice Adm. Raymond Peet, Director of Military Assistance in the Department of Defense, appreciated General Murray's lucid assessment and assured him that it would help support the Secretary of Defense's request to raise the congressional ceiling to $1.6 billion. (Msg, Peet to Murray, 222212Z, Feb 74, Log 168-74.)

Formal hearings on appropriations for South Vietnam began in the Senate Armed Services Committee on 12 March 1974. Meanwhile, the severe
controls Generals Vien and Khuyen had placed on ammunition expenditures were having some saving results. By mid-April, however, the on-hand stockage of the most critical item of ammunition—105-mm. howitzer, high explosive—was still dangerously low; only about 52 days of supply remained and less than that if high consumption rates required to repel a major offensive were applied.

Aside from the opposition of many influential members of the House and Senate to any sizable assistance for Vietnam, the Department of Defense and the services were further handicapped in their efforts to convince the responsible committees that additional monies should be made available for Vietnam because seemingly no one in any Defense agency knew how much prior year money had been obligated or what supplies and equipment had already been provided. In any case, the Senate Armed Services Committee refused to raise the $1,126 million ceiling on 3 April, responding in large measure to Senator Edward M. Kennedy's leadership. The next day, the House rejected the administration's request to raise the ceiling to $1.6 billion, as well as a compromise increase to $1.4 billion. The issue was dead, but the Defense Department kept trying. It informed the House and Senate Armed Services Committees that it had discovered $266 million of unobligated prior year funds and asked to have this amount excluded from the ceiling. The committees agreed that this would be proper, but on 6 May, the Senate passed a resolution, sponsored by Senator Kennedy, to the effect that any expenditures over $1,126 million in FY 74 would be illegal.

The dispute between the administration and Congress over the FY 74 Vietnam program, clearly won by the latter, was only the preliminary to the main event: the fight for the FY 75 authorization and appropriation.

By imposing rigid controls, the RVNAF managed to survive through the summer. Many of its vehicles were on blocks, its aircraft grounded because of parts and fuel shortages, its radios silent for lack of batteries, and its far-flung outposts suffering from inadequate artillery support. The stream of supplies had dwindled to a trickle, and weeks would pass after the start of the new fiscal year before the pipeline would again be flowing.

Meanwhile, General Murray arrived in Washington at the end of April 1974 to consult with the Defense Department and services on military assistance programs. He followed this visit with a brief, much needed vacation and returned to Vietnam toward the end of May. On 23 May, Admiral Bigley cabled General Murray that the House had passed the Defense Authorization Bill for FY 74 with the familiar ceiling of $1,126 million for MASF, while the Senate Committee was recommending $900 million. The best compromise in committee conference was that Defense could expect was a $1 billion ceiling, but the likelihood that this would be trimmed on the Senate floor was great. The Admiral asked General Murray to furnish some impact statements describing the results in Vietnam if the authorized program for FY 75 were $1,126 million, or reduced respectively to $900 million, $750 million, or $600 million. (Msg, Bigley to Murray, 2321187Z, May 74, Log 353-74.)

General Murray saw Admiral Bigley's message upon his return from Washington. His staff began working on the reply immediately, and a 30-page message, carefully drafted by General Murray and bearing the unmistakable marks of his incisive rhetoric, was dispatched on 1 June. (Msg, Murray to Bigley, 0111157, June 74, Log 377-74.)

It would seem from half way around the world that enormously effective use could be made of Secretary Schlesinger's comments to the press on 21 May. The most telling argument is the point he made so eloquently that it was we who told the South Vietnamese that we would give them the tools and they would have to finish the job. It was we who undertook a commitment to replace their combat losses on a one-for-one basis. It should be emphasized that all of us hoped in January 1973, at the time of the cease-fire, the other side would really observe it. It should be kept in mind that the GVN losses not only in manpower, about which we can do nothing, but in materiel have not been replaced as we promised. The importance of the above needs to be reemphasized after reading Senator Kennedy's comments during the debate on his amendment to eliminate the $266 million repayment authority. The Senator was extremely careful to try to point out that his proposed amendment would not really cripple the South Vietnamese military effort and implicitly recognized the obligations which the Secretary had pointed out, as recorded above. Therefore, it would seem useful to take the Secretary's comments as the point of departure and to drive home that any further reductions will seriously cripple the South Vietnamese capability to defend themselves and will be a violation of the clear understandings they had from us at the time of the cease-fire.

General Murray then reviewed the current situation and the impact FY 74 funding constraints had had on the RVNAF. "Cuts and economies have mortgaged the future," he told Washington. The entire program was in trouble. Because stock replenishment had been at a virtual standstill for over four months, the stockage of many common supplies was below safety levels. Included in this category were clothing, spare parts, tires, batteries, and M-16 rifle barrels. Despite intensive management of shortages to afford minimum combat support to engaged units, the deadline rate on vehicles, weapons, and communications equipment was bound to increase during the next quarter. In other words, even if the authority to requisition the supplies needed were provided at that moment, the lag in order-to-ship time would prevent immediate recuperation.

When it had first become apparent that the assistance program was in trouble, economies had been made in the usage of motor vehicle and marine fuels. The RVNAF staff had estimated that they
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would afford to operate about 70 percent of the M1 and naval fleets. But even this drastic measure was not enough. The reduction in the fuel program permitted support of only 55 percent of South Vietnam's equipment operating at severely curtailed levels.

The quality and responsiveness of the medical service had also suffered. Stocks of supplies, many of which were in the lifesaving category, were seriously depleted, such as blood collection bags, antivenomous fluids, antibiotics, and surgical dressings. Meanwhile, hospital admissions of wounded increased from 8,750 per month during the first three months of 1974 to over 10,000 per month by summer and would continue to rise as enemy operations intensified. The onset of the wet monsoon would bring with it the scourge of falciparum malaria in the northern provinces, and the supply of insect repellent for the troops was exhausted. In fact, the total supply picture was bleak. Roughly half the items on stockage lists were not there, and shipments into the depots had fallen off dramatically: from about 24,000 metric tons received in March to less than 8,000 in May.

Other effects of the cut-back in funds were readily apparent. The moratorium imposed on requisitions prevented the timely ordering of essential parts for the engine-rebuild program, and the lack of certain long-lead-time parts would soon stop production lines of truck and jeep engines, as well as power generators. The dependent shelter program was cancelled in its entirety. The ARVN engineers had to adopt less expensive and less durable methods in the program to improve lines of communications, a temporary saving to be offset by increased maintenance costs.

Because of the severe controls placed on ammunition usage, and because ammunition was given top priority for available funds, the stockage of ammunition had remained relatively constant during the last half of the fiscal year. Nevertheless, an NVA attempt to seize and hold the Iron Triangle had imposed new demands on the system. These demands were likely to increase. Roughly 177,000 short tons of ammunition had been on hand in South Vietnam at cease-fire. Including ammunition in transit through April 1974, DAO calculated that only 121,000 short tons would be available by the end of that month. With only $301 million allocated for ammunition purchase in FY 74, it would be impossible to regain the cease-fire ammunition posture. That amount of ammunition, $301 million worth, could be used in less than three months of intensive combat and would disappear in nine months even at the austere rates imposed by JGS.

The adequacy of ammunition stockage had not been foreseen as a problem when the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, was preparing to turn over the management of U.S. military assistance to DAO, Saigon. The MACV planners expected that the cease-fire would take hold enough to permit cutting ARVN ammunition usage by up to 70 percent in some categories. Further, it was anticipated that by reducing the allowable expenditure rates, the level of combat would drop accordingly, providing more encouragement for a true cease-fire environment to develop. While the U.S. could and did impose ammunition restrictions on the RVNAF through the budgetary process and by establishing "defense expenditure allocations," which amounted to dictating the number of rounds that could be expended per weapon per day, unfortunately no such restriction applied to the NVA. Consequently, as the tempo of combat increased, the ARVN was compelled to exceed the expenditure limits, and the funds allocated to replace the stocks were not sufficient. Furthermore, although the RVNAF exceeded the rates on which the $301 million allocation was based, the ammunition expenditures were far below those of prior years, even though the level of combat in many individual engagements was equivalent to the most intense periods of the 1968 and 1972 offensives.

While ammunition constituted a management problem for the DAO and JGS, the impact of the restrictions in the field was immediate and often decisive. Experienced infantrymen, accustomed to carrying six grenades into battle but now limited to two, responded with less confidence and aggressiveness to orders to advance and were less tenacious in holding threatened positions. Defenders in beleaguered outposts, restricted to two or three mortar or artillery rounds, were not inclined to wait and watch enemy sappers break through the wire and drag their recoilless rifles into firing position after ARVN artillery had fired its meager allocation. Artillery was limited to clearly identified targets, and harassing fires were stopped altogether. While experienced infantrymen and artillerymen could argue the worth or extravagance of such fires placed on trails and suspected assembly areas, they made enemy operations more difficult and hence had some value, however difficult to quantify. Although tactical and long-line communications were in poor condition, the need to economize still pertained. The RVNAF took measures to reduce the consumption of radio batteries by 25 percent. By combining nets, such as air/ground with command, they reduced the number of radios in operation and even then could plan on operating fewer than 20 days per month. As tactical efficiency suffered, casualties mounted. After noting that 41 percent of the authorized stockage list for tactical communications equipment had been depleted, General Murray reported (Ibid.):
Equipment in the combat divisions is suffering between 30 to 40 percent deadline rate. The divisions are losing communication flexibility and in MR 2 can no longer provide telephone and teletype communications to attached forces such as ranger units that do not possess VHF TO/E assets. The AN/FRC-25 radio operational readiness had decayed to 67 percent. 848 module and other repair parts ASL lines are at zero balance and are stopping the repair production lines for this radio. AN/FGC-25 teletype equipment in the area communications system is suffering from lack of repair parts. ARVN has adjusted to priorities and are reducing tactical divisions to 40 percent of authorized TO/E teletype assets. Equipment will be withdrawn from the divisions and used in the area communications system where the high volume of record traffic is processed and transmitted. Continued depletion of communications parts stocks is creating a catastrophic threat to an already seriously degraded tactical communications posture.

Long-line communications, which the U.S. mission also relied on for its own needs, were in similar difficulty. Even though emergency action had been taken to reprogram FY 74 funds for the long-line system, all communications were expected to decay, and if sufficient funds were not provided in FY 75, a collapse could be predicted.

The funding pinch was felt in the VNAF program as well. Requisitioning of essential "move-shoot-communicate" items for aircraft and supporting equipment had been severely curtailed since January 1974. The result was that one-fifth of the force was grounded for maintenance, a condition bound to worsen before FY 75 funds would have any effect.

The situation with ground combat equipment was similar. For example, in early March, the deadline rate for medium tanks was 25 percent; by mid-May, the lack of repair parts had forced the rate to 35 percent. The availability of armored personnel carriers, the main fighting vehicle of the armored cavalry, was sinking to only one-half of organizational strength. In December 1973, RVNAF's mobility, exemplified by the air movement of the ARVN 23rd Division from Kontum and the rapid shift of the 22d Division to cover the gaps, had been crucial in rescuing Quang Duc Province. This mobility had all but vanished with the decline in funding for maintenance requirements and the skyrocketing costs of all supplies, particularly fuel.

Military Assistance, Fiscal Year 1975

Such was the situation facing the RVNAF as Congress began to deliberate the FY 75 military assistance program. A proposal of $1.45 billion had been developed in Saigon in September 1973 based on requirements and prices known at that time. After hearings on the FY 75 Military Procurement Bill, the House Armed Services Committee recommended $1.4 billion for the FY 75 Vietnam MASF Program, but the House on 22 May passed its version of the bill with a $1.126 billion limit.

Although in the ten intervening months much had happened to change priorities, the changes could be managed under a $1.45 billion program, and the critical elements could be done within a $1.126 billion ceiling. General Murray was especially concerned about the need to expand depot repair facilities. Below $1.126 billion, this requirement was out of reach. But the greatest problems were caused by inflation. Ground ammunition was programmed at $400 million; when April 1974 prices were posted, the cost was $500 million. The prices of other common, high-volume supplies had undergone comparable increases. What had appeared to be a generous program during the 1973 planning days had become an austere one.

Another matter of concern was that South Vietnamese Air Force and Navy equipment losses had not been replaced in FY 74 and the U.S. commitment to replace losses on a one-for-one basis had not been fulfilled. Although surpluses existed in some categories at cease-fire and all lost equipment need not have been replaced, the almost complete lack of replacements hindered tactical operations, particularly those of the VNAF. Specifically, as General Murray pointed out, VNAF pilots were taking such extreme measures to reduce losses that their bombing and strafing techniques were ineffective. VNAF had lost 281 aircraft since the cease-fire (including 66 transferred to the USAF) and had received only eight O-1's as replacements. The Navy had lost 58 ships and boats, and none had been replaced. In essence, if the FY 75 program were held to $1,126 million, the minimum operational requirements of the RVNAF could be supported, but one-for-one replacement of losses could not be accomplished, and very little investment in long-term projects was possible. The current restrictions on mobility—only 49 percent of the vehicles would be operated, for example—and the severe controls on ammunition usage would be continued. General Murray concluded his discussion on RVNAF capabilities under the constraints of a $1.126 billion FY 75 program with an unequivocal, prophetic statement: RVNAF would be capable of defending the country against the FY 74 level of enemy activities and of countering country-wide high-points of enemy activity, but not capable of defending against a sustained major offensive. (Ibid., msg. of 1 Jun 74.)

Reductions below the $1,126 million ceiling could only have a disastrous effect on RVNAF capabilities and morale, and correspondingly enhance the enemy's potential. If the ceiling were reduced to $750 million, no investment program, that is, equipment buys, could be supported at all. Critical operational requirements—fuel, ammunition, spare parts, medical and communications supplies—would not be met. The construction program would be eliminated. VNAF flying hours would be further re-
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Meanwhile, Deputy Commander of USSAG, Maj. Gen. Ira Hunt came over to Saigon from his headquarters in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, to fill in as Defense Attaché until the newly appointed Maj. Gen. Homer Smith could arrive. General Hunt continued the conferences and working sessions between DAO and RVNAF staffs to revise the MASF program within the $700 million appropriation, which at that time was all but certain. The ARVN would get about $410 million, half of what it needed. Army ammunition requirements alone, originally estimated at $400 million, would be $500 at 1974 prices. The VNAF would receive about $160 million, less than 30 percent of its requirement, while the Navy would have to make do with about $9 million.

Draconian measures were applied. Only 55 percent of available transportation could be fueled, and tactical movement required the approval of the corps commander. Bandages and surgical dressings were washed and reused, as were other disposable surgical supplies such as hypodermic syringes and needles, intravenous sets, and rubber gloves. Replacement criteria for combat boots were changed from six to nine months, and the issue of boot socks dropped from three to two pairs per year. Ammunition issues were even more rigidly controlled than before. In the Air Force, squadrons were reduced from 66 to 56; no replacements were ordered for 162 destroyed aircraft; flying hours, contractor support, and supply levels were further reduced; and 224 aircraft were placed in storage, among them all 61 remaining A-1 bombers, all 52 C-7 cargo airplanes, 34 C-47 and C-119 gunships, all 52 C-7 cargo airplanes, and 31 UH-1 helicopters. Among other operational reductions, the Navy inactivated 21 of its 44 riverine units. This was hardly the posture for an armed force on the eve of its final battle for survival.

Note on Sources

General Murray's message file was a prime source of information. Ambassador Graham Martin contributed his own message on the subject, and General Murray provided the author a comprehensive review of the entire chapter, adding significant new information and insight.

The author participated in frequent discussions on the subject while in DAO Saigon and referred to his own notes and recollections. The DAO Security and Assistance Division's fact sheets and reports were also essential sources of precise fiscal data.

Newspaper accounts were used to report congressional activity and DAO Saigon Quarterly Assessments were used for information concerning the status of RVNAF during this period.
Critical decisions leading to an end to the third Indochina war were made in Washington and Hanoi in 1974. In Washington, Congress reduced military assistance to South Vietnam to below operating levels, a decision that seriously undermined South Vietnamese combat power and will to continue the struggle. While in Hanoi, taking fresh heart from the political fall of Richard Nixon and waning Congressional support of the war, Communist leaders decided that 1975 would be the year of final victory.

Estimates and Plans

In early October 1973, the DAO, Saigon, suggested that North Vietnam had three courses of action from which it would select the one most likely to provide the earliest achievement of its national goal, the conquest of South Vietnam. The first was political: creating a recognized government within South Vietnam capable of competing in the economic and political struggle. The second a limited military offensive designed to create a military, economic, and political situation beyond the capability of South Vietnam to handle. The third a major military offensive to cause the immediate collapse of South Vietnam's government and armed forces.

The DAO postulated that North Vietnam would base its decision for 1974 primarily on expectations of Soviet and Chinese military and economic support and on an assessment of the probable U.S. reaction to an escalation of the war. Enough was known about external Communist assistance and the size of NVA stockpiles, however, to conclude that logistics would not inhibit a major NVA offensive. On the other hand, little could be said about the reactions of the Soviets or Chinese to a major NVA offensive, nor could anyone estimate with confidence the influence they could or would exert on the North Vietnamese. But the DAO did know that North Vietnam's leadership was cognizant of the decline of U.S. support for South Vietnam and would not be inclined toward caution.

The political option would be indecisive because the VC infrastructure was too weak, South Vietnam too strong, and a reversal would take a long time. The great effort under way by the NVA to improve its offensive capability in the South indicated overwhelmingly the inclination toward a military course of action. The DAO concluded that North Vietnam was not yet ready for a major, decisive offensive—despite heavy infiltration of replacements, some NVA units in the South were still too far understrength—but that as the failures of the political struggle became more evident, the NVA would embark on a phased offensive, to create gradually conditions beyond the capacity of South Vietnam to cope with. While pursuing this military course of action North Vietnam would continue political and economic actions to support it and proceed with the development of the military strength required for a decisive offensive.

In the early spring of 1974, Hanoi's military leaders met to study the resolutions of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee's 21st Plenum. The DAO had scant knowledge of this event at the time, but the strategic concepts that emanated from this council paralleled remarkably the Saigon assessment. In a post bellum account, Senior General Van Tien Dung, the architect of the final offensive, described the situation as viewed from Hanoi (quotes from Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report: Asia and Pacific, vol. IV, no. 110, Supplement 38, 7 Jun 1976):

> ... the party Central Committee's 21st Plenum held in October 1973 set forth the method of combining the political military and diplomatic struggles and pointed out: The path of the revolution in the south is the path of revolutionary violence. No matter what the situation, we must firmly grasp the opportunity and the strategic offensive line and effect flexible leadership to advance the southern revolution. True revolutionary struggle is both an urgent and a basic requirement in the new situation. In March 1974 the Central Military Party Committee went into session to thoroughly study and implement the party Central Committee resolution. The committee asserted: The Vietnamese revolution may develop through various transitional stages, and it can only achieve success by way of violence with the support of political and military forces; if the war resumes on a large scale, a revolutionary war will be waged to win total victory. The southern revolution must firmly grasp the concept of strategic offensive. We must resolutely counterattack and attack the enemy, and we must firmly maintain and develop our active position in all respects.

The conference of the Central Military Party Committee completed its work and presented its plan to the Central Party Committee, which approved it. Orders went out to the military regions, directing training and maintenance preparations in the North and prescribing offensive operations for the expeditionary army in the South. How these operations were conducted, why some succeeded and others failed, is the subject of this and the following chapters. Major events occurred in each
military region, and only in the delta of South Vietnam's Military Region 4 and the border areas of Svay Rieng Province, Cambodia, was the RVNAF the clear victor. In Military Region 3, although the ARVN eventually ejected the NVA from the Iron Triangle, this costly success was vastly overshadowed by the critical loss of Phuoc Long Province to the NVA. In the highlands of Military Regions 1 and 2, all remaining outposts fell to NVA attack and the protective screen around Hue and Da Nang continued to decay.

The Tri Phap Campaign

Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province is a 60-mile-long salient, only 16 miles wide at its neck, thrust into the rich delta of Vietnam, ending in what was called the Parrot's Beak 30 miles west of Saigon. Although the Cambodian government maintained a garrison at the province capital, it did so only at the sufferance of the NVA, which controlled the rest of the province and did not consider the hostile Cambodians a threat of any significance. The only threat
to the NVA in Svay Rieng came from the RVNAF operating out of the provinces which enclosed the salient on three sides: Tay Ninh, Hau Nghia and Kien Tuong. As far as the South Vietnamese were concerned, Svay Rieng and the sizable enemy forces and bases it contained constituted a serious threat to the security of the three bordering provinces and was the source of infiltration and support of enemy forces throughout the northern delta. Consequently, the RVNAF maintained outposts and operational bases as close as possible to the international frontier to slow the movement of enemy forces and supplies into South Vietnam. (Map 12)

North of Tay Ninh City the RVNAF was at a disadvantage. The forests of northern Tay Ninh Province belonged to the NVA, and the principal port of entry, Lo Go, could be reached only by air strikes. But from Tay Ninh City south to Hau Nghia Province, the RVNAF maintained bases west of the Vam Co Dong River that impeded the free flow of enemy traffic out of Svay Rieng as well as contraband traffic into it. From these bases the South Vietnamese periodically probed into the border region but rarely intruded into Cambodia. During much of the year, the flat, marshy land was under water, but even when the weather was suitable for large expeditions into Cambodia, the RVNAF were restrained for political reasons and by the realization that the forces required to achieve significant gains were rarely available. The RVNAF strategy for the Hau Nghia flank was therefore one of active defense west of the Vam Co Dong.

The situation was quite different on the Kien Tuong side of the salient. Maintaining large forces in central Kien Tuong, principally the 7th and Z-15 regiments, the NVA operated major infiltration corridors through the province, anchoring this logistical system on a vast base area around a location called Tri Phap. The South Vietnamese held the province capital of Moc Hoa and a base at Long Khot, both of which were well within 105-mm. howitzer range of NVA artillery in Svay Rieng, but there were great reaches of uncontrolled, unoccupied territory between the Cambodian border and the first major population concentration along National Highway 4 (QL-4) through My Tho. Another important element of the threat was contributed by the NVA 5th Division, which had operated out of Svay Rieng Province in both directions, through Tay Ninh to An Loc and south toward My Tho. In early 1974, the 5th was north of Tay Ninh City, but available for operations into Kien Tuong and Hau Nghia.

Although South Vietnamese forces were not strong enough to contain the NVA in Svay Rieng, they could in Military Region 4 impose limits on the enemy's freedom of movement, make resupply of troops costly and difficult, and inflict high causalities. To do this much, the RVNAF had to hold Long Khot and Moc Hoa, seize the enemy's logistical and operational base around Tri Phap, and protect National Route 4 between Cay Lay and My Tho.

In January 1974, intelligence information became available to Maj. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, commanding IV Corps and MR 4, indicating that elements of the NVA 5th Division were being ordered to Dinh Tuong Province from Tay Ninh. Later in the month, advance elements of the division were detected in the division's Svay Rieng base.

Two NVA soldiers captured on 27 January told their interrogators that a battalion of the division's 6th Regiment had been sent south to reinforce the understrength NVA Z-18 Regiment in the Tri Phap area. Their testimony, along with that of four recent ralliers and captured documents, also indicated that the Dong Thap 1 Regiment, which traditionally operated in Dinh Tuong, was still badly understrength, though it had recently received 300 NVA replacements following its December 1973 battles, and would also probably receive more replacements from the 6th Regiment, 5th NVA Division. The interrogators also learned that the Z-15 Regiment had just received about 200 replacements from the North but that it was short weapons and ammunition.

Meanwhile, RVNAF outposts, patrols, and air observers detected enemy transportation elements moving past Tuyen Binh on infiltration Route IA. Some of these were intercepted, and the ARVN captured large quantities of rice and ammunition, as well as an NVA transportation company commander.

Time became important. If the 5th were allowed to occupy the Tri Phap, it would be extremely difficult to dig out, and the threat to Route 4 would become intolerable. The previous year's experience had shown General Nghi that his troops were capable of driving into and probably clearing the Tri Phap of the NVA elements, particularly if he moved fast while the NVA regiments were still reforming and receiving replacements. If he could establish a base of operations at Tri Phap, he could deny a vital logistical complex to the 5th NVA Division, one that would require for operations in Dinh Tuong.

On 12 February, the 12th Infantry Regiment of the 7th ARVN Division, reinforced with two battalions of the 10th Infantry and two troops of armored cavalry in personnel carriers, attacked through Tri Phap from the east and advanced to the Kien Phong-Dien Tuong Province boundary. Three days later, the 14th Infantry Regiment, 9th ARVN Division, reinforced with one battalion of the 16th Infantry and two troops of armored cavalry, attacked east from My An District town and linked up with
the 12th Infantry on the western edge of the Tri Phap. This two-pronged attack was followed on the 19th by an attack by the 10th Infantry Regiment, minus the two battalions attached to the 12th, from Hau My village in northern Cai Be District, north to clear the southern edge of the Tri Phap. Completely enveloped, the enemy in the Tri Phap suffered heavy losses in men, supplies, ammunition, and food. Elements of the Z-15 and Z-18 were identified in the battle, but most NVA casualties were among rear service troops. Another element of the 5th NVA Division, the 6th Battalion, 174th Infantry, was also identified in the heavy fighting around My An on the western edge of the Tri Phap, indicating that earlier intelligence concerning probable deployment of elements of the 5th from Tay Ninh was valid. Enemy casualties were heavy that first week of the Tri Phap campaign; over 500 were killed, and the ARVN captured tons of ammunition and nearly 200 weapons. ARVN casualties were slight in comparison.

Fighting flared through most of Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong Provinces for the rest of February and until the end of March. The center of action remained in the Tri Phap where the NVA again reinforced, this time with the Dong Thap 1 Regiment which was sent north to join the Z-18. The ARVN kept up the pressure, and in successive weeks killed another 250 enemy, capturing as many weapons. Meanwhile, COSVN directed NVA Military Region 3 (the southern delta command) to launch widespread attacks to take the pressure off Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong. Replacements, up to 3,000 according to two ARVN soldiers who escaped from captivity in Cambodia, were being readied for assignment to units in Svay Rieng Province. Unable to counter RVNAF advances on the battlefields, the NVA resorted to an increased terror campaign throughout the delta. On 9 March they fired one 82-mm. mortar shell into the primary school yard at Cai Lay while the children were lined up waiting to enter their classes. Twenty-three children died instantly; 46 others were badly wounded. Far to the south, in Bac Lieu, terrorists tossed a grenade into a religious service killing 9 and wounding 16.

ARVN operations on the My An front, that is, on the western edge of the Tri Phap area, were being supported out of Cao Lanh, with supplies coming up from Oiao Duc on interprovincial Route 30. The forces on the eastern edge of the Tri Phap and those fighting north around Moc Hoa were being supported along Interprovincial Route 29 (LTL-29) out of Cai Lay. The ARVN successfully countered NVA attempts to cut these two routes.

The first phase of the Tri Phap campaign slowly wound down during the last part of March. The Dong Thap 1 Regiment picked up 150 replacements, freshly arrived from North Vietnam, and NVA Military Region 2, whose regiments were being so badly abused in the Tri Phap fighting, received 200 replacements who had been previously destined for Military Region 3. Reinforcing success in the last week of March, General Nghi sent the 7th Ranger Group against the NVA Dong Thap 1 Regiment in the Tri Phap, where the Rangers killed over 30 and captured more weapons.

By the end of March, more than 1,000 enemy had been killed in the Tri Phap campaign, while the ARVN had about 700 wounded but fewer than 100 killed. Nearly 5,000 tons of rice and paddy were captured, along with over 600 weapons, 8 tons of ammunition, and a large haul of weapon accessories, radios, and other military equipment. Three NVA regiments, the Z-15, Z-18 and Dong Thap 1, had been severely mauled, and the Tri Phap base area was denied to the 5th NVA Division.

Work began immediately on the construction of fortified positions in the Tri Phap, enough to provide for posting an ARVN regiment there. The NVA Z-15 Regiment, meanwhile, was recuperating in southwestern Dinh Tuong Province, attacking ARVN outposts and preparing to return to the Tri Phap. On 26 April two NVA battalions attacked the RF battalion base at the village of Tri Phap. In a complementary attack one farther south on the Kien Phong-Dinh Tuong Province boundary, the Dong Thap 1 Regiment struck an RF outpost. Although temporarily successful, the enemy soon faced ARVN's 14th Regiment and a troop of the 2d Armored Cavalry and was routed with heavy casualties. Meanwhile, the 11th Infantry counterattacked in the Tri Phap and restored the lost position. The ARVN, by the first week in May, was therefore in firm control in the Tri Phap, with four RF battalions holding strong positions there. NVA forces in the area were weakened and demoralized, but elsewhere in the delta they kept up their campaign of terror as the slow deterioration of local security continued. Although abductions and assassinations were predominant, the enemy attacked another school. On 4 May, eight rounds of 82-mm. mortar fell on the school at Song Phu, in Vinh Long Province. Six children were killed and 28 wounded.

Elephant's Foot and Angel's Wing

A glance at the map of the Svay Rieng salient shows two minor prominences whose names described their shapes. On the southwest side was the so-called Elephant's Foot, appearing on the verge of crushing Moc Hoa, the capital of Kien Tuong Province. Against the underside of the elephant's leg was the Vietnamese village of Long Khot, less than 1,000 meters from the Svay Rieng border. As the
RVNAF vigorously pursued the Tri Phap campaign, the NVA increased pressure against RVNAF defenses around the Elephant’s Foot.

Opposite the Elephant’s Foot, bordering the Vietnamese provinces of Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia, what was known as the Angel’s Wing spread toward Go Dau Ha, the port on the Song Vam Co Dong through which passed the main highway between Tay Ninh and Saigon. The southern tip of the Angel’s Wing dipped toward an ARVN fire-base at Duc Hue, and the Svay Rieng border only five kilometers away nearly enveloped this exposed position. The Angel’s Wing and Duc Hue became the focus of heavy action in the spring and early summer of 1974 as the RVNAF sought to reduce the threat to the Saigon-Tay Ninh line of communication and inflict damage on the NVA 5th Division as it concentrated in southern Svay Rieng. (Map 13)

The NVA 5th Infantry Division was perhaps the most versatile of all Communist divisions; at least it was called upon to perform missions of extreme diversity. In the Nguyen Hue offensive of 1972, it participated in the Binh Long campaign, and after suffering heavy casualties in the jungles and plantations around An Loc, invaded the paddies and swamps of the Mekong Delta. Forced to withdraw, it sent elements to relieve the battered NVA forces in the forests of Quang Duc. In early 1974, it pulled these units back to bases in Tay Ninh and dispatched some battalions again to the delta to try to save disintegrating defenses in the Tri Phap. This mission failed in the face of powerful ARVN attacks, and COSVN ordered the division to assemble forces in southern Svay Rieng. From here, generally centered on Chi Phu, it could direct forces against southern Tay Ninh, Hau Nghia, and Kien Tuong. In early February an advance element of division headquarters began moving toward the Angel’s Wing from Tay Ninh, and by mid-March it was established there east of Chi Phu.
Although units of the 6th and 174th Regiments of the 5th Division had fought in the Tri Phap battle, other battalions of these two regiments were in the Angel's Wing along with divisional artillery. South of Duc Hue, the K-7 Sapper Battalion of Long An was ready to strike. On 27 March at 0300 the attack began on the RVNAF base at Duc Hue. Defending against two battalions of the NVA 6th Regiment was the ARVN 83d Ranger Battalion. Across the border in Cambodia NVA 105-mm. artillery fired at the defenders while recoilless rifles and heavy mortars (120-mm.) bombarded the garrison from closer ranges. Although 30 ARVN Rangers died, the NVA infantry assault failed to break the position; the two battalions of the 6th NVA Regiment were forced to withdraw, leaving 95 dead on the battlefield, together with a large number of weapons.

Under orders to maintain a loose siege of the Duc Hue post, the NVA, assisted by the local sapper battalion, blocked the only land access to the camp and continued the artillery bombardment but abandoned the idea of taking it by storm. On the ARVN side, the 25th Division committed a task force consisting of a battalion of the 46th Infantry, a battalion of the 50th Infantry, and a tank company to break the siege. Fighting raged in the paddies east and north of the camp for several days, and the VNAF provided effective support to the counterattacking infantry, losing an A-1 fighter-bomber and an observation aircraft to SA-7 fire. Meanwhile, the ARVN task force command post was hit by NVA 107-mm. rocket fire and the commander was one of those killed.

As April wore on, the threat of renewed assaults on Duc Hue by the NVA 5th Division remained. The situation was particularly dangerous because the 7th and 9th NVA Divisions were probing aggressively in the eastern part of Military Region 3. Lt. Gen. Pham Quoc Thuan, III Corps Commander, determined that he must reduce the threat to his western flank and the Tay Ninh corridor while he safeguarded, and few, if any, Americans in the U.S. Mission knew anything about it until 27 April when 45 sorties struck targets in Cambodia and known and suspected bases of the 5th NVA Division. These strikes began Phase I, which lasted through the 28th and included infantry sweeps by two RF battalions between the Song Vam Co Dong and the northern shoulder of the Angel's Wing. Meanwhile, the 49th Infantry Regiment, less one battalion, and the 7th Ranger Group, also short one battalion, left assembly areas near Hiep Hoa on the Song Vam Co Dong and advanced westward through the swamplands, past Duc Hue to the Cambodian frontier. To the south, three RF battalions provided security by conducting reconnaissance in northern Long An Province, generally between the Bo Bo Canal and the Song Vam Co Dong.

Another supporting maneuver, which quickly developed into a major operation, was the attack into Svay Rieng Province south of the Elephant's Foot by two battalions from MR 4. The northernmost of the two advanced from the border area north of Moc Hoa and established a blocking position near the local route 1012 that led eastward from an assembly area occupied by the 5th NVA Division. The other battalion crossed midway between the Elephant's Foot and the tip of the Parrot's Beak and established a lodgment on the southeastern edge of the enemy's logistical base and assembly area in Svay Rieng.

While Phase I of the ARVN sweep into Svay Rieng was getting started, the NVA on 28 April struck heavily at Long Khot, an ARVN post and district town at the inside curve of the Elephant's Foot. Whether the attack was pre-planned or reactive was unknown. Regardless, enemy tanks were reported at first by the defenders. Later, aerial observers correctly determined that the vehicles were captured M-113 armored personnel carriers. The defenders held strongly against the NVA's 275th Regiment and 25th Sapper Battalion of the 5th NVA Division. More than 100 sorties were flown on the 28th against NVA positions, weapons, and vehicles in the Svay Rieng area, many of them in support of Long Khot. On this same day, the ARVN at Long Khot captured nine prisoners from the NVA 275th Regiment and four from its supporting artillery, which had been employing 122-mm. guns and U.S. 105-mm. howitzers, as well as AT-3 antitank missiles and SA-7 antiaircraft missiles. Many enemy weapons were salvaged, and 75 enemy soldiers were counted dead on the battlefield.

Not only were the Long Khot defenders tenacious and prepared for the onslaught, but the VNAF proved its worth in close support as over the two days, the 27th and 28th, it flew 188 tactical and logistical sorties in the Svay Rieng Campaign. In a departure from normal practice, the 3d Air Division supporting III Corps in the Svay Rieng campaign, located a forward command post at Cu Chi alongside the III Corps forward command post in order to improve coordination and responsiveness. Combat pilots returned to their bases with encouraging, morale-building reports about enemy
troops throwing down their weapons and running when faced with low-level strafing.

By the night of 28 April, 11 ARVN battalions of infantry, RF, and Rangers were conducting screening, blocking, and reconnaissance-in-force operations as a prelude to Phase II of the Svay Rieng sweep. Meanwhile, the VNAF was assaulting enemy troop locations and bases, and Long Khot was fighting off a violent NVA armor, artillery, and sapper-infantry attack.

In Phase II, originally planned by General Thuan to encompass only three days of armored sweeps into the Cambodian bases of the NVA 5th Division, three columns drove west, generally parallel to each other, crossing the frontier west of Go Dau Ha and penetrating as deeply as 15 kilometers into Svay Rieng before wheeling south and southwest into Hau Nghia Province. Making the main effort and the deepest penetration was Task Force 315 with the 15th Armored Cavalry Squadron, the 64th Ranger Battalion, and a company of medium tanks as its striking force. Supported by a composite battery of 105-mm. and 155-mm. artillery this northernmost column crossed the border through the paddies south of Highway I and attacked west, turning south short of the swampy ground east of Chiphu, following local route 1012 toward the blocking position held by a IV Corps battalion near Ph Chek. It was screened on its right flank by a mobile RF battalion that advanced along Highway I about 12 kilometers inside the international frontier.

Along the center axis, which started about 2,000 meters south of Task Force 315, was Task Force 318, built around the 18th Armored Cavalry Squadron, a Ranger battalion, a tank company, and a howitzer battery. This column drove west for about 10 kilometers before turning inside the sweep south by Task Force 315.

Task Force 310, the only one of the attacking columns without tanks, had a battalion each from the 18th and 25th Infantry Divisions and the 3d Troop, 10th Armored Cavalry. Along with a supporting howitzer battalion it crossed into Svay Rieng just north of the southern tip of the Angel's Wing, along Cambodian Route 1013, and wheeled south inside Task Force 318, generally along the international boundary.

In reserve at Go Dau Ha General Thuan had two companies of medium tanks of the 22d Tank Battalion, a cavalry troop from the 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron, a battalion of infantry from the 18th Division, and a battery of 105-mm. howitzers. Designated Task Force 322, this powerful force was ready to exploit opportunities uncovered by the attacking echelons.

The 3d Armored Brigade controlled operations from Go Dau Ha. Fifty-four UH-I helicopters mustered for the campaign were effectively used in surprise air assaults into enemy defenses. Secrecy was more rigidly enforced in this campaign than perhaps any operation since the cease-fire, partly because it was important to surprise the 5th NVA Division in garrison, and partly to conceal, for political reasons, an ARVN offensive into Cambodia.

By 29 April, Task Force 315 had penetrated about seven kilometers into Cambodia and, at the cost of only one wounded, had killed nearly 50 enemy and captured one prisoner. To the south, Task Force 318 had experienced similar success, killing nearly 60 and capturing 5 while suffering only 6 wounded. The following morning, the 315th continued the attack, killing 40 more and sustaining light casualties. Meanwhile, the VNAF was pounding the enemy with nearly 300 sorties, accounting for nearly 100 killed, destroying many storage and defensive positions, and knocking out mortar and antiaircraft positions.

As the threat to the 5th NVA Division base in southern Svay Rieng became critical, the NVA was compelled to reduce the pressure at Long Khot and concentrate on attempting to relieve the E-6 and 174th Regiments and logistical installations lying in the path of the ARVN armored thrusts. By the end of April, nearly 300 NVA soldiers had fallen in ground combat, over 100 more had been killed by VNAF air strikes, and 17 prisoners of war were in ARVN hands. On the other hand, the speed, audacity and superior air-ground coordination that characterized the RVNAF attack had kept friendly casualties extremely low: only 21 killed and 64 wounded. In fact, success was so striking that General Thuan elected to extend the operation a few days.

Westward, over in the Elephant's Foot, matters were becoming desperate for the 275th NVA Regiment and its supporting troops. The 7th ARVN Division had moved a forward command post into Moc Hoa and was controlling the operation of two task forces then committed in the Elephant's Foot. One was composed of the 15th Infantry, 9th ARVN Division, and part of the 16th Armored Cavalry Squadron; the other included the 10th Infantry and elements of the 6th Armored Cavalry Squadron. In 12 days of fighting in the border area, these two mobile task forces killed 850 NVA soldiers, captured 31, collected over 100 weapons, and suffered fewer than 300 casualties, including 39 killed.

Making the adjustments required by the situation, particularly the fact that the most lucrative enemy contacts were being made in the southern sweeps of the 318th and 310th Task Forces, General Thuan ordered Task Force 315 withdrawn from its northern axis on 2 May and returned to Go Dau Ha where it reverted to reserve. Meanwhile, Task Force 322 was committed and advanced about four