kilometers into the center of the Angel's Wing, and
the infantry battalions of the 25th ARVN Division
continued their sweep between Duc Hue and Go
Dau Ha. By 6 May the land route to Duc Hue
Camp was secured and was being improved by
ARVN combat engineers, the threat to the vital
road junction at Go Dau Ha was substantially re­
duced, and the ARVN was in complete control of
the battlefield. The tank-heavy 322d Task Force
turned south and headed for Ba Thu, the long-held
NVA base on the border southwest of Duc Hue. On
10 May, the offensive ended, the last ARVN forces
began their march homeward. Their sortie had
killed nearly 300 NVA soldiers, captured 17, col­
lected 100 weapons, and seriously disrupted the
communications and logistics of the 5th NVA Divi­
sion.

But this was the last major South Vietnamese
offensive. The severe constraints on ammunition
expenditures, fuel usage, and flying hours permitted
no new initiatives. Although the RVNAF could
react strongly to local threats within supporting
distances of major bases, outlying threats were
beyond their capability to cope with. For South
Vietnam, a decline had begun to develop early in
1974 and would prove irreversible.

Note on Sources

The DAO Monthly Intelligence Summary and
Threat Analyses for the period October 1973 to
February 1974 were used as the basis for the first
part of this chapter, also Senior General Van Tien
Dung's account of the final offensive.

Operational data on the Tri Phap and Cambodian
battles came from DAO Saigon fact sheets, reports,
and weekly intelligence summaries, as well as from
J2/JGS weekly summaries. Gaps in the information
were filled in by reference to the author's notes and
to reports from offices of the U.S. Embassy, Saigon.
Strategic Raids

We have seen how the vigorous RVNAF attack into the Tri Phap in February had thwarted the NVA attempt to sever Saigon from the delta at My Tho and had prevented the NVA 5th Division from establishing a base from which to extend its operations southward into Dinh Tuong, and westward toward Saigon through Long An. Denied this approach, the NVA had concentrated between the Elephant's Foot and the Angel's Wing in Cambodia, threatening the district headquarters at Moc Hoa, but, more seriously, preparing to occupy the narrow strip of marshland between the Svay Rieng border and the Yam Co Dong River, the last real barrier between the Cambodian border and Saigon, only 30 miles away. NVA success would have strangled Tay Ninh Province, since the seizure of Go Dau Ha would end all land and water communications between Saigon and the province capital. The RVNAF had dealt with this threat by the daring armored thrust into Cambodia beginning in late April. Suffering severely, the NVA 5th Division was never again to seriously threaten the South Vietnamese in this sector.

But in spite of these encouraging operations, the North Vietnamese were pressing ahead with what they called their strategic raids campaign against the crucial defensive perimeter of bases north of Saigon. The first to fall was the relatively unimportant outpost of Chi Linh.

Chi Linh

In defense of Saigon, the 5th ARVN Division had its main base at Lai Khe, about 25 miles due north of the capital. This base, in fact, was the last strongly held position with an uninterrupted connection to Saigon. A few miles north, the 5th Division maintained a series of strongpoints, generally in the vicinity of the deserted hamlet of Bau Bang. North of Bau Bang, National Route 13 passed through dense jungle and was blocked by NVA units, usually the 9th NVA Division, the 7th NVA Division, or independent regiments of COSVN. The ARVN maintained a major garrison and artillery firebase at Chon Thanh, near the junction of National Route 13 (QL-13), which continued north to An Loc, and Local Route 13 (LTL-13), curving northeast to the ARVN base at Don Luan, about 25 miles away. About halfway to Don Luan, where Local Route 13 crossed the Song Be, the RVNAF had a small firebase called Chi Linh, manned by the 215th Regional Force Company with a platoon of two 105-mm. howitzers. (Map 14)

The 7th NVA Division attacked Chi Linh in the first week of April, quickly damaging the two howitzers and destroying the ammunition dump. On 5 April the 3d Battalion, 141st Regiment, with the division's 28th Sapper and 22d Artillery Battalion supporting, overran the base. By the 10th, about half of the defenders and 20 dependents had straggled into Don Luan or Chon Thanh. The rest, about 50 men, remained unaccounted for.

With the elimination of Chi Linh, the 7th NVA division enjoyed unimpeded movement along Local Route 13 between Chon Thanh and Don Luan, from north to south along the Song Be corridor, and had reduced the effectiveness of the defenses of Don Luan and Chon Thanh.

Tong Le Chon

Situated alongside the Saigon River on the Tay Ninh-Binh Long border, Tong Le Chon had been under siege since the cease-fire. By March 1974, the situation was becoming desperate for the defending 92d Ranger Battalion. Seriously wounded soldiers could be neither treated nor evacuated. Resupply was by parachute drop only. Morale in the camp was deteriorating under the strain of isolation and constant heavy bombardment. The cost of the continued defense of Tong Le Chon, as a symbol of gallantry, was exceeding its real worth. The human suffering was incalculable, but the expense in flying hours, ammunition, and other logistical support was great. As scarce resources became even more scarce, it was clearly time to reassess priorities and determine how best to end this intolerable situation.

As of 15 March, about 255 officers and men of the 92d were still alive in Tong Le Chon, and five of these were critically wounded. On 20 March Lt. Gen. Pham Quoc Thuan proposed to the Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, that one of three methods be selected to relieve the 92d Battalion. First, a division-sized operation could be launched from An Loc to secure a corridor through which the 92d could be withdrawn, replaced, or reinforced. Second, the commander of the NVA siege forces could be enjoined to permit the orderly and safe withdrawal of the 92d, surrendering the
camp to the enemy. Third, the 92d Battalion commander could be ordered to plan and execute a withdrawal—by exfiltrating in small groups—bringing out all his men, including the sick and wounded.

General Thuan realized at the outset that only the third plan was even remotely feasible, as General Vien and his staff no doubt understood. How could an ARVN division be expected to punch through from An Loc to Tong Le Chon when repeated efforts to attack even a few miles north of Lai Khe had failed? How could a division be assembled when the road to An Loc was held by the NVA, and even if this obstacle could be overcome, where would a division be found for the mission? The inescapable fact was that all ARVN divisions were heavily committed coping with other threats.

The second option was equally unrealistic, if for different reasons. There could be no "surrender." The political repercussions would be unmanageable for President Thieu, and the precedent could tend future such capitulations, some possibly with less than adequate justification.

Only the third option had any merit, but the decision could not be made at the JGS or at III Corps Headquarters. Matters of this import, even though essentially tactical, had to be settled at the presidential palace.

Meanwhile, as the problem was being studied, the situation at Tong Le Chon was becoming critical. The intensity of the enemy's artillery and mortar attacks increased greatly in the week of 17-24 March. In the Two-Party Joint Military Commission meetings in Saigon, South Vietnam's representative warned the Provisional Revolutionary Government that if the attacks on Tong Le Chon did not cease, the VNAF would launch devastating attacks against enemy bases in Tay Ninh and Binh Long. In fact, the VNAF did fly 30 or more sorties around Lo Go in Tay Ninh and around Tong Le Chon on the 23d. But the NVA bombardments...
continued. NVA artillery used against Tong Le Chon between 22 and 24 March included 122-mm. rockets, 122-mm. howitzers, 120-mm. mortars, and nearly 1,000 rounds from 82-mm. and 60-mm. mortars. Many of the bunkers and fighting positions were badly damaged. Enemy sappers attempted to break through the defensive wire on the night of 21 and 22 March but were driven off. On the 21st, the commander of the 92d Battalion, Lt. Col. Le Van Ngon (who had been promoted ahead of schedule in recognition of his courageous leadership at Tong Le Chon), sent a message to Colonel Nguyen Thanh Chuan, commander of the 3d Ranger Command at An Loc. Colonel Ngon said, in effect, get us some support or destroy this camp. He asked for more air strikes, although it was already apparent that the VNAF could not materially change the situation. He asked for a ground relief column, but he probably knew as well as did Colonel Chuan that this could not succeed. In emotional desperation, he asked for air strikes on his own camp as the only feasible alternative to surrender, which he said he and his men would never do.

Colonel Chuan relayed this urgent message to General Thuan. General Thuan replied that he had received no response from the JGS to his earlier proposals for evacuation or relief. By this time, the survivors at Tong Le Chon included 254 Rangers, 4 artillerymen, 7 stranded helicopter crewmen, and 12 field laborers. Of this force, 10 were seriously wounded and 40 slightly wounded. Sappers on the nights of the 24, 25, and 26 March penetrated three of seven rings of barbed wire before being forced to withdraw.

The unrelenting bombardment and repeated sapper attacks continued through the month and into April. Still no initiatives or decisions emanated from the presidential palace, III Corps, or 3d Ranger Command to ameliorate the suffering or offer hope to the defenders of Tong Le Chon. While nearly 1,000 rounds of mortar and artillery fire were falling on the base the night of 11 April, Headquarters, III Corps, received a final request from Colonel Ngon: give us authority to abandon the camp. Whether General Thuan conferred with General Vien or President Thieu is not known, but at 2330 that night he ordered Colonel Ngon to defend at all costs.

Shortly after midnight, the defenders of Tong Le Chon reported that sensitive papers were being burned. Later they requested that VNAF stop dropping flares over the camp because they were moving out. Radio contact with the Rangers was broken until 0900 on 12 April, when a radio operator outside the camp responded to a call. By that time the march to An Loc, some 10 miles northeast through the jungle and enemy lines, had started. The ranks of the wounded had swollen by 14 during the night's action, and 35 more were wounded during the withdrawal. All wounded were brought out; those who could not walk were carried. In the firefight during the withdrawal four more Rangers were killed, but even these bodies were carried on to An Loc.

It was a remarkable feat of courage and leadership to bring a group of 277 men, many of whom were wounded, out of an encircled position, and arrive inside friendly lines with 268. In fact, the outstanding success of the operation led many observers, Vietnamese and Americans alike, to suspect that the enemy had somehow collaborated in the withdrawal. Although possible, this is quite unlikely. Not only would the arrangement have had to be approved at a high echelon, but also the North Vietnamese would certainly have exploited the propaganda value of such an event. Furthermore, an eyewitness report on the NVA occupation of the camp strongly refuted such speculation.

According to a NVA participant, following an intensive artillery preparation, a ground attack of infantry and tanks had forced the Rangers to give up the position, but the defenses were so heavily mined that the NVA was unable to get through the barriers until the 13th. The Communists found that all equipment had been destroyed or removed and all wounded had been carried out. Only two Ranger bodies were found, and only one ARVN Ranger was captured. This NVA soldier ended his report with the comment that the attacking NVA infantry had been ordered to block the withdrawal but had disobeyed the order for fear of the RVNAF air and artillery fire, and that the discipline displayed by the ARVN 92d Ranger Battalion was extremely high, much higher than that found in NVA or VC main forces.

Although the record was clear that Colonel Ngon had disobeyed orders by withdrawing, he was not punished, but the battalion was dissolved and its men sequestered from the press. The official South Vietnamese position was that the camp had been overrun in clear violation of the cease-fire, and appropriate protests were made to the ICCS and the Two-Party Joint Military Commission. On 13 April, VNAF flew 19 sorties against what remained of the camp. The last of the survivors entered the An Loc perimeter on 15 April. The 92d ARVN Ranger Battalion had clearly distinguished itself by enduring the longest siege of the war and by conducting a remarkable withdrawal under fire.

With Tong Le Chon obliterated, the NVA had unrestricted use of its important east-west line of communication between Tay Ninh and Binh Long and controlled the Saigon River corridor from its source to Dau Tieng.
Binh Duong

In Binh Duong, the NVAs strategic raids campaign began on 16 May with a coordinated attack by the 7th and 9th NV A Divisions on Phu Giao and Ben Cat. ARVN 25th Division operations in Hau Nghia, Tay Ninh, and Cambodia had, by 10 May, significantly diminished the threat of the NVAs 5th Infantry Division to the western approaches to Saigon, but the NVAs 7th and 9th Divisions, in the jungles and plantations north of the capital, were in a fighting form. Replacements had been received, trained, and integrated into the force; supplies had been stockpiled and moved into forward positions; and the divisions had received their orders.

The 7th NVAs Division forces that had taken Chi Linh were still responsible for the zone of operations generally on the east side of National Route 13 (QL-13). Their main objective in the imminent campaign was the bridge at Phu Giao, where interprovincial Route 1A (LTL-1A) spanned the Song Be. Their capture of this bridge, and its controlling terrain, would isolate the 5th ARVN Divisions regimental base at Phuoc Vinh and provide the forward positions needed for subsequent attacks toward Phu Cuong, the Binh Duong provincial capital, and Bien Hoa with its huge air base and logistical concentrations.

The 9th NVAs Division was west of National Route 13, concentrating in the old secret zone, the Long Nguyen, north of the famous Iron Triangle. From here its artillery regularly bombarded the ARVN 5th Division base at Lai Khe, but its objectives in this May campaign were farther south. It would strike into the Iron Triangle, try to sever National Route 13 at the district seat of Ben Cat, and open the Saigon River corridor nearly as far south as Phu Hoa. By accomplishing this latter objective, it could position artillery to reach Tan Son Nhat Air Base and support operations against the ARVN 25th Division at Cu Chi. By cutting National Route 13 at Ben Cat, it would isolate the ARVN base at Lai Khe and, in coordination with the 7th NVAs Division, threaten Phu Cuong and eventually Saigon.

A glance at the map shows the strategic location of the Iron Triangle. Bounded on the north by the jungle and overgrown rubber plantations of the Long Nguyen, it was enclosed on the west by the Saigon River and on the east by the smaller but formidable obstacle of the Thi Thinh River. The Thi Thinh joined the Saigon River near Phu Hoa, at the southern apex of the Triangle, 7 miles from Phu Cuong. Phu Cuong itself, the capital of Binh Duong Province, was an important industrial and farming center and contained the ARVN Engineer School. It was linked by a major highway with the large ARVN base at Phu Loi (called Lam Son) and, farther east, with Bien Hoa. Lying as it did in the center of the Saigon River corridor, at the junction of Routes 13 and 1A, and only 10 miles from the outskirts of Saigon, Phu Cuong was vital to the defense of Saigon.

The terrain within the Iron Triangle was flat, almost featureless, and covered by dense brush and undergrowth. The clearings, especially in the northern part, were thick with elephant grass, higher than a man's head. The surface was scarred by countless bomb and shell craters so that vehicular movement off the narrow, rough dirt roads was nearly impossible. Even tracked vehicles had difficulty. A vast network of tunnels and trenches, most of them caved-in and abandoned, laced this ground that had been the scene of battles since the early days of the second Indochina war.

A weak string of three ARVN outposts protected the northern edge of the Triangle, from Rach Bap on the west, close by the Saigon River, along local Route 7 (TL-7B) to An Dien on the Thi Thinh River opposite Ben Cat. Each of these outposts, including Base 82, which was midway between Rach Bap and An Dien, was manned by a company of the 321st RF Battalion. Another country road passed by the Rach Bap outpost; local Route 14 (LTL-14) which generally paralleled the Saigon River from Tri Tam, through Rach Bap, and veered to the southeast through the Triangle, crossing the Thi Thinh River before it joined Highway 13 (QL-13) north of Phu Cuong. The NVAs had blown the bridge on Route 14 over the Thi Thinh a few weeks earlier, but the stream could be spanned by pontoon sections. About midway between Rach Bap and the Thi Thinh crossing of Route 14, the ARVN had another small firebase. (Map 5)

Frequent sweeps and some semi-fixed defensive positions north of Cu Chi manned by the ARVN 25th Division and Hau Nghia Regional Forces screened the western flank of the Triangle, but enemy resistance in the Ho Bo woods, opposite Rach Bap, and the formidable obstacle of the Saigon River, as well as a lack of resources, limited the influence that the 25th could exert on the situation within the Triangle.

The ARVN was strong with infantry, armor, and mutually supporting fire bases and outposts in Ben Cat District east of the Thi Thinh boundary of the Triangle, but only one bridge, a weak span, connected the district town and the Triangle hamlet of An Dien.

Such was the situation on the eve of the initiation of the strategic raids campaign in western Binh Duong Province. As mentioned earlier, this was a coordinated attack, with the 9th NVAs Division conducting the main effort in the west, while the 7th NVAs attacked in the east against ARVN posi-
tions along Highway 1A near Phu Giao. The distances between the two thrusts were too great, however, to provide for mutual support, and the ARVN III Corps was able to deal with them as separate operations. For these reasons, although they occurred simultaneously and demanded the concurrent attention of the III Corps commander and his staff, they can best be described sequentially, beginning first with the Iron Triangle attack of the 9th NVA Division.
The Iron Triangle Attack

The attack began with heavy artillery, rocket, and mortar concentrations falling on Rach Bap, Base 82, and An Dien on the morning of 16 May. The RF company at Base 82 abandoned its bunkers, many of which had collapsed under the weight of the bombardment, late that afternoon. Rach Bap held out until about 0300 the following morning, its surviving defenders withdrawing in the direction of An Dien. The fighting was fierce in An Dien until about 0300 the following morning, its many of which had collapsed under the weight of the bombardment, late that afternoon. Rach Bap held out until about 0300 the following morning, its surviving defenders withdrawing in the direction of An Dien. The fighting was fierce in An Dien, which was moving south from Rach Rap.

Two infantry regiments of the 9th NVA Division, with about ten T-54 and PT-76 tanks, were employed against the dispersed 321st RF Battalion. The 272d Regiment overran Rach Bap and continued the attack south into the Triangle along Route 14, while the 95C Regiment attacked Base 82 and An Dien. The 271st Regiment was held in reserve.

The RVNAF at Ben Cat were unable to counterattack the NVA immediately at An Dien because the bridgehead held by the RF was too shallow to protect the crossing of any large forces, but General Thuan quickly began reinforcing Ben Cat. Task Force 318 arrived in Ben Cat District on the afternoon of the 16th and on the 17th began reinforcing the RF holding the bridge and moving against the enemy's blocking positions west of the bridgehead.

The weakness of the ARVN bridgehead and the strength of the enemy positions in An Dien, which included antitank guns and tanks, made it impractical to send any armor of the 318th across the An Dien bridge at this time.

Meanwhile, the 322d Task Force moved from Tay Ninh Province to Phu Cuong and was ordered to prepare to attack into the Triangle along Route 14 (LTL-14) in order to oppose the 272d Regiment, which was moving south from Rach Rap.

VNAF aerial observers and photography on 17 May revealed two T-54 tanks inside Base 82, which VNAF fighter-bombers destroyed the next day, and four more in the An Dien base. Initial negative reactions at ARVN III Corps Headquarters to the seemingly hasty, if not unwarranted, withdrawal of the RF companies from their positions softened somewhat when the size and composition of the enemy force was revealed.

Six months would pass before the situation existing before 16 May would be restored along the northern edge of the Iron Triangle. The campaign was never officially divided as such, but major operations fell into four distinct phases. In the first, 16-17 May, the NVA had captured the northern edge of the Triangle and launched a major column into the center of this strategic approach to Phu Cuong. In the second phase, 18 May to 5 June, the ARVN counterattacked and regained control of An Dien. Four months later, on 4 October, ARVN troops concluded the third phase by reoccupying the devastated wasteland that was once Base 82. Finally, on 20 November ARVN infantry reentered Rach Bap, concluding the last phase of the 1974 Iron Triangle campaign.

An Dien Counterattack

General Thuan greatly underestimated the strength and tenacity with which the 9th NVA Division would defend An Dien, although he had accurate intelligence concerning the size, composition, and location of the enemy. His initial plans for the second phase, which proved unrealistic, called for virtually simultaneous recapture of the three lost bases by about 22 May. Perhaps the remarkable successes his corps troops had in repulsing the NVA 7th Division attacks on the Phu Ciao front had given him this unwarranted over-confidence.

Except for the few ARVN infantry and engineers that were thrown across the Thi Thinh River to reinforce the An Dien bridgehead, the first major ARVN unit to move into the Triangle was a battalion of the 43d Infantry, 18th ARVN Division, which crossed on Route 14 north of Phu Cuong. Shortly reinforced by the rest of the regiment, this element, followed by the 322d Armored Task Force, was to attack Rach Bap and Base 82. Meanwhile, the 318th Task Force would cross the An Dien Bridge, pass through An Dien, and proceed to Base 82. Three Ranger battalions attacking south out of Lai Khe were to strike Base 82 from the north. None of this worked as planned. The 43d Infantry became stalled after advancing only four or five kilometers north. Then, the tracked vehicles of the 322d Task Force found the going extremely slow in the dense brush and cratered terrain. General Thuan, concerned lest this armored force become bogged down and have a bridge blown behind it, ordered its withdrawal. He discovered, meanwhile, that the An Dien bridge had been seriously weakened by enemy artillery (including AT-3 missiles) and would not support the tanks of the 318th Task Force. Under enemy observation and, sporadically, heavy mortar and artillery fire, ARVN combat engineers attempted to repair the bridge. Casualties mounted, and the work progressed very slowly. About the same time, the 7th Ranger Group, with three battalions, moved southwest out of Lai Khe, crossed the Thi Thinh River and advanced on Base 82. The Rangers were immediately opposed in the
thick jungle and rubber plantation by the dug-in troops of the NVA 9th Division; and their attack stalled well short of the objective.

While III Corps was experiencing great difficulty getting moving, it was pounding An Dien with heavy artillery fire. The North Vietnamese responded in kind against ARVN batteries and the stalled Ranger and infantry columns and sent sappers into an RF command post just south of Ben Cat, where they destroyed a 105-mm. howitzer and routed most of the small garrison.

The VNAF, meanwhile, gave only limited support. NVA antiaircraft artillery and SA-7 defenses were plentiful in the area, forcing VNAF aircraft to high altitudes. On 24 May, an armored cavalry squadron of the 25th ARVN Division launched a diversionary attack from Go Dau Ha east toward the Boi Loi Woods. General Thuan's purpose was to cause enough of a threat here to prevent the 9th NVA Division from committing its reserve, the 271st Regiment, against either the 318th or the 322d Task Forces. By the 25th, the armored cavalry squadron had passed Suoi Cau without encountering any resistance, and another supporting maneuver began with two battalions of the 50th Infantry, ARVN 25th Division, moving north from Phu Hoa along the west bank of the Saigon River.

On 25 May, General Thuan met with the commander of the 18th ARVN Division, Brig. Gen. Le Minh Dao, and with the commander of the 3d Armored Brigade, Brig. Gen. Tran Quang Khoi, to coordinate the following morning's attack. At that time, the 43d Regiment was about seven kilometers south of An Dien, about to attack north, while the 3d Armored Brigade was preparing to send a cavalry squadron and a Ranger battalion across the An Dien bridge.

Although the enemy's heavy mortar and artillery fire had so weakened the bridge at An Dien that the cavalry could not follow the Rangers, by nightfall the 64th Ranger Battalion was dug in on the eastern edge of An Dien Village. The 43d Regiment was again ordered to resume the attack north, and the 7th Ranger Group, coming down from Lai Khe, was ordered to take Base 82 by night attack on 27 May. Because no progress was made General Thuan on 28 May decided to try a fresh approach. First, he turned the operation over to General Dao, told him to move his 52d Regiment over from Phu Giao, gave him operational command of the 7th Ranger Group, which was still north of Base 82, and attached to Dao's 18th Division a reinforced squadron of the 3d Armored Brigade. Since it would take two days to relieve the 52d Regiment on the Phu Giao front and move it into position at Ben Cat, the new operation was scheduled for 30 May. Delays in the relief and movement forced General Dao to set the date ahead to 1 June.

With the Rangers still holding the shallow bridgehead opposite Ben Cat and the 43d Regiment making slow progress attacking the dug-in 272d NVA Regiment south of An Dien, General Dao sent the 2d Battalion, 52d Regiment, across the Thi Thinh River on an assault bridge south of Ben Cat on 1 June. Once across, it turned north to attack the defenses of the 95C NVA Regiment in An Dien. Meanwhile, the reconnaissance company and an infantry company from the 18th Division crossed the An Dien bridge and advanced toward the village. Casualties on both sides were heavy that day in An Dien as the commander of the ARVN 52d Regiment committed his 1st Battalion behind the 2d. The 9th NVA Division responded by assaulting the ARVN infantry that night with infantry and at least 10 tanks. The two battalions of the 52d held their positions and were reinforced by the 3d Battalion the next afternoon. South of An Dien, meanwhile, ARVN combat engineers were clearing the road past the An Dien bridge. Working at night with flashlights to avoid enemy observation and fire, they removed 38 antitank mines from the route of advance.

Weakened by casualties, the 52d Infantry made very little progress on 2 and 3 June, and the 43d Regiment was still being blocked by the NVA 272d Regiment. General Dao then ordered his 48th Infantry across the Thi Thinh south of Ben Cat, to pass through the 52d and take An Dien. While the NVA artillery continued to pound ARVN positions, two battalions of the 48th crossed into the Iron Triangle on the night of 2-3 June.

The fighting at An Dien was especially fierce on 3 June as the NVA used tanks against ARVN infantry. Armed with light antitank weapons, ARVN infantry knocked out at least four enemy tanks in the final day of the battle. On 4 June, troops of the 18th ARVN Division finally entered An Dien, and on the 5th overran the last position of the NVA's 95C Regiment, which had since been reinforced by elements of the 9th NVA Division's 271st Regiment. On the morning of the 5th, two battalions of the 48th and two of the 52d were holding An Dien, facing a counterattack. One Ranger battalion was in a blocking position north of the destroyed village, while another secured the An Dien bridge. The 43d Regiment was still stalled by the NVA's 272d Regiment's defenses south of An Dien. The 7th Ranger Group had not been able to advance toward Base 82 from the north, and a new major ARVN attack would be required to advance past the positions held in and around An Dien.

NVA soldiers captured by the 18th ARVN Division in An Dien told of horrendous losses in the three battalions—the 7th, 8th, and 9th—of the 95C Regiment. Fourteen surviving members of the 9th Battalion were captured when the last stronghold
felled on 5 June. They said that casualties in the 8th and 9th Battalions between 16 May and 4 June were 65 percent, that a company of the 7th Battalion had only one man left, that a company of the 8th Battalion was totally destroyed, and that the 9th Battalion lost two complete companies. These accounts were confirmed by the large number of bodies left on the battlefield and by the quantity of weapons and equipment captured. ARVN losses were substantial, but none of its units were decimated as were those of the 9th NVA Division. Well over 100 ARVN soldiers had been killed in action, and the hospitals held over 200 wounded from An Dien, while 200 more suffered light wounds not requiring evacuation.

The expected NVA counterattack came on the night of 5-6 June as two battalions of the 271st Regiment, 9th NVA Division, supported by up to 14 tanks, attacked from two directions. The ARVN 18th Division held and its infantrymen knocked out 5 tanks and damaged 5 others.

The second phase of the Iron Triangle campaign was over with the recapture of An Dien, and General Thuan was anxious to get the attack moving again toward Base 82 and Rach Bap. Although the An Dien bridge would soon be in condition to carry the tanks of the 318th Task Force—one company of armored personnel carriers had already crossed into An Dien—a knocked-out T-54 tank blocked the narrow road from the bridge into An Dien. Swampy ground on each side prevented bypassing the tank, and it had to be blown off the road with demolitions. ARVN combat engineers were laboring at this task while infantrymen of the 18th Division were holding the perimeter around An Dien.

**Base 82**

The first of several attempts during the third phase to retake Base 82 began on 7 June 1974 when the 318th Task Force finally brought its tanks across the Thi Thinh River and passed through the 18th Division position in An Dien. While the 52d Infantry of the 18th Division remained in reserve holding the An Dien perimeter, two battalions of the 48th Infantry moved south and west to protect the southern flank of Task Force 318 as it attacked along Route 7 (TL-7B) toward Base 82. To the south, the 315th Task Force 43d Regiment maintained contact with the NVA 272d Regiment. Meanwhile, the 9th NVA Division had withdrawn the remnants of the 95C Regiment from action and placed its 271st Regiment at Base 82, where it prepared deep, mutually supporting defensive positions. Clearly indicating its resolve to conduct a determined defense along Route 7 in the Iron Triangle, COSVN sent the 141st Regiment of the 7th NVA Division south from its position along Highway 13, north of Lai Khe, to reinforce the 9th Division north of Base 82. The 9th Division meanwhile began shifting the 272d Regiment north from the southern part of the Iron Triangle to assist in the defense of Base 82 and Rach Bap.

The wet summer monsoon had arrived in Binh Duong Province. Rains and low cloud cover further reduced the effectiveness of VNAF's support of the attack. A dense rubber plantation northwest of Base 82 provided excellent concealment for supporting defensive positions and observation of local Route 7, the only avenue of approach available for ARVN armor. Dense brush covered the southern approaches to the base and concealed more enemy supporting and reserve positions. The only fairly open terrain was on either side of Route 7 where high grass offered no concealment to the ARVN column but reduced the visibility of ARVN tanks and infantry to a few meters. Furthermore, this approach was under the observed fire of the 9th NVA Division's supporting artillery, which included 120-mm. mortars, 122-mm. howitzers, 105-mm. howitzers, and 85-mm. field guns. Infantry mortars, 82-mm. and 61-mm., added to the indirect fire, and, in addition to the B-41 antitank grenade launchers carried in great numbers by the NVA infantry, NVA soldiers were amply equipped with the new Soviet 82-mm. recoilless gun, a superb antiarmor weapon.

By the evening of 8 June, Task Force 318 reached its first objective, Hill 225, about 1,000 meters short of Base 82. There it fought a battalion of the NVA 271st Infantry, killing 30 and capturing 10 while taking light casualties. The prospects seemed bright for recapturing Base 82 by the following day, and General Thuan told General Dao of the 18th ARVN Division that Rach Bap should be taken by 15 June. But on 10 June Task Force 318, advancing very slowly in two columns, one north of Route 7 and one south, was struck by a battalion of the NVA 271st Infantry supported by four tanks and a heavy concentration of mortar, howitzer, and rocket fire. Four of Task Force 318's tanks and one of its personnel carriers were knocked out but personnel losses were light. By nightfall only 200 meters had been gained, the enemy's minefields and 82-mm. recoilless guns having stopped the task force 800 meters short of Base 82.

No progress was made on 11 June, but ARVN artillery and VNAF pounded the base. Antiaircraft fire was intense and kept the VNAF fighter-bombers above their most effective attack altitudes. Meanwhile, General Thuan, determined to get the attack moving again, directed Brig. Gen. Khoi, commander of the 3d Armored Brigade, to assemble the 315th Task Force at Ben Cat and send it across the Thi Thinh to reinforce the attack. The 315th was to move southwest and attack Base 82 from the south, while the 318th continued its frontal assault.
Farther south, another change was taking place. Detecting that all but one of the NVA's 272d Regiment's battalions had moved north toward Route 7, General Dao left only one of his 43d Infantry battalions in the Phu Thu area, placing the balance of the regiment in reserve.

By noon on 12 June, the 315th Task Force had reached a position about 1,600 meters southeast of Base 82. At this point, General Dao changed the original concept of a two-pronged attack from the east and south. As soon as the 315th was ready to attack, he would withdraw the 318th to defend the eastern approaches to Ben Cat that had been weakened by the commitment of the 315th against Base 82.

Thick brush, rough terrain, and accurate enemy artillery fire prevented the 315th from making any gains on 13 June. In fact, as the 318th withdrew from contact, it left positions much closer to the objective than those reached by the 315th.

In another change in plans, General Dao proposed to General Thuan that two battalions each from the 43d and 52d Regiments take over the attack role, while the 315th remained in its defensive perimeter southeast of Base 82. The infantry battalions would move into the rubber plantation and attack from the north. General Thuan agreed and left for JGS headquarters to ask for a new ammunition allocation for the attack. He returned to his headquarters in ill humor, for General Khuyen, the RVNAF Chief of Logistics, was unable to satisfy this request.

By 15 June, the two leading ARVN 43d Infantry battalions, one of which was attempting to swing north of Base 82 from An Dien, had made very little headway against strong resistance and heavy enemy artillery fire. In contacts south of Route 7 on the 17th, prisoners of war were taken from the 272d Regiment, soldiers who had recently arrived in South Vietnam and had been assigned to the 272d for only three days before their capture. ARVN casualties continued to mount, troops were desperately fatigued, artillery support was too severely rationed, and the weather all but eliminated effective air support. On 21 June, General Thuan ordered a halt in the attempt to take Base 82, while a new approach, better supported by artillery fire, could be devised. Consideration was also given to replacing the 18th Division, whose troops had been in heavy combat for a month, with the 5th Division.

Instead of relieving the 18th, General Thuan decided to try his armor again. Holding the infantry in position, he sent the 318th and 322d Task Forces back into the Triangle, one north of Route 7, the other generally along the road. The enemy's antitank defenses, primarily employing the 82-mm. recoilless gun, stopped the attack once again, destroying 13 personnel carriers and 11 M-48 tanks between 27 June and 1 July, even though ARVN artillery and the VNAF supported the attack with 43,000 rounds and 250 sorties. The tired infantrymen of the 43d Regiment tried once again to take Base 82 from the south on 1 July but got nowhere.

On 2 July, General Thuan finally decided to relieve the 18th Division and replace it with the 5th. The armored task forces would be withdrawn for rest and refitting. General Thuan allowed his commanders ten days to complete the relief; he wanted it done gradually and expertly so that constant pressure could be maintained against the enemy. In order not to weaken the 5th Division's defenses north of Lai Khe, elements of the 18th Division's 52d Regiment, which had seen little action, and two battalions of the 25th Division's 50th Infantry were attached to the 5th Division in the Iron Triangle. The relief was accomplished on schedule, and a relative calm settled over the Base 82 battleground.

The 9th NVA Division also made adjustments during the last part of June and the first weeks of July. While the 272d Regiment retained defensive positions in the southern part of the Iron Triangle, the 95C Regiment, refitted and with fresh replacements, returned to the Base 82 area and assumed responsibility for its defense. The third regiment of the 9th NVA Division, the 271st, held defensive positions in the Base 82 area, primarily to the north and northeast. Meanwhile, the 141st Regiment of the 7th NVA Division returned to its normal area of operations north of Lai Khe, and artillery support for the 9th NVA Division was assigned to the 42d NVA Artillery Regiment. The 75th NVA Artillery Regiment moved from the Ben Cat area to support the 7th NVA Division east of Route 13.

The 5th ARVN Division made no determined effort during July or August to alter the status quo. The NVA, however, pulled the 95C Regiment out of Base 82 and replaced it with the 141st Regiment of the 7th NVA Division, in time to meet the next concerted ARVN effort to take Base 82.

By autumn the 8th Infantry, 5th ARVN Division, had been selected to try to plant South Vietnam's red and yellow banner on Base 82, having replaced its sister regiment, the 7th, in the Iron Triangle. Prior to an attack scheduled for 7 September, ARVN reconnaissance patrols had successfully reached the base's perimeter. The 8th Regiment formed a task force around its 1st and 2d Battalions, reinforced by the 5th Division Reconnaissance Company and a small armored troop with three M-41 tanks, three M-48 tanks, and three armored personnel carriers. The 1st Battalion advanced south of Route 7, while the 2d Battalion, with the reconnaissance company and the armored troops, advanced on an axis north of the road. Unopposed and moving quickly the two battalions reached the outer defenses of Base 82 in the early morning of 7...
September but could go no further that day. Faced with barbed wire and mines and under fire from the front and flanks, the 8th Infantry dug in. As the rain of enemy shells continued, much of it heavy 120-mm. Soviet mortars, the 8th kept digging and improving fighting positions with logs overhead.

On 8 September, the NVA shelling increased, and at 1600 it began to rain, ending all VNAF aerial observation and air support for the 8th Infantry. As the rain increased, so did the enemy bombardment, 1600 rounds falling in one hour, and the battlefield was obscured in smoke. ARVN infantry could hear the approach of tanks. One column of T-54’s came out of the rubber plantation and forest to the north, and another line of six advanced from the south. The three ARVN M-48’s withdrew, and at 1800 hours, nearly caught in a double envelopment, the 8th Infantry fell back, first about 300 meters where the leaders attempted to establish a new line, then 300 meters farther back where the troops of the 8th rallied and held on the western slope of Hill 25.

With victory seemingly so close, General Thuan was deeply disappointed by the rout of the 8th Regiment, and his disappointment changed to anger when he learned of the relatively light casualties suffered by the 8th: 6 killed, 29 missing, and 67 wounded. But even if the 8th Infantry leaders on the scene could have held their troops in their exposed positions in front of Base 82, the regiment probably could not have survived the NVA counterattack. In any case, General Thuan ordered an immediate investigation of the circumstances of the 8th Infantry’s failure and subsequently dismissed the regimental commander. On 11 September, the 8th Infantry was replaced in the Iron Triangle by the 9th, and the final phase of the fight to retake Base 82 was about to begin.

All three battalions of the 9th Infantry moved into position on the west slope of Hill 25. Combat losses since the start of the NVA offensive in May, combined with the slow flow of the replacements into the regiment, had reduced battalion strength to under 300. Between 12 and 18 September, the 9th concentrated on reconnaissance, planning, and improvement of positions. As the ARVN 9th Regiment prepared for the attack, the NVA was beginning to execute another relief in the Ben Cat battlefield. The 141st Regiment of the 7th NVA Division made preparations to leave the Base 82 area and turn over its defense once again to the 95C Regiment of the 9th NVA Division.

With the 2d Armored Cavalry Squadron protecting the right (north) flank, and two Ranger battalions protecting the left, the 9th ARVN Infantry Regiment began its attack toward Base 82. The two attacking battalions, the 3d Battalion on the right, north of Route 7, and the 2d on the left, crossed the line of departure on Hill 25 on 19 September. Moving slowly, with excellent reconnaissance and effective artillery support, the ARVN infantrymen methodically eliminated, one by one, the enemy’s mutually supporting bunkers that lay in a dense pattern all along the route of advance. Although the NVA infantrymen defended tenaciously and their artillery support was heavy and accurate, they gradually gave ground. On 29 September, the 1st Battalion relieved the weary 3d Battalion, and the relentless attack continued. On 2 October, the 2d Battalion, 46th ARVN Infantry, 25th Division, was committed to reinforce the 2d Battalion of the 9th Infantry. Before midnight on 3 October, as enemy artillery and mortars were still firing heavy barrages, a 12-man assault team from the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry, attempted to breach the barbed wire and scale the earthen wall. An antipersonnel mine detonated, disclosing the team’s position, and heavy fire from the base pinned it down. Very early the next morning, the NVA infantry counterattacked, forcing the withdrawal of the assault team. But it became apparent to the ARVN commander on the ground that victory was within grasp. A 100-round concentration of 155-mm. howitzer fire, which he requested, had the desired effect: enemy resistance and return fire was notably diminished by 1300, and a half hour later NVA infantrymen were seen climbing out of their crumbling fortress and running to the rear. At 1500 on 4 October the 1st Battalion, 9th Regiment, raised South Vietnam’s flag over Base 82, ending a bitter four-month struggle and the third phase of the Iron Triangle campaign.

Return to Rach Bap

Calm returned to the Iron Triangle as the remnants of the 95C and 272d NVA Regiments withdrew from Base 82. For three days, even the NVA artillery was silent. Meanwhile, far to the north of the Ben Cat battleground and in the COSVN rear area, a significant event was taking place. Recognizing the need to plan and coordinate the operations of multi-divisional forces, COSVN organized a corps headquarters in the Tay Ninh-Binh Long region and designated it the 301st Corps. This corps would soon direct the combat operations of the 7th and 9th NVA Divisions, separate regiments, and additional formations already en route from North Vietnam.

After the long and costly victory at Base 82, General Thuan decided to rest the tired troops of the 5th ARVN Division and turned his attention to sending his 25th Division to clear out the enemy bases in the Ho Bo area west of the Iron Triangle. The ARVN defenses around An Dien and Base 82 were taken over by Regional Forces and Rangers. For what became the fourth phase of the campaign, III Corps Headquarters worked on plans to resume
the attack to retake Rach Bap, the last of the three outposts still remaining in enemy hands. General Thuan also recognized the need to clean the enemy out of the southern part of the Iron Triangle, around Phu Thu, and a plan encompassing Rach Bap, Phu Thu, and the Phu Hoa area west of the Iron Triangle began to take shape. But on 30 October, before the execution of the plan, President Thieu relieved General Thuan of command of Military Region 3 and III Corps and replaced him with Lt. Gen. Du Quoc Dong. Other important command changes took place on the same day. The II Corps Commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, was replaced by Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, and Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khoa Nam became the new commander of IV Corps, in place of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi. Only I Corps was untouched, where Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong retained command.

General Dong immediately surveyed the situation in the Iron Triangle and reviewed the plan of his predecessor, which as modified became operation Quyet Thang 18/24 (Operation Will to Victory). Battalions from all three divisions of the corps were committed; D-Day was 14 November. The 9th Infantry of the 5th ARVN Division, the victors of Base 82, started from An Dien and marched west, along Route 7, past Base 82 toward Rach Bap. The 48th and 52d Regiments of the 18th Division crossed the Thi Thinh River south of Ben Cat and entered the Iron Triangle and attacked west toward the Saigon River. Elements of the 50th ARVN Infantry, 25th Division, were already in this area. Meanwhile, the 46th ARVN Infantry and one battalion of the 50th moved into the plantations north of Phu Hoa District Town to prevent enemy infiltration across the Saigon River.

Along Route 7, the 9th ARVN Infantry advanced without incident until 19 November when sharp fighting west of Base 82 resulted in over 40 ARVN soldiers wounded. The enemy withdrew leaving 14 dead and many weapons and radios behind. The next morning, Reconnaissance Company, 9th Infantry, entered Rach Bap unopposed. The Iron Triangle campaign was virtually over, although mopping-up operations continued in the south along Route 14 until 24 November. Measured against the costs and violence of the earlier phases of the campaign, this final chapter was anticlimactic. Casualties on both sides were light, and contacts were few and of short duration. The NVA had given up its last foothold in the Iron Triangle with only token resistance in order to replace losses, reorganize, re-equip, and retrain the main forces of the new 301st Corps for the decisive battles to come.
artillery and air strikes in the bridge area. By 23 May, despite reinforcement of the 165th NVA Regiment by a battalion of its sister regiment, the 141st, the ARVN tank and infantry counterattack had cleared the road to the bridge and beyond to Phuoc Vinh. Although the 7th NVA Division maintained its 165th and 209th Regiments in the Phu Giao area for the rest of the summer, the strategic raids campaign in eastern Binh Duong Province was a failure, essentially over a week after it began, and the ARVN successfully countered the sporadic attacks the enemy continued to make along Route 1A in the Phu Giao area.

Bien Hoa

The strategic raids campaign in Bien Hoa Province differed from that in Binh Duong, principally because the main objective, the sprawling air and logistical base at Bien Hoa, was beyond the reach of large NVA formations. But even if a main-force regiment could have penetrated the Bien Hoa defenses, it would most likely have been cut off, surrounded, and destroyed. The attacks in Bien Hoa were therefore stand-off artillery bombardments, sapper raids, and small-scale infantry assaults against outposts.

The first large attack of the summer came on 3 June. From launching sites north of the air base, the NVA artillery launched at least 40 122-mm. Soviet rockets. Most of them struck inside the base, where they did minor damage to runways and destroyed 500 napalm cannisters, but the rest exploded in hamlets surrounding the base, killing and wounding civilians. Surprisingly, no aircraft were damaged. The NVA artillery struck again early on 10 August with 25 rockets. Of these, seven hit the F-5A storage area, slightly damaging a few airplanes. Most of the rest fell on civilian communities causing light casualties. The bombardment continued sporadically throughout the morning and resumed the next day, but no significant casualties or damage resulted.

The 10 August rocketing of Bien Hoa signalled the beginning of the NVA’s attack on the outposts along the north bank of the great Dong Nai River in Tan Uyen District north of the air base. Employing primarily the 165th Infantry Regiment, the 7th NVA Division attacked RF-manned outposts intended to prevent the enemy’s crossing of the Dong Nai and deny him easy access to areas from which he could launch rockets against Bien Hoa.

The first outpost to fall, Ho Da, west of Tan Uyen District Town, was overrun on the night of 9 August but was recovered by the ARVN 52d Infantry five days later. On the 10th, a battalion of the 165th NVA Infantry captured Dat Cuoc outpost at the big bend in the Dong Nai east of Tan Uyen. The enemy managed to hold on to this outpost until 24 August, when the 346th RF Battalion recaptured it.

East of Dat Cuoc on the river north of Thai Hung village, was the Ba Cam outpost, manned by the 316th RF Battalion. In successive attacks, the 316th was driven out of its defenses by a battalion of the 165th NVA Infantry, heavily supported by artillery. By 13 August, the 316th had withdrawn to Thai Hung, virtually destroyed by NVA and ARVN artillery. By the end of the month, ARVN counterattacks had recovered all lost positions north of the Dong Nai, the enemy having suffered heavy casualties during the brief campaign.

The only other incident of note in the Bien Hoa area during 1974 was the NVA sapper attack on 21 October against the Hoa An bridge over the Dong Nai linking Bien Hoa with Saigon. This bridge, the most important of three across the Dong Nai northeast of Saigon, was 800 meters of reinforced concrete. By floating two rafts loaded with explosive downstream so that the rope that joined them wrapped around a bridge pillar, the water-sappers were able to accomplish their mission even though all of them were killed in the river by ARVN sentries before the explosion, which knocked down two 60-meter spans and rattled the windows in the American Consulate offices at the river’s edge. Three days later, ARVN engineers had a one-way Bailey span in place and traffic resumed.

Xuan Loc

General Thuan, commanding III Corps at the time, could not give the crucial battles north of Saigon his undivided attention during the summer of 1974. He was forced to look over his shoulder as the strategic raids campaign spread to the eastern limits of Military Region 3 and threatened to close National Route 1 (QL-1), Saigon’s major connection with the central coastal provinces.

About 50 kilometers along Route 1 east of Saigon was Xuan Loc, capital of Long Khanh Province. Set in the midst of vast, lush rubber plantations, Xuan Loc was the eastern terminus of the railroad that once carried passengers and freight up the coast all the way to Hanoi. Xuan Loc was also close to the beginning of Route 20 (QL-20), which joined Route 1 west of the city, and provided Saigon its connection with the mountain resorts and bountiful gardens of Dalat. Adding to the strategic importance of Xuan Loc, Local Route 2 began there and wound south through the plantations into Phuoc Tuy Province, providing an alternate route to the port city of Vung Tau.

The 18th ARVN Division usually kept a regiment at Xuan Loc, frequently operating against the NVA’s 33d and 274th Regiments that maintained base areas in the jungles north and south of Route 1. Because of heavy requirements for combat power in Binh Duong and Bien Hoa Provinces, General
Thuan pulled the 18th Division out of Long Khanh in the summer of 1974, leaving the security of that province and its lines of communication to Regional and Popular Forces and creating opportunities for the local VC, supported by the main force NVA regiments, to take the offensive in Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy Provinces.

Bao Binh and Rung La

The cluster of hamlets called Bao Binh, in the rubber plantations east of Xuan Loc, was the first major objective of Communist forces in the strategic raids campaign in Long Khanh Province. On 24 May, an NVA force of two battalions of the 274th NVA Regiment, a battalion of the 33d NVA Regiment, and an NVA engineer battalion invaded the hamlets, overrunning the local force defenses with ease. Tentative efforts by Regional Force battalions failed to dislodge the enemy, and the NVA still held Bao Binh when General Thuan visited province headquarters on 8 June. General Thuan was not pleased with the district chief's assertion that the clearing of Bao Binh would have to wait until the 18th Division returned to Xuan Loc.

On 11 June, a strong NVA force attacked the Rung La refugee resettlement village and cut Route 1 about 30 kilometers east of Bao Binh. Rung La was one of several villages established in eastern Military Region 3 to provide new homes and farmland for refugees who fled the NVA invasion of Binh Long Province in 1972. People from Loc Ninh and An Loc, after suffering weeks of inactivity in crowded tent camps following their escape from the Communist offensive, were clearing virgin land for farming and harvesting wood from the forests that surrounded new, government-sponsored villages. Some 152,000 refugees were making a fresh beginning in this region, and the struggle would have been difficult enough without frequent harassment from VC and NVA forces. Mortar attacks, minings, kidnapping and murder, all intended to disrupt resettlement efforts, failed, however, to drive the refugees away.

Communist terrorism had been relatively minor until April, when a definite rise in incidents was noted. The frequency of mortar attacks increased, and the Communists became bolder in early June as they exploited the absence of the 18th ARVN Division. On 1 June, they entered the Thai Thien resettlement village and burned 25 houses, warning the people to leave. Returning on 6 June, they burned 50 houses and again warned the villagers to leave. On 11 June, they burned 80 houses in Rung La village and closed Route 1 nearby.

Rung La was one of the largest settlements of An Loc refugees, the first of whom began occupying the village in December 1973. By June the population had grown to 18,000. When an NVA roadblock isolated Rung La from Xuan Loc, up to 10,000 villagers fled eastward into Binh Tuy and Binh Thuan Provinces. The 347th RF Battalion and the 358th RF company of Long Khanh Province were dispatched to break the enemy's hold on Route 1, but both were repelled by heavy mortar fire. An RF battalion from Binh Tuy experienced a similar reception at Rung La. The political and psychological damage, to say nothing of the serious effects on local commerce of cutting the principal north-south artery, was enough to draw the corps commander's attention away from the Iron Triangle and his other serious problems in Military Region 3. General Thuan flew over the roadblock on 13 June and viewed the NVA force and its defenses. He then ordered a task force, assembled at Xuan Loc, to start moving east along Route 1 to clear the road. The force included two battalions of the 5th ARVN Division's 8th Infantry, the 32d Ranger Battalion of the 7th Ranger Group, and a tank company. Making good use of heavy artillery support and air observation, the task force by 15 June cleared two of three enemy positions. When the last position fell on 17 June, and the road was again open, the villagers of Rung La began returning to rebuild their settlement.

Leaving the Ranger battalion and one of the 8th Infantry Regiment's battalions to secure the construction of a new RF base at Rung La, General Thuan ordered the province chief to use the other 8th Infantry Battalion and Long Khanh RF battalions to retake the Bao Binh hamlets still under enemy control. This force, however, proved to be too light for the task. Since heavy demands elsewhere precluded reinforcement, Bao Binh remained in enemy hands.

On 8 July, the NVA again moved against Rung La and succeeded in holding a segment of Route 1 until the 13th. Although these harassments were to continue throughout the year, the enemy was unsuccessful in blocking traffic again.

Bao Binh was a difficult objective. In late July and August, the province chief employed the 7th Ranger Group against the well-established enemy defenses, and the Rangers cleared all but one hamlet before being pulled out to operate around Rung La. But by the end of the year, all of Bao Binh was under South Vietnamese control as Communist units withdrew, probably to receive orders for the final offensive.

Tay Ninh

Because of the beating the 5th NVA Division had taken in the Duc Hue and Long Khot actions during the spring, the strategic raids campaign was slower getting started in Tay Ninh Province. The main attacks were against the ARVN outposts along
Interprovincial Route 13 (LTL-13) west of Tay Ninh City and the Song Vam Co Dong, but supporting and diversionary attacks were conducted against the Ben Cau outpost near the Angel’s Wing, the southern edge of Tay Ninh City, and Suoi Da, a hamlet and outpost northeast of Tay Ninh City in the shadow of Nui Ba Den. The NVA also moved 107-mm. rockets in close enough to bombard the city; some of these struck the civilian hospital on the night of 18 August and on the morning of the 19th, wounding 16 patients and killing one.

The NVA’s purpose was parallel to the one it had tried to achieve at Duc Hue; to seize the territory between the Cambodian frontier and the Vam Co Dong. The focus of this attack, however, was northwest of Duc Hue.

A string of three outposts guarded the western approach to Tay Ninh City between the Svay Rieng Province border and the Vam Co Dong. Ben Soi post was closest to Tay Ninh City; it was on Local Route 13 on the west bank of the Vam Co Dong. The two forward posts were Luu Buu Lam on Route 13, about halfway to the border, and Luoc Tan, located on seasonally flooded land within sight of Svay Rieng Province, Cambodia. The blow fell simultaneously on the three posts on the morning of 14 August as the 6th Regiment, 5th NVA Division, launched heavy mortar and artillery bombardments into the fortresses. About 1,000 civilians began streaming into Tay Ninh City to escape the onslaught, but some 3,000 were trapped behind the block that the NVA 6th Regiment placed on the road between Luoc Tan and Luu Buu Lam.

The ARVN 312th RF Battalion’s 2d Company at Luoc Tan reported absorbing intense shelling in which all of the buildings and three-fourths of the bunkers there had been destroyed. But it held on and beat back successive assaults by tank-supported battalions of the 6th NVA Regiment. As of 15 August, the company commander reported that his men had repaired most of the defensive positions and that very effective artillery and air strikes had knocked out one tank and killed over 300 of the enemy around Luoc Tan. Of the 97 men he had when the attack began, 45 were still able to fight.

East of Luoc Tan, Luu Buu Lam and Ben Soi were quiet after the second day as the NVA concentrated on Luoc Tan and the 25th ARVN Division’s 46th Infantry Regiment sent a battalion in to reinforce Luu Buu Lam. To the south, at Ben Cau, two NVA soldiers captured from the 174th NVA Infantry said that their regiment was severely undermanned and its mission was only to test the ARVN reactions to the attack at Ben Cau. The NVA found the reaction to be violent as well as firm.

The staunch defense put up by the company of the 312th RF Battalion at Luoc Tan boosted RF and civilian morale throughout Tay Ninh. Resupply of the little garrison was made by helicopter as the relief column of the 46th ARVN Regiment approached along Route 13. On 20 August, the company commander at Luoc Tan reported driving off a three-pronged infantry assault; the 46th Infantry’s battalion was stalled about three kilometers away, where it had been for four days. Fearing an ambush, General Thuan had ordered the battalion to halt its attempt to link up with Luoc Tan. The night of 20 August was the last for the 2d Company, 312th RF Battalion, as a battalion of the 6th NVA Regiment breached the shattered defensive works and captured the garrison. It remained in NVA hands, but the cost was high. The 6th NVA Regiment had to be withdrawn to Cambodia for another refitting and to receive replacements.

This has been an account of the main events that took place around Saigon during the NVA's strategic raids campaign in the summer and fall of 1974. No attempt has been made to cover all combat actions; the purpose has been rather to treat those which changed the map in a significant way, illustrated the relative strengths and weakness of the opposing forces, demonstrated the strategies and tactics adopted by the two sides, and set the stage for the final NVA offensive.

In the deep forests of northern Tay Ninh, Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces, COSVN was building a mighty combat capability, stockpiling weapons, ammunition, fuel, and supplies, marshaling and training replacements, building hospitals, improving roads and bridges, while its major fighting forces, the 5th, 7th, and 9th NVA Divisions pressed forward against the ARVN’s outer line of defense.

Note on Sources

Principal among the sources of this chapter were the author's notes recording visits to the field, particularly in Binh Duong Province and to III Corps headquarters at Bien Hoa, and meetings with the J2/JGS.

The Weekly Summary published by DAO Saigon Intelligence Branch and by the J2/JGS provided the chronology of events as well as detailed order-of-battle information. Heavy reliance was also placed on the reports of the Consul General, Bien Hoa, and offices of the U.S. Embassy, Saigon. As usual much reliable information was also derived from rallier and prisoner of war interrogation reports and from captured documents.
The Highlands to the Hai Van

Just as the COSVN forces in South Vietnam's Military Region 3 were conducting the strategic raids campaign to reduce the defenses around Saigon, so the forces of the B-3 Front and the NVA's Military Region 5 were embarked on their campaign to eliminate the isolated ARVN outposts in the Central Highlands and move into the coastal lowlands of South Vietnam's Military Regions 1 and 2. Heavy fighting lay ahead in the vast region from the high plateau of Darlac to the narrow coastal plain of Quang Nam.

Quang Tin

In the spring of 1974, South Vietnam still had two district seats deep in the highlands of Quang Tin Province but controlled only shallow perimeters around the towns, Tien Phuoc and Hau Duc, and maintained a tenuous hold on the lines of communication into them. The enemy still held Hiep Duc with elements of the 2d NVA Division (reorganized and redesignated from the old 711th NY A Division) and protected the headquarters area of NVA Military Region 5 between Tien Phuoc and Hau Duc.

The population was sparse in the mountain districts of Quang Tin, and its requirements for products from outside the region were relatively small. But after the NVA moved in with large troop units and commerce with the coast became restricted, shortages and hardships grew. The local Communists, striving to recruit a larger following among the villagers, were finding it difficult to provide incentives since the people knew that conditions were better around the South Vietnamese communities of Tien Phuoc and Hau Duc where infrequent but adequate convoys brought rice and other commodities from the province capital, Tam Ky. Part of the Communist strategy thus was to improve NVA lines of communication from southwestern Quang Tin Province to the coast near Tam Ky and to block South Vietnamese access to Tien Phuoc. If the NVA could succeed in these objectives, the mountain population would be impelled to shift to the areas under Communist control. (Map 16)

In 1973 the NVA engineers had improved the channel and constructed docks on the Song Tranh west of Hau Duc, thus providing a secure water route to the NVA base at Hiep Duc. The NVA engineers also widened the road southeast to Tra Bong District in Quang Ngai. The next steps were to gain access to the coast south of Tam Ky and block local Route 533 west from Tam Ky, thus isolating Tien Phuoc.

The first target was the sprawling village of Ky Tra, a minor road junction in the hills west of Chui Lai. Outside the village was an outpost called Nui Ya. On 4 May, after a battalion of NVA infantry overran Nui Ya, the attack quickly shifted to Ky Tra as mortar, rocket, and artillery fire fell on the defending 931st RF Company, two PF platoons, and about 60 People's Self-Defense Force militia. While Ky Tra was under attack, all four ARVN fire support bases within range came under heavy mortar and rocket fire. Contact was lost with the defenders on 5 May as the NVA's 1st Infantry Regiment, 2d Division, occupied Ky Tra. This maneuver placed a major NVA force in position to support attacks against the line of communication to Tien Phuoc and to block overland movement to Hau Duc.

The attack on Ky Tra signalled the eruption of attacks by fire and ground attacks on ARVN bases and outposts throughout Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces. A relief column headed by the 1st Battalion, 4th ARVN Infantry, 2d Division, was stopped by heavy enemy mortar and rocket fire nine kilometers from Ky Tra. A battalion of the 6th Regiment, 2d ARVN Division, also failed to reach Ky Tra. Meanwhile, the 31st Regiment, 2d NVA Division, launched an attack on outposts protecting Tien Phuoc, and one ARVN position, held by the 131st RF Battalion, was lost. The attacks continued on 16 and 17 May, but two RF battalions at Tien Phuoc repelled the 31st NVA Regiment attacks with heavy losses.

The fighting around Ky Tra continued. On 19 May, the 1st NVA Regiment again attacked the 1st Battalion, 4th ARVN Infantry. The understrength ARVN battalion broke and lost nearly 200 weapons and 13 field radios, impossible to replace, in the rout. While the infantry fought in the hills, the NVA pounded the 2d ARVN Division Headquarters at Chui Lai and the city of Tam Ky and its airfield with 122-mm. rockets.

Brig. Gen. Tran Van Nhut, commanding the 2d ARVN Division, sent the 12th Ranger Group, under his operational control, to reinforce Tien Phuoc. Although the NVA 31st Regiment continued to attack, it was unable to break through to Tien Phuoc. In early June, the 12th Ranger Group
Map 16
was relieved by the 5th Regiment, 2d Division, and the ARVN infantrymen succeeded in holding Tien Phuoc and keeping the road open to Tam Ky. Losses on both sides were heavy, and by mid-June, three battalions of the 2d ARVN Division—the 1st battalion of the 4th Infantry and the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 6th Infantry—were considered by General Nhut to be ineffective due to casualties and equipment losses. The 5th Regiment had also suffered moderate losses since 1 June on the Quang Tin road, and was only marginally effective. Likewise, the 12th Ranger Group, which had distinguished itself in the defense of Tien Phuoc, was badly understrength because of high casualties. General Nhut had two other Ranger groups, the 11th and 14th, committed to forward positions in the hills and kept his 4th Armored Cavalry Group as division reserve.

All during the Tien Phuoc–Ky Tra battle, General Nhut had to contend with serious threats to the security of coastal Quang Ngai. There the 52d NVA Brigade maintained pressure against lines of communication and population centers, defended largely by RF and PF units whose usual performance under main-force enemy attacks was desultory at best. Occasionally, however, responding to unusually strong leadership, territories of Quang Ngai turned in a stunning performance. For example, on 5 May south of Nghia Hanh, the 9th Battalion of the 52d NVA Regiment reinforced by the 15th NVA Engineer Battalion, attacked the 117th RF Battalion, but the attack was repelled, leaving 21 dead and a number of weapons at the RF defensive position. NVA soldiers in this battle were disguised in RVNAF uniforms, a tactic frequently seen. The increase in enemy attacks during May was not confined to the coast, however. In southwest Quang Ngai, on the boundary of Kontum Province, the 70th ARVN Ranger Battalion engaged in heavy fighting with an enemy force east of Gia Vuc in mid-May. Although these inconclusive struggles typified the early summer of 1974 in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai, events of a more decisive nature were occurring in the western highlands.

### Dak Pek

By the early summer of 1974 three totally isolated outposts remained in the mountains north and northeast of Kontum City. Astride Route 14 (QL-14) in the far northwestern tip of Kontum Province was Dak Pek, occupied by the 88th Ranger Battalion with 360 men and 10 PF platoons with about 300. All contact with the camp was by air, and no artillery outside the camp itself was available to provide support for the subsector headquarters or the camp. About 3,200 people, nearly all Montagnards, lived under the protection of Dak Pek outpost, which interfered with enemy logistics along the north-south line of communication.

In fighting near the camp on 27 April, a document was captured indicating that an attack to capture Dak Pek was imminent; in early May, Ranger patrols detected the presence of an enemy regiment near the camp and discovered a cache of 60 105-mm. artillery rounds. Unknown to the Rangers then, the 29th Regiment of the 324B NVA Division had been trucked south from the A Shau Valley of Thu Thien Province. The deployment of the 29th Regiment exemplified the remarkable flexibility and newly developed mobility of the NVA, the latter attributable to its road network and to antiaircraft defenses that prevented effective interdiction. In order to assign the Dak Pek mission to the 29th Regiment, the NVA had to move it secretly 75 miles and place it under the command of B3 Front.

The commander of the 88th Ranger Battalion had sealed orders to be opened in the event Dak Pek were overrun. He was to lead the survivors through the mountains to Mang Buk, some 60 kilometers southeast. It is doubtful that Major Di ever got around to opening the orders; certainly he had no opportunity to execute them.

The Rangers had a series of encounters with NVA patrols beginning on 10 May. Two days later, following artillery, rocket, and mortar bombardments, the NVA attacked the outpost and subsector headquarters. The defenders were able to hold the enemy infantry at bay until the morning of the 16th, when, following an intense concentration of fire support, the 29th NVA Regiment, supported by tanks, closed in on the camp and subsector. Major Di maintained contact with the VNAF, flying over 70 bombing and strafing sorties during the morning and destroying at least one tank in a futile effort to save the camp. Using 37-mm. antiaircraft guns, the enemy reduced the effectiveness of South Vietnamese air support. At noon Major Di's radio fell silent under the rain of enemy fire, over 7,000 rounds of artillery, mortar, and rocket hitting the camp in the 12 hours before capitulation.

Months later, at the end of November, 14 survivors of Dak Pek escaped from NVA work camps in the jungle where they had been held since their capture on 16 May and reported to an ARVN Ranger outpost northeast of Kontum City. They said that Major Di and his executive officer had both been captured along with the survivors, that both had escaped during VNAF air strikes, but that Major Di had been recaptured the following day.

### Tieu Atar

Tieu Atar was a frontier post manned by two companies from a battalion of Montagnard RF, stationed north of Ban Me Thuot, the capital of...
Darlac Province. Close to the Cambodian border, it interfered in a minor way with the NVA line of communication south of Duc Co. Beginning on 18 May 1974 Communist propaganda teams entered the Montagnard settlement around Camp Tieu Atar, telling the people of an impending attack and urging them to leave. About 1,200 took the warning and began a long trek south.

The attack began on 27 May when the NVA slammed 60 rounds of 82-mm. mortar into the camp. On 30 May, a concentration of 1,000 rounds began to fall on the camp. Radio contact with the 211th RF Battalion was lost when the battalion commander's bunker was destroyed by a direct hit. One to two infantry battalions attacked before noon and overran the camp. Effective VNAF support was not possible because of bad weather and lack of communications. For the NVA, the way was now clear from its major logistical center at Duc Co all the way to Ban Don.

While the enemy was toppling the few remaining ARVN outposts in the remote reaches of the Central Highlands, an NVA offensive of major proportions was taking shape farther north. Its focus was the Quang Nam lowlands.

**Quang Nam**

Two major rivers entered Quang Nam Province from the south and formed a fertile delta, which, except for a narrow coastal strip on the south, was enclosed by steep mountains rising to 4,000 feet. The Province capital, Da Nang, rested at the northern edge of the delta on the beach of the strikingly beautiful crescent of Da Nang Bay. Da Nang was the most important South Vietnamese city north of Saigon and the site of a major port, a major air base, and the headquarters of I Corps and Military Region 1. National Highway 1 (QL-1) passed through Quang Nam close to the sand dunes along the coast and continued through the Hai Van Pass to Hue in Thua Thien Province. The national railway operated daily trains between Da Nang and Hue in Thua Thien Province. The national railway operated daily trains between Da Nang and Hue on a roadbed, much subjected to Communist harassment and sabotage, that generally paralleled the highway. The delta of Quang Nam had been a contested area before the cease-fire, but by the spring of 1973, the ARVN 3d Infantry Division and the Quang Nam territorial had established control in the flatlands up to the hills of Duc Duc District in the southwest and Thuong Duc District in the west.

Local security in Quang Nam's nine districts—which in the military chain-of-command were sub-sectors, subordinate to the sector chief who was also the province chief—varied from poor in the mountainous regions to good in the area of Da Nang. Hoa Vang District, the most populous, surrounded Da Nang. Its least secure villages were in the southwest corner of the district, centered on Hoa Hai Village, close to the major line of communication, Route 530, between Da Nang and the forward positions of the 3d ARVN Division in Dai Loc and Duc Duc Districts. That part of Dai Loc District which was south of the Song Vu Gia was for many years a VC stronghold—the Americans who operated there named it the Arizona Territory—but the ARVN had cleared it about the time of the cease-fire. North of the Song Vu Gia, the mountains of Dai Loc, where the ARVN could maintain no continuous presence, offered the Communists access to the lowlands.

The Communists exploited this situation frequently and interdicted from time to time the one road linking Thuong Duc District with the rest of the province. This road, local Route 4 (LTL-4), followed the north bank of the Song Vu Gia, passed through a narrow defile between the hills and the river just west of an ARVN artillery base on Hill 52, and then entered the district town of Thuong Duc. The valley of the Song Vu Gia was only 3,000 meters wide here; steep hills overlooked the district seat of Thuong Duc on the north, west, and south. There were no villages outside the district town itself secure enough for South Vietnamese officials to spend the night, and only three villages in the district had government administration by day. NVA lines of communication from the northwest and southwest reached Thuong Duc via National Route 14, which terminated there, and Route 614, which began in the large NVA logistical complex south of the A Shau Valley and joined Route 4 west of Thuong Duc. This district, therefore, was a key entrance to the Quang Nam lowlands.

Southwest of Dai Loc District was the vast mountain district of Duc Duc. Only in the extreme northeast region of Duc Duc did South Vietnamese officials maintain full-time residence. The area west of the Song Thu Bon, which included part of the Arizona Territory, was insecure and sparsely populated, as were the southern and western reaches of Duc Duc. ARVN influence extended south to the Nong Son coal mines in the narrow canyon of the Song Thu Bon, about 10 kilometers from the district seat. Here at a place called Da Trach, not far north of the major operating base of the 2d NVA Division, the ARVN maintained a garrison with outposts manned by RF units and PF platoons. Duc Duc was the other principal entrance to the Quang Nam lowlands from the NVA-held highlands of Quang Nam and Quang Tin.

The ARVN 3d Infantry Division was responsible for the defense of Quang Nam and that part of Quang Tin lying within the Que Son Valley. In June of 1974, General Hinh, the division commander, had his 57th Infantry Regiment, reinforced by the attached 3d Battalion, 56th Infantry, defending in the
Que Son Valley. His 2d Infantry Regiment was operating in the Go Noi and Duc Duc areas, while the 56th Infantry, minus its 3d Battalion, was in division reserve. The 56th's 1st Battalion was in training, and its third was at Fire Support Base Baldy at the northern entrance of the Que Son Valley. The 14th Ranger Group, which had been under the operational control of the 3d Division in Quang Nam, had been sent south to operate with the 2d ARVN Division to deal with the crisis that developed in Quang Tin. The 14th took along its Baldy at the northern entrance of the Que Son Valley. Possession of the Khe Le Valley would give the NVA not only another flanking approach to the ARVN defenses in the Que Son Valley but would provide access to the several good trails into Duy Xuyen district, bypassing the defenses in Duc Duc.

The 78th Ranger Battalion at Da Trach, with about 360 men, was scheduled for retraining at the Ranger Training Center, and on 17 July 1974, the 3d Battalion, 56th Infantry, arrived to execute the relief. The infantry battalion pulled in on trucks just before dark. The relief was to take place at noon the next day, but the 78th had withdrawn most of its outposts and was bivouacked for the night in the village. Although unfamiliar with the layout of the camp defenses, the 3d Battalion, with three of its four companies, assumed the responsibility. Also assembled within the defenses were the drivers who had driven the 3d Battalion to Da Trach and who would take the 78th Battalion out the next morning.

The strength of the 3d Battalion, 56th Infantry, was only about 360 men, but its 2d Company was not in the camp; rather, it had set up outposts on two hills along the east bank of the Thu Bon. One rifle platoon was on Cua Tan directly across the river from Da Trach, and the rest of the company was at Khuong Que, to the north.

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The 36th NVA Regiment was formed in the spring of 1974 from replacement groups sent from North Vietnam into the mountains of western Duc Duc District. It was a light regiment, having only two infantry battalions, an antiaircraft machine gun company, light artillery, and administrative support units. On 10 July, a week before the planned relief of the 78th Ranger Battalion at Da Trach, the 36th NVA Regiment moved undetected into assembly areas close to ARVN outposts around Da Trach. Also on the move toward Da Trach were elements of all three regiments of the 2d NVA Division, the

Da Trach and Duc Duc

Da Trach, a battalion-sized camp, was a strong point situated on a prominent hill about 900 feet above the Song Thu Bong south of the subsector headquarters at Duc Duc. It had been quiet at Da Trach and around the outposts manned by one RF company and seven PF platoons. Three of these outposts were in the hills and along the river south of Da Trach, while the others were in the valley of the Khe Le stream—called Antenna Valley by the Americans who operated there before—which flowed into the Song Thu Bon northeast of Da Trach post. Also located in the valley was the 4th Company, 146th RF Battalion, which had its 80-man garrison in the Ap Ba hamlet group, along the road that twisted eastward over the Deo Le Pass to Que Son. The 78th Ranger Battalion at Da Trach, the 36th NVA Regiment, and the 3d Battalion, 56th Infantry, arrived to execute the relief. The infantry battalion pulled in on trucks just before dark. The relief was to take place at noon the next day, but the 78th had withdrawn most of its outposts and was bivouacked for the night in the village. Although unfamiliar with the layout of the camp defenses, the 3d Battalion, with three of its four companies, assumed the responsibility. Also assembled within the defenses were the drivers who had driven the 3d Battalion to Da Trach and who would take the 78th Battalion out the next morning.

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1st, 31st, and 38th, plus the 10th Sapper Battalion, division artillery, and batteries of Military Region 5 artillery.

Shortly after midnight on 18 July, the midsummer night's silence was shattered by NVA artillery, rockets, and mortar rounds exploding on the defenses and outposts of Da Trach. A relatively weak attack by the 2d Battalion, 36th NVA Regiment, on the camp's main defenses was beaten back with heavy losses to the enemy and light casualties to the defenders, but contact with the 2d Company, 3d Battalion, 56th ARVN Infantry, outposts at Khuong Que and Cua Tan was lost before daybreak. By that time, the 4th Company, 146th RF Battalion at Ap Ba had been attacked and overrun, and the survivors were trying to escape through the mountains toward Duc Duc headquarters.

Shelling of the main camp meanwhile had stopped, and the attackers regrouped for another assault. The 2d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, and a battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment, both of the 2d NVA Division, joined the two battalions of the 36th Regiment for the next attempt. As the reconnaissance platoon and the 4th Company, 3d Battalion, 56th ARVN Infantry, tried to retake a lost outpost south of the camp, they were stopped by intense artillery and automatic weapons fire, which killed the company commander and the battalion commander of the 78th Rangers. The enemy resumed infantry assaults on the camp, and the 3d Battalion commander, who had assumed command of the 78th Rangers as well, reported the situation critical. The camp's radio was knocked out before noon, and all contact was lost with whatever PF outposts remained in action.

Enemy tanks were sighted about 5,000 meters southwest of the camp, and the VNAF began to provide fire support to the defenders. Heavy artillery, rocket, and mortar fire continued, augmented by antiaircraft guns, up to 37-mm., used in direct fire.

Contact was also lost with the 4th Company, 78th Rangers, and the two-gun platoon of 105-mm. howitzers in the camp had been knocked out of action. At mid-afternoon, the five-battalion enemy assault, which by this time included the 10th Sapper Battalion against the northern sector, had carried through the southwest defense line. With all bunkers and fighting positions demolished by a bombardment of more than 5,000 rounds, the survivors of the 3d and 78th Battalions withdrew, and the NVA rounded up civilians in the hamlets and villages; about 7,500 of them would be moved to Communist controlled regions of Duc Duc District.

General Hinh, from his 3d Division Headquarters above Da Nang, reacted quickly to the crisis in Duc Duc District. The subsector headquarters there had also received a heavy bombardment. General Hinh moved a forward division command post to Dai Loc and ordered the 2d Infantry Regiment to deploy immediately to Duc Duc and relieve the defenders at Da Trach. Operation QUANG TRUNG 4/74 had begun.

Only the 3d Battalion, 2d Infantry, was immediately available; the 1st Battalion remained at Fire Support Base Baldy in the Que Son Valley, and the 2d was still in Quang Tin Province. Orders were sent to both battalions to move immediately to Dai Loc, in Quang Nam Province, and the 3d Battalion moved from Da Nang to Hill 55 in northwestern Dien Ban District to protect the deployment of artillery to support Duc Duc.

These deployments ordered, General Hinh saw as his first priority securing the bridge over the Song Thu Bon, north of Duc Duc subsector headquarters and over which all division elements would have to pass en route to the battlefield. He ordered the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, just arrived from FSB Baldy, with the 2d Troop, 11th Armored Cavalry, to secure the bridge and had the 3d Battalion, 2d Infantry, on 18 July move to Duc Duc District Town. His staff went to work immediately drafting the tactical plan for QUANG TRUNG 4/74 with the objective of retaking Da Trach. The bridge secured, the 1st Battalion joined the 3d, and both moved south of Duc Duc, prepared to continue on toward Da Trach. By nightfall on the 18th, the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry, had also moved to Duc Duc District Town, as had a battery of 155-mm. howitzers. Meanwhile, a battery of 175-mm. guns moved into firing positions in the Que Son Valley, within range of Duc Duc. These ARVN artillery positions soon received heavy and accurate counterbattery fire. The commander of the 2d ARVN Infantry, Lt. Col. Vu Ngoc Huong, having assumed tactical command of all ARVN forces in the Duc Duc–Da Trach battlefield, had communications with only two platoons of the original Da Trach defense force by the evening of 18 July.

The NVA resumed its coordinated offensive in Quang Nam in the pre-dawn hours of 19 July. A salvo of 35 122-mm. rockets fell on Da Nang Air Base; damage to VNAF operations was slight, although 16 people died and over 70 were wounded—many of whom were civilians and military dependents. In the morning Duc Duc Subsector received 45 rocket and mortar rounds. NVA 130-mm. guns hit an ARVN 105-mm. battery and the 2d Infantry's command post. Meanwhile, north of Dai Loc on Route 540, the 370th RF Company repulsed a strong enemy attempt to interdict the ARVN line of communication, killing 30 of the attackers and capturing many weapons.

With the enemy's fire erupting in their rear, the 1st and 3d Battalions, 2d ARVN Infantry, advanced south from Duc Duc toward Da Trach and by noon
reported securing their initial objectives without opposition. The 1st Battalion was on Ky Vi Mountain, southeast of subsector headquarters, and the 3d Battalion was on Hill 284, past Khuong Que and at the entrance of Khe Le Valley. The 2d Battalion was in reserve. The plan called for the 3d Battalion to continue the attack to Cua Tan Mountain, across the river from Da Trach, and for the 1st Battalion to attack south, first seizing Hill 454 and then descending into the Khe Le Valley at the village of Ap Ba. The feasibility of the plan came into question, however, when the last contact with the Da Trach defenders on 19 July revealed that the command group and two companies of the 78th Rangers were under heavy attack on the hill at Cua Tan.

After seizing Da Trach, the North Vietnamese placed infantry battalions and antiaircraft guns in the hills above the valley, awaiting the arrival of the 2d ARVN Infantry. The VNAF struck hard at these forces on the 18th and 19th and caused heavy casualties, but the NVA could not be dislodged. By the afternoon of 19 July, the 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, was in contact with elements of the NVA 36th Regiment on Ky Vi Mountain and on Hill 238, to the west. The VNAF flew 18 attack sorties in support, killing 75 enemy infantrymen and destroying a mortar. But the ARVN advance had to be halted. Suspecting a trap in the Khe Le Valley, General Hinh ordered the 2d Infantry to stop and send reconnaissance patrols forward.

Correctly anticipating that the enemy's Quang Nam campaign had only begun and that more forces would be required to deal with it, General Truong on 19 July ordered the 12th Ranger Group to move from Quang Ngai to Quang Nam. The 37th Ranger Battalion, already in Da Nang for rest and retraining, moved to Hieu Duc District on 20 July. That day, the 6th Infantry, 2d ARVN Division, began relieving the other two battalions of the 12th Ranger Group in Duc Pho and Mo Duc in Quang Ngai Province, and the 12th began to move north.

By 22 July, the NVA command at Da Trach apparently discovered that the ARVN 2d Infantry Regiment was not advancing into the trap in the Khe Le Valley. Plans were accordingly changed; the rest of the 1st NVA Regiment was ordered to Da Trach to attack the ARVN 2d Regiment in the hills above Duc Duc, while the 38th Regiment was to move through the hills above the valley toward Go Noi and Dien Ban. On 24 July the 1st NVA Regiment began moving into the attack, and the 38th Regiment started deploying east. General Truong was gathering more forces also. He ordered the 29th and 39th Ranger Battalions, 12th Ranger Group, newly arrived from Quang Ngai Province, to displace west of Go Noi Island, and he directed that the 1st Division in Thua Thien and the 2d Division in Quang Ngai each prepare one regiment for deployment to Quang Nam on 24-hour notice.

On 24 July, the 2d ARVN Infantry established its command post 700 meters north of the first hill south of Duc Duc, Nui Song Su. The 2d Troop, 11th Armored Cavalry, was providing security for the command post. The 2d Battalion was moving past Hill 238 and advancing on Hill 284, which had been vacated by the 3d Battalion under strong enemy pressure. The 3d Battalion had withdrawn to the hill at Nui Duong Coi, above a lake between it and Duc Duc Subsector, where the 1st Battalion was in reserve. The 1st Battalion, 56th Infantry, attached to the 2d Infantry, was protecting the regiment's right flank west of the Song Thu Bon.

The attack of the 1st NVA Regiment met the advancing 2d Battalion, 2d ARVN Infantry, on the slopes of Hill 284. The two leading companies of the 2d Battalion broke under a withering attack. By early afternoon on 24 July, the 1st NVA's attack reached the 3d Battalion on Nui Duong Coi. The battalion held and with good air and artillery support inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. But the assault continued, the 3d Battalion commander fell wounded, and the battalion began to break. By dusk, both forward battalions of the 2d Infantry were badly scattered and withdrawing toward Duc Duc. The NVA attack reached into the rear area of the 2d Infantry and forced the command post to drop back 1,000 meters. Seeing a disaster for the 2d Infantry in the making, General Hinh had his division reconnaissance company lifted in by helicopter to help defend the command post. Reaching the command post late in the afternoon, the reconnaissance company was soon joined by the 37th Ranger Battalion and two troops of the 11th Armored Cavalry which General Hinh had sent overland to reinforce the beleaguered 2d Infantry.

On the morning of 25 July, while an attempt was being made to regroup the scattered 3d Battalion, General Hinh ordered the 12th Ranger Group to bring its three battalions forward and relieve the 2d Infantry. As this relief was beginning, General Truong had the 1st Division send its 54th Infantry Regiment to Quang Nam for attachment to the 3d Division. Further, he cancelled all unit training in I Corps except for the 137th RF Battalion, soon to complete its training cycle.

The fighting in the hills south of Duc Duc took a heavy toll of the NVA 1st Regiment, and the 2d NVA Division had to withdraw it from action, just as the 3d ARVN Division had to relieve the 2d Infantry. The 38th NVA Regiment was ordered to stop its eastward movement and come to the relief of the 1st Regiment, while elements of the 31st NVA Regiment still around Hau Duc in Quang Tin Province were called forward to the division base at Hiep Duc to prepare to assist the 1st and 38th
The Highlands to the Hai Van

Regiments. The NVA plans for the 38th Regiment to move east into Go Noi were upset by the rapid ARVN deployment of the 12th Ranger Group. The battered 1st NVA Regiment was no longer equipped to protect the rear of the 38th or its line of communication against the expected counterattacks of the three Ranger battalions of the 12th Group. Further, the North Vietnamese soon learned of the movement of the 54th ARVN Regiment to Quang Nam, but they could not discover its mission or location. Considering these uncertainties, the NVA command suspended the attack and held its gains, replacing depleted battalions with fresh ones.

General Hinh had reached similar conclusions on 25 July. He declared the counterattack to retake Da Trach at an end; QUANG TRUNG 4/74 was over and QUANG TRUNG 8/74, an interim operation to defend the shallow positions south of Duc Duc Subsector, began. By this time, virtually all of the survivors of Da Trach had made their way back to friendly lines. Sixty-four were from the 3d Battalion, 56th Infantry; 79 from the 78th Ranger Battalion; 59 from the 4th Company, 146 RF Battalion; and 20 from the PF platoons. A few were village officials.

The 54th Infantry, 1st ARVN Division, arrived in Quang Nam on 26 July, put its headquarters at Dien Ban District Town, and immediately went into action. While the 1st Battalion took over a security mission in the Da Nang rocket belt near Hill 55, the 2d and 3d Battalions began clearing the area around Ky Chau Village on Go Noi Island. Both the 2d and 3d met heavy resistance and proceeded westward slowly, engaging an enemy force on 28 July and dispersing it with heavy losses.

Duc Duc and Dai Loc were struck on 25 July and again the next day by enemy rocket and artillery fire, but casualties were light. On 26 July, the Rangers completed their relief of the 2d Infantry and assumed responsibility for the sector. The 21st Ranger Battalion to the east was holding Nui Van Chi, the 37th Ranger Battalion was on Hill 238, just south of Nui Song Su, and the 39th Ranger Battalion was at Duc Duc Subsector in reserve. The shattered 2d Infantry moved west of Dai Loc District Town along Route 4 to protect the division right flank, while its 3d Battalion was being reformed at the division base near Da Nang. Meanwhile, the VNAF was trying its best to blunt the enemy attacks. The 1st Air Division flew 67 attack sorties on the 25th and 57 on the 26th, destroying a tank and several antiaircraft and mortar positions, striking large troop concentrations, and killing about 90 enemy soldiers.1

The NVA continued to batter ARVN rear areas. Water-sappers reached the Nam O Bridge on Highway 1 north of Da Nang before dawn on 27 July and dropped one span, but ARVN engineers had the bridge open with a Bailey truss by early afternoon. On 29 July NVA gunners sent 70 122-mm. rockets into the inhabited area around Da Nang Air Base and its ammunition dump. Casualties and damage were light, however.

With the withdrawal of 2d Infantry, QUANG TRUNG 8/74 was declared over on 29 July. QUANG TRUNG 9/74 was to begin on 30 July. The troop list had the 12th Ranger Group in contact south of Duc Duc, the 2d Infantry on the flank west of Dai Loc, the 54th in the Go Noi east of Dai Loc, and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 56th Infantry in reserve in Dai Loc District Town. The 3d Battalion, 56th Infantry, the battalion destroyed at Da Trach, was being reformed at Da Nang, while the 78th Ranger Battalion was undergoing the same process at the Duc My Ranger Training Center in Khanh Hoa Province.

**Thuong Duc**

When the 79th Ranger Battalion, 14th Ranger Group, returned from Quang Ngai to Quang Nam in mid-July of 1974 and assumed the defense of the post at Thuong Duc, the westernmost ARVN position in the province, the battle in the hills south of neighboring Duc Duc District Town was under way as NVA Military Region 5 committed all of its 2d Division there and in the Que Son Valley south of Duc Duc. Ranger and PF patrols and outposts around Thuong Duc reported little enemy activity, not unexpectedly since known enemy forces in Quang Nam were heavily engaged. Neither the Thuong Duc garrison nor, for that matter, the G-2 at I Corps Headquarters even suspected that the 29th NVA Regiment was rolling north to Thuong Duc following its mid-May conquest of Dak Pek.

The NVA shelling of Thuong Duc began on 29 July, while a volley of rockets fell on Da Nang Air Base. Infantry assaults on all outposts followed. Communication was quickly broken between Thuong Duc Subsector and three PF outposts. Contact was also lost with two Ranger outposts in the hills west of the town. ARVN artillery on Hill 52, near Dai Loc, gave effective support to the Thuong Duc defense, and enemy casualties were high.

Early on the morning of 30 July, the subsector commander was wounded by the continuing heavy bombardment, but all ground attacks were repulsed. Later that morning VNAF observers saw a convoy of tanks and artillery approaching along Route 4 west of Thuong Duc, and subsequent air strikes halted the column, destroying three tanks. As NVA attacks continued throughout the day, the Rangers of Thuong Duc took their first prisoner of war, and identified the presence of the 29th Regiment on the battlefield. Not apparent at the time, the 29th had
been detached from the 324B NVA Division and was operating under NVA Military Region 5.

In an assault on 31 July, NVA infantrymen reached the perimeter wire of Thuong Duc. The Ranger battalion commander asked for artillery fire directly on his command post. With the NVA occupying the high ground above Route 4 east of Thuong Duc, the ARVN 3d Division and I Corps commanders believed that the forces available to them were inadequate to relieve Thuong Duc. To protect his flank, General Hinh had placed the battered 2d Infantry on the road west of Dai Loc, but it was not strong enough to move west along Route 4. More fire support for Thuong Duc was provided, however, when General Hinh moved a platoon of 175-mm. guns to Hieu Duc. Conditions in the Thuong Duc perimeter were serious but not yet critical. Most of the South Vietnamese bunkers and trenches had collapsed under heavy artillery fire, the enemy controlled the airstrip just outside the camp, and casualties were 13 killed and 45 wounded.

Although the intensity of the NVA bombardment dropped off between 31 July and 1 August, Ranger casualties continued to mount. NVA gunners shifted their concentrations to 2d Infantry positions and ARVN artillery batteries near Dai Loc, causing moderate casualties and damaging four howitzers. The Ranger commander at Thuong Duc asked for medical evacuation for his wounded, but the commander of the VNAF 1st Air Division advised that air evacuation would not be attempted until the NVA antiaircraft guns around Thuong Duc had been neutralized. Meanwhile, General Truong ordered one M-48 tank company to move immediately from northern Military Region 1 to Quang Nam for attachment to the 3d Division; he told General Hinh to keep the tank company in reserve and to employ it only in an emergency. General Hinh then formed a task force to attack west from Dai Loc and relieve the Rangers at Thuong Duc. The tank company from Tan My, in Thua Thien Province, arrived in Da Nang in good order on 1 August, and General Hinh's task force, composed of the 2d Infantry and the 11th Armored Cavalry Squadron, prepared for the march to Thuong Duc.

On 2 August, with only light attacks by fire striking the camp, the Ranger battalion resumed patrolling beyond its perimeter. On 4 August Ranger patrols discovered 53 NVA bodies killed by VNAF air strikes in the hills southwest of Thuong Duc, but attempts at air evacuation of ARVN casualties failed when VNAF sorties against six antiaircraft positions south of the camp were unable to silence the guns. The next day, the first indication of another committed NVA regiment was revealed when the 2d Battalion, 2d Infantry, captured a soldier from the 29th NVA Regiment east of Thuong Duc. According to the prisoner, the entire 29th Regiment was positioned in the hills overlooking Route 4 between Hill 52 and Thuong Duc, while a regiment of the NVA 304th Division had been given the mission to seize Thuong Duc. Events proved this interrogation to be accurate. The 2d Battalion had fought all afternoon in the rice paddies and hills north of Route 4. Slowly moving toward Thuong Duc, it was still four kilometers east of the ARVN fire base on Hill 52, which itself was under enemy artillery and infantry attack. By 5 August, the 2d Battalion was still struggling to move forward along the foothills north of Route 4, and the 1st Battalion, 57th ARVN Infantry, reinforcing the 2d Regiment, was stopped by heavy enemy machine gun fire from the hills west of Hill 52.

Back at Thuong Duc, the situation was rapidly becoming critical as ammunition and food supplies were being exhausted. The VNAF attempted a resupply drop on the camp on 5 August, but all eight bundles of food and ammunition fell outside the perimeter. The VNAF tried to destroy bundles that were within reach of the NVA, and one A-37 attack plane was shot down in the attempt.

The next day, while the relief task force was battling its way west against heavy resistance, General Truong, concerned about the critical threat to Da Nang from a large NVA force west of Dai Loc, ordered fresh reinforcements to Quang Nam. Appealing personally to General Vien at the Joint General Staff in Saigon, General Truong succeeded in getting the 1st Airborne Brigade released from the general reserve for deployment to Quang Nam and attachment to General Hinh's 3d Division. The brigade was ordered to reach Da Nang by 11 August with three airborne infantry battalions and one artillery battalion. Additionally, the 3d Airborne Brigade, then deployed in the defense of Hue, was told to prepare for movement to Da Nang. But none of these measures would save Thuong Duc; the NVA overran the small garrison on 7 August.

Thuong Duc had absorbed hundreds of artillery and mortar shells since the attack began, but the bombardment of 7 August was singular in its intensity. Over 1,200 rounds, including many from 130-mm. guns, landed inside the perimeter beginning on the night of 6 August. The first wave of infantrymen was repulsed that night, but the assault at dawn the next day penetrated the defense. At midmorning, the Ranger commander reported that he had started a withdrawal. Soon radio contact was lost. The gallant ordeal of another ARVN Ranger battalion was over. With Dak Pek and Tieu Attar lost in May, speculation at II Corps Headquarters in Pleiku held that Mang Buk would be next.
Mang Buk

Perched on a hill above the Dak Nghe River, about 4,000 feet above sea level, Mang Buk was over 50 kilometers north of Kontum City and about 30 kilometers north of Chuong Nghia (Plateau Gi). A Communist supply route, locally known as A-16, connected Kontum with Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces and passed south of Mang Buk. The small garrison at Mang Buk, two RF companies and two PF platoons, had no capability to interfere with movement along this route. The subsector commander was under orders to keep one company in the camp and to patrol out to 2,000 meters. His firepower consisted of two 106-mm. recoilless rifles, two 81-mm. mortars, and some machine guns.

Realizing the threat to Mang Buk as well as its vulnerability, the Kontum province chief, Lt. Col. Mai Xuan Hau, ordered the evacuation of civilians from Mang Buk in June 1974. By the time the Communists began their siege on 25 July, all but 800 civilians had left.

Measured against other NVA sieges, the one at Mang Buk was light indeed; only 3,000 rounds hit the camp between 25 July and 4 August, while the subsector claimed 55 enemy killed. Other than 107-mm. rockets, the heaviest projectiles the enemy used were 82-mm. mortars. On 18 August, after a respite, the camp again came under heavy fire. The next day two battalions of the 66th Regiment of the 10th NVA Division, supported by artillery, overran the camp. Without artillery and denied air support by the low cloud cover, the defenders withdrew and headed for Chuong Nghia, the last remaining outpost in Kontum Province. The enemy was not far behind.

Plei Me

When II Corps Headquarters announced on 4 August 1974 that the first phase of the Mang Buk siege was over, the siege of Plei Me began. A well-fortified position about midway between Pleiku City and the fallen outpost of Tieu Atar, Plei Me was defended by the 82d Ranger Battalion, which in April had been ejected from Fire Support Base 711 by an NVA assault. By early August FSB 711, an artillery base north of Plei Me, was back in ARVN hands and able to support the Plei Me defense.

From its base near Duc Co, the 320th NVA Division planned and executed the attack on Plei Me. Reconnaissance and deployments for the attack began in early June as the 48th Infantry Regiment, elements of the 64th Infantry Regiment, and an artillery battalion and an antiaircraft battalion of the 320th moved close to Plei Me. The ARVN II Corps reacted by reinforcing FSB 711 with the 42d Infantry of the 22d ARVN Division and striking enemy assembly areas with air and artillery attacks. The 320th delayed its attack but kept elements of its 48th Regiment near Plei Me. When ARVN II Corps moved the 42d Infantry back to Binh Dinh Province, the NVA B-3 Front saw an opportunity for a long-awaited assault on Plei Me.

The ARVN 82d Ranger Battalion at Plei Me, in addition to its four rifle companies, was reinforced by the 2d Company, 81st Ranger Battalion. The main defense was inside Plei Me Camp itself, with outposts in Chu Ho Hill and Hill 509. When the attack began, the 2d Company was patrolling outside the camp, and only 22 men were able to get back to the camp before the enemy closed off all access. The battalion headquarters was also outside the main defenses when the attack started, but the staff managed to dash in through the main gate before being cut off.

The 320th NVA Division employed at least four infantry battalions from its 9th and 48th Regiments, plus the 26th Independent Regiment of the B-3 Front, and later a battalion of its 64th Regiment, against the 410 men of the ARVN Rangers and the fire bases and relief columns supporting them. Artillery support included at least two 130-mm. guns and three 120-mm. mortars in addition to 85-mm. field guns, 82-mm. mortars, and recoilless rifles. At least 12 heavy antiaircraft machine guns (12.7-mm., equivalent to the U.S. .50-caliber) were in position to fire into the camp and at VNAF aircraft.

Vacating the bunkers bombed by heavy Soviet mortars firing delay-fused projectiles, ARVN Rangers fought from their spider-web pattern of trenches. Two concentric fences of concertina barbed wire ringed the camp. The outer fence, six rows of concertina laced with mines, enclosed a 25-meter minefield strewn with claymores, trip grenades, and command-detonated 105-mm. howitzer projectiles.

Unlike Dak Pek and Tieu Atar, Plei Me was supported by artillery from outside the area under attack. ARVN batteries of 105-mm. and 155-mm. howitzers at Fire Support Base 711 provided excellent support. Artillery at Phu Nhong helped on the southern and eastern approaches, and 175-mm. guns covered the entire perimeter. The commander of the 82d Ranger Battalion and his deputy called and adjusted all fire missions, restricting radio traffic to themselves because the enemy monitored ARVN tactical nets.

Six days after the attack began, the outpost of Chu Ho fell on 10 August, followed five days later by Hill 509, but the main camp held on. Later, the battalion commander said that the outposts fell because they had run out of food. The main camp would have been defeated too if it had not rained, for there was no resupply of water during the 29-day siege. In any case, on 2 September the NVA 320th Division withdrew from the bloody field of
Ple Me. It had launched 20 ground assaults, fired over 10,000 artillery and mortar rounds, and lost at least 350 soldiers in its attempt to overrun the 82d Ranger Battalion.

Duc Duc and Que Son

On 29 July 1974, when the NVA first attacked Thuong Duc, the ARVN 21st Ranger Battalion on the left flank of the Ranger positions protecting Duc Duc District came under heavy attack. Although they inflicted heavy casualties on the 36th NVA Regiment, the Rangers were forced back about 1,000 meters to the slopes of Nui Duong Coi. The NVA pursued, and fighting continued in the rough terrain in front of Nui Duong Coi for several days. Then on 3 August, the 36th Regiment launched a strong attack. Several Ranger positions collapsed, and the commander of the 12th Ranger Group ordered the 39th Ranger Battalion to assist the 21st. After an all-day battle, the enemy withdrew and the Rangers regained all lost ground. The VNAF contributed greatly to the ARVN success; although Ranger casualties were high—more than 35 killed, 100 wounded, and 25 missing—the NVA left over 200 dead on the field. While the infantry fought in the hills, the NVA artillery slammed 280 rounds of 122-mm. rockets and 100-mm. gunfire into the command post of the 12th Ranger Group. Casualties were light, however. Fatigued and badly depleted, the 12th Ranger Group was relieved by the 54th Infantry, 1st ARVN Division. With its battalions down to 200 men each, the group withdrew to the rear to receive replacements and a much-needed rest. Through August and early September, the ARVN 54th Infantry made major advances even though the NVA reinforced the 36th Regiment with the 1st Infantry.

Other reinforcements were on their way from North Vietnam. The 41st Infantry Regiment with three infantry battalions and a sapper battalion arrived in Than My, southwest of Thuong Duc, in mid-August and soon deployed between Thuong Duc and Duc Duc.

While central Quang Nam Province was quaking under the NVA offensive, ARVN forces defending the Que Son Valley also came under heavy attack. The first outpost to fall was a hill southwest of Que Son District Town defended by an RF company and one company of the 57th ARVN Infantry. When contact was lost with the defenders on 31 July, General Truong ordered major changes in I Corps dispositions that inevitably weakened the ARVN hold on contested regions of Quang Ngai Province.

On 1 August, the responsibility for the Que Son Valley was transferred from the 3d ARVN Division, heavily engaged in Thuong Duc and Duc Duc, to the 2d Division. The 57th Infantry, minus a battalion attached to the 2d Infantry in Duc Duc, was attached to the 2d Division in the Que Son Valley, and the 4th Infantry was deployed to the valley from Binh Son District in Quang Ngai Province to be the I Corps reserve south of the Hai Van Pass. To compensate for the 4th Infantry's departure, the 5th Infantry was moved to Binh Son, and the 6th Infantry took over the 5th Infantry's mission in Duc Pho. Only territorials and a few Rangers were left in the threatened Mo Duc District of Quang Ngai.

The 4th Infantry was immediately engaged by two NVA battalions between Fire Support Base Baldy and Que Son. Although no more important positions were lost, fighting continued sporadically for the rest of the year in the Que Son Valley. Da Nang air base was subjected to several rocket attacks during August, but casualties and damage were negligible.

In September, faced with a deteriorating situation north of the Hai Van Pass, General Truong returned troops to the 1st ARVN Division in Thua Thien. Since the 54th Infantry Regiment had pushed the forward defenses of Duc Duc south almost to the Khe Le Valley and the 56th Infantry had partially recovered from punishing summer battles, he ordered the 54th to return to its parent division. General Hinh relieved the 54th with his own division's 56th Infantry. Thus, in early September, the infantrymen of the 56th Regiment returned to the battle-scarred hills of Duc Duc. The 3d Battalion took up positions on the right, on Khuong Que Hill where its 2d Company had fought and lost the first engagement of the enemy's Duc Duc campaign. The 1st Battalion was on the left, on Ky Vi Hill, and the 2d Battalion was in reserve with the regimental headquarters near Duc Duc Subsector.

The 1st NVA Regiment, 2d Division, launched simultaneous, heavily supported assaults on both forward battalions of the 56th Regiment on 4 October. While mortar and artillery fire pounded the 3d Battalion command post, NVA sappers entered the headquarters perimeter and severed communications with the two forward ARVN companies. These companies, under infantry attack from the front, withdrew and were caught in a devastating crossfire from the rear and flanks. The 1st Battalion fared little better; its outposts were also overrun, but casualties were lighter. The NVA coordinated artillery fire with great skill in this assault; a steady rain of shells kept the 56th Regiment's headquarters and the 2d Battalion from reacting while the two forward battalions were being overrun. As soon as he was able, the regimental commander ordered the attached 21st Ranger Battalion back into the line to relieve the shattered 3d Battalion.
The 1st NVA Regiment had accomplished its mission, but casualties were heavy, and it lacked the strength either to pursue or to consolidate its gains. The ARVN defensive line south of Duc Duc remained virtually unchanged, but the 56th Regiment was nearly out of action. Only the 2d Battalion could put more than 300 men in the field, and the 3d Battalion had only 200. General Hinh had to relieve the regiment again with the 12th Ranger Group.

During the summer and fall of 1974, the 3d ARVN Division and attached Rangers had reached exhaustion. By any standards, casualties had been extremely high. More than 4,700 men had been killed, wounded, or were missing in the actions in and around Duc Duc in the three months since the Communist offensive began at Da Trach on 18 July. A disproportionate number were officers and non-commissioned officers for whom no experienced replacements were available.

**Hill 1062**

The first contingent of the 1st Airborne Brigade was flown into Da Nang on 8 August 1974, the day after the 79th Ranger Battalion was driven out of Thuong Duc. Meanwhile the brigade’s heavy equipment was moving up the coast from Saigon on Vietnamese Navy boats. On 11 August General Truong ordered the 3d Airborne Brigade to deploy with three airborne battalions to Da Nang. By 14 August, the brigade headquarters and the 2d, 3d, and 6th Battalions were in Quang Nam, their defensive sectors in Thua Thien having been taken over by the 15th Ranger Group under the operational control of the ARVN 1st Infantry Division. Brig. Gen. Le Quong Luong, commanding the Airborne Division, established his command post at Marble Mountain south of Da Nang. His 2d Brigade remained in Thua Thien attached to the Marine Division.

A steep ridge extended north from the Song Vu Gia and Route 4. The low hills at the southern foot of the ridge had been seized by the 29th NVA Regiment, which had blocked the ARVN task force’s relief of the Rangers at Thuong Duc. The highest point on the ridge was about six kilometers north of Route 4 on Hill 1235, but Hill 1062, about 2,000 meters south of Hill 1235, offered the best observation of the road and Dai Loc. Having placed an observation post on Hill 1062, the NVA was delivering accurate artillery fire on ARVN positions in Dai Loc. Consequently, the first mission assigned to the Airborne Division was the capture of Hill 1062 and the ridge south to the road. To deal with the threat developing west of Da Nang, the 3d Airborne Brigade was assigned the secondary mission of blocking the western approaches in Hieu Duc District.

The 8th and 9th Airborne Battalions began the attack and made their first firm contact with elements of the 29th NVA Regiment on 18 August east of Hill 52, the same area in which the 3d ARVN Division Task Force had run into strong resistance. For an entire month, these battalions doggedly pressed forward along the ridge toward Hill 1062. In the meantime, having sustained heavy casualties, the 29th NVA Regiment brought in reinforcements. The NVA 3d Corps ordered the 31st NVA Regiment, 2d Division, to Thuong Duc to relieve the 66th Regiment, 304th NVA Division, so that the 66th could be deployed in support of the 29th, which was steadily giving ground to attacking Airborne troops. Additionally, the 24th Regiment, 304th NVA Division, arrived in the battle area in early September. Finally, on 19 September, the 1st Airborne Brigade reported that it had troopers on Hill 1062.

While the ARVN was taking nearly two weeks to consolidate the controlling terrain along this section of the ridge, the 66th NVA Regiment relieved the severely depleted 29th, and elements of the 24th NVA Regiment joined the fight against the 1st Airborne Brigade. By 2 October, the brigade was in possession of the high ground, and the 2d and 9th Battalions were digging in on the ridge to the south. About 300 enemy soldiers were killed in this phase of the battle on Hill 1062, and seven prisoners of war were taken. All were from the 304th—the Dien Bien Phu Division—one of the first regular units in the Viet Minh formed by General Giap in 1950.

During the weeks that followed, the 1st Airborne Brigade fought off repeated attempts by the 304th NVA Division to retake the ridge. Making skillful use of air and artillery support, the brigade managed to hold on despite the heavily supported assaults of superior numbers. In one incident, when the 24th NVA Infantry was allowed to penetrate the defenses on hills 383 and 126 and advance directly into a killing zone of preplanned artillery fires, nearly 250 of the attacking force was killed.

By mid-October, the 1st Airborne Brigade had also taken heavy casualties, and the four battalions in the hills above Thuong Duc were down to about 500 men each. Estimated enemy losses were over 1,200 killed during the first half of October, and 14 soldiers of the Dien Bien Phu Division were prisoners of war. The NVA, nevertheless, was determined to regain the dominating heights. On 29 October, the reinforced 24th NVA Regiment began another assault on Hill 1062, this time firing large concentrations of tear gas. This assault carried to the highest position on the ridge, forcing an airborne battalion to withdraw. On 1 November, Hill 1062 was again in enemy hands.

Meanwhile in Thua Thien Province, enemy pressure against the lightly held Hue defenses was be-
coming severe, and General Truong was receiving strongly phrased requests from his elements north of the Hai Van Pass to return at least some of the Airborne Division. General Truong resisted and ordered Brig. Gen. Le Quong Luong of the Airborne to retake Hill 1062. The attack began on 8 November, and three days later ARVN troops were back on the ridge. They established new defensive positions on the slopes, leaving the furrowed, shattered crest to the dozens of NVA dead who remained there. Although heavy fighting continued in the hills and on the ridge for several more weeks as the Airborne Division expanded its control of critical terrain, the most violent phase of one of the bloodiest battles since the cease-fire was over. The Airborne Division had lost nearly 500 of its soldiers killed since its commitment in Quang Nam Province on 15 August. Nearly 2,000 had been wounded. Enemy casualties were estimated to be about 2,000 killed and 5,000 wounded. Seven of the nine airborne battalions had fought in the three-month campaign, and by mid-November six of these were on Hill 1062. The enemy had observation of the airborne positions from the heights of Hill 1235, but General Luong could not muster enough force to take this peak and still defend what he had. Similarly, the enemy lacked the forces to counterattack in strength.

By the end of 1974, all but two airborne battalions were withdrawn from Hill 1062. The remaining 1st and 7th Battalions kept patrols there and depended on artillery fires to deny the terrain to enemy occupation, but placed their main battle positions near Dong Lam Mountain, about 4 kilometers to the east, and in the ridges above Hill 52.

The rainy season had reached Quang Nam Province in October and provided some respite from the intense and continual combat of summer. Both sides needed this time to recuperate and prepare for the next dry season and, although neither knew it then, the final NVA offensive.

Kontum

While the first phase of the siege of Mang Buc was under way, the rest of Kontum Province was relatively quiet. On 2 August 1974, Brig. Gen. Le Trung Tuong, commanding the 23d ARVN Division and responsible for the security of the western Central Highlands (Kontum, Pleiku, Darlac and Quang Duc Provinces), moved his main headquarters from Kontum to a more central location in Pleiku. In Kontum he left a forward command post and a sizable force of infantry under the command of his deputy, Colonel Hu The Quang. The troops under Colonel Quang's command included the 45th ARVN Infantry Regiment, defending the northeast approaches to Kontum City and operating in the mountainous jungle between Route 5B (LTL-5B) and Outpost Number 4. About 15 kilometers northeast of Kontum, Outpost Number 4 was lost to an NVA attack during the summer and never recovered by the ARVN. It had provided a base for interdicting an NVA road, called Route 715, which the Communists were constructing from Vo Dinh, northeast of Kontum, toward Binh Dinh. North of Outpost Number 4, Outpost Number 5 served a similar purpose, but it was also lost to the NVA that summer.

Colonel Quang had the 40th ARVN Infantry Regiment, attached from the 22d ARVN Division, securing the northwestern approaches to the city. Two battalions of the 44th ARVN Infantry Regiment were in reserve behind the 40th northwest of Kontum, while the third battalion was retraining in Ban Me Thuot. Three RF battalions manned outposts along the northern and western approaches, while a fourth RF battalion and two Ranger battalions secured the southern reaches of the province and the Chu Pao Pass.

Although Colonel Quang felt that he could defend Kontum City, ARVN formations in the highlands had lost the mobility that had previously enabled II Corps to deploy forces rapidly by air—from small patrols to entire divisions—to meet enemy threats and somewhat nullify the advantages of initiative and surprise. Constraints on fuel and maintenance had all but eliminated air mobility. Long range reconnaissance patrols, formerly moved by helicopter, were now walking to objective areas, their range and ability to remain drastically shortened. Logistical airlift for the entire province was limited to one CH-47 helicopter; consequently, nearly all supply and evacuation was trucked as far as possible, then carried over steep trails to forward positions. Thus, even in good weather, the ARVN could not reinforce or rescue isolated outposts such as Mang Buc.

As Mang Buc was overrun, the NVA B-3 Front conducted attacks along the Kontum defenses that held the meager II Corps reserves in place, denying reinforcements to Mang Buc. Enemy pressure declined after Mang Buc's fall, and the ARVN in Kontum concentrated on the enemy's Route 715, which by mid-September had been extended to within 15 kilometers of the boundary of Binh Dinh and Pleiku Provinces, bypassing the Kontum defenses on the east. The ARVN II Corps sent long range reconnaissance patrols against the road to lay mines and sabotage trucks and roadbuilding equipment, and air strikes were called in. Four 175-mm guns in Kontum, with fires adjusted by the Province's remaining L-19 observation plane, also interdicted Route 715. Persistent ARVN attacks caused high casualties among the NVA work parties and temporarily stopped further extension of the road.
Chuong Nghia

While II Corps was pounding away at Route 715, the NVA B-3 Front was preparing to attack Chuong Nghia. Aware of an impending attack, II Corps headquarters moved the 254th RF Battalion, operating west of Kontum City, to reinforce the defense of Chuong Nghia. By the end of September 1974 the garrison had 600 men—280 from the 254th, one RF Company, and nine PF platoons. The defense included a ring of outposts as far as six kilometers from the camp, intermediate outposts about three kilometers away, and an inner ring about 1,000 meters out. About 2,000 civilians lived within the camp's perimeter.

The NVA attacked the outposts on 30 September. Two 105-mm. howitzers in Chuong Nghia could not adequately support the widely scattered platoons and companies and one by one, the outposts were overrun. Although the commander of II Corps, General Toan, ordered two 175-mm. guns to move up Route 5B from Kontum to support the defense, the poor condition of the road made the going very slow. As the attacks continued on 1 October, II Corps sent an RF company by air to Chuong Nghia.

By 2 October, five outposts had fallen and the camp was under heavy bombardment. The ARVN 251st RF Battalion was at the Kontum airfield waiting to be flown to Chuong Nghia, but heavy enemy fire on the airstrip prevented the landing. The two 175-mm. guns were not yet in range.

The final assault began on 3 October with heavy artillery concentrations falling on the subsector headquarters and on the command post of the 254th RF Battalion. Volleys of 1,000 rounds were followed by the assault of a battalion of NVA infantry, from the 28th Regiment, against the subsector and 254th RF Battalion. Defensive positions were quickly overrun. Chuong Nghia was lost, and few survived. Although VNAF fighter-bombers were employed against the 28th NVA Regiment and its supporting artillery, the last major outpost in Kontum Province had fallen. Without supporting artillery, the South Vietnamese had no way to hold a small, isolated garrison against a determined, well-supported NVA attack.

Quang Ngai

The demands for reinforcements in Quang Nam Province and in the Que Son Valley had spread the ARVN very thin in Quang Ngai Province, which had been boiling with enemy activity since early summer. The 2d ARVN Division, under Brig. Gen. Tran Van Nhut, had conducted fairly successful pacification and security operations in Quang Ngai, but the vast expanse of territory it had to cover was vulnerable to hit-and-run Communist attacks. Furthermore, a number of ARVN outposts were deep in the hills beyond supporting or quick reinforcing distance.

The principal adversary opposing the ARVN in Quang Ngai was still the 52d NVA Brigade, which had four infantry battalions, a sapper battalion, and supporting artillery. The brigade had its battalions deployed west of National Highway 1 (QL-1), and south of Nghia Hanh District Town in position to threaten the populated areas of Mo Duc and Duc Pho, as well as the mountain district seats at Son Ha, Tra Bong, and Minh Long and the frontier outpost of Gia Vuc in the far western edge of Ba To District. Five other battalions of local sappers and infantry were disposed close to Route 1 from the northern district of Binh Son south to Duc Pho, and one battalion had infiltrated into the Batangan Peninsula east of Binh Son.

Augmenting the 2d ARVN Division in Quang Ngai Province were 12 RF battalions and 3 battalions of the 11th Ranger Group. The 68th Ranger Battalion was at Son Ha District Town, over the mountains west of Quang Ngai City; the 69th Ranger Battalion was in Tra Bong, up the Tra Bong River from Binh Son; and the 70th Ranger Battalion was still defending the outpost at Gia Vuc.

Timing operations with the opening of the offensive in Quang Nam Province, the NVA initiated heavy attacks by fire and ground assaults throughout Quang Ngai on the night of 19 July 1974. The following morning, NVA gunners fired at the base at Chu Lai with eight 122-mm. rockets but caused no damage. Attacks continued for five days before the intensity began to fall off.

Meanwhile, the critical situation in Quang Nam impelled General Truong to order Maj. Gen. Le Van Nhu to send his 4th Infantry Regiment to take over defense of the Que Son Valley, relieving the 3d ARVN Division of a responsibility that had distracted General Hinh from the principal threat in central Quang Nam. Heavy NVA attacks flared again on 3 and 4 August in the central district of Nghia Hanh. In the hills south of the district town in the Cong Hoa Valley, the 118th RF Battalion was overrun following a heavy artillery concentration. Two battalions, one RF and the other from the 5th Infantry, were sent to reinforce the 118th, but they arrived too late to rescue the position. General Truong and General Nhu saw the hard-won gains of the summer slipping away. There were no spectacular enemy initiatives: just a gradual erosion of security as one small position after another fell to short, violent enemy assaults. But with so few troops available, South Vietnamese commanders could do little to halt the decline, much less restore the earlier situation.

The first of the district headquarters to fall during the NVA offensive was Minh Long when elements...
of the 52d NVA Brigade overran the two defending RF Companies on 17 August. Outposts held by the 15 local PF platoons collapsed quickly under the weight of NVA artillery. A platoon of 105-mm. artillery was soon out of action, its howitzers damaged by enemy fire. A three-battalion ARVN relief force failed to make any headway, and NVA trucks were seen hauling ammunition into Minh Long on 23 August.

Three days after the fall of Minh Long, General Nhut asked General Truong for permission to withdraw the 70th Ranger Battalion from Gia Vuc, now completely isolated and exposed to Communist attack. General Nhut also wanted to pull the 68th and 69th Rangers out of Son Ha and Tra Bong because these battalions had poor prospects for survival against heavy NVA firepower. General Truong understood, but he would not agree to abandoning any districts to the Communists without a fight.

Artillery fire on Gia Vuc began on 19 September, followed shortly by ground assaults. Five outposts fell, but the Rangers moved out quickly and retook three of them. But without artillery support or air strikes—the weather was bad—and losing 50 men killed and as many wounded, the 70th Ranger Battalion was unable to hold. The camp fell on 21 September. Only 21 survivors eventually made it back to ARVN lines.

Some help for beleaguered Quang Ngai Province appeared on 1 October when the 4th Infantry, 2d ARVN Infantry Division, returned to Chu Lai from its operations in the Que Son Valley to try to recover the terrain lost to the NVA south of Nghia Hanh District Town. Well entrenched, the Communists had even moved a battery of 37-mm. antiaircraft guns to within four kilometers of the district town, but the guns were soon destroyed by ARVN artillery. The enemy force blocking the 4th Infantry's advance included three battalions of the 52d NVA Brigade. The 4th Infantry took heavy casualties but made no significant gains.

In December, the reconstituted battalions of the 14th Ranger Group from Quang Nam Province reinforced the 6th ARVN Infantry in heavy fighting on the Batangan Peninsula. Casualties were high, but the improvements to local security were slight.

As the year ended in Quang Ngai, the advantage and initiative lay in enemy hands. South Vietnamese territorial forces were understrength and dispirited; South Vietnamese forces were understrength and dispirited; South Vietnamese forces. Replacements were not well trained or in sufficient numbers to bring battered battalions up to strength. On the other hand, the NVA replacement flow was copious and free from interference. Second, NVA command, staff, logistics, and communications had been thoroughly expanded and proven during this campaign; the new 3d Corps had the valuable experience of a major offensive behind it. Third, the NVA had pushed its holdings to the edge of the narrow coastal plain and was within artillery range of nearly every major South Vietnamese installation and population center. Similar progress, meanwhile, was being made north of the Hai Van Pass.

**Note on Sources**

The field reporting from the Consul General's Office, Da Nang, was especially copious and usually reliable; these reports formed a large part of the basis of this chapter. Additionally, the author made a number of visits to Military Region 1 and 2 and has referred to his notes. DAO, Saigon, and J2/JGS Weekly Summaries provided most of the information on order-of-battle and combat activity. Most significant in this chapter, however, were the comments and corrections made by Generals Truong and Hinh whose personal recollections provided accurate data and understanding.
The Ring Tightens
Around Hue

Throughout the early months of 1974, the NVA maintained continual pressure against RVNAF defenses north of the Hai Van Pass and concentrated on the ARVN Airborne Division and 1st Infantry Division positions west and south of Hue. Aware that with three full-strength Marine brigades holding the line in Quang Tri Province an overly aggressive campaign would invoke retaliations against its burgeoning logistical complex around Dong Ha, the NVA did little to disturb the balance in the northernmost province. The most serious erosion of ARVN defenses took place during the skirmishes for the high ground south of Phu Bai, the only major airfield serving Hue. There the ARVN 1st Infantry Division was responsible for protecting the airfield, Highway I as it passed through the narrow defile in Phu Loc District, and the vital Ta Trach corridor to Hue.

Nui Mo Tau, Nui Bong, and Hill 350

The Hai Van Ridge formed the Thua Thien-Quan Nam Province boundary from the sea to Bach Ma Mountain, which was occupied by the enemy in October 1973. The ridge continued west past Bach Ma until it descended into the valley of the Song Ta Trach at Ruong Ruong, where the NVA had established a forward operating base. Local Route 545 twisted through the mountains north from Ruong Ruong, joining Highway I just south of Phu Bai. As it crossed over the western slopes of the Hai Van Ridge, Route 545 passed between two lower hills, Nui Mo Tau on the west, and Nui Bong on the east. Nui Mo Tau and Nui Bong were only about 300 meters and 140 meters high, respectively, but the ARVN positions on them, and on neighboring hills, formed the main outer ring protecting Phu Bai and Hue on the south. Outposts were placed on hills 2,000 to 5,000 meters farther south, including hills as identified by their elevations of 144, 224, 273 and 350 meters. (Map 17)

At first, the corps commander, General Truong, viewed the see-saw contest for the hills south of Nui Mo Tau as hardly more than training exercises and of no lasting tactical or strategic importance. That assessment was supportable so long as the enemy was unable to extend his positions to within range of Phu Bai. Once this extension occurred, protecting Hue's vital air and land links with the south became matter of great urgency.

During inconclusive engagements in the spring of 1974, the ARVN 1st Division managed to hold on to Nui Mo Tau and Nui Bong, losing Hill 144 between the two but regaining it on 7 April. Hills 273 and 350 were lost; then Hill 350 was recaptured by the 3d Battalion, 3d ARVN Infantry, in a night attack on 4 June. By this time, I Corps units were bothered by reductions in artillery ammunition. Tight restrictions had been imposed by General Truong on the number of rounds that could be fired in counterbattery, preparatory, and defensive fires. These conditions impelled the infantry commanders to seek means other than heavy artillery fires to soften objectives before the assault. In recapturing Hill 350, the 3d ARVN Infantry worked around behind the hill and blocked the enemy's access to defenses on the hill. Within a few days, NVA soldiers on the hill were out of food and low on ammunition. When the ARVN commander, monitoring the enemy's tactical radio net, learned this, he ordered the assault. No artillery was used; mortars and grenades provided the only fire support for the ARVN infantrymen. But they took the hill on the first assault even though the NVA defenders fired a heavy concentration of tear gas against them. ARVN casualties were light while the NVA 5th Regiment lost heavily in men and weapons.

Order of Battle

As the 1st ARVN Division pressed southward against the NVA 324B Division's battalions trying to hold hard-won outposts in the hills, another new NVA corps headquarters was organized north of the Hai Van Pass and placed in command of the 304th, 324B, and 325th Divisions. Designated the 2d Corps, it was a companion to the new 1st Corps in Thanh Hoa Province of North Vietnam, the 3d Corps south of the Hai Van, and the 301st Corps near Saigon. In the Thua Thien campaign, the 324B Division eventually assumed control of five regiments: its own 803d and 812th and three independent NVA infantry regiments, the 5th, 6th, and 271st. In early June 1974, after releasing the 1st Airborne Brigade to the reserve controlled by the Joint General Staff, General Truong made major adjustments in command and deployments north of the Hai Van Pass. The Marine Division was extended to cover about 10 kilometers of Thua Thien Province
and was reinforced with the 15th Ranger Group of three battalions and the 1st Armored Brigade and had operational control of Quang Tri's seven RF battalions. The division commander, Brig. Gen. Bui The Lan, positioned his forces with the 258th Marine Brigade, with one M-48 tank company attached, defending from the sea southwest to about five kilometers east of Quang Tri City. The 369th Marine Brigade held the center sector, Quang Tri City and Highway 1. Southwest of the 369th was the attached 15th Ranger Group along the Thach Han River, and the 147th Marine Brigade was on the left and south of the 15th Rangers. When he had to extend his forces southward to cover the airborne sector, General Lan used a task force of the 1st Armored Brigade, two Marine battalions, and an RF battalion, keeping three tank companies on the approaches to Hue.

The Airborne Division retained the responsibility for the Song Bo approach, placing its two remaining brigades, the 2d and 3d, to the west. The 2d Brigade had two RF battalions and one company of M-41 tanks attached. The 4th NVA Regiment was the principal enemy unit in the 2d Brigade's sector, while the 271st NVA Regiment opposed the 3d Airborne Brigade to the south near Fire Support Base Bastogne.

The four regiments and two attached RF battalions of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division were deployed in a long arc from the Airborne Division's left through the hills to Phu Loc District, with the 54th Infantry Regiment protecting Highway 1 from the Truoi Bridge, just north of Nui Bong, to the Hai Van Pass.

The Railroad

The national railroad paralleled Highway 1 through Thua Thien Province, and daily freight and passenger trains ran between Da Nang and Hue. Since the restoration of traffic in April 1973, passenger trains were heavily used because of low fares and regular service. In January 1974, the railroad carried 128,000 passengers and 1,500 tons of freight along a 100-kilometer run. In mid-May, the Communists increased their efforts to disrupt this service, for although the railroad had negligible economic and military value, it was popular with the people and its operation demonstrated the South Vietnamese government's ability to provide security.

Saboteurs concentrated their attacks along the stretch of rail that ran along the coast from the Lang Co Bridge, the first major bridge north of the Hai Van Pass, and northern Phu Loc District, just south of Phu Bai. More than 40 bridges and numerous defiles were in this section. By mid-June attacks became so frequent that work crews refused to repair track and roadbed without greater protection; one of their work trains was hit by rocket fire near Phu Loc District Town. The enemy placed large stone blocks on the rails, and the workmen, suspecting that they were mined, refused to remove them. Large sections of rail went unrepaired, and the line had to be closed on 22 June.

With territorials providing security for the crews, service on the line was restored on 9 July, only to be closed again the same day when a mine tore up 100 meters of rail. Nevertheless, the line was back in service the following day. In early August, the attack shifted to south of the Hai Van Pass. A large mine planted between the first and second tunnels north of Da Nang destroyed three cars and caused a few civilian casualties.

Interest in riding the railroad naturally began to wane. In August only 4,500 passengers and 180 tons of freight were carried until traffic was again suspended on the 20th. During the eight months of operation in 1974, a locomotive and 15 cars had been destroyed, 3,000 meters of rail had been torn up, and civilian casualties numbered 11 killed and 50 wounded. When he chose to do so the enemy showed that he could close down the railroad.

Naval Engagement Off Quang Tri

While skirmishing for the hills south of Hue occupied the 1st ARVN and 324B NVA Divisions, an event occurred along the Quang Tri coast, demanding the attention of the high commands on both sides. On 20 June 1974, a South Vietnamese Navy patrol sighted a convoy of two steel-hulled landing craft and 30 wooden boats off the South Vietnam coast, south of the mouth of the Cua Viet River. Although there was no clear line of demarcation defining the depth of the NVA's control south of the Cua Viet, these boats were about three kilometers off shore and, by RVNAF reckoning, in South Vietnamese waters. Accordingly, a VNAF helicopter gunship was sent to attack. After a few rounds, the helicopter's guns jammed, and it broke off the attack. Meanwhile, the small convoy changed course and headed north toward the Cua Viet, its original destination; poor navigation had caused it to miss the channel and continue south.

But one of the steel-hulled boats, its master apparently still confused about his location, lumbered on towards Hue, and the forward headquarters of I Corps at Hue ordered its capture. By this time, ARVN units along the coast and Vietnamese Navy elements had been alerted. Eventually, the ARVN 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron, using TOW missiles and tank gunfire, sank the boat off the coast of Thon My Thuy Village, northeast of Hai Lang District Town. The boat's log, recovered along with the bodies of the eight-man crew and part of
the cargo (200 cases of Chinese canned pork and 1,000 NVA uniforms), revealed that the vessel belonged to the 102d Boat Company and that there were 10 other boats and 2 barges in the 102d, 7 of which routinely operated between North Vietnam and Dong Ha in the Cua Viet.

The North Vietnamese protested the sinking, claiming that the boat, on a peaceful mission in their waters, was wantonly and illegally destroyed in an act of piracy. The South Vietnamese replied in equally strong terms, charging hostile intrusion by an armed vessel into their territorial waters. Both sides were obviously embarrassed; the North because of the demonstrably poor seamanship of its boat crew; the South because of the uncoordinated action that resulted in the sinking of an enemy boat that could have been easily captured. But the GVN was clearly the winner; it did have the ship's log with its interesting information concerning NVA logistics, and it had a few cases of good canned pork.

An Assist From the Hungarians

While the RVNAF was gaining a modicum of intelligence through the sinking of the enemy boat the NVA was apparently reaping a bountiful harvest of data concerning RVNAF dispositions, defenses, and operations through its connections with the Hungarian delegation on the International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS). Strong indications that this was so appeared north of the Hai Van Pass early in 1974, and the case was the subject of a detailed report submitted in June by the National Police of Military Region 1 to police headquarters in Saigon.

The essence of the report was that several members of the Hungarian delegation to the ICCS had been observed since February taking pictures and making notes at RVNAF bases, outposts, bridges, and other sensitive sites and that this activity bore all the earmarks of espionage. The inescapable conclusion was that the information so collected was espionage activities. The following elements of the report were considered significant examples of the kind of reconnaissance the Hungarians were engaged in:

February—Lieutenant Colonel Markus, Chief of the Hungarian ICCS group in Quang Tri, together with Lieutenant Gyori and Sergeant Szabo toured Phu Vang and Phu Thu Districts of Thua Thien Province, using maps and a camera to record the RVNAF defensive positions in the area.

March—LTC Markus, with camera and maps, was stopped at an RVNAF checkpoint on a road leading to the forward positions of the 3d Infantry Regiment, 1st ARVN Division. A few days later, LTC Markus and another member of his team drove from Hue to Quang Tri, recording on maps the GVN positions and installations along Highway 1. On the last day of the month, LTC Markus and CPT Gyula Toser were seen photographing all bridges on Highway 1 between Hue and Da Nang.

April—Three Hungarian field-grade officers arrived in Quang Tri from Saigon and, guided by LTC Markus, drove around the ruined city taking pictures of the Marine positions.

May—Hungarian Signal Sergeant Toth and two other members of the Da Nang team drove from Da Nang to the Hai Van Pass, taking pictures of the Nang O Bridge, the Esso gasoline storage area, and RVNAF military installations en route. Later in the month, Major Kovacs, chief of the Hungarian unit at Phu Bai was observed photographing, with a telephoto lens, aircraft landing and departing Phu Bai Airbase. He was also seen using binoculars and recording the locations of the RVNAF defenses around Phu Bai. Also in May, LTC Varkegyi and Lt. Borkely from Saigon toured the Hai Van Pass with Major Kovacs—taking pictures of all RVNAF installations.

June—Another delegation visited from Saigon. Brigadier General Csapo, Colonel Vida and three others were given the tour to the Hai Van Pass by Lieutenant Colonel Horvath (Chief of the Hue unit) and Major Kovacs. Using a map to note the locations, the party took pictures of installations all along the way.

There was probably no direct connection, but during the last week of June enemy sappers got to the fuel storage area at Camp Evans northwest of Hue and the ammunition storage at Phu Bai. About 8,000 gallons of gasoline burned at Camp Evans; 4,600 tons of ammunition blew up at Phu Bai.

Infiltration into the Thua Thien Lowlands

Ever since the flurry of battles following the January 1973 cease-fire subsided, the lowlands of Thua Thien had been considered almost totally free of Communist-controlled hamlets. Unlike the other southerly coastal provinces of Military Region 1, there were no so-called leopard spots of VC enclaves in either Thua Thien or Quang Tri Provinces. In the fall of 1974, however, disturbing evidence began to appear indicating that three small VC fortified areas had been established since June in Phong Dien District north of Hue. This district of Thua Thien was lightly populated, mostly a wasteland of sand dunes and tidal marsh, little of which was suitable for agriculture or even habitation.
One enclave was in the northwestern corner of the district on the edge of Phong Hoa Village. Occupying an area approximately two kilometers square, it was controlled by a body of about 50 VC political cadre and armed cadre from neighboring Hai Lang District of Quang Tri. During late October, a company from the 33d NVA Sapper Battalion entered the enclave and helped local forces construct bunkers and install antiaircraft machine guns. The company also mined the perimeter with 105-mm. howitzer projectiles and posted signs warning citizens of the minefields. One of these mines blew the tracks off an ARVN armored personnel carrier during an ARVN probe of the area, but a later operation eventually penetrated and cleared the area.

Another enclave, larger but less well defended, was in eastern Phong Dien District. Located in Phong Hien Village, it provided a base for a small armed unit that raided other hamlets in the region and attempted to proselyte in nearby refugee resettlements. But these disturbances in rear areas were of minor importance when measured against the expanding conflict in the hills south of Phu Bai.

The Hills of Phu Loc and Nam Hoa

Hills 144, 273, 224, 350, and Nui Mo Tau, overlooking the lines of communication through Phu Loc District and providing observation and artillery sites in range of Phu Bai, were generally along the boundary between Phu Loc and Nam Hoa Districts of Thua Thien Province. Having recaptured Hill 350 on 4 June, the ARVN 1st Division continued the attack toward Hill 273. A fresh battalion, the 1st Battalion, 54th Infantry, took the hill on 27 June, incurring light casualties, and by the next day, the 1st ARVN Division controlled all of the important high ground south of Phu Bai.

On 29 June General Truong directed his deputy north of the Hai Van Pass, General Thi, to constitute a regimental reserve for the expected NVA counterattacks against the newly won objectives. General Thi accordingly replaced the 54th Infantry with the 3d Infantry on July 5, the 54th becoming the corps reserve north of the Hai Van. General Truong had good reason to be concerned. The NVA was preparing for increased and prolonged operations in Thua Thien Province, as revealed by aerial photography of NVA rear areas on 30 June. A 150,000-gallon fuel tank farm, connected to the pipeline through the A Shau Valley, was photographed under construction in far western Quang Nam, only 25 kilometers south of the NVA base in Ruong Ruong. The Ruong Ruong region, also called the Nam Dong Secret Zone, was seen growing in logistic capacity. Local Routes 593 and 545 were shown to be repaired and in use, and a tank park and two new truck parks were discernable.

The 324B NVA Division took a while to get organized for renewed attacks in southern Thua Thien. Its battalions had taken severe beatings, and a period of re-equipping and replanning was necessary. In the meantime, action shifted to the old Airborne Brigade sector in northern Thua Thien where the 6th and 8th Marine Battalions, attached to the 147th Brigade, came under heavy attack. Attacks continued through July, and some Marine outposts, targets for 130-mm. gunfire, had to be given up. No important changes in dispositions took place, however.

Mid-July passed in southern Thua Thien without much activity. But on 25 July, as the 2d Infantry Regiment, 3d ARVN Division, was trying to regroup following a devastating engagement above Duc Duc, General Truong ordered the 54th Infantry, 1st ARVN Division, from Thua Thien to Quang Nam for attachment to the 3d. The 1st Infantry Division, with only three regiments, was left with a 60-kilometer front including Highway 1 and no reserve north of the Hai Van Pass. Since this situation was hazardous, General Truong on 3 August ordered General Thi to reconstitute a reserve using the 15th Ranger Group, at that time attached to the Marine Division on the Thach Han River.

Consequently, on 5 August the 121st RF Battalion replaced the 60th Ranger Battalion on the Quang Tri front. Shortly afterward the 61st and 94th Ranger Battalions pulled out, relieved respectively by the 126th RF Battalion and the 5th Marine Battalion. But events in Quang Nam forced General Truong to change his plans for the 15th Group; because Truong Duc had just fallen, he needed the 3d Airborne Brigade in Quang Nam. So, as soon as the Marines and territorials replaced the battalions of the 15th Group, the relief of the 3d Airborne Brigade began in the Song Bo corridor. But, General Thi was still without a reserve north of the Hai Van Pass, and fresh opportunities for the new NVA 2d Corps appeared in Phu Loc District.

While General Truong was shifting forces to save Quang Nam, the NVA 2d Corps was moving new battalions near Hill 350. First to deploy, in late July, was the 271st Independent Regiment, previously under the control of the 325th Division. In mid-August, the 812th Regiment, 324B Division, began its march from A Luoi in the northern A Shau Valley. Covering the entire 50 kilometers on foot, the regiment arrived undetected on 26 August. On 28 August attacks on ARVN positions in the Nui Mo Tau–Hill 350 area began. Over 600 artillery rounds hit Nui Mo Tau where the 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry, was dug in. The ARVN battalion held the hill against the assault of the NVA infantrymen, but
an adjacent position, manned by the 129th RF Battalion, collapsed, and the battalion was scattered. To the east, on Nui Bong and Hills 273 and 350, the other two battalions of the 3d Infantry were bombarded by 1,300 rounds and driven from their positions by the 6th and 812th NVA Regiments. Meanwhile, the 8th Battalion, 812th NVA Regiment, overran Hill 224. Thus, in a few hours, except for Nui Mo Tau, all ARVN accomplishments of the long summer campaign in southern Thua Thien were erased. The 51st Infantry of the 1st ARVN Division was rushed into the line, but the momentum of the NVA attack had already dissipated. The casualties suffered by the 324B NVA Division were high, but it now controlled much of the terrain overlooking the Phu Loc lowlands and Phu Bai.

Heavy fighting throughout the foothills continued into the first week of September with strong NVA attacks against the 3d Battalion, 51st Regiment, and the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 3d Regiment. The 6th and 803d NVA Regiments lost nearly 300 men and over 100 weapons in these attacks, but the 3d ARVN Infantry was no longer combat effective due to casualties and equipment losses.

Immediate reinforcements were needed south of Phu Bai. Accordingly, General Truong ordered the 54th Infantry Regiment back to Thua Thien Province, together with the 37th Ranger Battalion, which had been fighting on the Duc Duc front. General Thi took personal command of the ARVN forces in southern Thua Thien and moved the 7th Airborne Battalion from north of Hue and the 11th RF Battalion, securing the port at Tan My, to Phu Bai. These deployments and the skillful use of artillery concentrations along enemy routes of advance put a temporary damper on NVA initiatives in the foothills.

In an apparent diversion to draw ARVN forces northward away from Phu Loc, the NVA on 21 September strongly attacked the 5th and 8th Marine and the 61st Ranger Battalions holding the Phong Dien sector north of Hue. Although some 6,600 rounds, including hundreds from 130-mm. field guns, and heavy rockets, struck the defenses, the South Vietnamese held firmly against the ground attacks that followed. Over 240 enemy infantrymen from the 325th Division were killed, mostly by ARVN artillery, in front of the 8th Marines, and General Thi made no deployments in response to the attack. The next week, however, renewed assaults by the 803d NVA Regiment carried it to Nui Mo Tau, and by the end of September, the 324B NVA Division had consolidated its control over the high ground south of Phu Bai from Nui Mo Tau east to Nui Bong and Hill 350. The NVA 2d Corps immediately began to exploit this advantage by moving 85-mm. field gun batteries of its 78th Artillery Regiment into position to fire on Phu Bai Air Base, forcing the VNAF to suspend operations at the only major airfield north of Hai Van Pass.

The attack to retake the commanding ground around Phu Bai began on 22 October with a diversionary assault on Hill 224 and Hill 303. The 1st ARVN Infantry Regiment was to follow with the main attack against the 803d NVA Regiment on Nui Mo Tau. Bad weather brought by Typhoon Della reduced air support to nothing, and little progress was made by ARVN infantrymen. Nevertheless, the attack on Nui Mo Tau, with a secondary effort against elements of the 812th NVA Regiment on Nui Bong, began on 26 October. The 54th ARVN Infantry, with the 2d Battalion, 3d Infantry, attached, made slight progress on Nui Mo Tau, and the 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry, met strong resistance near Nui Bong. But the ARVN artillery was taking its toll of the NVA defenders, who were also suffering the effects of cold rains sweeping across the steep, shell-torn slopes. Heavy, accurate artillery fire forced the 6th Battalion, 6th NVA Infantry, to abandon its trenches on Hill 312, east of Hill 350, and the 803d Regiment's trenches, bunkers, and communications were being torn up by the ARVN fire placed on Nui Mo Tau. Toward the end of October, the 803d and 812th NVA Regiments were so depleted that the 2d NVA Corps withdrew them from the battle and assigned the defense of Nui Mo Tau and Nui Bong to the 6th Regiment and 271st Regiment respectively.

As heavy rains continued, movement and fire support became increasingly difficult, and the ARVN offensive in southern Thua Thien Province slowed considerably. Enemy artillery continued to inhibit the use of Phu Bai Air Base, and 1st ARVN Division infantrymen around Nui Bong suffered daily casualties to NVA mortars and field guns. On 24 November, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Diem, commanding the 1st Division, secured permission to pull his troops away from Nui Bong and concentrate his forces against Nui Mo Tau.

For a new assault on Nui Mo Tau, General Truong authorized the reinforcement of the 54th Infantry Regiment by the 15th Ranger Group drawn out of the Bo River Valley west of Hue; the 54th would make the main attack. The 54th Infantry commander selected his 3d Battalion to lead, followed by the 2d Battalion and the 50th and 94th Ranger Battalions. When the 3d Battalion had difficulty reaching the attack position, it was replaced on 27 November by the 1st Battalion. Weather was terrible that day, but two Ranger battalions made some progress and established contact with the enemy on the eastern and southeastern slopes of the mountain. On 28 November, with good weather and long-awaited support from the VNAF, the 1st Battalion, 54th Infantry, began moving toward the crest of Nui Mo Tau. On the mountain the enemy was
The Ring Tightens Around Hue

approaching a desperate state; one battalion of the 5th NVA Regiment was moving to reinforce but washouts on Route 545 between Ruong Ruong and Thon Ben Tau south of Nui Mo Tau had all but eliminated resupply.

Despite difficulties, however, the enemy continued to resist strongly on both mountains. On 1 December, Colonel Vo Toan, the highly respected commander of the 1st ARVN Infantry, returned to his regiment from a six-month absence at South Vietnam’s Command and General Staff College. His timely arrival was probably responsible for injecting new spirit and more professional leadership into the attack, which had bogged down so close to its objective. But help also arrived for the defenders; the 812th NVA Regiment, refitted and somewhat recovered from its earlier combat, returned to Nui Mo Tau, replacing the badly battered 6th NVA Regiment. Over on Nui Bong, however, the remnants of the 271st NVA Independent Regiment were without help. On 3 December, the 1st Reconnaissance Company and the 1st and 3d Battalions, 1st ARVN Infantry Regiment, were assaulting a dug-in battalion only 50 meters from the crest. But the expected victory slipped from their grasp. Intense fires drove the South Vietnamese back, and although the 1st Infantry retained a foothold on the slopes, it was unable to carry the crest.

The attack by the 54th ARVN Infantry and the 15th Ranger Group had more success. On 10 December, the 1st Battalion of the 54th took one of the twin crests of Nui Mo Tau and captured the other the following day. As bloody skirmishing continued around the mountain for weeks, the NVA executed another relief, replacing the 812th Regiment with the 803d. Although the enemy remained entrenched on Nui Bong, his access to lines of communication and the base in Ruong Ruong were frequently interdicted by the ARVN units operating in his rear. Furthermore, the 78th NVA Artillery Regiment was forced to remove its batteries because resupply past the ARVN position around Nui Mo Tau became too difficult. The VNAF, meanwhile, resumed military traffic into Phu Bai on 13 December.

By making timely and appropriate economy-of-force deployments, often accepting significant risks, General Truong was able to hold the NVA main force at bay around Hue. But the ring was closing on the Imperial City. Reinforced NVA battalions—equipped with new weapons, ranks filling with fresh replacements from the north—were in close contact with ARVN outposts the length of the front. Behind these battalions, new formations of tanks were being assembled and large logistical installations were being constructed, heavily protected by antiaircraft and supplied by newly improved roads. While the situation in the north appeared ominous, one of the most tragic events of the war was unfolding in Phouc Long Province to the south.

Note on Sources

As in the previous chapter, heavy reliance was placed on the reports of the Consul General, Da Nang, and weekly summaries from DAO and J2/JGS. DAO’s regional liaison office in Da Nang filed numerous valuable reports during this period, and these were also useful for this chapter. Comments by the I Corps commander, General Truong, were essential to establish the accuracy and completeness of the data.
The Last Christmas: Phuoc Long

In his serialized account of the "Great Spring Victory" (translated in the Foreign Broadcast Information Service—FBIS—Daily Report: Asia and Pacific, vol. IV, no. 110, Supplement 38, 7 Jun. 1976, pp. 2, 5–6), Senior General Van Tien Dung of the North Vietnamese Army described deliberations of the Central Military Party Committee and the General Staff as they reviewed the events of the summer campaign. He wrote of how, between April and October, from Thua Thien to Saigon, NVA forces had stepped up the offensive actions and had won great victories. The facts were, of course, that the NVA was stalemated at the extremes of this long battlefield—in Thua Thien and around Saigon—but had overrun isolated bases in the Central Highlands and succeeded at great cost in penetrating to the edge of the Quang Nam lowlands. This latter success loomed large in significance to General Dung and NVA planners:

We paid special attention to the outcome of a battle which destroyed the district capital of Thuong Duc in the 5th Region. This was a test of strength with the best of the enemy's forces. We destroyed the enemy forces defending the Thuong Duc district capital subsector. The enemy sent in a whole division of paratroopers to launch repeated and protracted counterattacks in a bid to recapture this position, but we heavily decimated the enemy forces, firmly defending Thuong Duc and forcing the enemy to give up.

However distorted the account, the victory at Thuong Duc and the numerous, more easily won objectives in the highlands demonstrated to the satisfaction of the North Vietnamese high command that the time had arrived for an even bolder strategy. General Dung went on to relate how the General Staff reported to the Central Military Party Committee that the combat capability of our mobile main force troops was now altogether superior to that of the enemy's mobile regular troops, that the war had reached its final phase and that the balance of forces had changed in our favor.

General Dung believed, and the Military Committee and the General Staff agreed, that the NVA's superiority should be exploited in a new strategy. The NVA would no longer attack only to destroy the RVNAF but would combine this objective with attacks to "liberate" populated areas. It would move out of the jungles and mountains into the lowlands. NVA planners observed that, "the reduction of U.S. aid made it impossible for the puppet troops to carry out their combat plan and build up their forces" and that the South Vietnamese were "forced to fight a poor man's war," their firepower having decreased "by nearly 60 percent because of bomb and ammunition shortages" and their mobility was reduced "by half due to lack of aircraft, vehicles and fuel."

According to General Dung, the conference of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee met in October, considered the General Staff's assessments and recommendation, and unanimously agreed on the following:

1. The puppet troops were militarily, politically and economically weakening every day and our forces were quite stronger than the enemy in the south.
2. The United States was facing mounting difficulties both at home and in the world, and its potential for aiding the puppets was rapidly declining.
3. We had created a chain of mutual support, had strengthened our reserve forces and materiel and were steadily improving our strategic and political systems.
4. The movement to demand peace, improvement of the people's livelihood, democracy, national independence and Thieu's overthrow in various cities was gaining momentum.

Having assessed their own capabilities and those of RVNAF, and having concluded that the time was right for the final offensive, the conference had to consider how the United States would react. They concluded:

After signing the Paris agreement on Vietnam and withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam, the United States had faced even greater difficulties and embarrassment. The internal contradictions within the U.S. administration and among the United States political parties had intensified. The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the entire United States and precipitated the resignation of an extremely reactionary president—Nixon. The United States faced economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis. Also, U.S. allies were not on good terms with the United States, and countries who had to depend on the United States also sought to escape U.S. control. U.S. aid to the Saigon puppet administration was decreasing.

Comrade Le Duan drew an important conclusion that became a resolution: Having already withdrawn from the south, the United States could hardly jump back in, and no matter how it might intervene, it would be unable to save the Saigon administration from collapse. Phuoc Long became the battleground for the first test of this assessment.

Phuoc Long—the Setting

The summer and fall of 1974 in South Vietnam's 3d Military Region had been difficult times. Unlike the losses in Military Regions 1 and 2, however, very little terrain of consequence had been given up to the NVA summer offensive. The divisional bat-
The Last Christmas: Phuoc Long

RVNAF to mount road-clearing operations each time a major rice and military convoy was scheduled to roll into Phuoc Long. The province required about 500 tons of rice per month, of which only half was produced locally and frequent convoys were necessary. The forces in Phuoc Long kept enough ammunition on hand to last for a week of intensive combat, and these stocks also had to be replenished frequently. Road convoys were supplemented by VNAF C-130s using the airstrip at Song Be.

Anticipating a resupply convoy in early November 1974, the Phuoc Long Sector, commanded by Colonel Nguyen Tan Thanh, started to clear the road. To protect its bases while RF battalions were on the highway, the III Corps, lacking infantry reserves, sent three reconnaissance companies to Phuoc Binh and Song Be, one from each of the three III Corps divisions. Forces at Duc Phong—the 362d RF Battalion, four PF platoons, and a 105-mm. howitzer platoon—and two companies from the 304th RF Battalion from Song Be were committed along Highway 14. In their one brief encounter with the enemy, near the Quang Duc boundary, these forces killed four enemy soldiers from the 201st NVA Regiment of the newly formed 3d NVA division. (This Division, formed in Phuoc Long, was separate from and unrelated to the 3d NVA Division operating in Binh Dinh.) Although the ARVN operation was a success, the presence of an NVA regiment so close to Duc Phong was an ominous sign.

In addition to the 340th and 362d RF Battalions already mentioned, Colonel Thanh also controlled the 341st RF Battalion at Don Luan and the 363d RF Battalion at Bunard. Thirty-four PF Platoons were scattered about the hamlets and military installations around Song Be, while 14 PF Platoons defended eight hamlets in the Duc Phong Subsector. South of Song Be at New Bo Duc, where the refugees of Communist-occupied northern Phuoc Long settled, were nine PF Platoons; in the eight hamlets and military posts around Don Luan, were a like number. Artillery support was provided by four 155-mm. and 16 105-mm. howitzers, employed in two-gun platoons throughout the sector. The RF battalions were fielding about 340 men each—about 85 percent of full strength—but the PF Platoons were seriously understrength.

Diversions

Phuoc Long Province during late November and early December was relatively tranquil, and the attention of the ARVN III Corps commander was divided between his eastern and western flanks. The situation in the northern reaches of his region were of little immediate concern. Outposts around An
Map 18

PHUOC LONG PROVINCE
(Not to scale)

Bo Duc
Phuoc Long City
Duc Phong
Don Luon

Song
Be (Rivet)

Phuoc Long City

Nui Be Ra
Song Be Airfield

LTL-1A

BATTLE OF PHUOC LONG
Dec 1974 - Jan 1975

ARVN dk assault
NVA attack
0 — 2 MILES
0 — 2 KILOMETERS

Ranger
Loc in Binh Long Province received sporadic enemy attacks by fire but were not in peril, although resupply was a constant problem due to NVA anti-aircraft fire. On 5 December an SA-7 missile shot down a CH-47 helicopter nine kilometers south of An Loc, killing all 15 passengers and crew members.

The major enemy threats appeared in Tay Ninh Province in the west and in Long Khanh and Binh Tuy Province in the east. A skirmish northeast of Xuan Loc at the end of November netted a document revealing enemy plans to attack Gia Ray and eliminate ARVN outposts along Route 333 north into Binh Tuy Province. Supporting attacks in Binh Tuy were to be conducted by the 812th NVA Regiment.

While the threat on the eastern flank was investigate, heavy combat in Tay Ninh was under way, NVA rockets falling on the province capital and on adjacent military installations. Although an RF company guarding the radio relay station on the summit of Nui Ba Den began receiving attacks of increasing intensity and frequency, the main NVA effort was against hamlets and RF outposts along local Route 13 northeast of Tay Ninh City. The NVA attacked early on 7 December. By noon, forces from the 205th Independent NVA Regiment were in the hamlets, although the RF post at Soui Da held on. The 8th and 9th Battalions, 205th NVA Regiment, were on local Route 13 southwest of Soui Da, and the NVA D-14 and D-16 Tay Ninh Battalions were blocking ARVN relief efforts. Meanwhile, the 7th Battalion, 205th NVA Regiment, in trying to overrun Soui Da, lost over 100 of its soldiers. The ARVN RF battalion defending Soui Da captured two NVA soldiers to confirm the identification of the 205th NVA Regiment in the attack, and one of the RF patrols ambushed and captured a 100-mm. Soviet field gun. The ARVN 46th Infantry, pushing a column up Route 13 from Tay Ninh City, did not fare so well. Ambushed on 12 December about three kilometers short of Soui Da, it suffered heavy casualties.

While heavy combat was taking place around Nui Ba Den, the 80-man RF company at the top fought off repeated assaults. Helicopter resupply and evacuation had become impossible, and although the company commander reported sufficient food and ammunition, water was running very short and several severely wounded men required evacuation.

Binh Tuy—Long Khanh

The RVNAF JGS and the III Corps commander had excellent warning of the impending NVA attacks in Long Khanh and Binh Tuy Provinces. They knew that the 33d NVA Regiment planned to attack Hoai Duc District in Binh Tuy Province and that the recently formed 812th NVA Regiment, composed of battalions from neighboring Lam Dong, would attack in Tanh Linh District. Furthermore, they rightly estimated that the 274th NVA Regiment would be involved. A new NVA division headquarters had been created to control the operation. Lacking information on its designation, the RVNAF called this new adversary the MR 7 Division, after the NVA military region in which it operated. Later, it was identified as the 6th NVA Division, and it controlled the three infantry regiments mentioned, plus the usual supporting arms and services found in the regular NVA divisions.

There were no regular ARVN units in Binh Tuy Province when the NVA offensive began. Territorial companies were deployed in the principal villages, and smaller territorial detachments secured bridges and checkpoints along local Routes 333 and 335, Hoai Duc's and Tanh Linh's only usable land routes out of the province. The province's small population was concentrated in the villages along these two roads, which generally followed the meandering course of the Song La Nga. Beginning in the 5,000-foot mountains overlooking the flat, deep forests of Binh Tuy on the northeast quadrants, the Song La Nga flowed through the rice bowl of the province. The two district towns, Tanh Linh on the east and Hoai Duc on the west, each had an airfield. The only other sizable village in the Province was Vo Xu, about midway between the two.

The 812th NVA Regiment attacked at Tanh Linh on 8 December. Supported by the 130th Artillery Battalion, one sapper and three infantry battalions attacked the subsector, the artillery position on the hill above the town, and the villages between Tanh Linh and Vo Xu. By the next day, the NVA Regiment had captured two 155-mm. howitzers at Tanh Linh, occupied the surrounding villages, and held the road between Vo Xu and Tanh Linh.

The ARVN III Corps ordered the 18th Infantry Division, with the 7th Ranger Group attached, from Xuan Loc to reinforce the territorials in Binh Tuy Province. When the 32d Ranger Battalion fell into a well-laid ambush along Route 333 and sustained heavy casualties, it became clear that the 33d NVA Regiment was not going to permit the reinforcement of Binh Tuy to proceed without a fight. Later the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 48th ARVN Infantry, 18th Division, joined the attack along Route 333 and were soon in heavy combat north of Gia Ray. In the days that followed, the 85th Ranger Battalion made it a four-battalion task force pushing up Route 333, but the lead elements—the Rangers—never made it past Gia Huynh, still 16 kilometers south of Hoai Duc. The NVA 33d Regiment was dug in along the road, well supported by mortars and artillery.
On 17 December Duy Can Village, between Vo Xu and Tanh Linh, was overrun by the 812th NVA Regiment, and the few survivors of the 700th RF Company struggled into Tanh Linh. Although outposts still in ARVN hands, as well as Hoai Duc and Tanh Linh, were receiving heavy indirect fire, General Dong, commanding III Corps ordered the 18th Division not try to press forward past Gia Huynh on Route 333. With his Military Region under attack from Tay Ninh to Phuoc Long, he was unwilling to risk having four of his battalions cut off and decimated. Meanwhile, the NVA blew a bridge south of Hoai Duc, occupied Vo Xu, and increased the intensity of its attack on Tanh Linh. Following a 3,000-round bombardment on 23 and 24 December, the NVA launched five successive assaults, finally overrunning the last defenses in Tanh Linh on Christmas. Hoai Duc, meanwhile, was under attack by the 274th Infantry, 6th NVA Division.

After the 274th NVA Regiment had penetrated the local defenses of Hoai Duc and had gained a foothold in the northeastern and southwestern edges of the town, the ARVN 18th Division moved the 1st and 2d Battalions, 43d Infantry by helicopter west and north of the town respectively, and began pushing the enemy out. While two battalions of the 48th ARVN Infantry held their positions on Route 333 north of Gia Ray, the tired and depleted 7th Ranger Group was withdrawn to Binh Duong to rest and re-equipped and made available to General Dong as a reserve.

Tay Ninh

NVA assaults on Nui Ba Den in Tay Ninh Province continued throughout December 1974, but the tough little ARVN RF Company held on. Meanwhile, by mid-month, an ARVN relief column eventually reached Suoi Da and found that the besieging enemy force had withdrawn. VNAF efforts to resupply the troops on the mountain were largely unsuccessful. Helicopters were driven off by heavy fires, and fighter-bombers were forced to excessive altitudes by SA-7 and antiaircraft artillery. One F-5A fighter-bomber was shot down by an SA-7 on 14 December. Finally, without food and water and with nearly all ammunition expended, the 3d Company, 314th RF Battalion, on 6 January picked up its wounded and withdrew down the mountain to friendly lines.

The Last Days of Phuoc Long

The 301st NVA Corps conducted the campaign for Phuoc Long Province, using the newly formed 3d NVA Division, the 7th NVA Division, which had been operating in eastern Binh Duong Province, a tank battalion from COSVN, an artillery and an antiaircraft regiment, and several local-force sapper and infantry units. This was a formidable force to concentrate against four widely dispersed ARVN RF battalions and PF platoons. One by one the isolated garrisons came under attack and were overrun.

The first blow fell on Don Luan on 13 December 1974. Simultaneous assaults on Duc Phong and New Bo Duc Subsectors on 14 December succeeded in overrunning these posts while the defense at Don Luan held. The next to go was the post at Bunard, along with two platoons of 105-mm. howitzers. Enemy casualties were heavy at New Bo Duc, but these were local NVA units, not main force. Still, the NVA artillery damaged both of New Bo Duc's 105-mm. howitzers before Phuoc Long Sector's counterattack retook New Bo Duc on 16 December. Although Phuoc Binh Subsector, near the province headquarters, was also under artillery attack, its positions for the moment appeared strong. Three ARVN reconnaissance companies, which had been deployed there to support the road-clearing operation in November, augmented the defenses of the 340th RF Battalion, and the VNAF flew six 105-mm. howitzers, ammunition, and other supplies into Song Be airfield, carrying out noncombatants and wounded. But the NVA did not permit this to continue. Artillery fire on 21-22 December heavily damaged a C-130 upon landing and destroyed another. The 3d NVA Division, meanwhile, launched another strong attack and took New Bo Duc for the last time.

While the battle raged around Song Be and New Bo Duc, the ARVN 341st RF Battalion continued to beat back successive assaults on its positions at Don Luan. The battalion lost the airstrip on 17 December but counterattacked and took it back again. In the north, however, the only positions still in ARVN hands were the Song Be airstrip, Phuoc Binh, and the crest of Nui Ba Ra overlooking the entire region.

The crisis at Phuoc Long, the strong enemy pressure in Tay Ninh, and the attacks in Binh Tuy presented General Dong with no favorable choices. He had to stop enemy advances toward Tay Ninh and hold Binh Tuy Province. On the other hand, he well knew the political and psychological damage that would follow the loss of Phuoc Long. Having to reinforce the north somehow, he ordered the 5th ARVN Division to send the 2d Battalion, 7th Infantry, by helicopter from Lai Khe to Song Be.

On 23 December, as the 2d Battalion reached Song Be, General Dong told Lt. Gen. Dong Van Quang, President Thieu's National Security Adviser, that III Corps needed at least part of the Air-
borne Division from Military Region 1 to save Phuoc Long. Informed of the request, President Thieu rejected it, stating that the Airborne Division was not available and that it could not be moved in time anyway. General Dong would receive priority on air and logistical support, but he would have to make do with his own troop units.

More grim news reached the JGS and III Corps Headquarters on 26 December. Following a 1,000-round artillery preparation, the NVA 7th Division, assisted by diversionary attacks against ARVN positions in and around Phu Giao, finally overran Don Luan.

Meanwhile, refugees poured into Song Be, and the RVNAF tried to resupply the isolated garrison. Ten attempts were made in early January 1975 to drop supplies, but none of the bundles could be recovered by the defenders. At least 16 enemy tanks had been destroyed in prior attacks, but on 6 January 10 more were seen approaching the city. That day General Dong sent two companies of his best troops into the battle: the 81st Airborne Rangers, whose highly trained volunteers were usually employed in commando operations. Also on 6 January, VNAF RF-5 photography disclosed seven 37-mm. antiaircraft positions around the city. It was only the first week of January and the RF-5 flying-hour allocation for the month had been nearly used up.

Very few infantry joined in the assaults on Song Be. Instead, squads of sappers followed the tanks as they rolled through the streets firing at ARVN positions, the sappers followed, mopping up bypassed positions and establishing strong points. Most of the NVA tanks damaged or destroyed were hit by M-72 LAW and 90-mm. recoilless rifles. Often the ranges were so short that the LAW missiles failed to arm themselves and harmlessly bounced off the tank hulls. Making tank kills even more difficult, the NVA M-26 Armor Group had welded extra armor plating on the sides of the hulls, and the crews kept buttoned up so that grenades could not be dropped through the hatches.

NVA artillery was devastating, particularly after 3 January when the rate of fire increased from about 200 rounds per day to nearly 3,000. Structures, bunkers, and trenches collapsed, and casualties mounted. ARVN artillery was out of action, its guns destroyed by fire from tanks, recoilless rifles, and 130-mm. guns. Finally, on 6 January, the province chief realized that he could no longer influence the battle. With no artillery and shattered communications, under direct fire from four approaching T-54 tanks, and seriously wounded, he and what remained of his staff, withdrew from Song Be. The NVA had captured the first province capital since the cease-fire.

There were some military and civilian survivors from Song Be. Pitiful little bands of Montagnards trekked through the jungles to Quang Duc, and VNAF helicopters rescued about 200 men of the Rangers, 7th Infantry, and sector territorials in the days immediately following the collapse. The province chief never made it to safety. His wounds slowed him down and he was not seen again. A few members of the command group eventually reached the ARVN outpost of Bu Binh on Highway 14 in Quang Duc. RVNAF losses were staggering. Over 5,400 officers and men of the 7th Infantry, Airborne Rangers, and territorials were committed; less than 850 survived. Especially costly were the high losses in the Airborne Ranger Battalion—85 troopers survived—and in the 2d Battalion, 7th Infantry, fewer than 200 returned from Phuoc Long. About 3,000 civilians, Montagnards and Vietnamese, out of 30,000 or more, escaped Communist control. The few province, village, and hamlet officials who were captured were summarily executed.

Although it was the time of the dry, northeast monsoon, unseasonably heavy torrents drenched Saigon. As this writer's Vietnamese driver dolefully remarked, even the gods were weeping for Phuoc Long.

Note on Sources

General Dung is quoted from his article as translated by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. The principal sources of operational and intelligence information came from the DAO liaison officer in Bien Hoa who had daily contact with III Corps headquarters, primarily with Colonel Le Dat Cong, the G-2. These reports were most complete, reliable, and perceptive.

The author made frequent visits to Bien Hoa, and his notes were also used in this chapter. DAO and J2/JGS weekly and daily reports were important references, as were many reports issued by the U.S. Embassy.
On the Second Anniversary of the Cease-Fire

Reaction to the NVA's Winter Campaign

The conquest of Phuoc Long Province was clearly the most blatant breach of the cease-fire agreement thus far. Anticipating its fall, the U.S. Department of State on 3 January 1975 asserted that the offensive "belies Hanoi's claims that it is the United States and South Vietnam who are violating the 1973 Paris truce agreements and standing in the way of peace." The PRG promptly rejected the accusation, and North Vietnam's Communist Party newspaper claimed that the offensive was "a legitimate right of riposte" in defense of the Paris agreements. On 13 January, the State Department released the text of an official protest, dated 11 January, delivered to the non-Vietnamese participants in the International Conference on Vietnam and to members of the International Commission of Control and Supervision:

The Department of State of the United States of America ... has the honor to refer to the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam signed at Paris January 27, 1973, and to the Act of the International Conference on Viet-Nam signed at Paris March 2, 1973.

When the Agreement was concluded nearly two years ago, our hope was that it would provide a framework under which the Vietnamese people could make their own political choices and resolve their own problems in an atmosphere of peace. Unfortunately this hope, which was clearly shared by the Republic of Viet-Nam and the South Vietnamese people, has been frustrated by the persistent refusal of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam to abide by the agreement's most fundamental provisions. Specifically, in flagrant violation of the Agreement, the North Vietnamese and "Provisional Revolutionary Government" authorities have:

- built up the North Vietnamese main-force army in the South through the illegal infiltration of over 150,000 troops;
- tripled the strength of their armor in the South by sending in over 400 new vehicles, as well as greatly increased their artillery and antiaircraft weaponry;
- improved their military logistics system running through Laos, Cambodia and the Demilitarized Zone as well as within South Viet-Nam, and expanded their armament stockpiles;
- refused to deploy the teams which under the Agreement were to oversee the cease-fire;
- refused to pay their prescribed share of the expenses of the International Commission of Control and Supervision;
- failed to honor their commitment to cooperate in resolving the status of American and other personnel missing in action even breaking off all discussions on the matter by refusing for the past several months to meet with U.S. and Republic of Viet-Nam representatives in the Four-Party Joint Military Team;
- broken off all negotiations with the Republic of Viet-Nam including the political negotiations in Paris and the Two Party Joint Military Commission talks in Saigon answering the Republic of Viet-Nam's repeated calls for unconditional resumption of the negotiations with demands for the over throw of the government as a pre-condition for any renewed talks; and
- gradually increased their military pressure, over-running several areas, including 11 district towns, which were clearly and unequivocally held by the Republic of Viet-Nam at the time of the cease-fire. The latest and most serious escalation of the fighting began in early December with offensives in the southern half of South Viet-Nam which have brought the level of casual­ties and destruction back up to what it was before the Agree­ment. These attacks—which included for the first time since the massive North Vietnamese 1972 offensive the over-running of a province capital (Song Be in Phuoc Long Province)—appear to reflect a decision by Hanoi to seek once again to impose a military solution in Viet-Nam. Coming just before the second anniversary of the Agreement, this dramatically belies Hanoi's claims that it is the United States and the Republic of Viet-Nam who are violating the Agreement and standing in the way of peace.

The United States deplores the Democratic Republic of Viet­Nam's turning from the path of negotiation to that of war, not only because it is a grave violation of a solemn international agreement, but also because of the cruel price it is imposing on the people of South Viet-Nam. The Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam must accept the full consequences of its actions. We are deeply concerned about the threat posed to international peace and security, to the political stability of Southeast Asia, to the progress which has been made in removing Viet-Nam as a major issue of great-power contention, and to the hopes of mankind for the building of structures of peace and the strengthening of mechanisms to avert war. We therefore reiterate our strong support for the Republic of Viet-Nam's call to the Hanoi- "Provisional Revolutionary Government" side to reopen the talks in Paris and Saigon which are mandated by the Agreement. We also urge that the ... [addressed] call upon the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam to halt its military offensive and join the Republic of Viet-Nam in re-establishing stability and seeking a political solution.

While the staffers in the State Department were putting together this carefully worded note, the North Vietnamese were claiming that the U.S. was flying reconnaissance over South Vietnam to assist the "Saigon administration to intensify its bombing and landgrabbing operations against the PRG-controlled areas." Defense Department spokesmen defended the appropriateness of U.S. aerial reconnaissance in Indochina in view of the extreme provocation by the North Vietnamese. The photography was of some intelligence value to the South Vietnamese but it was rarely, if ever, useful for targeting. U.S. reconnaissance over Laos was stopped on 4 June 1974, and a good part of the timely, detailed evidence of the flow of men and equipment into the South from North Vietnam terminated at that time.
Significantly, the President made no mention of Vietnam in his State of the Union message delivered to Congress on 15 January. In a press conference on 21 January, he said that he could foresee no circumstances in which the U.S. might actively re-enter the Vietnam War.

North Vietnamese leaders carefully analyzed the U.S. reaction to Phuoc Long. General Van Tien Dung reporting it this way:

It was obvious that the United States was in this position: Having withdrawn from Vietnam, the United States could hardly return. All the conferences at the Politburo Conference 18 December to 8 January analyzed the enemy’s weakness which in itself heralded a new opportunity for us. To fully exploit this great opportunity we had to conduct large-scale annihilating battles to destroy and disintegrate the enemy on a large scale. [FBIS Daily Report: Asia and Pacific Vol. IV, No. 110, Sup. 38, p. 7.]

The dramatic and conclusive victory in Phuoc Long, and the passivity with which the United States reacted to it, confirmed the earlier North Vietnamese estimates that the time for the decisive blow had arrived. The concepts for the spring offensive were discussed and sharpened during this midwinter conference in Hanoi.

**Military Region 1**

Following the long struggle over commanding terrain south of Phu Bai, a lull in combat came to northern Military Region 1. The monsoon rains and flooding compelled both sides to limit movement, and the VNAF flew no combat sorties between 17 December and 10 January. General Truong, commanding I Corps, took advantage of the temporary calm to pull the 2d Airborne Brigade out of the line west of Hue, placing it in reserve in Phu Loc District. Although the 147th Marine Brigade assumed responsibility for the sector vacated by the 2d, the defenses west of Hue were dangerously thin.

The Marine Division itself pulled two battalions out of forward positions northwest of Hue to constitute a heavier reserve and, further thinning the force, sent one company from each battalion to Saigon. These companies formed a new marine brigade for the JGS reserve. Later in the month, marine positions in Quang Tri were taken over by RF battalions, and three marine battalions were shifted south to Thua Thien Province.

By thinning out the line in northern Thua Thien, General Truong not only built up local reserves and contributed to the JGS reserve, but he also concentrated more combat power in the hills south of Phu Bai. The long campaign there continued through the month, and by 29 January, ARVN 1st Division troops were on all important terrain features: Hills 273, 350, 303, and Nui Bong. The battered forces of the 324th NVA Division withdrew to their base areas southwest of Phu Loc to reorganize and await orders for the next campaign. Meanwhile, security around Phu Bai was such that Air Vietnam, the civil airline, resumed regular flights.

After Tet the uneasy quiet that had settled over the battlefields north of the Hai Van Pass showed signs of being shattered. The 324th NVA Division concentrated south of Hue, giving up its positions in the Song Bo corridor, but even more threatening, the 325th NVA Division was relieved on the My Chanh line by local units and was apparently moving into Thua Thien Province. As if this were not enough to concern South Vietnamese commanders, the 341st NVA Division, having been converted from a territorial and training unit to a line infantry division, crossed the DMZ from Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam.

Southern Military Region 1 was more active. After a clearing operation in the Batangan Peninsula of Quang Ngai Province, four RF battalions and a battalion of the 5th Infantry, 2d ARVN Division, lost their effectiveness, and the remainder of the 2d ARVN Division had to be moved into the Province.

Near the border of Nghia Hanh and Mo Duc Districts a 2d ARVN Division clearing operation met with greater success. In six weeks of combat against the 52d NVA Brigade, the division seized the high ground, and inflicted serious casualties.

In late January, the 3d ARVN Division conducted a successful six-day foray into contested ground in Duy Xuyen and Que Son Districts of Quang Nam, again causing high casualties. In the week after Tet, enemy attacks increased markedly in Duc Duy and Dai Loc Districts of Quang Nam, and the ARVN responded with heavy artillery concentrations and air strikes. All indicators in forward areas pointed to a major offensive as the 304th and 2d NVA Divisions, opposing the 3d ARVN Division and the 3d Airborne Brigade, conducted reconnaissance and moved ammunition and artillery forward.

**Military Region 2**

Ground activity was light in the Central Highlands of Military Region 2 but heavy in coastal Binh Dinh province where the 22d ARVN Division was seriously hurting the 3d NVA Division at the entrance of the An Lao Valley. These attacks were designed to preempt offensive operations by the 3d NVA Division in northern Binh Dinh.

In early January, the 40th and 42d Infantry Regiments, 22d ARVN Division, held all key hills at the entrance to the An Lao Valley and successfully repelled repeated attempts by the 141st Regiment, 3d NVA Division, to dislodge them. The 141st suffered heavy casualties and soon had to pull back. Attacks against ARVN positions diminished in intensity during February and were limited to artillery. But high casualties alone had not caused the
lull; rather, a new mission had been assigned to the 3d NVA Division. The first indications of this reached General Niem, commanding the 22d ARVN Division, in early January when a prisoner of war from the 18th Signal Battalion, 3d NVA Division, disclosed the presence of a 3d Division reconnaissance party along Route 19 in the vicinity of An Khe and Binh Khe.

The Vinh Thanh Valley—sometimes called the Song Con Valley for the river which flowed south through it—ended at Binh Khe where the river turned eastward toward the sea and formed the broad fertile delta above Qui Nhon. The valley, which began in the rugged, forested highlands north of Binh Khe, was the natural avenue of approach for the 3d NVA Division to attack ARVN positions along Route 19. RVNAF reconnaissance had discovered in late February and early March that the NVA had improved and extended a road, up to eight meters wide with underwater bridges, from southern Kontum Province through the Kim Son region of Binh Dinh where it joined interprovincial Route 3A. Branches fed the base areas in the northern Vinh Thanh Valley, and heavy truck traffic was flowing into this critical area. Furthermore, a new NVA artillery regiment, the 68th, was discovered moving guns and ammunition south through Binh Khe through the valley. It was also about this time that fresh evidence appeared that the 3d NVA had shifted major elements into the Vinh Thanh region.

Fully recognizing the threat to Route 19, General Niem conferred with the Binh Dinh province chief on measures to secure the route and protect Pleiku-bound convoys. General Niem had had his 47th Infantry Regiment probing north into the Vinh Thanh Valley since early February, and contacts were becoming frequent and sharp. Meanwhile, the enemy increased pressure against Phu My and Phu Cat Districts along Highway I with terrorist attacks in the hamlets and by rocketing Phu Cat air base on 18 February for the first time since mid-1974. The focus of NVA activity had clearly shifted from northern Binh Dinh to the passes on Route 19.

General Phu, Commanding II Corps, was particularly concerned about the threat to his principal line of communication. On 2 March, he directed General Niem to pull the 42d Regiment from positions along Highway I and to constitute a mobile reserve to be ready to reinforce the 47th Regiment in the An Khe Pass. The security of Highway I was turned over to Binh Dinh territorial.

Despite the clear indications that the enemy was shifting its center of gravity southward, General Niem kept fully half of his division in the north, opposite the An Lao Valley. On 3 March, the 22d ARVN Division command post was near Qui Nhon; the 40th Infantry Regiment was in the Phu Cu Pass on Highway I, just south of Bong Son, and holding the high ground above and east of Hoai An; the 41st Infantry was in Bong Son, covering the entrance to the An Lao Valley, with one battalion north at Landing Zone English on Highway I; the 42d Infantry was in reserve in Phu My District, along Highway I, while the 47th Infantry was on Route 19 with two battalions in the An Khe Pass and its 2d Battalion pushing north in the Vinh Thanh Valley.

At this time the 22d Division G-2's estimate of the 3d NVA Division dispositions—which later proved to be accurate in all its essential elements—held that two battalions of the 2d Regiment and one battalion of the 141st Regiment were in the hills just north of Route 19 at the entrance of the Vinh Thanh Valley; the 12th Regiment was on the high ground south of Route 19 in the An Khe Pass, about midway between An Khe and Binh Khe; one battalion of the 2d Regiment was in the base area north of Vinh Thanh; while the other two battalions of the 141st Regiment were securing the An Lao base area in northern Binh Dinh. These were the dispositions in Binh Dinh on the eve of the final offensive.

While ground action in January in Kontum and Pleiku was limited to probes, patrols, and attacks by fire, the VNAF was busy daily striking the surge of truck convoys rolling south along new NVA logistical corridors. In one attack in early January, north of Kontum City, 17 loaded trucks were destroyed, an experience frequently repeated throughout the month and into February. Meanwhile, ARVN Ranger teams conducted several raids against the NVA pipeline. Despite the teams' tactical success, the cuts in the line were only temporary inconveniences. On the other hand, an NVA sapper raid on 9 January in Pleiku destroyed 1,500,000 gallons of assorted fuel, a heavy loss to the RVNAF's already severely strained logistics.

By 10 January, spoiling attacks by the 23d ARVN Ranger Group had reached positions 10 kilometers north of Kontum City along Route 14. The objective, Vo Dinh, however, was beyond reach, as NVA resistance stiffened. Meanwhile, in Pleiku Province, along Route 19 east of Le Trung, an NVA attack overran outposts of the 223d RF Battalion. The ARVN 45th Regiment of the 23d Division counterattacked and within a few days recaptured the original positions.

Recognizing a diminished threat in Quang Duc Province, the 271st NVA Regiment having left to participate in the Phuoc Long campaign, General Phu ordered the 53d Infantry Regiment to terminate operations there and return to the 23d Division's base at Ban Me Thuot in Daklak Province. But more significant deployments were under way in the NVA's B-3 Front. The 968th Infantry Division, which had sent its 9th Infantry Regiment to Pleiku the previous January, moved from southern Laos with its 19th and 39th Regiments into Kontum and
Pleiku. Although the combat effectiveness of the 968th was considered low because it had been relatively idle in the Laos panhandle for the past two years, it replaced the experienced 320th NVA Division in the defense of the Duc Co logistical center, thus permitting the B-3 Front to employ the 320th in offensive operations.

In mid-January the 320th NVA Division was noticed moving south toward Darlac, and a buildup near Ban Me Thuot was detected. On 30 January, air strikes damaged three NVA tanks in a base area north of Ban Me Thuot, and the 53d ARVN Infantry launched an operation into the area, meeting light resistance. General Phu sent the 2d Battalion, 45th Infantry, south from Pleiku to reinforce the security along Route 14 near where the Pleiku, Darlac, and Phu Bon Province boundaries met. On 4 February, near the mountain village of Buon Bieng, the battalion picked up an NVA rallier from the 48th Regiment, 320th NVA Division, who confirmed that the 320th was moving to Darlac. He said that the 320th left Duc Co about 12 January and that reconnaissance parties from both the 10th and 320th Divisions had been in Quang Duc and Darlac Provinces, respectively, in recent days.

In Darlac Province in early February, the ARVN had a forward command post of the 23d Division in Ban Me Thuot, two battalions of the 53d Infantry, one battalion of the 45th Infantry, and six of the seven Regional Force battalions belonging to the province. While the seventh RF battalion was deployed in Kontum Province, the six in Darlac were widely separated and in isolated areas. Two were around Ban Don, northwest of Ban Me Thuot; one was patrolling local Route 1 between Ban Me Thuot and Ban Don; one was an outpost north of Ban Me Thuot on Route 430; another was securing a resettlement village on National Route 21 close to the Khanh Hoa boundary; while the sixth was south in Lac Thien District.

General Phu responded to the growing threat to Darlac Province by committing the entire 45th Infantry to the Darlac-Phu Bon border area, attempting to find and destroy the elements of the 320th NVA Division. While these operations were going on north of Ban Me Thuot, the enemy in the last two weeks of February ambushed three ARVN convoys on Route 21 east of the capital. On the last day of the month, an ARVN unit ambushed an enemy reconnaissance patrol only 12 kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot, and the G-2 of II Corps, as well as the J2 of the JGS, insisted that a major attack on Ban Me Thuot was imminent.

Heavy fighting, meanwhile, had flared in Kontum and Pleiku Province. For the first time since the 1972 offensive, Kontum City on 28 February, and again on 4 March, received an enemy artillery attack. In western Pleiku, the 44th ARVN Regiment and the 25th Ranger Group came under strong attack in Thanh An District. Sensing that the main enemy attack would be in Kontum and Pleiku, and believing that the fighting at Ban Me Thuot was a deception, General Phu recalled the 45th Regiment from Darlac to Pleiku. He also directed the 23d Division to pull its forward command post out of Ban Me Thuot and return it to Pleiku. Further, on 4 March he ordered General Niem to alert his 42d Infantry Regiment for movement to Pleiku.

These orders issued and deployments completed, General Phu settled back to await the enemy onslaught in Kontum and Pleiku. His principal infantry formations in the highlands were, on 3 March, deployed as follows:

- The 23d Division—Headquarters at Ham Rong, 12 kilometers south of Pleiku City.
- 44th Infantry Regiment—20 to 25 kilometers west of Pleiku City in Thanh An District.
- 53d Infantry Regiment—Headquarters and 1st and 3d Battalions 20 kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot; 2d Battalion at Dac Song in Quang Duc.
- The II Corps Ranger Command—Headquarters at Kontum City.

- 4th Ranger Group—44th Battalion near Pleiku City in reserve; 42d Battalion at Plei Bau Can (on Route 19 west of Route 14); 43d Battalion attached to the 23d Division at Ham Rong.
- 6th Ranger Group—35th and 36th Battalions east and northeast of Kontum City; 51st Battalion attached to the 25th Ranger Group in Thanh An.
- 21st Ranger Group—with its 96th Battalion in the Chu Pao Pass between Kontum and Pleiku; 72d Battalion in reserve in Kontum; 89th Battalion attached to the 6th Ranger Group southeast of Kontum.
- 22d Ranger Group—95th Battalion in Truong Nghia west of Kontum; 88th Battalion in Ngoc Bay Mountain northwest of Kontum; 62d Battalion in reserve in Kontum.
- 23d Ranger Group—11th, 22d, and 23d Battalions north of Kontum along Route 14.
- 24th Ranger Group—63d Battalion at Gia Nghia; 81st Battalion south of Kien Duc; 82d Battalion in Kien Duc, Quang Duc.

**Military Region 3**

In Military Region 3, the 18th ARVN Division’s counterattack to drive the NVA out of Hoai Duc District progressed slowly but steadily, amply supported by VNAF air strikes, and the 274th NVA Regiment was forced to give ground as casualties mounted. Meanwhile, leaving a small occupying force in Thanh Linh, the 812th NVA Regiment, battered by air strikes, pulled back into the safety of...
the deep jungle between Thanh Linh and Hoai Duc. The 33d NVA Regiment, its ranks also depleted during an intense, month-long campaign, still held roadblocks along Route 333 in mid-January but was feeling the pressure of the 18th ARVN Division battalions pushing in both directions along the road. During the last week of January 1975, the RVNAF had the road cleared from Gia Ray to Hoai Duc and by February had reoccupied the village of Vo Xu. The Binh Tuy campaign was over. Losses had been high for both sides, and the remote eastern sector of the province remained in NVA control. The RVNAF still controlled the most populous area of the province and had prevented the NVA 6th Division from permanently closing the provinces two major highways, National Routes 20 and 1, which passed Binh Tuy Province on the north and south.

To forestall any NVA attempt to reassert control in the recovered areas, the new III Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, ordered the 18th ARVN Division to maintain a sizable force in Binh Tuy, but to prepare for employment elsewhere as the corps reserve. As of mid-February, the 43d Infantry of the 18th Division was along Route 333 between Hoai Duc and Gia Huynh; the 52d Infantry headquarters with its 2d Battalion was at the division base at Xuan Loc while its 1st and 3d Battalions operated in Dinh Quan and Gia Ray, respectively; and the 48th Infantry was in corps reserve at Long Binh in Bien Hoa Province. The famine in available forces in Military Region 3 was such that even the few major elements designated as corps reserve were nearly always engaged. But this did not deter General Toan from attempting to keep the enemy off balance through periodic spoiling attacks into contested areas. One such operation was an attempt in February by the 5th ARVN Division to clear Route 13 from Lai Khe and link up with the RF and Ranger patrols at Chon Thanh. After an auspicious beginning, however, the attack stalled, as all previous efforts had on Route 13, well short of its goal. The enemy was clearly determined to keep Route 13 closed and his own rear area intact; further, the 5th ARVN Division obviously lacked either the offensive power or will to succeed in this ambitious undertaking. (General Toan had been in the wings as Commanding General of the Armor Command since his relief from command of II Corps. Despite alleged participation in corrupt practices, he enjoyed a seemingly well-deserved reputation as a skilled and courageous commander. The fall of Phuoc Long Province sealed the fate of Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong as III Corps Commander. Military Region 3, with Saigon at its heart, required the services of an experienced, decisive campaigner, and General Toan, no matter how tainted, was the best man available.)

III Corps Rangers and Regional Forces conducted less formidable attacks in northern Bien Hoa Province to prevent NVA rocket artillery batteries from locating within range of the airbase and to disrupt 7th NVA Division operations around Tan Uyen District. These forays met with moderate success but did not permanently affect enemy capabilities.

On 17 January, III Corps launched an operation, using the 25th ARVN Division, to retake Nui Ba Den. While artillery, helicopter gunships, and VNAF fighter-bombers pounded the NVA position, ARVN Ranger patrols searched for enemy artillery positions in the jungles north of the mountain. An airborne assault was attempted, but NVA antiaircraft artillery and small arms fire were effective in preventing the landing. By 26 January it was apparent that retaking Nui Ba Den was beyond the resources available to III Corps. The 46th ARVN Infantry Regiment, which had moved to the base of the mountain, was withdrawn to Tay Ninh City and the operation was terminated. Aided by the excellent observation that Nui Ba Den afforded, NVA artillery continued to shell Tay Ninh City with heavy rockets and 130-mm. guns until the end of the month when the center of the province capital was virtually deserted.

A lull settled over Tay Ninh Province as the soldiers and civilians of South Vietnam prepared for Tet, which began on 11 February. But although combat declined, the enemy was very actively preparing for a major offensive in Tay Ninh and in adjoining Binh Duong and Hau Nghia Provinces. Elements of three NVA divisions, two separate infantry regiments, and a number of separate battalions, all supported by up to 10 battalions of medium and heavy artillery, moved to positions around Tay Ninh City. The 6th Regiment of the 5th NVA Division and at least three local battalions and a separate regiment, were concentrated to the southwest, ready to cut Routes 1 and 22 at Go Dau Ha. The new 3d Division, fresh from its victory at Phuoc Long, was north of the city, while the veteran 9th Division was around the Michelin Plantation, preparing to assault Tri Tam on the Tay Ninh-Binh Duong boundary. Large convoys of trucks were seen moving supplies and ammunition forward.

Faced by a formidable enemy on his western flank as he assumed command in Military Region 3, General Toan in characteristic fashion set about making decisive changes in dispositions and concepts to deal with the threat. To make the 25th ARVN Division, which covered an immense front from the Cambodian frontier nearly to the western outskirts of Saigon, more mobile, he gave responsibility for all static posts to Tay Ninh Regional Forces. Eight RF battalions and seven separate RF companies were placed along lines of communica-
tion and major approaches to the city, while the three regiments of the 25th Division conducted mobile operations in the forward areas. The 46th Infantry was east and southeast of the city; the 49th Infantry was north of the city, with battalions around Nui Ba Den; while the 50th Infantry was near Khiem Hanh, to the southeast. A company of M-41 light tanks and two troops of armored personnel carriers were in reserve near Tay Ninh City, and a reinforced company of the 81st Airborne Rangers conducted deep patrols on Nui Ba Den and into the jungle of War Zone C, north of the mountain. The division commander, Brig. Gen. Ly Tong Ba, had a background in armor and was exercising vigorous, personal leadership in the forward areas, urging his troops to patrol more aggressively into the contested area north of the city.

Tet was over and the first days of the Year of the Cat passed into March. In the east of his sector, General Toan watched the 6th and 7th NVA Divisions conducting reconnaissance and preparing for combat in Long Khanh and Bien Hoa. In the center, his 5th Division persisted, without much success, in pushing north out of Bau Bang to link up with the Rangers, who had attacked south from Chon Thanh along Route 13. The situation was becoming tense in western Binh Duong, at Tri Tam and throughout Tay Ninh Province, but General Toan’s fresh approach renewed the confidence of the 25th Division and the Tay Ninh territorials. To the southwest, at Tan An in Long An Province, astride Highway 4, the newly organized 4th Marine Brigade was deployed. Inexperienced but seasoned with a few veteran campaigners, this brigade stiffened the defenses of the Long An territorials.

Military Region 4

Consistent with its country-wide program of consolidating independent battalions and regiments into larger formations more suited to sustained conventional combat, the NVA in late 1974 organized the 4th Division in Chuong Thien Province and 8th Division in Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong Provinces of South Vietnam’s Military Region 4.

From 6-26 December 1974 Communist forces in the Mekong Delta had conducted the most widespread and intense attacks thus far in the war. They struck with greatest force in the Elephant’s Foot area of Kien Tuong Province, but strong attacks also occurred along lines of communication in Dinh Tuong, Chuong Thien, Ba Xuyen, Vinh Binh, Vinh Long, and An Xuyen Provinces. Casualties on both sides were heavy; the RVNAF had over 500 killed in action, and total casualties, including wounded and missing, exceeded 3,000. On the enemy side, the best estimates placed total losses—killed, captured, and permanently disabled—at over 3,500. Despite the generally effective defense put up by the RVNAF, security in the hamlets and countryside of the southern delta deteriorated as a result of widespread attacks against isolated, lightly defended regions.

Up until the end of January 1975, the new 8th NVA Division had been largely uncommitted—only its Z-15 Regiment in northern Dinh Tuong Province had engaged in significant combat—while the veteran 5th NVA Division attempted to secure Svay Rieng border areas. During a flurry of activity in January, the 5th NVA Division suffered high casualties and gained very little, while the ARVN held on tenaciously to Tri Phap bases against probes and harassing attacks launched by the Z-18 and 24th NVA Regiments of the 8th Division.

During January violence spread throughout the delta in a pre-Tet spasm of NVA attacks on lines of communication, cities, villages and outposts. With regard to the latter, Maj. Gen. Nguyan Khoa Nam, upon assuming command of IV Corps and Military Region 4, continued to reduce the number of indefensible, isolated posts and to consolidate combat power in larger positions. Sixty-three posts in the delta were abandoned under this plan in January, while another 87 were either overrun or evacuated under pressure. Of the latter, ARVN counterattacks regained 24. The heaviest losses were in the far south, in Bac Lieu, where 23 posts were lost and only 4 retaken, and in An Xuyen, where 16 posts fell and only 2 were recovered. Half the posts voluntarily abandoned were also located in these two provinces, while the central provinces of Phong Dien and Sa Dec and the northern border sector of Kien Phong suffered very light damage. Even in the key central province of Chuong Thien, where the three regiments (D-2, 18B, and 95A) of the new 4th NVA Division operated, the ARVN lost very little; of the six posts lost to enemy attack, four were recaptured. As the second anniversary of the cease fire came and went, it was clear that the ARVN soldiers of the delta had won the January round, but at high cost. RVNAF casualties in Military Region 4 were very high.

The enemy also lost heavily, but nowhere were his casualties heavier than in the battle between the 5th NVA Division and the 7th ARVN Division in northern Kien Tuong Province along the Cambodian-Svay Rieng border. By the end of January only two ARVN positions remained in Tuyen Binh District; Long Khot outpost was overrun by elements of the 6th and 174th NVA Regiments using captured M-113 armored personnel carriers. But capturing that outpost was the last significant success the NVA would enjoy in Kien Tuong before the final offensive. Toward the end of February, the 5th NVA Division withdrew the battered 6th Regiment from action and sent it into Cambodia to receive...
replacements and thereafter to southern Tay Ninh Province. Replacements flowed into the 5th NVA Division in great numbers during the month while the 7th ARVN Division kept up the pressure against the 174th Regiment around Moc Hoa.

Although the ARVN was successful against NVA main forces in most of the central and northern delta, security in the southern provinces—especially in An Xuyen and Bac Lieu—continued deteriorating. Territorials were not competent to deal with the threat, and not enough regulars were available. To strengthen Military Region 4 territorials, the JGS authorized the corps commander to deactivate 16 RF battalions, 5 RF companies, and 76 PF platoons to fill the ranks of other depleted territorial units.

The Navy in the delta was in similar difficulty. Budgetary limitations had cut the number of operational units from 44 to 21, and the riverine forces could no longer provide adequate security on several major canals.

In mid-February another security problem, one with tragic overtones, arose in the northern delta. The collapse of the forces of the government of Cambodia had caused thousands to seek refuge in Chau Doc Province. More than 7,000 people, including at least 500 military, streamed across the border.

Over on the western edge of the delta, north of Rach Gia District town, ARVN regulars intercepted two NVA battalions moving down Infiltration Corridor 1-C and inflicted heavy casualties; more than 350 were killed and a large quantity of ordnance was captured.

Congressional Visitors

Signs of the coming NVA offensive did not go unobserved. The Defense Attache Office, Saigon, and the American Embassy each reported in their own channels events which presaged the approaching campaign, and both were occupied with furnishing information to Washington to support the supplemental appropriation for Vietnam military assistance requested by the Ford administration. To see first-hand the situation which the White House said justified at least the $300 million requested, several members of Congress and their staff aides journeyed to Vietnam.

The first congressional visitor of the new year was Senator Sam Nunn, a member of the Armed Services Committee. His advance man was Don L. Lynch, a member of the committee staff, who arrived in Saigon on 7 January and stayed until the senator's two-day visit was over on 14 January. They were given detailed briefings by the Embassy and DAO and by General Khuyen, Chief of Staff of the JGS and Chief of the Central Logistical Com-

mand, who explained the military situation and the problems the RVNAF was facing due to the reduction of American assistance. Senator Nunn returned to the United States convinced, as was Representative Leo J. Ryan, who had visited Vietnam in late December 1974, that military aid reductions had seriously weakened the RVNAF.

President Ford requested an additional appropriation of $522 million for Vietnam and Cambodia on 28 January, $300 million of which would be for Vietnam. Accordingly, the Senate and the House of Representatives put together a joint bipartisan group to fly to Vietnam and return to report on the appropriateness of the administration's request. Two of the Congressmen, Senator Dewey F. Bartlett and Representative Paul N. McCloskey arrived in Saigon on 24 February, three days in advance of the main party, which included Representatives William V. Chappell, Donald N. Fraser, Bella Abzug, John P. Murtha, and John J. Flynt. These visiting Congressmen were accompanied by Mr. Philip C. Habib, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs; Mr. Eric von Marbod, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense; and a dozen staff aides and escorts.

Preoccupied though they were with the critical military situation, the South Vietnamese leaders prepared and presented eye-opening briefings and displays. No doors were closed to the delegation members; they were offered trips to any battlefront they wished to see. Bartlett, Murtha, and McCloskey were interested in extensive field trips. Others, particularly Abzug, wanted to see and talk to "political prisoners." The South Vietnamese arranged for such visits, although what constituted a political prisoner in this desperate, war-torn environment was a subject of no little dispute and misunderstanding.

Congressman Murtha went to Military Region 1 and, with General Truong, visited forward positions by helicopter. Congressmen Bartlett and McCloskey devoted their first two full days to extensive battlefield tours. They went first to IV Corps Headquarters at Can Tho where Representative McCloskey asked to see and was shown the compound for prisoners of war. At Dinh Tuong they visited the command post of the 12th Infantry, 7th Division. From there both Congressmen went to Da Nang and on to the headquarters of the 56th Infantry in Duc Duc, where they were briefed by General Hinh, the 3d Division commander. ARVN artillery was responding to a call for fires from a forward observer during this visit, and General Hinh explained the severe conditions imposed by the fuel and ammunition restrictions. The next day the Congressmen were given a close look at the Binh Dinh battle area, north of Bong Son, by the commander of the 22d ARVN Division. General Niem would