have taken them to the crests of the hills his men held, but the road was swept by fire, and enemy shells were falling on these positions.

Back in Saigon, the JGS had prepared a display of captured enemy weapons, ammunition, and equipment, including the most modern weapons and fighting vehicles furnished by the Soviet Union and China. Only a few members of the delegation attended. Before leaving Saigon on 2 March, most of the delegation questioned the NVA and VC delegation at Tan Son Nhut about Americans missing in action.

When they departed, some members left with brief cases bulging with fact sheets prepared by DAO, the JGS, and the American Embassy on subjects they inquired about. DAO fact sheets discussed military data supporting estimates for the coming offensive.

The fact sheet on the NVA strategic reserve pointed out that since the January 1973 cease fire, North Vietnam had rebuilt and increased its strategic reserve from two divisions (the 308th and 308B) to seven, and this list did not include the 968th Division deploying from Laos into the Central Highlands. They had returned the 312th and 320B Divisions to the reserve from Quang Tri Province; brought the 316th back to North Vietnam from northern Laos; reconstituted the 341st Division in the southernmost province of North Vietnam; and converted the 338th Division from a training division. Furthermore, they had created a corps headquarters in Thanh Hoa Province for controlling three or more divisions plus corps armor, artillery, and air defense regiments. These changes were viewed as strong indicators of major offensive intent. The fact sheet also showed that the deployment times of these divisions were greatly shortened from those before the cease fire due to the new highways and the absence of U.S. interdiction. Within 15 days, for example, a division in North Vietnam could be moved to South Vietnam’s Military Region 2 and committed to combat.

Another fact sheet discussed how heavy infiltration customarily preceded and continued through major NVA offensives in the south and showed that infiltration was especially large during the first two months of 1975. More than half as many replacements would arrive in South Vietnam during the first three months of 1975 than arrived during all of 1973. Since the cease fire, 200,000 replacements had moved south, a clear sign that an offensive was in the offing.

The greatly increased size and strength of the regular NVA forces in South Vietnam was the subject of a number of fact sheets. One listed the major combat and combat support units that had entered South Vietnam or had been formed there from replacement groups since the cease fire. (It did not mention several divisions formed from independent regiments or new regiments built of previously separate battalions.) Most of them were air defense units. Although the 968th Infantry Division was on the way from Laos only its 9th Regiment (since integrated into the 320th Division) was counted among the two other known infantry regiments then new to the southern battlefield—the 36th and 41st in Quang Nam. Five other new regiments of armor, artillery, and sappers were also listed, along with four new sapper battalions.

Another fact sheet displayed DAO Saigon’s estimate of the numerical strength changes that had taken place in NVA forces in South Vietnam since the cease fire. Combat units had gained 58,000 men and now had over 200,000. Combat and administrative support units had added about 30,000, for a new strength of over 100,000. Viet Cong were not included in these estimates. Armor vehicles, mostly tanks, had risen from about 100 to over 700, while the number of medium artillery pieces was over 400, up from about 100. The NVA now had twice as many tanks in South Vietnam (about 700) as did the RVNAF (352).

Papers on construction, lines of communication, supply level, and the pipeline showed that the NVA in the South had built a complex logistical system and had stockpiled enough supplies to support a major offensive for over a year. The NVA had never in the history of the war been in such a favorable logistical condition. Significantly, the RVNAF were, for the first time in the war, in an inferior position.

Besides these fact sheets, the DAO furnished the congressional delegation a paper called “Vietnam Perspective.” This explained frequently unperceived influences on the relative power, flexibility, and tactical potential of the opposing armed forces. For example, although the NVA’s expeditionary force in South Vietnam was less than half the size of the South’s combat force, the enemy made up the difference in troops maintained in secure garrisons in North Vietnam, more than 70,000 of which were available for immediate deployment to South Vietnam. Furthermore, the NVA possessed the frequently decisive advantages of surprise and the ability to mass overwhelming force. The RVNAF, even when they were able to discover the enemy’s intent in advance, were often unable to move sufficient reserves to the battle area in time to forestall defeat in detail. The NVA’s advantages also accounted for its ability to accomplish its objectives through the expenditure of far less ammunition than the defenders. Through careful reconnaissance, registration, and situating of batteries in concealed locations, the attacker concentrated heavy fires on small targets, while the defender had to search great areas, cover many avenues of approach and suspected enemy
positions, and use much larger amounts of ammunition in the defense. The requirements for defense of populated areas, thousands of bridges, and hundreds of miles of highway left the RVNAF with few forces available to use in deep or prolonged offensive operations.

Rounding out the set of documents furnished the delegation, the DAO presented its January 1975 threat assessment. Some pertinent paragraphs are quoted:

16. In early 1974, COSVN Resolution 12, based on resolution 21 of the Lao Dong Party which was adopted during the 21st Plenum of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi, emerged as the basic Communist guidance relating to the South. Resolution 12 reiterated previous emphasis on strengthening revolutionary forces, stressing that, if the Communists remained strong, the GVN would be forced to implement the Paris Agreement. COSVN 12 thus reflected a somewhat conservative outlook which emphasized building Communist strength, rather than exercising it on the battlefield.

17. In August 1974 [President Nixon resigned on August 9], however, the Communists adopted a strategy envisioning a large-scale offensive to defeat GVN pacification and bring about new negotiations. It called for an intense military campaign beginning in December 1974 and lasting until mid-1975. In defeating pacification, the Communist forces were to fulfill certain requirements (kill one third of the GVN's MF, RF and PF; neutralize one-half of the PSDF; and cut key LOC's) in order to accomplish certain missions: (1) liberate the bulk of the countryside; (2) increase the population in the Communist areas; (3) obtain rice; and (4) upgrade contested areas.

18. The 1974-1975 dry season campaign began dramatically in December with major attacks throughout MR-3 and MR-4, with the most visible result being the GVN loss of Phuoc Long Province. Major combat has since declined in those areas, but is expected to resume. In MR-1 and MR-2, the bulk of available intelligence indicates that major combat will soon be forthcoming. The campaign, thus, is expected to assume countrywide proportions and a number of indicators point to the introduction of strategic reserve divisions from NVN.

19. Thus, Communist strategy since the ceasefire has evolved from a rather cautious approach in the early stages, involving testing of the Paris Agreement and building up of rear areas, to one based primarily on battlefield victories to exploit the perceived weaknesses of the GVN. The COSVN resolution for 1975 heralds a return to major offensive activity as the primary means of advancing the Communist revolution to a successful conclusion...

46. If reported plans are executed, the Communists will be crossing the threshold between the outpost war and an attempt to deal critical blows to RVNAF and the GVN. In the near term, the Communists will probably experience continued success, to include overrunning of some district towns; however, increased Communist losses may prove prohibitive in the long run.

47. In conclusion, despite the lack of clarity concerning a number of key indicators as regards both specific intent and timing, we anticipate a significant upsurge in combat in northern SVN, as poor weather gradually abates in late February and March, and a resumption of major attacks in MR-3, once Communists preparations are complete. The war in the Delta is expected to remain at the recent intensified levels and to reflect increasingly ambitious Communist attacks on populated areas.

The Congressional delegation's jet left Tan Son Nhut airport on 2 March. As if having waited for the delegation to depart, the NVA launched the final offensive two mornings later with attacks that severed Highway 19 between the highlands and the coast.

Note on Sources

Newspaper accounts were used for the reactions and statements of officials in the United States. Generals Truong and Vien read this chapter and contributed valuable comments and corrections.

The final DAO Quarterly Assessment provided information concerning the visitors of early 1975, and DAO fact sheets were used to describe the prevailing situation. The January Monthly Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis was also useful.

Finally, the author accompanied Representative McCloskey on his field trips and attended most of the briefings conducted for the congressional visitors. The author's notes and recollections were referred to in relating the events surrounding this visit.
The Central Highlands, March 1975

Senior General Van Tien Dung was the principal architect of North Vietnam's final offensive against South Vietnam. In his account of "The Great Spring Victory" he described the planning of the offensive (FBIS Daily Report: Asia and Pacific, Vol. IV, No. 110, Sup. 38, pp. 6-10):

... during the 20 days of the conference the Political Bureau's assessment of the situation and its discussions were influenced increasingly by the obvious week-by-week achievement of major strategic objectives. While the Political Bureau was meeting, great news came from the south: the main force units in eastern Nam Bo [roughly conterminous with South Vietnam's Military Region 3, in cooperation with the provincial forces, had attacked and liberated Phuoc Binh City and all of Phuoc Long Province.

On 8 January 1975, two days after the Phuoc Long victory, Comrade Le Duan concluded the discussions. The situation is now clear to everybody. We are now determined to fulfill the 2-year plan.

Le Duan went on: Striking a strategic blow in 1975, Nam Bo will have to create an interrelated and interdependent position throughout the region, bring military pressure closer to Saigon, annihilate as many enemy main-force units as possible and create conditions for localities to deploy forces when opportunities arise.

In the Mekong delta region military pressure must be brought closer to My Tho. We have agreed that this year the attack on the Central Highlands will begin. He pointed to a map behind him and said: Attacks must be unleashed toward Ban Me Thuot and Tuy Hoa. The Fifth Region will have to form a liberated area from Binh Dinh Province northward, and the Tri-Thien forces will have to control an area from Hue to Da Nang.

While we discussed the 1975 strategic combat plan, another very important question was raised: Where to establish the main battlefield?

After considering the RVNAF strength, mobility and deployments, the relative strategic value of each major region, and the strength and mobility of the NVA, "the conferees unanimously approved the General Staff's draft plan which chose the Central Highlands as the main battlefield in the large-scale, widespread 1975 offensive."

According to General Dung, North Vietnamese leaders did not expect total victory in 1975. The major, country-wide offensive they were planning for early 1975 was to prepare the way for a "general offensive" that would finish the task in 1976. Nevertheless, they anticipated the possibility of "opportunities" to "liberate" South Vietnam "early or late in 1975."

General Dung reported that on 9 January, one day after the conference adjourned, the Central Military Party Committee convened to prepare military plans to support the conference resolution. It was here that Ban Me Thuot was selected as the first objective and main effort of the Central Highlands campaign.

The conference had just started when Comrade Le Duc Tho arrived unannounced. He opened the door, entered and joined us in the conference. Later on we knew that the Political Bureau was somewhat troubled because the idea of an attack on Ban Me Thuot had not been clearly outlined in the combat plan; therefore, it sent Comrade Tho to join us and present his idea that such an attack was essential. He said enthusiastically: "We must definitely raise the problem of liberating Ban Me Thuot and Duc Lap. It would be absurd if with almost five divisions in the Central Highlands we could not attack Ban Me Thuot." Comrade Vo Nguyen Giap, secretary of the Central Military Party Committee, concluded the conference by establishing the areas and targets of the offensive, the objectives of the campaign and the orders for deploying and using forces. He also suggested the fighting methods that should be applied, greatly stressing the principle of force, secrecy and surprise, and advised that it was necessary to deceive the enemy into concentration on defending areas north of the Central Highlands.

The Central Highlands campaign was code-named "Campaign 275." At that time on the Central Highlands front, Comrade Vu Lang, the front commander, left for the Ban Me Thuot area with some cadres to assess the situation. At the request of comrades Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, the Political Bureau sent me to the Central Highlands battlefield as a representative of the Political Bureau, the Central Military Party Committee and the High Command to take field command. I told Comrade Tran Van Tra following the Political Bureau conference: "This time I will fight in the Central Highlands until the rainy season. Then I will go to Nam Bo to join you in studying the battlefield situation and making preparations for military activities in the 1975-76 dry season." At this time in the Central Highlands we had the 320th, 10th and 955th divisions—divisions that had gained much combat experience on the Central Highlands battlefield. Toward the end of December 1974 the High Command decided to dispatch the 316th Division to this front.

Isolating the Battlefield

To capture Ban Me Thuot, NVA leadership in the B-3 Front—now personified in General Van Tien Dung—counted on surprise and overwhelming force. The element of surprise was to be enhanced by strong diversionary attacks in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces; once achieved, the advantage of mass, or the concentration of force, was to be prolonged by preventing the RVNAF from reinforcing Ban Me Thuot. The diversionary and supporting attacks began while the three NVA divisions that would take part in the Darlac—Quang Duc Campaign—the 10th, 316th, and 320—were still converging on their initial objectives areas.
VIETNAM FROM CEASE-FIRE TO CAPITULATION

Map 19

THE FALL OF MR II
8 Mar - 2 Apr 1975

- Convoy route
- ARVN attack
- ARVN retreat
- NVA attack
- NVA road block

Convoy route
ARVN attack
ARVN retreat
NVA attack
NVA road block

0 25 MILES
0 25 KILOMETERS

Map 19
The opening guns of Campaign 275 sounded along Route 19 (QL-19), the lifeline to the highlands, in the early morning of 4 March. Simultaneous attacks closed the highway from the Mang Yang Pass in Pleiku Province to Binh Dinh Province. Enemy sappers blew Bridge 12 southeast of Binh Khe, in Binh Dinh, and infantry struck ARVN territories on the high ground overlooking the An Khe Pass and the RF unit at the Route 3A (TL-3A) junction. Soon an artillery position supporting the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, north of Binh Khe was overrun. A strong attack by the 12th Regiment, 3d NVA Division, near the An Khe airfield was repulsed, while Phu Cat air base received a rocket attack and sustained light damage. (Map 19)

While Binh Dinh territories and the 47th ARVN Regiment struggled to hold their positions against the withering NVA artillery, infantry, and sapper assaults, South Vietnam forces in Pleiku Province came under heavy rocket, mortar, and recoilless rifle fire along Route 19 from Le Trung, 15 kilometers east of Pleiku City, to the narrow defiles of the Mang Yang Pass. Fire Support Bases 92 (east of Le Trung), 93 (near Soui Doi), and 94 (north of Hill 3045), all came under bombardment, while a number of their outposts were overrun. Two bridges and a large culvert between FSBS 93 and 94 were destroyed by enemy sappers. General Phu, the II Corps commander, reacted by sending two battalions of the 4th Ranger Group to join elements of the 2d Armored Cavalry Brigade, then clearing parts of Route 19, to proceed as far as FSB 95 in Binh Dinh Province, just east of the Mang Yang Pass. But before the operation could get under way, Base 94 was overrun. Meanwhile, NVA rockets hit Pleiku air base; although the field remained operational, the maintenance area sustained heavy damage.

While the attacks along Route 19 were viewed by General Phu as strong indicators that the NVA main effort would be against Pleiku, the Communists also interdicted Route 21 (QL-21), the other major road to the highlands, which connected coastal Khanh Hoa Province with Ban Me Thuot. Sappers blew two bridges between the Darlac boundary and Khanh Duong in Khanh Hoa Province, and NVA infantry overran an ARVN territorial outpost close to the provincial boundary. The only two available roads to the highlands were closed; the battlefield of the Central Highlands had been isolated in 24 hours of concentrated assaults.

At II Corps headquarters, South Vietnamese officers debated where the enemy’s main effort would take place. Colonel Trinh Tieu, the G-2, insisted that Ban Me Thuot would be the principal objective, with intermediate and supporting objectives at Buon Ho and Duc Lap. Based on indications that elements of the 10th and 320th Division had shifted south or had at least conducted reconnaissance in Quang Duc and Darlac Provinces, he told his commander that the attacks in Kontum, Pleiku, and on Route 19 were diversionary, designed primarily to hold the major RVNAF strength in place in Binh Dinh, Kontum, and Pleiku. General Phu nevertheless, believed Pleiku to be the main NVA objective. His reasoning was based on the weight of the current enemy attacks by fire against the 44th ARVN Infantry in Thanh An District of Pleiku and against the Rangers north of Kontum. Having only two regiments protecting the western approaches to Pleiku, he would not weaken this front to reinforce Ban Me Thuot where nothing significant had yet taken place.

Darlac and Quang Duc

Local Route 487 twisted through the forested highlands of southwestern Phu Bon Province between Cheo Reo, the capital, and Buon Blech, where it joined National Route 14 (QL-14) about 60 kilometers north of Ban Me Thuot. At this junction, also the district seat of Thuan Man in Phu Bon Province, the NVA on 8 March, struck the first direct blow of Campaign 275. Elements of the 9th Regiment, 320th NVA Division, attacked the subsector headquarters and the 23d Reconnaissance Company forcing a withdrawal. Meanwhile, the 45th ARVN Regiment on Route 14 near Thuan Man reported contact with enemy infantry. The fighting continued through the day, but Route 14 was permanently blocked by the 9th Regiment, 320th NVA Division.

On 9 March, the 10th NVA Division launched simultaneous attacks throughout Quang Duc Province. The assault against the Rangers at Kien Duc was repulsed, and the Quang Duc territories at Duc Lap also held their positions. But south of Duc Lap, at the Dak Song crossroads, heavy artillery bombardment and infantry assaults drove the 2d Battalion, 53d ARVN Infantry Regiment, from its defenses. By noon it was overrun.

General Phu was now convinced that Darlac was the main battlefield and his forces there needed immediate reinforcement. He asked the JGS for an additional Ranger group but was turned down; the JGS had few reserves, and threats to Saigon and Tay Ninh were mounting. Failing to acquire additional combat power from outside the region, General Phu pulled the 72d and 96th Ranger Battalions, 21st Ranger Group, from the Chu Pao Pass and Kontum and flew them to Buon Ho; once there they boarded trucks for the 35-kilometer ride to Ban Me Thuot. He also ordered the 45th Reconnaissance Company at Ban Don to return to Ban Me Thuot.

According to General Dung’s account, at 0200 Hanoi time on the morning of 10 March,
the offensive on Ban Me Thuot was heralded by the fire from sapper units directed against the Hoa Binh [Phung Duc] and city airfields. Long-range artillery began destroying military targets in the city. From a point 40 kilometers from Ban Me Thuot, our tank unit started their engines, knocked down trees which had been cut halfway in advance, beaded for Ban Me Thuot. On the Xe Poc [Kon] River, modern ferryboats were rapidly assembled, while tanks, armored vehicles, antiaircraft guns, and antitank guns formed queues to cross on the ferries. The mountains and forests of the Central Highlands were shaken by a firestorm.

In the early morning of 10 March 1975 heavy rockets and artillery fire fell on Ban Me Thuot, and mortar fire struck the airfield at Phung Duc to the east. The bombardment was followed by infantry and sapper assaults against the ammunition dump on local Route 1 west of the city; the 2d Company, 225th RF Battalion on Hill 559 northwest of the city, and the subsector headquarters at Phung Duc airfield. All attacks were repulsed, and enemy losses were heavy. Just before four that morning, the 3d Battalion, 53d ARVN Infantry, came under heavy attack at the airfield, and NVA tanks were sighted northwest of the city.

Meanwhile, attacks in Quang Duc Province continued as the 259th RF Battalion fought off enemy infantry on Route 12 between Dak Song and Duc Lap and the Rangers held their ground in Kien Duc and Gia Nghia. On 15 March the beleaguered defenders of Kien Duc, however, were finally overrun.

In Binh Dinh Province, General Niem, commanding the 22d Division, reinforced his 42d Infantry Regiment in Binh Khe District with the headquarters and two battalions of the 41st Infantry, but Route 19 was still cut at Le Trung and Binh Khe. Attacking Rangers were stalled at Bridge 31 between Fire Support Bases 93 and 94 in Pleiku Province. Although a heavy rocket attack on the airfield at Pleiku on 10 March closed down operations for several hours, Route 14 between Kontum and Pleiku remained open. A steady stream of traffic surged south through the Chao Pao Pass as the population of Kontum fled the daily rocketing of their city and the imminent threat of Communist invasion. The lines at the Air Vietnam terminal at Kontum flowed out into the streets as residents sought to buy tickets to Pleiku and points south. Highway 14 was closed on 10 March in southern Pleiku by enemy attacks on territorial outposts in the mountains close to the Darlac boundary.

By mid-morning on 10 March, major elements of the 320th NVA Division had penetrated Ban Me Thuot. The heaviest fighting was in the southern sector near the province chief’s residence, the sector headquarters, and the 23d Division command post. Five enemy tanks were destroyed or disabled near the command post, but one of the VNAF bombs intended for NVA armor demolished the sector headquarters, cutting off all communications. Two more tanks were destroyed near the city’s airfield. The small ARVN garrison there fought back repeated NVA assaults and held on to the control tower, but General Phu’s effort to fly two RF battalions from Ban Don to Ban Me Thuot was thwarted by heavy enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire. Both battalions were therefore diverted to Buon Ho, which also came under mortar attack on 10 March. Fighting at the airfield destroyed eight aircraft of the 6th Air Division, a CH-47, one 0-1, and six UH-1s. Four of the seven UH-1s belonging to the 2d Air Division were destroyed on the ground, but air crews managed to fly out three damaged helicopters under heavy fire. The sector ammunition storage site southwest of the city was overrun; 10,000 rounds of 105-mm ammunition were destroyed, and two 105-mm. howitzers were lost.

At the Phung Duc airfield, the 3d Battalion, 53d Infantry took two prisoners who identified the attackers as the 25th Independent Regiment and the 401st Sapper Battalion. Meanwhile, in Ban Me Thuot, the NVA was also taking prisoners. Two members of the ICCS, one Iranian and one Indonesian, had taken refuge with the only American official in Darlac, Paul Struharic, the Consul General’s provincial representative. Eight other foreign civilians, missionaries, and their families were with Struharic when NVA soldiers broke into his house and seized them all. Although they were imprisoned in Duc Co, all were eventually released.

By the night of 10 March the NVA had a firm hold on the center of Ban Me Thuot, while the principal remaining ARVN infantry, cavalry, and territorials held positions cast, west and south of the city. The 2d Company, 225th RF Battalion, remained on Hill 559, and the 4th Company, 242d RF Battalion still held the main ammunition dump. In a coffee plantation west of Ban Me Thuot, most of the 1st Battalion, 53d Infantry, and Headquarters and 3d Troop, 8th Armored Cavalry, defended their perimeter. The 4th Company, 243d RF Battalion, was dug in on Hill 491 to the south. Small units of the 53d Regiment and territorials were still fighting in the city, but the heaviest combat was at the Phung Duc airfield. There, the forward command post of the 23d ARVN Division fought along with the headquarters of its 53d Infantry, and the 3d Troop, 8th Armored Cavalry. Survivors of the sector headquarters were with some Ranger units west of the airfield.

Very heavy fighting continued on 11 March. ARVN defenders estimated 400 enemy killed, 50 weapons captured, and 13 tanks destroyed, and the 53d Infantry at the airfield reported that the NVA was using flame-throwers in the assault. Isolated pockets of resistance fought on, even though the province chief, Col. Nguyen Cong Luat, was captured.
In Pleiku, the 4th Ranger Group gained no ground on Route 19 in heavy fighting near Bridge 23 and Fire Support Base 93 as the 95B NVA Regiment counterattacked vigorously on 11-12 March. Fighting was widespread but light in the rest of Pleiku. The environs of the city were mortared, the II Corps headquarters sustained minor damage from a rocket attack, and three A-37 light bombers were destroyed along with fuel storage and a parts warehouse at Pleiku Air Base by 122-mm. rockets.

The disastrous turn of events in Military Region 2 led to the turning point in the long and bitter war, compelling President Thieu to make a decision regarding the conduct of the defense which would create chaos for the RVNAF and opportunities for the enemy. Regarding the northern part of the country as expendable in order to preserve the security of Military Regions 3 and 4, he thought it essential to retake Ban Me Thuot, even though Kontum and Pleiku might have to be sacrificed. He wished to convey this new concept to General Phu in Pleiku, but because of the hazards of such a meeting in that war-torn province, he was persuaded by his staff to meet the II Corps commander in Cam Ranh, south of Nha Trang, on 14 March.

On 12 March, General Phu announced that all organized resistance inside Ban Me Thuot had ceased. The 21st Ranger Group was assembling the survivors of its two committed battalions near the Phung Duc airfield, and the 45th ARVN Infantry Regiment was moving by helicopters to Phuoc An District on Route 21, east of Ban Me Thuot. The next day, as the 320th NVA Division consolidated its gains in Ban Me Thuot, the battle for Phung Duc continued. Recognizing the critical situation in the highlands, the JGS decided to send the 7th Ranger Group, its last available reserve, from Saigon to replace the 44th Infantry Regiment west of Pleiku, releasing the 44th to join the counterattack in Dalcar.

The situation in Dalcar continued to deteriorate. Quang Nhuie Village in the plantations north of Ban Me Thuot was overrun as was Buon Ho Village on Route 14. The South Vietnamese gave up Ban Don and withdrew remaining RF units. The planned relief of the 44th Infantry west of Pleiku had to be aborted after one battalion and the regimental headquarters were moved because the required airlift could not be marshalled to complete it.

On 14 March, General Phu had assembled in Phuoc An a task force under the command of Brig. Gen. Le Trung Tuong, commanding general of the 23d ARVN Division. In the task force were the 45th Infantry Regiment, one battalion and the headquarters of the 44th Infantry, and one battalion of the 21st Ranger Group. The plan was to attack west astride Route 21 to link up with the tenacious defenders at the Phung Duc airfield: the 3d Battalion, 53d Infantry, which had been there through four days of continuous fighting; the survivors of the 1st Battalion, 53d Infantry, who had withdrawn from west of the city; and the survivors of the 72d and 96th Battalions, 21st Ranger Group.

The counterattack was to be supported logistically by Nha Trang. Another task force of five RF battalions from Khanh Hoa Province was ordered to clear the route between Nha Trang and Khanh Duong.

On 14 March, General Phu flew to Cam Ranh for his fateful meeting with the President. With General Vien, Lt Gen. Dang Van Quang, and Prime Minister Khiem present, President Thieu outlined his concept. General Phu's role would be to retake Ban Me Thuot, using the troops he still had in Kontum and Pleiku Province, and the 22d Division from Binh Dinh Province. With Route 19 cut in Pleiku and Binh Dinh, and no way to use Routes 14 and 21 through Dalcar, General Phu had only interprovincial Route 7B (LTL-7B) available to recover his Kontum-Pleiku forces, assemble them in Khanh Hoa Province, and fight back along Route 21 into Ban Me Thuot. Although many hazards were discussed, this approach was accepted by the President, and General Phu flew back to his headquarters to set the withdrawal in motion. (American officials had no knowledge of the decision.)

That night, 14 March, NVA sappers penetrated the Pleiku ammunition storage area and blew up 1,400 rounds of 105-mm. howitzer shells. The deployments to Dalcar had greatly weakened security in Pleiku, and General Phu had already ordered the evacuation of all nonessential military personnel and dependents from Kontum and Pleiku. Colonel Giao, the acting commander of the 6th Air Division at Pleiku, directed the evacuation from Pleiku Air Base. Brig. Gen. Tran Van Cam, the deputy commander for operations, II Corps, was left in command of forces in Pleiku Province. Colonel Pham Duy Tat, commander of II Corps Rangers, remained in Kontum Province in charge of territorials and three Ranger groups, the 6th, 22d, and 23d. General Phu moved his command post to II Corps Rear at Nha Trang and, surprisingly, replaced the captured Dalcar Province Chief with Col. Trinh Tieu, his own G-2, whose correct estimate of the NVA offensive he had so tragically rejected. He made one other significant announcement to his staff before he left Pleiku: Colonel Tat was promoted to brigadier general and would command the evacuation of Kontum and Pleiku down Route 7B to the coast at Tuy Hoa. Upon the insistence of General Phu, Tat's promotion was approved by President Thieu at the Cam Ranh meeting.

As the 23d Division's counterattack from Phuoc An began on 15 March, the 53d Infantry's situation
at the airfield was grim. ARVN soldiers had withstood nearly continuous artillery and mortar bombardment and had beaten back successive assaults by the 25th NVA Regiment. But the 316th NVA Division, recently moved with great secrecy from North Vietnam, was poised to attack the battered 53d Infantry and Rangers east of Ban Me Thuot.

To block the 23d Division's counterattack from Phuoc An, General Dung ordered the 10th NVA Division up from Quang Duc. The 10th met the advancing 45th ARVN Infantry and stopped it at the Ea Nhae River, ten kilometers short of its planned link-up with the 53d. The 2d Battalion, 45th Regiment, was shattered in this fierce engagement, and the ARVN counterattack became a withdrawal. The division commander, Brig. Gen. Tuong, was slightly wounded as his helicopter received fire on 10 March. He had himself evacuated and command reverted to the senior colonel in the task force, Colonel Duc.

Behind the withdrawing survivors of the 23d Division, territorials from Khanh Hoa were meeting stiff resistance at Khanh Duong. Fighting for the high ground overlooking the road to Nha Trang, they captured some enemy soldiers from the 25th Independent Regiment, which had apparently slipped around the 23d Division at Phuoc An after failing to dislodge the 53d Infantry at the Phung Duc airfield.

The renewed NVA offensive in Dalac Province, led by the 10th Division along Route 21, pushed the 23d Division task force eastward, first back to Phuoc An, then through Chu Kuk near the Khanh Hoa boundary. Finally, the 23d Division command post reached Khanh Duong and settled there to recover the remnants of its battalions as they straggled in. Without resupply, the survivors of the 3d Battalion, 53d Infantry, on 18 March gave up the airfield and began a tortuous withdrawal eastward. On 21 March, what remained of the 23d ARVN Division was flown to the relative security of Cam Ranh. By this time, the exodus from Pleiku was well under way. The enemy still held high ground in and around Khanh Duong on Route 21, although the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 40th Regiment, 22d ARVN Division, had been moved from Binh Dinh Province to reinforce the attack. The 3d Airborne Brigade, pulled out of Quang Nam Province on presidential orders to become a reserve in Saigon, was taken off its ships in Nha Trang and rushed to Khanh Duong to halt the pursuing 10th NVA Division. Obviously, the immediate tasks facing II Corps were to reorganize its battered forces, complete the evacuation from the highlands, and stop the NVA advance on Route 21 at Khanh Duong. The counteroffensive to recapture Ban Me Thuot would have to wait.

Exodus from the Highlands

The evacuation of South Vietnamese forces from the highland provinces began in great secrecy; General Phu hoped that surprise would make it possible to reach Tuy Hoa before the enemy could discover and react to the movement. Accordingly, only a few staff officers and commanders were told of the plan in advance; the chiefs of the affected provinces, Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Bon, found out about it when they saw ARVN units moving. The operation was prepared only in outline; detailed orders were never drafted or issued. Not foreseeing the inevitable mass civilian exodus that would accompany the military column as soon as the population discovered what was going on, General Phu made no preparations to control the crowds which became entangled in combat formations, impeding their movement and ability to deploy and fight.

The only road available, Route 7B, was a track southeast of Cheo Reo, overgrown with brush, with fords in disrepair and an important bridge out. Aware of the road's condition, General Phu put the 20th Engineer Group in the vanguard. A few military vehicles began the journey to Phu Bon on 15 March, but the main body was scheduled to move over a four-day period, beginning on the 16th. Two hundred to 250 trucks were to move in each echelon, and each echelon would be protected by a company of M-48 tanks of the 21st Tank Battalion. The Ranger Battalions of the five groups still in Kontum and Pleiku Provinces, together with one tank company, would be the rear guard, to depart Pleiku on 19 March. Logistical units with ammunition and fuel trucks and some of the corps artillery were assigned to the first echelon, followed by more logistical and artillery units on 17 March. The II Corps staff, military police, and the balance of the 44th Infantry would move the next day. Territorial units were supposed to provide security along the route, an unrealistic mission since the province chiefs were not issued orders.

According to the best recollections of those involved in the operation—records are scarce, general, and sometimes erroneous—ARVN military units in the withdrawal included the following: one battalion, 44th Infantry / six Ranger Groups (eighteen battalions): the 4th (just arrived from JGS reserve, Saigon), 7th, and 25th Groups in Pleiku; the 6th, 22d, and 23d in Kontum / 21st Tank Battalion / two battalions, 155-mm. howitzer / one battalion, 175-mm. gun (self-propelled) / 20th Engineer Group (three combat battalions, one float bridge company, and one fixed bridge company) / 231st Direct Support Group.

Additionally, there were about 20,000 tons of Army and Air Force ammunition in the supply points, a 45-day stock of fuels, and 60 days of
rations, Some UH-1 helicopters and four CH-47
helicopters were sent up from Military Region 4 to
reinforce the 2d Air Division. C-130 transports flew
civilian and military dependents out of Pleiku on 16
March, but an enemy rocket attack closed the air
field that evening.

The orders for the military evacuation were
issued on 16 March; the 6th Ranger Group, defen
ing the northeast sector above Kontum City, had
withdrawn to Pleiku City the day before. The 22d
and 23d Ranger Groups from north and northwest
of Kontum pulled back to Pleiku the next day.
Observing the withdrawal, the Kontum province
chief joined the stream of traffic flowing south and
was killed in an ambush in the Chu Pao Pass. At
this time, the small force of the 44th Infantry and the 7th
and 25th Ranger Groups were still defending west
of Pleiku, and part of the 25th was under heavy
attack at Thanh An. General Tat, now in command
of the withdrawing troops, moved his command
post to Cheo Reo. Altering the plan slightly, he
took with him, in addition to the engineers, one of
his Ranger groups. This was a prudent modification,
since the territorials were not prepared to secure the
capital, the road, or the engineer work site. That
afternoon, 16 March, Cheo Reo was struck by
enemy rockets in the first attack against the town
since the NVA offensive began. The withdrawal
had been discovered although this rocket attack was
probably carried out coincidentally by local forces.

In discussing the final offensive, General Dung
describes receiving the first report on 16 March—
apparently the source was a communications inter
cept—that II Corps Headquarters had moved its
forward command post to Nha Trang. Later that
day, an NVA observation post reported a long
column of trucks running south toward Phu Bon.
Dung warned the 95B Regiment on Route 19, the
320th Division north of Ban Me Thuot on Route 14,
and along the road to Cheo Reo until 18 March. But
the Ranger rear guard was badly split back at
Cheo Reo. The 6th, 7th, and 22d Groups had most
of their battalions past the Ca Lui crossing, but the
4th, 23d, and 25th were trapped behind the 320th
Division, attacking blocking positions established by

18 March, the 320th Division struck at Cheo Reo
with artillery, mortars, and infantry. Military and
civilian casualties were heavy and wounded still lay
unattended on the streets the next morning. Aerial
photography taken on the morning of the 19th
showed artillery fire still falling in the city and
hundreds of vehicles, many of them damaged or
destroyed, abandoned along the road and in the
streets of Cheo Reo.

The convoy pressed on, fighting as it struggled
south. At mid-morning on 19 March, the leading
element was at the Con River, eight kilometers east
of Cung Son and about two-thirds of the distance
from Cheo Reo to its destination, Tuy Hoa. But the
ragged column stretched back to Cheo Reo where
refugees still streamed through the death-littered
streets. At a ford over the Ca Lui River, 25 kilome
ters northwest of Cong Son, a number of heavy
vehicles became mired. A NVAF air strike contribu
ted to the carnage and confusion by mistakenly
attacking a Ranger battalion and devastating it. By
this time, little military order or discipline remained.
General Tat no longer had control of the withdraw
ning forces, and the tank battalion commander was
walking, no longer able to command his tanks al
though at least 10 M-48s were still operational. As
the head of the column reached the broad Song Ba,
about 10 kilometers east of Cong Son, it found that
Route 7B had been so heavily mined by Koreans
who had operated in the area that it was impractical
to clear the route. Instead, the engineers were or
dered to bridge the Song Ba and divert the column
to local Route 436, which followed the south bank
of the river to Tuy Hoa. Anticipating this move
ment, the enemy set up five road-blocks along
Route 436 in a two-kilometer stretch east of the
Song Ba crossing, stopping the movement of bridge
sections from Tuy Hoa to the crossing. The 206th
RF battalion, one of the best territorial units, was
therefore ordered to attack through the roadblocks
from the east, while the 34th Ranger Battalion, with
16 M-113 personnel carriers, would attack from the
west after fording the Song Ba.

On 20 March, heavy trucks and tanks tore up the
ford on the Song Ba so badly that pierced-steel
planking had to be placed on the bottom. This was
delivered by the CH-47's, which also began flying in
bridge sections to the site about 1,500 meters down
stream from the ford.

On 21 March, the column was concentrated
around the ford and bridge sites east of Cong Son,
but the Ranger rear guard was badly split back at
Cheo Reo. The 6th, 7th, and 22d Groups had most
of their battalions past the Ca Lui crossing, but the
4th, 23d, and 25th were trapped behind the 320th
NVA Division, advancing on Cong Son. On 22
March, elements of the 64th Regiment, 320th NVA
Division, attacked blocking positions established by
the 6th Ranger Group west of Cong Son, and ARVN engineers completed the bridge over the Song Ba. In a rush to cross, the bridge was overloaded and a section collapsed. But the engineers quickly repaired the span, and many vehicles cleared the north bank of the river that day and night, only to face enemy blocking positions along Route 436 in My Thanh Tay Village.

While the 35th and 51st Ranger Battalions fought as a rear guard in a narrow defile about seven kilometers northwest of Cong Son, the 34th Rangers continued the attack east on Route 436 to clear the roadblocks. By this time, the 6th Ranger Group battalions were the only cohesive fighting units in the column, 3 of 18 battalions that began the long march through the Phu Bon gauntlet.

The 35th and 51st Rangers repulsed a strong attack by the 64th NVA Regiment on the night of 23 March, killing 50 and taking 15 weapons. These two battalions had mustered a force of 15 M-41 light tanks, 8 M-48 medium tanks, 11 105-mm. howitzers, and 2 155-mm. howitzers. Two CH-47s kept the Rangers supplied with rations and ammunition as they fell back through Cong Son. Reinforced by two tank companies, the 320th NVA Division pushed into Cong Son behind the withdrawing 6th Ranger Group late on 24 March.

Meanwhile, the 34th Battalion continued the attack against the blocking positions disposed in My Thanh Tay Village. Even though bad weather prevented air support, the Rangers reduced position after position. By 25 March they had broken the last position and led the shattered column into Tuy Hoa. Now hardly more than a company in strength, the 34th Battalion then turned around to guard the western approaches to Tuy Hoa.

Eventually, about 60,000 refugees from the highlands straggled into Nha Trang, but at least 100,000 remained stranded in western Phu Yen Province without food, water, or medical assistance. One of the most poorly executed withdrawals in the war, and certainly the most tragic, had ended. The 320th NVA Division continued its inexorable march to the sea and by 31 March had Tuy Hoa under fire.
The Final Offensive in the North

The Offensive North of Binh Dinh

Campaign 275 in the Central Highlands was the main effort in a country-wide offensive coordinated by the North Vietnamese high command with considerable precision. Coincident with the start of the Ban Me Thuot campaign on 8 March, the NVA attacked the three northern provinces of South Vietnam’s Military Region 1, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, and Quang Nam. In Quang Tin strong attacks did not begin until two days later. In Quang Ngai, the enemy’s offensive was delayed, apparently by an aggressive RVNAF clearing operation, QUYET THANH A-1-75 in Nghia Hanh District. The 4th Infantry Regiment, 2d ARVN Division, was involved in sharp fighting there on 6 and 7 March, and enemy casualties were substantial.

Initially, the strongest attack in Quang Tri Province struck territorial outposts and strong points in the foothills and the hamlets of the coastal lowlands. The 110th ARVN RF Battalion held its ground in the southwest sector of the province against a strong NVA infantry assault; moderate casualties were sustained by both sides. By 8 March, NVA and local VC were in control of seven hamlets in Hai Lang District and in southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien, and refugees streamed southward, until nearly the entire population of Quang Tri Province, as many as 100,000, travelled the road to Hue.

With tanks and armored personnel carriers, an ARVN task force composed of the 8th Airborne Battalion, the 112th and 120th RF Battalions, and the 921st RF Company, succeeded in driving the enemy from nearly all populated areas by afternoon on 9 March. Communist casualties were heavy and ARVN losses few in this opening phase.

The North Vietnamese infiltrated and attacked villages in the coastal lowlands of Thua Thien, as they had in Quang Tri, and vigorously assaulted RVNAF regulars protecting the approaches to Hue. Southeast of Hue regiments of the NVA 324B Division began the Thua Thien campaign attacking along an eight kilometer sector in the early morning of 8 March. Supported by intense artillery concentrations, enemy infantry swarmed over the surrounding hills. The 2d Battalion, 1st ARVN Infantry Regiment, held on Hill 121, but the 1st Battalion, 1st Infantry, was shattered and driven from Hill 224. The 2d Battalion, 54th Infantry, was initially forced to give ground but recovered its positions on Hill 144 on 9 March. The Reconnaissance Company of the 1st ARVN Division was forced from Hill 50 southwest of Nui Bong.

Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Dien, commanding the 1st ARVN Division, reacted by dispatching the 15th Ranger Group with the 61st and 94th Ranger Battalions to reinforce the line and recover lost positions. The 61st was ambushed en route, sustained moderate losses, but recovered to join the 94th in a counterattack on 10 March. The next day, the first firm evidence (a prisoner of war) appeared that the 325th NVA Division had moved south and was in position to join the attack in Phu Loc District.

At least 20 tanks accompanied the NVA assault in the Song Bo corridor where the Marine Division had its 147th Brigade of five battalions—the 3d, 4th, 5th, and 7th Marines and the 130th RF Battalion. The attacks continued for two days and one marine position was lost but the 4th Marine Battalion recovered it on 11 March. In two days of heavy fighting, with moderate marine casualties, the 147th Brigade killed more than 200 enemy, destroyed two tanks and damaged seven, and captured many weapons.

Just as the attacks in the forward areas were stronger in Thua Thien than in Quang Tri, so were the invasions into the populated lowlands. A battalion of the 6th ARVN RF Battalion held its ground in the southwest sector of the province against a strong NVA infantry assault; moderate casualties were sustained by both sides. By 8 March, NVA and local VC were in control of seven hamlets in Hai Lang District and in southern Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien, and refugees streamed southward, until nearly the entire population of Quang Tri Province, as many as 100,000, travelled the road to Hue.

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Hue. Infiltrating NVA Troops, mostly from the 4th Independent Regiment, were also quickly eliminated by South Vietnamese counterattacks.

South of the Hai Van Pass, NVA sappers penetrated Da Nang on 8 March and fired rocket grenades into subsector offices of Hoa Vang District. A heavy rocket attack on Da Nang Air Base on 11 March destroyed a new F-5E fighter-bomber. Meanwhile, artillery-supported infantry assaults were launched against ARVN 3d Infantry Division, Airborne Division, and territorial positions from Dai Loc to Que Son. Nearly all NVA assaults were repelled with heavy enemy losses, but sappers were able to get through and blow the main bridge on Route 540 north of Dai Loc.

The situation in Quang Tin Province was more serious. Long-expected NVA blows against the hill districts of Tien Phuoc and Hau Duc finally fell on 10 March. Two battalions of the 31st NVA Regiment, 2d Division, attacked Tien Phuoc from the north and west, while elements of the 1st NVA Regiment struck from the south and southeast. In Hau Duc, another battalion of the 31st NVA Regiment, with supporting local forces, overran the 102d RF Battalion. Refugees from both districts began streaming into Tam Ky, the province capital, which itself was hit by NVA 122-mm. rockets on 11 March. The major RVNAF base at Chu Lai also received a rocket bombardment.

Remnants of the 116th and 134th RF Battalions, decimated in Tien Phuoc, also struggled eastward toward Tam Ky. The 135th RF Battalion left its positions on Ban Quan Mountain east of Tien Phuoc and withdrew toward Tam Ky, but left four howitzers to the enemy. The 3d Battalion, 5th ARVN Infantry, with the 115th RF Battalion, counterattacked at My Mountain, the last important high ground on Route 533 between Tam Ky and Tien Phuoc, and regained the position, only to be driven off again by intense artillery fire.

General Nhut, commanding the 2d ARVN Division, organized a relief column to push out from Tam Ky and protect the withdrawal of the territorials and civilians from Tien Phuoc. The enemy, however, held the high ground overlooking the column's approach, including a prominent hill called Nui Ngoc. On 11 March the RVNAF column, composed of the 37th and 39th Ranger Battalions and the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry, 2d ARVN Division, stalled short of Nui Ngoc.

On 12 March, General Nhut sent the 5th Infantry Regiment from Quang Ngai Province and deployed it west of Tam Ky. Its three battalions were in depth along Route 533, the forward elements just east of My Mountain. Two RF battalions, the 115th and 135th, were north of the 5th Infantry, between Route 533 and the Ranger task force below Nui Ngoc. The 21st Ranger Battalion was behind the 135th RF, west of Tam Ky. Thus, General Nhut had nine battalions west of Tam Ky, as a strong enemy was about to continue the attack toward that city. Furthermore, Tam Ky was now within range of the enemy's light artillery.

Meanwhile, in Da Nang, General Truong was facing an even more serious problem. On 12 March, he received the JGS order to pull the Airborne Division out of the line and start it moving to Saigon. The deployment was to begin on 17 March. General Truong immediately called General Vien to protest the decision but learned that President Thieu had personally directed the deployment so that the Airborne Division could participate in the offensive to retake Ban Me Thuot. General Vien told General Truong that, if possible, two battalions of the new 468th Marine Brigade and a Ranger group would be sent North to replace the Airborne Division.

To adjust to the loss of the Airborne Division, General Truong decided to pull the Marine Division out of Quang Tri and northern Thua Thien Provinces and shift it south to cover Phu Loc District and Da Nang. The 14th Ranger Group would move north to relieve the marines on 13 March. Only one marine brigade, the one in Phu Loc, would remain north of the Hai Van Pass. General Nhut would be ordered to pull one regiment out of the Quyet Thang operation in Nghia Hanh to reinforce the defense of Tam Ky. This order effectively canceled the successful ARVN offensive in central Quang Ngai. Furthermore, General Nhut was told to defend Tam Ky at about the positions his forward battalions then occupied, such defense in effect ending the operation to return to Tien Phuoc. I Corps was to defend Hue and Da Nang, even if it had to give up Quang Tri, Quang Tin, and Quang Ngai Province. General Truong and General Thi agreed, however, that their ability to hold Hue after the Marine Division moved south was questionable indeed.

General Truong flew to Saigon on 13 March to participate in a secret meeting with President Thieu, Prime Minister Khiem, and General Vien during which Truong was told about the evacuation from the highlands and ordered to prepare a plan for the eventual evacuation of Military Region 1. He also was permitted to delay the first airborne brigade's departure to 18 March and the rest of the division until 31 March. The President's reasoning was that Da Nang was most important but that the rest of the region could be sacrificed. He would send the 468th Marine Brigade north to help defend Da Nang as soon as the Airborne Division arrived in Saigon. This division was vital to the defense of Military Regions 3 and 4 without which the Republic could no longer survive.

More disquieting news reached General Truong after his meeting with President Thieu. NVA attacks in southwestern Quang Tri Province had
overrun two RF strongpoints on the western flank of the My Chanh Line. Farther south, in the Song Bo corridor, the 4th and 5th Marine Battalions fought off strong attacks in the 147th Marine Brigade's sector. In the 1st ARVN Division's sector, two battalions of the 3d Infantry were forced from the Fire Support Base Bastogne area but regained most of their positions in a counterattack the following day. Heavy fighting continued southwest of Tam Ky, RF positions were crumbling, and NVA tanks were sighted approaching from east of Tien Phuoc. The 3d Battalion, 5th Infantry, and the 37th Ranger Battalion were both locked in close combat and in danger of being overrun.

On 14 March, General Truong met with General Thi, commanding I Corps troops in Quang Tri and Thu a Thien Provinces, and General Lan, the Marine Division commander, to explain his concept for the final defense of Da Nang. He would pull all combat forces into Quang Nam and defend Da Nang with the 1st, 3d, and Marine Divisions on line and the 2d Division in reserve. But this deployment would be approached gradually as divisional troops were relieved in Quang Tri and Thu a Thien Provinces and terrain in the southern part of the region was abandoned. General Truong ordered the immediate evacuation of all military units, including the 68th Ranger Battalion at Song Ha and the 69th Ranger Battalion at Tra Bong, and all civilians in both areas who wanted to leave. On 15 March, the 14th Ranger Group was to begin the relief of the 369th Marine Brigade in Quang Tri Province. While one marine brigade would remain in the Song Bo Valley for the defense of Hue, the 369th Marine Brigade would deploy to Dai Loc District in Quang Nam Province, and relieve the 3d Airborne Brigade for movement to Saigon. Generals Truong and Thi anticipated a mass civilian exodus from Quang Tri as soon as the people saw that the marines were leaving, and he directed his staff to prepare plans to assist the refugees.

Meanwhile, General Truong ordered General Nhu of the 2d Division to keep his 6th Infantry Regiment south of Nghia Hanh town to protect Quang Ngai City. The NVA attacked strongly throughout Quang Ngai on 14 and 15 March, overrun outposts all around the province capital. Quang Ngai territorials, never strong, had been weakened further by the departure of the 5th ARVN Regiment for Quang Tin Province and the shift of most of the 4th ARVN Regiment to 2d Division reserve in Chu Lai. Only two regular battalions, the 70th Ranger and the 3d Battalion of the 4th Infantry, remained south of Mo Duc; only three RF battalions between Mo Duc and the Binh Dinh boundary. In the northern sectors, on the night of 15-16 March, an NVA attack destroyed five PF platoons north of Binh Son and closed Route 1 to the Quang Tin boundary.

In Quang Tin, the NVA attacked north of Tam Ky close to National Route 1 and overrun an RF company north of the city on 15 March. When the NVA also struck west of Tam Ky, the 5th ARVN Infantry Regiment and the 12th Ranger Group fell back and the 37th Ranger Battalion was routed. While a collapse was imminent in the region's two southern provinces, the shifting of units in Quang Tri Province was proceeding on schedule. The 14th Ranger Group established its command post at Hai Lang and sent its 77th, 78th, and 79th Ranger Battalions forward to replace the 369th Marine Brigade, which began moving south to relieve the Airborne Division in Quang Nam. As the Marines left, they took the courage and morale of the territorials and civilians of Quang Tri with them, even though the last pockets of enemy infiltrators in the lowlands had been eliminated by 16 March.

While this relief was going on, a rallier from the 101st Regiment, 325th ARVN Division, was being interrogated in Phu Loc. His testimony confirmed the presence of the entire 325th Division in southern Thu a Thien Province, supported by the 85-mm. and 130-mm. guns of the 84th Artillery Regiment. At least two infantry regiments, the 18th and the 101st, were within easy striking distance of Phu Loc as of 15 March.

The 258th Marine Brigade pulled out of Quang Tri to relieve the Airborne brigade in southern Thu a Thien on 17 March. The Marine Division command post was set up at Marble Mountain Airfield on the beach east of Da Nang on 18 March while the 2d Airborne Brigade moved to the Da Nang docks for shipment to Saigon.

To support the defense of Da Nang, General Truong ordered the 175-mm. gun batteries north of the Hai Van Pass to begin moving to Da Nang along with a company of M-48 tanks. These deployments, ordered on 18 March, would leave two companies of M-48 tanks of the 20th Tank Squadron in Thu a Thien. The next day, NVA tanks attacked across the cease-fire line in Quang Tri.

The evacuation of Son Ha and Tra Bong got under way on 16 March as two CH-47 helicopters began lifting out civilians. The military—the 68th Ranger Battalion, 17 RF platoons, and over 400 PSDF soldiers—were flown to Son Tinh, north of Quang Ngai City. Many of the 12,000 residents of Tra Bong began moving along the road to Binh Son, protected by the 69th Rangers. Also in the column were a battery of territorial artillery, an RF company, 22 PF platoons and 600 PSDF militia. As the 25-kilometer trek began, the NVA attacked outposts north of Binh Son and severed Route 1 between that town and Chu Lai. NVA artillery
shelled Binh Son causing light civilian casualties while enemy infantry wiped out several outposts south in Son Tinh District. Meanwhile, General Nhut moved the 2d Battalion, 6th Infantry, from Nghia Hanh to the western edge of Quang Ngai City.

North of the Hai Van Pass, in Phu Loc District of Thua Thien Province, the 15th Ranger Group continued to restore ARVN control in the Nui Bong sector on 17-18 March. General Thi moved two M-48 tank companies of the 20th Squadron from north of Hue to south of the city.

On 18 March, Prime Minister Khiem flew to Da Nang. Drastic measures to adjust the country's defenses to conform to the new national strategy were underway in the highlands. The great, tragic exodus from Pleiku and Kontum had started, but calamitous events were rapidly overtaking the strategy. The goal was to hold a truncated Vietnam with its northern frontier anchored at Ban Me Thuot, but to do that required salvaging the nation's military strength now under savage attack from Phu Bon to Quang Tri. Tri Tam had fallen north of Saigon, and the NVA offensive was gathering momentum in Tay Ninh, Long Khanh, and Binh Tuy Provinces. I Corps had already given up one of its strongest divisions, the Airborne, to bolster the defense of Saigon, and Prime Minister Khiem's mission was to assess the impact of its loss, discuss the rapidly changing situation with General Truong, and advise President Thieu on what part of Military Region I could be defended with the forces available.

The Prime Minister made it clear to General Truong that no additional troops would be sent to his corps; the promised new marine brigade would remain in the defense of the capital. He told General Truong that the 3d Airborne Brigade had been diverted at Nha Trang and sent to block the NVA advance at Khanh Duong; the rest of the division would proceed to Saigon. He also promised to send a staff to Da Nang, representing all interested ministries, to assist in handling the monumental refugee problems that were developing in the region.

While in Da Nang, Prime Minister Khiem listened to briefings by the five province chiefs and the mayor of Da Nang. The mayor told him that civilian morale was very low, that many families had already gone to Saigon, and that the lack of support by the United States at this critical time was deeply felt by the people. The Quang Nam Province chief, Colonel Pham Van Chung, told him that morale among his troops was still good, but the people were very worried about the departure of the Airborne Division. The reports from Quang Ngai and Quang Tin, by Colonels Dao Mong Xuan and Le Van Ngoc, were grim; the territorials had all but given up, and were deserting in large numbers. Units were below half strength. The Quang Tri province chief, Colonel Do Ky, gave a similar report; almost all civilians had left the province, morale was low, and the territorials could not be expected to offer serious resistance to an attack now that the stiffening presence of the marines had been removed. Colonel Nguyen Huu Due of Thua Thien, unduly optimistic, said that although people were beginning to leave Hue in large numbers his territorials were in good spirits and would fight.

The Prime Minister left for Saigon, and the next day General Truong returned the visit. He was directed to stop the evacuation of Hue and to defend enclaves at Hue, Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Quang Ngai City. He could, when forced, surrender Chu Lai and Quang Ngai, but he was to defend Hue and Da Nang at all costs.

When General Truong returned to his headquarters on 20 March, he turned around the displacing 175-mm. batteries moving to Da Nang and stopped the evacuation of ammunition from Hue. The Imperial City would be defended despite the fact that enemy artillery had, on 19 March, already struck inside the Citadel and Highway 1 was clogged with the southbound traffic of thousands of refugees.

The contracted organization for the defense of Hue, under the command of General Thi, was divided between the deputy commander of the Marine Division, Col. Tri, who was responsible north of Hue, and the 1st Division commander, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Diem, south of the city. Colonel Tri's outposts were just inside the Thua Thien-Quang Tri boundary, nearly 30 kilometers northwest of Hue. Here, under the direct command of the 14th Ranger Group, were the 77th Ranger Battalion, seven RF battalions, and a troop of armored personnel carriers of the 17th Armored Cavalry Squadron. The four marine battalions of the 147th Brigade were in the vital Bo Corridor, within light artillery range of the Citadel, while the 78th and 79th Ranger Battalions were on outposts 10 kilometers west of the marines. South of the marines, on the high ground at Fire Support Base Lion—also called Nui Gio—was the 51st Infantry, 1st Division, with two of its battalions.

General Diem's responsibility began southwest of his 51st Infantry, which was attached to Colonel Tri's command. The 3d ARVN Infantry Regiment, with two battalions, held the high ground around Fire Support Base Birmingham, above the Song Huu Trach, south of Hue. East of the 3d Infantry, the 54th Infantry with two of its battalions defended the Mo Tau sector, while the reinforced 1st Infantry Regiment extended the line southeast to the Nui Bong area. The 1st Infantry had, in addition to its own three battalions, one battalion of the 51st Infantry, a company of M-48 tanks, and a troop of armored personnel carriers. The 15th Ranger
Group, with its three battalions and one battalion of the 3d Infantry, dug in on the hills above Highway 1 west of Phu Loc District Town. The 258th Marine Brigade, with two battalions, was also near Phu Loc Town, while the 914th RF Group of three battalions guarded the Hai Van Pass.

Shortly after General Truong returned from Saigon on 20 March he learned that the situation in northern Quang Tin, which had been bleak on 16 March when the enemy pounded Thang Binh District Town with artillery and overran outposts southwest of the village, now looked better. Two battalions of the 3d ARVN Division, sent from Quang Nam Province, joined two RF battalions in a counterattack causing high enemy casualties in tough fighting east of Thang Binh.

The prospects in Tam Ky, however, were not so favorable, despite the efforts of the 2d ARVN Division to concentrate forces there for its defense. The city was struck by heavy rocket fire on 21 March. On that day, the 4th Infantry Regiment moved its command post to Tam Ky from Quang Ngai, the 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry, moved in from Binh Son District, and the 916th RF Group headquarters moved down from Thang Binh with the 135th RF Battalion.

The situation in Quang Ngai Province was becoming desperate although elements of the 4th ARVN Infantry succeeded in opening Highway 1 in Binh Son District. But west of Binh Son, the NVA struck the long column of refugees and military fleeing from Tra Bong; the 69th Rangers were ambushed and dispersed. The NVA attack south of Duc Pho cut Highway 1, isolating Sa Huynh and the two battalions defending it, the 70th Ranger and 137th RF Battalions. The next day, General Truong gave General Nhut authority to consolidate his forces anyway he could to preserve combat strength.

After NVA tanks and infantry had crossed the cease-fire line in Quang Tri Province on 19 March, they rolled steadily south against the disintegrating resistance of the territorials until they reached the My Chanh Line at the boundary of Thua Thien Province. Here the advance halted while the attackers waited for the next phase to begin. It started west and south of Hue early on the morning of 21 March when the lead battalions of the 324B and 325th NVA Divisions, together with the independent Tri-Thien Regiment, with heavy artillery support, assaulted RVNAF positions from the Bo Corridor to Phu Loc. Heavy artillery fire fell on Hue.

The My Chanh line was quiet, and the attacks against the Marines in the Bo Valley were repulsed with heavy enemy losses. But the Phu Loc sector, taking the brunt of the attack by the 324B and 325th Divisions, began to crumble early. In the area of the 1st ARVN Infantry, the 18th NVA Regiment, 325th Division, supported by the 98th Artillery Regiment, took Hill 350 and drove on to assault Nui Bong. Although the mountain changed hands three times that afternoon, the 2d Battalion, 1st ARVN Infantry, controlled it on 22 March. Other formations of the 325th, notably the 101st Regiment, forced the 60th Ranger Battalion, 15th Group, from Hill 500 west of Phu Loc, and supporting artillery interdicted Highway 1. A stream of refugees began piling up along the road northwest of Phu Loc. By evening, however, one lane was opened for traffic to Da Nang.

To the west, in the hills around Mo Tau, the 21st Independent Regiment and the 29th Regiment of the 304th Division, both operating under the 324th Division, attacked the 54th ARVN Infantry and were repelled. A prisoner from the 271st said that casualties in his regiment were very heavy, that the 9th Battalion was nearly destroyed.

NVA attacks continued all along the Thua Thien front on 22 March. An ARVN counterattack to recapture Hill 224, a key position in the Mo Tau sector, failed. The population of Hue had declined to only 50,000, and the Hai Van Pass was clogged with desperate people trying to escape. Da Nang was inundated by a tragic flood of humanity. City police on 21 March estimated more than 100,000 refugees, and they were still coming. The ministerial delegation promised by Prime Minister Khiem finally arrived on the 22d, but it could offer little help since there was not enough rice to be bought on the Da Nang market.

The official count of refugees in Da Nang, based upon police registrations, was 121,000 by nightfall on 23 March. The unofficial estimate by the U.S. Consul General was 400,000. All the necessities of life were missing or rapidly disappearing: food, sanitation, housing, and medical care. On 24 March, the government began moving refugees south on every available boat and ship. Thousands made it, but many more did not. Fortunately, NVA attacks in Quang Nam Province were largely blunted by the 3d ARVN Division and territorial troops; security, although relative, was better in Da Nang than anywhere else in Military Region 1.

Southwest of Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, the 2d Battalion, 5th ARVN Regiment, had been in heavy combat since 12 March. Starting the campaign with 350 men, the battalion on 22 March was down to only 130, after heavy casualties and many desertions. General Nhut replaced it with the 2d Battalion, 4th Infantry, committing the 4th Infantry Regiment southwest of Tam Ky together with two battalions of the 5th Regiment and a company of tanks and sending the 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment, from Tam Ky to assist in the defense of Chu Lai. The 12th Ranger Group remained on Tam Ky's northwest perimeter.
The final NVA assault on Tam Ky began on 24 March. Sappers breached the perimeter and by midmorning were in the center of the city, blowing up the power plant. Artillery fire was intense all along the line and by noon tanks and infantry broke through an RF battalion and the 3d Battalion, 5th Infantry. That afternoon the city was lost, and General Truong ordered General Nhut to pull his forces out of Tam Ky and assemble them for the defense of Chu Lai. By this time, however, General Nhut no longer had enough control of the situation or of his units to comply fully with these orders. He managed to get the headquarters and one battalion of the 4th Infantry, plus some scattered fragments of other 4th Regiment units, moving toward Chu Lai that evening. Two battalions of the 5th Regiment, scattered in the assault also, were assembling for the march south. Units on the northwest perimeter including the dispersed 12th Ranger Group and the staff of the deputy commander, 2d Division, were forced to withdraw north toward Quang Nam, making it to Fire Support Base Baldy just inside the Quang Nam boundary on Route 1.

General Truong also ordered the evacuation of all forces in Quang Ngai Province; they were also to assemble for the defense of Chu Lai. The feasibility of this task was strained by NVA sappers who blew an important bridge on Highway 1 between Quang Ngai and Chu Lai.

Meanwhile, north of the Hai Van Pass, territorials on the My Chanh Line withdrew without orders on 23 March. The front in the Nui Bong–Truoi River sector stabilized, however, and ARVN engineers blew the bridge on Highway 1 east of Loc Son to prevent NVA tanks from advancing toward Hue from Phu Loc. On 24 March, after receiving the report of the collapse of the My Chanh line, General Truong met with his commanders—General Thi, Maj. Gen. Lan, Maj. Gen. Hoang Van Lac, (deputy commander of Military Region 1), and 1st Air Division commander, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Duc Khanh.

The 913th RF Group had started the unauthorized withdrawal from the My Chanh, and the territorials refused to stop at the next delaying position near Phong Dien District Town. The 913th’s pullout caused some panic among other forces, and a general rout developed. I Corps officers attempted to rally the troops at the Bo River. The mass desertion was not motivated by fear of the enemy but by the soldiers’ overwhelming concern for the safety of their families in Hue.

General Lac reported that Da Nang was close to panic also, with more than 300,000 refugees jamming the streets. Air Vietnam had scheduled all the special flights it could, but its bookings were solid through June.

At 1800 on 24 March, General Truong ordered General Thi to begin the evacuation of all troops defending Hue. All forces north and west of Hue would assemble at Tan My, the port of Hue north–east of the city, cross the narrow channel to Phu Thuan and march southwest down Vinh Loc Island. Crossing the mouth of Dam Cau Hai Bay on a pontoon bridge to be constructed by ARVN engineers and moving along the beach to Highway 1, they would cross over the Hai Van Pass and on to Da Nang. No trucks, tanks, or guns could make this march; all would have to be disabled or destroyed. The 1st ARVN Division would protect the column by blocking in Phu Thu District.

By the time these orders were issued, what was left of the population of Hue was streaming toward Tan My to take any available boat or ship out of Thua Thien Province. I Corps Forward, commanded by General Thi, established its command post in Tan My, together with the command posts of the Marine Division and the 147th Marine Brigade. The 7th Marine Battalion deployed there to secure the port and the command posts. The 1st Division withdrew from the Troui–Nui Bong sector. The 15th Ranger Group, which had held the Troui River for the 1st Division, pulled back to Phu Bai with heavy casualties. The 54th Infantry Regiment withdrew from the Mo Tau sector to Camp Eagle, southeast of Hue near Highway 1. The 3d ARVN Infantry withdrew from its forward positions on the Son Hue Trach and assembled in Nam Hoa, south of Hue. The 51st Infantry pulled back and located just west of the city while the division headquarters and the 1st Infantry, which had suffered moderate casualties in the Nui Bong sector, were around Hue.

Just as the withdrawal was well under way, General Truong was visited by a delegation of officers from the JGS, carrying orders to release the Marine Division immediately for the defense of Saigon. Pointing out that he could not defend Da Nang without the marines, General Truong objected. The JGS suggested giving up Chu Lai and sending the 2d Division to Da Nang. General Truong issued the order to the 2d Division but still insisted that Da Nang could not be held without the Marine Division; by the time he recovered what was left of the 1st and 2d Divisions, neither would be combat effective.

The sealift from Chu Lai would begin after dark on 25 March on LSTs (landing ship tank) en route from Saigon. Boats committed to the withdrawal of forces in Thua Thien Province would also assist at Chu Lai. While the shipping converged on Chu Lai, the battered 6th Infantry, 2d ARVN Division, was fighting its way toward Chu Lai from Quang Ngai. The Quang Ngai province chief and his staff, unable to break through the NVA units on the road to Chu Lai, went by boat to Ly Son Island.

As an embattled column of soldiers and refugees struggled north on Highway 1 north of Quang Ngai
City, dead and wounded littered the road, a scene reminiscent of the carnage on the same highway in Quang Tri during the 1972 offensive. Once the sealift from Chu Lai began, panic took over as soldiers fought for places on the first boats. Sufficient order was restored, however, to move about. 7,000 soldiers up to Da Nang. The remnants of the 4th Infantry and the almost nonexistent 6th Infantry were regrouped on Ly Son Island while the 12th Ranger Group, down to only 500 men, and the few remaining soldiers of the 5th Infantry, were assembled near Da Nang.

The situation in Da Nang on 26 March was approaching chaos, but the 3d ARVN Division still held in Dai Loc and Duc Duc Districts against mounting pressure. Early that morning, 14 NVA heavy rockets struck a refugee camp on the edge of Da Nang Air base killing and wounding many civilians, mostly women and children. Morale in the 3d ARVN Division was plummeting, and distressed soldiers deserted to save their families in Da Nang. Population control was almost totally absent in the city; more than 2,000,000 people were in the streets trying to gather their families and escape. Police desertions mounted, and those who remained found it nearly impossible to function while bands of armed soldiers, beyond the control of military police, roamed the streets. There were even some instances of shooting between soldiers and police.

The withdrawal from Thua Thien Province began in a rather orderly fashion. The 258th Marine Brigade linked up with the 914th RF Group on Vinh Loc Island to cross the narrow channel over to Loc Tri in Phu Loc District. But the bridge to be installed by ARVN engineers never got there; engineer boats were evidently commandeered by other military units attempting to escape. The withdrawing forces crossed anyway, using local fishing boats. General Truong flew over the column making its way down the long stretch of Vinh Loc Island and noted that the only apparent disciplined, cohesive units were marines. The rest was a mob.

Delayed by heavy seas on 25 March the 147th Marine Brigade left Tan My the next day for Da Nang. Also on 26 March, the marine battalion of the 258th Brigade holding the Phu Gia Pass—a short, twisting defile about 15 kilometers east of Phu Loc District Town—came under attack. With the enemy approaching the Hai Van Pass from the north and Vietnamese Navy boats breaking down faster than they could be repaired, General Truong stopped the sea movement of forces and equipment from Hue. Further, because he had been unable to reinforce Da Nang with adequate strength from the 2d ARVN Infantry Division, he elected to concentrate the recoverable elements of the Marine Division at Da Nang.

On the afternoon of the 27 March, VNAF pilots destroyed four enemy tanks attacking near Fire Support Base Baldy. Although the NVA broke off the attack, and the 3d Division battalions held their positions, it was apparent that the 3d Division would not be able to contain NVA attacks in the outlying districts of Quang Nam. General Truong therefore ordered a withdrawal to a shorter line within artillery range of the center of Da Nang. Attempts to hold that line failed as large numbers of 3d Division soldiers deserted to save their families. With defeat imminent, General Truong shipped all organized forces, mostly marines, out of Da Nang toward Saigon. Then he and most of his staff left; some of them, General Truong included, had to swim through the surf to the rescuing fleet of boats. Da Nang, the last enclave of South Vietnam presence in Military Region 1, belonged to the NVA by nightfall on 30 March.

Binh Dinh

While the furious battle raged in Darlac Province, and three NVA divisions attacked the out-gunned and out-manned 23d ARVN Division, the 22d ARVN Division, under Brig. Gen. Phan Dinh Niem, continued to fight in Binh Dinh Province. Although the 22d was unable to break the hold of the 3d NVA Division on terrain controlling Highway 19 through the An Khe Pass, ARVN soldiers and artillery and VNAF air strikes inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. In the early days of the engagement, General Niem expected the high casualties would sooner or later cause the 3d Division to withdraw. He did not, however, anticipate the precipitous turn of events in the rest of Military Region 2, which, in effect, made futile the gallant performance of his division in Binh Dinh.

The initial onslaught of the 3d NVA Division at the An Khe Pass and against Binh Khe succeeded in driving ARVN defenders, primarily territorials, from positions overlooking the pass and guarding the bridges. In some cases territorials withdrew without putting up much resistance. By the time General Niem had enough battalions in position to counterattack, the enemy had exploited his early gains and had major elements of all three regiments of the 3d NVA Division—the 2d, 12th, and 141st—plus sappers, artillery, and supporting local units, concentrated at the mouth of the Vinh Thanh Valley, between the An Khe Pass and Binh Khe. (See Map 19.)

On 10 March, as the 320th NVA Division entered Ban Me Thuot, General Niem had three of his four regiments committed between An Nhơn, where Highway 19 leaves Highway 1, and the eastern end of the Anh Khe Pass. The 1st and 2d Battalions, 47th Infantry, at the eastern entrance of the An Khe Pass, fought off repeated attempts by battalions of the 2d and 141st NVA Regiments to drive them from the field. On 11 March the 3d Battalion, 47th
Infantry, was airlifted to Binh Khe District Town, completing the deployment of this regiment. The 927th RF Group still held positions inside the pass but could not control the road. Its 209th RF Battalion was overrun on 11 March, and its 218th RF Battalion, with its companies spread thinly through the pass, was extremely vulnerable.

The 42d ARVN Infantry, with its command post in Binh Khe, was attacking west along Highway 19 to attempt a link-up with the two beleaguered battalions of the 47th. The 41st ARVN Infantry, having moved from Bong Son on 8 and 9 March, to An Son on Highway 19, was to secure the line of communication west toward Binh Khe and to protect Phu Cat Air base.

The fourth regiment of the 22d ARVN Division, the 40th, remained in northern Binh Dinh Province, holding the entrance of the An Lao Valley and guarding the Phu Ku Pass on Route 506 north of Phu My.

By 11 March, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 2d NVA Regiment had been badly hurt by ARVN artillery and VNAF air strikes. The 7th Battalion, 141st NVA Regiment, had been driven across the confluence of the Con and Dong Pho Rivers with two of its companies virtually annihilated. The 3d Battalion, 2d Regiment, and the 5th Battalion, 12th Regiment, were also hit hard. But truckloads of ammunition and replacements kept rolling down the Vinh Thanh Valley and the dead and wounded made the return trip to the NVA base areas north of Vinh Thanh.

On 13 March, a representative of the Defense Attache Office visited forward positions of the 22d ARVN Division. His report reflected the general confidence and optimism in General Niem's command. Heavy attacks of five NVA battalions against the 1st and 2d Battalions, 47th Infantry, had been repulsed, though four successive commanders of the 2d Battalion had been killed in action since 4 March. Now commanded by a captain, the battalion was down to half strength and was withdrawn to the division base camp for refitting. Without its 2d Battalion, the 47th Infantry was to attack the enemy in the eastern portal of the An Khe Pass, and link up with the RF still in the pass. The 927th RF Group, under the operational control of the 47th Infantry, had its command post west of the pass at An Khe and companies of its understrength battalions, the 209th, 217th, and 218th, on outposts through the pass. When the command post of the 218th RF Battalion and one of its companies were overrun on 12 March, the 47th Infantry appeared unlikely to break through to the pass in time to find any RF positions intact. The 218th reorganized, and maintained some positions at the west end of the pass, but on 17 March it was again under attack by the 5th Battalion, 12th NVA Regiment. The fighting was intense between the eastern end of the pass and Binh Khe during the period between 15 and 17 March. The 42d ARVN Infantry was attempting to dislodge three battalions of the 3d NVA Division which were occupying the high ground near the eastern end of the pass. Despite killing nearly 500 enemy in two days, the 42d made no real progress. Its commander was wounded twice but remained on duty. Meanwhile, the 41st ARVN Infantry moved up to south of Binh Khe District Town.

General Niem withdrew the two remaining battalions of the 47th Infantry and sent them to northern Binh Dinh Province to relieve the 2d and 3d Battalions, 40th Infantry, which General Phu had ordered to Khang Duong in Khanh Hoa Province. After the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry, finished refitting at the division base camp, he planned to send it north to replace the 1st Battalion, 40th Infantry, which would then become division reserve.

With only two regiments available and no reserve, General Niem decided on 17 March he could not open the An Khe Pass and ordered his battalions to hold in place. Although several thousand civilians and several hundred territorial troops at An Khe were cut off from Qui Nhon, there was no longer any compelling military reason to pursue the attack. The exodus from the highlands was already under way along the jungle track called Route 7B.

By 19 March, the NVA controlled the pass westward nearly to the outskirts of An Khe. By 22 March, the 5th Battalion, 12th NVA Regiment, was inside An Khe; all ARVN resistance there ended, and over 5,000 people were struggling south over rural roads and trails, trying to escape to Qui Nhon. On 24 March, the 42d ARVN Infantry pulled back along Route 19, east of Binh Khe, and the 41st Infantry assumed the defense of Binh Khe.

That same day, the long-expected NVA assault on Binh Khe began, and the 41st and 42d ARVN Regiments were cut off. The 3d NVA Division then pushed its 141st and 12th Regiments (except for the 5th Battalion still at An Khe) eastward toward Phu Cat. Meanwhile, the B3 Front's 95B Regiment, having marched east from Pleiku along Route 19, joined the 2d NVA Regiment for the continuation of the attack on the 42d ARVN Infantry east of Binh Khe.

But the 41st and 42d ARVN Regiments did not wait for the reinforced attack. Instead, on 27 March, they broke out and attacked eastward toward Qui Nhon, taking with them over 400 territorials rescued by helicopter the day before from the An Khe area. As the 41st and 42d Regiments dug in for the defense of Qui Nhon, orders arrived from Saigon to evacuate what remained of the 22d Division. Military Region 2 was virtually lost.
As NVA attacked Phu Cat Air base on 31 March, the VNAF flew out about 32 aircraft, leaving about 58, mostly disabled or destroyed, on the ground. On 1–2 April, about 7,000 troops of the 22d Division and Binh Dinh territorials boarded Vietnamese Navy craft at Qui Nhon and sailed for Vung Tau. Enemy tanks and infantry were in the streets of Qui Nhon.

Khanh Hoa—the End in MR 2

The 23d ARVN Division counterattack from Phuoc An had been decisively defeated when General Dung committed his 10th Division, up from Quang Duc. Survivors of the 23d Rangers, territorials, and civilians who escaped from Darlac streamed eastward across the plateau along Route 21. The military men were assembled at Khanh Duong, the last district on the high plain before the highway twisted down through the Deo Cao (M’Drak) Pass to the coastal hills and lowlands of Khanh Hoa Province. (See Map 19.)

The Deo Cao Pass was the obvious place for a defensive stand to protect Nha Trang, the site of the headquarters of Military Region 2, II Corps, the headquarters of the Navy’s Second Coastal Zone, and 2d Air Division. Nha Trang also held the ARVN Noncommissioned Officer Academy, and Lam Son, a major national training center, was nearby, North of Nha Trang, Route 21 joined National Route 1 at Ninh Hoa. West of Ninh Hoa, midway between the ocean and the hills of Khanh Duong District, was the large training center of Duc My, site of the Ranger Training Center and the ARVN Artillery School. Thus, with its military concentration and population, the Nha Trang–Ninh Hoa area was the last vital enclave in Military Region 2. Without it, a return to the highlands was virtually impossible. If it could be held, NVA divisions could be prevented from rolling down Highway 1 to Saigon.

Most of the survivors from Darlac were moved on past Khanh Duong by road and helicopter, the Rangers to Duc My for regrouping, the 23d Division soldiers to Cam Ranh and Lam Son. A forward headquarters of the 23d Division was established at Khanh Duong to command the forces assigned to defend the pass: the 3d Airborne Brigade, pulled from its ships at Nha Trang after being dispatched for Saigon from Quang Nam, and the headquarters and two battalions of the 40th Infantry, 22d Division, from Binh Dinh Province.

The 10th NVA Division took up the pursuit after Phuoc An and closed rapidly on Khanh Duong. The 40th ARVN Infantry pushed west of the town to meet the advancing 10th NVA Division. The 3d Airborne Brigade dug in on the high ground in the pass, behind the 40th Infantry. On 22 March, the leading battalions of the 10th NVA Division, with tanks supporting, blasted into Khanh Duong and the two battalions of the 40th ARVN Infantry were forced to withdraw through the 3d Airborne Brigade.

A network of logging roads traversed the dense, steep forests of western Khanh Hoa Province. If blocked by the 3d Airborne in the pass on Route 21, the NVA could send a large force south, bypassing the Airborne, and approach Nha Trang from the west through Dien Khanh District. To guard against this threat, the 40th was withdrawn to Duc My, then sent south to eastern Dien Khanh to prepare positions generally astride local Route 420, which led due east into Dien Khanh and on into Nha Trang. The 40th was reinforced with one RF battalion and supported by one 155-mm. and two 105-mm. howitzers.

Long range reconnaissance patrols were sent into the forest south of Khanh Duong to try to detect any significant enemy force moving south toward Dien Khanh. Nothing of any size was detected, although some ominous signs of recent heavy traffic were reported.

In the Deo Cao Pass, with forward positions at Chu Kroat Mountain, a prominent peak over 3100 feet, the 3d Airborne Brigade dug in to await the 10th NVA Division, whose 28th Infantry Regiment and tanks were already in Khanh Duong. A local RF battalion was in the pass south of the Airborne Brigade. The 34th Ranger Battalion, 7th Ranger Group, which had fought its way through the gauntlet of fire on Route 7B, was protecting the northern approach to Ninh Hoa at the Deo Cao Pass.

With the Airborne still holding on Route 21, General Phu announced on 29 March new command responsibilities in what was left of his military region. General Niem, commanding the 22d Division, was responsible for Binh Dinh and Phu Yen Provinces. Qui Nhon, the last enclave in Binh Dinh, fell on 2 April. He controlled for a brief period the 96th Battalion, 21st Group, which had fought at Ban Me Thuot and regrouped to fight again at Tuy Thoa in Phu Yen Province.

The mountain provinces of Tuyen Duc and Lam Dong Districts were the responsibility of Maj. Gen. Lam Quang Tho, commandant of the Military Academy, Vietnam’s West Point, at Dalat. In addition to the territorials, General Tho had some of the survivors of the 24th Ranger Group who had marched through the mountains after the fall of Quang Duc.

Brig. Gen. Le Van Than, the Deputy Commanding General of Military Region 2, was sent to Cam Ranh. He would defend the Cam Ranh Special Sector, Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Provinces. He was also to re-form the 23d Infantry Division out of the 4,900 troops mustered at Cam Ranh.
The most critical mission, the defense of Khanh Koa Province, fell to Brig. Gen. Tran Van Cam, in command the 3d Airborne Brigade, the 40th Infantry, the 34th Ranger Battalion, and territorials. But before General Cam could move from Phu Yen Province, where he was controlling the eastern end of the exodus on Route 7B, the 10th NVA Division attacked the 3d Airborne in the Deo Cao Pass on 30 March. Supported by the 40th Artillery Regiment and with two company of tanks attached, elements of the 28th and 66th Regiments the next day surrounded the 5th Airborne Battalion, at that time reduced by casualties to 20 percent strength.

The 3d Airborne Brigade was deployed in depth from Chu Kroa Mountain south for about 15 kilometers along the high ground over the highway. Heavy enemy fire knocked out 5 of 14 armored personnel carriers supporting the brigade, and the three 105-mm. howitzer batteries in the force had to move to the rear, setting up near Buon Ea Thi where, unfortunately, they were beyond supporting range of the forward Airborne positions. The collapse of the Airborne defense proceeded very rapidly afterwards. At Buon Ea Thi elements of the 10th NVA Division outflanked Airborne positions along the road and struck the 6th Airborne Battalion. Although the troopers knocked out three T-54 tanks, they could not hold. With the brigade split at Buon Ea Thi, a rapid withdrawal was imperative to conserve what was left of the decimated force.

The 3d Airborne Brigade, less than one fourth of its soldiers still in ranks, marched back through Duc My and Ninh Hoa and stopped in a narrow defile where National Route 1 edged along the beach below Hon Son Mountain, just north of Nha Trang.

The 10th NVA Division was close behind. On 1 April, NVA tanks rolled through Duc My and Ninh Hoa and headed for Nha Trang. The American Consul General and his staff left Nha Trang by air for Saigon, the II Corps staff drove south to Phan Rang, the defeated remnants of the Airborne, Rangers, territorials, and 40th Infantry followed. The VNAF evacuated Nha Trang Air Base at 1500 and all flyable aircraft were flown out. On 2 April, NVA tanks entered the city.

The momentum of the NVA advance was such that a defense at Cam Ranh was no longer feasible. Recognizing this, the JGS authorized the immediate evacuation of all that remained of II Corps through that port, and by 2 April, the evacuation was in full swing.
The Last Act in the South

Tri Tam and Tay Ninh

The 1975 Communist offensive was coordinated country-wide. The NVA troops of COSVN struck their first major blow of the campaign at Tri Tam, the district seat of Dau Tieng District at the southwestern edge of the Michelin Plantation. West of Tri Tam, across the Saigon River, local Route 239 passed through another large plantation, Ben Cui, before it joined local Route 26 (LTL-26), which ran northwest into Tay Ninh City and southeast to the ARVN forward base at Khiem Hanh. All traffic to Tri Tam had to pass over Routes 26 and 239, and by outposts manned by Tay Ninh territorials. Tri Tam was defended by three RF Battalions and nine PF platoons. III Corps had anticipated the attack on Tri Tam—major elements of the 9th NV A Division had been observed concentrating north of the town—so the province chief reinforced the garrison with two additional RF companies on 10 March. (Map 20)

The attack on Tri Tam began at 0600 on 11 March with an intense artillery and mortar bombardment, followed by an assault by T-54 tanks and infantry. But the success of the attack was assured by the earlier severing of the line of communication. At 0330, NVA infantry and tanks overran an RF outpost on Route 239 about 10 kilometers west of Tri Tam.

The province chief reacted by sending two RF battalions east along Route 239 toward Ben Cui, but they were stopped by heavy fire short of the last outpost. NVA tanks were already in the Ben Cui Plantation. Meanwhile, as the day wore on in embattled Tri Tam, the territorial defenders held on, destroying two T-54s in the town. The main attack was coming from the east, and the ARVN soldiers blew the bridge on Route 239 east of the town. Fighting raged through the night, and as dawn broke on 12 March, ARVN territorials still held Tri Tam. The 95C and 272d NVA Regiments, and at least a company of tanks, supported by a regiment of artillery, continued the attack that day and eliminated the last resistance in Tri Tam.

Meanwhile, the ARVN III Corps commander had dispatched another relief column toward Tri Tam. Task Force 318, composed of tanks and armored personnel carriers from the 3d Armored Brigade, with the 33d Ranger Battalion attached, was stopped by heavy B-40 and 130-mm. gunfire before it could reach Tri Tam. Three officers, including a company commander, were among the heavy casualties in initial fighting near Ben Cui.

With Tri Tam in its possession, the NVA now controlled the Saigon River corridor from its beginning, near Tong Le Chon, to the ARVN outpost at Rach Bap in the Iron Triangle. The ARVN base at Khiem Hanh was now within easy range of NVA artillery. Khiem Hanh's principal mission was to prevent major enemy units from closing on Routes 22 or 1 (QL-22 and QL-1) near the critical river port and road junction at Go Dau Ha. Tri Tam was thus the first important objective in a campaign to isolate Tay Ninh Province from Saigon. On the eve of the assault on Tri Tam three main force Tay Ninh NVA battalions, the D-14, D-16, and D-18, with support from the 101st NV A Regiment and the 75th Artillery Division closed Highway 22 between Go Dau Ha and Tay Ninh City. The 75th Artillery Division had five regiments operating in Tay Ninh for this campaign, and the 377th NVA Antiaircraft Artillery Division had about 15 antiaircraft battalions, some providing direct support for infantry.

While the NVA Tay Ninh battalions blocked Highway 22 north of Go Dau Ha, the 6th and 174th Regiments, 5th NV A Division, attacked out of Cambodia and struck the ARVN base at Ben Cau, northwest of Go Dau Ha between the international boundary and the Song Vam Co Dong. Initial assaults were repulsed, and two PT-76 tanks were destroyed. When two large concentrations of tanks were sighted west of Go Dau Ha on 12 March, fighter-bombers destroyed eight and damaged nine, losing three aircraft in the engagement. Ben Cau, however, fell on 14 March as defending territorials pulled back toward Go Dau Ha.

Ben Cau was only one of eight outposts west of the Song Vam Co Dong that came under heavy attack on 12 March. Most of them held out until the night of 13 March, but nearly all were in enemy hands by the next day.

General Toan, commanding III Corps, reacted to the crisis developing at Go Dau Ha by reinforcing at Khiem Hanh and along Routes 1 and 22. He deployed the 3d Armored Brigade, with its three battalions, reinforced by the 64th and 92d Ranger Battalions (from Tan Uyen District, Bien Hoa) and the 48th Infantry, 18th Division, reinforced with armored personnel carriers (from Corps reserve in Long Binh, Bien Hoa) to Khiem Hanh and Go Dau.
Ha. He also pulled the 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry, from the 5th Division at Lai Khe and sent it to reinforce Khiem Hanh.

While a battalion of the 48th ARVN Infantry attacked west out of Go Dau Ha to clear Route 1 to the Cambodian frontier, the 46th Infantry attacked north along Route 22 to help territorials clear the road to Tay Ninh against heavy resistance and intense artillery fire. Antiaircraft fire was so heavy in the area that General Toan was unable to land his helicopter at Go Dau Ha on 13 March. Route 22 between Go Dau Ha and Tay Ninh remained closed.

Long An

Connecting Saigon with the delta of Military Region 4, Route 4, even more critical than Route 22, was also threatened by the widespread offensive in Military Region 3. This highway passed through the rich, densely populated rice lands and pineapple farms of Long An Province on the boundary between the two military regions. Long An territorials were among the best troops in the country, and they gave a good account of themselves in initial fighting with local main-force battalions in early March, although suffering high casualties. Recognizing the need to keep Highway 4 open, the JGS had given General Toan two battalions of Marines, the 14th and 16th, which comprised the new 4th Brigade, to stiffen the defense in Long An. The Marines and RF operated well together and secured Long An throughout March.

The Eastern Front

While General Toan was committing more than half of his corps to the western flank, an NVA offensive erupted in the east and center. Available ARVN forces were inadequate to cope with the widespread attacks. Since the enclaves at An Loc and Chon Thanh in Binh Long were of no further military or political value, the ARVN battalions could be withdrawn and used to bolster the hard-pressed defenses throughout the region. Furthermore, a new enemy division was discovered near Chon Thanh—the 341st from just above the 17th parallel. To save the Rangers and territorials in An Loc and Chon Thanh, General Toan began an evacuation on 18 March. Among the first to be moved were 12 105-mm. howitzers, while 5 of the 155-mm. howitzers had to be destroyed because the VNAF did not have heavy-lift helicopters to move them. But despite the appearance of the 341st NVA Division and a new regiment—the 273d Infantry from North Vietnam's 4th Military Region—the most critical threat developed not in the center but on the eastern flank.

Just before the NVA attacked, the 18th ARVN Division was spread out. The 1st Battalion, 43d Infantry, was securing Route 20 north of Xuan Loc, the capital of Long Khanh Province. The Regiment's 2d Battalion was south of Dinh Quan, and the 3d Battalion was in Hoai Duc District Town in Binh Tuy Province. The 52d Infantry, minus its 3d Battalion on Route 1 between Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc, was in Xuan Loc with elements operating northwest of the town. The 48th Infantry was still attached to the 25th Division in Tay Ninh Province.

The NVA forces of Nambo began the Long Khanh-Binh Tuy campaign with strong attacks against ARVN positions on the two principal lines of communication in the region, Highways 1 and 20 (QL-1 and QL-20), striking outposts, towns, bridges, and culverts north and east of Xuan Loc. On 17 March, the 209th Infantry Regiment and the 210th Artillery Regiment, 7th NVA Division, opened what was to become one of the bloodiest, hardest fought battles of the war, the battle for Xuan Loc. The 209th struck first at Dinh Quan, north of Xuan Loc, and at the La Nga bridge, west of Dinh Quan. Eight tanks supported the initial assault on Dinh Quan, and NVA artillery fire destroyed four 155-mm. howitzers supporting the territorials. Anticipating the attack, General Dao, commanding the 18th ARVN Division, had reinforced the La Ngã bridge the day before, but the intense fire forced a withdrawal from the bridge. After repeated assaults, the 209th NVA Infantry penetrated Dinh Quan, and the 2d Battalion, 43d Infantry, as well as the RF battalion were forced to withdraw with heavy losses on 18 March. (Map 21)

The day before, the 3d Battalion, 43d Infantry, killed 10 enemy in heavy fighting northwest of Hoai Duc. At the same time another outpost of Xuan Loc District, Ong Don, defended by an RF company and an artillery platoon, came under artillery and infantry attack. The NVA assault was repulsed with heavy losses on both sides, and another RF company, sent to reinforce, ran into strong resistance on Highway 1 west of Ong Don. North of Ong Don, Gia Ray on Route 333 was under attack by the 274th Infantry Regiment, 6th NVA Division. The 18th ARVN Division headquarters therefore realized that two NVA divisions, the 6th and the 7th, were committed in Long Khanh. While the battle raged at Gia Ray, another post on Highway 1 west of Ong Don came under attack. Meanwhile, a bridge and a culvert on Highway 1 on each side of the Route 332 junction were blown up by NVA sappers. Thus, all ARVN forces east of Route 332 were isolated from Xuan Loc by formidable obstacles and enemy road blocks.

North from Xuan Loc, on Route 20, hamlets along the road were occupied in varying degrees by enemy soldiers, and the territorial outpost far to the
BATTLE OF XUAN LOC
17 Mar - 15 Apr 1975
- NVA attack
- ARVN attack
- ARVN retreat

Map 21
northeast near the Lam Dong boundary was over-run. General Dao decided to counterattack up Route 20 with his 52d Infantry, minus one battalion but reinforced with the 5th Armored Cavalry Squadron from Tay Ninh Province. The regiment was ordered to clear the road as far as Dinh Quan. But the attack quickly stalled as it met heavy resistance well short of its objective.

Evidences of increasing heavy NVA commitments in Long Khanh flowed into III Corps headquarters in Bien Hoa. The 141st Regiment, 7th NVA Division, had apparently participated in the attack on Dinh Quan. Hoai Duc was overrun by the 812th Regiment, 6th NVA Division, while that division’s other two regiments, the 33d and 274th, seized Gia Ray. The ARVN outpost on the conical peak of Chua Chan, standing 2200 feet above Xuan Loc and providing excellent observation, also fell to 6th NVA Division forces and Xuan Loc itself began to receive artillery fire, including 105-mm. General Toan responded to the burgeoning threat on his eastern flank first by sending the 5th Armored Cavalry Squadron and then one battalion of the 48th Infantry from Tay Ninh to Long Khanh.

Tay Ninh

The rest of the 48th Infantry was still heavily engaged near Go Dau Ha. The 3d Battalion made contact with an NVA Company west of the Song Vam Co Dong on 17 March, killed 36, and captured a number of weapons. Meanwhile, on Route LTL-26 east of Tay Ninh City, an outpost at Cau Khoi, manned by the 351st RF Battalion, was overrun. (See Map 20.)

The outer defenses of Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia began to crumble rapidly after the fall of Cau Khoi. Following an intense bombardment by 105-mm. howitzers and 120-mm. mortars, the 367th Sapper Battalion, 9th NV A Division, left nearly 200 dead. The artillery, tank, and automatic weapons fire was intense; the 271st was supported by a battalion of 37-mm. antiaircraft weapons used as field artillery, as well as by the 42d Artillery Regiment with its 85-mm. and 122-mm. guns. The decimated battalion of the 7th Infantry was withdrawn from combat and sent to the regimental base at Phu Giao in Binh Duong Province. As a precaution against being flanked by a strong attack down the Saigon River corridor, General Toan sent the 2d Battalion, 7th Infantry, to reinforce Rach Bap, the western anchor of the Iron Triangle.

Then General Toan asked the Chief of the JGS, General Vien, for an Airborne brigade to use in a counterattack at Truong Mit. General Vien refused the request; he could not agree to further dissipating the small general reserve while General Toan still had a few uncommitted units. Therefore, on 25 and 26 March, the hard-fighting 3d Armored Brigade, together with elements of the 25th ARVN Division, attacked the 271st NV A Regiment at Truong Mit and succeeded in reoccupying the position. Losses were again heavy on both sides. General Toan then reinforced the defense by sending the headquarters and two battalions of the 48th Infantry, 18th Division, to Khiem Hanh.

Binh Long

The planned ARVN withdrawal from its two enclaves in Binh Long Province was still under way when the 9th and 341st NV A Divisions attacked at Chon Thanh on 24 March. A battalion of T-54 tanks accompanied the assault, and in the first day’s action seven of these were destroyed by the VNAF and the defending 31st and 32d Ranger Groups. The Chon Thanh position held firm, and the evacuation from An Loc continued without interruption. On the 26th, the 341st NV A Division attacked again, apparently trying to retrieve disabled tanks, but was repulsed again. By 27 March the withdrawal from An Loc was complete, and the 31st and 32d Ranger Groups still held Chon Thanh. The 341st NV A Division, reinforced with the 273d Independent Regiment from North Vietnam, got set for yet another assault on the stronghold. Following a
howitzers and 120-mm. mortars, a regimental-sized 3,000-round bombardment by 105-mm. and 155-mm. howitzers and 120-mm. mortars, a regimental-sized force supported by an understrength tank battalion attacked Chon Thanh on 31 March. Again the determined Rangers drove back the attackers, destroying 11 more tanks. But it was clear that if the fighting strength of the two Ranger groups was to be preserved to fight again, they would have to pull out of Chon Thanh. Accordingly, on 1 April the VNAF saturated the assembly areas and bivouacs occupied by the badly mauled 341st Division with 52 sorties; under the cover of this attack, the 32d Ranger Group was airlifted out of Chon Thanh and set down in another hot spot, Khiem Hanh in Tay Ninh Province. That night, three battalions of the 31st Rangers and the one remaining RF battalion began a withdrawal to Bau Bang and Lai Khe, taking artillery and light tanks with them.

The northern defenses of Saigon were now about 14 kilometers north of the 5th Division base at Lai Khe, but this was not really a significant change since the fire base at Chon Thanh had long been isolated by strong NVA blocking positions on Highway 13 around Bau Long. Nevertheless, the arc of main force NVA divisions was pressing ever closer to the heart of the nation, and the vital lines of communications to the outer defenses were either severed or dangerously threatened.

Washington

As the ring of Communist divisions tightened around Military Region 3, the flow of military assistance to Vietnam was slowed by events in Washington. Members of a House caucus on 12 March voted 189 to 49 in favor of a resolution opposing more military aid for either Cambodia or Vietnam before the end of the fiscal year. The next day, 13 March, the House Foreign Affairs Committee rejected a compromise proposal that would have provided some additional aid.

The Ford administration pressed ahead with efforts to convince Congress that additional assistance was essential to the survival of Vietnam and that the Congressional approach to this issue was the cause of the Vietnamese decision to withdraw from the highlands.

Although the decline of U.S. support was the crucial factor in the overall disaster in Vietnam, the proximate cause of the highlands debacle was the failure of the corps commander to accept an intelligence estimate and to fight the battle of Ban Me Thuot with forces available. Then, when he followed this critical mistake with two others—inadequate planning and execution of the counterattack from Phuoc An and a horribly mismanaged withdrawal down Route 7B—he started the entire nation on a downhill slide that not even the valor of thousands of loyal officers and soldiers could reverse.

The Defense and State Departments were receiving reasonably accurate daily reports from the DAO and Embassy in Saigon, but most journalists in Vietnam were having difficulty discovering what was really happening on the battlefield, and it has been argued that military assistance could not have stemmed South Vietnam’s decline because the South Vietnamese lacked the will to fight. As in every war, some units performed poorly under attack, but the growing certainty that defeat was imminent, now that the United States had cut back military assistance, was at the root of the decline in combat efficiency. Yet there were countless instances of great tenacity in defense and awesome valor in combat, even in the face of overwhelming enemy firepower and numbers.

As the end of March approached, reports from Saigon told Washington that a crisis was rapidly approaching. Blocked by Congress from providing relief in the form of additional assistance, President Ford dispatched General Frederick C. Weyand, U.S. Army Chief of Staff and the last senior American commander in Vietnam, to Saigon to make a personal assessment of the situation. General Weyand arrived on 27 March. He met with Ambassador Martin and Maj. Gen. Homer D. Smith, Jr., the Defense Attaché, as well as with President Thieu and General Vien. He also met privately with the author on two occasions before his departure to brief President Ford on 3 April. In these two meetings, the author stressed the point that although a decision to renew the U.S. commitment to Vietnam was essential to its survival, it was already too late for this alone. A U.S. military effort was required and, as a minimum, would have to include U.S. airpower against NVA formations, bases, and lines of communication in South Vietnam. The author followed his discussions with General Weyand with a written summary of his assessment on 31 March, quoted in its entirety:

1. SUMMARY.

a. The GVN has a new strategy. It calls for defending from Khanh Hoa south and what remains of GVN MR’s 3 and 4 (see map). This strategy might have held the promise of success (1) if GVN forces in MR’s 1 and 2 could have been extracted more or less intact for employment in the south; (2) if the enemy forces committed, or to be committed, against the new, truncated South Vietnam were not in the process of being heavily reinforced and (3) if the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Vietnam were expressed in the form of immediate deliveries of essential equipment, ammunition and supplies; followed by assurances that this support would be continued for as long as the North’s aggression makes it necessary.

b. With regard to factor (1), above, of all the major formations in MR’s 1 and 2, only the 22d Division stands a chance to be extracted intact (as of now, a slim chance).
The Last Act in the South

c. With regard to factor (2), the enemy has reinforced in GVN MR 3. Reinforcement continues and the potential for more is very real.
d. Factor (3) has not been decided, but defeat is all but certain within 90 days without it. Because of factors (1) and (2), material and political support may no longer be enough to provide a successful defense. Only the application of U.S. strategic power in South Vietnam can give this any degree of probability.

2. AVNCAF Capability to Regroup.

a. Assuming necessary equipment is available and that the 22d ARVN Division is able to disengage from Ninh Dinh, the following can be ready for redeployment in 20 to 40 days:
   (1) The 22d Division (4 regiments). (now questionable)
   (2) A three-brigade Marine Division.
   (3) One other division.
   (4) Three to four Ranger groups.
   (5) Seven direct support and two general support artillery battalions.
   (6) Four armored cavalry squadrons.

b. One and probably two additional divisions should be ready for deployment in about 120 days.
c. Although the three existing ARVN divisions in MR 4 have been fairly aggressive, they are seriously understrength. Upgrading the divisions by reassigning territorial forces is underway. Territorial forces themselves, the key to Delta security, must continue to be upgraded.
d. Summary: Success in the above regroupments would provide ARVN with 13 divisions (or division equivalents of ARVN/Rangers/VNMC) within 40 days; an additional two divisions in four months.

3. ENEMY STRENGTH AVAILABLE FOR MR 3 AND 4 OPERATIONS.

We believe that the 341st NVA Division has arrived, that the 320 B Division is currently enroute to MR 3 and that two other divisions currently deployed in the south or from the NVN reserve will also move to MR 3 in the next one to three months. The movement of units to MR 3 will allow the use of infiltrators to rebuild units and the allocation of significantly larger numbers of infiltrators of GVN MR 4. Because of difficulties in terrain and supply, we do not believe that a new NVA division will try to move into MR 4.

4. NEAR TERM PROJECTION.

a. If the Communists allow the GVN six to eight weeks before initiating major attacks in MR 3, the GVN possibly could organize a sound defensive. The principal battle area will probably be Tay Ninh Province where the Communists have a three-division equivalent of infantry/sappers plus 20 artillery battalions and three armor battalions. They might deploy one of the newly arriving divisions to the Tay Ninh area.
b. Opposing are two ARVN division equivalents, plus territorials. Probably another four or five ARVN regimental equivalents would be moved to this front, but regiments of the 5th and 18th ARVN Divisions now in Tay Ninh will return to their normal AO’s. Thus, in Tay Ninh (with overlap in Hau Nghia) the GVN would probably deploy a total of seven or eight infantry regiments, supported by an armor brigade. An airborne brigade could be reserve. The GVN’s ability to withstand and neutralize expected heavy artillery and AAA fire will be key factors.
c. In central MR 3, the Communist threat may have temporarily lessened (since the 7th and 9th Divisions are deployed to eastern and western MR 3 respectively) but the 341st Division and another division will probably be committed to strike southwest in southern Binh Duong Province. These forces would be supported by about eight battalions of artillery and several tank battalions. The three regiments of the 5th ARVN Division would probably require support by at least another regiment and an airborne brigade. ARVN could probably withstand a two-division attack although they would probably abandon Phu Giao.
d. In eastern MR 3, elements of the 6th and 7th NVA Divisions, possibly reinforced by another division, will probably continue attacks to overrun Xuan Loc and establish a lodgment north of Bien Hoa. ARVN has only the 18th Division in this area. To meet this threat and also to open routes 1 and 20 will probably require another ARVN division equivalent. The GVN must also protect the water routes to Saigon and the key LOC’s from the Delta.
e. The movement of either the 7th or 9th ARVN Division out of the northern Delta would result in Route 4 being closed, and the departure of the 21st Division would endanger Can Tho and open up the southern Delta to nearly unlimited Communist gains.
f. The fighting will be very heavy with high GVN losses which will have to be replaced immediately. The GVN will have trouble matching Communist 130-mm. artillery and VNAF effectiveness will be limited by Communist AA weapons. The last two reconstituted divisions will have to be ready for commitment by early summer. If heavy rains occur early this year, Communist elements in the Parrot’s Beak will probably have to withdraw from forward positions. This would allow the GVN time to regroup and refit units in Tay Ninh and Kien Tuong Provinces.

5. CONCLUSION.

It is possible that with abundant resupply and a great deal of luck, the GVN could conduct a successful defense of what remains of MR’s 3 and 4. It is extremely doubtful that it could withstand an offensive involving the commitment of three additional Communist divisions in MR 3 without U.S. strategic air support in SVN. With defeat in MR 3 tantamount to defeat of the GVN, South Vietnam would be almost certain to fall within three to six months (or sooner).

By this time agencies in Washington were equally gloomy. A DIA assessment of 3 April gave south Vietnam only 30 Days.

Meanwhile, a misconception was spreading in Washington that the current reverses in Vietnam did not involve much combat. In his news conference of 2 April, Secretary of Defense Schlesinger spoke of “relatively little major fighting.” He repeated this view on “Face the Nation” on 6 April: “It is plain that the great offensive is a phrase that probably should be in quotation marks. What we have had here is a partial collapse of South Vietnamese Forces, so that there has been very little major fighting since the battle of Ban Me Thout, and that was an exception in itself.”

General Smith could not let that impression stand and sent a message to CINCPAC and a number of addresses in Washington attempting to correct the record:

On the contrary, there was heavy fighting all along the coastal plain and in the foothills from south of Phu Bai to Khanh Duong in Khanh Hoa Province.

In the hills south of Phu Bai, the 1st ARVN Div repelled numerous heavy two-divisional attacks and even gained some lost positions before it finally was ordered to withdraw because its northern flank was exposed.

In Phu Loc District just north of Hai Van Pass onQL-1, an overpowering attack by up to two regiments of the enemy’s 325th Div forced outnumbered ARVN defenders back from their positions and severed the line of communications.

These attacks could not be described as “little fighting.”

In the An Khe/Binh Khe region along QL-19 in Binh Dinh Prov, the ARVN 22D Div defended strongly with great perseverance against determined and heavy NVA attacks. Outflanked,
outgunned, and eventually cut off, the 22d fought its way back to the beaches and was eventually evacuated. This was a long and heavy battle.

Likewise along QL-21, the ARVN fight at Khanh Duong was a battle of major proportions. The NVA 10th Div employed three and possibly four infantry regiments to overcome the ARVN Defenses. The ARVN 3d Airborne Bde was reduced to only 600 men by the time it was able to fight its way out of encirclement and regroup intact near Phan Rang.

Respectfully recommend that you suggest to the Chairman that he acquaint the Secretary with these facts so that an accurate representation of what has occurred might be presented to the American people. There is a "great offensive" underway.

Meanwhile the bloody struggle continued as the GVN assembled its few forces recovered from the defeated regions, reorganized and redeployed for the final stand.

Reorganization and Redeployment

The stiff ARVN resistance and strong local counterattacks in Tay Ninh, Binh Duong, Binh Long, and Long Khanh Provinces caused the NVA to pull back and regroup. Meanwhile, a relative calm settled over the battlefields during the first week of April, and the ARVN exploited the opportunity to reorganize shattered units arriving from the north and redeploy forces to meet the certain resumption of the NVA attacks.

On 1 April, General Toan commanding III Corps, returned the headquarters and two battalions of the 48th Infantry to their parent division, the 18th, from Tay Ninh Province. The regiment moved to the Xuan Loc area but sent its 2d Battalion down to Ham Tan on the coast of Binh Tuy Province to secure the city and port while large numbers of refugees poured into the province from the north. About 500 troops, survivors of the 2d ARVN Division, were among those arriving from Military Region 1. When reorganized and reequipped, they would take over the security mission in Ham Tan.

The 52d ARVN Infantry, 18th Division, meanwhile was pressing forward on Route 20 south of Dinh Quan and in sharp fighting on 1 April killed over 50 NVA troops. The other regiment of the 18th was fighting east along Route 1, near Xuan Loc and in contact with a major enemy force.

General Toan also returned the battalions of the 7th Infantry fighting on Highway 1 near Go Dau Ha to their division at Lai Khe. This left the defense of Tay Ninh Province and its line of communication to the 25th ARVN Division, elements of the 3d Armored Brigade, Rangers, and territorials.

Shocked by the necessity to withdraw the RVNAF from the northern military regions, intensely preoccupied with the fierce battles raging within sight and sound of the nation's capital, unable to obtain reliable information concerning the status of withdrawing and decimated units, and further concerned with enormous personal and family tragedies that permeated all their thoughts, the officers of the Joint General Staff neglected until very late—and until prodded into action by the Defense Attaché Office—the planning required for reorganizing and reequipping shattered units whose members were pouring into the southern ports.

Colonel Edward Pelosky, Chief of the Army Division, DAO, took the lead in encouraging the Central Logistics Command to develop the plan. On 27 March, General Khuyen, the Chief of Central Logistics Command, as well as the Chief of Staff of the JGS, approved a plan setting forth a schedule for the reconstitution of units from Military Regions 1 and 2 and including the requirements for replacement vehicles, weapons, and all types of equipment and supplies. Unfortunately, General Khuyen had been unable to secure from the personnel, plans, and operations sections of the JGS information concerning personnel strengths and unit dispositions, and the plan was therefore not only incomplete but unworkable. Data concerning units available for reconstitution and information on the numbers and locations of officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers for these units were therefore not even considered. The unreality of the plan was aggravated by the fact that it was predicated on the availability of funds in a supplemental appropriation and the significant absence of a clear, fully coordinated statement of priorities. But despite these shortcomings, planning and reorganization went ahead, and the Army Division of the DAO reprogrammed unused funds and called forward as much supplies and equipment as could be realistically obtained under the severe funding limits and reasonably employed upon arrival.

By 29 March no contributions to the plan had been received from the J-1, J-3, or J-5 although the Operations and Plans Division, DAO, made another appeal for full JGS participation. Again, although these other staff sections were not represented, joint South Vietnamese-American planning continued, the U.S. side being represented by the DAO, and the South Vietnam side being represented by only RVNAF logisticians from the Central Logistics Command. The revised plan was approved by General Khuyen on 1 April and published as a JGS document, signed by General Vien, on 5 April. By this time, the JGS had become fully involved, and the plan included an activation schedule that dealt with the availability of units, personnel, and equipment as well as an obvious, although unstated, concept for deployment after reconstitution.

By 2 April, the survivors of the Marine Division were disembarking at Vung Tau. Under the leadership of their commander, Maj. Gen. Bui The Lan, they were moved into the 4th Battalion's camp there for processing and reorganization. In all, of
the 12,000 Marines who had been deployed in Military Region 1, about 4,000 were at Vung Tau. The equipment for a reorganized division was on hand in the Saigon–Long Binh area, but moving it to Vung Tau would be difficult. A more serious problem was the shortage of infantry leaders; 5 Marine battalion commanders and 40 company commanders had been killed in action during March and April. Nevertheless, the division rapidly took shape. One brigade of three rifle battalions and one artillery battalion was ready to receive equipment in three days. Ten days later, an additional similar brigade was formed.

Meanwhile, on 1 April the evacuation of Nha Trang came to an end when NVA troops moved in to occupy the harbor. But the evacuation of Cam Ranh Bay continued. Farther south, Phan Rang Air Base came under increasing enemy pressure, and its evacuation began, although the VNAF’s 6th Air Division continued limited operations from the field. A forward command post of III Corps was established at Phan Rang under Lt. Gen. Nghi and on 7 April the 2d Airborne Brigade was flown into Phan Rang. On 9 April, the brigade moved to Du Long, north of Phan Rang on Highway 1, to block the 10th NVA Division, moving south from Cam Ranh in the face of intensive air strikes by the VNAF. Meanwhile, Phan Thiet, the town and air base southwest of Phan Rang in Binh Thuan Province, was under attack. Binh Thuan territorials fought extremely well, but they could not hold for long against large NVA formations approaching through the hills from the north. Highway 1 would be cut in Binh Thuan and Phan Rang isolated. Phan Thiet on 12 April came under heavy attack, and its three RF battalions and 20 PF platoons were overwhelmed at the end of a determined defense.

As of 11 April, about 40,000 troops from Military Regions 1 and 2 had reported to training camps or had been reassigned to units in Military Region 3. The 2d ARVN Division, which had been assembled at Ham Tan, had grown to 3,600, including two RF battalions assigned to it from Gia Dinh Province. Its reconstituted 4th Infantry Regiment was sent to Phan Rang, relieving the 2d Airborne Brigade, but the balance of the division would have four light battalions when the outfitting was complete. Regrettably, the 4th Infantry was destroyed for the second and final time in the defense of Phan Rang. The 3d Division on 11 April had about 1,100 men at Ba Ria, Phuoc Tuy, and would be assigned another 1,000 soon, but it was short all types of weapons and equipment. The 1st Division was also at Ba Ria but with only two officers and 40 men. Near Ba Ria, at Long Hai, was the 23d Division with about 1,000 men and 20 rifles.

The 22d ARVN Division, whose tough resistance in Binh Dinh was one of the most remarkable feats of determination, courage, and leadership of the war, was in better shape than other divisions. At the Van Kiep National Training center at Vung Tau, the 22d had about 4,600 men, one-third of whom were territorials from Military Region 2. It was short of all categories of equipment, however; although it had enough artillerymen to man three battalions, it had no howitzers. Nevertheless, sparsely equipped and barely organized, it was ordered to deploy to Long An Province on 12 April.

A critical battle was shaping up in Long An as the 5th NVA Division, moving down from Svay Rieng Province in Cambodia, launched a strong attack near Tan An with its 275th Regiment on 9 April. The Long An territorials fought well and were reinforced from IV Corps by the 12th Infantry, 7th ARVN Division. Against light losses, the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, killed over 100 members of the 275th NVA Regiment, forcing its commander to ask for reinforcement. The next day, the NVA attacked the Can Dot airfield in Tan An and, after closing Highway 4, were driven off with heavy losses by Long An territorials. In two subsequent days of heavy fighting, the three Long An battalions, the 301st, 322d, and 330th, accounted for over 120 enemy killed and 2 captured. Meanwhile, the 12th ARVN Regiment, fighting two regiments of the 5th NVA Division, killed over 350 and captured 16. Into this combat the JGS sent the reconstituted 22d Division, the first battalion arriving on 12 April and two more following later. To provide unity of command against the 5th NVA Division, the JGS adjusted the boundary between III and IV Corps, giving the Tan An battle area to IV Corps.

The NVA kept the pressure on Bien Hoa and Tay Ninh Provinces, primarily with frequent heavy attacks by fire during the first two weeks of April. Rockets hit Bien Hoa Air Base and the military training center and schools at Bear Cat, while Tay Ninh was struck repeatedly by 105-mm. and 155-mm. artillery as well as rockets. The ARVN clung to Khiem Hanh, maintaining control of Trang Bang and Cu Chi, but skirmishes with enemy forces were frequent. Meanwhile, the final major battle of the war was taking shape at Xuan Loc.

**Xuan Loc**

The South Vietnamese fought splendidly at Xuan Loc, but the NVA high command used the battle as a “meat grinder,” sacrificing its own units to destroy irreplaceable ARVN forces. Meanwhile I Corps could slip to the west and set the stage for an assault on Saigon.

After the first NVA attempt to seize Xuan Loc had been soundly repulsed, the 341st NVA Division on 9 April began a second assault on the town, defended by the 18th ARVN Division. Infantry and
tanks were preceded by an artillery bombardment of about 4,000 rounds, one of the heaviest in the war. With tanks firing down the streets, hand-to-hand fighting developed in a fierce battle that lasted until dusk. By that time, the 43d ARVN Infantry had driven most of the shattered enemy force from the town, and the 52d ARVN Infantry base on Route 20 was still in friendly hands. The enemy resumed the attack the next day, this time committing the 165th Regiment of the 7th NVA Division along with regiments of the 6th and 341st NVA Divisions. Again the attack failed. (See Map 21.)

West of Xuan Loc, between Trang Bom and the intersection of Highways I and 20, the ARVN 322d Task Force and 1st Airborne Brigade (two battalions) were trying to force their way east against stiff resistance.

The NVA attacked the rear base of the 52d ARVN Infantry on Route 20, the 43d Infantry in the Xuan Loc, and the 82d Ranger Battalion on 11 April, the third day of the battle. At that time, the battalion of the 48th Infantry securing Ham Tan went back to Xuan Loc, and the 1st Airborne Brigade moved in closer to the town. Task Force 322 was making very slow progress opening the road from Trang Bom to Xuan Loc, and General Toan ordered Task Force 315 from Cu Chi to reinforce.

On the 12th, battalions of the 52d ARVN Infantry were still in heavy fighting north of Xuan Loc, but the town, although demolished, was still held by the 43d ARVN Infantry. NVA losses to that point were probably in excess of 800 killed, 5 captured, 300 weapons captured, and 11 T-54 tanks destroyed. ARVN casualties had been moderate. Most of the 43d ARVN Regiment was holding east of the town; the 48th was southwest; the 1st Airborne Brigade was south but moving north toward the 82d Ranger Battalion; and the 322 Task Force was on Route 1 west of the Route 20 junction, attacking toward Xuan Loc.

With the situation apparently temporarily stabilized, General Smith thought it appropriate to inform Hawaii and Washington that the RVNAF was putting up a determined and so far successful battle for Xuan Loc. He sent a message on “The Battle of Long Khanh” to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George S. Brown, on 13 April 1975:

1. We have a victory in the making. In the battle for Long Khanh RVNAF has shown unmistakably its determination, its will and its courage to fight even though the odds are heavily weighted against them. Although the battle may have passed only through Phase 1, we can say without question that RVNAF has won round one.

2. This battle for control of the vital road junction of QL-1 and QL-20 and the province capital at Xuan Loc began on 9 April with a 3,000 round concentration of artillery, rocket and mortar fire. Outnumbered SVN forces were driven from the city and from the many villages and hamlets along QL-20. ARVN quickly counterattacked and by nightfall on the first day of the battle had driven most of the enemy from Xuan Loc, although SVN troops still occupied many hamlets and villages.

3. As the battle progressed, it became clear that the enemy was determined to destroy the defenders and occupy this eastern gateway to Bien Hoa at all costs. By the third day of the battle, elements of three NVA divisions were committed.

4. This morning, the beginning of the fifth day of the battle, ARVN still holds its positions. It has reinforced and now has all regiments of the 18th Div, the 1st Airborne Bde., two Ranger Bns., three RF Bns. and two armored task forces in the battle area. ARVN means to stay. VNAF has provided continuous outstanding close support. Enemy losses have been staggering. Even after adjusting for possible double-counting, enemy killed and left on the battlefield exceed 1200. The equivalent of a tank Bn. has been wiped out; nearly 30 tanks. Over 200 weapons have been captured including a 37 gun, ten mortars, several recoilless guns and 25 B-40 grenade launchers.

5. The valor and aggressiveness of SVN troops, especially the Long Kanh Regional Forces, is certainly indicative that these soldiers, adequately equipped and properly led, are, man-for-man, vastly superior to their adversaries. The battle for Xuan Loc appears to settle for the time being the question “will ARVN fight.”

The message made well the point that the South Vietnamese in Long Khanh were indeed fighting to the death for their country. It was a great cooperative effort between the ARVN and the VNAF that enabled the 18th Division, the 1st Airborne Brigade, and the Rangers to hold on. Two resupply missions were flown into the besieged town; on 12 April, CH-47 helicopters brought in 93 tons of artillery ammunition and followed with 100 tons the next day. Meanwhile, the VNAF used reactivated A-1E fighter-bombers and a modified C-130 transport to drop 15,000 pound bombs, flown in by the U.S. Air Force, on enemy position. These airplanes, flying against intense antiaircraft fire, took a heavy toll of the NVA divisions around Xuan Loc.

The NVA assault resumed on 15 April. By this time, seven of the nine regiments of the 6th, 7th, and 341st Divisions had been committed to the Long Khanh battle. The attack began at 0450 against the headquarters and 1st Battalion, 43d ARVN Infantry, and lasted until 0930. When the enemy withdrew, he left 235 dead and about 30 weapons on the field. The attack picked up again at noon and lasted until 1500, but the 43d, with heavy VNAF support held.

Meanwhile, the 1st Airborne Brigade continued to attack north toward Xuan Loc, and Task Force 322, now reinforced by the 315th and 316th Task Forces, struck from the west. VNAF observers had discovered two batteries of 130-mm. guns northeast of Xuan Loc and took them under attack.

The NVA continued sending additional forces into Military Region 3. The 1 Corps from Thanh Hoa Province in North Vietnam set up its headquarters in Phuoc Long along with the 312th, 320B, 325th, and 338th Divisions. The 312th stayed with corps headquarters in Phuoc Long, but the 320B and 325th moved to Long Khanh where the 325th...
entered the battle on 15 April. The 10th and 304th Divisions were also on the march toward Saigon from Military Region 2. Aerial photography revealed a major concentration of antiaircraft artillery, including radar-controlled 85-mm. and 37-mm. guns around Don Luan, as well as SA-2 missile transporters and equipment on Route 14 south of Quang Duc.

The JGS and the ARVN III Corps bolstered the inner defenses of Saigon while the battle continued on the vital eastern approaches at Xuan Loc. General Ba, commanding the 25th ARVN Division, put a forward command post with his 50th Infantry Regiment at Go Dau Ha. In Tay Ninh City he had the 49th Infantry and the headquarters and one battalion of the 46th Infantry. The balance of the 46th was on Route 22 between Tay Ninh City and Go Dau Ha. (Map 22)

The inner defenses of Saigon were manned by territorials and a few regular formations, some of which had been recently reconstituted. Three Ranger groups were on the western approaches. The new 8th Ranger Group had its 1,600-man force near Phu Lam on the edge of Saigon where Route 4 enters the city from the Mekong Delta. Southwest of Phu Lam on Route 4 near Binh Chanh was the 6th Ranger Group, recently reorganized with about 2,600 men. North of the city was the newly organized 9th Ranger Group with about 1,900 men protecting Hoc Mon District only five kilometers north of Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Each group had four 105-mm. howitzers but little fire-direction equipment, and all were short of radios and machine guns. The Rangers and territorials in Hoc Mon intercepted a 100-man NVA group on 14 April, capturing five soldiers from the 115th Sapper Regiment, 27th Sapper Division, and killing 11 others. The sappers were accompanying a special group of terrorists and propagandists whose mission was to start uprisings in Go Vap near Tan Son Nhut. Liberation radio had been calling for popular uprisings since 11 April, but these appeals, like all others in past offensives, were ignored by the population.

The eastern and southeastern approaches to Saigon were anchored at Long Binh by a brigade of marines. The exhausted 18th ARVN Division was falling back from Xuan Loc through Trang Bom toward Bien Hoa City by 15 April, and Long Binh would soon become the front line on the east.

On the west, although Long An territorials and the 12th ARVN Infantry were still holding at Tan An, NVA artillery moved in close enough to Saigon to blast Phu Lam with 122-mm. rockets on 18 April. A large ARVN radio transmitter site was located near the Route 4 road junction at Phu Lam. Two barracks housing the troops and their dependents were demolished. This attack, only seven kilometers south of the Tan Son Nhut runways and the offices of the Defense Attache, emphasized the serious threat to the city. The enemy attack plan called for severing Route 4 near Binh Chanh. Here they would prevent the 7th and 9th ARVN Divisions from moving up Route 4 to assist in the defense of the city, and from Binh Chanh sappers and terrorist teams would infiltrate through Phu Lam to Tan Son Nhut and Saigon.

In Long An Province, the 5th NVA Division persisted in heavy attacks along the old Military Region 3 and 4 boundary, but by 15 April was forced to pull back to the northwest. The 12th ARVN Infantry had inflicted heavy losses on the 6th and 275th NVA Regiments near Tan An. By this time, small, ill-equipped battalions of the reconstituted 41st and 42d Regiments, 22d ARVN Division, had been sent to in Ben Luc and Tan An. But the NVA force was growing rapidly. Elements of five NVA divisions were now in Long An and southwestern Hau Nghia: the 3d, 5th, 8th, and 9th Infantry Divisions and the 27th Sapper Division. Additionally, the 262d Antiaircraft Regiment and the 71st Antiaircraft Brigade had batteries near the Long An-Hau Nghia boundary.

Far to the east and north of the capital, the final battles for Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Provinces were being fought. Major attacks by the 3d NVA Division, down from its successes in Binh Dinh Province, began on 14 April against the reconstituted battalions of the 2d ARVN Division, the 31st Ranger Group and the territorials. The attacks were repulsed on the 14th and 15th, but the defenders were finally overwhelmed on 16 April and Phan Rang was lost. The last of the 6th Air Division abandoned the airfield with the remaining flyable airplanes, leaving four AC-119s and two A-37s to the enemy.

Binh Thuan Province held out for two additional days, but Phan Thiet fell on 18 April. Some of the best territorial troops in the country had put up one of the most determined and aggressive defenses of the war.

Xuan Loc was 100 kilometers west of Phan Thiet and it was here that the final decisive battle was still being fought. After a week of the toughest, continuous combat experienced since the offensive began, the 18th ARVN Division had to give ground and fight its way back toward Bien Hoa. The armored task forces on Route 1 had to pull back also; half of their equipment had been destroyed, and the 6th NVA Division was moving north of Route 1 toward Trang Bom. NVA 130-mm. gun batteries were seen in the jungles north of Route 1, also moving toward Bien Hoa and on 15 and 16 April the air base was hit, first by 122-mm. rockets, then by 122-mm. gunfire. The runway had to be closed for awhile on the 15th due to small craters and debris, but the guns on the 16th were more accurate
than the rockets and damaged 6 F-5s and 14 A-37s. Sappers penetrated the base on the night of the 15th and blew up part of the ammunition storage area. That night also marked the end of the organized defense of Xuan Loc following a furious assault on ARVN positions at the junction of Routes 1 and 20. An artillery bombardment of 1,000 rounds fell on the headquarters and 3d Battalion, 52d ARVN Infantry, an artillery battalion, and elements of the 5th Armored Cavalry Squadron. Four 155-mm. and eight 105-mm. howitzers were destroyed, and the NVA infantry and tank attack forced the battered ARVN force back along Route 1. A general withdrawal began and continued until 20 April, by which time no organized ARVN forces existed east of Trang Bom. Meanwhile, the 1st Airborne Brigade, frustrated in its attack toward Xuan Loc, withdrew through the plantations and jungles toward Ba Ria in Phuoc Tuy Province, where it would defend until South Vietnam capitulated.

The Last Week

An uneasy quiet settled over the battlefields between 20 and 26 April while the enemy made plans, conducted reconnaissance, and issued orders for the final drive. Sixteen NVA divisions were now in Military Region 3 and poised for a three-pronged attack on Saigon.

The Defense Attache Office at Tan Son Nhut had established an evacuation control center on 1 April and had started sending nonessential American civil-\nian employees home on 4 April. On the 20th it began a full-scale evacuation of its personnel, dependents, and Vietnamese civilian employees.

Clinging to the hope that the North Vietnamese might stop the offensive and negotiate a settlement providing for some South Vietnamese representation, President Thieu resigned from office on 21 April. But the removal of this long-trumpeted obstacle to reconciliation of North and South had no discernable effect. The North's successes on the battlefields and the absence of any prospect of U.S. support had left no basis for negotiation. The South no longer had anything to bargain with.

Preparations complete, the NVA resumed the attack on 26 April, with Bien Hoa the focus east of Saigon. The town and air base received heavy artillery fire, and the NVA divisions on Route 1 began moving toward Bien Hoa. South of Long Binh, Route 15 was interdicted, isolating Vung Tau, and Ba Ria fell to the NVA. DAO plans for large-scale evacuation though Vung Tau were abandoned.

The NVA in Long An and Hau Nghia Provinces renewed attempts to dislodge the stubborn ARVN defenses in the west.

On 27 April, Vice President Tran Van Huong, who had succeeded President Thieu, having failed in trying to form a government with which the Communists would negotiate, was succeeded by Duong Van "Big" Minh. But this move was as irrelevant as had been Thieu's resignation.

Early in the evening of the 28th, a flight of A-37s, piloted by VNAF pilots forced into enemy service, bombed Tan Son Nhat Air Base. A number of aircraft were destroyed on the ground, but the field remained operational. The blow was more damaging psychologically than materially, although most Saigonese thought it was an attempted coup d'etat rather than an enemy action. It was the first time airpower had been used against the South and it signalled the beginning of the end.

On 29 April a heavy bombardment of Tan Son Nhat began. Rockets and artillery hit aircraft storage areas and runways, and rockets landed in the DAO compound. Cu Chi was under attack, and NVA sappers and infantry were in Go Vap, just north of Tan Son Nhat. It was clearly the time for the few remaining Americans to leave.

By dawn on 30 April the American evacuation was complete. That morning Duong Van Minh surrendered the country to the North Vietnamese Army.

Note on Sources, Chapters 15-17

General Van Tien Dung's articles on the final offensive set the stage for the action in these chapters. The factual record of the combat actions and order of battle was derived from multiple sources. Principal among them were the following: reports of DAO Regional Liaison Officers in the field, particularly those in Military Regions 1, 2, and 3 who visited units in combat, as well as senior commanders and staff officers; reports of the Consul Generals, particularly those at Da Nang and Nha Trang; reports of offices of the U.S. Embassy, Saigon; notes and recollections of the author, who visited each military region and had conversations with senior commanders and staff officers; DAO fact sheets and assessments prepared for General Weyand, and the author's notes and recollections of meetings with General Weyand.

The Weekly Intelligence Summaries published by DAO and J2/JGS were also used, as were the final DAO Quarterly Assessment and the report of Army Division, DAO.

Generals Vien and Truong read and commented on the deployments, plans, and combat described, and American newspaper accounts were used for statements of U.S. officials concerning the final offensive.

Most of the data on the April reconstitution was derived from the "Army Division Final Report," Vol IX: "Reconstitution of Forces," Defense Attache Office, Saigon, 18 June 1975 (compiled by the
Residual USDAO Saigon Office, Fort Shafter, Hawaii).

Finally, the most important single check on the accuracy of the account of this final offensive was contributed by Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, J2/JGS, who corrected several misconceptions and provided invaluable perspectives.
Was Defeat Inevitable?

What happened in the last two years of the struggle in Vietnam cannot really be understood in isolation from the many years of war that preceded the final period. Considerable treatment was therefore given to events immediately preceding the Paris agreement, to the balance of forces in the South, to the dispositions of forces following the Communist 1972 offensive, and to the cease-fire landgrab battles. Although measurements of power were not attempted, for the nature of ground combat does not lend itself to such analysis, it was clear that a temporary stalemate had been reached. The South was strong defensively and growing stronger with its newfound confidence, stability, and steadily improving combat efficiency, all brought about largely by the success of the Vietnamization program.

On the other hand, North Vietnam's expeditionary force, although no longer supported by an effective southern guerrilla force and badly battered by the battles of 1972, embarked on an intensive program of reorganization, modernization, and logistical buildup without interference from the United States or South Vietnam. The United States had withdrawn its forces from South Vietnam and that country lacked the military strength to attack the enemy's rear logistical areas and new lines of communications.

Generalizations about the character of the struggle in Vietnam inevitably fail many tests for validity and often lead to less rather than more understanding. That is why so much detail has been included in this account. One generalization, however, seems clear. During the last two years of the war, the South adopted an aggressive defense that strengthened its influence and improved security in the populated regions of the country. Seriously concerned about that success, the Communists responded with plans and operations specifically directed to "defeat pacification."

Although the antipacification plan was a failure, the NVA eliminated step by step isolated government outposts, most of which interfered in some degree with the Communist plan for developing sparsely populated regions and securing the expanded and modernized logistical system supporting the rapidly growing expeditionary force in the South. So, despite some notable Southern gains, as in the Seven Mountains of Chau Duc and the Tri Phap, and in Svay Rieng Province of Cambodia, the South's defenses around major population centers eventually became the forward line of contact.

As outposts fell, the armed forces of South Vietnam benefited in that there were fewer demands placed upon strained logistical and tactical resources. On the other hand, the resources thus freed were insufficient to build up significant reserves. The compression of South Vietnam defenses around the population centers also meant that the advantages of the NVA multiplied. Its heavy artillery came within range of final objectives, its logistical system was able to expand without effective observation or interference, and strategic options increased. It enjoyed the decisive advantage of the ability to mass, with considerable surprise, overwhelming combat power against strategic objective areas. This, essentially, is what happened at Ban Me Thuot.

Yet the outcome could have been different. Unit for unit and man for man, the combat forces of South Vietnam repeatedly proved themselves superior to their adversaries. Missing, however, were inspired civil and military leadership at the highest levels and unflagging American moral and material support. The required leadership was certainly available in the South Vietnamese armed forces, but it was not allowed to surface and take charge in enough situations. The United States might conceivably have responded consistently and more generously had the South Vietnamese been able to demonstrate conclusively the validity of their cause through beneficent and self-sacrificing leadership at the top. But convincing reforms were needed in South Vietnam long before the cease-fire of January 1973 in order to have reversed the momentum of decreasing American support.

Lest the impression be left that the civil and military leadership in North Vietnam was morally superior to that of the South or that the citizens of North Vietnam enjoyed greater freedoms, one need only look at the events that have transpired in the South since May 1975. Even in embattled South Vietnam, the citizenry largely went about its private affairs without interruption or governmental interference, and the rule of law was preserved. But what was missing was a national leader of great stature and strength who was committed to personal sacrifice, willing to get tough with inept or corrupt subordinates, and able to rally the support he would need to stay in office. Such a man did not emerge. But even without strong leadership, substantial
American support for an indefinite period would have made the difference. Given more time, a new generation of younger South Vietnam leaders probably could have produced the leadership to institute the internal reforms so badly needed.