CHAPTER IV

Leadership During President Thieu's Era

Background

The long years between late 1967 and 1975, which spanned two terms of Mr. Thieu's presidency, witnessed several challenges to the RVN's political and military leadership. It was during this period that the enemy launched three major attempts to take South Vietnam by force: the 1968 Tet Offensive, the 1972 Easter Offensive and the 1975 Final Offensive, which climaxed in the collapse of our nation. In the intervening time between the first two offensives, South Vietnam faced perhaps the biggest challenge of all—Vietnamization—for it implied that South Vietnam's fate now lay in its own hands.

But South Vietnam proved it could survive—with United States military aid and support. Twice during 1970 and 1971, the RVNAF demonstrated their coming of age by striking across the national borders, and in 1972, they contained and finally defeated the biggest invasion North Vietnam ever unleashed against the South. Although these exploits testified to the success of Vietnamization, they also placed an unprecedented burden on South Vietnamese military leadership and forced into the open all of its strengths and weaknesses.

To understand the magnitude and implication of these challenges and the unusual requirements of leadership to meet them, I will examine the major events during this critical period of our history.

By the end of 1967, two years and a half after the U.S. entered the ground war, the situation in South Vietnam appeared to be improving and pointed toward a bright future. Politically, the nation not only recovered completely from the biggest crisis of the post-Diem era; it also seemed to prosper under a regime founded on constitutional democracy.
For the first time in four years civilian rule was restored for South Vietnam.

Militarily, the RVNAF were devoting all efforts to the task of supporting pacification and development. Approximately 70% of the South Vietnamese population now lived in security under government control. Only about 16% still lived in contested areas and 14% under communist control. As a result of combat activities conducted by over 500,000 U.S. and Free World Military Assistance troops, the Communists had been edged into a weakening posture. Their main-force units had been forced to withdraw into bases and sanctuaries along Cambodia's and Laos's borders or deep inside these neighboring countries.

The communist strategic posture had been so weakened that the Communists' chance of a military success in South Vietnam was slim and seemed to recede with each improvement achieved by our side. Because of this, Hanoi decided to change strategy. As long as U.S. troops remained in South Vietnam, there was little hope that insurgency war, which so far had largely sought to dominate the countryside, could ever end in victory. The obvious alternative, as Hanoi saw it, would be to strike at the heart of the regime, i.e. the cities, and once the cities had been subdued, the rest of the country would fall apart in a matter of time.

The Communists carefully and thoroughly prepared for that event. They infiltrated commandos and weapons into Saigon and other cities several weeks in advance, skillfully making use of concealment and penetration techniques to avoid detection. The timeframe they had chosen for the country-wide attack coincided with the short period of truce routinely observed during the Tet holidays. Surprise was the major reason for this choice. For several years, truce had come about on two major occasions, Christmas and Tet, and on these occasions, there had never been any significant activity. The enemy hoped that the RVNAF would have no reason to suspect that the 1968 Tet would be any different from the previous ones.

To the Vietnamese people, Tet was a traditional holiday to be celebrated, an annual occasion for family reunions and enjoyment. As usual, the JGS imposed an alert during this period, and all units were ordered to confine 50% of their troops in barracks. But these orders, just as
usual, were never strictly enforced. In most units, several soldiers would go AWOL to join their families for the holiday, and this was condoned by most unit commanders, who believed that nothing would happen during the truce.

On 21 January 1968, NVA units began attacking and laying siege to Khe Sanh Base, which was manned by U.S. Marines. Immediately, truce orders were cancelled for the I Corps area. Then on the night of 29 January, the Communists attacked Qui Nhon City and were driven back. Our troops seized from the enemy a pre-recorded tape containing some statements about a country-wide offensive. On the basis of this piece of information, the JGS on 31 January cancelled the truce and ordered a country-wide alert. That same night, the Communist commandos who had penetrated the cities long before surfaced and launched the attack.

Saigon and other cities came under attack at about the same time. By this time, most of our combat units had less than 50% of their strength. The enemy's fire first came unnoticed amidst the noisy background of firecrackers. That the government had authorized firecrackers for that year also contributed an additional element of surprise to the enemy's initial attack. Despite this, all of our units reacted vigorously. With the exception of Hue City, in Saigon and other cities our forces succeeded in repelling the enemy within just one week.

In Saigon despite the strong reaction of our units, it soon appeared that they did not have enough troops and resources to dislodge the enemy from the city. On the eve of Tet, there was only one full-strength airborne battalion in Saigon; the other general forces had been attached to I and II Corps as reinforcements. Two companies of this airborne battalion were also attached to the Capital Military District to augment the defenses of the Saigon radio station and the Chi Hoa prison complex. Its other two companies were detailed for night guard duties at Tan Son Nhut airbase, which presently came under heavy enemy attack. The next morning, the same two companies were recalled to the JGS compound to help clear its No. 4 Gate located on the south side. Two days later, the JGS brought back to Saigon a
total of 14 battalions, to include paratroopers, marines, and rangers and launched Operation Tran Hung Dao to clear Saigon-Cholon. Because of special circumstances, I took personal command of this operation during its initial and most critical stage, which lasted 15 days. By the end of that time, the enemy had been completely driven out of the city, but he still clung to some suburbs. I then assigned III Corps the mission to continue the operation and push the enemy farther away.

Elsewhere across the country, our forces gradually regained control of the situation. The enemy was expelled from most urban centers after absorbing serious losses in personnel and weapons. During this very first phase of their offensive, which lasted through the month of February, the Communists lost in excess of 45,000 troops killed. Our combined losses amounted to only 5,474, to include 3,557 for the RVNAF, 1,825 for U.S. forces and 92 for FWMA forces. The country-wide fighting also displaced 599,858 people from their homes and turned them into refugees. Damage to our cities, especially industrial plants and civilian housing, was particularly heavy.

The enemy had planned his campaign to be a general offensive-general uprising, hoping to enlist the support of the people to help him overthrow our government. The mythical uprising never materialized nor did the population ever give a helping hand to the enemy. In all embattled areas, the people were always seen fleeing enemy-held territory toward government controlled areas, which accounted for the heavy influx of refugees.

Despite its failure, the enemy's country-wide Tet-offensive resulted in unexpected developments which were to affect the course of the war in the years ahead.

For the enemy, this offensive was indisputably a major failure. His strategy had been shattered, and he had lost a considerable amount of manpower and weapons. Most critically, a major part of his infrastructure, which had taken years to build and was committed to the attacks, had been destroyed.

For South Vietnam, the Communist defeat came about as a major source for added confidence and encouragement. Aroused by Communist perfidy and the wreckage the Communists had wrought, increasing numbers of youth
volunteered for military service, responded enthusiastically to draft calls, or joined local self-defense organizations. This upsurge of patriotism greatly facilitated the calling up of reserves and made partial mobilization an unprecedented success. Stimulated by this trend, the national congress passed a general mobilization bill which was signed into law on 19 June 1968. The RVNAF, meanwhile, expanded their force structure by 135,000 and began implementing a multi-year modernization and improvement program.

In the meantime, the United States had resumed bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong and increased B-52 sorties to a monthly average of 1,800. This rate of sorties was maintained until mid-July the following year. At the same time, an additional 10,000 U.S. troops were deployed to South Vietnam to counter the expected second phase of the enemy offensive.

Despite this intensification of military activities to ensure the enemy's defeat, the U.S. government at home seemed to be yielding to anti-war outcries. Apparently, the first offensive had wrought an irreparable psychological damage among the American people who, under the tantalizing effect of TV images and press reporting, were reacting unfavorably against continuation of the war. This was probably a major reason that impelled President Johnson to cease all bombing of North Vietnam above the 19th parallel beginning on 31 March 1968 and declare his non-candidacy in the forthcoming November elections.

After some overtures, during the month of April, the United States and North Vietnam exchanged public statements agreeing to establish contacts between their representatives and discuss peace. At about the same time, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford announced a ceiling of 549,000 on U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam and declared the policy of gradually turning over major war responsibilities to the RVN.

Despite all these developments, North Vietnam imperturbably continued with second and third phases of its offensive, which were launched in May and August, 1968, respectively, with greatly decreasing intensity.

The second half of 1968 saw a flurry of U.S. efforts urging all parties of the war to sit down and discuss ways to restore peace. These efforts had reached the point that the U.S. was able to declare a total
cessation of bombing against North Vietnam in late October. After raising some protest as a matter of principle, in late November the RVN finally consented to send a delegation to the Paris peace talks.

In the meantime, the RVNAF set about to exploit the gains they had obtained during the first offensive, pushing the enemy farther and farther away from populous centers. Simultaneously, the JGS strongly interceded with MACV for an increase in force structure and new weapons. An initial 820,000 force structure plan was approved together with an equipment modernization program which provided the RVNAF with new M-16 rifles, M-2 carbines, M-60 machineguns and LAW rocket launchers on a large scale. In keeping with the modernization trend, war-worn and obsolete equipment was also to be replaced by newer types. As a result, the RVNAF received replacement items such as the M-41 tank, the M-113 APC, the V-100 scout-car and the M-600 Jeep, in addition to a new series of field radio equipment. This increase in force structure was implemented without problems; the majority of the population responded favorably to the new general mobilization law. During 1968 alone, more than 80,000 youths of draft age entered military service. Concurrently, to regain control over those villages which had been disrupted by enemy activities during the year-long offensive, the GVN initiated an accelerated program of pacification beginning in November. The program ended in spectacular success after 3 months of intense effort.

In early 1969, the Paris peace talks were inaugurated with the participation of the U.S., the RVN, North Vietnam and the NLF. From the beginning, these talks were but a forum for communist propaganda, and all efforts by the U.S. and the RVN to get the Communists to negotiate seriously were met with intransigence and arrogance. Our side did not expect that it would take them three long years of frustration before an agreement was reached. On 1 February, the GVN initiated the 1969 pacification program, which was a continuation of the three-month accelerated effort and based on its success. The program soon proved to be just as successful, and the confusion among enemy ranks after their 1968 defeat contributed a great deal to this success. During the first two months of this program alone, nearly 100,000 enemy personnel rallied to our side, a record never attained before.
The RVNAF modernization and improvement program, which had begun in 1968, was also proceeding at an accelerated pace. To provide better coordination for its implementation, a joint JGS-MACV committee was established. This committee monitored and supervised the various phases of its progress, beginning with the ACTOV (Accelerated Turnover of Assets) project which transferred to the Vietnamese Navy all "brown-water" craft operated by the U.S. Navy in South Vietnam and, at the same time, responsibility for riverine operations.

At the Midway conference which took place on 8 June 1969, both the RVN and U.S. presidents agreed on a new approach to prosecute the war while striving for an early peace settlement based on the principle of "self-determination without interference." At the same time, President Nixon announced the first increment of U.S. troop "redeployment" involving a total of 25,000 men. This was the first step of a graduated withdrawal process which had been planned to be completed some time in 1973. And along with U.S. troop withdrawals, Vietnamization received a strong impetus to move ahead.

The Challenge of Vietnamization

The Vietnamization program, which sought to expand and improve the RVNAF to the point that they would be capable of taking over combat responsibilities from departing U.S. units, had in fact started as early as 1968. It consisted of various annual plans which, during the course of their implementation, had been modified several times to adjust to the changing situation and in an effort to meet the RVNAF requirements. The "Midway Package," which resulted from the June summit conference, represented a major step in that direction. Approved by the U.S. Department of Defense, this set of plans provided for a graduated increase in RVNAF force structure, 953,673 for FY-1970, and 992,837 for FY-1971. All of these plans were designed to develop the RVNAF into a modernly-equipped, structurally-balanced military forces capable of self-control, self-management and self-support. As viewed by the U.S. this force was destined to become a war deterrent in the event of peace and total U.S. withdrawal.
Toward that objective, Vietnamization progressed rapidly. Most conspicuous among its achievements were the developments of the Vietnamese Navy and Air Force, the modernization of the RVNAF logistics system, and the expansion of the territorial forces, which provided the mainstay of security and pacification. Despite a marginal increase in force structure, the Vietnamese Army kept in good pace with the withdrawal of U.S. units, taking over their areas of responsibility and some of their equipment.

In early June, 1970, a multi-year plan was initiated which focused on improving the RVNAF combat capabilities in conjunction with their expansion in force structure. This plan was to be revised every year to keep up with development trends and continued into FY-1973, by which time the total RVNAF force structure would have reached the 1.1 million mark.

By early 1972, most of this improvement plan had been completed. The biggest achievement that the plan brought about was the activation of the 3d Infantry Division, whose requirement was dictated by the withdrawal of U.S. combat units from northern MR-1. The activation of this major ARVN unit had met with initial MACV opposition, but it was subsequently validated to fall within authorized levels of MAP support.

Thus, within the space of less than 4 years, the RVNAF had expanded considerably in strength, from 820,000 in 1968 to 1,100,000 by 1972. The backbone of this combat force consisted of 11 infantry divisions—comprising 120 battalions and supported by 58 artillery battalions, 19 armored cavalry squadrons and engineer and signal units—one airborne division, one marine division, and 21 ranger battalions. The ARVN had a total strength of 429,000; the Navy, 43,000 with 1,680 ships and craft of all tonnages; and the Air Force, 51,000 with well over 1,000 planes of all types, to include about 500 helicopters. The territorial forces meanwhile, almost doubled in total strength with approximately 300,000 for the Regional Forces (1,679 companies), and 250,000 for the Popular Forces (8,356 platoons).

To keep up with the rapid increase in force structure and the requirement for leadership at all echelons, the RVNAF expanded their training base accordingly to meet growing requirements. At the start
of Vietnamization this training base consisted of 26 military and service schools, which conducted a total of 326 different courses and were capable of accommodating from 24,000 to 34,000 students at any one time. In addition there were 22 training centers scattered across the country to provide training for a total ranging from 65,000 to 100,000 recruits, to include infantry, Rangers and territorial forces.

Several improvements were gradually brought into this impressive training base, especially as far as training programs were concerned. All schools and training centers placed particular emphasis on command and leadership, night operation, marksmanship, and ambush and patrol tactics. Instructors were selected from among combat-experienced officers and non-commissioned officers and rotated between training and combat duties. Despite these improvements, the training effort seemed somewhat lagging behind requirements, which not only multiplied numerically but also called for increased specialization and diversification. This trend came about as an inevitable result of modernization and sophistication, which saw training ramified into such courses as special officer, company commander, RF officer refresher, combined arms, middle management, advanced technical, and countless other technical specialties.

In 1970, a plan for the consolidation of training centers was implemented. This plan sought to increase overall training capabilities and efficiency by concentrating resources and facilities at a lesser number of centers and reducing operational costs. The 28-million dollar cost of this conversion program was covered by the military assistance program's military construction fund. When it was completed, our 23 assorted training facilities had been consolidated into 10 modern, more adequately equipped national training centers.

To improve combat effectiveness and leadership for our fast growing army, it was deemed that classroom instruction given in schools and training centers was not enough. A program of "combined operations" was therefore initiated in which ARVN units participated under the tutelage of and in cooperation with U.S. units of the same or larger size. Coordinated at the corps and field force level, this program enabled ARVN units of division and smaller sizes to upgrade their combat effectiveness and operational planning capabilities in a relatively
short time. In addition, a special program of training was conducted for RF and PF units by mobile advisory and training teams. This program was highly successful despite the limited number of U.S. advisory personnel involved in it.

The rapid development of the Vietnamese Air Force and Navy generated unprecedented training requirements pertaining primarily to language and technology. A three-year program was initiated in 1970 to train as many as 3,334 pilots required by the Air Force. During 1971 alone, more than 1,000 pilot students attended schools in the U.S.. For the Navy, on-the-job training was provided under a program sponsored by the U.S. Navy, Vietnam, in connection with the transfer of ships and other brown-water craft. Under this program, entire crews of Vietnamese naval personnel underwent training at U.S. naval units, and upon qualification, they took over the transferred ships. This enabled newly created VNN units to become operational immediately after completion of training. The same type of on-the-job training applied to logistic and combat support units of the ARVN under a program sponsored by U.S. counterpart units.

As the RVNAF gradually developed and became more effective under the Vietnamization program, enemy activities declined markedly. During 1969, the enemy launched a series of "high point" activities designed to be a follow-up of the 1968 general offensive, but all ended in failure. The most significant activity of the year was the attack against the Ben Het Special Forces Camp in II Corps area in late June; it took our forces eight weeks to clear the enemy pressure on the camp.

In March 1970, a significant political development occurred in neighboring Cambodia, which saw the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk and the establishment of a pro-Western regime headed by General Lon Nol and Prince Sirik Matak. The event proved favorable to South Vietnam because for several years Prince Sihanouk had been friendly with the Communists and hostile toward the RVN despite his declared neutralist policy. His government had condoned the use of part of the Cambodian territory by North Vietnamese forces to establish bases and sanctuaries along the border. Our enemy had been using this border base system to store war supplies and materiel and as staging areas from which to harass and attack South Vietnam. Over the years, RVNAF had made limited thrusts,
primarily raids of short duration, into Cambodian territory. These pen­
trations were shallow and largely escaped notice because in most areas of
the frontier, the border was ill-defined on the ground as well as on the
maps. Deep attacks across the border were made neither by the Americans
nor by the RVNAF largely because U.S. policy, which naturally strongly in­
fluenced South Vietnam's behavior, included respect, so far as practicable,
of Cambodia's sovereignty and proclaimed neutrality. With Sihanouk gone,
however, South Vietnam was afforded a rare opportunity to move against
these enemy bases.

As early as late March, after the new Cambodian government had closed
the port of Sihanoukville (now redesignated Kompong Som) to communist ships,
III and IV Corps launched a few reconnaissance operations into border areas
of Hau Nghia and Kien Tuong Provinces. These local forays yielded some
communist weapons and materiels. Then with the GVN approval and U.S. and
Khmer concurrence, the RVNAF launched larger scale operations into Cambodia
in late April and early May, 1970. During the initial stage, III and IV
Corps joined forces and searched the Parrot's Beak area, where they captured
substantial amounts of enemy weapons and ammunition. In the next stage,
III Corps launched operations from the Tay Ninh border north and northeastward into the Fishhook and Angel's Wing areas and also helped relieve
enemy pressure on Cambodian provinces east of the Mekong River. At about
the same time, II Corps conducted operations into enemy bases across the
border and assisted Khmer forces in evacuating two isolated outposts under
enemy pressure. IV Corps, meanwhile, operated along the border and also
helped break the enemy's siege on several Cambodian cities and towns.

For these operations, both III and IV Corps employed a force equivalent
to six infantry divisions and three major brigades. Also, to clear the
Mekong River which had been interdicted by the enemy at several places, the
Vietnamese Navy, with the support of the U.S. Navy, conducted an operation
from the border to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. In general, during
the initial phase of the cross-border operations, the RVNAF confined their
activities to a border area whose depth varied from 40 to 60 km. As dictated
by requirements, the RVNAF subsequently extended their area of operation to
the west of Cambodia, covering a substantial part of Cambodian territory
limited by Snoul and Mimot to the northeast, Kompong Cham to the north,
the Mekong River up to Phnom Penh to the west, and by Route No. 4 running through Kompong Speu and Kampot.

The results brought about by cross-border operations were encouraging. In total, II, III and IV Corps forces inflicted on the enemy 11,349 dead, 2,328 detained and seized in excess of 25,000 assorted weapons and 2,500 tons of assorted ammunition. It was estimated that this amount of weapons and ammunition could have sustained the enemy for a six-month campaign in the III and IV Corps areas of South Vietnam at the same intensity as during the previous year. These cross-border operations also made the RVNAF feel more self-assured than before and greatly enhanced the confidence of South Vietnam. The assistance provided by the RVN to its Cambodian neighbor during these operations was also a source of pride for our nation.

The situation of South Vietnam in the aftermath of the Cambodian cross-border operations seemed to promise a bright future for the nation. The disruption of border bases had driven communist main forces deeper inside Cambodia and greatly bolstered South Vietnam's security. Enemy activities for the rest of 1970 and much of the following year were confined mostly to harassments of our installations by shellings or sapper attacks. The enemy's efforts to infiltrate supplies and materiels by sea was also defeated after most of his infiltration boats had been detected and sunk.

To further consolidate the political base of the nation, in 1970 the GVN initiated the "Land-to-the-Tiller" program, which was designed to eradicate social injustice and win the support of the farming peasantry. Even though a success, the program brought about a most unexpected reaction from another segment of society: the disabled veterans. Feeling that the government had not treated them well enough while favoring other segments of society, the disabled veterans went on a rampage, squatting on unused public lands in Saigon and Cholon. The disorder took the government a long time and a lot of skillful persuasion to quell.

At the Paris peace talks, meanwhile, there was still no progress. By mid 1970, the Communists were still insistent on their demands: a coalition government, neutrality and an immediate cease-fire. President Thieu rejected them all.

In early 1971, encouraged by the results obtained from the Cambodian cross-border operations, MACV suggested that the RVNAF conduct an offensive
operation into lower Laos to disrupt enemy logistic installations and storages in the Tchepone area. After the concept had been approved by President Thieu, the JGS instructed I Corps to plan and conduct this operation with the participation of the general reserve forces, the Airborne and Marine Divisions in addition to I Corps's organic forces, the 1st Infantry Division, the 1st Ranger Group and the 1st Armor Brigade. Code-named LAM SON 719, the lower-Laos operation was initiated on 8 February 1971 and sustained for 2 months.

During the second half of 1971, South Vietnam was alive with the fall presidential elections. There were at first three candidates for the presidency: President Thieu, Vice-President Ky and General Duong Van Minh. The new election law had made it impossible for other candidates to qualify; Vice-President Ky's candidacy was ratified only after he filed a complaint with the Supreme Court. In late August, however, both Generals Minh and Ky decided to withdraw their candidacy, leaving President Thieu as the sole candidate. This drew criticism on President Thieu whom public opinion accused of maneuvering for the elimination of his adversaries and tending toward autocratic rule. On 18 September, students and disabled veterans demonstrated in Saigon to oppose the elections, particularly the "solo performance" by President Thieu. The elections went on as scheduled, however, and President Thieu was reelected with 92% of the total ballots on 3 October 1971.

In the meantime, U.S. and FMFA forces continued to withdraw from South Vietnam and turn over military bases to the RVNAF. By the end of 1971, total U.S. strength had been reduced to 158,119, and FMFA strength, to 54,497. The RVNAF total strength, by contrast, had soared to 1,046,254.

In late 1971, the GVN initiated a comprehensive pacification program called the "Community Defense and Local Development Plan" which was to be implemented in four years beginning in 1972. This was a radical departure from pacification programs of years past, which had all been planned and implemented on an yearly basis. In launching this program, the GVN had felt that the achievements obtained during 1970 and 1971, especially as far as security and political stability were concerned, had warranted a longer look into the future and that the government should
devote attention to long-range objectives instead of short-term problems.

The four-year Community Defense and Local Development program sought to achieve three basic objectives: self-defense, self-management, and self-development. As a term, pacification no longer applied because government control had extended to almost all villages and hamlets across the country. The program also adopted a new approach to development which saw more responsibilities assigned to local governments in the task of nation-building. Prospects for the future looked promising indeed since, if implemented according to plans, the program should enable South Vietnam to become a prosperous and self-reliant nation.

This ultimate goal was precisely what the Communists were endeavoring to wreck. What we had discovered during the course of protracted peace negotiations left no doubt as to our enemy's real desire to see the U.S. completely withdrawn and South Vietnam turned over to his control. But our American ally was far from giving in to a disguised surrender. It simply wanted an honorable exit, a fair settlement of the war. This deadlock apparently could not be solved by the negotiation approach.

Our enemy opted instead for a military solution he thought could help achieve his goal. All of his preparations for this event did not go unnoticed by our side. In fact, beginning in mid-1971, North Vietnam began to receive a substantial increase in military assistance from Russia and Red China. Its infiltration of men and supplies into the South also stepped up significantly, and as 1971 drew to its end, its main force divisions began to move into staging areas, particularly the NT2 and 320th Divisions north of Kontum.

Obviously, the enemy would launch an offensive in early 1972, probably during the Tet holiday period. The JGS's estimate also focused on probable target areas such as Tay Ninh in MR-3 and northern MR-1 in addition to Kontum. The only surprise came about when the enemy chose to strike across the DMZ with a multi-division force supported by armor and artillery, even though we clearly realized he had this capability. Although fully prepared for a considerable time, the enemy had waited until the end of March to launch his offensive.

The Nguyen Hue campaign, as the enemy called this offensive, was conducted in three separate and major efforts. The first effort involved
a frontal attack launched across the DMZ into northern Quang Tri Province and coordinated with another attack in the direction of Hue City. A few days later, a second effort was driven from the Cambodian border against Binh Long Province in northern MR-3. The third effort, which began 14 days later, was directed against Kontum City at the same time as disruptive activities mounted in Binh Dinh Province on the coast. In the Mekong Delta, however, there was only an increase in enemy activities in areas adjoining the Cambodian border, especially in Chuong Thien Province which bordered on the U Minh Forest. But here, the enemy effort was not as strong and sustained as in other military regions.

North Vietnam thus committed a total of 14 infantry divisions in the offensive together with substantial artillery and armor forces. The initial momentum of the offensive was so overwhelming that the system of fire bases manned as defense positions by the 3d ARVN Division south of the DMZ was unable to hold more than three days. After resisting for a month, the 3d Division and other ARVN defense forces in northern MR-1 suddenly crumbled following a tactical blunder. Quang Tri Province fell into enemy hands despite the JGS efforts to reinforce I Corps with more infantry units and air support. Elsewhere, the northwestern part of Kontum Province, the northern part of Binh Long Province and northern Binh Dinh Province also came under enemy control. The cities of Kontum and An Loc were besieged and under unrelenting enemy attacks. It had taken the RVNAF three months to recover from the initial setbacks and counterattack after replacing losses and refitting their battered units within a record time. With strong U.S. air support, the RVNAF eventually regained almost all territories lost during the first month of the offensive.

In his effort to wreck the success of Vietnamization, gain a strong bargaining position at the Paris peace talks and perhaps to play on the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections in November, our enemy had committed almost the entirety of his main force divisions and an impressive array of modern weapons. Despite this, he had not only fallen short of his goal but also lost approximately 100,000 men and many of the new weapons supplied by the communist bloc in exchange...
for the control of a few remote district towns in South Vietnam.

Cognizant of the danger South Vietnam was facing, the U.S. reacted forcefully. For the first time in the war, it sent B-52's on bombing missions deep inside North Vietnam. The U.S. 7th Fleet was quickly reinforced with several ships to include eventually a total of seven aircraft carriers. U.S. tactical aircraft and naval gunfire attacked all vital targets in North Vietnam, to include major bridges, railway stations and power plants in the vicinity of Hanoi, Hai Phong, Vinh and other cities. Two of North Vietnam's most important bridges, the Long Bien bridge across the Red River in Hanoi and the Ham Rong (Dragon's Jaw) bridge in Thanh Hoa Province were destroyed by U.S. "smart bombs." At the same time, all major ports, to include Hai Phong, were interdicted by mines.

Inside South Vietnam, U.S. B-52's and tactical aircraft provided effective support for our troops, which resisted heroically, especially those under siege at An Loc and Kontum, and played an important role in our effort to retake the lost territories. The U.S. Air Force also contributed significantly to the deployment of ARVN troops from one military region to another and the emergency delivery of critical replacement equipment such as tanks and howitzers, enabling the RVNAF to refit their units in time for the counterattacks.

In concert with those forceful military actions, the U.S. accelerated the negotiating process in Paris in an effort to arrive at a peace settlement with North Vietnam, which was timed to be concluded prior to the U.S. presidential elections. The text of this preliminary agreement, however, contained several disadvantages for the RVN. Convinced that it would open the way to a coalition government in South Vietnam, President Thieu refused its endorsement. He was promptly accused by North Vietnam of undermining peace; our enemy insisted that the U.S. should sign the agreement on 31 October 1972, as scheduled. President Thieu's rejection thus upset the timetable that had been agreed upon by the U.S. and North Vietnam to conclude what later became known as the Paris Agreement. On his part, the U.S. negotiator, Dr. Kissinger, was convinced that "peace was at hand" when he explained the text of the agreement to the American public.
The RVN's strong reaction gave second thoughts to President Nixon. He directed that the agreement be reworded so as to remove ambiguities and at the same time, to win over his ally, decided to send more modern equipment to South Vietnam. The crash "Enhance Plus" program of equipment delivery which resulted from this decision was probably designed to reaffirm U.S. continued support for South Vietnam. It was also a move to stock up South Vietnam with war materials before the conclusion of the final agreement, which expressly forbade it. Refusing to renegotiate at first, North Vietnam was finally brought back to the conference table under the heavy pressure of U.S. bombings. The text of the agreement was revised and finally signed by the U.S., the RVN, North Vietnam and the PRG on 27 January 1972.

**The Challenge of Peace**

Contrary to expectations, the Paris Agreement, which provided for a standstill cease-fire, did not silence the sound of gunfire in South Vietnam. Almost immediately after the agreement went into effect, the Communists took advantage of the cease-fire by carrying out a machiavellian scheme to "grab land and population" which they had carefully planned since October the previous year. Under this scheme, communist forces broke down into small elements and penetrated villages and hamlets under GVN control, planting NLF flags as they went and claiming these places to be under their control. At the same time, they placed roadblocks on lines of communication where they also planted flags to stake out claims. Almost as swiftly, the RVNAF reacted with vigor and determination. Within a short time, our forces succeeded in retaking all penetrated villages and hamlets and restoring normal traffic on all lines of communications after removing enemy flags and roadblocks.

As a result, enemy-initiated incidents during 1973 soared to a monthly average of 2,980, as compared to 2,072 for 1972, the year of the Easter general offensive. In addition to the land and population grab campaign during 1973, the Communists committed four serious violations by attacking Cua Viet, Sa Huynh, Hong Ngú, and Trung Nghia. Enemy actions were also
directed against outlying bases such as Tong Le Chan, Le Minh, Ngoc Bay and Bach Ma. During the year, the enemy also began rehabilitation work on airstrips in areas under his control and expanded the Ho Chi Minh trail system to move supplies and materiels into South Vietnam day and night.

As to the RVNAF, during 1973 they had to contend not only with increasing enemy violations but also with limitations in the supply of fuels and ammunition. These limitations became more pronounced during the next year when U.S. military aid was drastically reduced.

The year 1974 began with the forced occupation of the Hoang Sa (Paracels) Islands offshore South Vietnam by Chinese Communists. Enemy activities during the year increased both in scope and in level, reaching an unprecedented high of 3,300 incidents per month. The enemy also kept up his logistical buildup activities along the border areas, and the ICCS continued to watch all of these violations with utter impotence. From the north-south main infiltration route along the border, the enemy was now constructing several lateral roads pushing into the coastal plains or as accesses to the outlying district towns and piedmont bases which he was trying to isolate. Several of these bases were successively overrun by the enemy, such as Dak Pek, Mang Buk, Plateau QL, and Gia Vuc, all of them lying in the way of the enemy's access roads. A new fuel pipeline was installed which reached southward to the Quang Duc area. And gradually, the targets of enemy attacks became more important to include eventually populous centers.

The RVNAF reacted most commendably against enemy incursions into these populous centers. Our large-scale operations, which sometimes involved as many as two or three divisions, succeeded in driving enemy forces away and often across the country. In the Mekong Delta, however, our forces fared less well, and the enemy was able to control several villages and hamlets in the provinces of Kien Giang, An Xuyen, and Chuong Thien. This weakness stemmed primarily from the ineffectiveness of RF and PF units, which suffered not only from understrength but also from lowered morale. An investigation was conducted by the JGS and shortly thereafter, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, IV Corps commander was removed from command.
Two years after the Paris Agreement went into effect, South Vietnam was edged into an increasingly disadvantageous position. Government control gradually shrank as populous centers came under serious enemy threat and the system of border defense no longer existed. The RVNAF exerted maximum efforts to improve this precarious situation but were greatly impeded by overextension and the effect of military aid cutbacks. For FY-74, military aid appropriations amounted to just one-third of the amount expended during the previous fiscal year. Drastic limitations in the consumption of fuels and ammunition, to cite only two of the most critical items, severely curtailed the RVNAF combat capabilities. Our units were compelled to devise ways to fight what became known as "a poor man's war." Yet they had to confront an enemy who was becoming not only numerically superior but also stronger in firepower and logistic support.

The national economy meanwhile was beset by galloping inflation and unproductivity. Basic commodities continued to be imported; rice imports alone amounted to 200,000 tons per year. Production was seriously curtailed by the vast expanse of uncultivated land: approximately 700,000 acres of ricefield and 50% of rubber plantations were either left unattended or destroyed by war. The Vietnamese currency was shrinking in value and prices soared. Its piaster, which was worth 1/35 of a U.S. dollar in 1964, now plummeted to a record low, a mere 1/685 of a dollar on the official exchange market. Along with the withdrawal of U.S. and FWMA troops, the RVN also lost a substantial source of income in foreign currency. The nation had yet to recover from the physical damage and economic ravages caused by the 1972 Easter offensive. On top of these difficulties, the world-wide oil crisis made the South Vietnamese economy even worse by virtue of its chain-reaction effect. A little hope kindled when oil was discovered in the national continental shelf, but effective production was still from 3 to 5 years away. In the face of this economic impasse, the GVN made plans to reduce the RVNAF total strength to just one million. But this soon proved impractical as enemy activities continued to increase.
Politically, the GVN also met with difficulties in its attempt to sell the Paris Agreement to the people and armed forces of South Vietnam, who had for years been conditioned to think of Communists as rebels and archenemy. Even after signing the Paris Agreement, President Thieu persisted in maintaining a hard-line anti-Communist stance when he proclaimed his "four-no's" policy. How could anyone explain then the contradictory fact that, as signatories of the agreement, the Communists had become our political partners? If not, why were they allowed to install offices and circulate freely in Saigon and other cities? Thus, despite the GVN's propagandistic efforts, it was hard for the South Vietnamese people to believe that the Paris Agreement was anything else but a "sell out," a breach of faith by the national leaders. It was obvious then that since the advent of the Paris Agreement, South Vietnam's political posture had declined markedly. President Thieu's prestige suffered accordingly, and his authority deteriorated when he was publicly denounced by demonstrators who opposed and challenged him.

All these developments ushered South Vietnam into the position of an underdog, politically and militarily. The enemy wisely exploited our debility by escalating violations and increasing his military pressure. He eventually succeeded in taking the provincial city of Phuoc Long, the first one lost in South Vietnam since the cease-fire. And this flagrant violation by the Communists resulted in a complete silence of those powers who had committed themselves to guaranteeing peace for South Vietnam. To compound a deteriorating situation, the U.S. Congress reduced military aid appropriations to 700 million U.S. dollars for FY-75. With this amount of aid, the RVNAF were barely able to meet one-half of their total maintenance and operational costs. As a result, the VNAF was forced to keep the major part of its aircraft grounded and ARVN artillery units fired only within the limits of a dwindling available supply rate. The enemy meanwhile seemed to prosper and grew ever stronger. His posture had become one of unsurpassed strength, and nothing seemed to stop him in the final conquest of South Vietnam.

After the loss of Phuoc Long, several U.S. congressional delegations arrived in South Vietnam to assess the situation and to determine whether
or not the requested 300-million additional aid could help stabilize it. They came away with divided opinions, and no one knew what the outcome would be. The one man who should have known the best was perhaps President Thieu himself. He probably knew that there were very slim chances of obtaining the additional appropriations, and if U.S. aid for South Vietnam were to continue at all, it would surely be reduced to a trickle.

It was perhaps his despair about the prospect of U.S. aid that impelled President Thieu to change strategy after the loss of another provincial city, Ban Me Thuot, on 11 March 1975. Summoning his advisers and key field commanders, he imparted a new strategy to save South Vietnam from ultimate collapse. Justifying his decision, he reasoned that this was the only alternative left for South Vietnam to survive, given its military, political, and economic posture. The new strategy consisted primarily of a major redeployment of forces to hold only that portion of the country deemed vital to its survival: MR-3 and MR-4 in their entirety, Ban Me Thuot and the coastal provinces of MR-2 south of Tuy Hoa, the southern part of MR-1 below Hue or the Hai Van Pass or even Chu Lao, and, of course, the valuable continental shelf adjoining all of these areas.

Ban Me Thuot, which happened to be part of the territory to be held, was to be retaken. As a result, three days after its loss, President Thieu ordered the MR-2 commander, Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, to redeploy his forces and reoccupy Ban Me Thuot at all costs. General Phu's ill-planned maneuver cost him over one-half of his forces and ended in dismal failure. The disruption of II Corps forces and the abandoning of the Central Highlands had a severe impact on the conduct of the war and led rapidly to the successive losses of MR-2's remaining provinces. The drama of South Vietnam's final collapse just began to unfold.

The still intact MR-1, in the meantime, found the morale of its population and troops seriously undermined by rumors of an imminent partition that would cede all of MR-1 to the enemy. The fact that the Central Highlands had been abandoned came to reinforce the credibility of these rumors and was instrumental in the rapid collapse of morale among I Corps troops and population. Fleeing in despair, refugees clogged Route QL-1, the only artery of MR-1, and caused a massive impasse at
Da Nang. The slowness and inefficiency with which the Saigon government moved to help I Corps solve this debilitating refugee problem made the situation more despondent. Finally, under mounting enemy pressure and attacks, I Corps forces were compelled to withdraw from MR-1 on 29 March 1975.1

After the withdrawals from MR-2 and MR-1, the RVNAF lost about 50% of their combat capabilities, but most of these losses were self-inflicted. Despite desperate efforts to replace losses and refit with whatever remained usable, the RVNAF never recovered enough to stabilize the situation. Encouraged by this windfall, the Communists massed 15 divisions in a forceful drive to take Saigon. After the last stronghold at Xuan Loc had caved in to enemy pressure, President Thieu decided to step down on 21 April 1975 amidst rumors that the enemy was willing to negotiate a political solution only with a government led by General Duong Van Minh. But President Thieu turned over his presidency to Vice President Huong as dictated by the constitution. As the military situation continued to deteriorate with every passing day, on 27 April 1975, the South Vietnamese national congress voted to turn over the presidency to General Duong Van Minh. General Minh took office on the afternoon of 28 April. Unable to negotiate a political solution with the Communists, he ordered the RVNAF to capitulate on the morning of 30 April 1975.

South Vietnam thus ceased to exist as a nation. As the events which precipitated its early demise had proven, the nation's ultimate failure was also one of leadership. Throughout the years of its existence, South Vietnam always depended on its armed forces for survival. This dependence was particularly pronounced during and after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. In some respect, the matter of national survival then became a question of whether or not military leadership could measure up to its historical role.

1President Thieu subsequently ordered the Minister of Defense to conduct an investigation to determine who was responsible for the demise of MR-2 and MR-1. The investigation was still under way when Saigon finally collapsed.
The successes and failures of this leadership are many. For the purpose of this monograph, I believe that the examples I have selected from among them amply illustrate the status of military leadership under President Thieu's regime, the most critical period of our history. These examples will be presented in the following order:

The challenge of corruption.
Leadership at the corps level.
Leadership at the division level.
Leadership at the province level.
Leadership at the battalion level.

The Challenge of Corruption

The geographical area of Military Region 4 included the fertile delta formed by the Mekong River and its tributary, the Bassac. It was the rice bowl of South Vietnam and the most densely populated. The type of war being fought here was also different from other military regions; it was primarily a low-level, brushfire type of warfare. Pacification was the main concern of IV Corps, and the role of the territorial forces was, therefore, particularly important to its success. As a result, the RF and PF of MR-4 made up about 40% of the total territorial force strength of South Vietnam.

Despite their numerical strength, the RF and PF units of MR-4 performed very poorly. In early 1974, the JGS decided to conduct an investigation to determine why their combat capabilities were so low compared to those of the other three military regions. Six fact-finding parties dispatched by the J-3 Division, JGS, visited various parts of MR-4 and conducted a two-week investigation. Their final reports provided several indications of ineffective leadership and supervision. In general, the active combat strength of MR-4 RF and PF units was extremely low. On the average, each RF battalion had only from 250 to 300 men and some, only 120.

These facts were reported to President Thieu as part of a RF and PF improvement program the JGS was undertaking. He immediately detected the problem in MR-4 and directed a country-wide campaign to eliminate the
infamous phenomenon of "ghost and ornament soldiers" particularly as it affected the territorial forces of MR-4.

The Vietnamese term "linh ma" (ghost soldier) applied to those servicemen, mostly private soldiers, who were no longer in service (dead, missing or deserters) but whose names still remained on the unit's control list and who, as if by magic, still signed the monthly payroll ledger to draw pay. Or their names might have been crossed out on the control list but still figured on the payroll ledger. The term "linh kieng" (ornament soldier) meant just that: those who did not serve the unit in any capacity other than being a kind of ornament such as office boys, domestic servants, and body guards, who were not authorized but were assigned to the unit. Most of them were sons of rich families who wanted to stay away from the hazards of combat. "Ornament soldiers" also included those who were authorized by the unit commander to continue their civilian business or trade and report to the unit only occasionally when their presence was required, such as during an inspection or unit strength audit.

The campaign against "ghost and ornament soldiers" in MR-4 was placed under the control of the IV Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, who was assisted in this task by the JGS. After three months of work, there were many deficiencies surfaced and remedied.

It was discovered that the vice of "ghost and ornament soldiers" was real and widespread among MR-4 provinces. Three of the most common irregularities committed by unit commanders were: detaching soldiers from the unit without authorization; authorizing soldiers to stay at home and tend to their civilian business, and failure to remove the names of deserters from the unit's payroll. The roll-call strength of each RF company, as a result, was reduced to an average varying from 35 to 60.

After correcting payroll ledgers to match the true strength of all RF and PF units, the Administrative and Logistic Support Centers of MR-4 were able to return to the national treasury the amount of 600 million piasters, which represented what would have been paid out to all deserters and those missing-in-action.

Following this campaign, the vice of corruption that had debilitated the territorial forces of MR-4 was kept under control and there followed
a marked improvement in the performance of territorial forces.

But corruption in MR-4 was not solely confined to the problem of "ghost and ornamental" soldiers among the territorial forces. It was in fact much more widespread and involved several province chiefs and a corps commander as well. As a result, an anticorruption campaign, which was initiated by religious factions and political opposition elements, soon turned into a strong movement. This movement at first demanded that President Thieu take action to purify the governmental apparatus. In subsequent developments, the movement expanded and publicly charged several high-ranking officials and general officers of corruption, including especially, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, IV Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, II Corps commander, and Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, Presidential Assistant for Security. To ease pressure, President Thieu temporarily removed Generals Nghi and Toan from command but chose to ignore the case concerning General Quang. This anti-corruption movement reached its climax when President Thieu himself was publicly charged with corruption. This was a period during which President Thieu's authority was jeopardized and his integrity seriously questioned, a dark cloud indicating still darker days ahead.

Corruption was a topic much talked about in the RVNAF, particularly during the later stages of the war. Under President Diem's administration, little was heard about it. Then, there were only sporadic

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2 In terms of military professionalism, both Generals Nghi and Toan were good field commanders. General Nghi, in particular, excelled in staff work and exercised his command duties with methodical and calculated care. In March 1975, when serving as Commandant of the Infantry School, he volunteered to assist the III Corps commander in defending the southern provinces of MR-2. As to General Toan, he was appointed to replace General Ngo Dzu as II Corps commander at a time when MR-2 was heavily threatened by the enemy's 1972 Easter Offensive. He succeeded in defeating the enemy offensive in the Central Highlands and improving the situation in MR-2 thereafter. Subsequently serving as Armor commander and III Corps commander, General Toan was a courageous and professionally competent commander.
"misappropriations of funds" or purloin cases involving primarily personnel responsible for the management of unit funds. Pilfering and larceny were also committed by some involved in the management of military properties and materiels. By 1965, kickback and bribery were rumored to be practiced by some connected with personnel administration and logistics. But corruption did not become a subject of common discussion and concern until 1967 when the RVNAF initiated a program of development and improvement. It finally took the JGS concentrated effort during 1971 to curtail and counter corruption activities, which by now had become widespread in the RVNAF.

Within the RVNAF, corruption took many forms. As an example in financial management, irregularities were possible in several areas.

1. Misappropriations and thefts of funds by the unit financial officer or NCO. These usually occurred when the unit commander failed to exercise tight control.

2. Paying the soldiers less than what was due them. This could be a deliberate failure to return change, a reduction of food allowance or illicit deductions of pay.

3. Deliberate procrastination in paying out family allowances (for newlyweds, a new child, birth expenses), pay increases (new rank, seniority), death and missing-in-action gratuities, and delaying the paperwork involved in pension claims in order to extort some compensation from the beneficiaries.

4. Collusion between the unit commander and his finance officer to receive the pay of deserters and those deceased or missing-in-action (ghost soldiers).

5. Collusion between the unit commander and contractors or suppliers to divide the contract payments without delivery of services or supplies.

6. Extortion of money or receiving kickbacks from contractors. This was usually done by pre-arrangement (for kickbacks) or delaying payments upon completion of contracts.

In the area of personnel administration, corruption usually involved extortion or receiving compensation from those draftees or servicemen who wanted special treatment, promotions or preferred assignments.
1. Exemption from military service or deferment for reasons of health, family situation or profession.

2. Assignment to garrison duties in the Capital Military District, big cities or to non-combat duties such as administration, logistics, technical services, or to less hazardous duties.

3. Selection to attend technical service courses after basic infantry training or assignment to these services after graduation. This was most commonly sought by draftees and reserve officers in addition to non-hazardous duties or duties near a hometown.

4. Promotion and appointment to positions yielding material or financial benefits such as positions affording opportunities for corruption.

5. Freedom to run private business or performing a lucrative civilian job (ornament soldiers). This usually called for compensation and/or forfeiting military pay to the unit commander.

The area of logistics and procurement offered numerous possibilities for corruption.

1. Cutting back on allowances of certain supplies issued to servicemen such as food, clothing and commissary items.

2. Extorting money from servicemen or their dependents who requested military transportation for visiting purposes.

3. Misappropriation of military properties such as vehicles or construction materials for private use; theft and sale of military supplies such as gasoline, tires, batteries, medicine.

4. Extortion of payment from real estate owners in the requisition or derequisition of their lands and buildings.

5. Soliciting kickbacks from contractors in the award of contracts.

These forms of corruption that I have summarized represent only the most typical among innumerable others. It is indeed impossible to make an exhaustive listing of all forms of corruption, since in a country long at war there were myriad ways to make a profit for the corrupt-minded people. In short, as far as South Vietnam was concerned, corruption could be said to be a social vice generated by the war and by the insecure psychology which prevailed among those elements who cared little about the war or its outcome.
The impact of corruption on the RVNAF combat potential and troop morale was debilitating. Combat effectiveness was greatly reduced because the manpower which could otherwise be allotted to field units found its way into staffs and non-combat units. Troop morale, especially in combat units, was often low because no one was happy to fight and die when others were exempt from these dangers.

To combat corruption and remedy its damaging effects, the JGS initiated two major programs beginning in 1967. One of these programs was called "New Horizon," and the other was designed to improve and develop the RVNAF capabilities. Both programs complemented each other by combining anti-corruption with developmental activities. From the start, it was felt that these programs could not obtain positive and lasting results unless the corrupt elements were eliminated. The first step, therefore, consisted of screening the RVNAF ranks and identifying their corrupt members. This responsibility was given to the Inspector General Directorate. It was a difficult and extremely complex task, since corruption had become so sophisticated that there was seldom evidence or legal grounds for prosecution. In bribery, for example, there were countless ways of making and receiving payments for services rendered and it was always in the interest of both parties involved to keep the transaction between themselves. Detecting and gathering evidence on corruption, therefore, was extremely difficult. But the Inspector General Directorate did not feel discouraged by the magnitude of its task. After reorganizing and strengthening the inspection system at all levels, the Directorate kept its door open for all complaints, charges and information leading to the incrimination of corrupt officials. All servicemen were allowed to contact the directorate directly by letter or in person for that purpose, and their names were kept confidential to avoid reprisals. Beginning in 1971, our Armed Forces were also subjected to the investigative operations conducted by the Office of the Vice-President, which was in charge of fighting corruption, and the GVN Office of Control and Supervision (Giam Sat Vien). Corruption, therefore, had become the main target of coordinated and well-organized investigative activities.
These anti-corruption activities brought about substantial and sometimes spectacular results. Two of the most spectacular cases involved the 5th and 25th Infantry Divisions, where our Inspector General conducted a long and difficult investigation on charges of corruption involving "ghost and ornamental soldiers," bribery for promotions, contribution of money to unit commanders, and illicit use of military vehicles and construction materials. Since the charges involved general officers, the reports of the investigation were submitted to President Thieu for decisions and appropriate action. In the light of incriminating evidence, the President removed both division commanders, Brig. Gen. Le Van Tu and Brig. Gen. Tran Quang Lich, who were subsequently arrested and prosecuted by a military court.

The RVNAF anti-corruption activities conducted by the Inspector General Directorate also brought to light many other lesser cases of corruption. Those convicted were all punished appropriately. Punishments ranged from disciplinary confinement, removal from office, demotion and discharge to prosecution by a military court. In addition, efforts to purify the officer corps led to the discharge of a few generals and in excess of 4,000 field and company grade officers who were either found too old for their ranks or convicted of wrong doing.

Corruption was inevitable in a society ravaged by war. Debilitating as it was, the worst that corruption could do to South Vietnam was to weaken its combat capabilities and potential. The collapse of South Vietnam as a nation did not result from corruption but primarily from a change in strategy, which not only came too late but was also badly implemented, and the great reduction in logistic support.

Leadership at the Corps Level:
III and IV Corps During the Cambodian Incursion

At the request of the Cambodian government, on 23 May 1970, III Corps initiated Toan Thang, Phase 5 for the relief of Kompong Cham. (May 3) Kompong Cham was the second largest city in Cambodia after Phnom Penh and the seat of the PANK MR-1 headquarters. The city's garrison consisted of four infantry battalions totalling approximately 1,000 men, supported by
Map 3 - The Relief of Kompong Cham (TOAN THANG 42, Phase V)
four pieces of 105-mm artillery with 1,000 rounds of ammunition. On 12 May 1970, units of the NVA 9th Division occupied the Chup plantation, east of Kompong Cham. Since that day, the city was constantly under enemy pressure. Both the city and its airfield were shelled day and night and the eastern part of the city was attacked several times by enemy sappers. Kompong Cham was practically isolated since the Mekong River, the major link between the city and Phnom Penh, and Route No. 7 had been interdicted by the enemy. The Cambodian forces defending the city suffered from low morale and shortages of food and ammunition.

To accomplish its mission III Corps formed two task forces, TF 318 and TF 333. Task Force 318 consisted of two Ranger battalions, the 18th Armored Cavalry Squadron, one 105-mm battery and one 155-mm battery; Task Force 333 was composed of two Ranger battalions, one airborne battalion, the 5th Armored Cavalry Squadron and two 105-mm batteries (-). From Krek and Prey Veng, the two ARVN task forces moved toward Kompong Cham along Routes 7 and 15 respectively; they were to converge in the vicinity of the Chup plantation. As soon as it moved out of Krek, the 7th Airborne Battalion of TF 333 clashed violently with the enemy. Supported by U.S. tactical air and gunships, this airborne battalion soon gained control of the situation, inflicting on the enemy 26 killed and 16 captured. The prisoners revealed they belonged to the 2d Battalion, 272d Regiment, 9th NVA Division. Task Force 318 also made heavy contact with the enemy on 25 May south of Route 7. The battle continued into the next day.

On 28 May, continuing its progress toward the Chup plantation, TF 318 clashed again with the enemy killing 73. The next day, 29 May, both TF 318 and TF 333 continued to battle elements of the NVA 9th Division in an area north of Chup.

On the morning of 1 June 1970, the Chup plantation was finally cleared of the enemy. Our forces continued searching for enemy caches in the area and expanded their activities northwestward in an effort to relieve pressure on the east of Kompong Cham.

Their mission accomplished, ARVN forces withdrew from Cambodia for rest and rehabilitation. Taking advantage of the ARVN withdrawal, the NVA 9th Division returned to the Chup plantation and again took Kompong
Cham under siege and initiated round-the-clock shelling. Once again, the city had to be relieved, and III Corps was assigned this task. For this second relief operation, III Corps employed three task forces and took six days to clear the enemy.

The cross-border operations that III Corps conducted in Cambodia produced important results. The enemy's heretofore inviolable sanctuaries had been severely disrupted and important quantities of weapons, ammunition, and foodstuffs discovered and captured. Enemy forces were also driven back deeper inside Cambodia.

One of the important factors that contributed to these successes was the initiative enjoyed by our forces in an area which had long been under enemy control. The RVNAF also felt a certain pride in coming to the help of a neighbor country in distress. But the most important factor was excellent command and leadership, especially at the corps level.

The III Corps commander obviously had a talent for organization. He had judiciously tailored his forces to satisfy tactical requirements by creating armor-infantry task forces. Depending on the composition, III Corps might assign the command of each task force to a regimental commander, an armor squadron commander or the corps Ranger commander. This eventually ensured unity of command and tactical flexibility which brought out the best from each combat arm. Each task force was also a balanced combination of infantry, armor and artillery, generally comprising two or three infantry battalions (to include Ranger or airborne), an armored cavalry squadron and one or two artillery batteries. This combination afforded maneuver, shock and firepower in all operations.

During these operations, the task forces were always directly commanded by Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, the III Corps commander, assisted by an assistant for operations who was selected from among his division commanders. This arrangement for command and control provided for responsiveness and better support of all participating elements. General Tri was aboard his command ship all day and every day during these operations, making contacts, receiving reports, giving orders, and stimulating his unit commanders on the ground into action. The minute an objective was occupied, he arrived to survey the situation. When any of his units ran into difficulties or clashed violently with the enemy, he invariably
landed on friendly positions, personally assisted the unit commander and encouraged the men. His ubiquitous presence on all battlefields greatly stimulated his troops and kept their morale and determination high. American reporters who accompanied General Tri into combat operations dubbed him "Vietnam's Patton." His combat prowess, personal courage and command ability became legendary and widely recognized. But occasionally, people thought that some of his gestures were ostentatious and calculated to convey an image of himself as a legendary hero. For example, in the battle for the Chup plantation, he landed the minute it was taken by our forces and inspected their positions. Then while the battle was still fiercely raging nearby, he took a dip in the plantation's swimming pool and quietly lunched in the plantation's clubhouse, as if nothing had happened. This was a peculiar trait of the man that few others possessed, including Maj. Gen. Nguyen Viet Thanh, the IV Corps commander, who was as courageous and almost as audacious.

Major General Thanh provides another fine example of effective military leadership amongst our senior officers. As IV Corps commander, he personally contributed to the success that his forces achieved during cross-border operations, especially Operation CUU LONG I. (Map 4)

On 2 May 1970, IV Corps initiated this operation in the Parrot's Beak area in coordination with III Corps. Major General Thanh personally commanded his forces which consisted of the 9th Division, the 5th Armored Cavalry Squadron and the 4th Ranger Group.

These units were organized into four infantry-armor task forces which moved out from Kien Tuong Province on three axes and progressed northward to link-up with III Corps forces in the Parrot's Beak. This operation was perhaps the largest conducted to date by the RVNAF and the best coordinated. All infantry and armor elements progressed rapidly on their assigned axes; they divided the objective into several areas in order to facilitate search and destroy activities. In addition to its organic artillery, IV Corps forces were supported by the U.S. 23d Artillery Group.

For two days, our forces made heavy contacts and inflicted severe losses on the enemy in human lives and weapons. On 5 May, IV Corps forces withdrew from the combined area of operation to prepare for the next phase. The results of this operation were impressive and indicated a high standard of military proficiency:
Map 4 — Operation CUU LONG 1, 2, 3, IV Corps

- Phnom Penh
- Neak Luong
- Chau Doc
- TF 211
- Kien Phong
- Kien Tuong
- Dinh Tuong
- GO Cong
- 'An Giang
- SADEC
- Vinh Long
- Kien Hoa
- Vinh Binh
- Chuong Thien
- BA Xuyen
- Bac Lieu
- An Xuyen

TOAN THANG 42 Participation

Participation:
- Kien KIEN
- Hung TUONG
- Phong PHONG
- Dinh DINH
- Tuong KIEN
- Hoa VINH
- Binh CHUONG
- Lieu AN
- Xuyen BAC

128
Friendly: 66 killed and 330 wounded
Enemy: 1,010 killed, 204 detained, and 19 rallied
1,166 individual weapons
160 crew-served weapons
100 tons of assorted ammunition seized and destroyed

This resounding success was directly attributed to IV Corps command and leadership. A poised and silent man, Major General Nguyen Viet Thanh had distinguished himself as a courageous and calm leader since the days when he commanded small units. He always studied the terrain, personally encouraged his men, and directed every major operation. As a result, he was greatly admired and respected by his subordinates. During the next phase of the operation, his command ship unfortunately collided with a U.S. Cobra gunship in bad weather. Both helicopters dropped to the ground in flames and Major General Thanh found tragic death.

About one year later, Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, III Corps commander, was also killed in a helicopter accident in Tay Ninh Province. The loss of two experienced and eminent corps commanders, both respectable leaders, in less than a year came as a great shock to the RVNAF. The war had definitely taken a heavy toll with this loss of two of the best military talents South Vietnam ever produced. The RVNAF death list during our extended war was certainly long with countless other young talents, perhaps not as celebrated as Generals Tri and Thanh, but equally courageous and devoted, who had sacrificed their lives so that our nation could survive. This was perhaps one reason why the RVNAF seemed to lack talented leaders at all levels, a void which became more acute when the nation had to face subsequently even bigger challenges such as the 1972 Easter offensive.

Leadership at the Corps Level:
I Corps During the 1972 Easter Offensive

The enemy initiated his 1972 Easter offensive by a frontal assault across the DMZ on 30 March. Within less than two days, all ARVN firebases north of the Cam Lo River fell into enemy hands. This blitzkrieg type action placed a new challenge on RVNAF leadership at all echelons.

On 2 April, the 56th Regiment, which defended Camp Carrol, surrendered after being encircled and heavily attacked several times by NVA infantry.
and artillery. Fifteen hundred men and 22 artillery pieces, to include four 175-mm guns, were captured by the enemy. Mai Loc Base, held by the marines, was evacuated shortly thereafter. Despite these initial setbacks, on the fourth day of the offensive, the 3d ARVN Division, which was responsible for the defense of Quang Tri Province, succeeded in establishing a firm defense line along the Cam Lo and Cua Viet Rivers, and temporarily stalled the NVA drive following orders issued by the JGS. (Map 5)

To strengthen I Corps's defenses, the JGS immediately reinforced it with one Al-H squadron, one marine brigade and three Ranger groups. All of these units were attached to the 3d Division by I Corps. As a result, the 3d Division found itself in command, control and support of two infantry regiments, two marine brigades, four Ranger groups, one armor brigade, and the territorial forces of Quang Tri Province. Neither the Ranger Tactical CP nor the Marine Division Tactical CP, which had been sent to I Corps by the JGS to assist the corps commander, were utilized or given a mission.

On 9 April, NVA forces launched a coordinated attack with major elements of the 304th and 308th Divisions and two armor regiments. This attack was driven back by ARVN forces, supported by strong U.S. tactical air, and the enemy suffered heavy losses, especially in armor vehicles. Because the terrain was flat and uncovered, most enemy tanks were easy targets for our tactical aircraft and infantry LAW antitank rockets.

In the meantime, farther south, the 1st ARVN Infantry Division effectively stopped all attempts by the NVA 324B Division and two other regiments to move toward Hue from A Shau Valley.

After repelling the enemy attack on 9 April, I Corps planned a counterattack to regain the lost territory in Quang Tri Province. An initial plan, which called for an attack across the Cua Viet River to retake the district of Gio Linh and the northern part of Quang Tri Province south of the DMZ, was discarded in favor of a drive westward. General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps commander, decided to reestablish his former line of defense to the west by launching an all-out counterattack in that direction. Cam Lo, Carrol and Mai Loc were the major objectives to be retaken.
Map 5 – The Defense of Quang Tri, 2 April 1972
Orders for the counterattack were immediately relayed by the 3d Division commander to all of his subordinate units, but none of them seemed enthusiastic to move out. It was apparent that inadequate command and control and the low morale among units contributed to this general inertia and eventually, to the failure of the counterattack. Most unit commanders hid behind pretexts to justify their inaction: high losses or preoccupation with clearing activities in their own areas of responsibility. This general state of inertia lasted until the end of April, during which time no unit made any progress. The counterattack simply failed to materialize, and neither the I Corps commander nor the 3d Division commander seemed too concerned.

In addition to a loose and over-extended command and control system, I Corps performance was beset by the personal approach to command of its commander. General Lam usually bypassed the 3d Division commander, giving orders directly to the brigades under the latter's control. This was especially true in the case of the 1st Armor Brigade, whose commander was an armor officer, the same branch of service in which General Lam had received most of his experience as a junior officer. The authority of the 3d Division commander suffered accordingly, which eventually resulted in distrust and even insubordination among the many units attached to his command.

On 18 April, a second major enemy attack was driven against the ARVN defense line. All units on this line reported heavy contact with the enemy. But the attack was repelled three hours later by the forceful intervention of U.S. tactical air and B-52's.

During the week that followed this attack, the ARVN line of defense along the Cam Lo and Cua Viet Rivers collapsed for unwarranted reasons. It began when the 20th Tank Squadron left its positions on the Cua Viet line and moved south on Route QL-1 to destroy an enemy element which was threatening the axis of supply between Dong Ha and Quang Tri City. This was done without the commander concerned even reporting his plan of action to the 3d Division commander or to adjacent units on the line. Seeing that armor support was being redeployed and thinking that this was perhaps a withdrawal, ARVN infantry units left their positions and followed suit. By the time the 3d Division commander personally succeeded in stopping
them, the Cua Viet line no longer existed. The ARVN defense line now shrunk to the immediate vicinity of Quang Tri City.

As the first month of the offensive was drawing to its end, the enemy interdicted seven kilometers of Route QL-1 south of Quang Tri City. I Corps efforts to keep this road open ended in failure. Meanwhile, enemy preparations clearly indicated that another big attack was imminent.

On 30 April, the 3d Division commander summoned his subordinate commanders and briefed them on his plan to withdraw south of the Thach Han River and establish a new line of defense on the southern bank of this river with Ranger and infantry units, leaving the defense of Quang Tri City to a marine brigade. This redeployment of forces was designed to release enough armor strength for the clearing of Route QL-1 which continued to be interdicted. On orders, the units were to move out and take up new positions on the morning of 1 May.

General Hoang Xuan Lam was informed of this plan and appeared to approve by his silence. In any event, he neither confirmed his approval nor issued any instructions to the contrary. On the morning of 1 May, however, he called the 3d Division commander to inform him that the plan was not approved. He also instructed that all units were to hold their present positions "at all costs" and not to withdraw unless he personally approved.

General Lam was only reiterating the instructions he had just received from President Thieu in Saigon. But these orders immediately resulted in confusion and disorder the minute the 3d Division commander relayed them to his subordinate units. In vain, he tried to countermand his own orders and issue new ones on the division command radio net. It was too late. Some units had already moved out, others pretended to be moving, and still others simply refused to comply with the new orders. One by one, ARVN units fell back from their original positions in disorder and it appeared that no force or orders could hold them back. Even the marine brigade, which was left to defend Quang Tri City, also followed suit without command authority. In utter despair, the 3d Division commander and his staff jumped aboard three armored personnel carriers and tried to catch up with the retreating column of ARVN troops. But on Route QL-1, the only lifeline to the rear, no movement was possible. It was clogged with vehicles,
soldiers and refugees and all of them eventually became targets for the merciless poundings of enemy artillery. Despondent, the 3d Division commander and his staff returned to their CP in the Quang Tri Citadel and were later evacuated by U.S. helicopters.

The fall of Quang Tri City dealt a serious blow to the morale of ARVN troops and the local population. On 2 May, the people of Hue City began to flee south toward Da Nang, creating an incredible spectacle of frenzy and chaos. In the city itself, throngs of tattered and hungry troops roamed about menacingly like wild animals, ransacking houses, looting, and turning the place into a nightmare of terror and decadence.

When news of unruly Rangers ransacking and setting fire to the Dong Ba marketplace in Hue City reached President Thieu through a civilian source, he immediately summoned the National Security Council. In the face of this tragic situation, the council decided to remove General Hoang Xuan Lam from command of I Corps and appoint Maj. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong in his place. The appointment of General Truong, a southerner by origin, as I Corps commander was a departure from the normal practice of assigning that position to natives of Central Vietnam only.

The task that faced the new I Corps commander was monumental. He was expected not only to stabilize a chaotic situation of defeat but also to restore faith and confidence to the population and troops of MR-I. The first thing he did after assuming command was to strengthen I Corps command and control. Toward this goal, he established I Corps Forward at Hue with a select staff composed of able and combat-experienced officers. He placed particular emphasis on the development of a fire support coordination center to better employ all fire support resources available and a target acquisition element to judiciously exploit the enormous firepower provided by the U.S. Air Force and naval guns.

General Truong then initiated a new defense plan whose concept was simple but effective. It consisted of a clear-cut division of tasks and judicious assignment of responsibilities among subordinate units. Following this plan, he launched a special offensive by fire, called "Thunder Hurricane," which concentrated all types of conventional firepower available to
include B-52's, on enemy targets in MR-1, especially those columns of enemy troops and supplies moving toward Hue. This was intended not only to destroy the enemy's offensive capabilities but also to buy time for the regrouping and refitting of those ARVN units retrieved from the Quang Tri debacle.

In a matter of just a few days, as if by miracle, the situation in MR-1 visibly improved and stabilized as General Truong's defense plan went into effect. And just as soon, stability on the frontlines brought back law and order to Hue. The city was cleared of all stray soldiers, who were given care and sent back to their units. The improvement in Hue was such that even though the danger of enemy attacks still persisted, the people who had fled the city began to return in increasing numbers. And soon Hue came alive again with the normal activities of a city in peace.

During May, the Airborne Division arrived in MR-1 as reinforcement after its brigades had been redeployed from Kontum and An Loc, regrouped and refitted. During the same month, marine units launched several limited attacks across their lines and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. The enemy reacted by attacking our new defense line along the My Chanh River but to no avail. In the meantime, the battered units retrieved from the infamous debacle at Dong Ha and Quang Tri were refitted, retrained and reconditioned for combat by the end of June.

On the Armed Forces Day, 19 June 1972, President Thieu visited Hue and reviewed I Corps troops. On this occasion, he declared that the enemy Easter offensive was a complete failure and ordered the RVNAF to take back the lost territories within three months.

His orders were swiftly carried out by I Corps. On 28 June, it launched Operation LAM SON 72, a counteroffensive designed to retake Quang Tri. (Map 6) For this effort, I Corps employed both the Airborne and Marine Divisions. The Airborne Division conducted the major effort, attacking toward La Vang-Quang Tri on an axis west of Route QL-1. This effort was supported by the Marine Division, which attacked along Route No. 553 toward Trieu Phong. Meanwhile, west of Hue, the 1st Division held back the enemy who attempted to push toward the city in force.
South of the Hai Van Pass, the rebuilt 3d Division assumed the defense of Da Nang and conducted limited offensive operations in Quang Nam Province while continuing its reorganization and retraining process. Farther south, the 2d Division searched and destroyed the enemy in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces.

The enemy's resistance in Quang Tri Province became heavier as I Corps forces moved nearer the Thach Han River. When the first airborne elements reached into the outskirts of Quang Tri City, the battle turned hellish. The enemy stuck to his positions and fought back in desperation, accurately employing concentrated artillery and mortar fire. As the fighting increased, the enemy moved in more reinforcements and by early September had assembled a force of six divisions in Quang Tri province alone.

In the face of this impasse, I Corps decided to switch units and the direction of attack, giving the Marine Division the primary effort. At the same time, frontline units were rotated and given a chance to rest and recuperate. To support the effort to reoccupy Quang Tri City, I Corps also launched secondary attacks to dilute enemy resistance. Eventually, softened by the massive and sustained firepower of B-52's, tactical air, artillery and naval gunfire, the enemy resistance weakened after severe losses. Finally, on 16 September 1975, the Marine Division took the Old Citadel and regained control of Quang Tri City.

A question arose frequently following the 1972 Easter offensive concerning the corps commander and the debacle at Quang Tri. If there had been a corps commander other than General Lam or if General Truong had been I Corps commander at that time, would the RVNAF have been able to hold the Cam Lo-Cua Viet Line? It is difficult to answer such a question since the circumstances of the debacle seemed to involve some intricacies that only the principals could clarify. One thing was clear, however. General Lam, as I Corps commander, certainly committed several blunders in his exercise of command and tactics.

An armor officer who had attended service schools in Vietnam and overseas, General Lam had once been an instructor and then director of our command and staff college. He had also climbed the military
hierarchy as a unit commander. Therefore, he should have had sufficient professional competence and command ability to assume his role as corps commander with ease. In retrospect, however, his combat experience was limited to counterinsurgency warfare, and even as division commander, he had conducted only small unit operations for the purpose of maintaining territorial security. Therefore, when he was confronted with conventional warfare, which involved the coordinated employment of major units and fire support resources, he was at a loss. He could have overcome this shortcoming if he had practiced all he had learned and taught in school, especially modern warfare tactics and principles of leadership, but he had failed to remember his teachings.

His major failure was to overburden the 3d Division with a span of control so large that it was impossible for the division commander to exercise command effectively. With nine brigades, the division had virtually become a corps and under these circumstances, I Corps should have established additional divisional control headquarters by utilizing, for example, the Marine Division Tactical CP and the Ranger Tactical CP. When initiating his counterattack in April, the I Corps commander also failed to follow up and take appropriate action when units under the 3d Division procrastinated. This inertia obviously resulted from the lack of positive leadership and combat fatigue, which could have been remedied by a rotation of units. The command and control of the 3d Division was most difficult when the I Corps commander gave direct orders to the 1st Armor Brigade, maneuvering its units without informing the division commander. As a result, infantry units on line did not know why the 20th Tank Squadron suddenly left its positions. This confusion and poor communications also indicate why they left their positions to follow the armor south, resulting in the senseless loss of Cua Viet and Dong Ha. In general, under the command of General Lam, I Corps units seldom received clear-cut orders nor were they assigned well-defined responsibilities. This could be a result of the I Corps Staff's ineffectiveness or its not being properly directed and utilized. In any event, staff coordination was rarely effective when the commander himself was indecisive or failed to take appropriate action when required.
There was also another characteristic about General Lam which should be avoided by leaders at every level. He would not report bad news or was very slow to do so. When the enemy offensive first started, he failed to report accurately on the DMZ situation and as a result, the JGS had no way of knowing that it was a large-scale invasion. As chief of the JGS, I did not fully grasp the real situation until General Abrams, COMUSMACV, informed me of what was happening. My concern at the time was to hold the Cua Viet line, and I accordingly gave General Lam as much reinforcement as the JGS could afford. I also wanted to give him additional assistance by detaching a small staff to I Corps headquarters along with the general reserve units. But General Lam did not seem eager for this assistance; he almost ignored the presence of this staff, thinking that perhaps it was there to check on him. When the unruly Rangers set fire to the Dong Ba marketplace in Hue following the fall of Quang Tri, he did not report this either. I had the impression that he did not monitor the situation very closely or the developments in his area of responsibility.

Looking back on that difficult period of time, I can now see that it was perhaps unrealistic to expect perfection from a corps commander. The kind of training and experience, the influence of politics on officers of General Lam's generation and their very background perhaps did not contribute to the cultivation of military leadership required by the circumstances. The very nature of the war and our tasks at hand seemed to demand that a corps commander be not only a skilled administrator, a shrewd politician, a leader of men but also a good field commander well versed in both anti-insurgency and modern warfare tactics and able to employ the vast array of combat support assets in defense as well as in offense. Such omnipotent corps commanders were rare. But rare does not mean that the RVNAF did not have any.

One such corps commander was Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, a career airborne officer who served with the Airborne Division until he became its deputy commander. His combat exploits during this earlier period were many, but what distinguished him most was his innate and unique qualities as a leader of men. I don't think I need to dwell at
length on his exploits because my discussions of the airborne tradition in the previous chapter should speak for themselves. Suffice it to say that Truong was one of the best commanders at every echelon the Airborne Division ever had. The only regrettable thing about his early career was that he did not have the opportunity to further his military schooling. Combat duties were so demanding that he hardly had time to attend the advanced courses designed for career officers like himself. However, this lack of advanced training certainly did not affect his military knowledge or professionalism. And he fully proved it when as I Corps commander, he successfully met the biggest challenge any ARVN field commander ever had to face. Not only did he restore morale and confidence to the troops and population of MR-l, he also quickly stabilized a despondent, chaotic situation and eventually retook that part of MR-l territory most prized by the enemy. During the counteroffensive he was credited with several tactical initiatives that enabled I Corps forces to neutralize the NVA superiority in strength and artillery and finally destroy even the enemy's will and determination to resist. General Truong's success in accomplishing the almost impossible can be attributed to several factors but one thing was certain: his outstanding leadership had made him one of the most capable military leaders South Vietnam had ever produced.

Leadership at the Corps Level:
II Corps During the Redeployment from Kontum-Pleiku

The redeployment of II Corps forces from the Central Highlands in mid-March 1975 was perhaps a most ignominious example of leadership failure in the history of the RVNAF. It resulted in the tragic loss of this ARVN corps as a major combat force and eventually precipitated the chain of events leading to the final collapse of South Vietnam.

II Corps was under the command of Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, a presidential appointee like other corps commanders. Small and fragile, Phu did not look like a man for sustained or critical actions. His combat record, however, was good. He performed quite well during LAM SON 719 as commander of the 1st Infantry Division. As a junior officer serving in French Union forces, Phu had seen combat action at Dien Bien Phu. Just four months into
his job as II Corps commander, he was about to face the biggest challenge of his military career.

On 14 March, 1976, two days after the loss of Ban Me Thuot City, President Thieu summoned General Phu to Cam Ranh for an exclusive meeting. During this meeting, the President ordered him to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot with II Corps forces still available. Since the 23d Division had been battered during the battle of Ban Me Thuot and the 22d Division was engaging the enemy at Binh Khe on Route 19, this implied that in order to carry out his mission, Phu had to withdraw all of his combat and support units from the Kontum-Pleiku area, bring them down to the coast, and launch a counter-attack on Ban Me Thuot from there.

In the Kontum-Pleiku area, by that time, there remained one battalion of the 44th Regiment, five Ranger groups of three battalions each, one M-48 tank squadron, two 155-mm artillery battalions, one 175-mm artillery battalion, and Regional and Popular Forces units. In addition, there were logistic support units such as the 20th Combat Engineer Group, the 231st Direct Support Group, the Army and Air Force ammunition depot with 20,000 tons of ordnance in stock, a POL depot with a 45-day supply and a food and subsistence depot with a 60-day supply.

The withdrawal of this impressive force plus II Corps Headquarters and headquarters units looked like an impossible mission. Since the 6th Air Division at Pleiku possessed only marginal airlift capabilities, the withdrawal had to be effected by road. But which road? Of all major axes of communication which afforded II Corps a redeployment route toward the coast, none was free from enemy interdiction. The only road available was perhaps Interprovincial Route 7B; but it had not been in use for a long time, and its present condition remained unknown.

General Phu seemed to be sure of his choice when he selected Route 7B to move his forces. As he explained it during the Cam Ranh meeting, this route, despite its uncertain condition, offered the best chance of success because the enemy would never suspect that II Corps would use it. The withdrawal, therefore, had to be carried out swiftly to avoid enemy pursuit. (Map 7)

The idea of a surreptitious movement conceived by the II Corps commander to take the enemy by surprise appeared to dictate the way he was
going to execute it. According to his chief of staff, Colonel Le Khac Ly, after he returned from the meeting late in the evening of the same day, General Phu convened a limited staff meeting during which he reported President Thieu's orders and issued his own for the redeployment. A general concept of movement was briefly discussed, and it was decided that Brig. Gen. Le Van Tat, the newly promoted Ranger commander and protege of General Phu, would be in charge. Colonel Ly, the II Corps chief of staff, was made responsible for the corps staff and logistic units. The entire operation was to be supervised by Brig. Gen. Tran Van Cam, the assistant II Corps commander.

Since the movement involved thousands of troops, hundreds of vehicles, artillery units and other heavy equipment, a schedule was established to implement it in four consecutive days, beginning March 16. Each day, a convoy of 200-250 trucks would move out of Pleiku to be followed during the next three days by other convoys of similar strength and composition. Instructions were also given to the 20th Combat Engineer Group to precede the lead column to rehabilitate road and bridges as required. Armor elements were to be assigned to each convoy for its protection. Itinerary security was to be provided by local RF and PF units. Finally, two Ranger groups and an armor troop were to form the rear guard. They were to be the last units to move out of Pleiku on the morning of March 19.

The next day, March 15, while movement preparations were feverishly taking place, the II Corps commander flew out to Nha Trang with a few selected staff members, purportedly to establish a forward CP there. His assistant, General Cam, followed suit to Tuy Hoa on the coast, from where he was supposed to touch base with the advancing column. Neither ever came back on the scene again to supervise the troop movement.

Since the redeployment was conceived in secret and carried out in haste, II Corps command did not inform the province chiefs of Kontum, Pleiku and Phu Bon. Not until late at night March 17, the second day of the redeployment, were orders given to the three Ranger groups stationed in Kontum to fall back on Pleiku. Only then did the Kontum province chief, Colonel Phan Dinh Hung, learn about the troop movement. Hastily, he went along but was killed in an ambush halfway between Pleiku and Kontum.
On March 16, the first convoy moved out of Pleiku as planned. But no sooner had the last truck departed when news of the redeployment reached the city and made its impact felt throughout the population. Soon people began frantically to evacuate the city by every means of transportation available, even on foot, taking along with them whatever belongings they could manage to carry. Later, they were joined by refugees moving out of Kontum and mingling with the redeployed troops; they formed a long mass of humans and vehicles flowing along unexplored Route 7B.

The first two days, March 16 and March 17, went by without serious incidents. By the evening of March 18, II Corps Headquarters had reached Cheo Reo (Phu Bon) where a light CP was established. It was in this area that all the convoys of the past three days and the human mass of refugees were stuck. The advance toward the coast, still some 100 miles of uncertainty away, was impossible because the engineers had not completed in time a pontoon bridge across the Ea Pa river near the town.

During the night enemy troops, presumably from local units ordered to intercept the stalled column, began shelling and mounting ground attacks. The Cheo Reo airstrip, less than one mile from II Corps light CP, was overrun. Fighting continued into late evening of the next day, March 19. By this time, wounded soldiers and refugees alike were lying all around, unable to be evacuated. There was practically no control in the town. Some unruly Montagnard RF and PF troops began looting or broke ranks and ran away, creating a chaotic commotion among troops and refugees. The situation became increasingly serious as each waiting hour went by. It was then that from Nha Trang General Phu issued orders for Colonel Dong, commander of the 2d Armor Brigade, to take over command of the column.

The convoy moved out of Phu Bon the next day, March 20, but could only progress as far as Ca Lui, 15 miles away. Phu Tuc, farther down the road, had been overrun by the enemy. Still the convoy kept moving, fighting its way ahead. Air support was called at 1600 hours but unfortunately, a few bombs were dropped by error on the lead elements. Nearly an entire Ranger battalion became casualties. This fatal accident