Overall, according to respondents, ARVN artillery also suffered from what other services suffered from: uncertainties as to doctrine and tactics. Organization on the U. S. pattern, according to the deputy artillery commander, was a mistake in the first place. It geared the artillery for conventional war, which was not then taking place, and also made the artillery unsuitable for the existing terrain. The deputy chief of ARVN artillery had this to say on the subject:

"With my experience during my adolescent years, living in Communist-controlled areas, and with the experiences I had gained through participation in the 1950 to 1954 war in North Vietnam, I was certain that we would (not) encounter a conventional type of war such as the American Advisory Groups, from TRIM to MAAG, shaped ARVN to fight. At that time, I raised those questions for discussion with the U. S. advisors in my unit. They answered, 'We are adopting modern methods of training and organization which have been carefully appraised by high-echelon staff commands, and cannot be erroneous.' They told me to be confident and strive to get more good results (in war fighting) as I had done in the past." (Doug, p. 14)

Respondents on the whole seem to agree that in the balance of forces the ARVN artillery did not have an edge over that of the enemy. In fact, with greater mobility attributed to the enemy, and due to the nature of the war, the enemy artillery, according to the two senior artillery officers heard, (the commander of ARVN artillery and his deputy) had the advantage.

The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF)

One might have thought that to have an air force of more than a thousand aircraft would have weighed considerably in ARVN's favor in the balance of forces, but according to the respondents this was not the case. One reason for this is that by "air power" all of them primarily understand B 52s and (to a far lesser extent) F 4s, i.e. planes they did not have. Most respondents credit the B 52s with having played a decisive part in their having been able to contain the 1972 enemy offensive, and most believe that the 1975
offensive might have had a similar fate if B 52s had been available, particularly in view of the enemy's tactic of moving and assembling his forces in broad daylight -- a practice, they say, he could not have employed had there been B 52s.

The apparent lack of efficacy of VNAF is not always attributed to the same factors, however. Different respondents stress different disabilities.

General Tran Van Minh, Commanding General of VNAF since 1967, a man originally trained as an artillery officer who later joined the Air Force and was appointed to his post by Nguyen Cao Ky, stated that the air forces were hampered by the fact that command over the aircraft was not really in his hands, but in the hands of the Corps commanders; and he also kept stressing the fact that "our mission remained basically unchanged: to support the ground forces" (Minh, p. 2). This means in plainer terms that when ARVN failed to do their job of stopping the enemy VNAF was in no position to do so. But there also were problems of control, Minh says:

"In any battle, the Air Force always supported the ground forces. But the concentration of fire was decided not by the Air Force, but by the JGS, because they were the ones who allocated...the amount of sorties and ammunitions. They did this by allocating planes to each Corps. The Air Force did not have the authority to determine the number of sorties or the expenditure of ammunition without the permission of the Corps Commanders. (Minh, p. 5)

As for the value of the aircraft at VNAF's disposal, Minh states:

"The F5 is a very good aircraft and the pilots liked to fly it. But it was not suitable. It is a very nice plane, but the load is not big enough, and the autonomy of the aircraft is insufficient -- it can fly only one hour and fifteen minutes. We would have needed B 52s that could release their loads beyond the range of the SAM-7. Still, with the help of our American counterparts we developed techniques for high-altitude release." (Minh, p. 6)
Were these techniques attaining accuracy?

"Not so accurate. It is very hard to get accuracy from high altitudes." (Minh, p. 6)

This problem of attaining accuracy of bombing from high altitudes had, according to various respondents, two related components to it. On the one hand, the enemy had excellent anti-aircraft defenses and was furthermore favored by the terrain in that he could often place these defenses on mountain ridges, thereby increasing their range, while he operated in the valleys. On the other hand, there was a morale problem involved here: to fly low enough to increase accuracy in the face of such defenses, required the taking of great risks for the pilots and therefore high morale. This, according to some field commanders who deplored the absence of effective air support, was often lacking.

When this question was raised with Marshal Ky, he had this to say:

Q. Were losses of aircraft a lot heavier in 1975?

A. Not really heavier because, at the end, now, that is, I'm very frank, most of the pilots didn't take too much risk, so they drop their bombs from very high...

Q. That's what we have heard from your field commanders. Several of them complained about VNAF for that reason.

A. Oh yes, I'm sure. Because the pilots came back and told me. Why risk my life with that regime (in Saigon)? If I die, what for? So, you know...

Q. Their morale had really declined?

A. Exactly....that's something that never happened when I was commander of the air force. But at the end, a squadron leader of the 837th came to me and said to me, frankly, he said, you know, now I drop a bomb at 35,000 feet because I don't want to go down and be hit by communist anti-aircraft. What for?" (Ky, pp. 20/21)

Ky attributes this low pilot morale not just to their attitude toward the regime but also to the financial distress under which they
Colonel Vu Van Uoc, VNAF's operations officer had this to say on the vulnerability of the planes.

"The majority of the VNAF planes were built 10, 15, sometimes even 30 years ago -- except for the A-37s remade from the T-37s, and the F5Es. These old planes were very slow compared to the firing capabilities of enemy anti-aircraft, especially their SA-7 air missiles and big caliber cannon capable of shooting down planes flying at over 18,000 feet... In a few words, our air force was a very easy target for the North Vietnamese during the years 1973-1975. For these latter had assembled too many anti-aircraft guns along with ground to air missiles on every battlefield" (Uoc, p. 6)

Uoc also pointed to the fact that the communists had changed their tactics, as for example later at Bannhettot, and moved in so quickly when attacking a town that VNAF had difficulty in operating against them. (Uoc, 1A).

The next factor mentioned by Uoc as negative was VNAF leadership.

"...In my airforce most of the wing commanders did not like their superiors at all because they were unqualified to be commanders. But Thieu put them in as commanders because they (obeyed) Thieu. The wing commanders did not like the men at headquarters. They don't like Minh (Commanding General of VNAF), and I don't like Minh. From the military point of view, he was not qualified. And his deputy chief for operations, the same. How can they command the air divisions and the wing commanders? They don't know how to fly the aircraft! Or how to fight a battle! How can they give orders?" (Uoc, p. 5A)

Uoc also complained that the Americans did not teach them enough of the required skills.

"The American air force trained the Vietnamese only in how to use American planes. How to fight the supply arteries, the LOCs and release the bombs, that's all. As for tactics and strategy, we never had a chance to learn them, except some of the F5E pilots. We just had to learn ourselves in the field. So we benefitted from the American force through
the U. S. advisors only in technical matters -- how to repair planes with the system used by the USAF. Supply, that's all. Battlefield -- we learned nothing from them.* (Uoc, p. 8 A)

Then, aside from the general problems, also encountered by other Service Branches such as shortage of POL and spares that plagued VNAF, two more problems that came in for mention were the claim that ground-air communications were poor, so that support of ground operations was difficult; and that, particularly toward the end, ARVN was unable to protect the air fields sufficiently to permit effective VNAF operations.

Despite all its problems, VNAF apparently performed to the satisfaction of some ground commanders. When asked to comment on the role of the Air Force during the defense of I Corps, General Truong said that the Air Force "gave very good support" in attempting to stem the enemy. They were particularly helpful during the Communist attacks in the Phu Loc area on the 20th and 21st of March. On the average, the Air Force provided about 30 sorties a day at the height of the fighting. However, this capability dropped off during the last days of the battle when the pilots and other Air Force personnel became preoccupied with finding ways to send their families to the south. General Truong compared the air support he had received in 1975 to that provided during the Easter Offensive in 1972 when the number of sorties in the I Corps area averaged 260 tactical air missions and some 25 B-52 missions daily. (Truong, p. 13)

*At this point in the interview, apparently reliving his frustrations, Uoc exclaimed: "The American people do not understand the oriental society! That's the problem. You put in Thieu, you put in Diem, you let Diem be killed, you kick out everybody, you lose again! You want them to listen to you but you didn't want to listen to them!"
But, if we can believe the respondents, VNAF on the whole was not the instrument to tip the balance of forces into RVNAF's favor, even though the enemy did not have any planes at all in the South.

The Balance Sheet

All the foregoing statements in this section indicate that the Vietnamese military leaders interviewed here regarded the balance of forces to be in their disfavor in every respect in 1974/75. The enemy, it seems, shared this view, and therefore felt ready to attack. Of his many assets, the enemy apparently valued none higher than his new lines of communications. Self-serving though the words of General Van Tien Dung, Commander-in-Chief of the North Vietnamese forces in the South may be, their vivid imagery conveys quite well what eventually happened:

"Our old and new communication lines (highways and pipeline) resembled endless lengths of sturdy hemp ropes being daily and hourly being slipped around the neck and limbs of the monster who would be strangled with one sharp yank when the order was given." (Van Tien Dung, GREAT SPRING VICTORY, p. 3, FBIS-APA-76-110).

Thus, the stage was set in the beginning of 1975 for a military campaign that brought greater and faster results to the enemy than even the enemy had anticipated, as we now know from the same source.

*The includes also the psychological factor: The leaders felt that U. S. interest in their cause had waned greatly, whereas the enemy's support for his cause from the communist world continued unabated.
PART II: THE COLLAPSE

In the view of one former senior ARVN general, the collapse of South Vietnam "was nothing but a succession of successful envelopments."

"...Communist strategy, very simple in nature, had not really changed in 1975, but the execution had been made easier and more effective, thanks to the new sophisticated net of roads. This strategy could be called 'a strategy of indirect approach' if we were to use Liddell Hart's terminology. It consisted of making a frontal attack with a relatively small force to [fix] ARVN units, while executing a deep envelopment in the rear to isolate the big cities and cut off the main lines of communication."

By applying military pressure in all four Corps areas simultaneously, Hanoi was able to exploit an over-extended and static GVN defensive posture that, for a variety of reasons, was far too brittle to cope with anything like a multi-front attack. Summing up the nature of this military problem, and the GVN's strategic weaknesses, another former general officer writes:

"The Communist offensive in late 1974 and early 1975 was launched simultaneously in all the four Corps areas, but was heaviest in I, II, and III Corps where the proximity of the border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail was an obvious advantage for the enemy. Hanoi certainly did not expect a quick victory, nor had they planned for any major objective in I, II, and III Corps. But Hanoi was ready to quickly exploit any substantial gain anywhere. Thus trying to guess the Communist intention or more precisely, the Communist main objective or main effort, would have been meaningless. Instead our effort had to be aimed at having a sound defense concept in all the military regions with overall centralized control and coordination. Unfortunately there was not a sound defense plan and there was no centralized control and coordination in the Joint General Staff. President Thieu was the lone controlling coordinating authority."

"In all the Corps areas, the defense system was a single line of defense, not a defense in depth. All available forces were positioned in the front line, no second defensive line was planned, and no reserve force was organized at the Corps or
THE SEQUENCE OF THE COLLAPSE
JGS level. Also there was no evacuation plan or withdrawal and delaying action plan. Those responsible certainly did not realize that no matter how strong it may be, a rigid line of defense can hardly withstand a vigorous initial wave of attack, and that without depth to absorb this initial shock, or without contingent evacuation plans to evade and whittle down the initial shock, a single front line defensive system will generally succumb to a sustained attack." (Lam Quong Tho, p. 29)

The following account attempts to trace the collapse of this "rigid line of defense" beginning with the loss of Phuoc Long's provincial capital in early 1975.

The Loss of Phuoc Long

In the view of several respondents, the disintegration of South Vietnam began with the loss of the capital of Phuoc Long province, on January 6, 1975. A "sparsely populated province of about 50,000 inhabitants," Phuoc Long was located in III Corps to the north of Saigon and was considered "untenable in case of a heavy attack due to its geographical position." (Buu Vien, p. 12) Its capital had been "isolated and practically encircled by enemy forces for months before its capture. Supplies to the civilian population had at times been flown in and convoys had to be organized with heavy military escort to get supplies into the province by road." Phuoc Long was "weakly defended" and offered little resistance to the overwhelming Communist forces (supported by tanks and artillery) which eventually overran it.

Buu Vien, the former Assistant Secretary of Defense, considers the loss of this province capital of major import.

"The Communists in their move to test the will of the ARVN armed forces, and especially to gauge reaction of the U.S. government, had indeed chosen an easy target. The loss of Phuoc Long was of great significance. It was the first time in the history of the Vietnam war that an entire province had been lost to the Communists and it obviously was a flagrant violation of the cease fire agreement by the Communists. Yet the ARVN armed forces command chose not to react militarily while the U.S. Government due to domestic difficulties did not make any significant move to deter the Communists from further aggression." (Buu Vien, p. 12)
When asked about the decision not to defend Phuoc Long, one high ranking member of the JCS states that the province capital had been threatened by two North Vietnamese divisions and it was the consensus of all military commanders at the time that it could not be successfully reinforced. All the reserves were committed to I Corps and there was insufficient time to mount a successful relief, although some Airborne Rangers were eventually lifted into the town at the last moment to help with the defense. In the view of this officer, the ARVN did not possess the capability in 1975 to relieve threatened province capitals as it had done in 1973.

Expanding on the considerations which led to the decision not to defend Phuoc Long, Buu Vien reports that President Thieu had discussed the problem in a Ministers' meeting. Thieu had explained that while it was "not impossible to reoccupy" Phuoc Long, "militarily speaking, it was not worthwhile."

"At least two infantry regiments would have to be deployed in the operation and the troops would have to be dropped by air. Given the enemy forces in the area, we should expect strong reaction from the enemy and casualties would be heavy. Once the province was recaptured, troops would be needed there to defend it. This would not only immobilize a number of ARVN units, but at the same time create serious problems of supplying the troops there. It would be better to save the troops to take care of other areas which had more strategical value." (Buu Vien, p. 31)

Buu Vien states that he for one strongly disagreed with this decision. He believes "the abandonment of Phuoc Long had probably been seen by the Communists as a sign of weakness of ARVN and strongly influenced them in their decision to move forward. At the same time it caused our troops to lose much of their enthusiasm and their confidence in their capability" and "created a harmful psychological effect on the population."

While urging the population to organize demonstration all over the country demanding reoccupation of Phuoc Long, the government itself did not take any concrete action against the enemy. People began to lose confidence in what the government said and lost faith in the capability of the Armed Forces to protect the country. After Phuoc Long,
many people became skeptical about the intent of the govern-
ment, and angry people engaged in talk about Phuoc Long being
sold out to the Communists." (Buu Vien, pp. 31-32)

But the action at Phouc Long was also significant in other respects.
The commander of the Vietnamese Air Force, Tran Van Minh, reports that
he had "lost a lot of aircraft at Phuoc Long" (some 20 planes) because
of AAA and SA-7 missiles. He noted that the SA-7 was almost "impossible
to surpress." (Minh, p. 4) As will be shown later, it was precisely
this fear of anti-aircraft and missile fire that forced South Vietnamese
pilots to fly high and miss targets at critical points during the course
of the final offensive.

For another Vietnamese officer, Phuoc Long was a telling manifesta-
tion of the GVN's inability to carry out combined operations. As special
assistant to the Inspector General of the JCS, Colonel Loi was directed
to investigate the reasons why the aforementioned lift of additional
Airborne Rangers into Phuoc Long by helicopter had gone so badly just
before the province capital fell. His investigation revealed that "no
one was responsible for this operation," that the needed helicopters
had not arrived on time not in sufficient numbers to carry the troops
scheduled for the lift. Maintenance people hadn't done their job, and
the various helicopter, air division, and other commanders charged with
the operation were "not serious" and "didn't carry out properly their
missions." (Loi, p. 53) In Colonel Loi's words, "the main mistake is
from the Air Force and secondly from headquarters of III Corps because
the III Corps is responsible for this operation. They didn't have a
man to coordinate the whole operation. They didn't check out everything
before the operation. So when the helicopters didn't arrive on time
they worried about this and they ran around with no one responsible.
This is the failure." (Loi, p. 55) When asked to sum up the conclusions
he drew from his investigation, Colonel Loi stated "I felt this was a
kind of hopeless operation and they had tried to carry out something
that the Americans did before but this time without their support. We
just landed these people there and it was up to them to try to do what
they could. And we knew that we cannot support them." (Loi, p. 57)
The Loss of Ban Me Thuot

If Phu Quc Long was considered the most significant precursor to the 1975 offensive, all respondents agree that the attack on Ban Me Thuot (the capital of Darlac province) on March 10 was the opening of the main event. This was to set into motion a chain of decisions and military moves that were to have disastrous consequences for the continued resistance of South Vietnam. It was, as one senior officer put it, to initiate a "domino effect" which resulted in the unraveling of the country.

II Corps where Ban Me Thuot was located presented difficult defense problems for the GVN in that the area was large, the terrain favorable to the enemy, the provincial capitals widely separated, and the major road networks linking these strategic points vulnerable to "easy" interdiction. (Ly, p. 32) As a result, the security of II Corps was heavily dependent on accurate intelligence of Communist troop movements and the capability to rapidly reinforce threatened positions by airlift. Mobility was particularly important in that the Corps was comparatively lightly protected: as the II Corps Chief of Staff, Colonel Ly put it, there were simply "not enough forces to defend everywhere." (Ly, p. 7)

Only two regular ARVN divisions were stationed there and these along with some seven Ranger groups (each of regimental size) and one armored brigade were required to cover widely dispersed areas. The Corps' largest division, the 22nd Infantry with four regiments, was committed to the defense of the heavily populated lowland provinces of Phu Yen and Binh Dinh, the latter being a traditional site of strong Communist military activity. Of the three regiments of the 23rd Infantry Division, two were deployed at Pleiku for the defense of that province and the third was stationed at Ban Me Thuot in Darlac province. The majority of the Ranger groups (usually between four and five) were situated in Kontum province.

By early 1975, the Communist forces deployed in II Corps numbered five divisions (the NT3, 10th, 320th, 968th, and 316th) plus an additional 15 independent regiments consisting of armored, artillery, AAA, and engineering units. Total Communist manpower in the area was estimated at between 75 to 80,000 men of which some 36,000 were in regular units.
(Ly, pp. 2-3) As with the case of I and III Corps, the enemy had made major improvements in its LOCs in the Corps area during the period following the signing of the Paris Accords and as a result had acquired a capability to rapidly shift armored and other strike forces between the western provinces bordering the major north-south Communist logistic routes.

Taking advantage of the improved road networks and with the help of some local Montagnard scouts, the Communists had managed to position three NVA divisions (the 320th, 316th, and the F10) in Daklak province by the beginning of March. (Han Tho Tounh, p. 40) With these forces in place around Ban Me Thuot, they then commenced to cut all the major road networks in the Highlands. On March 4 they established blocking positions east and west of the An Khe Pass on the road linking Pleiku to Qui Nhon (Route 19); on March 5 they severed Route 21 between Ban Me Thuot and Ninh Hoa and on March 7 they completed their interdiction operations by blocking Route 14 between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot.

While these road cutting operations and other intelligence indicators had alerted II Corps to expect a major Communist offensive, there was considerable uncertainty and difference of opinion as to where the blow would fall. The II Corps commander, General Phu, was convinced Pleiku would be the target, while others on his staff and in Saigon were persuaded it would be Ban Me Thuot or the capital of Quang Duc province further to the South. Among those believing Ban Me Thuot to be the objective, were intelligence specialists on the JGS, who read the available indicators (including prisoner interrogations, captured documents, and radio intercepts) as clearly identifying the capital of Dalac as the focus of Communist interest. According to one intelligence officer, the JGS made several unsuccessful attempts to persuade II Corps of the threat to Ban Me Thuot. However, the Chief of Staff of II Corps recollects that these JGS warnings were always qualified as "probable" and did not pinpoint Ban Me Thuot as the only target.

"I have been 21 years in the Army, and you know how the intelligence people are 'the enemy may attack such and such targets.' Several places were mentioned not only Ban Me Thuot and Phu..."
didn't pay any attention to such an estimate, saying "Ah, that's too many." (Ly, p. 6)

Aside from being unconvinced by the intelligence, General Phu was also reluctant to reinforce Ban Me Thuot because this would require uncovering his defenses in Pleiku and Kontum, which were by this time under constant enemy harassment and also vulnerable to attack. Since the II Corps headquarters was located in Pleiku, Phu felt "his prestige was there" and therefore, was reluctant to weaken its defenses. In the words of his Chief of Staff:

"He does not want to be a defeated general if the enemy attacked his command post. We didn't have enough forces to defend everywhere and according to the information that we got, the enemy had about two divisions, massed west of Pleiku, around Duc Co and Plei-me they wanted to attack posts like that. He was also afraid of the enemy's tanks because if the enemy used tanks to attack Pleiku it was ideal terrain." (Ly, p. 7)

Phu also apparently believed that he could rapidly reinforce Ban Me Thuot be air in an event of an attack. An assumption subsequent events were to prove quite erroneous.

Thus, despite the fact that General Phu had visited Ban Me Thuot shortly before it was attacked and had "learned about the newest information concerning the enemy concentration around" the provincial capital he provided only minimal reinforcements to the Ban Me Thuot area. One Ranger Group had been moved to the town of Buon Ho down Route 14 as a precautionary measure and one regiment of the 23rd Division (the 53rd) had been deployed to Phuong Duc airfield some five miles east of the city. An Advanced Command Post of the 23rd Division with a staff of about 300 officers and men was located within Ban Me Thuot proper as

* A perception the Communists attempted to encourage through feinting attacks and by leaving the main radio station of the 320th Division behind in the Pleiku area for deception purposes.
were some three companies of Regional Forces and several platoons of Popular Forces. As the rear base of the 23rd Division, Ban Me Thuot also contained the dependents of that division, a factor that was to importantly undermine GVN attempts to relieve the town.

Following a powerful artillery barrage, Ban Me Thuot was attacked by armored and infantry units of two NVA divisions in the early morning hours of 10 March. Most defensive positions in the town were overrun by the end of the first day. The Advanced Command Post of the 23rd Division held out until it was mistakenly bombed by VNAF aircraft attempting to provide close air support. This accidental air strike cut all the defenders' communications and completely disrupted any further organized defense. It was most unfortunate in that the troops at the Command Post were "fighting with good spirit there" and the Deputy Division Commander, Colonel Quang, had reported by radio shortly before the strike that "we are in good shape." (Ly, p. 12)

In their assault on Ban Me Thuot, Communist forces had adopted a new tactic of bypassing outer defense posts and striking immediately into the heart of the city itself. They had surrounded the 53rd Regiment at Phuong Duc airfield with strong holding forces, however, and prevented this unit from moving to the relief of Ban Me Thuot. While the 53rd "could not leave the airfield" it was able to hold out for a number of days until its defenses were finally reduced.

One relief force, however, was able to get into Ban Me Thuot. The Ranger Group at Buon Ho fought its way down Route 14 and was advancing into Ban Me Thuot when it was reportedly called off from the counterattack by the 23rd Division Commander, General Tuong, who ordered it to secure a landing zone outside the town to protect the evacuation of his wife and children. This diversion nullified any future possibility of a counterattack from the Ranger unit and was the subject of much criticism from the II Corps Chief of Staff:

"... General Tuong, the 23rd Division Commander, worried a lot about his family. His wife and children were still in Ban Me Thuot city. So he had them go to the training center southeast of Ban Me Thuot. We had them gather there in an open place. He then directed the Ranger Group to go back
to the training center in order to protect the landing zone for his helicopter to pick the family up. The Ranger Group was advancing, they were fighting with the enemy. The enemy was not strong inside the city. Most Communist main forces were outside the city possibly afraid to concentrate within Ban Me Thuot for fear of air attacks. Tuong directed the Rangers from the air to go back to the training center. The commander must obey the order of his general, his division commander. They went back to protect the landing zone, and they picked up his family and when the soldiers tried to go back to Ban Me Thuot city, the enemy had sealed it off." (Ly, p. 19)

Meanwhile, proded by President Thieu to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot, General Phu began to airlift elements of the 23rd Division's 44th Regiment from Pleiku into Phuoc An, a town about 20 miles east of Ban Me Thuot on Route 21. Apparently, General Phu planned to lift the entire regiment to Phuoc An within three days and from there to link up with the 53rd Regiment still holding out at the airfield east of Ban Me Thuot. However, this relief operation was badly conceived and could not be executed. Helicopter assets were limited and less than two battalions could be carried to Phuoc An in the allotted time and these could be provided with no artillery or tank support. Commenting on this operation, the II Corps Chief of Staff states that General Phu

"did not foresee that it might take longer to accomplish this and we would need reinforcements and logistical support for the troops. And no way with the roads cut, we could not get supplies from Nha Trang to that regiment. And even if we wanted to reinforce it, no way. The air assets were very limited, and kept dropping every day. The first day we had seven or eight Chinooks, the next day it dropped to five, next day to three, then two and one. Because of mechanical problems, and that was a big mistake." (Ly, p. 16)

But even more disastrous, the troops lifted into Phuoc An "were not ready to fight" and began to desert in order to take care of their families.

"Ban Me Thuot was the rear base of the 23rd Division, with many barracks of married men from all the units. For this reason,
it was hoped that the men would push quickly toward the city in order to liberate their families in the city—unfortunately, the opposite took place. As soon as they landed with their copters, ...most of the soldiers, seeing by chance their families who had left the city several days earlier, threw their uniforms and weapons away and disguised themselves as civilians in order to leave with their wives and children to Nha Trang, which city was still under friendly control." (Thinh, p. 34)

The Chief of Staff of II Corps confirms this breakdown in discipline:

"...the defensive troops worried too much about their families in Ban Me Thuot city. So when they got out of the helicopters they would run to find their wives and children rather than fighting the enemy. When they departed from Pleiku the spirit of fighting was really very high, the morale was very high. And Tuong and Phu felt very good about it. But actually, when they got on the ground at Ban Me Thuot they ran away to take care of their families. Nobody could control them." (Ly, p. 16)

Desertions out of concern for the welfare of dependents at first manifested in Phuoc An were to become a frequent story in the weeks ahead and a critical factor in the erosion of ARVN defensive capabilities in other areas of the country.

While General Phu undoubtedly did not expect his forces to desert, he nevertheless seems to have harbored reservations about the overall operation to relieve Ban Me Thuot. In a March 12 conversation with a II Corps colleague, General Thuan, when the airlift was in process, General Phu indicated that the only reason he was sending troops to Phuoc An was because President Thieu had ordered him to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot. Phu stated that he was operating under a major disadvantage in that he had "no information" on the size of the enemy forces in the area and was pessimistic about the chances of reoccupying the province capital. Besides, even at this late date, General Phu said he still believed that the attack on Ban Me Thuot was a diversionary effort and that the main target of the enemy was Pleiku. (Thuan, pp. 1-2)

As one would expect, with an operation that had gone wrong in so many respects, our respondents are highly critical of the manner in which the defense and relief of Ban Me Thuot had been managed. Several
believe that General Phu committed a serious blunder in not reinforcing Ban Me Thuot before it was attacked and all felt that his relief operation into Phuoc An to have been "very badly conducted" and planned. (Lam Quang Tho, p. 31 and Loi, p. 7) They consider the insertion of forces into Phuoc An, west of the Communist blocking positions on Route 21 to have been a major tactical error in that it denied these units necessary artillery and armor support.* Instead, the critics believe it would have been far better tactics to have attempted to reopen Route 21 with a combined armored task force moving up from Nha Trang.

One respondent attributes Phu's tactical errors to the mistaken belief that II Corps could still mount a fast reaction airlift operation "without American support."

"That is a very important point. The Vietnamese commanders did not realize that they could not operate in the same way. They still thought they could operate like the Americans." (Loi, p. 12)

Even the mildest critics feel General Phu acted "without adequate information" and fault the lack of coordination between air and ground units due to inadequate communications. Close air support to Ban Me Thuot which had numbered 200 sorties on March 10 dropped to only 60 or 70 sorties on the following days because "of lack of information about the enemy position as well as the movement of the fighting to populated areas which considerably constrained the air intervention." (Uoc, p. 2)

The performance of the 23rd Division Commander, General Tuong, was also the subject of severe censure, not only because he had diverted the Rangers from their counterattack in Ban Me Thuot, but also because Tuong had himself deserted the battlefield at Phuoc An after receiving a slight facial wound. (Thinh, p. 19) To quote one general officer,

"...he took the pretext to go to the hospital, to abandon his troops—that is why I don't like him. So I said he ran away from the troops."

*As another officer put it "all this infantry without artillery or tank support was just wandering around Phuoc An and could do nothing." (Loi, p. 7)
Thieu's Decision to Redeploy

The attack on Ban Me Thuot was the catalyst for a fundamental change in President Thieu's strategy for the defense of South Vietnam. It led him to abandon the policy of "no territorial concession" embodied in his often stated dictum of the "Four No's" and to order a major redeployment of GVN forces in both II and I Corps. While Ban Me Thuot was to trigger this change in strategy, there is evidence that the President was contemplating adjustments in his defensive positions at least a month earlier. A senior general reports that prior to the Tet holiday in February, Thieu had mentioned to him the need for a "new strategy" to "concentrate regular forces and abandon isolated areas" because the Communists had moved "a lot of divisions into the South." Thieu provided no details as to his specific plans, but did ask the general's opinion about the possibility of "giving up Kontum." The President said he would meet with him and "some other generals to make plans" about redeployments after Tet. Nothing came of this, however, as Thieu did not contact him prior to the attack on Ban Me Thuot.

Concern about the NVA buildup and, in particular, about the mounting Communist pressure in the Tay Ninh area of III Corps, however, did (according to some respondents) prompt Thieu and the JGS to decide in early March on the return of the Airborne Division to Saigon. Although stationed in I Corps since the Easter offensive of 1972, the Airborne was still considered to be the JGS's primary contingency force, and I Corps had previously been warned to be prepared to release this reserve upon 72 hours notice. On 10 March, I Corps received orders to return this unit to Saigon within a period of less than two weeks.

Commenting on the circumstances leading to this decision, Buu Vien writes:

"Along with the attack of Phuoc Long, fighting became more and more intense around Tay Ninh province. Unlike Phuoc Long, Tay Ninh was considered as a strategically important province that had to be defended at all costs. Its loss would directly threaten the security of the Capital Military District.

Even though the enemy had already succeeded in occupying several key positions around the provincial capital, especially the
Black Virgin mountain which overlooked the city and where the ARVN had its radar installation, he still wasn't able to get through to the city, thanks to the valiant resistance of the defending units, particularly those of the 5th ARVN division under the command of General Ly Tong Ba. Ba was one of the most able ARVN generals. It was he who had successfully defended Kontum with the 23rd ARVN division under his command, had driven off the Communists from the city in the 1972 Communist offensive.

But the pressure exerted by the enemy with heavy artillery shelling into the city created a population exodus to Binh Duong and Saigon and shook the morale of the Cao Dai dignitaries who were quick to declare the site of the Cao Dai Temple neutral to military activities.

As enemy pressure persisted, President Thieu deemed it necessary to strengthen the defense of the capital area and decided to pull the Airborne division back from IRI to Saigon." (Buu Vien, p. 13)

While other respondents agree with Buu Vien's view that the withdrawal was motivated by military necessity, several senior officers are equally convinced that Thieu's primary consideration in calling for the return of the reserves was to guard against the possibility of a coup. (See Don, p. 29) Whatever the motivation, the recall of the Airborne was to have a profound effect on subsequent events in I Corps and contributed irremediably to "unhinging" the defense of that area.

Even though Thieu seems to have been contemplating other shifts in GVN defensive dispositions, it was the attack on Ban Me Thuot which precipitated him to action. In the words of one high ranking general, "the fate of South Vietnam" was determined by a decision made at a meeting at the Presidential Palace on the morning of March 11. At this meeting, which was attended by General Cao Van Vien, Lt. Gen Dang Van Quang, and Prime Minister Khiem, the President is reported to have put a map on the table and told those in attendance that he considered Ban Me Thuot more important than Pleiku and that II Corps (i.e., General Phu) must retake it "at all cost." He went on to state that III and IV Corps were very important to South Vietnam's future (and must be defended) because of the offshore oil deposits and because they comprised the country's rice bowl. President Thieu then pointed to the more important coastal areas
of I Corps, which he said also should be held. Thus the President had come to the view that South Vietnam could no longer protect all its territory and that some redeployment of forces to defend the most important areas was now necessary.

When asked to speculate on why the President had finally come to this conclusion, one senior staff officer replied he thought it was because Thieu no longer had hope for American aid. Previously Thieu had thought the U.S. would react to a Communist attack because of the assurances he had received from President Nixon, but after a recent visit from a U.S. Congressional delegation he knew this was no longer in the cards.

That Thieu's decision stemmed from concern about the adverse balance of forces prevailing in the country and from a pessimistic reading of the likelihood of further U.S. assistance as also confirmed by Nguyen Ba Can. As Speaker of the House of Representatives and a Presidium member of the ruling party, Can had frequent meetings with Thieu and claims he was "one of the few to whom President Thieu confided his deeper thoughts on political matters." Thieu consulted Can the day after the Palace meeting (March 12) in order to discuss the "rapidly deteriorating situation" in the country and, as Can only later realized, in order to get "the House's concurrence in the historic decision he intended to take two days later" at Cam Ranh Bay when he ordered the redeployment from Pleiku and Kontum.

In Can's view, Thieu's decision to redeploy his forces "cannot be regarded as an inspiration of the moment, nor as a move by an exhausted man stunned by the loss of Ban Me Thuot. Rather it must be viewed as the result of his revised strategic assessment of the general situation of the country and mainly of the balance of forces that had become severely tipped in favor of North Vietnam." Moreover, there was a "disastrous moral crisis prevailing in South Vietnam at that time as a result of the aid reductions." In their frequent meetings, Thieu

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*A letter containing such assurances from President Nixon had been circulated to key officials in the government.*
told Speaker Can "that only a consistent U.S. support effort would deter North Vietnam from launching an all-out offensive." (Can, pp. 12-13)

But in addition to these military imperatives there "must have been highly important political necessities that motivated Thieu's decision to retreat."

"At the time, Thieu was in a very bad posture. The growing opposition was about to urge him to resign. Moreover, word of a coup spread around Saigon, and additional U.S. aid seemed to be uncertain despite tremendous efforts by President Ford to convince the Congress that more aid was vitally needed.

Besides satisfying the purely military needs, Thieu's decision to abandon the highlands...would also aim at creating a state of emergency in the country which would consequently muzzle the mounting opposition. What was more, Thieu would expect that because of worldwide repercussions resulting from the catastrophic retreat, the U.S. would appropriate the requested military aid in order to avoid being accused of betraying an ally and thus losing all confidence abroad.

Since Phuoc Long had fallen into enemy hands, President Thieu... repeatedly blamed his reverses on Washington's failure to keep its promises, and once exploded: 'If they (the U.S.) grant full aid we will hold the whole country, but if they only give half of it, we will only hold half the country.' [Can was] surprised by such reasoning which sounded as though President Thieu was defending the U.S. and was fighting for the Americans themselves." (Can, p. 15, see also Thuan, p. 53)

A few other respondents also believe that one of the key motivating factors in Thieu's order for the redeployment of forces, particularly with respect to Pleiku and Kontum, was to generate a climate of crisis and impell the U.S. to supply more aid: to cite the words of one officer, "a ploy for the ideas of the U.S. Congress." (Thuan, p. 4) But most doubt this was a major consideration and see Thieu's decision as an attempt to tighten his defense lines. (Tho, p. 32, and Nhan, p. 23) Buu Vien, for example, thinks Thieu wanted "to give up land to save troops" and Colonel Nhan states, "Thieu obviously believed that the retreat simply meant to preserve the fighting forces in order to defend a smaller area of land more effectively." (Buu Vien, p. 35 and Nhan, p. 23) Indeed, the President had demonstrated a propensity toward
such tactics during an earlier period of the Vietnam war. General Minh, who was III Corps Commander during the 1972 offensive, reveals that Thieu ordered him "three times" to withdraw his forces from embattled An Loc in order to "save" them for the defense of Saigon. Believing such a retreat would be disastrous for troop morale and discipline, General Minh successfully resisted this order only by threatening his resignation. (Nguyen Van Minh, pp. 5, 6, and 11)

Following the Palace meeting on March 11, Thieu moved rapidly during the next few days to order major redeployments in both I and II Corps. On March 13, he called the I Corps Commander, General Truong, back to Saigon and informed him that "he had to give up most of I Corps." The President's order was apparently explicit—I Corps was to keep only Danang, its seaport and the immediate surrounding area. (Truong, p. 6)

As General Truong later described this meeting to his Chief of Staff, the President said:

"...the new strategy was to 'tighten the top.' The idea of that strategy was to 'keep the bottom.' This term was used by President Thieu, for the country, that meant that Saigon was the bottom. And in I Corps it meant that the bottom piece was Danang...So what Saigon was for the whole country, Danang was for I Corps." (Dang, p. 3)

Truong was instructed to develop a plan for executing the necessary redeployments for a defense of Danang immediately upon return to his headquarters. While apparently not protesting at the time, General Truong reports that he was "disturbed" by this order in that he was already aware of problems resulting from the movement of refugees and dependents in the I Corps area. He knew the situation might become even more difficult because of the experience in the northern Corps during the Easter offensive of 1972. (Truong, p. 6)

Having set in motion the planning for redeployments in I Corps, Thieu next turned his attention to II Corps. On March 14 he met with the II Corps Commander, Major General Phu, at Cam Ranh Bay. Present at the meeting were again Lt. General Quang, General Vien, and Prime Minister Khiem. No staff officers were allowed to attend as General Phu had
received strict orders that the President wanted to meet with him "alone."

While some elements of the Cam Ranh meeting are disputed by various respondents it seems clear that the following basic decisions were made there: (1) that the regular forces (the remaining elements of the 23rd Division, the Rangers and the Armor Brigade) were to be withdrawn from Pleiku and Kontum and moved to the coast with the aim of eventually retaking Ban Me Thuot, (2) that the Regional and Popular Forces along with dependents, civilians and elements of the GVN administrative structure in Pleiku and Kontum were not to be withdrawn, (3) that the redeployment was to be implemented secretly and conducted within a few days in order to "surprise the enemy," and (4) that the route of the redeployment would be Route 7B, a long disused road leading from Pleiku to Tuy Hoa. The selection of this road was also to "gain surprise."

The major issue in dispute at Cam Ranh is whether Thieu ordered General Phu to abandon Pleiku and Kontum or just to redeploy forces to retake Ban Me Thuot. According to one version, Thieu gave his Corps commander orders to "reoccupy Ban Me Thuot at all costs" but did not order Phu to withdraw from Pleiku and Kontum, per se. But other respondents, including the investigating officer who read General Phu's declaration concerning the Cam Ranh meeting recall the II Corps commander claiming that withdrawal was indeed intended.* However, Phu's account of Cam Ranh seems self-serving and is not corroborated by his Chief of Staff, Colonel, who recalls General Phu asserting that the President's order was to redeploy forces to Nha Trang so that they could plan to retake Ban Me Thuot. Whatever the exact order, the issue is somewhat academic in that all participants must have realized that any major redeployment of additional forces from Pleiku and Kontum would necessarily result in the eventual loss of those two towns. Indeed, Thieu

*In his brief declaration to the JGS Phu claimed he told Thieu at Cam Ranh "we can hold out and we can defend Pleiku." However, the President rejected this course of action, responding, "now the American aid is cut off and now we have lost Ban Me Thuot we have to reduce the front. And we have to get out of Pleiku. So try to bring all your forces down to the coast." (Loi, p. 63)
acknowledged this to be the import of his decision in his farewell address on 21 April, 1975:

"After Ban Me Thuet fell we wondered where we could get troops to recapture it. We came to a political decision not to insure the life or death defense of Kontum or Pleiku... We decided to redeploy our forces from Kontum and Pleiku to recapture Ban Me Thuet. If Ban Me Thuet were retaken, we believed, we would have the opportunity to retake Kontum and Pleiku." (FBIS, Asia and Pacific, April 22, 1975, p. 19)

Moreover, the fact that Pleiku and Kontum were not to be "abandoned" and that all forces were not to withdraw is explained by the apparent agreed-upon strategy that the Regional and Popular Forces, who were Montagnard, were to be left behind to screen the withdrawal.

One of the most severely criticized aspects of the Cam Ranh decision was the selection of Route 7B as the withdrawal route. This road had long been abandoned, and was in a general state of disrepair, having been mined by forces on both sides and in need of extensive bridge work. According to one high-ranking officer, the initial suggestion for using Route 7B came from General Phu because the enemy was "not there" and it provided "the advantage of surprise." General Phu told General Thieu on March 16, that Route 7B had been selected both for surprise and because the President had ordered the redeployment to be accomplished within a couple of days. Phu said, "I didn't have a choice—The President said I had only two days in which to accomplish the withdrawal." (Thuan, p. 3) Alternative redeployment routes had been discussed at the Cam Ranh meeting but none were acceptable to Phu. However, none of those in attendance at Cam Ranh seem to have protested the selection of Route 7B and it is reported that both General Vien and President Thieu agreed with General Phu's decision to use that road.

*According to Colonel Ly, General Phu believed that surprise would be achieved on 7B because "the enemy didn't pay attention to Phu Bon so this area was forgotten by the enemy and friendly, too."
At least one participant at the Cam Ranh meeting seems to have harbored some reservations about the likely success of the operation. According to General Thuan, General Vien told General Phu at Cam Ranh that "if he succeeded in withdrawing only 50% of the military personnel and vehicles he would be a hero." When told this by the II Corps Commander several days later, General Thuan responded that Phu would not be a hero but would "lose your command by this withdrawal." (Thuan, p. 3)

The Withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum

Following the meeting in Cam Ranh, General Phu flew back to his headquarters at Pleiku and at 6:00 called a meeting of his key staff officers; included were General Cam (the assistant for operations), General Sang (Commander of the 6th Air Division), Colonel Tat (the Ranger commander and Phu's "favorite"), and Colonel Ly his Chief of Staff, "five people only." He told them the President's decision, "we would leave Pleiku and Kontum and go to Nha Trang and set up our II Corps headquarters there and then we would plan to retake Ban Me Thuot." With the exception of Colonel Tat who had met privately with General Phu upon his arrival, all of those assembled were surprised by this announcement. In the words of Colonel Ly:

"Nobody believed him. All of us asked him again, we are to abandon Kontum and Pleiku? Yes, this decision has already been made. We have no discussion on this. I asked him how? He said some by air, some by road. And I asked him what road? He said Route 7B through Phu Bon. 'That's been already decided.' No discussion again. It was the President's decision." (Ly, pp. 21-22)

Colonel Ly, who as Chief of Staff had responsibility for planning then said to Phu:

"Please give me a week or three days so I can present you with a plan. [Phu responded], 'No. You have no time. Everything starts tomorrow.' I opened my eyes, my mouth, and everyone looked at him, except Tat. He said 'Tomorrow I will fly to Nha Trang and Cam and Ly will stay here. And Tat will be overall commander.' That's the plan." (Ly, p. 22)
General Phu then expanded on the command arrangements for the redeployment. Colonel Tat was promoted to Brigadier General and was given overall command of the operation. However, matters were immediately confused when Phu also gave General Cam, "verbal orders to the effect that he was to 'supervise the retreat'." This, according to Colonel Ly, "created more problems between Tat and Cam, more disagreements." Phu directed his staff to "go ahead and prepare tonight and start moving tomorrow." Orders were to be issued just one hour in advance to each unit commander. (Ly, p. 22)

General Phu then revealed the news that only the regular units were to be withdrawn. Colonel Ly remembers this part of the conversation vividly:

"I asked him another question, now about the province and district personnel, the RF/PP, the troops dependents and the people? He said I will never forget, 'forget about them. You have no responsibility to take care of them!...if you tell them about it, you can't control it and you cannot get down to Tuy Hoa because there would be panic'." (Ly, pp. 23, 25-26)

That evening Colonel Ly attempted to dissuade General Phu from using Route 7B but instead attempt the withdrawal along Route 19, which he believed could be opened by simultaneous clearing operations from Pleiku in the west and from the 22nd Division in the east. He argued that Route 19 was a better road whereas Route 7B:

"...required a lot of engineer effort to open the road, because mines, enemy mines, friendly mines, and special force mines. The bridges were also down and the route had not been used for a long time. So we had to rebuild it. And it would take time and equipment to rebuild. Engineering equipment. Do we have enough, can we move it? If the American troops were here, they could use a flying crane, it would be easy. But now, we the Vietnamese are alone, do we have enough assets to move heavy equipment to the place where it is needed? That's a problem. It's good for surprise, I agree with you. Yes, surprise. For the enemy to move into this area to attack us would take time. But we have to build roads, to build bridges, and it's easy for
them to harrass us. The enemy will have enough time to overcome the surprise. But he didn't buy my opinions. He said the President had already decided." (Ly, pp. 26-27)

When asked if II Corps had sufficient engineers and equipment to repair Route 7B, Colonel Ly responded:

"We did not have enough. We had just a fair amount of equipment and engineers. It requires a lot of time, it's a tough job. To move equipment it takes time. It's heavy equipment and can't move fast. He [Phu] said the President discussed that, knew that. The President and Vien knew that, they all knew about the difficulties and they decided to take this road, a big surprise to the enemy. We would be down to Tuy Hoa by the time the enemy came and we would have no problem at all. We would use air support." (Ly, p. 27)

The next morning about 7:00, General Phu flew to Nha Trang taking with him a number of key staff officers. Angered at Phu's command arrangements, General Cam (the overall "supervisor") also decided to depart and flew to Tuy Hoa telling the Chief of Staff "Ly, you take care of everything. I will see you there." (Ly, p. 23) At this point, Colonel Ly saw himself burdened with almost the entire responsibility for the withdrawal of no staff, no planning, and no guidance from the JGS staff in Saigon, who themselves were at first unaware of Thieu's redeployment order:

"...Tat, he got his star, and he got to take care of his Rangers. And I was the only man to assume the responsibility for everything else. Cam to Tuy Hoa, Phu to Nha Trang, and Tat stayed at the old American 4th Division headquarters in Pleiku (Ham Rong mountain) to take care of his Rangers. I stayed of course in Corps headquarters. Every report from all units came to me and they reported 'enemy attack, enemy attack--surrounded.' I could communicate with General Phu on the 'hot line' phone only. And Saigon said they could not get information from Phu in Nha Trang. I forgot to tell you one more thing. Phu took with him all the key staff members. The Chiefs of G3, G2, G1, all his key staff went with him. He left only the deputies of each staff agency with me. The total troops we had in II Corps at that time was about 165,000. And you withdraw a Corps like that with no planning! With no planning at all he withdrew the troops. I had to do my best. I called the unit commanders,
I had to let them know the situation. I personally informed the Americans there, the CIA, the consulate, and told them they must go right now. At first they couldn't believe me. But I said, 'Go, don't ask.' They called Saigon and checked with headquarters, and they didn't know. Even the J3 of JGS, General Tho, and the Chief of Staff, General Khuyen at first didn't know. They hadn't heard about the order. I knew it before them. Later on of course, they knew and they were asking me questions, 'Where is Phu?' And I said, 'Phu is not here, Phu is in Nha Trang.' And Phu couldn't provide enough information for the JGS. So the JGS contacted me directly in Pleiku." (Ly, pp. 23-24)

Once Colonel Ly informed the unit commanders that they had to prepare to move, panic broke out in Pleiku. Realizing they were to be abandoned, the Montagnard Regional and Popular Forces began to riot. In Colonel Ly's words, "the people, the troops, the dependents became undisciplined. Troops were raping, burning things and committing robbery. The troops became undisciplined when they heard the order. I can't blame them. There was no plan to take care of the troops' dependents." (Ly, p. 24) Disorder also quickly spread to the Pleiku airfield where Colonel Ly was attempting to evacuate equipment and personnel by C-130 aircraft flown from Saigon. According to Colonel Ly:

"The airfield at Pleiku was in a state of panic. Sometimes the planes could land, but they couldn't do the job. I had to go there and use my pistol to restore order. Of course, I didn't shoot anybody, just shot in the air. And when the people saw me, there was order. But soon I had to go back to headquarters, and the enemy kept shelling the headquarters at Pleiku and the airfield. That was the reason we could not move everything we wanted out from Pleiku. We left all the old airplanes in Pleiku, helicopters and fixed wing, and heavy equipment, and the important equipment like the sensors left by the Special Forces. All types of equipment like that. We moved only about 70 percent of what we had. What we left behind we destroyed by air later." (Ly, p. 41)

After first dispatching engineer units down Route 7B to repair the disabled bridges, Colonel Ly began the withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum.

*However, Colonel Uoc reports that not all "operational planes" were destroyed at Pleiku and that "over 100,000 tons of ammunition" were left behind. (Uoc, p. 3)
on March 16. The movement of forces was scheduled over a three day period (March 16-18) and various combat, logistic, and staff components were assigned specific departure dates. Most of the Rangers were positioned toward the end of the column. However, Colonel Ly had no time to properly plan the operation and received little help from General Tat:

"General Phu didn't know anything about it. He believed Tat would take care of everything. But Tat didn't do anything. Tat told me--Tat and I were classmates--Tat said you take care of it. And he took care of his own troops. There was no time to think of anything, just reaction." (Ly, p. 40)

The road opening operations went slowly and the withdrawal column was soon blocked near Cheo Reo, the small provincial capital of Phu Bon province located halfway down Route 7B. Repair work on the bridges took much longer than had been anticipated:

"We had a problem with the equipment. The technique to build the bridge took time. General Phu's estimate was that in about two days the roads would be open. He was completely wrong. Just one bridge took about three or four days."

In the meantime, a mass of refugees from Kontum and Pleiku had begun to join the movement down 7B. "...Before noontime on the first day (March 16) the road started to have people moving on (it). And by that night and the next day many, many people--troop dependents, people, all kinds of transportation, even baby carriages were on the road, and every day from that day on."

Recovering from their initial surprise at II Corps' decision to retreat down Route 7B (which they had previously considered to be unusable), the Communists rapidly deployed elements of the NVA 320th division to attack Cheo Reo on March 17 and harass the withdrawal column. Jammed with civilians and military alike, the road from Pleiku rapidly became a nightmare. Unit integrity completely disintegrated as did all semblance of control. "There was no way to keep a well-organized column." Recalling the scene, Colonel Ly states:
"The road from Pleiku was terrible. I saw many old people and babies fall down on the road and tanks and trucks would go over them. Accidents all the time but everything would keep moving...Nobody could control anything. No order. The troops were mixed with the dependents and civilians and were trying to take care of all the children and wives. You can't imagine it. It was terrible. No control. And the enemy squeezed them. Refugees were strung out all the way from Cheo Reo back to the point where 7B and Route 14 fork. I walked under fire." (Ly, p. 43)

The Ranger units bringing up the rear of the column attempted to bypass the mass of civilians on the road to help with the growing Communist pressure on Cheo Reo, but were "blocked by the many people" and "couldn't move." Food supplies for the retreating forces were insufficient, and after two days "most of the soldiers were starving and had to pillage the highlander villages along Route 7." (Thin, p. 19) Instances of violence and rape were also common.

An armored unit fighting to open the road east of Cheo Reo became disorganized when it was mistakenly hit by VNAF pilots "flying too high." Four tanks were destroyed and a number of troops and civilians killed. This act, in Colonel Ly's words, "made morale very, very bad." (Ly, p. 45)

By the time Colonel Ly arrived in Cheo Reo on March 18, he found a "mass of population" crammed into the immediate area. "About 200,000 people around at one small place." The situation was chaotic, some troops were looting, and the Communists shelling the town. On the evening of March 19, with Communist forces within a half mile of the town General Phu ordered the evacuation of Colonel Ly and other senior officers from Cheo Reo by helicopter. (Ly, pp. 42-45)

In the ensuing days, the retreating military units and civilians continued to stagger down Route 7B toward Tuy Hoa. The necessary bridges were eventually repaired so that some could escape but most were killed or captured. The former Commander of the ARVN Artillery Command describes the retreat as follows:

"We must salute the battalion commanders and lower officers for having marched with their units but they were no longer able to control their famished and tired men. The soldiers kept shouting insults at Thieu for this impossible and terrible
retreat. Some reached the limit of their despair and killed the officers. An artillery battalion commander who was marching in the retreating column was shot to death by some Rangers who wanted his beautiful wristwatch.

The despair was so great that at one point two or three guerrillas arriving at the scene could make prisoners of a hundred Rangers. Wives and children of retreating soldiers died of hunger and sickness on the road. It was a true hell. (Thin, pp. 19-20)

By Colonel Ly's estimate only about 20,000 of the 60,000 troops which had started out from Pleiku and Kontum finally got down to Tuy Hoa, and these were no longer fit for combat. Only about 700 of the estimated 7,000 Rangers escaped along with a handful of armored vehicles, "about 30, including the APCs." Of the some 400,000 civilians who had attempted to flee Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Bon, only an estimated 100,000 "got through." (Ly, pp. 48-49) Whereas General Phu had calculated that the withdrawal could be accomplished within a period of "three days" military stragglers were still trickling down Route 7B when the Communists captured Tuy Hoa on the first of April. (Ly, p. 50)

One former general officer characterizes the withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum as the "greatest disaster in the history of the ARVN." (Thin, p. 19) Another goes even further, stating it "must rank as one of the worst planned and the worst executed withdrawal operations in the annals of military history." Of all the events contributing to the collapse of Vietnam, it is the most criticized by our respondents.

Unsurprisingly, the heaviest criticism is directed at General Phu, whom most respondents considered "unfit" for a Corps command. (Nhah, p. 21) They portray him as a man of "poor intellectual and professional capability," lacking the character or training to cope with the "grave situation" facing him in II Corps. (Tho, p. 32) His Chief of Staff describes him as a "big corrupter," ... "the type of person who acts according to his sentiment rather than his logic," and "in the battlefield...terrible." (Ly, pp. 2 & 52)
Most condemn the fact Phu was the first to flee Pleiku and had not remained with his troops to personally command the withdrawal. Behavior, which one respondent attributes to Phu's great fear of recapture by the Communists (he had been taken prisoner at the battle of Dien Bien Phu).

There were also those who feel the withdrawal operation should never have been left in Phu's hands in the first place, that the JGS should have played the major role. As General Don puts it:

"The problem was that an operation like this should have been conducted by the General Staff with their whole support... that was the mistake on our side. There was no cooperation between the General Staff and the Corps headquarters." (Don, p. 13)

But the respondents also see a more fundamental error—the decision to withdraw at all. They believe Thieu (along with the others at Cam Ranh) blundered in thinking II Corps could withdraw forces already under enemy pressure and preserve their morale and combat effectiveness, much less retake Ban Me Thuot. (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 27) Gen. Don, for one, characterizes the Cam Ranh decision as "stupid:"

"We come back to the same problem. Thieu has given too much power to the Corps commanders. And the Corps commanders decided what to do and when. It is the common duty for Thieu, Vien, the Corps commanders, to study also and not let only Thieu himself to decide. It is stupid to say you will retake Ban Me Thuot and then you abandon Pleiku. You didn't retake Ban Me Thuot, you lost Pleiku. I don't know. We must ask who is stupid? Both are stupid. Theiu was stupid. Vien was stupid, all were stupid. You need to hold one. You had two, you lost one, but keep this one. At least keep one." (Don, p. 76)

These critics believe it would have been wiser to have remained in Pleiku and Kontum and fought. One general officer on the JGS, for example, thinks this would have been by far the best alternative. He estimates that General Phu had from 15 to 30 days of supplies on hand
and that some air resupply would have permitted II Corps to hold out even longer. Had a strong defense been mounted, he believes this might have changed U.S. Congressional opinion and brought in more American support. Colonel Ly concurs in this view, and states that Pleiku could have held against a two division Communist attack for "at least two weeks" even if it could not be resupplied. (Ly, p. 29)

He feels it would have been "very costly to the Communists" to take Pleiku and that "it would have been a far better decision to stay there." (Ly, p. 30) Several of his subordinate officers apparently agreed with him:

"At least three or four unit commanders came to me when Phu had left Pleiku. They came to me and said, 'why do we leave?' I can't give you an answer. That's the order from high headquarters. We have to leave. And they said, 'why do we want to fight.' Even me, I want to die here. We still have enough supplies and assets to fight. The enemy cannot take over Kontum and Pleiku. I said, what can we do?" (Ly, p. 59)

The Subsequent Collapse of II Corps

Following the disastrous withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum, Communist main force divisions started exerting heavy pressure on the three regiments of the ARVN 22nd Division guarding Binh Dinh province in northern II Corps. ** (One other regiment of the 22nd Division had been redeployed to the south to assist with the defense of the Nha Trang area.) Initially, "the enemy pressure came from the highlands down to the lowlands" but the 22nd Division soon also had to contend with NVA forces driving down from southern I Corps where they had been freed by the collapse of resistance in Quang Ngai. (Ly, p. 55) By all accounts, the officers and men of the 22nd Division "fought very well" even "valiantly" in their attempt to hold off the attacking NVA divisions. (Ly, p. 60 and Thinh, p. 35)

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* The JGS had calculated that Pleiku and Kontum would require 300 tons of supplies daily in sustained combat but that air re-supply could only provide from 100 to 150 tons a day.

** The 22nd Division Commander, General Niem, "had one regiment in the north, north of Phu My, one regiment in Binh Khe (on Route 19), and one at Qui Nhon." (Ly, p. 60)
However, strong enemy pressure, lack of supplies, and the "disorder" created by Communist sapper attacks in the division's rear area at Qui Nhon, forced the 22nd to withdraw to Qui Nhon at the end of March and attempt an evacuation by sea. (Thinh, p. 35) In the words of one officer, "finally isolated, at the end of his supplies, and deprived of the necessary area support, it was forced to lead a heroic delaying action toward the ocean abandoning the province of Binh Dinh to the enemy." (Thinh, p. 35) In the course of this retreat, one regiment suffered heavy losses from a Communist ambush when it withdrew into Phu Cat airfield which it assumed to be still in friendly hands. However, the air commander at Phu Cat had received a "secret order" to evacuate the base and it had been occupied by the Communists by the time the regiment arrived. Only about 2,000 officers and men ("a fifth of its complement") could be evacuated by ship at Qui Nhon on April 1, the remaining forces having dispersed, been "killed, wounded or made prisoner." (Thinh, p. 35 and Ly, p. 60) "The general commanding the 22nd Division, in his command post on boat, fainted several times at the news of (the) severe losses of his unit." (Thinh, p. 35)

The situation in the central and southern areas of II Corps also began to disintegrate:

"With the loss of Ban Me Thuot, Quang Duc province in the southwest became completely isolated and immediately threatened. The situation there was untenable and Quang Duc could not possibly hold. The fall of Ban Me Thuot and Quang Duc opened the whole southern flank of II Corps area. Tuyen Duc (Dalat) and Lam Dong provinces were under Communist pressure. Heavy enemy infiltration with tanks, infantry, artillery, and rockets were reported in these two provinces. The Communists also were beginning to shell the two cities with rockets." (Lam Quang Tho, p. 31)

The Ranger Group defending Quang Duc province "dispersed;" Lam Dong province was occupied soon thereafter; and Dalat (the capital of Tuyen Duc province) was threatened with encirclement and eventually evacuated. (Ly, p. 55) However, several respondents report that Communist forces did
not actually occupy Dalat until several days after its evacuation. The Regional and Popular forces defending these latter provinces proved no match for the Communist main force units in the area.

Attempts were made to slow the Communist advance by air strikes on the roads and bridges leading to the coastal areas. Air operations, however, were hampered by the intense enemy aircraft fire which according to one VNAF commander was "very effective, usually up to 15,000 to 20,000 feet" and hit "most of the aircraft." (Uoc interview, p. 2)

But air support was also degraded by the confusion and congestion caused by the redeployment of the 6th Air Division from Pleiku to the remaining southern bases at Nha Trang and Phan Rang. According to Colonel Uoc:

"The combat forces of the two air divisions in the second military region declined from day-to-day because of the congestion caused by too many planes, personnel and their families. There was a shortage of mechanics and pilots because they were busy taking care of their families at Nha Trang and Phan Rang bases. As a result, there was no one to work on damaged planes, parts were lacking and pilots from a certain squadron could not fly planes of another squadron because headquarters had not yet made the arrangements. Also, because of lack of coordination some pilots and mechanics had nothing to do. In brief, that strategic withdrawal was carried out without previous organization or leadership; as Commander of the Air Operations Command, I had presented these difficulties to the Air Force headquarters without any result because we (the Air Operations Command) needed only planes, bombs, and ammunition in order to fight. It was very sad and heartbreaking to see the Communist attack without the ability to counter. The withdrawal of the 6th Air Division to Nha Trang and Phan Rang from all aspects—morale, materiel, as well as strategic—was a complete failure." (Uoc, p. 3)

The shortcomings in command and control mentioned above were a frequent source of complaint from our II Corps respondents. Several mention an absence of "clear orders" from headquarters in Saigon, which they even had difficulty contacting, and suggest that, at times, "no one was in charge" of the defense.
The Communist F-10 division, which had participated in the capture of Ban Me Thuot, began moving down Route 21 toward the coastal town of Nha Trang, the new site of the II Corps headquarters. In order to check this drive, the JGS on March 17th diverted one of the Airborne brigades being withdrawn from I Corps to Nha Trang and this unit was inserted at a pass (near Khan Duong) some 30 miles west of Ninh Hoa on Route 21.* With a force of about 2,000 men, the brigade was soon engaged in "violent fighting" and defended its position at the pass tenaciously, knocking out many enemy tanks in the process.**

"Quite a number of T-54 tanks were hit and burned, artillery duels terminated in silence by North Vietnamese artillery but also by the losses of South Vietnamese artillery. The paratroopers were the only hope for the port of Nha Trang, but they were only a light brigade, whereas the enemy facing them consisted of at least a division, supported by many heavy tanks, long-range cannon and intense anti-aircraft. Our side there [had] no tanks and only a few 105s and 155s." (Thinh, p. 20)

"After a week of hard and unequal combat" and after suffering heavy casualties, the Airborne brigade was finally outflanked and its few survivors withdrew down Route 21 toward Nha Trang. Their withdrawal in turn precipitated the sudden evacuation of several ARVN training centers situated on the road.

"Along the road from Ban Me Thuot to Nha Trang we had two or three training centers, so when the Airborne withdrew along the road, all these training centers just disbanded and ran with the Airborne. When the Airborne and these troops ran out of the camp, and Nha Trang knew about this, then Nha Trang ran too. If we had had responsible people to hold Nha Trang and to organize a defense of Nha Trang, I think that we could hold it for a while." (Loi, p. 76)

*It should be noted that this was the only major reinforcement to be received by II Corps during the course of the campaign.

**All Airborne units seemed to have fought consistently well throughout the last months of Vietnam.
Nha Trang, was by this time near chaos "the flow of civilian refugees and military evacuees from I Corps area and from the neighboring provinces created an atmosphere of panic and of hysteria which soon became uncontrollable. A further evacuation from Nha Trang was initiated by individual units without orders or coordination with Corps headquarters which was then completely paralyzed and overwhelmed by the situation." (Lam Quang Tho, p. 34) Even though there were still RF, PF, and some ARVN forces in the Nha Trang area (including the 40th Regiment of the 22nd Division) all command and control rapidly evaporated. There was in the words of Colonel Ly, "no support, no command, how can they fight." (Ly, p. 57)

On April 1, "the Corps staff at Nha Trang began to flee, people disappeared," among them General Phu, the II Corps Commander. Colonel Ly recalls vividly his commander's departure:

"I had a visit from Phu about noon time. He came back to headquarters and said, where are the people? I was in my office upstairs and he kept yelling, and I said 'I'm still here, working here. I think they must have taken the noon break.' The key officers are still here but Phu left the headquarters and he walked to the helipad just in front of his house, next to the headquarters and he left. Later on I learned that he had flown to Saigon. Of course, when the key staff officers saw him leaving, they also left 1 April. Again, the second time, I was left behind. Without any orders, I didn't know what happened, what was going on. I was alone with my aide, my secretary and some junior officers and Phu's security officer, a Ranger Major who commanded troops to secure Phu's house, was also left behind. I called the Ranger officer, and with some Rangers, we hit the airfield. I met my staff there. They were already there, they had seen Phu leave. I tried to gather them in the airport and talk with the Air Division Commander. The Air Force personnel tried to hold us as hostages in order to call Phu back, because the Air Force needed infantry troops to protect their base. They tried to hold us, but I said, you have no way to contact Phu now. And they tried to contact Saigon, and General Vien said, 'Phu must stay there to defend effectively Nha Trang. Don't withdraw anymore.' But who obeyed orders? All the troops abandoned their posts. No fighting at all. Panic in Nha Trang and every city in II Corps at that time. By eight o'clock in the evening the last airplane (I think) took me to Saigon." (Ly, p. 57-58)
With the departure of all senior commanders, "everyone ran;"

"...no one in charge of the whole area. So everyone is thinking about running. That is all. Each province chief is in charge of a big sum of money, so everyone tries to get it out from the treasury and run with it." (Loi, p. 78)

Thus, with the exception of the two southeastern provinces of II Corps (Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan) where the GVN still retained a tenuous hold, the Communists were in control of both the highlands and the coastal areas by the beginning of April.

The Fall of I Corps

Because of its proximity to the DMZ, unfavorable terrain, and the sizable Communist forces in the area, I Corps possessed the largest concentration of GVN strength of any Corps area. As of March 1, this comprised some five divisions including South Vietnam's major reserve units—the Marines and Airborne, one armored brigade, four Ranger Groups, plus some 220 Regional Force companies. The opposing Communist forces in early March were equivalent to some seven divisions, but there were also several additional NVA reserve divisions above the DMZ which could be inserted rapidly into the Corps area. (Truong, p. 1)

Tactically, the defenders in I Corps faced a difficult challenge. In order to protect the major population centers in the coastal lowlands and the logistic route connecting them (Route 1) it was necessary for the GVN to hold the key terrain features and ridge lines immediately west of the lowland areas. But such a defense had been greatly complicated by the substantial improvements in the enemy's LOC system which had taken place since the Paris Agreements. This series of roads permitted the Communists to maneuver and supply their forces at a number of points in close proximity to these lowland areas and provided them

*Running from north to south, I Corps' regular divisions were deployed as follows: the Marine Division in Quang Tri, the 1st Division in Thua Thien, the Airborne Division in Quang Nam, west of Danang, the 3rd Division in Quang Nam, mostly southwest of Danang, and the 2nd Division in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai.
with jumping off positions from which to launch armored assaults with little or no warning.

The heavy concentration of GVN forces in I Corps was also a reflection of the intensity of the fighting in that area. During 1974, I Corps had been the scene of a series of Communist assaults which had cost the GVN more than 15,000 casualties to repulse. (Truong, p. 17) Fighting had been particularly severe in Quang Nam province where the Communists had mounted an attack in mid-summer which gravely threatened the Danang area. This offensive had only been stemmed after heavy fighting by the 3rd Division, reinforced by two brigades of the Airborne and several Ranger units.

Later in the year the Communists opened an attack on a key terrain feature (Nui Mo Tau) some 15 miles southwest of Hue. After fighting that seesawed back and forth over several months, the Communists succeeded in capturing this high ground toward the end of the year. Forward observation posts on Nui Mo Tau allowed them to adjust their 122 mm rocket, 122 mm and 130 mm artillery fire on the 1st Division headquarters and airfield near to Hue. This artillery harassment forced the closing of the airport which, in the words of the 1st Division's Deputy Commander had a "great psychological effect" on the people. "The wealthy people of Hue and Quang Tri packed up and moved to the South--government officials and officers of the ARVN also evacuated their families to Danang and other safe cities." (Thuc, p. 2) Despite repeated attacks, bad weather (which inhibited air strikes and accurate artillery fire) and restrictions on "mortar and artillery ammunition" prevented the GVN from reoccupying this position until January 10th.

Communist prisoners captured during the battle for Nui Mo Tau reported that they had been instructed to hold this position until after Tet when it would serve as the jumping-off line for a major assault on Hue. (Thuc, p. 4) Other indications of an impending Communist offensive were also in evidence. According to a senior I Corps commander:
"In the last months of 1974, the Communists dramatically increased their logistical activities. Our air reconnaissance detected convoys of hundreds of Molotova trucks moving south, day and night...It was estimated that in MR I alone, in 1974, over 10,000 tons of supplies (mostly ammunition and food) were infiltrated every month."

On February 17 an air observer spotted "a big enemy convoy of 100 trucks" moving toward a ridge line some 28 miles southwest of Hue. Several new field artillery positions were identified in the area along with bulldozers building new roads toward friendly positions. However, I Corps headquarters failed to act on this intelligence and would not authorize artillery fire on these new positions. (Thuc, p. 18)

On March 8, the NVA 324th Division (reinforced by two independent regiments) launched a "powerful assault on the chain of high grounds which controlled the key Phu Bai logistical installations and airport" situated near Route 1 south of Hue. At the same time, the Communists also launched attacks in the "Street Without Joy" area north of Hue, and infiltrated five battalions into the coastal plains of Quang Tri and Thua Thien in order to attack the GVN's infrastructure in these provinces. However, a vigorous defense of Marine, 1st Division, and local units was able to successfully beat back these attacks which reportedly cost the VC and NVA over 1,000 killed. Simultaneously with these attacks in the north, the Communists also opened an offensive in the southern region of I Corps. On March 10 they started to attack a number of remote towns in Quang Tin province including two district seats (Han Duc and Tien Phuoc) which were situated on the approach route to Tam Ky, the capital of Quang Tin province. Although the Communists succeeded in overrunning the two district towns and were able to bring Tam Ky under artillery fire, the ARVN's 2nd Division succeeded in preventing further incursions.

While I Corps was able to contain these initial assaults, the situation began to deteriorate within a matter of days. Two factors occurred simultaneously which were to have catastrophic consequences for the GVN's defensive posture in the area. These were the realignment of forces which I Corps initiated to accommodate the previously ordered withdrawal of the Airborne Division, and the news of the loss of Ban Me Thuot and the retreat from Pleiku and Kontum.
As noted earlier, I Corps had been directed on March 10 to draw up plans for the withdrawal of the Airborne back to Saigon. (Truong, p. 5) Initially, I Corps hoped to phase in the withdrawal gradually, but Saigon, concerned about the situation in II Corps and the continued Communist pressure in III Corps, demanded that the movements be speeded up by several days. (Dang, p. 4) To accommodate the withdrawal, two of the three Marine brigades in Quang Tri were moved down to Quang Nam to defend the area formerly secured by the Airborne. Commenting on this pressure to advance the timeframe of the redeployment, General Truong reports that Saigon had "pushed to get it back." It was "not the time to do it" and the soldiers were very jumpy when they had heard what happened at Ban Me Thuot from BBC broadcasts. As a result, General Truong was forced to "hurry the Marines from their position in Quang Tri down to the Danang area." The people became very "frightened" when they observed the rapidity of these force movements. (Truong, p. 5)

*Almost every soldier in the Vietnamese army had a radio receiver in order to keep posted on the situation and many listened to the BBC believing it more credible than the Government radio. Several respondents were highly critical of BBC broadcasts during the period of the collapse, charging that they were inaccurate and biased in favor of the enemy. For example, the former Commander, Artillery Command, writes:

"Aside from the effects of the Communist's propaganda rumor, there also was the negative influence of transmissions in Vietnamese by the BBC. It is well-known that in Vietnam the people preferred to listen to the BBC or the VOA to news by Radio Saigon because Radio Saigon was controlled by the government. During the two last months of war in Vietnam, it seemed that the BBC was in favor of the Communists in its commentaries or in its daily news. Sometimes one could almost say that the BBC was bought by the Communists or that some of its correspondents in Vietnam might be Communist. When Nha Trang or Phan Rang were still under Vietnamese control, the BBC already announced the fall of these cities. When the Vietnamese advance units were at the level of Phan Rang and the South Vietnamese government was trying to negotiate with the North, the BBC said that the only possible aim of these negotiations could by the surrender of South Vietnam!" (Thinh, p. 38 and see also, Dang, p. 23)
All respondents point to the withdrawal of the Airborne and the repositioning of forces as having a critical impact on subsequent events in I Corps. In the words of the Corps' Chief of Staff, "this had three bad effects. It reduced our fighting strength; it reduced the morale of our troops; and it hurt the morale of the population. It upset the balance of forces." (Dang, p. 2) The "balance of forces" was indeed disturbed as I Corps Forward now had only the 1st Infantry Division, one Marine brigade, and two "depleted" Ranger Groups to face an enemy of four infantry divisions and the defenses of Quang Nam had also been weakened.

But even more important, these redeployments had a major, adverse psychological impact. The Marines and Airborne had "provided a sense of security" to the people in their respective areas. The people of Quang Nam "trusted the Airborne" because of its role in stopping the Communist drive on Danang the year before, and the Marines were held in similar esteem by the population of Quang Tri. (Truong, p. 4)

"In the minds of the people of Quang Tri and Hue the presence of these two divisions was so essential to the security of the area that the news of the withdrawal of the Airborne Division completely confounded them." (Buu Vien, p. 33)

The Chief of Staff of I Corps describes the situation as follows:

"When we took the Marines out of Quang Tri, it upset the population there; so, when we withdrew the Marines to replace the Airborne, we had the same effect in Quang Tri as we had had withdrawing the Airborne from Quang Nam. The people and the soldiers got upset. As soon as we started to withdraw the Marines from Quang Tri the collapse started already. They went down by truck over Highway 1." (Dang, p. 4)
As noted above, the repositioning of forces triggered a flow of refugees from the northern provinces. In the words of one I Corps commander, "with the departure of the Marine Division from the northern provinces the civilian population began to panic and evacuate en masse Quang Tri and Hue."

A major underlying reason for the panic was a belief among the population that a "deal" had been made concerning a further division of South Vietnam; that I Corps was to be abandoned to the Communists. Rumors concerning a possible new division of South Vietnam had been prevalent for some time in I Corps. Buu Wien writes:

"Ever since the 1972 Communist offensive, the people in the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam lived in constant fear of being abandoned to the Communist. When the Paris talks resumed there were rumors that a cession of the northern provinces in exchange for complete withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops, might be possible, and there was also speculation of a coalition government in Saigon and the creation of a buffer state in central Vietnam under ex-Emperor Bao Dai. Amid those rumors and speculation, there was a steady movement to the South by wealthy businessmen and those people who have enough possessions to establish a new life in Saigon."* (Buu Wien, p. 32)

Aware of these concerns, the SVN had attempted to "allay the fear of the people" by maintaining the two ARVN elite divisions in the northern Corps and by earmarking government funds for development programs in the Danang-Hue areas. (Buu Wien, pp. 32-33)

Now with the departure of the Airborne these rumors were rekindled and quickly spread among both the civilian population and the military forces, including the officer corps. They were given further credibility

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*Such rumors were also prevalent in II Corps, (see Ly, p. 36 and Thuan, p. 9).
when word was received of the loss of Ban Me Thuot and the withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum.

"...the retreat from Kontum and Pleiku had dealt a serious blow to the morale of the troops in MR I. Rumors of a deal between the government and the Communists spread like wild-fire among the soldiers. It was not known where the rumors had originated, but instinct led the soldiers to believe that an agreement had been reached by the two sides for another partition of the country, a solution that time and again many people had been talking about. Furthermore, the retreat from Kontum and Pleiku was so sudden and so brusque, so without any fighting, that there seemed to be no other explanation." (Buu Vien, p. 54)

To make matters worse, the government apparently made no attempt to counter these rumors. This led even high ranking officers to believe the U.S. had agreed to a new partition line. Commenting on the importance of this governmental passiveness, one such general officer writes:

"Rumors, as a matter of fact, were very important for the morale of the troops and the population as well. In Vietnam, in the closing days of the war, people talked about secret agreements between the U.S. and the NVA concerning the partition of South Vietnam along certain lines. Curiously, the government information agencies as well as the Army Directorate of Psychological Warfare never denied these rumors. The officers and soldiers asked themselves: 'Why do we have to fight to defend Danang when it has been agreed that the new demarcation line [will be from Ban Me Thuot to Phan Rang]?'")

Other respondents were also puzzled by and critical of the fact that the government did nothing during the course of the collapse to reassure the people of I Corps.

"While the country was plunged in unprecedented turmoil and on the verge of collapse, the government adopted a strange
attitude, a silence that was hard to understand except for
a few appearances on TV and radio by President Thieu. People
asked themselves questions and they tried to answer them
themselves. Rumors circulated in place of government announce-
ments. The Ministry of Information was mute, because the
Minister himself didn't know much about the situation and
didn't know what the President's intention was. Furthermore,
he didn't dare to take the initiative and talk about things
the President might not like or agree with. Since the resig-
nation of Hoang Duc Nha as Minister of Information, infor-
mation activities seemed to go at a slow pace. Nha, as
cousin of the President, was the only Minister who had direct
access to the President, and as a result of his closeness to
the President, could have come up with daring initiative and
quick reaction to the developments." (Buu Vien, pp. 55-56)

An underlying motivation spurring the flight of the population
was the fear of Communist repression should they fall into enemy hands.
This fear was inflamed by the memory of Communist atrocities in Hue
during its occupation at the time of the 1968 Tet offensive. Again to
quote Buu Vien:

"The Communist massacre of the Hue people in 1968 also con-
tributed to the enemy's success in 1975. Nobody, especially
the people of Hue, ever forgot the tragic days of the 1968
Tet attack when thousands of civilians were induced to attend
Communist indoctrination courses and later found executed in
cold blood by the Communists. Nobody ever forgot that long
search for their children, relatives who were supposed to
have been attending classes somewhere in the area, only to
find them buried in mass graves, with their skulls crushed
and their hands tied behind their backs. The spector of
that horrible slaughter was revived vividly in the people's
memory and hardly anybody, especially those who had close
or distant connections with the nationalist government dared
to stay behind. The fear of Communist prosecution was one
of the main factors that prompted the exodus of hundreds of
thousands of refugees to Danang."* (Buu Vien, p. 55; see also,
Dang, p. 21)

*According to Buu Vien, the Communists "intensified" their propa-
ganda efforts to encourage this fear. "In addition to urging mutiny
and desertion and promising clemency to those who 'repent and return
to the right path of revolution,' their efforts concentrated on creating
extreme fear among the population and refugees in the city of Danang." (Buu Vien, p. 55)
Driven by these fears, the movement of people out of Quang Tri and Thua Thien continued to accelerate. This had several pernicious effects: it clogged roads and impeded GVN military movements; it undermined the cohesion of the fighting forces because of concern for the welfare of the dependents; and it eventually burdened the city of Danang with two million refugees which doomed any successful defense of that enclave.

Concerned about the growing number of refugees on his LOCs, General Truong called Prime Minister Khiem in Saigon and told him that I Corps had increasing reservations about its ability to execute the withdrawal of forces into Danang contemplated in President Thieu's orders of March 13. Khiem, accompanied by some other cabinet members, flew to Danang on March 18 and met with General Truong, along with mayors, province chiefs, and other high officials from the I Corps area. These local administrative officials pressed the Prime Minister:

"...with questions as to whether or not they were authorized now to evacuate the civilian population, especially the dependents of government officials, cadres and soldiers. Prime Minister Khiem didn't answer the question directly, but decided that a high-level government delegation headed by a Deputy Prime Minister [Dr. Than Quang Dan] would be established and stationed in Danang to help take care of the refugees problem. The Minister of Public Works and Transportation was directed to help charter and requisition ships and boats necessary for transportation." (Buu Vien, p. 53)

However, Dr. Dan "claimed it not necessary to go to Danang" and left the refugee coordination task to his local representative in I Corps. "As a result, no high-level government delegation was sent to Danang." (Buu Vien, p. 53) Moreover, even though the GVN set about acquiring bottoms for the evacuation of refugees, it appears that little if any of this shipping was ever actually sent to I Corps. As one respondent put it: "they had confiscated all the ships in Saigon to evacuate them but...did nothing." Meanwhile, various government officials and their families in Quang Tri and Thua Thien joined the movement of refugees to Danang as did the dependents of the ARVN 1st Division.
On the morning of March 19 the I Corps Commander was ordered back to Saigon to review his plans for the redeployment to Danang. At a meeting in the Palace, General Truong repeated to President Thieu and General Vien what he had told Prime Minister Khiem on the previous day about the situation developing in I Corps; the movement of refugees, the role of rumors, and the effect the withdrawal of the Airborne was having on the psychology of the people. He outlined the tentative plan he had developed for the redeployment to Danang, but pointed out that the enemy was already exerting strong pressure on his LOCs and that the situation was changing almost daily. After offering the judgement that a withdrawal from Hue to Danang no longer appeared practical because of the mass of refugees on Route 1, General Truong suggested that the best way to deal with the situation at that moment in time was to "stay in Hue and fight." He said this might give the population some "confidence" and argued that he had "good defensive positions around Hue." (Truong, p. 8) He went on to propose that he regroup his forces into three enclaves, Hue, Danang and Chu Lai. Both President Thieu and General Vien approved the field commanders' plan.

During the course of the meeting General Truong also raised the question of Saigon's intentions vis-a-vis the Marine Division stationed in I Corps. He told the President that he had heard a rumor that Saigon would also withdraw this force. He said he was "not curious, but he needed to know for his own planning." President Thieu responded that there were no plans to move the Marines and that they would "stay in I Corps." He further told General Truong that he could "keep Hue" and protect as much of I Corps as possible but that the withdrawal of the Airborne elements would continue. After hearing this new decision General Truong reports he "felt good." However, following the meeting he had lunch with Prime Minister Khiem and asked him privately about the status of the Marines. The Prime Minister disclosed that there were indeed plans underway to bring back the Marines. Upon learning this General Truong says his spirits were "crushed." (Truong, p. 9)
During the night of March 19, NVA infantry supported by armored elements launched a frontal attack on the Regional Forces now guarding the northern section of Quang Tri, forcing these units to retreat to the My Chanh River. The next morning General Truong flew to meet with the commanders of I Corps Forward and informed them of the President's decision to "hold" Hue. He received a "confident" response to this plan from the commanders, who seemed "to have a good spirit."* When General Truong returned to Danang on the evening of March 20, however, he was met by startling new instructions from the JGS which he interpreted as orders to abandon Hue.** The message, as General Truong recalls, stated that the JGS had "means to supply only one enclave in I Corps" and that plans should be made to withdraw to Danang when I Corps considered such a redeployment possible.*** (Truong, pp. 10-11)

While General Truong understood the message as clearly ordering a withdrawal to Danang, this apparently was not the thrust intended by the JGS. According to the General Staff officer who drafted the message, it was only meant to warn the I Corps commander that Saigon had insufficient resources to support three enclaves at one time and to give him the discretion to withdraw to Danang should the military situation worsen and require such action. However, even this officer agrees that at best the text was "ambiguous." The misunderstanding recorded above is but one manifestation of the serious problems in communication and coordination that existed between the I Corps and Saigon staffs. The JGS did not appear

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*The new policy to hold Hue was confirmed the afternoon of March 20 when President Thieu announced over the radio that South Vietnamese forces intended to defend Hue "at any price." (Truong, p. 10)

**The message had been flown up from Saigon by special courier.

***General Truong says he was so stunned by this change of orders that he called his deputy over and said "read this for me." (Truong, p. 11)
to comprehend the gravity of the situation in I Corps, which it felt was being "exaggerated" by local commanders there. One JGS officer complains of "inadequate" and "inaccurate" reporting from I Corps, while General Truong, on the other hand, faults the "weak" planning support and command from Saigon. When the Americans had been in Vietnam, I Corps could rely on U.S. channels. However, with the departure of U.S. forces, coordination was no longer "appropriate to deal with the situation." (Truong, p. 21)

The need for a firm decision vis-a-vis the defense of Hue became apparent as the military situation in I Corps Forward rapidly worsened. On March 20, two NVA divisions, the 324th and 325th, launched a coordinated attack on the 1st Division and Ranger units in the Phu Loc area south of Hue and threatened to cut Route 1 between Hue and Danang. Despite intensive close air support and a determined counterattack by a Marine battalion rushed to the area, GVN forces were unable to recapture the high ground seized by the enemy and were soon forced to retreat. (Thuc, p. 19) Describing these events, a high ranking I Corps officer writes:

The 15th Ranger group, despite an heroic defense, was overrun by the 325th NVA Division on March 21st. The strategic Mom Cum Sat mountain which controlled Highway 1, south of Truoi, was lost and Hue was cut off from Danang. On the 22nd, the 1st Infantry Division had to blow up the Truoi bridge. In the afternoon, under heavy pressure, it had to withdraw to Phu Bai where hand-to-hand combats took place during the night.

At the same time, GVN forces defending north of Hue began to be pushed back toward the city, which was now threatened with envelopment. Moreover, the cohesion of the South Vietnamese forces began to disintegrate. The I Corps Chief of Staff states that "everything was out of control" and that the commanders: "reported back that they could not control their troops, that the troops deserted, that they did not have enough supplies and that they would not control the situation. They reported that they had to abandon Hue." (Dang, p. 6)