

Translation of chapter entitled "Tráun Táúp Kêch vaio Khu 'TACAN' trên Núi Pha-thê của Phán ááui Áâu Căng Quán Khu, ngày 11 tháng 3 năm 1968" [A Military Region Sapper Team's Surprise Attack on the TACAN Site on Pha-Thi Mountain on 11 March 1968]; pp. 181-205 (with map), in book entitled, "Quán Khu 2<sup>1</sup>, Măüt sáu Tráun ááinh trong Chiăún tranh Giái phoing 1945-1975 (Táúp III)" [Military Region 2, Several Battles During the War of Liberation 1945-1975 (Vol. III)], Nhà Xuăút Băin Quán Ááui Nhán Dán Viăút Nam [People's Army of Vietnam Publishing House], Hanoi, 1996.

## **A MILITARY REGION SAPPER TEAM'S SURPRISE ATTACK ON THE TACAN SITE ON PHA-THI MOUNTAIN on March 11, 1968**

After two years of using sapper tactics in the Lao theater, [our forces] gained initial successes, such as the battle of Tong-so at the beginning of 1966, the attack on the command post of the enemy's Groupement Mobile 17 (PC/GM-17) at Tha-thom at the end of 1966, and three counterattacks during operations in Nam-bac in 1967. This boosted confidence in the Military Region's sappers and reconnaissance forces and created belief in sapper tactics. This reflected a deep understanding of leadership: courage, resolve, and the use of the military ingenuity of the revolutionary army to take a small force and win a big victory.

Based on the missions and the after-action summaries of sapper engagements in 1966 and 1967 where we attacked only puppet (Lao) troops, this attack would be against an American signal jamming and air navigation command center (TACAN). This objective was also on a peak of a high, rocky mountain that had sheer cliffs. We attacked by surprise from many directions using many prongs, and coordinated the attack, etc. There were many difficulties. Under the guidance of the Ministry of Defense and the Military Region regarding systematic sapper tactics and procedures, especially after the Nam-bac victory, the enemy was confused and scattered. We went on to destroy part of Vang Pao's special forces who were led directly by the Americans. The determination of the Military Region to use its experience and sapper techniques to attack the peak of the rocky mountain to wipe out the enemy and liberate Pha-thi led to success.

### **I. GENERAL SITUATION**

#### **1. Terrain**

Pha-thi is a high rocky ridge west of Sam Neua Town. The [surrounding] terrain is miles and miles of rugged, hard-to-access terrain filled with obstacles. To approach Pha-thi, one must cross the high surrounding ridges that block access. To the north and northeast is the 1392-meter-high Phu-hin-he Ridge. The 1148-meter-high [Phu Huoi] Kha-moun [Ridge] is to the south. The 1425-meter-high Phu-bao Ridge, the 1223-meter-high Phu-hin-sa

Ridge, and the 1442-meter-high Phu-den-dinh Ridge are to the east. The 1586-meter-high Phu-houi-hao Ridge and the 1225-meter-high Phu-huoi-na Ridge are south and southeast, and high points 1443, 1088, 1052, 1148, and 1007 are west and southwest.

Because of these obstacle-filled and complicated terrain features, in the past French colonialists used Pha-thi as a central bandit's hideout to operate against and oppress the revolutionary base at Sam Neua.

When they replaced the French, the Americans followed a more long-range policy by developing Pha-thi into a fortified stronghold. This was the second-largest special forces hideout in Northern Laos (second to the Long-cheng area).

In 1962, we used a small force for deep penetration and it occupied the peak of Pha-thi Mountain, the enemy's most important and inaccessible location, and liberated the entire region. At the beginning of 1968<sup>2</sup> [sic], the enemy attacked and reoccupied the area. From then until 11 March 1968, the enemy continued to increase their reinforcement and defense of the area. They expanded their occupied territory to include the high surrounding mountain ridges and transformed Phi-thi into a strongly defended region. According to Western commentaries and assessments, Pha-thi was a solid fortress. It directly threatened the Lao revolutionary base and our Ma River (Song Ma) and Chieng-khuong regions along the Vietnamese-Laotian border, and formed a support base for the occupation and operations of special forces.

In March 1967, the Americans constructed a TACAN signal jamming and air control and navigation station on top of Pha-thi Mountain. This site could detect our aircraft, jam our signal communications, and command and control all American jet aircraft flying out of bases in Thailand helping them to attack Pathet Lao liberated areas and provinces in North Vietnam. These areas included Hanoi, the Thai Nguyen steelworks, the Viet Tri industrial zone, and the Duc Giang-Gia Lam petroleum-storage yards, etc. The TACAN station controlled bombing sorties..

### **Terrain in the vicinity of Pha-thi mountain**

Pha-thi Mountain is 1786 meters high and runs from north of Huoi-san Stream to south of the Nam-het River, a distance of about 7,000 meters. It is the highest peak in the region. The peak of Pha-thi Mountain is approximately 3-4 kilometers from the surrounding peaks. Therefore, this allows observation and control of a wide area. All four sides of the mountain are sheer cliffs that are between 50 and 200 meters high. No trails go up or down except for one path that goes up the eastern side.

However, this path crosses five hills that were all occupied by the enemy, and except for a 14-rung wooden ladder.

On the summit. Jagged rock outcroppings and crevices interspersed with many patches of old forest [growth] ran from the north end of Pha-thi (the area occupied by the Thai troops) to the north-northwest side of the 1786-meter crest. This restricted observation, avenues of approach, and fields of fire.

A gentler slope ran south-southeast from where the Thai troops were stationed to high point 1687. It was 2,000 meters long and from 200 to 300 meters wide, but had some sections that were from 400 to 500 meters wide. Many rock mounds and patches of sapling trees were scattered about this area, especially from north of the helicopter pad to the Thai troops' area. These were militarily advantageous for developing positions from which to hold and defend the area.

From the foot to about half way up the sides of Pha-thi Mountain, a mixture of rock and dirt covered all four sides. The slopes averaged from 45 to 60 degrees [sic], and were primarily covered with young trees and patches of bamboo. Local people cleared many areas to plant corn, rice, and opium. From about half way up to the summit, the sides were from 75 to 80-degree cliffs, and some were 85 to 90-degrees.

A freshwater spring flowed year-round on the eastern side near five earthen hills (location of intended occupation). This was the only source of water on the high ground in the area.

Peaks of over 1,000 meters surrounded Pha-thi. The terrain was very rough, and to get from one peak to another one had to cross many deep streams, which was very time-consuming. The majority of vegetation was grass used for thatch [Alang grass], was exposed to observation, and had been burned to clear for farming, especially in the areas to the west and northwest. The Nam-het River lay to the north and was from 3 to 5 meters deep and 30 to 40 meters wide. This made it very difficult to probe the area to conduct reconnaissance and set up an observation post to observe the central area on Pha-thi.

## 2. Enemy Situation

The central area on the mountain summit was a 2-kilometer-long plateau that was from 200 to 500 meters wide. Here, the enemy deployed:

A living area for Thai meteorological technicians that was guarded by two special platoons reinforced by heavy weapons.

The TACAN area, occupied by 20 American officers and technicians and guarded by two special squads.

The American communications center, that was guarded by one special platoon.

The Command post and a 105mm artillery position.

A helicopter-landing pad, an 85mm artillery position, and outer defensive positions east of Pha-thi Ridge.

Southern, perimeter defensive positions, with one special platoon occupying high point 1687.

An area of five earthen hilltops that lay next to the cliff on the northeastern side of high point 1687. This area lay on the ridges that ran down toward the east from the mountain, thereby forming the five earthen hills. The enemy took advantage of the high ground to control the area from afar and set up a strong defense using one battalion, BS-209 (this battalion had just been moved up from Na-khang), to strengthen the defense of the American TACAN site and hold Pha-thi.

North and northeast of Pha-thi. The enemy occupied blocking positions on Phu-hin-he and Phou-huoi-kha-moan Mountains with a force of roughly three companies.

East and southeast. The enemy occupied high point 1425 (2 km east of Pha-thi), Ban Pha-non [Village], and Ban Pha-thi [Village] with two companies (CV-261/BV26 and CS-2065).

South and south-southwest. The enemy occupied high point 1319 about a force of roughly three companies. Additionally, the enemy deployed two battalions, AC-15A and AC-14A, near Nhot-phat, Pha-mo, and Pha-hang (thirteen km south of Pha-thi).

West and northwest. Approximately two companies occupied and held the area of Ban Tham-nam<sup>3</sup> [Village], the Huoi-hoc airfield, and the Huoi-met High point.

The enemy's stratagem and methods of deploying a system of obstacles and minefields. Around the mountain, especially to the west and near the ladder on the eastern side, the enemy laid many fields of assorted mines (claymores, "elephant mines", and quick-fused grenades), along with barbed-wire fences, concertina-wire entanglements, and bangalore torpedoes.

They also deployed directional mines in each defensive area and electrically detonated B-90<sup>4</sup> rounds at locations they suspected we might use as avenues of approach.

At the TACAN site, they blasted away the rock to construct an open-air bunker in which they placed their technical equipment. They surrounded this with a thick iron wall protected by two rows of dirt-filled drums. The sleeping quarters and work building were both constructed of iron and were covered with camouflage netting to prevent detection by our aircraft. They strung concertina wire, laid directional mines, and set up trip-flares outside the iron wall.

### **Enemy Activities**

Around the Pha-thi base. The enemy increased the activities of the civilian defense forces, sending out patrols to scour the trails they suspected we might use for a sudden attack. They expanded pretending to hunt and fish, along with people clearing land and working as slash-and-burn farmers in the jungle to find our forces. They frequently fired their weapons at random, and at times, they fired their machine guns furiously as if they had just discovered us. They frequently fired artillery illumination rounds at night. They sent commando teams into the neighboring areas to monitor and reconnoiter our activities. (Before the day we attacked, the enemy launched several commando teams from CV-261 and BS-209 into the areas southeast and southwest of Pha-thi to search for us.) The enemy organized a network of informants in the hamlets and villages around their troop positions. When informants spotted signs of our activities, they would quickly report them and provide timely warnings.

The rocky mountain area. The enemy was less active in the immediate area of the mountain than they were in the surrounding area.. They assumed that because the sheer cliffs were so hard to climb, they could rely on the civilian defense forces, minefields, and obstacles, and it would be hard for us to mount a surprise attack. On the other hand, they continued to increase their vigilance and deploy new guard posts. (When the sappers began their attack, Phong's cell<sup>5</sup> unexpectedly came across a new guard post at the American communication center that was not there the day we reconnoitered the site.) The enemy frequently threw grenades down the western and northwestern sides of high point 1687 (where one of our troops tripped a mine and died when we reconnoitered the area in December 1966 [sic]). Their procedure for throwing hand grenades was to throw a flurry of grenades normally at intervals of about 45 minutes to 1 hour, sometimes lasting 2 hours, around 0600, 1800, and 2100 hours.

Movement between the base and the top of the mountain was almost entirely by helicopter, but sometimes they used the wooden ladder on the eastern side of the mountain. In particular, to

maintain secrecy, the Americans became strict about prohibiting the Meo soldiers from entering the TACAN site.

Relying on the tall mountain and inaccessible terrain, the enemy built Pha-thi into a fortified base that had special forces. They used it to conduct activities, commando operations, and to harass and encroach on the Laotian liberated zone. Therefore, they put forth a lot of effort to increase and strengthen their defenses by constructing fortifications and obstacles, and by setting up booby-trapped mines to defend against a surprise attack. At the same time, they expanded their occupied areas in the surrounding region. They established a dense civilian self-defense system that could detect us from a distance, in hopes they could make this a safe, impenetrable location. All told, approximately 15 special companies occupied the Pha-thi area..

Summary. Given the terrain features at Pha-thi, the deployment of [enemy] forces, troop strength and firepower, defensive fortifications, and the enemy's operational procedures, it was obvious that it would be difficult to use a large attack force and hard to develop firepower. However, if we used the small size of a sapper force and appropriate tactics, we could achieve victory and a higher level of combat effectiveness.

### **3. Friendly situation**

The force employed to attack the TACAN site consisted of one sapper team led by team leader Truong Muc [Trwong Muwcj]. The team included three officers, (one first lieutenant and two second lieutenants), fifteen non-commissioned officers, and fifteen soldiers. Twenty-one of these men joined the military in 1966. As for quality, 11 men were Party members, 20 were youth group members, and 2 were ordinary soldiers. The team included members of five different ethnic groups (six Meo, six Thai, three Nung, three Tay, and fifteen Vietnamese).

The team was equipped with three B-40s,<sup>6</sup> twenty-three AKs,<sup>7</sup> four carbines,<sup>8</sup> and two K54s.<sup>9</sup>

As for technical and combat qualifications, the team underwent nine months of training in sapper reconnaissance. They concentrated primarily on techniques for attacking rocky mountain peaks, climbing the faces of rock cliffs, maintaining secrecy while operating in the jungle for long periods, and physical training to increase strength and stamina and the ability to endure hardships. The team conducted two practical exercises operating as an independent sapper element. However, the team had not yet conducted a combined exercise with infantry and artillery. Upon review, higher authorities concluded that the

team could accomplish the mission if it had time to prepare, and if it prepared thoroughly.

#### **4. Situation of the [Local] Populace**

The majority of the people in this temporarily enemy controlled region were ethnic Meo and were dispersed on the high mountain peaks surrounding Pha-thi. A number of ethnic Lao villages were along both sides of the Nam-het River and were scattered along the Huoi-pha-nou, Huoi-hia, Huoi-san, Huoi-sop-ca, Huoi-lon, Nam-sut Streams. These people primarily engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture, land clearing, and lived partially from American aid. Additionally, some Lao clans, such as the Lao Lum, Lao Cang, etc., were swept up by the enemy in Noong-khang, Muong-xang, and Muong-et and were moved into villages styled as "Unity Villages." Because they were under enemy control and were subjected to distortions of policy, because of the Pathet Lao's policy, and because of the deepening conflicts between ethnic minorities, the people did not realize [the true situation]. Therefore, a large number of ethnic Meo strongly opposed the revolution. Consequently, the entire area temporarily under enemy control was a "white" region; we had no infrastructure. This was where the enemy planned to build a test bed for their "unconventional warfare" in Laos by applying military pressure, "winning over the people" and providing economic aid, and political and moral poisoning that caused the people not to understand or to understand very little about the revolution.

Our force's base of operations was in the vicinity of Muong-cau and Huoi-muoi, in Muong-son District, a Pathet Lao-liberated zone about 40 kilometers northwest of Pha-thi. The majority of the population was ethnic Meo who had a profound hatred of the enemy and zealously helped our troops and participated in guerrilla attacks against the enemy. (In December 1996 [sic],<sup>10</sup> the Pathet Lao Central awarded Tai-xeng and Huoi-muoi Villages the second class medal for achievement during the war of resistance.) Tai-xeng, Muong-cau, and Huoi-muoi Villages were all led by [Communist] Party chapters, had People's Committees and advisory cells with our specialists, and had a stable economic life. The civil self-defense and village guerrilla forces were somewhat proficient in ambush attacks, mines, and booby-traps, but they had no experience in deep penetration into the regions closely bordering the enemy. Therefore, guiding our troops into Pha-thi was difficult, and volunteer troops had to bear full responsibility for scouting and reconnaissance.

## **II. COMBAT MISSION AND OBJECTIVES**

### **1. Mission**

Because of the military and political importance of the Pha-thi area, we advocated and intended to liberate the Pha-thi area for a long time. In 1966, in addition to sending a reconnaissance element to prepare the Pha-thi battlefield, Military Region paid particular attention to developing and training a sapper team that would become highly proficient in attacking targets on rocky mountain tops, and would simultaneously be totally prepared and be ready to move out on a mission.

In December 1967, to coordinate with the main battlefield to eliminate an important part of the enemy's strength and liberate the Nam-bac region, Military Region launched one sapper team to prepare the Pha-thi battlefield. When preparations were complete, the team would join the infantry and conduct a surprise attack, eliminate the enemy, and occupy and liberate the entire Pha-thi area. The sapper team, commanded by team leader Truong Muc, was given the TACAN site on the summit of the mountain as the primary target.

## **2. Combat Resolve**

### **a) Combat intentions**

Method of attack. Organize the force so it could conduct multi-directional and multi-prong attacks. It could secretly probe, approach the enemy, launch a surprise attack, and destroy assigned targets.

Employment of Forces. The team consisted of 31 sappers from Military Region and was reinforced by one 9-man sapper squad from an infantry battalion. The entire team was lightly equipped (B-40s, AKs, carbines, hand grenades, and satchel charges), and was divided into two assault elements and one reserve element.

Assault Element 1: Focus on attacking the TACAN, the American communication center, and the helicopter-landing pad.

Assault Element 2: Attack the Thai troops' area.

Reserve element.

Assault Element 1: Commanded by First Lieutenant Truong Muc, it consisted of five cells.

Cell 1: (This cell was responsible for firing the opening round.) This cell had three members and was led by squad leader and Party member Phong [Phong]. It was armed with one B-40, one AK, one carbine, nineteen hand grenades, and several satchel charges. Cell 1's mission was to destroy and seize the American

communications center and then defend in-place and wait for the infantry to arrive and take over. ([Truong] Muc accompanied this cell.)

*Cell 2:* This cell had three members. It was commanded by Party chapter committee member Truong Xuan [Trwongf Xuaan]. This cell was armed with three AKs, 21 hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 2's mission was to coordinate with Cell 1 to destroy the enemy troops at the American communications center and then move to the east of the helicopter-landing pad and coordinate with Cell 4 to attack the helicopter-landing pad.

*Cell 3:* This cell had five members and was commanded by squad leader and Party member Tieng [Tieeng]. (This cell included Tap [Taapj], the team's political officer.) The cell was armed with one B-40, two AKs, one carbine, one K54, twenty-six hand grenades, satchel charges, and two, two-kilogram demolition charges. Cell 3's mission was to attack and seize the TACAN site and kill all the Americans at the site. After seizing the site, the cell was to find good terrain from which to defend and wait for infantry replacements to arrive.

*Cell 4:* This cell had four members and Le Ba Chom [Lee Bas Chomf] was the cell leader. It was armed with four AKs, twenty-eight hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 4's mission was to destroy an enemy element at the west end of the helicopter-landing pad and then move east of the pad and be ready to fight an enemy counterattack in the area of the communications center and the TACAN.

*Cell 5:* This cell had three members and Party member Thanh Xuan [Thanh Xuaan] was the cell leader. It was armed with two AKs, one carbine, eighteen hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 5's mission was to be the reserve cell for Assault Element 1 and was to reinforce any cell that encountered difficulties. If the attacks of all the cells went well, [Cell 5] was to choose suitable terrain near the American communications center and be ready to fight an enemy counterattack coming from helicopter pad.

*Assault Element 2:* Commanded by Second Lieutenant Nguyen Viet Hung [Nguyeenx Viuet] Hwng].

It was reinforced by one 71-B radio and was divided into four cells.

*Cell 1* had t three members. The assistant team leader and Party chapter committee member, Huong [Hwong], was the cell leader. The cell was armed with one B-40, one AK, one K54, twelve hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 1's mission was

to attack and seize the meteorological station and the 12.7mm gun emplacement.

Cell 2 had three members. Squad leader-Party member Chi [Chis] was the cell leader. The cell was armed with three AKs, twenty-one hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 2's mission was to wipe out the squad that was on guard southwest of the meteorological station.

Cell 3 had two members. Lieu [Lieur] was the cell leader. The cell was armed with two AKs, fourteen hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 3's mission was to wipe out the Thai officers and technicians in the two tents.

Cell 4 had four members. Assistant squad leader Linh [Linhx] was the cell leader. The cell was armed with four AKs, twenty-eight hand grenades, and satchel charges. Cell 4's mission was to wipe out the enemy platoon that was on guard southeast of the meteorological station.

After wiping out the Thai troops, the entire Assault Element 2 was to organize a defense in-place.

The Reserve Element was the responsibility of the infantry battalion's sapper squad. It was armed with seven AKs, one B-40, one carbine, fifty-seven hand grenades, and satchel charges. This element's mission was to act as the reserve for the entire team, supporting primarily Assault Element 1 and cells that encountered difficulties.

## **b) Support and Coordination**

Development of the plan. On 2 December 1967, Military Region gave the team its mission.

On 7 December 1967, the operation moved to the base and briefed the [Party] executive committee, Party chapter, and team on the intentions, missions, objectives, and significance of this battle. The mission to attack the American TACAN site was the heaviest responsibility as well as the highest honor. Everyone from cadre to soldier displayed high resolve and determination to accomplish the mission.

The preparation of the battlefield can be divided into two phases.

Phase 1. On 18 December 1967, one eight-man sapper cell, commanded by the team leader and assistant team leader, reconnoitered Pha-thi. The cell conducted terrain reconnaissance, reconnoitered the enemy situation, searched for a

concealed route of movement, confirmed the enemy command post was in the Pha-thi area (not in the area of the airstrip at Tham-nam), scouted the enemy's defense system around the mountain and scouted their normal activities.

Phase 2. On 22 January 1968, a reconnaissance cell of six cadres divided into two cells and resolved to do whatever it took to climb to the summit of the mountain and probe the TACAN site. Political Officer Tap's cell crawled up next to the TACAN site, the communications site, and the helicopter-landing pad, and confirmed the locations of the enemy living area and the deployment of his defenses. Assistant team leader Huong's cell probed the Thai troops' area, reconnoitered four buildings, the medium [machine gun], 12.7mm machine gun, mortar emplacements, and the meteorological station, as well as their defense and our infiltration route.

### **c) Advance Planning for Contingencies**

[The team had to] strive to avoid the enemy and civilians while advancing to the objective. In the event [the team] was forced to open fire or if it encountered obstacles along the route, the team was to dispatch a small element to engage in combat and resolve the situation while the main body of the force quickly advanced to the objective according to plan. If the assault elements were discovered after they reached the mountain peak, then:

Assault Element 1. Cell 1, Assault Element 1 was to immediately attack the TACAN site. Cells 2 and 3, Assault Element 1 were to immediately attack the communication site. Cell 4, Assault Element 1 was to attack the helicopter-landing pad, and Cell 5, Assault Element 1 was to reinforce Cell 1 of Assault Element 1 and finish off the TACAN site.

Assault Element 2. Cell 1, Assault Element 2 was to go first and immediately attack the bandit squad defending to the southwest and seize favorable high terrain to support the fighting. Cells 2 and 3, Assault Element 2 were to quickly attack and seize the meteorological station and, at the same time, take care of the two tents. Cell 4, Assault Element 2 was to wipe out the enemy according to plan.

If one assault element were successful and the other had problems, the element that was successful was to quickly assist the assault element that was in trouble after it completed its own mission.

If both assault elements were to have trouble, Assault Element 2 would leave a small element behind to pin down the

enemy while the remainder of the force would move to Assault Element 1 and would first help attack the TACAN. After that, it would continue to attack the Thai troops' area.

If the enemy blocked both assault elements while they were mid-way up the mountain and they could not ascend any further, the elements would circle up to the northwest and would try everything possible to attack the TACAN site.

#### **d) Other Support Matters**

Material support. Each man had to ensure he had provisions for 15 days (8 days of glutinous rice-flour cakes, 4 days of baih chäng,<sup>11</sup> 2 days of roasted rice, and 1 day of rice cakes), 400 grams of explosives, 6 hand grenades, 200 rounds of ammunition for each AK, and 6 rounds for each B-40. Additionally, each man had to have one-hundred grams of salt, one can of condensed milk, two water canteens, one three-meter length of nylon, one canvas jungle hammock, medicine, cotton, personal bandages, mosquito repellent, two pairs of shoe laces, needle and thread, etc. This was about 35 items, including weapons, equipment, and personal items, and weighed from 42 to 45 kilograms.

Support for casualties. Lightly wounded men will bandage themselves and continue to fight. Those seriously wounded will receive immediate emergency treatment from the medic, and depending on the situation, will be evacuated to the rear. Dead soldiers will be concealed both temporarily and carefully on-location and left for later resolution. Determined efforts will be made not to let wounded or deceased men become missing.

Operational Security. The route and activities will be kept secret before the operation commences. Diversionary tactics will be used to disguise the direction of movement and tracks on the route of movement will be erased.

S. pho- Policies regarding captured material, prisoners and those who surrender, and civilian proselytizing, especially in the assembly area and the region temporarily controlled by the enemy, will be properly executed.

Organize training improvements to insure victory. The unit organized democratic discussions on combat methods, coordination between individual cells and assault elements, supplemental contingency plans, getting troops to the vicinity of the mountain, and focal points of training, which included techniques for climbing sheer rock cliffs and coordination. Meanwhile, to insure security, the unit conducted a two-day movement to a different location to carry out preparations, test-fire the B-40s, throw hand grenades, and inspect explosives. The unit also

spread the word that it was going to attack Tong-kho, and made a diversionary move in the direction of Muong-son to deceive enemy surveillance.

All preparations were completed before February 28, 1968. On March 1, the team moved to its temporary holding position. The attack was scheduled to begin sometime from 0400 to 0500 on March 10 or from 0300 or 0400 to 0500 on March 11.

### **III. SEQUENCE OF FIGHTING**

#### **1. Sequence of Events**

##### **a. Movement to the Objective**

At 1800 on March 1, the team departed its base at Muong-cau and moved for two days and four nights to its assembly point.

On March 7, the Party Committee held its final meeting to confirm the resolution. It agreed that the attack would begin between 0400 and 0500 on the morning of March 11.

At 1700 on March 7, 1968, the team split into two assault elements and advanced to the base of the mountain.

*Assault Element 1.* At 2000 on March 7, the element stopped to rest about one kilometer from the position at Tham-nam and waited for the moon to go down before moving in close. At 2330, it continued to move in close, but 100 meters from the Tham-nam position the team encountered two grazing horses. Seeing the enemy turn on many flashlights, the team withdrew 100 meters and sent a cell forward to observe.

By 0230 on March 8, the team passed the enemy position and advanced into an old growth forest. At 1000, the team encountered an enemy minefield and halted.

All day on March 9 the team rested next to the minefield, while it sent one cell to reconnoiter ahead and confirm the route and direction of movement to the TACAN.

At 1000 on March 10, the entire team advanced to within 50 meters of the mountain peak and stopped to rest in a small cave. At 1600, the entire unit confirmed the resolution the last time: regardless of what happened, the unit had to seize the TACAN. Then the unit ate, drank, and rested.

At 1800, a cell advanced to the mountain, laid mines and short-fuse grenades, and confirmed their exact approach.

At 2030, the entire unit scaled the cliff.

At 2130, they arrived at the top of the mountain, passed within only 30 meters of an enemy guard post, entered the mature forest (100 meters northeast of the TACAN) and stopped there, reconnoitered and listened intently for sounds of enemy movement.

**b) Deployment to the attack formation.** At 0100 hours on March 11, the cells followed the plan and moved close to their assigned targets.

At 0300, the cell that was to attack the TACAN halted 30 meters from its target and the cell leader ordered the B-40 gunner to take aim at the target and be ready to fire. Cells 1 and 2, Assault Element 1, who were to attack the American communication center, moved to within 150 meters of their target, with Cell 5 following behind. The assault element leader ordered Cell 4, Assault Element 1 to attack directly east of the helicopter-landing pad rather than to the west as previously planned, because he observed that there were more buildings and higher terrain to the east of the landing pad.

While moving up to the peak, Assault Element 2 became lost on the face of the cliff 30 meters from the enemy and could not climb any further. Therefore, they were unable to open fire.

**c) Sequence of the fighting**

At 0345 on March 11, 1968, while moving about 30 meters from the American communications center, Cell 1 of Assault Element 1 unexpectedly encountered a concealed enemy guard post. The [enemy] soldier did not open fire in time, and Phong quickly jumped up and stole his weapon. However, he [the enemy soldier] had time to throw a hand grenade to the rear of Cell 1, but no one was hit. Phong immediately threw a hand grenade into the guard post and the enemy soldier fled. Phong immediately sent the B-40 gunner up to fire directly into the building that had many antennas. After only 15 minutes, Cells 1 and 2, Assault Element 1 had attacked and occupied the American communication center, killing one officer and wounding several others.

Cell 3, Assault Element 1 attacked the TACAN. After Cell 1's B-40 fired, gunner Thanh [Thanhf] immediately fired a B-40 round into the TACAN site. The round hit an electrical generator that burst into brilliant flames. Tieng threw a hand grenade toward the American living quarters. It hit the camouflage netting on the roof of the building and bounced back, wounding him lightly. After that, gunner Thanh immediately fired two B-40 rounds into the radar command center. At the same time, the entire cell opened fire with their AKs and assaulted. The

Americans were taken by surprise, and ran outside and scattered. Only a few stubborn ones resisted.

At 0415, Cell 5, Assault Element 1 (the reserve cell), reinforced by one B-40, arrived to assist Cell 3, Assault Element 1 on orders of the assault element leader.

At 0425, the assault element leader and one cell member who joined the fighting reinforced the cell. They completed the mission.

At 0430, after killing all remaining stubborn enemy resistance, the team seized the TACAN (after 45 minutes of heroic fighting).

Cell 4, Assault Element 1 (the cell attacking the helicopter-landing pad). When other cells opened fire, attacked, and occupied the communications site and the TACAN, Cell 4 also quickly attacked the enemy buildings east of the helicopter-landing pad. However, they were blocked by an enemy mortar that wounded one cell member and split the cell into two parts, placing the cell leader in front and the three cell members in the rear. Faced with a difficult situation, cell leader Le Ba Chom heroically assaulted the enemy defenses single-handedly, throwing hand grenades while firing his assault rifle, and killing five men and wounding several others. Fighting continued until nearly daybreak, when the enemy discovered that our force was very small. They tried to capture cell leader Chom alive. However, he cleverly took advantage of the rock outcroppings by firing and feigning, and he escaped encirclement by two enemy platoons and made his way back to make contact with the cell that attacked the TACAN.

### **Dealing with the enemy counterattack**

At the communication center. At 0415, after Cell 5, Assault Element 1 went to assist Cell 3, only Cells 1 and 2, Assault Element 1, remained to defend this location.

At 0600, the enemy began to conduct air strikes around and fire mortars into the communication center. This was followed by an enemy infantry counterattack that was aimed at seizing this site. Although the enemy fired very many different types of munitions and yelled as they assaulted, Cell 2, Assault Element 1, fought doggedly, killing four enemy troops with the first burst of fire and they retreated.

At 0615, the enemy again fired mortars and counterattacked a second time. This time, Cells 1 and 2, Assault Element 1 allowed them to come in very close to their defensive positions and

recover the bodies of their dead before opening fire and killing several more. Squad leader and Party member, Trinh Xuan Phong [Trinh] Xuaan Phong] fought very courageously. He was wounded twice, but continued to command and incite his men to destroy the enemy. When hit by strong enemy attacks and while the enemy was organizing an assault, Phong, although wounded, still shouted, "Hold your positions until the end." Together with his comrades, he beat back many enemy counterattacks. Phong continued to calmly encourage the two cells of Assault Element 1 to keep up a dogged defense right up to the time he died. This resulted in our holding the communication site until the entire Pha-thi area was liberated.

At 0625, when the enemy had been attacked and had not been able to take back the communications center, Cell 2 of Assault Element 1 received orders to assist in the fighting at the TACAN site.

At the TACAN site. At 0450, after losing the TACAN, the enemy ran out and hid in the rock crevices, taking advantage of the darkness of the night. Then, because we had a small force, they used rapid-fire assault rifles<sup>12</sup> and hand grenades and organized a counterattack to try to retake the TACAN. We quickly returned fire. The fighting was violent. Assault team leader Muc killed many men with a rapid-fire assault rifle he took from the enemy. Cell 5 of Assault Element 1, commanded by cell leader Thanh Xuan, fought very valiantly and eliminated many other enemy troops at this location.

By 0635, Cell 2 of Assault Element 1 had arrived as reinforcements, and together with the cell that attacked the TACAN and Cell 5, Assault Element 1, they killed nearly all the enemy who still survived, broke up the enemy attacks, and were in firm control of the TACAN site.

Organizing the defense of the TACAN site. After defeating the enemy attacks, we occupied favorable terrain and organized a defense in place. The enemy knew the TACAN was lost, so from 0600 until 1700, they sent jets and T-28 aircraft to strafe and drop cluster bombs and high explosive bombs in and around the TACAN site. At 0900, one helicopter dropped a line down near the TACAN site and rescued three wounded enemy troops. Because we were pinned down on the mountain, we fired on it but could not hit it..

All day on March 11, our men hid our wounded and dead in the rock crevices and avoided enemy bombs and aerial attacks, while defending the TACAN site. On the 12th and 13th, we still defended the TACAN and on the 14th, the entire unit withdrew to the assembly point.

## **2. Results**

We killed 42 men and wounded several [others], primarily Lao and Thai soldiers.

The enemy fled and abandoned the base on the mountain along with a large quantity of weapons, including one 105mm artillery piece, one 85mm artillery piece, two 106.7mm mortars,<sup>13</sup> two 81mm mortars, four DKZ 57mm recoilless rifles, six 61mm mortars, and nine heavy machine guns and a lot of military equipment, military goods, and provisions. (Later, our infantry went up and took control of everything.)

One of our troops was killed and two were lightly wounded.<sup>14</sup>

While the sappers were moving in close to the mountain, our infantry closed in and surrounded the enemy to the east. Before the sappers initiated their attack, our artillery fired on the enemy base on top of the mountain.

## **3. Significance of this battle**

The raid by the sapper team that seized the TACAN was successful and made a noteworthy contribution to the overall victory of the campaign. It broke up one of two large hideouts of Meo special forces in northern Laos, destroyed a control center for American aircraft attacking the northern region of our country, and dealt a heavy blow to the second strategic force in the enemy's "unconventional war" in Laos. It later destroyed enemy mobile regular forces in the Nam-bac region. The attack that seized the TACAN destroyed and dissolved an important part of their fighting strength, liberated the Pha-thi region, and expanded the Lao revolutionary base, which was becoming stronger day by day.

## **IV. STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND LESSONS LEARNED**

### **1. Strong points**

The Party Committee, Party chapter, cadre, and soldiers had a profound grasp of the circumstances of the mission and the tactical guidance of the Military Region. The unit was instilled with high and resolute morale, and motivated to overcome difficulties and hardships, [to act with] doggedness and courage, [to display] positive and creative thinking, [to maintain] secrecy and surprise, and to fight deep in the enemy's bosom (displaying in the two times [members of] the unit went to

prepare the battlefield, and in the fighting at the TACAN site and the communications site).

- The reconnaissance and preparation of the battlefield employed the concept of "see with your own eyes, hear with your own ears," by infiltrating right into the location of the assigned mission. The choice of direction [of attack] and the force employed were appropriate. Rear services operations were meticulous and thoughtful. Many contingencies were anticipated and handled correctly.

- Secrecy was maintained (intentions, mission, target of the attack, route of movement, deception was carried out, tracks were erased in the enemy's rear area). This is one of the important factors for success in battle, especially in circumstances such as those on the Laos battlefield.

- The cadre and soldiers' style of fighting was very bold, courageous, and resourceful; and their technical and tactical skills were good (all 11 B.40 rounds struck their target). Leadership had a deep understanding of, and was in very close touch with the men and mission, set an example for quick thinking, handled contingencies in a timely manner, carried out the attack quickly and resolved it quickly, organized a dogged defense, and held their positions firmly until the entire Pha-thi region was liberated.

## **2. Weak points.**

- Failed to create conditions that would allow posting of observation posts to observe and keep track of the enemy continuously until the unit had moved into position to attack; therefore, the unit had to reconnoiter the enemy en route as it moved, particularly when it approached the base of the mountain, near the enemy base.

Assault Element 2 became lost en route to the cliff. Therefore, when the other assault element and cells opened fire, Assault Element 2 was not able to scale the cliff even though it was only 30 meters from the enemy. This effected the fighting strength of the entire unit and prevented it from destroying the Thai troops' position. Assault Element 2 stayed in-place and did not actively look for a way up to join Assault Element 1 in the fighting and defense for the entire day of March 11.

While moving up the cliff, one soldier dropped AK magazines and the assistant B-40 gunner accidentally left rounds behind. When a hand grenade was thrown into the enemy's camouflage netting, it bounced back and wounded one of our troops. When the cell that attacked the helicopter-landing pad was blocked by

enemy mortar fire, it did not adapt and it lacked the determination to assault and destroy the enemy. It also was careless in taking care of one lightly wounded comrade.

### 3. Lessons learned

a) On the Northern Laos battlefield, we can use sapper forces to fight independently and assume responsibility for a target, or they can fight jointly as part of a combined arms force.

Based on the sapper team's attack on the TACAN, we can conclude that sapper forces can be used not only independently and separately against a single target or single sector in a campaign, but also that sapper forces can very effectively join infantry, artillery, and other branches to accomplish missions (assuming there is specific tasking and coordination of targets, missions, and scope of responsibility for each branch). In this battle, the sappers were responsible for attacking the command post of the communications center, etc.

The use of a sapper force of between 30 and 45 men for a single engagement is sufficient to finish off a target. All of the engagements the Military Region sapper forces fought for two years were organized for, and employed this size force.

b) The sapper troops not only can attack according to their own methods, but can also organize a dogged defense for a fixed period.

Sapper forces drained more American strength in this battle than in any other sapper attack on the Northern Laos battlefield before April 1968. After the target was taken care of, [the troops] had to go on the defensive for some time in complicated terrain. The enemy quickly reacted with artillery and air strikes, but the unit still kept a firm hold on the target for which it was responsible. This also resolved the question of sapper troops being hesitant to engage in violent defensive combat, fighting during daylight hours, and fighting continuously for several days. This strengthened the entire team's confidence that it could accomplish later combat missions.

c) The cadres' style of combat leadership must be flawless, reflect a deep understanding of, and be close to the men and the mission. The entire team's actions in combat must be courageous, resourceful, and agile.

Because sappers' combat tactics are to attack with precision, attack where the enemy is vulnerable, and attack important targets, the sapper team cadres' style of combat