I phoned and spoke directly with Comrade Kim Tuan, then commander of the 320th Division. Before the attack on Ban Me Thuot, I had several times asked about Route 7 and was informed that this route had long been abandoned by enemy troops with bridges left un-repaired and no ferryboats. Two days earlier, I had asked Comrade Kim Tuan about this route and had received the same answer. Now, upon learning that the enemy was retreating along Route 7 and that our unit did not yet have any concrete information about this route and had not yet begun to closely pursue the enemy, I severely criticized the top unit leader. I emphatically told Comrade Kim Tuan: "This is a shortcoming, a reproachable mistake. At this time, the slightest hesitation, mistake, fear of hardship or delay would mean failure. If the enemy escapes, you will be responsible."

In such moments, I do not expect any excuses from my subordinates which might lead them to make less effort. I want them to carry out their tasks in the strictest and most complete manner.

Having been in many battles and campaigns with my subordinates and having encountered the most complex and urgent circumstances, I, as a commander, make strict demands on my subordinates, and they understand me well. Therefore, after my orders had been given, they resolutely carried them out and usually achieved success.

Holding the phone receiver, I recalled scenes of disorderly retreats of the enemy during both the anti-French and anti-U.S. wars—such as those of (Le Pave) and (Charton) on Route 4 during the campaign to liberate the border areas, of the U.S. Marine brigade from Khe Sanh in 1968, of the 1st Division and Ranger and other brigades of the puppets on Route 9 in southern Laos in 1971, and of the 3rd puppet from Quang Tri in 1972. The enemy had many times fled in the face of our offensive strength and usually applied different deceptive maneuvers to insure his retreat. But now a whole regular corps of the puppets was hastily fleeing in retreat, abandoning the Central Highlands—a strategically important region.

Why such a retreat? And who had given the order for it? Was it true that the thunderous blow we had dealt at Ban Me Thuot had had such a shattering impact on the enemy? It was true that our well-placed blow had begun to have its effects only a few days after its delivery. It was true that the enemy had been stunned and been rendered strategically confused. The enemy had again made another grave strategic mistake. The order for the retreat of the II Corps must have been given by the central puppet administration in Saigon. Thus, the situation had developed beyond the scope of our campaign and had become a strategic matter. For the first time in the Indochinese war a modernly equipped enemy corps had to abandon an important strategic area and flee during the course of a campaign. This situation would lead to many other important events and might even lead to a quick end to the war with objectives as the victor. The enemy could not easily smooth out this problem which would trigger both military and political reactions and would affect even the United States, even the United States would not be able to settle this complex problem.

Now a great opportunity had presented itself to us. To firmly grasp this opportunity we must first of all annihilate the retreating enemy forces right on the Central Highlands battlefield and prevent them from escaping to the lowlands. They must be quickly and neatly destroyed to further accelerate changes in the war situation.
Recalling past events and reflecting on current developments, I felt both joy and anxiety. Throughout the night of 16 March we supervised and encouraged the 320th Division to conduct urgent operations, while ordering the Central Highlands command to mobilize more armored cars, trucks, artillery and supplies to help the 320th Division pursue and destroy the enemy. At the same time, we ordered the 5th Military Region forward command in Binh Dinh to mobilize the regional forces of Phu Yen to block Route 7 and prevent the enemy from escaping to Tuy Hoa; cabled the 968th Division, ordering it to march quickly into Pleiku and overrun all enemy positions while in pursuit of the fleeing enemy formations and to attack them from behind; and cabled the 559 Command to send the 470th Engineer Battalion to occupy Kontum and Pleiku, put out fires, guide the people to safe areas and take over all the equipment and storage facilities left behind by the enemy.

From the time these orders were given to the time they were carried out by the various units, especially the order to pursue and destroy the fleeing enemy, we anxiously awaited field reports and it seemed that the time went by all too slowly.

In fact, immediately after receiving the order, the 320th Division urgently conducted operations during the night of 16 March and on the morning of 17 March a unit quickly crossed the jungles to cut Route 7 and stop the enemy east of Phu Bon. Enemy forces were stopped both east and west of Phu Bon. On 18 March our main force caught up with the fleeing enemy, liberated Phu Bon city, destroyed the enemy forces kept at bay there and continued sweeping toward Gung Son. Meanwhile, two divisions of regional troops from Phu Yen destroyed Son Hoa bridge and joined the 320th Division in liberating Gung Son. The enemy forces became panic-stricken and they disintegrated. Six ranger multibattalion units, three armored regiments, various organs of II Corps and many tanks, artillery pieces, engineering vehicles and trucks were subjected to virtual destruction.

Part IX Continued

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[Part IX: "The Turning Point in the War"]

[Text] Puppet Col Pham Duy Tat, commander of the Ranger force in the 2d Military Region, made the following declaration to us about the puppet units withdrawing from the Central Highlands:

On the afternoon of 16 March, while I was going to various units to examine the defense situation in Pleiku, I received a call from the military region headquarters telling me to attend a meeting at the office of Pham Van Phu, commander of the 2d Corps. Phu said he had just come back from a meeting in Pleiku with Nguyen Van Thi, Tran Thien Khiem, Cao Van Vien and Dang Van Quang. Here is Phu's account of the meeting.

Thieu asked Vien: Do we still have reserve forces to reinforce the 2d Corps? Vien replied: No.

Thieu then turned to Phu, asking: If there are no reinforcement troops, how long will you be able to defend the area? Phu answered: I can defend for a month if I get maximum air support, sufficient air and some material, weapons, ammunition and reinforcement troops so as to compensate for our recent heavy losses. I will stay in Pleiku to fight and I will die there.
Thieu said: These conditions cannot be met, and the PLAF is conducting violent attacks. Therefore, we must withdraw from Kontum and Pleiku so as to preserve our forces and use our troops to defend the Delta and the coastal area. There, we will have more convenient access to supplies.

Thieu then asked: Could Route 19 be used [for our withdrawal]? Vien answered: In the history of the Indochina war, no forces have been able to withdraw along Route 19 without being badly mauled by the revolutionary forces.

Thieu again asked: How about Route 14? Vien answered: Withdrawal is all the more impossible along Route 14.

All those attending the meeting then realized that the only choice left was Route 7, which had not been used for a long time and was in bad condition, but it could provide an element of surprise. Brig General Tran Van Cam asked: How about the province chiefs, the regional forces and the local people? Shall we also organize their withdrawal?

Phu replied: According to Mr Thieu's order, the regional forces should be left behind, and no information about the withdrawal should be given to the province chiefs. Let them continue to defend. Let us complete our withdrawal, and let them continue to defend. Let us complete our withdrawal and let them find out about it later. The regional forces here consist only of Highlanders. Let them return to the highlands.

After completing his explanation, Phu ordered Cam and Ly, chief of staff of the 2d Corps, to work out a withdrawal plan.

On the morning of 15 March, Phu and the major staff of the 2d Corps withdrew to Nha Trang by plane, on the grounds that they would establish a forward command to direct the attacks to recapture Ban Me Thuot. Thus, Phu did not defend Pleiku to his death as he had promised. Troops of technical units withdrew to Phu Bon, taking along their families. This caused the people to clearly realize the puppet administration's intention to leave Pleiku. Puppet officers and troops were then terrified, and their families moved to the airfield in large numbers and vied with one another to get a place on the plane, thus creating a chaotic situation. Those who did get to the airfield used every kind of vehicle to flee to Phu Bon. Traffic congested as everyone wanted to be first to go. People insulted and even fought each other, thus causing more disorderly scenes on the road.

Meanwhile, the 22d Ranger Multibattalion Unit also withdrew from Kontum.

When the puppet 25th Multibattalion Unit arrived at Thanh An, it was overtaken by the PLAF, which launched fierce raids and inflicted heavy losses to it.

According to the plan, the 2d Corps command and combat units had to establish a defense line at Phu Bon and wait for heavy mechanized units and technical units to arrive there. When these units arrived at Phu Bon on 16 March, they were too tired and had difficulty in maintaining the situation. Therefore, they stopped and refused to move further. The troops and vehicles of these units were not only in the city, but also on the roads, creating heavy traffic. Traffic in the city was congested because puppet troops and vehicles moved in large numbers. These troops then destroyed property and looted the streets, thus causing great disorder.
On 16 April, the PLAF began attacking a unit of the 23rd Ranger battalion in (Ban Bleik) Pass, inflicting heavy losses on it. On 17 April, the liberation troops again shelled the enemy command in Phu Bon city, causing significant losses to the 23rd Ranger Multibattalion. At that time, the units of the regional force at Phu Bon were disbanded and deserted and fled, thus rendering the situation in the city more confused. The PLAP again launched attacks and seized a section of the road between the eastern part of Phu Bon city and Tu Na Pass, causing the rapid collapse of the enemy's defense of Phu Bon.

The 7th Multibattalion Unit on 17 March called for air support. A formation of A-37 aircraft came to drop bombs but hit the unit's troops. Almost a full battalion was annihilated. On the morning of 18 March the unit was attacked once again by the liberation troops. It sustained serious losses. Only a few troops succeeded in escaping. The liberation troops advanced and occupied Phu Bon.

Phu ordered us to abandon all heavy weapons and war materiel to flee from Phu Bon. I ordered the troops to abandon all vehicles and artillery pieces and to walk around the woods, skipping the pass. The 3rd armored squadron also abandoned all its vehicles and ran into the woods after being intercepted on many occasions by the liberation troops. On the section of road from the Tu Na mountain pass to Son Hoa district, the remnants of the troops had to hide themselves in the woods. Officers and soldiers brought their families with them. Hundreds and thousands of people followed them, thus revealing their whereabouts. The liberation troops constantly pursued and attacked them. Consequently great numbers of us were scattered and lost. The troops, tired and without commanding officers, abandoned all their weapons and equipment during their flight. The soldiers at Phu Tuo and regional posts surrendered or left their ranks and their posts and were seized by the liberation troops.

The 6th Ranger Multibattalion Unit was the rear guard column which had the responsibility of guarding the remnants of the other units back to Son Hoa. On the morning of 20 March the liberation troops began their surprise attack against the first detachment of the 6th Ranger Multibattalion Unit, causing fairly heavy losses. During the following days, the unit took flight but was still pursued and attacked. Only a small number of troops were able to run back to Tuy Hoa. The liberation troops' rapid deployment to the eastern part of Phu Bon township to check the road to the Tu Na mountain pass decided the failure of the Saigon troops' withdrawal from the Central Highlands.

Thus, it was obvious that the Ban Me Thout battle was truly redoubtable and powerful. Next, the battle which annihilated the reinforcement troops in the eastern part of Ban Me Thout was truly quick and neat.

All of this caused panic and confusion among the enemy, not only at the divisional and military zone level, but also up to the enemy leading organ—the Saigon puppet administration. After their errors in tactics and campaign, and after sustaining severe blows by our hands, the enemy committed an error in strategy: Panicked, the Saigon administration ordered all its troops to pull back from the Central Highlands to the lowland, with a view to maintaining its forces and safeguarding territory. However, the enemy could neither pull its forces back to the lowland nor safeguard its territory. We annihilated them as they fled.

Once an error in strategy was committed, defeat in the war was certain; it would come sooner or later. The only thing is that it was we who led the enemy to commit this error, stepped up that process by the enemy, and created that turning point in the war. By becoming faster, bolder, more decisive, and more active, and by rushing forward on the impetus of victories, we were certain to win the war.
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