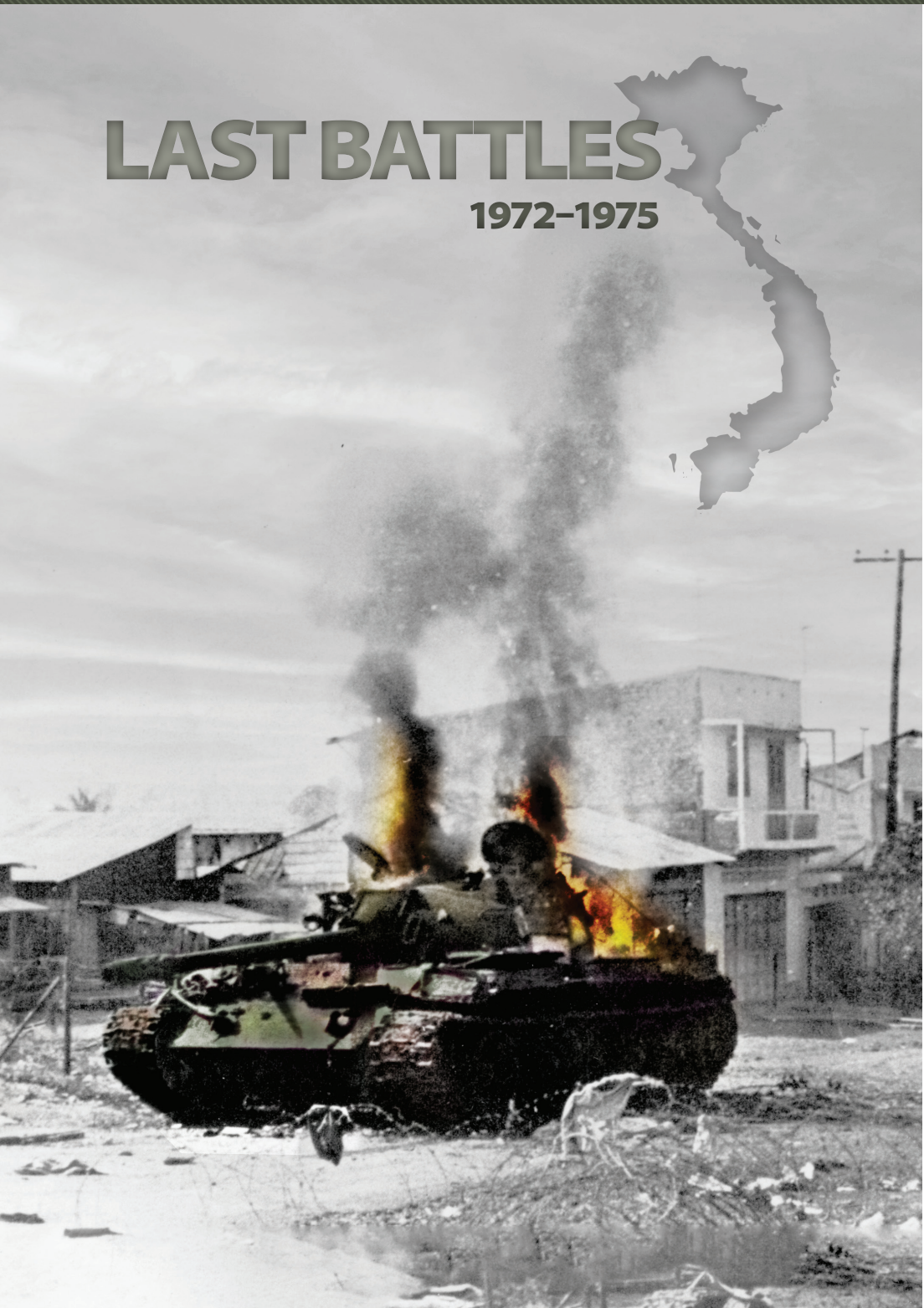
LAST BATTLES

1972–1975



Cover: A North Vietnamese T-54 burns in the streets of An Loc. *(U.S. Army)*

CMH Pub 76–8

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1972–1975



by

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Center of Military History
United States Army
Washington, D.C., 2025

Introduction

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive issue. But fifty years after the beginning of major U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, well over half the U.S. population is too young to have any direct memory of the conflict. The massive American commitment—political, economic, diplomatic, and military—to the mission of maintaining an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam deserves widespread attention, both to recognize the sacrifice of those who served and to remember how those events have impacted our nation.

U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia began after World War II when elements of the Vietnamese population fought back against the reimposition of French colonial rule. Although the United States generally favored the idea of an independent Vietnam, it supported France because the Viet Minh rebels were led by Communists and U.S. policy at that point in the Cold War sought to contain any expansion of communism. France's defeat in 1954 led to the division of Vietnam into a Communist North (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and a non-Communist South (Republic of Vietnam). The United States actively supported the latter as it dealt with a growing Communist-led insurgent force (the Viet Cong) aided by the North Vietnamese. The initial mission of training South Vietnam's armed forces led to deepening American involvement as the situation grew increasingly dire for the Republic of Vietnam.

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States already had invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the effort to build a secure and stable Republic of Vietnam. That commitment expanded rapidly through 1969, when the United States had over 365,000 Army soldiers (out of a total of a half million troops of all services) in every military region of South Vietnam with thousands of other Army personnel throughout the Pacific area providing direct

support to operations. The war saw many innovations, including the massive use of helicopters to conduct airmobile tactics, new concepts of counterinsurgency, the introduction of airborne radio direction finding, wide-scale use of computers, and major advances in battlefield medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden was still borne by soldiers on the ground who slogged on foot over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military effort by the United States was, however, matched by the resolve of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive as American commitment wavered in the face of high casualties and economic and social challenges at home. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the American military role in the conflict. Actual peace was elusive, and two years later the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam, bringing the war to an end in April 1975.

The vast majority of American men and women who went to Vietnam did so in the uniform of the United States Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. These commemorative pamphlets are dedicated to them.

JON T. HOFFMAN
Chief Historian

Last Battles, 1972-1975

By the beginning of 1972, the United States had been involved in the war in Vietnam for more than a decade. The Vietnamization effort and the withdrawal of U.S. troops, first announced by President Richard M. Nixon in June 1969, continued without let up. While Henry A. Kissinger attempted to negotiate an acceptable peace settlement in Paris, the Nixon administration pursued its twin track strategy of disengagement from Vietnam while preparing the South Vietnamese to stand on their own after U.S. forces departed. The U.S. commander in Vietnam, General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., faced a daunting challenge; he had to direct the war that continued to rage while also taking measures to increase the combat capability of the South Vietnamese, even as the United States drew down the number of troops he needed to accomplish those missions. It became a race against time to prepare the South Vietnamese military before all U.S. forces departed (*Map 1*).


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Kontum
Binh Dinh
Pleiku
Phu Bon
Phu Yen
Darlac
Khanh Hoa
Quang Duc
Tuyen Duc
Ninh Thuan
Phuoc Long
Binh Long
Lam Dong
Tay Ninh
Binh Duong
Long Khanh
Binh Tuy
Binh Thuan
Hau Nghia
Bien Hoa
SAIGON
Kien Phong
Kien Tuong
Long An
Gia Dinh
Phuoc Tuy
Chau Doc
Kien Giang
An Giang
Sa Dec
Dinh Tuong
Go Kong
Vinh Long
Kien Hoa
Phong Dinh
Vinh Binh
Chong Thien
Ba Xuyen
Bac Lieu
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GULF OF THAILAND
MR I
I CTZ
MR II
II CTZ
MR III
III CTZ
MR IV
IV CTZ
CAPITAL SPECIAL ZONE
REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
MAJOR COMMANDS
1972
Military Region/Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
Administrative Boundary
0
150 Miles
0
150 Kilometers

Map 1

Strategic Setting

After the United States committed ground combat troops to South Vietnam in 1965, the fighting steadily increased in intensity until early 1968, when the Communists launched a massive general offensive on the eve of the Vietnamese Tet holiday. The allied forces eventually defeated the enemy during the bloody battles that continued into the fall of 1968, but in the process, Hanoi achieved a tremendous psychological victory. The sheer scope and ferocity of the Communist attacks stunned the American people, and it was clear to many that the war was stalemated with no end in sight. The cries to get out of Vietnam intensified. A shaken Lyndon B. Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection. His withdrawal paved the way for a very contentious presidential election campaign as Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey and Republican Richard M. Nixon squared off in a fight for the White House. During his campaign, Nixon promised "new leadership that will end the war [in Vietnam] and win the peace in the Pacific." He proclaimed: "The nation's objective should be



President Richard M. Nixon and President Nguyen Van Thieu descend the steps of Independence Palace, followed by (*left to right*) National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, and U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker.

to help the South Vietnamese fight the war and not fight it for them. . . . If they do not assume the majority of the burden in their own defense, they cannot be saved." In a close race, he defeated Humphrey.

Immediately after taking office, the new president ordered an exhaustive study of the war, hoping to reach a consensus about the way forward. However, the report revealed drastically divergent opinions about how to proceed. Nixon faced a quandary; he had promised to achieve "peace with honor" and bring the troops home, but he could not, as National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger subsequently observed in his memoirs, "simply walk away from an entire enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel."

After much discussion, Nixon and Kissinger decided the best alternative was to increase the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese so that the United States could disengage. As part of this effort, Nixon ordered American representatives in Vietnam to take a "highly forceful approach" to convince President Nguyen Van Thieu and the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to assume greater responsibility for their own defense. Unspoken, but still clear to all involved, was the implication that this handover would precede a resultant withdrawal of American forces, which by this time totaled over 543,000.

On 8 June 1969, Nixon met with President Thieu at Midway Island and publicly proclaimed, for the first time, the new American policy of "Vietnamization." Nixon announced a steady buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while American troops gradually withdrew. He emphasized that the ultimate objective was to strengthen RVNAF capabilities and bolster the Thieu government, so that the South Vietnamese could stand independently against the Communists. Before closing, Nixon announced that he was pulling out 25,000 troops and more at "regular intervals" thereafter. However, the withdrawal of U.S. forces was contingent on three factors: the progress in training and equipping the South Vietnamese forces, progress in the Paris negotiations, and the level of enemy activity.

To codify the new strategy, President Nixon met with Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle G. Wheeler upon his return from

Midway. The previous mission statement, originally issued by President Johnson, charged Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) to "defeat" the enemy and "force" its withdrawal to North Vietnam. The new order that went into effect on 15 August 1969 directed Abrams to "assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces to take over an increasing share of combat operations" and focus on providing "maximum assistance" to the South Vietnamese to strengthen their forces, supporting the pacification effort, and reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy. The advisory and assistance presence would gradually shrink as South Vietnamese forces grew in capability and strength, but the new strategy, at least as it was described initially, always included leaving a small residual force in South Vietnam "for some time to come," as Laird told a House subcommittee in February 1970. Over the next three years, the United States carried out fifteen troop redeployments while the fighting raged in the countryside.

Vietnamization received its first test in the spring of 1970 when Nixon ordered an offensive against the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. This combined operation involved 32,000 American soldiers and 48,000 South Vietnamese troops. Elements of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 25th Infantry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment launched the main attack into the "Fish Hook" region. At the same time, the South Vietnamese assaulted the "Parrot's Beak" area. Both operations went very well, and the allies located and destroyed numerous large Communist base camps, capturing an impressive array of supplies and materiel, including 16 million rounds of various caliber ammunition, 143,000 rockets, 22,892 individual weapons, 5,487 land mines, 62,000 grenades, 14 million pounds of rice, and 435 vehicles.

Despite the political firestorm that resulted from the incursion into Cambodia, Nixon was pleased with the outcome of the operation on the ground. The South Vietnamese forces under the command of Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, supported by U.S. firepower, and accompanied by their U.S. advisers, accomplished all assigned missions. Nixon announced that the South Vietnamese performance in Cambodia was "visible proof of the success of Vietnamization."

In the early spring of 1971, the allies launched a new operation, Lam Son 719, to cut the enemy supply lines and deny the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Laos. The specific objective was a series

of base areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail adjacent to Military Region I. Although U.S. air support would participate this time, Congressional legislation prohibited American ground troops from crossing the border. Therefore, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces would attack by themselves without U.S. units or advisers.

The offensive along Highway 9 into Laos kicked off at 0700 hours on 8 February and went reasonably well initially. The South Vietnamese secured their initial objectives, but the advance bogged down. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese rushed reinforcements to the area, and a major battle ensued for another month. While some South Vietnamese soldiers fought valiantly, many more performed poorly or fled in panic. The operation ended with ARVN units falling back across the border in disarray. U.S. sources listed South Vietnamese losses as 3,800 killed in action, 5,200 wounded, and 775 missing.

Lam Son 719 demonstrated that Vietnamization had not been the success that Nixon had proclaimed. In the following months, senior U.S. and South Vietnamese military officials worked hard to bolster the morale and confidence of the ARVN after the debacle in Laos. MACV intensified ongoing training programs and issued new equipment to the ARVN to replace what was lost in Laos. At the same time, U.S. troop withdrawals continued. By January 1972, only 156,000 Americans remained in South Vietnam, the lowest number since 1965. That month, Nixon announced that he would withdraw 70,000 additional troops from South Vietnam by 1 May.

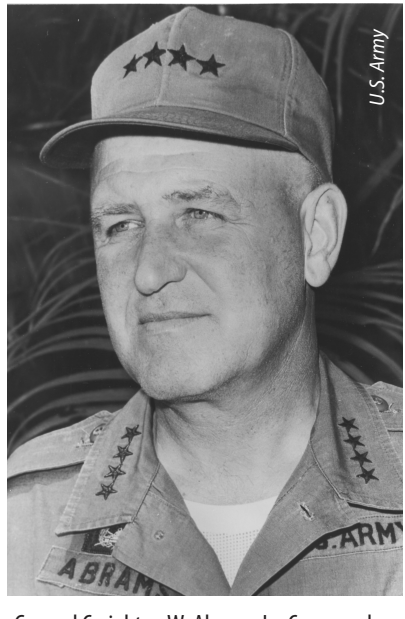
Operations

Ground Combat Operations

As 1972 began, the 1st, 4th, 9th, and 25th Infantry Divisions, as well as the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, most of the 1st Cavalry Division, part of the 101st Airborne, and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade had all been redeployed from Vietnam to the United States. Only fourteen infantry battalions remained in country and five of these battalions would be gone within the first two months of the year. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment maintained one squadron, the 2d, in country. U.S. troops continued to engage the enemy, conducting limited offensive operations and performing "dynamic defense" of logistics installations until their redeployment.

By 1972, the U.S. Army in Vietnam had changed drastically from that which had arrived in 1965–1966. The long years of war had taken a toll. Increasingly, it was a force confronted by discontent, indiscipline, racial strife, and drug and alcohol abuse. A growing issue was the question on many soldiers' minds: "Who wants to be the last man killed in Vietnam if the United States was leaving anyway?" The result was an Army beset by a "plague of disaffection and defiance within its ranks."

The withdrawals continued as General Abrams and his commanders attempted to address this situation. The largest single reduction of the entire war occurred between February and April 1972. During that period, 58,096 troops departed for the United States. By the end of March 1972, total military strength had fallen below 100,000. This left one brigade, the 3d from the 1st Cavalry Division—renamed Task Force Garry Owen when the bulk of the division departed Vietnam in early 1971—based at Bien Hoa and another, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, conducting defensive operations near Da Nang and Phu Bai. The remaining ground troops were primarily involved in supporting and logistical roles.



General Creighton W. Abrams Jr., Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 2 July 1968–30 June 1972.

Several Army aviation groups still operated in South Vietnam. These included elements of the 1st Aviation Brigade, the 11th Aviation Group in Military Region I (the former I Corps Tactical Zone) and the 17th Aviation Group in Military Region II (formerly II Corps Tactical Zone), as well as the 12th Aviation Group and various aviation assets attached to Task Force Garry Owen in Military Region III (formerly III Corps Tactical Zone). From this point on, while the few U.S. ground combat units still engaged the enemy, the

South Vietnamese forces, accompanied and assisted by their U.S. advisers and available air support, did most of the heavy fighting.

As U.S. forces withdrew, the focus of the U.S. logistics effort shifted to support of the RVNAF and providing the necessary equipment to ensure self-sufficient South Vietnamese forces after all U.S. troops had departed. MACV initiated Projects 981 and 982 in late 1971 to address the major equipment shortages, secondary items and repair parts. Part of the effort to enhance the combat power of the ARVN was the creation of seven new tank, air defense artillery, and artillery battalions. At the same time, MACV continued to provide a steady stream of newer weapons and equipment to increase the firepower and overall combat capability of the RVNAF, including the Regional and Territorial Forces. The South Vietnamese received over a million new M16 rifles, 40,000 M79 grenade launchers, 790 4.2-inch mortars, 10,000 radios, and 20,000 trucks. Additionally, ARVN armor units received 56 M48 medium tanks to replace the much older M41s that made up most of the South Vietnamese armor inventory.

By 1972, South Vietnam had 1.1 million under arms. This force included eleven ARVN divisions, one airborne division, and one Marine division (*Map 2*). A vastly expanded South Vietnamese Air Force numbered more than 2,000 aircraft. At the same time, the Vietnamese Navy, with more than 1,000 craft, had assumed full responsibility for conducting riverine and coastal naval operations.

The U.S. Advisory Effort

As one of the most critical aspects of Vietnamization, MACV enlarged the advisory effort to assist in improving the quality and training of the ARVN force. This was not a new program; U.S. advisers had been serving with South Vietnamese units since 1955. However, their importance increased as the number of American combat units dwindled.

With U.S. combat troops departing and the emphasis shifting to the advisory effort, General Abrams reorganized MACV, transforming it from an operational headquarters into a combined advisory group. He inactivated the large U.S. headquarters that had previously controlled operations in each military region (corps tactical zone) and replaced them with much smaller regional advisory commands. The U.S. Army XXIV Corps and I Corps Advisory Group combined to form the First Regional Assistance Command. Headquarters, I Field Force, and II Corps Advisory


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Pleiku
Phu Bon
Phu Yen
Darlac
Khanh Hoa
Quang Duc
Tuyen Duc
Ninh Thuan
Phuoc Long
Binh Long
Lam Dong
Tay Ninh
Long Khanh
Binh Duong
Binh Tuy
Binh Thuan
Bien Hoa
Hau Nghia
SAIGON
Long An
Gia Dinh
Phuoc Tuy
Go Kong
Kien Phong
Kien Tuong
Dinh Tuong
Chau Doc
An Giang
Kien Giang
Sa Dec
Vinh Long
Kien Hoa
Phong Dinh
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Map 2

Group joined to become the Second Regional Assistance Group. Headquarters, II Field Force, and III Corps Advisory Group became the Third Regional Assistance Command. In the Mekong Delta, the Delta Military Assistance Command and IV Corps Advisory Group combined to form the Delta Regional Assistance Command.

The regional assistance commander, usually an Army major general, oversaw the U.S. elements in the assigned area and served as the senior adviser to the ARVN corps commander. The one exception to this arrangement was in Military Region II, where Abrams appointed a civilian, John Paul Vann, as the head of the Second Regional Assistance Group. He had a U.S. Army general officer as his deputy, who exercised command over the military members of the advisory group and other U.S. forces.

The regional assistance commander controlled province and division advisory teams. A South Vietnamese colonel and his staff headed each of the forty-four South Vietnamese provinces. His American counterpart was the Province Senior Advisor who controlled the province, district, and territorial advisory teams operating under the auspices of the pacification program, known as Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, or CORDS. The province team was responsible for advising the province chief on the civil and military aspects of the CORDS program.

Division Combat Assistance Teams (DCATs) supported each South Vietnamese infantry division within the region. Additionally, similar U.S. advisory teams accompanied the South Vietnamese Airborne and Marine Divisions, which made up the national reserve; these advisory teams normally fell under the direction of the Regional Assistance Commander, where they were deployed. Originally U.S. advisers served down to battalion level, but those teams had closed out by 30 June 1971. As U.S. troop numbers decreased, the United States made a commensurate reduction in the number of advisers. By early 1972, only 5,416 tactical advisers remained in the whole of South Vietnam.

Despite their relatively small numbers, the advisers had assumed increasing importance as U.S. combat forces withdrew, performing critical functions as the effort to turn over the war to RVNAF gained momentum. They played key roles in the planning and conduct of combat operations, as well as logistics to support the South Vietnamese formations. Additionally, tactical advisers

accompanied their counterparts on combat operations in the field (except for Lam Son 719), acting as the focal point for liaison and coordination between South Vietnamese forces and the U.S. combat support assets still in country.

U.S. tactical air power was still an important factor throughout the theater of operations. Air Force fighter-bombers conducted missions from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand; however, their numbers were barely half of what they had been during 1968–1969. In addition, Navy and Marine planes flew tactical air support missions from carriers in the South China Sea. AC–119 and AC–130 gunships flying from bases in Thailand and B–52 heavy bombers from Guam and Thailand supported ground operations. U.S. Army helicopters, including AH–1G Cobras, conducted missions throughout South Vietnam. The U.S. advisers on the ground provided an invaluable link between the South Vietnamese forces and the U.S. air assets, a role that would prove critical during the action to follow in 1972.

As the new year began, it was clear that the war had reached a critical point. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker told Nixon on 26 January, "The consequences of our endeavor for many years in Vietnam will be on trial this year and next." He believed that the way forward was "to stay the course and continue providing the essential support that will enable the Vietnamese to survive the coming tests."

The military activity in the field had decreased during the last half of the previous year and in most cases, South Vietnamese units had replaced the withdrawing U.S. troops with no loss in overall security. The enemy still attacked U.S. forces; in the heaviest shelling in six months, eighteen Americans were wounded on 7 January in a bombardment of Fire Support Base Fiddler's Green, 20 miles northeast of Saigon. On 10 February, twenty-five rockets hit the U.S. air base at Danang, killing three and wounding seventeen. On 25 February, in a five-hour battle around a Communist fortified area 40 miles east of Saigon, U.S. troops clashed with the enemy in the largest single engagement in nearly a year, resulting in four Americans killed in action and forty-seven wounded. However, by late March, U.S. combat ground operations had largely ceased; on 9 April, C Battery, 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery, fired the last American heavy artillery round of the war.

Despite the reduction in enemy activity, intelligence reports indicated that Hanoi might attempt a large-scale offensive

sometime in 1972. Particularly troubling was the steep increase in enemy infiltrations from the north. Nevertheless, most intelligence analysts believed the offensive would occur later in the year, not too far in advance of the 1972 U.S. presidential election. Others thought the North Vietnamese might elect to wait until the spring of 1973 after the last U.S. troops departed South Vietnam. Only the Defense Intelligence Agency predicted that the offensive might come sooner, but that agency, like the others, significantly underestimated the growing strength of the North Vietnamese forces.

The Nguyen Hue Campaign

In Hanoi, the North Vietnamese party leadership under First Secretary Le Duan reached a momentous decision. They watched the U.S. withdrawals closely and decided it was time to put Vietnamization to the final test. Acknowledging that Nixon's policy had achieved some improvement in the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese and that the pacification effort had made progress in the countryside, Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, and other key members of the politburo viewed the uneven performance of the South Vietnamese forces in Laos in the previous year as evidence that the ARVN were ill-prepared to deal with a new general offensive. At the same time, they believed that the United States did not have enough combat power left in South Vietnam to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat if Hanoi pressed the attack. Moreover, they thought that political considerations at home would tie down Nixon and therefore he would be unable to respond in any meaningful way to a new escalation of the war. However, they were concerned with Nixon's diplomatic overtures to Moscow and Beijing and wanted to seize the initiative, while Soviet and Chinese support was still available to provide the weapons and materiel needed for a major new offensive. Accordingly, in late 1971, Le Duan directed planning "to win a decisive victory [in the South]. . .and force the U.S. imperialists to end the war by negotiating from a position of defeat."

The North Vietnamese spring offensive, officially named the *Chien Dich Xuan he 1972* [1972 Spring-Summer Offensive] but more popularly known as the Nguyen Hue Campaign, included a massive surprise attack on three fronts that ranged from the DMZ in the north to the Mekong Delta in the south. Ideally, the near-simultaneous attacks aimed at Quang Tri in the north, Kontum in the Central Highlands, and Binh Long north of Saigon would result in a knock-out blow against the Thieu regime and its armed forces.

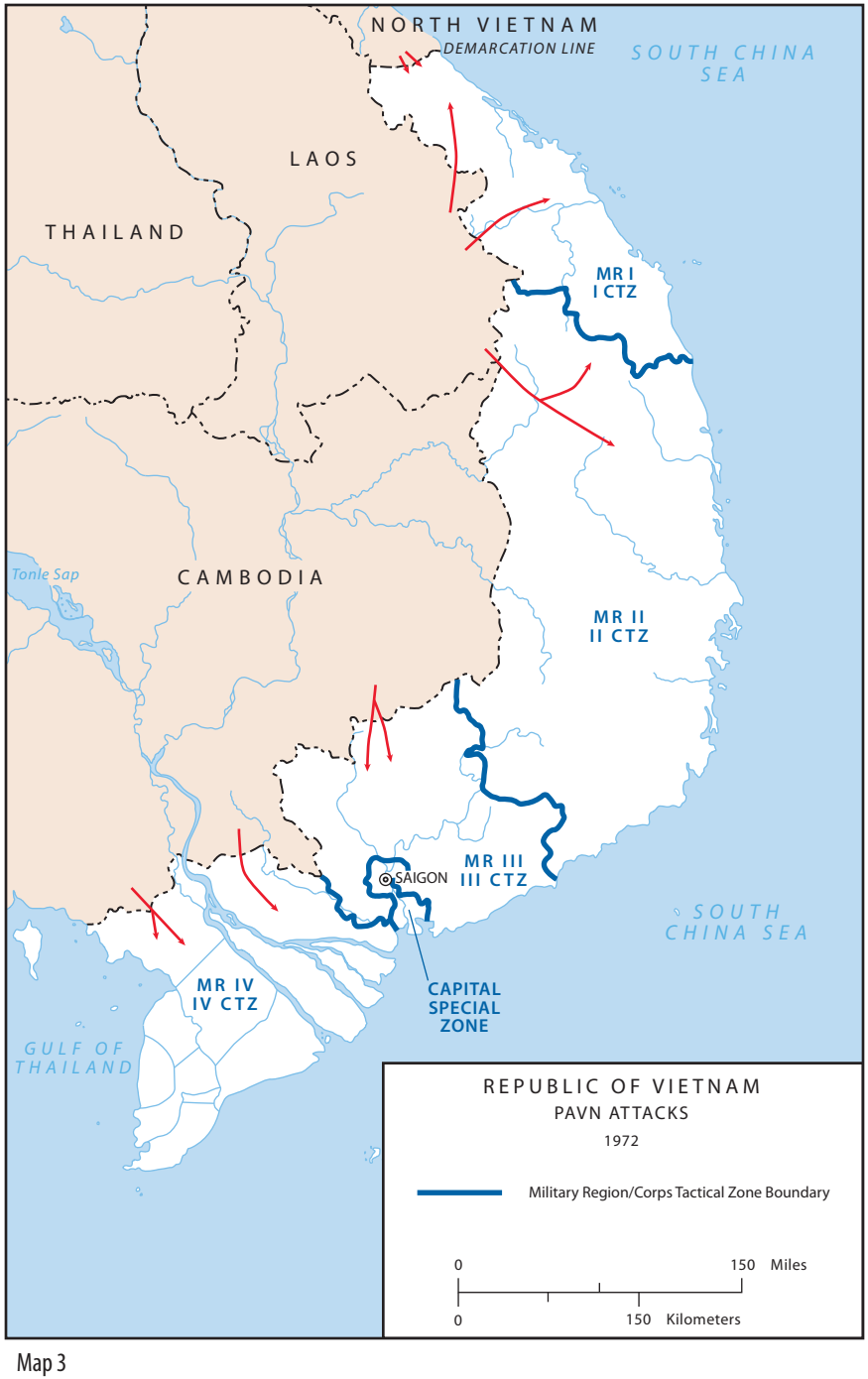
At the same time, Le Duan and his comrades in the politburo hoped that if their forces could decisively defeat the South Vietnamese while American troops were still in-country, they would show the world that they had the strength to defeat the Americans and, thus, win a great political victory that would enhance Hanoi's image and prestige on the world stage. If the offensive failed to achieve a decisive victory, it would still put the North Vietnamese in a position of advantage at the peace negotiations in Paris.

In preparation for the new offensive, Hanoi massed over 200,000 troops along the South Vietnamese border, stretching from the DMZ south to the Cambodian border north of Saigon. This effort involved long convoys of combat vehicles, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled antiaircraft guns, and long-range artillery, moved southward along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Also moving south was an armada of trucks hauling vast amounts of ammunition, fuel, food, and other supplies to staging areas (*Map 3*).

The Communist offensive began on Good Friday, 30 March 1972, when three North Vietnamese Army (or more correctly, People's Army of Vietnam, PAVN) divisions under the control of the B–5 Front attacked across the Demilitarized Zone toward Quang Tri and Hue in Military Region I. To the south, North Vietnamese forces under the direction of the B–3 Front struck ARVN outposts west of Kontum in the Central Highlands. Three days later, three PAVN divisions under the B–2 Front headquarters attacked Binh Long Province in Military Region III. A total of fourteen PAVN divisions and twenty-six separate regiments—a force of more than 130,000 combat troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles—participated in this offensive. This was a go-for-broke effort, leaving only one PAVN division in North Vietnam to defend the homeland and one conducting operations in Laos. The attackers employed conventional tactics and introduced advanced Soviet and Chinese weaponry not seen in any previous Communist offensive in South Vietnam. The coordinated enemy thrusts were characterized by a ferocity never experienced by the South Vietnamese forces and their advisers.

The Battle in the North

With only the U.S. 196th Light Infantry Brigade operating in the Danang-Phu Bai area, the responsibility for defending Military Region I fell to the South Vietnamese under Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of ARVN I Corps. General Lam had


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Map 3



Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, the commander of I Corps at the beginning of the Easter Offensive.

previously directed the forces that went into Laos in Lam Son 719 the previous year. The troops at his disposal included the 1st, 2d, and 3d ARVN Divisions, two South Vietnamese Marine brigades, and the 1st Armored Brigade.

Maj. Gen. Frederick J. Kroesen, commander of the First Regional Assistance Command, headed the U.S. advisory effort in the region. He was assisted by his deputy, Brig. Gen. Thomas W. Bowen, and Col. Gerald H. Turley, senior U.S. Marine adviser to the attached South Vietnamese Marine Division. Kroesen's command included 860 CORDS advisers and over 560 combat advisers, spread throughout the three ARVN divisions and two brigades of South Vietnamese Marines.

The initial brunt of the North Vietnamese attack focused on the 3d ARVN Division; a newly formed unit commanded by Brig. Gen. Vu Van Giai. The division was accompanied by Col. Donald J. Metcalf's Advisory Team 155, which was colocated with the division forward command post at Ai Tu just northwest of Quang Tri City.

The North Vietnamese commenced their offensive in Military Region I just before noon on 30 March with a massive artillery bombardment of 3d ARVN Division positions just south of the

DMZ. These artillery fires were closely followed by ground attacks across the DMZ and from the west along Route 9 by the PAVN 304B and 308th Divisions, three separate infantry regiments of the B–5 Front, two tank regiments, and at least one sapper battalion, an estimated 30,000 Communist troops. The unexpected enemy offensive caught the 3d ARVN Division repositioning its forces and not ready for a fight. Outnumbered and outgunned, the newly formed outfit was ill-prepared to defend against large-scale conventional tank infantry attacks supported by massive artillery strikes. The South Vietnamese reeled from the intensity of the PAVN onslaught.

General Lam and his intelligence staff at I Corps headquarters did not expect a Communist attack of such scope. Lam had seen no cause for alarm in the warnings from Saigon about a possible enemy offensive and consequently had made no special preparations. The corps commander expected any enemy attack in Military Region I to come from the west out of Laos rather than across the relatively flat and open Demilitarized Zone, so he was caught completely by surprise when the PAVN poured over the DMZ in force.

The enemy struck simultaneously at Fire Support Bases (FSBs) Fuller, A1, A2, and A4. Additional PAVN forces hit the 147th Marine Brigade at Nui Ba Ho and FSBs Sarge and Holcomb. The enemy attacks continued all day and increased in intensity as the hours passed. Clouds, fog, and drizzle significantly reduced the availability and effects of allied tactical air operations. Lacking this support, the South Vietnamese fell back, often in disorder. By evening on 1 April, the ARVN had evacuated positions along the northern perimeter under heavy enemy pressure. The Vietnamese Marine units held fast at Mai Loc and FSB Pedro and gave a good account of themselves against the PAVN attackers.

At 1800 on 1 April, General Giai ordered the withdrawal of all of his divisional forces north of Dong Ha, directing them to reestablish a defensive line south of the Cua Viet, Mieu Giang, and Cam Lo rivers. He ordered the 20th Tank Squadron, hastily thrown into combat as it was completing unit training at Camp Evans, to hold Dong Ha. By 2 April, General Giai had established his new defensive line, which was in fairly good shape.

Later that day, however, the enemy launched simultaneous attacks on Dong Ha and Camp Carroll, the most important South Vietnamese artillery position south of the DMZ. The line initially

held but soon buckled under intense artillery and human wave attacks supported by T–54 tanks. This caused a steady stream of terrified refugees to flee down Route 1 into Dong Ha. The panic was infectious, and the troops eventually lost their nerve, broke, and ran, joining the chaotic exodus south.

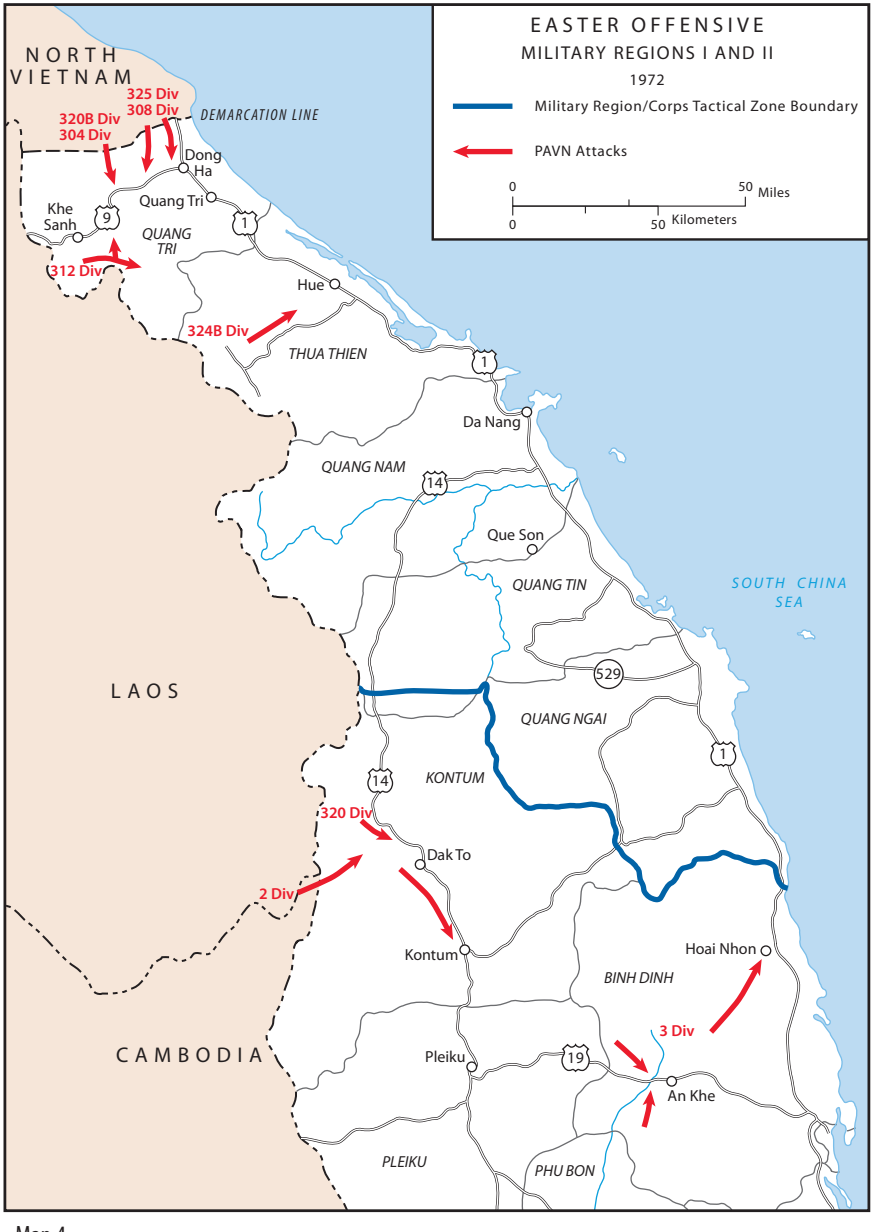
During the battle for Camp Carroll, Col. Pham Van Dinh, commander of the 56th Regiment, surrendered his entire unit to the enemy. With the fall of the ARVN camp, the North Vietnamese captured twenty-two artillery pieces, including a 175–mm. battery and numerous quad–50s and twin–40s, the largest assemblage of heavy weapons in Military Region I. Some 1,500 ARVN soldiers became prisoners. Lt. Col. William C. Camper, senior adviser to the Regiment, and one other team member managed to escape certain capture or death when a CH–47 Chinook helicopter extracted them.

With the loss of Carroll and its artillery, the Vietnamese Marine elements at Mai Loc were in an untenable position and fell back toward Quang Tri. Over the next few days, the relentless PAVN attacks forced the South Vietnamese defenders into a perimeter only 11 kilometers in diameter, barely encompassing Dong Ha and Quang Tri City. On 5 April, a momentary lull in the fighting came, as the PAVN repositioned artillery and replenished ammunition supplies. Before launching the attack, the North Vietnamese planners estimated it would take three weeks to push the ARVN back from their original positions south of the DMZ. PAVN forces accomplished this in just seven days.

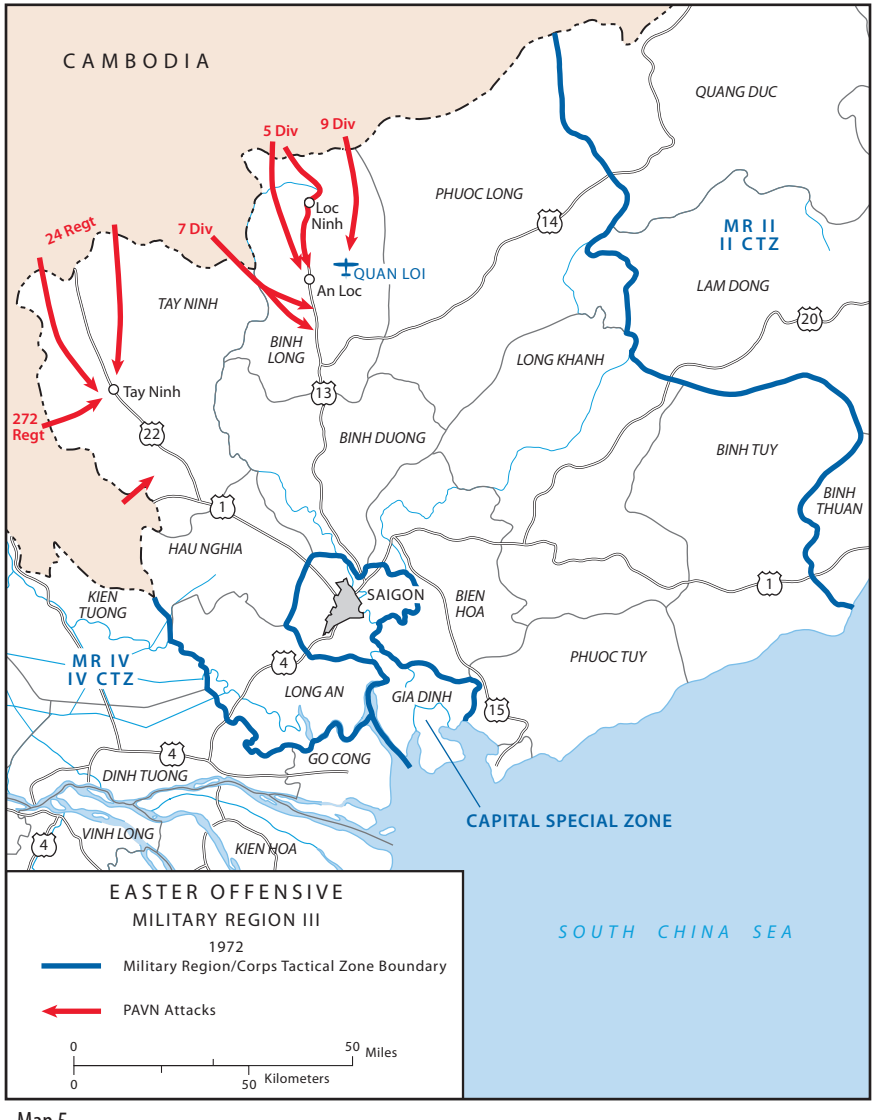
The Battle in the Central Highlands

While South Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri fought for their very survival, additional North Vietnamese forces struck in the Central Highlands. On 30 March, the PAVN began placing heavy artillery fire on "Rocket Ridge," a line of hill outposts that formed a screen protecting Pleiku and Kontum from the west and northwest. However, the B–3 Front under Maj. Gen. Hoang Minh Thao did not launch the type of massive ground attack that was underway in MR I and soon to develop in MR III. Nevertheless, Lt. Gen. Ngo Dzu, II Corps commander, and his adviser, John Paul Vann, prepared for an imminent attack in MR II. They did not have long to wait (*Maps 4 and 5*).

On 3 April, sappers attacked the airfield at Phung Hoang, near Dak To. A PAVN prisoner from the 400th Sapper Regiment


EASTER OFFENSIVE
MILITARY REGIONS I AND II
1972
Military Region/Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
PAVN Attacks
0
50 Miles
0
50 Kilometers
NORTH VIETNAM
325 Div
308 Div
320B Div
304 Div
DEMARCATION LINE
Dong Ha
Quang Tri
Khe Sanh
9
1
QUANG TRI
312 Div
Hue
324B Div
THUA THIEN
1
Da Nang
QUANG NAM
14
Que Son
QUANG TIN
SOUTH CHINA SEA
LAOS
529
QUANG NGAI
1
14
KONTUM
320 Div
Dak To
2 Div
Kontum
Hoai Nhon
BINH DINH
3 Div
CAMBODIA
Pleiku
19
An Khe
PLEIKU
PHU BON

Map 4


CAMBODIA
QUANG DUC
5 Div
9 Div
PHUOC LONG
Loc Ninh
14
MR II
II CTZ
24 Regt
7 Div
QUAN LOI
An Loc
LAM DONG
TAY NINH
BINH LONG
20
LONG KHANH
Tay Ninh
13
272 Regt
22
BINH DUONG
BINH TUY
BINH THUAN
1
HAU NGHIA
KIEN TUONG
SAIGON
BIEN HOA
1
MR IV
IV CTZ
4
PHUOC TUY
LONG AN
GIA DINH
15
4
GO CONG
DINH TUONG
CAPITAL SPECIAL ZONE
4
VINH LONG
KIEN HOA
SOUTH CHINA SEA
EASTER OFFENSIVE
MILITARY REGION III
1972
Military Region/Corps Tactical Zone Boundary
PAVN Attacks
0
50 Miles
0
50 Kilometers

Map 5

taken during this assault told his interrogators that the B–3 Front campaign in MR II, called "*Truong Song Chuyen Minh*" ("Western Mountains Rise Up"), would be conducted in two phases. In Phase I, PAVN forces would destroy ARVN military bases in Kontum Province and open routes for further enemy movement into the region. During Phase II, the PAVN would take Ben Het, Dak To, Tan Canh, and eventually Kontum City. Under control of the B–3 Front, the 2d, 3d "Gold Star," and 320A PAVN divisions, a total of more than 20,000 troops supported by four hundred tanks, maneuvered to their final attack positions as the pattern of artillery attacks by fire and light ground probes continued for several days.

On 11 April, the PAVN launched a heavy attack on several ARVN firebases west of Kontum, and the Ben Het Ranger Camp west of Dak To. At the same time, the PAVN attempted to interdict the vital supply line between Qui Nhon and Pleiku cities. The Communists wanted to deny Saigon the ability to reinforce and resupply South Vietnamese forces in the Highlands.

On 14 April, the ARVN abandoned FSB Charlie at the northern end of "Rocket Ridge" under heavy enemy pressure, but the withdrawal was orderly, and the South Vietnamese made the PAVN pay dearly for their advance. A U.S. forward air controller reported, "The people on Charlie were far outnumbered, but they held on. . . . They never did break. They made the reds take bunker by bunker. They just did not give up and run."

Unfortunately, such praiseworthy performance by the ARVN would not always be the case during the coming heavy action. By 20 April, PAVN forces had taken Tam Quan and Hoai An district capitals in Binh Dinh Province. On 23 April, the PAVN struck Tan Canh, the headquarters of the ARVN 22d Division, in full force with tanks, infantry, and artillery. The PAVN also used Soviet-made AT–3 "Sagger" wire-guided antitank missiles, the first time they had appeared in South Vietnam. Simultaneously, the PAVN cut Route 14 in three places above Dak To and south of Tan Canh, effectively cutting off Tan Canh and Dak To from Kontum City. At this point, according to Col. Phillip Kaplan, senior adviser to the 22d Division, Col. Le Duc Dat, the commander, broke under pressure. "Dat was really demoralized," Kaplan recalled.

Aware that Colonel Dat still had 1,200 soldiers inside the compound, Kaplan urged him to hold on, but Dat was paralyzed by fear, and so were his troops. On 24 April, as the ARVN defenders

waited terrified in their bunkers, the Communists surrounded Tan Canh and took the base with little difficulty, entering the 22d Division command post virtually unopposed. Despite the ever-present fighter-bombers and Spectre gunships, the ARVN had collapsed, and shortly after that, the PAVN took Dak To.

The 22d Division was not among the best ARVN units and succumbed to the psychological impact of the intense attacks. As the South Vietnamese fled in terror from the Tan Canh/Dak To area, they left the enemy twenty-three 155–mm. howitzers, ten M–41 tanks, and 16,000 rounds of ammunition. After these battles and the subsequent retreat, the 22d ARVN Division ceased to be a combat-effective unit. The only thing that slowed the enemy assault was tactical airpower. U.S. casualties among the 22d Division advisory personnel during these battles were four KIA, one WIA, and ten missing in action, including Lt. Col. Robert W. Brownlee, senior adviser to the 47th ARVN Regiment. Colonel Kaplan and eight of his fellow advisers were evacuated by U.S. helicopters as the PAVN overran the South Vietnamese positions at Tan Canh. While the PAVN took Dak To, additional Communist forces cut Route 1, drove most of the South Vietnamese units guarding the road from their bases, and effectively gained control of almost all of Binh Dinh Province.

Nixon Responds

On 2 April, Ambassador Bunker cabled Kissinger and Nixon that "ARVN forces are on the verge of collapse in I Corps." It was clear to the White House that the attacks in MR I were part of a full-blown Communist offensive and that the South Vietnamese, reeling from the intensity of the attacks, were in danger of folding. If the North Vietnamese succeeded in inflicting a major defeat on the South Vietnamese forces, Nixon's three-year-old policy of Vietnamization would be exposed as a fraud, and his run for reelection in November would be in peril.

Nixon was in a difficult position. He was scheduled to meet with Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow in mid-May, and he felt he could not go to Russia in the wake of a military defeat inflicted largely by Soviet-supplied weapons. However, if he responded forcefully to the North Vietnamese invasion, it might cause the Soviets to cancel the summit and destroy his hopes for detente. A strong response might also anger the Chinese, whom the president was trying to court. Yet, if Nixon did not use bombing, virtually

the only weapon left to him with most of the U.S. combat troops already having departed South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese would most likely overrun Saigon's troops, inflict a military defeat on ARVN, and compromise the U.S. strategic position throughout the world. At home, it was an election year, and Nixon would be condemned by one segment of American voters for failing to act to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam and by another if he responded with anything that looked like an escalation of the war.

Considering all this, Nixon concluded that "Defeat. . .was simply not an option." He and Kissinger agreed that they had to do something quickly to assist the faltering South Vietnamese and that the best way to do that was to "carry the war to North Vietnam." Given this situation, bombing was the only answer. Late on 4 April, Nixon, removing restrictions that had existed since 1968, ordered air strikes in North Vietnam up to the eighteenth parallel. According to U.S. Air Force Gen. John W. Vogt, who at the time was in Washington for briefings before flying to Saigon to assume command of the 7th Air Force, Nixon told him, "I want you to get down there and use whatever air you need to turn this thing around. . .stop this offensive."

Operation Freedom Train commenced on 6 April, when American fighter-bombers attacked Communist targets sixty miles north of the DMZ. In a follow-on attack on 10 April, twelve B–52s, escorted by fifty-three attack aircraft, struck supply depots near the port of Vinh, about 150 miles north of the DMZ. This was the first time that Nixon's administration had used big bombers on North Vietnam. By mid-month, B–52s were attacking targets within a few miles of Hanoi and Haiphong.

With Nixon's initiation of intensified air operations against North Vietnam, squadrons of additional aircraft and many American ships began moving toward Southeast Asia to comply with the president's orders to stop the North Vietnamese invasion. Within sixty days, U.S. forces available for use in Vietnam would increase by 100 B–52s, hundreds of tactical warplanes, 4 additional aircraft carriers, and 32 additional combat ships (bringing the total of the American fleet off the coast of Vietnam to 138 vessels).

The Battle in Military Region III

As the Nixon administration responded to the initial North Vietnamese attack and the PAVN pounded the 3d ARVN Division in and around Quang Tri, PAVN forces from the B–2 Front under

Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra struck in Military Region III. The 24th and 271st PAVN Regiments hit elements of the 25th ARVN Division in several firebases near the Cambodian border in northern Tay Ninh Province. As in Quang Tri, the PAVN struck with infantry and tanks, including American-made M–41s previously captured from ARVN forces. Although the South Vietnamese were surprised by the use of tanks and the intensity of the fighting, the enemy thrusts coincided with previous expectations that any significant PAVN move in the region would strike at Tay Ninh. However, these attacks proved to be a diversion designed to mask the movement of three PAVN Divisions—a total of over 35,000 PAVN troops including tanks, artillery, and other support elements—to final assault positions near Snuol, Cambodia, in preparation for the main attack toward An Loc in Binh Long province.

Military Region III, composed of the eleven provinces surrounding Saigon, was located between the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta. Binh Long ("Peaceful Dragon") Province was in the northwestern portion of the region and was bordered on the west by Cambodia. The province's capital was An Loc, a city of 15,000, only 65 miles north of Saigon. It was surrounded by vast rubber plantations totaling 75,000 acres and sat astride QL–13, a paved highway leading directly from the Cambodian border to the South Vietnamese capital. Because of its proximity to Communist base areas in Cambodia, the city had endured the rigors of war since the early 1960s. Due to its strategic location on the main attack axis between Cambodia and Saigon, An Loc figured prominently in the North Vietnamese strategy to directly threaten South Vietnam's capital.

As the PAVN offensive began, Brig. Gen. Le Van Hung's 5th ARVN Infantry Division, which numbered about 4,500 soldiers, was the only South Vietnamese division operating in Binh Long Province. Before the battle in An Loc was over, Hung assumed control of Task Force 52 (a two-battalion task force from the 18th ARVN Division), the 3d Ranger Group, the 74th Border Ranger Battalion, and the Binh Long Province RF/PF troops. Additionally, Hung gained the 1st Airborne Brigade when it deployed into Binh Long for part of the battle.

The PAVN plan called for the 5th People's Liberation Army (PLAF) Division—supposedly made up of so-called Viet Cong (VC) insurgents, but now primarily manned by North Vietnamese

regulars—to begin the campaign by taking Loc Ninh, the northernmost town in Binh Long located just south of the Cambodian border on highway QL–13 9 miles north of An Loc. With Loc Ninh secured, the 9th PLAF Division, another elite outfit manned by PAVN regulars, would then take An Loc. Concurrently, the 7th PAVN Division would cut the highway south of An Loc to interdict any attempts to resupply or reinforce the city. Once North Vietnamese forces secured the city, they would turn their attention to Saigon.

Per the B–2 Front plan, at 0650 on 5 April, the 5th PLAF Division crossed the Cambodian border and attacked Loc Ninh with infantry and tanks supported by heavy artillery fire. Only the effective employment of tactical air strikes prevented the defenders from the 9th ARVN Regiment, 5th ARVN Division, from being completely overrun; Capt. Mark A. Smith, Deputy Regimental Advisor, played a key role in slowing the enemy onslaught, working closely with the Air Force forward air controllers to maximize the use of the available air support. On the morning of 6 April, the PAVN attacked again. Repeated air strikes by fighter bombers and close support by AC–130 Spectre gunships broke the first attack and two others that followed. However, the sheer force of PAVN numbers eventually prevailed, and the North Vietnamese troops overwhelmed the defenders. Only one hundred ARVN soldiers escaped to An Loc, and six of seven U.S. advisers were killed or captured.

After the fall of Loc Ninh, the PAVN continued their march southward. They overran two ARVN firebases south of Loc Ninh, near the junction of routes 13 and 17 on QL–13, manned by Task Force 52. During the withdrawal of the surviving South Vietnamese troops toward An Loc, the three U.S. advisers with the unit, one of whom was seriously wounded, were extracted under heavy fire by an OH–6 light helicopter flown by Capt. John B. Whitehead of Delta Company, 229th Aviation. He later received the Distinguished Service Cross for his bravery under fire.

As the attacks on Loc Ninh and Task Force–52 unfolded, Maj. Gen. James F. Hollingsworth, commander of the Third Regional Assistance Command, realized that An Loc, not Tay Ninh, was the primary objective of the PAVN's main attack. He and his counterpart, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, III Corps Commander, convinced President Thieu that if An Loc fell, nothing could stop the PAVN from a direct attack on Saigon.

Subsequently, Thieu decreed that An Loc would be held at all costs; he radioed General Hung in An Loc that the city would be "defended to the death."

The opening battle of the enemy offensive in Binh Long had been a disaster for the South Vietnamese forces. In just a matter of days, the ARVN lost the equivalent of four maneuver battalions and nearly two artillery battalions, including thirty artillery tubes and over one hundred tanks and other vehicles. Fortunately for the defenders in An Loc, the North Vietnamese could not immediately exploit their victory at Loc Ninh. It would take almost a week to get all their forces in place and resupply them in preparation for the main attack on An Loc. Meanwhile, the advisers inside the city used this time well, working closely with their ARVN counterparts to prepare for the coming battle and communicating with General Hollingsworth to ensure that sufficient air support would be available when the PAVN attacked.

The Fighting Continues on All Fronts

While the North Vietnamese maneuvered their forces southward in Binh Long and the ARVN in An Loc girded for the coming attack, the defenders around Quang Tri attempted to hold the line against increasing enemy pressure. The loss of Camp Carroll and Mai Loc at first had taken a heavy toll on South Vietnamese morale, but their spirits improved when they managed to beat back repeated PAVN attacks. Additionally, reinforcements from the 369th Marine Brigade and the 1st, 4th, and 5th Ranger Groups arrived at Quang Tri. With these new forces, General Lam began to contemplate a counterattack. General Giai, however, disagreed and strongly urged that the new troops be used to reinforce the defensive line. By this time, Giai's span of control included the equivalent of nine brigades—a total of twenty-three battalions—from two regiments of his own, two marine brigades, four ranger groups, and one armor brigade plus all the territorial forces. Giai, who had risen from a colonel commanding a regiment just the previous year, was now hopelessly overburdened. General Lam could have remedied the situation by placing the Marine elements under the South Vietnamese Marine Division and by giving the Marine Division and the Ranger Command each the responsibility for a sector on the defensive line. However, Giai retained control of the sprawling force for the conduct of the entire defense of the Quang Tri area.

Major Enemy Push in Binh Long Province

While Lam's forces prepared for the counterattack in I Corps, the PAVN hit An Loc with everything they had. On 7 April, elements of the 9th PLAF Division seized the Quan Loi airstrip, just 3 kilometers east of An Loc. Coupled with the closing of QL-13 south of the city by the 7th PAVN Division, the enemy had surrounded An Loc and begun a prolonged siege that would last nearly three months.

General Hollingsworth urged General Minh to order the attached ARVN 1st Airborne Brigade to clear the highway to An Loc from the south. On 8 April, the paratroopers moved to Lai Khe from Saigon by truck. The next day they drove north along the highway. By the evening of 10 April, they reached a point six kilometers north of the village of Chon Thanh. There they came under heavy fire from the entrenched PAVN 7th Division. It was clear that the North Vietnamese were determined to dominate the road and interdict any attempt to relieve the defenders in An Loc.

With the city cut off from further ground reinforcement and resupply, the PAVN launched an all-out attack. During the early morning hours of 13 April, the Communists began a massive artillery preparation. A total of 7,000 shells and rockets fell on the city during the next fifteen hours, a rate of one round every eight seconds. Shortly after dawn, the Communists launched a combined tank and infantry attack from the west and northeast. Soviet-made T–54 and PT–76 tanks moved down the main north-south street toward the 5th ARVN Division command post in the middle of the town. The South Vietnamese forces, most of whom had never before confronted tanks in battle, were panic-stricken and fell back in the face of the PAVN assault. Two things helped stabilize the situation. First, the PAVN commanders were extremely inept at coordinating armor and infantry. The tanks worked without infantry support, persisted in advancing along roads when cross-country movement would have been safer, and, when speed and initiative were desirable, proceeded slowly and indecisively. This failure to apply the most basic tenets of combined arms tactics left the PAVN tanks unprotected against the ARVN defenders, who found them easy prey for their M–72 light antitank weapons (LAWs) once the South Vietnamese soldiers overcame the initial shock of facing armor.

The more important factor in thwarting the initial and subsequent attacks on An Loc was the well-executed air support that struck the enemy far forward of the ARVN positions and

prevented the PAVN from reinforcing their initial successes in the northern part of the city. While U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps fighter-bombers dropped their ordnance on PAVN forces massing around the city, the ARVN forces, supported by U.S. Army AH–1G Cobra attack helicopters from Task Force Garry Owen, Air Force AC–119K Stinger, and AC–130 Spectre gunships were able to defend against the reduced number of PAVN infantry and tanks that escaped the air strikes. This pattern would continue for the next three months, and air support would repeatedly be the difference between victory and defeat for the South Vietnamese defenders.

With An Loc under heavy attack, General Minh ordered the Airborne Brigade to move to pick-up zones where helicopters transported the paratroopers to landing zones southeast of An Loc. Once on the ground, they provided much-needed reinforcements for the defenders inside the city. For the next two days, the battle for An Loc continued. House-to-house fighting and constant enemy artillery bombardment characterized the intense combat. At one point, a PAVN tank came within 500 meters of the 5th ARVN Division command post in the center of the city, but Cobra helicopters from TF Garry Owen armed with 2.75-inch HEAT (High Explosive Antitank) aerial rockets disabled it. The Cobras claimed four more tank kills in the ensuing action.

While the battle raged inside An Loc, General Hollingsworth directed B–52 strikes on PAVN staging areas outside the city. Each mission, code-named Arc Light, consisted of three aircraft, each carrying 108 MK–82 500-pound conventional bombs. One B–52 strike caught an entire battalion in the open before it reached the northwest approach to the city, killing an estimated one hundred attackers, destroying three tanks, and breaking the back of the PAVN attack on that part of the city.

The defenders continued to pound the PAVN with tactical airpower and B–52 bombers. Brig. Gen. John R. McGiffert, Hollingsworth's deputy at Third Regional Assistance Command, said of the importance of the air strikes, "I really believe that without these the city would have fallen, because I think the infantry would have gotten in with the tanks." During the first two weeks of the battle for An Loc, over 2,500 air sorties hit targets in and around the city in support of the South Vietnamese defenders. The key to the success of these missions was that U.S. advisers on the ground with the ARVN units coordinated directly with the



A North Vietnamese tank burns in the streets of An Loc.

airborne forward air controllers to make maximum use of available air assets.

Despite the devastating effect of U.S. airpower, the PAVN pressed the attack on An Loc for three days. The battle was a near thing, with the PAVN soldiers almost taking the 5th ARVN Division command post twice, but still, the ARVN held. General Hollingsworth reported on 16 April to General Abrams that "there was a great battle at An Loc today, perhaps the greatest of this campaign. The enemy hit us hard all day long with all he could muster, and we threw it back at him. The forces in An Loc realized that they had to fight, and they fought well."

President Thieu, recognizing that his forces in An Loc were surrounded and in great peril, ordered the 21st ARVN Division to move from its base in the Mekong Delta to reinforce III Corps forces. General Minh immediately ordered the 21st to assume the previous mission of the Airborne Brigade and drive north from Lai Khe to open QL–13 to An Loc. The division moved to Lai Khe by truck and launched its attack, but it quickly ran into heavy resistance from the 7th PAVN Division, which continued to block the road. The North Vietnamese tied down the South Vietnamese forces for the next two months, preventing any ground relief of

An Loc from the south and badly battering the 21st ARVN in the process.

Back in the city itself, there was a momentary lull in the battle. The defenders had thwarted the enemy's initial plan to seize An Loc. The main attack, conducted by the 9th PLAF Division, supported by the 3d and 5th Battalions of the 203d Tank Regiment, was supposed to result in the occupation of the city by 20 April. Still, the assault was unsuccessful largely due to the continuous pounding by B–52s, fighter-bombers, AC–130 Spectre gunships, and Cobra attack helicopters.

Although they had stymied the PAVN's first attempt to take the city, the South Vietnamese defenders were in a desperate situation. Col. William B. Miller, 5th ARVN Division senior adviser, reported to General Hollingsworth on 17 April that An Loc continued to sustain extremely heavy shelling and that he thought the PAVN were girding themselves for another all-out assault. He was very pessimistic regarding the capability of the ARVN to carry on: "The division is tired and worn out; supplies minimal, casualties continue to mount, medical supplies are low; wounded a major problem, mass burials of military and civilians, morale at a low ebb. Despite incurring heavy losses from U.S. air strikes, the enemy continues to persist."

On 19 April, the PAVN launched its second full-scale assault on the city with five regiments. The battle raged for three days under a continuous bombardment. Tactical air support and attack helicopters permitted the defenders to stave off the PAVN attackers. However, the ARVN now held only a very small area in the southern portion of the city. The South Vietnamese were completely surrounded and under constant artillery fire. The situation inside An Loc was dire. Casualties increased as the defenders began to run out of ammunition, food, and medical supplies. The soldiers and the civilians trapped by the fighting lived underground and ventured outside their trenches and bunkers only at great risk. One adviser put the odds of surviving five minutes outside in the open at fifty-fifty. By the end of April, the South Vietnamese defenders still held An Loc, but it was a tenuous foothold at best.

Situation Worsens in the North

By 10 April, limited ARVN successes in Quang Tri province convinced General Lam, despite the continued protests from General Giai, that the time was ripe to strike back. Lam wanted

to launch a counterattack to reestablish the western portion of the original defensive line, retaking Cam Lo, Camp Carroll, and Mai Loc. The counteroffensive, called Quang Trung 729, began on 14 April.

The operation proved to be little more than a continuation of the same ineffective action that had been ongoing. The South Vietnamese forces were already in contact with the PAVN and were reluctant to advance. By the end of the week, the ARVN were hopelessly bogged down, having moved forward less than 500 meters from the line of departure. As one former ARVN general wrote after the war, "Quang Trung did not resemble an offensive, but rather had settled into a costly battle of attrition in place in which the ARVN battalions were steadily reduced in strength and effectiveness by the enemy's deadly artillery fire." South Vietnamese morale plummeted.

New command and control problems surfaced. As part of the national strategic reserve, the Marine Division headquarters and the Ranger Command did not fall under I Corps control. They responded to orders directly from the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff in Saigon. That did not stop them from questioning General Giai's orders to their troops attached to his command. On several occasions, they even issued directives and orders counter to those given by Giai, thereby complicating and confusing the chain of command in I Corps and inhibiting the preparations of an effective defense against the PAVN attacks.

On 18 April, the PAVN began a concerted effort to take Quang Tri with a major attack against the western sector of the 3d Division by the 308th and 304 B Divisions. Much as had happened in An Loc, U.S. tactical air support and B–52s broke the back of the assault and gave the ARVN a good opportunity to counterattack. However, the South Vietnamese refused to seize the moment and remained in their bunkers.

The following week, the Dong Ha defensive line that stretched east along the Cua Viet River collapsed, not from enemy action but from ARVN panic. The commander of the 1st Armor Brigade ordered his 20th Tank Squadron on the Cua Viet line to reposition to the south along Route 1 to clear the enemy elements there. The ARVN troops along the front, seeing the tanks moving south, panicked and broke ranks, fleeing down the highway toward Quang Tri. The Cua Viet defense, which had been very effective for nearly a month, was abandoned without a fight. The 3d Division

commander did not learn about the collapse until it was too late to do anything, but he managed to reestablish a defensive line west of Quang Tri City and north of the Thach Han River.

Over the days that followed, the defenders, already shaken, were further demoralized by the continual pounding by PAVN artillery. On 27 April, the North Vietnamese, trying to take advantage of the weather that had turned bad and inhibited allied air operations, initiated a new push to take the city. For the entire day, virtually all units of the 3d ARVN Division were in close contact with the enemy. The next day, enemy tanks approached the Quang Tri Bridge, only 2 kilometers southwest of the city. Frightened by the armor, the South Vietnamese defenders crumbled and abandoned their positions, fleeing south along Route 1. Meanwhile, elsewhere on the front line, enemy artillery and repeated ground attacks rendered the 57th ARVN Regiment combat ineffective.

On 30 April, General Giai decided that his position was untenable and ordered his forces to prepare to withdraw south of the Thach Han River, leaving the 147th Marine Brigade the only unit north of the waterway. The next morning, as the units were preparing to move, General Lam called Giai and directed that the 3d Division and its attached units remain where they were and hold their positions "at all costs." The result of this last-minute change in orders was total chaos. Some units had already moved to their new positions, others were on the way, and in still others, the unit commanders refused to give their troops the new orders.

The effect was that the 3d ARVN Division defense collapsed. Units to the north streamed across the river and "continued their way south with the uncontainable force of a flood over a broken dam." The mechanized elements that reached Quang Tri Bridge could not cross because the span had already been destroyed in the confusion. They left their vehicles and equipment and forded the river on foot. On the southern bank, those soldiers in the infantry units that had established new positions, seeing the ever-growing throng of ARVN soldiers, tanks, and vehicles streaming south at high speed, deserted their posts and joined the flood of humanity running from the PAVN. As tanks and vehicles that made it across the river ran out of gas, the drivers and crews abandoned them and continued on foot. The commander of the 147th Marine Brigade, north of the river and the only unit still defending the city, decided that the situation was hopeless and

ordered his unit to withdraw toward Hue, leaving the 3d Division commander and his skeletal staff all alone in Quang Tri.

General Giai and his staff officers boarded three armored personnel carriers and attempted to catch up with their fleeing troops but were unable to do so. U.S. helicopters came in to rescue the division's advisory personnel and their Vietnamese counterparts, including Giai's party.

On the afternoon of 1 May, PAVN troops entered the city, and Quang Tri became the first provincial capital to fall into Communist hands during the war. General Giai was subsequently relieved and court-martialed for dereliction of duty and abandoning his division. Many Americans thought that General Lam should have been court-martialed as well, but Giai became the scapegoat for the entire debacle in MR I.

Meanwhile, the situation worsened. Along Route 1 south of Quang Tri, PAVN gunners targeted the mass of military and civilian humanity, streaming down what became known as "Terror Boulevard." By 2 May, the entire province of Quang Tri was in PAVN hands, and the Communists could turn their attention to Thua Thien Province and the imperial capital at Hue. General Abrams cabled the Pentagon that "the senior [South Vietnamese] leadership had begun to bend and, in some cases, break, . . .[was] losing its will, and cannot be depended on to take the measures necessary to stand and fight."

With the South Vietnamese forces hard-pressed on all fronts, Nixon escalated the response to the North Vietnamese invasion by ordering Operation Linebacker, the mining of Haiphong harbor (Operation Pocket Money), and the extension of targeted areas to all of North Vietnam. Although this order risked the president's planned summit visit to Moscow, the Russians and the Chinese protested in a pro forma way. Still, they did nothing to impede the ongoing diplomatic efforts between Washington and the two Communist powers.

PAVN Launches New Major Attack in An Loc

The air offensive in the north would eventually have a major impact on the enemy, but for the time being, the situation on the ground in South Vietnam continued to worsen. While Quang Tri was falling, the North Vietnamese forces in Binh Long Province prepared for their third major attack on An Loc. On 6 May, a PAVN prisoner from the 9th PLAF Division informed his ARVN captors that his

division commander had been reprimanded for not taking An Loc in April and that the 5th PLAF Division commander had boasted that his troops would take the city in three days. Other intelligence indicated that the E6, 174th, and 275th Regiments of the 5th PLAF Division would attack from the east supported by the 271st and 272d Regiments of the 9th PLAF Division and the 141st and 165th Regiments of the 7th PAVN Division. Defending against these seven regiments were barely 4,000 ARVN troops, of which at least 1,000 were already wounded. The U.S. advisers in the city doubted that the ARVN could hold against a determined assault.

General Hollingsworth believed that the PAVN were readying for another major push on An Loc. He later wrote, "Enemy positions and movements, intensity of antiaircraft fire, and the increase in enemy artillery and rockets against An Loc pointed to an imminent all-out attack." Accordingly, he contacted General Abrams and requested the allocation of as many B–52 sorties as possible to thwart the coming drive. Abrams agreed and decided to send all available B–52s to An Loc. Hollingsworth's staff planned for B–52 strikes every 55 minutes for 24 hours commencing 11 May.

As these events unfolded, Colonel Miller prepared to depart An Loc. Although he wanted to stay to see the battle to its conclusion, the Army had selected him to command a brigade in the 101st Airborne Division back in the United States. On 10 May, Col. Walter F. Ulmer arrived to take command of the American advisers left in the city, and Miller departed on the same helicopter that had brought in his replacement.



B-52s line the runway at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, ready to attack targets in North Vietnam.

By this time, the enemy had initiated preparations for the next attack on the city. On 9 May, PAVN gunners began a two-day artillery barrage that far exceeded anything previously experienced. At 0035 on 11 May, the artillery bombardment began to intensify and for the next four hours, 7,000 rounds—or one shell every five seconds—fell on the ARVN positions inside the city. After a thirty-minute lull in the firing, the barrage began again in earnest at 0500. During the next twelve hours, 10,000 artillery rounds struck the city.

Under cover of these fires, the PAVN commenced their ground assault from all sides of the city, with the main attacks in the north and northwest. The tanks preceded the infantry and forged salients in the ARVN lines; the PAVN infantry attempted to widen these incursions. The PAVN plan was to join the two salients, separate the defenders into enclaves, and defeat them in detail.

Once again, the ARVN soldiers held their ground while U.S. airpower saved the day. MACV declared the situation in An Loc a tactical emergency, and close air support surged. U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine aircraft handlers loaded all available ordnance as aircraft made rapid turnarounds to get back into the air over An Loc to support the defenders. The situation was so critical that the 49th Tactical Fighter Wing, which had deployed from its home base in New Mexico and arrived at Takhli Air Base in Thailand on 10 May, immediately went into action over An Loc without normal familiarization or safety-check flights.

During the battle on 11 May, 297 sorties of tactical air, supported the An Loc defense. Additionally, Spectre gunships and Cobra attack helicopters from Task Force Garry Owen joined in the battle despite the enemy's employment of Soviet-made SA–7 heat-seeking missiles for the first time in South Vietnam. While the gunships and attack helicopters dealt with the PAVN troops in close contact with the ARVN, General Hollingsworth put to good use the pre-planned Arc Light missions, directing a steady stream of more than thirty B–52 strikes against PAVN staging areas beginning on the morning of 11 May.

The battle lasted for four days, but what one adviser termed the "almost ritualistic pattern of action and reaction" was beginning to take a heavy toll on the attackers as well as the defenders. The PAVN's repeated attempts to take An Loc had cost the Communists dearly. Nearly their entire armored force had been destroyed, and

the continual aerial bombardment had shattered or decimated entire infantry units. The beleaguered defenders had held the city against overwhelming odds. General Hollingsworth concluded, "The enemy had lost his capability for further offensive actions in Binh Long Province."

Fighting continued along QL–13 south of An Loc; Lt. Col. Burr M. Wiley, senior adviser of the 31st Regiment, and Lt. Col. Charles Butler, senior adviser of the 33d Regiment, were killed as the ARVN forces fought their way slowly against intense enemy fire. Nevertheless, the South Vietnamese forces advanced up the road. On 8 June, a relief column made up of ARVN troops and paratroopers pushed through enemy blocking positions and linked up with the defenders in the city.



U.S. Army

ARVN soldiers atop a captured T-54.

With the breakthrough on the highway, the intensity of the fighting inside An Loc lessened, but the enemy continued to launch sporadic ground attacks and pound the city with artillery. On 9 July, Brig. Gen. Richard J. Tallman, Hollingsworth's newly promoted deputy, who had succeeded General McGiffert, was killed in An Loc by enemy artillery fire while in the city to finalize

plans for the relief of the 5th ARVN by the 18th ARVN Division. Three of his staff officers who were accompanying him were also killed, and two Army advisers on the ground were wounded by the same shell.

The Battle for Kontum

While these events were unfolding in An Loc, the PAVN in Military Region II, having captured Tan Canh and Dak To, turned their attention to Kontum. It was defended by the 23d ARVN Division, which had moved from its previous base at Ban Me Thuot. The enemy pressure had taken its toll on General Dzu, the II Corps commander. He doubted his forces could hold and spent time calling President Thieu for guidance. Thieu, believing that Dzu had lost his nerve, would eventually replace him on 10 May with Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, the former commander of the ARVN armor branch.

Col. Ly Tong Ba, commander of the 23d ARVN Division, took overall charge of the Kontum defense. His newly arrived senior adviser was Col. R. M. Rhotenberry. Ba initially had only one regiment, the 53d, and the Kontum territorial forces, though his other two regiments would arrive before the heavy fighting began. He also nominally had operational control over an airborne brigade and four ranger battalions, but they tended to maintain communication channels with their parent organizations. Ba's status as the sole colonel commanding a Vietnamese division—normally a job for a general—further weakened his authority over those units, leaving him with the same command and control difficulties that had bedeviled General Giai at Quang Tri.

In the first two weeks of May, the enemy increased the pressure throughout the Kontum area. On 1 May, a ranger battalion occupying blocking positions at Vo Dinh, twenty kilometers northwest of Kontum, came under attack. The ranger group commander ordered them to withdraw to Ngo Trang. On 9 May, the border ranger camp at Polei Kleng fell to a massive tank-infantry assault. By the end of the second week in May, the PAVN were poised to attack the city of Kontum.

On 14 May, the 320th PAVN Division, with two attached regiments, launched the assault. The defenders broke up the initial effort when they took out the lead tanks, but the attack continued for the rest of the day. By nightfall, an enemy battalion had broken through a gap between two of the defending regiments. Two pre-

planned B–52 strikes blunted this penetration, killing several hundred attackers. Kontum was saved for the time being, but it had been very close. Over the next two weeks, the ARVN defenders, supported by B–52s and tactical air support, defeated several more PAVN attempts to take Kontum. With his defensive line holding, Colonel Ba launched limited counterattacks in the areas north and northwest of the city within range of ARVN artillery.

Meanwhile, General Toan, the new corps commander, initiated a major effort on 21 May to clear Route 14 from Pleiku north to Kontum. He sent two ranger groups reinforced with tanks to clear the PAVN blocking position at Chu Pao Pass held by the PAVN 95B Regiment. Despite U.S. air support, including the heavy use of cluster bomb units, the ranger relief column was unsuccessful in opening the road to Kontum.



North Vietnamese artillery crew in action near Kontum.

On 25 May, the PAVN made a last-ditch attempt to take the city. The monsoon season was starting, and the North Vietnamese needed to achieve a quick victory or withdraw for refitting and replenishment. The attack began with extensive artillery preparation followed by two sapper battalion assaults. From the north

and northeast, enemy tanks and infantry attacked and forged a penetration in the ARVN lines. The next day, the Communists tried to reinforce their success, but B–52s once again blunted the PAVN effort.

On 27 May, two PAVN regiments and a tank company attacked the 44th ARVN Regiment in a reserve position near the Kontum hospital. The South Vietnamese defenders fought back, halting the attack, but the enemy retained their position inside the ARVN lines, and by the night of 28 May, the South Vietnamese and the Communist soldiers were engaged in hand-to-hand, house-to-house fighting. However, the PAVN began experiencing resupply problems, and the attrition caused by air strikes and gunships began to take its toll.

Flying in support of the South Vietnamese for the first time were U.S. Army UH–1B helicopters armed with the experimental airborne tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missiles. John Paul Vann, the II Corps senior adviser, had lobbied for and received operational control of a test unit, the 1st Aerial TOW Team, which was rushed to South Vietnam from Fort Lewis, Washington. When Army CWO2 Carroll W. Lain knocked out four tanks on 2 May, he became the first American soldier to fire an American-made guided missile in combat. The aerial TOW team destroyed twenty-four tanks during the first three days of its employment at Kontum.

In addition to the Fort Lewis unit, an experimental team from the 82d Airborne Division armed with TOW missile launchers mounted on M151 jeeps deployed in Kontum at the height of the battle. On the evening of 14 May, TOW gunner Pfc. Angel L. Figueroa knocked out a T–54 along Highway 14, making him the first American soldier to destroy an enemy tank in combat with a jeep-mounted TOW missile.

Having successfully held off the North Vietnamese, Colonel Ba ordered a counterattack, which regained most of the lost territory in and around the city. Kontum was saved again. At 1430 on 30 May, President Thieu flew into Kontum, escorted by several Cobra gunships. As sporadic mortar fire fell, Thieu promoted Ba to brigadier general. Almost 4,000 dead North Vietnamese, along with destroyed tanks and trucks, littered the battlefield.

By the end of July, II Corps had taken back most of the areas previously seized by the PAVN. However, John Paul Vann, who had played such a vital role in the victory in II Corps, did not get

to see the fruits of his labor because he was killed in a helicopter crash near the Chu Pao Pass on 9 June. He was succeeded by Brig. Gen. Michael D. Healy.

Turning the Tide in I Corps

As the battles at An Loc and Kontum unfolded, the North Vietnamese continued their assault in MR I. During April, the 1st ARVN Division turned back several attempts by the 324B PAVN Division to take the western and southwestern approaches to Hue City in Thua Thien Province. These battles were inconclusive, but in the foothills west of Hue, the ARVN defenders managed to forge a defensive line that extended from Camp Evans in the north, through Fire Support Base (FSB) Rakkasan, then southeast through FSBs Bastogne and Checkmate to link up with FSB Birmingham. Bastogne and Checkmate were the keys to this defensive line because they were all that stood between PAVN forces in the west and Hue. These critical positions came under repeated heavy enemy attacks that left the ARVN defenders at both firebases at less than 50 percent strength, but tactical air support prevented the PAVN from overrunning their positions. On 28 April when the sheer weight of the PAVN attack by the 29th and 803d Regiments of the 324B PAVN Division overwhelmed the defenders at FSB Bastogne, the survivors fled to the east. With the fall of Bastogne, FSB Checkmate became untenable, and the defenders there withdrew. The loss of these two bases exposed Hue to a direct enemy attack.



Peter Braestrup Collection Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

John Paul Vann led the Second Regional Assistance Group.

By the first of May, although the ARVN and South Vietnam Marines had

a tenuous hold on Hue in the north and still held An Loc and Kontum, Saigon's strategic position was extremely precarious. After nearly a month of constant heavy fighting that ranged the length of the country, the South Vietnamese were close to breaking. It was a dark hour for Saigon, and national morale was at an all-time low. This was particularly true in Military Region I, where the fall of Quang Tri had been a severe psychological blow to both the military and the local population. The continuing flow of terrified refugees south down Route 1 toward Da Nang had a debilitating effect on the defenders at Hue. Additionally, throngs of deserters and dispirited troops, some from units that no longer existed, "roamed about, haggard, unruly and craving for food"; their presence added to the atmosphere of terror and chaos that reigned throughout Hue.



U.S. Marine Corps

Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong took over command of I Corps as North Vietnamese troops neared Hue.

President Thieu realized that he was in danger of losing Military Region I in its entirety. Accordingly, he replaced General Lam with Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, who had previously been commander of IV Corps in the Mekong Delta. Truong was a well-respected officer who had previously served in Military Region I as 1st Division Commander and knew the area well. Upon his arrival on 3 May, he immediately established a forward headquarters at Hue to take personal charge of the coming battle. Together with the senior U.S. adviser in MR I, General Kroesen—later succeeded by Maj. Gen. Howard H. Cooksey on 30 May—Truong took steps to stabi-

lize the situation, establishing clear-cut lines of command and assigning missions to each I Corps subordinate unit.

Using the three brigades of the Marine Division and two regiments of the 1st ARVN Division, Truong established a defense in depth around Hue, focusing on blocking the PAVN approaches from the west and north. At the same time, he reestablished control inside the city, restoring discipline and order, picking up stragglers and deserters, and assisting the civilian population and refugees. Truong requested and received reinforcements in the form of two South Vietnamese airborne brigades that redeployed from other battle areas in Military Regions II and III.

Once General Truong had stabilized the situation, he launched Operation Song Than (Tidal Wave), a series of limited counterattacks using U.S. helicopters to insert his forces. These attacks by Truong's Marines and two battalions from the 1st ARVN Division retook FSBs Bastogne and Checkmate, as well as several other key areas previously captured by the PAVN. These victories greatly boosted South Vietnamese morale in the region while wearing down the North Vietnamese forces.

Nevertheless, the PAVN was not done yet. On 21 May, they attacked the Marine positions along the My Chanh River. The Marines initially fell back but then stabilized their defensive line. Additional Marines, with the assistance of the U.S. Navy, launched an amphibious landing on 23 May at My Thuy, 10 kilometers north of the defensive line, and a heliborne assault into Co Luy, 6 kilometers west of the coastline. Cobra attack helicopters from the U.S. Army's F Troop, 4th Cavalry, supported the airmobile operation. After several days behind PAVN lines, the Marines returned to their positions along the My Chanh. During these battles, the 324B PAVN Division lost nearly 3,000 dead and some 64 tanks. By the end of May, Truong and his forces had regained the initiative, and with the arrival of an airborne brigade as reinforcements, the I Corps defense was in good shape.

Truong instituted a refitting and retraining program to bolster those South Vietnamese units that had suffered severe losses or had disintegrated during the first two months of the PAVN offensive. The ARVN casualties and materiel losses had been brutal. The 1st Armored Brigade alone had sustained 1,171 casualties and lost 43 M–48 tanks, 66 M–41 tanks, and 103 M–113 armored personnel carriers. I Corps had also lost 140 artillery pieces. The 3d ARVN Division had only a skeletal staff and the survivors of

two regiments remaining, and the ranger battalions had all lost at least half of their original strength.

Truong called on Saigon for assistance in putting his forces back together. In response, the ARVN Central Logistics Command and MACV made almost superhuman efforts to replace the lost equipment. Truong ordered an accelerated training program for the large number of arriving personnel replacements. He also directed that certain units, such as the 20th Tank Squadron, undergo unit retraining.

Once Truong had reconstituted his forces, he prepared an audacious plan to retake Quang Tri. When Truong presented his idea to Thieu, the president told him that it was too ambitious and to conduct a more limited spoiling attack instead. Truong was upset with this decision and returned to Hue very discouraged. The next day, he flew to Saigon and presented a stronger case for his proposal, finally securing Thieu's reluctant approval.

On 28 June, Truong launched Lam Son 72, a two-pronged counteroffensive in which the Airborne Division made the main attack along the southwest side of Route 1 toward La Vang, accompanied by a supporting attack by the Marine Division along Route 555 toward Trieu Phong. While the paratroopers and Marines attacked north, the 1st ARVN Division conducted operations to pin down PAVN forces southwest of Hue, and the 2d ARVN Division conducted search and destroy operations in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. The 3d ARVN Division, having completed its reconstitution and refitting, assumed responsibility for the defense of Da Nang.

The attack north made progress, but as the South Vietnamese forces approached the Thach Han River, PAVN resistance stiffened. On 7 July, as the first airborne elements reached the outskirts of Quang Tri City, the PAVN defenders responded violently, and it became clear that the Communists were planning to defend the city to the last man. As General Truong later explained, ". . .Quang Tri City suddenly became a 'cause celebre'. . .a symbol and a major challenge."

Determined to hold Quang Tri at all costs, the PAVN reinforced the city, and the ARVN drive stalled. By this time, elements of six PAVN divisions were operating in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Truong modified his plan, but the retaking of Quang Tri against these odds became a long, laborious, and bloody process that lasted into September. Using tactical air support, naval

gunfire, artillery, and B–52s, the South Vietnamese continued the attack, but it remained a slow and costly advance.

On 8 September, Truong, seeing an opportunity, ordered an all-out assault by the Airborne and Marine forces. Supported by a diversionary false amphibious assault on a beach north of the mouth of the Cua Viet River by ARVN forces, the attackers made slow but steady progress. It was a fierce fight, but on 16 September, the Marines raised the South Vietnamese flag in the old citadel in the center of the Quang Tri. Truong had retaken the embattled city.

Although fighting continued in all the military regions throughout the rest of the year, it was at a much-reduced level. By the end of September, the Communist Nguyen Hue Offensive was essentially over. The South Vietnamese, despite significant setbacks at the beginning, had held. Unfortunately for Saigon, the RVNAF did not have the strength to eject the remaining North Vietnamese forces from their territory, a situation that would cost South Vietnam dearly in the coming months.

Assessing the Nguyen Hue Campaign

The South Vietnamese forces had held against the PAVN onslaught, but it had been very costly. During the battles that raged in 1972, the RVNAF sustained over 12,000 killed in action, 34,000 wounded, and 15,000 missing in only the first two months of fighting. A closer examination of just one of the major battles demonstrated in more human terms just how much the defense had cost the South Vietnamese. In An Loc, the continuous shelling, estimated at over 78,000 rounds during the three-month battle, had reduced the city to almost total ruin. The fighting forced more than 60,000 refugees from their homes in Binh Long Province, while a large number of civilians were dead or missing. The ARVN defenders in An Loc, numbering about 7,500 with the addition of the Airborne Brigade, had sustained 5,400 casualties, including 2,300 killed or missing. U.S. advisers stated that every man in the 5th ARVN Division was a casualty; even those that survived had sustained one or more wounds during the fighting in An Loc. As one adviser described the city afterward: "The graves, the burned-out vehicles, and the rubble were mute testimony to the intensity of the battle that had been fought there." This situation was repeated in Quang Tri and Kontum, which were left virtually in ruins by the intense fighting.

Despite these costs, the South Vietnamese defenders and their advisers, with the help of tactical airpower, had decisively defeated a massive, multifront PAVN offensive. It is estimated that the North Vietnamese suffered 10,000 soldiers killed and 15,000 wounded during the battle at An Loc alone. Allied intelligence put the total PAVN killed in action at over 100,000. The fighting resulted in the destruction of more than 450 tanks, almost the entire PAVN armored force, innumerable artillery pieces, trucks, and other vehicles.

Interrogation of PAVN prisoners indicated the extent of the Communist defeat. In An Loc, for example, a prisoner from the 95C Regiment of the 9th PLAF Division reported on 10 June that only thirty to forty men remained in each battalion in his regiment. He said that his unit's battalion commander and all company commanders had been killed. Prisoners from the 141st and 165th Regiments of the 7th PAVN Division reported their outfits almost 100 percent destroyed. Losses were similar in most of the North Vietnamese units, particularly those involved in the bitter fighting at Quang Tri and Kontum.

Despite North Vietnamese casualties and equipment losses, the 1972 Nguyen Hue offensive was at least partially successful for the Communists. One of the objectives was to seize territory. In a sense, that was done for Communist troops to retain control of some of the ground taken in the south, putting Hanoi in a good position when the negotiated cease-fire went into effect in 1973. The other area in which the offensive was somewhat successful was its impact on the pacification program. As Craig Whitney reported in the *New York Times*, ". . .the [South Vietnamese] strategic reserve force was inadequate, and the government has had to deprive many relatively pacified areas of the country of their regular defenses" to throw them into the fighting. Thus, the offensive achieved two of its goals.

However, the offensive failed to land the knock-out blow that Hanoi had desired. The South Vietnamese stood up against the onslaught and remained intact as a nation and a military force. Observers could point to several reasons why the offensive did not overwhelm the Saigon regime and its armed forces. First, the North Vietnamese underestimated the effectiveness of U.S. airpower. Although most of the American ground combat troops were gone and those that remained were not a factor in thwarting the PAVN offensive, air support in its many forms, including Army aviation,



An A-7 prepares to take off from the USS *Constellation* to provide air support for the South Vietnamese Military.

was still available, and President Nixon was not reluctant to use it to assist the South Vietnamese in turning back the Communist invasion.

Nixon's use of airpower directly against North Vietnam was also a contributing factor toward blunting the enemy offensive. *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, the PAVN's official military newspaper, admitted the serious damage done to North Vietnam's transportation and communications systems and to her industrial production capacity in a three-part series of articles published during the first week of June.

Second, the North Vietnamese plan was flawed strategically. In an attempt to overwhelm the South Vietnamese at three critical points, the PAVN dispersed its main force units and permitted President Thieu to move his strategic reserve forces around the country to employ them where and when they were most needed to counter the offensive. Elements of the ARVN Airborne Division first went to An Loc and then Military Region II before redeploying to I Corps to assist ultimately in the action that retook Quang Tri. Had Hanoi focused the preponderance of North Vietnamese forces

at one point of attack, Thieu would have had difficulty mustering sufficient combat power to overcome the sheer numbers that the PAVN could have brought to bear. By conducting a three-pronged assault, North Vietnamese planners diluted their forces, and when they came up against heavy South Vietnamese resistance at An Loc and Kontum, they did not have the reserves to overcome the opposition and maintain the momentum. Additionally, the three prongs were difficult to sustain logistically. The PAVN required almost a week to resupply its forces after taking Loc Ninh, delaying its attack on An Loc and giving the defenders much-needed time to prepare their defenses. During the battle of Kontum, one U.S. adviser with the 44th ARVN Regiment found an abandoned PAVN T–54 tank with no apparent damage. Upon closer examination, the gas tanks were empty.

A fourth explanation for the failed enemy offensive was that the North Vietnamese high command focused on terrain objectives like An Loc and Kontum, letting their forces become involved in battles of attrition long after the significance of those objectives had passed. For example, the defenders at An Loc tied down three PAVN divisions who continued the pursuit of what was only a psychological victory when they could have bypassed the city and driven down QL–13 to threaten Saigon directly.

The outcome also can be traced to several North Vietnamese tactical errors. Although the PAVN employed large numbers of Soviet and Chinese-made tanks, they continually demonstrated the inability to coordinate the use of infantry and armor in the attack. Lt. Gen. Tran Van Quang, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the North Vietnamese Army, in a report on the conduct of the offensive in June 1972, acknowledged this situation, saying: ". . . . we still have not sufficiently established a clear system of command and control of our forces. . .among a number of our commanders, there is a lack of high-quality tactical training and combat experience. . . . These represent the main reasons for the heavy losses of our forces."

The result of this lack of training and experience in handling combined arms in the attack was that the PAVN, rather than take advantage of the inherent shock action and ability of armor to conduct deep thrusts into enemy lines, repeatedly used the tanks hesitantly and primarily as infantry support vehicles against heavily prepared defensive positions. Thus, the North Vietnamese forfeited the advantages of this capability. Once the South Vietnamese

overcame the initial shock of facing tanks and saw how easily they could destroy them with light antitank weapons, particularly in city fighting, they were successful in most cases in handling the enemy armor. Had the PAVN been more skillful in coordinating infantry and armor, they probably could have overrun the ARVN defenders in several instances.

The nature of the tactics the North Vietnamese used was also problematic. Enjoying superior numbers in most of the key battles, the PAVN commanders squandered their soldiers in repetitive human wave assaults. Massing for such attacks made them lucrative targets for B–52s and tactical air support, which wrought devastation on them, often saving the day for the South Vietnamese defenders. The attrition caused by the human wave attacks was a major factor in the loss of momentum for the North Vietnamese.

The last and maybe the most significant contributor to the defeat of the North Vietnamese invasion was that the leadership in Hanoi underestimated the ability of the South Vietnamese forces to endure the intense level of combat against overwhelming odds for a protracted time. Based on their experience fighting the ARVN in Laos during Lam Son 719, the PAVN leadership expected their opponent to fold under the weight of the fourteen-division attack. When the South Vietnamese, backed by their advisers and massive amounts of U.S. air support, managed to hold on, the PAVN became bogged down in meaningless battles that severely diminished their combat power over time.

In the wake of the offensive, Nixon proclaimed the success of Vietnamization, noting that the strategy successfully met the test in that the South Vietnamese forces had halted the enemy's offensive while the government in Saigon had continued to function and respond to the challenge during and after the crisis. The South had indeed withstood the Northern onslaught, but it had been a near thing that could have gone either way. The South Vietnamese had fought well in many cases, but in others, they had not.

In the end, General Abrams observed that "American airpower and not South Vietnamese arms" had been decisive and caused the North Vietnamese defeat. However, the Nixon administration said very little publicly about the role of airpower or the part that the American advisers had played. For better or worse, the South Vietnamese victory validated Vietnamization, at least as far as Nixon and Kissinger were concerned. This became one of the

underlying rationales for complete U.S. withdrawal and Nixon's "peace with honor."

Continued Drawdown and Peace Talks in Paris

During the late summer and early fall of 1972, as the South Vietnamese forces and their Allies pushed back the North Vietnamese, MACV continued to withdraw U.S. troops and equipment, as did the Free World Military Forces of Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. On 11 August, the last U.S. ground combat unit in South Vietnam, the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, Task Force Gimlet, was inactivated, along with G Battery, 29th Field Artillery. The 3d Battalion's Delta Company had completed its last patrol on 5 August, ending the U.S. Army infantry war in Vietnam. It had been seven years and five months since the Marines stormed ashore on Red Beach south of DaNang on 8 March 1965. Now only about 60,000 advisers, airmen, and support troops remained in-country. By 1 October, that contingent would shrink by half.

The U.S. advisory mission continued, but the number of advisers steadily declined. They still served on mobile training teams for infantry, armor, artillery, and ranger battalion refresher training. Additionally, other U.S. personnel provided new equipment training for TOW missiles, XM 202 flame rockets, and other recently arrived weapon systems. Advisers remained with the ARVN and Marine divisions, but the teams were drastically reduced in size by September.

As the invasion unfolded, the peace talks continued in Paris. In the early days of the new offensive, with North Vietnamese troops advancing on all fronts, the negotiators from Hanoi were intractable. However, as the tide began to turn on the battlefield, the Communists became more open to compromise. By early October 1972, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, the head of the North Vietnamese delegation, were close to a cease-fire agreement. On 26 October, Kissinger declared, "We believe that peace is at hand. We believe that an agreement is within sight." This proved to be premature.

That same day, Radio Hanoi officially announced the peace terms and accused Nixon and Kissinger of delaying the settlement to rush aid to South Vietnam. Some truth existed in this claim because, in an attempt to get President Thieu to agree to the terms of the proposed peace agreement, President Nixon approved a new plan to win over the South Vietnamese president. This plan, called Operation Enhance Plus, involved a massive airlift of military



Supplies from the Enhance Plus program in a storage area.

equipment to South Vietnam to bolster the RVNAF's combat capability, just as an earlier operation, Enhance, had provided new weapons and equipment to replace what was lost by the RVNAF during the Easter Offensive. Between 23 October and 12 December, the U.S. turned over 277 UH–1H helicopters, 117 M113 armored personnel carriers, 32 C–130A Hercules transport planes, and 72 M48A3 tanks to the South Vietnamese forces.

Concurrent with Enhance Plus, U.S. forces began transferring installations and associated equipment to the South Vietnamese. The ARVN assumed responsibility for port operations at Cam Ranh on 1 September and Da Nang on 1 October. Similarly, in September, the RVNAF took control of the last two major U.S. bulk POL systems at Da Nang and Long Binh. On 11 November, the U.S. handed over the massive base at Long Binh, once the largest American military facility outside the continental United States. By the end of the year, the U.S. and its Free World Allies relinquished or dismantled 318 installations.

Planning for the Cease-Fire

With a peace agreement pending, preparation began for the implementation of the cease-fire and the final withdrawal of American

troops from Vietnam. Prior to his 26 October press conference, Kissinger had described the draft accord to General Frederick C. Weyand, who replaced Abrams as the head of MACV on 30 June. Kissinger directed Weyand to devise a plan to create two supervisory bodies, the Four-Party Joint Military Committee and the Two-Party Joint Military Committee. The first would consist of representatives from the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government. It would deal with the cease-fire, the American troop withdrawal, and the prisoner of war exchange. The second group, comprised of South Vietnam and the Viet Cong, would focus on political issues.

Weyand assigned his chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Gilbert H. Woodward, the task of forming the joint military committees. His planners included a marine, Col. George T. Balzer and Army Maj. Paul L. Miles, both from MACV Plans and Operations Division. By early November, they worked out the general organization and functions of the two bodies. Others in MACV sketched out the plans for the final withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam and for MACV's successor military organizations.

In mid-October, the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed General Weyand to devise a plan for redeploying all U.S. forces within sixty days of a cease-fire. This effort included forming two new organizations to succeed MACV when it stood down. The new Defense Attaché Office would handle ongoing American military assistance to South Vietnam and a joint U.S. Support Activities Group/7th Air Force Headquarters, to be established



General Weyland, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 30 June 1972–29 March 1973.

in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, would assume responsibility for conducting post–cease-fire air and naval operations in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Weyand directed Maj. Gen. Jack C. Fuson, MACV Director of Logistics, to take charge of both the MACV drawdown and the transition to the two new organizations. Fuson formed a planning group headed by Col. Raymond L. Branch. The staff officers developed Operation Plan J215, initially named Operation Thunderbolt in honor of General Abrams, but subsequently retitled Operation Countdown.

Operation Countdown consisted of three phases. The first encompassed the period leading up to X-Day, day one of the cease-fire. During this timeframe, U.S. forces in Vietnam would stand down, the Support Activities Group/7th Air Force advance staff would move to Nakhon Phanom, and MACV would complete all remaining equipment and facilities transfers to the South Vietnamese.

During Phase II, X-Day to X+45, most American and Free World troops would depart. Additionally, the rest of the Support Activities Group/7th Air Force Headquarters would move to Nakhon Phanom, the Defense Attaché Office would commence operations, and MACV would relinquish most of its functions to the two new agencies and the Embassy in Saigon.

During Phase III, X+45 to X+60, the Defense Attaché Office and the Support Activities Group/7th Air Force Headquarters would go into full operation. The remaining U.S. forces, less those assigned to the Defense Attaché Office, would depart and the Headquarters MACV would inactivate. The planning group published Operations Plan J215 in early November when the cease-fire appeared imminent, but difficulties in the Paris peace talks gave MACV additional time to complete Phase I and prepare for the subsequent periods.

Breakdown of Paris Talks and Operation Linebacker II

After a landslide victory in the election in November, Nixon focused on concluding the negotiations and achieving a cease-fire in Vietnam. A large part of this effort would be to convince Thieu to support the outcome of the talks and the subsequent peace settlement. The South Vietnamese president was afraid that the accord would not benefit his country and raised new objections. Nixon made repeated promises that the United States would

support its ally if Thieu agreed to the eventual settlement, but the South Vietnamese leader was adamant and presented Kissinger with a list of sixty-nine amendments to the agreement.

Kissinger passed Thieu's demands to Le Duc Tho in Paris, and Tho balked, replying that "if these changes were presented as an ultimatum, the war would go on for another four years." The North Vietnamese negotiators asked for time to consider the proposed revisions and ended the meeting. On 21 November, Tho rejected most of the changes and introduced several new demands of his own. The talks bogged down; Kissinger suggested a recess on 25 November. The two sides agreed to meet again on 4 December.

The negotiations resumed on schedule, but the discussion accomplished very little. On 13 December, Le Duc Tho broke off the talks, saying he needed to return to Hanoi for consultation. Kissinger returned to Washington and recommended to Nixon that the United States increase the pressure on Hanoi to bring the negotiations to a head.

Deciding that only swift and decisive action would break the stalemate, Nixon ordered the commencement of Operation Linebacker II, a conventional bombing campaign of North Vietnam accompanied by replenishment of the U.S. Navy mines previously sown in the approaches to Haiphong Harbor. He intended to hammer the Communists back to the negotiating table. Additionally, Nixon wanted to break the enemy's will and damage North Vietnam's war-making capability so that it would have to postpone another major invasion of the South indefinitely. By ordering the new bombing, Nixon hoped to convince President Thieu that if he signed the agreement, the United States could and would inflict heavy punishment if Hanoi violated the terms of the cease-fire.

Operation Linebacker II commenced on 18 December and continued for eleven days. Throughout the campaign, B–52 bombers flew 729 sorties, dropping 15,237 tons of ordnance on 89 military and industrial targets, while Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps fighter-bombers contributed a total of 1,216 sorties and delivered more than 5,000 tons of bombs. The attacks focused on Hanoi and Haiphong, but also struck other targets in the surrounding area that included power generating plants, railroad marshaling yards, truck parks, canals, and roads.

On 22 December, Nixon sent Hanoi a message that he would suspend bombing north of the 20th parallel beginning on

31 December if the North Vietnamese would agree to resume the talks in Paris by 3 January. Hanoi did not respond, so, after a brief stand-down on Christmas, he launched the heaviest attack to date on 26 December. Shortly thereafter, Hanoi sent a message requesting the resumption of the talks on 8 January. After an exchange of diplomatic messages, the North Vietnamese agreed to commence technical negotiations on 2 January, and on 29 December, Nixon announced the cessation of LINEBACKER II.

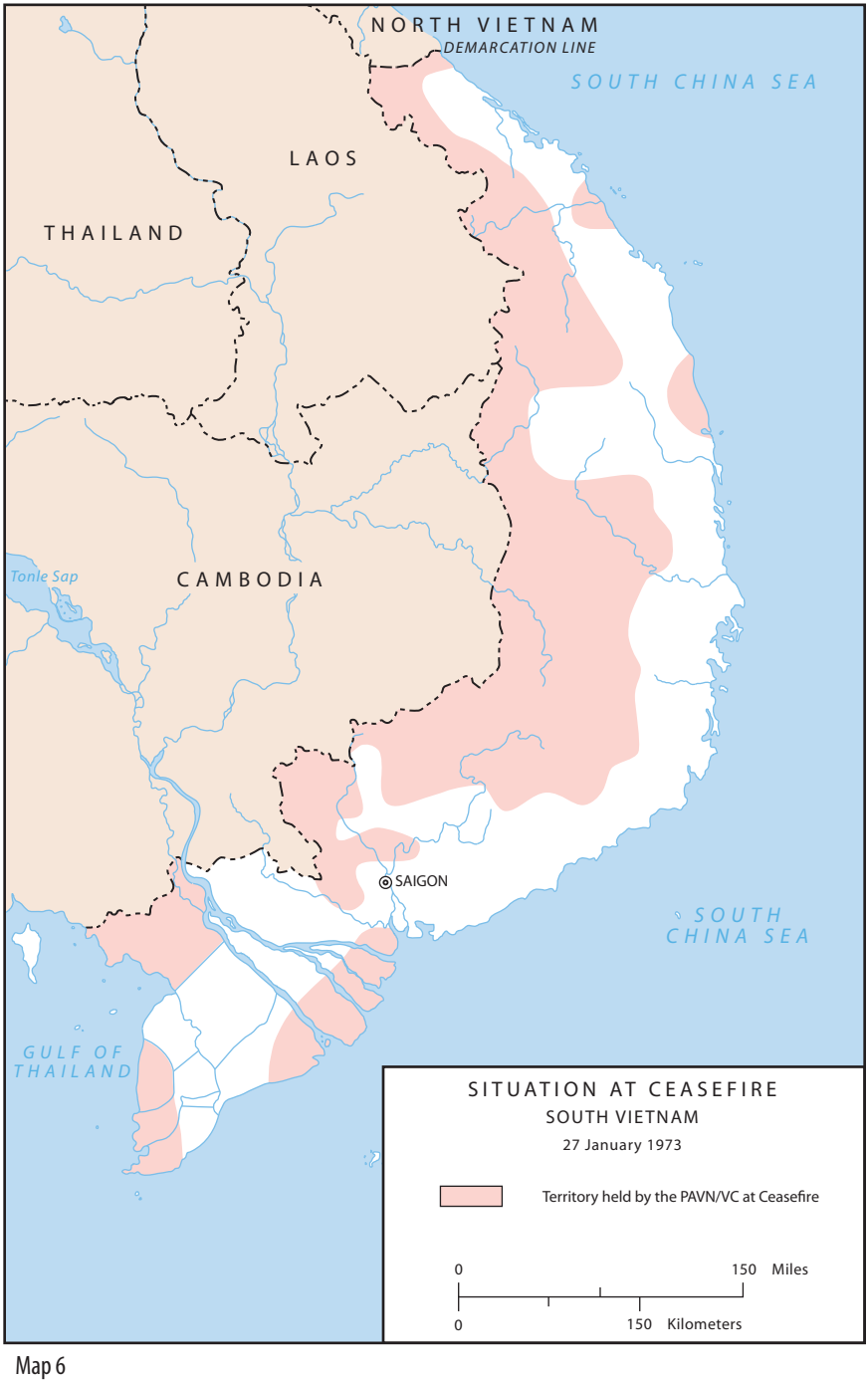
Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho in Paris on 8 January and quickly worked out the remaining details of the agreement. The terms were essentially the same as those previously agreed to in late October, with no new concessions by the North Vietnamese. Again, Thieu balked. Nixon sent General Alexander M. Haig to tell the South Vietnamese president that he needed to get on board or the United States would sign the agreement without him. A chastened Thieu acquiesced.

Kissinger and Tho initialed the "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam" on 23 January 1973, but that did not mean the fighting was over. Under the terms of the accord, a cease-fire in place went into effect at 2400 Greenwich Mean Time, on 27 January. On the eve of the cease-fire, a flurry of combat erupted as the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese launched simultaneous offensives to grab as much territory as they could while they still had the opportunity to do so. The last American to die before the cease-fire was Lt. Col. William B. Nolde, Binh Long province senior adviser, who was killed by North Vietnamese artillery fire in An Loc just eleven hours before the shooting stopped (*Map 6*).

Although the peace agreement eventually ended the fighting, at least for a brief time, it was fatally flawed. The terms mandated the departure of all remaining U.S. forces from Vietnam but did not address the estimated 100,000 PAVN troops still in the South. The Communists could be easily reinforced once the Americans left. In many cases throughout the country, South and North Vietnamese forces were separated only by the width of a road. This problem played a major role in the events that would unfold over the next two years.

U.S. DEPARTURE

Under the terms of the peace agreement, the United States agreed to "stop all its military activities against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" and remove remaining American troops,


NORTH VIETNAM
DEMARCATION LINE
SOUTH CHINA SEA
LAOS
THAILAND
Tonle Sap
CAMBODIA
SAIGON
SOUTH CHINA SEA
GULF OF THAILAND
SITUATION AT CEASEFIRE
SOUTH VIETNAM
27 January 1973
Territory held by the PAVN/VC at Ceasefire
0
150 Miles
0
150 Kilometers

Map 6

including advisers, from South Vietnam within sixty days. That process began on 28 January 1973. The last MACV units in South Vietnamese included a handful of Army air cavalry troops, helicopter companies, military police battalions, and two Marine combat aircraft squadrons. These troops—about 23,000 personnel—departed South Vietnam in four increments.

On 27 February, CORDS disbanded. With the implementation of the cease-fire, the U.S. advisory groups ceased operation. The Defense Attaché Office (DAO) assumed some of those functions, primarily those having to do with the maintenance and operation of new equipment. The four regional assistance commands dissolved. This ended the direct U.S. assistance, influence, and advice to the RVNAF field elements throughout South Vietnam. Responsibility for reporting and monitoring the military situation shifted to the DAO.

The last U.S. combat unit, the 1st Aviation Brigade, departed Vietnam on 28 March. The next day, in a ceremony at Tan Son Nhut, General Weyand formally inactivated U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. At the same time, Hanoi released the last sixty-one American POWs known to be held by North Vietnam.

President Nixon went on national television and radio to report that "for the first time in twelve years, no American forces are in Vietnam. All our POWs are on their way home. The seventeen million people of South Vietnam have the right to choose their government without outside interference, and because of our program of Vietnamization, they have the strength to defend that right. We have prevented the imposition of a Communist government by force on South Vietnam." The longest war in U.S. history up to that time was over, at least for the Americans.

Aftermath

It was not over for the South Vietnamese; they were now on their own. The only residual U.S. military presence in South Vietnam was the Defense Attaché Office under Maj. Gen. John E. Murray, U.S. Army. The DAO included 50 officers and approximately 1,200 American civilians, many of whom were retired middle and higher-ranking officers. Its mission was to manage and control the resupply, maintenance, and contractor support for the remaining U.S. logistics programs in support of the South Vietnamese government and military. Additionally, DAO was to provide technical assistance in such areas as communications and

intelligence but, per the cease-fire agreement, provide no advice on military operations or tactics.

Shortly after the cease-fire went into effect, the fighting again broke out as each side continued to jockey for control of territory in what became known as the "War of Flags." While the PAVN fought to expand its footprint, Hanoi also began to rebuild the North Vietnamese forces in the south, sending the first of more than 100,000 replacements in the first year after the Paris agreement. In addition, Hanoi began to dispatch tanks and artillery to replace the losses of 1972.

The fighting escalated quickly to a high level of intensity. According to one estimate, 80,000 Vietnamese on both sides were killed during the first year of "peace." South Vietnamese combat losses in 1973 were the third highest of the war, after 1968 and 1972. For the rest of 1973 and most of 1974, the North and South Vietnamese fought each other all over South Vietnam, and the battles extended into Cambodia.

The situation for the South began to worsen in the second half of 1974. Nixon had coerced Thieu into acquiescing to the Paris Accords, promising that the United States would come to the aid of the South Vietnamese if North Vietnam tried another major offensive. With this in mind, and using weapons and materiel stockpiled during 1972, the South Vietnamese initially held their own against the North Vietnamese in 1973 and the early months of 1974. However, Thieu had no one to turn to for support as these reserves began to dwindle. Nixon, reeling from the impact of the Watergate investigation, was fighting for his political life and was unable to generate any interest in Congress in the plight of South Vietnam and its people. On 9 August 1974, he resigned from the presidency. Thieu and his countrymen had always relied on Nixon's promises to intervene if the North Vietnamese violated the cease-fire. His successor, President Gerald R. Ford, promised that "the existing commitments this nation has made in the past are still valid and will be fully honored in my administration."

This was a guarantee that Ford could not keep, given the prevailing sentiment in Congress. When Hanoi decided to test the South Vietnamese with a limited attack against Phuoc Long Province, the ARVN fought poorly. The North Vietnamese routed the defenders, killing or capturing 3,000 soldiers, taking control of vast quantities of war materiel, and "liberating" the entire province. The Ford administration did not respond.



President Ford directs a meeting of the National Security Council.

Both Saigon and Hanoi were shocked; this was the first entire province to fall since Quang Tri in the 1972 offensive. Thieu finally realized that without the promised American support, his forces were relegated to fighting a "poor man's war" while the North Vietnamese, still being resupplied by China and the Soviet Union, got stronger every day. Army historian Graham Cosmas noted that when the U.S. Congress reduced appropriations for military assistance to South Vietnam, the cuts "induced a sense of abandonment and defeatism at all levels of South Vietnamese society."

The North Vietnamese decided that the time was ready for a knockout blow. Believing that the United States would not or could not intervene, they planned a two-year strategy that called for a large-scale offensive in 1975 to create conditions for a "general offensive, general uprising" in 1976. Called "Campaign 275," it targeted the Central Highlands. The North Vietnamese launched the operation on 10 March 1975 with an attack on Ban Me Thuot. They overran the city in two days and then turned their attention to Pleiku and Kontum. The South Vietnamese, realizing they were on their own without any hope of U.S. support, fell back in panic. When Thieu decided to shorten his lines by withdrawing his troops

from Kontum and Pleiku, supposedly to concentrate his forces for a major effort to retake Ban Me Thuot, the retreat rapidly turned into a rout. While the PAVN forces in the Highlands attacked the fleeing South Vietnamese, additional Communist troops in the northern provinces drove southward from Quang Tri. Within just a few weeks, the North Vietnamese had captured most of Military Regions I and II, effectively destroying or routing one-half of the South Vietnamese Army.

President Ford attempted to secure additional funding for the foundering South Vietnamese. He sent General Weyand, who had succeeded Abrams as the Army Chief of Staff, to South Vietnam to make a first-hand appraisal. Weyand reported that the situation was rapidly deteriorating and that something had to be done quickly to preclude a total South Vietnamese collapse. Ford sent a bipartisan Congressional delegation to Saigon, hoping they would return and convince their colleagues to authorize funds to come to the aid of the South Vietnamese. However, this ploy did not work, and Congress rebuffed Ford's attempts to secure additional support for Saigon.

The North Vietnamese continued their attack southward as the coastal cities and bases fell in rapid succession, often without much of a fight. On 21 April, President Thieu resigned as the South Vietnamese forces fell back in disarray. By the last week in April 1975, despite a valiant stand by the 18th ARVN Division at Xuan Loc northeast of Saigon, the Communists had closed on the capital and begun to prepare for their final assault, which would become known as the "Ho Chi Minh Campaign."

In the early morning hours of 29 April, the North Vietnamese began a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut air base. During the bombardment, two U.S. Marine security guards were killed. L. Cpl. Darwin Judge and Cpl. Charles McMahon Jr. were the last American servicemen to die in the Vietnam War. The rocket attack on the airfield was followed by shelling from long-range 130-mm. guns located near Nhon Trach. Chaos broke out as South Vietnamese soldiers and airmen tried to board anything that flew to escape. The South Vietnamese Air Force disintegrated; 132 aircraft escaped to U Tapao air base in Thailand. In its final assessment, the DAO reported that the situation at Tan Son Nhut "signaled the complete loss of command and control" of the air force "and magnified the continued deterioration of an already volatile situation."

While desperation and terror reigned at Tan Son Nhut, President Ford convened a meeting of his advisers in the White House. After much discussion, Ford directed the implementation of the final phases of Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of American civilians and "at-risk" South Vietnamese citizens from Saigon. Artillery and rocket attacks had effectively ruled out Tan Son Nhut for any further evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft, so the only way out was by helicopter. Over the next several days, U.S. helicopters airlifted some 7,100 American and South Vietnamese personnel out of the city, many of them from the grounds of the U.S. Embassy.

The North Vietnamese columns advanced on the center of the city, encountering very little resistance. The Saigon military command virtually ceased to exist. A reporter who observed the disintegration of the South Vietnamese armed forces and the civil government in Saigon later wrote: "Like a puppet no longer supported by its strings, the whole government apparatus of Saigon was collapsing. There was no order, no army, no authority other than that of the guns and weapons that many, a great many still had and were using."

Just after 0500 on 30 April, Ambassador Graham Martin, carrying the furled American flag he had taken from his office, departed by Marine CH–46 helicopter for the USS *Blue Ridge*, standing off the coast in the South China Sea. At 1024, President Duong Van Minh announced the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Vietnam.

By 1200, tanks from General Dung's 2d Corps rumbled through the outskirts of Saigon and rolled into the city unimpeded, followed by open trucks full of heavily armed PAVN soldiers. One armored column rolled down Thong Nhut Avenue across Cong Ly Boulevard, and crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon. The war was over. The demoralized South Vietnamese forces had collapsed in less than fifty-five days. Vietnamization had failed its ultimate test.

Analysis

When PAVN soldiers pulled down the South Vietnamese flag atop the Palace on 30 April 1975, U.S. involvement in South Vietnam ended. U.S. Army personnel initially arrived in Saigon in 1950. They were followed first by a wave of advisers and then a massive

influx of U.S. combat units, eventually numbering over 543,000 personnel by April 1969.

The United States had deployed Army and Marine ground combat troops to stave off the defeat of the fledgling nation. This resulted in bitter fighting that raged for almost a decade. The 1968 Tet Offensive, although a stunning defeat for the Communists on the battlefield, influenced the decision of President Lyndon Johnson not to run for reelection, paving the way for the victory of Richard Nixon in the presidential election. The new president initiated a policy of turning over the war to South Vietnam so the United States could disengage and withdraw its troops. This effort took more than three years. In the final analysis, Vietnamization provided a suitable—at least from the American perspective—cover for the withdrawal of the United States from South Vietnam. Still, it was an incomplete strategy that failed in its stated objective: to prepare the South Vietnamese to defend themselves after the departure of U.S. troops.

In 1973, MACV left the South Vietnamese armed forces in much better shape than they had been in years; they were much larger, better equipped, and a more capable force than when the RVNAF was first established. However, they were still plagued by the same problems of weak and corrupt leadership and uneven tactical performance that had been present since the beginning. The Vietnamization effort had not changed this situation. While the South Vietnamese performance in 1972 demonstrated that they could withstand a North Vietnamese invasion with U.S. advice and air support, when those props disappeared, they could not stand on their own.

Once the North Vietnamese began their offensive in December 1974, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces found themselves abandoned by the United States and performed abysmally in a fight that turned out to be for the very survival of their nation.

The war was lost on the battlefield by the South Vietnamese, but that does not absolve the United States of its share of the responsibility for the debacle. Despite gains in preparing the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for the war, the job was not finished. Nevertheless, the United States rushed to sign the Paris Peace Accords, leaving more than 100,000 North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam. Later, when the Communists launched a new general offensive, the United States failed to live up to the commitments made by Nixon, dooming the armed forces of South

Vietnam. Abandoned by the United States, the army that had become so dependent on American firepower and support lost its will and was unable to fight on its own without the promised assistance. Despite all the time and treasure expended in getting them ready to defend themselves, the South Vietnamese forces proved woefully inadequate for the task when abandoned by the United States.

Arguably, the situation may have been different had the United States demanded that North Vietnamese forces be withdrawn from South Vietnam in 1973 at the same time American troops left the country. This had initially been one of the U.S. goals at the talks, but this demand quietly faded when it became clear that Hanoi would never agree to such terms. Therefore, the remnants of the forces that attacked at Eastertime in 1972 remained in place in the south.

Still, the situation might have been saved if the United States continued to provide the promised long-term support it had to the Republic of Korea, but such was not the case. In the end, the flawed Peace Accords, and the failure of the U.S. government to honor promises made by two presidents proved to be the undoing of the South Vietnamese. Vietnamization extricated the United States from Vietnam but failed to ensure the continued viability of its ally in Saigon. Perhaps Col. Herbert Y. Schandler, Vietnam veteran and scholar, said it best when he wrote, "Peace with honor glossed over the ineffable strategic reality of the American Vietnam war: American withdrawal from the war and the survival of the South Vietnamese government. . .had always been contradictory objectives."

The long years of war in Vietnam left an indelible mark on the U.S. Army. After more than a decade of combat in South Vietnam and over 58,000 Americans killed in the fighting, two-thirds of them soldiers, the Army returned home, not as a victor but as a force that had done the best job it could under challenging circumstances. However, as historian Richard Stewart suggests, the Army, given the outcome, "could not escape being tarnished by its ally's fall." The war had taken its toll on the Army as an institution on several levels. In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and the subsequent collapse of Saigon, the Army had to find its way forward while recovering from the painful legacy of the war.

The Author

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Willbanks holds a B.A. in history from Texas A&M University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in history from the University of Kansas. He is the author or editor of twenty-three books and monographs, including *Abandoning Vietnam* (2004), *The Battle of An Loc, 1972* (2005), *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (2006), and *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (2014).

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