THE FINAL COLLAPSE



INDOCHINA MONOGRAPHS

THE FINAL COLLAPSE

by

GENERAL CAO VAN VIEN



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Foreword

General Cao Van Vien was the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. For almost ten years he worked closely with other senior Vietnamese officers and civilian leaders and dealt with U.S. military and civilian representatives in Saigon. General Vien is therefore particularly well qualified to give an account of the final years from a South Vietnamese standpoint. The views and conclusions are his and not necessarily those of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense.

This is one of a series of monographs written by officers who held responsible positions in the Cambodian, Laotian, and South Vietnamese armed forces. The General Research Corporation provided writing facilities and related support under an Army contract with the Center of Military History. The center published the other monographs informally and distributed them to major research libraries. It was felt, however, that General Vien's book would have a wider audience and deserved formal publication and sale.

The center also published *Vietnam From Cease-Fire to Capitulation* by Col. William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, who tells the story with somewhat more attention to the American side.

None of the authors attempted even semidefinitive accounts, but all wrote a few years after the end of the war while the events were still fresh in their memories. They have provided useful, sometimes invaluable information and source material for serious historians, including those working on the forthcoming U.S. Army in Vietnam series.

Washington, D.C.
June 21, 1982

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

Preface

This monograph presents the significant events during the last years and months of the Republic of Vietnam. This was not an easy assignment. For nearly a decade before Saigon fell on 30 April 1975, I had served as chairman of the Joint General Staff of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. During these years, I had overseen their growth and shared their victories as well as their setbacks. I felt what a mother must feel when her child suddenly dies an accidental death. My feeling of loss has been overwhelming.

It is a sad story indeed that the reader will find unfolding chapter after chapter in this monograph. As a principal actor and witness, I find it a moral obligation to tell it as it was, for the sake of history and for all those who died for a cause in which they believed. Events have been reconstructed as far as it is possible from my personal knowledge, interviews with responsible officers, and from available documents. To place my story in its proper historical perspective, I have thought it appropriate to begin with a brief summary of military and political events in the wake of the 1972 Communist offensive, then the circumstances in which the Paris Agreement was signed. As I view it, the agreement was the turning point which set South Vietnam on its inexorable course toward growing weakness and, finally, total collapse.

I am thankful for the valuable contributions and assistance provided by all the individuals involved in this project, without whom this monograph could hardly have been written. I am especially indebted to Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, my former chief of staff, and Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, commander of I Corps, for their wealth of accurate information and their critical view of events that occurred not only in their realms of responsibility but also elsewhere. Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, assistant chief of staff J-3, and Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung, assistant chief of staff J-2, of the Joint General Staff. Each in his own field of expertise contributed extensive data and deep insight concerning friendly and enemy activities. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh, commander of the 3d Infantry Division,

offered thoughtful comments and contributions concerning significant events.

A special debt of gratitude is owed Lt. Col. Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Colonel Vien, the last army attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing and also assisted with the development of the introduction. Ms. Bong, formerly a captain in the Republic of Vietnam armed forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing and editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form. Finally, to all those who provided assistance and support in one form or another but whose names do not figure here, I must say a special word of thanks. That this story could be put together and presented in its final form is entirely due to collective work for which I cannot rightly claim all credit.

CAO VAN VIEN
General, ARVN

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THE FINAL COLLAPSE

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When the Republic of Vietnam collapsed on 30 April 1975 and ceased to exist as a nation, the world at large—friend and foe alike—was taken aback. The rapidity and relative ease with which the Communists took over South Vietnam struck many people, the enemy included, as something unbelievable. How could it be possible? they asked. Why did South Vietnam go under so readily? What happened to the Vietnamese armed forces and the same army that had withstood so gallantly the two ferocious Communist onslaughts of 1968 and 1972? Why did such a powerful army crumble so easily in a matter of days?

The questions are many, but the answers are difficult to obtain. Indeed, to answer all those questions in depth and objectively is not an easy task. The violent emotions and traumatic experience of such a tragic loss may tend to blur or even distort the true facts. Then too, feelings of guilt, or the instinct of self-preservation of the principals involved, has made it hard to sort out fact from fiction, truth from pretense. While the most immediate causes of the final collapse can readily be identified in the events that built toward it, there are several other causal factors—some deep-rooted and distant, others untold or merely implied in the various accounts.

As a nation, Vietnam has a long and arduous record of survival. Aside from the succession of monarchical dynasties, its history is mostly an account of wars fought to resist invasion. For Vietnam, a small country at the southern periphery of the gigantic "Empire of the Middle," lived under constant threats of subjugation. A thousand years of Chinese annexation, nine hundred years of independence, nearly one hundred years of French domination, and thirty years of internecine fighting make up the Vietnamese historical experience. During the long Chinese domination, three significant insurrections in A.D. 39, 248, and 542 by local leaders—the Trung sisters, Trieu Au, and Ly Bon, respectively—failed to regain national independence. But the Vietnamese tenaciously resisted complete assimilation even though the Chinese imposed

their own political system, their customs, and their education and language. It is no small wonder that Vietnam finally emerged from this as a free and independent nation with a culture still largely intact.

Independence began with the Ngo dynasty in 939. This was a prosperous and glorious period of Vietnamese history. During the first six centuries, our forefathers of the Le, Ly, and Tran dynasties successfully expanded the national territory southward to Champa, a belligerent and piratical kingdom, which was annexed in 1471. Under the outstanding leadership of Tran Hung Dao, our gallant troops and militia drove back massive Mongol invasions from the north in 1257, 1284, and 1287. It was a feat unparalleled in history, for the Mongols had annexed China and were even on their way to conquer Europe, yet the Vietnamese managed to keep them at bay. Unfortunately, our nation was divided three times. The first secession happened in 1527 when Mac Dang Dung tried to usurp power from the Le, but it did not last long. The second division of 1620 lasted through nearly two hundred years of intermittent wars between the Trinh who occupied the north and the Nguyen the south. Unity was restored only in 1802 when Nguyen Anh finally installed himself as emperor (Gia Long) with the help of the French.

It was this foreign help that brought about the subsequent domination by the French. During the eighty-odd years of French rule, there were also many insurrections, first by monarchists like Phan Dinh Phung and Phan Boi Chau who made the restoration of the old monarchy their cause, then by the Nationalists of the Vietnam Kuomintang Party whose leader, Nguyen Thai Hoc, and thirteen of his comrades paid for their patriotism on a French guillotine in 1930. At the end of World War II, a number of Chinese-backed Nationalist Party leaders returned from exile and tried to regain independence from the French. Loosely organized and plagued by divisiveness, they were beaten to the mark by the more determined and better-organized Communists, then calling themselves the Viet Minh, who almost effortlessly took control of the country in August 1945 and declared Vietnam an independent nation on 2 September 1945. By this time the French, with the support of the British, had come back to South Vietnam and worked their way through negotiation and intimidation to the north with the intention of restoring the old colonial regime. Negotiations between France and the Viet Minh failed; ten-

sions mounted and finally developed into a full-scale war of resistance on 19 December 1946.

The war raged for the next eight years. During its course, the Viet Minh gradually became more openly Communist and pressed the people on the "road to socialism." Their actions brought about a polarization of political inclination, and by the time the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954, after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, most non-Communist nationalists had made their choice. It was then that South Vietnam came into being as a separate nation, determined to take its destiny into its own hands. The whole country was now independent, divided between a Communist state in the north, supported militarily and economically by Russia and Communist China, and a nationalist state in the south, sponsored and backed by the United States and other non-Communist powers. Economic and military aid dispensed by the United States as an instrument of its policy of containment made South Vietnam an independent, anti-Communist state in Southeast Asia, and, when war resumed in the 1960s, the area became a testing ground for modern weapons, tactics, and ideologies of both worlds.

Over the years, it is true, U.S. military aid and, for some time, the assistance of U.S combat forces helped the Republic of Vietnam build a viable force for self-defense. From an army of 170,000 equipped with obsolete weapons, the Republic of Vietnam armed forces finally emerged as a strong, modernly equipped force with over one million men under arms, second to none among non-Communist Asian countries. Its air force was ranked sixth in the world, and its best combat divisions rated as equal to their American counterparts. It is equally true, unfortunately, that in the process this impressive force had become overly dependent on U.S. money and equipment for its own sustenance and on U.S. air power for moral support as well as a shield and deterrent against outright invasion from the North. There is no doubt that the South Vietnamese soldier could fight, and he did fight well! But for years he had learned to do things the easy way, taking it for granted the needed supplies would never cease to flow and that if he were in any kind of trouble "Big Brother" would always be there to "bail him out." Such was the psychological conditioning that helped the armed forces of South Vietnam maintain morale and confidence and comforted the population.

So, when the United States shifted its policy to negotiation and began withdrawing its forces from Vietnam under the expedient program of "Vietnamization," the Republic of Vietnam armed forces were not entirely prepared to take over, psychologically or physically. How could they—without a substantial increase in the number of major combat units—effectively replace seven divisions, four brigades, and innumerable support units of the U.S. forces committed in Vietnam in addition to other non-Communist forces? No amount of training, equipment, or political exhortation could effectively fill the physical void or ease the feeling of insecurity that set in. Our forces began to stretch and soon suffered the consequence.

The enemy's offensive of 1972 dramatically brought to the surface the basic weakness of the Vietnamization process. Without U.S. support in air power and mobility, the Republic of Vietnam armed forces could hardly have held An Loc, defended Kontum, or reoccupied Quang Tri. Most lost areas remained lost, for it was now beyond our capabilities to take them back. But still, as long as U.S. air power was available, the overall balance of forces could be maintained, and the Republic of Vietnam stood a good chance of pulling through.

Then came the turning point that changed it all. The Paris Agreement was served on South Vietnam like a death warrant. The downhill course was set. Small wonder the enemy claimed it was his victory; he had indeed won the first round. With U.S. forces completely gone, the enemy set about making preparations for the final push. His hands were now completely free: no more U.S. air strikes, not even the remote chance of token retaliation. The balance of forces, which had been precariously maintained with U.S. air power, had tilted heavily in his favor.

The question of U.S. intervention was the foremost subject of concern for the Republic of Vietnam when it finally became resigned to accepting the Paris Agreement. It was no ploy of playing "hard-to-get" when President Nguyen Van Thieu insisted on a guarantee of U.S. intervention as a condition for his endorsement. It was a matter of grave consequence that could spell the difference between life and death for the nation. For probably, more than anyone else, he had come to realize that without such a shield, the Republic of Vietnam could hardly defend itself against the onslaught of the better-equipped and better-supported regular divisions of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Not only was intervention indispens-

able militarily, but its guarantee could also bolster the morale of our armed forces. It was unthinkable to attempt to "hack it" alone without Big Brother's protection. Confidence returned when President Richard M. Nixon finally and solemnly promised to react vigorously in case of a serious violation of the Paris Agreement. The Republic of Vietnam took it as a national commitment on the part of the United States, far from suspecting that there would be such a thing as Watergate and that an angry Congress could so effectively prevent any U.S. president from honoring a commitment, albeit one given by a predecessor. In early 1975, the enemy apparently gambled that he could overrun Phuoc Long without provoking any U.S. response. He won and became completely certain that the United States had now chosen to stay away from the conflict for good. The road was thus clear for him to take the next big step toward final victory.

If the 1973 Paris Agreement was the starting point for the demise of South Vietnam, and the absence of U.S. intervention was an encouraging sign to the enemy to proceed with his ultimate plan, it was the cutback in U.S. military aid that accelerated the whole process and made defeat inevitable. Conditioned as they were to fight a war at a certain level of supply, the Republic of Vietnam armed forces suddenly found it difficult to carry on at the greatly reduced level of U.S. appropriations for fiscal year 1975. For the first time in the war, whose intensity increased with every enemy escalation, our armed forces were in the decided position of underdog. Gone were their superior firepower and mobility, the very things that helped maintain tactical balance against an enemy who held the initiative. It now became clear that the most the armed forces could hope to achieve was a delaying action pending restoration of U.S. military aid to its former level. The irony of this uphill struggle was that the U.S. president was compelled to beg the Congress for something that it had willingly appropriated for the previous fiscal year. It failed to come through perhaps because the aid was termed *supplemental* or *additional* instead of *integral,* which it really was.

The big slash in appropriated funds made its tragic impact felt not only on the battlefield but also in the minds of South Vietnamese strategists as well. The ability to hold territory, they felt, was a direct function of aid level. With the reduction now in force, perhaps it was no longer possible to maintain "territorial integrity." It might be best, they reasoned, to tailor

our defense effort to the aid appropriated. Simplistic as it might sound, the idea reflected the realities of the situation. Whatever the motives behind it, President Thieu's decision early in 1975 to redeploy forces was certainly not taken lightly or without firm grounds. But it was also this fateful decision that set in motion a series of setbacks whose cumulative effect led to the final collapse.

What really hastened South Vietnam's demise was the hasty and neglectful manner in which the redeployment was executed. Even if cautiously and correctly carried out, a withdrawal of this magnitude would only stand a fair chance of success, given enemy strength and capabilities of pursuit. Military history abounds in examples of routs; it is the reason why theater commanders are extremely chary of taking such a dangerous step.

In the context of the Vietnam War whose political and military aspects were intimately entwined, such a retreat was predisposed to doom if no consideration were given to the Vietnamese civilians who depended on the troops for protection and for whom the war was being fought. Our armed forces were not operating on foreign soil; their role and mission differed from those of an expeditionary force. Removing them from an area without taking steps to evacuate the population amounted to sheer dereliction. The redeployment fiasco in Military Regions (MRs) II and I demonstrated the tragic fact that the population could not be separated from the troops and that troop movements could be halted by a rushing mass of refugees. These are the facts of the case. They explain the rapid moral and physical disintegration of an army that had fought well until undercut by events beyond its control.

CHAPTER 2

The Situation Before the Paris Agreement

After the Communist offensive of 1972, the Republic of Vietnam armed forces were given the task of reoccupying all lost territory (*Map 1*). In (MR-I), Operation LAM SON 72 was launched with the participation of the 1st Infantry Division, the Airborne Division, the Marine Division, and other supporting units.[1] By 15 September 1972, the city and greater part of the province of Quang Tri had been retaken. A new line of defense was established along the Thach Han River, extending eastward toward the sea. The enemy's reaction in Quang Tri was violent; at the same time he also launched several unsuccessful attacks against the southern part of MR-I.

In MR-II, operations were conducted to relieve enemy pressure around Kontum and Pleiku, to reoccupy the An Lao Valley in Binh Dinh Province, and to clear all main roads including National Route 14 between Kontum and Pleiku and National Routes 19 and 21. For this effort, II Corps was reinforced with two Ranger groups (the equivalent of regiments) which had been reorganized and redeployed from IV Corps. (Corps areas and military regions were identical; that is, I Corps was responsible for MR-I, II Corps for MR-II, etc.)

In MR-III, reinforced friendly forces successfully relieved enemy pressure around the city of An Loc. However, National Route 13 linking An Loc with Lai Khe remained closed.

In MR-IV, the situation was one of firm friendly control. All skirmishes with the enemy were taking place on Cambodian territory, although a number of small hamlets in Chuong Thien Province were still under enemy control.

Generally speaking, the military situation during the second half of 1972 reflected a rough balance of forces confronting each other on the battlefield while the withdrawal of U.S.

[1]The commitment of the Airborne and the Marine Divisions in MR-I had left the Joint General Staff (JGS) without any general reserve for the first time in the war.


SOUTH VIETNAM
1972
AREA LOST IN ENEMY OFFENSIVE
Quang Tri
Thua Thien
Quang Nam
Quang Tin
Quang Ngai
Kontum
Binh Dinh
Phu Bon
Phu Yen
Darlac
Khanh Hoa
Quang Duc
Tuyen Duc
Ninh Thuan
Lam Dong
Binh Thuan
Phuoc Long
Binh Long
Tay Ninh
Binh Duong
Long Khanh
Binh Tuy
Phuoc Tuy
Kien Tuong
Kien Phong
Kien Giang
Kien Hoa
Vinh Long
Vinh Binh
Phong Dinh
Chuong Thien
Ba Xuyen
An Xuyen

MAP 1

forces from Vietnam was in full progress. By 1973, however, the loss of U.S. tactical air support (including naval air) was to tip the balance in favor of the Communists.

To cope politically with the emergency situation during 1972, the central government of the Republic of Vietnam took several forceful actions. A state of martial law was proclaimed countrywide, deferments of draftees were drastically limited, and a ban was put on overseas travel for male citizens from seventeen to forty-three years of age. The president was delegated full legislative powers by the National Assembly for a period of six months, from July to December 1972, in matters of defense and national economy. A more severe law governing the press was promulgated, and scheduled local elections of village and hamlet authorities were canceled. Instead, province chiefs received instructions to reorganize local administrations and to complete the appointment of village and hamlet chiefs within two months.

Earlier Peace Proposals

In military terms, the 1968 Tet offensive had been a resounding defeat for the Communists but, politically and insofar as mass psychology was concerned, had given them a tremendous advantage. By and large, the American public became disenchanted with the war. General William C. Westmoreland's request for approximately two hundred thousand additional American troops had tended to reinforce the views of some that the Vietnam problem was hardly soluble militarily. On 31 March 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson advanced a peace proposal and temporarily stopped the bombing of North Vietnam north of the 20th Parallel. He also declared his noncandidacy in the coming presidential election. A month later North Vietnam agreed to the proposed talks, the first session of which was held in Paris on 10 May 1968 between W. Averell Harriman and Xuan Thuy. Little was accomplished. In a second effort, on 31 October 1968, President Johnson announced a cessation of bombing against all of North Vietnam. More talks were held. Nevertheless, no concrete result was reached after a long year of negotiating.

As part of the peace-seeking process, on 7 April 1969, the government of the Republic of Vietnam proposed a six-point program:

1. Withdrawal of enemy forces from South Vietnam.

2. Cessation of enemy use of bases in Laos and Cambodia.
3. National reconciliation.
4. Peaceful unification of North and South Vietnam.
5. International controls and guarantees to prevent future attacks by Communist forces.
6. Amnesty for Communist prisoners in the South if they would renounce violence and abide by the laws.

The National Liberation Front responded a month later by counterproposing, on 8 May 1969, a ten-point peace plan to end the war:

1. Respect the fundamental national rights of the Vietnamese people as affirmed by the Geneva Accords.
2. Unconditional withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops and removal of their materiel and weapons.
3. The problem of other armed forces in South Vietnam to be solved by the Vietnamese among themselves.
4. Organization of free and democratic elections to elect a constitutional national assembly and a coalition government.
5. In the interim period prior to elections, neither side to attempt to impose its political regime on the population.
6. South Vietnam to follow a peaceful and neutral foreign policy.
7. The reunification of Vietnam to be implemented step by step through peaceful means without foreign interference.
8. Both sides to avoid becoming party to any military alliance with foreign countries while waiting for reunification.
9. The problem of release of prisoners of war to be discussed between the two sides.
10. U.S. and allied forces to be withdrawn under international control.

There were wide discrepancies between the two proposals. The main points of disagreement were (1) South Vietnam emphasized the withdrawal of Communist forces, whereas the Communists emphasized unconditional withdrawal of American and allied troops; (2) South Vietnam proposed national reconciliation, but the Communists specifically asked for a new constitution and a coalition government (to which our side was most averse); (3) both sides spoke about international control,

but South Vietnam wanted it as a safeguard against future Communist attacks, while the Communists wanted it to supervise the withdrawal of U.S. and allied troops. The deadlock in negotiations caused by these irreconcilable differences lasted into the first months of 1970. In an apparent effort to show goodwill on its side, the United States had announced the withdrawal of 25,000 troops to be completed by August 1970 and the full implementation of the new Vietnamization program. The Communists responded aggressively by announcing the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary government of South Vietnam as of 10 June 1969.

While negotiations dragged on inconclusively, students and others in the United States staged massive antiwar demonstrations in many places during the final months of 1969. In the face of the enemy's apparent escalation of the war, a cross-border operation was conducted into Cambodian territory by our forces on 29 April 1970. Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, heretofore inviolable, were destroyed and a great quantity of weapons, ammunition, and war materiel was captured. In early 1971, on 8 February, the armed forces of South Vietnam launched an operation into lower Laos to destroy the enemy's communication and supply lines and storage depots scattered along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The flow of enemy troops and weapons had continued unabated into South Vietnam in spite of the negotiations being conducted. This operation was partially successful but was hampered by bad weather and insufficient air support including helicopters. The Communists in the meantime refused to make any concessions in the peace talks. Ambassador David K. E. Bruce, the U.S. negotiator, candidly admitted that for the past two years there had not been any serious talks at all and that the peace conference was simply being used by the Communists as a forum for their propaganda. Ambassador Pham Dang Lam of the Republic of Vietnam reported the same thing to his government.

Throughout 1971 the redeployment of U.S. forces continued according to plan, hand in hand with the Vietnamization program. Coordination between the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (USMACV), and the Joint General Staff (JGS) was excellent and effectively met political needs. During the same year, the Communists continued their rocket attacks on our major cities and even tried to breach the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Their flagrant actions led to the resumption of limited U.S. bombing of military targets in North Vietnam.

The bombing campaign, however, failed to produce progress in the peace talks. Nor did it prevent the general offensive that the Communists eventually launched on 30 March 1972. The Paris peace talks were indefinitely suspended a month later.

Such were the results of the "open" peace talks in Paris. The situation we faced was similar to that in Korea some twenty years earlier. The same "talk and fight" tactic was used by the Communists in both instances with the same results. It was Henry A. Kissinger, U.S. presidential assistant for national security affairs, who brought about some measure of breakthrough by dealing in secret with the other side. The war had been going on too long, he apparently reasoned, for the two sides to reconcile their differences, bury their hatchets, and trust each other. Each was suspicious that the other might have a trump card up his sleeve and was prepared to use it to cheat his opponent. Kissinger was convinced that the only way to foster mutual understanding and trust was through private contacts. More than anyone else, he recognized and came to value the role of the mediator. Not a Southeast Asia expert himself at the time, he had once been authorized by former President Johnson to get in touch with Mai Van Bo, the North Vietnamese representative in Paris, through two mutual friends, both Frenchmen.

When Nixon became president, he was persuaded by Kissinger, now his national security adviser, to pursue private contacts. As a result, Kissinger, with Nixon's permission, met with Xuan Thuy, the North Vietnamese negotiator, at the residence of Mr. Sainteny in Paris in August 1969. This was the start of private talks which were conducted in secrecy four times between February and April 1970 between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, apparently without significant result.[2] In September 1970, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho met again. This time the United States withdrew an earlier "mutual disengagement" proposal and suggested instead a "standstill cease-fire." The Communists demanded that the United States withdraw its support of the South Vietnamese government and replace it with a coalition government. The United States was thus asked to guarantee the political success of the Communists in South Vietnam as a precondition to the honorable exit of U.S.

[2] Most information concerning the secret talks between Henry A. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho was obtained from Bernard Kalb and Marvin Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1974).

troops. Some concessions were made on the U.S. side, but in the face of the extravagant Communist demands the secret talks became deadlocked.

Following the Cambodian cross-border operation and the Laos incursion, the United States made two major concessions: that U.S. forces would withdraw within six months after an agreement was reached and that President Thieu would step down one month before general elections took place. These proposals were turned down in a session held on 3 May 1971. In June, July, and August, Kissinger and Tho met five times. During these sessions, all proposals advanced by the United States were rejected by the Communists no matter how they were modified. Only during the last session, in September 1971, did the United States come to realize fully that the Communists really wanted South Vietnam to be turned over to their control before the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The United States became aware of the Communists' true design only after three long years of secret talks! And it was also during the same session that the North Vietnamese realized that the United States was definitely seeking an arrangement to end the war and not a cover for total surrender! [3]

On 20 March 1972 the United States proposed the resumption of talks. North Vietnam at first agreed but later requested a postponement until 15 April. The United States then proposed 24 April but received no answer until 31 March. By this time, however, the Communist general offensive of 1972 had been launched (on 30 March). In my opinion, by their cunning maneuvers and concealment, the North Vietnamese had kept the United States in the dark as to the date of their offensive even though planning for this major invasion had started right after the failure of the last session of secret talks in September 1971.

The military situation in the South during April 1972 was such that the United States feared a total collapse of the Republic of Vietnam. Again, Kissinger met with Tho on 2 May 1972 and, faced with a deteriorating situation, proposed that if North Vietnam agreed to a cease-fire and release of U.S. prisoners of war—only that and nothing else—all U.S. forces would be withdrawn within four months. However, the proposal met with instant rejection, and Le Duc Tho was adamant in demanding the removal of the Republic of Vietnam govern-

[3] Ibid., pp. 183–84.

ment and the installation of a coalition. To the United States this demand was equally unpalatable. The United States stepped up considerably the bombing of North Vietnamese military targets and proceeded to mine Haiphong Harbor and other waterways. Only after intercessions by Russia and Communist China were secret talks resumed between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in August, on the 1st, 14th, and 19th. During those sessions, although they still persisted in demanding President Thieu's resignation before a cease-fire, the Communists softened their position and recognized the existence of two govenments, two armies, and a third political component as an entity in itself. The Provisional Revolutionary government, of the Communists in the south, was ostensibly regarded by North Vietnam as a coequal of the Republic of Vietnam government.

Arranging the Cease-Fire

On 16 August 1972, Dr. Kissinger arrived in Saigon. He met with President Thieu and explained the political pressures in the United States and the influence these pressures might have on the approaching presidential election. He also affirmed President Nixon's determination to seek a solution for the Vietnam War. Then on 11 September 1972, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho met again in Paris. This time all clauses to which both sides had agreed during the talks in July and August were put on paper. In general terms, the agreements were as follows: Due to the existence of two governments, two armies, and other political forces in South Vietnam, national reconciliation, if it is to become a reality, should be achieved through mutual respect, and both sides should stop seeking to eliminate each other. South Vietnam should not be forced to accept either a Communist regime or any pro-American regime. Thus, for the first time, the Communists refrained from demanding removal of the Republic of Vietnam government.

In the next session on 26 September 1972, North Vietnam added to the agreements the formation of a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord. The prospects were good, and hopes were high that peace would soon come. On 8 October 1972, Kissinger crossed the Atlantic for the nineteenth time and again met with Le Duc Tho. For the first time, the Communists agreed to treat politics and the fighting separately. North Vietnam and the United States would end the fighting

by agreeing to a standstill cease-fire, and a political solution for South Vietnam would be subject to discussions between the two parties concerned. The proposal was prepared by Le Duc Tho as a draft agreement in English. Thus ended a conversation between two deaf men that had lasted too many years.[4] North Vietnam no longer demanded the removal of the Republic of Vietnam government and its replacement by a coalition. The draft agreement, however, still left many minor discrepancies to be worked out. As it had been prepared and agreed to by Kissinger and Tho, the draft agreement covered nine issues:

1. The United States respects the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Vietnam.
2. The cease-fire was to be effective twenty-four hours after the agreement was signed. All U.S. troops were to be withdrawn from South Vietnam within sixty days.
3. All prisoners of war were to be released within sixty days.
4. An administrative structure called the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord was to be composed of three equal elements to be created to organize general elections.
5. Reunification of Vietnam was to be implemented gradually through peaceful means.
6. An International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) was to be established.
7. An international conference to guarantee peace was to be convened within thirty days.
8. All parties were to pledge to respect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Laos and Cambodia.
9. The United States was to participate in the postwar reconstruction of North Vietnam and Indochina.

With President Nixon's blessing, Dr. Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho sixteen hours a day on 9 and 10 October. Discrepancies were reduced, and the two negotiators now agreed to the following timetable: 18 October—cessation of U.S. bombings and minings in North Vietnam; 19 October—Kissinger and Tho to initial the draft in Hanoi after President Thieu indicated his concurrence.

[4] Ibid., p. 354.

The final agreement was to be signed in Paris by the four "parties" involved (that is, the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary government) on 26 October, and the cease-fire was to be effective 27 October 1972.

The prospects looked good. Both sides definitely wanted a cease-fire to take place before the U.S. presidential election; the North Vietnamese especially, for they were convinced President Nixon would be less flexible after he was reelected. Information about the agreement was duly transmitted in general terms to the representative of the Republic of Vietnam in Paris, but nothing was said about the agreement text exchanged with North Vietnam or the timetable for its acceptance. Dr. Kissinger was confident he could persuade our government to accept it. An unexpected development, however, brought a delay to the timetable. On 11 October the French Embassy in Hanoi was damaged by U.S. bombs, and French Ambassador Pierre Susini was critically injured. By the time Le Duc Tho was able to complain in private to Kissinger, all bombing had been stopped.[5] Talks continued, and a second timetable was worked out: 21 October—cessation of U.S. bombings; 22 October—agreement text initialed in Hanoi; 30 October—official signing of the agreement in Paris.

On 16 October, Dr. Kissinger returned to Paris and the next day conferred with Xuan Thuy. Le Duc Tho had left earlier for Hanoi. This time Dr. Kissinger brought along two new faces to the meeting: William Sullivan and George Aldrich. Together with the North Vietnamese, they went over the text of the agreement sentence by sentence, clause by clause, and word by word. One of the two issues that required lengthy and heated discussions was replacing weapons, ammunition, and materiel lost, damaged, or worn out. The Communists wanted only token control of replacements, whereas the United States thought control should be tight. The second issue dealt with the release of political prisoners. The Communists linked it with the release of U.S. prisoners of war. The demand could not be met, and again the talks were deadlocked. However, with the timetable in mind, Dr. Kissinger left for Saigon.[6]

I recall clearly that he arrived in Saigon on 18 October, planning to stay two days. The next morning the U.S. delega-

[5] Ibid., pp. 359, 361.
[6] Ibid., p. 360.

tion with Dr. Kissinger, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, General Creighton W. Abrams, and Mr. Sullivan met at the Independence Palace with President Thieu. On the Vietnamese side there were Vice President Tran Van Huong, Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem, Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam, Mr. Nguyen Phu Duc, Mr. Hoang Duc Nha, and I.

Dr. Kissinger began the session by handing the text of the agreement, in English, to President Thieu. He then explained with emphasis the points he thought advantageous for South Vietnam. The United States, he stressed, pledged to maintain its air bases in Thailand and to keep the Seventh Fleet off Vietnam to deter any attack by the Communists. Economic and military aid would continue for South Vietnam while the United States believed that secret understandings with Russia and Communist China would drastically reduce their supply of war materiel to North Vietnam and permit the United States to withdraw its troops and recover its prisoners with honor. Dr. Kissinger also added that this was a good time to arrive at an agreement with the Communists because, after all, South Vietnam did have an army of over one million men and did control eighty-five percent of its nineteen million population. South Vietnam, he was confident, would develop and prosper in the postwar period. The agreement, Dr. Kissinger concluded, was good and acceptable. However, he did not go into the details of the things yet to be solved and above all did not inform the South Vietnamese of the timetable for signing the agreement. President Thieu responded by saying he would study the text of the agreement, which was then given to Hoang Duc Nha, the president's private secretary.

An emergency session of our expanded National Security Council was immediately convened to study the text of the agreement. Mr. Nha was the reporter for the session. Militarily, this was to be a standstill cease-fire. While all U.S. and allied forces were to be withdrawn and all U.S. bases in South Vietnam were to be dismantled, there was no mention of North Vietnamese troops. (It was estimated that North Vietnamese forces in the South numbered ten divisions. In addition, North Vietnamese troops made up sixty to eighty percent of the strength of Communist local units.)

As chairman of JGS, I voiced my opinion during the first session of the council that control of the cease-fire would be extremely difficult and that a standstill cease-fire in a "leopard skin" pattern carried with it many dangers. There were to be

no areas of regrouping and no lines of demarcation, which meant that the enemy forces would be allowed to stay where they were. But there was no doubt that they would not stay in their current locations. Out of their inherently aggressive nature, the Communists would certainly try, as soon as the cease-fire was announced, to break down into small units and penetrate our villages and hamlets, to make their appearance on our lines of communications, and to mark their presence by displaying their flags. To the proposed ICCS, this would be proof enough of Communist control. In an unconventional war without clearly defined lines, control of both population and territory is difficult to achieve. It would become many times more difficult and more complex in the prospective circumstances. A Vietnamese jokingly remarked: "Before, we went into the jungle to hunt down the wild beasts. Now we have to take them into our arms and sleep with them." It was just a joke, but it clearly made the point about putting up with the Communists.

There was virtual certainty that the Communists were not going to abide by the standstill cease-fire. Their actions in 1954 had given us a strong indication as to what they would do this time. Also, enemy documents captured on 10 October 1972, in the underground shelter of a district commissar in Quang Tin Province, attested to the fact that Communist troops and cadres had been studying the main issues laid out in the draft text of the agreement and had already received instructions for an appropriate line of action.[7] The documents were later personally handed to Dr. Kissinger by President Thieu. The point President Thieu wanted to make was that by the time South Vietnam was given the draft text of the agreement on 18 October, on the Communist side the text had already been disseminated to the lowest levels for study and action. About the same time, an intelligence source in Tay Ninh Province also confirmed to South Vietnamese and U.S. military authorities that a special study of the agreement draft had been made at the Communist political headquarters for the South.

[7] At 1700 on 17 October 1972, President Thieu ordered the captured documents brought immediately to Saigon. A relay of three aircraft had delivered the documents by midnight, and the next morning President Thieu handed them to Dr. Kissinger. They revealed that Communist units were prepared to launch the "Land and Population Grab" campaign on 22 October 1972.

By far the most important military issue was the presence of the North Vietnamese Army. The situation in September 1972 reflected a rough balance of forces on the battlefield. Now that all U.S. forces would be redeployed without a reciprocal withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces, that balance would undoubtedly lean toward the enemy.

Politically, the National Security Council was mostly concerned about the proposed National Council of Reconciliation and Concord. Many discussions were oriented toward this "third" political factor, and questions were asked. If this council could organize general elections in the future, then what kind of structure was it? In the event this council was created, what would become of the present government and how was it going to operate? Those were the things that needed to be clarified and, above all, considered in the light of the Vietnamese text. During the following session between Dr. Kissinger and President Thieu, these questions were put forward, and Kissinger promised to make the Vietnamese text available within twenty-four hours, which he did.

When the text came under examination, members of the National Security Council immediately realized that it was the original drafted by the North Vietnamese and definitely not a translated version of the English text. The syntax and vocabulary were specifically and purely Communist, North Vietnamese style. It contained some rare peculiarities and particularly important but controversial terms. The U.S. forces, for example, were called laconically but contemptuously, *Quan My*, which prompted the Vietnamese to remind the U.S. delegation that it should ask for a change to the more decent term, *Quan Doi Hue Ky*. To all knowledgeable Vietnamese in the South, the term, *Quan My*, was derogatory and insolent although it was literally quite correct.

A more important semantical issue was the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord, defined as an "administrative structure" and rendered in Vietnamese, undoubtedly with pernicious design, as *co cau chinh quyen*, meaning "government structure." It was thus entirely clear that the North Vietnamese saw the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord as an agency with full governmental powers and, in view of its composition, nothing less than a coalition government. Was this the true intention of the agreement? The Vietnamese text also mentioned three Vietnamese nations. North and South Vietnam were only two. What was that third nation? If South

Vietnam were to be two nations, then it meant the suzerainty of the South Vietnamese government would be shared with someone else. These were the major issues.

After careful and minute examination, our government came up with twenty-six changes in the draft agreement. While the discussions with the Americans were proceeding, a report from the Republic of Vietnam Embassy in Washington, D.C., informed the government that during an interview with the foreign press Prime Minister Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam had declared that peace negotiations in Paris were producing good results and that there would be a three-sided coalition government of transition. The report reinforced suspicions of deception. Who was trying to fool whom, and who was being fooled? This was an additional reason for President Thieu to harden his opposition to the agreement during the two sessions that took place on 22 October. During that night, a letter addressed to President Nixon was drafted and signed by President Thieu and handed over to Dr. Kissinger. The letter pointed out all the shortcomings of the agreement and stated the reasons why it could not be accepted as it was.

Dr. Kissinger's private scenario for the acceptance and signing of the agreement was clearly in jeopardy. He sent a cable to Le Duc Tho to the effect that although the United States was prepared to sign the agreement on 31 October, it was becoming extremely difficult to keep up with the timetable. At the same time, North Vietnam was informed that all U.S. bombings above the 20th Parallel were to cease as of 25 October.

For his part, President Thieu went on radio and television to make his point that the government of South Vietnam could not accept a coalition. North Vietnam in the meantime did not stand still. In an outbreak of propagandistic bombast, North Vietnam made public the text of the agreement, revealed the timetable agreed upon on 8 October, denounced President Thieu for having undermined peace, and demanded that the United States sign the agreement on 31 October 1972. In the face of these new developments, Dr. Kissinger called a press conference to explain the text of the agreement to the American public. In his words, "peace is at hand" and all that was required to wrap up the agreement was one more session with the North Vietnamese representative.

During November, a great deal of correspondence was exchanged between Saigon and Washington, but no major

changes were made in the text of the agreement. Also during the same month, U.S. C-5 Galaxy cargo planes and cargo ships brought to Saigon an important amount or war materiel and equipment, including F-5 and A-37 fighters, C-130A cargo planes, helicopters, M-48 tanks, and 175-mm. artillery pieces. American bases and equipment were also transferred intact to the South Vietnamese armed forces. With this equipment JGS activated additional heavy artillery, armor, and antiaircraft artillery units. New C-130A and F-5A squadrons were also formed. Some of the equipment provided, however, could not be used immediately. It had been delivered for later use as replacement equipment in accordance with the provisions of the cease-fire agreement. This crash supply program, called ENHANCE PLUS, was aimed at both military and political goals. While it improved the capabilities of our armed forces, the United States also wanted to demonstrate that it was a reliable ally and was hoping that our government would be more flexible regarding acceptance of the agreement.

President Nixon had given serious consideration to the discrepancies brought up by the South Vietnamese government, and credit ought to be paid him here for having ordered the reexamination of these discrepancies. They fell into two categories:

Major issues: (a) The Demilitarized Zone should be recognized as the border separating North from South Vietnam as it was so determined by the Geneva Accords. (b) There should be a token withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces (possibly about 25,000 men) to be reciprocated by a similar reduction in strength of the South Vietnamese armed forces. (c) The cease-fire should take place on the whole territory of Indochina. (d) Arrangements should be made for an international control force strong enough and ready to take up positions when the cease-fire went into effect.

Minor issues: (a) The translation should be revised so as to make the English and the Vietnamese texts identical and ensure that no misinterpretation could happen within the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord. (b) Arrangements should be made for all four parties to sign the official text of the agreement.

On 9 November, Kissinger's deputy, General Alexander M. Haig, Jr., arrived in Saigon. He delivered a personal letter from President Nixon and stressed the significance of the ENHANCE PLUS program. Since our government was still adamant

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in its position, General Haig indicated that if South Vietnam kept refusing to sign, the United States might go ahead and sign separately with the North. A few days earlier, on 5 November, the U.S. State Department had announced that Canada, Hungary, Indonesia, and Poland had agreed in principle to participate in ICCS.

Dr. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho met again in Paris on 20 November. Le Duc Tho arrived first and declared to the press that North Vietnam was suspicious of U.S. sincerity. Although he did not explicitly say so in his statement, it was understood he referred to the recent shipment of weapons and other war materiel to Saigon and the fact that the United States had failed to sign the agreement as originally planned on 31 October. During this session with Le Duc Tho, Dr. Kissinger laid out the demands of the Republic of Vietnam and the United States. The first few days of the talks went well and the mood was receptive. However, on 23 November, Tho suddenly became tough. He rejected all U.S. proposals and again demanded the removal of the South Vietnamese government. Apparently he was acting on new instructions from Hanoi. Dr. Kissinger was taken aback by this about-face. He asked for an explanation, but the answers Tho gave him were unsatisfactory. At Dr. Kissinger's remark that the cessation of bombing above the 20th Parallel had been a goodwill gesture by the United States to help bring progress to the talks, Tho countered that the United States had come up with new demands. Both sides terminated the talks on 25 November but agreed to meet again in early December.[8] At this juncture, Nguyen Phu Duc, a special envoy of the South Vietnamese government, was sent to Washington to deliver a letter from President Thieu to President Nixon and to clarify the position of our government.

On 4 December, Dr. Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho again in Paris and found him as intransigent as he had been in their last meeting. During the sessions that followed, the atmosphere became more relaxed, but no progress was made. Many issues were brought up again that were thought to have been solved. Dr. Kissinger left Paris on 13 December, but his assistants and experts remained to work out differences with their North Vietnamese counterparts. The deadlock this time, however, was real and ominous.[9]

[8] Kalb and Kalb, *Kissinger*, pp. 393, 400.
[9] Ibid., pp. 410–11.

After meeting with Kissinger and going over the situation in detail with him, President Nixon sent a cable to Hanoi, warning that unless serious talks were renewed within seventy-eight hours, the United States would resume bombing. In the absence of a favorable response, the United States began an intensified bombing campaign above the 20th Parallel, where bombing had been halted since late October. The devastating power of B–52s proved too much for North Vietnam and attested to the resoluteness of the U.S. position. In my opinion, North Vietnam was *forced* to return to the negotiating table. As a result, the most intensive of all U.S. bombing campaigns against North Vietnam was halted on 30 December.

Eight days later, on 8 January 1973, Dr. Kissinger met with Le Duc Tho. Things went better this time. Both sides carefully went over every clause, every section, every sentence, and practically every word of the text. On 14 January, Dr. Kissinger reported to President Nixon on progress. The next day orders were issued for U.S. forces to halt all military activities against North Vietnam.[10]

On 16 January, General Haig arrived in Saigon. The government of South Vietnam still took exception to a few issues raised by the protocols. However, on 19 January our government was informed that no more changes would be made and the agreement was going to be initialed on 23 January and officially signed on 27 January in Paris by the four parties involved. The cease-fire would go into effect at 8:00 A.M., Saigon time, on 28 January 1973. In addition, President Nixon wrote personally to President Thieu on 21 January. If South Vietnam rejected the agreement, Nixon warned, the United States would sign separately with North Vietnam and as a consequence all aid to South Vietnam would be cut off. But if South Vietnam signed the agreement (1) the president of the United States would intercede more vigorously with the U.S. Congress for continuing aid to South Vietnam, and (2) the U.S. government pledged to "react vigorously" to any serious violation of the cease-fire by the North. After many sessions with the National Security Council and after consulting various personalities of the government and National Assembly, President Thieu wrote a letter of acceptance to President Nixon in which he also recommended a summit meeting right after the agreement had been signed.

[10] Ibid., p. 419.

As in the Panmunjom talks in Korea two decades earlier, the negotiating table was used by the Communists as a forum for propaganda while their war actions continued. "Talk and fight" has always been a basic Communist tactic. In dealing with the Communists, perseverance is the rule, and maximum demands must be made. Military pressure must be exerted as a means of obtaining political concessions. Objectively speaking, the Paris Agreement was not perfect. The United States obtained a disengagement and recovered its prisoners of war. The Communists were allowed to maintain North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam, but South Vietnam still functioned as a nation with a government of its own.

South Vietnamese Reactions

In the face of an imperfect agreement—there can never be a perfect agreement unless one side prevails and forces the other to surrender unconditionally—what could South Vietnam do to assure its survival? What military and political measures could be taken to meet the new situation? In the light of the enemy's design as made known to us in captured documents and especially from lessons learned from the failure of the 1954 Geneva Accords, JGS had worked out a contingency plan with the code name TRAN HUNG DAO II. This plan provided in considerable detail all the measures to be taken in the face of any move by the enemy and was disseminated to sector echelon and to all combat battalions. It was because of this plan that South Vietnam was not caught by surprise and was able to anticipate and thwart every attempt by the enemy to "grab the land and the population."

On the political plane, a new five-year rural development program was initiated, and a political party, the Dan Chu [Democratic] Party, was formed in anticipation of the coming political struggle with the Communists. Leaders of the Dan Chu Party were mostly high officials of the South Vietnamese administration. By mid-1973, the government had been partially reorganized. Finally, to improve efficiency and foster a better understanding of national policies, the government embarked on a countrywide training program ambitiously called an administrative revolution. Fifteen thousand South Vietnamese civil servants, representing all echelons, had completed this training by mid-1973.

CHAPTER 3

The Military Situation After the Cease-Fire, 1973–74

In theory, the Paris Agreement of 27 January 1973 terminated the war in Vietnam. However, while true peace prevailed in the North, military conflict continued in the South. No clause in the Paris Agreement called for the withdrawal of Communist forces, nor was there any understanding about keeping them at bay. North Vietnam maintained its large forces in the South to back an eventual political settlement to its advantage while standing ready to cope with all eventualities. Without effective international control machinery to enforce the cease-fire, enemy violations of the Paris Agreement were committed openly and deliberately.

Role of ICCS

Established by a protocol to the Paris Agreement, ICCS was the international body in charge of controlling and supervising implementation of the agreement. The original members of ICCS were Canada, Indonesia, Hungary, and Poland. However, Canada soon became disenchanted and withdrew and was replaced by Iran. The responsibilities of ICCS were: (1) to follow the implementation of the provisions of the agreement through communication with the parties and on-the-spot observation where required; (2) to investigate violations on the request of a Four-Party or Two-Party Joint Military Commission (provided for in the agreement) or of any party, or in any case where the International Commission had adequate grounds for considering that there had been a violation; (3) when necessary, to cooperate with the Four-Party or Two-Party Joint Military Commission in deterring and detecting violations.

ICCS adopted for its operations the principles of consultation and unanimity. In practice, this meant that when the commission could find no appropriate way to deal with a serious violation, it would report this to the parties to the agreement and that the commission's reports had to be made with

the unanimous agreement of all four members. In case unanimity could not be reached, the different views of members would be forwarded to the four parties or to the two South Vietnamese parties in lieu of reports. The chairmanship of the commission was held in monthly turn by each of the four members.

From the outset ICCS was crippled by its own operating principles. Consultations and unanimity simply did not work; they depended entirely upon the willingness and objectivity of the members. It was impossible for ICCS to reach unanimous agreement on any matter for the simple reason that Poland and Hungary always refused to cooperate if the investigation was likely to work to the disadvantage of the Communist side. Communist-initiated violations thus escaped investigation, except for the unique case of Sa Huynh (see below) where the Polish representative was chastised for having rendered an objective opinion.

As to the control of armaments, munitions, and war material introduced into South Vietnam after the cease-fire as replacements authorized by Article 7 of the agreement, ICCS was unable to come up with enforcement procedures and to make them mandatory for the two South Vietnamese parties concerned. As a result, we had to work out our own procedures to implement this provision and were prepared to justify them to ICCS when required. This was a measure of goodwill demonstrated by our side. But what about the Communist side? Nobody, including ICCS, knew how much they had introduced into South Vietnam by way of the official points of entry of their own choice since the commission failed to install permanent observation teams as required by the agreement. ICCS was, therefore, reduced to total impotence. It was a matter of world knowledge that North Vietnam and the Viet Cong openly resumed war on a large scale in South Vietnam, yet ICCS would not raise a finger. When Communist tanks, artillery, and troops forced their way into Phuoc Long and Ban Me Thuot (see Chapter 5), ICCS did not even attempt an investigation.

ICCS was short of personnel. In addition, non-Communist ICCS representatives were hampered in the performance of their tasks by the Communist members and by NVA units. A case in point was the deliberate detention of three Canadian officers by Communist forces in 1973. It was a ploy to create difficulties for the Canadian representatives who the Commu-

nists knew usually carried out their responsibilities with devotion and objectivity. The Canadians had to be discouraged and made to lose face. For a long time, the three Canadian officers, who were on an investigation mission, were kept incommunicado and were not even allowed to contact their embassy. The Canadians finally withdrew altogether from ICCS and were replaced by the Iranians. The Hungarians and Poles showed partiality toward the Communists. There were also indications that they actively helped them by spying, taking photographs, and drawing maps of our outposts and bases. And at the beginning of the cease-fire the Communists intended to use ICCS in still another way.

The Attempted Land and Population Grab

The enemy-controlled area encompassed the DMZ, a great part of the jungled and unpopulated mountainous regions of the country, and twenty-one base areas. The standstill cease-fire thus gave the Communists a chance to stay mixed with South Vietnamese positions in an intricate pattern which had always been the enemy scheme. On the eve of the signing of the peace agreement, the Communists were highly confident of their chances for success after the cease-fire. They aimed to exploit it by "Land Grabbing and Population Nibbling." Their plan set forth specific guidelines for the Communist Party, the armed forces, and the people during three phases.[1]

Phase I was to be devoted to setting in motion the appropriate propaganda and military mechanisms. First, all cadres, especially political commissars, were required to study the clauses of the agreement and to learn them by rote and, more importantly, be able to interpret them to Communist advantage. They were to brief and explain all details to the people and be prepared for discussions with our government officials. Many small propaganda teams were organized. One of their missions was to collect or confiscate all available sewing machines and blue and red materials to make as many National Liberation Front (NLF) flags as possible. On the cease-fire day the teams would go about urging people to fly NLF flags at their homes, in every hamlet, along riversides, and on the tops of trees and hills. This move was intended to present "proof"

[1] This information was obtained by J-2 of JGS from captured documents, prisoners of war, ralliers, and agents.

of Communist sovereignty over an area. The Communist propaganda teams also would entice people to join a petition campaign in which they would ask South Vietnamese authorities to abolish martial law, the curfew, and the mobilization law. The people would also be urged to demand more liberties such as liberty of movement, of meeting, of speech and writing, of worship, and the like. The demand for liberty of movement, of course, implied that some refugees who had been resettled in pacified hamlets would be returned to their old farms which were under Communist control. Large Communist units were to be broken down into platoons and companies to occupy hamlets and villages and to control main roads and to hold those places until the arrival of ICCS representatives.

Phase II was the implementation phase. The cease-fire would be announced by Hanoi, NLF, and Saigon radio broadcasts. Then, all enemy military, political, and proselytizing activities would be closely coordinated to cause confusion among the people and entice them to rise up and disrupt our pacification program. The enemy would also attempt to destroy our bases and key positions and would demand the disbanding of the armed forces.

Phase III was the consolidation phase. Actions during this phase would depend on the outcome of Phases I and II, but the basic concept was to endeavor to strengthen and develop whatever had been accomplished to that point and to continue to frustrate all counteractions. It is worth noting that the Communists were fully aware of the proposed date for the cease-fire, which had been initially set for 27 October 1972. On 10 October, a captured document revealed that orders had been given for a last and final "preparation" prior to the cease-fire. The document contained many small details and corroborated other information on enemy plans. Our government, however, was not notified until 18 or 19 October and had no choice but to decline to sign the Paris Agreement. Although the enemy scheme to violate the cease-fire was disclosed, the Communists did not change their planned course of action. As a result, on the first day of peace, more than 1,000 violations were recorded.

Again, as in 1954, the Communists called upon our cadres to talk to them and tried to persuade them to join the other side because, they argued, peace had come, and they were peace-loving people. Villages and hamlets that did not cooperate were threatened with attacks and shellings. Throughout the

countryside more than 400 hamlets were occupied by Communist troops. Propaganda meetings were held in Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai Provinces. Roadblocks were set up to stop traffic on our main roads. Wherever they went, the Communists planted their flags and then asked ICCS to note and record the extent of their control. All these activities took place nationwide and with great intensity.

During 1973 the monthly average of enemy activities reached an all-time high of 2,980 incidents as compared with 2,072 in 1972, the year of the enemy's big offensive. But the enemy actions were met with forceful reactions by our armed forces. Every hamlet was reoccupied as soon as it was penetrated, and every road was cleared of roadblocks when they were set up. This was in fact a kind of game in which the Communists tried to gain yardage by planting flags, which in turn were pulled down and replaced with national flags by our side, and in which ICCS umpires were called upon to officiate. Both sides were eager to demonstrate to a confused ICCS the extent of their control merely by displaying their colors. But it was the Communists who started it all by going on the offensive. Our armed forces were forced to react in legitimate self-defense to keep their territory intact.

Cua Viet, Sa Huynh, Hong Ngu, Trung Nghia, and Tong Le Chan

During 1973, besides small-scale activities related to the "land and population grab" campaign described above, the Communists launched four division-size attacks, the four most important violations of the cease-fire agreement. Three of these attacks were aimed at securing strategically advantageous positions that could eventually serve as points of entry for war supplies and equipment.

On the eve of the cease-fire, our marines launched a preemptive attack against the Cua Viet Naval Base. The purpose of this operation was to deny the enemy the opportunity and inclination to attack friendly forces along the northern front lines prior to the cease-fire and to secure a position from which our troops could observe enemy river traffic to the occupied city of Dong Ha and provide us a river route to Quang Tri City. Despite intense U.S. air and naval gunfire support, the marine advance along the coast met strong enemy resistance. However, the Cua Viet Naval Base was secured just a few hours before the cease-fire went into effect. When the

cease-fire began at 0800 on 28 January 1973, the ICCS team was not in place. On 30 January the NVA began to concentrate large units, including tanks and artillery, with intent to isolate and destroy the marine force at Cua Viet. Though the marines fought bravely, they were forced to give up their positions and fall back to friendly lines. In the battle, the marines lost most of two rifle companies and an M-48 tank company but inflicted approximately 1,000 casualties on the enemy.

The seaport of Sa Huynh had once been an enemy base, during the first Indochina war in fact. With a population of 3,000 people, Sa Huynh was an important supply point of entry from the South China Sea and was linked by a mountain corridor to western highland country. The corridor also marked the boundary between MR-I and MR-II. On 26 January 1973, elements of the NVA 2d Division began to exert heavy pressure on Sa Huynh and its main fire support base. The base was overwhelmed in the afternoon of 28 January. On 29 January the enemy extended his attacks toward the north to Duc Pho District. Immediately our 2d Division, commanded by Brig. Gen. Tran Van Nhut, went into action. The counterattack was brutal and decisive. Sa Huynh and its fire support base were recaptured on 16 February. Casualties were heavy on both sides.

The Communist representatives in the Four-Party Joint Military Commission in Saigon immediately demanded an investigation. ICCS unanimously confirmed that Sa Huynh was territory belonging to South Vietnam. Unfortunately this decision was the first and last ICCS unanimous report in Vietnam from the time of the cease-fire to the end. After the investigation, the chief of the Polish delegation in Da Nang was relieved.

The district town of Hong Ngu in Kien Phong Province lay astride the Bassac River some five miles from the Cambodian border. Because of its position, Hong Ngu blocked an excellent access route from Cambodia by way of the Bassac into South Vietnam. In March 1973, the NVA 1st Division launched an attack against the district town, apparently to seize and make it an inland port of entry capable of serving enemy forces in both South Vietnam and Cambodia. The attack was repulsed by our 9th Division which drove the enemy back into Cambodian territory.

In June 1973 the NVA F-10 Division launched a surprise attack and seized the populous village of Trung Nghia some six miles west of Kontum City. After a long and arduous

operation which lasted into September, friendly forces retook the village. Both sides suffered heavy casualties.

Tong Le Chan (or Tong Le Chon) base in MR–III was a border camp lying astride enemy lines of communication between War Zone C (Tay Ninh) and Binh Long and Binh Duong Provinces. Its presence forced the enemy to make long detours. As a result, on 25 March 1973 he began an intense effort to force the evacuation of the base. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 92d Ranger Battalion which manned the base found itself cut off from all communication and supplies by road; it was unable to conduct patrols around the base. Helicopter supply became increasingly difficult due to heavy enemy antiaircraft fire. Supplies had to be dropped by fixed-wing aircraft. During sixteen consecutive weeks, the enemy shelled the base 300 times, using more than 10,000 assorted rounds, and launched eleven attacks by infantry and nine by sappers (assault engineers). In the meantime, the enemy also stepped up propaganda activities urging the Rangers to evacuate the base. But the defenders held fast and successfully drove back all enemy attacks. By 11 April 1974 the situation within the base became utterly untenable. The badly mangled 92d Ranger Battalion finally had to break out and fall back on An Loc. The commander, Lt. Col. Le Van Ngon, was promoted ahead of schedule in recognition of his unit's valiant performance.

Communist Military Preparations

The Communists' regular armed forces had suffered heavy losses during the 1972 offensive. Also, the costs of the 1968 Tet offensive were still felt in the enemy infrastructure and regional and guerrilla forces (*Table 1*). Immediately after the conclusion of the Paris Agreement, therefore, Hanoi began to improve the combat capabilities of its main and local forces, strengthening main force units in terms of firepower and mobility, reequipping and retraining local forces, and expanding the guerrilla organizations. During this time, our intelligence noticed that in North Vietnam the enemy's independent antiaircraft units were being integrated into divisional and regimental organizations with weapons ranging from SAM–2 to SAM–3 (surface to air missiles) and from 37-mm. to 100-mm. guns. Along the coast, the enemy's defensive forces were equipped with SAMLET, another missile recently supplied by Russia.

TABLE 1—ENEMY STRENGTH AND UNITS, JANUARY 1973

Category	Military Regions				Grand Total
	I	II	III	IV	
Troops					
Combat	79,450	31,200	27,300	29,050	167,000
Administrative and rear service	35,240	18,500	17,315	14,065	85,120
Guerrilla infrastructure	5,928	11,017	10,730	13,325	41,000
Total	120,618	60,717	55,345	56,440	293,120
Divisions					
Infantry	7	3	2	2	14
Sapper			1		1
Field artillery			1		1
Antiaircraft	1				1
Total	8	3	4	2	17
Separate Regiments					
Infantry	6	5	8	11	30
Sapper	3	1	2		6
Field artillery	6	2	2		10
Armor	2	1	1		4
Antiaircraft	12				12
Total	29	9	13	11	62

In South Vietnam the effort was even more visible in the number of field guns, antiaircraft batteries, and radar systems deployed. After the cease-fire until the fall of Saigon, the Communists introduced twenty more antiaircraft regiments equipped with all kinds of guns and a network of assorted radars providing a degree of control over the airspace of MR-I and much of MRs-II and -III. A new heat-seeking SA-7 missile was also introduced with its range increased from 9,000 to 15,000 feet (altitude). For field artillery, they had a total of 430 Russian-made 122-mm. and 130-mm. guns. Our troops in MR-II and MR-III were facing a new enemy artillery capability.

Hanoi also moved a great number of armored vehicles to the South. Of the 655 enemy armored vehicles estimated to be in South Vietnam, many were introduced for the first time on the battlefield. Included were the tank-launched Scissors Bridge (MT-54 and MT-34) and the armored personnel carrier BTR-152 series. Also deployed were airborne assault guns, ASU-75; the Soviet light artillery-tractor, M2; the 152-mm.

gun-howitzer, D20; and the 100-mm. antitank gun, T12. Other sophisticated weapons were reported but not fully confirmed by our intelligence. They included the T–60 medium tank and SA–7s mounted in groups. Improved canned food from Peking was found on enemy soldiers. Local and guerrilla forces were equipped with B40 and B41 rockets, AK–47 rifles, and mortars.

The enemy's effort to rebuild his general reserve was most significant. Hanoi withdrew the 312th, 308th, and 320B Divisions from Quang Tri Province to North Vietnam; the 316th Division from Laos to North Vietnam; and rebuilt the 341st Division. With the 308B, 316B, and the 968th in Laos, the Communists now had at least seven confirmed general reserve divisions. By the end of 1974, Hanoi had formed two army corps headquarters in MR–I and one in MR–III. Also several antiaircraft divisions were organized: the 671st, 673d, 675th, and 679th. Under direct control of their headquarters in the South, they organized the M26 Armor Brigade, the 75th Artillery Division, the 377th AAA Division, the 5th Engineer Division, and the 27th Sapper Division. From Laos, the 559th Transportation Group was moved into South Vietnam with its four organic elements: the 471st, 472d, 473d, and 541st Transportation Divisions.

In South Vietnam all independent infantry regiments were organized into divisions, such as the 3d Division with the 33d and 274th Regiments in MR–III; 4th Division with D1, 18B, and 95A Regiments; 6th Division with 24th, DT1, and 207th Regiments; and the 8th Division with the Z15th and Z18th Regiments. The Communists did not exaggerate when they emphasized in their Twenty-First Plenum that they had not been stronger since 1954. Young recruits were still being drafted in the North. An estimated 200,000 reached southern battlefields after the cease-fire. But the most difficult problem for the Communists was to restore their infrastructure and network to the pre-1968 level (approximately 100,000).

To maintain such an expeditionary force required a major logistical effort. During 1973 the Communists substantially expanded their network of supply bases and hard-surfaced, all-weather roads along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail complex in Laos. Truck convoys, sometimes more than 200 vehicles, were sighted during daylight on these roads, bringing more men, more weapons, and more material into South Vietnam.

During 1974 the intricate road system that made up the Ho Chi Minh Trail was enlarged and extended southward. Its main

north-south axis, formerly located mainly on Laotian and Cambodian territory, was now supplemented by a route on our side of the border, the Truong Son Corridor extending for nearly 600 miles from the 17th Parallel to the northern edge of Tay Ninh Province. Lateral routes linked the corridor to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and some of the coastal areas. However, it was not yet an all-weather route, and during the rainy season many pontoon bridges were needed to replace the wooden structures destroyed by high water and floods.

In this expansion effort, the Communists attacked and overwhelmed all of our remote highland bases and outposts that might interfere with their supply corridor. These bases included Bu Bong, Bu Prang, Plei-D'jereng, and Plei-Me. In addition, branches from the north-south axis were also built toward the eastern coastal plains. Bases and outposts (such as Dak Pek, Mang Buk, Plateau Gi, and Gia Vuc) which lay across these laterals were also overrun. (See below.)

The enemy also built an enormous network of fuel storage areas supplied by pipeline and pumping facilities. The pipeline network extended from the DMZ to the western edge of Quang Duc Province. The Communists also established several large storage areas containing many prefabricated houses and warehouses and reconditioned a number of airfields. In all, the enemy now controlled seven "light" and eight "medium class" airfields in South Vietnam, and two of the fields could be modified to accommodate jet fighters.

In summary, because of this major logistical effort it was established that the NVA could sustain for eighteen months a general offensive of the type seen in 1972. Also, the time required to send personnel from the North into the South was reduced from four months to approximately three weeks.

Communist Policy and Strategy

The protracted war in South Vietnam had inflicted heavy losses on both sides, but the toll was notably heavier for the Communists. In an interview with an Italian reporter, Vo Nguyen Giap acknowledged a casualty figure of more than 500,000 for North Vietnam. The Communist soldier, although hardened by party discipline and tempered by intensive indoctrination and watched closely by political cadres, nonetheless desired a real peace and hoped to be reunited with his family. Information from captured documents, prisoners, and ralliers

established the fact that in October 1972 when the cease-fire was almost accomplished, the Communist troops, as well as their cadres, were very excited. They listened to BBC and VOA radio broadcasts every day and openly discussed the possibility of returning to North Vietnam. When the 28 October cease-fire failed to materialize, they could not conceal their despair.

In the wake of the signing of the cease-fire agreement, directive No. 2/73 was issued by the Communist headquarters for the South, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), providing specific propaganda guidance for the Communist Party and its armed forces and people. According to the document, the Paris Treaty was an "epoch marking" and "history making" victory for Communists in the South. The Paris Agreement did not terminate the conflict, however, but established a state of "half war-half peace" in which political activities would take precedence over military operations.

During March and April 1973, two different propaganda teams were dispatched to the South from the North. They were headed by General Van Tien Dung and by To Huu, a politburo member. The teams conducted many meetings, explaining to their troops that the Paris Agreement was just a "break-phase" in conquering the South and was only part of the Communist strategy of "talk and fight." The Communist Party usually had a political "line" appropriate to each new development. At that time the "line" was to urge a three-element government with the armed forces ready to cope with all eventualities.

Communist propaganda had to cope with two contradictory attitudes and concepts. The first firmly supported the aim of the Paris Agreement to achieve a peaceful solution to the problem in South Vietnam. The second advocated the necessity of resuming the war and asserted that military action alone could lead to ultimate victory. Both of these concepts were thoroughly analyzed by the Communist Party in its directive No. 3/72 issued in early April 1973. This directive concluded that Communist troops should trust the party policy and strategy of flexibility; the existing situation was described as a state of "peace in war" during which the Communists could exploit the legal aspects of the Paris Agreement. With their efficient propaganda machine and their political indoctrination methods, the Communists sought to reconcile the two attitudes at

the lowest level. It would be a subject of discussion among troops and cadres.

Intelligence revealed that during a May 1973 meeting of provincial party leaders, presumably mid-level, it was concluded that the South Vietnamese Revolution could only be achieved by armed violence through a "blitzkrieg"of the type launched in 1968. (Noticeably absent was any mention of political struggle.) At another political meeting in July 1973, it was concluded that: "If the GVN did not implement the Paris Agreement by participating in a coalition government, the Communists had the capabilities to mount a general offensive and a general uprising." The scheme of a new offensive in the South was disclosed by a rallier, a Lam Dong provincial party member, as a contemplated strategic raid against Hue and Da Nang in MR-I. The rallier's statements were supported by other information. In North Vietnam, pilots were conducting stepped-up training missions, and aerial photos had revealed that in Laos the Communists had built a sand table mock-up of an airport with control tower, runway, and aircraft which looked just like the Da Nang Air Base. However, the rallier stressed that the offensive could come only after the approval of both Russia and China, as had been the case in 1968 and 1972. Incidentally, during August and September 1973, Premier Pham Van Dong and Party Secretary Le Duan made trips to China and Russia.

Throughout this time, the Communist forces in the South endeavored to build and develop their strength in preparation for subsequent campaigns. Its chairman, Nguyen Huu Tho, alleged during a press interview that the NLF did not plan to launch an offensive but would be in a favorable position if one became necessary. In a radio broadcast on 15 October 1973 Hanoi announced that Communist forces would repel any attacks with appropriate measures and armed forces. COSVN directive No. 4/73 issued at the same time provided specific guidance for attacking "point by point," grasping partial victories, and advancing toward final victory. Communist forces might fight while making propaganda or propagandize first and fight afterwards.

COSVN resolution No. 12 based on the report of the party's Twenty-First Plenum and issued around December 1973 or early January 1974 was probably intended to improve the sagging morale then prevailing among Communist troops. Both documents claimed that the Communist forces in the

South were stronger both militarily and politically than at any time since 1954. They should continue to engage in local actions and follow "war in peace" tactics while pretending publicly to observe the Paris Agreement. However, "local war" was interpreted to include attacks supported by all "armed services" and against such well-fortified positions as district seats or subsector headquarters, the rear bases of battalions and regiments, and division headquarters. In the political field emphasis was placed on the development of the infrastructure. COSVN resolution No. 12 continued to guide the enemy throughout 1974.

Toward the end of 1973, the Communists embarked on an extensive campaign against our remote outposts and bases. One by one, they were overwhelmed, or the defenders were forced to evacuate. The enemy campaign continued unabated into 1974, first with the commitment of regimental size units; then with divisions, supported by armor, artillery, and antiaircraft weapons. In September 1973, the Le-Minh (Plei D'jereng) Base was the first to be overrun, followed by the Ngoc Bay Mountain Base in Kontum and the Bach Ma Mountain Base near Da Nang. In November, the Dak Song Camp was overrun, then the Kien Duc Base. Except for the Kien Duc Base, which was retaken a week later by the 45th Regiment, all these outposts and bases remained under enemy control.

On our side during 1973, we had frustrated the enemy's "land and population grab" tactic on the one hand and pushed ahead with rural pacification on the other. However, insofar as the remote outposts were concerned, President Thieu's instructions forbade their evacuation. At all costs, they were to be defended and held. As it turned out, this policy proved politically but not militarily sound. It was fairly easy for the enemy to concentrate a force five or six times greater than ours at any remote place and with abundant fire support overwhelm an outpost at will. To attempt to hold all remote outposts, therefore, amounted to sacrificing a substantial number of troops who could be employed effectively elsewhere. But then our government still hoped the Paris Agreement would be observed to some extent. And the maintenance of these outposts, although costly, was thought of as visible proof of the extent of our control. Besides, abandoning these outposts would be tantamount to turning over to the enemy a sizable part of the national territory.

In MR-I during early July 1974, the enemy concentrated a large force composed of the 304B and 711 Divisions and elements of the 44th Front (eleven infantry battalions). The thrust of his attack enveloped the Da Trach Ranger Camp, Thuong Duc District, and a series of outposts in the Que Son Valley. His eventual objective was the vital Quang Nam coastal plain. This situation created a serious threat to the city of Da Nang and represented a major challenge to I Corps. Our 3d Infantry Division tried valiantly to impede the enemy advance. During the ensuing battle, I Corps reinforced the area with two infantry regiments, two Ranger groups, and two airborne brigades. Severe and bloody fighting continued through November when the situation was brought under control. Enemy forces were driven from the coastal plain and pushed beyond the foothills. Also in September, when the fighting in Quang Nam reached its peak, NVA forces launched a concerted effort in Thua Thien Province to cut National Route 1 between Hue and Da Nang. The enemy forces included three regiments of the 324B Division. Da Nang and Phu Bai Air Bases received heavy artillery and rocket attacks.

In addition, in the southern I Corps area, the NVA 52d Brigade (reinforced) overran the Gia Vuc Border Camp and the Minh Long District Town. Coordinated actions by our 1st and 2d Infantry Divisions in their respective zones provided the margin of success, and by the end of 1974, the situation in I Corps was stabilized. Each side had more than 15,000 casualties in a six-month period.

In MR-II, the Communists began constructing twin roads in an easterly direction from the north-south main infiltration route. One road was north of Kontum and the other south of Pleiku. When completed they were to meet at National Route 19 east of Pleiku City. This road system was designed to assist the enemy in isolating Kontum and Pleiku Provinces as well as II Corps Headquarters located in Pleiku City. Outpost 711 located to the south of Pleiku City blocked the Communist effort. In April 1974, two regiments of the NVA 320th Division attacked this outpost. The 22d Division, reinforced with a Ranger group, was committed and during May successfully pushed back the attackers and defeated the NVA effort to complete the roads. Thereafter in the summer and early fall of 1974, the NVA 3d Division based in Binh Dinh Province cut coastal National Route 1 in the three northern districts of the province and threatened the Phu Cat Air Base. The 22d Divi-

sion moved from Pleiku to reinforce the two Ranger groups based in the province. It successfully cleared National Route 1 and pushed the NVA 3d Division back to its base area in the An Lao Valley by the end of the year.

In MR–III we retook the district town of Duc Hue in Hau Nghia Province whose Ranger battalion had been overwhelmed. In June simultaneous attacks were thrown by the enemy against three outposts west of Binh Duong Province (An Dien, Base 82, and Rach Bap). The battle to retake these outposts was particularly harsh. The enemy took advantage of his numerical advantage in artillery pieces and his abundant supply of ammunition. Our troops were lured into a predetermined area and were pounded mercilessly by deadly concentrated fire. Losses were high on our part. Finally, only through a systematic counterbattery effort and the use of small assault teams could we silence the enemy's guns and reoccupy the outposts.

In the Mekong Delta our forces were on the offensive. A large-scale search and destroy operation was conducted against Tri Phap, long an enemy sanctuary in the Plain of Reeds (an area lying at the boundary convergence of three provinces: Kien Tuong, Kien Phong, and Dinh Tuong). The Communists reacted vigorously, and the three organic divisions of IV Corps were constantly tied up either in combat operations or in providing support and assistance to the Regional and Popular Forces, the ineffectiveness of which was a matter of grave concern. Because of this ineffectiveness, the enemy had gained control over several villages and hamlets in Kien Giang, An Xuyen, and Chuong Thien Provinces. The major weaknesses of the Regional Force and Popular Force units were low strength and low morale, the severity of which prompted JGS to conduct an investigation. As a direct consequence of the investigation, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, commander of IV Corps and MR–IV, was relieved of his command and replaced by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khoa Nam in November. The urgent mission entrusted to the new commander was to improve Regional Force and Popular Force units and make them effective combat units. General Nam's efforts were crowned with remarkable success.

CHAPTER 4

Problems and Policies, 1973–74

The first major problem we had to face as a consequence of the Paris Agreement was how to counter the enemy's "land and population grab" campaign. The void left by the departure of U.S. and allied troops also created new challenges. The national economy was in a serious state with an increasing loss of foreign exchange, rising cost of living, and widespread unemployment. Defense expenditures remained, as they had always been, a major burden for the national budget. But there was no way the government could reduce this burden in the face of the constant military threat posed by the presence of NVA forces and the continued fighting.

Our strategy immediately after the cease-fire had four major objectives. First and foremost, we were determined to keep the national territory intact and to maintain full control over the population. If any area were seized by the enemy, the armed forces had to wrest it back at all costs. Second, the armed forces were to complete their reorganization with particular emphasis on replenishing and reequipping units which had suffered significant losses during the enemy offensive of 1972, restoring a sizable general reserve, and consolidating the territorial forces. Third, the armed forces would seek to improve and modernize all their aspects but especially their logistics, firepower, and mobility. Fourth, the armed forces would continue to assist in the national pacification and development program and take part in other national projects—such as the consolidation of the military territorial structure at the village level and the farmland reclamation and resettlement program—all geared to achieve the "three-self" goal of national policy (self-defense, self-management, self-sufficiency).

Organization of the Armed Forces

A major task of JGS in the cease-fire period was to follow through with the improvement and modernization which had begun three years earlier and culminated in the crash delivery

of equipment in November 1972. With the Paris Agreement in force it was understood that the armed forces would operate under the ceiling of equipment which had been delivered before the cease-fire. As a result, it was decided to concentrate on the formation and consolidation of combat units and the enhancement of firepower and mobility with available assets. The objectives were to reestablish a division-size general reserve and to increase the strength and combat effectiveness of territorial forces.

Plans had been developed to consolidate three Ranger groups—the 5th, 6th, and 7th—into a division, but the U.S. Defense Attache Office (USDAO) could not provide the necessary heavy weapons and equipment without violating the Paris Agreement. So the Ranger division plan was discarded and replaced by the more realistic formation of brigade- and battalion-size units. Four infantry brigades, two armor squadrons, and one mixed artillery battalion were activated by Tet of 1975. The Marine and Airborne Divisions were thus augmented each by a fourth brigade: the 468th Marine Brigade and the 4th Airborne Brigade. Two new Ranger groups, the 8th and 9th, were added to the reserve, along with two composite armor squadrons (M–42, M–41, and M–113) and one mixed artillery battalion (155-mm. and 105-mm. howitzers) created with the training equipment of the Armor and Artillery Schools. All these units were held in reserve at the JGS level ready for deployment and intended to rotate with equivalent units in the field.

In addition, to increase the combat effectiveness and tactical mobility of territorial forces, heretofore used mainly as battalions for outpost and guard duties, JGS transformed sector headquarters into mobile regional group commands, each capable of controlling from two to four Regional Force battalions and one four-piece artillery battery relieved from territorial duties. Thus the Regional Force battalions and territorial artillery batteries were effectively consolidated into the equivalent of regiments with mobile combat capability which were no longer bound by provincial boundaries. They were instead placed under the direct control of corps commanders who could use them in any capacity required. The JGS plan called for the activation of twenty-seven such groups by June 1975. This effort was intended to free regular divisions from territorial concerns and give the military regions a sizable combat force to confront enemy territorial units.

In a shuffle of senior officers in March 1974, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Manh, chief of staff of JGS since 1969, was made deputy chairman of JGS for pacification and development in place of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van La who retired because of old age. General Manh, having served in his position for more than four years, was due for replacement. Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, who was then commanding general of the Central Logistics Command, was designated to replace General Manh as chief of staff of JGS. A devoted and hard worker, General Khuyen was to fill both positions until the final days.

A most important event was the confirmation early in 1974 of the discovery of oil in the continental shelf of South Vietnam. In the aftermath of the Paris Agreement, economic development in the postwar period had become a much talked about subject since it was hoped that peace would be enforced and South Vietnam never be abandoned. News of the discovery of oil in late 1973 enhanced the prevailing optimistic mood. In that buoyant atmosphere, JGS, on governmental orders, worked out a plan to trim the total strength of the armed forces to one million. The plan was to be carried out unannounced during 1974. An initial four thousand servicemen reaching age limits or having completed twenty-five years of service were released as required by regulations. They were earmarked for transfer to jobs in the civilian sector to help organize various government-operated production centers. Army units were also given roles in this production plan. By the end of 1974, as a result, the total strength of the armed forces had dropped to 996,000 men, a level from which it was difficult to rebuild to the authorized strength of 1,100,000.

For years the problem of maintaining full strength had proved to be a constant headache. Generally speaking, to maintain a level of 1,100,000 men, a yearly contingent of 200,000 to 240,000 new recruits was required to overcome attrition caused by combat losses, normal deaths, desertions, and discharges from service. The manpower made available by the draft (of those of eighteen to thirty-nine as determined by the general mobilization law) and voluntary service only amounted to a scant 100,000 to 150,000 men, resulting in a perennial deficit of 90,000 to 100,000.

Two reasons accounted for the inability to obtain enough replacements. First and foremost, the desertion rate was rather high, averaging 1.5 to 2 percent of total strength monthly. Thus, by desertion alone the armed forces lost up to one-

fourth of their total every year. Second, the recruits intended to make up for the deficit never filled the projected quotas due to extensive draft dodging. But even though the nation had been at war for over twenty years, very few deserters or draft dodgers chose to go over to the other side in spite of the enemy's propaganda efforts. Most simply vanished into the cities to live the lives of fugitives or returned to live in their villages with the connivance and help of friends or relatives. Some deserters became restless after prolonged inaction or simply got tired of hiding. So they reenlisted in a different unit under a new name or with modified personal identification. Because of these reasons, the actual strength of units, combat units in particular, was sometimes unusually low. Among other things, JGS required every combat battalion to muster a minimum of 500 men for operational duties (authorized strength was about 800).

The reduction by 100,000 men should have had minimum impact. However, owing to these other factors, the strength of units was seriously affected, and servicemen in general were given a false impression of peace prospects. As a result, the plan had to be rescinded when it became apparent that the Paris Agreement stood no chance of being respected and that a new Communist invasion was a foregone conclusion. The authorized strength of the armed forces was then restored to the previous level of 1,100,000 men. With the 100,000 spaces thus made available and the reassignment of additional troops after inactivation of units no longer required, such as four railroad security battalions (reconstruction of the Trans-Viet Railroad was temporarily suspended because of budget limitations and the tactical situation) and four military police battalions in charge of Communist prisoners, JGS made every effort to create additional Ranger, Airborne, and Marine units and to consolidate Regional Force battalions into regional mobile groups.

To counter any large-scale violation of the peace agreement by the Communists, a contingency plan was worked out by JGS and USDAO. It was a top secret arrangement whereby the United States agreed to provide our armed forces with appropriate support when required. A system of hot lines was established between the U.S. Support Command at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand and JGS. Our Air Force Headquarters and all four corps commanders were also given direct access to this system. Provisions of the plan, which was disseminated to corps com-

manders as a basis for their operational planning, included: (1) the constant updating of B–52 targets; (2) the activation of forward air control teams equipped with appropriate radios and manned by English-speaking personnel who had previously worked with the U.S. Air Force. (3) In the case of a major offensive, our armed forces were to hold their lines for seven to fifteen days, allowing time for the U.S. Congress to approve the employment of U.S. air power in South Vietnam. The JGS–DAO plan also provided the procedures for requesting U.S. Air Force support. In spite of its apparent promise, the contingency plan was never put to use because the scale of enemy violations in 1973 and 1974 did not warrant a request for intervention. By the time such intervention was required, U.S. Air Force units were not available.

The Reduction in U.S. Military Aid

Ravaged by war for over a quarter-century, South Vietnam had very little to contribute to the war effort except manpower and blood. Financially and materially, South Vietnam had to depend on military aid provided by the United States, the factor that largely decided the outcome of the war. On 2 April 1973 President Thieu was received by President Nixon in the Western White House at San Clemente. Together the two leaders discussed problems related to economic and military aid to South Vietnam and examined the continuing cease-fire violations and the Communist buildup. The visit shored up our confidence in continuing U.S. aid during the postwar period.

Fully aware of the difficulties the United States was facing in its own house, economically and politically, the Republic of Vietnam made every effort to enforce austerity and to maintain and preserve invaluable military assets as soon as the cease-fire was in force. It was hoped that reductions in military aid, if and when made, would be timed and graduated to reflect a true improvement in the military situation on the one hand and the development of the national economy of South Vietnam on the other.

During the first few months of 1973, following this belt-tightening policy and assuming that the enemy would respect the Paris Agreement to some extent, JGS and USDAO came up with a fiscal year 1975 military aid budget recommendation of $1,600 million. President Nixon submitted a revised figure of $1,474 million to Congress, but, in addition, he asked for

$474 million as a supplement to the fiscal year 1974 budget to cover increased operational expenses and the replacement of lost and damaged war material and another $266 million to make up for a deficit incurred in the previous fiscal year.

President Thieu sent me, as chairman of JGS, to the United States in April 1974 to seek support for our aid request. At the Pentagon, I made a presentation of the military situation in South Vietnam, substantiated by documents and photographic evidence of the enemy's escalating violations and his massive movement of men and arms into the country. Officials of the U.S. Department of Defense heartily assured me of their full support. Unfortunately, the U.S. Congress rejected all supplemental aid requests and merely authorized a fiscal year 1975 ceiling of $1 billion, of which only $700 million was finally appropriated. And this amount included operational expenses for USDAO ($46 million appropriated out of $100 million requested). The final appropriation came as a shock to the army and people of South Vietnam. It was certain that the huge gap between requirements and resources that had just been created could never be closed no matter how much self-restraint was imposed and how well the budget was managed.

Since the announcement of the cease-fire, our armed forces and people had staked their hopes on four possibilities. The first was that the Communists would respect the Paris Agreement. That meant the fighting would die down and requirements for fuel and munitions would be reduced. The Communists soon extinguished this hope.

The second was that the national territory to be held could be gradually reduced and consolidated into smaller but more defensible areas. This would require revising our national defense strategy and consolidating the armed forces to make them powerful enough to confront the enemy effectively at the level of available military aid and our own national capabilities. This looked like a most realistic prospect, but carrying it out would certainly require a long time because of the far-reaching psychological and political effects it was bound to create.

Third, we hoped that other financial resources could be found to supplement military aid or eventually replace it altogether, as for example the exploitation of oil, which had just been discovered, or additional aid from other non-Communist countries. However, this was only an expectation for the long term.

Fourth, there was the possibility the U.S. Congress might review its decision once the furor against President Nixon had died down. After all, U.S. credibility and prestige were at stake, and it was only reasonable to expect that South Vietnam would be given the wherewithal to defend itself after approximately 45,000 young Americans had given their lives for the same cause. It was to this last hope that the armed forces and people of South Vietnam desperately clung, and it was with the belief that somehow the additional aid would be provided that they stoically endured all privations and willingly shed more blood to make up for the missing rounds of ammunition.

A $300 million supplemental appropriation was requested on 2 January 1975, and this amount was boosted to $722 million by President Ford's last-ditch effort on 11 April 1975. By the time the U.S. Congress finally rejected it, however, it was already too late for any kind of hope. The final verdict had been rendered.

The $700 million appropriated for fiscal year 1975 only met about half of our austere requirements. Enemy-initiated actions in the meantime increased 70 percent as compared with the previous year. After deducting $46 million for USDAO operations, there remained $654 million for direct support (*Table 2*).

TABLE 2—U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE, FISCAL YEAR 1975

(In millions of dollars)

Arm	Minimum Requirement	Allotted	Percentage
Air Force	$414	$183	44
Army	841	458	54
Total	1,283	654	51

Air Force and Naval Aid

Because of the meager funds allotted, the air force was compelled to (1) Inactivate more than 200 aircraft including A–1 fighter-bombers; 0–1 observation planes; and C–7, C–119, and C–47 cargo planes. (2) Terminate its program of replacing F–5As with F–5E fighters. The 36 F–5Es that had been ordered were returned to the U.S. Air Force, and funds recovered were channeled to more vital operational and maintenance needs. (3) Call home 400 jet and helicopter pilot students undergoing

training in the United States. Over 1,000 airman-trainees for flight and nonflight jobs undergoing English language training were turned into infantrymen. This caused a most adverse psychological effect in the Vietnamese Air Force. (4) Reduce flight time for support and training, which in turn reduced fire support 50 percent as compared with 1973–74 and reconnaissance 58 percent, gravely affecting ability to keep track of enemy infiltration and provide observation for operational areas and convoy protection.

Helilift was down 70 percent. This affected most seriously medical evacuation as well as troop reinforcement and resupply, particularly in the Mekong Delta which is crisscrossed by a maze of canals and swamps and where for years the helicopter had been instrumental in saving innumerable wounded soldiers and outposts in distress. The sudden scarcity of helicopters compelled our troops to use hammocks and sampans for the evacuation of the wounded in some instances and greatly hampered the resupply of munitions. In addition, it also caused serious psychological readjustment problems.

Regular airlift was down 50 percent. This affected mostly the mobility of general reserve units. Since the Airborne and the Marine Divisions were the only reserves available on a countrywide basis, their ability to move swiftly was of critical importance. During the Communist offensive of 1972, the Airborne Division was able to deploy from Saigon to Pleiku and from Pleiku to MR–I within forty-eight hours. This feat was accomplished with our own and U.S. aircraft without detriment to other airlift operations. But in 1975 the same operation in reverse took seven days and completely disrupted other airlift operations. The C–130A cargo aircraft, the airlift mainstay, was also used during the first few months of 1975 for bombing missions. But, constantly plagued by technical troubles such as wing cracks and fuel leaks in addition to cuts in flying time and a shortage of replacement parts, only four to eight out of a total of thirty-two C–130As were serviceable daily.

Naval activities were reduced by an average of 50 percent. River activities were cut 72 percent. This huge reduction required the inactivation of over 600 river craft and boats, 240 of which belonged to the Regional Forces. Grave effects were felt in control of waterways, particularly in MR–IV and coastal areas, escort for supply convoys, including convoys to Cambodia, and security for the main waterways leading to Saigon. The defense of remote outposts in the Mekong Delta and the

security of military harbors in Da Nang, Qui Nhon, Cam Ranh, and Saigon, and the Saigon–Vung Tau artery were seriously compromised.

It was realized that troop movements could be seriously impeded in the event of a major offensive because our assets were limited. To enhance sealift capabilities, two repair ships were transformed into cargo and troop transports. The landing ship tank (LST) fleet thus increased from six to eight ships. We had earlier requested and been promised six additional LSTs. The air force tried to improve the low serviceability rate of its two C–130A squadrons, and additional spare parts were requested to keep more trucks in service.

Replacement of Items and Parts

According to Article 7 of the Paris Agreement, our armed forces could replace arms, munitions, and war materiel damaged, worn out, or used up after the cease-fire. But the limited funds permitted only a few trucks, tanks, and artillery pieces to be replaced during fiscal years 1973–74. No replacements could possibly have been made for fiscal year 1975, because most of the budget was needed for operational and maintenance requirements more essential to the war effort. As a result, not a single plane, ship, or boat was replaced after the cease-fire. And only 70 percent of the most critical item, ammunition, could be replaced. By the end of 1974, the total worth of materiel awaiting replacement came to over $400 million. In particular, the program of replacing AN/PRC–10 radio sets with AN/PRC–25s had to be suspended. Half of the Popular Forces had to "make do" with the inferior and war-worn AN/PRC–10 which was plagued with problems of spare parts and dry batteries.

Only 33 percent ($24 million) of the amount required was available for replacement parts. The shortage of replacement parts greatly affected maintenance performance. The backlog of work on unserviceable combat materiel at troop and direct support units increased from fifteen to thirty days as a result. The percentage of serviceable materiel and equipment at troop units declined to the levels shown:

Item	*Percentage of Requirement*
M–113 armored personnel carrier	80–85
M–48 tank	75–80
105- and 155-mm. howitzers	90–95
175-mm. howitzers	60–75
M–79 grenade launcher	80
2.5-ton truck	80–85
5-ton wreckers	70–75
Signal equipment	90

Over 4,000 vehicles transferred by U.S. and allied troops remained unserviceable for lack of spare parts. The in-country export rebuilding program was also suspended because funds were unavailable. War and maintenance reserves thus were gradually used up until they disappeared from the shelves altogether when they were most needed to reequip battered units retrieved from MR–I and MR–II at the end of March 1975.

Fuel and Ammunition

After austerity measures were taken in 1974, the consumption of diesel fuel and gasoline decreased 30 percent as compared with 1973. In spite of this reduction, $60 million, or 13 percent, of the total army budget, was still needed for fuel alone. Stock levels were deemed satisfactory, ranging from forty-five to sixty days, based on actual consumption rates. However, without supplemental aid, our armed forces would have run out of fuel by mid-May 1975.

Of the total army budget for fiscal year 1975 ($458 million), $239 million, or 52 percent, was earmarked for ammunition. This amount, however, only met 56 percent of true requirements. Within this ceiling, only $19.9 million could be made available each month, whereas the previous monthly issue rate, July 1973 to February 1974, had amounted to $37.3 million. Inflation further shrank the quantity of munitions purchased. On the average, in 1974, the cost of munitions increased 27.7 percent between time of request and time of appropriation (*Table 3*).

TABLE 3—AMMUNITION COSTS, FISCAL YEAR 1975

(Dollars per Round)

Item	Estimated	October 1974 Actual Costs	Percentage Increase
5.56-mm. rifle	$0.07	$0.08	14
60-mm. mortar	12.80	13.58	6
81-mm. mortar	25.67	27.80	8
105-mm. howitzer	29.21	35.70	22
155-mm. howitzer	40.95	60.31	47
Fragmentation grenade	1.95	2.85	46
66-mm. rocket (LAW)	41.32	72.35	85

In February 1974 we calculated that, even with stringent fire discipline, by June 1975 the stock level would be down to 57,000 short tons or only a twenty-four day supply at the pre-cease-fire consumption rate. While hoping that supplemental aid would be provided, our armed forces took certain austerity measures. Harassment and interdiction fires were prohibited altogether. Fire was authorized only when a target was visible. As a result, the monthly consumption rate during the first eight months of fiscal year 1975 (July 1974 through February 1975) amounted to only 19,808 short tons or 27 percent of the pre-cease-fire rate of 73,356 short tons per month. During the same period, enemy-initiated activities increased to 2,980 incidents per month as compared with the pre-cease-fire rate of 2,072. An available supply rate per weapon per day was determined monthly for each of the four military regions based on budgetary allocations and past consumption experiences, for example, 1972 intensive combat rate (*Table 4*). The new supply rates fell far short of requirements, however, and MR commanders constantly requested additional issues. The total of such requests for the period from July 1974 to February 1975 amounted to $164,981,000, of which JGS could meet only 40.5 percent.

TABLE 4—TOTAL AMMUNITION AVAILABLE, JULY 1974–FEBRUARY 1975

(Rounds per Weapon per Day)

Item	Available	1972 Intensive Combat Rate
5.56-mm. rifle	1.56	3.6
40-mm. grenade	0.2	0.8
60-mm. mortar	0.4	2.0
81-mm. mortar	1.1	2.8

TABLE 4—TOTAL AMMUNITION AVAILABLE, JULY 1974–FEBRUARY 1975—Continued

(Rounds per Weapon per Day)

Item	Available	1972 Intensive Combat Rate
105-mm. howitzer	6.2	25.0
155-mm. howitzer	4.9	16.2
Fragmentation grenade (brigade per day)	50.6	180.0
66-mm. rocket (LAW)	4.5	84.4

Although part of the Royal Lao Army reserve ammunition was transferred to our forces, the permanent stock level only amounted to between thirty and forty days' supply, far below the prescribed sixty-day level. By February 1975, days' supply of some categories had plummeted to the safety level:

Munition	*Balance on Hand (Days)*
5.56-mm. rifle	31
40-mm. grenade	29
60-mm. mortar	27
81-mm. mortar	30
105-mm. howitzer	34
155-mm. howitzer	31
Fragmentation grenade	25

Taking into account order and shipping time which was usually forty-five days, the problem of readjusting stock levels for fourteen ammunition depots throughout the country became increasingly difficult and costly because airlift was mandatory. If supplemental aid were not made available and if the intensity of combat remained at the level of late 1974, then all munition stocks would be exhausted by June 1975. After March 1975 the situation got completely out of hand as a result of the troop withdrawals from MR–II and MR–I. About half of the countrywide stocks were lost. In April 1975 stock levels at the four remaining munition depots in MR–III and MR–IV dropped to an all-time low of fifteen to twenty days' supply.

The debates and votes in the U.S. Congress and the exact amount of military aid finally appropriated were too widely

known for our comfort. Both we and the enemy knew and could anticipate all the difficulties and weaknesses of our armed forces. To our side, it was a matter for anxiety; to the enemy, it offered an excellent opportunity. The Communists first stepped up propaganda aimed at servicemen and their dependents, in particular those of the Regional and Popular Forces. Second, they increased their harassment and interdiction of our villages, hamlets, and outposts. By so doing, the Communists tried to demonstrate to the local troops and people that our forces no longer had enough ammunition to fire in their support, and our officers and the United States were leaving them to the mercy of the enemy. Then, after a dramatic demonstration, the Communists would urge the local troops to abandon their outposts.

To counter the enemy moves, a countrywide effort was made to explain to the troops what economy of munitions really meant. Soldiers were taught that economy simply meant not wasting, and they were assured that adequate supplies would be made available. They were encouraged to refrain from firing when the enemy could not be observed and to make every round count. However, some undesirable practices—hoarding, speculating, and bartering—were detected in certain combat units in which troops and cadres had lost confidence or had become too preoccupied about the future. The most desired items were hand- and tube-launched grenades which had proved effective and hence had become sought after at the "grass-root" level.

Thus the South Vietnamese soldier of 1974–75 marched into combat with the deep concern that his ammunition might not be replenished as fast as it was consumed and that, if wounded, he might have to wait much longer for evacuation to a hospital. The time of abundant supplies and fast helilifts had gone. It was now the turn of the soldier's family to become concerned about his safety in the face of growing shortages. The most tragic result of the shortage was increased casualties. A price in blood was paid by the soldier for every round of ammunition he was not issued after the cease-fire.

Aid and support from the United States had helped our armed forces successfully confront a powerful NVA armed with modern and sophisticated weapons; U.S. aid and support had prevented outright and immediate subjugation and made possible the quest for a political solution of a free South Vietnam. To reduce that aid so drastically and so abruptly ended any

chance of success and generated panic among the people and armed forces of South Vietnam while encouraging the Communists to accelerate their drive to conquer by force.

Forebodings for 1975

Thus in January 1975 an editorial in the North Vietnamese party journal *Hoc Tap* indicated that the Twenty-Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party had been held. This implied that a general offensive would soon be conducted in South Vietnam. However, first the Communists were to consolidate Communist-controlled areas, "liberate" disputed areas, and bring war into areas we controlled. Also, this editorial revealed, the enemy was contemplating attacking a number of cities including Saigon, Hue, Da Nang, and Can Tho. According to the Communists, it would be logical when a number of provincial capitals had been taken, for the rest of the country to fall. The Twenty-Third Plenum also discussed the possibility of U.S. intervention. The enemy had not anticipated the blockade and the huge B–52 raids on Hanoi and Haiphong in 1972. Of course this time he did not exclude the possibility that the United States would return, but that chance was now considered very small.

For future military efforts the Communists foresaw two possibilities. The first assumed a deterioration of the situation in the South, which NVA forces would try to speed up by conducting a general offensive. The second assumed a vigorous reaction by our forces which would be presented by the Communists as a South Vietnamese effort to resume the war. In this case, the Communists would "counterattack" with a great vigor and seize any "strategic opportunity" to launch a big offensive of the type seen in 1972. In possibility one, the United States would be denied any good reason to intervene on the battlefield because the Communists would commit only those units already in the South and would portray the new conflict as a civil war. In possibility two, to deny the United States the opportunity for timely intervention, the Communists would use all the forces at their disposal, including general reserves from the North. Whether Hanoi selected course one or two, primary emphasis was placed on the military conquest of the South by force of arms.

Our government had concluded 1974 with an assessment of the military situation. A top-level meeting was convened on 6

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December 1974 at the Independence Palace and was chaired, as usual, by the president. The National Security Council members were there, as was the complete array of service and corps commanders. The estimate was that 1975 would be the year when the Communists would probably launch a general offensive to coincide with and upset our presidential election scheduled for October and the 1976 U.S. presidential campaign. The military balance undoubtedly favored the enemy; he had accumulated enough supplies to sustain a major offensive for an uninterrupted period of eighteen months at a level of intensity comparable to his offensive of 1972.

The form of the new offensive would be a combination of his 1968 and 1972 campaigns, that is, attacks against major cities concerted with such field actions as interdiction of lines of communication. It was further expected that the enemy's priority targets would be Saigon, Hue, Da Nang, and Can Tho, in his belief that if these major cities—our central nerve centers—were taken he could expect to capture lesser cities without a fight. Toward that end, there were indications that such NVA general reserve units as the 316th, 312th, 341st, and 308th Divisions were preparing to move south. We estimated that the enemy would strike MR-II first in an effort to drain our reserves before he launched attacks in MR-I and MR-III. To the enemy MR-IV would be only a diversionary battlefield where supporting activities such as harassments and traffic interdiction would take place. The ultimate goal of the offensive would be to force the creation of the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord and, finally, a coalition government. It was also estimated that the most favorable time for the enemy to initiate his effort would be in March.

Such was our estimate of the situation. We made it in the light of hard intelligence. In the absence of specific guidance by the president, JGS took on itself the task of preparing for the next enemy move. Our major concern was how to reconstitute some general reserve for immediate use. Certain measures were taken, some to cope with an emergency, others to face long-term eventualities. To strengthen the defense of Saigon, especially during the Tet holidays, JGS issued the following instructions:

The IV Corps was to be prepared to release one of its three divisions, or at least a brigade-size task force of infantry, armor, and artillery, for immediate deployment to Saigon if needed. This division was to be deployed for permanent oper-

ational duties in the area spanning the boundaries of Long An and Dinh Tuong Provinces. Thus located, it could move to Saigon by road and ship within forty-eight to seventy-two hours.

The I Corps was told to rearrange its forces so that the Airborne Division could be redeployed to Saigon or elsewhere within seventy-two hours.

Reconnaissance companies organic to the Ranger groups were directed to undergo training at Duc My and deploy to Saigon to reinforce the defense of the city. (These companies were later returned to their units after the Tet holidays.)

Recruits undergoing training at the Quang Trung Training Center and students of the Thu Duc Infantry School were to form four fully equipped infantry battalions for the defense of Saigon. At the same time, the Signal School at Vung Tau, the NCO School at Nha Trang, and the Artillery School and Ranger School at Duc My were directed each to form a fully equipped battalion ready for deployment on orders of JGS.

Two armor task forces were activated with assets of the Armor School to include M–48 and M–41 tanks and M–113 armored personnel carriers. The two task forces were to stand ready for deployment within two and six hours, respectively.

In summary, during 1974 our forces made every effort to retake important areas and population centers that the enemy had occupied. But our losses were high, and our forces became overextended. The Communists continued to commit units of ever-increasing size and expand their logistical system along our side of the Laotian and Cambodian borders.

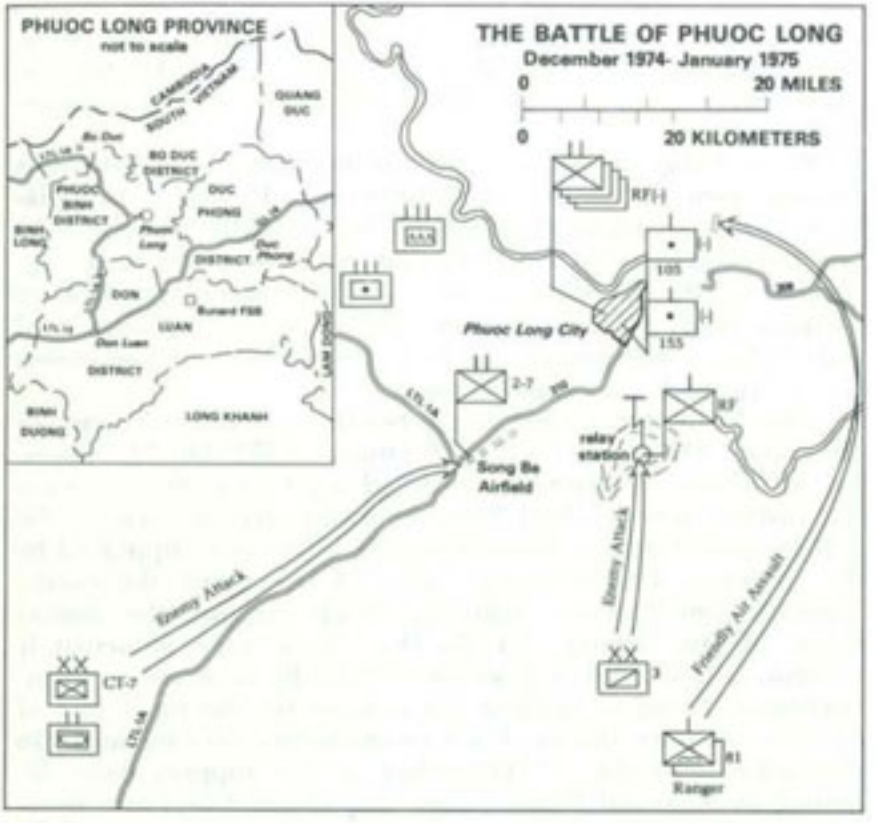
CHAPTER 5

The Beginning of the End

During 1973 and 1974, the enemy did not succeed in occupying any provincial capital of South Vietnam. At one time or another he had contemplated Kontum or Tay Ninh, but both cities proved to be beyond his reach. So he turned to Phuoc Long, the northernmost provincial capital of MR–III, and prepared to attack it with two infantry divisions augmented by an infantry regiment and supported by one tank regiment, one antiaircraft regiment, one field artillery regiment, and several sapper (assault engineer) units.

As early as October 1974, JGS had gathered enough information about the enemy's preparations and plans through technical intelligence, agents, and prisoners to predict the attack against Phuoc Long. The information had many times been made available to III Corps Headquarters and the sector headquarters of Phuoc Long, and each time it was updated with new developments. Thus, there was no question of surprise when the attack finally materialized in the latter part of December 1974.

The city of Phuoc Long lies seventy-five air miles northeast of Saigon. The province itself is bounded to the north by Cambodia and was composed of four districts: Duc Phong, Phuoc Binh, Bo Duc, and Don Luan (*Map 2*). Its population of approximately 30,000 was mostly Montagnard of the Stieng (Ma) and Mnong tribes, which make a living from lumbering and rubber harvesting. The remainder of the population consisted of Vietnamese merchants, plantation workers, and civil servants. The terrain is mountainous and blanketed by dense jungle which denies air observation. It was used by the enemy as a major base area. Phuoc Long City is linked to Saigon by Interprovincial Route 1A and National Route 14. The same Route 14 also connects Phuoc Long with Quang Duc and Ban Me Thuot to the northeast. The city's airfield, Song Be, had an asphalt landing strip capable of accommodating all cargo planes through C–130 classification. The morning mist usually



MAP 2

lasts until 0800 or 0900 but during the rainy season may last until 1000 or 1100.

The supply of Phuoc Long was ordinarily done by truck via Interprovincial Route 1A and National Route 14. Local products went to Saigon by the same route. Only one week after the cease-fire, however, the Communists cut this main supply artery at many places. Airlift by helicopters and propeller-driven planes then became the main supply means for the city and the four district towns. The monthly requirement was 400 to 500 tons, mostly rice, salt, sugar, ammunition, and fuel. Beginning in August 1974, III Corps made a concerted effort with II Corps to open National Route 14. The operation somewhat relieved the burden on airlift resources which now were needed for the secure delivery of such critical items as ammunition, fuel, and medical supplies. However, on 14 December 1974, the district town of Duc Phong, which lay astride the

supply route, was overrun by the Communists, and Phuoc Long again became dependent on airlift. And airlift became increasingly costly and unreliable due to the enemy's antiaircraft fire.

Phuoc Long was defended by five Regional Force battalions varying from 750 to 900 men; forty-eight Popular Force platoons, totaling approximately 1,000 men, mostly Montagnards; and four territorial artillery sections. This force was later augmented by the 2d Battalion of the 7th Infantry, two artillery sections from the 5th Division (six additional 105-mm. and four 155-mm. howitzers), and three reconnaissance companies of the 5th, 18th, and 25th Divisions.

The battle for Phuoc Long began in the latter part of December 1974 and ended on 6 January 1975. On 13 December 1974, the Communists launched a probing attack against the district town of Don Luan but were driven back by the gallant local Regional Force battalion, effectively supported by the air force. The following night, 14 December, the enemy executed simultaneous lightning attacks against the district towns of Duc Phong and Bo Duc. Both were immediately overrun and without indications of friendly resistance. An investigation failed to disclose the reasons for the rapid loss of these towns since almost all key commanders were missing. On the following night, 15 December, a fire support base defended by Regional Force troops was attacked and also overrun. Two 105-mm. artillery sections were lost to the enemy in this action.

In the face of these successive setbacks, III Corps helilifted the 2d Battalion of the 7th Infantry of the 5th Division from its base at Lai Khe into Phuoc Long. With this reinforcement, the sector headquarters conducted a counterattack and regained Bo Duc on 16 December. By this time, however, effective friendly forces in Phuoc Long comprised only the regular infantry battalion and two Regional Force battalions. More than 3,000 disorganized Regional Force, Popular Force, and Self-Defense troops had fallen back to the city from outlying districts, but they badly needed reorganizing and reequipping. The regular infantry battalion was made responsible for the defense of the Phuoc Binh District Town, which made up part of the city, and the Song Be Airfield where the 3d Logistical Command supply point was located.

With full support of JGS, III Corps now undertook to bring in weapons, ammunition, and other equipment by C–130 cargo

planes and CH–47 helicopters to resupply the garrison and to reequip the local troops who were being regrouped in the city. On return trips the aircraft evacuated military dependents and other civilians in an effort to relieve the supply burden. Enemy pressure in the meantime increased around the city. Song Be Airfield was heavily shelled, and air traffic was interdicted by antiaircraft fire in the northern and southwestern sectors. A C–130 was hit while landing and lay helpless in the parking area. The next day another C–130 which had brought in supplies and a team of mechanics was hit while taking off and was destroyed. In addition to paralyzing the airfield by shelling, the enemy also moved antiaircraft batteries closer to the city and the approach avenues used by helicopters and observation planes. Lai Khe, the command post of the 5th Infantry Division and the necessary refueling stop for helicopters on their way to Phuoc Long, was also brought under interdictory fire.

In conjunction with their effort to close the airfield by increasingly intense fire, the North Vietnamese launched a second attack against the district town of Bo Duc and seized it again on the night of 22 December. Four days later the NVA 7th Division renewed the attack against the district town of Don Luan and overran it. With this last success the enemy had gained control over the entire province, save for the capital and the district town of Phuoc Binh.

On the night of 30 December 1974, the NVA 7th Division and the newly activated 3d Division launched an attack against the district town of Phuoc Binh which was within the city's defense perimeter. The attackers were supported by a tank regiment and corps artillery. The battle raged through the morning and into late afternoon when the district headquarters was badly hit and its operations center destroyed. The district troops and the 2d Battalion of the 7th Infantry fell back to a new defense line around Song Be Airfield. Here they destroyed four enemy tanks at one end of the landing strip and killed or captured about fifty enemy. At about the same time an enemy element, in a move to cut off the retreat route of the 2d Battalion, pushed toward Ba Ra Mountain which dominated the city. After a full day of bitter fighting, the regular battalion and the district troops managed to fall back into the city where they joined provincial forces. The enemy now chose to confine his attack to daylight hours. He harassed our positions during the night, however, by indirect fire.

During the day over 100 sorties had been flown by our air force in close support of the ground troops. All kinds of bombs had been used, including cluster bomb units. This concentration of air support was made possible by JGS's temporary diversion of tactical aircraft from MR-II and MR-IV. At 0600 on 1 January 1975, in an apparent attempt to obstruct air support activities of the 3d Air Division, the Bien Hoa Airfield was heavily shelled. Its landing strip was damaged and some buildings were set afire. Air traffic was suspended until 1300.

At 0700 on the first the enemy, with the support of tanks, began driving his attack from the south into the city of Phuoc Long, but the advance was stopped at the foot of the hill ascending toward the city. At the same time enemy troops encircled and this time overran Ba Ra Mountain despite maximum activity by our air force. Upon overrunning Ba Ra Mountain, the enemy immediately installed artillery observation posts, and his 130-mm. guns began to fire accurately at targets within the city. Eight 105-mm. pieces and four 155-mm. pieces were hit by the enemy's accurate fire, and all became inactive by 3 January. Communications with the city were interrupted many times. As the battle developed, enemy antiaircraft batteries were positioned on Ba Ra Mountain, and it became increasingly difficult for our aircraft, especially helicopters, to make their approach.

Backed by advantageous defense positions and the effective support of our air force, troops in the city successfully repelled several assaults by enemy troops and tanks at the southern perimeter. They held firm during the day of 2 January. Fifteen enemy tanks were destroyed by our air force and ground troops. The province chief requested medical evacuation for the wounded and supplies and reinforcements. At 1800, however, our radio relay station on Ba Ra Mountain was finally overrun and that communications link with the city was lost.

The same day, 2 January, an emergency meeting chaired by President Thieu was held at the Independence Palace. Present were Vice President Tran Van Huong; Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem; Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, presidential assistant for security; Lt. Gen. Tran Van Minh, commander in chief of the air force; Lt. Gen. Du Quoc Dong, commander of III Corps; Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, chief of staff of JGS and also commanding general of the Central Logistics Command; and I as chairman of JGS. The subject for discussion was whether or not to reinforce Phuoc Long and, if so, how much

reinforcement was needed in terms of troops and other resources.

In his capacity as commander of III Corps, General Dong, after his briefing concerning the situation in MR–III and at Phuoc Long in particular, asked for at least one infantry division or the Airborne Division. His plan was to mount a relief operation by helilifting the division into the city from the north with maximum support of tactical aircraft and helicopters and air-dropped supplies. General Dong then offered to resign, citing his inability to improve the situation in MR–III since he assumed its command three months earlier. His offer was immediately rejected by President Thieu who was apparently more concerned with the question of reinforcement. The plan was thoroughly examined but rejected for the following reasons:

Troop reinforcement: JGS no longer held any unit in reserve. Both the Airborne and Marine Divisions were deployed in MR–I, and the situation there did not permit their withdrawal. The situations in MR–II and MR–IV also precluded removing any unit from those areas if stability were to be maintained. The same was equally true of MR–III because the 18th and 25th Divisions were positioned to prevent the NVA CT–5 and CT–9 Divisions from pushing into Tay Ninh and Saigon.

Airlift: All roads leading into Phuoc Long were cut and could not be cleared. Any relief operation would depend entirely on airlift to land and supply troops. To mount the operation as planned, two UH–1 squadrons and one CH–47 squadron would be required to augment airlift assets of MR–III plus additional tactical aircraft. The UH–1 squadrons could be diverted from MR–II and MR–IV, but the additional CH–47 assets were nowhere available. The CH–47 squadrons of MR–II and MR–IV, being newly activated units, were low in efficiency. Each squadron could only provide from four to six helicopters per day, and this was just about what each MR would require for its own daily emergency use. Moreover, the UH–1 was incapable of flying nonstop from Bien Hoa to Phuoc Long and had to make a refueling stop. The CH–47 was also incapable of lifting a 155-mm. howitzer.

As to supply, we could air-drop from high altitude the planned daily requirement of sixty to one hundred tons for a period of seven to ten days provided a large drop zone could be secured. But if supply had to be sustained beyond ten days, then airlift support for the other MRs might have to be sacri-

ficed. It was also anticipated that losses in aircraft would be very high, given the enemy's antiaircraft deployment at Phuoc Long. And if heavy losses were incurred, our air potential would be permanently reduced because no aid funds were available for replacements.

Timing: Our forces in Phuoc Long would be unable to hold out much longer against the two attacking divisions despite advantageous defensive positions. If reinforcement were decided on, it should be completed rapidly, within two or three days, before the city fell. If the Airborne Division were sent to Phuoc Long, the time required to assemble the troops, airlift them, and prepare them for combat would be five to seven days. An infantry division from MR-IV would also need at least three days to make ready for combat at Phuoc Long. This was what it had taken the 21st Division when it redeployed to Chon Thanh in 1972.

Strategic significance: On balance, Phuoc Long was much less important than Tay Ninh, Pleiku, or Hue, economically, politically, and demographically. Given our reduced means at this particular juncture, if it were deemed necessary to hold territory, then it would be better to conserve our remaining assets for the defense of Tay Ninh and Hue rather than Phuoc Long.

It was finally decided to reinforce Phuoc Long with assets available in MR-III. The 81st Airborne Ranger Group, because of its experience in the An Loc battle of 1972 and its ability to fight in jungle areas deep in enemy-controlled territory, was selected for the job. Its missions were to support the defense of the city's southern perimeter, the most advantageous avenue of approach to the city, and to try to reoccupy Ba Ra Mountain.

On 3 January 1975 the tactical situation remained almost unchanged apart from an increase of enemy pressure on the southern perimeter. The defense perimeter was now reduced to the marketplace, the provincial administrative complex, and the L-19 Airfield. All of our howitzers had been silenced by over 2,000 artillery rounds concentrated on the administrative complex and the sector's operations center. Twenty tons of ammunition and supplies had been dropped accurately on a drop zone north of the sector headquarters from high-flying cargo planes (up to 12,000 feet). However, the enemy's intense artillery fires had made recovery of the supplies extremely difficult. Over 300 wounded were awaiting evacuation. It was

planned to ship them out on the return flights of the helicopters scheduled to land the airborne Rangers the next day, 4 January.

In the meantime at Bien Hoa, the 81st Ranger Group had assembled two companies and readied them for combat. The group commander had completed reconnaissance of a landing zone on the slope of a hill north of sector headquarters. Flight routes had also been selected. On 4 January rain and clouds frustrated two landing attempts. The enemy meanwhile increased his shelling and attacked, but our troops held. The sector operations center was repeatedly hit by artillery fire and was finally destroyed. The sector deputy commander was killed instantly, and Lt. Col. Xuan, district chief of Phuoc Binh, was gravely wounded. At the same time, enemy tanks were sighted west and south of the city. Communications between sector and III Corps headquarters were reduced to a single radio channel after the destruction of the operations center.

On 5 January at 0800, sixty tactical air sorties cleared a helicopter landing zone east of the city. At 0900 the first landing of one company of the Ranger group (120 men) was successfully completed. As soon as they landed, the airborne troops linked up with the garrision. At 1100 a wave of helicopters moved in to land another company and a headquarters detachment north of the provincial administration building. By the time the helilift was completed at 1500, over 250 airborne troops had been inserted in the midst of deadly enemy artillery fire. Only one squad had been lost. Several helicopters were hit by antiaircraft fire, but all managed to escape. However, because of the enemy's intense fires, it proved impossible to evacuate the wounded as orginally planned.

In the interim, enemy tanks had broken through Regional Force positions at the sector logistical support center and were moving into the city. Enemy sapper teams carried in by tanks rapidly set up blocking positions while the tanks advanced toward the sector headquarters and the province chief's residence which now served as his command post and that of the airborne Rangers. But the enemy was driven back, and the Rangers launched a counterattack to reoccupy positions that had been lost, in particular the sector logistical support center. Although their counterattack was fierce and gallant, the airborne troops failed to regain the lost positions. By this time they had suffered 50 percent casualties. Our M-72 rockets, moreover, were only inflicting slight damage on the enemy

tanks which for this battle had been reinforced on both sides and were only partly filled with fuel. However, our 90-mm. recoilless antitank rifles proved most effective.

Late in the day, at 2100, the Ranger force sent in its report. The situation was desperate and not at all what sector had reported earlier to III Corps. Regional Forces were completely disorganized and had fled their positions when the tanks moved in. The Ranger commander decided to organize his defense around the province chief's residence and the provincial administration building. During the night over 1,000 artillery rounds were fired on this area and the business district.

On 6 January at 0900, enemy troops supported by tanks attacked again. The battle raged all day. At 2300 contact was lost with sector headquarters, but the airborne troops still maintained their communications. At 2400 the Rangers disengaged and filtered out of the city.

The next morning, 7 January, at 1000 the airborne Rangers reported the position of a 50-man element and their headquarters somewhere north of the city. Another group was reported northeast of National Route 14. From 9 to 15 January the 81st Ranger Group Headquarters conducted a search and rescue operation. And II Corps joined in this operation around Route 14 near the boundary of MR–II. After four days of search, 121 airborne Rangers were retrieved by helicopters. Thus, the airborne force lost about half of its committed strength. Other troops and civilians from Phuoc Long also managed to find their way to safety at various places. A total of over 1,000 people, to include civilians, police, Regional Force troops, and men of the 2d Battalion of the 7th Infantry were thus rescued and returned to Saigon. But the province chief, the district chief of Phuoc Binh, the infantry battalion commander, and over 3,000 troops failed to make it back to our lines.

At the time of his attack against Phuoc Long, the enemy also launched attacks at two other places in MR–III: in the north of Tay Ninh and at Hoai Duc–Tanh Linh (Binh Tuy Province). His aim was clearly to stretch our lines and prevent us from reinforcing Phuoc Long. The capture of Phuoc Long crowned the enemy's conscious and systematic efforts. Since December 1974 he had successively overrun the outlying districts, and by the time the battle began the city had been practically sealed off. The outcome of the battle could have been foreseen from the start. To confront the NVA main force of two divisions and its complements of armor and artillery, all

the sector of Phuoc Long could put up was Regional Force troops, augmented at the last minute by one regular battalion. The organization for the defense was also incomplete. A sudden and last-minute change in the defense plan prevented the garrison from organizing and consolidating its positions. The province chief proved unable to control his forces, and as a result his reports to III Corps were mostly inaccurate.

The enemy in contrast enjoyed a tremendous numerical advantage. He also benefited from a few technical and tactical innovations. The armor of his tanks, for example, had been supplemented to provide an air space or cushion and protect the sides of the vehicles from antitank rockets. Enemy sappers made no attempt to penetrate in small groups by night as they usually did in advance of the main force. Instead, in this battle they were carried into the city by tanks with the main attacking force. The enemy's artillery was accurate, and the intensity of its fire was frightening. Because of his advantage in firepower, he attacked only during daytime. He was also able to monitor our radio communications, and he knew in advance our every tactical move.

To best sum up what contributed to the loss of Phuoc Long, let us hear the comment of an airborne trooper, a veteran of An Loc, who had fought in the battle:

> The enemy troops were not so good and so courageous as we might have thought. There were simply too many of them. The enemy's artillery fire was fierce and many times more accurate than it had been during the battle of An Loc. Enemy tanks had something new and strange. Our M–72 rockets were unable to knock them out. We hit them; they stopped for a while then moved on. Our air support was not very effective; the planes flew too high. If only we could have had B–52s like we did at An Loc!

Militarily, the capture of Phuoc Long gave the enemy extended control over a very large area. Three of his base areas were now linked together in a continuous arc from the Cambodian border across northern MR–III with access routes toward Ham Tan on the coast. Psychologically and politically, the loss of Phuoc Long, the first provincial capital of South Vietnam permanently seized by the Communists, came as a shock to the population and the armed forces. The apparent total indifference with which the United States and other non-Communist countries regarded this tragic loss reinforced the doubt the Vietnamese people held concerning the viability of the Paris

Agreement. Almost gone was the hope that the United States would forcibly punish the North Vietnamese for their brazen violations of the cease-fire agreement. The people's belief in the power of the armed forces and the government was also deeply shaken. To the Communists Phuoc Long was not merely a military victory. What they had gained psychologically and politically was more important. It was their first big step toward total military conquest, boldly taken yet apparently without fear of any reaction from the United States. What more encouragement could the Communists have asked for? And what a good chance for them to step up propaganda against our government and to appeal to our troops to quit their ranks and join the Communists.

Ban Me Thuot

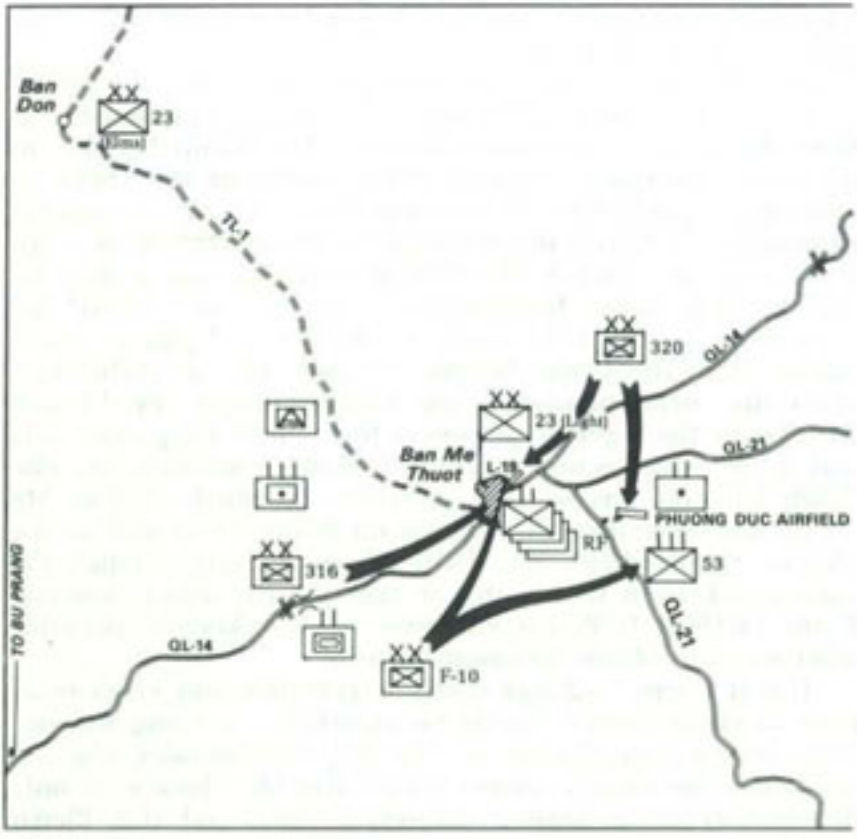
Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, who had commanded the 1st Infantry Division from October 1970 to July 1972, replaced Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan as commander of II Corps in December 1974 upon the recommendation of Vice-President Tran Van Huong who had insisted on removing General Toan because of charges of corruption. President Thieu apparently gave in to his vice-president's insistence with reluctance because he knew that despite the charges General Toan was a thoroughly competent field commander. General Toan was assigned as chief of armor and on 5 February 1975 was also given command of III Corps. He replaced General Dong, who had resigned a month earlier. The change of command in MR-II contributed to the events that finally led to the collapse of II Corps.

The Communists, meanwhile, were preparing for their next major campaign with more confidence than ever, encouraged by the new U.S. hands-off policy. Indications were that MR-II would be the theater for the opening rounds of the campaign then in the making. By the end of January 1975, the NVA 320th Division based at Duc Co (near Pleiku) was reported moving south toward the Darlac Plateau. The II Corps was alerted, but no significant action was taken apart from daily aerial attacks against enemy truck convoys. During February, Communist truck convoys were sighted almost daily moving south in great numbers along the western border routes. In one instance, toward the end of February, a convoy of several

hundred trucks was sighted and attacked by our air force with spectacularly destructive effect.

Other NVA divisions—for example, the 316th, the 312th, and the 341st—were also reported moving southward, but their destinations remained unknown. The 316th Division in particular concealed its movement toward Ban Me Thuot by cautiously approaching from lower Laos. Enemy documents captured on 5 March also revealed the movement of the engineer regiment of the F-10 Division from Kontum to Ban Me Thuot. From other fragmentary pieces of information, the enemy's preparations for a major offensive and plan of attack against Ban Me Thuot became obvious. In the preliminary phase the enemy planned to cut National Routes 14, 19, and 21 to sever the highland provinces from the II Corps lowlands and by the same action preclude friendly reinforcement. The 320th Division was to take up positions north of Ban Me Thuot and neutralize all outposts on Route 14 as well as the Phuong Duc Airfield. The F-10 Division would conduct the main attack from the southwest into the city along National Route 14 (*Map 3*). Precautions were taken to keep all preparations secret to obtain maximum surprise.

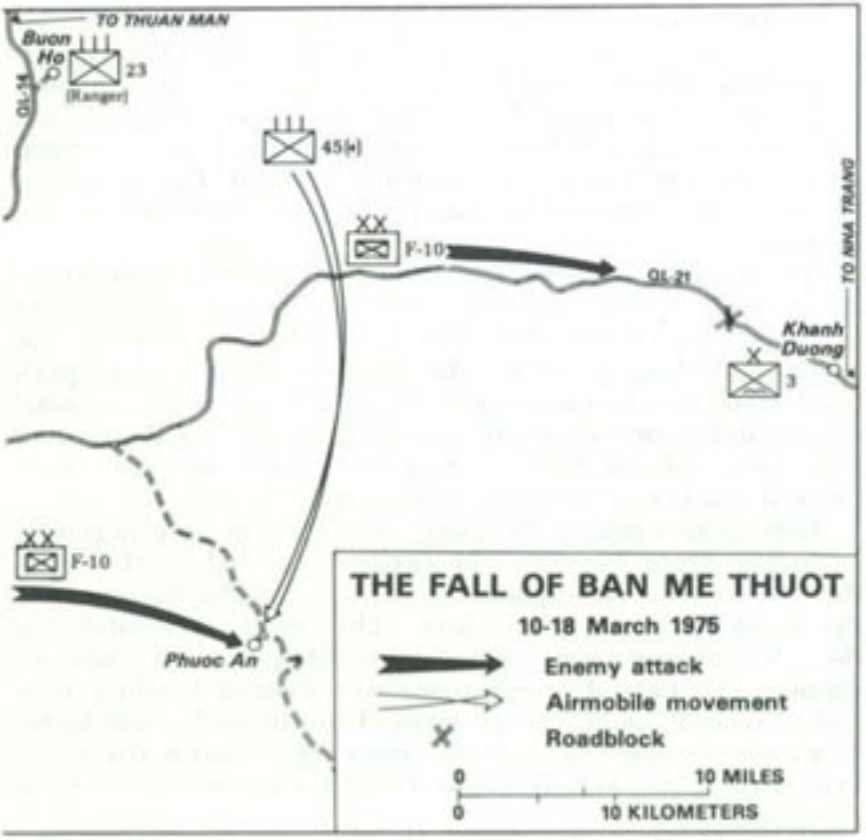
The II Corps G-2 had correctly compiled this estimate as early as mid-February, but unfortunately his warning was not given serious consideration by the corps commander who believed that the enemy's moves toward Ban Me Thuot were only diversionary or at most a secondary effort and that Pleiku would be the main objective. The disposition of II Corps accordingly reflected its commander's thinking. The entire 23d Division was deployed in the Pleiku area, leaving the task of defending Ban Me Thuot to a Ranger group and provincial Regional Force and Popular Force units composed mostly of Montagnards. At the beginning of March when alerted to the NVA 320th Division movement toward Ban Me Thuot, II Corps simply sent a headquarters detachment and a regiment, the 53d of the 23d Division, back to Ban Me Thuot. The 53d Regiment was then assigned the task of operating south of the Phuong Duc Airfield, and the Ranger group was deployed in the Buon Ho area, some twenty miles to the northeast. Reconnaissance teams of the 23d Division and of the Strategic Technical Directorate were dispatched into the border area around Ban Don Outpost to trace the movement of the 320th Division, but only small skirmishes with company-size local enemy units resulted.



MAP 3

The enemy in the meantime had effectively blocked National Route 21 from Ban Me Thuot to Nha Trang. An unsuccessful clearing operation was conducted by Khanh Hoa Sector, and the road remained blocked north of Khanh Duong District Town some fifty miles east of Ban Me Thuot. On 5 March 1975, the Communists attacked and overran Thuan Man District Town on National Route 14, approximately halfway between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot. Thus, communications by road from Ban Me Thuot to Pleiku and II Corps Headquarters and to Nha Trang on the coast were effectively interdicted, and the isolation of Ban Me Thuot was completed.

The battle of Ban Me Thuot began on 10 March and ended on 18 March 1975. In the early hours of 10 March, the F–10 Division supported by armor and artillery launched a three-



pronged attack into the city. The first prong, consisting of tank-led infantry, was directed against the ammunition depot north of the city. The commander of the depot, an army captain, was killed while directing the defense, and the depot was overrun in the afternoon. The second enemy effort was directed against Phuong Duc Airfield where enemy troops clashed violently with our 53d Regiment, and their advance became stalled. The third and leading effort, another combined infantry and tank attack, swiftly overran the L–19 Airfield and pushed into the city, establishing blocking positions as it moved. The main target was the sector headquarters which was encircled and attacked vigorously. An enemy T–54 tank was destroyed on the outer perimeter of the sector headquarters. A little past noon the sector operations center was hit

by artillery fire and destroyed. The sector commander-province chief was forced to move to the detachment command post of the 23d Division. By this time, however, the command and control of Regional Force and Popular Force troops had become disorganized. Enemy troops and tanks now converged on the 23d Division CP, and the battle raged. By the end of the first day, three enemy tanks had been destroyed at this location.

The Ranger group was immediately ordered to move to the city from Buon Ho, and this relief operation in effect began the same afternoon. But, being greatly impeded by the enemy's blocking positions, the Rangers did not accomplish much to relieve the enemy pressure. At the same time regional troops and armor elements operating in the Bu Prang area were also ordered back to Ban Me Thuot, but they were blocked at a bridge ten miles southwest of the city.

During the night of 10 March enemy forces were augmented by the 316th Division. The encirclement tightened around the 23d Division Headquarters complex, and the fierceness of the attack increased by the hour. The deputy commander of the 23d Division at the detachment CP requested close air support. Our tactical aircraft made very accurate bombing runs and destroyed many enemy tanks. Unfortunately, one bomb struck the division's tactical operations center and destroyed it. Communications with II Corps Headquarters were lost from that time.

On 13 March the 7th Ranger Group was airlifted from MR-III to Pleiku and assigned to II Corps Headquarters to replace the 44th and 45th Regiments of the 23d Division which had been ordered to Ban Me Thuot in an attempt to save the besieged city, by now under the virtual control of the enemy. The next day, 14 March, a relief force composed of the 45th Regiment and one battalion of the 44th was helilifted to Phuoc An, a district town twenty miles east of Ban Me Thuot, where the battered troops from the city's garrison, their dependents, and much of the civilian population had begun to converge. The advance of the relief column was slow and its counterattack ineffective, owing in part to the troubled morale of the troops whose dependents were being stranded in the city. A large number of troops of the relief force broke ranks and headed toward the city in search of their dependents.

On 16 March the commander of the 23d Division was slightly wounded and was evacuated from the combat zone. On

18 March Communist forces overran Phuoc An District Town, the last base for a relief effort. All fighting for the city had now ceased, and the entire province of Darlac came under enemy control. In the meantime, thirty miles farther east, at Khanh Duong, the 3d Airborne Brigade had taken up blocking positions on National Route 21 after arrival from MR-I the day before in an effort to stop the advance of the enemy's F-10 Division toward the coast. The brigade also made an effort to retrieve the battered troops of MR-II who were retreating from Ban Me Thuot and Phuoc An in small groups mixed with the civilian population rushing toward Nha Trang.

The loss of Ban Me Thuot resulted primarily from a failure to field a sufficient force for the defense of the city when the attack began. The enemy achieved tactical surprise and, more importantly, a vast numerical superiority in committing three infantry divisions with supporting armor and artillery. The commander of II Corps failed to reassess his situation in the light of hard intelligence concerning the movement of the NVA 320th and F-10 Divisions toward Ban Me Thuot and ignored his G-2's assessment as well as that of JGS. His preconceived and inflexible opinion convinced him that the enemy would strike Pleiku and Kontum, the usual objectives of the enemy's main effort in the past.

Understandably, the II Corps commander's assessment led him to deploy the bulk of his forces in the Pleiku-Kontum area and to leave the defense of Ban Me Thuot mostly to forces of the Regional and Popular Forces. This was also reflected in his reinforcement of distant outposts like Buon Ho and Bu Prang with armor and regular forces. He did, however, consider moving the whole 23d Division to Ban Me Thuot at the end of February at the insistence of his G-2. But after last-minute advice from the 23d division commander, the corps commander changed his mind and ordered the 44th and 45th Regiments to remain in Pleiku.

When the movement of the F-10 Division was reported to him on 6 March and after enemy troops had overrun Thuan Man on National Route 14 and cut Route 21 north of Khanh Duong, the II Corps commander began to have second thoughts. Concerned but still not convinced, he ordered one Ranger group to Ban Me Thuot, not to reinforce the city's garrison but to take up positions at Buon Ho twenty miles to the north. He himself visited Ban Me Thuot on 8 March, inspected the city's defense organization, and ordered combat

preparedness and, among other things, the issue of M–72 antitank rockets and TOW missiles. As an additional precaution, he also ordered the dispersion of the ammunition depot. When the enemy attack finally materialized, however, the only troops available for the defense of the city itself were the 53d Regiment and Regional Force and Popular Force troops. Caught short by the attack, II Corps began reinforcing Ban Me Thuot, but the effort was piecemeal and too late in any event. By this time all reinforcement routes had been effectively blocked.

The enemy thus had a golden opportunity for a surprise attack in overwhelming force. He succeeded in concealing the movements of his major units which arrived in the Ban Me Thuot area largely undetected. The 316th Division, for example, maintained strict radio silence while on the move. The NVA 320th Division purposely left its command radio station behind in Duc Co, apparently to deceive our radio direction finding efforts. But this deception scheme served no useful purpose simply because none of our electronic reconnaissance aircraft dared venture near Duc Co during that time. The F–10 Division kept its presence hidden by avoiding contact with our reconnaissance patrols. The enemy also cunningly selected unusual approach routes for his armor, through jungles and along streams. Finally, Regional Force and Popular Force Montagnard troops manning listening outposts on the defense perimeter failed to report enemy sightings or conduct a delaying action. This enabled enemy units to advance to the city undetected and attack sector headquarters.

When the attack was launched on 10 March, the enemy forces directed their main effort at our command posts, the sector headquarters and the headquarters detachment of the 23d Division which controlled all defense forces in the area. This effort paid off handsomely. Hard pressed from the beginning by a heavy attack, the sector headquarters was unable to exercise effective coordination and control. Its Regional Force and Popular Force troops and police gradually became disorganized and fought incohesively. It was impossible for the sector commander to report accurately on the situation in the city, and when his operations center was destroyed by enemy artillery fire, he was forced to move to the 23d Division CP. All organized resistance by Regional Force and Popular Force sector troops virtually stopped for lack of direction and control. The 23d Division CP was confronted with the same situation from the start. The pressure became particularly heavy

when enemy tanks closed in and fired from the outer defense perimeter. Air support was accurate and effective but too close. One bomb exploded on the CP itself causing loss of communications and effective coordination and control.

The counterattack was doomed to failure from the start. Phuoc An, where troops of the 44th and 45th Regiments assembled, was the way station for the civilian population fleeing the fighting. Here some of the new troops met their dependents and disappeared into the streaming flow of refugees. Others, anxious about the fate of dependents or relatives stranded in the embattled city, simply broke ranks and fled in search of their families. As a result, it was impossible to assemble a cohesive combat force for the effort. Phuoc An, the last base for a counterattack, was overrun four days later by the F-10 Division. Any hope for recapturing the city was gone.

President Thieu's Fateful Decision

During the first two months of 1975, a number of U.S. congressmen made fact-finding visits to South Vietnam. In the face of the deteriorating military situation and in view of the impending congressional debates on the issue of supplementary aid, our government extended a warm welcome to its influential visitors. Members of the U.S. Congress had been urged to see for themselves how South Vietnam was faring economically, politically, and militarily before they should decide whether to grant what had been requested. Hence, the visits were awaited with high expectation.

The first visitor was Senator Sam Nunn, followed by Representative Paul N. "Pete" McCloskey and Senator Dewey Bartlett. Then came the main party, including both senators and representatives. JGS thoroughly briefed the first visitors on the current situation in South Vietnam. The briefing centered on the insurmountable shortages that would result without the $300 million supplemental aid and pointed out the imminent danger of overt aggression which by now had become an obvious fact. The last visitors were not given any official briefings, but some congressmen took time to visit JGS and the permanent exhibit of captured Communist weapons at JGS headquarters.

The backgrounds of the visiting congressmen were as diverse as their opinions on the issue of U.S. aid. Some were for, others were against it. Some came with open minds, and others

appeared heavily prejudiced. Some were courteous and modest; others rude and contemptuous. Still others were completely detached and indifferent. But no matter who they were or how they behaved, all were received with equal warmth and sincerity. They were completely free to see whatever they wished, to contact anyone: progovernment or opposition groups; detainees or free people.

The entire population of South Vietnam, including the Communists, watched their movement and listened to their comments when possible. Speculation was rife, and hopes were raised or stifled. Those who opposed President Thieu and wanted a coalition with the Communists expected the United States to press our government for a change in attitude more to their liking and advantage. The moderates silently hoped that American leaders would thoughtfully examine the aid issue and that reasonably adequate military aid would be provided: first to allow us to defend ourselves and second to deter further Communist aggression. As for the Communists, they hoped for a complete aid cutoff which would destroy our armed forces.

In general, the departing visitors left behind a feeling of pessimism. The atmosphere was charged with rumors and speculation, all detrimental to the national cause. In the United States, we were induced to believe, our government was considered incorrigibly corrupt, despotic, and repressive. Disenchanted and troubled by its own domestic difficulties, political and economic, the United States was no longer in a position to contribute to the war effort. Aid stood no chance of being increased; on the contrary, it would be trimmed further for American attention had shifted to the Middle East.

No one read the signs and clues better than President Thieu himself. By the time the last visitor had departed he knew that there was no longer any hope for the $300 million additional aid. He also came to realize that the only possible future trend for U.S. military aid to South Vietnam was downhill. And apparently he made up his mind on the basis of these readings. What he had adamantly refused to do for the last two years, he was now resigned to accept. That was why the redeployment of our armed forces was attempted.

The forceful attack against Ban Me Thuot and the relative ineffectiveness of II Corps reactions seemed to act like a catalyst on the mind of President Thieu, the only man who made

all the decisions as to how the war should be conducted.[1] So far it had largely been a matter of holding out against increasingly unfavorable odds. Overextended throughout the entire national territory to the last reserve unit, our armed forces certainly could not do much to alter such odds. Besides, reduced aid had in many ways affected their combat capabilities and, more than usually admitted, their morale as well. Under those circumstances, it had become obvious that something had to be done if South Vietnam were to survive at all.

For some time JGS, in its advisory and supporting role, had thought that the armed forces would stand a better chance of holding if they had less territory to defend. From a military point of view, it was a sound idea, but politically it ran afoul of the publicly avowed "holding at all costs" stance that President Thieu had embraced since the cease-fire. No doubt, the president must have had second thoughts in his private moments. The deteriorating situation spoke for itself. First Phuoc Long, now Ban Me Thuot, in just two months. What area would be next? Also, the bitter aftertaste of those American lawmakers' visits was still lingering.

So his mind must have been made up when President Thieu invited the prime minister, Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, his assistant for security affairs, and me for a working breakfast at the palace on 11 March 1975, the day after Ban Me Thuot was attacked. When coffee and food had been served and the attendants had left, he took out a small-scale map of South Vietnam and started the session by going over the military situation with which we were all completely familiar. Then he said matter-of-factly: "Given our present strength and capabilities, we certainly cannot hold and defend all the territory we want." Instead we should redeploy our forces to hold and defend only those populous and flourishing areas which were really the most important.

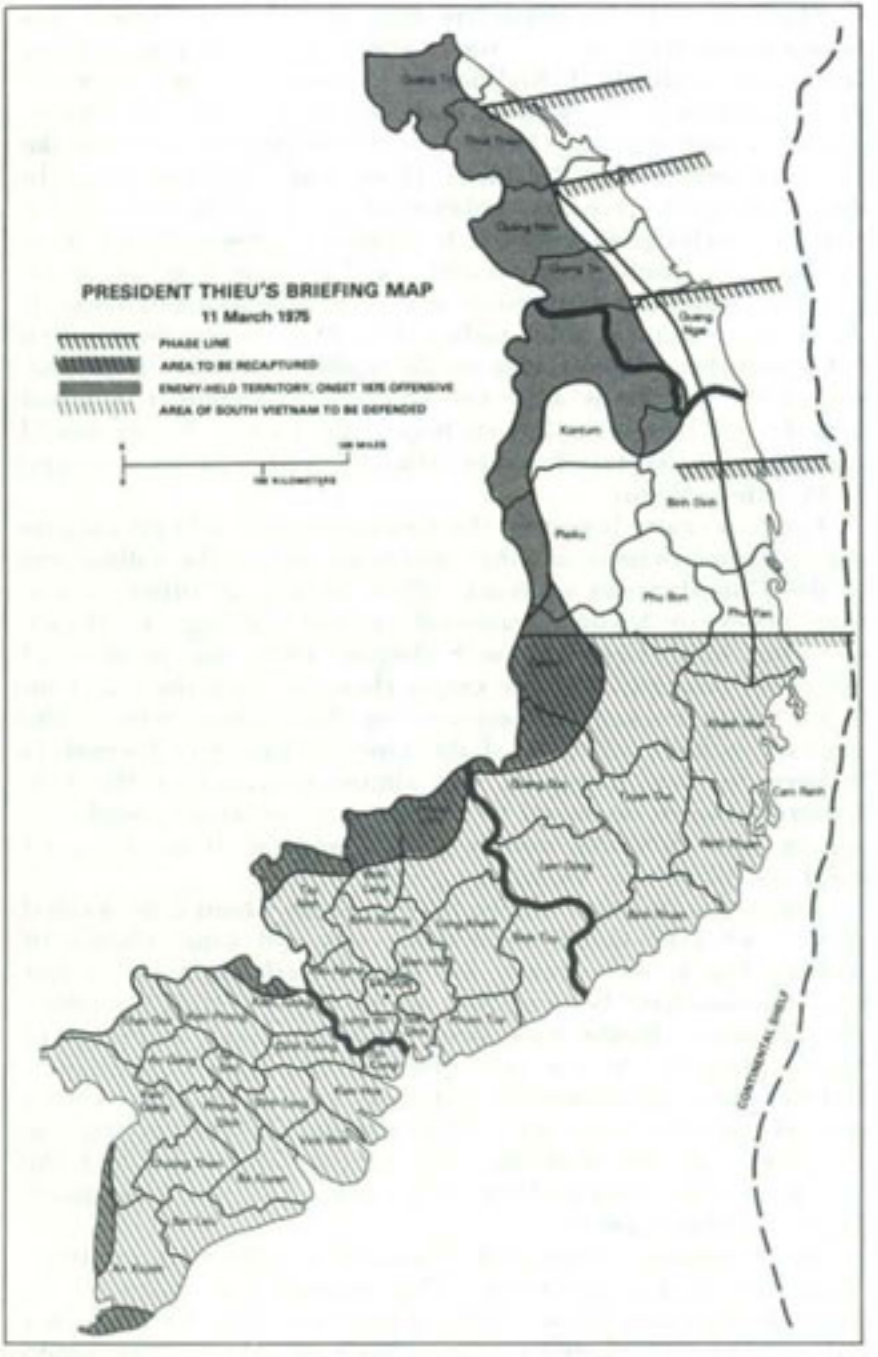
The conclusion struck us as one to which he must have given very careful consideration. It was as if he had been holding it back and wanted now to impart the decision to just the three of us around the breakfast table. He outlined on the map (*Map 4*) those areas he considered important. They encompassed all of MR-III and MR-IV plus their territorial waters. Those few areas which happened to be presently under Communist control within this territory ought to be reoccupied

[1] See Appendix A.

at all costs. After all, this territory was where our national resources—rice, rubber, industries, etc.—were concentrated. This was by far our most populous and prosperous land. In addition, its continental shelf had recently yielded oil. This was going to be our untouchable heartland, the irreducible national stronghold: Saigon, its surrounding provinces, and the Mekong Delta.

Continuing his impassioned monologue on geopolitics, President Thieu sounded perhaps a trifle less assured when it came to MR-II and MR-I. In the Central Highlands, he said, indicating the area by a sweeping motion of his hand, the Ban Me Thuot area was more important than Kontum and Pleiku taken together, because of its economic and demographic preponderance. So were the coastal provinces of MR-II because they bordered on the potentially rich continental shelf. As to MR-I, it was largely a matter of "hold what you can." Here he sketched his idea by drawing a series of phase lines cutting across the width of MR-I at different locations of the coastline from the north downward. If we were strong enough, he said, we would hold the territory up to Hue or Da Nang. If not, then we could redeploy farther south to Chu Lai or even Tuy Hoa. This way, he emphasized, we could redeploy our own capabilities, hold a more important part of our national territory with a better chance of surviving and prospering as a nation.

And so, with a few preemptory statements, a momentous decision had been made. Its full implication was still not clear, but it certainly carried wide ranging problems, militarily speaking. As the senior military advisor, I felt obliged to voice my opinion. I said something to the effect that this redeployment was indeed necessary, and I had embraced such an idea for a long time. But so far I had kept it to myself and considered it an improper proposal. First of all, it conflicted with the prevailing national policy, and, second, if I had made such a suggestion, it could well have been interpreted as an indication of defeatism. What I refrained from adding though was that I believed it was too late for any successful redeployment of such magnitude. Besides, it looked to me like a decision that precluded any unfavorable comment. After all, as commander in chief, it was the president's prerogative and responsibility to dictate the conduct of the war. He must have known exactly what he was doing.


PRESIDENT THIEU'S BRIEFING MAP
11 March 1975
PHASE LINE
AREA TO BE RECAPTURED
ENEMY-HELD TERRITORY, ONSET 1975 OFFENSIVE
AREA OF SOUTH VIETNAM TO BE DEFENDED
Quang Tri
Thua Thien
Quang Nam
Quang Tin
Quang Ngai
Kontum
Binh Dinh
Pleiku
Phu Bon
Phu Yen
Khanh Hoa
Quang Duc
Tuyen Duc
Lam Dong
Ninh Thuan
Binh Thuan
CONTINENTAL SHELF

MAP 4

However radical a departure from the current strategy this decision may have been, it was certainly the most logical thing any leader could do. It had been well over two years since the Paris Agreement was signed, and the situation was deteriorating at an alarming rate. The only criticism that one could make was to question why President Thieu had waited so long. In the meeting he gave no explanation or any indication of the steps in reaching his decision. It seemed to flow naturally from the facts themselves. Previously, he had hoped it would be possible to hold on to remote and sparsely populated areas. If the Communists should violate the Paris Agreement, then ICCS and the world at large would realize who was the culprit. And if the violations were too flagrant, President Thieu had hoped, and had been led to hope, the United States would justifiably take certain forceful actions in response as promised by President Nixon.

For two years, however, the Communists had been escalating their violations in number and scale to test the willingness of the United States to react. While he was in office, it was true, President Nixon occasionally issued warnings to Hanoi. But after his resignation on 8 August 1974, the promise of "vigorous reaction" became empty rhetoric. Even the attack on Phuoc Long evoked no response in the United States. The negative attitude of most of the visiting American lawmakers deflated the last hopes. It was almost certain that the U.S. Congress was in no mood to see the war continued, much less appropriate additional money to prosecute it. If anything, its mind and book were closed for good.

There was no other choice for President Thieu if he wanted to save what he could while there was still some chance of success. But it was already too late. A redeployment of our forces should have been carried out by mid-1974. At the latest, such a move should have been taken as soon as President Nixon resigned. As the principal architect of Vietnamization and the Paris Agreement, in our view, he was the only American official who bore the moral obligation of enforcing the cease-fire. He was also the only credible man who had the courage to take bold and forceful action when it was required. So it was then or never.

The Communists certainly would have welcomed any territorial gain, and cease-fire boundaries could have been a subject of bargaining. We would have been much better off with a reduced but not infested territory. Such an arrangement would

have more closely resembled the 1954 agreement: a new demarcation line, regrouping of troops on both sides, etc.; two clean-cut zones instead of the purulent spots of the "leopard skin." It could have been ideal for our own survival. But there were chances the Communists would have rejected it. Didn't they admit their mistake of agreeing to partitioning at Geneva? There was much less chance they would accept this solution again. After all, they had not gone through twenty years of war and hardship for nothing.

By the time Ban Me Thuot was lost, it was far too late. For one thing, the enemy was on a winning streak. For another, he had finally achieved a substantial numerical superiority. Extended and pressed the way we were, there was little chance we could disengage from any place without being pursued and pressed on farther.

There was also the problem of the local population and military dependents. Evacuating or failing to evacuate them at the appropriate time might be the key to success. No national leader in his right mind would ever think of deliberately abandoning the population to the mercy of the enemy. Yet concern for saving his military forces might compel him to do exactly that. But experience had proved that most South Vietnamese fled the Communists if they could. And "population" also meant military dependents who were the source of comfort and support for the combat troops. It was unthinkable to try to separate them for any length of time because they always tended to get together. This was especially true considering the traditional Vietnamese family attachment and the marginal living conditions of the troops and their dependents in general. All this had to be carefully considered whenever an attempt was made to separate troops from their families for any lengthy period.

In retrospect, the question is now raised as to the chance South Vietnam had of surviving if the redeployment had not been attempted. It sounds perhaps presumptuous at this time, but I believe the chances were good. For one thing, the self-generated collapse of morale among the troops and population—the direct consequence of the redeployment fiasco and the true catalyst of rapid disintegration—probably would not have happened, and we would still have had almost all our units intact, except perhaps part of the 23d Division. Even after Ban Me Thuot, the enemy would have had to stop and think twice before pressing on with another offensive of that

scale in MR–II. The II Corps still had the 22d Division and the equivalent of two other combat divisions plus two air divisions and enough logistical support to continue fighting through the dry season. Without the redeployment, I don't think the enemy would have succeeded in gaining much headway in MR–I either. Then the situation would have dragged on as before, more precariously in the face of dwindling military aid and difficulties in reconstituting a general reserve. But definitely it would not have deteriorated so rapidly and extensively if the redeployment had not been attempted at all.

That was the military prospect in the short term. After Ban Me Thuot, I think the enemy would have tried to pressure for a coalition, and President Thieu might have been inclined to accept it. But even that would merely have been an interim modus vivendi. The Communists would have sought more military victories with the objective of gaining still more political concessions. But could South Vietnam have withstood the enemy's mounting pressure in the long run? I believe it all depended on the amount of U.S. military aid. The hard and cold fact was that without additional appropriations our armed forces would have run out of fuel and ammunition by June 1975. How could any army stand and fight without the essential things with which to do the fighting?

CHAPTER 6

The Rout in the Highlands

Two days after the historic meeting at the Independence Palace during which the redeployment strategy was discussed, President Thieu expressed his desire to see Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, commander of II Corps, at his headquarters in Pleiku. By now, Ban Me Thuot was under virtual control of the Communists, and the frantic efforts of II Corps to reoccupy it had been largely unfruitful. Lest the chance of retaking this important city slip by indefinitely, it was President Thieu's intent to review the situation with the field commander and to try to save it. Pleiku was also under pressure and being shelled sporadically by enemy artillery. This was no place for the president to visit, much less for a presumably important discussion. Concerned about the president's safety, General Phu suggested another place, and after some debate, Cam Ranh was selected. The meeting took place on Friday, 14 March 1975.

The meeting place befitted the occasion perfectly. It was a handsome building perched on the top of a sandhill. The building dated from 1966 when it was erected by U.S. forces to accommodate President Johnson when he stopped over to visit U.S. troops. The same personalities who had attended the palace meeting three days earlier accompanied President Thieu to Cam Ranh: Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem, Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, and I.

As was customary for every such meeting, the commander of II Corps began the session by giving a briefing on the friendly and enemy situation in his military region. The turn of events as he described it was definitely grave and his tone profoundly pessimistic. All the major axes of communication of MR-II, National Routes 14, 19, and 21 had been effectively cut by the enemy, and traffic had been stopped. The most important of these arteries, Route 19, which cut across the width of the country and served as a vital link between Pleiku and the coastal city of Qui Nhon, was blocked at Binh Khe by the entire NVA 3d Division; our 22d Division with its four regi-

ments and under the energetic command of Brig. Gen. Phan Dinh Niem had tried unsuccessfully to dislodge enemy troops solidly entrenched in their blocking positions. Another NVA regiment was poised at Le Trung, at a striking distance east of Pleiku, and Pleiku itself was under heavy pressure from enemy artillery fire and was threatened with ground attacks from the east and the west (*Map 5*). As to Ban Me Thuot, after two days of fierce fighting the prospects of retaking it were not encouraging, given the present balance of forces and the virtual impossibility of moving troops by road.

When the situation briefing was completed, President Thieu pointedly asked the only and foremost question which had been preoccupying his mind. Was it at all possible for General Phu to retake Ban Me Thuot? As expected, the commander of II Corps did not commit himself to a positive and firm answer. He merely asked for reinforcements. Turning to me, President Thieu wanted to know what reserve force we could muster for the effort. But he must have known already. The last reserve unit, the 7th Ranger Group, had been sent to II Corps at General Phu's request when signs of the enemy offensive were still developing. Nothing really was left.

This was the most critical juncture of the entire war. Down to the last chip, our armed forces now faced a showdown with an adversary who continuously upped his ante. The only major reserve units, the Airborne and Marine Divisions, had been committed in MR-I since 1972. Well before the attack against Ban Me Thuot, President Thieu, apparently for political reasons, had decided to reassign the Airborne Division to the Saigon area. The newly created and combat-ready 468th Marine Brigade plus a Ranger group were to replace it. Thus, I Corps would eventually gain the equivalent of two brigades in return for the three brigades of the Airborne Division. But deployment of the promised Ranger group was countermanded by President Thieu himself in the face of the rapidly changing situation. The first Airborne Brigade to leave MR-I, the 3d, was being sea-lifted to Saigon when it received orders on 17 March to debark at Nha Trang and proceed to Khanh Duong on National Route 21 in an emergency move to stop the enemy's advance toward the coast after Ban Me Thuot was lost. As combat erupted fiercely in the following days, the 3d Airborne Brigade was decimated and never returned to Saigon as intended.


Kontum
Ranger
II
Ranger
Plaiku
Le Trung
95B
MANG YANG PASS
Ql. 19
22Mar
3
25 Mar
22
Binh Khe
30 Mar
Qui Nhon
96B
Ql. 19
Phu Nhon
Phu Bon
Ban Al Nu
18 Mar
18 Mar
Thuan Man
Buon Blech
Ql. 14
Phu Tuc
Cung Son
Tuy Hoa
24 Mar
320
Buon Ho
23
Ranger
Buon Mieng
Ql. 21
27 Mar
40
316
Ban Me Thuot
Khanh Duong
53
23(-)
3
17 Mar
F-10
Phuoc An
Ql. 1
Ninh Hoa
Nha Trang
THE FALL OF MR II
14 March-2 April 1975
Convoy route
ARVN retreat
NVA attack
Ambush
Roadblock
0
25 MILES
0
25 KILOMETERS

MAP 5

So at the very stage when a reserve was most needed, JGS could give General Phu nothing. It was as if, by asking something he had known all along, President Thieu wanted everyone to realize the impasse in which we had found ourselves and what was going to dictate his next move. Again, as during the breakfast working session at the palace on 11 March, President Thieu stood up beside a map of South Vietnam and with General Phu looking on attentively, launched into his explanation of the new strategy to be adopted. By hand gestures, he sketched on the map the general contour of the vital areas which General Phu was supposed to hold. Because of its economic and demographic potential, Ban Me Thuot was more important than Pleiku and Kontum taken together. It was now II Corps' task to redeploy its organic forces in such a manner as to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot at all costs. This was the president's order.

President Thieu then asked General Phu how he proposed to redeploy and which route he had in mind for moving troops toward Ban Me Thuot. According to the II Corps commander, National Route 19, which ran from Pleiku eastward to the coast, was impassable; his best division, the 22d had been unable to break through at Binh Khe. National Route 14, which connected Pleiku with Ban Me Thuot in a north–south axis, was also blocked at Thuan Man, north of Ban Me Thuot. There was a chance to clear it, but it would be extremely difficult because our progress would be known to the enemy. So General Phu said he planned to use Interprovincial Route 7B. This was a secondary route which, branching off National Route 14 twenty miles south of Pleiku, ran southeasterly through Hau Bon (Cheo Reo) toward Tuy Hoa on the coast. A narrow, ruggedly surfaced track, Interprovincial Route 7B had long been neglected and was out of use. Except for the immediately usable short stretch from National Route 14 to Hau Bon, no one seemed to know its condition. It was known, however, that one of the major bridges across the Song Ba (Ba River) south of Cung Son had been destroyed beyond repair, and the road's terminal stretch west of Tuy Hoa was unusable because of extensive mining by Korean forces a few years earlier. However, the commander of II Corps seemed to know what he was going to do. Tactical surprise was the critical factor, he said, which weighed heavily in his choice. He simply requested JGS to provide river-crossing facilities. I immediately approved this request.

Moving a corps-size column of troops, equipment, and vehicles along a largely unknown road some 160 miles through the mountains and jungles of the Highlands was a hazardous task of great magnitude. Surprise would only work if the movement were swift and unimpeded. But even the most optimistic commander could not rule out an enemy presence and should take certain precautions. This, after all, used to be the enemy's favored type of terrain where some of the bloodiest ambushes had been sprung against the French Union forces in the 1946–1954 war. As chairman of JGS, I felt it imperative to remind General Phu of the difficulties and hazards to be expected and the security measures to be taken. A troop movement of this magnitude, crossing this terrain and going this distance, required the General to ensure security and protection along the entire route. The column should be organized to afford protection for its lead element and its rear element as well as for the troops in between. Its commander should also have adequate and appropriate signal communications and air cover and close air support, as required.

Finally there were lessons for which the French had paid a high price during the first Indochina war. I reminded him of the French failure in the attempt to extricate their troops from Lang Son in 1947. I also reminded General Phu of how in October 1950 the two columns of troops and vehicles commanded by Colonels Le Page and Charton—the first moving out of That Khe northward and the latter going from Cao Bang southward—had been annihilated in the foothills around Dong Khe along Colonial Route 4. Last, I spoke of how, on the very same type of terrain and road that General Phu's column was to move, the famous French Mobile Group GM-100 was slaughtered on National Route 19 near An Khe in June 1954 and its remnants given the final coup de grace at Chu-Drek Pass on National Route 14. Those were bloody and tragic lessons that any commander in the treacherous Central Highlands should have kept in mind.

When the meeting drew to its end, and the participants were preparing to leave, General Phu suddenly made a personal request to President Thieu. In an almost pleading tone, he recommended that his subordinate, Col. Pham Van Tat, who commanded the Ranger forces in MR-II, be promoted to brigadier general. I didn't know Colonel Tat personally. I was told he was an able officer, but as a field commander he had no outstanding credits on his combat record. While I had no

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outright objection, my opinion was that for his promotion to be justified Colonel Tat should wait until he had accomplished some substantial feat in combat. President Thieu was undecided; he hesitated and agreed with my reasoning. But Phu was insistent and repeatedly pleaded his case with the president who finally gave his consent. (After being promoted, Colonel Tat was designated to command the forces to be redeployed. This explained the insistence with which General Phu had urged the promotion of his most trusted subordinate. General Phu's two deputies, Brig. Gens. Tran Van Cam and Le Van Than, were not given any responsibilities in the redeployment except that General Cam was assigned the vague job of "supervising" the total effort.)

Arriving back in Saigon, I summoned Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, my assistant chief of staff J-3, and told him the details of the meeting. My chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, was out of the country on a visit at the time. My instructions to Tho were to keep track of the redeployment movement and to give General Phu a hand, all in discretion, because this was essentially a top secret operation to be conducted by II Corps and to involve only its organic units. It was also a top secret operational order given directly by the president as commander in chief to a field commander. Hence, JGS was unauthorized to initiate any orders for the redeployment of those army and air force components in the Kontum-Pleiku area not directly involved in the operation.

General Phu's Plan

Thus far, II Corps' efforts to clear its vital lines of communication had been unsuccessful. From Qui Nhon, the 22d Infantry Division had pushed its three regiments westward as far as Binh Khe on National Route 19 but was unable to break through enemy blocking positions despite valiant attempts. From Pleiku, a combined armor-infantry task force composed of the 25th Ranger Group and M-48 tanks of the 21st Tank Squadron had moved out to clear Mang Yang Pass but could progress no farther than Le Trung, just fifteen miles east of Pleiku on National Route 19. In the meantime on National Route 14 an attempt by elements of the 23d Division to push south toward Ban Me Thuot had been defeated halfway short of its target. All of these actions had taken place before Ban Me Thuot was actually attacked. The 6th Air Division at Pleiku

had only marginal airlift capabilities. It had taken the 23d Division three whole days from 12 through 14 March to helilift the 45th Regiment and two battalions of the 44th Regiment to Phuoc An. Additional air mobility provided General Phu included one UH–1 wing and four CH–47 helicopters from MR–IV. Thus by the time President Thieu ordered the reoccupation of Ban Me Thuot during the Cam Ranh meeting of 14 March, the only route for II Corps forces still in the Kontum–Pleiku area to move east was Interprovincial Route 7B. General Phu did not have much choice.

By this time, in the Kontum–Pleiku area, there remained only one battalion of the 44th Regiment, five Ranger groups (7th, 21st, 22d, 24th, and 25th), the 21st Tank Squadron (M–48), two 155-mm. artillery battalions, one 175-mm. artillery battalion, and Regional and Popular Force units. In addition, there were logistical and support units: the 20th Combat Engineer Group, the 231st Direct Support Group, the army and air force ammunition depot with 20,000 tons of ordnance, the POL depot with a 45-day supply of fuel, and the food and subsistence depot with a 60-day supply. The mission assigned to General Phu was to move the bulk of these units to Nha Trang and from there conduct a counterattack to retake Ban Me Thuot.

The basic plan of the II Corps commander, for what really amounted to a withdrawal from the Highlands, was to take the enemy by surprise. According to his chief of staff, after General Phu returned from the meeting with the president at Cam Ranh, he convened a limited staff meeting late in the evening of the same day during which he reported President Thieu's orders and issued his own. Participants included newly promoted Brig. Gen. Pham Van Tat; Brig. Gen. Tran Van Cam, deputy II Corps commander for operations; and Brig. Gen. Pham Ngoc Sang, commander of the 6th Air Division. A general plan of movement was briefly discussed, and it was decided that General Phu and elements of II Corps forward CP would move to Nha Trang by air together with Brig. Gen. Le Trung Tuong, commander of the 23d Division, who would proceed to Khanh Duong to take charge of the effort to stop the enemy's advance on National Route 21 and to try to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot. By this time, in addition to the 53d Regiment which was still battling fiercely at the Phuong Duc Airfield, the 23d Division controlled the 45th Regiment and part of the 44th at

Phuoc An, the 23d Ranger Group at Buon Ho, and the 40th Regiment of the 22d Division at Khanh Duong.

General Tat was put in command of all II Corps troops to be redeployed from the Kontum-Pleiku area to Tuy Hoa along Interprovincial Route 7B. Colonel Le Khac Ly was made responsible for the corps staff and all logistical units. The whole operation was to be supervised by General Cam.

This was in general terms the disposition of troops for the movement planned by General Phu: The 20th Combat Engineer Group would precede the lead column to restore the road and repair bridges as required. Armor elements were to be assigned to each convoy for its protection. Route security was to be provided by local Regional Force and Popular Force units. Finally, two Ranger groups and an armor troop were to form the rear guard. They were also the last units to move out of Pleiku on the morning of 19 March.

Since the movement involved thousands of troops and hundreds of vehicles, artillery units, and other heavy equipment, a schedule was developed to accomplish it in four consecutive days, beginning 16 March. Each day, a convoy of 200–250 trucks would move out of Pleiku. This schedule, as recorded by the chief of staff of II Corps, provided for the following:

16 March: ordnance units, to include ammunition, POL, and some artillery units; approximately 200 trucks protected by armor.

17 March: remaining artillery units, engineer and medical units; approximately 250 trucks protected by armor.

18 March: II Corps Staff and Headquarters, MP units, part of the 23d Division Headquarters, and about 200 men of the 44th Regiment, also protected by armor.

19 March: rear guard to include Ranger groups and the last armor element.

The next day, 15 March, while the preparations were feverishly taking place, the II Corps commander flew to Nha Trang with a few selected members of his staff. His deputy, General Cam, flew to Tuy Hoa from where he was to meet the advancing column. Also, on 15 March a few military vehicles departed Pleiku in small groups.

Since the redeployment was conceived and carried out in secrecy, no word was passed to province chiefs of Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Bon. On 17 March, the second day, late at night, orders were given to the three Ranger groups in Kontum to fall back to Pleiku. Only then did the Kontum

province chief, Colonel Phan Dinh Hung, learn about the troop movement. Hastily, he went along but was killed in an ambush halfway between Pleiku and Kontum.

The Flight

On 16 March, the first convoy moved out of Pleiku as planned. But no sooner had the last truck departed than news of the movement reached the city. People soon began to leave the city by every means of transportation available, even on foot, taking whatever belongings they could carry. They were later joined by refugees from Kontum, and together with the troops they came to form a long mass of humans and vehicles flowing along the hazardous Route 7B. The exodus from the Highlands had begun.

The first two days, 16 and 17 March, passed without serious incidents. By the evening of 18 March, II Corps Headquarters had reached Hau Bon, Phu Bon Province, where a CP was established. It was in this area that all the convoys of the past three days and the human mass of refugees were stuck. The advance toward the coast, still some one hundred miles away, was impossible because the engineers had not completed a pontoon bridge across the Ea Pa farther down the road.

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

The convoy moved out of Hau Bon the next day, 20 March, but could only progress fifteen miles. Phu Tuc, ahead on the road, had been overrun by the enemy. Still the convoy kept moving, fighting its way ahead. Air support was called at 1600, but unfortunately a few bombs were dropped by error on the lead elements. Nearly an entire Ranger battalion became casualties. This fatal incident further stalled the movement and

increased confusion and chaos among the troops and refugees. In a frantic effort to seek cover and escape, several soldiers jumped into the river and were drowned. And at two river-crossing points, some tanks and vehicles were stuck in quicksand when they tried to bypass the road.

At Cung Son, some forty miles from Tuy Hoa, the convoy had to cross the Song Ba (Ba River) to continue the last leg of its journey on local Route 436 on the southern bank of the river. Beyond Cung Son, Route 7B had been mined extensively by Korean forces. A pontoon bridge had been brought to Tuy Hoa from Nha Trang, but it was impossible to move the bridge to Cung Son by road because of several enemy blocking positions. Finally, the bridge was carried to Cung Son piece by piece by CH–47 helicopters.

On 22 March, the pontoon bridge was finally completed and the convoy crossed over onto Route 436 and proceeded cautiously toward Tuy Hoa. Because of the tremendous rush at the start, a pontoon soon collapsed, causing further losses in lives and vehicles. But it was quickly repaired, and what remained of the battered column soon made it safely to the other side of the river.

It had taken seven days and innumerable casualties for the column to progress so far, but the remaining and final leg of the odyssey proved equally slow and even more hazardous. The distance was relatively short, but enemy blocking positions were hard to dislodge. No sooner had the lead element resumed its march than it was stalled immediately by enemy fire. Efforts to clear enemy blocking positions were slow and difficult. The column became bogged down again. It was raining and cold. And the enemy relentlessly kept up his harassing mortar fire. Because of extremely bad weather, the air force was unable to provide close support. Tuy Hoa Sector had run out of reinforcements, and the column had to rely on its own strength. Driven by desperation and compassion for the people who shared their lot, the troops of the 34th Ranger Battalion (7th Ranger Group) finally resolved to break through or die. Supported by a few remaining M–113s, they stormed ahead and systematically destroyed roadblock after roadblock. As soon as an enemy position was disposed of, the column rushed on, oblivious to all dangers ahead. An impatient civilian jeep suddenly surged ahead, passed the Rangers, and sped foolishly toward Tuy Hoa. Just a few hundred feet down the road, it was blown up by enemy fire.

On 27 March, the final blocking position was destroyed, and the column at last moved on freely toward Tuy Hoa. It was 2100 when the first vehicles reached the city. No deliberate effort was ever made to take stock of the number of vehicles and people that finally made it to Tuy Hoa. How many people in the original column survived the tragic journey, no one knew exactly. Over 300 vehicles, both military and civilian, later drove up to the fuel supply station set up by the 2d Logistic Command and asked for refueling. Also, approximately 5,000 people sought shelter at a makeshift refugee center at Tuy Hoa that night. Others either proceeded to Qui Nhon or Nha Trang or went home to families and relatives in town.

From a military point of view the withdrawal was a complete failure. Almost all the units withdrawn from the Kontum-Pleiku area were disrupted. The chief of staff, II Corps, Colonel Le Khac Ly, estimated that 5,000 out of 20,000 logistical and support troops were finally retrieved. From the five Ranger groups, about 900 men reported to II Corps Headquarters at Nha Trang. But the 34th Ranger Battalion, later dubbed "block destruction heroes" by the grateful refugees, lost only 50 percent of its strength. It was retained at Tuy Hoa for the defense of the city.

Causes and Results

Tactically, a retreat is a most difficult maneuver. It requires the most minute planning and strong leadership at all echelons. The redeployment of II Corps troops from Kontum and Pleiku was not, however, a retreat in a tactical sense. It was simply a scheduled movement of organized convoys with self-defense capabilities. But the movement of the convoys was seriously impeded by refugees and civilian vehicles and by road conditions and the lack of river-crossing facilities. The NVA 320th Division, which was thrown in pursuit only after the enemy learned of the actual redeployment, could never have caught up with the column if river-crossing facilities had been provided in time and if the flow of refugees had been regulated. The element of surprise could have worked. It had indeed for the first few days.

With hindsight it is easy to criticize, but however well justified his concept of secrecy and tactical surprise, the II Corps commander should have worked out a detailed plan with his

staff and exercised direct control over the whole operation. Whatever planning he had done was limited, and only a few trusted subordinate commanders had contributed and knew about it. Staff work was nonexistent. The chief of staff of II Corps, Colonel Le Khac Ly, admitted he was totally in the dark. The commander of the 231st Direct Support Group in Pleiku recalled, in his own words:

> I didn't know anything about redeployment orders. Only when an artillery unit nearby hastily assembled its men, equipment, and dependents and loaded them on trucks, did I go out and inquire about it. I was briefly told, "We're leaving town. Withdrawal orders. You'd better hurry." So I hurried back to my unit, loaded some good equipment on trucks and took off after the artillery convoy. I had no time to destroy anything. I didn't even report my displacement to the 2d Logistic Command. It was supposed to be kept secret.

The corps commander's trust in some of his subordinates to carry out his orders was not justified. The entire withdrawal lacked unified and effective control from the start. General Tat only looked after his Ranger troops. General Cam seemed to take no active part in the whole process. His remote supervision was largely inconsequential. The overall control of the movement turned out to be exercised by the II Corps chief of staff but only up to Hau Bon although he had not been given this responsibility.

The province chiefs of Phu Bon and Phu Yen failed to provide road security and protection. As a matter of fact, they were unable to control their Regional Force and Popular Force units in performing this task. If they had, if the route had been protected and if river-crossing facilities had been provided in time, the outcome would certainly have been much different. But excessive preoccupation with secrecy had precluded prearrangements which could have looked perfectly normal under the pretext of a road rehabilitation project. In fact, such a project had been planned for some time by JGS to include mine clearing on the terminal stretch of Interprovincial Route 7B from Cung Son to Tuy Hoa.

Finally, the failure was also one of leadership at all echelons. Troops had not been briefed, discipline was not enforced, constraints had not been imposed to avoid disorder and chaos. In particular, troops had not been motivated to take on the difficult task of destroying enemy blocking positions, the final obstacles to their survival.

Militarily, the withdrawal had resulted in a rout of strategic proportions. At least 75 percent of II Corps combat strength, to include the 23d Infantry Division as well as Ranger, armor, artillery, engineer, and signal units, had been tragically expended within ten days. The operation to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot failed to materialize simply because II Corps no longer had any combat troops. Communist troops had taken over Kontum and Pleiku without a fight. Elated by the unexpected magnitude of their victory, the NVA F–10, 316th, and 320th Divisions were determined to push on. By this time, the enemy knew that all II Corps could assemble to stop his advance toward the coast was the 3d Airborne Brigade at Khanh Duong.

Psychologically and politically, the self-inflicted defeat of II Corps in the Highlands amounted to a horrible nightmare for the people and armed forces of South Vietnam. Confusion, worries, anxiety, accusations, guilt, and a general feeling of distress began to weigh on everybody's mind. Rumors spread rapidly that territorial concessions were in the making. The immediate impact of the rumors was to unleash an uncontrollable surge of refugees seeking by all means and at all costs to leave whatever provinces remained of MR–II. To the north MR–I also felt the repercussions. Its population soon joined the refugees and battered troops streaming south along the coast. First, they rushed into Phan Rang and Phan Thiet, then moved on toward Saigon. In the national capital itself, the opposition increased its activities and irreparably widened the government's credibility gap. Confidence in the armed forces also swung down to its lowest ebb. Demonstrators angrily demanded the replacement of President Thieu; they also vigorously voiced anti-American sentiment. A pervasive hope still lingered, however, for some miraculous thing to happen that could save South Vietnam.

CHAPTER 7

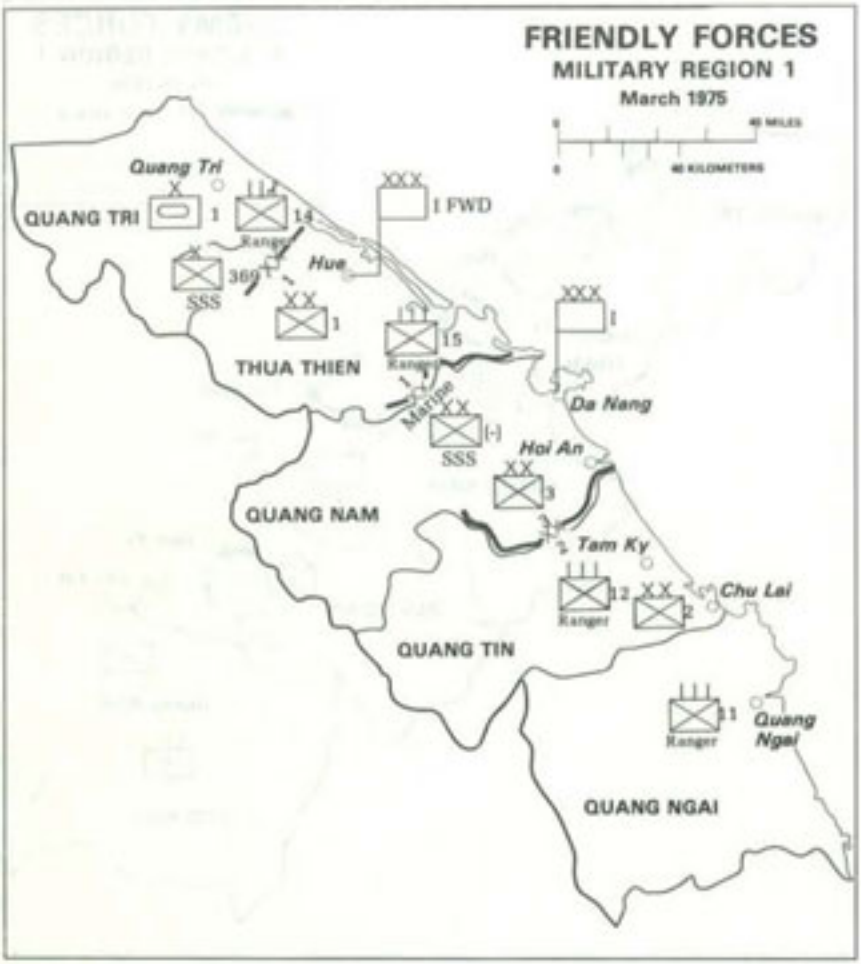
Defeat in the North

The situation in MR–I had regained some stability after I Corps had defeated the enemy effort to push into the coastal plain southwest of Da Nang in late 1974. It had been a real challenge to confront a three-division offensive directly threatening the region's heartland and also contain the unrelenting pressure of other enemy divisions against the northernmost and southernmost areas. However, the losses incurred during this six-month campaign were heavy and hard to replace. Combat effectiveness of most I Corps units had decreased as a result.

The Airborne Division withdrew in mid-March 1975 from the forward area of MR–I, which extended from the northern boundary of Thua Thien Province to the Thach Han River just north of Quang Tri City. This left only the 1st Infantry Division and the 15th Ranger Group for the defense of Phu Bai–Hue. To the north, the 369th Marine Brigade took over the area of operations vacated by the Airborne Division. The Marine Division had been pulled back to Da Nang where it was available for immediate defense of the city but its employment for other tasks subject to consultation. The Marine Division's former area of responsibility was bequeathed to the 14th Ranger Group. All these units and the 1st Armor Brigade formed a task force under the I Corps forward CP at Hue. Under direct control of I Corps Headquarters were the 3d Infantry Division, largely responsible for Quang Nam Province, and the 2d Infantry Division based at Chu Lai and responsible for Quang Ngai Province and part of Quang Tin Province. Two Ranger groups, the 11th and 12th, augmented the 2d Division for the defense of its large area of operation (*Map 6*).

Thus, to confront an enemy main force of five divisions and many separate regiments (*Map 7*),[1] I Corps could muster only

[1] The nine separate infantry regiments were the 4th, 5th, 6th, 27th, 31st, 48th, 51st, 270th, and 271st. Not shown on the map are three sapper regiments: 5th, 45th, and 126th (Naval); three armor regiments: 202d, 203d, and 573d; and twelve antiaircraft and eight artillery regiments.



MAP 6

three infantry divisions, one Marine division, four Ranger groups and an armor brigade. In addition, being adjacent to North Vietnam, MR-I could at any time be invaded by several enemy divisions held in reserve north of the 17th Parallel. So the tactical balance in terms of troop strength and disposition heavily favored the enemy, and the situation, although seemingly stable, could change at any time. The enemy had recently been exerting his heaviest pressure against two areas between Hue and Da Nang and between Da Nang and Chu Lai. From all indications it was a major effort to interdict National Route



MAP 7

1, the only communication route running the length of MR-I like a backbone.

General Truong's Plans

This was the situation presented by the commander of I Corps, Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, to the president on the morning of 13 March 1975. The occasion was a top-level meeting at the Independence Palace limited, as usual, to the prime minister, me as chairman of JGS, and the ubiquitous presidential assistant for Security Affairs, Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, commander of III Corps,

was also brought into the conference room after General Truong had finished his briefing. General Toan, in turn, gave a brief rundown of the situation in his military region. The picture he presented was mildly bright; no significant event had been recorded in the past few days.

The president then addressed the conference in earnest. First he made an analysis of the general situation and pointed out the difficulties we were facing in military aid. He admitted he did not entertain any hope of intervention by the U.S. Air Force in case South Vietnam were subjected to an all-out offensive by North Vietnam. He sympathized with the difficulties and handicaps of the corps commanders. Up to now, he admitted, he had given many instructions that he knew could not possibly be carried out.

The president said there was little he could do under the circumstances except to change strategy, to redeploy our forces to hold those vital areas where our national resources were concentrated. Even if we had to lose the jungle and mountainous areas to hold the remaining resource-rich areas (to include the continental shelf), such losses would be definitely much better than a coalition government with the Communists. The resource-rich areas defined in the president's new strategic plan included the Da Nang region for MR-I. As part of the redeployment plan, conceived in private by the commander in chief himself, the Airborne Division was slated to leave MR-I. Although this strategy was not mentioned at this meeting, the Airborne Division was to be followed by the Marine Division if possible without endangering the I Corps defense posture. These moves would allow the reconstitution of a general reserve which was vital to the success of the president's plan. President Thieu also instructed General Toan to temporarily withdraw his forces from An Loc to employ them wherever they were more needed in MR-III.

When the president completed his instructions, it was my turn, as chairman of JGS, to remind both corps commanders of the precautions to be taken when they withdrew their forces. On that cautious note, the meeting ended. Even without lengthy comments, the session had lasted exactly three and a half hours.

During the next six days the military posture of MR-I became increasingly precarious. More and more refugees kept flowing into Da Nang. It was almost impossible to regulate this human deluge. Important passes on National Route 1 were



MAP 8

frequently jammed, delaying the movement of the Marine and the Airborne Divisions.

It was precisely then that General Truong was called to Saigon for a second meeting at the palace on 19 March 1975. The session began at 1100 with Vice President Tran Van Huong also present. As expected, General Truong briefed the president on his MR-I withdrawal plan. This was well worked out, presenting a choice between two alternate courses.

Course 1 assumed the use of National Route 1. It prescribed two opposite but simultaneous withdrawals via National Route 1 from Hue to Da Nang and from Chu Lai to Da Nang (*Map 8*).



MAP 9

Course 2 assumed enemy interdiction of National Route 1 and hence the necessity of withdrawing all troops into three enclaves: Hue, Da Nang, and Chu Lai (*Map 9*). However, Hue and Chu Lai were only to serve as layover stations for troops who would be sea-lifted to Da Nang during the final stage. So Da Nang, the major enclave to be held as part of the redeployment plan, would become a stronghold defended by four divisions and four Ranger groups.

Less than a week separated the two meetings at the palace. By the time of the second meeting, it was obvious that only the second course stood any chance of success. Any phased with-

drawal along National Route 1 had become almost impossible. The pressure that the enemy exerted on it had increased tremendously between Hue and Da Nang and between Da Nang and Chu Lai. Two Ranger groups, the last units held in reserve by I Corps, had been thrown in to relieve the pressure, so far to no avail. The balance had been irretrievably lost. Besides, even without enemy pressure, I Corps could hardly conduct any major troop movement on an artery jammed beyond control during the last few days by refugees moving toward Da Nang.

This was in summary what General Truong told the president. "We have only one choice," he said, and "we had better act before it is too late." The only choice was to withdraw our troops toward Hue and Chu Lai as well as Da Nang and take advantage of existing fortifications in these cities, in particular those scattered in the hilly terrain around Hue, in order to destroy enemy troops to the maximum of our ability. General Truong had also heard unconfirmed reports that the Marine Division was to be redeployed to MR-III. If this should occur, it could affect General Truong's plan, and he accordingly asked for President Thieu's decision.

President Thieu's position was excruciating. It was he who had conceived and ordered the whole thing and already the redeployment from the Central Highlands had given signs of turning sour. Worst of all was the psychological impact on the civilian population that now threatened to throw his plan into utter disarray.

Understandably enough, when it came to giving specific instructions to his field commander, President Thieu sidestepped the withdrawal plan altogether. Instead, he told General Truong to make an effort to hold onto whatever territory he could with whatever forces he now had, including the Marine Division. Then turning aside and away from the problem, he asked General Quang to prepare a speech. He was going to address the people on TV, he said, to try to calm their emotions and let them know the government was going to defend Hue at all costs. He also seemed to ignore the refugee problem; neither he nor Prime Minister Khiem said anything about General Truong's headache. But in contrast with the previous meeting, there was a feeling of encouragement this time, if only because the momentous withdrawal decision had been set aside for the time being.

Northern and Southern MR–I

By 1800 the same day, 19 March, General Truong was back in Da Nang. As soon as his plane landed, he received an ominous report from Lt. Gen. Lam Quang Thi, his deputy, who called in from the I Corps forward CP at Hue. General Thi reported that 130-mm. guns were pounding his headquarters area and that enemy troops had just launched a large-scale attack with substantial armor across the outermost defense line at the Thach Han. The overt, all-out offensive of NVA units in MR–I had begun. For more than two years since the cease-fire, the skirmish line established along the Thach Han River had been the "peaceful" demarcation line observed by both sides. It was also where a permanent ICCS team headquarters was installed and was the site for many prisoner exchanges.

General Truong immediately reported to JGS and requested permission to employ the 1st Airborne Brigade—the last brigade scheduled for withdrawal from MR–I—when the situation so warranted. The brigade was being assembled at Da Nang and was preparing to depart for Saigon. President Thieu agreed to the request with one condition: the brigade could be retained, but it should under no circumstances be employed in combat. So the airborne brigade was only to play the role of a morale anchor. It was a good thing that the president had come to realize its psychological value, but no doubt, in his own mind, he did not think the brigade could do much to help alter the situation. By this time, the I Corps commander was most unsure about what was really happening in his northernmost province.

During the night of 19 March, all the forces manning the Thach Han defense line, including three Regional Force groups, one Ranger battalion, and armor elements, fell back to the My Chanh River. The entire province of Quang Tri came under enemy control. At the My Chanh, the northern boundary of Thua Thien Province, the retreating troops established a new defense line on the southern bank. (*See Map 7.*)

In the early morning of 20 March, General Truong flew to the forward CP of the Marine Division five miles from the My Chanh line. There he met all major troop commanders in the I Corps forward area, and together they reviewed the situation and discussed a plan for the defense of Hue which they had been ordered to hold at all costs. The situation that confronted General Truong and his commanders at that time was not

too bad. Regular units and territorial forces were in good shape; discipline was good; and morale was high. The loss of Quang Tri might have some adverse effect on the troops, but it was not a big setback in itself. After all, most of the population had evacuated, and the bulk of the Marine Division had safely withdrawn to Da Nang. Command and control were excellent, and the troops appeared unanimously resolved to hold Hue.

On his way back to Da Nang, General Truong dropped by Hue for a visit with his deputy for territorial affairs, Maj. Gen. Hoang Van Lac. His confidence was enhanced after an inspection tour of the city and its troop dispositions. At 1330 President Thieu's articulate voice was heard on radio Hue. He addressed the people, the population of Hue in particular, and ordered the troops to defend the city at all costs. This was a much needed, albeit somewhat belated, shot in the arm, General Truong thought, but he was not sure of its effect. He left Hue, however, feeling confident and determined.

Arriving back in Da Nang late in the afternoon, General Truong received a special delivery, flash message classified "Secret." It contained orders from the president relayed by JGS. Contrary to what he had proclaimed in the broadcast, President Thieu now ordered that because of inability to simultaneously defend all three enclaves (Hue, Da Nang, Chu Lai), the I Corps commander was free, depending on the situation and enemy pressure, to redeploy his forces for the defense of Da Nang only. The last airborne brigade was also directed to proceed immediately to Saigon; it left before midnight.

The situation in MR–I was becoming more serious each day. President Thieu's address continued to be carried over the air during the following days, but it failed to reassure the wary people of Hue. Their confidence had been deeply shaken; they continued to pour out of the city and made their way toward Da Nang. On 21 March, with additional units brought from his rear, the enemy intensified pressure in the Phu Loc area and brought it to bear most heavily on a stretch of National Route 1 halfway between Hue and Da Nang where the packed column of refugees was shelled. The 1st Infantry Division immediately went into action and with massive artillery and tactical air support managed initially to relieve this pressure. But the balance of forces already leaned heavily toward the enemy. The 1st Division held out until noon the next day, 22 March. At 1400 the 15th Ranger Group and

elements of the 1st Regiment in the Phu Loc area were overcome by a superior enemy force. National Route 1 was effectively cut, and there seemed to be no chance of clearing it again. Both the 15th Ranger Group and the 1st Regiment suffered heavy losses.

In the face of this unexpected setback and the virtual impossibility of reopening National Route 1, the commander of I Corps issued orders to contract and consolidate lines for the defense of Hue. In the meantime, with increased naval transport made available to MR-I, the evacuation of civilian refugees and military dependents toward Da Nang had begun in earnest. Part of the heavy military equipment was also shipped out with the refugees. In the morning of 23 March, enemy guns began to bombard Hue. The shelling continued throughout the day; it was sparse and ineffective, but its psychological effect on the people who were still stranded in the city was terrible. Terror soon gave way to frenzy and chaos.

The situation in the southern part of MR-I had begun to deteriorate following the loss of Hau Duc and Tien Phuoc, two district towns of Quang Tin Province. The 2d Infantry Division, augmented by the 12th Ranger Group, had finally managed to contain the enemy drive toward the provincial capital (Tam Ky) and the coastal plain. However, other remote bases located deep in the foothills could be overrun at any time. In the face of mounting enemy pressure, the I Corps commander on 16 March had ordered evacuation of two exposed district towns of Quang Ngai Province, Son Ha and Tra Bong. Other remote outposts were also abandoned. The move conserved forces for eventual defense of vital areas. As a result, a semblance of calm had been restored in both provinces.

In the early morning of 24 March, major fighting broke out in Quang Tin Province. The NVA 711th Division, the 52d Brigade (reinforced), and armor elements drove a vigorous attack against the city of Tam Ky. Within the city, enemy sappers penetrated into the provincial jail and released the prisoners to create disorder. By noon the city was overrun. The 2d Regiment of the 3d Infantry Division was then ordered to move toward Quang Tin to assist the local forces falling back from Tam Ky. The loss of Tam Ky drove the population north toward Da Nang by the thousands. And in all probability, enemy sappers and artillery forward observers gained access to the city by mixing with the throngs of refugees.

In Quang Ngai Province the enemy effort also began and expanded rapidly the same day. Enemy sappers, provincial main force, and other local elements took advantage of the deteriorating situation and attacked in force the airport, various military installations, and the villages located around the provincial capital. National Route 1 was cut midway between the city of Quang Ngai and Chu Lai; Quang Ngai's access road to the coast was also cut. In brief, within a single day the situation deteriorated beyond control. The 2d Infantry Division itself had been battered enough after repeated enemy attacks and was no longer capable of bringing relief to the embattled city. With I Corps approval, the sector troops of Quang Ngai fought their way toward the north during the night. In the early hours of the next day a few managed to reach Chu Lai.

The Final Evacuation

By the next day, 25 March, all I Corps forces had been gathered into three strongholds: Da Nang (including Hoi An), Hue to the north, and Chu Lai to the south. The retreat toward these havens had been painful and costly. Most of the troops were weary and disheartened. For a long time they had been fighting, battle after battle, year in and year out, but never before had they felt as truly discouraged. Gone was the hope that someone would give them a hand and help them to recover enough to confront the enemy again as of old.

During this most dispirited moment, another message was delivered to I Corps. Presidential orders again: I Corps was to redeploy its three organic divisions for the defense of Da Nang with the Marine Division as a reserve. During the night General Truong ordered the 1st Infantry Division and other units in the Hue area to withdraw toward Da Nang. At the same time he instructed the 2d Infantry Division, along with the Quang Ngai sector troops and their dependents, to proceed to Re Island some twenty miles offshore from Chu Lai.

The plan for the withdrawal from Hue required the 1st Infantry Division and its attached units to proceed to the Tu Hien Estuary. Naval and engineer units would bridge the estuary to provide passage for infantry troops who would then proceed to Da Nang by road. Marine units and their attached elements (to include armor) were to be retrieved by ship. I Corps forward CP was to direct and control the withdrawal.

By morning of the following day, 26 March, the sea became rough, and extrication by ship was delayed. Nor was the estuary bridge in place in time to be of any use. By noon the tide had risen enough to prevent any attempt to cross the estuary. By this time the enemy had discovered our movements and began to concentrate his artillery fire upon Tu Hien and other pickup points. Command and control failed miserably. Hardly any discipline remained. Only about one-third of the troops finally made it to Da Nang. But no sooner had they reached the city than they melted away in search of their dependents and a way out. The only units that retained cohesion were the Marines.

The sea-lift of the southern forces to Re Island, in the meantime, encountered no great difficulties. The 2d Division and regional troops were picked up by ships and regrouped safely on the island where they spent some time reorganizing and recovering. This move proved sound and appropriate, given the prevailing local circumstances. At least these troops and their dependents did not add to the chaos in Da Nang where matters were becoming worse each day.

During 27 March the situation in Da Nang deteriorated by the hour. Inside the city, a wild and maddened population made any defense practically impossible. From the outside the enemy pressed in, inexorably, unrelentingly. From the north the NVA 324B and 325C Divisions, augmented by an armor regiment and two artillery regiments, advanced along the Elephant Valley and were enveloping the entire western flank of the city. To the south the 711th Division in coordination with the 304th Division and forces of the 44th Front pressed on along the Thu Bon River and attacked the district towns of Duc Duc and Dai Loc. Da Nang was now within range of enemy artillery.

On the morning of 28 March, the commander of I Corps held an emergency meeting with all unit commanders at his headquarters. Measures were taken to restore order and hastily to reorganize battered units for the last-ditch defense of the city. But these efforts were undermined by a critical shortage of combat troops. Cadre and troops retrieved from the redeployment of previous days were detailed to the Da Nang Garrison Command to maintain order. Stragglers were regrouped and directed to combat units, but they hardly made up for the losses incurred.

At noon, a message from J-2/JGS warned that the enemy would attack Da Nang sometime during the night. Another order from JGS instructed the 1st Air Division to evacuate its helicopters and fly its jets to Phu Cat or Phan Rang. An alert was immediately issued by I Corps to all combat units on the defense line. Other actions were taken to prepare for the worst. By 1400 security no longer existed in the villages and hamlets surrounding Da Nang. All territorial forces of the Quang Nam Sector had melted away. The enemy had cut the road between Hoi An and Da Nang. The fuel storage depot and the ammunition depot were no longer functioning; their troops had already fled. Even at major installations and commands only key staff members remained.

Dusk had just set in when enemy artillery began to shell the airport and the naval base. I Corps Headquarters and numerous other military installations were also bombarded. The enemy's fire was intense and fairly accurate, undoubtedly adjusted by observers inside the city. All the rounds were fired from the direction of Elephant Valley. The two 175-mm. batteries of I Corps immediately counterfired, guided by observation planes, but the results were minimal. The enemy kept on pounding mercilessly, and soon the defensive line gradually caved in.

General Truong informed me of the situation. He also called the president and recommended immediate evacuation by sea. But during the conversation the president did not commit himself to any clear-cut order. He did not tell General Truong whether to withdraw or to hold and fight. He simply asked how many people could be extricated to safety in case of a withdrawal. Apparently he was apprehensive about the way things had turned out. This redeployment could well turn into another tragedy like the one which just happened in the Central Highlands. He wanted to spare himself the pain of another such order.

As soon as the conversation ended, all communications with Saigon were disrupted by enemy artillery fire. The situation by now had become entirely hopeless. Without hesitation, General Truong decided to withdraw from Da Nang. He discussed the embarkation with Rear Adm. Ho Van Ky Thoai, the naval commander of MR-I Coastal Zone, then met with each of his subordinate commanders, ordering the displacement of all units during the night toward three embarkation points—the

end of Hai Van Pass, the foot of Non Nuoc (Marble) Mountain, and the Hoi An Estuary.

Before dawn the next morning, 29 March, a thick fog had set in along the coast. All available naval ships were at the rendezvous points as planned, but the tide was low; the ships could not beach; and the troops had to wade and swim toward the ships. By midmorning the embarkation was going smoothly. Nevertheless, when enemy artillery fire began to zero in on the beaches, and the operation became disorderly, many soldiers drowned; others were killed by enemy fire. When the ships left, over 6,000 Marines and 4,000 troops of the 3d Division and other units were on board.

The Refugee Problem

One of the thorniest problems, which MR-I could hardly solve by itself, was the influx of refugees. It was not a new problem. Almost every significant enemy offensive had created refugees. The population of MR-I was genuinely wary of the ups and downs of a situation. The memories of Hue in 1968, Quang Tri in 1972, and numerous lesser hardships in between were still vivid and evoked many nightmares. It was as if the citizens of MR-I had been condemned to live in constant fear, ready to pack up and leave at all times. The expected offensive had not yet erupted; only a heavy pressure had been felt. But the pressure was real and ominous. Especially for the sensitive and wary people of the northernmost provinces this was warning enough.

In addition, the population of Central Vietnam, MR-I, and the northern part of MR-II had lived in constant fear of another partition ever since the Paris Agreement was signed in January 1973. Short of a coalition with the Communists, which President Thieu's administrations would never accept, partition seemed a plausible solution for the continuing war. Rumors proliferated and spread, at first about the possibility of a "vertical" partition, then about a "lateral" partition at the 16th Parallel. In the wake of major territorial losses, Phuoc Long and Ban Me Thuot, and without the prospect of a comeback, people were convinced that concessions would have to be made sooner or later. Then suddenly Kontum and Pleiku were evacuated. The local population had not been alerted nor given any explanation. The exodus from the Central Highlands was still under way when the Communists crossed the Thach

Han line and seized Quang Tri on 19 March. Still no explanation, not a word from the government. No doubt, people reasoned, all this must have been part of some arrangement. Had the rumor turned out to be true? Was partition to become a reality?

On top of that, the Airborne Division was being withdrawn from MR-I, the division that, to popular hearts and minds, symbolized the only credible protective and deterrent force to the exclusion of all others. This division was the very foundation of their confidence. What was happening, they asked? They found the answer themselves. The central government was certainly not intent on holding this part of the national territory if it had withdrawn the Airborne Division. Without this backbone, they reasoned, MR-I could hardly be protected. Had not the Airborne Division been most instrumental in the reoccupation of Quang Tri? How could Da Nang have been defended last year without this highly professional unit?

Without hesitation, therefore, people began to pack up and leave. At first it was only a trickle of wealthy individuals who could afford the air fare. Soon the trickle swelled into throngs, and the throngs finally turned into a frantic mass exodus when news of Pleiku and Kontum being abandoned reached MR-I. Civilians, military dependents, and civil servants began to evacuate Hue and other MR-I towns by the thousands. They converged on Da Nang or went directly to Saigon if they had the means. Rumors arose and spread: a partition had been arranged with the Communists; the government would surely abandon MR-I as it had Pleiku and Kontum. These rumors accelerated the exodus which was already taking on the speed and magnitude of a deluge. By the time the prime minister and cabinet members flew to Da Nang on 18 March to examine and try to solve the refugee problem, the city was besieged by over half a million uprooted citizens.

It was none too soon for action to be taken. General Truong himself had pleaded many times with the prime minister to help him solve the problem. The exodus had become a national emergency that MR-I alone was hardly equipped to handle. The arrival of the central government delegation was just what everybody had expected.

Before presiding over a session with governmental officials directly concerned with the refugee problem, Prime Minister Khiem was taken aside by General Truong for a briefing on the current military situation and his plan for the withdrawal.

In particular, General Truong alerted him to the profound agitation among the population. The prime minister was taken aback. He did not suspect that the situation could have changed so rapidly. He instructed General Truong to present his withdrawal plan to the president before implementing it. Then he stepped into the adjoining main conference room where his cabinet ministers were waiting.

All the province chiefs and mayors were there as were local military and civilian officials in charge of refugees and leaders of local charity organizations and other prominent personalities who came to volunteer their services. In rapid succession, the province chief and the mayor of Da Nang presented their problems and recommendations concerning the status of refugees and measures of relief. Among other things, they recommended: (1) that forceful disciplinary action be taken against civil servants who had fled without orders; (2) that the government go on record to deny or correct the rumors which were spreading among the population; (3) that the evacuation of all dependents, military and civilian alike, be authorized to free our soldiers from their family burdens.

The cabinet members were assembled on each side of and behind the prime minister. Together they represented the full power and authority of the administration. They listened with apparent concern. Unfortunately there was nothing they could do there and then. The consensus, however, was to give local authorities more latitude for solving problems. Finally, the prime minister made a decision. An interministerial commission, headed by a deputy prime minister, would be sent immediately to Da Nang to take charge of the refugees, thereby allowing I Corps to concentrate on its military problems. He also promised to requisition all available commerical ships to augment current transportation capabilities. But the most urgent problems remained unsolved; perhaps they could not be solved at all. With a feeling of pervasive uncertainty, the meeting adjourned. The prime minister and his ministers left immediately for Saigon.

A week later the interministerial commission materialized in Da Nang in the person of a colonel and a captain from the Ministry of Social Affairs. They brought along a few checks for monetary support. By now MR-I had been reduced to three enclaves packed with panicky refugees and troops: Da Nang, Hue, and Chu Lai. In contrast, local relief efforts were most commendable. The municipality of Da Nang, the various char-

ity organizations, and some prominent and respected private citizens in particular had been active and immensely helpful. Regrettably, the magnitude of the task at hand was simply beyond their capabilities.

The wary people of Hue, including military dependents, had begun moving out in earnest on 17 March. National Route 1 to Da Nang was packed with people and vehicles of all kinds. Part of the crowd of refugees sought a way out by sea. They besieged the port of Tan My which was busy unloading ammunition and other materiel for front-line units in the Quang Tri–Hue area and at the same time loading other equipment to be evacuated to Da Nang. All port operations were interrupted for two valuable days because of this unexpected assault. Even landing craft still crammed with unloaded materiel were commandeered and ordered to leave port. After a whole day of explanation and persuasion, the refugees cleared the port and proceeded to the beaches at Thai Duong Thuong to wait for ships. On 21 March, two NVA divisions cut National Route 1, the exit toward Da Nang for the refugees. The human mass then moved broadside toward the Cau Hai Sound and from there to the beaches beyond.

All fishing boats in the area were hired or commandeered by the refugees, but there were not enough boats. All naval vessels were tied up in supply missions for the Ban Me Thuot–Qui Nhon area or in troop transport. JGS negotiated without an official requisition for the only commercial ship available, the 2,000-ton *Truong Thanh*. On 23 March, in spite of a rough sea, it took on board over 5,000 refugees, including dependents of 1st Infantry Division troops. Two days later the ship left for Da Nang, which was still a safe place. But the city was already crowded with other refugees.

Hue was abandoned during the night of 25 March. Troops and the remaining civilians retreated along the coast toward Da Nang. Tam Ky was overrun on 24 March, and Chu Lai evacuated on the 26th. The population of the two southern provinces, Quang Ngai and Quang Tin, also rushed toward Da Nang.

On 26 March, General Truong sent his deputy for territorial affairs, General Lac, to Saigon to plead MR-I's case with the president, the prime minister, and me as chairman of JGS. The government should take immediate steps to alleviate the plight of the refugees stranded in Da Nang; the city was facing the danger of being torn asunder by chaos. Civil control was

almost impossible to exercise, and if this situation continued it would be impossible for I Corps to pull through, much less defend anything.

By this time the city was in utter disorder and chaos. People moved about frantically in search of relief and escape. All streets were packed; vehicles were unable to move. It was impossible to move 340 critically wounded servicemen the few miles between the hospital and the airport. "The mass of people stranded in the city was estimated at approximately one and one-half million. They took over every public building, all the public roads, and the harbor. The chaos and disorder were indescribable. Hunger, looting, and crimes were widespread. Traffic was impossible. To maneuver, tanks had to make headway by crushing people first." That was the spectacle seen and reported by Lt. Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, deputy chairman of JGS after returning from a mission to Da Nang.

On 27 March came the first U.S. commercial jet chartered for the evacuation. It had been planned to airlift about fourteen thousand people in daily runs between Da Nang and Cam Ranh. But news of the air evacuation spread rapidly. Soon the airport was besieged by a frantic crowd, deserters included, who trampled the security fence, overwhelmed the guards, swamped the runways, and mobbed the aircraft. There was total chaos at plane side, and it took the guards half a day to restore some order. But as soon as another jet landed, the same disorderly commotion took hold of the crowd. Finally, it became so unsafe for the jets themselves that the airlift had to be suspended altogether. Then four military C–130 cargo planes tried to take over, but they could take only one load on 29 March.

At the harbor another unruly crowd took over the piers. A number of U.S. oceangoing vessels arriving in Da Nang were ordered to anchor offshore. Then by barges and small boats the refugees were taken to the ships. The operation was slow, but it brought good results. As soon as each ship had taken aboard about 10,000 people, it was directed toward Cam Ranh. But soon the ships had to be redirected toward Vung Tau and Phu Quoc Island when Nha Trang was evacuated on 1 April. The long southbound voyage was painful and fatal to some refugees who were victims of crimes and other acts of violence by unruly soldiers and by disguised enemy agents. The elements, hunger, and thirst also took their toll, and a number of exhausted people fainted once put on shore. At Phu Quoc

more than ten Communist agents were denounced by the refugees for flagrant acts and were executed on the beaches of the island.

During the night of 28 March, the Communists shelled and vigorously attacked Da Nang. In the morning of 29 March, the refugees continued to leave by barges and tugboats under the enemy's merciless fire. More casualties occurred as the refugees desperately swam away from shore toward any floating vessel. The more fortunate were rescued; the less fortunate disappeared into the sea. During the afternoon of 29 March, out of sheer luck and audacity, a U.S. commercial jet suddenly landed at Da Nang, took aboard over 300 refugees, and took off to the consternation of Communist troops who did not know how to react. By this time Da Nang had been occupied by the enemy, and all evacuation efforts were officially stopped when the day was over. Still the refugees continued to make their way south by whatever means they could find in the days that followed.

In other times transportation for the million or so people stranded in Da Nang would have been provided by the local relief and resettlement committee leasing civilian facilities. Only rarely were naval ships used and then only to augment, not supplant, the civilian effort. During a meeting of the Central Relief and Resettlement Committee on 19 March, JGS briefed committee members about the rapidly changing military situation and warned that naval ships could no longer be made available. JGS also recommended to Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Phan Quang Dan that the government should (1) immediately requisition all domestic commercial ships, thirteen in all; (2) appeal to other countries, in particular the United States and those allies who had actively participated in the Vietnam War, to assist with transportation; and (3) set up an agency to coordinate the use of these facilities as they were provided.

These recommendations were approved by Dr. Dan who immediately ordered the Ministry of Public Works to requisition all domestic ships in national waters at that time. Those few ships which were sailing overseas were to be summoned home on an emergency basis. Unfortunately, the minister of public works considered the requisition order too important and beyond his authority. Instead of signing the document, which was well within his prerogative to do, he submitted it to Dr. Dan for his signature. During this time Dr. Dan was busy

traveling to the provinces of MR-II in his effort to select sites for resettlement centers. A valuable week had gone by before the requisition order was finally signed and carried out. In the meantime, because of an urgent requirement to evacuate dependents of the 1st Division, JGS succeeded in arranging orders for the *Truong Thanh* (its owner had agreed to its use), which accomplished its mission beautifully on 23 March. This was the only domestic ship to be of any use in the evacuation of refugees and military dependents from MR-I.

In the meantime other countries responded favorably to our appeal for assistance. The United States agreed to provide chartered commercial jets and sea transports. Australia would make a C-130 wing available, and the Republics of Korea and China offered the use of their LSTs. But a week to ten days had to be allowed before these facilities could be ready for service in Vietnam. If only they had been available on 18 March and if only we could have had the six LSTs that had been requested six months earlier, then perhaps the evacuation would have been carried out in an orderly and efficient way. As it turned out, the sheer number of refugees was overwhelming, and their state of mind precluded any attempt at orderly extrication.

How many refugees had been evacuated no one knew, and it was hard to make an estimate. But there were legions of them overcrowding the relief centers of MR-III and those on Phu Quoc Island. The cities of Vung Tau and Baria also seemed to be taken over by refugees. When they became a matter of national concern, a contingency plan was worked out to resettle refugees in various areas, depending on province of origin. Those from Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces were to be regrouped at Da Nang then directed toward permanent settlement centers in Cam Ranh and Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, and Lam Dong Provinces. Uprooted Montagnards from Pleiku and Kontum Provinces were to be resettled in Lam Dong. The rapidly unfolding events completely upset this original plan, however, because all resettlement areas were located in MR-II, which the government no longer controlled by the time Cam Ranh and Nha Trang were evacuated on 1 April. Many families found themselves displaced several times during just one week. Makeshift refugee centers were hastily set up in Vung Tau, Phuoc Tuy Province, Phu Quoc Island, Can Tho, and Vinh Long Province. Of these, Vung Tau and Phu Quoc were the

two most important centers, capable of accommodating between 50,000 and 100,000 persons.

Wherever it went, the refugee flow brought along chaos and disintegration. The danger was such that President Thieu was compelled to ban refugees from the Mekong Delta and the provinces surrounding Saigon. He himself lamented: "If we brought the refugees to some place, sooner or later that place would be lost."

It was obvious that there was no way for I Corps to stand up to an all-out offensive from North Vietnam given the balance of forces at the time and the rugged terrain of MR-I which gave the enemy tremendous tactical advantages. But the rapid deterioration of the situation was more the result of confusion and morale collapse than enemy pressure. The decision to redeploy forces, albeit unavoidable, was not entirely clear and firm in the case of I Corps. President Thieu could not bring himself to give clear-cut orders to the corps commander. Apparently the fiasco in MR-II weighed heavily on his mind and made him reluctant to play the role of commander in chief again. Instead, being an astute politician, he played on the connotation of words, leaving their interpretation, including implications of his silence, to his confused field commander. President Thieu's order to abandon Hue was issued barely one day after his resolve was made and he had promised in public to hold the "ancient capital city." True to his political instinct, however, President Thieu did not provide a time period for this evacuation.

The separation of families seriously affected the morale of troops who, out of impatience and anxiety, deserted their units to look for parents, wives, and children. In spite of efforts of the General Political Warfare Department to provide special care for military dependents, it was impossible to sort them out from the mass of refugees in the prevailing confusion and disorder. The troops withdrawing to Da Nang were more concerned with their dependents than with their units and the enemy. Given this chaotic situation, it was a matter of each individual trying to solve his own personal problems and those of his family. The disruption of withdrawing units was not caused as much by the enemy as by the collapse of troop morale. The challenge facing the I Corps commander was not merely a military problem, it was the failure of the government to solve a refugee crisis which already had gotten out of hand and doomed all military plans.

The Final Days of MR-II

When the highlands of MR-II fell under Communist control, II Corps lost most of its combat troops. In the coastal area, however, the 22d Division was still holding firm at Binh Khe on National Route 19 and at Tam Quan of northern Binh Dinh on the coast. Its 41st and 42d Regiments were fighting a fierce seesaw battle against the NVA 3d Division in the foothills of Binh Khe District west of Qui Nhon. (*See Map 5.*) Each hill, each stretch of road was wrestled back and forth between the two equally ferocious contenders. The outcome of the struggle was still undecided, but losses inflicted on the enemy were heavy. Freed now from its blocking mission at Le Trung, the NVA 95B Regiment moved east and joined forces with the NVA 3d Division. The pressure was particularly heavy, but the 41st and 42d Regiments were still holding on 30 March.

On the coast Communist reinforcements came south from Quang Ngai and began attacking Tam Quan (Bong Son) in force on 25 March. After three days our 47th Regiment was driven out of Tam Quan and fell back to the Phu Cat Air Base where it tried to establish a new line of defense on 28 March. By this time the air base had been evacuated by the 2d Air Division. The NVA 320th Division, after its attacks against the column on Interprovincial Route 7B, was now directing its effort toward Tuy Hoa. The entire F-10 Division, supported by tanks and artillery, was pushing east on National Route 21 from Phuoc An and, by 27 March, had attempted vigorously to break through at Khanh Duong, held by the 3d Airborne Brigade. Elements of the NVA 3d Division had also infiltrated Qui Nhon City and cut its main access routes. All local defense forces had evaporated, as if by magic, in the face of the mounting enemy pressure. The danger of being completely overwhelmed was such that II Corps was compelled to order the 22d Division, its only coherent combat force, to break contact and fall back to Qui Nhon.

On 30 March, the 41st and 42d Regiments disengaged from Binh Khe on orders. The 42d Regiment commander, Col. Nguyen Huu Thong, was indignant; he pleaded with the division commander not to withdraw. Said he: "Please, the situation still doesn't warrant a withdrawal. If you do it now, it will be tough to come back." But it was already too late. When the two regiments reached Qui Nhon during the night, they were engaged by enemy troops already entrenched in the city. By

this time, most of the population and all local defense forces had fled. The harbor was occupied; so were most of the tall buildings. Qui Nhon was already under virtual control of the NVA 3d Division. After two days of fighting, the 41st and 42d Regiments, with naval gunfire support, opened a breach south of the city and assembled on a beach four miles south of the harbor. At 0200 on 1 April, three naval ships took aboard what remained of the 22d Division. The commander of the 42d Regiment refused to evacuate and committed suicide.

In the meantime, the 47th Regiment had been driven out of Phu Cat Air Base where it had fallen back only two days earlier. In its withdrawal toward Qui Nhon during the night, it ran into an ambush at Phu Cat District Town. Enemy troops had overrun the town just a few hours earlier. The body of the town garrison Regional Force battalion commander still lay in the front yard of the district office; rather than surrender, he had preferred to commit suicide. The 47th lost about half of its troops and its commander, Colonel Le Cau, also took his life on the very site of the battle. The regiment was totally disrupted. When it was regrouped later at Vung Tau, the 22d Infantry Division numbered slightly over two-thousand men.

In the early hours of 2 April, the NVA 320th Division attacked Tuy Hoa and rapidly overran the lightly defended city. Shattered Regional Force and Popular Force troops retreated south toward Nha Trang. The II Corps deputy commander for operations, Brig. Gen. Tran Van Cam, and the Phu Yen Province chief were reported wounded and missing in action. Twenty-five miles farther south, at Deo Ca Pass, the 34th Ranger Battalion, whose troops had so valiantly broken through enemy roadblocks on Interprovincial Route 7B only two weeks earlier, was also attacked. It held out for a day before being overwhelmed late at night on 2 April.

By this time, the battle for Khanh Duong had been raging fiercely since 27 March when the NVA F–10 Division made an all-out attempt with armor support to break through toward the coast. The 3d Airborne Brigade fought bitterly despite the enemy's murderously accurate artillery fire. Several positions had changed hands many times. In the meantime, the supply route from Ninh Hoa was also interdicted. Convoys for Khanh Duong were attacked and suffered heavy losses. Efforts to clear this route by Regional Force units augmented by troops of the Duc My training complex were largely unsuccessful. Finally after a long week of very heavy fighting, positions held by the

3d Brigade were overrun on 2 April. Only 300 paratroopers escaped and fell back toward Nha Trang. Spurred by this victory, enemy tanks pushed onward and rapidly took Duc My and Ninh Hoa. The enemy was now poised for attack against Nha Trang.

As with other cities and towns of MR-II during this time, disorder and chaos reigned at Nha Trang. No control existed in the city. The police and local defense forces had begun to disappear into the tide of refugees flowing south. Prisoners broke out of jail and created a chaotic commotion throughout the city by shooting haphazardly with seized weapons. II Corps Headquarters was still in Nha Trang on 2 April. Late in the morning, Lt. Gen. Pham Quoc Thuan, commandant of the NCO School at Duc My, visited General Phu at corps headquarters. They talked in private for about fifteen minutes, then both went to the Nha Trang Air Base. General Phu boarded his helicopter and flew away in search of his remaining units. He returned to Nha Trang at 1800 and reported to JGS that he was unable to make contact with any unit. Despite JGS orders to organize the defense of the air base in coordination with air force and naval units, General Phu departed by aircraft about thirty minutes later without providing instructions for his staff or the air base commander. He did not return and was admitted to the Cong Hoa General Hospital in Saigon on 4 April. General Phu was by then no longer mentally able to exercise command. Besides, there was practically nothing left for him to command. Disorganized and disheartened by this time, II Corps staff soon evacuated Nha Trang.

Also on 2 April, under the unrelenting pressure of the NVA 7th Division, forces in the provinces of Lam Dong and Tuyen Duc retreated toward Phan Rang. And so, within less than three weeks, the force structure commanded and controlled by II Corps had nearly reached total disruption.

Like a plague, the refugees who swept south from MR-I and northern MR-II brought chaos as they moved along. Phan Rang was in such a situation on 2 April. Civil servants, police, and popular forces simply quit their ranks and fled. More than half of the Regional Force battalion guarding the Phan Rang Air Base was missing. The province chief, Colonel Tran Van Tu, had left for Phan Thiet after ordering the destruction of some equipment and facilities.

To redress the situation, it was decided that coastal Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Provinces, the last two bastions of

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MR-II, would be placed under the command and control of III Corps as of 4 April. (*See Map 1.*) As reinforcement, III Corps sent the 2d Airborne Brigade to Phan Rang on 6 April. Reconnaissance teams of the Strategic Technical Directorate were also sent into the areas northeast and northwest of the city. At the same time, a forward command post of III Corps with Lt. Gen. Nguyen Vinh Nghi, then commandant of the Infantry School, in charge, was established at Phan Rang Air Base. Order and security were soon restored within and around the city. The province chief of Ninh Thuan was also called back to reorganize the city's administration and defense. With a new command, fresh reinforcements, effective air support, and restored order, the situation was improving remarkably. Only sporadic skirmishes were reported, except for the pressure the NVA 7th Division was exerting on the northwestern flank of Phan Thiet. Reports of reconnaissance teams also revealed the presence of the NVA 3d Division and elements of the F-10 Division at Cam Ranh, some thirty miles to the northeast.

In the meantime, faced with mounting pressure on the Bien Hoa-Long Khanh front, the III Corp commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, decided to withdraw the 2d Airborne Brigade from Phan Rang to reconstitute his corps reserve. In its place, he sent a regiment of the 2d Infantry Division, newly refitted after being withdrawn from MR-I two weeks earlier; a Ranger group, also refitted after being extracted from Chon Thanh three days earlier; and an M-113 squadron reconstituted from II Corps armor remnants.

The troop replacement was nearing completion when heavy fighting broke out on 4 April. The NVA F-10 Division, augmented by elements of the NVA 3d Division, attacked in force with armor and artillery support. The Ranger group and the STD reconnaissance teams in positions north of Phan Rang Air Base suffered heavy losses. Faced with the danger of being immediately overwhelmed, General Nghi asked for the retention of an airborne battalion slated for withdrawal. On the morning of 15 April, the equivalent of two enemy divisions launched a two-pronged attack against the air base, defended by an airborne battalion and a Regional Force battalion, and against the city where the regiment of the 2d Division was heavily engaged. At the same time, enemy troops cut National Route 1 at Ca Na some thirty miles to the southwest to block the retreat route of our forces. At the air base, enemy troops overran our positions, and III Corps Headquarters lost contact

with its forward CP. The city proper was occupied by noon. The 2d Division Commander and elements of his only remaining regiment managed to withdraw to the beach and were retrieved by a supply ship. A column of enemy troops and tanks immediately pushed southward to Ca Na. Here they exchanged gunfire with our naval ships, sank one supply ship, and damaged two others. (Our air force and navy had destroyed several enemy tanks when they had moved toward Phan Rang for the attack.)

Thus the entire province of Ninh Thuan fell into Communist hands on 16 April. General Nghi, General Sang of the 6th Air Division, and the commander of the 2d Airborne Brigade, Col. Nguyen Thu Luong, were missing in action. The next day the district town of Thien Giao in Binh Thuan Province was overrun, and Phan Thiet fell on 18 April. The entire territory of MR-II was now under enemy control.

CHAPTER 8

Defense in the South

On 26 March 1975, General Frederick C. Weyand, U.S. Army chief of staff, arrived in Saigon. General Weyand had served in Vietnam for a long time in many capacities. He had commanded in succession the 25th U.S. Infantry Division and the II U.S. Field Force and then became General Creighton W. Abrams' deputy and finally succeeded him as the last commander of the Military Assistance Command. Because of his long association with our country, he was highly esteemed by Vietnamese military and political leaders.

During his call on JGS, there was no formal briefing. General Weyand and I only discussed the situation and exchanged ideas. I told General Weyand about the difficulties we were encountering, and I made a single request: that the U.S. Air Force use its B–52s to bomb enemy troop concentrations and exposed base areas. I thought that if B–52s were made available, the confidence and morale of the population and troops of South Vietnam could be restored. However, General Weyand explained to me that any new U.S. military intervention in Vietnam would have to be authorized by the U.S. Congress, and there was little chance our request would be approved.

General Weyand's delegation and the U.S. ambassador then attended an official meeting with President Thieu at the Independence Palace. During this meeting the U.S. delegation brought up the following points:

The government should explain the situation to the people so they would not be confused by the falsehoods spread by the enemy. Vietnamese leaders should make more personal appearances on TV.

JGS should receive greater authority.

JGS should seek a victory, even a small one, to help facilitate the request for the $300 million additional aid. The Communist 5th Division in the Parrot's Beak area west of Duc Hue offered an excellent target.

The problem of war refugees should be solved. Particular attention should be given to military dependents. They should be moved out of areas where battles were likely to be fought.

All the problems pertaining to the government and the population were discussed by the president and Prime Minister Khiem on one side and the U.S. delegation on the other. The question of handing over more authority to JGS, however, was not considered because it was a sensitive subject. Only President Thieu could solve that problem if he desired. From the military point of view, I fully agreed we needed a victory but, for the time being, there was no unit prepared to launch an operation to destroy the NVA 5th Division. This would have to await an appropriate opportunity. I also reiterated the emphasis we placed on the use of B-52s to destroy concentrations of enemy units. This would have an excellent effect on the morale of Vietnamese troops and the population. I informed the participants about what JGS had been doing in the absence of B-52s. C-130s were dropping pallets of JP-4 fuel drums containing scrapped oil and even 250-, 500- or 750-pound bombs. Evacuating military dependents from embattled areas might boomerang. In the absence of their families, the troops might have less spirit to fight. During the past, in the 1968 Tet offensive in particular and at remote outposts, there were instances when wives and children had given effective support in resupplying ammunition, evacuating the wounded, and even firing machine guns.

Regrouping and Refitting

After the loss of Ban Me Thuot and the Pleiku-Kontum redeployment failure, combat units of MR-II were entirely disorganized. Equipment losses amounted to 90 percent, but units still retained 30 percent of their M-16 rifles. The refitting task was planned as follows:

Troops of the 23d Division were regrouped at Dong Ba Thin, 10 kilometers north of Cam Ranh. The 23d Division Headquarters was responsible for refitting there. (Remnants of the 22d Division were taken to Vung Tau.)

Regional Force and Popular Force troops organic to the Ban Me Thuot, Kontum, and Pleiku sectors were regrouped at the Lam Son Training Center to be used as replacement manpower.

Ranger and artillery troops were regrouped at their respective training centers at Duc My, thirty-five kilometers from Nha Trang.

Armor troops were regrouped at the Armor Training Center at Long Thanh in Bien Hoa Province.

The refitting process included organization, accelerated training, and equipping and psywar, based on the battalion as basic unit for the infantry and rangers, the four-piece battery for the artillery, and the troop for the armor.

The refitting process brought good results. The 23d Division was completing the activation of one regiment; two Ranger battalions were reviewing the company phase of training; and two 105-mm. batteries were training and receiving their equipment. Then the Khanh Duong front, defended by an airborne brigade, was broken through after three days of bloody combat. Fighting spread rapidly, and the units being refitted at Duc My and near Cam Ranh were again disrupted and had to fall back southward.

Much additional materiel was lost. This was all the Central Logistics Command and JGS had been able to assemble from reserve stocks, including maintenance reserves from the 1st, 2d, and 4th Area Logistic Commands, and airlift to Cam Ranh. The materiel lost was enough to equip two infantry regiments, one 105-mm. battalion, one 155-mm. battery, and one M-48 troop.

When MR-I troops arrived in MR-II in a state of total disarray, the refitting process for them was as follows:

The basis for refitting was battalion, group, and brigade for the infantry, rangers, and marines; battery or twelve-piece battalion for the artillery; and troop for the armor.

Priority was given to the Marine Division, the 2d Division, and the Airborne Rangers—units whose strength was relatively unimpaired when regrouped in Vung Tau—and the 22d Division.

MR-I Headquarters, located at JGS, was responsible for regrouping regular and territorial troops under its command and directing them to the Van Kiep Training Center. These troops would be used to replenish the 2d and 3d Divisions on a priority basis. (The 1st Division was disbanded.)

Regular and territorial troops of MR-II were regrouped at the 22d Division to serve as replacement manpower.

Headquarters of II Corps/MR-II was disbanded and its personnel reassigned to units undergoing refitting.

The Ranger and Artillery Commands were responsible for regrouping all troops under their respective control at their rear base at Long Binh.

The Armor Command was responsible for regrouping all armor troops at the Armor School.

The Central Training Command was responsible for regrouping all students and cadre organic to military schools of MR-I and MR-II, directing them to schools in MR-III, and assuring that training be continued. Noncommissioned officer students were to resume their training at the Quang Trung Training Center; cadets of the Dalat National Military Academy were to resume their training at the Long Thanh Infantry School; psywar students were to continue their schooling at the Psywar Training Center in Saigon.

The locations selected for refitting were as follows: the Marine Division was at the rear base of the 4th Marine Battalion at Vung Tau; the 2d Division was at Binh Tuy; the 3d Division was at the Van Kiep Training Center; Ranger troops were distributed among rear bases of some Ranger Groups at Long Binh; the 22d Division was at the National Cadre Training Center at Vung Tau; artillery troops were at the rear base of the artillery battalion at Long Binh; and armor troops were at the Armor School at Long Thanh.

The maximum time allowed for the refitting of a regiment or brigade was fifteen days. Units and commands were responsible for retrieving all material and equipment brought back by individuals or units. They had to make maximum use of serviceable equipment, turn in unserviceable items to the 332d Direct Support Group of the 3d Area Logistic Command at Long Binh, and submit requisitions to the Equipment Management Center of the Central Logistic Command.

The 3d Area Logistic Command was responsible for coordination with temporary refugee centers in MR-III, and the Navy Command was responsible for coordination with the refugee center at Phu Quoc to retrieve weapons from stragglers and turn them in to the 332d Direct Support Group for reissue after reconditioning.

Direct support units, medium maintenance centers, and rebuilding bases were to increase their capabilities to perform on a twenty-four hour basis. Salvaging was to be pushed to recover parts.

Fifty percent of all equipment of schools and training centers in MR–III and MR–IV was sent to the 3d Area Logistic Command to be distributed to units.

All reserve stocks on hand, including the maintenance float, were shipped to Long Binh.

All equipment airlifted or sea-lifted from the United States was to be processed at once for distribution as during the 1968 Tet offensive and the 1972 summer offensive.

The results of the regrouping and refitting effort were significant. The 2d Division, reorganized with two regiments, one 105-mm. battalion, one 155-mm. battery, and one M–113 troop, went as reinforcement to the Phan Rang front on 14 March. One Marine brigade, reorganized with one twelve-piece 105-mm. battalion, was deployed as reinforcement to the Long Thanh front in MR–III on 10 April; a second brigade was undergoing training and in the process of receiving equipment. One Ranger group, reorganized with a four-piece 105-mm. battery, went to the Dinh Tuong–Long An front as reinforcement to MR–IV; a second group was undergoing training and in the process of receiving equipment. The 22d Division, reorganized with two regiments, two twelve-piece 105-mm. battalions, and two M–113 troops, was gradually deployed to the Long An front as reinforcement to MR–III in the latter part of April. One infantry battalion organic to the 3d Division was undergoing training and in the process of receiving equipment at the Van Kiep Training Center.

In spite of maximum use of reserve stocks, newly arrived equipment, and more than half of the center's training equipment, and despite the increase in repair capabilities, the units which had been refitted suffered critical shortages in the following categories:

1. M–27 grenade launchers and 60-mm. and 81-mm. mortars: only 50 percent were available.
2. M–16 ammunition clips: only three (instead of six) were issued per rifle.
3. Signal equipment: 50 percent. Each company was equipped with only one AN/PRC–25 or AN/PRC–10 radio set.
4. Artillery pieces: sighting devices were missing.
5. M–113s were missing radio equipment and machine gun shields.
6. Trucks: only 10 percent were available.

7. Helmets and individual first-aid packets: only 10 percent were available.

In addition, the following units had been readied for combat but were still waiting for equipment: one M–113 troop, two M–48 troops, two 105-mm. battalions, one 155-mm. battalion, one Ranger group, and one infantry regiment.

High-Altitude Bombing

During the last few months of the war, JGS used C–130A cargo planes in tactical support missions in a desperate effort to increase firepower and compensate for the ineffectiveness of fighter bombers neutralized by enemy antiaircraft fire. Each C–130 could carry eight pallets rigged with four JP–4 fuel drums containing waste oil. The pallets of oil drums were dropped from an altitude of fifteen to twenty thousand feet and the airplanes were guided on targets by radio. The destructive area of each sortie was 150 by 450 meters.

Each C–130 could also carry eight pallets rigged with four GP 81–82 (250–500 lb) or three GP–117 (750 lb) bombs. These bomb pallets were also dropped from fifteen to twenty thousand feet. The troops on the ground were jubilant when these bombing sorties were made; they described them as "mini B–52s" or "Vietnamese B–52s." When the bomb pallets were first dropped on Zone C in Tay Ninh, the population thought it was American B–52s. Rumors of intervention by the U.S. Air Force spread quickly.

Near the end of the war, enemy troop concentrations and logistical bases were largely exposed and offered excellent targets for mass destruction weapons. As a result, during the visits of Mr. Eric von Marbod, deputy assistant secretary of defense (end of February 1975), and General Weyand, JGS made a special request for a weapon the Vietnamese Air Force could handle. It was the 15,000-pound "daisy cutter" bomb that U.S. forces had dropped from C–130s to clear landing zones in the jungle. Twenty-seven bombs were scheduled to be shipped with U.S. training specialists within one week. In mid-April, three bombs arrived in Vietnam, followed by three others in the last two days of the war. A U.S. specialist also arrived to teach Vietnamese airmen how to assemble the fuse and strap the bomb in the aircraft. But the U.S. pilot who was scheduled to fly the aircraft did not arrive. In the face of urgent battle needs and the danger of stocking this kind of

bomb in Tan Son Nhut or in Long Binh, JGS and Air Force Headquarters had to select a good and experienced Vietnamese pilot for the first bomb run. It was scheduled for midnight. The bomb-loaded C-130 took off but returned to land after twenty minutes in the air. Responsible officers at Air Force Headquarters and JGS were gripped with suspense, but the plane landed safely. It was only a minor technical failure. The plane took off again half an hour later.

At 0100 hours that night, the first "big bomb" was dropped on the enemy six kilometers northwest of Xuan Loc. The entire provincial city of Xuan Loc shook as if rocked by an earthquake; all lights went out; and the enemy radio station abruptly stopped transmitting. The headquarters of the NVA 341st Division was struck and wiped out. Our troops were jubilant. "But does the JGS have many of them?" asked Brig. Gen. Le Minh Dao, commander of the 18th Division. News spread among the population that our forces had been equipped with atomic bombs. The Communists later condemned South Vietnam and the United States for using mass-destruction weapons.

These improvisations proved very effective. If nothing else, they helped restore confidence among our troops. But shortages of munitions and fuel and a low serviceability rate allowed the C-130s to fly only two to four sorties per day.

During the 1972 offensive, we also suffered heavy losses, particularly in MR-I. But time and resources allowed JGS to regroup and refit all battered units, infantry, armor, Rangers, and Regional and Popular Forces within one month. And after just one month, our armed forces were ready to retake the lost areas. The time bought on the battlefield depended chiefly on the powerful tactical air power of the U.S. forces, and most of all on the giant B-52 bombers. Without unlimited B-52 support our troops could hardly have held Kontum and An Loc; B-52 strategic bombers were used just like tactical aircraft in close support of ground troops.

In the rear area in 1972, C-5s, C-141s, and C-130s of the U.S. Air Force brought in equipment and materiel day and night, and our refitting effort succeeded admirably. At that time nothing was in short provision, from money to equipment. Our armed forces did not have to worry about shortages; their only concern was how to cope and keep up with the rhythm with which equipment arrived.

The contrast was abysmal this time. In place of the B-52s we had six 15,000-pound bombs; other equipment and materiel had to be improvised. By mid-April 1975, we had used up all stocks for refitting battered units retrieved from MR-I and II. At that late hour, even if the $300 million additional military aid had been approved, it would have been too late.

The Situation in MR-III

After their victories in MRs-I and II, enemy forces began to converge on MR-III with a view to launching a direct attack against Bien Hoa and Saigon, the very heart of the nation. Enemy regular divisions operating in MR-I (e.g., the 324B and 325th) and in MR-II (e.g., the 968th, NT-3, and F-10) headed south. In addition, the divisions which had so far been held in general reserve also deployed into MR-III where they joined forces with those already operating in that area (e.g., the CT-5, CT-7, CT-9, and the newly created 3d Division). In brief, the total enemy force around Bien Hoa and Saigon during the last days amounted to fifteen NVA infantry divisions augmented and supported by a sapper division, an artillery division, some armor brigades, and SAM antiaircraft units.

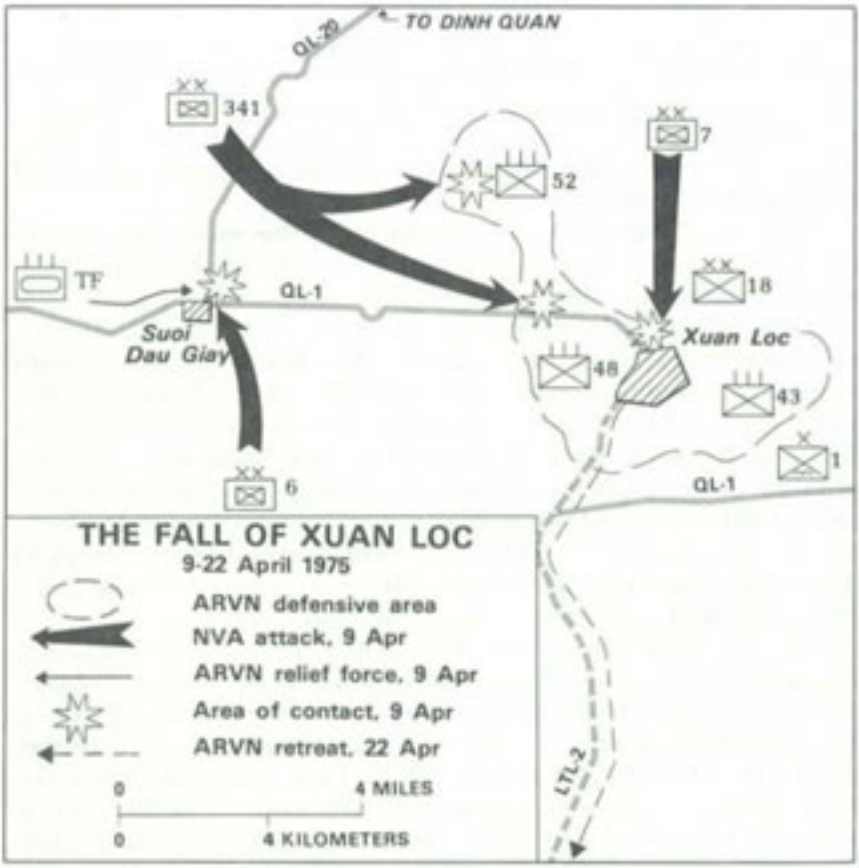
The enemy offensive was conducted on four different fronts, on each by a force equivalent to a three-division army corps. To confront this impressive force, III Corps could muster only three organic divisions; the 5th, 25th, and 18th; the 3d Armor Brigade; three Ranger groups; and a brigade of the Airborne Division. Although other units had been reorganized and refitted after their withdrawal from the north, their combat effectiveness was much less than before. It would certainly take more time and much more equipment to make them combat effective again. The 2d Division, which had suffered the fewest casualties, was refitted in a very short time and deployed to Phan Rang only to be disrupted again when that city was overrun. By this time, the 3d and 23d Divisions were also entirely destroyed and no longer existed as such. The 22d Division, which had lost about 40 percent of its strength, was refitted in one week and then deployed to Long An with two regiments to reinforce the southwestern flank of MR-III. About 2,000 Rangers from MR-I and -II were organized in one group, refitted in haste, and deployed to MR-IV at My Tho. The Airborne Division, which had suffered tremendous losses at Phan Rang and Khanh Duong, was now only 50

percent strong, with two brigades. The Marine Division had about 6,000 troops remaining. They were quickly reorganized into two brigades and attached to III Corps as reinforcement. In general, after the loss of MR–I and MR–II, total strength was reduced by about 50 percent.

The 18th Infantry Division was responsible for the Long Khanh (Xuan Loc) front, and its tasks included reoccupying Dinh Quan District Town on National Route 20, reestablishing normal traffic on National Route 1 between Xuan Loc and Binh Tuy, and protecting the northern perimeter of the vital logistical base of Long Binh, National Route 15, and the Bien Hoa Air Base. During the enemy attack against Xuan Loc, the 18th Division controlled the following forces: its own three regiments, the 43d, 48th and 52d, augmented by the 8th regiment of the 5th Division; the 3d Armor Brigade (two M–41/M–113 squadrons and one M–48 squadron), two Ranger battalions and two artillery battalions (105-mm. and 155-mm.), all organized into three task forces, the 316th, 318th, and 322d; the 81st Airborne Ranger Group, and the 1st Airborne Brigade (three infantry battalions and one 105-mm. battalion); and Regional Force and Popular Force forces organic to Long Khanh Sector, about four battalions. The 4th Air Division provided tactical air support.

The Long Khanh front was far more active than Tay Ninh and Binh Duong. On 9 April, the NVA 341st and 3d Divisions established blocking positions at the Suoi Dau Giay intersection which connected National Route 20 with the provincial city of Xuan Loc (*Map 10*) and heavily shelled the Bien Hoa Air Base, the Headquarters of III Corps, and the Long Binh logistical base. Later in the battle, the 341st and 3d Divisions were augmented by another division, the CT–7, thus making up a corps-size force of three divisions trying to take Xuan Loc. After blocking National Route 20 at Suoi Dau Giay, the enemy launched repeated attacks against the 52d Regiment defending the northwestern perimeter of the city. The 52d Regiment suffered heavy losses. At the same time the enemy effectively interdicted an armor task force sent to reinforce Xuan Loc.

After a week-long battle, National Route 20 remained blocked. As a result, III Corps had to request reinforcement, and the 1st Airborne Brigade was helilifted into Xuan Loc. In the meantime, helicopter resupply for the 18th Division was also augmented, and the division succeeded in enlarging the



MAP 10

defense perimeter of the city. The enemy, with augmented forces, attacked the 1st Airborne Brigade south of the city. The paratroopers fought most valiantly and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy who withdrew eastward. The airborne brigade pursued and badly mauled the enemy. In addition, tactical air and other bombing sorties flown by the VNAF destroyed his command post, and the southeastern perimeter of Xuan Loc became quiet for a few days.

But on the northwestern perimeter, after a forty-eight hour lull, the enemy resumed his push into the city and despite heavy losses managed to infiltrate some elements who immediately occupied the seminary area, the cathedral, and the diocesan office. The 18th Division reacted swiftly and successfully

and took over twenty enemy prisoners. Most of the prisoners were about seventeen years old and declared they were newly recruited conscripts introduced into the battle area just three days earlier. They did not know the terrain and were afraid of the fighting and of the artillery. After penetrating the city, they hid in the sewers and did not fire any of their seventy-round basic ammunition load.

After many unsuccessful attacks from the north and south, the enemy finally launched a new wave of attacks against the 48th Regiment on the western flank. Supported by tanks, the attacking troops broke through the line of defense, and communications were lost between the 18th Division and the 48th Regiment command post, although two of its battalions still maintained contact with the division. III Corps could not clear National Route 1 between Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc, and the number of helicopters available for resupplying the 18th Division in the city and for medical evacuation continued to dwindle. It was feared the 18th Division might become bogged down and eventually destroyed. Therefore, with JGS approval, III Corps finally decided to evacuate Xuan Loc.

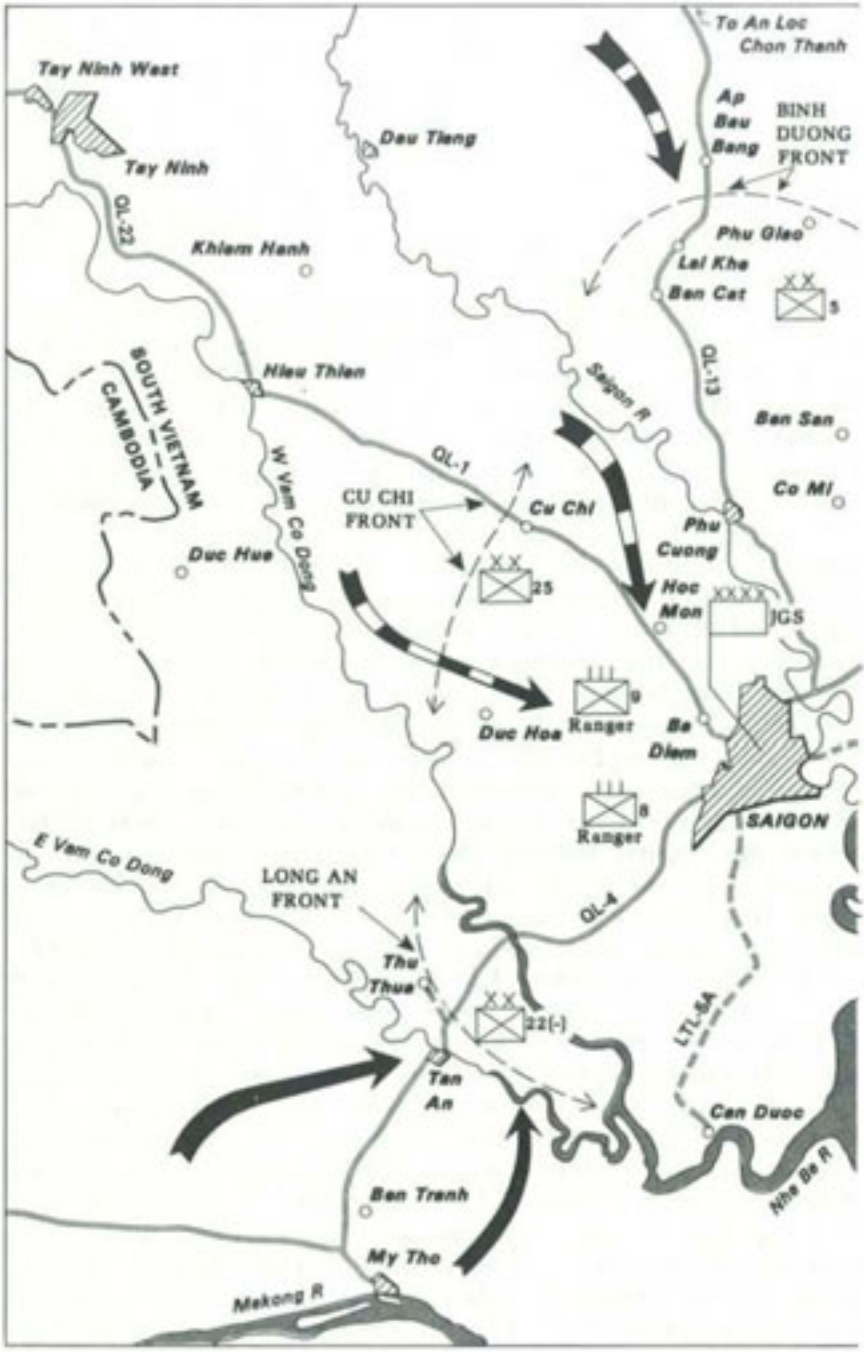
On 23 April the entire 18th Division, the 1st Airborne Brigade, and Regional Force and Popular Force elements extricated themselves from the city by a well-executed retreat along Interprovincial Route 2. This withdrawal succeeded admirably thanks to what Brig. Gen. Le Minh Dao, commander of the 18th Division, called "surprise and diversion." The movement was well conceived and well coordinated; all troops and artillery pieces were withdrawn without significant losses. However, the province chief of Long Khanh, Colonel Phuc, was fatally wounded by a B–40 rocket fired at his jeep. At 1800 hours the same day, the 18th Division made its way by trucks from Long Le to Long Binh base. Here it took a three-day rest and refitted before deploying again to defend the southeastern area of Bien Hoa. The 1st Airborne Brigade, meanwhile, was to stay in Phuoc Tuy Province to protect the access to Vung Tau.

After more than two weeks of fierce fighting, the 18th Division had suffered more than 30 percent casualties. Its 52d Regiment, almost destroyed, had to be completely reorganized and refitted. The losses were most serious since they included a great number of experienced and good commanders. The Regional Force and Popular Force units, however, suffered the heaviest casualties and were deemed no longer combat effective. Only the 1st Airborne Brigade incurred light casualties.

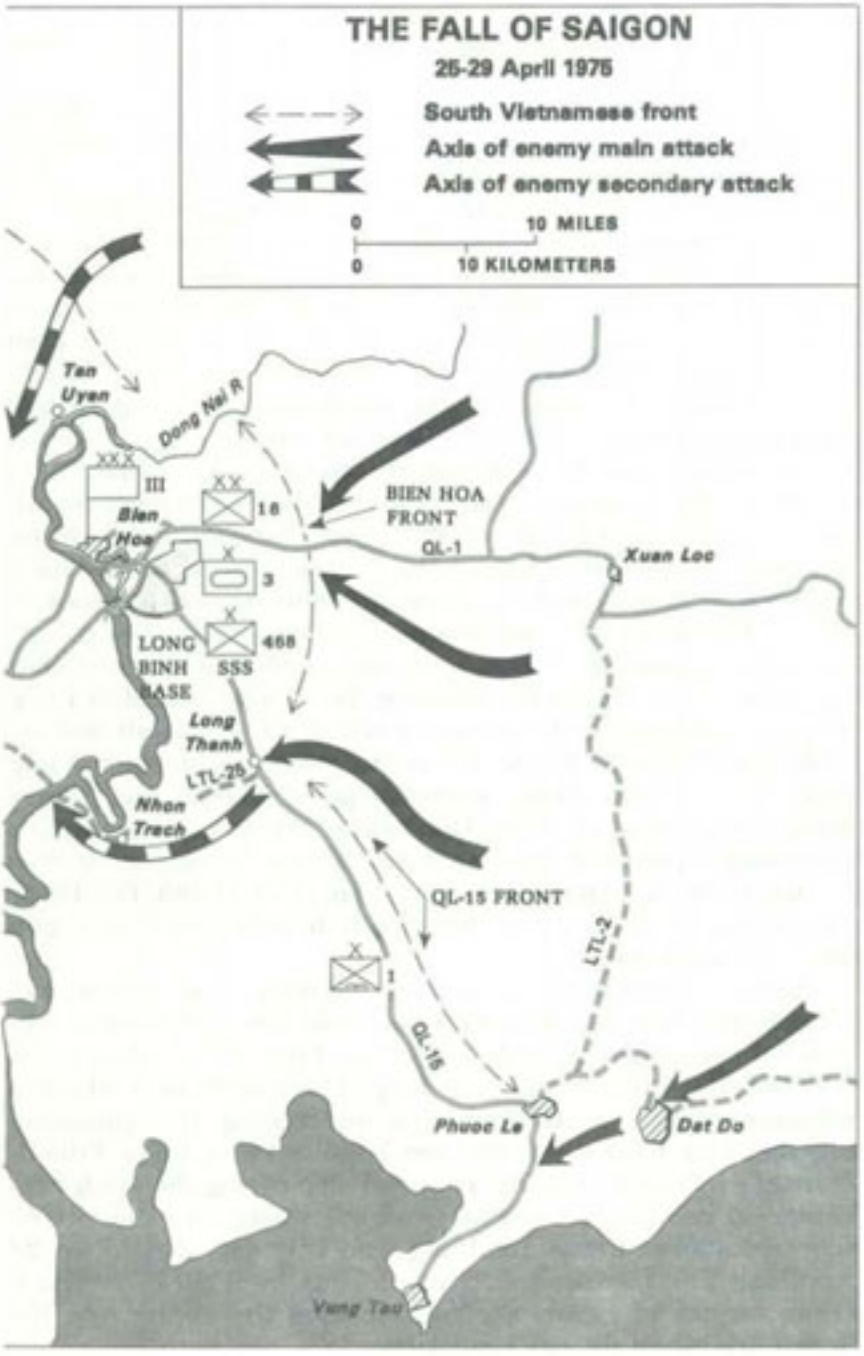
During the battle, air support was most effective. Tactical air sorties and CBU bombing missions broke up repeated enemy attacks; in particular, the CBU-55s and "big bombs" played havoc in the enemy ranks. At the very least, an entire enemy regiment was nearly wiped out. Refugees who later made their way through Xuan Loc reported having seen hundreds of enemy corpses scattered on the battleground, complete with weapons and battle gear; several of these bodies bore no marks of wounds.

The evacuation of Xuan Loc having been successfully completed, III Corps began consolidating its forces and prepared a plan which was submitted to JGS for the defense of the remaining MR-III territory and the Capital Military District. As conceived by the III Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, the plan called for organizing five major resistance centers. These centers were to extend their defense areas outward beyond the effective range of enemy 130-mm. guns; they were tantamount to five different fronts so connected as to form an arc enveloping the entire area west, north, and east of Saigon: the Cu Chi front to the northwest, defended by the 25th Division; the Binh Duong front to the north, defended by the 5th Division; the Bien Hoa front to the northeast, defended by the 18th Division; the Vung Tau and QL-15 (National Route 15) front, defended by the 1st Airborne Brigade, one battalion of the 3d Division, armor elements, and Regional and Popular Forces organic to the sector involved; the Long An front for which the Capital Military District (CMD) Command was responsible (it had the reconstituted remnants of the 22d Division). In particular, National Route 15 was to be kept open as the final retreat route toward the sea if need be (*Map 11*).

As field commander, Lt. Gen. Toan was delegated full power of decision, and he was to implement the plan with the full support of JGS. In a first move on 22 April, he withdrew the 25th Division from Tay Ninh, leaving the defense of this city to Ranger and territorial forces. The 25th Division fell back to Cu Chi where it established a line of defense covering Cu Chi and the western flank of CMD beyond the latter's own defense perimeter. The 18th Division, after three days of rest at Long Binh, took up positions on a line covering the eastern part of Bien Hoa, thus releasing the 3d Armor Brigade and the 468th Marine Brigade for the defense of the southern perimeter of Long Binh base. The 1st Airborne Brigade, which had fallen back from Xuan Loc, detailed one of its battalions for


To An Loc
Chon Thanh
Tay Ninh West
Tay Ninh
QL-22
Khiem Hanh
Deu Tieng
Ap Bau Bang
BINH DUONG FRONT
Phu Giao
Lai Khe
Ben Cat
5
QL-13
Ben San
Co Mi
Saigon R
Hieu Thien
SOUTH VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
W Vam Co Dong
QL-1
CU CHI FRONT
Cu Chi
Phu Cuong
Duc Hue
25
Hoc Mon
XXXX
JGS
Duc Hoa
9
Ranger
Ba Diem
8
Ranger
SAIGON
E Vam Co Dong
LONG AN FRONT
QL-4
Thu Thua
22[-]
LTL-6A
Tan An
Can Duoc
Nha Be R
Ben Tranh
My Tho
Mekong R

MAP 11


THE FALL OF SAIGON
25-29 April 1975
South Vietnamese front
Axis of enemy main attack
Axis of enemy secondary attack
0 10 MILES
0 10 KILOMETERS
Tan Uyen
Dong Nai R.
XXX
III
Bien Hoa
XX
18
BIEN HOA FRONT
QL-1
Xuan Loc
X
3
X
468
LONG BINH BASE
SSS
Long Thanh
LTL-25
Nhon Trach
QL-15 FRONT
X
1
LTL-2
QL-15
Phuoc Le
Dat Do
Vung Tau

the defense of Phuoc Tuy Sector while it deployed for the protection of National Route 15 and stood ready to intervene in Vung Tau if necessary.

After the successive evacuations of An Loc, Chon Thanh, and Xuan Loc, enemy pressure increased substantially in several directions pointing toward Saigon. National Route 22 connecting Cu Chi with Tay Ninh was interdicted at several places. Convoys moving toward Tay Ninh for the supply of that city were frequently ambushed. At the same time, the enemy stepped up shelling of Bien Hoa by rockets and 130-mm. guns and openly moved troops toward the city from north of Binh Duong, War Zone D, and the Boi Loi–Ho Bo base area. Intelligence reports indicated that the enemy was pressing toward Saigon from many directions. Each advancing corps included two or three main force divisions supported by artillery and armor. In the meantime, the friendly military situation deteriorated rapidly in the wake of President Thieu's resignation on 21 April 1975. (See Chapter 9.) Profiting from the political upheaval in Saigon and the general confusion and low morale among the population and troops, the enemy launched an all-out effort against Bien Hoa from the south and the southeast on 26 April. He began by attacking the Armor School at Long Thanh, overrunning the district town of Long Thanh and interdicting National Route 15 connecting Saigon with Vung Tau. At the same time, enemy sappers seized the railway bridge southwest of Bien Hoa while his guns and rockets unceasingly pounded the air base. Enemy troops were now closing in on the munition depot complex of Thanh Tuy Ha in an attempt to destroy this depot and directly threaten Saigon from the southeast.

Almost simultaneously, enemy infantry and armor had pushed into the Dat Do area after Binh Tuy had been evacuated on the same day with Xuan Loc. From there, the enemy attacked and overran the Van Kiep Training Center where a battalion of the 3d Division was undergoing reorganization together with Regional Force and Popular Force units. Friendly troops fell back to Vung Tau after destroying the Rach Hao Bridge to prevent the enemy from advancing into the city by way of National Route 15. Vung Tau City was shelled on 28 April and with increased intensity during the night of 29 April. Other targets of enemy shelling included the airport and the Signal School on the city's outskirts.

During early March 1975, the enemy attempted to seize the Ba Den Mountain and the villages west of Tay Ninh to widen his infiltration corridor into the areas of Ho Bo, Khiem Hanh, and Hieu Thien. On the Khiem Hanh–Hieu Thien front in particular, enemy forces met with vigorous reactions by the 3d Armor Brigade and the 25th Division and suffered casualties by the hundreds. Nonetheless, the enemy persisted, and after overrunning the district town of Dau Tieng in Binh Duong Province, he crossed the river and brought his armor and artillery into the Ho Bo–Boi Loi areas, thereby creating enormous pressure directly on the Capital Military District.

After redeploying from Tay Ninh City to Cu Chi and organizing a defense line there, the 25th Division repeatedly battled with enemy forces in the Duc Hoa–Duc Hue and Hieu Thien areas. Communication lines between Duc Hue and Hau Nghia Provincial City (Duc Hoa) and between Hieu Thien and Cu Chi were interdicted by enemy blocking positions, resulting in several skirmishes in which the 25th Division tried both to clear the roads and to block the enemy push toward Saigon. However, enemy troops succeeded in penetrating into the Ba Diem–Hoc Mon area and were poised to cut the 25th Division's retreat route toward the capital and launch direct attacks against Saigon. During the day of 27 April and the night of 28 April, Cu Chi was the target of continuous bombardment by rockets and artillery. Damage was heavy. In particular, a supply convoy moving from Cu Chi to Hieu Thien was ambushed and severely mauled. Forty-five trucks were burned. In general, however, fighting in the 25th Division's area of responsibility was much less intense than the fighting on the Bien Hoa front.

Another enemy effort during the final phase involved the areas of Phu Giao, Tan Uyen, and Co Mi, southeast of Binh Duong Province, Regional Force and Popular Force outposts were constantly attacked and overrun. Of particular note were the battles fought in the area north and northeast of Ben San where the 5th Division opposed the NVA CT-7 Division. The enemy design was to push into the eastern area of Binh Duong and the area northwest of Bien Hoa, but vigorous counterattacks by the 5th Division caused him sizable losses and his attempt was completely thwarted.

No sooner had the 5th Division stopped the enemy advance toward the east of Binh Duong than it had to confront other enemy attacks from Chon Thanh–An Loc. After safely extricating themselves from An Loc, four Ranger battalions and Re-

gional Force and Popular Force units of the Chon Thanh District fought violent skirmishes with the enemy south of Chon Thanh. The enemy attacked with preplanned artillery fire and armor-infantry assaults, coordinated with other attacks against 5th Division units attempting to advance toward Chon Thanh from Bau Bang on National Route 13. But with effective support of the air force, the Rangers at Chon Thanh inflicted heavy losses: more than three hundred enemy troops killed and fourteen tanks destroyed in two days of continuous fighting. However, the enemy did not break contact; his troops still clung to the southeastern part of Chon Thanh District in a determined effort to destroy the Rangers and sever their retreat route toward Lai Khe. Yet the Rangers managed to fall back to Lai Khe without significant losses; they even brought back all their wounded although they had to leave behind the bodies of twenty comrades who had been killed in action. The friendly forces withdrawn from An Loc and Chon Thanh totaled eight battalions, six Ranger and two Regional Force, all under the command of Col. Nguyen Thanh Chuan. Together with the entire staff of the sector, they fell back to Lai Khe almost intact, still retaining 90 percent of their strength. All artillery pieces of two 105-mm. battalions were successfully helilifted to Lai Khe, but four 155-mm. howitzers and over 10,000 artillery rounds had to be destroyed on the spot before the retreat.

The Situation in MR-IV

In contrast with the other three military regions, the situation in MR-IV was relatively quiet except for constant but indecisive battling between the ARVN 9th Division and the NVA CT-5 Division in the area straddling the Cambodian border where Kien Tuong Province adjoins Svay Rieng. Enemy activities were largely confined to local actions against Regional Force and Popular Force outposts, particularly in the provinces of Chuong Thien and Kien Giang. But as of mid-March 1975 and continuing into the early part of April enemy harassment suddenly increased in cases and intensity. Most actions were now directed against logistical installations and the Regional Force units manning outposts along National Route 4, the main artery connecting the Mekong Delta with Saigon.

After a long time spent in replacing earlier losses and refitting, the NVA CT-5 Division moved into MR-IV in the

area southwest of Tan An and attacked the district town of Thu Thua, defended by Regional Force and Popular Force units. (*See Map 11.*) The enemy design was, once having seized Thu Thua, to move into a position to interdict National Route 4 between Tan An and Phu Lam on the outskirts of Saigon and prevent the ARVN 7th Division from reinforcing Saigon. But this attempt was defeated; the defending forces of Thu Thua determinedly drove back enemy forces and inflicted heavy losses. Another enemy effort was directed against the district town of Ben Tranh, but here again the attack was broken up by the combined efforts of the defending 7th and 9th Divisions. After a day of fighting, the enemy was forced to break contact, leaving behind nearly two hundred dead and hundreds of weapons, including artillery and antiaircraft guns. About twenty enemy troops were taken prisoner. Other enemy blocking positions set up south of Tan An and in the Ben Tranh area were completely cleared. As a result, normal traffic resumed on National Route 4 from Saigon to My Tho and beyond.

Having penetrated into the remote districts of the Upper and Lower U Minh areas, the enemy succeeded in keeping his supply line open from the border area of Ha Tien into Kien Giang and Chuong Thien Provinces. Sharply increased infiltration of troops, weapons, and supplies permitted the activation of a new division, the NVA 8th Division which also contained territorial and independent units formerly under the control of the enemy's 3d MR. The NVA 8th Division launched an attack against the Can Tho defense perimeter in late March 1975. This was a two-pronged attack directed against the city of Can Tho, seat of IV Corps Headquarters, and against the Cai Von Training Center and the district town of Binh Minh of Vinh Long Province. In addition, the enemy also established blocking positions at Ba Cang, the usual sensitive spot between Can Tho and Vinh Long. The ARVN 21st Division and its armor troops repelled the attack at the outer perimeter of Can Tho and inflicted over three hundred casualties and captured numerous weapons. The attack against Cai Von and Binh Minh was also quickly defeated, and only forty-eight hours later, all blocking positions at Ba Cang had been eliminated.

In brief, the main enemy effort in MR-IV was an attempt to interdict National Route 4, severing communication between Saigon and Can Tho, and to protect his infiltration corridor from the Parrot's Beak. This was apparently a secondary effort

to support his principal attack in MR-III which, of course, contained Saigon, the final objective of the war. During the final weeks all enemy independent regiments in MR-IV were grouped into new divisions, but they existed largely in name and on paper, not in combat effectiveness. This move was mostly political and was made for its psychological effects.

In contrast to his large-scale conventional military operations in other parts of the country, the enemy's warfare in the Mekong Delta remained essentially guerrilla, seeking to undermine our government infrastructure and gain a measure of control over the bountiful economic resources of the region. Even when the fighting reached its peak in MRs-I, II, and III during the first quarter of 1975, MR-IV enjoyed relative peace and quiet. Until the time the surrender order was given on 30 April 1975, no district town was ever seized or even temporarily controlled by the enemy.

CHAPTER 9

The Last Days

The loss of Ban Me Thuot and the failure of the Kontum-Pleiku withdrawal caused a significant political upheaval in Saigon. Elements of the underground political opposition came into the open and held meetings to voice their antigovernment feelings. The government moved in and on 27 March 1975, arrested a number of people suspected of plotting a coup. About the same time, President Thieu instructed his prime minister to form a new cabinet. Given the deteriorating situation, probings and consultations took a long time and ran into insurmountable obstacles. All political personalities who were willing to join the cabinet demanded impossible conditions. Opposition political circles all held President Thieu personally responsible for the tragic military situation. They believed he was no longer able to lead the country out of its predicament. After more than a week of unfruitful consultations, Prime Minister Khiem finally resigned. He gave as the reason for his action the need to allow broader cabinet participation by other political elements.

On 2 April 1975, during an ordinary session, the Senate adopted a resolution with forty-two votes for and about ten against, holding President Thieu responsible for the deteriorating situation and asking him to take immediate steps to form a broader cabinet. Rumors spread at once about a possible coalition government which Mr. Tran Van Lam and Mr. Tran Van Do were willing to lead. But nothing materialized; presumably the idea was rejected by President Thieu.

Three days later, on 5 April, Mr. Nguyen Ba Can, Speaker of the House of Representatives, was designated as the new prime minister. On 8 April, a South Vietnamese F-5 bomber bombed the Independence Palace. This was the first time the new palace had been bombed. The old palace was attacked in 1960 by an air force A-1 Skyraider during Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem's presidency. Rumors again circulated that the fate of South Vietnam had been decided and that the great powers had agreed to give North Vietnam a free hand in unifying the

country. It was speculated that to save what we could the government should send a plenipotentiary to Paris and ask the French government to act as official intermediary in negotiations about to be conducted with the Communists. The deadline for such a move was rumored to be 7 April, later extended to 10 April. Deputy Prime Minister Tran Van Don, back from a liaison mission to the United States, reported the same thing to the president on 5 April. But President Thieu appeared incredulous.

During all this time, our forces had been retreating from the north, and the enemy was approaching Saigon. On 23 April Xuan Loc was evacuated. The military situation deteriorated with every passing day although JGS made every effort to provide support for the field command and to reorganize and refit all battered units for immediate deployment.

Demands that President Thieu should resign and transfer his powers at once to General Duong Van Minh were resurrected in earnest. A coalition government led by General Minh, it was contended, stood a good chance of being accepted by the Communists; if so, more bloodshed could be averted. On Monday 21 April during a meeting at the Independence Palace, President Thieu announced his decision to step down. He insinuated that the United States wanted his resignation and that whether or not he consented, certain generals would press for it. He said he hoped that his move would help bring true peace to the country and military aid for the armed forces. As required by the constitution, he was prepared to transfer the presidency to Vice President Tran Van Huong. Finally, he asked the armed forces and the national police to fully support the new president.

In the evening of 21 April 1975, the televised transfer ceremony took place at the Independence Palace. In his farewell speech intended for the government and the population, President Thieu made a detailed analysis of the situation and the reasons for his resignation. For the first time, he admitted having ordered the evacuation of Pleiku and Kontum because, he said, it was the inevitable course of action to take in the face of the deteriorating situation; but he also insisted that the generals had failed him.

The question most asked then and now concerns possible pressures behind President Thieu's resignation. Was it a decision he had made entirely on his own? In his testimony before the Investigations Subcommittee of the House International

Relations Committee on 27 January 1976, Ambassador Graham Martin affirmed that he played no significant role in persuading Mr. Thieu to resign. But he also confirmed that during a conversation with President Thieu on 20 April he gave the president intelligence gathered by USDAO and CIA concerning the balance of forces at the time.

I said it was my conclusion that almost all of his generals, although they would continue to fight, believed defense was hopeless unless a respite could be gained through the beginning of the negotiating process.

And they did not believe such a process could begin unless the President left or took steps to see that the process began immediately.

I said it was my feelings [*sic*] that if he did not move soon, his generals would ask him to go.[1]

Ambassador Martin emphasized the personal character of his opinions. He was speaking to President Thieu, as he put it, "only as an individual, not for the President or the Secretary of State, or even as the American Ambassador."

As to the "generals would ask him to go" in Ambassador Martin's opinion, I am certain that on our side there was absolutely no pressure from any general to force him to resign. But there could have been some misreading of one event. After retired Lt. Gen. Tran Van Don was appointed minister of defense in Mr. Can's cabinet, he summoned all available general officers for a meeting at JGS. This was in essence an introduction and familiarization talk, but to outsiders it could well appear to have been something else, perhaps even a collusion for political purposes. But it was an open meeting attended by a broad audience, and there could be no misunderstanding as to its nature or intent.

After President Huong took over, he immediately went about imposing certain forceful measures, among which was a formal ban on all overseas travel. Servicemen and civil servants who had fled to foreign countries were ordered to return within thirty days; if they failed to do so, their citizenship would be revoked, and all their belongings confiscated. The only people that the new government would allow to go over-

[1] "The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency, 1975," Part III—Vietnam Evacuation: Testimony of Ambassador Graham A. Martin (Hearing before the Special Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 94th Congress, Second Session, 27 January 1976); pp. 546–47. For full testimony on the conversation, see Appendix B.

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seas were the old and the ill; they were to be permitted to seek treatment out of the country after posting a large bond. The money from those bonds would be used for relief of combatants at home.

President Huong was intent on seeking General Duong Van Minh's participation in the government. He extended an invitation which was quickly declined by General Minh who demanded large powers for himself. General Minh had long been advised by a leftist military and political staff. His ambition had always been to become president himself, and he had hoped to be handed the presidency by President Thieu. Although rumors persisted that the Communists were willing to negotiate a political arrangement only with General Minh, Mr. Huong, a believer in constitutional government, did not choose to transfer his presidency to General Minh without the consent of the Congress.

In the meantime, the military situation became increasingly bad. In the afternoon of Sunday 27 April 1975, the defense minister, Mr. Tran Van Don, led a military delegation composed of general officers of JGS and the commander of CMD in an appearance before a meeting of both houses of Congress. By 1930, 138 senators and representatives were present. Mr. Don summarized the military situation: Saigon was now surrounded by fifteen enemy divisions under the control of three army corps. The Saigon–Vung Tau Highway had been cut, and enemy troops were advancing toward the Long Binh base. At 2020 the General Assembly voted (136–2) to hand over the presidency to General Duong Van Minh. The next day, Monday 28 April 1975 at 1730, General Minh was sworn in as president.[2]

There had been earlier rumors of a "Duong Van Minh solution." During the early part of April, the French Embassy and the French ambassador, Mr. Merillon, in particular, worked feverishly for a political solution to the war: an arrangement between a government led by General Minh and the Communists. On the American side, the State Department

[2]Before President Huong stepped down, he issued a decree relieving me of my position as chairman of the Joint General Staff. It was then up to the new president to appoint my replacement. I designated Lt. Gen. Don Van Khuyen, my chief of staff, as acting chairman of the JGS, and left Vietnam on Monday afternoon, 28 April 1975, for the 7th Fleet.

was doubtful but had some reason to hope the Communists would accept a negotiated settlement.[3]

General Minh was much more confident. According to a source close to him, General Minh based his conviction of an eventual political arrangement with the Communists on these facts as he saw them: (1) The Communists did not have a solid infrastructure in Saigon and its surrounding areas. Negotiations would allow the Communists more time for consolidating their infrastructure. (2) The Provisional Revolutionary government was made up entirely of Southerners who did not want to be dominated by North Vietnam. They preferred a "two Vietnams" solution. (3) It was believed that Communist China would prefer a divided Vietnam. Once unified, Vietnam might become a threat to its southeastern border. (4) General Minh believed that the French Ambassador could arrange for fruitful negotiations. Finally he concluded: "The Communists know that the people of South Vietnam don't like Communism. Since it is impossible for the Communists to kill them all, it is to their advantage to negotiate." [4]

In addition, on one occasion when he met with me after 21 April 1975, General Minh boasted he used to keep in constant touch with the other side by radio. It was a fact he could not disclose before for fear of arrest, but it was all right to tell me now. So he firmly believed that a government with him at the head would be acceptable to the Communists and that they would be willing to negotiate with him for a political solution. This was also why a large number of military officers and civil servants of all ranks elected to stay behind to work for the new government. With the hope they could play some role in the new administration, some people even came back to Saigon with their families after living in foreign countries for several years. As it turned out, North Vietnam had changed its mind. I understand that by late March, the U.S. Embassy in Saigon had received reports from one of its agents who had penetrated the Communist Central Office for South Vietnam that North Vietnam was inclined toward a military victory rather than a political arrangement.

[3] In his testimony ("The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency, 1975," Part III—Vietnam Evacuation, pp. 608-9), Ambassador Martin later shed some light on efforts to achieve a political solution to the war. See Appendix C.

[4] This information was obtained during my interview of Maj. Gen. Charles J. Timmes, U.S. Army (Ret.).

General Minh waited in vain for a favorable word from the other side but nothing came. The response of the Communists was ominous: they bombed Tan Son Nhut Air Base the moment he was sworn in and shelled Saigon barely twelve hours later. Still a last-ditch effort was attempted by General Minh's people to contact the Communists through their representative at Tan Son Nhut. But the answer was evasive and intimidating. It was then that General Minh realized his hope was gone. He gave in to all Communist demands.

General Minh personally admitted he had been duped by the Communists. He advised his closest aide and his son-in-law, Colonel Nguyen Hong Dai, to leave Vietnam. But General Minh was not the only one to be duped. Several other credulous Vietnamese were unable to leave because it was too late by the time they realized what had happened. Among those who elected to stay, however, a few military officers, civil servants, and artists, writers, etc., were treated well and given good positions in the new Communist government because of their past connections and service to the underground Communists. And so we came to realize how deficient our security services, both military and civilian, had been in their effort to prevent penetration by Communists and their agents.

The Evacuation

The people who advocated appeasement and coalition with the Communists believed that an immediate cease-fire—certainly within twenty-four hours—would follow General Minh's inauguration. But for others who had never compromised with the Communists and for whom a coalition meant certain death, the inauguration was a signal to pack and leave. For these people, the die-hard anti-Communists, a chapter of Vietnamese history had closed. It was a chapter written with the blood shed by hundreds of thousands of soldiers for a cause in which they believed. Even after President Thieu had stepped down, most of these people—among them the military officers and civil servants who had served under his regime and leadership—still hoped to carry on the struggle. They were certainly not Thieu's followers; they simply wanted to serve the cause for which they had been fighting. Now that an entirely new chapter had begun, they felt this was no place for them; it was better to leave it to those who believed they could compromise with the Communists.

The plan for evacuating American personnel and selected Vietnamese citizens must have been thoroughly worked out by the U.S. Embassy in Saigon and based on lessons learned from the disorder and difficulties encountered during the evacuation of refugees from Da Nang and Nha Trang. Any contingency plans which existed were entirely airtight and were carefully kept that way. On the Vietnamese side, neither the civilian government nor the military knew anything officially about these plans. The details remained secret. No one was told, for instance, how many people the U.S. Embassy planned to evacuate, what means were available to transport them, what procedures would be employed, or where or when the evacuees were supposed to meet for the journey. The military had only personal contacts, chiefly with U.S. counterparts who almost without exception advised them to evacuate their families ahead of time.

The dilemma then facing the military was that the ban on overseas travel was still being enforced. If a serviceman were to leave the country, he would become a deserter. Civilians who left would be charged with illegal exit. On the other hand, since the evacuation facilities were not under Vietnamese control, no one knew for certain how many refugees would be accommodated, where the final destination would be, and what formalities or papers were needed. As a result, JGS did not issue any instructions concerning the evacuation. It was understood, however, that the number of evacuees was limited and highly selective. Those who were selected would be contacted by U.S. personnel and given proper guidance. This was in general what we on the Vietnamese side learned of the American plans.

Only later did it become known that the contingency plan for the evacuation had been worked out by the U.S. Embassy and DAO with the assistance of CINCPAC. The plan, code named Talon Vise, was constantly updated to reflect requirements and assets available. It also envisaged the possibility of employing aircraft and a U.S. ground force for protection and security. The main concern, as it was learned from Ambassador Martin's later testimony, was to avoid chaos-causing frenzy. The goal was to extricate all American citizens, Vietnamese nationals related to them, and those Vietnamese citizens whose lives would be endangered if they stayed behind. The total number of evacuees falling into the last category was

ultimately fixed at 50,000 on 25 April, as Ambassador Martin later testified.

Until 14 April, the Embassy had parole authority, that is, authority to waive issuance of U.S. visas only for the 2,000 orphans being airlifted to the United States.

On 14 April, the Embassy received parole authority for alien relatives, physically present in Vietnam, of U.S. citizens who were physically present in Vietnam.

On 19 April, the Embassy received parole authority for alien relatives of U.S. citizens and Vietnamese permanent residents not physically present in Vietnam if the relatives were beneficiaries of visa petitions approved by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

On 25 April, the Embassy finally received parole authority for additional categories of relatives and up to 50,000 high-risk Vietnamese. This was four days before the final departure from Vietnam.[8]

This is what actually happened: "High-risk" Vietnamese contacted were to furnish a list of relatives whom they wanted to have evacuated. After approval by the U.S. Embassy or DAO, a rendezvous point was given, and evacuees were told to bring along only a hand bag per person for valuable objects or articles of utmost necessity. At the rendezvous point the evacuees were picked up by a bus and driven to the DAO compound. Here they were assigned to large waiting rooms. The planes used in the evacuation airlift, large cargo types such as C–141s or C–130s, would usually arrive late in the afternoon and park at the end of the runways at Tan Son Nhut, far from the airport facilities. When evening came, usually at about 1900 or 2000, well-screened buses would take those evacuees whose names appeared on a manifest, and who had been waiting in the DAO compound, directly to the planes. The police and military security personnel knew about these movements but did not interfere since their own families were among the evacuees. So the evacuees simply boarded the waiting planes without going through the formalities normally required by the Ministry of Interior and without any control whatsoever by airport authorities. In other words, as far as the government was concerned, it was an illegal exit. The airlift would continue throughout the night and stop by early morning only to be resumed in the evening. It went well until 28 April and was only suspended for good as of 29 April when

[8] Ambassador Martin's testimony, p. 592.

Tan Son Nhut Air Base was rendered unusable by heavy shelling and bombing.

During the two last days, 29 and 30 April, the U.S. Embassy managed to evacuate about 11,600 additional people by helicopter and by barge. Also, a number of fishermen living in coastal areas and those refugees who made their way out by ships or boats were picked up by the U.S. 7th Fleet offshore. Judging from the effectiveness with which the evacuation was carried out, the number of people evacuated could have been much higher if there had been more time and if the circumstances had been different.

But all in all, the evacuation of 130,000 Vietnamese was an admirable feat in itself, comparable in every aspect to a successful military operation. This was a far cry from what had happened at Da Nang, Nha Trang, and even Phnom Penh.

Saigon

By 25 April, the enemy's pressure seemed to be enveloping the entire Capital Military District, and his efforts against Saigon were stepped up from many directions. The territory controlled by our forces was by now largely confined to the area bounded by Bien Hoa in the northeast, Long Thanh in the east, Lai Khe in the north, and Hoc Mon in the northeast. (*See Map 11.*) Enemy advance elements had already made probing attacks on the outskirts of Saigon. During the night of 26 April, sappers simultaneously attacked the Newport Complex, the Bien Hoa Highway Bridge nearby, and the telecommunications terminal complex at Phu Lam. The terminal was damaged but continued to function. The airborne battalion guarding the Independence Palace was deployed to the Newport and quickly routed the enemy. Traffic immediately resumed between Saigon and Bien Hoa.

On the following night, 27 April, all Regional Force and Popular Force outposts along the East Vam Co River in Hau Nghia Province were attacked and overrun, thus exposing the entire western flank of Saigon to enemy penetration and attack. The 5th Division Headquarters at Lai Khe, north of Saigon, was also under attack. The Bien Hoa Air Base to the northeast was heavily shelled; fuel and ordnance blew up and burned fiercely, and base operations were completely disrupted. But all aircraft had evacuated, partly to Tan Son Nhut and partly to Tra Noc in MR-IV. The 3d Air Division, assisted by

U.S. Marines, began destroying all remaining facilities on the base, in particular the overhaul shop, the computer installations, the calibration shop, and several storage areas. The 18th Division defense line at Trang Bom was attacked and penetrated. From Phuoc Le, the 1st Airborne Brigade had to fall back to Vung Tau in the face of an enemy armor and infantry assault. From Long Thanh, enemy armor and infantry advanced along Interprovincial Route 25 toward the district town of Nhon Trach, overrunning Regional Force and Popular Force outposts along the way, and attacked and seized the town in the afternoon of 28 April. The district chief and his troops fell back to the Thanh Tuy Ha ammunition depot for a last-ditch stand and fight. Saigon was thus completely surrounded and now lay within range of the enemy's 130-mm. guns.

At 1800 on 28 April, the depressing inauguration of the new president, General Duong Van Minh, having just ended, three A-37s suddenly attacked Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Antiaircraft weapons opened fire from the Independence Palace and from naval ships docked along Bach Dang Quay. Two F-5As scrambled, but the attacking aircraft flew off. The damage caused by the sudden bombing raid was minimal; one bomb was dropped over the air base, another struck the Hoc Mon area, and another exploded in an open field near the Binh Trieu Bridge. Air Force Headquarters finally confirmed that the three attacking aircraft were flown by Communists and had come from a distant air base under enemy control. Their launch and recovery point was probably Phan Rang because all carried wing-tip fuel tanks. Intelligence reports now warned of a possible second raid at 2100, but the radar warning system was inoperative following the destruction of Bien Hoa Air Base. In retaliation, a "big bomb" sortie was directed against Phan Rang Air Base where the A-37s in all probability had to stop over for refueling if they had come all the way from Da Nang. Our F-5A fighters meanwhile kept constant watch from the air. During the night, III Corps headquarters moved from Bien Hoa to Go Vap where it shared the headquarters of the Armor Command.

From 0400 on 29 April, the JGS compound, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and the Navy headquarters on Bach Dang Quay were shelled intermittently. The JGS compound and Bach Dang Quay sustained only minor damage, but the destruction at Tan Son Nhut Air Base was extensive. Parking areas, fuel dumps,

ammunition depots were all hit. Fires and explosions occurred at several places. The DAO Headquarters (old MACV compound) was also hit but suffered only slight physical damage. Two U.S. Marine guards were fatally wounded. In conjunction with shellings, enemy troops also attacked and broke through the northern defense perimeter of the air base. By 0600 they were all driven back by a newly formed airborne battalion, but about the same time other Communist troops launched attacks at numerous places around the city. The situation at 0700 on 29 April was as follows:

In Long An Province, the 22d Division met with sporadic contacts, but it held firmly.

In Hau Nghia Province (Cu Chi front), the sector headquarters lost contact with III Corps.

In Binh Duong Province, the Lai Khe base was heavily shelled during the night, Ben Cat District Town was under attack, and National Route 13 was interdicted between Phu Cuong, the provincial capital, and Lai Khe. Phu Cuong itself was penetrated by enemy sappers who set up blocking positions at some places.

In Bien Hoa Province, the Tan Uyen District Town was under heavy attack. Police and Popular Force troops broke ranks; the city itself was almost deserted. The Trang Bom defense line had been broken at several places, and the 18th Division had fallen back to south of Long Binh base. The 257th Marine Brigade defending to the north of Long Binh was under attack. Long Binh base continued to be shelled and harassed. The large ammunition depot complex at Thanh Tuy Ha was also shelled and surrounded.

Directly west of Saigon the 8th and 9th Ranger Groups were heavily attacked during the night. Casualties amounted to 50 percent of their strength. The Hoc Mon District Town was under attack, its Regional Force and Popular Force troops had suffered heavy losses. National Route 1 connecting Saigon with Cu Chi was interdicted; traffic was impossible. The Quang Trung Training Center was shelled and attacked throughout the night. At the Go Vap–Hanh Thong Tay logistical complex, Communist troops had surfaced and set up positions north and northeast of the area just as they had done during the 1968 Tet offensive.

In Cholon, the Nhi Thien Duong Bridge had been seized by the enemy, and the Phu Lam telecommunications complex had been shelled and harassed.

At 0900 on 29 April the Tan Son Nhut Air Base was bombarded a second time. Damage was extensive. Aircraft in parking areas, including A-37s and in particular four C-130s already loaded with bombs, were hit and exploded. Fires spread rapidly at every place. The air base was completely out of operation and in disorder. Over 3,000 people who had been there since the day before (28 April) to wait for U.S. evacuation aircraft in the area behind the DAO compound became terrified and frantically fled the base. By 1000 Air Force Headquarters was no longer in control of its personnel. In the air, waves of U.S. helicopters swirled and hovered about tall buildings and in the DAO compound evacuating U.S. personnel. It was hard to distinguish U.S. from South Vietnamese helicopters.

Also at 1000 on 29 April, III Corps reported that the situation was critical. It had lost contact with Hau Nghia Sector Headquarters. The 25th Division continued to clash violently with the enemy and requested more helicopter support. The Trang Bom defense line was totally shattered, and the 18th Division was now battling the enemy south of Long Binh base. In the base itself, disorder prevailed; command and control were no longer possible. The Tan Uyen District Town had been overrun at 0900, and enemy troops were advancing toward Bien Hoa. III Corps was no longer receiving any air support.

It was impossible for the CMD Command to relieve enemy pressure south of Saigon. Its commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, requested troops from JGS to reinforce the southern defense perimeter. Two out of three airborne Ranger companies held in reserve at JGS were immediately released for his use. A Ranger group which was then operating on National Route 4 south of Ben Tranh was called back to Can Duoc District Town on Interprovincial Route 5A at 1200 to be placed under CMD command. But the movement could not be carried out because helicopters were no longer available. Interprovincial Route 5A connecting Cholon with Can Duoc was also interdicted at several places, and it was impossible to dislodge the enemy from the Nhi Thien Duong Bridge.

Meanwhile, the Thanh Tuy Ha ammunition depot was badly hit and disintegrated in violent explosions. Contact with the depot was lost at 1300. Enemy tanks by now had appeared at Cat Lai and were firing at the ammunition unloading pier. Completely surrounded and isolated, left without support and

without reinforcement, the Capital Military District was waiting helplessly to be conquered.

President Minh gave twenty-four hours for all U.S. personnel to leave Vietnam. The evacuation proceeded feverishly throughout the night and was over at 0500 on 30 April. At 1000 on 30 April 1975, President Minh ordered our armed forces to stop fighting. And South Vietnam came under Communist control and no longer existed as a free nation.

CHAPTER 10

Conclusions and Observations

South Vietnam was lost to the Communists. After thirty years of test and trial on the Vietnam battlefield, their kind of war—whether called guerrilla war, revolutionary war, people's war, or war of liberation—finally prevailed. This should be a warning to other countries that more Vietnams are in store for the future. Conquered one by one, non-Communist countries are being gradually reduced in number to the extent that some day, perhaps, there will remain only the United States and three or four other powers surrounded by a much greater number of Communist or Communist-leaning countries. It is a somber prospect that we will probably face in the coming decades if we fail to realize the deficiencies and mistakes of the past and come up with a new line of conduct for the future.

Having read the previous chapters, the thoughtful reader should be able to see for himself some of the reasons for the collapse of South Vietnam. Some causes that this monograph points out, explicitly or implicitly, are, as the author saw them:

(1) South Vietnam had to accept an agreement which was much too disadvantageous to its survival: The Paris Agreement tilted the balance of power to the Communist side and gave North Vietnam a free hand to launch its offensive in 1975.

(2) The pledge given by a U.S. president to react with vigor and which South Vietnam regarded as a national commitment could not be honored by the administration which succeeded him even when Communist violations were blatant.

(3) The unexpected huge slash in U.S. military aid for South Vietnam seriously affected the combat capability and morale of its troops and population.

(4) President Thieu made a strategic decision too late for it to have any chance of success although he acted out of necessity. The withdrawal of II Corps forces was too hasty and disorderly, resulting in the rapid collapse of I Corps and II Corps.

(5) South Vietnamese leaders failed to realize that U.S. policy had shifted toward appeasement and accommodation with the Communists even at the price of reneging on a com-

mitment to help an ally maintain independence. Therefore, they could not adjust to the realities of the post-Agreement period but continued to stake South Vietnam's fate on the elusive and the impossible.

Finally, after many years of continuous war, South Vietnam was approaching political and economic bankruptcy. National unity no longer existed; no one was able to rally the people behind the national cause. Riddled by corruption and sometimes ineptitude and dereliction, the government hardly responded to the needs of a public which had gradually lost confidence in it. Despite rosy plans and projects, the national economy continued its course downward and appeared doomed short of a miracle. Under these conditions, the South Vietnamese social fabric gradually disintegrated, influenced in part by mistrust, divisiveness, uncertainty, and defeatism until the whole nation appeared to some to resemble a rotten fruit ready to fall at the first passing breeze.

Aside from these major causes, there were of course other reasons to which the total failure can be attributed, reasons whose interplay in the areas of politics, economics, military action, and diplomacy can be traced far back in time. At the end of World War II, the American leadership of the free world could hardly be contested. But as far as Vietnam in particular and Southeast Asia in general were concerned U.S. foreign policy shifted many times after 1945, beginning with a virtual absence of policy, then reaching a climax of involvement in a hot anti-Communist confrontation, and finally receding by installments toward accommodation. This change necessarily affected aid policies and the conduct of the war in this part of the world.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt never made up his mind whether to support the French desire to reclaim its Indochina colonies at the end of the war. Nor did the Truman administration have a clear-cut reaction to the conflict that broke out in 1945 and 1946 between the French and the Viet Minh. The U.S. government refused French requests for American planes and ships to transport French troops to Indochina and similarly turned down appeals for American arms to help fight the Viet Minh. But the Truman administration also rebuffed appeals from Ho Chi Minh. In August and September 1945, while his forces were in control of Hanoi, Ho sent a request to President Truman through the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) asking that Vietnam be accorded "the same status as the

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Philippines" for a period of tutelage pending independence. From October 1945 until the following February, Ho Chi Minh wrote at least eight letters to President Truman or his secretary of state formally appealing for U.S. and U.N. intervention against French colonialism. There is no record that any of the appeals were answered. Nonintervention by the United States was tantamount to acceptance of the French.[1]

But even when Vietnam was granted limited independence as an Associated State of the French Union in March 1949 with Bao Dai as its head, the Truman administration did not fully support him, contending he was a weak leader and a puppet of the French. American policy toward Vietnam began to take shape only after Mao Tse-tung became master of China late in 1949. Its aim was then to block further Communist expansion in Asia. So when Russia and Communist China recognized Ho Chi Minh in January 1950, the United States immediately responded by recognizing Bao Dai in February and only three months later declared it would give France economic and military aid to take care of Indochina. From a modest start of $10 million, this aid skyrocketed beyond the $1 billion mark by 1954. The first Indochina war was thus fought with American money piped through French channels.

When the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu and forced to sign the Geneva Accords in 1954, the Eisenhower administration's National Security Council decided that the accords were a disaster and sought to prevent further Communist expansion in Vietnam. The objectives set by the council were "to maintain a friendly non-Communist South Vietnam"—the new South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem—"and to prevent a Communist victory through all-Vietnam elections." The Republic of Vietnam now received direct aid from the United States. Its budding national Army, heretofore equipped and trained by the French, went through a complete reorganization. Professional soldiers, combat experienced but tainted by their French background, were released from service. A whole generation of new recruits and young draftees came into the ranks of the national Army, now called Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The goal was to activate division-size forces under American guidance. American training methods and American equipment were used

[1] The summary of U.S. policy is based on the 1971 *New York Times* version of "The Pentagon Papers."

throughout. To familiarize themselves with new command methods, ARVN officers took a mandatory "Command and Leadership" course. Later these officers also received training in various military schools in the United States.

When elected to office, President John F. Kennedy transformed the limited-risk gamble of the Eisenhower administration into a broad commitment to prevent Communist domination of South Vietnam. But this commitment, although broad, never went beyond active support. It had to wait until the Johnson administration to turn into active participation in the air and ground war, reaching a military peak of 543,500 men in early 1969.

Johnson's successor, President Nixon, immediately reversed the commitment course with Vietnamization, a convenient by-product of his doctrine. Instead of confrontation, Nixon advocated negotiation, and his strategy for peace was based on "three pillars: willingness, strength, and partnership," as he put it. But if a single characteristic mainly distinguished the Nixon Doctrine from other U.S. national security principles since 1945, it was the emphasis that President Nixon now placed "on the role our partners must play in the common defense." Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird was critical of the former administration's policy:

> From a standpoint of American defense policy, a real tragedy of Vietnam is that Vietnamization was not started much earlier than 1969, through a policy of deliberately training and equipping the South Vietnamese forces to fight effectively against North Vietnam as well as to cope with internal security problems caused by Viet Cong activity. Such opportunities existed throughout the 1960's (and not just in Vietnam). Apparently, the opportunities were set aside in favor of decisions to introduce substantial American involvements in all phases of the war.[2]

The basic infantry rifle, AR-15, later called M-16, was a case in point. The AR-15 was tested in Vietnam as early as 1964. The Vietnamese Airborne Brigade considered it an excellent weapon: light, easy to maintain, and accurate. The small cartridge could be carried in greater quantity by the infantryman, and the bullet had great penetrating and devastating power due to its high velocity; in sum, it was a rifle tailored for the Vietnamese soldier and the Vietnamese battle-

[2] "The Nixon Doctrine: From Potential Despair to New Opportunities," speech delivered by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird.

field. However, only a little over two hundred such rifles were brought over for actual use. The M–16 became the basic individual weapon of Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) infantry years later, after the Communists had dramatically demonstrated the superiority of their AK–47s during the Tet offensive of 1968. The same was true of other weapons. Our troops were equipped with M–72 antitank rocket launchers and later with TOW missiles only after the Communists had begun to use their highly effective B–40s and B–41s. And only when Communist T–54 tanks and 130-mm. guns appeared on the battlefield did we receive any M–48 tanks and self-propelled 175-mm. guns. These were only a few examples concerning Army weapons.

Admittedly, dependence on sophisticated weapons and equipment posed an inevitable danger. Prior to 1954, fighting alongside French forces from a country not as rich as the United States, the National Army of Vietnam was trained for and conditioned to a compromise between human and material resources. But as of 1955, with the advent of direct military aid, our armed forces were trained in American tactics and strictly applied them during the years they fought side by side with U.S. forces. They were dubbed "rich man's" tactics because, based on science and technology, they substituted machines for human labor. Instead of marching, our infantry rode in trucks or M113s, and a final assault was always preceded by maximum preparatory fire. When military aid was reduced, our forces plummeted from a state of material abundance to one of privation, and this seriously reduced our combat capabilities and troop morale. During 1974 JGS strove to devise methods to suit the new situation, but it was too late.

What about the Communists? How did they manage with or without aid? The Communists finally conquered South Vietnam with Russian tanks and guns, but at the start of the first Indochina war whatever weapons the Viet Minh happened to have were primarily those left behind by the Japanese or seized from French forces. From scratch, the Viet Minh built an army that grew and matured through privations and hardship. Their war efforts were sustained by the war itself; their tactics, which were essentially "poor man's," substituted human muscle for machinery. In the early years of the war especially, the Communists in South Vietnam also sustained themselves by adhering to the rural population like a mistletoe. They raised huge sums by taxing commodities and local products. In spite of our

control measures, much of our rice and rubber production went into Communist stocks.

But after the Communists took over mainland China and beginning in 1950, the Viet Minh started receiving military aid from both China and Russia. For all its effectiveness, the foreign aid that North Vietnam received from China, Russia, and other Communist countries was discreet and kept in low profile as long as possible. The North Vietnamese Army had many Russian and Chinese advisers within its ranks, but the Communists never admitted this. In addition, the Communists always made a point of educating their troops and the population to rely only on themselves. Although of primary importance, aid was never credited for the victories which could hardly have been won without it.

On the South Vietnamese side, the conduct of the war was largely defensive. Our goal was to contain Communist expansion within the national territory, and there was no question of an offensive to carry the war into North Vietnam. Only on two occasions did we cross the border and strike into enemy bases in Cambodia and Laos, but even these operations were merely part of the defense and were never prescribed by a continued and deliberate strategy. The primary mission of our armed forces was always to pacify (that is, control) the national territory, hence a twofold strategy: pacification in populated areas and search-and-destroy operations to eliminate major Communist forces in unpopulated areas. Throughout the war, this defensive strategy kept us constantly striving to catch up with an enemy who always held the initiative, whether in tactics or in weaponry.

In the early stages of the war, many uninformed people used to ask why we could not defeat the Communists when we greatly outnumbered them? The basic reason was that guerrilla warfare had its own operational rules which were entirely different from those of conventional warfare. The enemy did not have any exposed or permanent installations to protect. He lived mixed with the population in our own territory or hidden in his bases or sanctuaries. When he outnumbered us and had the upper hand, he struck; he avoided contact when he was weak. After a battle, his troops would disperse, refit, and train in some safe haven. It was easier to defeat guerrillas in Greece, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Those countries were peninsulas or islands; it was possible to limit or prevent infiltration of materiel and men from the outside. But South Vietnam shared

more than a thousand miles of common border with north Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The border terrain was largely uninterrupted, with uninhabited jungles and mountains that offered unlimited base areas or sanctuaries from which the Communists in South Vietnam were constantly supported and reinforced by the North Vietnamese regular army.

In contrast, we needed all the troops we had to guard and hold the important military and civilian installations; we had to provide security for the population in the villages and hamlets; in addition, we needed troops to conduct search-and-destroy operations or to react. Experts in guerrilla warfare usually estimate that the victor needs ten to one superiority. If one side has only a five to one ratio over the other, the war will drag on indecisively; and if the guerrillas are only outnumbered two or three times, they will win. By the time the combined strength of our forces and their allies reached the 1,500,000 mark, as opposed to an estimated enemy strength of 320,000 men, we could pacify all villages and hamlets and at the same time chase all major Communist units beyond our borders. The winning ratio in this case was only about 4.7 to 1.0. But our ground troops, allied and Vietnamese, were effectively supported by U.S. ground-based and carrier-based air power. In addition, the organic firepower of U.S. infantry divisions was also tremendously helpful.

The war in Vietnam thus ceased to be what many people erroneously called a "civil war." In its final stages it became a conventional war of aggression fought with abundant supplies of modern weapons and equipment provided by the Communist bloc. It was a war conceived, planned, conducted, and led by Communist North Vietnam behind screens labeled National Liberation Front and Provisional Revolutionary government of South Vietnam.

Many of our friends suggested that we employ guerrilla tactics to fight the Communists in the areas under their control and even in their big sanctuary of North Vietnam. But such unconventional ventures were limited in number and scale; in particular, they were not fully supported by the local population. Successes were few and failures many. It is axiomatic that any population controlled by a native Communist apparatus for several years is *firmly* controlled. Potential opposition has been weeded out and most potential leaders liquidated or preempted by the Communist cadres.

Vietnam became truly independent only in late 1954. The Vietnamese people as a whole have not as yet reached a decent standard of education and knowledge. Many Vietnamese lived on the fringe of and endured the war for so long that they became totally indifferent to it. They needed, therefore, to be motivated, educated, and offered guidance. But democracy, a form of government completely novel to them, was not necessarily the best answer.

Attempts to respect certain democratic principles hampered the war effort of a nation struggling for survival. It was forbidden, for example, to take forceful or "antidemocratic" measures to solve problems of national discipline, mobilization, desertion, or draft evasion or for that matter problems of political life in general such as a defeatist opposition or pro-Communism. There were many deficiencies in our control and neutralization of pro-Communist elements who lived and freely mingled with our own people. Even some relatives and dependents of high-ranking Communist cadres lived in peace and freedom in the areas under governmental control. And after the collapse, some journalists, artists, politicians, and military officers who stayed behind were given responsible positions by the Communists. To my thinking, in all its actions, decisions, and policies, a nation at war should first strive to deal effectively and conclusively with the war. War is priority number one; all other problems are of lesser importance.

In general, our mobilization policy succeeded only in meeting about half of all manpower requirements. We also achieved quite modest results in our effort to reduce the desertion rate and effectively control our manpower resources. Usually understrength, our units had little opportunity for rotation, rest, and recuperation. In addition, living conditions of our troops and their dependents were well below average standards. As to personnel policy, both the civilian government and the armed forces made regrettable errors. Assignments and promotions were often based on family or clan connections and more on personal trust than ability, achievements, or integrity. Many offenses of officers and officials went unpunished, or token or deferred punishment did not prevent others from doing the same.

Although the population of North Vietnam outnumbered that of the South by two million, the requirement for replacements was particularly acute on the Communist side; even released prisoners of war were retrained and reemployed.

North Vietnam also relied on general mobilization, but in contrast to our system, theirs was strictly enforced and draft evasions were kept to a minimum. In the South, many youths under draft age (15 to 17) were coaxed or coerced into Communist ranks. In general, the Communists enjoyed a solid rear area whose stability and security were maintained through the totalitarian, party-controlled measures of a police state.

In Korea, U.N. forces served under a single command—American. President Syngman Rhee even allowed Korean citizens to serve in U.S. units when the situation had become utterly desperate. In Vietnam during the period of active American participation, however, we never achieved unity of command and thus violated one of the basic principles of war: no unified command existed to direct the various combat forces involved. The substitute principles of cooperation and coordination through understanding and goodwill as applied at all levels brought about good results because commanders deliberately avoided clashes. Although certain minor clashes occurred due to personalities, misunderstandings, or complexities, they were largely insignificant. But without a single command, our war effort suffered from inadequate will, delayed decisions, and inefficient use of abilities and resources.

In tactics our side came up with commendable innovations. The availability of M-113s and large helicopters made it possible to turn large-scale operations that once involved many troops and days of marching into surgical-type operations requiring fewer troops and less time and frequently bringing about more concrete results. If our troops had to stay in any area longer, fire support bases could be set up with hardly any delay. But without going into a detailed discussion of various tactics used during the Vietnam War, it should be stressed that field commanders had to change tactics frequently because the enemy always learned from experience and made every possible effort not to repeat the same mistake.

In military intelligence, remarkable improvement was achieved in our organizational structure and our technical collection capabilities. Beginning in 1968, we started to get more intelligence, and it was more accurate than before. Similarly in logistics, our structure was expanded and modernized to respond more effectively to the requirements of all combat units in supply, maintenance, and other services.

The Vietnamese Air Force's primary mission was to provide close air support and transportation for the ground forces, and

it had very limited capabilities for the defense of the national airspace. As the Communists brought more and more antiaircraft units into South Vietnam, our close air support became less and less effective late in 1974. The Vietnamese Navy, equipped primarily for river patrols and interdiction of enemy coastal infiltration, was hardly a match for the more sophisticated Chinese Communist Navy during the short but violent clash over the Paracel Islands in early 1974.

In brief, apart from deficiencies in manpower and in personnel management, our armed forces demonstrated in many instances, especially in 1968 and 1972, that they were fully capable of carrying out their mission, provided they were given adequate and timely material support.

The war pursued by the Communists without interruption over the years was not purely military; it was a total war fought on other fronts as well: political, economic, diplomatic, etc. On the diplomatic front, North Vietnam succeeded in enlisting not only the support and assistance of "fraternal" Communist countries but also the backing of the "nonaligned" countries as well. By skillful maneuvering North Vietnam antagonized neither Russia nor Communist China and received indispensable benefits from both. According to diplomatic sources, North Vietnam received three or four times more aid from Russia and Communist China in 1974 than in previous years.

The Communists clearly realized that as long as the United States kept its military aid at a certain level, South Vietnam would be able to stand and fight. So they went all out and found effective ways to stop that aid. This was one of their

[3]To a developing nation, foreign investment or aid is essential in the nascent phase. However, its receipt must not preclude every effort to strive for self-sufficiency in the shortest time possible, for a political string is usually attached to all aid—economic or military.

When a recipient nation is ravaged by war, as was South Vietnam, naturally it needs all the aid it can get for a longer time than is usually required. In such a case, foreign aid should be made the object of a long-range plan determining among other things the duration of the aid, the amounts to be made available each year, the types of commodities or equipment to be delivered, etc. This allows a recipient nation to know what to do in yearly planning and what it can expect and must do in the long term when the aid will inevitably come to an end. But aid should never be reduced sharply and suddenly because of the serious material and moral impact on the recipient nation. The ideal aid policy should stem from a sincere desire to help a recipient nation become self-sufficient and self-supporting in the shortest time possible.

It has become common for leaders of aid-receiving nations to be criticized for ineptitude and corruption. Some probably deserve the criticism. If they are incorrigible, by all means they should be replaced by more deserving leaders. And if a country cannot eventually produce a good leader, it does not deserve any aid at all; for no amount of aid can do any good if the country is going to collapse sooner or later.

most devastating blows because it struck at the very foundation of the war itself. All the propaganda machinery of North Vietnam went into motion, echoed and amplified by the press and huge propaganda apparatus of the entire Communist bloc. Their worldwide machinations justified their kind of war, on the one hand, and effectively distorted understanding of our war effort on the other. To the people of the United States and the world at large, the war fought by our side was made to appear as an inhuman and evil war and the government of South Vietnam as an inept and corrupt administration deserving no aid.[3]

The American press, many of whose papers were inclined against the war, did not do much to counter this. The cause for which we fought, therefore, was either largely ignored or falsely portrayed. In addition, very vocal antiwar groups in America helped drown out the voices of reason and truth. One of these groups, the Indochina Resource Center which Ambassador Martin referred to in his House testimony, was an association of college professors, bishops, pastors, and nuns who circulated the infamous "pastoral letter" appealing for peace in Vietnam by ending all military aid.

Communist propaganda also played to the psychological inclinations and moods of the American public, reinforcing antiwar sentiments and the belief that the Vietnam War was a hopeless adventure that might drag on forever. Out of disenchantment and desperation, American students and youths were roused into violent antiwar demonstration. Moved and spurred by such actions and feelings, the U.S. Congress took steps to end U.S. military involvement and later to reduce military aid for South Vietnam. After the first Indochina war, people said with conviction that the French lost their war in Paris; we can now say with equal justice that the Vietnam War was lost in America.

Our enemy was determined, persistent, and experienced. This is a fact we cannot in all honesty deny. During his long years of struggle, a single, continuous, and unchanging politico-military strategy dictated his conduct of the war. His constant goal was to "liberate," that is, conquer, South Vietnam and unify the country through phases of a people's or revolutionary war in which his military forces played the decisive role. From time to time resolutions adopted after important party meetings influenced certain war activities and sometimes

modified them, but they always pointed in the same general direction, the same conduct for the war.

Our strategy didn't always have such continuity. While the Communists continued their war preparations after the Paris Agreement, our effort for some time was optimistically directed toward economic development. To this effect, a plan was worked out to reduce military strength by 100,000 men and transfer the manpower into the economic production sector. But the plan had to be abandoned in the face of continued violations by the other side; by the time we came back to reality, valuable time had been lost.

The Communists never worried about their losses. Every military action was as good as any other provided their political objective could be attained. Two of the foremost examples were the Tet offensive of 1968 and the Easter offensive of 1972. In 1968 our situation was excellent in all respects, with remarkable progress being achieved in pacification and a prospect of the war coming to an early end. We finally believed we were able to see the "light at the other end of the tunnel." However, at this time the Communists suddenly launched three waves of suicidal attacks against our cities and towns, striking at our military and political centers of power. They suffered extraordinarily high losses but demonstrated that they were far from defeated and still able to do things nobody could expect or anticipate. American and world opinion was stunned and in an uproar, and President Johnson decided not to run again.

In 1972, in the face of the impasse in both open and secret negotiations and aware that the United States would not yield to their demands, the Communists decided to break the deadlock by striking across the 17th Parallel and in other places. By the end of 1972 many Communist battalions in South Vietnam were down to a hundred men. At the time of the attack, however, the situation was judged so critical in Washington that President Nixon made an equally desperate move—the offer to withdraw U.S. forces from Indochina within four months after a cease-fire and the return of U.S. prisoners of war. Fortunately, the proposal was not palatable to the Communists at the time.

Communist weaknesses and failures were well concealed and never successfully exploited by our side. In general, Communist troops were trained only to fight well-rehearsed battles. They were at a loss when initiative and quick reaction were

required to confront a new situation or a surprise. But every mistake they made became an object of systematic self-criticism and was corrected in due course. Their tenacity and willingness to learn paid off handsomely.

By contrast, on our side we never learned enough from past experience and never knew how to exploit our successes and achievements which often went unrecognized. My own contention is that, given the advantageous military position we enjoyed after the 1968 Tet offensive, if we had pursued our successes by more forceful exploiting actions and larger-scale counterattacks, the Vietnam War could have been resolved then and there. It was common knowledge that the Communists had by then become entirely exhausted; indeed, it took them four years to recover their combat capability. Once, according to an unverified source, B–52s struck the Central Office for South Vietnam and disrupted this Communist nerve center. Unfortunately, we were not able to exploit this success.

The advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses of both sides added up to the final collapse of South Vietnam. We can still learn from it and devise a sound policy for the future, but some day it will be too late: the Communist challenge is always there.

Glossary

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBU	Cluster bomb unit
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific
CMD	Capital Military District
COSVN	Central Office of South Vietnam
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
GVN	Government of Vietnam
ICCS	International Commission for Control and Supervision
JGS	Joint General Staff
LAW	Light assault weapon
LST	Landing ship, tank
LTL	Interprovincial route
MR	Military Region
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
POL	Petroleum, oil, and lubricants
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
QL	National highway or route
RF	Regional Forces
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SAM	Surface-to-air missile
TL	Provincial route (Republic of Vietnam)
TOW	Tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided
UN	United Nations
USDAO	United States Defense Attache Office
USMACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force
VOA	Voice of America

Appendix A

The Role of the Joint General Staff

Surprisingly, JGS, the command body of an impressive three-service force, did not make any decisions on the conduct of the war it had been created to fight. Constitutionally and for all practical purposes, the president of the republic was the supreme commander of the armed forces. As such, he made all policy decisions as to how the war should be prosecuted. In defense and security matters, he was advised by the National Security Council whose members included the vice president, the prime minister, the minister of defense, and the chairman of JGS. To assist the president in plans and policies for pacification and development, a Central Pacification and Development Council was created; as chairman of JGS, I was made a member. Thus, the functions of the chairman of JGS, as far as national policies were concerned, were primarily advisory in nature.

The national defense structure was reorganized by a presidential decree of July 1970, which also defined the functions and responsibilities of JGS. It was defined as an interservice staff, temporarily charged with the functions of an army command. The navy and air force had their own general staffs while the army did not, because most of its general staff functions were performed by JGS. In reality and in essence, therefore, JGS was an army general staff with supervisory authority over the other two services. Its chief, who was also army commander, was responsible to the minister of defense for the organization, training, and employment of the armed forces in accordance with policies determined by the president. The functions of JGS included

employment of the armed forces for national defense and territorial pacification;

organization and development of the armed forces;

collection and exploitation of all tactical and strategic intelligence and counterintelligence;

improvement, employment, maintenance, and management of the armed forces;

establishment of force structure plans and civilian personnel requirements;

establishment of logistic plans;

following up on the procurement of materiel and equipment;

training for all the armed forces;

implementation of projects to improve the morale and the material living conditions of all personnel;

combat research and development;

drafting combined plans with allied forces as directed;

preparation and promulgation of basic regulations governing the management of prisoners of war.

From the functions so minutely laid out, it was clear that JGS was neither involved in top-level decisions concerning strategy or the conduct of the war, which was the prerogative of the president, nor was it responsible for implementing such strategy, which was the defense minister's responsibility. In reality, however, especially before April 1972, the defense minister was almost always bypassed in presidential consultations concerning the actual prosecution of the war and largely functioned as a budget and manpower manager. In combat force utilization and operational matters, the president always turned to the chairman of JGS for advice and recommendations, hence the chairman reported to him directly.

The four army corps were theoretically under operational control of JGS. However, due to the nature and extent of the combat operations which were usually fought at division or, at highest, corps level, operational responsibilities were entirely delegated to corps commanders who, functioning as military region commanders for administrative matters at the same time, enjoyed the actual authority of theater commanders. JGS rarely if ever interfered with corps commanders' operational plans and decisions, except perhaps for cross-border operations or when general reserve units were involved. Since a military region commander was also primary executor of the national pacification and development plan in his own area, he exercised control over province chiefs and designated national resources, an authority never enjoyed by JGS. The powers and responsibilities of the corps commanders were so encompassing that they frequently reported directly to the president, from whom they also often received direct orders and to whom they were directly responsible for the execution of presidential orders.

Each year JGS prepared and disseminated a plan for the military campaigns to be conducted in the following year. It was based on the friendly and enemy situation on the one hand and on the national or defense policies as promulgated by the Defense Ministry or the president on the other. These yearly campaign plans bore the designation AB followed by a three-digit number, such as AB–139, AB–140, etc. Beginning in 1967, with the participation of U.S. and other non-Communist forces, planning became a multination effort and the annual products were known as "Combined Campaign Plans." AB–142 was the first of such plans jointly signed by the chairman of JGS, the commander of U.S. MACV, and commanders of other allied forces. They contained detailed instructions for corps commanders and the navy and air force commanders. Every quarter, and later every month, a meeting was held at JGS during which the situation in each military region was reviewed and examined concerning progress being made according to the AB plan.

After the Paris Agreement went into effect, JGS suspended these meetings because every military action had political implications. As a result, the same meetings were now held at the Independence Palace, chaired by the president in his capacity as supreme commander and usually attended by the vice president; the prime minister, who was also minister of defense; and the president's assistant for security, Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang. During these meetings, it became a practice for each corps commander (or the navy or air force commander) to make a personal presentation of the situation in his area of responsibility. Discussions followed, and finally the president made decisions or issued orders and other necessary instructions.

Appendix B

Testimony, 27 January 1976, by Ambassador Graham Martin
Before the Special Investigations Subcommittee of the
House International Relations Committee
Subject: the Balance of Forces in Vietnam

I told President Thieu the actual military order of battle and the analysis of the comparative forces each side could bring to bear provided a very grim picture.

The conclusion was inescapable that should Hanoi rapidly move in for the kill it would be difficult for Saigon to last more than a month, even with the most skillful and determined defense, and probably not more than three weeks.

I said that while it was my opinion that Hanoi wanted Saigon whole, not a pile of rubble, one could not escape the possibility they might elect the latter, if there was no move toward negotiations.

President Thieu asked about the prospects for additional military aid. I said that even if by some miracle it were now approved, it might preserve the opportunity for a better negotiating position, but it could not arrive in time to change the balance sheet he had just read. As of now the military balance arrayed against him was overwhelming.

I said that anyone sitting in his chair, whether in Independence Palace, Downing Street, the Elysee, the Kremlin, in Peking, or in the White House had one problem in common. It was difficult to be sure they were getting the whole truth.

Some would shade reports for personal or bureaucratic advantage, others for fear of hurting him, others because they were afraid of him, others because they did not wish to be the conveyors of bad news.

Whatever the reasons, it was difficult at times to perceive things as they really were.

I said I was speaking to him only as an individual, not for the president or the secretary of state, or even as the American ambassador.

I said I was speaking only as one who for a very long time had watched events in Southeast Asia and who for the past two years had worked very hard at understanding the interweaving of the fabric of Vietnamese affairs.

I said the older I got, the more I knew that I did not know it all, and a reasonable doubt was always present. But it was a difficult time, and perhaps my perceptions were as accurate as those of any other Westerner.

A few things were very clear to me. The military situation was very bad, and the Vietnamese people held him responsible for it. The political class, both his supporters and his enemies, did not believe he could lead the country out of its present crisis.

I said it was my conclusion that almost all of his generals, although they would continue to fight, believed defense was hopeless unless a respite could be gained through the beginning of the negotiating process.

And they did not believe such a process could begin unless the president left or took steps to see that the process began immediately.

I said it was my feeling that if he did not move soon, his generals would ask him to go.

President Thieu asked whether his leaving would affect the vote in Congress. I said it might have changed some votes some months ago; it could not now change enough to affect the outcome.

In other words, if his thought was [*sic*] to offer to resign if Congress assured a level of aid sufficient for South Vietnamese survival, that was a bargain whose day had passed, if indeed it had ever existed.

After all his opponents would accept just as easily the distortions that would be fed to them about his successor as they had about him. The important thing was perhaps the effect his leaving would have on the other side.

I said I did not know the answer, but it seemed that most South Vietnamese now seemed to think it would facilitate negotiations.

I personally thought it would make little difference. Hanoi would be opposed to any strong leader. They would insist on a much weaker man, if indeed they were really interested in

negotiating. But his colleagues felt it might buy time which was now the essential commodity for Vietnam.

Some felt if the destruction of Saigon could be avoided, if an independent Vietnam could continue to exist, one might hope, even if reason recognizes the dimness of the hope, that things might improve. The conversation went on for about an hour and a half.

Appendix C

Testimony, 27 January 1976, by Ambassador Graham Martin Before the Special Investigations Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee.

Subject: Efforts To Achieve a Negotiated Settlement With the Communists

Question 11. Secretary Kissinger stated on 5 May 1975, that the Soviet Union played "a moderately constructive role in enabling us to understand the possibilities for evacuation, both American and South Vietnamese, and for the possibilities that might exist for a political evolution."

(a). What do you know about the Soviet role in the negotiations during the second half of April?

Answer. My knowledge was confined to that expressed earlier in this hearing, that is, the Soviets had informed the United States that Hanoi would not militarily interfere with our evacuation.

(b). Do you agree with Kissinger's evaluation?

Answer. Yes.

Question 12. During the period prior to Minh's assumption of power, did the French Embassy in Saigon advise you that if Minh replaced Thieu, the Communists would be willing to work out a political arrangement with Minh rather than seek a total military victory?

Answer. I think it might be more accurate to say that the sense of the question reflected the hope of the French that that was what would come to pass.

Question 12 (continued). If so, where did the French get this information?

Answer. Most governments, including our own and that of France, are extremely chary about revealing their sources. The

correct answer is that I did not know where the French got this information.

Question 13. Secretary Kissinger stated on 5 May 1975, that until 27 April the United States had "considerable hope" that North Vietnam would not seek a purely military solution but would agree to a "negotiated solution" with Duong Van Minh. What factors caused the U.S. officials to have such expectations?

Answer. As the answer to this question may involve consideration of information not available to me in Saigon, I have asked the Department of State to supply this answer. It follows:

The secretary made this statement in the course of his press conference of 29 April, immediately following the evacuation of Saigon.

These expectations were based on a reading of messages and public statements from the Communist side and on actions by the Republic of Vietnam side in the weeks before the fall of Saigon.

As the secretary stated on 29 April, we had dealt with Hanoi and the PRG through different intermediaries and had been in a position to put in our views and to receive responses from the other side. He noted in particular (in a 5 May interview) that the Soviet Union played during the final weeks a moderately constructive role in enabling us to understand the possibilities there were for evacuation, both of Americans and South Vietnamese, and for the possibilities that might exist for a political solution.

During the latter part of April, the Republic of Vietnam moved rather rapidly to comply with Communist demands or conditions for a political settlement. During March and early April, Hanoi had demanded the resignation of President Nguyen Van Thieu. This occurred on 21 April. The Communists then asked for the removal of his successor, specifying that General Duong Van Minh would be acceptable and a person with whom they would be prepared to talk. This demand was met, and General Minh was accordingly sworn in as president. In the meantime, Saigon complied as well with other demands, despite the fact that the demands escalated literally with every passing day.

However, as the secretary noted in his 29 April press conference, for reasons which were unclear, the North Vietnamese changed their signals on the night of 27 April and appeared to

shift suddenly to a military option. The possibility for a negotiated settlement was thus ruled out. On 30 April Communist forces occupied Saigon, and General Minh was obliged to surrender the government and its armed forces unconditionally.

Question 14. With regard to the efforts between 19 and 27 April to work out a political settlement with the Communists, involving changes in the Saigon government, what role did the Polish and Hungarian delegations to the International Commission for Supervision and Control play?

Answer. My impression was that the two delegations referred to were somewhat stunned by the pace of events between 19 and 27 April. It was my further impression that their role, as much as was possible at that stage, was designed to be helpful.

Question 14 (a). Did they transmit messages from the North Vietnamese to the embassy?

Answer. They transmitted no direct messages, as such, of which I was aware.

Question 14 (b). Did they provide the embassy with any "interpretations" of Hanoi's policy toward a political arrangement?

Answer. Most certainly. Such "interpretations" by one of them were furnished almost on an hourly basis.

Question 14 (c). If so, what did they tell the embassy?

Answer. My impression was that one of them was simply hopelessly behind the curve of the events then unfolding or was trying to provide a deception center in its insistence that a "Minh" government would be acceptable to Hanoi and that a negotiated solution might still be possible. The other delegation was much more cautious, correct, and professional.

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