Thiet Giap!
The Battle of An Loc, April 1972

by
Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks,
U.S. Army, Retired

50th Anniversary

COMBAT STUDIES INSTITUTE

FOREWORD

The Battle of An Loc was one of the most important battles of the Vietnam War. It took place during the 1972 North Vietnamese Spring Offensive, after most U.S. combat troops had departed South Vietnam. The battle, which lasted over two months, resulted in the virtual destruction of three North Vietnamese divisions and blocked a Communist attack on Saigon. The sustained intensity of combat during this battle had not been previously seen in the Vietnam War.

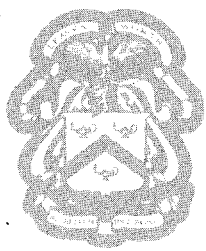
Although this battle occurred after the high point of American involvement in Vietnam, when U.S. forces were in the process of withdrawing from that country, Americans played a key role in the action. South Vietnamese ground forces and their U.S. Army advisers, working in close cooperation with U.S. Army and Air Force air support, proved a combination capable of resisting defeat and seizing victory .

Because the Battle of An Loc did not involve large numbers of American troops, little has been written about the battle or American participation in it. Jim Willbanks' study focuses on the conduct of the battle and the role American combat advisers and U.S. air power played in defeating the North Vietnamese forces during the spring of 1972.

Richard M. Swain

September 1993

RICHARD M. SWAIN
Colonel, Field Artillery
Director, Combat Studies Institute



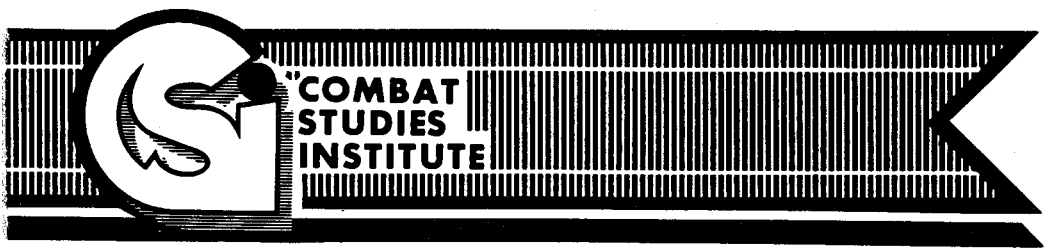
CSI publications cover a variety of military history topics. The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or of the Department of Defense.

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by
Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks,
U.S. Army, Retired

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027-6900



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To all the American men and women who answered their nation's call and served in the Republic of Vietnam, but especially to those who made the supreme sacrifice with their lives, to include Brigadier General Richard Tallman, Lieutenant Stanley Kuick, Major Richard Benson, First Lieutenant Richard Todd (killed by incoming artillery in An Loc on 9 July 1972), and Lieutenant Colonel William B. Nolde, the last American who died in Vietnam before the negotiated cease-fire went into effect. (Nolde was killed in An Loc on 27 January 1973, just eleven hours before the guns stopped firing.)

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PREFACE

The genesis of this paper goes back to 1972 in a hospital ward in the 3d Field Hospital in Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. Having just been evacuated from the besieged city of An Loc, I thought that someday I would attempt to write of the desperate battle that was fought there during the massive North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

Twenty years after the fact, as part of a master's degree program at the University of Kansas, I began drawing together the many aspects of this key battle that blocked the North Vietnamese attack on Saigon. The result is the following study.

Aside from the obvious personal interest that this battle held for me, I also wanted to address the critical contribution of U.S. advisers and American close air support to the eventual South Vietnamese victory in defeating the 1972 North Vietnamese offensive in Military Region III. The body of literature on the war in Vietnam grows daily, but the emphasis of most of these works falls within two categories: historical overviews and first person accounts. These books usually focus on the height of American involvement, when large numbers of U.S. troops and units were actively conducting combat operations. Very little has been written about the American commitment in the latter part of the war when U.S. participation was embodied in a handful of advisers who remained with the Vietnamese units in the field and the few air elements left in country.

This paper focuses on the role of U.S. advisers and American tactical air power in the latter part of the war, specifically the 1972 Easter Offensive. While I was a participant in this battle, this study is by no means a memoir or a personal account. The purpose of this paper is to examine the battle of An Loc to determine the contribution made by the American advisers and flyers.

I have relied on my own personal experience for context but have attempted to document the story of the battle from multiple sources. My research drew heavily on primary sources, such as unit histories, official communiqués, operational summaries, intelligence reports, after-action reports, and a limited number of first person accounts. The research also considered the South Vietnamese point of view by examining the U.S. Army Center of Military History Indochina Monograph Series, in which former senior South Vietnamese military leaders discuss a variety of issues germane to the Vietnam War, including the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) performance during the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion.

A limited number of North Vietnamese sources are also considered. While these works are very political in nature, they provide a glimpse of the Communist perspective and the strategy that led to the North Vietnamese decision to launch a large-scale offensive in 1972.

Most primary sources for this study are available in the Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

I am indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Ramsey III and Colonel Richard M. Swain of the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for giving me the opportunity to publish this study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of groups and persons that I would like to thank for their contribution to this effort.

First, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Ted Wilson of the University of Kansas for his kind guidance and encouragement in what has become a reconstruction of one of the most significant emotional events in my life. I greatly appreciate his patience, indulgence, and wise counsel.

I am also indebted to Mr. Dan Doris and the staff of the Combined Arms Research Library, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for their superb and timely assistance during the research for this paper.

I also express my appreciation to my fellow instructors in both the Center for Army Tactics, the Directorate of Joint and Combined Operations, and the Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, for their insight, comments, and recommendations for improving this study. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to Mr. Don Gilmore for his professionalism and expertise in editing this paper.

A special heartfelt thanks goes to my wife, Diana, who served on the home front and supported me through the difficult times addressed in this study. I also commend her and our children, Jennifer and Russell, for their support during the preparation of this paper. Lastly, I am grateful to my mother and father, Master Sergeant (U.S. Army, Retired) and Mrs. James E. Willbanks, for their unfailing love and support over the years.

I. INTRODUCTION

The sun had just come up in An Loc, the capital city of Binh Long Province in South Vietnam; it was 13 April 1972. The author, at the time a U.S. Army infantry officer serving as an adviser with the army of South Vietnam (the ARVN), was on the roof of a building putting up a radio antenna. It had been a relatively quiet night with regard to enemy probes and ground attacks, but there had been a significant increase in the number of incoming rockets and artillery rounds. The ARVN infantry task force that the author advised had just moved into the city the day before. It had withdrawn under intense North Vietnamese Army (NVA) pressure from two firebases to the north that it had previously occupied.

I and Major Raymond Haney had joined the regimental task force after the original advisory team members had been wounded and subsequently evacuated during the withdrawal from the north. The replacement advisory team arrived in An Loc by helicopter on 12 April to find the city nearly panicked. Artillery rounds and rockets were falling steadily on the city, and the helicopter that brought the officers into the city hovered only long enough for them to jump off the aircraft into a freshly dug hole in the city soccer field as artillery rounds impacted near the landing zone. During the evening, the South Vietnamese soldiers prepared for the inevitable North Vietnamese attack, and they were up early for whatever the day would bring.

As I finished installing a radio antenna, I heard a tremendous explosion and ran down the stairs to the front of the building. Frantic South Vietnamese soldiers ran by shouting, "Thiet Giap!" I had never heard this phrase before, but as the soldier ran around the corner of the building, it became all too apparent that the cry meant "tank"; advancing down the street from the north was a line of North Vietnamese T-54 tanks! So began the Battle of An Loc, described by Douglas Pike as "the single most important battle in the war."[1]

For the next four months, a desperate struggle raged between 3 North Vietnamese divisions (estimated at over 36,000 troops) and the greatly outnumbered South Vietnamese defenders, assisted by their U.S. Army advisers. The 66-day siege of An Loc would result in horrendous losses on both sides and would culminate with South Vietnamese forces blocking the North Vietnamese thrust toward the South Vietnamese capital in Saigon.

Although this battle occurred after the high point of American commitment in Vietnam, American forces were active and key

participants in the action. The American advisory effort had become increasingly more important as American combat troops were withdrawn. During the Battle of An Loc, American advisers on the ground, working in consonance with American air power, would prove to be the key ingredients to the South Vietnamese victory.

The Battle of An Loc, although one of the key battles in the entire Vietnam War, has been discussed only briefly in the literature about the war. The purpose of this study is to examine the battle in detail to determine the extent of the American contribution to the victory. This battle will then be compared with the performance of the South Vietnamese forces against the North Vietnamese invasion of 1975 in an effort to assess the impact of an absence of American participation in the latter action. The focus of the study will be on the American military's role in thwarting the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion; it will not debate the relative merits and demerits of the Vietnamization process or the efficacy of the eventual American withdrawal from South Vietnam.

II. THE NORTH VIETNAMESE SPRING OFFENSIVE

The North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972 consisted of a massive, coordinated three-pronged attack designed to strike a knockout blow against the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. In the offensive, the North Vietnamese used conventional tactics and introduced weaponry far exceeding that employed during any previous guerrilla campaigns.

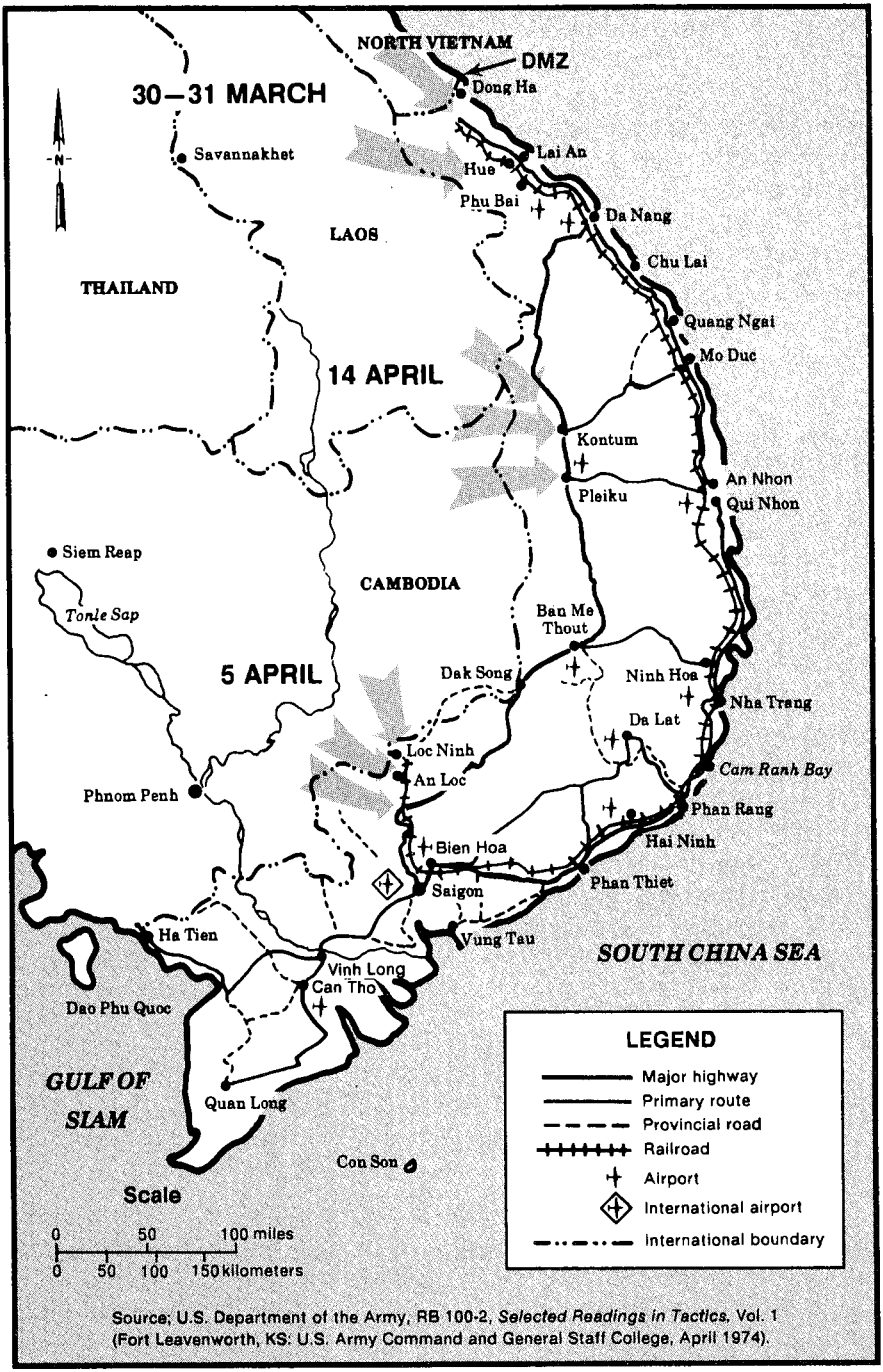
This was a radical departure from earlier North Vietnamese strategy. The NVA decided to employ conventional tactics for this offensive for several reasons. First, they did not believe that the Americans, with only 65,000 troops left in Vietnam, could influence the strategic situation. Furthermore, they did not think that the political situation in the United States would permit President Nixon to commit any new troops or combat support to assist the South Vietnamese forces. Additionally, they believed that a resounding NVA military victory would humiliate the president, destroy his war politics, and perhaps foil his bid for reelection in November.[1]

The North Vietnamese Strategy

The architect of the North Vietnamese campaign was General Vo Nguyen Giap, the hero of Dien Bien Phu. According to captured documents and information obtained from NVA prisoners of war after the invasion, Giap's campaign was designed to destroy as many ARVN forces as possible, thus permitting the North Vietnamese to occupy key South Vietnamese cities, putting the Communist forces in a posture to threaten President Nguyen Van Thieu's government. At the same time, Giap hoped to discredit Nixon's Vietnamization and pacification programs, cause the remaining American forces to be withdrawn quicker, and ultimately to seize control of South Vietnam.[2]

A subset of Giap's strategy called for a Communist provisional government to be established in An Loc as a precursor to the assault on Saigon.[3] Although the North Vietnamese hoped to achieve a knockout blow, a corresponding objective was to seize at least enough terrain to strengthen their position in any subsequent negotiations.

The offensive began on 30 March 1972, when three NVA divisions attacked south across the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam toward Quang Tri and Hue. Three days later, three more divisions moved from sanctuaries in Cambodia and pushed into Binh Long Province, the capital of which was only sixty-



Source: U.S. Department of the Army, RB 100-2, *Selected Readings in Tactics*, Vol. 1 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, April 1974).

Map 1. NVA Easter Offensive, 1972

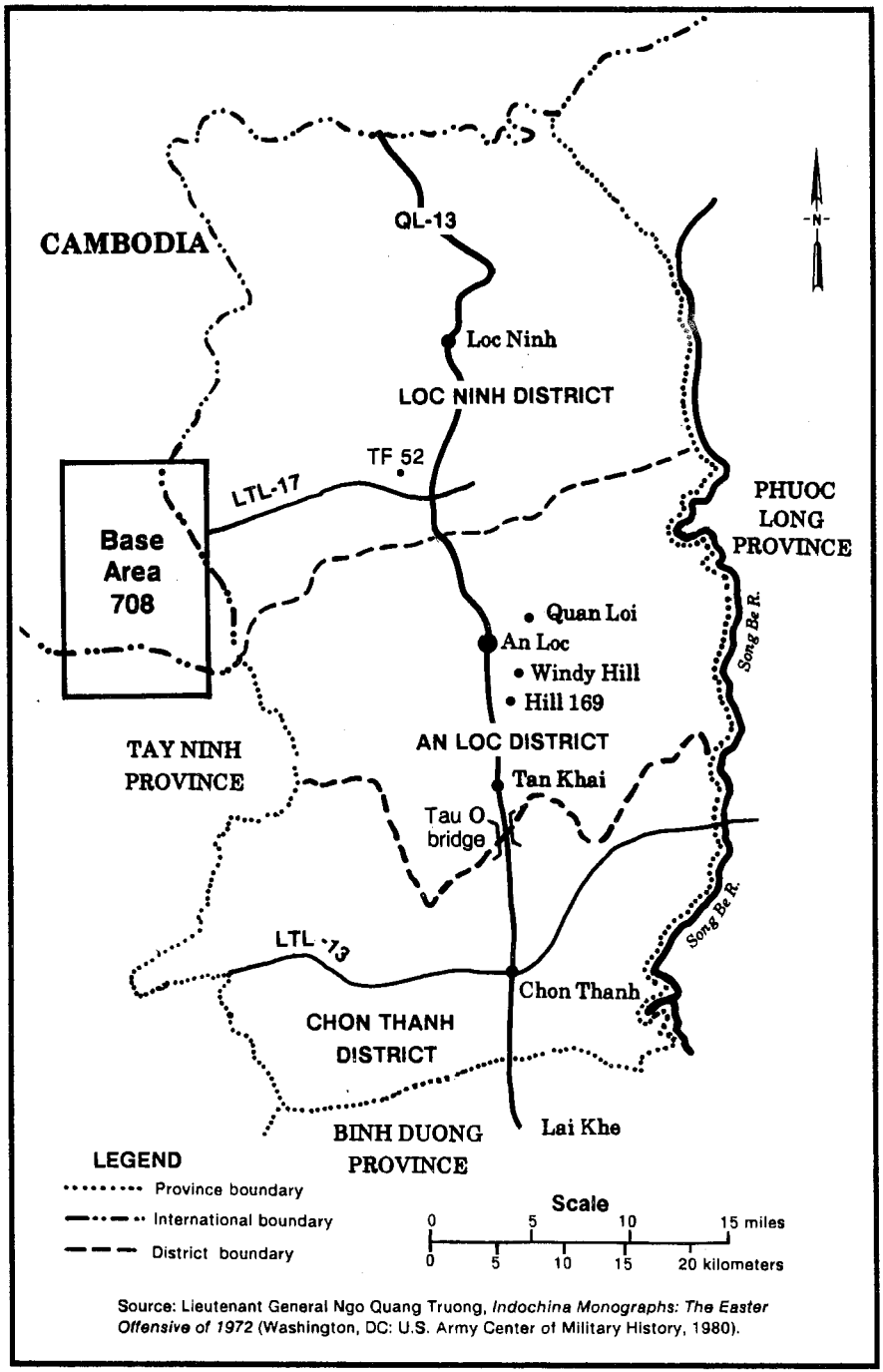
five miles from the South Vietnamese capital in Saigon. Additional North Vietnamese forces attacked across the Cambodian border in the Central Highlands toward Kontum (see map 1). A total of 14 NVA infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments (including 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles) participated in the offensive.[4]

The North Vietnamese invasion was characterized by large-scale conventional infantry tactics, accompanied by tanks and massive artillery support. The enemy thrusts were initially successful, particularly in the north, where the NVA quickly overran Quang Tri, threatened Hue and Kontum, and generally routed the defending ARVN forces.

Military Region III

Military Region III (MR III), comprised of the eleven provinces that surrounded Saigon, was located between the Central Highlands and the Mekong River delta. The enemy activity in this region began in the early hours of 2 April with attacks by the 24th and 271st NVA Regiments against elements of the 25th ARVN Division in several firebases near the Cambodian border in northern Tay Ninh Province. The North Vietnamese attacked with infantry and tanks (American-made M-41 tanks previously captured from ARVN forces), supported by heavy mortar and rocket fire. Although there had been earlier intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese were making preparations for offensive operations, there was little indication that there would be attacks on the scale of those in Military Region I. While intelligence had shown an increase in enemy activity in Tay Ninh Province in March, the general feeling at Headquarters, MACV, was that the enemy would not try to attack the towns along Highway QL-13. It was felt that ARVN operations along the Cambodian border would prevent the NVA from massing for an all-out attack like the one at Quang Tri in the north. Thus, while the South Vietnamese were surprised at the ferocity of the enemy attacks and the use of tanks, the attacks themselves coincided with expectations that any significant attacks would occur in Tay Ninh.[5]

The initial assaults on the outlying South Vietnamese posts would prove to be diversionary attacks designed to mask the movement of three North Vietnamese divisions (5th VC, 7th NVA, and 9th VC) taking up their final attack positions in Binh Long Province.[6]



Source: Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980).

Map 2. Key locations, Binh Long Province, MR III

Binh Long ("Peaceful Dragon") Province is located in the northwestern portion of Military Region III and is bordered on the west by Cambodia (see map 2). The capital of the province is An Loc, a city of 15,000, which lies only 65 miles north of Saigon. An Loc, a thriving and prosperous city surrounded by vast rubber plantations totaling 75,000 acres, sat astride QL-13, a paved highway leading directly from the Cambodian border to the South Vietnamese capital. Because of its proximity to Cambodia and the accompanying Communist base areas, the city had endured the rigors of war since the early 1960s. Due to its strategic location between Cambodia and Saigon, An Loc figured prominently in the North Vietnamese strategy. Seizure of An Loc would provide a base for a follow-on attack on the South Vietnamese capital city to seize President Thieu's seat of government.

At the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive in MR III, the Saigon government had only a single division, the 5th ARVN, operating in this critical area. This division, a regular South Vietnamese infantry division, was dispersed throughout Binh Long Province.

The Vietnamization Program

By this time in the war, President Nixon had instituted his "Vietnamization" program, designed to turn over the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese. During the 1968 election campaign, Nixon had pledged to bring American troops home and secure an honorable peace in Vietnam. As part of this plan, he directed that a "highly forceful approach" be taken to cause President Thieu and the South Vietnamese government to assume greater responsibility for the war.[7] This program, first called "Vietnamization" by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, sought to make preparations to turn over the war to South Vietnam. This was to be accomplished by a progressive buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while, at the same time, steadily withdrawing American troops. The ultimate objective was to strengthen ARVN capabilities and bolster the Thieu government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the Communists from North Vietnam.

In order to accomplish program objectives, Nixon directed the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), the senior U.S. military headquarters in Vietnam, to provide maximum assistance to the South Vietnamese to build up their forces, support the pacification program, and reduce the flow of supplies and materiel dispensed to

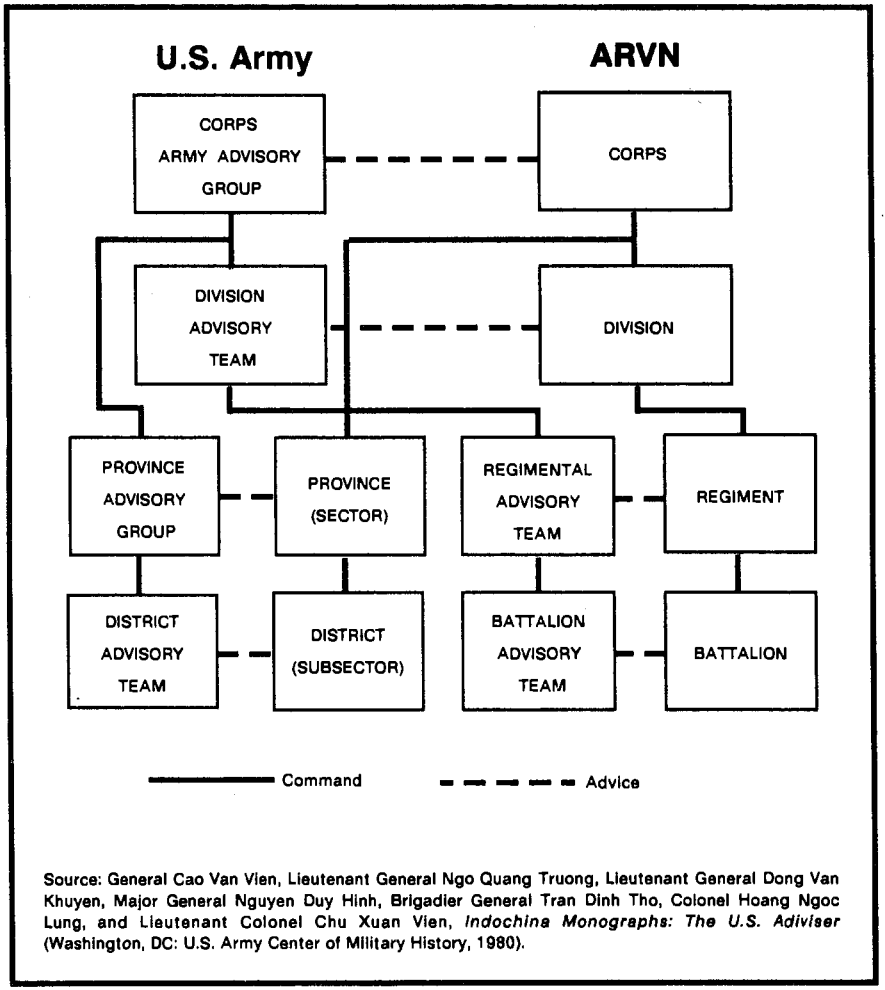
Communist forces in the south.[8] Between 1969 and 1972, the Thieu government, with American aid, increased the size of its military forces from 825,000 to over 1 million. American military aid provided the ARVN with over 1 million M-16 rifles, 12,000 M-60 machine guns, 40,000 M-79 grenade launchers, and 2,000 heavy mortars.[9] The ARVN military schools were improved and expanded to handle over 100,000 students a year. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was increased to 9 tactical wings, 40,000 personnel, and nearly 700 aircraft. By 1970, the South Vietnamese military was one of the largest and best equipped in the world.

Equipment and numbers were not the only answers to the problem of the South Vietnamese becoming self-sufficient on the battlefield. In order to improve the quality of the ARVN force, MACV increased the advisory effort. This program was not a new effort; Americans had been serving with Vietnamese units since 1955.[10] However, the importance of the advisory program had increased as the number of American combat units dwindled. By 1972, most U.S. ground combat forces had been withdrawn, and the only Americans on the ground in combat roles were advisers who served with ARVN forces in the field.

The American advisory structure closely paralleled that of the Vietnamese military command and control organization. Headquarters, MACV, provided the advisory function to the Joint General Staff (JGS), the senior headquarters of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).

Just below the JGS level were four South Vietnamese corps commanders who were responsible for the four military regions that comprised South Vietnam (see figure 1). Their U.S. counterparts were the commanders of the four regional assistance commands, whose responsibilities included providing assistance, advice, and support to the corps commander and his staff in planning and executing operations, training, and logistical efforts. As the corps senior adviser, the regional assistance commander, usually a U.S. Army major general, exercised operational control over the subordinate U.S. Army advisory groups in the military region.

Under the U.S. regional assistance commander in each region, there were two types of advisory teams: province advisory teams and division advisory teams. Each province in each military region was headed by a South Vietnamese colonel. His American counterpart was the province senior adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The



Source: General Cao Van Vien, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, and Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The U.S. Adiviser* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980).

Figure 1. Organization, U.S. Army advisory structure, 1972

province advisory team was responsible for advising the province chief in civil and military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs. Additionally, the province team advised the regional and popular forces, which were essentially provincial militia.

There was a division combat assistance team (DCAT) with each ARVN infantry division. This advisory team's mission was to advise and assist the ARVN division commander and his staff in command, administration, training, tactical operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and certain elements of political warfare.[11] The division

senior adviser was usually an Army colonel, who exercised control over the regimental and battalion advisory teams.

Each ARVN division usually had three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and several separate battalions—such as the cavalry squadron and the engineer battalion. The regimental advisory teams were normally composed of from three to five U.S. Army personnel (they had been larger earlier, but the drawdown of U.S. forces in country gradually reduced the size of the American teams with the ARVN units). The regimental teams were usually headed by an Army lieutenant colonel and included various mixes of captains and noncommissioned officers. The separate battalion advisory teams usually consisted of one or two specialists, who advised the South Vietnamese in their respective functional areas, e.g., cavalry, intelligence, engineering, etc.

Elite ARVN troops, such as the airborne and ranger units (and the Marines in MR I), were organized generally along the same lines as regular ARVN units, except the highest echelon of command in the ranger units was the group (similar to a regiment). The airborne brigades were organized into a division. There was also an airborne division advisory team headed by an American colonel. Each of the airborne brigades was accompanied by an American advisory team, which was headed by a lieutenant colonel and was similar, but somewhat larger, than those found with the regular ARVN regiments because they included advisers down to battalion level.

U.S. Army advisers did not command, nor did they exercise any operational control over any part of the ARVN forces. Their mission was to provide professional military advice and assistance to their counterpart ARVN commanders and staffs in personnel management, training, combat operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and psychological-civil affairs operations.[12] As U.S. combat forces withdrew from South Vietnam, the U.S. Army advisers increasingly became the focal point for liaison and coordination between ARVN units and the U.S. Air Force, as well as other elements of U.S. combat support agencies still left in country.

By early 1972, there were just 5,300 U.S. advisers in the whole of Vietnam.[13] Only a small fraction of this number were actually involved in advising units conducting combat operations. In Binh Long Province, the 5th ARVN Division, in and around An Loc, was accompanied by a small division advisory team consisting of ten to fifteen advisers who worked with the division headquarters and several small teams of two to five persons with each of the division's

subordinate regiments. (The rest of the division advisory team were at the division base camp in Lai Khe.) The division senior adviser at the time of the North Vietnamese offensive was Colonel William ("Wild Bill") Miller. In addition to the division team, there was also a province team, headed by Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Corley, with the Binh Long Province headquarters in An Loc. Most of this advisory team, except Corley and a small party, would be evacuated after the start of the battle. Other American advisers accompanied the ARVN reinforcements that would be brought in during the course of the battle. These few Americans (never numbering more than twenty-five during the course of the battle) would find themselves in the thick of the combat action once the North Vietnamese attack began in earnest.

Although there were few American forces operating on the ground in combat roles in Vietnam, U.S. tactical air power was still much in evidence throughout the theater of operations. U.S. Air Force and Marine aircraft operated from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand, while the Navy and other Marine aircraft operated from carriers in the South China Sea. B-52 heavy bombers flew missions in both North and South Vietnam regularly from bases in Guam and Thailand. Prior to the 1972 offensive, the B-52s had been used mostly in the strategic role, but during the Eastertide battles, the big bombers were used increasingly in the tactical support role. Additionally, U.S. Army armed helicopters continued to fly ground support missions throughout South Vietnam. The availability and responsiveness of this American aerial firepower would prove critical in the conduct of the battles to come.

III. THE BATTLE OF AN LOC, PHASE I

The NVA Plan in MR III

The focus of the North Vietnamese main effort in Military Region III was on seizing An Loc, the capital city of Binh Long Province. Once An Loc was taken, the path would be clear for a direct assault down Highway QL-13 to Saigon.

The plan for taking An Loc involved the use of three NVA divisions and supporting forces (see table 1). By this time in the war, although some of the North Vietnamese formations still carried the traditional Vietcong (VC) designations, the divisions were organized and equipped as main-force NVA units manned primarily by North Vietnamese soldiers who had come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from the north.

Table 1. Estimated NVA Troop Strength*

5th VC Division		69th Artillery Command	
HQ & Support	4,680	HQ & Support	1,395
275th Regt	1,550	42d Artillery Regt	800
174th Regt	1,500	208th Rocket Regt	835
E6 Regt	1,500	271st AAA Regt	800
Total	9,230	Total	3,830
7th NVA Division		Other Forces	
HQ & Support	4,100	205th NVA Regt	1,250
141st Regt	1,500	101st Regt	760
165th Regt	1,500	203d Tank Regt (includes 202d Special Wpns Regt)	800
209th Regt	1,500	429 Sapper Group (-)	320
Total	8,600	Total	3,130
9th VC Division			
HQ & Support	4,680		
271st Regt	2,000		
272d Regt	2,000		
95th Regt	2,000		
Total	10,680		

NOTE: The total estimated North Vietnamese forces committed to the Battle of An Loc were 35,470. Additionally, intelligence projections estimated that the committed units received more than 15,000 replacements during the course of the seige.

*Strengths are prior to the Battle of An Loc, April 1972.

Source: Major General James F. Hollingsworth, "Communist Invasion in Military Regional III," unpublished narrative, 1972. (Microfiche Reel 44, University Publications of America: Records of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.)

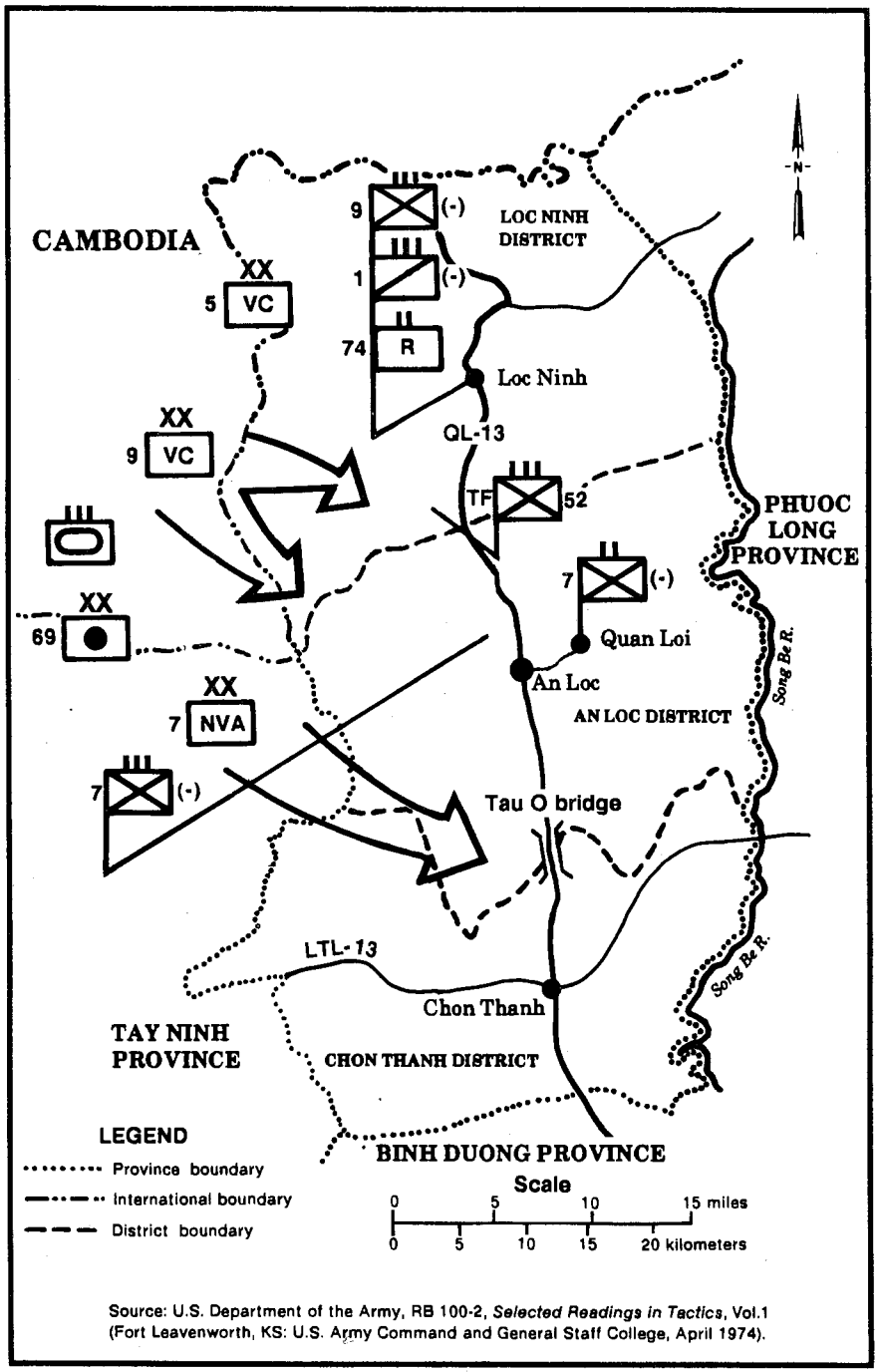
The 9th VC Division, considered one of the elite NVA divisions, was targeted against An Loc itself. The 7th NVA Division was tasked to interdict supplies and reinforcements from reaching An Loc from Saigon by cutting QL-13 south of An Loc, between Chon Thanh and Lai Khe (see map 3). The 5th VC Division was to initiate the offensive campaign by capturing Loc Ninh, the northernmost town in Binh Long Province. After securing this foothold, the North Vietnamese forces would move on An Loc.[1]

The Assault on Loc Ninh

At 0650 on the morning of 5 April, the 5th VC Division crossed the Cambodian border and attacked Loc Ninh (see map 4). This district town was defended by approximately 1,000 soldiers from elements of the 9th ARVN Infantry Regiment and an attached armored cavalry squadron (which was deployed north of the town) from the 5th ARVN Division, part of an ARVN border ranger battalion, and a small number of local territorial forces. The NVA attacked initially from the west with a heavy ground assault led by at least one tank and supported by artillery, rockets, and mortars. These attacks were violently executed, and only skillful employment of tactical air strikes prevented the defenders from being overrun that day. The situation had stabilized, but the attackers had been successful in forcing the defenders into small compounds in the northern and southern ends of the town.

The commander of Third Regional Assistance Command (TRAC) was Major General James F. Hollingsworth, a graduate of Texas A&M University, a protégé of General George S. Patton Jr. during World War II, and a veteran of the Korean War. He had served one previous tour in Vietnam as the assistant division commander of the 1st Infantry Division and was the holder of three Distinguished Service Crosses and five Purple Hearts. He and his ARVN counterpart, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, commander of III Corps, the senior ARVN headquarters in MR III (located in Bien Hoa), realized the seriousness of the situation at Loc Ninh.[2] Intelligence reports had indicated for months that an attack was on the way, but Hollingsworth and Minh believed that the main attack would come in Tay Ninh Province based on previous intelligence.[3] This was despite the fact that the advisers of the 5th ARVN Division began getting indications of increased NVA activity in Binh Long and around An Loc during the period 1–3 April.

The intensity of the attack on Loc Ninh ultimately convinced Minh and Hollingsworth that this was the real opening shot of the



Source: U.S. Department of the Army, RB 100-2, *Selected Readings in Tactics*, Vol.1 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, April 1974).

Map 3. Binh Long Province, 5 April 1972

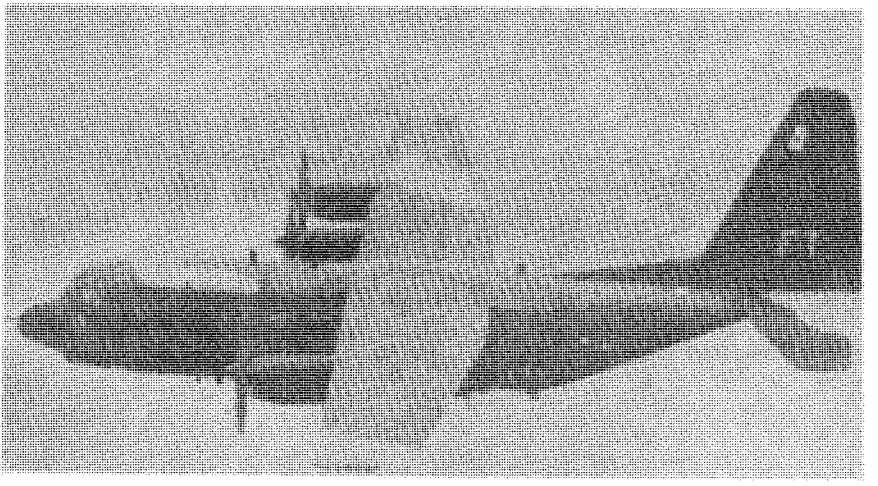
offensive and that an attack of major proportions was imminent. Accordingly, they directed all available air support north to Binh Long to assist the 5th ARVN Division elements in Loc Ninh.

On the morning of 6 April, the defenders heard tanks moving around the southern end of the airstrip. At 0530, the NVA attacked from three directions supported by twenty-five to thirty T-54 and PT-76 tanks.

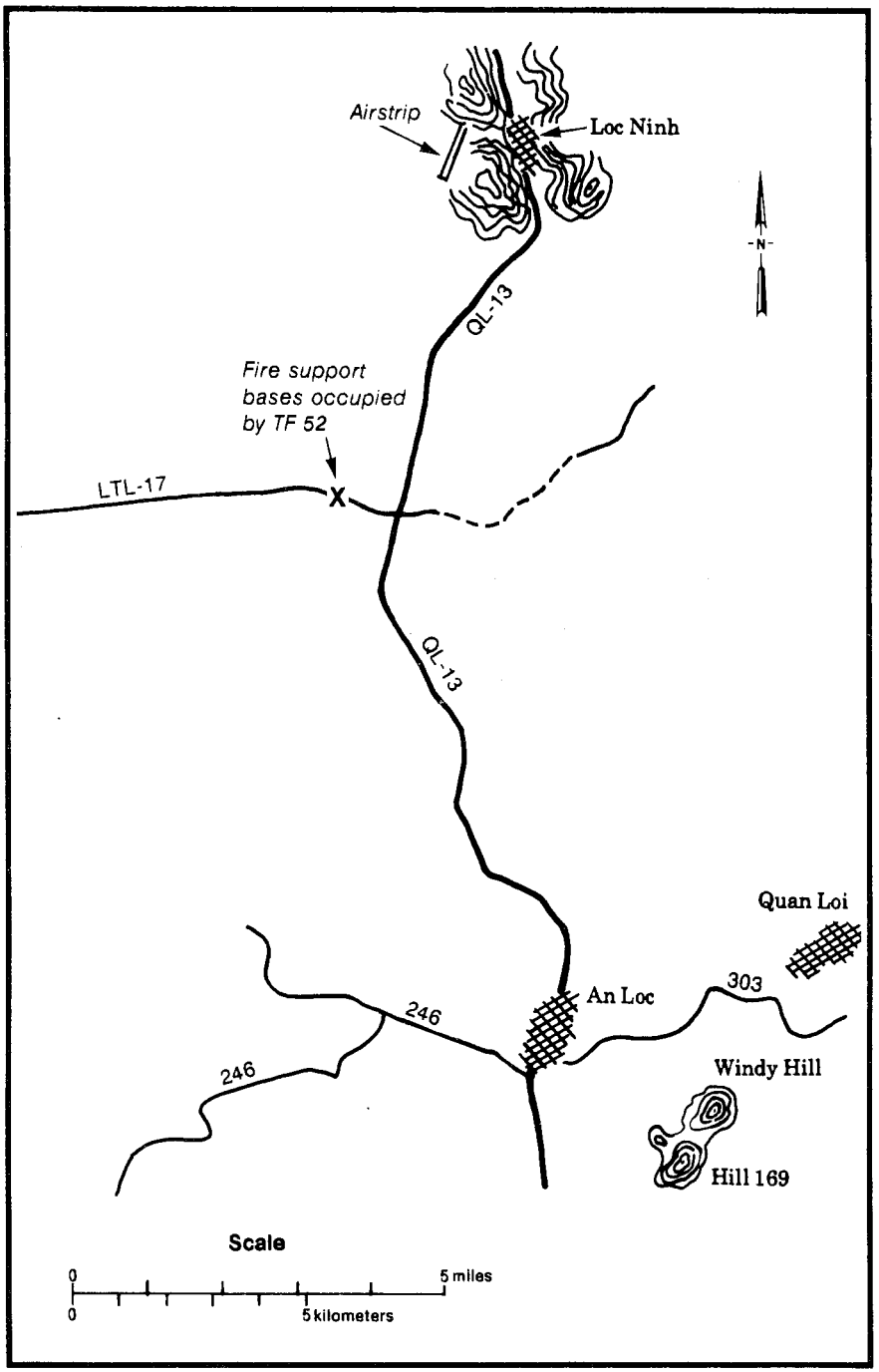
The ARVN forces and their seven American advisers inside the small compounds fought desperately against the North Vietnamese onslaught. The American advisers coordinated and directed U.S. tactical air support from Bien Hoa Air Base, the aircraft carriers U.S.S. *Constellation* and U.S.S. *Saratoga*, and other attack aircraft flying from bases in Thailand, including AC-130 Spectre gunships. The volume of well-placed air strikes and AC-130 fire enabled the tenacious defenders to hold the NVA at bay for two days (see map 4).

When the NVA tried to get through the defenses of the southern compound, an AC-130 gunship, according to Major General Hollingsworth, "slaughtered" them in the wire and "destroyed the better part of a regiment."[4]

The four-engine propeller-driven aircraft was originally designed as a cargo carrier, but it had been armed and modified earlier in the war to carry out interdiction missions against North Vietnamese men and materiel moving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam.



An AC-130 Spectre gunship. These aircraft were on station over An Loc for the entire battle and proved highly effective against the NVA attackers.



Map 4. The Loc Ninh-An Loc vicinity

The aircraft was initially armed with 7.62-mm Vulcan miniguns, 20-mm Vulcan, and 40-mm Bofors automatic guns. It was also equipped with a variety of tracking equipment, to include a Black Crow radar (used to pick up vehicle ignitions), low-light-level television camera, infrared detector, ground target radar, and a strong searchlight. These well-armed, versatile aircraft would prove crucial in the coming battle for An Loc.

U.S. Air Force fighters stopped three mass attacks on the compounds by what was known as "snake and nape," a mixed ordnance load of conventional high-drag bombs, cluster bomb units (CBUs), and napalm. As the North Vietnamese troops massed for attacks on the remaining ARVN positions, the repeated tactical air strikes and accurate AC-130 fire wrought terrible damage.

However, the next day, 7 April, the sheer force of NVA numbers prevailed, and the repeated human-wave attacks, supported by 75-mm recoilless rifles, 122-mm rockets, 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers, BTR-50 armored personnel carriers, and tanks, eventually overwhelmed the defenders. The southern compound fell at around 0800; the remaining ARVN positions in the northern compound were overrun about 1630.

Less than 100 of the Loc Ninh defenders escaped to An Loc; the remainder of the ARVN troops and American advisers were killed or captured by the victorious North Vietnamese forces. One adviser, Captain Mark Smith (who had virtually assumed command of the ARVN soldiers when the 9th ARVN Regiment's commander, Colonel Nguyen Cong Vinh, had surrendered), was last heard from as he called in air strikes on the NVA troops overrunning his own position in the southern compound.[5] He was wounded multiple times, captured, and not repatriated until the spring of 1973.

Another adviser in Loc Ninh, Major Thomas A. Davidson, part of the Binh Long Province advisory team, escaped through the wire just as the North Vietnamese troops entered one end of his command bunker in the northern compound. He and his Vietnamese interpreter evaded the NVA for the next four days, barely avoiding capture on numerous occasions and finally reaching an ARVN Ranger battalion in the northern part of An Loc. One other adviser, Captain George K. Wanant, Loc Ninh district adviser, also escaped but was captured by the North Vietnamese near Cam Le Bridge thirty-one days later.

As the final attack on Loc Ninh unfolded, Task Force 52 (TF 52), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Ba Thinh, was conducting operations from two small firebases located between Loc Ninh and An

Loc near the junction of LTL-17 and QL-13. This task force had been formed from a battalion of Thinh's own 52d Regiment (2-52) and one from the 48th Regiment (1-48), both originally from the 18th ARVN Division, which had been moved from the 18th Division base in Xuan Loc (Long Khanh Province) in late March and placed under the operational command of the 5th ARVN Division to serve as part of the border screen for the division. The task force was accompanied by three U.S. Army advisers, Lieutenant Colonel Walter D. Ginger, Captain Marvin C. Zumwalt, and Sergeant First Class Floyd Winland.

On 6 April, Brigadier General Le Van Hung, the 5th ARVN Division commander, at the urging of Colonel Miller, his U.S. adviser, ordered Lieutenant Colonel Thinh, to mount an attack to reinforce the beleaguered Loc Ninh garrison. Thinh attempted to accomplish this task with his northernmost battalion (2-52), but the battalion ran almost immediately into an ambush as they moved toward the junction of LTL-17 and QL-13. During this ambush the battalion came under heavy enemy attack from several directions, and it was forced to withdraw to its original firebase. The NVA unleashed an artillery barrage on both firebases, pouring down more than 150 rounds of 82-mm mortar and 105-mm howitzer fire and 122-mm rockets from the south and northwest.[6] Barely able to defend themselves against these attacks, the task force was unable to comply with General Hung's order to assist the garrison at Loc Ninh. As the NVA attacks on TF 52 increased in intensity, it became apparent that Loc Ninh could not hold out much longer, and Colonel Miller realized that they were about to lose Thinh's forces as well. On the morning of 6 April, Lieutenant Colonel Ginger radioed to Colonel Miller that the NVA forces had nearly completed the encirclement of TF 52.

On the morning of 7 April, after numerous attempts, Colonel Miller finally convinced General Hung, who was badly shaken by the events at Loc Ninh, that something had to be done quickly to preclude the destruction of the task force. Hung ordered Lieutenant Colonel Thinh to evacuate the firebases and move the task force to An Loc.

At 0830 on the morning of the 7th, the lead element, complete with trucks towing artillery pieces and water trailers, moved east along LTL-17 toward the junction of 17 and QL-13. Near the junction, the convoy ran into a strong ambush (in the same area as the previous day's action); the survivors of this brief, but violent, ambush withdrew once again back to the firebase, abandoning three 105-mm howitzers and numerous vehicles. The NVA gunners increased the volume of artillery into both ARVN firebases.

It was clear that the NVA was not going to let TF 52 evacuate their position without a fight. At 0900, General Hung ordered Lieutenant Colonel Thinh to destroy the task force's heavy weapons and vehicles and withdraw on foot to An Loc.[7]

Thinh directed that 2-52 continue to hold the northern firebase as a rear guard, while the command group and 1-48 attempted to force the enemy positions along LTL-17 to break through to QL-13. The destruction of vehicles and equipment (to include 105-mm ammunition) was not complete when the lead elements moved out. They soon passed the site of the two previous ambushes, marked by both destroyed and undamaged ARVN vehicles. Shortly after that, the 1-48 was taken under direct and indirect fire by the NVA and their movement stalled. Meanwhile, 2-52 had departed the northern firebase and ran into the rear of 1-48 where it had been stopped by the North Vietnamese. A near panic situation ensued in the ARVN ranks, and unit integrity began to break down as the forces became intermingled.

In the process of trying to regain control of the situation and get the task force moving toward An Loc, Thinh and his command group, accompanied by the American advisory team, ran into a large ambush and Captain Zumwalt was wounded in the face by a fragment from an enemy B-40 rocket. Lieutenant Colonel Ginger determined that Zumwalt was too badly injured to continue and requested extraction by helicopter. Leaving several wounded ARVN soldiers with the Americans, Thinh and the remnants of the task force pressed on for An Loc.

For the next thirty-six hours, Lieutenant Colonel Ginger and his small band of comrades fought off continual enemy attacks at very close range. Tactical aircraft, AC-130 Spectre gunships, and helicopter gunships were called in to aid the beleaguered group, while repeated efforts were made to pick them up. The Americans were completely surrounded, and NVA ground fire prevented U.S. Army helicopters from landing. Two aborted rescue attempts resulted in the wounding of one crewman on the first medevac and the death of Chief Warrant Officer (WO-2) Robert L. Horst, the pilot of the second.[8]

At 0800 on 8 April, Ginger's men were finally extracted under extremely heavy fire by an American OH-6 helicopter. By the time the party was picked up, both Ginger and Winland were also wounded. The helicopter picked up Ginger's party plus six ARVN soldiers hanging on the skids; a total of twelve personnel flew on a helicopter designed to carry four. A second OH-6 extracted additional ARVN

wounded. Ginger, Zumwalt, and Winland were evacuated to 3d Field Hospital in Saigon.

The pilot of the lead OH-6, Captain John B. Whitehead, D Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, received the Silver Star and was nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor for braving intense ground fire to effect the rescue. Sergeant First Class Winland would later receive the Distinguished Service Cross for his valorous actions during the withdrawal operations and subsequent evacuation attempts.

The remainder of TF 52, only 600 of the original 1,000 soldiers, reached An Loc after a week of infiltrating through the NVA positions astride QL-13. They joined the defenders girding themselves for the coming attack.[9] The next day, the regiment was joined by Major Raymond Haney and Captain James H. Willbanks (the author), who arrived by helicopter from the 18th ARVN Division headquarters in Xuan Loc, to replace the evacuated advisory team.

As the attacks on Loc Ninh and TF 52 unfolded, General Minh and Major General Hollingsworth became convinced that An Loc would be the primary objective of the enemy attack.[10] They also realized that if An Loc fell, the North Vietnamese would have very little between them and Saigon. Accordingly, the decision was made to hold An Loc at all costs. South Vietnamese President Thieu radioed the senior ARVN officers in An Loc that the city would be defended to the death.[11] This had a psychological impact on the enemy as well as the defenders. By directing that the city be held "at all costs," Thieu all but challenged the North Vietnamese to take it. In the weeks that followed, the NVA became virtually obsessed with the desire to overrun An Loc, even long after it had ceased to hold any real military significance.[12]

On the American side, some advisers had been pulled out of Quang Tri when the enemy offensive had started in Military Region I, and this had had disastrous effects on the morale of the South Vietnamese forces there. Hollingsworth determined that the stakes were too high to risk a reoccurrence this close to Saigon. He notified the advisers in An Loc that they were there for the duration.[13] Thus, the American advisers prepared to share the fate of their ARVN counterparts in the coming battle. This proved to be a crucial factor in convincing the South Vietnamese defenders that they would not be left in the lurch to face the repeated North Vietnamese attacks alone.

While concerned about the welfare of his advisers, Hollingsworth was excited about the opportunity to get the NVA to stand and fight.

He later said, "Once the Communists decided to take An Loc, and I could get a handful of soldiers to hold and a lot of American advisers to keep them from running off, that's all I needed."[14] He told the advisers in An Loc, "Hold them and I'll kill them with air power; give me something to bomb and I'll win."[15]

The North Vietnamese Turn on An Loc

On 6 April, the enemy forces arrayed in and around Loc Ninh had begun moving south toward An Loc. Under cover of darkness and moving stealthily through the jungle and rubber plantations, the NVA forces took up positions encircling the provincial capital.

As the pressure on An Loc increased, General Minh, III Corps commander, ordered two battalions of the 3d Ranger Group to An Loc to bolster the ARVN defenders. Additionally, on 7 April, Minh was given operational control of the 1st Airborne Brigade, which had previously been located in Saigon as the Joint General Staff strategic reserve. He ordered the brigade, consisting of the 5th, 6th, and 8th Airborne Infantry Battalions and the 81st Ranger Group, to move to Lai Khe to assume the mission of III Corps' reserve; he told them to deploy north of Lai Khe along QL-13.

On the evening of 7 April, North Vietnamese forces from the elite 9th VC Division attacked the Quan Loi airstrip, just three kilometers northeast of An Loc, where the U.S.-ARVN helicopter rearming and refueling areas were located. The attack was characterized by repeated human wave attacks and the use of tear and nausea gas by the attackers. The two companies from the 7th ARVN Regiment defending the airfield were unable to hold against the NVA attacks, and they were ordered to destroy their equipment and withdraw to the city.

With the loss of Quan Loi, it appeared that the North Vietnamese were trying to isolate and encircle An Loc. Hollingsworth advised Minh to order the 1st Airborne Brigade to attack north to secure QL-13, An Loc's lifeline to Lai Khe and ultimately Saigon. With the 5th Battalion in the lead, the brigade attempted to push north but immediately came under heavy attack from North Vietnamese forces entrenched along the highway. It was clear that the NVA were determined to interdict any attempt to reinforce or resupply An Loc by road.[16] The loss of Quan Loi airstrip and the blocking of QL-13 by the NVA meant that the city was surrounded and cut off from the outside. Thus began a siege that would last for over two months.

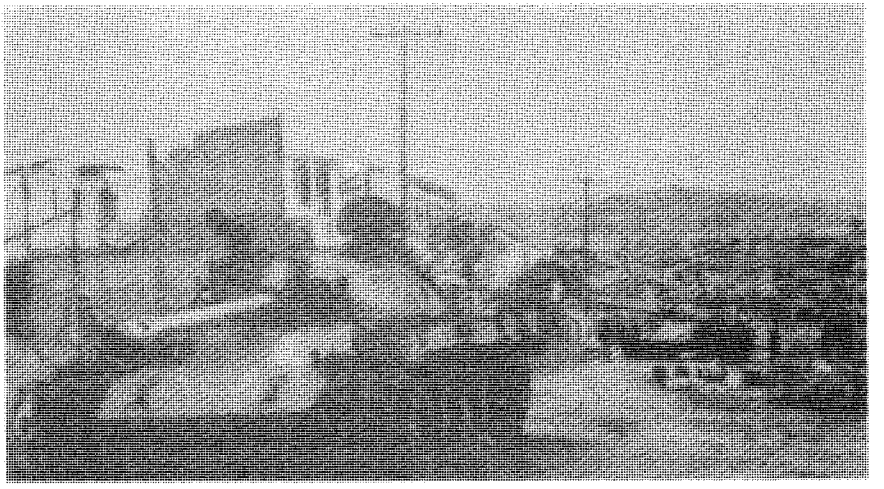
Over the next several months, the forces in An Loc would undergo a protracted attack, marked by repeated human wave assaults and



NVA artillery in action, April 1972

continuous heavy shelling at levels seldom seen during the conduct of the entire Vietnam War. To withstand the intensity of this prolonged level of combat would demand almost superhuman endurance on the part of the defenders and their advisers. Additionally, the absence of any significant friendly artillery support and surface resupply would demand the utmost from American air support, both for firepower and resupply.

With the seizure of the Quan Loi area, the NVA gained control of the high ground overlooking the city from which to direct accurate artillery fire and rockets into the city. Still, the NVA made no move to attack the city on the ground for several days. North Vietnamese documents later revealed that the ARVN's rapid withdrawal from Loc Ninh and the other border outposts surprised the NVA and upset their planning timetable.[17] They had expected the securing of Loc Ninh and the outlying border posts to take more time, which would have permitted them to continue to build up the logistics base in Binh Long Province in preparation for the attack on An Loc. Their success in the initial attacks on Loc Ninh and TF 52 had far exceeded their greatest expectations, and they needed time to regroup and continue the buildup for the main thrust on the provincial capital.



A column of T-54 tanks destroyed during the initial assault on An Loc, April 1972

The defenders had their own logistical problems. With the blocking of QL-13, all resupply had to be flown in by helicopters. On 12 April, intense antiaircraft fire downed a VNAF CH-47 helicopter attempting to bring supplies into the city. The amount and types of antiaircraft fire indicated that the NVA had greatly strengthened the ring around the city, and it became very difficult to get helicopters into and out of the city. The NVA had all avenues of approach covered with massive .51-caliber, 23-mm, 37-mm, and 57-mm fire. Additionally, they had introduced the SA-7 Strella heat-seeking antiaircraft missile, similar to the American-made Redeye shoulder-fired heat seeker. Furthermore, a system of early warning spotters enabled the North Vietnamese to identify incoming aircraft so that their gunners would be ready to fire. The result was a devastating pattern of antiaircraft fire every time an aircraft got close to the city.

Within the city, the situation was becoming extremely grim. Artillery and rocket fire were increasing, and patrols outside the defensive perimeter ran into heavy enemy concentrations. Refugees streaming into the city from the north reported sighting tanks, artillery, and other heavy equipment—all headed south. An ARVN officer who was captured by the NVA at Loc Ninh, but escaped and made his way to An Loc, reported that his captors told him that they were going to take An Loc at "any" cost.[18] This and other intelligence indicated that the enemy was preparing for an all-out assault on the city.[19]

Reinforcements were flown into An Loc during the relative lull following the NVA attack on Quan Loi. The 1st and 2d Battalions of the 8th ARVN Regiment and the regimental reconnaissance company were flown in on 11 and 12 April.

By the afternoon of 12 April, ARVN forces in and around the city had grown to a total of four regiments (nine infantry battalions), consisting of regular infantrymen from elements of two divisions, rangers, and territorial forces (see map 5).[20] This force of about 3,000 soldiers would be outnumbered 6 to 1 by the 3 NVA divisions advancing on An Loc.

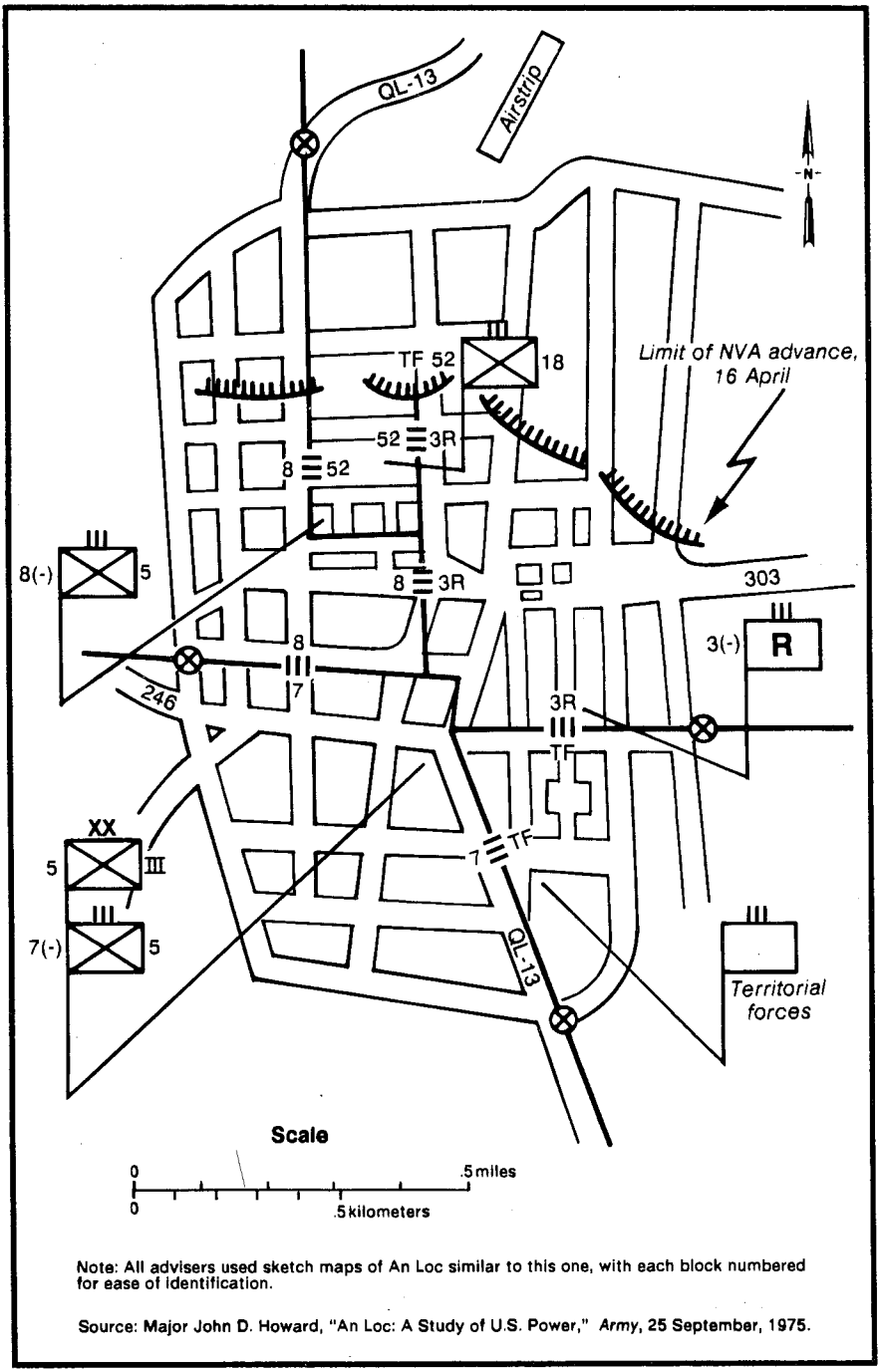
At Headquarters, Third Regional Assistance Command, in Long Binh, General Hollingsworth and his deputy, Brigadier General John R. McGiffert, read the intelligence reports and determined that the enemy's main attack on An Loc was about to begin.[21] They met with U.S. Air Force representatives at Lai Khe and planned B-52 missions and tactical air strikes on suspected enemy positions around An Loc for the next day.

The Battle for An Loc

During the early hours of 13 April, enemy artillery increased dramatically in volume all over An Loc. The whole spectrum of NVA weapons was brought to bear, including Soviet-made 57-mm and 75-mm recoilless rifles, 100-mm and 76-mm tank guns, as well as 107-mm and 122-mm rockets and all types of heavy mortars. It was also reported that the NVA used Soviet-made 130-mm howitzers. In addition to the Soviet weapons, the NVA also employed American-made 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers captured from the ARVN forces during the Lamson 719 incursion into Laos in 1971 and at Loc Ninh and TF 52 firebases. A total of 7,000 shells and rockets would fall on the city during the next 15 hours, a rate of one round every 8 seconds.[22]

Shortly after dawn, the NVA forces began a combined tank and infantry attack from the northeast. The Soviet-made T-54 and PT-76 tanks moved down Ngo Quyen Street, the main north-south street in An Loc, toward the 5th ARVN Division command post in the southern section of the city. The South Vietnamese troops, who had never faced tanks in battle before, were panic-stricken; the forces in the north of the city that took the initial brunt of the tank assault quickly fell back in the face of the NVA attack.

The key event for the South Vietnamese forces in this early attack occurred as the tanks moved toward the center of the city. Private



Note: All advisers used sketch maps of An Loc similar to this one, with each block numbered for ease of identification.

Source: Major John D. Howard, "An Loc: A Study of U.S. Power," *Army*, 25 September, 1975.

Map 5. The defense of An Loc, 12 April 1972



An NVA T-54 killed near the center of the city by the 8th Regiment of the 5th ARVN Division

Binh Doan Quang, a soldier from the local territorial forces destroyed one of the lead tanks with an M-72 light antitank weapon (LAW). This was a galvanizing act that demonstrated that the enemy tanks could be stopped and greatly enhanced the confidence of the badly shaken defenders.[23] Word spread quickly and the ARVN soldiers began to emerge from their holes and fire at the tanks.

Two other factors contributed to ARVN efforts to stabilize their defensive lines. First, the NVA were extremely inept in their use of coordinated armor and infantry in the attack. Although most of the tank crews had recently returned from tank training in the Soviet Union, they quickly demonstrated that they did not understand the use of combined arms tactics.[24] The tanks routinely attacked without infantry, persisted in advancing along roads when cross-country movement would have been safer, and, when speed and initiative were called for, proceeded slowly and indecisively.[25] This failure to apply the most basic tenets of combined arms tactics left the North Vietnamese tanks unprotected against the ARVN defenders, who found them easy prey for their LAWs, once they overcame the initial shock of the armored attack.

During the confusion of the initial attack, one North Vietnamese tank crew demonstrated that even the NVA had that small percentage of people who "don't get the word." Thinking that the city had been secured by the NVA infantry, they rolled into the city with all hatches open, completely oblivious to the fact that the soldiers in the fighting positions were ARVN, not NVA. The tank made it all the way to the



An ARVN defender at An Loc. Using M-72 LAW missiles, such defenders knocked out several North Vietnamese tanks.

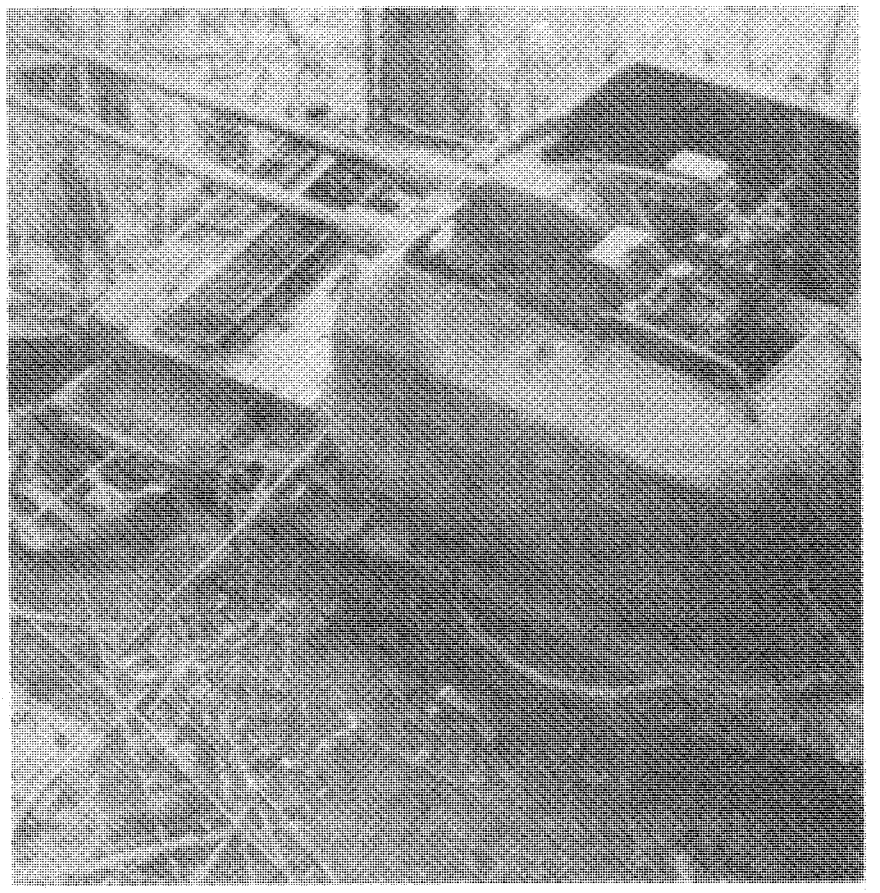
southern part of the city before it was knocked out by an ARVN soldier with an M-72 LAW.[26]

But what thwarted the North Vietnamese onslaught was the well-executed air support that struck the enemy well forward of the ARVN positions and prevented the NVA from reinforcing their initial success in the northern part of the city. While A-6s, A-7s, F-4s, and A-37s and VNAF A-1s and A-37s dropped their bombs on the NVA forces massing around the city for the attack, the ARVN forces, supported by Army AH-1G Cobra attack helicopters and Air Force AC-119K Stinger and AC-130 Spectre gunships, were able to defend against the reduced number of NVA infantry and tanks that escaped the air strikes and assaulted the city.

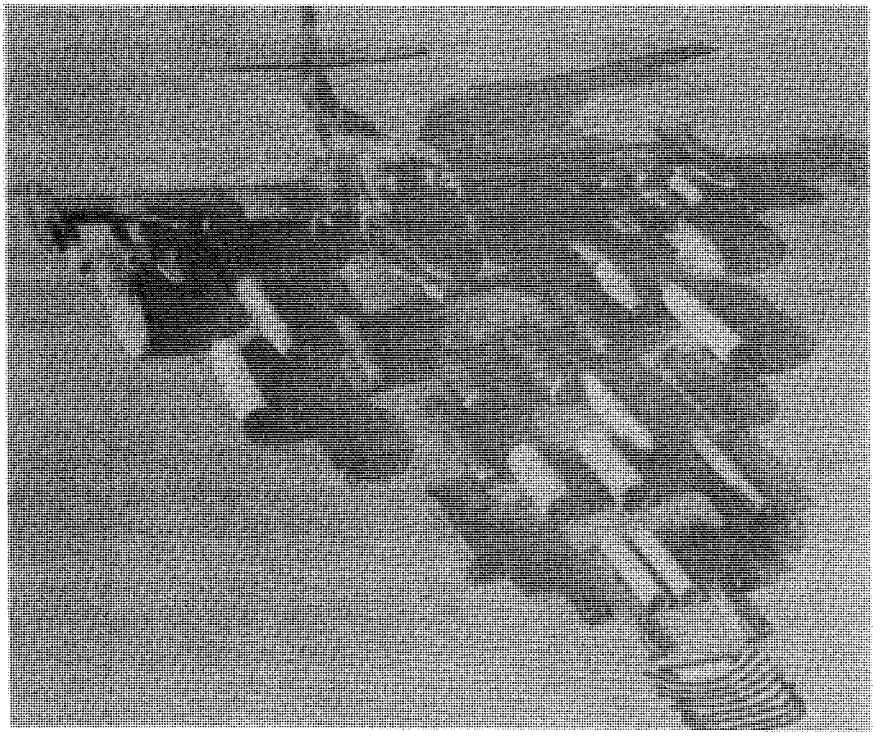
The Cobras from F Battery, 79th Aerial Rocket Artillery, and F Troop, 9th Cavalry, were particularly effective in hitting the tanks in the close confines of the city streets. During the initial NVA assault, they caught one tank column attacking south near the 8th ARVN Regiment's command post. They knocked out the lead tank, one in the middle, and the last tank in the column, effectively stopping the attack

in its tracks. Another Cobra, flown by Captain Bill Causey with Lieutenant Steve Shields as gunmen, was eventually credited with killing or disabling five tanks during the first week of the battle for An Loc.[27]

For the remainder of the 13th and the next two days, the American advisers directed repeated air strikes against the NVA forces, which were sometimes as close as twenty meters to friendly troops.[28] The tenacity of the defenders and the continuous air strikes prevented the enemy from expanding its foothold in the northern part of the city.



A fighter aircraft destroyed this North Vietnamese ZSU57/2 antiaircraft weapon near the center of the city



An A-37 with the various types of ordnance it was capable of carrying. These aircraft provided close air support during the intense fighting in An Loc in April and May.

The house-to-house fighting continued unabated. Lieutenant Colonel Edward B. Benedit, one of Colonel Miller's deputies, later recalled: "The enemy pounded and pounded. He'd hit and take a house, then reinforce at night, and next day take the next house and the next."[29]

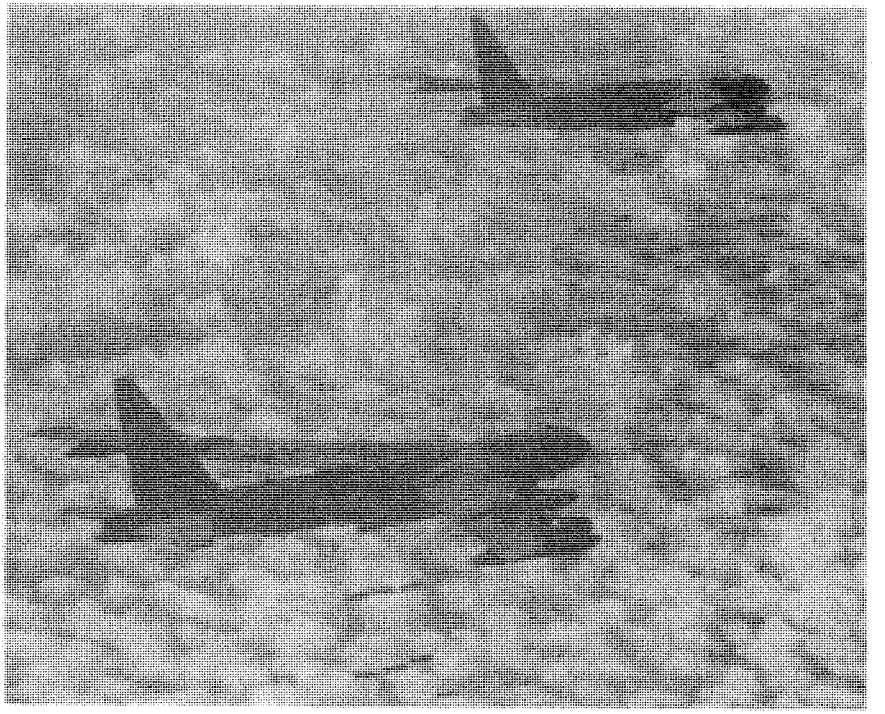
The civilian citizens of An Loc were not immune to the death and destruction going on all around them. One of the NVA T-54 tanks made it into the center of the city, where it rolled into a Catholic church. Huddled inside were old men, women, and children conducting a prayer service. The tank fired its cannon and machine guns, killing well over 100 of the innocent civilians.[30]

As the battle inside the city raged, General Hollingsworth directed B-52 strikes on NVA staging areas very close to the city. Each B-52 strike, code-named Arc Light, consisted of three aircraft, each carrying up to 108 MK-82 500-pound conventional bombs. The devastation wrought by these missions was immense. One B-52 strike

caught an entire battalion in the open before it reached the northwest approach to the city. The bombs killed an estimated 100 attackers, destroyed at least 3 tanks, and broke the back of the NVA attack on that part of the city.[31] These strikes would prove the difference between victory and defeat countless times during the next two months.

The NVA increased the heavy shelling on the city, but the ARVN defenders "circled the wagons" and used tactical air power to hold the NVA ground attacks at bay while the B-52s worked on the enemy staging areas. General McGiffert later commented on the effectiveness of the B-52 strikes and the tactical air sorties of 13 through 15 April thusly: "I really believe that without these the city would have fallen, because I think the infantry would have gotten in with the tanks."[32]

Air support in all its forms had a tremendous impact on the outcome of every battle. Patrols after the first assault on An Loc



American B-52s like these, flying from Guam and Thailand, were instrumental in breaking up NVA troop concentrations at An Loc



Brigadier General Le Van Hung, commander, 5th ARVN Division, in his command bunker in An Loc

confirmed more than 400 enemy dead, half of whom were killed by air.[33] During the first two weeks of the battle for the city, over 2,500 air strikes were flown in support of the ARVN forces in and around An Loc.[34] The U.S. Air Force had been a key factor in the stabilization of a very serious tactical emergency.

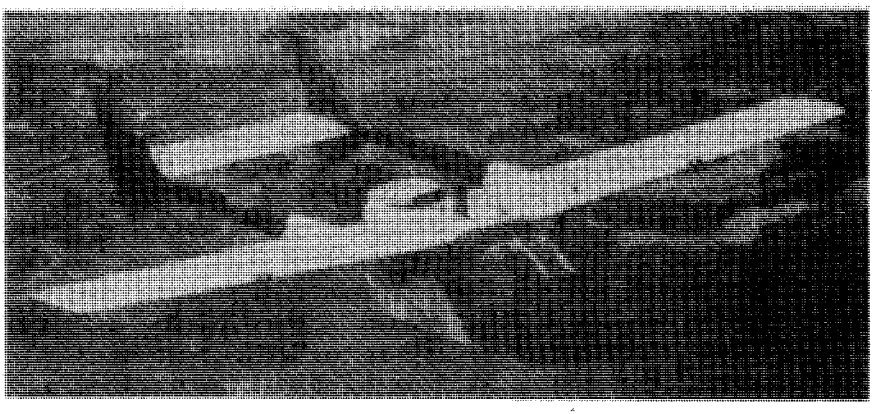
The North Vietnamese forces were undeterred by the heavy casualties inflicted on them by the continuous air strikes. They continued to press the attack, still leading with tanks. On 14 April, one such attack, accompanied by small groups of infantry, came within 500 meters of the 5th Division Command Post in the center of the city before it was beaten back by the defenders.

After two days of intense fighting and relentless shelling, the ARVN morale remained high. Recovering from the initial shock of the armored attack, the ARVN soldiers had rallied and reorganized their defenses. The presence of the American advisers and the around-the-clock tactical air support they controlled demonstrated to the defenders that they were not going to be left to fend for themselves.

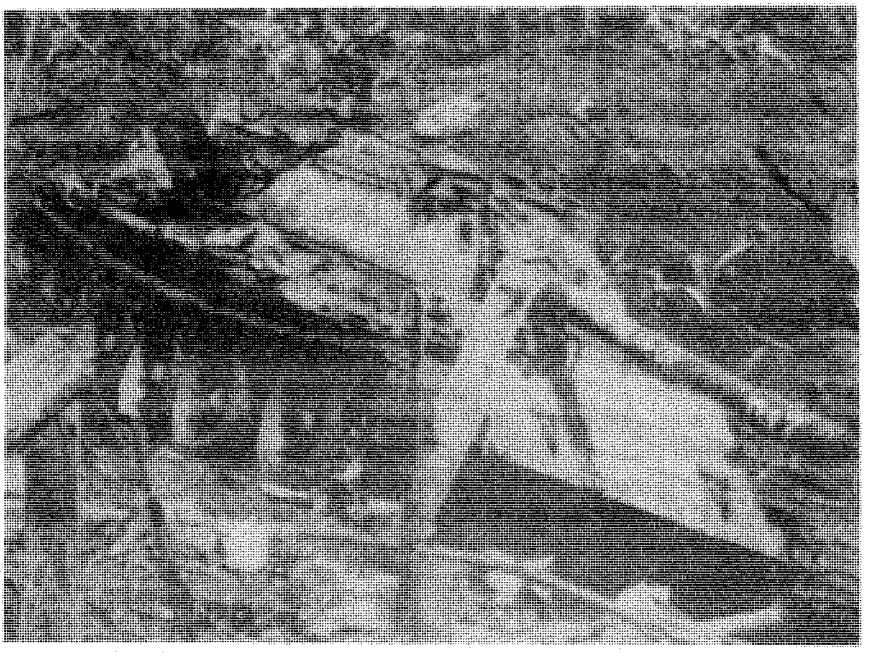
The advisers were busy. Colonel Miller and his fellow American officers in the 5th ARVN Division's command bunker worked twenty-four hours a day, stopping only briefly to grab quick naps. Huddled around a plywood map table, they planned and coordinated the battle. The ARVN commander and his staff had little training or experience in handling operations as complex as those demanded by the NVA attack. The American officers acted as General Hung's staff; they advised him on troop dispositions, planned air strikes, coordinated support, and processed intelligence. They spoke constantly with the forward air controllers coordinating the air support vital to the defense of the city. They also planned the next day's missions and attempted to coordinate the air resupply drops.

The advisers with the regiments and battalions also had their hands full. They advised their counterparts on defenses and tried to bolster their morale. Their primary function, however, was to coordinate the air strikes that had been allocated to their respective units by the advisers in the 5th ARVN Division's command bunker.

To coordinate the allocated air strikes, the advisers talked directly to the forward air controllers (FACs) of the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, who were orbiting over the city in O-2Bs, small Cessna fixed-wing aircraft with push and pull motors. These "good old boys," as one adviser called them, were the true heroes of the air war.[35] Their job was to fly "low and slow" over the battlefield to coordinate with the ground troops and direct the aircraft to their targets. The FAC aircraft were unarmed, except for smoke rockets, which were



The Cessna 0-2B Super Skymaster, flown by the forward air controllers from 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, during the Battle of An Loc



A North Vietnamese T-54 tank destroyed in the western sector of the perimeter at An Loc

used to mark the targets. Since most of the fighter-bomber aircraft did not have the same kind of tactical radios that the ground forces had, the FACs, who had both kinds, acted as the link between those on the ground who needed the ordnance put on target and those aircraft carrying the ordnance.

The normal procedure was for the senior advisers in the 5th ARVN Division's command post to coordinate requests for air support by talking to what became known as the "King FAC," who parceled out available tactical aircraft sorties to various other FACs who had been given area responsibility for different parts of the city and surrounding area. The FACs talked directly with the advisers on the ground to learn the nature of the target to be struck. They then spoke with the inbound fighter-bombers and directed them to the targets, using smoke rockets and adjustment instructions relayed from the ground. For the duration of the entire battle, the FACs and advisers, working closely together, were able to make the best use of all available aircraft and munitions to help the outnumbered defenders in very tenuous situations.

The ever-present U.S. Air Force greatly bolstered the ARVN's morale, which got another boost on 14 April when General Minh ordered the 1st Airborne Brigade to disengage along QL-13 and move by helicopter to reinforce the 5th ARVN Division forces at An Loc. The 6th Battalion conducted the initial combat assault by helicopter into an area adjacent to Windy Hill and Hill 169, the high ground three kilometers to the southeast of the city. The combat assault was made unopposed, but shortly thereafter, the airborne troopers made heavy contact with the enemy, sustaining moderate casualties. The American advisers with the unit called in tactical air support and the situation stabilized.

The next day, the remainder of the brigade was inserted in the same area southeast of the city. The brigade headquarters, along with the 5th and 8th Battalions, occupied positions east of the city. The 81st Ranger Group assaulted into a landing zone southeast of Hill 169 and began moving toward An Loc. The 6th Battalion began to construct a firebase for the six 105-mm howitzers from a battery of the 3d Artillery Battalion that were airlifted in that morning by CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

The pressure on An Loc increased on 15 April when the NVA once again renewed their attacks on the city in earnest. Two separate tank-led thrusts were made during the course of the day, but both were turned back after pitched battles. The outcomes of both of these battles were extremely close; in the latter attack, the NVA attackers once again almost took the 5th ARVN Division's command post, with one tank making it to within 200 meters of General Hung's command bunker, firing directly into it and killing three division staff officers.[36] As the defenders held tenaciously to their small piece of terrain, tactical air support once more provided the difference between victory and defeat. In one attack at 1400 that day, tactical aircraft destroyed nine of ten attacking tanks.

Meanwhile, President Thieu, realizing the criticality of holding An Loc to prevent a direct thrust on Saigon, had earlier ordered the 21st ARVN Infantry Division from its base in the Mekong delta to Binh Long Province to reinforce III Corps' forces. General Minh ordered the new division to attack north from Lai Khe to open the highway to An Loc. By 16 April, the 21st had moved north and was attacking the heavily entrenched NVA forces at Tau O Bridge on QL-13 south of the city. Unfortunately, they were having a difficult time of it and were not able to relieve any of the pressure on the ARVN defenders in An Loc to the north.

By late on 16 April, the battle inside An Loc had abated somewhat. The enemy shelling was still heavy, but there was a lull in the ground attack. After three days of combat, the enemy had lost twenty-three tanks, most of them T-54s.[37] Still, the NVA forces held the northern part of the city, and in many cases, the opposing forces were separated only by the width of a city street. Meanwhile, the NVA tightened its stranglehold on An Loc. The city had received 25,000 rounds in the previous 5 days, and it would continue to receive between 1,200 and 2,000 enemy rocket, artillery, and mortar rounds per day.[38]

General Hollingsworth reported on the 16th to General Abrams, commander of MACV in Saigon, that "there was a great battle at An Loc yesterday, perhaps the greatest of this campaign. The enemy hit us hard all day long with all he could muster—and we threw it back at him. The forces in An Loc realized that they had to fight and they fought well."[39]

In truth, the fighting ability of the ARVN during the initial NVA onslaught had been less than uniformly outstanding, yielding half of the city in the face of heavy ground, armor, and artillery attacks. However, the fact remained that the ARVN had held, and at least the southern half of the city was still in South Vietnamese hands.

The NVA Change Their Plan

Although the defenders did not know it at the time, the first phase of the battle had ended. The enemy's initial plan to seize the city had been thwarted. The main attack, conducted by the 9th NVA Division, supported by the 3d and 5th Battalions of the 203d Tank Regiment, had been unsuccessful—largely due to the continuous pounding by B-52s, fighter-bomber aircraft, AC-130 Spectre gunships, and attack helicopters. Accordingly, the North Vietnamese modified their plan.[40]

The original North Vietnamese plan had called for An Loc to be overrun and occupied by NVA forces no later than 20 April.[41] Due to the American tactical air support, the ARVN defenders were able to hold out, and the original Communist timetable was no longer achievable. Accordingly, the NVA headquarters ordered a renewed main attack on An Loc from the east by the 9th VC Division, supported by secondary attacks on the airborne brigade south of the city by elements of the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions. In an attempt to negate the impact of American air power, additional antiaircraft weapons were emplaced around An Loc.

By a twist of fate, the revised NVA plan of attack came into ARVN hands on 18 April. On that day, an ARVN Ranger element engaged NVA forces near Tong Le Chon firebase, just outside the city. The Rangers found a handwritten report on one of the enemy bodies after the battle; the report was from the 9th VC Division's political commissar assigned to the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the North Vietnamese headquarters. This report addressed the failure of the NVA attack to take An Loc in accordance with the initial plan. The report cited two reasons for this failure. First, the intervention of American air power had been devastating on the attacking forces. Secondly, the lack of coordination between armor and infantry forces in the attack had allowed the ARVN forces to regroup and reorganize their defenses. The report also contained a narrative of the modified plan to take the city.

With this plan, the enemy was very confident that the city could be seized within a matter of hours.[42] In fact, the NVA were so confident of victory that Radio Hanoi broadcast a report that the city would be taken and the People's Revolutionary Government established in An Loc by 20 April.[43]

Captured North Vietnamese soldiers later reported that after the initial attack, their leaders increased efforts to exhort them to do their utmost to defeat the ARVN "puppets." There were also reports that North Vietnamese tankers were found chained in their tanks.[44] Whether this was actually true or merely a symbolic gesture on the part of the NVA soldiers, it is indicative of the North Vietnamese commitment to take the city.

The defenders inside the city realized that they had only a momentary respite before the NVA attacked once again. On 17 April, Colonel Miller, senior adviser to the 5th ARVN Division, reported to General Hollingsworth that An Loc continued to sustain heavy shelling and that he believed the enemy planned to continue its stranglehold on the city and then attack in mass. Although the ARVN troops still held the city, Colonel Miller was pessimistic regarding their capability to carry on: "The division is tired and worn out; supplies minimal, casualties continue to mount, medical supplies are low; wounded a major problem, mass burials for military and civilians, morale at a low ebb. In spite of incurring heavy losses from U.S. air strikes, the enemy continues to persist."[45]

The situation in An Loc was indeed bleak. The U.S. and Vietnamese Air Forces attempted to resupply the city on a daily basis, but the enemy antiaircraft fire made it increasingly difficult to drop

the supplies so the defenders could recover them. Extremely heavy casualties had been sustained by all ARVN units. Evacuation of the wounded was nearly impossible, because the VNAF evacuation helicopters either refused to fly into the city, or if they made it into the city, they refused to touch down long enough to load the wounded. Those few courageous South Vietnamese airmen who did try to pick up the wounded were usually shot down or their aircraft heavily damaged by enemy ground fire.

The Second Attack

It was under these conditions that the defenders prepared themselves for the next NVA assault. The attack began in the early morning hours of 19 April, with a massive bombardment by rockets and artillery on both the city and the 1st Airborne positions on Windy Hill and Hill 169, southeast of the city. Following the heavy artillery preparation, the three regiments of the 9th VC Division (271st, 272d, and 95th) conducted the main attack on An Loc itself.

At the same time, the North Vietnamese launched a supporting attack with two NVA regiments, the 275th and the 141st (from the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions respectively), on the scattered elements of the 1st Airborne Brigade around the city. This attack was extremely violent, but the 5th Airborne Battalion was able to repulse the NVA from their positions east of QL-13 just outside the city. Tactical air support and B-52 strikes inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. However, the 6th Airborne Battalion in and around the firebase on Hill 169 was eventually overwhelmed. A small force of about eighty paratroopers was able to break out and was later extracted. Two companies made it into the city and joined the besieged defenders. Stragglers and escaped prisoners from the 6th Airborne Battalion continued to turn up in An Loc for several weeks, but the 6th Battalion as a unit was virtually out of the operation until it was reconstituted in late May.[46]

The result of this action was that NVA forces were able to occupy the dominant terrain previously held by the South Vietnamese paratroopers; these positions provided them unencumbered observation of ARVN defenses throughout the southern and eastern parts of the city.

Meanwhile, the main enemy attack on An Loc by the 9th VC Division did not go as well for the NVA. The 5th and 8th Airborne Battalions assumed positions in the rubber plantation just south of the city and were able to block the NVA thrust from that direction. In An



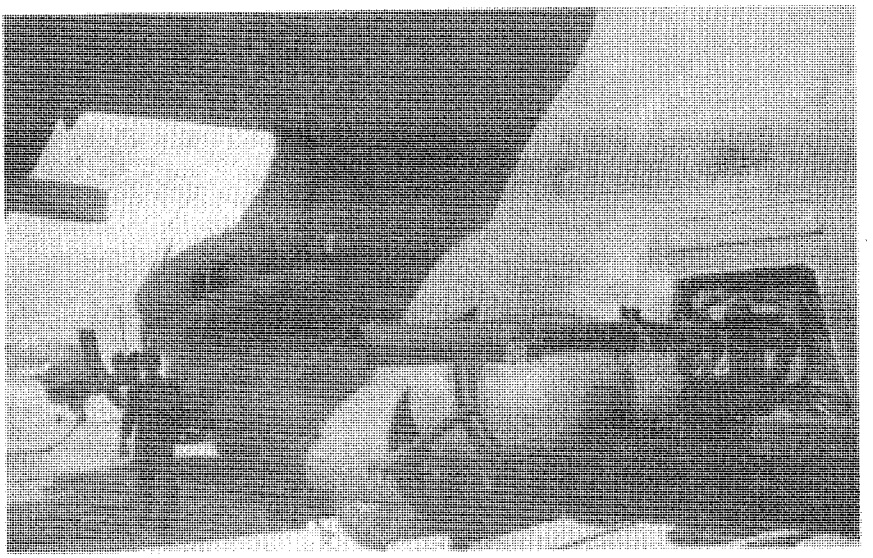
This NVA T-54 tank was knocked out just as it attempted to breach the barbed wire around the Binh Long Province compound near the southern gate of An Loc

Loc itself, the defenders and their advisers continued to repulse repeated ground assaults and employed close air support to bring devastating fire on enemy massed formations attacking all over the city. The fighting was intense, but the air support permitted the defenders to beat back the attacks.

By 22 April, the ground assaults had abated somewhat, but the artillery and rocket attacks had increased significantly, almost to the point of continuous "bombardment" according to one adviser. Nonetheless, the situation had stabilized; the NVA still held the northern part of the city, while the ARVN occupied the southern portion.

That night, the ARVN decided to see if they could improve the situation. The 81st Airborne Ranger Group, which had moved into the city and occupied defensive positions on the perimeter, launched a limited counterattack to eliminate several enemy lodgments in the northern sector of the city. Their aggressive attacks, among the first South Vietnamese offensive actions since the NVA invasion began, were supported by a Pave Aegis AC-130, a specially outfitted Spectre gunship with a 105-mm cannon. Sergeant First Class Jesse Yerta, light weapons adviser with the 81st, employed the Spectre's fire in the form of a rolling barrage to support the ARVN attack. In order to bring the supporting fire in close, Yerta moved with the lead assault element and repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire. He was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that night.

The attack by the 81st was mildly successful, but the tactical situation remained virtually unchanged from 22 April until 10 May. While both sides jockeyed for position and the opposing forces



A Pave Aegis AC-130 Spectre gunship, armed with a 105-mm howitzer, a 40-mm cannon, and 20-mm miniguns. The 105-mm howitzer was very effective against NVA tanks in An Loc.

remained in contact, neither side made significant gains. However, the NVA were able to secure a small salient in the western part of the city.

Conditions in the City

During this period, the enemy continued to pour 100-mm tank fire, rockets, and artillery and mortar rounds into the city. Meanwhile, the conditions in An Loc deteriorated to a new low. On at least three occasions, the NVA fired tear gas projectiles in the vicinity of the 5th ARVN Division's command bunker. The defenders lived underground, venturing outside only at great risk. One adviser put the odds for surviving five minutes outside in the open at only fifty-fifty.[47] The defenders had been brought to a point where they feared to move, shoot, or expose themselves in any way.[48] Most buildings and other structures in the city had been destroyed by the repeated ground attacks, shelling, and air strikes. The city, once considered one of the most beautiful in Military Region III, was strewn with mounds of rubble, shattered trees, garbage, and dead domestic animals. Captain Harold Moffett, an adviser with the 3d ARVN Ranger Group, later described the landscape as looking "like Berlin at the end of World War II."[49]

The civilian refugees from the fighting in Loc Ninh had escaped to the "safety" of An Loc earlier in the month; they now joined the citizens of the provincial capital in the battle for survival amidst some of the most intense combat of the Vietnam War. By this time, the civilian population in An Loc was estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000.[50]

Suffering from lack of food, water, medical supplies, and shelter, the noncombatants were caught in the crossfire between the defenders and the NVA attackers. The NVA realized that the civilians complicated the problems of the defenders and made every effort to guide additional refugees into the city and prevent them from leaving, indiscriminately killing anyone who attempted to escape the city.

The civilians merely wanted to get away from the fighting, but the North Vietnamese forces had the city encircled, and there was no way out. Still, the refugees tried to escape; some were successful, but many suffered the same fate as a group of 200 refugees who made a run for it on 15 April. Led by a French Catholic priest and a Buddhist monk, they went through the barbed wire and concertina that surrounded the city and tried to move south down QL-13 to safety. They made it to the southern edge of the city before the NVA opened fire with rockets and artillery, driving those that survived back into



The flood of refugees that crowded the roads often obstructed operations against the NVA

the city. This abortive attempt left dead and wounded "laying in ditches like cordwood" all along the highway.[51]

This was not an isolated incident. Almost every time a large group of refugees tried to escape from the heavy combat, the NVA's artillery forward observers targeted the fleeing columns and devastated these innocents. This pattern also prevailed in Military Region I and the Central Highlands; President Thieu claimed on 9 May that enemy guns had killed a total of 25,000 refugees trying to escape the 3 major battlefields in the previous 72 hours.[52]

The human toll inside the city was ghastly; the streets and rubble were littered with bodies, both military and civilian. Province Senior Adviser Corley reported that "the bodies of men, women, and children are everywhere."[53] The smell of death permeated the air. Under these conditions, innumerable diseases, including cholera, soon ran rampant through both civilian and soldier ranks. To avoid a full-fledged epidemic, bodies were buried in common mass graves, some containing 300 to 500 corpses, by soldiers operating bulldozers during the infrequent lulls in the shelling.[54] Many bodies had to be reburied after exploding shells churned up the original graves.[55]

Antiaircraft fire had increased to the point that it became even more difficult to supply the defenders by air. By 26 April, two U.S. Air Force C-130s and three VNAF C-123s had been shot down over An Loc, and every transport that had flown over the city had sustained severe damage from enemy ground fire.

The situation was particularly critical since medical supplies were almost exhausted. The NVA forces had shelled the province hospital and its 300 patients on the night of 13 April, destroying the hospital and killing most of the patients and staff.[56] The few remaining ARVN medical officers were overwhelmed by the rapidly mounting number of casualties. It remained almost impossible to evacuate the wounded because the few VNAF helicopters that made it near the city usually refused to do anything but hover for a few minutes before flying away. Many of the wounded, particularly the civilian refugees trapped in the city, went unattended. Obviously, this grim situation had a major impact on the defenders' morale.

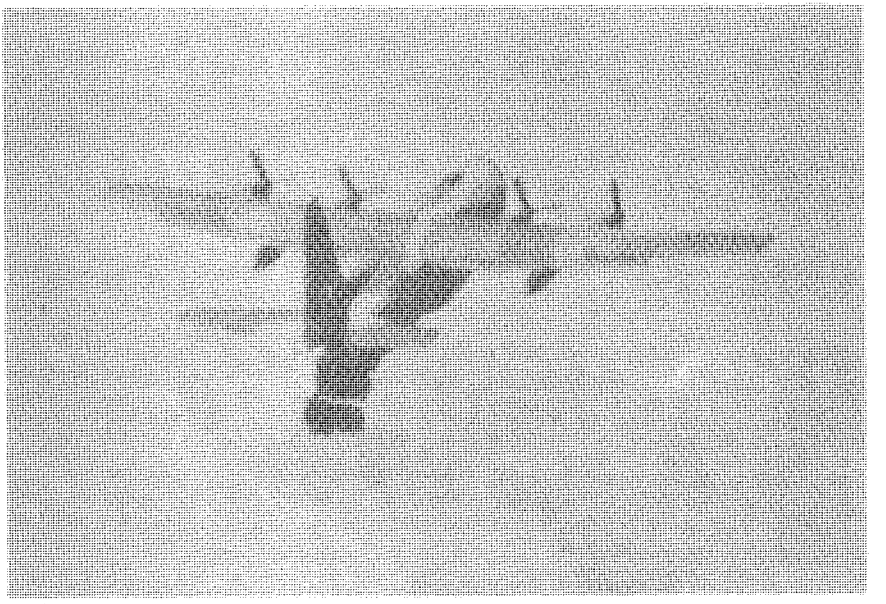
The morale was further degraded by several incidents involving what one adviser called "the olympic wounded."[57] On at least two separate occasions, evacuation helicopters braved intense ground fire to land in the city to pick up casualties only to have certain "wounded"



Frantic South Vietnamese soldiers scrambling aboard a hovering helicopter at An Loc. Such behavior by able-bodied ARVN soldiers had a devastating effect on troop morale in An Loc, particularly among the wounded.

ARVN soldiers drop their more severely wounded compatriots to clamber aboard the departing helicopters.

The resupply situation changed somewhat for the better when the U.S. Air Force assumed total responsibility for resupplying the city. The amount and range of the various NVA antiaircraft weapons dictated that the C-130 transport aircraft drop their cargo bundles from an altitude in excess of 6,000 feet. Using the An Loc soccer stadium as a drop zone, the Air Force pilots attempted to deliver much



An example of a high-altitude airdrop from the 61st Tactical Airlift Squadron. Much trial and error was required before the proper procedure was developed and successful resupply drops could be effected in the high-intensity air defense situation over An Loc.

needed food, medical supplies, and ammunition by high-altitude, low-opening parachutes. This technique resulted in less exposure to the aircraft from ground fire, but there was a problem with the packing of the parachute bundles, and most fell outside the drop zone and into enemy hands.

Colonel Andy Iosue, commander of the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing, instituted a new tactic that involved low-altitude drops, but the first attempts resulted in severe aircraft damage from NVA ground fire and several aircraft losses. Iosue then tried the same approach at night, but this did not appreciably reduce the exposure to ground fire, plus it was more difficult to identify the drop zones in the dark. The supply situation in the city became so desperate that often fire fights broke out between ARVN units competing for the few cargo bundles that were recoverable. One adviser observed that the supplies that made it into the city went to the "strongest, swiftest, and the closest to the pallet drop."[58]

One captured NVA officer demoralized his ARVN interrogators, who were existing on brackish water and an ever-decreasing supply of canned fish and rice, when he asked for a can of C-ration fruit cocktail.

He said he had grown very fond of it when his unit had retrieved cases of the stuff dropped by the American airplanes.[59]

On 1 May, General Hollingsworth estimated that during the period 15—30 April, less than 30 percent of the USAF's C-130 tonnage had been recovered by ARVN forces.[60] As much as 85 percent of the rest of the supplies fell into North Vietnamese hands.[61]

As the defenders inside the city attempted to deal with the resupply problems and increasing casualties inflicted by the intense shelling, NVA units surrounding An Loc began to reposition themselves for yet another assault. While elements of the 7th NVA Division in the south continued to block the relief attempt by the 21st ARVN Division, seven NVA regiments were poised for the next attack on the city.

On 6 May, an NVA prisoner from the 9th VC Division informed his captors that his division commander had been reprimanded for not taking the city in April and that the 5th VC Division commander had boasted that his troops would take An Loc in three days.[62] Other intelligence indicated that the E6, 174th, and 275th Regiments of the 5th VC Division would attack from the east supported by the 271st and



ARVN soldiers rigging loads at Bien Hoa Airbase for an airdrop at An Loc

272d Regiments of the 9th VC Division and the 141st and 165th Regiments of the 7th NVA Division.

Defending against these forces were barely 4,000 ARVN troops, including both regular and territorial forces. At least 1,000 of the defenders were wounded, but those that were able continued to man their defensive positions.

The American advisers on the ground realized that the situation in the city was critical and doubted that the ARVN could hold against another determined attack.[63] The South Vietnamese troops knew that they would not be evacuated if they were wounded. Thus, the continuous artillery bombardment had a demoralizing effect on the ARVN's morale and resolve. The advisers were afraid that the ARVN would break if the NVA attacked in force, and the Americans stepped up their efforts to bolster their counterparts' morale. It was under these conditions that the defenders found themselves when the NVA launched their next attack to take the city.

IV. THE BATTLE OF AN LOC, PHASE II

The Third Attack

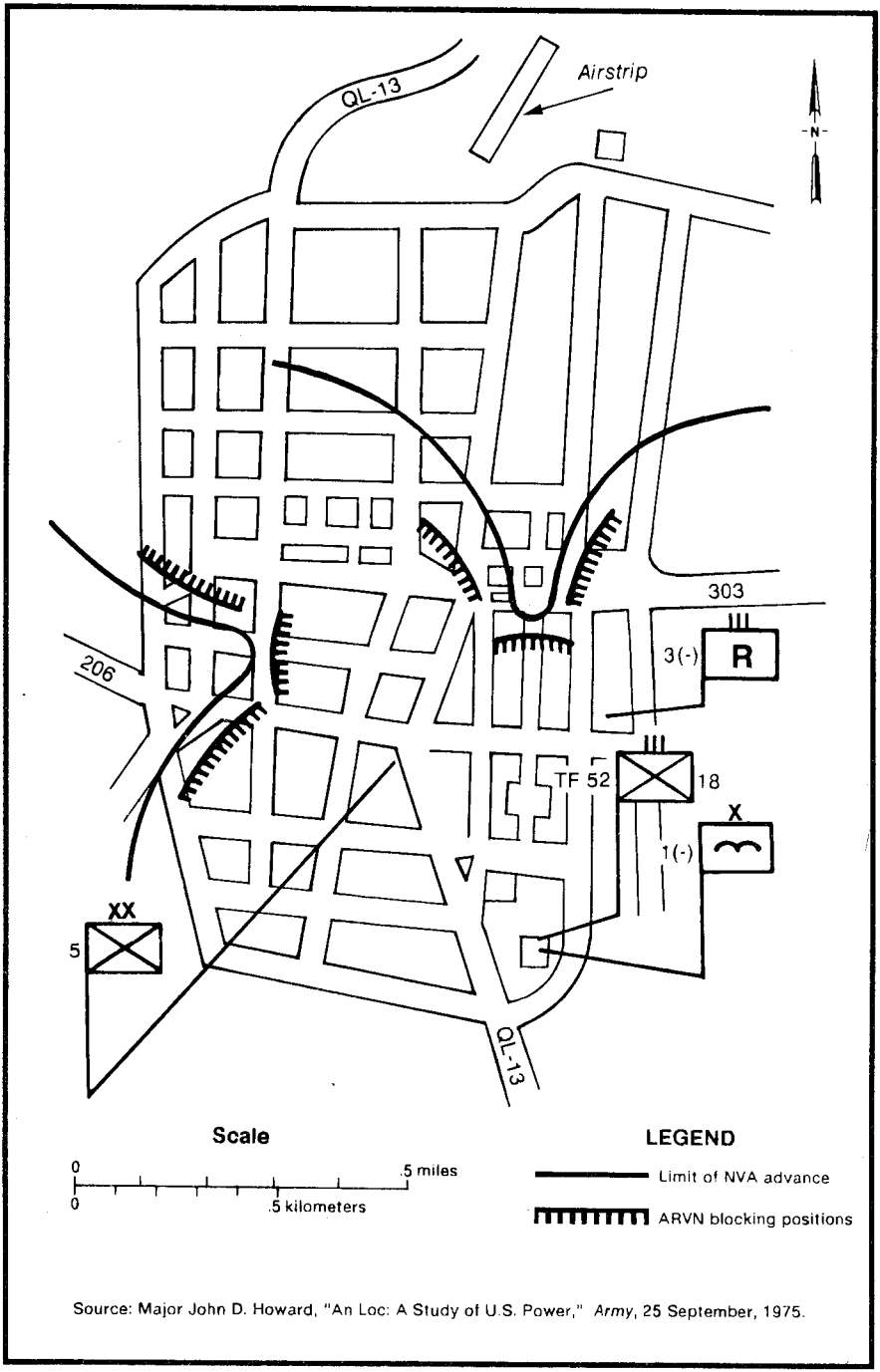
At Third Regional Assistance Command, all intelligence indicated to General Hollingsworth that the enemy was preparing to make another push to take the city. Reports of enemy movements and a tremendous increase in shelling meant that the time of the attack was near. Hollingsworth knew that the situation in the city was deteriorating rapidly. He later reported:

> I spent many hours during the course of the next few days encouraging the province chief [Colonel Nhut], the division commander [General Hung], and their advisers to hold their positions. My attempts to belittle the capability of the enemy and to strengthen friendly forces' morale seemed almost hopeless. Enemy positions and movements, intensity of antiaircraft fire, and the increase in enemy artillery and rockets against An Loc pointed to an imminent all-out attack.[1]

At 0530 on 9 May, the enemy commenced strong ground probes all around the ARVN perimeter. Additionally, the volume of enemy artillery fire increased even more. Based on the patterns established in the previous two attacks, General Hollingsworth correctly guessed that the main attack would come on the morning of 11 May.[2] Accordingly, he planned 18 B-52 boxes (target sets for 3-ship missions) and almost 200 tactical air strikes to support the besieged defenders. Armed with his air support plan and intelligence reports, Hollingsworth flew to Saigon to speak with General Abrams, commander of MACV. He convinced Abrams that the enemy main attack was coming and that the ARVN could not hold without maximum air support. Abrams agreed and promised to send him everything that he needed for the battle.[3]

On 10 May, the enemy continued the pattern from the previous day, with heavy shelling and limited ground probes throughout the day. Hollingsworth was even more convinced that the enemy main attack would come the next day, and that afternoon, he once again called Abrams, requesting that he be allocated one B-52 strike every fifty-five minutes for the next twenty-four hours.[4] The MACV commander agreed, and Hollingsworth's planners quickly drew up plans for their use and transmitted them through channels to the Seventh Air Force planners and the Strategic Air Command Advanced Echelon (who acted as liaison between Seventh Air Force and the B-52 wings in Guam and Thailand) at Ton Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon.

At 0035 on 11 May, the NVA drastically increased its bombardment of the ARVN perimeter, which by now only measured



Source: Major John D. Howard, "An Loc: A Study of U.S. Power," *Army*, 25 September, 1975.

Map 6. The NVA high-water mark in An Loc, 11 May 1972

1,000 by 1,500 meters. For the next 4 hours, 7,000 rounds (or one shell every 5 seconds) fell on the ARVN positions. Major Kenneth Ingram, an adviser with the 5th ARVN Division command post, said later that the barrage was so heavy that to leave your bunker was "certain death."[5]

Captain Moffett, with the 3d Ranger Group, said that the noise "kept going up to a crescendo . . . it sounded like somebody was popping popcorn . . . and about 4 or 4:30 it stopped—bam—just like somebody dropped a baton. Everything stopped at once."[6]

For the next thirty minutes, there was a deathly silence. At 0500, the artillery barrage resumed in earnest, and during the next 12 hours the city was struck by 10,000 rounds of enemy indirect fire.[7] Under cover of this barrage, the NVA commenced the ground assault from all sides of the city, with the main attacks in the north and northwest. The tanks preceded the infantry and forged salients in the ARVN lines; the NVA infantry then attempted to widen these incursions (see map 6). The NVA plan was to join the two salients, thereby separating the defenders into enclaves that could be defeated in detail.

The NVA had moved in additional 23-mm, 37-mm, and mobile twin 57-mm antiaircraft guns (the latter mounted on tank chassis), as well as more SA-7 Strella heat-seeking antiaircraft missiles to provide cover for the attack. The focus of this effort was directed at the Cobra gunships and the forward air controllers. The NVA hoped to eliminate the FACs to degrade the effectiveness of the close air support. They also wanted to drive away the Cobras, which were very effective against the attacking infantry and tanks that were trying to negate the tactical aircraft by "hugging" the defenders. The Cobras were able to bring their minigun fire and 2.75-inch rockets in very close to the defenders where the tactical aircraft could not work. The NVA knew that they had to neutralize the effect of the air support to be victorious, so they threw everything possible into the air over An Loc.

The situation in the city rapidly became an extreme tactical emergency. Air Force, Navy, and Marine aircraft handlers loaded all available ordnance, as aircraft made rapid turnarounds to get back to support the defenders. The situation was so dire that the forward air controllers turned no aircraft away, regardless of ordnance load. For example, in one case, the 36th Ranger Battalion was in imminent danger of being overrun, and the only immediately available ordnance was an F-4 loaded with 500-pound bombs with "Daisy Cutters," a delay fuze usually used for clearing landing zones. The FAC directed the



This T-54 was part of a six to eight-tank column attacked by F-4 Aircraft. When this tank stopped during the attack, two airborne soldiers boarded it, opened its hatch, and lobbed a grenade on top of its struggling crew.

aircraft to drop the bombs 200 meters in front of the ranger positions, and the resulting blasts turned back the NVA attack.

The Air Force planners at Ton Son Nhut threw every available aircraft into the fight. The 49th Tactical Fighter Wing self-deployed from its home base in New Mexico and arrived at Ton Son Nhut on 10 May. It went into action the next day without normal familiarization or safety-check flights.

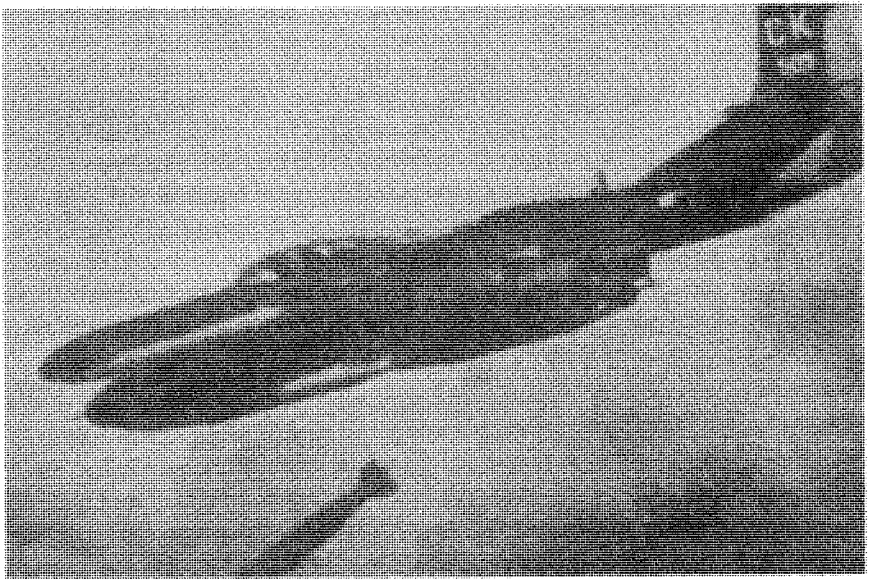
General Hung and his adviser, Colonel Walter F. Ulmer, who had just replaced Colonel Miller, realized that the NVA were trying to separate the ARVN forces and moved the 5th Airborne Battalion from the southern part of the perimeter to blunt both NVA penetrations in the northeast and west. These ARVN paratroopers fought tenaciously, and the enemy advances were halted. Once the penetrations were stopped, the Air Force (both U.S. and VNAF) went to work reducing the western salient with repeated bomb strikes. The enemy troops in the northeastern salient were too close to the ARVN defenders to use bombs, but the AC-130 Spectre gunships were able to bring accurate and effective 40-mm and 105-mm cannon fire on the attackers, driving them back.

At one point, Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Weed, commander of the 8th Special Operations Squadron, made two low-level passes in his A-37 through a curtain of intense enemy antiaircraft fire to destroy a North Vietnamese T-54 tank that was firing point blank into the 5th ARVN Division's command post. On the first pass, his 250-pound bomb scored a direct hit on the tank, but the bomb was a dud. The tank

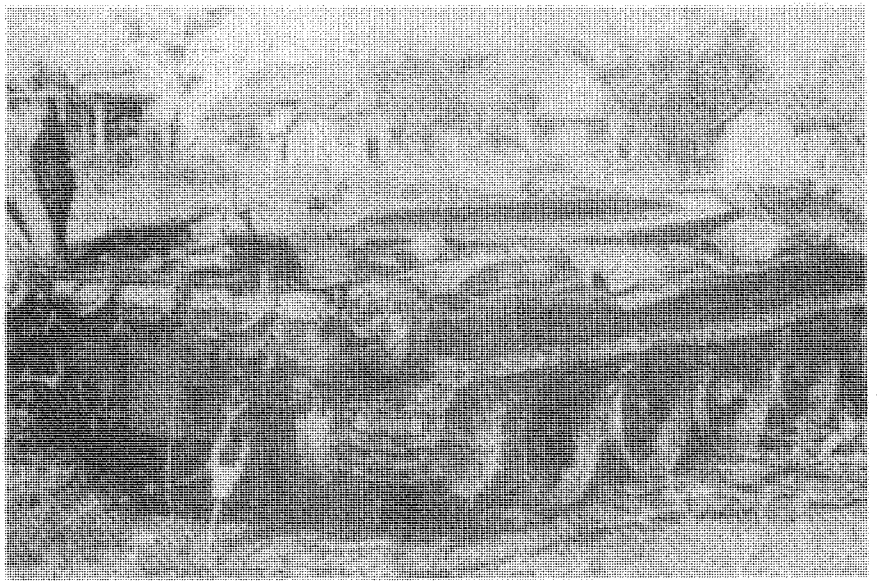
stopped firing, but it was not immobilized. Lieutenant Colonel Weed made another pass through a hail of 37-mm and .51-caliber ground fire, and this time the bomb scored another direct hit; the subsequent explosions destroyed the tank and drove back the supporting infantry troops.

During the course of this battle, 297 sorties of tactical air support were flown on 11 May and approximately 260 sorties on each of the following 4 days. These missions were flown in the face of some of the most severe antiaircraft fire ever encountered in South Vietnam. The airspace over An Loc during this battle was what one observer called a "mass of confusion."[8] At least three FACs were over the city at all times, constantly putting in air strikes as the aircraft arrived on station. In addition, several AC-130 Spectre gunships were also orbiting as they struck targets in support of ARVN forces in contact with the enemy.

The situation in the air was made more hazardous by the unprecedented volume of enemy antiaircraft fire from the North Vietnamese gunners. Further complicating the mission for the airmen



The A-37 light ground attack aircraft, a small but reliable tactical support aircraft, here dropping a 500-pound bomb. These aircraft, flown at An Loc by Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Weed and his 8th Special Operations Squadron, were extremely effective in the close fighting that characterized the battle for An Loc.



By dropping 155-mm powder bags inside the hatch and igniting them with a grenade, infantrymen blew up this tank (with the help of the tank's own main gun ammunition)

was the presence of the SA-7 Strella heat-seeking missile, which was used in significant numbers for the first time in the war. Several near misses on AC-130 Spectres and the downing of two Cobra gunships by SA-7 missiles caused all aircraft in the area to take extreme evasive maneuvers when delivering ordnance on target. The FACs played a key role in ensuring that the missiles did not tip the scales in favor of the attacker. The FACs maintained sufficient control to make maximum use of available aircraft on immediate ground targets while minimizing the exposure of the aircraft to the heat-seeking missiles and withering ground fire.

While the FACs continued to employ all available tactical air support in sorties on targets in direct support of the ARVN forces engaged in close combat, General Hollingsworth increased his efforts to ensure that B-52s were available to strike enemy staging areas. He had "borrowed" an additional five B-52 strikes from Second Regional Assistance Command (MR II) to bring the total of B-52 strikes against the forces surrounding An Loc to thirty within a twenty-four-hour period. These massive "Arc Light" missions were a tremendous morale booster for the defenders, who could readily see their effects. The American advisers requested that the B-52 strikes be brought closer to

the ARVN perimeter, and several of the strikes were moved to as close as 600 meters to the ARVN positions.

In one instance, a large enemy force was inflicting heavy casualties on the 81st Ranger Battalion on the eastern perimeter. A B-52 strike was diverted to that location, and the attack virtually annihilated the enemy force. General Hollingsworth reported to General Abrams that "B-52 strikes and tacair allowed us to punish the enemy severely."[9]

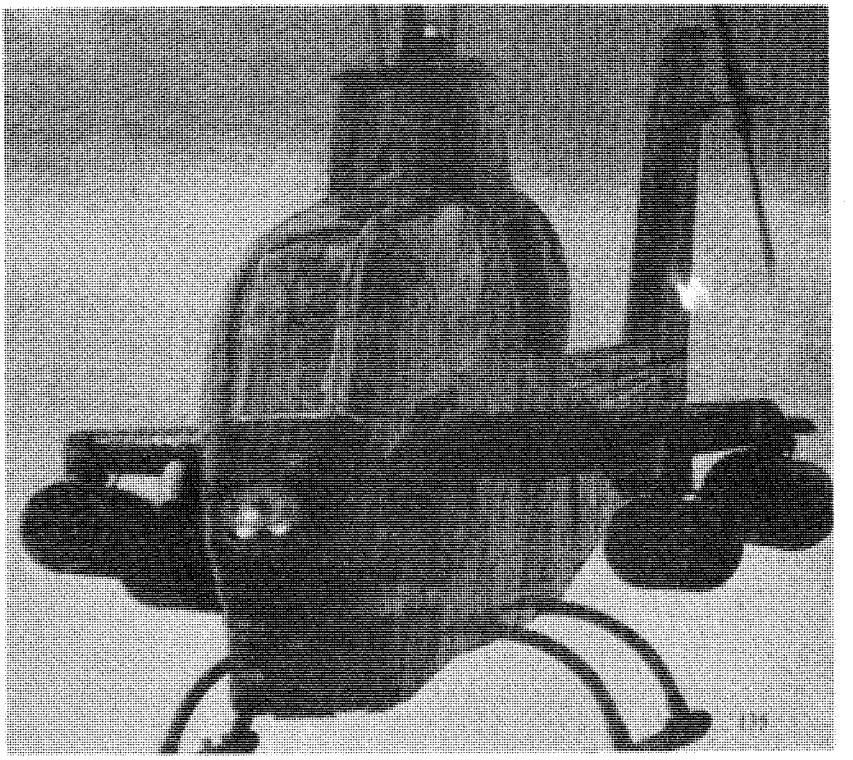
By late on the 11th, the repeated B-52 strikes, continuous tactical air support, and tenacious defense by the ARVN forces in the city combined to break the main enemy attack, but fierce fighting continued until the following day when the situation stabilized, due more than anything else to fatigue on both sides.

The NVA continued to pour massive amounts of indirect fire on the city, while the defenders replied with devastating air strikes. However, stopping the NVA was not without its price; the withering enemy antiaircraft fire downed one A-37, two Cobra gunships, and two FAC O-2 aircraft during the course of the day's action. A Spectre gunship also was hit by an SA-7 missile but was able to safely return to its home base.

During the night of 12 May, the NVA mounted yet another desperate attempt to take the city. Once again, the attack was spearheaded by tanks, but this time, most of them were PT-76 light tanks, because a heavy toll had been taken by the defenders on the T-54 medium tanks that led the earlier assaults. Under cover of darkness and extremely bad flying weather, the NVA attacked with tanks from the north and east, supported by infantry attacks from the west and south.

Without air cover, the defenders found themselves in deep trouble. Hollingsworth responded to the situation by diverting six B-52 strikes against the NVA troop concentrations. These strikes, accomplished in close proximity to friendly positions, broke up the enemy attacks.

Shortly after midnight, the weather improved slightly, and two AC-130 Spectre gunships arrived on station and responded to the defenders' call for fire. The Spectres were extremely effective against the enemy troop formations and equipment. Hollingsworth cited the Spectre's "magnificent performance" during marginal flying weather and believed that, in the final analysis, the B-52 raids "spoiled another apparent enemy effort to seize An Loc."[10]

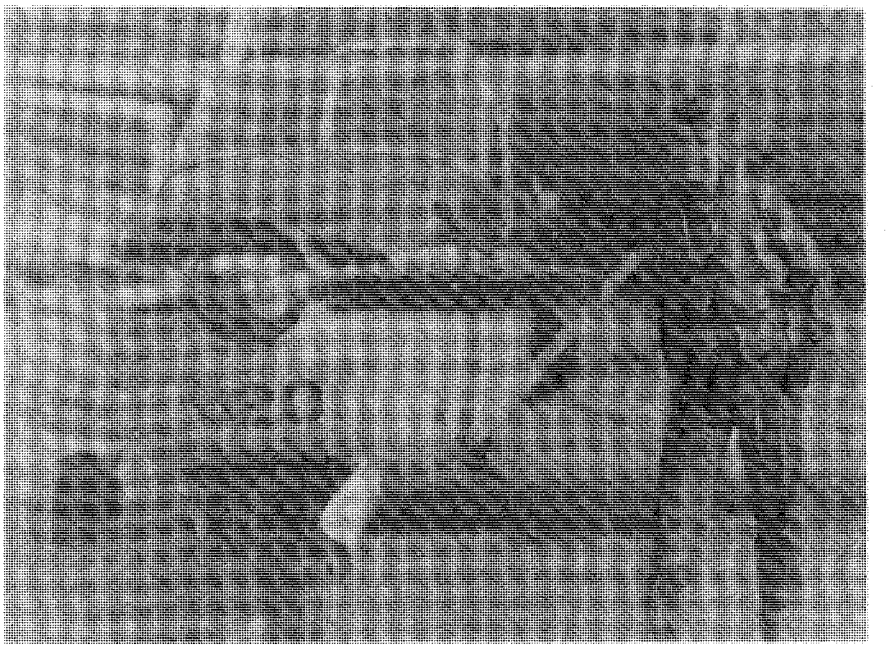


AH-1G Cobra attack helicopters proved to be very effective tank killers in An Loc, particularly in the early part of the battle in April and early May

The heavy shelling of An Loc continued unabated (3,000 rounds on 13 May, 2,000 on 14 May, and 2,600 on 15 May), but the intensity of the ground attacks decreased in frequency, strength, and duration.[11] There were only two more significant attempts to breach the ARVN perimeter between the 11th and the 15th, and both efforts were blunted by the ever-present B-52 strikes.

Continuous air strikes by B-52s and close air support aircraft had enabled the ARVN forces to counterattack and retake what remained of the enemy salients. By nightfall on the 15th, it appeared that the NVA forces had called off their attack plans and withdrawn farther into the surrounding rubber plantations.

It was slowly becoming evident that what one adviser termed the "almost ritualistic pattern of action and reaction" was beginning to take a heavy toll on the attackers as well as the defenders.[12] Although



Lieutenant James W. Beaubien, one of the forward air controllers from the 21st Tactical Air Support Squadron, who were essential in coordinating the air strikes so critical to the defense of An Loc. These courageous pilots (using the call signs SUNDOG and RASH) repeatedly braved intense antiaircraft fire over the city to provide support to the ARVN soldiers and their advisers.

the NVA troops still ringed An Loc, this last attempt had cost the enemy dearly. Almost his entire armor force had been destroyed; over forty tanks and armored vehicles littered the battlefield in and around the city.[13] The continual aerial bombardment had decimated whole NVA units. The beleaguered defenders had held the city against overwhelming odds. Major General Hollingsworth concluded, "The enemy has lost his capability for further offensive actions in Binh Long province."[14]

The Battle on QL-13

The battle of An Loc, however, was not over yet. The 5th ARVN Division advisers estimated that the enemy had shifted his focus toward the south to prevent the 21st ARVN Division from moving north and relieving the still besieged city.

The 21st ARVN Division had closed on Lai Khe on 12 April. The division's initial mission had been to secure QL-13 from Lai Khe to

Chon Thanh, a village thirty kilometers south of An Loc. The division moved north from Lai Khe and immediately ran into heavy enemy contact. After ten days of hard fighting, the lead ARVN elements reached a point fifteen kilometers north of Lai Khe, where they encountered a heavily entrenched NVA force astride the highway. The 21st Division commander, who had only recently assumed command, attempted to maneuver elements of the division against the NVA forces, but the attacks were conducted in an uncoordinated fashion. What followed was an almost daily pattern of attempting to attack in the morning hours, followed by attempts to evacuate casualties and prepare for the next day's attack in the afternoon. The ARVN division commander was not adept at coordinating the efforts of several regiments against an entrenched enemy. As Colonel Ross Franklin, senior adviser to the 21st Division said, "It doesn't take a lot of guys in bunkers to stop an uncoordinated attack."[15] It would take until 29 April to reduce the NVA forces in those positions and finally reach Chon Thanh.

The 21st was ordered then to move up QL-13 from Chon Thanh to effect a linkup with the ARVN airborne forces south of An Loc. Upon launching the attack from Chon Thanh, the lead ARVN regiment came under intense fire from elements of the 7th NVA Division, which was entrenched in yet another belt of fortified positions along the highway. Two weeks of continuous battle ensued before the ARVN attackers finally defeated the dug-in NVA units and reached a point eight kilometers north of Chon Thanh.

The 32d Regiment continued the attack north, but the enemy had regrouped, and the resistance was severe. The ARVN troops sometimes advanced only fifty meters a day. Colonel Franklin later said, "Once in a while we would break through and push a mile, but the attack was being fought piecemeal . . . all the good leaders had been killed."[16]

One regiment, the 15th from the 9th ARVN Division, maneuvered around the 21st and got behind the NVA positions on QL-13. However, for the next three weeks, it was pounded by NVA tanks, artillery, and infantry as it inched toward An Loc. The remnants of this regiment, numbering only 120 survivors, ravaged by dysentery and all wounded at least once, finally reached the outskirts of the city, but the road behind them remained closed to the 21st ARVN as it tried to relieve the besieged city.

Although the 21st Division was unsuccessful in effecting the linkup with the forces in An Loc, its attack tied down almost an entire

NVA division, making it unavailable for the fight in An Loc. This was a major contribution to the ultimate South Vietnamese victory, because the presence of one more NVA division in the direct assault on the city would almost certainly have tipped the scales in favor of the attackers, and An Loc would probably have fallen.

General Minh, the III Corps commander, recognized that providing fire support to both the defenders of An Loc and the would-be relief force from the 21st ARVN Division was crucial. He ordered the 9th Armored Cavalry Squadron and other elements of the 9th ARVN Division, which had been moved from the Mekong delta to Lai Khe as reinforcements, to establish a fire support base at Tan Khai on QL-13, just ten kilometers south of An Loc. This was accomplished on 16 May.

The occupation of the firebase at Tan Khai occurred at the time of the second major NVA effort to take An Loc. The enemy attacked the newly established firebase on 20 May and over the next three days, the ARVN soldiers turned back repeated attacks. The defenders would continue to hold this small outpost for the next forty-five days.

The establishment of the firebase at Tan Khai served to alleviate some of the pressure on An Loc and helped raise the morale of the defenders inside the city. This position remained the only ARVN redoubt in the enemy-held territory between An Loc and the 21st Division north of Chon Thanh.

The Siege Is Broken

By the end of May, the situation at An Loc had improved considerably. There was a lull in the fighting, and even the incoming artillery had decreased significantly. The around-the-clock air strikes had taken a horrendous toll on the NVA forces. ARVN intelligence estimated that the 3 NVA divisions, the 5th, 7th, and 9th, had already suffered over 10,000 casualties in the fight for the city and along QL-13.[17]

The massive air strikes had destroyed many of the antiaircraft weapons that ringed the city, and this permitted the first sustained aerial resupply to the defenders since the battle began. Additionally, the improved enemy air-defense environment permitted the delivery of much-needed personnel replacements and evacuation of the more seriously wounded.

The defenders had held their position against overwhelming odds and, with the increase in resupply and the arrival of fresh soldiers, morale in An Loc soared. Taking advantage of the success of the air

strikes and the devastation they had wrought on the enemy, the ARVN commanders shifted to the offensive with the objective of expanding the city's defensive perimeter.

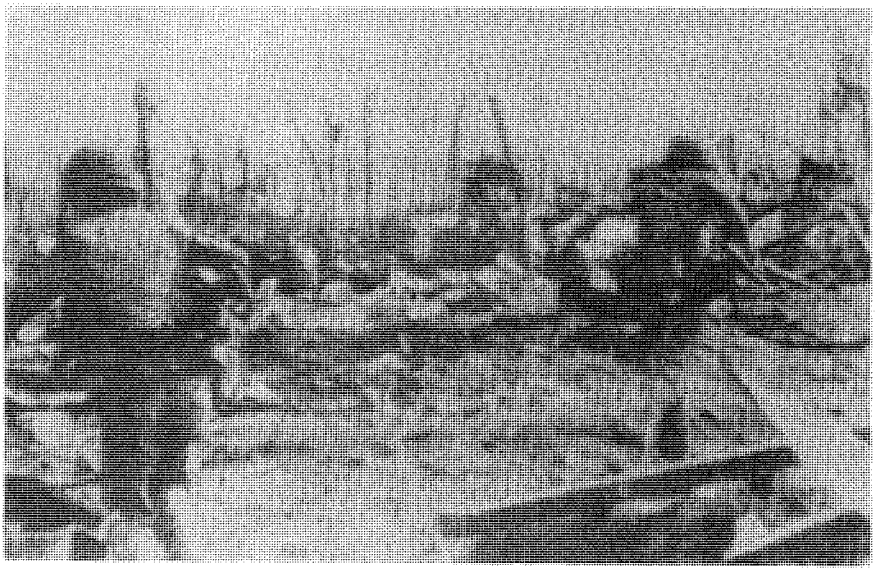
As the ARVN troops began to push their perimeter outward, they soon saw the death and destruction wrought by the continual massed air strikes. Three kilometers south of An Loc, in a B-52 target area, ARVN soldiers discovered 208 enemy dead from one regiment, all apparently killed by a single B-52 strike. Inside the city, several NVA regimental command post complexes were found that had been completely destroyed by the murderously accurate AC-130 Spectre gunship fire.[18] Unburied NVA bodies littered the terrain in and around the city.[19]

By 8 June, ARVN units had cleared the center of the city of most enemy resistance and greatly expanded the area controlled by friendly units. The situation further improved on 13 and 14 June when III Corps ordered in the 48th ARVN Regiment, a fresh unit from the 18th ARVN Division, to begin replacing the battered troops of the 5th Division. On 17 June, the 48th retook the hills to the south of the city and from that vantage point began to direct tactical air strikes on the remaining enemy concentrations to the west and south of the city.

From that point on, the enemy shelling of An Loc was greatly reduced. For the first time since early April, the ARVN soldiers were able to move around above ground without risking almost certain death.

On 18 June, General Minh declared that the siege of An Loc was broken and released the 1st Airborne Brigade to return to its parent unit in Saigon. Although the siege was officially lifted, this did not mean that the battle was over. ARVN and NVA forces continued to exchange fire as the South Vietnamese forces attempted to destroy the remaining enemy. North Vietnamese artillery and rockets continued to fall on the city, but in a much reduced volume.

On 9 July, Brigadier General Richard Tallman, General McGiffert's successor as General Hollingsworth's deputy (who had been promoted to his rank only eight days earlier), landed in the city with several of his key staff officers to observe the progress of ARVN operations and coordinate the reinforcement effort. They were met by two advisers from the 18th ARVN Division, Major Joe Hallum of the 48th Regiment Advisory Team and the author, who had joined the 43d Regiment after TF 52 was evacuated from the city earlier. As the helicopter departed, the general's party was struck by enemy artillery fire. Three American officers accompanying Tallman—Lieutenant



ARVN infantry advancing through An Loc after the NVA siege was broken

Colonel Stanley Kuick, Major Richard Benson, and First Lieutenant Richard Todd—and Sergeant Son, an ARVN interpreter, were killed instantly. General Tallman, Major Hallum, and Captain Willbanks were wounded by the incoming fire. They were immediately evacuated by U.S. medevac helicopter to 3d Field Hospital in Saigon, where the general, mortally wounded, died on the operating table.[20] The other two officers later recovered from their wounds.

In order to relieve the exhausted 5th ARVN Division, General Minh ordered the entire 18th ARVN Division into An Loc. The 18th arrived by a massive helicopter airlift on 11 July. Brigadier General Le Minh Dao directed his troops to commence operations immediately to eradicate the remaining enemy resistance in and around the city.

Also at this time, General Minh moved the 25th ARVN Division from Tay Ninh to Chon Thanh to replace the 21st ARVN, which had fought hard but still had not broken the NVA roadblocks astride QL-13 south of An Loc. During the course of the effort to relieve the embattled city, the 21st sustained 660 killed and 3,400 wounded.[21] Still, the exhausted division had inflicted tremendous casualties on the North Vietnamese forces. The 25th, on its part, was fresh and able to encircle the remaining enemy positions along the highway and destroy them by 20 July.

The ARVN Are Victorious

The Battle of An Loc was over. The continuous shelling, estimated at over 78,000 rounds during the 3-month period, had reduced the city to almost total ruins.[22] Over 15,000 refugees had been forced from their homes, and a like number were dead or missing. The ARVN defenders in the city had sustained 5,400 casualties, 2,300 of whom were killed or missing.[23] As one adviser described it, "The graves, the burned out vehicles, and the rubble were mute testimony to the intensity of the battle that had been fought there."[24]

In spite of this cost, the defenders and their advisers, with the help of tactical air power (262 B-52 missions and 9,203 tactical air strikes were flown against the North Vietnamese in An Loc and along QL-13), had decisively defeated three of the finest divisions in the North Vietnamese Army and held the city against overwhelming odds.[25] It is estimated that the North Vietnamese suffered 10,000 soldiers killed and 15,000 wounded during the battle.[26] The area in and around the city was littered with over eighty burned-out NVA tanks and other vehicles.[27]

Interrogation of NVA prisoners indicated the extent of the Communist defeat. A prisoner from 95C Regiment, 9th VC Division, reported on 10 June that only thirty to forty men remained in each battalion; he said that his battalion commander and all company commanders had been killed. The situation was much the same in the other NVA units. Prisoners from the 141st and 165th Regiments of the 7th NVA Regiments reported their units almost 100 percent destroyed.[28]

The South Vietnamese victory prevented a direct threat to the national capital in Saigon. In addition to inflicting a military defeat on the enemy, the ARVN defenders won a decisive psychological victory as well. Although there were obvious problems and the situation could have gone either way, the ARVN had stood up against the best of the North Vietnamese Army, defeated them, and prevented them from establishing their "liberation government" in the south.[29] President Thieu and his government emerged from the crisis stronger than ever, at least on the surface. He and his army, although badly battered, had been victorious. The brutality of the North Vietnamese invaders had not won them many converts in the south. The victory seemed a turning point for South Vietnam.[30]

The Nixon administration used the South Vietnamese victory at An Loc to declare the President's Vietnamization policy a success.[31] Citing the "fierce determination of its Vietnamese defenders,"



President Thieu (right) congratulates Brigadier General Le Van Hung (next to Thieu) on the victory at An Loc

administration officials proclaimed the victory at An Loc as clear proof that the policy of turning the war over to the South Vietnamese was working.[32] The ARVN had indeed won a decisive victory against overwhelming odds in the desperate battle for An Loc, and in many cases, the courage, skill, and endurance of South Vietnamese officers and soldiers were exemplary. Published MACV reports at the time lauded the bravery and performance of the South Vietnamese defenders; however, the reports failed to reveal just how close the outcome of the battle had been.[33]

Colonel Miller, the original 5th ARVN Division senior adviser, upon his return to the United States in May, was called before the House Armed Services Committee to testify on the battle and ARVN performance. During these hearings (and additional discussions with Senator John Stennis, Alexander Haig, and other high government officials and members of the media), Miller testified that in his opinion, the ARVN had not really won, but had merely avoided defeat with the help of their advisers and American air power.[34] He also said that removing the advisers and U.S. air support prematurely would result in disaster for the South Vietnamese. These warnings were not

heeded; An Loc became one of the underlying rationales for pressing on with Vietnamization and complete U.S. withdrawal.

V. THE AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS

In comparing the claims of the Nixon administration and the closeness of the outcome of the battle, it is appropriate to examine more closely the American contributions to the victory. American military might was clearly a major factor in the fight and subsequent victory in An Loc. The American contribution can be considered in two areas: U.S. air power effectiveness and the role provided by American combat advisers on the ground in and around An Loc.

American Air Power

U.S. air power in all its forms was absolutely critical throughout the campaign to defend An Loc from repeated North Vietnamese attacks. It took primarily three forms: tactical air support, aerial resupply, and evacuation of wounded.

Tactical air support was so critical that the city would almost certainly have fallen before 1 May without it. Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations traveled to Saigon in late 1972 to investigate the conduct of the Easter Offensive. The Committee Report in 1973 cited U.S. air support as the key ingredient to the ARVN victory. During one of the briefings presented to the committee members at MACV headquarters, the briefer was asked what would have happened if U.S. air support had not been available; the briefer replied: "We would be meeting some other place today."[1]

General Abrams, former MACV commander, later stated that in his opinion, "American air power and not South Vietnamese arms, had caused his [the enemy's] losses."[2] This evaluation was echoed by participants at all levels. The after-action report of the 21st ARVN Division stated, "The accuracy, devastation, and responsiveness of U.S. tactical air meant the difference between victory and defeat."[3] Brigadier General McGiffert, General Hollingsworth's deputy at Third Regional Assistance Command, was even more emphatic in his evaluation of the impact of U.S. air power. During the battle, he was quoted as saying that the B-52 force was "the most effective weapon we have been able to muster" and asserted that the threat of bomber strikes "forces the enemy to break up his ground elements into small units and makes it difficult to mass forces for an attack."[4] When asked after the battle what he thought about the ability of the ARVN to hold An Loc without American tactical air support, he replied, "No contest—never would have hacked it."[5]

Even South Vietnamese officials shared this sentiment. General Cao Van Vien wrote after the war, "The tremendous firepower unleashed by the USAF, especially B-52 strikes, effectively blunted all enemy efforts on three fronts, disrupted enemy supply lines, and helped the RVNAF conserve their ground forces. It also gave the RVNAF much-needed respite to recover from the initial enemy shock, consolidate their lines of defense, and regroup for the counterattack."[6] He further stated, "Without this support, the RVNAF success in stalling the enemy invasion would have been impossible."[7]

A smaller and less publicized, but no less important part of the critical air support, came from Army attack helicopters. This support was provided by AH-1G Cobras from units such as F Battery, 79th Aerial Rocket Artillery (known as "the Blue Max"); F Troop, 9th Cavalry; and D Troop, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion—all of Task Force Gary Owen (part of what was left in country from the 1st Cavalry Division), one of the last remaining U.S. combat units in South Vietnam. Colonel Miller recommended these units for Presidential Unit Citations after the battle, citing their willingness to brave intense antiaircraft fire to provide much needed close support to the ground forces.

There is absolutely no doubt that U.S. tactical air support, including the Army helicopters, but especially the B-52 strikes, wrought tremendous damage on the North Vietnamese attackers. The importance of this support was heightened by the fact that after the first week, the ARVN defenders in the city had no artillery support of their own. When the last ARVN artillery pieces were destroyed in the city in early April, the ARVN soldiers were left with nothing but rifles, machine guns, LAWs, and a few mortars to defend themselves against repeated human wave assaults. Without air support, the defenders would have been quickly overrun, and three NVA divisions would have had insufficient strength to stop them from making a direct assault on Saigon. Tactical air power saved An Loc, and it may have also saved Saigon.

The other two facets of American air power in the battle for An Loc are closely interrelated. Aerial resupply and evacuation of wounded soldiers and civilians had a tremendous impact on the outcome of the battle. Initially, resupply and medical evacuation were accomplished by the VNAF's helicopters. However, as the North Vietnamese tightened the ring around An Loc and increased the number of antiaircraft weapons in the area, the VNAF helicopters



The devastation of An Loc. The lignter areas indicate the destruction wrought by continuous NVA artillery bombardments and repeated U.S. tactical air strikes. The pockmarks east of the city (right side of photo) are the results of B-52 "Arc Light" missions.

became less and less effective. With the loss of Quan Loi airfield in early April, the city was cut off from access to the outside world.

Airdrops by VNAF C-123 cargo aircraft began on 12 April, but the volume of ground fire was such that these parachute drops were very

inaccurate. Another attempt was made to drop loads from high altitude, but two aircraft were lost. It became apparent that the VNAF efforts were not going to provide the critical ammunition, medical supplies, and food that the defenders needed to hold out.[8]

The situation in the city was worsening. The few cargo bundles that made it into the city and were recoverable often led to confrontations between friendly units on the ground. Morale was suffering as the defenders watched the preponderance of the resupply efforts land in the enemy's hands.

The situation improved only after MACV directed the U.S. Seventh Air Force to assume responsibility for the An Loc resupply effort. The American pilots experienced the same volume of antiaircraft fire that the VNAF pilots had seen. Additionally, they experienced extreme mechanical difficulties in configuring the parachutes for cargo drops. The enemy ground fire and the difficulties with the parachutes continued to wreak havoc with the resupply of the embattled garrison. After much trial and error and serious damage to aircraft operating over the city, the USAF eventually solved these problems, and improved techniques led to 238 successful drops, totaling 3,100 tons, in the months of May and June.[9] Although this was less than the Americans hoped to get into the city, it represented a significant improvement over previous efforts and vastly improved the defenders' morale. By August, the aerial resupply effort totaled over 600 sorties and 7,600 tons of ammunition, food, and other supplies.[10]

An equally important part of the air support issue deals with the evacuation of wounded. The same antiaircraft fire that made resupply missions extremely dangerous and difficult also impeded efforts to get VNAF evacuation helicopters into the city to pick up the large number of casualties. A U.S. Air Force report after the war stated, "The heavy, intense AAA [antiaircraft artillery] and accurate artillery, however, created an environment in which VNAF crews either were reluctant to land helicopters in order to pick up wounded or seemingly deliberately landed on LZs [landing zones] where no wounded were waiting."[11]

On occasions when a VNAF helicopter did land, the walking wounded and even healthy ARVN jumped aboard the helicopter or clung to the skids in an almost crazed attempt to get out of the hellish environs of An Loc.[12] Morale inside the city plummeted because the defenders realized that their chances of making it out of the city if wounded were almost nil.

On 3 May, General Hollingsworth directed that a U.S. mission commander and a single U.S. command ship lead a combined medical

evacuation operation into An Loc. He hoped to demonstrate to the South Vietnamese that successful medical evacuation was possible at a reasonable risk if proper leadership, planning, and execution were applied.[13] The mission was led by Colonel John Richardson of the 12th Combat Aviation Group and included four VNAF evacuation helicopters. The mission succeeded, bringing in thirty-six fresh troops and taking out forty-two wounded with no loss of aircraft. The demonstration worked and showed the VNAF pilots that they could evacuate their own wounded if they planned and executed properly. Still, the VNAF never really mounted the sustained medical evacuation effort dictated by the level of combat in and around An Loc.

The MACV command history attributed the difficulty that the South Vietnamese had in providing much needed evacuation helicopter support to a lack of leadership on the part of VNAF senior officers.[14] This situation could have had a terminal impact on the morale of the soldiers in An Loc had not General Hollingsworth and other Americans stepped in.

The importance of the American role in providing air support for the defense of An Loc cannot be overstated. Tactical air support provided the necessary firepower to defeat a numerically superior enemy. The improvement of the aerial resupply situation and the resumption of helicopter medical evacuation flights greatly improved the defenders' morale and permitted them to continue the fight. As one U.S. Air Force report stated after the war, "In combination with the resilience of the defenders, and the responsiveness of the air strike forces, the successful air resupply of An Loc became a decisive factor determining the Allied victory."[15]

American Advisers

The last major contribution made by the American forces in this battle was the performance of the advisers on the ground in An Loc. The advisers stayed with their counterparts throughout the battle and shared their fate on a daily basis. They served in several key roles.

First, they provided encouragement to their counterparts. This encouragement was particularly important in the darkest hours of the repeated North Vietnamese attacks. The very presence of the American advisers was a tangible demonstration of American resolve. The fact that the advisers remained with their counterparts in and around An Loc to coordinate U.S. support and were in constant contact with General Hollingsworth greatly encouraged the South Vietnamese defenders and provided excellent leadership by example.

Lieutenant General Phillip Davidson wrote that the advisers "stiffened the morale of the ARVN commanders in time of desperate peril."[16]

One of the most critical roles served by the American advisers relates to the importance of U.S. tactical air support. The advisers provided the link between the ARVN defenders and the American tactical aircraft and helicopters supporting the battle. Without the advisers and their radios, the defenders on the ground in the city and surrounding area would have been unable to talk to the aircraft. The advisers were tireless in coordinating the around-the-clock air strikes that prevented the North Vietnamese forces from overrunning the city. General McGiffert said that the ARVN defenders would have been unable to hold out if the advisers had not been there controlling the air strikes. He said of the advisers, " . . . their primary duty and their primary reason for existence was coordination of US tacair [tactical air support] and without them it [the defense of An Loc] would have just been damn near impossible."[17]

The advisers also provided General Hollingsworth and the other senior Americans who controlled the air assets with an accurate and reliable assessment of the situation on the ground. Determining exactly what was going on in the city was particularly difficult in the beginning stages of the battle when confusion and near panic reigned. The advisers in An Loc talked daily by radio with Hollingsworth and his operations personnel. This allowed the general to plan the air strikes that proved so crucial in the battle for the city. General McGiffert described this role of the advisers in the following manner, "It was the only way we could get any kind of objective analysis of what was really going on in there, it was talking to them [the advisers] everyday."[18]

The last and maybe most crucial role performed by the American advisers in An Loc is less tangible. Many of the ARVN fought bravely and maintained their fighting edge under the most trying conditions. Unfortunately, others allowed panic and fear to rule and fought less than valiantly. On several occasions, the situation in An Loc was only a breath away from crumbling. General McGiffert said that the advisers "were the glue that kept them [the ARVN] together."[19]

Leadership in the South Vietnamese armed forces had long been a problem, and the situation still existed in 1972.[20] The crucible of An Loc only served to exacerbate this shortcoming. While leadership and morale were generally high in the elite airborne and ranger units, they were often less than satisfactory in the regular units, including



Colonel Tran Van Nhut (left), Binh Long Province chief; Major General James F. Hollingsworth, commander, Third Regional Assistance Command; and Sir Robert Thompson, noted British counterinsurgency expert, contemplating the defense of An Loc. Colonel Nhut was a shining example of South Vietnamese combat leadership during the battle. Major General Hollingsworth provided guidance and direction to the U.S. advisers in An Loc and ensured that they had all available tactical air support.

the higher echelons of command. Certainly there were exceptions; one of these was Colonel Tran Van Nhut, the Binh Long Province chief, who provided visible leadership and an excellent example for his soldiers during the most difficult times during the battle. However, such leadership at the higher levels was not the norm. The 5th ARVN Division commander was a case in point. According to Colonel Miller, "a spring came loose inside General Hung" when the NVA overran Loc Ninh, and he failed to exercise command when it was needed most.[21] General McGiffert stated later that Hung "choked" under the pressure and "just didn't do a damn thing for a long time."[22] McGiffert also felt that the regimental commanders, with some exceptions, were no better than mediocre. McGiffert said that "there was no control. There was no supervision; there was no command emphasis to get out into the crew positions."[23]

The leadership and discipline was so poor in some of the 5th ARVN units that the civilians who remained in An Loc had nothing but scorn for these soldiers, many of whom had seemingly spent as much time looting as fighting.[24] Looting incidents and firefights between friendly troops over the airdrops that made it into the city were indicators of the breakdown of discipline among some of the defenders.

This situation was so critical at several points during the siege that some advisers felt that the city would probably have fallen if the NVA had left the road open to the south so the ARVN troops could have escaped.[25] In many cases, troops who did not wish to be there had no choice but to fight in order to survive.[26] Given this situation, the advisers in An Loc often did a lot more than advise their counterparts; in many cases, the Americans stepped into the void and assumed virtual command of the ARVN units they were with, providing the leadership that they so badly needed.[27] The Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported, "No one with whom we talked, American or Vietnamese, thought that the South Vietnamese could have held had there not been American advisers."[28]

Another part of the problem with the South Vietnamese leadership had to do with the tactical competence of the South Vietnamese leaders. U.S. advisers had been working with ARVN commanders for years, and much emphasis had been placed on the conduct of tactical operations and planning. However, the focus of this training had been mostly on conducting counterinsurgency operations. The situation in An Loc was extremely far removed from the type of circumstances that even the best ARVN commanders had previously experienced. Facing tanks was a far cry from chasing guerrillas. As one adviser later described the situation that existed in An Loc: "Regimental and higher level leadership was not tactically or psychologically prepared for a battle of the duration and intensity of the Binh Long campaign; battalion level leaders lacked preparation for the close coordination necessary between fire and maneuver elements."[29] In many cases, the American advisers provided the expertise in handling battles of such magnitude.

The American contribution to the battle of An Loc was key to the South Vietnamese victory in 1972. American air power and the performance of the U.S. advisers on the ground meant the difference between victory and defeat. To appreciate this contribution fully, one must compare this action with the final North Vietnamese offensive in 1975 after the United States had departed South Vietnam. This time, there was neither U.S. air power nor American advisers.

VI. THE NORTH VIETNAMESE VICTORY IN 1975

1973–1974

The treaty ending the Indochina War was signed in Paris in January 1973; by the end of March, the United States had the prisoners of war back, and nearly all Americans had left Vietnam.

However, the signing of the treaty did not mean the end of the war. The South Vietnamese were struggling to remain an independent nation; the North Vietnamese wanted unification of both Vietnams on their terms. Since the remainder of the Communist military units that had come south and survived the desperate battles of 1972 were still in place, this soon led to open combat with the South Vietnamese, as the Communists tried to consolidate control of the areas they occupied. During the first 3 months of "peace," the South Vietnamese lost 6,000 soldiers in fighting with the North Vietnamese.[1]

Although the North Vietnamese forces occupied areas in the south, they had been hurt seriously during the 1972 combat. They needed time to regroup and refit. They instituted a program of quiet infiltration to bring in supplies and fresh replacements from the north. Large volumes of tanks, other armored vehicles, rockets, long-range artillery, and antiaircraft weapons were moved south. Replacements came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and North Vietnamese units in the south were reorganized and refitted. This effort even included the building of a 5,000-kilometer pipeline from Quang Tri in the northern MR I to Loc Ninh in MR III.

Most of the South Vietnamese Army, now numbering over a million soldiers, was tied down in the defense of static positions. This permitted the North Vietnamese to prosecute their regeneration unhindered.

The Initial Attack on Phuoc Long

By 1974, the North Vietnamese decided to test the South Vietnamese with a limited attack. In December, they attacked Phuoc Long Province with both regional and mainline NVA units. This time, unlike the action in An Loc, the infantry and armor forces were well coordinated, and they routed the South Vietnamese force, killing or capturing 3,000 soldiers, took control of vast quantities of war materiel, and "liberated" the entire province.

The United States did nothing. President Nixon had left office in disgrace, and most Americans wanted nothing further to do with Vietnam. General Van Tien Dung, commander of NVA forces, realized that President Thieu, without American help, was now relegated to fighting a "poor man's war."[2] The posttreaty balance of power had shifted in favor of the North Vietnamese.

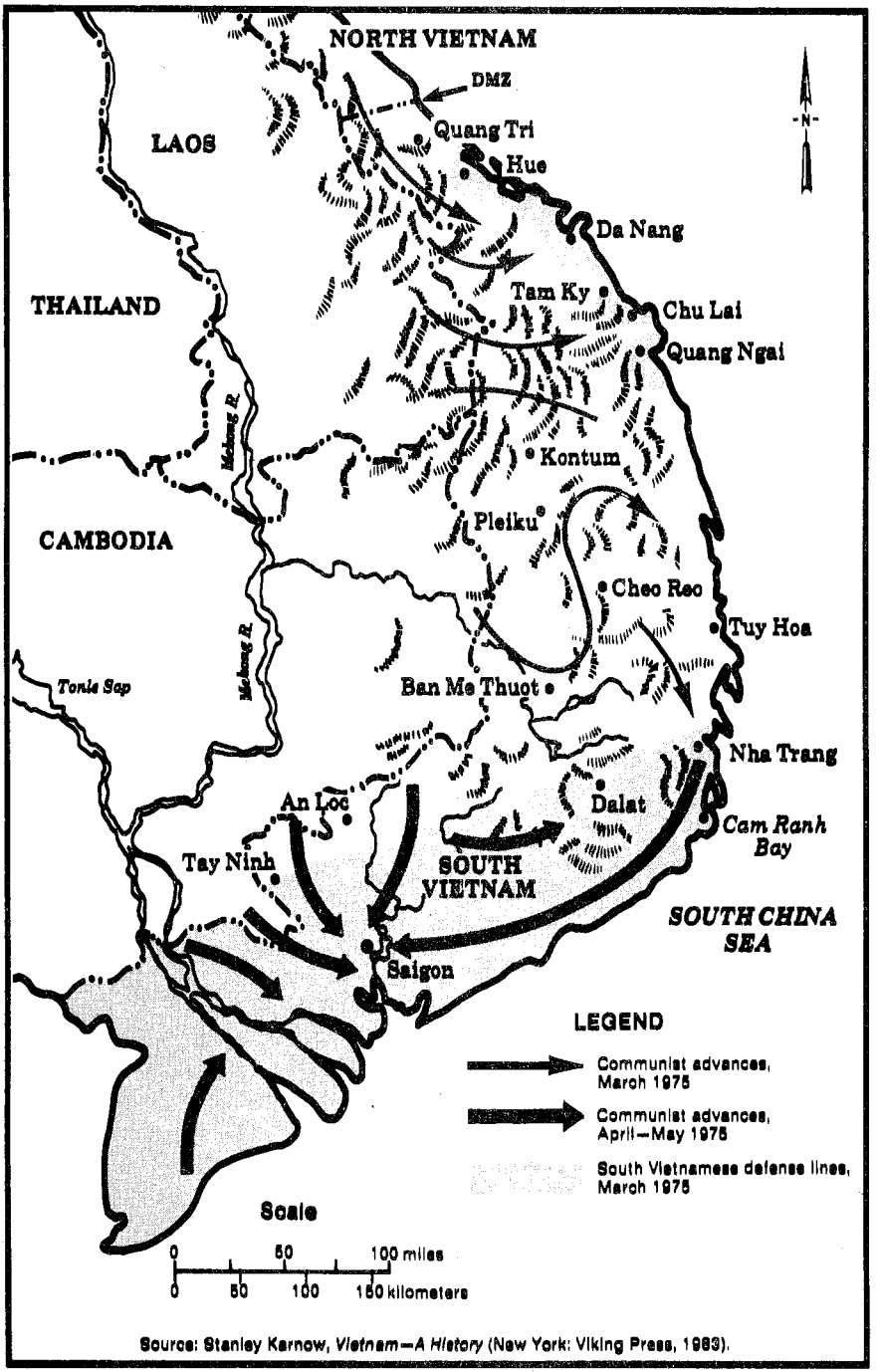
The Communist war planners developed a two-year strategy that called for large-scale offensives in 1975 to create conditions for a "general offensive, general uprising" in 1976.[3] The strategy hinged on the assumption that the United States, having pulled out, would not return to Vietnam. The thrust of the strategy was to determine which battles would have the greatest impact on the Thieu government. Having determined the high-value targets, the North Vietnamese planners massed armor and infantry to overwhelm the ARVN defenders at those points. NVA plans called for "blooming lotus" attacks, in which the critical point was to be captured and then NVA control spread out in every direction.[4]

The General Offensive

On 10 March 1975, the North Vietnamese launched the general offensive with an attack on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. The ARVN were spread thinly throughout the country, and the Central Highlands was no exception. The NVA overran the city in two days, and the ARVN fell back in panic.

The NVA then turned on Pleiku and Kontum, securing the highlands before the advent of the monsoon season. The success of the NVA onslaught panicked President Thieu, and he ordered ARVN forces to withdraw from the highlands. But the NVA cut the roads to the south, blocking the ARVN's retreating forces. Thus, the withdrawal became a totally disorganized rout, with every man concerned only for himself. To compound the problem, the civilian populace tried to escape to the south. The mass confusion and disorderly retreat led to the virtual destruction of the ARVN forces in the Central Highlands. South Vietnam had been cut in half, six provinces had been lost, and two ARVN divisions ceased to exist as a fighting force. The confidence of both the army and the South Vietnamese people was shaken to the core.

Dung and the other North Vietnamese generals were surprised by the success of these initial attacks and instituted contingency plans to exploit the staggering ARVN's situation (see map 7). NVA forces struck both Hue and Da Nang. The ARVN response was no better than



Map 7. The NVA final offensive, March—May 1975

in the highlands, and they fell back in disarray. Within ten days, both critical cities fell to the Communists.

The Thieu government and the remnants of its president's army were in dire straits. Thieu had lost contact with the northern half of the country, and at least 50 percent of his army had given up after putting up only token resistance. Thieu, in response, ordered the evacuation of Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay.

Still, the United States did nothing. Even as South Vietnam fell, the mood of the country would not permit President Ford to recommit American forces or even send military aid. General Dung stepped up the timetable for the "Ho Chi Minh Campaign" and ordered his troops to execute a "deep advance" on Saigon.[5] The drive from Da Nang to Saigon took less than a month. The only real resistance was put up by the 18th ARVN Division at Xuan Loc.

On 24 April, North Vietnamese tanks crashed the gates to the Presidential Palace in Saigon and Thieu resigned. The last ARVN resistance in Military Region III was overcome, and the North Vietnamese took Saigon on 1 May, raising the Communist flag over the Presidential Palace and renaming Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City.

The South Vietnamese had folded in less than fifty-five days. The ARVN, with few exceptions, became ineffective as a fighting force almost immediately after the North Vietnamese attacked. The same army that had been victorious with American help in 1972 could do nothing by itself. American tactical air power and the advisers that provided the backbone of resolve in 1972 were not there in 1975, and the ARVN fell apart. Without the Americans, the South Vietnamese forces were rapidly overwhelmed, and Vietnamization was revealed, as retired U.S. Army Brigadier General Douglas Kinnard later described, as "the fraud and deception that it was."[6]

VII. CONCLUSIONS

General McGiffert said that the battle of An Loc was "an American show in its essence."[1] Indeed, as Major John Howard said, it was "the war we came to fight."[2] As Andrew Krepinevich so aptly points out, the United States had never been comfortable fighting a counterinsurgency war. American forces were not principally equipped and organized for such operations; they were designed to bring superior technology and firepower to bear on a foe who fought in the open under "normal" rules.

The American way of war called for U.S. forces to close with and destroy the enemy by firepower and maneuver. There is some debate that the emphasis was on firepower rather than maneuver. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong refused to provide the appropriate targets for this type of attrition-based warfare, with its heavy reliance on technology and firepower. Although North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces were confident in their own tactical skills, they knew that they could not match the Americans' ability to mass indirect and aerial fires for extended periods of time. Consequently, the Communist forces fought their own style of war designed to negate the American advantages. They generally refused to fight the type of battles that would allow the Americans to prevail, opting for hit and run tactics and avoiding set piece battles of long duration.

In 1972, General Giap and his fellow North Vietnamese generals made a serious mistake when they decided to abandon their previously successful strategy and initiate conventional attacks against the South Vietnamese. An Loc was a battle the Americans were trained and equipped to fight. When ARVN leadership and resolve wavered, General Hollingsworth and his advisers provided the technical expertise and fighting spirit to stabilize a desperate tactical emergency.[3] American firepower and American advisers, fighting in the American way of war, enabled the ARVN defenders to win a great victory (or at least stave off a disastrous defeat).

Unfortunately, this victory led to a fatal set of perceptions, both for the Americans and the South Vietnamese. Many ARVN soldiers fought valiantly under conditions never seen before in the history of the Southeast Asia war. Yet the battle had been close, and many South Vietnamese leaders and units had not done well. Nevertheless, the Nixon administration promoted the South Vietnamese victory as a vindication of the Vietnamization program. The President made statements that the South Vietnamese had demonstrated that they

were ready to prosecute "their war" without American help. Many in the American press agreed; Joseph Alsop wrote after the battle of An Loc, "ARVN has a damn good record in this fighting; ARVN has proven itself..."[4]

Both Michael MacLear and Lieutenant General Phillip B. Davidson maintain that President Nixon put the best face on the South Vietnamese performance in 1972 to validate the Vietnamization policy and provide the justification for completing the American withdrawal from Vietnam.[5] Davidson further maintains that even as early as 1968, "any cold-blooded analysis of the capacity of the South Vietnamese to carry out their part of Vietnamization would have argued against its adoption."[6] This evaluation was supported by examining other battles prior to 1972, such as the Lam Son 719 debacle in 1971, which clearly demonstrated that the South Vietnamese were not ready to take over the war.[7] This operation involved an invasion of the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Laos and was made by South Vietnamese forces without U.S. support; the ARVN forces were badly bloodied.

The fact that U.S. tactical leadership and firepower were the key ingredients in the battle for An Loc was either lost in the mutual euphoria of victory or ignored by Nixon administration officials who wanted to get the United States out of Vietnam in the most expeditious manner. The victory at An Loc provided the rationalization for the complete withdrawal.

Even though South Vietnamese forces had learned some valuable lessons and made strides in improving their combat capability, ARVN forces were not prepared for what happened at An Loc. They were still plagued by the same kinds of problems that had bothered them for the entire Vietnam War: politicized commanders, inept leadership, and tactical incompetence at the higher levels of command. The ARVN were victorious at An Loc because the American advisers and U.S. air power had negated the debilitating effects of these long-standing maladies.

Evidence is irrefutable that the South Vietnamese would not have performed as well as they did in the spring of 1972 if the American advisers and U.S. tactical air support had not been there. Unfortunately, the North Vietnamese proved this in 1975, after the advisers and U.S. tactical air support were gone, when they overran South Vietnam in just fifty-five days. Although some South

Vietnamese soldiers fought valiantly, the ARVN force as a whole, without the "steel reinforcing rods" provided by the American advisers and air support, crumbled precipitately.[8] The North Vietnamese had suffered a strategic defeat in 1972, but they took the long-term approach to reap a greater victory in 1975, after the United States had departed and the South Vietnamese were left to their own devices. The ultimate result was that South Vietnam ceased to exist as a nation, and the United States lost the first war in its history.

APPENDIX
Order of Battle

Battle of Loc Ninh, 4–8 April 1972

ARVN	*NVA*
9th Regiment (2 battalions)	5th VC Division
1st Armored Cavalry Squadron	E6 Regiment
74th Border Ranger Battalion	174th Regiment
1st Battalion Regional-Popular Forces	275th Regiment
1 105-mm Battery	
*Task Force 52	69th Artillery Division
1st Battalion, 52d Regiment	42d Artillery Regiment
1st Battalion, 48th Regiment	208th Rocket Regiment
1 105-mm Battery	271st Antiaircraft Regiment
	203d Tank Regiment
*Not in Loc Ninh itself	Elements of 202d Special Weapons Tank Regiment
	429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle of An Loc, 9–15 April 1972

ARVN	*NVA*
5th Division	9th VC Division
7th Regiment (minus 1 battalion)	271st Regiment
8th Regiment	272d Regiment
Task Force 52	95C Regiment
1st Battalion, 52d Regiment	
1st Battalion, 48th Regiment	203d Tank Regiment (2 battalions)
3d Ranger Group	
	Elements of 202d Special Weapons Tank Regiment
Binh Long Province Forces	69th Artillery Division
2 battalions of Regional-Popular Forces	42d Artillery Regiment
	208th Rocket Regiment
	271st Antiaircraft Regiment
	429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle of An Loc, 19–22 April 1972

ARVN

5th Division
- 7th Regiment (minus 1 battalion)
- 8th Regiment
- Task Force 52
  - 1st Battalion, 52d Regiment
  - 1st Battalion, 48th Regiment
- 3d Ranger Group

1st Airborne Brigade (arrived 15 Apr)
- 5th Battalion
- 6th Battalion
- 8th Battalion
- 81st Airborne Ranger Battalion

Binh Long Province Forces
- 2 battalions of Regional-Popular Forces

NVA

9th VC Division
- 271st Regiment
- 272d Regiment
- 95C Regiment

203d Tank Regiment (2 battalions)

Elements of 202d Special Weapons Tank Regiment

141st Regiment (7th NVA Division)

275th Regiment (5th VC Division)

69th Artillery Division
- 42d Artillery Regiment
- 208th Rocket Regiment
- 271st Antiaircraft Regiment

429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle of An Loc, 9 May–June 1972

ARVN

5th Division
- 7th Regiment (minus 1 battalion)
- 8th Regiment
- Task Force 52
  - 1st Battalion, 52d Regiment
  - 1st Battalion, 48th Regiment
- 3d Ranger Group

1st Airborne Brigade (arrived 15 Apr)
- 5th Battalion
- 8th Battalion
- 81st Airborne Ranger Battalion

NVA

9th VC Division
- 271st Regiment
- 272d Regiment
- 95C Regiment

5th VC Division
- 174th Regiment
- 275th Regiment
- E6 Regiment
- 141st Regiment (7th VC Division)
- 165th Regiment (7th VC Division)

Binh Long Province Forces
2 battalions of Regional-Popular Forces

203d Tank Regiment(-)

Elements of 202d Special Weapons Tank Regiment(-)

69th Artillery Division
42d Artillery Regiment
208th Rocket Regiment
271st Antiaircraft Regiment

429th Sapper Group(-)

Battle Along QL-13, 5 April–June 1972

ARVN

21st Division
31st Regiment
32d Regiment
33d Regiment
9th ACR
15th Regiment

3d Airborne Brigade (thirty days only)

NVA

7th NVA Division
141st Regiment (departed for An Loc, 16 Apr)
165th Regiment (departed for An Loc, 7 May)
209th Regiment
101st Regiment (Independent)

Elements of 69th Artillery Regiment
208th Rocket Regiment(-)
42d Artillery Regiment(-)
271st Antiaircraft Regiment(-)

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Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks, U.S. Army, Retired

Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks, U.S. Army, Retired, was commissioned in the Infantry on graduation from Texas A&M University in 1969. He has served in command and staff assignments in the United States, Germany, Japan, and Panama. In 1971–72, he was an adviser in Vietnam with the 18th Infantry Division (ARVN) and received the Silver Star for action in the Battle of An Loc. Willbanks is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the School for Advanced Military Studies, and holds a master's degree in military and diplomatic history from the University of Kansas. He retired from active duty in June 1992 and is now an instructor in the Department of Joint and Combined Operations.

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