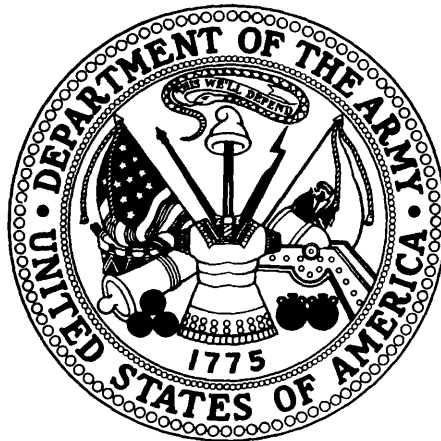


Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation

Col. William E. Le Gro



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with enduring respect to all the fighting men of South Vietnam, especially the infantry, rangers, airborne troops, and marines. May this book preserve at least a partial record of those who fought long, bravely, and under great handicaps and hardships to preserve individual freedom in their country.

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Foreword

An infantryman, Colonel William E. Le Gro, USA (Ret.), fought in New Guinea and the Philippines in 1944 and 1945. Subsequent service included troop and staff duty in Germany and Korea and graduation from the Army War College. As a graduate student at American University in 1963 and 1964, the author specialized in East and Southeast Asia. He was also concerned with Southeast Asia while assigned to the office of the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations in 1964 and 1965. Colonel Le Gro served in Vietnam in 1966 and 1967 as G-2, 1st Infantry Division, and was Director of Asian Studies at the Army War College from 1969 to 1971. From December 1972 until 29 April 1975, he was a senior staff officer with the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and its successor agency, the U.S. Defense Attache Office, Saigon.

The views, evaluations, and conclusions presented here are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the Department of State. Faculty and students at service schools will find the book useful, however, and it will be a valuable source for historians.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
Brigadier General, USA (Ret.)
Chief of Military History

Introduction

The final declaration of the Geneva Conference on the problems of restoring peace in Indochina was dated 21 July 1954. The second war in Indochina began two years later as the deadline passed for reunification elections and ended on 27 January 1973 as "The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam" took effect. But the two-year respite that followed the Geneva Conference of 1954 was not to be repeated. What could be called a third Indochina war began immediately after the 1973 agreement.

Although some traces of the Viet Cong (VC) guerrilla forces remained, as well as a few unconvincing contrivances intended to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam, the third Indochina conflict quickly assumed the character of conventional war between regular ground forces. Irregulars played an insignificant role in the final outcome. The war's central characteristic was an invasion across well-defined frontiers. With a secure base in the north and a large army already positioned in South Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) systematically rebuilt and reinforced its expeditionary force without any effective interference until the South Vietnamese ground forces, short of essential resources and demoralized, abandoned entire provinces to concentrate their battered defenders and then collapsed. What follows is the story of that final Indochina struggle and of the eventual and tragic collapse of the South Vietnamese.

The United States in August 1969 entered secret negotiations to end the war in Indochina. Three and a half years later the final agreement was signed in Paris. In a speech to the nation on 25 January 1972 (text in State Dept. *Bulletin*, 14 Feb. 72.), President Richard M. Nixon made the negotiations public and stressed the urgency the United States attached to disengaging from the war and exchanging prisoners of war. The final agreement required major concessions on the part of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN) and only required the DRV to

return prisoners of war and account for soldiers missing in action.

In the final agreement the United States was allowed only 60 days to remove its remaining forces from South Vietnam. On the other hand, the agreement was silent on the presence of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. In a news conference (24 January 1973) announcing the agreement, The Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Henry A. Kissinger, responded to a related question:

Our estimate of the number of North Vietnamese troops in the South is approximately 145,000. . . nothing in the agreement establishes the right of North Vietnamese to be in the South. . . . The North Vietnamese have never claimed that they have a right to have troops in the South . . . The North Vietnamese troops in the South should, over a period of time, be subject to considerable reduction. [State Dept. *Bulletin*, 12 Feb. 73.]

Intelligence suggested that Dr. Kissinger's estimate of the strength of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in South Vietnam was on the low side. With 13 division headquarters and 75 regiments, the North Vietnamese could have had as many as 160,000 soldiers in the south, an expeditionary force backed up, supplied, and trained from secure bases in the north and in Laos.

No similar advantage accrued to the South Vietnamese. Their logistical and training bases and lines of communication remained vulnerable to infiltration, sabotage, and attack. The South Vietnamese had never been able to carry the attack to North Vietnam, and the agreement provided that "the United States will stop all its military activities against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam." Although the United States kept forces in Thailand and in the South China Sea and remained capable of either attacking North Vietnam or supporting the South Vietnamese, that proscription in the words of the agreement remained "durable and without limit of time." (Text in State Dept. *Bulletin*, 12 Feb. 73.)

As time passed, the NVA invasion and attacks grew in boldness and scope without attracting any significant response from the United States. After the final bombing halt following the B-52 raids of Christmas 1972, the North Vietnamese probably never again seriously considered that the United States could be provoked into new reprisals. Even if they had been reluctant to violate the agreement in a brazen manner for fear of American reaction, their inhibitions must have been greatly diminished by the congressional prohibition of 15 August 1973 on further bombing of Cambodia and dissipated entirely during the North Vietnamese conquest of Phuoc Long Province in December 1974. Although conclusive evidence is lacking, the Phuoc Long campaign was probably undertaken, in part at least, to test the American response. Since the United States

did not respond, the final offensive could proceed as planned without concern for the high costs that would attend a resumption of American bombing of North Vietnam.

In Article 7, the agreement states that

The two South Vietnamese parties shall not accept the introduction of troops, military advisers, and military personnel including technical military personnel, armaments, munitions, and war material into South Vietnam. The two South Vietnamese parties shall be permitted to make periodic replacement of armaments, munitions and war material which have been destroyed, damaged, worn out or used up after the cease-fire, on the basis of piece-for-piece, of the same characteristics and properties . . .

Those restrictions, however, did not apply to military assistance provided North Vietnam by the Soviet bloc and China. Military equipment, supplies, technicians, and advisers continued to flow into Hanoi after the cease-fire. The agreement, moreover, did not specify how the restrictions would be enforced with regard to the NVA forces already in South Vietnam. Responding to a question about this at the news conference of 24 January 1973, Dr. Kissinger said that it was "not inconceivable that the agreement will not in all respects be lived up to. In that case, adding another clause that will not be lived up to, specifically requiring it, would not change the situation." That appraisal proved to be an understatement, for the restrictions had no apparent effect on North Vietnam's rebuilding and reinforcing its expeditionary force. On the other hand, American shipments to South Vietnam after the cease-fire were meticulously accounted for as replacements for similar supplies and for equipment lost, used up, or evacuated.

The temporary partition of Vietnam by the Accords of 1954 was continued in the Paris Agreement. That was done, according to Dr. Kissinger (press conference, 24 January), because "the provisions of the agreement with respect to infiltration, with respect to replacement, with respect to any of the military provisions, would have made no sense whatsoever if there was not some demarcation line defining where South Vietnam began." But the true demarcation was 30 kilometers south of the 17th parallel on the Thach Han River where South Vietnamese marines held on to the rubble of Quang Tri City. The North Vietnamese maintained the fiction of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) by locating a customs post on the south bank of the Ben Hai River. Meanwhile, the most extensive NVA logistic base in South Vietnam was constructed from the DMZ through Dong Ha and west along Highway 9 to Khe Sanh. Dong Ha became a major port of entry for military supplies, and the traffic across the DMZ soon surpassed anything seen in the years before the cease-fire.

Ever since the North Vietnamese began major military operations against South Vietnam, they

used the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos and eastern Cambodia as their principal logistical corridor. By January 1973 about 70,000 NVA regulars were in Laos, mainly in the logistical corridor, and about 30,000 were in Cambodia. In Dr. Kissinger's words:

. . . there is a flat prohibition against the use of base areas in Laos and Cambodia. There is a flat prohibition against the use of Laos and Cambodia for infiltration into Vietnam . . . there is a requirement that all foreign troops be withdrawn from Laos and Cambodia, and it is clearly understood that North Vietnamese troops are considered foreign with respect to Laos and Cambodia. . . . It is our firm expectation that within a short period of time there will be a formal cease-fire in Laos which in turn will lead to a withdrawal of all foreign forces from Laos and, of course, to the end of the use of Laos as a corridor of infiltration. [Press Conference of 24 Jan., State Dept. *Bulletin*, 12 Feb 73.]

That withdrawal failed to materialize. There was little reason to think that it would, considering the entrenched position of the North Vietnamese in southern Laos, their reliance on the logistical network established there, and their record of violating the agreements of 1954 and 1962. In the two years after the 1973 cease-fire, the NVA shifted sizeable logistical units from Laos into South Vietnam as it developed the Route 14 corridor south from Khe Sanh. It also moved its 968th Infantry Division from Laos into the Kontum-Pleiku area. But it did not stop using the corridor. On the contrary, it built macadam roads and added concrete culverts and bridges, and infiltration continued. During 1973 over 75,000 replacements entered South Vietnam, mostly through Laos. South Vietnam lacked the means to cope with that flagrant breach of the agreement, and although the United States was concerned, U.S. reconnaissance over the corridor was greatly reduced and what remained did not reveal the destination of some major NVA reinforcements moving south in late 1974 and early 1975.

Another important provision in the agreement established an International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS). The ICCS was supposed to detect and investigate violations, control entry into South Vietnam, and generally supervise the cease-fire. Unfortunately for South Vietnam, two of the four members of the commission, Poland and Hungary, were not impartial. They did not man the entry points into South Vietnam, except those used by the United States, and failed to inhibit in any way the movement of men, supplies, and weapons from North Vietnam. One member, Canada, quickly became disenchanted with the frustrations of dealing with an uncontrollable situation and resigned. Replacing Canada, Iran experienced the same frustrations but persisted in trying to give some balance to the reporting and some meaning to the cease-fire. In the face of the North Vietnamese invasion, however, and opposed at every turn by the decidedly hostile Poles and Hungarians, the other commission

members could not have changed the outcome of the conflict, no matter how dedicated they were to fairness, law, and peace.

Domestic politics forced the United States to observe the agreement even while the North Vietnamese blatantly violated it. Domestic politics also

prevented adequate U.S. support in arms, ammunition, and equipment. Thus the military balance shifted in favor of the invader as the capabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces declined until they were unable to withstand the final NVA offensive.

Before the Cease-Fire

The Nguyen Hue Offensive

The Nguyen Hue offensive of 1972 left both sides exhausted and depleted in manpower, supplies, and equipment. The offensive began on 30 March and ran its course by the end of June. There were three arenas of heavy action. Below the Demilitarized Zone, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) committed three divisions, several separate regiments, and tanks and heavy artillery to seize its principal objectives, Quang Tri Province and Hue. In the Central Highlands, a force of two divisions with tanks and heavy artillery struck at Kontum. In the south, between Saigon and the Cambodian border, three NVA divisions, also with tanks and heavy artillery, attacked out of Cambodian sanctuaries toward Saigon.

By summer, casualties had amounted to thousands and considerable territory had changed hands. The new dispositions were later to provide decisive advantages to the invader. The 17th parallel was eliminated as the division between North and South Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese Army was free to develop a line of communication from Dong Hoi in Quang Binh Province to Dong Ha and the logistical complex along Highway QL-9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. Western Quang Tri was cleared for the construction of an alternate corridor from Khe Sanh to the B-3 Front in Kontum. (The B-3 Front was the NVA command in the Central Highlands.)

Successes in the Kontum battles removed South Vietnamese influence north and west of Kontum City. The development of a logistical complex at Duc Co and the extension of the alternate corridor south to Binh Long Province became possible, although the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), in heavy fighting, managed to delay progress until the end of 1972.

As the campaign in South Vietnam's Military Region 3 (MR 3) ended in the siege of An Loc, only 90 kilometers north of Saigon, the NVA controlled all of Binh Long Province except the province

capital and the small garrison at Chon Thanh on Highway QL-13. Only a major effort could keep Highway 13 open north of the ARVN 5th Division base at Lai Khe, and An Loc and Chon Thanh soon became entirely dependent on air resupply. Similarly, the NVA was in position to control land access to Phuoc Binh (Song Be), the capital of Phuoc Long Province. That advantage was to be used with decisive effect in the NVA's conquest of Phuoc Long in December 1974.

The enemy's objectives for the Nguyen Hue offensive in the Mekong Delta, South Vietnam's Military Region 4, lacked the focus that characterized the fighting in other military regions. Communist strategy in that densely populated rice bowl was to attack on a broad front, blanketing the region in order to gain control over as much land and population as possible. Intending to destroy or immobilize the ARVN and overrun province and district capitals, the North Vietnamese launched major, successive attacks by large, main force formations. The South Vietnamese used infantry divisions, ranger groups, and armored cavalry squadrons to engage the NVA's main force, while territorials handled hundreds of local threats.

The Counteroffensive

The plans of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), the North Vietnamese Army's headquarters in the southern part of South Vietnam, called for seizing An Loc before advancing southward into Bing Duong Province and Saigon. Supported by U.S. bombers, which proved to be crucial, the South Vietnamese fought heroically and denied the enemy An Loc but achieved little else. By the end of 1972, the North Vietnamese still held every important objective they had seized during the campaign. At that time South Vietnam's line of relatively secure control in Military Region 3—that is, bases that could be supported by lines of communication and secured through minor operations—ran from the Cambodian border west of Tay Ninh City, generally east to Dau Tieng on the Saigon River, down to Bau Bang, north of Lai Khe, over to Phuoc Vinh (Phu Giao) on Highway LTL-1A, and along the Song Be and the Dong Nai River to north of Xuan Loc in Long Khanh Province. Highway QL-20 was open from Xuan Loc to Dalat, but local Route 2 south to Baria in Phuoc Tuy Province was hazardous. Highway QL-1 was open to Nha Trang.

Despite staggering losses—the Kontum campaign cost the enemy 4,000 lives—the North Vietnamese in the Nguyen Hue offensive secured a lodgment inside Kontum City, although by mid-June of 1972 the city was again under South Vietnamese control.

In tough fighting the ARVN cleared Highway QL-14 from Kontum to Pleiku by early July and

opened it to civilian traffic. Enemy interdictions, however, continued to close it periodically until the end of the year. Operations north on Highway QL-14 were less successful, and the enemy retained control from Vo Dinh all the way to Dak Pek. Highway QL-19 remained open to Binh Dinh, although subjected to periodic interdictions, and the situation was tenuous along Highway QL-1 running through the province.

The enemy's main effort in the Nguyen Hue offensive in the Mekong Delta began when the NVA 1st Division moved from its Cambodian base into the Seven Mountains of Chau Doc Province. Losses were heavy on both sides during the last week of March, and the 1st Division managed to retain a foothold in the craggy peaks. Another surge of attacks hit mostly in Chuong Thien and southern Kien Giang Provinces in the second week of April, and by the time the ARVN had reasserted its dominance, nearly 400 of its soldiers had died while another 700 or more had been wounded. During late May and early June, the NVA launched a fresh campaign against Kien Luong District in Kien Giang Province, using the 1st Division to spearhead the drive, but ARVN rangers of the 44th Special Tactical Zone drove most of the 1st Division back to Cambodia. Meanwhile, the NVA 5th Division pulled away from the Binh Long battlefield, moved across Prey Veng Province in Cambodia, and attacked Moc Hoa, the capital of Kien Tuong Province, and Tuyen Binh District town. Badly mauled, the 5th Division, by mid-June, withdrew into Cambodia, followed by the ARVN 7th Division.

The next sharp upsurge occurred on 4 July 1972 when two ARVN battalions were decimated in an ambush in the northern part of the Mekong Delta. Meanwhile, activity increased in and around Base Area 470 where five enemy regiments operated, threatening Highway QL-4 as well as Route 29 between Moc Hoa and Cai Lay. Anticipating a cease-fire, during October many enemy main force units split into small groups to spread control over vast reaches of the delta. They were methodically and thoroughly defeated. The action was punctuated by two high points: one from 2 to 9 October against Highway QL-4 between Can Tho and Saigon; the other beginning on 26 October and much more widespread throughout the delta. When October's fighting had subsided, no major changes in territorial control had taken place, but the NVA's strength in the delta was significantly diminished.

The South Vietnamese counteroffensive in Military Region 1 achieved significant territorial gains. The attack to retake Quang Tri City jumped off on 28 June 1972. Eighty grueling, hard-fought days later, on 15 September, South Vietnamese marines recaptured the Citadel and the rubble that once was the city of Quang Tri.

By the end of the year, the marines had pushed north along the coast to the Thach Han River. The western-most thrust of the counteroffensive ended at Fire Support Base (FSB) Anne, while the security of Hue was improved by recapturing FSB Bastogne. The Hai Van Pass was secure, but only a narrow coastal strip along Highway QL-1 remained in South Vietnamese control south to the Binh Dinh border. (National Route 1 climbs over Hai Van ridge on the boundary of Quang Nam and Thua Thien Provinces. The ridge juts into the sea to form the northern enclosure of Da Nang Bay and separates the northern and southern sectors of MR 1.)

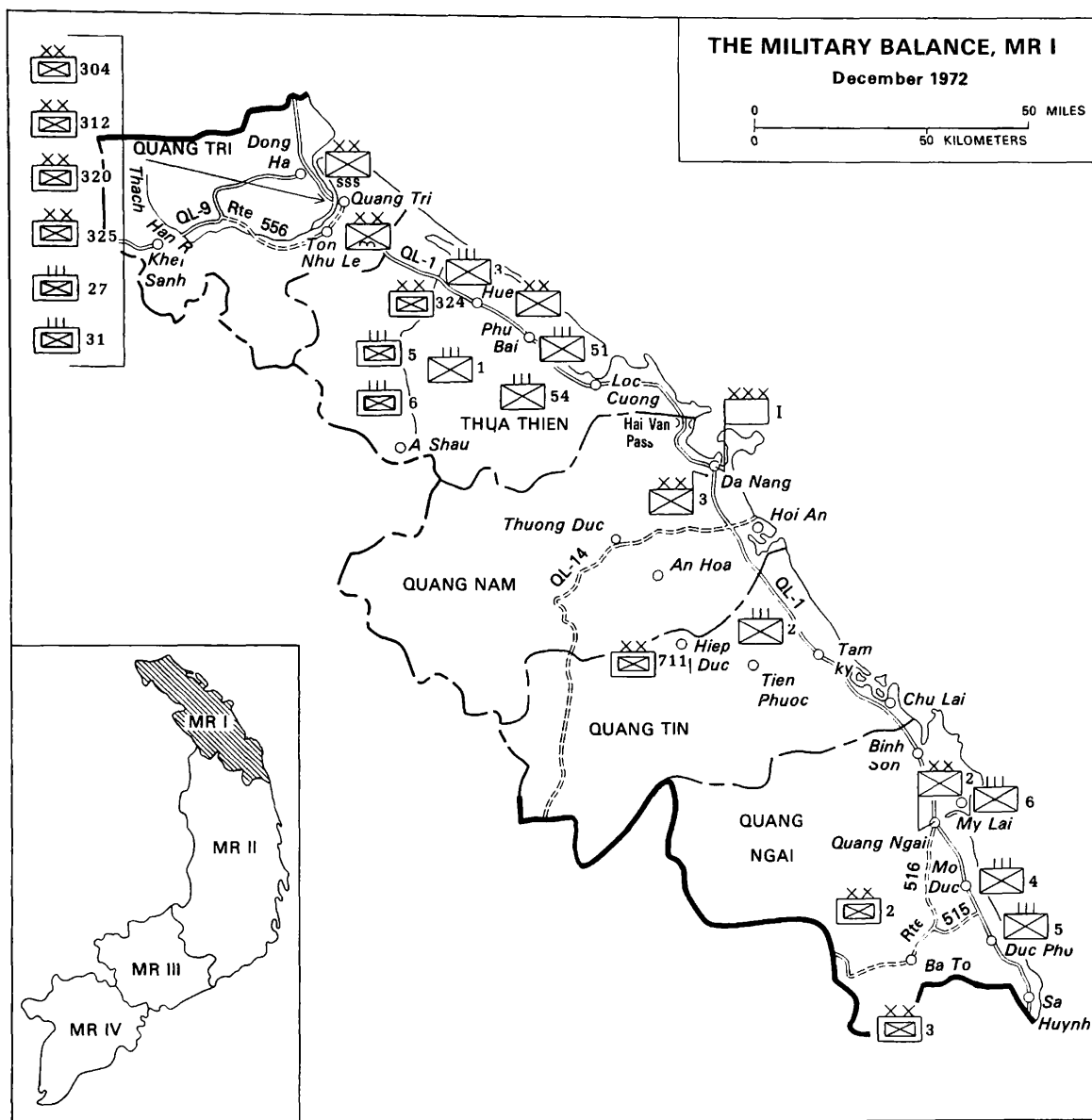
The Military Balance, December 1972

MILITARY REGION 1

Military Region 1, the responsibility of ARVN's I Corps, encompassed the five northern provinces. North of the Hai Van Pass is: Quang Tri and Thua Thien were the 1st Division and the Marine and Airborne divisions. Enemy forces in those provinces operated under control of Military Region Tri-Thien-Hue (MRTTH) and the B-5 Front. South of the pass, enemy forces were commanded by North Vietnam's Military Region 5, while two ARVN divisions, the 3d in Quang Nam and northern Quang Tin Provinces and the 2d in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces, were controlled by I Corps Headquarters at Da Nang. (Map 1)

The NVA began the Nguyen Hue offensive in South Vietnam's Military Region 1 with three divisions, but by the end of the offensive had employed eight divisions, five independent infantry regiments, probably three armor regiments, and six or seven artillery regiments. There were in addition several sapper regiments, perhaps 4, and up to 33 independent local battalions of infantry, field artillery, anti-aircraft artillery, reconnaissance troops, and sappers. (Sapper regiments in the NVA were similar to what other armies would call assault or shock infantry, and to the U.S. Army Ranger Battalions of World War II. They were specially trained in employing mines and demolitions and neutralizing and breaching minefields and fortifications. Elements of sapper regiments often preceded regular infantry in the assault of defensive positions. The NVA had also specialized sapper units, smaller than regiments, such as water sappers, trained in swimming and underwater demolitions.)

That formidable force was opposed by five South Vietnamese divisions, a ranger group, some ranger border defense battalions, and the territorial forces of the provinces. (South Vietnamese ranger groups had three battalions, lighter than the regular infantry, authorized 661 men each. A ranger border defense battalion, designed to defend an isolated,



Map 1

forward operating base, was authorized only 461. The territorial forces were composed of Regional Forces [RF] and Popular Forces [PF]. Regional Forces were organized into companies and battalions and were controlled by province chiefs; Popular Forces were organized into platoons and were commanded by village and hamlet chiefs.)

During November 1972, two South Vietnamese marine brigades supported by B-52s and U.S. naval gunfire, attacked north along the coast east of Provincial Route 560 in Quang Tri Province, to seize the south bank of the Cua Viet River. Hampered by stiff resistance and heavy December rains, the marines were in defensive positions by the end of the year, still short of their objective. They were op-

posed by elements of the NVA 325th Division, principally the 101st Regiment, and the 48th Regiment of the 320th Division, both regiments supported by the 164th Artillery Regiment of the B-5 Front. The 164th was equipped with Soviet 130-mm. field guns. Between the 101st Regiment, operating along the coast, and Quang Tri City, the NVA employed the 27th and 31st Regiments of the B-5 Front, as well as the 18th Regiment, 325th Division. (The practice of assigning the same numerical designation to more than one unit was not unusual in the NVA. The 101st Regiment, 325th Division, was distinct from the 101st Regiment that operated in Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia Provinces under the control of the Central Office for South Vietnam—

COSVN. The 165th Infantry Regiment of the 312th Division was in Quang Tri Province, and another 165th Infantry Regiment of the 7th Division was in Binh Duong Province. Still more confusing for order-of-battle analysts, those two divisions each had 141st and 209th Regiments, while NVA 2d Division in Quang Ngai Province also had a 141st.)

While the marines held Quang Tri City, the Airborne Division was defending the hills south and southwest of the city and attacking toward the line of the Thach Han River. The attacks reached Route 556 between Nhu Le and Quang Tri, and Fire Support Bases Anne and Barbara in the Hai Lang forest were recaptured by airborne troops in November, using tactical air and B-52 strikes with good effect. Activity declined, however, in December because of monsoon rains and flooding. Elements of the NVA 312th Division and the 95th Regiment, 325th Division, opposed the airborne troops south of Quang Tri City. As the year ended, the 95th Regiment was defending on the south bank of the Thach Han from Quang Tri to positions north of FSB Anne. On that regiment's right, northwest of FSB Anne, was the 209th Regiment, 312th Division. The headquarters of the 312th Division was probably located about six kilometers west of FSB Anne with its 165th Regiment in the vicinity. Just to the southwest was the 66th Regiment of the 304th Division. No fewer than four NVA divisions and two B-5 Front regiments were defending the Cua Viet-Thach Han line in Quang Tri: the 304th, 312th, 320th, and 325th Divisions and the 27th and 31st Regiments. The other NVA division that had fought in Quang Tri during the Nguyen Hue offensive, the 308th, was by this time on its way back to North Vietnam to recuperate and rejoin the general reserve.

Besides the Marine and Airborne Divisions, the only other ARVN division north of the Hai Van Pass was the 1st Division. Like the 22d Division in II Corps, the 1st was a heavy division. It had four regiments—the 1st, 3d, 51st, and 54th—and each regiment had four battalions. The 1st Division was responsible for defending from the Song Bo corridor through the Hai Van Pass, for supporting the territorial forces in the defense of Hue, and for securing the line of communication. Opposing the 1st were three regiments of the 324th Division—the 29th, 803d, and 812th—which were generally deployed opposite Hue, the 5th and 6th independent regiments in the hills southwest of Hue, and local main force battalions south of Phu Loc. At year's end, the 3d Regiment of the 1st Division held positions, including FSB T-Bone, south and east of the Song Bo. To its south, the 1st Regiment held FSB Veghel and FSB Bastogne controlling the approach to Hue along Route 547. With headquarters in Phu Bai, the 51st Regiment was patrolling Highway 1

south to the Hai Van Pass. The 54th Regiment was in the hills south and southwest of Phu Bai and Phu Loc.

The ARVN 3d Division had been shattered in Quang Tri during the Nguyen Hue offensive. Although it was still rebuilding and retraining, it was responsible for the important southwestern approaches to Da Nang: Duc Duc District and the Que Son Valley, scenes of some of the heaviest fighting in 1972. Enemy advances in this area inevitably led to the rocketing of Da Nang Airbase, as happened on 26 December. Even more threatening was the possibility of the enemy bringing his field guns within range of the city and the airbase. The ARVN could give up very little more terrain before that threat would become a reality. NVA formations opposing the 3d Division in Quang Nam and northern Quang Tin were the 711th Division with its three regiments—the 31st, 38th, and 270th—and the 572d Tank-Artillery Regiment of the enemy's Military Region 5. A sapper regiment, the 5th, which operated in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces, had been broken in heavy combat during the year and was disbanded in December. Its understrength battalions were assigned to MR 5 and the 711th Division.

The ARVN 3d Division straddled the boundary between Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces, which bisected the Que Son Valley. Although the division was able to hold Fire Support Base Ross in the valley's center, it could not reach Hiep Duc. From a base behind Hiep Duc, the 711th Division deployed its regiments forward into the valley and on the ridges above. As the end of the year approached, the division's 31st Regiment had elements southwest of FSB Ross, and its 270th Regiment (also known as the 9th) had elements near Route 536 where it crossed the ridge west of the base and on the Nui Ong Gai ridge to the south. The ARVN 2d Regiment, 3d Division, was in contact on Nui Ong Gai.

Reports from prisoners of war and deserters alluded to serious morale problems in the 711th Division. Malaria and battle casualties had taken a heavy toll, and battalions, particularly those in the 270th Regiment, were below 200 men. The reports gained added credence in the summer of 1973 when the 711th was redesignated the 2d Division and the 270th Regiment was disbanded entirely. The weakness of the 711th gave the aggressive commander of the newly reorganized 3d ARVN Division, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh, the opportunity to move his battalions out of the rocket belt around Da Nang westward into Quang Nam Province and the Que Son Valley.

The ARVN 2d Division fought heavy actions in southern Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces in the fall and winter of 1972. In late September, its 5th

Regiment and the 77th Ranger Battalion failed in a tardy effort to save Tien Phuoc District Town in Quang Tin Province, but the town was subsequently recaptured by the 2d Regiment, 3d Division. Meanwhile, reinforced by the 4th Tank Battalion, the 78th Ranger Battalion, and the 2d Ranger Group, the 2d Division's 4th and 5th Regiments cleared the enemy's 52d Regiment, 2d Division, and elements of the NVA 3d Division from Mo Duc and Duc Pho, two important towns on Highway 1(QL-1). After participating in the Tien Phuoc success, the 6th Regiment returned from the 3d Division to the 2d Division and, with the 1st Ranger Group, operated east of Highway 1 in the Batangan Peninsula and around My Lai. An attempt by the ARVN 5th Regiment to retake the highland district town, Ba To, was unsuccessful. Opposing the 2d Division in Quang Ngai were the 1st, 52d, and 141st Regiments of the NVA 3d Division from its bases in northern Binh Dinh Province.

The NVA 2d Division was in poor condition. It had moved to Quang Ngai Province in June 1972 after incurring heavy losses at Kontum in April and May. It was probably at no more than half-strength when it arrived in Quang Ngai, and it soon lost another third to B-52 raids and ARVN operations. Although the division received some replacements, morale and combat effectiveness in the weeks before the cease-fire were low. NVA objectives in southern Quang Ngai were to block Highway 1 and seize the small port of Sa Huynh. Despite its weakened condition, the 2d Division was going to be handed the mission of achieving those objectives, and as the year ended it was preparing to attack while the South Vietnamese in southern Quang Ngai retained a precarious hold on Highway 1.

MILITARY REGION 2

Military Region 2, largest of the four South Vietnamese regions, included all of the provinces of the Central Highlands and the long coastline from Binh Dinh Province south to the northern border of Binh Tuy Province, only 60 miles east of Saigon. At year's end the enemy had three regular divisions and numerous independent regiments and battalions opposing the ARVN's 22d and 23d Divisions, 21st Medium Tank Battalion, and three ranger groups and the Republic of Korea (ROK) Tiger Division. Two of the NVA divisions were in the highlands, the 10th (first organized in December) in Kontum and the 320th in Pleiku. The NVA 3d Division was in Binh Dinh. (Map 2)

The appearance of military balance in Military Region 2—three divisions opposed by three divisions—was deceptive, for the ROK Tiger Division had all but withdrawn from action following hard fighting in April in the An Khe Pass. For that matter, until forced into responding at An Khe

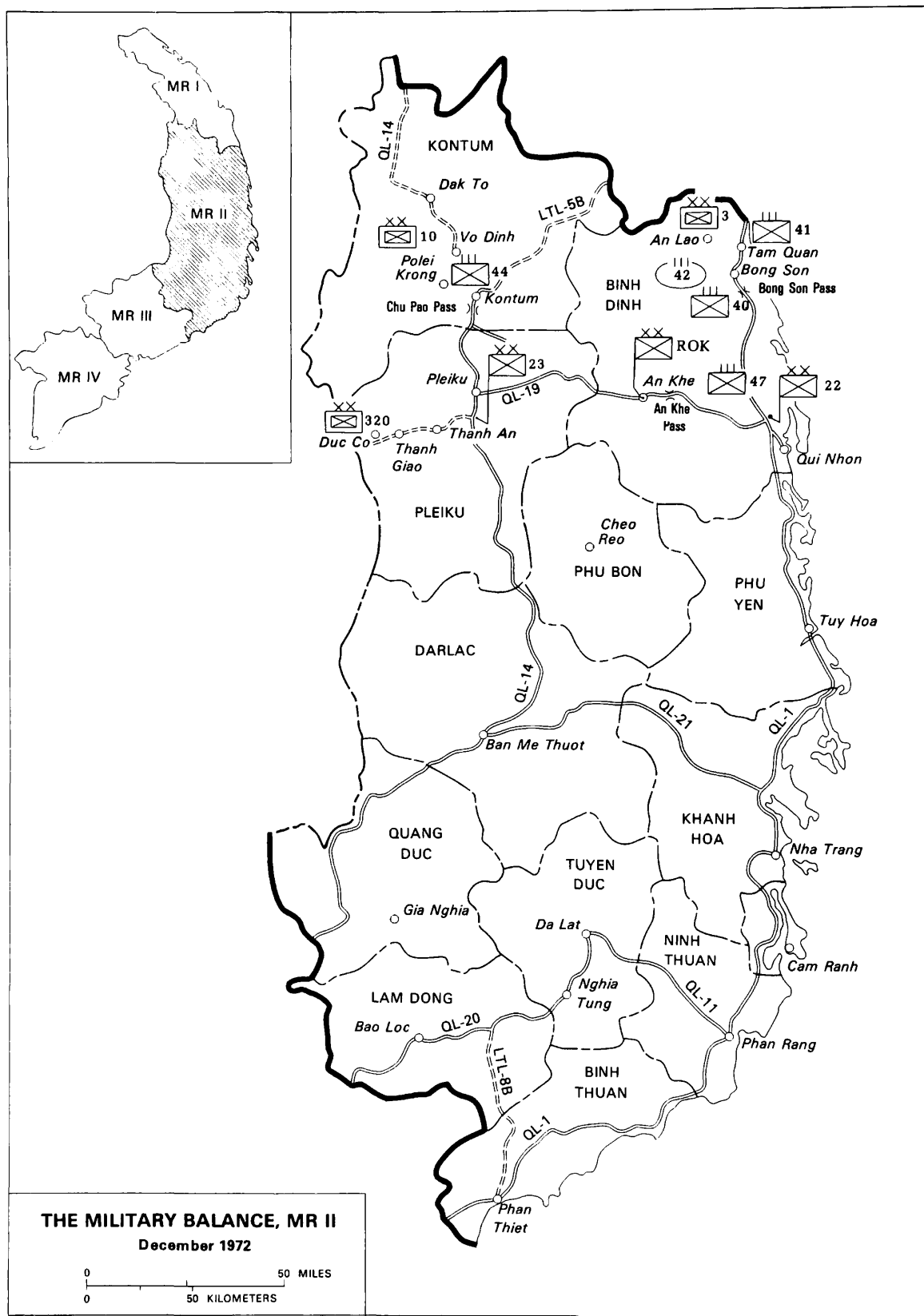
when the enemy overran its outposts, the Tiger Division had been quiescent for about three years.

Although the ARVN 22d Division had incurred heavy losses during the Nguyen Hue offensive, the division was somewhat aggressive in moving against enemy bases in Binh Dinh Province and in securing the most important lines of communication, Highway 1 (QL-1) along the coast, and Highway 19 (QL-19), which climbs westward over the Annamite range to Pleiku. Security on the latter route, whose steep grades, blind curves, defiles, and many bridges created ideal opportunities for ambush, was being provided by the 3d and 19th Armored Cavalry Squadrons. The 22d Division had four regiments: the 40th was in northern Binh Dinh in the area of the Bong Son Pass; the 41st was in Tam Quan, the northernmost district of Binh Dinh; the 42d was in reserve in Hoai An District; and the 47th was providing security around Phu Cu on Highway 1. Reinforcing the 22d Division in Binh Dinh were the 14th Armored Cavalry Squadron in Bong Son and two regiments of ARVN rangers—the 4th Ranger Group east of Tam Quan, and the 6th east of Phu Cu.

With the NVA 3d Division recuperating in the An Lao Valley and the ARVN 22d Division exerting pressure on the exits from the valley, the situation had stabilized in northern Binh Dinh Province. Estimates at the time placed the 3d Division at less than 40 percent of authorized strength. Its three regiments—the 2d, 12th, and 21st—were operating with fewer than 800 men each. To the south in Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, and Binh Thuan Provinces, local security along Highway 1 was adequate to keep traffic moving. In the Central Highlands, meanwhile, South Vietnamese objectives were to drive the enemy from positions around Vo Dinh, north of Kontum City, and to push west in Thanh An District of Pleiku Province to drive the NVA 320th Division from Duc Co.

Kontum City is located near the northern end of a high, rolling plateau with the airfield on the north side of the city at an elevation of over 1800 feet. The land begins to rise abruptly to the east and north where steep, jungle-covered ridges reach an elevation of 2700 feet within 10 kilometers of the city. This arc of hills was defended by the ARVN, but the density of the forest, the steepness of the terrain, and the absence of roads eliminated the area as an avenue for large or mechanized enemy forces.

Although Kontum was the last major city north of Pleiku in the western highlands, Highway 14 (QL-14) continued as an improved road as far as the ARVN outpost at Dak To, about 40 kilometers north of Kontum. The highway was the main route to Kontum from the north. The NVA had used it to enter Kontum in the Nguyen Hue offensive, and although the ARVN had eventually cleared the



Map 2

city, a number of attempts to push the NVA beyond Vo Dinh, north of Kontum, had failed. The forward ARVN defenses northwest of Kontum were manned by the 44th Regiment, 23d Division at Base N, a strongpoint constructed behind the Dak La Stream and on Eo Gio hill, astride Highway 14 north of Base N, near the Kontum airfield. Strongpoint R, south of N, gave some depth to the defense.

The Dak Bla River looped around the city on the south and meandered westward to join the Poko River near Trung Nghia village. The Montagnard hamlet of Polei Krong was on the Poko, just north of the confluence. With the 85th Ranger Border Defense Battalion at Polei Krong, the ARVN held Trung Nghia with Kontum Regional Forces.

The enemy's 10th Division was responsible for control of the area north and west of Kontum City. Its 28th Regiment was probably in the vicinity of the Ngok Bay ridge, a spine-like chain 2,000 feet high that American troops had named Rocket Ridge because the enemy had long used it as a base for firing rockets on Kontum. The 66th Regiment was in the vicinity of Dak To, while on the last day of December 1972, the 95B Regiment, forcing a withdrawal by the 44th ARVN Regiment of the 23d Division, managed to secure a lodgment in the Chu Pao Pass where Highway 14 curves between 3,000-foot peaks south of Kontum City. All three NVA regiments had incurred heavy losses during the Nguyen Hue offensive and were considered to have only about 25 percent of authorized strength. A fourth regiment, the 24B Independent Regiment of the B-3 Front, was located west of the Chu Pao Pass. That regiment was probably at less than 40 percent of authorized strength.

The 320th NVA Division, at about 60 percent of authorized strength, was in Base Area 701 in the vicinity of Duc Co. Its 48th Regiment was near Thanh Giao in western Pleiku Province, and its 64th Regiment was probably close to Thanh An District town. The division had only two infantry regiments at the time, having transferred its 52d Regiment to the NVA 2d Division during August 1972 where it operated in Quang Nam and Quang Tin Provinces. The division's 54th Artillery Regiment was providing support from the vicinity of Thanh An.

Thirty days before the cease-fire, the military balance in the Central Highlands was precarious. The NVA 10th Division had two regiments concentrated north and west of Kontum City and had a third interdicting Highway 14 in the Chu Pao Pass. Although the enemy was unable to keep the road closed, he could interdict the road any time he wished to pay the price. The ARVN was unable to extend its defenses as far as Vo Dinh or beyond Polei Krong in the west. The enemy had the capability of bombarding Kontum and its outskirts by

rocket whenever he chose. Although the ARVN was capable of keeping open the line of communication from Kontum to Pleiku to Binh Dinh Province, the enemy could interdict it for short periods of time.

As the year ended, the ARVN 23d Division after heavy fighting was in possession of the border camp at Duc Co. The 23d owed much of its success at Duc Co and in Thanh An District to heavy U.S. B-52 support and to the attached 41st Regiment of the 22d Division, which had taken Duc Co after elements of the 23d had failed. The defense of Duc Co was then turned over to the 73d Ranger Border Defense Battalion. Although events proved that the ARVN could not hold Duc Co indefinitely, it was strong enough to prevent any significant enemy gains elsewhere in Thanh An District. For either side to make any significant tactical gains in the Central Highlands, reinforcements would have to be added to the equation.

MILITARY REGION 3

Military Region 3 contained not only the seat of the government of South Vietnam and its financial and commercial center, but also all of the most important operational, logistic, and training bases of the armed forces. The Joint General Staff (JGS) was in a compound adjacent to Tan Son Nhut Airbase on the northwestern edge of the city of Saigon. Tan Son Nhut itself was the hub of international and domestic air traffic, the headquarters of the Vietnamese Air Force and the 5th Air Division, and the home base of the ARVN Airborne Division. Most seaborne commerce steamed through the ship channels of the Rung Sat south of Saigon and passed through the city's docks on the Saigon River. The headquarters of the Vietnamese Navy was also on the Saigon River, near the major military terminal, Newport, and the largest petroleum storage terminal in the country was a few miles south of Saigon, also on the river, at Nha Be. (Map 3)

Major military training installations were the Quang Trung National Training Center, just north of Saigon, the Thu Duc Training Center, site of the Infantry and Armor Schools until they were moved to Bear Cat, near Bien Hoa, and the Marine Corps Center at Di An, north of Saigon. The ARVN Arsenal was also on the northern edge of the city. Northeast, across the broad Dong Nai River, was the sprawling military complex of Bien Hoa-Long Binh. A modern four-lane highway and the national railway linked Saigon with Bien Hoa. At Bien Hoa were the logistical headquarters of the South Vietnamese Air Force and the 3d Air Division, which contained, except for one squadron at Da Nang, the entire F-5 force. Long Binh, the former logistical center of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, housed the 1st



Map 3

ARVN Associated Depot and later the Command and General Staff College.

The flat rice-lands of the Mekong Delta lay a few miles west of Saigon's city limits with the rice-rich province of Long An to the south. The brushlands of southern Tay Ninh and Binh Duong Provinces started only 25 kilometers north of the city and gave way to the vast jungle of the Dong Nai Terrace, which stretched to the Cambodian border.

Saigon was the focus of five first-class national highways. National Route 1 (QL-1) came from Phnom Penh and traversed Svay Rieng Province before entering Vietnam in Tay Ninh Province west of Go Dau Ha. Highway 1 then passed through Saigon and continued through Bien Hoa and Xuan Loc on its way up the coast. Three major north and

northeast routes began in or north of the city. Highway 13 (QL-13), sometimes called Thunder Road for the many ambushes that had taken place along its jungled length, ran north through Lai Khe and An Loc and crossed into Cambodia north of Loc Ninh. Route 1A (LTL-1A) branched off Highway 13 in Phu Cuong, about twenty kilometers north of Saigon, crossed the Song Be, and climbed through the jungles of War Zone D to Don Luan where it joined Route 14. Highway 14 (QL-14) continued on to Ban Me Thuot and points north, but left Military Region 3 at the Quang Duc border.

One of the most secure major roads in Vietnam was Highway 20 (QL-20), which left Route 1 east of Bien Hoa and reached Dalat, 230 kilometers by air from Tan Son Nhut. When Highway 1 was interdicted, Highway 20 was a good alternate route to

Nha Trang. Another secure route and perhaps the most heavily travelled in the country, was Highway 4 (QL-4) to the Mekong Delta. It was vital to Saigon's rice supply, and its several major bridges and thousands of culverts required constant vigilance against sabotage.

By the end of December 1972, both South and North Vietnam had made adjustments in their forces in Military Region 3. The siege of An Loc was over, and only one NVA regiment, 95C, remained in the vicinity. The ARVN 18th Division had turned over the defense of An Loc to the MR 3 Ranger Command with eight ranger battalions. One of the battalions, the 92d, was defending the outpost at Tong Le Chon. The NVA 9th Division (the old 9th Viet Cong Division), leaving its 95C Regiment to prevent any ARVN land movement in or out of An Loc, had shifted its 272d Regiment to the vicinity of Bo Duc in northwestern Phuoc Long Province for rest and refitting. The 271st Regiment of the 9th Division was northeast of Chon Thanh in southern Binh Long Province in position to block the ARVN from using Highway 13 between Chon Thanh and An Loc and to threaten South Vietnamese posts at Chi Linh and Don Luan (also known as Dong Xoai).

Don Luan, in Phuoc Long Province, and Chi Linh, in Binh Long Province, were defended by Regional Forces and were customarily resupplied by air. Chi Linh was beyond the range of secured roads, and all travel was by helicopter. On the other hand, Route 1A connected Don Luan to Phu Giao where the South Vietnamese 7th Regiment, 5th Division, was stationed. In early January 1973, the 7th cleared the highway permitting a convoy to reach Don Luan. North of Don Luan, Highway 14 was interdicted, and much of the logistical support beyond that point was by air. The base at Phuoc Long Province headquarters in Phuoc Binh was resupplied by fixed-wing aircraft and by road via Quang Duc. Just south of Phuoc Binh was the landing strip and village of Song Be, and forces there were within supporting range of those at Phuoc Binh. A transplanted community, New Bo Duc, was constructed south of Song Be; the population consisted of refugees from a village in northern Phuoc Long Province taken over by the North Vietnamese. In northern MR 3, the South Vietnamese controlled only the capitals of Binh Long and Phuoc Long Provinces and Highway 14 as far as the western border of Quang Duc Province. The rest of the territory, which was largely forest and rubber plantations, was controlled by enemy units or was unoccupied by either side.

The ARVN 5th Division had placed its headquarters at Lai Khe in Binh Duong Province, with one regiment usually based at Phu Giao. The NVA 205th Regiment, which had been operating under

the control of the NVA 7th Division, was opposing the ARVN 5th in eastern Binh Duong. Concern for the security of Phuoc Long had prompted the stationing of the 9th Regiment, 5th Division, at Phuoc Binh. At the same time, the NVA 7th Division was operating from a base east of Highway 13 between Chon Thanh and Bau Bang.

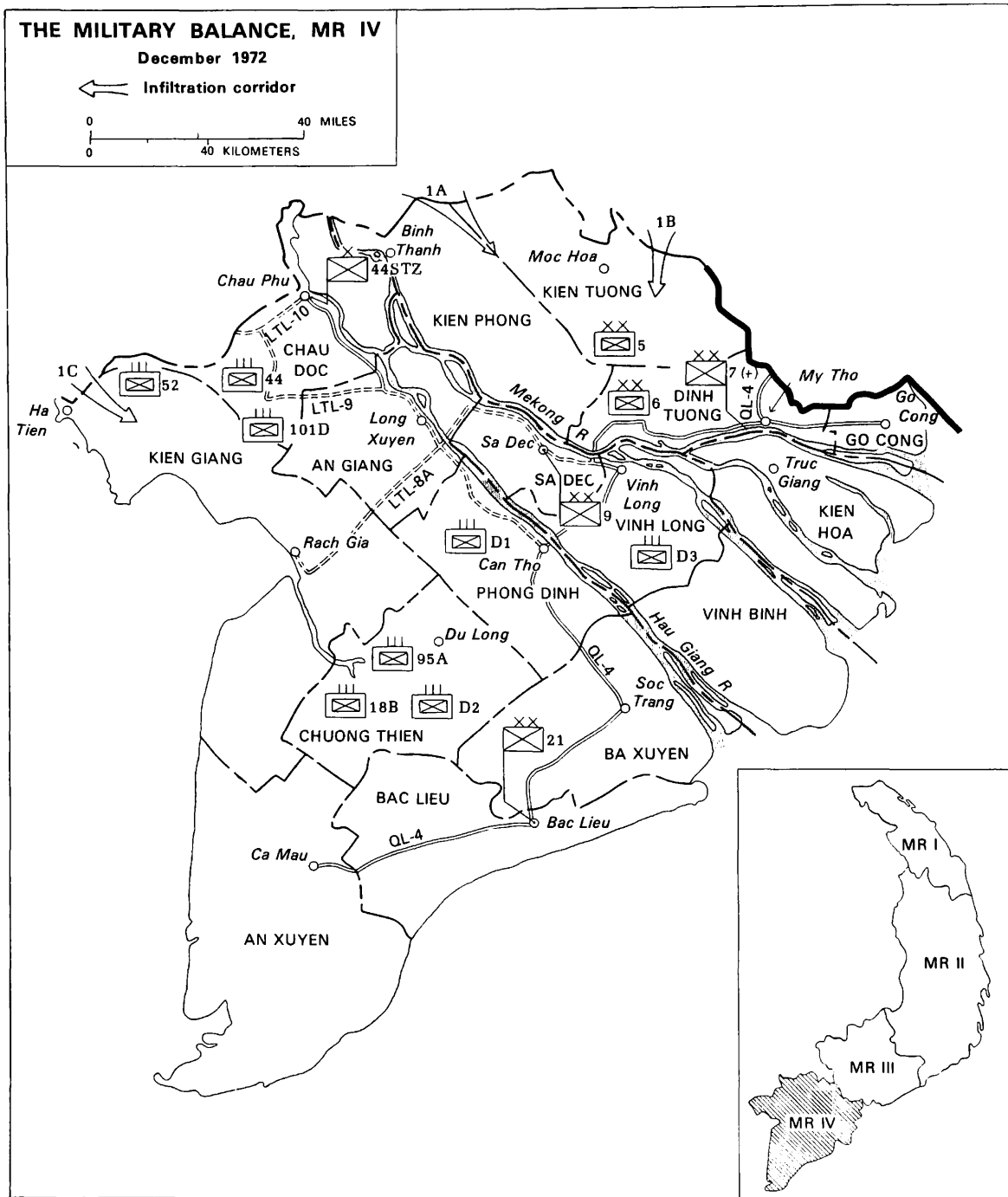
The ARVN 18th Division was headquartered at Xuan Loc, the capital of Long Khanh Province. It usually kept one regiment based in Bien Hoa and one in southern Binh Duong. The NVA 33d Regiment was in its normal area of operations in Long Khanh Province. The D10 Sapper Battalion was in the Rung Sat south of Saigon. At year's end, the 274th Regiment was believed to be in its traditional jungle base area, the Hat Dich Secret Zone, on the border between southern Bien Hoa Province and Long Khanh.

In western Military Region 3, the ARVN 25th Division was in its base at Cu Chi in Hau Nghia Province, just south of the Saigon River and the Ho Bo Woods. It kept one regiment at Cu Chi, one around Khiem Hanh north of Cu Chi, and one in Tay Ninh at the airstrip west of the province capital. Two battalions of the 50th Regiment, 25th Division, were in the Dau Tieng area of Binh Duong; one battalion was in Tri Tam, and the other was on the west, and opposite, side of the Saigon River. The NVA 101st Regiment was in the vicinity, probably in the Boi Loi Woods east of Khiem Hanh. The NVA 271st Independent Regiment was probably close to the Vam Co Dong River south of Go Dau Ha in Hau Nghia Province, posing a threat to Highways 1 and 22, the line of communication between Saigon and Tay Ninh.

As December came to a close, the 5th and 25th Divisions attacked north into the Saigon River corridor. Three battalions of the 5th moved into the Iron Triangle, while on the west side of the river four battalions of the 25th entered the Ho Bo Woods. Resistance was weak and casualties light.

During the Nguyen Hue offensive in MR 3, the North Vietnamese suffered much more severely than the forces of South Vietnam. Enemy units were dispersed throughout the northern part of the region, and his local forces were in disarray. NVA units were estimated to be less than 30 percent of normal strength, and local forces were even lower. The NVA nevertheless held the important village of Loc Ninh in northern Binh Long Province and was using it as a political center for the region, and other political centers were being established in northern Tay Ninh Province.

Although the ARVN was conducting some modest offensive operations, it seldom ranged far from established bases, and heavy reliance would have to be placed upon aerial supply of the isolated bases of An Loc and Song Be. The enemy neverthe-



Map 4

less posed no serious offensive threat to friendly forces or population centers in MR 3.

MILITARY REGION 4

South Vietnam's Military Region 4 contained 16 of the nation's 44 provinces, more than half of the cultivated land, most of which was devoted to rice, and more than half of the country's population. The

region was the broad, tropical, fertile delta of the great Mekong River. Its geographic, demographic, and economic characteristics dictated a war of predominantly small unit actions or attacks by fire and without armor or heavy artillery support. Much of the tactical and logistical movement was by waterway, and many of the battles were fought for control of canals. (Map 4)

By the end of December 1972, the ARVN had three divisions stationed in MR 4. The 7th Division, with headquarters near My Tho, was responsible for Kien Phong, Kien Tuong, Dinh Tuong, and Go Cong Provinces. A major problem facing the 7th was security in densely populated Dinh Tuong. That province was the key to control of Highway 4 (QL-4), the important line of communication leading to Saigon, and it contained the major city of My Tho. It was also the focus of two major enemy infiltration corridors from Cambodia. One, Corridor 1A, generally paralleled the boundary between Kien Phong and Kien Tuong Provinces into the key enemy base, the Tri Phap, at the junction of Kien Phong, Kien Tuong, and Dinh Tuong Provinces. The other, Corridor 1B, came out of Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province and entered Dinh Tuong Province and the Tri Phap through the Plain of Reeds in Kien Tuong Province.

Two enemy divisions opposed the ARVN 7th Division in MR 4. The NVA 5th Division with three regiments, the 275th, the 174th, and the E6, had fought in the Nguyen Hue campaign in the Binh Long battles of April through June 1972, then moved to the Mekong Delta and campaigned in Kien Tuong, Kien Phong, and Dinh Tuong Provinces. The 6th NVA Division was in central Dinh Tuong. Its 24th Regiment was probably located east of My Tho close to the border of Go Cong Province; the 207th Regiment was in northern Kien Phong Province; and the 320th Regiment, which was probably operating as part of the 6th Division, was in southern Kien Phong. The ARVN 7th Division, with an attached regiment of the ARVN 9th Division, had to cope with two independent regiments, the 88th and the DT1, controlled by VC Military Region 2. Although the 7th as the year ended had secured the vital line of communication to Saigon and the enemy's actions were limited to attacks by fire against outposts and populated areas, it had an imposing assignment.

The ARVN 9th Division was responsible for Sa Dec, Vinh Long, Vinh Binh, and Kien Hoa Provinces. The 9th was opposed by only one main force regiment, D3, under the command of VC Military Region 3. One of only two main force regiments in South Vietnam still considered to be predominantly Viet Cong, the D3 Regiment was probably operating in southeastern Vinh Long.

The ARVN 21st Division was responsible for the southwestern delta with an area of operations including Phong Dinh, Ba Xuyen, Bac Lieu, An Xuyen, and Chuong Thien Provinces and the southern half of Kien Giang, including the province capital, Rach Gia. Controlled by MR 3, four enemy regiments operated against the ARVN 21st Division: the VC D1 Regiment in Phong Dinh; and the

NVA D2, the 95A Sapper, and the NVA 18B Regiments in Chuong Thien.

ARVN military operations and security in the northwestern delta were the responsibility of the 44th Special Tactical Zone. In December 1972 the 44th consisted of the 4th Armor Brigade and three ranger groups, each with three battalions. The armor brigade had five armored cavalry squadrons equipped with armored personnel carriers. There were no tanks in the delta. Although the headquarters of the NVA 1st Division was located in Cambodia, three of its regiments operated in the border area of Chau Doc Province and northern Kien Giang Province against the 44th Special Tactical Zone. The 1st Division's 101D and 44th Regiments held strongly fortified caves in the Seven Mountains of Chau Doc, while its 52d Regiment operated along infiltration corridor 1C in Kien Giang. Despite the presence of those major enemy forces, it was still possible during daylight to travel by road almost anywhere in the 44th Special Tactical Zone. The NVA 1st Division, the weakest enemy division, was in poor condition and was preoccupied with hostile Cambodian Communist units that raided the division's logistical installations and impeded the flow of replacements.

The enemy in the delta sustained very heavy casualties during the 1972 offensive, estimates for main force units ranging from 15 to 26 percent of authorized strength. During October alone, the enemy probably lost more than 5,000 soldiers, many of whom came from his best forces in the delta. As of the end of the year, few replacements had been received to make up for those losses, and ammunition stocks were probably very low, both factors contributing to the decline in enemy activity during the last part of December.

As the year ended, the situation in Military Region 4 seemed to favor the South Vietnamese. The major route from the lower delta to Saigon was open to commercial and military traffic, the rice harvest was good, ARVN units were in fair condition in spite of heavy combat, and enemy units were greatly understrength, short of ammunition, and in some cases demoralized. The South Vietnamese controlled most of the commerce of the delta, most of the important lines of communication, and all of the important population centers. During the two years following the cease-fire, major battles were to take place in MR 4, and the ARVN would win them all. The outcome of the war, however, was not to be decided in the Mekong Delta.

Note on Sources

The major source of the pre-cease-fire situation was the MACV Official History, Volumes 1 and 2. Order-of-battle information was checked and in

some cases provided by ARVN officers who were there at the time. MR 1 information was checked by Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, ex-commander of I Corps, and Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh, ex-commander ARVN 3d Division; Maj. Gen. Phan Dinh Niem, who had commanded the ARVN 22d Divi-

sion, assisted with II Corps; Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh provided information concerning ARVN disposition in MR 3. Col. Hoang Ngoc Lung, ex-J2/JGS, checked all order-of-battle. The author also consulted his own notes and files derived from documents collected and preserved by Intelligence Branch, DAO Saigon.

U.S. Organization for the Cease-Fire

Enhance and Enhance Plus

Projects ENHANCE and ENHANCE PLUS were undertaken in 1972 to accelerate the delivery of equipment and improve the combat capabilities of South Vietnam's armed forces (RVNAF), but the force structure basis for those projects was developed four years earlier. In May 1968 the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) submitted a plan to Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC) for the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Program (CRIMP). CRIMP was intended to provide an improved balance in the combat forces and increase the fire power, mobility, and logistics of RVNAF. It came to be the basis for later force structure changes and Vietnamization.

The RVNAF force structure subsequently approved by the Secretary of Defense under CRIMP called for just over a million men in the armed forces in fiscal year 1971, for about 1,090,000 in fiscal year 1972, and for 1,100,000 in fiscal year 1973. In October 1971 CINCPAC directed a review of the fiscal year 1973 force structure. MACV's review resulted in a plan approved by CINCPAC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in February 1972. The most important capabilities added to the RVNAF were the new 3d Infantry Division and the 20th Tank Regiment for Military Region I.

Project ENHANCE was undertaken following the Nguyen Hue offensive to compensate for the heavy materiel losses during that campaign and to deliver replacements before expected cease-fire conditions might curtail the deliveries. In essence, ENHANCE was undertaken to accelerate programs already planned under CRIMP. It provided new units and equipment for the Army, Air Force, and Navy. The following lists summarize the major items of equipment delivered under ENHANCE.

Army: 3 artillery battalions, 175-mm. gun; 2 tank battalions, 90-mm., M48; 2 air defense artillery battalions, .50-caliber and 40-mm.; 100 TOW (tube launched, optically tracked, wire guided) antitank

weapons, to be provided to 26 infantry regiments, 3 airborne brigades, 3 Marine brigades, and 7 Ranger groups.

Air Force: 32 UH-1 helicopters; 5 F-5A fighters; 2 A-37 squadrons (Light Bombers); 12 RC-47 photo-reconnaissance airplanes; 1 AC-119K squadron (gunships); 1 C-7 squadron (cargo airplane); 1 C-119G squadron (maritime patrol); 2 CG-47 squadrons (cargo airplane).

Navy: 3 high endurance cutters (WHEC).

ENHANCE was designed to bring the force structure up to planned levels before the cease-fire. In summary, by January 1973 the structure for the ARVN, supported by the ENHANCE shipments, was as follows: 11 infantry divisions (35 regiments, 105 battalions); 1 airborne division (3 regiments, 9 battalions); 7 Ranger groups (21 battalions); 7 armored cavalry squadrons (nondivisional); 3 M-48 tank squadrons (1 deployed, 2 in training); 33 border defense Ranger battalions; 41 105-mm. artillery battalions (36 divisional, 5 nondivisional); 15 155-mm. artillery battalions (11 divisional, 4 nondivisional); 204 105-mm. artillery platoons (2 howitzers each); 4 air defense artillery battalions (1 deployed, 1 in training, and 2 to be activated); 17 miscellaneous battalions (military police, engineers, reconnaissance, etc.).

ENHANCE PLUS was a program to augment and modernize the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). ENHANCE PLUS provided the following additional aircraft and units: 2 additional CH-47 squadrons to provide medium helicopter lift for each of the four military regions; 3 additional A-37 squadrons; 2 additional F-5A squadrons; the early activation of 3 F-5E squadrons; 3 additional UH-1 squadrons to bring the total to 19 squadrons and increase the size of the existing squadrons; 10 additional EC-47 airplanes (electronic reconnaissance); 35 O-2 aircraft to replace the existing O-1's; 2 squadrons of C-130 cargo airplanes to replace the C-123's; 1 additional AC-119K squadron.

ENHANCE and ENHANCE PLUS provided additional aircraft to VNAF as follows: UH-1 (286); CH-47 (23); AC-119K (22); A-1 (28); C-130A (32, resulted in turn-in of all C-123, C-47, and C-119K); A-37 (90, brought total strength up to 249); C-7 (4); F-5A and B (118 brought total strength to 153); EC-47 (23 added to 10 already in service); T-37 (24); O-2 (35, 1 for 1 exchange with O-1's).

Shipments under ENHANCE PLUS were made by sea and air. The first cargo aircraft arrived at Tan Son Nhut Airbase on 23 October 1972, and the last shipment arrived at Newport, near Saigon, on 12 December. Nearly 5,000 short tons came by air and 100,000 short tons by sea. Not part of either ENHANCE or ENHANCE PLUS were 31 amphibious vehicles delivered to the Vietnamese Marine Corps in November.

While the United States was rushing equipment to Vietnam to avoid the constraints expected to be imposed by the cease-fire agreement, the Communists were also shoving great quantities of materiel including field guns, tanks, and antiaircraft weapons down the roads into South Vietnam, including SA-2 air defense missiles on their way to Khe Sanh in Quang Tri Province. As later demonstrated, the Communists were not concerned about any restrictions a cease-fire might impose on shipments to South Vietnam; the surge of shipments was instead in response to the heavy losses the NVA suffered during the Nguyen Hue offensive and the ARVN counteroffensive.

Based upon clearly reliable data, MACV estimated that North Vietnam sent nearly 148,000 replacements into South Vietnam during 1972. This estimate included individual replacements to make up for the staggering losses incurred during the campaign but not the organized divisions, regiments, and battalions sent to join the offensive. Although the estimates of enemy losses are based on less reliable information, the NVA probably lost over 190,000 men during 1972. Of these about 132,000 were killed in action, another 46,000 probably died of wounds or were permanently disabled, 2,500 were prisoners of war, and 10,000 turned themselves in to South Vietnamese authorities as ralliers. As was the case with materiel shipments, the North Vietnamese showed no urgency in transporting replacements prior to the cease-fire. Those replacements methodically crossed the border from Laos and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) without inspection or control, a condition that persisted until the end.

Missions

Planning for the coming cease-fire at the headquarters of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, involved consideration of at least seven distinct functions, and new organizations had to be devised to accomplish some of them. First, MACV and all American and third country forces had to be withdrawn within 60 days of the cease-fire. Second, a small U.S. military headquarters was needed to continue the military assistance program for the RVNAF and supervise the technical assistance still required to complete the goals of Vietnamization. This headquarters was to become the Defense Attache Office, Saigon. Third, that headquarters was also to report operational and military intelligence through military channels to U.S. National Command authorities. Fourth, an organization was required to plan for the application of U.S. air and naval power into North or South Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, should either be required and ordered.

Called the United States Support Activities Group & Seventh Air Force (USSAG/7th AF), it was located at Nakhon Phanom in northeast Thailand. In this regard United States air support operations into Cambodia continued until the autumn of 1973. Fifth, a United States delegation to a Four-Party Joint Military Commission (US, SVN, DRV, PRG) had to be organized. The commission was to serve as a forum for communication among the Four Parties, assist in the implementation of the agreement, and help verify compliance with the agreement. Sixth, planning for the support of the International Commission of Control and Supervision had to be accomplished. And seventh, efforts to recover Americans still missing in action had to continue. For that purpose, the Joint Casualty Resolution Center was established as a successor to MACV's Personnel Recovery Center.

Since the purpose here is to examine the North Vietnamese invasion, the South Vietnamese response, and the United States reaction to the invasion, organizations not directly connected with the events or outcome of the third Indochina war will be mentioned only in passing.

The Defense Attache Office

DAO (Defense Attache Office) Saigon was organized according to requirements established by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CINCPAC, and Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and was activated on 28 January 1973 by Maj. Gen. John E. Murray. DAO Saigon was a unique organization. It performed the traditional functions of a defense attache, managed American military affairs in Vietnam after the cease-fire including the programs for the support of South Vietnam's armed forces, administered procurement contracts in support of the RVNAF, and furnished housekeeping support to Americans remaining in Vietnam after the cease-fire. Aside from the support of the RVNAF, it reported on operational matters, such as violations of the cease-fire, and produced intelligence information on which subsequent decisions concerning the Military Assistance Program and American interests in Southeast Asia could be based. The DAO occupied the offices turned over to it by the MACV at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, outside of Saigon, and most of its employees and officials conducted their work from those offices. Small field offices were located in Da Nang, Pleiku, Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, Long Binh, Nha Be, Dong Tam, Binh Thuy, and Can Tho.

To perform the traditional representational and information-collecting functions of military attaches, five professional attaches—two Army, two Air Force, and one Navy—were assigned to the

DAO with offices in the American Embassy in Saigon. The senior member of this group was the assistant defense attache, an Army colonel who relieved General Murray of much of his representational functions and who reported to the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington through attache channels. The attaches made frequent visits to the field where they observed RVNAF units and activities and reported those observations to the defense attache and to Washington.

The deputy defense attache was Brig. Gen. Ralph J. Maglione, U.S. Air Force, previously the MACV J-1. General Maglione was also chief of the Operations and Plans Division, DAO. In addition to having a small plans branch to perform customary military planning functions, Operations and Plans Division had an operations branch that manned the Operations Center and conducted liaison with the RVNAF Joint General Staff and with Headquarters, USSAG, on operational and reporting matters. The training section of the Operations Branch was responsible for training provided to the RVNAF under the Military Assistance Program.

The largest element in the Operations and Plans Division was the Intelligence Branch. The Chief of the Intelligence Branch was responsible for American military intelligence activities in the Republic of Vietnam. He reported directly to the ambassador and the defense attache, coordinated with RVNAF intelligence agencies and other U.S. intelligence activities in South Vietnam, and, in intelligence channels, reported simultaneously on most matters to USSAG, CINCPAC, and the Defense Intelligence Agency. Because DAO Saigon was subordinate to USSAG in operational and intelligence fields, the normal flow of tasking and reporting was through USSAG to CINCPAC and the JCS in Washington.

The Communications and Electronics Division had functions which, like those of the Operations and Plans Division, included support of U.S. military activities as well as continued military assistance to RVNAF. The Communications and Electronics Division supervised a contract which provided communications for DAO, the American Embassy, and other U.S. agencies. The division also gave technical support, through contractors, to RVNAF military communications systems. It also provided liaison and assistance to the RVNAF Joint General Staff and the ARVN Signal Department.

Three divisions within DAO managed the complex military assistance programs for the ARVN, the VNAF, and the Vietnamese Navy: the Army, Air Force, and Navy Divisions.

Despite its broad responsibilities, DAO was authorized only 50 military and 1,200 civilians. It was also told to plan for an early reduction in strength and disestablishment, the latter expected to occur within a year.

To accomplish its mission while planning on phasing out, DAO had to employ contractors to perform many functions. The contracts, however, were also to be reduced in number and scope throughout the year. When DAO Saigon became operational upon the disestablishment of MACV in late January, no fewer than 383 separate contracts were on the books with a total value of \$255 million. Slightly fewer than 250 of these were performed in South Vietnam; the others were off-shore. In January 1973, over 23,000 people were employed by contractors in South Vietnam, of whom over 5,000 were Americans, 16,000 were Vietnamese, and the remainder were third-country nationals. By mid-year of 1973 the total was reduced by half.

More than half the American contract employees were involved in training programs for the RVNAF. Of these, more than half were involved in aircraft maintenance, another large group was in communications and electronics, and the rest worked in technical fields ranging from vehicle repair and overhaul to ship overhaul and maintenance. Although most contract employees were located in the Saigon region, sizable groups were at the air bases at Da Nang, in Military Region 2 at Pleiku, Phu Cat, and Phan Rang, and at Binh Thuy, the VNAF air base near Can Tho in MR 4. Two years later, as the final Communist offensive gained momentum, the safety of those Americans in the outlying bases became a matter of major concern, even though their numbers by that time were greatly reduced.

The cease-fire agreement in Vietnam signaled the end of the American advisory effort in that country. The senior officials of DAO scrupulously avoided any offer of operational advice to the Vietnamese with whom they worked intimately and continuously. The technical assistance provided by the military and senior civilian officials of DAO and by the contractors was essential to the RVNAF's modernization and expansion, but the South Vietnamese military would get no advice on military operations, tactics, or techniques of employment. The war belonged to the Vietnamese, and they were going to fight it. The RVNAF knew what to do but had to be provided the means. What they could not control was the steady buildup of North Vietnamese military power within their borders, a buildup which culminated in the final offensive of 1975.

Note on Sources

The MACV Official History was consulted for information concerning ENHANCE and ENHANCE PLUS as were messages sent by MACV to CINCPAC recovered from Defense archives. Concerning the organization and functions of DAO Saigon, the

major sources consulted were the MACV Official History, Volumes I and II, and DAO Saigon's Quarterly Review and Analysis, 1st Quarter, FY 74.

The author, who was present during the final days of MACV and participated in organizing DAO, has also referred to his own notes and recollections.

Landgrab 73

The Paris discussions to end the war had resumed on 19 June 1972. On 8 October, the DRV announced a new proposal that led to "acceleration" in the talks and gave rise to speculation concerning an imminent cease-fire. It is beyond the scope of this work to examine the negotiating issues involved; suffice it to say that the DRV insisted that its new proposal was contingent upon an agreed solution to end the war by 31 October. The United States responded with a pledge to try and reach an agreement by that date. Anticipating success in negotiating, the NVA in mid-October began widespread pre-cease-fire attacks to gain land and population. By the end of the month, ARVN counterattacks had nullified nearly all NVA gains, and discussions in Paris again broke down. (See Department of State *Bulletin*, 13 November 1972, for a report on the October discussions.)

The situation was similar at the beginning of 1973. From information available at the time and from intelligence subsequently gathered through the interrogation of prisoners of war and the exploitation of captured documents, MACV learned that the NVA again planned general attacks throughout most of South Vietnam to take place immediately before the expected date of the cease-fire. These attacks, known as LANDGRAB 73, occurred essentially between 23 January and 3 February 1973. There was, however, a lack of uniformity in local objectives and in the manner in which the local attacks took place.

Military Region 1

In the northern part of South Vietnam, Military Region 1, the NVA B5 Front was in no condition to launch anything but local attacks, as NVA leadership apparently recognized. On the other hand, the B5 Front had no intention of giving up any of the terrain in northern Quang Tri Province for which it had paid so dearly during 1972. Throughout January it vigorously opposed with heavy artillery bombardments attempts by the South Vietnamese marines to advance along the coast toward the Cua

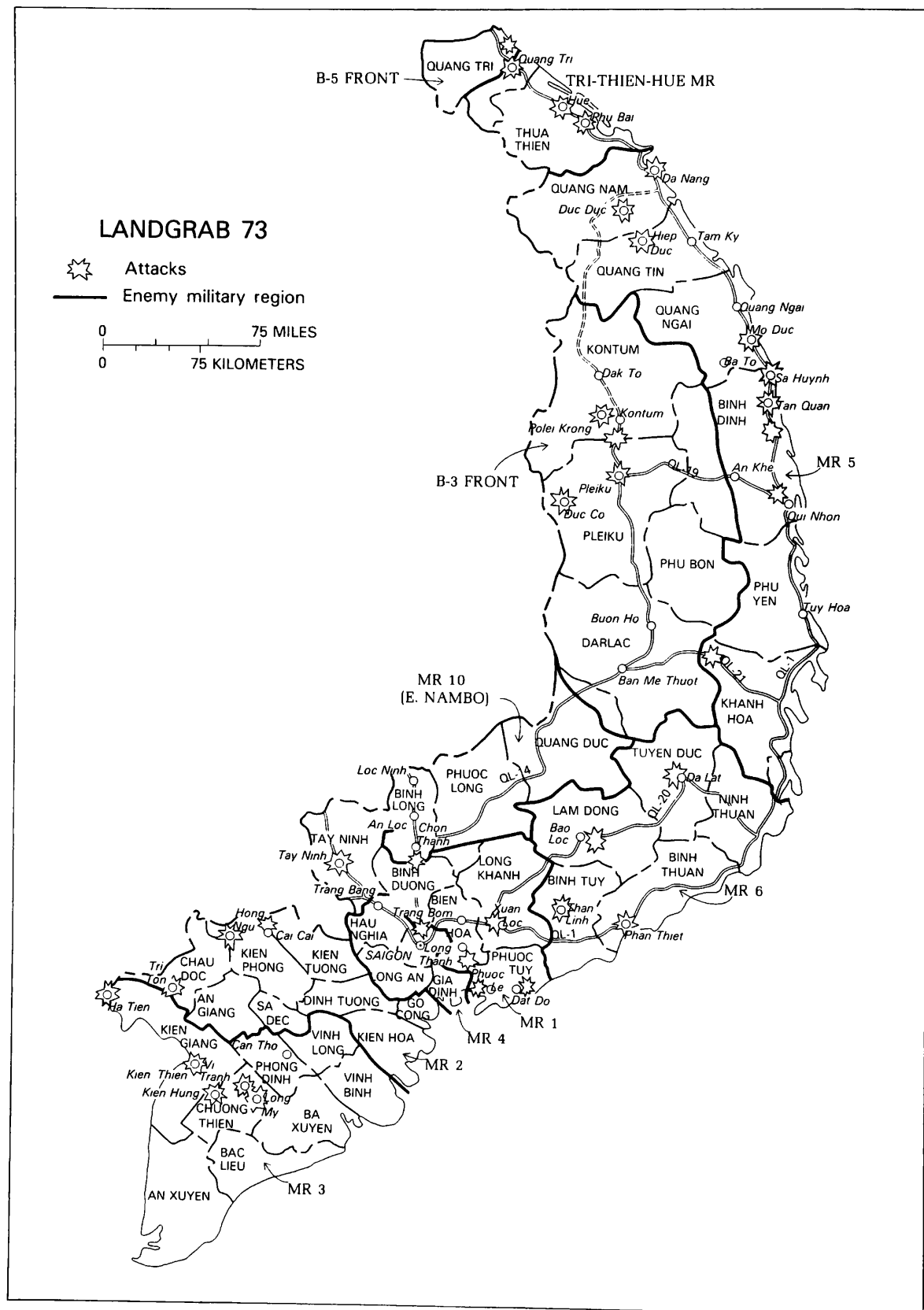
Viet. Likewise, south and west of Quang Tri City, the B5 Front forces prevented any expansion of the Airborne Division's positions into the hills south of the Thach Han River and against the Thach Han River line itself.

The enemy continued to reinforce his defenses in the highlands north of the Thach Han River and west of Quang Tri City. Elements of the NVA 304th Division were shifted to this sector, and additional antiaircraft units were brought into the B5 Front, so that by the end of January elements of at least 11 antiaircraft regiments were deployed in northeastern Quang Tri Province. An additional tank battalion from North Vietnam evidently entered the Quang Tri Front on the Cua Viet during January and was probably used in countering the South Vietnamese marines on the 26th. Despite very heavy artillery fire and tank reinforcements, the marines succeeded in temporarily establishing a lodgment at the mouth of the Cua Viet on 28 January.

South of the B5 Front, in the area of operations controlled by MRTTH (MR Tri-Thien-Hue), the situation called for a different approach. The populated lowlands along the coast seemed to the North Vietnamese to invite infiltration and occupation. If a political presence could be established there, post-cease-fire evidence of the legitimacy of the NLF could be offered. Therefore, military operations by the main forces of MRTTH were designed to support infiltration.

Elements of the 803d Regiment, 324B Division, had moved into the lowlands south of Camp Evans, and regular forces were moving toward the lowlands north of Hue on 24 January. The next day, artillery and ground attacks increased against RVNAF positions north, west, and south of Hue. Between 27 January and 3 February, elements of the 803d attempted to interdict Highway 1 in the vicinity of the An Lo bridge. In this area alone, the enemy lost approximately 200 killed in fierce fighting in which the North Vietnamese captured a number of hamlets before being ejected. South of Hue, the NVA 5th and 6th Regiments, attacking in the lowlands around Phu Bai, penetrated several hamlets, although most of the infiltrators were intercepted before reaching the populated areas. About 175 enemy soldiers died in the fighting south of Hue. Although the enemy in MRTTH was partially successful over the eight-day period in establishing some control, ARVN forces subsequently drove the infiltrators out. Undoubtedly contributing to the enemy's failure and the South Vietnamese successes was the general antipathy of the population for the Communist forces. The people recalled the massacres of Tet 1968.

South of the Hai Van Pass, NVA operations to seize land and people prior to the cease-fire were



Map 5

under the control of NVA Military Region 5. Intelligence available at the time revealed that officials of MR 5 mistakenly believed that teams of the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS) would be in position at the time the cease-fire became effective. Although the North Vietnamese seized some hamlets and villages, ARVN counterattacks soon drove most of the local and NVA forces out. Both the NVA and the local forces overextended themselves in the brief campaign and could not secure their gains.

Intelligence sources revealed that the NVA expected its main forces to be able to contain the ARVN in its bases and thereby permit local forces to invest the hamlets and villages. The basic assumption was that even though the cease-fire might stop all military activity, local forces would be able to conduct political and propaganda activities without interruption. As it turned out, ICCS teams were not available or deployed to prevent ARVN counter-moves, and it is doubtful, even had they been in place, whether they would have had any appreciable influence on military operations.

In northern MR 5, NVA attacks were heaviest in three areas: Front-4 operations were conducted in Quang Nam; the 711th Division operated to contain the ARVN in the Que Son Valley and prevented the ARVN from advancing into the important enemy logistical base in the Hiep Duc region; and provincial and local forces operated in northern and central Quang Ngai, while the NVA 2d Division attacked in the southern district of the province.

In Quang Nam Province, Front-4 had completed its preparations for the attacks by 22 January 1973, including having the 575th Artillery Battalion move rockets into four firing positions for attacks against Da Nang. Fighting began on the morning of 26 January with a ground attack against Duc Duc and a rocket attack against Da Nang.

Numerous attacks by fire and infantry assault were simultaneously conducted against South Vietnamese positions and lines of communication throughout the province, and all district headquarters in Quang Nam Province were hit. Da Nang received rocket attacks for three consecutive days. Coincident with the attacks on the major headquarters and district capitals, the NVA supported the local forces infiltrating the hamlets and villages. NLF flags were sighted in the hamlets of western Hieu Duc District, southern and western Dai Loc, Dien Ban, northeastern Duc Duc, western Duy Xuyen, and parts of northern Que Son District. Subsequent ARVN operations recovered some of these outlying villages and hamlets; the final result probably correctly reflected the relative military balance and political influence in the area.

Southwest of Que Son, just across the province boundary in Quang Tin Province, was the important

NVA logistical area centered at Hiep Duc. The 711th Division was committed to defending this vital area and thus played no offensive role in LANDGRAB. Two days after Christmas 1972, the ARVN 3d Division launched a strong, fast-moving spoiling attack aimed at tearing up the enemy's Hiep Duc base. Deep penetrations were made in the first few days, and the I Corps Commander, Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, sought to exploit the early success by detaching the 51st Infantry Regiment from the 1st Division and, on 3 January, sending it to reinforce the advancing 3d Division. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh, commanding the 3d, committed the 51st Regiment on the night of 16 January to continue the attack to seize Fire Support Base (FSB) West, a strongly fortified position defended by elements of the NVA 711th Division on Hill 1460 guarding the eastern approach to Hiep Duc. The 51st was able to advance only part way up the slopes of Hill 1460 and could not dislodge the enemy infantry holding the crest. Meanwhile, elements of the 3d Division's 2d Regiment were across the Que Son Valley and had seized the hill above Chau Son, thus controlling Route 534 into Hiep Duc. On 24 January, the 3d Division's attack continued; the objective was FSB O'Connor on high ground just east of Hiep Duc. Two days later, with the cease-fire imminent and the local enemy forces moving into the populated lowlands of Quang Nam, the 3d Division had to terminate its attack barely short of its final objective. A strong counterattack by the 711th Division forces still on FSB West prevented the 3d Division's infantry from gaining FSB O'Connor, but the heavy casualties sustained by the 711th demoralized and weakened it severely. By the end of January, 3d Division troops were busy clearing local forces from the hamlets west and southwest of Da Nang, and by the end of the month only one hamlet remained under enemy influence in Dai Loc District.

Between 23 and 26 January, enemy local forces in Quang Ngai Province infiltrated into assembly areas in the lowlands and on 27 January attacked throughout the lowlands, rocketing the provincial and district capitals and interdicting Highway 1 (QL-1) in a number of places. Several RF and PF posts were overrun. In southern Quang Ngai, the 52d Regiment, NVA 2d Division, established defenses around the district town of Ba To, which it had controlled since the fall of 1972. Rather than challenge this position, the ARVN deployed to prevent the 52d from moving toward the lowlands.

Holding its 1st Regiment in reserve, the NVA 2d Division used one battalion to support local forces in Mo Duc, kept one battalion in the base area, and deployed the third to support the attack of the 141st Regiment in Duc Tho District. It was in Duc Tho that the greatest threat to ARVN security occurred.

On 27 January the 141st's attack reached Highway 1 south of Duc Tho and secured the rest of the district south to the border of Binh Dinh Province. The area captured included the small fishing and salt-making port of Sa Huynh, in which two battalions of the NVA 12th Regiment, 3d Division, supported the attack of the 2d Division. Since the NVA had blocked the only north-south line of communication and had secured a seaport, however small and undeveloped, in the center of the country, the South Vietnamese could hardly permit this situation to go unchallenged. Vigorous counterattacks succeeded in driving the enemy from Sa Huynh by 16 February. Enemy losses in the fighting may have exceeded 600 men, but probably of greater importance was the psychological and political impact of the defeat. Despite having seized Sa Huynh only the day before the cease-fire, the Communists were outraged at being ejected from lands they "legitimately" occupied at the moment of cease-fire. Sa Huynh became a Communist cause and plans for its recapture appeared regularly in intelligence reports until the final days of the Republic.

Military Region 2

The southern part of Communist Military Region 5 included Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Khanh Hoa Provinces. Intelligence collected before the cease-fire provided an accurate preview of what could be expected there. The enemy's objectives were to isolate the northern districts of Binh Dinh, hold the ARVN 22d Division in its bases, cut Highway 1 (the only north-south route of any importance under South Vietnamese control), and gather to the NLF as much land and as many people as possible. From the NVA point of view, the prospects for success seemed good, for large segments of the population in the coastal areas of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen had long been sympathetic to the VC, and the ARVN 22d Division had yet to establish any reputation for excellence in battle. Since the area along Highway 1 was fairly densely populated, it would provide a significant population base.

Fighting started in northeast Binh Dinh when, by 23 January 1973, elements of the 12th Regiment, NVA 3d Division, moved from bases in the An Lao valley toward the Tam Quan lowlands. Beginning on the 24th and lasting until the 28th, the attacks were designed to fix the ARVN 41st Regiment in its bases and support the attack of the NVA 2d Division just to the north at Sa Huynh.

South of the Lai Giang River, in Hoai An District, the rest of the NVA 3d Division attacked government posts and attempted to prevent the deployment of the 22d Division. On 28 January, the local forces began their attacks along Highway 1 and in the hamlets and villages, successfully cutting

the highway just south of the Bong Son pass and in several places in Phu Yen Province. Farther south, in Khanh Hoa, other attempts to cut Highway 1 were unsuccessful. Although contacts were light and scattered in Khanh Hoa Province, the enemy succeeded in interdicting Highway 21 (QL-21), temporarily isolating Ban Me Thuot from the coast. By the day after cease-fire, a number of hamlets in Phu Yen were under Communist control, but hard fighting by RF and PF succeeded by 2 February in eliminating Communist control in all but two hamlets. By the 5th all of Highway 1 was back under government control, although the route remained closed to traffic until all destroyed bridges were repaired.

Although the enemy seemed to enjoy great chances for success in Binh Dinh and Phu Yen Provinces, it was clear by the first week of February that he had failed to achieve any significant gains. Highway 1 was open from Khanh Hoa Province to the Quang Ngai border, the towns and villages were in South Vietnamese hands, and the local enemy forces had incurred extremely heavy losses.

The NVA's B3 Front included Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, and Darlac Provinces, part of Quang Duc, and western districts of Binh Dinh. Objectives assigned to enemy forces in B3 Front were similar to those in southern MR 5: to hold the ARVN 23d Division in place, isolate the cities of Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuot, and interdict the main highways. Attaining these objectives would effectively extend control over the population of the highlands. Although the objectives were in no important way different from those assigned in the attacks which preceded the aborted cease-fire in October 1972, the enemy apparently had learned one important lesson in the October fiasco: it was fatal to begin the attack two weeks before the effective date of the cease-fire. This time the North Vietnamese waited until the night of 26 January to make their moves into the hamlets and villages, and not until the morning of the cease-fire did the attacks reach full intensity. The timing meant that the ARVN would have to conduct its counterattacks after the cease-fire and thus—so the theory had it—be subject to ICCS observation and control.

Preparations for occupying the villages and hamlets in the highlands began on 20 and 21 January when elements of both enemy divisions, the 10th and 320th, began attacks to tie down ARVN defenders. Employing the 24th and 28th Regiments, the 10th Division on 27 January attacked Polei Krong and Trung Nghia, forcing the ARVN 85th Ranger Border Defense Battalion to withdraw from Polei Krong on the 28th. The 320th meanwhile attacked Duc Co on the 20th and the next day gained control of the camp.

Route interdictions began later. On 26 January, in coordination with the Polei Krong and Trung Nghia attack, the 95B Regiment, 10th Division, seized Highway 14 (QL-14) where it traversed the Chu Pao Pass and held on until 10 February. Farther south, in Darlac Province, a bridge on Highway 14 near Buon Ho was destroyed and several hamlets infiltrated. Contact with Ban Me Thuot by way of Highway 14 was interrupted until about 14 February. The enemy's Gia Lai Provincial Unit closed Highway 19 (QL-19) at the Pleiku-Binh Dinh border and maintained the block until 4 February. South of Pleiku City, elements of the 320th Division were successful in closing Highway 14 temporarily. Pleiku City itself received repeated attacks by 122-mm. rockets on 28 January, but damage was light.

Although the enemy's main forces in the highlands achieved their initial objectives in the LANDGRAB campaign, their ultimate failure can be attributed to the weakness of local forces. Not only did they fail to hold occupied villages, but also they sustained heavy losses and the military effectiveness of their units decreased significantly. The most important gain was the recapture of Duc Co in time to receive the ICCS, yet this achievement was caused more by ARVN overextension than by 320th Division strength. By mid-February the military balance in the highlands was generally the same as it had been at the end of December 1972.

NVA Military Region 6 included five South Vietnamese provinces, the beautiful mountain provinces of Tuyen Duc and Lam Dong and the coastal provinces of Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, and Binh Tuy. This was a sparsely populated region and relatively isolated from the war. The ARVN had no regular forces deployed there, and the RF and PF maintained effective control.

The enemy in MR 6 had only four NVA infantry battalions, one NVA artillery battalion, and two VC infantry battalions, all of them weak and under-strength. Action began on the night of 26 January with an attack on a hamlet north of Dalat, the capital of Tuyen Duc. Another enemy force attempted unsuccessfully to enter a hamlet north of Phan Thiet in Binh Thuan. Although local forces interdicted Highway 20 (QL-20) east of Bao Loc in Lam Dong Province, the RVNAF cleared the route by 30 January. Another thrust was repulsed with heavy losses at Tanh Linh district town in Binh Tuy on 27 January. On the morning of the 28th, the day the cease-fire was to become effective, the number of hamlets entered increased significantly, especially in Binh Thuan, but an NVA battalion entering a suburb of Dalat was quickly ejected.

The LANDGRAB campaign in MR 6 was clearly a failure. The RF and PF performed capably, and by the end of January the situation was clearly under

South Vietnamese control. Highway 1 through the coastal provinces was never successfully cut, and the only lasting result of the campaign was the serious depletion of the enemy's local force battalions.

Military Region 3

The enemy's Eastern Nam Bo Region was roughly the same as South Vietnam's Military Region 3 (Binh Tuy, Gia Dinh, Hau Nghia, and Long An Provinces were excluded). In addition to scheduling attacks close to the cease-fire date, the NVA in October 1972 had also learned that it lacked the strength to infiltrate the Saigon area with main forces. Thus LANDGRAB 73 in Eastern Nam Bo did not begin until a few days before the cease-fire was to become effective, and Saigon was not an objective.

As in other populated areas of South Vietnam, the enemy's objective just before cease-fire was to extend the area under Communist control and gather more people to the National Liberation Front, but in the Eastern Nam Bo region a second objective applied: to establish a suitable capital for the NLF in South Vietnam. Intelligence collected in the weeks before cease-fire appeared to indicate that Tay Ninh City, the capital of Tay Ninh Province, had been selected; but for reasons not fully clear, the Communists failed to allocate sufficient forces to capture the city. ARVN preemptive operations in January 1973 most likely eliminated the enemy's capability to assign main forces to a Tay Ninh campaign. As a result, only relatively weak, local forces were available, and the campaign failed.

At the end of the first two weeks in January, ARVN III Corps began an attack into the Saigon River corridor and advanced all the way to Tri Tam in the Michelin plantation. Enemy losses were estimated in excess of 400 killed. The damage and disruption caused in enemy bases in the Long Nguyen Secret Zone and the Boi Loi woods were extensive. Heavily supported by B-52's, the ARVN disrupted the enemy's plans for pre-cessate-fire operations. The NVA 7th Division was forced to deploy in the Michelin plantation, and the ARVN contained it there during this critical time. The Michelin operation also impelled the NVA to keep major elements of the 9th Division in defensive positions around An Loc and Loc Ninh in Binh Long Province. Intelligence reports had indicated that the 9th was to play an important role in the Tay Ninh attacks.

The number and intensity of attacks by fire significantly increased from 23 through 25 January. Widespread attacks by fire and assault began on the 26th and 27th against ARVN and RF-PF outposts, mostly on those located in defense of major lines of

communication. Among those hit were Trang Bang on Highway 1, the vicinity of Trang Bom in Bien Hoa Province, the junction of Highways 1 and 20 in Long Khanh Province, Highway 13 south of Chon Thanh and north of Lai Thieu in Binh Duong Province, Highway 15 south of Long Thanh and north of Phuoc Le, and Highway 23 in southern Phuoc Tuy Province near Dat Do. Enemy casualties were fairly heavy, especially along Highway 13 south of Chon Thanh, where the Communists lost over 120 killed.

The Communists attained some short-term successes, for about 144 hamlets were reported contested at one time or another during the period 23-29 January 1973. (During the October 1972 attacks, only 96 hamlets were contested.) Nevertheless, by 3 February only 14 hamlets remained under enemy control, and four days later all hamlets in the region were back under control of South Vietnamese forces. The line-of-communication interdictions were also short lived; all major roads were open by 1 February.

In keeping with the Communist goal of political control, terrorist attacks during the brief campaign were few, apparently on the theory that widespread terrorism would antagonize the people. As it was, in most instances the people would leave their hamlets as the enemy forces entered and return only when government forces had ejected the Communists. The enemy's political objectives were not achieved, the attempt to seize Tay Ninh City never approached success, and territorial forces were able to clear the enemy from outlying hamlets with only minimal assistance from the ARVN. The cost of the campaign for the enemy was heavy: over 2,000 Communist troops were killed and 41 captured. A large proportion of the casualties occurred in local forces; they were weak at the beginning and weaker still at the end. They never recovered.

Military Region 4

Just as the ARVN preempted enemy operations in Military Region 3 so it did also in the Mekong Delta. In a delta-wide operation known as DONG KHOI, the ARVN and territorials planned to attack for six days beginning on 15 January, but so spectacular were the early successes that the operation was extended for six more days. Losses of over 2,000 killed and disruptions in deployment and logistical activity, coming just before LANDGRAB, seriously affected the enemy's ability to launch a significant offensive.

The areas the Communists planned to capture in the delta were those having the greatest potential for subsequent exploitation and expansion. In the northern delta, they considered the border area with Cambodia from Ha Tien in the west to the Parrot's

Beak in the east to be most important, to include northern Kien Giang, Chau Doc, Kien Phong, Kien Tuong, and Long An Provinces. Western Hau Nghia Province also had high priority as did central Dinh Tuong Province. Highway 4 from the southwestern delta to Saigon crossed the center of Dinh Tuong, and the area around My Tho, the capital, was densely populated. The Communists also wanted to extend their control in Chuong Thien Province. Having already established control in the U Minh Forest, they could anchor the terminus of infiltration corridor 1C from Cambodia through Kien Giang into the lower delta. But because of the South Vietnamese DONG KHOI operation, none of these goals was destined to be realized.

Communist Military Region 2 included eight of the delta provinces: in the north, Chau Doc, which contained the enemy base in the Seven Mountains on the Cambodian border; to the east, Kien Phong and Kien Tuong, with the vast marshy area of the Plain of Reeds; to the south of these three border provinces, the central Mekong provinces of An Giang and Sa Dec, whose dense populations were under relatively strong South Vietnamese influence and control, and the vital, populous province of Dinh Tuong; and in the far south, the coastal provinces of Kien Hoa and Go Cong.

LANDGRAB 73 in Communist MR 2 appeared to begin on 23 January 1973 when two battalions of the NVA 207th Regiment crossed the Cambodian border into northern Kien Phong Province. This invasion coincided with at least 13 light attacks by fire and ground probes. Two Communist soldiers captured that day revealed that the NVA's intention was to capture the district town of Hong Ngu, destroy all government posts along the border, intercept RVNAF relief columns, and then extend the attack southward deep into Kien Phong Province. Attacks were recorded along the entire border. In one of many sharp engagements northeast of Cai Cai, RVNAF casualties were light but the enemy lost 32 killed and two prisoners. In heavy fighting on the 25th, the ARVN again incurred light casualties but killed 47 of the enemy. Enemy losses in less than three days exceeded 100 killed in exchange for only minor ground advances. Following this flurry of attacks, the fighting in Kien Phong Province abated and remained so until the eve of the cease-fire. South Vietnamese bases were subjected only to sporadic light attacks by fire.

In Dinh Tuong, despite a heavy concentration of enemy main force units in the center of the province (the 5th and 6th Divisions, the E1, 6th, DT1, and 320th Regiments, and possibly elements of the 174th Regiment), the level of activity was surprisingly low. Even on 28 and 29 January, when the number of attacks approximately doubled, the weight of the attacks remained low. Although ground contact

was made with elements of the 174th Regiment in the area known as Tri Phap, these contacts subsided after the cease-fire, probably attributable to the enemy's high casualties.

In eastern Dinh Tuong and Go Cong Provinces a prisoner reported that main forces, including the NVA 88th and 24th Regiments, were to break down into small units and conduct political activity among the population. This tactic was to create the impression that the local forces were everywhere throughout the delta and would support Communist political activity. The troops had instructions to limit the use of heavy weapons and thus gain more credibility as local guerrillas. Local South Vietnamese forces responded effectively to this campaign, and the Communists achieved no significant gains.

The NVA's Military Region 3 included the nine provinces of the lower delta. Kien Giang, on the Cambodian border, was the northernmost. The delta capital and the headquarters for the ARVN IV Corps was at Can Tho in the central Mekong province of Phong Dinh. The Communists' only relatively secure and uncontested base area in the delta was in MR 3, the U Minh Forest, a vast mangrove swamp and forest extending across the border of Kien Giang and An Xuyen Provinces on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand.

As elsewhere in the delta, activity in MR 3 increased sharply on 23 January. Well over half of the incidents reported were harassments and attacks by fire against South Vietnamese posts. In the northwest, the NVA 1st Division sent troops across the frontier from Cambodia with the apparent purpose of having them in position for the kickoff of operations at the time of the cease-fire. Documents captured in sharp fighting near Ha Tien village in northwestern Kien Giang were identified as belonging to a battalion of the 52d Regiment, 1st Division, and subsequent interrogation of a captured prisoner confirmed the battalion's presence as well as those of the regimental headquarters and a second battalion. The prisoner also gave evidence of the regiment's low morale; many of the soldiers had recently been released from military hospitals, and the general health of the unit was low. The regiment's mission was to occupy the Ha Tien area and show the VC flag prior to the cease-fire. Combined RVNAF operations, employing the Air Force and the Rangers, pushed the 52d back into Cambodia. Air strikes killed more than 70 soldiers of the 52d, and ground fighting accounted for at least 15 more.

The enemy's 44th Sapper Regiment, also subordinate to the 1st Division, began operations in the Seven Mountains of Chau Doc on 15 January with attacks by fire against South Vietnamese posts. The 44th moved into the Seven Mountains near Tri Ton on 23 January to occupy as much territory and gain control of as much population as possible, but

ARVN counteroperations again prevented any significant successes. The third element of the NVA 1st Division, the 101D Regiment, apparently remained in its base in the Seven Mountains and contributed to LANDGRAB only with attacks by fire.

The highest level of enemy activity in NVA Military Region 3 occurred in Chuong Thien Province. No fewer than four NVA regiments were available to converge on the province capital, Vi Thanh. The NVA 18B Regiment was to the northwest, the 95A Sapper Regiment was south along with elements of the D2 Regiment, and part of the D1 Regiment was in eastern Chuong Thien near the Phong Dinh Province border. The headquarters for MR 3 was in the center of the province.

The number and intensity of attacks increased sharply on 26 January, including a series of mortar and rocket attacks, some with 120-mm. mortars, southwest of Y Tang. The activity increased again on 27 January and a number of outposts and district towns experienced ground attacks and attacks by fire. Contingents of the D2 Regiment penetrated the district town of Long My as far as the marketplace before they could be driven out. On the same day Kien Thien received a heavy bombardment followed by a ground attack by elements of the 95A Sapper Regiment. This attack was also repelled. At Kien Hung, through the nights of 27 and 28 January the 18B Regiment conducted attacks by fire. By the morning of 28 January the town was surrounded by enemy troops, but South Vietnamese forces successfully held. The province capital, Vi Thanh, received sporadic attacks by fire, but casualties and damage were light.

Attacks were widespread to the far south, primarily against territorial force outposts and district towns; but in no case did the situation change markedly from that before the LANDGRAB campaign got under way. The activity appeared to crest by midday on 28 January, and a general uneasy quiet followed. During LANDGRAB in MR 2 and 3, at least 125 hamlets came under Communist attack, but no more than 20 were ever being contested at any one time. No main lines of communication were ever threatened, and all major roads and canals remained open to traffic. Assassinations and other terrorism lagged. Nowhere in the Mekong Delta did the Communists make any significant or lasting gain. In the face of the highly successful South Vietnamese-DONG KHOI campaign, the enemy apparently realized that major territorial acquisitions were impossible.

Relative Strength, 31 January 1973

There are countless ways to display order of battle comparisons. All can be misleading if they are used to form judgments regarding relative strengths and capabilities without reference to other factors

TABLE 1: RELATIVE STRENGTH, LATE JAN. 1973

	<u>MR 1</u>	<u>MR 2</u>	<u>MR 3</u>	<u>MR 4</u>	<u>Total</u>
RVNAF: Ground combat troops (thousands)	145-170	143-146	155-175	246-257	689-748
In Regular units (thousands)	75-90	27-29	50-60	40-50	192-229
Regional and Popular Forces (thousands)	70-80	116-117	105-115	206-207	497-519
Trainees, Admn. and service troops, and casualties (thousands)	---	---	---	---	c.200
Divisions	5	2	3	3	13
Regiments and brigades*	16	7	9	9	48#
Regular battalions*	95	50	64	55	264
Enemy: Troops (thousands**)	96	42	41	40	219
Combat troops (thousands**)	71	25	25	27	148
NVA regulars	68	19	20	16	123
Viet Cong	3	6	5	11	25
Admn. and service troops (thousands**)	25	17	16	13	71
NVA regulars	19	9	5	1	34
Viet Cong	6	8	11	12	37
Divisions	8##	3	2	3	16
Regimental Hq.*	54	11	13	16	94
Battalion Hq.*	195	73	77	79	424

*Includes independent regiments and battalions.

#Total includes 7 Ranger groups.

**In most cases, figures have been rounded down rather than up.

##Includes an air defense division.

such as training, battle experience, weaponry, tactics and techniques of employment, missions, morale, and mobility. Showing the opposing forces that appeared on the South Vietnam battlefields as the final two years began is nevertheless useful in understanding later developments.

Table 1 shows the number of troops and units. The figures for the enemy were compiled by experienced analysts from intelligence gathered from many sources over a number of years; although estimates, these figures are reasonably reliable.

Table 2 shows the deployment of RVNAF divisions, and Table 3 gives the order of battle of NVA and VC forces.

TABLE 2
MAJOR RVNAF UNITS, JAN. 1973

Military Region 1

1st Div, Regts: 1, 3, 51, 54; 2d Div, Regts: 4, 5, 6; 3d Div, Regts: 2, 56, 57; Airborne Div, Brigades: 1, 2, 3; Marine Div: Brigades, 147, 258, 369.

Military Region 2

22d Div, Regts: 40, 41, 42, 47; 23d Div, Regts: 44, 45, 53.

Military Region 3

5th Div, Regts: 7, 8, 9; 18th Div, Regts: 43, 48, 52; 25th Div, Regts: 46, 49, 50.

Military Region 4

7th Div, Regts: 10, 11, 12; 9th Div, Regts: 14, 15, 16; 21st Div, Regts: 31, 32, 33.

TABLE 3
ENEMY ORDER OF BATTLE,
LATE JAN. 1973

S. Vietnam MR 1 (71,350 troops)

NVA B-5 FRONT, QUANG TRI PROVINCE (47,200 TROOPS)

Divisions 325th (5,000) Regts: 18, 95, 101; 320B (3,500) Regts: 48B, 64B; 312th (6,000) Regts: 141, 165, 209; 304th (5,000) Regts: 9, 24B, 66.

Regts, Inf and Sapper: 27B (1,000); 31st (500); 126th Naval Sapper Gp (500); 270B (1,000); DMZ Sapper Gp (5 Bns, 1,500).

Regts, Armor: 202d (4 Bns, 500); 203d (4 Bns, 500).

Regts, Arty: 45th (1,000); 58th (1,000); 68th (1,000); 84th (1,000); 164th (1,000); 166th (500).

Misc Bns: 15th Sapper (150); 47th Inf (300); 75th AAA (150).

NVA MILITARY REGION TRI-THIEN (8,600 TROOPS)

324B Division (Thua Thien—5,000) Regts: 29, 803, 812.

Regts, Inf (Thua Thien): 5th (1,000); 6th (1,000).

675B Arty Regt (Quang Tri--500)

Misc Bns (Thua Thien): 7th Sapper (200); 11th Rcn (200); 35th Rocket (200); 582d Inf (300); Phu Loc Inf (200).

NVA FRONT-7, QUANG TRI PROVINCE (750 TROOPS)

Battalions: 808th Inf (250); 810th Sapper (250); 814th Inf (250).

NVA MR 5, QUANG NAM AND QUANG TIN PROVINCES (9,800 TROOPS)

Divisions: 711th (3,500), Regts: 31, 38, 270; 2d (4,000) Regts: 1, 52, 141.

Regts, Sapper: 45th (550); 5th (1,000).

572d Tank/Arty Gp (500).

Misc Bns (Quang Tin): 32 Rcn (150); 120th VC Montagnard Inf (100).

NVA FRONT-4 (3,300 TROOPS)

Quang Nam, Misc Bns: 1st NVA Inf (200); 2d NVA Inf (150); 42d VC Rcn (150); 80th NVA Inf (150); 83d NVA Inf (150); 86th NVA Inf (150); 89th NVA Sapper (200); 91st NVA Sapper (200); 471st NVA Sapper (150); 575th NVA Arty (250); 577th NVA Arty (250).

Quang Tin, Inf Bns: 11th NVA (150); 70th NVA (150); 72d NVA (150); 74th VC (150).

Quang Ngai, Misc Bns: 38th NVA Inf (150); 48th NVA Inf (150); 70th VC Sapper (150); 107th Rocket (NVA, 100); 145th VC Inf (150).

SEPARATE COMBAT PLATOONS, ALL MR 1 (1,700).

S. Vietnam MR 2 (25,550 troops)

NVA B-3 FRONT (12,350 TROOPS)

Divisions: 320th (3,000) Regts: 48, 64; 10th (3,800) Regts: 28, 66, 95B.

Regiments: 24C Inf (800); 40th Arty (1,100); 400th Sapper (800).

Misc Bns: 2d NVA Inf (200); 5th NVA Inf (200); 28th NVA Rcn (250); 297B NVA Armor (200); 631st NVA Inf (250); unidentified Arty (200).

Kontum (P) Bns: 304th NVA Inf (250); 406th NVA Sapper (150).

Gia Lai (P) Bns: 2d NVA Inf (250); 45th VC Inf (150); 67th VC Inf (200); 408th VC Sapper (200).

Darlac (P) Bns: 301st NVA Inf (200); 401st NVA Sapper (200).

NVA MR 5 (6,800 TROOPS)

3d Division (3,500), Regts: 2, 12, 21.

405th NVA Sapper Bn (150).

Binh Dinh (P) NVA Inf Bns: 50th (200); 52d (200); 53d (150); 54th (200); 55th (200); 56th (200).

Phu Yen (P) NVA Bns: 9th Inf (150); 13th Inf (150); 14th Sap (150); 96th Inf (150).

Khanh Hoa (P) Bns: 7th NVA Sap (200); 12th NVA Inf (200); 407th NVA Sap (200); 460th NVA Inf (200); 470th NVA Inf (200); 480th NVA Inf (200); Khanh Hoa VC Sap (200).

VC MR 6 (1,250 TROOPS)

Misc Bns: 130th NVA Arty (150); 186th NVA Inf (200); 240th NVA Inf (150); 481st VC Inf (200); 482d VC Inf (150); 810th NVA Inf (250); 840th NVA Inf (150).

VC MR 10: 251ST VC INF BN (150).

SEPARATE COMBAT PLATOONS, ALL MR 2 (5,000).

*S. Vietnam MR 3 (24,600 troops,
all under COSVN)*

Divisions: 7th (4,100) Regts: 141, 165, 209; 9th (4,100) Regts: 95C, 271, 272.

Regts, Inf: 201st (600); 205th (1,200); 271st (1,200); 101st (1,100); 33d (1,200); 274th (900).

429th Sapper Cmd Hq (400); 29th Sapper Regt (600); Sapper Bns: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16 (1,400).

Separate Sapper Bns, NVA: 89th (150); 268th (150); 4th (150); 6th (150); 7th (150); 211th (150).

Separate Sapper Bns, VC: 10th (100); 12th (150).

Armor Bns: 3d (200); 5th (200).

Arty Bns: 35th Bn, 96th Arty Regt, NVA (250); 2d NVA (150); 74A NVA Rocket (150); 3d NVA (150); 8th VC (150); 74B NVA Rocket (150).

Inf Bns, VC: 168th (150); 368th (150); 1st (Tay Ninh) (150); 6th (150); 20th (150); 445th (150); 9th (150); 269th (150); 508th (150).

Inf Bns, NVA: 14th (200); 1st (250); 2d (100); 4th (150); 267th (250); 506th (150).

Separate Combat Platoons, all MR 3 (2,800).

S. Vietnam MR 4 (27,050 troops)

COSVN (11,700 TROOPS)

Divisions: 1st (3,400) Regts: 44 Sap, 52, 101D; 6th (2,300) Regts: 24, 207; 5th (3,900) Regts: 275, 6, 174.

Regts, Inf: Z-15 (900); Z-18 (700).

Arty Bns: Bn/96th NVA Arty Regt (250); Bn/208th NVA Arty Regt (250).

VC MR 2 (3,800 TROOPS)

DT-1 Regt (600).

Misc Bns: 504th NVA Inf (200); 207th VC Sapper (100); 309th VC Arty (150).

NVA Sapper Bns: 267B (100); 281st (200).

VC Inf Bns: 209th (100); 268C (150); 271st (150); 278th (150); 279th (200); 295th (300); 310th (200); 512th (300); 516A (200); 516B (150); 590th (150); 502d (200); 514C (200).

VC MR 3 (5,750 TROOPS)

Regiments: VC D-1 (600); NVA D-2 (900); VC D-3 (1,000); NVA 18B (900); NVA 95th (900).

962d NVA Inf Bn (100).

VC Sapper Bns: 2012d (150); 2014th (150).

VC Arty Bns: 2311th (100); 2315th (100).

VC Inf Bns: Tay Do (100); U Minh 10th (250); U Minh 2d (100); 764th (150); 501st (150); 857th (100).

SEPARATE COMBAT PLATOONS, ALL MR 4 (5,800)

At the end of January 1973 the ARVN had an assigned strength of about 450,000 men. Of this strength about 152,000 were in the infantry divisions and another 10,000 in the Ranger groups. A small number was assigned to the separate nondivisional

artillery, cavalry, and tank units. The remainder was to be found in training, logistical, and other service and administrative support organizations and in hospitals. South Vietnam also had a Navy of about 42,000 and an Air Force over 54,000. It had in addition about 325,000 in the Regional Forces, some 200,000 in the Popular Forces, and over 4,000 in the Women's Armed Forces Corps, for a total authorized strength of close to 1.1 million. Actual strength was probably less than a million, however.

In contrast, the North Vietnamese at the time of the cease-fire had about 148,000 combat troops in South Vietnam, including slightly over 16,000 assigned to 15 antiaircraft artillery regiments. Supporting this force in South Vietnam were some 71,000 administrative and logistical troops.

These gross figures—1.1 million South Vietnamese versus 219,000 Communists in South Vietnam—tell little about relative combat power, however. A closer look at the combat force structures and the missions of the opposing armies gives one a somewhat clearer understanding. For example, the North Vietnamese combat strength in South Vietnam included 15 infantry divisions. These were opposed by 13 RVNAF divisions. As another example, the Communists fielded 27 separate infantry and sapper regiments, whereas the only roughly comparable units in the RVNAF were 7 Ranger groups.

At this point, attempts at comparing combat units begin to break down. This is because of the entirely different missions the opposing armies had. Communist combat strength in the South was devoted almost entirely to offensive operations against fixed government bases, hamlets and villages, and lines of communication, while the separate RVNAF battalions were assigned almost exclusively to fixed defensive missions. Thus, comparing some 140 separate Communist battalions of infantry, sapper, reconnaissance, tank, and artillery to the 54 ARVN Ranger battalions and 300 or more regional force battalions is rather meaningless.

Any consideration of North Vietnamese strength should also take into account a large administrative and logistical support force within North Vietnam similar to South Vietnamese backup forces. North Vietnam also had the distinct advantage of not having to defend lines of communication or base areas in North Vietnam from ground attack. It did, however, have to use significant numbers to defend against air attack in North Vietnam and small numbers to protect lines of communication through Laos and Cambodia.

The Communists normally maintained five training divisions in North Vietnam: 304B, 320B, 330th, 338th, and the 350th. In January 1973, however, elements of only two NVA regular infantry divisions, the 308th and 308B, were in North Vietnam.

Two more divisions were soon to return to North Vietnam from Quang Tri Province, the 312th and 320B, and later the 316th Division came back from Laos. The 341st Division was re-created in the southern part of North Vietnam, and the 338th was converted to a regular line infantry division. In addition to having a sizable training base and strategic reserve, the North Vietnamese maintained in each of the seventeen provinces a provincial unit of about regimental size. They also had a militia estimated at 1,600,000, many of whom were employed in air and coastal defense and in logistical and engineering work. A regional force was drawn from the best of the militia, contained men only, and had an estimated strength of 51,000. Exclusive of the militia, the North Vietnamese in January 1973 had an army between 500,000 and 570,000, of which about 290,000 were in North Vietnam, 65,000 to 70,000 in Laos, 25,000 in Cambodia, and the rest in South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese Army thus contained about 100,000 men more than that of South Vietnam. It also contained more infantry divisions, a reserve (which the ARVN could not afford), far more antiaircraft artillery and air defense missiles (of which the ARVN had none), and a larger tank force.

The North Vietnamese, on the other hand, had only a small navy of about 3,000 men, limited to close-in security of territorial waters. They had one KOMAR guided missile boat, but failed to deploy it southward. The North Vietnamese Air Force was small but contained some modern air-to-air fighters that had earlier proved their capability against U.S. fighter-bombers. In January 1973, about 10,000 men were assigned to the North Vietnamese Air Force, operating about 300 aircraft including slightly over 200 jets, a few turboprops and helicopters, and some 60 assorted propeller airplanes. The air force was light in transport aircraft, and its jets were devoted entirely to air defense. South Vietnam's air force, in comparison, was well-balanced. Although its pilots had no experience in air-to-air combat, they had developed a high degree of skill in ground support, reconnaissance, and transport roles. As events developed, the two opposing air forces were never to be employed against each other.

One of the most spectacular developments during the cease-fire period was the rapid increase and sophistication in the air defense system the North Vietnamese moved into South Vietnam. Sometime in January 1973 and probably not later than the 27th, elements of the 263d NVA SAM Regiment, equipped with SA-2 missiles, deployed to Khe Sanh in Quang Tri Province. The regiment had four firing battalions and one support battalion, each firing battalion having four to six launchers and

occupying one firing site. Aerial photography disclosed the construction of three sites in the Khe Sanh area during February, and a fourth battalion moved into a site in April. (In a television appearance on *Face the Nation* on 11 March, Secretary of State Rogers was "pleased to report here this morning that the missile site has been removed from Khe Sanh."—Department of State *Bulletin*, 2 Apr. 73. p. 373. The Secretary was misled by a preliminary report from Saigon; the launchers did disappear from one of the sites, but they reappeared within a few days. Launchers, missiles, and related equipment were periodically shifted from site to site around the Khe Sanh complex.)

The SA-2, a Soviet missile similar to the U.S. NIKE, had a range in distance and altitude of about 19 nautical miles and 85,000 feet. Its location in the Khe Sanh area provided protection to the important logistical complex the North Vietnamese were constructing in Quang Tri Province along Highway 9 and at the junction of that route and Highway 14. One air defense division, the 377th, was deployed to South Vietnam, while in North Vietnam there were over thirty automatic weapons regiments, more than ten SAM regiments, and from time to time up to nine air defense divisions. The ARVN, on the other hand, had four battalions of antiaircraft, but only two of these were operational.

The Balance Sheet

The operations of late January and early February 1973 followed the patterns established in October 1972 when a cease-fire had appeared imminent, except that the enemy waited until much closer to the date of the cease-fire to start the campaign. Otherwise, the objectives and techniques were substantially the same. Main force units generally defended the territory already under control and attacked to fix ARVN regulars in their bases while local NVA and VC units entered the hamlets. Throughout South Vietnam, the campaign between 28 January and 9 February cost the Communists over 5,000 killed in exchange for little alteration in the situation that existed in mid-January. By 9 February, only 23 of more than 400 hamlets attacked were still reported as contested.

U.S. observers at MACV in Saigon attributed the enemy's failures to errors on his part, the limited capabilities of the local forces, and an outstanding performance by the RVNAF. The enemy had obviously erred in delaying his pre-cessate-fire operations in the expectation that the RVNAF would be deterred in counterattacking by the presence of ICCS teams.

The Communists committed their other important strategic mistake by breaking down the local forces

into small units and attacking at so many places, thereby reducing the staying capacity of any local unit. The ARVN and local RF and PF were able to react deliberately against these hamlet challenges and to eliminate them one by one. The enemy's local forces were decimated and never recovered. South Vietnamese forces had clearly learned much of the enemy's strategy and objectives from the preview in October and had planned accordingly.

LANDGRAB 73 spanned the end of the second Indochina war and the beginning of the third. It demonstrated that South Vietnam's armed forces could probably hold their own against the force the North had at that time on the southern battlefields. It also demonstrated that the military balance in South Vietnam was close to even.

Note on Sources

Two principal sources were used: The MACV Official History and a MACV study "LANDGRAB 73." Order of battle information was derived largely from Defense studies and estimates retained by DAO Saigon Intelligence Branch. More details on deployments were obtained from American Embassy reports, extracted from DAO files, as well as from notes retained by the author. Deployments and other order of battle information were checked by the Vietnamese officers mentioned in the "Note on Sources," Chapter 1. Much of the information on Sa Huynh was from a Fact Sheet, prepared from MACV records, by DAO Intelligence Branch in May 1973.

Consolidating and Rebuilding

Political Strategy

In anticipation of the cease-fire, the North Vietnamese developed a strategy consisting of two parallel elements: political and military. Although this strategy was no departure from the fundamental theory that guided the prosecution of the war from its beginning, its restatement contributes to an understanding of subsequent events. Recognition of the endurance of this strategy and its ultimate objective, the conquest of South Vietnam, provides a frame of reference in which the tactics of the post-cease-fire period can be examined.

The political was the public element of Communist strategy. As the element that the North Vietnamese propagandized worldwide and used in exhortations to the troops, it first became apparent on the eve of the January cease-fire in a replay of the events preceding the aborted cease-fire of October 1972. Its supporting military activity was to capture as much populated area as possible just before the cease-fire, show the flag, and rely on the NVA main forces to contain the RVNAF while local forces entered the hamlets and villages. There the Communists would await the arrival of the teams of the International Commission for Control and Supervision to declare and guarantee their legitimacy in newly won areas. The success of this tactic depended on the local forces to gain access to the population and subsequently to win, through the gamut of persuasions from propaganda lectures to kidnapping and assassinations, allegiance from the South Vietnamese and defections from their forces. But the LANDGRAB campaign failed.

Much was learned about the political element of Communist strategy through the exploitation of captured documents and interrogation of prisoners of war and ralliers to the South Vietnamese side. One such document was Directive No. 2/73, issued by the enemy's Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) in late January to coincide with the signing of the cease-fire agreement. Enunciating the

guidelines for activity during and after the cease-fire, this document was explained to all Communist forces in South Vietnam. It announced the beginning of a new political struggle in which military units were to play a secondary role in support of the political efforts of the cadre. They were to help the VC with its proselyting role, harass the RVNAF, defend the "liberated" areas, conduct terrorist campaigns, protect "mass movements," and secure the resettlement areas within the Communist-controlled regions of the country. Essentially, this document contained the rationale for the campaign.

Although disappointed by the failures of January and February, the Communists did not abandon the political offensive. COSVN Directive No. 2/73 called upon the Viet Cong's infrastructure, or political arm, to accomplish five tasks sequentially: (1) motivate the population; (2) develop mass movements; (3) reform the infrastructure and local armed forces to suit prevailing conditions and to mirror the governmental structure of South Vietnam; (4) strengthen the infrastructure, the revolutionary government, and its armed forces; and (5) adapt operational procedures to new situations and missions. Although the guidance was admittedly vague, it was to be executed with readily definable programs. The COSVN directive applied only to COSVN forces in the southern part of South Vietnam, but it was based on high-level guidance from Hanoi and had its counterparts in the other military regions and fronts.

One of the major components of the political offensive was propaganda. There were three broad targets for it: "world opinion," in which were included, with different objectives, both the United States and North Vietnam's allies; the citizens and armed forces of South Vietnam; and the Communists' own people and soldiers.

The principal thrust of the propaganda message to the world was that the Communists were scrupulously observing the terms of the cease-fire in the face of constant, aggressive violations by the other side. The only offensive operations undertaken by the Communist forces were to punish the "Thieu puppets" and promote peace. This line persisted until its credibility was worn irreparably thin by the NVA's conquest of Phuoc Long Province in December 1974. Although its effectiveness cannot be objectively measured, Soviet and Chinese military and economic assistance to North Vietnam increased after the cease-fire, while American help tapered off. An estimate based on information available in early 1975 showed that North Vietnam received from its Communist allies a record 2.8 million metric tons of imported commodities during 1973. This volume was over 50 percent greater than that received during 1972 and more than 10 percent higher than the previous record set in 1971. The

trend continued throughout 1974, when more than 3.5 million tons were received.

That the propaganda to encourage desertion and disaffection among RVNAF troops failed is shown in desertion statistics. For example, in the first half of 1973, desertions among territorials, the most vulnerable to Communist propaganda, remained relatively constant, declining slightly from a high in February. Desertions in the ARVN declined sharply from February to June, the period of most intensive Communist proselyting activity. Almost without exception the desertions were simply desertions and not defections to the Communist side.

The third target of the propaganda campaign, the NVA, was especially important because its soldiers were anticipating a real peace and an early return to their northern homeland. With inconsequential exceptions, the only NVA soldiers who went home were the severely wounded and sick, essentially those who could never be returned to battle. Even ex-prisoners of war, unless they were in poor physical condition, were assembled in retraining camps in the South and reassigned to combat units. Many Communist PWs released by the South Vietnamese after the cease-fire rallied or were captured again.

The first former Viet Cong PW to rally in Phu Yen Province turned himself in on 10 June 1973 to Dong Xuan District. His testimony was typical. He said that a thousand PWs were released in Binh Dinh Province on 10 and 11 March 1973. Their first formal activity was so-called political training during a 10-day period of reorientation and rest. Next they were told that they would have to spend another period of time, unspecified, working for the revolution and for ultimate victory. About 700 of the prisoners, men not over 30 years old, were assigned to military units in Communist MR5; about 300 who were over 30 were sent back to their home provinces to be assigned to VC Province Party Committees.

The heavy fighting of 1972, the high casualties and little evidence of accomplishment, combined with the profound disappointment on being ordered to remain in the southern battlefields, had lowered morale in many units. The failure of the cease-fire to bring peace had to be rationalized and attributed to the perfidy of the South Vietnamese.

Another tactic included in the political strategy was resettlement of the "liberated" areas. In some parts of the country, this involved moving civilians from North Vietnam down Laotian trails into the wooded, primitive areas of the Central Highlands. In other cases such as in South Vietnam's Military Region 3, it involved bringing in not only Northerners, but also Southerners who had fled their homes in Tay Ninh and Binh Long for the relative safety of Cambodia.

One example of this program was described in the interrogation of a soldier who had been in the 12th Artillery Battalion of the 711th NVA Division before defecting on 22 June 1973 in Que Son District, Quang Nam Province. This rallier described a speech, made at the hospital in which he was a patient, by To Huu, who was introduced as the Secretary of the Central Headquarters of the North Vietnamese Labor Party. Huu had traveled from Hanoi on an inspection trip with other members of the Government. According to the rallier, Huu said that if the South did not strictly observe the cease-fire agreement, the Armed Forces of the North would "deal heavy blows" to the enemy in the South. In the meantime the Army's missions would be to promote self-sufficiency in producing food and to train to improve combat skills and be always ready to fight. He added that many youths, including young women, were being bought from North Vietnam to construct roads and installations in the base areas and that when a true peace was achieved, they would be employed in civil enterprises and agriculture in the "liberated" areas.

The world wide propaganda campaign was launched soon after the agreement was signed. On 30 January 1973, Hanoi Radio said that the United States and South Vietnam must "bear full responsibility" for cease-fire violations and demanded that Saigon "immediately withdraw" its forces from "areas under Provisional Revolutionary Government, Republic of South Vietnam control." The broadcast blasted President Thieu's 28 January speech, which, it claimed, proved his intention "to sabotage the agreement right at the outset." It also charged that Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William Sullivan sought "to cover up these violations" and had "hinted at the possibility of resuming United States military intervention, which makes one question the United States attitude toward seriously implementing the agreement."

Meanwhile, Le Duc Tho and Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh were attending a banquet hosted by top Russian officials in Moscow. This visit ostensibly was to brief the Soviet leadership on the final round of talks in Paris. In Hanoi, the North Vietnamese Central Committee convened a special conference on 29 January to hear government leaders report on the Paris Agreement. Truong Chinh, Chairman of the National Assembly's Standing Committee, urged the audience to propagandize "deeply and widely" the "great victory of the agreement on ending the war."

To administer the areas in which new settlers were being established, immediately after the cease-fire and perhaps before, the North Vietnamese began sending in large numbers of bureaucrats. By mid-May more than 3,000 were on their way to South Vietnam, their functions covering the full

spectrum of government and public administration. By far the largest enemy-controlled population in South Vietnam, possibly as many as 180,000 people, was in northern and western Quang Tri Province, spreading southward into western Quang Tin and Quang Ngai, as well as western Quang Nam. Many of the people were Montagnards who had fled to Laos but had returned to their homes after the cease-fire. In northern Quang Tri, which was under exclusive North Vietnamese control as far south as the Thach Han River, a provincial government, integrated into the North Vietnamese system, developed gradually, probably beginning in the winter of 1972, and by the time of the cease-fire the process was virtually complete. Local offices of the Departments of Communications and Transportation, Culture, Education, Finance, and Public Health were established while the Lao Dong (Communist) Party of North Vietnam began operating in Quang Tri, co-located with government headquarters in Dong Ha.

Farther south, in South Vietnam's Military Region 2, Communist administration in the villages was on a much smaller scale and vulnerable to interference. A survey in early May 1973 in Phu My District in the center of the coastal plain of Binh Dinh Province disclosed that about 25,000 of the district's 100,000 people were under Communist control. According to the survey, since the cease-fire the Communists had established resident Village Administrative Committees in 13 of the 15 government-recognized villages of Phu My. In 9 of the villages the Communists had constructed permanent, publicly identified village offices, usually of palm leaves and thatch, and some displayed the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) flag. In the other 4 villages, they used private homes for offices. In My Chanh, the village office was within 500 meters of and plainly visible from the South Vietnamese village office. In order to fill some of the vacant positions in the village administration in Phu My, the VC demobilized some of the military cadre and brought them back to perform administrative duties. The Communists constructed fences around sections of villages and hamlets and told the people that those areas would be defended if the South Vietnamese government tried to interfere. They also began confiscating South Vietnamese identification cards, replacing them with Communist documents. When an individual wanted to leave the area, he would call at the village office and obtain his South Vietnamese identification card, which he needed for travel in areas controlled by the RVNAF. Upon returning to the village, he would turn in his South Vietnamese card and pick up his Communist card.

Preparations for issuing identification cards were discovered soon after the cease-fire throughout

Vietnam. Notes made in a book belonging to an unidentified cadre from Communist Military Region 5 (Quang Da Special Zone Party Committee) disclosed that 50,000 identification cards were available for distribution some time after 25 December 1972. Other notes revealed that 165,000 identification cards would be issued following the cease-fire but would be back-dated beginning in February 1970 in order to create the impression that the bearer had been under the control of the Communist government since the date of issue of the card.

An example of how a local VC political unit interpreted and determined to execute COSVN Directive No. 2/73 was contained in a report from a member of the VC Can Tho Province Committee. On 19 February 1973, the Committee issued a directive entitled "Indoctrination Document for Can Tho Province Unit." The mission of the Communist Armed Forces, as described in this directive, was to support the political struggle through violence and bloodshed although this did not mean, the directive insisted, that they would conduct attacks that "clearly violated" the cease-fire. On the other hand, it did not mean that they would cease hostile action. This sort of rationalization was fairly typical of the guidance given to local units during this period. The Communist military force in Can Tho Province was expected to occupy and control all rural areas so that the political and administrative organizations could establish jurisdiction. They were not to use firepower to overwhelm the RVNAF but only to protect their political forces from attack. The directive went on to say that the combat units were to protect VC "controlled territory" so that VC organizations in "liberated" areas could be developed. They were also to eliminate South Vietnamese officials in the villages and hamlets, surround government outposts with mines and booby traps, increase guerrilla warfare by harassing the RVNAF with small-scale attacks and ambushes, capture weapons, and organize indoctrination sessions "to develop the spirit of leadership." Coincident with these low-level military operations, armed propaganda units had two primary missions: to enter South Vietnamese-controlled territory and recruit in the vicinity of the outposts manned by territorial forces; to move among the population, propagandizing, recruiting soldiers, and collecting taxes. During the months following the cease-fire, Communist activities in the delta generally followed the patterns suggested by this directive.

The guidance for military-supported political activities in Can Tho Province was similar to that issued in Tay Ninh Province. In late April 1973, COSVN conducted a meeting concerning proselytizing among the Cao Dai, a religious sect centered in Tay Ninh City. At this meeting, the Lao Dong Party Committee advised that the time had come to

concentrate on developing the "liberated" areas and not to be concerned with launching military campaigns. Political capabilities and local infrastructures would be expanded. The NVA had paid a high price to achieve the cease-fire agreement, and it behooved the VC leadership to operate within the framework of the agreement to recover its political, economic, and military strength. In Tay Ninh Province, the Thien Ngon and Xa Mat areas would be developed into political and economic resettlement areas. (Thien Ngon was in north-central Tay Ninh Province, and Xa Mat was north of it on the Cambodian border. This was the area in which contingents of COSVN Headquarters had been located before most of them slipped across the border during the Cambodian incursion of 1970.)

The Northern leadership expected more of the Southern cadres than they were able to deliver. One of the Southerners at the meeting said that one of the greatest problems they faced was the lack of success in recruiting new party cadre at local levels. The problems arose, they said, from the gradual isolation of the cadre from the people and local units and because the political cadre had suffered greatly during the 1972 campaign and LANDGRAB 73.

Preparing for the Military Option

Even as the political offensive was being conducted internationally and locally, supported by relatively minor military operations, unprecedented preparations for new main force warfare were under way in North Vietnam and along the lines of communication into South Vietnam. Anxious to deny observation of these preparations, the NVA provided protection for them by deploying new anti-aircraft systems into South Vietnam. Although the North Vietnamese were largely successful in denying VNAF visual or photo reconnaissance over sensitive areas, they were not successful in preventing U.S. reconnaissance drones from photographing the buildup.

Attempts by the ICCS, which was supposed to monitor shipments of all war materials into South Vietnam, to deploy to the border crossing points were effectively thwarted by the Communists. One such effort ended in tragedy on 7 April 1973 when two ICCS helicopters, flown under contract by Air America, were shot down along Route 9 in Quang Tri Province, en route to Lao Bao on the Laos frontier. One was hit by an SA-7 heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile and crashed in the forest killing all nine passengers and crew, including a North Vietnamese officer who was supposed to be guiding the flight over an approved course to Lao Bao. The other helicopter, hit by small arms and machine gun fire, made an emergency landing without casualties.

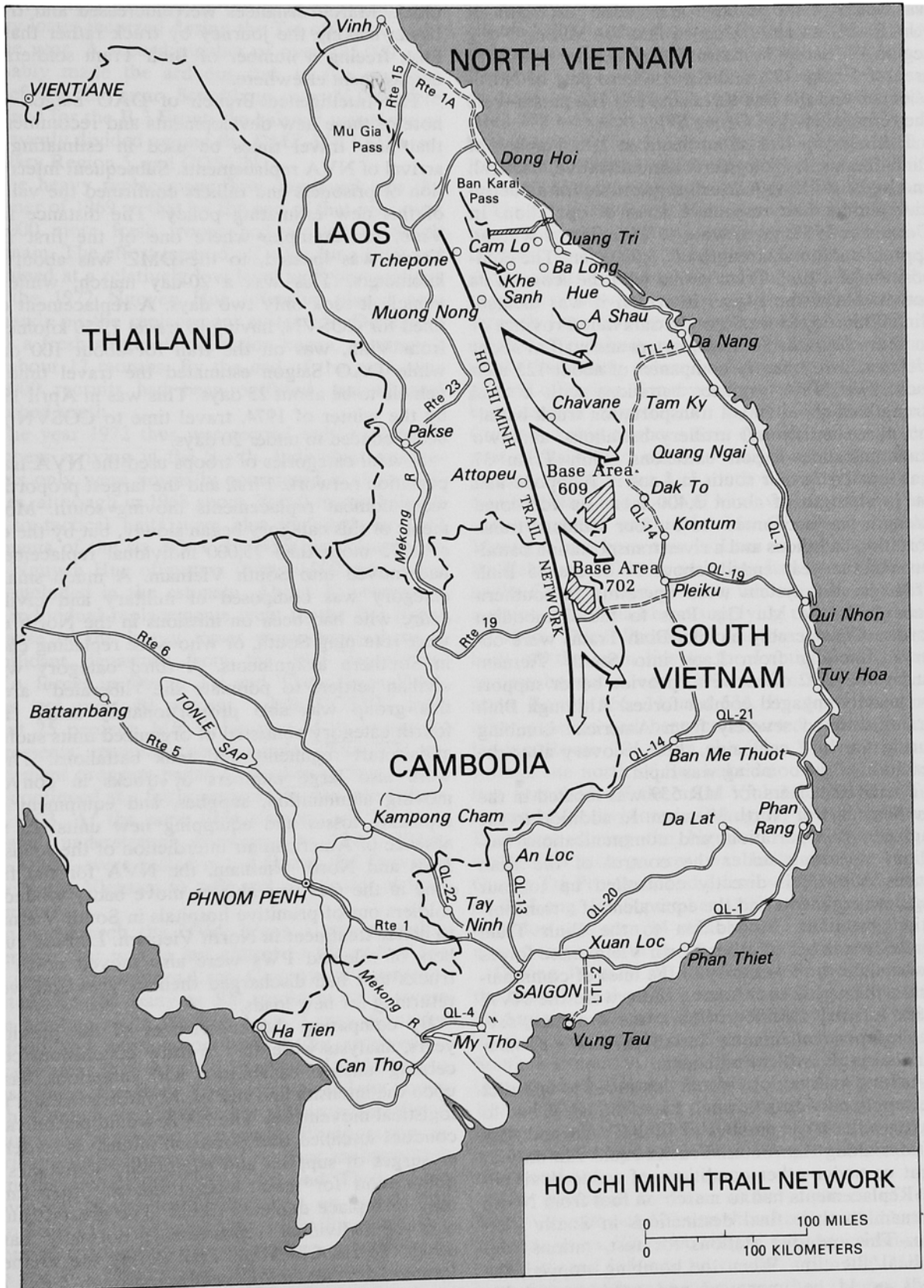
Attempts to establish an effective ICCS post at Duc Co, the proposed entry point into Pleiku Province, also failed. Because of inadequate health protection and sanitation facilities provided by the Communists, all ICCS members became ill with malaria, dysentery, or other ailments. The post was abandoned in May 1973, although the closing was of little consequence, because while in Duc Co, the team was never permitted outside its compound without Communist escort and was not allowed to observe any traffic or military activity.

As mentioned earlier, the North Vietnamese were receiving ample shipments of military assistance from Communist allies, principally the Soviet Union and China. The problem facing the NVA was not the quantity of material coming into North Vietnam but rather transportation of the equipment into South Vietnam, storing it, and distributing it to the combat units. Nevertheless, over the years, even in the face of intensive U.S. air attacks, the NVA had developed a complex and remarkably efficient system for the movement of supplies into South Vietnam (Map 6).

With the advent of the cease-fire, the system was streamlined and expanded. Unfettered by American air attacks in North Vietnam, Laos, or South Vietnam, the system was soon able to handle increasingly large tonnages of ammunition, tanks, and other heavy equipment and at the same time transport to South Vietnam the thousands of replacements required by the NVA.

In a strategic sense, this logistics system provided the North Vietnamese with the military option of renewing the main force war if the political offensive failed to achieve its objective. Signs that the political offensive might fail must have been apparent to the North Vietnamese leadership early in 1973, for it was then that a new surge of replacements and heavy equipment began to move south. In a remarkably short time, the NVA established in the South its strongest military position during the course of the entire war.

The organization responsible for the movement of all personnel and materiel into South Vietnam was the Headquarters, General Directorate for Rear Services. Located in Hanoi, the headquarters directly controlled the operations of all support units in North Vietnam, Northern Laos, and Military Region 559, the latter controlling operations of logistics groups in southern Laos, the Republic of Vietnam, and Cambodia. In December 1972, there were five logistical groups subordinate to MR 559: Group 470 had jurisdiction generally in the tri-border area of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam and southward into the mountain provinces of South Vietnam; Group 471 controlled activities north of Group 470 and into the A Shau Valley of Vietnam's Thua Thien Province; Group 473's area



Map 6

was north of the A Shau and ended just south of Khe Sanh, but also extended into the Muong Nong region of Laos; Southern Laos was the operating area of Group 472; and the southern part of North Vietnam and the Ban Karai and Mu Gia passes were the responsibility of Group 571.

Each group had subordinate to it a number of Binh Trams, which were administrative, tactical, and logistical headquarters, responsible for all activities within their respective areas of operation. In December 1972, there were 45 Binh Trams with an approximate total strength of 75,000 men. The composition of a Binh Tram varied with the scope of its activities and the region in which it was located. Binh Tram 35, for example, in Saravane Province of southern Laos, had a headquarters and staff of about 450 men, two infantry companies of about 125 men each, two NVA engineer battalions with a total strength of about 500, a transportation truck battalion, three antiaircraft artillery battalions, and two communications-liaison battalions. Binh Tram 37 was located farther south in Laos in Attapoeu and had a strength of about 3,400 men. Its additional strength was accounted for by four standard transportation battalions and a river transportation battalion. As the year ended, about 19 of the 45 Binh Trams in the system were operating in southern Laos from the Mu Gia Pass to the Cambodian border. Considerably mobile, Binh Trams were observed moving from Laos into South Vietnam during the 1972 offensive to provide better support for heavily engaged combat forces. Although Binh Trams suffered severely from American bombing during the 1972 campaign, their recovery after the cessation of the bombing was rapid.

The headquarters for MR 559 was located in the southern part of North Vietnam. In addition to the engineer, transportation, and communications battalions operating under the control of the Binh Trams, the 559th directly controlled up to four engineer regiments and the equivalent of a transportation battalion. In addition to the Binh Tram system, a number of other North Vietnamese forces contributed to the security of the lines of communication through Laos. Among these were the NVA 968th Infantry Division in Saravane Province, several independent infantry battalions, and a number of antiaircraft artillery regiments.

As long as American planes continued to interdict the supply corridors through Laos, the NVA had to maintain the large number of Binh Trams and way stations along the routes. Trucks could run only at night or under other conditions of reduced visibility. Replacements had to march on foot from North Vietnam to their final destinations in South Vietnam. This required stations for rest, rations, and medical attention. When the bombing stopped, the roads could be improved and used around-the-

clock. March distances were increased and troops began making the journey by truck rather than on foot, freeing a number of Binh Tram soldiers for employment elsewhere.

The Intelligence Branch of DAO Saigon took note of these new developments and recommended that new travel times be used in estimating the arrival of NVA replacements. Subsequent interrogation of prisoners and ralliers confirmed the validity of this new estimating policy. The distance from Vinh, for example, where one of the first Binh Trams was located, to the DMZ was about 300 kilometers. This was a 20-day march, while by vehicle it took only two days. A replacement destined for COSVN, having to travel 1,250 kilometers from Vinh, was on the trail for about 100 days, while DAO Saigon estimated the travel time by vehicle to be about 25 days. This was in April 1973; by the winter of 1974, travel time to COSVN had been reduced to under 20 days.

Several categories of troops used the NVA transportation network. First, and the largest proportion, were combat replacements moving south. Movements of this category began slowly, but by the end of 1973 more than 75,000 individual replacements had moved into South Vietnam. A much smaller category was composed of military and civilian cadre who had been on missions in the North and were returning South, or who were replacing cadre in Southern assignments. A third category were civilian settlers to populate the "liberated" areas; this group was also proportionately small. The fourth category consisted of organized units such as antiaircraft regiments and tank battalions. There were also large numbers of trucks in convoys moving ammunition, supplies, and equipment for replacing losses and equipping new units. In the absence of American air interdiction of the roads in Laos and North Vietnam, the NVA for the first time in the war was able to move badly wounded soldiers out of primitive hospitals in South Vietnam to better treatment in North Vietnam. Limited numbers of released PWs were also moved north on trucks that had discharged their cargoes and were returning for new loads.

By comparing the experiences of the previous years, analysts were able to draw conclusions concerning enemy capabilities and intentions based upon the intensity and size of the infiltration and the logistical movements. The NVA would periodically conduct so-called transportation offensives to deliver surges of supplies and equipment, sometimes in preparation for major operations, at other times only to replace depleted stocks. The greatest numbers of individual replacements normally came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the southern Laotian dry season, December through July. An exception occurred during 1968 when trail activity

remained high throughout the year to replace the heavy losses incurred during the Tet offensive early in the year. A record number of over 235,000 men probably made the arduous trek to the southern battlefields that year. Something over 25,000 were destined for the B-3 Front; the balance was more or less evenly divided among the DMZ-MRTTH area, Military Region 5, and COSVN.

The heavy replacement flow continued into the summer of 1969 so that by the end of that year over 100,000 more fresh troops had arrived in South Vietnam. The effort tapered off after June 1969 and remained at a relatively low level until preparations for the 1972 Nguyen Hue offensive placed new demands on the replacement system. In December 1971 a fresh surge of infiltration began, continuing for about 12 months. By the end of the year over 150,000 recruits had been outfitted, trained, and marched south.

The year 1972 thus was second only to 1968 in numbers arriving in the South. Individual replacements only were normally considered in these estimates, although in 1968 about 30,000 troops belonging to tactical units were also included. In 1972 elements of the six NVA divisions participating in the Nguyen Hue offensive, over 40,000 men, were not included in the estimate. About 20 percent of the individual replacements went to the B-3 Front because of the heavy losses experienced there, a significant departure from the 1968 experience. NVA forces in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces got over 40 percent, while COSVN took about 25 percent. MR 5, because of its lower requirements, received the remainder. The 1972 replacement program began to slacken in September, but continued at a fairly respectable rate into February 1973. At the same time elements of three exhausted, understrength divisions—the 304th, 308th, and 312th—were pulled out of Quang Tri Province into North Vietnam to refit and retrain for at least six months.

In mid-March the NVA began a transportation offensive that was to last almost to the end of the dry season in southern Laos. Convoys of unprecedented size—as many as 300 trucks in each—were seen heading south through Laos. Large quantities of food and ammunition were being received in storage areas in Quang Tri Province. In addition to streamlining the Binh Trám system, at least seven Binh Tráms were converted to antiaircraft artillery, infantry, or engineer regiments. Photography in April disclosed improvement on four major routes from the DMZ into Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces. Heavy traffic was seen on Route 534 from Laos to Hiep Duc in Quang Tin Province, and extensive roadwork was observed on several roads into the B-3 Front's area. Road improvement appeared intended to link the NVA units operating on

the edge of the coastal lowlands with Base Areas 609 and 702 in the Central Highlands. (Base Area 609 was in the triborder area in western Kontum Province and in Attopeu and Ratanakiri Provinces of Laos and Cambodia respectively, while Base Area 702 was next to Route 19 in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia, and just north of Duc Co in Pleiku Province.) Similar route improvement activities were noted in photographs of Tay Ninh Province.

The force the North Vietnamese were constructing, reinforcing, and supplying in the south was a modern, mechanized army that moved on wheels and tracks and required a steady supply of fuel. The old way of moving tons of gasoline and diesel fuel through Laos in drums would no longer suffice. A system of pipelines was the only feasible way to satisfy increasing demands and prepare for a new general offensive. For several years, North Vietnam had received its petroleum fuels via pipelines from China and ship-to-shore lines (Soviet tankers at the port of Bai Chay) north of Haiphong. A four-inch pipeline brought the fuel south to Vinh. Construction of a main line south of Vinh was started in 1968 and completed across the Mu Gia Pass into the Muong Nong base area in Laos in February 1969. By February 1973 the main line had been extended to the Chavane area of Laos, while since early 1972 a major branch had been supplying the A Shau area in Thua Thien Province. Another spur line was built off the main line to the Laotian-South Vietnamese border in early 1973 where it appeared to serve Routes 966, 14, and 534. By April 1972 another pipeline had been constructed generally following Route 101 from the Thu Thu petroleum storage site north of Bat Lake into the DMZ. This line branched off the main Vinh-Mu Gia line and served NVA divisions in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces during the Nguyen Hue offensive. A major fuel storage area was built at Cam Lo in Quang Tri Province, and a line was extended south of Ba Long. By September 1973, new pipeline construction was seen 14 miles south of Ba Long to a new storage site at A Luoi in the A Shau Valley.

During January 1973 and immediately following the cease-fire, the NVA took advantage of the halt in American air interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to reinforce its tank and artillery strength in South Vietnam. Attrition during the Nguyen Hue offensive had reduced the tank force to an estimated 100 vehicles, but by the end of April, estimated tank strength was close to 500. Many of the tanks were seen and photographed on the improved roads in southern Laos.

The principal medium artillery pieces of the NVA were Soviet 122-mm. howitzers and 122- and 130-mm. guns. They outranged the American-supplied 105- and 155-mm. howitzers of the ARVN and were more accurate at long range than the few U.S.

175-mm. guns in the ARVN corps artillery. (The ARVN had five battalions of 175s, each with 12 guns. Three battalions were deployed in MR 1 and one each in MR 2 and 3. The gun had a maximum effective range of 32,000 meters. The 105-mm. and 155-mm. howitzers had maximum effective ranges of 11,000 and 15,000 meters respectively. Ranged against these weapons were the 122- and 130-mm. Soviet field guns with ranges of 23,000 meters and 26,000 meters respectively. The Soviet 122-mm. howitzer had a range comparable to the U.S. 105-mm. howitzer, many of which were also in the NVA artillery force.)

By the end of April the NVA had increased its artillery strength in South Vietnam by the introduction of at least 170 more 122- and 130-mm. guns, bringing the total to over 250. As was the case with replacement soldiers, no accounting was made to the ICCS, but the ICCS teams nevertheless kept close track of U.S. shipments into Bien Hoa, Da Nang, and other ports of entry.

Of particular concern to the South Vietnamese as well as to American officers responsible for planning for renewed U.S. air operations, should they be ordered, was a rapid and significant increase in the NVA's air defense forces in northern Quang Tri Province. Order-of-battle experts had evidence that elements of 10 NVA antiaircraft regiments were operating in Quang Tri Province at the end of 1972. By the end of January 1973, two more regiments had joined this force and by the end of April, the count had risen to 13, even after two of the Quang Tri regiments had shifted into Laos. These antiaircraft regiments were equipped with cannon ranging from the automatic 20-mm. to 100-mm. They also had 12.7 and 14.5-mm. antiaircraft machine guns, and many of their 57-mm. cannon were radar-controlled. Furthermore they had the SA-7 "Strella" Soviet hand-held, heat-seeking missile, and early in 1973 evidence began to accumulate that at least some of the SA-7s were an improved version. Also early in 1973 the 263d SAM Regiment moved into

Quang Tri Province and set up near Khe Sanh. By the end of April this regiment had constructed eight SA-2 sites around Khe Sanh and had placed weapons in four of them. Although it would have been prudent for the South Vietnamese to have destroyed the sites before they became operational, the VNAF lacked the sophisticated ordnance, the radar jamming gear, and the navigational aids required for such a mission. Even had it been possible politically for American planes to do the job, significant losses would have been expected. While ominous for the future, Communist reinforcement of its expeditionary army in South Vietnam was consistent with the political offensive enunciated in the strategy directives.

Note on Sources

The section on North Vietnamese post-cease-fire strategy was derived largely from documents captured by the ARVN, translated at the J2/JGS Document Exploitation Center, and furnished to DAO Saigon. Principal among these documents was a copy of COSVN Directive 2/73. Interpretations of this and other documents, as well as reports of interrogations of prisoners of war and ralliers, were found in DAO reports, studies, and estimates and in reports originated by the U.S. Embassy, Saigon.

Strength and other personnel reports, prepared by the RVNAF J-1, and furnished to DAO Saigon, provided information on RVNAF desertion and absentee rates.

Unclassified reports by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) provided quotations from the Hanoi press and radio.

Reports, appraisals, estimates and fact sheets prepared by the Defense Intelligence Agency and DAO Saigon were used as the basis for information concerning the NVA logistical and tactical buildup in South Vietnam. Finally, translated editions of the J2/JGS Daily Intelligence Summary and notes retained by the author were used to describe certain aspects of the enemy strategy and general situation.

The Third Indochina War: The First Half-Year

Cease-fire Violations

As the post-cease-fire flurry subsided, activities in the four military regions began to develop patterns that persisted through the summer of 1973. As has been said so many times, there were four wars in South Vietnam, a different one in each military region.

In Military Region 1 both sides avoided serious contact as the NVA continued to consolidate and defend its positions and to construct its major logistical bases in northern Quang Tri and western Thua Thien Province. The South Vietnamese meanwhile used artillery sparingly and air power not at all in defending military posts and lines of communication along the coast.

In Military Region 2 the opposing sides developed strong positions around Kontum City. While the ARVN sought to keep NVA forces out of rocket range of the city and its airfield and to keep open Route 14 south to Pleiku, the NVA's new 10th Division pressed against the city's defenses to the north and west. Another area of contention developed around the westernmost ARVN outposts of Plei Mrong and Plei Djereng. The latter was destined not to survive because it was much too close to Duc Co, the major NVA logistical base in the highlands. The Communists also worked to improve their north-south logistical route from the vicinity of Dak To southward through the Plei Trap Valley of western Kontum Province. Combat in the eastern part of MR 2 centered primarily in Binh Dinh Province, where the NVA constantly harassed South Vietnamese posts, in the populated areas and along lines of communication. The ARVN responded with sorties into NVA areas in order to deny the enemy easy access to the coastal lowlands.

In Military Region 3 the NVA concentrated against Tong Le Chon, an isolated ARVN post deep in Communist-controlled northern Tay Ninh

Province, located close to the Song Saigon, where the river was still a quiet stream winding through dense jungle on its way to the South China Sea. Existence of the post had forced the enemy to detour from preferred logistical corridors from Tay Ninh into Binh Long Province and southward along the Saigon River to Binh Duong. The NVA in March 1973 began a siege of the post destined to last for a full year. Although action elsewhere in the region was relatively light, harassment of outlying hamlets and resettlement areas was constant.

In Military Region 4 the heaviest action centered in the Seven Mountains area of Chau Doc Province, where ARVN Rangers were undertaking a slow and costly campaign to destroy the remaining elements of the NVA's 1st Division in that mountain stronghold. Other intense combat occurred in the Hong Ngu region along the border close to where the Mekong River enters South Vietnam from Cambodia. The rest of the region experienced relatively persistent harassment of Regional and Popular Forces outposts and of populated areas.

Relying on information supplied by the RVNAF Joint General Staff (JGS), DAO Saigon began reporting statistical and descriptive information on cease-fire violations. Arbitrary definitions were established in order to categorize hostile action. For example, a "minor attack by fire" was one in which 20 or fewer high explosive rounds hit a friendly position or populated area and in which casualties were five or less. For attacks of more than 20 rounds or five casualties, the category was a "major attack by fire." Contacts between ground troops were similarly defined as "minor" if ARVN casualties did not exceed five; as "major," if casualties were six or more. RVNAF ground operations resulting in combat were not reported as South Vietnamese cease-fire violations. The attitude taken by reporting officials in the JGS seemed to be that the RVNAF had the right to be in the particular area in which the conflict took place, and any resulting fire-fight was a violation attributed to enemy encroachment on South Vietnamese territory. Similarly, RVNAF artillery firings into suspected or known enemy locations were not reported as violations. The rationale was that the firing was defensive and in response to a clear threat or to a prior violation by Communist forces. Even though a certain amount of distortion thus crept into the reporting system and inaccuracies were doubtless present, the statistics on cease-fire violations provided a general idea of trends and patterns.

A look at Military Region 1 reports, probably the most accurate of those submitted from the field, shows a pattern of minor activity so characteristic of I Corps. In the three weeks immediately following the cease-fire, during the final phase of LAND-GRAB 73, there were 58 major contacts between op-

posing forces, but in the fourth week, 18-24 February 1973, there were only 3. In the 20 weeks from 18 February until 5 July 1973, the weekly average for major contacts in the region was only 1.25. Minor contacts were also at the lowest level in the country, with 517 reported between the start of the cease-fire and 17 February. After that date a downward trend began, so that by the first week of July, the rate was down to 20 per week. The total in the 20-week period was only 1,107, a weekly average of 55.

The record in Military Region 1 becomes remarkable when compared with other regions, particularly the delta. Over 800 minor contacts occurred in Military Region 4 in the three weeks following the cease-fire. By July, the weekly rate was still in the 90's; the total for the 20 week period was 2,652, for a weekly average of over 130. Major contacts also maintained a high level in the delta; during the same period, the average was over 5.3 per week.

Casualties naturally followed a similar trend. In the three weeks following the cease-fire, about 500 ARVN soldiers died in combat in MR 1, compared to about 300 in the delta. The casualties then began to taper off in MR 1 until by July only 15 to 20 were killed in action each week, while the rate remained high in MR 4 with a weekly total of 80 or more.

The frequency of ground combat in Military Region 2 was between the low of MR 1 and the high experienced in the delta. Three weeks after the cease-fire and up until 5 July, the average frequency of major contacts had fallen to 3.25 per week; the number of minor contacts during this period was 1,205, an average of 60 per week. III Corps forces had more minor contacts (1,341), but major contacts were at the same low level as in MR 1, 1.25 per week.

The record of attacks by fire was also illustrative of the general situation and reflected the order of battle and the diversity among the four regions. In the delta, for example, enemy attacks by fire were frequent, though the rate remained fairly constant for the first five months after the cease-fire. This high rate reflected the large number of isolated outposts manned by South Vietnamese territorials which seemed to draw fire as candle flames attract moths. Since ARVN artillery was deployed throughout the delta, the customary response to an enemy mortar or rocket attack (the enemy had no field guns or howitzers in the delta), was counter-battery fire. From the cease-fire to 5 July, the JGS reported over 3,900 attacks by fire in Military Region 4, 46 percent of the country-wide total. ARVN artillery expenditures, partly in response to enemy fire, also remained fairly constant after the cease-fire, except for the first three weeks when South Vietnamese gunners fired about 190,000 rounds (105-mm. and 155-mm. howitzer). By the

first week in July, IV Corps forces in the delta had expended almost 555,000 rounds, a modest 21 percent of the country-wide total.

By disregarding the first three weeks of the cease-fire, when expenditures were extremely heavy in Military Region 1, a more meaningful representation of ammunition usage appears. Over 25 percent of the artillery ammunition used after 17 February was fired in the delta. The consistency of the delta war is even more dramatically shown by ammunition figures after 29 April, when the heavy expenditures in MR 1 were sharply reduced. About one-third of the ammunition fired from 29 April to 5 July was expended in the delta.

As alluded to earlier, the high level of combat during LANDGRAB 73 in MR 1 was revealed in the statistics on attacks by fire and ammunition expenditure. In the first three weeks following the cease-fire, more than 46 percent of the enemy's attacks by fire were directed at targets in MR 1. Although the rate remained fairly high (second in the country) for the rest of the period, the share of attacks by fire in the region's I Corps had dropped by 5 July to 30 percent. A much more striking decline occurred in RVNAF artillery usage; in the three weeks following the cease-fire, nearly 670,000 rounds were fired by I Corps forces, almost 50 percent of the country total; but after 29 April, I Corps' ammunition usage accounted for only 18 percent of that fired country wide.

Attacks by fire in Military Region 2 were the lowest in the country. During the period under discussion, only 800 attacks by fire were directed at II Corps forces in the region, 9 percent of the total; 20 percent of these were launched in the first three weeks of the cease-fire. Ammunition usage was also the lowest, 430,000 rounds, or 16 percent of the total. This percentage would have been even lower had it not been for the heavy fires in support of attempts to retake Polei Krong and Trung Nghia in western Kontum Province in June. ARVN artillery fired 62,000 rounds in the four weeks of this action.

Attacks by fire in Military Region 3 were also relatively low, only 15 percent of the country total. Ammunition expenditures reflected that figure: 450,000 rounds for the period, or about 17 percent of the total. During a brief two-week period, (3-15 June), however, the region's gunners fired 87,000 rounds supporting an unsuccessful attack to open Route 13 from Lai Khe to Chon Thanh. This represented 57 percent of the shells fired from 29 April to 5 July.

The Threat to Saigon

The attempt in June 1973 to open Route 13 was symptomatic of a strategic malady from which the ARVN in Military Region 3 suffered throughout

the months following the Nguyen Hue offensive up until the final capitulation. In an attempt to get more depth in the defense, the ARVN had maintained positions and outposts deep in territories which, if not under firm enemy control, were nevertheless subject to easy enemy interdiction with minimum forces. In strong positions guarding the western, northern, and eastern approaches to Saigon, the ARVN held in good order and in strength sufficient to repel any enemy offensive, assuming no significant reinforcement of Communist forces. The southern approaches were adequately protected by the dispositions of IV Corps around My Tho, and no sizable threat could develop in the Rung Sat, the extensive mud and mangrove delta of the Saigon and Dong Nai Rivers.

The defensive arc was nevertheless quite close to the capital. In the northwestern sector at Cu Chi the 25th ARVN Division was only 25 kilometers from Tan Son Nhut airbase. Although only one regiment was usually kept in the Cu Chi area, substantial territorial forces gave density and depth to the defenses there. Since this was perhaps the most likely approach to Saigon for armor, extensive anti-tank ditches were dug near strong points. The 25th kept one regiment at Tay Ninh West and the other in the Khiem Hanh-Tri Tam-Boi Loi triangle. Although inside contested territory, these dispositions afforded essential depth to the defense. The trouble was that the enemy often exercised his capability to interdict the tenuously held routes to the outposts, so that major operations were frequently required to run the resupply convoys, and increasingly heavy burdens were placed on aerial resupply.

The enemy crowded the ARVN defenses with local battalions, as well as main force regiments. Contact was virtually constant in the Ho Bo and Boi Loi areas north of Cu Chi, but an even more serious threat developed in the Long Nguyen, a heavily wooded, long-time enemy base area in the gap between Cu Chi and the 5th ARVN Division at Lai Khe. The 9th NVA Division pushed into this area from its bases in the Michelin and Minh Thanh plantations and was soon threatening lightly held territorial positions on the northern leg of the so-called Iron Triangle: Rach Bap, Base 82, and An Dien.

An appreciation of the seriousness with which an enemy salient in the Iron Triangle had to be viewed can be gained from the following: First, the southern vertex of the Triangle, opposite the village of Phu Hoa and at the confluence of the Saigon and Thi Thien Rivers, is only 26,500 meters from the runways of Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa airbases, and maximum range of the 130-mm. field gun is 26,700 meters. Second, a successful crossing of the Thi Thien River below Ben Cat would isolate the 5th Division at Lai Khe, probably result in eliminat-

ing the defenses in front of the Binh Duong Province seat at Phu Cuong, and place enemy forces in a position for a rapid move into Saigon.

The lack of contiguous depth to the defense was much more apparent and had more immediate and serious consequences in the center sector where the NVA in the Nguyen Hue offensive had taken Loc Ninh, the district town north of the Binh Long Province seat of An Loc. Although the garrison at An Loc withstood the siege, destroying dozens of tanks and entire battalions in the process, eliminating the immediate threat to Binh Duong Province and Saigon, and providing a much needed psychological boost, the South Vietnamese were left with a large, critical base that could be supplied only by helicopter.

A similar problem existed southwest of the An Loc perimeter where at Tong Le Chon the enemy's siege by 25 March had begun in earnest. Soon after that date all resupply had to be parachuted, evacuation became almost impossible, and bombardment was almost continuous. Helicopters could not land without prohibitive risk, and the NVA anti-aircraft positions around the camp became so dense that even approach by helicopter became almost impossible. In a 16-week period beginning on 25 March, the NVA conducted almost 300 attacks by fire against the camp, expending over 13,000 mortar, rocket, and artillery rounds. There were also 11 ground attacks and at least 9 attempts by sappers to infiltrate defenses. The NVA supported the attacks with psychological bombardments, promising over loud-speakers to afford the defenders safe passage out of the camp and appealing to the camp commander to lead his men out.

As of the first week in July, the total strength of the 92d Ranger Battalion inside the camp and two close-in outposts was 224 officers and men, of whom 34 were out of action because of wounds or illness. Total casualties for the period were 16 killed, 4 seriously wounded, and 192 lightly wounded or sick, including some with beri beri and malaria. Despite isolation and deteriorating morale, the ranger battalion nevertheless held fast and during those 16 weeks counted 86 enemy soldiers killed and 10 individual weapons captured, including an anti-aircraft machine gun, and claimed destruction of one enemy 105-mm. howitzer.

During the 16-week period, the VNAF flew over 3,000 sorties supporting this little camp. The planes dropped more than three hundred 400-pound bundles of food and other supplies, of which 134 were recovered by the defenders while the remainder fell into enemy hands.

The besieging force consisted at first of a battalion of the 271st Regiment, 9th NVA Division, later replaced by a battalion of the 201st Independent NVA Regiment. Also included in the forces sur-

rounding Tong Le Chon were a battalion each of the 42d and 271st NVA Antiaircraft Regiments of the 69th Artillery Group and firing batteries of the 28th NVA Artillery Battalion, the latter equipped with 130-mm. field guns.

South of the An Loc perimeter on National Route 13, was another isolated garrison at Chon Thanh. Although regiments of the 5th ARVN Division were rotated in and out of Chon Thanh, the basic defense was the responsibility of territorials and rangers. A sortie out of the camp in early June by the 7th Infantry, 5th ARVN Division, progressed only five or six kilometers before being stopped with moderate casualties. This was an unsuccessful attempt to link up with the 8th Infantry attacking north out of the advanced base at Bau Bang, north of Lai Khe. Chon Thanh remained cut off for the rest of the war. An outpost at Chi Linh, southeast of the An Loc perimeter on the Song Be River, also required helicopter resupply.

Northeast of An Loc, a jungle-cloaked peak rises 700 meters out of the rolling woods, plantations, and farms of the Dong Nai terrace. Its beautiful, symmetrical cone shading Phuoc Binh, provincial seat of Phuoc Long Province, can be seen on clear days from Saigon. On some maps Phuoc Binh is labeled Song Be for the swift-flowing river that curves around the north base of the mountain. A military garrison was located at an airstrip near Phuoc Binh. This province headquarters was in no way integral to the defenses of Saigon; its importance was exclusively political in that throughout the war, the South Vietnamese could still claim possession of all province capitals.

Until the NVA Phuoc Long offensive of December 1974, Phuoc Binh could be reached by road from Kien Duc, in Quang Duc Province to the northeast, although the route was long and circuitous: from Nha Trang to Ban Me Thuot, thence to Gia Nghia and over to Kien Duc, then west to Phuoc Binh. Route 14 was kept open by troops posted at Duc Phong, about half the distance between Kien Duc and Phuoc Binh. Road travel was also possible with some risk south from Duc Phong to a small outpost at the Bunard plantation, but not beyond. The ARVN was unable to open Route 14 north of Don Luan (also known as Dong Xoai) after mid-March, although one convoy managed to get through an ambush on Route 1A and make it to Song Be. Even when interdictions of Route 1A south of the regimental base camp at Phuoc Vinh (called Phu Giao by the ARVN) became common, the ARVN managed to keep 1A open to Phuoc Vinh most of the time, but not to Don Luan, which became totally dependent on aerial resupply.

The situation in the eastern sector was different, there being no isolated areas dependent on airlift for supply or evacuation and all major roads being

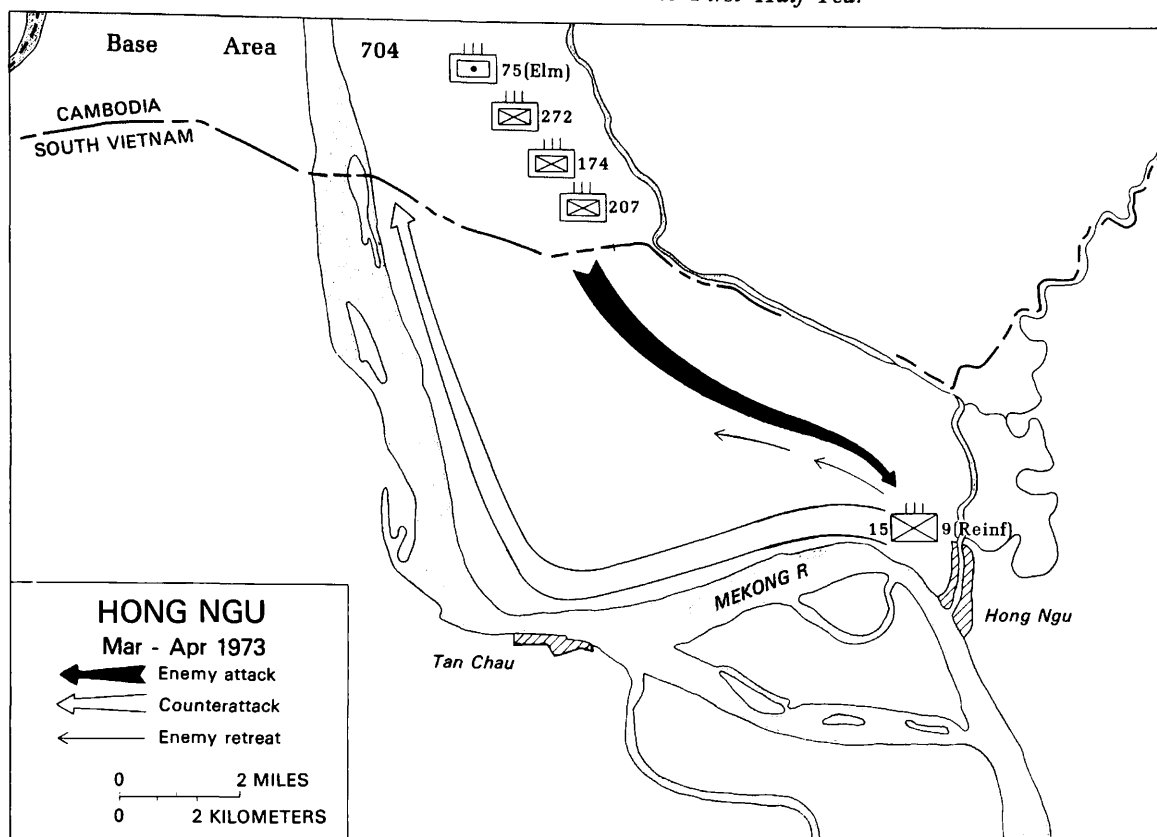
open. Civilian and commercial as well as military traffic moved without escort on Route 20 to and from the mountain resort and gardens of Dalat. National Route 1 was open for all traffic to the coastal town of Phan Thiet, and Highway 15 was open to the beaches at Vung Tau. The 18th ARVN Division, with territorials in support, had no serious difficulties with the NVA's 33d and 274th Regiments in Long Khanh and Phuoc Tuy Provinces, although these main forces and some local units made travel hazardous on Interprovincial Route 2 from Xuan Loc to Ba Ria. Constant patrolling was also necessary to protect traffic on Interprovincial Route 23 between Dat Do and Xuyen Moc in southern Phuoc Tuy.

The Cambodian Connection

The main ship channel of the great Mekong River empties into the South China Sea opposite the port city of Vung Tau. Convoys of tugs and barges for Phnom Penh marshalled there for the slow tow to Tam Chau, 150 miles up the brown river, just short of the crossing into Cambodia. All of the heavy tonnage comprising U.S. assistance to Cambodia—mostly ammunition, fuels, and rice—had to go this way since the Communists had closed off Phnom Penh from Cambodian ocean ports. The border areas of South Vietnam's Kien Phong, Chau Doc, and Kien Giang Provinces, as well as the southern reaches of the adjacent Cambodian Provinces of Prey Veng, Kandal, Takeo and Kampot, had long been used by the NVA and VC for base areas and lines of communication. The NVA in early 1973 had up to 11 regiments in Cambodia, all used in South Vietnam except for 3 or 4 deployed against Cambodian Government forces.

The situation that developed in this border area was unique and was due to the interaction of a number of factors: American efforts to keep the convoys moving; the NVA's attempts to stop them; the ARVN's support of the convoy effort as well as its determination to prevent Communist main force incursions and infiltration of supplies and men into Vietnam; the NVA's persistent commitment to keep the lines of communication open through Cambodia into South Vietnam; and finally, the peculiar harassment the Cambodian Communist units inflicted on the supply lines and depots of their NVA allies. While this last factor appeared to have little lasting effect on NVA effectiveness in South Vietnam, there was evidence of serious incidents which doubtless required the NVA to divert troops that could otherwise have been devoted to more productive activity.

The river town of Hong Ngu, where the Hong Ngu tributary flows into the Mekong, became the focal point of the NVA's attacks to clear impedi-



Map 7

ments to infiltration and interdict the Mekong convoys as they moored at the Vietnamese Navy Base of Tan Chau before churning on into Cambodia. In March, the NVA concentrated above Hong Ngu in Cambodia the 207th Regiment, 6th NVA Division; the 174th Regiment, 5th NVA Division; the 272d Regiment (detached from the 9th NVA Division, which remained in the area of Minh Thanh and Michelin plantation of South Vietnam's Military Region 3); and elements of the 75th Artillery Group. With the 207th leading, supported by artillery, the North Vietnamese attacked from Prey Veng Province, Cambodia—NVA base area 704—toward Hong Ngu. Not only did they meet immediate heavy resistance, but their rear area was pounded by B-52's and tactical bombers. The U.S. air effort in support of the Cambodian campaign to clear the Mekong banks from the Vietnam border to Phnom Penh was in full swing. (Map 7)

Benefits to the ARVN defense of Hong Ngu and Tan Chau were substantial. Several reliable reports told of heavy casualties and damage to the NVA's storage areas. One B-52 strike on 23 April 1973 north of the border between the Mekong and the Hong Ngu stream probably caught a large portion of the attacking force. Survivors reported seeing

impressed civilians carrying the bodies of more than 100 NVA soldiers from the area. Many bunkers were destroyed, and the scent of death was heavy in the air.

In mid-April, the ARVN 15th Infantry, 9th Division, together with the 2d Armored Cavalry Squadron and a Regional Forces Group, counterattacked. Although casualties were heavy, excellent VNAF and Vietnamese Navy support helped enable the ARVN troops to clear the east bank of the Mekong from Hong Ngu to the Cambodian frontier. Not only was control of this stretch of the river never again seriously threatened, but also the thrust inflicted heavy casualties and dealt a damaging blow to enemy morale. By the end of May, one battalion of the 207th NVA Regiment had only 100 men. By the 4th of May, when the Hong Ngu fighting had wound down to intermittent small contacts and light shellings, 422 enemy dead had been counted, while ARVN casualties were 94 killed, 743 wounded, and 36 missing.

Civilian casualties in the action were by far the highest since the cease-fire, over 300, of which 80 were killed by NVA artillery. Almost 300 houses were destroyed by enemy fire. In the second week of April alone 123 high-explosive 122-mm. rockets slammed into Hong Ngu.



Sparring in the Highlands

The situation in regard to isolated outposts was much the same in Military Region 2 as in Military Region 3. There was a deep but fragile arc of outposts manned by ranger border defense battalions and territorials extending north from Kontum City, and one isolated border camp, Plei Djereng, west of Pleiku. All had to be supplied by air.

Mang Buc, just inside Kontum Province on the border with Quang Ngai Province, was north of Kontum with no usable road in-between. Southwest of Mang Buc, over ridges rising to 2,100 meters, was Dak To, the only remaining position along Route 14 north of Kontum still held by the RVNAF, and Dak To itself was of little concern to the North Vietnamese because they were building a new highway that would bypass the camp on the west. South of Mang Buc and northeast of Kontum was the isolated camp of Chuong Nghia (also known as Plateau Gi). It too posed no particular problem for the North Vietnamese since they built a road bypassing it. (Map 8)

West of Pleiku, on the slopes of the high plateau above the valley of the Se San River, was Camp Le Minh at the village of Plei Djereng. This post posed a different problem for the NVA. It was on the edge of a base area being expanded from Duc Co. It was also on Route 509 leading directly to Pleiku. And it was astride the Route 14 complex that was under construction and would eventually link Khe Sanh in Quang Tri Province with the Bu Dop-Loc Ninh logistical center north of Saigon. For the ARVN the problem was familiar: only a major operation could open Route 509 from Pleiku to Plei Djereng, and the forces for that were not available. Thus Le Minh had to be supplied by air.

The most important ARVN tasks in the Kontum-Pleiku defense were to keep the enemy from closing Highway 14 between the two cities, prevent NVA artillery from interdicting Pleiku Air Base or hitting the military logistical centers in the area, and keep Highway 14 open to Ban Me Thuot and Highway 19 open through the Mang Yang Pass. The western trace of the defense, which left much of the terrain uncovered, was anchored in Thanh An District on Highway 19 about midway between the junction of Highways 19 and 14 and the NVA's base at Duc Co. From Thanh An, the trace went north bending in toward Highway 14.

The forward positions west of Kontum were just east of Polei Krong and the adjacent village of Trung Nghia near the confluence of the Dak Bla and Krong Poko rivers. The NVA had attacked Polei Krong and Trung Nghia during the cease-fire landgrab and still occupied Polei Krong, which it appeared determined to hold, not only to provide a good point of departure for an attack on Kontum

but also because Polei Krong was astride one of the best north-south lines of communication. This area became the scene of some of the heaviest fighting in Military Region 2 during the summer and early autumn of 1973. Southwest of Kontum, on Three Points Mountain (Hill 700) overlooking Provincial Route 3B and the Dak Bla River, was the isolated outpost of Doi Ba Cham, accessible only by helicopter.

In mid-May, VNAF aerial observers saw two 130-mm. guns being moved into position northwest of Kontum. Primarily through agent reports, ARVN intelligence officers learned of NVA plans to use artillery against ARVN artillery batteries in the Kontum City area. Shortly afterwards, heavy attacks by fire hit the ARVN fire bases and positions of the 53d Infantry Regiment, 23d ARVN Division, northwest of the city on Eo Gio Hill and Bases N and R. Two NVA ground attacks against Doi Ba Cham were repulsed. Artillery bombardments by the NVA's 40th Artillery Regiment, employing 130-mm. gun and 122-mm. rocket fire, continued against forward ARVN positions and artillery batteries during the first week of June, while elements of the 10th NVA Division conducted ground probes against three forward ARVN positions. On 7 June, a major attack by battalions of the 66th Regiment, 10th NVA Division, and the 24th Independent NVA Regiment, supported by at least 10 T-54 tanks and by fire from 130-mm. guns and 122-mm. rockets, struck ARVN positions at Trung Nghia and Polei Krong. The attack drove a regional force battalion and elements of the 44th ARVN Regiment from their positions, affording the NVA control of positions 17 kilometers west of Kontum City.

Even as the 10th NVA Division was pressing hard against the Kontum perimeter, the 320th NVA Division was trying to force contraction of the ARVN defenses west of Pleiku as well as those protecting Highway 14 north of the city. In early May, ARVN intelligence learned that at least one battalion of the 95-B Regiment, 10th NVA Division, had moved out of the Chu Pao Pass area and into a base near Plei Monoun, just south of the Yali Falls, there to prepare for attacks on the ARVN ranger base at Plei Mrong.

In late March a more serious situation was developing in Thanh An district on Highway 19 where elements of the 320th Division began moving from Duc Co toward the ARVN base at Thanh Giao. In the first week of April, the defenders were pounded by 18 separate bombardments and beat off five major ground attacks, although an outer defense perimeter was forced to pull back. Examination of shell fragments disclosed the presence of 130-mm. guns and 120-mm. mortars. It was obvious that the NVA wanted more buffer space east of Duc Co.

VNAF's aerial observers saw a new compound of 34 buildings being erected near the airfield, and photos disclosed extensive new road construction. VNAF bombers attacked a crossing on the Se San River, which forms the Cambodian border at this point, and destroyed 13 medium ferries while ARVN's aggressive defense at Thanh Giao caused the NVA to back off for a few weeks.

By 1 May the 320th Division's 64th Regiment was bivouacked north of Thanh Giao and the 48th remained to the south. Nevertheless, no significant attacks took place, and the ARVN 47th Regiment, 22d Division, having moved from Binh Dinh Province, stiffened the defenses in Thanh An District.

The RVNAF II Corps Commander, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, could deploy the 47th Regiment to reinforce Pleiku with confidence that the 22d Division could control the situation in Binh Dinh without it. Over a year having passed since the 22d was badly mauled in Kontum, the division was well on the way to recovery. In northern Binh Dinh the division nibbled at enclaves seized by the Communists in January, finding that the NVA 3d Division was barely effective. The 12th NVA Regiment was in western Tam Quan District, and the 2d and 21st Regiments had pulled out of Hoai Nhon to refit and receive replacements west of the An Lao River in Hoai An District. The fighting strength of the enemy battalions was probably under 200 men each. Having lost heavily in LANDGRAB 73 and in post-cease-fire engagements, the division's morale, as well as its strength, was at a low point, while the ARVN 22d Division was gaining strength and appeared to be imbued with the confidence and drive of its commander, Brig. Gen. Phan Dinh Niem. In any event, with the 6th Ranger Group operating in Tam Quan District, the 40th and 42d Regiments in Hoai Nhon, and the 41st Regiment in Phu My, the 22d ARVN Division as mid-summer approached controlled the main lines of communication and populated coastal regions of Binh Dinh Province.

The South Vietnamese outnumbered the NVA and VC forces in Military Region 2. The ARVN 22d and 23d Divisions had a total of seven regiments in Binh Dinh, Kontum, and Pleiku Province. There were also the 2d Ranger Group, detached from III Corps, and battalions of the 7th Rangers from IV Corps. In all there were 18 Ranger battalions in MR 2 in the summer of 1973. On the other side of the ledger, the enemy had his 3d, 10th, and 320th Divisions, the first two with three regiments and the third with two. The NVA also had four separate regiments and as many as 40 understrength independent battalions but total enemy combat strength in MR 2 was probably under 30,000. The NVA nevertheless demonstrated at Trung Nhia and Polei Krong an ability to concentrate the forces required at a vulnerable objective to achieve tempo-

rary success. On the other hand, the enemy failed to concentrate against any decisive objectives in Pleiku or Binh Dinh Provinces, even though the RVNAF was spread thinly throughout the corps area. The activity in MR 2 during the early summer of 1973 illustrated a perennial truth about main force combat success and failure in Vietnam: despite overall numerical and qualitative inferiority, the NVA could concentrate forces, achieve temporary fire and maneuver superiority, attack with some degree of tactical surprise, and overwhelm local RVNAF defenses.

Logistics and Infiltration

By the end of June, at least three NVA transportation regiments were moving supplies along the northern section of Highway 14 from the Khe Sanh area into the A Shau Valley. At least three major storage depots were moved out of Laos into South Vietnam, probably to be located in the new Highway 14 area. As much as 10,000 short tons of supplies were moved into the B-3 front and NVA Military Region 4 during June. This amount was evidently part of the estimated 50,000 short tons which crossed the DMZ into Quang Tri during the first weeks after the cease-fire. The Highway 14 network inside South Vietnam would, when completed, provide an alternate to much of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Significantly, when the roads in the southern Laos panhandle were washed out in the southwest monsoon, the Route 14 net in the northern highlands of South Vietnam would be dry and trafficable.

Enemy logistical developments received close attention at DAO and by the J2 of RVNAF. A competent intelligence estimate, employing conservative criteria, concluded that as of the end of May 1973, the NVA had moved supplies into Laos and South Vietnam in sufficient quantities to support offensive operations in South Vietnam at the 1972 (31 March 72-January 73) level for 13 to 18 months and that these supplies would be sufficient to begin a similar offensive by July 1973. Replacements, however, had not yet been received in the numbers required to bring combat units up to the strengths preferred by the NVA for launching an offensive.

From January through June, 65,000 replacements arrived in South Vietnam. This compared to over 92,000 during the same period of 1972. Even when reassigned ex-prisoners of war were added to the totals, a picture of understrength enemy units remained. The RVNAF JGS had estimated enemy casualties during 1972, killed, permanently disabled, or died of wounds, at over 178,000. Even if generous adjustments were made for possible exaggerations, there was no question but that losses were extremely heavy and an estimated 39,000 more

enemy soldiers were permanently put out of action during the first six months of 1973. Thus the enemy still had some catching up to do in regard to replacements (RVNAF losses were also heavy in 1972 with over 40,000 killed. Although much lower than those incurred during the Nguyen Hue offensive, casualties in the first half of 1973 were substantial: 15,800 killed, 5,000 dead from non-combat causes, 73,700 wounded in action, and 16,000 injured from noncombat causes.)

Guns and tanks were also moving south. A reasonable estimate, proved accurate by information acquired subsequently, was that the NVA had brought about 140 new 122-mm. and 130-mm. guns into South Vietnam since January 1973, and that about half of these went to COSVN with the rest to Military Region 5 and the B-3 Front. About 250 new tanks also entered the country, also going to COSVN with smaller equal shares to the B-3 Front and MR 5.

The SA-7 "Strella"

Amid the remarkable increase in NVA anti-aircraft strength in South Vietnam the gravest threat to VNAF planes, particularly in the southern part of the country, was the SA-7 hand-held missile. From the cease-fire until the end of June, there were 22 reported SA-7 attacks on VNAF aircraft, 8 of which shot down the planes. The following tabulation gives the date / province / aircraft and result:

4 Feb / Quang Tri / A-37, destroyed
25 Feb / Dinh Tuong / UH-1H, missed
3 Mar / Dinh Tuong / A-1H, missed
3 Mar / Dinh Tuong / AC-119, missed
3 Mar / Binh Duong / UH-1, missed
6 Mar / Dinh Tuong / UH-1, missed
20 Mar / Dinh Tuong / A-37, missed
23 Mar / Tay Ninh / CH-47, missed
24 Mar / An Xuyen / UH-1, missed
28 Mar / Binh Long / A-1H, destroyed, pilot missing
28 Mar / Binh Long / AC-119, missed
29 Mar / Binh Long / A-1H, destroyed, pilot missing
29 Mar / Binh Long / F-5A, destroyed, pilot missing
7 Apr / Quang Tri / UH-1 (ICCS), destroyed, 7 killed
16 Apr / Tay Ninh / L-19, missed
20 Apr / Kien Phong / A-1G, destroyed
20 Apr / Kien Hoa / UH-1, destroyed, 1 killed, 3 wounded
29 Apr / Kien Phong / L-19, missed
30 Apr / Kien Phong / L-19, missed
8 May / Tay Ninh / UH-1H, missed
3 Jun / Tay Ninh / CH-47, destroyed, 5 killed
25 Jun / Tay Ninh / UH-1H (two), missed

The concentration of firings and successful attacks in Binh Long Province reflected the intensity

of the VNAF air support provided during the effort to relieve the siege of Tong Le Chon. The rather low ratio of successful firings—slightly better than one out of three—was attributable in large degree to effective countermeasures adopted by the VNAF. As the SA-7 was fired, it had a distinctive flash which could often be seen from the air, followed by a characteristic smoke and vapor trail. With attack aircraft flying in pairs, one or the other of the pilots might see the missile coming and take or direct evasive action. High-energy flares were sometimes tossed out or mechanically ejected, frequently causing the missile's heat-seeker to lock on and track the flare and burst a harmless distance from the plane. Helicopter crews were also alert to watch for missiles, and in order to reduce infrared emissions, UH-1 helicopters were modified. The hot-spot on the fuselage below the main rotor was shielded and the exhaust diverted upwards by means of an elbow attached to the tailpipe. But regardless of these moderately effective measures, the result of this contest between air and ground was an environment that forced reconnaissance and attack aircraft above optimum operating altitudes and virtually eliminated the employment of large helicopter formations.

As the NVA was preparing for the assault on Trung Nghia in Kontum, as NVA regiments were making their futile but bloody attempts to continue the attack out of Cambodia into Hong Ngu, and as the ring was being drawn ever more tightly around Tong Le Chon, the diplomats were meeting again in Paris to assert once more the desire of all parties for a real cease-fire and a lasting peace in Vietnam. The communique that issued from the conference marked the beginning of a period which in Saigon was called "Cease-fire II."

Note on Sources

Statistical information on cease-fire violations was principally derived from DAO Saigon Quarterly Assessments, March and June, 1973. The RVNAF/JGS reports on this subject were the primary source used by DAO in publishing its Quarterly Assessments. The general situation prevailing in the country during this period was described with reference to DIA, DAO, Saigon, U.S. Embassy and J2/JGS reports, studies, and assessments. Particularly helpful in this regard were the contributions of Gen. Phan Dinh Niem, commander of the ARVN 22d Infantry Division, who filled in many blanks and corrected some erroneous data concerning the activities and deployment of his division and other forces in the highlands and in Binh Dinh.

Cease-Fire II in MR 1 and 2

June–August

The third Indochina war reached a milestone of sorts on 13 June 1973 when the four parties to the original agreement got together in Paris and issued a communique calling upon themselves to observe the provisions of the 28 January cease-fire. The communique was followed by a decline in combat activity that reached the lowest level since the brief hiatus following the LANDGRAB campaign, but this pause was also temporary. The United States then shored up its commitment to Vietnam by assigning one of its toughest, most experienced diplomats, Graham Martin, to be Ambassador in Saigon. Meanwhile, members of the Canadian delegation to the ICCS began making preparations to leave Vietnam, having announced on 29 May that they had come to supervise a cease-fire but instead were observing a war. The Canadians had had no illusions concerning the feasibility of their task. They gave it the best they could, enduring considerable hardships and dangers, and suffering casualties in the bargain.

Dr. Kissinger held a press conference in Paris in which he released the text of the joint communique to take effect at noon on 15 June. His questioners were justifiably skeptical, and Dr. Kissinger barely concealed his own doubts:

What was signed today is an amplification and a consolidation of the original agreement. It is not a new agreement. . . it is our hope that by what has been done today a significant step has been taken in the consolidation of peace in Vietnam and Indochina. . . the history of Indochina is replete with agreements and joint declarations. I am not naive enough to pretend to you that the mere fact of having again agreed to certain words in itself guarantees peace; but I will also say that since all parties have worked so seriously for the past three weeks, we have every hope that they will match this effort with performance and therefore there is fresh hope, and we hope a new spirit, in the implementation of the agreement, which in itself is maintained. [Department of State *Bulletin*, July 9, 1973, p. 46.]

The communique would have no lasting effect because it had no power of enforcement behind it. It contained no requirement that North Vietnam aban-

don its fundamental objective; neither did it promise sanctions against any party that chose to ignore its provisions. Perhaps, viewed from Saigon, it provided some reason to hope that South Vietnam could count on enough U.S. support to continue the defense of the country.

There was naturally high interest in Saigon about what effect the communique would have on the level of combat. For the reporting offices of the Defense Attache Office, notably the Operations Division, 15 June marked the beginning of a new reporting period: "Cease-fire II." Based on statistics collected from South Vietnam's JGS and reported as indicators of combat activity, some restraint was imposed by both sides during the first week of Cease-fire II. Table 4 illustrates general declines in activity, comparing the period from 10 June to noon on the 15th (only 5 1/2 days) with the period from noon on the 15th through the 21st.

Fifteen instances of increased activity, indicated by asterisks, occurred in the period following Cease-fire II. Little significance can be attached to any of these instances, except to note that Military Region 1 reported a sharp increase in "incoming artillery" and all regions except Military Region 3 reported an increase in "friendly killed-in-action." There was an abrupt decline in RVNAF offensive indicators in MR 3: "Artillery rounds fired" were 3,712, down from 38,745, and there were no "VNAF sorties flown," compared to 236 the preceding period. Cease-fire II appeared to have the least effect, on both sides, in Military Region 4. Changes were small in most categories.

Early Assessments

The military intelligence community in Vietnam collected considerable information about an enemy buildup but few signs that a major offensive was imminent. Instead, it was faced with contrary, or at least ambivalent, data emphasizing the so-called political struggle and claiming adherence to the cease-fire. At the end of July, the Intelligence Branch of DAO noted that construction on the NVA's new logistical corridor inside South Vietnam, Route 14, was continuing, that the pipeline was being extended, and that ammunition shipments into South Vietnam were at a high level. But these preparations notwithstanding, no new offensive was seen in the offing. The RVNAF J2 had independently reached similar conclusions in a study showing considerable understanding of the situation and of enemy capabilities and intentions.

About a month and a half before Cease-fire II, the President of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, discussed his personal estimate with the cabinet. The gist of his remarks, which reached the American Embassy, corresponded to the view held there

TABLE 4: COMBAT LEVEL INDICATORS, JUNE 1973

<u>Indicator</u>	<u>MR 1</u>		<u>MR 2</u>		<u>MR 3</u>		<u>MR 4</u>	
	10-15 Jun	15-21 Jun	10-15 Jun	15-21 Jun	10-15 Jun	15-21 Jun	10-15 Jun	15-21 Jun
Incidents	114	93	99	70	144	97	349	267
Major	16	22*	13	10	10	6	38	25
Minor	59	30	21	16	54	33	178	125
Major contacts	3	1	2	3	0	0	6	2
Minor contacts	36	40*	63	41	80	58	127	115
Incoming arty	1696	2210*	551	528	484	327	1800	1428
Rounds arty fired	12280	5580	14762	11144	38745	3712	22186	22038
VNAF sorties scheduled	132	68	305	232	428	285	76	94*
VNAF sorties flown	14	3	137	49	236	0	44	30
Friendly killed	19	38*	16	18*	41	4	52	70*
Friendly wounded	112	114*	123	123	105	46	275	270
Enemy killed	92	79	173	127	31	31	174	133
Enemy wounded	0	1*	2	1	0	2*	6	0
Civilians killed	8	15*	1	2*	6	2	17	15
Civilians wounded	9	11*	1	1	3	7*	50	12

*Increased activity.

that the Communists were not likely to attack in strength during 1973. Thieu said that the Communists would enjoy the best advantage if they would wait until near the end of President Nixon's term to launch their offensive. He believed they would not move sooner realizing that President Nixon would intervene in the defense of South Vietnam.

The irony of what President Thieu said would not become apparent for many months. He could not have known that two days later Nixon would "accept full responsibility" for the Watergate affair and dismiss his four closest political advisers. Neither could he have predicted that Nixon would leave office 15 months later. The Communists also were undoubtedly surprised by the political turmoil in Washington and would not be quite ready by the time of Nixon's departure in August 1974 to begin the final drive. In the summer of 1973, almost everyone on the scene—Communists, South Vietnamese, and Americans—could agree on three things: the Communists were not ready for a new offensive; they were incapable of resuming guerrilla warfare; and the nature and tempo of military activity in support of the political struggle would remain about the same for the balance of the year. In fact, some analysts were extending their predictions of relative quiescence well into 1974.

Communist resolutions and military directives circulating among troops in South Vietnam in the summer of 1973 reiterated and expanded the general guidance of COSVN Resolutions 2 and 3. As corroborated by the interrogation of ralliers, these documents seemed to direct a holding action in the South while the armed forces were reconstituted and strengthened. They admitted to a present inability to pursue successfully a large-scale offensive, but expressed confidence and pride in the preparations under way—the system of roads, pipelines, airfields, and refurbished main forces—that would offer them this option in the near future. Although their propaganda carried no hint, by late summer the Communists had abandoned the illusion that there could ever be a political settlement, or a tripartite council, or an election that would serve their purposes. The summer of 1973 found the Communist leadership as well as the common soldiers badly demoralized. Peace had not come as promised, the battlefields were still very dangerous, and the RVNAF were showing strength nearly everywhere. Although the South Vietnamese knew the U.S. Congress had voted that American bombing in Cambodia would stop on 15 August, they also heard President Nixon say that on the day the last U.S. bomb fell in Indochina he would "work with the Congress in order to take appropriate action if North Vietnam mounts an offensive which jeopardizes stability in Indochina and threatens to overturn the settlements reached after so much sacrifice by so many for so

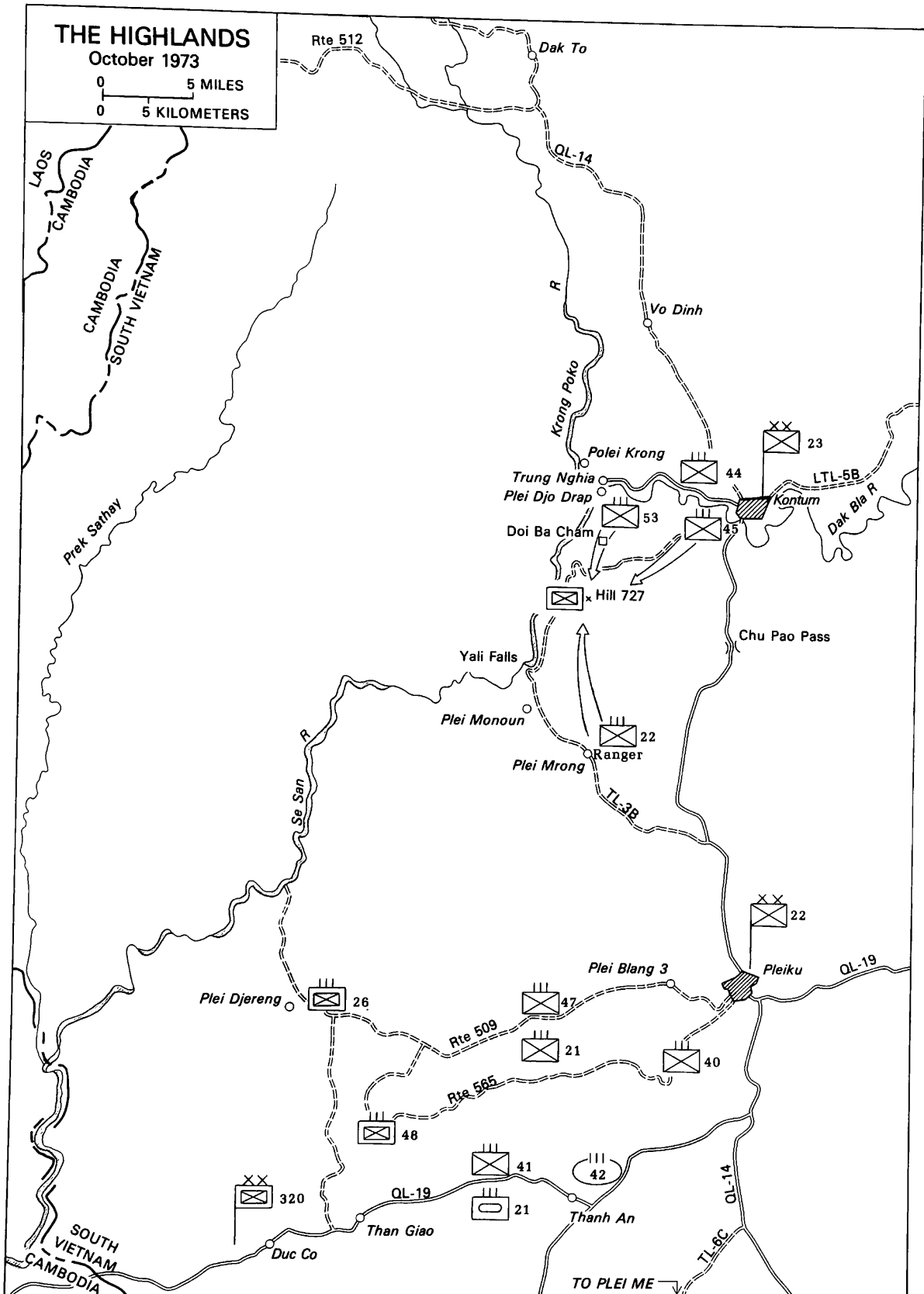
long." The South Vietnamese, however, could not know that Nixon's vice-president would be forced to resign in disgrace within two months, that Nixon had already lost all his ability to work with the Congress concerning Vietnam, and that he would be out of office himself within a year.

On 4 July 1973 the enemy's South Vietnam Liberation Army issued a directive for the conduct of the struggle in the second half of the year. Signed by Maj. Gen. Tran Do, the army's Deputy Political Officer, it was essentially an exhortation to bolster sagging morale among the cadre. The cadre was told that a great advantage had been won through the terms of the cease-fire but that efforts must be redoubled, particularly in proselyting, if final victory was to be grasped. Furthermore, all cadre would have to work toward modernization of the Liberation Army and correct such tendencies as "pacifism, rightism and passivism." Local military units would be strengthened and their combat efficiency improved. Another order, COSVN Directive 934, turned up in Long An Province in August. Dated the 7th, it recognized the "new opportunities" afforded by the joint communique of 13 June. The United States, according to COSVN, had been forced to abandon its previous policies with regard to Vietnam and would probably not intervene again militarily. Meanwhile, the Liberation Forces would consolidate and rebuild and encircle South Vietnamese controlled areas. These resolutions followed on the heels of To Huu's visit in May during which COSVN's propaganda and training cadre was roundly criticized for inefficiency in carrying out its ideological and educational responsibilities. Thus, following a temporary downturn in activity, a new phase of combat was about to begin.

Trung Nghia

When the ARVN 44th Regiment, 23d Division, was driven out of Trung Nghia by a tank-infantry assault on 8 June 1973 the South Vietnamese immediately tried to retake the position. Casualties mounted on both sides as successive attempts failed to dislodge the deeply entrenched enemy, who enjoyed the advantage of observation from the heights of Ngoc Bay Mountain. In early July, the 44th gained a few meters and dug in on the eastern edge of the village of Ngoc Bay but could move no farther, despite the employment of massive artillery preparations and air strikes. (Map 9)

Stalled in the attempt to take Trung Nghia by frontal assault, General Toan determined that an approach from the south against the positions at Plei Djo Drap, directly across the Dak Bla River from Trung Nghia, would strike the defenses in the flank and force a withdrawal. He therefore directed the



Map 9

23d Division, reinforced with rangers, to attack north from the base at Plei Mrong.

The southwest monsoon, in full force over the western highlands of Pleiku and Kontum Provinces in early August, allowed the NVA to maneuver in daylight since aerial observation was spotty and artillery and air strikes consequently much less effective. Plei Mrong and its camp, called Ly Thai Loi by the ARVN, was situated on Provincial Route 3B south of the Yali Falls of the Krong Bolah and the enemy concentration around Plei Monoun. The ARVN move north caused activity to pick up during the week of 4-10 August when the NVA 28th Reconnaissance-Sapper Battalion of the B3 Front launched seven separate attempts to take the camp, supported by 75-mm. and 130-mm. gunfire. ARVN Ranger units in the field north and south of the camp also came under attack. A few days later a battalion of the 95B Regiment, 10th NVA Division, hit the ARVN 22d Ranger Border Defense Battalion at Doi Ba Cham, just north of Plei Mrong, but was repelled, leaving 150 dead on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the ARVN 45th Regiment, 23d Division, advancing in the Plei Monoun area to the Krong Bolah River, encountered other elements of the 95B Regiment. Combat with the 95B continued throughout the month in the Plei Mrong sector, and its losses were substantial, probably as many as 200. But despite these losses, the 95B was successful in preventing the ARVN from closing on the Dak Bla River.

The NVA was nevertheless suffering from the bombardment at Trung Nghia. Damage to the NVA 24B Regiment was so severe that it was withdrawn to the Dak To area for recuperation and replaced by elements of the 66th and 28th Regiments, 10th Division. The 28th, recently strengthened by replacements from the North, took up the defense of Trung Nghia while the 66th held Plei Djo Drap. (At this time it became apparent that the 24B Regiment was attached to the 10th Division, while the 95B, the third regiment of the 10th, was taking its direction from B3 Front.) Meanwhile, South Vietnam's tired 44th Regiment was replaced in the attack by the 42d Regiment of the 22d Division, flown to Kontum in C130s from Binh Dinh Province. This fresh regiment, and a small but important change in tactics, made the difference. Rather than engage in large infantry assaults, the 42d methodically eliminated enemy bunkers, one by one, using platoon-sized assaults supported by 81-mm. mortars firing delayed-fuze rounds which blew away overhead cover and killed or exposed the occupants. Prisoners of war later attested to the effectiveness of this technique, particularly the use of delayed fuzes.

On 1 September 1973, the 42d Regiment began the final assault on Trung Nghia, advancing cautiously to find that except for a few isolated riflemen

the enemy had withdrawn. The 28th NVA Regiment, depleted by casualties and malaria, limped north along the Poko River. Some of its wounded, left behind and captured, revealed that forces defending Trung Nghia had suffered losses of 30 percent on the whole, and that in some units with considerable sickness casualty rates were as high as 60 percent. On the other hand, the 42d's casualties were light. Furthermore, the ARVN replacement system was working well and in mid-September the two divisions, the 22d and the 23d, were at about 90 and 85 percent strength, respectively.

While the 42d Regiment entered Trung Nghia, the 53d Regiment, 23d ARVN Division, advanced along the south bank of the Dak Bla River and occupied Plei Djo Drap, vacated by the withdrawing 66th NVA Regiment, which crossed the river to recuperate. Trung Nghia was cleared of all enemy by 7 September, and the 42d entered Polei Krong on the 16th. During the rest of the month mopping-up operations cleared enemy remnants from the slopes of Ngoc Bay Mountain, while skirmishing between the ARVN Rangers and elements of the NVA 95B continued around Plei Mrong. But as the success of the 42d Regiment transformed gloom and frustration into euphoria at South Vietnam's II Corps headquarters, a major blow fell on Plei Djereng.

Plei Djereng-Le Minh

One of the few impediments to the steady projection of the NVA's logistical corridor down the length of the western highlands of South Vietnam was an ARVN camp at Plei Djereng, called Le Minh, manned by the 80th Ranger Border Defense Battalion. The position, situated astride Route 613 and blocking free movement from Communist-controlled Plei Trap Valley into the NVA logistical base at Duc Co and east to Pleiku, was an obvious enemy objective. (Map 9)

There was ample warning of an impending attack. A master sergeant from an NVA reconnaissance company turned himself in to Thanh An District, Pleiku, on 16 September and said that the NVA 26th Regiment of the B3 Front would attack Plei Djereng before the end of September. Considerable reliance was attached to the master sergeant's report because his knowledge of the 26th Regiment's order of battle confirmed other information previously collected.

Armed with this intelligence, the battalion commander at Le Minh intensified his security operations around the camp. On 22 September, only one company was inside the camp perimeter together with several families belonging to the battalion; the other two were patrolling outside the wire, although they did not range far from the camp. About

noon the 26th NVA Regiment began an assault employing a heavy artillery bombardment including 122-mm. and 130-mm. guns, mortars, and rockets and accompanied by T-54 tanks. As the battle raged through the afternoon, radio contact with the camp was lost, and the battalion commander was mortally wounded. Rain and poor visibility prevented VNAF support. No reinforcement was attempted by the corps commander, although two teams of Loi Ho Rangers (long range reconnaissance patrols) were moved by helicopters into the battle area to reestablish communications and attempt to rally the defenders. In the face of overwhelming NVA strength, this mission had no chance of success. The Rangers reported seeing 6 T-54 tanks, while VNAF pilots after the attack counted 10 and destroyed 3. But this was two days later; rain and poor visibility prevented the VNAF from providing support during the attack. Of 293 men in the 80th Ranger Border Defense Battalion when the battle began, 200 were killed or captured in this short, violent action.

Until the attack on Le Minh, the corps commander, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, had enjoyed a deserved reputation as a forceful, if not brilliant, field commander. President Thieu, visiting Pleiku on 1 October along with Chief of the Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, to commemorate the 16th anniversary of II Corps, harshly rebuked General Toan for not reacting to the advance warning of the attack and taking steps to reinforce or at least provide adequate artillery support to the defenders. For General Toan, who some observers felt would be awarded his third star on the occasion of the President's visit, the reprimand was indeed a shattering experience. Although Toan would eventually become a lieutenant general and was to employ his forces with considerable skill during his remaining time in command, of far greater significance than the blow to his ego was the possibility that his lapse at Le Minh (as viewed by President Thieu), may have started a decline of confidence in his ability that culminated in his relief 11 months later.

In any event, Toan seemed to recover rapidly and immediately proposed a plan to retake Le Minh. His subsequent actions revealed, however, that he was less interested in Le Minh than in destroying the NVA 320th Division. President Thieu had directed him to use whatever means necessary to prevent the enemy from concentrating and seriously threatening South Vietnamese forces or territory in Military Region 2. General Toan, with some justification, considered the other NVA division in the highlands, the 10th, to be less than a major menace, having recently experienced heavy casualties in the fighting around Trung Nghia. He therefore decided to concentrate on the 320th, which he believed would be

capable of major offensive operations by early 1974, if not crippled in the meantime.

His plan, which he began implementing in mid-October, involved building and occupying strong points along Provincial Route 509 from Pleiku west to Le Minh as bait to entice the 320th into concentrating in the open terrain where Toan could destroy its battalions with air and artillery. He built another strong position where a road used by the NVA into Base Area 701 crossed Provincial Route 6C about 10 kilometers north of and within artillery-supporting range of Plei Me. The position was in relatively open, rolling brush land, and General Toan, whose background was armor, manned it with a task force consisting of a battalion of M-48 tanks, a reconnaissance squadron, a four-gun battery of 155-mm. howitzers, and a regional force battalion, hoping that the 320th would accept the challenge to its line of communication. Instead, however, the 320th kept the pressure on Thanh An District, along Highway 19, and against the ARVN outposts west of Pleiku along Provincial Route 509. Attacks by fire were frequent and heavy, but throughout the summer little ground changed hands and the 320th Division was never seriously hurt. Behind the screen of the 320th, the NVA 470th Logistical Group moved in from Cambodia and set up its headquarters in Duc Co.

By early October, General Toan directed that operations in Binh Dinh be turned over to the province chief and that only one regiment of the 22d Division, the 40th, remain in the coastal province. The fighting commander of the 22d, Brig. Gen. Phan Dinh Niem, who had been wounded more than a dozen times in his long career in battle, had moved his command post to Thanh An District, Pleiku. His 47th Regiment was west of Pleiku with the 21st Ranger Group advancing in the direction of Plei Djereng on Provincial Route 509. In mid-October the 40th was airlifted into Pleiku and assigned to operate west of Pleiku, generally along Provincial Route 565. The 41st Regiment, with the 21st Tank Regiment, was moving on Highway 19 toward Thanh Giao; the 42d Regiment, following its victory at Trung Nghia, was in reserve.

The 23d Division was still responsible for operations in Kontum Province and had its 44th Regiment, supported by territorials, securing the northwestern approaches to the city, while the 45th and 53d Regiments were closing in on Hill 727 west of Kontum City, the last major lodgment of the enemy east of the Krong Bolah River. The 22d Ranger Group at the same time was advancing on Hill 727 from Plei Mrong. Thus, while the victory at Trung Nghia had restored some relative stability to the sector northwest of Kontum and had reduced the threat to the ARVN artillery, logistical and air bases around the city, the situation in western Pleiku

Province was far from settled. Pleiku Airbase and artillery fire bases in the province had been rocketed, and the 320th Division was responding to General Toan's extension of outposts along Provincial Route 509 by moving out from its Plei Djereng base to attempt to force their contraction. To exploit this perceived opportunity to put the 320th out of action, General Toan had the entire 22d Division airlifted by VNAF C130's to Pleiku.

While elements of the 48th Regiment, 320th Division, harassed the ARVN advanced base at Plei Blong 3, near Pleiku, the 2d Bn of the ARVN 40th Regiment fought a fierce engagement with an enemy battalion, supported by five T-54 tanks, southwest of Plei Blong 3 on the afternoon of 23 October. Losses were heavy on both sides. Although other bloody skirmishes followed, none presented General Toan with the opportunities for even gradual attrition such as he enjoyed at Trung Nghia against the NVA 10th Division. In western Pleiku Province, the 320th had room for maneuver and was not committed to defend a small piece of terrain as the 10th was at Trung Nghia. The decision to give up the offensive and pull back to defensible positions in a shallow strip west of Pleiku was, however, forced upon General Toan by the turn of events in Quang Duc.

Quang Duc

Quang Duc, the mountain province where Vietnam bends westward and the Annamite Range begins to slope down to the terrace of the Dong Nai, was important commercially for its vast timber resources and militarily, for both sides, because of the lines of communication that passed through it. After the NVA had closed surface travel from Saigon to Phuoc Long by the direct route through Binh Duong, the only land access available to the South Vietnamese was via Ban Me Thuot and Quang Duc. As far as the NVA was concerned, Quang Duc was pivotal to the extension of its Route 14 out of Mondol Kiri Province, Cambodia, and Darlac Province, South Vietnam.

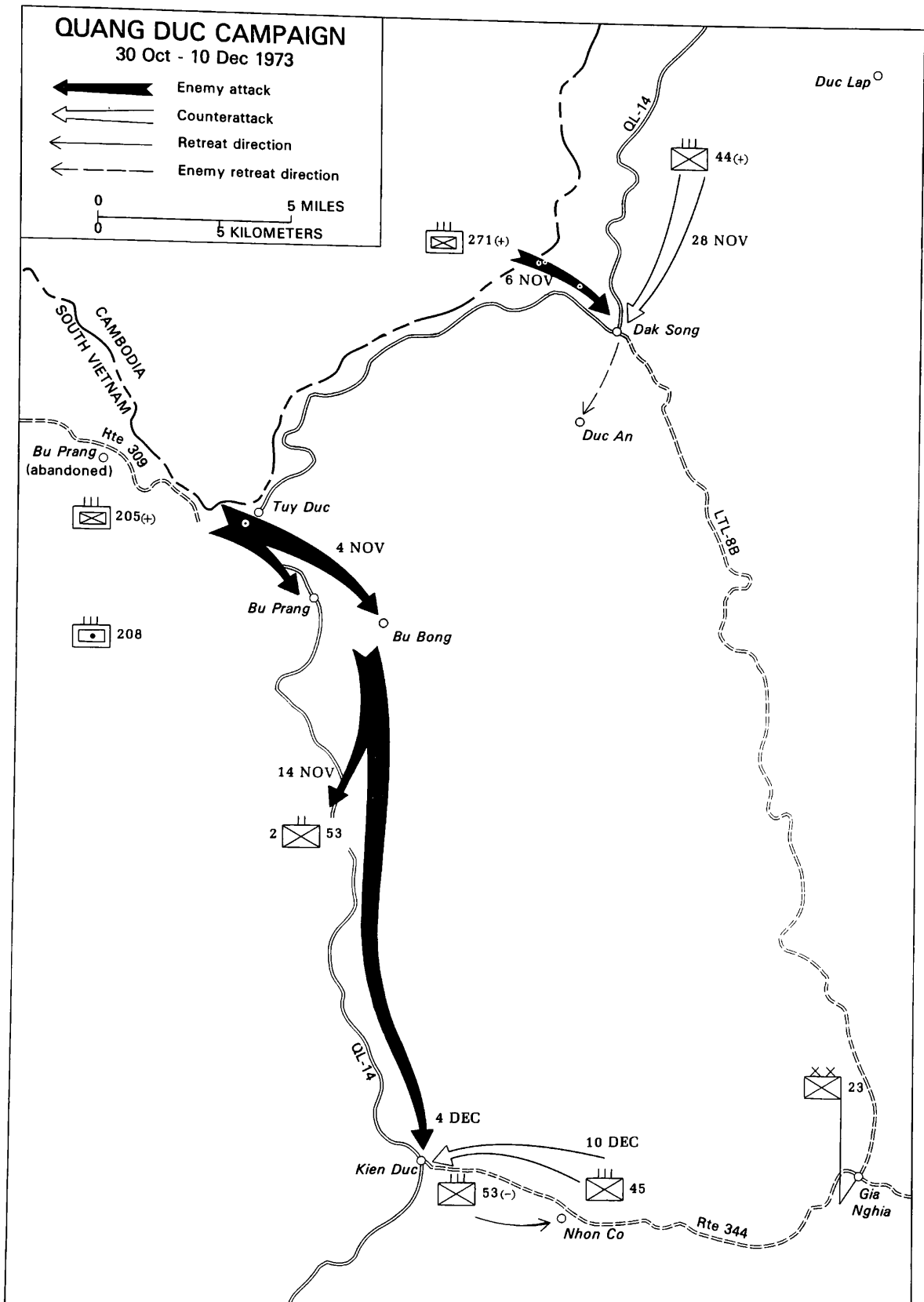
Because South Vietnamese forces controlled Highway 14 as far south and west from Ban Me Thuot as the Tuy Duc crossroads, the NVA's new Route 14 had to pass through Cambodia and reenter South Vietnam in that salient of Mondol Kiri Province that juts into Quang Duc near a place called Bu Prang. The site of an abandoned U.S. Army Special Forces camp, Bu Prang and its short runway perched atop a high, forested ridge astride National Highway 14 near Tuy Duc crossroads at the Cambodian border. Before reaching the Phuoc Long border of South Vietnam's Military Region 3, Highway 14 was joined at the little hill town of Kien Duc by Local Route 344, coming over from the

Quang Duc Province capital of Ghia Nghia. This road junction was vital because its control provided an alternate route from Ban Me Thuot—through Dak Song and Ghia Nghia on Provincial Route 8B. Important as well was the road junction at Dak Song, where Provincial Route 8B left Highway 14. (Map 10)

Until mid-May 1973 when the NVA's projection of its new line of communication reached Bu Prang and while the South Vietnam's access to Phuoc Long through Quang Duc remained unthreatened, neither side paid much attention to Quang Duc. ARVN engineers were working on local roads, primarily to improve access to the timber preserves in the northeast section of the province, and the only enemy activity of any note was mining to harass and delay this project. Only three regional force battalions were located in the province. They were supported by six 105-mm. howitzer platoons (12 guns), which had no occasion to fire since the cease-fire. Additionally, 27 popular force platoons were scattered about the province. These territorials were nearly all Montagnards, and the province population was 60 percent tribal.

Around the beginning of May, a regional force patrol, moving out from its lonely outpost near Bu Prang, made contact with an NVA reconnaissance party and killed four. The rest of May and June were quiet until enemy harassment of the RF positions around Bu Prang began in early July, evidently in response to the unusually aggressive patrolling ordered by Col. Nguyen Hau Thien, Quang Duc's province chief. Mortar attacks, accompanied by some light infantry probes, continued through July, as did RF forays into the "old" Bu Prang positions on the border west of the Tuy Duc crossroads. In the last week of August, Colonel Thien tried a reconnaissance in force with two RF battalions. Both met heavy resistance short of their objectives on the border and returned to camp. This inconclusive skirmishing took on an ominous note in early September when the first evidence appeared disclosing that COSVN had sent two battalions of its 271st Regiment from southwest of Tay Ninh City up to Quang Duc. The presence of an NVA main force regiment was a new and dangerous development in Quang Duc. Colonel Thien asked for reinforcement and was given an RF battalion from Darlac Province. He complained about the poor performance of the Darlac battalion, and General Toan agreed to replace it with another battalion from Khanh Hoa. This gave Colonel Thien a force of four RF battalions, two of his own Quang Duc battalions and two from Khanh Hoa. He located the entire force at the mutually supporting bases of Bu Prang and Bu Bong, each with a platoon of 105-mm. howitzers.

The NVA 271st Independent Regiment had been roughly handled by the ARVN and VNAF in the



Map 10

early months of 1973 in marsh and ricelands along the Vam Co Dong River and the Cambodian border in Hau Nghia Province and southern Tay Ninh. COSVN had pulled it back to Cambodia in April for reorganization and recuperation. Afterwards the regimental headquarters and two of its battalions, the 8th and 9th, were trucked to Bu Dop in northern Phuoc Long Province, while the other, the 7th, was sent to operate under Long An Province authority. (When the 271st Regiment was committed to battle in Quang Duc, it had three battalions; the third was evidently an infantry battalion from the Tay Ninh-Svay Rieng Military Region (C-50), probably attached to the 271st during the reorganization phase in April.) Leaving Bu Dop, the 271st marched through Bu Gia Map and arrived northwest of Bu Prang in late August, ready to assist in the defense of the new line of communication and to deny the ARVN use of Highway 14 in the border region. Successive attempts by the Quang Duc territorials failed to gain any ground west of the Tuy Duc crossroads, as the rest of Quang Duc Province remained relatively quiet.

Meanwhile, NVA preparations for the Quang Duc campaign continued. A task force headquarters, designated Unit 95, was established at Bu Dop in Phuoc Long Province, and the NVA 205th Independent Regiment was assembled there for movement to Quang Duc. The 205th had been operating since the cease-fire in South Vietnam's Military Region 3, and before moving to Bu Dop it had been in northern Binh Duong Province east of the Michelin plantation. Three more maneuver elements joined the task force at Bu Dop before its composition was complete: the 429th Sapper Regiment, the 46th Reconnaissance Battalion, and a tank battalion (probably the 20th) from the COSVN 26th Armor Group. Artillery support was provided by the 208th Artillery Regiment, 69th Group, COSVN, which had been operating in Binh Long. Antiaircraft artillery, including 23-mm. automatic cannons, joined the force as well as a detachment equipped with SA-7 antiaircraft missiles.

Unit 95 had reached division strength, but this was not yet realized at South Vietnam's II Corps headquarters. Given the meager defenses in Quang Duc, it was surprising that the NVA leadership committed a force of such overwhelming size. The fact that it did so appeared to reflect the inadequacy of NVA tactical intelligence, which had been demonstrated on several occasions, and a respect for RVNAF capabilities. Such a commitment also underscored the importance attached to the principal objective—construction and protection of the line of communication. Much later, after the major engagements were over and the Communist leadership considered the threat to its line of communication significantly diminished, South Vietnamese intelli-

gence officers discovered that continued offensive operations by the enemy's Quang Duc task force were designed to draw RVNAF into the province and keep them occupied, thereby reducing the forces available for employment against the B3 Front. Had the forces been available, General Toan might have accommodated the enemy in this regard. They were not, however, and Quang Duc security had to revert to territorials and Rangers.

By the end of September 1973, reconnaissance and survey parties from the 208th Artillery Regiment had selected firing positions and observation posts near the Tuy Duc crossroads at Bu Prang, Bu Bong, and Kien Duc. Firing batteries moved into Quang Duc by the end of October with their 85- and 122-mm. field guns and 120-mm. mortars. To insure consistency in survey and firing, the only maps authorized for use in the 208th Artillery were the 1:50,000 series printed in Hanoi.

The NVA 205th Infantry Regiment, with the 429th Sapper Regiment attached, arrived in assembly areas near Bu Prang in mid-October, and on 23 October the 208th Artillery began a five-day rehearsal preparatory to the attack. Meanwhile, the NVA 271st Regiment with the 46th Reconnaissance Battalion moved toward Dak Song.

The 208th Artillery began softening up Bu Prang and Bu Bong on 30 October. Each day 122-mm. rockets and mortar and artillery shells fell on the two camps. The camp commander kept his four RF battalions outside the perimeter, patrolling near the Tuy Duc crossroads, and the local defense of the two positions was the responsibility of an RF company, an engineer platoon, and the two platoons of artillery. The attack began just before dawn on 4 November. The NVA 205th Regiment, with the 429th Sappers and two companies of tanks and armored personnel carriers, overran the badly outnumbered and outgunned defenders. They destroyed two ARVN howitzers, towed the other two away, and outside the camps dispersed the four RF battalions. During the assault on Bu Bong, the commander of the NVA 205th was seriously wounded and had to be evacuated.

General Toan responded rapidly to the situation in Quang Duc Province, although he had available only sketchy information concerning the enemy's strength and dispositions. He immediately ordered the ARVN 23d Division to pull the 53d Infantry out of western Kontum and get it started toward Ban Me Thuot. As this order was being executed, a blow fell on Dak Song, the camp controlling access to Route 8B, the only land access to Quang Duc from Ban Me Thuot. The defenses at Dak Song crumbled under assault of the NVA 271st Regiment; Gia Nghia, the province capital, was cut off. But the 53d ARVN Infantry was on the way; by 8 November, its 1st Battalion was approaching Dak Song. The 2d

Battalion, 53d ARVN Infantry, was flown into Nhon Co airfield west of Gia Nghia and began moving north on Highway 14 toward Bu Prang and Bu Bong.

Meanwhile, the NVA 205th Regiment began executing the next phase of its orders: it turned over the defense of the newly won positions at Bu Prang and Bu Bong to another element of the task force and began deploying south generally along Highway 14 from Bu Prang toward the Doan Van bridge. South of Bu Prang it had its first taste of battle with ARVN regulars from the 23d Division. In the early morning of 14 November, the 3d Battalion, NVA 205th Regiment, with a platoon of tanks, smashed into the defensive perimeter of the 2d Battalion, 53d Infantry. The 2d Battalion held, knocked out 2 tanks, and captured 9 crew-served weapons and 27 automatic rifles. The enemy left 100 dead on the field. A second attack was repulsed the next day with moderate losses to the enemy. The 3d Battalion, NVA 205th Regiment, had to be withdrawn; only 100 effective soldiers remained in the ranks.

Despite these serious losses, the 205th continued its advance south toward Kien Duc. With only the 2d and 3d Battalions available (the 1st was still engaged near Dak Song), the ARVN 53d Infantry prepared to defend the Kien Duc road junction. The NVA 205th began probing these defenses on 21 November. On the 23d Communist leaflets were found around Kien Duc, signed by the Commander in Chief, National Liberation Front Forces, advising RVNAF officers and men to stop trying to retake Bu Prang, Bu Bong, and Dak Song and threatening to attack Gia Nghia with tanks if the South Vietnamese persisted. (The NVA, with steadily diminishing justification, still believed strongly in the psychological impact of tanks against the ARVN.)

While skirmishing took place around Bu Prang, Dak Song, and Kien Duc, General Toan continued to send forces to Quang Duc. The 21st Ranger Group and the 44th and 45th Infantry Regiments of the 23d Division began their deployments. In the highlands, the 22d ARVN Division pulled back from western Pleiku in order to assume the defense of Kontum, vacated by the departing 23d Division. On 28 November, the 44th Infantry of the ARVN 23d Division, with a battalion of Rangers, attacked into Dak Song, forcing the withdrawal of the reinforced 271st NVA Regiment, which pulled back toward Duc An, leaving blocking elements on Route 8B.

Its reconnaissance and preparation completed, the 205th NVA Regiment, reinforced with the 429th Sappers and supported by tanks and the 208th Artillery Regiment, attacked the Kien Duc road junction on 4 December, wounding the regimental commander and forcing the elements of the 53d Infantry

to withdraw six kilometers east to Nhon Co airfield. Casualties were moderately heavy on both sides; the 53d lost 40 killed, 40 wounded, and 80 missing. The 205th quickly began to replace some of its losses; about 100 fresh troops, lately arrived from North Vietnam, joined the regiment at Kien Duc on 8 December.

Meanwhile, General Toan flew to Saigon to report on the Quang Duc situation to President Thieu and General Vien. The President told him not to be concerned about lost outposts, but to direct his efforts to the destruction of the NVA forces in Quang Duc. These instructions no doubt pleased General Toan. That same day he ordered the 23d Division commander to put his command post in Gia Nghia and to fly his 45th Regiment to Nhon Co. Within hours six C-130's landed elements of the 23d Division at Nhon Co, although the airfield there was under intermittent artillery and rocket attack. That night and the next day, the 21st ARVN Rangers removed the last road blocks on Route 8B south of Dak Song. Casualties were heavy, but the first convoy since September soon rolled into Gia Nghia from Ban Me Thuot.

Although the commander of the 53d Infantry had recovered from his wound and asked for the mission of retaking Kien Duc, Colonel Tuong, commanding the division, assigned the task to the 45th. This regiment was fresh, while the 53d's battalions had been in nearly constant action for a month. Following an intense and effective artillery and air preparation, the 23d Division Reconnaissance Company and the 3d Battalion, 45th Infantry, led the attack into the trenches, bunkers, and rubble at the Kien Duc road junction. The NVA 205th was forced to retire with heavy losses; its 1st Battalion lost 40 percent of its strength at Kien Duc, and its sapper company was so decimated that it was disbanded after the battle. A rallier later reported that the 205th lost more than 200 killed and 400 wounded in its Quang Duc campaign.

The 23d ARVN Division, using its 44th Regiment, continued effective operations during December and early January, primarily in the Bu Prang - Bu Bong area, against the NVA 271st Regiment's forces remaining there. With the route again secured from Ban Me Thuot through Gia Nghia to Phuoc Long, General Toan's responsibilities in the highlands and Binh Dinh demanded that the 23d leave Quang Duc Province to deal with more pressing threats.

In Quang Duc the NVA exploited the benefits of prolonged and detailed preparation and capitalized on its ability to concentrate overwhelming force against lightly defended objectives. Although these factors combined to produce success in the initial battles, the RVNAF, employing with particular skill its newly developed capability of rapid air deploy-

ment, its professional application of close air support and artillery fire, and its experienced regular infantry, won the campaign. The NVA was denied the use of Highway 14 through Quang Duc, its line of communications in the border region around the Tuy Duc crossroads remained subject to harassment and interdiction, and the RVNAF were able to regain and keep control of the logistical route to Phuoc Long. Quang Duc proved once again that the South Vietnamese, provided sufficient ammunition, fuel, and maintenance support, could overcome the traditional advantages enjoyed by the attacker.

Military Region 1

For the NVA, the last half of 1973 was a period for rebuilding and expansion. The intense fighting in the B-3 Front area, from Kontum to Quang Duc, was the direct result of the determination of the NVA to expand its logistical system—particularly the Route 14 complex—and prevent RVNAF encroachment into base areas and lines of communication. The level of combat in South Vietnam's Military Region 1 was comparatively low, simply because the NVA's northern Quang Tri and western highland bases and logistical routes were neither seriously threatened nor interfered with. The North Vietnamese continued construction and stockpiling activities in full view of RVNAF positions and made little effort to camouflage. They did attempt to prevent aerial observation and photography, and the density of their antiaircraft defenses denied manned flight over sensitive areas such as Khe Sanh and Cam Lo. Since the enemy required no additional terrain or routes for his logistical activities, there were only minor adjustments in the line of contact.

As Cease-fire II came to MR 1, General Truong, commanding I Corps, made some adjustments in defensive sectors assigned to his divisions north of the Hai Van Pass. The Marine Division retained responsibility for the northern approaches in Quang Tri Province and was given operational control of the 51st Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, which replaced the Airborne Division west of Highway 1. The Airborne Division was assigned the defense of the Co Bi-An Lo Bridge sector, while the 1st Infantry Division was responsible for the western and southern defenses of Hue as far south as Phu Loc District and the Hai Van Pass. South of the Hai Van Pass, the 3d Infantry Division held Quang Nam Province and the northern district of Quang Tin Province, which included the Que Son Valley. The 2d Infantry Division was spread from the valley southward to cover the rest of the region to the boundary of Binh Dinh Province.

The Marine Division's sector was the most stable and least active in the region, if not in the entire

country. Opposing riflemen exchanged invectives rather than bullets. The Marine Division commander, Brig. Gen. Bui The Lan, reported in early July that no rifle or artillery fire had been directed against his troops since March. He said that he would respond in kind to any attack against his positions and that one of his targets would be Dong Ha city itself, which was within range of his artillery. The Communists undoubtedly understood the risks associated with any significantly heightened activity in the Quang Tri sector. They were rebuilding Dong Ha, and its small port was rapidly becoming a major storage and transshipment point for military supplies. VC activity in the marine rear was all but wiped out, although fragments of the infrastructure probably still functioned clandestinely among the 27,000 refugees settled in Hai Lang District behind the front. Adding to the strength of the division and its attached 51st Infantry were six RF battalions and 12 PF companies, all from Quang Tri Province. The PF companies and some of the RF companies were integrated with marine companies occupying the same positions. General Lan was quite pleased, saying that the PF companies were the equal of the RF.

He attached two of the RF battalions to marine brigades in the line where they were assigned sectors to defend, while two other battalions, seriously understrength after malaria-ridden tours in the western mountains, were shifted to coastal areas of operations east of Quang Tri City. General Lan also had some armor under his control—the 18th Cavalry Squadron with a troop of M-41 tanks and two troops of armored personnel carriers and a reinforced company of M-48 tanks. Later in the year he was to gain control of a Ranger group, but he had to return the 51st Regiment to the 1st Division west of Hue. The stability of the main front enabled General Lan to keep three battalions in reserve and to rotate battalions to Saigon for two-week periods of rest and family visits. In spite of extended tours in positions face to face with the enemy, morale in the Marine Division was the best in the armed forces.

Meanwhile, the NVA, also taking advantage of the cease-fire in Quang Tri, in December withdrew its 320B Division to Thanh Hoa Province in North Vietnam. Following the 308th and 312th Divisions, the 320B became the third NVA infantry division to deploy home from the Quang Tri front since the 1972 offensive.

The most sensitive part of the Hue defenses was the sector guarding the critical An Lo Bridge. Less than 15 kilometers from the Imperial City, the An Lo Bridge carried Highway 1 across the Song Bo River at the mouth of the Song Bo Valley. Not only was this sector the northwestern gateway to Hue, but its control by the enemy would isolate the Marine Division. The Airborne Division was given

the task of its defense, made all the more difficult by Typhoon Opal that hit the northern coast in October. Flooding in the Song Bo Valley forced the Airborne to evacuate several defensive positions in the Co Bi area, and the Communists were able to occupy some of them before the paratroopers could return. Further complicating maneuver and logistics, the An Lo Bridge was washed out, and all traffic had to use a one-way Bailey bridge installed by I Corps Engineers.

Until the typhoon struck, the Airborne Division was making fair progress strengthening the west bank defenses of the Song Bo. Attached to the division were two RF battalions, employed as regular infantry, a tank company, and an armored personnel carrier troop, and the division commander, Brig. Gen. Le Quang Luong, was confident of their ability to accomplish their mission. The Airborne Division had been rushed to Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces in May 1972 to turn back the NVA advance, and it was proud of its record there. But its losses had been heavy; from its deployment to Military Region 1 until January 1974, nearly 2,900 airborne officers and soldiers had been killed in action, about 12,000 had been wounded, and 300 were missing in action. For a unit whose organization called for only 13,500, these losses meant that most of its finest leaders and fighters had perished or were out of action, and the ranks were filled with unseasoned replacements. By December 1973, the traditional esprit and its accompanying high morale were significantly weakened under the impact of poverty suffered by soldiers and their families. The quality of replacements declined, and their numbers were not sufficient to compensate for battle losses and desertions. Nevertheless, General Luong, with his division committed on a relatively narrow front, was able to hold a reserve of two battalions and release a regiment for corps reserve.

Although the Airborne Division defenses were dangerously shallow south of the An Lo Bridge, the deeper positions held by the ARVN 1st Division to the southeast were under greater enemy pressure. A small tributary of the Song Bo twisted through the hills and joined the river west of Hue; it was along this stream, the Ngoc Ke Trai, that the forward positions of the ARVN 3d Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, were sited. In the first heavy action in the sector following Cease-fire II, two 3d Infantry positions west of the confluence fell to Communist attack in late July. The pressure continued, and the 3d Infantry gave up four more outposts along the Song Bo in late August. Another series of positions along the Ngoc Ke Trai fell in November as signs of deteriorating morale and weak leadership began to appear in the formerly highly respected 1st Division. Casualties resulting from the enemy assaults were light, and the rapid collapse of the defenses

could only be attributed to faltering will and uninspired leadership. At this time Lt. Gen. Lam Quang Thi, I Corps Deputy Commanding General and commander north of the Hai Van Pass, detached a battalion from the 51st Infantry and returned it to the 1st Division to reinforce the Song Bo defenses. The 1st Division Commander, Brig. Gen. Le Van Than, further reinforced the 3d Regiment with a battalion of the 1st Infantry Regiment. The line stabilized toward the end of the year, but not until after General Truong had accomplished the removal of General Than and replaced him with Col. Nguyen Van Diem. Colonel Diem took command of the division on 31 October but could make no noticeable headway in solving the division's tactical and morale problems. These were too much the results of conditions beyond the control of the commander: an extended front under continuous enemy pressure, the debilitating effects of cold, wet, typhoonal weather; inadequate supply to the forward infantry outposts; and the worsening economic straits in which the men found themselves.

If the 3d Infantry's control of the situation in the Song Bo-Ngoc Ke Trai sector was unsettled and worrisome to the 1st Division commander, the 54th Infantry Regiment's hold on the southern approaches to Hue inspired little confidence either. The 54th held Mo Tao Mountain and other key positions in the Song Ta Trach sector. The Ta Trach River, which was the main tributary of the Song Huong—the famous Perfume River that flows through the heart of Hue beneath the walls of the ancient Citadel—formed a natural corridor into the city. Although the forward positions were in contested terrain, the NVA maintained only light pressure throughout the last part of 1973.

The 54th's sector of responsibility was wide; it extended south to Phu Loc District and the northern end of the Hai Van Pass. After winding north through the Pass, Highway 1 in Phu Loc paralleled the railroad along the beach, over numerous culverts and bridges. At Phu Loc a great massif, whose highest peak was Bach Ma at 1448 meters, tumbled down to end abruptly at the bay. Bach Ma was an ideal site for severing Thua Thien and Quang Tri Province from the rest of the country. Neither side occupied it at cease-fire, but the ARVN soon after established an outpost at the summit. The NVA followed suit, and by August 1973 two ARVN RF companies faced a small enemy force less than 100 meters away.

During clear weather, Bach Ma provided good observation of Highway 1 at Phu Loc, but as the rainy season arrived, clouds rested on the summit not only obscuring vision but making resupply of the forces on top virtually impossible by helicopter. Although an informal understanding had been reached with the North Vietnamese—they would

stop firing at VNAF helicopters from their positions on the mountain if the VNAF fighter-bombers would stop attacking their positions—the weather closed in by late August, and all resupply had to be carried up the steep mountain trail on foot. It was no surprise, therefore, when the RF on Bach Ma abandoned their positions in the face of a relatively light enemy attack on 12 October. The event was viewed mostly as a psychological setback at I Corps headquarters, and no plans to retake the positions were seriously considered, since Bach Ma's importance as an observation post would be nil until the dry season returned to Thua Thien. Nevertheless, its loss represented another small chink in South Vietnam's armor, one that would go unrepaired until the end.

Given the overwhelming NVA capability for rapid reinforcement from the north, the thin line of shallow positions held by the overextended RVNAF, and the extreme vulnerability of the sector to isolation from the south, it was not surprising that an attitude of gloom pervaded General Thi's headquarters in the months following Cease-fire II. Nor was it surprising that General Thi clung to the belief—or perhaps a hope expressed as a belief—that U.S. B-52's would be decisive in saving Quang Tri and Thua Thien in the event of an NVA offensive. After all, massive U.S. air and naval power was required to turn back the NVA's assault in 1972. And that time the enemy started behind his own goal line; this time he was already on the ARVN 30. Although having scant confidence that U.S. bombing would be resumed, DAO and USSAG planners cooperated with I Corps in keeping target folders current, and direct liaison between I Corps and USSAG was established for this purpose. General Thi had observed that since the NVA had placed thousands of tons of supplies and equipment in open, visible storage throughout northern Quang Tri and Western Thua Thien, the B-52s could wipe them out in 10 days. He added, significantly, that his three divisions could successfully defend the two northern provinces against a determined enemy attack, but only with U.S. air support. This assessment was shared by the chiefs of intelligence and operations branches, DAO.

Cease-fire II began in southern Quang Nam Province on an ominous note scarcely noticed at DAO, or for that matter at South Vietnam's JGS. The ARVN 78th Ranger Battalion received a number of concentrated bombardments on its positions guarding the Thu Bon Valley approach to the flatlands south of Da Nang. One of its companies was forced to abandon its position and rejoin the battalion, which received prompt orders from I Corps to hold its position. Although the attacks subsided, they were an unperceived precursor to violent assaults in 1974. But at the time, the late summer and fall of

1973, the NVA's 711th Division was the only sizeable main force element facing the ARVN 3d Division in Quang Nam and northern Quang Tin, and the 3d, with the help of Rangers and territorials, could deal with this threat adequately.

Meanwhile, as the rice harvest was coming in during September and October, NVA-supported local Communists became active in the hamlets along the coast and in the larger valleys, and security deteriorated in the wake of bridge-minings and assassinations. Still, by the first anniversary of the cease-fire, General Nguyen Duy Hinh, who was proving to be one of the most effective division commanders in the RVNAF, was so much in control of the situation that he could keep an entire regiment, the 2d Infantry, in reserve, and each of the committed regiments, the 56th in southern Dai Loc and northern Duc Duc Districts of Quang Nam, and the 57th in the Que Son Valley, could hold a battalion in reserve. The division's fighting and headquarters positions were dug deeply into hillsides with connecting tunnels, and General Hinh was justified in his confidence that his division could protect Da Nang and the lowlands against the NVA 711th. Five of South Vietnam's district seats of Quang Nam, however, were within range of NVA 130-mm. guns, and their security was questionable. Of these, Thuong Duc and Duc Duc were the most vulnerable.

While the ARVN 3d Division concentrated south and west of Da Nang, the ARVN 2d Division had the formidable task of securing the coastal piedmont and plains from the Binh Dinh boundary north to Tam Ky in Quang Tin Province, a distance of 135 kilometers. Fresh from its victory at Sa Huynh, the 2d Division was to support the territorials in clearing the lowlands west of Highway 1 of the remnants of VC units. By October, the division could claim substantial success in this mission, and the emphasis shifted to continuing the pressure on local VC units until they withdrew into the foothills. The division's battalions, reinforced with Rangers and territorials, pushed into the piedmont to block the enemy's supply lines to the coast, find and destroy supply bases, deny access to the rice harvest, protect refugee villages, and secure Highway 1 against enemy attack. Added to these generalized missions was one very specific requirement, imposed not only by orders from I Corps but compelled by the honor of the division: defend Sa Huynh. The 4th Infantry Regiment was assigned this mission, keeping two battalions entrenched in the hills overlooking the small fishing village. The 4th, with one RF battalion attached and another under the command of the district chief, was responsible for security in Duc Pho District of Quang Ngai, but its control extended scarcely 5,000 meters west of Highway 1.

The 5th Infantry Regiment, 2d ARVN Division, had missions parallel to the 4th, but operated in the central coastal district of Mo Duc. The 5th was reinforced by two RF battalions, but its success in maneuvering west of Highway 1 was also limited, although security along the highway was reasonably well maintained. North of Quang Ngai City, in Son Tinh District, the 11th Ranger Group had the responsibility, but it was probably among the least effective units of this kind. With battalions that could muster only 225 to 300 men for operations, its performance was desultory at best. The group's 68th Battalion typified the general lack of combat efficiency characteristic of the other two battalions, and for that matter, most of the 12 RF battalions in Quang Ngai. The 68th was driven from its dug-in positions on Hill 252—in the important Cong Hoa Valley approach to Quang Ngai City—in October by an inferior VC unit. After stalling in attempts to retake the hill, it was sent—somewhat as punishment for failure—to an active area south of Chu Lai. There, on the night of 17 December, the 95th VC Sapper Company of Binh Son District infiltrated the sleeping battalion command post, caused over 50 casualties including the battalion commander and his deputy, and carried away an 81-mm. mortar, eight PRC-25 radios, 15 M-16 rifles, five .45-caliber pistols, and five binoculars.

The 6th Infantry Regiment of the 2d Division was responsible for the sector from Chu Lai to the division boundary north of Tam Ky and like the other two regiments, engaged in numerous contacts with local VC through the fall and winter of 1973. There were 6 major bridges and at least 25 shorter spans along the stretch of Highway 1 in the 2d Division sector. All had to be protected, and the mission was nearly always assigned to territorials. Enemy water-sappers—underwater demolition teams—got to the Ba Bau Bridge south of Tam Ky the day after Christmas and dropped it in the river. On Christmas, they blew up the Tra Can Bridge in Duc Pho District, right under the noses of an RF Company. Maj. Gen. Tran Van Nhut, the 2d Division Commander, was so incensed at this debacle—the RF Company commander had been warned that a VC unit was seen reconnoitering for the attack—that he slapped the captain in jail. According to General Nhut at the time, at least a part of the problem of territorial ineffectiveness in Quang Ngai Province was traceable to the fact that a very high percentage of the RF, PF, and Peoples' Self-Defense Force troops had relatives in the Communist ranks; family loyalties often took precedence over military orders and duties.

The night after Christmas, VC units entered two resettlement villages across the river from Quang Ngai City, killed a village chief and nine others, and

destroyed at least six houses. This attack differed from the routine sapper assaults on RVNAF installations and lines of communication in that it was part of a country-wide Communist campaign to destroy South Vietnam's refugee settlement program, which against formidable obstacles was achieving some success. But the enemy attacks in Quang Ngai against these already tragic figures were particularly brutal.

The campaign against the refugees started in May. The first attack in Quang Ngai Province was described as minor in the sense that there were no reported casualties. The VC had entered a hamlet in Son Tinh District and burned the tents the people were living in while they were working on permanent houses. The Social Welfare Service of Quang Ngai promptly replaced the tents only to have them burned again a few days later. The frequency and intensity of attacks increased in July as the VC moved in with mortars and civilian casualties began to mount. The constant mortaring of two sites in Mo Duc led to their abandonment. Duc Pho resettlement sites not only suffered mortar attacks, but VC sappers infiltrated and destroyed houses with demolitions, some with the occupants still inside. In other hamlets the VC entered at night and sowed footpaths with antipersonnel mines.

The attack on An Tinh Hamlet in Son Tinh District on 6 September was a classic in execution. VC sappers entered at 0300, and after they were inside the fence another VC unit began mortaring the nearby outpost, effectively confining the defenders to their little fortress. As the mortar fire began, the sappers moved methodically through the hamlet, throwing incendiary grenades into the dry, thatch houses and firing B-40 rockets. Because the people had taken cover in their bunkers, only five were seriously wounded, but all 322 houses burned to the ground in a spectacular blaze fed by high winds. The tragedy was visible for miles. But the people of An Tinh were a stubborn lot, and by the end of October they had rebuilt once more.

As the cease-fire anniversary came and went in southern Military Region 1, the situation resembled more than anything else the conditions in the Mekong Delta: ARVN regulars had control of the major population centers and the important lines of communication; the NVA was more or less on the ropes but recovering, rebuilding, and receiving replacements; and South Vietnamese territorials were taking the brunt of the Communist attacks—attacks that eroded morale, exacerbated already strained economic conditions, and contributed to a slow but perceptible decline in the population considered under government influence or control.

Note on Sources

The statistics relating to cease-fire violations before and after the joint communique were derived from the DAO Saigon Quarterly Report, June 1973. The situation prevailing at the time was described with reference to the DAO Saigon Monthly Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis and the RVNAF J2/JGS Study: "Enemy Situation in RVN 45 Days after the 13 June Joint Communique."

Captured enemy documents and interrogation reports provided by J2/JGS were used in describing enemy plans and activity. Intelligence information

reports of DAO, Saigon and offices of the U.S. Embassy, Saigon, were also consulted.

Much of the information concerning Quang Duc came from the author's own notes and recollections of his visit there immediately after the ARVN recaptured Kien Duc.

General Niem was again very helpful in providing information and comments concerning combat actions in Military Region 2. Similarly, Generals Truong and Hinh, commanders respectively of I Corps and the 3d ARVN Division, assisted greatly in assuring accuracy in the description of activity in Military Region 1.