

The Laos Campaign of 1971

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Thesis: The lack of a fully integrated US and Vietnam military campaign caused failure of the Laos Campaign of 1971.

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In 1966, General Cao Van Vien, a leading strategist of the Vietnamese Army was the leading advocate to sever ties with the communist infrastructure and guerrillas of North Vietnam. He proposed to invade North Vietnam during a testimony before members of the National Leadership Committee. General Vien stated this operation would not be successful unless South Vietnam had the support and participation of the United States and other Free World Military Assistance Forces. General Vien also believed his proposed idea to invade North Vietnam would eventually serve as "a leverage for bargaining in truce negotiations" (Duy Hinh) if the invasion and occupation were successful.

On 8 December 1970, General Creighton Abrams (COMUSMACV) called a special meeting as a countermeasure after intelligence informed him of a build-up of North Vietnam troops in Laos. General Abrams only called six of his officers to attend the top secret meeting. After the initial meeting and some further planning, General Abrams on 7 January 1971 sent word to Lieutenant General Sutherland with a directive instructing him to begin planning a detailed attack against Base Areas 604 and 611 in Laos. The letter stated the operation should commence in February ('71), just after "the Tet Lunar New Year Holiday" (Nolan 30). The reason for attacking in February was because during the peak of the dry season, (February & March) the U.S. could better estimate the amount of supplies that would be traveling down the main Trail, Route 9. The operation took on the name Lam Son 719. Lam Son is the birthplace of a famous Vietnamese patriot who defeated an invading Chinese Army back in 1427 A.D. The numerical designation for this conflict came from combining the year 1971 with the main highway that was used, Route 9.

After receiving his orders from General Abrams, LTG Sutherland contacted his counterpart, General Vien, and suggested an operation into Laos. With his unrealized concept still in his mind, General Vien gladly agreed. General Vien reported his discussion to President Nguyen Van Thieu because "he knew this cross-border operation was going to have international repercussions" (Duy Hinh). General Vien never discussed his own concept with General Abrams or LTG Sutherland because he felt he should go along with the US concept in order to obtain the necessary support needed to accomplish his mission.

A missing element from Lam Son 719 was the absence of U.S. ground combat troops and U.S. military advisers on the ground with their South Vietnamese counter-parts. They were not authorized to go into lower Laos because of a major obstacle imposed by Congress: The Cooper-Church amendment, which was the result from antiwar hysteria following Cambodia. United States ground troops were prohibited from entering Laos; they could only be employed as support along the border. United States advisers were only allowed to provide assistance to their counter-parts at command post located on the Republic of Vietnam side of the border. "This was a major departure from procedure, for every South Vietnamese unit had Americans with them to help coordinate support fire and logistics from United States sources, and to offer guidance on the waging of war" (Duy Hinh). This decision made the role of ARNV units even more prominent and important. Their commanders were given an opportunity to prove their combat effectiveness and compete with their colleagues that fought in the Cambodia incursion with the United States the previous year.

The entire process of planning and operational preparation for operation Lam Son 719 appeared to have taken place in a great rush. There was only about three weeks from the time the directive was issued until D-Day. Considering the scale of this major operation and the time everyone was allotted for planning, this operation was destined to fail. In addition, secrecy was the utmost important for this invasion so "participating units were given only a short time to prepare" (Nolan 41). With such a difficult and complex campaign to be conducted over unfamiliar terrain, the question U.S. had was, were the ARVN units prepared to meet all "the unforeseeable challenges ahead of them" (Duy Hinh). Lower Laos was "hemmed in by dense jungle and rough mountains" (Duy Hinh) which was not favorable to heavy logistics activities. This along with the stubbornness of the enemy would create serious problems for the ARVN and they should have given it more attention. In addition, the ARVN only committed eight infantry brigades during the initial planning phase and intelligence reports estimated the enemy could increase its three infantry regiments to an addition of eight more regiments within two weeks. U.S. intelligence felt the operation would be lightly opposed and severely underestimated the enemy. With a tough mission ahead, the ARVN had to carry it out with limited support from the United States. Operation Lam Son 719 could have been a decisively victory for the United States if ground troops were committed in Laos and the ARVN had the support of US military advisors. Lam Son 719 failed because the United States put the entire operation together in less than two weeks and did not factor in their enemies fighting capability. When the United States starts and invasion or attack with another country and decides not to employ all of its forces, the

they don't intend to support it fully and allow the American soldiers to fight they way they trained.

Operation Lam Son 719 was a large offensive operation against North Vietnam Army (NVA) sanctuary base 604 located in Quang Tri province of Laos. No American infantry soldiers were allowed to set foot into the country of Laos, this order included all American advisors attached to the Republic of Vietnam units. The lack of fully integrated US and Vietnam military campaign caused the failure of the Laos campaign of 1971. This operation called for ARVN forces to drive west to Khe Sahn, cut the Ho Chi Minh Trails, seize Tchepone, destroy NVA forces and supplies and return to Vietnam.

Will Fowler wrote that the battle plan for operation Lam Song 719 involved an attack by Airborne division and the 1st Armored Brigade along route 9 to Aloue and then to Tchepone where route 9 intersected with the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Route 9 was to be kept open as the main supply route into Laos during the operation. The 1st Infantry Division was to attack on a parallel axis to the main attack along the high ground south of the river and protect the southern flank of the Airborne Division. The Ranger Group would establish firebases north of route 9 and protect the right flank. A Marine brigade would remain in reserve near Khe Sanh.

Phase I of operation Lam Son 719 begin at 0400hrs 29 January 1971 U.S. ground forces. Objective of the U.S. was to secure Khe Sanh Airstrip and surround areas and open route 9 for the main effort of the AVRN. On 8 February 1971, the leading element of the ARVN 1st Cavalry with M-41 tanks and M-113 APCs crossed the border into Laos of route 9. While the rough terrain slowed the advancing ground forces, U.S, helicopters left Khe Sanh packed with

troops from the 1st Infantry Divisions and the 1st Rangers groups. ARVN infantry division assaulted into landing zones south of route nine while two battalions of Rangers air assaulted north of route nine. By nightfall of the first day, the ARVN armored column had moved nine kilometers into Laos. Though enemy resistance was weak, the column could not move more rapidly because of the bad road conditions and the dense jungle on both sides of the road. The enemy main force units in the area of operation were confirmed to be the 1st Regiment of the 2d (Yellow Star) Division, 24B Regiment of the 304th Division and elements of the 675th Artillery Regiment. A prisoner from the 14th Air Defense Battalion of the 2d Division disclosed that the subordinate units of this division (1st, 3d and 141st regiments) had been moving east from the Tchepone area since early February to block the ARVN advance.

The discovery of the command post of the 308th Division on 18 February further confirmed reports that this division had joined in the fighting (the 308th Division had three regiments: 36th, 88th and 102d). The drive to Tchepone would become some of the bloodiest fighting for the ARVN during the Vietnam War. Enemy resistance was light at first as the 12,000 man South Vietnam Army thrust it way across the border in the communists' deepest stronghold toward Tchepone. However, resistance stiffened as North Vietnamese rushed reinforcements to the area. Fighting continued from February into March as the South Vietnam Army pushed with all available assets to reach its objective. On 6 March objective Tchepone was reached by the South Vietnam Army. In the early morning of 7 March, the first enemy reactions to the 1st Division's presence at Tchepone occurred in the form of artillery and mortar fire. The first attack, which was brief and light, caused only five casualties, but the second attack was heavier as indirect fire

poured in from all calibers of guns from 82-mm mortars to 152-mm artillery. The next ten days were met with heavy fighting and a large number of casualties on both sides however, the NVA were capable of replacing their personnel losses much faster with Viet Cong regiments from Laos, South Vietnam and North Vietnam.

On the 16th March the I Corp Commander decided that most of the objectives of Lam Son had been accomplished and ordered withdrawal from Laos. From 18 March on it seemed that the enemy was well aware of the ARVN withdrawal and there were signs of the enemy concentrating a regimental size unit maneuvering to prevent the orderly ARVN withdrawal from Laos. While the ARVN tried to withdraw under the heavy pressure of the NVA along route 9, and the mounting casualties caused concern among higher headquarters personnel to reevaluate the withdraw plan. The only reasonable course of action was an orderly withdrawal to conserve as much of the committed force as possible. Further reinforcing this conclusion was the fact that the political and psychological objective of the campaign had been achieved. It was apparent that President Thieu had decided, at the outset, that once Tchepone had been entered by ARVN, the withdrawal should begin without delay. The main features of the withdrawal plan were outlined that 2d Infantry Regiment would close Fire Support Base Sophia in Tchepone and establish a new fire base (called Brick) near Route 9 about nine kilometers south of Ban Dong. The units of the 2d Regiment would be picked up at various landing zones in the Sophia-Liz area and inserted into landing zones south and west of Fire Support Base Brick. Thereafter, the 2d Regiment would move southwest, searching for and destroying installations of Communist Binh Tram 33 and interdicting Route 9 until they reach the Vietnam and Laos boarder. It will take

two weeks of hard combat fighting for the ARVN to fight it way back to Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government claimed that 13,341 enemy had been killed against 5,000 KIA/WIA. American estimates put the ARVN losses at 10,000, which amounted to half of its forces committed to the operation. The official end to Lam Son 719 was 9 April 1971.

If the U. S. combat ground forces were allowed to cross the Lao border along with the ARVN the outcome of the battle may have turn out different. In our opinion, there are two important factors that may have changed the outcome. First, on the friendly side during the beginning of the operation high level headquarters were located too far from the combat zone, which created coordination and planning difficulties. Second, the tactical command post of the I Corps at Ham Nghi Base was weak and the officers on duty there were all of the junior grades. Lam Son 719 was in almost every aspect an extremely important operation that took strategic planning from both the U. S. Commanders and South Vietnam Army Commanders. The U. S. involvement became necessary in an effort to deter Communism from spreading into South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Nguyen Int). For several years, the eastern part of the Laotian panhandle was used by North Vietnam as a corridor for the infiltration of personnel and materials required to sustain its war efforts in South Vietnam and Cambodia. In addition to the Ho chi Minh Trail, the eastern panhandle contained many logistic installations and base areas. After the 18 March 1970 change of government in Cambodia which closed the port of Sihanoukville to the enemy, this trail-base area complex in lower Laos became even more important to North Vietnam in its prosecution of the war in the South. The real hub of this entire complex, where transportation and storage activities were coordinated, was Base Area 604 located west of the Demilitarized

Zone. To disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies into South Vietnam, a ground attack was launched across the Laotian border against this enemy hub of activity on 8 February 1971. Operation LAM SON 719 was conducted by I Corps with substantial U.S. support in firepower and helilift but without the participation of U.S. advisers with those ARVN units fighting in Laos. As a test of Vietnamization, this operation was to demonstrate also the progress achieved in combat effectiveness by the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. Further, LAM SON 719 achieved the objective of forestalling a Communist offensive in the spring of 1971. To assist I Corps forces in making preparations for their cross-border offensive, XXIV Corps implemented Phase I of LAM SON 719 exactly as scheduled, at 0000 hours on 30 January 1971. Codenamed DEWEY CANYON II, this operation consisted of securing staging and assembly areas for I Corps units in the northwestern corner of Quang Tri Province adjacent to the Laotian border, including Khe Sanh Base and Route No. 9. As part of a deception plan, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Air mobile) launched heavy attacks by fire and reconnaissance patrols into the A Shau valley farther to the south. This move was to divert the enemy's attention from the area where the main action was about to unfold. (Nguyen Int). Almost simultaneously the 1st Brigade, U.S. 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) advanced west from Fire Support Base Vandegrift in two elements. The main effort, Team A, 3/5 Cavalry, reinforced by engineer troops, advanced along Axis Gold, following Route No. 9 toward Khe Sanh. The secondary effort, a task force of the 3/5 Cavalry (-), proceeded southwesterly along Axis Brown from the Rockpile area to north of Khe Sanh. Thanks to the element of surprise, the lead element managed to progress six kilometers before daylight along the highway without enemy contact. The U.S. 14th Combat

Engineer Battalion immediately followed the attacking cavalry forces, restoring nine of the eighteen required bridges and nine of the 20 required culverts along the road. At Khe Sanh, U.S. Army engineers were to survey a site planned for an assault airstrip which was to run parallel to the old, unserviceable PSP airstrip. This assault airstrip, scheduled to be completed on 3 February, was to be used during the initial phase pending repairs on the main airstrip. Concurrently, a company of the U.S. 7th Combat Engineer Battalion, with three D7 bulldozers, immediately started building a road leading from the Rockpile directly to Khe Sanh. Initial artillery support was provided by the 1/82 (-) and 2/94 Artillery Battalions at Vandegrift along with the 8/4 Artillery Battalion at Camp Carroll. The 5/4 Artillery Battalion was expected to displace forward to provide support at Khe Sanh. Beginning at 0830 hours, three infantry battalions (3/187 Infantry, 1/11 Infantry and 4/3 Infantry) of the U.S. 1st Brigade 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) were heliborne into three landing zones in the Khe Sanh area. The operation proceeded smoothly and was completed at 1530, each battalion moving into its assigned area of operation without significant contact with the enemy. While the 1/11 Infantry Task Force secured Khe Sanh, the 1/77 Armored Task Force remained in the Vandegrift area and provided security along Route No. 9 from the Rockpile to the south of Vandegrift. The 1/1 Cavalry Task Force meanwhile conducted a reconnaissance in force along from Khe Sanh toward the Laotian border. After U.S. armored and infantry forces had consolidated their positions in the objective area on 1 February, heavy artillery elements along with the 8/4 Artillery Battalion began to move into Khe Sanh. On that day, U.S. engineer units also completed temporary repairs on the road from Vandegrift to Khe Sanh and it was now able to accommodate

tracked vehicles as far west as Lang Vei. The 27th Engineer Battalion meanwhile began to remove damaged PSP from the main airstrip at Khe Sanh. Two efforts were conducted in the next morning; the 1/1 Cavalry Task Force advanced to approximately four kilometers west of Lang Vei where it established a screen near the border, and the 2/17 Cavalry Squadron conducted a raid in an area where enemy presence was suspected, approximately 18 kilometers south of Khe Sanh. No enemy contact was made but they did find a hospital located in a large tunnel complex, evidently the enemy had moved out 12 to 24 hours earlier. While U.S. units continued to expand their control in the north- western corner of Quang Tri, ARVN units began to move into the staging area. The Airborne Division Headquarters and the 3d Airborne Brigade, along with support units were successively airlifted from Saigon to northern Quang Tri, beginning on 1 February. By 4 February, the entire 3d Airborne Brigade with supporting artillery had closed into its assembly area south of Khe Sanh. The Forward Command Post of I Corps had opened at the Dong Ha airfield on 30 January. The tactical command post of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division was also established and initiated operations in its vicinity. On 2 February, the first combined operational meeting was held at the headquarters of I Corps Forward, attended by all RVNAF and U.S. commanders and detailed operational orders were issued. Immediately after this meeting, ARVN units feverishly completed their preparations for the big operation that promised numerous challenges. The next day, the 1st Ranger Group (21st, 37th and 39th Ranger Battalions) was helilifted into the Phu Loc area northwest of Khe Sanh to defend a fire support base to be established there. The U.S. 108th Artillery Group received the mission of augmenting the firepower of I Corps Artillery and this group consisted of the 8th

Battalion, 4th Artillery (with four 8-inch howitzers and eight 175-mm guns), the 2d Battalion, 94th Artillery (with the same number of artillery pieces), and B-Battery, 1st Battalion, 396th Artillery (with four 175-mm guns). As required, the 108th Artillery Group could be augmented by the 5th Battalion, 4th Artillery (with eighteen 155-mm self-propelled howitzers), which was the direct support unit of the U.S. 1st Infantry Brigade (Mechanized). In addition to the big guns of the 108th Artillery Group, U.S. air support was an important factor during the first week of the incursion. Each day, from 500 to 800 sorties of air cavalry gun-ships were flown in addition to approximately 100 sorties of tactical bombers and, depending upon available targets, a number of missions by B-52 strategic bombers. Losses inflicted on the enemy by these air-strikes were very significant, but despite the devastating U.S. air and artillery support, enemy anti-aircraft gunners took a heavy toll of helicopters; and the U.S. air cavalry, as well as the RVNAF, had to increase their efforts to silence the Communist guns. On the friendly side, several shortcomings were evident from the very beginning of the operation. First, high level headquarters were located too far from the combat zone and from each other and as a result, they had difficulties coordinating with each other.

The U.S. XXIV Corps Forward, for example, was located in Quang Tri while I Corps Forward was in Dong Ha. Coordination was thus difficult and often slow. (Nguyen Int). Second, as stated earlier, the tactical command post of I Corps at Ham Nghi Base was apparently weak, and officers on duty there were all of the junior grades; key staff officers meanwhile remained at Dong Ha. Though the I Corps commander was frequently at Ham Nghi during the day, staff operations were still hampered by the absence of senior staff personnel with enough authority

and competence to provide immediate solutions to battlefield emergencies as they arose. This was a noteworthy shortcoming and it contributed to the loss of Fire Base 31 and the inadequate coordination between RVNAF commands in the withdrawal. Third, the U.S. XXIV Corps had no representative in the forward area with authority to coordinate the activities of those units supporting the RVNAF forces such as the 101st Aviation Group, the 1/5 Mechanized Brigade, and the 108th Artillery Group. All these units communicated directly with the ARVN divisions they supported and as a result, coordinating the allocation of support assets among the ARVN divisions became extremely difficult. The divisional advisory staff meanwhile had no authority to handle the coordination of support and had to refer every action to Quang Tri. Solutions, therefore, were worked out on the basis of expediency, requirements and good will.

An outstanding feature of LAM SON 719 was the conspicuous absence of U.S. combat troops and U.S. advisers who were not authorized to go into lower Laos. U.S. advisers could still provide assistance to ARVN staffs but only at command posts located on the RVN side of the border. Even division senior advisers were not authorized to fly over lower Laos. As you can clearly see if the U. S. ground forces were allowed to enter into Laos along with the ARVN the outcome of the battle may have turned out different.

The fact that the integration of aircraft into the organic structure of the ground forces is as radical a change as the move from the horse to the truck, and the process is only beginning. One of the major battlefield innovations of the Vietnam War was the extensive use of airmobile operations. Beginning in the early 1950s, the United States Army began to develop the concept of using helicopters both to transport soldiers to the battlefield and to provide battlefield fire

support. In the early 1960s, this concept was tested by the 11th Air Assault Division at the Fort Benning, Georgia. The rapidly deteriorating situation in Vietnam caused the Army to convert this test division into a regular unit – renaming it the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in 1965 – which was soon there – after deployed to Vietnam. Later the 101st Airborne Division was also converted to an airmobile and it remains the only airmobile division in the U.S. Army.

On 11 December 1961 the United States aircraft carrier USNS Card docked in downtown Saigon with 82 U.S. Army H-21 helicopters and 400 men. The 57th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) from Fort Lewis, Wash., and the 8th Transportation Company (Light Helicopter) from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, had arrived in Southeast Asia. This event had a two-fold significance: it was the first major symbol of United States combat power in Vietnam. From 1961-75 the United States Army made great improvements on their tactical employment of helicopters. From a single transportation battalion with three helicopter companies in early 1962, the U.S. Army developed an enormous operational and logistical support complex consisting of many battalions of helicopter companies, fixed-wing units, maintenance units, and special purpose organizations. (Frankum B. Ronald Jr. 12-14).

Helicopters were the hallmark of U.S. military operations in the Vietnam War. Used by the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines, they fell into four general categories. The UH-1 Huey as utility helicopter was used to transport troops and supplies and to evacuate the wounded; it was also modified to serve as a gunship. The standard cargo helicopter for the U.S. Army was the CH-47 Chinook. For the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, the standard was the CH-46 Sea Knight and the larger CH-53 Sea Stallion, respectively. Observation helicopters were also used

for command and control, to oversee ground combat operations – for adjustment of artillery fire and for reconnaissance of enemy positions. They included the OH-13 Sioux and OH-23 Raven and after 1969 the newer OH-58 Kiowa and OH-6 Cayuse. Better known as the Loach, it was especially popular with air cavalry scouts.

Assault helicopter gunship in the early days of the war were modified Hooeys and Chinooks, which carried a variety of add-on armaments, included rockets and machine guns. On 1 September 1967, the first Huey Cobra (AH-1G) arrived in Vietnam and it was a major step forward in the development of the armed helicopter. (Frankum B. Ronald, Jr. and Maxner F. Stephen 18-20).

The statistics on U.S. military use of helicopters in Vietnam are staggering, they flew some 3.932,000 attack (gunship) sorties, 7.547,000 assault (troop landings in hostile areas) sorties, 3.548,000 cargo sorties and 21.098,000 command-and-control, artillery observation battlefield reconnaissance, search-and-rescue and other sorties. The helicopter provided unprecedented mobility and without the helicopter it would have taken three times as many troops to secure the 800-mile border with Cambodia and Laos. Approximately 12.000 helicopters saw action in Vietnam and the Army UH-1's totaled 7.531,955 flight hours between October 1966 and the end of 1975, and Army AH-1G's totaled 1.038,969 flight hours in Vietnam.

We would also like to mention briefly that airmobile operations enabled United States Forces to frustrate Viet Cong and North Vietnamese ambush tactics and were successful in keeping them off balance. Much of the tactical doctrine for armed helicopter employment evolved during this period including the techniques for protective fire preparation of landing zones prior to and

during a helicopter assault. In airmobile operations, artillery, jet fighters and helicopter gunship raked an area with fire while infantry units closed into the battle area in transport helicopters. Moments before they landed, the supporting fire is lifted and the soldiers embarked from their helicopters with guns blazing. This tactic was highly successful and allowed the United States combat forces to counter the enemy tactic of ambushing road-bound reinforcement and supply convoys. On the other hand, the techniques of fire for all weapons systems were based on maneuvering the helicopter and manipulating the weapons during the firing run. One example after the ground force arrived in the landing zone; the ground commander often marked and identified insurgent targets so that suppressive fire could be quickly and accurately placed on them. In mountain and jungle terrain, where targets were obscured, the suppressive fire had to be accurately controlled and fire discipline maintained in order to avoid hitting friendly troops and to prevent needless expenditures of ammunition. (Kutler I. Stanley editor 1-15).

Lam Son 719, "The Battle," an attack into Laos was initiated on 8 February from bases established on the KHz Shan Plain. The army of the Republic of Vietnam 1st Armored Brigade Task Force crossed the border at 1000 and advanced nine Kilometers to the west Route on the first day.

The battle plan for Lam Son 719 involved an attack by the Airborne Division and the 1st Armored Brigade along highway 9 Aloud and then on to Tchepone, where Highway 9 intersected the Ho Chi Mina Trail. Twenty-two miles inside Laos Tchepone was a major enemy communications and supply hub. On March 6, 1971 U.S. Airmobile assets launched the largest air assault of the war. 120 Huey's lifted two ARVN battalions into the town of Tchepone Laos,

capturing it against light enemy resistance and this large combat assault was carried out in what was considered to be the most hostile air defenses environment ever encountered in the entire war, yet only one Huey was hit and made a safe landing in the objective. Enemy personnel losses were very heavy and while these losses might eventually be replaced, the requirement to decorate losses in such regiments as the 1st Viet Cong, 29th, 36th, 64th, 102d, and 803d would, in all probability, draw off replacement personnel programmed for other units. Combined air-ground operations in Base Area 604 resulted in reported total of 13,914 enemy killed in action. Air and ground attacks inside the five depot areas reportedly accounted 5,357 of these casualties. An additional 69 enemy soldiers were captured.

The Vietnam War was the first, modern, nonlinear battlefield for the United States military. This war is the first in which rotary wing aircraft had been used as offensive weapons and air mobility gave the commander unique capabilities in reconnaissance, maneuver, and logistics while the armor give the shock and firepower that have characterized it in the past. Air cavalry and airmobile infantry can find and fix the enemy so that armored and mechanized forces can be brought at the decisive moment to finish him. The Huey, the Cobra, the light observation helicopter, and the Chinook were the essential vehicles of airmobile combat and combat support. There is no doubt that armed helicopter was the single greatest innovation of Vietnam.

([http://www.101avn@org/lam Son 719](http://www.101avn@org/lam%20son%20719.htm). Phy 1973).

There is no doubt that Lam Son 719 was a major operation of the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam, early in 1971. The Lam Son 719 operation, in a nutshell, was comprised of three South Vietnamese divisions that went into Laos to attack two major enemy bases, unknowingly,

they walked into a North Vietnamese trap. The operation, which was thought to be a simple one, was for ARVN troops to drive west from Khe Sanh, cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and seize Tchepone in Laos and after destroying North Vietnam Army forces and supplies, and then return to Vietnam (www.militaryhistoryonline.com/vietnamization/0392.cfm). The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was supposed to provide and command the ground forces that entered Laos, while U.S. Army and Air Force units would supply and support with aviation airlift and supporting firepower. The mighty 101st Airborne Division commanded all U.S. Army aviation units in direct support of the operation (www.a101avn.org/LamSon719.html). Because of the invasion of Laos, it was not a good year for the Americans or the South Vietnamese army and government. What was really demonstrated to the world was that there was a lack of leadership on the part of the South Vietnamese, from the tactical commanders in the field all the way up the chain of command to President Thieu. This was also one of the first realizations of what would become a severe problem for the remainder of the war, the inability of the United States and the people of South Vietnam to establish an honest, open and trusting relationship with the government in Saigon (Nolan-55). The South Vietnamese Army had gained confidence after what took place during Lam Son 719 and perhaps during this high point in and after the conflict was a critical time, a time when the United States and the South Vietnamese governments should have taken military and political advantage of what was being accomplished on the battlefield and in the pacification program.

Unfortunately, the advantage was not taken and this was not to be. Before the conclusion of Lam Son 719 on 9 April 1971, American estimates put the ARVN losses at 10,000, which

amounted to half of the forces that were committed by the South Vietnamese, to the operation. The losses to the United States helicopter forces were said to be 65 helicopter crewmen that were killed in Action (KIA), 818 crewmen that were wounded in action (WIA) and 42 crewmen missing in action (MIA). The total of losses varies from report to report, but these are fairly accurate. Of the equipment that was lost during Lam Son 719 were 618 American helicopters that were shot up, downed or damaged. That total averaged about 20% of the fleet that would never fly again. During the operation, the United States had 106 helicopters that were lost outright. The loss of United States helicopters and planes is what some considered a failure. Compared to our losses, when the fighting was over the North Vietnam Army (NVA) had lost more than 13,000 KIA alone, no exact total was known about MIAs or WIAs. Their, the NVA, equipment loss was at least 75% of their tanks, and vast quantities of ammunition, weapons and rice (Military History Online, 3-5).

Although America suffered great losses during Lam Son 719, South Vietnam celebrated one of the greatest victories in its struggle for independence. South Vietnam featured large armies fighting intensely and compassionately. Most of the first part of the operation, which began 0400 hours 29 Jan 1971, was conducted by United States ground forces. If the entire mission could have been accomplished and won by ground forces, this would have been a productive conflict. The mission of the ground force was to open a route to the Laotian border. At the beginning of Phase 2, the ARVN started their push into Laos. The North Vietnam Army reacted like a force to be reckoned with, but the ARVN continued its attack, supported by United States air strikes and troop lifts by US Army helicopters. Once the units crossed into Laos they met

enemy armored track vehicles, which were effectively dispatched by American gun-ships.

The last Phase started at the beginning of March and was the withdrawal from Laos by all units. Two weeks of hard combat were necessary for the ARVN task force to fight its way back to Vietnam. A few lessons learned in regards to ground tactics during Lam Son 719, was that the ground troops completed all its tasks and its operation was deemed a success. However, for the individual rifleman this was the worst of times, even though causality figures were low for an operation of this size and duration. The unforgiving terrain, which was some of the most challenging in South Vietnam, the constant mortar fire and the lack of rest and supplies made this conflict a ground troops nightmare. This was no different from any other conflicts, except, the United States had earned the title of losers. Because of the lack of supplies, it was cold at night and there was little water available for drinking or bathing. Even during those times, moral played a big part in the health, welfare, and minds of troops.

The greatest threat to air cavalry forces was from .51-caliber machine guns, which the North Vietnamese Army employed in large numbers. The OH-6A scout helicopter was too vulnerable to heavy fire from these guns to operate as part of a reconnaissance team. Instead, groups of two to six AH-1G Cobras and one command and control aircraft were formed, with scout pilots as front seat gunners in the Cobras. Although not designed as a scout ship, the Cobra did well in the reconnaissance role. Its weapons could immediately engage the enemy and it was powerful enough to make runs at high speed through hostile areas without taking unacceptable risks. Even with the Cobras leading the pack, the losses were still well known during the Lam Son 719 conflict. The damage would still be done, no matter how superior the air cavalry was.

In conclusion, Lam Son 719 was a conflict that will forever go down in infamy as a loss for the United States. President Nixon still considered it a success, only because we didn't lose as many troops to KIAs, MIAs, or WIAs as the South Vietnam, however, we did lose air assets, enough to feel the loss in the United States (Air Force) fleet.

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