

III. THE BATTLE OF AN LOC, PHASE I

The NVA Plan in MR III

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

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

Table 1. Estimated NVA Troop Strength*

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

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

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

Source: Major General James F. Hollingsworth, "Communist Invasion in Military Regional III," unpublished narrative, 1972.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

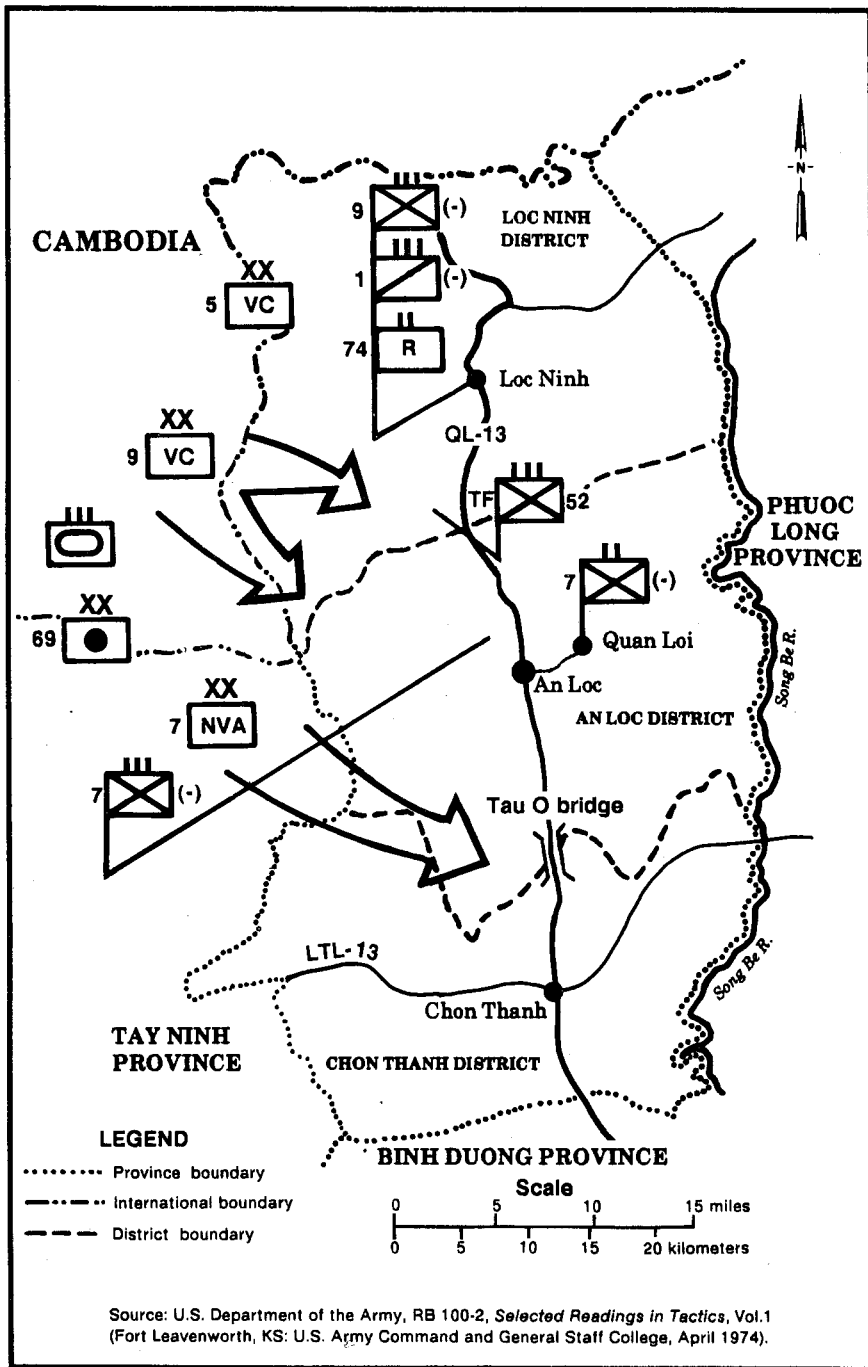
The 9th VC Division, considered one of the elite NVA divisions, was targeted against An Loc itself. The 7th NVA Division was tasked to interdict supplies and reinforcements from reaching An Loc from Saigon by cutting QL-13 south of An Loc, between Chon Thanh and Lai Khe (see map 3). The 5th VC Division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

The Assault on Loc Ninh

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

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

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



Map 3. Binh Long Province, 5 April 1972

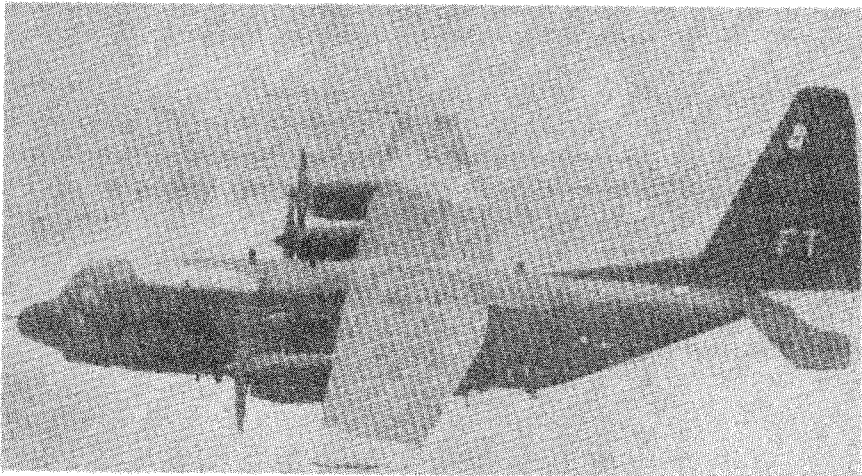
offensive and that an attack of major proportions was imminent. Accordingly, they directed all available air support north to Binh Long to assist the 5th ARVN Division elements in Loc Ninh.

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

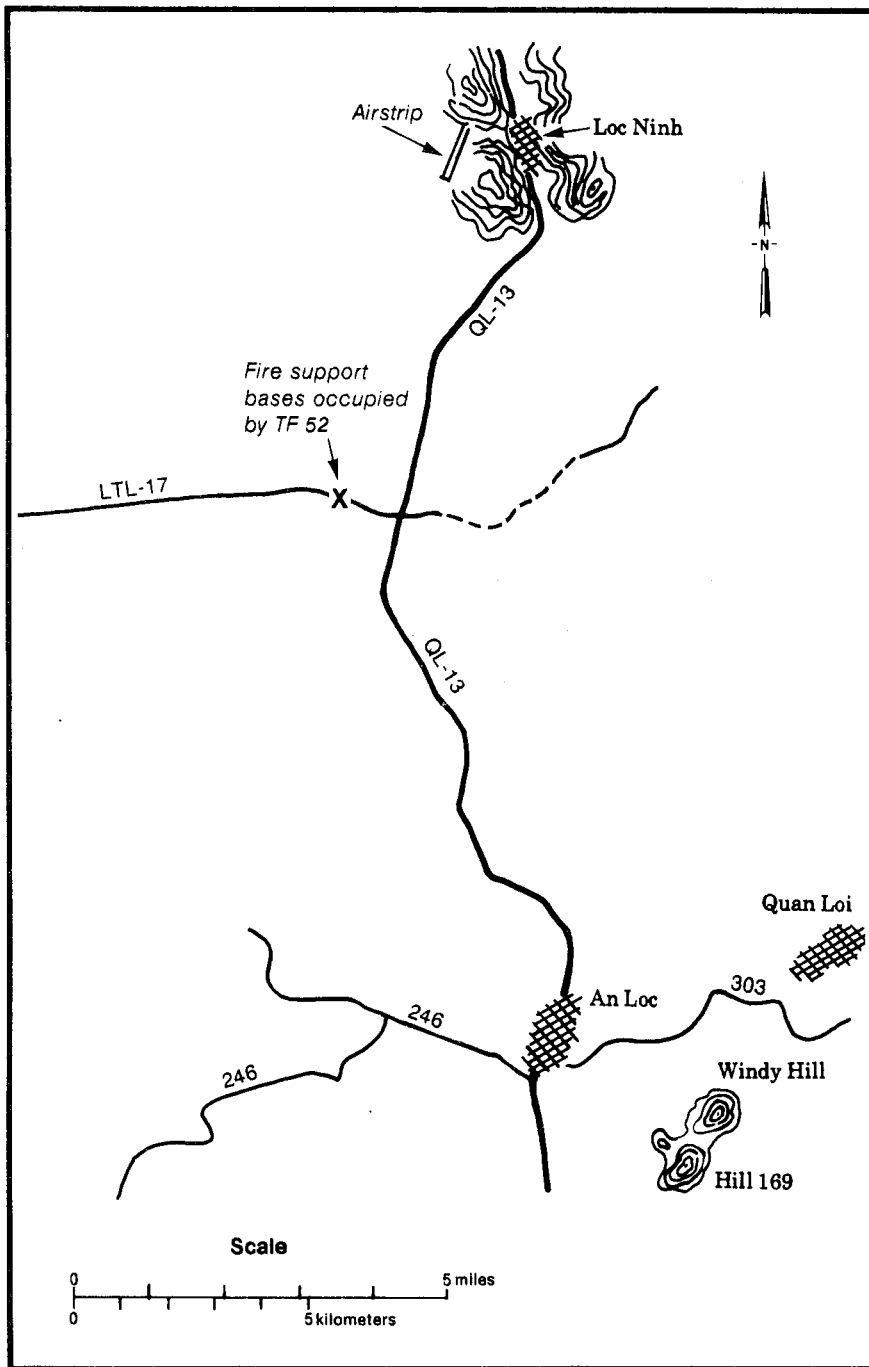
The ARVN forces and their seven American advisers inside the small compounds fought desperately against the North Vietnamese onslaught. The American advisers coordinated and directed U.S. tactical air support from Bien Hoa Air Base, the aircraft carriers U.S.S. *Constellation* and U.S.S. *Saratoga*,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

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

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



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



Map 4. The Loc Ninh-An Loc vicinity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The North Vietnamese Turn on An Loc

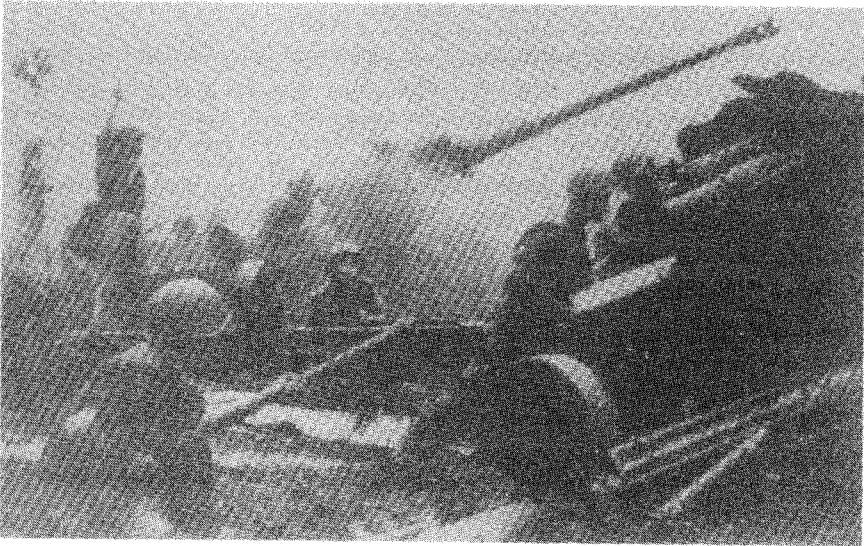
On 6 April, the enemy forces arrayed in and around Loc Ninh had begun moving south toward An Loc. Under cover of darkness and moving stealthily through the jungle and rubber plantations, the NVA forces took up positions encircling the provincial capital.

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

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

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

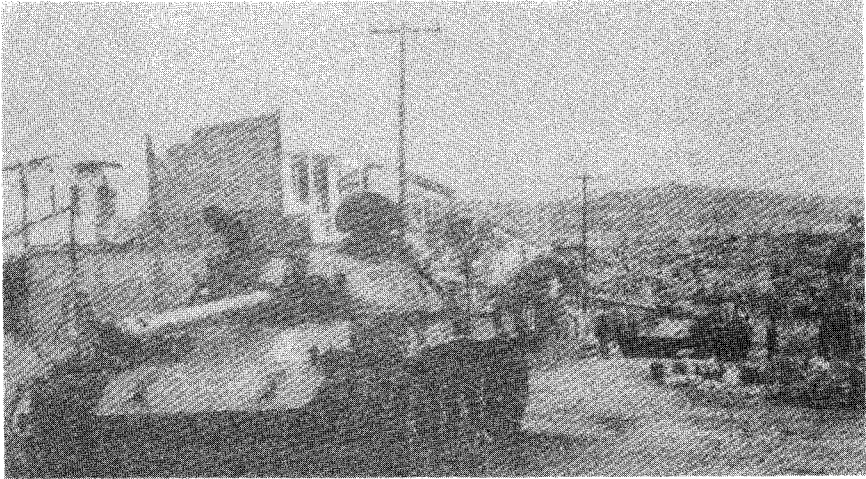
Over the next several months, the forces in An Loc would undergo a protracted attack, marked by repeated human wave assaults and



NVA artillery in action, April 1972

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

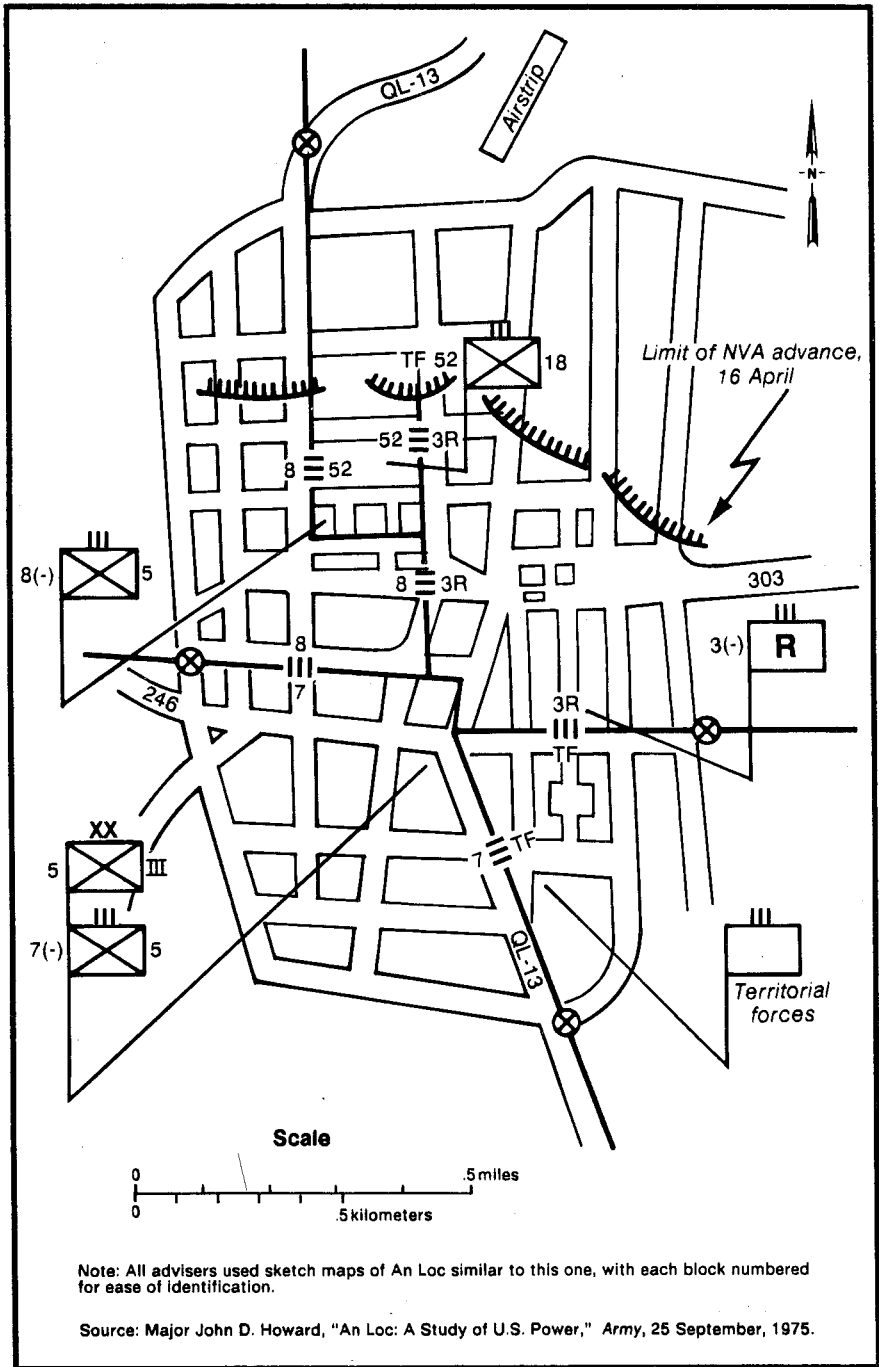
At Headquarters, Third Regional Assistance Command, in Long Binh, General Hollingsworth and his deputy, Brigadier General John R. McGiffert, read the intelligence reports and determined that the enemy's main attack on An Loc was about to begin.²¹ They met with U.S. Air Force representatives at Lai Khe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

The Battle for An Loc

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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



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

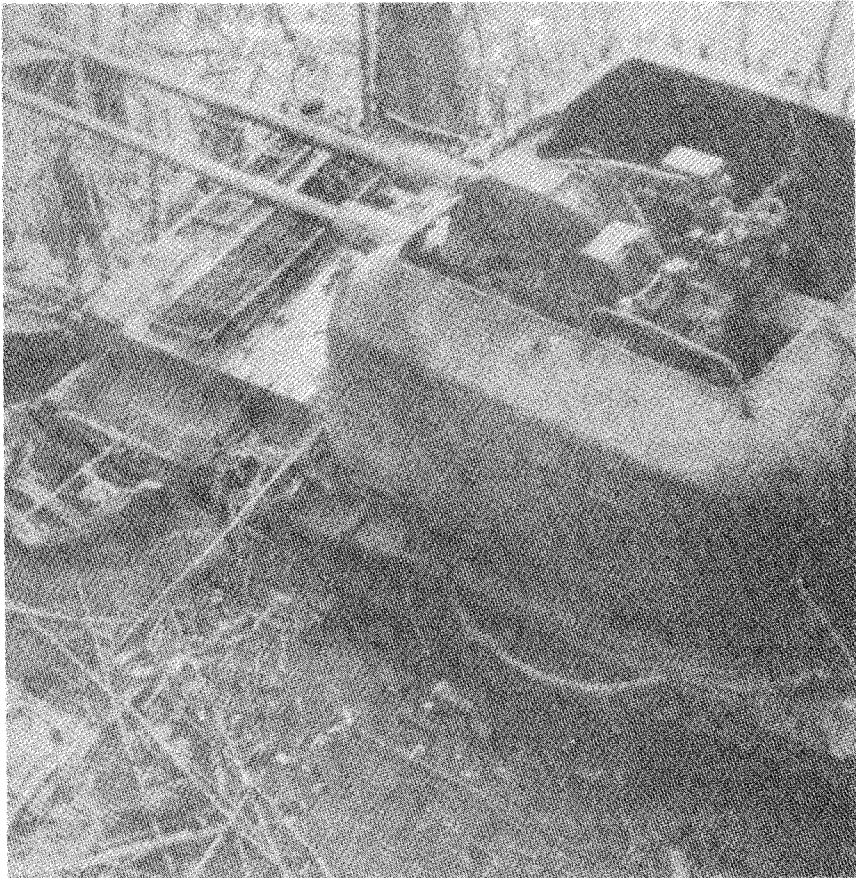
southern part of the city before it was knocked out by an ARVN soldier with an M-72 LAW.²⁶

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

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

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

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



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