

IV. THE BATTLE OF AN LOC, PHASE II

The Third Attack

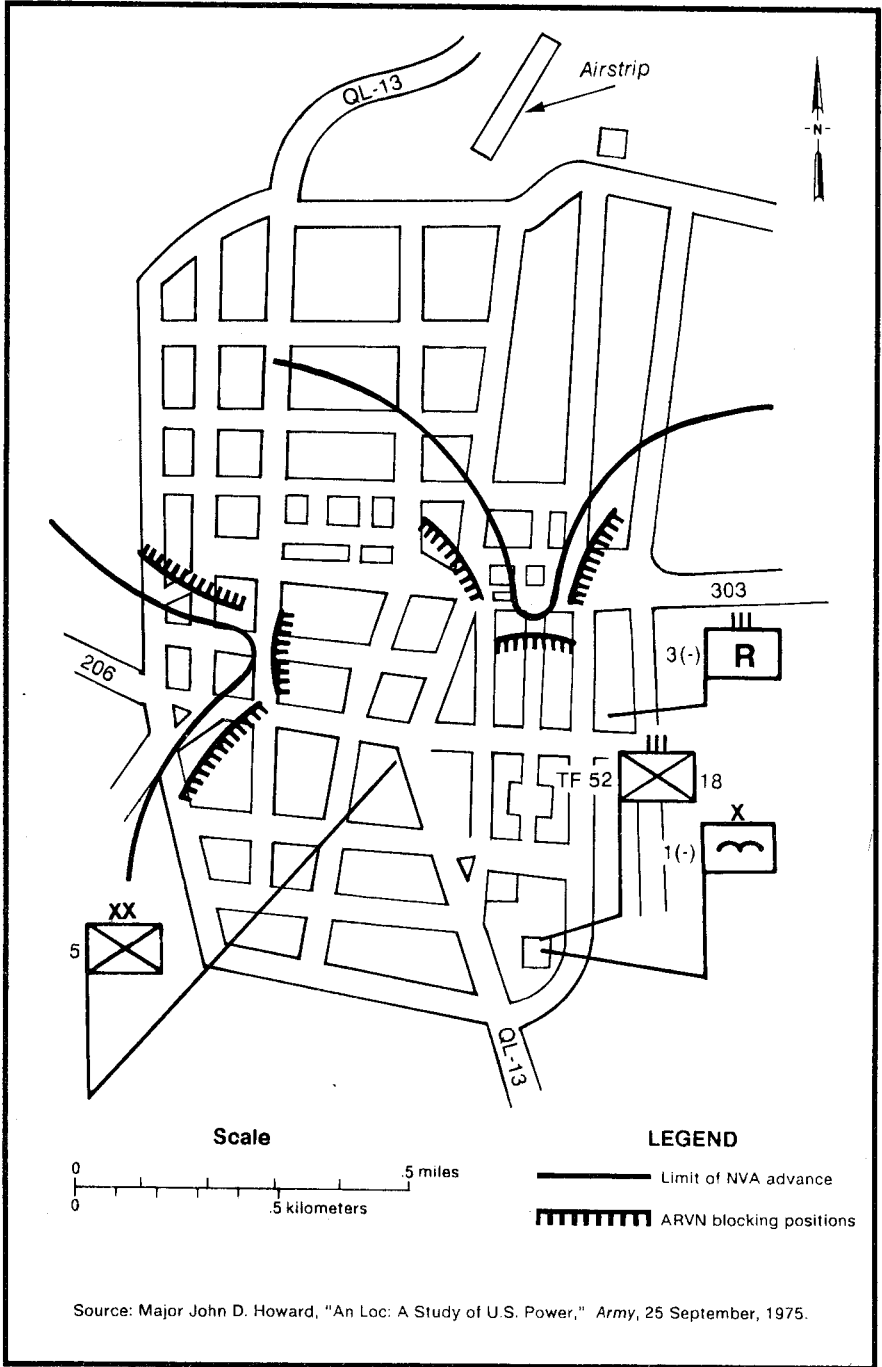
At Third Regional Assistance Command, all intelligence indicated to General Hollingsworth that the enemy was preparing to make another push to take the city. Reports of enemy movements and a tremendous increase in shelling meant that the time of the attack was near. Hollingsworth knew that the situation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

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

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

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

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



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

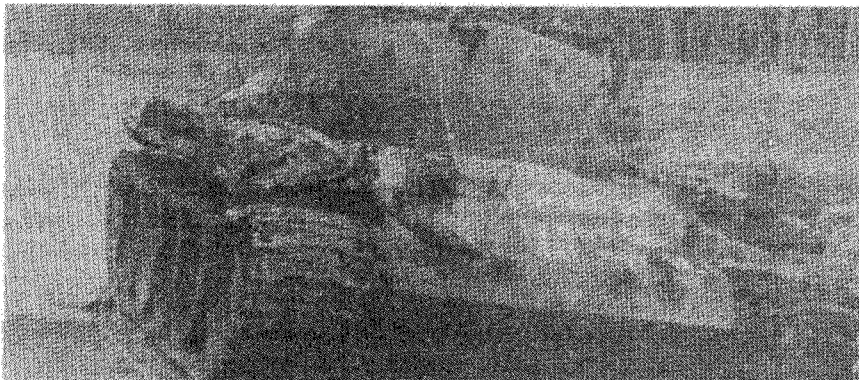
1,000 by 1,500 meters. For the next 4 hours, 7,000 rounds (or one shell every 5 seconds) fell on the ARVN positions. Major Kenneth Ingram, an adviser with the 5th ARVN Division command post, said later that the barrage was so heavy that to leave your bunker was "certain death."⁵

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

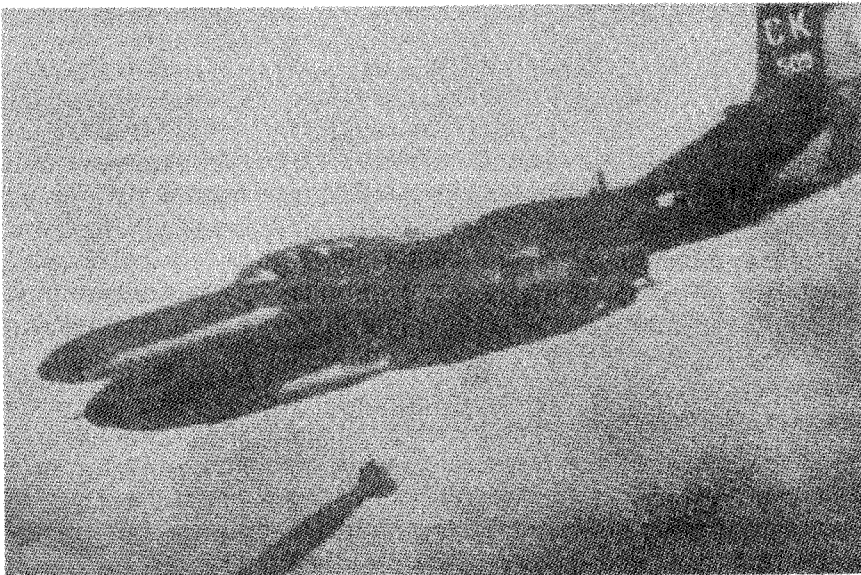
General Hung and his adviser, Colonel Walter F. Ulmer, who had just replaced Colonel Miller, realized that the NVA were trying to separate the ARVN forces and moved the 5th Airborne Battalion from the southern part of the perimeter to blunt both NVA penetrations in the northeast and west. These ARVN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

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

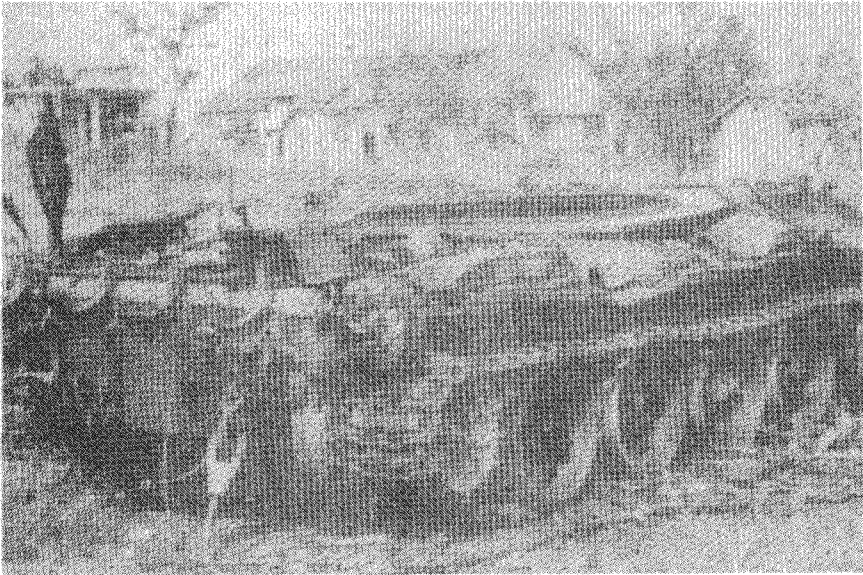
stopped firing, but it was not immobilized. Lieutenant Colonel Weed made another pass through a hail of 37-mm and .51-caliber ground fire, and this time the bomb scored another direct hit; the subsequent explosions destroyed the tank and drove back the supporting infantry troops.

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

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

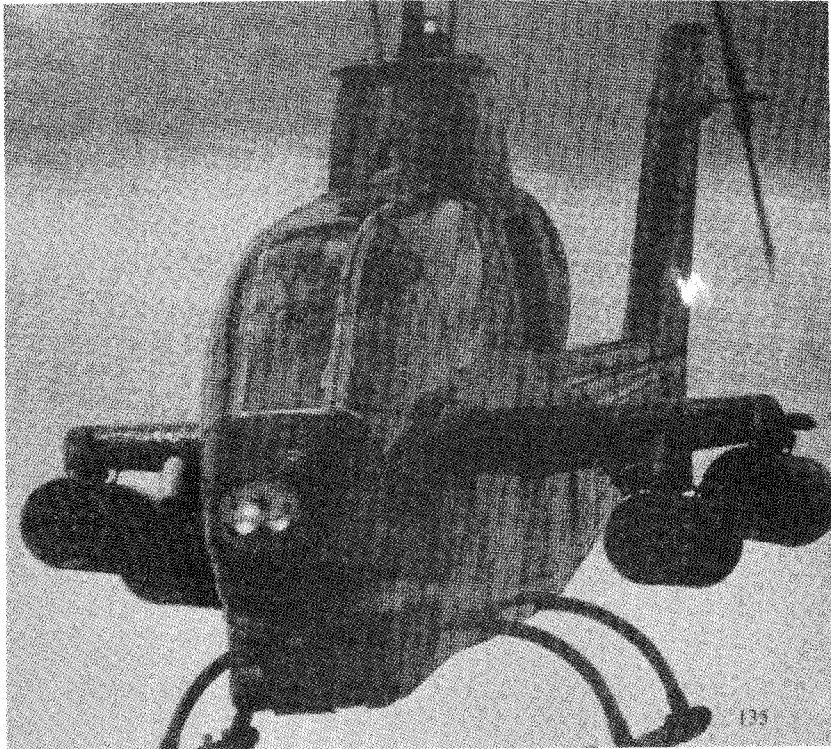
By late on the 11th, the repeated B-52 strikes, continuous tactical air support, and tenacious defense by the ARVN forces in the city combined to break the main enemy attack, but fierce fighting continued until the following day when the situation stabilized, due more than anything else to fatigue on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

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

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

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

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

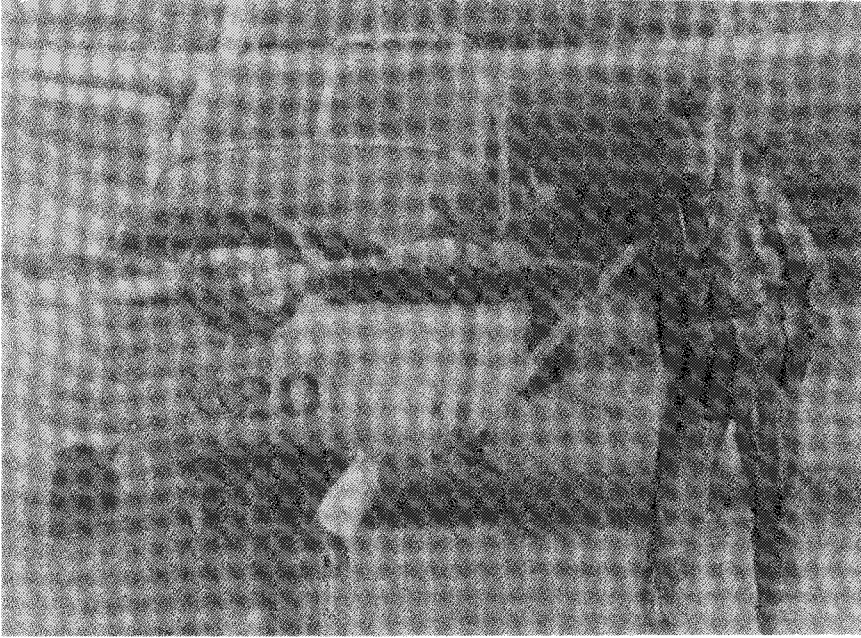


AH-1G Cobra attack helicopters proved to be very effective tank killers in An Loc, particularly in the early part of the battle in April and early May

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

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

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



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

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

The Battle on QL-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Siege Is Broken

By the end of May, the situation at An Loc had improved considerably. There was a lull in the fighting, and even the incoming artillery had decreased significantly. The around-the-clock air strikes had taken a horrendous toll on the NVA forces. ARVN intelligence estimated that the 3 NVA divisions, the 5th, 7th, and 9th, had already suffered over 10,000 casualties in the fight for the city and along QL-13.¹⁷

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

The ARVN Are Victorious

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

V. THE AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS

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

American Air Power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

American Advisers

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leadership in the South Vietnamese armed forces had long been a problem, and the situation still existed in 1972.²⁰ The crucible of An Loc only served to exacerbate this shortcoming. While leadership and morale were generally high in the elite airborne and ranger units, they were often less than satisfactory in the regular units, including



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

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

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

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

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

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

VI. THE NORTH VIETNAMESE VICTORY IN 1975

1973-1974

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

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

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

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

The Initial Attack on Phuoc Long

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

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

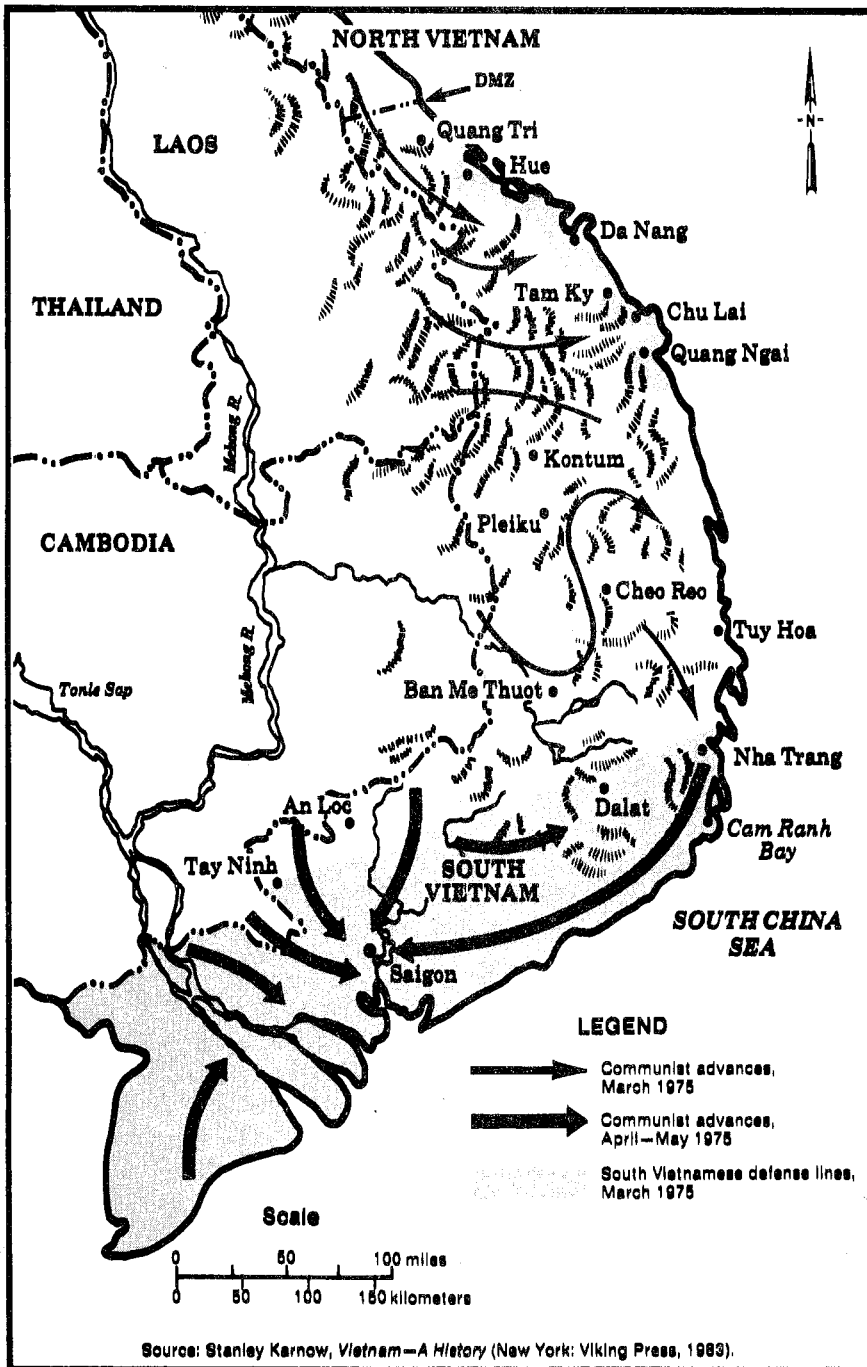
The Communist war planners developed a two-year strategy that called for large-scale offensives in 1975 to create conditions for a "general offensive, general uprising" in 1976.³ The strategy hinged on the assumption that the United States, having pulled out, would not return to Vietnam. The thrust of the strategy was to determine which battles would have the greatest impact on the Thieu government. Having determined the high-value targets, the North Vietnamese planners massed armor and infantry to overwhelm the ARVN defenders at those points. NVA plans called for "blooming lotus" attacks, in which the critical point was to be captured and then NVA control spread out in every direction.⁴

The General Offensive

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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