Indochina Monographs
LAM SON 719
by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh
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Glossary
LAM SON 719
by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh
Preface
For several years, the eastern part of the Laotian panhandle was used by North Vietnam as a corridor for the infiltration of personnel and materiels 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 and surrounding the district town of Tchepone.
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.
This monograph will present a critical analysis of all aspects of LAM SON 719 from the planning stage to the withdrawal from lower Laos. In its preparation, I have drawn primarily from my own experience as an ARVN infantry division commander and from interviews with Vietnamese unit commanders and staff officers who participated in the operation. My work would not have been complete without the valuable contributions of several associates to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude.
General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the Joint General Staff, RVNAF, has provided me with a unique insight into LAM SON 719 from the highest level of our armed forces. Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, who was Commander of the Central Logistics Command, RVAAF at the time, has contributed his account of combined logistic support for the operation. Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commander of IV Corps and later I Corps, under whose command and leadership I had served for several years, has enlightened me with his highly professional and analytical comments on tactical problems concerning the ARVN and especially the 1st Infantry Division. Brigadier General Tran Dinh Tho, Assistant Chief of Staff J-3, JGS, has briefed me in detail concerning his personal involvement in the early planning stage of the operation. Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Assistant Chief of Staff J-2, JGS, has been of great assistance with his

intimate knowledge of NVA forces, their activities on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the enemy logistic structure in the area of operation.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attaché serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of my manuscript in final form.

McLean, Virginia Nguyen Duy Hinh
31 July 1977 Major General, ARVN

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The overall situation throughout South Vietnam began to improve soon after American troops were committed to the ground war; and as the enemy gradually lost the initiative, his main force units were driven away from populated regions and other areas vital to the defense of the country. The Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNAF) regained their poise and, with increased United States assistance and support, were greatly strengthened.

The exertions made by the Communists during the 1968 general offensive seriously depleted their strength. The huge losses they incurred during this campaign - 200,000 troops killed, taken prisoners or rallied to the GVN-caused entire units of the enemy's main force to be paralyzed and considerably weakened his infrastructure. Consequently, as of late 1968, it became evident that the improved military situation provided the

opportunity for an energetic revitalization of the Republic of Vietnam. To consolidate the gains, the United States found it necessary to further strengthen the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam and increase American assistance in all forms. Firepower and troop morale of ARVN combat units were quickly improved as a result of force structure increases, the creation of new units and the delivery of modern weapons such as the M-16, rifle, N-60 machine- gun and M-79 grenade-launcher.

In 1969, the new Nixon administration reemphasized efforts begun in the last part of the Johnson administration to obtain a lasting peace in Indochina. New efforts were made in Paris and the United States adopted a more flexible negotiating stance aimed at reaching an early compromise. While at the Midway meeting of 8 June 1969, the President of the United States and the President of the Republic of

Vietnam proclaimed a new course of action, which the U.S. referred to as "Vietnamization." Under the doctrine of Vietnamization, the United States would begin removing its combat troops and turning over the prosecution of the war to the soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam. To facilitate the withdrawal of United States troops, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam were to be rapidly expanded and modernized and the United States would also assist and strengthen the development and economy of the Republic of Vietnam by increasing non-military aid as well.

The years 1969 and 1970 witnessed an unprecedented development of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam. Their total strength was rapidly increased from 700,000 in early 1968 to nearly one million in late 1970. Major ARVN combat forces consisted of ten infantry divisions fully equipped with modern weapons, including heavy artillery and armored vehicles. The general reserve forces consisted of the Airborne and Marine Divisions, both up to strength and thoroughly combat worthy. In addition, armor, artillery, engineer and logistic capabilities were rapidly improved and training facilities were developed in order to provide for the needs of a l,000,000 man army.

The Air Force and Navy were also strengthened. The Air Force, which had 16,000 men in 1967, was boosted to 45,000 men in 1970. Its five air wings were upgraded into five full fledged air divisions, equipped with A-37 and A-1H fighters and modern UH-l helicopters. The Navy also experienced a rapid development from 16,000 men in 1967 to 40,000 in late 1970. New naval units were created as a number of U.S. vessels operating at sea and in rivers were turned over to the Vietnamese Navy. Amphibious Task Force 211 was created at Dong Tam and became fully operational in late 1969. River Patrol Force 212, created in mid 1970, was assigned patrol and interdiction duties on rivers and canals. United States naval vessels operating on the high seas were also gradually turned over to the Vietnamese Navy.

In addition to regular forces, the territorial forces similarly underwent major changes. The numerical strength of the Regional Forces, whose units were responsible for local security at the province and

district levels, rose from 150,000 in early 1968 to 280,000 in late 1970. The number of their fighting units increased accordingly from 880 to 1,600 companies. The Popular Forces, responsible for security in villages and hamlets, numbered 250,000 by late 1970 as compared to 150,000 in 1968, an increase from 4,100 to 7,200 combat platoons. Noteworthy is the fact that these territorial forces were supplied with new basic weaponry just like their regular counterparts and were greatly improved in terms of training, command and control, and logistics.

As the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces developed following the Midway agreement, the United States and other free world forces gradually stood down and re-deployed. Of the ten U.S. divisions fighting in Vietnam, only six remained as the year 1971 began.

During the period that United States combat forces were actively fighting the ground war, major units of the Vietnamese regular forces were assigned the primary role of pacification support. The 1968 Communist offensive, however, caused a significant change in the responsibilities of the RVNAF. Since most of the targets of this offensive were cities and urban centers, Communist forces were pitted directly against the ARVN. This general offensive resulted in a military defeat for the enemy and two facts became immediately apparent. One was that the RVAAF had the capability to meet and cope with such challenges. The second was that the people of South Vietnam were still strongly anti-Communist. They refused to respond to the call of the Communists for a general uprising and their wide response to the general mobilization law afforded the manpower needed to enlarge the national armed forces.

Even though the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam could not replace the re-deployed United States and other free world forces on a numerical basis, they made every effort to fill the vacuum. In the beginning, this was not a very difficult task. The enemy's post-offensive strength had considerably dwindled while the combat effectiveness of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam was improving as each day passed. New weapons and equipment stimulated ARVN morale. Concurrently, United States troops cooperated with the Vietnamese armed

forces to capitalize on the enemy's diminishing strength. Major operations were launched successively which succeeded in forcing the enemy from his bases and driving him over the national boundaries.

The enemy's weakness and the Allied successes of 1969 and 1970 were favorable to the implementation of the Vietnamization program. ARVN units were re-deployed to gradually replace United States troops and assume more combat responsibilities. The northernmost DMZ area was taken over by units of the 1st Infantry Division. By the end of 1969, the northern part of II Corps area and the entirety of IV Corps area were

defended by the armed forces of Vietnam. In other corps areas, whenever a United States infantry unit was leaving, adjacent Vietnamese units immediately expanded their operational responsibilities to cover the evacuated area as well.

The Vietnamese Air Force continued to develop and provided more effective support for friendly ground units. The Navy also was given more responsibilities at an accelerated pace. By September 1970, the inner perimeter of Operation Market Time, which was designed to interdict sea infiltration routes to the Communists, became the sole responsibility of the Vietnamese Navy. By the end of 1970, twelve of the fourteen joint United States-Vietnamese naval operations in progress were conducted entirely by the Vietnamese Navy. The other two operations, Solid Anchor (south of Cape Ca Mau) and the outer perimeter of Market Time, were subsequently completely turned over to the Navy of the Republic of Vietnam.

The years 1969 and 1970 were a period when the Republic of Vietnam took advantage of the enemy's declining strength and power. Pacification and development campaigns were launched in rapid succession, designed to reoccupy and rehabilitate the countryside. As early as at the end of 1968, the Hamlet Evaluation System indicated that the pacification program had more than restored the conditions that had existed in the countryside prior to the Communist general offensive. In late 1970, 95 percent of the hamlets of the Republic of Vietnam were recorded as secure and fairly secure (HES categories A, B and C). When compared to 1967, an additional five million people had come under the authority of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam.

Achievements in other areas also pointed to the success of the pacification effort during the initial stages of the Vietnamization program. The number of Communist personnel defecting to the Government of the Republic of Vietnam reached its peak in 1969 (47,000) and remained very high in 1970 (32,000). Many of the Communist senior cadre chose to come over to the side of the government. At the same time, popular sentiment against the Communists continued to rise in the aftermath of their 1968 general offensive.

In early 1970, the People's Self Defense Force numbered as many as 3-1/2 million members, supplied with approximately 400,000 weapons of various types, a significant force politically and militarily. The territorial forces, comprised of the Regional and Popular Forces, in coordination with the paramilitary forces including Police, Rural Development cadre, Armed Propaganda cadre, Provincial Reconnaissance units and People's Self-Defense forces, succeeded - with support from ARVN units - in driving the enemy from the populated areas and reducing his infrastructure. His local guerrilla bases were eliminated by these forces while his major bases in country were being destroyed by the Armed Forces of Vietnam and those of the United States.

As the pacification program continued to improve, the people who had taken refuge in the more secure urban areas were able to return to their home villages and resume farming. Rural development programs steadily changed the outlook of the countryside of

South Vietnam. Schools sprang up almost everywhere, attended by large numbers of eager children. As a result of the agricultural development and technical guidance programs, extensive use of fertilizers and improved rice hybrids, and finally the implementation of the Land-To-The-Tiller program, agricultural production in South Vietnam improved considerably. Rice production in 1969 increased by 700,000 metric tons as compared to the preceding year. In 1970, this figure rose by another 400,000 tons. Total agricultural production in 1970 reached the 5.5 million tons mark, exceeding even the 1964 figure which had been the highest in South Vietnam since World War II. Besides rice crops, other agricultural products were plentiful. Fisheries became highly productive as a large

number of the fishing fleet units made use of newly imported motors. The results of these rural development programs were apparent throughout South Vietnam in the gleaming prosperity of the countryside: great expanses of green rice fields, the great number of motor bicycles on the roads, the TV antennas on rooftops, and the fleet of motorized sampans crisscrossing the waterways.

Against this favorable setting for increasing self sufficiency, 1970 also provided a major event that diminished still more the Communist threat and boosted the morale of the people of South Vietnam. Prince Sihanouk was overthrown as Chief of State of neighboring Cambodia. For many years, Cambodia, under Sihanouk's rule, had been a sanctuary for the Communists; they had built on Cambodian territory near the border areas a network of bases from which they mounted attacks against the Republic of Vietnam. It was on this "neutral" territory that Communist war supplies and materiel dispatched from North Vietnam were stored before being brought to use in South Vietnam. The seaport of Sihanoukville had also served as a major supply port for the enemy for many years.

At the end of March 1970, after General Lon Nol had taken over. ARVN III and IV Corps sent a few reconnaissance patrols into the border area adjacent to the provinces of Hau Nghia and Kien Tuong and found a number of Communist supply caches in the area. In late April, with the concurrence of the new Cambodian government, and the cooperation and support of United States units, III and IV Corps launched a large offensive against Communist sanctuaries on the other side of the border. This offensive was joined in early May 1970 by the U.S. 25th Infantry Division, 1st Air Cavalry Division and armor elements. While United States units swept into enemy bases and command complexes adjacent to the border, west and north of Tay Ninh province, ARVN forces progressed deeper into Cambodia flushing out Communist units and searching for supply caches.

Unable to resist the advancing U.S. and ARVN units, Communist forces fell back into Cambodia and, in cooperation with Khmer Rouge units, threatened Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, and a number of

other cities. This prompted the new Cambodian government to appeal for help. Responding to this request, III Corps forces assisted in the relief of Cambodian provinces under pressure west of Tay Ninh, while IV Corps helped clear the enemy threat from provinces south of Phnom Penh. During these relief operations, ARVN engineers reestablished road communications on National Route No. 1 between Phnom Penh and Saigon and built a major logistic base at Neak Luong, 40 miles south of the Cambodian capital. A Vietnamese Marine brigade was deployed to Neak Luong with the mission of assisting with the security of Phnom Penh, if required. In the meantime IV Corps units and the Vietnamese Navy mounted operations to clear the Mekong River, a vital supply route for the Cambodian capital.

This cross border, offensive campaign was a resounding success. By 30 June 1970, which was the deadline for United States forces to withdraw from Cambodia, Allied forces had eliminated 5,000 enemy troops, and captured 9,300 tons of weapons, ammunition and assorted supplies, and 7,000 tons of rice. Most enemy bases had been overrun and destroyed. The amount of materiel and supplies seized was enough for the enemy to sustain a military campaign in his COSVN area of South Vietnam for at least six months.(1)

After the Cambodian incursion the RVNAF continued to conduct small scale cross border operations as required by the situation or to assist the Cambodian government when requested.

The operations into Cambodia resulted in significant improvements in security in South Vietnam and, just as important, the morale of the population as well as of our troops was stimulated in the belief that, despite the continued redeployment of United States and Free World Military Assistance forces and the deadlocked Paris talks, the U.S. was still striving for a satisfactory solution to the war and Vietnamization was going to work.

This was a difficult time for the enemy. His system of bases and sanctuaries on both sides of the Cambodian border was apparently paralyzed and continued to be harassed. The port of Sihanoukville (redesignated Kompong Som) no longer was a free port of entry for his supplies and our Operation Market Time on the high seas off the Vietnam coastline was effectively interdicting infiltration by sea. To continue supporting its war in the South, it appeared that North Vietnam would have to rely solely on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the supply route along the rugged Truong Son mountain range. Therefore, an invasion of the Laos Panhandle became an attractive idea; such an operation would retain the initiative for the RVNAF, disrupt the flow of enemy personnel and supplies to South Vietnam, and greatly reduce the enemy's capability to launch an offensive in 1971.

(1) COSVN, the Central Office for South Vietnam, was the enemy head-quarters responsible for the geographical area under GVN Military Region 3, Military Region 4 and the five southern provinces of Military Region 2.)

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CHAPTER II

The Operational Environment

The Ho Chi Minh Trail System

A byproduct of the First Indochina War, 1946-1954, the footpath system that ran North-South along the Truong Son Mountain Range of Vietnam became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail; for a long time it had served the strategic purposes of the Viet Minh. From its jungle redoubt of North Vietnam's highlands) the Viet Minh High Command was faced with the pressing need for a secure communication system that would enable it to direct the war effort in South Vietnam and support its subversive activities in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. National Route No. 1 which ran parallel to the coastline was not practicable because of French control. Sea routes were available but the risks of running into French naval patrols and foul weather were forbiddingly high. Besides, the Viet Minh did not have a reliable) organized sea transportation fleet. Considering these circumstances, the heavily jungled mountains of the Truong Son Range lent themselves to the establishment of a secure line of communication generally free from observation and attacks.

It was this footpath system that kept the Viet Minh resistance in South Vietnam alive with fresh troops, weapons and ammunition. By the end of the First Indochina War, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been well developed although it was only a system of jungle paths connected by local secondary roads and suitable only to movement by foot, animals and

bicycles. Soldiers moved on foot but military Supplies, although usually carried by manpower, were sometimes transported on bicycles, oxcarts, horses or elephants. The narrow, steep pathways meandered

through dense jungles, across streams and mountains and a journey on the trail was exhausting and slow.

For a time after the Geneva Accords in 1954, the trail was practically abandoned since the war had ended. Then, when South Vietnam, under the leadership of President Ngo Dinh Diem, began restoring its stability and proving that it could stand on its own after repudiating reunification with North Vietnam, the Central Committee of North Vietnam's Communist Party decided on a new course of action against South Vietnam. In May 1959, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) High Command activated Transportation Group 559 under the direct control of its Rear Service (Logistics) Department. Group 559 was to be a special unit in charge of moving men and supplies into the South for the support of the insurgency effort which had just been initiated under the form of a "war of liberation." The trail's old pathways were rehabilitated and widened, and new ones were surveyed and projected. Group 559's task of enlarging this strategic axis of infiltration was pushed ahead with vigor and determination.

The increase of subversive activities against South Vietnam was in almost direct proportion to the development of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, since the Communist war effort in the South was largely sustained by a constant flow of cadre and troops from the North. At this early stage, the flow was sporadic because the journey was harsh and long for the men and the means of transporting supplies still primitive. But as pathways were eventually enlarged into roads, the means of transportation were also improved.

Prior to 1965, the Ho Chi Minh system was close to the Vietnam border, but after the United States became involved in the war and bombings increased, the Communists gradually shifted toward the west where they found the densely jungled areas of lower Laos and eastern Cambodia perfect sanctuaries for the movement or concentration of troops and the storage of weapons and war materiels.

Map1: The Ho Chi Minh Trail

By the end of the 1960's, the Ho Chi Minh trail had become an elaborate system of nearly 2,000 miles of pathways and roads, including some natural waterways(Map 1) . It started at Vinh, ran through the

Mu Gia Pass and other lesser passes such as Ban Karai and Ban Raving, penetrated into lower Laos and finally came out in northern Cambodia and the Tri-Border area of South

Vietnam. In several areas, the trail system was so extensive that it could be compared to a cobweb of crisscrossing roads making up a corridor of from 30 to 50 miles wide, complete with bridges (over or under water), culverts, river crossing ramps, much of it concealed under dense jungle canopies. With the assistance of Pathet Lao guerrillas, the estimated 50,000 troops of NVA Group 559 and about 100,000 Vietnamese volunteers and forced laborers maintained this vital artery.

To protect the corridor, the Communists established an elaborate defense and security system. The duty of Pathet Lao units was to intensify guerrilla activities and launch periodic attacks in order to keep the Royal Lao Army confined to the cities and towns along the Mekong River. The protection of the trail system and storage areas was performed by Group 559 itself. Augmented by infantry units and unattached militiamen, the group defense forces included anti-aircraft units armed with all types of light and heavy weapons, from 12.7-mm, 14.5-mm and 23-mm heavy machineguns to 37-mm, 57-mm and 100-mm anti-aircraft cannons.

Group 559 installed a forward headquarters in the southern panhandle of North Vietnam from where it controlled many 'binh trams' (literally troop stations). In 1970 there were about 40 such stations, from Vinh to the Cambodian border, under the control of a number of intermediary headquarters. Each binh tram was a self contained, logistical complex

responsible for a well defined area. Its subordinate units usually consisted of engineer troops, surface and waterway transportation elements, maintenance units, quartermaster and medical units, warehouses, and a certain number of way stations to support troop movements.

During the cessation of bombings in North Vietnam, trucks moved by convoy from Vinh down the trail. Upon reaching the Laotian border, they formed units of five to eight vehicles and usually moved only at night or in foul weather in order to avoid the round the clock bombing by United States Air Force planes. As a result, binh trams were usually separated from one another by a day's journey and their parking areas were scattered and well concealed. The vehicles moving on the trail only transported supplies and heavy materials. Light equipment was either carried on men's backs or by animals. Since troops had to march, they moved by day or night, using pathways different from those used by trucks. New recruits or replacements usually entered the system at Vinh in North Vietnam and often marched over 100 days to reach their final destination in South Vietnam. In view of this long journey, they had to rest and recuperate at way stations where they received food, medicine and indoctrinations. Combat units usually moved by battalions of 500- 600 men each and they often suffered substantial losses from disease and constant bombings by the U.S. Air Force.

Map2: The Trail System, Lower Laos - 1970

The extensive use of vehicles posed a fuel supply problem for the Communists. Until they built a pipeline system from Vinh to the Mu Gia Pass in 1968, all fuels were transported by trucks but by February 1969 the main pipeline had been extended to the Muong Nong area in Laos west of the A Shau valley(Map 2) . Fuel storage areas along this line became one of the major targets for bombings by American planes.

Map3: The Border Area, Military Region 1 & 2

As the insurgency intensified in South Vietnam, efforts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh supply line increased. As early as the first few years of the First Republic, President Ngo Dinh Diem implemented several plans aimed at controlling the territory adjacent to the Laos border. In Military Region 1, agrovilles were established in such areas as Lao Bao, A Shau, A Luoi and Nam Dong (Map 3). ARVN units regularly conducted reconnaissance patrols deep into the border areas adjacent to

Laos, particularly in the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Kontum. The enemy base area of Do Xa, which lay astride the boundary of MR-1 and MR-2, was a target for frequent ARVN attacks. In 1958, repair work began on the abandoned stretch of GVN National Route No. 14 which paralleled the Laotian border and connected Kontum with Hoi An in Quang Nam Province but the onset of the insurgency interrupted the work which was never resumed.

During the period from 1960 to 1965, as the fighting escalated, the GVN was unable to do anything against the Laos infiltration route but the United States made a significant contribution in 1961 when it helped organize the highlands Montagnards into combat units (CIDG's) and develop the Vietnamese Special Forces for the defense of the border areas. Against Communist activities on the Ho Chi Minh trail, however, neither the U.S. Army Special Forces nor their Vietnamese counterparts ever interdicted the Communist logistics system to a significant degree, even during the period of maximum effort. Also, the idea of building the "McNamara Line" of sensors across the Truong Son mountain range at the southern boundary of the DMZ was never fully implemented as planned.

The surveillance and interdiction of the trail, therefore, lay primarily in the hands of the U.S. Air Force whose reconnaissance planes covered the trail system around the clock. Ground electronic sensors planted along jungle pathways, river crossings, and mountain passes picked up vehicle and other man made noises, transmitted them to over flying planes which relayed the information to terminal stations to be analyzed and interpreted. The electronic monitoring of enemy activities on the trail system helped record the number of vehicles and men moving along the trail; consequently, intelligence on Communist infiltration was remarkably reliable.

In addition to surveillance, a major task for the United States Air Force was to interdict this infiltration. All types of aircraft were used including B-52 strategic bombers, sophisticated fighter-bombers and several types of gun ships. The U.S. Air Force claimed that its bombs and improved weapons systems inflicted heavy losses to the enemy in terms of personnel, vehicles and materiel moving down the

trail. In fact, in early 1971, the Air Force released the story that this interdiction was so effective that only one ton Out of every 32 tons shipped from North Vietnam ever reached its final destination in South Vietnam (1). Subsequent NVA offensive operations in South Vietnam demonstrated that the U.S. Air Force claim was greatly exaggerated.

Among the targets of intensive bombing were the mountain passes and roads which were pounded day and night. The enemy's efforts to repair the damage were complicated by his lack of heavy machinery, but he was resilient and stubborn. No sooner was a mountain road destroyed than a detour was completed.

Map4: The Logistical Area of Tchepone

The Ho Chi Minh Trail could supply about 50 percent of the enemy's combat needs; in other words, the trail was capable of sustaining Communist forces in RVN Military Regions 1 and 2. The port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia was used to support forces operating in RVN Military Regions 3 and 4. The coup in Phnom Penh during March 1970, however, closed the port. The Ho Chi Minh Trail then became essential for the enemy to support the entire war in South Vietnam. As a result, the NVA Transportation Group 559 received special reinforcements and during the second half of 1970, the enemy made a determined effort to develop logistical base area 604, adjacent to Quang Tri province (Map 4). Concurrently, he improved the existing base and road system in the eastern part of lower Laos. After his seizure of the cities of Attopeu and Saravane in Laos, he widened his trail system to the west in order to increase the flow of supplies and to complicate the U.S. Air Force's interdiction efforts.

At the beginning of 1970, the enemy's plan to rehabilitate Route 1036 was suspended for some time due to extensive United States bombing along the Laotian border. Nevertheless, he succeeded in opening Route 1039 through the Ban Raving Pass which connected with Route 913. This gave the enemy an additional route into Tchepone, the communications center for base area 604. In the meantime, Route 1032A in North Vietnam

allowed him to move his trucks to the western edge of the DMZ. Here his supplies were usually floated on the Houay Nam Xe River and then on the Xe Bang Hiang River southwesterly toward Tchepone where they were picked up before reaching the town.

To the south, the enemy had already completed Route 616 which cut across the Xepon River and deep into South Vietnam. The existence of this east-west infiltration route was detected for the first time on 1 January 1970 but subsequent surveillance indicated that enemy activities on it were light. The heaviest traffic was always reported on the north-south axis, moving from base area 604 on Routes 96, 926 and 914 toward base area 611.

By January 1971, Route 1032A had been connected with Route 1032B which gave the enemy an additional roadway into lower Laos from North Vietnam. Recordings made by electronic sensors indicated that of every four trucks leaving North Vietnam, one always moved on this route regardless of the bombings by United States planes west of the DMZ. Aerial photos also revealed that the enemy had built several alternate bypass routes in this area in order to avoid concentrated bombings and ensure the flow of traffic. Reconnaissance planes further reported that east-west Route 925 had been widened but terminated approximately two and a half miles from the GVN border. This appeared to indicate that the enemy wanted to project another infiltration route into the Khe Sanh area, west of Quang Tri but subsequent air reconnaissance showed that the enemy was using Route 616 for truck traffic and his activities were increasing substantially south of base area 611.

All of these indications clearly confirmed the enemy's efforts to open additional infiltration roads, develop storage areas, transhipment points and truck parks, and to make the entire area just west of Quang Tri Province an intricate logistical and transportation complex complete with pipelines and bypass roads. Furthermore, all these activities progressed with little interruption despite continuous bombings. The efforts were most conspicuous in base areas 604 and 611. On the other hand, to increase his protection capabilities, the enemy also moved additional anti-aircraft and combat units into these areas.

Enemy Situation in Northern Military Region I

In South Vietnam proper, no significant enemy activities were recorded in northern MR-1 during the entire first half of 1970. Enemy initiatives in this area consisted only of attacks by fire and small scale, sapper attacks. Targets were usually remote, small size fire support bases and outposts. The enemy main force units devoted this entire period to building roads, refitting troops, and storing food and supplies, but intelligence reports revealed that enemy forces were preparing to launch an offensive campaign against the two northernmost provinces of MR-1, probably in January 1971. Another agent's report disclosed that North Vietnam might strike forcefully into Quang Tri and Thua Thien during the spring and summer of 1971 with a goal to occupy the plains area of these two provinces. At the boundary area between Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, the enemy had further extended the newly rehabilitated Route 616 into the Da Krong River valley, apparently with a view to facilitate his supply movements into MR-1.

Map5: Enemy Deployment, Northern MR I

In terms of force structure, in the DMZ area, the enemy's B5 Front forces consisted most notably of three infantry regiments: the 207th, 27th, and 246th which were all deployed for the defense of this area; a number of artillery battalions; the 33d Sapper Battalion and the 126th Naval Sapper Regiment. Both of these sapper units usually conducted attacks along the DMZ area, against National Route No. 9 and the Cua Viet River. The 270th Regiment had the apparent mission of protecting the Vinh Linh area, north of the DMZ while the 164th Artillery Regiment was conducting training and defending the coastal area. (Map 5)

In the enemy Tri-Thien-Hue Military' Region, the enemy main force consisted of three regiments under direct control of the MR headquarters - Regiments 4, 5, and 6 - and a number of sapper battalions which usually operated within the MR and sometimes penetrated into the plains area of Thua Thien Province to interdict traffic on National Route No. 1. In addition, west of Thua Thien and in base area 611, the 324B NVA Division, supported by the 675th Artillery Regiment, was almost always deployed with its three infantry regiments, the 812th, 803d, and 29th.

Enemy Situation in the Laos Panhandle

Map6: Laos and North Viet Nam

The enemy had a sizable combat force in Laos (Map 6). Within the Royal Lao MR III area, this force was estimated at 42,000 men, consisting of 13 NVA battalions (5,000 men), 20 Pathet Lao battalions (5,000), and about 32,000 troops and cadres of Transportation Group 559. Further south in Royal Lao MR IV, enemy strength was estimated at 22,000 troops who made up 17 NVA battalions (7,000 men), 21 Pathet Lao battalions (4,000 men) and about 10,000 troops and cadres belonging to six binh trams of the 559th. In northern Laos, enemy strength was estimated at 33,000, consisting of 16,000 NVA and 17,000 Pathet Lao troops. However, intelligence estimates precluded the participation of these elements in any engagement west of Quang Tri.

Air reconnaissance and agent reports further confirmed the enemy's stepped up logistical activities and augmentation of combat forces at base areas 604 and 611 since the beginning of the lower Laos dry season. In October, 1970, an agent report revealed that a division size unit, approximately 10,000 strong, was leaving the Mu Gia Pass and moving south. It was believed at that time that this was the 320th NVA Division with its three organic regiments, the 48th, 52d, and 64th. Subsequent intelligence reports confirmed that the 52d Regiment was located west of the DMZ and the 64th Regiment was building

roads in Quang Binh Province, north of the DMZ. It was, therefore, probable that the 48th Regiment was the unit which was moving into base area 604.(2)

Map7: Enemy Disposition, Early February 1971

A rallier from the enemy B-7 Front reported that the 9th and 66th Regiments of the 304th NVA Division had returned to North Vietnam, leaving behind the 24B Regiment which used to operate west of Khe Sanh(Map 7). Air reconnaissance missions revealed traces of an enemy unit in the area west of Quang Tri. This was believed to be an element of the 24B Regiment. At the same time, the enemy 81st Artillery Battalion was

reported north of National Route No. 9. The detection of tracks in this area further indicated the presence of artillery pieces. (3)

In late December, 1970, aerial photography and air reconnaissance revealed an enemy effort to open Route 616 to vehicle traffic. This road appeared to head toward the Laotian salient, west of Quang Tri where the 812th Regiment, NVA 324B Division was reported. In this same area, the enemy was also increasing his logistical efforts and probably his engineer, logistical and anti-aircraft capabilities. Other intelligence data obtained from prisoners of war and an enemy cadre who had rallied to the Royal Lao Army indicated that the 141st and 9th Regiments (separate) were also operating in lower Laos under control of the Communist Southern Laotian Front. It was probable that the 141st Regiment would move back to Quang Nam after being refitted.

In the meantime, the enemy 2d Division seemed to be going through a refitting process with its two regiments, the 1st and 3d, in an area north of base area 612. This division was probably preparing to return to Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces in southern MR-1, but it was possible for it to be deployed as reinforcement to the Tchepone area in Laos if required. (4)

In addition to Communist combat units reported in the proposed operational area west of Quang Tri Province or in its vicinities, there were eight binh trams that had been recently reinforced with approximately 20 anti-aircraft battalions (5). Not all of these battalions were fully equipped but since each battalion could have from 2 to 16 anti-aircraft

weapons, it was estimated that the enemy's medium caliber anti-aircraft artillery deployed in the proposed operational area numbered from 170 to 200 pieces of 23-mm to 100-mm in caliber.

In summary, enemy forces in the area of operation were estimated at three infantry regiments (Regiments 48/320, 243/304, and 812/324B), an artillery element and the binh

tram units whose most important capability was anti-aircraft. Total enemy strength in the area was estimated at 22,000 to include 7,000 NVA combat troops, 10,000 men belonging to logistic units, and 5,000 Pathet Lao soldiers (Map 7).

The enemy's capability to reinforce within a short time (2 weeks) was estimated at eight regiments which were: the 52d and 64th Regiments of the 320th Division, the 29th and 803d Regiments of the 324B Division, the 3d and 1st Regiments of the 2d Division, and the 141st and 9th Separate Regiments, all supported by artillery elements. Additionally, enemy reinforcement capabilities from North Vietnam were also considered by planning staffs and field commanders.

Finally, in January 1971, agent reports disclosed that Communist units located north of the DMZ had received alert orders. The enemy B-5 front was reported making preparations to face an attack by allied forces against the provinces of southern North Vietnam. Remembering his losses during the Cambodia incursion of the previous year, it appeared that the enemy was consolidating his general defensive posture, and would devote particular attention to the security of his infiltration and supply corridor in lower La08 during the remaining months of the 1971 dry season.

The Area of Operation

Map8: The Area of Operation

To inflict maximum damage on the enemy logistic and infiltration corridor system, all intelligence indicated that Tchepone would be the decisive objective area. This area was unpopulated except for a few Montagnards living in the vicinity of Khe Sanh - Lang Vei and a very sparse population in Tchepone itself. Intelligence revealed that all villages and towns whose names appeared on our maps had been evacuated or largely destroyed by the protracted war. (Map 8)

North of the Thach Han River, the terrain of Quang Tri Province could be divided into three general regions: (1) the lowlands bordering on the sea, which was flat terrain not exceeding 10 meters in elevation; (2) the piedmont region which ran west from National Route No. 1 to a depth of between 15 and 20 kilometers with an average elevation of about 300 meters; (3) and the westernmost mountainous region of the Truong Son Range with elevations up to 1,600 meters.

The vegetation of Quang Tri province reflected the characteristics of these three geographical regions. The flat coastal plains were usually inundated, which permitted rice planting and the agglomeration of farming villages. The piedmont region was dry and sterile with vegetation not taller than a man's height, consisting mostly of scattered

bushes. The mountainous region was generally covered by rain forests whose trees grew taller further to the west. These were double and triple canopied forests with very dense undergrowth consisting mostly of bamboo and thorny under- bushes. River valleys in this region were fertile and favored crop planting. The Lao Bao Valley, for example, was renowned for its coffee and fruit trees.

The primary line of communication (LOC) in the province was National Route No. 1 which ran north-south close to the coastal plains. A secondary LOC was National Route No. 9 which ran from a junction with Route No. 1 in the vicinity of Dong Ha west to the Laotian border. From Dong Ha to Son Lam hamlet (close to FSB Vandegrift), Route No. 9 was a two lane, all weather, hard surfaced road, occasionally subjected to enemy harassment. West of FSB Vandegrift it became a dirt road usable only in good weather; this stretch was insecure and had several destroyed bridges. The Khe Sanh airfield, which had been abandoned for a long time, would require extensive repairs to be operational.

The Thach Ran River, a major tributary of the Cua Viet River, was a major waterway linking the cities of Quang Tri and Dong Ha with the sea. Because of its proximity to the DMZ, this river was continually a target for minings and sabotage by enemy frogmen.

To the west beyond the Laotian border, the terrain was predominantly mountainous. The area of operation on this side of the border was

characterized by three prominent features. The first of these was the Xepon River which ran south and then parallel to Route No. 9 until it reached Tchepone where it met the Xe Bang Hiang River, the primary north-south waterway in the area. During the rainy season, when most ground lines of communication were inundated, the enemy used the Xe Biang Hiang River to float supplies downstream.

The second prominent terrain feature was the Co Roc Highland adjacent to the Laotian border and just south of Route No. 9. This highland had several peaks with elevations ranging from 500 to 850 meters which dominated Route No. 9 to the east and west. It also provided excellent observation into the Khe Sanh area. The vegetation in the Co Roc area consisted primarily of bamboo and brushwood, offering adequate cover and concealment.

The third significant terrain feature was a high escarpment whose ridgeline extended all the way to Tchepone, parallel to and south of Route No. 9 and the Xepon River. Several peaks of this ridgeline were 600 to 700 meters high and offered excellent observation over Route No. 9 and the Tchepone area. Much of the area was covered by dense jungle and thick brushwood except for a few places which had been cleared for farming.

The terrain north of Route No. 9 was hilly and heavily vegetated against a backdrop of relatively high peaks which restricted operations in this area almost entirely to infantry.

Around Tchepone, the terrain was much lower, sparsely vegetated and more appropriate for armor vehicles.

Route No. 9 from Khe Sanh to Tchepone was a one lane, unevenly surfaced dirt road with destroyed bridges and culverts. Dominated by the high escarpment to the south, this road was easily interdicted. It also was difficult to prepare bypasses due to the river to the south and the hilly terrain to the north.

Map9: The Main Trail System and Base Areas

In addition to Route No. 9, which was an old public road, the enemy had completed in the area west of the Laotian border an extensive, criss-crossing system of lines of communication (Map 9). Most important of these was Route 1032 which connected with Route 92 and offered direct access from North Vietnam and the western DMZ area into base area 604, then base area 611, and from there into South Vietnam either by Route 92 or Route 616 or Route 922 further to the south. Another route, designated

Route 1039, also originating in North Vietnam passed through the Ban Raving Pass and offered access into Tchepone and base area 604 then connected with either Route 29 to go further south or with Route 914 which led into base area 611 and from there into South Vietnam. All these routes were well maintained two lane roads practicable for large trucks at least during the dry season. Due to extensive bombings, the enemy had built several alternate routes which were well concealed by vegetation and often under double and triple canopies. In addition to main routes, the enemy also built narrow pathways crisscrossing the entire area. These were difficult to observe from the air and were convenient for concealing troop movements.

February in the Tchepone area was the transitional period from the northeast to the southwest monsoons. The northeast monsoon, which brought rains and cloudiness to Central Vietnam above the Hai Van Pass from October to March, was the dominant weather factor. The Truong Son mountain range deflected much of this wet weather on the Laotian side but in the area of operation, the skies were generally covered. The amount of cumulus buildup in this area depended on the strength and depth of the monsoon. Average temperature during February was 220C in the lowlands and about 180C in mountainous regions.

As of mid March, the southwest monsoon gradually picked up, resulting in a relative improvement of the weather and higher ceilings. The average temperature was warmer than in February but this was a period of showers during which the skies were temporarily covered. Beginning in May, however, rainfall became heavier over the Truong Son Range while in the eastern lowlands, the weather was dry and hot.

In general, during the period considered for the operation, the weather was fairly good but quite unpredictable. From experience, it was estimated that the area of operations would be cloudy and hazy in the morning. The weather was favorable for air operations only from 1000-1200 hours until mid afternoon. The 2,500-foot ceiling in the low lands would allow only a l,000-foot altitude' in the area of operation. This was recognized as a major handicap since all aircraft used in support missions would be located in the lowlands and would have to be
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flown first to the Khe Sanh airfield. Low ceilings and hazardous mountains would force helicopters flying frontline support missions to follow natural avenues of approach such as valleys and rivers which the enemy could interdict with ease. This handicap was going to be an important factor affecting the course of combat operations.
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(1)"Untold Story of the Ho Chi Minh Trail", U.S. News and World Report, February 15, 1971.

(2)All enemy units referred to in this monograph are infantry unless otherwise specified.

(3)U.S. XXIV Corps Operation Order, LAM SON 719, dated 23 January 1971, Annex B (Intelligence), p. B-5.

(4)No distinction is made here between NVA and Viet Cong units because it does not make sense to dwell on this technicality when 3/4 of the so called Viet Cong units were made up of NVA troops and the majority of their commanders and staffs were North Vietnamese.

(5)U.S. XXIV Corps Operation Order, LAM SON 719 dated 23 January 1971, Annex B (Intelligence): Appendix 2 (Anti-Aircraft Capability), p. B-2-1.

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Indochina Monographs

LAM SON 719

by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh

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Glossary

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CHAPTER III

The Planning Phase

How It All Started

To the South Vietnamese political and military leaders, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had always been like a thorn in the back to be removed at any cost whenever there was a chance. The possibility that something could be done about it began to take shape as the war intensified and U.S. combat forces helped regain the military initiative in 1966.

One of the leading Vietnamese strategists, General Cao Van Vien, who was both Chairman of the Joint General Staff and Minister of Defense at that time, was the first to advocate the severance of the Communist lifeline. In a testimony given before members of the National Leadership Committee, who ruled the country from June 1965 to September 1967, General Vien propounded an offensive strategy, called the "strategy of isolation and severance" for the effective defense of South Vietnam. This was in essence a two pronged strategy aimed at isolating the Communist infrastructure and guerrillas from the population within South Vietnam by pacification on the one hand, and severing North Vietnam's umbilical cord with its southern battlegrounds on the other. To implement this severance action, he proposed to invade North Vietnam's southern panhandle with the objective of seizing the city of Vinh, the northern terminal of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and at the same time establishing a strong defense line across northern Quang Tri Province to run the entire length of National Route No. 9 from the eastern coast to the Mekong River bank. This operation assumed the participation of U.S. and other Free World Military Assistance Forces. The attack against the two southernmost North Vietnamese provinces - Thanh Hoa and Nghe An - and their

eventual occupation, would serve as leverage for bargaining in truce negotiations while the defense line along Route No. 9 would give the RVN a reasonable chance to defend itself after its forces would have been withdrawn from North Vietnam's panhandle. Such was the general outline of General Vien's strategy which subsequently became the widely commented subject of several lectures and magazine articles. (1)

General Vien's concept remained only that because South Vietnam was unable to perform this momentous task all by itself.

In early January 1971, General Crighton W. Abrams, COMUSMACV, called on General Vien at the JGS and suggested an operation into lower Laos. With the unrealized concept still nurtured in his mind, General Vien gladly agreed. Meeting with General Vien again a few days later, General Abrams explained his concept of the operation on a map. U.S. forces were to clear the way to the border by conducting an operation inside South Vietnam. The main effort was to be conducted by RVNAF airborne and armor forces along Route No. 9 in coordination with a heliborne assault into Tchepone. The purpose was to search and destroy base area 604. Other RVAAF units would be employed to cover the northern and southern flanks of the main effort. For the support of the operation, maximum U.S. assets would be provided. After searching and destroying base area 604, ARVN forces would shift their effort toward base area 611. At the end of the meeting, both General Abrams and General Vien agreed to have staff officers work out an operational plan.

General Vien then reported his discussions with General Abrams to President Nguyen Van Thieu because he knew this cross-border operation was going to have international repercussions. Being a military man himself and well versed in military strategy, President Thieu immediately approved the operation.

Recognizing the political realities, General Vien had long since abandoned the idea of an invasion of North Vietnam as part of an operation to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but still his concept differed somewhat from that presented by General Abrams. General Vien advocated

an airborne operation into Tchepone as the first step. Then after searching, the paratroopers would attack east to link up with an armor-infantry task force moving along Route No. 9. After link-up, the forces could shift their effort southward toward base area 611. General Vien conceived the foray into Laos to be a raid, an operation of short duration and ordered his J-3 to look for drop-zones around Tchepone. Later, because he felt he should go along with the MACV concept in order to obtain the necessary U.S. support assets, he abandoned this concept and did not even discuss it with General Abrams.

In mid January the J-3, JGS, Colonel Tran Dinh Tho, and his MACV counterpart flew to Da Nang. Colonel Tho's mission was to brief Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, Commander of I Corps and MR-l on the concept of the operation. The meeting took place discreetly at Headquarters, US XXIV Corps. General Lam was taken to a private briefing room where, in front of a general situation map, Colonel Tho explained how the operation was to be conducted as conceived by the Joint General Staff(2). The main effort of the operation, he said, was to be launched along National Route No. 9 into Laos with the objective of cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the region of base area 604 and destroying all enemy installations and supplies stored there. After this mission had been accomplished, the operational forces were to move south and sweep through base area 611 to further create havoc to the enemy's logistic system before returning to South

Vietnam. This operation was to be conducted and controlled by the I Corps Command which, in addition to its organic units, would be augmented by the entire Airborne Division and two Marine brigades. The third Marine brigade and the Marine Division Headquarters would be available if required. As to U.S. forces, they were going to conduct operations on the RVN side of the border and provide the ARVN operating forces with artillery, helilift and tactical air support. This concept of operations thus coincided in near totality with the one initially proposed by COMUSMACV.

After this exclusive briefing, General Lam met in private with Lieutenant General Sutherland, Commander U.S. XXIV Corps. General Sutherland's staff had already begun planning after receiving the MACV directive on 7 January, but now joint planning could begin in earnest. A joint planning committee with strictly limited membership began working on the operational plan at the headquarters compound of U.S. XXIV Corps. The only I Corps staff members involved were the G-3 and the G-2. On the U.S. side, the same restriction on the planning staff was initially observed. Both staffs worked closely together in a specially arranged area with limited and controlled access.

On 17 January, planning guidance was provided by I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps to participating units under the guise of "Plans for the 1971 Spring-Sumer Campaign" and on 21 January, General Lam and General Sutherland flew to Saigon, where, during a meeting at MACV Headquarters, they submitted the plan to the Chairman of the JGS and the MACV Commander(3). Intelligence estimates on which the detailed operational concept was formulated were also carefully reviewed. Subsequently on the same day, General Lam personally presented his operational plan to President Thieu.

The Basic Operational Plan

The combined operation was code named LAM SON 719(4). It was to be executed in four phases during an indefinite period of time with the objective of destroying enemy forces and stockpiles and cutting enemy lines of communications in base areas 604 and 611. (5)

Map10: Operation Plan, Phase I (Dewey Canyon II)

In Phase I, which was to be called Operation Dewey Canyon II, the 1st Brigade, U.S. 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), reinforced, was to advance on D-Day, occupy the Khe Sanh area, and clear Route No. 9 up to the Laotian border, ARVN troop assembly areas, and forward artillery positions required for support of the operation (Map 10). In the meantime, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), while continuing its operations

in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, was to conduct artillery attacks by fire in the A Shau Valley, west of Thua Thien Province from D-Day to D+4 (a diversionary action) and in cooperation with the 2d Regiment, 1st ARVN Infantry Division to be prepared to defend the areas south of the DMZ. The U.S. 45th Engineer Group was assigned the mission to repair Route No. 9 up to the Laotian border and rehabilitate the Khe Sanh airstrip for C-130 use. Tactical air was to be provided by the U.S. 7th Air Force, B-52 strikes by CINCSAC, and gunships and artillery by units of U.S. XXIV Corps. During Phase I, ARVN forces were to complete their movements toward assembly areas and be prepared to attack on order across the border into lower Laos.

Map11: Operation Plan, Phase II

In Phase II, on D-Day, I Corps forces, following intensive preparation fires, were to launch their attack into lower Laos. The major effort was to be conducted along Route No. 9 by the ABN Division reinforced by the 1st Armor Brigade, engineer and artillery elements. While the 1st Armor Brigade (with its two squadrons 11 and 17) and engineer troops moved along Route No. 9, repairing it as they progressed, en ABN battalion was to be helilifted into Objective A Luoi (geographical name: Ban Dong) and two other ABN battalions were to establish fire support bases - one eight kilometers northwest and the other eight kilometers northeast of A Luoi - to the north(Map 11). Battalions of the 1st Infantry Division's 1st and 3d Regiments were to be inserted by helicopter and establish FSBs on the Co Roc elevation south of Route No. 9 to protect the I Corps southern flank. The 1st Ranger Group with its three battalions, the 21st, 37th and 39th, was to be helilifted north of Route No. 9 to occupy blocking positions more than 16 kilometers to the northeast of A Luoi and protect the northern flank of the ABN Division. After the completion of this troop movement, the armor brigade would attack westward from Objective A

Luoi to link-up with the third ABN Brigade which was to be helilifted into Tchepone. The Marine 147th and 258th Brigades would serve as I Corps reserves at Khe Sanh.

Also during Phase II, the U.S. 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) was to continue operations west of Quang Tri Province and the U.S. 101st ABN Division (Airmobile) was to continue security operations as during Phase I and provide reinforcements and combat support as required. The ARVN "Black Panther" (reconnaissance) company, 1st Infantry Division, in the meantime, was to be attached to the U.S. 101st ABN Division and employed in rescue missions, if required, to extract U.S. crew members shot down in Laos.

Phase III was to be initiated after the successful occupation of Tchepone. It was to be the exploitation phase during which search operations would be expanded to destroy enemy bases and stockpiles. The ABN Division would search the area of Tchepone while the 1st Infantry Division would conduct search operations to the south. The 1st Ranger Group,

meanwhile, would continue holding blocking positions to the north. During Phase III, the mission of U.S. forces was unchanged; they would continue to provide fire support, helilift and tactical and strategic air for ARVN units.

Phase IV was the withdrawal phase. On order, I Corps forces were to withdraw toward the border by one of two alternate routes called Options 1 and 2. In Option 1, the ABN Division and the 1st Armor Brigade were to withdraw to Objective A Luoi to support and cover the 1st Infantry Division which was to attack and search the western part of base area 611 then move on southeastward, followed by the ABN Division. In the meantime, the 1st Armor Brigade, augmented by the 1st Ranger Group from its northern positions and having been separated from the ABN Division, was to withdraw toward Khe Sanh along Route No. 9. The Marine 147th and 258th Brigades were to conduct operations into the Laotian salient toward Objective Ngok Tovak at the same time as the 1st Infantry Division began its attack to the southeast. Option 2 differed from Option 1 only during the last stage of the withdrawal when, after sweeping through base area 611, the 1st Infantry Division, to be followed by the ABN Division, was to

change direction and move eastward through the Laotian salient toward an area near Route No. 9. The mission of U.S. forces during this final phase was to remain unchanged.

On 22 January, XXIV Corps and I Corps completed preparation of their operational orders. On D-Day, 30 January the Forward CP of I Corps was to be established at Dong Ha; it was to include a small command element to be located at Ham Nghi FSB, south of Khe Sanh. The Forward CP of the U.S. XXIV Corps was to move to Quang Tri combat base the day before. The I Corps forces were to cross the border on 8 February. During a combined briefing session held at Dong Ha on 2 February, the I Corps operation orders were disseminated to all participating units (6). (Chart 1)

Chart1: Task Organization, LAM SON 719, Early February 1971

To assist in the execution of LAM SON 719, MACV planned a diversion in the form of a maneuver involving U.S. naval and marine units off the coast of Thanh Hoa Province (North Vietnam).

Division Planning and Preparations

The main effort of LAM SON 719 was assigned to the Airborne Division and on 18 January 1971, during a meeting at I Corps Headquarters, the division commander, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong, learned this for the first time. He immediately ordered his division, at the ABN Division rear base in Saigon to begin preparations for

deployment. Meanwhile, the U.S. advisory team on 27 January visited headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, to receive first hand briefings and report on ABN preparations. ABN units deployed on an operation in War Zone C (north of Tay Ninh) were withdrawn to receive additional training by U.S. advisers on communications and the employment of U.S. gunships and supply and medevac helicopters, as well as air-ground communications with supporting U.S. tactical aircraft.

General Dong flew to Dong Ha on 1 February 1971 and was followed during the next few days by his staff, the U.S. ABN Division advisory team, and combat and support units.

The ABN Division began its operational planning only after it received detailed guidance from the I Corps commander on 2 February during the combined staff meeting at Dong Ha, where the I Corps Forward CP was now located.

The combat plan developed by the Airborne Division called for successive heliborne operations to occupy Objectives 30, 31 and A Luoi in coordination with an armor-infantry thrust along Route No. 9. Intermediate objectives, on which fire support bases would be established, would be seized in the advance to Tchepone, after which battalion sized blocking positions would be occupied around Tchepone. The heliborne operations to occupy A Luoi and Tchepone would be conducted as soon as the armor-infantry thrust progressed near the objectives. This was to be a coordinated advance so timed as to provide immediate link-up at the objectives. (Map 11)

Initially, the armor-infantry thrust consisted of two squadrons, the 11th and 17th of the 1st Armor Brigade, the 1st Airborne Brigade (with its three battalions: 1st, 8th and 9th), the 44th Artillery Battalion (155-mm) and the 101st Engineer Battalion. This task force was to advance along Route No. 9, repair roads as it moved and link-up with heliborne units. The 3d Airborne Brigade (three battalions: 2d, 3d and 6th) would be the heliborne force assigned to occupy objectives and establish FSBs north of the road. For the assault on Tchepone, the mission was given to the 2nd Airborne Brigade which consisted of three battalions, the 5th, 7th and 11th. The troop pick-up point for airborne operations would be Ham Nghi Base. The Airborne Division operation plan was presented to Lt. General Hoang Xuan Lam on 3 February who immediately approved it in principle.

Of the two Marine brigades to be provided by the JGS, the 258th Brigade with one artillery and three infantry battalions was operating in an area southwest of Quang Tri. The other brigade, the 147th after regrouping its detached units, completed its movement by C-130 to Dong Ha on 3 February. Both brigades were to be employed as I Corps reserves and given the temporary mission of security for ARVN forces on the RVN side of the border.

The I Corps organic forces that participated in the operation were the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Ranger Group and 1st Armor Brigade, all immediately available. The 1st Armor Brigade with its two squadrons was attached to the Airborne Division. The 1st Ranger Group was assigned the security mission on the northern flank of the operational area. Its three lightly equipped battalions would be deployed in screening positions facing north (7). The 1st Infantry Division, meanwhile, would deploy its two regiments, the 1st and 3d, to its area of operation south of Route No. 9 with the mission of blocking enemy forces from the south and simultaneously searching enemy base area 611. Its two other regiments, the 2d and 54th, which would not participate in the operation, but would remain where they were, east of the DMZ area and west of Hue, respectively.

U. S. Support

It was apparent that due to the lack of helicopters, tactical air and long range artillery, I Corps could not conduct such a large scale operation away from its support bases without assistance. United States support was therefore required, not only to compensate for I Corps' lack of assets but also to provide the kind of mobility and firepower needed for combat against a heavily defended enemy stronghold in rugged terrain. Therefore, the U.S. XXIV Corps was charged with planning for this substantial support.

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(8). To compensate for the absence of advisers who always helped in communicating with U.S. units for support, it was decided to assign a Vietnamese serviceman-interpreter to each of the FAC teams and to the 7th Air Force airborne command and control center. It was also planned that one member of each division advisory team would be airborne over the AO of their respective units. This was intended to alleviate some of the problems related to language and communications.

The U.S. 108th Artillery Group received the mission of augmenting the firepower of I Corps Artillery. 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).

Procedures for coordination and liaison were clearly established. Fire coordination was to be effected at I Corps FSCC between fire support elements of I Corps and XXIV Corps,

and communications with I Corps artillery was to be maintained through U.S. advisers. Plans were also made to provide for close coordination between supporting and supported units. This was done by an exchange of liaison officers between the U.S. 108th Artillery Group and ARVN infantry divisions and brigades operating separately. Fire support requests from ARVN units in Laos could be routed through either one of two alternate channels. The first channel was from requesting units to division or separate command posts where the U.S. 108th Artillery Group's liaison officers would receive and

forward all requests to supporting units. Through the second channel, operational units were able to send fire support requests directly to their liaison officers posted at the U.S 108th Artillery Group CP where the requests would be immediately routed to the fire direction centers (FDC) of supporting units. Fire coordination with the U.S. 4/77 Aerial Artillery Battalion was to follow the same channels as those of the 108th Artillery Group to which the battalion would attach liaison officers to collect fire data or requests.

Of prime importance to the entire operation was the mobility support provided by United States helicopters of all types. The U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) was assigned this support responsibility. Having to continue its current missions inside South Vietnam which were greatly expanded due to the redeployment of a number of ARVN units and to provide operational support in lower Laos at the same time, the 101st Airborne Division obviously could not meet all the requirements with its organic assets, so the division was augmented with four Assault Helicopter Companies (UH- lH), two Assault Support Helicopter Companies (CH-47), two Air Cavalry Troops and two Assault Helicopter battalion headquarters, all detached from other U.S. divisions. This reinforcement was to be more substantial on days when special requirements arose. Each U.S. assault helicopter battalion was made responsible for providing direct support to an ARVN major unit. Thus the 158th Assault Helicopter Battalion was assigned to support the ARVN Airborne Division and its reinforcements and the 223d Combat Assault Battalion was to pr6vide support for the ARVN 1st Infantry Division while the 14th Combat Assault Battalion would support the Vietnamese Marine brigades. Each of these support battalions was to attach a liaison team to the ARVN unit to be supported and each U.S battalion commander was required to visit the ARVN unit he supported every day. In case additional support units were provided, they would be placed under the operational control of these commanders. The commander of the 101st Aviation Group, 101st Airborne Division was to exercise operational control over all assault, assault support and aerial weapons helicopter units (Chart 2). In addition, an Assistant Commander of the 101st Airborne Division was designated as the aviation support coordinator.

Chart2: U.S. Army Aviation Task Organization

To solve problems related to tactical air support, certain flexible arrangements were made. An airborne command and control center of the United States 7th Air Force (AFCCC) was to operate around the clock aboard a C-130 aircraft to receive support requests, provide guidance for preplanned tactical air sorties, to make decisions on the employment of assets, and to ensure that additional sorties would be available in case of emergency. All forward air controller (FAC) teams, each assigned a Vietnamese interpreter, were to cover the areas of operation assigned to ARVN divisions and separate brigades. Initially, 200 tactical air sorties were planned for, each day. Emergency tactical air support requests would be initiated by ground units and sent to the airborne FAC team which would relay them to the 7th Air Force AFCCC, also airborne, for immediate action. Preplanned sorties would have to be requested through the normal channel which went from the Tactical Air Control Parties (TACP), attached to ARVN divisions, to I Corps Fire Co-ordination Control Center/Direct Air Support Center (FSCC/DASC) and from there to the XXIV Corps Forward Direct Air Support Center at Quang Tri. To facilitate air support missions in bad weather or at night, an air support radar team (ASRT) of the U.S. Marines at Quang Tri would be provided at Khe sanh from where it could cover the entire area of operation in lower Laos. A number of U.S. naval air sorties to be launched from aircraft carriers USNS Hancock, Kitty Hawk and Ranger was also planned. Finally, LAM SON 719 was to receive the highest priority in strategic air sorties provided by the Unites States Strategic Air Command.

Solving Logistic Problems

In addition to combat and combat support planning, an important area that required extensive pre-arrangements was logistics. Unfortunately, the ARVN 1st Area Logistics Command, which was responsible for logistical support for I Corps and MR-l, was excluded from the operational planning staff because of security and restrictive measures. Therefore, when this, logistic command received orders to make preparations

for support, it was too late. But this tardiness was in no way an insurmountable obstacle. A big, helping hand was extended by the U.S. Army Support Command, Da Nang. U.S. support and the division of tasks between U.S and ARVN logistics units were planned as follows:

Map12: U.S. Army Logistic Plan, LAM SON 719

from D-day to D+8 I Corps units were to receive the same support from U.S. logistic agencies as United States units. During the period from D+9 to D+17 the ARVN 1st Area Logistics Command was to gradually take over responsibility for the support of operational forces. U.S. logistic agencies would be deployed to the assembly area ahead of time and would initiate support activities when the operation was launched. Under the

delegation of authority from and with reinforcements provided by the Da Nang Support Command, the U.S. 26th General Support Group (GSG) was to establish a base support area (BSA) at Quang Tri to be operational on D-Day. Two forward logistic agencies were also to be established: Forward Support Area (FSA) 26-1 in the Ca Lu - Vandegrift area to begin operations on D-day, to be followed by FSA 26-2 at Khe Sanh which would become operational during the period from D+4 to D+6. (Map 12)

During the initial period, no significant difficulties were encountered by U.S. logistic units in supplying ARVN forces because most supply items were similar with the exception of some special types of ammunition, for example 57-mm recoilless, and more particularly, combat rations. The ammunition items were no longer available in the U.S. supply system and ARVN combat rations were radically different from U.S. C-rations. As a result adequate ARVN combat rations were immediately shipped to class I supply points operated by United States forward support areas.

Map13: ARVN Logistics Plan, LAM SON 719

On its part, the ARVN 1st Area Logistic Command planned to establish three main support areas at Phu Bai (near Hue), Quang Tri and Khe Sanh(Map 13). To facilitate coordination of activities and the maintenance of security it was decided that U.S. and ARVN logistic agencies would be co-located and there should be an exchange of liaison officers as well as logistic data between the two staff elements at Da Nang and in forward support areas.

The most vital consideration in logistic support planning was supply routes and transportation. The major axes of road communication available were Routes No. 1 and No. 9. While No. 1 was a two way all weather road from Da Nang to Dong Ha, truck traffic from the Dong Ha junction had to move westward on No. 9. This was possible only to Vandegrift base. From Vandegrift to the Laotian border, No. 9 was extensively damaged with many destroyed bridges. Therefore, U.S. engineer units were charged with repairing and rehabilitating this stretch of road. The control of traffic movements on Routes No. 1 and 9 would require very close coordination between U.S. and ARVN traffic management agencies.

Map14: Integrated Transportation System, LAM SON 719

In sea transportation, the port of Tan My and the Dong Ha ramp, about 8 miles upstream from the Cua Viet rivermouth, were to serve as major shipping points. Both facilities were operated by U.S. forces. Most ARVN supplies would be shipped by LST to Tan My where they would be unloaded with the assistance of U.S. terminal personnel. For the shuttle of supplies between Tan My and long Ha, a number of American intercoastal ships would be used to assist the ARVN 1st ALC. (Map 14)

In air transportation, the two existing airfields at Quang Tri and Dong Ha were ready for immediate use. The abandoned airstrip at Khe Sanh, however, needed extensive repairs by U.S. engineer units and was scheduled to become operational on D+6 to accommodate C-130 cargo planes. Several U.S. C-130 planes were also earmarked for the ARVN to transport emergency supplies directly to Khe Sanh. Due to the sizable quantity of helicopters required to support the operation, the supply of aviation fuel was an important problem. ARVN quartermaster units were assigned additional assets for the transportation of fuels, and the establishment of forward storage facilities and supply points.

To move supplies to forward combat units operating along Route No. 9, ground transportation was planned. For those units operating far from the road, helicopters would be used both for re-supply and medical evacuation. As to the movement of heavy items of supply to forward areas, the only means available would be large U.S. cargo helicopters.

Observations

The entire planning process - and the resultant operations plan - for LAM SON 719 indicated a carefully considered decision arrived at by responsible U.S. and GVN political and military authorities. The authorities of each country - the US and the GVN - considered in their decisions the best intelligence available to them at the time and each approached the problem with the best interests of his own country in mind. Of course each was influenced by the political and military factors peculiar to his own country. Tchepone, the crossroads of enemy supply routes, appeared to be a well selected objective since all enemy logistic and infiltration movements south had to go through this area. According to intelligence reports, this was indeed an area where important enemy storage facilities were located. The time had finally arrived to sever by ground attacks the lifeline which had sustained enemy warring capabilities for so many years. This was a sound and bold decision following several years of reconnaissance and interdiction efforts from the air.

The time frame selected for the operation was also appropriate in that the dry season in the Laotian panhandle had begun three months earlier. After his substantial losses in Cambodia during 1970, the enemy was using the dry season to the maximum for the movement of replacements south and to replenish his supplies; the enemy was conducting an aggressive "logistic offensive." The amount of supplies in transit and in these storage facilities was substantial and if we succeeded in destroying them, the blow on the enemy would be most devastating. He would be in serious trouble, not only from our spoiling actions during the remaining three months of the dry season, but also because time was running out for the movement of supplies for that year.

Despite the continuation of redeployments, United States military presence in South Vietnam was still substantial enough to support a large scale offensive by the ARVN. If this offensive were deferred, U.S. support would no longer be as adequate and as effective. This was

another consideration of prime importance which contributed to the decision to conduct LAM SON 719 at this time.

Once the decision was made, the speed with which planning and preparations progressed was amazing. Only two weeks after planning guidance was received, operational orders had been developed by I Corps and XXIV Corps. This was indicative of how close and effective cooperation and coordination between U.S. and ARVN staffs had been.

The exchange of intelligence proved to be particularly beneficial to ARVN forces. Lacking long range reconnaissance facilities, the ARVN intelligence system could not provide adequate data on the Ho Chi Minh trail and North Vietnam. It was obvious that almost all information concerning enemy capabilities in the target area had to be supplied by the United States.

Combat support provided by the U.S. XXIV Corps for I Corps was another indication of the outstanding support provided by MACV. The I Corps unit commanders who were to participate in the operation felt encouraged and unusually enthusiastic because of this. To them, this was an opportunity not only to prove I Corps combat effectiveness but also to compete with their colleagues of III and IV Corps who had participated in the Cambodia incursion the previous year. Finally, the fact that no U.S. combat troops were to cross the border and that even U.S. advisers were precluded from the operation made the role of ARVN units even more prominent.

In spite of the sound decision, the effective cooperation and coordination between the RVNAF and MACV and the support allocated by the United States, several problem areas cropped up during the planning phase which should receive special attention. First, the entire process of planning and operational preparations appeared to have taken place in a great rush. Considering the scale of the operation and the importance of the objectives, the time involved for planning might have been too short. To ensure utmost secrecy, participating units were given only a short time to prepare. In the face of such a difficult campaign which was to be conducted over unfamiliar terrain, the question that naturally arose was: were I Corps units prepared to

meet all the unforeseeable challenges? The events that subsequently occurred during the operation left no doubt as to the answer to this question. Then there was the questionable

wisdom in selecting a single road axis for the major effort of the offensive. Hemmed in by dense jungle and rough mountainous terrain, this type of road did not lend itself readily to heavy logistic activities. In South Vietnam, such difficulties in road transportation could be removed by the alternate use of waterways or U.S. airlift facilities. But in lower Laos, jungles, rough mountains and steep valleys, added to the stubbornness of the enemy, created serious problems that should have received more attention. While there were plans for infantry units to advance and withdraw using different routes, mechanized and armor units were confined to Route No. 9. The holding of this route required the relative superiority of friendly forces, which was not the case.

Next was the tactic of establishing fire support bases. In view of the single axis available to progress through mountains, the effective control of the area of operation and the conduct of search activities depended on the capability of our forces being deployed on both sides of the road, north and south. In our case, the operational plan called for the advance of infantry forces through a series of fire support bases. Each new leap forward necessarily required an additional number of these bases. The use of fire support bases had been successful in South Vietnam but this success depended a great deal on the over-whelming firepower and initiative of United States forces in the face of a less endowed enemy. To be effective in lower Laos, it was apparent that fire support bases would have to enjoy the same conditions. The question was: would it be feasible? If it was not - without the benefit of firepower and initiative in the area of operation - fire support bases were apt to become defensive positions tying down sizeable forces which otherwise might be used for offensive.

A comparison between friendly and enemy forces in lower Laos also resulted in hard thinking even during the initial phase. As intelligence estimates had made it clear, enemy forces in the area of operation included three infantry regiments, not to mention the eight or so binh

trams, each equivalent to a regimental size force in terms of ground defense and antiaircraft capabilities. Within a period from one to two weeks, the enemy was capable of reinforcing with up to a total of eight additional infantry regiments, not to mention artillery and other units from North Vietnam. To defeat these 11 infantry regiments and the defense forces of the binh trams, I Corps committed, according to the initial plan, only eight infantry regiments or brigades. Our forces enjoyed the advantage of an armor brigade but our tanks might be of little value off the main axis. Even if, at the limit of its capabilities, I Corps would bring in two additional regiments (the remaining Marine brigade and the third regiment of the 1st Infantry Division), it would only have 10 regimental size units and the balance would still be in favor of the enemy. Additional reinforcements would be highly improbable and any such effort to obtain them would certainly meet with difficulties.

In the effort to obtain the tactical advantage in the area of operations and to compensate for the lack of force superiority, the planners of LAM SON 719 expected too much from the support of United States tactical air and air cavalry gunships. The question that should have been asked then was: how effective would air power be in support of ground combat troops deep in the Truong Son mountain range? If the bombings of North Vietnam had been an indication of this effectiveness, then were the results to be obtained exactly what we had desired? Over the years, the U.S. Air Force had bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail heavily. Was the effect of these bombings enough to paralyze the enemy's activities on the battlefields of South Vietnam and Cambodia? Too much was expected from airpower and this problem should have been weighed with caution by the planners.

Then there was the role to be played by helicopters. With the exception of mechanized forces operating along Route No. 9 which would be re-supplied by road transportation according to plans, all other operational units would have to depend on helicopters for movement of troops and artillery, supply and medical evacuation. This was the only means practicable as long as these forces were required to operate considerable distances from roads and fire support bases. There was no doubt that

the U.S. would provide enough helicopters to satisfy requirements. But there was cause to doubt the effectiveness of helicopters in the expected combat situation, considering the terrain and weather in lower Laos and the enemy's antiaircraft capabilities. This was a serious question which required careful consideration.

As the time approached for D-day, however, ARVN and U.S. commanders and staffs alike appeared to be confident of success. As a testimony to this confidence, I think it appropriate to excerpt here a passage of the report filed by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, senior adviser of the Airborne Division. In this after- action report, Colonel Pence described the mood that prevailed during a meeting at Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps prior to Phase I of LAM SON 719. He wrote:

"It was apparent at this time that United States intelligence felt that the operation would be lightly opposed and that a two day preparation of the area prior to D-Day by tactical air would effectively neutralize the enemy antiaircraft capability although the enemy was credited with having 170 to 200 antiaircraft weapons of mixed caliber in the operational area. The tank threat was considered minimal and the reinforcement capability was listed fourteen days for two divisions from north of the DMZ." (9)

The RVN military leaders thought that ARVN forces had a tough mission ahead but would be able to carry it out with the support of the United States. The decision had been made. I Corps forces were like the soldier on the firing line who had armed his rifle and taken aim. All he had to do now was to squeeze the trigger.

(1) "Vietnam: What Next? The Strategy of Isolation," Military Review, April 1972.

(2) After the exclusive briefing for General Lam, Colonel Cao Khac Nhat, G-3 I Corps, took Colonel Tho aside and told him, "Why exclude me from the briefing? I have already completed the operational plan."

(3) This date was obtained from U.S. XXIV Corps After Action Report which records: "21 January: XXIV Corps/I Corps received approval of detailed concept." Ibid. p.3.

(4) Lam Son was the birthplace of Le Loi, a national hero second only to Tran Hung Dao in popular reverence. Le Loi ejected the Chinese from Vietnam in the early 15th Century.

(5) The directive given by U.S. XXIV Corps to the U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) and the Da Nang Support Command stated that these units should be prepared to provide support for I Corps operations forces for at least 90 days, in other words, until the onset of the Laotian rainy season in early May 1971.

(6) For details on participating units, see Appendix A.

(7) General Lam considered the Ranger Group adequate for this mission, which was to provide the main body early warning of any enemy force approaching on his flank and to delay and force him to concentrate until heavier combat power could be placed against him. It would have been advantageous to assign this mission to a mobile, armor equipped force, but not only did the rugged terrain preclude this, but General Lam needed his armor and his 1st Division for the main effort. Furthermore, he wanted to keep the 1st Division available for a sweep south through base area 611.

(8) After Action Report on LAM SON 719; 1 April 1971, by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, p. 3.

(9) After Action Report on LAM SON 719 dated 1 April 1971 by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, p. 2.

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Indochina Monographs

LAM SON 719

by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh

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Glossary

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CHAPTER IV

The Offensive Phase

Preparing to Cross the Border

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.

Map15: The Attack Toward Khe Sanh

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(Map 15) . 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.5. 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 Arrored 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 long 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 screen near the border. Mean while, 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.

Map16: Consolidation of the Assembly Area

The Khe Sanh assault airstrip was completed on 4 February but test landings by C-130 aircraft revealed that additional compacting would be required. On 5 February, the 111 Cavalry Task Force reached the border on Route No. 9. This unit immediately deployed along the border and assisted ARVN units entering the assembly area. All U.S. units were assigned specific areas of responsibility to secure the assembly area and support ARVN forces. (Map 16)

The 2d ARVN Airborne Brigade arrived at the Dong Ha airfield on 6 February while other ARVN units - the 1st Armor Brigade, 1st Airborne Brigade and 3/1 Infantry Regiment - moved overland to the Ham Nghi (Khe Sanh) area. Upon arrival, the 1st Armor Brigade and the 1st Airborne Brigade, which were both scheduled to move out by way of Route No. 9 on D-Day Phase II, immediately entered the assembly area adjacent to the border. That evening, a regrettable incident occurred. A United States Navy aircraft mistakenly attacked the ARVN forward elements destroying one M-113 armored personnel carrier; additionally, six ARVN

personnel were killed and 51 armor and airborne personnel wounded. These were the first ARVN casualties of Operation LAM SON 719.

On the logistic side, immediately following in the steps of the U.S. engineers who were repairing and opening roads, U.S. logistic units were displacing forward to establish support facilities and Forward Support Area (FSA) 26-1 at Ca Lu south of Vandegrift was opened on 30 January. Advance elements of Forward Support Area 26- 2 arrived at Khe Sanh on 3 February and this facility was operational two days later. Ground transportation soon became difficult because the road section between Vandegrift and Khe Sanh was only trafficable one way. Despite this, U.S. and ARVN convoys, combat and logistic alike, moved day and night.

During the first days, and as originally planned, ARVN units were supported by U.S. logistic facilities. As soon as ARVN units reached the assembly area, they were issued supplies in preparation for action. This activity proceeded smoothly except for some difficulties in the issue of combat rations. Vietnamese combat rations were not similar to American C-rations. Instead of a self- contained package of individual meals, each

Vietnamese ration consisted of three separate items: instant rice, canned meat or fish, and condiments. These were packaged individually but issued collectively by the carton. American logistics personnel were unfamiliar with these rations and with ARVN issue and accounting procedures so to solve the problem some Vietnamese specialists were detached to FSA 26-2. During this same period, ARVN logistic units dispatched advance teams to Khe Sanh to establish their own support facilities including ammunition and fuel supply points, which were scheduled to initiate operations on D- Day + 17 (16 February).

Probably taken by surprise, enemy troops in Quang Tri reacted very slowly and weakly during the first days. Although some mine explosions occurred along the routes of advance, floating mines appeared on the Cau Viet River, and a few rockets were fired into rear support bases, other activities of Communist units in northern Quang Tri Province showed no significant changes. The northwestern corner of Quang Tri, in particular, remained very quiet.

The weather was favorable during the first few days of the operation and our air support was effective. On 4 and 5 February, however, the weather turned unfavorable; low clouds, interspersed with rain, delayed some troop landing plans and interfered with the activities of engineer units, particularly road repairs and rehabilitation work being conducted at the Khe Sanh airstrip. Although the weather during 6 and 7 February was better than the preceding two days, it was not adequate for effective preemptive airstrikes by the United States Air Force. Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland, Commander of XXIV Corps, communicated this information to Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, Commander of I Corps who decided that the cross-border operation should go ahead as planned despite the lack of adequate preemptive air-strikes (1). Apparently General Lam would not modify his orders without consulting President Thieu who had approved the original plan. To compensate for this, General Lam requested that U.S. air cavalry fly ahead of the ARVN thrust. But because the air cavalry could not cross the border ahead of ARVN units, the RVAAF and U.S. corps commanders agreed that, at precisely 0700 hours on D-day Phase II (8 February) the Airborne Division would send a combat team across the border to be immediately followed by air cavalry(2) . This compromise seemed. to satisfy both U.S. political restrictions and the I Corps desire for additional support.

Securing Ban Dong

Map17: The Advance to Ban Dong

In the early hours of 8 February, 11 Arc Light sorties were flown against targets in lower Laos as well as to support troop landing zones. The Airborne Division had positioned artillery batteries at Lao Bao in the immediate vicinity of the border to support the main thrust along Route No. 9. Everything seemed to be ready and at 0700 the first air-borne-armored team crossed the border. A moment later, it was followed by a flight of U.S. air cavalry helicopters which eventually took the lead to cover the main ARVN task force. The ARVN soldiers, after so many days of waiting, were now cheerfully waving from their armored vehicles at foreign and local press reporters. The press embargo, which had been imposed during the initial stage for security reasons, had been lifted a few days earlier and a number of reporters were already at the border. This first task force consisted of the 1st Armor Brigade (11th and 17Th Armor Squadrons) reinforced by the 1st and 8th Airborne Battalions, the l0lst Combat Engineer Battalion and a platoon of bulldozers. The road on the Laotian side of the border had been cratered and cut by ditches at many places, and the armored elements provided support for the engineer repair crews. Many parts of the roads were destroyed beyond quick repair and the engineers had to build detours. Sporadic enemy fire was received but it was insignificant in the face of our mighty armored force and the brave airborne troops and they advanced rapidly. Ahead of the column and on the mountain slopes north and south of the axis of advance, air cavalry gun-ships struck at enemy air defense positions. (Map 17)

All supporting firepower provided by U.S. forces was coordinated by the U.S. 108th Artillery Group. The 155-mm and 8-inch howitzers and long-range guns hit against deep targets in lower Laos beginning at 0800 hours. The 108th Group expertly and effectively performed its support mission.

Meanwhile, U.S. air cavalry teams expanded their range in search of the enemy. Toward the north, not far from the border, by a stream

nearly two kilometers south of Ban Na, U.S. gun-ships attacked four enemy tracked vehicles at 0820 hours. One vehicle was towing a 37-mm anti-aircraft gun; the gun was immediately destroyed. At 1100 hours, air cavalry reconnaissance spotted enemy armored vehicles northwest of Landing Zone 31, about eight kilometers north of Ban Dong. Results of the gun-ship attack on these vehicles could not be verified immediately but this was the first evidence of enemy armored units in the area of operations.

While armored and infantry forces were progressing into Laos along the road, the northern and southern flank security elements were heliborne. The 4/3 Infantry Battalion was transported to Landing Zone Hotel in the Co Roc area by helicopters at 1100 hours without enemy contact. The 2d Airborne Battalion reached Landing Zone 30 ten kilometers north of Route No. 9 unhampered. At 1300 hours, however, near Landing Zone Ranger South, five kilometers northwest of LZ 30, the 21st Ranger Battalion's insertion was met with fire from 12.7-mm antiaircraft machine-guns; 11 rangers wounded and the troop insertion continued while U.S. air cavalry attacked the gun positions. This

U.S. gun-ship activity resulted in a number of enemy troops killed and several trucks destroyed, but more significantly, these attacks caused numerous secondary explosions from a network of fortifications which lasted over a period of an hour.

At 1620 hours, the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 3d Infantry Regiment were helilifted into two areas in the vicinity of Landing Zone Blue, four kilometers southwest of LZ Motel. Immediately thereafter, the 2/3 Battalion was engaged by the enemy. Friendly forces sustained five wounded while the enemy lost nine killed and one 12.7-mm machinegun, one AK-47 assault rifle and one Chicom radio captured.

At 1655 hours, U.S. air cavalry gun-ships attacked a suspected target two kilometers east of Landing Zone 31 causing numerous secondary explosions with flames reaching 1,500 feet in the air. Reconnaissance aircraft reported the fire lasted until just before daylight the following morning. After the attack on this target, the 3d Airborne Brigade Headquarters and 3d Airborne Battalion occupied Landing Zone 31 unopposed.

Toward nightfall, near Fire Support Base Phu Loc at the border, the command post of the 1st Ranger Group and the 37th Ranger Battalion were

subjected to an enemy attack by fire consisting of 50 rounds of 82-mm mortar and 105-mm howitzer; three soldiers were killed and 15 wounded.

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.

During the day, on the Vietnamese side of the border, U.S. units continued to expand their operations to consolidate security for ARVN rear bases. The pioneer road from the Rockpile to Khe Sanh was opened to track vehicles by 1635 hours providing another vehicular access to Khe Sanh.

In support of the first day of the cross-border operation, U.S. forces had flown 11 B-52 sorties expending 719 tons of bombs which caused 40 secondary explosions, and performed 468 helicopter gun- ship and 52 tactical air missions, destroying 11 gun emplacements and 40 trucks, damaging 18 trucks and causing 13 secondary explosions and 23 fires. Four huge "commando vault" bombs had been used to clear landing zones. During the night, C-130 gun-ships had also destroyed additional enemy trucks moving near Ban Dong, the next objective.

On 9 February, the weather suddenly became very poor. Heavy rain made the road a quagmire, preventing the engineers from working. Heliborne troop insertions were delayed and logistical buildup efforts were halted. Those units already in Laos endeavored to consolidate their positions or increase the range of their patrols.

Throughout the day, there were only two minor contacts made by the 21st Ranger Battalion near the Ranger South area and by the 8th Airborne Battalion north of Landing Zone Alpha approximately 10 kilometers west of the border with insignificant results reported by each unit.

The next day, 10 February, the weather improved but did not permit heliborne operations until late in the afternoon when the 4th Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, completed an assault into Landing Zone Delta, 10 kilometers due west of LZ Hotel at 1630 hours. The armored thrust meanwhile resumed at a stronger pace after a day of marking time. At 1700 hours the 9th Airborne Battalion was inserted into Landing Zone A

Luoi (Ban Dong), approximately 20 kilometers from the border. Enemy antiaircraft fire was heavy, but thanks to the dedicated support of air cavalry teams, the landing was completed at 1720 hours. Two hours later, advance elements of the armored column linked up with the 9th Airborne Battalion at A Luoi. This was the greatest success of the day.

The same day was marked by several other events. Troops of the 3d Airborne Battalion, operating approximately one kilometer east of Fire Support Base 31, were engaged by the enemy at 1230 hours. They suffered light casualties but captured six Molotova trucks loaded with ammunition. Extending their search north, this team found a cache of fourteen 82-mm mortars, four 122-mm rocket launchers and nine AK-47 assault rifles.

Meanwhile, near the area of operations of the 21st Ranger Battalion, a flight of four VNAF helicopters bound for Landing Zone Ranger South was hit by enemy 37-mm antiaircraft artillery fire at 1300 hours. Two helicopters were downed and all passengers were presumed killed. The first helicopter carried two ARVN colonels, the G3 and G4 of I Corps. The second helicopter reportedly carried a number of foreign correspondents. It was suspected that the I Corps G3 had carried with him an operational map of LAM SON 719 along with signal operating instructions and codes. The loss of these documents to the enemy would be extremely significant. A thorough search of the area for the downed helicopters produced no results.

The linkup on Route No. 9 between the armored and airborne troops at Landing Zone A Luoi (Ban Dong) nearly 20 kilometers deep into enemy territory was an encouraging achievement. I Corps Headquarters therefore decided to push the operation further westward. Reinforcements were to be sent on 11 February to increase security on the northern and southern flanks before further advance was made. At 1430 hours, the 311 Infantry Battalion was heliborne to be inserted into Landing Zone Yellow but because of last minute intelligence reports of important enemy concentration nearby, the battalion was diverted to Landing Zone Don, four kilometers southwest of LZ Delta. During the same period, toward the north, the 39th Ranger Battalion was deployed in the area of Landing

Zone Ranger North, two kilometers west of Ban Na in coordination with the 21st Rangers which had been manning Ranger South since 8 February.

In order to obtain additional fire support for the planned movement all major fire support bases were consolidated and reinforced. At Fire Support Base 30, one 105-mm battery and one 105-mm battery were deployed. Fire Support Base 31, the command post of the 3d Airborne Brigade, had a six-piece 105-mm battery. Light bulldozers were helilifted into these fire support bases to help fortify the defenses. Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong), Fire Support Base Hotel of the 3d Infantry Regiment, and Fire Support Base Delta of the 1st Infantry Regiment (1st Infantry Division) also received an adequate number of artillery pieces.

From 11 to 16 February, while I Corps staff in the rear was planning the next moves, ARVN units in the forward area in lower Laos expanded their operations and continued the search for the enemy, increasing the number of contacts and caches uncovered. In the ranger's area, on the northern flank, the 37th Ranger Battalion operating near Fire Support Base Phu Loc and protecting the northwestern approaches to Khe Sanh was continuously subjected to enemy attacks by fire and probes. At 1100 hours on 12 February, the battalion, supported by U.S. gun-ships, engaged an enemy force three kilometers north-northwest of the base. The results were as follows: on the friendly side, four rangers killed, six wounded, and one UH-1G helicopter shot down by 12.7-mm fire; enemy troops suffered 13 killed, one captured and ten AK-47 assault rifles seized.

The 39th and 21st Ranger Battalions, which operated around Landing Zones Ranger North and Ranger South respectively, were probably the units most frequently in contact with the enemy. At 1825 hours on 11 February, the 21st Ranger Battalion engaged the enemy four kilometers northeast of its base killing 11 Communist troops, but later, at 2200 hours suffered six wounded from an enemy attack by fire consisting of forty 82-mm mortar rounds. During the afternoon of 13 February, the 39th Battalion engaged a large enemy force at three kilometers west-southwest of Landing Zone Ranger North, killing 43 enemy personnel and seizing two 37-mm antiaircraft artillery guns, two 12.7-mm machineguns, a substantial amount of ammunition and assorted types of equipment.

The 39th Battalion had only one killed and 10 wounded. Meanwhile, the 21st Ranger Battalion made sporadic contacts with the enemy throughout the day without significant results. Light contacts continued during the following days.

In the area of operations of the Airborne Division, no additional major units were inserted after the initial deployment but the ones already in place were expanding their search

activities. The 1st Armored Brigade launched two reconnaissance missions of combined armored/airborne forces north and south of Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong). In the afternoon of 11 February, the northern element engaged an unknown size force Friendly losses were two M-113 armored personnel carriers destroyed) one killed and one wounded. At approximately the same time) another M-113 detonated a mine, causing nine wounded. In the afternoon of 15 February, an element of the 17th Armored Squadron came upon two Russian trucks three kilometers north of Ban Dong and destroyed an estimated six tons of rice.

Around Fire Support Bases 30 and 31, the 2d and 3d Airborne Battalions pushed further out. Their companies made sporadic contacts and proved superior to enemy forces in the area. In the morning of 12 February in particular, an element of the 2d Airborne Battalion engaged the enemy five kilometers southeast of Fire Support Base 30, killing 32 enemy troops, seizing 20 individual weapons and destroying three crew-served weapons. Friendly forces had only three killed. Other sporadic contacts were all in favor of friendly forces. At 1430 hours on 14 February, Fire Support Base 31 received an attack by fire which resulted in six airborne troops killed, three wounded and one bulldozer damaged. The following day, toward noon, Fire Support Base 31 received 122-mm rockets which killed two and wounded four.

In the meantime, south of Route No. 9, the 1st Infantry Division introduced more troops into action. The 3/1 Battalion had been transported to Landing Zone Don in the afternoon of 11 February, and the 2/1 Battalion was helilifted to Landing Zone Delta 1, six kilometers southeast of Ban Dong, in the afternoon of the following day to push further west. On 16 February, the 2/3 Infantry Battalion was inserted

at Landing Zone Grass, 12 kilometers northeast of Muong Nong, to push further south toward the enemy's Base Area 611. LZ Grass was the southernmost position held by friendly forces in the area of operation.

Throughout this period, various units of the division searched for the enemy and made many contacts which produced substantial results to include several enemy caches. At 1615 hours on 11 February, the 311 Battalion observed a target one kilometer southeast of Landing Zone Don which had been hit by air-strikes. The battalion discovered 23 enemy bodies and seized two 12.7-mm machineguns, four AK-47 assault rifles and one chicom radio. In the afternoon of 12 February, this battalion found a cache three kilometers south- southwest of Landing Zone Don which contained 600 individual weapons, 400 82-mm mortar rounds, numerous rounds of assorted ammunition and the bodies of 50 enemy troops killed by air-strikes. Late in the afternoon, at three kilometers south of Landing Zone Don, the 1/1 Battalion discovered an enemy camp containing substantial amounts of food along with military clothing, equipment and ammunition, particularly 12.7-mm rounds. On 13 February, the 3/1 Battalion found another cache with thirty 75-mm recoilless rifles, fifty 55 gallon drums of gasoline and substantial quantities

of other types of equipment. At the same time, six kilometers north- northeast of Landing Zone Grass, the 2/3 Battalion seized three new Russian trucks.

As of 13 February, contacts being made by elements of the 1st Division forces were increasing. During the afternoon of that day, the 1/1 Battalion engaged an enemy element three kilometers south- southwest of LZ Don, killing 28 enemy troops and seizing a storage area which contained an East German machinegun, seven RPDs, one B40, one B41, two SKS, gasoline, generators and huge quantities of food along with kitchen utensils. On 14 February, the 2/3 and 1/3 Battalions each received an attack by fire of an estimated one hundred 82-mm mortar rounds. The 1st Battalion had one killed and seven wounded and the 2d Battalion had 16 wounded. Even though enemy attacks by fire and actual contacts increased during the next few days, all the units of the 1st ARVN Division continued to seize substantial amounts of enemy supplies and materiel.

Meanwhile, in northwest Quang Tri province, U.S. units continued their security operations. Their efforts were mainly directed northward toward the DMZ, particularly north of the Rockpile. In the evening of 11 February, Forward Support Area 26-1 at Vandegrift received six 122-mm rockets which resulted in four U.S. troops killed and two wounded. On 14 February at 0215 hours, Dong Ha City and its airfield, where the forward CP of I Corps was located, received 25 rounds of 122-mm rockets which killed one civilian and wounded 14 others but the airfield suffered only light damage.

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(3). 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.

By the end of the first week of the invasion of Laos, the I Corps armored-airborne advance along Route No. 9 had become much slower and more cautious. Securing and repairing this road had become vital to guarantee a logistical lifeline for ARVN forces in the event inclement weather precluded the use of helicopters. A network of fire support bases had been established along the road to ensure artillery support and while the task force proceeded westward, its flanks were effectively protected. An airborne brigade and a ranger group secured the northern flank while two regiments of the 1st Infantry Division were deployed along the southern flank.

According to the operational plan, the Airborne Division and the 1st Infantry Division were expected to advance westward, each step forward to be solidly anchored on a fire support base. The planners of LAM SON 719 apparently believed that this tactic, coordinated with the massive support by the USAF and U.S. Army air cavalry, would help accomplish the mission with minimum losses. But because of this procedure, the operation progressed slowly and did not exactly meet the expectations of U.S. counterparts. In Saigon, General Abrams, COMUSMACV, in a discussion with General Cao Van Vien, Chairman of the JGS/RVNAF, expressed his wish to see the operational units reach Tchepone as quickly as possible(4). Then, in the afternoon of 16 February, in the forward command post of I Corps at Dong Ha airfield, Generals Vien and Abrams met with Generals Lam and Sutherland for two-and-a-half hours. After a review of the general situation, a decision was made to step up the operation by having the 1st Infantry Division quickly occupy the higher mountain tops south of the Xepon River and establish fire support bases there to support the Airborne Division1s push toward Tchepone. They estimated that this would take three to five days. But, as later events were to prove, battlefield developments seldom occur exactly as planned. Enemy reactions were becoming stronger with each day and the test of strength more arduous.

The Enemy Counteracted

Nearly a week had passed since Ban Dong was occupied. Except for a few clearing activities conducted by units of the 1st Infantry Division, the forward movement of ARVN forces seemed to have stalled. The heliborne insertion of troops through the fierce enemy air defense screen in the afternoon of 10 February had enabled friendly forces to quickly occupy this objective. The linkup with armored forces had also been made immediately thereafter. Fire Support Base Ban Dong was now well entrenched with six 105-mm and six 155-mm howitzers and adequate ammunition and supplies. However, as of 16 February, six days after the capture of Ban Dong, there had been no further progress by ARVN troops toward the objective Tchepone. In the meantime, the enemy had increased his air defense capabilities along the mountain slopes to the south. Enemy attacks by fire, which were initially conducted with assorted mortars and 122-mm rockets, were now occasionally augmented by long-range artillery. ARVN armored units had tried to advance but could not make much progress. The dense forests bordering the road required careful, time consuming reconnaissance to avoid ambush and this made the armored column's movement extremely slow.

On 17 February, it rained hard and the helicopters rested idly on the airfields. However, since early morning, an armored infantry task force consisting of the 17th Armored Squadron and the 8th Airborne Battalion operating north of Ban Dong had been engaging the enemy. The results were four friendly troops killed while the enemy suffered 36 killed. Sixteen AK-47 assault rifles and a quantity of military clothing and equipment were seized. Toward noon, this task force made another contact four kilometers north of

Ban Dong and captured one PT-76 amphibious tank, two Russian trucks, one 12.7-mm machine gun and two 7.62-mm machineguns. The PT-76 tank was only slightly damaged and was towed back to A Luoi. To the south, the 1st Infantry Division continued to make contacts and receive attacks by fire.

In the early morning of 18 February, the 1st Airborne Battalion, while conducting an Arc Light bomb damage assessment two kilometers north of LZ Bravo, made light contact with the enemy and found a command post. Captured documents indicated that this was the command post of the 308th NVA Division and traces found in the area were rather recent. Toward noon, U.S. air cavalry spotted and attacked an enemy truck convoy nine kilometers west-northwest of Ban Dong destroying one truck, and damaging another and a tracked vehicle. Nearby, at two places two-and-a-half kilometers to the east, the 2d Troop, 17th Armored Squadron found and cut three pipeline sections four inches in diameter. Two sections were destroyed while the third one was made unusable. During the day, other airborne units and elements of the 1st Infantry Division were subjected to sporadic attacks by fire and ground contacts and a few helicopters were shot down.

All these activities were quickly eclipsed by reports of heavy enemy troop concentrations around the 39th and 21st Ranger Battalions. Both battalions were being subjected to attacks by fire and ground attacks and the fighting lasted all night while friendly artillery, tactical air and flareships responded quickly in support of the embattled rangers.

The next morning, enemy pressure on the 21st Ranger Battalion gradually diminished but heavy pressure persisted on the 39th Battalion in the Ranger North area. The battle continued over 19 February. Enemy troops here were confirmed to be elements of the 102d Regiment of the 308th Division, all with new weapons and clothing. Before launching an assault, the rangers reported, the enemy made extensive use of recoilless rifles and mortars; his fire was very accurate. The strongest enemy attacks were directed at the eastern flank of the rangers which was their weakest spot. However, the 39th Battalion continued to hold its positions with support from U.S. artillery and tactical air.

Meanwhile, information concerning the enemy's growing capabilities became clearer with each day. His air defense network was becoming dense and heavy artillery was committed. ARVN artillery-men confirmed that, in addition to the various types of mortars and rockets commonly

used in South Vietnam, the enemy had also fired quite a few rounds of 122- and 105-mm field guns and howitzers and possibly 85- and 130-mm field guns as well. In addition to three pipeline sections found and destroyed, captured documents also suggested the

existence of pipeline throughout Base Areas 604 and 611. And the presence of enemy armor became increasingly apparent.

Enemy main force units in the area of operation were confirmed during the fir8t days 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.

Enemy opposition grew stronger with each day around Ban Dong and the area of Route 1032B for which the rangers were responsible. On 10 February, the 21st Ranger Battalion engaged an element of the enemy's 88th Regiment. The next day, the 37th Ranger Battalion engaged a battalion size unit near FSB Phu Loc. 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).

Map18: Enemy Situation, Last Week of February, 1971

On 11 February, two prisoners disclosed that the 64th Regiment/320th Division had arrived in lower Laos on 4 February and was operating in the Ban Dong area. On 14 February another prisoner of the 64th Regiment gave the location of each battalion of this regiment. He also reported an NVA armored unit with an estimated fifteen PT-76s in the same area southeast of Fire Support Base 31 where signs of enemy tracked vehicles had been detected. The vehicles were subsequently attacked. Toward the south, in the area of operations of the 1st Infantry Division, captured documents confirmed the location of Binh Tram 41 two kilometers south of Landing Zone Blue with the 4th Air Defense Battalion, the 75th Engineer Battalion, and an unidentified infantry regiment providing additional security. This infantry regiment might have been the 141st Regiment of the 2d Division. (Map 18)

While firefights were raging in the Ranger North area, on 19 February President Thieu visited I Corps Forward CP at Dong Ha. General Lam reported the critical situation faced by the 39th Rangers and the increasingly forceful enemy reactions which were making the planned push toward Tchepone by the Airborne Division highly questionable. In the presence of ARVN division commanders, President Thieu told him to take his time and, under the present circumstances, perhaps it would be better to expand search activities toward the southwest to cut off Route 914 which led into Base Area 611.

During the night of 19 February, the enemy continued to attack the 39th Battalion while launching uninterrupted attacks by fire to hold the 21st Battalion in check. Seven fixed wing gun-ships and six flare-ships were used in support of the 39th Battalion and, from

0730 to 1430 hours on 20 February, 32 tactical air sorties were flown in support of the rangers. Efforts to resupply and evacuate their casualties were made with strong support from tactical air, gun-ships and artillery. Some helicopters managed to land in the area, ammunition was delivered and some wounded evacuated. But upon takeoff, two helicopters were damaged by enemy fire. One had to land in the positions of the 21st Ranger Battalion (Ranger South) and the other managed to land at Fire Support Base 30.

In the afternoon, reconnaissance aircraft reported sighting an estimated 400 to 500 enemy troops encircling the 39th Battalion. At 1710 hours on 20 February, radio contact with the 39th Ranger Battalion was lost. At 1856 hours, I Corps CP received information that the able bodied personnel of the battalion had fought their way out and reached the 21st Ranger Battalion positions with most of the wounded and all of their weapons but with very little ammunition left. Those who reached the 21st Ranger Battalion numbered nearly 200; 107 were still able to fight but 92 were wounded. Total losses were 178 dead and missing and 148 wounded. Intelligence reports indicated enemy casualties to be 639 killed with a corresponding number of weapons destroyed (423 AK-47s, 15 B40/B4ls and numerous automatic weapons).

With most of the wounded of the 39th Ranger Battalion still stranded in the 21st Rangers' positions, this unit received intense attacks by fire, including 130-mm artillery, on the night of 21 February. Plans were made to evacuate the wounded rangers the following day. Toward noon on 22 February, the area around the battalion position was subjected to a heavy barrage of fire involving tactical air, air cavalry, aerial artillery and ground artillery for nearly an hour while 13 medical evacuation helicopters were airborne, ready to go in. All of them landed and successfully picked up122 wounded as well as one U.S. pilot who had been stranded there 8ince his aircraft was shot down. The ranger force remaining in combat position at Ranger South numbered approximately 400 men including 100 from the 39th Battalion but two days later, on 24 February, the battalion was ordered by the I Corps commander to withdraw to FSB 30. From there they were helilifted to FSB Phu Loc.

While the 39th Ranger Battalion was holding out, numerous activities took place in other areas. U.S. air cavalry continued to search for and destroy pipelines. Units of the 1st Infantry Division moved further south, striking along Route 92 and finding a number of enemy installations, but also making numerous contacts and receiving attacks by fire. The 8th Airborne Battalion and armored elements engaged the enemy two kilometers north of Ban Dong, destroying one T-34 tank and a 23-mm gun position. This was another strong indication of enemy armor involvement. On the friendly side, a number of U.S. helicopters were shot down while on supply, medical evacuation or support missions.

The corps commander had concluded that the position held by the 21st Rangers and the survivors of the 39th was untenable. A maximum effort in air and artillery support was required for each re-supply and evacuation mission and he had other pressing demands

for this support. The position was not an objective in itself and there was no military advantage in sacrificing a ranger battalion in a doomed attempt to hold it. The corps commander was looking toward his objectives in the west and he wished to conserve as much of his combat power as possible for the main mission.

In the southern sector of the 1st Division, within objective area A-Ro, the 2/3 Battalion came into heavy contact with the enemy on 23 February. The 3/3 Battalion was brought in to reinforce but the enemy would

not disengage. On 24 February, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division requested a B-52 mission and the two battalions pulled back an hour prior to the air-strike; they counterattacked immediately thereafter. Results were verified to be 159 enemy bodies left in place along with numerous weapons. Still, the enemy remained deployed around Fire Support Base Hotel 2, causing a delay in the plans to move the 105-mm artillery battery out and close the base in order to send the 3d Infantry Regiment westward with the mission of cutting off Route 914 as directed by President Thieu during his 19 February visit.

The loss of Fire Support Base 31

The withdrawal of the 21st Ranger Battalion left the northern flank of the Airborne Division exposed and Fire Support Bases 31 and 30 now bore the brunt of enemy attacks. They had been under pressure since the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 3d Airborne Brigade were inserted. Established in the immediate vicinity of the Communist north-south supply line, both bases were able to monitor closely enemy troop movements as well as signs of enemy armored activities. Each battalion left but a small force to defend the bases while a larger force fanned out in security and search activities, but this mobile force was not sufficient to prevent the enemy from moving close to the bases and setting up mortars and antiaircraft guns to interdict supply and medical evacuation attempts(5). Each helicopter landing or departing usually resulted in heavy attacks by fire.

Map19: Attack of FSB 31

To strengthen the security of Fire Support Base 31, which was a more important position and seemed to be more heavily threatened because it housed the 3d Airborne Brigade headquarters, plans were made to helilift the 6th Airborne Battalion to a mountain range northwest of the base on 13 February. This mountain range controlled a valley running a south-easterly course to Fire Support Base 31 and the valley was the source for attacks by fire against friendly positions. Although B-52

bombs had cleared the landing zone and its approaches, the fleet of helicopters bringing in the first elements of the 6th Airborne Battalion was subjected to heavy attacks by fire immediately upon landing. The remaining elements of the 6th Battalion were diverted to alternate landing zones nearby. Upon touching the ground, the battalion spread out its troops over nearly a kilometer but continued to receive enemy artillery fire. The battalion then broke up and withdrew south, to near Fire Support Base 31. It had lost 28 KIA, 50 WIA and 23 MIA during this short venture. Between that time and its eventual evacuation on 19 February, the 6th Battalion was unable to carry out any significant mission. The northwest mountain range remained under enemy control and FSB 31 continued to hold under heavy enemy pressure. (Map 19)

A company of the 3d Airborne Battalion operating southwest of FSB 31 received a rallier who was a sergeant, platoon leader in the 24B Regiment of the 304th Division. He reported that the Communists had been preparing to counter the RVNAF-US operation since October 1970. Rear service units of Group 559 had in fact received orders to prepare for combat and an army corps size headquarters called the 70th Front was designated in October 1970, to command the 304th, 308th and 320th divisions, a number of artillery regiments, an armored regiment, a number of air defense regiments and other support units. To counter Operation LAM SON 719, the 70th Front Headquarters was sent to lower Laos along with NVA combat units. The 24B Regiment along with advance elements of the 9th and 66th Regiments had infiltrated the border area west of Quang Tri since 9 February. From all these new revelations it appeared that the enemy would make a determined effort to defend his base areas.

The situation heated up following the evacuation of ranger positions in the north and as a result of heavy enemy attacks. The 31st and 32d Companies, 3d ABN Battalion operating in the mountain ranges northeast of Fire Support Base 31 received orders from the division to move south and meet an armored task force composed of the 17th Armored Squadron and two companies of the 8th Airborne Battalion coming

as reinforcement. Remaining at the base were a 105-mm artillery battery, the command section of the 3d Airborne Artillery Battalion and the 33d and 34th Rifle Companies. The 34th Company had suffered heavy combat casualties and was left with only 60 men. Outside the base there was only the 3d Reconnaissance Company deployed on a mountain to the west. On the night of 23 February, a team of Communist sappers was spotted as it attempted to infiltrate the base from the west. Fifteen Communist troops were killed on the spot. The enemy continued to launch attacks by fire and kept our helicopters from providing support. Many of our dead and wounded were left on the base for three or four days as evacuation was not possible.

At 1100 hours on 25 February, Fire support Base 31 received massive attacks by fire, including fire from 130-mm field guns. At 1300 hours, the 31st Company to the south reported enemy armored movements. The base responded with artillery fire and called for artillery support from Fire Support Bases 30 and A Luoi. The forward air controller's aircraft (FAC 229) was not in the air because of a confusion in grid coordinates and did not arrive until 1400 hours. By that time, fire from small weapons was being received from all directions and enemy tanks had reached the southern perimeter of the base. The first flight of fixed wing tactical aircraft to reach the base destroyed a number of enemy tanks on the spot and held back the armored thrust against the southern perimeter. At 1520 hours, an estimated 20 tanks supported by enemy infantry troops moved in from the northwest and the east. At precisely the same time, an F-4 aircraft was hit and erupted in flames but the pilot ejected. The Hammer FAC aircraft left its position to direct effort to rescue the U.S. pilot, interrupting air support for Fire Support Base 31. After a fierce artillery barrage, the enemy assaulted. At that time, a helicopter of the advisory team for the Airborne Division was the only aircraft flying overhead. It turned its M-60 machinegun fire on the enemy but it was in vain! Artillery from A Luoi and Fire Support Base 30 continued to fire in support but could not stop the enemy tanks attacking on the hill slopes. Forty minutes later, the base was overrun. It is possible that had the FAC remained

on station above the battle that U.S. airpower could have been employed to hold the firebase. A number of airborne troops managed to break out but the commanders of the 3d Airborne Brigade and 3d Artillery Battalion were captured by the enemy(6). The weather thereafter worsened and aircraft could not provide support. ARVN losses at Fire Support Base 31 were 155 killed and missing with a corresponding number of individual weapons and six 105-mm howitzers The enemy lost an estimated 250 killed and eleven PT-76 and T-54 tanks.

Between 25 February and 1 March, on its way to relieve Fire Support Base 31, the armored-infantry task force composed of the 17th Armored Squadron, the 8th Airborne Battalion and remaining elements of the 3d Airborne Battalion fought three major battles on 25 February, 27 February and on the night of 1 March 1971. They lost 27 KIA, 186 WIA, one MIA, three M-41 tanks and 25 armored vehicles destroyed. The enemy sustained 1,130 killed, two captured, over 300 assorted weapons seized, 17 PT-76 and six T-54 tanks and two Molotova trucks destroyed. The prisoners disclosed that the 24B Regiment and the 36th Regiment of the 308th Division, reinforced by the 202d Tank Regiment, had taken part in recent battles. The 24B Regiment was the unit which attacked Fire Support Base 31 while the 36th Regiment was operating to the south. Cumulative enemy losses during these battles equaled one half of the strength he initially committed.

Even before the attack on Fire Support Base 31, Fire Support Base 30 of the 2d Airborne Battalion had been the target of repeated enemy attacks by fire involving all sizes of

ammunition in the Communist inventory. Because of the accurate enemy anti-aircraft fire, helicopter takeoffs and landings were very risky. Each resupply mission was

planned and prepared as if it had been a landing of combat troops. On 27 February, re-supply efforts were made; smoke cover, artillery, gun-ships and tactical air were used but the enemy still shot down an aircraft which interrupted the supply attempts. Supplies were running low while the. number of dead and wounded increased but could not be evacuated. The base fought desperately to defend itself.

Up to this point, the direction taken by enemy reactions seemed rather clear. The main forces committed consisted of the 304th, 308th and 2d (Yellow Star) Divisions along with elements of the 320th and 324B Divisions and armored and artillery units. The NVA strategy appeared to concentrate on massing the infantry, armor and artillery force necessary to isolate and overwhelm - one by one - the RVNAF fire bases. The enemy took advantage of the rugged terrain to disperse his logistic, engineer and air defense units into small elements which were well entrenched in fortified positions established throughout the area and ARVN forces made contact wherever they moved; only by summoning concentrated firepower were they able to overpower the enemy.

The enemy appeared to have coped effectively with friendly mobile forces, heliborne insertions of troops and artillery positions. His mortar fire, which was sustained by adequate reserves of ammunition, was now supplemented by long-range artillery. This came as a new experience for ARVN forces who were not fully prepared to cope with massive and sustained attacks by fire and the conventional armor supported infantry attack that overran FSB 31 was probably the first Communist large scale combined arms attack in the Indochina theater.

The difficulties that Fire Support Base 31 had experienced and Fire Support Base 30 was now experiencing showed that enemy reactions largely consisted of attacks by fire and air defense. Attacks by fire were designed to create tension and cause attrition. Anti-aircraft fire was aimed at disrupting communications, supply and medical evacuation by helicopters, and isolating the bases.

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. 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. Second, the tactical command post of I Corps at Ham

Nghi Base was apparently weak. Officers on duty there were all in 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. As a result, coordinating the allocation of support assets among the ARVN divisions became extremely difficult. The divisional advisory staffs 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.

In addition, the Airborne Division complained that there was only one forward air controller aircraft for the entire area covered by the division. Since the airborne division was involved in several operations simultaneously conducted in different directions this represented a major handicap. This problem was quite evident during the battle at Fire Support Base 31.

Counterattacks by the enemy revealed the weakness of ARVN anti- tank weaponry. The Airborne Division reported that the M-72 light anti-tank weapon was ineffective against armored vehicles which continued to move after being hit. Lieutenant General Lam immediately notified the Central Logistical Command. As a result over 300 3.5" rocket launchers with ammunition, all previously considered obsolescent and placed in storage

pending return to the United States, were hastily transported to the front for distribution to combat units. XXIV Corps also gathered a number of 90-mm recoilless rifles to help the ARVN airborne forces. However, the M-72 light anti-tank weapon was later re-tested at the Quang Trung Training Center and proved to be effective. As regards ARVN armor units, this was their first significant confrontation with enemy tanks. ARVN gunners proved to be confused and hasty, firing from too far away and often too soon, thereby frequently causing deflections. Enemy tanks, moreover, seldom moved in the open but mostly lay in ambush, well concealed in the jungle.

A number of units also failed to carry adequate clothing when this was a period of lingering cold in the mountains and forests of the Truong Son Range. The Central Logistic Command was required to have field jackets and blankets air delivered to units during combat.

Tchepone Was the Objective

After capturing and destroying Fire Support Base 31, Communist forces continued to encircle and harass ARVN fire bases. North of Route No. 9, Fire Support Base 30 continued to bear the pressure of heavy artillery attacks each day and was cut off from the rear by an almost impenetrable air defense net. The ARVN armored task force which tried to pick up the survivors of the 3d Airborne Battalion from Fire Support Base 31 was repeatedly engaged by NVA armor-supported infantry.

South of the road, the targets of enemy encirclement were Fire Support Base Hotel 2, seven kilometers southwest of Landing Zone Don, and the 2/3 and 3/3 Battalions of the 1st Infantry Division on mobile operations along Route 92 nearby. On 27 February, despite heavy air strikes which attempted to silence enemy air defense guns, a big H-53 helicopter was hit and exploded in the air while trying to sling-carry a 105-mm howitzer. It was then decided to close Fire Support Base Hotel 2 and send the 3d Regiment northwestward on a mission to interdict and disrupt Route 914. This plan could not be carried out immediately because there still remained a battery of 105-mm howitzers whose

extrication proved difficult. During the night, I Corps Headquarters ordered the destruction of the artillery pieces in the base; the defending unit was then to proceed on foot to join the 3d Regiment. The 2d and 3d Battalions of the regiment were also ordered to move their wounded north to find a suitable pickup point for medical evacuation helicopters. In the morning of 28 February while on their way, these units came upon a target hit by B-52s and found the bodies of 157 enemy troops along with numerous weapons destroyed. During that day, medical evacuation efforts were not successful because of intense enemy fire from 82-mm mortars and small arms directed at the pickup zone and one UH-lH was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire and burst into flames.

The situation by this time was becoming increasingly tense throughout the area of operations Truck convoys were frequently attacked on Route No. 9 in Laos and on the RVN territory, the enemy increased efforts to ambush convoys and attack rear bases The ARVN westward drive was stalled. In the midst of this situation, I Corps Headquarters received a directive from President Nguyen Van Thieu to have the Marine Division relieve the Airborne Division. He must have realized that such a relief under the combat conditions on that battlefield would be very hazardous. Besides, the Airborne Division was still a strong unit; it had suffered some losses but these losses were not yet too serious. What then caused him to order its replacement? The most probable answer could be that he was really worried over the additional losses that the Airborne Division would sustain in protracted combat. He certainly would like to keep this elite unit intact at all costs. In any event, the Marine Division was a poor choice for the relief. Despite the combat worthiness of its individual brigades, it had never fought as a division.

It was probably with this bothering thought that in the afternoon of 28 February, Lieutenant General Lam flew to Saigon with an alternative to present to the President. During his meeting with President Thieu, Lam's plan was adopted. Instead of the Marine Division, the 1st Infantry Division with three regiments under its command was selected to proceed northwest from its present positions to occupy

Tchepone. The Airborne Division would provide protection for the northern flank and secure Route No. 9. The Marine Division was to deploy two brigades behind the 1st Division; its remaining brigade would serve as the corps' reserve.

Tchepone, a tiny town whose civilian population had fled long ago, now had only scars and ruins left. By this time, it had become more of a political and psychological symbol than an objective of practical military value. There was nothing of military importance in the ruined town; enemy supplies and war materiel were all stored in caches in the forests and mountains. Lines of communication were located east and west of Tchepone, not in the town proper. Despite all this the Tchepone road junction was near the center of NVA logistics activity in the Laos panhandle and it was understandable that it became a symbol of great importance. The RVN information agencies, the press (both foreign and domestic) all contributed their share in making Tchepone the place to reach at all costs so the ARVN effort now seemed to be more directed at setting foot in Tchepone than trying to destroy the NVA logistical system which was the real objective of the offensive.

Meeting with Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams in the afternoon of 1 March, President Thieu made known his plan to relieve the Airborne Division and expressed his desire to helilift two infantry regiments into the areas surrounding Tchepone. He also disclosed that the JGS/ RVNAF had been ordered to reinforce I Corps with a number of tanks and that the Marine Division had been sent to the northern front. General Abrams took this opportunity to defend the U.S. position in the face of Senator Tran Van Huong's complaints that the U.S. was not providing adequate support to RVAAF forces operating in lower Laos. These complaints had given rise to all sorts of rumors speculating on the difficulties ARVN forces encountered in lower Laos. President Thieu stated that the change of plan did not result from losses sustained by the Airborne Division but came about because the 1st Infantry Division was more familiar with the lower Laos terrain and, being an organic unit of I Corps, was more accustomed to working with the corps and would respond better to the I Corps commander during this difficult operation.

While high level officials were reviewing the plans to arrive at appropriate decisions, at the subordinate levels preparations and assignments were already underway. The I Corps commander needed reinforcements in lower Laos and in the northern area of MR 1 so on

25 February, the U.S. XXIV Corps ordered the U.S. 101st Airborne Division to be prepared to send its 3d Airborne Brigade to the Demilitarized Zone to replace the ARVN 2d Infantry Regiment. This regiment had five battalions; one remained in place while the other four were re-deployed on 28 February. On 29 February, the 11th Brigade/U.S. 23d Infantry Division was pulled out of the area south of Hai Van Pass (southern MR 1) and also sent to reinforce the northern sector and all U.S. forces in northern Quang Tri or operating in support of ARVN forces were placed under operational control of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division. The forward command post of this division relocated in Quang Tri from its former position further south. In order to coordinate operational support, a joint coordinating group was set up and placed under the Commander of the 108th Artillery Group. This group operated from the tactical CP of I Corps at Fire Support Base Ham Nghi (Khe Sanh) as of 1 March. Coordination and control of U.S. support was thus made possible in the forward combat area instead of being referred to Quang Tri as in the past.

More RVNAF forces were also committed to the new effort. The command section of the 369th Marine Brigade and support elements were airlifted directly to Khe Sanh beginning on 1 March and this movement was completed two days later. The 2d Infantry Regiment was ready. The 4th and 7th Armored Squadron of the 1st and 2d Infantry Divisions were brought in to reinforce armored elements in lower Laos. I Corps Headquarters also relocated the 77th Border Ranger Battalion (+) from Quang Tin and reassigned it to provide security for Fire Support Base Ham Nghi, freeing other forces for combat and the corps' tactical control CP there was strengthened.

While these preparations were made for the push into Tchepone there were increasing reports of enemy armor presence throughout the area of operation. In the early morning of 1 March, C-130 gun- ships

reported sighting an estimated 8 enemy tanks moving near Route No. 9, approximately eight kilometers west of A Luoi. The gun-ships attacked and destroyed some of the tanks. Toward noon, tactical air sighted two T-54 tanks south of the road between A Luoi and the border, attacked and destroyed one.

Meanwhile, in the north, the 17th Armored Squadron was heavily engaged and Fire Support Base 30 of the 2d Airborne Battalion remained under siege. At Fire Support Base 30, fierce fighting took place on 3 March from 0100 to 0900 hours. After heavy attacks by fire, enemy infantry, supported by armor, approached friendly positions. The base was located on a high mountain with steep slopes and enemy tanks were used only to provide direct fire support. C-130 gunships and two Arc Light strikes diverted at the last minute helped the 2d Airborne Battalion hold its ground. When the gunfire ended, a search around the base produced 98 enemy bodies, 26 AK-47s, eight B-40s and two machine-guns right on the perimeter of defense. Friendly casualties were one killed and four wounded. However, as a result of repeated enemy attacks by fire during the preceding

days, all 12 artillery pieces (six 105-mm and six 155-mm) had been damaged. In the afternoon of 3 March, the 2d Airborne Battalion was ordered to abandon its positions and move out to evacuate its wounded and conduct mobile operations. The damaged artillery pieces at the base were destroyed before the battalion left.

During the night of 3 March, the 17th Armored Squadron, reinforced by the 8th Airborne Battalion, engaged a battalion size enemy force five kilometers north of Ban Dong. Results of the battle were 383 enemy killed two detained, 71 individual and 28 crew-served weapons seized. Friendly forces suffered over 100 killed and wounded and 10 armored vehicles damaged. In the early morning of 4 March, after two re-supply and medical evacuation attempts had proved unsuccessful because of heavy enemy fire, an Arc Light strike was made and, following it, a third attempt succeeded in evacuating 77 airborne wounded. Only one UH-lH helicopter was shot down and an airborne company was brought in as reinforcement. The next day, a column of armor-supported airborne troops linked up with the 17th Armored Squadron to re-supply it and evacuate

the remaining 43 armored wounded. Cumulative enemy losses for the period from 25 February to 3 March throughout the lower Laos area of operation were 1,536 killed. These losses amounted to about one regiment per week.

Map20: The Attack Toward Tchepone

While the enemy endeavored to annihilate Fire Support Base 30 and the 17th Armored Task Force, the relief plan was being carried out, marking the beginning of a new offensive phase (Map 20). Between Fire Support Base A Luoi (Ban Dong) and the border, the Airborne Division set up two fire support bases, Alpha and Bravo, to consolidate the security of Route No. 9. The 1st Ranger Group with its remaining two battalions (21st and 37th) was deployed northwest of Khe Sanh and provided security for Fire Support Base Phu Loc. The 369th Brigade, kept in reserve by the corps, conducted security operations south of Khe Sanh.

On 2 March, the 7th Marine Battalion, 147th Brigade, began landing troops in Fire Support Base Delta. The 2d Battalion of the 3d Regiment, which had suffered from combat attrition at Hotel 2, was sent to the rear to reorganize while other elements of the regiment moved out to operate in the areas of Delta 1 and Brown. For three consecutive days, the 147th Brigade Headquarters and the remaining 2d and 4th Battalions were inserted into Delta. Immediately thereafter, the 2d and 4th Marine Battalions moved out to operate in the area of objective Alpha. The entire 258th Brigade, meanwhile, was inserted at FSB Hotel. The 8th Battalion assumed security of the base and operated in the Co Roc area while the 1st and 3d Battalions searched for the enemy in the area of objective Bravo. Marine activities during this time resulted in 361 enemy killed and 51

weapons seized. Also, 153 enemy personnel killed by air-strikes were found by marine troops.

On 3 March, in execution of the plan to enter Tchepone, the 1st Battalion of the 1st Infantry Regiment was inserted at Landing Zone Lolo 13 kilometers southeast of Tchepone. The landing had met with strong enemy opposition and had been postponed twice because of additional preparations required for the landing zone. The 1/1 Battalion finally touched ground at the price of 11 helicopters shot down, 44

others hit by gunfire and two D4 bulldozers destroyed after being dropped from the air. The following day, the 1st Regiment Headquarters, the 2/1 Battalion and a battery of 105-mm howitzers were brought into Landing Zone Lolo. Fire Support Base Lolo was thus established. The 4/1 Battalion meanwhile landed at Landing Zone Liz, six kilometers west-northwest of Lolo(7). The various units then moved out to search the area but only a few light contacts were made with minor results.

In the morning of 5 March, in order to continue its westward push, the 2d Infantry Regiment of the 1st Division was scheduled to occupy Landing Zone Sophia, four-and-a-half kilometers southwest of Tchepone at 1100 hours but unexpected bad weather delayed the operation. After preemptive air-strikes, at exactly 1320 hours five UH-lHs landed safely. Sporadic gunfire was received but posed no major threat. By nightfall, Landing Zone Sophia had eight 105- mm howitzers in position with adequate ammunition. Searching further out the 4th and 5th Battalions found the bodies of 124 enemy troops and seized 43 AK-47s, nine 12.7-mm machineguns, four RPD automatic rifles, nine B-40 rocket launchers, three radios, military clothing, equipment and food supplies. After securing Fire Support Base Sophia, the 2d Regiment was now in a position to control Tchepone from its mountain base and keep the areas surrounding the town within range of its artillery.

For the next two days, throughout the areas of operation of the 1st Infantry and the Marine Divisions, friendly units caught the spirit of the new offensive. They fought aggressively, repeatedly engaged the enemy, and defeated him everywhere. In the morning of 5 March, in the area of Objective Alpha, the 4th Marine Battalion killed 130 enemy troops and seized 25 assorted weapons including two 82-mm mortars. Friendly forces sustained six killed and 42 wounded. The 4/1 Battalion made contact near Landing Zone Liz, killing 41 Communist troops and seizing 15 weapons along with two mortars. By 6 March, engagements were increasing and occurring everywhere, but friendly forces suffered only light casualties while inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. More importantly, they were now within easy reach of Tchepone, the final objective that President Thieu had ordered them to take just three days earlier.

In the afternoon of 6 March, Khe Sanh received an attack by fire of an estimated 22 rounds of 122-mm rockets and two U.S. troops were killed and 10 wounded. Elsewhere, the enemy appeared to take no significant initiative but he was increasing his use of surface- to-air missiles in lower Laos. Earlier, on 2 February, a Mohawk aircraft flying west of the demilitarized zone reported an unidentified missile fired from the ground which exploded approximately 100 meters away, causing no damage to the aircraft. Subsequently, 14 instances of surface-to-air missile firing were photographed or reported by forward air controllers, army pilots, tactical air and reconnaissance aircraft. Missile transportation equipment and antenna vans along with other equipment related to surface-to-air missile systems were also sighted in the tri-border area.

The day selected to enter the ultimate objective, Tchepone, was 6 March. A total of 120 U.S. helicopters were assembled to carry out the assault. In addition to B-52, U.S. tactical air strikes or air cover sorties were scheduled every 10 minutes. Elements of the 2/17 U.S. Air Cavalry reconnoitered targets, prepared landing zones and covered the assault. An enemy attack by fire on Khe Sanh Base forced the huge assemblage of U.S. helicopters to depart 90 minutes earlier

than planned, but preparations for this operation had been so carefully executed that when the first helicopters carrying the 2/2 Battalion landed at Landing Zone Hope four kilometers northeast of Tchepone, only sporadic gunfire was received. By 1343 hours both the 2d and 3d Battalions along with an element of the 2d Reconnaissance Company and the tactical command post of the 2d Infantry Regiment had landed safely at Hope. Searching the adjoining areas and occupying key positions, the 2d Regiment only made light contacts but found the bodies of 102 enemy troops killed by B-52s and seized five 12.7-mm machineguns and one anti-aircraft artillery gun. Extending its search further south toward Tchepone, the 3/2 Battalion found a cache of an estimated 1,000 tons of rice and 2,000 gas masks along with 31 enemy bodies and numerous weapons destroyed by B-52s. nearby, the 2/2 Battalion found an area devastated by B-52s with nearly 100 enemy bodies and assorted weapons shattered to pieces. After the two reinforced ARVN battalions had made assault landing near the objective and rapidly exploited their success, the district town of Tchepone was practically under ARVN control, dominated as it was by the array of artillery pieces to the south. The most remote terrain objective of LAM SON 719 was attained.

(1) After-Action Report on LAM SON 719 dated 1 April 1971 by Colonel Arthur W. Pence, pp. 7, 8.

(2) Specific instructions from COMUSMACV prohibited any U.S. Army elements from entering Laos in advance of the RVNAF border crossing.

(3) Bomb damage assessments were extremely difficult and hazardous to conduct in this dense, heavily defended area. As a consequence, only 10% of the B-52 targets struck during LAM SON 719 were reconnoitered later on the ground and even those that were entered by ground troops were so torn up by craters and splintered trees that accurate assessments were impossible. Nevertheless, by putting together all sources of information - prisoner and rallier interrogations, aerial - observation and photography, ground reconnaissance, document exploitation, agent reports and communications intelligence analysts concluded that enemy losses to U.S. air attacks were substantial.

(4) Message 00843, 141435Z Feb 71, COMUSMACV to CJCS.

(5) Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, commander of the 3d Airborne units routinely secured their fire support bases in this manner. Other ARVN units also employed this technique when the terrain and enemy situation made it appropriate.

(6) Colonel Nguyen Van Tho, commander of the 3d Airborne Brigade, was forced by the Communists to make a radio statement denouncing LAM SON 719 shortly after his capture.

(7) English names were chosen for objectives, fire-bases and the like primarily to facilitate communications with U.S. support units. During the First Indochina War. The French had followed a parallel practice (at Dien Bien Phu, for example). Perhaps feminine names were selected to bring some softness into the virile world of combatants at war. "Lolo", "Liz", and "Sophia" were chosen by Colonel Vu Van Giai, the very effective deputy commander of the 1st Division who assisted in maneuvering the division during this period. He had served for several years in the DMZ area, in coordination with U.S. combat units, and he naturally followed their practice in naming fire-bases. The small return that the NVA might have enjoyed by exploiting these names for propaganda value - as proof that the Americans were still in charge despite Vietnamization - was certainly overridden by the practicality of having words the Americans could understand and pronounce.

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Indochina Monographs

LAM SON 719

by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh

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Glossary

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CHAPTER VI

A Critical Analysis

The Balance sheet of LAM SON 719

The picture of AKVN soldiers hanging on the skids of a helicopter which evacuated them from lower Laos and other equally dramatic photographs showing battered I Corps troops returning back across the Laotian border caused grave concern among South Vietnamese, military and civilian alike. Their concern deepened when they read the tantalizing news articles first carried by American newspapers and magazines then picked up by the foreign and Vietnamese press which all reported that the ARVN incursion into lower Laos was being terminated. The military spokesman had a hard time denying these reports. He announced that this was simply an exchange of operational forces and for all practical purposes, LAM SON 719 was still underway and that ARVN forces were continuing their destructive forays against Communist logistical bases and infiltration routes on the other side of the border. President Nguyen Van Thieu echoed this line during his press conference at Dong Ha on 1 April 1971, but news; about raids in lower Laos no longer interested Vietnamese public opinion which was more concerned about the real outcome of the well publicized campaign. In the absence of official announcements, rumors and speculations proliferated. Everyone wanted to know the truth about friendly losses. But when official results were later made public, no one seemed to believe that they reflected the truth.

Despite the high figure of ARVN casualties which the GVN confirmed at nearly 6,000, there was still suspicion that the true figure was being concealed from public view. Newsweek magazine correspondents estimated this figure unofficially at nearly 10,000. But their figure

was definitely inflated because the highest level of ARVN strength committed during the entire operation reached only 17,000. It is obvious that if the casualties had been 10,000 as reported by these correspondents, certainly not very many ARVN units would have been able to make their way back to the border, which was not true. Reports on enemy losses, similarly, were regarded as being inflated. Also the general public believed that more U.S. helicopters had been destroyed than official announcements indicated. (Table 1)

Table 1 - GVN Released Results for LAM SON 719 (1)

ALLIED LOSSES
UNITED STATES
Dead: 102
Wounded: 215
Missing: 53

ENEMY LOSSES
TROOPS
Dead: About 13,000
(Saigon government figure)

SOUTH VIETNAM

	Official Figure	Unofficial report
Dead:	1,146	3,800
Wounded:	4,236	5,200
Missing:	246	775

WEAPONS
Captured or Destroyed:
1,968 crew-served
4,545 individual

HELICOPTERS
Destroyed: 92
Cost about $30 million
Damages to others about
$10 million

VEHICLES
Captured or Destroyed:
100 tanks 291 trucks

PLANES
Destroyed: 5
Cost about $8 million

SUPPLIES
Captured or Destroyed:
128,000 tons of ammunition
1.3 million drums of gasoline
7,600 yards of pipeline

Food, medicine and clothing

(1) - This information was published in the American Newsweek magazine, April 5, 1971, P.29

RVNAF and United States casualties including killed, wounded and missing as reported through military channels for all of LAM SON 719 totaled 9,065. Most of the 7,683 RVNAF casualties were incurred by the tactical units that participated in the operations in Laos; the 1st Infantry Division and the Airborne Division absorbed over one half of this total. (Table 2)

Table 2 - LAM SON 719 Cummunlative Casualties (2)

UNIT FRIENDLY KILLED	WOUNDED	MISSING	TOTAL
XXIV Corps -			
101st Airborn Division			
1st Bde, 5th Inf Division			
11thBde, 23rd Inf Division			
XXIX Corps Artillery			
Other Support Forces			
Total			
68			
55			
47			
9			
36			
215			
261			
431			
256			
76			
125			
1149			
17			
3			

7
0
11

38
346
489
310
85
172

1402
I Corps -
1st Infantry Division
Airborn Division
Marine Division
1st Armored Brigade
1st Ranger Group
I Corps Troops

Total
537
455
355
54
93
55

1549
1607
1993
770
364
435
314

5483
537
0*
63
0
27
24

651
2681

2448
1188
418
555
393

7683
Sum-Total
(Adjusted) 1764 6632 689 9065
* It was not true that there was absolutely no MIA for the Airborne Division. Based on first hand information, the author knew that a number of Airborne officers and troops were captured bythe enemy.

(2) Excerpt from "An Assessment of the Performance of South Vietnamese Forces During Operation LAM SON 719: 30 January - 6 April 1971" by Headquarters, US XXIV Corps, dated 3 May 1971.

I Corps casualties thus represented about 45% of the maximum 17,000 troops that were committed during the most active phase of the operation. For LAM SON 719, I Corps had deployed a total of 42 battalion size combat units of which 34 actually fought in lower Laos. Four ARVN battalions suffered losses so severe that they had to be reconstituted; six others, while suffering losses considered "moderate," still managed to fight as units. As to U.S. casualties they were incurred partly in combat activities conducted in South Vietnam, partly in helilift and air support activities in Laos.

Table 3 - Major Items of Equipment Lost or Destroyed (3)

ITEMS	US	RVNAF	TOTALS
Small Arms Individual Weapons	363	2,107	2,470
Small Arms Crew Served Weapons	98	320	418
Trucks	67	211	278
Combat Vehicle	76	87	163
Tanks	17	54	71
Artillery	4	96	100
Radios	61	1,516*	1577
Bulldozers	6	31	37

* Figures provided by RVNAF and used as the basis for requisitioning replacement items. Apparently not all were combat losses.

(3) After Action Report, LAM SON 719, Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, 14 May 1971, p. 90.

Equipment and materiel losses for both U.S. and ARVN forces are outlined in Table 3. On the ARVN side, the most noteworthy losses were the 87 combat vehicles (to include M-113 armored personnel carriers and similar vehicles), 54 light tanks (M-41), 96 artillery pieces (of both 105-mm and 155-mm), 31 bulldozers, and over 1,500 radio sets. Most tanks and armored vehicles were damaged and destroyed during combat but the losses also included those left behind which were not able to maneuver around ambush sites. Among the 96 artillery pieces lost, the majority had been damaged by enemy counter battery fire before being left behind in evacuated fire support bases; the remaining were destroyed by ARVI4 artillery troops prior to their withdrawal. No

engineer machinery was brought back. In fact, the 101st Combat Engineer Battalion and a platoon of the 118th Engineer Land Clearing Company lost all of their heavy equipment.

As to the enemy, his human losses were considerably higher than those suffered by the RVNAF. (Table 4)

Table 4 - Enemy Casualties, LAM SON 719 (4)

Enemy Losses			
Reported by	U.S.	RVNAF	Total
Killed	4,795	14,565*	19,360
Captured	8	49	57

* Includes enemy personnel killed by U.S. tactical air and B-52s discovered by ARVN troops conducting operations in Laos

(4) After Action Report, LAM SON 719, Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, 14 May 1971, p. 90.

To counteract the ARVN incursion into his most vital logistic base area, the enemy deployed, and the figures were later confirmed, 12 infantry regiments belonging to five different divisions, and at least an armor regiment and an artillery regiment. Total enemy combat strength thus committed in the LAM SON 719 area of operation was estimated at 30,000, not to include reserve elements. In addition, the enemy logistic structure in the general area of operations also had from 10 to 20,000

men. Out of this total, the enemy lost an estimated 20,000 men or about one half. But while his losses caused by actual combat engagements could be generally verified, his casualties inflicted by artillery and aerial bombings could only be estimated. Bomb damage assessments could only be obtained on approximately 10% of all B-52 missions. Even in those areas where search and bomb damage assessments were conducted an accurate body count vas not always possible, partly due to the immensity and ruggedness of the terrain and partly due to the unbearable stench produced by masses of badly decomposed human bodies.

Enemy equipment losses throughout the campaign were also substantial; major categories are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 - Enemy Equipment Losses (5)

Items	Quantity	Observations
Individual Weapons	5,170	
Crew Served Weapons	1,963	
Vehicles	2,001	
Combat Vehicles	11	
Tanks	106	
Artillery/Mortars	13/93	
Radios	98	
Ammunition	170,364 tons	
Rice	1,250 tons	
	422	Reported by USAF (RVNAF ground troops confirmed 422 trucks)
	88	U.S.verified

U.S. verified 20,000 tons
(5) Ibid, p. 91.

Most enemy vehicles were destroyed by U.S. gunships and tactical air. So were enemy tanks of all types which largely consisted of the amphibious PT-76's and a number of T-34's and T-54's, all Russian made. The ammunition destroyed included an important quantity of artillery shells and rockets, also Russian made. In addition, the enemy fuel pipeline originating in North Vietnsm and running through the LAM SON 719 area of operations was cut in several places.

United States Combat Support

No account of LAM SON 719 would be complete without mentioning the importance of U.S. support. In closing the balance sheet on friendly and enemy losses, credit should be duly given to the role performed by U.S. Army Aviation, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Naval Air for without them, LAM SON 719 could hardly have been possible.

Topping the scale and from the point of view of the ARVN infantry man, U.S. Army Aviation units contributed by far the most important kind of support. In total, U.S. Army gun-ships and other types of helicopters flew over 90,000 sorties for the benefit of ARVN forces, to include nearly 24,000 gun-ship sorties, over 34,000 trooplift sorties and nearly 20,000 logistic related sorties. (Table 6)

To carry out their vital support mission, U.S. Army Aviation units suffered losses in Laos amounting to 82 aircraft of all types destroyed and over 600 aircraft damaged but recoverable. (Table 7) U.S. Army pilots and crew members who sacrificed their lives in combat numbered 55 while 178 others were wounded and 34 were listed as missing in action.

Table 7 - U.S. Army Aircraft Damaged and Destroyed

Type Aircraft	Damanged*	DestroyedIn Laos	In South

Vietnam	Total	Grand Total
OH6A		
OH58		
UH1C		
UH1H		
AH1G		
CH47		
CH53		
CH54		
Total (Non-hostile)	25	
	15	
	63	
	316	
	158	
	26	
	13	
	2	

	618	
(4)	4	
	4	
	7	
	43	
	20	
	3	
	1	
	0	

	82	
(0)	6	
	2	
	1	
	10	
	6	
	0	
	1	
	0	

	26	
(5)	10	
	6	
	8	

53
26
3
2
0

108
(5)
35
21
71
369
184
29
15
2

728
(9)
* Aircraft receiving any degree of combat damage but is economically repairable

The performance of the U.S. Air Force in support of LAM SON 719 was no less impressive. A total of 9,000 tactical air sorties were flown, to include 7,000 over lower Laos. The highest daily number of sorties reached 277 on 8 March 1971. (Table 8)

Table 8 - U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Support

Total Sorties Flown
Average Sorties/Day
Highest Number of Sorties on
Any One Day (8 March 1971)
Total Ton Ordinance Delivered
Number of Aircraft Lost
In Laos
7104
103

10931 In South
Vietnam
2010
29

3100

Total
9114
132

277
14031
7

During the course of the operation, a total of 25 "Commando Vault" bombs (15,000-lb) were dropped by C-130 aircraft to clear landing zones and also to strike against specific targets such as warehouses, vehicle parks and enemy troop concentrations. Armed fixed wing aircraft such

as AC-119 "Stingers" and AC-130 "Spectres" and AC-130 "Candlestick" flareships were particularly effective in attacking and destroying enemy trucks moving by night and in providing close support for ARVN forces engaged in fire fights. These aircraft accounted for about 50-60 enemy trucks destroyed. The results obtained by U.S. tactical air support to include both U.S. Air Force and U.S. Naval Air are outlined in Table 9.

Table 9 - Bomb Damage Assessment, U.S. Tactical Air

Enemy Killed by Air
Secondary Explosions
Secondary Fires
Destroyed: Structures/Bunkers
Trucks
Tanks

Antiaircraft Weapons
Radar Sites
In Laos
3103
6694
779
471
179
59
165
1 In South
Vietnam
61
234
207
421
1
0
2
0
Total
3164
6928
986
892
198
59
167
1

Total losses and casualties incurred by USAF tactical air units in support of the operation amounted to seven aircraft destroyed (3 F- 4's, 1 F-l00, 1 A-7, 1 A-1, and 1 0-2) and 4 pilots killed in action. Other pilots who had been shot down over Laos were all rescued.

U.S. Naval aircraft also contributed significantly to the support of LAM SON 719 with nearly 1,900 sorties launched from U.S. carriers Hancock, Kitty Hawk and Ranger.

A particularly important role in air support was performed by the B-52s in the annihilation of enemy installations, rear bases and troop concentrations. In Operation LAM SON 719, B-52 sorties were also used to clear landing zones and to provide close support for ARVN forces in

many emergency situations. Several ARVN units learned how to use B-52 strikes in their plans for combat maneuvering with skill. Total B-52 strikes in support of LAM SON 719 amounted to 622, to include 421 for the benefit of ARVN forces and 201 in support of U.S. forces. (Table 10)

Table 10 - B-52 "Arc Light" Operation Summary, LAM SON 719

	PHASE I (Planning) (8 Feb - 5 Mar 71)	PHASE II (6 Mar - 15 Mar 71)	PHASE III (16 Mar - 7 Apr 71)	Total
NOMINATED	I Corps			
	0	8	8	175
	93	129	90	39
	129	132	212	344
	397	352	746	
SCHEDULED	I Corps			
	0	7	7	158
	87	245	86	39
	125	129	175	304
	373	308		

U.S.
TOTAL
U.S.
TOTAL

681
DIVERTS I Corps
U.S.
MACV
TOTAL
0
0
0
0 93
16
10
119 86
0
2
88 153
16
15
184 332
32
27
391
ABORTS 0 9 6 17 32
STRIKES I Corps
U.S.
TOTAL
0
7
7 189
37
226 97
20
117 135
137
272 421
201
622
NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT 18 670 359 807 1854
TONS OF BOMBS 456.75 14435.50 9261.75 22705.25 46859.25

The assessment of bomb damage inflicted by B-52 missions was nearly impossible to carry out, however. In general, only about 10% of all B-52 targets were searched through

by ground troops; their BDA reports are sumarized in Table 11. In addition secondary explosions were observed by B-52 air crews and other aerial observers over 480 targets.

Table 11 - BDA Results on 55 Arc Light Targets

Categories of Damage	
KIA	2644
WIA	12
INDIVIDUAL WEAPONS	1541
CREW SERVED WEAPONS	82
MORTARS	93
ROCKET LAUNCHERS	300
AAA	16 (INCLUDES 23MM, 37MM and 57MM WEAPONS)
AA/AW	41 (INCLUDES 12.7MM WEAPONS)
TRUCKS	72
TRACKS	11 (INCLUDES ONE TANK)
ARTILLERY PIECES	13
AMMUNITION	933 TONS
FOOD	1101 TONS
STRUCTURES	890
BICYCLES	300
BUNKERS	176
FUEL Quantities	

151,925 GALLONS

Last but not least, U.S. artillery units, despite their location on the RVN side of the border, contributed significantly to the effective support of ARVN forces due to their long range and accurate fire. Their support was particularly useful at night or in bad weather. (Table 12)

Table 12 - U.S. and ARVN Artillery Support

	Caliber Number of Tubes	Missions	Rounds	Number Pieces Combat Loss
US	105mm	6	28	0
	155mm		20	0
	175mm		8	4
	8 inch		62	0
	TOTAL	111	5738	4
ARVN	105mm		6946	
	155mm		2373	
	TOTAL	3197	15168	
			132278	
			36695	
			16392	
			208962	0

152
48
200 Unknown
Unknown
Unknown 240709
70228
310937 70
26
96
TOTAL 262 15168*
(US ONLY) 519899 100
* This figure does not include 4969 missions flown by two batteries of U.S. Aerial Field Artillery (24 helicopters)

In summary, during their 45-day incursion into lower Laos, ARVN forces of I Corps inflicted on the enemy heavy casualties amounting to at least 50% of the combat forces he had committed to the area of operation. A sizeable dent had thus been made into the participating elements of five NVA divisions, the 2d, 304th, 308th, 320th, and 324B, and the logistical units in Base Areas 604 and 611.

In exchange for these results, I Corps suffered casualties equivalent to 45% of the combat strength it had committed in the operation not to mention substantial losses in equipment. Although not a protracted campaign, LAM SON 719 brought about profound repercussions among the South Vietnamese people. Despite official claims of a "big victory" and mass demonstrations to celebrate the "lower Laos victory," the people still were shocked by the severe losses incurred. Perhaps the greatest emotional shock of all was the unprecedented fact that ARVN forces had to leave behind in Laos a substantial number of their dead and wounded. This came

as a horrendous trauma for those unlucky families who, in their traditional devotion to the cult of the dead and their attachment to the living, were condemned to live in perpetual sorrow and doubt. It was a violation of beliefs and familial piety that Vietnamese sentiment would never forget and forgive.

Observations and Evaluation

Operation LAM SON 719 was terminated unexpectedly and in haste. Despite official denials to the contrary by GVN authorities, the fact could not be hidden from the inquisitive media reporters of the Free World. The campaign had lasted only 45 days,

much shorter than its intended duration, but it was long enough to create a disquieting impact on the troops and population alike. Much speculation had arisen about the merits of the operation measured against the losses and casualties that I Corps had suffered. Was it worth all the bloodshed and the bodies and wounded left behind? Was it a victory or a defeat? Popular sentiment seemed to be aroused by the dramatic accounts and personal feelings of the I Corps troops who returned from Laos. Almost without exception, they did not believe they were victorious.

To political and military leaders of South Vietnam, the Laotian incursion offered further proof of close cooperation between the U.S. and RVN in the face of the enemy's threat. They had long coveted such an action but knew that South Vietnam alone could not destroy the war sustaining lifeline from North Vietnam so they had welcomed the American initiative with unconcealed enthusiasm.

The general situation at that time also lent itself to a focus of attention on our objectives in lower Laos. The turnabout in Cambodia's political attitude and the resulting cross-border operations of 1970 brought about encouraging prospects of denying safe havens and storage areas to the enemy in that terminal section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The prospects would look still better if the Communist lifeline could be cut at its most sensitive point - in lower Laos. Domestically, the Vietnamization program was making excellent progress. After the Cambodian

incursion of 1970, the RVNAF felt as if they had matured overnight and desired another chance to prove it. With every passing day, the security situation looked better and better despite our anticipation of additional reductions in U.S. combat forces; at the beginning of 1971 a total of over 250,000 U.S. troops had already departed since the Vietnamization program was initiated and another redeployment increment was scheduled in the near future. Politically, two important events, the RVN and U.S. presidential elections, in late 1971 and 1972 respectively, were drawing near. These and the improved military situation in South Vietnam joined hands to provide the rationale for LAM SON 719.

Once the decision had been made, the combined planning for the operation between Vietnamese and American staffs became a shining example of close and effective cooperation. By the time the J-3, JGS relayed the official decision to the I Corps commander and briefed him on the general concept of the operation, the initial planning process was already underway by the I Corps and the U.S. XXIV Corps staffs. This was made possible by an instant exchange of data concerning the enemy situation, U.S. support, characteristics of the area of operations, especially those pertaining to North Vietnam and the target area which were almost exclusively provided by the C-2, U.S. XXIV Corps. Everything that should be known by I Corps about the enemy was made available including order of battle on NVA forces in North Vietnam and Laos, the status of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and enemy activities on it, the situation in Base Areas 604 and 611, and disposition of enemy units and detailed information on the enemy's anti-aircraft

capabilities in the area of operation. Aerial photos were scrutinized with particular care. Our intensive study and planning resulted in estimates that bolstered confidence. The enemy's opposition would be initially light. His antiaircraft system would be effectively neutralized by our devastating firepower. Our helilift capabilities and mechanized assets would make short work of the occupation of key objectives. Initially, it was thought that Tchepone could be ours after three days of combat. (6)

Naturally, after that, our search activities would expand and continue until the enemy's logistical system in the area of operation was effectively strangled. Although there was no official record of the anticipated duration of the campaign, it could be inferred from public statements and private comments made by authorities that the operation was to last until the onset of the rainy season in lower Laos, or about early May 1971. From then on, monsoon rains over the Truong Son Mountain Range would inhibit the enemy's infiltration and logistic activities.

The close coordination between I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps continued during the entire course of the operation by a constant exchange of combat information which resulted in appropriate modifications of the original plan and even better cooperation. Intelligence continued to be an important aspect of the combined effort. Initial data provided by U.S. forces were corroborated and complemented by battle reports and intelligence gathered from enemy prisoners and ralliers which in time became particularly important with regard to the confirmation of enemy units, the movements of enemy troops and the day to day situation along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All these data were shared between the U.S. and ARVN staffs. During the initial phase of the campaign, the advance of ARVN units was bold, swift and effective. The concept of maneuvering along ridgelines by helilift combined with a series of fire support bases allowed an audacious progress, well supported by artillery. Heliborne movements were coordinated with an armor thrust; these forces linked up at predetermined objectives along the axis of the main effort. Both the northern and southern flanks of this effort were also protected and once the final objective was attained, the actual search of the target area and exploitation of combat gains could be expanded.

This was a sound concept whose success depended on the superiority enjoyed by ARVN in terms of heliborne mobility, air power and mechanized capabilities. Swift progress made step by step and from peak to peak, and occupation of dominating terrain features by a series of mutually supporting fire support bases where the essence of that concept. It was in fact the faithful transplant of a combat tactic that had worked for so

many years in South Vietnam and should work in lower Laos, given the considerable concentration of resources. This also offered the ARVN forces an opportunity to put into combat practice what they had learned from combined operations with U.S. forces.

The rough, jungled terrain of lower Laos proved particularly difficult for ARVN forces. In every advance, they were apt to be engaged by the enemy in heavy firefights. At almost all prominent terrain features in the area, they met head on with solid defensive positions deployed by enemy logistic units. This defense system, consisting of mutually supporting, well dug in, crescent shape, covered trench segments, which the enemy called "horseshoe blocks," was extremely difficult and time consuming to break through since their destruction would require accurate, highly concentrated artillery fire.

One of the first major problems that our forces had to face, in addition to the enemy's blocking positions, was his elusive but devastating anti-aircraft system. The most common weapon he used against our air-craft was the 12.7-mm heavy machinegun which constantly switched firing positions. In addition, throughout the area, there were about 200 AAA pieces from 23-mm up to 100-mm, some of them radar controlled. Even these heavy weapons frequently changed their firing positions which were usually well concealed. In general, the enemy's anti-aircraft system seemed to be well coordinated and its fire controlled with skill and discipline. His heavy machineguns such as 12.7-mm, 14.5-mm or even 23-mm, were arranged in a diamond or circle pattern, affording mutual protection and providing a well coordinated fire trap. For example, one weapon could open fire to draw our aircraft to it and when our aircraft made the attack, it would enter another weapon's field of fire. Enemy AAA positions not only changed frequently, they also moved in uncomfortably close to our units in coordination with an envelopment and attack by infantry troops. As a result, they were extremely difficult to destroy and the price our helicopters had to pay when lifting troops, delivering supplies or evacuating the wounded was high.

Another enemy weapon that was least expected in view of the adverse terrain in lower Laos was the tank. Since the very first days of the operation, our troops had detected and reported traces of tracked vehicles. Then enemy prisoners provided additional information which pointed to the presence of an armor regiment in the area. It was only later when some of these tanks made their appearance that they were observed and attacked by U.S. aircraft. Then, a combined infantry-armor attack against FSB 31 made it all too clear that tanks were being used extensively by the enemy although in a rather unorthodox manner. In his attack against FSB 30, for example, the enemy used tanks only to provide direct support fire, and at FSB Delta, his flame throwing tanks repulsed a counterattack by our Marine troops. The enemy's employment of armor was even more unorthodox in that tanks were used individually to ambush our troops along well concealed jungle paths, as if they were playing a hide and seek game. This tactic worked

because the enemy knew well the system of paths that crisscrossed the area. Against our armor or truck convoys, enemy tanks were usually positioned in ambush, then suddenly opened fire and withdrew quickly into jungle paths. In addition to PT-76's, the enemy also employed medium T-54 and T-34 tanks whose 100-mm and 85-mm guns had a greater firepower than our 76-mm M-41 light tanks. Confined to a one way road with little room for cross-country maneuvers, ARVN armor units found themselves in an extremely disadvantageous position.

While enemy infantry troops seemed to have excellent anti-tank capabilities with their B-40 and B-41 teams and their ambush tactics, our infantrymen were not well prepared against enemy tanks. ARVN airborne troops, for example, complained about the ineffectiveness of the M-72 light anti-tank weapon(7). As a result, old 3.5" rocket launchers

and new 90-mm recoilless rifles were quickly brought in as replacements. Even U.S. gun-ships during the early stage of the operation were not armed with HEAT rockets which were required to knock out tanks. Our head on collision with enemy tanks, therefore, was obviously a big tactical surprise.

Enemy artillery also posed a challenge that could not be easily met. In the first place, mortars of all calibers formed close rings of fire around our positions. Their continuous firing indicated that the enemy had an ample supply of ammunition which was probably pre-positioned. Next came recoilless rifles, rockets and artillery of all types. For the first time in the war, ARVN forces came to grips with the deadly fire of enemy 152-mm howitzers and 130-mm guns which had a range far greater than their own 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers. Enemy artillery was emplaced in scattered, individual positions, some dug into mountain slopes to elude our counter battery fire. In action, several pieces would open fire at the same time from several directions, making them all the more difficult for our forces to locate. Without field radar, ARVN forces had to rely on their technique of crater analysis which did not produce accurate results.

The enemy effectively coordinated all his capabilities, to include antiaircraft, artillery, mortars and massive infantry formations to envelop and overrun our FSBs as well as our mobile units. As soon as a FSB was established or a unit had debarked on a landing zone, the enemy's encirclement process would begin, first by mortars which moved in at close range around the position and opened fire every time helicopters landed or took off. Then, antiaircraft teams and infantry units advanced to complete the ring, always keeping as close as they could to our position, while from many directions further away, enemy artillery guns zeroed in to create a continuing state of tension within our base. The surrounding web of antiaircraft weapons, mortars and artillery gradually became so thick that the base was effectively isolated and no re-supply or medical evacuation activities could be conducted. A FSB was usually occupied and defended by an ARVN battalion which normally deployed from two to three companies to man a security

belt around the base. This ARVN tactic worked fine in South Vietnam in most situations. However, in the face of a more concentrated encirclement combined with artillery fire and ground attacks and frequently with an armor thrust, this ARVN defensive tactic proved to be less effective. Under these conditions, a single battalion was eventually overpowered and lost the initiative. The final attack to overrun a base was usually conducted with a massive concentration of infantry troops usually outnumbering the defenders by three to five times without regard to losses.

In the face of these difficulties which ARVN forces were not prepared to meet, Operation LAM SON 719 bogged down as soon as it reached Ban Dong. First the rangers, then the paratroopers, and finally the armor troops, all had the chance to prove their gallantry in combat and indeed inflicted severe losses to the enemy. But by this time, the ARVN forces had lost their initiative and our vigorous offensive thrust was blunted. The state of inconclusive, seesaw fighting continued until the beginning of March when, with increased U.S. helilift and firepower support, the 2d Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division succeeded in landing in Tchepone, the major terrain objective of the entire operation. For all its merits, this exploit was more a symbolic gesture than a real achievement. It merely meant that "we were there."

The 2d Regiment did not stay long in Tchepone. The imbalance of forces by that time precluded any attempt at holding and exploiting this objective. Our success in reaching Tchepone was largely due to a flexibility in plans and the awesome capability of U.S. helicopters. The real prize, however, was not to be found there. It was located further west where the enemy's more important supply caches still lay unsheltered on the ground. But ARVN forces could not get there nor could they afford to linger long in Tchepone. As swiftly as they came in, they were extracted in haste before the enemy had time to regroup and react. A previous prolonged search of the area of Route 914 by the 1st Division had shown that enemy reactions were swift. This was another indication of our inability to achieve what had been originally intended. It was true that U.S. helicopters helped with the maneuvering

of our forces but the overall tactical imbalance that prevailed at that time made it impossible for ARVN forces to hold terrain and exploit the gains. This was a truth that no one could deny.

Throughout the operation, the role played by U.S. combat support was particularly illustrious. It was evident that without this support, no incursion would have been possible, much less on such a large scale. The fact that ARVN forces were able to progress into Laos as far as Tchepone was a measure of the significance of United States

support. When enemy resistance developed into such proportions that no further progress was possible, it became all the more obvious that without U.S. combat troops in the rear and without U.S. helicopters and tactical air support for the frontline, it would have been impossible to withdraw with any satisfactory degree of unit integrity.

U.S. support assets were plentiful, but it appeared that during the early stage of the operation, their control and coordination were not entirely satisfactory. Part of the problem seemed to derive from the physical separation of major operational headquarters. The U.S. XXIV Corps Forward CP was installed at Quang Tri Base while its counterpart, I Corps Forward CP was at Dong Ha, about 10 miles to the northwest. Still, another important element of I Corps Forward CP, the operational control staff, was located further west at Ham Nghi Base (Khe Sanh) which was 35 miles southwest of Dong Ha. Operating on the principle of cooperation and coordination, both the U.S. and ARVN staffs found it difficult to work effectively while physically separated. At Ham Nghi Base, an important hub of support activities where all ARVN divisions' rear echelon headquarters and U.S. forward support agencies were located, there was no official representative of the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps with authority for control and coordination. All decisions pertaining to support and the distribution of support assets had to be made at the Quang Tri Base. As a result, at the forward echelon, the direction of support effort suffered from delays and the coordination of support activities was too loose for a fast changing tactical situation which required timely decisions on the spot.

This shortcoming was remedied however, when a U.S. Joint Coordinating Group (JCG) was established on 1 March 1977 under the control of the Commander, U.S 108th Artillery Group who represented, the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps. Members of the JCG included the deputy commander U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) who acted as an aviation officer, a representative of the G-3, U.S. XXIV Corps, and a representative of the U.S. 7th Air Force (not a permanent member). Co-located with I Corps Tactical Control CP at Ham Nghi Base, this Joint Coordinating Group proved to be extremely effective in the rapid coordination of U.S. combat support assets. Working hand in hand with the I Corps commander and his staff who provided timely data for the planning of support operations, the JCG chief and his aviation officer were able to assist them in the process of operational planning and decision making by providing expert advice.

Although a combined operation, LAM SON 719 had an unusual character of its own. It was the first large scale operation undertaken without the direct participation of U.S. advisers. Long accustomed to the presence of advisers which they found reassuring and invaluable, especially in difficult combat situations, ARVN regimental and battalion commanders went into Laos with apprehensive feelings. They realized that this was going to be a difficult challenge and they were not too sure they could handle the problem of communications with supporting U.S. units. This had always been an exclusive service

provided by their advisers in addition to regular and routine advisory assistance. But they had to accomplish all requirements by themselves this time, and despite some apprehensions, they all felt proud and believed they could excel without their advisers. After all, as unit commanders, they were accustomed to assuming responsibility which they routinely discharged without difficulty whether it was administrative work, troop training or the conduct of combat operations with only ARVN support. Their self assurance and determination was demonstrated throughout LAM SON 719. Due to special arrangements to provide Vietnamese interpreters aboard FAC and AFCC aircraft, ARVN unit commanders handled the problem of calling for U.S. support quite professionally.

U.S. advisers could have helped more had they been permitted to do so. As it was, only one member from each division advisory team was allowed in the air at any time over his division's tactical area of responsibility. The division senior advisers were not allowed to overfly Laos at any time. Although the advisers in the air over the divisions monitored the situation closely and helped greatly in difficult problems of support, they were often overwhelmed by requests for assistance from several divisional units which were being engaged by the enemy simultaneously. Confined to the divisions' rear echelon CPs inside South Vietnam, the senior advisers were able only to expedite support through reports or map studies.

The question has often surfaced concerning President Thieu's personal influence on the operation. From the beginning it was obvious that his influence was decisive. It was he who approved the idea of launching an offensive into lower Laos, concurred with the general concept of operation and decided to augment the forces for I Corps. The JGS only acted with his approval. The attachment of the Airborne and Marine Divisions to I Corps for the offensive effort, for example, could not have been done without President Thieu's personal approval. But the selection of 8 February as D- day, as far as I can determine, was a recommendation of the combined planning staffs of I Corps and the U.S. XXIV Corps. President Thieu had been briefed on this selected date by the I Corps commander. Therefore, without strong reasons for a change, the I Corps commander apparently felt committed to the decision that he had recommended and obtained from the President.

But President Thieu's role was not confined just to the decision to proceed with the operation. At least on two occasions, the directives he gave to the I Corps commander clearly affected the course of the operation itself. During a visit to I Corps on 19 February, in the company of a central government delegation, he received an operational briefing presented by the participating ARVN field commanders. During this briefing they outlined for him the serious difficulties being met by ARVN units in lower Laos with the implied suggestion that a deeper incursion would be inadvisable. At that time, the Ranger 21st and 39th Battalions were being heavily engaged and FSBs 30 and 31 began

to detect strong enemy pressure. President Thieu made a few remarks to the effect that ARVN forces should take their time and should conduct search operations in the vicinities of their present positions while waiting for developments. From that day on, the Airborne Division would not make any further advance.

The second time involved the decision to push into Tchepone. On 28 February, President Thieu met again with the I Corps commander in Saigon. By this time, progress on the ground had been stalled for over two weeks and the foreign press was publicizing daily ARVN's inability to advance further. During this meeting, it was President Thieu who decided that ARVN forces should go into Tchepone. As a result, General Lam produced his plan to occupy Tchepone and President Thieu ordered the JOS to reinforce I Corps with the entire Marine Division and additional armor elements. The attack against Tchepone was conceived merely as a short term raid to be conducted primarily for its propaganda and morale value. Although President Thieu suggested that the Marine Division be used to relieve the Airborne Division in the main effort, General Lam convinced him that the 1st Division would be better in this role, while the marines could be employed to protect the rear and the LOC. The division commanders present also agreed that the advance, except for the raid to Tchepone, should be suspended until the enemy's intentions and capabilities became more clear. The field commanders and General Lam also persuaded President Thieu that reinforcement with the 2d Division in Laos would not improve the situation. Now that the initiative had been largely assumed by the NVA, a much more potent force than the 2d Division would be required to recapture it. Finally, President Thieu's desire to conduct a raid in force into Muong Nong ceased to be a practicable course of action by the time the withdrawal was beginning and General Lam exercised his command prerogatives by not attempting it. It was clear that President Thieu listened carefully to the recommendations of his field commanders, that he did not arbitrarily impose rigid instructions upon them, but that he allowed them the latitude in the execution of plans and orders that combat commanders must have.

The conduct of the operation was also plagued by dissension verging on insubordination among some ARVN field commanders. Lieutenant General Lam was never able to exercise full control over the commanders of the Airborne and Marine Divisions who were his equals in rank. Of the two, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong, the paratrooper, proved to be more submissive, but he did not always carry out the I Corps commander's orders in a strict manner. Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, Commander of the Marine Division, who was more senior in rank than the I Corps commander, delegated his command authority to his deputy, Colonel Bui The Lan, who directly exercised operational control over the entire division. While occasionally present at the Marine Division's rear echelon CP, General Khang never attended any official operational briefings presided over by the I Corps Commander. Because of this, the Marine Division

acted independently on a few occasions when the odds were against it. For example, it made its own decision to abandon FSB Hotel and withdraw its troops from Laos.

President Thieu and General Vien, Chief of the JGS, were probably aware of the discord among their subordinates, but they took no remedial action. Perhaps General Lam did not ask for such an action. Or perhaps the matter was so delicate among these generals, who were all considered pillars of the regime, that it defied any easy solution.

This dissension among commanders adversely affected staff coordination between I Corps and the Airborne and Marine Divisions. Many reports were delayed; at times, there were no reports at all. As a result, I Corps was unable to control the situation effectively, especially when the enemy pressure began to increase significantly. Because of this, General Lam chose an organic unit of I Corps, the 1st Division, for the Tchepone mission instead of the Airborne or Marine Division.

LAM SON 719 was further impeded by advance news dispatches in the press. During the preparatory period, reporters were not allowed into the Quang Tri area but this aroused their curiosity and gave rise to speculation. The press seemed to be able to pick up leads and develop them into news dispatches that gave every detail of the operation as of the end of January 1971. Thus, the advantages of surprise were lost very

early and the enemy had ample time to prepare. As early as during the first days of February, Tchepone had already been mentioned as an objective. After that, U.S. Government officials publicly praised the merits of the Laotian campaign which would ensure the continued redeployment of U.S. forces. Then on 8 February, the day I Corps forces crossed the border into Laos, President Thieu went on TV to personally break the news to the Vietnamese public. As the operation continued, press reports increasingly focused on the small district town of Tchepone as the final objective. To the RVN, it had become an objective to be attained at all costs.

While the RVN announced that its troops had occupied Tchepone, North Vietnam quickly and loudly disclaimed it. The GVN in the mean time received foreign press reporters with a total lack of enthusiasm and did not allow them easy access to battleground visits as it had during other operations. This increased suspicion and speculation. Subsequent press articles and pictures depicting the withdrawal of ARVN troops from Laos further confused attempts at assessing the offensive campaign correctly, particularly by foreign observers. However, with the exception of the minority elite in big cities, the South Vietnamese general public was not influenced by the foreign press. Still, the initial publicity about LAM SON 719 looked embarrassingly hollow in their eyes in view of the hasty termination of the operation. This impression lingered on despite official announcements of victory and the ribbons and medals awarded to the "victorious" troops of I Corps.

If the premature conclusion of the Laotian campaign could not be effectively screened from the outside world, it was all too clear to insiders that the campaign was an unfinished job. The intended and desired goal to sustain combat until the onset of the rainy season in order to strangle the enemy's supply route could not be accomplished. Only 45 days after ARVN forces had crossed the border, they were already back in South Vietnam. The two lesser raids that were subsequently conducted sought to enhance the public image of the RVNAF more than to achieve military gains. Finally, the returns produced by LAM SON 719 in terms of enemy caches destroyed were not even as impressive

as those of the Cambodian incursion. For one thing, ARVN forces had stopped short of the real prize, the area west of Tchepone where most of the enemy's supplies lay vulnerable on the ground. For another, the search and destruction of Base Area 611 could not be carried out as planned because the tactical balance no longer favored the continuation of the operation in that direction.

Regardless of these shortcomings, a substantial number of the objectives had been accomplished which required ARVN units to fight hard and incur great sacrifices. Topping the honor roll, the 1st ARVN Infantry Division stood up to its reputation as the number one ARVN combat unit. The division's organic units maneuvered with skill and were well led; its well disciplined troops fought with gallantry and dedication. During its 42 days of operation in Laos, the division was extremely active south of Route No. 9. Switching its effort during the final days, it successfully pushed toward Tchepone and occupied it. During the withdrawal, some of its units were heavily engaged and suffered losses. Despite this, the 1st Infantry Division accomplished its mission with top honors.

Long considered as the elite unit of the RVNAF, the Airborne Division did not perform as brilliantly as its reputation would indicate during LAM SON 719. Despite the enemy's superiority in maneuvering forces and his employment of new weapons, the fact that the division was unable to hold FSB 31 seemed to be indicative of its lack of contingency planning for such a situation. But our airborne units fought extremely well as individual elements. One of the division's brigade commanders was missing in action - probably captured by the enemy; and five out of nine of its battalion commanders were either killed or wounded. This testified to the intense fighting that the division had to face but by and large, the division accomplished nothing spectacular in its assigned mission. During the final stage, the division also failed to provide effective flank protection for the major effort and secure Route No. 9 even with the reinforcement of four armor squadrons. This failure greatly complicated the ARVN withdrawal from Laos.

As for the Marine Division, it was the first time it had participated in an operation as a division. Accustomed to operating separately at brigade level, and in view of the traditional autonomy of its brigades, the division seemed to have problems of command and control. The 147th Marine Brigade did not succeed in clearing the enemy pressure around FSB Delta despite continuous efforts for several days. Then the division made its own decision to withdraw from FSB Hotel and its positions on the Co Roc promontory, apparently to avoid facing a difficult battle. This action clearly reflected the autonomy enjoyed by the division commander, Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, who did not consider himself under the control of the I Corps commander but still made tactical decisions that affected the latter's conduct of the operation. Despite this, Marine units fought extremely well during sustained combat under heavy enemy pressure. Regardless of losses, they always retained unit integrity and cohesiveness.

The 1st Ranger Group was heavily engaged as soon as it was deployed. Its 39th and 21st Battalions responded well to the enemy's massive attacks and also inflicted severe losses on enemy units. The early withdrawal of this Group did not allow a correct evaluation of its performance.

As to ARVN armor units, their employment in LAM SON 719 was perhaps one of the very few occasions of any large concentration during the war. The 1st Armor Brigade was committed initially with only two squadrons; this total was later increased to four in addition to two troops of M-4l light tanks re-deployed from MR-2. These reinforcements were introduced to offset some losses but still the deployment of all these armored forces on a short stretch of narrow jungle road not even 20 kilometers in length and affording no room for maneuver represented perhaps one of the unwisest moves on the part of the tactical commanders involved (8). If this decision was deliberate, then perhaps they had

seriously underestimated the enemy's capabilities or the restrictions dictated by the terrain in that area. As a result, the 1st Armor Brigade was at a great disadvantage when faced with enemy tanks deep in the jungle. In those circumstances, ARVN armor officers were naturally unable to make effective use of combat tactics they had learned in Western service schools. The brigade commander was also not resourceful enough to meet this unusual combat challenge. The outcome was evident: only one third of the total number of armored vehicles committed managed to return home after accomplishing nothing substantial. If someone was to be held responsible for this failure, the question would arise as to whether it should be the commander of the brigade or his superior, who committed this unit to such an undesirable and impossible situation.

In contrast, I Corps artillery performed exceptionally well during the entire operation. Fire coordination between ARVN and U.S. supporting units was extremely flexible and effective. Divisional artillery units providing direct support in Laos fared less well, however. Their deployment was also limited. Each infantry regiment or brigade was supported by only one 105-mm battery and one 155-mm battery. Given the number of

artillery pieces left behind in Laos after the hasty withdrawal, one may wonder whether we should have committed more artillery assets to the battle.

The 1st Air Division, Vietnam Air Force, did not play a significant role in providing close air support for I Corps forces. Its participation and contributions were rather modest even by RVNAP standards due to the availability of the United States Air Force. The 1st Area Logistics Command, by contrast, proved to be resourceful and capable enough to meet the challenge of providing support for a corps size operation on short notice. Its lack of initial preparations were more than offset by the solid backing given by U.S. logistical agencies.

Lessons learned

LAM SON 719 reflected quite accurately the strengths and weaknesses of the RVNAF combat effectiveness in almost every area: organization, command, leadership, motivation, operating techniques, planning, and execution. It was impeded by certain significant errors and shortcomings that made the entire effort fall short of its intended goal.

Foremost among the most significant problems of LAM SON 719 was perhaps timely tactical intelligence. To give due credit to the intelligence effort, one must admit that intelligence estimates concerning the operation were definitely accurate or nearly accurate as far as enemy capabilities in antiaircraft weapons and troop reinforcements were concerned. However, they were less accurate in other areas. Enemy artillery and armor capabilities were not listed as significant factors. In addition, reports on the area of concentrated supplies were not entirely accurate. Several enemy prisoners in fact disclosed that most supplies caches had been evacuated to areas outside the AO. The enemy appeared not to be surprised at all; by contrast, he had been prepared and expecting our forces to come in. This led to the conclusion that several things concerning the enemy had eluded our collection capabilities. Once more, the Vietnam war seemed to have taught us some useful things about intelligence and security. To be more effective, a more extensive collection network would seem to be indicated with emphasis on human intelligence in the areas under enemy control. Then, analysis, evaluation and interpretation of enemy capabilities should be made with the full cognizance that they were apt to change very rapidly and as a result, estimates would have to concentrate not only on the current situation but also on how it was going to change. At the same time, for an operation of that scale and importance, a more conscious effort at deceiving the enemy by a comprehensive deception scheme perhaps would have helped offset the adverse effect of publicity and effectively confused the enemy. What we did for LAM SON 719 was certainly not enough for the purpose contemplated.

Planning and preparations for the offensive were another major area that needed improvement. The operational plan for LAM SON 719 was adequate only so long as the operation progressed smoothly and ARVN forces were able to hold the initiative. It should have taken contingencies into full consideration and been able to respond to them with resourcefulness. The extent and intensity of enemy reactions, for example, were one contingency that planners apparently overlooked. Then the enemy could well reinforce his resistance by diversionary actions elsewhere in South Vietnam, too. The absence of contingency planning was a glaring deficiency of LAM SON 719. ARVN units were also not thoroughly prepared when they went into Laos. Elite troops like the paratroopers, for example, had problems using the M-72 light anti-tank weapon. Several other units did not have enough warm clothes and blankets for their troops. FSB 31, which was supposed to serve as a major supporting base during the entire course of the operation, had only a most rudimentary defense system: a single concertina ring thrown around it. The command and control center of the 3d Airborne Battalion, which was responsible for the defense of FSB 31, was sheltered only by 12 PSP sheets protecting the battalion headquarters, its S-3 section, and communications and medical elements. With this kind of defense and protection, how could FSB 31 hold out against enemy 130-mm shells and tanks? Obviously, planning and preparations should have been more extensive, more careful.

The problem of preparations was closely related to the need to preserve secrecy. How to proceed with preparations at the unit level while keeping them from being detected by the enemy? That was a major problem that needed to be solved. At the JGS level, even the J-2 was not informed about the operational plan until the campaign had started. He did not have the opportunity to contribute to the planning process either his intelligence data or his own expert assessment of the enemy's capabilities. I Corps staff agencies other than the G-2 and G-3 divisions, and those of participating units were similarly left out. It seemed as though the whole undertaking had been just a contingency action to meet a difficult situation.

As far as command and control were concerned, the most important problem to be solved was insubordination on the part of general reserve unit commanders who like many other generals considered themselves the pillars of the regime. The I Corps commander apparently bowed to the political powers of these generals and this adversely affected his conduct of the operation. The (insubmissive attitude of the Marine and Airborne Division commanders was actually inexcusable in that they placed themselves above the national interest and let their personal pride interfere with the task of defeating the enemy. For the operation to succeed as planned, the problem of effective command had to be

satisfactorily solved above everything else because it affected the relationship between subordinate staffs and the control of the operation itself. At least, the I Corps commander should have been given the authority to require that his orders be strictly carried out.

The arrangements for effective operational control did not necessarily require the traditional echelons of tactical command posts as had been organized: main CP, forward CP and tactical control CP. In view of effective signal communications and the availability of command ships, the tactical control CP and the forward CP could be combined into one. Its location was immaterial as long as the CP was able to exercise effective control and coordination of subordinate units. At this operational CP, there should have been adequate staff personnel, a clear division of responsibilities among staff elements and full authority should have been given them to solve every problem at hand without having to refer to another echelon of command. The effective functioning of this CP would inspire confidence among subordinate units and their staffs. The breaking down of I Corps headquarters into three echelons for the control of LAM SON 719 required a dilution of its limited staff personnel with the end result that no echelon was able to function properly.

ARVN units that participated in the operation definitely lacked a system of accurate and timely reporting. This was not only a matter of training or experience but also a matter of loyalty. A higher command's exercise of control was only as effective as its subordinate

units' reporting was reliable. In the case of LAM SON 719, this reporting was most deplorable. Because the intensity of the fighting did not permit frequent visits by the I Corps and division commanders, they depended entirely on reports for the control of the situation. But reports by their subordinate units were slow, inaccurate, and sometimes non-existent. During the operation, there were several instances in which division commanders lost control of their units. Even the I Corp. commander sometimes did not know the major events affecting his divisions.

A significant development which turned out to be extremely valuable for the effective support of the operation was the creation of the Joint Coordinating Group (JCG) by the XXIV Corps as of the beginning of March 1971. The group exercised operational control of all U.S. support activities. Its centralized coordinating authority was instrumental in providing timely and appropriate support for every ARVN combat need during the operation. Co-located with the I Corps tactical control CP, the Joint Coordinating Group assisted it with invaluable data for effective planning. An organization of this type was clearly indicated for every combined effort in which the U.S. only played a supporting role. On its part, the ARVN could have benefited more if it had established a counterpart "support coordination center" or equivalent to coordinate ARVN support activities with those of U.S. units through the JCG. This would have enabled the operational commander to monitor closely the flow of support activities and plan his tactical moves more systematically.

In the area of combat tactics, a most remarkable feature of LAM.SON 719 was the use of semi-fixed fire support bases installed on high peaks. This tactic was a duplication of the American usage in South Vietnam. But the situation in lower Laos did not favor the installation of these FSBs for the reason that the area of operation had been under enemy control for a long time; the enemy was well entrenched and well organized for defense. The several peaks in the area gave the enemy an advantage in observation which resulted in accurate indirect fire on our fixed fire control bases. The amount of troops deployed for the defense of

each FSB was also not adequate. The inevitable result was that our units were immobilized in these FSBs and gradually became fixed targets for enemy encirclement and attacks. Most of the 96 artillery pieces lost in Laos resulted from our system of lame duck FSBs. This system could have been replaced by other alternatives such as mobile FSBs, selection of lower, more accessible sites and increased use of mortars to augment artillery firepower. A system of mobile FSBs would have fully utilized the U.S. helilift capabilities; it would also have afforded better defense and greater opportunities to keep the offensive moving. Heliborne operations as a tactic were thoroughly put to test during the Laotian campaign because they were conducted in an area of operation where fighting was more intense than in any past experience in South Vietnam and where the enemy's antiaircraft system was effective. But the U.S. Army's rules governing these operations seemed to hold fast and were proved valid. However, their execution could stand some improvement in terms of coordination and fire support; in any case, it should be done with expertise and attention to details.

First, it appeared that the enemy would have been confused if more landing zones (LZ) had been prepared than were really needed. B-52 strikes should not be used too far in advance of the actual landings. After that other types of firepower could be used to prepare LZs. Experience showed that it would be better to divide the area into several sectors, each sector assigned to a particular type of firepower so that all the various types firepowers available could be applied at the same time to achieve a maximum effect: tactical air, aerial artillery, air cavalry, ground artiliery, etc. The use of fire power should not be confined to the preparation of LZS; it should also be directed against avenues of approach and areas where enemy artillery or troops concentration were suspected. Shortly before the landings, all firepower should be concentrated for the last time on the selected sites. Next, air cavalry elements would carry out their classic reconnaissance mission. Since they were familiar with LZ sites, local terrain and flight approaches, the air cavalry commander should be made responsible for fire coordination. When landings began, support fire

should be continued but diverted to other pre-selected areas. Aircraft laid smoke screens could be useful to conceal landing activities; they could also be used elsewhere to deceive the enemy. Air cavalry reconnaissance, in the meantime, should extend its coverage to protect landings. For command and control purposes during landings, at least two command ships should be utilized, one above the pick up zone (PZ) and the other above the LZ. Each should have command authorities aboard with full power to solve contingency problems. Both the air mission commander and the ground commander should be airborne together at the LZ. Alternate troop commanders should be designated in advance to take over in case of accidents. All protective fires and reconnaissance flights should continue until the landings are completed.

A basic weakness of ARVN forces participating in LAM SON 719 was their lack of ground mobility. Since the concept of operatio evolved around the extensive use of helicopters, ARVN forces tended to be over dependent on them. They used helicopters indiscriminately for every activity, even for short movements which could have been made more effectively by marching. This was a serious mistake that not only overtaxed U.S. helilift units but also incurred their complaints. The use of helicopters should have been conceived more judiciously and then only for extensive movements such as a shift of effort direction, the move toward Tchepone, or an exploitation of gains and creating surprise for the enemy. More troops movements should have been made by marching to ensure discretion and initiative. In this regard, the 1st Infantry Division was particularly commendable. Another short coming of ARVN units at battalion and lower levels was their failure to maneuver when being engaged. After the first contact, they tended to stop and wait for support rather than conduct probes and maneuver to attack or close in on the enemy. This shortcoming indicated a need for additional training for small unit leaders.

With regard to combined arms tactics, there was no doubt that ARVN units had received extensive training but in actual combat they seemed to falter easily. In the face of a formidable enemy, neither the airborne nor the armor units displayed evidence of effective

cooperation and teamwork. Armored vehicles were mostly used for transportation. When an engagement was made, infantry troops left tanks unprotected in the jungle and tanks were compelled to fend for themselves, alone. It was apparent that because of this lack of teamwork and mutual protection, the Airborne Division and the four armor squadrons could not operate effectively along the road and in the jungle of lower Laos.

Another serious shortcoming was the employment of reserves. During LAM SON 719, all participating divisions had their own reserve force. I Corps, on its part, had a reserve force consisting of a Marine brigade and a Ranger group. But the strange thing was that in no instance during the course of the operation was a reserve force thrown into combat to help clear an area from heavy enemy pressure. All reserve forces were used piecemeal at the rear echelon. No commander ever thought of using them at the forward echelon to

his advantage. When a FSB was threatened with being overrun, the only course of action our unit commanders took was to destroy the artillery, abandon the base and extricate their troops by helilift. It was apparent that to be more combat effective, ARVN units needed to learn how to organize reserves and employ them decisively on the battlefield.

A lesser but no less dangerous shortcoming was the lack of communications security. In general, ARVN units at lower levels were not disciplined enough in the application of security procedures concerning radio communications. At corps and division levels, however, these procedures were more strictly observed through the systematic encoding of messages sent by CW radio or radioteletype. But at lower level units, which made extensive use of FM voice radio sets, communications were usually sent in dear text in sheer disregard of basic encoding procedures. ARVN commanders were accustomed to talking freely over radio networks, using the most rudimentary system of codes. Something was missing in the enforcement of communications discipline among ARVN units.

Finally, the withdrawal operation conducted by I Corps was such that this experience should be examined with utmost candor. First of

all, withdrawing under enemy pressure was always a difficult operation which should be carefully planned and executed. The time allowed for its execution was too short. The extrication of troops by helicopters naturally increased their vulnerability when compared to a withdrawal on foot. However, some movements to the rear on foot were not executed in a satisfactory manner. Our forces suffered serious losses on routes selected for withdrawal because of combined armor-infantry ambushes laid by the enemy. During the withdrawal, the Airborne Division and the entire armor force were unable to ensure protection for their own movements. The Marine units, however, fared much better; their withdrawal was a successful operation.

In summary, LAM SON 719 was a bloody field exercise for ARVN forces under the command of I Corps. Nearly 8,000 ARVN soldiers and millions of dollars worth of valuable equipment and materiel were sacrificed. The realities of battles fought in Laos certainly taught us many invaluable lessons that the RVNAF would have to learn in order to defend South Vietnam effectively. Many of these lessons - those that were appropriate for such treatment - became subjects of instruction at RVNAF service schools and training centers.

(6) Reference Message No. PT008443, datetimed 141435Z Feb. 71 from COMUSMACV to CJCS and CINPAC.

(7) It is possible that one of the problems the troopers experienced with the LAW was related to firing the weapon at very close range, shorter than the minimum arming distance of the projectile.

(8) The commanders of ARVN I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps were both armor officers.

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Indochina Monographs

LAM SON 719

by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh

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Glossary

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CHAPTER VII

Observations and Conclusions

LAM SON 719 was a combined RVNAF-US operation conducted under several constraints. U.S. ground combat troops were allowed to cross the border into Laos. There was no joint command for the control of operations. Both the ARVN I Corps commander, who directed the operational effort in Laos, and the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps, his senior adviser, worked together on an equal footing in keeping with the principle of cooperation and coordination. In contrast to the usual practice, ARVN forces went into combat without their advisers; neither could they expect a helping hand from U.S. or other Allied infantry troops while on Laotian soil. On the other hand, U.S. combat support for the offensive effort was greatly increased in terms of firepower and helilift. This support was vital since the objectives of the operation lay outside the RVN national border in a terrain which was not only unfamiliar and difficult but also held for a long time by the enemy and organized into an important logistical base area.

To break the RVN attempt to strangle their lifeline, which was the only one remaining in the entire southern Indochina area, the North Vietnamese Communists reacted swiftly. Elements of five infantry divisions with their armor and artillery support and all logistic units operating in the area were eventually thrown into the battle. This combat force was

estimated at over 40,000 men. In an effort to compensate for his inferiority in firepower, the enemy employed the tactic of massive infantry attacks. In response, our devastating firepower inflicted severe losses on the enemy; about one half of his committed combat strength was sacrificed. An enemy regiment went into Laos in

early February 1971 with approximately 2,000 men. After 45 days of combat, it was reduced to a total strength of 600 to 900. These losses required replacements, and to keep his severely mauled main force units in the north up to combat strength, the enemy was forced to reduce the amount of replacements earmarked for his units further to the south in both Vietnam and Cambodia.

Although the supply caches that our forces found in Laos were not as large as those captured in Cambodia the previous year, the amount of enemy materiel and supplies destroyed was quite substantial according to statistics which included bomb damage assessment of only 10% of the B-52 targets. The true amount could have been much greater had all strike targets been carefully searched. Of particular importance, sections of the enemy's fuel pipeline system were destroyed in at least seven areas. The quantity of enemy ammunition and other supplies expended or destroyed during this campaign also reduced his supply level to a considerable extent. In fact, in the aftermath of LAM SON 719, there were many indications that enemy units, throughout all of South Vietnam and Cambodia, began to feel the pinch of supply and personnel shortages.

These losses and expenditures naturally had to be replaced or replenished, and to meet these heavy demands, the enemy required more resources, more manpower, and more time. Despite its short duration, LAM SON 719 effectively disrupted the enemy's north-south supply system. This effect was nearly total in the area of operation, somewhat less west of it. Our intelligence revealed that enemy personnel manning the supply base system sustained about 50% casualties along with sizable materiel losses. In addition, the destroyed and mined roads that ARVN forces left behind caused the enemy more difficulties long after the incursion had ended. ARVN troops had also received the opportunity to observe first hand the road net, terrain and disposition of enemy logistic facilities which contributed to our target development.

On the part of the RVN, the offensive it had launched into Laos obviously meant much more in another aspect. Simultaneously with this effort, the RVN also initiated a large sweeping operation through

several other Communist bases located in Cambodia. This conduct of two simultaneous major offensive operations beyond the national border would have been impossible for the RVN just two years earlier. More significantly, while our troops were operating

outside the border, the military situation at home was quiet, security improved, and the re-deployment of U.S. combat troops continued at a steady pace. All these accomplishments would have been impossible without considerable progress in the combat effectiveness of the RVNAF and in the Vietnamization and Pacification programs.

In lower Laos, ARVN forces had proved their fighting ability. At least three quarters of all infantry battalions fought with professional effectiveness despite the absence of U.S. advisers and the overwhelming numerical superiority of enemy forces which were also supported by substantial firepower. This fact alone imparted self confidence to those units which engaged such great odds.

The swiftness and forcefulness with which enemy forces reacted to our incursion gave credence to intelligence reports that the enemy had been preparing to launch an offensive of his own some time during the year. Had it not been for LAM SON 719, the enemy's planned offensive, which occurred in the spring of 1972, may have come up to a year earlier. As it was, the RVAAF were much further along in the process of Vietnamization by Easter 1972 than they were in early 1971 and better prepared to cope with the great and widespread offensive the NVA eventually launched. This delay forced upon the enemy was one of the most important outcomes of LAM SON 719.

On the other hand, subsequent intelligence reports also indicated that the enemy was concerned that after LAM SON 719, the RVN would strike into the A Shau Valley and try to destroy Base Area 611. This concern on the part of the enemy revealed two things. First, he would be preoccupied with consolidating the defense of this base area and, as a consequence, would have less time to devote to any offensive activity. Second, despite his boastful claims of victory, the enemy apparently respected the RVNAF capabilities.

The above analysis serves to point out the main objectives that both the RVN and the U.S. had expected to achieve through LAM SON 719: more time for the Vietnamization process and the strengthening of the RVN to justify the continued redeployment of U.S. forces. From all indications, this objective was achieved. It permitted President Nixon to announce, only one day after the last raid into Laos had ended, that an additional 100,000 troops would be withdrawn between early May and the end of November 1971. This would reduce total U.S. combat strength in South Vietnam to 184,000. So, in the final analysis, although LAM SON 719 was not a total tactical success, it certainly helped the RVN and the U.S. to achieve some of their more important strategic objectives. In return, the RVN had to pay a high price and in the process exposed some of its weaknesses in the areas of defense and security.

In the first place, the general reserve forces, which consisted of the Airborne and the Marine Divisions, proved to be insufficient. for the defense posture of the RVN. During LAM SON 719, both divisions were unable to achieve total success despite a rather

limited objective and the participation of the 1st Infantry Division and the 1st Armor Brigade. On the enemy side, the NVA reserve forces which were thrown into the battle effectively blunted our offensive thrust in spite of serious losses, a clear indication of the enemy's ever increasing military might. In addition, the Ho Chi Minh Trail had become a sophisticated, convenient and flexible infiltration system and its thousand odd miles of well concealed jungle roads had proved to be difficult to interdict and hold.

Next, was the continued RVNAF dependence on U.S. support demonstrated by LAM SON 719. In retrospect, one may wonder how the Laotian incursion would have proceeded without U.S. artillery, air and other combat support assets. The RVNAF had been trained and conditioned for several years in the use of U.S. firepower either through the U.S. advisory effort or through combined operations with U.S. combat units. The Vietnamization program which was designed to enable the RVNAF to assume the combat burden, apparently had not provided enough firepower and mobility for self support. It was understood that in the long run, the RVNAF would have to develop a combat doctrine of their own supported

by their limited capabilities. However, this goal was not in reach within the foreseeable future. In the immediate present, LAM SON 719 made it all too clear that not only was North Vietnam's combat strength increasing, its capabilities surpassed the RVN's by a large margin in term of anti-aircraft weapons, armor and artillery. The question posed at that time appeared to be whether the RVN, without U.S. presence and support, could meet the challenge presented by the enemy's continued expansion and development.

LAM SON 719 did not come as a surprise for the enemy as intended. This was a profound disappointment for our side. We had tried to keep the planning and preparation process as leak proof as possible, even at the expense of carefully preparing our units for the challenge. But the enemy had correctly anticipated our possible action five months in advance (1). To counter it, he had activated a Corps level control headquarters, Front 70B, as early as in October, 1970 to exercise control over the 304th, 308th and 320th Divisions. The battleground had also been carefully prepared. To the dismay of ARVN units, they found that regardless of their direction of advance in the area of operation, they encountered well organized defense positions. Enemy artillery was also pre-registered to every hilltop susceptible of becoming a landing zone for our helicopters. In addition, enemy prisoners testified that a substantial part of supply caches had been removed to other areas. What we had hoped to be a surprise turned out to be something the enemy had planned for as a contingency ever since the Cambodian incursion was terminated. On the contrary, the surprise, in some areas, was ours.

We did not expect to meet head on with T-54 tanks and 130-mm guns in the jungles of Laos. Neither did we suspect that Route No. 9 would be such a problem, heavily mined and riddled with fire ambushes. We had no idea that the enemy had developed to such an extent his defense of our area of operation.

The rapid and determined reaction of the enemy to our incursion also presented additional complications. Even though we enjoyed modern and effective air support, we were unable to neutralize his antiaircraft system. His artillery did not suffer much from our counter battery fire. As to his mortars, they were beyond our capability to destroy or drive sway. In a concerted effort, his antiaircraft weapons, artillery and mortars joined fires to neutralize our superiority in air mobility. Our infantry was eventually forced on the defense by the numerical superiority of enemy units whose firepower was also no less overwhelming. We did not anticipate that the enemy's armor would be a major threat, especially in the Laotian jungle. We were wrong. As a matter of fact, we were unable to counter it effectively regardless of the manner in which it was deployed. We had 300 armored vehicles but they could barely control twelve miles of road. It is obvious that our commanders and planners had underestimated the enemy's ability to react. We did so because we viewed the enemy through our own lens and judged him according to our experience. Most of our combat decisions were based on subjective reasoning with the end result that neither our strategy nor our tactics seemed responsive enough to the kind of warfare the enemy was waging. The great military strategist, Sun Tzu, had said centuries ago: "Know thy enemy, know thyself, a hundred battles fought, a hundred victories assured." This was perhaps just military common sense but how many of our current military commanders really grasped that simple truth and put it to work? Besides, it seemed that our side was still complacent with its outdated vision of a guerrilla type enemy which had existed only a decade ago.

The major tactical error of LAM SON 719 centered, then, on a rigid application of familiar operational patterns that had so far succeeded reasonably on the battlefields within South Vietnam. These ingrained

habits did not go unnoticed by the enemy who always reviewed every detail following an engagement. But these tactics simply did not work in the rugged terrain of the Truong Son Range, a long held enemy base area. Despite the advantage of U.S. firepower and airmobility, I Corps did not always know how to employ it effectively although the heliborne thrust into Tchepone conducted by the 1st Infantry Division was a successful maneuver. By contrast, the enemy proved resourceful enough to take maximum advantage of the terrain and to develop his strengths accordingly while minimizing his weaknesses. Because of his resourcefulness, the effectiveness of our FSB system, our armor and our airmobility were greatly reduced. Even our firepower became less devastating than it should have been.

Finally, both the RVN and the U.S. really missed the chance for a big victory during LAM SON 719 on a battleground which was decisive for the outcome of the war. Because of the significance of the panhandle, the enemy had thrown into combat almost all of his reserve forces - 12 regiments confirmed and three others probable - and he seemed determined to go all out, win or lose. On our part, we hesitated, we procrastinated and we passed up a big chance of winning when the chips were all down. For one thing, we failed to foresee the big stake, plan for it carefully and commit sufficient forces to ensure success. When we went in, we knew that the objective was important. We believed our firepower was superior enough to destroy the massive concentration of enemy forces which resisted us. But we did not use it fully to our advantage to reach our objective as quickly as possible. As new enemy units arrived in the area, tilting the balance of forces in his favor, we only considered withdrawing to avoid undue losses. Was it an error in planning or a lack of planning? The 2d Infantry Division was available for commitment. It could have been re-deployed without risk because the U.S. 23d Division (Americal) was in its area to provide security. But we did not commit the 2d Division for the simple reason that we were not sure we could win. As to committing more forces to ensure victory, the RVNAF simply did not have them available.

In lower Laos, our enemy had once more proved that his war machinery was effective. He also proved he was determined and capable enough to muster his force for the protection of his vital area. As individuals, the enemy troops who were captured or rallied to our side all proved to be weary of the war and utterly demoralized. But within their own ranks and during combat, under the stimulation of command and Party cadres, they were apt to become fearless. During the operation, their repeated waves of assault were so fierce that some were reported occasionally to have been drugged prior to engagement. Whatever the truth1 the fact must be admitted that enemy command and control was effective. North Vietnam also demonstrated it could see far ahead, plan for its goal realistically and implement its plans with resolution. In addition to having effective command and control, NVA units were well disciplined, well, trained and exceptionally well indoctrinated. Their obvious advantage was positive and determined leadership, both military and political.

The South Vietnamese soldier was definitely superior to his enemy as an individual. He was more experienced, better trained and wiser. In general, he had fought with determination and professionalism against a numerically superior enemy who endeavored to protect his vital life line. Despite the protractedness of the war and overwhelming hardships and privations he still fought on and accepted sacrifices. This was evident during LAM SON 719.

The immediate results of LAM SON 719 were impressive indeed. However, the far reaching impact of this operation only materialized a long time afterwards as the situation in both South Vietnam and Cambodia began to improve. But the repercussions of this imperfect exploit seemed to indicate that the long term struggle of South Vietnam needed

to be forged by sharper tactical skills and guided by an appropriate and more effective strategic leadership. This was perhaps the greatest lesson that we could derive from LAM SON 719.

(1) Deposition made by a Communist sergeant from the 24B Regiment, NVA 304th Division who defected to our side. Enemy units had received orders to counteract a possible ARVN offensive along Route No. 9 five months before it was launched.

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Indochina Monographs

LAM SON 719

by Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh

Published by U.S. Army Center Of Military History

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APPENDIX A

TASK ORGANIZATION, ARVN I CORPS
FOR LAM SON 719

Hq, I Corps

I Corps Arty
64th Arty Bn

1st ALC I Corps
71st Med Gp
I Corps Sig Bn

1st MP Bn
111th Trans Co
116th Trans Co
118th Trans Co

1st Armored Bde
7th ACS
11th ACS
17th ACS
4th ACS (Prov) (OPCON) (D+40)
lst/3d Armored Cav
lst/8th Armored Cav

1st Ranger Gp (+)
21st Rngr Bn
37th Rngr Bn
39th Rngr Bn
77th Rngr Border Defense Bn
3d Co 79th Rngr Border Defense Bn

10th Engr Gp
101st Engr Bn (OPCON to Abn Div)
102d Engr Bn
118th Engr LC Co

1st Inf Div
1st Inf Div Arty
48th Arty Bn (-)
B/l1 (105)
B/48 (155)
C/10 (155)
14th Arty Bn (-)
A/48 (155)
62d Arty Bn
A/62 (105)
B/14 (105)
C/48 (155)
11th Arty Bn (-)
C/11 (105)
A/10 (155)
1st Engr Bn
1st Med Bn
1st Sig Bn
1st Log Bn

1st Regt
1st Bn, Ist Inf Regt
2d Bn, 1st Inf Regt
3d Bn, 1st Inf Regt
4th Bn, 1st Inf Regt

2d Regt
1st Bn, 2d Inf Regt (OPCON 54th Regt D+53 to D+68)
2d Bn, 2d Inf Regt
3d Bn, 2d Inf Regt
4th Bn, 2d Inf Regt
5th Bn, 2d Inf Regt

3d Regt
1st Bn, 3d Inf Regt
2d Bn, 3d Inf Regt
3d Bn, 3d Inf Regt
4th Bn, 3d Inf Regt

54th Inf Regt
1st Bn, 54th Regt
2d Bn, 54th Regt
4th Bn, 54th Regt

Abn Div (+) (OPCON)
Abn Div Arty (-)
44th Arty Bn (155)

1st Abn Med Bn
1st Abn Service Bn
1st Abn Signal Bn
1st Abn Bde
1st Abn Bn
8th Abn Bn
9th Abn Bn
1st Arty Bn

2d Abn Bde
5th Abn Bn
7th Abn Bn
11th Abn Bn
2d Arty Bn

Abn Bde
2d Abn Bn
3d Abn Bn

6th Abn Bn
3d Arty Bn

Marine Division (OPCON)
Hq Bn
Service Bn
Medical Bn
A Btry, 48th Arty Bn (-) (155)
147th Bde (D+1)
2d Inf Bn
4th Inf Bn
7th Inf Bn
2d Arty Bn
C Btry, 20th Arty Bn (155)

258th Bde
1st Inf Bn
3d Inf Bn
8th Inf Bn
3d Arty Bn
D Btry, 48th Arty Bn (-) (155)

369th Bde (D+32)
5th Inf Bn
6th Inf Bn
9th Inf Bri
1st Arty Bn

5th Inf Regt, 2d Inf Div
1st Bn, 5th Inf Regt
2d Bn, 5th Inf Regt

APPENDIX B

TASK ORGANIZATION, US XXIV CORPS
FOR LAM SON 719

Hq, XXIV Corps

108th Arty Gp
8th En1 4th Arty
2d En, 94th Arty

1st En, 39th Arty (-) (D+30)
1st En, 44th Arty AWSP (-)
45th Engr Gp (OPCON D-13 to D+23)
14th Engr En (CBT)
630th Engr Co (LW)
511th Engr Co (PB)
59th Engr Co (-) (LC)
27th Engr En (CBT) (-)
59lst Engr Co (LE)

504th MP Bn (-)
300th MP Co (OPCON)

212th CAB
13lst Surv Aerial Co
220th Recon Airplane Co

101st Abn Div (Ambl) (-)
101st Abn Div Arty (-)
2d Bn (Ambi) 11th Arty
2d Bn (Ambi) 319th Arty
4th Bn, 77th AFA (Ambi)
Co B, 326th Engr Bn (Ambl)

1st Bde, 101st Abn Div (Ambl) (Res)
3d Bde, 101st Abn Div (Ambl) (D+30 to D+67)
1st Bn, 501st Abn Inf (D+25 to D+67)
2d Bn, 502 Abn Inf (OPCON 3d Bde, 101st Abn Div) (D+26 to D+67)
1st Bn, 506th Abn Inf (D+47 to D+67)
2d Bn, 327th Abn Inf (D+29 to D+48)

TF 326th (-) (OPCON) (D-1 to D+67)
Co A, 326th Engr Bn (Ambl) (+)
59th EOD Det (-)

101st Combat Aviation Group
101st Avn Bn (AH) (Ambl)(D-1 to D+67)
158th Avn Bn (AH) (Ambl)(D-1 to D+67)
159th Avn bn (AH) (Ambl)(D-1 to D+67)
5th Trans Bn (D-l to D+67)
14th Avn Bn (OPCON) D+2 to D+63)
71st AHC (D+25 to D+59)
116th AHC (D+34 to D+36 & D+50 to D+53)
174th AHC (D+25 to D+67)
132d ASHC (D+25 to D+63)

223d Avn Bn HHC (OPCON) (D+2 to D+67)
48th AHC (D+2 to D+67)
173d AHC (D+2 to D+67)
282d AHC (D+34 to D+36 & D+50 to D+51)
235th AWC (D+38 to D+56)
238th AWC (D+2 to D+56)
D/227th AWC (D+28 to D+66)
179th ASHC (D+23 to D+66)
756th Med

2d Sqdn (Ambl), 17th Air Cav
C/7/17 Cav Sqdn (OPCON)
B/7/1 Cav Sqdn (OPCON)

67th Med Gp
237th Med Det
571st Med Det

34th Can Spt Gp (-)
34th Avn Det (DS)
34th Co Spt Gp (AM&S)

58th Trans Bn
610th SG Trans Co
14 2d DS Trans Co
263d GS Avel Co

MHHS 463d, 1st MAW (OPCON D+1)

1st Bde, 5th Inf Div (Mech) (+) (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl) D+32 to D+67)
1st En, 11th Inf (Mech)
3d Bn, 187th Abn Inf, 101st Abn Div (OPCON D-1 to D+67)
1st Bn, 61st Inf (Mech) (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl) D+26 to D+31 and D+57 to D+67) (11th Bde, 23d Div D+32 to D+56)
3d Sqdn, 5th Cav
1st Bn, 77th Armor
5th Bn, 4th Arty (DS)
1st Bn, 82d Arty (-) 23d Div (Atch) (DS) (D-1)
Co A, 4th Bn, 12th Armor
Co A, 7th Engr
Co P, 75th Ranger
298th Sign Co
Co B, 23d Med Bn, 23d Div (OPCON D+31 to D+48)
75th Support Bn
Trp F, 8th Cav (OPCON D+2 to D+67)

11th Bde, 23d Inf Div (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl) D+32 to D+66)
1st Sqdn, 1st Cav (OPCON 1st Bde, 5th Inf Div (Mech) D-1 to D+56) (OPCON 101st Abn Div (Ambl D+67)
2d Bn, 1st Inf (D+21)
4th Bn, 3d Inf, 23d Inf Div (OPCON 1st Bde, 5th Inf Div (Mech) D-1 to D+56)
H Troop, 17th Cav
Co C, 26th Engr Bn
6th Bn, 11th Arty (-)
Btry C, 1st Bn, 82d Arty
Btry C, 6th Bn, 11th Arty
Btry A, 3d Bn, 82d Arty
11th Spt En (Prov)

Hq, USASUPCOM - DNG
26th GSG
8th Trans Gp
39th Trans Bn
57th Trans Bn
Co C, 11th Motor Trans En (+)
2d Maint Bn
63d Maint Bn
FSA Maint Bn
FSA 26-1
FSA 26-2

Glossary

AAA Antiaircraft Artillery
AA/AW Antiaircraft Automatic Weapon
ABN Airborne
AFCCC Air Force Command and Control Center
AHB Assault Helicopter Battalion
ALC Area Logistics Command
ARVN Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASHB Assault Support Helicopter Battalion
ASRT Air Support Radar Team
BSA Base Support Area
BDA Bomb Damage Assessment
CAB Combat Assault Battalion
CIDG Civil Irregular Defense Group
CINCSAC Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command
COMUSMACV Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
DASC Direct Air Support Center
DMZ Demilitarized Zone
FAC Forward Air Controller

FDC Fire Direction Center
FSA Forward Support Area
FSB Fire Support Base
FSCC Fire Support Coordination Center
GSG General Support Group
HES Hamlet Evaluation System
JGS Joint General Staff (VN)
JCG Joint Coordinating Group
JCS Joint Chiefs of Staff (U.S.)
KIA Killed-in-Action
LAW Light Anti-Tank Weapon
LOC Line of Communication
LZ Landing Zone
MACV Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MIA Missing-In-Action
MR Military Region
NVA North Vietnamese Army
PHILCAG Philippine Civic Action Group
POW Prisoner of War
PSP Pierced Steel Planking
PZ Pick Up Zone
RVN Republic of Vietnam
RVNAF Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
TACP Tactical Air Control Party
USAF United States Air Force
USN United States Navy
USNS United States Navy Ship
WIA Wounded-In-Action

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CHAPTER VI

A Critical Analysis

The Balance sheet of LAM SON 719

The picture of AKVN soldiers hanging on the skids of a helicopter which evacuated them from lower Laos and other equally dramatic photographs showing battered I Corps troops returning back across the Laotian border caused grave concern among South Vietnamese, military and civilian alike. Their concern deepened when they read the tantalizing news articles first carried by American newspapers and magazines then picked up by the foreign and Vietnamese press which all reported that the ARVN incursion into lower Laos was being terminated. The military spokesman had a hard time denying these reports. He announced that this was simply an exchange of operational forces and for all practical purposes, LAM SON 719 was still underway and that ARVN forces were continuing their destructive forays against Communist logistical bases and infiltration routes on the other side of the border. President Nguyen Van Thieu echoed this line during his press conference at Dong Ha on 1 April 1971, but news; about raids in lower Laos no longer interested Vietnamese public opinion which was more concerned about the real outcome of the well publicized campaign. In the absence of official announcements, rumors and speculations proliferated. Everyone wanted to know the truth about friendly losses. But when official results were later made public, no one seemed to believe that they reflected the truth.

Despite the high figure of ARVN casualties which the GVN confirmed at nearly 6,000, there was still suspicion that the true figure was being concealed from public view. Newsweek magazine correspondents estimated this figure unofficially at nearly 10,000. But their figure

was definitely inflated because the highest level of ARVN strength committed during the entire operation reached only 17,000. It is obvious that if the casualties had been 10,000 as reported by these correspondents, certainly not very many ARVN units would have been able to make their way back to the border, which was not true. Reports on enemy losses, similarly, were regarded as being inflated. Also the general public believed that more U.S. helicopters had been destroyed than official announcements indicated. (Table 1)

Table 1 - GVN Released Results for LAM SON 719 (1)

ALLIED LOSSES

UNITED STATES

Dead: 102
Wounded: 215
Missing: 53

ENEMY LOSSES

TROOPS

Dead: About 13,000
(Saigon government figure)

SOUTH VIETNAM

	Official Figure	Unofficial report
Dead:	1,146	3,800
Wounded:	4,236	5,200
Missing:	246	775

WEAPONS

Captured or Destroyed:
1,968 crew-served
4,545 individual

HELICOPTERS

Destroyed: 92
Cost about $30 million
Damages to others about
$10 million

VEHICLES

Captured or Destroyed:
100 tanks 291 trucks

PLANES

Destroyed: 5
Cost about $8 million

SUPPLIES

Captured or Destroyed:
128,000 tons of ammunition
1.3 million drums of gasoline
7,600 yards of pipeline
Food, medicine and clothing

(1) - This information was published in the American Newsweek magazine, April 5, 1971, P.29

RVNAF and United States casualties including killed, wounded and missing as reported through military channels for all of LAM SON 719 totaled 9,065. Most of the 7,683 RVNAF casualties were incurred by the tactical units that participated in the operations in Laos; the 1st Infantry Division and the Airborne Division absorbed over one half of this total. (Table 2)

Table 2 - LAM SON 719 Cummunlative Casualties (2)

UNIT	FRIENDLY KILLED	WOUNDED	MISSING	TOTAL
XXIV Corps -				
101st Airborn Division				
1st Bde, 5th Inf Division				
11thBde, 23rd Inf Division				
XXIX Corps Artillery				
Other Support Forces				
Total				
	68	215	1149	1432
	55	261	17	333
	47	431	3	481
	9	256	7	272
	36	76	0	112
		125	11	136
	215	1149	38	1402

346
489
310
85
172

1402
I Corps -
1st Infantry Division
Airborn Division
Marine Division
1st Armored Brigade
1st Ranger Group
I Corps Troops

Total
537
455
355
54
93
55

1549
1607
1993
770
364
435
314

5483
537
0*
63
0
27
24

651
2681
2448
1188
418
555
393

7683
Sum-Total
(Adjusted) 1764 6632 689 9065
* It was not true that there was absolutely no MIA for the Airborne Division. Based on first hand information, the author knew that a number of Airborne officers and troops were captured bythe enemy.

(2) Excerpt from "An Assessment of the Performance of South Vietnamese Forces During Operation LAM SON 719: 30 January - 6 April 1971" by Headquarters, US XXIV Corps, dated 3 May 1971.

I Corps casualties thus represented about 45% of the maximum 17,000 troops that were committed during the most active phase of the operation. For LAM SON 719, I Corps had deployed a total of 42 battalion size combat units of which 34 actually fought in lower Laos. Four ARVN battalions suffered losses so severe that they had to be reconstituted; six others, while suffering losses considered "moderate," still managed to fight as units. As to U.S. casualties they were incurred partly in combat activities conducted in South Vietnam, partly in helilift and air support activities in Laos.

Table 3 - Major Items of Equipment Lost or Destroyed (3)

ITEMS	US	RVNAF	TOTALS
Small Arms Individual Weapons	363	2,107	2,470
Small Arms Crew Served Weapons	98	320	418
Trucks	67	211	278
Combat Vehicle	76	87	163
Tanks	17	54	71
Artillery	4	96	100
Radios	61	1,516*	1577
Bulldozers	6	31	37

* Figures provided by RVNAF and used as the basis for requisitioning replacement items. Apparently not all were combat losses.

(3) After Action Report, LAM SON 719, Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, 14 May 1971, p. 90.

Equipment and materiel losses for both U.S. and ARVN forces are outlined in Table 3. On the ARVN side, the most noteworthy losses were the 87 combat vehicles (to include

M-113 armored personnel carriers and similar vehicles), 54 light tanks (M-41), 96 artillery pieces (of both 105-mm and 155-mm), 31 bulldozers, and over 1,500 radio sets. Most tanks and armored vehicles were damaged and destroyed during combat but the losses also included those left behind which were not able to maneuver around ambush sites. Among the 96 artillery pieces lost, the majority had been damaged by enemy counter battery fire before being left behind in evacuated fire support bases; the remaining were destroyed by ARVI4 artillery troops prior to their withdrawal. No

engineer machinery was brought back. In fact, the 101st Combat Engineer Battalion and a platoon of the 118th Engineer Land Clearing Company lost all of their heavy equipment.

As to the enemy, his human losses were considerably higher than those suffered by the RVNAF. (Table 4)

Table 4 - Enemy Casualties, LAM SON 719 (4)

Enemy Losses			
Reported by	U.S.	RVNAF	Total
Killed	4,795	14,565*	19,360
Captured	8	49	57

* Includes enemy personnel killed by U.S. tactical air and B-52s discovered by ARVN troops conducting operations in Laos

(4) After Action Report, LAM SON 719, Headquarters, U.S. XXIV Corps, 14 May 1971, p. 90.

To counteract the ARVN incursion into his most vital logistic base area, the enemy deployed, and the figures were later confirmed, 12 infantry regiments belonging to five different divisions, and at least an armor regiment and an artillery regiment. Total enemy combat strength thus committed in the LAM SON 719 area of operation was estimated at 30,000, not to include reserve elements. In addition, the enemy logistic structure in the general area of operations also had from 10 to 20,000

men. Out of this total, the enemy lost an estimated 20,000 men or about one half. But while his losses caused by actual combat engagements could be generally verified, his casualties inflicted by artillery and aerial bombings could only be estimated. Bomb damage assessments could only be obtained on approximately 10% of all B-52 missions. Even in those areas where search and bomb damage assessments were conducted an accurate body count vas not always possible, partly due to the immensity and ruggedness of the terrain and partly due to the unbearable stench produced by masses of badly decomposed human bodies.

Enemy equipment losses throughout the campaign were also substantial; major categories are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 - Enemy Equipment Losses (5)

Items	Quantity	Observations
Individual Weapons	5,170	
Crew Served Weapons	1,963	
Vehicles	2,001	
Combat Vehicles	11	
Tanks	106	
Artillery/Mortars	13/93	
Radios	98	
Ammunition	170,364 tons	
Rice	1,250 tons	
		Reported by USAF (RVNAF ground troops confirmed 422 trucks)
		U.S.verified 88
		U.S. verified 20,000 tons

(5) Ibid, p. 91.

Most enemy vehicles were destroyed by U.S. gunships and tactical air. So were enemy tanks of all types which largely consisted of the amphibious PT-76's and a number of T-34's and T-54's, all Russian made. The ammunition destroyed included an important quantity of artillery shells and rockets, also Russian made. In addition, the enemy fuel pipeline originating in North Vietnsm and running through the LAM SON 719 area of operations was cut in several places.

United States Combat Support

No account of LAM SON 719 would be complete without mentioning the importance of U.S. support. In closing the balance sheet on friendly and enemy losses, credit should be duly given to the role performed by U.S. Army Aviation, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Naval Air for without them, LAM SON 719 could hardly have been possible.

Topping the scale and from the point of view of the ARVN infantry man, U.S. Army Aviation units contributed by far the most important kind of support. In total, U.S. Army gun-ships and other types of helicopters flew over 90,000 sorties for the benefit of ARVN forces, to include nearly 24,000 gun-ship sorties, over 34,000 trooplift sorties and nearly 20,000 logistic related sorties. (Table 6)

To carry out their vital support mission, U.S. Army Aviation units suffered losses in Laos amounting to 82 aircraft of all types destroyed and over 600 aircraft damaged but recoverable. (Table 7) U.S. Army pilots and crew members who sacrificed their lives in combat numbered 55 while 178 others were wounded and 34 were listed as missing in action.

Table 7 - U.S. Army Aircraft Damaged and Destroyed

Type Aircraft	Damanged*	DestroyedIn Laos	In South Vietnam	Total Grand Total
OH6A				

OH58
UH1C
UH1H
AH1G
CH47
CH53
CH54

Total
(Non-hostile) 25
15
63
316
158
26
13
2

618
(4) 4
4
7
43
20
3
1
0

82
(0) 6
2
1
10
6
0
1
0

26
(5) 10
6
8
53
26
3
2

0

108
(5)
35
21
71
369
184
29
15
2

728
(9)
* Aircraft receiving any degree of combat damage but is economically repairable

The performance of the U.S. Air Force in support of LAM SON 719 was no less impressive. A total of 9,000 tactical air sorties were flown, to include 7,000 over lower Laos. The highest daily number of sorties reached 277 on 8 March 1971. (Table 8)

Table 8 - U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Support

Total Sorties Flown
Average Sorties/Day
Highest Number of Sorties on
Any One Day (8 March 1971)
Total Ton Ordinance Delivered
Number of Aircraft Lost
In Laos
7104
103

10931 In South
Vietnam
2010
29

3100

Total
9114
132

277
14031
7

During the course of the operation, a total of 25 "Commando Vault" bombs (15,000-lb) were dropped by C-130 aircraft to clear landing zones and also to strike against specific targets such as warehouses, vehicle parks and enemy troop concentrations. Armed fixed wing aircraft such

as AC-119 "Stingers" and AC-130 "Spectres" and AC-130 "Candlestick" flareships were particularly effective in attacking and destroying enemy trucks moving by night and in providing close support for ARVN forces engaged in fire fights. These aircraft accounted for about 50-60 enemy trucks destroyed. The results obtained by U.S. tactical air support to include both U.S. Air Force and U.S. Naval Air are outlined in Table 9.

Table 9 - Bomb Damage Assessment, U.S. Tactical Air

Enemy Killed by Air
Secondary Explosions
Secondary Fires
Destroyed: Structures/Bunkers
Trucks
Tanks
Antiaircraft Weapons
Radar Sites
In Laos
3103

6694
779
471
179
59
165
1 In South
Vietnam
61
234
207
421
1
0
2
0
Total
3164
6928
986
892
198
59
167
1

Total losses and casualties incurred by USAF tactical air units in support of the operation amounted to seven aircraft destroyed (3 F- 4's, 1 F-l00, 1 A-7, 1 A-1, and 1 0-2) and 4 pilots killed in action. Other pilots who had been shot down over Laos were all rescued.

U.S. Naval aircraft also contributed significantly to the support of LAM SON 719 with nearly 1,900 sorties launched from U.S. carriers Hancock, Kitty Hawk and Ranger.

A particularly important role in air support was performed by the B-52s in the annihilation of enemy installations, rear bases and troop concentrations. In Operation LAM SON 719, B-52 sorties were also used to clear landing zones and to provide close support for ARVN forces in

many emergency situations. Several ARVN units learned how to use B-52 strikes in their plans for combat maneuvering with skill. Total B-52 strikes in support of LAM SON 719

amounted to 622, to include 421 for the benefit of ARVN forces and 201 in support of U.S. forces. (Table 10)

Table 10 - B-52 "Arc Light" Operation Summary, LAM SON 719

	PHASE I (Planning) (8 Feb - 5 Mar 71)	PHASE II (6 Mar - 15 Mar 71)	PHASE III (16 Mar - 7 Apr 71)	Total
NOMINATED	I Corps			
	0	8	8	175
U.S.	93	129	90	39
TOTAL	129	132	212	344
	397	352	746	
SCHEDULED	I Corps			
	0	7	7	158
U.S.	87	245	86	39
TOTAL	125	129	175	304
	373	308	681	
DIVERTS	I Corps			
U.S.				

MACV
TOTAL
0
0
0
0
93
16
10
119 86
0
2
88 153
16
15
184 332
32
27
391
ABORTS 0 9 6 17 32
STRIKES I Corps
U.S.
TOTAL
0
7
7 189
37
226 97
20
117 135
137
272 421
201
622
NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT 18 670 359 807 1854
TONS OF BOMBS 456.75 14435.50 9261.75 22705.25 46859.25

The assessment of bomb damage inflicted by B-52 missions was nearly impossible to carry out, however. In general, only about 10% of all B-52 targets were searched through by ground troops; their BDA reports are sumarized in Table 11. In addition secondary explosions were observed by B-52 air crews and other aerial observers over 480 targets.

Table 11 - BDA Results on 55 Arc Light Targets

Categories of Damage	
KIA	2644
WIA	12
INDIVIDUAL WEAPONS	1541
CREW SERVED WEAPONS	82
MORTARS	93
ROCKET LAUNCHERS	300
AAA	16 (INCLUDES 23MM, 37MM and 57MM WEAPONS)
AA/AW	41 (INCLUDES 12.7MM WEAPONS)
TRUCKS	72
TRACKS	11 (INCLUDES ONE TANK)
ARTILLERY PIECES	13
AMMUNITION	933 TONS
FOOD	1101 TONS
STRUCTURES	890
BICYCLES	300
BUNKERS	176
FUEL Quantities	151,925 GALLONS

Last but not least, U.S. artillery units, despite their location on the RVN side of the border, contributed significantly to the effective support of ARVN forces due to their long range and accurate fire. Their support was particularly useful at night or in bad weather. (Table 12)

Table 12 - U.S. and ARVN Artillery Support

	Caliber	Number of Tubes	Missions	Rounds	Number Pieces Combat Loss
US	105mm	6	28	5738	0
	155mm	28	20	6946	0
	175mm	20	8	2373	4
	8 inch	8	62	15168	0
	TOTAL	62	111	3197	4
ARVN	105mm	152	48	132278	0
	155mm	48	200	36695	0
	TOTAL	200	Unknown	16392	0
				208962	0

Unknown
Unknown 240709
70228
310937 70
26
96
TOTAL 262 15168*
(US ONLY) 519899 100
* This figure does not include 4969 missions flown by two batteries of U.S. Aerial Field Artillery (24 helicopters)

In summary, during their 45-day incursion into lower Laos, ARVN forces of I Corps inflicted on the enemy heavy casualties amounting to at least 50% of the combat forces he had committed to the area of operation. A sizeable dent had thus been made into the participating elements of five NVA divisions, the 2d, 304th, 308th, 320th, and 324B, and the logistical units in Base Areas 604 and 611.

In exchange for these results, I Corps suffered casualties equivalent to 45% of the combat strength it had committed in the operation not to mention substantial losses in equipment. Although not a protracted campaign, LAM SON 719 brought about profound repercussions among the South Vietnamese people. Despite official claims of a "big victory" and mass demonstrations to celebrate the "lower Laos victory," the people still were shocked by the severe losses incurred. Perhaps the greatest emotional shock of all was the unprecedented fact that ARVN forces had to leave behind in Laos a substantial number of their dead and wounded. This came

as a horrendous trauma for those unlucky families who, in their traditional devotion to the cult of the dead and their attachment to the living, were condemned to live in perpetual sorrow and doubt. It was a violation of beliefs and familial piety that Vietnamese sentiment would never forget and forgive.

Observations and Evaluation

Operation LAM SON 719 was terminated unexpectedly and in haste. Despite official denials to the contrary by GVN authorities, the fact could not be hidden from the inquisitive media reporters of the Free World. The campaign had lasted only 45 days, much shorter than its intended duration, but it was long enough to create a disquieting impact on the troops and population alike. Much speculation had arisen about the merits of the operation measured against the losses and casualties that I Corps had suffered. Was

it worth all the bloodshed and the bodies and wounded left behind? Was it a victory or a defeat? Popular sentiment seemed to be aroused by the dramatic accounts and personal feelings of the I Corps troops who returned from Laos. Almost without exception, they did not believe they were victorious.

To political and military leaders of South Vietnam, the Laotian incursion offered further proof of close cooperation between the U.S. and RVN in the face of the enemy's threat. They had long coveted such an action but knew that South Vietnam alone could not destroy the war sustaining lifeline from North Vietnam so they had welcomed the American initiative with unconcealed enthusiasm.

The general situation at that time also lent itself to a focus of attention on our objectives in lower Laos. The turnabout in Cambodia's political attitude and the resulting cross-border operations of 1970 brought about encouraging prospects of denying safe havens and storage areas to the enemy in that terminal section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The prospects would look still better if the Communist lifeline could be cut at its most sensitive point - in lower Laos. Domestically, the Vietnamization program was making excellent progress. After the Cambodian

incursion of 1970, the RVNAF felt as if they had matured overnight and desired another chance to prove it. With every passing day, the security situation looked better and better despite our anticipation of additional reductions in U.S. combat forces; at the beginning of 1971 a total of over 250,000 U.S. troops had already departed since the Vietnamization program was initiated and another redeployment increment was scheduled in the near future. Politically, two important events, the RVN and U.S. presidential elections, in late 1971 and 1972 respectively, were drawing near. These and the improved military situation in South Vietnam joined hands to provide the rationale for LAM SON 719.

Once the decision had been made, the combined planning for the operation between Vietnamese and American staffs became a shining example of close and effective cooperation. By the time the J-3, JGS relayed the official decision to the I Corps commander and briefed him on the general concept of the operation, the initial planning process was already underway by the I Corps and the U.S. XXIV Corps staffs. This was made possible by an instant exchange of data concerning the enemy situation, U.S. support, characteristics of the area of operations, especially those pertaining to North Vietnam and the target area which were almost exclusively provided by the C-2, U.S. XXIV Corps. Everything that should be known by I Corps about the enemy was made available including order of battle on NVA forces in North Vietnam and Laos, the status of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and enemy activities on it, the situation in Base Areas 604 and 611, and disposition of enemy units and detailed information on the enemy's anti-aircraft capabilities in the area of operation. Aerial photos were scrutinized with particular care. Our intensive study and planning resulted in estimates that bolstered confidence. The enemy's opposition would be initially light. His antiaircraft system would be effectively

neutralized by our devastating firepower. Our helilift capabilities and mechanized assets would make short work of the occupation of key objectives. Initially, it was thought that Tchepone could be ours after three days of combat. (6)

Naturally, after that, our search activities would expand and continue until the enemy's logistical system in the area of operation was effectively strangled. Although there was no official record of the anticipated duration of the campaign, it could be inferred from public statements and private comments made by authorities that the operation was to last until the onset of the rainy season in lower Laos, or about early May 1971. From then on, monsoon rains over the Truong Son Mountain Range would inhibit the enemy's infiltration and logistic activities.

The close coordination between I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps continued during the entire course of the operation by a constant exchange of combat information which resulted in appropriate modifications of the original plan and even better cooperation. Intelligence continued to be an important aspect of the combined effort. Initial data provided by U.S. forces were corroborated and complemented by battle reports and intelligence gathered from enemy prisoners and ralliers which in time became particularly important with regard to the confirmation of enemy units, the movements of enemy troops and the day to day situation along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. All these data were shared between the U.S. and ARVN staffs. During the initial phase of the campaign, the advance of ARVN units was bold, swift and effective. The concept of maneuvering along ridgelines by helilift combined with a series of fire support bases allowed an audacious progress, well supported by artillery. Heliborne movements were coordinated with an armor thrust; these forces linked up at predetermined objectives along the axis of the main effort. Both the northern and southern flanks of this effort were also protected and once the final objective was attained, the actual search of the target area and exploitation of combat gains could be expanded.

This was a sound concept whose success depended on the superiority enjoyed by ARVN in terms of heliborne mobility, air power and mechanized capabilities. Swift progress made step by step and from peak to peak, and occupation of dominating terrain features by a series of mutually supporting fire support bases where the essence of that concept. It was in fact the faithful transplant of a combat tactic that had worked for so

many years in South Vietnam and should work in lower Laos, given the considerable concentration of resources. This also offered the ARVN forces an opportunity to put into combat practice what they had learned from combined operations with U.S. forces.

The rough, jungled terrain of lower Laos proved particularly difficult for ARVN forces. In every advance, they were apt to be engaged by the enemy in heavy firefights. At almost all prominent terrain features in the area, they met head on with solid defensive positions deployed by enemy logistic units. This defense system, consisting of mutually supporting, well dug in, crescent shape, covered trench segments, which the enemy called "horseshoe blocks," was extremely difficult and time consuming to break through since their destruction would require accurate, highly concentrated artillery fire.

One of the first major problems that our forces had to face, in addition to the enemy's blocking positions, was his elusive but devastating anti-aircraft system. The most common weapon he used against our air-craft was the 12.7-mm heavy machinegun which constantly switched firing positions. In addition, throughout the area, there were about 200 AAA pieces from 23-mm up to 100-mm, some of them radar controlled. Even these heavy weapons frequently changed their firing positions which were usually well concealed. In general, the enemy's anti-aircraft system seemed to be well coordinated and its fire controlled with skill and discipline. His heavy machineguns such as 12.7-mm, 14.5-mm or even 23-mm, were arranged in a diamond or circle pattern, affording mutual protection and providing a well coordinated fire trap. For example, one weapon could open fire to draw our aircraft to it and when our aircraft made the attack, it would enter another weapon's field of fire. Enemy AAA positions not only changed frequently, they also moved in uncomfortably close to our units in coordination with an envelopment and attack by infantry troops. As a result, they were extremely difficult to destroy and the price our helicopters had to pay when lifting troops, delivering supplies or evacuating the wounded was high.

Another enemy weapon that was least expected in view of the adverse terrain in lower Laos was the tank. Since the very first days of the operation, our troops had detected and reported traces of tracked vehicles. Then enemy prisoners provided additional information which pointed to the presence of an armor regiment in the area. It was only later when some of these tanks made their appearance that they were observed and attacked by U.S. aircraft. Then, a combined infantry-armor attack against FSB 31 made it all too clear that tanks were being used extensively by the enemy although in a rather unorthodox manner. In his attack against FSB 30, for example, the enemy used tanks only to provide direct support fire, and at FSB Delta, his flame throwing tanks repulsed a counterattack by our Marine troops. The enemy's employment of armor was even more unorthodox in that tanks were used individually to ambush our troops along well concealed jungle paths, as if they were playing a hide and seek game. This tactic worked because the enemy knew well the system of paths that crisscrossed the area. Against our armor or truck convoys, enemy tanks were usually positioned in ambush, then suddenly opened fire and withdrew quickly into jungle paths. In addition to PT-76's, the enemy also employed medium T-54 and T-34 tanks whose 100-mm and 85-mm guns had a

greater firepower than our 76-mm M-41 light tanks. Confined to a one way road with little room for cross-country maneuvers, ARVN armor units found themselves in an extremely disadvantageous position.

While enemy infantry troops seemed to have excellent anti-tank capabilities with their B-40 and B-41 teams and their ambush tactics, our infantrymen were not well prepared against enemy tanks. ARVN airborne troops, for example, complained about the ineffectiveness of the M-72 light anti-tank weapon(7). As a result, old 3.5" rocket launchers

and new 90-mm recoilless rifles were quickly brought in as replacements. Even U.S. gun-ships during the early stage of the operation were not armed with HEAT rockets which were required to knock out tanks. Our head on collision with enemy tanks, therefore, was obviously a big tactical surprise.

Enemy artillery also posed a challenge that could not be easily met. In the first place, mortars of all calibers formed close rings of fire around our positions. Their continuous firing indicated that the enemy had an ample supply of ammunition which was probably pre-positioned. Next came recoilless rifles, rockets and artillery of all types. For the first time in the war, ARVN forces came to grips with the deadly fire of enemy 152-mm howitzers and 130-mm guns which had a range far greater than their own 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers. Enemy artillery was emplaced in scattered, individual positions, some dug into mountain slopes to elude our counter battery fire. In action, several pieces would open fire at the same time from several directions, making them all the more difficult for our forces to locate. Without field radar, ARVN forces had to rely on their technique of crater analysis which did not produce accurate results.

The enemy effectively coordinated all his capabilities, to include antiaircraft, artillery, mortars and massive infantry formations to envelop and overrun our FSBs as well as our mobile units. As soon as a FSB was established or a unit had debarked on a landing zone, the enemy's encirclement process would begin, first by mortars which moved in at close range around the position and opened fire every time helicopters landed or took off. Then, antiaircraft teams and infantry units advanced to complete the ring, always keeping as close as they could to our position, while from many directions further away, enemy artillery guns zeroed in to create a continuing state of tension within our base. The surrounding web of antiaircraft weapons, mortars and artillery gradually became so thick that the base was effectively isolated and no re-supply or medical evacuation activities could be conducted. A FSB was usually occupied and defended by an ARVN battalion which normally deployed from two to three companies to man a security

belt around the base. This ARVN tactic worked fine in South Vietnam in most situations. However, in the face of a more concentrated encirclement combined with artillery fire and ground attacks and frequently with an armor thrust, this ARVN defensive tactic proved to be less effective. Under these conditions, a single battalion was eventually overpowered and lost the initiative. The final attack to overrun a base was usually conducted with a massive concentration of infantry troops usually outnumbering the defenders by three to five times without regard to losses.

In the face of these difficulties which ARVN forces were not prepared to meet, Operation LAM SON 719 bogged down as soon as it reached Ban Dong. First the rangers, then the paratroopers, and finally the armor troops, all had the chance to prove their gallantry in combat and indeed inflicted severe losses to the enemy. But by this time, the ARVN forces had lost their initiative and our vigorous offensive thrust was blunted. The state of inconclusive, seesaw fighting continued until the beginning of March when, with increased U.S. helilift and firepower support, the 2d Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division succeeded in landing in Tchepone, the major terrain objective of the entire operation. For all its merits, this exploit was more a symbolic gesture than a real achievement. It merely meant that "we were there."

The 2d Regiment did not stay long in Tchepone. The imbalance of forces by that time precluded any attempt at holding and exploiting this objective. Our success in reaching Tchepone was largely due to a flexibility in plans and the awesome capability of U.S. helicopters. The real prize, however, was not to be found there. It was located further west where the enemy's more important supply caches still lay unsheltered on the ground. But ARVN forces could not get there nor could they afford to linger long in Tchepone. As swiftly as they came in, they were extracted in haste before the enemy had time to regroup and react. A previous prolonged search of the area of Route 914 by the 1st Division had shown that enemy reactions were swift. This was another indication of our inability to achieve what had been originally intended. It was true that U.S. helicopters helped with the maneuvering

of our forces but the overall tactical imbalance that prevailed at that time made it impossible for ARVN forces to hold terrain and exploit the gains. This was a truth that no one could deny.

Throughout the operation, the role played by U.S. combat support was particularly illustrious. It was evident that without this support, no incursion would have been possible, much less on such a large scale. The fact that ARVN forces were able to progress into Laos as far as Tchepone was a measure of the significance of United States support. When enemy resistance developed into such proportions that no further progress was possible, it became all the more obvious that without U.S. combat troops in the rear and without U.S. helicopters and tactical air support for the frontline, it would have been impossible to withdraw with any satisfactory degree of unit integrity.

U.S. support assets were plentiful, but it appeared that during the early stage of the operation, their control and coordination were not entirely satisfactory. Part of the problem seemed to derive from the physical separation of major operational headquarters. The U.S. XXIV Corps Forward CP was installed at Quang Tri Base while its counterpart, I Corps Forward CP was at Dong Ha, about 10 miles to the northwest. Still, another important element of I Corps Forward CP, the operational control staff, was located further west at Ham Nghi Base (Khe Sanh) which was 35 miles southwest of Dong Ha. Operating on the principle of cooperation and coordination, both the U.S. and ARVN staffs found it difficult to work effectively while physically separated. At Ham Nghi Base, an important hub of support activities where all ARVN divisions' rear echelon headquarters and U.S. forward support agencies were located, there was no official representative of the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps with authority for control and coordination. All decisions pertaining to support and the distribution of support assets had to be made at the Quang Tri Base. As a result, at the forward echelon, the direction of support effort suffered from delays and the coordination of support activities was too loose for a fast changing tactical situation which required timely decisions on the spot.

This shortcoming was remedied however, when a U.S. Joint Coordinating Group (JCG) was established on 1 March 1977 under the control of the Commander, U.S 108th Artillery Group who represented, the Commanding General, U.S. XXIV Corps. Members of the JCG included the deputy commander U.S. 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) who acted as an aviation officer, a representative of the G-3, U.S. XXIV Corps, and a representative of the U.S. 7th Air Force (not a permanent member). Co-located with I Corps Tactical Control CP at Ham Nghi Base, this Joint Coordinating Group proved to be extremely effective in the rapid coordination of U.S. combat support assets. Working hand in hand with the I Corps commander and his staff who provided timely data for the planning of support operations, the JCG chief and his aviation officer were able to assist them in the process of operational planning and decision making by providing expert advice.

Although a combined operation, LAM SON 719 had an unusual character of its own. It was the first large scale operation undertaken without the direct participation of U.S. advisers. Long accustomed to the presence of advisers which they found reassuring and invaluable, especially in difficult combat situations, ARVN regimental and battalion commanders went into Laos with apprehensive feelings. They realized that this was going to be a difficult challenge and they were not too sure they could handle the problem of communications with supporting U.S. units. This had always been an exclusive service provided by their advisers in addition to regular and routine advisory assistance. But they had to accomplish all requirements by themselves this time, and despite some apprehensions, they all felt proud and believed they could excel without their advisers. After all, as unit commanders, they were accustomed to assuming responsibility which

they routinely discharged without difficulty whether it was administrative work, troop training or the conduct of combat operations with only ARVN support. Their self assurance and determination was demonstrated throughout LAM SON 719. Due to special arrangements to provide Vietnamese interpreters aboard FAC and AFCC aircraft, ARVN unit commanders handled the problem of calling for U.S. support quite professionally.

U.S. advisers could have helped more had they been permitted to do so. As it was, only one member from each division advisory team was allowed in the air at any time over his division's tactical area of responsibility. The division senior advisers were not allowed to overfly Laos at any time. Although the advisers in the air over the divisions monitored the situation closely and helped greatly in difficult problems of support, they were often overwhelmed by requests for assistance from several divisional units which were being engaged by the enemy simultaneously. Confined to the divisions' rear echelon CPs inside South Vietnam, the senior advisers were able only to expedite support through reports or map studies.

The question has often surfaced concerning President Thieu's personal influence on the operation. From the beginning it was obvious that his influence was decisive. It was he who approved the idea of launching an offensive into lower Laos, concurred with the general concept of operation and decided to augment the forces for I Corps. The JGS only acted with his approval. The attachment of the Airborne and Marine Divisions to I Corps for the offensive effort, for example, could not have been done without President Thieu's personal approval. But the selection of 8 February as D- day, as far as I can determine, was a recommendation of the combined planning staffs of I Corps and the U.S. XXIV Corps. President Thieu had been briefed on this selected date by the I Corps commander. Therefore, without strong reasons for a change, the I Corps commander apparently felt committed to the decision that he had recommended and obtained from the President.

But President Thieu's role was not confined just to the decision to proceed with the operation. At least on two occasions, the directives he gave to the I Corps commander clearly affected the course of the operation itself. During a visit to I Corps on 19 February, in the company of a central government delegation, he received an operational briefing presented by the participating ARVN field commanders. During this briefing they outlined for him the serious difficulties being met by ARVN units in lower Laos with the implied suggestion that a deeper incursion would be inadvisable. At that time, the Ranger 21st and 39th Battalions were being heavily engaged and FSBs 30 and 31 began

to detect strong enemy pressure. President Thieu made a few remarks to the effect that ARVN forces should take their time and should conduct search operations in the vicinities of their present positions while waiting for developments. From that day on, the Airborne Division would not make any further advance.

The second time involved the decision to push into Tchepone. On 28 February, President Thieu met again with the I Corps commander in Saigon. By this time, progress on the ground had been stalled for over two weeks and the foreign press was publicizing daily ARVN's inability to advance further. During this meeting, it was President Thieu who decided that ARVN forces should go into Tchepone. As a result, General Lam produced his plan to occupy Tchepone and President Thieu ordered the JOS to reinforce I Corps with the entire Marine Division and additional armor elements. The attack against Tchepone was conceived merely as a short term raid to be conducted primarily for its propaganda and morale value. Although President Thieu suggested that the Marine Division be used to relieve the Airborne Division in the main effort, General Lam convinced him that the 1st Division would be better in this role, while the marines could be employed to protect the rear and the LOC. The division commanders present also agreed that the advance, except for the raid to Tchepone, should be suspended until the enemy's intentions and capabilities became more clear. The field commanders and General Lam also persuaded President Thieu that reinforcement with the 2d Division in Laos would not improve the situation. Now that the initiative had been largely assumed by the NVA, a much more potent force than the 2d Division would be required to recapture it. Finally, President Thieu's desire to conduct a raid in force into Muong Nong ceased to be a practicable course of action by the time the withdrawal was beginning and General Lam exercised his command prerogatives by not attempting it. It was clear that President Thieu listened carefully to the recommendations of his field commanders, that he did not arbitrarily impose rigid instructions upon them, but that he allowed them the latitude in the execution of plans and orders that combat commanders must have.

The conduct of the operation was also plagued by dissension verging on insubordination among some ARVN field commanders. Lieutenant General Lam was never able to exercise full control over the commanders of the Airborne and Marine Divisions who were his equals in rank. Of the two, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong, the paratrooper, proved to be more submissive, but he did not always carry out the I Corps commander's orders in a strict manner. Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, Commander of the Marine Division, who was more senior in rank than the I Corps commander, delegated his command authority to his deputy, Colonel Bui The Lan, who directly exercised operational control over the entire division. While occasionally present at the Marine Division's rear echelon CP, General Khang never attended any official operational briefings presided over by the I Corps Commander. Because of this, the Marine Division acted independently on a few occasions when the odds were against it. For example, it made its own decision to abandon FSB Hotel and withdraw its troops from Laos.

President Thieu and General Vien, Chief of the JGS, were probably aware of the discord among their subordinates, but they took no remedial action. Perhaps General Lam did not ask for such an action. Or perhaps the matter was so delicate among these generals, who were all considered pillars of the regime, that it defied any easy solution.

This dissension among commanders adversely affected staff coordination between I Corps and the Airborne and Marine Divisions. Many reports were delayed; at times, there were no reports at all. As a result, I Corps was unable to control the situation effectively, especially when the enemy pressure began to increase significantly. Because of this, General Lam chose an organic unit of I Corps, the 1st Division, for the Tchepone mission instead of the Airborne or Marine Division.

LAM SON 719 was further impeded by advance news dispatches in the press. During the preparatory period, reporters were not allowed into the Quang Tri area but this aroused their curiosity and gave rise to speculation. The press seemed to be able to pick up leads and develop them into news dispatches that gave every detail of the operation as of the end of January 1971. Thus, the advantages of surprise were lost very

early and the enemy had ample time to prepare. As early as during the first days of February, Tchepone had already been mentioned as an objective. After that, U.S. Government officials publicly praised the merits of the Laotian campaign which would ensure the continued redeployment of U.S. forces. Then on 8 February, the day I Corps forces crossed the border into Laos, President Thieu went on TV to personally break the news to the Vietnamese public. As the operation continued, press reports increasingly focused on the small district town of Tchepone as the final objective. To the RVN, it had become an objective to be attained at all costs.

While the RVN announced that its troops had occupied Tchepone, North Vietnam quickly and loudly disclaimed it. The GVN in the mean time received foreign press reporters with a total lack of enthusiasm and did not allow them easy access to battleground visits as it had during other operations. This increased suspicion and speculation. Subsequent press articles and pictures depicting the withdrawal of ARVN troops from Laos further confused attempts at assessing the offensive campaign correctly, particularly by foreign observers. However, with the exception of the minority elite in big cities, the South Vietnamese general public was not influenced by the foreign press. Still, the initial publicity about LAM SON 719 looked embarrassingly hollow in their eyes in view of the hasty termination of the operation. This impression lingered on despite official announcements of victory and the ribbons and medals awarded to the "victorious" troops of I Corps.

If the premature conclusion of the Laotian campaign could not be effectively screened from the outside world, it was all too clear to insiders that the campaign was an unfinished job. The intended and desired goal to sustain combat until the onset of the

rainy season in order to strangle the enemy's supply route could not be accomplished. Only 45 days after ARVN forces had crossed the border, they were already back in South Vietnam. The two lesser raids that were subsequently conducted sought to enhance the public image of the RVNAF more than to achieve military gains. Finally, the returns produced by LAM SON 719 in terms of enemy caches destroyed were not even as impressive

as those of the Cambodian incursion. For one thing, ARVN forces had stopped short of the real prize, the area west of Tchepone where most of the enemy's supplies lay vulnerable on the ground. For another, the search and destruction of Base Area 611 could not be carried out as planned because the tactical balance no longer favored the continuation of the operation in that direction.

Regardless of these shortcomings, a substantial number of the objectives had been accomplished which required ARVN units to fight hard and incur great sacrifices. Topping the honor roll, the 1st ARVN Infantry Division stood up to its reputation as the number one ARVN combat unit. The division's organic units maneuvered with skill and were well led; its well disciplined troops fought with gallantry and dedication. During its 42 days of operation in Laos, the division was extremely active south of Route No. 9. Switching its effort during the final days, it successfully pushed toward Tchepone and occupied it. During the withdrawal, some of its units were heavily engaged and suffered losses. Despite this, the 1st Infantry Division accomplished its mission with top honors.

Long considered as the elite unit of the RVNAF, the Airborne Division did not perform as brilliantly as its reputation would indicate during LAM SON 719. Despite the enemy's superiority in maneuvering forces and his employment of new weapons, the fact that the division was unable to hold FSB 31 seemed to be indicative of its lack of contingency planning for such a situation. But our airborne units fought extremely well as individual elements. One of the division's brigade commanders was missing in action - probably captured by the enemy; and five out of nine of its battalion commanders were either killed or wounded. This testified to the intense fighting that the division had to face but by and large, the division accomplished nothing spectacular in its assigned mission. During the final stage, the division also failed to provide effective flank protection for the major effort and secure Route No. 9 even with the reinforcement of four armor squadrons. This failure greatly complicated the ARVN withdrawal from Laos.

As for the Marine Division, it was the first time it had participated in an operation as a division. Accustomed to operating separately at brigade level, and in view of the traditional autonomy of its brigades, the division seemed to have problems of command and control. The 147th Marine Brigade did not succeed in clearing the enemy pressure

around FSB Delta despite continuous efforts for several days. Then the division made its own decision to withdraw from FSB Hotel and its positions on the Co Roc promontory, apparently to avoid facing a difficult battle. This action clearly reflected the autonomy enjoyed by the division commander, Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang, who did not consider himself under the control of the I Corps commander but still made tactical decisions that affected the latter's conduct of the operation. Despite this, Marine units fought extremely well during sustained combat under heavy enemy pressure. Regardless of losses, they always retained unit integrity and cohesiveness.

The 1st Ranger Group was heavily engaged as soon as it was deployed. Its 39th and 21st Battalions responded well to the enemy's massive attacks and also inflicted severe losses on enemy units. The early withdrawal of this Group did not allow a correct evaluation of its performance.

As to ARVN armor units, their employment in LAM SON 719 was perhaps one of the very few occasions of any large concentration during the war. The 1st Armor Brigade was committed initially with only two squadrons; this total was later increased to four in addition to two troops of M-4l light tanks re-deployed from MR-2. These reinforcements were introduced to offset some losses but still the deployment of all these armored forces on a short stretch of narrow jungle road not even 20 kilometers in length and affording no room for maneuver represented perhaps one of the unwisest moves on the part of the tactical commanders involved (8). If this decision was deliberate, then perhaps they had

seriously underestimated the enemy's capabilities or the restrictions dictated by the terrain in that area. As a result, the 1st Armor Brigade was at a great disadvantage when faced with enemy tanks deep in the jungle. In those circumstances, ARVN armor officers were naturally unable to make effective use of combat tactics they had learned in Western service schools. The brigade commander was also not resourceful enough to meet this unusual combat challenge. The outcome was evident: only one third of the total number of armored vehicles committed managed to return home after accomplishing nothing substantial. If someone was to be held responsible for this failure, the question would arise as to whether it should be the commander of the brigade or his superior, who committed this unit to such an undesirable and impossible situation.

In contrast, I Corps artillery performed exceptionally well during the entire operation. Fire coordination between ARVN and U.S. supporting units was extremely flexible and effective. Divisional artillery units providing direct support in Laos fared less well, however. Their deployment was also limited. Each infantry regiment or brigade was supported by only one 105-mm battery and one 155-mm battery. Given the number of artillery pieces left behind in Laos after the hasty withdrawal, one may wonder whether we should have committed more artillery assets to the battle.

The 1st Air Division, Vietnam Air Force, did not play a significant role in providing close air support for I Corps forces. Its participation and contributions were rather modest even by RVNAP standards due to the availability of the United States Air Force. The 1st Area Logistics Command, by contrast, proved to be resourceful and capable enough to meet the challenge of providing support for a corps size operation on short notice. Its lack of initial preparations were more than offset by the solid backing given by U.S. logistical agencies.

Lessons learned

LAM SON 719 reflected quite accurately the strengths and weaknesses of the RVNAF combat effectiveness in almost every area: organization, command, leadership, motivation, operating techniques, planning, and execution. It was impeded by certain significant errors and shortcomings that made the entire effort fall short of its intended goal.

Foremost among the most significant problems of LAM SON 719 was perhaps timely tactical intelligence. To give due credit to the intelligence effort, one must admit that intelligence estimates concerning the operation were definitely accurate or nearly accurate as far as enemy capabilities in antiaircraft weapons and troop reinforcements were concerned. However, they were less accurate in other areas. Enemy artillery and armor capabilities were not listed as significant factors. In addition, reports on the area of concentrated supplies were not entirely accurate. Several enemy prisoners in fact disclosed that most supplies caches had been evacuated to areas outside the AO. The enemy appeared not to be surprised at all; by contrast, he had been prepared and expecting our forces to come in. This led to the conclusion that several things concerning the enemy had eluded our collection capabilities. Once more, the Vietnam war seemed to have taught us some useful things about intelligence and security. To be more effective, a more extensive collection network would seem to be indicated with emphasis on human intelligence in the areas under enemy control. Then, analysis, evaluation and interpretation of enemy capabilities should be made with the full cognizance that they were apt to change very rapidly and as a result, estimates would have to concentrate not only on the current situation but also on how it was going to change. At the same time, for an operation of that scale and importance, a more conscious effort at deceiving the enemy by a comprehensive deception scheme perhaps would have helped offset the adverse effect of publicity and effectively confused the enemy. What we did for LAM SON 719 was certainly not enough for the purpose contemplated.

Planning and preparations for the offensive were another major area that needed improvement. The operational plan for LAM SON 719 was adequate only so long as the operation progressed smoothly and ARVN forces were able to hold the initiative. It should have taken contingencies into full consideration and been able to respond to them with resourcefulness. The extent and intensity of enemy reactions, for example, were one contingency that planners apparently overlooked. Then the enemy could well reinforce his resistance by diversionary actions elsewhere in South Vietnam, too. The absence of contingency planning was a glaring deficiency of LAM SON 719. ARVN units were also not thoroughly prepared when they went into Laos. Elite troops like the paratroopers, for example, had problems using the M-72 light anti-tank weapon. Several other units did not have enough warm clothes and blankets for their troops. FSB 31, which was supposed to serve as a major supporting base during the entire course of the operation, had only a most rudimentary defense system: a single concertina ring thrown around it. The command and control center of the 3d Airborne Battalion, which was responsible for the defense of FSB 31, was sheltered only by 12 PSP sheets protecting the battalion headquarters, its S-3 section, and communications and medical elements. With this kind of defense and protection, how could FSB 31 hold out against enemy 130-mm shells and tanks? Obviously, planning and preparations should have been more extensive, more careful.

The problem of preparations was closely related to the need to preserve secrecy. How to proceed with preparations at the unit level while keeping them from being detected by the enemy? That was a major problem that needed to be solved. At the JGS level, even the J-2 was not informed about the operational plan until the campaign had started. He did not have the opportunity to contribute to the planning process either his intelligence data or his own expert assessment of the enemy's capabilities. I Corps staff agencies other than the G-2 and G-3 divisions, and those of participating units were similarly left out. It seemed as though the whole undertaking had been just a contingency action to meet a difficult situation.

As far as command and control were concerned, the most important problem to be solved was insubordination on the part of general reserve unit commanders who like many other generals considered themselves the pillars of the regime. The I Corps commander apparently bowed to the political powers of these generals and this adversely affected his conduct of the operation. The (insubmissive attitude of the Marine and Airborne Division commanders was actually inexcusable in that they placed themselves above the national interest and let their personal pride interfere with the task of defeating the enemy. For the operation to succeed as planned, the problem of effective command had to be satisfactorily solved above everything else because it affected the relationship between subordinate staffs and the control of the operation itself. At least, the I Corps commander should have been given the authority to require that his orders be strictly carried out.

The arrangements for effective operational control did not necessarily require the traditional echelons of tactical command posts as had been organized: main CP, forward CP and tactical control CP. In view of effective signal communications and the availability of command ships, the tactical control CP and the forward CP could be combined into one. Its location was immaterial as long as the CP was able to exercise effective control and coordination of subordinate units. At this operational CP, there should have been adequate staff personnel, a clear division of responsibilities among staff elements and full authority should have been given them to solve every problem at hand without having to refer to another echelon of command. The effective functioning of this CP would inspire confidence among subordinate units and their staffs. The breaking down of I Corps headquarters into three echelons for the control of LAM SON 719 required a dilution of its limited staff personnel with the end result that no echelon was able to function properly.

ARVN units that participated in the operation definitely lacked a system of accurate and timely reporting. This was not only a matter of training or experience but also a matter of loyalty. A higher command's exercise of control was only as effective as its subordinate

units' reporting was reliable. In the case of LAM SON 719, this reporting was most deplorable. Because the intensity of the fighting did not permit frequent visits by the I Corps and division commanders, they depended entirely on reports for the control of the situation. But reports by their subordinate units were slow, inaccurate, and sometimes non-existent. During the operation, there were several instances in which division commanders lost control of their units. Even the I Corp. commander sometimes did not know the major events affecting his divisions.

A significant development which turned out to be extremely valuable for the effective support of the operation was the creation of the Joint Coordinating Group (JCG) by the XXIV Corps as of the beginning of March 1971. The group exercised operational control of all U.S. support activities. Its centralized coordinating authority was instrumental in providing timely and appropriate support for every ARVN combat need during the operation. Co-located with the I Corps tactical control CP, the Joint Coordinating Group assisted it with invaluable data for effective planning. An organization of this type was clearly indicated for every combined effort in which the U.S. only played a supporting role. On its part, the ARVN could have benefited more if it had established a counterpart "support coordination center" or equivalent to coordinate ARVN support activities with those of U.S. units through the JCG. This would have enabled the operational commander to monitor closely the flow of support activities and plan his tactical moves more systematically.

In the area of combat tactics, a most remarkable feature of LAM.SON 719 was the use of semi-fixed fire support bases installed on high peaks. This tactic was a duplication of the

American usage in South Vietnam. But the situation in lower Laos did not favor the installation of these FSBs for the reason that the area of operation had been under enemy control for a long time; the enemy was well entrenched and well organized for defense. The several peaks in the area gave the enemy an advantage in observation which resulted in accurate indirect fire on our fixed fire control bases. The amount of troops deployed for the defense of

each FSB was also not adequate. The inevitable result was that our units were immobilized in these FSBs and gradually became fixed targets for enemy encirclement and attacks. Most of the 96 artillery pieces lost in Laos resulted from our system of lame duck FSBs. This system could have been replaced by other alternatives such as mobile FSBs, selection of lower, more accessible sites and increased use of mortars to augment artillery firepower. A system of mobile FSBs would have fully utilized the U.S. helilift capabilities; it would also have afforded better defense and greater opportunities to keep the offensive moving. Heliborne operations as a tactic were thoroughly put to test during the Laotian campaign because they were conducted in an area of operation where fighting was more intense than in any past experience in South Vietnam and where the enemy's antiaircraft system was effective. But the U.S. Army's rules governing these operations seemed to hold fast and were proved valid. However, their execution could stand some improvement in terms of coordination and fire support; in any case, it should be done with expertise and attention to details.

First, it appeared that the enemy would have been confused if more landing zones (LZ) had been prepared than were really needed. B-52 strikes should not be used too far in advance of the actual landings. After that other types of firepower could be used to prepare LZs. Experience showed that it would be better to divide the area into several sectors, each sector assigned to a particular type of firepower so that all the various types firepowers available could be applied at the same time to achieve a maximum effect: tactical air, aerial artillery, air cavalry, ground artiliery, etc. The use of fire power should not be confined to the preparation of LZS; it should also be directed against avenues of approach and areas where enemy artillery or troops concentration were suspected. Shortly before the landings, all firepower should be concentrated for the last time on the selected sites. Next, air cavalry elements would carry out their classic reconnaissance mission. Since they were familiar with LZ sites, local terrain and flight approaches, the air cavalry commander should be made responsible for fire coordination. When landings began, support fire

should be continued but diverted to other pre-selected areas. Aircraft laid smoke screens could be useful to conceal landing activities; they could also be used elsewhere to deceive the enemy. Air cavalry reconnaissance, in the meantime, should extend its coverage to

protect landings. For command and control purposes during landings, at least two command ships should be utilized, one above the pick up zone (PZ) and the other above the LZ. Each should have command authorities aboard with full power to solve contingency problems. Both the air mission commander and the ground commander should be airborne together at the LZ. Alternate troop commanders should be designated in advance to take over in case of accidents. All protective fires and reconnaissance flights should continue until the landings are completed.

A basic weakness of ARVN forces participating in LAM SON 719 was their lack of ground mobility. Since the concept of operatio evolved around the extensive use of helicopters, ARVN forces tended to be over dependent on them. They used helicopters indiscriminately for every activity, even for short movements which could have been made more effectively by marching. This was a serious mistake that not only overtaxed U.S. helilift units but also incurred their complaints. The use of helicopters should have been conceived more judiciously and then only for extensive movements such as a shift of effort direction, the move toward Tchepone, or an exploitation of gains and creating surprise for the enemy. More troops movements should have been made by marching to ensure discretion and initiative. In this regard, the 1st Infantry Division was particularly commendable. Another short coming of ARVN units at battalion and lower levels was their failure to maneuver when being engaged. After the first contact, they tended to stop and wait for support rather than conduct probes and maneuver to attack or close in on the enemy. This shortcoming indicated a need for additional training for small unit leaders.

With regard to combined arms tactics, there was no doubt that ARVN units had received extensive training but in actual combat they seemed to falter easily. In the face of a formidable enemy, neither the airborne nor the armor units displayed evidence of effective

cooperation and teamwork. Armored vehicles were mostly used for transportation. When an engagement was made, infantry troops left tanks unprotected in the jungle and tanks were compelled to fend for themselves, alone. It was apparent that because of this lack of teamwork and mutual protection, the Airborne Division and the four armor squadrons could not operate effectively along the road and in the jungle of lower Laos.

Another serious shortcoming was the employment of reserves. During LAM SON 719, all participating divisions had their own reserve force. I Corps, on its part, had a reserve force consisting of a Marine brigade and a Ranger group. But the strange thing was that in no instance during the course of the operation was a reserve force thrown into combat to help clear an area from heavy enemy pressure. All reserve forces were used piecemeal at the rear echelon. No commander ever thought of using them at the forward echelon to his advantage. When a FSB was threatened with being overrun, the only course of action our unit commanders took was to destroy the artillery, abandon the base and extricate

their troops by helilift. It was apparent that to be more combat effective, ARVN units needed to learn how to organize reserves and employ them decisively on the battlefield.

A lesser but no less dangerous shortcoming was the lack of communications security. In general, ARVN units at lower levels were not disciplined enough in the application of security procedures concerning radio communications. At corps and division levels, however, these procedures were more strictly observed through the systematic encoding of messages sent by CW radio or radioteletype. But at lower level units, which made extensive use of FM voice radio sets, communications were usually sent in dear text in sheer disregard of basic encoding procedures. ARVN commanders were accustomed to talking freely over radio networks, using the most rudimentary system of codes. Something was missing in the enforcement of communications discipline among ARVN units.

Finally, the withdrawal operation conducted by I Corps was such that this experience should be examined with utmost candor. First of

all, withdrawing under enemy pressure was always a difficult operation which should be carefully planned and executed. The time allowed for its execution was too short. The extrication of troops by helicopters naturally increased their vulnerability when compared to a withdrawal on foot. However, some movements to the rear on foot were not executed in a satisfactory manner. Our forces suffered serious losses on routes selected for withdrawal because of combined armor-infantry ambushes laid by the enemy. During the withdrawal, the Airborne Division and the entire armor force were unable to ensure protection for their own movements. The Marine units, however, fared much better; their withdrawal was a successful operation.

In summary, LAM SON 719 was a bloody field exercise for ARVN forces under the command of I Corps. Nearly 8,000 ARVN soldiers and millions of dollars worth of valuable equipment and materiel were sacrificed. The realities of battles fought in Laos certainly taught us many invaluable lessons that the RVNAF would have to learn in order to defend South Vietnam effectively. Many of these lessons - those that were appropriate for such treatment - became subjects of instruction at RVNAF service schools and training centers.

(6) Reference Message No. PT008443, datetimed 141435Z Feb. 71 from COMUSMACV to CJCS and CINPAC.

(7) It is possible that one of the problems the troopers experienced with the LAW was related to firing the weapon at very close range, shorter than the minimum arming distance of the projectile.

(8) The commanders of ARVN I Corps and U.S. XXIV Corps were both armor officers.

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