

South Vietnamese Combat Performance

A Case Study

by

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Douglas Pike described the battle of An Loc during the North Vietnamese Spring Offensive of 1972 as “the single most important battle in the [Vietnam] war.”¹ Beginning in April, a desperate struggle raged between three North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions and the greatly outnumbered South Vietnamese defenders.² The nearly three-month siege resulted in horrendous losses on both sides and culminated in the blocking of the North Vietnamese thrust toward Saigon. This was the last major battle in which U.S. support, primarily advisers and air support, was available to South Vietnamese forces.

During the course of the battle, the besieged South Vietnamese defenders would hold out against a sustained North Vietnamese attack of an intensity seldom seen in the Vietnam War. At the end of the fierce fighting, the city remained in South Vietnamese hands. As a participant in this battle as a regimental advisor, I had a unique opportunity to observe South Vietnamese combat performance under some of the most severe circumstances of the war.

THE NGUYEN HUE CAMPAIGN

The North Vietnamese Spring Offensive of 1972 consisted of a three-pronged attack, designed to strike a knock-out blow against the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. The attackers employed conventional tactics and introduced advanced weaponry not seen in any previous Communist offensive in South Vietnam. According to captured documents and information obtained from NVA prisoners of war after the invasion, the campaign was designed to destroy as many ARVN forces as possible, thus permitting the North Vietnamese to occupy key cities, putting the Communist forces in a

posture to threaten Saigon and the Thieu government.³

The Communist offensive began on Good Friday, March 30th, 1972, when three NVA divisions under the control of the B-5 Front attacked south across the Demilitarized Zone toward Quang Tri and Hue. Additional North Vietnamese forces under the direction of the B-3 Front attacked Kontum in the Central Highlands. Three days later, three NVA divisions under the B-2 Front headquarters attacked into Binh Long Province in Military Region III (MR III). A total of 14 NVA divisions and 26 separate regiments, totalling 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles, participated in this offensive, known as the Nguyen Hue Campaign.

The coordinated enemy thrusts, characterized by a ferocity never before experienced by the South Vietnamese forces, were initially successful, particularly in the north where the NVA quickly overran Quang Tri, virtually routing the defending South Vietnamese (ARVN) forces. Additional Communist forces threatened Hue and Kontum.

Military Region III, comprised of the 11 provinces that surrounded Saigon, was located between the Central Highlands and the Mekong Delta. Binh Long (“Peaceful Dragon”) Province is located in the northwestern portion of the region and is bordered on the west by Cambodia. The capital of the province is An Loc, a city of 15,000, which lies only 65 miles north of Saigon. An Loc, a thriving and prosperous city surrounded by vast rubber plantations totalling 75,000 acres, sits astride QL-13, a paved highway leading directly from the Cambodian border to the South Vietnamese capital. Because of its proximity to Communist base areas in Cambodia, the city had endured the rigors of war since the early 1960's. Due to its strategic location on the main attack axis between Cambodia and Saigon, An Loc figured prominently in the North Vietnamese strategy in

1972. As the NVA offensive began, the 5th ARVN Infantry Division, commanded by Brigadier General Le Van Hung, was the only South Vietnamese division operating in Binh Long Province. Before the battle in An Loc was over, he would be given control of Task Force 52 (a two-battalion task force from 18th ARVN), the 3rd Ranger Group, the 74th Borger Ranger Battalion, and the Binh Long Province RF/PF troops. Additionally, the 1st Airborne Brigade would be inserted into Binh Long for part of the battle (See Order of Battle chart).

By this time in the war, President Nixon had instituted his “Vietnamization” program, designed to turn over the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese. The ultimate objective of this program, first instituted in 1969, was to increase ARVN capabilities and bolster President Nguyen Van Thieu's government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against both the Viet Cong and the Communists from North Vietnam. Ultimately, the strengthening of ARVN capabilities would ultimately permit the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

As one of the most critical aspects of the Vietnamization program, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), the senior U.S. military headquarters in Vietnam, increased the advisory effort to assist in improving the quality of the ARVN force. This was not a new program; U.S. advisers had been serving with South Vietnamese units since 1955. However, the importance of the advisory program had increased as the number of American combat units dwindled. By 1972, most U.S. ground combat forces had been withdrawn and the only Americans on the ground in combat roles were advisers who served with ARVN forces in the field. There were U.S. advisers at corps, division, and regimental levels; additionally, in the elite airborne, ranger, and marine units, there were

American advisers with each battalion. There were also advisers with each South Vietnamese province and district headquarters. These advisers would figure prominently in the ARVN defense against the North Vietnamese invasion.

The Nguyen Hue Offensive began in Military Region III on April 2nd with attacks by the 24th and 271st NVA Regiments against 25th ARVN Division fire bases along the border with Cambodia in Tay Ninh Province. Although there had been earlier intelligence reports that the North Vietnamese were making preparations for offensive operations in MR III, there was little indication that there would be any action on the scale of that which had occurred in Quang Tri in MR I. The attacks in Tay Ninh, supported by tanks, rocket, and heavy mortar fire, seemed to confirm earlier intelligence that the main North Vietnamese effort in the region would come in that province. Thus, while the South Vietnamese were surprised at the ferocity of the enemy attacks and the use of tanks, the attacks themselves coincided with expectations that any significant attacks in MR III would come in Tay Ninh.⁴

For three days after the North Vietnamese attacks in Tay Ninh, events were relatively quiet in Binh Long Province. Senior U.S. advisers with the 5th ARVN Division picked up indications of increased enemy activity in the area, but analysts at MACV in Saigon insisted that the main enemy effort would continue to focus on Tay Ninh. These analysts would soon be proven wrong.

At approximately 0650 on the morning of April 5th, the war came to Binh Long Province with a major tank-supported attack on Loc Ninh, a district town located on QL-13, approximately half-way between An Loc and the Cambodian border. Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, III Corps Commander, and Major General James F.

Hollingsworth, his American adviser, determined that the attacks in Tay Ninh were a diversion and that Binh Long would be the target of the NVA main effort. Accordingly, the generals sent all possible support to Binh Long. The North Vietnamese attacks against the small ARVN force of about 2,000 troops (mostly from the 9th Regiment of the 5th ARVN Division and the local regional force garrison) and their seven American advisers were relentless, employing tanks and large volumes of artillery, mortar, and rocket fire. Hollingsworth directed all available tactical air support to assist the beleaguered garrison. Skillful coordination of these assets by the American advisers in Loc Ninh inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers. Ultimately, however, sheer numbers overwhelmed the defenders. Repeated human wave attacks supported by tanks and heavy artillery fire resulted in the NVA overrunning the ARVN positions late in the afternoon of the 7th. While some of the ARVN soldiers and several advisers managed to escape, the rest of the South Vietnamese and the remaining American advisers were either killed or captured.⁵

The B-2 Front plan for taking An Loc involved the use of three NVA divisions and supporting forces. By this time in the war, although some Communist formations still carried the traditional Viet Cong designations, these divisions were organized and equipped as main-force North Vietnamese Army units manned primarily by North Vietnamese soldiers who had come down the Ho Chi Minh trail from the north. These units ranged in size from 7,000 to 9,000 soldiers; additionally, 10,000 other NVA troops in various types of support units would participate in the battle for An Loc.⁶ According to the North Vietnamese plan, the 9th VC Division, considered one of the elite NVA divisions, was targeted against An Loc itself. The 7th NVA Division was tasked to interdict supplies and reinforcements from reaching An Loc from Saigon by cutting QL-13 south of An Loc,

between Chon Thanh and Lai Khe. The 5th VC Division, which initiated the offensive campaign in Binh Long by capturing Loc Ninh, was to join the 9th VC Division in its assault on An Loc after Loc Ninh had been secured.

As the battle unfolded in Loc Ninh, the NVA also attacked an ARVN regimental-sized task force (TF-52) from the 18th ARVN Division that was under the operational control of the 5th ARVN Division Commander. The task force had been conducting operations from two small fire bases between Loc Ninh and An Loc. The NVA overran the ARVN positions and forced the survivors of the task force to withdraw into An Loc.

Shortly after the fall of Loc Ninh, the 9th VC Division made its opening move against An Loc by seizing the airstrip at Quan Loi, just three kilometers northeast of the city. Meanwhile, south of the city, the 1st ARVN Airborne Brigade, which had been moved by truck to Binh Long from Saigon, was directed to move north up QL-13 from Lai Khe to reinforce the An Loc garrison. The airborne forces immediately ran into heavy contact with elements of the 7th NVA Division entrenched along the highway. It became clear that the North Vietnamese were determined to interdict any attempt to reinforce or resupply An Loc by road. The loss of Quan Loi airstrip and the blocking of QL-13 meant that An Loc was surrounded and cut off from the outside. Thus, began a siege that would last nearly three months.

After the seizure of Quan Loi, a brief lull in the battle occurred while the NVA prepared for the main attack on the city itself. By the afternoon of April 12th, ARVN forces in and immediately around the city had grown to a total of nine infantry battalions, consisting of regular infantrymen from elements of the 5th and 18th ARVN Divisions, rangers, and territorial forces. Brigadier General Hung, 5th ARVN Division Commander,

was given operational control of all South Vietnamese units in the city, approximately 3,000 soldiers, who were outnumbered 6-to-1 by the NVA forces surrounding An Loc.

The preparations for the initial NVA direct attack on An Loc began in the early morning hours of April 13th, when North Vietnamese gunners brought a wide range of guns, rockets, and mortars to bear on the city. Shortly after dawn, the NVA forces began a coordinated tank and infantry attack on the city from the northeast. Soviet-made T-54 and PT-76 tanks attacked down the main north-south street into the city. Panic ensued among the ARVN defenders, who had never encountered tanks before. Several units broke and ran. The situation stabilized somewhat when an ARVN soldier knocked out one of the lead tanks with an M-72 Light Antitank Weapon (LAW), thus demonstrating that infantry soldiers could stop tanks.

The battle raged for three days as the NVA advanced house to house. Casualties were heavy on both sides. The ARVN situation was tenuous at best. After three days of combat, the NVA had lost 23 tanks, but had forced the ARVN defenders into a small redoubt in the southern part of the city, measuring only 1,000 meters by 1,500 meters. The NVA forces held the northern part of the city; in many cases the opposing forces were separated only by the width of a city street. On several occasions, the attackers almost succeeded in taking General Hung's 5th ARVN Division command bunker.

The critical factor in thwarting the initial North Vietnamese attack was American air support, coordinated by the U.S. advisers with the ARVN units on the ground in An Loc. While Air Force, Navy, and Marine fighters and fighter-bombers, AC-130 gunships, and Army armed helicopters worked in close with the defenders in contact with the attacking NVA forces, General Hollingsworth directed B-52 strikes against North

Vietnamese staging areas in the rubber plantations around the city. This air support made the difference in the pitched battles that raged for the first three days, saving the outnumbered ARVN from almost certain defeat. This set the pattern for the action to follow during the next two months.

After three days, the intensity of the fighting in the city abated somewhat as the NVA attacks lost momentum due to the continual airstrikes. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese tightened their stranglehold on An Loc, completely encircling the city. The North Vietnamese shelled the city heavily; 25,000 artillery rounds and rockets fell during the first three days of the NVA attack. They continued to fire between 1,200 and 2,000 rounds per day into the city for the next week as they regrouped for a renewed assault.

On April 16th, Lieutenant General Minh, III Corps Commander, directed the 1st Airborne Brigade to helicopter assault into the high ground just to the southeast of An Loc on April 16th to reinforce the city. That same day, General Minh received operational control of the 21st ARVN Division, which had been operating previously in the Mekong Delta area. He ordered the 21st to move to Lai Khe and attack north up QL-13 to relieve An Loc.

The original plan for NVA forces to overrun and occupy An Loc no later than April 20th failed. The main attack by the 9th VC Division had been repulsed due to the effectiveness of the American air support. The North Vietnamese revised the attack plan and repositioned forces for a new attack from the east. Once again, the 9th VC Division would make the main attack against the city, with supporting attacks against the 1st Airborne Brigade positions southeast of An Loc by elements of the 5th VC and 7th NVA Divisions. In order to counter the American air support, the NVA moved up additional

antiaircraft weapons, including Soviet-made SA-7 Strella heat-seeking antiaircraft missiles and ZSU-57-2 self-propelled antiaircraft guns to provide cover for the new attack.

The second major attempt to take An Loc began in the pre-dawn hours of April 19th with a massive artillery bombardment of both the city and the 1st Airborne Brigade positions southeast of An Loc. The attacks against the airborne forces were successful, overrunning one battalion and driving the two other battalions out of their positions and into the city.

The main NVA attack against the city was less successful. The ARVN defenders and their advisers continued to fight off repeated ground assaults and employed close air support to bring devastating fire against repeated human wave attacks. The fighting was intense, but the air support permitted the defenders to beat back the attackers.

By the 20th of April, the North Vietnamese attacks abated somewhat. However, the NVA continued to pour 100mm tank gun fire, rockets, and artillery and mortar rounds into the city. As the enemy shelling continued without let-up, the conditions in An Loc deteriorated to a new low. The defenders and the unfortunate civilians who were unable to leave before the NVA attacked lived underground, venturing outside only at great risk. The enemy fire was extremely accurate and one adviser put the odds for surviving five minutes outside in the open at “only 50-50.”⁷

Most buildings in the city had been destroyed by the repeated ground attacks, shelling, and air strikes. The city was strewn with mounds of rubble, shattered trees, garbage, and dead domestic animals. One adviser described the scene as “looking like Berlin at the end of World War II.”⁸

The human toll inside the city was ghastly; the streets and rubble were littered with

bodies, both military and civilian. One adviser reported that “the bodies of men, women, and children are everywhere.”⁹ The smell of death permeated the air. Under these conditions, innumerable diseases, including cholera, soon ran rampant through both the civilian and soldier ranks. To avoid a full-fledged epidemic, bodies were buried in mass graves, some containing 300-500 corpses, by soldiers operating bulldozers during the infrequent lulls in the shelling. Many bodies had to be reburied after exploding shells churned up the original graves.

Antiaircraft fire had increased to the level that it became almost impossible to resupply the defenders by air. Medical supplies were exhausted and little could be done for the increasing number of casualties. The food and ammunition status was not much better. Virtually nothing could get into the city; consequently, there was no way out for the wounded. The dire situation, coupled with the continuous artillery bombardment, had a demoralizing effect on ARVN resolve and morale plummeted. The advisers were afraid that the South Vietnamese troops would break if the NVA attacked in force again and they redoubled their efforts to bolster the confidence of their ARVN counterparts. Under these bleak conditions, the defenders, now numbering approximately 4,000 troops, with the arrival of the two airborne battalions, prepared themselves for the next North Vietnamese onslaught.

The NVA once again changed their plans. Captured enemy documents revealed that the 9th VC Division commander was reprimanded for failing to accomplish his mission after two attempts. A new plan called for the 5th VC Division to make the main attack, supported by elements of the 7th NVA and 9th VC Divisions.

The attack began at 0500 hours on May 11th with the customary heavy opening

NVA artillery barrage. During the next twelve hours, the city was struck by 10,000 rounds of enemy indirect fire. Under this artillery cover, the NVA attacked from the north and northwest with tanks and infantry. The enemy forces were successful in forging two salients in the ARVN lines, almost bisecting the ARVN defensive perimeter. The fighting was intense and the ARVN defenders were close to the breaking point on several occasions. However, continuous tactical air support prevented the South Vietnamese from being overrun. The airspace over the city was extremely crowded as Air Force, Navy, and Marine close air support aircraft, AC-130 gunships, Army Cobra attack helicopters, and B-52s vied for position to place ordnance on the attackers. Skillful coordination by the advisers working with the Air Force forward air controllers made maximum use of all available air assets. This made the difference and, once again, saved the day for the ARVN defenders.

During the course of the battle, 297 sorties of tactical air support were flown on May 11th and approximately 260 sorties each on the following four days. Additionally, on May 11th, 30 B-52 strikes were made against the enemy positions surrounding An Loc. This air support, flown in the face of some of the most severe anti-aircraft fire ever encountered in South Vietnam, broke the NVA attack, enabling the ARVN forces to stabilize their lines, and eventually reduce both salients.

Unfortunately for the defenders in An Loc, the battle along QL-13 by the 21st ARVN Division did not go well. The Division had fought up the highway almost inch by inch, sustaining heavy casualties. The ARVN attacks were not coordinated and they were unable to defeat the entrenched North Vietnamese forces along the road. Although the 21st Division was unsuccessful in opening the road and affecting the linkup with the forces in

An Loc, its efforts were not wasted. In the process of trying to force the NVA positions, the 21st tied down most of one NVA division, making it unavailable for the fight in An Loc. This was a major contribution to the ultimate outcome, because the presence of one more NVA division in the direct assault on the city would almost certainly have tipped the scales in the attackers' favor.

By the end of May, although the fighting continued, the tide had turned in favor of the defenders. The around-the-clock air strikes had taken a horrendous toll on the NVA forces; ARVN intelligence later estimated that the NVA forces attacking An Loc sustained 10,000 casualties in April and May.¹⁰ The North Vietnamese had reached their culminating point and they were never again able to mount a large-scale attack on An Loc in 1972. In early June, Lieutenant General Minh was able to send reinforcements into An Loc and to withdraw the battered survivors of the 5th ARVN Division. On June 18th, he declared the siege of An Loc broken.

That did not mean that peace had come to An Loc, however, as the shelling continued, although on a much reduced scale. The fighting around the city continued sporadically until late summer. On July 9th, Hollingsworth deputy, Brigadier Richard Tallman, three of his officers, and an ARVN interpreter were killed shortly after landing at An Loc for an inspection tour. Two other American officers, one of whom was the author, were wounded in the same attack and were evacuated to Saigon by helicopter.

By mid-July, the battle of An Loc was over. The continuous shelling, estimated at over 78,000 rounds during April-May period, had reduced the city almost to total ruins.¹¹ The ARVN defenders had sustained 5,400 casualties, 2,300 of whom were either dead or missing.¹² As one adviser later described it, "The graves, burned out vehicles, and the

rubble were mute testimony to the intensity of the battle that had been fought there.”¹³

Nevertheless, the city of An Loc remained in ARVN hands. In spite of the costs, the defenders and their advisers, with the help of American tactical airpower, had decisively defeated three of the finest divisions in the North Vietnamese Army and held the city against overwhelming odds, preventing a great threat to Saigon and destroying the better part of three enemy divisions. It is estimated that the North Vietnamese suffered 10,000 soldiers killed and 15,000 wounded during the bitter battle for the city.¹⁴

ASSESSING THE ARVN

The bitter fighting at An Loc provided a unique opportunity to observe ARVN fighting capabilities under some of the most extreme conditions of the entire war. Despite the fact that the North Vietnamese had been defeated, the performance of the South Vietnamese troops during the demanding battle for An Loc had been uneven at best. In the South Vietnamese army, as with any army, the performance of the soldiers normally reflects the quality of the leadership of their officers and noncommissioned officers. This was particularly true in the life or death struggle for An Loc.

Some units had fought with almost superhuman valor and skill. Lieutenant Colonel Laddie Logan, a U.S. advisor in An Loc, remarked after the battle that “The 81st [Ranger Battalion] never gave up an inch of ground, and they never left a single one of their dead unburied, even under the heaviest artillery fire.”¹⁵ The airborne rangers were among the best troops in the South Vietnamese forces and acquitted themselves well during the intense fighting in An Loc. I know the commander of this unit only as “Tiger 36,” his radio callsign. He called in his own airstrikes and personally led several counterattacks

against the North Vietnamese across the thin strip of no man's land that bisected the city and separated the two sides. He was an inspirational leader who led from the front and his troops responded accordingly.

Many of the ARVN took everything the NVA threw at them and stood fast, despite enduring almost unspeakable hardship and taking horrendous casualties. The 3rd Ranger Group, commanded by Colonel Nguyen Van Biet, had over a thousand soldiers when the NVA launched their first attack; after three months of fighting, all but 346 were dead or wounded. There was little medical support, but the soldiers, for the most part, had continued to fight, doing the best they could under the horrendous circumstances.

The performance of the territorial forces (RF/PF) under the command of Colonel Tran Van Nhut was generally outstanding throughout the siege of An Loc. Nhut was a charismatic leader, who was highly visible to his troops during the battle. Before the battle, he made sure his RF/PF soldiers were well-equipped and well trained. Once the battle started, they responded to his leadership and example. Many had lost one or more of their family members and seen their homes destroyed during the battle. They had a cause to fight for and that is what they did, acquitting themselves very well against the North Vietnamese regulars; their morale remained high throughout the fighting despite heavy casualties.¹⁶

The effect of Nhut's leadership was evident early in the battle. When the tanks attacked on the morning of 13 April, the ARVN soldiers and their advisors fell back in front of the armored assault. The soldiers were panic-stricken and the defense looked like it was about to disintegrate when one of the most courageous acts I have ever witnessed occurred. One of Nhut's PF soldiers grabbed several M72 LAWs (Light Antitank

Weapons) and standing out in the open stopped the lead tank in its tracks. This fearless act galvanized the defenders, who then realized that the North Vietnamese tanks could be stopped. This realization settled everyone down and stabilized the situation.

The performance of the Binh Long sector troops remained noteworthy for the duration of the siege. In April and May after the NVA had tightened the ring around An Loc, reconnaissance operations by the 5th ARVN Division ceased almost completely. However, the Binh Long reconnaissance and intelligence platoon, often dressed as civilians, repeatedly infiltrated the enemy lines to gather intelligence, returning with useful information that was repeatedly used for targeting by the ever-present close air support.

The airborne brigade and the ranger battalions also performed extremely well. When the airborne were inserted into the high ground east of the city early in the battle, they soon found themselves in heavy fighting. The 6th Battalion fought well, but sustained so many casualties that it was rendered combat ineffective. The other two airborne battalions fought their way into positions on the eastern side of the city and played a major role in blunting NVA attacks from that direction.

The townspeople had nothing but praise for the Regional and Popular Forces, the airborne brigade, and the ranger battalions. The rangers had a particularly good relationship with the locals. They shared their food with the civilians, who in turn cooked for the rangers and did their laundry. If one of the civilians was wounded, the ranger medics attended to them.

However, not all the South Vietnamese soldiers covered themselves with glory. Many of the townspeople of An Loc had nothing but scorn for some of the soldiers of the 5th ARVN Division. Soldiers of the division engaged in considerable looting and in some

cases even fired into houses to force the occupants out so they could loot the unoccupied buildings.¹⁷ Some 5th ARVN troops were observed selling the food and medical supplies that had been delivered by parachute. On several occasions, 5th ARVN soldiers fired on airborne and ranger troops who were attempting to retrieve airdropped supplies for their own units.

The most demoralizing display of poor discipline was apparent in several incidents involving what one adviser called “the olympic wounded.”¹⁸ On at least two separate occasions, American evacuation helicopters braved intense ground fire to land in or near the city to pick up casualties only to have certain “wounded” ARVN soldiers drop their more severely injured compatriots to clamor aboard the departing helicopters.

Such instances indicated a lack of leadership in the units those troops came from. As previously stated, leadership was the key determining factor in the soldiers’ performance; where the leaders were aggressive and physically shared the same hardships as their soldiers, the soldiers’ performance was exemplary. Colonel Ulmer later related one such case. During the last major attack on An Loc, the NVA had surrounded part of an ARVN battalion in the city jail on the night of 10-11 May. The South Vietnamese soldiers had run low on ammunition and were virtually defenseless. The NVA sent a message to the ARVN commander, telling him that he had fought well, that he was surrounded, that he could surrender with honor and would be protected, but if he did not surrender, he and his soldiers would be killed. He replied that he was not about to surrender on those terms. In a few hours, the NVA overran his position. The battalion commander and his soldiers fought to the last man. Their bodies were found on 12 June when the 7th ARVN Regiment,

cleared the area in house-to-house fighting.¹⁹ The commander and his men had willingly made the supreme sacrifice; such valor is uncommon in any army.

In another case, the regimental commander of the 7th Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Quan (after the battle promoted to colonel on the spot by President Thieu during his visit to the city) was himself wounded three times during the early days of the battle. For the critical period in mid-May, he commanded while being propped up in his cot.²⁰

In yet another notable instance, a small Ranger fire base at Tong Le Chon outside the city, was besieged by vastly superior numbers. The Rangers never gave up and turned back repeated North Vietnamese attacks. The fire base held out even after the fighting began again following the ceasefire in January 1973; it did not succumb to the North Vietnamese until late 1974.

The brutal fighting at An Loc brought out the best and worst in men. Many ARVN fought courageously against overwhelming odds, tenaciously turning back wave after wave of tank and infantry attacks while suffering under the seemingly never-ending indirect fire. However, for all those heroic soldiers who fought well and hard, there were others who demonstrated a lack of discipline and even cowardice under fire.

Despite this mixed performance, the ARVN held against the repeated NVA assaults and when the battle was over, the city (or what remained of it) was still in South Vietnamese hands. President Nixon promoted the victory as a vindication of his Vietnamization program, declaring that the South Vietnamese had clearly demonstrated that they were ready to prosecute “their war” without American help. While this might have been politically expedient for a president who was trying to disengage from Vietnam, the truth was that the battle for An Loc had been a very near thing. It was true that the

ARVN had held An Loc, but there were two other key ingredients that played a major role in the South Vietnamese victory: U.S. airpower and the role of the advisers on the ground with the ARVN units.

Tactical air support was so critical that the city would almost certainly have fallen without it. A total of 247 B-52 missions and 9,203 tactical air strikes were flown against the North Vietnamese in Loc Ninh, An Loc, and along QL-13.²¹ Additionally, Air Force C-130 Spectre gunships and Army Cobra attack helicopters played major roles in the city's defense. By most accounts, this air support was the key ingredient in the victory.

Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations traveled to Saigon in late 1972 to investigate the conduct of the South Vietnamese defense against the North Vietnamese invasion. During one of the briefings presented to the committee at MACV Headquarters, the briefer was asked what would have happened if U.S. air support had not been available; the briefer replied: "We would be meeting some other place today."²²

General Creighton Abrams, former MACV Commander, later stated that in his opinion, "American air power, and not South Vietnamese arms, had caused his [the North Vietnamese] losses."²³ This evaluation was echoed by participants at all levels. Brigadier General John R. McGiffert, Major General Hollingsworth's deputy in MR III, when asked after the battle what he thought about the ability of the ARVN to hold An Loc without American tactical air support, replied, "No contest – never would have hacked it."²⁴ This may have been a harsh assessment, but even South Vietnamese generals agreed that the city would have fallen if it had not been for the responsiveness of both Army attack helicopters and U.S. Air Force air support. General Cao Van Vien, of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, stated after the war, "Without this [tactical air] support, the RVNAF

[Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] success in stalling the enemy invasion would have been impossible.”²⁵

There is absolutely no doubt that U.S. air support prevented the defenders from being overrun. If that had happened, three NVA divisions would have had very little to stop them from making a direct assault on Saigon. Tactical airpower saved An Loc and it may also have saved Saigon.

U.S. air support also took the form of aerial resupply, which played a critical role in the ability of the ARVN defenders to hold out for almost three months. As the North Vietnamese tightened the ring around An Loc and increased the number of antiaircraft weapons in the area, the skies over An Loc soon became deadly. Initially, the C130s from 7th U.S. Air Force had a difficult time in delivering logistical supplies to the defenders in An Loc and most of the parachute drops went the enemy in April. After much trial and error to determine the optimum procedures, the U.S. Air Force made 238 successful air drops of 3,100 tons of food, medical supplies, and ammunition in May and June. Without this resupply, the defenders could not have held out. As one report stated after the war, “In combination with the resilience of the defenders, and the responsiveness of the air strike forces, the successful air resupply of An Loc became a decisive factor determining the Allied victory.”²⁶

While air support in all its forms was essential to the victory at An Loc, American advisers there played a pivotal role, as well. They served in several key capacities. The advisers stayed with their counterparts on the ground throughout the battle, sharing their fate on a daily basis. Some advisers in MR I had been pulled out when the NVA attacked and this had a devastating effect on the ARVN units and their ability to withstand the North

Vietnamese invasion. As the physical embodiment of U.S. commitment to the South Vietnamese, the mere presence of the advisers in An Loc stiffened the resolve of the ARVN commanders in time of desperate peril. The advisers provided encouragement to their counterparts, a function that should not be underestimated. This encouragement was particularly important during the darkest hours of the intense North Vietnamese attacks in April and early May.

Next and maybe most importantly, the advisers acted as the link between the ground and the critical American tactical aircraft and helicopters supporting the battle. Without advisers and their radios, the ARVN defenders would have been unable to talk to the aircraft. The advisers were tireless in coordinating the around-the-clock air strikes that prevented the North Vietnamese forces from overwhelming the city. General McGiffert said that the ARVN defenders would not have been able to hold out if the advisers had not been there controlling the air strikes. He said of the advisers, "...their primary duty and their primary reason for existence was coordination of U.S. tacair [tactical air support] and without them it [the defense of An Loc] would have just been damn near impossible."²⁷

The last role performed by the American advisers in An Loc is less tangible – leadership by example. When ably led, many of the ARVN soldiers fought bravely and maintained their fighting edge under the most trying circumstances. Unfortunately, when the leadership was not so able, the troops panicked and fought less than valiantly. Some ARVN commanders, notably those in the ranger and airborne units, were shining examples of outstanding combat leadership under extreme pressure, but there were other instances where officer leadership was lacking. On several occasions, the situation was only a breath away from crumbling, but according to numerous accounts, the advisers "were the glue that

kept them [the ARVN] together.”²⁸

Another part of the leadership problem was the level of tactical competence of many of the ARVN commanders. The situation in An Loc was far removed from the circumstances that the ARVN had dealt with in the past in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. Facing tanks and massive enemy artillery was a far cry from chasing insurgents through the jungle. As one adviser later described the situation that existed in An Loc during the battle, “Regimental and higher level leadership was not tactically or psychologically prepared for a battle of the duration and intensity of the Binh Long campaign; battalion level leaders lacked preparation for the close coordination necessary between fire and maneuver elements.”²⁹ The Americans provided the expertise in handling the high intensity conventional battle that characterized the struggle for An Loc.

THE BOTTOMLINE

While there is no doubt that U.S. airpower and the American advisors played critical roles in the defense of An Loc, it must be acknowledged that none of that would have mattered if the South Vietnamese soldiers had not held their ground. Perhaps General Creighton Abrams, MACV commander, said it best when he observed, “...I doubt that the fabric of this thing [the ARVN defense] could have held together without U.S. air. But the thing that had to happen before that is the Vietnamese, some numbers of them, had to stand and fight. If they didn’t do that, ten times the air we’ve got wouldn’t have stopped them... We would we were we are this morning if some numbers of the Vietnamese hadn’t decided to stand and fight.”³⁰

In the final analysis, the ARVN and their American counterparts, working together and supported by massive amounts of U.S. airpower in all its forms, won a great victory at An Loc. As *Time* magazine correspondent Rudolph Rauch quoted one of the American advisers in An Loc in early June: “The only way to approach the battle of An Loc is to remember that the ARVN are there and the North Vietnamese aren’t. To view it any other way is to do an injustice to the Vietnamese people.”³¹

Despite a number of problems, the South Vietnamese soldiers had endured unbelievable hardship and still triumphed in the end. Although there had been some serious shortcomings, the South Vietnamese put up a “stubborn, even heroic...defense.”³² In doing so, they demonstrated that with sufficient continuing support from the United States they had at least a chance of surviving even after all American combat troops were gone.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to these soldiers who endured so much was the one inscribed on a monument erected by the grateful people of An Loc in honor of the 81st Rangers. This monument stood amidst a cemetery especially built for the members of that unit who had fallen during the defense of the city. It read:

“An Loc Xa Vang Danh Chien Dia

Biet Cach Du Vi Quoc Vong Than”

This translates to: “Here, on the famous battlefield of An Loc Town, The Airborne Rangers have sacrificed their lives for the nation.” Such sacrifice was not limited to the Airborne Rangers and An Loc remained free because of the South Vietnamese soldiers, supported by American airpower and joined by their advisers, stood and fought against almost overwhelming odds.

The real tragedy for the Republic of Vietnam is that the sacrifices made by its soldiers in An Loc (and Quang Tri and Kontum) ultimately proved to be in vain. With U.S. help, the South Vietnamese had not only survived the North Vietnamese onslaught that began on Good Friday in 1972, they had won a great victory. In the aftermath of that victory, Saigon had agreed to the Paris Peace Accords largely because of Richard Nixon's repeated promises that America would continue to support the South Vietnamese in their struggle. Once the Americans troops were gone, the South Vietnamese held their own during the fighting that continued into 1974, but when the North Vietnamese upped the ante in December of that year, the promised support was not there and the South Vietnamese fell in less than 55 days.

Appendix 1

ORDER OF BATTLE

BINH LONG PROVINCE, APRIL-MAY 1972

NVA (35,500):

B-2 Front

5th VC Division

7th NVA Division

9th VC Division

69th Artillery Command

20th Regiment

101st Regiment

203rd Tank Regiment

202nd Special Weapons Regiment

429th Sapper Group

ARVN (4,500 +/-):

5th Infantry Division

9th Regiment (-)*

1st Armored Cavalry Squadron*

7th Regiment (-)

8th Regiment

Task Force 52

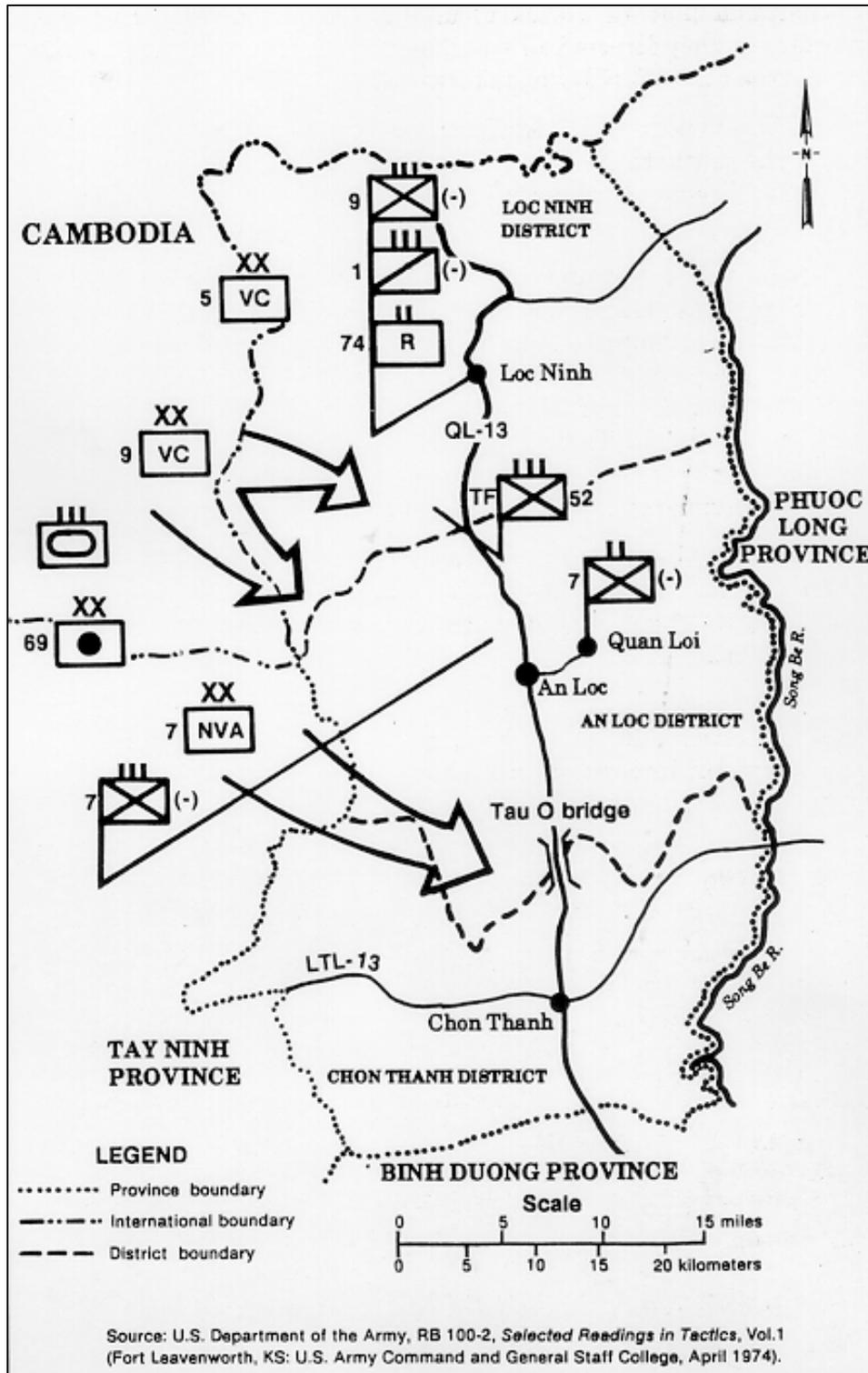
3rd Ranger Group

74th Border Ranger Battalion*

Binh Long Province RF-PF

1st Airborne Brigade (OPCON)

Appendix 2



ENDNOTES

¹ Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, California: Presidio Press), p. 229.

² The North Vietnamese forces were actually called the Peoples' Army of Vietnam, or PAVN, but the more popular name for the Communist troops from the north was NVA, for North Vietnamese Army. The South Vietnamese army was called the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN. Those designations, NVA and ARVN, will be used for the duration of this study.

³ Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Special Intelligence Report: The Nguyen Hue Offensive – Historical Study of Lessons Learned (Saigon: Military Assistance Command Vietnam, January 1973), p. C-1.

⁴ Military History Branch, Headquarters, U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Command History, 1972-73 (Saigon: Military Assistance Command Vietnam, 1973), p. J-1. Hereafter referred to as MACV Command History, 1972-73.

⁵ One advisor, Major Thomas Davidson, managed to elude the North Vietnamese and escaped to the south, reaching An Loc after four days.

⁶ Major General James F. Hollingsworth, "Communist Invasion in Military Region III," Unpublished Narrative, 1972, Microfiche Reel 44, University Publications of America: Records of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, p. 21.

⁷ Philip C. Clarke, "The Battle That Saved Saigon," *Reader's Digest*, March 1973, p. 154. Part of the enemy's accuracy was explained when six young women were discovered with radio transmitters concealed in their brassieres. Accused of relaying information to enemy gun crews, the women were tied up and left in an area where NVA artillery subsequently killed them.

⁸ "An Adviser's Three-Month Nightmare Ends," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 4 June 1972, p. 1.

⁹ Ian Ward, "North Vietnam's Blitzkrieg--Why Giap Did It: Report From Saigon," *Conflict Studies*, October 1972, p. 5.

¹⁰ Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 134.

¹¹ Headquarters, 21st Infantry Division (ARVN), "After-Action Report--Binh Long Campaign, 1972" (Saigon, July 1972), p. C-1.

¹² Major John Howard, Unpublished Student Paper: “The War We Came to Fight: A Study of the Battle of An Loc, April-June 1972” (Ft Leavenworth, Kansas: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 1974), p. 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁴ Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972*, p. 134.

¹⁵ “A Tale of Two Broken Cities,” *Time*, 15 January 1973, p. 26.

¹⁶ K. G. Mortensen, *The Battle of An Loc, 1972* (Parkville, Victoria, Australia: Gerald Griffin Press, 1996), p. 57.

¹⁷ MACV, Command History, 1972-73, Vol. II, p. J-21.

¹⁸ Howard, “The War We Came to Fight,” p. 18.

¹⁹ Mortensen, *The Battle of An Loc, 1972*, p. 51.

²⁰ Tragically, this courageous officer was killed in May 1973, when his helicopter was shot down not far from Lai Khe.

²¹ “Battle of An Loc Ends,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, June 18, 1972, p. 1.

²² Committee of Foreign Relations, United States Senate, *Staff Report: Vietnam, 1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), p. 2.

²³ Jeffrey C. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years – The U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: The Army Center of Military History, 1987), p. 482.

²⁴ Interview with Brigadier General John R. McGiffert, Deputy Commanding General, Third Regional Assistance Command, by Walter S. Dillard, Military Assistance Command, History Branch, October 10, 1972 in Saigon.

²⁵ General Cao Van Vien and Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, *Indochina Monographs: Reflections on the Vietnam War* (Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 109.

²⁶ A.J.C. Lavalley, ed. *United States Air Force Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Airpower and the 1972 Spring Offensive* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air Command and Staff College, 1976), p. 91.

²⁷ Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years*, p. 484.

²⁸ McGiffert Interview; see also General Creighton Abrams’ comments quoted in Lewis Sorley, ed. *Vietnam Chronicles The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), p.842.

²⁹ Military Assistance Command Vietnam, "Senior Officer Debriefing Report, Colonel Jack Conn," (Saigon, Vietnam, February 1973), p. K-1-3.

³⁰ Quoted in Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, p.826.

³¹ Rudolph Rauch, "A Record of Sheer Endurance," *Time*, 26 June 1972, p. 26.

³² Pike, *PAVN*, p. 224-225.

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