

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

THE DRAWDOWN

1970-1971



Cover: Tanks await transport back to the United States as part of the withdrawal. (*National Archives*)

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THE DRAWDOWN 1970-1971



by

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Introduction

To many Americans, the war in Vietnam was, and remains, a divisive issue. But fifty years after the beginning of major U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, well over half the U.S. population is too young to have any direct memory of the conflict. The massive American commitment—political, economic, diplomatic, and military—to the mission of maintaining an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam deserves widespread attention, both to recognize the sacrifice of those who served and to remember how those events have impacted our nation.

U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia began after World War II when elements of the Vietnamese population fought back against the reimposition of French colonial rule. Although the United States generally favored the idea of an independent Vietnam, it supported France because the Viet Minh rebels were led by Communists and U.S. policy at that point in the Cold War sought to contain any expansion of communism. France's defeat in 1954 led to the division of Vietnam into a Communist North (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and a non-Communist South (Republic of Vietnam). The United States actively supported the latter as it dealt with a growing Communist-led insurgent force (the Viet Cong) aided by the North Vietnamese. The initial mission of training South Vietnam's armed forces led to deepening American involvement as the situation grew increasingly dire for the Republic of Vietnam.

By the time President Lyndon B. Johnson committed major combat units in 1965, the United States already had invested thousands of men and millions of dollars in the effort to build a secure and stable Republic of Vietnam. That commitment expanded rapidly through 1969, when the United States had over 365,000 Army soldiers (out of a total of a half million troops of all services) in every military region of South Vietnam with thousands of other

Army personnel throughout the Pacific area providing direct support to operations. The war saw many innovations, including the massive use of helicopters to conduct airmobile tactics, new concepts of counterinsurgency, the introduction of airborne radio direction finding, wide-scale use of computers, and major advances in battlefield medicine. Yet, as in most wars, much of the burden was still borne by soldiers on the ground who slogged on foot over the hills and through the rice paddies in search of an often elusive foe. The enormous military effort by the United States was, however, matched by the resolve of North Vietnamese leaders to unify their country under communism at whatever cost. That determination, in the end, proved decisive as American commitment wavered in the face of high casualties and economic and social challenges at home. Negotiations accompanied by the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces led to the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, effectively ending the American military role in the conflict. Actual peace was elusive, and two years later the North Vietnamese Army overran South Vietnam, bringing the war to an end in April 1975.

The vast majority of American men and women who went to Vietnam did so in the uniform of the United States Army. They served their country when called, many at great personal cost, against a backdrop of growing uncertainty and unrest at home. These commemorative pamphlets are dedicated to them.

JON T. HOFFMAN
Chief Historian

The Drawdown, 1970–1971

The years 1970 and 1971 were important ones in the Vietnam War. They were also years of contrast. The American public was deeply divided—many no longer wanted to fight the war, while others wanted to win it. It was a period in which the United States fought aggressively while seeking to end the conflict through talks held in Paris, France—negotiations that were frequently as contentious as the battles in the field. In 1970 and 1971 the United States and its allies made progress in solidifying the security and viability of the Republic of Vietnam. Yet in no way was victory achieved, and in some respects South Vietnam would emerge more vulnerable than before. Finally, it was during these two years that the United States expanded the geographical extent of the conflict while curtailing its participation in it. The stress and confusion of the situation took its toll as soldiers tried to make sense of it all.

STRATEGIC SETTING

In 1954 international mediators bifurcated Vietnam into a Communist-controlled North and a non-Communist South to terminate a nine-year conflict over the fate of the former French colony of Indochina. Immediately thereafter, the United States started sending advisers, military equipment, and economic aid to South Vietnam as part of the global Cold War between democracy and communism. By 1960 war had erupted in South Vietnam. Those Southerners who favored reunification with the North—the Viet Cong—fought under Northern direction to overthrow the non-Communist government. The war did not go well for the South Vietnamese government and, not wishing to see the area fall to communism, the United States deployed ground combat troops to South Vietnam in 1965. Five years later the conflict was still ongoing.

By 1970 the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese military had 237,000 troops in and around South Vietnam. Most of these soldiers were North Vietnamese, with several hundred thousand more in reserve in North Vietnam itself. South Vietnam and its allies—the United States, the Republic of Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand—had 1.7 million security personnel in the South. About 475,000 of these personnel were Americans, with 333,000 of them being members of the U.S. Army. The principal combat elements of the Army contingent were the 1st, 4th, 23d, and 25th Infantry Divisions, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), and the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile). Four separate brigades, an armored cavalry regiment, and a multitude of aviation, artillery, Special Forces, logistical, and support units rounded out the Army's contribution. Some of these units had been in Vietnam since 1965, although only a fraction of soldiers had spent more than a year there due to the Army's personnel management policies. One of the longest serving soldiers was the commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), General Creighton W. Abrams Jr.—the overall commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam—who had been in country in various assignments for over three and a half years (*Map 1*).

By January 1970 American servicemen had been serving for a year under the leadership of President Richard M. Nixon, their commander in chief and the thirty-seventh president of the United States. Prior to his inauguration in January 1969, Nixon had promised that he would achieve “an honorable end to the war in



Map 1

Vietnam.” He realized that many Americans had lost patience with what was already one of the country’s longest military conflicts. America’s participation was tearing the nation apart politically, damaging the economy, and exacerbating social tensions at home. Ending America’s involvement had become a political necessity, but President Nixon did not want to cut and run. Leaving South Vietnam in the lurch would not only be a stinging defeat but would signal weakness in the wider Cold War. Torn between conflicting imperatives, the president struggled to chart a course through what some were calling a “quagmire.”

Nixon chose a multifaceted approach. Pressure at home dictated that he reduce the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam, and by the end of 1969 he had withdrawn 75,000 men. He also pursued peace talks, but he understood that diplomacy without force was bound to fail. He therefore hoped that the United States, South Vietnam, and their allies would achieve sufficient success on the battlefield to persuade the Communists to agree to terms. Ideally an agreement would include the withdrawal of both U.S. and North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam and the acceptance of that state as a free, independent, non-Communist nation. In the meantime, Nixon sought to strengthen South Vietnam’s position in two additional ways. First, U.S. civilian and military personnel would continue to help South Vietnam uproot the Communists’ clandestine politico-terror apparatus that dominated much of the countryside, replacing it with a government presence that provided enhanced security and socioeconomic benefits sufficient to win the support of the rural population. The allies used various terms to describe this process—Revolutionary Development, Rural Construction, or simply, pacification. Second, the United States would redouble its efforts to provide South Vietnam’s military with the training and equipment it needed to stand, if not entirely on its own, at least with minimal outside assistance from the United States. The United States called the buildup of South Vietnamese forces and the progressive transfer of responsibility for waging the war “Vietnamization.”

Nixon’s policies enjoyed some success in 1969. Allied military forces killed large numbers of enemy troops, South Vietnam’s economy improved, and the South’s military grew stronger. The allies eroded the clandestine Communist structure that governed large swaths of rural Vietnam, while the influence of the South Vietnamese government seemed to be spreading from the capital of Saigon into the countryside. By year’s end the Hamlet Evaluation

System, which the United States used to evaluate pacification progress, reported that the percentage of the population over which the Saigon government exercised some degree of control had grown by 14 percent. These were encouraging signs.

Yet challenges remained. Poor leadership, corruption, social divisions, apathy, and deep, structural weaknesses still plagued the young South Vietnamese state. U.S. casualties, while far lower than those of the enemy, had a disproportionate impact on America's democratic system, with each loss bolstering the antiwar movement at home. South Vietnam's economy was fragile and, although weakened, Communist influence among the population remained strong, with the infrastructure still numbering in excess of 70,000 officials and agents.

Last but not least, the enemy showed no signs of breaking. The peace talks were stalled and the enemy's forces remained strong. North Vietnam continued to send replacements and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and into the South. It also continued to use sanctuaries in "neutral" Cambodia and Laos, where Communist troops could rest and refit just across the border from South Vietnam. U.S. troop withdrawals also gave the enemy no reason to quit. Nixon had hoped for a reciprocal drawdown of forces, but political pressure at home and the influence of his Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, who believed the war unwinnable, led him to withdraw U.S. troops without achieving concessions from the other side. Unilateral withdrawals may have helped mollify domestic critics of the war, but they undermined America's bargaining leverage at Paris and placed General Abrams in the unenviable position of trying to fight a determined foe with progressively fewer resources.

Believing that the United States was losing the will to fight, North Vietnam's leaders in Hanoi opted for a strategy of prolonged attrition. They husbanded their major forces, which had taken a severe beating over the past few years, stationing them in and around South Vietnam's borders where it was difficult for the allies to come to grips with them. Meanwhile, they used small bands of guerrillas and sappers, mines and booby traps, artillery, and occasional attacks by regulars to inflict casualties, weaken allied morale, and disrupt pacification without unduly exposing their strength. Then, as America and South Vietnam tired and antiwar pressure built in the United States, the Communists planned to press their case with renewed vigor, either in Paris by negoti-

ating from a position of strength, in Saigon by undermining the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, or if necessary, on the battlefield. Once U.S. forces had either withdrawn entirely or been reduced to a manageable level, the Communists could strike in full fury at a time and fashion of their choosing.

As 1969 drew to a close, General Abrams looked for solutions to the dilemma. None were good. The president had already pledged to make deeper cuts in U.S. strength in the coming year. In theory he intended to tie the withdrawals to progress in the war, in pacification, and in Vietnamization. In practice, it had already become clear that these goals had become decoupled from the question of U.S. troop strength, just as the idea of demanding reciprocal cutbacks by Communist forces had fallen by the wayside. Once begun, the drawdown had taken on a life of its own, only loosely based on actual conditions on the ground, in what had become a politically irreversible process.

Faced with the possibility that the drawdown might outpace Vietnamization, the United States sped up the delivery of war materiel to South Vietnam, but Abrams could not guarantee that the South would be able to efficiently absorb the windfall. Nor could he promise that the Saigon government would be able to convert its growing presence in the countryside into enthusiastic support or competent administration. Certainly it was essential for U.S. military forces to continue the important work they had been doing over the past few years—destroying enemy forces, providing security to the population, and supporting pacification. But these alone were not enough. Something more was needed to improve the odds for South Vietnam's survival.

Abrams' solution was to use military force to alter the trajectory of the war, much as the enemy had done with the Tet Offensive in 1968. But time was running out—the allies needed to act before the drawdown made such a move impossible. A dramatic success would buy time for pacification and Vietnamization to take root. It might even persuade the Communists to make concessions at Paris. The prospects for a bold gambit lay not in South Vietnam, however, but outside it. By launching substantial forays into Cambodia, Laos, and perhaps North Vietnam itself, Abrams hoped to destroy the depots and large military formations that sustained the enemy's ability to wage war inside South Vietnam.

The proposal was not new. U.S. military leaders had urged Nixon's predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to take similar action,

but he had always demurred. Johnson had feared that any cross-border attack would expand the war, increase U.S. casualties, inflame antiwar sentiment at home, and garner diplomatic criticism abroad. In the cases of Laos and North Vietnam, U.S. action in those countries might provoke a military response from Communist China, which bordered both those states.

Nixon sensed that Abrams was right. Indeed, several weeks before his inauguration he had ordered a study of the situation in Cambodia, the easiest of the three sanctuaries to crack, stating "I think a very definite change of policy toward Cambodia probably should be one of the first orders of business." Out of this had emerged a decision to bomb enemy bases in Cambodia, the result of an effort that Nixon began in March 1969 in secret, lest word of it further inflame the antiwar movement. But just as bombs could not stop the flow of men and material from North Vietnam through Laos and into South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they could not erase enemy capabilities in Cambodia. For this, ground troops were necessary, but the same constellation of factors that had stymied prior proposals for land operations outside of South Vietnam continued to weigh against Abrams' proposals. Moreover, Defense Secretary Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers adamantly opposed discarding the long-standing geographical constraints over allied ground operations. Abrams' proposal seemed doomed. It would have gone the way of all prior suggestions had not fate offered an opportunity for an incursion into Cambodia.

OPERATIONS

THE CAMBODIAN INCURSION

Like its neighbors Laos and Vietnam, Cambodia had been a part of the wider French colony of Indochina until France granted it independence in November 1953. From the beginning, Cambodia's leader, King (later retitled Prince) Norodom Sihanouk, had tried to keep his fledgling country out of the struggle between pro- and anti-Communist forces that was tearing apart the rest of Indochina. Relations with the United States and its allies soured, however, and Sihanouk permitted Vietnamese Communists to use Cambodia as a refuge. Cambodia became a major base for Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers. They launched attacks into South Vietnam from the ostensibly neutral country and retreated

there to rest and refit when pressed by allied forces. They also built extensive housing, training, medical, and supply facilities along Cambodia's border with South Vietnam, facilities that were stocked with war materiel brought into Cambodia either overland through Laos, or more importantly, by sea through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. Cambodia was truly vital for the Communist war effort. Even after President Nixon authorized the bombing of enemy bases in eastern Cambodia in May 1969, they remained an existential threat to South Vietnam, particularly because some of them lay less than forty kilometers from Saigon.

Interestingly, two months after the United States began bombing Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk chose to restore diplomatic relations with the United States, relations he had severed in 1965. The bombing had shown that the fig leaf of neutralism was wearing thin, and that a different course was needed if Cambodia was to avoid being sucked into the conflagration. But the prince remained unable or unwilling to confront the North Vietnamese, who not only occupied a portion of his country, but who threatened to unleash Communist Cambodian rebels, known as the Khmer Rouge, should Sihanouk take action against them. Little changed, therefore, until the spring of 1970 when the prince succumbed to the precariousness of his position.

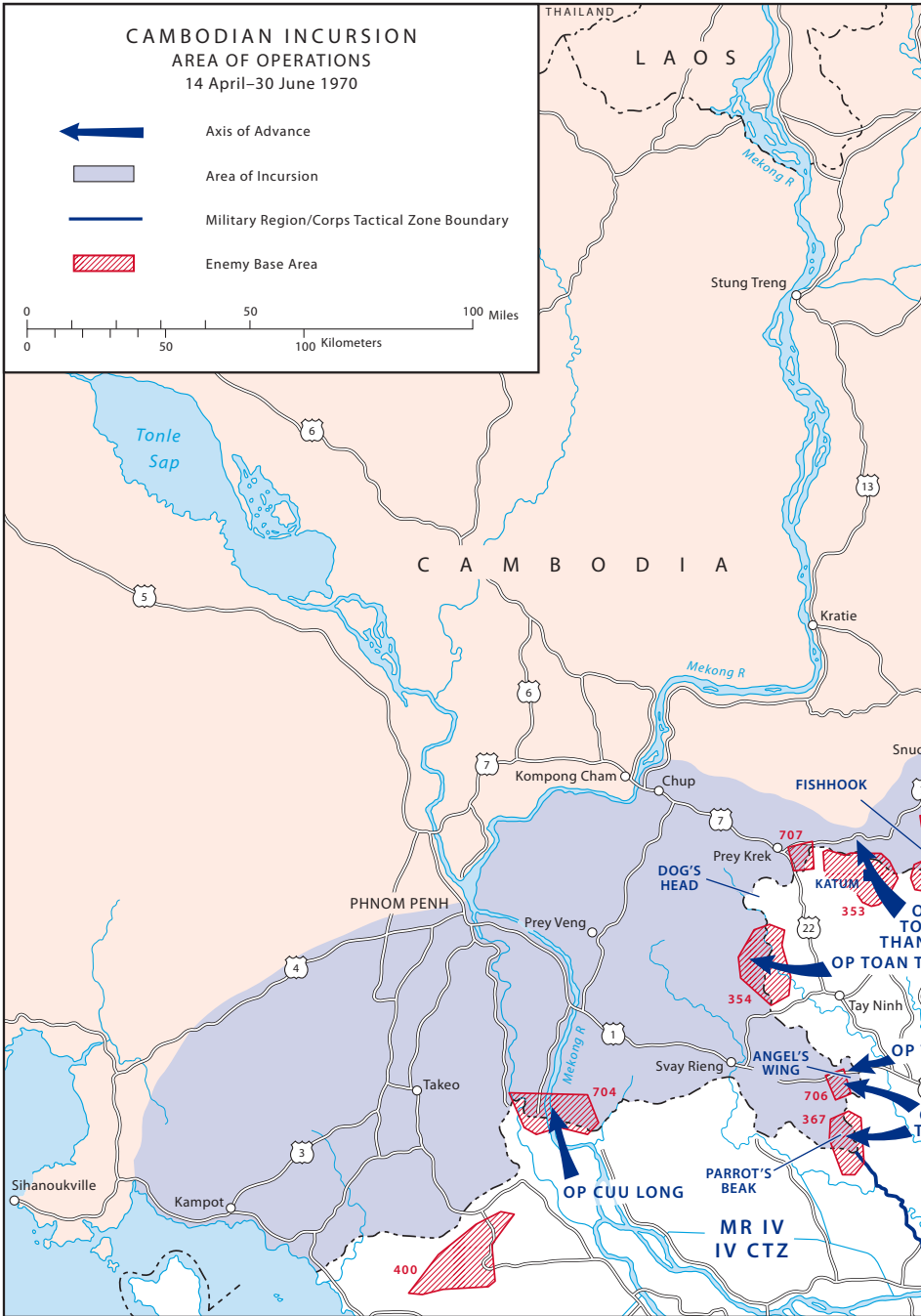
On 18 March 1970, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Lon Nol, overthrew the Sihanouk government while the prince was traveling abroad. Nol established the Khmer Republic with himself as president. He banned the use of Sihanoukville by the Communists and demanded that Hanoi remove its troops from Cambodia. The North Vietnamese refused. Instead, they directed the Khmer Rouge and their own forces to advance on Cambodia's capital of Phnom Penh. Nol's position quickly deteriorated.

With a friendly government now at risk, Nixon saw an opportunity to come to its aid while simultaneously plucking the thorn that had long irritated South Vietnam's western flank. In late March he overruled Secretary of Defense Laird and ordered that plans be developed for an offensive against the enemy's sanctuaries in Cambodia. General Abrams and the Joint Chiefs of Staff forwarded several proposals to deal with the 40,000–60,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soldiers thought to be in Cambodia. Meanwhile, President Nixon began giving military equipment to Cambodia. He also authorized the South Vietnamese Army—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN—to make short, cross-border raids.

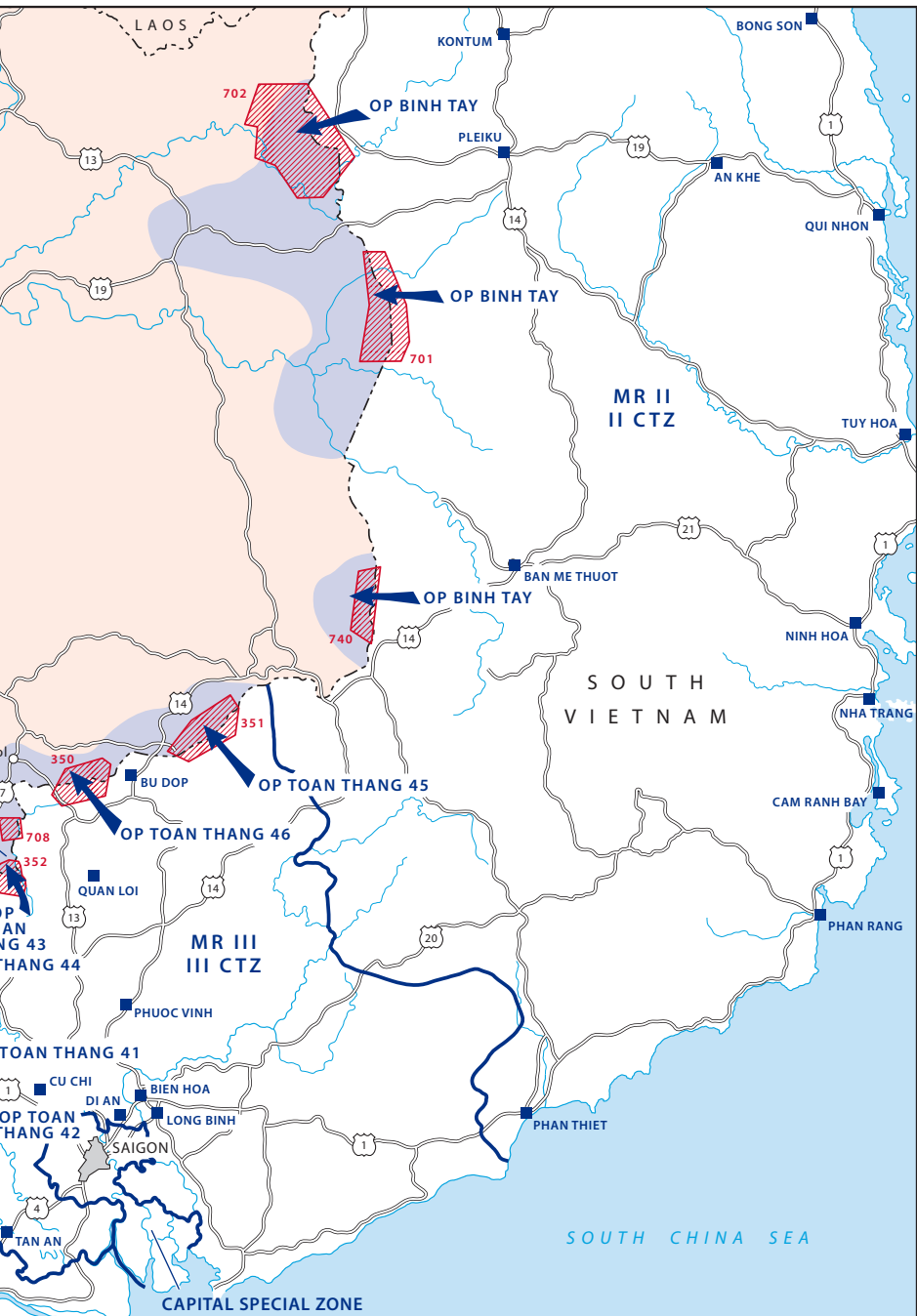
The first such action, Operation TOAN THANG 41 (TOTAL VICTORY 41), began 14 April 1970 as a small force advanced from Go Dau Ha in South Vietnam's Tay Ninh Province into a Communist base area called the Angel's Wing in Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province. The two-day raid inflicted 415 casualties on the enemy and captured 100 weapons and 200 tons of rice at the cost of 8 South Vietnamese dead and 67 wounded.

Despite the operation's success, it was clear that something far larger would be needed to achieve significant results. Over the next few days allied staff officers worked feverishly to complete plans for a major incursion. However, in doing so they had to stay within guidelines established by the Nixon administration. U.S. participation was to be brief, and U.S. troops were not to advance deeper than thirty kilometers into Cambodia. And it had to be done quickly before the southwest monsoon season that drenched southern Vietnam and Cambodia from May through October made operations difficult.

The chief planner for the operation, Lt. Gen. Michael S. Davison, focused on two geographic targets. The first was called the "Parrot's Beak," a salient that jutted into South Vietnam toward Saigon. The enemy had used the Parrot's Beak as a staging area for the 1968 Tet Offensive. To remove the threat to the South Vietnamese capital, allied planners crafted Operation TOAN THANG 42, in which the commander of South Vietnam's III Corps, Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, would lead 8,700 South Vietnamese troops to destroy the enemy's facilities in the area. To accomplish the goal, Tri would divide his command—drawn mostly from the South Vietnamese 5th and 25th Infantry Divisions, backed by rangers and armored cavalry—into three task forces, each consisting of one armored cavalry squadron and three infantry battalions. These troops would strike the eastern tip of the "beak" from north and south. Their objective was the town of Svay Rieng on the main road between Saigon and Phnom Penh. Also targeted would be the enemy's Base Area 354 farther north. The allies would launch the operation without a large buildup so as to achieve a measure of surprise. U.S. advisers would accompany the attack to facilitate logistical, artillery, and close air support, but all the ground fighting would be done by the Vietnamese. President Nixon hoped the operation would "be a major boost to [South Vietnamese] morale as well as provide a practical demonstration of the success of Vietnamization (*Map 2*)."



Map 2



Davison's second major objective was the "Fishhook," west of South Vietnam's Binh Long Province and eighty kilometers north-west of Saigon. U.S. planners believed that the enemy's southern military headquarters—the *Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)*—was situated in the Fishhook near Base Areas 352 and 353, along with the North Vietnamese *People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) 7th Division*. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces would jointly tackle this objective. MACV labeled the action Operation ROCKCRUSHER, while the South Vietnamese referred to it as TOAN THANG 43.

To attack the Fishhook, Davison massed 12,000 American and 5,000 South Vietnamese soldiers opposite Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province. He built the U.S. force around the 1st Cavalry Division; the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor of the 25th Infantry Division; the 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry (Mechanized) of the 9th Infantry Division; and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. The main South Vietnamese contribution came in the form of the 3d Airborne Brigade and 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron. The Assistant Commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, Brig. Gen. Robert M. Shoemaker, would command the combined force. Davison hoped a fast-paced assault would ensnare the *7th PAVN Division* and destroy the enemy's supply depots. A key objective was the village of Snuol, an important road junction that facilitated the enemy's logistical operations inside Cambodia. However, raiding COSVN headquarters was not a key objective, as the command element could probably slip away.

The South Vietnamese led off the incursion at 0700 on 29 April 1970 with General Tri's thrust into the Parrot's Beak. Morale was high as the soldiers advanced behind a curtain of bombs and artillery shells against the 10,000–20,000 Communists thought to be in the area. They encountered resistance soon after crossing the border but advanced steadily. President Nixon heralded the move the following day in a television address in which he explained, "This is not an invasion of Cambodia," but a temporary thrust that would end as soon as the allies had destroyed the enemy's bases. "I have concluded that the time has come for action," he added, to "guarantee the continued success of the withdrawal [of U.S. troops] and Vietnamization programs."

By 1 May South Vietnamese troops had reached Svay Rieng town. The North Vietnamese continued to fight delaying actions to allow personnel to escape. In fact, despite allied

precautions, enemy commanders had received warning of the attack and had evacuated most of their troops two days before the incursion began.

After they had occupied the Parrot's Beak, the South Vietnamese devoted themselves to destroying Communist facilities, most notably a major complex at the village of Ba Thu. Operation TOAN THANG 42 continued until 22 July, although by that time, many South Vietnamese units had already left Cambodian territory. In the first three days of the operation, the South Vietnamese backed by U.S. airpower had killed over 1,000 enemy soldiers. The South Vietnamese had captured 204 Communists and approximately 100 tons of ammunition, as well as 90 percent of the rice hidden in the area. Casualties among North Vietnamese officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were especially high, and replacing these would be difficult. South Vietnamese losses in the Parrot's Beak numbered 66 killed and 330 wounded.

As the South Vietnamese consolidated their hold over the Parrot's Beak, the main event started to unfold. Early on the morning of 1 May, the day General Tri's troops reached Svay Rieng town, eighteen B-52 bombers dropped high explosive payloads on enemy positions in the Fishhook. This was followed by a field artillery bombardment by ninety-four howitzers, mostly 155-mm. and 105-mm. types. After the artillery barrage, fighter bombers struck suspected enemy positions along the border for about an hour. Later that morning, U.S. aircraft dropped two 15,000-pound "Daisy Cutter" bombs that blew open two helicopter landing zones designated EAST and CENTER in the Cambodian forest. U.S. Army helicopters then ferried South Vietnamese paratroopers into the new clearings as well as a third site, designated Landing Zone WEST, which was already devoid of heavy vegetation. Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese 1st Armored Cavalry Squadron drove without opposition into Cambodia from Quan Loi, South Vietnam, toward the town of Snuol. It reached Landing Zone EAST and, together with the paratroopers and several batteries of artillery, established blocking positions north of the Fishhook to prevent the enemy from retreating in that direction. Operation ROCKCRUSHER-TOAN THANG 43 had begun.

Soon after the morning bombardment had ended, General Shoemaker sent the 2d and 3d Squadrons of Col. Donn A. Starry's 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment from Firebases SOUTH I and

SOUTH II into the southeastern base of the Fishhook. Soldiers marveled at the devastation caused by the bombardment as they pushed through terrain of tall grassland interspersed with areas of jungle. They expected a tough fight. “We were all a little apprehensive at first,” Colonel Starry recalled, as “we knew that there were two North Vietnamese Army regiments right astride the border area we had to go through.” However the lead tanks encountered only light resistance. Part of the regiment came under sporadic attack during the afternoon, but progress was steady. Paralleling the squadrons’ advance, off to the west, the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, moved north from Katum, South Vietnam.

Farther north, U.S. Army UH-1D “Huey” helicopters airlifted the South Vietnamese 5th Airborne Battalion, 3d Airborne Brigade, to Landing Zone CENTER, established earlier that morning. Soon afterward, the Vietnamese 9th Airborne Battalion arrived at Landing Zone WEST. Resistance was light. Helicopter gunships from the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, attacked bands of North Vietnamese as they fled. On the incursion’s first day, the 1st Cavalry Division commander, Maj. Gen. Elvy B. Roberts, reported: “By nightfall everyone was solidly in control of their zones. From all indications our operations achieved complete surprise and I believe the enemy was caught flat footed.” Later, a prisoner related that while the Communists had received warning about the South

The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment advances through a rubber plantation 10 kilometers northwest of Memot, Cambodia.



Vietnamese incursion, the participation of American forces had come as a surprise.

Over the next few days, the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, pressed into Cambodia from the south, while South Vietnamese soldiers moved out from their landing zones in the north to cut off the enemy's retreat. The 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, established Firebase X-RAY west of the Fishhook in the enemy's Base Area 353. As before, the North Vietnamese tried to avoid combat.

Late on 3 May, troopers of the 9th Cavalry located a huge logistics center south of Snuol along Highway 7 just north of Base Area 352. Nicknamed "the City" by the soldiers, the 7th PAVN Division base covered three square kilometers and included more than 500 buildings. It even had a swimming pool and a livestock farm. U.S. troops captured over 171 tons of munitions and 38 tons of rice, much of which they removed to South Vietnam. Engineers destroyed what could not be transported.

On 5 May the 11th Armored Cavalry rumbled northward toward Snuol, from which most of the civilians had already fled. The enemy had destroyed three bridges south of the town. The armor was able to ford the first two streams while engineers built a pontoon bridge over the northernmost waterway. Upon reaching Snuol, the lead units came under fire from fortifications manned

A 1st Cavalry Division trooper examines enemy ammunition found in "the City."



by soldiers of the *141st PAVN Regiment*. A grenade fragment wounded Colonel Starry and he had to be evacuated. After airstrikes pounded the entrenchments late in the day, the troopers spent a tense night before entering Snuol the following morning. The heavily damaged town was empty, with the North Vietnamese having left behind 150 dead. The Americans then proceeded to search the surrounding area for caches.

On 6 May, the same day that U.S. soldiers entered Snuol, MACV launched four new thrusts into Cambodia. The first was Operation TOAN THANG 44 (also known as BOLD LANCER), in which the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, moved into a part of Cambodia called the “Dog’s Head,” southwest of the Fishhook. Over the next eight days the brigade searched Base Area 354, killing 300 North Vietnamese soldiers, eliminating many bunkers, and capturing 270 tons of rice and many tons of munitions and supplies. On 14 May the brigade withdrew to South Vietnam, with the brigade commander remarking that he could have destroyed far more facilities and supplies had he been given more time.

More time was not available, for the 1st Brigade was slated to participate in a follow-on action, BOLD LANCER II. In this operation the brigade was to move into the Fishhook and Base Area 353. Elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry and the South Vietnamese 8th Airborne Battalion would join the search, as would the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, which was operating in Base Area 707 just to the west in the Dog’s Head. The 1st Brigade crossed back into Cambodia on 16 May, sweeping aside scattered resistance. On the following day it uncovered an enormous communications facility that had 135 bunkers, dozens of smaller structures, and tons of radio equipment. By the time BOLD LANCER II ended in June, the Americans had captured 850 weapons, 45 tons of ammunition, 1,500 tons of rice, 56 vehicles, and over 6 tons of medical supplies.

The second major incursion that MACV launched into Cambodia on 6 May alongside BOLD LANCER was Operation TOAN THANG 45, in which the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, moved from Bu Dop, South Vietnam, to strike Base Area 351 north of the Fishhook. After several days of stiff fighting the cavalymen discovered what would prove to be the largest enemy cache captured during the war. Nicknamed “Rock Island East” after the U.S. Army arsenal in Illinois, the facility contained 326 tons of ammunition along with hundreds of small arms, rockets, grenades,

mortar rounds, and crew-served weapons. So much was captured here that U.S. Army engineers constructed a road from the base to Highway 14 in South Vietnam to facilitate removal of the supplies. The Army still could not evacuate all of the stores. After working for four days to collect the remaining materiel, engineers destroyed those supplies in a single massive detonation using a large quantity of C4 explosives. People could see the resulting mushroom cloud fifty kilometers away.

The third incursion launched on 6 May was Operation TOAN THANG 46. U.S. Army helicopters landed the South Vietnamese 9th Infantry in Base Area 350. Over the next six weeks the infantrymen scoured the area, capturing nearly 100 tons of enemy supplies before they returned to Vietnam.

The fourth and final element of the wave of operations initiated on 6 May was Operation BINH TAY. In a series of actions, troops from the 4th Infantry Division and the South Vietnamese 22d Infantry Division aimed to destroy supplies in northeastern Cambodia. The thrust came from South Vietnam's Pleiku Province. Following a wave of B-52 bombers, allied soldiers descended by helicopter onto several landing zones in Cambodia. The operation lasted ten days, and except for some resistance during the initial landings, they had little contact with the enemy. The allies captured 500 tons of rice and a large medical complex. Subsequent operations launched on 16 May involved South Vietnamese forces attacking from Pleiku and Darlac Provinces. These units remained in Cambodia while the Americans began withdrawing.

On 9 May, three days after the allies launched their four-pronged thrust farther to the north, South Vietnamese troops crossed into Cambodia from Vietnam's southernmost region, the Mekong Delta. In Operation CU LONG, the South Vietnamese force—the 9th and 21st Infantry Divisions, the 1st Marine Brigade, the 4th Armored Brigade, and rangers—moved with their U.S. advisers to clear out Communist sanctuaries along the southern Mekong River. U.S. Army and Air Force aircraft flew overhead, while a combined fleet of U.S. and Vietnamese ships advanced up the Mekong. They traveled as far as Phnom Penh to rescue Vietnamese civilians who wanted to leave the country, and in subsidiary operations begun on 16 May, they relieved Communist pressure on the Cambodian town of Takeo.

By the end of June 1970, the deadline imposed by President Nixon, all U.S. soldiers had left Cambodia and returned to Vietnam.

South Vietnamese troops continued to operate in Cambodia for several more weeks, driving even deeper into Cambodia before they, too, came home. Over 80,000 allied personnel had eventually participated in the incursion, and the mission had been a success. Abrams reported that he had destroyed 40 percent of the enemy's logistical base in Cambodia. The allies had killed 11,369 Communist soldiers and taken over 2,000 prisoners. They had captured almost 25,000 weapons, 16 million rounds of ammunition, 45,000 rockets, 435 vehicles, 62,000 grenades, and huge quantities of rice. They had also destroyed 11,700 bunkers. It would take an extensive effort to rebuild, a task further hampered by the closing of Sihanoukville and the active opposition of the admittedly weak Cambodian military. For the present, the allies had severely damaged the enemy's ability to threaten Phnom Penh and Saigon.

The Cambodian campaign also indicated that Vietnamization was progressing. Performance had generally been good and morale high. One reporter noted that South Vietnamese operations during the campaign were "impressive in that many have been conducted beyond the range of American logistical and firepower support." Yet other observers were not as sanguine, citing cases of poor leadership, lack of initiative, and unwillingness to close with the enemy. Some formations had also seemed too dependent on their advisers. Considering that the enemy had usually avoided contact, many remained skeptical about the capabilities of the South Vietnamese military.

THE WAR IN SOUTH VIETNAM, 1970

If events in Cambodia stole the headlines during the first half of 1970, a war remained to be fought inside South Vietnam itself. Allied strategy for 1970 did not differ significantly from that of previous years. Vietnamese civil officials and the paramilitary territorial forces—the Regional and Popular Forces, backed by the National Police and a partially armed militia known as the People's Self-Defense Force—bore the primary burden for pacifying the countryside. Assisting them were U.S. military and civilian advisers from MACV's office of Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). U.S. and South Vietnamese Army units participated in pacification as well, defending urban areas, maintaining patrols, hunting guerrillas and members of the Viet Cong infrastructure, and performing humanitarian actions,

but their main role lay elsewhere. First, allied regular forces cleared areas slated for pacification by conducting offensive operations. Second, they maintained security cordons around locations that were either undergoing pacification or were already pacified to prevent the enemy's main combat forces from returning to those areas. Finally, they executed offensive operations to destroy the enemy's troops, depots, and lines of communications to preempt him from attacking the populated areas. All three missions were essential for pacification's success, but in 1970, as before, the U.S. Army focused on offensive tactics. During the year, 70 to 90 percent of the time the Army spent in operations involving a battalion or more was devoted to offensive missions, while only 6 to 10 percent of the time spent on large-unit operations directly involved pacification. Reserve, training, and security missions accounted for the remaining time.

The primary differences between 1970 and earlier years were of degree rather than of design. First, the withdrawal of U.S. troops meant the Army would be running fewer operations. Second, domestic sensitivity meant that U.S. forces would avoid actions that might incur undue casualties. This meant the Army would continue to rely heavily on artillery and airpower to kill the enemy. Third, the withdrawal would mean that the South Vietnamese Army would have to bear more of the conventional combat burden once borne by the United States. Fortunately for the allies, the enemy's decision to lie low, coupled with the losses incurred in Cambodia, facilitated all of these measures. Except in unusual circumstances, the enemy confined his activities to what MACV termed "low-level combat," short-duration bombardments, sniping, small ground probes, sapper attacks, ambushes, sabotage, mine warfare, and acts of terror. Still, even at this level the cumulative effect could be quite lethal, particularly for the South Vietnamese who bore the brunt of these actions.

Nowhere were the differences from previous years more evident than in the urgency accorded the twin pillars of U.S. policy—Vietnamization and withdrawal. Unfortunately, factors that had worked against South Vietnamese military effectiveness in the past—war weariness; apathy; nepotism; corruption; incompetence; educational, technical, and economic barriers; bureaucratic inefficiency; dependency on the United States; and inexperience in some of the more sophisticated functions of operating a modern military organization—continued to complicate matters. Many

U.S. civil and military officials doubted South Vietnam would ever be able to survive without some form of a continued American presence. In January, Nixon responded to these concerns by stating that the South Vietnamese “must take responsibility if they are ever to gain confidence.” He had a point, but the following month the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that South Vietnam would need a residual force of over 40,000 U.S. servicemen even after American combat units had withdrawn.

During 1970 the Vietnamese did make progress. Efforts at reform continued, the armed forces grew in size and capability, and the regular army assumed a greater share of the conventional war burden. This bolstered Nixon and Laird’s sense that Vietnamization was on track, but General Abrams remained deeply uneasy. In November he reiterated that the United States would have to maintain a residual force in South Vietnam of over 40,000 men after the ground combat troops were gone. Advisers, signalmen, logisticians, intelligence specialists, and other support personnel made up the compliment. Not counted were personnel outside the country, such as sailors on ships offshore or B-52 pilots based in other countries who, in Abrams’ calculation, would have to fly a minimum of 1,400 sorties a month to protect South Vietnam. MACV leaders thought the United States could withdraw much of the residual force fairly quickly, but that about 24,000 men would be required indefinitely. The military’s estimate represented a sober appraisal of the capabilities of North and South Vietnam. Whether the Nixon administration would tolerate such a program remained to be seen.

Meanwhile, the push to reduce U.S. forces continued unabated. No sooner had the Increment III redeployment ended in April 1970, removing 50,000 military personnel, than the president announced that the United States would withdraw 150,000 more men by the spring of 1971. Of these, 90,000 would leave Vietnam by the end of 1970. Withdrawals of this magnitude, coupled with desires to minimize casualties, could not but impact the conduct of the war.

In 1970 as in the past, the U.S. and South Vietnamese militaries operated on parallel tracks, coordinating their operations with neither side directing the other. At the top, General Abrams controlled all U.S. forces inside Vietnam while the chief of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, General Cao Van Vien, headed the Vietnamese armed forces. The Vietnamese divided



General Abrams (left) and General Vien

the country into four Corps Tactical Zones (renamed Military Regions in July 1970), designating them from north to south as I to IV. A South Vietnamese Army lieutenant general commanded the Vietnamese personnel in each corps/military region. Stationed within these zones were parallel American headquarters, called “Forces” or “Commands” rather than “Corps,” to avoid confusion with their Vietnamese counterparts. These entities controlled all U.S. ground personnel in their respective areas. A U.S. lieutenant general commanded the “Forces,” while an officer of lesser rank oversaw the “Commands.” The III Marine Amphibious Force served in the north with I Corps; the Army’s I Field Force operated in central Vietnam with II Corps; and the II Field Force worked in III Corps. Nestled within III Corps was Saigon, which had its own autonomous South Vietnamese command and hence an American counterpart, the Capital Military Assistance Command. Last but not least was the southernmost area, IV Corps, which controlled the heavily populated and agriculturally rich Mekong Delta. By 1970 MACV no longer had ground combat units in IV Corps. U.S. advisers, Special Forces, aviation, and support personnel who worked in this region fell under the control of MACV’s Delta Military Assistance Command. In addition to controlling U.S. troop units, MACV and its major subordinate headquarters

oversaw the work of about 13,000 field advisers, whose assigned billets ranged from headquarters through battalion level. They were also tasked with assisting South Vietnamese officials at the provincial and district levels. About 10,000 of these advisers were members of the U.S. Army; of these, 6,000 served with the South Vietnamese regular Army and 4,000 served with local governments and territorial forces under the CORDS program (*Map 3*).

Since 1965 the United States had accepted the job of defending northern I Corps. This was due to the enemy's ability to launch an invasion from Laos or across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separated the two Vietnams. By shouldering this burden, more South Vietnamese troops were free to support pacification. By 1970 the III Marine Amphibious Force controlled 152,000 Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps personnel in I Corps. The Army's contribution fell under the command of XXIV Corps. In addition to providing artillery and aviation assets, the XXIV Corps reinforced U.S. Marine and South Vietnamese positions along the DMZ with the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division. A mechanized organization, the brigade used its mobility to secure Highway 9 which ran parallel to the DMZ from the coast inland to Laos. Farther south, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) served in Thua Thien Province, while the 23d Infantry Division, nicknamed "Americal," operated in I Corps' southernmost provinces.

Like the other major Army headquarters in Vietnam, the XXIV Corps supported pacification both directly and indirectly. Combat units directly supported the effort by stationing units in populated areas to conduct small-unit patrols and raids against guerrillas and infrastructure personnel while also performing civic actions. The Americans provided indirect support by conducting offensive actions outside the areas undergoing pacification. In I Corps, where most of the population lived along the coast rather than in the rugged interior, this meant that most screening actions occurred in the foothills that overlooked the coastal plain. Occasionally, however, U.S. troops would thrust farther west into the heavily forested, mountainous interior where the enemy's main forces lurked. These spoiling attacks kept the enemy off balance by destroying his bases, supplies, and lines of communications, making it difficult for him to mount major offensives into the populated areas.

In March 1970, the end of the northeastern monsoon season that dampened northern Vietnam from November to March, gave



Map 3

the 101st Airborne Division the opportunity to move its screening operations west into the interior of Thua Thien Province and toward the Laotian frontier. Leaving one brigade to support pacification in eastern Thua Thien, the division's other two brigades moved into the mountains to man a network of artillery firebases. Included among them was Firebase RIPCORD located just northeast of the northern mouth of the A Shau Valley.

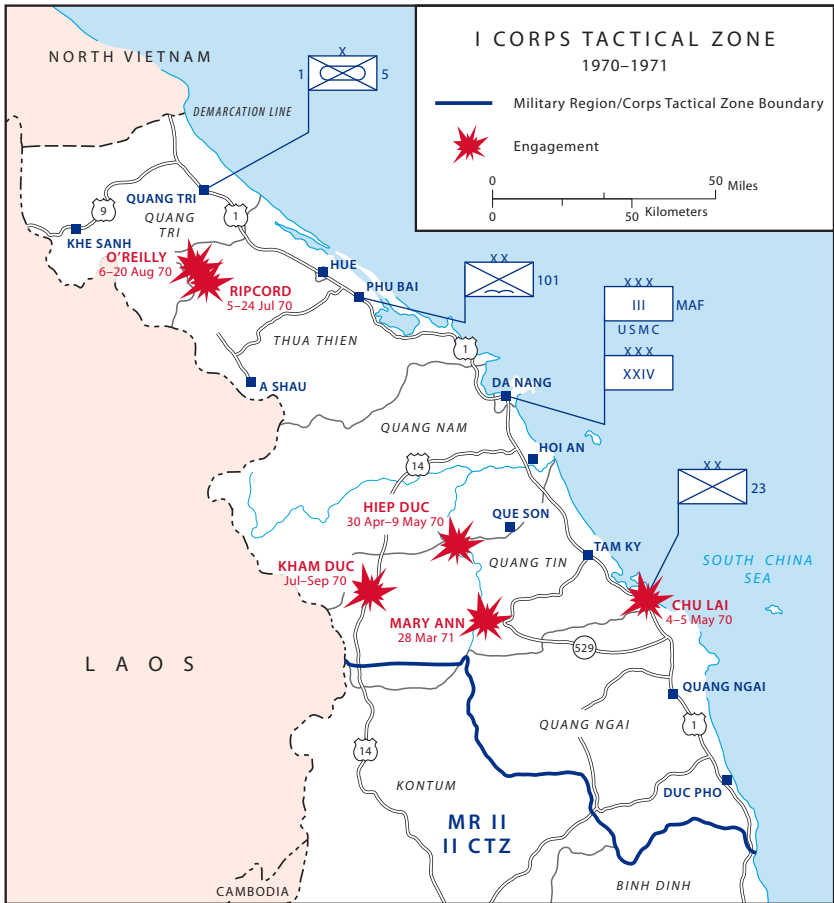
The A Shau Valley was a key conduit for enemy supplies from Laos into Vietnam. By 1970 the warring parties had already fought over the valley several times, but its remoteness and relative inaccessibility to aircraft during the rainy season meant that the allies could not maintain a permanent presence there in sufficient strength to prevent the enemy from using it. In 1970 the *324B PAVN Division* resided in the valley. By establishing a string of outposts and artillery firebases between the A Shau and the coast, the allies both threatened the enemy's logistical lines and kept the North Vietnamese bottled up far from the populated lowlands.

After failing to prevent the paratroopers from seizing the mountain on which RIPCORD was situated, the enemy launched a series of small attacks against the outpost system in March and April, but it was RIPCORD that held his attention. The North Vietnamese hoped that, by breaking it, they would weaken the remaining network so as to open a way to the coast. After marshaling their forces for over two months, they launched several assaults on the base during the early morning hours of 5 July. The paratroopers repulsed them all, but the activity led the commander of the 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, Col. Benjamin L. Harrison, to decide that he must take control of some of the neighboring hills to better protect the base.

On 7 July, a company of the 2d Battalion, 506th Infantry, left RIPCORD and marched a kilometer to the west to Hill 1000. For two days the paratroopers tried unsuccessfully to climb the hill, but even with artillery and air support they could not dislodge the enemy. The Americans tried again on 14 July, this time employing over two companies of paratroopers, but the results were the same. The North Vietnamese, Harrison would later write, were "too strong, too determined, too well-fortified to be dislodged without the cost in American lives becoming too great." By this point in the war, casualties weighed heavily on American politicians and the public, and General Abrams had already inquired why Harrison was taking so many losses. The acting commander of the

101st Airborne Division, Brig. Gen. Sidney B. Berry, questioned Harrison's tactics, believing he had not used air and artillery fire-power to its fullest effect, but backed off his initial inclination to relieve him (*Map 4*).

The North Vietnamese operated without political constraints on casualties, and they continued to press the siege. After forcing the Americans to abandon an outwork on Hill 805, on 18 July they began bombarding RIPCORD with weapons as large as 120-mm. mortars. The following day the North Vietnamese shot down a CH-47 helicopter that was ferrying ammunition into the base.



Map 4

aircraft crashed into the ammunition dump, triggering a conflagration that destroyed six of the post's 105-mm. howitzers. Continued bombardments over the succeeding days made clear that the North Vietnamese were preparing for another major assault, with three regiments massing in the surrounding hills. Earlier in the war U.S. commanders might have made a stand, but by the summer of 1970 the political ramifications of, at worst, a defeat, or at best, a victory with significant U.S. casualties, were unpalatable. In what he called "the most difficult professional decision of my life," on 22 July Berry decided "to get out of RIPCORD as soon as possible."

The next day helicopters evacuated the garrison under the cover of U.S. Air Force fighters and Army helicopter gunships. Then for the next eight days the Americans pummeled the area, firing over 12,300 rounds of artillery and dropping more than 10,000 pounds of bombs. The effects were uncertain, but the Americans estimated that they had killed 400 North Vietnamese around RIPCORD. U.S. casualties totaled 112 killed and 698 wounded. The Americans had failed to close the enemy logistical corridor in the A Shau Valley, but they had tied down a significant number of Communist troops for several months far from the populated coast.

After having forced the 101st Airborne Division out of RIPCORD, the North Vietnamese moved on to another element in

Firebase RIPCORD



the outpost system, Firebase O'REILLY. Located north of RIPCORD, O'REILLY was particularly vulnerable because it had relied on RIPCORD for artillery support. The 101st Airborne Division assisted O'REILLY's garrison, a battalion of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry, with patrols and fire support from nearby firebases, but on 6 August North Vietnamese artillery opened fire on the base from surrounding hills. The South Vietnamese deployed the rest of the 1st Infantry to O'REILLY, and U.S. aircraft and artillery pounded the hills. The Communists suspended the siege on 20 August. For the allies, it was time to withdraw as well. The approach of the rainy season in northern South Vietnam and O'REILLY's exposed position made it prudent to withdraw from it and many other firebases located in the Anamite Mountains. The allies moved to the eastern piedmont where they could better shield the population during the wet and overcast months ahead. They believed that during the siege they had killed 500 North Vietnamese at the cost of 61 South Vietnamese soldiers.

As for the 101st Airborne Division, it assumed a new configuration. The 1st Brigade remained in the western hills as a blocking force while the 3d and 2d Brigades assisted in the pacification of Thua Thien's coastal plain. Working closely with South Vietnamese forces, the two brigades conducted frequent patrols and occasional thrusts into the interior. Casualties on both sides were low as the enemy avoided contact through the end of the year.

South of Thua Thien the U.S. Marine Corps operated in Quang Nam Province while the Army's 23d Infantry Division supported pacification in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai Provinces. The division's 196th Infantry Brigade operated in Quang Tin, the 11th Infantry Brigade in Quang Ngai, and the 198th Infantry Brigade served in both provinces. Continuous patrols to shield the population were the norm, punctuated by raids, sweeps, and reaction operations to keep the enemy off balance and to relieve posts and communities under threat. Guerrillas and booby traps were the main threat, gradually bleeding units and sapping morale, but rarely causing a large number of casualties at any one time. An exception occurred in Quang Ngai on 15 April, when a soldier from the 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry, accidentally triggered a booby-trapped 105-mm. shell. The blast detonated two 81-mm. rounds, which in turn caused several claymore mines in soldier backpacks to ignite. The cascade of explosions killed fourteen soldiers and wounded eleven.

Fifteen days later, the enemy broke from his desultory tactics when elements of the *2d PAVN Division* captured Hiep Duc village, Quang Tin Province, thirty-six kilometers west of the provincial capital at Tam Ky. Five companies from the Americal Division and a South Vietnamese battalion were initially unable to retake the community until reinforced by additional South Vietnamese troops and U.S. Army helicopter gunships and artillery. By 9 May the allies had gained control of the village during daylight, but scattered fighting would continue at night for the rest of the month. North Vietnamese casualties up to 9 May included 526 dead and an unknown number of wounded. The allies lost 46 dead—19 of them Americans—and 210 wounded, including 117 U.S. troops. Not included in the total were casualties suffered on 4 and 5 May, when the enemy tried to influence the battle by bombarding Chu Lai Air Base near Tam Ky with 122-mm. rockets. The attack killed twelve Americans and wounded thirty-three. Several aircraft and the runway were damaged as well.

The 196th Brigade struck back in May and June, killing nearly 600 North Vietnamese. Then in July a combined U.S.-South Vietnamese force thrust deep into the interior with an air assault on the abandoned post of Kham Duc, sixty-five kilometers west of Tam Ky. Several months of operations against enemy supply lines around Kham Duc and to the east yielded little before the foray ended in late September. As had been the case farther north, the enemy chose to lay low in the Americal sector for the remainder of the year, rebuilding his strength for the future.

South Vietnam's II Corps resembled I Corps in that most of the population lived along the coast rather than in the rugged interior. Here, however, the similarity ended. Being farther away from North Vietnam, it did not receive the large numbers of U.S. troops that I Corps did, yet its geographical extent was far greater. Lacking the manpower to protect everything, the allies had long been forced to spread themselves thinly across the region. U.S. Army Special Forces teams that worked with Montagnard tribesmen in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program assisted the 4th Infantry Division and a South Vietnamese division in screening the long, forested frontier with Laos and Cambodia, doing their best to prevent enemy main forces from descending onto the coastal plain. Along the coast, a mixture of U.S., South Korean, and South Vietnamese troops guarded the population so that the government could restore its authority. Due to the paucity

of forces in the area, the American drawdown would hit II Corps particularly hard.

By 1970 the major U.S. command in II Corps, the I Field Force, had already begun to reposition troops for their eventual departure. Only Special Forces detachments and the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, remained in the central highlands, harassing enemy bases and training paramilitary soldiers. Contacts were few as the enemy mostly hid. In April the Army recalled the brigade from Vietnam. As it was departing, the North Vietnamese struck a violent blow, first at Dak Seang Special Forces camp in northwestern Kontum Province, and later at the Special Forces camp at Dak Pek, fifteen kilometers farther north. These remote camps interfered with the enemy's infiltration into the South, and he wanted them gone. The South Vietnamese took the lead in relieving the besieged camps, assisted by their U.S. advisers and American aviation and artillery. After a vicious monthlong battle, the allies prevailed. The South Vietnamese suffered 338 dead and 1,275 wounded; the Americans reported 13 wounded; and the North Vietnamese had 2,922 killed. Nevertheless, the Americans were disturbed by the lack of initiative demonstrated by the South Vietnamese in the campaign (*Map 5*).

The 4th Infantry Division was not the only U.S. Army force to leave the highlands. By year's end the Army terminated the CIDG program, closing thirty-eight camps nationwide and converting the irregulars into South Vietnamese Army Ranger Border Defense Battalions. The waning role of Special Forces was symbolized by the withdrawal of the 5th Special Forces Group headquarters in April 1971.

While the allies operated on a shoestring in the highlands, they devoted their major efforts toward pacifying the lowlands. During 1970 the U.S. Army massed three brigades—the remaining two brigades of the 4th Infantry Division and the 173d Airborne Brigade—to help the South Vietnamese gain control over Binh Dinh, a heavily populated province with deep ties to the Viet Cong. The struggle there had never been easy, and it remained a thorn in allied control of the central coast. One of the main problems was the proximity of the *3d PAVN Division*, which frequently operated in the mountains that loomed over the coast. When the division withdrew deeper into the interior, pacification advanced. When it chose to return to the populated areas, or merely hung around their edges in a menacing fashion,



Map 5

pacification receded. In March 1970 the 4th Infantry Division's 1st and 2d Brigades searched for the division fifty kilometers north of An Khe, but as so often was the case, they came up empty handed. Until the allies could deal with the main force threat, Binh Dinh would never be secure. For the remainder of the year the 4th Infantry Division did what it could to help pacify Binh Dinh, but time was against it. In the fall it began preparations to leave Vietnam, and by year's end it was gone.

Left behind was the 173d Airborne Brigade. Unlike the 4th Infantry Division, which had spent most of the war in the highlands, the brigade had extensive experience in Binh Dinh conducting a long-running pacification support operation called WASHINGTON GREEN. Since April 1969 the brigade had operated in the An Lao Valley at the northern end of the province. There it broke down into small units that hunted guerrillas, uprooted the Viet Cong infrastructure, protected the population, and secured rice harvests. It also worked closely with local forces to improve their effectiveness. It had some significant successes, with one prisoner indicating that

A soldier from the 4th Infantry Division guards prisoners.



“pressure” from combined U.S. and South Vietnamese patrols “made it impossible . . . to obtain food or drink or to link up with any other guerrillas.” Yet periodic reappearances by the *3d PAVN Division* continued to cast a shadow over the region. The departure of the 4th Infantry Division in December brought WASHINGTON GREEN to a close. With no U.S. division to provide an overarching umbrella of protection, the 173d Airborne Brigade was compelled to move to An Khe to keep Highway 19 to the highlands open. U.S. advisers and their Vietnamese counterparts in Binh Dinh reacted with alarm, for despite the brigade’s nineteen months in direct support of pacification, they knew that the government’s hold over the province was tenuous. Whether the South Vietnamese could manage on their own remained to be seen.

Far to the south from Binh Dinh Province, the U.S. Army maintained its greatest concentration of troops outside of I Corps in the III Corps Tactical Zone. The allies needed the large numbers to protect the heavily populated region, particularly the capital city of Saigon and the vital administrative and logistical installations clustered around it. The II Field Force stationed the 1st Cavalry Division along the Cambodian frontier northwest of Saigon to intercept the enemy’s main forces before they came close to populated areas. The other U.S. forces typically operated closer to Saigon, although they could move toward the frontier when required. The 25th Infantry Division stood west of the capital, the 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, to the southwest, and the 1st Infantry Division to the north. The 199th Infantry Brigade and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment stood east of the city, the least threatened sector, but they could deploy to wherever they were needed. Artillery, aviation, and a host of logistics and support units rounded out the U.S. presence in the region. Like all U.S. units in Vietnam, these forces worked closely with the Vietnamese, providing training, pacification, and humanitarian aid (*Map 6*).

Most of the larger battles in III Corps in 1970 occurred prior to the expedition into Cambodia. For the past few years the enemy had mounted attacks around the time of the Tet holidays in January and February, a period of dry weather around Saigon, and consequently every year Abrams intensified operations to minimize the threat. The stepped-up American activity was successful, and Tet passed with only minimal interference.

Frustrated but undeterred, COSVN tried to “create an offensive posture . . . aimed at attracting enemy forces to areas far from Saigon where we could destroy them.” In March, U.S. intelligence identified parts of the Viet Cong *People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) 271st and 272d Regiments* crossing into Tay Ninh Province from Cambodia. This led General Roberts to open firebases closer



to the border to stem the flow. The move began on 17 March when elements of the 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, opened Firebase ILLINGWORTH in western War Zone C, one of the enemy's main base areas inside South Vietnam. This was remote country, with no roads or villages, but the enemy had long used it to infiltrate into northern III Corps.

Twenty bunkers built into a four-foot high earthen berm formed the post's defenses, with claymore mines placed outside the fortifications. The base was typical of its type with one exception—the 2d Battalion's commander, Lt. Col. Michael J. Conrad, had chosen not to surround the post with concertina wire in the belief that wire posed little obstacle to the enemy. Manning the defenses were the reconnaissance platoon and Company C from the 2d Battalion, 8th Cavalry, along with four M113 armored personnel carriers and a Sheridan armored vehicle from Troop A, 1st Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry. Also present were a four-barreled "quad" .50-caliber machine gun, a mortar platoon, two eight-inch howitzers from Battery A, 2d Battalion, 32d Artillery, three 155-mm. howitzers from Battery A, 1st Battalion, 30th Artillery, and six 105-mm. howitzers from Battery B, 1st Battalion, 77th Artillery.

The Viet Cong resented the intrusion, and at 0200 on 1 April 1970, the *1st Battalion, 272d PLAF Regiment*, attacked. The Communists subjected ILLINGWORTH to accurate fire from mortars, 122-mm. rockets, and machine guns while their sappers and infantrymen surged toward the northern end of the base, a sector manned by the reconnaissance platoon. The bombardment was "hellacious," recalled the leader of the reconnaissance platoon, 1st Lt. Gregory J. Peters, and the continuous explosions churned up a lot of dust. The dust allowed the enemy to get close without being seen and fouled weapons quickly. Most of the reconnaissance platoon soldiers were forced to resort to throwing hand grenades when their M16 rifles jammed after firing just a handful of magazines.

Within minutes of launching the assault the first attackers were at the berm. Sp4c. Peter C. Lemon was helping to man a machine gun. After both it and his M16 rifle jammed, Lemon began hurling grenades until they ran out. Suddenly an enemy soldier appeared in the dust cloud, and Lemon clubbed him with his rifle. He then jumped over the berm and attacked two surprised enemy soldiers with his bare hands, killing them both.

An exploding satchel charge peppered Lemon with shrapnel, but he managed to make it back over the berm. Armed with a new weapon, he continued fighting until additional wounds caused him to collapse. The Army later recognized his heroism by awarding him the Medal of Honor.

At the center of the defense were the mortars and artillery. The enemy knew exactly where they were, and within minutes one of the base's three mortar positions was in flames, apparently from a satchel charge thrown by a sapper. The second mortar position fell soon thereafter. One American spotted a shadowy figure slip into the pit and throw something inside; he yelled a warning and the crew leaped for cover as an explosion tore the emplacement to shreds. The third mortar position lasted somewhat longer, but the Viet Cong silenced it as well. The howitzers were also a priority target. One took a direct hit from an enemy round, starting yet another ammunition fire.

The press of the Viet Cong attack compelled the reconnaissance platoon to retreat to a secondary position. With the help of 8-inch guns firing flechette rounds from Firebase HANNAS four kilometers to the south, as well as an orbiting AC-119 Shadow gunship, the platoon stabilized the situation. Just after 0300 Lieutenant Peters ordered a counterattack that recaptured the berm.

A new danger, however, emerged. A sapper threw a charge near the ammunition supply in the howitzer position at the center of the base, and within minutes, fires threatened the entire area. At 0318 the ammunition exploded, tearing through a section of berm and spraying the area with shrapnel. The blast stunned both the infantrymen on the berm and the artillerymen, and for a moment the Americans stopped firing. It was a dangerous interlude. While the guns were silent, men from Company C moved forward and filled the gap along the northern perimeter. With that, the battle ended. ILLINGWORTH would take fire for the next forty-five minutes, but the enemy did not return.

At daybreak helicopters arrived to evacuate the American casualties—twenty-four dead and fifty-four wounded. Patrols located seventy-four dead Viet Cong.

The fight at Firebase ILLINGWORTH ended the enemy's offensive against the 1st Cavalry Division's screen along the border. For the remainder of the spring, the division harassed Communist lines of communications inside South Vietnam. It also prepared for the foray into Cambodia.

For the 25th Infantry Division, 1970 began with an assault on Nui Ba Den mountain in Tay Ninh Province, the suspected headquarters of part of the Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government. The mountain was also a staging area for attacks on the provincial capital, Tay Ninh City. In Operation CLIFF DWELLER IV, U.S. troops would sweep the mountain's rugged northeastern slope. The 1st Brigade's 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, would provide most of the men, with Company A, 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, and part of the 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry, waiting at the bottom of the slope as a blocking force.

Before dawn on 4 January, tanks and infantry took up positions at the foot of Nui Ba Den. At 0800, helicopters began delivering the 3d Battalion's Companies B and C to the summit. Soon afterward, other helicopters deposited the battalion's reconnaissance platoon on the mountain's northern shoulder, from which they could observe the progress of Companies B and C and block any attempts by the enemy to escape in that direction. Descending the precipitous slope was slow work, and both companies had to stop for the night less than halfway down.

Rain during the night soaked the rocks, further impeding the infantry's movement the next morning, but the troops reached the foot of the mountain unscathed. Continued searches the following day uncovered some caches, but contact with the enemy remained light. On the morning of 8 January, however, the enemy opened fire from concealed positions, leading to steady contact until the operation terminated on 11 January. The Americans had killed 159 North Vietnamese at a loss of 3 killed and 55 wounded. Thereafter the 25th Infantry Division continued to unearth enemy caches and harass his lines of communications until the division headed for Cambodia in May.

As for the third U.S. division around Saigon, the 1st Infantry Division, its participation in the war was almost over. The day after Operation CLIFF DWELLER IV ended, MACV announced that the 1st Infantry Division would be heading home. Combat operations ended on 19 March and by mid-April 1970 the division was gone.

In addition to guarding their original sectors, the remaining Americans joined the South Vietnamese to patrol the 3,600 square kilometers that had once been the 1st Infantry Division's area of responsibility. Having to do more with less was a fact of life under the drawdown, but the allies rose to the challenge.

Few major battles occurred as the enemy continued to avoid allied sweeps. The Americans spent the summer as they had the spring, hunting for the enemy, disrupting his logistical network, screening the approaches to Saigon, assisting with pacification, and training the South Vietnamese for the day when they would have to stand alone. That day was fast approaching. In September the 199th Infantry Brigade left for home. The 3d Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, departed the following month, and the 25th Infantry Division withdrew in December. Only the division's 2d Brigade remained behind as a separate unit. It, along with the 1st Cavalry Division and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, would continue to defend Military Region III into the new year.

CHALLENGES TO COHESION AND MORALE

Every departure placed additional psychological pressure on the troops who remained. No one wanted to be the last man to die in a war that an increasing number of Americans believed either could not be won or was not worth winning. America's citizen soldiers were very much affected by the political and social currents at home, and the 1960s and 1970s were unusually turbulent years. In addition to the antiwar and civil rights movements, the era was one in which many Americans, especially the nation's youth, were challenging social norms and questioning established authority in all facets of life. This created a difficult milieu for a military involved in an unpopular war, and by the late 1960s military leaders noticed a disturbing trend of morale and disciplinary issues throughout the force, including in Vietnam. Problems inherent in the Army itself—careerism, ticket punching, and corruption among some officers and NCOs—aggravated the situation. So did substandard leadership at the lower levels, partly due to training deficiencies and partly because the Army had difficulty filling so many key slots due to the turnover caused by one-year tours of duty in Vietnam. During the year Army Chief of Staff General William C. Westmoreland reformed the personnel management system for officers. He also established an office to transition the Army from a draft-based force to an all-volunteer institution. These developments would eventually have a significant impact on the Army, but not in Vietnam in 1970. The question remained: was time running out?

A group of forty junior officers serving in Vietnam answered this question in the fall of 1970. In a letter to President Nixon they

wrote that the rank and file were increasingly questioning their situation, and that “We, too, find continuation of the war difficult to justify and we are being asked to lead others who are unconvinced into a war in which few of us believe. . . . It seems very possible that if the war is allowed to continue much longer, young Americans in the military will simply refuse *en masse* to cooperate . . . this day is coming quickly. You must have us out of Vietnam by then.” Another junior officer, a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, vented similar frustrations. In a letter to Secretary of the Army Robert F. Froehlke, he complained that “Troops are very reluctant to seek out the enemy when they know that combat troops will be withdrawn in the near future.” He went on to say,

It is the total lack of satisfaction that I now have. The feeling that we don't know what we're doing—that our role is now purposeless. I am tired of troops that refuse orders to go to the field; fed up with the Army's new judicial system that stacks the deck against the commander and adversely affects good order and discipline. I am tired of arrogant blacks who feel they can violate every regulation with impunity and do. Most of all, I am fed up with senior commanders who never question our reason for being, our mission, or the changing nature of [the] environment both socially and tactically. . . . Well, I have had it.

Senior officers worried too. The Deputy Commander of the U.S. Army, Vietnam, Lt. Gen. William J. McCaffrey, acknowledged that only a thin margin of leadership held many units together, while the commander of the I Field Force, Lt. Gen. Arthur S. Collins, marveled that the American soldier performed in combat as well as he did given the circumstances. But he had to admit that “it appears to me that we have a serious disciplinary problem which has resulted in operational slippage.”

Mutinies were unusual but not unknown. In the spring of 1970 CBS News correspondent John Laurence filmed a situation in which a squad refused to advance along a route the men thought was dangerous. After some negotiation, the squad advanced along an alternative route. More common were individual soldiers refusing to obey orders. In 1970, for example, a total of thirty-five soldiers in the 1st Cavalry Division refused to obey orders. It is probable that some leaders avoided actions that they knew would be controversial or risky. At its most extreme, soldiers attempted to

influence the behavior of their leaders through violence. In an act called “fragging,” soldiers would detonate a fragmentation grenade in the proximity of an officer or NCO to intimidate, maim, or kill the individual. Desertion, by contrast, was a less threatening way to protest. It was a major problem for the Army worldwide in 1970 and 1971, though not so much in Vietnam itself where deserters had few appealing places to go. About 100 servicemen deserted every month in Vietnam in 1970, with the number at-large by year’s end totaling 2,500.

Undesirable behavior in interactions with civilians—fights, criminal activities, hazardous driving, and the like—had always been a nagging problem. Throughout the year commanders vigorously discouraged and punished troop misconduct, but problems continued. Murders were rare, and the MACV Inspector General reported finding no evidence that U.S. or South Vietnamese troops had committed war crimes during 1970. Welcome as such news was, it was overshadowed by lingering controversy over the massacre of several hundred civilians by U.S. forces in the village of

Military police search Americans in a Saigon bar looking for illegal drugs.



My Lai, Quang Ngai Province, in March 1968. News of the atrocity had not become public until late 1969, and the episode roiled the American public in 1970 and for years thereafter. Westmoreland reinforced training on the Geneva Convention and commissioned Lt. Gen. William R. Peers to conduct a thorough investigation of My Lai and the cover up that had followed. After Peers submitted his report in March 1970, the Army took steps to punish those implicated by the study. Several disciplinary measures occurred, but only one person was successfully prosecuted on charges of war crimes. In March 1971 a military court found 2d Lt. William Calley guilty of twenty-two counts of murder.

While the Army grappled with the fallout from My Lai, Abrams and Westmoreland wrestled with two other serious disciplinary problems—drug abuse and race relations. In 1965 MACV had arrested forty-seven servicemen on drug charges. In 1970, there were over 11,000 arrests. Marijuana was the most common illegal substance. Studies in 1969 estimated that about 25 percent of servicemen used marijuana, but by the end of 1970 the Defense Department conceded that marijuana use was perhaps as high as 50 percent. No one seemed to know for sure, but in August 1970 Abrams declared that drug abuse was “a big and serious problem . . . in fact the biggest among all those that we have, including black marketeering and currency manipulation.” The activity was so rampant that the Army tended not to prosecute marijuana cases unless other infractions were involved. Less widespread, but far more troubling, was the use of heroin. For some, marijuana use became a gateway for trying this more dangerous narcotic. By year’s end MACV had supplemented its initial prosecutorial response with a wider program of education and treatment.

Changes in race relations in the United States naturally impacted the troops in Vietnam. Despite the fact that the Defense Department had embraced desegregation in the 1950s, some white soldiers still held prejudicial attitudes toward blacks, while black soldiers were becoming increasingly vocal about discriminatory practices. MACV felt the media exaggerated the problem. In 1970 MACV fielded only ten requests for Inspector General investigations into racial discrimination in Vietnam, and none of the allegations were substantiated. Still, in October 1970 the Army’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Gen. Walter T. Kerwin, noted, “In the past year racial discord has surfaced as one of the most serious problems facing Army leadership.” Back home Westmoreland

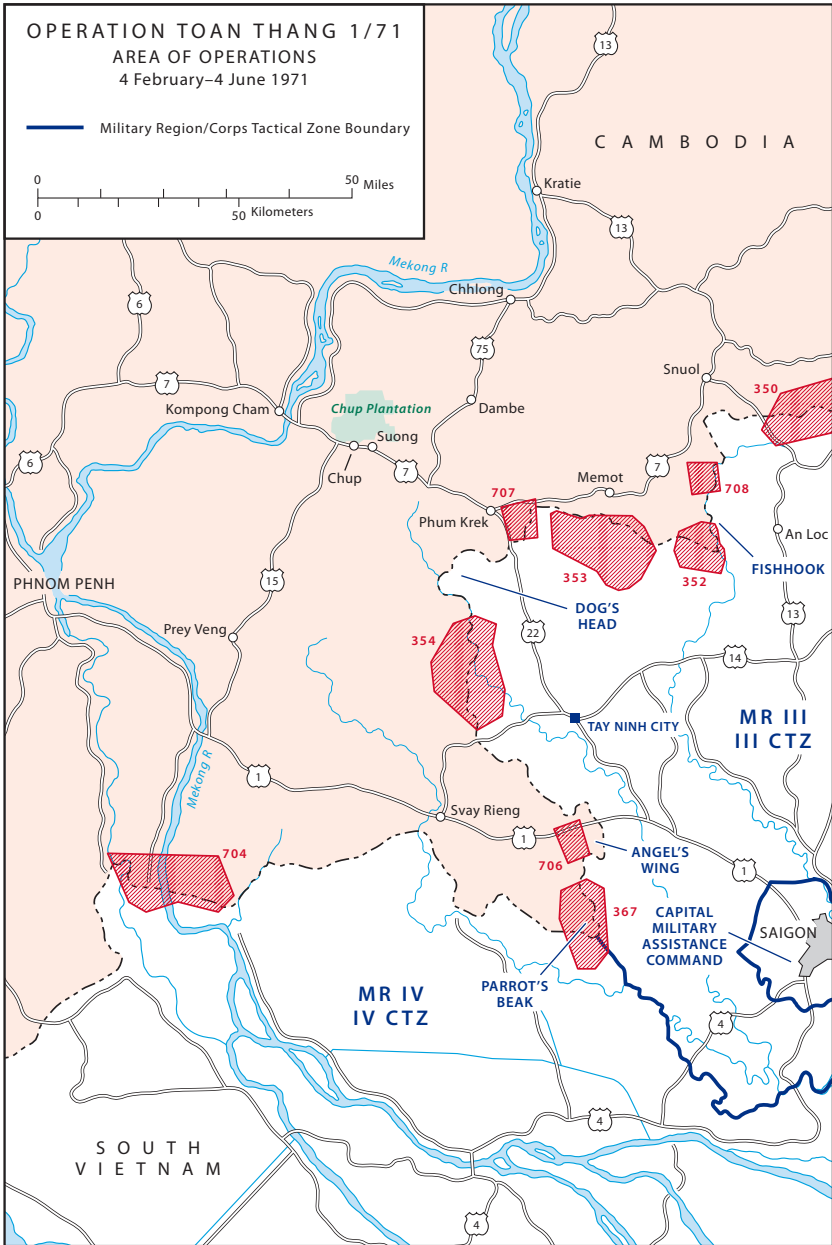
introduced a course on race relations into the Army educational system, while in Vietnam Abrams issued a directive demanding that officers ensure equal opportunity and treat all personnel equally. Leaders were to strive to improve the welfare of their men and to keep channels of communication open. In short, Abrams held that harmonious race relations were a hallmark of effective leadership. To facilitate communication, he directed that every unit have a human relations officer as well as a human relations council, with representatives of all ranks and races. Commanders followed through, but a survey found that many black soldiers felt that there was much talk, but little corrective action.

The problem of poor race relations became abundantly clear on 17 December, when a brawl erupted between black and white soldiers at Camp Baxter near Da Nang, home to the 5th Transportation Command. Black protesters succeeded in gaining the release of a black soldier being held in pretrial confinement. The following day was marred by an attempted fragging and some indiscriminate firing. An investigation found that the riot represented the culmination of six months of racial incidents and deteriorating discipline at Camp Baxter. To avoid a recurrence, MACV published a case study of racial tensions at Camp Baxter. But as was the case with drugs, the command found it difficult to solve such deep-seated political and social issues.

CROSSING THE BORDER AGAIN: CAMBODIA, 1971

As troubling as the deterioration of morale and discipline was to General Abrams, he still had a war to fight. He continued to believe that the most promising avenue open to him was to use offensive action to keep the enemy off balance and buy time for Vietnamization and pacification to solidify. His ability to do so was significantly constrained, particularly in Military Regions II and III where American troop withdrawals had been the greatest. With the pro-American Lon Nol government still under severe threat and the enemy rebuilding his supply lines, Abrams and General Vien agreed on a new incursion into Cambodia. Because Congress had just banned U.S. ground troops from entering Cambodia, American support would be limited to Army and Air Force aviation overhead and Army artillery based in Vietnam (*Map 7*).

On 4 February 1971, General Tri led the first of 16,000 South Vietnamese troops into Cambodia in Operation TOAN THANG 1/71. The goal was to destroy enemy bases and to help the



Map 7

Cambodian government reestablish control over the area north of Highway 7 up to the Mekong River town of Kratie. Initially the troops concentrated on clearing Highway 7 between Snoul and Chup, and for the most part the enemy avoided contact.

On 26 February, however, advancing South Vietnamese troops came under fire from a line of bunkers concealed in a tree line. Capt. Jon E. Swanson, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, swept down in his OH-6A scout helicopter to engage the foe with grenades and machine guns. After destroying five bunkers he came under fire from an anti-aircraft machine gun. Despite having expended his grenades, he engaged the position with machine guns and knocked it out. When a second anti-aircraft gun opened fire, hitting his helicopter, he attacked again before directing an Army helicopter gunship to destroy the target. He was then engaged by a third anti-aircraft gun. Ignoring his own safety he flew his damaged and now virtually unarmed helicopter toward the enemy to mark the target for the gunships when enemy fire caused his helicopter to explode, killing him and his copilot. The Army posthumously awarded Swanson the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions that day. In 2002 President George W. Bush upgraded the award to the Medal of Honor.

By the time of Swanson's death, the momentum behind the incursion had started to wane. General Tri was dead, the victim of a helicopter accident, and his successor was less aggressive. The first large engagement occurred on 17 March, when two South Vietnamese task forces, supported by Army gunships, engaged a Communist regiment in a two-day battle in the Chup Plantation, a major enemy depot. Two weeks later, a South Vietnamese task force defeated an enemy battalion in a five-hour battle near Soung. After some additional activity around Snoul during the first week in April, the enemy went to ground. Thereafter, South Vietnamese troops focused on uprooting enemy supply caches.

The operation remained relatively uneventful until the North Vietnamese learned that the South Vietnamese planned to withdraw a task force of the 5th Infantry Division from Snoul in late May. On 25 May, three Communist regiments massed to cut Highway 13, thereby trapping the task force in Snoul. Intense anti-aircraft fire prevented the allies from resupplying the town by air, and after three days of fighting the South Vietnamese position became untenable. The South Vietnamese sent a brigade-size relief column up Highway 13 from South Vietnam to link up with the

beleaguered contingent as it fought its way out of Snuol. A U.S. adviser described the scene: "What had been a controlled operation was turned into a rout as units that were supposed to occupy night defensive positions continued down the road and suffered heavy personnel and equipment losses." By the time the relief operation ended on 31 May the enemy had lost 1,143 dead and 186 weapons in the fight, while the South Vietnamese had lost 133 killed, 494 wounded, 130 missing, 947 individual weapons, 83 crew-served weapons, 41 mortars and artillery pieces, 198 armored personnel carriers, 6 tanks, and 41 vehicles.

Operation TOAN THANG 1/71 ended in June. The senior U.S. adviser to III Corps, Maj. Gen. Jack J. Wagstaff, declared the results mixed. The operation had imposed heavy casualties on the Communists, tying down three enemy divisions away from South Vietnam and further bolstering the Khmer Republic. On the other hand, the South Vietnamese had not done significant damage to the enemy's logistical network, and the debacle at Snuol once again raised questions about the progress of Vietnamization.

Although TOAN THANG 1/71 was over, the South Vietnamese continued to operate in Cambodia for the rest of the year. Seasonal rains dampened both sides' activities until September, when the enemy tried to replicate the Battle of Snuol at the Cambodian town of Phum Krek. After secretly building fortified positions along the length of Highway 22 from Tay Ninh City, South Vietnam, to Phum Krek, the Communists besieged South Vietnamese forces at Phum Krek on 26 September. Fortunately, the enemy did not have as many anti-aircraft guns as he had employed at Snuol, and allied aviation was able to keep the isolated garrison supplied. It took two brigade-size task forces pushing up Highway 22 from South Vietnam to relieve Phum Krek on 5 October. During the campaign U.S. Army helicopter gunships flew 3,699 sorties and U.S. artillery based in South Vietnam fired 4,800 rounds—just a fraction of the 154,000 rounds fired by South Vietnamese artillery. Casualties in the campaign amounted to 2,581 enemy killed and 19 prisoners. The South Vietnamese lost 198 killed, 1,194 wounded, and 56 missing.

A new phase of the Cambodian campaign began on 22 November 1971, when elements of four South Vietnamese divisions sought to destroy the *5th* and *7th PAVN Divisions* in the Chup-Dambe and Snuol areas. By the time this action ended, the enemy had lost 1,376 dead. Allied casualties were 92 killed—5

of them American—243 wounded, including 11 Americans, and 3 missing. Although none of the operations in Cambodia had achieved a knockout blow, cumulatively they had disrupted enemy logistics, imposed casualties, and diverted enemy pressure from Phenom Penh and Saigon. These were noteworthy accomplishments, yet the enemy remained dangerous, and whenever or wherever allied forces receded, he busily rebuilt his organization to continue the fight.

LAOS—LAM SON 719

Even as the South Vietnamese initiated Operation TOAN THANG 1/71 in early February, the allies were preparing for an even more ambitious incursion, this time into Laos. After Cambodia had denied the enemy the use of the port of Sihanoukville in 1970, the Ho Chi Minh trail was the only way North Vietnam could reinforce its strength in Cambodia. It was also the only way for Northern soldiers to enter South Vietnam, other than by crossing the fortified Demilitarized Zone that separated the two Vietnams. The Americans wanted the South Vietnamese to strike as deep as the town of Tchepone, a road junction forty kilometers west of the border in the enemy's Base Area 604. As had been the case with the Cambodian incursions, the thrust would damage the enemy's logistical infrastructure, hinder his ability to launch a major offensive in 1971, and might possibly lead the North into making concessions at Paris. At the very least, it would gain more time for Vietnamization and pacification.

Abrams briefed the concept to General Vien in January 1971. Vien had long wanted to strike into Laos and endorsed the idea. Some officials, however, were uneasy. The terrain in southern Laos was much more forbidding than in Cambodia. Entry points and lines of communications were tightly constricted, and the enemy was more readily reinforced from North Vietnam. Finally, a 1969 U.S. law banned American ground forces from operating in Laos, so as in Operation TOAN THANG 1/71, the South Vietnamese would not have access to U.S. advisers or ground troops once they crossed the border. Nevertheless, President Thieu agreed to the operation.

Detailed planning between the allies for Operation LAM SON 719 occurred under tight security. Planning was rushed, with the goal being to hit Laos at roughly the same time Operation TOAN THANG 1/71 began in Cambodia. The principal planners were

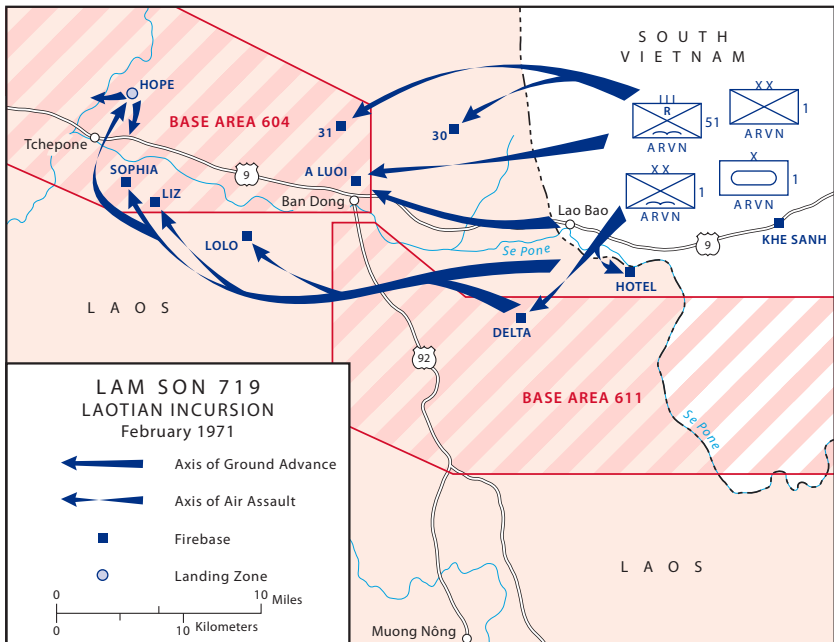
the XXIV Corps' commander, Lt. Gen. James W. Sutherland, and the commander of South Vietnam's Military Region I, Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam. The first phase of LAM SON 719 would be a mostly American operation, dubbed DEWEY CANYON II. Its goal was to clear the way for South Vietnamese forces to move to the Laotian border without U.S. troops actually crossing the frontier. On 30 January 1971, the mechanized 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, backed by a battalion from the 101st Airborne Division, advanced westward along Highway 9 to open the route that the South Vietnamese would use to enter Laos. The troops reopened the abandoned U.S. Marine Corps base at Khe Sanh, while the 45th Engineer Group rehabilitated Highway 9. As the United States deployed artillery and supplies toward the border to support the South Vietnamese, other elements of the 101st Airborne Division conducted a feint toward the A Shau Valley to confuse the enemy about the allies' true intentions. The deception failed, for once again the North Vietnamese got wind of the impending incursion.

The incursion itself began on 8 February, four days after the start of Operation TOAN THANG 1/71 in Cambodia. The South Vietnamese force consisted of 17,000 men and included the 1st Airborne Division, the 1st Infantry Division, the 1st Armored Brigade, and the 51st Ranger Group, with the 1st Marine Division in reserve. Although these were elite forces, their commanders were unused to working with each other. Moreover, General Lam had never commanded an operation of this size. After B-52 bombers and the guns of the U.S. Army's 108th Artillery Group hit suspected enemy concentrations, General Lam's armored column, along with two attached airborne battalions, advanced westward on Highway 9 into Laos, passing through thick jungles and rugged hills toward Tchepone. Progress was slow, as the "highway" inside Laos was little more than a rough, single-lane dirt track that had been significantly damaged by allied air strikes. In fact, the road was only suited to tracked vehicles and remained so, despite the efforts of South Vietnamese engineers to improve it. Rainstorms would soon make it all but impassable. Fortunately, Lam faced only light resistance during the first two days of the incursion. On 10 February U.S. Army helicopters braved anti-aircraft fire to deliver the 9th Airborne Battalion to Objective A Loui at the village of Ban Dong, about twenty kilometers inside Laos on Highway 9. Later that day, Lam's M41 tanks and M113 armored personnel carriers

linked up with the paratroopers. The South Vietnamese were now about half way to Tchepone (*Map 8*).

As the armored column advanced along Highway 9, flanking forces air assaulted to the north and south, receiving heavy anti-aircraft fire in the process. The three battalions of the 1st Ranger Group operated north of the road, while the 1st Infantry Division took up positions in high ground south of the highway. U.S. Army helicopters scouted ahead of the South Vietnamese, delivered artillery to newly created firebases, and attacked enemy anti-aircraft guns, bunkers, and troops concentrations.

Although the Central Intelligence Agency had warned that the Communists would put up a strong defense, allied commanders were surprised at the speed with which enemy resistance stiffened. The North Vietnamese had decided to fight, not only to protect their logistical facilities, but to “annihilate a number of units of the enemy’s strategic reserve forces” and to disrupt the Vietnamization process. Soon they had massed five infantry divisions, a tank regiment, two artillery regiments, eight sapper battalions, and



Map 8



South Vietnamese soldiers advance in Laos.

hundreds of anti-aircraft guns. According to North Vietnamese historians, it was “our army’s greatest concentration of combined-arms forces . . . up to that point.” With accumulated supplies to sustain themselves for several months, about 22,000 North Vietnamese troops were closing in on the South Vietnamese, a far greater force than U.S. planners had anticipated.

The attack lost momentum as enemy forces fought back and South Vietnamese commanders became more cautious. On 12 February President Thieu visited General Lam’s headquarters and ordered a halt to the advance so that the army’s flanks could be reinforced against the enemy’s increasingly powerful attacks. Thieu feared for the safety of the army’s main line of communications along Highway 9, and General Abrams could not prod the South Vietnamese forces to move forward. By 19 February the North Vietnamese were pounding General Lam’s northern flank with repeated infantry assaults backed by artillery and tanks that were sometimes of heavier caliber and armor than that possessed by the South Vietnamese. The enemy overran several ranger firebases north of Highway 9, while U.S. helicopters flying support missions suffered severe losses from anti-aircraft fire.

To save face politically, on 7 March Thieu ordered two battalions of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division to dash for the

bombed-out town of Tchepone, occupy it for three days, and then retire. The foray would have little military significance, but it would allow the South Vietnamese to claim that they had reached the objective. General Lam then ordered all forces to return to South Vietnam. During the withdrawal some units lost cohesiveness and the retrograde operation took on the characteristics of a rout. The lack of suitable landing zones through which to evacuate heavy equipment, enemy pressure, and breakdowns—both mechanical and moral—ultimately led the South Vietnamese to abandon much of their American-provided equipment. By 25 March, all but two patrols had returned to South Vietnam, effectively concluding Operation LAM SON 719.

The results were mixed, and allied casualties were high. The South Vietnamese 1st Armored Brigade lost 60 percent of its tanks and 50 percent of its armored personnel carriers from combat or abandonment. Lam's force suffered 1,549 men killed, 5,483 wounded, and 651 missing. The U.S. Army had 219 soldiers killed, 1,149 wounded, and 38 missing during its support missions. It also lost over one hundred aircraft during the campaign, the highest loss in any operation during the war.

Although some troops fought very well, overall the performance of the South Vietnamese in Laos was disappointing. Several factors contributed—inadequate planning, the lack of U.S. advisers, the nature of the terrain, the strength and heavy armament of the enemy, and confusion in the upper echelons of South Vietnamese leadership. Clearly the South Vietnamese were still dependent on the United States when conducting major combat operations, most notably in the realms of aviation, fire, and logistical support. The U.S. media was particularly harsh in its evaluation. *Life* magazine stated that the North Vietnamese Army “drove the invading forces out of Laos with their tails between their legs.” The *Christian Science Monitor* opined that “Laos showed that the North Vietnamese are not any less determined to fight now than they were two years ago,” while *Time* called the operation “a costly miscalculation.” The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* concluded that LAM SON 719 was “one of the biggest fiascoes of the Vietnam War.”

Government officials countered the media's depressing assessment with a rosier picture. President Thieu characterized the campaign as “the biggest victory ever.” President Nixon claimed that the South Vietnamese had fought “effectively.” General Abrams believed the operation had at least achieved its minimum

goals. He stated that the campaign had shown that the South Vietnamese had “an ability to mount a complex, multi-division operation, in conditions of difficult and unfamiliar terrain, adverse weather and against the best forces that a determined enemy could muster.” “Although it is too early to make a final judgment,” he informed the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, Admiral John S. McCain Jr., “LAM SON 719 may well prove to have been a pivotal point in the Indochina conflict.” And indeed, the allies had hurt the enemy. During LAM SON 719 allied forces—including 5,000 U.S. troops—had killed about 19,000 North Vietnamese. The allies had also captured or destroyed over 7,000 individual and crew-served weapons, hundreds of vehicles, and approximately 25 percent of North Vietnam’s tank force. Last but not least, the allies had destroyed 1,250 tons of rice, at least 20,000 tons of munitions, as well as other supplies and facilities. It would take time for the enemy to rebuild these lost assets.

FIGHTING WITHDRAWAL: THE WAR AFTER LAM SON 719

The incursion into Laos and its questionable results came at a bad time for the Nixon administration and the Army. Surprisingly, public outcry against LAM SON 719 was initially muted, but the South Vietnamese Army’s lackluster performance and mounting U.S. Army helicopter losses spawned criticism. As one White House aide complained, “the malaise about the war is spreading wider and deeper. Domestic opinion is very sensitive to anything which smacks of a setback or which our TV commentators can so describe.” More revelations about the My Lai atrocities came out around the same time as the incursion, as did continuing stories about the illegal activities of the former Sergeant Major of the Army William O. Woolridge, who later pleaded guilty to bribery charges associated with the operation of NCO clubs in Vietnam. In early March, Secretary Laird admitted that the Defense Department had given the press misleading information about allied achievements in LAM SON 719. Polls showed that the American public disapproved of the Laotian incursion, doubted the president and his administration were being totally forthcoming, and supported the full withdrawal of U.S. troops by the end of the year.

President Nixon responded. No sooner had the South Vietnamese withdrawn from Laos than he announced another reduction of American strength. Telling a TV audience on 7 April, “that Vietnamization has successes,” he announced that

the United States would remove 100,000 additional troops by 1 December 1971. Moreover, in a move that must have been troubling to those who believed a residual force would be necessary after the combat troops left, the president stated that his ultimate goal was to remove all U.S. personnel. "The American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end, the day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight." Nixon's announcement helped relieve pressure for an immediate withdrawal and bought the allies more time, but it did not pacify the antiwar movement. The nation remained in turmoil.

Back in Vietnam, the war ground on, albeit at a reduced tempo for many U.S. soldiers. Several factors contributed—the enemy's continued predilection to avoid decisive combat in favor of a prolonged guerrilla war of harassment and attrition; the dwindling number of U.S. combat troops; and the overarching desire of both sides to avoid casualties. In 1969 U.S. forces conducting operations of less than battalion size had contacted the enemy an average of 621 times per month. In 1970 the number had fallen to 372 times per month. In 1971, U.S. small-unit operations averaged only nineteen contacts a month. This would have been good news if the enemy's strength had fallen off just as precipitously, but it had not. In 1971 the enemy had just as many battalions in South Vietnam as he had during the climatic Tet Offensive of 1968, although most of these units were at a lower strength.

In early February 1971, the impending withdrawal of the 1st Marine Division from Military Region I led XXIV Corps Commander General Sutherland to order the 23d Infantry Division to take over the defense of Quang Nam Province. The division then divided its three brigades among the three southernmost provinces of I Corps. The 196th Brigade operated in Quang Nam, the 198th Brigade in Quang Tin, and the 11th Brigade in Quang Ngai. This reallocation had little impact on Americal operations because during the early months of 1971 all three brigades saw a distinct downturn in enemy activity, even during the traditional Tet holidays. Intelligence attributed the lack of Communist offensive action to severe weather during late 1970, which had destroyed many food caches and hampered resupply efforts. "The loss of these caches had a demoralizing effect on enemy personnel," read one report.

In Quang Nam the 196th Brigade established “a mobile concept with no fixed fire support bases.” This entailed relinquishing most of the old marine bases around Da Nang to the Vietnamese, who took over the city’s security belt. The Americans conducted continuous patrols to intercept enemy troops before they could get to the coast—much as the division had already been doing farther south.

Fortunately for the allies, Communist forces in southern I Corps were a far cry from their strength in earlier years. Most of the enemy’s main forces had withdrawn to Laos. Dozens of local force units roamed the countryside, most of them numbering fewer than fifty men in each. Still, the Communists managed to launch an offensive in southern I Corps, but most of the engagements consisted of short bombardments of territorial force outposts. In response, the 23d Infantry Division began a new series of operations in March, but these represented just a slight retooling of preexisting campaigns. American soldiers pushed west into the foothills and mountains of the three coastal provinces to screen the area and look for the enemy. One of these operations was titled MIDDLESEX PEAK. It began on 1 March and entailed Col. William S. Hathaway’s 196th Brigade patrolling a broad swath of plains and foothills in Quang Tin Province from Chu Lai in the east to Firebase MARY ANN—an area of more than 1,000 square

A squad leader in the 196th Infantry Brigade (Light) gives instructions while on patrol.



kilometers. Contact was rare, until the enemy struck with unanticipated fury at month's end.

As firebases went, MARY ANN was fairly ordinary. Overlooking the Tranh River in Quang Tin Province about forty kilometers southwest of Tam Ky, the base monitored Communist infiltration through a series of valleys that emptied into a plain just south of the base. Situated on a ridge between two hilltops, the post was surrounded by barbed wire and included a perimeter trench line with twenty-two bunkers. Thirty other bunkers and huts lay inside the post along with a landing strip and artillery emplacements. However, MARY ANN was not in an ideal position. Several nearby hills were higher than the firebase, allowing the enemy to look down on the Americans. Better sites to the west would have placed MARY ANN outside the range of U.S. artillery to the east, so the defenders had settled for a slightly precarious position supported by two firebases seven kilometers to the southeast. In late March 209 Americans manned Firebase MARY ANN, most of them from Headquarters Company and Company C, 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, as well as a reconnaissance platoon, two 155-mm. howitzers, and a quad 50-cal. machine gun. Also present were twenty-one South Vietnamese manning two 105-mm. howitzers.

The past six months had seen little activity in the area, and the general belief among the garrison was that the war was waning. Although the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, had been an aggressive unit in the past, it was now becoming complacent. Its commander, Lt. Col. William P. Doyle, was well respected but seemed not to be demanding as much from his men. The unit did only sporadic patrolling around the base and allowed the perimeter defenses to fall into disrepair.

But the war was not over. At 0230 on 28 March 1971, North Vietnamese mortarmen unleashed a salvo of tear gas and high-explosive rounds while soldiers from the *409th Sapper Battalion* pierced the poorly guarded perimeter. Having studied the base closely, the enemy targeted command and control facilities, knocking down most of the post's radio antennas and inflicting casualties on many of the U.S. officers and NCOs at the outset. The defense quickly collapsed as every man fended for himself.

Yet there was heroism among the chaos. Pfc. Larry J. Vogelsang, a conscientious objector who was a medic, rushed headlong into the Company C command post during the attack and treated survivors. He received the Silver Star for his actions.

Sp4c. Marshall H. Turner, another member of Company C, received the Bronze Star for using his grenade launcher against a group of sappers. Sgt. Ervin E. Powell, a member of the battalion reconnaissance platoon, earned a Silver Star for bravery. When the attack began, Powell ran from his bunker wearing only shorts and combat boots and fired his M16 at the sappers until an explosion slammed him to the ground. He eventually found himself in the thick of the fighting, killing two North Vietnamese in close-quarter combat among the flaming bunkers. A member of the battalion staff, Capt. Paul S. Spilberg, likewise earned the Silver Star for bravery. So too did 1st Lt. Jerry W. Sams, who continued to fight despite suffering severe burns.

Within forty-five minutes after it began, the attack was over. The enemy left behind fifteen corpses, but it is likely that many more died. Thirty Americans died and fifty-two suffered wounds. The battle marked the largest loss of American lives from a single incident in more than two years, and represented more than one-third of the week's casualties for the entire country. It was not long before reporters swarmed over Firebase MARY ANN. U.S. officials in Saigon and Washington felt the political heat immediately, and they launched an investigation to determine what had happened.

Although the Army was loathe to admit it, drug use likely contributed to the incident. More than one press story reported that some of the soldiers at the base smoked marijuana, even when on patrols. "The company potheads lit up as soon as the sun went down," read one account. If marijuana was not available, some soldiers found alternatives. A few months before the attack, three soldiers had fallen ill after eating C4 explosive because they believed it would make them high.

MACV completed its review in July. In a message to Westmoreland, Abrams concluded that the North Vietnamese had achieved surprise at Firebase MARY ANN because the base was "neither prepared for an attack nor alert." He further concluded that the commander of the Americal Division, Maj. Gen. James L. Baldwin, did not "ascertain the actual defensive posture as it existed on Fire Support Base MARY ANN" while the 196th Brigade commander, Colonel Hathaway, had failed to detect shortcomings in the defense despite numerous trips to the post. The last visit had occurred on the afternoon before the attack, during which time Hathaway had said that the "firebase looked good." The brigade

commander—as well as other officers—“tended to perpetrate a belief of security and invincibility.”

The Army disciplined a number of officers. It reduced Colonel Doyle, whom Abrams had relieved from command immediately after the battle, to the rank of major. The Army removed Colonel Hathaway from the brigadier general promotion list and reduced his rank to lieutenant colonel. Several other officers received letters of reprimand. A disagreement, however, surfaced over General Baldwin. Westmoreland and Abrams thought he should be reduced in rank, but Secretary of the Army Froehlke, disagreed. Writing that “I believe that a division commander in his circumstances is too remote from the day-to-day events at a fire support base like MARY ANN to be held accountable to this degree for the deaths and injuries that occur,” Froehlke chose to issue a letter of reprimand to Baldwin rather than demote him. No one was discharged, but all of these officers’ careers were ruined.

The disciplinary actions reflected the times. In the past, Abrams had handled similar incidents less harshly. Lax security had resulted in twenty-six Americans being killed and sixty-two wounded at Firebase AIRBORNE in May 1969, yet no investigation had ensued. But that had been when the war was at its height. Now, with the withdrawal nearing conclusion and antiwar sentiment at its peak, every casualty represented a black eye for the Army and raised the pressure on the Nixon administration to get out of Vietnam as soon as possible.

Compared with the attack on Firebase MARY ANN, the rest of 1971 was relatively uneventful for U.S. forces in Military Region I. Both due to his preexisting strategy and to the damage inflicted by allied forces in Laos, the enemy continued to confine his actions to short bombardments, sapper attacks, and acts of harassment while avoiding full-scale battle. The Americans, for their part, resumed their normal patrol, raid, and pacification support activities. Old operations ended and new ones began, but little changed in the nature of U.S. activity.

In northern Military Region I, Operation DEWEY CANYON II and support for the incursion into Laos had absorbed U.S. attention during the first few months of the year. Once those activities ended, the 101st Airborne Division and the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division once more teamed up to attack the Communist logistical system in and around the A Shau Valley. These actions

lasted from April through August. Meanwhile, the 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, returned to eastern Quang Tri where it resumed its former duties. It suffered its heaviest casualties of the war on 21 May when a 120-mm. rocket slammed into a bunker at Fire Support Base C2, killing twenty-nine and wounding thirty-three. As for the Americal Division, small-unit patrols in the foothills punctuated by occasional forays deeper into the interior to disrupt Communist logistics were the norm, and, as before, booby traps and land mines caused most U.S. casualties.

The U.S. Army's presence in Military Region I began to recede in August. The 1st Brigade, 5th Infantry Division, left Vietnam and MACV informed the Americal Division that it would be next. The division shifted to more conservative actions as it prepared to depart. By the end of November the unit was gone, leaving behind the 196th Brigade with the limited mission of guarding Da Nang and an intelligence-gathering facility at Phu Bai south of Hue. As for the 101st Airborne Division, its 3d Brigade departed Vietnam in December, with the rest of the division slated for removal over the next two months. It remained for the South Vietnamese to man the once mighty bulwark against aggression from the North. To help do so, the South Vietnamese raised a new organization—the 3d Infantry Division—and stationed it in Military Region I.

Farther south in Military Region II, the only major Army ground combat unit left by 1971 was the 173d Airborne Brigade. It continued to stand vigil over Highway 19 and Binh Dinh's western approaches. But the ordeal of the longest serving Army ground combat brigade in Vietnam was drawing to a close. Retrograde activities began in April, and in August the last elements returned to the United States. By this time, Binh Dinh Province had again become insurgent territory. In April and May, U.S. advisers wrote that the enemy was having a "field day, romping through the province virtually unchecked." By June, enemy sappers had detonated three explosions at the Qui Nhon ammunition depot and sunk a ship in the harbor. The main insurgent activities, though, were collecting rice and taxes, harassing the territorial forces, and assassinating local officials. U.S. advisers blamed the Vietnamese, both for their lassitude and their failure to build on the work of the 173d Airborne Brigade. "These leaders and their troops are still waiting for the Americans to do everything," complained one U.S. general, but the South Vietnamese no longer had U.S. troops to rely on.

The failure of Operation WASHINGTON GREEN to pacify Binh Dinh Province did not rest on the South Vietnamese alone. The 173d Airborne Brigade had assisted the population in a wide range of civic actions, from dispensing free medical care to building schools and pig farms. Vietnamese civilians welcomed the aid, yet it rarely motivated them to risk their lives for the allied cause. Prolonged civic action and patrol duties against a shadowy enemy who clearly enjoyed the support of some of the population grated on the soldiers, many of whom preferred offensive operations where they had a chance to confront the enemy instead of merely suffering casualties from mines, snipers, and booby traps. This tension had led to misbehavior, mostly off-duty, that had earned the 173d a local reputation as “the most hated unit in the U.S. Army.” Binh Dinh Province’s senior U.S. adviser at one point called for more military police to control “irresponsible, careless, thoughtless soldiers who are not properly supervised.” In the end, not even a prolonged, deep insertion of a U.S. brigade in direct counterinsurgency and pacification activity had been able to overcome the obstacles to victory in Binh Dinh: extensive devastation and refugee flows, the South Vietnamese armed forces’ overreliance on U.S. assistance, the sporadic yet haunting presence of the *3d PAVN Division*, the systematic corruption of the local government, unhelpful behavior by U.S. soldiers, and a population that in many cases sympathized with the enemy.

As for Military Region III, the 1st Cavalry Division continued its long-running mission screening the Cambodian border and the major in-country bases of War Zones C and D. But its service was also drawing to a close. On 26 March 1971, one month to the day after Captain Swanson died in support of South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia, the 1st Cavalry Division held a stand down ceremony to mark its impending withdrawal from Vietnam. By May it was gone, leaving behind its 3d Brigade as a separate entity to carry on the division’s screening mission. Augmented with several attachments that brought its strength to around 7,600 men, the “Garryowen Task Force” as the brigade was known, spent much of the remainder of the year conducting raids and patrols over 3,500 square miles of territory, a task that was only possible due to its unusual mobility. In September it helped the South Vietnamese repulse an offensive launched by the *7th PAVN Division* into Tay Ninh Province from Cambodia. By year’s end it had pulled back to defend vital military installations around Saigon and in nearby

Bien Hoa Province. It was an increasingly lonely vigil, for the 11th Armored Cavalry had returned to the United States in March and the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, had done the same in May. During the course of the year, the number of U.S. Army combat maneuver battalions operating in Military Region III had dropped from sixteen to five.

In the southernmost reaches of Vietnam, Military Region IV, U.S. Army advisers, aviators, and support personnel of the Delta Military Assistance Command actively supported the South Vietnamese armed forces. A long running campaign in the notorious U Minh Forrest by the South Vietnamese 21st Infantry Division from December 1970 to November 1971 resulted in the deaths of 4,900 Viet Cong and 490 government soldiers. As was the case throughout the country, Communist guerrillas in Military Region IV focused most of their efforts against pacification and the territorial forces responsible for population security. During the year they succeeded in overrunning ninety-six outposts in Military Region IV, in many cases with the help of agents inside the garrisons. Still, the continuing struggle did not spare the region from the iron law of drawdown quotas. During the year the number of U.S. personnel serving in Military Region IV fell from 16,700 to 8,500.

One side effect of the drawdown was the drastic reduction of the number of draftees in Vietnam. Many draftees had served in combat units, while the reduction in overall strength meant that the Army had an easier time meeting its manpower needs in Southeast Asia without using drafted men. In 1967, 49 percent of U.S. Army soldiers in Vietnam had been draftees, the highest percentage of the war. By 1971, draftees made up only 28 percent of Army forces in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, the reduction in the numbers of draftees did not eliminate the morale and discipline problem in Vietnam. Combat refusals continued. In one instance in October, several soldiers refused to go on patrol outside Firebase PACE, Tay Ninh Province. Sixty-five soldiers at the base then sent a letter to U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy asking him to investigate their plight. Fragging also continued, and although the full extent is unknown, by war's end the Army documented 730 cases of fragging with 83 deaths. Racial tensions remained, although MACV surveys and statistics continued to indicate that the problem was overblown. MACV also felt that assertions by various congressmen

that between 15 and 40 percent of servicemen in Vietnam were addicted to hard drugs were exaggerated, with the command's data indicating that the true number was closer to 5 or 6 percent. Even that level was disturbing. In fact, while the number of marijuana cases declined, partly due to the reduced troop strength, the number of reported cases of hard drug usage exploded, from 1,146 in 1970 to 7,026 in 1971. In June MACV began urinalysis testing of soldiers and the Defense Department announced that it would not allow any serviceman who tested positive to return to the United States until after he had undergone five to seven days of detoxification. Treatment was also available. Two months later Abrams initiated a program of unannounced unit testing, with every unit to be tested once per quarter. MACV believed that this had a deterrent effect. Units that had a high level of heroin abuse received intense command scrutiny. Meanwhile, Westmoreland continued his efforts at rejuvenating the Army, establishing an NCO education system, and initiating reforms to make soldier life and training more palatable. But like the reforms initiated the prior year, these came too late to influence the situation in Vietnam.

ANALYSIS

The Allies enjoyed many successes during 1970 and 1971. They severely disrupted the enemy's logistical system and prevented him from launching any major attacks into heavily populated areas. The South Vietnamese armed forces had grown in capability, so that by the end of 1971 they had essentially assumed responsibility for the ground war. Pacification, too, had progressed. In January 1970 the allies claimed that the Saigon government exercised some degree of control over 88 percent of the population. By December 1971, this had risen to 98 percent. A land reform program introduced in 1970 was redressing a deep-seated socioeconomic problem, while MACV reported that the Communist clandestine organization had plummeted, from 75,000 members in January 1970 to 42,000 by the end of 1971. Reflecting the tide of events, 53,000 enemy combatants, agents, and sympathizers had voluntarily surrendered. The allies had also continued to win the war of attrition. Despite that fact that contact during these years was moderate to light, punctuated by only a few big events, MACV reported that the allies had killed nearly 202,000 Communist personnel during

the two years. American losses numbered 5,605 dead, fourth-fifths of whom had died in 1970, while 46,000 South Vietnamese security personnel lost their lives. Last but not least, the allies had achieved these accomplishments while the United States withdrew 318,000 servicemen from Vietnam, of whom 211,000 were Army personnel.

The U.S. Army had played a large role in many of these achievements. It had kept the enemy at bay through offensive action, it had provided security for pacification, and it had enhanced the capability of indigenous military and paramilitary forces. Although the allies had not permanently destroyed the enemy's logistical system in Laos and Cambodia—an impossible task without a continuous occupation—they had fulfilled Abrams' goal of significantly weakening the enemy and of buying more time for South Vietnam to develop. And the Army had done all this while under severe political, psychological, and emotional pressure caused by a gradual withdrawal from an unpopular war in an era of domestic social upheaval. If the Army emerged from these struggles a bit tattered, it could take pride in the fact that the vast majority of soldiers had served honorably and bravely in what increasingly seemed a thankless task.

The progress the allies had made was real, but one always found another side to every coin in Vietnam. Although the Hamlet Evaluation System claimed the government controlled 98 percent of the population, only 29 percent were entirely isolated from the Viet Cong. This was better than ever, but meant that the majority of the people were still exposed to some degree of enemy influence. Building a nation quickly while at war had proven an almost impossible task, and many social, economic, and political weaknesses continued unabated. Support for the Saigon government remained lukewarm. The best that could be said, observed the CORDS adviser to Military Region II, John Paul Vann, was that "the government of South Vietnam is not admired or respected by the people, but it is hated less than the enemy." Bureaucratic lethargy, corruption, and weak leadership continued to trouble government administration, whose financial future seemed uncertain as the United States withdrew.

Leadership was also a problem in the military—not enough qualified people filled junior officer and NCO billets. Desertion was high—320,000 South Vietnamese soldiers deserted during 1970 and 1971, of which 52,000 returned to the ranks—while

motivation often appeared lacking. Unit performance ranged from excellent to poor. Having served so long in a territorial security role, South Vietnamese troops lacked the experience and equipment to be a truly mobile force. Last but not least, the South Vietnamese military remained heavily dependent on the United States for many logistical and technical functions. Nowhere was this more evident than in the realm of aviation, where the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force continued to provide the type of transportation and firepower that had proven so necessary to meet and defeat the enemy in battle. By mid-1971, for example, U.S. Army helicopters were still flying half of all the helicopter missions required by South Vietnamese forces, and the U.S. Air Force was flying half of the total number of tactical fixed-wing air sorties. A diminishment in capability was inevitable once the Americans left no matter how effective Vietnamization might be. The question was, how would the balance sheet finally settle out?

Several aspects appeared particularly problematic. First, the enemy remained determined to fight despite his enormous losses—and he was capable of doing so. The fact that the Communists were able to kill 46,000 South Vietnamese military, paramilitary, and police personnel in two years indicated that the war remained hotly contested despite the sharp decline in U.S. losses. To put matters in perspective, South Vietnam lost more men killed in

Tanks await transport back to the United States as part of the withdrawal.



1970 and 1971 than the United States had lost in the entire war to date. In 1971 alone, South Vietnam's military lost more dead than the U.S. Marine Corps lost in combat in all of World War II. And given the difference in the size of the populations of the two countries, the proportional impact on South Vietnam was huge. South Vietnam was in the midst of an existential crisis, regardless of what the Hamlet Evaluation System might indicate, with no end in sight.

The changing balance of forces added urgency and uncertainty to the situation. In January 1970 the allies had enjoyed an advantage in manpower of 6.6:1 over the enemy. By December 1971, this had dropped to 6.3:1. In terms of combat maneuver battalions, the shift was even starker. In January 1970 the allies had thirty-one more maneuver battalions than the enemy. By the end of 1971, they had one battalion less than the Communists. These ratios would only get worse, as the United States, Korea, Thailand, and Australia continued their drawdowns. When one considers that the most capable units were disappearing—U.S. maneuver battalions dropped from ninety to sixteen over the two years—the impact dwarfed the simple decline in the numbers of men and units. True, the United States still had a large presence in South Vietnam by the end of 1971—157,000 servicemen—yet only about 12,000 of them were in combat infantry units. In many respects, American participation in offensive ground combat had come to an end in 1971, and it remained to be seen how adequately the Vietnamese would be able to fill the void.

The final troubling aspect was uncertainty over America's future commitment to Southeast Asia. A growing number of Americans wanted a clean break from the war, to include an end to all human, financial, and materiel support. U.S. policy had always been guided by two desires—to end American participation in combat while at the same time securing South Vietnam's survival as an independent, non-Communist state. After six years of direct participation in the war, it was becoming clear that for many Americans, if America could not readily achieve both goals, withdrawal trumped South Vietnam's independence. Now President Nixon, who had worked to buy as much time as he thought the American people would allow to achieve the South's survival, was himself starting to hedge. In April 1971 he informed the media that "we do not have as a goal a permanent residual force, such as we have in Korea at the present time." He also introduced a new justi-

fication for retaining a residual force in South Vietnam—it would act as leverage to get the North Vietnamese to release American prisoners of war. The inference was that if the president could get back the prisoners, the residual force would go away—a position he made more explicit in January 1972. Nixon further darkened South Vietnam’s horizons when he stated that the purpose of Vietnamization was to foster “the ability of the South Vietnamese to develop the capacity to defend themselves against a Communist take-over—*not the sure capacity, but at least the chance.*” [Italics added.] A chance of survival was better than none, but that was probably not very comforting to the South Vietnamese and those Americans who believed the nation had an obligation to fulfill even after U.S. combat troops had come home.

Taken together, these trends appeared ominous given the U.S. military’s long-held belief that South Vietnam could not survive without a significant residual force, to include airpower. Moreover, the United States was not the only country that was feverishly pouring aid into Southeast Asia. During 1970 and 1971 China and the Soviet Union pumped \$1.2 billion worth of economic and military aid into North Vietnam to allow that country to continue its war of aggression against the South. The future thus remained very much in doubt.

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WINTER-SPRING 1969-1970

SANCTUARY COUNTEROFFENSIVE 1970

VIETNAM COUNTEROFFENSIVE, PHASE VII 1970-1971

CONSOLIDATION I 1970-1971



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