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# Courage and Blood: South Vietnam's Repulse of the 1972 Easter Invasion

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Not long after the watershed Tet Offensive of early 1968, dramatic changes occurred in nearly every aspect of the US approach to the war in Vietnam. General Creighton Abrams succeeded to the top military post there, joining Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and, before long, Ambassador William Colby in forming a capable and like-minded leadership team.

Their shared concept was that the conflict must be approached as "one war" in which combat operations, pacification, and improvement of South Vietnam's forces were given equal emphasis and importance. The large-scale "search and destroy" sweeps of the past gave way to "clear and hold" operations. Security for the people in the hamlets and villages replaced attrition of enemy forces as the primary objective, while the achieved level of security replaced "body count" as the measure of merit. This coherent approach brought about dramatic improvements in the military, economic, and political situations in South Vietnam, despite the progressive withdrawal of US forces that also characterized these later years.

"By 1972," observed William Colby, "the pacification program had essentially eliminated the guerrilla problem in most of the country." [1] John Paul Vann saw it the same way. "We are now at the lowest level of fighting the war has ever seen," he said in January 1972. "Today there is an air of prosperity throughout the rural areas of Vietnam, and it cannot be denied. Today the roads are open and the bridges are up, and you run much greater risk travelling any road in Vietnam today from the scurrying, bustling, hustling Hondas and Lambrettas than you do from the VC." Concluded Vann, "This program of Vietnamization has gone kind of literally beyond my wildest dreams of success." [2]

By the beginning of 1972 most of the planned expansion and improvement of South Vietnam's armed forces had been completed, providing a formidable capability based on 11 infantry divisions fielding 120 infantry battalions. There were also 58 artillery battalions, 19 armored battalions of various types, and the appropriate engineer, signal, and other supporting arms and services. The Airborne Division and the Marine Division, along with 21 Ranger battalions, were the general reserve, while along the frontier 37 Ranger border defense battalions were positioned. The navy had grown to 1,680 craft of many types; the air force fielded over 1,000 aircraft. Most important of all, perhaps, were the Territorial Forces--the Regional Forces and Popular Forces--constituting at some 550,000 the bulk of the forces overall and providing the all-important close-in security by means of 1,679 RF companies and 8,356 PF platoons stationed throughout the provinces. Complementing the regular armed forces were the National Police, another 116,000 men, and the People's Self-Defense Forces, numbering more than four million. [3]

Meanwhile the enemy sought once again to regain the initiative and fashion some means of achieving a victory. "The result of successful Vietnamization and pacification," stated Sir Robert Thompson, "was that by early 1971 the North decided that the only thing left was to invade." [4] General Giap, observed Douglas Pike, had "spent the period from 1968 to 1971 devising still another variant of armed *dau tranh*," meaning the armed struggle movement, "one that would rectify earlier shortcomings." This modified approach, which Pike characterized as a sort of "high-technology armed *dau tranh* strategy," was unveiled in the enemy's 1972 Easter Offensive. Outmatching the defenders in tanks and long-range artillery, the North Vietnamese launched a massive invasion that was, concluded Pike's analysis, defeated because "air power prevented massing of forces and because of stubborn, even heroic, South Vietnamese defense." The attackers absorbed devastating losses, especially from airpower while preparing to attack, but most important was that "ARVN troops and even local forces stood and fought as never before." [5]

As 1972 began, Abrams--reviewing all the indicators of impending combat that had been amassed--said of the enemy, "I feel very strongly that he's going to try to materialize all that we have seen here, in some way, in the course of 1972." President Nixon reacted by announcing that 70,000 more US troops--the largest single increment of the war--would be withdrawn from Vietnam by 1 May. Abrams was philosophical. "On the one hand," he told his field commanders, "we've got Giap's great campaign coming up. On the other hand, we've got the great redeployment thing coming up. There's a tendency in there for some conflict." [6]

In North Vietnam, General Vo Nguyen Giap had just delivered a speech saying, "We must fight with determination to win in order to ensure victory, which is near." Adding that "a costly battle is ahead" and that it would involve "much sacrifice and heartache," Giap closed with his own version of "light at the end of the tunnel": "Victory is in sight." [7]

Of the South Vietnamese, said Abrams, "Here again, as there's always been, there are deficiencies, inadequacies, inadequate performances, and so on, but the state of readiness, the alertness and activity on the part of the armed forces here in this country is the highest that I've ever seen it, even though there's some that are still asleep at the switch. You're never going to eliminate it."

As for the Americans still in country, Abrams had 20 Inspector General teams out combing the country to check on the state of readiness, supplementing what the chain of command was doing. Given later assertions about the questionable condition of the troops at this late stage of the war, what they found is instructive. "I just have to say I'm quite gratified--yeah, he found some things, and of course you've all found a lot more," Abrams told his field commanders, "but really the responsiveness of the chain of command I think is really quite excellent. The total is good. The word got out, right down to the bottom of the thing. People knew what the hell they were doing, and they were responding. I just think that that part of it is really quite healthy."

In February, CBS news correspondent Phil Jones filmed a report based on his visit to the 3d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, one of the few US combat units still in Vietnam. Later MACV got a tape of the program and screened it during one of the Weekly Intelligence Estimate Updates held on Saturday mornings in Saigon. On the sound track can be heard the plop-plop-plop of rotor blades as Jones is helicoptered to the field along with Brigadier General James Hamlet, the brigade commander. "You always hear about the protesters and the potheads who are back in the rear areas," Hamlet is heard saying, "but you ask these men how they feel about their mission. They have volunteered for the most dangerous job left in Vietnam, going into the bush every day looking for the enemy." [8]

When Jones got out with the troops he found them pretty outspoken. "In the past ten years we've lost a lot of American lives here in Vietnam," said one, "and to just toss them out the window and say 'to hell with it,' that's pretty low. And these are just a different caliber of people than what's out in the world. What you see on the streets in D.C. is pretty disgraceful. But here, I think, is what America should see. These are the *men*, not those freaks or fakes or whatever you want to call them. These are *men*." A trooper from the division's Ranger Company spoke proudly of his unit, emphasizing that "the war's not over. Since we're here I think we have to be professional. And this company is the most professional company in Vietnam." The broadcast closed with Hamlet's tribute to his men: "From my point of view, the Vietnam story is the story of the American soldier who fights so well and often gets so little credit for it." [9]

Soon Abrams cabled urgent representations to Washington of his need for additional operational authority to counter the coming enemy offensive, including authority for fighter aircraft to strike enemy MiGs on the ground at Dong Hoi, Vinh, and Quan Lang and to strike active ground control intercept radars in North Vietnam below 20 degrees north. Abrams also asked authority to have fighters strike any occupied surface-to-air missile site within range of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), to emplace sensors in the DMZ, and for emergency use of aircraft in support of limited cross-border operations by Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF).

"The stakes in this battle will be great," Abrams told the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "If it is skillfully fought by the Republic of Vietnam, supported by all available US air, the outcome will be a major defeat for the enemy, leaving him in a weakened condition and gaining decisive time for the consolidation of the Vietnamization effort. We are running out of time in which to apply the full weight of air power against the build-up. The additional authorities requested are urgently needed." [10] Stressing that he expected the major action to occur in the area just north and south of the DMZ,

Abrams closed with an observation: "In the final analysis, when this is all over, specific targets hit in the southern part of North Vietnam will not be a major issue. The issue will be whether Vietnamization has been a success or a failure."

"As messages go," said Abrams, "this is probably the most unequivocal message we've ever sent--on the situation. But I think the evidence is very clear." Ambassador Bunker agreed: "I think it's time to be unequivocal, because there's so much at stake." On 20 January the message was dispatched to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Six days later Abrams got an answer. Some authorities were granted for immediate execution and some for standby execution later. But the most crucial, those having to do with strikes against MiG airfields, active radars, missile sites, and logistics facilities, were all still "pending approval." To call the JCS response tepid would grossly understate the case.

But--a very significant development--augmentation of US air and naval forces in theater had begun. Eighteen F-4s arrived from Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Provisions were made for a minimum of two carriers to be maintained offshore within easy striking distance, with a third on 48-hour alert status and a fourth en route from the United States. The monthly B-52 sortie rate was increased from 1,000 to 1,200, with additional aircraft positioned on Guam sufficient for a surge effort to 1,500. That proved to be only a beginning; by June the rate skyrocketed to 3,150, the peak for the entire war.[11]

Pacific Fleet placed a cruiser, two guided missile destroyers, and another destroyer on 72-hour alert, ready to reinforce the naval gun line off the coast of South Vietnam. Additional P-3 aircraft were standing by to augment coastal patrols if needed, and supplemental C-130 and C-141 cargo aircraft were also on standby. The entire American military establishment in theater was geared up and involved, watching to see how Abrams would conduct his last great battle. "The VC side of it is over," said the visiting Sir Robert Thompson. "The people have rejected the VC." Now it was going to be just plain old hard-nosed conventional warfare in a fight to the death.

On 5 February, based on intelligence of the enemy's continued buildup and the positioning of his major troop units as reviewed with Admiral McCain, General Abrams made a determination that the enemy offensive had in fact begun, a judgment which triggered some of his standby authorities to retaliate. Thus, with all in readiness for the coming offensive, MACV brought to bear on the enemy buildup everything it had--within the still restrictive rules of engagement. Tactical air sorties, gunships, and B-52 strikes were brought in practically nonstop. As Abrams met with his senior field commanders, a 48-hour maximum effort was begun, concentrating all available airpower against the B-3 Front in the Highlands. Then, after a mandatory 24-hour Tet cease-fire, the same effort was applied in Military Region 1 in the north.

"We've got a 24-hour flow of aircraft now," confirmed Seventh Air Force Commander General John D. Lavelle, "and we can keep the flow now. It's set up, it's scheduled, so there's something every few minutes. And we just keep it coming and change the target area, so whenever General Abrams makes a decision as to where to put the weight of effort, or where to go next, we've already got the flow of aircraft."

When, despite allied expectations, the enemy still had not attacked, *that* became an issue. After a visit from Peter Osnos of *The Washington Post*, Abrams said, "The wicket he appears to be on is that, for some insidious political reason, we have created the myth of this impending campaign." There was not much meeting of the minds. "I'm sure he . . . feels that I feel that he's a scurrilous shit," Abrams told Sir Robert Thompson.

Allied forces took one significant casualty even before the main battle began. General Lavelle was found to have ordered a number of "protective reaction" strikes against targets in North Vietnam, thereby violating the rules of engagement then in effect. The offense was compounded by the fact that false reports, representing these strikes as genuine protective reactions, were subsequently filed. Summoned home by the Air Force Chief of Staff, Lavelle was relieved of his command and retired in two-star rank. Said Abrams, in agreeing that Lavelle had "acted improperly," rules were a way of life in Vietnam. In a purely military sense, he acknowledged, some of those rules looked silly, but "if you are going to hold it together, they must be followed." [12] Lavelle's successor, General John Vogt, arrived just in time for Easter.

At noon on 30 March 1972, the long-expected enemy offensive began in Military Region 1 with widespread attacks

by fire. By midnight about 4,000 rounds of mortar, 122mm rocket, and 122mm, 130mm, and 152mm artillery fire had blanketed friendly fire bases across the front. The next day a heavy ground attack struck Quang Tri combat base, and Cam Lo was heavily attacked. Friendly troops were withdrawn from a crescent of fire support bases as enemy tanks were engaged by South Vietnamese armor south of the Cam Lo River. In an early report to Admiral Moorer, Abrams advised that "the enemy's offensive in Quang Tri Province involves a total of ten infantry and five artillery regiments" from the 304th and 308th North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions.[13]



**Figure 1. North Vietnam's 1972 Easter Offensive.**

Quickly a second prong of the enemy offensive thrust at the Central Highlands, and a day later yet a third targeted Loc Ninh in Binh Long Province, about 100 kilometers north of Saigon. The defending forces there were quickly overwhelmed, withdrawing under heavy pressure southward toward An Loc.[14] Soon the 325th NVA Division, North Vietnam's last remaining division in the north, was fixed in the Vinh area, 240 kilometers south of its usual location near Hanoi. Six enemy divisions had attacked on three fronts. "It's a full court press," Abrams almost exulted.

After a week, President Nixon decided to retaliate for this enemy aggression by launching a strong air offensive in the north. Two weeks into the offensive John Vann wrote an assessment that he mailed to a number of friends. "There is very little assistance being provided [to the enemy] in I, II, and III Corps by the local forces, and the enemy's infrastructure plays hardly any role at all," he reported. "The explanation for the latter is fairly simple. The existing

infrastructure in South Vietnam hardly deserves its name or notoriety. The overwhelming number of the individuals now called members of the infrastructure no longer reside in populated areas, but instead exist in the base areas, carry weapons, and are largely indistinguishable from other military personnel."

What was under way, then, was a straightforward conventional invasion on multiple axes. Even at this early stage, and there was much, much hard fighting ahead, Vann forecast the outcome. "It is quite predictable," he wrote, "that their regular forces will . . . be defeated and will suffer such heavy casualties and losses of equipment as to be ineffective for the next one to two years." [15]

In Military Region 1 the first five days of heavy assaults on the northern crescent of fire bases resulted in enemy advances as far south as the Dong Hai River, but there resistance by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) stiffened and the enemy paused to regroup and resupply. A later history of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN, aka the North Vietnamese Army) acknowledged the effective fight put up by ARVN defenders. "Relying on defensive fortifications already in place and on their reinforced troop strength," it recalled,

the enemy organized a defensive system consisting of three centers--Dong Ha, Ai Tu, and La Vang-Quang Tri. Hundreds of tanks and armored personnel carriers formed a barrier of steel surrounding these bases. Artillery fire bases and tank guns fired scores of thousands of rounds into our positions. All types of tactical aircraft and B-52 strategic bombers dropped hundreds of tons of bombs. Because the enemy had increased his troop strength and his fire support, and because he had changed his defensive plan, the wave of assaults made by our troops on 9 April was not successful. [16]

Sir Robert Thompson noted that the enemy had moved only 18 miles in three weeks, "not exactly an electric advance." [17] When the assault resumed, however, Quang Tri City was captured on 1 May and evacuation of Fire Support Base Nancy was forced two days later. The proximate cause of these reverses was withdrawal of the 20th Armored Squadron, ordered by 1st Armored Brigade commander Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat without notifying either higher headquarters or adjacent units. This move spooked other friendly forces into displacing prematurely and opened a convenient hole through which the attacking NVA drove deep into friendly lines. [18]

At the end of the third week, Abrams brought his field commanders in to review the situation and gain a little perspective. "There's been some poor performances," he acknowledged, then continued:

But there always have been poor performances--in war or anything else. And I think that there always will be. You've got a few guys do great, a few guys who are sort of satisfactory most of the time, and then you've got a few guys that are just miserable. But in this thing now, until this is over, there's no point--you've just got to accept the fact that there're going to be some poor performances. The trouble is that you're doing it with human beings. If you didn't have them, you wouldn't run into that. Some poor performances are not going to lose it. It's the good performances that are going to win it.

"I doubt the fabric of this thing could have been held together without US air," Abrams told his commanders,

but the thing that had to happen before that is the Vietnamese, some numbers of them, had to stand and fight. If they didn't do that, ten times the air we've got wouldn't have stopped them. So--with all the screwups that have occurred, and with all the bad performances that have occurred . . . we wouldn't be where we are this morning if some numbers of the Vietnamese hadn't decided to stand and fight.

On 24 April, Abrams cabled Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird his personal assessment of the situation. "The North Vietnamese have launched from their sanctuary in [North Vietnam] an all-out effort against the Republic of Vietnam," he began. "They are holding nothing back. Their last reserve division has been moved south near the DMZ and can enter the battle within two to four days after receiving orders." Four divisions and an independent regiment had already been brought down from North Vietnam, joining the seven divisions, 22 independent regiments, and seven artillery regiments already in South Vietnam. "It has been a conventional warfare battle employing the most sophisticated weapons."

"Overall," Abrams reported, "the South Vietnamese have fought well under extremely difficult circumstances. There

has been a mixture of effective and ineffective performance, as in any combat situation, but on the whole the effective far outweighs the ineffective. Thus far the South Vietnamese have prevented the enemy from achieving his major objectives." One significant improvement from the battles of Lam Son 719 the previous year was the integration of air, armor, artillery, and infantry into a coherent whole. "This has been outstanding," said Abrams. "They have made great progress in this area during the past year in particular."

Perhaps most gratifying of all, given the earlier problems, was that "leadership at the presidential level has been outstanding. President Thieu has provided sound guidance to the Joint General Staff, has made prompt decisions, and has made his personal presence felt by timely visits to combat areas." [19]

While fierce ground fights were raging along the DMZ, in the Central Highlands, and on the approaches to Saigon, an air and naval campaign of unprecedented ferocity was taking the war to the North Vietnamese. President Nixon ordered available fleet and air elements nearly doubled by rapid reentry to the combat zone of multiple squadrons of combat and supporting aircraft, including a hundred more B-52s--so many that on Guam one whole runway had to be closed for use as a parking lot--and over 50 naval combatants.[20] Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps tactical air came streaming into the theater from the continental United States, Hawaii, Korea, Japan, Okinawa and the Philippines. From 35 tactical air squadrons--US Air Force, US Navy, and Vietnamese Air Force--the total increased to 74, including five US Marine Corps, generating more than 55,000 sorties through early June. B-52s contributed another 4,759 devastating sorties, and fixed-wing gunships many more, with the daily average of tactical air sorties rising from about 380 to over 650 and B-52 sorties going from 33 a day to 150. Six aircraft carriers were assigned, putting four on station at all times. Along the naval gunline during the peak period, three cruisers and 38 destroyers provided naval gunfire support.[21] In a campaign designated "Linebacker," these forces began intensive bombing of targets in North Vietnam, including military facilities in and near the key cities of Hanoi and Haiphong, as well as round-the-clock support for South Vietnam's defending forces.

Soon air strikes brought to a halt all rail traffic south of Hanoi. On 8 May the MACV briefer stated that "pilots reported 16 bombs out of 20 on the power plant. If there're any lights burning in Hanoi tonight, they'll be candle power." Advances in bombing technology since earlier in the war were now providing greater accuracy and a humanitarian dividend as well. Newly introduced laser-guided bombs made it possible to take out in a single attack point targets such as key bridges that had withstood hundreds of attempts to destroy them with conventional munitions.[22] "And with the smart bombs," reported Seventh Air Force, "we don't have any problem with the civilian population."

Beginning 9 May, all the major North Vietnamese ports were mined. It took only a minute, literally, for nine Navy aircraft off the USS *Coral Sea*, roaring in at 400 knots only 400 feet off the deck, to put 36 Mark 52 mines--huge magnetic things weighing 1,100 pounds and packing 625 pounds of high explosive--in at Haiphong, the first target hit and North Vietnam's most important seaport. Over successive days the lesser ports were sowed, with all mines set to activate at 0900 hours on 12 May. "It took us eight years to get permission" to mine Haiphong harbor, said Admiral Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Afterward not one ship entered or left the harbor until we took up the mines." [23] This aerial bombardment campaign, wrote Allan Millett, "ruined North Vietnam's economy, paralyzed its transportation system, reduced imports by 80 percent, and exhausted its air defenses." [24] Commented Lieutenant General Dave Palmer, "Linebacker was not Rolling Thunder--it was war." [25]

Again the enemy agreed. "This war was different than the first war of destruction," observed a history of PAVN, contrasting Linebacker with the Rolling Thunder campaign of an earlier period in the war. "This time the enemy massed larger forces and made massive attacks right from the first day of operation, using many types of modernized technical weapons and equipment." [26]

In early May the South Vietnamese suffered a series of battlefield reverses so serious that Abrams cabled Laird that "the situation has changed significantly since my assessment of 24 April." In Military Region 1, Dong Ha had fallen, Quang Tri combat base had been evacuated, and Quang Tri City was threatened and would soon fall, overwhelmed by 40,000 attackers and outnumbered three to one. Farther south, Fire Support Bases Bastogne and Checkmate, important positions blocking Route 547 to Hue, had also fallen. In Military Region 2, the 22d ARVN Division in the Tan

Canh/Dak To area had performed poorly and suffered a costly defeat. In Binh Dinh province the situation was also very serious, with the only remaining friendly position in the northern half of the province not expected to hold.[27] In Military Region 3, ARVN troops were hanging on at An Loc in what Douglas Pike called "probably the single most important battle in the war," a terrific struggle in which a heroic and successful defense ended General Giap's hopes for decisive victory in the campaign.[28] Ultimately the enemy would commit to these three attacks his entire combat force--14 divisions, 26 separate regiments, and a huge array of supporting armor and artillery--save for one division remaining in Laos.[29]

"Enemy staying power is his most effective battlefield characteristic," said Abrams. "It is based first on his complete disregard for the expenditure of resources, both men and materiel, and second on discipline through fear, intimidation, and brutality. An enemy decision to attack carries an inherent acceptance that the forces involved may be expended totally." [30]

Then Abrams set forth the crux of the changed situation. "The RVNAF capability to turn back the enemy offensive is now a function of two intangibles. The first is RVNAF resolve and will to fight. Although the will to fight among senior leaders in MR-1 continues to be strong, there are serious problems in this regard at the lower levels, and command and control is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain." The problems in Quang Tri were serious, said Abrams, "and may be beyond correction." The poor performance of the 22d ARVN Division in Military Region 2 put the defense of Kontum City in doubt, but at An Loc and Fire Support Base Bastogne surrounded ARVN forces fought well. "Unless the ARVN forces hold on the ground and generate lucrative targets, US and [Vietnamese] air power cannot achieve [its] full effectiveness." The second factor mentioned by Abrams, not yet ascertained, was the amount of damage done to the enemy.[31]

Abrams closed with an unvarnished statement of the realities. "In summary of all that has happened here since 30 March 1972, I must report that as the pressure has mounted and the battle has become brutal the senior military leadership has begun to bend and in some cases to break. In adversity it is losing its will and cannot be depended on to take the measures necessary to stand and fight." Abrams cited two known exceptions--General Truong, commanding IV Corps, and the 1st Division's General Phu. "In light of this there is no basis for confidence that Hue or Kontum will be held." [32] Secretary Laird's reply to this evaluation showed that he understood the situation: "It is boiling down, as we have thought, to RVN will and desire." [33]

The next morning Bunker and Abrams met alone with President Thieu. Abrams showed Thieu the assessment he had sent to Washington the previous evening. Thieu read it carefully, then--said Abrams--described in "big arrow" fashion how the battle should be fought. When he finished, Abrams stated his conviction that the real problem was the effectiveness of South Vietnam's field commanders, following that with a by-name description of individuals who were not measuring up. "I told President Thieu," reported Abrams to Laird, "that it was my conviction that all that had been accomplished over the last four years was now at stake, and, at this stage, it was the effectiveness of his field commanders that would determine the outcome--either winning all or losing all."

Thieu interrupted the meeting at that point to issue instructions for all corps commanders to report to the Palace later that day. Then Thieu offered the view that if Hue and Kontum could hold for four days they would have won the battle. Again Abrams expressed a contrary outlook. "I told the President that no one should think in any less terms than six weeks more of heavy, bloody fighting and maybe more. This is a battle to the death, the communists have planned it that way and will not quit until they have been totally exhausted." [34]

That same day Abrams found it necessary to transmit a grim order to his field commanders: "Effective immediately no Vietnamese commander will be air lifted out of a unit defensive position by US fixed-wing aircraft or helicopter unless such evacuation is directed personally by the RVNAF corps commander. Inform your counterpart." [35]

Soon thereafter Abrams sketched the nature of the fight and its effects on the enemy for visiting Assistant Secretary of Defense Barry Shillito. "Every one of these regiments that are in the fight [has] already been engaged," he said. "It's just an all-out onslaught, and the losses on both sides--I mean, he's losing tanks like he didn't care about having any more, and people, and artillery, and equipment. The level of violence, and the level of brutality, in this whole thing right now is on a scale not before achieved in the war in Vietnam. And that's what you're in."



With disaster impending in Military Region 1, President Thieu made a dramatic command change, moving Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong from Military Region 4 to take charge in the north. Said General Vien of the relieved Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, "Confronted with conventional warfare . . . he was at a loss." Later Vien was understanding, if not sympathetic, remarking that "the influence of politics on officers of General Lam's generation and their very background perhaps did not contribute to the cultivation of military leadership required by the circumstances." [36]

The effects of the change in command were electric. "General Truong is a symbol in that part of the country of all that's good in Vietnamese terms," said Abrams. "He went up there day before yesterday to take command. And when he went to Hue the first thing he did was to get on the radio and television. He told them that they were going to defend Hue. It would not fall. And at the end of it he called on every soldier to report back to his unit--*now*. And those who failed to do it would be shot."

It was not only Truong's personal leadership and charisma that turned things around, but also his professional approach to doing business. "Prior to his arrival we [the South Vietnamese] ran I Corps on the dial exchange telephone by personal calls from the corps commander to division commanders, and then never a staff follow-up to tell everybody else what was said to a particular division," observed General Fred Kroesen, the senior American advisor in Region 1. Things were different under Truong. "He's got the staff functioning for the first time ever in I Corps. General Truong has got that staff working, and there's a sense of urgency in the staff that's never been there before."

In a later account the enemy also paid implicit tribute to Truong's professional competence. After Truong took command in Military Region 1, read a history of PAVN, "the enemy concentrated on consolidating his defensive line along the My Chanh River and utilized this line as a base to strike out to the east and west in order to sabotage our preparations to attack Hue." Due to intensive B-52 and naval gunfire, "our troops encountered many difficulties in maintaining their supplies." Then, "because we were slow to change our campaign tactics at a time when the enemy had strengthened his forces and solidified his defenses, our assault against the My Chanh defensive line . . . was unsuccessful, and our losses in that attack were twice those suffered during the two previous attacks." Fighting on that front had become "very complicated." [37]

Sometime during May, remembered an officer on the MACV staff, General Abrams arrived for a briefing and began with an observation:

Every morning, when I walk over to my office from the quarters, I feel just like a company commander on the battlefield, tired and apprehensive. I haven't had enough sleep because the phone from Washington keeps ringing, and I know that there will be another battle waiting, another hill to be taken. And, sure as hell, there won't be enough ammo, the weather will be bad, and replacements not up yet. But all I will hear is, "Abrams, get moving and take that hill."

There Abrams paused for a moment, smiling broadly as he looked around at everyone: "But, you know, I like it!" [38]

Colonel William F. Wollenberg was then in charge of drafting daily messages expressing the "Personal Assessment of the COMUSMACV." After one such message was dispatched, there came a query back: "Can the South Vietnamese hold?" Major General John Carley, the J-3, took it upon himself to draft a six-page reply. Abrams rejected it. Then Wollenberg was given the task. He wrote simply: "It looks to us like the job will get done." Abrams looked at that, made one change, and the message was dispatched: "It looks to me like the job will get done."

Subsequently, as the critical point approached on multiple fronts, Abrams determined to mass his most potent weapon, the B-52, for concentrated strikes in sequence on each battlefield in turn. On 10 May he cabled Fred Kroesen in Region 1, John Vann in Region 2, and Jim Hollingsworth in Region 3. "I want to use the three days, 11, 12, and 13 May," he told these commanders,

which we may have before the enemy attack, to inflict as much damage as possible on the major enemy troop units and their supporting artillery. Therefore, I have decided to allocate the entire B-52 effort to

MR-3 on 11 May, to MR-2 on 12 May, and to MR-1 on 13 May. This means that for two days between 11 and 13 May each of you will have no B-52 support and you must plan your tacair, naval gunfire, and artillery support accordingly. On the day that you have the entire B-52 effort, the targeting will be against enemy troop units posing the greatest threat to An Loc, Kontum, and the Hue area and their supporting artillery and not against the deep logistics areas. You should apply multiple strikes to major enemy troop locations with consecutive TOTs [the time on target for each scheduled strike] on each rather than spreading the TOTs over a long period.[39]

That concentration of force meant they'd be getting three B-52 sorties every 55 minutes, around the clock, for 24 hours.

The results of this tactic were spectacular. Hollingsworth in particular thought the airstrikes had been his salvation. When he got the word that Abrams was giving him the total sortie allocation, he said, "If it'd done any good to show my appreciation I'd have just jumped out of the damn helicopter. By god it just saved us, that's all. And I'll say that your intelligence department must be awful damn good--that you knew that that was the time to go. We just couldn't hit her any better on this one."

The enemy saw it the same way. In a subsequent historical analysis the North Vietnamese acknowledged that during April and May, "The enemy mobilized a large number of B-52 sorties to viciously attack our campaign rear areas." Thus "three waves of assaults against Binh Long City," apparently the enemy's designation for An Loc, "were all unsuccessful. Our units suffered heavy casualties and over half of the tanks we used in the battle were destroyed. On 15 May, after 32 days of ferocious combat, our troops ended the attack on Binh Long City." [40]

In the middle of these fearsome strikes, Abrams held a commanders' brief at which he spoke frankly of what he had been telling the South Vietnamese. "For the last several years I've tried to maintain rapport with the Vietnamese that I work with. And I've tried not to do things that they would find insulting--always been kind of careful about that," he began,

but I wanted to tell you, in the last few weeks, in my conversations with General Vien, and with the President, I've said it straight, and called it for what it was worth. Just the other day General Vien was telling me about some equipment they wanted, and I told him that we were doing everything we could to get this equipment to them and so on. But I then went on to tell him, I said, "Equipment is not what you need. You need men that will *fight*. And you need officers that will fight, and will lead the men." I said, "No amount of equipment will change the situation. It's in the hands of *men*, and if they'll fight, and their officers will lead them, you've got--even today--you've got all the equipment you need." I said, "That's the trouble." I said, "I don't think you've lost a tank to enemy fire. You lost all the tanks in the 20th because the men abandoned them, led by the officers. You lost most of your artillery because it was abandoned and people wouldn't fight." Now I don't want you to go back and tell your counterpart that I told the President off. That's not why I'm telling you this. I want you to know the way I'm conducting my business with the counterparts I have to deal with, and I think it has to be straight with them. I'm never insulting and so on, but it's a fact. And that's what we must talk about are the facts.

By mid-May the friendly situation was looking much more favorable in the Highlands, in fact all around. "Since the fall of Quang Tri," said Abrams, the enemy "really hasn't been able to put anything together. Now you may say, 'Well, that's right. He didn't plan to. He's just gathering stuff together and he will eventually.' And maybe that'll happen. But we do know that the divisions in here--the 308th, the 304th and the 324 Bravo--have taken really horrible losses." As for retaking Quang Tri, suggested Abrams, "I think all we've got to do is keep [the Joint General Staff] out of it and let Truong develop a plan. And then it will be a good one."

The tide of battle was now sweeping back in favor of the South Vietnamese, with the outcome in fact decided, and only some more hard fighting needed to nail it down. When Abrams and journalist George McArthur discussed the situation, McArthur asked an interesting question: "You always hesitated to criticize Giap," he observed. "What about now?" Abrams recalled Cornelius Ryan's book about the last 100 days of World War II in Europe. "Those Germans knew the war was over," said Abrams; "they knew that all the decisions had been made; they knew they had lost. They

knew they had no hope and they went ahead and just died. In a way I think we might be at that point now. Giap is a very resourceful fellow. But I think"--and here, said McArthur, Abrams was very emotional--"what is going on now is just a lot of unnecessary killing." [41]

In Military Region 1 the enemy was stopped at the My Chanh River, the southern boundary of Quang Tri Province. Late in June the Airborne Division was airlifted south of the river and, attacking with other ARVN and marine troops, drove the NVA back 20 kilometers to Quang Tri City. [42] "Beginning in late June 1972," observed the North Vietnamese in their later historical analysis, "combat on the Tri Thien Front became very complicated, with fierce back-and-forth fighting between our troops and the enemy." [43] Fielding three divisions against six of the enemy, Truong led a fight that lasted the rest of the summer. With marines leading the way, he retook Quang Tri City. In late September the reconstituted 3d ARVN Division began an operation to drive the enemy out of Tien Phuoc and, after a week of bitter fighting, retook the town.

At Kontum City the equivalent of three enemy divisions kept the city under siege for nearly two months. The airfield had to be closed due to enemy fire, and resupply was accomplished by air drop. But the defenders--now the 23d ARVN Division, a unit far superior to the routed 22d Division--held on, inflicting casualties on the enemy estimated to exceed 16,000. [44] The performance of the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) had counted for a lot. "VNAF came into its own during the 1972 offensive," said a USAF advisor. "In the defense of Kontum the VNAF has been magnificent, absolutely magnificent." [45] B-52s weighed in at Kontum in a decisive way as well. Late on 14 May the enemy broke through the seam between two defending regiments and began a series of mass assaults. Fortunately two B-52 strikes had been planned for that night. "The two B-52 strikes came exactly on time, as planned," recalled General Truong, "like thunderbolts unleashed over the masses of enemy troops. The explosions rocked the small city and seemed to cave in the rib cages of ARVN troops not far away. As the roar subsided, a dreadful silence fell over the scene. At dawn, ARVN search elements discovered several hundred enemy bodies with their weapons scattered all around. Kontum was saved." [46] John Vann credited the Territorial Forces, not the army, with much of what went right in Region 2. "The RF and PF, in most places, have performed quite well and were a much more stabilizing force than the ARVN," he reported.

Meanwhile at An Loc the defenders had withstood three months of constant North Vietnamese bombardment in what General Hollingsworth called "this desperate, fanatic adventure on the part of Hanoi." [47] Attacks by fire reached a peak on 10 May when over 7,600 rounds were received, part of more than 47,000 rounds during that month, bombardments punctuated by repeated tank and infantry attacks. General Truong called it "the longest and bloodiest siege of the war." [48] With the B-52 onslaught of 11 May, the back of the enemy siege was broken. Despite one attack after another by three divisions, An Loc could not be taken, and the enemy was left with more than 12,000 casualties to show for his efforts.

The South Vietnamese lost over 8,000 killed in action during the Easter Offensive, about three times that many wounded, and nearly 3,500 missing. During the campaign over 53,000 men volunteered for military service and nearly 18,000 additional were conscripted, while more than 40,000 of those already serving deserted. Said Lieutenant General William McCaffrey, "The ARVN soldier emerges as a remarkable individual who perseveres in spite of great hardships. He has earned a victory." [49]

The North Vietnamese Army suffered more than 100,000 casualties in its attacking force of 200,000--perhaps 40,000 killed--and lost more than half its tanks and heavy artillery. It took three years to recover sufficiently from these losses to mount another major offensive, and in the meantime General Vo Nguyen Giap found himself eased out as NVA commander. [50]

One important result of the Easter Offensive was the relief from command of certain ARVN incompetents. Two corps commanders--Lieutenant General Lam and Lieutenant General Ngo Dzu--lost their jobs. Brigadier General Vu Van Giai, who had commanded the newly formed and ill-fated 3d Infantry Division until its collapse a month into the battle, was not only relieved but court-martialed and imprisoned. Giai was, it appeared, a victim of General Lam's shortcomings, a radically overextended span of control (at one point two of his own infantry regiments, two marine brigades, four ranger groups, an armor brigade, and all the province's territorial forces were under his command), and the inevitable liabilities of a new division. Wrote Major General Hoang Lac sympathetically, "General Giai, a soldier

with most of his life sleeping out in the jungle, was sentenced to five years in military confinement and imprisonment. Gai remained there until the NVA took over Saigon and put him in their camp, a fate undeserved for a good and brave soldier." [51] The Marine Division commander was also relieved, and the commander of the 22d Division had simply disappeared. At the regimental level, the 56th Regiment was surrendered intact by its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Dinh, who soon thereafter came on the airwaves urging other ARVN soldiers to come over to the enemy side. [52]

After the war, General Truong wrote a thoughtful analysis of the Easter Offensive and its aftereffects. "The American response during the enemy offensive was timely, forceful, and decisive," he affirmed. "This staunch resolve of the US to stand behind its ally stunned the enemy. Additionally, it brought about a strong feeling of self-assurance among the armed forces and population of South Vietnam." [53]

"When the enemy offensive began," added Truong, "Vietnam's fate was in its own hands. President Thieu, the Joint General Staff, and the corps commanders had to decide where, when, and how to fight." Much of that was of course dictated by the dimensions of the enemy offensive, but--as Truong also observed--on the part of the South Vietnamese "there was no change in strategy; the concept of securing all national territory continued to be the order of the day. Every area, every strongpoint, no matter how small or remote, had to be held `at all cost."

Truong recalled President Thieu's strong insistence that "we would not yield even a pebble in Quang Tri or a handful of mud in Ca Mau to the enemy." On other occasions, many other occasions, Thieu had repeated and emphasized what he called his "four no's": "no coalition, no neutralization, no territorial concessions, and never let communist forces operate openly in South Vietnam." Yet now, despite successful defense against the three major thrusts of the Easter Offensive, some lost territory could not be recovered. "South Vietnam had in effect lost a continuous, wide expanse of territory extending along the border from the DMZ to the northern Delta," wrote General Bruce Palmer, "an area which North Vietnam referred to as the `Third Vietnam.'" [54]

It took the North Vietnamese three years to recover sufficiently to mount their next offensive, a conventional invasion involving some 20 divisions. With US support for South Vietnam having evaporated, the outcome was foreordained. But in 1972, in one of their finest hours, the South Vietnamese defended their country with courage and tenacity, rewarded with eventual hard-won success.

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## NOTES

1. William E. Colby, Keynote Address, Vietnam Symposium, Texas Tech University, 18 April 1996.
2. John Paul Vann, remarks, Lexington, Ky., 8 January 1972, Vann Papers, Patterson School, University of Kentucky. In 1969 Joseph Kraft had written that Vann was "the all-pro pessimist among American officials here and the true source of much journalistic skepticism and not a few Pulitzer Prizes." *Chicago Daily News*, 25 August 1969.
3. James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1975), pp. 90-91.
4. Sir Robert Thompson in *The Lessons of Vietnam*, ed. W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell (New York: Crane, Russak, 1977), p. 103.
5. Douglas Pike, *PAVN: The People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1986), pp. 224-25.
6. Nixon made the announcement on 13 January 1972. This increment had to be out by 1 May, leaving the United States with 69,000 troops in Vietnam. At that time, Abrams noted, "We will have redeployed 95 percent of the maneuver battalions, 97 percent of the artillery battalions, and 91 percent of the attack aircraft squadrons." Recording, COMUS-ROK Minister of National Defense Brief, 10 February 1972, Abrams Special Collection (ASC), Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

7. Printed in the 19 December 1971 issue of *Nhan Dan*, as quoted in Recording, Commanders WIEU (Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update), 22 January 1972, ASC.
8. Recording, WIEU, 4 March 1972, ASC.
9. Ibid.
10. Recording, Special Authorities Brief, 20 January 1972, ASC.
11. James Pinckney Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1982), p. 255.
12. Abrams' comments were made in his confirmation hearing as Army Chief of Staff-designate.
13. Message, Abrams to Moorer, MAC 03019, 042335Z APR 1972, ASC.
14. By MACV's calculations the enemy had initiated the offensive on the night of 30 March in MR-1, on 31 March on the B-3 Front, and on 1 April in western MR-3. Recording, Commanders WIEU, 22 April 1972, ASC.
15. John P. Vann, letter for "My Friends," 12 April 1972, Vann Papers.
16. Vietnam Military History Institute, *History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, II, 389ff., unpublished trans. by Merle Pribbenow.
17. As quoted in Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (London: Scolar Press, 1978), p. 197.
18. Cecil B. Smyth, Jr., in Michael Martin, *Angels in Red Hats: Paratroopers of the Second Indochina War* (Louisville, Ky.: Harmony House, 1995), p. 43, n. 2. Luat had previously been a problem as commander of the 17th Armored Squadron during Lam Son 719.
19. Message, Abrams to Laird, MAC 03757, 241111Z APR 1972, US Army Center of Military History (CMH).
20. David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland, *The Vietnam Experience: South Vietnam on Trial, Mid-1970 to 1972* (Boston: Boston Publishing, 1984), p. 142. Also Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., *On Watch: A Memoir* (New York: Quadrangle, 1976), p. 379.
21. Ngo Quang Truong, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington: CMH, 1979), p. 77.
22. MACV Command Briefing, 23 October 1972.
23. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, interview, 26 September 1994.
24. Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Free Press, 1984), pp. 564-65.
25. Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: A History of the Vietnam War from a Military Man's Viewpoint* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), p. 321.
26. Vietnam Military History Institute, *History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, II, 389ff., trans. Pribbenow. The history continued:

Because the enemy had escalated rapidly, was bombarding us massively, and was using many types of new weapons and items of technical equipment (laser-guided bombs, guided missiles, various types of jammers, etc.) many units and local areas suffered heavy losses. Almost all the important bridges on the railroad and on the road corridors were knocked down. Ground transportation became difficult. Coastal

and river transportation were blocked. The quantity of supplies shipped across the Gianh River forward to the battlefields was only a few thousand tons for one month. Enemy jamming equipment made it difficult to locate targets, especially B-52's. Our low combat efficiency, as revealed by the ineffectiveness of our targets and by the low number of enemy aircraft shot down, became a source of concern.

27. Message, Abrams to Laird, MAC 04021, 011601Z MAY 1972, CMH.
28. Pike, p. 225.
29. Truong, p. 13.
30. Message, Abrams to Laird, MAC 04021, 011601Z MAY 1972, CMH.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Message, Laird to Bunker and Abrams, OSD 04321, 031617Z MAY 1972, CMH.
34. Message, Abrams to Laird, MAC 04039, 020443Z MAY 1972, CMH.
35. Message, Abrams to multiple addressees, MAC 04040, 020452Z MAY 1972, US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.
36. Cao Van Vien, *Leadership* (Washington: CMH, 1981), pp. 138-39.
37. Vietnam Military History Institute, *History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, II, 389ff., trans. Pribbenow.
38. As quoted by Major General Stan L. McClellan, letter to Mrs. Abrams, 8 October 1974, enclosing "Recollections of Maj. Gen. Stan L. McClellan on 4 September 1974."
39. Message, Abrams to multiple addressees, MAC 04325, 100730Z MAY 1972, ASC.
40. Vietnam Military History Institute, *History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, II, 389ff., trans. Pribbenow.
41. George McArthur, notes of 24 May 1972, provided to the author by Mr. McArthur.
42. Cecil B. Smyth, Jr., in Martin, p. 40.
43. Vietnam Military History Institute, *History of the People's Army of Vietnam*, II, 389ff., trans. Pribbenow.
44. MACV Command Briefing, 23 October 1972.
45. Major Gordon E. Bloom as quoted in Project CHECO, *Kontum: Battle for the Central Highlands, 30 March-10 June 1972* (Headquarters, Pacific Air Forces, n.d.), p. 83.
46. Truong, p. 98.
47. Message, Hollingsworth to Vogt and Monger, ARV 0969, 221550Z APR 1972, CMH.
48. Truong, p. 176.
49. Lieutenant General William J. McCaffrey, Senior Officer Debriefing Report, December 1972, MHI.
50. Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 178. Other estimates of the enemy's casualties are much higher, Sir Robert Thompson, for example, wrote that "the `great

sacrifices' called for by General Giap had been paid to the extent of an estimated 130,000 men killed and disabled." *Peace Is Not at Hand* (New York: David McKay, 1974), p. 121. General Bruce Palmer, Jr., stated in his study of CIA intelligence on the war that enemy "losses for the March-September 1972 period were conservatively estimated at over 100,000 killed." "US Intelligence and Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence* (1984 Special Issue), p. 94. Palmer's work also demonstrated that by this point CIA was virtually ignoring the war. A National Intelligence Estimate published in April 1971 was the last NIE or SNIE on Vietnam until October 1973, almost two and a half years later. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

51. Hoang Lac and Ha Mai Viet, *Blind Design: Why America Lost the Vietnam War* (privately printed, 1996), p. 78. General Truong agreed, stating that "to put it briefly, the 3d Division failed because it was overburdened." Truong, p. 166.

52. G. H. Turley, *The Easter Offensive: Vietnam, 1972* (Novato: Presidio, 1985), p. 274. In commenting on this development, Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., recalled how, during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, the US 106th Infantry Division panicked and two of its regiments surrendered to the Germans. *Vietnam War Almanac*, p. 292.

53. Truong, p. 179.

54. Palmer, "US Intelligence and Vietnam," *Studies in Intelligence* (1984 Special Issue), p. 94.

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