

North Vietnam's Final Offensive: Strategic Endgame Nonpareil

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From *Parameters*, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 58-71.

[Go to Winter issue Table of Contents.](#)

[Go to Cumulative Article Index.](#)

Almost a quarter century ago, a third world country won the final battle of a long and difficult war through the use of an unexpected and decidedly modern strategy. The tutorial embodied in this victory is worth remembering today, in an age when there is a tendency to rely more on technology than on strategy and to assume that our enemy's strategic skills are as backward as his nation's economy, social structure, and technological base.

On 4 March 1975, the Communist People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) launched the final campaign of its 30-year war with an attack on South Vietnamese positions in the Mang Yang Pass in the Central Highlands. The PAVN offensive, which ended in total victory less than two months later, was unlike any other in the war's long history. The difference? For the first time, PAVN's campaign strategy was not based primarily on the demonstrated willingness of its troops to die in greater numbers than those of its opponents. Moreover, it paid only lip service to the old dogma of a popular uprising. The PAVN campaign relied instead on deception, diversion, surprise, an indirect approach, and alternate objectives--in short, a highly cerebral strategy. PAVN finally mounted a campaign worthy of the modern, professional army the Vietnamese communist leadership worked so long to build.

Many historians maintain that given the massive reductions in US military aid to South Vietnam after 1973, any major communist offensive was bound to succeed. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) which confronted PAVN in early 1975, however, was no paper tiger.[1] While ARVN suffered from serious morale and logistics problems, and much of its leadership was abysmal, ARVN's soldiers were hardened veterans, and South Vietnam still maintained vast stockpiles of ammunition and equipment (as demonstrated by the massive quantities of war materiel captured by the North Vietnamese when the war ended). The final collapse of the South Vietnamese army may well have been inevitable, but the end would have been much bloodier

and much longer in coming had the communists chosen a more direct, conventional plan of attack. In fact, the most damaging blow of the entire communist campaign may have been the crushing psychological blow their skillful and unexpected strategy dealt to the mind of ARVN's commander-in-chief.

The following account, drawn primarily from Vietnamese communist sources, is the story of the evolution of the PAVN campaign strategy. Unfortunately, the Vietnamese communists have not opened their military archives to an independent examination of the contemporaneous records of their 1975 campaign, nor have they allowed Western historians to conduct the kind of frank, open interviews of participants in these events necessary for a truly complete and balanced history. It was therefore necessary to base this account largely on histories and memoirs approved by the Vietnamese communist regime (although one of the primary sources, the memoirs of Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, was not only officially disapproved, it was confiscated and banned by the regime immediately after publication because of Tra's blunt criticisms of senior North Vietnamese officers, especially Chief of Staff General Van Tien Dung). While a diligent effort was made to filter out self-serving and propagandistic elements contained in the various communist accounts and to check these accounts against available historical records, it must be acknowledged that some aspects of their version of events must be taken with several grains of salt.

Initial Planning

The seeds of the 1975 communist offensive were planted during two high-level military conferences held in Hanoi in March and April 1974 to review the military situation.[2] These conferences concluded that PAVN had regained the initiative in the South for the first time since the 1972 Easter Offensive. Following the January 1973 Paris cease-fire agreement, PAVN had greatly expanded its logistics lifeline to the South, the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With the trail complex no longer subject to US air attacks, North Vietnam was shipping massive quantities of supplies and equipment southward--80,000 tons of military supplies in 1973 alone, including 27,000 tons of weapons, 6,000 tons of petroleum products, and 40,000 tons of rice. One hundred thousand fresh PAVN troops had marched down the trail to the South during 1973, and another 80,000 were on their way south during the first half of 1974. PAVN's troop strength in the South, decimated by the 1972 Easter offensive, now stood at its highest level of the war--400,000 full-time soldiers.[3] PAVN could now see its own light at the end of the tunnel. The problem it faced was how to get there.

Following the March and April meetings, in May the General Staff in Hanoi completed a draft study titled, "Outline Study of a Plan to Win the War in the South." [4] This study was forwarded to PAVN's Commander-in-Chief, the legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap, for review. On 18 July 1974, after carefully evaluating this outline, General Giap called in his senior deputy, General Hoang Van Thai, and issued orders for the preparation of a full-fledged campaign plan aimed at securing total victory in the South by the end of 1976. Giap's overall concept was for a two-stage offensive consisting of a major attack by main-force regulars in the Central Highlands followed by an all-out assault against the defenses of Saigon.[5] (While most historians assert that Giap played little or no role in the 1975 attack, claiming that he had by this time been reduced to mere figurehead status by illness and the failures of his 1968 and 1972 offensives,

North Vietnamese accounts describe Giap as being very much involved in the planning and overall command of the offensive from its inception through its final victorious conclusion.[6] On 26 August 1974, after ripping up a number of earlier drafts, the General Staff completed the "Strategic Plan for 1975-76" and circulated it to senior party and military leaders for comments.[7] The finished plan was finally presented to party leaders for approval at a lengthy Politburo session in October 1974.[8]

Even though PAVN knew it had regained the strategic initiative in South Vietnam, the General Staff's initial plan was quite cautious because PAVN still had to contend with a number of serious problems.[9] Communist efforts to rebuild the Viet Cong's rural guerrilla base had largely failed, reaching only 30 percent of the 1973-74 plan's troop strength goals for local armed forces in the South.[10] Also, the communist urban political base was still very weak, and--most important--PAVN's regular forces were facing serious shortages of heavy weapons and ammunition.[11] In addition, while the North Vietnamese leadership believed it had a window of opportunity of several years to seek victory before the United States recovered from its own domestic turmoil, PAVN believed it must still be on guard against possible foreign intervention.[12] Giap's original instructions included the requirement that PAVN forces in North Vietnam be prepared for the possibility that the offensive might provoke a renewal of US bombing of North Vietnam or even a hostile amphibious landing on the North Vietnamese coast.[13] The General Staff decided that given these problems, PAVN could not mount a Tet 1968-style nationwide "general offensive and uprising" using large numbers of rural and urban guerrillas (which it did not have), nor did it have the resources to conduct a massive nationwide conventional attack along the lines of the 1972 Easter Offensive.

The deficiencies of PAVN's armored and heavy artillery forces, which were essential for attacks on heavily fortified ARVN regimental and divisional base camps, weighed heavily on the minds of the General Staff planners who drew up the plan presented to the Politburo in October 1974. Much attention has focused on the role ARVN's ammunition shortages played in the collapse of South Vietnam, but it is not generally known that PAVN suffered similar shortages. Soviet and Chinese military aid, especially in the category of "offensive weapons" (armor and artillery), had declined significantly since the Paris cease-fire.[14] PAVN's massive losses during the 1972 Easter Offensive exacerbated the shortages caused by these aid reductions. Also, much of PAVN's armor and artillery was in poor condition, and spare parts were in short supply.[15] Most PAVN artillery units, especially in the South, were still equipped only with light mortars, recoilless rifles, or single-tube rocket launchers. In the COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam) area of operations, consisting of the southern half of the country, seven infantry divisions (the 3d, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th) and one corps headquarters (4th Corps) were supported by only five battalions of field artillery, two of which were equipped with captured US-made weapons for which there was little ammunition, and three understrength armored battalions.[16] PAVN's 2d Corps, with three artillery regiments belonging to its three infantry divisions, a corps artillery brigade, a tank brigade, and a separate armored battalion, could field a grand total of only 89 tanks and armored personnel carriers and 87 towed artillery pieces when it set off to attack Saigon in April 1975.[17]

The most critical problem, however, was an acute shortage of ammunition for PAVN's tanks and heavy artillery (i.e., field artillery and mortars 85mm or larger in caliber). During their 1972

offensive communist forces had fired more than 220,000 rounds of tank and heavy artillery ammunition, with 150,000 rounds having been used on the Quang Tri front alone.[18] By 1974, PAVN's entire stock of heavy artillery and tank ammunition, including all ammunition held by combat units at forward warehouses, and in North Vietnam's strategic reserves, totaled just 100,000 rounds.[19] The ammunition problem was so serious that the PAVN artillery command had to replace the larger weapons in a number of units with obsolete 76.2mm and 57mm artillery pieces drawn out of storage for which there still was adequate ammunition.

Because of these problems, the PAVN High Command decreed that all remaining heavy equipment and ammunition be carefully husbanded for one decisive push, to be launched only when a decisive opening finally arrived.[20] The 1975-76 plan allowed for the expenditure of only a little over ten percent of PAVN's remaining artillery ammunition stocks during the entire 1975 campaign. Forty-five percent of the remaining ammunition was allotted for the 1976 campaign, with the rest to be held in reserve.[21]

"Strategic Opportunity"

Although the October plan was cautious, it was also extremely opportunistic. The plan's overall goal was to create, by any means possible, what PAVN called a "strategic opportunity." This strategic opportunity might be a military coup in Saigon, a political upheaval resulting in the collapse of the South Vietnamese government, or a decisive military victory won by PAVN main force units.[22] Whenever and however the strategic opportunity appeared, the plan called for all communist forces to move immediately and decisively to exploit the opportunity by launching an all-out offensive aimed at securing total victory in the shortest time possible before "countries inclined towards intervention," meaning primarily the United States and China, had time to react.[23]

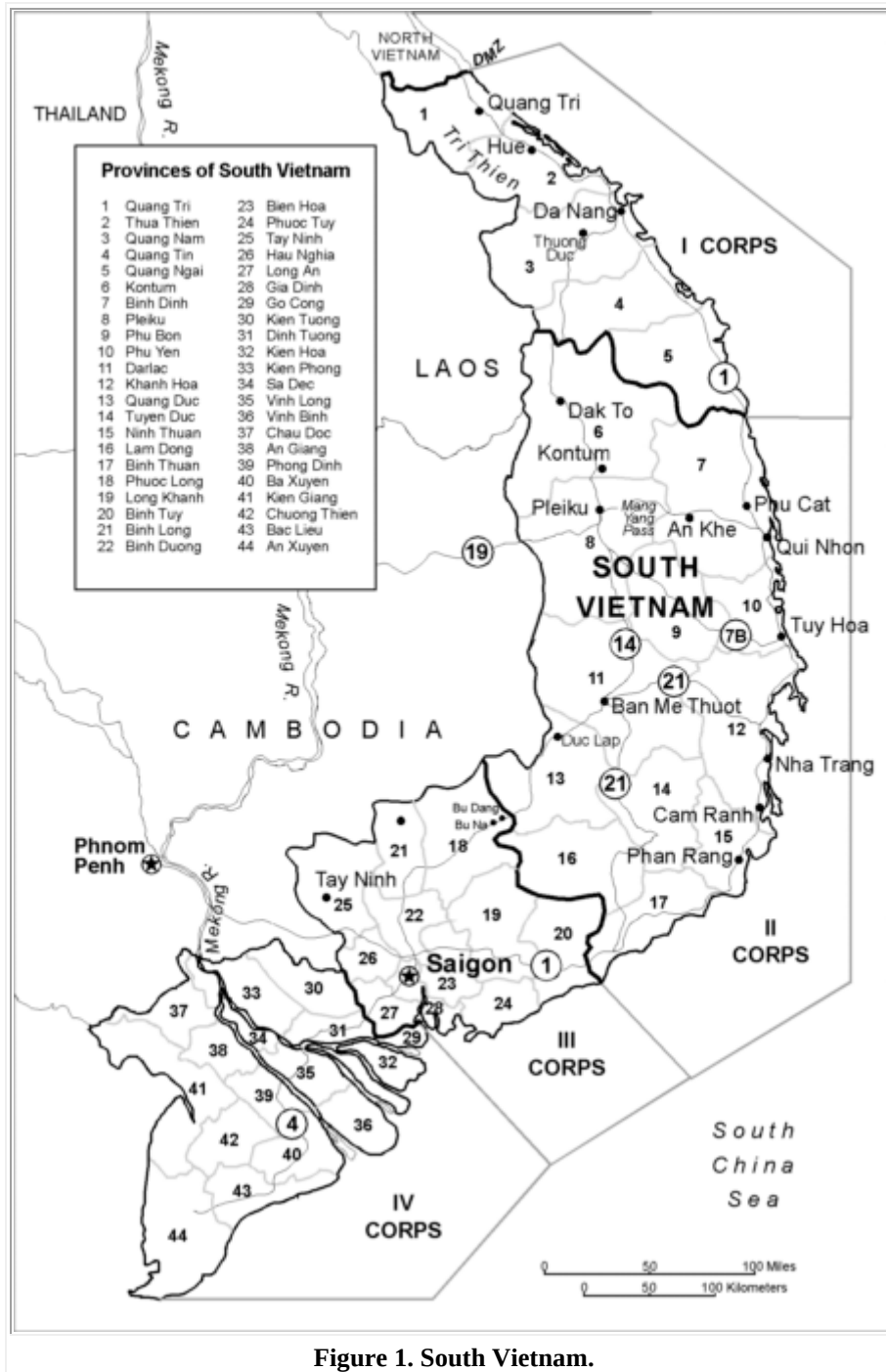


Figure 1. South Vietnam.

The offensive plan for 1975 was divided into three phases and was to be followed in 1976 by a "general offensive and general uprising" to complete the "liberation" of the South. The first phase of the 1975 plan, a limited offensive in the COSVN theater of operations, would last from December 1974 to February 1975. Phase two, the heart of the 1975 offensive, would begin in March 1975 with a corps-sized attack on the border outpost of Duc Lap on Route 14 at the southern end of the Central Highlands. The Duc Lap attack would be supported by secondary and diversionary operations in eastern Nam Bo (the general area from Saigon to the edge of the

Central Highlands), the lowlands of Central Vietnam, and the Tri Thien area (the northern portion of South Vietnam's I Corps). Phase three, August-October 1975, was a hodge-podge consisting of follow-up attacks in northern Central Vietnam, consolidation of PAVN forces in the rest of South Vietnam, and preparations to carry out "contingency plans" as needed. The plan's goals for 1975 were to destroy a significant portion of ARVN's total troop strength; defeat the pacification program; extend PAVN's logistics and supply network down Route 14 all the way to the Mekong Delta; interdict enemy lines of communications; cripple the South Vietnamese economy; and incite political opposition to the South Vietnamese government.[24] All these different goals had the same ultimate purpose: to wear down South Vietnamese resistance and create conditions for the appearance of a "strategic opportunity."

Although the Politburo approved the General Staff plan during its October session, it was not completely satisfied and decided to meet again in December to review developments and make revisions in the plan as needed. Events now intervened to significantly alter the PAVN plan. During the October Plenum, the Politburo had concluded that based on the new domestic situation in the United States (the political aftermath of Nixon's resignation), America would not re-intervene in the war in any meaningful way.[25] This removed a central concern of the PAVN planners, giving them the freedom to consider more aggressive options. In addition, in a battle lasting from August to December 1974, the PAVN 304th Division overran the key outpost of Thuong Duc in the mountains west of Da Nang and defeated a series of determined counterattacks mounted by two ARVN divisions, the 3d and the elite Airborne Division. Thuong Duc convinced PAVN's leadership that their soldiers could now defeat even the best troops ARVN could muster.[26]

The two final elements in the evolution of PAVN's final strategy, however, were those nemeses of planners everywhere: luck and the human factor. The human in this case was an ambitious general, Tran Van Tra. Tra was COSVN's military commander, a position he had held off and on since 1964. Tra was blamed by many for devising the plan used in the disastrous Tet 1968 attack on Saigon, and his career had stagnated as a result.[27] Now he saw a chance to redeem himself.

As we have seen, a key element of the General Staff's overall plan was the requirement to be prepared to exploit immediately any strategic opportunity. When Tra received the order from the General Staff for COSVN to prepare a contingency plan for an immediate attack on Saigon in the event of a possible "political-military event" (a coup), he transformed this "contingency plan" into the foundation of the entire COSVN plan for 1975. Tra set the capture of Saigon during 1975, not 1976, as the ultimate goal of the COSVN plan. He demanded that Hanoi immediately send him three or four more divisions to carry out this plan, and he changed the limited phase one COSVN offensive called for by the General Staff into a major operation aimed at laying the groundwork for the attack on Saigon by seizing control of the entire province of Phuoc Long. When the High Command balked at his requests, Tra set off for Hanoi to make his case in person.

Arriving in Hanoi in late November 1974, Tra found that the General Staff had canceled most of his plans for the Phuoc Long attack and forbidden any use of COSVN's precious armor and heavy artillery assets in the smaller attacks that remained. Tra angrily began lobbying his old comrades in the party leadership, especially First Secretary Le Duan, to reverse the General Staff

decision.[28] In the midst of his efforts, fortune finally smiled on Tra. During their initial attacks Tra's troops overran the small ARVN outposts at Bu Dang and Bu Na on Route 14. COSVN Military Command reported to Hanoi on 20 December that within the ruins of these two outposts PAVN forces had captured intact four 105mm howitzers and 7,000 rounds of artillery ammunition. This unexpected treasure trove stunned the leadership in Hanoi. Seven thousand rounds were more than half the number the General Staff had planned to expend nationwide during the entire 1975 campaign. Tra now argued that he could use this bonanza for his planned attack on the Phuoc Long province capital without even touching his current ammunition holdings.[29] In fact, PAVN could expect to capture even more ammunition at the larger bases. It was an argument the leadership could not resist. Tra was authorized to proceed with his original plans.[30] On 6 January the PAVN 3d and 7th Divisions completed the conquest of Phuoc Long province by taking the province capital and capturing another 10,000 rounds of artillery ammunition. The South Vietnamese did not make even a token effort to retake Phuoc Long, and while the United States threatened action by diverting the *Enterprise* aircraft carrier battle group toward South Vietnam, the *Enterprise* soon turned away and the threat evaporated.[31]

The unexpected Phuoc Long victory finally convinced the North Vietnamese leadership that their original plan was too conservative. The Politburo's assessment that the United States would not re-intervene in the war had been proven correct, the weakness of ARVN's defenses had been exposed, and, just as important, a solution to their most critical ammunition shortage--targeting and capturing ARVN artillery stocks--had finally been found.[32] In addition, the battle for Phuoc Long demonstrated to the Politburo that the plan for PAVN's main attack in 1975, the March offensive against Duc Lap by three PAVN divisions, was now outdated and would have to be changed. The plan approved in October had set two main goals for the Duc Lap attack: first, to clear Route 14 for use as a strategic transportation route for the final attack on Saigon, and second, to draw in and annihilate a significant portion of ARVN when it tried to retake the lost territory. Based on the lessons of Phuoc Long, it was now clear that if Duc Lap was attacked this second goal would not be met. Phuoc Long proved that the South Vietnamese were prepared to abandon remote and strategically unimportant areas such as Duc Lap. If the South Vietnamese did not try to retake Duc Lap, three entire PAVN divisions would be left sitting in the middle of nowhere with no one to fight, and the element of surprise would be lost. Tran Van Tra claims that it was he who first proposed changing the attack target to Ban Me Thuot. Whether or not Tra was first with the idea, the communist leadership embraced with open arms the prospect of seizing Ban Me Thuot.[33]

Ban Me Thuot was a city of over 100,000, the "capital" of the tribal peoples of the Central Highlands. It held the headquarters and rear base facilities of the ARVN 23d Division, including the tempting Mai Hac De supply complex with large stores of artillery ammunition. The city straddled a vital road junction where Route 14, running south from Kontum down to the northern approaches of Saigon, met Route 21, running east to the large coastal city of Nha Trang. If Ban Me Thuot was taken, PAVN forces could move swiftly by road north to take Pleiku from the rear, east to cut Vietnam in half, or south to attack Saigon. ARVN could not afford to lose such a strategic position and would be forced to mount a counterattack. This was doubly true because the families of the soldiers of the 23d Division were all housed in Ban Me Thuot--ARVN troops simply could not abandon their own wives and children without a fight. Ten years previously, the

tiny hamlet of Binh Gia east of Saigon had been selected as the target of the first communist multi-regimental operation of the war (in December 1964) largely because many families of ARVN marines were housed in Binh Gia. PAVN commanders had known ARVN would rush to retake the hamlet in order to rescue their loved ones and laid a trap which destroyed the ARVN relief force.[34] Now PAVN repeated this tactic on a much larger scale. Because Ban Me Thuot was so lightly defended (by only the understrength 53d Infantry Regiment, an armored and an artillery battalion, and several Regional Force battalions[35]), a massive surprise attack on the city would quickly overwhelm its defenders. Once the city was taken, PAVN forces could deploy to block and destroy ARVN's counterattack while the ARVN relief force was caught out in the open without time to dig in.

On 7 January 1975, at the conclusion of the Politburo session during which the new plan was approved, First Secretary Le Duan laid out the goals of the new attack:

In Military Region 5 and the Central Highlands, use three main-force divisions to attack the Central Highlands, open up a corridor connecting the southern Central Highlands with eastern Nam Bo, and create conditions for the main-force troops to move quickly into eastern Nam Bo and coordinate with the [COSVN] main force troops in attacking Saigon. The opening battles will be fought to take Ban Me Thuot, break through to Tuy Hoa and Phu Yen, cut the Military Region 5 lowlands [and South Vietnam] in half, and create another direction from which to rapidly advance south and put pressure on Saigon.[36]

Prospects for the future were so promising that the Politburo, acting on a suggestion from General Giap, ordered the General Staff to prepare a new contingency plan for the total conquest of South Vietnam before the end of 1975.[37]

Two days later the Central Military Party Committee met and laid down specific goals for the 1975 Central Highlands Campaign:

- Destroy four to five enemy infantry regiments, one to two armored squadrons, and inflict serious losses on ARVN 2d Corps units.
- Liberate the provinces of Darlac, Phu Bon, and Quang Duc, with the city of Ban Me Thuot as the main target.
- If the opportunity should arise, expand the attack to the north to liberate Pleiku and Kontum provinces or to the east to take Phu Yen and Khanh Hoa.[38]

To demonstrate the importance the leadership now attached to this operation, PAVN Chief of Staff General Van Tien Dung was ordered to depart immediately for the Ban Me Thuot area as the personal representative of the Politburo and to assume overall command of the Central Highlands Campaign.[39]

This new PAVN plan was daring and innovative. One senior South Vietnamese general, speaking after the fall of Saigon, saw in the PAVN strategy a reflection of B. H. Liddell Hart's strategy of the indirect approach.[40] PAVN's key blow would be directed not at the enemy's main army, but instead at a weakly defended strategic point which the enemy could not afford to lose. The plan emphasized the principles of mass, speed, surprise, and deception. Finally, the

seizure of Ban Me Thuot would allow PAVN to select any of several different options for its next move, thus forcing ARVN, already spread thin, to guess where PAVN would strike next. Enactment of the plan would place the South Vietnamese in the position that Liddell Hart most favored for an enemy: "on the horns of a dilemma." It invited ARVN's commanders to make a mistake and ensured that PAVN was prepared to exploit any opportunity.

Executing the Plan

Events now began to move quickly. Units participating in the attack (including the 10th and 320th Divisions of the Central Highlands Front; the 968th Division from Laos; the 316th Division trucked south from North Vietnam; four independent infantry regiments; armored, artillery, and engineer units; and 8,000 recruits from North Vietnam) began arriving at their assembly areas.[41] Assured by their excellent espionage network that the South Vietnamese were still ignorant of their real intentions, and aware they could not keep their massive supply and logistics preparations a complete secret, the communists mounted a sophisticated deception campaign directly targeted against the strongest element of their opposition's intelligence apparatus: the electronic and aerial reconnaissance assets of South Vietnam and its US allies.[42] Strict radio silence was imposed on all units involved in the offensive.[43] PAVN deception personnel sent hundreds of fake radio messages, made unconcealed truck movements, and conducted bogus road-building operations, all aimed at convincing the South Vietnamese that the PAVN 10th and 320th Divisions were concentrating around Pleiku and Kontum and that these two cities in the northern Central Highlands were PAVN's true targets. This deception operation was so effective that a number of human source reports from prisoners and agents indicating that PAVN was in fact about to attack Ban Me Thuot were disregarded by the South Vietnamese commanders.[44]

By the end of February all PAVN units were in place. On 1 March the 968th Division attacked several small outposts west of Pleiku, focusing ARVN attention on the threat to that city. On 4 March the PAVN offensive kicked off with an attack by Regiment 95A which overran several small ARVN outposts guarding Route 19 in the Mang Yang Pass, thereby severing ARVN's main supply route to its forces in the Central Highlands. Farther east on Route 19 the 3d PAVN Division launched its own offensive, making further cuts on this vital road and tying down the ARVN 22d Division. The next day PAVN's 25th Regiment cut Route 21, the only other road from the coast to the Highlands, between Ban Me Thuot and Nha Trang. ARVN forces in the Central Highlands were now isolated and completely dependent on aerial resupply. The South Vietnamese air force's meager air transport assets were totally inadequate to conduct an airlift of this size. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and his General Staff realized that unless Routes 19 and 21 were reopened soon, ARVN forces in the Highlands would rapidly run out of food, fuel, and ammunition. On 8 March the PAVN 320th Division overran a district capital on Route 14 north of Ban Me Thuot, cutting the road to Pleiku and completing the isolation of Ban Me Thuot. The stage was set for the final attack, and ARVN still had not guessed that Ban Me Thuot was the target.[45]

Watching developments in Saigon, President Thieu and his General Staff could not tell where the main communist blow would fall. As part of the PAVN deception campaign and to prevent ARVN reserves from being sent to reinforce the Central Highlands,[46] in the days preceding the

Ban Me Thuot attack communist forces had launched a wave of attacks throughout South Vietnam. In the north, on 5 March sapper and guerrilla forces attacked the lowlands of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, and on 8 March the PAVN 324th Division struck hard at ARVN's main defense line southwest of Hue.[47] To the south, on 8 March communist forces mounted a series of attacks in the Saigon area and the Mekong Delta, culminating in the capture of a key district capital northwest of Saigon.[48] President Thieu and his generals were befuddled. A nationwide communist offensive was clearly imminent, but what was its main target? Where was the danger the greatest? To Thieu and his generals, the answer appeared obvious: the capital, Saigon. PAVN's deception plan had worked to perfection.

On 9 March the PAVN 10th Division, with two infantry regiments (the 28th and 66th) and supported by only two 105mm howitzers with 50 rounds of ammunition, attacked and overran Duc Lap and all its outlying defensive positions within 24 hours. ARVN losses at Duc Lap totaled three battalions, including 14 artillery pieces and 20 armored vehicles.[49] After consolidating its victory, the 10th marched north toward Ban Me Thuot.

During the early morning hours of 10 March, 12 PAVN regiments launched a massive surprise attack on Ban Me Thuot. The 198th Sapper Regiment and two regular infantry battalions which had secretly infiltrated into the city struck Ban Me Thuot's two airports, the Mai Hac De supply depot, and the 23d Division headquarters. Five infantry regiments (three from the 316th Division, the 10th Division's 24th Regiment, and the battle-scarred veterans of the 325th Division's 95B Regiment) rolled into the city from three directions, led by 64 tanks and armored personnel carriers of the 273d Armored Regiment and under a curtain of fire laid down by the 78 heavy guns of the 40th and 675th Artillery Regiments.[50] The 232d and 234th Antiaircraft Regiments accompanied the attack columns, putting up an umbrella of antiaircraft fire so intense that South Vietnamese air force bombing attacks were largely ineffective and did almost as much damage to friendly forces as to their PAVN targets.[51] After 32 hours of combat, PAVN forces overran the 23d Division headquarters complex and captured the division's deputy commander.[52] General Dung informed Hanoi that his forces had captured 12 artillery pieces and 100 tons of artillery ammunition in Ban Me Thuot, assuring the worried General Staff that the offensive could proceed unhindered by ammunition concerns.[53] The North Vietnamese leadership immediately recognized the significance of their victory. During a Politburo meeting on 11 March, Le Duan broached the possibility that the strategic opportunity, the time to launch the final general offensive, might be imminent.[54] Victory in war goes to the side prepared to seize it. The North Vietnamese were prepared.

The drum roll of attacks, first seemingly directed at Pleiku, then Saigon and Hue, and now, unexpectedly, the assault on Ban Me Thuot, were psychological blows that stunned South Vietnam's leaders. Confused, desperate, and in what must have been a virtual state of shock, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu made two momentous decisions on 10 and 11 March that sealed the fate of South Vietnam. Thieu still had not guessed that Ban Me Thuot was PAVN's main target. He was convinced, however, that he was facing an all-out offensive and that PAVN's ultimate target was Saigon. Thieu's first move was to order the immediate recall of the ARVN Airborne Division, the cornerstone of the defense of I Corps, to shore up Saigon's defenses.[55] As ARVN commanders tried to withdraw units and redeploy to fill the gap left by the Airborne's pull-out, the defenses of I Corps began to teeter like a house of cards. Second, as

the North Vietnamese knew he would, Thieu ordered an immediate counterattack to retake Ban Me Thuot "at all costs." [56] With the road to Ban Me Thuot cut, ARVN II Corps Commander General Pham Van Phu was forced to send the two remaining regiments of his 23d Division into battle by helicopter, dropping five battalions on a landing zone east of Ban Me Thuot during the period 12-14 March with no armor and only limited artillery support. The regiments landed in the middle of a planned PAVN "killing zone." The 10th Division, newly arrived from Duc Lap and with powerful armored and artillery support, lay in wait. In four days of blitzkrieg-like attacks the 10th rolled over and destroyed what was left of the 23d Division and the 21st ARVN Ranger Group. [57] Meanwhile, the last remnants of ARVN's once-powerful army in the Highlands (19 ranger battalions, one infantry battalion, three armored squadrons, and six artillery battalions), their supply lines cut and with no prospect of resupply or rescue, were doomed. [58] Thieu's 14 March order to withdraw these forces from Pleiku down the unused and almost impassable Provincial Route 7B to the coast was an act of desperation aimed at saving what was left of his forces in the Highlands. The order was stupid, its execution abysmal, but, in context, it was understandable.

As General Dung's forces completed their destruction of the ARVN column withdrawing from Pleiku, General Giap ordered his forces around Hue to bypass the ARVN mountain defense line which had thrown back PAVN's initial attacks. Giap ordered PAVN 2d Corps to send its 324th and 325th Divisions to strike directly into the coastal lowlands, cut Route 1, ARVN's main line of withdrawal, and destroy retreating ARVN forces before they could regroup and consolidate. [59] Caught in the open and on the move, cut off and isolated, the retreating ARVN units were swept with panic. By 29 March, Hue, Da Nang, and all of ARVN I Corps were in communist hands.

Denouement

Meanwhile, during a historic Politburo session on 18 March, General Giap drove the final nail into South Vietnam's coffin with the last major strategic decision of his illustrious military career. Giap announced that the long-awaited strategic opportunity had now arrived. He recommended that PAVN immediately launch a nationwide general offensive to seize total control of South Vietnam before the end of 1975. North Vietnam's last strategic reserve, the elite 1st Corps, should now be committed to the battle. The Politburo instantly approved Giap's recommendations and issued orders for an all-out assault on Saigon. [60]

With this decision, the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. The coroner's certificate lists 30 April 1975 as the time of death, but the shot that killed the Republic of South Vietnam was fired on 18 March by General Vo Nguyen Giap. Contrary to his well-earned reputation for ruthlessness, Giap's last victory was also his most bloodless.

NOTES

1. On the fighting prowess of ARVN in the late stage of the war, see Lewis Sorley, "Courage and Blood: South Vietnam's Repulse of the 1972 Easter Offensive," *Parameters*, 29 (Summer 1999), 38-56.
2. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *History of the People's Army of Vietnam, Vol. II* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1994), pp. 461-62 (hereinafter HPAV); Hoang Van Thai, *The Decisive Years: Memoirs of Senior General Hoang Van Thai*, Joint Publications Research Service Report JPRS-SEA-87-084, 23 June 1987, p. 44.
3. HPAV, p. 458; Hoang Van Thai, p. 50.
4. HPAV, p. 461; Hoang Van Thai, pp. 37-39.
5. Hoang Van Thai, pp. 44-45.
6. See especially Hoang Van Thai, and Van Tien Dung, *Great Spring Victory* (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, 1976).
7. Hoang Van Thai, p. 66. According to this account, the man described by many as the architect of the 1975 victory, PAVN Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung, was "vacationing" abroad while the plan was being drawn up and got his first look at the plan only in August when he returned to Vietnam.
8. Ibid., p. 65.
9. Ibid., p. 47.
10. HPAV, p. 469.
11. Hoang Van Thai, pp. 60-61.
12. Ibid., pp. 56-57
13. Ibid., pp. 44-45.
14. HPAV, p. 469; Hoang Van Thai, pp. 36, 73. See also Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 334-35. Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *Alien Wars* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1996), drawing on official Soviet sources, state that the reduction in Soviet military aid to North Vietnam actually began in the early 1970s.
15. HPAV, pp. 469-71; Hoang Van Thai, p. 79.
16. Tran Van Tra, *Concluding the 30-Year War*, Vol. 5 of his *Memoirs* (Saigon: Ho Chi Minh Cultural Publishing House, 1982), pp. 131-32.
17. HPAV, p. 543.

18. Tran Van Tra, p. 182.
19. HPAV, p. 469; Hoang Van Thai, pp. 42, 60.
20. Tran Van Tra, pp. 159, 161.
21. Ibid., p. 186.
22. Hoang Van Thai, p. 67.
23. Ibid., pp. 57, 68.
24. Ibid., pp. 68-69. See also HPAV, p. 488, and Tran Van Tra, pp. 162, 181, both citing Duc Lap as the target for the phase two attack in the Central Highlands.
25. Van Tien Dung, pp. 27-28; HPAV, p. 483.
26. HPAV, pp. 479-81; Hoang Van Thai, pp. 62-63.
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