

The sudden change in the pattern of the war in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the spring of 1975 seemed vaguely reminiscent of three years earlier when the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had begun sustained conventional attacks in an attempt to gain its long-sought political ends in the south. However, in 1972, the timely application of U.S. power proved to be a key element in blunting Hanoi's carefully orchestrated "Easter Offensive."

At no place was this more apparent than in the besieged provincial capital of An Loc, 60 miles north of Saigon; during a three-month period commencing in April, 1972, the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army provided the ARVN garrison and its handful of U.S. advisors their sole means of fire support, their primary source of resupply and timely intelligence of enemy troop movements in and out of the An Loc area.

This triad of support not only broke the NVA stranglehold on the once-prosperous rubber plantation town, it also destroyed most of three enemy divisions that would have been poised to move on the nation's capital had An Loc fallen.

The onslaught in Military Region (MR) III was only one part of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's solution to force the collapse of the Thieu government. He also directed attacks across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) against Quang Tri and Hue and into the Central Highlands; each strike committed NVA regulars, well supported with tanks, heavy artillery and sophisticated air-defense weapons. Undoubtedly, the basic premises underlying the North Vietnamese planning were that the "Vietnamization" program had failed and that the U.S. government would be impotent in the face of domestic antiwar pressures.

The constraint imposed by the upcoming U.S. presidential campaign was an additional factor in favor of a communist initiative. A similar situation had arisen in 1968 when the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong had suffered a staggering military defeat during the Tet offensive but had reaped great political gains from the enervation of Saigon's chief ally. Given these conditions and the maximum use of NVA military force, the probability of success of an offensive in the spring of 1972 seemed very high.

An Loc, capital of Binh Long Province, straddles Highway 13 amid one of Vietnam's most fertile stands of rubber. Because it was near Cambodia and the enemy's bases there, its people had suffered the rigors of war since the early 1960s. In February and March, 1972, intelligence had identified three NVA divisions in the Krek-Chup plantation areas near the border of Tay Ninh and Binh Long Province. Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, the MR III commander, was sure the

By Maj. John D. Howard



ARMOR Magazine Photo

The military and political climate in 1972 placed the odds high in favor of Hanoi as it massed its Easter Offensive at An Loc.

However, precise planning smashed three enemy divisions and made a shambles of its armor attack.

A Study of U.S. Power



enemy planned a major attack with these forces, but he was not certain of the objective.

The NVA attempted to foment suspicions that Tay Ninh would be the target by mounting a major attack against a Vietnamese army (ARVN) fire base along Highway 22 on the night of 1-2 April. This feint in a traditionally contested area drew attention away from Binh Long and covered the movement of the three divisions into positions near their objectives (Figure 1).

The VC 5th Division began the first phase of the MR III campaign by attacking the district town of Loc Ninh in the predawn hours of 5 April. By afternoon, ARVN resistance centered on two compounds near the town's airstrip where U.S. advisors kept the enemy at bay for the next two days through a combination of well-placed air strikes and AC-130 (Specter) gunships. For the encircled forces, neither withdrawal nor evacuation remained feasible.

Finally, the preponderance of enemy numbers took its toll and notwithstanding the superhuman efforts of Maj. Gen. James F. Hollingsworth (commanding the Third Regional Assistance Command, or TRAC), U.S. aviators and troops on the ground, the outposts were overwhelmed. Of the seven U.S. advisors in Loc Ninh at the outset of the attack, only Maj. Thomas Davidson, the district advisor, managed to escape capture or death.

Fighting in the northern district also spilled over to engulf Task Force (TF) 52—two battalions from the ARVN 18th Division charged with holding a fire base and key bridges between Loc Ninh and An Loc. After being ordered to reinforce An Loc on the morning of 7 April, an NVA regimental-size ambush had forced the ARVN TF to abandon its equipment and withdraw to the south. Only 600 of the original 1,000 managed to reach the "safety" of the provincial capital.

Although the ARVN suffered a considerable blow from the loss of Loc Ninh and TF 52, the actions set a precedent for coming operations. It became evident that the influence exerted by U.S. air power would enable it to coordinate air assets of all services and to insure the constant presence over the battlefield of the TRAC commander (or his deputy, Brig. Gen. John R. McGiffert), to provide the command impetus for sustained support.

Soon after the fall of Loc Ninh, Gen. Hollingsworth decided to leave advisory teams with the ARVN units in An Loc. This would assure the presence of a U.S. Army officer or NCO to maintain quick communications between air and ground forces. During the two major attacks on the city, tactical air strikes, aerial gunships and armed helicopters were used close to each other

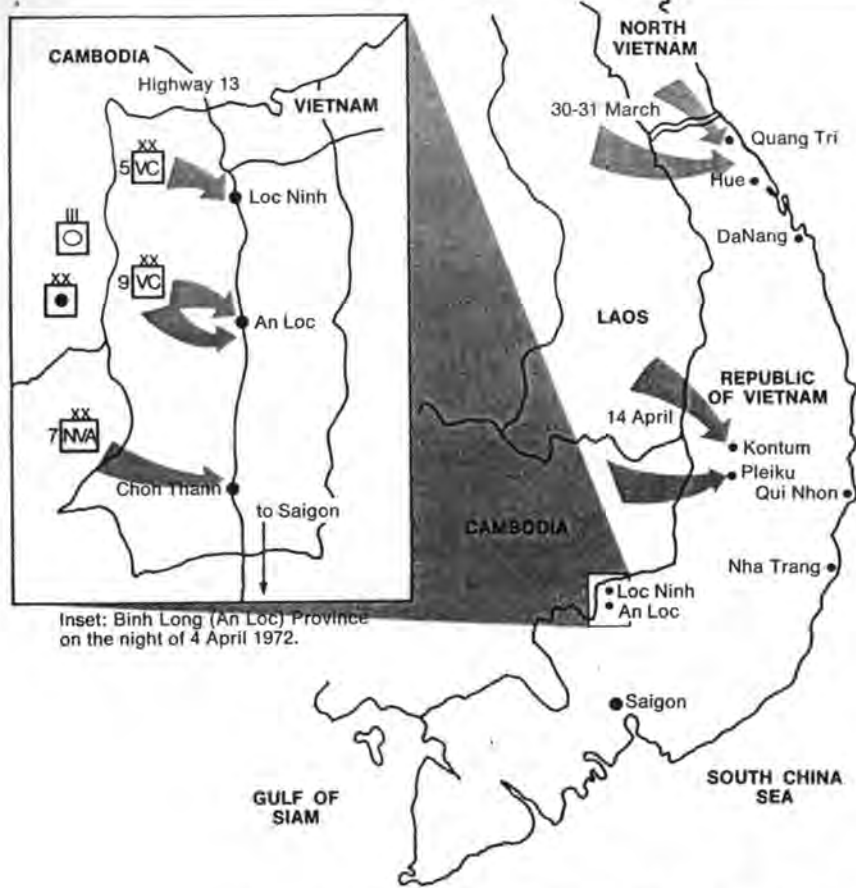


Figure 1. North Vietnamese Easter Offensive, April, 1972.

and friendly troops; control and direction of these sorties were vested in the advisors.

The enemy's first artillery shells that hit An Loc on 8 April sent streams of refugees who had flocked into the city fleeing toward Saigon. The return of many of them indicated what ARVN and U.S. senior officers had suspected; the city was surrounded by the NVA. However, the decision to make a stand in An Loc was firm; President Nguyen Van Thieu had announced that the city would be held "at all costs," and after a conference with his military commanders on 7 April assigned additional units to defend MR III and Binh Long Province.

The ARVN 21st Division and the 1st Airborne Brigade reinforced the corps organization, while the ARVN 5th Division hastily assembled its units (including the attached 3rd Ranger Group) in An Loc. By the afternoon of 12 April, nine battalions, regular infantry, Rangers, Territorial Forces and the survivors of the Loc Ninh battle were preparing to carry out the president's orders.

At the same time, intelligence indicated that the NVA would very soon make a determined effort to take An Loc. Patrols of previous days had reported increased contacts and the movement of large enemy forces into the area while military stragglers claimed they had seen many tanks near the city. Within An Loc there was a

noticeable increase in enemy artillery fire and definite attempts to deny the ARVN use of aerial lines of communication. Fortunately for the garrison, these indicators were properly evaluated by Gen. Hollingsworth and Gen. McGiffert.

On 12 April, they met in Lai Khe and planned B-52 and tactical air strikes for the next day on suspected enemy troop dispositions and along probable avenues of advance. Soon after midnight, it became obvious that the U.S. generals had read the NVA intentions and that a major attack was imminent.

The main attack, from the north at 0600, consisted of an armor thrust that drove the ARVN out of the northern half of the city. Although the defenders withdrew in good order, they were ably assisted by the U.S. Air Force and the NVA's ineptness at launching combined arms attacks. As the enemy pressed forward, his momentum was stalled by well-executed close air strikes that kept the NVA infantry away from the Russian-made T54 and PT76 tanks and isolated them in the narrow city streets.

While the B-52s, F-4s and A-37s struck well forward of friendly positions and prevented reinforcement of enemy troops in the northern sector, ARVN soldiers and U.S. Army Cobra (AH-1G) helicopters were able to attack the tanks with relative impunity. The first aerial tank kills were by Cobra aviators from the 1st Cavalry Division's Battery F, 79th Artillery, equipped with dual-purpose 2.75-inch rockets. Before noon, the helicopters, known by their radio call sign as "Serpent," had destroyed three T54 tanks and had forced most of the others into hiding among the rubble of buildings and in alleys.

During this confusion, one North Vietnamese tank crew demonstrated that even the NVA had that small percentage of people who don't get the word. Thinking the town was secured, they rolled down Ngo Quyen Street with hatches open, unaware that the soldiers in the fighting positions were ARVN, not theirs. After moving all the way through the city, a Territorial Forces' soldier retained enough presence of mind to knock out the tank with an M72 LAW (light antitank weapon).

This attack made An Loc a political as well as a military prize. At the Paris peace talks, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, chief representative for the Vietcong, vowed that the city would be taken in a few days and "become the seat of the Provisional Revolutionary Government in South Vietnam." This served to heighten passions on both sides; although the NVA resorted to heavy rocket and artillery fire against the defenders, an attack strong enough could not be mounted to exploit the gains that had been made.

Gen. McGiffert later said of the effectiveness of the B-52 flights and planned tactical air sorties of 13-15 April: "I really believe that without these the city would have fallen because the [enemy] infantry would have gotten in with the tanks."

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Patrols later confirmed that more than 400 enemy were found following the battle, half of them killed by air (Figure 2).

Coincident with the heavy fighting was Gen. Minh's attempt to reinforce the garrison with the 1st Airborne Brigade and the 81st Airborne Ranger Group. The airborne brigade's mission was to launch an airmobile assault on 14-15 April that was to secure that high ground southeast of the city. Two of its battalions were tasked to augment the perimeter while the 6th Airborne Battalion, an artillery battery and a light command post (CP) from brigade headquarters established two fire bases on key hills.

The operation, however, was short-lived because the NVA felt bound to make good its promise to take An Loc before 20 April. Two regiments overran the hills on 19 April, forcing the 1st Airborne Brigade's CP and two companies of the decimated 6th Battalion into An Loc. Their artillery destroyed by enemy fire, they joined other units of the brigade and became responsible for the southern portion of the perimeter while the 81st Rangers moved to the northern sector to assist the ARVN 8th Regiment and the 3rd Group.

The presence of the airborne and the 81st served to boost the morale of the ARVN 5th Division and lend credence to the government's promise that An Loc would not be allowed to wither away. On the night of 22 April, the 81st Rangers eliminated some of the enemy lodgments in their new area. Their aggressive attack was supported by an AC-130 aircraft whose 105-mm cannon ferreted the NVA out of the rubble of destroyed buildings. SFC Jesse Yearta of Columbus, Ga., light weapons advisor to the Rangers, used the Specter's fire as a rolling barrage.

So that the AC-130's fire control officer could keep the fire in front of friendly troops, SFC Yearta accompanied an assault squad and used scores of pen flares to provide a beacon from which the gunship could offset its fire. (He was later awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart for his action.)

Although An Loc had withstood the enemy's first determined assault, Col. William Miller, senior advisor to the ARVN 5th Division and the senior American in the city, thus assessed the situation:

The division is tired and worn out; supplies minimal, casualties to mount. Wounded a major problem, mass burials for military and civilians; morale at a low ebb. In spite of incurring heavy losses from U.S. air strikes, the enemy continues to persist.

Before this 17 April report, resupply of the garrison had been the responsibility of the U.S. Army and the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF), and during the heavy fighting it had been sporadic at best. When a VNAF aircraft was lost on 19 April, aerial resupply became the mission of Air Force C-130s. Initial efforts proved that this

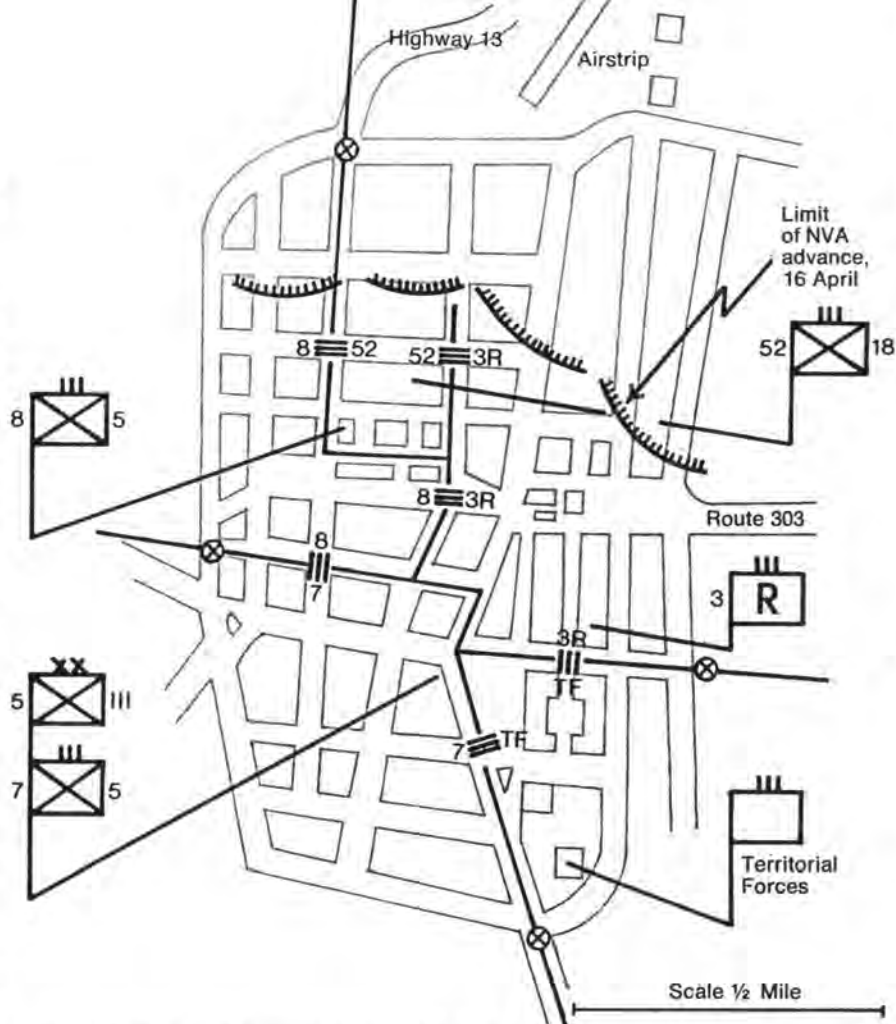


Figure 2. Status of Forces in An Loc, 12 April, 1972.

would not be easy; the NVA had the city ringed with .51-caliber, 23-mm, 37-mm and 57-mm gun emplacements, while an early-warning network of spotters notified firing batteries of incoming aircraft.

Daylight low-level runs drew heavy fire and both attempts to use this technique (18 April and 23-26 April) were justifiably terminated after severe damage to aircraft and several losses. The interim experimentation with high-altitude, low-opening (HALO) systems resulted in less aircrew exposure but proved unsatisfactory because of faulty parachute rigging. The airlift commander instituted low-level night runs in order to avoid some of the faults encountered with other methods; these missions still faced heavy ground fire and were complicated by difficulty in recognizing the drop zone (DZ).

Although the DZ was marked with lights, the signals were masked by antiaircraft tracers, artillery flashes and fires in the city. Col. Miller requested on 3 May that these missions be scrapped because he felt that the NVA was benefiting more by drops that went astray than was the ARVN through its recovery system. Finally, the arrival of U.S. parachute riggers at Tan Son Nhut air base prompted the return to HALO techniques.

Notwithstanding the restricted size of the DZ and the minimal area that was in friendly hands, the recovery rate rose significantly. As DZs were shifted to accommodate individual units, it became commonplace to recover all bundles.

Recovery of food and ammunition was only one aspect of An Loc's resupply operation. After pallets were gathered, an orderly distribution system became imperative for the garrison's survival. During the first Air Force resupply attempts, dog-eat-dog situations ensued on the DZ; fire fights broke out among hungry ARVN soldiers attempting to get to the food. Many recoveries went unreported because men were attempting to hoard. It was only after the Vietnamese commander placed Col. Luong of the 1st Airborne Brigade in charge of the DZ and the subsequent distribution did the logistical operations begin to function normally.

Trouble in receiving and distributing supplies were exacerbated by VNAF pilots' refusal to fly into An Loc on medevac missions. All helicopters were part of VNAF, so ground commanders in An Loc and at MR III headquarters had virtually no control over their actions. By 15 April, medical supplies were critically low and there was no advanced hospitalization; as a result of evacuation failures, soldiers who were lightly wounded often had to have limbs amputated and those who were seriously wounded were left to die.

On the few occasions when the VNAF helicopters did come into the landing zone (LZ), they hovered four to five feet off the ground so that only the walking wounded could climb into them—the "Olympic" wounded, one advisor called them. For litter cases, even to go out to the LZ was an exercise in futility. The failure of the VNAF to properly support its ground forces was painfully illuminated by U.S. helicopters inserted for medical evacuation and resupply of advisors.

Finally, Gen. Minh prevailed upon Gen. Hollingsworth to execute a combined mission under the command of a U.S. pilot to show the VNAF that it could be done. Although only partially successful, it demonstrated some techniques that Col. John Richardson of the 12th Combat Aviation Group used to assure helicopter survivability under active antiaircraft threat.

By the end of the first week in May, the resumption of near normal aerial resupply and some limited medical evacuation indicated the weaknesses in NVA strangulation and starvation tactics. Although more than 1,000 artillery rounds daily had been dropping on the city for several weeks, there were no signs of capitulation. The NVA felt it imperative to mount another major attack before the ARVN became much stronger. The 13 ARVN battalions in An Loc numbered 5,100 men; 1,000 of whom were wounded or otherwise ineffective.

To the south, the ARVN 21st Division and the 3rd Airborne Brigade were attempting to reopen Highway 13 against stiff opposition from the NVA 7th Division. While these units made little real progress in attempts to relieve An Loc, their potential nevertheless concerned the NVA high command.

In order to get the force necessary for a major



assault, the VC 5th Division moved into the An Loc area to bear the brunt of the next battle, relegating the VC 9th Division to a supporting role. The commander of the VC 5th Division, flushed with his victory at Loc Ninh, boasted that while the previous fighting had been a failure he could take the objective in three days. By now the NVA controlled all key terrain around the city and had assembled seven infantry regiments, an artillery division and a tank regiment.

The plan of attack visualized cutting the city in two, then defeating the separated enclaves in detail. To minimize the effect of the massive U.S. air support that had stymied the previous operation, air-defense weapons were to move with the assaulting echelons and provide a protective "umbrella"; this cover was augmented by the shoulder-fired SA7 heat-seeking missile to threaten forward air controllers (FAC) and low-flying jet aircraft.

As the time for the attack drew closer, enemy probes and shellings increased and as Gen. Hollingsworth predicted, on the morning of 11 May the NVA made its move. Before the assault, which began at 0530, an artillery barrage laid 8,000 rounds on the city's defenses. When the armor spearheads hit the main line of resistance, the tanks and their supporting infantry became separated; however, they still succeeded in making two significant penetrations of the perimeter in an attempt to link up in the center of the city.

Fortunately for the defenders, execution of plans was not an NVA forte; the tank crews lost much of their shock action by stopping frequently and moving slowly through the streets. All attacked without external fuel drums and many ran out of gasoline before they had expended their ammunition. This gave the ARVIN ground commander,

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Brig. Gen. Le Van Hung, time to move the 5th Airborne Battalion into the gap between the two salients.

The penetrations were too narrow for effective air strikes, but Specter gunships with 40-mm and 105-mm cannon silenced many of the tanks and gave the ARVN time to establish defensive positions to contain any further NVA advances. The defenses held, and the two penetrations proved to be the high-water mark of the North Vietnamese offensive in An Loc (Figure 3).

While the ARVN fought tenaciously on the ground, the U.S. Air Force provided the weight that blunted the attack. This clout was obtained by Gen. Hollingsworth, who had appealed to Gen. Creighton W. Abrams and Gen. Fred C. Weyand for maximum B-52 and close air support. Working from a broad range of intelligence sources, he requested Air Force assets on 9 May.

His request was approved and the big bombers began pounding the NVA as the attack started. One flight hit the enemy every 55 minutes for the next 30 hours; as units were moved, the Strategic Air Command's Advanced Echelon (ADVON) at Tan Son Nhut provided the flexibility for making changes in planned target "boxes" while the B-52s were en route to An Loc. Lt. Col. Art Taylor, senior advisor to the 1st Airborne Brigade and an infantryman in the Korean War, has said that neither he nor the Vietnamese had ever seen a more awesome display of firepower.

Unparalleled assistance by tactical aircraft complemented the use of interdiction systems in a close support role. On 11 May nearly 300 sorties were flown in the face of some of the heaviest antiaircraft fire ever faced in South Viet-

nam. Men on the ground were lavish in praising the FACs and the A-37 pilots from the 8th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) at Bien Hoa. On one occasion, Lt. Col. Gordon Weed, SOS commander, made two low-level passes through a curtain of enemy flak to destroy a T54 tank that was threatening the ARVN 5th Division's CP.

Stopping the NVA was not without its price: the clusters of air-defense weapons downed four U.S. aircraft by the evening of 11 May. Next day, the situation had stabilized with both attacker and defender exhausted. The NVA continued massive indirect fire on the town while the ARVN countered with devastating air strikes; however, it was slowly becoming evident that these ritualistic exchanges were beginning to take their toll on the NVA.

Except for one armor attack along Highway 13 against the airborne brigade's positions on 23 May, the NVA turned toward continuing An Loc's isolation. The ARVN 21st Division's drive to reopen the highway had become hopelessly bogged down despite considerable U.S. air support and exhortation. Finally, in an attempt to break the stalemate on the road and the attrition tactics around An Loc, the reconstituted 6th Airborne Battalion mounted an assault into an LZ ten kilometers to the south with its mission to link up with and reinforce the city's defenders.

After heavy fighting with the NVA 7th Division, contact was made with the garrison at 1745 on 8 June. This was the first ground reinforcement of An Loc since the 1st Airborne Brigade and the 81st Ranger Group had reached the city on 16 April. In the following days, the last remnants of enemy forces in the western and northern sectors of the city were eliminated and resupply and medical missions began to be flown regularly. More than 10,000 civilians who had withstood a primitive underground existence for more than two months began to evacuate the city on foot, eventually arriving at camps well away from the fighting.

By mid-June, the defensive perimeter had been expanded to encompass most of the outlying hamlets and commanding terrain that surrounded the city. The strength of the garrison had swelled to almost 7,600, and although there was no formal proclamation of victory until later, the siege was broken.

During the Easter Offensive of 1972 and particularly in the Binh Long campaign, the NVA demonstrated a previously undemonstrated capability: the use of conventional tactics over a considerable period that stressed shock action, firepower and mobility. In trying to establish the seat of the Provisional Revolutionary Government at An Loc, the North Vietnamese had assembled formidable combat power. They showed a skillful use of artillery and air-defense weapons but squandered armor in a series of uncoordinated attacks.

Their violation of aggressive armor doctrine,

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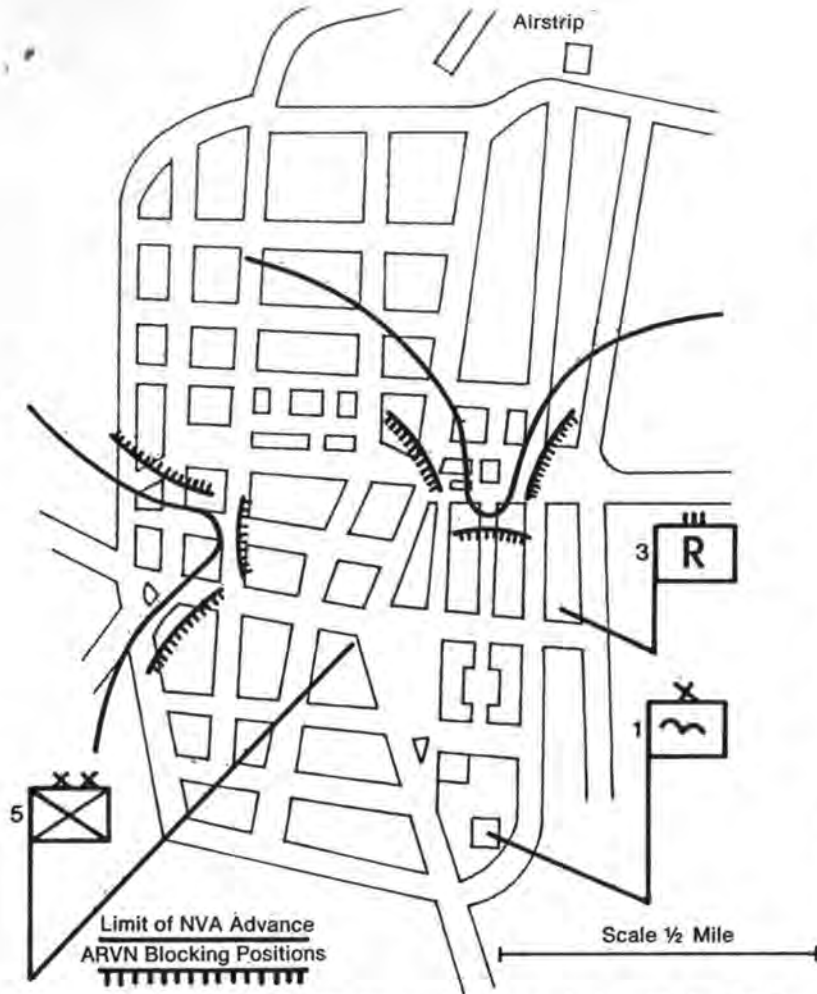


Figure 3. NVA's high-water mark in An Loc, 11 May, 1972.

either through errors of omission or commission, demonstrated that sophisticated machinery can be successfully challenged and eliminated by rather rudimentary means. Thirty-six enemy tanks were destroyed within An Loc and nearly 50 others became strewn around the city's periphery.

While the destruction of a large portion of the NVA armor-equipped force was a tribute to the ARVN soldier, it was also a commentary on the ability to merge armed helicopters and tactical and strategic aircraft into a cohesive force. The key people in the application of close-air support at An Loc were the FACs who provided a 24-hour-a-day watch over the battlefield. In conjunction with U.S. advisors serving with ARVN battalions and regiments, they controlled all strikes and regulated the use of airspace.

The unusual rapport between the men on the ground and the FACs served the garrison well during some of the trying days of April and May. This was particularly enhanced by reports from an FAC who spent a week with the 1st Airborne Brigade after being shot down over the city on 14 May.

Most of the pilots volunteered to fly An Loc missions regularly instead of rotating to less taxing operations. Their knowledge of the area facilitated target location and adjustment since reference could be made to terrain features or landmarks that were well-known or had figured prominently in previous fighting. Many Army advisors who had one or more previous tours in RVN were surprised to learn that FACs were much younger than those of the 1960s; certainly their performance and professionalism over An Loc belied their rank and youth.

At a higher level, the battle for An Loc once again proved that while massive air support cannot hold terrain, it can be decisive in assisting those who have that mission. The NVA grossly miscalculated the havoc that could be wrought on their forces by the diminished U.S. presence in RVN; they also underestimated U.S. ability to readjust to rapidly changing situations and failed to realize that air power is restricted — but not utterly thwarted — by adverse conditions.

Coupled with judicious allocation decisions, the flexibility of aviation commanders and the men coordinating these assets prevented An Loc from being Gen. Giap's 1972 "Dien Bien Phu" victory and the stepping-stone for an even larger prize: Saigon.

In March, 1975, the North Vietnamese returned to An Loc. This time the city was no longer the symbol of ARVN resistance or the focal point of American concern. Perhaps An Loc's plight was overshadowed by the crumbling ARVN resolution and the loss of large portions of the country. By quietly ceding the province, the sufferings of three years earlier were not repeated.

An Loc's epitaph was mutely transcribed to the public by the ever-growing shaded maps of Vietnam that showed Binh Long as just one more area under communist control.

Oh, Is That All?

When I read an unclassified message in the Army Materiel Command's cable book and came across the words "Tetam Mou," I started asking questions, but no one in the office could explain what the phrase meant.

The message detailed a proposed plan to send a team to Fort Belvoir, Va., for preliminary negotiations for a Tetam Mou. Determined to satisfy my curiosity, I told an action officer to find

out what the message writer was talking about. Several phone calls later he reported back:

"Hold onto your sides, boss," he warned. "Tetam Mou in Pentagonese means 'Tactical Effectiveness Test of Antitank Missiles Memorandum of Understanding.'"

COL. GLENN E. FANT
AUS, retired

Army will pay, on publication, from \$5 to \$25 for true first-person anecdotes.