

LAMSON 719  
THE VIETNAMESE INCURSION INTO LAOS

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The Vietnamese Incursion Into Laos

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by

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To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Thomas Handy entitled "Lamson 719." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.



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## PREFACE

Lamson 719 was an important battle. It was the last major allied offensive in which American forces were directly involved. It was a dramatic test of South Vietnam's military capability and the Vietnamization program. Like many of the earlier allied offensives, the 1971 Vietnamese incursion into Laos did not achieve all of its stated or implied objectives. However, unlike previous campaigns, this operation received only superficial treatment among secondary accounts. Part of the reason was the inaccessibility of various classified documents, many of which have just been declassified. Then too, Lamson 719 was a relatively recent operation and was overshadowed by more dramatic events--particularly, the Cambodian invasion in 1970 and the Communist spring offensive in 1972. This paper will focus on this operation in which the United States Armed Forces played a secondary role.

In some of the footnotes, the page citations from several of the military documents will appear to be quite confusing. Regrettably, nearly every document used its own individual coding system. Hence, for the Final Report of the 101st Airborne Division, a citation such as II, IV 194 means page 194 of enclosure IV in volume II. In another document, 4B2 is page 2 of tab B in the fourth enclosure of the parent document. As confusing as it may seem, that is how the pages were numbered. Still, it proved to be the easiest way to note a specific reference.



CHAPTER I  
THE OBJECTIVE

I

North Vietnamese interest in the Kingdom of Laos dated back to the first Indochina War.<sup>1</sup> By the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference, the indigenous Communists known as the Pathet Lao and Viet Minh held firm control over two of the sixteen Laotian provinces; both bordered on North Vietnam. Both Communist factions sought to overthrow the royalist-neutralist government. Although North Vietnamese advisors continued to work with the Pathet Lao, Hanoi's immediate objective was to keep Laos neutral. A pro-Communist Laos might have encouraged Thailand, the United States, and the Republic of Vietnam to intervene, while an anti-Communist Laotian government might have challenged North Vietnam's position in the border provinces and southern Laos. Apparently, as early as May 1959, North Vietnam had selected the Laotian panhandle as an invasion route into South Vietnam.

There were two major infiltration routes into South Vietnam: one through the Laotian panhandle, and the other through the Cambodian seaport of Sihanoukville. Because greater quantities of equipment could be shipped safely through Sihanoukville, it became the busier of the two

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<sup>1</sup>Dien Bien Phu lies astride a major invasion route into Laos. One of the reasons that French forces occupied this area in 1954 was to protect Laos from another attack by the Viet Minh. Bernard F. Fall, Anatomy of a Crisis: The Laotian Crisis of 1960-61, ed. Roger M. Smith (New York, 1969), pp. 52-53.

infiltration routes during the latter half of the 1960's. Laos, however was still used for the movement of troop replacements and light equipment.<sup>2</sup>

When Prince Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown in March 1970 and replaced by an anti-Communist regime, North Vietnam lost its Cambodian seaport. Two months later, the Communists suffered another reversal when a combined United States - Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) offensive destroyed several major supply depots inside Cambodia. These two setbacks made the Laotian panhandle particularly important to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) operating in South Vietnam. It was the only remaining avenue for supplies and reinforcements coming from the North.

The Laotian government controlled a thin strip of land along the Mekong River that formed the border between Thailand and Laos in the southern panhandle. Although some parts of this region were not dominated by either the neutralists or the Communists, the eastern half of southern Laos was firmly held by the NVA and their Pathet Lao allies.<sup>3</sup> It was through this area that an extensive transportation and communications network, known as the Ho Chi Minh trail, continued to supply and reinforce the Communists insurgency in Cambodia and South Vietnam.

The "Trail," as it became known, was a twelve thousand mile interlacing transportation system including narrow dirt roads, rivers, perilous mountain trails, and the larger, more easily defined road

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Dommen, Conflict in Laos: The Politics of Neutralization (New York, 1964), pp. 254-255.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Science Monitor, 6 February 1971, p. 5





structures which flowed down the eastern side of Laos.<sup>4</sup> The trail didn't simply work its way down through Vietnam. It left North Vietnam and entered Laos. Driving south and west, it drifted to the Plains Des Jarres as well as down into Cambodia through Southern Laos.

The Ho Chi Minh trail was a unique logistics complex.<sup>5</sup> At the height of its development, it consisted of narrow, winding footpaths that seemed to lead nowhere and two-lane dirt roads carefully cut through mountainous terrain and thick vegetation. Trails that passed through small clearings were covered by a trellis with live vegetation placed over it to conceal the road from aerial observation. After the United States began bombing the panhandle in 1964, bridges that once had crossed a river were rebuilt below the water line, thus hiding them from Air Force reconnaissance photos.

Along the major roads, small reinforced bunkers provided shelter for the truck drivers during an air raid. Supplies were stored as much as two miles away from principal thoroughfares. Sometimes other supplies were placed inside airtight drums and floated down river to be picked up by another transportation unit. Pipelines, carefully concealed and often buried, stretched from the North Vietnamese border to South Vietnam to keep the trucks on the trail, and later the tanks in the field, adequately fueled.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Richard S. Drury, My Secret War, (Fallbrook, Ca., 1979), pp. 19-20.

<sup>5</sup>Ralphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, ed., The Air War in Indochina (Boston, 1972), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup>Carl Berger, ed., The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973 (Washington, 1973), pp. 116-119.



## II

The Communists reduced the effectiveness of the Air Force interdiction campaign by creating dummy supply depots and establishing several anti-aircraft positions to defend the entire trail complex. Parallel roads gave the enemy the ability to continue moving troops and equipment south if one road or a portion of it was destroyed by bombing. New roads were always under construction to replace the ones which had been or soon would be destroyed. And finally, nearly all movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail was done at night.

The North Vietnamese were concerned about the vulnerability of their Laotian sanctuary. Although the Royal Lao Government had never offered any serious challenge to NVA control of the Ho Chi Minh trail, several special South Vietnamese and American units had successfully threatened isolated areas near the Laotian-Vietnamese border. Beginning in 1964, six-man reconnaissance teams from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam occasionally would parachute into Laos to observe and harass the NVA. These missions usually failed. By the following year, specially trained nine-man teams--three Americans and six Vietnamese--operated in the Laotian panhandle for brief periods of time.<sup>7</sup> They destroyed isolated supply depots, mined roads, seized prisoners, and directed air strikes against enemy installations. These small unit raids probably forced the North Vietnamese to leave additional troops in Laos in order to defend their lines of communication.

The clandestine operations in southern Laos were safe and relatively

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<sup>7</sup>William C. Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports (Garden City, 1976), pp. 107, 109.

inexpensive exercises. With just a few well-trained soldiers, thousands of enemy troops were tied down in providing security for the area and its facilities. But these operations never stopped the increasing flow of men and material moving through the Laotian panhandle to the battlefields in Cambodia and South Vietnam. Accordingly, American officials considered more definitive means of terminating enemy infiltration through Laos.

Early in 1964, a special advisory staff under President Lyndon Johnson proposed using the South Vietnamese Army to attack the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos,<sup>8</sup> but the first complete plans for such an operation developed under the direction of William C. Westmoreland, then the Commander of United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). From 1966 to 1968, three different plans were considered for an allied offensive into southern Laos. The first plan was the most ambitious. It called for one U.S. division to be airlifted by helicopter into the central plateau of the Laotian panhandle. Another American division would attack west from Khe Sanh along Route 9 and seize the transportation center of Tchepone. While these two thrusts were taking place, an American division and an ARVN division would push through the A Shau Valley and hit the Ho Chi Minh trail from the southeast. The second plan called for two American divisions and one ARVN division to strike west from Khe Sanh, while a Thai or Laotian division attacked from the Mekong River region. All four divisions would converge on Tchepone. The third

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<sup>8</sup>Alexander Kendrick, The Wound Within: America in the Vietnam Years, 1945-1974 (Boston, 1974), p. 172.



and final proposal envisioned employing only four brigades of infantry. Again, the attack would be launched from Khe Sanh and the A Shau Valley with Tchepone as the immediate objective.<sup>9</sup>

These plans, however, were never implemented. The first proposal, developed in 1966, required a corps-size force that could not be spared at that time. The third scheme called for a reduced number of troops, but no commensurate reduction in objectives. The second plan was feasible and strongly supported by South Vietnamese and American military planners. But Laotian neutrality, political discontent in the United States, and increasing enemy pressure in South Vietnam prevented the Johnson administration from approving any of the proposed operations.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, Westmoreland never lost hope for a cross-border attack into Laos. Indeed one of the reasons why the Americans maintained a fire support base (FSB) at Khe Sanh was in anticipation of using the facility as "an eventual jump-off point for ground operations to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail."<sup>11</sup> During the closing phase of the 1968 Tet Offensive, General Westmoreland renewed his efforts to gain permission to launch a "win-the-war" campaign, which included among other things, an allied offensive into Laos. Burdened by domestic pressures and fearing an expansion of the war, President Johnson refused to grant the General's request.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, pp. 271-272.

<sup>10</sup> Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Westmoreland, A Soldier Reports, p. 336.

<sup>12</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam (Boston, 1972), p. 398.

## III

The American proposals to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail symbolized the conduct of the Vietnam War from at least 1965 through 1968. The conflict had become Americanized. Planned offensives into Laos called for American units to spearhead the attack, with an ARVN division tagging along for support. The Americans conceived the operation and identified the objectives, not the South Vietnamese. Moreover, Americans monitored enemy traffic in the panhandle and employed sophisticated weapons to reduce that traffic. The South Vietnamese contributed little to these activities.

Certainly, part of the reason for the Americanization of the war was the inability of the South Vietnamese to cope simultaneously with all of their problems. Wracked by internal dissension, political corruption, a growing guerilla war at home, poor training, and inadequate equipment, ARVN units could barely hold their own even when fighting alongside U.S. forces.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, in March 1968, President Johnson directed General Westmoreland to "Vietnamize" the conflict. South Vietnamese armed forces received new and better weapons, more training, and increased unit strength through a general mobilization of the country's population.<sup>14</sup> In turn, the South Vietnamese were expected to assume a greater share of the fighting. By the following year, Vietnamization and a gradual American disengagement became the official policy of the

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<sup>13</sup> ARVN capabilities in the 1960's are summarized in U.S.G. Sharp and William C. Westmoreland, Report on the War in Vietnam (Washington, 1968), pp. 83-86, 211.

<sup>14</sup> Geurnter, Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York, 1978), pp. 164-166.

new Nixon administration.

The Vietnamization of the war in Southeast Asia formed the cornerstone for the success or failure of the Nixon Doctrine.<sup>15</sup> The speed with which the United States could withdraw from South Vietnam, and thus fully implement the Doctrine, depended on the ability of the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces (RVNAF) to replace their American counterparts. By early 1971, the Vietnamization program was the dominant consideration among soldiers and politicians alike, and Washington was eager to proclaim its success.

Troop withdrawals, begun in June 1969, gradually increased so that by May 1971, projected American forces in Vietnam would be almost half of what they had been two years earlier. The reduced combat role also marked a decline in American casualties. The countryside was more secure and ARVN forces were on the offensive in all four corps tactical zones. When an anti-Communist coup replaced Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia in March 1970, the North Vietnamese suffered a serious setback that was aggravated later by the U.S.-ARVN Cambodian invasion that spring.<sup>16</sup> In that operation, RVNAF demonstrated its newly acquired offensive capabilities. By all outward appearances, the Vietnamization program was working.

In December 1970, the U.S. Commander in Chief, Pacific, Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., was ordered by President Nixon to ask General Abrams, Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), to submit a

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Butwell, "The Nixon Doctrine in Southeast Asia," Current History, LXI (December 1971), pp. 321-326, 366-367.

<sup>16</sup> Lewy, America in Vietnam, pp. 167-177.



plan for a pre-emptive strike into Laos by South Vietnamese ground forces. Because Congressional restrictions enacted after the Cambodian incursion prohibited the use of U.S. ground troops in Cambodian or Laos, Abrams was instructed to limit the American military role to that of air and logistical support: President Nixon and his chief national security adviser, Dr. Henry Kissinger, had previously emphasized to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff the need to step up Vietnamization.<sup>17</sup>

By January 1971, the South Vietnamese leader Nguyen Van Thieu had agreed to invade the Laotian panhandle. Thieu selected the commander of the ARVN's I Corps, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, to direct invasion planning, authorizing him to utilize the nation's general reserve, the elite Airborne Division and Marine Brigade, and a Ranger Group of three battalions.

As the final objective for Lam's operation, Thieu designated the town of Tchepone, about 22 miles (35 km) inside Laos, where Route 9 intersected the Ho Chi Minh trail. Thieu believed that the seizure of Tchepone would cut the Ho Chi Minh trail and thus disrupt the enemy's wet-season offensive. General Lam planned to advance toward Tchepone along three axes: the 1st Armored Brigade was to move westward on Route 9; the Airborne and Ranger battalions were to move by helicopter along the hilltops north of Route 9; the 1st Infantry Division was to be heli-lifted along the escarpment--some 1,000 feet (300m) high--south of Xepon, a river flowing parallel to the south side of Route 9. The Marines would form a reserve force.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ray Bonds, The Vietnam War, (New York, 1980), p. 190.

<sup>18</sup> Bonds, The Vietnam War, p. 191

## IV

Named after a Vietnamese victory over the Chinese in 1427, "Operation Lamson 719" (the American part of the operation was designated "Dewey Canyon II") comprised four phases.<sup>19</sup> Beginning on January 30, ARVN and U.S. forces would clear Communist ambush sites and mines on Route 9, from central Quang Tri province to the Laotian border, so that South Vietnamese ground forces could concentrate near the former combat base of Khe Sanh in northwest Quang Tri province. In Phase II, beginning on 8 February 16,000 South Vietnamese would advance in tanks, armored personnel carriers, and helicopters to Tchepone. For the next two days--the consolidation phase--Lam's men would consolidate against counterattack and destroy all enemy supply dumps in the Tchepone area. The withdrawal phase would begin on 10 March or later, depending on the strength of enemy resistance.

During the planning of Lamson 719, Lieutenant General James W. Sutherland, commanding XXIV Corps--the largest U.S. military formation in the South Vietnamese I Corps tactical area--was ordered by General Abrams to assist General Lam. Sutherland committed several units to the operation; XXIV Corps Headquarters contributed an artillery group, an engineer group, a combat aviation battalion, and a military police battalion; the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) provided two brigades of airborne infantry, three battalions of divisional artillery, and a combat

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<sup>19</sup>"Like all American military code names, the designation has no significance. The code name for the first action, Operation Dewey Canyon, is believed to have been inspired by the wet weather in that area of South Vietnam, with 'dewy' misspelled by whoever first wrote it down." New York Times, 6 February 1971, p. 4.

aviation group; the 1st Brigade of the 5th U.S. Infantry Division (Mechanized) and the 11th Brigade of the 23rd U.S. Infantry Division (Americal) also participated. The total American force numbered 10,000 men, 2,000 fixed-wing aircraft, and 600 helicopters--but only the aircraft were to cross the border in close support of the South Vietnamese.<sup>20</sup>

There had been increasing speculation outside Vietnam that there would be a ground offensive against the Ho Chi Minh trail and the Communist sanctuaries in southern Laos. A number of factors indicated that it was imminent. With the start of the new year, tactical air strikes were diverted from other areas in Indochina and directed along the Ho Chi Minh trail.<sup>21</sup> Within two weeks, these air raids destroyed over 1,000 North Vietnamese trucks in the Laotian panhandle.<sup>22</sup> This was nearly three times the number of enemy vehicles normally destroyed in a two-week period during the dry season.<sup>23</sup>

Still, this subtle change of tactics probably would have gone unnoticed had it not been for the rapid succession of events during the last three days of January. On the 29th, the President of the Republic of Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, met with U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker

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<sup>20</sup>Bonds, The Vietnam War, p. 194.

<sup>21</sup>See for instance: "Operation Steel Tiger," Newsweek, LXXVII (18 January, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>22</sup>Christian Science Monitor, 18 January 1971, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup>Precise figures vary from source to source, but the most manageable statistics can be found in the New York Times, 22 February 1971, p. 12. The Times reported that 7,000 enemy vehicles were destroyed in Laos during the 1970-71 dry season, which at that time was 2,000 more than the year before.



and General Creighton W. Abrams, the MACV Commander. That same day, a news embargo was imposed on all military operations and movements taking place in MRI.<sup>24</sup> In a press conference, also on the 29th, Secretary of State William P. Rogers suggested that the United States might support an ARVN attack into Laos.<sup>25</sup> Two days later, the New York Times printed a front-page article in which the Premier of Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma, indicated that he expected the North Vietnamese to launch a new offensive against the Royal Laotian Army.<sup>26</sup>

Even with the news embargo, the American Public--and for that matter, the entire world--received almost daily alerts of an impending South Vietnamese invasion of Laos. The Japanese Kyodo news agency, quoting "reliable sources," reported that several thousand ARVN paratroopers had struck deep inside southern Laos.<sup>27</sup> Ellsworth Bunker flew to Washington on 1 February<sup>28</sup> and the press openly speculated when the invasion might take place.<sup>29</sup> Even the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese anticipated an offensive into Laos.<sup>30</sup> In what was probably just a small

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<sup>24</sup>The instructions given to correspondents concerning the news embargo were printed in the New York Times, 5 February 1971, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup>New York Times, 30 January 1971, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup>New York Times, 31 January 1971, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup>Los Angeles Times, 2 February 1971, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>The New York Times considered this, as well as previous high-level meetings in Saigon and Washington, an important indication that something was afoot. Of course, these events were not considered significant until after the incursion into Laos began; see: New York Times, 9 February 1971, p. 16.

<sup>29</sup>New York Times, 1 February 1971, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup>New York Times, 2 February 1971, p. 8.

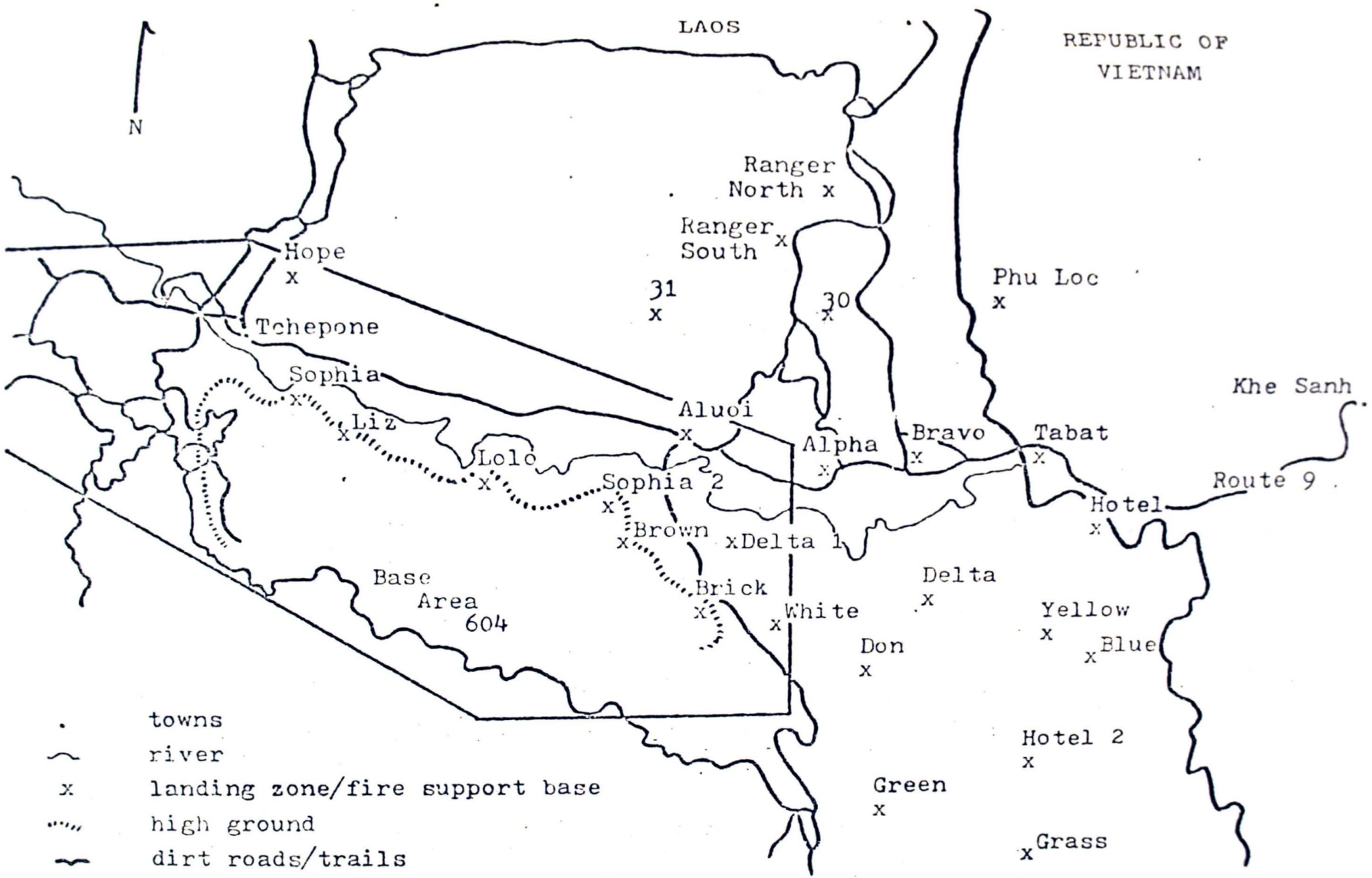
unit ground reconnaissance of the area, the Pathet Lao excitedly announced that South Vietnamese troops had invaded the Laotian panhandle and penetrated as far as Tchepone. South Vietnam, however, denied that any of its soldiers had entered Laos.<sup>31</sup> In an attempt to dispel these rumors, the South Vietnamese government announced that no "large-scale operations into Laos" were scheduled for the immediate future.<sup>32</sup> After nearly a week of inactivity and misinformation, the press accepted the announcement at face value.<sup>33</sup> Then, on 8 February, elements of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam crossed the international border to initiate Operation Lamson 719.

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<sup>31</sup>New York Times, 7 February 1971, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup>Christian Science Monitor, 6 February 1971, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup>Los Angeles Times, 7 February 1971, p. 1.



one centimeter = three kilometers



## CHAPTER II

### THE INCURSION

#### I

Two significant factors were to make Lamson 719 different from previous operations. For the first time since 1965 there was to be no thought of assistance from American combat troops; U.S. units were forbidden to enter Laos, meaning General Lam's ARVN forces would be completely on their own once they stepped beyond the border. Perhaps even more noteworthy, neither could advisors accompany their counterparts. Not in a decade had South Vietnamese units gone into battle without American advisors. This was a big step in the weaning process of Vietnamization. American helicopters and tactical air would work in Laotian skies, and U.S. artillery would assist for as far as it could reach from fire bases along the border, but, on the ground, it would be entirely up to ARVN.

On the other side, put on guard by the Allied incursions into Cambodia, the NVA was ready. The North Vietnamese government had over twenty thousand men in the area, including thirteen thousand first line combat troops. Ammunition was pre-stocked, defensive positions were set, counterattack plans had been completed and released, high speed routes into the area had been improved, anti-aircraft defenses were heavily bolstered. Base Area 604 would be defended. There would be no running away as there had been in Cambodia.

The Lamson operational area extended for some 22 miles (35 km) from east to west, and about 19 miles (30 km) from north to south. Much of the terrain was mountainous and heavily forested, and even in good weather the area offered few suitable launching sites for large-scale helicopter operations. During the northeast monsoon period, rain, fog, haze, and low cloud cover prevailed, forcing pilots providing air support to ground missions to fly very low. Anticipating this, the North Vietnamese had sited anti-aircraft batteries in those valleys where such aircraft were most likely to be operational.<sup>1</sup>

The airmobile operations of Lamson 719 were spread through three areas: the coastal base camps where most of the helicopters were kept at night; the forward staging area at Khe Sanh, where only a few helicopters remained overnight; and the operational area over Laos. Weather conditions at any one or all three locations could have a major effect on helicopter support. The right combination of weather conditions had to exist before helicopters could take off from the coastal base, land at Khe Sanh to refuel and be briefed for missions, and fly into the operational area over Laos.

Early morning fog, rain and cloud cover, sometimes delayed airmobile operations until late morning or early afternoon. Rarely did weather conditions preclude operations all day throughout the operational area. On occasion, airmobile operations were conducted under ceilings and weather conditions that precluded employment of tactical air support.

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<sup>1</sup>Bonds, The Vietnam War, p. 192.

The smoke and dust raised by artillery combined with natural haze sharply reduced the visibility and frequently caused flying safety hazards. The highest degree of professionalism was required from all pilots.<sup>2</sup>

The enemy forces in southern Laos were logistics Organizations of Base Area 604, with reinforcements from regular NVA units. Besides the permanent service force of engineers, transportation, and anti-aircraft troops, the NVA forces included elements of five divisions, twelve infantry regiments, a tank regiment, an artillery regiment, and nineteen anti-aircraft battalions. Each of the divisions had previously fought in South Vietnam and most of the enemy had taken part in the large-scale operations around Khe Sanh and Hue in 1967 and 1968.

The major ARVN forces assigned to Lamson 791 were the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Airborne Division, the Marine Division, three battalions of Rangers and the 1st Armored Brigade with three cavalry squadrons. The U.S. elements operating in direct support of the ARVN troops inside Laos consisted of the 2nd Squadron, 17 Cavalry with four Air Cavalry troops, the 101st Aviation Group, with a number of aviation units under their operational control from the 1st Aviation Brigade, and one squadron of Marine medium transport helicopters.<sup>3</sup>

The tactical concept for Lamson 719 envisioned the Airborne Division, with the 1st Armored Brigade attached, making the main attack by air assault and overland movement astride Highway 9 to Aluoi, and then

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<sup>2</sup>John J. Tolson, Airmobility 1961-1971 (Washington, 1971), p. 238.

<sup>3</sup>Tolson, Airmobility, p. 240.



proceeding in subsequent attacks to Tchepone. Highway 9 was to be opened as the main supply route. The 1st Infantry Division, according to the concept, was to attack on a parallel axis to the main attack along the high ground south the Xe Pon River and protect the left flank of the Airborne Division. The Ranger group would establish a fire base, near the Laotian border north of Tabat, and protect the right flank of the Airborne Division. A Marine brigade was to be the reserve in the vicinity of Khe Sanh.

From the start, however, there were clear indications that this would be a difficult exercise. The terrain hampered offensive operations; only one heavily-mined dirt road led directly to Tchepone, and it ran through a deep valley surrounded by a double canopied jungle. There were very few naturally cleared areas in which helicopters could land. To remedy this situation, Air Force aircraft frequently created suitable landing zones in the midst of the forest by dropping 15,000 pound bombs.<sup>4</sup> Generally, high ground ran in a north-south direction, as did many of the footpaths and roads that formed part of the trail complex. Thus, while ARVN units were crashing through the jungle en route to Tchepone, the NVA could still maneuver with relative ease along their trail network--unless that trail was physically blocked or occupied by an ARVN unit.<sup>5</sup>

After the first day of the operation, the South Vietnamese units had barely penetrated beyond the border. Helicopters had airlifted

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<sup>4</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, I, I 8-10.

<sup>5</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II II, 7-8.

3,351 troops into five landing zones (LZ). The enemy contested four of these landing zones, destroying one helicopter and damaging twelve others. By sunset, the armored column, which had left Tabat at 1000 hours, was barely nine kilometers inside Laos.<sup>6</sup>

The following day, inclement weather cancelled all airlifts in the area, and the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade crept forward another two kilometers.<sup>7</sup> On 10 February, the weather cleared and an Airborne battalion was inserted into Objective Aluoi. The tanks, trucks and armored personnel carriers moving down Route 9 linked up with the Airborne forces that afternoon.<sup>8</sup> Aluoi would be the farthest westward advance for the South Vietnamese armor.

Events now began to develop at a more rapid pace. While the airborne forces moved to secure Aluoi, an ARVN infantry battalion made a combat assault into LZ Delta, five miles southwest of FSB Hotel.<sup>9</sup> Allied intelligence indicated that elements of the North Vietnamese Army were moving into the Laotian panhandle from positions in Cambodia, northern Laos, North Vietnam, and the A Shau Valley of South Vietnam. One NVA regiment moved south from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in an apparent attempt to isolate ARVN forces that had already entered Laos.<sup>10</sup> To

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<sup>6</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719: February 8, 1971 to March 25, 1971 (Republic of Vietnam, 1971), 1; hereinafter cited as Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719.

<sup>7</sup>John J. Tolson, Airmobility 1961-1971 (Washington, 1973), 240-241.

<sup>8</sup>Tolson, Airmobility, 241.

<sup>9</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, 2.

<sup>10</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, 3.

counter this threat, the 39th ARVN Ranger Battalion was inserted into LZ Ranger North. During the following week, the South Vietnamese established positions at Objectives Don, Hotel 2, Delta 1, and Grass. They cancelled an attempt to insert an infantry battalion into LZ Green when enemy ground resistance became too intense for the helicopters to land.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of denials by officials in Washington, rumors circulated that United States military personnel were aiding the South Vietnamese in Laos. Some American soldiers indicated that they had fought pitched battles inside Laos. Two network reporters claimed that they had seen Special Forces officers, some dressed in ARVN uniforms, working with the South Vietnamese, and that U.S. helicopter pilots would substantiate these claims. Other press reports suggested that Americans definitely were operating in Laos, but only to gather intelligence in support of the South Vietnamese and to assist in the evacuation of downed helicopters and crews.<sup>12</sup>

The military response to these accusations was confused. Initially, the American military command insisted that no U.S. troops had set foot in Laos.<sup>13</sup> Local commanders, however, admitted that some American soldiers had entered the panhandle to rescue pilots and retrieve their aircraft. By the end of the month, that became the "official" response.<sup>14</sup> Though technically illegal, it is probably that this was the

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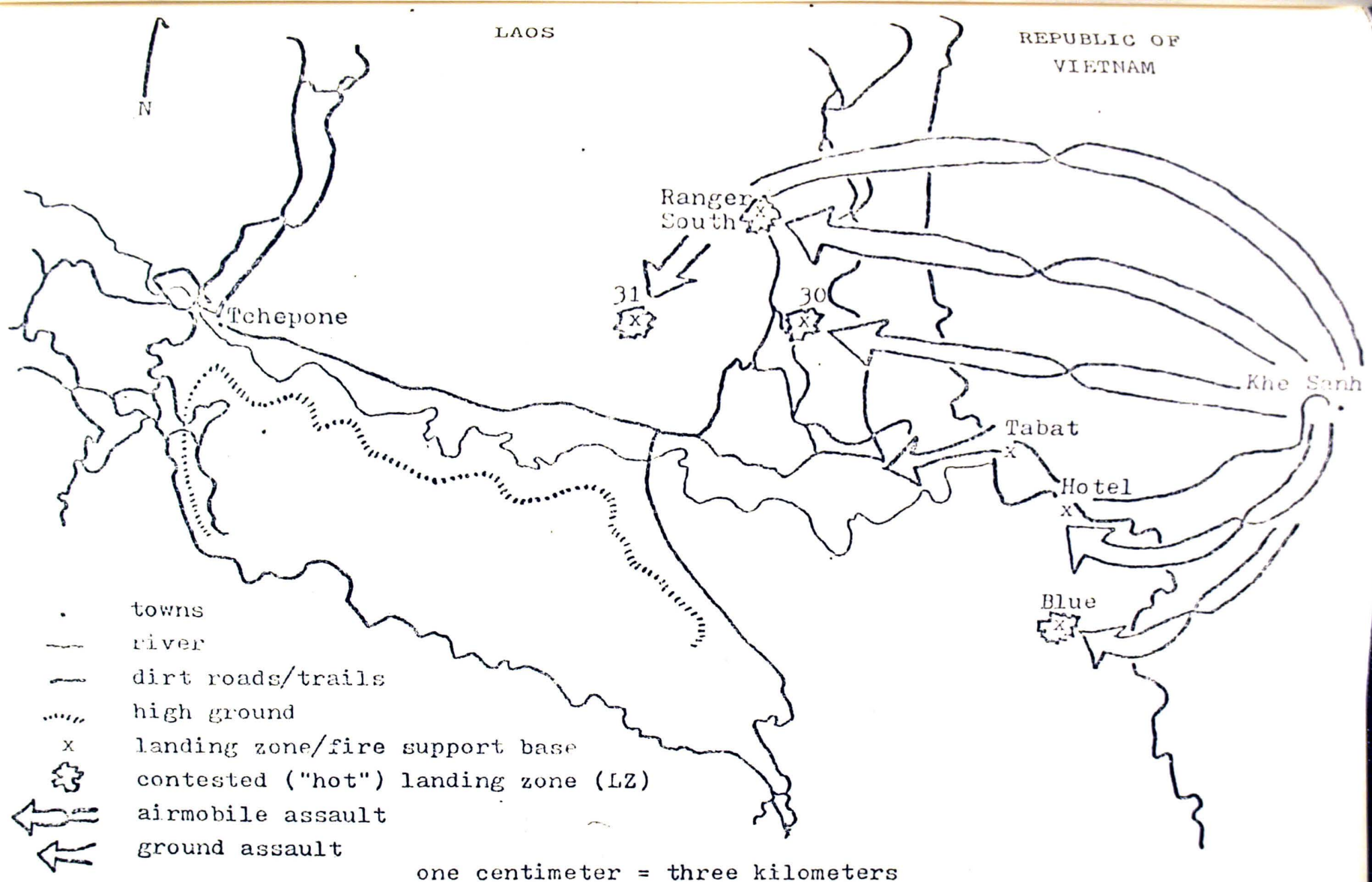
<sup>11</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, A 17-21.

<sup>12</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, pp 2-5.

<sup>14</sup>Los Angeles Times, 11 February 1971, p. 14.





extent of involvement by American ground combat forces in Laos-- notwithstanding the imaginative recollections of a few unidentified eager-to-be-interviewed soldiers.<sup>15</sup>

The idea that Special Forces (SF) troops were operating inside Laos was not new. Throughout the 1960's, these elite soldiers worked with the Central Intelligence Agency in Laos to organize a counter-insurgency movement against the Pathet Lao and NVA. In fact, during the Laotian incursion, some of these friendly guerilla forces helped interdict Communist traffic west of Tchepone along the Ho Chi Minh trail. There was, however, no firm evidence proving that SF units or individuals were joined with the South Vietnamese in Laos.

As the incursion neared the end of its second week, the public received the first complete and relatively accurate casualty reports. After twelve days of Operation Lamson 719, the South Vietnamese Army had lost two helicopters and suffered 691 killed and wounded in action. American units supporting the Vietnamese had twenty helicopters shot down and fifty-four casualties, nine of which were missing in action. ARVN troops had unearthed several small supply caches inside Laos, which resulted in the seizure of 111 crew served weapons, 759 individual weapons, 400 bicycles, one field radio, and 500 dwellings. Seventy-eight tanks were reported destroyed (probably by air strikes), 690 NVA soldiers were killed and eight more were captured.<sup>16</sup>

NVA resistance had been building since the operation began, but it

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<sup>15</sup>Los Angeles Times, 27 February 1971, p. 1

<sup>16</sup>Los Angeles Times, 17 February 1971, p. 5.

was too weak to stop the ARVN forces at the border. By the end of the second week, however, the enemy slowed the South Vietnamese advance. And now, aided by deteriorating weather and more manpower, the Communists launched their counterattack.

LZ Ranger North was surrounded. After 18 February, ground fire became so intense that no helicopters could land to deliver supplies or evacuate the wounded. An attempt to rescue an American soldier shot down earlier in the battle failed; perhaps indicative of the desperate situation was the awarding of twelve decorations for valor to the pilots and crew that tried.<sup>17</sup> Low ceilings prevented the use of tactical air strikes to disperse the enemy. An armored task force left Aluoi to relieve the beleaguered Rangers, but arrived too late. With overwhelming numbers of troops and the use of heavy artillery, the NVA overran LZ Ranger North on the evening of 20 February.<sup>18</sup>

The South Vietnamese government was surprisingly candid when it announced that the 39th Ranger Battalion had "no more combat capability."<sup>19</sup> The survivors of the battle, perhaps half of the 45-man battalion, infiltrated through the jungle to LZ Ranger South, where there were strong indications that a similar fate awaited that position.<sup>20</sup>

LZ 31 and LZ Ranger South were the next two targets for the Communists' counterattack. Tactical air strikes, attack helicopters, and

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<sup>17</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III p. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Colonel Hien (ARVN Spokesman), quoted in the New York Times, 23 February 1971, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 5.



heavy artillery kept the enemy from massing sufficient forces to seize these two positions before Ranger North fell, but it became increasingly difficult to resupply the rangers and paratroopers and simultaneously evacuate their wounded. On the day that the survivors from the overrun LZ North arrived at Ranger South, a near-panic gripped the frightened defenders. Soldiers trying to escape the raging battle overwhelmed the helicopters, and often caused wounded personnel scheduled for evacuation to be abandoned on the pickup zone (PZ).<sup>21</sup> As a result, the U.S. aviation commander refused to allow his helicopters to land at Ranger South until the situation was brought under control. Hovering helicopters dropped additional supplies, but the wounded could not be removed.<sup>22</sup>

By 22 February, the situation had improved at LZ Ranger South so that American helicopters could land without being mobbed. The following day the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade sent a task force toward LZ 31. Since pressure was also building south of Route 9, the ARVN Corps Commander decided to narrow the Laotian salient and push further west. The South Vietnamese abandoned their positions at FSB Hotel 2, LZ Green (taken earlier in the week), and LZ Grass. Under heavy fire, the units airlifted to new positions code named Delta 1, Brown and Brick.

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New York Times, 23 February 1971, p. 6

Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, pp. 5-6. The Final Report of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) did not mention the panic, and neither did LTG. Tolson (Airmobility). The only press report that could be found was in the Los Angeles Times, 22 February 1971, p. 1.

Seventeen helicopters were damaged or destroyed during the redeployment.<sup>23</sup>

On 25 February, the ARVN abandoned Ranger South. All the rangers were repositioned inside South Vietnam at a fire support base north of Tabat. On the 26th, two NVA regiments, supported by twenty tanks, overran LZ 31 despite tenacious South Vietnamese resistance. Although the Communists succeeded in pushing the ARVN forces off the LZ, they were unable to hold it. The North Vietnamese deserted the hilltop, leaving behind eight disabled tanks. In spite of the valiant fight for the hill, the cost of holding the position was too high for the South Vietnamese. Rather than reoccupy the objective, the paratroopers withdrew south toward Aluoi. To avoid yet another costly battle, LZ 30 was evacuated on the 27th.<sup>24</sup>

In the past two weeks, the South Vietnamese armored column had made no significant progress. Mined roads, enemy ambushes, and the harshness of the terrain had hampered their effectiveness. To prevent total dependence on aerial resupply, the South Vietnamese had expected to use Route 9 as the principal logistical artery for the Laotian incursion; but the road had never been totally secure. With friendly tanks bogged down at Aluoi and enemy pressure mounting north and south of the highway, even the tenuous hold on this overland lifeline was in jeopardy. Accordingly, on 1 March, an Airborne battalion established FSB Alpha to help secure the one east-west road that led into (and out

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<sup>23</sup>New York Times, 24 February 1971, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup>New York Times, 24 February 1971, p. 1.

of) Laos.

As Lamson 719 entered its second week, a flurry of conflicting reports confirmed the suspicion that something was wrong. When the operation began, the press guessed that Tchepone was the initial goal, but the South Vietnamese neither confirmed nor denied this speculation. Later, ARVN spokesmen suggested that Tchepone was not necessarily the objective, and that the slow advance of ARVN troops resulted from the numerous enemy supply depots found in the area.<sup>25</sup> This was followed by an announcement that the offensive was stalled because of poor weather, increasing enemy resistance, and insufficient logistical support. Finally, the day before LZ Ranger South was evacuated, the South Vietnamese military command made the most startling revelation of the week; they were a scant sixteen miles inside Laos and had no intention of going any further "right now."<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, the South Vietnamese had serious problems. The marginal weather made airmobile operations difficult to execute, and each day brought more enemy troops into the conflict. Moreover, the NVA proved to be stronger than originally anticipated. The Communists had Russian-built medium tanks to use against the American-built light tanks. And when the ARVN forces in Laos used 105mm and 155mm howitzers, the NVA countered with 130mm and 512mm artillery pieces.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, enemy supply depots were so widely scattered and small units of NVA soldiers

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<sup>25</sup>New York Times, 19 February 1971, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>New York Times, 20 February 1971, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup>New York Times, 24 February 1971, p. 1



so firmly entrenched, that the momentum of attack rapidly dissipated as ARVN units searched for each cache site and encountered each enemy position.

Khe Sanh had not been occupied since 1968. Although the area had been under careful surveillance, the Allies were still concerned about the strength and disposition of NVA and Viet Cong (VC) forces in the region. Surprise and mobility were essential. To confuse the enemy during the investment of Khe Sanh, American units launched artillery raids in the A Shau Valley,<sup>28</sup> and broadened their area of operations in the two northern provinces of South Vietnam, thereby freeing additional ARVN units for other combat operations.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, engineer units worked feverishly on Route 9, improving the road for vehicular traffic and clearing away mines and other obstacles. The airstrip at Khe Sanh was repaired and new helipads were built around the growing installation.<sup>30</sup>

In the week that followed, American units patrolled the area around Khe Sanh, but they encountered only sporadic and light enemy resistance.<sup>31</sup> Approximately 20,000 ARVN soldiers worked with the 9,000

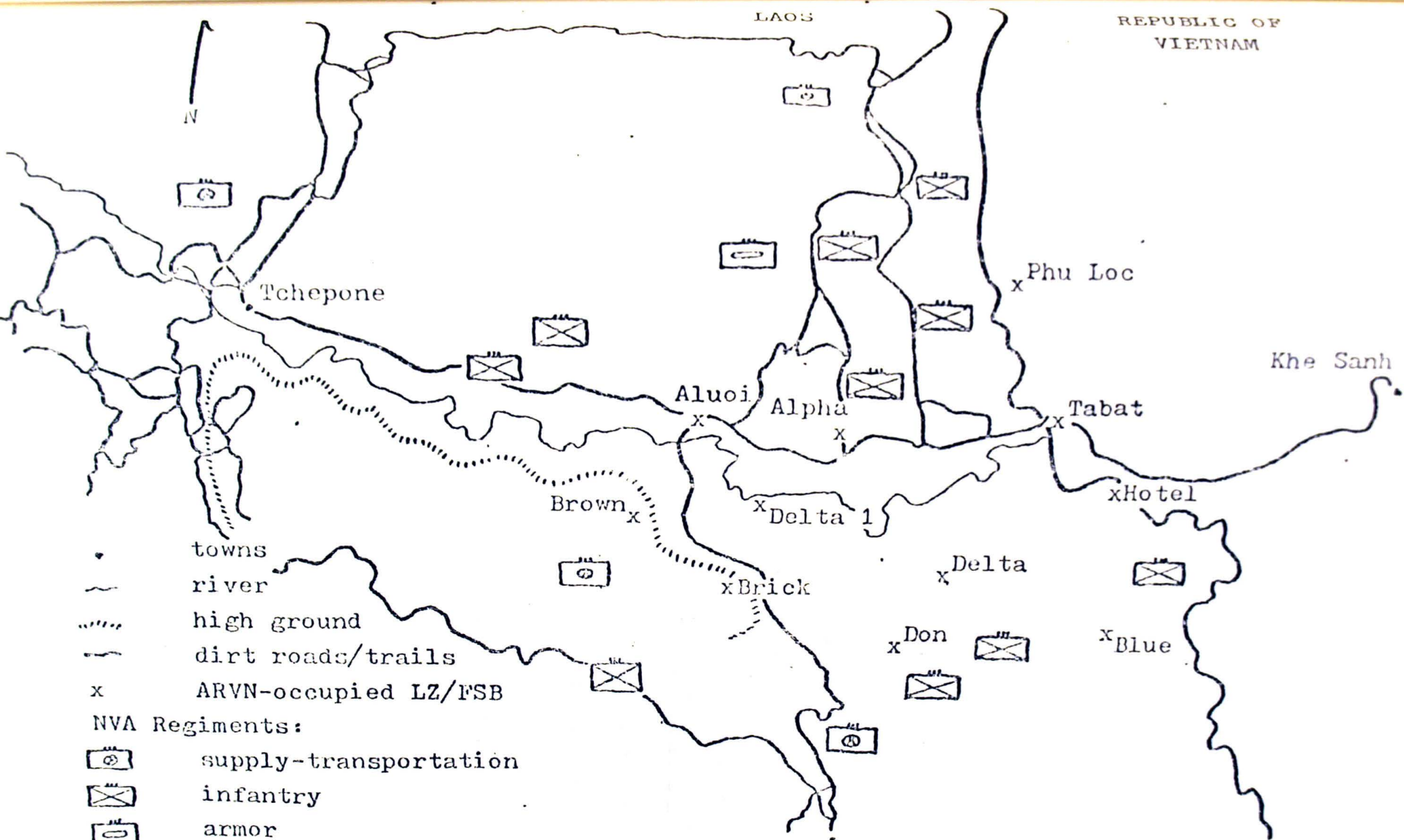
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<sup>28</sup>This involves the rapid air movement of artillery (usually a battery of six guns and usually 105mm howitzers) deep inside enemy territory to fire at pre-planned targets and then leaving before the enemy can react.

<sup>29</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division (AMBL), Operational Report - Lessons Learned, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), Period ending 30 April, 1971 (Republic of Vietnam, 1971, 4 hereinafter cited as Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, ORLL).

<sup>30</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, ORLL, pp. 53-54.

<sup>31</sup>See for instance: Headquarters, 3rd Battalion (AMBL), 187th



American troops in the northwestern corner of the country also identified as Military Region I (MRI). Initially, the South Vietnamese units played a passive role in the allied offensive. For the first few days, they confined their movements to relatively secure areas east of Khe Sanh, but suddenly, on 3 February, several ARVN units arrived by helicopter at the fire base. The next day, an American infantry battalion and an artillery battery established positions near the abandoned border village of Tabat. An ARVN armored column moved down Route 9 and stopped at the South Vietnamese Laotian border. They waited there for four days.

Three weeks of fighting in Laos left one ranger battalion badly mauled. Two other ranger battalions had withdrawn from the area of operations. Two positions were overrun, and six others were abandoned. The ground assault was stopped almost half-way to Tchepone, and enemy attacks were pressing against the front, flanks and rear of the Laotian salient. Route 9 could not be secured for convoy traffic, and the unpredictable weather hampered aerial resupply operations. Clearly, the South Vietnamese were left with only two options: withdraw from Laos, or change the tactical plan.

Withdrawal was out of the question. Even though the operation was

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<sup>31</sup>Infantry, Combat Operation After Action Report, Operation Lamson 719 (Republic of Vietnam, 1971), paragraph 11; hereinafter cited as Headquarters, 3-187th In, After Action Report.

<sup>32</sup>"Laos Invasion - The U.S. Gamble," U.S. News and World Report, LXX (22 February 1971), p. 17.



to be "limited in time and in space,"<sup>33</sup> it still was much too early to pull out--especially in view of the meager results already achieved. Moreover, neither side had gained any significant tactical or strategic advantage, and it was still unclear how determined the enemy resistance might be. Accordingly, the Commanding General of the I ARVN Corps arranged for the release and redeployment of reserves stationed in the Republic of Vietnam. Concurrently, six American infantry battalions moved into the area around Khe Sanh, relieving other Vietnamese units for the Laotian operation. The plan was going to be changed.<sup>34</sup>

## II

The allies modified the original concept of the operation. Instead of the paratroopers taking Tchepone from the north, the 1st ARVN Infantry Division would take the village from the south. The armored column would remain in place, and the 1st ARVN Airborne Division would protect the tenuous hold on Route 9 inside Laos, while the ARVN Rangers and American troops did the same in South Vietnam. Most importantly, the new plan called for airmobile insertions into positions far beyond established South Vietnamese support bases.

Beginning on 3 March, the South Vietnamese launched a series of airmobile assaults south of Route 9 along the high ground leading to Tchepone. Two brigades of South Vietnamese Marines occupied FSB Hotel and FSB Delta, freeing additional elements of the 1st ARVN Infantry

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<sup>33</sup>Nguyen Van Thieu, speech announcing the Laotian incursion, Printed in the New York Times, 8 February 1971, p. 14

<sup>34</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II I 9-10.

Division for combat assaults on the Laotian village. Simultaneously, another infantry regiment east of Khe Sanh prepared for an air movement into Laos.<sup>35</sup> The first objective for these airmobile attacks was approximately half-way between Aluoi and Tchepone. It was identified as LZ Lolo, and it became the most hotly contested combat insertion of the Laotian incursion.

On the day before the attack into Lolo, the Commanding General of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division informed his regimental commanders that regardless of the casualties, the operation would continue on schedule and that Tchepone would be taken.<sup>36</sup> Initially, one battalion of 537 soldiers was to be landed on the LZ during the morning of 3 March, but anti-aircraft fire was too intense for the troop-lift helicopters to reach the objective. They backed off while tactical air strikes and attack helicopters pulverized the landing zone and the surrounding area. Even after this preparation, the battalion and its helicopters encountered deadly accurate fire when they returned to the objective that afternoon. Forty-two helicopters were damaged or destroyed during the insertion.<sup>37</sup>

The three factors contributing to the difficulties at Lolo were characteristic of the problems faced throughout the operation. First,

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<sup>35</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III, 2-3.

<sup>36</sup>Sidney B. Berry, Assistant Division Commander of the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), and staff, Republic of Vietnam, transcript of informal discussion entitled Operation Lamson 719, (9 March 1971), 8; hereinafter cited as Berry, et al., Operation Lamson 719.

<sup>37</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 10.

it was one of the few clear areas on the escarpment overlooking Route 9; but worse still, it was barely large enough to accommodate one helicopter at a time.<sup>38</sup> Thus, until the engineers expanded the landing zone, enemy gunners over two miles away had numerous opportunities to locate suitable targets. Second, there was no alternate landing zone selected in case LZ Lolo turned out to be "hot." When the ARVN battalion and their American pilots arrived at the objective and found that it was still covered with overlapping fields of machinegun fire, it was either "go" or "no go."<sup>39</sup> And the ARVN Division Commander had made that decision for them the day before. Generally, these problems resulted from the Laotian terrain, but the third factor was human error. The South Vietnamese had requested a B-52 air strike on the landing zone for 2 March. It never happened. Of the nine bombing missions scheduled that day, all were flown on target except the one on LZ Lolo.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, the tactical air strikes, attack helicopters, and long-range artillery from FSB Tabat were enough to permit the ARVN battalion to land and begin preparing their newly-acquired fire support base. By the 4th, Lolo was relatively secure. Helicopters flew a regimental command post and another battalion into the LZ, along with two artillery batteries. At the same time, an artillery battery and an infantry battalion were airlifted to LZ Liz. The next day 1,134 troops

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<sup>38</sup>Berry, et al., Operation Lamson 719, p. 10

<sup>39</sup>Berry, et al., Operation Lamson 719, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup>Berry, et al., Operation Lamson 719, p. 9. There was no explanation given for this failure, and none of the Air Force documents that were consulted mentioned the incident.



moved to LZ Sophia (also known as Sophia West).<sup>41</sup> The South Vietnamese had regained the initiative and were now in position to seize Tchepone.

On 6 March, in the largest single airmobile operation of the Laotian incursion, 164 helicopters carrying two battalions of infantry converged on LZ Hope, eight kilometers north of LZ Sophia and within walking distance of Tchepone. Tactical air strikes and heavy artillery bombardment had preceded this combat assault. At the same time, a battalion of paratroopers established a fire support base at Objective Bravo, about nine kilometers from the Laotian-Vietnamese border on Route 9.<sup>42</sup>

The following day, South Vietnamese units from LZ Hope and LZ Sophia linked up at Tchepone.<sup>43</sup> Although the town was leveled by aerial bombardment, ARVN troops discovered a Communist supply depot intact.<sup>44</sup> It contained 300 tons of ammunition, canned goods, rice,

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<sup>41</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, pp. 10-11. There is no established format or limitation on naming landing zones or fire support bases. They are usually named by the using unit's commander or an operations officer. In this instance, some press reports indicated that the three prominent hilltops known as LZ Lolo, LZ Liz and LZ Sophia were named after three equally prominent actresses: Gina Lollobrigida, Elizabeth Taylor, and Sophia Loren. Los Angeles Times, 8 March 1971, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, pp. 11-12. Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III 3.

<sup>43</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III 3; Volume I, I 10 claimed that Tchepone was occupied on 6 March but the later date is probably more correct. Any ARVN troops in Tchepone prior to 7 March were probably there on reconnaissance rather than for physical occupation of the town.

<sup>44</sup>New York Times, 7 March 1971, p. 1. Given the elaborate nature of the entire Ho Chi Minh trail complex, it is quite probable that such a supply depot could be found intact amidst so much rubble.

five trucks, fifteen anti-aircraft weapons, and 2,000 gas masks. In separate actions outside of Tchepone 200 NVA soldiers were reported killed.<sup>45</sup>

Apparently, the ARVN forces in Tchepone assumed defensive positions and waited temporarily for an enemy counterattack.<sup>46</sup> They deserted the village on the 10th.<sup>47</sup> That same day, South Vietnamese troops at LZ Hope moved overland to LZ Sophia, and on 11 March, elements of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division left Sophia and moved to LZ Liz. The evacuation of Laos had begun.<sup>48</sup>

It is not clear why the evacuation began so soon. At first, it was suggested that the South Vietnamese were merely shifting their positions in order to avoid a pitched battle with numerically superior enemy forces.<sup>49</sup> But this was more than just a simple relocation of a few units; entire battalions were leaving the area. Another claim was that the deteriorating weather would seriously restrain further air support.<sup>50</sup> Although the weather had hampered airmobile operations and tactical air support in the previous five weeks, the climatic conditions were no worse than before the withdrawal began.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>45</sup>New York Times, 8 March 1971, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III 3.

<sup>47</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup>New York Times, 13 March 1971, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup>Los Angeles Times, 14 March 1971, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, A 1-7.

dry season, which was the peak period for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, did not end until the monsoons arrived in early May. Others have suggested that "most of the objectives of Lamson 719 had been accomplished,"<sup>52</sup> but this too was questionable. One of the principal reasons for sending ARVN troops into Laos had been to physically stop the flow of troops and equipment moving down the Ho Chi Minh trail, and this early departure only permitted North Vietnam to resume its resupply efforts. By month's end, as many as 2,500 trucks were again moving through the trail network each day. Rather, the withdrawal probably began because the South Vietnamese were beginning to realize what U.S. intelligence sources had already discovered: elements of five NVA divisions, plus support troops and auxiliary forces, totalling over 36,000 men were converging on a narrow and indefensible salient barely twenty-five miles long and ten miles wide.<sup>53</sup>

The withdrawal began with an orderly displacement from Hope and Sophia to Liz. From there, two battalions and a regimental command post were airlifted to LZ Sophia 2 (also known as Sophia East). By 12 March, LZ Liz was deserted. The following day, helicopters inserted two companies of ARVN paratroopers into positions north of Tabat in order to clear the border region of enemy infiltrators around Route 9. One battalion flew out of Sophia 2 back to Khe Sanh.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Tolson, Airmobility, p. 242.

<sup>53</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, A 23.

<sup>54</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 15



Over the next five days, ARVN units fought a series of running battles with their NVA counterparts. Often anti-aircraft fire was too intense for helicopters to deliver supplies or evacuate troops. The South Vietnamese at Lolo had to fight their way out, leaving behind their heavy equipment and artillery.<sup>55</sup> Once the ARVN had broken contact with the enemy east of Lolo, helicopters swooped in to rescue the infantrymen. The helicopters were followed by B-52 bombers, which destroyed the equipment left on the LZ.<sup>56</sup>

Some troops, stranded outside the perimeter at LZ Lolo, moved overland to LZ Brown, but conditions were no better there.<sup>57</sup> Under intense enemy pressure, Brown was quickly evacuated; Delta 1 and Sophia 2 were abandoned in the same manner. Other fire support bases in Laos faced similar fates, and enemy artillery even hit the Americans at Khe Sanh.<sup>58</sup>

### III

The NVA counterattacked not only in Laos, but in South Vietnam as well. Small unit attacks, ambushes, and indirect fire harassed American patrols and convoys around Route 9. Between Hue and Danang, the VC increased their acts of terrorism and sabotage. Two NVA commando

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<sup>55</sup>New York Times, 17 March 1971, p. 1. The military reports alluded to abandoned equipment, but they did not specify when or where it happened.

<sup>56</sup>"Slugging It Out," Newsweek, LXXVII (29 March 1971), p. 34.

<sup>57</sup>Los Angeles Times, 20 March 1971, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, pp. 17-18. Tolson, Airmobility, pp. 242, 244.

attacks on a fire base east of the Khe Sanh destroyed 8,200 rounds of ammunition and 36,000 gallons of aviation fuel.<sup>59</sup> The day before LZ Lolo was abandoned, Communist troops began shelling Khe Sanh daily with 122mm field guns.<sup>60</sup>

In the early morning hours of 23 March, forty enemy soldiers, supported by mortars and rockets, penetrated the perimeter at Khe Sanh. They destroyed two helicopters and ammunition, damaged four other helicopters, and inflicted twenty-two casualties.<sup>61</sup> But American resistance was stiff. Indeed, one American soldier received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his part in repelling the attack.<sup>62</sup>

Four days earlier, on the 19th, the 1st ARVN Armored Brigade left Objective Aluoi. They reached FSB Alpha without incident; but when the armored column passed FSB Bravo, they were stopped. Mines, machinegun fire, mortar fire, and snipers saturated the last ten kilometers back to Vietnam. As the lead tanks were destroyed, their wreckage provided another obstacle for subsequent vehicles. Some men abandoned their transportation and tried to make it on foot. The orderly withdrawal, that had begun just ten days earlier, was rapidly deteriorating into a rout.<sup>63</sup>

After the tanks left Aluoi, helicopters arrived to extract the

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<sup>59</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, ORLL, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, ORLL, p. 70.

<sup>61</sup>Headquarters, 101st Aviation Group, Operation Lamson 719, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, General Order 39, Nov. 1973.

<sup>63</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III 4.

helicopters arrived to extract the paratroopers. Enemy fire intensified, and then something snapped: the paratroopers panicked. Dozens of soldiers dashed for the aircraft and others grabbed the helicopter skids as the choppers took off. At least one of those men fell to his death on the flight back to South Vietnam.<sup>64</sup>

The ARVN armored column limped across the border into South Vietnam on the same day that NVA sappers attacked Khe Sanh.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps as many as 200 tanks, trucks, and armored personnel carriers had entered Laos six weeks earlier.<sup>66</sup> Less than half came back. Additional troops withdrew from FSB Delta, leaving FSB Hotel the only ARVN-occupied position inside Laos. Hotel was evacuated on 24 March, but later reoccupied by two reconnaissance teams. Finally, that hilltop was abandoned on the 28th.<sup>67</sup>

As ARVN units approached the border, American forces struggled to keep the area secure and to cover the battle-weary troops re-entering South Vietnam. An armored task force attacked west from Khe Sanh to clear Route 9 and join an infantry battalion that was holding off enemy attempts to cut the road near the border. U.S. forces were kept busy east of Khe Sanh too. Hundreds of small unit engagements occurred through the area, with the NVA usually initiating contact.<sup>68</sup> These

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<sup>64</sup>New York Times, 19 March 1971, p. 1 and 21 March 1971, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III 4.

<sup>66</sup>Los Angeles Times, 24 March 1971, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, III 4.

<sup>68</sup>See for instance: Headquarters, 3-187th In, After Action Report, Paragraph 11. Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, ORLL, I 13-16.



incidents marked a significant increase of enemy activity in MRI since the incursion began.

The allies, however, were not yet willing to give up the offensive. The final evacuation of FSB Hotel technically represented the end of Laotian incursion, but American and South Vietnamese military officials had other plans. For both political and tactical reasons, these officials launched a series of airmobile raids into Laos using the elite Hac Bao (Black Panther) Company of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division.

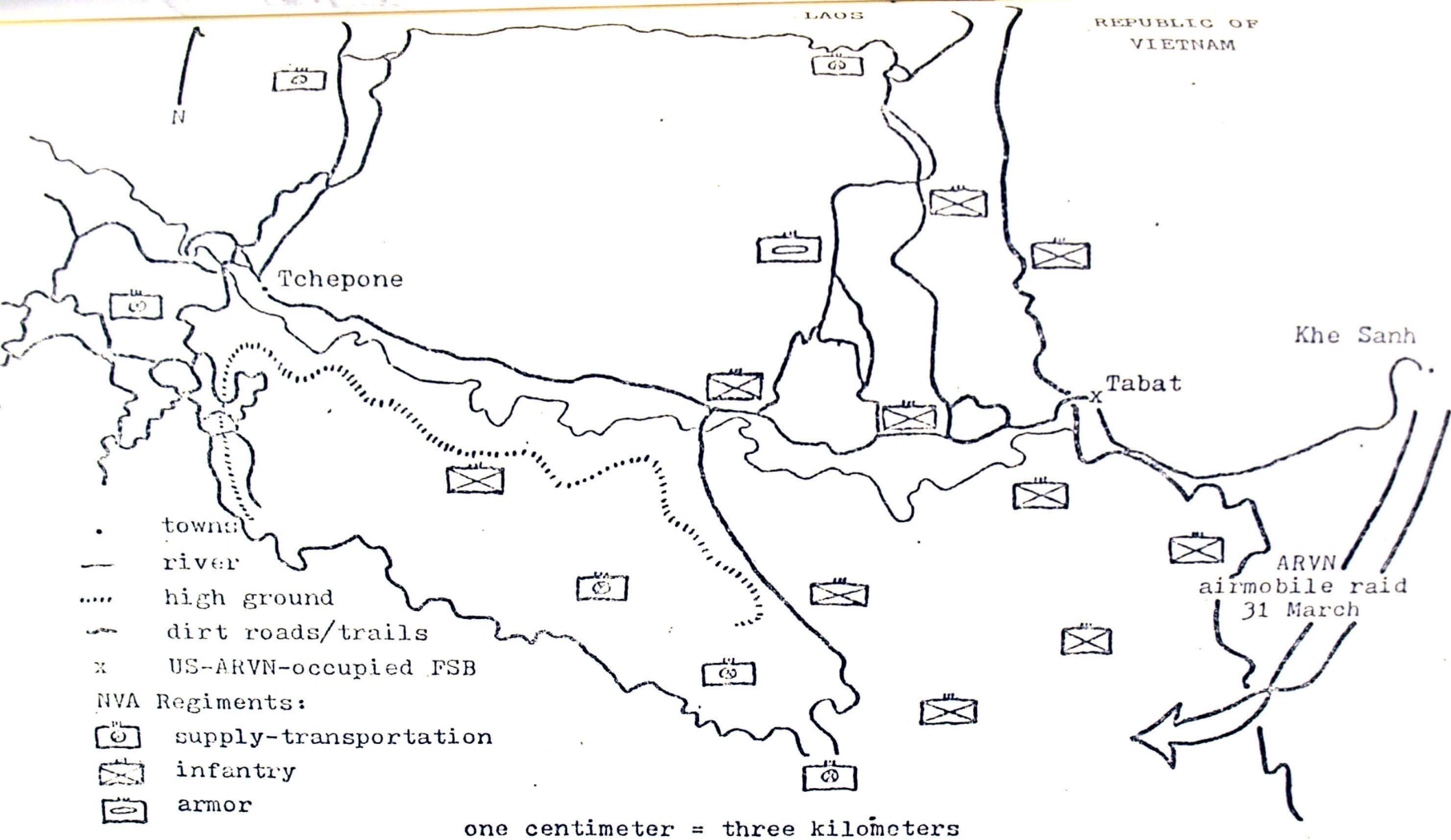
The first raid was postponed. Originally scheduled for 28 March, poor weather and a defense in depth of anti-aircraft weapons forced the planners to change the objective to a more vulnerable target farther away. On the 31st, approximately 300 ARVN troops attacked an isolated enemy position eight kilometers inside Laos. Preceded by B-52 bombers and tactical air strikes, which accounted for eighty-four NVA killed, the Black Panthers destroyed 1,000 gallons of fuel, one ton of ammunition, one ton of rice, and thirty-eight weapons. They killed one NVA soldier, and attack helicopters hovering overhead killed six others.<sup>69</sup> That night, the South Vietnamese called in a tactical air strike on a truck convoy heading south. The ARVN unit withdrew the following day.

The public was not impressed. One journal called the raid "an exercise in public relations,"<sup>70</sup> while another account suggested that the raid's results were a "pinprick" compared to "the vast stores of

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<sup>69</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II III 4, V2.

<sup>70</sup>"Aftermath of a 'Victory'," Newsweek, LXXVII (12 April 1971), p. 42.



supplies and ammunition believed to be located in the area."<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, Operation Lamson 719 still was in progress; so the South Vietnamese scheduled another raid for 6 April. After American airpower had softened the objective, 150 ARVN troops landed on an uncontested LZ (one of the few encountered during the entire Laotian operation). They killed fifteen NVA soldiers, and destroyed seventeen weapons and thirteen tons of rice before leaving the area that afternoon.<sup>72</sup>

The airmobile raids were a modest success, but only because the objectives were carefully selected and the operations were well planned. Moreover, the Hac Bao Company was relatively fresh, having served prior to the raids as a security force for aircraft and crews that were shot down over Laos.<sup>73</sup> The same could not be said for the rest of the I ARVN Corps. The rapid withdrawal from Laos had left some units totally disorganized and still others without essential combat equipment. The Black Panthers alone could never sustain even the hint of a continued Laotian offensive, and the South Vietnamese had new battles to fight within their own borders. On 9 April 1971, Operation Lamson 719 officially ended.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Christian Science Monitor, 3 April 1971, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II III 3, V3.

<sup>73</sup>Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, Final Report, II, IV 99-100.

<sup>74</sup>New York Times, 9 April 1971, p. 7. Several military documents date the operation's termination as 6 April, but that date is erroneous. The earlier date often is cited because that was the last combat assault of the incursion. Since this was a South Vietnamese operation and the South Vietnamese chose the 9th to end the campaign, the latter date would be more accurate.



## CHAPTER III

### THE RESULTS

#### I

After the 101st Airborne Combat Aviation Group had removed the last South Vietnamese soldiers from the Laotian panhandle on 25 March, Hanoi and Saigon both published impressive casualty figures. Calling the battle "a complete victory," Hanoi claimed to have killed, wounded, or captured 16,400 men, including 200 Americans. Saigon, however, alleged that General Lam's troops had killed 13,636 North Vietnamese at a cost of a little more than 6,000 killed and wounded. American experts estimated that the South Vietnamese had actually suffered approximately 50 percent casualties--nearly 10,000 killed, wounded, or missing.<sup>1</sup>

Was Lamson 719 an impressive South Vietnamese victory, a stalemate, or a devastating defeat? In answer, it must be determined whether the incursion attained its two fundamental objectives: first, to foil enemy preparations for a spring offensive; second, to show that the South Vietnamese could fight virtually on their own--the measure of the Vietnamization program.

Lamson 719 succeeded in disrupting many North Vietnamese offensive preparations in the Laotian panhandle. General Lam's forces inflicted enormous losses upon the Communists: Lieutenant General James

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<sup>1</sup>New York Times, 10 April 1971, p. 1.

W. Sutherland, commanding XXIV Corps, reviewed a study made by his staff, that estimated the South Vietnamese had killed 10,505 enemy, and that U.S. air support and artillery had accounted for a further 8,900. Sutherland predicted that those losses would compel 70 B Corps to postpone a general offensive in the South for up to six months; in fact, he underestimated by six months the time the North Vietnamese would need before launching another major offensive.<sup>2</sup> However, whether Hanoi waited twelve months because of the losses sustained during Lamson 719--or whether the North Vietnamese were instead awaiting the withdrawal of American troops before renewing their assault--cannot be determined from the intelligence available.

Along the Ho Chi Minh trail, Lamson 719 had disrupted Communist logistical activity only briefly. Within a week of the battle at Fire Base Delta, U.S. pilots reported that North Vietnamese vehicles again moved freely down the trail. In May, intelligence sources reported that the North Vietnamese had rebuilt Tchepone. Only permanent deployment of large ARVN ground forces along Route 9, from South Vietnam to Thailand, could have substantially interdicted the Ho Chi Minh trail.<sup>3</sup>

## II

As a test of Vietnamization, Lamson 719 revealed both strengths and weaknesses in ARVN leadership and training. Early in the operation, a comparative lack of opposition had made the South Vietnamese

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<sup>2</sup>Tolson, Airmobility, p. 249.

<sup>3</sup>Newsweek, 21 April 1971, p. 15.

overconfident. But when the ARVN's advance bogged down near Aluoi, that overconfidence was quickly replaced by undue reliance on U.S. air support, helicopters, and artillery.

General Lam's staff had made a major planning error in placing the Ranger and Airborne battalions on the most vulnerable northern flank. Trained and equipped as light infantry and inexperienced in operations at divisional level, the Ranger and Airborne troops lacked the skill, armor, and firepower to withstand armored assault and North Vietnamese artillery bombardment. The ARVN 1st Infantry Division, with its armor, artillery, and extensive experience in large operations, would have been better able to hold off the North Vietnamese and keep Route 9 open. The inflexibility of I Corp's staff prevented it from recognizing and rectifying the error until early March.

The North Vietnamese had displayed fairly efficient conventional tactical skill against a strong South Vietnamese task force. Adverse weather and rugged terrain, compelling U.S. helicopter pilots to fly low along predictable routes, enabled Communist anti-aircraft gunners to put up effective barrages over every hilltop occupied by the ARVN. The North Vietnamese also exploited the ARVN's failure to send out patrols beyond fire base perimeters to prevent the enemy from establishing avenues of approach to South Vietnamese positions. Whenever U.S. aircraft threatened Communist troops besieging an ARVN-held hilltop, the enemy easily advanced to the defense perimeter and "hugged" it so closely that American pilots often held their fire for fear of inflicting casualties upon friendly troops.

The heavy losses incurred by the ARVN's three best divisions in



Lamson 719 probably discouraged South Vietnam's military leaders very greatly. Thieu had deployed his general reserve divisions alongside General Lam's 1st Infantry Division--a unit often praised by U.S. Army officers as a model for Vietnamization. But despite support from Sutherland's XXIV Corps and from nearly half the U.S. air power available in Indochina, the elite ARVN formations left the Laotian panhandle under great pressure and with considerable losses. Without substantial American air support, it is doubtful whether the South Vietnamese could have stayed so long in Laos--or have withdrawn with a casualty rate of only 50 percent.

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